International Journal of Research in Education: Theory and Practices
E-ISSN 3048-8486
Volume 2 Issue 2
Mar-Apr 2025, PP 152-159

Ian McEwan's Sweet Tooth: The Enduring Role of the Author

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Abstract. Ian McEwan's novel Sweet Tooth uses metanarrative techniques to challenge how we understand literature. These techniques create and break illusions of reality, making us question the nature of fiction. The novel responds to Roland Barthes' idea of "the death of the author" by suggesting a different perspective - the disappearance of the subject instead of the author. This allows the author's voice to survive within the narrative. McEwan explores the purpose of fiction, showing an idealized but fragile view of storytelling. The novel rethinks the roles of the author, subject, and reader, leading to a new understanding of authorship.

Index Terms- Metanarrative, Ian McEwan, Sweet Tooth, first-person narrative, metafiction

I. Introduction

Ian McEwan's Sweet Tooth (2012) presents a sophisticated interplay of narrative form and metafictional commentary, positioning itself as a critical response to post-structuralist conceptions of authorship, particularly Roland Barthes' seminal proclamation of "the death of the author." McEwan's novel not only interrogates the boundaries between fiction and reality but also reflects upon the role and persistence of the authorial presence within literary texts. Through its layered narrative structure and the surprising metafictional twist that reframes the story's creation, Sweet Tooth offers an incisive meditation on the enduring role of the author in an age increasingly sceptical of authorial authority and intentionality.

Rather than affirming Barthes' thesis, McEwan proposes a more nuanced alternative - the disappearance or destabilization of the subject rather than the author. In this context, the 'subject' refers both to the characters within the text and to the reader's own stable position in interpreting meaning. The novel blurs the lines between creator and creation, particularly through the revelation that the male protagonist is the true author of the narrative attributed to the female protagonist, Serena Frome. This narrative trick not only reclaims the author's voice but also problematizes the reader's assumptions about narrative authenticity and gendered voice.

In rethinking the triadic relationship between author, subject, and reader, Sweet Tooth challenges contemporary literary paradigms and reasserts fiction's capacity to convey deeper truths - truths that reside not in the absence of the author but in their imaginative and elusive presence. This paper explores how McEwan's novel reconfigures authorship in light of these concerns.

II. The Enduring

Ian McEwan's novel Sweet Tooth is fast-paced and character-driven, making it easy to read and engaging. On the surface, it follows a straightforward, linear narrative, but beneath this, the novel explores deep questions about life and art. Set in England in the early 1970s, it appears to be a simple spy novel. However, the ending introduces a meta-literary twist that changes our understanding of the entire story. This forces readers to rethink what they believed about the plot, the author's intent, and the structure of the novel. Essentially, Sweet Tooth presents one story, but in the end, reveals another that both frames and disrupts the first.

The novel engages with meta-critical ideas, particularly the relationship between the author, narrative, and characters. A useful way to analyse McEwan's approach is through Roland Barthes' concept of 'the death of the author.' This idea helps us understand how Sweet Tooth plays with narrative control and perspective. In an essay of the same name, Barthes posits that, once a literary work has been written, the words assume an identity of their own that transcend the author's own interests and intentions. The author is merely a vehicle through which the words are transmitted: the author does not retain control or presence in the written work. In essence, the narrative is set free to fulfil its purpose through its creator's absence or figurative death. Given the novel's structure and themes, interpreting it through Barthes' framework is a fitting approach. McEwan himself seems to encourage such a reading, inviting readers to question the role of the author within the text.

The final twist in Sweet Tooth is designed to make readers rethink the entire story by rearranging characters and events. Since the goal is to analyse the narrative as a whole, it is appropriate to reveal this twist at the beginning of the discussion. Until this last chapter, we believe that we are reading a first-person account by a young female narrator, Serena Frome. Groomed by her older lover, Tony Canning, Serena has been recruited by the British intelligence agency MI5 to participate in - Sweet Tooth, a cultural campaign designed to promote anti-communist ideology through literature. The plot follows Serena, whose job is to recruit writers with ideologically acceptable views by offering them financial support. She begins a relationship with one of these writers, Tom Haley. In the novel's final revelation, we discover that Haley has actually written the very story we have been reading. This adds a metafictional layer, challenging the reader's perception of narrative authority. Furthermore, as critics and McEwan himself have noted, Tom Haley closely resembles McEwan in terms of background and literary style. While their lived experiences may not be identical, the similarities suggest that Haley functions as a fictionalized version of McEwan, blurring the boundaries between author and character.

