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THE POWER OF THE SYMBOLIC: LACAN'S PERVERSION AND THE SYMBOLIC ORDER IN IAN MCEWAN'S *THE COMFORT OF STRANGERS*

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to examine and analyze the main characters in Ian McEwan's novel *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) in the light of the overarching theme of the novel, that is, how unconscious or conscious desires lead to violence and destruction. Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory comprises the main theoretical framework of the paper. More specifically, his concepts of the symbolic order and clinical structure of perversion serve as an analytical tool for the analysis of characters. Therefore, the main hypothesis of the paper is that McEwan's characters, the problems of sexual violence and unrecognized desires can be analyzed and explained through Lacan's theory of perversion and symbolic order. What Lacan's theory illuminates in the context of the novel is that characters' unconscious motivations and drives formed during their earliest experiences, if left unrecognized and unaddressed, lead to violence and destruction.

Keywords: character study, psychoanalysis, Ian McEwan, Lacan, symbolic order, perversion, literary studies.

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Introduction

This paper deals with characters in Ian McEwan's novel *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981).[1]The main aim of the paper is to closely examine the characters in the novel, their motivations and behavior in the light of the central issues presented in the text. Ian McEwan's novel explores desire, violence and destruction in relationships between men and women, deeply rooted in the psyche. Moreover, the novel expresses the danger of failing to recognize or repressing those violent desires and simply trying to replace them with conscious intellectual beliefs.

One of the possible ways in which the characters in McEwan's text can be examined is psychoanalysis. Although it cannot offer an aesthetic appreciation of the novel, or it may appear reductive, it can possibly serve as an analytical tool for the interpretation of the novel's core, which is mostly psychological. Therefore, Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the symbolic order, Oedipus complex and the psychological structure of perversion forms the central theoretical framework of the paper. It is through Lacan's theory that the aforementioned issues in the novel may be addressed and interpreted. Additionally, Bruce Fink's *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (1997) substantially contributes to the theoretical background of the paper, as it provides detailed explanations and many examples pertaining to Lacan's notion of perversion. Moreover, the paper also partly leans on Judith Seaboyer's (1999) and Dominic Head's (2007) commentaries on the

[1] The version of the novel used here is the one published by Pan Books in 1982. Furthermore, the novel was published in Serbia in 1991 and translated by Ljubica Damjanov. It was also well-received in Serbia and attracted a lot of critical attention. Notably, this novel and McEwan's other works were extensively analyzed through Lacanian theory by a number of critics in Serbia. For example, in her paper, Tijana Parezanović (2011) uses Lacan's theory of the Imaginary, the mirror stage and primary identification to extensively analyze the motivations of characters in the novel. Moreover, she argues that the novel, through different stages and various techniques, invokes all of Lacan's orders: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Another example is Bojana Borković's (2013) employment of Lacan's theory of the Other in her analysis of McEwan's *Enduring Love* (1997). She also encompasses other works by McEwan in her analysis, including *The Comfort of Strangers*, to prove that the majority of his texts express the idea that the knowledge of the self can only be realized through its relationship with the Other. Thus, this paper hopes to make a modest contribution to the rich and ongoing debate.

novel, where they have already provided some important insights into the problems depicted in McEwan's text.

Therefore, the main hypothesis of the paper is that McEwan's characters, and the problems of sexual violence and unrecognized desires can be analyzed and explained through Lacan's theory of perversion and the symbolic order. Thus, this section of the paper serves as a general introduction to the central problems explored here. The second part presents and explains Jacque Lacan's theoretical concepts of the symbolic order and perversion. The third part of the paper presents the analysis of characters based on the theoretical framework outlined in the previous section. Finally, the last part of the paper presents the conclusion as a summary of the research results.

Lacan's Theory of the Symbolic and Perversion

The symbolic order is a theoretical concept in Lacan's psychoanalytic theory that denotes the overarching network of language and social rules. The symbolic order has a profound effect on human beings as it actively structures the meaning of the world around them, provides them with rules of the society and structures their desire.

