การศึกษานวนิยายของเอียน แม็คอิวัน: ภาพสะท้อนประเทศอังกฤษในฐานะประเทศที่ปฏิเสธความจริง

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A STUDY OF IAN MCEWAN'S NOVELS AS REFLECTIONS OF ENGLAND, A NATION IN DENIAL

Miss Darintip Chansit

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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ดริณทิพย์ จันทร์สิทธิ์: **การศึกษานวนิยายของเอียน แม็คอิวัน: ภาพสะท้อนประเทศอังกฤษในฐานะประเทศที่ปฏิเสธความจริง** (A STUDY OF IAN MCEWAN'S NOVELS AS REFLECTIONS OF ENGLAND, A NATION IN DENIAL) **อ.ที่ปรึกษาวิทยานิพนธ์หลัก: ผศ.ดร. คารินา โชติรวี**, 143 **หน้า**.

วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้นำเสนอการศึกษาเชิงวิเคราะห์นวนิยายของเอียน แม็คอิวัน นักประพันธ์ชาวอังกฤษร่วมสมัยที่ได้รับรางวัลวรรณกรรมมากมายเรื่อง*The Cement Garden* (1978) *Amsterdam* (1998) และ *Atonement* (2001) ซึ่งสะท้อนลักษณะของการปฏิเสธความจริงที่สามารถเปรียบเทียบได้กับการปฏิเสธความจริงของประเทศอังกฤษในช่วงครึ่งหลังของคริสต์ศตวรรษที่ยี่สิบ *The Cement Garden* เสนอกลุ่มเด็กในภาวะปฏิเสธความจริงเมื่อขาดความมั่นคงหลังจากที่ต้องกำพร้าบิดามารดาอย่างกะทันหันด้วยการปกปิดและเสแสร้ง ในขณะที่เด็กเหล่านี้พยายามจะคงไว้ซึ่งฉากหน้าของสภาวะปกติ สภาพรอบตัวกลับสะท้อนถึงความเสื่อมสลายทั้งด้านกายภาพและทางจิตใจซึ่งเป็นเหตุให้ความต้องการการปฏิเสธความจริงดังกล่าวทวีความรุนแรงขึ้น ในเรื่อง *Amsterdam* ประเด็นทางสังคมของการปฏิเสธความจริงได้รับการเน้นย้ำมากขึ้นเมื่อตัวละครหลักจงใจมองข้ามจริยธรรมและจรรยาบรรณเพื่อต่อต้านความล้มเหลวทางวิชาชีพในปัจจุบันของตนและพยายามรื้อฟื้นอดีตอันสวยงาม สุดท้าย *Atonement* แสดงภาพผลกระทบของการปฏิเสธความจริงของตัวละครที่มุ่งควบคุมทุกๆ สิ่งรวมถึงชีวิตของผู้อื่น อันก่อให้เกิดงานเขียนที่นำเสนอประวัติศาสตร์ตามอำเภอใจโดยอาจมีจุดมุ่งหมายแฝงเพื่อให้ตนเองพ้นผิด ทั้งนี้ มีการนำเสนอสภาพแวดล้อมในประเทศอังกฤษและทัศนคติของคนอังกฤษควบคู่ไปกับบทวิเคราะห์การปฏิเสธความจริงในนวนิยายเหล่านี้ เพื่อแสดงถึงความแตกต่างระหว่างเรื่องแต่งและความเป็นจริงในเชิงเปรียบเทียบ แม้ว่าในความเป็นจริงความสำคัญของประเทศอังกฤษในช่วงหลังของศตวรรษที่ยี่สิบจะลดทอนลงเป็นอย่างยิ่ง ประเทศอังกฤษยังคงมีทัศนคติมองโลกในแง่ดีอย่างผิดๆ เกี่ยวกับสถานภาพของตนเองอย่างต่อเนื่อง จากการปฏิเสธความจริงของสถานการณ์ปัจจุบัน ประเทศอังกฤษได้พยายามที่จะสร้างและคงไว้ซึ่งภาพลักษณ์เชิงบวกของตนเอาไว้

ภาควิชา ภาษาอังกฤษ ลายมือชื่อนิสิต .....

สาขาวิชา ภาษาอังกฤษ ลายมือชื่อ อ.ที่ปรึกษาวิทยานิพนธ์หลัก .....

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DARINTIP CHANSIT: A STUDY OF IAN MCEWAN'S NOVELS AS REFLECTIONS OF ENGLAND, A NATION IN DENIAL. ADVISOR: ASST. PROF. CARINA CHOTIRAWE, Ph.D., 143 pp.

This thesis aims to present an analytical study of three novels written by multi-award winning contemporary novelist Ian McEwan: *The Cement Garden* (1978), *Amsterdam* (1998), and *Atonement* (2001) which reflect characteristics of denial that can be compared to England's perceived state of denial in the latter half of the twentieth century. *The Cement Garden* presents children all of whom are in denial of their insecurities, rendered by their suddenly becoming orphaned, through the acts of concealment and pretense. While attempting to maintain a façade of normalcy, the conditions surrounding the children represent prevalent decline, both physical and mental, which intensifies the need for denial. In *Amsterdam*, the social aspects of denial receive more emphasis as the main characters make conscious decisions to disregard moral and ethics in order to counteract the professional failures in their present and revive their glorious past. Lastly, *Atonement* portrays the effects of denial of a character who seeks to impose control over everything, including the lives of others, resulting in a work of fiction that portrays an arbitrary version of history with a possible ulterior motive to exonerate herself. Alongside the analysis of denial in these novels, circumstances in England and the attitudes of its people are observed to demonstrate parallels between fiction and reality. Despite the reality of its diminishing power in the global arena, England in the second half of the twentieth century continuously demonstrates false optimism of its position. In denial of its current situation, England has attempted to create and maintain a positive image.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The first half of the twentieth century brought about tremendous changes and destruction to the world. Among the world's great powers, Britain was the only Superpower that fought both World Wars I and II and remained on the winning side. In 1945, the War ended in Europe. Peace returned, but the years following World War II were bleak times for England. After six years of fighting a devastating war, the infrastructures of the country were close to ruin and the people enduring harsh living conditions. The Tory government led by Winston Churchill which had been in power during the War faced rejection by the British people at the polls, making way for a new administration led by Clement Attlee in 1945. The Labour government introduced changes to the British society by establishing plans, seen by many as downright ambitious, for a more equal and open society, at the heart of which were the intentions mentioned in Sir William Beveridge's report back in 1942 to 'wage war on want.'[1] Therefore, most notable for this government was the launch of the post-war consensus that incorporated a mixed economy with the nationalization of all key industries and the establishment of the 'welfare state.' The main purposes were to provide decent living standards, employment, and adequate healthcare to the citizens.

[1] The Beveridge report proposed by Sir William Beveridge suggested several drastic changes to ensure a "freedom from want" in terms of finance after the war. In this proposal, weekly contributions are expected from people of working age which will be allocated to help the sick, retired, widowed, and unemployed, as well as their families.

Apart from the famous 'post-war consensus,'[2] Britain emerged after the devastation of World War II as "an extremely rich country in comparative terms" having reconstructed the economy quickly (Woodword). From a country dependent on staple industries, such as cotton and coal, from the late Victorian period on, during the war, the government deliberately shifted the nation's resources out of these traditional industries into the essential wartime industries, such as electronics and aerospace, which offered good growth prospects and gave Britain a favorable industrial mix. In the following decade, production and consumerism clearly thrived, with a 34 per cent increase of average industrial earnings between 1955-1960, for example (Christopher 4). This helped maintain Britain's status as one of the most rebust economic powers for some time. However, post-war international policies of the British government presented doubtful economic value resulting in few obvious economic benefits. Also, as palpable with most wartime victors, the British government preferred policies which reward the people for their sacrifices during the war with the main goal to promptly fix the problem of unemployment caused by the interwar years (Woodword). Thus, Britain's economic growth was not in its full degree after the war ended.

Despite the amount of progress on many fronts, the 1950s was a "cautious and austere decade" as soon after World War II ended, Britain was faced with severe economic and political setbacks (Bradbury 257, 313). Robert Hathaway records the atmosphere of the time in his book *Ambiguous Partnership* that the worst blizzard that hit Britain in 1947, topped with a shortage of coal, "brought the economic life of the

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2 The Post-War Consensus is a period in British politics which lasted from the end of World War II to 1979 when Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. It included a mixed economy with the nationalization of major industries, the establishment of the National Health Service and the creation of the modern welfare state in Britain. The policies were instituted by both Labour and Conservative governments in the post-war period.

country to a virtual standstill and emphasized how vulnerable the once proud island had become"; one example is seen in the termination of the British Mandate for Palestine and the shifting of control over to the United Nations which was seen as Britain's admission of its inability to handle even a once exclusively British problem (qtd. in Bradbury 258). In 1951, the government held the Festival of Britain on the South Bank of the Thames with the aim of reaffirming hope and energy after the years of war. Ironically, critics deemed the key emblem of the festival, a tall aluminium Skylon erect in the air without obvious moorings, to be like Britain itself as it had no physical support. While the Festival of Britain was taking place, all around the city of London still lay severely damaged from bombings and battles (Bradbury 314). Not only that, the country was faced with constant shortages, strikes and the 'dollar gap.' Furthermore, the generation which saw itself victorious in the war was not satisfied with the government policies and demanded "fun and consumerism" which the Labour government clearly could not provide (Christopher 3). Consequently, they, too, were rejected in the following election, leading the country back to the government under the Tory Party. A consumer boom followed in the 1960s – 1970s in which "a commercial mass media, supermarkets, and tall, modernist apartment blocks all became part of everyday life" (Christopher 7). Still, dissent and disappointment grew.

Gradually, Britain's role as a world power came into serious doubt, and its status in the international arena was precarious. By degrees, the living standards in Britain fell behind other countries, being overtaken by France and Germany during the 1960s and Japan in the 1970s. In terms of global economy, Britain's position is only in the periphery (Storey 23). The economic decline continued in the seventies, in

comparison to almost all other developed nations, and even in absolute terms compared with earlier production levels (Morgan). In 1976, there was a Sterling crisis in which the value of the pound fell by almost 25 per cent against the U.S. dollar, forcing the Bank of England to request an enormous loan worth 2.3 billion pounds from the IMF as a strategy to hold up the currency. The failure to match other industrialized countries in terms of growth performance could be attributed to Britain's early economic start as the former colonial power of the world, thus leaving the nation at a disadvantage of a low growth potential and little room to expand (Woodward).

Ideologically, Malcolm Bradbury contrasts the period between 1939 and 1989 to that between the 1890s to 1939, the era of high modernism:

> A fresh and terrible age of politics had taken over, and the historical optimism that was once part of the dream of modernity had long since failed. As the second half of the century turned to grim and menacing stand-off, the progressive hopes and ideological Utopias that had attracted many in the 30s seemed at best naïve illusions, at worst forms of treachery and betrayal, corrupting allegiances. (260)

Within the island, the attitudes are not the same in all of the countries. While against the rest of the world they altogether constitute Britain, regional culture or identity is important among the member countries of the United Kingdom. Established partly on the foundation of political alliances which appeared solid in the past due to the Empire's political grandeur and stability, the relationship between England and the other three countries of Britain is inevitably faced with changes in the modern time when England's status has dwindled (Higgins et al. 3).

Moreover, the victory of World War II became negative as the longstanding British Empire came to an end, resulting in former colonies around the world gradually demanding and declaring independence. The momentous incidents in the process of decolonization include the return of self-government to India, Pakistan, Burma, and Sri Lanka, significantly transforming the power of Britain. Decolonization in other regions of the world followed, some of which were peaceful while some required violent efforts. With the loss of the Empire, Britain also lost its position as the world power whether in economics, politics or culture (Kumar 52).

The atmosphere of the 1970s—the way the British people lived, their focus, their mood—had changed drastically. The climate of the 1970s Britain was what Bradbury describes as "the Me Decade" in which British people "retreated to personal preoccupations" and the important issues in discussion became those of relational matters closer to their personal lives. The narrower the scope of the issue, the more varied the voices on it become, and this decade found itself represented by, and dealing with, many different viewpoints of the people as Britain underwent a constant shaping process with "variousness" in the country which remained to be fully understood (Bradbury 418, 423). According to Dominic Head, Britain in this era was torn between "an uncompromising tradition" and "the reinvention of nationality" (118).

Among the monumental changes that Britain was faced with, multiculturalism was one of the most influential. In the 1970s, steep immigration reached a new statistical high, increasing ethnic diversity as well as racial tension in the country. From a country that was once viewed as having monoculture, Britain has become a "pluralistic" nation full of "inner fragments" consisting of foreigners and migrants

belonging to various sub-cultures (Jain xii). An imminent phase of immigration brought over 70,000 Kenyan and Ugandan Asians to Britain as refugees, making the number of immigrants soar to over one million (Christopher 9). Within Britain itself, conflicts between England and neighboring countries like Scotland, Wales and Ireland were also reported repeatedly as these countries tried to assert and regain their national identity. Race riots were sporadic even in large cities like London, concentrated around the impoverished black communities. Authorities became casualties as the immigrant community and the police force fell out of trust, resulting in, for example, a murder of a policeman in Tottenham, north London (Morgan). These events were accompanied by the mounting unemployment rate in Britain, especially for young people. The British government of the era, under Margaret Thatcher, encouraged a renewal of English nativism, xenophobia, and nostalgia for the central power the British Empire held in international affairs (Walkowitz 223). Still, despite the problems arising out of it, the postcolonial migration caused an unprecedented "cultural (and biological) hybridity" which would come to take its place in the English consciousness as a leading course of progress in the following decades (Head 119).

The significance of the gradual loss of grandeur and status is particularly immense for England. Though often referred to interchangeably, England and Britain are separated, especially with regard to the power dynamics. Over the course of history, the Empire period included, it has been Great Britain that was the center of politics, economy, trade, production, and basically everything for countries across the globe. However, it cannot be disregarded that the ruler of Britain, and by extension the colonies, has always been the monarch of England. Thus, if Britain can represent

colonial power, England is the zenith of such power, clearly superior even to the nations included in Great Britain. For the discussion in this thesis, the term England is used to refer to the country of England with its unique political, historical, and cultural contexts as separate from the rest of Britain.

The social conditions have an impact on many aspects of people's lives, including literature. The genre of the novel, in particular, is known to be strongly affected by social circumstances. However, after the 1970s onward, a question was raised whether the English novel was "living or dying" as it was seen to be unable to adapt to the trend of modernism or to respond to the expanding and internationalizing world (Bradbury 439). Richard Bradford, the author of the book *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*, drawing upon the opinion of Bernard Bergonzi, deemed that the English novel was "stultifying" and "irrevocably parochial"—not having moved much forward since the nineteenth century but having replaced, and devalued, the classic ideas with "a nugatory conservatism" (25-26). In comparison with the modern literary trends, however, Peter Ackroyd argues in his book *Notes for a New Culture* that England "had 'insulated itself' from the benefits of modernism and maintained the 'false context' and 'false aesthetic' of realism" (qtd. in Bradford 25). His focus was on the perceived inferiority of the English novel to that of the French *nouveau roman*. Similarly, *The New Review*, published in 1978 and including several views on the state of the novel by a number of writers and critics, compares British writers with those from America, France, and several Third World countries and finds that the British are "self-absorbed, unambitious, complacent and reactionary in what they produced" (qtd. in Bradford 25).

Such pessimism was not completely accurate. Rather, the condition of the English novel was going through a transformative period. Peter Childs observes that writings in the 1970s reflect the advancement of the post-war changes in social attitudes, religious consciousness, sexual mores, and youth movements, underpinned by an increasing Americanization of British culture (*Contemporary Novelists* 10). Furthermore, attempts were made in the age of Margaret Thatcher to control the impact of immigrant communities on the languages and literatures of Britain, but ironically, novelists who flourished in this period included such names as Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, and V. S. Naipaul, all of whom were not of English descent and were transforming the literary landscape of works written in English (Walknglowitz 223). In Bill Buford's essay "The End of the English Novel," he argues that the beauty of the contemporary fiction lies not in its comparable eloquence to the old classics, but in its refusal to be associated with and its skepticism of the old traditions. To him, the new creative prose is liberated, truly experimental, and exploitative of, but not wasted by, traditions (9). The only example given by him of writers who possess such qualities was Salman Rushdie. Writers like Rushdie and his kind had claimed not only the interests but also approval from critics of English literature. From the literary world dominated mainly by British writers, now Britain had come to embrace, accept and appreciate literature of writers from other countries writing in English. Obvious evidence is the founding of the Booker Prize in 1969 which included writings from the Commonwealth and other countries in English. The opinions toward this change are divided into two strains: one that feels the emergence of the inclusion gives the British literary world "a powerful new foothold in contemporary culture" and one that condemns it as turning the novel "from the realm

of art to that of commerce" (Bradbury 419). Either way, names of these immigrant writers were not only included in the qualifying works but also in the winner list as well, starting with the Welsh female writer Bernice Rubens in 1970, only one year after the establishment of the Prize. More widely-known names followed with V. S. Naipaul in 1971, Salman Rushdie, with his *Midnight's Children*, in 1981, J. M. Coetzee in 1983, Kazuo Ishiguro in 1989, Aravind Adiga, author of *White Tiger*, in 2008, and other names of similar, non-Anglo-Saxon origins in between.

The influx of Commonwealth literature created doubt in the British literary community with regard to the survival of the mainstream English writers who used to occupy the market and were the focus of literary critics in the previous decades. The impact of these writers was not limited to only the writing of immigrants, but it extended into the works of western novelists as well. Novels produced from this era on have invariably displayed their subtle acknowledgement of "social fragmentations" and possible "social collapse" with manifest focus on "dispossessed figures" (Head 38). Moreover, one subject matter in contemporary literature has shifted from that of "the power of ideology or the conquest of space," which clearly reflects the Colonialist mentality, to "an awareness of shrinking spaces," drawing attention to the loss of eminence both in terms of physical space and power (Jain 1). The emergence of this new trend in British literature sent a message to the public with regard to the change taking place in not just the political or economical spheres but in their culture as well. Accepting writers like Rushdie, Desai, or Ishiguro as household names meant that the British people were opening up to the cultural diversity in the literary world, but it did not necessarily carry a positive connotation. On the contrary, this cultural

shift acted almost like a wake-up call for the British people to the consequences of their past behavior.

Despite their growing prosperity, many of these so-called Commonwealth writers were not satisfied with their newly attained position in the British literary circle. Much condemnation was directed against Britain from these writers as they saw the supposed augmentation of the position of Commonwealth literature in the canon as a degradation of sorts. Rushdie, for example, expresses his contempt for this particular coinage "Commonwealth Literature" in his essay "Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist," saying that it is simply a way of the English to obscure the true changes that are happening to the world of the English language by creating such a limiting term in order to segregate non-English writers from them. Rushdie calls himself and other writers of his kind "rough beasts"—a term mocking the way the English apparently see them (70). He remarks sarcastically that "England…has not been expelled from the Commonwealth quite yet"; however, English literature is not considered as part of the Commonwealth literature. Canonical English literature, Rushdie mocks, is "the great sacred thing" which should be put on a pedestal, instead of mingled with "this bunch of upstarts, huddling together under this new and badly made umbrella" (62). Clearly, he feels that the concept of Commonwealth literature, starting from the very term itself, is simply an invention of the English to obfuscate the increasing importance of the people whom they formerly colonized and to establish a delusional partition of ranks between the colonized and colonizers. Commonwealth literature, to Rushdie, is "an exclusive ghetto" created as an inferior and somewhat embarrassing corner inside English literature in order to transform the meaning of the term 'English literature' into "something far narrower, something

topographical, nationalistic, possibly even racially segregationist" (63-64). The change that Rushdie accuses the English of attempting to disguise is the fact that the English language "is by now the world language," that it no longer belongs exclusively to the English, but has now become a common tool for people around the world to be used as they please (63-64). Ironically, as Rushdie points out, the spread of the English language was not solely or even primarily due to the British legacy, but it also resulted from the primacy of the United States of America in the affairs of the world (64). England was seen, at least by writers of the Commonwealth, as not taking the prime role over the pre-eminence even of its own language. By extension, the nation had obviously lost its power and significance in the international affairs. By the 1970s England's role had become peripheral, and the United States had firmly taken its place as one of the world's leading powers. Taking the matter of the English language as the starting point, England had not simply become insignificant, but it was diminishing in power to those it had before subjugated, America and the Commonwealth. Thus, it is not difficult to see why the concept of Commonwealth literature may be interpreted as a way to conceal, or at least obscure, the imminence of this new wave of writers emerging from the former British colonies because in accepting the transformation that Rushdie describes, the English people inevitably acknowledge their past mistakes and crimes, among which ranks mainly colonialism. As biased as his opinion may be, Rushdie may have come up with a closely accurate description of the situation at hand by ending his essay with a suggestion that 'Commonwealth literature' was likely invented "to delay the day when we rough beasts actually slouch into Bethlehem. In which case, it's time to admit that the centre cannot hold" (70).

If indeed Commonwealth literature can be compared to a production of the 'beasts,' then it is natural that it remained in an isolated slot to which it was allotted. The English, as theorized by Dominic Head, will always be identified in connection with imperialism. He accords with the idea which Rushdie suggests in *The Satanic Verse* that imperialism has left a key feature to the English "national character" which is "a self-conscious arrogance" (119). To accept the literature written by the Commonwealth 'beasts' as accurate or valid, or worthy on the same level as English literature, would simply be unacceptable for the British mentality. As expected, the emergence of Commonwealth literature points to some of the faults and misconducts committed along the history of Britain, but they would be readily or conveniently dismissed, or at best, studied with almost clinical detachment by its British readership. Therefore, it seems there was a need for a kind of writer who could accurately evoke the same message as that which Rushdie expresses in his essay and be accepted in the British literary public without skepticism or discrimination. In the 1970s, a new wave of writers emerged who clearly reflected the changes taking place inside the British Isle. This new wave was part of the culture where recent history and the advanced technological consumer society was a picture of the grotesqueness of modern life, provoking their works to portray the sense of a "corrupted, baffling, decaying, materially damaged world" (Bradbury 426-437). While the Commonwealth writers' negative portrayals of Britain were received with prejudice, similar depictions made by inherently British writers may achieve more uncondescending scrutiny and impact. Ian McEwan was among this group of new writers who have been termed *les enfants terribles* or the terrible children.

Ironically, and appropriately, McEwan began his writing career in the 1970s, the period coinciding with the establishment of the Booker Prize. Described by David Malcolm as "a happy, worldly, fashionably dressed, reasonably prosperous professional upper-middle-class man," he is probably one of the writers who are the farthest physically from Rushdie and the likes (4). Still, he did not fail in gaining recognition as a leading British novelist among all the hybrid writers who were dominating the market. From his first collection of stories *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), followed closely by his first novel *The Cement Garden* (1978), he earned himself a reputation as the author of "literature of shock" (Childs 3). Jack Slay Jr. explains that the "shock value" in McEwan's novels is, in fact, "reflective of the world itself" (5). His second novel *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, followed by *Black Dogs* in 1992, *Atonement* in 2001, and *On Chesil Beach* in 2008. *Amsterdam*, his eighth novel, won the Man Booker Prize in 1998. Malcolm states that McEwan's stories were written and published "in the context of the changes, both perceived and real, that shaped British fiction" from the 1970s onward (6). While he is celebrated for his "cool, clinical" techniques (Cowley qtd. in Walkowitz 504), McEwan stated that his aim was to produce fiction with heavy critical substances. He asserted that "I would like to see the novel less urbanely celebratory of our times and more critical" (McEwan qtd. in Walkowitz 504). Although he uses extreme subject matter and imagery, his messages and concerns are those that were and have been until this day at forefront of human experience. According to Head, McEwan can be considered "the most significant" writer of the new wave of contemporary British writers who tackle the issues of waning morals and social problems, particularly apparent in 1980s and 1990s England, and represented

ethical voices through their fiction in an era whose atmosphere encouraged otherwise (1-2).

As his career has worn on, McEwen's range of themes became wider and more mature, stepping away from incestuous relationships to social concerns, but he has still maintained the quality of provoking uneasiness with his descriptive style and striking imagination. His "stylish morbidity," which Kiernan Ryan deems as his appeal can still be identified in every work (2). McEwan has said of his writing as being composed by a lack of familiarity or connection with the world which has been portrayed and overportrayed in countless English novels, a world punctuated by discernible class distinctions, social mobility, in its positive and negative aspects, and the meticulously described furniture, which, to him, too much resembles social documentary (McEwan interview "The Salon Interview" 2). Like his contemporaries, McEwan reacts to the modern world from which he writes with contempt that is transformed into narratives of disturbing themes and issues. Defamiliarization and alienation are key techniques that writers including McEwan use in representing the images and effects of the world in the latter part of the twentieth century (31). According to Philip Tew, writers of McEwan's generation, i.e. from the mid-1970s onward, have been responding "fundamentally to a shift in Britain's intellectual and geographic culture" and "often questioning explicitly…the parameters of nationhood" (31-32). The contemporary novel, much like McEwan's novels, is largely concerned with the impact on contemporary life of modern European history, of the transformative abilities of science, and of the political dilemmas from liberal-democratic societies in a globalized world (Gasiorek 205). Yet, although McEwan's fiction is built on the familiar and the conventional, it can reveal unnerving

discrepancy between the world we know and the fictional world as it is laid out (Bradford 24).

