

## A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration in Ian McEwan's *Nutshell*

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Yili Tang,

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**Abstract:** In her article "A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration in Ian McEwan's *Nutshell*" Yili Tang analyzes the narrative rhetoric and ethics of Ian McEwan's novel *Nutshell* using James Phelan's rhetorical theory of character narration. Applying the principle that character narration is an art of indirection, she attempts to decode the rhetorical dynamics of the novel. These dynamics entail an apprehension of the complex relationships between the functions of the narrator, a fetus, facing his narratee, and the implied author facing his audience. Furthermore, she traces the ethical consequences that are elucidated by the chosen narrative technique and the delineation of the character narrator. She argues that McEwan makes the best of the challenges posed by the character narrator's limited perspective and effectively conveys the story from the viewpoint of an unborn child, whose perspective, despite its restrictions, remains within a realistic communicative frame, in an indirect way. Indirection allows the authorial audience to follow McEwan's suggestions regarding the fetus's physical and emotional obstacles. The respect for life and love for others spur the fetus to see goodness in human nature, and perhaps ultimately allow him to reach ethical enlightenment.

Yili TANG

### **A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration in Ian McEwan's *Nutshell***

Ian McEwan, one of the most accomplished craftsmen of narrative and prose, has a history of creating disturbing yet intriguing character narrators. A vast variety of characters narrate their own stories, from an eloquent primate in "Reflections of a Kept Ape" (1978), the incestuous character narrators in "Homemade" (1975) and *The Cement Garden* (1978) to his fetus-narrator of the novel *Nutshell* (2016). Originally concerned primarily with the psychopathological world, McEwan has matured into an author who engages actively social issues through his narrative writings. Stylistic social realism characterizes several of his works, like *Solar* (2010), *Sweet Tooth* (2012) and *The Children Act* (2014). In *Nutshell*, McEwan interweaves bold imagination with compelling narrative. As he describes it, the novel is "a holiday of the senses" (Aitkenhead). An earlier insight into his sources of literary inspiration is also relevant: "I just have a habit of watchfulness. There are two areas where I look. One is how people are with their children, because that fascinates me a great deal. And the other thing is couples, married or otherwise" (Slay 6). *Nutshell* elucidates and explores both of these relationship dynamics: between parents and their children, and between spouses.

*Nutshell* is written in an unnatural and intertextual style. Readers of McEwan's work are quite familiar with his Shakespearian characterization and plot; however, he clarifies that he did not intentionally rewrite *Hamlet* nor paid tribute by releasing *Nutshell* on the 400th anniversary of the bard's death. Yet, similarities do inevitably arise between the two texts. It is apparent that the fetus shares Hamlet's feeling of helplessness. As McEwan states, "my unborn narrator has privileged access to pillow talk and to the careful plotting of a murder. What can he do about it? His options are necessarily constrained. But he has his thoughts, and he might find a way to intervene – or he might be too late. Might he take revenge?" (Adam). McEwan is not the first novelist to use an unborn child as the narrator. Novels by Muriel Spark, Thomas Keneally, and Carlos Fuentes are narrated by fetuses in the womb. However, McEwan's monologuing fetus echoes Hamlet through his soliloquizing verbosity, erudition, and classical ethical dilemma. *Nutshell's* virtuoso entertainment is, as Tim Adam points out, almost certainly the first to combine these two elements.

Biwu Shang lists several narrative techniques that are implemented by McEwan, such as character narration, audio narration, and unnatural narration (Shang 29). Criticizing the novel, Orlando Bird notes that the voice itself is not automatically problematic as numerous implausible narrators have been encountered before in McEwan's fictional world. However, "the trouble with *Nutshell* is that its bold conceit is often spoilt by McEwan's attempts to rationalize it...but the tension between McEwan's experimental impulse and his desire for authorial control is distracting. Who's really doing the talking?" Adam expresses a similar concern that the danger is always self-consciously clever conceit. The terms "authorial control" and "clever conceit" demonstrate that McEwan masterfully develops the interplay between his perspective and the fetus's in multiple ways.

