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Ethical literary criticism and Ian McEwan’s *Nutshell*

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**ABSTRACT**
This article, from the perspective of ethical literary criticism conceptualized by Nie Zhenzhao, attempts to examine ethical dilemmas, ethical identities, and ethical choices of Ian McEwan’s recent novel *Nutshell*. It argues that almost all major characters of the novel are imprisoned either by their existing ethical identities or by their misplaced ethical identities, which restrains them from making proper ethical choices and thus leads to their ethical tragedies. In particular, it tries to decode three ethical metaphors implied by the novel’s title “nutshell,” namely nutshell of desire, nutshell of poetry, and nutshell of womb.

**KEYWORDS**
Ethical literary criticism; Ian McEwan; ethical identity; ethical choice; ethical dilemma

As is observed by William Baker and Shang Biwu, since the opening up of China, the importing of Western critical theories has contributed to the overall progression and flourishing of literary studies in China; on the other hand, large-scale translating and applying of Western literary theories brought complications. For example, scholars either tended to move away from literary texts in the name of theory or became too engrossed in theoretical, thematic, and terminological complexity. In short, Western literary theories were found wanting. (Baker and Biwu 14)

Against this backdrop, Nie Zhenzhao proposes his ethical literary criticism (*wen xue lun li xue pi ping*), which is defined as “a critical theory that approaches literary works and their authors from the perspective of ethics” (Zhenzhao, “Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 84). It should be pointed out that ethical literary criticism is different from moral criticism in that it “does not simply evaluate a given literary work as good or bad on the basis of today’s moral principles. Instead, it emphasizes ‘historicism’, that is, the examination of the ethical values in a given work with reference to a particular historical context or a period of time in which the text under discussion is written” (84). Ethical literary criticism, according to Nie, attempts (1) to investigate moral values of the writers and their historical background, and the connections of the writers’ own moral values and those ethical values projected in their works; (2) to investigate the relations between moral phenomena existing in works and in reality, the moral inclinations of the works, and social and moral values of the works; (3) to examine the effects of the works’ moral values on readers and society, and readers’ evaluations of the moral thoughts of the writers and the works; (4) to evaluate the moral inclinations of the writers and their works from an ethical perspective, the influence of the moral inclinations of the writers and their works on their contemporary writers and literature as well as those of the later period; (5) to uncover the moral features of the writers and their works as well as to explore various issues concerning the relations between literature and society, literature and writers, and literature and writers from an ethical perspective (Zhenzhao, “Ethical Approach” 19–20; Baker and Biwu 14; Shang, “The Rise of a Critical Theory” 29). In short, the overarching aim of ethical literary criticism is “to uncover ethical factors that bring literature into existence and the ethical elements that affect characters and events in literary works” (Zhenzhao, “Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 84).
Unlike other strands of critical theories, ethical literary criticism takes a different view of the origin of literature, claiming that “literature is a product of ethic, or a unique expression of morality in a given historical period. In other words, literature is fundamentally an expression of ethic” (85). In the conceptual system of ethical literary criticism, the term *ethic* first of all refers to “the ethical relationship or ethical order between man and man, man and society, or man and nature” (88). Within particular literary texts, *ethic* also refers to “the moral conceptions based upon ethical order, or the relevant norms used to maintain the ethical order” (88–89). Viewed in this light, the general aim of literature therefore lies in its describing “the ethical order, the changes of ethical order, and moral problems caused by those changes, so as to offer some experience for human beings to learn from” (89).

To conceptualize ethical literary criticism, Nie proposes a number of critical concepts, such as *ethical taboo*, *ethical chaos*, *ethical consciousness*, *ethical environment*, *ethical identity*, *ethical selection*, *ethical choice*, the *Sphinx factor*, the *human factor*, the *animal factor*, rational will, irrational will, and natural will, among which *ethical selection*, *the Sphinx factor*, and *ethical identity* are particularly illuminating. I agree with Nie when he sees the fact that “In the history of human civilization, the biggest problem for mankind to solve is to make a choice between the identities of animals and the identities of human beings” (32). As a rejoinder to Charles Darwin’s notion of biological selection, which largely accounts for the physical forms of human beings, Nie proposes a conception of *ethical selection*, which helps to endow human being with reason and ethical consciousness and, eventually, turns them into ethical beings. In connection with *ethical selection*, Nie coins another concept, *Sphinx factor*, which is derived from his new reading of the Sphinx riddle in Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*. In Nie’s opinion, the Sphinx riddle can be seen not as “an expression of issue concerning humanity’s doomed failure to fight against fate, but as an exploration of the mystery why humans are such beings.” (Zhenzhao, “Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism” 36). In Nie’s opinion, the feature of the Sphinx’s combination of a human head and an animal body suggests that “the most important feature of a human image lies in its head, which stands for reason of human beings emerged in the evolutionary process, and that human beings evolve from animals and thus still contain some features belonging to animals” (38). With this point in his mind, Nie names this feature the “Sphinx factor,” which is composed of two parts: the human factor and the animal factor. Specifically, the human factor equals “ethical consciousness embodied by the human head, which results from human being’s biological selection in their evolution from savagery to civilization”; while the animal factor refers to “human beings’ animal instinct, which is mainly controlled by their primitive desires” (38–39). That said, the Sphinx riddle can be interpreted as an ethical proposition for human beings to meditate on after going through biological selection—being human or being animal, which in turn requests them to complete their evolutionary process by undertaking the ethical selection.