There is a caricature built around the readings of McEwan's works that ties his writing to the "demonic image" acquired from his first books; however, there is undoubtedly a vast gap between his early preoccupations and his involvement in later works (Ryan 2-3). He presents modern society through images of "alienation, detachment, nausea, [and] 'desolate couplings'" (Bradbury 437). Although certain scenes may strike readers as grotesque and controversial, they are "recognizably and disturbingly human" (Childs 2). Without inhibitions, McEwan writes to show that such "hellish existence" of violence and atrocities which has become "the universal human condition" is part of the "sordidness of the real world" which he forces us to acknowledge (Slay 10-12). In many of his novels, there is an interference with or a transgression into personal spheres of social situations making the two worlds inseparable—a style which is characteristically McEwan—but with the attention centered on the "private psyche of individuals, the problems and disturbances of their thinking and feeling" (Morrison 67). It is with this technique that Jago Morrison claims to be the possible venue for studying "the processes of psychological discovery…in microcosm" and where "broader insights are captured" (67). He transforms a world of moral and rational jeopardy into a "world of psychic oddity and intensity" (Bradbury 437). Yet, it is said that in his more recent works there is recognizably an emerging desire for hope, love, and redemption, which relieves the ominousness pervasive in his earlier writings.

With McEwan, the readers always get "a sense of the very ordinary and familiar as possessed of something potentially discomforting" through his narrators

who have “a modest, learned elegance of manner [but] unobtrusive yet quietly, sometimes frighteningly, evocative” style (Bradford 18). The same description can be said of the writer himself. McEwan may seem like an embodiment of a true British middle-class man, but he brings forth a considerable amount of displeasure with Britain in his literary works.

The theoretical framework used for the analysis of the three novels in this thesis relies mainly on the book *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (2001) by Stanley Cohen. In this book, Cohen comprehensively discusses several aspects of denial, for example, types, causes, conditions, etc. His main thesis is that while some may think that denial is a psychological abnormality in response to uncommon situations, it is in fact a rather common and normal state of affairs. In a traditional sense, such as the psychoanalytical sense of denial introduced by Sigmund Freud, denial is part of the defense mechanism that is activated when the mind, or the ego, is faced with traumatizing or overwhelming incidents, in order to protect the ego from going into a breakdown and losing sanity altogether. However, Cohen addresses a different aspect of denial referring to a number of concepts that people normally avoid due to disturbing or intense contents while giving reasons that these issues do not concern them directly, that there are people already taking responsibility for the issues, or that there are more important things that they have to attend to. In the three novels, a number of types of denial are detected, but the most notable is what Cohen calls *implicatory denial* which refers to the condition in which an individual accepts the event as fact, but denies the implications that such fact invokes (8). In other words, the factual aspects, such as dates, times, or even details of the action, are acknowledged, but there is a refusal to recognize the consequences of what happened.

More importantly, Cohen thoroughly explores the mechanisms of denial in sociological terms. He debunks the idea that denial is a matter of the individual mind which affects only the individuals and families. Instead, he states that denial extends to social and cultural contexts as well showing that "Government bureaucracies, political parties, professional associations, religions, armies and police have their own forms of cover-up and lying" (6). Specifically, he addresses the sociological denial theory in the chapter titled "Denial at Work: Mechanisms and Rhetorical Devices" by illustrating each type of denial mechanisms separately and citing several theorists and events such as C. Wright Mills and the 1990's feminists analysis of abusive situations, in order to show how denial is at work in almost all aspects of social life. He argues that denial is not simply private, but it is influenced by "ordinary cultural transmission" meaning that on many occasions denial happens almost out of public consent (59). "Collective denials," discussed in the chapter "Blocking out the Past: Personal Memories, Public Histories," are also evident in connection to "public histories," mainly those which affect the public at large.

Another angle of denial concerning social or public events that is discussed in detail by Cohen is the *bystander state* which is seen as a symptom of modern consciousness or an "urban malaise" (68-69). This phenomenon refers to the witnessing of a negative happening, regardless of the degree, ranging from domestic violence, bullying, crime, or even acts of war, without offering assistance to the victims or attempting to interfere in order to put a stop to the violence. This inaction thus concerns the denial of responsibility which is simply the excuse that the bystander fabricates for himself/herself in order to avoid the guilt of inaction. This type of denial will be elaborated in the analysis of *Amsterdam* in Chapter III.

Apart from Cohen's book, a number of literature contribute to the understanding and the analysis of denial in the three novels. One such work that is significant to this thesis is Kathryn Schulz's *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*, which addresses the experience of human error from numerous angles. Similarly to Cohen, Schulz observes that denial can occur in both conscious and subconscious levels (230). The subconscious level, the one which she asserts as sincere, is not a psychological response to the "facts" but to the "feelings those facts evoke" (228). Therefore, while denial is often regarded negatively as "the last, sorry refuge of those who are too immature, insecure, or pig-headed to face the truth," it is actually a human response that should be understood and sympathized (Schulz 228). On the other hand, she cites one classic example of a conscious denial, which she deems "cynical," referring to Franklin D. Roosevelt's speech given in Pittsburgh for the presidential election. In this speech, Roosevelt promised the public that he would not raise taxes regardless of the circumstances in the future. Facing a budget problem a few years into his first term as President, he realized he had to break that promise and thus turned to his speechwriter for advice on how to handle the reversal. The answer he received was a quintessential representation of a conscious denial, "Deny you have ever been in Pittsburgh" (Schulz 230).

The concepts of denial are applied to several aspects of the three novels by Ian McEwan chosen for this study. The first novel, *The Cement Garden* (1978), is analyzed for its depiction of denial of insecurities and vulnerability. While this is a novel focused mainly on childhood, it can also be read as an observation of a deliberate mentality of denial, which, by extension, can be compared to that of England. The characters, time, and place are "at once very physically and

substantially there and at the same time rather general" (Malcolm 56). In this book, McEwan portrays the siblings in a state of denial of their insecurities. Because they are left without parental supervision, in reality they are vulnerable and in need of care from adults. However, they purposely keep their situation a secret from everyone and assume the roles that are vacated by their parents' deaths in order that the family remains somewhat the same (Childs 34). Similarly, England is in denial of the changing dynamics of the world politics and culture. The actions of the siblings in this novel can be interpreted as the actions of the English people that refuse to admit their vulnerability. The third chapter explores the novel, *Amsterdam* (1998), which depicts the denial of failures of the main characters who have obviously passed the prime of their lives and career. However, they still try to show everyone that they still maintain the qualities that distinguished them in their youth and salvage their career which seems to be on the declining end. In terms of position, the two main characters, Clive and Vernon, can be compared to England in the late twentieth century with the glorious past of the Empire and world power behind it. From the way it holds itself superior to many other countries, especially those that used to be subjugated to them, it can be said that England is still nostalgic of its past, and wants to revive the old ways. The last novel is *Atonement* (2001) which reflects the denial of insignificance. Described as one of McEwan's most notable novels, he spans the timeframe for the story from pre-World War II to the end of the twentieth century. With an overimaginative mind, the main character Briony turns all her energy into her fiction writing, but she fails to distinguish between reality and her own fantasy. She misinterprets the romantic relationship between her sister and the maid's son, and, with a series of unfortunate happenings, ruins the lives of both her seniors. However,

it can be said that part of the reasons why she possesses such a detrimental tendency, albeit inadvertent, is because she is neglected in the real world by her family, and thus feels left out and unimportant. Hence, the way she manipulates the story of Cecilia and Robbie can be attributed to her countering the insignificance that she feels. England in the latter half of the twentieth century also faced the same problem. It was no longer in the prime position as the world's leading power and its significance in the international stage was diminishing. Nevertheless, like Briony, it was in denial of the loss of importance to the surroundings, and would try to establish a way to regain that power. Confronted also with the "abysmal moral and political realities" of World War II, McEwan suggests that it is virtually impossible for any good will to survive (Mackay 161). He takes the theme of self-deception further by showing that the book is a novel that Briony writes to atone for the mistakes she has made. This can be related to the English subconscious deception that mistakes can be easily atoned, like the mistakes of colonialism.

CHAPTER II

THE CEMENT GARDEN:

CONSPIRACY IN ISOLATION

> "It was not at all clear to me now why we had put her in the trunk in the first place. At the time it had been obvious, to keep the family together. Was that a good reason?" (*The Cement Garden* 98)

A novel which is usually included in any discussion of Ian McEwan's body of works is his 1978 novel *The Cement Garden*, both for its status as his debut novel and as representative of the themes and style of McEwan's early writings. Peter Childs in his book *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction Since 1970* contends that this novel is a continuation of the preoccupations in McEwan's earlier short stories and can be considered an expansion of the "familiar McEwan territory" which includes familial rivalry, taboos, and impending threats of violence (161). Not only that, it can also be categorized as a "Condition-of-England" novel[1] of the late twentieth century (Malcolm 65). This chapter analyzes the events represented in *The Cement Garden* and their indication of denial by examining the processes of denial performed by the characters toward several external as well as internal stimuli, in particular the decline in the physical and psychological circumstances. It also illustrates the repercussions stemming from such attempts at denial, and aims to present the reflections implied by

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1 The Condition-of-England novel is a term developed in the Victorian era to describe works of fiction that address contemporary social and political problems, with emphasis on the issues of class, gender, and labor, in England. Victorian novels of this genre were produced largely as a response to the Condition of England Question in Thomas Carlyle's *Chartism* (1839) which was concerned with the 'two nations theme,' the rich and the poor. Such novels thus aim persuade the reading public to look for ways of reducing the gap between the 'two nations.'

the denial demonstrated in this novel of the collective mentality of British people in the period contemporary of its publication, which can be interpreted as showing similar characteristics of denial.

At the time of writing *The Cement Garden* (1978), his first novel, McEwan's career as a writer consisted mainly of successful collections of short stories. Although it is his first full-length novel, *The Cement Garden* still maintains the mood and preoccupation of his earlier literary works, which were two collections of short stories that deal heavily with grotesque matters such as abuse, incest, and murder. The book deals with four siblings living in a house with a garden that has been cemented over by the father. After both parents die, one of them is buried by the children themselves in a cemented trunk. To prevent the truth from being discovered, which will result in all of them being placed in the social system where they are likely to be separated, the children then continue living their lives during the summer break from school as though everything is still the same. *The Cement Garden* received ambivalent reception, a combination of horror and fascination. When it was first published, initial reception from foreign critics like Wolfgang Wicht and Gérard Klaus deemed the book "Ein unerbaulicher Roman" or an unedifying novel and viewed Jack as "ce monstre d'insensibilité" or an unfeeling monster, repectively (qtd. in Malcolm 45). Anne Tylor states that the dark and unpleasant children around whom the story revolves are problematic because the reader cannot identify with or believe in them (qtd. in Childs *The Fiction of Ian McEwan* 33). However, despite the rather negative reaction toward this novel seeing it as being morbid and repulsive, many critics subsequently came to see the merits of this book.

The novel presents itself to be problematic from the title itself. The "cement garden" is an unconventional concept as it does not conform to the image of a garden commonly recognized in the reader's mind. Generally, a garden conjures images of plants, whether shade-giving trees, flowers, or grassy lawns. However, the garden at the center of this novel has no plants, an intentional gesture on the part of the father who cements over the entire area surrounding the house which is usually intended as a garden. In fact, the condition of this garden becomes a joke among the children of the house when once at the dining table, Jack tells his siblings that he has noticed something strange in the garden and that thing turns out to be a flower, to which the children respond with histrionic excitement (*The Cement* 20). This cement garden is the foremost deviance from the norms.

The concept of the garden has been a predominant feature in the English culture for a long time. Throughout history, the trends in the creation of the English garden have altered, but they all ultimately reflect the passion of the English people in decorating the space with plants and other ornaments (Ross). Not only that, Anne Helmreich's investigation of the relationship between gardens and national identity underscores the role played by the garden in the cultural nationalism of England, which, despite and also due to its continuous changes in forms and influences, implies the solid collection of ideologies, values, interests, and traditions shared by the English people (2-6). In general, the key elements of the English garden comprise a formal layout of controlled, rather rigid but manageable, shapes, such as those of geometry, with informal plants undermining the lines and material structures from figurines to miniature edifices such as castles as ornaments. One of the most influential features of the English garden, according to Ursula Buchan, is the hedges

which are trimmed and styled neatly into shapes that provide frames and directions to the garden (37). Thus, for the father of the family in *The Cement Garden* to wish so vehemently for the garden to be cemented over, leaving a smooth, flat surface and no plants, is a strong deviation from the conventional structure of the English garden. Thematically, this also reflects the overall scope of the novel in that the behaviors and attitudes of the main characters can be said to parallel the *cement garden* due to their deviance from convention in almost every aspect of their lives. Not only that, the cold and lifelessness of the cement also mirror the distant relationship between the father and his children. This irregular and artificial garden sets the perimeter of the house within which the events in the story unfold, further emphasizing the fact that this family hides a dark secret that would be deemed unacceptable to the conventional society.

Furthermore, the artificiality of this garden functions to accentuate the subversion of nature presented in this novel. Actually, the very concept of a garden is, in itself, coercion upon nature as all gardens are products of their makers' desire to control and organize their natural surroundings. The English garden then illustrates a stronger enactment of this notion since it portrays the preoccupation with both geometric shapes and solid structures. "Hard landscaping," as is the case with the English garden, is barely malleable throughout the year and provides boundary for the flowers and fruits that ripe with seasons (Buchan 34-36). Geometry, states Buchan, is "a specific rejection of nature" (13). Moreover, in this book, the garden that has all been cemented over is a reinforcement of the false control being imposed upon nature by the father. Similar to the underlying implication of the material objects being placed in any garden, the artificial cemented garden is a way to subvert nature, as well

as fate. Having a man-made structure in the garden implies that the garden has something to offer its creators or visitors all year round, undermining the fact that seasons change and the natural elements in the garden are subject to the cycle of nature. The cement in the garden can be said to serve the same function for the family living within the confines of this so-called garden. By refusing to let nature take its course in the house, the family also refuses to acknowledge or accept that they, too, are subject to the natural progression of events. Moreover, Helmreich examines that the garden functions as an "invented tradition" which incorporates

> a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past and include such symbols as the national flag or anthem that signified membership in the exclusive club of nationhood (4).

Hence, with the garden as the framework of their lives, the family in the novel is confined within the boundary of subversion and denial, which thus sets the atmospheric scope of the entire novel. This symbol of denial is presented even in the linguistic level, considering the way the book is entitled *The Cement Garden* instead of 'The Cemented Garden.' In order to be defined as a garden, the space has to be made up of plants, and the area around the house seen in this story is a garden which has been cemented over, thus making 'the cemented garden' a proper name for it. Yet, McEwan opts for the more deliberate 'cement garden' as the title, signifying the abuse of the term. The garden is presented as if it was originally created with cement, which

would then render it not a garden at all. From this, it can be read that the condition of being cemented over is tantamount to being denied.

The characters in *The Cement Garden* are depicted to represent various traits of denial throughout the book. It can be interpreted that the basis for the denial is the various states of decline of both the atmosphere and the characters which are extensively conveyed. The characters' denial is both active and passive, with such tactics including evasion, negation, avoidance and silence, among other strategies. The most evident type of denial presented in the novel is implicatory denial. In this case, the major implication against which the siblings of *The Cement Garden* vehemently allot their denial is the vulnerability consequent of the several aspects of decline encompassing them.

In the novel, a number of instances portray elements of decline, which can be seen from the beginning through to the end. Such pervasive decline is the main catalyst for the denial in the story, and it can be categorized into physical and psychological. The physical decline is discernible from the description of the geographical settings, the health conditions and the corporal states of the characters. Firstly, the house which is the main setting of the novel is far from elegant or even well-maintained. The area surrounding the house is described by many critics as a "wasteland" (Malcolm 55; Ryan 19; Wells 118). The family house which stands alone amidst the deterioration of the neighborhood is surrounded by the "urban desolation" (Malcolm 54). The road on which the house stands runs "into another street" where most of the houses

> and all the houses in the next street across, had been cleared to make way for four twenty-story tower blocks. They [stand] on wide aprons of

> cracked asphalt where weeds [are] pushing through. […] All down their concrete sides were colossal stains, almost black, caused by the rain (*The Cement* 29).

There are no cultural or geographical references to the backdrop of the novel. This story can take place anywhere and at any time. However, instead of being at fault with generalization, this lack of historical reference points or "the greyness of the prose," according to Christopher Williams, reinforces the emptiness of the lives of the characters which seem to be external of society (220). The characters seem to exist in and abide by the rules and traditions established by themselves within the confines of the cement garden, insomuch that the social factors have little influence on their decisions or mentality. In other words, they portray the natural condition of humanity that is not governed or determined by space or time, as reflected through the use of the grey prose. This house is located "on an empty land where stinging nettles [grow] round torn corrugated tin. The other houses were knocked down for a motorway they never built" (*The Cement* 27-28). David Malcolm compares this wasteland to the typical conditions of specifically 1960s England (65). Even the father's preoccupation with covering the entire garden with cement, which is part of the product of the urbanized mentality that threatens to obliterate all plants in the garden, at the beginning of the novel shows the aftermath of the industrialized society England, along with the rest of Britain, became in the nineteenth century. Since the concept of the English garden points to a considerable amount of greens, albeit in constricted geometric shapes, which is considered one of the symbols of the English gentility, the purely cemented surface tremendously reflects the decline of the physical decorations. Not only that, the house itself is "built to look a little like a castle, with thick walls,

squat windows and crenellations above the front door" (*The Cement* 21). Described by Ryan as a "desolate suburban fortress" (19), the physical house can be reflective of England in terms of both the colonial power it was known for and the perceived attitude of the English people as being genteel and rather snobbish.

Moreover, the house is a recluse in itself, as the family has not had any visitor in a long time. Jack notes that not even the milkman calls anymore. He also narrates about an occasion when both their parents were still alive but had to leave for a "funeral of one of their last surviving relatives" out of town, and were unable to take the children with them. The mother gives detailed instructions to the children of how to behave during their unsupervised stay. The father gives them instructions on what to do if there are visitors or accidents (*The Cement* 77-78). However, it turns out that nothing out of the ordinary happens and no one ever visits while the children are left in a temporary state of complete freedom much like what they experience after the deaths of both parents. This incident shows that this family has been isolated from the world even before the death of the parents. It also foreshadows that regardless of the children's behavior or the living conditions after both parents have died, there is likely to be no interference from the outside world. In a way, following the British colonial power analogy, the external elements of the house reflect the longstanding Colonialism coming to an end, losing ties with society in the same way that the countries that were once colonies gradually claimed independence.

Secondly, there is the issue of failing physical conditions which apply to both the father and the mother. The health problems of the father are inserted in several episodes recounted by Jack. Early on in the novel the father is described as "a frail, irascible, obsessive man with yellowish hands and face" (*The Cement* 13). He has

suffered a heart attack, which turns him into “a semi-invalid” in the eyes of his children (*The Cement* 17). On the other hand, the illness of the mother spans a great deal longer than the father’s as Jack relates the goings-on of the household throughout the prolonged period of her sickness. The earlier signs of her worsening conditions come in the forms of her inability to sleep and deteriorating physical features. She has “grey and watery” eyes that are “sunk so far into her skull she seem[s] to stare out from a deep well” and the skin around them are “dark [and] wrinkled like a peach stone” (*The Cement* 29-31). Then, her physical weakness becomes more pronounced when she retreats to the bed and stays confined in her bedroom once she is no longer able to handle regular chores in the house. This remains the case until the day that she dies. However, for the mother, what is more important is that her physical decline does not end with her death. Due to the children’s unconventional enactment of burying her in a cemented trunk, her decline continues in the form of her decomposing corpse. The stench from the corpse is the first predominant sign of the decomposition, which then prompts Jack and Sue to investigate the trunk. The corpse has apparently distended as it pushes the middle of the cement out (*The Cement* 131).When they peer over the crack in the cemented trunk, Jack sees “a convoluted yellowish gray surface,” which he briefly imagines to be “a face, an eye, part of a nose and a dark mouth,” and Sue says it is the mother’s nightwear (*The Cement* 132). According to Malcolm, this also marks the “ultimate motif of decay” presented in the novel (56). Apart from the parents, Jack himself is a representation of material decline in the story. The readers are told of how he lets his body become dirty and repulsive by abandoning showers and any act to maintain personal hygiene. With spots all over his face, he “no longer wash[es his] face or hair or cut[s his] nails or [takes] baths”

and also stops "brushing [his] teeth" (*The Cement* 26), to the point that his sister also remarks that he "stink[s]" (*The Cement* 36). Similarly, the house is left to degenerate through the deliberate inattention of its inhabitants. The kitchen becomes "a place of stench and clouds of flies" not long after the burial as none of the children feel "like doing anything about it beyond keeping the kitchen door shut" (*The Cement* 82). The flies then "spread through the house and [hang] in thin clouds by the windows and [make] a constant clicking sound as they [throw] themselves against the glass" (*The Cement* 82).

The other decline palpable in the novel is the mental decline which is reflected through a number of incidents. The first sign is the father's attitude toward the garden when he has an uncanny obsession with cementing over the whole garden, to which the mother objects. The mother is "furious" because they have "little money" reasoning that "Tom would soon be needing new clothes for starting at school," but to no avail (*The Cement* 15). This fixation can be seen as reflecting a diminishing connection to the natural world and the increasing reliance on the artificial, as all existing natural elements are obliterated to make way for the controlling and controllable flat cemented surface. When before, the father is narrated to have attempted to decorate the natural garden with plants and flowers but had to stop due to his heart attack, he abandons the original plan for the cement garden that he can make and manipulate. The issue of urbanity is one that is prevalent in McEwan's novels including this one. Jack Slay Jr. observes that the city in *The Cement Garden* is portrayed as "a vast and aching nothingness" (*The Cement* 37), where the image of the concrete jungle epitomized by the cement garden serves to problematize the entanglement of nature and artificiality of urban life as it symbolizes the dominion of

the artificial leaving no room for nature to exist. The cement that is poured over the natural garden thus corresponds with the enclosing but unrealized urbanity, both of which point toward decline both physical and mental. Combined with the general atmosphere of the house, this cement garden evokes the sense of alienation brought on by the influence of urbanity. Another aspect of decline at the psychological level is the familial relationship. Communication within this family is neither smooth nor effective. The father and the mother argue about the cement and the father's relationship with the children is troublesome. Apart from constantly telling Jack to help with his work in the garden, the father is "strict with Tom, always going on at him in a needling sort of way." From this point, Julie is of the opinion that he now must "compete with Tom for Mother's attention," a contest which Tom will win and the father will "take it out on him" (*The Cement* 17). Moreover, he always finds fault with the children's behaviors or characteristics—Sue's "almost invisible eyebrows and lashes," Julie's "ambitions to be a famous athlete," Tom's "pissing in his bed sometimes," Mother's bad arithmetic skills and Jack's "pimples" are all part of the ridicule "stage-managed by Father" (*The Cement* 19-20). As with the relationship between the mother and the children, Jack often becomes frustrated in the presence of or interaction with her. In one episode, the mother reminds him of his breakfast which he has not taken, but he ignores her and simply "slam[s] the front door hard and cross[es] the road" (*The Cement* 27). Lastly, the relationship among the siblings is not entirely cordial either. Jack and Julie frequently have quarrels about each other's behaviors. For example, Julie often criticizes Jack's lack of sanitation "with scorn" (*The Cement* 36). Jack, on the other hand, holds contempt with the fact that Julie naturally affirms the authority that is left unexercised by the mother's illness.

