



Universidad
Zaragoza

Trabajo Fin de Grado

The Merciless Violence of the Super-Ego: A
Freudian Analysis of Ian McEwan's
The Comfort of Strangers

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2016

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Prof. Susana Onega for her fullest assistance and guidance. I would also like to express my gratitude to my family for the support provided during these months, and to Blanca Roig, Javier Rodríguez and Santiago Urós for their constant encouragement and patience.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ian McEwan's fiction has received largely contradictory critical responses due to "his freezing of his moral faculties and his refusal to react as decency demands to the shocking scenes staged by his own morbid imagination" (Mengham 203). The reason for such adverse criticism is that, particularly in his early work, he "depicts deviant characters who [...] have allowed their ids to become the ruling force of their psyches and actions" (Sgarlata 5). Like Martin Amis, McEwan became a salient figure in the British literary scene of the Thatcher era (1979 - 1990) (Head 2), after having been depicted by the media as one of the *enfants terribles* of his generation (Vipond 2). Among other names, "he won the soubriquet of *Ian Macabre*" (3) in the 1980s because of his obsession "with the perverted, the depraved and the macabre" (Mengham 203) in such early works as *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), *In Between the Sheets* (1978), *The Cement Garden* (1978) and *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981). Still, this "literature of shock" written by authors like McEwan and Amis "can be seen as one strategy for awakening the collective conscience" (Head 2). And, although, since the early 1980s, McEwan's work has shifted away from "the sealed-off, suffocating worlds of childhood trauma, teenage alienation and secret adult obsession" (Mengham 205), the macabre shadow of these worlds is still traceable in his later fiction. McEwan has openly complained about being pigeonholed in these terms and about the fact that "even when there is not this [macabre] element, then all people write about the absence of it" (in Mengham 205).

The aim of this thesis is to analyse *The Comfort of Strangers* from a Freudian perspective. Through this approach I intend to delve into the

protagonists' inner minds, or psychic apparatus, and its repercussions on their actions. Freud's theories will provide a psycho-analytical interpretation of such key themes in the novel as the issues of sadomasochism, childhood trauma, psychosexual development and conscience.

As Emily Sgarlata has pointed out, McEwan's habit of reading Freud while writing fiction, which he acquired during his final undergraduate year at the University of Sussex, has had an important effect on his work (4). Moreover, *The Comfort of Strangers*—and McEwan's early work in general—is perfectly suited for a Freudian analysis, since he is very concerned with “the tension between the private worlds of individuals and the public sphere by which they are contained” (Mengham 206), that is, with the tension between the inner selves and the external world. Although the novel has been regarded as depraved and perverse because it “contains the most disturbing moment of violence in all of McEwan's work” (Head 57), there are also positive approaches, like the one provided by Judith Ailsa Seaboyer, who argues that *The Comfort of Strangers* brings to light culturally repressed issues, and is, therefore, “potentially regenerative” (115).

McEwan has stated several times that *The Comfort of Strangers* was inspired by a trip he made with his partner in 1978, and it is undeniable that he had some resemblance with Colin, the British young man who goes on holiday to Venice with his partner Mary. This resemblance would explain why McEwan “found the writing “painful” and why, on writing Colin's death, he felt as if he was writing his own” (Seaboyer 116). Nevertheless, the autobiographical features of the novel go beyond this, as there is evidence that McEwan also had some similitudes with Robert, the abusive misogynist and sadist the British

couple meet in Venice, especially regarding their past and their fathers. In *The Comfort of Strangers*, Robert describes his father as “a big man. [...] Everybody was afraid of him. My mother, my four sisters, even the ambassador was afraid of my father” (McEwan 20). However, Robert worships the memory of his father and grandfather to the point of keeping a little museum devoted to them, thus pointing to the fact that he is the victim of an unresolved Oedipus complex. Even his wife, Caroline, tells Mary that “he’s obsessed with his father and grandfather” (88). The main resemblance between McEwan and Robert is the strict, domineering and intimidating personality of their fathers. Echoing Robert’s description of his father (20), McEwan has stated that “both my mother and I were rather frightened of him” (in Abbasiyannejad, Talif, and Heidari 59). In an interview at the BBC, McEwan explained that his father served in the army, and that “the soldiers that he trained really feared him” (in Lloyd n. p.). He also explained that “during the week, I had my mother all to myself, and then, Friday evening, he [my father] would arrive [...]. Mommy, send that man away!” (n. p.). McEwan’s rivalry with his father, his desire to make him disappear and his wish to possess his mother suggest that McEwan underwent an Oedipus complex in his childhood similar to that of Robert, who also indulged in “phantasies of possession of the mother” (Seaboyer 151). Yet another confession McEwan made in the BBC interview was that he was brought up “in an atmosphere where you didn’t speak up and you didn’t speak your mind” (in Lloyd n. p.). Similarly, in *The Comfort of Strangers*, Robert tells Mary and Colin that “when he [his father] frowned nobody could speak. [...] you could not speak unless spoken to first by my father” (McEwan 20). Moreover, the contrast between McEwan’s parents’ personalities, the domineering father and the gentle mother, served as

