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Ian McEwan: 'From the Dark Side to the Light of the Family Life, and  
Back to the Dark Side of the Society'

Master's Thesis

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I declare that I have worked independently on the thesis “Ian McEwan: 'From the Dark Side to the Light of the Family Life, and Back to the Dark Side of the Society'” using only the sources listed in the bibliography.

In Olomouc, 6. May 2024.

Bc. Karolína Crháková

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	4
2. The British Novel.....	6
3. Ian McEwan.....	8
3.1. Postmodernism in Ian McEwan’s work .....	10
4. The Analysis of Ian McEwan’s Works.....	15
4.1. Macabre Phase.....	16
4.1.1. The Unease and Suffering in <i>The Cement Garden</i> .....	17
4.1.2. A Strange Attraction in <i>The Comfort of Strangers</i> .....	27
4.1.3. Conclusion .....	32
4.2. Social Phase.....	34
4.2.1. A Search for a Child in <i>The Child in Time</i> .....	36
4.2.2. The Truthfulness in <i>Atonement</i> .....	43
4.2.3. Conclusion .....	50
4.3. Political Phase .....	51
4.3.1. Morality and Hypocrisy in <i>Amsterdam</i> .....	53
4.3.2. The Clash of Law and Religion in <i>The Children Act</i> .....	60
4.3.3. Conclusion .....	67
5. Conclusion .....	69
6. Resumé.....	72
7. Bibliography .....	76
8. Annotations.....	79
9. Anotace .....	81

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As members of society, we become engaged in conversations every day. A conversation within a certain group would include discussions about mainstream and acceptable topics according to our social norms to successfully fulfil our social obligations without making others uncomfortable. Even today, there are topics considered inappropriate and unacceptable for social discussions in the same way as they were considered inappropriate or taboo in the 1970s. One century later, society is still unprepared to include unconventional topics to protect our social status.

Ian McEwan, who now belongs to a group of well-known British writers gained his reputation through his early work, which was distinctively different in terms of themes and issues. His writing career started with works that included very unconventional and taboo topics for his time. Even though his writing underwent significant changes and developments, he never stopped urging us as a reader to stop and think about the life around us and reconsider our moral views. Later in his work, those highly controversial topics were replaced by political views and societal norms, still provoking thoughts, and reflection within his readers.

This thesis aims to demonstrate how his writing has changed, and what development and in which direction can be observed within his work. The themes of his works move from very uncomfortable and controversial topics to slightly lighter topics focusing on relationships and returning to the less comfortable views on society, their morals, the legal system and the consequences of our actions.

The opening chapter of the thesis covers the development of British literature during the twentieth century, starting mid-1970s. Beginning in 1975, moving forward through the years, related authors, and reaching twenty-first-century publications. This chapter will provide a cultural overview and an overview of authors and works related to the author and his works which will further be discussed in this thesis. A subchapter about Ian McEwan's life will be included to summarise his upbringing, family life, writings, and success. His works in connection to postmodernism.

The next chapter is devoted to analysing several chosen works, dividing the chapter into three smaller subchapters – Macabre Phase, Social Phase, and Political Phase – according to the time of the work's publications and topics and themes

relevant to connect those works. His early works, *The Cement Garden* and *The Comfort of Strangers* marked the beginning of his career and set off his reputation in the literary world. Their topics are heavy themes usually considered taboo and inappropriate. The second subchapter focuses on the change in his writing, showing the development forward to more socially focused topics. Emphasising relevant everyday life topics, we frequently come across as human beings. The second subchapter starts with *The Child in Time*, which presents the turning point in his style, followed by *Atonement*. Both works incorporate a little bit of the political situation, however, the main focus is on the inner feelings and relationships between people. The last subchapter of this part focuses on the political influence over people's morals in everyday decisions and the relationship between morals and law. In *Amsterdam* and *The Children Act* moral decisions are the main focus of the novels. Morals are connected to the political situation or law concerned with children's welfare.

The final chapter presents the findings of the three previous chapters on the author's work and presents them in one big conclusion of the separate analysis. Putting together the connection between analysed works, how the themes and impact changed according to periods and general movements and changes within the society and the political sphere.

## 2. THE BRITISH NOVEL

Trying to study, write and define contemporary British literature can be a challenging process. It is a field that is constantly evolving, developing, and producing new criticism as the years proceed. Thus, further, in the analysis of British literature, I will avoid the term *contemporary*, it can become very subjective depending on the point of view and defining the exact period becomes an issue that could lead to never-ending discussions about what years should and should not be included in the analysis.<sup>1</sup> However, the term *contemporary* usually refers to the immediate present, the moment a literary work is published it becomes a part of literary history and is a part of the canon. It can be potentially defined as a period from the 1970s until the present.<sup>2</sup> The analysis will include British fiction, starting from the mid-1970s and reaching the twenty-first-century mark, as this period is relevant to the author discussed later. The beginning year is being chosen for several reasons. The main reason is the election of Margaret Thatcher as the leader of the Conservative Party in 1975, furthermore, this year marks a changing period in British politics and connected social, cultural, and economic spheres. The division of Britain in the political sphere into the Right and Left Wings is fundamental for all three spheres that became the main topics. From the 1970s onwards several authors responded to those changes with their literary works – writing novels within contexts such as politics, class differences, sexuality and gender or the postcolonial period.<sup>3</sup>

However, British writers were not solely influenced by their political history, but also by international events that significantly impacted Britain. The Cold War, specifically the ongoing tension between capitalism and communism, raised concerns about the potential outbreak of another world war, casting a shadow over British culture. As a result, these international events became an important source of inspiration for British writers such as Graham Swift, J. G. Ballard, and Martin Amis. The Cold War ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall and a series of revolutions that spread across Europe. In Ian McEwan's novel *Black Dogs* (1992), the fall of the Berlin Wall marked the beginning of his exploration of violence in

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction* (London: Palgrave, 2018), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Nick Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction* (2008), 2-3.

the post-World War II era. Similarly, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) examines the impact of significant events during this period and the mixed reactions towards the events in Berlin in 1989. The most traumatic event that has been incorporated into literary works is the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The context of terrorism and political and ethical questions became a key feature in J. G. Ballard's novels. In his novel *Saturday* (2005), McEwan uses the context of 9/11 to describe an aeroplane on fire flying above London.<sup>4</sup>

Class and politics are closely interconnected. In Britain, the division between the Labour and the Conservative Parties was primarily based on social class. The Labour Party represented the interests of the working class, while the Conservatives appealed to the middle-class population. Based on economic status, society can be divided into three classes: the working, middle, and upper classes. These class divisions have their roots in the social issues of the 1930s, which were then carried over into a different world post-World War II. In the 1950s, there was a shift in how we can comprehend the concept of class, and it offered a new perspective for literary works. This shift moved the focus from economic terms to cultural ones, however, a reoccurring theme of a classless British society emerged during the 1950s. The Thatcherite government took responsibility for attempting to blur the lines between classes, providing a rich fiction source. Many successful writers including Kingsley and Martin Amis, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, and others have based their novels on working-class issues or set them in working-class environments. While the *working-class* novel was the primary source of British fiction from the 1950s onwards, it is also possible to identify and explain it better by considering other social categories such as gender and sexuality, ethnicity, or national identity.<sup>5</sup>

The feminist movement during the 1950s brought attention to the societal constructs of masculinity and femininity. It was widely accepted that these characteristics were shaped by society rather than innate traits. However, feminism was not a uniform movement and many factions emerged in the 1970s. In Britain, feminist writers and activists were closely linked to political and socialist movements where women's rights were considered part of a larger class struggle.

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<sup>4</sup> Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction* (2008), 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction* (2008), 8-11.

During a particular period, a literary movement emerged where many female writers focused on exploring feminist themes. However, there were some challenges with how women expressed themselves, which often resulted in their speech being dismissed as unimportant or lacking authority. As a result, some women took a different approach by adopting characteristics typically associated with masculinity. One such example is Margaret Thatcher, who openly disagreed with the main ideas of feminists in the 1970s. Despite being an atypical feminist figure, her masculine traits set her apart from conventional female figures.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. IAN MCEWAN

Ian McEwan, an acclaimed British writer, and screenwriter was born on June 21, 1948, in Aldershot, England. The formative years of his childhood were predominantly spent at military bases in England, Singapore, Libya, and other countries, owing to his father's service as an army officer. After returning to England, he attended a boarding school and earned a B.A. in English studies and an M.A. in creative writing at the University of East Anglia.<sup>7</sup> He is widely recognised in the literary world for his exceptional storytelling skills, intricate plots, and profound exploration of complex themes. McEwan's literary career began in the 1970s, and since then he has contributed significantly to the canon with numerous novels, short stories, and screenplays. His novels cover diverse topics, from scientific inquiry to moral considerations and the complexities inherent in human relationships.

McEwan's first three books – the short story collection *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) included works he had written during his master studies; the second book of short fiction *In Between the Sheets* (1978); and his first novel *The Cement Garden* (1978) – earned him a reputation of a distinguished storyteller, recognised for his masterful command of suspenseful narration, skilful use of imagery and nuanced characterisation. Some of his novels focus on domestic themes, such as the exploration of feelings of guilt and anger, after the abduction of a child in *The Child in Time* (1987). Other works touch slightly political topics as in *The Innocent* (1990) and *Sweet Tooth* (2012). Furthermore, certain narratives are set within a

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<sup>6</sup> Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction* (2008), 11-13.

<sup>7</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 1154.

contemporary context, such as the Booker Award-winning novel *Amsterdam* (1998), which delves into the subject of a euthanasia pact, or *Saturday* (2005) whose events unfold against the backdrop of shadows cast by the event of September 11, 2001. Additionally, more recent legal novels *The Children Act* (2014) and *Nutshell* (2016).<sup>8</sup> Among McEwan's notable literary contributions is the acclaimed work *Atonement* (2001), a novel that explores the profound themes of guilt, redemption, and the effects of the Second World War on both individuals and society. This novel was recognised by being shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2001 and subsequently adapted into an award-winning film. *Enduring Love* (1997) is another work that delves into the complexities of human relationships, particularly focusing on the thin line between love and obsession.

McEwan's writing style is characterised by his powerful prose, vivid imagery, and attention to detail. He has been praised for his ability to construct dynamic literary landscapes and complex characters that can deeply connect to the readers. His literary contribution has been recognised through various prestigious awards he has received. Adaptations of his literary works to the screen proved instrumental in the successful career of the talented scriptwriter. His prowess in screenwriting was evident in his contributions to the British movie and television industry, as well as in Hollywood.<sup>9</sup> Beyond writing, McEwan has been involved in various forms of advocacy, including environmentalism, and promoting human rights.

In the realm of success, public scrutiny is often an unwelcome companion. In 2006, the celebrated writer Ian McEwan faced allegations of plagiarism for a second time in his novel *Atonement*. McEwan acknowledged that he drew inspiration from the autobiography of the recently deceased writer Lucilla Andrews in crafting certain portions of his novel, *Atonement*. This admission came in the form of an Acknowledgment within the book itself. This accusation has raised a question about the relationship between history and fiction and how novelists incorporate historical material into their works.<sup>10</sup> McEwan the character of Briony and her point of view in Andrews's narrative points out that "Dunkirk or a wartime

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<sup>8</sup> Ramazani, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 1154.

<sup>9</sup> David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Sebastian Groes, *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 57-58.

hospital can be novelistically realised, but they cannot be re-invented.”<sup>11</sup> This is because writers of historical fiction rely on memoirs to ensure the accuracy of historical events.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.1. Postmodernism in Ian McEwan’s work

Postmodernism is one of the most prominent movements of the twentieth century. The most prominent year of “popular postmodernism” was during the 1990s, when many fiction, TV series and films adopted techniques typical for this movement. British writers such as Angela Carter, Ian McEwan, and Salman Rushdie embrace some of the energies coming from postmodernism, while Martin Amis, Will Self and J.G. Ballard use postmodern techniques in their work but are sceptical towards the “market-driven” culture.<sup>13</sup> Some of the typical forms that can be found in postmodern literature include intertextuality, self-reflexivity, metafiction, and unreliable narrators and those usually include themes related to historical or political issues.

How do we recognise postmodernism in the work? Some critics try to differentiate according to used narrative techniques – modernism has purpose, hierarchy, and depth while postmodernism includes play, anarchy, irony, or chance. However, foregrounding the nature of fiction and its relationship with other forms such as history and politics is among the most prominent features of postmodernism. Metafiction is used in postmodern texts, allowing the author to ask questions about the nature of reality.<sup>14</sup> Linda Hutcheon uses the term “historiographic metafiction” to refer to novels combining history and fiction. Those novels are “both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages.”<sup>15</sup> Postmodern novels are “deliberately fragmented, playful and experimental.”<sup>16</sup>

Ian McEwan is being influenced by postmodernism and its techniques, like many writers of the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> He is also a contemporary of Martin Amis, together they are considered the best-known yet the

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Groes, *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 58.

<sup>12</sup> Groes, *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 58.

<sup>13</sup> Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction* (2018), 14.

<sup>14</sup> Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction* (2018), 15-16.

<sup>15</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London; New York: Routledge, 1988), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Fiona Tolan, *New Directions Writing Post 1990* (London: York Press, 2010), 207.

<sup>17</sup> Lynn Wells, *Ian McEwan: New British Fiction* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 16.

most controversial contemporary British writers. Martin Amis is known just like his father for catching mores, concerns, and controversial mannerisms of the beginning of the 1970s with excellent accuracy.<sup>18</sup> Unlike many contemporaries, he is not unsettled and shocked by the political development in England. There are no better writers to look at if we want to see how differently this topic can be approached. McEwan's characters are less grotesque and more tragic, whose lives get disrupted by a tragic event.<sup>19</sup>

The political and social conditions become the subject of discussions, and many society-related issues are being addressed including issues of globalisation, multiculturalism, identities, experimenting with tradition, also gender, class ethnicity or sexuality is the topic too. Even though there is great diversity, many authors deal with the relationship between fiction and history or reality. They incorporate self-reflexive forms, historiographic metafiction, and intertextuality to deal the relationship between reality and fiction. The use of self-reflexive forms and metafictional writing devices are connected to the role of the author in the story.<sup>20</sup> The 1990s are regarded as the most popular postmodern period, according to Bentley it is a decade known for its "fascination with parody, pastiche, retroism, a knowing self-awareness of previous forms and its general scepticism towards grand narratives."<sup>21</sup> These tendencies affect other areas of cultural life not only literature.

McEwan's interests are at the beginning about obsessive behaviours, sex or moral corruption and later he becomes also interested in the relationship between fiction and reality.<sup>22</sup> *The Cement Garden* is not just a bizarre gothic tale<sup>23</sup> as it can

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Bradford, *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 12.

<sup>19</sup> Bradford, *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*, 36-38.

<sup>20</sup> Nick Bentley, *British Fiction of the 1990s* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-5.

<sup>21</sup> Bentley, *British Fiction of the 1990s* (2005), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Han and Wang, "Postmodern Strategies in Ian McEwan's Major Novels." *Advances in Literary Study* 2 (2014): 134.

<sup>23</sup> **Gothic literature** beginning in 1764 with Walpole's *The Castle of Ontario*, experienced a peak during the 1790s, continuing to its present-day alternations. The word "Gothic" has been used in many different contexts. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a combination of Gothic and Romance, later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it became preoccupied with issues of sexuality, gender, violence, and desire, drawing from Sigmund Freud. (Angela Wright, *Gothic Fiction: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 1-6.) The gothic in McEwan's novels work with a connection to psychological and crime fiction. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the genre was automatized but not fully acceptable in the literary hierarchy. McEwan like many of his contemporaries treats the genre with caution surrounding it with trivial things, a treatment that helps to refresh such an automatized genre. (Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 79-80.)

seem within the few first pages, but it is marked by “Freudianism”, the Oedipal complex with the death of the father. More importantly, McEwan raises the question of plausibility.<sup>24</sup> The novel deals with childhood, similarly to *The Child in Time*, but from a different perspective. Here the children are becoming adults except for Tom who regresses to the infantile stage, and not adults who regress into childhood. The children’s indifference to social norms is seen by Malcom as a metaphor for “a specifically British rejection of a sterile authoritarian and patriarchal past.”<sup>25</sup> Another issue treated is gender differences, we come across the patriarchal view and the enormous gap between men and women. This gender problem is also present in *The Comfort of Strangers*, where Mary embodies feminist views which are not welcomed by Robert. The topic itself is the most postmodern feature, the precise description of human perversion which leads to extreme violence and murder in the end. We read from the point of view of the characters, those are never shared. There is a sense of coolness towards events, separation, and a feeling of detachment the whole time.<sup>26</sup>

*The Child in Time* marks a change in McEwan’s work but still shares some features with his previous works from a different point of view. He deals with childhood and regression into it, the relativity of time, gender roles and a bit of science and politics are involved too. He himself admitted in an interview he was “aware of the danger that in trying to write more politically ... might exclude that rather exclusive element that is so important in fiction...”<sup>27</sup> He reacts to Thatcherite Britain and incorporates the political practices and behaviour of the society. More importantly, he is concerned with the public and private and how they intertwine. Everything is relative and nothing is sure in life, as portrayed through the search for a child, not only the lost child but also the one within us.

Barry in his chapter on postmodernism comments on the role of fragmentation:

For the postmodernist, by contrast, fragmentation is an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief. In a word, the

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<sup>24</sup> Bradford, *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*, 20.

