



Research Article

The Dysfunctional Family and Adolescent Identity Crisis in *The Cement Garden*

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Abstract

This paper explores the adolescent identity crisis experienced by the siblings in Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden* against the backdrop of a dysfunctional family, with a focus on the impacts of parental illness, death and inharmonious family power relations. Grounded in Erik H. Erikson's identity development theory, the study analyzes the formative causes of the dysfunctional family: the father's patriarchal dominance destroys the intimate spousal relationship, leads to emotional alienation among family members, and the father fails to act as a positive role model for the adolescent son Jack; the parent's subsequent illness and death further exacerbate the family's dysfunction, leaving the children in a traumatic state of isolation without effective emotional support and guidance. Trapped in the closed and dysfunctional family system, 14-year-old Jack and 18-year-old Julie suffer severe identity crisis amid physical and psychological adolescent development. Lacking identification with peers and external role models, they descend into emotional loneliness and moral disorientation, even resorting to incestuous union as a distorted defensive response to fend off external threats. This narrative of adolescent identity crisis in a modern alienated society reflects McEwan's profound reflection on dysfunctional families and the spiritual predicament of modern people as well as his deep concern for the emotional challenges faced by adolescents in the modern wasteland far from God.

Keywords

The Cement Garden, Dysfunctional Family, Emotional Alienation, Adolescent Identity Crisis, Parental Illness and Death

1. Introduction

Ian McEwan, one of Britain's most renowned contemporary novelists, has published 19 novels to date. His literary career began with his first short story collection, *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), and his most recent novel is *What We Can Know* (2025). Over the course of his career, McEwan has received numerous prestigious awards, including the Somerset Maugham Award for *First Love, Last Rites*, the Whitbread Prize for *The Child in Time* (1987), the Booker Prize for *Amsterdam* (1998), the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award for *Atonement* (2002), and the Paddy Power Political

Fiction Book of the Year award for *Sweet Tooth* (2012). In his early works, McEwan explored dark themes such as incest, regression, and pedophilia, which earned him the critical nickname "Ian Macabre." [1] *The Cement Garden* (1978), his debut novel, "McEwan's literature of shock is prevalent, even overwhelming at times, with the author treating us to such sensational material including incest, regression, and a corpse hidden in the cellar, which at times proves even overwhelming [2]". (p. 35). As Jack Slay observes, while the novel clearly echoes the macabre subjects of his early stories, in *The Cement*

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Garden McEwan also delves more deeply into the psyches of his characters, moving beyond a simple desire to shock and repulse his readers [2] (p. 35).

In *The Cement garden* the dysfunctional family suffers crisis through the parents' illness and death while the children particularly the elders Jack and Julie experience the identity crisis in their adolescence. And the trauma of the loss of parents deteriorates their identity crisis. The previous researches explore the ethical inversion, 'a vast and aching nothingness [2]' in which the children are involved, the crisis of the culture etc. Yet few scholars address the adolescents' identity crisis associated with the illness and death of the parents in the dysfunctional family in the contemporary world. The present paper aims to explore adolescents' identity crisis in light of the theory drawn from Erik H. Erickson's *Identity: Youth and Crisis* [3] in the context of the dysfunctional family set in a modern alienated world associated with the trauma of parent's disease and death as well as the inharmonious power relationship.

2. Inharmonious Relationship Between the Parents and the Dysfunctional Family

McEwan once said that in this novel he wishes to "examine power relationships in the family and also an interest in the sexuality of young children. [2]" (p. 36) In a family the husband and wife's intimate and harmonious relationship is the anchor in a healthily functional family system. Unfortunately Jake's parents do not sustain such a harmonious relationship. For example, Father does not discuss with his wife concerning his decision to buy 15 sacks of cement to construct the garden. After the cement arrived, they argue over the cement. "My mother, who was a quite sort of person, was furious." [4] (p. 2) She tried to convince her husband to send back the cement, due to the shortage of money. Father rudely refused with self-important and foolish manner, which made Mother angrier and her voice choked with exasperation. The children slipped away upstairs to Julie's bedroom and closed the door. As the dominant figure in the patriarchal family system, father fails to play the anchored role in the system. Father's dominance is not only over his wife, but also over all the children. Thus Father's dominance in the family makes the intimate relationships inharmonious and gradually alienated.

