

An Intertextual Analysis of *Nutshell* and *Hamlet*

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Abstract

As an integral part of the traditional literary creation, adaptation serves as one of the internal impetuses of postmodernist literary creation. Ian McEwan's novel *Nutshell* is a contemporary rewriting of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The story shifts the setting from the Danish royal court to 21-century London, retelling the conspiracy of the protagonist's mother and uncle to murder his father from the perspective of an unborn foetus. In the new version, all three characters in this love triangle have been given entirely new interpretation. Through this, McEwan unveils the true meaning of the "nutshell" and conveys his anxiety about contemporary society, continuing Shakespeare's concern for new era.

Keywords

Nutshell, *Hamlet*, adaptation, intertextuality, Ian McEwan.

1. Introduction

Adaptation is an indispensable facet of literary creation. It deeply embedded in human tradition and serves as an inexhaustible driving force for innovation in postmodern literature. Looking back upon literary history, writers have continuously rewritten and retold the same stories, endowing them with new meanings and achieving artistic regeneration. From this perspective, the evolution of human literature may be perceived as a chronicle of perpetual rewriting. As a towering figure in British literary, Shakespeare authored 37 plays during his lifetime, which left an indelible imprint during the Renaissance period. These dramatic works, characterized by their thematic richness and philosophical depth, provides fertile soil for subsequent adaptations, encouraging endless reinterpretation and creative engagement. Since the 17th century, countless writers have engaged in rewriting Shakespeare's dramas, which has evolved into a global literary and cultural phenomenon. For Shakespeare's works, these layered adaptations function as both homage and innovation[1].

The adaptations of Shakespeare's plays allows for a renewed appreciation of their literary originality and uniqueness, meanwhile, Shakespeare's works is continually endowed with new contemporary significance through adaptation. British novelist Ian McEwan's *Nutshell* exemplifies this dynamic, offering a distinctive contemporary relevance through its rewriting of *Hamlet*. The story functions as a prequel to *Hamlet*, unfolding through the soliloquy of a fetus in the womb. It gradually reveals the conspiracy between the mother, Trudy, and the uncle Claude, to murder the father John. Despite omniscient awareness of what is happened in outside world, the fetus who is trapped in a prenatal state is forced to witness the impending patricide without the power to intervene. Like Price Hamlet, the fetus faces perpetrators bound by blood: his mother, who is connected through the umbilical cord, and his uncle, who carries a quarter of his genome[2]. The twisted familial ethics and brutal truth of the murder plunges the fetus into existential anguish. Like his Shakespearean counterpart, he vows vengeance against the patricidal conspirators, yet both the fetus and Hamlet hesitate when putting vengeance into action. Ultimately, the fetus chooses to be born precisely when his uncle attempts to flee, bringing this modern play to its end.

2. The Defence of Gertrude

By relocating familiar narrative tropes and characters to 21st-century London, McEwan intertwines familiar social phenomena with the well-known narrative framework of Hamlet, thereby compelling readers to re-examine the marginal figures in Shakespeare's original play. The character of Trudy in *Nutshell* bears striking resemblance to Queen Gertrude in Hamlet, which is a deliberate interlingual signal that guides readers to recall Gertrude's actions in the original tragedy. Gertrude remains ambiguity of the former king's murder, and marries Claudius largely due to political necessity. However, McEwan significantly reworks this character into a woman who is disillusioned with her marriage, and consciously chooses adultery and murder for her own awareness. Far from a passive participant in patriarchal structure, Trudy emerges as a calculating decidedly resolute and remarkably cunning, which is a complete subversion of her Shakespearean counterpart.

