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From *Child in Time* to *Atonement:* The importance of crisis in Ian McEwan's works

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Karolína Krhutová

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Abstract

The diploma thesis “From *Child In Time* to *Atonement*: The importance of crisis in Ian McEwan’s works” aims to identify and subsequently analyse the issue of crisis in the selected works of Ian McEwan. The thesis focuses on six novels: *The Child In Time, The Innocent*, *Black Dogs, Enduring Love*, *Amsterdam* and *Atonement.* In the theoretical part, Ian McEwan is introduced in the context of British literature. Since Ian McEwan’s work is on occasion influenced by postmodern thinking, the concept of postmodernism is characterized in brief. As Ian McEwan’s later fiction is influenced immensely by his literary beginnings, his early fiction is introduced in order to provide a holistic view, a more complete picture. The following practical part examines the concept of crisis in Ian McEwan’s work, using the author’s selected works as references.

Anotace

Předmětem diplomové práce „Od *Dítěte v pravý čas* k *Pokání:* Důležitost krize v dílech Iana McEwana" je identifikace a následná analýza výše zmíněné problematiky. Práce se zaměřuje na šest novel spadajících do daného úseku, tzn. *Dítě v pravý čas*, *Nevinný*, *Černí psi*, *Nezničitelná láska, Amsterdam* a *Pokání*. V teoretické části je Ian McEwan představen a zařazen do kontextu britské literatury. Práce toho spisovatele jsou příležitostně ovlivněny postmoderním uvažováním, z toho důvodu je krátce nastíněn i koncept postmodernismu. McEwanova tvorba ze sledovaného období je také pevně zakořeněna v jeho literárních počátcích, proto je v práci zahrnuto i krátké představení jeho dřívějších děl. Následující, praktická část zkoumá koncept krize v díle Iana McEwana a na příkladech vybraných děl rozebírá jednotlivá témata.

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Introduction

Ian Russell McEwan, better known by his media–assigned – and rather unappreciated – nickname "Ian Macabre" has been praised by critics ever since he made his literary debut in 1975. The story of his arrival on the literary stage is well–known: McEwan, a University of Sussex graduate at that time, had applied for the Master Program at the newly established University of East Anglia. There he seized the opportunity and took – as one of two pioneers – the class taught by Angus Wilson, and – especially – by Malcolm Bradbury. Here, under Bradbury's guidance, he underwent a most intensive and deeply intoxicating literary initiation that, as he often mentions in his interviews, was crucial for him and for his understanding of literature:

> Fiction, as I was seeing it through his eyes, was the highest calling. I continued to fulfil the academic requirements, but I only cared about the stories. Malcolm was my reading public. I wrote in the certainty that I would receive a close reading – and this was an extraordinary privilege (*The Guardian*, n. pag.).

Although Ian McEwan is often grouped alongside Martin Amis or Julian Barnes, he is at the same time generally perceived as a "more serious, and less postmodernist writer than [the aforementioned]" (Childs, 160). However, a continual development can be observed in McEwan's fiction. From his early focus on the marginal manifestations of human existence (his reputation was that of a "master of a 'short, sharp shock'", after all (Williams, p. 217), McEwan has shifted his attention to more accessible themes. This development can already be observed in *The Child in Time* and it becomes even more evident in *The Innocent*. At the same time, the growing incorporation of postmodern aspects (as a focus on the process of narration, for instance) is evident in McEwan's later fiction as well; nevertheless, his fiction still remains fully rooted in the tradition of the psychological novel. He still confronts his characters with situations that are critical and often fatal; he still lets them face the consequences of their actions and observes their lives getting shattered into pieces.

The thesis attempts to submit an analysis of these critical moments on the lives of the characters. For that purpose, I have chosen to work with six of McEwan's novels, starting with 1987 novel *The Child in Time* and ending with *Atonement*, which was published in 2001. In the first part of the thesis, the persona of Ian McEwan will be presented in closer detail. The first chapter will offer a brief insight into the

transformation of British culture after World War II, as well as into the development of the British literature that accompanied it. Such an informative background is necessary not only for introducing Ian McEwan as one of the authors of what is today commonly understood as contemporary British fiction, but also for outlining some of the historical and cultural facts necessary for a fully developed understanding of McEwan's work.

McEwan’s themes are indeed very eclectic but at the same time, there is a continual development that is evident in his fiction: for that reason, I have chosen to include also a chapter providing an outline of McEwan’s work from his first short stories collection *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) to the 2001 novel *Atonement*, which is the last work of McEwan’s that will be covered in this thesis.

The second part will be devoted to the main theme of the thesis itself, that is the importance of crisis in Ian McEwan’s works. McEwan has his characters face situations that are often too difficult to handle for them, and then explores the consequences. Very often, the situations are external in nature and caused by other people: Bradford describes this strategy with a simile that seems to be extremely fitting - he likens it to tectonic warping, during which two strata of existence are forced to come together (18). To explore this issue further, I have decided to analyse the individual themes and provide interpretations for them; when relevant, I have worked with secondary sources to set a foundation for my analyses.

In conclusion, I will summarize my findings and comment on them.

1 Introducing Ian McEwan in the context of British literature

1.1 British culture after the Second World War

The historical and social changes that United Kingdom underwent after WWII altered the structure of British society significantly: the foundation of the Welfare State in the 1940's and the introduction of several reforms, including the promotion of free secondary education, led to a significant democratization of British society and to a certain re–structuralization of the Establishment (Hilský, 7). This allowed for a whole new 'class' of people to reach for social and economical prospects that were previously inaccessible for them, but an improved quality of life living came at the price of a certain degree of vulgarisation of British culture. Such a materialistically oriented society was bound to find its critics – Martin Hilský mentions a famous Somerset Maugham's critique of Lucky Jim, in which he calls the new generation of intellectuals "scum" (in Hilský, 9). This new elite that came to power in the 1950's shared a distaste of snobbery and expressed an overall belief in the importance of 'common sense', with a strong emphasis on the 'common' part of the equation. An important milestone in post–World War II Britain history was the Suez Crisis in 1956 which gave rise to an anti–war movement: in fiction, the same year was formative for a group of writers often called the 'Angry Young Men' (Hilský, 10).

The 1960's were designated mainly by the Labour Party winning the election in 1964, the debate as to whether UK should or should not join the European Economic Community, and the continuing decolonisation of the British Empire: British society, however, still maintained its largely conservative 'consensus politics' (Childs, 3). By that time, British identity had been shaken due to massive social and historical changes and the British public was tired of the claustrophobic Cold War climate: the sixties in the UK was therefore defined by the rise of the counter–culture, by enormous technical progress (together with increase in availability of such technical devices to masses, subsequently) and by a re–examination of individual identity. The questioning of traditional concepts – such as the nuclear family, heterosexual orientation or the role of the housewife, to name but a few example – had naturally found its way into literature, as well: the realism of the fifties thus could have been easily seen as inadequate by some (Hilský, 18), because it simply could not keep pace with the changing situation. New theories were entering the discussion of what it meant to be human and his place in

the world; the notions of our understanding of human existence were being revised. The literature of the decade was marked by omnipresent experimentation as well, whether it was the self–conscious fiction that strove to explore the new literary theories, or highly complex narratives examining the nature of space or time, for instance (Childs, 9). As a result, the traditional realist novel had slowly started to disintegrate into the opposing modes of 'non–fiction' (i.e. fiction mixed with documentary material) and 'metafiction' (i.e. fiction with postmodernist aspects) – a process that continued until the 1970's at least (Hilský, 19).

1.2 The 'Thatcher Revolution'

The course of post–war British 'consensus politics was changed with Margaret Thatcher entering the scene in the mid–1970's when her 'One Nation Conservatism' was replaced with a new direction towards the promotion of entrepreneurism, business and consumerism in general (Childs, 3). As Childs mentions, the 'Thatcher Revolution' modified the face of British society once again and moved the locus of power away from the bureaucracy and the Establishment to the free market and individual trade, a trend that continued under the governments of Tony Blair and David Cameron (4). In fiction, the dominant themes "reflected in myriad ways the maturation of the post–war shift in social attitudes, sexual mores, religious consciousness, and youth movements" (Childs, 9). Among other things, the 1970's had seen a rise of genre fiction such as science fiction and fantasy, bringing their authors cult status: subsequently, genre fiction slowly started to permeate other, more traditional forms of literature (Childs, 9). More importantly, the continuing process of redefining the traditional novel, initiated in the 1960's and happening in the background of cultural changes within the so–called 'postmodernist movement', had created up a foundation for a generation of writers who became celebrated as the influential, bestselling promoters of a new paradigm in British literature (Hilský, 9) and who, a decade later, partly revised some postmodernist practises (Childs, 1). This new generation of writers made their literary debut predominantly in the eighties, an era that, in Childs's words, "has generally been seen as the foremost period for British fiction since the war" (11). Not that any of them had witnessed WWII or British Empire first–hand: instead they were living in a world where the division between high culture and popular culture was already blurry at best, a time that was experiencing a rush of new, often very intoxicating impulses (Childs, 8). This

generation of the 80's will be covered in the next sections, but first let us introduce a concept important for several generations of British writers: postmodernism.

1.3 The postmodern influence

The plurality of modes of perception that emerged during the 1960's and without which the British fiction of the second half of the twentieth century would look, in fact, very different, is often merged into the single term 'postmodernism'. Postmodernism, as it is important to realize, cannot be understood in terms of any strictly formulated doctrine or as a cohesive movement: instead it should be seen as a particular construct used to approach the complex realities of the social, economic and political changes taking place in developed societies worldwide, vaguely dated by and into the second half of the twentieth century. It is a very fluid and ambiguous term, very difficult to characterize or date since its influences are manifested in differing forms of the human experience and with varying levels intensity (Hilský, 19 – in this context, it is worth mentioning Linda Hutcheon's (the author of the influential work *The Politics of Postmodernism*) insisting on a differentiation between the term 'postmodernism' to designate the cultural manifestations and the term 'postmodernity' when referring to socio–economic factors (26): as is already evident, attempting to characterise such ambiguous and – at times – paradoxical term is complex at best). Since postmodernism is possible to understand in terms of plurality, it is difficult to trace its manifestation in something as diverse as literature, therefore a certain simplification is probably inevitable.

If we want to understand better how postmodernism is relevant to literature specifically, a useful insight might be offered by Jean–François Lyotard. Although his seminal work dedicated to the postmodern situation, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* is sociologically oriented, it can nonetheless provide a certain referential framework within which postmodern thinking can be successfully illustrated. In his observation of a developed society, he claims that our growing distrust in past concepts is fuelled by the rapid development of technology: the 'grand' or 'meta–narratives' that used to govern our thinking to the extent that it is possible to talk about manipulation can no longer span the totality of human experience (4). These meta–narratives, which have always been usurping power at one point of the time map, have thus passed the baton to the smaller yet more diverse local narratives, enabling various "language games" (15). In literary practise, it is mirrored by rejecting any universal interpretation of reality and previously unopposed concepts, such as the concept of truth

or the previously mentioned issues of identity and interpersonal relationships, for instance. What is more, as the language itself was also uncovered as manipulating, it is possible to draw attention to its nature: hence the strong textuality of postmodern fiction.

David Lodge took a different route in his essay *The Novelist at the Crossroads*, where he likens a contemporary author to a man standing at the crossroads of fabulation, (a term popularised by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg), the non–fiction novel and metafiction (or 'problem novel' in Lodge's words). In the famous metaphor, the author must hesitate as to which turn he should take. Lodge admits that such an author must adapt to the changing society (especially to the developments in the understanding of human knowledge), and that in fact he often does, but he still expresses a belief that realism will prevail (rpt. in *The Novel Today*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury, p. 85). Indeed, he was not entirely mistaken – as Martin Hilský reminds, it is important to bear in mind that the realist novel has and probably will continue to have an eminent position in the contemporary literature (19) –, but at the same time it is important to note that such a metaphor had been shown to be not completely accurate. In this context, Bradford reminds us that Lodge, given that *The Novelist at the Crossroads* was published in 1971 – could not possibly have anticipated the upcoming generation of writers (11). Lodge re–opened this theme in 1996 in a revised essay called *The Novelist Today: Still at the Crossroads?* where he jokingly mentions that this belief of his was admittedly partly hope, since he was just about to publish his own contribution to the tradition of the realist novel, *Out of the Shelter.* It is interesting to compare Lodge's initial metaphor of a man who might hesitate at first but then will very likely go one way or another, with the updated version of an author who is no longer at the crossroads but went 'shopping at the supermarket'. It indeed seems that such a vision illustrates the situation of the contemporary British writer better, since it takes into account not only that there is a variety of paths an author can pursue, but also that he in fact can hesitate, proceed in a straightforward fashion, then go back and take a different route entirely, as well as pick and mix as he likes because the supermarket shelves are full of tempting goods. To quote Lodge,

> [...] relatively few novelists are wholly and exclusively committed to fabulation or the non–fiction novel, or metafiction. Instead they combine one or more of these modes with realism, often with a

> startling, deliberatively disjunctive way" (*The Novelist Today: Still at the Crossroads?,* 9)

1.4 '*Granta* authors' enter the scene

In the 1980's, the cultural trends originating from the cultural boom of the last decades stood confronted with the New Right's so–called 'Victorian values' that viewed the increasing permissiveness seen in the public climate as a threat: according to Margaret Thatcher,

> [t]he fashionable theories and permissive claptrap [of the 1960's] set the scene for a society in which the old virtues of discipline and self–restraint were denigrated (in Childs, 8).