<sup>25</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 65.

<sup>26</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 69.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Bradford, *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*, 37.

modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernist celebrates it.<sup>28</sup>

Ian McEwan in his work does not only focus on fragmentation and disorientation but includes many other themes such as guilt, class and gender differences, social pressure, and the past. We can experience the disorientation and fragmentation through the characters' points of view and how they deal with life events. The technique used in *Atonement* shows the typical metafictional narrative, readers get challenged with the fiction-within-fiction. The novel can be referred to as a "historiographic metafiction," McEwan mixes here fiction with history. Except for the fragmentation presented by the three main characters, we encounter many examples of intertextuality throughout the novel. The character of Robbie quotes several times from distinct works such as Malvolio's lines from *Twelfth Night* or Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." Another allusion is to an even earlier novel, Richardson's *Clarissa*. The main character of Briony's play *The Trials of Arabella*, Arabella is Clarissa's sister's name, this reference places the play within the tradition of sentimentality and sensationalism. McEwan uses these intertextual references and allusion in most of his works.<sup>29</sup>

In *Amsterdam*, disorientation influences the characters through their personal problems, when they suddenly lose the right direction in life. The lives of the two main characters Vernon Halliday and Clive Linley are influenced by their shared lover Molly Lane. They become occupied with their own thoughts, and feelings and start reflecting on life and creating a pact with unpredictable results. A similar process of thoughts can be found in *The Cement Garden*, in Jack's character who at some point rethinks his point of life not knowing what to do next. McEwan touches on another controversial topic Euthanasia<sup>30</sup> and the right to decide to leave the world under certain circumstances in this novel.

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<sup>28</sup> Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 2nd ed., (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 84.

<sup>29</sup> Brian Finney, "Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's 'Atonement,'" *Journal of Modern Literature* 27, no. 3 (Winter 2004): 72-73, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3831941>.

<sup>30</sup> Interestingly Ian McEwan chooses for his novel *Amsterdam* the capital city of the Netherlands, where euthanasia became legal in 2002. The Netherlands were the first country to legalise euthanasia and assisted suicide under very strict conditions. (Guardian Staff, "Euthanasia and assisted suicide laws around the world," *The Guardian*, July 17, 2014.)

The novel *The Children Act* presents to us a court case related yet again to the situation of children. A problematic relationship between religion, legal regulations but also adults' personal beliefs and decisions. McEwan again looks into the problems of public and private like in *The Child in Time*, here we look at the issues of authority and personal autonomy, the relationship between them and the consequences on the lives of others. The freedom to choose whatever religion we want, and what influences and clashes it can bring upon someone's life.

McEwan presents society's flaws and reflects on ethics through his characters. His novels are occupied with the realistic picture of situations we can come across in day-to-day life. Ian McEwan is an author who can write about something unnerving with such ease.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Bradford, *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*, 19.

#### 4. THE ANALYSIS OF IAN MCEWAN'S WORKS

Ian McEwan's earliest works, a short story collection *First, Love, Last Rites*, with his first longer work *In Between the Sheets* and *The Cement Garden*, earned him the nickname "Ian Macabre."<sup>32</sup> Those first publications helped establish his reputation as one of his generation's most controversial yet exciting writers. His career started in the mid-1970s, with works that showed a certain obsession with controversial or even taboo topics of that time, works that were concerned with "the perverse, the grotesque, the macabre." The incorporation of themes of sexual abuse, incest, sadistic moments, insanity, and sexual needs was done with style and detachment that chronicled those experiences of the characters.<sup>33</sup>

As an author, he slowly moved from these adolescent fantasies to a more responsible and conscious novelist. A transition can be identified between his early novels and his more recent fiction, abandoning those dark suffocating gothic themes, and moving towards a wider scope of topics including social norms or political concerns that were relevant to that time. However, in his work, we can identify one common thing that creates a connection between them, it is their power to question our morals, confidence and more importantly judgement.<sup>34</sup> As Kiernan says in his analysis of Ian McEwan "His writings are adventures in the art of unease, the art of playing havoc with the preconceived."<sup>35</sup> McEwan is forcing his readers to stop and rethink their perception of the world and the principles surrounding them.

It can be challenging to definitively determine whether Ian McEwan's personal experiences have significantly influenced his writing throughout his career. While he has not explicitly claimed a direct correlation between his works and life experiences, there are subtle nuances within the themes of his writing that suggest an influence. Much like any other author, McEwan will likely draw from his observations of human behaviour, relationships, and societal dynamics to develop his stories or life experiences. In his novel *Atonement*, Ian McEwan draws a parallel between the character Briony and his mother's illness, which he intentionally chose to include in the story. Briony suffers from vascular dementia,

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<sup>32</sup> Groes, *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Ryan Kiernan. *Ian McEwan* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), 1-2.

<sup>34</sup> Kiernan. *Ian McEwan*, 2-5.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Kiernan. *Ian McEwan*, 5.

an illness that gradually erases all memories, just like McEwan's mother. In an interview for *The Guardian*, McEwan revealed that he was inspired by his mother's struggle with dementia. During one of their drives together, his mother used a phrase from a different era, "Lady Muck", which perfectly fit the time of *Atonement*. In an article, McEwan explained why he incorporated his mother's illness into the novel: "Then I'll always remember that she said it. I have a character just coming to life who can use her words. So thank you, Rose, for that - and all the rest."<sup>36</sup>

#### **4.1. Macabre Phase**

The first chapter will focus on Ian McEwan's early phase of writing, the very beginning of his literary career. Two of his first longer works, novels *The Cement Garden* and *The Comfort of Strangers*, will be discussed in more details below, focussing on their themes, topics, narration, and related symbols. His early works do not include much of a political involvement, statements or opinions in this social area which can be observed in his later works in the following chapters. On the other hand, they are introducing to us uncomfortable themes and taboo topics which are still to this day considered rather inappropriate as topics for discussion in society. Topics people would rather ignore instead of discussing and acknowledging them in some manner because there is nothing happy about them. Even though these works are not occupied with the same themes or similar characters, the main theme of inappropriateness, uneasiness and discomfort prevails in both.

In these works, themes such as death followed by decay, incestuous relationships, and unusual sexual needs that are outside the normal acceptable scale within society, including perversion are emerging. We can also observe the problems connected with masculinity in his early writing, which is set in the post-patriarchal era. These novels challenge traditional patriarchal roles along with gender concepts, showing a change in the author's work towards a new social condition. This change is referred to as "the process of maturation" by Hosseini in

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<sup>36</sup> McEwan, "Mother Tongue," *The Guardian*, October 13, 2001.

her article, with a focus on masculinity.<sup>37</sup> The fall of certain masculinity roles is evident through the consequences of the terrible events that take place during the narration, such as death, murder, or regression.<sup>38</sup>

The novels, *The Comfort of Strangers* and *The Cement Garden* present dysfunctional behaviour and serious themes that will provoke the reader's thoughts. The first novel portrays a murder for pleasure, showcasing the brutality of the characters.<sup>39</sup> The couple has a strong connection through physical pain. The second novel depicts the development of an unusual relationship between a brother and a sister, which leads to trouble and eventually to a separation by the authorities. While the settings and characters differ – one is about orphaned children, and the other is about an adult couple exploring their needs and life – both novels urge us to consider the initial trigger for the characters' actions. These thought-provoking books present darker themes and serious topics that encourage reflection.

#### **4.1.1. The Unease and Suffering in *The Cement Garden***

Ian McEwan's first novel, *The Cement Garden*, is a thematic continuation of his shocking tales of incest, paedophilia, sex, erotic violence and death in *First Love*, *Last Rites* and *In Between The Sheets*,<sup>40</sup> and some of these themes can be also found in *The Cement Garden*. What connects these works is not only those themes but also the strength of McEwan's writing in a way that forces the readers to some extent to a process of self-reflection as Kiernan points out in his work on McEwan:

Far from disguising the tainted pleasure they take in their more lurid themes, his best tales confess the ambiguity of their attitude and oblige us to reflect on the mixed motives governing our own response as readers.<sup>41</sup>

McEwan's writing has been labelled by Ryan as "Art of Unease" and his first free published works can be better understood if we look at them as experiments in the form of "dissident Surrealism."<sup>42</sup> The desire is one aspect that the Surrealists were

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<sup>37</sup> Fatemeh Hosseini, "'Filiarchy' and Masculinity in the Early Novels of Ian McEwan," *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice*, ed. by Stefan Horlacher (Brill, 2015), 191-192. [191–216] <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv2gjw1m.13>.

<sup>38</sup> Hosseini, "'Filiarchy' and Masculinity in the Early Novels of Ian McEwan," 194.

<sup>39</sup> Dominic Head, *Ian McEwan* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 30.

<sup>40</sup> Groes, *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 13.

<sup>41</sup> Kiernan. *Ian McEwan*, 13.

<sup>42</sup> Groes, *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 14.

concerned with, inspired by Freudian theories of sexuality<sup>43</sup>, in literary art became engaged with the “polymorphous perverse”<sup>44</sup> – masturbation and incest tendencies in children.

With the publication of *The Cement Garder* came accusations of plagiarism, that his novel resembles too much a work by Julian Gloag’s *Our Mother’s House*. McEwan defended himself and there was no aftermath of these accusations. Another literary work, *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, bears significant resemblance to the novel that we are currently examining. Unlike the boys who are stranded on a deserted island, the children of McEwan’s book have to continue to live their ordinary lives. The four siblings gradually create their own world in isolation. A world without any rules, no traditional morals applied, no social standards, and more importantly no authority figures that would keep an eye on their behaviour, and relationships. The innocence of childhood is successfully destroyed in the ruleless household of the orphaned children, much like the boys in *Lord of the Flies* governing themselves on an isolated island.<sup>45</sup>

The story is divided into two parts, written from the point of view of a fourteen-year-old Jack who later turns fifteen. These two parts of the book represent the life of a family (no surnames are mentioned) before and after the death of their mother. The novel opens with the death of the father which is later followed by the death of the mother, the influence of death will be discussed later. A home without parents, usually means freedom for children, however, this freedom will turn into great suffering for them, as it takes some time before they realise the consequences of their actions. To stay together, they create their own little world, connected by an unconventional relationship which grows stronger between the two oldest siblings. The gothic elements such as death, decay or rotting corpses are present throughout the whole piece of work. The story revolves around death and the dead body of the children’s mother, which they have decided to bury in the basement using the cement their father had bought before dying.

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<sup>43</sup> **Sigmund Freud’s theories** of the human psyche and the unconscious mind have a significant impact on literature. Freud’s ideas about the Id, Ego, and Superego, as well as his theories of repression, the Oedipus complex, dream analysis, and the concept of the uncanny, or the sense of something being both familiar and strange, have been explored in works. For him the home is the place where the Oedipal desires are born, thus the home stops being a safe place due to the sexual tension. Since it involves incestuous feelings, it becomes uncanny and traumatic as a result. (Andrew Smith, *Gothic Literature*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2007, 13.)

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Groes, *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Nick Rennison, *Contemporary British Novelists* (London: Routledge, 2005), 108.

The narrative technique of Jack is described by David Malcolm as “Jack speaks what is almost a British Hemingwayesque”<sup>46</sup> when he is describing his father’s garden: “There were narrow flagstone paths which made elaborate curves to visit flower beds that were only a few feet away. One path spiraled up round a rockery as though it were a mountain pass.”<sup>47</sup> This type of speech is not something the reader expects from a teenage boy, on the other hand, his style is inconsistent. Jack uses the styles as he pleases even mixing them within one sentence. Sometimes his speech is resembling an educated person saying things like this “weary admonition”<sup>48</sup> but within the same sentence, he uses words like “shit... piss... arse”<sup>49</sup> which are part of the typical teenage vocabulary we are expecting more from him as readers.

The setting of the novel is typical 1960s urban Britain recognisable to anyone who lived during 1960 in Britain.<sup>50</sup> The description of the place where Jack lives with his parents, and siblings Julie (17), Sue (13) and Tom (6), even in the beginning reminds us of a wasteland, disorder and decay. “Our house had once stood in a street full of houses. Now it stood on empty land where stinging nettles were growing round torn corrugated tin,”<sup>51</sup> indicates the beginning of the decay that will follow for the rest of the story.

Their father, who is the only one without a name, suggests a complicated relationship and less importance. He is very fond of his garden and the space he has created and before his first heart attack he intended to “build a high wall round his special world”<sup>52</sup> therefore isolating the whole family from the rest of the world. The isolation is not only caused but their father, or the place they have lived but the parents no longer have any close family nearby and there is an unspoken family rule that “none of us ever brought friends home.”<sup>53</sup> The only people who ever visit their house are Julie’s boyfriend Derek and Tom’s friend, but this only happens after both parents are dead. The isolation is highlighted by Jack’s statement, that “there was not even a milkman in our road now. As far as I could remember, the

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<sup>46</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 49.

<sup>47</sup> McEwan, Ian, *The Cement Garden* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 19.

<sup>48</sup> McEwan, Ian, *The Cement Garden*, 27.

<sup>49</sup> McEwan, Ian, *The Cement Garden*, 27.

<sup>50</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 55.

<sup>51</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 27-28.

<sup>52</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 19.

<sup>53</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 26.

last people to visit the house had been the ambulance men who took my father away.”<sup>54</sup> Their house becomes the representation of the ultimate decay and death.

The relationships between them are not so good either, especially the father’s relationship with his children and with his wife. He only sees his daughter as an ambitious athlete and shows no interest in Julie’s achievements. His relationship with Jack is marked by Jack’s Oedipal hostility, which he expresses when they move the bags of cement into the basement. He lets his father carry as much as he does, knowing his father has suffered from a heart attack and it could hurt him. What we see in Jack is not a typical Oedipal complex, when a boy fights with his father over the love of his mother. This Oedipal complex is not only portrayed by the boys but also by the father who fights for their mother’s love too like a boy. A fact that we learn from Julie who usually knows the most about what is happening in the family, Julie tells Jack about their father and Tom:

Julie had told me recently that now Father was a semi-invalid he would have to compete with Tom for Mother's attention. It was an extraordinary idea and I thought about it for a long time. So simple, so bizarre, a small boy and a grown man competing. Later I asked Julie who would win and without hesitation she said, "Tom of course, and Dad'll take it out on him."<sup>55</sup>

Even though Jack is most of the time rude to his mother, from one of the flashbacks we learn that he pretends to be sick to get her full attention when no one else is at home. However, he does not develop a sexual desire for his mother but instead an unhealthy fixation on his older sister Julie, a romantic one. His behaviour is supported even more by the game they used to play together all the time with his other younger sister Sue, they pretend to be “scientists.” “We rolled Sue on to her side and then on to her belly. We stroked her back and thighs with our fingernails. We looked into her mouth and between her legs with a torch and found the little flower made of flesh...”<sup>56</sup> Jack and Julie undress her together and touch her naked body in a way partners usually do with each other. However, this game suddenly stops after the father’s death.

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<sup>54</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 28.

<sup>55</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 17.

<sup>56</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 16.

The father's death does not influence much the family life, at least not on the surface. Later we will see that his death is marking the beginning of chaos, disorder, and the collapse of social norms, which result in Tom's regression to the infantile stage and the incest between Jack and Julie. More importantly, the way how Jack comments on his death shows his feelings for him; his death has no bigger significance for him, and he is more interested in his personal growth.

I did not kill my father, but I sometimes felt I had helped him on his way. And but for the fact that it coincided with a landmark in my own physical growth, his death seemed insignificant compared to what followed... I am only including the little story of his death to explain how my sisters and I came to have such a large quantity of cement at our disposal.<sup>57</sup>

Jack's indifference towards his father is even more evident after the ambulance takes him away and he decides to fix the fresh cement "I did not have a thought in my head as I picked up the plank and carefully smoothed away his impression in the soft, fresh concrete."<sup>58</sup> Their bad relationship suggests some unresolved conflict between them, Oedipal conflict but it also portrays a subtle resemblance to Freud's "primal herd."<sup>59</sup> The father's behaviour and his beliefs in superiority over women, explain Jack's behaviour later when he tries to be the male of the "herd."

They talk a little bit about their father a week after his death but not much after that. They do not miss him much or need him for anything. The situation has not changed much since his passing, as he never showed much interest in his children's lives and accomplishments. Nevertheless, certain topics should be addressed with teenagers, and it is often more comfortable for a same-sex parent to have these conversations. It can be an uncomfortable situation when Jack's mother attempts to discuss the sensitive topic of masturbation and its potential negative effects on his health. What becomes even more awkward is that Jack is having a recurrent dream about his mother's talk even after she dies. However, from what we learn about his father, we assume he would not be able to have this talk with Jack even if he was still alive and Jack would probably not care about it much

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<sup>57</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 13.

<sup>58</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 24.

<sup>59</sup> Hosseini, "'Filiarchy' and Masculinity in the Early Novels of Ian McEwan," 195.

anyway. Soon after the father's death, their mother becomes bedridden over time due to her unspecified illness and since Jack's birthday, she would not leave her bed at all. Somehow, she remains the main source of authority for the children, keeping the house and them in order. However, the children are coping with this new situation surprisingly well, keeping the house clean. "We adapted well enough. We took it in turns to take up the tray, and Julie shopped on the way back from school. Sue helped her cook and I washed the dishes,"<sup>60</sup> everyone is doing their part but that is something that will not be possible anymore after her death, it feels like with her death her invisible authority disappeared as well.

