

Original Paper

The Imprisonment and Escape of the Characters in *The Cement Garden* from the Perspective of Power Space

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Abstract

Under the interaction of space and power, characters in The Cement Garden are subject to the double restriction of the above-ground and underground spaces in their home, resulting in confused identity cognition, which leads to the characters' incestuous behavior. From the perspective of power space, this paper explores the negative impact of family dysfunction on the soul and body of characters, as well as the initiative and necessity of individuals to develop a clear personal identity recognition through interaction with social space.

Keywords

Ian McEwan, The Cement Garden, space, power, identity,

1. Introduction

As a writer who grew up in the British plate glass university generation, McEwan inherited the rebellious spirit of "the Angry Young Man" of the 1950s and continued to develop the theme of rebellion against social reality. However, the reason why his works stand out in the British literature is not only limited to the exposure of social reality, but also closely related to his bold, sharp, absurd and macabre writing form and content. His first novel *The Cement Garden* tells the story of four siblings who poured cement into the rusty iron box containing their mother's body and placed it in the cellar so as to ensure that the family members would not be put into an orphanage. The four kept silent about the body buried in the cellar, considering it as the best way to maintain family unity. However, Derek, boyfriend of the older sister Julie, discovered the deeply buried secret in the cellar. After Derek witnessed the incestuous behavior between Jack and Julie, he was furious and smashed open the iron box in the cellar. Therefore, the secret of the family is exposed to the public. As McEwan's first novel, the novel has been interpreted by

domestic and foreign scholars from multiple perspectives including incest, violence, children's sexual psychology, anti-growth, and cultural crisis. Among them, Professor Biwu Shang interpreted the characters' growth loss from the perspective of literary ethics criticism (Shang, 2014, p. 74); Professor Helong Zhang analyzed the novel from the perspective of Freud's psychological analysis as an "anti-growth" novel in which sex psychology moves towards confusion and distortion (Zhang, 2003, p. 45); British critic Malcolm Bradbury believed that *The Cement Garden* is a "Gothic story" (Bradbury, p. 52); Some scholars have analyzed the individualized cultural crisis in the novel, etc. In view of this, this article mainly focuses the interaction between space and power and the formation of individual identity cognition given the family dysfunction, thereby concluding that individuals should take the initiative to escape the collusive suppression between power and space through the intervention of social forces so as to develop their self recognition.

2. The Imprisonment of Soul and Body in the Family Space

Lefebvre proposed the concept of "social space" in *The Production of Space* and pointed out that space is produced by human activities. Space is not a static place containing objects, but a dynamic place of openness, contradiction and conflict. The "representation of space" contained in the "Spatial Trinity" at the core of his space theory belongs to the conceptualized space. It is the conceived space, the dominant space, and the abstract space that should be regarded as the object of our research (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 59). Ontologically, it corresponds to the dominant space in any mode of production or social form. The conflicts arising within the space are not directed at the characters themselves, but are rooted in the reconfiguration of the dominant values, interests and even powers represented within the space (Zhang, 2010, p. 42). The series of conflicts that occur in Jack's home space in the novel are a true portrayal of the characters being suppressed by power in the family space and how do they resist the repressive power system within the space.

Constructed space relies not only on descriptions of objects, but also includes descriptions of actions. Character actions within the physical space are the explicit reflection of the protagonist's psychological activities. Architects play a crucial role in the process of constructing space. The architect delineates the boundaries, designs and plans how to construct. The architect's orderly planning makes the building deliver a sense of rationality and extensity. Compared with social space in which everyone exerts certain influence on social construction, parents play the role of architects in the family and they are responsible for the design and layout of the family space. In *The Cement Garden*, Jack's father plays the role of the leading architect in family's layout design. The father's original intention was to build cement walls in the front and back of the yard to entirely surround the yard. The first reason to do so is that he is too weak to clean the garden with the heart disease; Secondly, the front and rear walls will also reduce the mother's burden of cleaning the floor dust. The unfinished spatial layout planned by the father changes the internal layout of the family home, which in turn affected the inner emotions of the family members. Later, the mother's death marked the departure of another architect. When a space is completely out of an architect,

the planning and development of the entire space will be correspondingly out of control. On the one hand, the architect gives order to the architectural space, showing a designed beauty of rational restraint. On the other hand, the presence of architects stifles the free and original beauty of the development of architectural space. When Jack's parents were alive, the siblings in the novel were disciplined and isolated by their parents in the family space, resulting in killing the possibility of free development of their personalities. After the death of their parents, the deficient understanding of social order and deformed identity caused the four children to grow and develop in a state of absolute freedom for a period of time. However, absolute freedom serves as a negative agent, which is manifested in the deterioration of the family environment and the deformation of individuals' psychology in the novel.

