

‘Contrary Emotions’: The Irony of Fear in Ian McEwan’s *On Chesil Beach* (2007)

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Abstract— *The aim of this paper is to show that a peculiar logic of defeating expectations underpins McEwan’s On Chesil Beach. The paper posits that situational irony underlies the whole framework of the narrative; and that it generates, maintains and eventually defines the narrative line of the novel. On the other hand, we argue that irony mainly proceeds from fear and misunderstanding. The study shows that the ironic situations in the novel stem mostly from irrational fears relating to sexuality and failure, and a lack of communication between two young lovers in the early years of the sexual liberation movement.*

Keywords— *On Chesil Beach; Ian McEwan; irony; fear; sexuality; misunderstanding.*

“The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown” (H. P. Lovecraft, p. 1).

I. INTRODUCTION

Among the requirements for a literary production to be considered a novel is the length of the story told. This quantitative issue has led critics to consider McEwan’s *On Chesil Beach* to be a novella rather than a novel. Though we shall regard it, for the purpose of the study, as a novel, *On Chesil Beach* is to say the least quite a short fiction. One should not, however, be surprised at this fictional brevity. The novel is consistent in its conciseness for it relates an aborted wedding night: the wedding of Edward Mayhew and Florence Ponting, and their marriage which has roughly lasted eight hours¹. The brevity of the novel is, thus, ironically reflexive. As suggested in the one-night marriage subject-matter, the novel is ironic both in form and content.

This paper posits that irony underlies the whole framework of the narration in McEwan’s novel. On the other hand, we argue that irony mainly proceeds from fear and misunderstanding in the story, which unfolds as a space dedicated to a transformation of sex into discourse. In this textual/sexual dynamic, irony will be regarded in relation to Paul de Man’s theory, that is, more as a question of disillusion, of a disruption of a narrative line than a matter of interpretation. In other words, the focus shall be put less on verbal irony than situational irony. Our first endeavour shall consist in discussing the theme

of fear as it permeates the text, and then the study will zero in on the interplay of ironic situations.

II. FEAR IN A WORLD OF FEAR

Ian McEwan’s *On Chesil Beach* is set in 1962. Accordingly, it addresses socio-political issues the United Kingdom and the West confronted in the late 50s and early 60s: the sexual revolution², the arms race, and the uncertainty and anxiety stemming from a changing paradigm in geopolitics. All the allusions to politics in the novel are fear-arousing. Prime Minister Harold Macmillan is fictionalized as a means to convey that anxiety. He is time and again hinted at, sometimes about the fall of the British Empire, sometimes about the Cold War. On home affairs, for example, “some cursed him for giving away the Empire [...] with these winds of change blowing through Africa” (OCB 131). And, at the hotel where Edward and Florence spend their wedding-night, Macmillan is, at some specific point, the focus of attention. His speech on TV in the main bulletin gives voice to the existential anxiety serving as a backdrop to the novel:

Edward and Florence heard the muffled headlines and caught the name of the Prime Minister, and then a minute or two later his familiar voice raised in a speech. Harold Macmillan had been addressing a conference in Washington about the arms race and the need for a test-ban treaty. Who could disagree that it was folly to go on testing H-bombs in the atmosphere and irradiating the whole planet? But no one under thirty—certainly not Edward and Florence—believed a British Prime Minister held much sway in global affairs. Every year the Empire shrank as another few countries took their rightful independence. Now there was nothing left, and the world belonged to the Americans and the Russians. Britain, England, was a minor power—saying this gave a certain blasphemous pleasure (OCB 24).

Along with the independences of the former colonies, this passage expresses anxiety on the arms race, especially the H-bomb. By the way, provided the novel's concern with the existential anxiety of that period, it is not surprising that Edward and Florence first met at a meeting about weaponry:

As his eyes adjusted, the first person he saw was Florence [...] her gaze was on him as he approached, and when he was near enough she took a pamphlet from her friend's pile and said 'would you like one? It's all about a hydrogen bomb landing on Oxford' (47-48).