We can see that Julie is showing her strong character even during the time their mother is still alive but bedridden. Julie is already starting slowly to take over the motherly role, probably because she is the oldest sibling. When her younger siblings start to avoid their mother because of her sickness it makes Julie angry and while she snaps it helps improve the situation at home and the attitude of her siblings. Even Jack tries to talk to his mother, but it is visible that it is hard for both of them to keep the conversation. As Jack's birthday is approaching, there is a possibility to have friends over for a party. However, he decides to celebrate with his family only, not because of generosity but due to the lack of friends. After the birthday party, their mother passes away, and Jack informs them about the news in a straightforward manner, without showing any emotions: "Three days later she was dead."<sup>61</sup> Later he shows some emotions, they go from anger to crying after the initial shock and then he becomes selfishly angry at her not for dying and leaving them alone as people normally do but he is angry because she has not told Julie that he is also in charge of the household. In addition, it seems that Jack has difficulty expressing his emotions and grieving for his own mother's death. He only becomes emotional and cries when he imagines someone else's mother passing away, which is concerning and suggests that he may have unresolved issues and complex feelings towards his own family members. When Sue discovers the news about their mother and cries alongside Julie, Jack attempts to console her but is unsuccessful, as the sisters do not seem to notice him at all.

Even in such a hard time, there are some comic moments during the manipulation of their mother's dead body. They have trouble staying serious when

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<sup>60</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 49.

<sup>61</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 59.

they are trying to cover her body with a blanket because she was in a sitting position before and the blanket is now too short to cover her whole body.

Sue and I giggled again. Julie pulled the blanket over the feet and Mother's head was revealed once more like an unveiled statue. Sue and I laughed uncontrollably. Julie was laughing too; through clenched teeth her whole body shook.<sup>62</sup>

This weird time of giggles is interrupted when Tom enters their mother's bedroom and finds all his siblings there. They lie to him and tell him that their mother is just asleep.

For a moment it seemed that through sleep, a very deep sleep, we might initiate Tom in the concept of death. But we knew no more about it than he did, and he sensed something was up.<sup>63</sup>

On the other hand, it is surprising how the children have reacted, there is no panic but maybe this is caused by the fact they have been used to their mother's absence. Jack captures the feelings of all of them when he says: "I had accepted without curiosity the fact that Mother was rarely out of bed now. She became bedridden so gradually we hardly commented on it."<sup>64</sup> This becomes over time their standard, the way it has been like this for a long time that they no longer think it is something unusual. They do not realise the situation is not normal and the way they act after can be seen as strange. Sue suggests they should tell someone and have their mother properly buried with a funeral to which Jack replies with his mother's words:

"If we tell them," I began again, "they'll come and put us into care, into an orphanage or something. They might try and get Tom adopted." I paused. Sue was horrified... "The house will stand empty," I went on, "people will break in, there'll be nothing left."<sup>65</sup>

They cannot leave their mother in bed, so they have to come up with some solution, and Jack comes up with this idea inspired by his book *Commander Hunt*. Kiernan states that their mother "mutates like *Commander Hunt's* monster,

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<sup>62</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 63.

<sup>63</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 63-64.

<sup>64</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 49.

<sup>65</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 66.

becoming a gargantuan, enveloping presence. By secreting her body in the home, the children deny her death... Their ghoulish act is a doomed attempt to make time stand still, to ward off the advent of growth and decay.”<sup>66</sup> Surprisingly in this absurd situation, Jack is the one who shows some rational thinking. He comes up with the idea to bury their mother in the basement in the cement their father ordered, while Julie wants to bury her in the garden. He argues that if someone would come looking for her, the garden would be the first place they would start digging. So, the decision is to bury her in the basement of the house. When Jack and Julie do, they work mechanically the whole night without any thinking. It feels normal for Jack as he says: “There was nothing odd about mixing cement.”<sup>67</sup>

Now the role of a mother falls completely on Julie who accepts it as she has already been stepping up since their mother fell ill. Tom’s behaviour worsens after their mother dies. He slowly starts to have setbacks, eventually regresses into his infantile stage, and would like to be mothered. There Tom starts to demand Julie’s attention like he did when his mother was still alive. Julie is aware of the fact that Tom requires attention so one afternoon when he is super annoying and clingy, she snaps at him providing him with what he longs for, a mother figure telling him what he has to do. She makes him go to bed early, he does so with no objections.

“If he wants to be mothered,” Julie shouted, “then he can start doing what I tell him. He's going to bed.” ...Ten minutes later Tom was back before us in his pyjamas and, utterly subdued, allowed Julie to lead him upstairs to his bedroom.<sup>68</sup>

At first, we can see his regression as a way how to get attention and protection, his behaviour regresses too far. He starts to behave like an infant, sleeping in a cot, wearing a bib, or crying like a baby. While attempting to stay united and maintain the whole household, the children suffer from the lack of “emotional assurance” that parents provide for their children and from “mother deprivation”.<sup>69</sup> Even Jack

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<sup>66</sup> Kiernan. *Ian McEwan*, 21.

<sup>67</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 70.

<sup>68</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 80.

<sup>69</sup> Roohollah Reesi Sistania, Ruzy Suliza Hashimb, and Shahizah Ismail Hamdanb, “Psychoanalytical Tensions and Conflicts of Characters’ Interactions in Ian McEwan’s *The Cement Garden*,” *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 118 (2014): 455, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.02.061>.

in the end ends up with Tom in his cot, because it reminds him of security, this regression is more visible in Jack than in younger Tom.

We do not learn much about the relationships among the siblings. Mostly we learn about Jack and Julie and then Sue when they are playing their little game together behind closed doors. This is caused by the fact that Sue and other members are on the periphery of Jack's interest, Sue is for him "merely a sister, a person,"<sup>70</sup> unlike Julie who has his full attention and interest. We can say that Sue might be the only normal person out of the four children, she has no problems with expressing her emotions and keeps a diary that helps her track time. Suddenly after the death of their mother, Jack sees her differently and admires some of her skills. Tom, the youngest sibling, undergoes the most significant change and the regression is only one reaction. Tom wants to become a girl because he is being bullied at school and this seems like a good solution to him because he says: "You don't get when you're a girl."<sup>71</sup> While his sisters are thrilled and there is excitement in the room for a while, Jack is not pleased about Tom being dressed in pretty girl's dresses and says "he'd look bloody idiotic."<sup>72</sup> Jack has a very strong masculine point of view on the works and his reaction makes his sisters angry. He is dealing with this whole situation by sleeping, masturbating, and doing meaningless activities. He gets to a state where he no longer knows what his wants and desires are when he has a chance: "I had no idea what I wanted. I thought I would know when I saw it, and even if it cost more than two pounds, then at least I would have something to want, something to think about."<sup>73</sup> His behaviour suggests he is trying to avoid unpleasant situations but his responsibility too at the same time.

From the beginning, we notice that Jack has a desire for his sister Julie in a way that a lover would have. That becomes a bigger issue when Julie brings home her older boyfriend Derek. Derek is seen as an outsider who is trying to become a family member. Jack immediately hates him and becomes frustrated when others do not support him. The position of being the only male in the family is being threatened. Jack thinks Derek is trying to become the head of the family to be in charge together with Julie. Derek's influence is quite the opposite, he brings the

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<sup>70</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 40.

<sup>71</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 54.

<sup>72</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 55.

<sup>73</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 83.

siblings closer together as they have to clean the house before he comes for dinner. When the three of them – Julie, Sue, and Jack – are cleaning tighter it brings him joy and happiness: “For the first time in weeks I was happy... I felt safe, as if I belonged to a powerful, secret army.”<sup>74</sup> From now on Julie becomes more interested in Jack, making Derek jealous, who now feels excluded while Jack is now more included. Derek only wants the same thing as Jack, trying to become the father figure and to belong somewhere.

Their situation is exceptional, and their thinking is not rational or traditional. During the summer Jack was thinking about what they had done: “Why we had put her in the trunk in the first place. At the time it had been obvious, to keep the family together. Was that a good reason? ... Nor could I think whether what we had done was an ordinary thing to do...”<sup>75</sup> It is not so clear to him, and over time he lost his judgement about what is normal and what is not anymore. Their little world collapses in the hands of Derek who calls social services when the growing intimate relationship between Jack and Julie climaxes and they are caught by him. His reactions are normal: “Now I've seen it all... It's sick... he's your brother.”<sup>76</sup> In the end, the children no longer remember why they have buried their mother in the basement in the first place and Julie finds the situation rather amusing and comforting: “I've lost all sense of time. It feels like it's always been like this. I can't remember how it used to be when Mum was alive and I can't imagine anything changing. Everything seems still and fixed and it makes me feel that I'm not frightened of anything.”<sup>77</sup>

Malcolm points out the presence of gothic elements in the novel. The dark basement, the burial of their mother, and the smell and state of their house signalling decay. Not only the decay of the house as an object but the whole family has been falling apart since the beginning of the novel. The love between the siblings keeps them together, until the final incestuous scene. They get caught by Derek, who takes their fate into his hands and calls the authorities. They have let an outsider into their lives, which led to the end of their little world.

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<sup>74</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 95.

<sup>75</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 98.

<sup>76</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 149-150.

<sup>77</sup> McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 149.

#### 4.1.2. A Strange Attraction in *The Comfort of Strangers*

As Malcolm points out, the technique used in *The Comfort of Strangers* is similar to the one used in *The Cement Garden*. McEwan draws attention to human evil at the same time we as a reader are struck by how much he can achieve within a shorter work.<sup>78</sup> *The Comfort of Stranger* just like its preceding novel tells a rather sordid tale as well.<sup>79</sup> McEwan himself felt a bit uncomfortable about the whole story as he said:

‘I felt very strongly identified with Colin, as if I was writing my own death in some strange way. I felt terribly sickened by it.’<sup>80</sup>

The author's research delves deep into the underlying motivations of individuals, requiring a closer examination of the realities of power and sex. Through the observation of human behaviour in unconventional and violent situations, he sheds light on the sexual drives and needs of both men and women. His exploration of the nature of unconsciousness and how social interactions shape it is a fascinating area of study,

It wasn't enough to be rational, since there might be desires – masochism in women, sadism in men – that act out the oppression of women or patriarchal societies but which have actually become related to sources of pleasure.<sup>81</sup>

*The Comfort of Strangers* traces the horrifying fate of a young and unmarried English couple, who are enjoying their holidays in a warm foreign country in an unnamed city, however, the description of streets and buildings suggests it can be Venice, the city of lovers. But Colin and Mary's love has lost its drive and edge, and they are left with their “repressed appetites.”<sup>82</sup> One night they meet a local and charismatic Robert who introduces them to his wife Caroline. The couple starts dominating their lives, even in their subconscious thoughts. After their meeting, Colin and Mary start to rethink their intimate relationship and even let some fantasies in. Nevertheless, their meeting is not coincidental at all, Robert

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<sup>78</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 66.

<sup>79</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 66.

<sup>80</sup> Kiernan, *Ian McEwan*, 33.

<sup>81</sup> Kiernan, *Ian McEwan*, 33.

<sup>82</sup> Kiernan, *Ian McEwan*, 34.

chooses Colin as his victim, from the moment he first sees him. Colin and Mary are lured into a trap in which Robert and his wife Caroline fulfil their sadistic fantasies. Their relationship is built on violence, and their little erotic game ends with the death of Colin. Robert kisses Colin's lips, then proceeds to murder him while drugged Mary watches them with terror. "See how easy it is," he said, perhaps to himself, as he drew the razor lightly, almost playfully, across Colin's wrist, opening wide the artery. His arm jerked forward, and the rope he cast, orange in this light, fell short of Mary's lap by several inches."<sup>83</sup> The act of murder, violence and sex makes the reader more conscious about their desires, McEwan is suggesting that those "abnormal" acts are within all human beings, just in more control.

What makes the story, so unnerving is the narration and the couple's passivity towards events. The story uses a third-person narrator and many times it is limited providing the scenes through the eyes of Colin or Mary. As the story progresses, the narration switches between the points of view of its protagonists. There are no shared points of view, even intimate moments between Colin and Mary are perceived separately. When they are walking together, Mary observes the mannequins while Colin is on the other side of the street. Not the entire novel is written from its character's point of view, we as readers are aware of a third-person narrator that is distinct from the characters. "Alone, perhaps, they each could have explored the city with pleasure..."<sup>84</sup> could be seen as their connected thought or just a simple observation of the situation and relationship between Colin and Mary. Thus, this detached figure provides several important observations with a "sense of coolness towards events and characters."<sup>85</sup>

The representations of space and time signify some uncertainty, we know the location, but we also do not, it's not really specific and, in a sense resembles the wasteland setting of *The Cement Garden*.<sup>86</sup> Mary and Colin's vulnerability is tied to the location, they are abroad, most of the time isolated in their hotel room and away from their normal routines. Their emotions and mental state can be represented by the city itself, its narrow streets resembling a maze. They get lost without maps to navigate their way back and are just wandering among the streets

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<sup>83</sup> Ian McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers* (London: Picador, 1982), 121.

<sup>84</sup> McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 14.

<sup>85</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 69.

<sup>86</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 72.

until they meet Robert. Their relationship with time is vague, and they are reluctant to discuss the past while Robert and Caroline talk about how their past has shaped their present. Although the city is never named, we can guess it from the descriptions of everyday life and situations outside their hotel room. It is important because it places the evil within the everyday, and Mary still can hear the outside sounds when the novel reaches its violent climax.

Similarly to *The Cement Garden*, our protagonists are missing their surnames, which is in favour of the evil plan of Robert and Caroline and not giving Mary a chance for a bit of justice. This also leaves the reader with,

“The discomfort of being lured into an unknowing intimacy with strangers, into a meeting-place which is fiercely lit and surrounded by shadows.”<sup>87</sup>

However, we learn enough about Colin and Mary to recognise they are a typical modern couple. They have been together for seven years, but do not live together, and act more like individuals avoiding serious and deep talks about sex politics, and if they did discuss this, they never talked about themselves. “When they looked at each other they looked into a misted mirror,”<sup>88</sup> caused by arguments by Mary’s feminist opinions. Mary engages in feminist work, used to work in an only female theatre group and is extremely delighted by radical feminism ““They want convicted rapists castrated!”<sup>89</sup> she sees on flyers while walking with Colin through the city.

From the first moment, they meet Robert, he tests Mary’s judgement. For the couple, Robert portrays everything they refuse, however, when he emerges from the shadows to claim them, we realise there is nothing accidental about this meeting. There is a contrast between these couples. Mary challenges male superiority, especially Robert’s views on male dominance, he hates feminism and is explicit about his opinions in an apologetic way.

“These are women who cannot find a man. They want to destroy everything that is good between men and women.” He added matter-

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<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Kiernan, *Ian McEwan*, 35.

<sup>88</sup> McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 18.

<sup>89</sup> McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 24.

of-factly, “They are too ugly.” Mary watched him as she might a face on television.

“There,” Colin said, “meet the opposition.”<sup>90</sup>

Robert believes women should understand male energy and he says to Colin:

“My father and his father understood themselves clearly. They were men, and they were proud of their sex. Women understood them too.”<sup>91</sup>

These couples are opposites, Robert’s thinking is rooted in his upbringing, he is a child who grows up from adoring his mother to sadistic tendencies, hurting his wife, and never admitting he likes men too.

However, this meeting sparks some fantasies in Mary and Colin’s relationship. Their intimacy has its passion back, and they become more connected. Their fantasies show the dynamics between men and women. When Mary mutters in her fantasy that:

...her intention of hiring a surgeon to amputate Colin’s arms and legs. She would keep him in a room in her house, and use him exclusively for sex, sometimes lending him out to friends.<sup>92</sup>

She reduces Colin to a mere sex object taking away his masculinity and all the values of human beings in her fantasy fulfilling only her needs. While Colin in his fantasy replaces himself with a machine purely to serve Mary’s pleasure: “...the machine would fuck her, not just for hours or weeks, but for years, on and on, for the rest of her life, till she was dead and on even after that, till Colin, or his solicitor, switched it off.”<sup>93</sup> Colin’s fantasy shows his low self-esteem and uncertainty about his masculinity. He would rather provide Mary with a machine than himself for her pleasure. His behaviour might be the deciding factor for Robert who chooses Colin since he first saw him.

The relationship between Robert and his father is not optimal, and it plays a significant role in shaping their behaviour, similar to that of Jack's in *The Cement Garden*. Robert probably wishes at some point in his childhood that his abusive

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<sup>90</sup> McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 28.

<sup>91</sup> McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 72.

<sup>92</sup> McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 81.

<sup>93</sup> McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 81.

father would die, for the beating he had to endure. Robert's relationship with his mother is special, he adores her, and they are close. "She knew I had to have an excuse to call out to her in the middle of the night. But there was no need to explain."<sup>94</sup> as a child, Robert suffered from nightmares and bad dreams, often he would call his mother to him or sleep in her bed whenever his father was away for work. As Robert grows older his views on the relationship between men and women shift, and he longs to be just like his father. Starts showing feelings of regret in his Oedipal behaviour, seeing his father as a rival and a competitor for his mother's attention.

Robert was desperate to be a father, desperate to have sons, but nothing came of it. For a long time, the doctors thought it was me, but in the end it turned out to be Robert, something wrong with his sperm.<sup>95</sup>

This situation in their marriage is the starting point for Robert's domination, masochism, and violent behaviour. The inability to fulfil his duty as a husband, to have children he can pass down the values and knowledge so the next generation can preserve it. He fails to pass down the patriarchal values his grandfather and father taught their children. From now on Robert is being violent towards his wife during their intimate moments.