When reflecting on “theory now and again,” Jonathan Culler stresses that “In literary studies, theory was first deployed for thinking about the nature of the critical enterprise and for producing new readings of literary works” (Culler 230, emphasis mine). In Culler’s opinion, the most essential quality of a good critical theory is to produce new readings of literary works. In that case, I think Culler will be happy to read what Nie has ambitiously claimed: “The significance and value of ethical literary criticism is not to repeat the existing conclusions or arguments but to establish new interpretations, cognitions, and new findings, surpassing thereby the existing scholarship, and ultimately moving critical scholarship forward” (Zhenzhao, “Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 100). Though developed as “one of the most vibrant and productive critical theories in China” (Baker and Biwu 15), ethical literary criticism, as I have pointed out in “Ethical Criticism and Literary Studies,” “exemplifies the best resource for the study of literature by facilitating new ways of engaging with literature and fostering new understandings of literary history. In this sense, it resonates not only with Chinese scholars, but ought to resonate with scholars in the West” (Shang, “Ethical Criticism” 6). Along this line of thinking, I attempt to read Ian McEwan’s most recent work *Nutshell* in the conceptual
framework of Nie’s ethical literary criticism, partly in the hope of bridging Chinese critical theories and studies of English literature.

The title of McEwan’s novel is taken from Act II, Scene II of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In his conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet says that “Oh God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space—were it not that I have bad dreams” (*Hamlet*, Act II, Scene II). The narrator of the work is a fetus, who tells a story about his mother and uncle’s plot of poisoning his father and his consequential revenge. However, when interviewed, McEwan denies his intention to rewrite *Hamlet*, insisting that “I didn’t really intend to write a version of *Hamlet*. It just sort of crept in” (Neill, “Ian McEwan on New Novel *Nutshell*”). I agree with Adam Mars-Jones, who observes, “There’s no explicit reference to Hamlet or Shakespeare, but plenty of allusion, some of it so direct that it might as well be explicit reference” (Mars-Jones, “In the Body Bag”). Lucy Scholes sees *Nutshell* as “the best thing” that McEwan has written in years (Scholes, “Ian McEwan’s *Nutshell*”). Scholes’s point has been specified by Kate Clanchy, who puts it rather straightforwardly. “Like T. S. Eliot’s ‘Marina,’ also a riff on *Shakespeare,*” Clanchy says, “it is a consciously late, deliberately elegiac, masterpiece, a calling together of everything McEwan has learned and knows about his art” (Clanchy, “*Nutshell* by Ian McEwan”). So far as narrative skills are concerned, *Nutshell* fully demonstrates McEwan’s virtuosity, which is typically shown in his employment of character narration, audio narration, and unnatural narrator. At issue is why *Nutshell* is deliberately elegiac? What are the factors making it elegiac? What does the elegiac imply? Perhaps the word “elegiac” is similar to Decca Aitkenhead’s “allegorical indictment.” Aitkenhead argues that “*Nutshell* is an allegorical indictment of our post-factual age, in which feelings matter more than the truth” (Aitkenhead, “Ian McEwan”). Regrettably, Aitkenhead does not reveal the “truth” containing in the novel, nor does he elaborate the relation between “feelings” and the truth. To a large degree, both Clanchy’s “elegiac” and Aitkenhead’s “truth” are closely related to the overwhelming ethical tragedy: the fetus gets to know that his mother and uncle plot to poison his father. Though the word “nutshell” seems to suggest the fetus’s aspiration to become “a king of infinite space,” in reality he is like a prisoner confined to such a limited space as “nutshell.” In a sense, “nutshell” can be seen as an ethical metaphor of a small world, into which all characters of the novel are stuck and are unable to get out. In this article, I attempt to decode three ethical metaphors implied by “nutshell,” with a particular reference to ethical literary criticism: nutshell of desire, nutshell of poetry, and nutshell of womb.

**Nutshell of desire: Sphinx factor and the loss of ethical consciousness**

Tim Adams postulates: “There have been plenty of novels inspired by *Hamlet*—Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*, John Updike’s *Gertrude and Claudius*, even David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. And there have been one or two novels told in the voice of fetuses in the womb—Carlos Fuentes’s *Christopher Unborn*, for example. But Ian McEwan’s virtuoso entertainment is almost certainly the first to combine the two” (Adams, “*Nutshell* by Ian McEwan”). The fetus begins his narration with much perplexity:

>_So here I am, upside down in a woman. Arms patiently crossed, waiting, waiting and wondering who I’m in, what I’m for. My eyes close nostalgically when I remember how I once drifted in my translucent body bag, floated dreamily in the bubble of my thoughts through my private ocean in slow-motion somersaults, colliding gently against the transparent bounds of my confinement, the confiding membrane that vibrated with, even as it muffled, the voices of conspirators in a vile enterprise. That was in my careless youth._

(McEwan 1)

It reads rather unnatural that a fetus in its mother’s womb gets to know a vile enterprise of conspirators through the resonance of membrane with voices outside. Who are the conspirators? What is the vile enterprise? In addition, it also needs to be noticed that the fetus deliberately uses the words “conspirator” and “vile,” both of which convey his negative ethical judgment about the nature of the action to be taken. Similar to *Hamlet*, in *Nutshell*, the fetus’s father is poisoned to death by his mother and his uncle, one on whom he tries to take revenge. However, unlike *Hamlet*,
who knows the truth of his father’s death through a ghost, the fetus witnesses every step in which his father is murdered.

