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The Cement Garden as an Allegory of Modernity

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Abstract

This thesis concentrates on the analysis of Ian McEwan's controversial work *The Cement Garden*. By referring to Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory, especially his illustrations of fragmentation and melancholy, this thesis will analyze the fragmentary images of ruins, death and corpse and the fragmentary time presented in it; meanwhile, it will explore the alienated human relationship, the identity crises and the barren spiritual state of modern people under the melancholic gaze. Through the analysis, the author elucidates that *The Cement Garden* is not a "revolting novel" as some critics claimed, but can be called an allegory of modernity in the modern cultural context.

Key words: Ian McEwan; *The Cement Garden*; Allegory; Modernity

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, allegory as an interpretative method was developed in Alexandria to interpret "properly" Homer, and somewhat later in Palestine to interpret "properly"

the Old Testament. According to Morton W. Bloomfield, allegorical interpretation can be divided into historical and ahistorical allegorical interpretations. (Bloomfield, p.301) Historical interpretation attempts to read the significance of a literary work in terms of its original or assumed original significance, while ahistorical interpretation is interested in the universal, that is, the contemporary significance of a work which may be psychological, ethical, structural, mythic, religious or several of these. Ahistorical interpretation is the oldest and the most popular type of allegorical interpretation. It is a method of keeping the past literary documents modern, and it is also a method of imposing significance on the seemingly devalued and meaningless text. With the application of ahistorical allegorical interpretation in this thesis, the author concentrates on analyzing Ian McEwan's controversial work *The Cement Garden*, and demonstrates that this novel displays "an allegorical dimension" (Haffenden, p.174) in its inward and hidden text in spite of the morbid guise of Oedipus Complex, transvestitism and sibling incestuous relationship in its outward and visible text. By referring to Benjamin's theory of allegory and the features of modernity, this thesis draws a conclusion that *The Cement Garden* can be interpreted as an allegory of modernity.

1. ALLEGORICAL MEANING OF FRAGMENTATION

Fragmentation is frequently mentioned in the process of appreciating modern literary works. As a modern allegory theorist, Benjamin firstly explains his understanding of fragmentation as a feature of language. According to Benjamin, there exist two languages: divine language and human language. Divine language, which is applied in the paradise before the Fall, demonstrates no division between name and thing; as a consequence, there is no need for an external knowledge to bridge the gap between

thinking and being. However, after the Fall, name and thing have become separated, and objects and their proper meanings no longer coincide, hence the fragmentation of language. Secondly, by fragmentation, Benjamin indicates fragmentary images. When analyzing *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin finds that it is replete with fragmentary images represented by ruins, death and corpse in the background. These fragmentary images have destroyed the chimerical unity and totality achieved by aesthetic symbols, and demonstrates the feature of fragmentation of allegory. With his illustration of fragmentation, Benjamin's theory of ruins comes into being. In fact, Benjamin's illustration of fragmentation has imposed great influence on the modernists. For example, T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", *The Waste Land* and *Hollow Man*, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Ezra Pound's poems all apply the fragmentary images to some extent to reveal the fallen state of the modern world and the fragmentation of people's experiences. In *The Cement Garden*, the author finds fragmentation in this novel is not only represented by images of ruins, death and corpse in the background, it is also reflected through the fragmentary time.

1.1 Fragmentary Images of Ruins, Death and Corpse

The social environment described by the narrator turns out to be ruinous. According to Jack, the narrator in the novel, their house used to be situated in a street full of houses. However, it now "stood on an empty land where stinging nettles were growing round torn corrugated tin," (McEwan, 22) because the other houses in the neighborhood have already been knocked down for the construction of other public facilities which have not been built yet. In effect, not only the surrounding houses, the houses in the neighboring streets are destroyed as well, which leaves an impression of a wasteland replete with weeds "that look like small lettuces." (124)

In addition, the family house also turns from neatness into ruins after the demise of the parents. Since the death of the father, the cement garden, which is planned to be built to keep the house clean, has become disintegrating. Consequently, weeds become flourishing within the garden. The ruinous state becomes worse after the death of the mother. Since then, none of the children care to clean their house. As a result, their kitchen has become a place of stench before long. There are "mould-covered plates, the flies and blue bottles, the huge pile of rubbish that had collapsed and spread across the floor." (85) The flies, which look like clouds and make a constant clicking sound, are spreading in their house. All these detailed descriptions make their house look like a wasteland all the more.

