

*Nutshell*, by Ian McEwan. London: Jonathan Cape,  
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According to Ian McEwan, novelists, whether they are aware of it or not, live in Shakespeare's shadow. The reaction to this shadow has recently become a common choice for authors of various backgrounds, a choice meant to react to stories, plots, characters, and those ambiguities on which Shakespearean plays are solidly constructed.

In his latest novel, *Nutshell*, published in September 2016 by Jonathan Cape, the British novelist engages in a postmodern rewriting of *Hamlet*, transferring the action to contemporary London and the court of Elsinore into a rotting house and the womb of Hamlet's mother, Trudy. Trudy and Claude, her brother-in-law, conduct a clandestine affair behind the back of Hamlet's father, John Craincross, a broke professor and failed poet. The illicit relationship between the two lovers is punctuated by sex and reveries, chit-chat and gossip, all aimed toward the murder of John. What distinguishes McEwan's revenge tale from Shakespeare's is that the protagonist is a nine-month old fetus, who plots to avenge his father's death while witnessing the whole sequence of events from within the maternal womb. The physical and sentimental bond between the fetus and his mother makes the affair a love-hate triangle, where everything that is said, done, and felt by Claude and Trudy is equally experienced by the woman's silent guest.

The novel emerges as a tale of negated revenge, a revenge tragedy *sui generis*, due to the protagonist's inability to gain agency against his uncle, Claude. The revenge is internalized, truncated, and the question that the protagonist keeps asking himself is not "Must I avenge my father?" but rather, "How can I avenge my father from here?" In an interview with *The Guardian*, McEwan claimed that the only person who he could think of as more trapped than a fetus was Prince Hamlet (Aitkenhead 2016). This is when he decided to turn Hamlet into a clever, sassy, and self-deprecating baby within the womb of a would-be murderer and lover of her own brother-in-law.

When appropriating a text, the author who is re-interpreting or re-writing is often politically, ethically, or morally committed. In the light of that, could we consider *Nutshell* as a criticism of the extreme and criminal consequences of reckless, perverse extramarital relationships? An extended,

witty meditation on abortion and child abuse? And, in that sense, an attempt to give a political voice to those who are dismissed as having none? McEwan seems to reject these claims, as he states that his novel is about "the communication of pleasure" (McEwan, 2016) and is, therefore, what Barthes would have called a *texte du plaisir*.

While Shakespeare's Hamlet moves on stage freely and manages to overhear, spy, and dissemble, McEwan's soon-to-be Hamlet is literally bounded in a nutshell. But here's the rub: Trudy's placenta is what separates the soon-to-be Hamlet, whose future name is never mentioned by the characters outside, from the world — his mother, his father, and Claude. The novel opens with a short, but extremely powerful, evocative sentence: "So, here I am, upside down in a woman" (McEwan 2016, 1). This woman, Trudy, not only seems to be based on Shakespeare's Gertrude, but also has characteristics of Lear's Goneril (for her strong sexual energy and masculinity) and of Lady Macbeth, due to her shifting relation to the crime she is about to commit.

Trudy cherishes bittersweet memories of the poems her current husband John used to dedicate to her and of his childish fantasies; even the fetus recalls some of his father's lines, which are often borrowed from Shakespeare and other poets; John first resembles John of Gaunt, paraphrasing his celebration of England, and later quotes Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," praising the intimacy of the grave. Claude, on the other hand, is the opposite of his brother and is anything but a poet; rather, uncle Claude is a man built on banality, where nihilism constantly balances the commonplace. The baby's verdict is implacable: "Just how stupid is Claude really?" (McEwan 2016, 56). Claude speaks a factual, repetitive, and insignificant language, and the fetus takes great pleasure in deconstructing and undermining his uncle's speeches and actions and shows an outstanding, and lucid critical sensibility, unconsciously nurtured by Trudy whenever she listens to the news or the radio.