As Childs notes, it was paradoxically the 1980's – the most culturally repressive period in post–war British history – that saw the rise of many writers who are today considered the "established names of British fiction" (8). In 1983, the Book Marketing Council agreed on the 'Best Twenty Young British Novelists' under the age of 40, whose sample works were then published in a literary periodical *Granta* (Childs, 1). This particular issue of *Granta,* which defined the upcoming generation, included Salman Rushdie, Graham Swift, Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, Pat Barker etc. – and, of course, Ian McEwan. As Bradford reminds us, for this generation of writers, WWII and the literary heritage of modernism were a matter of the distant past (11): nevertheless, to find some kind of tendency which serves to unify the works of these authors is no simple matter. In this context, Hilský admits that when delimiting the scope of interest of the '*Granta* authors' some simplification is inevitable, yet in fact, it is possible to notice particular aspects that can be found in most of their works (139). Apart from a virtuosity of language, he emphasizes the importance of a certain movement in their fiction: a movement from the centre to the periphery, a kind of "decentralization". This 'decentralization' is observable in a thematic shift towards the formerly marginalized, as well as in the ethnic plurality of the authors: many of these British authors, including Kazuo Ishiguro or Salman Rushdie for instance, are of non–British origin (Hilský, 139). Some of the postmodern techniques of the previous decades were also revised by the *Granta* authors, as already mentioned (Childs, 11).

1.5 Ian McEwan

While it is true that all the aforementioned tendencies – that is, a refined style, the postmodern aspects and an interest in the more marginal manifestations of human existence – are present in Ian McEwan's works to a certain extent, his fiction at the same time maintains a rather traditional "modest, learned elegance of manner" (Bradford, 18). His power lies in a precise characteristic of narration by the accumulation of information that is presented to the reader with a close attention to detail. McEwan does – especially in his beginnings – work with diverse themes that are potentially very discomforting, but the sense of uneasiness – which is characteristic for his works – is typically evoked by an ostensibly unconcerned and routine narration, rather than by the actual content.

In the next chapter, the persona of Ian McEwan will be presented in closer detail.

2 Looking closer: Ian McEwan and the moments of crisis as the "pinpricks on the time map"[1]

2.1 An early career: 1975 – 1981

With the publication of his first short–story collection *First Love, Last Rites* (which included several pieces that were written during his studies at East Anglia), Ian McEwan emerged as a highly original and technically brilliant author – a literary sensation in a way. Critics praised his precise style, as well as his ability to invoke a strange sense of uneasiness that often overpowered the reader. Indeed, at the very beginning of his career, McEwan did favour themes that inevitably must have been seen as shocking and often plainly revolting; one of his first short stories, for example, included a teenage boy who calculatingly plans to lose his virginity to his younger sister (*The Guardian*, n. pag.). Therefore, there is no denial that an interest in taboo themes such are incest, marginal manifestations of human sexuality or the sexuality of children is characteristic in McEwan's literary beginnings, as evident in his second collection of short stories, *In Between the Sheets* (1978) and especially in his first novella, *The Cement Garden* (1978). This minimalist, dark story with gothic elements can be seen as first of the two "sums" (the second being *The Comfort of Strangers*) of McEwan's renditions of people who, while struggling with their innermost desires, are confronted with a situation that has enormous consequences for their lives. In *The Cement Garden,* the event that changes the lives of four siblings living on the periphery of a big city is the death of their parents, especially that of their mother. The orphaned children decide to escape the threat of being consigned to an orphanage by burying her in the basement and covering her in cement left over from remodelling the garden. Through the initial chaos and anarchy of living in a now– parentless house, the old patterns of behaviour start to manifest and slowly, step by step, the old order is established: the once broken family is reunited. The novel includes many motifs which were to be found in McEwan's previous collections and which are recurrent in his later works as well: the characters transgress into childhood, they commit incest and they make use of violence and psychological pressure in times of desperation, to name a few examples. The novel itself is heavily symbolic and can be read as an allegory for a world that, once violated, can never be the same again, for our lives are constantly being shaped by powers that are beyond our grasp, powers that originate from the deepest recesses of our psyches. A

[1] McEwan, Ian. *Enduring Love,* p.1

contrast between these conflicting aspects of human existence is one of McEwan's eminent themes and can be found in nearly all of his works: in his books, the characters are often powerless not only against external sources, but also against what they harbour inside them. In *The Comfort of Strangers*, a horror story set in Venice during the holiday season, we encounter British couple Colin and Mary, who fall into the trap of the grotesque and crippled psyche of one of the Venice locals, Robert. The sense of uneasiness, so characteristic of McEwan's work, is intensified here to the point where it is almost unbearable: even though we suspect that tragedy is inevitable, the final act of murder, as presented by McEwan, is no less shocking: in surgically precise details, we witness Robert opening Colin's artery and letting him to bleed to death. Both *The Cement Garden* and *The Comfort of Strangers* share a sense of unreality and timelessness, a certain eerie quality that permeates both texts, yet in *The Comfort of Strangers,* McEwan goes even further: if the siblings in *The Cement Garden* awoke from their "dream" to a future that is at best uncertain, for Mary in *The Comfort of Strangers* there is nothing left but emptiness and a future filled with sorrow. After Colin is murdered and she is asked to identify the body, she leaves Venice for good in a strange paralysis that, as can be inferred, will accompany her for the rest of her life. Despite the taboo themes, *The Cement Garden* is, pre–eminently, a melancholic swan song for a lost innocence; *The Comfort of Strangers¸* on the other hand, can be read as an inexorable and brutal testament to the destructive potential of the most carnal of human instincts.

2.2 From The Child in Time to Atonement: 1987–2001

If a child was one of the most important themes in the early works of Ian McEwan, in 1987's *The Child In Time,* he made it the most important one – or rather, the absence of a child. In the intimate story of the abduction of a little girl, McEwan dives into the mind of Stephen, an acclaimed author of children's literature, and tells the painful events of a breakup of one marriage and, subsequently, of its rebirth. McEwan here broadens his themes, enriching his imagery with an interest in politics and social affairs and making *The Child In Time more* accessible to a broader readership base. In that sense, his next work *The Innocent* (1990) – revealing the author's interest in history – can be seen as a logical continuation of such processes: this genre fiction, set in Berlin during the Cold War, revolves around the actual events of Operation Gold (or Operation Stopwatch) in the 1950's (Childs, 169). In the background of the Berlin Tunnel, built by

MI6 and the CIA, we follow a young British engineer experiencing not only an intense love affair, but also events symptomatic of McEwan: while protecting themselves from Maria's abusive ex–husband, the couple accidentally kills him and Leonard and Maria are forced to deal with the situation in the best way possible. As a result, the couple comes up with an elaborate and grotesque plan involving dismembering the body and covering up the murder with the placement of espionage equipment, but what follows is nothing but chaos. McEwan's depiction of the disclosure of Operation Gold – which, in his version, was brought about by a grotesque and seemingly random cause – can remind the reader of the memorable burial scene burial from *The Cement Garden* or his earlier stories: yet this spy novel lacks the intensity and formal elegance of both, although it is unquestionably more accessible than either one of them. Indeed: *The Innocent* was the most successful of McEwan's works to date (Childs, 169), which is a fact that can be, without doubt, attributed not only to an attractive theme and a relative absence of "macabre" motifs, but also to the use of a noticeably less complex language and style – an aspect that, as Malcolm mentions, was observable in *The Child In Time* already, and that grows even more prominent in the following novels, *Black Dogs* (1992) and *The Enduring Love* (1997) (130).

Black Dogs, a narratively interesting work, develops McEwan's already hinted–at interest in history; but if *The Innocent* confronted an individual with the relentless nature of great historical events, the history in *Black Dogs* – which indeed did hits the characters significantly – appears to be much more fluid and much more complicated that it would seem. As a man whose parents died in his youth, the novel's protagonist, Jeremy, is fascinated by the histories of other people, namely of June and Bernard, his mother and father–in–law. Once they loved each other very deeply but something has separated them: despite their opposing characters – June believes in an intuitive approach and in the sacred nature of all things living, while Bernard is a sworn rationalist who celebrates nothing but science – the nature of their old conflict goes much deeper and is, in the end, fatal. *Black Dogs* tells a story of evil that it an inseparable part of any existence, as well as of the limitations that we may find within ourselves when confronted with its manifestations. It is also a story that presents us with the consequences of failed communication, a story that shows us what can happen if a mutual understanding cannot, for various reasons, be reached: yet, as McEwan implies, there is still a hope for us – no matter how banal or mawkish it may seem, the only redeeming force capable of connecting people and their thoughts is love.

Love is also an important theme in the next McEwan novel, *Enduring Love* (1997): however, as Childs points out, it is love very different from the one present in *Black Dogs* (172). In the story of Joe, his partner Clarissa and his stalker Jed Parry, love is not seen as something vital, capable of connecting people, but as a power that can, if not reciprocated, be extraordinarily destructive. Although it is possible to see in Parry's aberrant psyche the echoes of McEwan's grotesque early characters, *Enduring Love* is less about deviancy than about constructing, or reconstructing, an individual "truth". Once again, there is an event of significant importance, and the people involved whose lives are about to change because of it: this time it is a child in a hot–air balloon that will very likely fly away in a matter of seconds, five men who try to hold it down and, ultimately, their failure to do so, resulting in the death of one of them. Such a tragedy must obviously influence anyone who would witness it, yet for Joe, it proves to be far more personal since it triggers Parry's obsession with him. Although there is no denial that *Enduring Love* is technically a very elaborate work full of sophisticated dialogues, at the same time it is possible to notice a certain flatness in the story (Childs accuses *Enduring Love* of being "overly schematic", 172) or a simple inadequacy to write fully–fledged characters. Joe, much like Bernard from *Black Dogs*, talks and thinks in the limits of rationalist discourse: yet rationalist thinking cannot compete with Parry's mania in any way, subsequently revealing Joe's belief in science as inadequate and ultimately shallow. Therefore, if *Enduring Love* succeeds, at least partly, as a psychological study of obsession, as a study of human rationality, it fails.

In 1998, Ian McEwan was awarded the Man Booker Prize for his novel (or novella), *Amsterdam*. The work's reception was, however, quite mixed. It tells the story of two best friends who, after having been confronted with the death of their shared ex-lover Molly, become involved in a downward spiral of events that culminates in their mutual destruction. While it is true that this particular work of McEwan's indeed lacks the intensity of his previous fiction, it is still possible to read and enjoy it as pure dark comedy however.

The last novel discussed in the thesis, *Atonement*, can be seen as a certain sum of McEwan's previous works. The novel offers three perspectives on a singular event, taking place one summer day in the garden of an English country house. The novel's narrator, Briony Tallis, witnesses her older Cecilia throwing herself in the fountain, while being watched by Robbie Turner, Cecilia's childhood friend. Briony, being a child when this episode takes place in the novel, cannot "read" the situation right;

therefore her imagination starts to build a “story” in her mind that, sadly, has a tragic consequences for all three of them. In *Atonement*, the concept of inventing (and re-inventing) reality, an idea already presented in *Black Dogs* and *Enduring Love*, is now brought to perfection: in this masterpiece, Ian McEwan has truly proven himself to be a master stylist.

The following chapter will introduce the first novel of McEwan’s discussed in the thesis, that is, *The Child in Time.*

3 The Child in Time

In the 1987 novel *The Child in Time,* McEwan seemingly abandoned themes occurring in his previous works, that is, various portrayals of destructive personalities, sexual deviations or incestuous relationships (Slay, 205): themes that were considered characteristic of McEwan's writing but which at the same time were considered controversial by many (Hilský, 142). Indeed, the "macabre" of his beginnings has noticeably lessened in *The Child in Time* but the echoes are still present – one of the novel's characters, for instance, is an extremely successful politician and a public man who is torn apart due to a life–long inner conflict between a highly ambitious personality and an irrational urge to return to his pre–pubescent years. The dysfunctionality of (most often family) relationships is brought to light in *The Child in Time* once again*,* yet what is new is not only a certain relaxation of language and style (Malcolm, 130), but also a noticeably lighter and seemingly cheerier mood evident in the structure of the novel. Such a change is apparent, especially when compared with both McEwan's previous novels: the family in *The Cement Garden* was robbed of their newly established unity and forced to awaken into the harsh reality of the outside world and in *The Comfort of Strangers,* every meaningful bond is destroyed completely with nothing left but paralysis (Slay, 205). In *The Child in Time,* on the other hand, the relationships are indeed tested but they eventually prove firm: in this painful, multi–layered story, two people are confronted with the disappearance of their child and, subsequently, with a void that threatens to ruin their relationship, yet in the end they manage to accept their loss and find peace. Such development in a way marks a new tendency in McEwan's writing, which, as Malcolm reminds us, grows even more prominent in the next novel *The Innocent* but is already evident in *The Child in Time*: that is the gradual abandonment of the metaphysical concerns and their lesser recognisability on a textual and technical level (130). The author's long–term interest in knowledge, mirrored not only in *The Child in Time* but in many subsequent novels including *Black Dogs* and *Enduring Love*, for instance, is thus gradually being incorporated more into the topical level of the text and less into its style (Malcolm, 130): however, it still constitutes an important aspect of McEwan's works.

In the next chapter, two of *The Child in Time* most prominent themes will be analysed. The novel examines the nature of time and, subsequently, the issue of a personal identity in time, as well as the importance of childhood as a period of an

inherent innocence. As was mentioned, *The Child in Time* can be seen as an essential work in the context of McEwan's career since, as Head mentions, it is not only the first McEwan's work longer than a novella, but also the first work trying to cover both personal and public experience (70): the next chapter will thus analyse both of these levels in *The Child in Time.*

A child that is ours, a child that we used to be, a child that is within us

The novel is set in an unspecified time, presumably in the near future from the publication year of 1978, in a dystopian right–wing society that has legalised a new class of licensed beggars and which had privatised public education. The protagonist, Stephen Lewis, once an ambitious novelist with dreams of writing a new literary classic but now the accidental author of a best–selling children's book called *Lemonade*, struggles to accept the fact of the kidnapping of his three–year–old daughter Kate. Two years after the incident, now being a member of a government–appointed commission whose task is to write an "*Authorized Childcare Handbook"*, Stephen spends his days either in pointlessly discussing the nature of the manual or engaging in depressing and unproductive TV viewing in his apartment. His marriage has been broken: after Kate's disappearance, both Stephen and his wife Julie dealt with their grief differently, and while Stephen dived into frenetic activity and a maniacal search for his lost daughter, Julie had shut herself down in an inscrutable, paralysing grief, forbidding her husband to reach her. Their mutual misunderstanding, as well as a sense of overwhelming guilt that neither one of them was able to process, resulted in the complete disintegration of their relationship.