Furthermore, the general conflicts within the family are accompanied by the unconventional transformations adopted by the children. In a way, Childs asserts, this novel examines the pervasiveness of illusion and fantasy in this seemingly "ordinary" family through the ways that children "re-imagine" their lives through unreal lenses such as science fiction, dreams, role play and dressing up (*Contemporary Novelists* 168). One of the fantasies is seen in the game that the children play without the knowledge of their parents. The readers are shown that the children often furtively engage in seemingly innocent forms of play that involve sexual acts; however, they are performed in the form of role play. When the parents argue, the children move upstairs and start their game with Sue acting as an extraterrestrial specimen being examined by Jack and Julie, in the role of the scientists. During this investigation, the two older siblings "strip" Sue, "strok[e] her back and thighs" and slide their "moistened finger[s]" between her legs (*The Cement* 15-16). This particular game becomes the recurring image in Jack's mind when he masturbates and is also the foreshadowing of the eventual consummation between the two older siblings, Jack and Julie. Meanwhile, it is also an indication of the lack of social norms, somewhat inherent in these children's minds, which is reinforced by what Ryan calls as a "decadent climate" (22). The last representation of psychological decline can be seen in the regression of Tom, the youngest sibling. Tom favors the idea of being dressed like a girl because it appears to have more "advantages" than being a boy in terms of physical safety because in his perspective boys do not hurt girls (Malcolm 59). He also reverts further to infancy toward the end of the novel when he climbs into the cot and sucks his thumb in his mouth (*The Cement* 145-146). This behavioral deviance displayed by the children might also be seen as a manifestation of the collapse of

social systems and norms. The novel does not provide all the norms against which the characters' actions are to be scrutinized but relies on the readers' cultural knowledge or contexts as standards by which they are to make judgments about the characters, assuming that the readers apply their immediate social traditions to the incidences they see in the novel. Despite the possible obscurities and differences in social standards, it is still evident that a large number of behaviors present breaches of what would normally be regarded as acceptable or normal. Ryan calls the period in which the children live without parental control "a reign of licence and confusion" (22). McEwan himself explains his concept of the children's situation calling it "a ripe anarchy" in which all emotions and desires deemed taboo by society can be freely expressed, for example, Jack's oedipal and incestuous desires for his sister ("Points of Departure" 21). Despite their flaws, the characters are not immoral. Rather, they behave indifferently to the normally accepted standards of society, which heightens a sense of dread in the human potential (Malcolm 65). Similar readings of the circumstances in this period are found in the analyses of John Carey as well as Callil and Tóibín. Carey asserts that the children's behavior is the product of the failure of the officious response from society to domestic tragedies, while Callil and Tóibín feel their actions result from the social dysfunction specific to the societal background of the time of publication of the book itself (146-48; 113). Moreover, these aberrant sexual behaviors also point toward the desire to retreat to the natural state of being prior to sexual restrictions, which corresponds with an implication of the word 'garden,' referring to the naturalness and purity of such a garden as the biblical Garden of Eden. As these instances happen within the bounds of a cement garden, it can also be interpreted that the behavioral degradation is affected by the

transformation of the natural garden. By extension, the psychological decline in *The Cement Garden* occurs in accordance with the physical decline as well.

Apart from the physical and psychological decline, certain narrative tools also serve to accentuate the motif of decline in this novel. Firstly, the book is noticeably marked by the prevalence of gothic elements which, in itself, stirs the feeling of unease and horror. The castle-like house with dark cellar signaling gruesome secrets or dark matters even reminds the reader of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" and Hitchcock's *Psycho* (Malcolm 52). The burial of the mother's corpse in the trunk is the most prominent gothic echo, not to mention the rotting corpse pushing the cement to bulge out of the trunk. When Jack first takes Tom down to the cellar to look at the cement bags, the description of the cellar yields the same effect. The cellar is "large and divided into a number of meaningless rooms." In one room, the two boys are intrigued by "a massive tin chest" which Jack describes as "empty and blackened, so black that in this dusty light [they] could not see the bottom," and that Tom believes to be "a deep hole" (*The Cement* 17). As they move to another room, Tom's laugh is echoed from the previous room, giving a sense of a haunted castle. Moreover, other details such as the cement deliverers whose faces bear "a ghostly look" because they are "covered in a fine, pale dust" and the box in Jack's nightmare all emphasize the presence of the gothic genre (*The Cement* 13). At the same time, though, the setting in the story is disturbingly generic and domestic, which renders the novel more appalling as it accentuates the decay of traditional rules and order, the specific places notwithstanding. Readers may be reminded of the phrase 'the banality of evil'[2] which

[2] The 'banality of evil' is a term used by philosopher Hannah Arendt in 1963 to explain that most of the atrocities, or the 'evil,' in history, with emphasis on the Holocaust, were not committed by fantastical or psychopathic individuals, but in fact by ordinary people.

seems to fit the settings of the urban neighborhood that, behind its commonplace appearances, houses a family with twisted mentality. This domestic setting depicts precisely "the heart of darkness," such that is epitomized in Joseph Conrad's iconic 1899 novel, but the darkness in *The Cement Garden* is already present in the familiar atmosphere of an urban family (Malcolm 53). Another literary technique which serves the similar purpose is the narrative voice. Critics have observed the use of the adolescent first-person narrator in *The Cement Garden* in comparison with the traditional "I" narrator of British novels in the past. The novel as a reflection of social conditions is a common genre in British literature, and the narrative voice is an influential tool used by the author to convey the message. However, in the past, when the novel features a first-person narrator the reader is usually inclined to identify with the narrator if not in terms of social circumstances then in terms of moral standards; a prime example of the authors who employ this technique is Charles Dickens whose first-person narrators are usually recognized as representative of the characters exploited by the social circumstances of nineteenth century Britain. Wicht distinguishes a clear difference in moral stances and values between McEwan's Jack and Dickens' protagonists such as David Copperfield, and attributes Jack's lack of clear morals to the amorality of the book (Malcolm 46). As the narrator, Jack is often depicted as devoid of emotions or involvement, thus rendering the readers unable to identify with or sympathize with him. His emotional reserve also reflects the desolation of the world in which he and the other characters inhabit (Malcolm 50). Correspondingly, Williams maintains that Jack's main characteristic is egocentricity, which can be seen from his reactions to the death of both father and mother (221). He first mentions the death of his father with the explanation that he is "only including

the little story of his death to explain how [his] sisters and [he] came to have such a large quantity of cement at [their] disposal" (*The Cement* 13). During his last moments with his father, Jack steals some time alone to masturbate in the cellar and experiences his first ejaculation, at which he "stare[s]…a long time, up close," a manner uncannily repeated as he discovers his father's body in the concrete (*The Cement* 23). Unable to move away at first, he "stare[s] wonderingly, just as [he] had a few minutes before" (*The Cement* 23). Similarly, when he first hears of his mother's death, his crying is narrated with a hint of self-centeredness. "For a moment [he] perceive[s] clearly the fact of her death, and [his] crying became dry and hard. But then [he] picture[s himself] as someone whose mother had just died and [his] crying was wet and easy again" (*The Cement* 61). Here is a narrator who is clearly a product of a world of "waning moral affect" which is apparent in McEwan's novel (Wells 117). In this world, Jack and his siblings are nurtured, arguably poorly, to become ill-equipped to deal with the crisis with which they are faced; thus, they slip into inertia as a coping mechanism, Jack in particular.

To react against these forms of decline, the characters of *The Cement Garden* adopt a number of acts of denial. The forms of denial evident in the novel can be divided into three types: personal obsession, lies, and normalization. First, several characters in the novel are consumed by their own obsessions which are unhealthy and lacking in appropriate purpose or grounds. As mentioned earlier, the father in the story has an obsession with cementing over the existing garden of the house. The creation of the artificial garden becomes an outlet for him to "sanitize and control" the house and the family (Hennessey 15). This corresponds with the concept of garden as a method to control and make sense of the spaces (Buchan 13). However, he takes this

method too far and abuses it. He works incessantly on his cement garden even when his health becomes a hindrance, thus propelling him to recruit the help of his son, Jack. Apart from the father, Jack has an even worse case of fixation with masturbation. According to Rebecca L. Walkowitz, Jack is more absorbed by his sexual deeds than by the damaged circumstances in which he and his family are plunged into (507). At the age of puberty when male masturbation may seem like a natural way of relaxation or relief of stress, Jack's behavior is far from healthy. He mentions that he considers his first ejaculation as "a landmark in [his] own physical growth" (*The Cement* 13). He masturbates obsessively whenever he gets the chance and it adversely affects his body. Even when he is helping his father cementing the garden, he excuses himself to the bathroom and "work[s] on [himself] rapidly," fantasizing about "Julie's hand between Sue's legs" (*The Cement* 23). His mother obviously notices his behaviors and tells him that his "pupils are very large…and there are bags under [his] eyes even though [he has] just woken up." Moreover, she articulates that Jack "can't get up in the mornings" and is "tired all day [and] moody" because he masturbates excessively and the body "takes two pints of blood to replace it" every time he does it (*The Cement* 34-35). When confronted with her, Jack naturally lies that he has not been doing what she suspects (*The Cement* 34-35). This falls into the second type of denial displayed in the novel.

The children continuously lie about their unsupervised state, which will be explored later. They also lie to Derek that the thing buried inside the trunk is Jack's "dead dog" (*The Cement* 133). Following this, Jack and Julie have to try to force Tom to remember the dead dog named Cosmo and how Tom reacted when she died. "You remember Cosmo, our dog," Julie tells him and reminds him that "You sat on my lap

and cried" (*The Cement* 140). Another strategy, which is similar to lies, regularly detected in denial and adopted by Jack and his siblings is evasion. In Sue's diary, she keeps a record of certain negative matters concerning Jack which he never reveals to the readers, and when she reads it to him, he denies such occurrences ever take place. For example, Sue writes that when Julie asked the siblings whether they would mind if she brought Derek home, "Jack pretended he didn't hear and went upstairs," to which Jack contests that Julie "didn't mention bringing anyone home" (*The Cement* 109). Sue's claim that she "can hardly remember anything about" the sexual role play among the siblings also repeats the traits of denial present in the family (*The Cement* 106). Evasion is also visible in the children's behaviors during the period of mother's sickness. While the asperity of her conditions is the vital lie in the household, the children avert their attention elsewhere and avoid directly dealing with this situation such as by paying much attention to Tom. There is collusion within the group of common deniers to perpetuate the concealment of the vital lie through minimizing the fearsome truth or through relatively sugarcoating it (Cohen 64). Participants of this collusion often find themselves conversing about insignificant but "discussable" matters and avoiding the proverbial elephant in the room, which, in this case, is the mother's fatal illness (Zerubavel 84).

This can also be seen as an act of normalization, which refers to the psychological, as well as physical, alteration of the dreaded event to appear normal. Normalization usually takes various forms such as accommodation, routinization, and tolerance (Cohen 51). In this novel, normalization is recognizable in the ways that the family members try to conceal anything unsavory by emphasizing on what is normal or fabricating a charade of normalcy. By taking the role of the mother and caring for

her younger siblings, Julie takes the lead in retaining the familial dynamic of parents and children. Its effectiveness can be observed in the episode where from afar Jack mistakes a woman on the bridge for his mother and Julie. He recounts the situations as follows:

> Fifty yards from the bridge I could not resist glancing up. The woman was my mother, and she was looking right at me. […] When I was almost under the footbridge I stopped again and looked up. Great relief and recognition swept through me and I laughed out loud. It was not Mother, of course; it was Julie, wearing a coat I had never seen before. […] I ran under the bridge and up a flight of wooden stairs. Face to face with her now I saw that it was not Julie either. (*The Cement* 84)

The image of the family is completely normalized as a unit consisting of parents and children when Jack and Julie consummate their relationship, thus positing them as the mother and father of the remaining family. The mother, while still alive, had strived to normalize the defect in the family that is her illness by refusing to be examined by the doctors, claiming that she had "seen enough doctors and…had enough tests," which the children take without questioning. Also, as "there were no visitors, there was no one to ask [the children] what was wrong with her," and neither do the children (*The Cement* 49), further deepening the sense of false normalcy in the household.

Nonetheless, of all the denial in *The Cement Garden*, none is as prominent as that of the mother's death which occurs on the last day of the summer term. Although she had been sick and bedridden for a while, her death still has an overwhelming impact on the children. The girls "burst into tears and embrace each other" and so

does Jack, while Tom, after a dramatic attempt to wake mother up, cries "himself to sleep on the sofa downstairs" (*The Cement* 61-64). However, Julie's initial reaction when she is alone with Jack is much calmer. She delivers the news of her death to him and tells him to "come down and talk before Tom and Sue get in" (*The Cement* 60). Once downstairs, her demeanor is one of composure and authority. She has "tied her hair in a ponytail and [is] leaning back against the sink, her arms folded. All her weight [is] on one foot, and the other rest[s] flat against the cupboard behind her so that her knees [protrude]" (*The Cement* 61). As Jack cries, she puts her hand on his shoulder, but removes it shortly after and "resume[s] her position by the sink" (*The Cement* 61-62). The mother's death relinquishes the burden of responsibility to Julie and Jack to shoulder. "The house must be run properly," Mother tells Jack not much earlier when she considers going to the hospital to finally get cured, and Julie and Jack "will have to be in charge" (*The Cement* 58-59). Therefore, it sparks a string of denial which is most prevalent in this story. Once left alone, the children secretly agree to keep their mother's death from the public by burying her corpse in the basement. The children's situations are adequately summed up in Commander Hunt's words, "Now that we do not have gravity to keep things in their place...we must make an extra effort to be neat" (*The Cement* 91). The gravity in question is obviously their mother whose absence is compensated by the siblings' incessant effort in appearing otherwise. Such a course of action is taken due to the desire to maintain the existing way of life that they have, what Hennessey sees as an attempt to "maintain equilibrium" (25). It is made clear that the only way to keep the family intact is to conceal the mother's death. If the truth reaches any person outside their family, then the social service will come and "put Tom into care, and perhaps [Jack] and Susan

too" and as "Julie wouldn't stay [at home] by herself," "people [will] be breaking in, taking things, smashing everything up" (*The Cement* 59). The children will then fall in the position of vulnerability as they will be separated without anyone who truly knows or understands them and they will have nowhere they can return to. What is left of the family at this moment is "a system," an internalized course of action, that the children feel obligated to protect in order for them to maintain "their identity" as members of a functioning family (Hennessey 20). The motive of their denial then lies mainly in the realm of necessity for security. The characters employ denial as a self-defense mechanism to protect both their internal equilibrium and their external status in the world. Their sense of belonging in the family is the cohesive agent that propels their complicity in the denial throughout the book. This reason also becomes Jack's main rhetorical device or motivational account as he persuades his siblings of the methods to handle the corpse. Cohen explains that in the psychology of denial, the reasons of the perpetrator or the denier, called 'accounts,' may differ from the general reasons given by society, and are often given as persuasive device to make the act seem more rational than it really is (58-59). Jack's accounts are that the unfortunate development in the house, namely the mother's death, will bring about further segregation of the family and the dissolution of every familiar landmark of their lives should word of the mother's death leave the household. According to Wright Mills, a person's accounts may be drawn from his/her cultural repertoire for a specific social function (qtd. in Cohen 58). For Jack, the purpose of his accounts is to engage his siblings in denial. As it turns out, his technique works almost ineffably since all siblings believe and partake in this unconventional burial and the convoluted web of denial. In actuality, it is not the actual death, but rather the implication of the death

which reveals their vulnerability that the children dread and at which their denial is aimed the most.

The process of their denial starts with the corporal act of burying the corpse. When the discussion comes to the point of the suitable actions following the mother's death, it is Julie and Jack who suggest that they "bury her" in a "private funeral" (*The Cement* 67), making use of the remaining cement and bury her in the basement. The process of entombment is described in horrid detail, from moving and mixing cement, wrapping and moving the body from the bedroom upstairs down to the basement, to putting and covering her body with cement in the trunk (*The Cement* 69-73). The burial of the mother's corpse is the physical enactment of the burial of their dark secret to escape the consequences. Still, the attempt to bury the secret and deny their vulnerable state does not end with the burial because now the children have to maintain their charade by pretending that their mother is still alive, but simply sick and confined to her bedroom. This may also be considered as the true start of their denial, while the burial itself serves as a physical preamble. The children perceive their mother's death as a fact, but they refuse to acknowledge the full impact of such an event in proper ways. Together they form a conspiracy of silence that jointly keeps the fact hidden. Although realizing the severity of this incident, they deliberately project themselves in such a way that will effectively conceal the repercussions. This emphasizes their attempt at denial as it goes one step beyond simply not acknowledging to intentionally and systematically hiding the unsavory secret. The main strategy taken by the oldest children, Jack and Julie, is to assume the role of parental figures in order to make the situations in the house appear normal in the eyes of outsiders. As Childs suggests, once the adult figures in the family are removed, the

children will adapt to the provided role models that are now vacant (*The Fiction of Ian McEwan* 34). Julie, in particular, has gradually taken over the parental presence and authority in the family since the mother started showing signs of illness. Being the eldest, the mother entrusts her with the duty to control her younger siblings and confides in her about her health condition. The mother and daughter engage in "long conversations...in the kitchen" which "break off" if Jack or other siblings walk in on them (*The Cement* 36). Julie's admission that mother has "been dying for months" may simply show that she has been privy to the seriousness of mother's sickness more than any of her siblings, but her elaboration that mother does not want the other children to know posits her as the key catalyst in maintaining the denial in the family (*The Cement* 60). Apart from that, the mother tells Jack that she has "opened an account at the post office for Julie [into which] money will get paid" from mother's account so that she can take care of everyone (*The Cement* 59). Although the account is meant to be used while the mother is away to the hospital, it serves its original purpose as well after her death. The assumption of the parental roles is complete when the two older children, Jack and Julie, eventually consummate their incestuous relationship toward the end of the novel.

Therefore, anyone outside the conspiracy of silence is not trustworthy enough to be included as belonging to different social groups; outsiders tend to have dissimilar perception, causing their reactions unpredictable and, often, undesirable (Zerubavel 17-19). The scope of the conspiracy of silence varies according to the number of people privy to the secret or the degree of the secret itself. This scope can in turn affect the significance of the matter or the measures taken revolving it. In this story, anyone outside the family is classed as being outside of the conspiracy of

silence as well, including Derek, Julie's boyfriend. Although Derek has been around the family for quite a while, knows all of Julie's younger sister and brothers, and has even taken Jack on a trip to the billiard room with the purpose of getting close to the boy, he is only vaguely allowed in on the secret. Julie may have told him that both their parents have passed away and that the children are looking after themselves, but she does not disclose the truth about the body buried in the cellar even when he asks what is down there. In fact, she even gets angry when he takes the key and goes down to the cellar without permission from her or anyone in the house. Apparently this action is not received warmly by Jack, in the same way that Jack replies with a scornful "You promised you wouldn't say" when Julie tells Derek what is inside the trunk (*The Cement* 113). This reaction corresponds with one given toward a violation of the conspiracy's rules. There is an unspoken agreement among the members of the conspiracy of silence that they are not to include outsiders unnecessarily; therefore, giving an outsider like Derek an easy access to the truth meant to be hidden is likely to be met with contempt from the insiders like the siblings. Derek's status as an outsider is also reinforced by his angry outburst that Julie has "never even let [Derek] come near" her. This reveals Julie's distrust of him as reflected in her physical reaction even when they are alone away from the family (*The Cement* 150). It is only in the end that he gets to confirm his suspicion about the secret in the basement, but even then, it is with rage and the children realize that "he found that sledgehammer and he's smashing it up" (*The Cement* 152).

For critic Zerubavel, even in a group or a conspiracy of silence, it is not an easy task to maintain the secret from outsiders. The silence that the members agree to uphold can be "socially exhausting" and thus cause tension among the co-conspirators

(84). Therefore, the children are often found to be in conflict with one another. Nevertheless, despite the conflicts that the children may have among them, they are still able to maintain a conspiracy of silence, which is defined by their shared perception and experience, both positive and negative. According to John Storey, the same quality is inherent in a sense of nationalism in which the people are driven by what they collectively perceive as common sense to feel the sense of belonging to a group or a nation (19). Like any other country, Britain has her form of nationalistic sentiments that set her apart, one of which is the culture of social class, which is distinctively British and stronger than in any other European countries (Higgins et al. 2). Interestingly, Bradford avers that although the concept of class is inherent throughout Britain, it originated and persists in England, with its "germane, divisive elements" (184). Another obvious characteristic is the feeling of superiority, as well as national pride, of the British people, which is congenitally planted due to the monumental Imperialism and the country's past power and significance in the world arena. Unfortunately, the loss of the Empire played a significant role in the transformation of the British power. Returning self-government to India, Pakistan, Burma, and Sri Lanka was considered the "key moment" which was followed by the decolonization, both peaceful and violent, of territories in West and East Africa, including Kenya and Cyprus, and southern Africa. As it turns out, Britain also lost her position as the world power whether in economics, politics or culture (Kumar 52). However, the British people are invested in the belief of their country being an almighty nation with a thousand years of glorious history; consequently, they are stuck under the shadow of the empire and its loss (Storey 13, 23). This false attitude

leads to the difficulty in coming to terms with the changed status of the country and even the sense of denial of the loss of power and securities.

Moreover, in an interview with John Haffenden in 1983, McEwan reveals that he first imagined *The Cement Garden* to portray a family living like "burrowing animals" while the house "seems to fall asleep" after the mother dies (*The Cement* 170). It can be interpreted that these representations serve to display dysfunctional relationships among the family members and also between them and society, depicting how, without the usual ties to society, the children retreat into their private space and refuse to grow up, allowing themselves to be submerged in both literal and metaphorical slumber. Similarly, during the few decades following World War II Britain was faced with bleak prospects with stagnancy in development as an obvious display of the drawbacks in the country's power growth. The political situation in the second half of the twentieth century was plagued with what Bradbury describes as a grim and menacing stand-off (260). Britain was not able to match the growth rate of other industrialized countries, leading to numerous problems such as the decreasing value of the Commonwealth trade preference system, the Pound Sterling crisis, which Young calls the "attempts to play a world role without the necessary resources," the high level of unemployment as well as the numerous strikes taking place in Britain (170-172; Morgan). Britain in this era was torn between "an uncompromising tradition" and "the reinvention of nationality," trying to negotiate the "variousness" that the British people did not yet understand but that was becoming the defining factor of their country (Head 118; Bradbury 423). This was a new era that Britain was not quite prepared for, so she retreated into a somnambulant state, much like the siblings in *The Cement Garden*. Once faced with disruption in the familiar stability of

their lives, the children display their vulnerability by exhibiting a lack of self-control and emotional responsiveness needed to mediate anxiety and accomplish a satisfactory closure (Hennessey 22-23). From this, it is possible to draw the similarities between the British people and the characters in *The Cement Garden* as both circumstances include the declining period and the vulnerability which those involved collectively deny. The response of the characters is resonant of the British mentality to maintain the false belief that their once great nation is still able to continue its prominence.

As pointed out by Cohen, denial, as an unnatural and unhealthy method that the mind adopts to ward off what it is not ready to face, comes with repercussions. In *The Cement Garden*, the consequences take effect on the children in the form of a smothering impact that eventually leads to the breakthrough of the very thing that is being denied. The impact seen in the novel mirrors the metaphor given by A.N. Wilson in his book *Our Times* of British colonial power as "the Imperial straitjacket" (51). The thick walls and the artificial looking garden surrounding the house indicate how the secret maintained in this house has a suffocating effect as well as freedom. The children are somewhat frozen within a monotonous and meaningless life identical to the cement that smoothes everything (Slay 40). As much as they seem to relish in this freedom of not being under the supervision of parents, they are also unknowingly paralyzed by it (Ricks 526). At first, Jack admits the releasing effect his mother's death has as it gives him "a sense of adventure and freedom which [he] hardly dare[s] admit to [himself]" but then as time passes the excitement dissipates and the children keep indoors to avoid "a fine, black dust" that the wind blows and not even the sun can shine through the "high, yellowish cloud" (*The Cement* 79). It seems that in the

early stages following her death, no elements from the outside world are able to penetrate their bubble. The dynamic of the family becomes exceedingly "centripetal" with the children's desire for connection is drawn inward, thus severing them from the larger world outside the house (Hennessey 11). As the ties and obligations to the outside world decrease to almost nonexistent, the children obviously retreat into the insulated and confined domestic sphere which keeps them intact as a family unit but suffocates them as well (Ryan 19-20). This sense of unease felt by the children stems from the clash between the inner impulse to stay enclosed within the walls of denial and the normative force of the external world. Their intense attempt to deny the course of nature in contrast leaves an overwhelming influence over their lives in the form of the mother's presence. Instead of the mother being removed completely from their lives through death, their meticulous attempt to deny the consequence of her death only serves to enhance her influence over them, so that, according to Ryan, "she mutates [and] becom[es] a gargantuan, enveloping presence" (*The Cement* 21). It seems that the less involved she is in her children's lives, the more powerful her gravitational pull becomes. While she is still well and able to run the house, her children, especially Jack, treat her with respectful indifference at best, but once she falls ill, "her bedroom [becomes] the center of the house" where the children spend their time "talking among [them]selves or listening to her radio, while she doze[s]" (*The Cement* 49-50). On Jack's birthday, the mother is "not getting up" to join the party because she is too tired even for that, so instead the children celebrate "round her bedside" (*The Cement* 43). After her death, Sue spends time in the basement sitting next to the trunk talking to her and keeping a diary in the form of letters to her. Even Jack is still drawn down to the cellar where he touches the surface and kneels

down “and put[s his] nose to it and sniff[s]” (*The Cement* 77). Their intense determination to prevent the authorities from discovering their secret is proof of her ongoing interference with the children’s psychological process because the idea of the social authorities or society being disruptive to their family is initially put into their knowledge by their mother in her illness, which Jack repeats to his siblings with conviction. It is the mother’s cautionary remark that is rooted in the children’s consciousness and is the prompt for their actions. Its intense impact shows that the mother is given more and more importance as her physical presence ceases.

