

Performing the Ethics and Aesthetics of Violence in Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*

Pao-I Hwang

Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, National Taiwan University
No. 1, Sec. 4, Roosevelt Road, Taipei 10617, Taiwan
E-mail: pihwang@ntu.edu.tw

Abstract

This paper focuses on the use of violence in Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*. It considers the critical reception of the work before moving on to a closer examination of the complex aesthetic skills and ethical considerations displayed by the work. The reading is largely based on the performative aspects of the text, but in the process also borrows Julia Kristeva's native/foreigner dialectic and delves into the postmodern ethical/aesthetic issues. It is an attempt to understand why McEwan's luridly provocative novel is so often approached with reverence rather than disgust. One possibility is that the role of violence in the novel is not as gratuitous as it seems and induces a very active form of self-questioning. Indeed, using violence as the focus, it is possible to argue that McEwan has not only mastered the art of writing, but in practicing his art has perfected a very sophisticated form of moral awareness. *The Comfort of Strangers* provides a very particular form of moral questioning by engaging the reader in a coherent,

Received January 24, 2008; accepted March 24, 2009; last revised September 18, 2008

Proofreaders: Jeffrey Cuvilier, Ming-Chieh Chen, Chun-ta Lee, Ying-tzu Chang

powerful and meaningful reading experience.

Key Words: violence, performance, morality, aesthetics,
postmodernism