The presence of a child is ubiquitous in McEwan's work from the very beginning of his career and is a persistent recurring theme: the first collection of short stories, that is, *First Love, Last Rites,* thematised children, especially children that were confronted with the adult world prematurely. In *The Child in Time*, the image of a child – and childhood – is central and is reflected in the novel on different levels: on the most fundamental level, in the internal conflict of a parent who must learn how to live in the world where his daughter is, and forever will be, absent; metaphorically, in a process of maturation in which a human being must recognize his place in history and accept his identity as something determined by the time in he lives; and, most abstractly, in the need for a sense of personal freedom that, if denied to a person, can have fatal consequences. All aspects of the novel are then linked together by the unifying image of

time, which is simultaneously both manipulating and manipulated – or, in Slay's words, "vandalizing" and "vandalized" (205, 206).

3.1 A child that is ours

The trigger that sets everything into motion, the abduction of little Kate, is communicated to the reader in flashbacks as Stephen wanders in his thoughts during an especially boring commission session: in his mind, he goes back to the day when he took Kate to the supermarket with him. He recalls it as a normal day, framed with the usual banal activities – he woke up, though after a long night of Kate's nightmares slightly sleep deprived; he considered postponing the grocery shopping and spending more time in bed with his wife; he walked with Kate to the supermarket; he was not paying attention to anything but the products on the shelves; he was just about to pay for the groceries when he noticed that Kate was not with him. At the same time, this everyday banality is interwoven with the constant reminders of the mercilessly unyielding nature of time:

> Later, in the sorry months and years, Stephen was to make efforts to re–enter this moment and, to burrow his way back through the folds between events, crawl between the covers, and reverse his decision. But time – not necessarily as it is, for who knows that, but as thought has constituted it – monomanically forbids second chances. There is no absolute time, his friend Thelma had told him on occasions, no independent entity. Only our particular and weak understanding (14).

The first occurrence of something that will later become an important aspect of McEwan's fiction (i.e. exploring the temporal nature of crucial events) suggests a great deal about the complex nature not only of time, but also of our individual perception of it. After the kidnapping, Stephen repeatedly returns to that critical moment in the supermarket and in desperate attempts to win over time he searches through his memories, trying to identify the kidnapper, but every time he is defeated by the omnipresent power of time which is continually eroding his memory of Kate: "But time held his sight for ever on his mundane errands, and all about him shapes without definition drifted and dissolved, lost to categories" (16). Thus Stephen, unable to prevent time from taking Kate from him, must undertake a long and painful journey of reconciliation.

McEwan depicts the development of Stephen's perception as an irrational process, once again accentuating the human inclination to "magical thought" in times of weakness – an inclination that Stephen discovers in himself right before Kate's birthday (126):

> The observance of a mystery would release unknowable configurations of time and chance, the number magic of birth dates would be activated, events would be set in train which otherwise would not occur. […] He would purchase his gift in joy rather than sorrow, in the spirit of loving extravagance, and in bringing it home and wrapping it up he would be making an offering to fate, or a challenge – Look, I've brought the present, now you bring back the girl (126).

In this way, the absent child's presence can be – at least partly – mimicked: to Stephen, this understandable act of weakness is "an act of faith in his daughter's continued existence" (126). Such faith is toxic for him but he is unable to abandon it, and therefore he continues to live his life in a vacuum until one day, he mistakes a young girl for his daughter, resulting in a situation in which he is almost arrested. This crucial event makes him realizes the pointlessness of his actions and marks the development of his acceptance of Kate's disappearance: as Slay reminds us, it forces him to comprehend the full range of his obsession (210), to accept the fact that he may well never see his daughter again – and that he must eventually let this 'child in time' go. However, although this epiphany of his is an important step towards his final act of reconciliation, for Stephen, there is still a long journey ahead.

3.2 A child that we used to be

In the novel, there is yet another 'child in time' that is central to the book: when visiting Julie, Stephen – in a place called The Bell – mysteriously enters a different time and in a paradoxical moment, he witnesses a scene that literally decides his very existence:

> A man was carrying two glasses of beer from the bar towards a small table where a young woman sat waiting [...] Had the couple glanced up and to their left, towards the window by the door, they might have seen a phantom beyond the spotted glass, immobile with the tension of inarticulate recognition. It was a face taut with expectation, as though

> a spirit, suspended between existence and nothingness, attended a decision, a beckoning or a dismissal. (58–59)

As Childs notes, this scene echoes Stephen's own loss (180) – had the young woman (who was, naturally, Stephen's mother) not glanced towards the window eventually and not seen the face of her 'future' child, she would have aborted him and therefore lost him as he lost his daughter, because he would never have been born at all. In this moment, a temporal paradox, Stephen metaphorically loses every connection to physical reality and becomes only a hypothetical version of him; a mere possibility trapped in the infinite boundlessness of time together with other versions of him and of many others:

> […] he had nowhere to go, no moment which could embody him, he was not expected, no destination or time could be named; for while he moved forward violently, he was immobile, he was hurtling round a fixed point. And this thought unwrapped a sadness which was not his own. It was centuries, millennia old. It swept through him and countless others like the wind through a field of grass (60).

This is the moment which not only secures his actual existence, but also which enables a new life to be initiated as Stephen, still intoxicated by the extraordinary nature of this experience, conceives a new child with Julie that day: the "post–Einsteinian […] plasticity of time and space" (Head, 75), which has been examined a number of times in the novel, allows for a timeslip that eventually connects the past and the present: "It was then that [Stephen] understood that his experience [at The Bell] had not only been reciprocal with his parents', it had been a continuation, a kind of repetition" (211). Only then is Stephen able to fully accept the past and move forward, to metaphorically abandon both 'children in time' – Kate and himself – and grow up completely. His journey into adolescence is once again accented by McEwan, who lets Stephen – on his way to Julie, to give birth to their baby – to travel in the railway engine in the cabin, which is Stephen's boyhood dream and finally, after Stephen symbolically loses the connection to the past, the couple is, for the first time, able to mourn the loss of Kate and, subsequently, to celebrate the birth of their second child.

3.3 A child that is within us

The issue of childhood as a period of time in human life providing us with an illusion of safety is, as previously mentioned, central to McEwan's works, especially to his earlier ones; in *The Child in Time* it is once again recalled by the character of Charles Drake. Drake, a highly ambitious, successful but psychologically successful publisher and politician, is torn apart between his longing for public recognition and a personal need for freedom that was once forbidden to him, resulting in him moving to the countryside and regressing to a pre–pubescent mentality. Although it is implied that Charles's regression is partly sexually oriented, the most important aspect of it is that it is triggered by his inability to abandon the past. As summarized by Drake's wife Thelma:

> He wanted the security of childhood, the powerlessness, the obedience, and also the freedom that goes with it, freedom from money, decisions, plans, demands. He used to say he wanted to escape from time, from appointments, schedules, deadlines. Childhood to him was timelessness, he talked about it as though it were a mystical state (201).

Drake's problem is that although he desires to escape the pressures of adult life, at the same time he is unable to abandon it because his ambition would not allow for it: he desperately wants to enter "the infinite, unchanging time of childhood" (120) in which it would be possible to leave out everything but his own existence, yet at the same time, he actively contributes to the oppression of the state when he secretly writes down the shadow, authoritative version of an "*Authorized Childcare Handbook".* The infamous character of the Thatcherite Prime Minister (whose gender is never specified) stands here, as Childs mentions, for a metaphorical parent who is unable to care for its child in a healthy way (181), which is mirrored in both an oppressive attitude toward the nation, as well as towards Drake who is – as suggested – not only sexually harassed by the Prime Minister, but also monitored by her or him. Consequently, Drake, as another metaphorical 'child in time', is therefore unable to completely mature because he is simply not allowed to: if Stephen managed to reconcile with the part of him that longed for the past, and accept "[t]he child in him" (194), Drake is denied this privilege and therefore must contend with poor substitutes. Unlike Stephen's, Drake's journey is thus not headed towards acceptance and a new life, but, as Hilský reminds us, towards resignation and death (142) and although both Stephen and Drake tried to resist time

and attempted to fight it, only Stephen was able to realize that his identity is shaped by the fluidity of time and thus to accept his own existence.

“Time present and time past are both perhaps in time future, and time future contained in time past”[2]

Time is also one of the central themes in *The Child in Time*: the characters not only search for various types of ‘missing children’, but also for different forms of time. They often notice that time is by no means a simple mechanical process and they subsequently comment on it throughout the entire novel. The one who perceives the complexity of the nature of time most profoundly is Stephen: his experience of it is strongly connected with the intuitive understanding that there apparently may be more than one form of time. Without any obvious reason, a moment in time may be experienced as “right” (153), but it is equally possible – and often pleasant, as discussed above – to resist it:

> Time itself had a closed–down, forbidden quality; he was experiencing the pleasurable transgression, the heightened significance that came with being out of school at the wrong moment (143).

The image of being ‘in the wrong moment’ or ‘out of time’ is recurrent throughout the novel, and although it is depicted as potentially seductive, it is also potentially very dangerous. This observation is most significant in ‘The Bell’ episode when Stephen, after stepping right into the middle of the time paradox scene, feels ‘stripped’ of his physical existence because in that moment, he exists as nothing more than a possibility. This episode, as Head claims, can be seen as potentially problematic and threatening to the novel’s relatively traditional realism that “treats chronology in an assured and fluid way” (75); how, he asks, should we process such “disruption to the codes of realism”? (77). Should we, together with Slay, see it as “an episode of magical realism”? (qtd. in Head, 77), or probably as an experience that is “metaphysical, supernatural”, as Malcolm suggests? (qtd. in Head, 77). The last part of this chapter will try to expound on this issue more.

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[2] Eliot, T.S. *Four Quarters*.“Burnt Norton”. Faber and Faber Limited, 1944. Print.

3.4 The nature of time

The Child in Time, as already mentioned, constitutes for several reasons a turning point in the context of McEwan's fiction: it is considerably longer, it addresses both personal and public experience, and also, for the first time, it explores a new interest that will later become a prominent aspect of McEwan's works, that is, the issue of contemporary science (Head, 78). In *The Child in Time,* this is manifested in the character of Thelma, a theoretical physicist and the wife of Charles Drake, who is currently writing a work on the nature of time within the novel. She understands it as a beautiful and fluid stream present in every aspect of reality:

> Think how humanised an approachable scientists would be if they could join in the really important conversations about time, and without thinking they had the final word – the mystic's experience of timelessness, the chaotic unfolding of time in dreams, the Christian moment of fulfilment and redemption, the annihilated time of deep sleep, the elaborate time schemes of the novelists, poets, daydreamers, the infinite, unchanging time of childhood (120).

Thelma's passionate speech offers a different perspective towards the issue of time because she is addressing a seemingly scientific phenomenon in the words of a poet. But as followed from the preceding paragraph, such an interpretation of reality does not correspond to our experience and as such, it must be scrutinised once again. Thelma's words, which perceive the world exclusively through the lens of a scientist as well as looking at it through the rose–tinted glasses of a poet, are not enough to echo the holistic worldview of David Bohm, a philosopher, scientist – and, in *The Child in Time,* Thelma's colleague (Head, 78). After Stephen's car accident and his own experience of how pliant time can actually seem, Thelma offers him a "whole supermarket of theories" (117) that, however, she considers insufficient to capture both the 'scientific and poetic' quality of time. She talks about the "twin pillars" (118) of physics – that is, relativity and quantum theory – that cannot provide a unifying theory because while the first sees the world as "causal and continuous", the latter, on the other hand, describes a "non–causal, discontinuous world" (118); and she passionately expresses here belief that sometime in the near future, science will discover a way to approach different aspects of existence holistically:

> The new theory would refer to a higher order of reality, a higher ground, the ground of all that is, an undivided whole in which matter, space, time, even consciousness itself, would be complicatedly related embodiments, intrusions which made up the reality we understood (119).

In this 'new theory', as McEwan implies, can be noticed Bohm's theory of 'enfolded or intricate order' which would connect Thelma's two pillars (Head, 78) because it attempts to understand "relativity and quantum theory on a basis common to both" (Bohm, qtd. in Head, 78). Bohm's theory presupposes that the universe is in some way implicated in everything and that each thing is implicated in the whole (Bohm, 79), which, when simplified, means that in the physical world, the relationships between external things seem "relatively separate", but this ordinary experience cannot provide us with a full understanding of 'this implicate order', where "each thing is internally related to the whole, and therefore, to everything else" (Bohm, qtd. in Head, 79). It is a common experience to all of us that the passage of a period of time may seem long to ourselves but, to a different person, the same period may appear as only a moment, which is a phenomenon usually associated with the 'relativity' of a physical period of time. Indeed, Bohm links such a paradox with the theory of relativity, but at the same time, he reminds us that we should be careful with this classification because "this variation is significant only […] as we approach the speed of light and is quite negligible in the domain of ordinary experience" (Bohm, qtd. in Head, 79). Instead, as he proposes, it is inspirational to strive for some form of a high–level theory that could be applied to both space and time (Head, 80):

> Since the quantum theory implies that elements that are separated in space are generally non–causally and non–locally related projections of a higher–dimensional reality, it follows that moments separated in time are also such projections of this reality (Bohm, qtd. in Head, 80).

This 'higher–dimensional' reality, as he continues, may thus find its way into many different sequences of moments (Head, 80), which may result in the aforementioned phenomenon of people experiencing the same period of time differently, as well as it creating the illusion that time seemingly accelerates or decelerates. This time warping is most obvious in the car accident scene where, as Stephen discovers, time is deformed: "In what followed, the rapidity of events was accommodated by the slowing of time"

(93). He is fascinated by his discovery that in the critical moments, the human consciousness is able to distort the perception of time, how “duration [can] shape itself round the intensity of the event (95)”.

This subjective experience of time constitutes an important aspect of McEwan’s fiction, and although it is in his later, early 21st Century fiction where McEwan explores this phenomenon most profoundly, this interest is foreshadowed in his early works as well (Courtney, 186). It is evident in the confrontations of the characters with events that are often stressful but most frequently rather life–changing (as was Stephen’s near–death experience), a technique that, as Courtney states, has evolved over time, becoming incorporated right into the style of the novel (186–7).

