

The Survival of the Author in Ian McEwan's *Sweet Tooth*

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Abstract

Metanarrative techniques in Ian McEwan's latest novel, *Sweet Tooth*, challenge our conception of literature by creating and destroying illusions of reality. The metanarrative subtly challenges Roland Barthes' notion of "the death of the author" by offering an alternative—the death or dissolution of the subject—which permits the survival and persistence of the author as a distinct voice within the narrative. An idealized but ultimately untenable examination of the nature and purpose of fiction is presented. The novel radically reexamines the role of author, subject, and reader, culminating in an evolved and emergent vision of the author.

Keywords: metafiction, Ian McEwan, metanarrative, poststructuralism, first-person narrative

The Survival of the Author in Ian McEwan's *Sweet Tooth*

Ian McEwan's latest novel is a pleasing and accessible, fast-paced and character-driven work that employs many of the tropes of an uncomplicated, linear narrative, but conceals a sophisticated contemplation of the nature and meaning of life and art. Ostensibly a spy novel set in England in the early 1970s, *Sweet Tooth* concludes with a meta-literary twist that forces us to turn the narrative upside down and to reexamine what we thought we had known. In so doing, the ending asks us to radically reorganize our assumptions regarding the author's intent and the very structure and identity of the work. In effect, we think we are reading one story, only to discover at the very end that we are reading another that contains and frames, and perhaps deliberately destroys, the first.

As the above issue involves a meta-critical examination of the interaction between author, narrative, and character and all of their relative roles, a reasonable way in to this analysis of McEwan's work is Roland Barthes' famous statement about the death of the author. In an essay of the same name, Barthes posits that, once a literary work has been written, the words assume an identity of their own that transcend the author's own interests and intentions. The author is merely a vehicle through which the words are transmitted: the author does not retain control or presence in the written work. In essence, the narrative is set free to fulfill its purpose through its creator's absence or figurative death. I examine McEwan's work by reading it within the context of Barthes' thesis, an approach that is more than justified by the invitation that McEwan sets out for us.

As the author's concluding twist is clearly meant to rearrange characters and events in our minds and prompt a reexamination of the narrative, and since the purpose here is to effectively pick up the story by its tail and scrutinize it as a whole, it is no betrayal of these goals to describe this concluding twist here at the outset of the analysis. Until this last chapter, we believe that we are reading a first-person account by a young female narrator, Serena Frome. Groomed by her older lover, Tony Canning, Serena has been recruited by the British intelligence agency MI5 to participate in "Sweet Tooth," a cultural campaign designed to promote anti-communist ideology through literature. The premise is simple: Serena's job is to cultivate and encourage writers with an ideology deemed appropriate by vetting them and offering them a stipend. She embarks on an affair with one such author. At the end, we find that this author, Tom Haley, has in fact written the very account we have been reading. To add another layer of interpreted meaning, as many reviewers have remarked and as McEwan has confirmed in interviews, Tom Haley bears a strong and conscious resemblance to McEwan in terms of his background and literary interests. The similarity is sufficiently pronounced for us to conclude that Haley is in fact a fictionalized version of McEwan himself, even if a similarity with regard to their experience cannot be confirmed.

In an interview in which he discusses the writing of *Sweet Tooth*, McEwan states, "I have always been skeptical of first-person narratives"¹. It is a simple enough statement when taken at face value, seemingly referring to a preference on the part of the author. On the other hand, though, it is a distinctly odd statement in light of the fact that McEwan has here produced a first-person narrative, and the use of the word "skeptical," surely a deliberate choice, suggests a lack of believability of such narratives. One reading might suggest that McEwan finds himself

¹"Sweet Tooth - Writing and Research - Ian McEwan" August 22 2012 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbuS-SHtzhU>

incredulous, and therefore skeptical, with regard to the authenticity of the first-person narrative. As the narrative in question is fictional, however, from whence comes this skepticism? Surely a fictional first-person account is always just that – fictional, and the result of an author's ability to adopt a character's voice? Yet if skepticism is activated during the course of reading, it indicates that the fiction itself is faulty, providing an imperfect illusion. In *Sweet Tooth*, McEwan seems to want to convince us of the permeability of this faulty illusion. Therefore, he displaces and destroys the first person narrative he has created, forcing the reader to share his own skepticism of it.