At the beginning the description about the father's relationship about the garden has symbolic meanings about Father's role in the family. "He had constructed rather than cultivated his garden according to plans he sometimes spread out on the kitchen table in the evening while we peeped over his shoulder. [4]" (p. 6) "He did not like bushes or ivy or roses. He would have nothing that tangled. On either side of us the houses had been cleared and in summer the vacant sites grew lush with weeds and their flowers. Before his first heart attack he had intended to build a high wall round his special world. [4]" (p. 6) Here the garden symbolically is the family where father is

the dominant figure in the system, as with his garden he constructed in a domineering way. He does not want others to intrude on his power in the family just as he intended to build a high wall round his special world. He does not treat the family members with tender feelings and intimate relations, as symbolically in the garden "he would have nothing that tangled. [4]" (p. 6) From Jack's narration Father dominates the family as a cold and powerful figure. "There were a few running jokes in the family, initiated and maintained by my father. Against Sue for having almost invisible eyebrows and lashes, against Julie for her ambitions to be a famous athlete, against Tom for pissing in his bed sometimes, against Mother for being poor at arithmetic, and against me for my pimples which were just starting up at that time. [4]" (p. 7) Father's dominance in the family's running jokes, the laughter and jokes are obviously established on the mocking of his wife and children's defects, which emotionally hurts and alienates the family members. "The laughter was instant and ritual. Because little jokes like this one were stage-managed by Father, none of them ever worked against him. [4]" (p. 7) Though Jack and Julie attempts to make up a joke against Father, yet they fail to act out and Father was sulky. And 14 year old Jack felt nervous and greatly relieved when Father spoke to him again after two days. Father's intimidating influence is evident in the family, where he fails to play a role model of expressing his love, care and tolerance for his wife and children. Emotional communication is lacking between Father and the other family members, as indicated here when Jack worked with Father in the garden, "Apart from his infrequent, terse instructions we said nothing. I was pleased that we knew so exactly what were doing and what the other was thinking that we did not need to speak. [4]" (p. 8-9).

Despite Father's dominance in the family, his heart disease threatens his powerful role in the family. As Father suffered the first heart attack, he stopped working on the garden, which symbolizes that his power of dominance over his family is threatened. In the garden "The dancing Pan fell on its side and broke in two and nothing was said. The possibility that Julie and I were responsible for the disintegration filled me with horror and delight. [4]" (p. 8) Here indicates Jack's intention to dismantle the dysfunctional family system, possibly through some horrible means together with his sister Julie, which foreshadows the incestuous union Jack and Julie will commit in the end of the novel.

When Jack views his father suffering from heart disease, Jack does not show loving feelings to care for Father. Instead he bears a feeling of revenge towards Father. In a healthily functional family the family member who suffers illness should be tended to with love and care by other family members, first by the mate. However, in this dysfunctional family, Father fails to receive the loving care from Mother and the children. Instead, as Jack narrates, "Julie had told me recently that now Father was a semi-invalid he would have to compete with Tom for Mother's attention. [4]" (p. 4) Jack feels confused that Father would compete with 6-year-old Tom for

Mother's attention and his sister Julie tells him that Father failed in his competition with Tom for Mother's attention while he "used Mother against Tom much as he used his pipe against her. [4]" (p. 5) Father not only fails to get attention and care from Mother but also fails to get concern from children, like Jack. When Father and Jack are dragging the cement sacks together, "Because of his heart attack my father was forbidden this sort of work, but I made sure he took as much as I did. [4]" (p. 5) Here Jack is very indifferent to his father's illness, and what is worse is that he even intends to take revenge on Father, which reveals Jack's distorted mentality through his narration.