4 The Innocent

The novel *The Innocent* was published in 1990 and was McEwan's biggest commercial success to date (Childs, 163). When compared to his previous works, it becomes evident that the gradual abandonment of any disruptive elements to the 'traditional' narrative chronology, only suggested in the previous chapter, is now explicitly seen in *The Innocent*. Here the narration proceeds in a straightforward fashion, with an omniscient (or quasi–omniscient) narrator who switches from Leonard's and Maria's points of view, and only sometimes foreshadows events to come (Malcolm, 113). The novel itself is an example of genre fiction (Childs mentions its strong roots in the genre of an espionage novel, 163) and contains several traces of thriller and horror story, as well as echoes of McEwan's previous interests in personal psychology and deviant manifestations of human sexuality. The personal identity and the concept of innocence, present in McEwan's earlier works from *In Between the Sheets* to *The Child In Time,* are brought to light yet again and as such, constitute a central theme in *The Innocent.* Similarly to *The Child in Time,* the focus here is broadened and covers not only the personal experience but the public one as well, but to differentiate between the personal and the public in *The Innocent* is sometimes problematic since the borders are blurry at best.

The following chapter will look closely at both the issue of political and personal identity, together with the concept of innocence (and its loss) that is connected to it. In *The Innocent,* both the personal and the political merges at a certain level, culminating in a powerful scene of murder: this moment of both personal and political crisis will be given attention as well.

4.1 The political identity

The events, upon which the story of Leonard Marnham, a young British engineer, is based, are historically accurate. During 1955–56 in 'Operation Gold', Britain's MI6 and the American CIA cooperated in an attempt to spy on the Russians' phone lines by digging a tunnel into the Soviet sector of Berlin: however, the operation was betrayed by a double–agent named George Blake and it ultimately failed. This historically accurate background is then populated by McEwan and allows for a complex and double–edged play, proving the difficulty in tossing aside the prejudices and stereotypes we so often incorporate in our unconscious minds, as well as bringing to light the issues

of absurdity and coincidence – and the uncomfortable question of whether or not it really plays the fundamental role in our lives.

The Innocent's protagonist, Leonard, arrives in Berlin as a technician recruited by the Americans to install new monitoring equipment in the secret tunnel that is being dug into Berlin's Russian sector. The aim of the operation, that is, spying on the Russians, is – in a city literally teeming with spies of all sorts – problematic at best: however, Leonard's biggest problem is not the Russians but the Americans. In the words of the first lieutenant Lofting:

> Look here, Marnham. You've only just arrived so there's no reason why you should know the situation. It's not the Germans or the Russians who are the problem here. It isn't even the French. It's the Americans. They don't know a thing. What's worse, they won't learn, they won't be told. It's just how they are (1).

Both the post–WWII situation and the schizophrenic reality of the Cold War era nourishes an atmosphere of paranoia where everyone is suspicious of everyone else while also strengthening stereotypes, as well as old, and often unconscious grievances and feelings of superiority. Leonard experiences them as well: after arriving in Berlin, he is unable to restrain himself from feeling a strange sense of unearned victory:

> It was impossible for a young Englishman to be in Germany for the first time and not think of it above all as a defeated nation, or feel pride in the victory (4–5).

Although similar feelings will bring him a great deal of sorrow later, such thinking, a type of post–war victor's euphoria, is natural not only to Leonard but to every party operating in Berlin with the exception of the vanquished Germans. The British do not trust the Americans with their seemingly arrogant self–confidence; the Americans look down on British politeness and (what they perceive as) cowardice; the Germans suffer the fate of the once victorious but now defeated nation who must accept everything happening to them, no matter how humiliating; and the Russians are despised by virtually everybody. All of them then live their days in a constant battle to obtain the newest and the best information possible, in which endeavour they use all means they have at hand because information equals knowledge, and knowledge equals power. In that sense, Berlin is reminiscent of a giant neural network of interconnected

fundamental neurons (like the infamous Cafe Prag) within which information flows in a ceaseless stream and in which almost everyone is both hunter and hunted. In this never–ending cycle, no one is innocent because everyone has traded their innocence for knowledge and thus has something to hide now.

The episode in the bar where Leonard drinks with Glass and Russell can thus be seen as symptomatic: Glass talks about his understanding of our biological need for *secrets,* and his speech offers us not only an important insight into the mentality of a man unreservedly convinced of the rightfulness of his endeavours, but it also shows us, the reader, the potential seductiveness of such thinking to Leonard:

> [...] Back then we all used to hang out together all day long doing the same thing. We lived in packs. So there was no need for language. If there was a leopard coming, there was no point saying, Hey man, what's coming down the track? A leopard! Everyone could see it, everyone was jumping up and down and screaming, trying to scare it off. But what happens when someone goes off on his own for a moment's privacy? When he sees a leopard coming, he knows something the others don't [...] He has something they don't, he has a *secret*, and this is the beginning of his individuality, of his consciousness. If he wants to share his secret and run down the track to warn the other guys, then he's going to need to invent language. From there grows the possibility of culture. Or he can hang back and hope the leopard will take out the leadership that's been giving him a hard time. A secret plan, that means more individuation, more consciousness [...] Secrecy made us possible (35).

Glass's speech is interesting not only because he talks openly about knowledge having the power to be both a means of defence and an offensive weapon, but also because an important aspect of Leonard's pre–Berlin personality is suggested therein. Leonard's existence is an existence without any individuality: when he arrives in Berlin, he is a young man who has never experienced a clash with reality of any sort. Back home, he was living a rather comfortable life and although he was not financially dependent upon his parents, he was still somewhat sheltered by them. Thus, at the beginning he is introduced as an inexperienced boy, both in terms of life and his lack of experience with women; a boy who finds the familiar comfort of his new apartment consolatory and

who talks in the same polite but starchy register he had been taught at home. In simpler terms, he does not know anything because he has not yet been given the chance to create a *secret* for himself.

At this level, it becomes evident that McEwan works with a certain concept of political innocence when forcing Leonard to deal with his own insufficiency and ignorance, feelings he recognises, especially when confronted with the ways of the Americans. While getting ready for his first day at the new job, he feels insecure and frightened: “His Englishness was not quite the comfort it had been to a preceding generation. It made him feel vulnerable. Americans, on the other hand, seemed utterly at ease being themselves” (7). Leonard sees the Americans as self–confident because they seem to have the individuality that he lacks and which comes only with knowledge and ability. It becomes especially evident in the American football scene where Leonard unwillingly witnesses the extraordinary casualness of the American men:

> Presently a side door in the low building opened and two men stepped out [...] Both men were well over six feet [...] They seemed immune to the cold. They had an orange rugby ball which they lobbed back and forth as they walked away from each other. They kept on walking until the ball was arcing through an improbable distance, spinning smoothly about its longer axis. It was not a two–handed rugger throw–in, but a single–handed pitch, a sinuous, whip–like movement over the shoulder. Leonard had never seen an American football game, never even heard one described. This routine, with the catches snapping high, right up on the collarbone, seemed over–demonstrative, too self–loving, to represent any serious form of game practice. This was a blatant exhibition of physical powers. These were grown men, showing off. Their only audience, an Englishman in a freezing German car, watched with disgusted fascination [...] That two adults should be so publicly playful, that was what held him, irritated him (14–15.)

What is important to realize here is that the scene above is not an objective description of reality but rather Leonard’s *perception* of it. What would probably seem like a perfectly normal display of American football to anyone else looks almost enigmatic to Leonard: the men, depicted as nearly superhuman because something as trivial as cold

weather does not seem to have the ability to affect them; they are practically overflowing with physical health and innate ability. The description is peculiar because it emphasizes the aspects that Leonard values but lacks at the same time: self–confidence, ability, independence, individuality and physical beauty, this is what he admires in others and what he hopes to eventually find in himself. The British, on the other hand, are depicted as stiff, ludicrous or even physically crooked:

> He smiled at his little irony, revealing his pitiful teeth. They teetered at all angles, like old gravestones. He caught Leonard's gaze. He tapped his mouth with his forefinger and spoke right into the younger man's embarrassment. 'Milk teeth. The other lot never came through. I think perhaps I never wanted to grow up (67).

The character of MacNamee, even though he is unquestioningly competent, still has a certain aura of incompetence around him, and it is no coincidence that it is MacNamee who tries to make Leonard a British spy. Naturally, he fails miserably because Leonard is simply not spy material: in a way, he is able to keep maintaining his political innocence for such a long time simply because he is so clueless. These episodes thematically echo McEwan's earlier works, often accentuating childhood as being not a period of factual innocence but rather a time when a human being stands outside the society whose machinery he does not fully understand; and these misunderstandings can potentially have very destructive results (see McEwan's first short story–collection *First Love, Last Rites* or the novella *The Cement Garden*) – which is, unfortunately, relevant to Leonard as well.

Similar reminders are incorporated into the narrative of *The Innocent* at various place, strengthening its symbolic quality (the personal often merges with the general, resulting in the possibility to read *The Innocent* as a kind of allegory): and, last but not least, a certain duality is observable in *The Innocent*'s antithetic understanding of the division between childhood and adulthood – or ultimately, even the relationship between a man and a woman.

4.2 Personal identity

The process of Leonard's personal development is, naturally, inseparably connected to Maria: it is she who initiates the contact (this fact later arouses Glass's suspicion that she might be a spy), and it is her who helps Leonard to mature, not only sexually, but also emotionally. It is Maria who introduces Leonard to the world of adults and who

accompanies him on his explorations ("*Erkundungen")* of the female body, explorations that take place in the particularly timeless atmosphere of Maria's tiny, cold apartment. While away from Maria, Leonard is absent–minded and unattainable, and while he is with her he starts losing not only his sense of time, but his old personality as well: "Leonard naturally inclined towards a well–ordered, hygienic existence. For four days after the inception of the first love affair of his life he did not change his underwear or socks, he had no clean shirt and he hardly washed (74)". He is aware of the potential danger of such a situation, even though only indistinctly: on his way to Maria, he is letting his mind wander:

> He was not certain whether this time spent travelling between his two secret worlds was when he was truly himself, when he was able to hold the two in balance and know them to be separate from himself; or whether this was the one time he was nothing at all, a void travelling between two points. Only on arrival, at this end or that, would he assume or be assigned a purpose, and then he would be himself, or one of his selves, again. What he did know for sure was that these speculations would begin to fade as his train approached his Kreuzberg stop, and that as he hurried across the courtyard and took the five flights of stairs two or even three at a time, they would have vanished (72).

Of course, Leonard's ecstatic feelings can be easily explained by his new and fresh love for Maria, yet we can notice an echo of an experience had by Stephen in *The Child in Time* in his out–of–body feelings as well; at this point, Leonard feels stripped of his physical existence to that extent that everything but Maria disappears. His old self starts to transform, or rather, starts to dissolve into the infinity of different versions of himself. As a result, the old Leonard slowly vanishes, apparently freeing Leonard from the burdens of his awkward past. However, despite that this new experience is both exciting and intoxicating, the current situation quickly shows itself to be potentially quite dangerous when Leonard starts to fantasize about controlling Maria:

> This was his first intimation of a new and troubling feature. It was hard to describe. There was an element of mind creeping in, of bits of himself, bits he did not really like. Once he was over the novelty of it all, and once he was sure he could do it just like everyone else [...],

> and once he was quite convinced that Maria genuinely liked and wanted him and would go on wanting him, then he started having thoughts that he was powerless to send away when he was making love. They soon grew inseparable from his desire. These fantasies came a little closer each time, and each time they continued to proliferate, to take new forms. There were figures gathering at the edge of thought, now they were striding towards the centre, towards him. They were all versions of himself, and he knew he could not resist them (78).

Leonard's fantasies grow stronger – and more brutal – when he starts to see Maria as a denizen of a defeated nation:

> He looked down at Maria, whose eyes were closed, and remembered she was German. The word had not been entirely prised loose of its associations after all. His first day in Berlin came back to him. German. Enemy. Mortal enemy. Defeated enemy. The last brought with it a shocking thrill [...]. Then: she was the defeated, she was his by right, by conquest, by right of unimaginable violence and heroism and sacrifice. What elation! To be right, to win, to be rewarded [...] He was powerful and magnificent (78).

Although Leonard ultimately realizes that it is in fact Maria who is in control and who "had been liberated by the invasion of Europe, not crushed" (78), his newly experienced feelings of dominance overcome him, resulting in a final delusion that Maria would actually enjoyed being abased. Therefore, Leonard's growing violence culminates in a powerful and horrific scene of rape.

In a sense, Leonard's delusion can be partly attributed to his ignorance, and we learn in the process that what we have mistaken for a particular "innocence" was simply Leonard's underdeveloped moral self. What is even more unsettling, however, is Leonard's perception of Maria as a defeated German woman and of himself as a victorious British soldier. Subsequently, what is supposed to be an act of intimacy between two people is cruelly transformed into an act of political aggression; it is precisely at this point where we can see the merger of the personal and the political in *The Innocent*.

4.3 The collapse of both the political and the personal

Leonard's personal growth, as already mentioned, is inseparably connected to Maria. It is only when he realizes that what he had done could cause her to leave him forever that he is able to mature and abandon his outdated concepts of national and political identity. In *The Innocent*, Maria's and Leonard's decision to build their relationship on love rather than stereotypes is embodied by their engagement; to quote Bob Glass's speech at their engagement party:

> We all know the kinds of freedom we want and like, and we all know what threatens them. We all know that the place, the only place, to start making a Europe free and safe from war is right here, with ourselves, in our hearts. Leonard and Maria belong to countries that ten years ago were at war. By engaging to be married they are bringing their own peace, in their way, to their nations. Their marriage, and all others like, binds countries tighter than any treaty can. Marriages across borders increase understanding between nations and make it slightly harder each time for them to go to war ever again (127).