In fact, the paradoxical connection between absence and influence is prevalent in this novel and concerns more than the matter of the mother’s continued importance. The members of this family seem to thrive on the isolation from the external world as if their existence as an individual unit within this limited domain of a house were sufficient, making their seclusion intentional rather than circumstantial. The reader is told that neither of the parents have “any real friends outside the family” or siblings, and the “distant relatives” that the mother has in Ireland she has not met “since she was a child,” none of them hold any significance to the family (*The Cement* 28). Apart from Tom’s friend in the neighborhood and Julie’s boyfriend, the children do not mention any social life. The notion of deliberate isolation is portrayed at a more radical level in the characters’ passive attitude toward life. It appears that the characters’ lives are narrated as though they were mere participants with little or no enthusiasm for it. The father’s plan to decorate the garden is altered after his heart attack to cementing the garden altogether, which he insists on continuing despite his weak heart conditions. The mother suffers from a disease which steadily impairs her health, but refuses to seek medical treatment from the doctor until she dies on her own

bed. During her illness, her bedroom takes on the centralizing quality similar to idolatry as the children develop the habit of regularly visiting. On Jack's birthday, the celebration is carried out around her bed with candle blowing, eating, and a form of spectacle by Julie and Jack (*The Cement* 44-45). Furthermore, before entering her bedroom, Jack undergoes an almost ritualistic cleansing process by washing his hands and wrists in hot water, cutting his fingernails and combing his hair (*The Cement* 43-44). These accounts seem to indicate the family's worship of death rather than life, which explains their desire and comfort to stay detached from society.

During the summer when they are high in their denial, the children are constantly on edge lest someone discovers what they have done. This anxiety haunts Jack even in his dream where he is compelled to "foolishly peer" into a box and then sees his mother "with huge, hollow eyes" (*The Cement* 105). Furthermore, it is reflected in the novel that Jack receives as a birthday present from Sue which features an intergalactic hero named Commander Hunt. In this novel, Commander Hunt is on a mission to slay a space monster and dispose of its gigantic corpse. The reason behind this mission is explained by a scientist to Hunt as, "To allow it to drift for ever through space…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?" (*The Cement* 43). To the children, the dreaded mutation which will emerge from this is the disintegration of the family and the loss of the only stability they know. Hence, it is mandatory that they prevent her death from taking its proper development. The resemblance of Commander Hunt's mission and Jack's attitude toward his mother's corpse, both of which feature an adverse entity that needs to be contained as it can otherwise bring about detrimental results, is

striking and it echoes Jack's fear of exposure of the "carcass" that must be enclosed (Ryan 21). It is this same fear that makes the children, even Julie, evade Derek's question and lie to him about the content of the trunk. They even tell him that it is "a dead dog...Jack's dog" buried in there (*The Cement* 133). This phenomenon further confirms that the children's appalling act is a doomed attempt to stop time (Ryan 21). However, it is clear that they cannot succeed because the secret that they try to keep has had more power over them from the start, considering the way that they cannot seem to move on from it and, as much as they purport to continue their lives, still revolve around the death of the mother and its consequences.

Moreover, the outcome is clear toward the end of the novel that the secret, personified in the form of the mother's corpse, will not stay buried and their denial must come to an end. After a while, the cement begins to crack and the rotten corpse starts to radiate its pungent stench all over the house. Jack finds that there is "a hairline crack" on the surface of the cement the first time he returns to it after the burial, of which Sue knows and remarks that "it's getting bigger" (*The Cement* 97-99). The crack expands "in some places half an inch wide" as the mother's corpse rots and distends, making "the middle [bulge] right out" (*The Cement* 131). The smell which has been permeating around the house for some time is first causally explained away by Jack as "the drain outside the kitchen [which] gets blocked very easily" (*The Cement* 129). On the contrary, the dialogue between Jack and Sue reveals that the children:

> '... know what that smell is.'
>
> 'It isn't me.'

> She led me into the kitchen and unlocked the cellar door. It was, of course, the same smell, I knew that at once, but it was changed by being intensified. Now it was separate from me. There was something sweet, and beyond that, or wrapped around it, another bigger, softer smell that was like a fat finger pushing into the back of my throat. It rolled up the concrete steps out of the darkness. I breathed through my mouth.
>
> 'Go on,' Sue said, 'go down. You know what it is,'" (130-31)

The crack in the cement is reflective of the façade that is falling apart and also the dark secret that is breaking through. Apparently, this is the nature of how the events in *The Cement Garden* play out in the end—all the charades come to their logical stop.

Yet, this does not provide a clear solution for the children. All events toward the end represent the leakage that is the natural repercussion of their denial. Nothing that is repressed improperly can stay buried forever (Cohen 119). Even so, the children remain invested in their pretense throughout the dissolution of their plan. As Derek examines the trunk that is smelling, they stand "in a shallow circle behind him, as if some important ceremony were about to take place" (*The Cement* 133). This circle is tantamount to the conspiracy of silence to which they faithfully hold. Later, Derek's patience reaches its breaking point at seeing Julie and Jack engage in an incestuous lovemaking and hearing Julie talk to him with no remorse or affection. When he asks why Julie has not told him about her relationship with her brother, she simply replies, "Actually, it's none of your business" (*The Cement* 150). Consequently, he goes down to the basement, smashes the trunk open, and calls the authority. All the while, the children are huddled together in Julie's room and "talk in

whispers about Mum,…her illness and what it was like when [they] carried her down the stairs" (*The Cement* 152). Similarly, the British people collectively suffer from having to function in the aftermath of their country's diminished grandeur. Ever since the Cold War, Britain has played "a junior peripheral role" in the global stage, and Britain has had to rely on her relationship with the US (Bradford 28). In Britain, there is evidently "a loss of dynamic and purpose and a general bewilderment" which, according to Mark Donnelly, are due to "a systematic failure of leadership" of the country (49). In other words, Britain is no longer in the position of a world super power that it used to be despite the history and culture, not to mention the expertise, that it has. However, the British still prefer to think differently, as can be seen from their assertion that Britain and America are "interdependent" instead of admitting that America has surpassed them long ago and their reluctance to forgo the image of a great imperial power (Young 171-72). There are still questions about whether or not Britain still holds a unique position of influence in the world and whether Britain, despite the power shift to the US, should continue to play a role so distinctively unlike other countries because Britain has historical, as well as political, links to the Commonwealth (Wilson 52). Apparently, this viewpoint is maintained by virtually all of the British people who still believe that the former empire will continue its influential status forever, as observed by Tom Nairn (194). The British people, at least back in the time when *The Cement Garden* was written, still seem to have this shared faith in their country being superior to others and find it hard to accept that their prime has passed.

As represented by McEwan's *The Cement Garden*, the characters' behaviors can be interpreted as reflections of the British people's denial of the diminished power

of their country. A reading of this novel reflects a personified enactment of the denial retained of the true implications of the present and eminent decline. The denial held by the characters in the story is targeted against the decline, both physical and psychological, and the consequent vulnerability. The characters undergo the mechanisms of denial ranging from lies, normalization, silence, and pretense, as well as their adverse repercussions in the forms of the tremendous presence and the terminal dissipation of their charade. Interestingly, at the very end of the novel, Julie harkens back to the whole events as “a lovely sleep” (*The Cement* 153), with such optimism uncharacteristic of an individual about to face the truth which she has been dreading so vehemently. This can imply that although there is an intervention of the external world in the end, there is a possibility that the characters will continue to maintain their sense of denial in the future, perpetuating the false optimism and possibly rendering them vulnerable still for the real world.

Chapter III

AMSTERDAM:

PROFESSIONAL HYPOCRISY AND A PRIME LONG PAST

"It was as if he weren't there. He wasn't there. He was in his music. His fate, their fate, separate paths. It was not his business." (*Amsterdam* 88)

After being shortlisted several times, in 1998 Ian McEwan finally received the Man Booker Prize for his novel *Amsterdam*. Written at the end of John Major's term as Britain's Prime Minister in 1998, the novel stands as a signal of the closing of an era in British politics by adopting the form of social satire, which is also an unexplored territory in McEwan's literary career. The story is tightly centered around the relationships between Molly Lane, whose funeral is used as an exposition of the events and relationships of the novel, and her lovers, both past and present. This chapter scrutinizes *Amsterdam* for the traits of denial by focusing on the events revolving around the two main characters, Clive Linley and Vernon Halliday, who became best friends through their experiences as Molly's past lovers, including their professional status, moral dilemmas and decisions, and analyzes how these reveal the flawed nature of these supposedly renowned figures in an amoral world the book depicts. Then, it attempts to point out the parallels between the fictional settings and the social contexts of its publication in order to illustrate the denial that can be seen as reflections of the mentality of the English people that can be perceived in reality.

Despite winning the prestigious Booker Prize, the book is often considered to enjoy a lesser status in comparison to McEwan's other works (Childs 118). Critic Paul

Elie sums up his assessment of the book in a rather derogatory fashion as a "higher airplane read"—a piece of text engrossing enough to drown out the boredom or anxiety during flight but without much intellectual depth, certainly not so complicated that your brain requires much energy to digest or you cannot put down—which is "in a tremendous hurry to get where it is going—but one with no real destination" (2). Chronologically, *Amsterdam* can be considered as a transitional piece which marks a break from its predecessors both in terms of mood and length. McEwan's previous novel is the tremendous *Enduring Love* (1997) which spans over 200 pages, and is considered part of the same arc as his works in the last decade, starting with *The Child in Time*, focusing on "crisis and transformation…of great intensity" (McEwan interview *Bold Type*). Earlier, McEwan's repertoire consisted mainly of stories such as *The Cement Garden* (1978), *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), and *The Innocent* (1990) that are heavily involved with dismal themes such as incest, murder, or pedophilia, so much so that he earned himself the nickname "Ian Macabre." He was then more preoccupied with the perversion happening in the private spheres of human activities and perception and less interested in political or social matters. Patrick Henry remarks that McEwan's early work functions as if he "has something to prove" through the overt intention to target the literary establishment and distinguish himself, as can be seen from his deliberately shocking and grotesque themes (76). However, the direction of his work obviously changed, and from *Amsterdam* onward he has become more focused on political activism and social commentary. Although the novel might seem out of place with McEwan's other novels because it seemingly lacks real seriousness, its satirical elements echo the works of satirists such as Evelyn Waugh or Kingsley Amis (Childs 121; Head 149). In an interview, McEwan himself

admits to being influenced by Waugh's early works (McEwan interview *Bold Type).* In as short as 178 pages, the book portrays an intricate web of deceits and betrayal in the upper circle of the British society through two main characters, best friends Clive Linley, a renowned composer, and Vernon Halliday, a tabloid editor. After learning of the neural conditions that their former lover, Molly Lane, suffered from and the horrible effects of the disease prior to her death, the two make an unusual pact to never let the other experience the same loss of physical functions and in the event that it should happen to commit euthanasia, recently legalized in the Netherlands, as a way of putting the other out of misery, thus allowing them a dignified end. However, as the story progresses, both Clive and Vernon encounter challenges that will define their nature and moral standards as Vernon has to decide whether to publish a compromising picture of Julian Garmony, a politician he despises, and Clive allows the intention to finish his symphony overshadow his humanity. Their failings eventually lead to disputes between the two friends and ultimately their identical deaths; each deciding to follow the promise once made between them but with a more deadly intent. At the end of the story, Clive and Vernon find themselves in Amsterdam, attending a millennial event where Clive's symphony is originally meant to be performed, and they each put poison into the other's drink, resulting in mutual murder.

The novel can also be seen as marking a transition between political eras of Britain. Although McEwan commented in an interview with *Bold Type* in 1998 that he did not believe it was time yet for the politics of the country to directly influence the collective body of writing produced by English novelists, he did admit that *Amsterdam* was his farewell to a recently-ended era to which he was happy to say

goodbye (McEwan interview *Bold Type*). Thus, the novel does not overtly adjudge the government; rather, it treats the decline of the rule of the Conservative with mockery and probably through the representation in the fate of Garmony (Tsai 8). The era being alluded to specifically is that of the Conservative government led by Prime Minister John Major, to be followed by a shift in political power back to the Labour party led by Tony Blair, which readers are able to discern in the context and atmosphere of *Amsterdam*. The parallels help to accentuate the theme of denial in the story that can be found in real life. During the nearly eight years of John Major's term in office as Prime Minister, the atmosphere in England was rather ambivalent where even Major himself stirred mixed opinions among the people. Although generally one could recount a few incidents that occurred in favor of Britain in Major's period, the more prominent images and events in people's memories are still negative.

Major's period as PM followed directly, albeit not smoothly, from the controversial reign of Margaret Thatcher and ended in 1997. Assuming the position after such a towering figure like Margaret Thatcher was expectedly arduous. The contrast in the atmosphere between the periods of Major and Thatcher is apparent, both in terms of political approaches and ideological beliefs, despite the two PMs being from the same party that had been in power for decades since the 50s. According to A.N. Wilson, Major's "unflappability and understatedness," also regarded as his "virtues," made him "insufferably dull" (317). Therefore, it was not long before his quiet demeanor was viewed by the public as an indication of a lack of determination and extreme agenda present in Thatcher, leading to the opinion that he had been "overpromoted" ("John Major"). Despite the general image that the time of the Major government conjures up, this period in the English political history did

yield a number of positive results. A good example of this is Major's role at the European Council in Maastricht in December 1991. Since it was one of his early missions after being elected as Prime Minister, it was expected that the confidence of the general public was not at its best. However, Major surprised the people with his effectiveness as a negotiator. With the influence of the European Community's ERM, Major managed to stand firm with his decisions regarding Britain's involvement in the treaty that would bind European countries under the same regulations. One of his achievements from this incident was his refusal to join the single European currency that seemed to correspond with the mood of the British people at the time and probably saved the Conservative party, which was then going through internal conflicts, from splitting ("John Major"). His return to England on this occasion was received warmly by the people; as a result, his personal parliamentary majority increased from 27,500 to 36,000, considered one of the largest in the history of English parliament (Wilson 310). Apart from this, in 1993, only three years after Major came to power, the recession that had affected Britain since 1990 was beginning to abate. Consequently, the high unemployment in the country, which reached one of the highest points in history in January 1982, started to decrease as well.

Nevertheless, the events following his seeming triumph at Maastricht became "ruinous" for the British economy (Wilson 311). In a short while, Major led the nation toward the financial crisis after what was called the Black Wednesday incident where, as a consequence of the ERM, Britain lost billions of pounds to defend the sterling's value, by drastically reducing the interest rates. Savers, investors, and people involved in business faced devastating losses, which served to lessen the public's satisfaction

with Major a great deal. Not only that, his perceived indecisiveness and irresoluteness at handling the economic mishap induced skepticism among his fellow party members regarding whether he was skillful enough to administer the nation. The party began to disintegrate into different fractions and threatened to collapse altogether. Apart from the obvious economic fallout, the Black Wednesday also had a startling effect on the psyche of the British people, developing what Wilson views as the fear of "losing British independence within the stultifying bureaucracy of a superstate" (311). Apparently, the idea of being included in the EU, an equivalent to a superstate, is regarded antagonistically as an integration process that would threaten the status that differentiates the whole of Britain from the rest of Europe, whether in terms of economic or political standings, and eventually submerge the country into the same system that the people find deficient. To the English people, particularly, the implication of this event could be stronger. Having been at the governing position of Britain and, by extension, of the vast Empire, England's sense of power and prestige is inevitable. Even after the disintegration of the Empire, England can still enjoy the premium of being a centralizing and controlling figure within the boundary of Great Britain. Hence, to be submerged in all aspects of the EU would be tantamount to relinquishing the privilege and authority of the country to another corporation of sorts.

In other aspects, Major's term was also criticized for its inept performance. One definition given to Major's term as Prime Minister is the infamous phrase "Politics of the Sleaze" which was used to describe the period at around the same time as the beginning of the "Back to Basics"[1] campaign. While the campaign was in fact

[1] "Back to Basics" was a political campaign proposed in 1993 with the purpose to regain popularity of and public confidence in the John Major government after the debacle of the Black Wednesday in 1992. The campaign was intended to focus on legal, educational, and financial issues in society, including public probity, especially single mothers.

intended by the government for economic, education or other important social purposes, it was largely misinterpreted to be a reversal to conventional moral and family values. Thus, since the people were under the misguided impression that the atmosphere of the country was being steered towards the more reserved, prim-and-proper morality of the English tradition, it was unsurprising that any immoral or unethical acts by influential people in society would be emphasized as they would seem to be discrepant with the government policies. As a result, the period surrounding the enactment of this campaign was most prominently associated with sexual misconduct and hypocrisy, mainly of political figures; hence, the politics of sleaze. Another reason for the sudden prevalence of such exposure was the media's boredom with the over-18-year consecutive rule of the Conservatives being at the helm, causing the newspapers in the country to turn their attention to probing the "absurd antics" of the Cabinet members (Wilson 313). One scandal that was familiar to the British people was what was known as the "cash-for-questions" affair. Starting in 1994, this phenomenon referred to situations where politicians or parliament members accept money from influential people such as businesspeople or lobbyists in exchange for posing specific questions in the parliament. The most famous case was that of Tim Smith and Neil Hamilton, two Conservative MPs, who allegedly received bribes from lobbyist Ian Greer in exchange for asking parliamentary questions in favor of Mohamed Al-Fayed, the Egyptian owner of Harrods department store. In terms of international matters, one ignominy greatly illustrated the hypocrisy of British politics. The Arms-to-Iraq incidence in which the British government had secretly sponsored arms to the then-Saddam-led Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War also contributed to the decline in popularity of the Conservative party.

Another significant type of scandal during this period was the sex scandals which were revealed ubiquitously. For example, one cabinet minister, David Mellor, was exposed for having an extramarital affair with an actress. Numerous other public figures were affected by a string of exposés, including the Earl of Caithness, Malcolm Sinclair, Minister of State at the Department of Transport, parliament members such as David Ashby, Michael Brown, Alan Amos, and Tim Yeo, after which they had to abdicate from office. Another Conservative MP exposed in sexual scandals was Stephen Milligan whose postmortem report revealed the cause of his death as a result of auto-erotic asphyxiation during a presumably solitary sexual intercourse[2]. While the case started ripples of worldwide scandals and smeared his previous integrity or positive reputation, there were many unanswered questions regarding the true cause of his passing and his sexual preferences, indicating that these scandals sometimes aimed more at sensationalizing and sabotaging rather than investigating and uncovering the truth (Harris). Even Major himself was not exempt from the scandals regardless of his generally perceived public image of a bland family man, thus rendering the sex scandal more shocking. After his term ended, there came the scandalous revelation that he had carried on an extramarital affair with Edwina Currie, one of the Conservative MPs working closely with him under the Thatcher government. Although the affair started and ended before Major became premier, its exposure still further tarnished his personal and political reputation, as well as the overall waning moral image of his cabinet. In fact, it was speculated that had the truth been public,

2 Milligan's body was found wearing women's underwear and having a chord tied from his ankles to his neck and a piece of Satsuma orange in his mouth. It was speculated that he had been engaged in bizarre solitary sexual escapades (AEA) using amyl nitrate poppers to heighten sexual release. The Satsuma orange is known for the ability to eliminate the bitter taste of the amyl nitrate fumes.

Major would most likely not have been elected Prime Minister ("Lord Newton of Braintree").

In summary, the period of contemporary British history with John Major as the Prime Minister, which coincides both chronologically and incidentally with the writing and the fictional events presented in McEwan's *Amsterdam*, was one which was marked evidently by more negative features than positive. When his term came to an end as he and the Conservative party lost the general election in 1997, there was a prevalent need for a change in the country, and he could not withstand the influence of the divisions over Europe ("John Major"). In other words, he was cast off by journalists as "an embarrassing failure" (Wilson 316). Although the country recovered from recession during his term in office, there were great divisive conflicts within the Conservative party, mainly concerning the several aspects of proposed integration with the European Community. Moreover, the nation was faced with numerous scandals, both sexual and political, which greatly deprecated political figures in the eyes of the public. Therefore, while Major might have been an honest and decent man, as leader of his country, he was largely perceived as a weak and ineffectual leader who was neither able to commandeer the country to the appropriate growth nor control the behavior of the politicians working under him.

In McEwan's words, the backdrop of *Amsterdam* is one in which the mainstream press and newsrooms promote and uphold "a near-Victorian morality" while "sex scandals are run against an implicit set of moral values, which actually nobody in the country is living by" (McEwan interview *Bold Type*). Victorian morality, modeled from Queen Victoria's firm sense of duty and moral righteousness, is famous for prudery over humans' natural impulses and behaviors. Most

specifically, the Victorian conduct channeled sexuality as a target of suppression and restraint. For example, to avoid social crudeness, there were euphemisms for every part of the body, and books stored in libraries were arranged so that works by female and male authors were kept separately ("Victorian Britain" 4). One popular reference to the height of Victorian sexual prudery is the covering of the limbs of a grand piano in a girl's school to prevent sexual thoughts. In retrospect, such practices are criticized for their absurdity and extremity. Also, different writers have interpreted Victorian morality as having other negative social functions such as class domination or sexual politics ("Victorian Britain" 4). For example, in Victorian literature, women are often portrayed as inferior to men in every way except in moral standards, and that is only the case because women were believed to lack, or show substantially less, sexuality (Long). Yet, despite the rigid moral restraints, it can be seen that ironically the Victorian period was an era in which works of explicit sexual and grotesque depictions or implications were produced in large numbers. For instance, the Victorian period saw the flourishing of such literary genres as Gothic[1] and the Novel of Sensation[2]. In addition, literature concerning sexual subject matter occurred incessantly in this period, e.g. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) which was burned publicly by the Bishop of Wakefield in the year of its publication. This is comparable to the moral standards depicted in *Amsterdam* in which there is a somewhat vague desire for an ideal code of conduct, but the real

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1 Gothic fiction deals with morbid and terrifying subjects like monsters and death in supernatural or unnatural manners.

2 Sensation Novel is influenced by the Gothic and Romantic traditions and deals with socially scandalous themes such as adultery, bigamy, kidnapping, seduction, etc.

situations do not meet such expectations. For example, while among the main characters Garmony is seen as a crooked or inefficient politician, his image to society is linked to strong familial bond, the quality which toward the end saves him from humiliation and public persecution. Yet, the issue of his transvestism is presented first and foremost as a compromising and debilitating characteristic through the eyes of Vernon.

In terms of setting, the social context in the novel is summed up by Lynn Wells as "urban Britain under a waning neo-Conservative government, with all the attributes of unchecked greed and ambition, rampant commercialism, social decay and environmental degradation" (84). Dominic Head views the novel's backdrop of the 80s and 90s as concentrating on "self-gain" and "personal advantage," with both the physical and the emotional conditions depicted representing a largely amoral society being dissected and exposed (11). Moreover, this society is filled with hypocrisy which is noticeable both through the characters' actions and the narration. *Amsterdam* is categorized by several critics as a modern day morality tale due to its depiction of a struggle between good and evil and a moral lesson in the end. As such, *Amsterdam* does offer moral and ethical dilemmas forced upon the characters that ultimately function as platforms for their true nature to surface, whether in public or in private. Not only that, other elements in the book also serve to demonstrate the lack of genuine integrity or moral substance in the characters, as well as society, even without crises or obvious external pressure. One issue that is reflected most clearly in this novel is the inconsistency between the moral values that are endorsed by the mainstream media and the ones actually held by the people. McEwan's choice of professions for both of the main characters to be in journalism and musical industry

also corroborates this element. Clive and Vernon, two characters connected not through blood but through a long history of friendship and commonalities, not only epitomize the corrupt society to which they belong by embodying unscrupulous moral standards, but, according to Head, also exemplify "an unselfconscious professionalism" which, as proven in the novel, readily "dispenses with ethical foundations" (47). Moreover, Wells describes them as "ruthlessly self-promoting" (84). Several aspects surrounding their professional features contribute to their being representative of the denial reflected in this novel.