In McEwan’s new work, Shakespeare’s gloomy prince Hamlet has been changed into an unborn but articulate fetus, the wise old king into poet John Cairncross, King Claudius into real-estate developer Claude, Queen Gertrude into pregnant housewife Trudy. The castle in Elsinore of Denmark has been changed to an old mansion in contemporary London, which more or less constitutes the ethical environment of the novel, which is very essential to our understanding of the novel. Ethical literary criticism pays particular attention to the analysis of ethical environment. In Nie’s words, “To understand a literary work, we need to refer to its particular ethical environment or ethical context, which is a premise of our understanding of literature” (Zhenzhao, Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism 256). The story of Nutshell takes place mainly in an old mansion in King George’s time. To a large extent, it is the old mansion that has incurred John’s tragic death. As far as wealth is concerned, John “has less money than Trudy and far less than Claude. He knows by heart a thousand poems” (McEwan 11). Despite the fact that John has difficulties in paying his rent, is often in debt, and frequently borrows money from his brother, he is a rich man. The mansion he has inherited from his mother is worth seven million pounds in the real-estate market. Puzzled by John’s being driven out of his own mansion by his wife, the fetus comments, “Most men, most people, would never permit a spouse to eject them from under their childhood eaves. John Cairncross is different” (McEwan 12). No matter how hard John tries to stay with his pregnant wife to take care of her, he is rejected ruthlessly out of his own house. Ironically, Trudy uses the fetus as her excuse, while her real purpose is to welcome her lover and to possess her husband’s house. Ambitious in poetry writing and publishing, John is kind and passionate in nature, unaware of the value of his inherited mansion. In contrast to his greedy brother Claude, John gives all the money he borrows to help other poets in need.

Regarding Claude’s identity as a real-estate developer, the fetus sees him as a parasite that reaps without sowing, because he “composes nothing, and invents nothing” (McEwan 5). Claude’s seven-figure inheritance has been squandered to less than a quarter. Maybe it is the hope for unearned benefit that generates a larger desire in him and prompts him to take possession of his brother’s old mansion, which values high in the real-estate market. Metaphorically, both Trudy and Claude are like prisoners trapped in the mansion. Coveting the mansion and its economic value, Trudy hardly goes outside it and spends the first half of her life as a prisoner-like dweller, while she will have to spend the rest of her life as a real prisoner in jail. Either way, she loses her freedom.

Trudy persuades her husband to move out of the house, claiming that they need to give each other some time and space. Meanwhile, Claude also persuades his brother to move out, explaining that the separation will save their marriage. When lending money to his brother, Claude hypocritically says, “John, she truly loves you but she’s asked me as trusted family member to ask you to stay away for just a little while. Best hope for your marriage. Erm. It’ll come out right in the end. I should’ve guessed your rent was in arrears. But. Please say yes, take the case, let her have her space” (McEwan 35). In fact, Claude’s real purpose is to drive his brother away so as to get together with his sister-in-law. He plots with his sister-in-law to poison his brother, while ostensibly saying their marriage will come to a good end. Ironically, he takes himself as “trusted family member,” but in practice he commits adultery with his brother’s wife and attempts to poison his brother in the aim of taking over his house, completely betraying the trust between family members.

Whenever with Trudy and Claude, John recites poems for them, but his recital is always ignored and rejected. When trying to read his newly received poem about an owl in front of Claude, John infuriates his brother, who withdraws the money and leaves in anger. In contrast to Claude’s fury and his withdrawing the money, John devotes himself to proofreading the poem in no hurry. The narrator says that “he doesn’t care, and hardly knows he doesn’t care” (McEwan 36). The poem describes the “blood-wise fatal bellman, we quaintly thrill to a shrieking cruelty” (McEwan 36). Containing such words as “fatal” and “cruelty,” the poem is rich in ethical implications. If we relate these words to Claude’s crime of poisoning his brother, it is not hard to understand his feeling “strangled” and
“furious.” Actually, Claude’s refusal to listen to poems could be regarded as his refusal of moral teaching. Nie claims, “The value of literature is best realized in its moral teaching […] as a fruitful result of human civilization, literature is one of the most important means for human beings to receive moral enlightenment” (Zhenzhao, “Ethical Literary Criticism” 11). Not receiving moral teaching of literature, Claude is unable to tell right from wrong in his actions, which leads to his eventual commitment of an unethical crime.

 Desire is like a huge net, devouring Trudy and Claude. It seduces them to lose rationality and to degenerate too far to redeem themselves. In fact, they do not have to obtain John’s consent to their staying together, since he has already known of their incestuous relationship and has no intention to break them up. What makes them persistent in poisoning John is their greed for his house. In other words, their incestuous collusion is not for love but for money. Ironically, though plotting and staying together, they behave like strange bedfellows. For example, when Trudy accidentally hurts her foot, Claude’s first concern is to clean the bloodstain on the floor rather than dressing her wound; Claude makes Trudy commit every step of the murder while withdrawing himself from the evidence of crime; when their crime is brought to light and they are preparing themselves to leave, Claude attempts to escape alone, abandoning his pregnant lover yet not knowing that his passport has been hidden by her. To seize the property, Trudy and Claude violate the taboo of murdering his brother/her husband. According to ethical literary criticism, “At the beginning of human civilization, taboos were used to maintain the ethical order of society. In ancient society, taboos were indeed the basis for the formation of ethical order and the maintenance of that order. Originally, taboos imposed restrictions upon transgressive acts, and worked through customs” (Zhenzhao, “Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 90). Transgressing the ethical order and violating the ethical taboo, Trudy and Claude are to be put in jail and receive their due penalty.