Primarily from Claude Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology, "Lacan derives the idea that what characterizes the human world is the *symbolic function*," a function that intervenes in all aspects of our lives (Homer 2005, p. 36). As Lacan describes it, "the human order is characterized by the fact that symbolic function intervenes at every moment and at every stage of its existence" (1991, p. 29). In particular, Lacan takes from Lévi-Strauss the idea that the social world is structured by certain laws which regulate kinship relations and the exchange of gifts (Evans 2006, p. 203). Consequently, we should understand our own acts, which we perceive as autonomous and individual, against a background of social relations from which they derive their meaning (Homer 2006, p. 35). As Lacan explains, when we try to bring order to a certain number of phenomena, "in the end it is always the paths of the symbolic function which lead us, much more than any sort of direct apprehension" (1991, p. 32). As Ellie Ragland-Sullivan elaborates, the symbolic order is "that order of life which includes language, cultural codes and conventions, and whose principal function is to differentiate one thing from another" (1982, p. 7). In other words, the symbolic order serves as a mediator between us and reality. It makes sense of the world and its phenomena for us, it structures them, differentiates them and gives them meaning. Thus, we do not only receive conscious language, but we also receive pre-given symbolic principles or "rules" of culture that structure our behaviour in a given society. Those rules are also called by Lacan the law, as "a set of universal principles which underlie all social relations" (Evans 2006, p. 101). Lacan emphasizes the importance of the law by saying that "for every human being, everything personal which can happen to him is located in the relation to the law to which he is bound" (1988, p. 197). Put differently, every

experience that a human being has is constructed in a relation to the law; it is structured and mediated by the law. In addition, Slavoj Žižek (2007, pp. 8-9) explains that the symbolic order is made of a complex network of rules and other kinds of presuppositions, and our speech is grounded on our accepting and relying on those rules. He adds that when we talk or interact with others, there must always be someone third there governing that interaction, the symbolic order (2007, p. 9). It should also be noted that Lacan often refers to the symbolic order as the Other. Essentially, the term "Other" represents a radical alterity or absolute otherness that cannot be integrated into one's subjectivity (Homer 2005, p. 70). It is a term that Lacan equates with language as a structure, the symbolic order and the unconscious (Chiesa 2007, p. 35). In another sense, the Other can refer to other people insofar as another person can occupy this position and embody the Other for another subject (Evans 2006, p. 136).

Therefore, the symbolic order plays an important part in the development of the subject as it basically provides it with language, social rules and regulations without which it cannot properly function. Not entering the symbolic order has a detrimental effect on the subject, as in the case of perversion.

Perversion in Lacan's Theory

In Lacan's theory, perversion means that the subject did not successfully resolve the Oedipal crisis. More precisely, perversion is a result of the subject's negation of symbolic castration and as a result it remains the object of its mother's desire. Furthermore, the subject does not carry an identification with the father and consequently does not enter the symbolic order and receive the law from the father.

Before explaining Lacan's notion of perversion, it is useful to briefly outline his rendition of the Oedipus complex. Put simply, Lacanian Oedipus complex occurs in three stages or moments, and involves the figures of the mother, father and phallus. Initially, during the first stage of the Oedipus complex, objects that satisfied a biological need of the child are transformed into symbolic gift exchange between it and the mother, and consequently, what is at stake in the child's relation with the mother is not really the real object but rather the love of the one who can give you this gift, a symbolic object of love (Chiesa 2007, pp. 65, 71). Moreover, during the passage from the first to the second stage, the child realizes that the mother lacks the imaginary phallus. The imaginary phallus is perceived by the child as the object of the mother's desire, "as that which she desires beyond the child" (Evans 2006, p. 144). Consequently, the child seeks to become the object of mother's desire and identifies itself with the imaginary phallus (Homer 2005, p. 55). The second stage of the Oedipus complex is marked by the entrance of the imaginary father, an image made of all "the imaginary constructs that the subject builds up in fantasy around the figure of the father," whose purpose is to break the incestuous mother-child dyad (Evans 2006, p. 63). Before this is possible, the child carries out an imaginary identification with the father which entails,

