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Narrative and Stylistic Strategies in Ian McEwan's Early Work

Vyprávěcí a stylistické postupy v rané tvorbě Iana McEwana

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Annotation

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The bachelor thesis *Narrative and Stylistic Strategies in Ian McEwan's Early Work* is divided into two parts – theoretical and practical. The theoretical part deals with Ian McEwan's life, his career, and his work and creative development. There are also mentioned some contemporary authors of British fiction and often pointing out political and feministic issues. The practical part deals with the analysis of two early novels of Ian McEwan – *The Cement Garden* and *The Comfort of Strangers*.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, British fiction, a novel, naturalism, feminism.

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Anotace

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Bakalářská práce na téma Vyprávěcí a stylistické postupy v rané tvorbě Iana McEwana je rozdělena na dvě části – teoretickou a praktickou. Teoretická část se zabývá životem Iana McEwana, jeho kariérou, jeho dílem a tvůrčím vývojem. Jsou zde zmíněni také současní autoři Britské beletrie a jimi často probíraná politická a feministická témata. Praktická část se zabývá analýzou dvou raných románů Iana McEwana – *The Cement Garden* a *The Comfort of Strangers*.

Klíčová slova: Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, Britská beletrie, román, naturalismus, feminismus.

I declare that I worked on my thesis on my own using only the sources listed in the Bibliography and Internet sources.

Prohlašuji, že jsem svou bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně s použitím uvedené literatury a internetových zdrojů.

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Jana Fialová

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2. Introduction

My bachelor thesis focuses on two early novels published by Ian McEwan in the 1970s and 1980s, and those are *The Cement Garden* and *The Comfort of Strangers*. I have chosen this author mainly for his bravery to express what we are often afraid to think about, and speak out about, both privately, and in public. These themes include adverse situations such as becoming an orphan, burials, perverse behaviour, and death, or murder. The second reason for choosing this author lies in the pleasure of reading his stories. Ian McEwan uses extraordinarily rich and colourful language, full of unusual adjectives, and adverbs to distinguish the tiniest differences and even frighteningly precise descriptions of thought processes.

I attempt to describe the position of the narrator, the style of conveying the stories and strategies used in these two novels. I focus on the most prominent motives and themes occurring in the 1970s which the works reflect.

My thesis is divided into two parts, theoretical and practical. In the theoretical part, I focus on the author Ian McEwan, his life, education, career, writing process, and political and religious beliefs. I mention his creative development, including writing short stories, screenplays, novels, and development in the chosen themes of his works. The practical part deals with Ian McEwan's two early novels. I analyse these books with an emphasis on narrative and stylistic strategies.

3. Theoretical Part

3.1 Author

3.1.1 Personal Life

Childhood

Ian McEwan, with his full name Ian Russell McEwan, was born on June 21, 1948, in Aldershot in North Hampshire. His place of birth cannot be considered as a serendipity, the reason being that his father David McEwan was an army officer. Rose Lilian Violet Moore,¹ mother of Ian McEwan, born in Ash, a small village ca. 8 miles from the military town Aldershot, was a daughter of a painter-decorator.²

At first sight, Ian McEwan's early childhood seems completely without any unusual circumstances, however, if we find the connection between an advert in the local paper *Reading Mercury* of 1942³ and a particular interview in a 2007 issue of the *Guardian*, it ceases to be so conventional. Still married to her first husband Ernst Wort and a mother to two young children, Rose Moore had an affair with David McEwan, and not so long after that, she found herself expecting a baby. Sadly, but seeing no other option, she decided to give the baby up and she placed in the local paper an advert saying: "*Wanted, home for baby boy, aged one month: complete surrender.*"⁴ And because of those ten words, Ian McEwan knew nothing about his older brother for almost 60 years even though they were living nearby. The baby placed for adoption was Ian's older brother David Sharp, whom Ian learned only coincidentally about in 2002. The actual state of affairs was expressed by David Sharp for the *Oxford Mail*: "*I had never heard of him. Of course, I've read all of his books now, but whether he's a road-sweeper or an author is immaterial. He's just my brother to me.*" Although Mr. Sharp had never heard of this world-famous author and his own specialization (he worked as a bricklayer) had not been writing books, on Ian's instigation he wrote his biography *Complete Surrender* published in 2009 by John Blake. The overall result was not exploring David's genial writing genes, but sharing a story, which was not as rare as it seems.

¹ Dominic Head, *Ian McEwan* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

² Ian McEwan, "Mother Tongue," *IanMcEwan.com*, 2001, last modified 14 November 2015, <http://www.ianmcewan.com/resources/articles/mother-tongue.html>.

³ Dave Sharp, *Complete Surrender - The True Story of a Family's Dark Secret and the Brothers it Tore Apart at Birth* (London: John Blake, 2009).

⁴ Alex Kumi, "Bricklayer Traces His Long-lost Brother, Ian McEwan", *Guardian*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/jan/17/books.booksnews>.

David McEwan and Rose Moore married, after her first husband's death in combat in Normandy. David had rejected partaking in bringing up the children from his wife's previous marriage and therefore the younger Jim was given into his paternal grandmother's care and his sister Margy was sent to a boarding school.

Ian McEwan considered himself an ordinary boy with no exceptional predispositions to become a successful writer of fiction.⁵ Nonetheless, he gained many unusual experiences, due to his father's job, traveling with his parents abroad, and visiting various places in East Asia, Germany, and at last North Africa.⁶ Returning to England at the age of eleven, he led a deep conversation about God with a next-sitting passenger, and he was allegedly seriously thinking about this question.⁷ In my opinion, it shows a sufficient amount of self-consciousness and in this regard also good characteristics for his future career.

Education

Ian returned to Great Britain at the age of eleven, his parents stayed abroad due to his father's commission, and a year later he started his path to success at boarding school in Suffolk. Ian described Woolverstone Hall as a more or less "*successful experiment by a left-wing local authority*"⁸. Although the pupils were not from the same social class, they were all studying, playing, and discussing their problems together. During those years Ian started to move from reading books his mother brought him to more sophisticated and more complicated ones. His first vivid memories of such books are from the age of fourteen, they were mainly novels written by Iris Murdoch (†1999) and various books by Graham Green (†1991). The content of these books started to be appealing to Ian primarily for the essential form of the text. During his school years, his verbal skills improved, and his ability to express the tiniest details positively changed as well, but he still knew about his weaknesses in English.⁹

In 1970 Ian McEwan successfully finished his education at the University of Sussex and gained a degree in English literature. Then he decided to continue at the University of East Anglia, where he studied literature as well. Ian McEwan is often said to be one of the first who studied

⁵ Andrea Koczela, "Ian McEwan: From Troubled Childhood to Critical Acclaim," *Books Tell You Why. Com*, June 18, 2014, <https://blog.bookstellyouwhy.com/ian-mcewan-from-troubled-childhood-to-critical-acclaim>.

⁶ *El Imparcial*, "Biografía de Ian McEwan", May 31, 2011, <https://www.elimparcial.es/noticia/85285/biografia-de-ian-mcewan.html>.

⁷ Ian McEwan, "A Sinner's Tale," interview by Deborah Solomon, *New York Times Magazine*, December 2, 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/02/magazine/02wwln-Q4-t.html?_r=0.

