Studies in Linguistics and Literature
ISSN 2573-6434 (Print) ISSN 2573-6426 (Online)
Vol. 9, No. 2, 2025
www.scholink.org/ojs/index.php/sll

Original Paper

A Study on the Narrative of "Things" in Cement Garden

Yuan Jianing[1*]

[1] Wen College, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou City, China

[*] Yuan Jianing, Wen College, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou City, China

Received: March 21, 2025 Accepted: April 6, 2025 Online Published: April 18, 2025

doi:10.22158/sll.v9n2p72 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v9n2p72

Abstract

"The Cement Garden" is a Gothic novel written by British author Ian McEwan. The narrative function of "objects" in the novel is often underestimated. This paper uses Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory and Jane Bennett's Vital Objects as frameworks to focus on the performative capabilities of basements, cement, books, and diaries in "The Cement Garden". It explores how objects deconstruct anthropocentric narratives through spatial discipline, sensory penetration, and textual intervention, and how they construct interactive relationships between humans and objects. The paper also reveals the mechanisms by which post-industrial British society alienates family ethics through the reverse dominance of objects over people in the context of the family ethics crisis in post-industrial Britain.

Keywords

dynamic things, narrative of things, strategic function, subjectivity

1. Introduction

Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden* has been a classic text for studying the crisis of modernity and the alienation of human nature since its publication in 1975, due to its somber Gothic style and extreme ethical themes. The novel focuses on ethical themes and Gothic narratives, or is seen as a political allegory of Britain's entry into the European Community, but the narrative function of "things" as independent actors has not yet been systematically explored. "Things" are not (Shi & Dang, 2023) only active but also possess narrative functions. Only when things serve as metaphors and symbols related to humans, especially to needs and desires, do they gain special significance in narratives, becoming intriguing symbols. In the context of the rise of Material Turn theory, "things" are no longer passive props or symbolic signs in scenes; instead, they become actors with performative capabilities, even becoming the core force for reconstructing narrative ethics.

When rereading Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden*, the novel's horror effect stems from the core tension between "spiritual entities" and ethical disorder. Following this line of thought, many

perplexities can be reasonably explained, such as: how does cement, through its material properties, drive the exposure of family secrets? How does the threshold nature of the cellar externalize the existential dilemmas of characters? In the answers that the underage narrator cannot provide, the author notes that "objects" almost participate in all major plot twists, subverting traditional Gothic narratives through their "reversal" and elevating the materiality of objects to a philosophical critique of technological rationality. This paper uses Latour's concept of "non-human actors" to analyze the agency of cement, while Bennett's theory of "vital objects" explains how the stench of the cellar becomes a "whistleblower" of ethical collapse. These object-oriented narrative perspectives highlight how human cognitive limitations are refracted through the narrative prism, constructing a labyrinth of multiple truths within fictional texts.

2. The Cellar: A Depressing Space

2.1 The Allusion to the "Cellar"

In Western literature, the cellar often symbolizes evil and secret (such as the body hidden in the cellar in Poe's The Fall of the House of Usher). McEwan follows this tradition, but gives it a modern critique: the cellar is not only a hiding place for personal evil, but also a microcosm of the spiritual ruins of the entire British industrial society.

In Ian McEwan's novel *The Cement Garden*, the cellar serves as a significant space, bearing multiple metaphors. It is both a tomb for family secrets and a mirror reflecting the darkness of human nature; it is both an irony of patriarchal society and a prophecy of modernity's crisis. Through this space, McEwan dissects modern civilized society: when we attempt to bury the traditional ethics represented by the mother's corpse with cement, symbolizing industrial civilization, the decayed bodies in the cellar become the climax of the narrative of resistance against objects. The suppressed truth always lurks in the dark, ready to strike back.

Bakhtin points out that in novels, the perspectives held by different protagonists each have their own characteristics, manifested in their partiality, irreplaceability, and complementarity among them. This means that each character's perspective provides a unique understanding and interpretation (Bakhtin, 1988) of events, which cannot be entirely replaced by other perspectives, yet they complement each other, collectively forming the full picture (2018) of the story: "The cellar was large, divided into several inexplicable rooms... inside it was empty, pitch black, so dark that we couldn't see the bottom of the cabinets under this grayish fiber optic". In the novel, Jack's description of the cellar clearly shows how estranged and disconnected his family is, much like the rooms separated by the cellar. This is closely related to the social unrest caused by post-war economic recession in Britain in the 1970s, which was marked by widespread pessimism. The cellar can be seen as a physical symbol of family trauma in the narrative of material objects, hinting at the suppressed emotions between people and the isolated social conditions.