Robert started to hurt me when we made love... One night I got really angry at him, but he went on doing it, and I had to admit, though it took a long time, that I liked it.<sup>96</sup>

Caroline is very open with Mary, sharing her life story in a very detailed way. Although she admits she hates what her husband is doing to her, at the same time she cannot make herself leave him and this unusual marriage behind. Robert becomes very violent over time and even breaks her back during one of their intimate moments. But on the other side, she is fascinated by his wants, and tells Mary:

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<sup>94</sup> McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 39.

<sup>95</sup> McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 108.

<sup>96</sup> McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 108-109.

“He wanted to kill me, as we made love,”<sup>97</sup> in some sick way, she is enjoying what they are doing. She hates it but because of the excitement and fear of death and “because of that possibility hanging over us, we made love like never before.”<sup>98</sup>

Her behaviour and approach change, and she sinks into submission, with the feeling of being ashamed for liking the way their intimate moments happen for their friends and family she is the abused wife. Together they create this game for Colin and Mary, she listens to Robert and supports him no matter what. Robert has complete power over her, as it used to be a long time ago when women were to obey men’s orders.

Mary can see through her and recognise what is happening with Caroline. However, she is oblivious to what they are about to face when they return to Robert’s place despite her weird feelings. Mary admits this to Caroline saying: “We didn’t exactly plan to come, but it wasn’t completely accidental either. I wanted to talk to you.”<sup>99</sup> There is something they cannot resist and fight, so they lead themselves towards the horrible act. This sense of domination becomes the ending of Mary and Colin’s relationship. Just before they start with Colin, Mary is already drugged after talking with Caroline. Right in the violent act, Caroline tells Colin: “Mary understands. I’ve explained everything to her. Secretly, I think you understand too.”<sup>100</sup> Mary is forced to witness Colin’s murder, she still drifts several times away due to the special tea, but she knows what is going on unable to help. For the first time since their relationship Mary looks directly into Colin’s face, unfortunately for the last time as well. When she wakes up, Colin is dead, and Robert with Caroline are gone—no traces left behind them for the police.

### **4.1.3. Conclusion**

Both works deal with outlandish personal and sexual relations placed in a context that is far removed from everyday life. As readers, we get our morals challenged and we should be feeling sorry for the children’s faith and Mary after Colin’s murder. Nevertheless, our emotions are challenged, we rather experience a lack of them in both novels. The gothic elements appear in both works respectively,

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<sup>97</sup> McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 110.

<sup>98</sup> McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 110.

<sup>99</sup> McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 106.

<sup>100</sup> McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 119.

elements such as death and decay, obsession with sadistic tendencies, violence and murder or immoral and irrational responses in normal situations. In *The Cement Garden* children instead of burying their mother the usual way, they have buried her in cement in the basement of the house. Later her rotting corpse becomes the ultimate sign of decay in the family of four children. Their lives have no order, and no rules and death are mirrored in their behaviour of them all. The feeling of exclusion is present in Jack and Derek as well, with Jack being excluded from the conversation by his family while Derek is not being let in by Julie's siblings.

Mary and Colin in *The Comfort of Strangers* let the strangers dominate their decisions, Robert from the first meeting tells them where to go and to visit him. Even if they decide not to go there again, they end up in their house for the second and last time ever. This night results in a planned murder of Colin. The death in both novels draws attention to human evil, presenting a sordid tale<sup>101</sup> for readers. The death in *The Cement Garden* is the beginning of an end for one family, while in *The Comfort of Strangers*, we can say it represents the end of a new beginning for Mary and Colin.

The relationship between father and son shapes the behaviour of Jack in *The Cement Garden* and Robert in *The Comfort of Strangers*. In both characters, a version of the Oedipal complex can be observed. Jack's father believes that men are superior to women, therefore Jack does not have a typical Oedipal complex, instead of being fixated on his mother, he is rather rude towards her. However, he develops a strong fixation on his older sister Julie, leading us to the final scene where they share a bed and touch each other. While Robert, as he grows older, starts regretting his Oedipal behaviour, instead of seeing his father as a competitor he wants to be more like him. This is caused by the fact he cannot have his children, thus he fails to continue his line and he becomes violent towards his wife Caroline, who accepts his behaviour and becomes submissive.

The views on men versus women and masculinity versus femininity are challenged. There is a representation of more "womanly times"<sup>102</sup> as Hosseini says in her work. Those patriarchal values are challenged through the character of Mary, who believes feminist work is important and presents a challenge for Robert who hates and despises them because they ruin everything good that has been established

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<sup>101</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 66.

<sup>102</sup> Hosseini, "'Filiarchy' and Masculinity in the Early Novels of Ian McEwan," 210.

before. Mary undermines masculinity by reducing Colin to just a male sex object in her fantasy, stripping him of the purpose and reversing the patriarchal view.

Both novels are remarkable, the ease with which McEwan can describe even the most bizarre and morbid things detached from everyday life, as Rennison says about both early novels in his book “the meticulousness in the description of unsettling events and a remarkable ability to create and control a feeling of mounting unease in the reader.”<sup>103</sup>

#### 4.2. Social Phase

A few years passed before McEwan published another novel, his third work *The Child in Time* marks a change in his style showing an important step forward in the development of his fiction. Although those previous works show great talent and technical precision, they have been preoccupied with the literary exercise of Gothic.<sup>104</sup> In the 1980s, Ian McEwan started slowly raising his own family, thus his writing style shifted a little bit, from provocative themes to more family-related incorporating political views into his work. *The Child in Time* represents a turning point in his writing career, marking his first attempt at a social novel, where the public and private are constantly intertwined. Unfortunately, readers and critics perceived him as a “perverse, macabre” writer, instead of focusing on the newly introduced topics, they focussed their comments on the lack of this element in his third novel.<sup>105</sup>

This second chapter will focus on two of his later novels, *The Child in Time* and *Atonement*. We will find several themes that appear in his previous works as well. Here he treats them from a different perspective, these are the themes of adulthood and childhood and the relationship between these two, society or the treatment of time and change. The notion of time in both novels plays a crucial role in healing and accepting the situation.

*The Child in Time* criticises Thatcher’s Britain but at the same time depicts love, loss and reconciliation that is centred around a very painful topic such as the abduction of a child. Child abductions and paedophilia were the main preoccupations of 1990s Britain’s society, which grew into a media obsession.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Rennison, *Contemporary British Novelists*, 108.

<sup>104</sup> Rennison, *Contemporary British Novelists*, 109.

<sup>105</sup> Kiernan, *Ian McEwan*, 15.

<sup>106</sup> Head, *Ian McEwan*, 70-73.

McEwan becomes more politically conscious and incorporating it into his works marks a turning point in the middle phase of his career. Through the characters, we can explore the thoughts and feelings of parents who suffer great pain. Each parent will have their own method how to mourn and deal with this enormous loss. In the interview, McEwan reveals his intentions for themes for this book. He says he is interested in “how private fates and public events collide.”<sup>107</sup>

Even though *Atonement* is not as politically involved as *The Child in Time*, the novel still touches on the topics of law, courts and how certain people will be considered suspects while others are not even mentioned. McEwan portrays how little is sometimes enough to ruin an innocent life if you are someone others believe without further questioning. The main focus is placed on the feelings of guilt and the search for some sort of atonement in the end. The themes of guilt and atonement are linked to the writer’s authority and the question “How the writer can reach atonement if above him is only God?.” This process is conducted through the character Briony Tallis, who is trying to fix her teenage mistake.<sup>108</sup> A part of the book is devoted to the horrors of the Second World War, during the Dunkirk operation.

The narrative technique used in *Atonement* can be said to be postmodernist, so-called metanarrative, where fiction and reality merge and the reader is challenged with the decision of what is true and what is fiction. Furthermore, both novels give insight into society, relationships and behaviour and a great loss and feelings of guilt. In *The Child in Time*, we experience how everyone is dealing with loss in different ways but in the end, if the love is strong enough to worth fighting it can have a good end. In the character of Charles, we see how life expectations can take one’s life away. In *Atonement*, we are following Briony’s attempt at atonement for her previous crime, a false accusation that ruins one innocent life and turns the lives of the rest of them around. It is harder to fix what has been broken. In both we experience that nothing is as simple as we see it, there can be much more going on that we cannot see or comprehend.

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<sup>107</sup> Margaret Reynold and Jonathan Noakes, *Ian McEwan: The Essential Guide* (London: Vintage, 2002), 12.

<sup>108</sup> Head, *Ian McEwan*, 156.

#### 4.2.1. A Search for a Child in *The Child in Time*

*The Child in Time* also deals with a horrifying and unpleasant situation – the loss of a child – on the other hand the novel includes themes such as faith, redemption through love and hope, and politics. The Gothic and dark are no longer the main elements of the novel. In McEwan’s essay “Mother Tongue,” we learn a lot about his family, but he also states this:

I read *The Female Eunuch* in 1971 and thought it was a revelation. The feminism of the 1970s spoke directly to a knot of problems at the heart of our family's life. I developed a romantic notion that if the spirit of women was liberated, the world would be healed. My female characters became the repository of all the goodness that men fell short of. In other words, pen in hand, I was going to set my mother free.<sup>109</sup>

McEwan continues to challenge the stereotypical roles of men and women and tries to fight for equality. Jack in *The Cement Garden* embodies traditional patriarchal values, creating a clash between him and his sister Julie. In *The Child in Time* Julie also portrays the stronger person in her marriage with Stephen. Even though it shares some themes with McEwan’s previous works such as regression, trying to keep the relationship and love, it sets a different mood and focus. The biggest difference from his previous works is the setting, this time the setting is not an unnamed urban wasteland or half-specified Venice, *The Child in Time* is set in London and the Home Counties.<sup>110</sup>

*The Child in Time* is situated within a distinct moment in British history. Published during the era of Thatcherism in 1987, the story takes place in a not-too-distant future. The book offers insight into the political climate of the Thatcherite government,<sup>111</sup> a period of distinctive social and economic policies<sup>112</sup>, creating a unique connection between personal and political life. It provides a vision of

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<sup>109</sup> McEwan, “Mother Tongue.”

<sup>110</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 90.

<sup>111</sup> **Thatcherism**, the political and economic ideas, and policies advanced by Margaret Thatcher, Conservative prime minister (1979–90) of the United Kingdom, particularly those involving the privatization of nationalised industries, a limited role for government, free markets, low taxes, individuality, and self-determination. (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, "Thatcherism," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 2, 2024.)

<sup>112</sup> Tolan, *New Directions Writing Post 1990*, 9.

Thatcherite Britain, with examples such as the change in school education which became “a dingy, shrunken profession; schools were up for sale to private investors, the leaving age was soon to be lowered... The idea of the more educated the population the more readily could its problems be solved had quietly faded away.”<sup>113</sup>

Here we also have characters that are ordinary people facing an extraordinary life situation as in the previous works – *The Cement Garden*, and *The Comfort of Strangers*. The main character Stephen and his wife Julie have to deal with the loss of their three-year-old daughter Kate who is kidnapped. The novel describes Stephen’s tries for reunion and acceptance of the hard fact his daughter is gone forever. The story is narrated in the third person from the point of view of Stephen, again we get situations where the narrator analyses a situation or addresses the readers directly “But time – not necessarily as it is, for who knows that, but as thought has constituted it – monomaniacally forbids second chances.”<sup>114</sup> The novel is divided into nine chapters, corresponding to nine months of pregnancy, and each chapter starts with a quote from the fictional *The Authorised Childcare Handbook* “More than coal, more even than nuclear power, children are our great resource.”<sup>115</sup>

Stephen Lewis is an accidental writer of children’s books, who is not entirely sure how this happened in his life. *Lemonade*, his first book, becomes a successful book for children despite the fact it is not meant for them. During his struggle to get his book published, he meets Charles Darke, who will intertwine with Stephen’s life. Charles is a young senior editor, who later becomes a junior Minister in the Cabinet. Under Charles’s influence, Stephen becomes a member of the Subcommittee of the Official Commission on Childcare that works on preparing a new children's manual. However, the committee's work is pointless since the manual has been already written by Charles and printed in a few copies for the men in higher places.

Even two years after the horrible incident, Stephen is still looking around during his regular weekly journey to Whitehall and is “on the watch for children, for a five-year-old girl. It was more than a habit, for a habit could be broken.”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time* (London: Picador, 1988), 28.

<sup>114</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 14.

<sup>115</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 205.

<sup>116</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 7.

Stephen wants to let his wife rest and takes his daughter with him to the supermarket, but this nice selfless act turns into a nightmare as he loses his daughter. Since then, their lives turn around and his work for the committee becomes the only obligation of his life. Other aspects of his life are put on hold “Much of this freedom he spent in his underwear, stretched out on the sofa in front of the TV, moodily sipping neat Scotch, reading magazines back to front or watching the Olympic games. At nights, the drinking increased.”<sup>117</sup> This job provides at least some human contact and keeps him on the sane side, if he is not at Whitehall, he is at home avoiding people and spending his alone time by daydreaming.

The committee’s set-up is of minimal concern to the Prime Minister. From their meetings, we can see the ridiculousness of the whole setting. Their conclusion that “Boys will be boys,”<sup>118</sup> shows it is not a serious business for them, as well as saying that children “were averse to soap and water, quick to learn and grew up all too fast”<sup>119</sup> is not a convincing way of use the manual that is supposed to be created by the committee. They all sound rather ridiculous during their meeting and arguments. We learn later that the committee serves as a coverup for the public because the manual has been already written by Charles Darke, someone who is childless. The Prime Minister fancies Charles, and we can see a resemblance between Margaret Thatcher and the Prime Minister in the book, however, we do not know the gender so we can only guess if it is a woman or a man because “there was a convention in the higher reaches of the Civil Service never to reveal, by the use of personal pronouns or other means, any opinion as to the gender of the Prime Minister.”<sup>120</sup>

Charles works as the young senior editor when he and Stephen meet for the first time and Charles becomes obsessed with Stephen’s book. Charles and his wife Thelma will be the only people outside Stephen’s family that he will keep on seeing after Kate’s kidnapping. Towards the end, Stephen becomes the only person who will know about Charles’s real reason for leaving politics and his only friend except for his wife Thelma who shows enormous patience and tolerance. We can find a child within every adult, however, in Charles’s case it has a darker turn. He is aware

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<sup>117</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 11.

<sup>118</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 11.

<sup>119</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 11.

<sup>120</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 82.

of the child within him, but later this turns into a regression when a grownup man starts acting like a ten-year-old boy playing in the woods and building tree houses. Charles tells Stephen that he knows that *Lemonade* is not supposed to be a children's book, but it is meant for a child, he says to him: "You wrote it for yourself. And this is my point. It was your ten-year-old self you addressed... This book is not for children, it's for a child, and that child is you."<sup>121</sup> We can see Stephen's book as a trigger for Charles's regression.

Charles has moved from the television business into politics just from mere curiosity. To our surprise politics is not influencing his marriage as much as it influences his mental health. After climbing a tree and tasting Charles's homemade lemonade Stephen is left speechless. He is desperately trying to look for the traces of an adult when Charles is showing him the treasures in his pockets. There is no evidence of humour or so, which leaves Stephen:

...impressed by what appeared to be very thorough research. It was as if his friend had combed libraries, diligently consulted the appropriate authorities to discover just what it was a certain kind of boy was likely to have in his pockets.<sup>122</sup>

Thelma, Charles's wife, is very supportive of him even in these hard times, they move to a cottage after he resigns from politics. She despite being childless is behaving like a mother, after Charles's regression it feels like it more than ever before. "Thelma had arrived in a snow storm to collect Stephen...He could carry out simple commands so long as he did not have to reflect on their rationale,"<sup>123</sup> when Stephen needs it the most, she represents the figure in charge to help him, and can be seen as motherly care too. For this act of kindness, it is expected of him to help them as well, especially when Charles's regression gets worse. Stephen has a hard time dealing with what has become of Charles, his visits are rare after witnessing Charles's regression state. So, when Thelma calls and asks Stephen to come as soon as he can it is because Charles is dead. Thelma asks Stephen to carry him back from the woods, and as he does, he regrets his poor visits, and he tries to

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<sup>121</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 33.

<sup>122</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 113.

<sup>123</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 42-43.

“atone for his poor showing as a friend. He had dropped his friend before, he would not drop him now.”<sup>124</sup>

Charles has been battling his illness for quite some time, it is also the reason why he is constantly changing the field of his work, probably to find purpose and a source of happiness. Thelma admits to Stephen that he already tried once to take his life while they were still living in London. She says:

‘It’s how it usually is. The manic side, the energetic, successful side was public, and the rest, the mad lows, was all for me. Moving out here was supposed to reconcile the two.’ She had walked back to where Stephen stood. ‘Except,’ he said, ‘out here I was the only public.’<sup>125</sup>

After this Stephen realizes that climbing the ladder with Charles when he first visited represents a little bit of public performance for him, because Stephen is the public there, just like Thelma. Charles’s regression might have been caused by his childhood more like the lack of it, his mother died when he was young, while Tom’s regression in *The Cement Garden* is triggered by the death of his mother.

