

Investigating Object Relation Theory in Ian McEwan's Selected Novel 'Nutshell' From the Perspective of Melanie Klein

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Abstract

Object Relations Theory is a theory of relationships between people, in particular within a family and especially between the mother and her child. In present study, we study the object relation theory in Ian McEwan's selected novel, *Nutshell* (2016) from the perspective of Melanie Klein. McEwan's narrative is sardonic, his characters are of few words and many disclosed intentions. In the context of object relations theory, the term "objects" refers not to inanimate entities but to significant others with whom an individual relates, usually one's mother, father, or primary caregiver. In present study, we investigate concepts of "good object" and "bad object". The good object which then arrives is not the object which did not arrive. Likewise, the infant who destroyed the bad object is not the infant who loves the good object.

Keywords: object relations theory, Melanie Klein, *Nutshell*, Ian McEwan

INTRODUCTION

Object relations is a variation of psychoanalytic theory that diverges from Sigmund Freud's belief that humans are motivated by sexual and aggressive drives, suggesting instead that humans are primarily motivated by the need for contact with others—the need to form relationships. Object relations theorists stress the importance of early family interactions, primarily the mother-infant relationship, in personality development. It is believed that infants form mental representations of themselves in relation to others and that these internal images significantly influence interpersonal relationships later in life. Since relationships are at the center of object relations theory, the person-therapist alliance is important to the success of therapy (Greenberg, 1983).

In the context of object relations theory, the term "objects" refers not to inanimate entities but to significant others with whom an individual relates, usually one's mother, father, or primary caregiver. In some cases, the term object may also be used to refer to a part of a person, such as a mother's breast, or to the mental representations of significant others (Bell, 1970).

Internal objects are formed during infancy through repeated experiences with one's caregiver. The images do not necessarily reflect reality but are subjectively constructed

by an infant's limited cognitive abilities. In healthy development, these mental representations evolve over time; in unhealthy development, they remain at an immature level. The internal images have enduring qualities and serve as templates for future relationships. Central to object relations theory is the notion of splitting, which can be described as the mental separation of objects into "good" and "bad" parts and the subsequent repression of the "bad," or anxiety-provoking, aspects. Infants first experience splitting in their relationship with the primary caregiver: The caregiver is "good" when all the infant's needs are satisfied and "bad" when they are not.

Initially, these two aspects of the object (the caregiver) are separated in the mind of the infant, and a similar process occurs as the infant comes to perceive good and bad parts of the self. If the mother is able to satisfactorily meet the needs of the infant or—in the language of object relations—if the mother is "good enough," then the child begins to merge both aspects of the mother, and by extension the self, into an integrated whole.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lindfors et al. (2013) in a research titled *Self-concept and quality of object relations as predictors of outcome in short- and long-term psychotherapy* investigates 326 patients, 20–46 years of age, with mood and/or anxiety disorder and concludes Patients with mild to moderate personality pathology, indicated by poor self-concept, seem to benefit more from long-term than short-term psychotherapy, in reducing risk of depression. Long-term therapy may also be indicated for patients with relatively good psychological functioning. More research is needed on the relative importance of these characteristics in comparison with other patient-related factors. Gagnon et al. (2015) investigates *Relationship between Two Dimensions of Object Relations and Group Psychotherapy Attendance Rate in Borderline Personality Disorder Individuals* and concludes the quality of object relations could be a potential predictor for group therapy attendance. The results are discussed by taking into account the particular aspects of relational issues in group psychotherapy as opposed to individual psychotherapy.

Mullin et al. (2016) in a research titled *Changes in Object Relations over the Course of Psychodynamic Psychotherapy* investigates whether object relations (OR) functioning improves over the course of psychodynamic psychotherapy, and whether this improvement is related to symptom decrease as well as therapist technique. The sample consisted of 75 outpatients engaged in short-term psychodynamic psychotherapy at a university-based psychological service clinic. OR functioning was assessed pre- and post-treatment by independent raters using the Social Cognition and Object Relations Scale from in-session patient relational narratives. Multilevel model analyses confirmed pairwise correlations accounting for therapist effects on a variety of process–outcome measures, number of sessions attended, initial levels of psychiatric symptoms, employment of therapeutic techniques as well overall OR functioning at outcome.