2.1.1 A Repressed Space for Personal Desire

Some scholars argue that "objects can also point to the social landscape, value systems, and institutional culture behind them (Chen, 2021), thereby constructing their discursive meanings through interactions both within and outside the text". After the father's death, the traditional family structure disintegrated, and the cellar replaced the living room as the core domain of family power. The incestuous acts and body sealing that occurred here symbolize the new order children attempted to establish after the loss of patriarchal authority—a deformed power system based on primal desires rather than moral rules. "In the midst of internal and external difficulties, the four (2018) orphans found themselves in even greater distress. Outside the window was a record-breaking heat, but the cellar—a metaphor for human nature, made us feel bone-chilling cold. The four orphans could only huddle together for warmth: Julie moved the crib from the cellar to her own bedroom, and Tom officially became a baby in swaddling clothes... My sister Julie and I truly merged into one, becoming father and mother". The incestuous relationship between Jack and his sister Julie takes place in the cellar, suggesting that this is a space where the superego (social morality) fails and the id (primal desires) erupts. The darkness and cold of the cellar strip away civilizational discipline, becoming an "incubator" for primal human impulses. As the story unfolds, the cellar gradually becomes a symbol of ethical disorder and identity distortion among the children, reflecting both their escape from reality and their inability to resolve inner conflicts, as well as Britain's deep divisions over European integration: a desire to join the European Community while clinging to sovereignty, ultimately leading to isolation and chaos. As the core existence of the bearer matrix and the root system of the house, the cellar tries to close the "sin" and "death", but after the intrusion of the outsider Derek, it continues to seep out through the cracks, exposing the ethical and ontological crisis faced by the whole human life space in the process of modernization.

2.1.2 An Isolated Natural Threshold Space

Some critics have adopted Foucault's early research model on how the external form and spatial construction of objects implement power and control, focusing on how the visual presentation of objects (Han, 2017) in texts disciplines the subject, exploring the controlling force exerted by the external form of technical objects. Other critics, influenced by Bachelard, Gruer, Munsterberg, and others, delve into how objects satisfy the emotional needs of the subject through their external spatial structure. In *The Cement Garden*, the cellar is not only a physical space but also a reflection of the characters' inner worlds, bearing their secrets, fears, and struggles for survival.

In an interview, when asked about the motivation behind "The Cement Garden", McEwan said, "It was a sudden inspiration while I was doodling in my notebook. I wanted to write about a family (Haffenden, 1985) that lives like cave dwellers... the house seems to have fallen asleep after Mom's death". Undoubtedly, McEwan's creative motivation is well reflected in his work. After reading the entire piece, readers will feel as if the growth of the children has come to a halt after their mother's passing. Julie

always basks in the garden, Sue writes her diary, and Tom lies in his cradle. Jack describes his own life this way: "I wake up very late in the morning, masturbate until I fall back asleep. I dream, not nightmares, but bad dreams where I struggle to wake up... sometimes I fall asleep in my armchair in the afternoon, even though I've only been awake for a few hours". This hibernation-like state permeates Jack's narrative, making the entire novel feel like it exists in a frozen time and space, where the children live out their days as if they were sleepwalking.

The sense of time in stagnation turns the already secret cellar into a threshold space. As the boundary between life and death, family and the outside world, morality and depravity, the ambiguity of the cellar intensifies the existential confusion of its inhabitants. Julie plays both "mother" and "lover" within the cellar, with the fragmentation of identity concretely experienced through the spatial threshold. Anthropologist Van Gennep introduced the concept of "threshold", referring to the transitional state in rituals where one leaves their old identity but has not yet acquired a new one. The cellar, as an underground space for the family, is neither entirely private (like a bedroom) nor public (like a living room), but rather exists in a "threshold" state. Children here handle their mother's body and engage in incest, symbolizing the unfinished ritual of transitioning from childhood to adolescence. The mother's body is sealed in cement in the cellar, blurring the line between life and death. The cellar becomes a domain for "living dead": the mother, though dead, continues to intervene in family life through her decaying physical presence, while the children fall into a mental state of "living dead" due to the collapse of ethical order. The enclosed environment strips away social relationships, turning characters into Heidegger's "thrown beings": Julie's maternal role and Jack's violent tendencies are cruel proofs that existence precedes essence. The cellar serves as a testing ground for human nature in a vacuum, revealing the terrifying picture of modern spiritual alienation.