Again, we get to the theme of time, sometimes we can have the feeling that time has been slowed down on several occasions, car accident Stephen witnesses in slow motion. Everything that happens has an impact on Stephen’s life. Starting with the incident in the supermarket, he feels like he saw someone behind Kate, but does not acknowledge the person completely. When she is taken, he is looking after a girl not a strange person with a coat. Suddenly everyone gets involved in looking for her, Stephen feels alone in the situation because his daughter “the lost child was everyone’s property.”<sup>126</sup> Yet the worst is about to come, Stephen has to go home and tell his wife he has lost their only daughter. There are no words, it is described through emotions and gestures. Stephen describes his wife to us as a “calm, watchful woman, she had a lovely smile, she loved him fiercely and liked to tell him,”<sup>127</sup> she is a violinist. What makes them closer at the beginning of the tragedy also sets them separate “Their sorrows were separate, insular, incommunicable.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 198-199.

<sup>125</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 200.

<sup>126</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 18.

<sup>127</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 21.

<sup>128</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 24.

As readers, we can observe the ways how men and women cope with difficult situations. The loss of their child creates two extremes, while Stephen is trying hard maybe even obsessively find his lost daughter, Julia stays at home and does nothing. Eventually, it becomes impossible to eat together or talk to each other, this great loss created a wall between them. “Their loss had set them on separate paths... Being together heightened their sense of loss.”<sup>129</sup> in the heat of the moment, this is the best solution for them, to be able to reconcile later.

While they live separately, they still keep in touch by exchanging postcards, based on these postcards Stephen decides to visit her after several months of no in-person contact. On the way he experiences something weird related to time, he ends up outside the pub called The Bell. Through a window, he thinks he sees his parents when they were young and later his mother confirms that it happened some time ago. Stephen sees himself as a foetus who decides his own fate, and this experience leaves him in shock. He feels terror standing outside The Bell, when he wakes up in Julie’s (their) bed, the feelings between them are different, suddenly closer.

Stephen took Julie’s hand and felt the sinuous compliance of her body communicated along the length of her arm, and as he drew her across his lap and kissed her, he did not doubt that what was happening now, and what would happen as a consequence of now, was not separate from what he had experienced earlier that day.<sup>130</sup>

Those two moments are without any doubt somehow connected, the desire to belong is for a few moments stronger than the loss they have both experienced. We will learn the consequence of this meeting several months later, it will be a very happy one in the end which was caused by their intimate moment when everything felt a little bit different for a moment until it is again the same feeling they have experienced before:

They squeezed into the narrow, lukewarm bath, taking with them wine which they drank from the bottle... The lost child was between

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<sup>129</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 52-53.

<sup>130</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 63.

them again. The daughter they did not have was waiting for them outside. Stephen knew he would be leaving soon.<sup>131</sup>

Both still have a lot to deal with, and this requires some time to heal.

Stephen still holds onto the idea of Kate getting older, and in the end, this might lead to moving on. He fully realizes it is a fantasy, but it keeps him going. When Kate's birthday approaches, he does a very irrational thing, he goes out and buys her presents. Deep down Stephen knows it is a step back, but he makes a justification for it, this is "an act of faith in his daughter's continued existence."<sup>132</sup> Instead of getting one symbolic present, he goes insane with presents, later when he is packing them, he comes to the realization of how hopeless this whole act is he turns back to drinking. He and Julie have their way of coping with their loss, while he drinks and continues his search, Julie is trying to find her solitude alone to come to her terms with the loss. On his way to lunch with the Prime Minister, Stephen experiences an event that turns things around for him. He mistakes another girl for Kate, and he follows into a classroom. This encounter marks a fresh start, he starts being more rational.

Stephen learns surprising news about Julie, while he is visiting and helping Thelma. The whole time he has been thinking that Julie is completely lost for him, but the opposite is true he was just too blind to notice that Julie was in front of him. After a call, he is on his way to Julie where there is a big surprise waiting for him. On the way he manages to fulfil his boyhood dream, travelling on the railway engine. When they are together, after three years they can talk openly about the loss:

It was then, three years late, that they began to cry together at last for the lost, irreplaceable child who would not grow older for them, whose characteristic look and movement could never be dispelled by time.<sup>133</sup>

While their second child is being born, they realize that "they could never redeem the loss of their daughter, they would love her through their new child, and

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<sup>131</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 65.

<sup>132</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 126.

<sup>133</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 215.

never close their minds to the possibility of her return.”<sup>134</sup> The gender of the baby is never mentioned, but it is not an important thing at the moment. The most important thing is that they are connected again, and the family is restored.

Primarily we are concerned with the child and the search for it. In the novel, the search is not only for Stephen’s lost daughter but also for the child that lives within us. Charles, as I already mentioned is not only looking for it, instead, he is embracing this little voice inside him and regressing into this carefree world of a ten-year-old boy. On the other hand, Stephen is trying to fight this feeling, however, in his search for Kate, he reaches some sort of innocence through the memories of her. It has been interesting to watch how the spheres become connected, private, and public. “*The Child in Time* was very much an attempt to write about something quite intimate, like childcare, and something quite public, like a childcare manual.”<sup>135</sup>

#### **4.2.2. The Truthfulness in *Atonement***

*Atonement* belongs among the number of McEwan’s successful novels, in Natasha Alden’s essay, we learn what the novel’s publication has brought upon McEwan. He was accused of plagiarising some parts of the novel from an autobiography by Lucilla Andrews *No Time for Romance*. Ian McEwan had to defend himself, in the newspaper he admitted he had used Andrews’s autobiography as a source of inspiration, however, he mentioned her in the Acknowledgements. The reason for using Andrews’s work was due to historical accuracy, and out of respect so McEwan could portray the suffering of the character’s generation.<sup>136</sup> Of course, there were voices supporting him and those who were against him, which raises a question about the use of historical material for accuracy in historical novels.

The literary work *Atonement* presents a unique hybrid of memoir and fiction, wherein the character of Briony plays a pivotal role in the narrative. First Briony’s attempt to prove that Robbie is innocent and has not committed the crime she accused him of, secondly it is her try how to atone for the wrongdoing by giving Robbie and Cecilia a happy ending. This is presented through a “novel-within-a-

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<sup>134</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, 215.

<sup>135</sup> Reynold and Noakes, *Ian McEwan: The Essential Guide*, 12.

<sup>136</sup> Groes, *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 57-58.

novel” format, which allows Briony to explore her guilt and strive to make amends for her actions.<sup>137</sup>

The novel is divided into four parts – three major parts and an epilogue. The first part which is set in 1935, shows the modernist technique, the absence of omniscient narration. Although this part is narrated in the third person, in each chapter we see the events through the eyes of different characters with the exception in chapter five when we get both Lola and Paul. Briony Tallis narrates most of the first part, later we realize she plays the central part of the plot and its telling. Her narrative raises the question of whether a happy ending is possible, and whether it depends on our point of view. Briony’s earlier thought “...how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?”<sup>138</sup> leads the reader to a question of what had *really* happened, whether the happy ending is real, or a fiction created by Briony to reach some atonement and ease the guilt.<sup>139</sup>

Part One is set at the Tallis family estate, it recalls events of one summer day/night in 1935, and it is influenced by contemporary writers such as Virginia Woolf, Rosamond Lehmann, and Elizabeth Bowen. It follows the story of Briony Tallis, a thirteen-year-old girl, with a vivid memory, which later causes unhappiness and sadness to many people. In the interview, Ian McEwan comments on the danger of imagination, where finding the line between reality and something unreal is very unclear.<sup>140</sup> Briony is the youngest child of the family, but she has a great relationship with her older brother Leon and sister Cecilia. For the arrival of her beloved brother, Briony writes a play *The Trials of Arabella* to play with her cousins Lola, Jackson, and Pierrot Quincey.

Briony loves writing, it is her passion and a source of her pleasure. She has found a new satisfaction “...miniaturization. A world could be made in five pages, and one that was more pleasing than a model farm.”<sup>141</sup> She enjoys creating a whole world within a few pages, unlike her sister she is a very tidy person which is reflected in her writings. Secrets are another great passion of Briony, even if she has some herself nobody would know. Her world full of order will come to an end

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<sup>137</sup> Groes, *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 60.

<sup>138</sup> Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (New York: Nan. A. Talese, 2002), 350.

<sup>139</sup> Groes, *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 73.

<sup>140</sup> Reynold and Noakes, *Ian McEwan: The Essential Guide*, 19.

<sup>141</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, 7.

when her cousins move in with them because their parents are getting a divorce. Since Briony always looks up words for her writing she knows what “divorce” means but does not find it interesting for her writings. She tries to involve her cousins in the play but realizes there are differences between them, and they do not understand her intentions.

Her sister, Cecilia is home from college and most of the time she is bored and looking for an adventure. She admits that Cambridge changed her, but she is still indecisive about whether she should stay or leave home. Honestly, nothing holds her back there, her father also spends most of the time in London in the office. She is aware but she also “simply liked to feel that she was prevented from leaving, that she was needed. From time to time, she persuaded herself she remained for Briony’s sake, or to help her mother...”<sup>142</sup> Her desire to be needed is fulfilled later, she helps Robbie to survive in the prison and the war, and her sister Briony decides to study to become a nurse just like her.

There is a vase in the family that has greater significance, it was given as a gift for saving a life. In the most important scene by the fountain, it gets damaged a bit but still can be repaired. Later we will read this scene from three different perspectives, and it will change those lives forever. It is interesting to observe the difference between Briony’s view and her thoughts compared to how things happened. Nothing is really how it looks at first glance. Later we learn that the vase gets broken beyond repair, signalling that Cecilia and Robbie will not be together as they both die during the war. Briony will never be able to earn their forgiveness to ease her guilt.

We can see that the father figure in *Atonement* has a similar function as the mother in *The Cement Garden*, the hidden authority. Mr. Tallis spends a lot of time in London, but he calls every day. Although Cecilia obeys his father’s rule about cigarettes and women, she does so only in his presence. In the presence of her mother, she does not care at all, smokes in the house and addresses her as Emily instead of her mother. Robbie’s father is not present at all, he left when he was young. He is thinking about him during the war on his way to Dunkirk. He has this distinct memory of his father “of being carried on his father’s shoulders... He would like those shoulders now. His missing father had left few memories ... Nearly every

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<sup>142</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, 20.

man here had a father who remembered northern France... He wanted such a father, dead or alive.<sup>143</sup> Mr. Tallis presents a small substitution for a father but mostly only on the financial side, he pays for Robbie's studies but is not a proper father figure.

When the children are rehearsing the play, Briony gets disappointed as nothing goes according to the original plan. Lola gets the leading role by blackmailing Briony and being a little manipulative. In the end, Lola takes over every role, being the leading role and the director. Briony can only watch how her control over her play is slipping away. Although Lola is better at managing her younger brothers, Briony wishes she had just given her brother Leon the script instead of creating the performance. She sadly says:

The simplest way to have impressed Leon would have been to write him a story and put it in his hands herself, and watch as he read it... A story was direct and simple, allowing nothing to come between herself and her reader—no intermediaries with their private ambitions or incompetence, no pressures of time, no limits on resources.<sup>144</sup>

Briony has a romantic soul, therefore it makes her overprotective of her family. The fountain situation marks Briony's entry into the adult world "This was not a fairy tale, this was the real, the adult world in which frogs did not address princesses..."<sup>145</sup> However, Briony misinterprets a simple situation of retrieving a vase from the fountain during this scene where Cecilia declines Robbie's assistance in retrieving the vase and instead, she undresses and performs the task herself. It is crucial to acknowledge that there is no actual danger or a threat to her sister's life, and the limited view of Briony's window fails to provide her with the complete context, she can only see what is happening, but she cannot hear any conversation. She finds it inspiring for her new story, giving her the idea of three different points of view.

Robbie and Briony share their love for literature, he writes poetry and is a dreamer just like her. That is a reason why Briony likes him so much. He studied

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<sup>143</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, 227.

<sup>144</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, 35.

<sup>145</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, 37.

literature but now decides to become a doctor because he sees something romantic behind this change:

Birth, death, and frailty in between. Rise and fall—this was the doctor’s business, and it was literature’s too... feel the fevered hand begin to cool and reflect, in the manner that only literature and religion teach, on the puniness and nobility of mankind . . .<sup>146</sup>

When Robbie gives her a letter for her sister Cecilia, where he expresses his deepest desires. Briony knows it is wrong to open it and read it, but she does it anyway and reading it stirs unpleasant emotions in her:

With the letter, something elemental, brutal, perhaps even criminal had been introduced, some principle of darkness, and even in her excitement over the possibilities, she did not doubt that her sister was in some way threatened and would need her help.<sup>147</sup>

Briony has just entered the adult world, and it is obvious that she cannot recognize a love letter and does not comprehend many things in the right way. She is still too young to understand fully how adult relationships work.

The second time she encounters Robbie and Cecilia is in the library, where they have reckless sex in a house full of children and guests. A situation that tests and shows again Briony’s immaturity. Unfortunately for Robbie, she has already decided who he is based on their previous encounters. Based on what she sees, she thinks Robbie is a violent person who decided to hurt her sister:

Briony stared past Robbie’s shoulder into the terrified eyes of her sister. He had turned to look back at the intruder, but he did not let Cecilia go. He had pushed his body against hers, pushing her dress right up above her knee and had trapped her where the shelves met at right angles.<sup>148</sup>

The aftermath of her misjudged interpretations becomes a lens through which McEwan explores deeper themes of guilt and the enduring consequences of one’s actions.

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<sup>146</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, 87.

<sup>147</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, 106-107.

<sup>148</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, 116.

Robbie also recalls the scene from the library, he sees Briony in general as a good person but at that moment, he realizes that “he had never hated anyone until now,”<sup>149</sup> for interrupting them. On the other hand, we can see that he understands Briony’s thinking well and why she has entered the library:

He saw it clearly, how it had happened: she had opened a sealed envelope to read his note and been disgusted, and in her obscure way felt betrayed. She had come looking for her sister—no doubt with the exhilarated notion of protecting her, or admonishing her, and had heard a noise from behind the closed library door.<sup>150</sup>

When the boys disappear leaving behind them just a goodbye letter, everyone goes outside looking for them. During this time Lola gets raped and Briony finds her but cannot see who the person running away is. Although Briony has already encountered sexual intercourse twice during one day, she cannot distinguish between rape and consensual sex. The following conversation between Briony and Lola is purely directed by Briony, she is sure she is right and that it was Robbie whom she saw. She manages to persuade Lola, that it must have been Robbie who assaulted her. She has this image in her head of him based on the previous encounters of the day. Lola takes on the role of a victim, unsure about who did that but waits for Briony's statement and plays along. Briony’s statement breaks the whole Tallis family. Cecilia is the only stands behind Robbie, believing him, unlike the rest of the family. Interestingly Paul Marshal, Leon’s friend is never mentioned as a potential suspect, probably due to his wealth of course.

The second part of the book unfolds against the backdrop of the Second World War, providing an opportunity to delve into the broader implications of human action. McEwan’s tone has changed now, writing about death, and casualties of the war, his words got less complex as Robbie is serving in the war, entering a darker theme, portraying the saddest parts of the war – “Minutes later they passed five bodies in a ditch, three women, two children. Their suitcases lay around them.”<sup>151</sup> During those horrifying times, Robbie’s mind is with Cecilia who helps him survive. Before the war, Robbie had served three years in prison, and we learn

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<sup>149</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, 130.

<sup>150</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, 130.

<sup>151</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, 206.

that the whole time he was in touch with Cecilia by letters. After his release and before his departure they spent a day together. Their love is still there, this has not changed however prison has left a mark on Robbie.

In one of Cecilia's letters, we find out that they – she and Briony – plan on clearing Robbie's name. Cecilia is surprised that Briony becomes a nurse at the same hospital as she was. They plan on being finally together and happy, and she would always tell Robbie: "I'll wait for you. Come back."<sup>152</sup> The second part ends, and we are not sure whether Robbie lives or dies.

In the third part, Briony now works as a nurse in London, after one horrific night, she comes to the realization, that everyone knew, even she "that a person is, among all else, a material thing, easily torn, not easily mended."<sup>153</sup> During this night spent with soldiers at the hospital, she learns how easily can one's life become destroyed but fixing it is almost impossible. That is what she has caused to Cecilia and Robbie, Briony ruined their lives within one day, not being able to fix it, even after all the time has passed. After seeing all the wounded soldiers that night, and not being able to help them besides offering some comfort, she sees how hard it is to fix what has been broken, just like a vase, even if you manage to fix it, it can leak, and never will be the same as before. The vase and the war become the metaphor for the fragility of human life and relationships and the challenges of achieving redemption in a world torn apart by a conflict.

Briony has never met with Robbie and Cecilia again, and Cecilia could not do what she told Robbie about in the letter. Instead of attending Lola's wedding, Briony goes back to the hospital. We learn the timeline of events, Briony is in London, after Robbie's and Cecilia's deaths.<sup>154</sup> Briony has changed, for someone who loves order and tidiness, she works in a hospital carrying bedpans and so much more. She no longer is the baby of the family and is taking care of herself alone.

Her job still requires order, but the nurses only have surnames on their tags and an hour break during the training days. When Briony was a child, she used to write and had a lot of imagination, now when she writes to her family, she is very brief in her letters. However, she keeps a diary, where she writes but of course, changes the names and it is purely for her purposes to get rid of thoughts. In the

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<sup>152</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, 201.

<sup>153</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, 287.