Home is not only a cradle where children enjoy the care and love of their parents, but also the place where children first come into contact with the world, understand the social norms and form their values. However, if the home itself is physically dilapidated and crumbling, inside the house is full of indifference and quarrels as the relationship among family members deteriorates. Then the home is no longer a warm harbour for family members, but the shackle of psychologically distorted family members or even the jail where the soul and body are imprisoned.

In Foucault's view, modern disciplinary society is a big prison. It consists of hospitals, mental hospitals, factories, schools, barracks, asylums, nursing homes, institutions and other types of "prisons" to form a so-called "prison archipelago". Everyone is in this "prison archipelago" without knowing it, and everyone is under the close surveillance of the ruler's "eyes of power" with no way to escape (Foucault, 1995, pp. 297-300). Once someone tries to resist the authority within the space, they will be punished. For Jack's family members, the home is undoubtedly a prison for them. Jack's father, as the most powerful supervisor in this prison, monitored and restricted every member in the prison. No one's behavior in the family space could override the most forbidding power holder. When Jack was dissatisfied with his father's ridicule to other family members at the dinner table, Jack and his sister Julie sarcastically fought back against their father. However, the consequence is that they were deliberately ignored and blamed by the rest of family members. Other family members acknowledged that this was resistance to the father's authority, but out of fear, they chose to remain silent and avoided being the accomplices of Jack to mock their father. According to Foucault, within the modern disciplinary system, power is not repressive but productive. Through the production of discourse, the ruling class ideologically tames and enslaves the ruled class, thereby enabling the ruled to self-supervision and self-discipline (Hu, 2013, p. 118). Although other family members in the novel clearly know that they are under the suppression of their father's authority, they never dare to resist his father's authority. When Jack used his father's way to fight against his father, the indifference and neglect of other family members was, to a certain extent, the result of the successful implementation of ideological discipline by his father, the overbearing authority. It was also the result of self-supervision and self-discipline after the domestication of thoughts. The neglect and silence of family members resulted in Jack's helplessness, self-deprecation, and self-suspect. For example, for several days after this incident, Jack was in self-doubt and self-denial. It was

not until his father took the initiative to talk to him again that Jack felt relieved that his father had forgiven him of his crime. “Julie was apologising, making it up to him in some way. I could not face that, but when, two days later, he spoke to me for the first time I was greatly relieved” (p. 21). When their mother died, sisters Julie and Sue hugged each other and cried bitterly to comfort each other. They completely ignored Jack’s existence. Jack was watching from the sidelines. He felt that he didn’t even exist. The feeling of being ignored by his sisters strengthened Jack’s uncertainty about his own existence. “Through their crying Julie and Sue were saying unintelligible things, to themselves perhaps, or to each other. I wished I could abandon myself like them, but I felt watched” (p. 62). Jack often sat in front of the mirror to study his features, sometimes staring at himself in the mirror for an hour or so. Lacan believes that between 6 and 18 months of age, babies usually identify the image in the mirror as their true self through narcissistic identification. However, there is an illusory connection process when the baby constructs this ideal image in the mirror. The process of equating the real self with the ideal self in the mirror is illusory, self-imagined, and does not exist (Lacan, 2005, p. 2). When Jack competed with his sister Julie for the right to speak in the family, it was obvious that he shifted his dead father’s authority to himself. He believed that he, as a male, should be the leader to arrange the entire family after his father’s death. However, since this self-identity is entirely an illusory ideal self that is not recognized by the outside world and is constructed through narcissistic identification, Jack’s failure in the competition with his sister Julie is an inevitable result. Sue seems to be the only normal child in the family, but her withdrawn character makes her often lock herself in her bedroom and live in a small space of her own. Sue expressed all her emotions and secrets in a notebook and almost refused to communicate wholeheartedly with the other family member. The novel reveals to readers about Sue’s cold and withdrawn personality through Sue’s facial features. “Her face was long and delicate, the lips colourless and the eyes small and tired-looking with pale, almost invisible lashes. With her high forehead and wispy hair she sometimes really did look like a girl from another planet” (p. 30). From the description of Sue’s appearance, readers can picture a pale, unattractive, and even disgusting female image. Sue’s pale face was as undrafted and lifeless as the cement his father placed in the corner. As the eldest sister in the family, Julie is aloof and irritable. The elder sister Julie’s silence at school scares the people around her, and it is through this silence that Julie establishes her authority. “She dominated her group and heightened her reputation with a disruptive, intimidating quietness” (p. 25). As Julie’s younger brother, Jack is also well-known in school, but his sister Julie never talks to him. It is as if Julie will deliver authority to her younger brother Jack, once they have a conversation. After her father’s death, the eldest sister Julie took over the daily family affairs on behalf of her bedridden mother. After the death of their mother, Julie gained absolute power in the family and often gave orders to her younger siblings.