Regrettably, Bird and Adam fail to adequately express McEwan's "trouble or danger." I argue that McEwan's "trouble or danger" lies in how to communicate the emotional richness, psychological complexity, and ethical dilemma of the fetus through his unnatural, restricted, and unreliable narration. Although the fetus's perception restricts his knowledge, McEwan grants the narrator an adult's ability to understand crucial scenes and the realities of the world. This narrative mechanism invites readers to play a crucial ethical role in shaping the response to the fetus's dilemma, thus enabling the audience to share his perspective.

In this light, this article analyzes narrative rhetoric and ethics in *Nutshell* using James Phelan's rhetorical theory of character narration. Applying the principle that character narration is an art of indirection, it attempts to decode the rhetorical dynamics of the novel. This entails an apprehension of the complex relationships between the functions of the fetal narrator facing his narratee, and the implied author who faces his audience. Furthermore, the article traces the ethical consequences of the narrative technique and the delineation of character narrator. My argument is that the success of *Nutshell* is highly dependent on the implied author, McEwan, to communicate himself to his authorial audience through the fetal character narrator's story to his audience. This finally provides an "ethically satisfying reading experience" (Phelan, *Living* 25).

#### **From Direction to Indirection: The Rhetoric of Character Narration in *Nutshell***

The story is narrated by a fetus in utero, who is privy to his mother Trudy and uncle Claude's affair and plot to kill Trudy's husband, John. Prior to the day of the murder, the poet-academic John brings Elodie,

his poet friend and apparent new girlfriend, home (where John's wife Trudy and his brother Claude live). John informs Trudy and Claude that he knows about the affair, and asks them to move out of his house so he can move back in. However, bringing Elodie home is just a way for John to make Trudy jealous; he still hopes for a reconciliation. The desire to take advantage of the priceless London townhouse owned by the fetus's father turns the adulterous pair fiendishly murderous. The character narrator hears all about the plot as he grows in utero, making him an involuntary participant in the events. Whereas Hamlet is unable to prevent his father's murder because it has already taken place (before the events of the play), the fetus in *Nutshell* is unable to impede the murderous plot because he has not been born yet. To take revenge on the murderous couple by sending them to prison, the fetus ingeniously punctures the amniotic sac to induce a premature birth.

The talking fetus is a limited narrator. Sequestered away from the outside world and trapped with only his thoughts in his mother's womb, he is aware of the details of the murderous plot hatched by his deceptive yet beloved mother and his uncle against a father he yearns to know. As the fetus cannot see anything, he narrates in terms of sounds. Images of people and the world are not realized through appearances, but through voices and other sounds. Unable to control his movements, the fetus lives as a uterine prisoner, forced to participate in a scandalous affair and murderous strategy. His confinement limits his ability to take action; he is only able to give an occasional kick in opposition. For almost the entirety of the novel, the only way for the fetus to interact with the surrounding world is through physiological cues from his mother. McEwan faithfully reflects the limitations of the fetus and uses them to his advantage. Both the fetus-narrator and the fetus-character can directly access information on the premeditated murder through the privilege of pillow talk. However, due to his containment and lack of interaction with the outside world, the fetus needs to find other indirect means of personal expression.

In this case, the character becomes the narrator, recounting events in which he unwillingly participates within the story world, "as *embedded narratives* told to other characters or as the main narrative voice responsible for shaping and creating the storyworld, as is often the case with a *first person narrator* telling of the story of events in which 'I' took part." (Thomas 10, emphasis in original) James Phelan refers to this type of narration from inside of the story-world as character narration, which is

an art of indirection: an author communicates to her audience by means of the character narrator's communication to a narratee. The art consists in the author's ability to make a single text function effectively for its two audiences (the narrator's and the author's, or to use the technical terms, the narratee and the authorial audience) and its two purposes (author's and character narrator's) while combining in one figure (the 'I') the roles of both character and narrator. (Phelan, *Living* 1)

The unborn fetus in *Nutshell* plays the dual role of a character participating in the story-world and the narrator who tells the story. The novel, if we apply Phelan's strategy, contains a doubled rhetorical situation: while the fetal narrator addresses the story to a narratee, the implied author McEwan communicates to his audience both the story and the fetal narrator's telling of it. Despite the controversy underlying the concept, Phelan writes, "the implied author is a streamlined version of the real author, an actual or purported subset of the real author's capacities, traits, attitudes, beliefs, values, and other properties that play an active role in the construction of the particular text" (Phelan, *Living* 45). In other words, the implied author plays a role of a text designer with a certain purpose and closely resembles the real author. The implied author both constructs the text and is based on the evidence that is provided by the text itself.