2.2 The Experiential Function of the Cellar

Bill Brown argues: "Only when something ceases to function as it is accustomed to do can we penetrate its surface to grasp its essential (Meng & Luo, 2008) nature, which he calls its materiality". In *The Cement Garden*, the cellar, through its material properties such as form, texture, and spatial relationships, interacts directly with the characters 'bodies and senses, thereby shaping the narrative's perceptual dimension. The cellar in *The Cement Garden* is not only a symbolic figure but also becomes an experiential subject that drives the narrative process through its deep entanglement with the characters' actions and psychology.

2.2.1 Sensory Infiltration: The Discipline of Physical Properties on Human Body

The low temperature of the cellar physically invades the characters' bodies, as Jack describes "the chill piercing to the bone". This tactile experience intensifies the harshness of survival: cold is not just an environmental feature but also a form of violence that compels characters to seek warmth through abnormal behaviors (such as incestuous physical closeness), hinting at the body's instinctive resistance to civilizational discipline.

The cellar lacks natural light, and the failure of vision forces characters to rely on other senses (such as touch and hearing). Darkness blurs ethical boundaries: Julie and Jack's incest occurs in an invisible space, suggesting the failure of moral judgment under sensory deprivation. Darkness also becomes a psychological projection—characters' "blindness" to their own actions, externalized as the invisibility of physical space.

The stench of the mother's corpse spread from the cellar to the entire house, making smell an inescapable sensory experience. As a "language of things," the odor continuously reminds the children of the suppressed truth of death, which is exposed when outsider Derek intrudes (2018). "Hey, you guys aren't very good at keeping secrets... What are you hiding underground that smells so good?" The sense of smell functions as a "narrative informant", revealing the unsustainability of the enclosed space. The lingering smell of decay turns the cellar into a tangible container of guilt. The olfactory experience forms a synesthesia with morality: Jack writes in his diary, "The stench sticks to my skin", suggesting that the sense of evil penetrates the subject through material experiences, undermining their psychological defenses. The irreversible process of decomposition (the physical change of the object) compels characters to take action: Julie tries to mask the smell with perfume, while Jack reinforces the cement seal. The "autonomy" of objects (decay) continually disrupts the characters' escape strategies, driving the narrative toward a climax of conflict (the secret is exposed).

2.2.2 Behavior-driven: The Colonization of Human Psychology by Physical Properties

Latour views humans and "things" as part of the same network, where both play active roles (Yin & Tang, 2019). This means that things, which have always been part of relational networks, are no longer objects in the subject-object relationship but rather subjects in intersubjective relations. The cellar transcends traditional "scene" functions through sensory infiltration, emotional colonization, and behavioral manipulation, becoming an autonomous narrative subject. Through the "experiential function" of the cellar, McEwan reveals how objects in modern society reverse shape people: while industrial civilization (concrete) attempts to suppress nature (gardens) and humanity (ethics), the materiality of objects becomes a key force in deconstructing anthropocentric narratives through the violence of experience.

When studying the phenomenon of object fetishism, researchers believe that objects not only charm the subject (Chodorow, 1999) through their "materiality", such as attributes, texture, color, and shape, but also the low ceiling and narrow passages of the cellar evoke claustrophobic feelings through spatial pressure. This anxiety manifests in Julie's pathological obsession with the "mother figure" (such as compulsive cleaning) and Tom's regression to infantile behavior as an escape. The physical oppression of the cellar becomes a catalyst for psychological breakdown. The confined space forces children to choose cement burial over burial, an unconventional act that directly triggers subsequent ethical collapse.

The cellar, as a hidden space, offers the four siblings an opportunity to escape reality. Against the backdrop of family collapse and social isolation, the cellar becomes their place to hide their pain and secrets. By entering the cellar, the characters temporarily free themselves from external pressures, experiencing a fleeting sense of security and tranquility. This escape reflects their helplessness in the face of reality and their yearning for freedom. The existence of the cellar prompts changes in the interactions among the characters. The children hide their mother's body in the cellar, a behavior driven not only by fear of death but also by their inability to cope with the collapse of family structure. The enclosed nature of the cellar isolates the characters emotionally, further deepening the barriers between them. The confined environment eliminates social scrutiny, providing a "safe zone" for taboo behaviors, yet the oppressive atmosphere makes sexual acts violent (as Jack describes it as "like making love in hell"). The cellar becomes a hidden space outside the normal "ethical space 'and' orderly space", a place where secular morals and ethics have no jurisdiction.