It is worth noting that this passage is a replica of Florence's presence at the meeting: just as Edward, she had left home "with a vague ambition of wandering" (54)³ and ended up at the meeting in Oxford where she is explained, by one of her old acquaintances, the dangers of the H-bomb, and asked to help hand over the pamphlets:

As her eyes adjusted, she looked about her [...] he began to outline for her the consequences of a single hydrogen bomb falling on Oxford [...] The crater he was describing would be half a mile across, a hundred feet deep. Because of radioactivity, Oxford would be unapproachable for ten thousand years [...] and then she saw Edward coming towards her (55-56).

The context of anxiety and fright Edward and Florence first met in crystallizes somewhat the feeling of fear that pervades the novel. As a matter of fact, fear unites both the protagonists. Likewise, as we shall see, it is through the agency of fear—namely the consequences it engenders—that Edward and Florence separate. An intense and inhibiting fear characterizing altogether both characters causes their wedding-night to be a real flop.

Edward is depicted as a character terrified by the prospect of failure, especially in his relationship with Florence. Florence, contrary to Edward, is from the upper-class. She is from a rich family—her father is a businessman and her mother a lecturer at the university—and is accordingly educated. As her love for classical music attests, Florence is a sensitive soul. She is, so to speak, squeamish. Conversely, Edward is from a fairly poor family⁴ and he enjoys rock music. It is mandatory that he adjust and avoid being coarse lest he should lose her. As a result, because of all these sociological and psychological pressures, Edward "did not trust himself" (OCB 91)⁵. He fears loss and castration, as the following passage suggests:

[Edward] could not escape the memories of those times when he had misread the signs, most spectacularly in

the cinema, at the showing of *A Taste of Honey*, when she had leaped out of her seat and into the aisle like a startled gazelle. That single mistake took weeks to repair—it was a disaster he dared not repeat (OCB 90).

The idea in this passage is that, previous to their wedding, whenever Edward's behaviour was unseemly, whenever he behaved in a sexually suggestive way towards her, Florence rejected him. She disapproved of such behaviours across the board.

III. THE IRONY OF FEAR

Edward's lack of experience too, can account for his fear of failure. He is very anxious about his upcoming sexual performance in the wedding night. Just like Florence, he ignores much about sexuality. The unknown arouses in him fear and, furthermore, he is afraid of leaving Florence unsatisfied. For that very reason, he refrains from the masturbation he used to indulge in. He did not want to be "in real danger of arriving too soon" (OCB 31); and he consequently made strenuous efforts to avoid experiencing such a disappointment. As the narrator observes:

Edward's single most important contribution to the wedding arrangements was to refrain, for over a week. Not since he was twelve had he been so entirely chaste with himself. He wanted to be in top form for his bride (20).

The most appealing irony in *On Chesil Beach* is linked, as it happens, with this fear of dissatisfaction: the reader, enjoying what Holdcroft calls "grim humour" (493), is informed in the third part of the novel that Edward has experienced premature ejaculation. His dream has become a nightmare as "the most sensitive portion of himself" would not, would even never, "reside, however briefly, within a naturally formed cavity inside this cheerful, pretty, formidably intelligent woman" (OCB 7). This ironic situation, indeed a situational irony, which generates the paradox of early divorce, is somewhat due to Edward's warranted anxiety about the "uncanny"; but it also results, in good part, from Florence's own phobia about sexuality. As Jaclyn Melcher writes, "Both Edward and Florence were products of their time, and both were entirely unprepared for the romantic notions thrust upon them by Western society and the marriage plot" (40).

The inconsistency in Florence's relationship with Edward lies in that she deeply loves Edward and willingly accepts to be his wife while, simultaneously, she repels the idea of sex relationships. Where Edward "merely suffered conventional first-night nerves, she experienced a visceral dread, a helpless disgust as palpable as

seasickness” (OCB 7). The feeling of fear is, besides, more intense in her than in Edward. As already suggested, Florence is in McEwan’s novel the epitome of the prudish Victorian woman⁶. She suffers, perhaps, from a sexual desire disorder. There is no doubt, however, that she is psychologically unfit for the realm of sexuality, as it appears when she is exposed to sexually explicit materials:

In a modern, forward looking handbook that was supposed to be helpful to young brides, with its cheery tones and exclamation marks and numbered illustrations, she came across certain phrases or words that almost made her gag: *mucous membrane*, and the sinister and glistening *glans*. Other phrases offended her intelligence, particularly those concerning entrances: *Not long before he enters her...or, now at last he enters her, [...]* Almost as frequent was a word that suggested to her nothing but pain, flesh parted before a knife: *penetration [...]* the idea of being ‘touched down’ by someone else, even someone she loved, was as repulsive as, say, a surgical procedure on her eye (OCB 7-8).

