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## **Gothic Revisitations of *Hamlet*: Ian McEwan's *Nutshell***

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**Abstract:** The paper looks at a recent example of rewriting Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by a British author who has gained celebrity in the 1970s and 1980s with his macabre plots, which distill the gothic tradition in a contemporary, politically and socially sensitive environment. Ian McEwan's *Nutshell* (2016) shows, after more than a decade in which the typical dark mode of the author has "mellowed", a return to the typical sexual and psychological gothic that made his plots controversial in the years of his literary debut. Reading *Nutshell* as a response to Shakespeare's proto-gothic atmosphere and mindframe, the paper discusses how McEwan's signature – claustrophobia, the unemotional narration of taboo subjects, horror and suspense – adapts an appropriation of Shakespeare's tragedy to the contemporary readers' skeptically critical expectations.

**Keywords:** Ian McEwan; Gothic; Horror; Macabre; Appropriation; Whodunit.

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### **Introduction**

“So here I am, upside down in a woman. Arms patiently crossed, waiting, waiting and wondering who I'm in, what I'm in for.”<sup>1</sup> These lines are certainly a far cry from Hamlet's famous “to be or not to be” soliloquy, but, still, they belong to a novel which, published in 2016, was meant to complete the string of literary celebrations for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bard's death. While a British national editorial project commissioned famous writers to write modern versions of Shakespeare's most famous plays, other authors marked this celebration more subtly, in their own way. The large-scale Hogarth Shakespeare project (from the publisher who initiated it) includes a rewriting of *Hamlet* proposed by American writer Gillian Flynn. Known for her dark detective plots and psychological thrillers, Flynn was regarded as suitable to propose an anchoring of *Hamlet*'s gothic tale amid the contemporary police reports of violence and abuse. Ian McEwan's *Nutshell* (2016) is a parallel offer, which displays as many elements of intertextuality as there are traces of his typical macabre voice.

The “nutshell” itself is a metaphor which still holds the imagination of today’s thinkers, the best example being Stephen Hawking’s 2001 *The Universe in a Nutshell*<sup>2</sup>, where the scholar proposed a unified theory of physics, including relativity and the notion of multiple histories, in order to describe everything that happens in the universe. The origin of this metaphor, though, is an easily recognizable Shakespearean trope, Hamlet’s melancholy mood being contained in it: “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!” (II, 2)<sup>3</sup> The confession anticipates the prince’s pessimistic, suicidal thoughts formulated in Act III, where the “bare bodkin” would be an ideal way to end up the sorrow and dilemma but for the fear that afterlife is only an unfounded religious fabrication. McEwan makes the necessary courtesy to the Bard’s memory in his own way, adding the gothic elements from his earlier years, which in the meantime, have been softened.

### Gothic and Mimesis

Ian McEwan’s debut novels displayed a high concentration of macabre and abjection, to such an extent that titles like *The Cement Garden*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, or *The Child in Time* have generated and are still generating a great deal of controversy in their critical reception. Tackling some of the most taboo subjects, such as murder, infanticide or incest, the British writer strikes an even more sensitive chord among readers when he addresses them in an unemotional, cool and detached manner. In the middle period of his career, the appetite for gothic plots continued with

the Man Booker Prize winning novel *Amsterdam*, which addresses yet another taboo in its crudest light, euthanasia. In the 2000s, critics remark on his progressive “mellowness”, which, a high quality in other writers, here is regarded as an oddity. Decidedly softer in *Saturday* or other titles, McEwan returns to his darker earlier self in *Nutshell*, the story of a murder told by an embryo.