through comparison with his body image, for both boys and girls, the symbolic assumption of one's own sexuality (Chiesa 2007, p. 81). Thus, the Oedipus complex is the moment when the subject can be properly sexuated and assume its symbolic position as a man or a woman (Lacan 2017, p. 149). During the third stage, the father symbolically castrates the child, whether a boy or a girl, "in the sense of making it impossible for the child to persist in trying to be the phallus for the mother" (Evans 2006, p. 132). In turn, the child identifies symbolically with the father as the bearer of the symbolic phallus, and the subject finally assumes his or her sexual position as masculine or feminine (Chiesa 2007, p. 84). Therefore, the role of the father, or the paternal function, is to separate the child and the mother and to impose the law of culture on the child, so that it can successfully enter the symbolic order. Ultimately, the Oedipal crisis is resolved when the rules, conveyed by the symbolic order, are accepted and acceded to (Ragland-Sullivan 1982, p. 7). However, if the Oedipal crisis is not successfully resolved, one of the possible results is perversion.

Initially, perversion is distinguished from other clinical structures by the operation of disavowal or negation. As Lacan claims:

> The whole problem of the perversions consists in conceiving how the child, in its relationship with its mother – a relationship that is constituted in analysis not by the child's biological dependence, but by its dependence on her love, that is, by its desire for her desire – identifies with the imaginary object of her desire insofar as the mother herself symbolizes it in the phallus. (Lacan as cited in Evans 2006, pp. 462-463)

This means that the pervert disavows or negates castration by perceiving "that the mother lacks the phallus, and at the same time refuses to accept the reality of this traumatic perception" (Evans 2006, p. 142). Therefore, the imaginary object of the mother's desire is the phallus and the child attempts to become it for her (Fink 1997, p. 175). In other words, the subject is incapable to give up his or her position as the phallus for the mother (Haute 2001, p. 240).

What is of importance in perversion is the inadequacy of the paternal function. Namely, the action of disavowal concerns the father, or more precisely the paternal function which is typically fulfilled by a child's father in our society (Fink 1997, p. 169). The subject becomes perverse because the father is in some way incapable of fulfilling his function of separating the mother and the child (1997, p. 173). The failure of the paternal function has a direct influence on prohibition and desire. Because the paternal function fails, that is, there is no prohibition imposed by the father, the pervert cannot desire what is prohibited (Fink 1997, p. 181). Instead, the pervert has to make the law come into being. As a result, the pervert does not identify himself or herself with the father and his or her sexual identity is not properly constituted.

Furthermore, the concept of *jouissance* also takes up a significant position in perversion. *Jouissance*, for Lacan, denotes a sort of painful pleasure which is the result

of the subject's constant attempts to transgress the prohibitions on his or her enjoyment (Evans 2006, p. 93). Moreover, there is always a link between *jouissance* and death. *Jouissance* involves a death drive insofar as death for Lacan is the final term of sexuality (Macey 1988, p. 203). For Lacan, death drive and sexual drive are manifests of one single drive because every drive pursues its own extinction and is an attempt to go beyond the pleasure principle, to the realm of excess *jouissance* where enjoyment is experienced as pain (Evans 2006, p. 34). Because of the failure of the paternal function and imposition of limit upon unbridled *jouissance*, "the perverse subject continues to believe in a *jouissance* without limits" (Haute 2001, p. 240). As a result, the pervert is the person who carries the attempt to go beyond the pleasure principle to the limit (Evans 2006, p. 142). However, no matter how much the subject might dream of an unlimited *jouissance*, the perverse scenarios are actually directed towards setting limits to this desire, where sadism and masochism probably provide the clearest illustrations (Haute 2001, p. 241).