As *Amsterdam* is a novel heavily set within the professional sphere of the human society and which significantly involves the issue of professionalism, it is important to pay attention to the professions McEwan gives his two characters. First of all, the career paths of the two main characters, Clive and Vernon, imply the kinds of lifestyle that deviate from strict professional integrity. In other words, their occupations somewhat require that they use deception and manipulation as a means to succeed. Clive is a renowned and established composer whose talent is accepted in the music industry of the country. Wells opines that by giving him a career in music, McEwan uses him as a medium to reflect on aesthetics and the ethical role expected of artists in modern society (87). According to Head, there is veneration for the process of orchestral composition in its intricacy (150). However, with Clive as the delegate of such profession, it becomes that success in this seemingly prestigious industry, and, by extension, any artistic industries, does not necessarily require real talent (Head 151). Moreover, the character of Clive is full of contrasts, when it involves professional conduct or attitudes. Early on in the novel, Clive shows his contempt for the term 'genius,' as it connotes arrogance if anyone proclaims

themselves to be one, while aiming to "reassert music's essential communicativeness" and make it a "humanistic tradition" (*Amsterdam* 22). Yet, he proudly declares it as a label for himself when he is writing his own millennial symphony. Through Clive, the flippancy and insincerity of the industry's professionals are exposed. However, it is Vernon's eminence in journalism that accentuates the nature of hypocrisy even more in the story. The concept of journalism is a widely researched and discussed one in a multitude of aspects including journalism as a profession, as an ideology, or as a literary genre. There are, of course, distinctions within the journalistic profession, but it seems that all journalists share the same occupational ideology that serves to "legitimize" their position in society as well as determine their journalistic decision-making processes (Deuze 446-47). Newspapers, in Britian, are seen to be important to the communication of "Britishness" in the global context as they contribute to the formation of the image of the country through their portrayal of events and trends in the country (Higgins 279). In *Amsterdam*, McEwan narrows his depiction of journalism to almost a direct attack on tabloid journalism, which is Vernon's type of newspaper. In closely studying British tabloid and broadsheet journalists by Mathieu Rhoufari, tabloid journalists pride themselves in the creativity and techniques of their work and delineate their style that the more outrageous, the better (Sparks and Tulloch 175). This does not mean that they disagree with the general negative views of their profession given by other scholars or professionals either. To illustrate, certain people debase it as being inferior in terms of intelligence. Former editor of *New Statesman*, Ian Hargreaves describes British tabloid as "a species of nonsense and trivia" and former managing director of the *British Journalism Review*, Ron Stevens, as "a babyfood diet of superficial information which the most narcoleptic couch potato

could absorb without difficulty" (qtd. in McLachlan and Golding 75-76). Others condemn it, not surprisingly, for the very style that gives its writers gratification. The problems with tabloid are its simplification, personalization, sensationalism, and orientation toward scandal, which "panders to the lowest common denominator of public taste" under the "perverse guise" of human interest and demotes the standards of public discourse (Örnebring and Jönsson 283; Rooney 91). McEwan describes the world of the media in *Amsterdam* as a preposterously shallow and unethical one where newspaper editors explicitly state that,

> It's time we ran more regular columns. They're cheap, and everyone else is doing them. You know, we hire someone of low to medium intelligence, possibly female, to write about, well, nothing much. You've seen the sort of thing. Goes to a party and can't remember someone's name. Twelve hundred words. (*Amsterdam* 129)

As the editor of *The Judge*, a tabloid newspaper, Vernon makes his name from "scandals, scoops and sensationalism" (Wells 89). However, with the sales figures declining, Vernon feels obligated to grab any opportunity that arises that may increase circulation, regardless of whether or not it could potentially be harmful to other people or threaten his professional candor. This sentiment is true of the U.K. journalistic industry in the 1980s and 90s, in which circulation fell for both tabloids and broadsheet papers. Thus, since readership is the "dominant motive" of tabloids, especially in the U.K., and income from circulation is "paramount," there is naturally always the "incentive" to increase the number of readers and then retain them (Rooney 91-93). Furthermore, one of the shareholders of Vernon's paper happens to be George, Molly's husband, whom Vernon and Clive overtly despise, which impels

Vernon to be amiable to George in spite of his obvious contempt for the man. This is another indication that Vernon has to rely on deceptiveness and unscrupulousness in order to retain his position in the industry. Nevertheless, while he is an important figure at *The Judge*, he is still potrayed as "simply the sum of all the people who had listened to him…He was widely known as a man without edges, without faults or virtues as a man who did not fully exist" (*Amsterdam* 30), thus signifying that Vernon, as a professional figure, is neither fully accomplished nor candid.

Moreover, the actions of the two characters are determined, and their integrity tainted, by their social positions which propel them to continuously strive for certain standards. Clive is a renowned composer who, in spite of the flimsiness that the readers come to realize, has real musical talent up to a certain point. It is stated in the novel that "along with Schubert and McCartney, Linley could write a melody" (*Amsterdam* 21). This shows that fellow musicians and composers who know Clive accept that his reputation is backed by his musical capability. Also, while his musical orientation is traditional, it is complimented by the industry for its accessibility as well. As a result, he is commissioned to compose a new symphony that will have the potential to "'play itself' into public consciousness" for the purpose of welcoming the new millennium (*Amsterdam* 21). Apparently, he is a significant figure in the music industry and has accumulated enough reputation to earn himself what is deemed a prestigious assignment in the history of British music. However, since taking on the Millennial Symphony, Clive has been faced with his inability to produce a satisfactory piece. Due to the veneration that he holds, Clive tries desperately to reproduce a work that can be considered in the same standards as, if not superior to, his previous pieces. This determination is the source of tension in his character as it is

gradually revealed in the book that Clive no longer possesses the same level of talent he used to during the peak of his career. Unfortunately, in Clive's mind, he is still the same great musician capable of manifesting his expertise and originality to the world, even going so far as to pompously comparing his duty to compose the Millennial Symphony to Beethoven's composing the "Ode to Joy" (*Amsterdam* 76). In one of the character's most egoistically self-affirming moments, Clive even admits, matter-of-factly, to himself that he is "a genius" (*Amsterdam* 133).To Clive, the opportunity represents more than a composition of a new symphony which will be played in the country, but, as it will be premiered in the city of Amsterdam, it forges a sense of pride, albeit premature and falsely conceived, in him. It can be seen in his musing, "Ah, to be in continental Europe and be maestro!" (*Amsterdam* 158). Along this line, William H. Pritchard describes Clive as the quintessential "overreaching, setting himself up for a fall" (4). It is not difficult to agree with Pritchard's criticism since the readers cannot help but feel that the immense significance of the symphony and the strenuous effort to create it are ingrained in Clive's mind rather than in reality. Although this symphony is meant to be used in a momentous event, it clearly is nowhere near as important as saving a person's life, over which he chooses his musical musing. In fact, as the novel unfolds it is revealed that Clive's work has been dismissed due to its low quality and alleged plagiarism and that the entire performance has been canceled (*Amsterdam* 176), further accentuating the dispensability of this work. Still, the reputation that he audaciously holds and the image that he has of himself fuel his determination to produce works that are musically fascinating like he has been acclaimed for.

In a similar manner, Vernon's newspaper *The Judge* is relatively famous, determined to be a modernized version of broadsheets like *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, and *The Times* (Head 146). When the novel opens, his position as its editor is currently precarious as there is a conflict of editorial policy within the paper. Therefore, not only is it vital for Vernon to prove himself to secure his position, he also has to boost the paper's circulation in order to save it. Early in the novel, it is shown that Vernon "opened his desk drawer. There was a metal ruler left by Mobey, fourth editor in succession to fail to reverse *The Judge*'s declining circulation. Vernon Halliday was trying not to be the fifth" (*Amsterdam* 32). He realizes the severity of the task he is faced with and, like Clive, when an opportunity presents itself in his favor, Vernon takes it, whether or not it means compromising his professional integrity. For Vernon, his actions are prompted by necessity, as perceived by him, for his own position. Vernon's decision to publish the photos of Garmony is inevitable because he views them as the only way out of the difficult situation he is faced with. According to Henry, Vernon is addicted to authority, and, thanks to the significance his opinions receive at *The Judge*, he develops the illusion that he can decide the destiny of a man and even the country (79). He is delighted by the outlook that "a man's life, or at least his career, was in [Vernon's] hands. And who could tell, perhaps Vernon was in a position to change the country's future for the better" (*Amsterdam* 56).

While these characters are in part pressured by their professional and social positions to strive for certain standards, the worse trait of denial they portray is the pretense that their actions are for a noble or esteemed cause, rather than the selfish ideals that actually drive the acts. As Clive becomes desperate for an inspiration for

the symphony, he decides to take a walk into the woods, hoping that the proximity and contact with nature will stimulate him to write a fascinating piece. However, while he is losing himself in the peaceful surrounding of England's Lake District, he is disturbed by the presence of a man and a woman in a heated argument. The man is later revealed to be a serial rapist. Although Clive is not aware of this fact at the time, it is obvious that the two are engaged in intense conflict and the woman is being assaulted. Thus, the logical and appropriate course of action is for Clive to intervene and lend some help to the woman who is in a potentially dangerous situation, whether or not she actually needs it. Instead, he purposely ignores them and continues with his musing, reasoning that by interfering, "a pivotal moment in his career would have been destroyed. The melody could not have survived the psychic flurry" (*Amsterdam* 88). Even after he learns that the man was a rapist, he still refuses to go forth to the police and tell them about the scene he had witnessed. Clive's decisions and actions are those of a 'passive bystander,' which, as stated in Cohen, is a condition generally perceived of modern society. Drawing upon a number of incidents across the globe in recent history, Cohen explains that 'bystanding' has the implication of "unresponsive" behavior in itself, which inevitably comes with moral judgment (69). Similarly, Petruska Clarkson sums up that a bystander is someone who refuses to be "actively involved" when another person is in need of help (6). Cohen further clarifies that by recognizing the iniquity and purposely turning a blind eye, the passive or unresponsive bystander is considered complicit in the wrongdoing by allowing it to happen and, as theory goes, is also culpable of encouraging it to continue. More importantly, bystanders generally maintain similar accounts as those of the offenders, also called bystander patterns or slogans, whose functions include readying the self

for isolation, justifying the withdrawal in retrospect, and abstaining from responsibility (69-70). Clive's apathetic inaction, then, follows the obvious pattern of a bystander, down to the denial of responsibility later on. In the face of this dilemma, Clive justifies himself with a very deluded denial that it is "as clear as a neon sign: *I am not here*" (*Amsterdam* 85). Further, he also conceives of more denial by claiming that "given the width of the ridge and the numerous paths that crossed it, how easily he could have missed them" (*Amsterdam* 88). Another reason he gives to himself for not offering help to the woman is that the couple may "turn on him for presuming to interfere" if they happen to be "closely bound" (*Amsterdam* 87).

Similarly, Vernon publishes the photographs of Garmony dressed in women's clothes, knowing that it will destroy his reputation and political standing, as well as social status. McEwan describes the process of Vernon's decision as being arduous and complicated as he debates with himself and with his friend over whether he should publish the photos or not. In the end, despite the objections and the possible detrimental impact it can have on Garmony's life and family, Vernon still goes ahead and publishes the photos anyway. Unlike Clive, the excuse Vernon gives for his action is that of the so-called greater good. His *account*, then, is along the line of *denial of the victim*. As described by Cohen, this type of account refers to denying the status of the victim by arguing that the fault in fact originally lies with the victim and that the assault made on him or her is "rightful retaliation" (61). In Vernon's case, he tries to justify his actions by choosing to exclusively focus on the negative side of Garmony and the damage he is likely to inflict on the country if he were to succeed as Prime Minister of Britain in the future. Thus, Vernon excuses that Garmony probably deserves the humiliation given the record of wrongdoings that he has, rendering

Garmony not the victim, but the original assailant, and himself not the delinquent, but the punisher or neutralizer. Therefore, even before the offence occurs, such an account lays the foundation that allows for the person making this account to commit the act (Cohen 61). Vernon's excuse may come with a certain amount of reluctance, but the assault is eventually acted upon.

Although Clive and Vernon try to justify their decisions, and, by extension, themselves, by using denial in varying degrees and methods, their true motive is essentially the same; both make their morally dubious decisions to achieve personal gains. For Clive, he refuses to intervene with the quarrel and remains hidden and inactive reasoning that he simply does not want anything to disturb his process of composition, lest the inspiration is banished and does not return. In fact, it has been observed that Clive seems to have not fully matured when it comes to human contact; Head calls him a "failure as a social being" (152). While he is a prominent figure in society, his social skills are clearly inadequate as he does not appear to be capable of appropriately relating to other human beings, other than to his friend, Vernon. Actually, it can be interpreted that Clive views himself as superior to others as can be seen in several incidents, the first one being his self-proclamation as a genius, as mentioned earlier. Apart from this, in the episode where he takes a journey into the woods and encounters a scene of potential crime, his sojourn is compared to that of the Romantic poets in the eighteenth century, who turned to nature for inspiration (Wells 84). During the short, yet influential, trend of the Romantic Movement, the styles and attitudes of Romanticism were widespread. However, the Romantic artists—poets, writers, composers—were later criticized for their tendency to place themselves above others, despite their proclaimed attempt to be closer to the common

man. For example, in his "Preface to the Lyrical Ballad" (1800), William Wordsworth expresses his aim to write with the language and subject matter of the common people in order to be able to truly communicate with the average reader through his verse. However, while he implies an attack on the old tradition of writing which was restricted only for the upper class, he also portrays himself as a man who has "a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind" (par. 15). This clearly shows the attitudes toward the self of the group of men to whom Clive is being compared. Similarly, modern criticism regards the Romantic Movement as involving a "powerful egotism at the core" and poets with godlike capability (Mellor qtd. in Wells 88). Koloze observes that Clive's aestheticity prevents him from fully appreciating ordinary human life, as he sees more beauty in the less materialistic things, such as nature and music, than in humanity (314-15). His "revulsion" toward mundane reality can be seen in his observation of the scene at the police station while he is giving his statements.

> In the fluorescent light everybody looked ill. There was a lot of scorching tea in plastic cups, and there was a lot of shouting, and routine, uncolourful swearing, and clenched-fist threats that no one took seriously. It was one huge unhappy family with domestic problems that were of their nature insoluble. This was the family living room. Clive shrank behind his brick-red tea. (*Amsterdam* 153)

Worse still, even Clive's opinions toward his friend are not one of equal companionship. Despite their seeming trust and confidence in each other, Clive feels that there is "a certain lopsidedness" in his friendship with Vernon, and that he has

"given" but has not received as much as he deserves (*Amsterdam* 65). In his contemplation of this friendship, Clive recalls that:

> Was it generally true that over the years it had been Clive rather than Vernon who had provided the music—in every sense? The wine, the food, the house, the musicians, and other interesting company… When had Vernon ever proposed and arranged some fascinating pleasure? … Why had he never properly acknowledged the act of friendship that lay behind his borrowing a large sum to see Vernon through a difficult time? When he had an infection, Clive visited almost every day; when Clive slipped on the pavement outside his house and broke his ankle, Vernon sent his secretary round with a bag of books from *The Judge*'s books page slush pile. (*Amsterdam* 65)

As Clive cannot effectively relate to other human beings, his ability to empathize with others is not adequate either. Deep down he does not regard the woman or the man that he sees as being equal with him; therefore, the instinctive desire or intention to take initiatives to help a stranger in need, which is inherent in most of common humans, is not strong enough for Clive to execute the action. His internal monologue as he contemplates whether or not to intercede in the quarrel not only divulges his motivation to be personal interest, but also betrays how little he is cognizant of his "failure as a social being" (Head 152). His first reaction is an obvious, deliberate denial of responsibility, stating that his "immediate thought was as clear as a neon sign: I am not here" (*Amsterdam* 85). Then, he shows the intention of offering his help by "peer[ing] over the rock" when he hears the woman's voice (*Amsterdam* 86). In his mind,

> He imagined running down there. The point at which he reached them was when the possibilities would branch: the man might run off; the woman would be grateful, and together they could descend to the main road by Seatoller. Even this least probable of outcomes would destroy his fragile inspiration. The man was more likely to redirect his aggression at Clive while the woman looked on, helpless. Or gratified, for that was possible too; they might be closely bound, they might both turn on him for presuming to interfere. (*Amsterdam* 86-87)

However, he turns his attention to his position in the incident, realizing that "it was not a piece of music that was simply waiting to be discovered; what he had been doing, until interrupted, was creating it" (*Amsterdam* 87). When he comes to take action, his two alternatives become "he should either go down and protect the woman, if she needed protection, or he should creep away round the side of Glaramara to find a sheltered place to continue his work, if it was not already lost" (*Amsterdam* 87). Directly after his contemplation of the two choices, the exchange between the man and the woman reaches its peak of apparent violence, with the woman making "a sudden pleading whimpering sound" (*Amsterdam* 88). Clive's choice is to slip calmly away from the scene leaving the woman to her fate. "Even as he was easing himself back down the slope, he understood that his hesitation had been a sham. He had decided at the very moment he was interrupted" (*Amsterdam* 88). Moreover, when Clive later discusses the matter of Garmony's cross-dressing photographs with Vernon, Clive demonstrates further denial by assuming a higher moral standards than Vernon and trying to condemn his friend for wanting to publish the photos

(*Amsterdam* 75). While the readers can already discern that the argument for Clive's morality is questionable, especially in comparison to Vernon's and in light of the event at the Lake District, Clive himself rebukes his short charade by offering a parting confession that his true reason for objecting to the publication is that it will destroy the mischievous spirit of Molly, indicating that other impersonal, noble benefits still do not really concern him (*Amsterdam* 70-72).

In the case of Vernon, his ulterior motive is more pronounced and more tangible. He launches into a long list of positive consequences of Garmony's photos being published that

> Hypocrisy would be exposed, the country would stay in Europe, capital punishment and compulsory conscription would remain a crank's dream, social welfare would survive in some form or other, the global environment would get a decent chance, and Vernon was on the point of breaking into song, (*Amsterdam* 111)

most of which refers to the benefits to be gained for society, even though its deliberate satirical comicality is an extreme slippery slope of false causation. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing that this line of reasoning is simply an affectation employed to hide the true motive behind his decision, which is Vernon's eagerness to secure his editorial position by running a story that is shocking and scandalous and attracting the public's attention to the paper. Not only that, his intention is also additionally tainted by his personal vendetta against Garmony himself as he is a former lover of Molly whom Vernon despises. The flaws in Vernon's substantiation for his action can also be seen as McEwan's critique of the politics of the Conservative party that reflects "exclusiveness and narcissism of the self" (Tsai 14).

The analyses of these two characters' motives and actions offer a rather clear explanation of the general mood of the novel to involve a great deal of hypocrisy and inadequacy, both inherent and acquired through the changes of time. Head points out that the book provides several incidences which hint as well as accentuate the inadequacy of the characters and the micro-society to which they belong. These instances show defects in both the professional and personal realms. Similarly, Tsai concludes that there is a sense of lack that can be found in all the characters who are involved in ethical concerns in the novel (*Amsterdam* 15). Firstly, Clive, as a musical figure of importance, appears to lack the creativity required in a true artist (Head 150-51). Secondly, Vernon is described as a man of absence who not only has no real talent, but also has virtually no real identity either. Koloze views Vernon as having a disintegrated personality in that, due to his high position at *The Judge* and the fact that his opinions are regarded and obeyed by many people, Vernon sometimes considers himself as non-existent (316). He is "infinitely diluted…simply the sum of all the people who had listened to him" (*Amsterdam* 29). Thirdly, most of the minor characters portray attributes that point to the waning morals and competence of society. Garmony is a politician firmly established in his career and currently running for the position of premiere. Yet, it is revealed by the other characters that he is a flawed character. It is stated that he "had made a life in the political marketplace with an unexceptional stall of xenophobic and punitive opinions" and Vernon calls him a "high-ranking bastard, hot in the sack" (*Amsterdam* 13). As for George Lane, Molly's husband, little is known about him except a few mentions here and there by the main characters, often begrudgingly. For instance, George is described as a "morose, possessive husband" who kept Molly prisoner while she was suffering from her

illness (*Amsterdam* 3). He, much like the other characters, also prefers to be the center of attention. At Molly's funeral, the narrator notes that he does not want a memorial service for Molly because he does not "want to hear these three former lovers [Garmony, Clive and Vernon] publicly comparing notes…or exchanging glances while he made his own speech" (*Amsterdam* 8). The worst side of George that is shown to the readers is the ending of the novel where, after the death of Vernon, he contemplates taking Vernon's widow as his new love interest (*Amsterdam* 177-178). In addition, the editorial staff of *The Judge* are also portrayed as impolite and crude. The new editor Frank Dibben, who takes the position from Vernon, readily making a shift from news to entertainment and scouting for less intellectual journalists to write about less profound topics, and the senior staff suggesting more frivolous column ideas such as "Is my bum too big?" and "Always get the supermarket trolley with the wobbly wheel" (*Amsterdam* 129).

So far, this chapter has highlighted the hypocrisy and the ethical deficiency manifested by both the characters and the social as well as political contexts of the novel. Besides depicting the amorality of English society, inspection of these characteristics also reflects a sense of nostalgia that is prevalent at both the character level and in the comparison to England as a nation. In other words, the reality represented in *Amsterdam* is one where esteemed political and social status is a mask used in denying the true condition of society, which is on the decline after its prime has long passed. For instance, the music and the journalistic industries as portrayed in the novel are going through changes that signify their desperate struggle to keep up with the global trends. Newspapers are losing circulation both as a result of heavy competition with other types of mass media and of the saturated interest of the readers

and are at the turning point where the question of modernization is being debated, indicating doubt in the old traditions and the reluctant intent to improve. Similarly, the world of classical music in England may demonstrate progress in preparing to organize a performance to celebrate the millennium, but the performance is programmed to take place in Amsterdam in a grand event hosted by the Netherlands. This indicates the necessity to collaborate, even in a following rather than leading position, with the other nations in Europe. In fact, continental Europe is even described with appreciation and respect given Clive's longing to have his music performed in Amsterdam. This can be contrasted with the reluctance of England to be considered as part of the Europe or its cooperative endeavors. England's attempt to differentiate itself can be seen in a number of occasions, including its firm insistence on not being amalgamated into the EU. John Storey observes that there is a tradition of responding to the European "interference" with the grandeur of the history of England (13). For example, in 1994, John Major stated his view regarding the fact that Europe was attempting to impose on the island entry into the European Union as a "bully" that would not be tolerated (Storey 13). Moreover, the lives of the main characters all have a certain level of glorious reputation or success in their past, which are unmatched by their current situations, be it Clive, Vernon, Garmony, or even George Lane. As a matter of fact, it can be interpreted that the sign of their deterioration first manifests at Molly's funeral. Along this line, it seems that the most flourishing time of these characters is marked by the presence of Molly Lane. Apart from being the vibrant lover of all the four men, her memory is mentioned with both fondness and reverence. To both Clive and Vernon, she is a "lovely girl" who "danced naked on Christmas Eve on a snooker table in a Scottish castle" (*Amsterdam* 7). Her

adventurous and sensuous charms are not the only attributes that persist in the men's mind; her importance to each of her lovers varies—sexuality and musical intellect to Clive and companionship to Vernon. Not only that, her profound attraction is described as the ability to see through the external components of a person and acknowledge their true value with an open mind and positivity (Wells 86). Furthermore, she is the central force that ties the prominent male characters together, especially Clive and Vernon, as their bond is rooted in their mutual affair and attachment with Molly. From this perspective, the general mood of nostalgia detectable in the book centers around the image of Molly, who is their epitome of past glory and genuine enjoyment. Molly, then, is the symbolic image that is cultivated in the personal biographies of the main characters in the novel triggering the wave of private nostalgia as she is associated with the time in the past that is full of success and positivity. As a result, she is given more value psychologically through the process of idealization. This notion is also supported by the author's choice of the epigraph. The novel opens with "The friends who met here and embraced are gone,/ Each to his own mistake," taken from W.H. Auden's "The Crossroad." Apparently, the meeting between the 'friends' that this poem implies is the one at Molly's funeral where Vernon and Clive, together with Garmony and George, interact in the presence of one another for the last time before departing on their own way (Childs *The Fiction* 118). After separating at the funeral, the events in their lives deteriorate, further indicating that Molly's death is the end of the "benign 'feminine' principle of caring for others" in the world portrayed in *Amsterdam* (Wells 86). Connection can be made between the significance of Molly in *Amsterdam* and the mother in *The Cement Garden*. Both novels revolve around a female figure whose influence lingers, if not

intensifies, even after her death. Both females also serve as a centralizing force as in *The Cement Garden* the children often get together for the occasions involving the mother and in *Amsterdam* Molly is the one link that ties Vernon and Clive, as well as the other main characters, together.