It is a simple but masterful move: the elementary nature of the device gives way to a more profound meditation on the very nature and limitations of the fictional world. When McEwan transfers his own skepticism of the first-person narrative—perhaps as a form that is by its nature particularly deceptive—to the reader, the tropes and conventions of literature are called into question. In a way, of course, that is what all postmodern or meta-literary narratives do. Critics sometimes distinguish between metafiction, which calls attention to its own fictional nature (simply stated, “fiction about fiction”), and the metanarrative, which is a “fiction about the process of writing” (Mullan). Metanarrative, Mullan explains, is distinct from metafiction. The former is a self-referential form that may predate postmodernism. Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* “from the first sentence makes a story out of how reader and writer conspire to make a story” (Mullan). In fact, authors throughout much of the history of literature have used elements of metafiction, at least as far back as Chaucer. Metafiction simply means that the reader is being made aware that the writing or telling of fiction is taking place. Metanarrative, on the other hand, is more intensely self-referential and as such it is well positioned to call into question the nature of the fictional reality, sometimes by entertaining opposing interpretations of it. We are forced to acknowledge that the narrative is inherently unreliable. McEwan employs elements of metanarrative in previous novels, most obviously in *Atonement*, but also in *The Cement Garden*, *The Child in Time*, and *Enduring Love*.

Though a more recent development than metafiction, the metanarrative is well established in postmodern literature and is hardly McEwan's invention. For example, John Fowles achieved a similar effect several decades ago in both *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *The Magus*. In the former, the writer/narrator occasionally steps into the role of an additional character in the novel, speaking directly to characters and readers and thus, according to critic Frederick Holmes, destroying one illusion of reality and replacing it with another. The technique in fiction was an innovation at the time it was written, but may be no different from occasions when a character in a drama (for example, David Huang's *M. Butterfly*) steps out of the fiction of the performance and engages directly with the audience for a time. In both cases, the result is the destruction of the contrived scene simply through an admission that something else is transpiring; indeed, that this created reality is somehow being orchestrated. In fact, destruction is the point here: one thing these postmodern techniques do is to systematically destroy the conventional fiction, and pull our attention to what is created in its place. But what is the ultimate purpose of such machination? For one thing, it guards against a relaxation into verisimilitude and the world of the fiction. As such, I would argue that metanarratives that deliberately preclude the wholehearted acceptance of the created reality of the fiction in effect protest and guard against the notion that the author can or must die. On the contrary, in such narratives, the author proves himself to be alive and well, visibly pulling the strings of the narrative and demanding to be seen.

Frederick Holmes, in describing Fowles' work, discusses the idea of destruction and creation, referring to deliberately created worlds as the products of a 'godgame'. The author, of course, both creates and destroys, and one element of the meta-literary novel is that this is done consciously, visibly and deliberately, and that, as readers, we are invited or forced to look at the author's process as a component of our experience of the novel. Contrasting two works by Fowles, Holmes states:

In order to demonstrate to Urfe that his enterprise is, like a novelist's, fictional, Conchis [in *The Magus*] must destroy the reality of each stage of the godgame before moving on to create a new illusion involving his company of actors. It becomes increasingly difficult for the reader to submit imaginatively to successive illusions inasmuch as he becomes increasingly aware that they will soon be punctured. (Holmes 184)

Given that the role of the magician Conchis is analogous to that of an author creating a fictional world, the successive destruction of those worlds asserts the dominance of the author over the appearance and principles of the fictional world. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the destructive action is the same: the intrusion of its creator—the author—pierces the illusion. But because this is done in a subtler way, our sense of disruption is minimal and can be overridden. The "illusionist element" in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Holmes suggests, "does not strain our credulity because its fictionality is exposed in a way that does not require its destruction... the narrator identifies himself as the author, and, accordingly, it is apparent from the start that he does not exist within the confines of his narrative (although at two points he does enter it briefly as a character). Consequently, he can periodically point up the artificial nature of his story without destroying it" (Holmes 184-5).