According to Walter Benjamin, death and corpse can be regarded as fragmentary images in addition to ruins, and death and corpse are permeating in the background of *The Cement Garden*. The novel turns out to sink in an

atmosphere of death. At the very beginning of the novel, Jack narrates the father's sudden death in the cement garden. Not long after that, the slow and agonizing death of the mother is described in details. In addition to the death of human beings, the death of animals is also depicted. For example, Jack gives the reader a detailed description of the death of the mutated beast in outer space as well as the description of the half-dead frog which Jack intends to bury. Through the presentation of death, the novel is enveloped in the death atmosphere. Besides, McEwan also presents vivid but gothic descriptions of corpse. The most impressive descriptions are made of the mother's corpse. The mother dies after a long illness. When the children go to deal with the corpse, detailed descriptions are given as "she lay propped up by pillows, ... her eyes were not open and staring like people in films, nor were they completely closed." (55) When Jack and Julie try to cover the corpse and move it to the trunk, a more gothic scene is presented: when Julie draw the sheet over mother's head, "mother's feet appeared. They struck out from underneath the blanket, bluish-white with a space between each toe." (55) When the corpse becomes rotten in the trunk, it is described to be haunted by rats and the smell of the rotten corpse is penetrating throughout the whole house. In short, descriptions of corpse are no less impressive than Baudelaire provides in "Voyage to Cythera". With the gothic descriptions of corpse, the death atmosphere becomes stronger correspondingly.

According to Benjamin's demonstrations of fragmentation, both direct descriptions of ruins, and indirect descriptions of the ruins through death atmosphere and corpse are the elementary components of the fragmentary images. And Benjamin holds that "the relation between object and essence is metonymic rather than metaphorical: in the context of allegory the image is only a signature, only the monogram of essence, not the essence itself in a mask." (Benjamin, 1985, p.214) Therefore, the ruins, death and corpse have become the shroud of allegory and they harbor great allegorical significances in the literal guise.

The descriptions of the ruins, death and corpse should not only be regarded as human beings' brutality to nature, they also correspond to spiritual dryness and brutality of modern society. The inclusion of innumerable images of urban decay and putrefaction—set in a context which causes them to stand out all the more shocking—is by no means fortuitous; rather, it is McEwan's systematic intention. In fact, McEwan has applied the environmental decays as their background in many of his early short stories. In one of the stories in his first collection, "Last Day of Summer", London is portrayed as an encroaching monster, "a terrible secret" which is not only reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but also of so many contemporary novels which warn about the brutality of sprawling cities like Martin Amis's *London Fields*. In

In *Between the Sheets*, cities are described to be violent, chaotic and anonymous conglomerates which favor individual's alienation and loneliness. "Psychopolis", as its title suggests, provides the ultimate example of human depravity, schizophrenia and urban manic behavior, whose degree becomes greater with the background of "the vast, fragmented city without a center, without citizens, a city that exists only in the mild, a nexus of change of stagnation in individual lives," (McEwan, 1978, p.133) and such a city somehow becomes representative of all world cities and of modern, ruthlessly alienating living. Therefore, taking McEwan's writing into consideration, it can be concluded that the urban squalor and the environmental decay in *The Cement Garden*, in a narrow sense, reflects the destruction of nature made by human beings; in a broad sense, it reveals the degradation, moral dryness and void of human beings in the alienated modern society.

Besides, ruins, death and corpse in the novel have disclosed the political inertia and social disfunction in the modern period. This can be detected through the historical background of the novel. *The Cement Garden* was published in 1978, the year before Margaret Thatcher took power in Britain. During that period, Britain was under the charge of Wilson Labor government, whose management of Britain was not so successful. As a consequence, the Britain of the seventies was called the Ice Age by Margaret Drabble in her "1977 condition of England" novel of the same title. During this period, "confident assumptions about growth in living standards no longer seemed so certain; as the international recessions grow, the mood was one of decline." (Bradbury, p.418) In 1974, Edward Heath brought Britain into the European Economic Community after two rebuffs, but it was now a Britain already economically enfeebled by sterling crises, balance-of-payments deficits and low productivity, unsure of its relationship with the expanding economic and political world. The conflict between rising hopes and deteriorating economy destabilized successive British governments, all of which resulted in the "Winter of Discontent" of 1978-9 when the Public Unions withdrew their services; sewage disposal ceased, rubbish piled in the streets, the dead lay unburied. In short, the capitalist society, whose social relations are stripped of an aura everywhere reinstated by the commodities they generate, is in some ways an even more degraded version of the corrupt world of the Trauerspiel. Therefore, considering the background of the novel, the present writer holds McEwan does not present the ruinous state at random, but provides the desolate vision of human life. And by using the lurid and macabre details, McEwan underlines and warns against the squalor of contemporary social texture. Through the descriptions of the ruins, death and corpse, he expresses his denouncement of the government as well as his anxiety about the individual, who might become the victims and "reveals the full enormity the state's crime

when it sets out to crush that individuality".(McEwan, 1989, p.xi)