<sup>154</sup> Groes, *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 62-63.

hospital, she runs from one duty to another with less or no free time. After Briony has to take care of the soldiers from Dunkirk she realizes how she “had been too wrapped up in her own tiny concerns.”<sup>155</sup>

In the epilogue, we learn the author is Briony herself. She is now old and suffering from the same disease as McEwan’s mother, dementia. Followed by a final twist, Briony informs the reader that she had made up the part about Robbie and Cecilia living together, they both died during the war. Her act of letting their love last forever on the pages of the book was her atonement for her crime. She explains what the novel means for her and asks: “How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?”<sup>156</sup> She is the one creating the whole story. Only readers can judge and decide whether it is enough to deem her actions to be forgiven for the mistake she made as a child.

#### **4.2.3. Conclusion**

We can see the development from the most obscure themes like death or murder towards socially oriented ones – family relationships – in both works. In *The Child in Time* the main topic is the loss but also the love and hope for reconciliation. The loss of a child is not a pleasant experience, and Stephen and Julie adopt different ways in the healing process. We might feel sorry for Stephen when his wife moves away, and their communication is reduced as well as their time together. The truth is they both needed time, we realize that towards the end. As parents, they need this time to come to terms with the loss of their daughter so they can be ready for what is coming next in their lives: a new beginning, a new life.

There is still a connection to his previous works too, Charles undergoes a stage of regression just like Tom in *The Cement Garden*. His regression is not connected to any traumatic experience, probably an illness combined with the stress created in the political sphere. We read about his behaviour shifting from an adult to a ten-year-old boy. He seems happy while he plays in the forest close to their cabin where they move with his wife. All this time he spends in a regression state is not healing only postponing the inevitable suicide that will come. We learn that

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<sup>155</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, 267-268.

<sup>156</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, 350.

Thelma, his wife knows, she just hopes it will not happen. Through both Charles and Stephen, we see true about politics, and how it is manipulated to look the best in the public eye. The commission is purely created for the public, it has no significance in decisions.

In *Atonement*, we read about the before and after, the effect that is caused by false accusation and the feeling of guilt afterwards. As readers, we learn that seeing a situation does not mean we understood it correctly because there is always more that is hidden from us. When a girl with her imagination ruins someone's life and causes the family to fall apart, we realize how important it is to pay attention to the possibility there is more than we can see. Later in life, Briony tries to atone for her wrongdoing by writing using her imagination to create a happy ending for them and by becoming a nurse. Since McEwan includes historical moments, we read about the horrors of the Second World War and Dunkirk. As readers, we wonder if it is real or fiction until the epilogue where we find out the truth about the whole story. The happy ending is Briony's way how to get her atonement.

Both works underwent significant changes in themes and storylines, but some remained. Julie in *The Child in Time* is presented as stronger than Stephen, she is the same strong woman as the girl Julie in *The Cement Garden*. McEwan keeps challenging gender roles is one of the most obvious in this novel, the motherly figure we see in Thelma. The novel is not only about looking for a lost child but also about the search for the child within us. The structure of *Atonement* is particularly noteworthy due to its incorporation of metafiction, which results in narrative experimentation that evokes uncertainty in the reader regarding the truthfulness of the whole story.

### 4.3. Political Phase

Ian McEwan is known for his works that delve deep into complex social and personal issues, along with many other uncomfortable themes. In many of his works, one of the recurring themes is the male-female power relations that are based on psychological differences and social dynamics. However, this theme is notably absent in his novel *Amsterdam*.<sup>157</sup> Even though the only influential woman character dies, her influence over the men in her life remains, and the novel focuses

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<sup>157</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 186.

more on their reactions and subsequent actions. On the other hand, *The Children Act* is narrated from the point of view of a female judge. These two works both touch upon the issues that surround medicine and medical ethics, such as euthanasia in *Amsterdam* or the conflict created by treatment between religion and the welfare of the child in *The Children Act*.<sup>158</sup> We as readers are presented with new themes and topics that will still leave a mark.

*Amsterdam* is often viewed as “an inferior Booker winner”<sup>159</sup> and has been a subject of divided opinions. While some critics consider it to be an expertly crafted satire, others view it as underwhelming. Nevertheless, inside the novella *Amsterdam* a piece of an article from *Sunday Times* written by John Sutherland is cited, he describes this piece in brief:

The novel twists and turns unexpectedly...*Amsterdam* is an enigma...The narrative pivots on mystery and a blinding last-chapter revelation. On the way, the reader can relish the black tints of the prose...McEwan has a master’s control over his instrument.<sup>160</sup>

The Booker Prize for Literature creates two poles, one group is praising McEwan's ability to express societal struggles while others calling into question the award's merit. The social satire is portrayed through two main characters – Clive Linley and Vernon Halliday – both representing the successful men of the Thatcher-Major era.<sup>161</sup> He delves into the depths of human nature, examining the darker corners of desire, ambition, and betrayal. It is an exploration of the complexities of relationships and the moral dilemmas that arise from them.

We will be continuing with the exploration of moral dilemmas, human relationships and the British legal system in the novel, *The Children Act*. The story follows the life of Fiona Maye, a judge who is presented with a challenging case concerning a teenage boy who, due to his religious beliefs as a Jehovah's Witness, refuses to undergo a life-saving blood transfusion. The novel explores themes such as the conflict between religious convictions and medical treatment, the role of the judiciary in society, and the intricacies of personal relationships. Moreover, this

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<sup>158</sup> Vivek Santayana, “‘The Children Act’ reviewed by Vivek Santayana,” *The Polyphony*, September 26, 2015.

<sup>159</sup> Head, *Ian McEwan*, 24.

<sup>160</sup> Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam* (London: Vintage, 1998).

<sup>161</sup> Head, *Ian McEwan*, 24.

chapter delves into the character of Fiona Maye and how her personal and professional lives intertwine throughout the book. We highlight the significance of the novel's examination of the legal and ethical predicaments confronted by judges and lawyers and their resultant impact on their personal and professional lives. The Boston Globe has praised McEwan's writing and lauded his wit:

*The Children Act* manages to be highly subtle and page-turningly dramatic at once... Only a master could manage, in barely over 200 pages, to engage so many ideas, leaving nothing neatly answered.<sup>162</sup>

McEwan's work is a thought-provoking and unforgettable journey through the complexities of human relationships, the choices we make in our lives and their inevitable consequences.

#### **4.3.1. Morality and Hypocrisy in *Amsterdam***

The novel earned McEwan an international reputation as it won the Booker Prize for Fiction in 1998, however, winning the prize raised mixed reactions among critics. Generally raising the suspicion that it has earned the prize in connection to his previous works and efforts rather than the novel *Amsterdam* itself.<sup>163</sup> And some of the reactions are not positive and nice towards his work.

Will Self was right, on that live TV commentary show on the Booker, to do his nut when this won the prize: it really is meant to go to novels, not five-finger exercises. A more fitting award, we feel, is that of the modestly coveted Paperback of the Week slot.<sup>164</sup>

On the other hand, others expressed their positive views. Nicholas Lezard in his review for *The Guardian* reacts to Will Self's comment, and considers Ian McEwan "a damned good writer," even though it is a shorter novel he says that due to its "compulsive nature of prose: you just don't want to stop reading it."<sup>165</sup> Those comments in favour of the work are mostly concerned with the topic of the novel and its readability. According to Alain de Botton the novel *Amsterdam* is "a pitiless study of the darker aspects of male psychology, of male paranoia, emotional

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<sup>162</sup> Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Vintage Books, 2014), cover.

<sup>163</sup> Groes, *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 116.

<sup>164</sup> Nicholas Lezard, "Morality Bites," *The Guardian*, April 24, 1999.

<sup>165</sup> Lezard, "Morality Bites."

frigidity, sexual jealousy, professional rivalry and performance anxiety.”<sup>166</sup> The examination of those characters and their morals is compelling, however, none of us would wish to spend a day with them.

In *Amsterdam* we can observe the connection to his previous works, in a certain way it recalls other works. When Clive has to attend the identity recognition at the police station it raises the same question of “the fallibility of memory and perception”<sup>167</sup> as in *Enduring Love* or *Atonement* Briony’s accusation, while Garmony’s transvestism relates to little Tom’s behaviour in *The Cement Garden* who dresses like a pretty girl, however, their reason for this action differs. While Garmony knows what he is doing, Tom’s behaviour is a response to the trauma. There is a difference between his first novels and *Amsterdam*, all the previous heavy topics such as incest, violence, ritual murder, and paedophilia are not completely forgotten but so much is present now. Instead, McEwan chooses other demanding topics to write about – euthanasia, assisted murder and transvestitism. His language changes a little bit, it is milder now and even though there still is a heavy topic present the original shock and disgust of his previous novels it not there.

*Amsterdam* can be placed within the psychological novel among much of McEwan’s work. We come across sections of three indirect thoughts – the form of indirect speech without the introduction “he/she said that or he/she thought this” – which gives us readers the inside into the character’s opinions, thoughts, worries or plans. Such an example is at the very beginning when Clive observes Garmony:<sup>168</sup>

What had attracted her? Garmony was a strange-looking fellow: large head, with wavy black hair that was all his own, a terrible pallor, thin unsensual lips.<sup>169</sup>

Those thoughts do not belong to the narrator but to Clive himself. As the novel proceeds, the readers enter the minds of the other characters at some point as well, mostly the two main protagonists’ – Clive Linley and Vernon Halliday – encountering their fears, uncertainties, moods, or thoughts on morality.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Alain de Botton, “Books: Another study in emotional frigidity,” *The Independent*, September 12, 1999.

<sup>167</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 190.

<sup>168</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 192.

<sup>169</sup> Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 13.

<sup>170</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 192.

It is also a social novel, to be more precise a social satire with a political dimension. It is putting focus mainly on a particular member of the generation of men.<sup>171</sup> Men from higher social circles like politicians, publishers, journalists, musicians, or artists who were the young men of the 1960s and gained their respectability during the 1980s and 1990s. Clive and Vernon are typical examples of such a man. Clive makes an observation at Molly's funeral about the mourning people around him "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.*"<sup>172</sup> Yet again we see how the private and public intertwine, and social expectations fight with the inner self of the characters. We can also say it is in a way a moral fable, as the story develops Clive and Vernon are challenged with their own moral dilemmas and they both will fail spectacularly.

The novel is divided into five parts, we notice unlike his previously mentioned work, the women are not so visible, yet they still influence the main events. They are not mentioned much only at the beginning we start with the funeral of Molly Lane, later Garmony's wife has some spotlight in the story only as a supporter of her husband. *Amsterdam* engages with the Thatcherite Era, extending to the premiership of John Major, putting focus on the entrepreneur's self-promotion.<sup>173</sup> It is set in the mid-1990s, centring around the moral dilemmas of two good friends Clive and Vernon who are in the end punished for their morals, stupidity, and ego, and so is the hypocritical Garmony. The only person who comes as a winner is George Lane, who is equally immoral as the rest of them, and starts a relationship with Vernon's wife after his death. The world in the novel is corrupt, there is not a single character that would provide any moral judgement or standard, and all characters at some point act amoral without realising it.<sup>174</sup>

We have a third-person omniscient narration, the narrator takes the readers through the life and decisions of the main characters. The narrator speaks in an educated way but remains simple. The story is full of sarcasm and irony, showing the world of prominent people who are influenced by the political, social, and

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<sup>171</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 8.

<sup>172</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 11-12.

<sup>173</sup> Groes, *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 116.

<sup>174</sup> Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 17.

cultural life but on the other hand are the contributors as well. The story opens with the funeral of Molly Lane, a famous reporter, photographer, and restaurant critic and the important link between the characters – her husband and her former lovers. At the funeral we get introduced not only to her obsessive husband George Lane, but all her lovers too, Vernon Halliday, who is a successful editor of the broadsheet *The Judge*, Clive Linley, a successful composer and Julian Garmony, Foreign Secretary, and the candidate for the Prime Minister.

The novel opens with the description of the two men attending the funeral of Molly Lane, who died after a rapid illness. “Two former lovers of Molly Lane stood waiting outside the crematorium chapel with their backs to the February chill,”<sup>175</sup> Clive and Vernon are facing an unexpected event that will turn their lives upside down and disorganize their lives. As the story unfolds, we meet all the men characters that have to deal with the loss of the most important woman of their lives. Molly is described as a “lovely girl”<sup>176</sup> and a positive person, even though it is common knowledge she had several lovers and cheats on her husband who never truly has her just for himself until she falls sick. Clive remarks on her situation as “brain-dead and in George’s clutches,”<sup>177</sup> while he regrets not marrying her, it is only a sentiment, he cannot know if it would make a difference in her behaviour or her life. Her death causes both her former lovers to think about their health, and both unexpectedly experience weird feelings within their bodies which evokes the question of euthanasia. The more Clive thinks about Molly’s faith in the way she dies and how helpless she is in the final stage, he realises how vulnerable they are as human beings. Her memory daunts both of them, and they eventually become paranoid. Clive invites Vernon over to talk to his best friend and shares this unbearable pain with him:

Just supposing I did get ill in a major way, like Molly, and I started to go downhill and make terrible mistakes—you know, errors of judgment, not knowing the names of things or who I was, that kind of thing. I’d like to know there was someone who’d help me to finish

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<sup>175</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 3.

<sup>176</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 7.

<sup>177</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 5.

it ... I mean, help me to die. Especially if I got to the point where I couldn't make the decision for myself, or act on it.<sup>178</sup>

It is a proposal to use euthanasia upon him in case he gets seriously ill in the future, so he does not end up in the same situation as Molly. We can already sense this favour placed upon Vernon will be the end of both of them, as he accepts it with one condition that Clive will do the same for him, at this moment they place a death sentence over each other without even realising the full consequence of this initial conversation.

Throughout the story, we follow both of their lives, and we witness their failures in both spheres, moral and professional, which leads to their death. They commit a double suicide with medical assistance. Since euthanasia is forbidden in Britain, the author chooses another state, the Netherlands, where the laws are being liberalised. A direct connection between the title and the place where it takes place is made, Amsterdam. The capital city of the Netherlands, where Clive's symphony rehearsal is taking place and where both former friends meet under the false pretext of reconciliation, with no regrets on either side because Clive admits "his research and planning had been meticulous. It was going to happen, and he experienced a thrill."<sup>179</sup>

Molly is the connecting link between them, deep down they have very different personalities. Clive thinks of himself as a genius, a true artist who devotes everything to his work, composing music represents a means of communication.

There were moments in the early morning... the thought was, quite simply, that it might not be going too far to say that he was ... a genius. There hadn't been many. Among his countrymen, Shakespeare was a genius, of course, and Darwin and Newton, he had heard it said. Purcell, almost. Britten, less so, though within range. But there had been no Beethovens here.<sup>180</sup>

He is at the peak of his career, being asked by the commission to compose a "Millenium Symphony" which would make him a remembered and celebrated man. Before their euthanasia trick, we learn that quite the opposite happened his

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<sup>178</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 48-49.

<sup>179</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 150.

<sup>180</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 133.

symphony was a disaster with a plagiarised last part. Clive is struggling to finish, he locks himself at home and rarely leaves the house, only moving between his study and bedroom. He plans a trip to the Lake District to find inspiration since hiking worked for him last time. While being there he fails miserably due to his selfishness. He decides not to help a woman who is being threatened by the rapist just to save his artistic muse. After hours of hiking, the inspiration comes and Clive wants to keep it at all costs, even a human life. He thoughts about intertwining their fight then after some hesitating moments decides not to interrupt them and rather moves. He does so for his own benefit and does not get influenced by other people's needs or problems. The most striking is the inner justification for his action of not helping:

The melody could not have survived the psychic flurry. Given the width of the ridge and the numerous paths that crossed it, how easily he could have missed them. It was as if he weren't there. He wasn't there. He was in his music His fate, their fate, separate paths. It was not his business. This was his business, and it wasn't easy, and he wasn't asking for anyone's help.<sup>181</sup>

Vernon appears to be the opposite of Clive in his attitude towards moral and personal values. He is pragmatic and determined to save his newspaper no matter the cost. In comparison to Clive, he does not let his morals influence him too much, especially in reaching his goals, on the other hand, Clive's behaviour shifts later in the novel and in a way, he starts to act similarly. When Vernon gets his hands on compromising pictures of Garmony, he intends to publish them without any hesitation. He believes he is doing his country a favour and is even proud of himself, not feeling any heaviness and moral shame.

Where others would have felt a weight upon their shoulders, he felt an enabling lightness... Hypocrisy would be exposed, the country would stay in Europe, capital punishment and compulsory conscription would remain a crank's dream, social welfare would

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<sup>181</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 88-89.

survive in some form or other, the global environment would get a decent chance, and Vernon was on the point of breaking into song.<sup>182</sup>

At the same time, he is a hypocrite himself, he used to advocate for the sexual revolution, defend those people, and fight against banning movies. Now he is about to publish photos of Garmony in women's dresses, exposing him as a transvestite. As a politician, he should not be seen in public like this, but Vernon's action contradicts everything he fought for before. Unfortunately, for Vernon, he does not escape his public punishment. Garmony's wife in her speech supporting her husband refers to Vernon as a man who has "the mentality of a blackmailer, and the moral stature of a flea."<sup>183</sup> Her influence on the public is great, which results in Vernon's resignation and his loss of everything.