In *Sweet Tooth*, McEwan follows the former pattern insofar as the narrator and author he reveals at the conclusion is a member of the cast of characters to whom we are introduced. Moreover, the similarity between McEwan himself and his character Tom Haley suggests that McEwan is stimulating a surreptitious entry into the action of the novel as himself. The personality of the author in this case is unusually robust, surviving the transition between worlds that would usually eliminate or obscure the representation of his personality. Like a spy himself, in keeping with his theme, the author infiltrates the narrative under false pretenses.

As noted previously, this is not the first fiction in which McEwan has manipulated and altered the version of reality he has painstakingly created, forcing the reader to reconsider not only the story but the whole nature and motivation of fiction. In what is arguably his most acclaimed novel, *Atonement*, the author pulls the proverbial rug out from under us by demonstrating that the narrative we had been reading and believing in was, all along, an invention by another character. As readers, we are surprised – even shocked – by this revelation, and then what checks us in our surprise is the realization that any narrative is, to some degree, invented, and as such may be just as easily reinvented.

In *Atonement*, this occurs through the shifting identity and perspective of the narrator, which culminates in a revelation about the supposed "truth" of the narrative. The identity of the narrator—or, rather, our understanding of it—shifts from the omniscient and impersonal to one who is intimately involved with the characters and action, preceding the final disclosure that this narrator has written the story, and not as a faithful representation of fact but a wistful fiction that

provides her the opportunity to atone. The persistent message in this metanarrative is, it seems, the awareness of how a narrator's emotion and intention both intrudes upon and shapes the narrative. Even the element of time that confines the characters in the narrative is challenged by the narrator's persistent consciousness. As Mullan notes in "Looking forward to the past", an analysis of *Atonement*, McEwan uses "prolepsis - the reader's 'premature' knowledge of eventualities" (Mullan 2006, para. 2). In other words, the narrator's knowledge and anticipation of events intrudes the narrative.

To justify a narrative that refuses to maintain its own illusion, there must be something profoundly instructive, even some epiphany, to be found in that moment of surprise and shock, when we, unlike the captives in Plato's allegorical cave, are made to realize and acknowledge that we are looking at shadows. We can call it enlightenment, but the moment is, at the same time, one of destruction. Once the shadow world loses its integrity, it can never truly be reconstituted. It is in this way that, like Fowles' *Conchis*, McEwan destroys a version of reality in order to create another one.

Standing in opposition to this acknowledgement of destruction is Roland Barthes' notion of the death of the author. Barthes' essay proposes that for a story to retain its integrity the one who orchestrates it into existence must relinquish any active or dynamic role—he or she must be forgotten. The existence of the author, his or her identity, and his or her historical and social circumstances—these all must be obliterated so that the story exists unfettered by any consciousness of the author. The author must truly be "dead" in the reader's mind in order to give the story life. McEwan, it would seem, protests the death of the author by allowing him to infiltrate the narrative, drawing attention to both its "truth" and its fictionality. As though in recompense, it is the integrity of the principle narrative and its first-person subject that collapses, perhaps suggesting that Barthes was, in fact, essentially correct, but that his statement was incomplete. There may be an alternative to the death of the author; namely, the demise of our belief in the reality of the work. In other words, if the author refuses to die, perhaps his "living" in the narrative requires this sacrifice—simply stated the death or dissolution of the subject.

The metanarrative, like other poststructuralist forms, "... [seeks] not to constitute the subject, but to dissolve it" (Drolet 3). The integrity of the subject is dissolved or destabilized by the built-in necessity that we recognize in the work the "...multiplicity of interpretation, perspectivism and limitedness of any one point of view" (Wheeler 213). Nevertheless, the ultimate goal of the fiction cannot be mere destruction. Rather, the goal is to create something durable that can withstand and transcend the instability of the subject. Regarding *Atonement*, Mullan states: "The test of the trick is perhaps in re-reading... McEwan wants you to identify with characters, to succumb to narrative illusion, to believe it for the moment. If it works, the novel compels you not to treat it as mere fiction" (Mullan 2006, para. 7). *Knowingly* succumbing to illusion is a confirmation of the power of fiction even without the need to "believe in" what it tells us.