The fragmentary images have revealed an allegorical picture of the fallen human history as well. While discussing Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin envisions the angel in it as the angel of history, who witnesses the catastrophe of human beings represented by the piling ruin upon ruin at his feet. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin illustrates his view more clearly by the statement that the same as the Baroque allegorists, he believes that history is not in a progressing process and holds that nature comes to serve precisely as an allegorical representation of history, and history itself is consigned to a fate of inevitable decline and putrefaction, hence his "conception of historical life as a vast heap of ruins that grows incessantly higher with the passage of time." (Wolin, p.61) Through fragmentary images, McEwan expresses the view identical to Benjamin's. The ruins, left because of the construction of new buildings and other public facilities, on the material content, indicates the progress in people's living standards; on the truth content, they record the reification in modern society, which leads to people's fallen life and their indifference to nature, hence the fallen human history.

1.2 Fragmentary Time

In *The Cement Garden*, allegorical meaning is also revealed through the fragmentary time presented in the novel. Generally speaking, time is perceived to be linear, but the time in *The Cement Garden* turns out to be fragmentary, that is, time presented in the novel turns out to be malleable, reversible and immeasurable.

The fragmentation of time is firstly shown through its malleability. In *The Cement Garden*, time duration can alter in accordance with the characters' will, and consequently, it can become prolonged as well as come to stand still. Examples of the prolonged time are numerous. After the demise of the parents, the children feel that the length of a day becomes prolonged since they have nothing to do each day. However, according to our common sense, the duration of a day is definite. Another representative example of the prolonged time is shown through the children's experiences when both of the parents go to attend a relative's funeral. After the parents' leaving the house, the children get rid of all restraints and engage themselves in fighting games, forgetting their lunch totally. Although the duration of this experience only lasts for a few hours, the children have enjoyed the total freedom without any authoritative figures, and this incident leaves a deep impression on them. Afterwards, Jack confesses that "it was no more than a few hours, but the time seemed to occupy a whole stretch of my childhood." (71) Time's becoming prolonged is reflected by the incident of Jack's going out with Derek as well. When going out with Derek, Jack is treated coldly by his friends, which makes him longing to go home. When he

finally arrives home, he generates “a strong sensation of having been away several months,” (107) but actually it has been only a few hours since he leaves home. Consequently, time turns out to become prolonged through the children’s experiences. Apart from the prolonged time, its malleability can be detected from the children’s unconsciousness of time, which enables time to appear still. The staticity of time is mainly reflected through the time perception of Jack and Julie. Jack’s comments show that he has already lost his sense of time because except for the time he goes down into the cellar where his mother is buried, he feels like he is asleep. Not only does Jack have this feeling, Tom also shows a confused memory of the things past. Julie’s time perception is more impressive with her declaration that “it’s funny I’ve lost all sense of time. ... Everything seems still and fixed and it makes me feel that I am not afraid of anything.” (134) Through their experiences of time, everybody in the family seems to be slightly anaesthetized, and “they wander around like sleepwalkers, without perception of time.” (134) Therefore, everything comes to stand still for them and the children seem to be living in a vacuum of time.

The fragmentation of time is also reflected through its reversibility, which is mainly demonstrated through Tom’s infantile regression. The narrative shows that Tom has undergone a transition from a six-year-old boy to a girl and to an infant. At the very beginning of the novel, Tom is a six-year-old boy who wishes to become a grown-up. Since the death of the mother, Tom becomes attached to Julie, whom he regards as a mother figure. In order to draw the elder siblings’ attention, Tom begins to behave like a baby: he goes to bed early, speaks in a baby voice, sucks his fingers and sleeps in the abandoned cot again. To the denouement of the novel, Tom has completely regressed into an infant. With the presentation of Tom’s infantile regression, time seems to flash backwards, and consequently, leaves the reader an impression that time is reversible.

It is generally agreed that time resists any form of direct representation, but McEwan has provided the reader with a vivid presentation of time by characterizing it as malleable, reversible and immeasurable through recourse to the children’s experiences of time. In *The Cement Garden*, time is no longer linear or develops from the left to the right. On the contrary, it can change in accordance with the observer’s will. In other words, time in the novel is quite similar to Bergson’s notion of qualitative time. With the presentation of malleable and reversible time in *The Cement Garden*, McEwan has actually allegorized the modern notion of time vividly.