Lacan believes that the first recognition of the subject by the self is through the mirrored Other, and the first stage is to recognize the self through the image in the mirror. The mirror stage also includes the second stage, that is, the mirror of gaze constructed by “a kind of crowd that dominates the first few years of one’s childhood.” That is to say, children will be shaped by their relationships with people around

them (Lacan, 2005, p. 79). Tom uses cross-dressing and babe-playing as means of protecting himself. Cross-dressing is when anyone wears clothing that is considered to be of another gender for any reason or motive. Tom's main purpose of cross-dressing is to avoid male violence by dressing up as a girl. First of all, the father, as the mother's legal partner, always prevails in the competition with Tom for the mother's attention, and he often exercised physical strength on Tom with physical violence such as "pinch" and "push". Secondly, Tom cross-dressed to avoid being bullied by boys of the same age at school. It was the hostility of male characters around Tom caused him to be in a state of defense and rejection with others during his childhood. Thus, Tom turned to his mother and sister for recognition and acceptance. He especially enjoyed dressing up as a baby and being held in the arms of his mother and Julie and trying his best to attract their attention. However, he was often rejected by his mother, sisters and other family members. As a child, Tom was uncertain about the value of his own identity, so his efforts to attract the attention of family members were actually an attempt to define his own identity by building mutually recognized and accepting relationships with others. However, the frequent rejections from family members show that Tom has failed to construct his identity by turning to his family members.

The British Bentham once proposed a "panopticon", which means that the monitored person is under the pressure of surveillance to realize the self-supervision and self-discipline of the monitored person (Foucault, 1995, p. 200). In Jack's family, under the imprisonment of their father, the holder of absolute authority, the self-disciplined family members were indifferent to each other psychologically and refused to recognize and accept each other. This resulted in the four children being unable to recognize themselves during the critically formative period of constructing identity, and thus imprisoning the self in the family jail.

3. The Escape of Soul and Body from the Family Space

Space is the product of social relations. Human produce space, and social individuals must also have the properties of the space in which they live (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 103). The death of the father, the chief architect of the family, marked the decomposition of the hegemony established by the father, and the invisible walls between family members began to slowly collapse. The mother and her four children gradually escaped from this enclosed, in different and suffocating cement-like family atmosphere, and began to explore more possible spaces of mutual acceptance and connection.

One of the functions of the carnival ritual is the playful decoronation of the king. It vividly and concretely expresses the carnival spirit that destroys everything and renews everything. Celebrating people's temporary abolition of all classes, privileges, norms and prohibitions, creating an opportunity for life to stretch itself, and making everything rigid come alive (Duan, 2000, p. 47). The description of the scene when his father died was like a carnival-like performance. "Subsequently there was a great deal of activity and noise. An ambulance came and my mother went off in it with my father, who was laid out on a stretcher and covered with a red blanket..., the radio was playing in the kitchen..." (pp. 23-24). The scene was filled with a lot of activity and noise. The father's body was covered with a bright red blanket,

and the radio in the kitchen seemed to be playing background music for the father's death. It is in this humorous carnival atmosphere that the crown of Jack's father is taken off, and other family members are liberated from the suppress of the father's autocratic authority. The mother became bedridden shortly after the death of their father, so the main activity space for the four children during this period was the mother's bedroom. After the death of his father, the most important event for the family members in the highly private personal space of the bedroom was Jack's 15th birthday. The five of them ate cake and drank orange juice together, and each performed some entertainments to a certain extent. In this small bedroom, it is not only the physical activity area being narrowed, but the psychological distance between each other. physical activities and decorative displays inside the space reflect a person's psychological reflection of the outside world (Fang, 2016). Jack's father always had various excuses to lose his temper on birthdays, so the family has not held birthday party for several years. After the death of father, his mother's proposal to hold a birthday party was the symbol of the collapse of the psychological barriers between family members and the starting point for the emotional rejuvenation of Jack's family.