Despite his indifferent attitude towards Father's sickness, Father's death makes Jack suffer from the guilty feelings. Yet, just before Jack viewed Father's heart attack, he experienced his first ejection in the toilet upstairs as he escapes from the work site of the garden, "I worked myself rapidly... From downstairs I could hear the scrap of the shovel. My father was mixing cement himself. Then it happened, it appeared quite suddenly on the back of my wrist... [4]" (p. 9) As Jack narrates at the beginning, "And but for the fact that it coincided with a landmark in my physical growth, his death seemed insignificant compared with what followed. [4]" (p. 1) Here we see Jack is obsessed with his sexual landmark in his adolescent years, which is a critical point for him to construct his youth identity. In a healthily functional family, usually Father is the model and guide for the adolescent boy who is undergoing the sexual, physical and psychological transformations during the adolescence. As a 14 year-old boy, Jack is eager to form his identity to confirm who he is at the present stage and what kind of a person he would love to become in the future. However the patriarchal Father fails to be Jack's role model.

The inharmonious relationship between the parents and Father's dominance over Mother and children result in a kind of dysfunction in the family, in which the loving emotions fail to flow naturally among the alienated family members. Jack once expresses his view about parent's relationship with his sisters, "I had been saying that secretly they had hated each other and that Mother was relieved when Father died. [4]" (p. 24) Thus the dysfunction of the family as a result of the lacking in love between the parents fails to provide the loving atmosphere in which Jack and his siblings could get the emotional support and learn from the role models of parents when forming identity in their growth journey.

3. Further Dysfunction of the Family and Siblings' Identity Crisis

3.1. Jack' Identity Crisis

Father's sudden death due to heart attack causes the family to become more dysfunctional. It is Jack who first viewed Father lying face down on the ground, his head resting on the newly spread concrete, struck with the heart attack. Jack knew that he had to run for help, but for several seconds he could

not move away. Jack's response seems unusual, as he narrates in the beginning of the novel "I did not kill my father, but I sometimes felt I had helped him on his way. [4]" (p. 1) Jack's guilty feelings for Father's death is due to his delay in asking for help. Yet he insists that his father's death "seemed insignificant compared with what followed. [4]" (p. 1) Jack's paradoxical and indifferent response to his father's death results from the the family's dysfunctional impact on him while he wrestles with the adolescent identity confusion and crisis.

According to Erikson, "Individually speaking, identity includes, but is more than, the sum of all the successive identifications of those earlier years when the child wanted to be, and often was forced to become, like the people he depended on. [3]" (p. 74)"To some degree in his adolescence the 14-year-old Jack is forced to become his father. But with the grudge towards father's patriarchal dominance in the family, Jack does not want to become a person like his father. Thus Jack suffers identity confusion. "Young people must become whole people in their own right, and this developmental stage characterized by a diversity changes in physical growth, genital maturation, and social awareness. [3]" (p. 74) The wholeness to be achieved at this stage Erikson has called "a sense of inner identity." And Erikson argues that the young person, in order to experience wholeness, must feel a progressive continuity between that which he has come to be during the long years of childhood and that which he convinced himself to be and that which he perceives others to see in him and to expect of him. [3]" (p. 74)" Unfortunately 14 year-old Jack does not have such kind of progressive continuity between that which he has come to be during the long years of childhood and that which he perceives others to see in him and to expect of him. He is confused about his diversity changes in physical growth, genital maturation, and social awareness. "Identity is a unique product, which now meets a crisis to be solved only in new identifications with age mates and with leader figures outside the family. [3]" (p. 74) The 14- year-old Jack does suffer the identity confusion and crisis, which becomes more severe due to the sudden death of Father.

Before Father's death, though not a good role model for Jack to follow, Father's presence in the family system still nourishes Jack to some degree. Father's death makes Jack's identity confusion become worse and Jack suffers from identity crisis. Moreover, he fails to have any identifications with age mates. Nor does he have identified with leader figures outside the family. The family has been isolated for many years, "No one ever came to visit us. Neither my mother nor my father when he was alive had any real friends outside the family. [4]" (p. 13) The lack of social connection with the outside world is also symbolically expressed in the description of the house, "Our house was old and large. It was built to look a little like a castle, with thick walls, squat windows and crenellations above the front door. Seen from across the road it looked like the face of someone concentrating, trying to remember. [4]" (p. 13)"The closed family system contributes to Jack's identity crisis.