Jack and Julie's union, disregarding human ethics, plays the roles of "father" and "mother", sharing the burden of this family. Thus, this narrative is allegorical, where the signifier detaches from the signified, pointing to deeper implications—The Oedipus complex is the underlying foundation that sustains a family. McEwan once said that in his fictional scenarios, "Oedipus and incest are one and the same", which also explains Julie's rejection of her boyfriend Derek, "He wants to be part of our family, to be some 'smart big daddy'. He's driving me crazy". For Julie, Derek's attempt to join is a disruption of the family's internal integrity, and her response is to engage with her own brother, thereby transforming the Oedipal complex into a genuine effort to integrate the family.

Derek, as the author's tool for dissecting this world from the outside, is undoubtedly a sledgehammer that brutally shatters the rotten truth. When talking about this character, McEwan once said that Derek represents a part of himself: an only child raised under strict adult supervision, yearning for the free and wild camaraderie of siblings in the "concrete" world, wanting to join but being excluded, and ultimately hatingly smashing the alternative kingdom. Derek's act of smashing his mother's concrete coffin marks the end of their closed world: outsiders are about to intervene, and the stagnant time is about to restart. It feels as if everything has come to an end, like a dream that must wake up, and McEwan does not shy away from this symbolism. At the end of the novel, Tom wakes up, and Julie and others gather around the crib, saying, "Look! Isn't he sleeping soundly?" This single sentence concludes the entire piece.

McEwan portrays the collapse of the family as the "most fertile moment" through scenes of ruins, hinting at the inevitable outcome that the "concrete garden" must face. He skillfully guides the audience to complete this narrative process in their minds, much like Walter Benjamin's theory of the parable, where ruins exist as a language of the future. Thus, the collapse of the "home" seems almost predestined. When Jack revisits the burned ruins, he thinks about how strange it would be for a family to live in such a concrete rectangle. Here, the "concrete rectangle" echoes the concrete cabinets in the

cellar. Although Jack can hardly imagine what it would be like for a family to sleep in a grave, his own family continues in this state. The images of ruins, death, and corpses have long taken root in this unfortunate orphaned family.

3. The Cement: The Thing of Vitality

3.1 The Metaphor of "Cement"

3.1.1 Alienated Material Tools

The critique of "thing turn" emphasizes the focus on the "materiality" and "form" of objects, where various microscopic material details such as the shape (Han, 2017), color, properties, and orientation of objects are imbued with cultural connotations and aesthetic significance. Cement, as an industrial product, symbolizes the oppression of human authenticity by instrumental rationality. Its standardized homogeneity and lack of differentiation erode individual uniqueness; after the garden is covered with cement, all natural traces are erased, much like how modern society alienates people into replaceable "parts". In the novel, the father stubbornly insists on building a concrete garden, even though his wife and children do not support him, and even though his body is not strong enough to sustain the project. He rudely orders 15 bags of cement and asks his children to help. The father's act of pouring cement is the ultimate manifestation of patriarchal will: establishing authority through physical transformation of space. However, the "eternity" formed by the solidified cement becomes a satire of the collapse of patriarchy—After the father's death, the concrete ground still exists, but the power order has disintegrated into a game of primal desires among his children.

"Objects" in narratives can become symbols, used as metaphors for culture (Yin & Tang, 2019), history, and society. Cement, used by the father to pour over the garden, marks the complete suppression of pastoral traditions by industrial civilization. The garden, originally a vessel for natural life and human spirit, has been transformed into an inanimate "gray desert" by the covering of cement. This act symbolizes the violent suppression of ecosystems by modern technology, hinting at the disconnection between humans and nature. The solidity of cement metaphorically represents the one-way transformation of society by industrial civilization: once completed, it cannot revert to its original state. Just as children cannot plant flowers on concrete, modern society has lost the possibility of rebuilding natural connections in the process of industrialization.

Secondly, it symbolizes the obstacles to growth. Children live in a closed environment, unable to develop and mature normally, and the presence of concrete emphasizes this stagnation and predicament. The sense of time is clearly embodied in the characters of the novel. Julie says, "I have lost all sense of time. It seems like it has always been this way. I can't remember what my mother was like when she was alive, nor can I imagine any changes. Everything seems frozen..." The narrator Jack, who narrates in a dreamlike manner, tells us, "Apart from those few trips to the cellar, I feel as if I am asleep at other times, weeks pass without awareness. If you ask me what happened three days ago, I cannot tell you".

For Tom, real time is an even more non-existent thing; he defies the natural laws of growth, as if traveling through a time tunnel, transforming himself back into a baby, returning to the cradle to babble. In the novel, McEwan disrupts the linear sequence of time, but rather than reconstructing narrative time as magical realism does, he focuses on depicting the psychological time of the characters. In such a scene where psychological time is almost stagnant, the external realism of the text is deconstructed, and the children are set on their clocks of growth in this garden cast in concrete. The departure of their parents makes an already unhealthy family even more unfortunate.