⁸ McEwan, "Mother Tongue," paragraph 8.

⁹ McEwan, "Mother Tongue," paragraph 10.

creative writing, but he himself rejects this statement with adding some details.¹⁰ By the educational standards in the 1970s this course, taught by Professor Malcolm Bradbury (†2000), was led in a very unusual informal way. The young aspiring author saw Professor Bradbury only few times during his studies, however every time their meeting brought so much needed encouragement. The course was attended also by Kazuo Ishiguro.¹¹ According to research done by Lise Jaillant during that period, there were similar tendencies among universities to provide courses focused on creative writing as well¹². Considering the fact that Ian did not attend a strictly established course of creative writing, he went through such a program, which brought him enough self-esteem to start his own way in literature.

Adult Life

In 1982 Ian McEwan married Penny Allen, with whom he had two sons, William (*1983) and Gregory (*1986). Penny already had two daughters from her previous relationships. However, after a thirteen-year marriage, the McEwans divorced. Their quarrels were prolonged by the question about the care of their two underage sons.¹³

Two years later, in 1997 McEwan married Annalena McAfee, a well-known journalist, a former editor for the *Guardian*,¹⁴ and primarily a children's author. The list of her works includes for instance the critically acclaimed book called *The Visitors Who Came to Stay* (2000), a story set in a family home. Ian supposedly encouraged her to start writing also more serious literature and therefore she published the novel *The Spoiler* (2013), her first satirical story intended for adult readers.¹⁵ The spouses have found a suitable way of support in the field of creating a new piece of literature. Ian likes to read his newly constructed paragraphs to his wife and then they ordinarily do not talk about it. Meanwhile, she likes to let Ian peacefully read her text usually without other comments as well.¹⁶

¹⁰ Ian McEwan, "Why Do You Want to Live Forever?" *Zeit Online*, December 28, 2019, https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/2019-12/ian-mcewan-interviewpodcast-alles-gesagt?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fen.wikipedia.org%2F.

¹¹ *BBC News*, "Author Sir Malcolm Bradbury Dies", November 28, 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/1043975.stm.

¹² Lise Jaillant, "Myth Maker: Malcolm Bradbury and the Creation of Creative Writing at UEA," *New Writing* 13, no. 3 (2016): 350-352, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2016.1192196>.

¹³ *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, "Ian McEwan Biography", <https://www.notablebiographies.com/newsmakers2/2004-Ko-Pr/McEwan-Ian.html>.

¹⁴ Daniel Zalewski, "Ian McEwan's Art of Unease," *New Yorker*, February 16, 2009, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/23/the-background-hum>.

¹⁵ Lisa O'Kelly, "Annalena McAfee: 'I See Myself as a Recovering Journalist'," *Guardian*, April 9, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/10/annalena-mcafee-spoiler-ian-mcewan-interview>.

¹⁶ Ian McEwan, "Ian McEwan Interview (2002)," interview by Charlie Rose, *YouTube*, 26:46, October 18, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvuVfgZ9wcI&ab_channel=ManufacturingIntellect.

Ian McEwan left the home by modern standards quite early, but during his master's studies, he visited his parents quite often. Most of the time, the atmosphere at home was far from ideal, there was very frequently "violence in the air".¹⁷ His parent's relationship raised questions about equality and the rights of man and woman, husband and wife in the. His father had always been a soldier on duty, and reserved expressions were part of his way of communication on daily basis. On the other hand, Ian's mother was a rather calm and quiet person, who tolerated sudden changes in her husband's behaviour. Ian contemplates his parents' marriage as not the perfect one, which might have been caused by their unplanned pregnancy and the consequent steps, but also by the thoughts of the second wave of feminism, incomprehensible for David McEwan. Rose McEwan might have known about the thoughts of feminism of the 1970s, surely, she did not like the violence, but she did not want her son to intervene.¹⁸

As mentioned, Ian made the unexpected discovery of having an older brother David Sharp, who had been given away only a month after birth. And even his older brother, although he is not a writer or a person engaged with literature, published a book as well. It seems that Ian McEwan has successfully influenced people in his surroundings.

Ian remembers with sadness how his father David died in 1996, too early to read his son's bestseller *Atonement*, a great part of which takes place on a world war battlefield, and some scenes were inspired by the storytelling of him.¹⁹ Ian's mother passed out in 2003 after a long struggle with Alzheimer's disease. Unfortunately, when her son David came to her in 2002 to meet his biological mother and also the woman who had given him away, she was unable to recognise her son David due to her dementia.

Career

For authors, born in the United Kingdom, regardless of modern standards, it may be useful to mention their social class. The post-war generation of authors mainly belongs to the middle class like Ian McEwan, or to the working class.²⁰ The authors writing in the same period as Ian McEwan include Martin Amis, Zadie Smith, Monica Ali, J. G. Ballard, Julian Barnes, A. S. Byatt, or Jonathan Coe. Martin Amis is best-known for his novels *The Rachel Papers* (1973), *Money* (1984), and *London Fields* (1989). His creative development was influenced among others by the fact of the ongoing Cold War between the Soviet Union and the Western Powers,

¹⁷ McEwan, "Mother Tongue," paragraph 24.

¹⁸ McEwan, "Mother Tongue," paragraph 21-22.

¹⁹ McEwan, "Ian McEwan Interview (2002)".

²⁰ Nick Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 24.

by the fear of Nuclear War, and by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Ian McEwan was influenced by these events as well, which shows in his novel *Black Dog* (1992).²¹ Alongside McEwan, Amis, and Julian Barnes were interested in the ongoing feministic issue in the 1980s. Approximately in this time, sex and gender became widely discussed, and sexuality was used as repeating motive.²²

Zadie Smith is another British novelist and short-story writer of this period writing about politics. Her best-known work is *White Teeth* (2000) where she reacts through some of her characters to the events in Berlin in 1989. Her other works are *The Autograph Man* (2002) or *On Beauty* (2005).

Clive James was an Australian critic, journalist, and broadcaster, who led the show *Talking in the Library*, and one of his hosts was Ian McEwan.²³ He published a memoir called *Unreliable Memoir* (1980), and a book of essays *Cultural Amnesia* (2007).

Ian McEwan was listed as a young aspiring author alongside Philip Roth, Susan Sontag, and Günter Grass, who created works commenting on ongoing political issues as well.

In 1971 Ian's first stories appeared in the *Transatlantic Review* and then in the *New American Review*, where his name was first mentioned along with other giants of literature, such as Philip Roth, Susan Sontag, and Günter Grass.²⁴ Ian described that feeling in such a manner that it seems like an unexpectedly quick and a rather crucial progress.²⁵ The year 1975 can be considered the beginning of his real literary career, as he started to experiment with his writing abilities. *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), the first book published with his name on the cover, was labelled as an experiment with forms, plots, settings, and features of the characters. For the young author, the central motifs were often repeating questions of young adults about sex and the delicate balance between normality and perversity, often even absurdity. Four years later, his second book *In Between the Sheets* (1978) saw the light of the day, again playing with not exactly pleasant aspects of life. Depicting frightening, upsetting, and sometimes disgusting scenes is not an exception. In view of the fact that his second book along with the first one

²¹ Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction*, 21.

²² Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction*, 28, 29.