As mentioned at the beginning of the article, McEwan experiments with character narration. The fetus-narrator in *Nutshell* possesses innocence and naïveté, as demonstrated in his simple understanding of blue and green; but the consciousness provided for him by the implied author McEwan is persuasive and much wiser than the audience expects. The fetus provides extensive insights into the world, owing to his indirect means of learning. He absorbs knowledge and information from his mother's radio habit and his father's love of reciting poetry. As an explicit illustration of his knowledge, the fetal narrator expresses his personal opinions on current events and culture:

I stay awake, I listen, I learn. Early this morning, less than an hour before dawn, there was heavier matter than usual. Through my mother's bones I encountered a bad dream in the guise of a formal lecture. The state of the world. An expert in international relations, a reasonable woman with a rich deep voice, advised me that the world was not well...In conclusion, she said, these disasters are the work of our twin natures. Clever and infantile. We are built a world too complicated and dangerous for our quarrelsome natures to manage...Pessimism is too easy, even delicious, the badge and plume of intellectuals everywhere. It absolves the thinking classes of solutions... Like most things, it didn't happen. The matter was settled by some fireships

and a useful storm that drove their fleet round the top of Scotland. We'll always be troubled by how things are—that's how it stands with the difficult gift of consciousness. (McEwan 24, 27-28)

In this soliloquy, the fetal narrator ponders the harsh reality of the world, such as problems in the Middle East, anti-Semitism, drugs, corrupt capitalists, inequalities of wealth, and environmental concerns. The passage has an ironic air, given the bold statements of the unborn child, who has neither seen nor entered the world. Reviewing this paragraph from the rhetorical perspective that the narrative is a "purposive communicative act" (Phelan, "Rhetoric/Ethics" 203), the fetus-narrator shares his concern that Western civilization is in economic, ecological and ethical crisis. He also criticizes people's tendency to respond to such problems with negativity. Pessimism is a very easy escape from reality. Given what we know about the fetus's way of absorbing knowledge, the implied author McEwan not only shows us how this erudite unborn child receives information and what his reaction is to the outside world, but also invites us to understand the fetus's complex existential anxiety.

Serious conversations on the radio become the main source of the fetus's perceptions and understanding of the world, portraying the merciless reality of society. As an individual who ruminates on the future, the fetus finds that isolation from authority helps him to make sense of the world and his future life. He is forced to question the meaning of existence as a human being in this absurd society. Notably, through the fetus's immediate apprehensions of the world, the implied author McEwan draws our attention to the way that the fetus's "mind's eye" structures society. Through his eyes, the climate crisis seems frightening, but will be solved by "solar panels and wind farms and nuclear energy and inventions not yet known" (McEwan 27). He lists the benefits of modernity, including hygiene, holidays, anesthetics, fast cars, reading lamps, and oranges in winter. The fetus's prenatal optimism and youthful idealism in the face of political cynicism serve to soothe his more immediate anxieties. The implied author McEwan uses the fetus-narrator's combination of sophisticated philosophy and naive thinking to remind the audience of the world's problems while attempting to find more marginal meanings in the world. He offers the fetus as a reminder of our own existential vulnerability and fragility. McEwan invites the audience to see that the fetus recognizes that his consciousness can impart meaning to the world, which gives him some sovereignty over his own existence, and "take what he wants, whatever suits him" (28).

