

The Institutional Gaze in the Children Act: A Study of Surveillance

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Abstract

The Children Act by Ian McEwan offers an interesting examination of the way in which institutions affect human lives through observing and regulating human actions and emotions. In the story, Fiona Maye, a high court judge, is faced with the decision of granting a 17-year-old boy Adam Henry a blood transfusion, even though it goes against his religion. Although the story seems to be mostly about ethics and the law, it also shows us how laws, hospitals, and the public opinion affect individual freedom and identity. The purpose of this paper is to look at the way in which observation and regulation of emotions is used in the novel through institutional power, medical intervention, and personal relations. Drawing from the theories of Michel Foucault and David Lyon, this paper claims that McEwan shows modern society as an environment where people are always being observed, regulated, and disciplined emotionally.

Keywords: Observation, institutional power, law, identity, discipline, authority

Introduction

In today's world, institutions of observation and regulation play a great role in our lives. We are controlled constantly by such organizations as courts, hospitals, schools, government agencies and so on. The point here is that such institutions do not control people by means of physical punishment. They affect people's lives using judgement, observation and expectation. Contemporary literature depicts this reality through its impact on people's lives.

The Children Act is one of those novels that deals with the issues raised above. The novel is based on the life story of Fiona Maye, a famous judge of the High Court in London. She has to make a decision about the destiny of Adam Henry, a seventeen-year-old Jehovah's Witness that refused to undergo some kind of treatment because of his religion. Thus, Fiona evaluates people through her professional activity. However, she herself is affected by the society's rules and expectations. Similarly, Adam becomes an object of law and medicine. Thus, he is deprived of the ability to make any decisions about his own body. Although the main theme of the novel is connected with laws and ethics, there is a crucial aspect of observing and regulating people's lives. The theory provided by Foucault and David Lyon can be applied to understand the aforementioned topics present in the book. According to Foucault, modern establishments discipline individuals by way of surveillance and regulation, whereas, according to David Lyon, surveillance systems have already been incorporated into our daily lives. The said notions are vividly exemplified in The Children Act.

Institutional Observation and Legal Authority

Institutions like the legal system in *The Children Act* have great capacity for surveillance and evaluation. The occupation of Fiona Maye entails close scrutiny of the lives of other people and making life-changing decisions for them. In the courts, private lives become public affairs subject to evaluation by institutions. The condition of Adam Henry has been evaluated carefully by the lawyers, the doctors, and the judge before reaching any decision on his treatment. His sickness has been evaluated along with his maturity level, his emotional status, and his religious background.

Michel Foucault explains that modern institutions maintain control through discipline rather than direct punishment. According to him, individuals become obedient because they know they are being watched and judged. Fiona's courtroom reflects this idea because it creates an environment where personal choices must be justified before institutional authority.

McEwan describes Fiona as having "a readiness to hear and decide" (McEwan 12). This quotation highlights the confidence and authority attached to her position as a judge. Her judgment and ability to observe give her considerable control over the other's life. This makes the courtroom not only the place of dispensing justice but also a place where institutions dictate the standards of rationality and morality. The refusal by Adam of the treatment is not only seen as his decision but something that should be fixed by the law.

Medical Monitoring and Control of the Body

In addition, hospitals and medical establishments can be seen as means of surveillance and control. The body of Adam Henry is subjected to constant medical scrutiny. The doctors examine his disease, control his health, and prescribe treatment in accordance with science-based knowledge. The hospital context is an embodiment of the influence of modern medicine on the human body. Adam's desires and religious convictions are less significant than his survival. Though doctors intend to help Adam survive, they treat him like a medical subject whose body needs management and control.

According to David Lyon, modern society is built around massive data collection about individuals. In the novel, Adam's state is recorded in various medical, legal, and psychological documents. Adam is becoming a record in institutional files instead of an independent person.

Fiona's visit to Adam in the hospital is one of the most crucial episodes in the novel. The nurse sees Adam in person to understand if she should allow his treatment. During their conversation, Fiona sees Adam's intellectual and emotional qualities. Nonetheless, her visit makes the institutional control over Adam's life stronger as the decision will determine Adam's fate.