²³ Ian McEwan, and Clive, James, "Talking in the Library," *YouTube*, 2006, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xXR86GgeXw&ab_channel=CliveJames.

²⁴ Brian Hoey, "Man of Macabre: Five Interesting Facts about Ian McEwan," *WWW. Books Tell You Why.Com*, June 20, 2015, blog.bookstellyouwhy.com/man-of-macabre-5-interesting-facts-about-ian-mcewan.

²⁵ McEwan, „Mother Tongue,“ paragraph 12.

confirmed his attention to the possible negative aspects of the ordinary life of modern people, he earned the nickname "*Ian Macabre*".²⁶

Three more published books are considered included among his early works, namely *The Cement Garden* (1978), *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), and *The Child in Time* (1988). They are going to be the main focus of analysis in the second part of my bachelor thesis. Briefly said, the author does not abandon his previous interest in actions (strictly) forbidden by law, unacceptable by morality, or other tragic circumstances of people's daily lives. All those stories have mesmerized the public and they were as seen worth adapting into movies.

In the subsequent years, Ian McEwan has gradually broadened the list of his books and successes, collected a huge number of prizes, above all the Booker Prize (for *Amsterdam* (1998) and he became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. The works known worldwide among for instance previously mentioned *Amsterdam*, later followed by *Atonement* (2001), *Nutshell* (2016), or *The Cockroach* (2019).

3.1.2 Creative Influences

Rose Moore, Ian's mother, had a great impact on young Ian, especially by struggling to find the appropriate way of expression. She was always so wary of saying something socially inappropriate in public, and Ian claims to have "*inherited her wariness*".²⁷ She also chose his first books for reading during his early years at school. In addition, there was the fact of living abroad where McEwan kept meeting people of other cultural backgrounds with more or less various manners of etiquette, traditions, and lastly languages. These reasons may explain the description of young Ian as a very shy, hopelessly speechless boy with very few assumptions about a good future job. These early experiences influenced his way of writing.

Ian McEwan is very open about his creative habits when describing his way or style of writing: he often repeats his everyday slow carefully planned effort, word by word, paragraph by paragraph, laying particular words cautiously and consciously in the sentence. Every punctuation, every conjunction, and preposition have their own path behind the curtain of story creation. He creates continuously his stories, thinking about any possible ambiguities or incomprehensibility.²⁸

²⁶ *BBC News*, "Malcolm Bradbury dies."

²⁷ McEwan, „Mother Tongue," paragraph 1, 12.

²⁸ *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, "Ian McEwan Biography."

Feminism

Starting in the 1960s and continuing into the 1980s, to the so-called second wave of feminism raised increasingly lauder calls for equality and comparable rights for men and women. The circumstances of the 1970s influenced Ian a lot and according to him “*the feminism of 1970s spoke directly to a knot of problems*” in his family.²⁹ Feminist protest banners of the 1970s included slogans about women caged in their husbands’ houses, caring for children and households, and not allowed to develop their own potential in the field of art, the field of science, or in their own careers.³⁰ Ian’s mother agreed with opinions of that era promoted by women in the United Kingdom, USA, or France. In contrast, his father saw the potential danger of losing his status in providing money for the family and controlling the family budget and thereby the plans of the whole family.

The feminist thoughts circulating in the society were conceivable and desirable for Ian, who even believed that the call for changes could solve the continuing problems between his parents. He tried to present the female characters in his books as strong, capable, reliable, and sometimes almost free women, often contrasting to their incapable counterparts. Ian McEwan gorgeously claims that, he was going to give his mother freedom.³¹

Many of his stories contain not only female characters willing to take the responsibility for themselves, despite someone (father, husband) who would support them, but also characters who are comfortable with their status and not willing to change anything because of the great effort and a possible failure at the end. The depictions of man-woman relationships in his work have been influenced by his childhood experience of problematic parent relationship and of the second wave of feminism.

Politic, environmental, and religious beliefs

Some authors tend to comment on the current issues of politics and environmental behaviour publicly, and Ian McEwan is one of them. His interviews frequently contain criticism of various problems and problem-solving processes. He, as an author, does not content himself with mere words, but he also joins for example some environmental movements such, as the 10:10

²⁹ McEwan, „Mother Tongue,” paragraph 23.

³⁰ Constance Grady, “The Waves of Feminism, and Why People Keep Fighting Over Them, Explained,” *Vox*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/platform/amp/2018/3/20/16955588/feminism-waves-explained-first-second-third-fourth>.

³¹ McEwan, „Mother Tongue,” paragraph 23.

movement,³² which deals with reducing our carbon footprint.³³ He spoke out loud when the Brexit referendum took place.³⁴ The general trend showed that older people were voting for leaving the EU, while the younger generation favoured remaining in the EU. Ian McEwan was also pro-Remain. Seeing the consequences of the vote, Ian has published a satiric political novella *The Cockroach* (2019), reflecting on this event and offering a possible “*therapeutic response*” to the political disagreement of this resolution using mockery.³⁵ The book features a cockroach, which has changed into a human being.³⁶ It is inspired by Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1915) where the main character turns into a beetle.

Religious belief is probably not the right label considering that Ian is a conscious atheist.³⁷ He does not believe in God, but he is aware of various aspects of world religions. Provided that religion is only a human concept and general agreement of accepting morality is an important part of it, the promised paradise and the eternal reincarnations are not viewed as available anymore, which leaves behind only everyday burden and day-to-day deciding between good and evil. McEwan’s first books do not contain the fight between good and evil, but between convention and unconventional manners. In his stories, morality clashes with absurdity daily in ordinary peoples’ lives with casual goals, desires, and dark sides. The main characters of his early works are often described from more points of view and the reader is gradually given a full complex picture of their appearance, medical conditions, and mental processes. I do not think that Ian McEwan creates his characters with any pattern or any detailed analysis, but in many cases, we can distinguish the components of the characters’ personalities classified by Karl Gustav Jung’s theory of archetypes. His four major archetypes give us a useful guide for the analysis of a personality. They are the Self, the Persona, the still repeating Shadow with its lapses, and the Anima in men and Animus in women. While the Persona mirrors a person’s desiring version, the Self is described as the true version of the person. All deviant desires, or sins we are ashamed of are hidden in the Shadow. The Anima and the Animus are relatively independent personalities coexisting with the (main) personality of our own. Jung claims that

³² *BBC News*, “Malcolm Bradbury dies.”

³³ Ian Katz, “10:10: What’s It All about?” *Guardian*, September 1, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2009/sep/01/10-10-campaign-explained>.

³⁴ McEwan, “Why Do You Want to Live Forever?”

³⁵ Ian McEwan, “The Cockroach.” *IanMcEwan.com*, last update September 27, 2018, <http://www.ianmcewan.org/books/cockroach.html>.

³⁶ Fintan O’Toole, “*The Cockroach* by Ian McEwan Review – a Brexit Farce with Legs,” *Guardian*, October 7, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/07/the-cockroach-ian-mcewan-review>.