Fischer-Kern et al. (2018) investigates *Transference-focused psychotherapy for borderline personality disorder: Change in reflective function and concludes improvements in reflective function were significantly correlated with improvements in personality organization.*

Huprich et al. (2015) in a research titled Sidney Blatt's Object Relations Inventory: Contributions and Future Directions provides a tabular summary of empirical studies of the measure and offer a critical review of those aspects of the instrument that require further empirical investigation and methodological rigor.

Agua et al. (2008) in a research titled On understanding projective identification in the treatment of psychotic states of mind: The publishing cohort of H. Rosenfeld, H. Segal and W. Bion (1946–1957) concludes with the impact of the work of Rosenfeld, Segal and Bion and variations on the technique of analyzing psychotic states in terms of the patient's early history, transference and countertransference.

Roth et al. (2017) offers a Kleinian view of the relational understandings described in Mills's paper regarding two central issues: the exploration of the analyst's subjectivity by the patient, and the use of self-disclosure. It is suggested that from a Kleinian perspective it is less advisable to "invite" the patient to explore the analyst's subjectivity, or to use self-disclosure as a curative procedure, because major analytic work focuses on the primitive parts of the personality, that is, the working-through of deep anxieties, massive projective identification, and a deep confusion between self and object.

Nutshell by Ian McEwan

The narrator of Ian McEwan's *Nutshell* is an unborn baby. It's the sort of device that feels mad-cap, self-consciously edgy and definitely ambitious. The blurb proclaims "a perspective unlike any other". Then you remember that already this year we've had Harry Parker's *Anatomy of a Soldier*, narrated by more than 40 objects including a bomb and flesh-eating bacteria. And it's not that long since Irvine Welsh's *Filth* was interrupted by a tapeworm posing existential questions.

Taking a hammer to *Nutshell*, although many will wonder how McEwan puts words into a mouth that can't speak. His solution is to make his baby narrator sound essentially like Ian McEwan. Eloquent to a fault, he is remarkably well informed about his immediate surroundings, and the world at large. He's even a bit of a know-it-all – talking loftily about James Joyce, quoting Keats and philosophizing about global realpolitik.

In case you're wondering how an embryo could be better informed about current affairs than, say, Donald Trump, his mother exists, somewhat conveniently, on a diet of podcasts. Downloading is not her only addiction. An inveterate boozier, she also can't keep her hands off her husband's slick younger brother. Their affair is intense enough for the pair to plot murder.

If bells are ringing, then McEwan's title and epigraph will clang deafeningly: "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and/ count myself a king of infinite space,/ were it not that I have bad dreams." That's right: our un-christened fetus is Hamlet by any other name. It's as if McEwan has taken Polonius' advice to Ophelia – "Think yourself a baby" – as the idea for a novel. Claudius and Trudy (in place of Gertrude). The role of Hamlet's father is reinterpreted by John Cairncross, a failed poet and small-time publisher. Is McEwan also thinking of John Cairncross, the Fifth Man in the infamous Cambridge spy circle? According to his killers, he's a bumbling has-been. Then again, neither is exactly trustworthy.