Confused about who he is and what kind of person he would like to become, Jack does not have the purpose in life. He even refuses to follow the life rituals in the normal world. At home Jack “abandoned all the rituals of personal hygiene. I no longer washed my face or cut my nails or took baths. I gave up brushing my teeth. [4]” (p. 12) Though Mother persuades him to clean himself, Jack feels proudly beyond his mother’s control. “At weekends I lay in bed till the afternoon and then took long solitary walks. In the evenings I watched Julie, listened to the radio or just sat. I had no close friends at school. [4]” (p. 12) Thus Jack feels lonely and estranged from his peers at school, siblings at home as well as from himself. Frequently staring at himself in mirrors Jack narrates this way “I felt noble and unique. I stared at my own image till it began to dissociate itself and paralyze me with its look. It receded and returned to me with each beat of my pulse, and a dark halo throbbed above its head and shoulders. [4]” (p. 12)) Jack’s paradoxical feelings about himself both noble and paralyzed demonstrate his identity crisis before his fifteenth birthday. On the one hand the physical growth gives him a sense of masculine strength like a man as his body says to him “Tough”, “Tough”. However, quickly he is overwhelmed with a physical senseless and he felt his body said to him in a louder voice, “Shit... Piss... arse. [4]” (p. 12) Obviously Jack dislikes himself physically, emotionally and mentally, and holds a low self-esteem. Suffering from the identity crisis in his inner heart Jack is anxious to get warmth and love from the family, particularly from his 18-year-old sister Julie. However, Julie also suffers from identity crisis in the dysfunctional family.

3.2. Julie’s Identity Crisis and the Sibling Relationship Between Julie and Jack

Jack’s 18-year-old sister Julie also suffers identity crisis. She is good at sports and “She already held the local under-eighteen records for the 100-and 220-yard sprint. She could run faster than anyone I knew. [4]” (p. 11) However, Father does not recognize Julie’s strength, “Father had never taken her seriously, he said it was daft in a girl, running fast, and not long before he died he refused to come to sports meeting with us. [4]” (p. 11) Thus “He missed the pale-brown, slim legs flickering across the green like blades, or me, Tom, Mother and Sue running across the enclosure to cover Julie with kisses when she took her third race. [4]” (p. 11) Father’s estrangement with the family is obvious, which contributes to the dysfunction of the family system. Julie at the critical period of constructing her young identity fails to be recognized or guided by her father. “She was one of a handful of daring girls at school who wore starched petticoats beneath their skirts to fill them out and make them swirl when they turned on their heel. She wore stockings and black knickers, strictly forbidden. [4]” (p. 11) Julie does not feel recognized at home or at school, and demonstrates her rebellious spirit through wearing forbidden clothes. Julie had boyfriends at school and her closest

friends were girls, the most rebellious, the ones with reputations. [4]” (p. 11).

At the adolescent age Julie and Jack need peer mates with whom to be identified. However, “There was an unspoken family rule that none of us ever brought friends home. [4]” (p. 11) The unspoken rule implies that the family is isolated from outsiders who may bring fresh energy into the space. After Father died, Jack finds that “Julie was more remote now. [4]” (p. 20) Jack hopes to be close to Julie and know more about Julie, but “She wore make-up and all kinds of secrets. [4]” (p. 20)” Thus sensitivity to gender difference at the adolescent stage makes the situation worse when Jack hopes to be close to Julie and get recognized by Julie to strengthen his identity.

The identity crisis of Jack and Julie finds expression in their uneasiness with the institution either at school or at home. Jack longs to be acknowledged to be Julie’s brother at school, yet “she never spoke to me there or acknowledged my presence. [4]” (p. 11) It seems Julie’s rebellious spirit through her daring dressing impresses Jack and as a younger brother, Jack is eager to be acknowledged by Julie for the sense of safety and belonging. However, Julie chooses to ignore Jack at school, which hurts Jack’s feelings and makes him paradoxically more eager to connect with Julie.