³⁷ Ian McEwan, “Interview: - Ian McEwan” *Frontline*, April 2002, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/faith/interviews/mcewan.html#:~:text=Ian%20McEwan%20is%20the%20author,11%20attacks>.

these two archetypes help men to understand women and vice versa. Until they cooperate with the (main) personality, the person will be confused about men's and women's behaviour.³⁸

Author's description of his writing process

In an interview after publishing his bestseller *Atonement*, he says that the analyses of literary works created by literary critics (along with the amateur public), are not something coming to his mind during creating a new story. He does not seek any themes and motives, any archetypes in his characters during the writing process.³⁹ From my point of view, it is common sense, logic, and the most natural way of transferring experiences, feelings, and thoughts. He tells the story in the same way as people live their lives. First, comes the perception of ourselves – our needs, desires often incorrectly and distorted, however, perceivable. Second, we consider the narrowest reality around ourselves including family, friends, jobs, and leisure time. Thirdly, broader interests such as additional education come in. Second to last is our imagination concerning the general working of the known World, beginning with its beauties and miracles but also cruelty and ruthlessness and ending with the global issues. The last stage of perception may concern exploring the meaning of life, confessing the faith in God above or rejecting such entity, and differing the law from individual fundamental moral rules. I am going to develop this in my analysis.

3.1.3 Ian McEwan's creative development

Ian McEwan is often presented as a fiction author, or novelist. However, he has also authored screenplays, a libretto, and an oratorio. In this part of my thesis, I have tried to divide his works into five categories according to their content, in most cases, they are also chronologically aligned.

Experimenting

During his studies, McEwan started to write short stories. In between, he wanted “*to break the isolation of writing fiction*”⁴⁰, therefore, he wrote television plays. This genre appealed to him by its naturalistic grammar, theme diversity, and on the other hand, its similarity to short stories. His first television plays *Solid Geometry* (written in 1973, adapted in 1978), *Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration* (written 1974, transmitted on television in 1976⁴¹), and *The Imitation*

³⁸ C. G. Jung, “*Collected Works of C.G. Jung*,” vol. 9, trans. Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 16, 23.

³⁹ McEwan, “*Ian McEwan Interview (2002)*.”

⁴⁰ Ian McEwan, “Ian McEwan Writes about His Television Plays,” *London Review of Books* 3, no.2, 5 February 1981, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v03/n02/ian-mcewan/ian-mcewan-writes-about-his-television-plays>.

⁴¹ Sebastian Groes, *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 2. ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 18.

Game (broadcasted by BBC in 1980, adapted in 1981) were only “attempts”; not all of them probably lived up to his expectations.⁴² Mainly, his first works were surprising to the audience, due to their naturalistic pattern. It was usual for audience to see such content on television, but providing the offer of the same theme in literature was for readers surprising. although he considered them at that time “funny”.⁴³ Ian McEwan experimented “with the generic convention of another medium [...] connecting his personal preoccupations (the troubled family life, feminism) with political events of the time by embedding these concerns within a wider historical perspective”.⁴⁴

In 1975, Ian McEwan entranced the literary scene with his first book *First Love, Last Rites*, which caused a great deal of outrage, due to the chosen motives of *sibling incest, cross-dressing, a rat that torments young lovers, actors making love mid-rehearsal, children roasting a cat, child abuse and murder, a man who keeps a penis in a jar and uses esoteric geometry to obliterate his wife*.⁴⁵ Three years later, similar outrage occurred over his second book *In Between the Sheets*, which continues on the same wave of morality message, law interpretation, and absurdity. These collections of stories were created as a literary experiment and also Ian McEwan’s intention was to be seen and by causing a shock.⁴⁶

During the following years, he added two more screenplays, *The Ploughman’s Lunch*⁴⁷ (released in 1983) and *Soursweet*, based on Timothy Mo’s novel (released in 1988), and an oratorio with the very poetic name *Or Shall We Die?* (1983). By now, he has on his list also a libretto prepared with an English composer Michael Berkeley called *For You* (2008).⁴⁸

In 1978 *The Cement Garden* was published followed *The Comfort of Strangers* three years later. The theme of the first one is a controversial sexual relationships within a family, similarly to the previous stories and plays. The theme of the second one contains taboos as well – mainly sexual fantasies, however not between family members in this case.

⁴² McEwan, “Ian McEwan Writes about His Television Plays.”

⁴³ McEwan, “Why Do You Want to Live Forever?”.

⁴⁴ Groes, *Ian McEwan*, 7.

⁴⁵ Ian McEwan, “Ian McEwan: when I was a monster,” *Guardian*, August 28, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/28/ian-mcewan-first-love-last-rites-40-years-since-publication>.

⁴⁶ McEwan, “Why Do You Want to Live Forever?”

⁴⁷ The script is available at: https://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/ploughmans_lunch.html.

⁴⁸ Ian McEwan, and Michael Berkeley, “Michael Berkeley and Ian McEwan Talk about New Opera for You,” *YouTube*, April 18, 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FR5YdlcygDM&ab_channel=MusicTheatreWales.

Family Novels

I called the next decade “Family Novels“, although the motive of a family as a concept is presented very often in other books as well. Nevertheless, in these novels (*The Child in Time*, *The Innocent* (1990), *Black Dogs* (1992), the children novel *The Daydreamer* (1994), and *Nutshell* (2016), families are in the centre of the stories, with all their good or bad, functional or unfunctional relationships, with their climbs and falls, with a special focus on children. This may sound simple at first sight, nevertheless, McEwan tells his stories in interesting, often experimenting ways. For instance, in the book *Nutshell*, the narrator is an unborn baby, who possesses narrative and cognitive skills typical for a well-educated adult person.

Love Stories

Since literature exists, love stories exist. For children, beautiful stories are written with good fairy-tale ends, for young adults, a large amount of romantic tales with many complicated obstacles and binding rules are written, and often they bring an utterly different and distorting view of reality. Generally, the choices of books for adults are much more varied. In these stories, many aspects of life are interfering, such as sexuality, the (in)ability to have children, parenting, illnesses, incurable diseases (even better also invisible), death of beloved people, lies, betrayals, good intentions without fulfilments, poverty, great riches, helplessness, or on the other hand enormous responsibility, mockery, false accusations, or too many expectations and others. Ian McEwan managed to employ these motives and many others in his works, which were later adapted into much-awarded movies. This category includes *Enduring Love* (1997), *Amsterdam* (1998), *Atonement* (2001), and *On Chesil Beach* (2007). In 2007 the movie *Atonement* was based on, starring James McAvoy, Keira Knightley, and Saoirse Ronan.

And here comes the reason of choosing the topic for my thesis - like Briony (the narrator of *Atonement*) I had seen something not quite appropriate for my age and I could not cope with it at that time. It was this movie. At the age of eight or nine, it brought very strong emotions to me, but among the sad feelings also the hunger (the main impression that should Ian’s books bring to me) for other stories like that. Nevertheless, it caused in my opinion also one very positive effect – awareness of the fact, that words can change or even destroy people’s lives. Unfortunately, this piece of information Briony did not have at the beginning.