The fact that Molly is the only woman who has an influential presence throughout the novel—Garmony's wife notwithstanding since she only appears briefly and as support for a marriage that is based on sham and concealment, not to mention that her very existence is the representation of the hypocrisy also personified by Garmony—to some extent beckons the comparison between her and Mother England. People today are familiar with the concept of England as the mother country and usually refer to the country with the feminine qualities, which can be traced back to the era when England was an Empire under which many nations were colonies. Incidentally, with the fact that England in the two periods in history deemed as the country's golden age and in the present time has Queens who reign as the country's monarch, rather than Kings, the image of England as a matriarch of her colonies has endured. Tracing back to the sixteenth century, England was also in an era considered the Golden Age, with Queen Elizabeth I at the throne. She was considered by many as the best monarch to have ever ruled England (*The Lost Colony*). Elizabethan England was the time of public well-being, advancements, and literary development. Similarly, the Victorian era was a period of colonial expansion and significant social change. It was in this age that England emerged as a major world power in colonialism and power acquisition. The extended reigns on the throne of both Queens, 45 years for Queen Elizabeth I and 63 years for Queen Victoria, indicate their apparent power and influence over the English people and the world. On the other hand, in the present

time, England is one of the few countries left in the world with a ruling female monarch. Queen Elizabeth II is England's second longest reigning monarch, 60 years to date, fast approaching the 63 years mark of Queen Victoria. However, the sovereignty of the English monarchy is nothing like what it used to be. While the monarchs were held as the representatives of God during in the past, nowadays, largely as a result of the democratic tradition that changed the country's system, the royal family seems to assume the place of the people's subjects; especially in the case of England, as in many other countries, where the royal family is under the title of Constitutional Monarchy, the power of the monarchs becomes infused mainly with the "iconic, branding" role and as a public symbol rather than with the polity of the country (Balmer 640). As such, it can be seen that the former eras under female monarchs embody the more positive elements of the country's history than those in the present time.

Furthermore, John Brannigan asserts that Molly not only symbolizes the end of the best part of these men's lives, but also foreshadows their future (qtd. in Childs *The Fiction* 121). As mentioned earlier, the cause of Molly's death started with the neural abnormalities in parts of her body—"tingling in her arm" (*Amsterdam* 3)—and progressed into a drug-induced dementia and eventually death. This fate is spoken of with dread by Clive and Vernon and is echoed in both men's projection of fear of similar conditions, as well as their deaths.

> [Clive] saw jagged rods of primary color streak across his retina, then fold and write into sunbursts. His feet were icy; his arms and chest were hot. Anxieties about work transmuted into the baser metal of simple night fear: illness and death, abstractions that soon

> found their focus in the sensation he still felt in his left hand. (*Amsterdam* 25)

As well as Clive, Vernon faces his own fear of the strange condition of neurological disease which is manifested by his mind,

> [T]he night before, as [Vernon] had stood up from dinner—and it was there when he woke in the morning, continuous and indefinable, not cold, or tight, or airy, though somewhere in between. Perhaps the word was dead. His right hemisphere had died. (*Amsterdam* 31)

Not only does Molly's life indicate the fear of their odd symptom beforehand, but also the deaths of both of them; Clive experiences "sensuous fatigue" communicated to him by "the heated marble floor…through the soles of his feet" (*Amsterdam* 166). He feels that he cannot move his legs and feels "a tear run down his cheekbone and tickle his ear" but he cannot "quite be troubled to wipe it away" (*Amsterdam* 166). Lastly, he hallucinates that he is able to see and speak to Molly and musician Paul Lanark, who are in actual fact a Dutch doctor and nurse. In Vernon's case, his death also comes after his hallucination is described.

> Vernon would never tell anyone about scorching pain in his upper arm, and that he had just begun to grasp, though feebly, where he really was and what must have been in his champagne and who these visitors were. But he did interrupt his speech and fall silent for a while, and then at alst murmured reverentially, 'It's a spoiler'. (*Amsterdam* 173)

Brannigan argues that by their reactions, it is implied that Clive and Vernon's worst fear is actually the inability to "access and rehearse the past" (80). It is quite clear that both men realize that the best moments of their lives are now behind them, and they are fearful that they will lose the capacity to remember that endeared past. From the prediction of these two characters, it can be interpreted, as suggested by Malcolm, that this view is expandable to the generation which they represent—that of the "young men of the 1960s who have made good and become respectable in the 80s and 90s." More specifically, he observes that the social range of characters in *Amsterdam* is constricted to "the great and the good" or what he calls "the chattering classes" composing of rich politicians, publishers, and journalists, among others (Malcolm 193). Therefore, their hollowness of characters and their psychological defects echo the possibility that their generation also nurtures the same conditions as well.

In response to the desire to recapture and regain the past, the novel's characters resort to unscrupulous means, as mentioned throughout the chapter. In addition, since their attempt to attain the past is merely the denial of the present failing conditions, it is bound to backfire. *Amsterdam* ends with both Clive and Vernon's deaths at the hands of each other, seemingly suggesting that the wicked are finally punished. While this ending has been criticized by some as too convenient, well-made or deliberate, it is an appropriate result for this analysis. In the aftermath of each character's failures, Clive and Vernon decide to fulfill the promise once made to each other by performing euthanasia, in spite of the circumstances which are different from what was originally in the agreement. Although neither is threatened physically by any neural symptom, their conscience seems to already be compromised. In fact, they are so morally corrupted that, ironically, euthanasia, which is supposed to be a

solution to physical and mental disability, becomes the tool that will end their lives. Nevertheless, the denial maintained by Clive and Vernon may die with them, and that held by Garmony with his political reputation, the implication is that the English society satirized in this novel is still infected by the same condition of amorality and denial. According to Malcolm, in the society burlesqued by *Amsterdam*, the good are not rewarded because "there are no good" (195). The pomposity is still seen, for example, in the case of the only victors in the story, Frank Dibben, who takes over Vernon's position as the editor, and George Lane. George's presence in the novel is almost always spoiled by personal agendas hidden beneath a civil façade. When approached by Garmony, George denies being the one who had supplied the scandalous photos to the media (*Amsterdam* 175). His goal in the relationships he has with the other characters is to be "the primal master" aiming to put everyone around him under his control (Tsai 9). In the end, he is depicted as taking delight in seeing the destruction of his wife's former lovers—Clive, Vernon, and Garmony—and even going so far as to show a romantic interest in Vernon's widow. Through them, McEwan portrays the world in *Amsterdam* as "an unredeemed society" in which there is no one with enough moral or ethical superiority to ensure that goodness wins over evil (Wells 91).

As depicted in the novel, a portion of society appears to be populated by people who are shallow and crooked in nature. The characters who are posited in the crux of moral dilemmas fail to display strong benevolent stance and those who are on the sideline are not active in providing moral or benign contexts for the story. The characters' declining situations can be attributed to their denial of the unsavory present and nostalgia for the glorious past that they once possessed, and the symbol of

such longing is concentrated into the character of Molly whose very funeral opens the novel. Wells makes an interesting allusion to W.H. Auden's poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" which delineates a scene of death as "The day of his death was a dark cold day" as being in correspondence with Molly's funeral when temperatures dropped to a frigid "minus eleven" (*Amsterdam* 4) in that both scenes lament the passing of benevolent presences and seem to hint at the threats of human hatred and national violence (86). The denial portrayed in this novel is morphed into dangerous acts because the characters take unethical and immoral measures in their impossible attempt to retrieve their past. As a social commentary to a change in political weather of the country, *Amsterdam* mocks the conduct and attitudes of the English society by negatively reflecting them through the characters of this novel.

Chapter IV

ATONEMENT:

A NEED FOR ATTENTION AND ORDER

"For, though it offended her sense of order, she knew it was overwhelmingly probable that everyone else had thoughts like hers. She knew this, but only in a rather arid way; she didn't really feel it." (*Atonement* 36)

This chapter discusses *Atonement* (2001), which is acclaimed to be one of Ian McEwan's most ambitious and greatest achievements to date. Not only that, its popularity was heightened when the novel was adapted into a movie directed by Joe Wright in 2007, which was nominated for several Academy Awards, including Best Adapted Screenplay. Divided into four sections, this novel seems encoded with multiple layers—a domestic drama, a war narrative, and a journey toward reconciliation—at the heart of which is the impact of violence on the lives of simple individuals who even if they truly existed in real life would never make it to the history books. McEwan states that in writing about "violence," an author is addressing "something that's certainly common in human nature" (McEwan interview Reynolds and Noakes 22). In this respect, this novel deliberately places the personal crime committed by Briony, the main character, within the scope of World War II so that the reflections and impacts of both the crime and the War are emphasized. Most importantly, this novel underscores the dangers of arbitrary interpretation and manipulation of matters beyond one's comprehension, which is at the core of Briony's crime and the reason why she has spent her life composing an atonement of her own.

Moreover, although the fictional setting is the World War II, the message is resonant of any acts of violence in human history. In an article pertaining to the 9/11 tragedy in the U.S., McEwan has stated that it is the inability to empathetically imagine themselves as other people that enabled terrorists to commit such atrocities (McEwan "Only Love and Then Oblivion"). For Briony, the same failure causes her to falsely accuse Robbie of a crime he did not commit. However, her motivation is spurred from the need to react against an isolation that is forced on her by the environment. In this chapter, Briony's attempt to deny and counter the sense of insignificance, as well as her profession of atonement, is explored. Also, the wartime narrative of the retreat to Dunkirk is analyzed in parallel to the national account of the same event in order to reveal the denial of the situation of the country.

Following the lighter novella-length satire *Amsterdam* (1998), *Atonement* (2001) is one of McEwan's most intricate and most ambitious books. The novel is divided into three parts and an epilogue, each narrating events of different years and places. In the first part, the story revolves around a particularly hot day in 1935 in the Tallis summer house, an upper-class English family. Told through an omniscient third-person narrative voice, the story centers on the precocious Briony Tallis, then an adolescent with an overly imaginative mind and a strong ambition to become a writer. In celebration of the return of her brother Leon, Briony writes a melodrama called *The Trials of Arabella* and enlists her reluctant cousins, Lola and the twins Jackson and Pierrot, to perform in the play. However, her cousins are too caught up in their sorrow over their parents' separation to be satisfactorily cooperative, and Briony has to call off the performance. Ignored by her negligent mother and her dismissive sister Cecilia, Briony finds herself loitering around the house with nothing to do. From the

upstairs window, the thirteen-year-old witnesses a scene between Cecilia and Robbie Turner, the son of the family's charwoman, by the fountain, in which her sister strips down to her undergarments and dives into the water while Robbie waits nervously. Unable to comprehend the situation, Briony nurses a curiosity that later transforms into a grave misinterpretation of Robbie's character. After reading, without permission, Robbie's letter to Cecilia which is rather graphic in nature, wrongly sent by accident, and interrupting the two lovers in their act of lovemaking in the library, Briony accuses Robbie of raping her cousin Lola. As a result, Robbie is arrested and sent to prison, thus ending the narrative of part one.

The second part presents Robbie's account of his time as a soldier on the infamous World War II retreat to Dunkirk. The reader is told that Robbie has been released from prison and enlisted into the army. It is also revealed that Robbie has been maintaining a correspondence with Cecilia through letters. Accompanied by two fellow soldiers, Robbie treks through the French countryside, on his way to the beaches of Dunkirk where the British Expeditionary Force are waiting to be evacuated back to Britain. His thoughts oscillate between wonderment at the horrors of the war he is facing and recollection of his life as a student supported by Cecilia and Briony's father and his brief but passionate romance with Cecilia prior to his imprisonment. Robbie is injured and toward the end of the section goes into delirium from his illness.

Part Three of the novel returns to England and shows Briony now working as a nurse in London. Claiming that she feels penitent about her childhood crime, she has severed her relationship with her family, following in the footsteps of her sister Cecilia and devoted herself to helping wounded soldiers in the war. She is assigned the task of nursing a dying French soldier named Luc who mistakes her for his lover,

an experience which greatly frightens her but in turn forces her to develop empathy for others as well. All along, it is told that Briony continues to write fiction in her free time and has submitted her short story "Two Figures by a Fountain" to *Horizon* magazine, from which she receives rather negative criticism. This section also shows her journey to see the lovers, now living together in the suburbs, to offer them her apology and ask to make amends. The novel ends with an epilogue, years after the events in the first three parts, showing an old Briony who is now an established writer with vascular dementia. She reveals that it is she who has written the entire novel as a means of atonement for her crime. This part also discloses that in fact Robbie and Cecilia had died without ever having been physically reunited, but it is Briony's romanticized creation that places them together.

In this novel, one type of denial that is discernible is what is often described as *constructive denial.* Individuals under constructive denial seek meaning from their condition as well as imbue themselves with the belief that their experience is under their control; as a result, their perceptions are altered to positively reinforce their self-concepts and self-worth (Cohen 55-56). This type of denial is analogous to the responses of patients with critical injuries whose attitudes toward themselves are sometimes strengthened during crisis (Elliott et al. 608-13). Not only that, another issue that *Atonement* raises is what Cohen terms "state-organized denial" which is often used to cover up collective or public histories that are unpleasant or shameworthy and can take many forms (133). Specifically, the treatment of public events in this novel falls under the categorization of denial by transforming into other types of events. As will be discussed in detail in the section concerning the retreat to Dunkirk, this event and its meaning is denied by the government which addresses the

horrifying and humiliating retreat only as a heroic and praiseworthy deed. Furthermore, in Briony's case, her entire novel goes one step beyond the act of denial; it is an act of acknowledgement. Toward this end, she employs a number of generally accepted acknowledging techniques such as expiation and apology, commemoration and memorialization, which is contained in her publication of the novel. As Cohen avers, the acts of expiation and apology include not only "exoneration" of those who were victimized, but also public intimation of the wrongs that were done to them (236). Expiation and apology, when sincerely offered, can serve remedial purposes. According to Erving Goffman, the elements of an apology are as follows:

> In its fullest form, the apology has several elements: expression of embarrassment and chagrin; clarification that one knows what conduct has been expected and sympathizes with the application of negative sanction; verbal rejection, repudiation and disavowal of the wrong way of behaving along with verification of the self that so behaved; espousal of the right way and an avowal henceforth to pursue that course; performance of penance and the volunteering of restitution. (113)

Moreover, Briony seeks to achieve reconciliation as a way to acknowledge what has been denied as well. In its genuine definition, reconciliation refers to "tolerance, forgiveness, social reconstruction and solution of social conflicts in ways other than punishment" (Cohen 238). However, it is dubious who exactly she aims to be reconciled with.

One significant feature of *Atonement* that is noticeable and discussed by almost every critic of McEwan is its multitude of allusions to other literary works,

especially those of English writers. Firstly, the novel opens with an epigraph from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817):

> 'Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English: that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing, where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting? (*Atonement* 1)

This reference evokes the same issue that seems to be structural of this novel. The chosen quotation shows Catherine Morland, a female character with an overimaginative mind much like Briony, being chastised by Henry Tilney, a knowledgeable but sarcastic clergyman, for conjuring up the concept of Gothic horrors in a prim and proper English setting. Feeling that her assumptions are outrageous, Tilney compels her to draw upon her knowledge and experience with the English society to which she belongs in order to demonstrate the falsity of her imagination. This suggests the negative impact of confusing fantasy with reality, a point which is echoed throughout *Atonement* with the character of Briony in the place of Catherine. Using this comparison as a point of departure, McEwan states that

Atonement takes "a step further" by not only examining the crime of over fictionalizing, but also "the process of atonement" (Reynolds and Noakes 19-20). Secondly, the influence of modernist writing is also pervasive, especially the technique of Virginia Woolf. This reference is mentioned blatantly in the long letter given in response to Briony's story "Two Figures by a Fountain," in which editor Cyril Connolly rejects her work on the grounds that it "owed a little too much to the techniques of Mrs [Virginia] Woolf (*Atonement* 312). This letter also refers to Elizabeth Bowen and Rosamund Lehmann; the former as an attentive reader of the story whose comments partly motivate *Atonement*'s first part and the latter as author of *Dusty Answer* of which the "redeeming shades" are noticeable in Briony's story (*Atonement* 314). Moreover, similarities are discernible between McEwan's *Atonement* and Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897), particularly in terms of the use of the child's point of view to portray the world of adults (Kermode 8). Another connection can be made to L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (1953), with a similar long heat spell that impacts the emotional wellbeing of the characters as well as their behaviors (Mullan 32). Geoff Dyer views these heavy literary influences as McEwan "retrospectively inserting his name into the pantheon of British novelists of the 1930s and 1940s" (8). However, with its shifting points of view and narrative styles, *Atonement* both harkens back to its predecessors in literature and accentuates the ubiquity of literary dominion. Briony, in a sense, is a personified product of fictional ascendancy, mainly of British influences. On the other hand, an alternative view of literature is presented in the novel through the opinion of Emily Tallis, the mother of Cecilia and Briony, who finds contempt in Cecilia's chosen field of study in literature. To Mrs. Tallis, her daughter "had lolled about for three years at Girton with

the kind of books she could equally have read at home—Jane Austen, Dickens, Conrad (*Atonement* 152). Instead of deriding literature, McEwan shows this attitude as an emphasis on the family's cultural and intellectual superiority, or "modern…snobbery" (*Atonement* 152).

As the novel discloses in the ending coda, all the narrative voices present in the three parts are filtered by Briony's adult writing, written and rewritten throughout the 59 years of finishing the story. Presenting the events taking place in 1935, Part One employs shifting points of view but mainly focuses on the story seen through the eyes of a precocious thirteen-year-old Briony. An aspiring writer, her most outstanding traits are noticeably her imagination and curiosity. Brian Finney opines that it is her literary imagination that is presented to the readers first, and her personality second (70). The readers are introduced to her literary preoccupation through *The Trials of Arabella*, a play she has written for her brother Leon. She aims for the play to be performed at the welcome party for Leon as a way to showcase her creative talents to all of her family. Not only that, a central scene in this part—the fountain encounter between her sister Cecilia and Robbie—can be viewed as the one force that stimulates her chain of actions throughout her life, considering the entire novel is based on Briony's story "Two Figures by a Fountain" which is her perspective of the scene she witnesses from the window. The window itself as a separator should suggest that her insight into this exchange between Cecilia and Robbie is obstructed as she only has her visual perception but not audio. It is suggested that Briony is caught in the position of a child trying, and failing, to make sense of the lives of adults (Messud 106). Her literary inclination makes her curious about all the events that go on around her much like a novelist is curious about

possible subjects of his or her next novel. However, her limited perspective on life makes it inadequate for her to interpret the behaviors of the adults around her. The window in this case acts also as a symbol of a barrier between ages that separates Briony from the two people that she is watching.

It can also be said that in Part One Briony is subtly isolated from the world with which she was familiar or which she thinks she understands. This can be seen symbolically in the observation that her perception of exchanges between other people is always blocked or obscured by certain objects such as the window, doors, or the darkness. The two encounters between Robbie and Cecilia which Briony happens to witness are covered by the windows and by the library doors. In the essential scene of Lola's attempted rape, Briony mistakes the figure of the rapist, the identity of whom is later revealed to be Paul Marshall, Leon's friend and Lola's eventual husband, for a moving bush due to the darkness. All of these incidences show that when involving other human beings, especially adults, Briony never really gets a clear view of any events. This issue thematically implies the denial that she is in the process of committing. Denial, in a general sense, is a loss of sense, or "a quasi-sensorial shutoff" (Zerubavel 4). Ironically, the one event that is the least obvious to her in terms of sight, or the identity of Lola's assailant, is the one that she claims adamantly to have seen "with [her] own eyes" (*Atonement* 181). Apart from these, other events in which she discovers changes in her existing knowledge or beliefs or simply any incidences where her desires are thwarted serve to isolate her further (Jensen 7). By reading Robbie's letter to Cecilia, she is struck by the word 'cunt,' a word which she does not know the meaning of but can discern that it denotes something rude, vulgar, perhaps vicious. This is alarming to her because growing up she has always viewed

Robbie as a polite individual. Also, her cousins, both Lola and the twins, whom she thought would be fully cooperative in the play to welcome Leon home turn out to be incapable of fulfilling their roles because they are preoccupied by their parents' divorce. Eventually, she is forced to acknowledge that "the world, the social world, [is] unbearably complicated" (*Atonement* 36). In a sense, Briony can be described as living in a bubble. According to Kathryn Schulz, whether or not a person is well-equipped to face different and disconcerting events and viewpoints depends considerably on his/her environments (196). In a stable atmosphere, human senses tend to *habituate* and cease to produce responses; this causes people to be especially sensitive to changes in the atmosphere (Butler and McManus 17). This phenomenon explains why Briony responds strongly to this new realization about her environment.

Moreover, she realizes that while she feels her world—a concept that includes her ideas, feelings, and imagination—to be highly significant, it is not viewed as such by others. As a result, Briony's world becomes an unfamiliar place to her and she feels even more neglected. Granted, the treatment she receives from her family members is affectionate dismissal at best. Her mother is portrayed almost as an invalid, constantly weak and complaining about migraine and retreating to her room without paying much heed to her daughters. Her sister, not unlike the average adult sister who is much older than her younger siblings, leaves Briony to her own devices without bothering to acknowledge or participate in the young girl's imagination. All along, it can be seen that her family provides no environment for her to come to terms with the changes she is facing. The combination of many disappointing events happening in one day heightens the sense of being abandoned and causes her to feel her isolation more acutely. It seems that for the first time, she is exposed to the reality

of the external world that belittles her significance. Even the attribute that she deems her forte, her imagination and fictional talent, is overlooked by seemingly everyone. Apparently, her fantasy has no place in and even clashes with the world of adults. Consequently, she is stuck with the alienation that most girls tend to feel as they go through adolescence, a period which Stone and Church describe as vulnerable with "persistent feelings of dislocation and estrangement" (Rogers 173). Childs points out that Briony's child world is then disturbed by the influence of the adult world; as a consequence, a child like her is prone to act in ways that have the potentials for disaster (*Fiction* 171). Unfortunately, at thirteen, she does not possess sufficient mental capacity either to fully interpret the world as a socially populated place or to realize that each person, even the ones close to her like her family, has a private life that is apart from her and out of her control. On the contrary, instead of "simply watch[ing]" (*Atonement* 39) like she hints to be the appropriate thing to do, she decides to interpret all that unfolds around her and even fictionalize them with confidence even though she has never personally experienced such behaviors or emotions, nor does she understand them (Childs *Fiction* 171).

In response to this unfamiliar sense of insignificance, Briony's reaction is to try and impose control on her circumstances. This attempt, in a more tangible version, can be seen in the way she arbitrarily directs her cousins to perform *The Trials of Arabella* without really taking heed of their consent. Especially, the twins voice their opinion that they "hate plays and all sort of thing…and dressing up" (*Atonement* 11). More importantly, as Briony is presented to be predominantly influenced by her literary nature, it is no surprise that her method of regaining control is through fictionalization and fantasizing. Her personality can be categorized as

"confabulatory," a term used for people who are especially prone to generate stories and theories about what goes on around them, and tend to fabricate any "plausible-sounding" explanation in response to all the questions they encounter (Schulz 77-83). Upon watching the scene by the fountain, she is struck by the confusion of the actions before her, not from the strangeness of the behaviors of the two people, but from the misalignment of the sequence of actions compared with how she imagines things should happen. "The sequence was illogical – the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal" (*Atonement* 39). It is common for human beings to crave order and cling to the organized and coherent state of things in life (Jensen 3). Furthermore, it is our natural predilection to be able to explain things, no matter how unlikely the ability to do so or how elusive the true explanation (Schulz 81). Similary, Briony, especially being a young adolescent, wants to be able to form some level of understanding and make clear-cut judgments about her life. Also, she craves the certainty of being able to anticipate the sequence of events like in a routine. Her internal argument about the fountain incident is an obvious demonstrator of this inclination within her. Moreover, when the play rehearsal brings unexpected complications, she regrets not having written a story, which offers her "the neat, limited and controllable form…A story was direct and simple, allowing nothing to come between herself and her reader" (*Atonement* 37). Her most drastic attempt at control is her categorization of Robbie as a sexually depraved, wicked man without having any valid grounds or proof.