Intertextual texts, by virtue of their divergence from readers' cultural traditions and reading habits, often fracture the relationship between signifier and signified, rendering the reading process fraught with obstacles and disorientations[3]. Yet, this very tension engenders a frenzied, destructive pleasure, a paradoxical blend of pain and exhilaration. In Hamlet, The reason why Gertrude is frequently interpreted as a promiscuous woman is primarily due to her son's vehement accusations. In their confrontation, Hamlet dominates the discourse, vividly imagining Gertrude's incestuous union with his uncle Claudius as a scene of "In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, Stewed in corruption"[4]. Through Hamlet's patriarchal gaze, Gertrude becomes condemned as a woman of unrestrained lust whose hasty remarriage after her husband's death is seen as proof of carnal desire. Crucially, Hamlet's condemnation reflects patriarchal norms: even widowed, Gertrude is expected to remain chaste, with any expression of desire deemed shameful. Her sexuality inadvertently positions Hamlet and Claudius as rivals competing for her, a dynamic that simultaneously inherits and disrupts the former king's legacy. Were she not to marry Claudius, she would remain solely the late king's widow and Hamlet's fragile mother; by becoming Claudius's wife, she assumes new roles that Hamlet perceives as betrayal. This explains why their dialogue allows no space for Gertrude's rebuttal—Hamlet monopolizes his anguish while Gertrude can only plead for him to stop, tacitly accepting her role as either a contested resource in patriarchal structure or a hollow tool for advancing the narrative or venting Hamlet's suffering, rather than a subject in her own right. Thus, while McEwan reshapes the image of Trudy in *Nutshell*, deeper empathy and engagement with her motivations and victimization will be formed in readers' respond. Though Shakespeare's queen is shamed for her desires, McEwan's Trudy boldly acknowledges hers. Beneath her charming exterior lays her dissatisfaction towards marriage and intimacy. Her coupling with both Claude and John is purely physical and emotionally detached. She dismisses their confessions and expressions, indulging instead in self-affirming pleasure and viewing both of them as tools. Here, McEwan disrupts the patriarchal narrative: Trudy's desire is not a moral failing but a response to emotional deprivation, her agency reclaimed through acts of calculated defiance.

Beyond her sexual dominance over Claude, where he has to cater to her desires to gain favor, Trudy also orchestrates the murder of John. Initially, Claude attempts to persuade Trudy to kill John by offering numerous suggestions, but she dismisses them all, asserting that this must be done her way. She precisely plans the murder, hands the poisoned wine to her husband by herself, and immediately prepares a calculated response after his death, swiftly formulates alibis. When the conspiracy is espoused and Claude attempts to flee alone she outmaneuvers him by hiding his passport, coercing him into assisting her during childbirth. No longer a passive cipher subordinated to narrative necessity or patriarchal ownership, Trudy asserts her voice, demonstrating both intelligence and rationality. As Roland Barthes posits, intertextual texts are texts of bliss (*jouissance*): they unsettle readers with a sense of loss, provoking

discomfort or even revulsion[5]. They shatter readers' historical, cultural, and psychological assumptions, disrupting the coherence of their tastes, values, and memories. By amplifying Trudy's decisive role in the patricide, McEwan not only delivers this *jouissance* but also exposes contemporary women's marital dilemmas—their voices unheard, their needs unacknowledged. This reclamation of female agency echoes Margaret Atwood's *Gertrude Talks Back*, where the traditionally weak and frivolous is also reshaped. By imagining Gertrude's rebuttal to Hamlet's accusations, Atwood recasts the feeble queen as a subject who voices discontent with the King and Hamlet, reinterprets her carnal desires, and openly confesses to dominating the murder[6]. Both McEwan and Atwood exemplify contemporary writers who refocus attention on Hamlet's passive, marginalized characters. On the one hand, there is a reinterpretation of literary characters, which grants them more room to present arguments highlighting their complexity and diversity. On the other hand, the tragic significance of such a character is further magnified after the rewriting. In *Nutshell*, ample space is provided for a marginalized character to present her case. Her actions and words are extensively depicted, placing her at the center of the story. The fetus constantly ponders whether its mother loves it, repeatedly mentioning the potential harm it might suffer due to Trudy's drinking during pregnancy and her affair with Claude. However, at the end of the story, when Trudy manipulates Claude into assisting her during childbirth and frantically delivers the fetus, it serves as a testament to her love for the child. Unlike Queen Gertrude in *Hamlet*, who is shackled by layers of constraints and constantly berated for her series of "improper" actions, Trudy in *Nutshell* is not required to respond to what she should or should not do. Trudy is under no obligation to respond to what she should or should not. Throughout the whole story, her autonomy as an individual woman is fully realized—she neither accesses nor answers the fetus's speculative anxieties. Unlike Hamlet, the fetus cannot reproach its mother from patriarchal vantage points. There could be seen that Shakespeare, as an outstanding representative of the Renaissance, achieved his most significant feat in discovering humanity, revealing human nature, and contemplating the human existential condition. [7]Hamlet, the longest and most renowned play among Shakespeare's works, is a profound embodiment of Shakespeare's inquiry into humanity and human nature. During the Renaissance, influenced by religion, women held extremely low status. They were regarded as appendages of men, lacking access to education, career opportunities, and property rights, with their lives strictly constrained. Religious doctrines often emphasized their submission and obedience, exacerbating societal oppression and discrimination against them, making it difficult for women to gain equality and respect within both family and society. As described in the Bible, woman was created from man's rib. Thus, under the feudal system, whether it was Gertrude in *Hamlet* or women in European society at the time, they were all vassals of men, with extremely low social status. However, with the rise of modern feminist movements, many women steps out of the home to participate in the workforce. As mentioned in *Nutshell*, Trudy earns more than John, the male head of the household, and as the story unfolds, she proves to be more perceptive and rational than Claude. But her personal identity is confined to being the mother of the fetus, her husband's "muse," and her lover's "little mouse." In the narrative pattern of adultery with her husband's brother and plotting her husband's murder, she is still subconsciously portrayed as a "weakling" or the "other." Through the portrayal of Trudy, McEwan continues Shakespeare's inquiry into humanity and human nature. By further showcasing the marital predicaments of contemporary women, he issues a warning against the stigmatization and stereotyping issues faced by women.