Claude, when he isn't ravishing his brother's wife, is plotting property fraud. Trudy comes across as addicted to anything that will dull her feelings of guilt. Having committed murder most foul, there's nothing for it but to turn on each other.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON NUTSHELL

Nutshell of desire: Sphinx factor and the loss of ethical consciousness

Tim Adams postulates: "There have been plenty of novels inspired by Hamlet—Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince*, John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius*, even David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. And there have been one or two novels told in the voice of fetuses in the womb—Carlos Fuentes's *Christopher Unborn*, for example. But Ian McEwan's virtuoso entertainment is almost certainly the first to combine the two" (Adams, "Nutshell by Ian McEwan"). The fetus begins his narration with much perplexity:

So here I am, upside down in a woman. Arms patiently crossed, waiting, waiting and wondering who I'm in, what I'm for. My eyes close nostalgically when I remember how I once drifted in my translucent body bag, floated dreamily in the bubble of my thoughts through my private ocean in slow-motion somersaults, colliding gently against the transparent bounds of my confinement, the confiding membrane that vibrated with, even as it muffled, the voices of conspirators in a vile enterprise. That was in my careless youth. (McEwan 1)

It reads rather unnatural that a fetus in its mother's womb gets to know a vile enterprise of conspirators through the resonance of membrane with voices outside. Who are the conspirators? What is the vile enterprise? In addition, it also needs to be noticed that the fetus deliberately uses the words "conspirator" and "vile," both of which convey his negative ethical judgment about the nature of the action to be taken. Similar to Hamlet, in *Nutshell*, the fetus's father is poisoned to death by his mother and his uncle, one on whom he tries to take revenge. However, unlike Hamlet, who knows the truth of his father's death through a ghost, the fetus witnesses every step in which his father is murdered.

In McEwan's new work, Shakespeare's gloomy prince Hamlet has been changed into an unborn but articulate fetus, the wise old king into poet John Cairncross, King Claudius into real-estate developer Claude, Queen Gertrude into pregnant housewife Trudy. The castle in Elsinore of Denmark has been changed to an old mansion in contemporary London, which more or less constitutes the ethical environment of the novel, which is very essential to our understanding of the novel. Ethical literary criticism pays particular attention to the analysis of ethical environment. In Nie's words, "To understand a literary work, we need to refer to its particular ethical environment or ethical context, which is a premise of our understanding of literature" (Zhenzhao, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, p. 256). The story of *Nutshell* takes place mainly in an old mansion in King George's time. To a large extent, it is the old mansion that has incurred John's tragic death. As far as wealth is concerned, John "has less money than Trudy and far less than Claude. He knows by heart a thousand poems" (McEwan, p. 11).

Desire is like a huge net, devouring Trudy and Claude. It seduces them to lose rationality and to degenerate too far to redeem themselves. In fact, they do not have to obtain John's consent to their staying together, since he has already known of their incestuous

relationship and has no intention to break them up. What makes them persistent in poisoning John is their greed for his house. In other words, their incestuous collusion is not for love but for money. Ironically, though plotting and staying together, they behave like strange bedfellows. For example, when Trudy accidentally hurts her foot, Claude's first concern is to clean the bloodstain on the floor rather than dressing her wound; Claude makes Trudy commit every step of the murder while withdrawing himself from the evidence of crime; when their crime is brought to light and they are preparing themselves to leave, Claude attempts to escape alone, abandoning his pregnant lover yet not knowing that his passport has been hidden by her. To seize the property, Trudy and Claude violate the taboo of murdering his brother/her husband. According to ethical literary criticism, "At the beginning of human civilization, taboos were used to maintain the ethical order of society. In ancient society, taboos were indeed the basis for the formation of ethical order and the maintenance of that order. Originally, taboos imposed restrictions upon transgressive acts, and worked through customs" (Zhenzhao, p. 90). Transgressing the ethical order and violating the ethical taboo, Trudy and Claude are to be put in jail and receive their due penalty.