Atonement is a story showing the nascent love of a young couple with a promising future, Cecilia and Robbie, which is destroyed by Briony’s single misinterpretation of an act of love changing it into an act of rape. From then, the romance turns into a hopeless seeking a new

chance of a reunion by the lovers, which will never happen. Robbie is slowly dying in Dunkirk thinking about his beloved Cecilia, who drowns hidden during a bombing in a tube station and the only one who stays alive is Briony, who caused their violent separation and now writes their story inventing a happy ending for them.⁴⁹

Political and environmental stories

Ian McEwan's most recent writing period consists of books based on currently discussed issues, ranging from politics, and environmental problems to vision of the future, for example. The books contained in this category are *Saturday* (2005), *Solar* (2010), *Sweet Tooth* (2012), *The Children Act* (2014), *Machines like me* (2016), *The Cockroach* (2019), and *Lessons* (2022).

The book *The Children Act* aroused my great interest, due to the fact that it is based on a true event from 1993 copiously discussed by the media,⁵⁰ concerning a young Jehovah's witness, who seriously needed a blood transfusion. The case was referred to the judge of the Court of Appeal Sir Alan Ward.⁵¹ Blood transfusions are strictly forbidden by Jehovah's Witnesses, but the doctors are sworn by the Hippocratic oath to save lives. Again, the story followed by a book, and then by a movie, was written by life itself.

⁴⁹ Ian McEwan, *Atonement: A Novel* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003).

⁵⁰ Ian McEwan, "Ian McEwan: The Law Versus Religious Belief," *Guardian*, September 5, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/05/ian-mcewan-law-versus-religious-belief>.

⁵¹ Sarah Langford, "Film Review: The Children Act," *Legal Cheek*, August 28, 2018, <https://www.legalcheek.com/2018/08/film-review-the-children-act/>.

4. Practical Part

After introducing Ian McEwan's life, career, influences, and works as well as other contemporary British authors from his literary milieu, I can continue to analyse McEwan's earliest-published novels. Generally, a novel is invented prose usually long and complex, with more characters and covering a longer period of time. My analysis of each book is divided into six categories – basic information, plot, narrator and his position, characters, place and time, themes, and motives.

4.1 *The Cement Garden*

4.1.1 Basic Information

The Cement Garden is a novel first published in Great Britain by Jonathan Cape in 1978. The book is divided into two parts, each of them containing five unnamed chapters. The whole story evolves in 138 pages. In 1993 a movie with the same name was made, directed by Andrew Birkin and starring Charlotte Gainsbourg as Julie and Andrew Robertson as Jack.

4.1.2 Place and Time

Neither the place nor the time are specifically given, however, the described reality could take place at the time the novel was published, in the 1970s. I suggest this period because of the fashion presented by Julie, the thoughts about being of another gender, other than the one known at birth, and the feminist issues. Also, the described story covers only a few months, perhaps three or four.

The name of the place, where the main action occurs in the novel is also unknown, nevertheless, it is chosen to perfectly fit the occasions and circumstances of the story: the main characters occupy an isolated house with a special kind of garden, namely a cement garden. The other buildings around the house had been previously demolished, and only the torsos of them have remained alongside the long street they live in.

4.1.3 Plot

At the beginning of summer, a lorry with sacks of cement arrives and delivers twenty of them to Jack's father. Jack, a fourteen-year-old boy helps his father to carry them to the cellar. The father intends to transform their large garden by using the cement and making concrete paths despite Jack's mother's disapproval. Later, the children join in a small experiment with Jack's sister Sue's body where her siblings Julie and Jack touch her intimate parts.

The father reconstructs the garden with Jack, however suddenly, when Jack is masturbating in the bathroom, his father dies in the garden. During the first part of the story, Jack feels very lonely and therefore he creates fantasies about his sisters. All children attend the nearby school while their mother stays at home. After the father's death she looks very tired and feels sicker day after day. At the end of the first part of the book, the children realise that their mother has died in her bed.

They fear telling anyone and they decide to bury their mother in the cellar in a trunk and cover her with the bought cement. The youngest boy Tom does not understand the situation fully, but his sadness and its signs are on daily basis. All children have holidays and therefore no plans, no rules at all. An everyday routine does not exist, there is no leader who would advise them. When Tom has an interest to become a girl, both sisters start to treat him as a girl, Julie plays the role of his new mother, and he pretends to be a baby instead of a six-year-old boy.

After some time, Julie brings her new boyfriend Derek, who behaves very elegantly, and he is receptive to nuances in the house. He starts to be very curious about the situation of children living without their parents and their strange treatment and relationships among them. After a longer observation, he finds out that in the cellar lies their two-month-dead mother and that Julia and Jack lead an incestuous relationship.

4.1.4 Narrator

The narrator of the story is Jack, using his perspective to describe the place, the setting, the mood, and feelings. The narrative combines relatively objective descriptions with subjective inner monologues and dialogues, which are conveyed by Jack to the reader. But the story is not happening during the reading, all these situations happened in the past, however, the narrator speaks, naturalistically, cogently, and without hesitation. He tends to remember everything and chronologically presents the story, except for some memories: "*When I was eight years old, I came home from school...*"⁵²

The descriptions and inner monologues are usually longer than the dialogues, and the language differs as well. First, the reader is acquainted by the narrator with the setting, using long structures, full of adjectives, adverbs, and various ranges of verbs to get a complex impression of the situation. The language used in the dialogue is very simple, often not using whole sentences, except on rare occasions when he starts the dialogues eager something to express. The dialogues are often interrupted by the narrator's inner monologues, which completes the

⁵² McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 25.

entire impression. An example of a dialogue follows: “Wanna fight? Wanna race?” Julie lowered her eyes and kept to her course. I said in a normal voice, “What’s wrong?” “Nothing.” “Are you pissed off?” “Yes.” “With me?” “Yes.”⁵³

The language of the narrator changes according to the situation, informal language without shortened forms is used in descriptive passages and monologues, and on the other hand, shortened forms are used in dialogues. As an example, I use a sentence where the father’s direct speech occurs with Jack’s description added, continuing with Jack’s interpretation of the situation on to inner monologue:

*It will be tidier,” he said. “I won’t be able to keep up the garden now” (he tapped his left breast with his pipe), “and it will keep the muck off your mother’s clean floors.” He was so convinced of the sanity of his ideas that embarrassment, rather than fear, no one spoke against the plan. [...] My excitement increased when my father talked of hiring a cement mixer.*⁵⁴

The narrator is fourteen years old, and he experiences puberty, therefore, he feels lonely having no one, who he could talk to and who could understand him. He puts himself first, he behaves as if someone observes him, but in some cases, he does not care about anyone’s opinion like in this case, where he abandons his hygiene: *I no longer washed my face or hair or cut my nails or took baths.*⁵⁵

4.1.5 Characters

During the story, seven main characters are introduced, but not all of them have a name. The family consists of the parents, mother and father, and four children, Julie, Jack, Sue, and Tom. Another important character is Derek, Julie’s boyfriend, who is introduced almost at the end of the story.

Father

The character of the father has no particular name, he is always called *Father* or *Dad*. In the first three pages the noun occurs with lower cases, however during the remaining part of the book, the noun *father* is, no matter the context, written with a capital letter. The phrase in lower case always contains a pronoun as in these examples: „*My father nodded.*” or “*My father counted them,...*” but on the other hand, in sentences like “*...now Father was a semi-invalid...*”

⁵³ McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 24.

⁵⁴ McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 16-17.

⁵⁵ McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 21

or “*Dad’ll take it out on him.*”⁵⁶ When the father is the agent of the action, he is written capitalised, on the other hand, when the narrator tells generally about him as a person, the noun is in lower cases.