Father’s death makes the dysfunctional family become worse. After father’s death, Mother tries to manage the household in her gentle feminine way. Mother attempts to guide Jack about his masturbation. She entered Jack’s bedroom in the morning and said, “It’s time we had a talk, you and I. [4]” (p. 18) “Looked at me. [4]” (p. 19) “I looked into her eyes and they roved anxiously across my face. I saw my own swollen reflection. [4]” (p. 19) Mother’s anxiety and vague language seemed to increase Jack’s fear and identity confusion rather than relieve his uneasiness about his adolescent body at the stage of his sexuality budding into maturity. Without effective guidance, Jack is uneasy about his physical changes. “... my spots were so thoroughly established across my face that I abandoned all the rituals of personal hygiene. I no longer washed my face or hair or cut my nails or took baths. I gave up brushing my teeth. [4]” (p. 12) Jack’s abandonment of all the rituals of personal hygiene indicates his refusal to enter the order of the normal adult world, which further alienates him in the family and his identity crisis becomes severe.

Moreover, Mother’s illness and confinement to bed makes it difficult for her to take care of herself, not to mention to look after her four children, particularly the 6 year-old Tom. At breakfast time, “My mother, drained by another night without sleep, was not eating. Her sunken eyes were gray and watery. With whines of irritation Tom was trying to push his chair nearer hers. She arranged the chair for him and ran her fingers through her hair. [4]” (p. 12) Tom as the youngest child clings to Mother for special attention and love, “He wanted to sit in her lap, but she complained he was too heavy. She arranged the chair for him and ran her fingers through her hair. [4]” (p. 13) Mother’s poor health makes it hard for her to satisfy Tom’s need for care and love.

Still Mother tries her best to maintain the order of the family ever since Father's death, and even celebrates Jack's 15 years old birthday party while lying in her bed with illness. But from Jack's perspective "It was hardly a party really, and I was impatient to return to my book. [4]" (p. 28) And at the party Jack has conflict with Julie. After Julie sang a song and asked Jack to sing a song of "Greensleeves". Jack feels that "The very title of the song irritated me. [4]" (p. 29) and he challenges Julie, "You're not God, are you? [4]" (p. 29) Jack does not feel integrated in the family. Jack's interrogation about Julie in relation to God implies that his perception of God mainly lies in the unquestioned authority of God, irrelevant to God's unfailing love, compassion, and redemption for man. Throughout the narrative, there is no trace of family's worship service and pray service. Thus spiritually the family is disconnected with God the source of unfailing love, which finds expression in the west-land of the dysfunctional family. In his daily life Jack hopes to walk to school with Julie or Susie. But neither of them is willing to walk with Jack to school. Jack is terribly isolated in the family as the house which once stood in a street full of houses. As Nick Ambler argues, "One realizes that the adult world represented by his mother and late father has never offered him the support that he needs to become less alienated from his peers and more integrated into his albeit isolated family. Jack is trapped in a bulwark of remorse, loneliness, distress and confusion. Thus he is already mentally debilitated and vulnerable to the further trauma of his mother's death." [5].

3.3. Mother's Death and the Siblings' Further Identity Crisis

There is no adequate mourning for Father's death in the dysfunctional family and Mother's death leaves the dysfunctional family in a worse state. "If the grieving processes had been unsatisfactory and inadequate following the father's death, the children's secret internment of their mother becomes a grotesque parody of the closure procedures necessary for natural grief." [5] When Jack first learns of his mother's death, he succumbs to an experience of vertigo: "For a moment I thought of snatching the key, but I turned and, light-headed, close to blasphemous laughter, followed my sister down [4]" (p. 42) "Oscillating between fear and desire, tears and laughter, Jack's ambivalent response reflects the uncertainty of knowing how to negotiate trauma. [6]" (p. 24) Sue, the quietest and third oldest child who loves reading, wants to tell someone about their mother's death, "We have to tell someone so there can be a funeral. [4]" (p. 47) It is Jack and Julie, however, that warn her that keeping others informed about Mother's death would mean them going into an orphanage, "If we tell them, they'll come and put us into care, into an orphanage or something. They might try and get Tom adopted. [4]" (p. 47). Horrified at the orphanage fate, Sue conforms to Julie and Jack's response to Mother's death. From this point on Julie takes over as the head of the household with very disturbing consequences, first burying Mother's body in

the cellar with cement. Both Julie and Jack work in complicit co-operation overnight with sand and cement in the cellar, then together with Sue carry Mother with sheet from her upstairs bedroom to the cellar to bury her body in the trunk with cement.