In a 2004 article about Ian McEwan, I observed about the use of the grotesque category in his literature as a mimetic act, using Theodor W. Adorno’s concepts about modern art.<sup>4</sup> For Adorno, modern art mimics the absence of harmony and death in order to continue to exist in a hostile environment, just as animals play dead until the danger of the predators has passed. The result is the generally dark mood of modernity and a process of objectification, seemingly derived from clinical observation and dissection. Modern art, in an attempt to free itself from the natural, so as to follow the rules of the social edifice and the manipulating techniques of cultural industry, is left only with a residual form of beauty and joy, built in the contemplation of horrible things. This complex process was identified by Matt F. Connel (1998) in a reading of Kafka, the reproduction of elements of reality that provoke shock and horror being associated with a defense strategy, like that of the hover fly which is scary because it looks like the wasp. This involuntary identification “allows an insight into the power of the wasp: the absence of a real danger highlights the intensity of the automatic bodily reaction to the striped stimulus.”<sup>5</sup> Connel claims that the unease provoked by Kafka’s texts can operate in a similar manner and, by extension,

my own argument was that McEwan's macabre plots serve the same purpose.

The British writer's evocation of the abject body has a maximum of substance in his first novel, published in 1978, *The Cement Garden*. Causing fear and discomfort, this body is an overwhelming presence, like the space it occupies, its habitat, constantly vulnerable at its margins, which are fluid borders, coming into contradiction with canonic ideals of propriety and discretion. While the "normal body" of contemporary standards of correctness is closed, clean and fit, its grotesque counterpart seems magnified under the microscope. The novel's narrator is a teenage boy, who watches and hates the medium of flesh supposed to secure the complicated transition from childhood to maturity. He abandons all rituals of hygiene and contemplates, with a mixture of horror and thrill, how his body responds:

Coloured light through the stained glass above the front door illuminated from behind stray fibres of my hair. The yellowish semidarkness obscured the humps and pits of my complexion. [...] I stared at my own image till it began to dissociate itself and paralyse me with its look. It receded and returned to me with each beat of my pulse, and a dark halo throbbed above its head and shoulders. 'Tough', it said to me. 'Tough.' And then louder, 'Shit... piss... arse.'<sup>6</sup>

As early as his debut, McEwan is concerned with the impact of bioethics and social policies on modern western individuals and he moralizes by exposing his readers to the grotesque, where

a prematurely degraded body and mind adapt, by default, to an environment from which strong values, as well as strong will, absent themselves. Because it is very hot and because they have nothing else to do, the four child-characters of the novel sleep most of the time. A form of exhaustion or inertia, this sleep is regressive and potentially dangerous, as a form of abandoning rationality and self-control. The four orphans live on their own in the big family house after their parents' death, which they keep away from the authorities, to prevent being separated and sent into foster care. They practically hide the reality that their mother, a widow, died of cancer in her own bedroom, so they bury her in the cellar, in a huge suitcase they fill with the surplus cement their father had used to pave the garden, an effort which had caused him to die of a heart attack. The mother's death coincides with the breakup of schools, so the children, free from adult supervision, live in complete isolation, in a deserted neighborhood which nobody ever visits. Jack, the narrator and eldest son, lives in a limbo of self-abandonment, without washing, cutting his finger nails or changing his underwear and bed sheets. Tom, the youngest, has the fancy of being an infant and refuses to walk, speak, wash himself and go to the toilet, Julie, the 16-year-old sibling, taking over the mother's role. This is, reports say, the hottest summer since 1900, a condition which accelerates the characters' decline into complete torpor and the degradation of all types of waste. Food consumption, garbage and physical death become synonymous:

As I stooped to drink water from the kitchen tap, a cloud of flies hummed

around my face. I walked on the sides of my bare feet because the floor around the sink was covered with something yellow and sticky, probably spilt orange juice.<sup>7</sup>

It was not long before the kitchen was a place of stench and clouds of flies. None of us felt like doing anything about it beyond keeping the kitchen door shut. It was too hot.<sup>8</sup>

There were several wasps in the kitchen feeding off rubbish that had spilled across the floor. Outside there was a cloud of flies round the overflowing dustbins which had not been emptied for weeks.<sup>9</sup>

When she [Julie] was not out she was getting ready. She took long baths which filled the house with a sweet smell, stronger than the smell from the kitchen.<sup>10</sup>