III. Narrative - Metafiction and Metanarrative

McEwan's approach is simple yet highly effective. By using a straightforward narrative device, he leads readers into a deeper reflection on the nature and limits of fiction. His scepticism about first-person narratives - perhaps because they can be inherently deceptive - is transferred to the reader, prompting questions about literary conventions. This technique aligns with the goals of postmodern and meta-literary narratives, which challenge traditional storytelling.

Critics differentiate between metafiction and metanarrative. Metafiction refers to fiction that draws attention to its own constructed nature – essentially, 'fiction about fiction.' In contrast, metanarrative is a more self-referential form, focusing on the process of writing itself. John Mullan explains that metanarrative has existed long before postmodernism. For example, Italo Calvino's If on a Winter's Night a Traveler turns the act of reading and writing into part of the story itself. Similarly, elements of metafiction can be found throughout literary history, dating back to Chaucer.

Metafiction reminds readers that they are engaging with a fictional work, while metanarrative goes further by questioning the reality of the story itself. This often leads to multiple interpretations and an acceptance of narrative unreliability. McEwan has explored these techniques in earlier novels, most notably in Atonement, but also in The Cement Garden, The Child in Time, and Enduring Love.

Metanarrative, though a more recent development than metafiction, is well established in postmodern literature. McEwan did not invent this technique; earlier writers, such as John Fowles, used similar methods. In The French Lieutenant's Woman and The Magus, Fowles disrupts the illusion of reality by having the narrator step into the story as a character.

1"Sweet Tooth - Writing and Research - Ian McEwan" August 22 2012 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbuS- SHtzhU

As critic Frederick Holmes notes, this technique replaces one illusion with another. This narrative approach was innovative when Fowles used it, but it is similar to how characters in theatre sometimes break the fourth wall. For example, in David Huang's M. Butterfly, a character steps out of the fictional world of the performance to address the audience. In both cases, this act destroys the illusion of fiction by revealing its artificial nature.

The goal of these postmodern techniques is not just to break conventional storytelling but to replace it with something new. One key purpose is to prevent readers from fully immersing in the fictional world. Instead, metanarrative forces them to recognize the presence of the author. Unlike Barthes idea of 'the death of the author,' these narratives prove that the author remains active, controlling the story and making their presence undeniable.

To justify a narrative that deliberately refuses to sustain its own illusion, there must be something profoundly revelatory in the moment when the artifice is exposed. In Sweet Tooth, this moment of rupture functions not merely as a metafictional device but as an epistemological awakening - an echo of the allegory of Plato' s cave, where the captive is forced to confront the shadows as mere representations rather than truth itself. However, unlike Plato's enlightenment, McEwan's narrative disruption entails a dual movement: illumination and destruction. The dismantling of the fictional world's integrity - he realization that the narrative voice belongs not to Serena but to her lover, the author Tom Haley - hatters the illusion that had sustained the reader's belief. Once this constructed reality collapses, it cannot be seamlessly restored. Yet, it is precisely through this destruction that McEwan asserts a new vision of authorship. As with John Fowles' enigmatic figure of Conchis in The Magus, who manipulates

perception to provoke self-reflection, McEwan breaks one reality to construct another - one in which the author's presence is not erased but reframed. Rather than submitting to Barthes' conception of the 'death of the author,' McEwan revives the author's role as an architect of experience, drawing attention to the act of storytelling itself. The novel thus stages the collapse of illusion as a necessary precondition for a deeper engagement with fiction's creative and philosophical possibilities, affirming the enduring, if transformed, role of the author.

Standing in critical dialogue with Roland Barthes' influential pronouncement of 'the death of the author,' Sweet Tooth offers a nuanced counterpoint to the notion that a narrative's integrity depends upon the erasure of its creator. Barthes argues that for a literary work to be autonomous and unshackled from interpretive constraints, the author must be effaced - their identity, historical context, and intentionality rendered irrelevant. Only through this symbolic death, he contends, can the text achieve true independence and allow meaning to emerge freely through the reader. McEwan, however, complicates this formulation by reasserting the author's presence in a way that is both playful and philosophically charged. Rather than disappearing, the author - embodied in the fictional surrogate Tom Haley - actively infiltrates the narrative, revealing not only the constructed nature of the story but also the illusion of narrative subjectivity itself.

In doing so, McEwan stages a collapse not of the author but of the subject, particularly the first-person voice of Serena Frome, whose apparent authority as narrator is retroactively dismantled. The text thereby enacts a trade-off: in refusing the death of the author, it sacrifices the reader's belief in the ontological stability of the narrative voice. McEwan does not reject Barthes outright, but reconfigures his thesis - suggesting that while the author need not vanish entirely, their narrative presence demands a different kind of loss: the dissolution of the subject's reality. Sweet Tooth thus proposes an alternative vision of authorship - one that survives not through invisibility, but through its embedded, self - aware artifice.