Thus Julie, Jack and Sue are unified in coping with Mother's body in the claustrophobic system as a defensive reaction to the hostile outside world in their view. However, under the traumatic impact of Mother's death Julie and Jack who suffer the identity crisis fail to distinguish the real from the fiction in the consequential events and are doomed to the tragic end of incest sexual union. As Julie assumes the head of the home, she becomes the surrogate mother for 4 year-old Tom, the youngest kid. The new role further deteriorates Julie's identity crisis. Julie becomes impatient with Tom's emotional demands, "Don't keep asking me." She would snap, "Get away from me Tom, just a minute. [4]" (p. 57) Julie's impatience and irritation towards Tom indicates her further identity crisis and anxiety after Mother's death.

Jack narrates that his emotional response to Mom's death this way, "When Mother died, beneath my strongest feelings was a sense of adventure and freedom which I hardly dared admit to myself and which was derived from the memory of that day five years ago. [4]" (p. 56) Five years ago as their parents went to attend a funeral of one of the last surviving relatives, the four children were left alone at home. They experienced freedom and disorder without the presence of adults. Just before parents' coming back home they hurried to clean up Tom with shit in pants and pretended to have eaten lunch their Mother cooked in advance. Instead of feeling the sorrow and loss of Mom, Jack seems to be glad to finally enjoy the sense of freedom and adventure again. However, the absolute freedom without boundary implied in the presence of adults involves mess, decay and disorder, "In the meantime the flies spread through the house and hung in thin clouds by windows, and made a constant clicking sound as they themselves against the glass. [4]" (p. 59) The siblings with total freedom are yet paralyzed in doing anything to tidy up the house, as McEwan once states in an interview about the novel, "Suddenly, children find themselves in the house---there are no teachers, no parents, no figures of authority, they have total freedom---and yet they are completely paralyzed. [7]" (p. 21).

Without the ritual of mourning for Mother's death, Julie struggles to run the house in her idiosyncratic terms. Though the four siblings live in the same house, each one suffers greater loneliness and identity crisis. Sue becomes even more introverted and bedroom ridden. Tom becomes so demanding and retreats like a crying baby. Jack "masturbated each morning and afternoon, and drifted through the house, from one room to another, sometimes surprised to find myself in my bedroom, lying on my back staring at the ceiling, when I had intended to go out into the garden. [4]" (p. 60) Jack himself feels impatient and dislikes his own inaction, "I could not bear to remain on the bed, and yet any activity I thought of disgusted me in advance. [4]" (p. 60) Thus Jack is further at a loss

who he is. His sense of identity crisis reaches the climax after Mother's death.

In Jack's innermost heart, he is eager to connect with siblings, particularly with Julie. Yet Julie "frequently disappeared, usually in the afternoons and for hours on end. [4]"(p. 60) Also Sue locked herself in her room. As Jack goes out to the shop, he has the illusion of first seeing his mom then Julie, who turns out to be a strange female. Jack feels more disconnected while Julie and Sue together dresses up Tom as a girl and jokingly would also dress Jack up as a girl. Jack attempts to recommend Julie to read the science fiction so that they may have something to discuss, but Julie shows no interest. After mother's death Julie also picks up a new habit of smoking and has a boyfriend who gives her a present of a pair boots beyond Jack's understanding. Frustrated with the connection with siblings Jack becomes more inactive, "I woke in the late morning, masturbated and dozed off again. I had dreams, not exactly nightmares; but bad dreams that I struggled to wake out of... I thought about returning to school at the end of summer, and I thought about getting a job. I was not drawn to either of these. [4]"(p. 70) Thus Jack continues find no purpose in life and has no motivation to take action to assimilate into the social world. His suffering of identity crisis also finds expression in his body and he finds that the spots on face were spreading down the sides of his neck. "I wondered if they would cover my whole body, and I did not much care if they did. [4]"(p. 70) Here the spots on face metaphorically implies his uncleanness and his low self-esteem. He has fear that the spots would cover his whole body. Despite his deep fear, it seems that Jack has no energy to change his mental-paralysis situation, with a "Devil may care" attitude.

