

Ian McEwan – On Chesil Beach

[The novel is set in 1962. It tells the story of Edward and Florence, a newly-married couple whose wedding night is marred by their shared apprehension about failing to perform sexual intercourse. In the following passage, Florence has left their hotel room after the couple's failed attempt at making love.]

5 She watched him coming along the strand, his form at first no more than an indigo stain against the darkening shingle, sometimes appearing motionless, flickering and dissolving at its outlines, and at others suddenly closer, as though moved like a chess piece a few squares towards her. The last glow of daylight lay along the shore, and behind her, away to the east, there were points of light on Portland, and the cloud base reflected dully a yellowish glow of street lamps from a distant town. She watched him, willing him to go slower, for she was guiltily afraid of him, and was desperate for more time to herself. Whatever conversation they were about to have, she dreaded it. As she understood it, there were no words to name what had happened, there existed no shared language in which two sane adults could describe such events to each other. And to argue about it was even further beyond her imagining. There could be no discussion. She did not want to think about it, and she hoped he felt the same. But what else were they to talk about? Why else were they out here? The matter lay between them, as solid as a geographical feature, a mountain, a headland. Unnameable, unavoidable. And she was ashamed. The aftershock of her own behaviour reverberated through her, and even seemed to sound in her ears. That was why she had run so far along the beach, through the heavy shingle in her going-away shoes, to flee the room and all that had happened in it, and to escape herself. She had behaved abominably. *Abominably*. She let the clumsy, sociable word repeat itself in her thoughts several times. It was ultimately a forgiving term - she played tennis abominably, her sister played the piano abominably - and Florence knew that it masked rather than described her behaviour.

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35 At the same time, she was aware of his disgrace – when he rose above her, that clenched, bewildered look, the reptilian jerkiness along his spine. But she was trying not to think about it. Did she dare admit that she was a tiny bit relieved that it was not only her, that he too had something wrong with him? How terrible, but how comforting it would be if he suffered from some form of congenital illness, a family curse, the sort of sickness to which only shame and silence attach, the way it did to enuresis, or to cancer, a word she superstitiously never spoke aloud for fear it would infect her mouth - silliness, for sure, which she would never confess to. Then they could feel sorry for each other, bound in love by their separate afflictions. And she did feel sorry for him, but she also felt a little cheated. If he had an unusual condition, why had he not told her, in confidence? But she understood perfectly why he could not. She too had not spoken up. How could he have begun to broach the matter of his own particular deformity, what could have been his opening words? They did not exist. Such a language had yet to be invented.

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100 Even as she elaborately thought this through, she knew very well there was nothing wrong with him. Nothing at all. It was her, only her. She was leaning back against a great fallen tree, probably thrown up onto the beach in a storm, its bark stripped by the power of the waves and the wood smoothed and hardened by salt water. She was wedged comfortably in the angle of a branch, feeling in the small of her back, through the massive girth of the trunk, the residual warmth of the day. This was how an infant might be, securely nestling in the crook of its mother's arm, though Florence did not believe she could ever have nestled against Violet, whose arms were thin and tense from writing and thinking.

45 When Florence was five there was one particular Norland Nanny, fairly plump and motherly, with a musical Scots voice and red raw knuckles, but she had left after some unnamed disgrace.

50 Florence continued to watch Edward's progress along the beach, certain that he could not see her yet. She could drop down the steep bank and double back along the shore of the Fleet, but even though she feared him, she thought it would be too cruel to run away. Briefly, she saw the outline of his shoulders against a silver streak of water, a current that plumed far out to sea behind him. Now she could hear the sound of his footfalls on the pebbles, which meant that he would hear hers. He would have known to come in this direction because it was what they had decided, their after-dinner plan, a stroll on the famous shingle spit with a bottle of wine. They were going to collect stones along the way and compare their sizes to see if storms really had brought order to the beach.