the role model for McEwan's concern "about the relationship between the dominator and subordinator" (Abbasiyannejad, Talif, and Heidari 59), in the couple formed by Robert and Caroline in *The Comfort of Strangers*.

2. THE REAL NATURE OF COLIN AND MARY'S JOURNEY TO VENICE

In *The Comfort of Strangers*, a young unmarried couple, Colin and Mary, go on vacation to Venice after having been together for seven years at a moment when their relationship "was no longer a great passion" (McEwan 7). From the start, the external narrator brings to the fore their helplessness and dependence on each other. Soon after their arrival, they meet Robert and his wife, Caroline, who had been severely injured by her husband during sex and confined to the upstairs storey of their decadent palace. After the first encounter between the two couples, Colin and Mary's erotic relationship revives and they spend three days in the hotel room having sex and sadistic dreams and phantasies involving amputations, sexual violence and handcuffing. This is the beginning of a psychological journey towards masochism and death planned by Robert with the complicity of his wife, that will end up with Mary being drugged and obliged to witness how Robert and Caroline murder Colin and have sex with the corpse.

As soon as the novel starts, the reader is immersed in a womblike and lethargic world dominated by the unconscious and dreams. "The ritual hour they [Colin and Mary] spent [...] listening patiently to the other's dreams" (McEwan 1) is just one symptom of the Freudian world that the British couple has entered. Indeed, Colin's dreams "of flying, of crumbling teeth, of appearing naked before a seated stranger" (1) are purely Freudian. In fact, as Seaboyer has pointed out,

these dreams “are even mentioned on the same page in *The Interpretation of Dreams*” (128). This is what Freud wrote:

There is a fair amount of agreement [...] over the interpretation of various forms of dreams that are described as ‘typical’, because they occur in large numbers of people and with very similar content. Such are the familiar dreams of falling from a height, of teeth falling out, of flying and of embarrassment at being naked or insufficiently clad (Freud 1991a, 100).

Besides dreams, the setting also works as a psycho-analytical tool that mirrors the characters’ inner selves. Although the name of the city is not mentioned, several hints are given by the narrator about characteristic elements of the city, such as “the canal bridges” (McEwan 3), that point to watery Venice, an apposite “mirror for Freud’s topography of the psyche” (Seaboyer 113). There are two clearly identifiable and diametrically opposed areas of Venice: one is the “legible, sunlit and expansive” (113) tourist zone of San Marco, Dorsoduro and the Adriatic that mirrors the innocence of Colin and Mary, and the other the “darkened, damp, and confusing [...] womblike enclosure of the labyrinth that is Castello and Cannaregio” (113), where Robert’s house and gay bar are placed, and whose meandering and claustrophobic shape mirrors the dark, sadomasochistic perversion of Robert and Caroline. At the beginning of the novel, Mary and Colin wander around the “tourist zone” but as soon as night arrives, they enter the darkened zone of Cannaregio and Castello looking for a place to eat. The reason for shifting from one area to another is, apparently, that

Colin forgets to bring the maps and “without them they were certain to get lost” (McEwan 10). The ability to get lost and the incapability to plan the journey are symptoms of “their reversion to a childlike dependence on each other and others” (Sgarlata 31). This dependence is visible in many instances throughout the narrative, for example, in the hotel, when they “came to depend on her [the maid] and grew lazy with their possessions” (3).