3. The Subversion of Traditional Male Roles

In *Hamlet*, the death of the King meets a strikingly simple demise: he is poisoned just when Claudius pours a small vial of ebony juice into his ear during a nap. *Nutshell*, however, subverts

this paradigm: John, the fetus's biological father, isn't directly murdered by his brother Claude. While Claude instigates the poisoning plot, he lacks a conspirator's strategic cunning. It is Trudy who ultimately orchestrates John's death by coaxing him to drink the poisoned milkshake by leveraging her intimate knowledge of John. This narrative choice not only elevates Trudy's agency but systematically deconstructs traditional masculinity embodied by Claude and John. Claude exhibits a conspicuous behavioral trait in the story: repetition. He enjoys repeating his thoughts to impress others and derive pleasure from this habit. Consequently, he lacks rigorous thinking skills, with many of his ideas for murdering John being rejected by Trudy. McEwan intentionally uses the fetus's auditory perspective to repeatedly mention Claude's animal-like sounds after his sexual interaction with Trudy. In *Hamlet*, Claudius kills his brother to satisfy his extreme and shameless carnal desires and deceive Queen Gertrude. Both Claude and Claudius embody more bestiality than humanity. In this way, Claude fails to comprehend Trudy's hesitation in murdering John, her wailing after deciding to poison him, or the impact of John's death on her. At the moment Trudy decides to give birth and outsmart Claude, the human Trudy triumphs over the beastly Claude. She not only successfully delivers the baby, perpetuating humanity, but also ensures Claude's legal punishment. Although John and Claude are diametrically opposed in personality and character, both are chosen by Trudy as her sexual partners, each representing an aspect of her dual nature—humanity and bestiality. John represents the past, while Claude represents the present. After Trudy rejects John, there are no further intimate descriptions of their relationship. Like Claude, John's behavior is also marked by repetition; he continuously writes and reads poems, repeatedly professing his love to his wife with little proof. While readers cannot directly witness Trudy and John's past love, glimpses of Trudy's conscious descent into the abyss of desire can be discerned through Claude's repetitive behavior and Trudy's fleeting memories.

Trudy and Claude, despite having significantly higher incomes than John and no urgent financial needs, are driven by an intense desire to kill John and acquire his old house worth seven million pounds. So, what fuels this irrational craving? René Girard posits that desire never originates intrinsically; it is always mediated through the Other which assigns illusory value to the desired object[8]. Hamlet's desire is reliant on the Other, namely his mother occupying the phallic position; he merely seeks to monopolize her and become the object of her desire, while her desire leaves Hamlet in a state of hesitation, ultimately leading to tragic death. In *Hamlet*, Gertrude's desire is merely to have a dependable husband and live a stable life, but after becoming Claudius's queen, she is reproached by her son and reduced to a symbol of desire. However, in *Nutshell*, the author subverts Claude's image; the serpent that incites desire is no longer a stereotypical seductive female but a foolish, greedy male who relies on a woman's schemes to achieve his goal of fratricide. Initially, he naively believes he can manipulate Trudy into carrying out the murder through his own wit, thinking he can perfectly evade suspicion. He is empty-headed, acts without considering consequences, and nearly fails to handle police interrogation properly. This subverts traditional literary tropes where women appear either as seductive sirens who lure men's physical desires or as obedient angels under patriarchal rule. *Nutshell*, by inverting gender roles, presents a more humane Trudy to readers. After knowing John's death, Trudy recalls his importance to her and realizes that killing him was not her true intention, filled with remorse. She endures great pain, persists in giving birth, and brings new life to the fetus.