3.1.2 A Mental Desert of Rigidity

Concrete, a proud achievement of human "progress", becomes the catalyst for family collapse in the novel. The father's initial intention to transform the garden with cement was perhaps to "beautify his home", but it ended up creating a spiritual wasteland. The sealability of concrete symbolizes the spiritual isolation of modern people. Family members isolate themselves from the outside world with cement, effectively imprisoning themselves in a cage of ethical vacuum. This self-imposed isolation reflects the estrangement and trust crisis in interpersonal relationships in post-industrial society.

Objects can convey meaning through their own characteristics and forms, as well as through (Richardson, 2012) the materials and decorations used. Cement represents rigidity and isolation; its hard, rough, and temperatureless texture externalizes the alienation of family relationships. This sense of estrangement is not only present between children within the family but also between the family and the outside world. As the story unfolds, the relationships among family members become increasingly rigid and distant, starting with the father's purchase of a large pile of cement. The family is filled with arguments and dissatisfaction, with the marital relationship becoming rigid and the father-son relationship becoming strained. The same issues arise among siblings. When young Tom was bullied at school, he even experienced gender dysphoria. In response to his desire to become a girl, his two older sisters not only failed to show concern but also happily dressed him in feminine attire, while his brother Jack merely mocked him for dressing up as a girl. Cement, as a hard and cold material, reflects this emotional isolation and lack of communication. The cold hardness and weight of cement can be seen as a materialization of the characters' emotional states. The loneliness, fear, and helplessness felt by the children after losing their parents are concretized through the presence of cement. After the parents 'passing, the emotional connections among family members gradually become "cementified". Julie's mechanical and cold "maternal role" towards her younger brother, Jack's obsession with violence that is as rigid and unyielding as cement, and Julie's boyfriend Derek's attempt to integrate into this cement garden—knowing that the body in the cellar was not a puppy's but their mother's, he helped them hide it and even taught Jack how to seal the cracked cement coffin with cement. But the children remained silent about Derek's refusal to join them. The cement not only sealed the mother's body but also sealed their emotions and connection to the outside world. This self-sealing mirrored the alienation of interpersonal relationships and the crisis of trust in post-industrial society.

In recent years, critics of the "thing turn" often examine the relationship between objects and humans from certain special physical attributes of things, such as durability, robustness, precision, and luxury, arguing that these attributes enable objects to form a "function for stabilizing human life." Moreover, even the positions objects occupy during their use or possession are included in the discourse of the "thing turn," as they constitute (Han, 2017) the "basis of thought, memory, and sensation". By doing the same thing with the same object or placing the same object in the same position, the subject creates "a unified and continuous image, helping to overcome disorder and change".—Through the imagery of cement, McEwen elevates the tragedy of the family to a philosophical judgment on modern society. When humans pour "progress" into monuments with cement, these monuments will ultimately become epitaphs for their own alienation.

3.2 The Subjectivity of "Cement"

Bennett (Jane Bennet) also believes that objects possess agency (vibrant). As agents, objects can not only facilitate or hinder human plans but also have their own trajectories and natures. Therefore, Bennett uses the term "the (Bennett, 2010) power of things" (ting power) to summarize this agency. In the theory of object narrative, "subjectivity" emphasizes the agency of objects (agency), meaning that objects are not only subjects of human actions but also have the ability to intervene, shape, and even dominate the narrative process. Ian McEwan, in *The Cement Garden*, endows the industrial material "cement" with strong agency, making it a central actor that drives plot development, reconstructs character relationships, and deconstructs modern civilization.

3.2.1 "Non-human Actors" of Industrial Civilization

Hu Yamin believes that the plot is a series of formal or semantic elements in an event, serving as the backbone (Hu, 2004) of the story structure, supporting characters and environments. Latour further proposed the "actor-network" theory, which addresses the binary opposition and anthropocentrism (Gao, 2023) in the "actor" model. He emphasizes that objects, like people, are "participants", focusing on the structural relationships between people and objects in narrative works. The father poured concrete over his garden, ostensibly to tame nature, but this act actually reveals the invasive nature of industrial civilization. "A lawn the size of a card table stands a few feet above a pile of rocks; around it, only a row of marigolds is planted, which he calls an aerial garden... He dislikes shrubs like ivy or roses. He doesn't want any plants that grow wildly. Both sides of our house have been demolished, and in summer, the vacant lot is lush with wild grass and flowers. Before his first heart attack, he had planned to build a high wall to protect his own world". The fluidity of concrete and its irreversible solidity make it the best tool for the father's violent transformation of the garden space. Thus, the garden transformed from a living space of natural vegetation into a cold, dead space covered with concrete, not due to the weak health of the father alone, but as a result of the material properties of concrete and human desires working together.