Moreover, with the application of fragmentary time, McEwan reveals the fragmentation of modern people’s experiences and displays the children’s wish to keep their childhood permanent at the same time. The notion of childhood is inextricably connected with an absence of time progression because of the mythical aspect of its

dimension. If childhood is the biblical Garden of Eden, life’s golden age of vitality and fullness, one of its main qualities is that of being perennial, at least to the eyes of the child. Being the master of wonderful realm, the child is not aware of the tyranny of time or its destructive action, and lives as if such season will last forever while it ignores the fact that its mythical time will come to end. Nonetheless, as adolescents, Julie and Jack have already sensed the threat to their carefree childhood. And the brutality, indifference and responsibilities in the adult world make them reluctant to accept the reality. Therefore, they try to refuse the realities by making their psychological time come to stand still. However, they lost the true self with the staticity of psychological time.

The same as Walter Benjamin, Baudelaire and some other modernists do in their works, McEwan seeks the sublation of traditional rounded, symbolic works of art in favor of a form of allegory, an aesthetic expression that is fragmentary and profane, devoid of the grandeur and sublimity associated with the so-called great works of art. In this respect, McEwan’s work, like that of James Joyce and Franz Kafka, parallels the avant-garde renunciation of the aesthetic ideal of isolated self-contained, perfect work and presents it instead as a “work-in-progress.” Therefore, in spite of the absence of the grandeur, sublimity and unity shown by the symbolic literary works, McEwan’s *The Cement Garden* presents the reader with an authentic physiognomy of the society in the modern periods, and the discrepancy demonstrated in it reveals the very feature of allegory.

2. ALLEGORICAL MEANING UNDER THE GAZE OF MELANCHOLY

Melancholy is frequently discussed from ancient time to the present. By referring to Cervantes’s and Freud’s views, Benjamin has put forward his unique understanding of melancholy with the following comments:

If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and remains behind dead, but externally secure, then it is now quite incapable of emanating any significance or meaning of its own; such significance as it has, it acquires from the allegorist. He places meaning within it, and stands behind it: not in a psychological but in an ontological sense. In his hands the object becomes a key to the realm of hidden knowledge; and he reveres it as the emblem of this. (Benjamin, 1985, p.183-184)

According to Walter Benjamin, the activity of imposing meaning on the devalued subject, from which new significance will arouse, can be called an activity of detecting the allegorical meaning from the subject under the melancholic gaze. As a consequence, both the author and the critics can be regarded as the allegorists to some extent. With his demonstration of melancholy, Benjamin’s another principle of allegorical criticism comes into being.

After detailed analyses, melancholy can be drawn

from the material content of the novel. In *The Cement Garden*, although McEwan manages to be objective in the narration, and although the narrator tells the whole story in an indifferent tone, it is easy for the reader to find that under the “phenomenal” context of *The Cement Garden*, melancholy is penetrating in the narrative: an acute sense of anxiety accompanies the characters throughout the novel. When the mother dies, the children are afraid of revealing the news, because they worry that they will be put into care or into an orphanage, and Tom might be adopted. Consequently, their house might become a wasteland. After burying their mother secretly, they fear that the tomb might be discovered by other people. Their anxiety for the discovery of the mother’s tomb aggravates with the penetrating smell of the rotten corpse. In short, despite the callous narrator and novelist, the reader can still detect the melancholy in the narrative. Apart from melancholy in the material content, the melancholic temperament in the truth content is more significant.

2.1 Alienated human Relationship Under Melancholic Gaze

The most prevailing melancholic temperament in *The Cement Garden* is about the alienated human relationship. Alienation is a term from Marx’s theory. It is conceived as a fracturing and frustrating of man’s nature, not only the nature that man shares with animals, but also his distinctively human traits. And Merton P. Strommen asserts that

alienation can be described in two ways. First it can be considered as a quality of life that is singular and common to all men. ... Then, alienation can be viewed also as multi-several dimensioned. ... These dimensions are usually labeled powerlessness, normalness, isolation, self-estrangement and meaninglessness. (Strommen, p.362)

And the human relationship in *The Cement Garden* has demonstrated dimensions of alienation through the following analyses of the text.

The alienated human relationship is revealed through that between Jack’s family and the outside world. Jack’s family live an isolated life from the very beginning to the end. The isolated life of the family firstly can be detected from the family house, which is described to be a forbidden castle, just like the castle described by Franz Kafka. Then, the isolated life can be revealed through the family members’ dealing with people outside. Before the death of the parents, the family is in an isolated state, since “no one ever came to visit us. Neither my mother nor my father when he was alive had any real friends outside the family.” (23) Because of the isolation of the family life, there forms an unspoken rule that none of the children ever brings friends home. In addition, their isolation can be shown through the following example. When Jack’s father and mother go to attend a relative’s funeral, the children do not show any sadness but feel that “the death meant very little to our parents, certainly

it meant nothing to us children.” (69) Most importantly, the father has to tell them what to do if someone comes to the door when they are away, underlining the fact of their isolation, which is confirmed by Jack’s startling comment that “no one had ever knocked at the door.” (69) Just because of their isolated life, even though the mother is seriously ill, there are no visitors to ask what is wrong with her. After the death of the mother, such life of the children continues. They bury their mother’s corpse secretly and make all efforts to exclude Derek from entering their family, and at the end of the novel, Derek remains as an outsider like Mr. K in *The Castle*.