With these actions, Briony is acting in denial of the insignificance that is alien to her thirteen-year-old mind. Granted, at this stage, she has not fully overcome the identity formation process; in other words, she does not yet have a clear idea of who

she is as a person. As introduced by Erik Erikson, an individual has to undergo eight developmental stages in a lifetime, and adolescence is one of the critical periods because in this phase a person forms, negotiates, and achieves—or fails to achieve—his/her identity. Identity formation has then become one of the major trends in adolescent psychology, with variations on emphases and details. Erikson describes this process as one in which adolescents examine and experiment with their roles and skills, often in multitudes, in order to find ones that fit their beliefs, ideals, and expectations (128). Also, these newly acquired images or perspectives of the self are often scrutinized in connection with those that define an adult—an example of a person who has achieved identity, as this is how adolescents learn to distinguish between themselves and the others in society and make the transition to becoming *identity achieved* individuals (Erikson qtd. in Cobb 141). In Adelson and Douvan's "The Self and Identity," this issue is explained further, stating that identity formation includes synthesizing the attributes of an adolescent and making the connection between them and the opportunities offered by society (167). As for Briony, she is still caught in this phase where her identity is not yet firmly established. The clearest idea that she has of her personal qualities is her ability to confabulate although, as the readers can discern, her talent is still that of a child's fantasy revolving around melodrama, linear storytelling, and well-made plots. Moreover, as Boxer, Tobin-Richards and Petersen argue, adolescents have "a developed consciousness" through which changes are experienced, which can make them feel uncomfortable or even embarrassed of themselves (85). Supported by this, it is plausible to view Briony's situations as the changes in circumstances that cause discomfort and vulnerability in her. In most cases, failure to cope with dissonance or disconfirming contexts may

thwart the adolescent's identity formation and lead that adolescent to *diffusion*, an identity status labeled by another notable identity theorist James Marcia, which refers to a state of a person who cannot achieve identity due to the lack of extensive identity exploration ("Identity Statuses" 1). Unfortunately, Briony's confusion is worsened by her misunderstanding of herself as well as of others. As a glimpse of her inner perception is shown to the readers, she is so sure of herself as if she has already completed her identity formation. Even as she starts to develop questions about the existence of other people, there is an underlying conviction that she is a realized individual. She wonders, "[Was] everyone else really as alive as she was? For example, did her sister really matter to herself, was she as valuable to herself as Briony was? Was being Cecilia as vivid an affair as being Briony?" (*Atonement* 36). At thirteen and having no real experience of the social world of adults, it is not possible that she has already achieved a distinct sense of who she is, as this is in fact a life-long process.

Furthermore, Cobb asserts that adolescents are particularly susceptible to any trivial events supporting their self-concepts, especially those that confirm or even hint that they are individuals of exceptional importance (155). This can also support Briony's adamancy to interpret and even manipulate the events on this day to conform to her ideas. She takes pride in her literary talents and longs to prove them to everyone. Thus, once she feels that her talent is overlooked and that her significance is depreciated, she retaliates by manipulating the circumstances to restore order in her world and eventually to regain the focus to be on her.

Throughout the course of the book, the major action whose influence remains predominant is Briony's accusation of Robbie as the person who assaults Lola on that

evening at the Tallis estate. Even though she cannot really see the man who was trying to rape her cousin, Briony firmly tells the police that she saw and confirmed she knew the identity of the culprit. She answers in affirmation to the constable's questioning of whether she "saw him…just as [she] saw [the police]…with [her] own eyes" (*Atonement* 181). This false allegation sets in motion the hardships in Robbie's life—imprisonment, war, and death—and Briony's attempt to atone. In "The Impression of a Deeper Darkness," Peter Mathews, views Robbie as "a scapegoat" which is sacrificed for the "dissolution of symmetry" (155). A more sentimental interpretation of Robbie's plight may attribute his fault of shattering order to his obvious romantic feelings toward Cecilia, instead of Briony. In one recollection of Robbie, he remembers rescuing Briony from a pond and her confessing her love for him. She purposely risks drowning so that Robbie could save her. When asked why she does it, she simply replies, "Because I love you" (*Atonement* 232). Robbie's image to Briony at that time is similar to a knight in shining armor, which may have endured as she grows. Her choice of word to describe Robbie as a "medical prince" in the epilogue also hints at this view (*Atonement* 371). Thus, Robbie falling in love with Cecilia deviates from the proper narrative and causes confusion in her world. From the beginning of the novel, Briony is described to the readers as "one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so," which can be seen from the way she arranges her room with "the model farm spread across a deep window ledge consisted of the usual animals, but all facing one way—toward their owner—as if about to break into song, and even the farmyard hens were neatly corralled" (*Atonement* 4-5). This is, in McEwan's words, "a shrine to her controlling demon" (*Atonement* 5). Not surprisingly, her literary creation reflects this inclination, considering that her play

The Trials of Arabella exhibits what Frank Kermode calls "a necessary sort of knowingness," a sense of control and authority over a world in which she can create and arrange everything as she sees fit (8). In Briony's deluded perspective, the real world should possess the same qualities as the fantasy world she creates. However, the force of the combined events in this one day effectively shatters the harmony that she has taken for granted in her life, leaving her with a sense of disorientation and insignificance. Lost in her fantasy world, Briony has only ever perceived of herself as being omnipotent. Apparently, Briony's conviction in her own creative ability is "inflated"; she believes that being a writer means she is blessed with "great powers," which she demonstrates by reconstructing real events into fantasy (Wells 109; Messud 106). As an author, Briony believes that she possesses the "absolute power of deciding outcomes" (*Atonement* 371). This misguided viewpoint places her on "a search for purity," or the "artistic ideal [of] the beautiful symmetry of the world that existed before the blight of the negative and the impure intervened" (Mathews 155). For this reason, Briony's mind has identified Robbie as the maniac who must be eliminated; anything thereafter is a matter of confirmation. This process of thinking is called the *confirmation bias*, and is often referred to as one of the most problematic issues and the commonest inferential error in human reasoning (Evans 41). Basically, confirmation bias occurs when individuals subsume only evidence that supports their hypothesis or existing theory, or mold any evidence to their service (Nickerson 175). As such, they disregard any conflicting information and develop a distorted sense of the available evidence they have. Schulz's deliberation on human error also elaborates on this particular aspect. It is in human nature to determine the probable, rather than the "logically valid and theoretically possible," based on comparative experiences

between the incident in question and our own (Schulz 117-18). In the end, we simply relate the evidence at hand in terms of level of compatibility and disregard further evidence that might exist, thus causing us to easily make mistakes should reality not conform to our expectations (Schulz 118). Briony's perception follows the same pattern in forming attitudes about Robbie. Robbie's obscene letter and his physical act with her sister in the library, which she observes but is too young to fully comprehend, contribute to her negative characterization of him, making her feel that "she could never forgive Robbie for his disgusting mind" (*Atonement* 115). However, at that time, casting him as the villain is a pointless attempt when there is no crime for which he can be reprehensible. Therefore, when she stumbles upon an assault being made on her cousin, Briony sees her chance to harmonize her story and even prove her assumptions of Robbie, thus affirming her creative talents. Hence, it does not matter that "it was too dark for [her eyes]" to tell her "the truth" because "what she saw must have been shaped in part by what she already knew, or believed she knew" (*Atonement* 169, 123). Normally, humans "passively absorb" the world through senses, which can be gathered from the common sensory, especially visual, analogies associated with knowledge such as *insightful*, *observant*, or *visionary* (Schulz 53). On the contrary, Briony allows her imagination to cloud what her eyes see, resulting also from her belief that her imagination can dictate the world. With her authorial god-like power, sensory data is inferior to her "literary instincts" (Wells 102). Although she even mistakes Paul Marshall for a moving bush, it is irrelevant because at that moment, "her eyes confirmed the sum of all she knew and had recently experienced…It was her story, the one that was writing itself around her" (*Atonement* 169, 166). According to Childs, it is her desire to conceive fiction that generates her

fabricated account to the police, which she states with utter certainty that she has seen Robbie committing the assault on Lola (*Atonement* 141). "The truth instructed her eyes. So, when she said, over and over again, I saw him, she meant it" (*Atonement* 169). In this episode, Briony's perception clearly follows a *perceptual set*—a set of expectations established by the mind that guides sensorial contact (Butler and McManus 20)—that has already deemed Robbie a villain. The fateful statement—"I saw him" (*Atonement* 181)—is, to her, not a lie because she is finally giving harmony to her masterpiece. The strands of fiction that revolve around Robbie and Cecilia are significant to her as they stir her emotional responses so strongly that she feels they will turn "her into a real writer" (*Atonement* 115). It can be argued that Briony needs to vocalize this story and to have its impact visibly made upon the real world as it will reinforce her belief of her ability and her self-proclaimed status as a writer; thus, the regained confidence will annul her sense of desertion and puzzlement caused by the tranquil and orderly world disrupted.

The extent of Briony's faults is elaborated in the last part of the novel, the coda headed "London, 1999." In this epilogue, Briony reveals that the entire novel is the final draft, out of over half a dozen, of the story that she has been writing as her way of giving justice to the people whose lives she has irreversibly destroyed and obtaining atonement for herself. As a disclaimer of sorts, Briony explains that the materials used for her description of the wartime horrors in France and the relationship between Robbie and Cecilia are supplied by Briony's correspondence with Corporal Nettle, Robbie's fellow soldier who survived the ordeal at Dunkirk, and the love letters between the lovers themselves, now on display at the Imperial War Museum. She also states that, as a way to show her sincerity, she has written this

novel by "disguis[ing] nothing—the names, the places, the exact circumstances…put[ting] it all there as a matter of historical record" (*Atonement* 369). However, it has been observed that her depiction of the war verges on fantasy rather than historical realism and that this style persists into her narrative in Part Three of the book as well (Wells 105-07). In fact, after learning of how she completely changes the fates of the lovers, having them reunite in Part Three when, according to her disclosure in this coda, Robbie died before he was rescued from Dunkirk and Cecilia in the bombing of a London underground without ever having actually been physically reunited, it becomes conceivable to doubt the accuracy of her wartime portrayal and the verity of the events in Part One (Wells 107). Moreover, as the entire novel is based on her recollection of the events that span over years and places, all of which took place over fifty years in the past, it is also difficult to trust the accuracy of the details, even provided that the events are true. Apparently, in writing the novel, Briony has had to retrieve the events from her memory. As summed up by Butler and McManus, memory is "both selective and interpretive" (36). One has to not only retrieve information that has been stored, but also reconstruct it, aided by the context or cues of each memory, which is why details of events are usually more inexact than their meanings or feelings (Price et al. 249-51; Butler and McManus 36). The fact that Briony has already produced several drafts with varying details is indicative of this tendency. Also, the information is shown to be alterable by way of persuasion. For example, the vase over which Robbie and Cecilia argue by the fountain is revealed to be a Ming in her earlier draft, but is changed to Meissen in the final draft due to the suggestion made to Briony by *Horizon* critic C.C., guessed to be real-life literary editor Cyril Connolly. Apart from this, it turns out the advice given to Briony comes

from Connolly's friend Elizabeth Bowen. As a result, Briony edits her story to resonate Bowen's book *The Last September* (1929), describing a restive life of a girl in a big mansion.

Nevertheless, while she proclaims her noble intention in doing right by her sister and Robbie through this novel, it can be argued that Briony is in fact still motivated by self interest. It has been observed by many critics that Briony's atonement is not genuine. On examining the text as Briony's dedication to make amends for her sins, a number of elements in the novel are problematized, such as the amount of time and number of drafts taken to produce the story, the adventitious reversal to melodrama in the epilogue, and the fantasy elements of the narrative, which will be explored later in this chapter. Furthermore, critic Judith Seaboyer finds it difficult for the readers to trust Briony's intention to atone because it is thoroughly, albeit subtly, tainted by her egotistical agenda to attract the readers to her story (32).

Apparently, Briony still favors her fiction over the truth. For Wells, fictionalization, especially one that is presenting itself with such self-consciousness like *Atonement*, is Briony's way of denying the truth using the version of made-up reality that is more pleasurable to her consciousness (99). As stated earlier, Briony has a hard time accepting her insignificance in her social circle. Like a child, Briony prefers the concept that she is the only human being with a vivid and vivacious inner life, making her special. The prospect that when placed among other individuals, none of whom are unique from one another, she is simply of "irrelevance" threatens her (*Atonement* 36). Generally, adolescents are inclined to "see themselves as separate and unique" (Adelson 48). However, Briony's mind is too invested in this view that she fails to see other humans as diverse, separate individuals as well. It is implied

throughout Parts One and Three how she regards the people around her as mere subjects for her fiction. For example, when she watches the exchange between Cecilia and Robbie from the window, while she is puzzled by their eccentric behaviors, she refers to the scene as a "dumb show" (*Atonement* 41). This show, of course, ignites in her an epiphany in fiction writing, showing that, to her, the complexity of human emotions and behaviors supplies not social curiosity or maturity, but materials for fiction. "For her now it could no longer be fairy-tale castles and princesses, but the strangeness of the here and now, of what passed between people" (*Atonement* 39). Not only that, she eagerly forces the twins to act in her play, but when they start to feel animated about their roles she feels offended because their portrayals of the dramatist personae are different from the visions that she has in her mind when she wrote the play. For example, Briony feels that both Pierrot and Jackson have "the knack of depriving [their] lines of any sense" (*Atonement* 33). Also, she feels that the leading role is stolen from her as Lola asks "do you mind if I play her? I think I could do it very well. In fact, of the two of us…," implying that she makes a better Arabella than Briony, whereas Briony imagines Arabella as "not a freckled person…and her thoughts were Briony's thoughts" (*Atonement* 13-14). What this reveals is that even children of her own age have varying minds that perceive and interpret things dissimilarly to hers. Claire Messud opines that one of the abilities that Briony lacks is the cognizance of other people's consciousness and the fact that everyone she interacts with or witnesses exists in reality, not in her fiction (106). This view is shared by Peter Childs who asserts that Briony's commitment to her fiction disables her from acknowledging that the figures she views as her characters actually have their own feelings and ideas that are not her fashioning and are "better informed" than

what she can give to them in words (*The Fiction* 135). Not only that, despite growing up in a rich family with prim and proper mannerisms, when aroused by an opportunity for story, Briony readily neglects what she knows to be the appropriate conduct. When Robbie gives her the letter, he instructs her to hand it to Cecilia and to not open it; apparently, she does not listen. In her mind, "[i]t was wrong to open other people's letters, but it was right, it was essential, for her to know everything" (*Atonement* 113). Although one of the first impressions of Briony shown to the readers is her "passion for secrets: in a prized varnished cabinet, a secret drawer was opened by pushing against the grain of a cleverly turned dovetail joint, and here she kept a diary locked by a clasp, and a notebook written in a code of her own invention[,]" she has no respect for the secrets of others (*Atonement* 5). In the principles of achieving understanding of other people, one unique tool that is essential is extrapolation, pertaining to the ability to infer about the "internal states" of others (Schulz 253). As seen, Briony clearly lacks this capacity as adolescent. Based on the letter she has coveted, which contains the wrong content anyway, and her false interpretation of the scene at the fountain, Briony fabricates the character of Robbie as a sex maniac, a misguided attribution encouraged by her cousin Lola. Despite having known Robbie as a decent person since childhood, Briony is now assuming that Robbie is inherently iniquitous. By doing so, Briony is attributing dispositional reasons to Robbie's behaviors, meaning she deems that any actions made by Robbie are born of his internal traits, instead of considering that they are situational or investigating them for certain (Price et al. 523-26). This can be seen in another key scene of the novel, the library love scene, which is narrated through both the points of view of Briony and Cecilia. What happens in this encounter between Cecilia and Robbie, or at least what

Briony in her adulthood must come to realize happens, is a passionate awakening for the two adults. From Robbie's point of view, the two confront each other about the letter before they confess their attraction to the other and engage in a passionate lovemaking. While they "make love against the library shelves which creaked with their movement," Briony interrupts them, "no doubt with the exhilarated notion of protecting her" sister, and "of their own accord, they moved apart and turned away, and now they were discreetly straightening their clothes" (*Atonement* 134-39). On the contrary, Briony at the age of thirteen sees something different entirely. To her, this is a scene of sexual assault, which lends her accusation of the assault on Lola much conviction. Upon discovering the couple in the library, "her immediate understanding was that she had interrupted an attack, a hand-to-hand fight" (*Atonement* 123). Her description of the scene is mostly accurate in the physical aspects, but she misinterprets every angle.

> [Robbie] had pushed his body against [Cecilia's], pushing her dress right up above her knee and had trapped her where the shelves met at right angles. His left hand was behind her neck, gripping her hair, and with his right he held her forearm which was raised in protest, or self-defence.
>
> He looked so huge and wild, and Cecilia with her bare shoulders and thin arms so frail. (*Atonement* 123)

Briony may see Cecilia's "terrified eyes," (*Atonement* 123) but she may not be terrified or trying to struggle free of Robbie; either way, it is not probable for Briony to know for sure, nor is it her place to do so (Kermode 8). McEwan's presentations of the same scene described from two different perspectives, one of the participant's and

one of the outsider's, draw attention to the significance of various minds and how they lead to dissimilar understandings of the same event. In this instance, Briony's prejudiced viewpoint causes her to make only a negative judgment of the scene.

Briony's failure to distinguish reality from fantasy is not limited only to people, which can be asserted as her biggest crime, as she seems confused about the difference between fact and fiction (Bedford 52; Reynolds and Noakes 19-20). For her, to be the author means that "she is also God" and she can assume "some god-like place from which all people could be judged alike" (*Atonement* 371, 115). As a result, she manipulates the events in reality as if she would were they the materials of her fiction, with no regards to the consequences and the repercussions that her actions will have on others. In other words, since she cannot treat other people as real, she displays an inability to feel empathy for others' situations and plight, which, as stated by McEwan, is a key to human compassion. Even as she aims to make amends for her childhood crime, she still uses the means of fiction because, as such, she still reserves certain power and control. Not surprisingly so since most of her erroneous perception and behavior careen toward the means of empowering herself with a sense of control.

Furthermore, Briony's obsession with neat narratives persists to her adult life as well. In Part Three, the readers are told that Briony is working as a nurse in London and that she has renounced her family, like Cecilia has. She may have grown up, but she clearly has not realized that the true cause of the detriments she has caused is her fixation with fiction and her relentless quest for narratives and order, as well as her failure to recognize her powerlessness to control reality. All along, she has been writing and trying to get her story published by submitting it to publishers, which is

seen from the long comments she receives from a critic with the initials C.C. This endeavor reflects her attempt to create a world based on real events and manipulate the fates of other people that she has not abandoned even though it has caused devastating effects before. In fact, it can be argued that her decision to become a nurse is rather dubious. While she presents herself as if taking on the role of a nurse in London is part of her methods to atone for her sin, Peter Mathews proposes that it is, in fact, the actualization of her obsession with order (154). He compares the hospital culture of the wartime nurses to the militarization of the Nazis, and asserts that by enlisting as a nurse, instead of dedicating herself to a take responsibility of and care for other people, Briony can obtain the experience of this rigid order in a crumbling world like England during World War II (154). Furthermore, she receives an invitation to the wedding between Briony's cousin Lola, who was assaulted on the fateful night in 1935, and Paul Marshall, the friend of Briony's brother Leon and Lola's true assailant. As she watches the ceremony, it crosses her mind that this wedding should be stopped because of the history between the two. Now knowing for certain that Paul is the real culprit, Briony feels that he should take responsibility and punishment for his crime, however long ago it was. Still, she remains silent and allows the ceremony to progress, not out of fear or shame, but more perhaps out of her yearning for an organized narrative. The wedding thus seems like an element of a fairy tale, a ceremony representing the "formal neatness of virtue rewarded" (*Atonement* 8), that Briony cannot bring herself to disrupt with the ugly reality of Paul's crime (Wells 106).

Among all this, it seems Briony's most significant and most deluded case of manipulation of truth is her decision to unite Cecilia and Robbie in Part Three. This

reunion, along with Briony's meeting with them, is debunked in the Epilogue as total fiction. The reality is that Robbie died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes before he was rescued from Dunkirk and Cecilia died in the bombing of Balham Underground station in the same year. This revelation implies that any encounters between the two lovers after the unfortunate incident at the Tallis summer house, including Briony's interaction with them, have been fabricated by Briony herself. The readers' shock and betrayal aside, Briony states her reasons for choosing this line of future for her characters explicitly in the Epilogue.

> What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? I couldn't do it to them. I'm too old, too frightened, too much in love with the shred of life I have remaining. I face an incoming tide of forgetting, and then oblivion. I no longer possess the courage of my pessimism. (*Atonement* 371)

By writing that the lovers whom she had severely wronged get a well-deserved union, Briony is simply acting on her inherent predilection for a conventional, fairy-tale-like narrative. This artificial happy ending reflects the preoccupation with order that has been with her since her childhood (Wells 108). While she claims that this is her way of atoning for her sins, giving her victims what would have been rightfully theirs had she not adversely interfered, it cannot be overlooked that she still lets herself be influenced by the characteristic that has proved detrimental over the years, the very

characteristic that caused them hardships and sorrows they did not deserve. This is another technique that she uses to counteract the lack of control that she has felt ever since her world was disrupted in 1935.

Apart from the details of her narratives, it can be argued that Briony's entire atonement is a written testimony to her denial of insignificance. It can be an admittedly startling experience to go through changes in the personal and social environment in a steady world she has always taken as secure; still, it can be worsened by a strong conviction of one's own importance like Briony's. Essentially, our beliefs are "mental representations" or "models of the world" that we perceive in all aspects, and they are intricately and inextricably linked to our identities. As such, threats to our beliefs can be damaging to our sense of self and thus trigger an "intransigent, infuriating, ostrichlike" denial, specifically directed at the prospect of being wrong (Schulz 92-95, 239-40). In a similar manner, this story is instigated by the intense reaction of Briony against the unwelcome and unwanted break in her peaceful world, which propels her to reconsider her place in relation to her environment. Although time has passed, it is debatably difficult for her to accept in a straightforward manner and acknowledge it, not to mention the mistakes she made as a result of it. Hence, she employs convoluted narratives to reveal her own faults. First of all, the atmosphere of fantasy writing permeates the entire novel, making it seem almost dreamlike, even though she tries to account for her verisimilitude in crafting her fiction. Her manipulations of some of the events presented in the novel seem unnecessary and are perhaps included merely for the purpose of serving her imaginative arbitrariness. In Wells' opinion, certain created incidents in Part Three that do not match reality are troublesome as Briony, after spending 59 years trying to

atone for her wrong through the act of incessant writing, should not feel the need to supply any more lies in order to create joy from tragedy (107). Yet, it seems that even after decades, her tendency to manipulate reality to her own liking still persists. Claudia Schemberg writes in her book, *Achieving "At-one-ment": Storytelling and the Concept of the Self in Ian McEwan's* The Child in Time, Black Dogs, Enduring Love, *and* Atonement, that as she grows up, Briony's accomplishment in inhabiting other people's minds through imagination is evident in her mature writing; Parts Two and Three dealing with Robbie's wartime experience and her own experience during World War II, are different in both style and tone from her youthful account (85). Similarly, Morten Høi Jensen feels that while the adolescent Briony fails to regard the world as a rounded, dynamic place where everybody has his/her own perspective, her adult self shows an ability to acknowledge both sides of any incidents and put herself in the position of others, which leads her to gain a moral understanding of her mistakes as a child (9). However, if that were so, the fates of the two lovers should be revealed in a more realistic way or at least the fantasized meeting between Briony and the couple should be portrayed differently. While there is humility in her acknowledgement that she is "not so self-serving as to have [Cecilia and Robbie] forgive her" (*Atonement* 372), the intent is clear that Briony designs this scene to communicate what she believes she deserves to get if she were ever to make amends for her crime in real life. This includes the violent reaction from Robbie and Cecilia's attempt to protect her. Unsatisfied with her response about taking responsibility, Robbie

> took a step towards her and she shrank back, no longer certain of his harmlessness…but Cecilia slid between them. […] As Cecilia

> gripped him tighter, he twisted his whole body away from her…Now with two hands she was gripping his cheeks tightly, and with an effort she turned his face, and drew it towards her own…With a tenderness that Briony remembered from years ago, waking in the night, Cecilia said, 'Come back…Robbie, come back. (*Atonement* 343)

This has an echo of her childhood false conviction of Robbie's aggressive nature and the sisterly affection that Cecilia used to offer. As such, it can be interpreted that Briony has not moved very much away from the notions and attitudes that brought her to trouble all those years ago, thus confirming that she has not, in fact, developed or achieved better moral understanding of the world.

Apart from this, Briony's journey to see Cecilia and Robbie is described within the scope that can be interpreted as denial of reality. The key to this scene is its location of the reunion which is in the suburbs. According to Wells, Briony's trip from central London is portrayed with an atmosphere of "long-ago innocence"—a journey back to the "timelessness" that seems to characterize the first part of the novel (107). The description of the area where Cecilia and Robbie live is a contrast to the urban environment of London where Briony works.