In the case of *Sweet Tooth*, however, fiction itself is called into question by the representation of how it can be used and manipulated, forming a subtext of instability whose intention at times seems to be the production of a radical skepticism in the reader. Laura Miller points out that Serena Frome herself might not approve of McEwan's metanarrative techniques; in fact, she would be likely to regard them as 'tricks' to be 'distrusted'. Reading a story written by Tom Haley, Serena criticizes a narrative twist that foreshadows McEwan's own:

“Only on the last page” Serena explains, “did I discover that the story I was reading was actually the one the woman was writing. The ape doesn't exist, it's a specter, the creature of her fretful imagination.” (Miller 72)

Thus, the death of this subject, Serena, is not a simple or clean death. In retrospect, Serena seems to speak directly to readers when she decries narrative “tricks” as violations of the unspoken contract between author and reader. The death of Serena becomes, then, a sort of battle between her voice and the one that emerges, for through her destruction, we also witness the emergence of a new subject, the fictional author, intruding upon and cannibalizing the story. Early in the narrative, reading voraciously, Serena vainly searches for a subject that can reflect her in a story:

... I suppose I was, in my mindless way, looking for something, version of myself, a heroine I could slip inside as one might a pair of favorite old shoes. Or a wild silk blouse.... I suppose I would not have been satisfied until I had in my hands a novel about a girl in a Camden bedsit who occupied a lowly position in M15 and was without a man. (McEwan 38)

Both the narrative and our belief in the narrative are destabilized when we realize that the story we are reading is that very thing that Serena desires, in the manner of a mirror that would root her more firmly in the manufactured world. Yet in the process, the illusory reality of Serena disappears, along with the sense of desire emanating from her; indeed, we realize that she was never there at all, much like the happy couple in *Atonement*. But where, in the earlier work, a grimmer version of reality—their own deaths during the war—replaces the phantom couple, here McEwan replaces the young female subject and narrator with something possibly even more disconcerting—something (and someone) totally unlike herself, and like him.

This clever dénouement challenges our sense of reality in the novel, as the loss of the reality of Serena is easily interpreted by the reader as the loss of the woman herself, who has been our pleasant companion throughout this narrative. As readers, we experience a radical distancing from Serena when it is revealed that she is the creation of her lover, the one whom we had believed was being objectified. He steps forward as narrator to take her place as we find it has been his hand and therefore his consciousness at work all along. Nor, as mentioned, are the biographical similarities accidental: while seeming to root him in the non-fictional world, they also point to the fact that Tom Haley himself can likewise be revealed as an illusion, as behind him stands the author himself. In essence, if the author was supposed to die, he has here exacted the ultimate comeback: a resurrection and reassertion of himself into the midst of the narrative.

At first glance, McEwan appears to be demonstrating in a spectacular way that the author is not necessarily the one who dies but instead that the subject and the narrative itself may be made to die in his place. But why insist upon the virility and survival of the author? Is it a philosophical stance or a poetic one - or perhaps both? We would not suspect an author of McEwan's ability and range to be engaging in a simple expression of ego, so then what is gained by staging the death of the subject and refusing to allow the author to die? Why does McEwan take this approach to prompting a meta-critical examination of the text and of the dynamic interaction between subject and author?

Whereas an awareness of the death of the author is comprehended on an intellectual level, the destruction of the subject is a more poignant loss for the reader, evoking every childhood disappointment in finding out that a beloved character is “only pretend,” never having existed at all. With the creation and then the death of the subject, a fantasy world is created and then destroyed, suggestive of the magical qualities of the author as creator in the manner of Holmes’ description of Conchis in Fowles’ *The Magus*, the powerful manipulator who “...must destroy the reality of each stage of the godgame before moving on to create a new illusion” (Holmes 184). The moment of revelation of a new stage in the author’s ‘godgame’ is in fact reminiscent of a magician revealing his tricks, or the screen being pulled away from the Great and Powerful Oz, or Prospero in *The Tempest* renouncing his magic book. At the same time, this act of stripping a character of her illusory reality is like an act of violence in a book that is otherwise remarkably devoid of it.