Florence’s visceral revulsion for sex is, in spite of that, balanced by her tendency to keep up appearances. She loves Edward and does her best to avoid offending him; and this is in this state of mind that she unwillingly prompts his failure.

Because she is troubled by her fear for sexual relationships, on the one hand, and she is afraid, on the other hand, of offending her lover—how could she otherwise justify a refusal to enjoy utmost intimacy with her husband on their wedding-night?—she decides to make the first move. She lifts the curtains of what Marie-Luise Kohlke calls ‘the consummation scene’ (2015: 155), proposing Edward to get into bed with her (OCB 32). Unfortunately, the outcome of all her subsequent bold acts ironically reinstates her in her revulsion for sex:

She was going to get through this. She would never let him know what a struggle it was, what it cost her, to appear calm. She was without any other desire but to please him [...]. Her panic and disgust, she thought, were under control [...] amazed by her own boldness, she moved back down a little, to take his penis firmly, about halfway along, and pulled it downwards, a slight adjustment, until she felt it just touching her labia (OCB 103-104)

This sexually explicit passage, reminiscent of what Kohlke terms the sexual trend in contemporary fiction, namely neo-Victorian fiction (2015: 159), seems to be proclaiming fulfilment in both the protagonists, and the reader also. One could at this point of the story believe there would be no “discrepancies between expectations and actual performances” (Holdcroft 493), that there would be, in other words, no ironic situation. The narrative line, nonetheless, gets unexpectedly disrupted, entangling in “erotic disappointment” (Kohlke, 2006: 5).

In horror she let go, as Edward, rising up with a bewildered look, his muscular back arching in spasms, emptied himself over her in gouts, in vigorous but diminishing quantities, filling her navel, coating her belly, thighs, and even a portion of her chin and kneecap in trepid, viscous fluid. It was a calamity, and she knew immediately that it was her fault, that she was inept, ignorant and stupid. She should not have interfered [...] (105).

Florence’s attempt at surmounting her fears is not rewarding and, most importantly, her reaction to the incident gives way to a misunderstanding resulting from her tendency to keep up appearances. “She was incapable”, says the narrator, “of repressing her primal disgust, her visceral horror at being doused in fluid” (105).

Nothing in her nature could have held back her instant cry of revulsion [...] as Edward shrank before her, she turned and scrambled to her knees, snatched a pillow from under the bedspread and wiped herself frantically (OCB 105-106).

She then runs out of the hotel room toward the beach in search of a soothing and consoling *locus*. This “comic climactic moment [...] in which ejaculation becomes absurd and disempowering” (Head 122), dramatic as it may be, arouses nevertheless an amusing feeling in that Edward misinterprets Florence’s reaction.

Florence is, in reality, not so much shocked by Edward’s flop as she is traumatised by the fact that her skin has got “fluided”. However, Edward firmly believes that Florence’s reaction proceeds from a disappointment at his premature ejaculation, at his inability to satisfy her in their wedding-night, and at a prospect of having to live with a man who is impotent⁷. He is, as a result, totally distraught, bewildered, extremely offended and deeply ashamed:

He was feeling the pull of contrary emotions [...] this over-obvious fact was too harsh. How could he get by, alone

and unsupported? And how could he go down and face her on the beach, where he guessed she must be? His trousers felt heavy and ridiculous in his hand, these parallel tubes of cloth joined at one end, an arbitrary fashion of recent centuries. Putting them on, it seemed to him, would return him to the social world, to his obligations and to the true measure of his shame (130-131).