Curiously, the odor of cleanness and hygiene is ambiguous enough to be mistaken with a boy's unwashed body and the smell coming from the basement. Finally, the smell of the corpse covers all the others, violent, aggressive: "There was something sweet, and beyond that, or wrapped around it, another bigger, softer smell that was like a fat finger pushing into the back of my throat. It rolled out the concrete steps out of the darkness."<sup>11</sup>

While the individual body seems objectified, the environment gains anthropomorphic characteristics: the deserted house protecting the children from the outer world but also allowing them to abandon decorum and break taboos looks

like an angry man, frowning, an entirely gothic décor moved to a post-industrial dimension:

Our house was old and large. It was built to look a little like a castle, with thick walls, squat windows and crenellations above the front door. Seen from across the road it looked like the face of someone concentrating, trying to remember.<sup>12</sup>

The house seems deserted even when the parents are alive, although it is inhabited by a large family with many children, because no one ever comes to visit them and because it stands in a deserted area, the only survivor of an urban project that never came to see the light. The lifeless landscape surrounding the house is a sign of the indifference and misanthropy of the family, a post-apocalyptic script which allows for the last barriers of social convention and moral restraint to be smashed. It is for the reader to decide whether the rotten body fixed in cement, discovered by the police at the end of the summer, or the incestuous affair Jack and Julie indulge in, playing mom and dad, is more revolting. A nightmarish, hostile and sickly background as the one sketched by McEwan in the most detached and technical language can favor nothing less, and the oxymoronic title increases the burdening anxiety about a potential, though diffuse, cataclysm. In an interview occasioned by a staging of the novel in London,<sup>13</sup> the writer confessed that the "sexual gothic" of *The Cement Garden* was explained by the fatalism his generation was imbued with in the late 1970s and the 1980s, when all things seemed on the verge of collapse, London was filthy,

relations were semi-functional and the general mood seemed post-apocalyptic. "I don't know about words like dark", McEwan exclaimed, quite tongue-in-cheek, in this interview. The crepuscular environment and the physical abjection, though, observe all the norms to qualify the story as disquieting and terrifying.

*Amsterdam* (1998), another novel centered round the modern myth of the body, focusing on the notion of pain and disease, displays the same contrast between a dark plot and an unemotional narrative. The "forensic elegance" praised in the interview about *The Cement Garden* is identifiable here, too, plus the brevity which gives readers the impression of swallowing a highly concentrated dose of grisliness in one "enjoyable gulp."<sup>14</sup> Like in other stories, the Man Booker Prize awarded novel speculates about the discomfort produced by the unexpected intervention of violence in the lives of otherwise normal middle-class characters. Lawrence Driscoll observes<sup>15</sup> that the preference of middle-class writers for middle-class characters is understandable and predictable. What is less usual here is the uncanny nature of the circumstances they are forced to face, which trigger the most extreme and frequently deranged psychological reactions. While the typical gothic setting is supernatural, archaic and exotic, the concentrated horror of events and people next door is all the more disturbing and controversial. "The unsettling fable" of the 1998 novel<sup>16</sup> consists of revealing the hasty degradation of two middle-aged men who seem to be the very embodiments of professional success, respectability and bourgeois order, Clive Linley, a famous composer, and Vernon Halliday, an equally famous journalist. An

oppressive dimension is installed from the very first pages, when the two friends attend a former lover's funeral. Molly died recently of a form of Alzheimer, something that paralyzed her body and killed her brain, transforming her into a grotesque and pitiful shadow of the sparkling socialite she used to be. The mourners at the funeral, held on a rainy day, look strangely contaminated by a generic illness and can be easily mistaken for upright "specters" in the crematorium. Terrified by such a prospect, Clive and Vernon make a pact: to end each other's suffering and humiliation in case something similar to what happened to Molly may happen to them – a mutual euthanasia. From this point of view, the references to the newly accepted medical practices in Holland are a *mise en abyme*, an anticipation of what is going to happen in the capital of legalized euthanasia, Amsterdam:

and in Holland some unsavoury types with medical degrees were offering a legal service to eliminate your inconvenient elderly parent. How interesting. All one needed was the aged parent's signature in duplicate and several thousand dollars.<sup>17</sup>