Existing critical examination of the nature of this violence focuses on a feminist analysis of the work that emphasizes the role of the heterosexual relationship. Katie Riophe points out that Serena may have been suspect from the beginning, as her character is “a little thin”, and the reader’s overall impression of her is that of a “pliant, lovely, spirited, slightly vacant woman” (Riophe 1). It makes perfect sense to the reader, therefore, when Serena is revealed to be “a man’s fantasy of a woman” (Riophe 1). Moreover, it is through the (imperfect) appropriation of the woman’s persona and identity that the male narrator, who so closely resembles the author, seeks to reconstitute and represent himself. Tom states: “I had to get out of my skin into yours. I needed to be translated, to be a transvestite, to shoehorn myself into your skirts and high heels...”; however, as Riophe points out, the transformation and therefore the representation of Serena is “... clouded by [Tom’s] own vulnerabilities and hopes and vanities” (1). We are left with a portrait of the drawbacks of a worldview in which the female is subject to the male gaze, as well as a hypothesis regarding the perceived need of the dominant male to objectify the female. The implication here is that the male requires the feminine archetype in order to comprehend and reconstitute his own persona.

Gender politics, however, though present in this narrative, may not offer a full interpretation of the text’s purpose. Gender-related issues seem secondary to the author’s implicit comments on the nature and limitations of fiction itself. If we take as a starting point McEwan’s skepticism of the first-person narrative, it becomes apparent that what the author may be objecting to is the intimacy of that point of view, and the illusion that we as readers have the ability to step inside the character’s mind and experience. That is impossible in a fictional narrative and somehow disingenuous, as it involves the author’s pretense of being someone else, of hiding within the semblance of another. To discover that the first-person narrator is not in fact who she professed to be is tantamount to the author’s admitting to the deception, and thus justifying our own skepticism on this matter. To become accustomed to the use of that first-person pronoun and then to be told that it was an illusion creates the loss of precisely what was seemingly present as a result of the point of view—that is, the intimacy with the one who not only created but also lived the narrative, the direct person-to-person transmission of experience.

Once the illusion is compromised, the reader, like prisoners freed from Plato’s metaphorical cave, gazes around at the shattered remains of the illusion and begins to reconstitute a world, based this time on a broader landscape, encompassing both the ruined illusion and the elements that created it. Of course, this is only an intermediary step to anything that may be considered an ultimate reality. Tom Haley himself is a fictional construct, closely identified with McEwan yet distinct from him, another illusion and a false self as McEwan stops

just short of doing as Fowles did several decades earlier and inserting himself in his identity as author directly into the narrative. The precise relationship between McEwan and Tom Haley is a matter requiring some interpretation. Is Tom Haley McEwan's stand-in, his avatar, his means of functioning within a fictional world (albeit one that overlaps, temporally at least, with McEwan's own social background)? Is Tom, then, a means of allowing McEwan to function within a version of his own memories? Or is the emphasis, rather, on McEwan and Tom as parallel figures, both creators, the one begetting the other? The latter is, indeed, a more fascinating proposition because it allows us, finally, to examine the relationship between McEwan and his character, Serena Frome. Her illusory nature does not mean that she and her individual characteristics can or should be dismissed, though it may, as critics have suggested, make her a profoundly unreliable narrator, calling into question her ability to be an authentic representative example of the female psyche. Such critical analysis is certainly warranted, and indeed implicitly invited by the author. But if we are to consider the author and Tom Haley as having an existence parallel to one another as writers and creators, we must consider, also, the implication that Serena is to Tom what Tom is to McEwan—a literary subject with whom both author and reader identify, as indicated in Tom's case by the appropriation of the first-person pronoun and perspective.