His shame is so far-reaching that he who would have lived with Florence for the best and the worst and would have died to protect and cherish her, seems now to resent her. Love is shifting into hatred:

[Edward] stood here, half naked among the ruins of his wedding-night. He was aided in his surrender by the clarity that comes with a sudden absence of desire. With his thoughts no longer softened or blurred by longing, he was capable of registering an insult with forensic objectivity. And what an insult it was, what contempt she showed for him with her cry of revulsion and the fuss with the pillow, what a twist of scalpel, to run from the room without a word, leaving him with the disgusting taint of shame, and all the burden of failure. She had done what she could to make the situation worse, and irretrievable. He was contemptible to her, she wanted to punish him, to leave him alone and contemplate his inadequacies without any thought for her own part (133).

In Edward, what should have been the joys of a wedding-night has become affliction, and the honey moon, a bitter moon. Besides, the passage above underscores in Edward a move from shamefulness to guilt and then its rejection. Florence experiences this feeling as well. In fact, when she saw Edward heading towards her on the beach, a feeling of fear arouses in her:

She watched him, willing him to go slower, for she was guiltily afraid of him, and was desperate for more time to herself. Whatever conversation they were about to have, she dreaded it [...] She was ashamed. The aftershock of her own behaviour reverberated through her, and even seemed to sound in her ears [...] She had behaved abominably. [...] She was aware of his disgrace [...] Did she dare admit that she was a tiny bit relieved that it was not only her, that he too had something wrong with him?

[...] She did feel sorry for him, but she also felt a little cheated (139-141).

Edward, however, outdoes Florence as to this symptomatic interplay between guilt and its rejection on the partner. The irony in the misunderstanding of the two lovers is more manifest in him because guilt rejection in him eventually turns into depressive regrets:

For a whole year [Edward] had suffered in passive torment, wanting her till he ached, and wanting small things too, pathetic innocent things like a real full kiss [...] He had been patient, uncomplaining—a polite fool. Other men would have demanded more, or walked away. And if, at the end of a year of straining to contain himself, he was not able to hold himself back and had failed at the crucial moment, then he refused to take the blame. That was it. He rejected this humiliation, he did not recognise it. It was outrageous of her to cry out in disappointment, to flounce from the room, when the fault was hers (134).

The misunderstanding which the passage above foregrounds is very telling as to the place of irony in the structuration of McEwan's novel. Misinterpretation stemming from ignorance and lack of communication determines both Edward and Florence, and their endeavours to absolute union make separation unavoidable. The marriage between Edward and Florence has lasted merely a few hours. Union and separation, marriage and divorce are, therefore, unusually synchronic in *On Chesil Beach*. The marriage is not, and will never, be consumed because the ironic knots that disrupt the narrative line keep deferring *ad infinitum* the happy-ending denouement any readers should be expecting from the outset of the story.

The incident that ultimately provokes inevitable separation in the couple is what Foucault would term Florence's transformation of sexuality into discourse (28), her "self-effacing" proposal: against all odds, Florence, stripping marriage of its procreative function, recommends that she should live with Edward as wife and husband but never have sexual relationships with him, and affirms that she should not mind when the latter would need to cheat on her. Suggesting gender troubles, and revealing in Florence some Sapphic orientation, this proposal is expressed as follows:

We love each other—that's a given. Neither of us doubts it [...] Really, no one can tell us how to live [...] people live in all kinds of way now, they can live by their own rules and standards

[...] mummy knows two homosexuals, they live in a flat together [...] What I mean, it's this—Edward, I love you and we don't have to be like everyone, I mean, no one, no one at all...no one would know what we did or didn't do. We could be together, live together, and if you wanted, really wanted, that's to say, whenever it happened, and of course it would happen, I would understand [...] I'd never be jealous, as long as I knew that you loved me (OCB 155).