Even though Claude is the initiator of this ethical crime, without Trudy he would never have realized his plot. Sex and money are the two central means for him to take firm control of Trudy. As a mother and wife, Trudy is not an insensitive puppet, but how could she gradually lose her conscience and rationality and become Claude's conspirator? The question can be answered with reference to her Sphinx factor. According to ethical literary criticism, "In all literary works, characters can be regarded as a Sphinx factor containing both goodness and evil. The value of literature is to reveal the process of ethical selection conducted by human beings through depicting the interplays of human factor and animal factor" (Zhenzhao, p. 15). To a large degree, Trudy fails to let her human factor control her animal factor, which leads to a full play of her natural will and free will. Nie points out, "In literature, the Sphinx factor has taken on the forms of natural will, free will and rational will. Natural will, to some degree, designates the primitive desire of human beings, libido in particular, and free will is the representation of human desire, while rational will is the representation of ratiom" (Zhenzhao, p. 42). Nie further elaborates, "The three wills are the different realizations of Sphinx factor. Natural will is similar to such primitive will as sexual instinct, and free will is closer to such a rational will as deliberate pursuit of a certain aim, while rational will is closest to ethical consciousness, which is concerned with the awareness of moral standard and the distinction between good and evil" (Zhenzhao, p. 42). In *Nutshell*, Trudy and Claude's natural will is shown in their steadfast pursuit of sex, and their free will is typically shown in their desire for wealth. Staying together in John's house, Trudy and Claude mainly do two things: make love and conspire to poison John. It would be a misconception if we considered their persistence of murdering John for the purpose of staying together in the name of true love, since John is not only aware of their abnormal relationship but also gives them the green light, saying, "I'm happy for you" (McEwan, p.69). What Trudy and Claude really want is his house rather than his consent. They could not accept John's arrangement of his house, when he says, "Claude, you have your nice big place in Primrose Hill, and Trudy, you can move there. I'll be moving some stuff back in here tomorrow. As

soon as you've gone and the decorators have done their work, Elodie will move in with me" (McEwan, p. 70). In other words, it is not Trudy's envy for John's lover Elodie but John's driving her out the house that consolidates her will to murder her husband. Trudy emphasizes, "I want him dead. And it has to be tomorrow" (McEwan, p. 71). It needs to be noted that Trudy and Claude are at variance and wary of each other in every step of their conspiracy. Part of Claude's perfect plan is to attain a huge amount of profit, meanwhile getting disassociated with the murder, which is seen through by Trudy. She puts it bluntly: "The bigger question is this. Where's your risk, what's your exposure here when you're wanting a share of the money? If something goes wrong and I go down, where will you be once I've scrubbed you out of my bedroom?" In other words, she wanted to make it clear to Claude that "you tied into this, and I mean totally. If I fail, you fail" (McEwan, p. 59).

Nutshell of poetry: Displaced ethical identities and ethical tragedies

Though the novel does not spare much space for John Cairncross, he is no doubt one of the important characters, around whom the plot has developed. What kind of person is John? What allows him to be murdered by his wife and brother? How should his tragedy be interpreted? To answer these questions, we shall take John's ethical identity into consideration. According to ethical literary criticism, "Almost all ethical issues in literature are concerned with ethical identities" (Zhenzhao, p. 263). John has multiple identities: a poet and publisher in his career, a mentor of the female poet Elodie, Trudy's husband, Claude's brother, and father of the fetus. His wife and brother have developed an incestuous relationship, which leads to the crisis of his marriage. Meanwhile, they covet his property, which causes his being poisoned to death. Unlike Hamlet's father, who does not break up with his wife before his death and who knows nothing about his wife's extramarital adultery with his brother Claudius, John has separated from his wife before his death, and he is fully aware of the incestuous relationship between his wife and his brother. Owing to Claude's intervention in John and Trudy's marriage, John's identity has been changed from Trudy's husband to Trudy's husband's brother, and Trudy has been changed from John's wife to the wife of John's brother. Though John tries hard to restore his proper ethical identity, all his efforts not only end in failure but also accelerate his death. Specifically, his way of saving his marriage and recovering his ethical identity goes in a circular manner from "poem recitation" to "provocation," and back to "poem recitation."