Unlike Tom and McEwan, Serena Frome is, ostensibly, a consumer rather than a creator of literature. But her participation in the Sweet Tooth program and its emphasis on providing intellectual and ideological guidance and nurturing for young authors invites us to question that categorical judgment. Serena, albeit by proxy, is, at least by aspiration, a creator of literature. Moreover, had her enterprise been successful, Serena would have been a part of the creation of the literary, intellectual and cultural landscape of her society. To be sure, she would have done so as an agent of M15, not as an independent figure. This distinction, however, also points toward an examination of the meaning of agency. Specifically, a social agent is one who is able to act freely and with autonomy on his or her own behalf. Because of the fact that women, in so many times and places, have been (and continue to be) denied social agency, the concept is a familiar and important one within feminist analysis. Serena, however, acts as an agent not solely for herself—she is an agent in another capacity, acting on behalf of an organization attempting to arbitrate culture, and it is in this capacity that she herself, at least potentially, becomes a cultural arbiter and a creator of literature. If we continue to entertain for a moment that McEwan and Tom Haley are parallel figures, then each creates a version of himself. If Serena is a version of the author, on the strength of the parallel relationship and her role as a 'creator' by proxy, then the implication is that authors themselves may not be agents only of themselves, but of the dominant culture they see and experience around them. Literature itself, while not created as propaganda, is nevertheless judged by its ability to reflect desirable cultural values, and if it does so, it is rewarded by a facilitated acceptance by readers. Thus, McEwan invites us to consider the extent to which we are implicated in a Sweet Tooth program.

On the other hand, the preceding analysis of McEwan's work, while satisfying, is a trifle facile in that its conclusion has already been engaged and proven by writers and critics. It was, in fact, this awareness of the powerful persuasiveness of social mores and norms that may have led Barthes to dismiss the voice and enculturation of the author, striving toward a pure and unmediated engagement of the reader with the words of the text. It would be in keeping with McEwan's implicit repudiation of Barthes, as discussed above, to conclude that he wished to remind us of the prevalence of social values in writing and the near impossibility of freeing

oneself from them. Serena's job and the visible artifice of her conception make her a viable device for delivering this message.

But to stop at this analysis and conclusion is to ignore the other peculiarities of Serena's character and what they might convey. Before we are asked to grapple with the significance of her role as an agent, Serena's dominant identity, as suggested by her activities and distinguishing characteristics, is that of a *reader*, and as such surely significant within the scope of this discussion. Serena is an anomaly, being a prodigious reader but not a scholar of literature, and this distinction is deliberate and vital. The fact that Serena studies mathematics at university but fails to excel at it is noteworthy for several reasons: first, it provides a basis for a discussion of gender roles and expectations, as Serena herself comments on her unlikely inclusion in a predominantly male department; and second, it establishes Serena's weak association with the world of absolute logic, important for both its presence and its ultimate failure. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, her academic field frees Serena from receiving overt instruction in literature or the arts, in effect allocating a protective zone around her within which she may read without judgment.

Within that protected space, Serena, as a reader, is indiscriminating. She reads quickly and voraciously, but in a way that is almost sacrilegious to an orthodox scholar. Within the purely personal parameters defining her interests, all literature is laid out side-by-side and equal. As a reader, Serena is not exactly democratic, but she is ruled by intuitive preferences. She initially states: "I read anything I saw lying around. Pulp fiction, great literature and everything in between - I gave them all the same rough treatment" (McEwan 16). Later, she expands on this attitude and contrasts it to the more cultivated tastes of those around her:

I caused amusement among my Newnham friends studying English when I told them that *Valley of the Dolls* was as good as anything Jane Austen ever wrote. But who cared? Who really minded the unformed opinions of a failing mathematician? Not me, not my friends. To this extent at least I was free. (McEwan 17)