The well-spoken and highbrow fetus has also gained the verbal acuity and cleverness thanks to his father's habit of reciting poems. Poetry represents not only John's lifelong passion, but also his hope of reconciliation with Trudy. For the son who cannot communicate with his father, poetry also serves as a way get to know his separated parents.

My father comes by the house from time to time and I'm overjoyed...He has a weakness for these glutinous confections that are supposed to extend his life. I don't know why he visits us, for he always leaves in mists of sadness...It said that his work was outdated, stiffly formal, too "beautiful". But he lives by poetry, still recites it to my mother....He really believes that to write a poem in praise of my mother (her eyes, her hair, her lips) and come by to read it aloud will soften her, make him welcome in his own house. (10-12)

My father by nature is defenceless, as I am by circumstance...That's hard, and what's hard is that the poet is so soft. John Cairncross, ousted from his family home, his grandfather's purchase, for a philosophy of "persona growth" —a phrase as paradoxical as "easy listening." (32-33)

Unlike the elder Hamlet who appears on stage solely as a ghost, John still visits his marital home from time to time. Although not constantly present in the novel, he serves as the mainspring of the story. Notably, John's qualities of kindness, honesty, and undesirability are apparent in his poetry. His poems enable the fetus to understand Trudy's beauty through his father's eyes. This beauty lies in a sharp contrast to Trudy's selfishness and greed in carrying on an affair with Claude and plotting murder for money.

As a cuckold cheated on by his wife and brother, John undoubtedly retains the moral high ground and garners sympathy. The implied author McEwan highlights John's kindness and generosity through the fetus's narration. At the beginning of the novel, the fetus speculates that John's generosity is due to his lack of awareness of Trudy and Claude's indiscretion. However, on learning that John is not the "dupe and the unknowing cuckold" (63) he previously assumed, the fetus is unable to understand how John endures the humiliation. As a poet and publisher, John is neither ambitious nor greedy for fame or money. He encourages the advancement of other younger poets and promotes poetry in schools, devoting himself to poetry rather than treating it solely as a way of making a living. As husband and brother, John is generous enough to forgive Trudy and Claude's cheating; he even seeks to reestablish his relationship with them. Under the rubric of ethical literary criticism, Zhenzhao Nie notoriously claims

that "literature takes its origin from ethics. Ethical enlightenment as well as education is its primary function" (Nie 84). Poetry, one of the forms of literature, uses the aesthetic and rhythmic qualities of language to evoke an awareness of ethics or emotions. I thus agree with Shang's comments on Trudy's indifference to John's poems: "Trudy's disgust and refusal of poetry as an important literary genre, has indicated John's failure in reviving his displaced ethical identity. Trudy completely abandons literary ethical education, and makes a wrong ethical choice, resulting in the ethical tragedies of John's death and her imprisonment" (Shang 38).

In the "letter" to his father composed before Trudy and Claude's planned murder, the fetus describes John's ethical education as follows: "There was a poem you recited then, too good for one of yours, I think you'd be the first to concede. Short, dense, bitter to the point of resignation, difficult to understand. The sort that hits you, hurts you, before you've followed exactly what was said. It addresses a careless, indifferent reader, a lost lover, a real person, I should think" (McEwan 82). The character narrator pities John's sadness at failing to save Trudy from her incestuous relationship with Claude. He constructs his genome's other half as a cuckold who tastes the bitterness of his marriage's failures, but can do nothing effectively about it. Although John and his poems teach the fetus to appreciate the beauty of mind, this "pale beauty," with its "softness" and "defencelessness," is not the fetus's ally. He is aware of the noble qualities of both poetry and his father, but he regards mere poems as a weapon of the weak, useless for either protection or revenge. He sympathizes wholeheartedly with his father's failure until John introduces Elodie as his lover, whereupon he expresses approval for Trudy and Claude's indiscretion. The fetus thinks that his father, who once wanted him, will now abandon him. John's perceived rejection makes the fetus turn to his mother. The implied author McEwan demonstrates the fetus's complex feelings about his father and his poems, which strike a chord with the fetus, but fails to complete his ethical education. His resulting feelings of abandonment and betrayal cloud the fetus's judgment and finally drive him to become part of the crime, despite his claim of innocence. "Careless, indifferent reader... a lost lover... a real person" refers not only to Trudy, but also, implicitly, to the character narrator himself.