According to McEwan, Adam "studied her with such intensity that she found it disconcerting" (McEwan 98). This episode is essential as it changes the flow of observation for a brief time. Fiona, who used to examine other people professionally, understands that she herself is being emotionally examined by Adam. In this way, McEwan implies that systems of observation influence both the observer and the observed.

Emotional Discipline and Self-Control

One of the most fascinating elements in the book is the manner in which emotional discipline is achieved by Fiona. Being a judge, Fiona has an understanding that she should be composed, controlled, and emotionless. She always tries to control her emotions because professionals should have discipline and control.

This demonstrates the theory developed by Foucault that power within institutions is finally internalized

by the individual. People start disciplining themselves due to the fact that they know that there are certain expectations placed on them socially or professionally. Fiona always keeps track of herself in order to achieve authority.

McEwan mentions that Fiona “had learned to keep a distance from the emotional content of the cases” (McEwan 23). This quote shows us how deeply professionalism disciplines Fiona. Nevertheless, it also influences her personal life since her husband, Jack Maye, is not getting enough attention from his wife due to Fiona's commitment to her career. This situation makes their marriage difficult for Fiona because she finds it difficult to reconcile her responsibilities with her emotions.

Moreover, the emotional attachment of Adam Henry towards Fiona adds to the complexity of control Fiona feels. The reason why Adam develops strong feelings for Fiona is that he thinks that Fiona has saved his life through the court case. This indicates that emotional discipline may cause isolation and even personal issues. People get caught up in the conflict between institutional requirements and emotional needs of people.

Religion, Morality, and Institutional Power

The struggle between religion and law in the novel introduces yet another institution of power. Adam rejects the procedure of blood transfusion on the basis of being a Jehovah's Witness. Nevertheless, the court rules that his life has priority over his religious beliefs.

It indicates the way in which institutions measure and control people's belief system. Adam's religion is exposed to public inspection instead of being a purely private issue. It should be decided whether he has reached sufficient maturity and rationality to make such a decision.

Fiona permits the blood transfusion for Adam because she assumes that Adam is unaware of the implications of refusing the treatment. In saving Adam's life, Fiona takes away the freedom and independence of Adam.

McEwan portrays this scenario with moral ambiguity. Although the legal system operates with sympathetic motivations, it still manages to override Adam's preferences. The institution thus appears to be protective and controlling at once.

This novel brings up some pertinent issues regarding the extent to which institutions intervene in private matters. According to McEwan, institutions today meddle in private affairs under the pretense of helping people.

Identity and Personal Freedom

Both Fiona and Adam's identities in the novel are formed under the influence of observation and institutionally controlled environment. Firstly, the identity of Fiona is tightly connected to her role as a judge. Discipline, intelligence, and professionalism are appreciated by Fiona, however, the same features keep her away from emotional involvement.

Secondly, Adam's identity is formed under the pressure of such institutions as religion, sickness and law. Having been rescued from his sickness, Adam finds himself confused about his own convictions and future. Thus, the author implies that identity formation process is influenced not only by the person itself but also by the institutions surrounding an individual.

Individuals are always under the influence of expectations and judgments of other people. So, the novel shows how modern life is closely connected to the process of observation and emotional control.

Conclusion

Ian McEwan's *The Children Act* provides a very strong analysis of the concept of institutional observation, emotional discipline, and morality in contemporary society. This is clearly illustrated through the stories of two characters: Fiona Maye and Adam Henry.

Through Foucault and David Lyon's theoretical framework, it can be said that observation in this novel goes beyond mere watching. It transforms into institutional and emotional control which impacts public and private spaces. Both courts and hospitals exert control through judgment and authority, while individuals control themselves emotionally.

Ultimately, McEwan shows us that the power of institutions is both necessary and problematic. While such institutions might take action for the purposes of protecting the lives of humans and ensuring that there is some sense of order, they also impinge on the freedoms and independence of people's emotions.

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