Glass's exaggerated speech suggests how deep stereotypes can go, although probably only on the subconscious level. Later in the evening, Maria comments on that as well:

> It was a terrible speech [...] Does he think I'm the Third Reich. Is that what he thinks you are marrying? Does he really think that people represent countries? (131)

In other words, in Maria's (and subsequently in Leonard's) words, the usual labels of 'nation' or 'enemy' start to lose their previously tangible meaning. This gradual dissolution of meaning in *The Innocent* is observable in various levels of the novel and it culminates in a powerful scene of murder.

The merger of the political and the personal in *The Innocent* reaches a zenith in the scene following Maria's and Leonard's return to Maria's flat after their engagement party. As they discover, Maria's ex–husband Otto is sleeping there in the wardrobe; what follows is a heated argument between Maria and Otto that unfortunately ends in Leonard killing Otto in self–defense.

In that moment, everything is ruined. Otto, as an ex–soldier, was respected by the local police (even though he was an alcoholic and abusive), while Maria and Leonard now must face the prospect of being accused of murder. As a result, they come up with a sophisticated plan to get rid of Otto's remains: they will dismember his body and carry the pieces to a safe place in large suitcases.

The scene itself is described with an almost surgical attention to detail (" 'I have to stop!' he shouted, but he did not. He kept going. He should not have been going through bone. The idea was to get between the joint" (167)) and, at times, with a grotesqueness that is both hilarious and terrifying:

> Maria was sitting on a wooden chair by the open cases. She took each part of her ex–husband onto her lap and patiently, with an almost maternal care, set about folding it away and sealing it and packing it carefully along with the rest. She was wrapping the head now. She was a good woman, resourceful, kind (169).

Their encounter with death, however, triggers guilt in both of them and slowly starts to dissolve their relationship. Otto's corpse makes them confront their irrational fears, as well as compelling them to step out from their comfort zones in a brutal fashion; and ultimately, they arrive at a metaphorical place where the (already blurry) meanings disintegrate even more. As Head notes, they are forced to approach the *abject* (95).

The abject, to quote Julia Kristeva, is "the jettisoned object, [something] radically excluded [that] draws me toward the place where meaning collapses (2)". A dead body, as Kristeva discusses, when seen "without God and outside of science" is "the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part [...]" (both 4).

As she claims, abjection is not caused by any particular lack of hygiene but rather by our inability to classify it (Kristeva, 4). According to her, the abject is something that

> [d]isturbs identity, system, order. [Something that] does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in–between, the ambiguous, the composite [...] Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject (4).

Such an interpretation can be related to Maria's and Leonard's experience of the collapse of their relationship in the aftermath of their crime. They are forced together to

deal with a situation without any *meaning,* a situation that is impossible to process rationally, and because of that they lose their love for each other. On a subconscious level, they become well aware of this very early after the incident; Leonard, for instance, cannot help but feel relieved after leaving Maria's apartment: "Beyond the spinning tiredness, he was aware of his pleasure in going. If he was disposing of Otto, in a sense he was disposing of Maria too. And she of him" (175). The sense of relief is only short–lived because Leonard suffers from a guilty conscience as a result of his crime, which manifests itself in his mind playing tricks on him (as can be observed in the episode with Otto 'coming back to life'). Because he and Maria have experienced a fatal collapse of meaning, they now must regain it: for Leonard it means to 'betray' the tunnel to the Russians and, subsequently, to chose a new kind of identity for himself. Although in the end he is not the one who reveals the secret (that is, the existence of the tunnel), it is still symptomatic that his pursuit of a personal interest (that is, to save himself) is, on a certain level, entwined with a political. In Dominic Head's words,

> *[The Innocent]* deploys the framework of a spy novel to produce an innovative psychological fiction in which a collapse of identity is glimpsed before being reasserted in such a way as to undermine the basis of Cold War politics (102).

Nevertheless, although Leonard and Maria have to sacrifice their love in order to get their identities back, there is still hope, as suggested by Maria's letter to Leonard decades after their Berlin experience.

5 Black Dogs

In *Black Dogs,* McEwan continues to explore the theme of ideological differences previously touched upon in *The Innocent* (Childs, 164). These two works share an interest in the situation of post–WWII Europe and, specifically, in the construction (and ultimate destruction) of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Similarly to *The Innocent*, *Black Dogs* aims to examine the area of political and individual identity and the way it affects people's lives: however, unlike the relatively uncomplicated espionage–influenced narrative of *The Innocent, Black Dogs* aims to address a much more profound and more general experience of a human being existing in space defined by invisible, yet eminent powers.

Being a general quality of every human being, the human capacity to *remember* is fundamental to our sense of understanding. It is precisely our ability to keep memories which we use to process and make sense of the world around us: in *Black Dogs* the phenomenon of an individual's perception is thematically linked to the abilities and constraints of social reality, and, subsequently, to the concept of history which is inevitably made of (and by) us. The concept of self, contrasted with greater events, having been prominent in *Black Dogs,* will be discussed in the following chapter.

Technically, the novel consists of four parts taking place at several places at several times: Part One takes place at Wiltshire in 1987; Part Two taking place two years later in Berlin; Part Three follows the narrator Jeremy's Berlin experience and Part Four presents Bernard's and (especially) June's experiences in France in 1946. All the sections are then interwoven by various flashbacks from either Jeremy's or Bernard's and June's past. Nevertheless, we should not omit the narrator's Preface, which is not connected to the events addressed later in the novel anyhow, but which provides us with an important context: in the preface, we learn about Jeremy's parentless childhood, his seeking warmth and safety in the houses of his friends' parents, his growing up in the abusive household of his older sister Jean, and his relationship with his younger niece Sally. As he assures us, the characters occurring in the preface are, in any event, not important to the plot:

> Neither Sally, Jean nor Harper play a part in what follows. Nor do the Langleys, Nugents or Silversmiths. I left them all behind (17).

We have only the narrator's word for it, but is it enough to keep us satisfied? As Anja Müller–Wood and J. Carter Wood emphasize, a great part of *Black Dogs'* ability to convince us lies in the moral dimension of *remembering* (45): we cannot escape the past even if we try our best – what's more, we should not even attempt to escape it, because we have a moral responsibility to face it and, subsequently, to learn from it. Thus the identity of the narrator, as well as his trustworthiness, will be discussed in the second part of the following chapter.

5.1 The postmodern history

If we had witnessed an important historical event in *The Innocent*, in *Black Dogs* we are presented with a history far greater and much more complex: the protagonist, Jeremy, aims to recount a personal history of June and Bernard Tremaine, his parents-in-law, in the context of post–war Europe, starting from the moments immediately following the end of the Second World War in Europe and ending with the historical triumph connected with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Yet, although the story of *Black Dogs* unfolds in the aftermath of the horrors unleashed by the Nazi regime and ends around the time Europe was undergoing another dramatic change in 1989, the novel can be read as a testament of something inherently present in all of us, something that we, for lack of a better word, can call evil. Therefore, in *Black Dogs*, the protagonists' lives are inseparably connected to the 'great history' flowing all around them – June and Bernard, as a young and idealistic couple, start their productive lives as members of the Communist Party, after all – yet their destiny is inevitably shaped by something more intangible and (if we accept June's perspective) much *older* than the 20th Century's historical experience.

In *Black Dogs* we are presented, piece by piece, with a story of how June and Bernard met, fell in love, married, went on a honeymoon/humanitarian trip to Europe where June experienced threatening and life–changing moment and, eventually, how they discovered that they can no longer live together due to their opposing world–views. Everything we learn, we learn from Jeremy's interviews with both of them several decades after their separation: in the first section (after the Preface) we meet Bernard, now an ex–member of the Communist Party of England, an elected MP and a social reformer, and June, who is dying from leukaemia at a nursing home. We meet Jeremy as well, because he is trying to write a memoir based on Bernard's and (especially) June's memories. Jeremy is fascinated by the couple's dramatic differences and is

determined to discover the reason why they were never able to reconcile, even though they loved each other their entire lives.

It is important to note that we are allowed to see only glimpses of their memories, or (if we talk about Part Four) that we are presented with a fictionalized version of their lives. To distinguish between the individual layers of June's and Bernard's competing perspectives is not easy at all, partly because they naturally have very different opinions of what had happened, and partly because we are viewing their life stories through a particular *filter*. In addition, Jeremy not only constructs versions of his parents-in-law's lives but during the process, he constructs his own identity as well. In that context postmodern influence is apparent here: to cite Linda Hutcheon's notion on 'historiographic metafiction':

> The narrativization of past events is not hidden; the events no longer seem to speak for themselves, but are shown to be consciously composed into a narrative, whose constructed – not found – order is imposed upon them, often overtly, by the narrating figure. The process of making stories out of chronicles, of constructing plots out of sequences, is what postmodern fiction underlines (66).

The postmodern claim that history must always be individual is indeed very convincing, yet the Woods's comment that the postmodern emphasis on subjectivity is nothing new because all of history is inevitably selective, is worth mentioning here (44). McEwan, having published *Black Dogs* in 1992, works with the postmodern concept of history as something *constructed* by the individual, but he extends the theme to include the global historical experience as well (Woods, Woods, 44).

5.2 The individual vs. history

All of the characters in *Black Dogs* share a view on history as something invented since they sometimes bend the facts quite deliberately. During one of Jeremy's visits to the nursing home, for instance, June finds it amusing to intentionally lead Jeremy astray when he ashamedly indicates an interest in her and Bernard's physical relationship. As a result, she enthusiastically submits a dramatic, and to Bernard, very favourable story of their first time. Nevertheless, later in the novel, during Jeremy's and Bernard's trip to Berlin to witness the fall of the Berlin Wall, we are presented with a completely different story told by infuriated Bernard. It is followed by his angry outburst:

> What was she doing, making that up? Cooking the books, that's what! Our first time was a disaster. She's rewritten it for the official version. It's the airbrush all over again [...]. I'll tell you this. My wife might have been interested in poetic truth, or spiritual truth, or even her private truth, but she didn't give a damn for *truth,* for the facts, for the kind of truth that two people could recognise independently of each other. She made patterns, she invented myths. Then she made the facts fit them. For God's sake, forget about sex. Here's your subject – how people like June bend the facts to fit their ideas instead of the other way round. Why do people do that? Why do they go on doing that? (86)

At the same time, he is more than willing to admit that in fact he is the same: when asked directly by Jeremy if he, as a member of the Communist Party, had ever bent any facts, Bernard simply answers, "Of course":

> What are those lines of Isaiah Berlin's that everybody quotes, especially these days, about the fatal quality of utopias. He says, if I know for certain how to bring humanity to peace, justice, happiness, boundless creativity, what price can be too high? To make this omelette there can be no limit on the eggs I might need to break. Knowing what I know, I wouldn't be doing my duty if I couldn't accept that thousands may have to die now so that millions can be happy for ever (88–89).

Of course, Bernard's words are deeply sarcastic and affected by a sense of bitterness and delusion (after all, he did leave the Party in 1956 after the Soviet invasion of Hungary), yet Jeremy's passionate accusation is to the point here:

> That's crap, Bernard! It's worse, it's malicious! You're a liar! [...] You never listened to what she was telling you. She wouldn't listen either. You accused each other of the same thing. She was no more of a hardliner than you are. Two softies! You loaded each other with your own guilt (90).

If we accept Jeremy's view, we can conclude that June's and Bernard's tragedy is not that they are too different but rather, that they are too similar; and although they indeed

can be seen as "rationalist" and "mystic", "commissar" and "yogi", "joiner" and "abstainer", "scientist" and "intuitionist", and, ultimately, "the extremities, the twin poles" (19), what unites them is their shared and determined quest for the *truth*, even though they have been looking for it in different places and they have both created their own different versions of it.

Nevertheless, as is characteristic for Ian McEwan's works, there is also a different story that over time became a family 'myth' of a kind, a single moment of crisis that forever changed June's and Bernard's lives. We learn the most important story of June's and Bernard's lives in Part Four, where we are presented with Jeremy's version of the events. For our purposes, it is worth summarizing: In the spring of 1956, June and Bernard set off on a honeymoon tour across France and Italy, with a vague idea to contribute somehow to this beautiful new world and to travel before they settle down in a normal married life. As they soon discover, the world is not that hungry for their help; therefore they decide to dedicate the remaining time entirely to travelling. During the trip to France's Gorge de la Vis, June is attacked by a pair of huge, black stray dogs while Bernard is admiring the local fauna; June is able to defend herself, but suffers a great shock as a result. During the attack, she also experiences the peculiar presence of some unknown entity. Later the day she is told a story about a widowed local woman who was harassed by the Gestapo and who, allegedly, was raped by the Gestapo's black dogs during a typically brutal interrogation. The story is rejected as pure gossip by Bernard, yet it affects June greatly and it slowly starts giving rise to her growing sense of unease. The couple continues their trip and in the evening reaches an old bergerie. There June feels a strange restlessness for a second time, yet she is sure that this is the place where she is supposed to be and, as a result, she buys the bergerie. In the following years, back in England, she gives birth to three of Bernard's children, leaves the Communist Party and grows more and more confident that the world is governed by invisible forces that cannot be tamed by mere human endeavours. Her relationship with Bernard steadily grows worse until the couple finally realizes that they simply cannot coexist; therefore June moves to the bergerie in France where she spends the rest of her productive days.

If we accept Jeremy's reconstruction of the events of 1956 and place June's encounter with the two black dogs in a larger historical picture, we can allow ourselves to perceive the ultimate image of two black dogs as deeply symbolic (after all, we should not forget to mention the scene of the brutal fight when Jeremy is stopped with

the words ”Ça suffit!”, which curiously, are the same words that June uses to calm down the dogs at the Gorge de la Vis). In that reading, *Black Dogs* become an embodiment of something old and feral that is inherent to all of us and that can manifest itself anytime and anywhere; in Jeremy's words:

> June told me that throughout her life she sometimes used to see them, really see them, in the retina in the giddy seconds before sleep. They are running down the path into the Gorge of the Vis, the bigger one trailing blood on the white stones. They are crossing the shadow line and going deeper where the sun never reaches [...]; and as sleep rolls in they are receding from her, black stains in the grey of the dawn, fading as they move into the foothills of the mountains from where they will return to haunt us, somewhere in Europe, in another time (173–174).