 Even though Claude is the initiator of this ethical crime, without Trudy he would never have realized his plot. Sex and money are the two central means for him to take firm control of Trudy. As a mother and wife, Trudy is not an insensitive puppet, but how could she gradually lose her conscience and rationality and become Claude’s conspirator? The question can be answered with reference to her Sphinx factor. According to ethical literary criticism, “In all literary works, characters can be regarded as a Sphinx factor containing both goodness and evil. The value of literature is to reveal the process of ethical selection conducted by human beings through depicting the interplays of human factor and animal factor” (Zhenzhao, “Ethical Literary Criticism” 15). To a large degree, Trudy fails to let her human factor control her animal factor, which leads to a full play of her natural will and free will. Nie points out, “In literature, the Sphinx factor has taken on the forms of natural will, free will and rational will. Natural will, to some degree, designates the primitive desire of human beings, libido in particular, and free will is the representation of human desire, while rational will is the representation of ration” (Zhenzhao, Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism 42). Nie further elaborates, “The three wills are the different realizations of Sphinx factor. Natural will is similar to such primitive will as sexual instinct, and free will is closer to such a rational will as deliberate pursuit of a certain aim, while rational will is closest to ethical consciousness, which is concerned with the awareness of moral standard and the distinction between good and evil” (Zhenzhao, Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism 42). In Nutshell, Trudy and Claude’s natural will is shown in their steadfast pursuit of sex, and their free will is typically shown in their desire for wealth. Staying together in John’s house, Trudy and Claude mainly do two things: make love and conspire to poison John. It would be a misconception if we considered their persistence of murdering John for the purpose of staying together in the name of true love, since John is not only aware of their abnormal relationship but also gives them the green light, saying, “I’m happy for you” (McEwan 69). What Trudy and Claude really want is his house rather than his consent. They could not accept John’s arrangement of his house, when he says, “Claude, you have your nice big place in Primrose Hill, and Trudy, you can move there. I’ll be moving some stuff back in here tomorrow. As soon as you’ve gone and the decorators have done their work, Elodie will move in with me” (McEwan 70). In other words, it is not Trudy’s envy for John’s lover Elodie but John’s driving her out the house that consolidates her will to murder her husband. Trudy emphasizes, “I want him
dead. And it has to be tomorrow” (McEwan 71). It needs to be noted that Trudy and Claude are at variance and wary of each other in every step of their conspiracy. Part of Claude's perfect plan is to attain a huge amount of profit, meanwhile getting disassociated with the murder, which is seen through by Trudy. She puts it bluntly: “The bigger question is this. Where's your risk, what's your exposure here when you're wanting a share of the money? If something goes wrong and I go down, where will you be once I've scrubbed you out of my bedroom?” In other words, she wanted to make it clear to Claude that “you tied into this, and I mean totally. If I fail, you fail” (McEwan 59).

In an interview, McEwan says that “Claude and Trudy, like Claudius and Gertrude, are villains plotting a murder, so they're not meant to be sympathetic” (Neill 1). In Hamlet, Claudius experiences the moment of repentance for his crime of murdering his brother, while in Nutshell, Claude has not shown any sign for his repentance. Unlike Claude, Trudy has not lost all her ethical conscience, and she occasionally doubts her immoral motivation. Sometimes she repents and accuses herself, and she once refused the plan of poisoning her husband. After all, in her words, “I loved him once” (McEwan 55). She wakes up at midnight and cries, “We can’t do it” in her husband’s study, but under Claude's temptation she soon changes to “We can” (McEwan 9). Regrettably, Claude’s temptation and encouragement make Trudy's temporary ethical consciousness suppressed by her primitive desire, and she thus makes the wrong ethical choice.

When John drives away with the poisoned fruit smoothie, Claude and Trudy have no sense of regret. Instead of worrying about John’s death at any moment, they are sexually aroused by the success of their plan and start making love as soon as John’s car is out of sight. In other words, Trudy and Claude choose money and sex over John’s life. It is true that when the policemen confirm John’s death to Trudy, she feels a little bit remorseful. In the novel, the narrator deliberately says, “It was never meant to work; she’s telling herself. It was just my foolish spite. I’m only guilty of a mistake” (McEwan 109). However, Trudy's transient sense of regret is short-lived by her erotic desire aroused by Claude, who controls her behavior and makes her indulge in sensual pursuit. Losing their ethical consciousness, committing murder and telling lies, they not only have brought misfortune to John and the fetus but also receive their due punishment, which confines them in another type of “nutshell”: the cell of prison.