For example, Hamlet's intellectual and cognitive maturity improves on a daily basis through the few means he has. On the one hand, Shakespeare's Wittenberg is replaced by news reports, television programs, and radio talks; on the other, the beat of Trudy's heart, her hormones, breath, and epiglottis movements are the baby's litmus test. His fondness for the radio and his readiness in overhearing everything that is going on "outside" recalls Hamlet's and Polonius' spying and peeking in Elsinore, a transposition of information and voices that is never direct and clear, but rather muffled and filtered.

As the novel unfolds and the plot to poison John through some food bought at The Danish Takeaway progresses, no one is spared from the baby's judgment: McEwan's Hamlet plays the part of both the fool and the malcontent. He is the only one who sees his mother, father,

and uncle for what they really are. While John is a man-child, Claude is a small-minded, dull, Machiavel, not clever enough to get away with John's murder; however, the fetus-protagonist keeps an eye out for any revelation and overhears the couple's pillow-talks and sexual activities as the public does at the theater, becoming, *de facto*, an accidental victim-accomplice in the murder, a point emphasized when the fetal Hamlet defines the events as "a doomed production of a terrible play, where improbable lines were rehearsed in the small hours by drunks" (McEwan 2016, 94). Sometimes it feels as though he is sitting next to us, reproaching us, and requesting silence — "But shush, the conspirators are talking!" (54). The fourth wall is, thus, broken down, and the protagonist, being a fool, prevents us from reaching catharsis: lucid and precocious, Hamlet unveils the truth with his linguistic maturity, takes the beauty out of the narrated events with cold reasoning and epigrammatic lines, and makes us sympathize with him, bounded in a nutshell but still king of infinite space. As a consequence, the novel takes the form of a critical and relentless inner monologue, interrupted, now and then, by meaningless and decadent exchanges between Trudy and Claude; McEwan's conversational style and fluid prose also confer a sense of deterministic chaos to the baby's reasoning.

And since the fetus is both a spectator of and actor in this tragedy, there is the typically Elizabethan need to create several clusters of images that might obviate the need of the child for sight, physical settings, and faces. Hamlet, like a blindfolded audience, relies on sounds, words, and the mental images they create in him, and declares that "words, as I'm beginning to appreciate, can make things true" (McEwan 2016, 59).

Playing the part of the malcontent, he says, "Life imitates art" (McEwan 2016, 117), and ultimately, that is what he tries to do: the murderers want the police to believe that John committed suicide, and Hamlet even imitates the fiction they try to keep up by using his umbilical cord to hang himself. Frustratingly, the baby attempts to "suit the action to the word" (*Hamlet*, 3.1.58), but eventually fails.

The dilemma *to be or not to be?* thus acquires a new, drastic meaning: *to be born or not to be born?* At the beginning of the novel, the fetus struggles to understand whether it is better to come into the world and therefore make his guilt and his connivance real, or, simply, not to be born and live innocently. "Ripeness isn't everything" (McEwan 2016, 34), Hamlet affirms bleakly, since he is well aware that he has no other option than to be alive and despair, because it is he who must set time right again. The question he keeps asking himself is also directed at us: *would you come into the world if you knew what is waiting for you?* However, McEwan's message is clear. When it comes to life, we are bound by personal destiny.

Nevertheless, the dilemma changes again, and the protagonist declares: "I want to become" (McEwan 2016, 119). *To be someone or to be someone else?* is now the question. Finally persuaded that his mother is going to deliver him in a prison cell, he wants his life and his own identity, something that he, as opposed to Claude's and Trudy's sin, will shape.

The protagonist is the sole character who does not lie. Living inside his mother, close but at the same time removed from the outside world and those who make the events unfold, he makes us experience them "third-hand," in a game of metafictional frames where the baby's words and eyes are our filter and all we can rely on, as if the audience was, too, a silent womb dweller. Sometimes the baby even mocks the reader, making him believe that John's ghost is haunting the house; however, he is making fun of the one person who is sitting next to him at the theater and knows even less than him. Even so, in the end Hamlet's revenge is truncated: Trudy gives birth, gets arrested and the dreaded prison cell approaches. "The rest is chaos" (McEwan 2016, 199), he claims, not silence, since what is left now is simply life.

## References

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