Still Jack struggles to do something together with his sisters so that he would feel recognized by his siblings. After one month's rubbish piling up in the house after Mother's death, It is Jack who finally proposes, "Let's clean up the kitchen. [4]"(p. 70) Then Julie, Jack and Sue are doing the cleaning thoroughly. Jack finds that, "... for the first time in weeks I was happy. I felt safe, as if I belong to a powerful, secret army. We worked for over four hours, one job following another, and I was hardly aware of my existence. [4]"(p. 71) Thus in doing the cleaning with sisters to build up the order for the house Jack has a positive feeling of belonging. Yet such a positive sense of belonging is temporary and not stable enough for Jack to live through his identity crisis. Moreover, Mother's death and her burial in the trunk with cement in the cellar is a trauma that Jack fails to confront in a sensible way, which adds to his suffering of identity crisis. "It was not at all clear to me now why we had put her in the trunk in the first place. At the time it had been obvious, to keep the family together. Was that a good reason? It might have been more interesting to be apart. Nor could I think whether what we had done was an ordinary thing to do, understandable even if it had been a mistake, or something so strange that it was found out it would be the headline of every newspaper in the country. Or neither of these... [4]"(p. 73) Jack wants to justify their way of burying

Mother's body with the reason of keeping family together, yet he is not certain whether it is a moral mistake. The loss of the moral orientation in life makes him puzzled, also a expression of identity crisis. "The impossibility of knowing or feeling anything for certain gave me a great urge to masturbate. [4]"(p. 73) At the adolescent stage Jack has to resort to masturbation to release the anxiety of identity crisis, which makes him more lifeless, worsening his identity crisis.

The seemingly closed system occasionally has interactions with persons from the outside world. Tome plays with his friend in the yard outside, but Tom's playmate is too young to impact the family system. Julie's boyfriend 23 year-old Derek is an important person that will break the dysfunctional order of the house. In the youth age to establish an intimate relationship with lover is challenging. The more likely that a person has a stable self identity, the more possible that the person would establish a healthy intimate relationship with the lover. Unfortunately, Julie still suffers identity crisis when she gets to know Derek. Jack dislikes Derek's coming in the house. He also hopes Sue dislikes the way he does. Yet Sue who enjoys reading by herself seems neutral towards Derek's coming. And Jack "felt isolated from everyone I knew. [4]"(p. 82) Jack is absorbed in himself, and feels more isolated. In contrast Sue's love of reading gives her some healing power to cope with the trauma of Mom's death and her frequent talking with Julie also gives her some warmth. Sue also points out that Jack is alienated from Mom when Mom is alive, "You never did anything she asked you. You never did anything to help. You are always too full of yourself, just like you are now. [4]"(p. 82) When Jack argues that he does care for Mom, since he dreams about his masturbating in front of his Mom. Sue responds that "You didn't dream about her. You dreamed about yourself. That's why you want to look in my diary, to see if there's anything about you in it. [4]"(p. 82) Jack's identity crisis is also symbolically related with the disease, "I began to notice a smell on my hands... It was a smell that reminded me of the meat we had thrown out..." Jack worries about the smell and suspects that he suffers a cancer, "I found the home encyclopedia and looked up cancer. I thought I might be rotting away from a slow disease... [4]"(p. 94) In depth, Jack's heart is filled with insecurity, anxiety and fear for death, which reveals his identity crisis.

Jack goes out with Derek to play snooker games, and views Derek's parents and Derek finds that Jack shares something unusual with Julie. "You are really just like your sister, you are, [4]" Derek said.(p. 90) What Jack and Julie share as a secret is Mother's death and her body buried in the trunk with cement in the cellar, which is also a trauma for Jack, Julie and their siblings. Though Derek feels the odd smell from the smell and inquires Julie about it, 'Whatever's in there is really rotten.' 'It's a dead dog.' Julie said suddenly and simply, Jack's dog. [4]' (p. 104-105) Jack, Sue and even Tom all complicitly agree on the lie that what is buried in the cellar trunk is Jack's dog. In Jack's narrative he blurs the boundary between reality and fiction and emphasizes that he dreams often to justify