To illustrate how the narrator defends himself, his unreliability could be analyzed. As Phelan argues, "any time we have character-narrators, whether the character is protagonist, witness or reporter as several removes from the action, the question of reliability is inevitable" (*Narrative* 110-111). Unreliable narrators are not uncommon in McEwan's fiction; Briony Tallis from *Atonement* is one example. However, Siddhartha Mukherjee regards the fetus in *Nutshell* as an *over-reliable* narrator. Even the author himself acknowledges that "when you have a fetus narrator, it's quite restrictive. The first thing to say about a fetus is: you can always trust a fetus. They're straight-talking, there's no spin—they really tell you as it is. This is a *reliable* narrator." (See Bedford, emphasis in original )

As a witness who has not been exposed to the outside world, the fetal narrator takes advantage of his special connection with Trudy. However, the reliability of the unborn child comes into question. Before reaching a conclusion, it is necessary to examine the concept of unreliable narration using Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative first. Adhering to the rhetorical approach to unreliable narration pioneered by Wayne C. Booth, Phelan broadens Booth's definition by claiming that "a character narrator is 'unreliable when he or she offers an account of some event, person, thought, thing, or other object in the narrative world that deviates from the account the implied author would offer'" (*Living* 49). He distinguishes six types of unreliability along three axes of "facts/events," "knowledge/perception" and "ethics/evaluation." Our task as readers is either to reject the narrator's misreporting, misreading, and misregarding, or to supplement the narrator's underreporting, underreading, and underregarding (*Living* 51).

Against this background, although *Nutshell's* "blank slate" narrator has gained an unusual amount of knowledge solely through listening, his limitations and inexperience impair his judgment and make him unreliable. For instance, both the fetus and Trudy regard John as a "lovelorn fool," trying his best to reunite the family. To provoke Trudy's jealousy, John pretends to give up his marriage and introduces the aspiring owl poet Elodie as his new partner, challenging Trudy's manipulative behavior. The fetus-narrator thinks that he has understood the three sides of the adulterous triangle, and has gradually accepted the cruel fact of Trudy and Claude's indiscretion. When the fourth person joins and disrupts the balance of the relationship, and the one abandoned becomes the abandoner, the fetus's thoughts become misaligned. A scene in which John, Trudy, and their respective lovers sit down for a glass of wine is particularly dramatic. Their dialogue is full of tension.

"Owls are vicious," Trudy says.

Elodie: "Like robins are. Like nature is."

Trudy: "Inedible, apparently."

Elodie: "And the broody owl is poisonous."  
Trudy: "Yes, the broody one can kill you."  
Elodie: "I don't think so. She just makes you sick."  
Trudy: "I mean, if she gets her claws into your face."  
Elodie: "Never happens. She's too shy."  
Trudy: "Not when provoked."  
The exchange is relaxed, the tone inconsequential. (McEwan 66)

The strategic wordplay in this dialogue is analogous to a duel with swords. Although the fetus senses the atmosphere of hostility, his interpretation of the dialogue is insufficient due to his lack of knowledge, perception, and sophistication. McEwan invites his audience to infer supplementary information from the fetus's narration. On the surface, the exchange about the activities of owls seems "relaxed" and casual, as the narrator observes. The two women simply converse about animals and nature. Elodie claims that she writes about owls from real-life experience. However, the reader imposes symbols, associations, and meanings on simple poetry and life. Instead of connecting owls with wisdom, like Claude, Trudy uses a highly emotional adjective, "vicious," to describe them. To warn Elodie off, she repeatedly emphasizes the aggressive behavior of an owl that feels threatened. Elodie's intervention ignites Trudy's hatred and jealousy and endangers her dominant status. In contrast, Elodie's insistence on the owl's lack of aggression and her reference to her own poetic creation reflects her relatively docile personality and view of life, as well as her non-threatening role in John's plan. Given what the authorial audience knows, the fetus-narrator is "underreading" the dialogue here. His unreliability thus lies on the axis of knowledge and perception. His auditory education, from radio and poetry, seems not to have taught the fetus the art of small talk or adult insincerity. He becomes aware of Trudy's hatred of Elodie from the quickening of her pulse, but is unable to understand why their conversation seems so "inconsequential." The implied author McEwan uses the character narrator's underreading to create an interesting tension through Trudy's secret warning.