> That was all London was beyond its centre, an agglomeration of dull little towns. […] The Edwardian terraces, net-curtained and seedy, 43 Dudley Villas was halfway down, with nothing to distinguish it from the others except for an old Ford 8, without wheels, supported on brick piles. (*Atonement* 329-30)

The physical atmosphere is a clear reminiscence of England in the past, which, at the same time, is presented in a negative light. Also, in order to maneuver her way through this section of town, Briony's only equipment is a "crumbling bus route map dated 1926" (*Atonement* 318). In this meeting, Briony directly faces her guilt and offers to officially enact her atonement by confronting her sister and Robbie whose lives she has practically destroyed and promising them that she will publicly change her statement to the police and clear Robbie's name. As Briony never gets this opportunity in real life, this is the only scene in the entire novel where she actually fictionalizes her admission of guilt to the victims of her crime as well as her means of absolution through her offer to exonerate Robbie. However, instead of placing this scene of seeking reconciliation in a setting that is more closely related to her adult life, such as in London where she works, Briony posits the lovers and her journey to them in a rustic and rather backward environment similar to the atmosphere of the Tallis estate. This choice of description can be said to have two implications. First, it is Briony's repeated subconscious attempt to impose control on the situation. Even though the rural Tallis summer house is the backdrop of her crime, it also represents a scene where her imagination takes its most powerful and influential, albeit destructive, course. Ironically, the events which trigger the necessity for her atonement is framed by the same setting that makes her feel empowered through the accomplishment of her fiction. Second, it reflects Briony's hidden desire to regress to her younger years when her 'innocent' world was still predictable and undisrupted. This further emphasizes her unconscious denial of the present state of being. Instead, Briony prefers to revert back to the period when the notion of guilt and war are the affairs of adults and only relevant to her in the sense of fantasy; her world of familiar

comforts revolves around her and exists on her terms. This longing for the proper happy ending is confirmed by the atmosphere of the last scene in "London, 1999" where all the members of Briony's family are present at her merry birthday party and preparing to watch *The Trials of Arabella* being performed. At this point, it seems the novel takes a full circle and returns to its starting point of a rather pleasant family gathering before everything gets spoiled. In the end, Briony's attraction to order and conventional storytelling triumphs and resurfaces by neatly wrapping up the story, thus returning the position of control to Briony, the author, once again. This delightful ending is also a denial in itself as it reveals Briony in her old age to be unable to take responsibility for her past mistakes with a realistic approach and resorting to melodramatic well-made structure to present what she considers her atonement.

Moreover, in her opinion, fiction is the only way for her to immortalize not only her sister and Robbie, the two people whose happiness was robbed away by her over-imaginative and arrogant adolescent mind, but also herself. With the publication of the book, even after her death, "these two lovers will survive to love […] They will always live"; thus, if Robbie and Cecilia can survive "right out of the little playlet she was trying to write at the age of thirteen," then perhaps Briony herself can survive out of this novel with lifelong process of writing as well (McEwan qtd. in Finney 81). While this seems an optimistic, romanticized gesture, it may also expose her egotistical need to be recognized as a living figure after she is no longer living. As a means to reconcile, her ulterior motive to commemorate not just her victims, but herself, the perpetrator, as well, shows that the main object of reconciliation is in fact herself. Since with the deaths of both Robbie and Cecilia, "[t]here is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her"

(*Atonement* 371). Thus, a true atonement "was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point," and the "attempt was all" (*Atonement* 371). For Briony, there have been many attempts, which is possibly why the novel has been in the process of being written and rewritten for nearly six decades, none of which she is satisfied with since the published draft is said to be different from the others. In fact, she even mentions the possibility of writing an ending with "Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at *The Trials of Arabella*? It's not impossible" (*Atonement* 372). One obstacle to this new imagined scene is the onset of Briony's vascular dementia which is likely to prevent this fantasy from being written (Finney 81). Nevertheless, the consideration of this new scenario shows that Briony's mind never really stops framing and shaping this story, and each new draft increases in pleasantness for Briony's conscience. Therefore, it can be interpreted that while Briony gains the ability to imagine herself in other people's places as she grows, she still strives for the peace of mind that can be obtained from a fantasized act of atonement, a neat ending that does not leave any mistakes or chances unaddressed. It is still self-interest that drives Briony to make public her testimony to the crime committed decades prior.

In addition, the point that problematizes the integrity of the novel the most is Briony's medical condition revealed in the Epilogue. She has vascular dementia and is on her way to losing her mind. Considering she has devoted her adult life to composing a story that hopefully will atone for her sins, it is curious why it has taken her as long as 59 years to finally publish this story. One probable instigator for this action is her progressive illness. Briony may have thriven as a writer, being an accomplished author, but towards the end of her life, it seems her biggest fear is still

that of fading away without leaving a significant mark on the world. In an interview with Michael Silverblatt, McEwan states that Part Three can be seen as Briony's "stand against oblivion" (qtd. in Finney 82). The most severe part about the onset of her illness is the accelerating loss of memory. As a result, soon there will be nothing left of Briony and she too will become a character in the novel she has written. Therefore, if she does not publish this lifelong masterpiece now, she may not be able to do so again with the progression of her illness. Her ingenious work will be forgotten and abandoned, which is similar to the situation in 1935 where her talent was overlooked and forgotten by everyone. With the Epilogue contradicting the majority of the novel, it is virtually impossible to distinguish what is real from what is imagined. Consequently, Briony's claim at regret may be only "skin deep" which then propels an interpretation that the only source of reconciliation that Briony looks for is herself (Wells 110).

On the other hand, *Atonement* is not only an exploration of Briony's private conflicts, but also an invocation of the English society in the middle of the twentieth-century. John Mullan comments on the atmosphere at the Tallis estate in Part One as "very English" as the family uncomfortably tries to eat their "sweltering roast dinner" during a suffocating heatwave (32). In her article "If Your Memories Serve You Well…," Hermione Lee writes that the novel displays echoes of the collapsed life of "establishment England" from the broken Meissen vase to the disorderly retreat of the British Expeditionary Force to Dunkirk (Lee). The vase, broken once and mended by Cecilia in Part One and irreparably destroyed by a servant during the war, can be symbolic of the conventional English life that, while glazed and smooth on the surface, nurtures hairline cracks and impurities that cannot be wholly fixed or hidden

forever (Lee). The "vast heat that rose above the house and park, and lay across the Home Counties like smoke" in the first part also provides a background conducive for "all the rules [to] change" (*Atonement* 64). In general, the depiction of the house, with its Bernini's *Triton* and an island temple, and its atmosphere are classic English that contains a sense of "isolation and timelessness," but there are signs that this life is being invaded by changes, as well as the war (Wells 103). The influence of social change is seen in Cecilia's admission to the Oxford educated and the nouveau riche Paul Marshall who makes money from the war. The war is already well under way, with Paul profiting from selling chocolate bars to the army. However, in this family gathering at the summer house, the events still proceed as if in a bubble. Even the unfortunate allegation of Robbie can be read as a testament to the deeply rooted sense of class in the English consciousness. Among the male characters at the house on that summer night who are not members of the Tallis family, it is Robbie, the son of a servant, who is readily accused of being the rapist, instead of Paul, who is of the bourgeois class, a wealthy friend of Leon, the family's eldest son. Although the novel shows that another worker in the house, Danny Hardman, is suspect, he does not fall under direct accusation perhaps because he represents no signs of attempted class ambitions, except for Cecilia's suspicion that he is interested in Lola. In contrast, Robbie receives financial support from Mr. Tallis, the absentee father of Leon, Briony, and Cecilia, to further his education at Cambridge, from which he even achieves better results than Cecilia, and plans to go to medical college next. Even Cecilia in the beginning reveals contempt toward this idea. In practice, he is the embodiment of an overachiever who has outperformed his superior and plans on continuing as such. Thus, the victimization of Robbie is not only caused by Briony,

but also by a social class of English people represented by the Tallis family as well (MacKay 160). Furthermore, the horror of Part Two is effectively summed up in Robbie's words as a product of "a dead civilization. First his own life ruined, then everybody else's" (*Atonement* 217). This observation is also supported by James Wood, writer of "The Trick of Truth." While it is largely recognized that war is inevitably chaotic, McEwan's description through Robbie's point of view efficiently captures the breakdown of order in the infantry's retreat. The prevalent mood becomes that of "a tired anarchy" with soldiers "slouching" on their way to the beach (Wood). Briony's experiences in Part Three are also vivid and detailed in description. It is the descriptive fineness of the novel as a whole that effectively evokes "English life" prior to and during World War II (Wood; Finney 77).

Not only that, *Atonement* can be read as a cogitation of England's global position in the twentieth century. From the Victorian era, Britain, at the crown of which is England and its grandeur, had enjoyed a long-standing and widespread authority all over the world. At the start of the twentieth century, Britain was one of the world's Great Powers; however, as the century wore on, its position shifted, heralded by global destruction and transformations in unprecedented scales. John Young writes that as much as the hegemony of Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries benefited Britain's stature, the loss of such predominance in the twentieth century affected Britain as severely (142). Out of both the First and Second World Wars, Britain emerged victorious, an achievement which gave the country "great prestige" but at the same time paved the way toward ruin as it forced England out of its peripheral role and also caused the disintegration of the Empire (Young 141). At the head of not just a small island consisting of a few Anglophone countries,

but a vast Empire spanning over the world, England was secure in its position, much like Briony was before most of the events in *Atonement*. Moreover, if Briony's sense of self is threatened by startling changes in the environment, then similarly England was overwhelmed with the prospects of decolonization. This phenomenon, though spanning a long time, directly affected the country's "image of 'greatness'" and required "heart-searching and reluctance" in overcoming the changes (Young 142). It is the reluctance, it seems, that has permeated the attitude of the British people until the present. Though still a prominent nation, Bill Schwarz observes that to think of Britain's global position as center would imply "too much unwarranted grandeur" (157). The inability to accept change is a trait that causes conflict in *Atonement*; in the same manner, the people in England "failed to adjust the attitudes which accompanied greatness" (Young 168). Before the sense of loss resulting from the end of the Empire probably lies in what Young theorizes as the frustration at England's failure to play God, "to shape Europe in its own image" (231). Loss of hegemony was clearly felt on the small country which was once the world's Great, if not the Greatest, Power, with colonies of sub-continental scale in size. In response to the same emotion, *Atonement* employs fiction as a way to reconstruct the world.

Between Parts One and Three which focus on Briony is Part Two told through the point of view of Robbie as he is trekking through northern France to Dunkirk where he and his fellow soldiers will be awaiting extraction from England. The atmosphere that imbues this entire section is stale horror that is so commonplace that it seems to overshadow all the crimes committed in Part One. Robbie muses about the scene he passes that "there were horrors enough, but it was the unexpected detail that threw him and afterwards would not let him go" (*Atonement* 191). As Robbie and the

two corporals walk along what he calls "their shortcut," he sees "a leg in a tree. A mature plane tree, only just in leaf. The leg was twenty feet up, wedged in the first forking of the trunk, bare, severed cleanly above the knee…there was no sign of blood or torn flesh. It was a perfect leg, pale, smooth, small enough to be a child's" (*Atonement* 192). In another instance, as Robbie nears the beach, he passes "a convoy of three-ton lorries" when "men tired of waiting, scrambled off the backs of the lorries…And before anyone could even glance around, the mountain of uniforms was detonated. It began to snow tiny pieces of dark green serge" (*Atonement* 242). As Wells has observed, McEwan probably includes such gruesome, horrid details with a purpose other than realistic historical account (98). For the description in this section, McEwan opts for a simpler and choppier prose to better match the subject matter of the war. In an interview, McEwan explains that "on the battlefield the subordinate clause has no place" (qtd. in Finney 74). Through the eyes of Robbie, the narrative of Part Two not only delineates the deaths and typical abhorrence of a country in wartime, but also conjures up vivid feelings of the soldiers present in the retreat. With careful, selective images, the text clearly exposes "the bewilderments and the humiliations" of the event, with details that are "vivid and unsentimental" (Wood). As Robbie and two other soldiers arrive at the beach, the sight they see is that of a formless army of bored soldiers wandering "about the sands without purpose… with nothing to do for hours on end" (*Atonement* 248, 221). Soldiers are swimming, playing football or, in a particular incidence which Robbie gets involved in, assaulting an RAF officer. For Robbie, who is already suffering from an injury, every action, it seems, is marked by distinct fatigue. For example, "even as he chewed, he felt himself plunging into sleep for seconds on end" (*Atonement* 260). Such specificities

contribute greatly to the merit of this passage. In writing these passages, McEwan has consulted various real-life sources of wartime narratives, namely Gregory Blaxland's *Destination Dunkirk* (1973), Walter Lord's *The Miracle of Dunkirk* (1982), and Lucilla Andrews' *No Time for Romance* (1977). Interestingly, most of the sources he uses are rich in personal anecdotes (Head 166). His methods of referential consultation is reflected in Briony's reliance on Robbie and Cecilia's letters, supposedly stored at the Imperial War Museum, and her own correspondence with Corporal Nettle. Although the writer has researched the event, the power of this part lies not in the "accuracy" of the description, but in "the accumulation of living human detail" (Wood). Therefore, it is irrelevant whether any one action or activity mentioned in this passage is refuted by real participants or witnesses of the event.

Since *Atonement* as a whole is associated with fiction writing, Part Two in particular engages the issue of historiography, of what "fiction *can* do with history that history *cannot*" (Alden 59). As he waits at Dunkirk, Robbie wonders "Who could ever describe this confusion, and come up with the village names and the dates for the history books? And take the reasonable view and begin to assign the blame?" (*Atonement* 227). This casts problems to the traditional history writing, which tends to focus on factual recordings such as dates, names, and place. Factual representation, however, is not to be confused with truth, as historical records may not really give readers the truth about what really happened. The historical narrative that is of particular interest here is the one about the retreat to Dunkirk. The evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk is a significant defining historical moment for England during the Second World War. With the German forces relentlessly advancing into France, General Viscount Gort, Commander of the BEF stationed in

France at the time, ordered the army to make the retreat to the port of Dunkirk to wait for evacuation. This event was remembered and referred to in a number of national historical narratives as a "heroic rescue" which saved the lives of British soldiers and contributed to the victory of the war later (Lee 16). For example, Julian Thompson's *Dunkirk: Retreat to Victory* relates stories of "heroism" (Rees). Moreover, some personal accounts on BBC's WW2 People's War[1] negated that the BEF was "beaten" or that they were "disorganized, demoralized groups" (Addis). The evacuation was carried out with the help of civilians who brought their own *little ships* to help transport the soldiers from the beach back to their motherland. Waiting for these soldiers on their arrival were the WVS women who offered them "a bun and tea" to welcome them home (Bulger 147). This horrid experience of the soldiers was treated somewhat like a spectacle for the people back home in their country.

However, the portrayal of Dunkirk in McEwan's *Atonement* problematizes the view of Dunkirk as "a patriotic landmark of British history" (Bulger 155). In a speech given by Winston Churchill to the House of Commons, he referred to the retreat to Dunkirk as one of Britain's *finest hour*, which, considering the representations in *Atonement*, it is anything but. Marina MacKay, author of *Modernism and World War II*, describes the evacuation of Dunkirk as a commemoration of "the pathos of passive defence and a horrifically outnumbered retreat" (2). Upon witnessing the behaviors of the other soldiers on the beach, Robbie feels disconcerted by "the full ignominy of the

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1 WW2 People's War is an online archive of wartime memories contributed by members of the public and gathered by the BBC. The archive can be found at bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar

retreat" (*Atonement* 201). In one incidence on the way to the beach, Robbie describes a passing of Welsh Guards in a state contrasting with his army.

> It was a platoon of Welsh Guards in good order, rifles at the slope, led by a second-lieutenant. They came by at a forced march, their gaze fixed forwards, their arms swinging high. The stragglers stood aside to let them through. These were cynical times, but no one risked a catcall. The show of discipline and cohesion was shaming. It was a relief when the Guards had pounded out of sight and the rest could resume their introspective trudging. (*Atonement* 240)

The evacuation scene is not mentioned in *Atonement* as Part Two ends with Robbie falling asleep, thinking about Cecilia.

> He would be cleared. From the way it looked here, where you could hardly be bothered to lift your feet to step over a dead woman's arm, he did not think he would be needing apologies or tributes. To be cleared would be a pure state. He dreamed of it like a lover, with a simple longing. He dreamed of it in the way other soldiers dreamed of their hearths or allotments or old civilian jobs. If innocence seemed elemental here, there was no reason why it should not be so back in England. Let his name be cleared, then let everyone else adjust their thinking. He had put in time, now they must do the work. His business was simple. Find Cecilia and love her, marry her, and live without shame. (*Atonement* 228)

However, the disarray presented throughout this section matches a number of anecdotes of the people in the Dunkirk event as well. For instance, one of the people who manned the rescue boat, Arthur D. Divine, describes the evacuation as follows:

> The picture will always remain sharp-etched in my memory – the lines of men wearily and sleepily staggering across the beach from the dunes to the shallows, falling into little boats, great columns of men thrust out into the water among bomb and shell splashes. The foremost ranks were shoulder deep, moving forward under the command of young subalterns, themselves with their heads just above the little waves that rode in to the sand. As the front ranks were dragged aboard the boats, the rear ranks moved up, from ankle deep to knee deep, from knee deep to waist deep, until they, too, came to shoulder depth and their turn. ("The Evacuation at Dunkirk, 1940")

Therefore, it appears that the Dunkirk section in *Atonement* serves to emphasize the denial infused in Britain's national history. The disgrace and defeat of the BEF is glossed over in many historical narratives. McEwan himself mentions that in discussing the retreat to Dunkirk, it is impossible to ignore "the fact that tens of thousands of people died in that retreat, and yet we have a rather fond memory of it in the national narrative" (McEwan interview Reynolds and Noakes 22-3). MacKay asserts that this treatment of war fits the caricature of England, as well as Great Britain, in modernism, which refers to the country as being "post-imperial, anti-heroic and totally unwanted" (2). In between the two great wars, Britain retained the

aloofness, or isolationism, due in part to its loss of status as a superpower and significance in the global arena (Bulger 147).

As discussed earlier in the previous two chapters, the status on the global stage of Britain diminished as the twentieth century progressed. In terms of timeframe, *Atonement* may harken back to prior periods of time, but its resonance is no less astounding. Reacting against the atrocities and the disgrace of the Dunkirk situation, Britain opted for a more pleasant, sugar-coated version of the event, which was achieved both by manipulating the historical discourse and by staging the event in a more positive atmosphere. This parallels the controlling scheme of Briony's writing in *Atonement* as in the end she decides to use her authorial power to fictionalize a happy ending for the people whose lives she has destroyed through misguided obsession with patterns, and hopefully to exonerate herself as well. Not only is Briony's intention in writing the novel dubious, but the novel itself, once revealed as Briony's fiction with such ulterior motive, can be seen as disturbingly inadequate.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This thesis has presented an analysis of three novels by Ian McEwan: *The Cement Garden*, *Amsterdam,* and *Atonement*, concentrating on aspects of denial that can be discerned in the novels and how they can be interpreted to reflect the reality that England is a country in denial of its problems. Toward this end, the use of various theories and concepts concerning denial, especially those compiled in Stanley Cohen's *States of Denial*, were significant in decoding and foregrounding the characteristics of denial detected in each novel.

In McEwan's first novel *The Cement Garden*, the bizarre behaviors of four siblings living in a desolate urban area are examined to indicate their denial of both physical and psychological decline of their situations, as well as their insecurities. Most noticeable is the burial of the mother's corpse in a trunk in the basement, which reflects the intention to conceal signs of unsavory situations and to pretend that everything is normal. The novel also problematizes the concept of garden which is significant in England's national identity by disparaging it through the act of cementing, creating a smooth surface that denies the force of nature and the horrors of reality. Around the same time of the publication, England was still recuperating from the destruction, induced physically by the Second World War, and the downward shift in her global position. Yet, as much as possible, England maintained an attitude of authority and superiority in her interaction with other nations.

Chapter three discusses McEwan's social satire *Amsterdam* in terms of its denial of the professional failures and amorality in the main characters. Disguised by

professional stature and public reputation, the two characters, Vernon and Clive, both encounter dilemmas, the results of which prove their moral unscrupulosity. The novel also has political undertones as it reflects McEwan's rather negative attitudes toward the government of Prime Minister John Major whose term had recently ended. Despite the rather conservative proclamation, the events which took place under the premiership of Major revealed scandals and misconduct, which are echoed in the novel. Nostalgia, self-aggrandizement, and delusion of grandeur run through the entire novel as responses against the dissatisfaction with the present in comparison to England's fading and glorious past.

The fourth chapter of the thesis examines characteristics of denial in *Atonement* with two focal points: the character of Briony and the retreat from Dunkirk. The motive of the crime for which Briony spends her entire life trying to atone is spurred by the denial of insignificance, combined with the hazardous inability to distinguish between fact and fiction. Furthermore, the detailed horrors in the description concerning the soldiers' retreat from Dunkirk provide a contrast to the common narratives of Dunkirk by the officials. Similar to Briony's attempt to atone which spans over six decades from her adolescence to old age, her account is a reflection of the general attitudes of England in the periods that parallel her lifetime, which can be counted from after the Second World War onward.

Not only does each novel constitute individual interpretations, but the three also share underlying themes that can be linked to one another. It is noticeable that in each of the three novels, the influence of a female figure is prominent both in instigating the major actions and in affecting the atmosphere of the story. The mother in *The Cement Garden*, Molly in *Amsterdam*, and Briony in *Atonement* are all central

to their novel in the aspect that their presence tends to signify a positive period of time or connote balance or order. The lack of such figures thus results in the circumstances which necessitate denial due to their threats to the wellbeing of the lives or the psyche of the other characters or the stability of the general atmosphere. If the mother's death is not covered up, the children will be vulnerable in the external world; similarly, the conditions of the male characters after Molly's death reflect their loss of glory which causes them to react in defense of their social position as well as mental stability, and Briony feels isolated when she realizes that her identity is threatened, resulting in detrimental actions in an attempt to regain balance.

Although it is obvious that McEwan's writing has evolved significantly in terms of subject matter, from the macabre, gothic style of *The Cement Garden* to the complex metafiction of *Atonement*, the essence of the three stories, the same as his other literary works, remains universal. McEwan has stated that fictionalizing inevitably involves "writing about – at some level – conflict between people" (McEwan interview Reynolds and Noakes 18). As such, regardless of the plotline, the concepts running beneath the surface will always be recognizable and relatable by the readers as they reflect impulses that are instinctually human. Therefore, whether he writes about the entombment of a dead mother, which is very far-fetched, or the more imaginable exploitation of other people's private business for personal gain, careful readers are able to discern the psychological mechanisms and relate to their circumstances.

Furthermore, one trait that is constantly found in McEwan's work is the relationship between the private and the public spheres. Thus, in McEwan's novels, personal problems can usually be perused alongside the social conditions of the time.

Morrison observes that the second half of the twentieth century consisted of "massive, multi-dimensional cultural change" of which contemporary literature is born (7). As for England in its postimperial state, the changes have been tremendous. In response to the shrinking of spatial control and the increase in fragmentation among the population, England has had to reinvent its image accordingly (Gupta and Bhatt xii). Moreover, John Young efficiently concludes in his book *Britain: and the World in the Twentieth Century* that with all circumstances combined, Britain, and at the heart of it, England, simply no longer possessed the resources to remain an effective world power and was now "without a role" (169). In the three selected novels, one aspect of the contemporary image of England is shown, which is the inability to properly come to terms with the shift in global position, at least in mentality.

In addition, since the nature of contemporary culture in England is inclined toward pluralism, the need to effectively imagine oneself in others' positions becomes more pronounced. The capacity for compassion has received much attention in McEwan's writing from the beginning. Without it, humans will, inadvertently or deliberately, endanger or distress other people as seen in crimes and wars, especially those without a solid cause. It seems that contemporary history is focused on the collective guilt of humans at large. For McEwan, violence is frequently treated with "sentimentality" in the popular culture, trivializing it as "spice" and leaving out the consequences; in other words, representations of violence often fail to effectively make people *see* the real implications (McEwan interview Reynolds and Noakes 22). As a result, crimes and wrongdoings become so commonplace that their full effects are belittled, if not overlooked, by those who perceive them. This truth is addressed in *Atonement* when Robbie muses about the condition of the world that:

> Everyone was guilty, and no one was. No one would be redeemed by a change of evidence, for there weren't enough people, enough paper and pens, enough patience and peace, to take down the statements of all the witnesses and gather in the facts. The witnesses were guilty too. All day we've witnessed each other's crimes. You killed no one today? But how many did you leave to die? (*Atonement* 261)

This analysis of Ian McEwan's three novels *The Cement Garden*, *Amsterdam*, and *Atonement* suggests that denial stems not only from the inability to cope with present situations, but also from the failure to acknowledge the past, whether of the perpetrators or the bystanders. For England, in particular, this issue appears more intense considering the fact that in the not too distant history it had been at the pinnacle of glory but that glory was now fading if not faded, making the experience traumatic enough to trigger denial of its loss, the traits of which can be seen reflected in these novels.

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VITAE

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