Nevertheless, it is up to us if we side with Bernard and interpret June's black dogs as symptoms of depression or if we accept June's perspective and see them as incarnations or spirits: or, if we, together with Jeremy, use them to provide "symbolic continuity and a sense of suspense" (Woods, Woods, 46) for the reader. They can still can show us the advantages and limitations of *stories* as a means of understanding (and creating) the world around us.

5.3 The narrator

However, there is another dimension in *Black Dogs* on which we have just barely touched, and that is the credibility of the narrator. It was already mentioned that we are allowed to see June's and Bernard's life–changing trip to Europe only second–hand, through the eyes of Jeremy. Due to the fact that the novel is narrated in the first person, we are naturally presented with Jeremy's perspective, yet, as Dominic Head points out, so much of the novel invites us to question Jeremy's trustworthiness and as such, we should be very careful (109). As already hinted, if we want to understand the narrator better, we should go back to the beginning and start with the narrator's Preface, where Jeremy intentionally establishes himself as an orphaned and emotionally deprived teenager who desperately seeks parents:

> Ever since I lost mine in a road accident when I was eight, I have had my eye on other people's parents. This was particularly true during my teens

> when many of my friends were casting off their own folk, and I did rather well in a lonely, hand–me–down way (9).

In Jeremy's words, we can notice a distant echo of McEwan's early juvenile characters, who were growing up with little or no parental control at all (see McEwan's first short story collection *First Love, Last Rites* or his novella *The Cement Garden*), yet what is new is Jeremy's confession that he "missed [his] parents terribly" (14). His later cuckoo–like interest in Bernard's and June's life stories can therefore be attributed to his loneliness during his formative years; however, what we learn about his little niece Sally is even more interesting:

> My protégée and intimate in this unhappy household was my three–year–old niece, Sally, Jean's only child. The rages and reconciliations that surged up and down the big apartment – Jean had inherited half the estate; my half was held in trust – tended to sweep Sally aside. Naturally, I identified with an abandoned child and so we holed up nicely from time to time in a large room, and a tiny kitchen we used whenever the savagery beyond made us not want to show our faces (9).

Jeremy admits that it was Sally who made him feel at home and "rooted", yet at the same time he emphasizes that he couldn't stayed with her at that time. To quote Jeremy's memory of his departure to Oxford:

> [...] I was free. But Sally's dogged, suspicious questions as she tracked me backwards and forwards between our room and the pavement were an indictment of betrayal. 'Where are you going? Why are you going? When are you coming back?' To this last, sensing my evasiveness, my clotted silence, she returned again and again. And when she thought to lure me back, to divert me from a History degree with the suggestion, so pertly, so optimistically put, that we play instead, Sailing to a New Place, I put down my armful of books and ran out to the van to sit in the passenger seat and weep. I thought I knew only too well how she felt [...] (17).

As Jeremy admits, the emotional emptiness and feelings of not belonging anywhere, brought to life by his guilt, comes to an end with his marriage to Jenny Tremaine: "My

existence began. Love, to borrow Sylvia Plath's phrase, set me going. I came to life for good, or rather, life came to me" (18). By establishing his own family, he is finally able to *belong* and fill the emotional void that has been with him since childhood. Sally, as he asserts in the Preface, does not have a place in his adult life, yet we learn in Part Two that the two of them continue to be in touch in a way:

> Sally was the most likely caller. She had come to live with us twice, and the strain on family life had been too great for us to keep her. Several years before, at the age of twenty–one, she had married a man who had beaten her and left her with a child. Two years later, Sally had been found unfit, too violent, to care for her little boy who was now with foster parents [...] Her mother, Jean, was dead and Sally counted on us for affection and support. She never asked for money (68).

Jeremy's confession that "[he] could never rid [himself] of the idea that her unhappy life was his responsibility" (68) suggests the depth of his emotional damage, and although he is scarcely to blame for Sally's destiny, he did leave her with her irresponsible and violent parents. As Head reminds us, the role of the Preface is clearly to set the stage for the events to come "where the theme of cruelty and individual suffering is magnified in the treatment of human evil and personal responsibility" (110); therefore, this little act of (albeit unintentional) cruelty can be understood as another occurrence of the "black dogs"' phenomenon.

The doubts concerning Jeremy's trustworthiness – already shaken by his recollections showing his emotional damage and suppressed guilt – are further amplified in one of the novel's most powerful scenes: two years after June's death, when returning from a Berlin trip in 1989, Jeremy visits the family's bergerie and there he experiences his own revelation of a kind. As soon as he opens the door, he cannot help but feel June's presence; and that feeling strengthens gradually. Then, when walking through a darkened kitchen, he can sense a presence of something *wrong*, something *dangerous*. Due to his sharpened sense of perception, he is able to identify the danger and avoid being stung by a scorpion that is resting on the cupboard.

What follows is a passionate debate that unfolds in Jeremy's mind: was it really June who had warned him against this dangerous arachnid? Did she protect him by sharpening his senses and thus enabling him to locate the scorpion? Or was it simply

a subliminal reaction? The competing sides of religion and science are personified by June's and Bernard's 'ghosts', which fight for Jeremy's attention in his imagination; yet Jeremy is unable to take any particular side and thus, he remains undecided.

However, at this point of story, we can notice a 'gap': although in 1989, June had been dead for two years, Bernard is still very much alive (and Jeremy sent him to England only several days ago). If we presume that the novel's content is, in essence, Jeremy's memoirs, and that Jeremy in the Preface addresses Bernard's 'ghost' ("It is my hope that June's ghost, and Bernard's too – if some essence of his consciousness, against all his convictions, persists – will forgive me" (21)), we can conclude that Jeremy is using the facts in his own way and writing a memoir for the future.

Our growing suspicion that it is "Jeremy's personal quest for meaning [which] is the book's focus, rather than the war of ideas embodied in the ideological standoff of his parents–in–law" (Head, 113) can be confirmed in the Preface already:

> In conversations with [June and Bernard] over several years, I discovered that the emotional void, the feeling of belonging nowhere and to no one that had afflicted me between the ages of eight and thirty–seven had an important intellectual consequence: I had no attachments, I believed in nothing. It was not that I was doubter, or that I had armed myself with the useful scepticism of a rational curiosity, or that I saw all arguments from all sides; there was simply no good cause, no enduring principle, no fundamental idea with which I could identify, no transcendent entity whose existence I could truthfully, passionately or quietly assert (18).

In that sense, Jeremy's narrative unreliability, triggered by both his emotional issues and spiritual longings, complicates the trustworthiness of *Black Dogs* as a fictional memoir, but at the same time it emphasizes the importance of a personal identity. Jeremy's struggle to accept his past without suppressing will probably be a life–long journey, yet, as we have seen, it is immensely important to *remember*. And in the same way that *Black Dogs* encourages us to re–read the story and fill in the blank spaces, we should always bear in mind the bad things that happened. The titular *Black Dogs* will probably return again – in another time, in another place – so the least we can do is *remember* them and, hopefully, act better in the future.

6 Enduring Love

In a way, *Enduring Love* can be understood as another milestone in Ian McEwan's writing: although that he had been showing interest in the questions of knowledge from an early point of his career (Malcolm, 157), it is in *Enduring Love* that he, for the first time, fully explored the theme of science and scientific thinking. In *The Child In Time* we saw Thelma, longing for a scientific explanation of a poetic experience, and Stephen, experiencing an encounter with the relative nature of reality; in *Black Dogs,* we were confronted with two radically opposing world views and invited to interpret them according to our tastes; nevertheless, in *Enduring Love,* science and scientific thinking becomes a central theme, something that is not only important to the characters, but constitutes a foundational aspect of the narration as well.

Enduring Love can be understood as a particular "quest" for meaning in the chaos of different possibilities. It is notable that McEwan works here with the concept of inventing and re–inventing reality, an idea already discerned in *Black Dogs* already, and which is broadened further in his masterpiece, *Atonement.*

In fact, *Enduring Love* can be said to foreshadow *Atonement* in more than one way. Similar to *Atonement*'s Briony Tallis, Joe Rose attempts to find meaning in meaningless, to restore order in disorder; and, also similar to Briony, he is confronted with a difficult situation; he fails and subsequently, must deal with the consequences. Naturally, such tactics are not unknown to McEwan, yet in *Enduring Love* (and especially later in *Atonement*) this guilt becomes the fundamental motivation for the given character.

Although it is possible to notice traces of the thriller or crime story in *Enduring Love* (Malcolm, 161), the novel's focus is still on the characters' psychology; and even though the novel can somewhat be read as a case study of an obsession, it is Joe the narrator who remains the most important character in *Enduring Love*. In a way, *Enduring Love* is fully rooted in the tradition of the psychological love story (Malcolm, 162). However, although it does contain many elements usually present in traditional novels (a chronological, linear narration, a rare occurrence of retrospective scenes, a first-person narrator, an epilogue, etc.), there is also a substantial number of elements typical in postmodern fiction.

The following chapter will attempt to analyze the concept of interpretation in *Enduring Love,* with respect to the postmodern approach to storytelling. *Enduring Love*

can be read as an individual's quest for meaning: the focus of this chapter will be on Joe's perspective.

6.1 Interpreting stories in the postmodern world

In *Enduring Love,* we enter the scene straight away:

> The beginning is simple to mark. We were in sunlight under a turkey oak, partly protected from a strong, dusty wind. I was kneeling on the grass with a corkscrew in my hand, and Clarissa was passing me the bottle – a 1987 Daumas Gassac. This was the moment, this was the pinprick on the time map: I was stretching out my hand, and as the cool neck and the black foil touched my palm, we heard a man's shout (1).

As we learn later, the moment, the "pinprick on the time map", this time takes the form of a man dying during an attempt to rescue a boy trapped inside of a hot–air balloon. Consequently, the ballooning incident becomes life–changing for Joe Rose (the novel's narrator), his partner Clarissa and, last but not least, a young man named Jed Parry. Naturally, the extreme experience influences all involved; but while Joe suffers from a guilty conscience as a result, in Parry, the incident triggers a psychological disturbance known as de Clérambault's Syndrome, a form of obsessive erotomania focused on a socially superior person.

The suspenseful opening provides the reader with a good deal of insight into the nature of Joe's character (who will be discussed in the second part of this chapter), and although it is possible to criticize *Enduring Love* for being overly schematic (Malcolm, 158), the opening of that novel should still be appreciated for its evocative qualities. At this point, it could be fruitful to include McEwan's quote on the nature of novel writing:

> I think of novels in architectural terms. You have to enter at the gate, and this gate must be constructed in such a way that the reader has immediate confidence in the strength of the building ("Ian McEwan": Interview by Dwight Garner).

In *Enduring Love*, the building is constructed upon the foundation of three competing principles: the rational, the emotional and the religious; a similar layout, as was already mentioned, is to be found in *Black Dogs*, yet *Enduring Love* empowers the importance of knowledge and *thinking* in general and, at the same time, establishes a base for even

deeper submergence into the characters' psychology (or perhaps it's better to say, the *opposite sides* of individual psyches).

The competitive voices in *Enduring Love* are embodied by Joe Rose, a former scientist and a currently well–known populariser of science; Joe's partner Clarissa, a scholar and a passionate admirer of Keats; and Jed Parry, a lonely and fanatical Christian. Such a situation is perfectly in harmony with the notion of a postmodern world governed by tolerance for individual "language games" (see The postmodern influence): that is, small local narratives that may differ, but must be considered equal. What is more, in the postmodern world, even formerly non–narrative perspectives must adopt the narrative's point of view, to "play by the rules of the narrative game" (Lyotard, 28). To quote John Docker:

> In the postmodern age we no longer have a positivistic science that claims to know the truth; rather, science, as in the new quantum mechanics associated with Chaos Theory, now tells stories, competing stories, as in any other areas of knowledge (109).

In other words, in the postmodern era, even science must talk in narrative language – and Joe knows that very well. In fact, telling stories is precisely what he does for living: when writing a piece about the seductiveness of anthropomorphic thinking in science, he has this observation on the nature of a story:

> What I liked here was how the power and attractions of narrative had clouded judgement. By any standards of scientific enquiry the story, however charming, was nonsense. No theory evinced, no terms defined, a meaningless sample of one, a laughable anthropomorphism (41).

In other words, *story* is uncovered as potentially very powerful, or even manipulating. In *Enduring Love*, *story* becomes an essential "tool", not only to Joe Rose but to Jed Parry as well. In the aftermath of the opening tragedy we witness the very birth of Parry's escalating obsession; in Joe Rose's words:

> Had I known what this glance meant to him at the time, and how he was to construe it later and build around it a mental life, I would not have been so warm (20).

As Joe says, “[e]verything, every gesture, every word [he] spoke was being stored away, gathered and piled, fuel for the long winter of [Parry’s] obsession” (21). In a way, Parry creates his own *story*, his own understanding of the world, but unfortunately, this story is destructive to everyone but him.

Luckily, not every story in *Enduring Love* has to be seen as harmful: after the incident, Joe and Clarissa seek comfort in telling stories to each other: “We tried to imagine it, the delivery of this empty car to the home in Oxford where Mrs Logan waited with her two children. But this was unbearable too, so we returned to our own stories” (29). In the intimate talk between two people, the redemptive ability of *story* is suggested: “Rather than follow the path that must lead us back to Logan, we told shivering and shaking stories, and as often happened in these talks, childhood was central” (34). Once again, one of McEwan’s long–standing themes (i.e. childhood) is brought to light here, but what is even more intriguing is the accentuation of an almost intimate relationship. After all, as Malcolm notes, the power of human love certainly constitutes one of the essential aspects of McEwan’s writing (156).