First, cement, as a building material, shapes the living environment of children. Its hardness and coldness reflect the oppressive atmosphere of the home, making children feel isolated and helpless in this space. The presence of cement is not only a physical barrier but also creates a sense of isolation psychologically, affecting the emotional expression and interpersonal relationships of the characters. Peter Childs, when discussing "The Cement Garden", said: "The title of this novel suggests several central themes: the cultural embellishment of nature, the taboo between natural and unnatural regarding incest, and the modern urban jungle built with concrete". ② In the novel, the father feels powerless to tend to the garden before his death, so he wants to level it with cement and build a large concrete platform around the house. "Cement" seems to carry a meaning of "covering and sealing" throughout the novel; it is used not only to construct a platform that draws a boundary between the Jack family and the outside world but also to conceal the mother's body after her death, blocking the last trace of connection between this home and the adult world. It is in this sense that the book title resonates with the novel's theme—This novel actually explores the relationship between "appearance" and "truth", where there are too many layers of concealment and cover-ups between culture and nature, norms and taboos, society and individuals; the author's brilliance lies not only in revealing many truths beneath the surface but also in pointing the source of thought to the essence of "truth" and "falsity".

The "thing turn" critical discourse, while erasing the boundaries between subject and object, emphasizes the agency and vitality of things, becoming a significant watershed distinguishing "thing turn" critical discourse from traditional literary studies since the new century. In traditional criticism, when using material details in texts to penetrate or uncover related historical contexts, things often serve as metaphors attached (Han, 2017) to or possessed by the subject. However, in "thing turn" critical discourse, things are not only the starting point and origin of textual interpretation but also given a primary position. The agency and agency of things become a new perspective for examining the relationship between things and humans. Cement in the narrative is not a passive material existence; it is more of an agent with subjectivity. When I noticed my father struggling to carry cement, I deliberately held back, breathing as lightly as possible through my nose, even though I felt like I was about to pass out from (McEwan, 2018) holding my breath. The protagonist Jack did not want to participate in the labor of carrying cement but was compelled by his father's authority to join the plan to build a cement garden. He tried to express his youth and strength through a light-handed reaction, showing that he was more suitable for making decisions at home than his father. This became evident after his father's death: the first hammer struck a small piece of cement, but subsequent strikes made no difference. I took a breath and redoubled my efforts. This time, a large crack appeared. A chunk of cement shattered. Cement has influenced Jack's actions and choices from beginning to end, whether assisting his father in carrying cement or breaking the cement path after his father's death, all of which are external manifestations of Jack's inner desire for family authority. The presence of cement makes the characters feel an invisible pressure when facing the challenges of life. This pressure not only

comes from the natural and primitive industrial civilization colonization brought by cement, but also comes from Jack's deep desire to break the ethical constraints of secular society and pursue self-identity.

Secondly, surrounded by cement, the children experienced growth and change. The cold texture of the cement and its grayish-white hue constantly reminded them that "nature is dead", forming a physically symbolic representation of mental suppression. The concrete floor deprived the children of the possibility to touch soil or plant flowers, confining their activities within the enclosed house, exacerbating ethical disorder. If Jack, who witnessed his father's death scene, had already begun to exhibit the cold and indifferent character traits of cement: "Father lay face down on the ground, his head resting on the newly laid concrete path, still holding the wooden board used to smooth it out" (McEwan, 2018), then the four siblings' attempt to seal their mother's body using the properties of cement was even more shocking: "When she poured the first bucket of cement onto her mother's feet, Su let out a cry. Then, when Julie scooped another full bucket, Su rushed to the pile of cement, using both hands to scoop as much as possible and throw it into the cabinet". In the significant turning points of the children's lives—whether participating or making decisions—the cement, as a product of industrial society, entered their homes, becoming a "colonizer" that propelled the family's fate and a driving force that encouraged the children to explore themselves and establish new identities, reflecting their efforts to find a sense of belonging and identity in the face of parental absence and solitary survival.

3.2.2 The "Leaker" Who Undermines Ethics

Mary-Laura Ryan once said, "Objects have an intrinsic agency", capable of creating meaning and shaping individual roles. Objects can influence the subject's (Ryan & Tang, 2020) anxiety, preferences, making them feel fear or filled with imagination. The impermeability of concrete cuts off the connection between the family and the outside world, forcing children to establish a self-sufficient but distorted order. As the concrete sets, the story enters a new phase, with children's lives gradually dominated by secrets and repression.