The cleaning up of the physical space reflects, to a certain extent, the characters' increasing escape from their original repressive and morbid psychological state. After the death of their mother, the four children enjoyed freedom for the first time in the true sense without power discipline. The author uses "a house full of flies" as the correspondence of the psychological state of the four children in a state of absolute freedom. The four children did not cook a meal for a week after their mother died. They only bought some cold bread and milk from the supermarket to sustain their life. The physical space of the family is deteriorating day by day—the kitchen is full of garbage, the floor is covered with sticky yellow liquid, the living room is filled with stale air, and the space created by the four is stink, fly-infested and dirty. After a period of relative freedom and disorder, Jack realized how dirty, messy and filthy the kitchen environment was and prepared to clean it up. Julie and Sue seemed to be waiting for Jack's awareness. This time Jack was not left out, they cleaned the house together, sang together, went out to buy food for cooking together and put the utensils on the table together. "In the living room there were four plates on the table, and on either side of each plate was a knife and fork...There was a chair for each plate. I thought, as if we were real people" (p. 96). The four children feel that they are living a real life for the first time after their mother's death, it shows from another perspective that what the children long for is not chaos, but a neat and orderly life. Even the unwritten rule of "no bringing friends back home" in Jack's family was broken. The most obvious change is that Julie has a boyfriend. Her attempt to bring her boyfriend home is unprecedented for the family. When his parents were alive, there were almost no relatives or friends to visit their home. The location where Jack's family lived was surrounded by dilapidated houses that were about to be demolished, and no outsiders passed by. The four children's anticipation for Derek's arrival shows that they are beginning to accept "outsiders" into the private space of their own family with a more open and tolerant attitude. Sue tries to get in touch with people to escape from her once enclosed heart. Sue at first refused to show the specific contents of her diary to the outside world, but later she read part of her diary at Jack's request. When Derek first visits Jack's family, Sue is full of excitement

and anticipation. She regarded Derek's arrival as a big event. Although Sue either sat in a far corner of the living room or boiled water in the kitchen for most of the time, Sue always paid attention to every move of Derek and other family members in the living room. Tom began playing games on the doorstep with new friends and brought new friends home and his cross-dressing received no objection from other siblings in the family. Jack began to pay attention to personal hygiene, tidying up his clothes and changing his previous negative view of Tom's cross-dressing. At Derek's invitation, he stepped out of the domestic space and entered the social space represented by Derek's adoptive parents' residence.

It is the contact with the external social space represented by Derek that causes Jack to begin to change internally. Although Jack's first experience with the social space was not so pleasant, Jack began to move out of the private space of the family and move forward into the larger external space. The four of them are all trying to escape and change the messy, chaotic, immutable and emotionally indifferent nature that this house originally represents, and strive to move towards a more open, diverse, warm and orderly external social space. With the death of their parents, the characters in the novel seemed to be free; But the four of them were once again imprisoned by the secrets buried in the cellar with nowhere to escape. However, as Derek, the "other", intervenes in the private space of Jack's family, the secrets under the cellar begin to be revealed gradually, and the four of them begin to expose themselves to Derek who represents the "social force".