Until such time as she reads Solzhenitsyn and undergoes a sort of fall from grace, Serena leads a charmed life—a serene one, as her name implies. Though living in the shadow of the cathedral, she states that religion has touched her only lightly. Though an avid reader, she is an innocent one, free of any socially based judgment about what she is reading. To some readers, the inner world presented as Serena's is as attractive as it is fundamentally vapid. She is innocent and her observations about literature may be laughable, but she is a character designed to exact a kind of grudging respect even from literary scholars based on the speed and volume of her reading, not to mention the breadth of an intellect that includes mathematical ability along with literary accomplishment. Despite the learning she has acquired and despite the fact that seems to reside in the shadow of academia as well as of religion, Serena, at the outset, is presented as an innocent, minimally influenced by socialized attitudes and therefore, arguably, possessed of a refreshing spontaneity and naivete, which, coupled with intelligence, may make her novel and interesting. There is no question that Serena's innocence at the outset of the novel is truly a reflection of McEwan's own conception of the female psyche, given the complex and nuanced female characters he has created in other works. She is, however, uncomplicated and appealing, the breadth of her intellect and her early success as a columnist prohibiting a judgment of her seemingly inclusive and unschooled mind.

This early state of mind ends, however, with her political awakening, an event that is referred to as leading to a “sin”—that of earnestness. For this sin – which arises, for Serena, when she reads Solzhenitsyn, adopts his anti-communist ideology, and comes to idealize him as a person – she is expelled from the Eden-like existence that she initially seems to inhabit (later, as though to emphasize the point, she is expelled from the rural ‘Eden’ of her idyll with Tony Canning by knowledge - his wife’s knowledge of their affair and his own knowledge of his impending death). The initial fall, of course, leads in a direct line to Serena’s employment with MI5 and her acting as an agent for a political agenda. Her earnestness regarding Solzhenitsyn’s political message, in other words, is not one that she can easily expunge, but is one that follows her and comes to define her life. McEwan makes clear both the inherent appeal and the impossibility of remaining in that initial state, where ignorance holds knowledge in balanced check. In effect, it is impossible to be or remain as Serena does in her serene, charmed existence. So then what is the purpose of presenting us with such a scenario?

Serena’s indiscriminate reading and her ideological neutrality, prior to her ‘fall’ with Solzhenitsyn, mimics the position of the reader who is truly innocent of any influence stemming from the author’s identity, background or political stance. Perhaps Serena, as a reader prior to her ‘fall’, is what all readers would be if the author were truly able to die. That philosophical stance, McEwan implies here, is appealing and desirable but ultimately untenable. The ‘fall’ with Solzhenitsyn comes about from a natural engagement of the emotions and intellect with her reading, and Serena denies the death of the artist by stating of Solzhenitsyn, the man, “He was God! I would have washed his feet”. Even though the author is, in this case, literally dead, she revives him by invoking his physical being along with his politics. Later, as Canning points out, it is clear that even the act of reading (and leaving books open at the spine) tampers with the innocent reaction of the next reader; this is the meaning behind Professor’s gift to Serena of a bookmark, a device with which the neutrality of the text might be protected.

Of course, Serena goes far beyond influencing readers by leaving pages folded open. As an MI5 agent, she undertakes to manipulate the very creation of literature. In this way, McEwan lets us know the consequence of leaving that state of grace and innocence in which all literature is regarded and judged equally, impartially, and with an intelligent but unschooled carelessness. Once the sin of earnestness has been committed, one is in danger of unwittingly or not becoming an agent for an ideology, an agenda, or a well-defined critical stance. The reader loses her impartiality, and any optimistic or idealistic interpretation of Barthes’ ‘death of the author’ concept is likewise invaded and breached, so all that remains is a text that is vulnerable to casual or deliberate appropriation.

Finally, it is, of course, significant that McEwan ‘destroys’ his female protagonist, as outlined earlier. Serena’s destruction allows for the deconstruction of the interaction between ideology and the creation of literature. McEwan has left in Serena’s place a durable figure, his own literary double. Perhaps the intention is not so much to subvert and resist the death of the author as it is to imbue with the author’s own image the amorphous words left behind after the author is forced to depart the scene. On the other hand, it is also possible that Tom Haley’s novel – the dystopian work that is based on an early, unpublished work of McEwan’s own – is intended to resist the political message and agenda of *Sweet Tooth*, and, by extension, the intrusion of cultural agendas on literature. To be sure, a dystopian worldview is hardly unaffected by ideology; it references culture strongly in order to mount a criticism or resistance of it. Yet Tom Haley’s novel is, essentially, the undoing of the entire web of influence and interaction that exists within McEwan’s narrative. Germs of his own early work are embedded in the center of