The metanarrative, as a hallmark of poststructuralist fiction, functions not to affirm the coherence of the subject but to actively dismantle it. As Michael Drolet notes, such forms "seek not to constitute the subject, but to dissolve it" (Drolet 3). This dissolution emerges from the narrative's inherent invitation to recognize the plurality of meaning, perspectival fragmentation, and the epistemological limits of any single interpretive framework. In Sweet Tooth, McEwan exploits this dynamic by embedding multiple layers of deception, perspective, and authorial play, ultimately unsettling the authority of the first-person narrator and exposing the artificial scaffolding of the story itself. As Wheeler asserts, fiction of this kind insists on "the multiplicity of interpretation, perspectivism and limitedness of any one point of view" (Wheeler 213), thereby destabilizing the reader's reliance on a singular, coherent subject.

Yet, McEwan's objective is not nihilistic. The purpose of such metafictional interventions is not merely to deconstruct, but to affirm fiction's enduring affective and cognitive power. The illusion may be ruptured, but the aesthetic and emotional resonance remains intact. As John Mullan observes of Atonement, "The test of the trick is perhaps in re-reading… McEwan wants you to identify with characters, to succumb to narrative illusion, to believe it for the moment" (Mullan 2006, para. 7). Sweet Tooth operates on a similar principle: the reader is invited to knowingly enter the illusion, aware of its contractedness yet still moved by its emotional truth. This conscious surrender underscores the vitality of authorship - not as a concealed presence, but as a guiding, enduring force that gives fiction its transformative potential.

In Sweet Tooth, fiction itself becomes the object of interrogation, as McEwan lays bare its capacity for manipulation and illusion. The novel constructs a metafictional subtext of instability, inviting the reader into a space of epistemic uncertainty where narrative authority is persistently undermined. This destabilization does not merely challenge the reliability of the narrator but calls into question the ethics and efficacy of storytelling itself. At times, the text appears to cultivate a form of radical scepticism, pushing the reader to question not only the authenticity of the narrative but the motives and mechanisms behind its construction.

Laura Miller astutely observes that Serena Frome - the ostensible narrator for much of the novel - would likely reject McEwan's metanarrative tactics. Her literary preferences lean toward conventional realism, and she might dismiss such techniques as mere "tricks" that should be "distrusted." This ironic distance between the narrator's sensibility and the novel's own structural design becomes one of Sweet Tooth's most significant metafictional gestures. The fact that the story is ultimately revealed to be authored by Tom Haley further complicates the reader's position, as it reframes the entire narrative as a fictional construct within a fictional world—an illusion staged by the author-figure within the text.

In exposing fiction's capacity to deceive while still engaging the reader emotionally, McEwan underscores the enduring power of authorship. Rather than rejecting narrative artifice, Sweet Tooth highlights its capacity to provoke, to mislead, and ultimately, to illuminate. The author's hand remains visible - not to undermine fiction, but to reassert its intellectual and aesthetic significance. Serena criticizes a narrative twist that foreshadows McEwan's own:

- Only on the last page Serena explains, - did I discover that the story I was reading was actually the one the woman was writing. The ape doesn't exist, it's a spectre, the creature of her fretful imagination. (Miller 72)
- The death of the subject in Sweet Tooth - embodied in the narrative voice of Serena Frome - is neither simple nor absolute. Rather, it unfolds as a layered and paradoxical erasure. In hindsight, Serena's disdain for narrative "tricks" - which she perceives as breaches of the implicit contract between author and reader - can be read as an anticipatory critique of the very metanarrative strategy that will ultimately overwrite her voice. Her collapse as the story's presumed authorial consciousness becomes a site of narrative contestation: a battle between the illusion of a stable, first-person subject and the reassertion of the author's presence through the figure of Tom Haley.
- This death, then, is not a silencing but a transformation - Serena's narrative is cannibalized by another, more self-aware authorial voice that reveals its own fabrication. The emergence of Tom Haley as the true author reframes the entire novel as a metafictional performance, one in which the original subject is sacrificed for the sake of exposing the mechanisms of authorship itself. Serena's early longing to find herself reflected in fiction - her voracious and idealistic reading - underscores the irony of her own eventual narrative effacement. She becomes, in effect, the constructed subject she once sought in literature.

Through this displacement, McEwan foregrounds the enduring and manipulative role of the author, who asserts creative dominance not by disappearing but by orchestrating the very illusion of absence. Sweet Tooth thus dramatizes the collapse of the

subject as a necessary precondition for the survival - and evolution - of the author's voice within postmodern fiction.