4. Cellar: The Place Where Souls and Bodies Are "Imprisoned" and "Escaped"

The most Gothic image in the novel is the family's cellar. The dark, claustrophobic and damp underground space of the cellar contrasts with the open and bright above-ground space. On the one hand, the cellar's concealment and darkness excuse a series of irrational behaviors of the characters; On the other hand, it also reflects the distortion of the characters' psychological space and their betrayal of convention. Psychological space is an internal, subjective space. It is a space constructed by human emotions and consciousness after coloring, filtering, deforming, and editing the external world. It is also the projection of the human psychology to the external world (Fang, 2016, p. 44). First of all, the normal way to dispose of the mother's body is to bury in a public space such as the cemetery. However, in the novel, the four siblings abnormally placed the mother's body in a rusty iron box poured with cement and buried it in the center of the cellar. This behavior of the children was originally to keep the family members together and prevent the four of them from being separated by the orphanage and adopted family. Besides, this irrational behavior also reflects the enclosed mentality of the four children, causing them to lose the ability to contact with the outside world. What's more, the iron box containing the mother's body is placed in the central area of the cellar, which absolutely highlights McEwan's consistent concern for female. When the father first bought back the cement, Jack's mother had a quarrel with his father because of the deteriorating economic situation of the family and demanded that the cement should be returned. However, the father rejected the mother's request with absolute authority. This cement turmoil eventually ended with the father's patriarchal victory and the mother's fruitless appeal. At this

point, cement itself represents the oppression suffered by the mother at the psychological level given the father's overwhelming victory. Even after her death, her body still could not escape the shadow of the cement bought by her father. This time, the cement seemed to put more pressure on the mother. The mother's body was imprisoned in a small iron box enshrouded by cement, which forever suppressed by metal and cement products, without the ability to fight back or escape. For a long time, metal and cement products, with their hard and solid forms, are symbols of masculinity. Such objects were pitted against the soft and liquid substances of femininity. In the article, Jack's mother is not only placed in a rusty iron box, but the outer surface of the iron box is also poured with cement. In other words, Jack's mother's body in the cellar is oppressed and imprisoned by cement, representing the father's authority. Jack's mother was in a disadvantaged position in the marital relationship during her lifetime, and was always in a position of rejection and denial by her husband. After her death, this irresistible sense of oppression became even denser and tighter. The placement of the mother's body in an airtight rusty box made of cement undoubtedly reproduced the suffocating living situation of the mother under the absolute authority of the father during her lifetime.

For a period of time after their mother's death, the four children did not want to have contact with the outside world because they were afraid that information about their mother's death would be known to the outside world, which would lead to the separation of family members. The four people as a whole "I" keep the secret deep in the cellar. However, as Julie's boyfriend Derek enters this family space and begins to explore the secrets of "I", Derek, an outsider of family, becomes the "Other" to "I" in the family space. Once the secret of the collective identity "I" sustained by the cellar-secret relationship is revealed, that is to say, once the intermediary role played by the secret in the cellar stops working, the identities of the four become unstable again. As Derek becomes increasingly involved in Jack's family life, the four children's strict guarding attitude towards the secrets of the cellar begins to change. Faced with Derek's curiosity of the secrets down in the cellar, the four started hesitating and prevaricating. At first, they pull Derek to another place to divert his attention, then Julie got angry at every time Derek asked, and finally they gave Derek a wrong answer—a dog named "Cosmo" was buried in the cellar. Although the answers given by the four to Derek were wrong, it at least showed that the four began to accept that Derek, an outsider of the family, had entered the underground space where family secrets were hidden, rather than directly refusing to answer Derek's inquiry. Derek, who assumed the identity of "Other", began to slowly approach the "I", the collective identity of the four siblings. As a member of the outside social space, Derek has injected the originally imprisoned and lifeless private family space with fresh power; on the other hand, Derek is also the intrusive external social force that discovers and exposes the Jack family's private space. The disclosure of the secret of the cellar will sever the ties that bind the four children. As the private family space where the four children live is intervened by external social space forces, the four children will no longer coexist in the original family space. The separation of ties marks that the four people are about to passively leave the family space that was originally united by blood ties. In addition, the breaking of the bond also symbolizes the cutting of the umbilical cord

when the four people are reborn, which will inevitably accompany the advent of the four people's new life. The fundamental attribute of human beings is social attributes. As social creatures, humans will inevitably have a series of interactions with the outside world. With the intervention of social forces, the four children will usher in a new life, that is, they will leave the "Garden of Eden" that belongs to them alone and move toward a more real, rational, and orderly social space.

5. Conclusions

In *The Cement Garden*, characters are suppressed by power within the family space, which leads to the crisis of character's identity cognition caused by family dysfunction. With the collapse of the power system within the family space and the intervention of external social forces, the characters will finally step out of their chaotic identity recognition with the strength from society, and achieve a clear recognition of their identity through the interaction with social space.

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