Another great taboo, euthanasia becomes an explicit subject, described by McEwan with the same clinical detachment. Claustrophobic and hypochondriac, Clive grows more and more incapable to concentrate on his work, to enjoy a holiday in the country or a successful concert. Anxious and feverish, he filters all his fears and hesitations through his body and transfers his mental troubles onto the somatic level. There is a certain masochistic lust for

immobility that all the characters experience at a certain moment, in a symbolic rehearsal for the experience of the disease that is going to mark down two of them. They choose solitude, isolate themselves deliberately in a declared misanthropy, in hatred and self-hatred. Paradoxically, Clive seems more and more detached from his physical self as the disease progresses, as if his once familiar body were a mere object now. His own house and his life look unfamiliar and distant in the light of his newly discovered sensations. He gazes at the things around him as if he saw them in a documentary film about himself; he contemplates himself in the mirror and no longer recognizes the shape, tired, tormented, and ill as he is. After days spent only in bed, he no longer knows his own kitchen or dining room, feeling as if he has embarked on an expedition in a new, hostile world and, no longer used to making the effort of walking, climbing down the stairs is an irksome, exhausting experience. The day before dying, he sees a doctor in Amsterdam; his diagnosis: “unpredictable, bizarre and extreme antisocial behaviour, a complete loss of reason, destructive tendencies, delusions of omnipotence, a dis-integrated personality.”<sup>18</sup> Vernon’s spiteful poisoning of his former friend turns out to be eventually salutary – Clive is already half dead when he is murdered. Vernon’s crime looks no less sardonic as it turns out he is actually keeping his word and rescuing the victim from a dreadful agony and extreme humiliation.

While this novel was criticized for its unconvincing ending and cartoonish psychology, critics have also saluted “the chill” of its telegraphic style,<sup>19</sup> its exploration of ethical issues against the background

of “striking effects” and the “thoughtful” manner of relating the sensational in an unsensational way.<sup>20</sup>

### Gothic and Forensic Detail

If *The Cement Garden* presented the dysfunctionality of the post-industrial Thatcherite society of the 1970s and 1980s with a taste for incest and necrophilia, *Amsterdam* zooms in on the smaller world of the privileged elite professionals who, being the same age as the author himself, are presented as “lucky”:<sup>21</sup> their successful careers in the 1990s are the result of a few good years “with full employment, new universities, bright paperback books [and] affordable ideals”. The novels that follow abandon the gothic vein, apparently, as McEwan explains in the same 2014 interview, because the vehemence that suited him as a writer at 25 would be out of place at 50.

However, at 70, the writer seems to return to his earlier, biting version of himself, in a novel that has been almost unanimously acclaimed by critics as a revelation. *Nutshell* is a reading of *Hamlet* in a way that extends the gloom of the original tragedy onto the doom of the contemporary world, decidedly “out of joint” in McEwan’s view. The writer developed the habit of using plots as pretexts to address political and ethical issues of the day even in his mellow mid-phase novels, such as *Saturday*<sup>22</sup>, a story set during one single day in February 2003, on the famous model of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, here a neurosurgeon witnessing the protests against the Americans’ decision to invade Iraq and musing on the meanings of history and politics in the postmodern world. Taking

his cue both from the Renaissance prince's despair against tyrannical and unenlightened forms of government and from his own plots' restlessness about contemporary geopolitics, McEwan employs *Nutshell* as a pretext to discuss not only an individual's place in a community of shared values, but also Britain's place in the world in the third millennium. Still in the early days of the Brexit preparations, the book is an extended soliloquy about the anxieties of living in – or being born into – an unsafe, unpredictable place.