55 The memory of that lost pleasure did not make her feel particularly sorrowful now, for it was immediately displaced by an idea, an interrupted thought from earlier in the evening. To love, and set each other free. It was an argument she could make, a daring proposal, she thought, but to anyone else, to Edward, it could sound laughable and idiotic, perhaps even insulting. She never could quite get the full measure of her own ignorance, because
60 in some matters she thought she was rather wise. She needed more time. But he would be with her in seconds and the terrible conversation must begin. It was another of her failings that she had no idea what attitude to take with him, no feelings beyond her dread of what he might say, and of what she would be expected to say in return. She did not know if she should be asking for forgiveness, or expecting an apology. She was not in love, or out of
65 love - she felt nothing. She just wanted to be here alone in the dusk against the bulk of her giant tree.

Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach*, 2007

Line of analysis: How does the scene both depict an unbridgeable distance resulting from linguistic flaws and attempt to close that very distance through the narration of the characters' thoughts?

- 1. A narrative pause that acts as a foil to the focalizer's thoughts and perceptions**
 - a. Limited action
 - i. sight (l 1 = l 6 = l 46) – repetition as pause
 - ii. position: “was wedged comfortably” (38) ± passive
 - iii. movement: “as though moved” (3) passive
 - b. disrupted flow of time
 - i. overbearing weight of past events: “when Florence was five” (43)
 - ii. insufficient pause – passing of time measured by Edward's movement
 - c. Perceptions and thoughts
 - i. Sight: limited / partial (“yellowish”; “against” l.2, l.49)
 - ii. Sounds: potential “seemed to sound” (15) / “she could hear ... he would hear hers” → abstraction ≠ concrete actions
- 2. Of distance and proximity: embracing Florence's viewpoint to highlight the distance between the characters**
 - a. Physical distance
 - i. E closer and closer but resisted by F
 - ii. Reification of distance and obstacles: “the matter lay between them” (13)
 - b. metaphorical distance in F's perception of E
 - i. dehumanizing sight: “an indigo stain”(1) / “chess piece” / “reptilian jerkiness” (23)
 - ii. dismembering of E: “the outlines of his shoulder” (49), “the sound of his footfalls” (50)
 - c. narrative proximity
 - i. identification and proximity through free indirect speech (ex: ll 13-14 : rhetorical questions)
 - ii. distance through a more present narrative voice: indirect speech (l 35, 48, 58) → potential nuance l. 59-60
- 3. Voicing the unsaid: narrative distance as a way to bridge the linguistic gap between the characters**
 - a. Refusal of language
 - i. A silent scene
 - ii. Negative structures: “unnamed disgrace” (45), “no words” , “no shared language”, “whatever conversation” (potential), “not spoken up” (32), “did not exist” (34), “never spoke aloud” (28)
 - b. A deficient language
 - i. Insufficient language: “no words, no shared language” (9) → repetition as proof of flaws of language
 - ii. Social conventions limiting what can be voiced: “abominably” x2 → highlights inadequacy / “unnamed disgrace” (45): sexuality remains hushed
 - c. Performative language and literature

- i. Performative power of speech as limitation: “superstitiously never spoke aloud” (28) → language as having a concrete impact on reality – marked by critical distance of the narrative voice
- ii. ≠ narrative of fictitious story to shed light on reality of miscommunication

The passage revolves around the creation of distance. The physical distance between the characters marks the passing of time throughout the scene, which is itself based on the seemingly unbridgeable gap resulting from the failed attempt to have sex, hence to erase the physical distance between the newlyweds. This failure is further made unbridgeable by a sheer refusal to talk about it on the part of Florence, a refusal that stems from yet another distance: that separating language from reality. Yet, by the very act of narrating the scene, the narrative voice bridges the gap of miscomprehension. While the narrator’s embracing of Florence’s viewpoint enables the reader to access her perspective on the scene and on the events, increased nuance and narrative distance broaden the reader’s understanding of the situation. Only through literary narration can the two mute lovers be reconciled.