In my opinion, the father is the male leader, the patriarch within the family. His position and role are strictly given by the conventions of society and untouchable among the other members of the family. Despite the fact that he is respected by the family members, he does not achieve authority due to his job success, due to his behaviour prone to imitation, or due to love and kind treatment, but he gains respect by causing fear. There is no possibility of influencing him, and therefore he can make whatever decision he wishes to. Even his wife cannot persuade him and when she argues about his answer, he uses a violent action as an answer: “*He knew how to use pipe against her.*”⁵⁷ This is far from equality in the relationship.

Mother

The mother is like her husband called only by her position and role in the family. The noun is also written in lower case only with connection to someone’s pronoun, on the other hand, all children call her *Mother*, also capitalised. “*My mother, who was a quiet sort of person,...*” but “*...Mother poured a little milk...*”⁵⁸. As with by the father, the mother is addressing in the same way. In my point of view, the mother and father lack the features resulting from having a name, these nouns might be the names from the perspective of the narrator.

The mother of four children is a quiet, peaceful person, who is perceptive to their children’s needs. She speaks to them quite frequently and tries to advise them. Unfortunately, her role is not easy on several accounts. Her husband treats her as inferior and lacks interest in her opinions, and she is accustomed to that.

This woman found her way through her life by marrying a man who would support her financially, whom she could give offspring, and whom she would take care of. If these were the goals, she had planned for herself, she succeeded. Precisely that way of life was discussed as undesirable and unacceptable for women in the 1970s and 1980s. This mother represents the conventional role viewed as wrong and obsolete by of that time, on the other hand, her daughter Julie evinces multiple sympathies for change in society.

⁵⁶ McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 10, 13.

⁵⁷ McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 11.

⁵⁸ McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 10, 16.

Jack

Jack is a fourteen-year-old boy, who is, as said before, the narrator of the novel, his descriptions are not objective because his feelings complicate his perception and moreover the situations are described with hindsight. His life changes rapidly after his parents' deaths. At the beginning of his narrative, he is a boy dependent on his mother's caring and with a role given by his father. Then he has to care for himself and find a new role for himself. These attempts are not very close to the normal way of life. Unfortunately, he is neither motivated nor willing to take responsibility for his life or his siblings' lives. Even worse he does not meet anyone else apart from his siblings, so his intention to explore his sexuality expands to sex with his sister Julie.

From Jung's archetype perspective, Jack's Persona and Self are very closely connected, most of the time, he does not care about what anyone else thinks about him. He does what he wants to do— he does not wash, masturbates to the fantasies about his sisters, lies, and allows having sex with his sister. All these gradually increasing sins are part of his Shadow. His Animus and Anima are not fully accomplished yet, Jack seeks the perfect balance between them.

Julie

The seventeen-year-old Julie is the oldest child in the family. Her life changes dramatically as well, but in a different manner from Jack. She was brought up to be an obedient girl to later become an obedient, submissive, and dependent wife. Her successes in school races were marginalised, and she was never meant to elevate her position: "*Father had never taken her seriously, he said it was daft in a girl, running fast, and not long before he died he refused to come to a sports meeting with us.*"⁵⁹ The death of her parents changed everything: now, she was the family leader, the most experienced, with access to money (from her mother), with sufficient self-esteem, but without firm rules for managing the household and her siblings. However, she voluntarily accepts her new role, including the role of mother to small Tom. This position is easy for neither an adult female, nor a young girl. Hence, she is unable to define the rules and set some boundaries for the child. She also proves that being a mother is not the only role she wants to perform.

A Jungian interpretation would be that Julie's Self was imprisoned for a long time by oppression from her father, but she was looking for an acceptable way of expressing herself. "*She wore stockings and black knickers, strictly forbidden. She had a clean white blouse five days a week.*" Later, she started wearing a pair of "*deep brown*" boots with "*a rich smell of leather and*

⁵⁹. McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 20.

perfume.” When her loneliness became excessive, she looked for a soul mate, someone close – her brother Jack. In Jack’s view, that close relationship had lasted for “*ages and ages.*” At the same time, such behaviour is considered unconventional, immoral, and finally also illegal, and therefore it might be the Shadow. The Persona is present with Derek and with Tom: she gets advantages from the relationship with Derek (the boots are from “*A friend.*”⁶⁰) and she accepts the role of Tom’s mother. The Anima and Animus are steady enough to not bother her with similar thoughts as Tom does.

Sue

The second daughter of her parents is the thirteen-year-old Sue. Before her mother died, she lived peacefully, welcoming experiments on her body from her older siblings. After her mother’s death, she dwells very often behind the closed door of her room, reading books or writing a great number of letters to her missing dead mother. Instead of complaining about everything, she tries to live in the household they have. “*I like reading,*” Sue said, “*and there’s nothing else to do.*” [...] “*I don’t think I feel like doing anything else.*” [...] I [Jack] said to Sue, “*But you still write in that book, don’t you?*”⁶¹

I would say that this young girl would be in her puberty nowadays, but in the 1970s she might be in prepubescent age. Her behaviour has no deviational signs, she looks stable in regard to her difficult family situation and her interest in the opposite sex is only platonic. Her behaviour is conventional, her Self sits closed in her room writing letters and reading, her Persona cleans the kitchen occasionally, and her Shadow might have died with Julie’s and Jack’s last touches of her body for the time being. Her Anima or Animus seem not to be developing temporarily.

Tom

He is only six years old, and entirely dependent on his sibling. The life without his mother is unbelievably harsh for him, so he desperately wants to create a new one – Julie and starts to pretend to be a girl and a baby with his needs. He is already able to perceive some differences between a boy and a girl, here is a conversation with Sue about this topic:

[...] but Sue went on, “He came to my room and said, “What’s it like being a girl?” and I said, “It’s nice, why?” And he said he was tired of being a boy and he wanted to be a girl no. And I said, “But you can’t be a girl if you’re a boy,” and he said, “Yes I can. If I want to, I can.” So then I said, “Why do you want to be a girl?” And he said, “Because you don’t get his when you’re a girl.” And I told him you do sometimes, but he said, “No you don’t, no you don’t.” S then I

⁶⁰ McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 20, 79, 135, 80.

⁶¹ McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 97.

said, "How can you be a girl when everyone knows you're a boy?" and he said, "I'll wear a dress and make my hair like yours and go in the girls' entrance."⁶²

At the age of six, he cannot understand the complexity of the problem, but he sees the gender change as a suitable solution for his bullying in school. I think that this might be a reference to the fact, that some kind of domestic violence existed in the author's family, and being a girl, or a woman prevents no one from hitting.