It turns out that the isolated life of the family is resulted in the hostile environment of the society, which threatens the characters and makes them reluctant to deal with people outside. Firstly, the hostile environment is revealed through Tom’s dealing with the outside children. Tom is afraid of going to school because he is afraid of the outside world and usually spends his spare time around the family house and even has a wish to become a girl to escape from the ruthless realities. Then, the hostility among human beings is seen through Jack’s experiences. When being taken out to play snooker by Derek, he meets a large crowd of people there, who make him feel threatened and longing to go back home. The experience of contacting with the outsiders aggravates Jack’s wish for living an isolated life, because although it increases the opportunity for chance encounters, the connection with outsiders is also the breeding ground for the notorious callousness and indifference among people. Seen from this aspect, the isolated life of Jack’s family seems more understandable. The incapability of establishing viable relationship among human beings, as a matter of fact, reflects the desolate and arid background of fast-paced and dehumanizing society.

In addition, the alienated relationship is shown through the relationship among the family members. Many critics have already pointed out, the parent-child relationship is frequently dealt with in McEwan’s books. In accordance with our common sense, the parent-child relationship is usually harmonious. Nevertheless, in *The Cement Garden*, the children appear to be the laughing-stock of the father. This can be seen through the running jokes about the shortcomings of the children in the family, which are initiated and maintained by the father. Besides, the father is extremely strict with Tom, always going on at him in a needling sort of way, which causes Tom to fear him a lot. Holding the same attitude as the father, the children are not so kind to their parents either. This is mainly demonstrated through Jack’s deeds. At the beginning of the novel, Jack narrates that “I did not kill my father, but I sometimes felt that I had helped him on his way.” (9) Later, Jack reveals why he thinks he has helped his father on his way to death. When his father is alive, Jack and Julie try to make evil jokes about his father to avenge them, which makes the father sulk for a few days.

Besides, when Jack and his father go to carry the bags of cement into the garden, Jack makes sure the father takes as much as weight as he does although he knows the father is forbidden this sort of work due to heart attack. Furthermore, when Jack helps the father mix the cement and sand in the garden, he manages to find excuses to go to the toilet and wanders for a while intentionally, leaving his father to do the mixing alone. When he comes back to the garden, he finds his father lying down on the ground because of heart attack. However, after the father is taken away, Jack is indifferent, only “picked up the plank and carefully smoothed away his impression in the soft, fresh concrete.” (19) Jack’s deeds show that he has no affection towards his father and even harbors the intentions of patricide. He is also callous to his mother. When the mother dies, Jack feels sad not because of the mother’s death, but because he feels that he is cheated by his mother, who leaves them without explaining to Julie that he will charge the family as well. Even the cry is not from the bottom of his heart, for he confesses that his crying is dry and hard. The relationship among the siblings is alienated as well. From the scenes of sex games played by the children at the beginning of the novel, it can be said that the relationship among them is no longer the pure sibling relationship. Angela Roger asserts that “the relationship between Jack and Julie in *The Cement Garden* moves inexorably from normal sibling affection to incest. In between, the pair engages in a power struggle, which Julie easily wins. Julie is nevertheless portrayed as a subject of affection and admiration for her brother Jack.” (Roger, p.14) Angela Roger’s comments provide the reader with the alienating process of the relationship between Julie and Jack. Julie demonstrates feminist thoughts and shows great desire for power, while Jack, influenced by the father, also demonstrates masculinities and intends to take charge of the family. Being aware of Julie’s power in the family, Jack tries to struggle with Julie for power, but in vain. Correspondingly, their sibling relationship has transformed into that between enemies. In addition, Jack is in the period of adolescence and he regards Julie as the object of sexual desire. When they commit incest, their relationship transforms into that between lovers, and simultaneously, they both become the parents of Tom. Furthermore, although Sue is described to be the most normal child, she always leads an isolated life by locking herself in her room, reading books all day and rarely communicating with her siblings. As a consequence, the normal close sibling relationship is replaced by indifference among the children. Jack Slay asserts that Julie’s bossiness, Sue’s isolation, Jack’s alienation and perverse desire and Tom’s regression are a kind of defense mechanism against the harsh reality outside their home. (Slay, p.44) Nevertheless, it can not be denied that the intention of fighting against the outside world leads to the alienation of the children, hence the alienated relationship among them.

