

What view would a
feminist critic take on
enduring love written
by ian mcewan ess...



'Enduring Love' encompasses the key message that the contrasting ideologies of science and emotion, cannot compliment each other, but in turn serve parallel meta-narratives, as expressed through the actions of Joe and Clarissa. McEwan directs the reader to believe in Joe's rationality, where in Appendix One his assumptions are proved right. This creates the stereotypical view, that any positive outcome is led by a man and his rational decisions, thus leaving women in the background without a role to play but express their emotions, as is the case with Joe and Clarissa's relationship.

This is opposed by feminists such as Kate Millet who recognised the imbalance of the distribution of power between men and women and 'saw very clearly that the widespread negative stereotyping of women... constituted a formidable obstacle on the road to true equality.' McEwan formed the novel on the basis of his 'interest in science,' whilst he wanted to oppose the 'sense that rationality gets a 'bad press' in literature,' as he states 'there are many situations in life... in which it does no harm...to try and think rationally' thus his key message begins to evolve.

McEwan portrays the science and rationality through Joe - a science journalist, who strips the events apart, layer by layer, as if he was a surgeon and then re-stitches it to provide the final outcome; once again placing the male figure in the dominant position, whereby he narrates and leads the novel, 'let me freeze the frame' almost having an omniscient power as he self-consciously controls the narrative. This shows, according to Lacan, that men control the power of speech and language that dominates society, whereas women are shown to revel in non-verbal communication, a common preconception which is opposed strongly by feminists.

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McEwan was intentionally going to write a philosophical novel, however he uses many forms to interest the reader - the most common being the continual aspect of a psychological thriller. Chapter one opens serenely with Joe and Clarissa 'in sunlight under a turkey oak' however it was abruptly halted as they 'saw the danger'. This short phrase creates a sense of foreboding, especially as it doesn't state what the danger was, but instead leads Clarissa and Joe into 'its labyrinths.' The sudden change in events leaves Clarissa behind, as Joe 'races into the story' without her.

This short scene could represent the role of women in society and perhaps undermine their value as they are marginalised, whilst men have all the power, as four others 'were converging on the scene,' once again reinforcing Millet's ideas. McEwan often seems to use this technique of marginalising women, as is proven by Julie's portrayal in *The Child in Time*. Julie is the mother of an abducted child which the novel centers around, however her husband, Stephen, is the main protagonist.

Throughout the novel we see how he suffers with the loss of a daughter. Julie is rarely mentioned except for the fact that she moved to the countryside. This is an area of isolation, not only away from society but also away from the readers. As we see, McEwan repeatedly casts women in the background, suggesting the small role they play in life. Further evidence of a psychological thriller could be enhanced through the thoughts and actions of Jean, where Joe states 'She has lived so long in her head' incorporating an air of mystery.

Another view is that McEwan may not have given her dialogue, to weaken her role as a female in the narrative and thus inexplicitly proposes that women are not able to express themselves clearly through speech, supporting Lacan's theory. The description given by Joe destroys Jean's credibility as she is portrayed as mad. McEwan also portrays Jean and women in general, as negative beings, thriving on their emotions and thus lacking rationality, as she states bluntly ' I'll kill her. ' This portrays her as slightly insane and causes the readers to view her in a different light.

The phrase depicts her isolation as well as her monopoly on all ' the available emotions. ' Millet, however, would argue that although Jean's thoughts are entirely private, Joe has been given the ability to reveal them, thus proving that the power-based relations that exist in public are also present in the private world, degrading women of their privacy. One other scene to enforce this form of interest is when ' Clarissa had spent the afternoon under the threat of Parry's knife. ' It is a typical ' damsel-in-distress' moment where Joe must save the day therefore portraying women as ' helpless' without the aid of men.

Another form explored by McEwan is that of romanticism. Clarissa is stereotyped as an ' unworldly, self-sacrificing angel' one of the four stereotypes presented in the anthology. She devotes her life to ' Keats' and travels to find various letters of his - ' Clarissa Mellon was also in love with another man'. This statement provided by Joe creates a negative connotation of Clarissa, as she devotes all her time to Keats but not to him. This is supported by H Bertens, a feminist analyst, who believes that '

independence leads to dislike and rejection' therefore implying women should be dependent on others to be liked.

McEwan however, has portrayed Clarissa in the opposite light, as she does not rely solely on Joe and his ability to provide for her. Contrary to this, feminists may find it a positive aspect, as it portrays women capable of providing for themselves and gaining power almost equal to that of men. Chapter 13 has evidence of realism, where Jean's ' hair was greasy and pulled back harshly across her scalp. ' This description from Joe's narrative presents Jean as an ' eternally dissatisfied shrew' another common depiction of women.

As readers we notice that Joe is only focusing on Jean's physical appearance and is perhaps subconsciously implying that women's appearance to men is far more important than their personality or qualifications in life, hence belittling women and their role in society. The description also makes Joe seem condescending and judgemental in his unemotional conduct towards Jean who is ' grieving'. This now presents Joe in an ill manner and he begins to lose his power on the readers, as they start to view him a different light.