… I suppose I was, in my mindless way, looking for something, version of myself, a heroine I could slip inside as one might a pair of favourite old shoes. Or a wild silk blouse…. I suppose I would not have been satisfied until I had in my hands a novel about a girl in a Camden bedsit who occupied a lowly position in M15 and was without a man. (McEwan 38)

Both the narrative and our trust in its coherence are fundamentally destabilized when we come to realize that the story we are reading is, paradoxically, the very fiction Serena Frome yearns for - a narrative that reflects her subjectivity, anchoring her identity within a constructed literary reality. This revelation acts as a mirror, but one that fractures rather than affirms. As the narrative illusion unravels, so too does Serena's ontological presence; her voice, desires, and subjectivity vanish, revealing that she was never an autonomous narrator at all. Much like the fictional lovers in Atonement, whose imagined survival is later undercut by the brutal truth of their wartime deaths, Serena's narrative existence is exposed as a literary fabrication—a fiction within a fiction.

Yet, Sweet Tooth diverges from Atonement in a crucial respect. Whereas Atonement replaces illusion with historical tragedy, Sweet Tooth replaces its imagined female narrator with a male authorial presence - Tom Haley - who retroactively claims narrative control. This substitution is not merely a shift in perspective but a deeper ontological displacement: the dissolution of a female subject whose literary and emotional life is appropriated and rewritten by a voice markedly different from, and arguably reflective of, McEwan himself. The result is a metafictional gesture that is as disconcerting as it is revealing. In collapsing Serena's subjectivity, McEwan foregrounds the enduring presence of the author - not as a silent absence behind the text, but as an active constructor of realities, reasserting authority within the very postmodern framework that sought to eliminate him.

The novel's clever dénouement profoundly unsettles our sense of narrative reality, as the dissolution of Serena Frome's voice is easily experienced by the reader as the erasure of the woman herself - our companion and guide throughout the text. This revelation induces a sharp narrative and emotional dislocation: the realization that Serena is not a fully autonomous subject but rather a fictional construct authored by her lover, Tom Haley. The power dynamics shift abruptly - where we once believed Serena was narrating and objectifying Tom through her gaze, it is, in fact, Tom who has been constructing her all along. He emerges as the true narrative agent, effectively replacing Serena's first-person voice with his own authorial consciousness.

This narrative twist is further complicated by the deliberate biographical parallels between Tom Haley and Ian McEwan himself. These similarities initially appear to anchor Haley in the extra-textual world, blurring the boundary between fiction and authorial reality. However, they also draw attention to Haley's own ontological instability - he too is a narrative fiction, behind whom stands the unmistakable presence of McEwan. In this layered metafictional maneuverer, McEwan stages not just the collapse of his character's subjectivity but also his own return. Far from succumbing to Barthes' theoretical 'death of the author,' McEwan orchestrates a deliberate resurrection: the author steps forward, not merely as a structural absence or implicit presence, but as a self-conscious force shaping and reclaiming the narrative from within. Sweet Tooth, then, becomes a bold affirmation of the enduring - and evolving - role of the author in contemporary fiction.

IV. Conclusion

In Sweet Tooth, Ian McEwan orchestrates a sophisticated metanarrative that not only critiques but ultimately reaffirms the enduring presence of the author within contemporary fiction. By subverting the reader's expectations and gradually dismantling the illusion of Serena Frome's narrative authority, McEwan reconfigures the literary power dynamics that have long been central to poststructuralist debates - most notably Roland Barthes' assertion of the 'death of the author.' Rather than erasing the authorial presence, Sweet Tooth enacts a reversal: the subject dissolves, the illusion of narrative autonomy collapses, and the author re-emerges from within the very fiction that was presumed to mask him.

This return is not a nostalgic reinstatement of traditional authorship, but a reflexive, postmodern strategy that acknowledges its own artifice while still insisting on the creative and interpretive centrality of the author. McEwan foregrounds fiction's dual nature - its capacity to deceive and to reveal, to construct reality and simultaneously dismantle it. Through this intricate play of voices and identities, the novel challenges the boundaries between author and character, fiction and truth, illusion and authorship.

Ultimately, Sweet Tooth invites readers to reconsider the role of the author not as a vanished figure behind the text, but as an active participant embedded within its structure. In doing so, McEwan not only resists Barthes' thesis but reclaims the author's place in shaping narrative meaning. The novel stands as a testament to fiction's enduring capacity to evolve - and to the author's indispensable role in that evolution.

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