The narrator's lack of knowledge and misaligned value system also lead to his "misreading." By virtue of his location in the womb, the fetus has a front row seat in his mother's life, and accordingly bears witness to Trudy and Claude's affair. John now becomes a subject of question. Based on John's generosity and kindness in the face of Trudy's lame excuse of separation, the fetus makes the following judgment:

Various of my conjectures have proved wrong in the past, but I've listened carefully and for now I'm assuming the following: that he knows nothing of Claude, remains moonishly in love with my mother, hopes to be back with her one day soon, still believes in the story she has given him that the separation is to give them each "time and space to grow" and renew their bonds. That he is a poet without recognition and yet he persists. (McEwan 11)

Later, the fetus realizes the inaccuracy of this conjecture: "he was never the dupe, the unknowing cuckold" (63). The fetal narrator misreads here. John is a knowing cuckold who has never given up his love for Trudy, and seeks to drag her out of her unethical relationship with Claude. The character narrator's "misreading" is the consequence of his "misregarding" along the axis of ethics and evaluation. As mentioned previously, despite the fetus's praise of John's noble qualities, he does not accept his father's "defencelessness" and "softness." In the fetus's opinion, a man who has been betrayed by his beloved wife and his brother should not tolerate such humiliation, nor take such a "soft" way to recapture what belonged to him. Compared with the fetus who is bound in the tiny room, John has the ability to take action. He is the fetus's only hope to reconcile with his parents. The narrator does not believe the effectiveness of John's ethical education by poetry. He feels Trudy's disgust of John's reciting, and thus is sympathetic to John, all while being frustrated and disappointed by John's "cowardice" and failure. Furthermore, our character narrator still exists in the midst of his ethical and emotional development. He received the same teachings that Trudy has. When he gropes his way through numerous crossroads, his mother turns away from morality, which has a profound negative impact on his growth. The fetus's mistaken value system denies the importance of John's kindness and ethical education, and leads him to make a wrong judgment.

Phelan notes that in addition to "underreading," "misreading," and "misregarding," which increase the distance between the narrator and the implied author, two broad categories of unreliability exist: estranging unreliability and bonding unreliability. Estranging unreliability underlines or increases the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience, while bonding unreliability reduces the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience (Phelan, "Estranging" 223-224). In *Nutshell*, the fetal narrator repeatedly mentions his inability to understand adult devices: "No child, still less a

foetus, has ever mastered the art of small talk, or would ever want to. It's an adult device, a covenant with boredom and deceit" (63); "I can't trust my judgement. Nothing fits" (67). In the first short passage, the fetus-narrator expresses his awareness that he lacks the knowledge or perceptiveness required to interpret the contest between Trudy and Elodie, and John's sudden change of mind. His underreading allows the audience to see that the fetus has learned something from the dialogue even though he lacks information. He is reliable and sincere about his limitations, which makes him *over-reliable*. The implied McEwan advances the fetus's narration from underreading to reliable reading. In this regard, although the authorial audience recognizes the fetal narrator's unreliability, the author also moves us affectively toward the fetus.

In contrast, the narrator's unreliability concerning John increases our estrangement from the fetus. When he says that John is "a poet without recognition" and "a dupe and unknowing cuckold," he misreads and disregards his father, moving far away from the perspective of the implied author McEwan on John's kindness and ethical education. The authorial audience recognizes the distance between the character narrator and the implied author, and thus substitutes a more generous view of John. In this way, McEwan increases the ethical and interpretive distance between the authorial audience and the fetus.

