

Push me pull you:  
ideology vs.  
individuality in  
mcewan's on chesil  
beach



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“ And what stood in their way? Their personalities and pasts, their ignorance and fear, timidity, squeamishness, lack of entitlement or experience or easy manners, then the tail end of a religious prohibition, their Englishness and class, and history itself” (McEwan 119). Throughout the novel *On Chesil Beach*, author Ian McEwan builds an exploration that considers the role of identity, of social influence, and of ideology within the lives of two individuals. Through these two principle characters, McEwan reflects upon instances in which individuals are torn between personal desire and societal pressures. In facing these, each feels the influence of surrounding society as a universal or incontestable, natural law. Through their struggles, McEwan problematizes the role of regional hegemonies in colonizing individuals and examines the way in which ideology elevates the regional norms to universal morays and effectively eradicates free will. Edward, McEwan’s principle male character, spends the majority of the novel considering how to escape the life of his “ squalid family home” (45). At a crucial coming of age moment, Edward feels “ his own being, the buried core of it he had never attended to before, come to a sudden, hard edged existence, a glowing pinpoint that he wanted no one else to know about” (90). After this rite of passage, nothing is the same for Edward and class placed “ a certain constraint in the air when he was with his friends, on their side as well as his” (91). From this point on, He saw himself as an adult and capable of yet unknown ascensions, and “ he was simply impatient for his life, the real story, to start . . .” (94). While the tendency in analyzing a character may be to focus attention on internal conflicts or on familial relationships, McEwan explicitly steers readers away from this and directs them towards Edward’s attempts to climb social ladders. McEwan tells us that Edward not only willingly and easily adapts to

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his girlfriend's social status but that " he politely took it as his due" (137). This revealing of Edward's entitled feeling shifts our view from Edward's psyche out to the context of his socio-economic standing. Lois Tyson writes of a move from a Psychoanalytic approach to a consideration of Marxist critical theory: By Focusing our attention on the individual psyche and its roots in the family complex, psychoanalysis distracts our attention from the real forces that create human experience . . . Power is the motive behind all social and political activities, including education, philosophy, religion, government, the arts, science, technology, the media, and so on. (50). Seen through this lens, Edward's desire for Florence carries ominous implications. Even if his individual motive seems to be based in love, his ideology complicates his intentions. His ideology and estimation of himself " prevent [him] from understanding the material/historical conditions in which [he] lives because [he] refuses to acknowledge that those conditions have any bearing on the way [he] sees the world" (53). Edward entrenches himself into a social reality and way of life that he understands to be universal and proper for him. He " absorbed these domestic circumstances without acknowledging their exotic opulence . . . In fact, he was entranced, he lived in a dream" (McEwan 146). In fact, it is the good fortune of his like that dooms Edward to the disastrous result of his wedding night. Unfortunately for Edward, the society into which he has embedded himself is overtly, archetypally patriarchal and driven towards power by pride and masculinity. Or, as Tyson explains, this is a " culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles. Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive" (83). Further, Edward and those around <https://assignbuster.com/push-me-pull-you-ideology-vs-individuality-in-mcewans-on-chesil-beach/>

him pridefully, “ passionately believed they were right, and they acted on their convictions” (McEwan 144). Again Edward’s pride keeps him bound by the conventions of the ideology that shape his understanding of a natural, universal order. Not only is he due certain things in life, but the power that ascribes these rights also requires certain behaviors and beliefs. Falling neatly into Michel Foucault’s panopticon, Edward produces the behaviors expected by the colonizing hegemony even without their intervention; he has internalized the influence of society in a way that “ assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 201). As the lovers move towards their room, Edward is disturbed by the social estimation of his masculinity reflected by the desk clerks: “ he did not actually see the young men exchange their meaningful glance, but he could imagine it well enough” (McEwan 193). Edward is checked by the expectations of his peers even without their presence and “ bound by protocols never agreed or voiced but generally observed” (26). Ultimately, there is no possible outcome for Edward that does not involve a move to power and masculinity through sex and the claiming of his domineering, patriarchal role. And this influence extends, as seen through our narrator’s duality of perspective, to alter the life of McEwan’s other principle character. While it may seem that Florence has an internal, psychological problem with sex or sexuality, McEwan makes it abundantly clear that she is confronting a problem rather more expansive and socially implicated (implicating?) than a conflicted psyche. In the bedroom, Florence momentarily disconnects from the social implications of sex and proves her sexuality to be present and healthy if subtle as she finds “ the beginnings of desire, precise and alien but clearly her own; and beyond . . . was relief that she was just like everyone else” (108). McEwan moves <https://assignbuster.com/push-me-pull-you-ideology-vs-individuality-in-mcewans-on-chesil-beach/>