**Nutshell of poetry: Displaced ethical identities and ethical tragedies**

Though the novel does not spare much space for John Cairncross, he is no doubt one of the important characters, around whom the plot has developed. What kind of person is John? What allows him to be murdered by his wife and brother? How should his tragedy be interpreted? To answer these questions, we shall take John’s ethical identity into consideration. According to ethical literary criticism, “Almost all ethical issues in literature are concerned with ethical identities” (Zhenzhao, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* 263). John has multiple identities: a poet and publisher in his career, a mentor of the female poet Elodie, Trudy’s husband, Claude’s brother, and father of the fetus. His wife and brother have developed an incestuous relationship, which leads to the crisis of his marriage. Meanwhile, they covet his property, which causes his being poisoned to death. Unlike Hamlet’s father, who does not break up with his wife before his death and who knows nothing about his wife’s extramarital adultery with his brother Claudius, John has separated from his wife before his death, and he is fully aware of the incestuous relationship between his wife and his brother. Owing to Claude’s intervention in John and Trudy’s marriage, John’s identity has been changed from Trudy’s husband to Trudy’s husband’s brother, and Trudy has been changed from John’s wife to the wife of John’s brother. Though John tries hard to restore his proper ethical identity, all his efforts not only end in failure but also accelerate his death. Specifically, his way of saving his marriage and recovering his ethical identity goes in a circular manner from “poem recitation” to “provocation,” and back to “poem recitation.”

As a poet, John first attempts to save his marriage by reciting poems to Trudy and Claude. About his father, the fetus says: “But he lives by poetry, still recites it to my mother, teaches it, reviews it, conspires it in the advancement of younger poets, sits on prize committees, promotes poetry in schools, writes essays on poetry for small magazines, has talked about it on the radio” (McEwan 11).
Poetry is not only John’s career but also his commitment in life. He offers financial aids to new poets and struggles to maintain his poetry press, which is on the edge of bankruptcy. He spares no effort to cultivate many poets and young writers, trying to help them realize their literary dreams. In other words, poetry is John’s career and wealth, as well as his artistic shelter during the crisis of love, marriage, and family. Therefore, it seems to be his only trustworthy means of saving his marriage. Every time John comes back to his house to meet Trudy, his habitual act is to recite poems for her. About John’s behavior, the fetus explains: “Here are my reasonable inferences. Born under an obliging star, eager to please, too kind, too earnest, he has nothing of an ambitious poet’s quiet greed. 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” (McEwan 12). The fetus praises his father for his noble qualities by using such words as “kind,” “honest,” and “not greedy,” which stand in sharp contrast to Trudy’s vice. Very interestingly, the fetus praises Trudy’s beauty multiple times, but her beautiful appearance seems to be the disguise of her ugly soul. Though she is the mother of her fetus and wife of her husband, she blindly pursues her desire for sex and money. She not only develops incestuous relations with her husband’s brother but also conspires with him to poison her husband with the aim of seizing his property.

From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, “literature takes its origin from ethics, and moral teaching is its primary function” (Zhenzhao, “Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 84). As one of the major genres of literature, poetry plays an important role of moral teaching. John recites poems in front of Trudy to praise her beauty in hope of changing her mind. In doing so, John expects Trudy to accept his request of moving back to be with her and to restore his ethical identity at home. To John’s disappointment, Trudy feels disgusted and bored whenever he starts reciting poems. Inside Trudy’s womb, the fetus could feel her boredom forming a “crust,” which “blinds her to the pathos of the scene—a larger, larger-hearted man pleading his cause without hope, in the unmodish form a sonnet” (McEwan 13). Trudy shows indifference to John’s poems and ignores his tolerance. On the contrary, she considers it his weakness and takes advantage of it. To reject John’s request of moving back to the house to take care of her, she says, “Please John, not now. We’ve been through this. I need more time. Try to be considerate. I’m bearing your child, remember? This isn’t the time to be thinking of yourself” (McEwan 18). Ironically, it is Trudy who has been thinking only of herself, never caring about her fetus and her husband. If only she thought about the fetus rather than herself, she would not violate the ethical taboo by developing an incestuous relationship with her husband’s brother, nor would she murder her husband, which makes the fetus fatherless before he gets born. Trudy’s wrong ethical choice is, to a large extent, caused by her loss of ethical consciousness and her refusal of moral teaching.

When poem recitation fails to save his marriage and to recover his ethical identity, John tries to make his wife feel jealous by bringing in another woman, who is not really his lover at all. He takes young poet Elodie to the old mansion where Trudy lives, claiming that Elodie is his lover, with the aim of arousing his wife’s jealousy. To some extent, Elodie’s visit does succeed in arousing Trudy’s jealousy, which can be seen from their conversation about owls:

“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.” (McEwan 66)

They seem to talk about the habit of owls. However, a close look at their conversation reveals that it is a contest between different values, about which the fetus comments, “The exchange is relaxed, the tone inconsequential” (McEwan 66). The fetus’s comment on their conversation hides the
hostility between Elodie and Trudy. To some degree, John’s introduction to Elodie surprises Trudy and does arouse her jealousy, which is not a major reason for causing his death, though. In doing so, John hopes to remind her of the good time they spent together so as to change her mind, because he still loves Trudy, even though he has known her betrayal.