Alienated relationship frequently occurs in the modern allegorical works, among which Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* is one of the representatives. In *The Cement Garden*, although the relationship between the parents and the children has not transformed into that between the employer and employee, the harmonious relationship among human beings can no longer be found, and the pure relationship among the siblings is tainted with power and economic struggles, sexual desire and isolation. Therefore, the human relationship has become alienated, which places human beings into a dehumanized condition and this is the very problem confronted by people in the modern society.

2.2 Identity Crisis Under Melancholic Gaze

In addition, *The Cement Garden* is replete with the melancholy in the identity crises of the people in the modern society. Identity is a frequently discussed topic in the modern age. In traditional society, identity is largely pre-given through membership in the group and community, determined externally by systems of kinship and religion, and in traditional culture, identity is more or less fixed at birth and integrated into relatively stable structure of custom, belief and ritual. Daniel Miller asserts we should discern at least three strategies for articulation of an authentic self. First, the individual is constituted by a pre-existent identity waiting to be found or discovered. In this view, identity is substantial, essential and unchanging, as implied by Cartesian, Kantian and other Enlightenment conceptions of a rational and knowing ego. Second, identity is to be found through a romantic or existential search for personal meaning on the part of an isolated individual pitted against or in retreat from society. In this tradition, the path to identity lies outside society and its oppressive constraint. Third, in the Hegelian tradition, the self is construed as a product of social interaction, whereby identity is forged through manifold encounters with and appropriations of the external, “objectified” world. The crises of identity have already come into existence in the period since the Renaissance, and the problem becomes more serious in the modern period. (Dunn, p.55)

From the above comments, it can be drawn that traditional identity shows the feature of stability. Nevertheless, the identity of the children in *The Cement Garden* is totally against the traditional concept of identity, and demonstrates the destabilization of identity to a large extent.

Before the demise of the parents, the children remain their stable identities through their relatively stable relationship between each other. However, after the death of the parents, their relationship becomes alienated, which leads to the alternation of their identities accordingly.

First, the destabilization of the children’s identities can be seen through the unstable identities of Julie and Jack, which are revealed through the changing relationship

between the two. At the beginning of the novel, Julie and Jack possess the identity of elder sister and younger brother. However, their identities have transformed gradually since the death of the parents. At the very beginning, the relationship between Julie and Jack is the normal sibling relationship in spite of Jack's admiration for Julie, thus they possess the identities of elder sister and younger brother. However, after the parents' demise, the relationship between them undergoes a change from enemies of power struggle, sexual attraction, to partners for keeping the family together, which leads to the transformation of their identities correspondingly. Since the mother gets ill, it is Julie that takes charge of the family, which is what Jack desires. Viewed from this aspect, the relationship between Julie and Jack transforms from the relationship between siblings to that between enemies, hence the change of their identities. Later, because of the sexual attraction between them, their relationship evolves into that between lovers, which can be demonstrated through the love-making scenes of the two. At the beginning, it is Jack that is enchanted by Julie and treats her as the object of his sexual desire. From Jack's point of view, Julie represents coy temptresses, objects of desire because of her beauty. Despite Jack's love for Julie, Julie is indifferent to him because he abandons hygiene and takes perverse delight in revolting his sisters with greasy hair, filthy nails, yellowing teeth and smelly feet. It is not until Jack changes his appearances that Julie becomes mild to him and treats him as her sibling as well as her son. Then, they develop the identities of sister and brother and mother and son simultaneously. When Julie detects Derek's intention of entering and controlling the family, Julie begins to cooperate with Jack so as to exclude Derek from the family. In order to achieve their aim, they adopt extreme means by committing incest. Therefore, they have developed the identities of partners as well as lovers, and they both became the parents of Tom. As a consequence, with the alternation of the relationships between Julie and Jack, they have taken different identities as siblings, enemies, lovers and partners.