The gothic preliminaries are secured unequivocally: the setting is a large, decayed, labyrinthine old Georgian mansion; the characters – an adulterous and murderous couple. The house, inherited by John Cairncross, poet and publisher, from his grandfather, is fancied by his younger brother, also enthralled by the charms of the poet's beautiful wife. The mansion being worth 8 million and the wife very much in love, a way out of the inheritance issue and the erotic triangle dilemma is the removal of the husband, too lyrical and unpractical for his own good. The couple prepares a poison out of an antifreezing solution and mixes it with a fruit smoothie, the husband dies, but the police put two and two together when a hat and a pair of gloves cannot be convincingly accounted for and come to arrest the accomplices. The unusual lure of this detective story stems from its narrative point of view. All the revolting details of the double sin and crime are literally resonating with the consciousness of an invisible but omnipresent witness – an 8-month fetus which (who?) struggles for space in his mother's womb, while also struggling for a future and thus intervening in the denouement of the thriller.

McEwan confesses to have had the idea of writing a story in an unborn baby's voice while talking to his pregnant daughter-in-law about how much of a human entity an embryo can be after all.<sup>23</sup> Such a choice for an unreliable narrator who has a limited perception of the plot due to his young age was first operated by Henry James in his *What Maisie Knew*, where, indeed, the little girl touched the readers to tears with her candid interpretation of her parents' divorce and her displacement. McEwan goes much further, into advanced genetic issues, when speculating about the complexity of an unborn human's conscience, as well as into equally advanced narrative experimentation, making his story-teller a loquacious, complicated child prodigy. The fetus, a boy, has learned a lot not only about his parents and his uncle, from patient listening, but also about the world, about terrorism, about domestic policies, about science and technology, or about literature and music, from his mother's passion for Radio 4, whose news she follows carefully during her long insomnias. As the pregnancy advances, the fuzzier perceptions of earlier trimesters turn into an acute philosophical synthesis, which obviously voices the author's own, very mature conclusions: "Pessimism is too easy, even delicious, the badge and plume of intellectuals [...] We excite ourselves with dark thoughts in plays, poems [...] but] we are bloated with privileges."<sup>24</sup>

The chilling dimension of this detective plot, which made critics immediately call the novel "a dark tour de force",<sup>25</sup> is the "sickening complicity"<sup>26</sup> which the narrator confesses with the whole business. If McEwan has long accustomed his readers to the even, dispassionate voice in

which he reveals the most atrocious crimes and the most unworkable secrets, *Nutshell* adds yet another level to this crudeness. While totally blind to everything around and outside him, the baby is a witness and accomplice despite himself to the careful preparation of the murder, its *mise en oeuvre*, the interrogation of the police officers, the realization that all is lost and the only escape is a quick exit from the stage by the night train to France. He hears the first hints made by his uncle that death is not as impossible to achieve without suspicion as it seems, his technical description of poisoning symptoms, the actual deed, with the father's voice, while swallowing the laced smoothie, drumming in his ears like thunder, the arrival of the chief inspector and the adrenaline rushing through his mother's body, finally her desperate attempts to save herself when she realizes their plans have gone terribly wrong. Rather than sight, it is the other senses, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting that take over the narrative and its galloping pace, making the story seem even more overwhelming because of this. For example, the kitchen, the murder scene, which hasn't been cleaned for a long time, is abruptly tidied by the baby's mother in an attempt to remove all evidence, suddenly feeling different in the baby's perception: "The floor no longer sticks to her sandals, the flies have moved to other heavens."<sup>27</sup> This is in sheer contrast with yesterday's visit to the same kitchen, when downtrodden meat and fat, molten butter and greasy knots, "the rotted putty of the unwashed panes" generated a nauseous sensation and called for the presence and immediate action of pest control.<sup>28</sup> We recognize here McEwan's clear signature, the setting for him having

been constantly scary and revolting not by virtue of an agglomeration of ghosts and monsters, but of a slowly growing pile of waste and dump, a grotesque reminder of the characters' collateral sins – neglect, laziness, insensitivity, regression into a state of primitivism and brutishness.