### **From Death to Birth: The Ethics of Character Narration in *Nutshell***

As McEwan builds the distance between the fetus and the implied author, the inferences he asks his audience to make become increasingly complicated, expanding from rhetoric to ethics. When examining McEwan's ethical reflection on his fiction, Lynn Wells argues as follows: "McEwan's fiction has been most acute in its examination of elemental ethics in its depictions of literal face-to-face encounters, moments when he pits individual characters against one another at crucial points of decision during which they must choose between self-gratification, or even self-preservation, and genuine benevolent action" (15).

Tracking these "crucial points of decision" in *Nutshell*, it becomes apparent that these points are constructed to aid the narrator's emotional and ethical development. Drawing on our previous inferences about the character narrator, the audience recognizes that much is occurring beneath the surface. This complicates the authorial audience's emotional response to the narrator's decision through the complexity of the fetus's narration, as well as his ethical predicament and choice at every crucial moment.

The first crucial point of decision occurs with the crime. The kind poet John becomes the fetus's last safeguard, allowing him to escape the fate of abandonment. Thus, the arrival of Elodie makes the fetus aware that he is hardly a desired child, and faces the fate of being dumped at any time. The resulting feelings of abandonment and betrayal complicate his reactions to Trudy and Claude's homicidal machinations. In terms of actions, there are only two options the fetus can take: one is gaining a "morsel of agency" (McEwan 92) by kicking; the other is birth severing the amniotic sac with his fingernails. However, kicking achieves little, and birth may equate to suicide. At this "crucial point of decision", the fetal narrator emphasizes his inability to warn or act and his father's rejection of him: "My father's rejection of me, his possible fate, my responsibility for it, then my own fate, my inability to warn or act" (75); "Or take the kinder course, live rather than die, accept your son, hold me in your arms, claim me for your own. In return I'll give you some advice" (83). The character narrator wants the narratee to recognize that his choice of non-action is due to his own inability and John's abandonment. However, the implied author McEwan guides his audience to recognize that the fetus has given up on saving his father's life, and attempts to lay the blame on John's betrayal and his circumstances to reduce his guilt. In fact, this decision is guided by his eagerness to experience life and love: "What I fear is missing out. Healthy desire or mere greed, I want my life first, my chance of a consciousness. I'm owed a handful of decades to try my luck on a freewheeling planet. That's the ride for me—the Wall of Life. I want my *go*. I want to *become*" (128, emphasis in the original).

The desire to live and experience pleasure, which is common to every living thing, is part of the fetus's nature. Trapped in a claustrophobic space with only one wordless way to communicate, the fetus is constantly bothered by existential anxiety. His awareness of alienation from the human condition as well as reflection on existence and his own predicament makes this small, limited, and helpless unborn child an existential hero. As shown in the previous analysis, the fetus gains an insight into the horrible world and the horrific truth. He attempts to figure out how his consciousness attributes inner meaning to the outside world. His narration is filled with life, hope, and fervor, even when facing the harsh realities of the world and his broken family. He realizes that he needs to become his own master and therefore kicks Trudy to show his agency. Noteworthy is that compared with Trudy's ruthlessness in the process of the murder, the fetus still suffers from guilt. While waiting tensely for his father's demise,

the fetus cannot hide his remorse for the betrayal of duty and love, although he keeps creating excuses for the inevitable death of his father.

If the first "crucial point of decision" leads to John's death, the second leads to the fetus's birth. After John's death, the fetus is caught in a "push-and-pull" between self-blaming and self-soothing, while holding ambivalent love-hate feelings toward Trudy. Although the fetus disapproves of Trudy's cheating and detests her malevolence, he is cognizant of his complete dependence on her, self-questioning, "still love her?" "and I love her— how could I not?" (McEwan 7). He realizes Trudy's selfishness, cruelty, and greed, but he cannot stop longing for maternal love. He needs Trudy, who shares her body with him and sustains his life. The unborn child projects his yearning for life and happiness onto maternal love. He cannot survive without his only parent. He also shares Trudy's second thoughts as well as her modicum of guilt, further adding to his love for her. The falsehood of John's love for Elodie and his loyalty to Trudy enable them to face the crime in which they are both implicated. Notably, the fetus is touched by Trudy's grief, although this turns out to be merely a way to avoid acknowledging her crime: "Her status as a murderer is a fact, an item in the world outside herself. But that's old thinking. She affirms, she identifies as innocent. Even as she strains to clean up traces in the kitchen, she feels blameless and therefore is—almost. Her grief, her tears, are proof of probity" (146).