what they lie about Mother's death and later attempts to justify his tragic incest with Julie. In Julie's perspective as they told Derek about the dog, what upsets Derek is that "we don't let him in on it. [4]"(p. 118) 'He feels left out... He wants to be one of the family, you know, big smart daddy... He wants to take charge of everything. He keeps talking about moving in with us. [4]"(p. 118) Derek is viewed as a big threat towards the family. For Julie her role is to guard the siblings against any threat from outside the family, including the threat which she assumes from Derek. Thus her intimate relationship with Derek dooms to fail. As the tragic incest is about to happen, Julie and Jack finally have a communication about Mother's death and what have been happening after Mother's death in the family, thus the traumatic feelings vent out. Similarly Julie and Jack share the defensive mechanism against the trauma of having no sense of time ever since Mother's death, Julie said, 'I've lost all sense of time... Everything seems still and fixed and it makes me feel that I'm not frightened of anything. [4]' (p. 119) Jack says 'Except for the times I go down into the cellar I feel like I'm asleep. Whole weeks go by without me noticing, and if you asked me what happened three days ago I shouldn't be able to tell you. [4]'(p. 119) As they lie close to each other in the bed next to Tom's cot to share with each other the hidden feelings, and "talk in whispers about Mum [4]"(p. 122) They feel healed in a closed world without the sense of time which symbolizes the ethical order when the tragic incest happens and they deeply feel connected to each other. When Derek breaks in to view the tragic incest and reports to the outside world. The closed world finally collapses. Thus the identity crisis of Julie and Jack reaches the climax.

4. Conclusion

The security of being connected and loved among the family members is lacking from the very beginning in the dysfunctional family. Father's patriarchal dominance negatively impacts his intimate relationship with Mother and the children. Without the love affections flowing between Father and Mother as a result of failure of mutual respect, the nurturing atmosphere is lacking in love and security. As 14-year-old Jack and 18-year-old Julie confront identity confusion and identity crisis, they fail to get emotional support from the parents. Father's heart disease threatens his dominance in the family and his competition with the 4-year-old Tom for Mom's attention and love leaves a negative impression on children, particularly on Jack, whom fails to have Father as a model and guide as he confronts adolescent identity confusion. Also the isolated family from other social connections makes Jack have no peers or adult models with whom Jack can identify when he suffers identity confusion. Later Father's sudden death and no adequate grief mourning makes the family further dysfunctional. Though Mother attempts to manage the family through her feminine way, her failure to confront the reality of her suffering illness in an honestly authentic way and fear of leaving

the children as orphans further makes the family less supportive while Jack and Julie are experiencing identity crisis. Experiencing trauma of Mother's death, with the fear of threat from the outside world Julie and Jack decide to bury Mother's body in the cellar with cement with no bereavement mourning among the siblings, which further traumatizes the siblings and the identity crisis reaches the climax, with Julie and Jack's tragic incestuous union in the end in their closed system characterized by "utter decay and disorder [8]"(p. 55) with no sense of time associated with the ethical world to fend against the patriarchal threat from Julie's boyfriend Derek. Under the impact of great trauma of Mother's death, "The siblings cannot develop a healthy relationship among themselves because as Caruth suggests, traumatic shock impairs their perception of the self. [9]"(p. 30).

Throughout Jack's narration the dysfunctional family is lacking in abundant love and connection from the very beginning, cut off from the divine source of love, no trace of regular worship service in church on Sundays or any daily bible reading at home. The family is like a cement garden disconnected from the spiritual nourishment of God's love, a characterization of the spiritual wilderness in the modern world amid the declining faith in God. In such a isolated and dysfunctional family, the adolescents undergo an identity crisis in their growth journey, which is shocking with the tragic sibling incestuous union as a distorted way to fend off the fear of external threats.

Described as "a kind of landlocked *Lord of the Flies* [10]"(p. 48), this narrative of adolescent identity crisis in a modern alienated society reflects McEwan's profound reflection on dysfunctional families and the spiritual predicament of modern people, as well as his deep concern for the emotional challenges faced by the adolescents in the modern wasteland far from God.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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