Besides, the unstable identity can also be explored from Tom. In the novel, Tom is described to be small as a six-year-old boy. He is pale, a little jug-eared, has an idiotic grim and black hair which grow in a thick, lopsided fringe and is the perfect playground victim. Because of these characteristics of Tom, he is usually bullied at school, which makes him afraid to go to school and wish to become a girl, because he believes that if he becomes a girl, he will not get a hit at school. When knowing he can do nothing to his physical body, he considers realizing his wish by wearing girls' clothes. Therefore, he pleads Julie and Sue to dress him in girl's clothes and wear him a wig. Since then, he usually wears girls' clothes in his daily life. Viewed from this aspect, Tom has a double gender identity as a boy and a girl simultaneously. In addition,

Tom also changes his identity from a six-year-old child to an infant. In the first chapter of the novel, Tom wishes to be a grown-up and begins to despise the toys he used to play with. Although he is still attached to his mother, he has shown intentions to grow up both physically and spiritually. Nevertheless, after the demise of the mother, Tom turns his attachment toward Julie, who is strict and will not cuddle him initially. In order to attract Julie's attention, Tom begins to speak like a baby, sucks his fingers and finally takes his old cot back and sleeps with Julie like a baby again. In this regard, Tom's regression has led to his new identity as an infant.

The children's identities can be altered at will and are indeterminate. Their indeterminate identities demonstrate their lack of center, and thus conform to Jacques Derrida's concept of "freeplay". In this regard, the children's identities are like signs, which only have signifiers without the signified. With the multiple identities, their identities become unstable and decentered. With the destabilization of their identities, the children present the reader a world of ontological uncertainty, absence of center and a loss of fixed points of reference, all of which lead to the identity crises faced by the people in the modern society. Stuart Hall asserts that identity has been seriously "disrupted" in our time by intellectual developments undermining the West's mythology of its own certitude, as based on the assumption of a unified, knowing subject. (Hall, in Dunn, p.25) The major theoretical "decentering of identity", which begins with Marx's theory of the alienation of labor and continues in the psychological writings of Sigmund Freud and the linguistic analyses of Ferdinand de Saussure, has forever cast doubt on beliefs in a stable and secure identity from which to think and act. These doubts about the identities of human beings form a backdrop to the fragmentation of collective identities resulting from modernity's own historical development. Due to these changes, people now experience their relationship to all their basic identities—class, gender, race and sexuality—in more complex and uncertain ways than before, which leads to the identity crises of modern people.

2.3 Barren Spiritual State Under Melancholic Gaze

Melancholy in the Barren Spiritual State is demonstrated in *The Cement Garden* as well. The barren spiritual state of modern people is firstly revealed through the boredom experienced by the characters. The etymology of "boredom" suggests that it is a historically constituted feeling which developed with the birth of modernity—the verb "to bore" was first used in the middle of the eighteenth century; while the noun "boredom" dates only from the mid-nineteenth century. For Walter Benjamin, boredom is not simply related to modernity, it is also the quintessential experience of modern life. (Moran, p.169) And for Patricia Meyer Spack boredom is "a state of the soul defying remedy, an existential perception of life's

futility.” (Spacks, p.27) By taking into consideration the two critics’ comments on boredom, it can be concluded that boredom is the reflection of the barren spiritual state of people in the modern period. And in *The Cement Garden*, the boredom of the children is described vividly.

First, boredom is demonstrated through the presentation of the characters’ meaningless lives, among which Jack’s meaningless life is demonstrated outstandingly. Before the death of the mother, Jack seems to have nothing to do and have no intention of doing anything, which is demonstrated through his confession that “I had homework to do but since the long summer holiday was about to begin, I no longer cared. I was not even sure if I wanted to return to school in the autumn, and yet I had no plans to do anything else.” (49) Since he has nothing to do, he usually gets a hammer, poking around, and getting bored, to smash the walls in the garden. After the demise of the parents, there are no authorities to restrain Jack any more, and as a consequence, his life becomes hollow, meaningless and monotonous. For instance, before the death of his mother, Jack is frequently warned of the damage of masturbation to the body by the mother. After the mother’s death, Jack masturbates each morning and afternoon. Sometimes he cannot be aware of what he is doing. He usually drifts through the house from one room to another, sometimes finding himself lying in his bedroom, when he intends to go out into the garden. If Jack does not masturbate, he will spend most part of the day sleeping since as far as Jack is concerned, “there was not much point in getting up.” (84) Consequently, Jack believes that he is the only one in the family who has nothing to do, which is contradictory to the fact. In fact, the other three children in the family live a boring life as Jack. Although Julie becomes the matriarch of the family, her life is a boring one. When she stays at home, she does nothing but always lies on the rockery to enjoy the sunshine. Sue always locks herself in her bedroom and engages herself in reading, because she holds that there is nothing else to do and she does not feel like doing anything either. As for Tom, he seems to have nothing to do except playing games around their house. The meaningless life of the children enables them to experience boredom in all aspects.