As a whodunit, *Nutshell* follows the rules theorized by one of the canonical authors of detective fiction, P.D. James, who, in a book where she reflects about the evolution of the genre from sensational to (partly) highbrow, acknowledges the role played by the gothic novels of atmosphere in the coagulation of the new story, stating that the step to be undertaken by writers is that of securing the passage from supernatural to rational terror.<sup>29</sup> McEwan, who distills the avant-gothic plot of *Hamlet* into a post-gothic story of lust and murder, combines atmosphere with the forensic detail, plus a good dose of "morality fable."<sup>30</sup> In the presentation of the potential murder weapon – a drop of ethylene glycol in a glass of fruit juice – the narrator faithfully reproduces the accomplices' presentation of the poison's chemical composition, the list of symptoms it generates, the time it takes this poison to kill an adult man, its "advantages" over other more conventional poisons. Gone are the days when arsenic was such a successful way to remove one's adversaries or undesirable relatives that it had acquired the sinister nickname *poudre de succession*. Now a very simple test can immediately detect even the smallest quantity in the victim's hair and nails. Gone are also the days in which, somehow poetically rather than malefically, poison could be poured into one's ear while the victim was asleep. This Hamletian trope, though, is imported by McEwan into his modern

tale, in the form of news about the removal of a Russian spy (how many Russian spies can actually get poisoned in London?) by means of diphenhydramine, a highly efficient substance even in the smallest doses. Some classical gothic elements are preserved, if only for the pleasure of experimenting with the juxtaposition of various registers and planes of reality. The fetus has a vivid dream in which he travels back in time to medieval London and observes the solemn ritual of a funeral, while later, dizzy from the alcohol consumed by his mother, he has a hallucination, in which his father's cadaver, smelling of "maggot-friendly flesh"<sup>31</sup>, appears in the room where he was poisoned to claim his revenge. In the hallucination, the murderous uncle dies of horror and the adulterous mother is petrified after the cadaver, whose lips have disappeared, embraces her with ardor and rage.

The police investigation is surprisingly efficient. This is partly due to McEwan's love for the three classical unities, which make most of his novels be dramatic, concentrated plots which consume themselves almost instantaneously. *Nutshell*, like *Saturday*, unravels within the frame of the unity of time and place: only a couple of days pass since the fetus, already entangled in "incestuous sheets" with his mother and uncle, overhears their murderous plans, witnesses the poisoning and the killers' attempt to flee. Everything happens in the old Georgian house, which is part of the reason why the baby's father has to die anyway, a place whose large size, considerable neglect and unquestionable gloom contribute to the overall macabre effect. On the other hand, the detectives' speed in identifying the culprits has to do with

the latter's self-sufficiency and vanity (both synonymous with stupidity). Claude and Trudy don't need more time to plan the perfect murder because they are instinctive beings, described by the narrator as dull hedonists, so they act as they usually do, with too much self-confidence and too little anticipation, feeling sexual arousal rather than remorse after poisoning takes place and John's death is announced. But their crime of passion (even if it is passionless) ignores all the marvels of state-of-the-art criminology, which includes DNA tests and CCTV camera evidence. So it only takes the chief inspector 24 hours to put all the clues together and to seize the villains. Aware of this denouement, the lovers plan to catch a train that would take them out of the country, but their escape is prevented by the baby's decision that enough is enough and that, while he has witnessed the entire plot with the frustration of being unable to act, the ending can be written by him in the simplest way, following the course of nature.