Moreover, perversion is, for Lacan, a paradoxical situation because while it may sometimes "present itself as a no-holds-barred, jouissance-seeking activity, its less apparent aim is to bring the law into being: to make the Other as law exist" (Fink 1997, p. 180). Thus, the pervert's conscious fantasies may involve a kind of unending *jouissance*, but conscious fantasies must not be confused with concrete activity which is designed to place limits on *jouissance* (Fink 1997, p. 180). Therefore, perverts' motivation is to actually restrict or prohibit their unrestrained pursuit of jouissance. Fink (1997, p. 170) describes this apparent contradiction inherent in perversion as: "I know full well that my father hasn't forced me to give up my mother and the *jouissance* I take in her presence, but I'm going to stage such an exaction or forcing with someone who stands in for him; I'll make that person pronounce the law." He adds that this formulation suffices to indicate that perversion implies a certain staging or making believe the paternal function (Fink 1997, p. 170).

Two possible sub-categories of perversion are masochism and sadism. In Lacan's theory, sadism and masochism are closely interrelated, where the masochist prefers to experience the pain of existence in his or her own body, the sadist rejects this pain and forces the Other to bear it (Evans 2006, p. 171). In the case of perversion, it is the subject's partner who acts as Other in his or her fantasies (Fink 1997, p. 187).

In the case of masochism, the subject "will do anything for the sake of the jouissance of the Other; she abandons herself and her own welfare in order to be its instrument" (Van Haute 2001, p. 243). The masochistic subject will allow himself or herself "to be bound, struck, humiliated, rendered helpless," submitting completely to the Other's mercy (Van Haute, 2001, p. 243). However, the goal of the masochist is "to bring the partner to the point of enunciating a law" by generating anxiety in him or her (the partner) (Fink 1997, p. 180). In other words, the masochist tries to push the Other to the point where the *jouissance* becomes intolerable, and he or she is compelled to set

some limits (Van Haute 2001, p. 244). Therefore, the masochist's conscious behavior is in direct contrast to his or her unconscious desire. As Fink (1997, p. 180-181) explains, the masochist's fantasy is to do everything for the Other no matter the cost, but his or her desire for the enunciation of a law is an act of defense in order for a limit to be set on *jouissance*. Therefore, it may appear that the masochist devotes himself or herself to giving the partner unlimited *jouissance*, but unconsciously it is completely the opposite.

On the other hand, at first sight it may seem that the sadist does not want anything other than to torture and humiliate his or her victim, reducing "the victim to a mere means to the end of his or her own *jouissance*" (Van Haute 2001, p. 241). In Lacanian psychoanalysis the sadist sees himself as acting, not for his or her own *jouissance*, but for the *jouissance* of the Other (Evans 1998, p. 17). In the case of sadistic phantasy, "the subject equates itself with an Other that does not know any lack and for whom limitless *jouissance* lies within reach" (Van Haute 2001, p. 241). The sadist, for whom the law has not operated, plays the part of the Other in his or her scenario in order to make the Other exist (Fink 1997, p. 191).

Ultimately, perverts remain imaginary objects for their Other's (mother's) desire, "never becoming someone with symbolic status," who can see themselves as valued for their social, cultural, or other symbolically designated achievements (Fink 1997, p. 188). Moreover, the perverse subject longs for the completion of his or her symbolic castration. However, he or she "is never altogether successful in doing so, and thus must reinitiate the enactment again and again" (Fink 1997, p. 187). In other words, the pervert is stuck in a never-ending cycle of trying to enact the symbolic castration.

Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*

As already stated, Ian McEwan's novel *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) depicts a terrible realm of violence and destruction where characters are driven by forces that are beyond their control. The novel portrays a young couple, Colin and Mary, during their vacation in an unnamed city that seems to be Venice according to the narrator's detailed descriptions of the place. During one of their wanderings, they meet Robert who leads them to a restaurant where he tells them the story of his troubled childhood. On another occasion, Robert brings Colin and Mary to his home where they meet his wife, Caroline. Eventually, Caroline reveals their problematic and violent relationship to Mary. Later in the novel, it becomes clear that Robert was stalking Colin and Mary from the beginning. However, the young couple almost inexplicably go to Robert's and Caroline's house again. There, Robert and Caroline drug Mary and force her to watch as they brutally murder Colin. Throughout the progression of the novel, Robert and Caroline's relationship is portrayed openly as sadomasochistic, where their sexual intimation is always marked by gruesome violence. On the other hand, Colin and Mary are portrayed as a rather common modern couple, holding egalitarian, liberal and feminist values. However, as the novel progresses, their deeply hidden violent

sadomasochistic fantasies come to the surface being augmented by Robert and Caroline's openly violent behavior. Their joined failure to recognize their own destructive impulses leads them into the hands of Robert and Caroline who murder Colin and force Mary to witness the act, leaving her emotionally and mentally scarred. Thus, the characters of Robert and Caroline and their conscious behavior and unconscious motivations can be examined in the light of Lacan's theory of perversion. In the case of Colin and Mary, the incongruity between their conscious adoption of certain intellectual beliefs and their own desires structured by the symbolic order which had been repressed leads them to destruction. As Seaboyer puts it, McEwan's text self-consciously describes "a sadistic savagery that unmasks its origins in psychic structures and exposes the dangers of failing to recognize the role of the psyche in the formation of social reality" (1999, p. 958).

Robert and Caroline: A Never-ending Circle of Violence

Robert and Caroline's behavior, both at the conscious and the unconscious level, could be explained through Lacan's description of the perverse clinical structure. Robert's obsession with his father and patriarchy, their violent sexual relationship, and their staging of Colin's murder could be interpreted as behavioral patterns of perverse subjects.

Firstly, clues for Robert's sadistic structure can be found in his description of his childhood. Although Robert's father is described as a ferocious figure who has ultimate supremacy over the rest of the family, there are some indicators of his failure of fulfilling the paternal function in the Oedipal triangle. This is evident in Robert's relationship with his mother, where their incestuous union is not broken. As Fink explains, even if the father tries to fulfill his function, he may be undermined by the child's mother, "who, the moment the father's back is turned," (1997, p. 173) lets the child know that their special relationship will secretly remain unshaken. This could be said to be the case of Robert's childhood. Robert tells Colin and Mary that whenever his father was away, he slept in his mother's bed. Furthermore, he remembers that "every night for many months," he called for his mother asking for a glass of water (McEwan 1982, p. 39). However, this water-giving act is not at all an expression of biological need. As Robert explains, "she never left the water by my bed. She knew I had to have an excuse to call out to her in the middle of the night" (McEwan 1982, p. 39). In Lacanian terms, this could signify a purely symbolic gift exchange of love characteristic of the pre-Oedipal union between the mother and the child. In Robert's case, this exchange of symbolic gifts is not broken or disrupted in any way, neither by him nor his mother. If this could be understood as the failure of the paternal function, that is, breaking up of the mother-child dyad, then Robert remains stuck as the object of the mother's desire; he maintains his identification with the imaginary phallus. In other

words, Robert's behavior is marked by the operation of disavowal. He simply refuses to renunciate his position as the object of mother's desire. Consequently, as already described, the child, or in this case Robert, cannot be symbolically castrated. In other words, he cannot symbolically identify with the father, enter the symbolic order and receive the law of culture.