From a Freudian perspective, Colin’s oversight of the maps may be interpreted as a case of “forgetting of intentions”, that is, the forgetting of his intention to take the maps is caused by “obscure motives [that] rise against them [the intentions]” (Freud 1991b, 211). According to this, it would be the work of the unconscious that leads Colin to forget the maps, rather than pure coincidence. Thus, he enters, and is willingly followed by Mary, this dark side of the city prompted by their unconscious “desire” to join the deepest and most obscure layers of the psyche that Robert and Caroline represent. By yielding to this force, they transform their holiday into a psychic journey towards masochism and death. This is clearer the second time Colin and Mary find themselves dragged into Robert’s district. Once they are inside the house, Mary tells Caroline that they “didn’t exactly plan to come, but it wasn’t completely accidental either” (McEwan 84). This apparently irrelevant remark reinforces the interpretation that the British couple does not plan consciously to visit Robert and Caroline, but are unconsciously driven towards them by a subtle force that will lead them towards death itself.

3. A FREUDIAN ANALYSIS OF ROBERT'S BEHAVIOUR

In this section, I will try to explain Robert's inner mind in order to elucidate his psyche apparatus (ego, id and super-ego), and its influence on his behaviours. Although I will take into consideration the behaviour of the main four characters, I will centre the analysis on Robert, due to the complexity of his personality and the fact that he is the active agent in establishing the relation between the two couples.

3.1 Robert's Childhood

In order to analyse in depth issues such as Robert's sadistic behaviour with his wife and the reasons for Colin's murder we have to go back to Robert's childhood. Robert was the "youngest child and only son" (McEwan 19) in a well-to-do, extremely conservative patriarchal family with three children and, according to Robert himself, he was his father's "favourite [...] his passion" (20). The severity and fear provoked by his father (and the awe inspired by his even starker paternal grandfather), and the idealisation of his mother lie at the core of his unresolved Oedipus complex. At that stage, Robert was like a puppet in his father's hands. Although he was younger than his sisters, he was promised to be "next head of the family" (20) and was conferred "a false position of power over them" (Seaboyer 152). One afternoon, when his parents were away, his older siblings, Eva and Mary, used her mother's make-up and dresses (McEwan 21). When his father came back and asked Robert about the afternoon, he betrayed his sisters and told his father what had happened. Later on, his father called him into his office and was obliged to see how he beat them, "three very

hard strokes each on the backside” (23). Eva and Mary took their revenge a month later, when they incited Robert to swallow big portions of cake, chocolate, a box of marshmallows and two bottles of lemonade, together with some medicine for his stomach, which turned out to be “four big spoonfuls of some kind of oil” (24). After this, Robert was tied and locked up in his father’s study while his sisters screamed: “Now you are big Papa in his study” (24). Soon, “the lemonade came, and not long after the cooking chocolate and cake, like a liquid” (25). He defecated and peed over the whole study, even on the walls, running “as if [his] father was already chasing [him]” (25). He was found by his father trying to clean up the mess. From a Freudian perspective, defecating in his father’s study amounts to bringing Robert back to the anal phase, when the child enjoys playing with the faeces (Ehrmann 98). Moreover, this event could be interpreted as a present to his father, since “faeces are the infant’s first gift” (Freud 1991c, 299). However, the fact that he defecated even on the walls can also be read as a form of moral masochism, in which the ego “seeks punishment at the hands of a parental power” (Seaboyer 154).

Robert was educated in a very strict and masculine-based atmosphere. Sweet things like chocolate and lemonade were not permitted because, his father told him, they “were bad for boys [...] they made them weak in character, like girls” (McEwan 23). Therefore, the episode shattered the whole sense of male superiority indoctrinated by his father, and he had to be beaten for not being as perfect as him. After this episode in his childhood, Robert tried to separate himself from the effeminate man that he proved to be. Traumatized by this memory, he became a patriarchal and severe figure, as if imitating his Ideal I, that is, his father.

Years later, when Caroline and Robert married, “Robert was desperate to be a father” (86), in an attempt to “step into his father’s position” (Seaboyer 155), but the couple could not make it happen. Trouble appeared when Robert turned out to have “something wrong with his sperm” (McEwan 86). His infertility was just another proof of the shadow of his childhood effeminacy that he wanted to run away from. Also revealing is the fact that Robert’s aggressiveness towards Caroline started right after his infertility was diagnosed. Ailsa Seaboyer argues that it is Robert’s incapacity to father children—which mirrors his inability to take up the position of his father— what causes his aggressiveness towards his wife, “punishing in her a femininity he feared in himself” (155). However, there is a trait that contradicts this interpretation, namely, Robert’s homosexuality, a clear form of effeminacy that is not accepted by his father, or his super-ego. Surprisingly, instead of being a latent tendency, repressed in his inner self, Robert displays his homosexuality in his way of dressing and makes an evident manifestation of it by owning a gay bar frequented by young men “arranged in identical postures” and wearing, like him, “tight clothes” (McEwan 17). Consequently, I suggest two different interpretations for this issue. On the one hand, this bar could be read as Robert’s attempt to reach a balance between the multiple drives that form his complex psychosexuality. On the other, it may be regarded as an attempt to project, or cast out his homosexuality as a defence mechanism. In other words, the acquisition of the bar in the external world provides Robert with an opportunity to place this homosexual drive that his ego does not want to acknowledge outside his own persona. In either case, these protective measures will prove inefficient as Robert’s purpose of separating himself from femininity and weakness will