readers out of a psychoanalytic consideration of Florence and towards an investigation that includes her social context and the ideological programming that she fights throughout the text. Even though Florence abhors the thought of sex on her wedding night (or any time), “ she agreed it was right to do this, and have this done to her” (37). Andrea Dworkin says about heterosexual intercourse: Intercourse is commonly written about and comprehended as a form of possession or an act of possession in which, during which, because of which, a man inhabits a woman, physically covering her and overwhelming her and at the same time penetrating her; and this physical relation to her – over her and inside her – is his possession of her. (63)The physical act of sex is clearly, to Florence, the culminating event that marks her unavoidable loss of self. And yet even before the attempted consummation, Florence understands that she has “ let go of something important, given something away that was not really hers to give” (McEwan 73). In fact, Florence has been dominated by the patriarchal culture since long before Edward in an unphysical sexual domination. Dworkin writes that “ in being compelled, through social force and money (having nothing herself), she experiences the sexuality of possession: force triggers the possession . . . force is the equivalent of the fuck in creating the reality of possession” (Dworkin 73). Florence’s subordination to her father and then to Edward reflect overlapping possessions as Florence is dominated, commodified, and traded. Even though Florence and Edward share an awareness of England’s fading influence in the world, ironically, they also share in the ideology that blinds them to the impermanence of the empire’s social conventions. To them, and common to the colonized, social norms extend beyond the temporally regional context and into the future – they see

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their future defined by the same expectations as their past and present. Through these two characters, McEwan examines a principle paradox of postcolonial theory as it “ analyzes the ideological forces that, on the one hand, pressed the colonized to internalize the colonizer’s values and, on the other hand, promoted the resistance of colonized peoples against their oppressors” (Tyson 365). However, McEwan is also doing something more complex than simply using characters to question the effects of colonization. He’s also problematizing the locality of it as well. McEwan effectively draws readers in to consider how colonizing forces are regionally situated in history and constructed by shared myths. While his character’s are “ trapped in the moment by private anxieties,” they and McEwan’s readers are acutely aware of being “ bound by our history” (McEwan 32, 143). Lois Tyson explains the need for culturally situating ideology as the key to understanding how colonizing influences interact: “ However, the tendency of postcolonial criticism to focus on global issues, on comparisons and contrasts among various peoples, means that it is up to the individual members of specific populations to develop their own body of criticism on the history, traditions, and interpretation of their own literature” (364). Thus, as the immensity of power displayed by a hegemonic ideology seems to express universal essences of right and wrong or good and bad, they in actuality are a product of a cultural history that is so reliant on subjectivity as to preclude extension beyond the scale of a small cluster of people. Morals and ethical considerations as not only products of cultural influence but producers and influencers of culture as well. Edward and Florence are both constituent of the forces acting upon them and constitutive as well. But rather than focus on the individual story of these two fighting a historically regional hegemony, <https://assignbuster.com/push-me-pull-you-ideology-vs-individuality-in-mcewans-on-chesil-beach/>

McEwan seems to ask: so then where is this text located? The universality sought in literary study has traditionally built upon the idea that “down through the centuries mass delusions had common themes” (McEwan 144). Readers draw from historical generalizations of ideology to broadly apply social conventions and expectations across contexts. However, McEwan has quite effectively shown that the conventions of a social cluster are specific and contextually bound; they are not universal but regional. Tyson explains that “all human events and productions have specific material/historical causes. An accurate picture of human affairs cannot be obtained by the search for abstract, timeless essences or principles but only by our understanding concrete conditions in the world” (50). Or: In other words, all events are shaped by and shape the culture in which they emerge . . . Their relationship is mutually constitutive and dynamically unstable. Thus the old argument between determinism and free will cannot be settled because it rests on the wrong question: “Is human identity socially determined or are human beings free agents?” This question cannot be answered because it involves a choice between two entities that are not wholly separate. Rather, the proper question is, “What are the processes by which individual identity and social formations create, promote, or change each other?” (280)

McEwan pulls readers into a situation in which they must question the locality of both the individuality of each of the lovers and the forces acting upon them – not in an either/or binary but rather in a problematized exploration of the processes interacting. Thus McEwan places us as readers, like his characters, into a situation in which we wrestle with “the difficulty in theorizing our way out of patriarchal ideology [as] we think of our immersion as an all-or-nothing situation” (93). Through this, it is easy to see how the <https://assignbuster.com/push-me-pull-you-ideology-vs-individuality-in-mcewans-on-chesil-beach/>

characters suffer their lost love. They are blinded by the apparent universality of social norms and by the perceived binary of a social identity. In their view, they have to choose between an unchoosable action and a moment of inaction, and “ this is how the entire course of a life can be changed – by doing nothing” (McEwan 203). Whether readers extract a lesson on active over passive determination of self, a complicated (re)formation of social theories is bound up in the reading and the reader and how each interacts with the text. Certainly, if nothing else, McEwan’s novel can prove that the nature of individuality is tied very tightly to an understanding of history and an understanding of the social expectations of the specific local culture that produced it. And if nothing else, when readers finished this novel on a late Friday night, set it aside, and looked back over the events within and the potential for individuality in their own lives, “ their lives seemed hilarious and free, and the whole weekend lay before them” (159). Works Cited Dworkin, Andrea. *Intercourse*. New York: Free Press, 1987. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage, 1995. McEwan, Ian. *On Chesil Beach*. New York: Doubleday, 2007. Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today*. New York: Garland, 1999.