The unborn child's tolerance of his mother's criminal intentions and selfishness mirrors John's kindness and generosity toward Trudy. Although the fetus is aware of the murder, love spurs him to understand and accept John's kindness and selflessness. When the fetus learns that Trudy and Claude plan to escape without any sign of surrender, he realizes that it is time to make the choice: "I thought the murderers should escape, for the sake of my liberty. This may be too narrow a view, too self-interested. There are other considerations. Hatred of my uncle may exceed love for my mother. Punishing him may be nobler than saving her. But might be possible to achieve both" (183).

As his final choice, the fetus decides to be born prematurely, through which he risks ending both Trudy's life and his own. If he chooses the path of guaranteed survival, he still faces the reality of imprisonment, which defies his desire to pursue happiness. Immersing the reader in the fetus's battle against past obstacles, both physical and mental, the implied author McEwan demonstrates our narrator's ethical development from John's death to the fetus's birth. Although the fetus has every reason not to risk or sacrifice his own life, due to his helplessness, he has come to believe in the pursuit of justice, defining himself in the heat of action and engaging in the process of self-becoming.

Highlighting the importance of ethical values to narrative, Phelan champions the ethical dimension of character narration, especially the proposition of an "ethical position." He describes the ethical position of the real reader as the result from the interaction of "four ethical situations," namely, (1) that of the characters and their behavior and judgments; (2) that of the narrator in relation to the telling, to the told, and to the audience; (3) that of the implied author in relation to the telling, to the told, and to the audience; and (4) that of the flesh-and-blood reader in relation to values, beliefs and locations operating in (1)-(3) (*Living* 23).

Extending the prior analysis of the relationship between the fetus and his parents, as well as that between the fetus and the world, the fetus-narrator plays an active role in framing the characters' ethical situations. In other words, when the narrator's ethical situation changes, the other characters' ethical situations change accordingly. The task of narrating his struggle at every crucial point and his ambivalent feelings toward his parents leads the fetus to confront his "selfishness" and evasion of the duty. He experiences a spectrum of situations, from incomprehension and misunderstanding to acceptance of John's ethical education, giving him an awareness of his own agency and leading him to undertake the noble action of inducing premature birth. At each critical point of change, McEwan offers the fetus's point of view to guide the audience through his choices and development. Throughout *Nutshell*, McEwan draws the audience's attention not only to the fetus's erudition and sophistication, but also to his naïveté, unreliability, deficiency, and limitations. In this sense, McEwan positions himself and his audience above the character narrator, looking down on him with superior knowledge and understanding. However, even more remarkably, this epistemological superiority is accompanied by an emotional investment in the fetus's existential and ethical predicament, as well as by a positive judgment of his response to the situation and final action. McEwan's multifaceted character narrator effectively challenges the audience to ponder their own ethical philosophy. As a result of ambivalent effect that is created by the author, the audience sympathizes with the character narrator and is touched by his changes and development.

### **Conclusion**

Excavating ethical ambiguities in its treatment of "growing up," McEwan's *Nutshell* is characterized by "a keen awareness of the important structuring and meaning-giving task that narrative in general and fictional storytelling in particular perform in our lives" (Schemberg 9). McEwan makes the best of the

challenges associated with the limited perspective of his character narrator and communicates effectively albeit indirectly with his audience through the fetal narrator, whose limited perspective nevertheless remains within a realistic communicative frame. Indirection allows the audience to follow McEwan's suggestions about the fetus's physical and emotional turmoil. Respect for life and love for others spur the fetus to see goodness in human nature, and this, perhaps, ultimately allows him to reach ethical enlightenment, which is the point that is best expressed through and complemented by the way of narration in *Nutshell*.

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