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Sense and Sensibility: Rationalism and Irrationalism in selected novels of Ian McEwan

Abstract

Critics have widely assumed that Ian McEwan, being a New-Humanist, advocates rationalism in his novels. In this study I interrogate this assumption by analysing the interplay between "sense" and "sensibility" in his fiction. My dissertation focuses on the themes, language, point of view, narrative structures and symbolism in McEwan's novels. It has taken the form of a comparative textual analysis and close reading of four of McEwan's texts which I believe highlight the debate around "sense and sensibility" most explicitly: *Enduring Love* (1997); *Amsterdam* (1998); *Atonement* (2001) and *Saturday* (2005). The fact that the characters that represent rationalism are always male brings into question the role of gender within McEwan's novels. Whether McEwan is a realist, modernist or postmodern writer, is another debate that emerges, when studying rationalism in his works. My project therefore addresses the conundrum of whether an author can be both a humanist and a postmodern writer, despite these ideologies seeming irreconcilable. This study examines the ways in which McEwan passes through these seemingly contradictory novelistic discourses, and ultimately rejects the moral indeterminacy of postmodern poetics, proving him to be a polygot writer. Finally, I conclude by arguing that McEwan does not promote "sense over sensibility" but rather suggests a balance between the two. This research stimulates debate around morality, gender and the challenges of "defining" a postmodern novel.