Furthermore, viewed as perverse, Robert's conscious behavior can be interpreted as a desperate wish for the law to be procured. His pathological obsession with his all-powerful father may only be a covert longing for an identification with him. Following previous argumentation, Robert's careful arrangement of his father's and grandfather's possessions as symbols of patriarchal power can also signal his wish for the symbolic order that he cannot enter as a symbolic equivalent of his father. As already pointed out by Seaboyer, "Robert must show that he is like the father, and he must *be* the father" (1999, p. 979). Moreover, his failure to symbolically identify with his father in the Oedipus complex is suggested by Caroline. As she says to Mary, "Robert was desperate to be a father, desperate to have sons, but nothing came of it … something wrong with his sperm" (McEwan 1982, p. 108). Seaboyer (1999, p. 979) interprets this as a sign of Robert being castrated, based on his impotence. However, in Lacanian terms, his impotence might also be interpreted as the failed identification with his father, the symbol of masculine power and potency. As Head explains, Robert's "aggressiveness to Caroline dates from the discovery of his own infertility" (2007, p. 62). This symbolic failure to be like his father sets his violent behavior in motion as an attempt to complete the symbolic identification with the father that he lacks. Finally, Caroline refers to Robert as a child who makes up stories (McEwan 1982, p. 111). This can also be interpreted as Robert's arrested development, that is, him being stuck in the middle of the Oedipus complex, not being able to get out.

In Caroline's case, it is a bit more difficult to describe her as a pervert, as McEwan presents very little of her childhood experiences. However, Caroline's attraction to Robert based on his relationship with his mother cannot be overlooked. As Robert points out, during the time when he first met Caroline, she thought of him sleeping with his mother as "really awfully sweet" (McEwan 1982, p. 40). It could be said, based on the only reason of attraction, that at the unconscious level, Caroline desires someone who can complement her own perverse needs that are uncovered later in her adulthood. This turns out to be true, as she confesses to Mary that she liked when Robert repeatedly hurt her during their sexual intercourse. What essentially confirms her perversion, more precisely masochism, is her description of her own experience of being hurt. As she tells Mary, "it's not the pain itself, it's the fact of the pain, of being helpless before it and being reduced to nothing by it" (McEwan 1982, p. 109). This is a striking description of masochism, as "the masochistic subject will allow himself or herself to be bound, struck, humiliated, rendered helpless, submitting completely to the Other's mercy" (Van Haute 2001, p. 243). In the case of Caroline, she completely submits

herself to Robert and allows him to do whatever he pleases with her. As she tells Mary, she was covered in bruises, cuts, her ribs were cracked, Robert had broken her finger and, in the end, her back. Moreover, she describes this pain and suffering as "a source of pleasure" (McEwan 1982, p. 109). She goes on and says, "I wanted it more and more. I needed it" (McEwan 1982, p. 109). What Caroline experiences at the conscious level is that unlimited *jouissance*, that "painful pleasure" as Lacan describes it. However, if *jouissance* means going "beyond the pleasure principle," the end of that journey is always death as the "final term of sexuality." Caroline practically confirms this by saying, "we had arrived at the point we had been heading towards all the time … Robert confessed one night that there was only one thing he really wanted. He wanted to kill me" (McEwan 1982, p. 109-110). Caroline's masochistic structure is only reaffirmed when she confesses that when she thought Robert was going to kill her, she said to herself, "I wanted to be destroyed" (McEwan 1982, p. 110).

If Robert and Caroline are to be identified as a sadist and a masochist, respectively, then it is evident why their relationship is doomed to be in perpetual pain, violence, and suffering. The masochist wants to make his or her partner anxious and pronounce the law, but if on the other side there is a sadist, he is utterly incapable of pronouncing it because for him there is no law, no limit can be set. Thus, in Lacanian theory, the sadomasochistic relationship is not a good combination and the chance for improvement is miniscule. Therefore, Robert and Caroline are caught up in a never-ending cycle of violence that is beyond their conscious control.