In fact, Claude's feelings for Trudy are also distorted by the presence of John as the Other. He misconstrues John's desire for Trudy as his own, leading Claude to merely seek possession of his brother's wife rather than genuinely loving her. This twisted desire disrupts the equilibrium of marriage and transforms sexual relations. Struggles born of desire invariably culminate in tragedy. In *Hamlet*, although the prince succeeds in killing his uncle, seemingly triumphing over his father's murderer, he is merely driven by desire, which magnifies his inner thoughts and

ultimately costs him his life. McEwan extends Shakespeare's interrogation of desire into contemporary terrain. Even John—ostensibly virtuous—succumbs to mimetic corruption: his scheme to feign romance with a poetess, intended to provoke Trudy's jealousy, instead strips him of humanity and seals his fate. Both brothers are reduced in *Nutshell* to desire-signifiers, their repetitive behaviors mirroring Trudy's dual nature—the civilized and the feral. This continuity across centuries poses an unanswerable dilemma: how to balance humanity amidst desire's torrent? McEwan's warning resonates: modern society must discern authentic needs from socially implanted cravings. Desire fuels survival, yet not all desires sustain life—some erode it.

4. The Multi-layered Implications of Nutshell

Composed at the turn of the 17th century during England's feudal-capitalist transition, *Hamlet* mirrors the sociopolitical upheavals of its era. The burgeoning bourgeoisie's demands for liberty, equality, and individualism, while fueling unprecedented productivity, simultaneously sowed the seeds of hedonistic excess and social instability. Shakespeare transposes these tensions onto an eighth-century Danish court, crafting an aesthetic meditation on civil fragility. Rapid economic growth exacerbated class stratification, with poverty, crime, and labor conflicts reaching crisis proportions. The unresolved power struggle between monarchy and parliament bred systemic uncertainty, prompting Hamlet's lament: "Denmark's a prison...the worst one." His existential dilemma—"To be, or not to be"—transcends personal tragedy to interrogate an epoch where unchecked desire guarantees collective ruin. The Danish court becomes a metaphorical nutshell enclosing self-destructive figures, their fates serving as Shakespeare's prophetic warning. McEwan's *Nutshell* consciously inherits this diagnostic impulse. Its epigraph—Hamlet's declaration "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space"—frames multiple narrative "nutshells" as contemporary prisons of desire, extending Shakespeare's social and critical vision into the postmodern age.

The primary "nutshell" space in the narrative is Trudy's womb—a dominion where the fetus reigns as the ultimate narcissist, bordering on divine self-delusion. Through violent kicks and umbilical tugging, it asserts control over its mother, interpreting her body as inherited paternal property that must provide unconditional love. The fetus's discomfort during Trudy's sexual encounters stems not merely from moral outrage but territorial fury—a hyper-individualist response to perceived spatial violation. This solipsistic sovereign manipulates Trudy's insomnia to satisfy its craving for auditory validation, reinforcing its imagined omnipotence within the cramped uterine world. Significantly, the physical toll of Trudy's pregnancy remains conspicuously absent from its monologue. The ultimate threat of umbilical suicide epitomizes the strained mother-child bond, mirroring contemporary society's fraying social fabric under extreme individualism. In contrast of Hamlet's soliloquies pondering existential universals, the fetus's coldly rational narration fixates on self-interest, a stylistic choice exposing modernity's humanist decay. McEwan's uterine thought-experiment lays bare a pathological individualism that reduces human bonds to transactional control, prioritizes personal desires over collective welfare and transforms inherited connections into fragile, destructible ties. The womb becomes an allegorical prison where unchecked desire magnifies original sin, reflecting humanity's broader existential crisis.