Jung's theory of personality opens up a view on his behaviour from more perspectives. At the age of six, he has not fully developed the Shadow, his intentions are primarily good, but The Self and Persona have their ground. The Self is the part, which is completely honest with itself, it is the true self – Tom feels happy when he can play with his friend, not pretending anything: *Tom, who was wearing his own clothes for the first time in days, played in the garden with his friend from the tower block.* This situation shows what Tom wants to do. The second situation shows, on the other hand, Tom being ordered by Julie about going to sleep: "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."⁶³

In the second part of book, he pretends to be at first a girl, then a baby. These strategies are acts of the Persona. Tom's Anima becomes evident in his attempt to be a girl: from his point of view, being a girl means being safe. "Because you don't get his when you're a girl."⁶⁴

Derek

Derek is a twenty-three-year-old man with a lifestyle contrasting with Jack's and his father's. While, Derek works on his career, looks regularly for company, and controls his life, Jack, in his father view, does not make so much effort. Derek seems very competent and offers Julie and her siblings help in the form of taking care of them. He thinks about the worth of their house, of making some money from it by changing the rooms into flats. Although it could be considered another example of patriarchal behaviour, he treats women around him with respect. This is one example: *Derek took a cigarette from Mr O's packet. Mrs O kicked her legs and*

⁶² McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 46-47.

⁶³ McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 122, 72.

⁶⁴ McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 47.

*made a whimpering sound and held up her mouth like a baby bird in a nest. Derek took another cigarette and put it in her mouth and she and Mr O laughed.*⁶⁵ I do not consider him a despot.

4.1.6 Themes and motives

The main theme are the feminist questions occurring in the 1970s. There are two couples I consider contrasting, the first one being the father and mother, the second one a couple representing the next generation – Julie and Derek. The mother and father used to grow up in a society where the man was strictly the head of the house and the wife had only gender-defined things to do, that is to be a wife, have children and take care of them, and maintain the household.

Another theme relates to sex and gender. Through the naïve questions raised by small Tom, some serious questions enter the book. These questions challenging the bipolarity of sex and gender and their possible changes are nowadays much more prominent, even giving rise to a multiverse of genders.

The next theme is the incestuous relationship between Julie and Jack. In my opinion, this theme is still a taboo, at least in our country. Any relationships are difficult to maintain in the long run and favourably for all persons included. During the very difficult times for this family, and later for the children alone, keeping at least some relationships make them feel safe. Initially, I found the idea disgusting, unforgivable and unacceptable, but after further consideration, I felt sorry for them. They had never received good parenting leading them to trust themselves and therefore be brave enough to trust someone else than their family.

Bad upbringing could be another theme; it might be the primal issue, which caused the consequent ones. Jack remembers one single day when their parents had to leave their children alone. The parents had prepared everything needed before leaving, not allowing their children to at least try to help themselves. After the parents left, a paradise arose – everything was allowed, and they could spend the time as they wanted. At that time, the violence was allowed, and they were trying the limits: “*Julie delivered a low, hard punch to my [Jack’s] ribs*”, “*Sue filled a balloon with water and threw it at my head.*” Jack’s first reaction to his mother’s death sounded similarly: “*When Mother died, beneath my strongest feelings was a sense of adventure and freedom which I hardly admit to myself and which was derived from the memory of that day five years ago.*”⁶⁶ From my point of view, such reaction sounds unconventional and

⁶⁵ McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 102.

⁶⁶ McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 70, 71.

shocking to death of a close person, but also believable. The emotions are primarily reflexes of the physical body, then after further reconciliation the higher-level emotions come. Therefore, it is completely normal, that adventurousness was the first feeling.

The whole story unfolds in the spirit of naturalism, beginning with the description of flies and wasps prying in the rubbish in the untidied kitchen, or smashing a frog in the garden and ending with a very graphic description of the mother's torso visible through a crack in the concrete. The description of Jack's touching Julie's body is very naturalistic too.

4.1.7 Narrative Style

I have mentioned that Ian McEwan creates his stories similarly to the way in which people generally perceive reality. In this novel, McEwan uses one of the characters as the narrator. This character is thus both set aside from the story and remains a part of it. From the narrator's subjective perspective, the reader gains information about him and his surroundings. The author's fictional world is created part by part by the narrator Jack, who often misinterprets reality.

The narrator refers to reality without further interest, without evaluation and thoughts about future and yet his descriptions are very complex, providing views full of details. This perception is determined by the narrator's behaviour and his opinions.

This novel contains some naturalistic motives. Naturalism focuses on the negative parts of people's lives with a particular interest in describing such unpleasant or upsetting things in detail. This is one example of naturalistic writing:

As I walked round the pond I felt something collapse under my foot. I had trodden on a frog. It lay on its side with one long back leg stuck in the air quivering in little circles. A creamy green substance was spilling out of its stomach and the sac under its chin blew in and out very rapidly. With one bulging eye it stared up at me in a sorrowful, unaccusing kind of way. I knelt down beside it and picked up a large flat stone. Now it seemed to look at me expecting help. I waited, hoping it would recover or die suddenly. But the air sac was filling and emptying faster and it was attempting hopelessly to use its other back leg to right itself. Its small front legs made swimming movements in the air. The yellowish eye stared into mine. "That's enough," I said out loud and brought the flat stone sharply on the small green head. When I lifted the stone the frog's body stuck to it and then dropped to the ground. I began to cry. I found it in with a stick I saw its front legs tremble. I covered it quickly with earth and stamped the grave flat.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 113-114.

This is a very detailed description of something generally unimportant in comparison to the description of the mother's death. "*Three days later she was dead.*" This is the most rigid possible description of someone's death, especially someone's close. In this case, the reader could be strongly affected as well. Meanwhile, the first description brings us relatively clear negative emotion - disgust, the second one lets us lonely with our thoughts, which could be much worse.

The detailed description of the frog's death might be caused by the interest in examination of the death itself, without previous interest in the life. But the death of the mother is such a different experience in comparison. She was important for giving life to her children, Jack knew her, because he lived with her, saw her every day, she was giving him advice. Now, she is gone forever, and no one is able to replace her. These feelings are so dark and deep that words may not be able to describe it.

Marking this story as claustrophobic is utterly accurate. The setting in an isolated house with a limited number of characters and limited possible actions may reduce the space for a development. The claustrophobic atmosphere is made stronger the fact that the children live in a house with lots of rooms and a huge cellar. Gradually, some rooms become inhabitable. The kitchen is full of dirt, the children's dead mother lies in the cellar covered in concrete, Jack's room causes him hallucinations and in the garden is too hot during the summer that the sun burns everything.

If Julie is the only one with access to money from her mother, then the other children have low chance to escape from their situation. The younger they are, the more dependent are on Julie. Unfortunately, they do not make their situation easier. Generally, they treat one another badly, with little respect and without attention.

Claustrophobia is an irrational fear of small, confined places, and this house is a such place. The word mentioned in the title of the book – garden – evokes the idea of a large green sunshined place, where anyone can freely breathe, move, think, and gain inspiration. Adding the adjective *cement* to the title makes, the whole picture completely different. These two words are for me so contrasting that they are practically contradictory.

What might the author have meant by the title? Does he create a paradox? He writes a story with an extremely unconventional title, does he then create a story beyond the boundary of ordinary morality and convention? I think that he extends the concept of the garden towards the

absurd, and in such case, he extends the story about an ordinary family exploring the boundaries of morality and convention and addressing taboos that society usually shies away from.