lead him to kill Colin, a clear example of “the gender confusion and unhappiness that is disrupting [his] patriarchal culture” (Seaboyer 156). Only by killing Colin, an effeminate man, a mirror of the child that defecated in his father’s study, can Robert finally be like his father. In Seaboyer’s words: “In punishing Colin, he [...] punish[ed] his failed, effeminate self once and for all” (156).

3.2 Sadomasochism

According to Freud, the main handicap of our culture is the restriction, rather than the inhibition, of two of the main instincts that are intrinsic to the human being: sexuality and aggressiveness.¹ This restriction prevents human beings from being completely contented within civilisation. However, Robert behaves as the primitive man who “was better off in knowing no restrictions to instinct” (Freud 1961, 62). Even though Freud did not find a satisfactory explanation for this phenomenon, he mentioned some of the causes for the appearance of sadism, which can help us understand Robert’s behaviour. Like all sexual streams, sadism finds its roots in childhood, in the psychosexual stages during the first years of development. First of all, the sexuality latent in children and the repeated acts of spanking and beating by the parent may “lead to a life of sadomasochism” (Ehrmann 96), with “both parent and then, tragically, child, tak[ing] up the sadomasochistic positions, simultaneously and in turn” (Fitzpatrick-Hanly 270).

The beatings received and witnessed by Robert at the hands of his father and a childhood based on violence had a traumatic effect on Robert’s sexuality. From a Freudian perspective there is no doubt that the beating of Robert’s sisters,

¹ A pointed example of the effects of this enforced cultural prohibition is moral masochism, a behaviour caused by the individual’s obligation to restrict the instinct of aggression, which leads to its unconscious incorporation into the ego against one’s self (Freud 2001b, 170)

and of himself, as their father's main method of instruction and education had influenced Robert to put into practice this harsh tendency later in his adulthood. But even if children are not mistreated by their parents, they can also develop sadistic tendencies during the anal and phallic phases since "sadism and anal eroticism play the leading parts" in "pregenital organisation" (Freud 1991c, 295). In the anal phase, the child has the opportunity to decide whether he expels or retains the object. The two phases, the expulsive and retentive, represent the beginning of sadomasochism in the individual, since the narcissistic attitude of retaining the faeces in order to master the object is masochistic. It is based on auto-erotic satisfaction (299) through active search for pleasure through painful retention. On the other hand, the expulsive phase is sadistic in the sense that it is the expulsion of the destroyed object. In Robert's case, the fact that the defecation was so brutal and was splashed even on the walls can be interpreted as the instance in the expulsive sadistic phase that would lead Robert to develop sadism in his adulthood.

Although sadomasochism begins in the anal phase, the real development of sadism, and of any sexual instinct, occurs during the next psychosexual stage, the phallic stage. This is what happens to Robert, since his sadism begins in the anal stage and is further developed during the phallic stage, when the sexual instinct is directed towards an external object and towards Caroline and Colin later in his adulthood. However, this pattern is not universal as sadism is not necessarily rooted in one's childhood and early sexual development. Thus, Colin and Mary indulge in some obscure sadistic phantasies due to their proximity to Robert and Caroline without having any previous sadistic record. This may be considered a way of showing sexuality as a complex and polymorphic

phenomenon in which apparently pervert desires are ubiquitous. It is only after having spent some time with Robert and Caroline, back at the hotel, that Colin and Mary seem to be imbued with this sadomasochistic drive. In contrast to the Venetian couple, who responds to the male sadist/female masochist pattern, both Colin's and Mary's phantasies are sadistic. She thinks of amputating Colin's legs and using him only for sex and Collin fancies creating a machine that would fuck Mary until someone switches it off, after she was dead (McEwan 63). In this sense, it is worth noticing that also Caroline, at the end of the novel, adopts a sadistic behaviour during Colin's murder, thus joining ranks with Robert, the dominator, the one who inflicts pain.