Besides, the boredom of the characters’ life can be explored through their daily conversations. One of Benjamin’s examples of the way in which boredom has narrowed the horizons of modern people is that the weather has become a frequent topic of conversation and a source of complaint. Walter Benjamin observes that:

the most narcotizing effect which cosmic forces have on a shallow and brittle personality is attested in the reaction of such a person to one of the highest and most genial manifestations of these forces: the weather. Nothing is more characteristic the precisely, the most intimate and mysterious affair, the working of the weather on humans should have become the theme of their emptiest chatter. Nothing bores the ordinary man more than

the cosmos. (Benjamin, 1999, pp.101-102)

Benjamin holds the talks about weather is a representative of the boredom of modern people’s life, and in *The Cement Garden*, the weather becomes the frequent topic of the children’s conversation. Since the parents’ death, the four children live an isolated life and rarely communicate with each other. If they want to talk about something, they will discuss if it is the hottest day in history or how many times it has rained before. And sometimes the trivial conversation about weather will bring about quarrels among the siblings. Through revealing the boredom of the children’s life, McEwan demonstrates that boredom is frequently confronted by people in the modern society, since the modern society has created “a universe expanding technology and comfort ... a world in which the guarantee that we shall not die of starvation, entails the risk of dying of boredom.” (Vaneigem, p.170) The boredom prevents its sufferers from thinking objectively and reasonably, and it demonstrates the individual’s moral failing to a more fatalistic and sociological nineteenth and twentieth century notions. Thus, through the descriptions of the boredom of modern people’s life experiences, McEwan presents the spiritually barren life of modern people as Samuel Beckett does in *Waiting for Godot*.

Secondly, the barren spiritual state of people in the modern period is demonstrated through the immorality of the characters. The same as Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, *The Cement Garden* presents detailed descriptions of the alienated parental-filial love. Generally speaking, the parents should be affectionate to the children, and vice versa. Nevertheless, it is absolutely not like this in *The Cement Garden*. In the novel, the parents are no longer affectionate to their children, which can be demonstrated through the father’s taking his children as laughing-stock, and the children are not filial to the parents either, which can be seen through Julie and Jack’s revenge and Jack’s confession of patricide. Furthermore, when their mother becomes seriously ill, the children seem to be indifferent. They do not show any concern for their mother, but become self-centered, which is demonstrated by Jack’s engagement with his own body, Julie in power struggle and Sue in reading. They do not express sadness in the parents’ death, but “suddenly, the children find themselves in the house—there are no teachers, no parents, no figures of authority, they have total freedom.” (McEwan, 1989, p.ix)

Despite the freedom, the children are exposed to loneliness, moral and physical disintegration and schizophrenia after the disappearance of the authoritative figures, there are no external standards to guide the children, and consequently, their ethical judgement is suspended. They can not tell right from wrong and do everything of their free will. As a consequence, Tom is allowed to transform into girls’ clothes and regress into

infant. Jack masturbates every day and does nothing else. And Julie and Jack commit incest. In the novel, McEwan has provided close-up physical details of the incest scene with a few pages, which leads to some criticism on its eroticism. Nevertheless, as Peter Lewis says, there is nothing titillating about McEwan's writing as the detached and lucid tone of his narrative proves. Admittedly McEwan's subject matter is often potentially lurid and pornographic, with sex, perversion, and bodily functions featuring frequently, but his actual treatment of these is highly controlled and even reticent. (Lewis, pp.590-592) Contrary to people's impression that McEwan is inclined to depravity, it is more accurate to say that his explicit treatment of sex and of its perverted aspects is a way for him to point out the degree of brutality and depravity contemporary society has reached. McEwan's application of incestuous sex in various depraved aspects is a way for him to unmask the immorality of people in the modern world.

More than one hundred years ago, Nietzsche revealed the frightening fact that "God is dead", which statement not only subverts the status of God, but also subverts the metaphysical rationality. With the death of God, the spiritual support of human being disappeared, which leads to the meaningless, hollow, absurd and immoral life of human beings. Therefore, all the immoral deeds of the characters in *The Cement Garden* reveal that human beings have come to a state of moral vacancy and ambiguity and have fallen to the condition of dehumanization. On the other hand, through the presentation of the immorality, McEwan also condemns the immoral life in the modern society and expresses his desire to raise the standard of ethical conduct.

CONCLUSION

McEwan's early works are generally called as "art of unease" by many critics because of the scenes of sex and violence. However, a close reading of the text shows that *The Cement Garden* has displayed the slippage of the

signifier from the signified, polysemy and unity beneath the superficial discrepancies, which are the features of allegory. And in the material content of the novel, the problems and crisis of the modern age are exposed sufficiently. From this perspective, it can be said that there are deep meanings for the reader to explore under the so-called "morbid subjects" of McEwan's work, through which McEwan shows his anxiety about the modern age, and thus, making him a serious writer.

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