"Objects themselves possess life and spirit, an ancient proposition that has gained widespread acceptance (Yin & Tang, 2019) in today's wave of object-oriented thinking". Since objects have their own spirituality, the analysis of text meanings can shift from traditional character analysis to the exploration of object properties. In other words, it moves from making people present to making objects present, focusing on what kind of "voice" the object conveys. Cement runs through the main thread of the novel *The Cement Garden*, participating in every significant narrative turn. For example, the inexplicable act of his unwell father buying 15 bags of cement is baffling; he attempts to emphasize his dominant position by creating a hard cement garden. After his father's death, the eldest son Jack uses a large iron hammer to violently demolish the cement path that symbolized his father's authority.

The dilapidated concrete garden constantly reminds Jack of the weakening and departure of those in

power at home, while his mother's instructions prompt him to reassess his identity and relationships with family members. As Felski puts it: "Literary studies are no longer about gazing at texts or searching for inspiration (Liu, 2021) for textual interpretation from the dark boxes of political and historical contexts, but rather about pursuing the heterogeneity formed by the intermingling of texts, people, and objects". In his interactions with concrete, Jack's character transforms from a competitor of male authority to its inheritor. Indeed, in his narrative, Jack reveals his desire to replace his father's authority without overstepping: he deliberately holds his breath and acts more relaxed than his father when lifting concrete; after his father's death, he tries to smash the concrete path. He constantly seeks new ways of life by changing and transforming their environment, using concrete to reshape himself and connect with his family in a repressive society.

The eldest daughter, Julie, took on her mother's role, serving as a pillar to support the broken family. By then, her mother was already gravely ill, and she entrusted Julie to prevent Jack from destroying the cement path. The industrial nature of cement as an inorganic material contrasts with the organic human body. In his diary, Jack repeatedly describes the texture of cement as "rough like sandpaper", hinting at how it gradually erodes human nature through physical contact: the "inhuman" quality of cement highlights the mechanization of human behavior. After her mother's death, Julie and Jack formally assumed the roles of new mother and father. Cement not only seals off the garden and the corpse but also imposes social ethical constraints. Its impermeability provides a physical sanctuary for incest: the cement wall shields against external moral scrutiny, while its inert properties tacitly legitimize forbidden acts. As they face the collapse of their family and social isolation, the solidity and coldness of cement resonate with their inner pain and struggles. The coldness of cement symbolizes their suppressed emotions, reflecting their longing for warmth and intimacy. Thus, they disregard ethical norms and merge in this closed environment, where their behavior increasingly deviates from societal standards. Cement is not only the backdrop of their lives but also a testament to their moral decay.

The critique of "object turn" focuses more on how objects, through their "materiality", enchant (Han, 2017) the subject, helping to stabilize and construct the subject's identity. Although cement symbolizes oppression and indifference, it also offers characters the possibility of reconstruction and creation. In the novel, cement directly influences the actions and choices of the characters. The children bury their mother's body in cement, an act that is not only a critical turning point in the plot but also reflects their fear of losing their parents and their sense of powerlessness in the face of family disintegration. Here, cement becomes a means for them to attempt to maintain the integrity of their family.

Latour, in his "Actor-Network Theory" (actor-network theory), views humans and "things" as coexisting within a network, each playing the role of actors (Latour, 2005) within this network. Over time, cement, as an actor with performative capabilities in the novel, gradually oversteps the control of the four siblings, becoming an oppressive force that exposes secrets. The cement coffin, which cracks after the mother's burial, and the intrusion of an adult, Derek, pose the risk of the body being exposed

and the family disintegrating. Cement, as a proactive "non-human actor", sets the tone and direction of the story. Its presence continually reminds readers to pay attention to the hidden truths and suppressed emotions, becoming crucial for understanding the characters' psychology and the novel's themes.

Similarly, Jane Bennett (Jane Bennett) argues that "things" are not passive objects. As agents, "things" can both facilitate or hinder human plans and have their own trajectories and natures. She uses the term "thing power" (thing-power) (Bennett, 2010) to summarize this agency of things. Cement, as the "perfect embodiment" of modernity, reaches its peak of agency precisely when it fails: the layer of cement sealing a body cracks, symbolizing the ultimate failure of industrial civilization's suppression of death and chaos. The collapse of cement is not just a physical event but also a narrative irony: the "subjectivity" of things ultimately deconstructs humanity's blind faith in technology. Although children seal their mother's body with cement to cover up the death, the porous nature of cement and the chemical reactions of decay create an uncontainable "resistance of things". Here, cement is not a passive container but actively exposes family secrets through its cracking, leading to police intervention. Through the narrative of cement's "subjectivity", McEwan challenges anthropocentric perspectives, revealing how things exert reverse control over humans in post-industrial society. When humans attempt to construct rational order with cement, the cold logic of things proclaims that so-called civilization is merely another form of alienation, suggesting that the order built by modern people using industrial civilization will ultimately turn against them, becoming a cage that confines freedom.