While Vernon remains more or less the same, Clive develops throughout the story, from a sensitive person becomes an insensitive individual who doubts everyone and everything, especially his friendship with Vernon. After a minor quarrel with him, he cannot help but evaluate their friendship, realising the imbalance which annoys him even more. Clive lets his anger influence his judgment and the goodhearted person is gone thinking about all the imbalance:

... Clive had been aware of somewhere in his heart and had always pushed away, disliking himself for unworthy thoughts. Until now... when Vernon stayed for a year and never once offered to pay rent.<sup>184</sup>

Their first bigger disagreement even deepens those thoughts. They argue about the photos of Garmony, while Vernon is sure he will publish them, Clive is against the idea. He brings out the dead Molly and says to Vernon that he is betraying her and her private life, trying to play on his feelings and morals. Later Vernon interrogates Clive about his hike at the Lake District, he knows about the woman and put two and two together that it must have been the rapist. He brings out the moral duty on Clive "This is outrageous. Go to the police, Clive. It's your moral duty."<sup>185</sup> This moment is the start of their war, out of all people he is not the one who should be telling another person about morals. Vernon is angry, he calls

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<sup>182</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 111.

<sup>183</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 125.

<sup>184</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 65.

<sup>185</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 119.

the police on Clive thinking he can get him into some trouble. Clive is not accused of anything, but the situation makes him even angrier, so when Vernon gets fired, he sends him a note saying: “*Your threat appals me. So does your journalism. You deserve to be sacked. Clive.*”<sup>186</sup> A message that will start a series of events leading to the end of their friendship and lives.

Almost by the end of the novel, all the characters have lost something. Molly Lane is dead. Julian Garmony loses his chances of becoming the Prime Minister. Clive Linley finishes his “Millennial Symphony” which will turn out to be a huge failure. And Vernon Halliday loses his job, lover, and good friend. They all lose the most important thing in their lives. To save the friendship at least, Clive invites Vernon to Amsterdam where his symphony is rehearsing. By the time they are both there, he has decided on the faith of his friend not knowing Vernon did the same thing. McEwan confirms for us what we might have suspected since their first argument, they cannot forgive each other, rather they choose to kill each other as they agreed in the beginning. Both believe they are fulfilling their friend’s wish as they both experience the troubles and difficulties of the other person. Garmony and George are picking them up in Amsterdam and bringing their coffins home when Garmony speaks to the doctor, George can admire the faces of his old friends:

They looked surprisingly at peace. Vernon had his lips parted slightly, as though he were halfway through saying something interesting, while Clive had the happy air of a man drowning in applause.<sup>187</sup>

#### **4.3.2. The Clash of Law and Religion in *The Children Act***

The novel *The Children Act* is another thought-provoking work that delves into the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by a British High Court judge whose task is making a pivotal decision regarding a life-or-death situation of children. The narrative was adapted into a film in 2017, notably the screenplay was penned by McEwan himself. The novel explores intricate themes, including religion, the law, and the human condition, focusing on the conflict between religion, personal autonomy, and the welfare of a child. McEwan draws his inspiration from genuine cases that were presided over by the same judge, Sir Alan Ward, in 1990 and

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<sup>186</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 138.

<sup>187</sup> McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 176.

another one in 2000.<sup>188</sup> Nevertheless, all the characters in the story are purely fictional, and there is no semblance to the real-life cases that served as the basis for the story. Importantly he is highlighting the significance of the judiciary's role in society and the possible clashes and issues.<sup>189</sup>

The novel raises questions about the relationship between law and morality, the limits of individual freedom, and the responsibilities of parents and the state in protecting children's welfare. The story follows Fiona Maye, a high court judge in London's family court, who must make a last-minute-call ruling on whether a 17-year-old Jehovah's Witness,<sup>190</sup> Adam Henry, should be forced to receive a blood transfusion that would save his life. The novel delves into the complexities of this case and the ethical dilemmas that arise. Fiona is presented with a difficult decision that challenges her own beliefs and values, as well as the laws of the state. She must weigh Adam's religious beliefs against his right to live, the rights of his parents to make decisions for him, and her own responsibility to protect children's welfare. McEwan also explores the personal and professional challenges Fiona faces as a judge. The novel presents a vivid portrayal of the workings of the family court, its procedures, and the intricate relationships between the judges, lawyers, and social workers. Fiona's job is emotionally draining, and she must constantly balance her professional responsibilities with her personal life. Her marriage is strained, and her husband Jack temporarily leaves her. McEwan uses Fiona's story to explore broader issues related to the legal and moral aspects of making decisions and the consequences of those decisions. Fiona, the protagonist, acts as the voice of reason in the face of religious narrow-mindedness. The novel raises questions about the nature of justice, the limits of individual freedom, and the moral responsibilities of judges, parents, and religion.

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<sup>188</sup> The **conjoined twins** are linked to a case from 2001 of Gracie and Rosie Attard, involving twins conjoined at the abdomen. The weaker twin was slowly killing the other child, and the judge found in favour of the hospital. Another case of **abduction of a child** by the father is connected to the case of 2000, in which the mother fled with her two children from Spain to England. The main case of the **Jehovah's Witness** boy suffering from Leukaemia who is refusing treatment is linked to the case of the 1990s. ("The Children Act (film): Assessing the similarities between the film and the real-life family cases it is said to portray," *A Family Affair*, April 10, 2019.)

<sup>189</sup> McEwan, *The Children Act*, 215.

<sup>190</sup> **Jehovah's Witnesses** adhere to several traditional Christian beliefs as well as some unique to their faith. They hold beliefs that certain medical practices go against the teachings of the Bible. Specifically, they do not approve of blood transfusions, citing the scriptural admonition against the consumption of blood (Leviticus 3:17). This belief, which conflicts with standard medical practice, often leads to controversy with authorities, especially in cases involving children. (J. Gordon Melton, "Jehovah's Witness," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 29, 2024.)

The plot of the story takes place in several locations around London, where the weather serves as a significant factor in creating a particular atmosphere. The recurring presence of rain sets the tone for the narrative. A pivotal moment where the rain sets the mood is during the first encounter between Fiona and Adam. His drenched appearance, caused by the downpour outside, becomes a clear symbol of his emotional state, conveying his need for help without any verbal expression. In chapter two, Fiona's walk from her apartment to work is a significant section that employs the weather and the surroundings to depict her emotional state. The author's use of words like “blocking, freezing air, consequence of man-made climate change”<sup>191</sup> to describe the weather directly relates to the crisis Fiona faces in her personal life with her husband Jack. Such descriptions of the environment in the novel become all the more powerful, given their relevance to the plot's theme.

The novel is written directly and soberly, as an exploration of reality through the marriage crisis of a judge against the interplay between law and religion. The language is elegant and precise, reflecting the intelligence and education of Fiona Maye. At times, it can be more formal than the average person's speech, but this is in keeping with the legal profession and Fiona's own character. Overall, the third-person narration provides a clear and engaging perspective on Fiona's legal mind and allows the reader to fully immerse themselves in the story and its themes.

London. Trinity term one week old. Implacable June weather. Fiona Maye, a High Court judge, at home on Sunday evening, supine on a chaise longue, staring past her stockinged feet toward the end of the room, toward a partial view of recessed bookshelves by the fireplace and, to one side, by a tall window, a tiny Renoir lithograph of a bather, bought by her thirty years ago for fifty pounds.<sup>192</sup>

The storyline unfolds as a gripping five-part courtroom drama, with Fiona as the lead character. We witness her live a comfortable middle-class life, thanks to her successful legal career as a high court judge. However, despite her prosperity, she struggles with the emotional burden of being childless. Her world is turned upside down when her marriage suddenly falls apart, as a result of her career. She is more invested in her cases than her marriage, while she is dealing with family

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<sup>191</sup> McEwan, *The Children Act*, 42.

<sup>192</sup> McEwan, *The Children Act*, 1.

problems, which has to remain detached from her legal work not letting it influence her professional judgement. Fiona takes no interest in religion outside her legal work where she comes across conflicts between religion and law. The first conflict appears in a case involving a strict Orthodox Jewish father, who wants to separate his daughters from their mother because she “wanted her girls to stay on at school past the age of sixteen and to go to university if they wished.”<sup>193</sup> A choice that is against their traditions, women should be taking care of the home not pursuing education and career.

Through the character of Fiona, we experience the hardship of balancing legal obligations with personal beliefs, as well as considering the cultural and religious implications of the situation. Another clash with religion comes when Catholic parents are willing to let their conjoined twins die for their beliefs and God’s will. While some see the judge’s decision to save the twin whose organs are functioning for both of them as a wise one, others call it murder because the second twin will die without the support of the other. All those decisions by the court must be “on behalf of the children between total religion and something a little less. Between cultures, identities, states of mind, aspirations, sets of family relations, fundamental definitions, basic loyalties, unknowable futures.”<sup>194</sup> Fiona stands in a position where the legal and moral space is tight. Will she be able to remain impartial and deliver justice, or will her personal struggles cloud her judgment? Against her own crisis, she is faced with a high-stakes legal dispute: seventeen-year-old Adam, with the full support of his parents, is refusing a life-saving blood transfusion due to their religious beliefs as Jehovah’s Witnesses. While the situation is dire and time-sensitive, the court must weigh the medical necessity of the transfusion against the family's right to practice their faith. In Court, Adam’s parents and medical specialists are interrogated. The case is in favour of the transfusion from the medical perspective, without it Adam will surely die. On the other hand, the parents have their religious freedom. This religious community has saved Adam’s father from drugs and hopelessness, so their refusal is more serious given their deep love for their son.

After hearing the perspectives of both parties, Fiona makes an unusual decision to visit the hospital to meet Adam herself, accompanied by a social worker.

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<sup>193</sup> McEwan, *The Children Act*, 10.

<sup>194</sup> McEwan, *The Children Act*, 13.

Upon meeting Adam, Fiona recognizes his exceptional qualities as a teenager. Despite his medical condition, Adam's passion, talent, intelligence, and sensitivity are evident in his love for poetry and recent dedication to playing the violin. Even after only a brief period of practice, he already displays considerable skill on the instrument. He holds strongly to his beliefs holding onto the principles of his parents. Fiona's objective during the hospital visit is to evaluate Adam's capacity to make such a significant decision independently, without being unduly influenced by his parents or elders. However, Fiona's line of questioning inadvertently crosses a boundary, causing Adam to become emotional when she discusses the possible outcomes if he survives but remains mentally or physically disabled. Adam expresses his reluctance to accept such an outcome yet remains steadfast in his beliefs: “‘I’d hate it, I’d hate it.’... ‘But if that’s what happens I have to accept it.’”<sup>195</sup> This incident may be the moment when Adam fully comprehends the consequences of his convictions.

Fiona's offer to join Adam in a duet while he plays the violin, while well-intentioned, may have been perceived as unprofessional. This spontaneous action blurs the line between her legal work and personal connection, ultimately resulting in Adam's change of behaviour. Despite this, their musical exchange serves as a powerful moment of understanding between them. The duet helps them to bridge the gap between Adam's religious beliefs and Fiona's adherence to protocol. This encounter has a significant impact on both Adam's life and Fiona's decision-making process.

Upon returning to Central London to her office, Fiona faces the reality of Adam's serious condition and must make a well-reasoned decision. The opposition is based on three principal arguments, firstly Adam is nearly eighteen years old, highly intelligent and aware of the consequences of his decision therefore should be treated as Gillick competent.<sup>196</sup> Lastly, Adam's religion and faith should be respected. Given these circumstances, Adam should be treated as an adult and therefore have the right to refuse the treatment. However, Fiona in her reasoning as the judge disagrees with the defence and decides to rule in favour of the hospital.

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<sup>195</sup> McEwan, *The Children Act*, 106.

<sup>196</sup> **Gillick competent** refers to children under sixteen years old, who have legal competence to consent to a treatment, showing a sufficient maturity and intelligence to understand the treatment and its possible risks. (Richard Griffith, “What is Gillick competence?” *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics*, 12(1), 2016.)

According to her views, Adam does not fully realise the consequences of the refusal of the treatment, she describes him as:

He is without doubt an exceptional child. I might even say, as one of the nurses did this evening, that he is a lovely boy, and I'm sure his parents would agree. He possesses exceptional insight for a seventeen-year-old. But I find that he has little concept of the ordeal that would face him, of the fear that would overwhelm him as his suffering and helplessness increased. In fact, he has a romantic notion of what it is to suffer.<sup>197</sup>

The important aspect is the incorporation of a specific legal context in Great Britain. Fiona's verdict is based on the 1989 Children Act, which prioritizes the welfare of a child. This decision is based on a real-life case that bears similarity to the current matter at hand:

I am guided instead by the decision of Mr. Justice Ward, as he then was, in *Re E (a minor)*, a judgment also concerning a Jehovah's Witness teenager. In the course of which he notes, 'The welfare of the child therefore dominates my decision, and I must decide what E's welfare dictates.'<sup>198</sup>

The judge also clarifies that this welfare does not apply to adults, because "To treat an adult against his will is to commit the criminal offence of assault."<sup>199</sup> The judge summarises her reasoning for the verdict as follows:

I have given due weight to A's age, to the respect due to faith, and to the dignity of the individual embedded in the right to refuse treatment. In my judgment, his life is more precious than his dignity.<sup>200</sup>

After the court's decision, Adam breaks away from his religion. He sends a letter to the judge, and later even follows her on her trip. He suddenly finds it hard to understand his parents. They refuse the treatment due to religious beliefs, even

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<sup>197</sup> McEwan, *The Children Act*, 121.

<sup>198</sup> McEwan, *The Children Act*, 121.

<sup>199</sup> McEwan, *The Children Act*, 122.

<sup>200</sup> McEwan, *The Children Act*, 123.

though it puts their child's life at risk. But they are happy when the court makes the decision. He explains all this to Fiona:

When I saw my parents crying like that, really crying, crying and sort of hooting for joy, everything collapsed. But this is the point. It collapsed into the truth. Of course they didn't want me to die! They love me. Why didn't they say that, instead of going on about the joys of heaven?<sup>201</sup>

Adam experiences a sudden sense of immaturity and inadequacy due to his religious beliefs. He acknowledges feeling foolish for seeking approval and admiration from the elders for obeying God's will. McEwan draws a comparison between religion and mental illness, such as anorexia, through Adam's thoughts:

Her dream was of wasting away to nothing—like a dried leaf in the wind, was what she said, just fading gently into death and everyone pitying her and blaming themselves afterward for not understanding her. Same sort of thing.<sup>202</sup>

Adam is feeling lost without his religion and starts writing regularly to the judge, but she never answers him, keeping her professional distance. As he becomes more obsessed, he follows her on her trip outside London. When they meet, he proposes the idea of living with her and her husband. Not long after their meeting, Adam sends her a strange poem "The Ballad of Adam Henry," in which he compares her to Judas. In the beginning, Fiona is seen as a saviour, she opens Adam's eyes that there is more than religion. Then she becomes Satan, and Adam is lost, he cannot cope with the real world and is unable to find a secular meaning. Despite feeling alarmed by the poem, she does not act. Later, during a concert, she plays a song she sang with Adam. The song triggers a weird feeling, a sense of worry about Adam.

After the concert, she finds out he has passed away when his leukaemia returns since he is an adult, he refuses the treatment. Fiona experiences intense guilt, she fails to answer his letters, and she sends him away when comes looking for her.

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<sup>201</sup> McEwan, *The Children Act*, 164.

<sup>202</sup> McEwan, *The Children Act*, 161.

Her regrets are constructed in a secularist manner she realizes that her actions had potentially contributed to Adam's tragic end:

She thought her responsibilities ended at the courtroom walls. But how could they? He came to find her, wanting what everyone wanted, and what only free-thinking people, not the supernatural, could give. Meaning.<sup>203</sup>

Fiona is burdened by the belief that she failed him. Although she offers him a new world and new opportunities, they lack the necessary stability and a replacement for his religion. Similarly, his parents' devotion to religious principles overshadows their love for him, and in the same way, Fiona is more concerned about the rules and principles than life itself. The heartbreaking suicide is indicative of his rejection of both worlds and the tragic outcome of being lost without assistance.

#### **4.3.3. Conclusion**

Both *Amsterdam* and *The Children Act* contain political undertones. *Amsterdam* satirises the Thatcher-Major era, and McEwan touches on the Thatcher-Major era in his previous work *The Child Time*, where the main message is the relationship between two people who suffer greatly. In contrast, *Amsterdam*, highlights the time through the characters' actions, their intrigues and plotting against each other. On the other hand, *The Children Act* portrays the relationship between law, religion, and children's welfare as the primary conflict. Through the eyes of a high court judge, we witness the struggles of making the right moral decision that involves children's lives. McEwan captures the legal system of Britain drawing from real cases that were presided over in the past. Both narratives are thought-provoking and explore the intricacies of human relationships, morality, and societal expectations.

*Amsterdam* employs sarcasm and irony to highlight the hypocrisy of the men of the 1960s. They accuse each other, but in reality, none of them is better than the other. The main characters and good friends are both hypocrites, not just because of their amoral decisions but also for supporting Molly's affairs and talking about them while hating on George, her husband. In the end, Clive is punished for his arrogance and ignorance, along with his greedy and ambitious friend Vernon.

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<sup>203</sup> McEwan, *The Children Act*, 213.

They kill each other in assisted suicide, showing how euthanasia should not be used. It is supposed to help people who suffer, but here it is a means of execution of revenge for their hurt male egos.