After the incident, the characters’ sense of inner peace is brutally shaken, and even though each of them reacts differently, they all share a common need to make a sense out of the experience. In that context, the conversation between Clarissa and Joe can be seen as symptomatic:

> ‘Yes,’ I said finally. ‘[John Logan] wanted to save that kid’ […]. ‘It must mean something,’ she said dully. I hesitated. I’d never liked this line of thinking. Logan’s death was pointless – that was part of the reason we were in shock. Good people sometimes suffered and died, not because their goodness was being tested, but precisely because there was nothing, no one, to test it […]. I was silent too long, for she added suddenly, ‘Don’t worry, Joe. I’m not going weird on you. I mean, how do we begin to make sense of this?’ I said, ‘We tried to help and we failed.’ (33)

In Clarissa’s and Joe’s opposing views there is possible to notice a distant echo of June and Bernard from *Black Dogs;* similar to June and Bernard, Joe and (especially) Clarissa stand for *ideas* rather than for full–fledged characters. For instance Clarissa, herself a person of emotion rather than of reason, has chosen Joe precisely for his rationality, yet she is still unable to accept the rational explanation for Logan’s death –

that is, it happened simply because bad things just happen sometimes. Her romantic belief in something surpassing the human experience then mirrors Joe's conviction that there is simply *nothing*: no answer, no explanation, no meaning at all. Joe's rational, modern thinking then clashes with Clarissa's irrational, postmodern perspective.

Since he sees the world as a place governed by reason, Joe simply does not have the capacity to fully comprehend the depth of Parry's irrational mania, and, as a result, he is unable to properly cope with the consequences. In that sense, Clarissa's final critique of the fact that he has failed to convey the seriousness of the situation to her is exceedingly accurate: although that in the end he justified his stand (and has proven Parry to be psychically ill), his relationship with Clarissa is broken and although he has ultimately succeeded in 'reading Parry's story' he still has failed to read Clarissa's. In that sense, the postmodern stance is established: the meaning has been lost in the process and what seemed to be winning might actually be losing in disguise.

6.2 Joe's personal 'quest for meaning'

As outlined above, the novel's focus is primarily on the narrator Joe Rose. But who exactly is Joe? It was already mentioned that he is a man of reason, a man who seeks logic and a rational background in everything; the problem, however, is that he has been confronted with a situation in which logic must inevitably fail. Therefore, his portrait is indelibly affected by the trauma he has experienced and subsequently shaped by his suppressed guilt. Constant reminders of his failure, which he tries to rationalize, haunt Joe:

> Someone said *me*, and then there was nothing to be gained by saying *us*. Mostly, we are good when it makes sense. A good society is one that makes sense of being good. Suddenly, hanging there below the basket, we were a bad society, we were disintegrating. Suddenly, the sensible choice was to look out for yourself. The child was not my child, and I was not going to die for it. The moment I glimpsed a body fall away – but whose? – and I felt the balloon lurch upwards, the matter was settled; altruism had no place. Being good made no sense. I let go and fell […] (15).

The question who was the first to let go of the rope, *whose* body Joe saw to fall away, becomes the embodiment of his anxiety and guilt as well as a hint for us that Joe may not be an objective and trustworthy narrator. The question becomes a haunting reminder

of Joe's (supposed) moral failure in a moment of crisis, and although he constantly attempts to scrutinize his memory in desperation ("And who was the first person? Not me. Not me. I even said the words aloud (55)"), we are never told clearly if it was him or not. The unanswered question as to whether is he deliberately repressing his memory or if he is simply unsure provides psychological depth to Joe's character and firmly establishes his status as a unreliable narrator.

Nevertheless, although we never learn the identity of the first person letting go of the rope, what is important is that *Joe perceives himself as the guilty party*. As Malcolm rightly remarks, self–examination and self–consciousness are indeed essential for Joe's narration (164). He constantly returns to his personal D–Day in his memories, and while re–telling the moments of – and after – Logan's fall, he is engaging his analytic mind:

> Best to slow down. Let's give the half minute after John Logan's fall careful consideration. What occurred simultaneously or in quick succession, what was said, how we moved or failed to move, what I thought – these elements need to be separated out. So much followed from this incident, so much branching and subdivision began in those early moments, such pathways of love and hatred blazed from this starting position, that a little reflection, even pedantry, can only help me there. The best description of a reality does not need to mimic its velocity (17).

As he adds, "(w)hole books, whole research departments, are dedicated to the first half minute in the history of the universe" (17). Here, Joe is attempting to impose order upon chaos and to regain control over his own memories. Such an effort is naturally doomed from the start, but what is intriguing here is the connection to *The Child in Time.* In fact, what he is doing is *deliberately* bending his own experience of time to give himself the opportunity to analyse the moments immediately after the incident. Joe's intentionally decelerated time can be linked to the temporal distortion experienced by Stephen in *The Child in Time;* however, while Stephen is only experiencing the phenomenon of relative time, Joe is actually *creating* it himself. Therefore, it can be concluded that the concept of a different personal temporality in McEwan's fiction has truly evolved since *The Child in Time*.

In a sense, *thinking* is what defines Joe's narration. It is symptomatic that he narrates even his own mental struggle to find the right word to express his current mood:

> I couldn't find the word for what I felt. Unclean, contaminated, crazy, physical but somehow moral. It's clearly not true that without language there is no thought. I possessed a thought, a feeling, a sensation, and I was for its word. As guilt was to the past, so, what was it that stood in the same relation to the future? Foreboding. Anxiety about, distaste for the future. Guilt and foreboding, bound by a line from past to future, pivoting in the present – the only moment it could be experienced. It wasn't fear exactly. Fear was too focused, it had an object. Dread was too strong. Fear of the future. Apprehension then. Yes, there it was, approximately. It was apprehension (43).

Joe's tragedy lies in the fact that he is an intellectual. As someone who lives inside his mind, he is used to thinking all the time; however, after the incident, his mind has problems to deal with the trauma in a rational manner ("Don't leave me here with my mind (58)"). He is desperately trying to make sense of the situation in his own way, but instead he is forced to observe the disintegration not only of his mental state, but of his relationship with Clarissa as well. Joe is well aware that Clarissa can help him find the redemption he seeks; he even attempts to adopt her perspective in Chapter Nine ("It would make more sense of Clarissa's return to tell it from her point of view. Or at least, from that point as I later constructed it (79)"). The redemptive quality of love is once again suggested here because in the end, Joe is able to persuade Clarissa that Jed Parry is indeed a dangerous individual (it is symptomatic that Clarissa blames Joe for 'inventing' Jed Parry). However, although Joe's perspective has been justified and he has been able to prove his point, we still cannot say for sure because in the end there is that significant question mark: were Joe and Clarissa finally able to re–establish the link between them? We are told that the two of them have adopted a child, but were they able to interpret their own stories once again? This we shall never know; paradoxically, it is perfectly possible that the only happy ending for any of the characters in *Enduring Love* is Jed Parry, whom we encounter again at the end of the novel, having been institutionalized for three years, considered incurable, and dwelling in his own mania and delusions.

7 Amsterdam

The publication of *Amsterdam* in 1998 was tainted by its somewhat mixed legacy: on the one hand it was precisely this novella which brought McEwan his first – and to date only – Man Booker Prize. On the other hand it is, as often agreed, noticeably lightweight or, simply, not the best work that he has written (David Malcolm offers a summary of reviews accompanying the *Amsterdam's* publication that, given the novella's interest in the press, is worth mentioning here: The Guardian (5 September 1998), the Daily Express (12 September 1998), the Independent (13 September 1998), the Daily Telegraph (19 September 1998), the Sunday Telegraph (13 September 1998) and the Sunday Times (13 September 1998) see the novel as good; the Mail (13 September 1998), The Times (19 September 1998), the Daily Mail (9 October 1998) and the Spectator (12 September 1998) however disagree: in Malcolm, 190). Nevertheless, as Peter Childs points out, although *Amsterdam* is surely not one of McEwan's best works, it is also one of his first works in the genre of satire, a novel that can be read and enjoyed as pure black comedy (166–67).

While it is possible to agree that *Amsterdam* differs significantly from McEwan's previous works, at the same time it should be remembered that some of his recurrent themes are to be found here as well. The issue of transvestism, for instance, refers back to McEwan's novels *The Cement Garden* and *The Comfort of Strangers,* or even to one of his early stories, 'Disguises', which was published in a collection *First Love, Last Rites.* The repressive Conservative government, embodied by then Foreign Secretary Julian Garmony in *Amsterdam*, can remind the reader of the nameless, Thatcher–esque Prime Minister from *Child In Time,* as well.

Amsterdam, with it omniscient narrator and a linear, chronological narration that is only rarely interrupted with moments of foreboding, evokes the Nineteenth– and Twentieth–Century novelistic tradition (Malcolm, 191). The narrative voice in *Amsterdam* fluctuates between an ironic tone and an explicit critique, and the way it addresses an issue of morality echoes the works of E.M. Forster or Joseph Conrad (Head, 152); however, as Head does not forget to mention, it also balances on the edge of parody (152).

A unifying thematic element in *Amsterdam* is *absence*: an absence of substance, of personality, of originality. Thus, the following chapter will offer a certain 'portrait' of absence in *Amsterdam*, on both the personal and social level.

7.1 Absence of personality

In *Amsterdam,* we witness two old friends, Vernon Halliday and Clive Linley, meeting at the funeral of their mutual ex–lover Molly Lane. Molly, once a beautiful, intelligent and unconventional woman, fell victim to a rapid degenerative disease that ultimately deprived her of her mental powers. This single moment unleashes a circle of escalating events leading to a tragic, yet comically exaggerated, end.

With its roots firmly planted in the tradition of the psychological novel (Macolm, 192), *Amsterdam* follows not only Vernon's and Clive's experience, but the experience of the whole generation:

> He looked around at his fellow mourners now, many of them his own age, Molly's age, to within a year or two. How prosperous, how influential, how they had flourished under a government they had despised for almost seventeen years. *Talking 'bout my generation.* Such energy, such luck. Nurtured in the postwar settlement with the state's own milk and juice, and then sustained by their parents' tentative, innocent prosperity, to come of age in full employment, new universities, bright paperback books, the Augustan age of rock and roll, affordable ideals. When the ladder crumbled behind them, when the state withdrew her tit and became a scold, they were already safe, they consolidated and settled down to forming this or that – taste, opinion, fortunes (17).

Clive's ironic indirect internal speech, quoted above, explicitly addresses the experience of the post–war generation that, although having never experienced World War II first–hand, has grown up in a prosperity and sufficiency and, subsequently, despite that the fact that some of that post–war generation harshly criticized Conservative rule, they also later "established themselves in such a way as to make them the beneficiaries of the very policies they had decried" (Head, 145). Clive's thought's can thus be related to the obvious paradox of the 'Thatcher–Major' era (Head, 145) – that it was precisely this era that set the stage for a renaissance in British fiction; and in a way, it suggests Vernon's and Clive's problem.

Although both of them are professionals who have earned a great deal of respect in their individual careers, they both feel that their lives are somewhat inadequate. For

Clive, the confrontation with Molly's death has made him face his own fear and mortality:

> In bed at last, lying on his back in total darkness, taut, resonating from mental effort, he saw jagged rods of primary color streak across his retina, then fold and writhe into sunbursts. His feet were icy; his arms and chest were hot. Anxieties about work transmuted into the baser metal of simple night fear; illness and death, abstractions that soon found their focus in the sensation he still felt in his hand. It was cold and inflexible and prickly, as thought he had been sitting on it for half an hour. He massaged it with his right hand and nursed it against the warmth of his stomach. Wasn't this the kind of sensation Molly had when she went to hail that cab by the Dorchester? (27)

These emotions manifest themselves physically; Clive experiences pain in his left hand (a crucial matter for a music composer). Vernon's feelings after Molly's funeral are even more intense:

> The thought recurred to Vernon Halliday during an uncharacteristic lull in his morning that he might not exist. For thirty uninterrupted second, he had been sitting at his desk gently palpating his head with his fingertips and worrying [...]. He was simply the sum of all people who had listened to him, and when he was alone, he was nothing at all. When he reached, in solitude, for a thought, there was no one there to think it [...]. This sense of absence had been growing since Molly's funeral. It was wearing into him. Last night he had woken beside his sleeping wife and had to touch his own face to be assured he remained a physical entity (31).

If we realize Vernon's position as a chief editor then we can understand the horror of such a situation – because what could be more terrifying for a journalist than being deprived of his *mental faculties*? Vernon's feeling of inner absence and Clive's physical symptoms can be interpreted as displays of performance anxiety, and again, can be related to the whole generation of the "young men of the 1960s who have made good and become respectable in the 1980s and 1990s" (Malcolm, 193). Therefore, it is possible to see Vernon and Clive (or other *Amsterdam* characters) as social archetypes

rather than fully–fledged characters, as professionals defined by their hunger for acclaim and recognition rather than people with any actual personality.

7.2 Absence of originality

If we agree that it is possible to understand Vernon and Clive as mere representatives of their generation, we should not also forget to mention the futility of their endeavours. Clive, a respected musical composer, has been commissioned to compose a symphony for the new millennium; therefore he spends his days and nights either in desperate stagnancy or frenetic activity. However, composing the symphony that would persuade anyone of Clive's genius is still beyond his grasp, as he realizes during a trip to the Lake District:

> Occasionally, as the train gathered speed and they swung farther away from London, countryside appeared and with it the beginnings of beauty, or the memory of it, until seconds later it dissolved into a river straightened to a hedges or trees […] As far as the welfare of every living form on earth was concerned, the human project was not just a failure, it was a mistake from the very beginning (58)

Vernon longs to be remembered as much as Clive, but his motivation is not only professional but personal as well: when he gains access to pictures of Foreign Secretary Garmony dressed as a drag queen, Vernon decides to publish them in his unsuccessful newspapers in order to boost flagging sales and, at the same time, to take revenge on a hated rival (Julian Garmony is another of Molly's ex–lover). However, his plan is foiled by a clever plot of Garmony's wife who is able to manipulate the press and, by publishing the photos first, turning the public opinion her way.

The creative crisis of Clive and Vernon's vain attempt to earn journalistic fame (Garmony, as a promoter of hateful and racist politics, is widely despised) can again be linked to the zeitgeist of a whole generation that, as it is implied, suffers from a lack of fresh or original impulses. In that context, it is worth mentioning Christina Byrnes's claim that Clive and Vernon are displaying symptoms of syphilis, potentially contracted by Molly (in Head, 151). Such an interpretation may seem rather imposed; however, it does suggest an important aspect of *Amsterdam*: that the whole generation is, metaphorically speaking, *ill*. The personal and the public merges again, as it has in many of Ian McEwan's preceding works.