In the hope of changing Trudy’s mind, John pretends to be calm and tolerant about Trudy and Claude’s incestuous relationship, about which the fetus feels a little bit unexpected: “My father appears unfazed to find his brother in this kitchen, opening the wine, playing the host. So John Cairncross was never the dupe, the unknowing cuckold” (McEwan 63). In other words, though John is not in the dark of his wife and brother’s betrayal and incestuous relationship, he does not give up correcting the disturbed ethical relations in his family and restoring his displaced ethical identities. Poem recitation and arousing his wife’s jealousy are part of his efforts to do so. In the presence of Elodie and Claude, John recalls his time with Trudy in the past. After all, they have passionately loved each other. In John’s words, “Our lovemaking was an extension of our talking, and our talking of our lovemaking” (McEwan 68). When Trudy and John are together, their “lovemaking” is equivalent to “talking,” a communication between two souls and combination of spiritual love and physical love. When Trudy stays with Claude, they indulge in wild lovemaking, which makes her addicted to lust and lose her ethical consciousness. When his poem recitation does not work, John tries to resort to the strategy of provocation. He says he would like to break up with Trudy and bless her new life with his brother Claude, while he will also start a new life with his girlfriend Elodie. It would be a misconception if readers attributed Trudy’s insistence on murdering her husband to her envy of Elodie. As a matter of fact, Trudy is not really concerned about who is going to be John’s new girlfriend. What truly makes her so determined in poisoning her husband is that she is asked by him to move out the house, which is her bottom line. When John and Elodie meet Trudy and Claude, John speaks out his plan after breaking up with his wife: he will move back to his mansion with Elodie, while Trudy will move out of the house and live at Claude’s place. Instead of winning Trudy’s heart back, John’s plan only quickens his death. John’s arrangement makes Trudy realize that “John Cairncross is not her fool after all. He’ll kick her out, and soon. She must act today” (McEwan 76). Trudy’s decision to poison John suggests the failure of his plan of using the strategy of provocation to save his marriage and to restore his ethical identity.

It needs to be pointed out that John never gives up his efforts to restore his displaced ethical identity. When meeting Trudy for the last time, he still has fantasies of touching her, and he bets his last chance on poetry recitation again. Poetry to John is, as his only faith in life, like money and property to Trudy. In his last meeting with Trudy, he pleads with her: “But Trudy. Just for old times. Shall I say a poem for you?” Yet Trudy gives him a prompt rejection as usual: “Please, John, for heaven’s sake, don’t!” (McEwan 91). Especially when John recites a poem despite her objection, Trudy resolutely claims, “I don’t want to hear another poem for the rest of my life” (McEwan 92). Trudy’s blunt refusal of John’s request for reading poetry for her not only suggests his failure to save his marriage and to restore his displaced ethical identity, but also signals her resistance to the role of moral teaching played by literature, which more or less accounts for her making an ethical choice at the price of John’s death and her imprisonment.

In the conceptual framework of ethical literary criticism, “Ethical choice is an important means for human beings to approach goodness and stay away from evil […] ethical choice is made through moral teaching, while moral teaching is realized by literature” (Zhenzhao, Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism 6). Viewed in this light, Nutshell is an ethical tragedy caused by Trudy’s resistance to moral teaching, which is conducted mainly through John’s repeated reading of poetry. To a large extent, the novel offers a negative moral example for readers to reap ethical enlightenment by describing both characters’ misplaced ethical identities and their improper ethical choices.

**Nutshell of womb: Ethical dilemma between waiting and action**

So far as Shakespeare’s Hamlet is concerned, most critical attention has been paid to Hamlet’s soliloquy “To be, or not to be.” In Nie’s view, “it is essentially an interrogation and choice of justice. That is to say, it is a judgment about Hamlet’s action. Knowing the truth of his father’s death,
Hamlet is encountered with two choices: to revenge or not to revenge, which is an ethical dilemma” (Zhenzhao, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* 132). In *Nutshell*, the fetus is faced with a similar ethical dilemma, wandering between waiting and action, feeling it is hard to make a choice. His dilemma and delay of taking action is based mainly on his understanding and judgment of his family relations.

The unnaturalness of the fetus is typically shown by his infinite knowledge, which is explained by him as diligence and eagerness to learn. He says that “I stay awake, I listen, I learn” (McEwan 24). Though he excels at politics and is well informed about current affairs, he finds it hard to sort out the complicated relations of his family members. After a careful and long-time observation, he seems to makes his thought clear:

I can begin to comprehend my situation, I can think as well as feel. An unassuming New World white can do this much. So. My mother has preferred my father’s brother, cheated her husband, ruined her son. My uncle has stolen his brother’s wife, deceived his nephew’s father, grossly insulted his sister-in-law’s son. My father by nature is defenceless, as I am by circumstance. My uncle—a quarter of my genome, of my father’s a half but no more like father than I to Virgil or Montaigne. What despicable part of myself is Claude and how will I know? I could be my own brother and deceive myself as he deceived his. (McEwan 32)

The fetus feels puzzled by the complicated relations among his family members, all of which are caused by the displacement of their ethical identities: his mother does not love his father but loves his uncle; his mother has thus become his aunt; his uncle has intercourse with his elder brother’s wife, and thus his sister-in-law has become his wife; his mother and uncle have an incestuous relationship, which makes his uncle become his father, and his father becomes his uncle. As an unborn fetus, although the narrator has a large amount of knowledge, he does not have the ability to interfere and to take action in the real world outside. Like Hamlet, the fetus constantly hesitates between waiting patiently in his mother’s womb and taking immediate revenge for his father’s death.