*The Children Act* depicts a legal case and the reasoning behind the decision between the clash of religion and law concerning a child's welfare. Making a moral or amoral decision is not an option, but the weight of the decision against someone's wish is heavy. When the judge decides in favour of the hospital saving a young boy's life, it starts a set of unfortunate events. Fiona, the judge, makes the mistake of being too familiar towards the patient, creating a special bond that she breaks after the court decision is made. Ironically, Fiona wants to save him but fails him in the same way his parents do. His parents' religious beliefs are stronger than the will to save their son's life, but Fiona's obsessive fixation on rules does not allow her to help him either. The suicide is readable as an implicit double refusal of two worlds that are the inverted mirror of each other. Overall, *The Children Act* is a powerful and poignant novel that will stay with readers long after they have finished reading it.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The Master Thesis aimed to remark on the development of Ian McEwan's writing. We have explored the works of Ian McEwan and how it has evolved from his early works to his later ones. We have seen how he started with themes that were considered taboo and controversial by society and later moved on to topics that focused on relationships, emotions, and the consequences of our actions. Finally, we have seen how his work evolved to reflect the political and societal landscape of the time, exploring the relationship between morals, law, and politics.

The works are analysed within three sub-chapters: the Macabre Phase, the Social Phase, and the Political Phase. The Macabre Phase focuses on the works *The Cement Garden* and *The Comfort of Strangers*. Both deal with taboo and controversial themes, such as incest, murder, and sexual violence. In *The Cement Garden*, we see that the absent parents represent freedom but also disorder. The bad relationship with the father is reflected in the novel. Jack suffers from an unusual Oedipal complex and is fixated on his older sister leading to incest. Tom likes to dress as a girl and later regresses into the infant stage. The oldest siblings, Jack and Julie, take on the paternal roles that are missing. McEwan uses the themes of incest and the Oedipal complex to explore the darker side of human nature and the consequences of isolation and loneliness. In *The Comfort of Strangers*, the problematic relationship with his father leaves Robert with violent behaviour and a dominant personality. He and his wife Caroline show love in a sick way, which becomes the end of the British couple whose innocence is ruined when they "accidentally" meet Robert and Caroline. They get caught up in a dangerous and twisted relationship with a local man. Through the theme of attraction, again the Oedipal complex, love and desire we explore the darker side of human nature and the consequences of giving into our desires.

The Social Phase explores relationships and emotions in *The Child in Time* and *Atonement*. Both works deal with the consequences of our actions and their impact on our relationships with others. *The Child in Time* explores the theme of loss, every parent's nightmare of a lost child and their journey to reconciliation. However, their relationship is not explored in depth more focus is placed on the search for a child within us. McEwan is challenging the gender roles, we see Julie as a stronger person than Stephen, and the same applies to Charles's wife. Through

regression, we search for the child within the adult and through the loss we explore the complex emotions and relationships that come with grief. In *Atonement* we see how truth is a relative term, nothing is always as we see it and there is a second side to the story. A young girl falsely accuses her sister's lover of a crime, which leads to tragic consequences and the fall of the whole family. She tries to atone for her crime by becoming a nurse and writing a novel where she gives them the happy ending, they never experienced due to the war. McEwan uses the theme of truthfulness to explore the power of storytelling and how it can impact our relationships with others.

The Political Phase explores the relationship between morals, law, and politics, such as euthanasia and children's rights. *Amsterdam* centres around the morality and hypocrisy of the 1960s British men. Two friends, Clive and Vernon, make a pact to help each other die if they become seriously ill and turn to each other by the end of the story. He touches on the topic of euthanasia, an assisted death to help seriously ill people. Here they use it against each other, to kill the other because of their hurt male ego. They lack morals and are hypocrites in their actions, yet they cannot forgive each other accusations. *The Children Act* explores the clash between law and religion which arises in connection to medical help. A high court judge, Fiona, has to decide whether to order a blood transfusion for a young boy who is a Jehovah's Witness. Her decision has nothing to do with morality but keeping the child's welfare. Fiona makes the mistake of getting to know this boy, who creates a false expectation after her visit. She shows him more than his religion but fails to provide a replacement, this mistake results in his death when his illness returns, and he refuses treatment this time.

We can say that Ian McEwan's works have evolved significantly over the years, reflecting the socio-cultural and political landscape of the time. His early works were considered taboo and inappropriate, but they were also groundbreaking in their exploration of unconventional themes. Later, his work focused more on relationships and emotions, reflecting the everyday struggles of society. Finally, his work evolved to reflect political and societal issues, with a focus on the relationship between morals, law, and politics. However, throughout his writing, he never stopped urging us, as readers, to stop and think about the life around us and reconsider our moral views. His exploration of themes that were once considered

taboo has helped to push the boundaries of what is acceptable in literature and encourages us to rethink our own beliefs and values.

## 6. RESUMÉ

Diplomová práce má název „Ian McEwan: ‘From the Dark Side to the Light of the Family Life, and Back to the Dark Side of the Society’” v češtině „Ian McEwan: „Z temnoty k rodinnému životu a zpět ke špatné stránce společnosti.“” Cílem práce je zkoumat, jakým způsobem se vyvíjela témata a hlavní myšlenky v tvorbě Iana McEwana, od prvních novel na počátku jeho kariéry až po novější díla. I přesto, že se určitá témata opakují, mají jiný záměr. Kapitola s analýzou je rozdělena podle hlavního tématu a období, do kterého dané dílo můžeme zařadit.

První kapitola pod názvem „The British Novel“ se věnuje vývoji současné britské literatury počínaje půlkou 70. let 20. století až po 21. století. Na ni navazuje kapitola o samotném autorovi, jeho životě, důležitých milnicích, a dílech. Na kapitolu o autorově životě navazuje podkapitola o vlivu postmodernismu, a jeho spojení s ním.

Třetí část „The Analysis of Ian McEwan’s Work“ je rozdělena do tří samostatných kapitol. První kapitola „Macabre Phase“ se věnuje dílům *The Cement Garden* a *The Comfort of Strangers*, ve kterých najdeme gotické prvky jako je například incest, smrt, vražda či dominantní chování. Podkapitola „The Unease and Suffering in *The Cement Garden*“ se zabývá změnami, které nastaly po smrti rodičů, izolovaností rodiny a vztahy mezi sourozenci, zejména nejstarším Jackem a Julie. Projevy Oidipovského komplexu jsou přítomné nejen v postavách synů, kteří vyžadují pozornost matky, ale i u jejich otce. Krátce po smrti otce onemocní i matka a většinu času tráví na lůžku. Její postava udržuje řád v rodině i přesto, že už není moc aktivní, ale to zanikne s její smrtí. Její roli po ní převezme Julie a nejmladší Tom ze zmatenosti upadá do stavu regrese. Druhá změna v Tomově chování je oblékání do dívčích šatů. Postupem času celý dům upadá do zanedbaného stavu. Když Julie přivede domů svého přítele Dereka, tak se najednou sourozenci semknou a nechtějí ho mezi sebe pustit. Jeho snahy o začlenění jsou neúspěšné, a když přistihne Jacka a Julie v jedné posteli, přivolá policii.

V druhé podkapitole „A Strange Attraction in *The Comfort of Strangers*,“ jsou hlavním tématem sexualita, touhy a přitažlivost, které je těžké odolat. Mladý pár na dovolené, pravděpodobně v městečku Benátky, městu zamilovaných, potká místní pár Roberta a Caroline. Vztah mezi Colinem a Mary postrádá jiskru. Jejich první setkání zanechává na páru spíše smíšené pocity a není vůbec náhodné, protože

Robert si Colina vyhlédl a pár sledoval. I přes tyto pocity a intuici, ale později neodmítnou druhé pozvání, které vyústí fatálním koncem a vraždou Colina. Vztah mezi Robertem a Caroline je úplně odlišný od vztahu Colina s Mary. Jejich vášeň je podpořena touhou po násilí, vše začalo Robertovým vztahem s otcem, znovu narážíme na Oidipův komplex. Robert si vztek vybíjí na Caroline. Tu to na jednu stranu znechucuje, ale zároveň to v ní budí pocity touhy a uspokojení. I když se Colinovi a Mary něco nezdá na druhém páru, touha a neznámo je přitahuje.

V druhé kapitole s názvem „Social Phase“ přichází zlom v McEwanově kariéře, kdy opouští gotická a nepřijatelná témata a posouvá svoji tvorbu směrem k mezilidským vztahům, a to v dílech *The Child in Time* a *Atonement*. Podkapitola „A Search for a Child in *The Child in Time*“ není pouze o ztraceném dítěti a marné snaze rodičů se se ztrátou vypořádat, ale také o tom, co se může stát, pokud až moc podporujeme „vnitřní dítě,“ které je v každém z nás. Na pozadí příběhu hledání ztracené dcery se připravuje příručka, jak vychovávat děti, která po únosu dcery představuje pro Stephena způsob, jak udržovat mezilidské vztahy. Příručka je nápadem premiérky, děj se odehrává v období vlády Margaret Thatcherové. Charlesova manželka Thelma i přesto že nemá děti, zastává roli matky jak svému manželovi, tak Stephenovi. Stephen je jejich blízký známý, ale potom, co vidí Charlese v jeho regresi, je přestane navštěvovat. Thelma a Stephenova žena Julie představují silné ženy. Později vyjde najevo, že příručku napsal sám Charles, kterého inspirovala Stephenova první kniha. Když Charlesova regrese způsobí jeho smrt, znamená to nový začátek pro Stephena. Jeho chvilková návštěva u Julie má dohru o několik měsíců později narozením jejich druhého dítěte, které je konečným uzavřením celé nešťastné události.

Druhá část „The Truthfulness in *Atonement*“ se zabývá tématem představitosti, která zajde do extrému, které přinese neštěstí celé rodině. Dospívání hlavní postavy, Briony, se odehrává během jednoho letního dne a jeho události změní životy několika lidí, kteří se s následky musí vypořádávat po zbytek života. Hlavním tématem je vliv falešného obvinění na psychiku člověka, jak oběti, tak toho, kdo ho označil za viníka. Briony píše příběh, ve kterém čeká na její sestru Cecilií s Robbiem šťastný konec jako způsob pokání za svůj čin a dávnou chybu. Briony obviní Robbieho na základě několika situací, kterým je svědkem během dne, aniž by věděla, co se doopravdy v každé situaci odehrálo. Otázkou celého díla

zůstává, jestli je možné dosáhnout pokání, pokud ji nemá, kdo fyzicky odpustit a vše se odehrává pouze na papíře.

Poslední kapitola „Political Phase“ se věnuje dílům *Amsterdam* a *The Children Act*, obě díla zapojují do děje politiku, právo a medicínu. V podkapitole „Morality and Hypocrisy in *Amsterdam*“ kde děj je zasazený do období vlády Margaret Thatcherové a Johna Majora, si postavy navzájem vyčítají své morální hodnoty a pokrytectví, aniž by zvážili své vlastní činy. Děj je o dvou přátelích, Vernon a Clive, kteří se potkají na pohřbu jejich dávné milenky. Z rozpolcení z její smrti a strachu, že se mu přihodí to samé, požádá Clive Vernona o to, aby mu pomohl umřít pomocí eutanazie, kdyby vážně onemocněl a nebyl schopen rozhodovat sám za sebe. Vernon žádost nakonec přijme, ale pouze za předpokladu, že Clive udělá pro něj to stejné, tím si navzájem podepíší rozsudek smrti. Vernon je editor a pro záchranu svých novin udělá cokoliv, a když získá kompromitující fotky premiéra v ženských šatech neváhá s jejich publikací. S tímto krokem nesouhlasí Clive, který vnímá jako pokrytectví odsuzovat premiéra na něco, za co sám Vernon předtím úspěšně bojoval. Naopak Clive upřednostňuje svoji hudbu naprosto před vším. Když se při procházce při hledání inspirace stane svědkem násilného činu, řekne si, že to není problém, který by měl řešit. Vernon a Clive si navzájem vyčítají svá rozhodnutí, které skončí vzájemným usmrcením v Amsterdamu, kdy oba věří, že plní přání toho druhého.

Poslední podkapitola „The Clash of Law and Religion in *The Children Act*“ poukazuje na tenkou hranici mezi morálkou a správným právním rozhodnutím. Kniha je inspirována třemi skutečnými případy, které se týkají péče o děti. Na stůl soudkyně Nejvyššího soudu se dostane urgentní žádost o povolení dát transfuzi chlapci trpícímu leukemií přes nesouhlas jeho rodičů skrze náboženskou víru. Soudkyně Fiona nemá moc času, a tak se rozhodne pro netradiční krok, a to navštívit Adama osobně v nemocnici, aby mohla posoudit, zda si uvědomuje váhu a dopad svého odmítnutí transfuze. Pro něj tohle setkání znamená mnohem více, později začne Fionu sledovat. Fiona nakonec rozhodla ve prospěch nemocnice, uznala že Adam je nadměru chytrý, ale že si neuvědomuje, jaké fyzické následky ho čekají při odmítnutí. Po jeho uzdravení se odloučí od své víry a vyhledá Fionu, jelikož se cítí ztracen a chce někam patřit. Bohužel jak Fiona, tak jeho rodiče nedokáží Adamovi dát to, co hledá. Adam má tak pocit, že nemá místo ani v jednom světě. Když se mu nemoc vrátí je už plnoletý a má možnost odmítnout léčbu, to

udělá a chvíli na to umírá. Na pozadí Adamova příběhu se odehrává manželská krize mezi Fionou a jejím manželem.

Cílem diplomové práce bylo poukázat na závažnost a změny McEwanových témat. Jeho první tvorba je hodně morbidní a zahrnuje témata, která nejsou úplně přijatelná ve společnosti, témata gotická jako smrt, vražda nebo incest. Jeho další díla už se více věnují vztahům, citům a psychice postav, které se nachází v běžných, ale náročných situacích. Poté se opět vrací k závažnějším tématům jako je politika, právo a smrt, kde probíraná témata jsou aktuální a je potřeba je okomentovat a poukázat na ně.

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## 8. ANNOTATIONS

Name: Bc. Karolína Crháková

Department: Department of English and American Studies

Title of the thesis: Ian McEwan: 'From the Dark Side to the Light of the Family Life, and Back to the Dark Side of the Society'

Supervisor: Mgr. Ema Jelínková, Ph.D.

Number of pages: 82

Year of Presentation: 2024

The Master thesis "Ian McEwan: 'From the Dark Side to the Light of the Family Life, and Back to the Dark Side of the Society'" aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Ian McEwan's writing style and the evolution of his themes, topics and relation to postmodernism. The thesis provides an insight into McEwan's literary contributions and their connection to the broader context of British literature during the twentieth century.

The introductory chapter provides a detailed overview of the purpose, scope, and methodology of the study, including the development of British literature during the twentieth century. Chapter two discusses the British novel's history, development, and notable authors, connecting it to Ian McEwan's work. Chapter three provides an overview of Ian McEwan's life, work, and connection to postmodernism. The chapter evaluates McEwan's contribution to literature and the relevance of his work in the postmodern era.

The following chapters focus on the analysis of six novels, namely *The Cement Garden*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, *The Child in Time*, *Atonement*, *Amsterdam*, and *The Children Act*. The subchapters effectively connect McEwan's themes and topics to the broader context of British literature and evaluate the quality and relevance of his work. The analysis demonstrates McEwan's evolution as a writer and highlights the relevance of his work in contemporary society. The final chapter summarizes the findings of the thesis, effectively showing the development of his style and writing. The chapter highlights the significance of McEwan's work and its relevance to contemporary society. The thesis provides a comprehensive

analysis of McEwan's writing style and highlights the significance of his work in contemporary society.

## 9. ANOTACE

Jméno: Bc. Karolína Crháková

Katedra: Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Název práce: Ian McEwan: „Z temnoty k rodinnému životu a zpět ke špatné stránce společnosti“

Vedoucí práce: Mgr. Ema Jelínková, Ph.D.

Počet stran: 82

Rok obhajoby: 2024

Cílem magisterské práce „Ian McEwan: ‚Od temné strany ke světlu rodinného života a zpět k temné straně společnosti‘ je podat analýzu stylu psaní Iana McEwana a vývoje jeho témat, námětů a vztahu k postmodernismu. Práce poskytuje vhled do McEwanova literárního přínosu a jeho souvislostí s širším kontextem britské literatury dvacátého století.

Úvodní kapitola poskytuje podrobný přehled o účelu, rozsahu a metodologii práce, včetně vývoje britské literatury během dvacátého století. Druhá kapitola pojednává o historii, vývoji a významných autorech britského románu a propojuje jej s dílem Iana McEwana. Třetí kapitola poskytuje přehled o životě, díle a vztahu Iana McEwana k postmodernismu. Následující kapitola hodnotí McEwanův přínos literatuře a význam jeho díla v postmoderní době.

Následující kapitoly se zaměřují na analýzu šesti románů, a to *Betonová zahrada*, *Cizinci ve městě*, *Dítě v pravý čas*, *Pokání*, *Amsterdam* a *Myslete na děti!*. Podkapitoly účinně propojují McEwanovy náměty a témata s širším kontextem britské literatury a hodnotí kvalitu a relevanci jeho díla. Analýza dokládá McEwanův spisovatelský vývoj a zdůrazňuje význam jeho díla v současné společnosti. Závěrečná kapitola shrnuje závěry práce a účinně ukazuje vývoj jeho stylu a psaní. Kapitola vyzdvihuje význam McEwanovy tvorby a její relevanci pro současnou společnost. Práce poskytuje komplexní analýzu McEwanova stylu psaní a vyzdvihuje význam jeho díla v současné společnosti.