7.3 Absence of the moral

The metaphorical illness of Clive's and Vernon's generation is most noticeable in their lack of moral values. In *Amsterdam*, both Clive's and Vernon's morality is tested; both of them, however, fail spectacularly. Vernon Halliday's ethically dubious decision to ruin the life of an individual for profit (no matter what negative qualities the individual might have) is affected by his personal antipathy; Clive Linley's selfish ignorance of a woman in distress is caused by his narcissistic preference of his work over the life of a human being.

As Head reminds us, with the characters of Clive and Vernon, McEwan criticizes the arrogance of the professional elite (146). For that reason, the characters are depicted as almost two–dimensional: for instance, Clive's decision not to help a woman fighting a rapist is almost entirely predictable (Head, 152) since his character is defined by self–interest and a certain social incompetence. In a similar fashion, Vernon has no choice but to capitulate to his own amorality and, as a result, to suffer the fate of an excruciating public humiliation. The 'amoral inevitability of pure geometry' (Head, 148) is thus also a reason why Vernon's and Clive's mutual destruction can be anticipated: once the word 'euthanasia' is spoken in relation to Halliday, then Linley's fate is sealed as well. To quote Dominic Head, their final double–murder is "a consequence of the collapse of personality under the sign of enclosed professionalism (148)".

8 Atonement

Atonement, having been published in 2001, can quite possibly be called Ian McEwan's most mature novel to date; in a way, it is comprised of many the elements present in previous McEwan's fiction. There is a powerful scene that, once again, turns the lives of people involved upside down and subsequently changing their lives forever. There is a child confronted with the adult world prematurely, a theme frequent in McEwan's fiction from the very beginning of his career (see *First Love, Last Rites, The Cement Garden* or *The Child In Time*, for instance). There is a central question of morality, a question of whether we are responsible for misdeeds we have committed out of ignorance (see *The Innocent* or *Amsterdam*, for instance), and, subsequently, the issue of guilt and the way it can affect our understanding (see *Enduring Love*). There is also the theme of the human mind and its capacity to create memories (see *Black Dogs)*; and finally, a central theme of *love*. *Atonement,* at least partly, can be read as a chronicle of one big, fated love, a love capable of moving mountains. It can also be read as a picture of a life-long quest for self-forgiveness and forgiveness of the people you care about; and, last but not least, it is possible to see it as a certain declaration of love to *literature* or, in a narrow sense, to *storytelling* itself.

In *Atonement,* the private is confronted with the public once again. As Head mentions, "McEwan's portrayal of the retreat from Dunkirk as a hellish ordeal puts a different perspective on a historical event usually viewed, through a patriotic lens, as a rescue of heroic proportions (8)". According to Head, McEwan confronts the engineering of a national myth in order to invoke different kind of myth, namely, the construction of a literary tradition (156). This 'literary tradition' is then observable at different levels of *Atonement:* the novel itself is centred on an issue of individual perception and, subsequently, differing interpretation. The act of narrating is accentuated as the characters frequently discuss or quote various literary sources, as well. Once again, McEwan works here with the concept of re-inventing reality, already present in *Black Dogs* and, later, in *Enduring Love*.

8.1 Briony's emerging conscience

In *Atonement*, everything is set into action by a thirteen-year-old Briony witnessing a scene which she does not understand, and which includes her older sister, Cecilia,

throwing herself into their garden's fountain without any apparent reason. There is only one other person present, and that is Robbie Turner. However, Briony misinterprets the sexual tension between the young people and devises a "story", which has tragic consequences for all three of them.

In an interview with Michael Silverblatt, McEwan describes *Atonement* as a "story about storytelling itself" (an interview with Michael Silverblatt, *Bookworm*). The self-conscious nature of *Atonement* is already suggested in the character of Briony: in Chapter One, we meet the thirteen-year-old Briony in the process of adapting her play *The Trials of Arabella.* The novel opens with a description of the play,

> for which Briony had designed the posters, programmes and tickets, constructed the sales booth out of the folding screen tipped on its side, and lined the collecting box in red crêpe paper, was written by her in a two day tempest of composition, causing her to miss a breakfast and a lunch (1).

At this point, we know nothing about Briony, except she might seem to be a little bit 'obsessed'. As Finney notes, the important thing here is that we are being presented with Briony's literary imagination before we get a chance to explore her personality (70).

The thirteen-year-old Briony is described as an aspiring writer, someone who, while being right on the cusp of entering young adulthood, "possess[es]a strange mind and a facility with words" (6). We enter the story at the point when it becomes clear that Briony's fascination with literature in no longer a mere interest but something of her very own. Being practically an only child, the "baby of the family" (6)", Briony is used to spending time alone, with her imagination as a constant companion; at the same time, she is well aware that if she wants the attention of the adults, she must earn it. She asserts that she wrote *The Trials of Arabella* with the intent of persuading her older brother to finally marry and settle down (because Arabella is rewarded with a wedding at the end of the play, naturally). Briony's fantasies about Leon's reaction are certainly not lacking in the type exaggeration so common with children:

> [I]n another (fantasy), there he was, cocktail in hand at some fashionable city watering hole, overheard boasting to a group of friends: Yes my younger sister, Briony Tallis the writer, you must surely have heard of her (4).

Nevertheless, they also serve to suggest how ambitious Briony might be and how serious she is about literature.

Young Briony's hunger for literature is depicted in a significant detail:

> […] Briony could not have been held back from her writing. In any case, she was discovering, as had many writers before her, that not all recognition is helpful […]. She was on course now, and had found satisfaction on other levels; writing stories not only involved secrecy, it also gave her all the pleasures of miniaturisation. A world could be made in five pages, and one that was more pleasing than a model farm. The childhood of a spoiled prince could be framed within half a page, a moonlit dash through sleepy villages was one rhythmically emphatic sentence, falling in love could be achieved in a single word - a *glance* (7).

Briony's need for order, as well as her fascination with the process of storytelling, can be seen as a kind of manipulation. During the rehearsals of *The Trials of Arabella*, Briony desperately wants the part of Arabella, yet she is outmanoeuvred by her cousin Lola. Lola, having been older than Briony, uses strategy that exceeds Briony's experience and is thus awarded with Arabella's part. The notion of a relationship (or indeed, any interaction between two people) as a certain 'battlefield' is frequent in Ian McEwan's fiction; in *Atonement,* it sets the base for Briony's 'sin' which she will spend the rest of her life trying to atone for.

The world, as seen through Briony's eyes, is a place where everything has a *meaning:* therefore, in Briony's imagination, it only takes one swift look and love is invoked. What is more, she is starting to realize that her mind is capable of *generating* meanings:

> [A]nd when she did crook it finally, the action seemed to start in the finger itself, not is some part of her mind. When did it know to move, when did she know to move it? […]There was no stitching, no seam, and yet she knew that behind the smooth continuous fabric was the real self - was it her soul? - which took the decision to cease pretending, and gave the final command (36).

Briony's perspective, as it is possible to notice (and as we learn later) is affected by the modernist sensibility. She wonders at the miracle behind something so simple as a movement: how is it even possible that her body can move without any apparent stimulus? "The mystery", as she realizes with fascination, "was in the instant before it moved, the dividing moment between not moving and moving, when her intention took effect. It was like a wave breaking "(both 35).

In fact, Briony's account, as Finney mentions, is inspired by her literary 'idol' Virginia Woolf (72). Woolf's literary technique, which involved using the mind to generate sensations in order to make the things perceived both present and 'alive' (Hilský, 3), is being beautifully explored by Briony:

> [A]second though always followed the first, one mystery bred another: was everyone else really as alive as she was? Was being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony? Did her sister also have a real self concealed behind a breaking wave, and did she spend time thinking about it, with a finger held up to her face? Did everybody, including her father, Betty, Hardman? If the answer was yes, then the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated, with two billion voices, and everyone's thoughts striving in equal importance and everyone's claim on life as intense, and everyone thinking they were unique, when no one was (36).

What is peculiar in Briony's thoughts is the mixture of childlike and adult perspectives. The world for her is clearly a source of wonders; yet, in her wonderment, there is also the burgeoning knowledge that everything is immensely complex. This realization, although being inseparably connected to the process of maturation, is extremely painful and difficult: and it was Cecilia's and Robbie's tragedy that Briony was confronted with the fountain scene precisely at this point of her life.

8.2 Briony as a storyteller

Briony's account on the events that led to Lola's rape and, subsequently, to Briony's false accusation of Robbie, is later revealed as fictional. As we learn at the very end of the novel, the book we have just read was written by an elderly Briony in order to come to terms with her past and, last but not least, to write a different ending for Cecilia and Robbie. Such tactic provided McEwan with an opportunity to examine a child's mind

from an adult's perspective. In his words: "I didn't want to write about a child's mind with the limitations of a child's vocabulary or a child's point of view" (an interview with Michael Silverblatt, *Bookworm*). In a way, *Atonement* can be seen as a certain continuation of McEwan's early stories, often exploring the confrontations of children and adult perspective; however, while McEwan's early characters lacked life experience, Briony has the "understanding of a lifetime" (Finney, 72).

Briony's depiction of the central fountain scene is clearly affected by her young age:

> Closer, within the boundaries of the balustrade, were the rose gardens and, nearer still, the Triton fountain and standing by the basin's retaining wall was her sister, and right before her was Robby. There was something rather formal about the way he stood, feet apart, head held back. A proposal of marriage (38).

At that moment, Briony starts to construct her story. Meeting Robbie on the bridge later that day, his unfortunately graphic letter to Cecilia that Briony reads by mistake; in fact, what she is doing is creating a *plot* in her mind. We do not know it yet but at this point McEwan's stylistic virtuosity is at peak; as we learn later in the novel, Briony, now in her twenties, despises plots:

> What excited her about her achievement was its design, the pure geometry and the defining uncertainty which reflected, she thought, a modern sensibility. The age of clear answers was over. So was the age of characters and plots […] (281). She had read Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* three times and thought that a great transformation was being worked in human nature itself, and that only fiction, a new kind of fiction, could capture the essence of the change (282).

The fact that the older Briony - or 'Nurse Tallis' - is pictured reading Virginia Woolf, is one of McEwan's numerous literary nods to the reader in *Atonement*. Clarissa's name, for instance, alludes to Samuel Richardson's novel of the same name that is being discussed by her and Robbie. H. Auden's words "[i]n the nightmare of the dark, (a)ll the dogs of Europe bark" (190), quoted by Clarissa in her letter to Robbie, can remind us of the pair of black dogs from McEwan's eponymous novel, while at the same time, raising the issue of the terrors of war once again.

At the same time, as McEwan has admitted, Briony's fascination with modernistic sensitivity was partly a result of his desire to "enter the conversation with modernism" (an interview with Michael Silverblatt, *Bookworm*). Briony's first draft of what is to become *Atonement*, a story called *Two Figures by a Fountain,* is strongly influenced by Virginia Woolf's writing. "We found *Two Figures by a Fountain* arresting enough to read with a dedicated attention [...]", writes Cyril Conolly in his letter of refusal. "Something unique and unexplained is caught. However, we wondered whether it owed a little too much to the techniques of Mrs Woolf (312)". Indeed; Briony's lengthy paragraphs dedicated to the "clear light of a summer's morning" and the "sensations of a child standing at a window (282)", imply how guilty she feels about the crime she committed as a young girl. What she needs (and what she lacks, as she admits to herself) is a "backbone" (314). Ironically, the lack of "backbone" (that is, of the plot) is also something for which she is criticised by Cyril Conolly in his letter. Briony is well aware of that:

> What she needed, Briony told herself yet again, was backbone […]. The interminable pages about light and stone and water, a narrative split between three different points of view, the hovering stillness of nothing much seeming to happen – none of this could conceal her cowardice. Did she really think she could hide behind some borrowed notions of modern writing, and drown her guilt in a stream – three streams – of conscience? (320)

In other words, the storytelling of Briony at this point is motivated more by her guilt than by a desire for power. The lack fo courage she feels when walking to Lola's and Marshal's wedding and, later, to Cecilia's flat, is something she will very possibly never forgive herself for: the key, however, is to be found the following paragraph:

> Her secret torment and the public upheaval or warhad always seemed separate worlds, but now she understood how the war might compound her crime. The only conceivable solution would be for the past never to had happened (288).

By altering the past for Cecilia and Robbie, she is able to not only forgive herself but also allow these two people to have the lives that they were never given. In Briony's final beautiful words:

I like to think that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet. If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration…Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at the *The Trials of Arabella?* It's not impossible.

But now I must sleep (372).

9 Conclusion

In my thesis, I have introduced Ian McEwan in the context of both post World War Two British society and the British literature that accompanied it. Although Ian McEwan is often grouped together with others, the so-called *Granta* authors, he is at the same time generally perceived as a less postmodernist author than, let us say, Martin Amis or Julian Barnes. To introduce the concept of postmodernism, Jean–François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* is therefore used.

I have also pointed out a certain development in McEwan's oeuvre, starting with his inclusion of more reader-friendly themes in *The Child in Time* and especially in *The Innocent*. Concerning his style, it is possible to notice a gradual shift towards a more self-conscious fiction: the beginning of this process is possible to discern in *Black Dogs* and it becomes even more prominent in *Enduring Love;* and especially later in *Atonement*. However, despite the influence that postmodernist thinking has exerted over his writing, it is still possible to conclude that McEwan's fiction remains fully rooted in the tradition of the psychological novel.

McEwan lets his characters face critical situations and then explores the consequences in the aftermath of those situations. My aim was to provide an analysis of the critical moments on the lives of the characters: for that reason, I have decided to work with six of McEwan's novels, namely with *The Child in Time, The Innocent*, *Black Dogs, Enduring Love*, *Amsterdam* and, finally, *Atonement*. Thus, in the second, practical part of the thesis, I have included an analysis on the individual themes in the aforementioned novels.

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