Before Freud, it was generally agreed that there were two main types of masochism: moral masochism and masochistic perversion (Fitzpatrick-Hanly 267). The moral masochist is a person who unconsciously seeks pain, while the pervert masochist consciously seeks pain for sexual pleasure (267). Freud refined this distinction by introducing the concepts of self-reproaches and pangs of conscience as mechanisms that help to give up this masochistic tendency (Fitzpatrick-Hanly 267). Caroline does feel these reproaches and sense of guilt when she confides to Mary that she was ashamed, but instead of drawing on it to give up her behaviour, she turned her shame into "a source of pleasure" (McEwan 86).

Freud widened the spectrum of masochistic behaviour by distinguishing three types of masochism: erotogenic, feminine, and moral (2001b, 161). The first two forms are secondary to sadism, while moral masochism is neither erotic nor related to a specific person, it is the suffering that matters, not the person who inflicts it (Ehrmann 101). According to this classification, it can be argued

that Caroline undergoes a transition from a feminine to a moral masochist. She is a feminine masochist in that her masochism “emanates from the loved person [Robert] and [is] endured at his command” (Freud 2001b, 165). This kind of masochism is characterised by the need to “be treated like a small and helpless child” (162). As Caroline puts it: “it’s not the pain itself, it’s the fact of the pain, of being helpless before it” (McEwan 86). Her development into a moral masochist becomes obvious when the reader sees how Caroline disassociates Robert from the scene and just loves being punished (87), apparently regardless of who inflicts this punishment. According to Freud, moral masochism is provoked by a turning inwards of the destructive instinct against the self (2001b, 165) to the extreme of wanting to be destroyed. Caroline acknowledges this transition when she tells Mary that “of course, I wanted to be destroyed” (87). Moreover, for all his sadism, Robert is also a moral masochist, although he does not know it himself. This unconscious form of masochism, in Robert’s case, is created by an unconscious sense of guilt directed towards his own ego due to the demands made by his super-ego. The final destruction of his castrated self, the final wish to be destroyed, is another trait of moral masochism that is also shared by Caroline. If we take into account Freud’s surprising contention that “through moral masochism morality becomes sexualized once more, the Oedipus complex is revived and the way is opened for a regression from morality to the Oedipus complex (Freud 2001b, 169), we must conclude that Robert’s Oedipus’ complex, like McEwan’s, is not overcome, but at a standstill. The masochism that operates in Robert’s psychic apparatus and the sadistic attitude that Caroline adopts during Colin’s murder are no rare instances, but rather respond to common

behavioural patterns since, as Freud reminds us, “a sadist is always at the same time a masochist” (1991c, 73).

3.3 Photography and Voyeurism

Robert started taking photographs of Colin and Mary since the day they arrived in Venice: “Robert took a lot of pictures that day [...] he brought more pictures home” (McEwan 90). He then made a little exhibition in his bedroom “of numerous photographs, overlapping like a collage” (90) to be enjoyed when he had sex with Caroline. Given Robert’s sadistic drive, this interest in photography might be interpreted as a way of repressing his instinct of aggression and death through a defensive mechanism of the ego termed “sublimation” (Fodor, Gaynor and Reik 178). The function of sublimation is to adapt and shape our instincts according to our cultural values and rules. Therefore, we could say that the pictures Robert takes of the British couple allows him to make the transition from an unacceptable conduct (his primary instinctual impulse of aggression) to an artistic endeavour (a socially accepted form of behaviour). However, there is no textual evidence to sustain this reading and, from a psychological perspective, Robert’s passion for photography can also be approached as the first phase in Freud’s theory of the death drive, or instinct towards destruction and the return to inorganicism that opposes the pleasure principle, or tendency toward survival, reproduction, sex, and other creative, life-producing drives (Freud 2010).

The applicability of this theory to the analysis of Robert’s behaviour is supported by the connection many novelists make between photography and death. One example that comes to mind is John Fowles’ *The Collector* (1963), a novel that presents photography as an artefact of death, in opposition to painting,

since it kills the essence of the objects. As Miranda, the kidnapped art student, states: “All photos [are dead]. When you draw something it lives and when you photograph it it dies” (55). Yet another example would be *The Dark Room* (2001), Rachel Seiffert’s debut novel exploring the dark terrain of the Holocaust and its legacy, whose central metaphor is the photographer’s “dark room”. In 1981, the association of photography with death was theorized by Roland Barthes in a short book entitled *Camera Lucida*. As Andy Grundberg explains, in this work, “he arrives at the broad conclusion that every photograph contains the sign of his death and that if the essence of the photograph is found in death, it leads only to a dead end” (n. p.).