Although it may seem that perverts enjoy *jouissance* without limits, their unconscious motivation is to set a limit on *jouissance*, to somehow make the law come into being. Viewed through Lacanian lenses, the same can be said of Robert and Caroline. On the one hand, on the conscious level, killing Colin provides an ultimate wish-fulfilment for both Robert and Caroline. Robert is able to reach unlimited *jouissance* by slitting Colin's throat and deriving sexual pleasure from the act. Achieving that ultimate *jouissance*, as explained, always results in death, and a sadist always displaces that wish on to someone else. Meanwhile, Caroline can fulfil her own wish of enabling Robert to achieve his ultimate phantasy as a masochist always does, but without dying herself. On the other hand, as perverts are always in a paradoxical situation, the master plan of murdering Colin can be read as an unconscious desire to enact some form of symbolic castration. Through the perspective of Lacan's Oedipus complex, Robert wants to complete his identification with the father, as the sadist's aim is to enact some form of symbolic castration. Additionally, if his unconscious aim is to pronounce the law, then it is logical that he wants to identify with the father. Moreover, the murder of the effeminate Colin is, in a sense, a confirmation of the enactment of castration. Lacan sees the effect of the Oedipus complex as that which decides the assumption of sex, where sex is correlated with identity rather than gender (Ragland-Sullivan 1982, p. 7). Colin, as a figure who disrupts the pregiven symbolic positions of

man and woman inscribed in the law, must be destroyed if the law is to exist. Having all this in mind, this carefully planned scene by Robert and Caroline might seem as a perfect satisfaction of both their conscious and unconscious desire. However, as previously mentioned, perverts almost never succeed in their intentions.

Even the aftermath of Colin's murder can be interpreted as Robert and Caroline seeking that elusive law to be pronounced, which only contributed to the failure of their master plan. As Fink explains, the criminal justice system provides "perverts who are subjected to it confirmation that vindictiveness and cruelty constitute the hidden face of the law." (Fink 1997, p. 190). He adds that incarceration continues to serve as a form of punishment for the pervert, "who wants some sort of substitute symbolic castration" (Fink 1997, p. 190). Therefore, Robert and Caroline's behavior after Colin's murder, where they seem as they actually wanted to be caught by the authorities provides another possible interpretation in the light of Lacan's theory of perversion. Their attempts to resolve the Oedipus complex on their own proves to be futile over and over again. Their conscious fantasy of staging Colin's murder proves to be unsuccessful, and the circle of violence and punishment is yet once again not broken.

Colin and Mary: The Power of the Symbolic

One of the central problems in Mary and Colin's behavior and their tragic end at the hands of perverse and murderous Robert and Caroline can be expressed as an utmost inadequacy between their conscious intellectual beliefs and their unconscious desires and drives that are, at least in Lacan's terms, structured by the symbolic order. Their incapability to realize and position themselves in relation to their desires is their ultimate fault that results in Colin's death and Mary's mental and emotional scarring. This view has already been expressed by other critics. For example, Judith Seaboyer explains that McEwan's text self-consciously describes "a sadistic savagery that unmasks its origins in psychic structures and exposes the dangers of failing to recognize the role of the psyche in the formation of social reality" (1999, p. 958). Similarly, Dominic Head asserts that McEwan's novel "is an enactment of the inner lack that results when individuals adopt value systems or codes by which to live, having paid little heed to their own desires and needs" (Head 2007, p. 52).

To begin with, Colin and Mary, at the conscious level, hold rather leftist, egalitarian beliefs that are at odds with their unconscious structure. They hold those views, but seem lacking in conviction, or even understanding, about their private lives (Head 2007, p. 57). Furthermore, Colin and Mary are in favor of feminist principles, "but their engagement with gender politics has taught them nothing about how their fantasies have been constructed" (Seaboyer 1999: 59). During the whole course of the novel, Colin and Mary repeatedly fail to talk about their desires. For example, the narrator explains that "when they talked of the politics of sex, which they did sometimes, they did not talk of themselves" (McEwan 1982, p. 17). Additionally,