### Gothic and Appropriation

In generating a powerful sense of awe in his Elizabethan audiences, Shakespeare was one century and a half ahead of the aesthetic debate about the sublime, which produces admiration and fear in the viewers, therefore being superior to beauty, which is responsible only for less intense reactions, like pleasure. In 1757, Edmund Burke wrote *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*<sup>32</sup>, thus preparing the ground for the gothic fashion that seduced writers for the next one hundred years. Burke's mechanism of reception based on the principles

of the sublime consists of acknowledging the most intense passion as being fear – especially the fear of death – and describing its effect as suspense. A pre- or proto-gothic technician in his dark tragedies, Shakespeare anticipates both these aesthetic debates (though he gives them a more religious touch) and the tension of the narrative which is specific in modern thrillers. *Hamlet* presents some of the most evident gothic features in its use of an exoticized version of the past – the early Middle Ages amid the Scandinavian mists of folk mythology, quite remote from the tranquil, domestic Tudor England –, in the use of the theme of revenge – also a stylized form of tension between a past tormenting a guilty present –, and the cathartic effects of literal and metaphoric madness.

This potential has been recognized by most of the writers, stage and film directors who have attempted an exercise of appropriation, both highbrow and popular. While the Introduction of this article offered an example of the former, completing the anniversary Hogarth Shakespeare project of 2016, a recent example in the latter category is a Victorian gothic romance where the Hamletian plot is told by a young female narrator who resembles Ophelia.<sup>33</sup> McEwan's *Nutshell* complicates the gothic labyrinth when he decreases the level of melodrama by having the story told by an innocent whose morality is rather philosophical. To compensate, the author increases the level of horror by having this same innocent witness "a deftly charted crime",<sup>34</sup> not by seeing but by hearing its gory details, from inside the echoing shelter of his mother's body.

The Freudian interpretation of the mother-son relation in *Hamlet* is given by McEwan a brand new dimension in the

extraordinary physicality and interdependence between the pregnant host and the tenant of her womb, a love-hate relation, in which the mother protects her large belly instinctively even if she wants to give the child away for adoption, or the baby adores his mother with the same intensity with which he loathes her for betraying his father. One of the most intimate remarks the fetus makes is related to the enforced and extreme fleshliness of the Oedipus complex: "I wear my mother like a tight-fitting cap."<sup>35</sup> The sense of claustrophobia that the original play conveyed by the evocation of the metaphorical prison is here transferred to the physiological description of the lack of space, in an outstretched uterus, of a big fetus, who remembers the days when he was "drifting" aimlessly in the placenta as opposed to the discomfort he experiences now.

In general, this rewriting of the great tragedy benefits from the considerable distance it takes from the original (unlike many of the commissioned novels in the Hogarth Shakespeare project, which have been frequently criticized for trying too hard to accommodate an Elizabethan plot, with its conventional oddities, to the practical expectations of today's readers). The main element of originality is, of course, the fetus, a replica of young Hamlet who goes the other way: not from life to death, but from non-being to getting born. The "to be or not to be" opposition, which voices the fears of a still profoundly religious society for the unknown – the ghost, the murder, suicide or natural death being all mere versions of the same formidable unknown, which is "the undiscovered country" (III, 1)<sup>36</sup> – takes the shape of another dilemma in *Nutshell*. How to prevent the murder, then, how to punish the murderers, and finally, how to

stay alive and secure a future for himself after birth? While Claude is unequivocally contemptible (a greedy, narrow-minded and priapic real-estate agent, who speaks in “dribbling cliché” and looks like a fox), the father is a mixture between heroic and ordinary. A good-hearted poet, he is often too predictable in his honesty and naivety, and his golden aura is spoilt by his psoriatic skin, the character being regarded by critics as “convincing as both melancholy hero and bore.”<sup>37</sup> Moreover, despite his generosity, he seems just as uninterested in his future son as his wife and brother. The careful preparation of the murder, all the talking about it, the anxiety growing in the female accomplice after the murder has taken place, all remind us more of *Macbeth* than of *Hamlet*, the former being a play about what happens both before and after killing, the latter dealing exclusively with the aftermath of murder. The thirst for revenge is present in *Nutshell*, but it seems to have a more parochial, selfish dimension, since the baby, who knows he will be abandoned by mother and uncle if they escape, plans to get them caught by the police because in prison he won't be separated from his mother. Infants, he reasons, are known to be treated better behind bars than in foster care, on the thirteenth floor of a working-class family flat.