Taking into account all these precedents, it is legitimate to consider Robert’s use of photography as a bad omen, rather than as an attempt to sublimate his instinctual impulse of aggression. Following Barthes’ line of thought, it could be argued that the photographs Robert takes of Colin suggest that the latter “is already dead”, thus constituting a proleptic warning about Colin’s impending danger. Moreover, besides a bad omen, photography can also be seen as a particular form of *scopophilia*, or sexual pleasure in looking at beautiful objects of desire. This would connect photography with voyeurism.² Examples of voyeurism also occur throughout the narrative, such as when Caroline watches Mary and Colin while they are sleeping naked (McEwan 45), or when Mary looks at Colin, also naked, while she is doing yoga exercises (39). Moreover, the fact that he is always the object of the gaze, the one who is looked

² This act of voyeurism could be classified as a form of perversion as it does not lead to sexual intercourse but death. In Freud’s own words: “scopophilia is foreplay and properly should lead to intercourse; anything else risks perversion” (Freud 1991c, 70).

at, could be another proleptic element pointing to Colin as the passive element at the hands of Robert, the active character.

All in all, Robert's death drive can be divided into three main phases. Photography would be the triggering phase, which consists of taking photos of Colin and looking at them when he and his wife have sex. The second phase is that of knowledge. When Colin and Robert meet and start being acquainted with each other, the morbidity of Robert's instincts increases. The third, closing stage, that of the killing itself, providing the final satisfaction of one of the most primitive and intrinsic human drives, is the death drive. Considered together, these are the different stages, involving a gradual movement from distance to proximity in Colin's process towards death and Robert's final fulfilment of his narcissistic satisfaction, which is the seizure of someone's life.

3.4 Robert's Conscience: Sadistic Super-ego and Masochistic Ego

According to Freud, morality, or conscience, "is the expression of the tension between the ego and the super-ego" (2001a, 61), due to the demands made by the latter, that is, in Robert's case, by his father. Robert is a very instinctual, id-ridden character, as can be gauged by many situations in the narrative, such as when he punches Colin in the stomach, or the fact that he has hurt his wife to the extent of almost killing her, as she herself confides to Caroline: "My back was broken and I was in hospital for months" (McEwan 87). Allegedly, Robert has managed to avoid the desire to kill her for quite a long time and this repression of his death drive should lead to a tension between his ego and super-ego expressed in feelings of guilt. This guilt can arise from "a fear of an external

authority” or from “a fear of the super-ego” (Freud 1961, 74). In Robert’s case, it is the latter that would operate, taking the form of an all-knowing conscience that must punish the ego even if it has not committed the desired action of killing his wife. Therefore, the ego becomes subordinated under the aggression inflicted by the sadistic super-ego, and its need for punishment is symptomatic of its masochistic nature (83). This process responds to Freud’s description of the tension between a sadistic super-ego and a masochistic ego. Nevertheless, this mirror situation between Robert’s sadomasochistic nature and the one in his psychic apparatus or, in other words, between Robert’s sadomasochistic tendency towards the external world and towards his own ego, cannot be approached through this desire to kill his wife. The desire to kill is not repressed, but rather displaced towards Colin and, as we have seen, executed in the established set of phases that constitute the progressive fulfilment of the death drive (photography, knowledge, and death). Just as the habit of photographing Colin is not a defensive mechanism but an act of voyeurism and the first approach towards death, so the desire to kill his wife is not repressed but displaced.

Still, although Robert does not succeed in repressing his death drive, he has a guilty conscience provoked by his super-ego whenever he deviates from the strict patriarchal and male-chauvinistic rules imposed on him by his father. He feels guilty whenever he eats sweets or defecates, the two acts he was brutally punished for as a child (see above), or also when he is diagnosed with infertility. The guilt provoked by this diagnosis points to Robert’s true, unacknowledged initial trauma: the homosexuality that his father tried to eradicate by obnoxious means during his childhood. Developing this aspect of Robert’s behaviour, Ailsa