As a poet, John first attempts to save his marriage by reciting poems to Trudy and Claude. About his father, the fetus says: "But he lives by poetry, still recites it to my mother, teaches it, reviews it, conspires it in the advancement of younger poets, sits on prize committees, promotes poetry in schools, writes essays on poetry for small magazines, has talked about it on the radio" (McEwan, p. 11). Poetry is not only John's career but also his commitment in life. He offers financial aids to new poets and struggles to maintain his poetry press, which is on the edge of bankruptcy. He spares no effort to cultivate many poets and young writers, trying to help them realize their literary dreams. In other words, poetry is John's career and wealth, as well as his artistic shelter during the crisis of love, marriage, and family. Therefore, it seems to be his only trustworthy means of saving his

marriage. Every time John comes back to his house to meet Trudy, his habitual act is to recite poems for her. About John's behavior, the fetus explains: "Here are my reasonable inferences. Born under an obliging star, eager to please, too kind, too earnest, he has nothing of an ambitious poet's quiet greed. He really believes that to write a poem in praise of my mother (her eyes, her hair, her lips) and come by to read it aloud will soften her, make him welcome in his own house" (McEwan, p. 12). The fetus praises his father for his noble qualities by using such words as "kind," "honest," and "not greedy," which stand in sharp contrast to Trudy's vice. Very interestingly, the fetus praises Trudy's beauty multiple times, but her beautiful appearance seems to be the disguise of her ugly soul. Though she is the mother of her fetus and wife of her husband, she blindly pursues her desire for sex and money. She not only develops incestuous relations with her husband's brother but also conspires with him to poison her husband with the aim of seizing his property.

Melanie Klein's Object Relations Theory

According to Klein, the first relation towards the mother is filled with love, but other feelings, such as discomfort, frustration, pain, and hatred also emerge. Consequently, the child creates ambivalent relation to the mother: on the one hand, there is the capacity for love, and on the other, there is the feeling of persecution. Out of a highly intensive psychological relationship between the child and the mother, two parallel processes take place – the introjection of the good and bad aspects of the mother and the projection through which the child communicates with both the mother and the environment and attributes them various feelings, primarily the feelings of love and hate. The mother in her good aspect is the first good object that becomes part of the newborn's inner world. If the object, the mother, has been introjected as good and reliable, it becomes a basis for further identification. Whether this good object will become a part of the child's self, leading to positive feelings for one self (self-worth), will depend to a certain extent on the strength of persecutory anxiety. At the same time, the role of the mother is of crucial importance – her care, warmth of her love, understanding of the baby's needs, and tolerance of the baby's negative feelings, all of these contribute to the success of this process. The personality of the child develops on the basis of a good identification with the mother and later on with the father as well. As a result, the child's inner world begins to contain predominantly good objects and feelings, and the good objects are felt as responding to the child's love. All this contributes to establishment of a stable personality and maintenance of good feelings towards others. If the newborn has succeeded in establishing a good inner object during the depressive position, the depressive anxiety will lead to further enrichment of inner world and creativity. The schizo-paranoid and the depressive positions are constellations of emotions and reactions to them. Essentially, this part of psychological development refers to the development of the capacity to tolerate feelings, primarily the basic conflict between love and hatred, and associated feelings.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Klein (1955) believed that children used a number of mental defenses from the very early childhood. These severe destructive feelings result from oral-sadistic anxiety related to

the breast. To control these anxieties, children use a variety of mental defense mechanisms, such as in-depth, diffuse, division, and photocopying.

Klein's impression was different from Freud's conception. First, Cline (1952) believed that the Oedipus complex began much earlier than Freud's age. At the genital stage (Klein preferred the term, because it mentions psychological psychology) reaches its peak at 3 or 4 years. Secondly, Klein believed that an important part of the Oedipus complex was the fear of children retaliated by their parents because of their imagination about emptying the parent's body. Third, he emphasized the importance of preserving the positive feelings of children toward their parents over the years of Oedipus. Fourth, he assumed that the Oedipal complex, in its early stages, serves the same need in both sexes, that is, to form a positive attitude toward a good object and to avoid the bad object.