In Shakespeare’s work, Hamlet gets to know the truth of his father’s death through the ghost, of which he is a little suspicious. Therefore, he directs “The Mouse-trap” to prove its authenticity. However, in *Nutshell*, the fetus hears his uncle and mother’s conspiracy with his own ears and witnesses the process of his father being poisoned. As a dutiful son, he is fully aware of his responsibility to prevent his mother from committing the crime and to save his father from danger, which is clearly evidenced in his cry inside: ”Don’t let your incestuous uncle and mother poison your father. Don’t waste your precious days idle and inverted. Get born and act!” (McEwan 45–46). However, as a fetus incapable of action, he has merely become a passive witness of the crime and is more helpless than Hamlet. About the embarrassing and difficult circumstances of the fetus, McEwan is right in claiming, “Is there anyone more helpless than Hamlet? Well, yes, there’s a foetus. My narrator not only is helpless but contemplates suicide, sees a ghost and has the triangle of his father, uncle and mother, but in modern terms.” (Neill 1).

Among all other characters in the novel, Trudy is the only one who directly connects with the fetus, who has developed complicated feelings about his mother. Unable to protect from his father from being murdered, the fetus attributes it to his physical inability on the one hand and his uncertainty of his mother’s love on the other. In one place, when measuring how much Trudy loves him, the fetus says frankly, “I am uncertain of her love” (McEwan 32). Seen in this light, the fetus needs to make up his mind to take action only after he is sure of his mother’s affections for him. In another place, he feels angry at Claude and Trudy’s cruelty toward him: “And…we’ve placed the baby somewhere. With repetition, the words were rubbed clean as truth and my intended future shines clear. Placed is but the lying cognate of dumped. As the baby is of me. Somewhere is a liar too. Ruthless mother!” (McEwan 42). Like what his mother has done to his father, she is also ruthless to her son. Once she succeeds in poisoning her husband and taking seven million pounds by selling his house, she will escape with her lover and abandon her son somewhere. The “somewhere,” to the fetus, implies nothing but not being with his mother. Therefore, the fetus feels deceived by his mother’s affection for him and, accordingly, he decides to pay it back. He says,

NON SANZ DROICT, and mine is to a mother’s love and is absolute. To her schemes of abandonment I deny consent. I won’t be exiled, but she will be. I’ll bind her with this slimy rope, press-gang her on my birthday with
one groggy, newborn stare, one lonesome seagull wail to harpoon her heart. Then, indentured by strong-armed
love to become my constant nurse, her freedom but a retreating homeland shore, Trudy will be mine, not
Claude’s, as able to dump me as tear her breast from her rig cage and toss them overboard. I can be ruthless
too. (McEwan 43–44)

Apparently, “love” is the central word to fetus. It seems that he takes revenge not for the sake of
his father; he does it for acquiring love from his mother. If his father fails to win his mother back
from Claude, it is his responsibility to have her back and make her the loyal nurse taking good care
of him. More than once in the novel, the fetus admits that he is in love with his mother: “And I love
her—how could I not? The mother I have yet to meet, whom I know only from the inside. Not
enough! I long for her external self. Surfaces are everything” (McEwan 7). He has known Trudy from
inside, falling in love with her and looking forward to meeting her. Meanwhile, the fetus hopes that
his mother truly loves him and will never dump him so that he will survive after birth. Unlike the
fetus, Claude loves Trudy with an aim to use her for poisoning his brother John, for attaining
economic profit, as well as for taking revenge against brother, whose excellence hurts his pride.
Though both the fetus and Claude fall in love with Trudy in a selfish manner, their love is different
in nature: Claude tries to take away a person’s life, while the fetus intends to save a life.

The fetus’s hesitance to take action is caused not only by his uncertainty of Trudy’s love for him
but also by his uncertainty of his interference with his parents’ life. In other words, he is not sure
whether he understands his parents’ breakup correctly. To use his words, “The sacred, imagined
duty of the child of separated parents is to unite them” (McEwan 88). To put it another way, in the hope
of uniting his parents, he assumes that his duty is to get them together rather than to interrupt their
life or to punish his mother. Given that, he has been wondering how to protect his mother and
prevent her from committing crimes, about the consequences of which he has been going over in his
mind:

Could my mother, who’s never had a job, launch herself as a murderer? A tough profession, not only in the
planning and execution, but in the aftermath, when the career would properly begin. Consider, I want to say to
her, even before the ethics, the inconvenience: imprisonment or guilt or both, extended hours, weekends too,
and all through every night, for life. No pay, no perks, no pension but remorse. She’s making a mistake. (McEwan 79)

For the fetus, if he loves his father, he should try to save his life, or he should take revenge for him
after his father’s death. Similarly, if he loves his mother, he should stop her from making mistakes.
Regrettably, the fetus indulges himself too much in thinking and misses the opportunity to stop his
mother from poisoning his father, and he witnesses the whole process of his father being poisoned to
death by doing hardly anything.