Seaboyer concludes that Robert's true aim in killing Colin was to attain "the complete destruction of the self [...] and become the object of the gaze of society and the law" (152). This interpretation that Colin's murder is driven by Robert's unconscious desire to destroy himself would be in keeping with Freud's pattern of sadistic super-ego and masochistic ego summarised above. According to this interpretation, the law is the paternal imago on which the super-ego is based in its search for punishment of the ego. This occurs due to the "introjection into the ego of the first objects of the id's libidinal impulses" (Freud 2001b, 167) during the Oedipus stage. In Robert's case, the introjected object is his father, who is desexualised and incorporated into the super-ego after the Oedipus stage, with its main characteristics: severity and sadism among others³ (167), which will consequently constitute the main component of Robert's super-ego. In other words, it is his father who will operate as the agency known as conscience (Freud 2001b, 167). Therefore, when Robert behaves in a way that differs from the demands made by his ideal or super-ego (that is, his father), Robert's ego will react with feelings of anxiety (Freud 2001b, 167). From this perspective, the tantalising scene when, after being locked up in it by his sisters, Robert defecates in his father's study, provides clear evidence that his ego is seeking punishment at the hands of his father. Likewise, when he is diagnosed with infertility, Robert interprets it as a failure to respond to the features of masculine superiority and strength that characterises his father, which dominates Robert's super-ego. Consequently, the super-ego inflicts the aggression on its own ego in the form of conscience.

³ "The Oedipus complex is the source of our individual ethical sense, our morality" (Freud 2001b, 168). In other words, the super-ego is a replacement or substitute for the Oedipus complex.

The pattern sadistic super-ego/masochistic ego can also be found in the other characters of *The Comfort of Strangers*. According to Seaboyer, Colin and Mary would embody the innocent ego, and Robert and Caroline the severe and sadistic super-ego (114). Indeed, Colin's and Mary's need of punishment responds to their masochistic nature since they are accomplices in their own disgrace. Their unconscious shifting towards Cannaregio and Mary's comment that their coming back to Robert's house "wasn't completely accidental either" (McEwan 84) are proof of their complicity and need of punishment. This relationship between ego and super-ego or, in the novel's terms, between Colin and Mary on the one hand, and Robert and Caroline on the other, perfectly illustrates what Freud termed the "merciless violence [that] the super-ego can come to exercise over the ego" (in Seaboyer, 114). According to Seaboyer, Colin's climactic murder is "a sadomasochistic murder in which perverse perpetrators and innocent victims are alike complicit" (114). However, this interpretation does not take into account the complexity and depth of Caroline's perversions. Unlike Seaboyer, I contend that Caroline is not a perverse perpetrator *per se*, but an innocent masochist before her transition towards a moral masochist, who eventually develop sadistic traits. Not until the *dénouement* of the novel, climaxing in Colin's murder, does she take up the sadist role. Likewise, as we have seen, the innocent victims, Mary and Colin, have sadistic dreams. Their complex behaviour conveys the central idea of the novel that pervert desires are not exceptional, but rather common in human beings.

3.5 The Characters' Defensive Mechanisms

Freud described an extensive set of defensive mechanisms of the ego that are crucial for the development of the plot. Among these, I will delve into the ones that have more effect on the narrative. Firstly, the mechanism of denial that Colin's ego displays when Robert punches him in the stomach "with his fist, a relaxed, easy blow" (McEwan 55). This event, which is external, cannot be dealt with by his ego; therefore, Colin rejects that experience and behaves as if nothing had happened. Since Colin's reaction of ignoring such a striking experience and behaving in a normal manner is not quintessential, it is plausible to deem this behaviour as the consequence of an earlier abuse in childhood. This hypothesis would provide a very simple psychological reason for this phenomenon, namely, that repressed unconscious memories from Colin's childhood had surface as a consequence of Robert's punch.

Likewise, an imperative mechanism that operates in Robert's mind is the mechanism of displacement, which essentially consists of "satisfying an impulse with a substitute object" (McLeod n. p.). As suggested in the earlier section, Robert's desire to kill his wife is not repressed, rather, the destructive impulse is displaced towards Colin. There is no in-depth interpretation of the function of the mechanism of displacement. Nevertheless, Freud related it to the death drive, which he saw as a doubly oriented instinct, directed partly inwards and partly outwards, and "in the service of the sexual function" (2001b, 163). In Freud's own words:

The instinct is then called the destructive instinct [...] a portion of this instinct is placed directly in the service of the sexual function, where it

has an important part to play. This is sadism proper. Another portion does not share this transposition outwards; it remains inside the organism [...]. It is in this portion that we have to recognize the original, erotogenic masochism (163).