his latest, a powerful nucleus. For the author, this literary resurrection of his early and unpublished work, along with the time frame of *Sweet Tooth*, turn back the calendar and provide transport back to his early career. As Serena and all that she represents is undone by the same device, we may speculate that the thrust of the whole novel is, in some way, toward undoing what has been woven into place during forty years of writing. And yet, as an inveterate creator, McEwan only does so as part of the process of creating something new. Through the entire process of creation and destruction, he works toward a new, emergent definition of the role of a writer and a writer's role.

Famously, at the conclusion of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Prospero promises to free the spirits that he has enslaved to his purposes so that they might populate his created world. As added assurance that he has truly renounced the magic, he promises:

...this rough magic
 I here abjure, and, when I have required
 Some heavenly music, which even now I do,
 To work mine end upon their senses that
 This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,
 Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
 And deeper than did ever plummet sound
 I'll drown my book.

(*The Tempest*, Act 5 Scene 1)

Scholars have viewed this speech as a reflection of Shakespeare's own consciousness that, in view of advancing age, his career is drawing to a close, and with it, the magic that had wielded through the written word. The concept of advancing age, of course, is different in this era than it was in Shakespeare's. Shakespeare was in fact only 46 years old (compared to McEwan's 64) when he wrote *The Tempest*, his last independently written work. There is no reason to think that McEwan is at anything other than the prime of his career; nevertheless, the trip back into time that he achieves through his revisiting of 1970s culture and his own early career is suggestive of a full circle journey, just as the construction and subsequent destruction of his central character suggests an undoing of the fruits of his craft.

The importance of this act of 'giving up', if we are to interpret the author's intentions as such, lies not, as some critics point out, in what is lost, but rather in what is to be gained. In an article published in a psychology journal, William Benzon begins his analysis of Shakespeare's Prospero with the query: "Why is Prospero Shakespeare's greatest creation?" His response to the question is the idea that in this character, as in none other, male and female properties comingle. Thus, "Prospero is Shakespeare's embodiment of human wholeness" (Benzon 259). Interestingly, this explains, for Benzon, why female characters are absent from the play (with the notable exception of Miranda, who functions as a child rather than a woman in the narrative); he states: "Shakespeare no longer needs them to carry, preserve, and defend feminine values [as] he has a male protagonist who can do that" (Benzon 261). From this author's point of view, it is, moreover, a mark of Shakespeare's maturity as a writer and as a person that he is able to create such a character, as he himself had "significantly transcended the division of experience into male and female" (Benzon 261). It is from this position of strength and mastery that Shakespeare contemplates the conclusion of his career of creating successive worlds driven by precisely that opposition between male and female protagonists that he has now laid to rest – and it is from this same position that his creation, Prospero, gives up his magic and his book. It is, perhaps, no stretch of the imagination to speculate that McEwan, through his conscious conflation of his own

character, persona and history with that of his character Tom, and with the melding of his Tom's persona with Serena's through metanarrative manipulation, experiences some of that same accomplishment of wholeness, of coming together of components that were previously disparate. The overall 'serenity' of this narrative, the lack of disruption by any bizarre or catastrophic event (a notable departure from previous works) likewise suggests the tranquility that may come about when all conflict and polarization has passed.

Finally, at the conclusion of *The Tempest*, after the renouncement of his magic, Prospero performs a small, quotidian action: he dons the old robe that he wore as the Duke of Milan. This signifies the resumption of his old, rightful position, the one he occupied at the beginning of his journey, though now boundlessly enriched by the journey itself. One could argue that McEwan's representation of himself in the guise of Tom Haley is a similar action—a renewal of something outgrown and long past, with the implication that there is work still left to be done on a different plane or in a different place. With the neat, tight structure of this latest novel, which nevertheless leaves the reader with the serious job of contemplating the nature and meaning of literature, McEwan leaves behind the fantastical and leaves us with nothing more nor less than a representation of the real.

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