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Multiple Narrative Spaces in The Innocent

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Abstract

Ian McEwan's transformative work, *The Innocent*, explores the delicate relationship between the individual and the broader historical and political dynamics of the Cold War by constructing a multi-dimensional narrative space. The novel employs spatial transformation to develop and intertwine two primary story threads, thereby highlighting the unique cultural connotations inherent in different geographical settings. Among these, the wilderness-like city of Berlin symbolizes the trauma of history, the labyrinthine underground tunnels represent the secrets and darkness of human nature, and Maria's flat reflects personal desires and complex psychology.

Keywords: Ian McEwan; *The Innocent*; narrative space

1. Introduction

Ian McEwan is a renowned contemporary British author celebrated for his unique narrative techniques and profound analyses of human nature. His work, *The Innocent*, tells the story of Leonard, a young electronics engineer sent by Britain to Berlin after World War II to join an Anglo-American spy project. Leonard's transformation from an innocent and ordinary man to a thug is depicted with great narrative skill and technique, creating a sense of narrative hunger and pushing the tension to its extreme. *The Innocent* marks a departure from McEwan's earlier, more closed and sombre style. As Albertazzi(2016) said that McEwan see history "as a collection of deeds and situations experienced, endured and suffered by common men and women",while he continues to focus on the personalities of marginalized characters affected by the repercussions of their actions, he also expands his narrative to encompass a broader social landscape. This allows for a deeper exploration of human nature, revealing McEwan's evolving interrogation of the complexities within.

In *The Innocent*, McEwan meticulously crafts certain scenes with distinct story spaces and narrative places, creating a plausible storytelling effect. This approach serves as a crucial method for presenting the inner dynamics of the characters, characterizing them, and revealing the novel's central themes. McEwan sets up perfect spatial transitions, skillfully building two storylines: one depicting the romantic relationship between the British young man Leonard and the charming German woman Maria, and the other illustrating the spy conflict between Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union in Berlin during the Cold War. These two storylines ultimately converge due to a murder and the subsequent burial of a body, intertwining multi-dimensional spaces. The diverse geographical spaces in the novel carry special cultural emotions. The narrative spaces presented in *The Innocent* are analyzed to explore their specific connotations, we will revealing how different settings contribute to the overall narrative and thematic depth of the work.

2.City of the Wasteland

Literature and geography are inseparable; literature brings perceptual awareness to geography, and geography defines the spatial context for literary creation. According to literary geographer Mike Crang(1998), 'The "subjectivity" of a literary work is not a defect; in fact, it is its "subjectivity" that illuminates the social significance of place and space. In addition to reflecting the real environment, the geographical space in literary works is also an integral part of the real space.

In *The Innocent*, McEwan chooses post-war Berlin as the primary setting for the narrative. The imagery of this urban wasteland illustrates the sense of alienation between humans and their space of existence, as well as the oppressive weight of a violent war-torn history on humanity. This choice of setting not only grounds the story in a tangible historical context but also enhances the themes of dislocation, trauma, and the struggle for personal identity amidst political turmoil.

During this particular period of the Cold War, Leonard, an Englishman representing the victorious side, faces profound cultural conflict in a foreign city. Under a specific political ideology, he experiences a sense of individual conquest and glory brought by the victory in Berlin: "the fact that it had been the Russians who had liberated the city, he made his way through this pleasant residential district of Berlin that evening-the wind had dropped and it was warmer-with a certain proprietorial swagger, as though his feet beat out the rhythms of a speech by Mr. Churchill."¹(McEwan, 2018,10) In the bars of Berlin, conversations revolve around war, sin, love, and death. The streets are lined with escorts collecting money for soldiers who have not yet returned home. The Berliners harbor resentment towards the brutal practices of the Russians. Amidst this backdrop, Leonard, who initially possesses a pure heart, ultimately loses his naive

¹ McEwan, *The Innocent*, Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2018.

innocence.

Through the protagonist's point of view, the changes in the spatial environment reflect the inner transformations of the character. "Berlin is the site of Leonard's alteration and his freedom." (Malcolm, 2002) In the afterword, Leonard returns after thirty years to a newly transformed Berlin: "Families were eating out in the deep shade of ornamental trees; a green Ping-Pong table stood on an immaculate lawn. He passed an empty hammock slung between apple trees.....a contented, inward silence drifted upward with the heat of the afternoon." (McEwan, 2018, p. 385). This scene starkly contrasts the gray and decayed Berlin of the past, and with those ruins, his sins and his love also fade away. The change in Berlin's environment serves as a metaphor for Leonard's transformation. Emerging from the darkness of his past, it appears that everything is thriving, but only those who have experienced it know that what has receded is merely superficial pain.

3.The Tunnels of Maze

When Leonard first arrives in Berlin, he views the war-ravaged city with a strange sense of conquest, as previously quoted. However, this perspective shifts dramatically once he enters the underground tunnels concealed beneath the Berlin Wall. Chen Xiaolan (2010) observes that the "maze" in modern urban literature is not merely a topographical metaphor but also a symbol of societal, religious, and psychological dimensions. It represents a diffuse and multi-directional existential and spiritual state, characterized by a lack of center, loss of faith, and disorientation. Leonard finds himself in this existential predicament.

The labyrinthine tunnels in *The Innocent* serve as secret passageways used by the Americans to eavesdrop on telecommunication calls between the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. These dark and twisting tunnels symbolize layers of secrets and crises. The deeper one ventures into these tunnels, the more the darker sides of human nature gradually emerge, with truth and lies becoming increasingly intertwined. Through Leonard's journey into these tunnels, McEwan metaphorically explores the hidden and often sinister aspects of political machinations and human behavior during the Cold War. The complex network of tunnels, with their twists and turns, mirrors the convoluted and morally ambiguous world that Leonard finds himself entangled in.