Seaboyer views Mary and Colin as being almost like twins, pointing out that "such a superficially attractive ease of resemblance disguises a perilous denial of difference that fixes them within the static realm of illusion, narcissism and the Imaginary, and outside language and the Symbolic" (Seaboyer, 1999, p. 967). In other words, this points out their complete disregard of the all-encompassing symbolic order that structures their own subjectivity, their intersubjective relations including sexual desire. Moreover, throughout the novel, it is evident that Mary and Colin's passion and sexual desire for each other is sparked and amplified by the closeness of Robert and Caroline's sadomasochistic relationship. They also invent their own sadistic fantasies, "but neither the fantasies nor what might underlie them ever enters into the intense conversations they conduct outside sex" (Seaboyer 1999, p. 972). In Lacan's (1988, p. 183) own terms, the goal for every subject is to formulate its desire in speech, to recognize it in the full sense of the term, and not to satisfy that desire. This is precisely at what Colin and Mary fail. Additionally, they speak neither of the sadomasochism that they both recognized in Robert and Caroline, nor of the coercion to which they acquiesced. (Seaboyer 1999, p. 972). This complete neglect of acknowledging their own sadistic desires is what enables Robert to carefully orchestrate the terrible scene of Colin's murder and Mary's witnessing of it.

Even the end of the novel suggests that no substantial change is possible. As Seaboyer explains, during her interrogation by the police, Mary "lapses into silence and so any examination of the violence that underlies the trauma she has experienced is cut off, the possibility of change blocked" (1999, p. 981). As McEwan himself explained in an interview, "you might well have grown up deciding that you accept certain intellectual points of view, and you might also change the way you behave as a man or a woman, but there are also other things – vulnerabilities, desires – within you that might well have been irreversibly shaped in childhood" (Head 2007, pp. 65-66). In other words, the power of the symbolic is not to be outrightly discarded, as desires shaped by it can make more harm if left repressed and unattended.

Conclusion

Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* is a striking rendition of violence and destruction, rooted in people's earliest experiences. It explores problems of harmful childhoods that imprison the characters in perpetual violent fantasies. It also explores the inadequacy of modern intellectual views that try to completely overthrow the social structures of the past. Thus, Robert and Caroline are, in Lacan's terms, perverts shaped by their personal histories and doomed to repeat their violent and destructive behavior in a never-ending search for completing their own subjectivity. On the other hand, Colin and Mary fail to perceive the danger by failing to recognize their own violent desires that had been already structured by the symbolic order and simply replacing it by progressive ideologies without bridging the gap between.

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MOĆ SIMBOLIČKOG: PERVERZIJA I SIMBOLIČKI POREDAK ŽAKA LAKANA U ROMANU *UTEHA STRANACA* IJANA MAKJUANA

Rezime

Rad se bavi likovima u romanu *Uteha stranaca* (1981) Ijana Makjuana, kroz koje pisac prikazuje i problematizuje nasilje i destrukciju u međusobnim odnosima između žena i muškaraca koje su postale izvor užitka. Makjuan se interesuje za one nesvesne želje koje su oformljene tokom naših najranijih iskustava i koje utiču na naše ponašanje tokom života, duboko ukorenjene u prihološkoj strukturi. Tako, rad pokušava da psihološkom analizom likova ponudi moguće odgovore na probleme predstavljene u romanu. Središnje mesto u teorijskom okviru rada zauzima psihoanalitička teorija Žaka Lakana. Tačnije, polazi se od njegove teorije simboličkog poretka i perverzije kao osnovnog analitičkog sredstva u analizi likova. Takođe, detaljan opis i mnogobrojni primeri Brusa Finka koji se tiču Lakanovog koncepta perverzije čine jedan deo teorijskog okvira. Štaviše, rad se jednim delom oslanja na dosadašnja istraživanja Makjuanovog romana a tiču se problema kojima se rad bavi. Glavni deo rada se bavi analizom likova u romanu pomoću već uspostavljenog teorijskog okvira. Tako se prvi par u romanu, Robert i Karolajn, analiziraju kao sadista i mazohista, i nudi se objašnjenje za njihovo svesno ponašanje i nesvesne motivacije. Kolin i Meri, kao drugi par u romanu, analiziraju se sa gledišta simboličkog poretka, kao mreže jezika, društvenih pravila i kodova koji determiniše i strukturira poziciju subjekta u odnosu na realnost, njegove želje i identitet.

Ključne reči: studija likova, psihoanaliza, Ijan Makjuan, Žak Lakan, simbolički poredak, perverzija, studije književnosti.

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