The second "nutshell" space, the decaying mansion, functions as Trudy's corporeal and existential prison. Her entire existence within these walls reduces to three primal acts: sexual gratification, consumption, and murder plots. Her primitive and malicious desires are repeatedly emphasized in this spatial layer, while the voice of the world transmitted through the radio seems to belong to another civilization. Through the relationship between the old house and Trudy, McEwan aims to present a world distorted by absurd existence. In this world,

due to the infiltration of sex and violence, various ethical and moral constraints lose their value, and a person's trivial desires are amplified, leading to irreparable evil. Trudy easily succumbs to lust, reducing herself to an object and transforming into prey for pleasure; this is her personal choice, but it profoundly reveals tragedy. Her personal value is self-dissolved by her distorted desires, and she can only demonstrate her existence as Claude's lover, the "little mouse," or as the "external womb" of the fetus inside her. In *Hamlet*, there is no specific depiction of the erotic scenes between the Queen and the new King; however, in *Nutshell*, the sexual acts between Trudy and Claude are presented continuously, scene after scene, because it is through these scenes that an environment dominated by absurdity can be created. Beneath this nutshell of lust, eroticism is structured by the metaphysics of sexual pleasure, discarding the Western notion of love as the harmonious unity of mind and body. The alienation between man and the world achieved through eroticism inevitably implies the in-communicability between spirit and physical body; the old house, as the nutshell of eroticism, negates humanism. It is no wonder that the fetus in the womb is always worried and constantly doubts whether its mother loves it, precisely because the fetus senses that the mother receives no love but only twisted lust and desire. When Claude sees Trudy bleeding and injured, he merely nods at her and even considers abandoning her and leaving alone after the conspiracy is exposed. By highlighting this shell-like spatial layer, McEwan raises the question of whether people still possess the capacity to love and be loved, returning to Shakespeare's Renaissance-era contemplation of humanity.

The third "nutshell" space encompasses contemporary society itself—a turbulent "nutshell" where inhabitants indeed suffer "nightmares without end." While Shakespeare depicts a feudal Denmark bracing for war, McEwan shifts focus to modern global crises: nationalism, anti-Semitism, migration conflicts, wealth disparity, religious oppression, and resource scarcity. Though the fetus' destined Britain enjoys material abundance compared to North Korea, its internal instability persists through succession uncertainties. Hamlet's existential dilemma—"To be, or not to be"—finds no direct utterance in *Nutshell*, yet the fetus' anxious monologues channel McEwan's parallel concern for human survival. Christian constraints prevent Hamlet from revealing his ghost-gained knowledge or Claudius' confession; similarly, the fetus embodies ultimate helplessness, who is unable to choose its nation, parents, or even exercise self-termination. As McEwan notes: "I can conceive nothing more powerless than a fetus." [9] Through this prism, *Nutshell* innovatively extends Shakespeare's epochal interrogation: How can humanity endure present societal collapse? Within this global nutshell, mere crisis recognition brings little remedy. McEwan's urgent questions, which is about readiness for new life and preventing generational trauma, reanimate Renaissance humanism for the Anthropocene age.

5. Conclusion

In the story of *Nutshell*, tragedy extends from the Danish court to modern-day London. The modern queen, Trudy, is given more space to voice her thoughts and is no longer a marginal figure in this conspiracy drama; John and Claude, whose subjectivity is weakened, become the dual representations of her humanity and bestiality. Driven by distorted desires, the characters in *Nutshell* exhibit repetitive behavioral traits. John repeats Claude's actions by pretending to love someone else, while Claude mimics John's desires by seducing the pregnant Trudy. Meanwhile, Trudy's experiences of choosing different male partners mark her transition from humanity to bestiality. The desires lurking behind the three characters are exposed, further elucidating the tragedy that is repeatedly enacted due to desire. Through the stage of the brand-new 21st century, McEwan interprets the true meaning of the "nutshell" from three perspectives: inflated individualism, distorted humanity, and an unstable society. McEwan not only profoundly explores the underlying causes of the tragedy in *Hamlet* and offers constant

warnings to contemporary society but also continues Shakespeare's profound concern for the times. At the end of the story, with the birth of the fetus, he expresses the hope that the light of humanity will continue to shine in contemporary society.

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