Peter Childs also agrees with this as he states ' Joe's narration does at times imply he has difficulty with empathy and his observations on the emotions of others can seem callous. ' Instead Joe ' becomes the surrogate object of her bitterness' as well as the readers due to his detached and rational character. This leads to a role reversal where Jean - a woman, holds the power and ' was having to lead me by the hand'. This is extremely positive as she is now no longer shed into the background as women once were earlier in the novel.

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This reversal in power further deepens the readers' curiosity as to whether Joe is a reliable narrator, as Sean Matthews comments ' there a number of instances where he withholds information from the reader...which, when it is revealed...aggravates our unease about the reliability. ' The fact Jean is now dominant, perhaps relates to the time of production of the novel, as women acquired jobs and depended on themselves - not just the income of their husbands, proving a turning point in society and its perception of the role of women.

Jean also altered Joe's perspective on life through her ordeal, leaving him to realise he must ' return to London and save our love. ' Jean led him into uncharted emotional territory and inspired Joe to begin to feel and express emotions. Thus with the aid of Jean the semantic fields of science and emotion have been blurred conforming to a feminist's ideal for a short time. This ideal being one that conflicts against general definitions of femininity and instead assumes a universal female identity whilst focusing on the blurring of gender and its outlined roles of men and women.

Throughout the narrative Joe describes Clarissa, ' Celt's pale skin and green eyes' indicating he is in control of her actions and features, suggesting men are the dominant figures and that ' women are suppressed by a patriarchal society' as outlined by H Bertens. Joe goes on to describe her as ' gleaming in an alien light' or was ' like a cartoon sleepwalker' degrading her of her human form and implying women are not of equal nature to men, by focusing on their physical appearance. Joe writes chapter nine from Clarissa's perspective.

He believes that “ all Clarissa wants to say is, ‘ Where’s my kiss? Hug me! Take care of me,” this represents Clarissa as again, ‘ cute but essentially helpless,’ once again placing Joe in power and of a higher status by controlling her language. He thinks ‘ it would make more sense to tell it from her point of view’ yet is extremely condescending as he doesn’t actually know what she thinks, thus implies that all women must think of the same nature and cannot be independent of their own thoughts.

This is similar to another of McEwan’s narratives, *The Comfort of Strangers*. Caroline is the wife of Robert, she is a submissive character that believes men are masters and that women should yield to them. Throughout these two novels there is the continual power struggle between men and women, yet McEwan expresses through the characters that men should be in charge and hence true equality will never exist, opposing Millets ideology.

This is furthered as Robert expresses his thoughts that ‘ women love... trength and power in men...women long to be ruled by men. ’ Thus, as Joe tried to write from Clarissa’s perspective, Robert tries to express women’s thoughts. This is extremely patronising and disrespectful of women’s thoughts and feelings. Therefore the readers could view Joe and Robert in a negative light for being so demeaning and hence losing their power over the readers.

Clarissa is also shown to be emotional ‘ what surprised me was she was already crying. Joe further exacerbates this by adding ‘ already’ evoking the sense that she is too emotional and provides the binary oppositions of logic and emotion so commonly placed to men and women. Peter Childs argues

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that the chapter is ' best read as a further example of Joe trying to deal with his guilt or as another attempt to show how Clarissa was unable to empathise with him presented as a chapter in which he empathises with her.

This view would then confirm that Joe's and Clarissa's characters have been reversed, as Joe is now the emotional being and Clarissa the one in power, committing to a positive feminist perspective. Adversely, he also states that ' unlike Joe's direct address to the reader in the book, Clarissa is associated throughout the novel with letters' this complies with Lacan's view that women are not represented by verbal communication thus making them seem unworthy of such a natural form of interaction, negatively stereotyping women.

The mention of ' Clarissa's library of cookery books' suggests she is the person who deals with the household chores, picking up after Joe as if she were a slave. The view that women should be ' housewives' is extremely traditional and is not accepted in this day and age, therefore devaluing Clarissa and women in general, as it seems they are not capable of contributing to the household. The fact that ' Clarissa is unable to bear a child' detracts from her femininity and perhaps reduces her role in the narrative.

It could be depicted in a positive light, as she is still able to lead a successful life without bearing children. In contrast, the fact Clarissa is unable to conceive means she cares for her nieces and others even more, showing women are caring and compassionate. In conclusion, Enduring Love provides a narrative under threat from feminist critique. But, by the end of the novel,

Clarissa is able to prove she is independent and doesn't live behind Joe, as she writes a letter in chapter twenty-three from her own perspective.

She expresses her thoughts and feelings as she writes to Joe, ' you became more agitated... you were manic. ' This initially seems positive; however she is unable to express these thoughts to him verbally, backing up Lacan and Childs who said women used non-verbal communication and that men are the holders of speech. The novel ends with the focus once again on the imbalance of the distribution of power between men and women, concluding that McEwan is seemingly misogynistic through his representation of women in the novel.