4. Result

Peter Calder, when discussing *The Cement Garden*, said: "The title of this novel hints at several central themes: the cultural embellishment of nature, the taboos of natural (Childs, 2005) and unnatural incest, and the modern urban jungle constructed from concrete". Cement, transforming from a tool of patriarchal will into a "non-human actor", symbolizes the violent colonization of pristine nature by technological rationality through its solidity. Cracks and decay expose the illusion of modern industrial products. The cellar, as a container of the subconscious and a symbol of physicalized trauma, disciplines the body and mind of characters through sensory penetration of cold, decay, and darkness. Its threshold blurs the boundaries between life and death, morality and depravity, becoming a testing ground for ethical disorder, ultimately declaring the collapse of the closed system with the "informing" of a putrid odor. The "autonomy" of objects deconstructs humanity's blind faith in order, suggesting that industrial civilization is merely another form of alienation.

In recent years, New Materialism (New Materialism) and the "turn to materiality" theory have provided a new perspective for literary criticism. Latour emphasizes the agency of "non-human actors" (non-human actors) in narratives, while Bennett introduces the concept of "thing power", arguing that objects have the autonomy to intervene in human plans and shape narrative trajectories. These theories

challenge the limitations of "anthropocentrism" in traditional literary studies, opening up possibilities for interpreting the complex roles of objects in *The Cement Garden*. The cold and putrid sensations evoked by objects no longer serve to create atmosphere but directly participate in ethical judgments, compelling readers to confront the pathological slices of civilization. The solidification of cement and the spatial confinement of the cellar trapline linear time, suggesting that modern people are trapped in an "eternal present," losing their connection to reason and nature.

"The Cement Garden" is not only an allegory of family collapse but also a mirror reflecting the crisis of modernity. It reminds us that when humans pour progress into monuments with concrete, the materiality of objects will ultimately turn these monuments into their own alienation epitaphs through a more ruthless logic. Ian McEwan's "The Cement Garden" constructs a profound critique of modern civilization through the material narratives of cellars, cement, books, and diaries. These objects not only carry symbolic meanings but also act as agents with the power to intervene in narratives through their materiality, spatiality, and textuality, revealing the inevitable logic of human alienation and ethical collapse in industrial society.

References

Bakhtin, M. (1988). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics: Theory of Polyphonic Novel* (p. 47). Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company.

Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Chen, B.-F. (2021). "Things": Cultural Narratives and Discourse Meanings. *China Social Sciences News*, (8).

Childs, P. (2005). *The Fiction of Ian McEwan*, *33*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Chodorow, N. J. (1999). *The Power of Feelings: Personal Meaning in Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Culture*. London: Yale University Press.

Gao, X. Y. (2023). On Dong Qizhang's "Trilogy of Natural History". *Chinese Literature*, (5), 23-30.

Haffenden, J. (1985). *Novelists in Interview* (pp. 170-171). London: Methuen.

Han, Q. Q. (2017). Key Terms in Western Literary Theory: The Material Turn. *Foreign Literature*, (6), 88-99.

Hu, Y. M. (2004). *Narratology*, *102*. Wuhan: Huazhong Normal University Press.

Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Liu, H. (2021). Actor-Network Theory. *Foreign Literature*, (6), 64-76.

McEwan, I. (2018). *The Cement Garden* (Feng Tao, trans.). Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Press.

Meng, Y., & Luo, G. (2008). *Material Culture Reader* (p. 92). Beijing: Peking University Press.

Richardson, C. (2012). *Shakespeare and Material Culture.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ryan, M.-L., & Tang, W. S. (2020).“Humanized Objects and Strange Objects: On the Active Role of Objects in Narrative. *Jiangxi Social Sciences*, *40*(1), 134-141+255.

Shi, Y. L., & Dang, Z. Y. (2023). *Trauma Narrative of “Things” in What They Carry*. *Journal of Zhejiang International Studies University*, (06), 98-104.

Yin, X. X., & Tang, W. S. (2019). Cultural Symbols, Subjectivity and Reality: On the Three Narrative Functions of “Things”. *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching*, *2*, 76-84.