In trying to cut corners and avoid early separation, Florence manages only to further irritate Edward. The latter is shocked by her proposal of faking marital life. "His indignation", as the narrator notes, "was so violent it sounded like a triumph. 'My God! Florence [...] You want me to go with other women! Is that it? [...] You're telling me I could do it with anyone I like but you'" (155). The traumatising proposal from Florence, unsurprisingly, prompts the ending of their union. The tight knot linking them gets then irretrievably unwoven, untied flat. And the trauma Edward suffers from this latest blow is extensive, as reflected in this stream of consciousness of his:

To marry him, then deny him, it was monstrous, wanted him to go with other women, perhaps she wanted to watch, it was a humiliation, it was unbelievable, no one would believe it, said she loved him, he hardly ever saw her breasts, tricked him into marriage, didn't even know how to kiss, fooled him, conned him, no one must know, had to remain his shameful secret, that she married him then denied him, it was monstrous (158-159).

The prospect of living happily ever after expected in a fiction staging a wedding night between two young lovers is thus thwarted in *On Chesil Beach*. Edward's failure and subsequent disappointments, a situational irony followed by dramatic ironies, makes happiness impossible. As for Florence who needed perhaps to "be psychoanalysed. [To] kill [her] mother and marry [her] father" (OCB 153), she is left one option: to repress her sexual aversion and fears in classical music.

IV. CONCLUSION

In *On Chesil Beach*, Dominic Head argues, "McEwan would seem to be very much in debate with contemporary culture, and the perceived sense that we live in an increasingly sexualized world" (121). To be sure, the calamity and permissiveness of the novel is

obvious. With its sexually explicit content, McEwan's novel exemplifies to a great extent "present-day sexual liberation" (Kohlke 2015: 159). McEwan's fiction is very telling too, about that sexual liberation movement of the 1960's. As Head writes, "one failed wedding-night in 1962 can be taken as emblematic of the dividing line between the sexual liberation of the 1960's and the repression that preceded it" (118).

Disrupting the narrative line and defeating expectations is characteristic of Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*. As discussed earlier, situational irony is central in this McEwan's fiction. The climactic irony about the failure in the wedding-night, turning the honey-moon into a bitter moon, is revealing enough of this phenomenon. The main characters, and the reader too, experience disappointment from what should have procured joy and confer to the text pleasure. The significance of McEwan's text lies, undeniably, in the author's ability to easily entangle the story in a web of ironies (situational and dramatic alike); ironies that proceed mostly from irrational fears of sexuality and failure, and lack of communication between two young lovers in the early years of the sexual liberation movement. Fascinating, at the same time dramatic and amusing, irony in McEwan's novel exhibits all its paradoxical nature. Be it situational, dramatic or verbal, irony always, one way or another, succeeds in harmoniously associating two opposites: the tragic and the comic.

V. NOTES

1. Joyce's *Ulysses* is, in this logic, a "counter-example" since it relates the one-day happenings of Leopold Bloom, the main character, but is, contrary to *On Chesil Beach*, a lengthy narrative. At any rate, as Dominic Head writes, "shorter fiction is determined overtly by structure and device, and [...] such considerations restrict the experimental treatment of larger issues and themes (Head 116).
2. The lift in 1960 of the ban over D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, a novel that was deemed obscene in 1920, among others, is illustrative enough about the changing attitudes about sexuality in the West. As suggested in Philip Larkin's poem, *Annus Mirabilis*, the end of the Chatterley ban constitutes a milestone in this sexual revolution.
3. Edward left home in the same circumstances and had even planned to go to London but eventually ended up in Oxford.
4. Edward's father is a school teacher and his mother is brain-damaged.
5. For Dominic Head, "it is hard not to conclude that the joint failure of Edward and Florence to

commence a family life is partly explained, on Edward's part, by the lack of a domestic model on which to found his expectations, and the absence of an emotionally sustaining upbringing" (Head 119).

6. Although the setting in *On Chesil Beach* is not nineteenth-century England, the Victorian period and its repressive attitude towards sex (which Foucault questions) is implicitly addressed in the novel. The subtlety of this neo-Victorian characteristic of McEwan's novel resides in part in the depiction of Florence as a prudish woman but it is also evoked, still relating to this female protagonist, when disappointed Edward tells her: "You don't have the faintest idea how to be with a man [...] You carry on as if it's eighteen sixty-two" (OCB 144).
7. Unarguably, this is a deconstruction of masculinity that is suggested beyond Edward's failure to satisfy his bride in their wedding-night.

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