Still, the instinct of destruction “which has been directed outwards, projected, can be once more introjected, turned inwards” (164). This is what may happen to Robert if he represses the instinct to kill his wife. Therefore, by substituting the object of aggression and directing his death drive towards Colin, Robert manages both to satisfy his sadistic desire and to prevent the death instinct from turning inwards and inflicting erotogenic masochistic pain to his own ego.

Freud’s theory of the origin of the death drive provides, then, an explanation for the displacement of Robert’s desire from his wife to Colin in order to avoid both killing his wife and repressing his desire. However, if we accept Seaboyer’s interpretation that, by killing Collin, Robert is seeking his self-destruction, we would have to admit that Robert’s death drive has in fact turned inwards, that, instead of protecting his persona and avoiding the death drive from turning inwards, Robert’s killing of Collin constitutes “an ultimate transgression that will guarantee the ego’s exposure and destruction at the hands of the law, as the symbolic father” (Head 61). This interpretation is supported by the fact that even though Robert and Caroline made “elaborate escape plans, he leaves behind an incontrovertible trail of evidence” (Seaboyer 151): they committed the crime in their own house and left the corpse there, and moreover,

few hours before the murder, Robert walked with Colin holding hands and telling “everyone [they] met [...] that you are my lover” (McEwan 81).

According to the first reading, Robert’s killing of Colin would be an attempt to prevent his death drive from turning inwards. According to the second, it would provide evidence that this turn inward has taken place. Though opposed, both interpretations highlight the importance of the turn inward of the death drive. In any case, the second interpretation allows for further nuancing, since, as Barbara Low has pointed out, the search for self-destruction is very much related to the “Nirvana Principle” (Freud 2001b, 159). In *The Economic Problem of Masochism*, Freud defined this principle as the “purpose of reducing to nothing [...] the sums of excitation which flow upon it [the mental apparatus]” (159). From this perspective, the aim that Robert intends to achieve through his own destruction would be “to conduct the restlessness of life into the stability of the inorganic state” (160).

4. CONCLUSION

As the analysis has attempted to demonstrate, *The Comfort of Strangers* is structured as a physical journey that soon becomes a complex and disquieting exploration of the human psyche, with watery Venice symbolising the protagonists’ plunge into the darkest recesses of their unconscious. McEwan uses Freudian theory to show the complementarity the physical and the psychological journeys of the main four characters, and how these journeys constitute a process towards death, involving a gradual shortening of the distance between sadism and masochism, victimiser and victimised, and from photography, through knowledge, to assassination. Both facets, the sadistic

(Robert and Caroline) and the masochistic (Mary and Colin), show the merciless violence that one's own super-ego can exert on the ego. McEwan guides the reader along a behavioural storyline in which quintessential elements of psychoanalysis, such as the sense of guilt, the psycho-sexual stages and the relationship of id, ego and super-ego, are decisive for the development of the plot and its atrocious *dénouement*.

A central message of the novel is the closeness of the sexual and the death drives. Not only is Robert's death drive an imperative requirement for his behaviour and use of photography, but also a fundamental element in relation to his sexual drive. While Robert's sadism originated in the anal and phallic phases of his psychosexual development due to traumatic events occurred in his childhood, his masochism found its roots in the rejection by the super-ego of his homosexuality, thus triggering the pattern sadistic super-ego/masochistic-ego and proving the existence of a conscience. Indeed, Robert's sadomasochism is based on a never-ending spiral of rivalry between his sexual and his death drives, with each of them attempting to usurp the other's leading position. The murder of Colin shows that Robert's sex drive has overruled his death drive. By contrast, Colin's incapacity to react adequately to the threat embodied by Robert reveals an unconscious acquiescence in his own murder.

According to Seaboyer, *The Comfort of Strangers* is potentially regenerative in that it brings to light an unvarnished truth that society endeavours to silence. However, approaching the novel from a Freudian perspective, it reveals itself as an unfortunate, yet presumptive chain of events in which, McEwan, wielding his unquestionable authorial power, forces his equally wretched and miserable, puppet-like characters to enter a vicious cycle of

suffering with Robert, the active agent, inflicting pain on the others, in an attempt to fulfil his super-ego's/creative father's demands. In this sense, *The Comfort of Strangers* may be said to materialise the analogy suggested above between McEwan's and Robert's Oedipus complexes, with McEwan—submitting his characters to a merciless treatment that echoes the sadistic behaviour of the patriarchal figures in Robert's family across three generations: his grandfather, his father, and himself, thus pointing to the never-ending, vicious cycle of violence, misogyny and hate promoted by patriarchal culture.

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