Concepts of Object relations theory

Good object

According to Klein, The child creates ambivalent relation to the mother: on the one hand, there is the capacity for love, and on the other, there is the feeling of persecution. Out of a highly intensive psychological relationship between the child and the mother, two parallel processes take place – the introjection of the good and bad aspects of the mother and the projection through which the child communicates with both the mother and the environment and attributes them various feelings, primarily the feelings of love and hate.

Bad Object

If the experiences are not satisfying, the representation will be of a bad object imbued with hate. Since self-representations develop in parallel with those of object representations, the developmental task consists in reconciling the good and bad primitive object representations. However, inevitably when needs or desires of the young baby are not immediately met by the mother, because she is not there to fulfill them, the absence of the good object is experienced as the presence of the bad object.

Depressive position

Depressive position is a crucial step in the newborn's development and its processing is followed by a radical change in his understanding of reality. When the ego becomes more integrated, the process of projection reduced, and the newborn starts to perceive its dependence on the external objects and the ambivalence concerning its own objectives and instincts, the child discovers its own psychological reality.

Schizo-paranoid position

In relation to Klein's theory, schizo-paranoid position is closely linked to the beginning of symbiosis, and depressive position coincides with the phase between the end of symbiosis and beginning of the separation phase.

DISCUSSION

From the above analysis, it can be clearly seen that the novel's premise is eccentric. It is narrated from the perspective of a nine-month-old foetus who overhears his mother and her lover plotting to kill his father. How is he to save or avenge his father? Oh, and the

foetus is also based on Hamlet. You can imagine the publishers gently sobbing into their green teas when they heard the synopsis.

In contrast to Fairbairn and later Guntrip (1975), Klein believed that both good and bad objects are introjected by the infant, the internalization of good object being essential to the development of healthy ego function. Klein conceptualized the depressive position as "the most mature form of psychological organization", which continues to develop throughout the life span.

Klein saw the depressive position as an important developmental milestone that continues to mature throughout the life span. The splitting and part object relations that characterize the earlier phase succeeded by the capacity to perceive that the other who frustrates is also the one who gratifies. Schizoid defenses are still in evidence, but feelings of guilt, grief, and the desire for reparation gain dominance in the developing mind.

CONCLUSION

Nutshell is the 17th novel from acclaimed British author, Ian McEwan. This latest book is constructed within the framework of Shakespeare's best-known play. The protagonist becomes aware of a plot between his mother, Trudy (Gertrude) and his uncle, Claude (Claudius), to poison his father, John Cairncross, 'a man who knows by heart a thousand poems.' He listens furtively to their scheming, deplores their devious plot, craves revenge, and curses his helplessness. So far, so Hamlet. So what is new? The narrator is a fetus of 38 weeks gestation. He describes his situation in the brilliant opening line: 'So here I am, upside down in a woman.'

The child also realizes that it loves and hates the same person. At this point, the child starts to fear that its own destructiveness will ruin the good object, i.e., the mother that it loves and completely depends on. In the depressive phase, the newborn may remember in an integral way and contain love for the good object even when it hates it. Grief and longing are characteristic depressive experiences arising from the feeling that the good object was destroyed by the child's own destructiveness. This is the most intensive experience in depressive position.

As the tension builds, the protagonists argue and an inspector calls, the novel moves swiftly towards a dramatic and satisfying conclusion, McEwan proving as adept with his endings as he is with his beginnings. One both feels and fears for Foetus, who betrays signs of holding a grudge and planning revenge as soon as he's out of nappies, although the reader can't help but hope that he maintains his womb memories long enough to let his plans take shape.

So a strange sort of book in the end, an interesting experiment that mostly works, not quite comparable with his masterpieces but not as disappointing as his mis-steps. Still, if there is any truth to the central conceit and babies can hear everything while they are in the womb, perhaps that explains why they always come out screaming (John Boyne, 2016).

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