While Hamlet, as a grown-up prince, is expected to act dutifully and courageously, his tragic flaw being his very inability “to take arms against a sea of troubles” (III, 1)<sup>38</sup>, McEwan's fetus is not expected to do, or even be, anything. This status of the novel's protagonist and “over-reliable narrator”<sup>39</sup> is exploited by the author who takes the opportunity to ask a series of scientific questions about genetics, kinship, neurological processes, and obstetrics. So,

when he changes the final moments of the plot from a successful escape into an ill-timed succession of events, his strength increases and his role shifts from that of passive witnessing to one of resolution. What breaks Hamlet, who is given a license to kill by his father's ghost and by the moral and legal standards of his age, but is prevented by his excessively introspective nature, makes Trudy's boy, his determination to have the culprits punished coinciding with the need to pierce the membrane of the womb two weeks earlier, be born and behold his mother's face. Unlike Hamlet, who dies in a tardy attempt to finish his father's mission, the baby contemplates the outer world in silence, though his first thought after birth is not Hamlet's fate after death. “The rest is silence” (V, 2)<sup>40</sup> is opposed by McEwan with a more explicit “first sorrow, then justice, then meaning. The rest is chaos.”<sup>41</sup>

In this subtle appropriation of Hamlet's revenge tragedy, some more hints of an explicit intertextual game are identifiable. The baby dreams about an avatar of himself riding in the streets of Tudor London, where the high number of dubious figures of thieves and prostitutes and the intensity of foul smells suggests an ill-famed area of the city, possibly on the south banks of the Thames, the very neighborhood where playhouses began to flourish in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and where, of course, Shakespeare himself became famous. The same baby has a Halloween fantasy in which his father's dead body scares Claude to death, this ghost appearing somewhere else in the economy of the plot and with a different purpose, but still being effectively reminiscent of the original ambiguity contained by the supernatural presence. The poet's corpse

is horrible to contemplate but stands there to do justice to himself, just like the royal Dane's specter in armor was alternatively "a spirit of health or goblin damn'd" (I, 4)<sup>42</sup>. Finally, the talk about poison poured into one's ear appears as a news bulletin watched by Claude, who admires the assassin's creativity and skill and laments his own lack thereof. Dull as he is, he chooses the most unimaginative substance in the world to use as poison against his brother, antifreeze in the middle of a very hot summer – a dry and biting touch today's readers can't miss. Another re-write of a Shakespearean soliloquy, from *Macbeth* this time, is the baby's sorrowful projection about his own future, possibly celebrating New Year's Eve in 2099: "Life [is] a thriller of sorts, violent, sensational, highly commercial, a compendium of dreams, with elements of horror"<sup>43</sup>. Not a far cry from *Macbeth*'s fatalism:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor  
player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the  
stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and  
fury,  
Signifying nothing. (V, 5)<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

Appropriation is a phenomenon which says as much about the authority of the source as about the literary, cultural or even political context into which the source is imported and adapted. In this logic, *Nutshell* documents the diversity of directions in which *Hamlet* can be read and exploited, as well as the peculiarities of Ian McEwan's writing technique. While Shakespeare's Danish tragedy was by all standards a precursor of the psychological and aesthetic intricacies of reception that defined the gothic genre during the early days of Romanticism, the contemporary British writer's sparse style and grim mode is an extension of a disenchanting age, in which the various voices of postmodernism overlap, experimenting, in a detached manner, with irony, cynicism and understatement, which makes it possible that all the imminent small apocalypses of a shifting geopolitical map can be announced in the flattest voice. All the more intense given its apparent lack of intensity, McEwan's dark prose is not just a contemporary proposal of how the canon can be read today and where its hierarchies should be placed, but also a reflection on the kind of magic – if any – that readers and writers alike can still afford today.

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