The military-political connotations of the tunnels themselves are profound, as the individuals within them are shrouded in secrecy, concealing truths from each other to maintain isolation from the broader reality. This is highlighted when Glass initially takes Leonard to the radar station and remarks:

"But the point is this-everybody thinks his clearance is the highest there is, everyone thinks he has the final story. You only hear of a higher level at the moment you're being told about it. There could be a level four here." (McEwan, 2018, p. 25).

Being in the labyrinthine tunnels, individuals are constantly aware of higher levels of security and secrecy. Each level they ascend reveals that the secrets they once guarded become mere layers in a web of deception. For instance, staff members like Glass and Leonard believed they could use the tunnels to eavesdrop on Soviet communications. However, they eventually realized that the Soviets were aware of their activities all along and were merely using the tunnels to mislead the British and American intelligence efforts. Leonard thought that the operation had been compromised due to his inadvertent disclosure of tunnel secrets, unaware that the real double agent was his neighbor, Blake, who had already informed the Soviet military of the tunnel's existence. Blake, in turn, believes he has finally discovered the machine to decipher secrets, the reality is that the so called machine is a fabrication that Leonard created to cover up a murder and the dismemberment of a body. These layers of deception fuel an international espionage operation that spans oceans and ultimately links to the murder of an ordinary staff member. This intricate web of secrets underscores the pervasive nature of mistrust during the Cold War, as well as the moral ambiguities faced by those involved in espionage.

McEwan places the characters in a labyrinthine narrative space, where, in the process of finding their way out, individuals risk being swallowed up by the labyrinth. Leonard, burdened with a heavy suitcase, also carries the memories of a violent history. This individual, lost in the maze, reflects the collective experience of Europe, which has lost its innocence and purity in the course of this history.

4. The House of Lust

If Leonard plays an insignificant, institutionally controlled pawn in the espionage of the tunnels, the spatial dichotomy created by this cultural difference gradually triggers anxiety and estrangement in him, causing him to slowly lose his sense of self-identity. Another layer of the story's space emerges after he leaves the dark, claustrophobic, and secretive tunnels: the room of his mistress, Maria.

Upon first entering the modest room, the narrator portrays it through Leonard's perspective:

"This room made no claims. It would be possible to leave tomorrow without regret, taking nothing. It was a room that managed to be both spare and untidy. It was grubby and intimate. It might be possible to say exactly what you felt here. You could begin again with yourself." (McEwan, 2013, p. 92)

Indeed, in this "grubby and intimate" cold room, Leonard undergoes a profound transformation. Here, his introverted simplicity evolves into passionate, indulgent lust in front of his lover, revealing that the line between innocence and sophistication is quite often blurred.

In this space, Leonard's violent fantasies manifest, imagining his lover as a tool to fulfill his desire for military conquest. This is met with Maria's stern defiance and eventual expulsion. The forceful aggression precisely "symbolize the changing political scene and the change in distribution of power"(Abbasiyannejad, M., & Talif, R. 2014). Here, he hosts a small engagement party, fantasizing about a happy married life and feeling a bit more mature. Ultimately, it is in this room that Leonard fights with Maria's ex-husband Otto, culminating in Otto's murder and dismemberment. This act signifies Leonard's complete descent from innocence into the depths of sin.

In McEwan's creation, "historical, sequential flow becomes geographic, coexisting presence, and the sense of space begins to replace the sense of time as the center of human sensation" (Yao Zhen, 2018). The variegated changes of space are often intrinsically related to the growth trajectory of individuals, forming a unique narrative pattern. Different story spaces project the image of the protagonist in various states, and the space shown from Leonard's point of view is not only the real space he inhabits but also an outward manifestation of his inner changes. The environment and the state of mind mirror each other, making the story space an externalization of the character's heart. Leonard's experience exemplifies this spatial dynamic. As he navigates between different secret worlds, he reflects:

"He was not certain whether this time spent travelling between his two secret worlds was when he was truly himself, when he was able to hold the two in balance and know them to be separate from himself; or whether this was the one time he was nothing at all, a void travelling between two points. Only on arrival, at this end or that, would he assume or be assigned a purpose, and then he would be himself, or one of his selves, again." (McEwan, 2018, pp. 127-128).

However, the convergence of these worlds ultimately binds him, leaving him unable to break free for the rest of his life.

In terms of the novel's narrative strategy, this spatial transition from tunnel to room exemplifies the intermittent technique of "the isolation of all scenes and the abandonment of a narrative procedure that emphasizes the coherence between the two, an abandonment that leads to the creation of powerful forces"(Yao Zhen, 2018, p.124) Such spatial transformations bring aesthetic value to the structure itself and demonstrate the social concern of the creator to the reader.

5. Conclusions

Through the multi-dimensional construction of narrative space, McEwan presents in *The Innocent* the complex relationship between the individual, history, and politics during the Cold War. This double-arched spatial narrative structure not only endows the text with a three-dimensional and rich effect, mirroring the situation of individual survival, espionage, and political activities, but also metaphorically reveals the establishment of self-consciousness and the gradual process of spiritual alienation in modern individuals. The fate of individuals like Leonard,

who are lost in the flood of history, emphasizes the grandiose nature of McEwan's historical narrative. This meticulous spatial narrative enriches the structure and thematic depth of the novel, showcasing McEwan's extraordinary narrative art and his deep concern for the human condition amidst historical upheaval.

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