Failing to save his father, the fetus does not get depressed, with no crying and wailing. On the
contrary, he articulates: “Infantile wailing entirely misses the point. Waiting is the thing. And
thinking” (McEwan 47). What he is waiting for? What is he thinking of? In my opinion, he is
waiting for the time to take action—namely, the time when he could be born safely. In addition,
he might also be thinking of how to make a choice between waiting and action, weighing the
pros and cons, which reminds us of Hamlet, who also places much weight upon waiting. He
says, “All is not well. I doubt some foul play. Would the night were come! Till then sit still, my
soul. Foul deeds will rise, Though all the earth o’erwhelm them, to men’s eyes” (Hamlet, Act I,
Scene 2). Hamlet seems to pin his hope on characters’ self-reflection and to let time expose
everything. Unlike such a passive and negative type of waiting, the fetus is waiting for the ability
to take action. If he dies, he would never take revenge for his father, so he has to live on, which
largely accounts for why he is trapped in an ethical dilemma between waiting and taking action.
According to ethical literary criticism, “Ethical dilemma can be also named ethical paradox,
which is composed of two moral propositions. If one were to make an ethical judgment of each
proposition, he would usually find each choice correct. However, to choose one proposition
would necessarily cause a violation of the moral principles of another” (Zhenzhao, Introduction
The fetus of *Nutshell* is trapped in the following dilemma: if he takes action immediately and kills himself, his mother might give up her plan to murder father; but there would be another possibility that he will lose his own life and could not save his father, let alone take revenge. If he waits for a little bit longer, he would have to witness his father being murdered, which makes him feel guilty and undutiful. However, as long as he is alive, he will have the possibility of bringing the murderers to justice.

Knowing that his father is dead, the fetus feels remorseful and blames himself for not taking timely action to stop Trudy and Claude from poisoning his father. He has mixed feelings of regret and anger: “Yes, I was there when he tempted her again to bed, called her his mouse, pinched her nipples hard, filled her cheeks with his lying breath and cliché-bloated tongue” (McEwan 156). Before his father is murdered, the fetus has done nothing, but after his father’s death, should he act immediately and take revenge? The difficulty of answering the call is another dilemma troubling the fetus: punishing his mother almost equals punishing himself, since he would never survive outside his mother’s womb. Therefore, we can find that he adopts a conflicted attitude toward his mother, whom he loves as much as he hates. He says, “The mystery of how love of my mother swells in proportion to my hatred. She’s made herself my only parent. I won’t survive without her” (McEwan 108). On the one hand, the fetus hates his mother, because she has betrayed and murdered his father, but on the other hand, he loves his mother, because he has attached to her as his only parent. More realistically, he still needs his mother to bring him up and to rely on her for survival at least. Thus he decides to wait for his mother and uncle to surrender themselves, for their repentance, and also for his ability to take action. Once he sees no sign of their repentance and their readiness to escape, the fetus takes risk of having a preterm birth in order to stop them. He says with determination:

> After all my turns and revisions, misinterpretations, lapses of insight, attempts at self-annihilation and sorrow in passivity, I’ve come to a decision. Enough. My amniotic sac is the translucent silk purse, fine and strong, that contains me. It also holds that protects me from the world and its bad dreams. No longer. Time to join in. to end the endings. Time to begin. (McEwan 191)

As is revealed in this passage, the fetus could not wait any longer. Though he is not mature enough to be born, he decides to give up the senseless thoughts before, including self-destruction, feeling sad for his unfortunate circumstances, lapses of insight and misinterpretations. Now he must “end the endings. Time to begin” (McEwan 191). To take action, he uses his fingernail to punch through the fabric of the womb and comes out prematurely. In doing so, the fetus successfully stops his mother from escaping. Even though Claude attempts to abandon Trudy and the baby and run away alone, she has foreseen his possible betrayal and hidden his passport in advance, which makes his escape impossible. As a result, he is forced to help her to deliver the baby and wait for the arrival of the police.

About his courageous action and its consequences, the fetus expresses his pride by showing his sarcasm and contempt for Trudy and Claude. He laments ironically, “I’m thinking about the taxi waiting outside. A waste. Time to send it away. And I’m thinking about our prison cell—I hope it’s not too small— and beyond its heavy door, worn steps ascending: first sorrow, then justice, then meaning” (McEwan 197). This is in correspondence with what he said before: “It’s not a good end. It was never going to be” (McEwan 197). As a fruitful result of his parents’ ethical choice, the fetus could be seen as a Sphinx factor, a combination of animal factor inherited from his mother and human factor from his father. Though the fetus is still in the womb, with the human factor he has obtained humanity, and he is able to make an ethical judgment, which lays a premise for his ethical choice later on. In this regard, his preterm birth is an important “ethical choice” of the narrator as a fetus; meanwhile, it also marks the beginning of his “ethical selection” of a human being as an ethical existence.
Conclusion

In her conversation with McEwan, Zadie Smith expresses her admiration for his writing:

His prose is controlled, careful, and powerfully concise; he is eloquent on the subjects of sex and sexuality; he has a strong head for the narrative possibilities of science; his novels are no longer than is necessary; he would never write a sentence featuring this many semicolons. When I read him, I am struck by metaphors I would never think to use, plots that don’t occur to me, ideas I have never had. I love to read him for these reasons and also because, like his millions of readers, I feel myself to be in safe hands. (Roberts 108)

Given the quoted lines, we can find that when Smith talks about McEwan’s works, she speaks highly of his writing style and narrative techniques, in particular his unique “metaphors,” “plots,” and “ideas.” As far as Nutshell is concerned, its uniqueness lies in the ethical metaphor of “nutshell,” in which characters are trapped and fail to make the right ethical choices (in the case of John, Trudy, and Claude) or find it hard make an ethical choice (in the case of the fetus). Through rewriting Shakespeare’s Hamlet, McEwan pays tribute to Shakespeare on the one hand, and he projects his own view on the ethic of life on the other hand, which reminds us of what he has previously claimed: “We are innately, moral beings” (Roberts 70).

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The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the article.

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