The story brings up many questions, however, it is true that most of them remain unanswered. Did the parents bring up their children consciously for their future life? Did the parents let them try the limits, to discover new things? Did the parents show their children any feelings – appreciation, pride or love? Are the children able to make difficult decisions? At which age is a child able to understand sex? Also, other very urgent questions are: Is there any difference between sex and gender? At what age should children be told about it? And by whom? What is a conventional reaction to death? What are the conventions? What is considered normal? What is good and what is evil? Who can judge and pass a judgement? Is there a God above us?

As I said, many of these questions remain unanswered in the novel. In addition, everyone can ask different questions, but some of them are answered by the story and some of them answered by psychology, sociology or philosophy and some of them would be answered by a six-year-old child. The Tom's reaction to the death of his mother is sadness, crying and looking for a new one. Why does the book ask so many questions? What is the author's intention?

The author does not answer the questions, he lets them rise from his story and lets his readers think about these difficult things. Even though he writes about behaviour that is usually viewed as unconventional or even immoral, McEwan does not judge, and especially avoids hasty judgements. He only describes the situations that life can bring. If the author does not want to judge, should we judge? *“Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”*⁶⁸ If this is the God's message, how dare we judge? From my point of view, the process of judging is very subjective, and nobody is able to know about all peripeties which might have preceded that decision.

4.2 *The Comfort of Strangers*

4.2.1 Basic Information

The Comfort of Strangers is the second novel written by Ian McEwan, first published in 1981 by Jonathan Cape. The novel is divided into ten chapters. It was made into a movie with the same name in 1990. The main male characters are played Christopher Walker and Rupert Everett, and their female counterparts by Helen Mirren and Natasha Richardson. The director is Paul Schrader.

⁶⁸ Bible, Lk 6:37.

4.2.2 Place and Time

The story takes place in an unknown town in Italy, mainly in a hotel where the two main characters Colin and Mary stay, then in the streets or bars or restaurants of that town and lastly in the house of another couple Robert and Caroline. The town is not specified, but maps are sold showing some tourist attractions and prominent places such as restaurants and bars. It is a place, easy to be lost in without the map and it is also known that the town has access to a sea. The town might be Venice, but the atmosphere remains more thrilling in unknown place.

Time, on the other hand, could be assessed due to the ongoing issues, such as the presence of two groups of opinions, the first one that places a man unconditionally in charge, and the second that believes in equality between the sexes. Then sexual preference and deviant behaviour are also issues circulating among the public during the 1970s. In 1967 the Sexual Offences Act was passed which decriminalised homosexuality, which was by most people considered a deviant behaviour.

4.2.3 Plot

At the beginning of the story, Colin and Mary are presented as a couple seven years together, with a quite complicated relationship. Mary has already two children, but Colin is not their father. They are on holiday, accommodated in a small quiet hotel, where they are often hidden from the heat and sunshine behind the shutters in their beds. They often make love, and they share their fantasies, which are usually nothing extreme.

With no need to buy the map, they get lost in the streets and they meet a man introducing himself as Robert. They let him lead them into his restaurant, which is currently on sale. Robert starts telling them a story about his father, how he admires him and what wonderful things he had done. He tells about his mother and his sisters. He often mentions that what he is now, is due to his father.

After a long story full of Robert's memories, they returned to the hotel, tired and thirsty, not having managed to get drinking water. They agree that Robert's company was somehow unpleasant, but at that time, Robert himself is coming to them and apologises and gets them a taxi.

Then they wake up in one of the rooms in Robert's house and meet Robert's wife Caroline, who has some struggles with her back. They have dinner, talking once more about themselves and the house and their plans. Robert and Caroline admire the exceptionally handsome Colin. Then Caroline insists on their next visit and so it is promised.

For the next four days, Colin and Mary stay only in the hotel, enjoying themselves, making love and sharing their sexual fantasies, including subjection and humiliation. Mary speaks about a photographer who has taken photos of Colin. They spend some time in the town of their own, when suddenly they notice Caroline waving at them.

During the next visit, Robert takes Colin with him to the town and lets Caroline accompany Mary. Colin is confused when he discovers that Robert has taken a picture of him and rejects to explain the purpose of that action. While the men are in Robert's restaurant, Caroline prepares tea and tells Mary about her and Robert's masochistic sexual experience when he almost killed her. Later Caroline shows all the photos of Colin Robert has made and keep them in their bedroom displayed on the wall.

When Colin and Robert have return from the town, Mary is somehow numb. She cannot react properly and she knows already that they are not safe with Robert and his wife. She tries to warn Colin but hopelessly. Then Robert and Caroline start undressing him and kissing him, and at the end, they cut his veins with a razor and let him bleed out to death. Mary drugged by something added to the tea is not able to help him.

When she gets to the police to inform them about this crime, they simply tell her that such things happen often.

4.2.4 Narrator

The story is conveyed by the omniscient third-person narrator, who uses past tenses to describe the setting, often with information about the place, weather, and time, and about the characters' actions and emotions. Although the situations are not evaluated by the narrator, they are described in full detail, therefore the evaluation is dependent on the reader. The narrator uses two ways of conveying the entire story – descriptions and dialogues. Often these methods are mixed as in the following example:

“It is terribly late,” said the man. “There is nothing in that direction, but I show you a place this way, a very good place.” He grinned and nodded in the direction they had come from. He was shorter than Colin, but his arms were exceptionally long and muscular. [...]

On a chain round his neck hung a gold imitation razorblade [...] Over his shoulder he carried a camera. [...]

He addressed himself to Mary with a wink. “My name is Robert.” Mary shook his hand and Robert began to pull them back down the street. “Please,” he insisted. “I know just the place.”

After much effort over several paces, Colin and Mary brought Robert to a standstill and they stood in a close huddle, breathing noisily.

Mary spoke as though to a child. "Robert, let go of my hand." He released her immediately and made a little bow.

Colin said, "And you'd better let go of me too."

But Robert was explaining apologetically to Mary, "I'd like to help you I can take you to a very good place." They set off again.

"We don't need to be dragged towards good food," Mary said, and Robert nodded. He touched his forehead. "I am, I am..."⁶⁹

There are several strategies in this dialogue, firstly the direct speech completed with the narrator's commentary referring to the way in which the character expresses a certain sentence, then the description of the place and positions of characters and lastly, ellipsis, meaning hesitation.

The third chapter of the book contains a story within the story. Robert tells about some important experiences from his childhood that have changed his entire life and formed his personality. This particular part is written using the same strategies as the other parts of the story but having exceptionally two narrators. The general omniscient third-person narrator commenting on Robert's behaviour, and Robert himself, commenting the behaviour of the characters in his story: *"All his life my father was a diplomat, and for many years we lived in London, in Knightsbridge. But I was a lazy boy" - Robert smiled - [...] or in another case: My father would say, "Robert, may the girls wear silk stockings like their Mama?" And I, ten years old, would say very loudly, "No Papa". "May they go to the theatre without their Mama?" "Absolutely not, Papa." "Robert, may they have their friends to stay?" "Never, Papa!"⁷⁰*

4.2.5 Characters

Colin

Colin is a young man, with an extraordinarily beautiful appearance, according to Robert and Caroline. There is a moment when Caroline shares their feeling with Mary:

"He is very beautiful," she said softly. "Robert saw you both, quite by chance, the day you first arrived." She pointed at the picture of Colin standing by a suitcase, a street map in his hand. [...]" We both think he's very beautiful." [...]" "Robert took a lot of pictures that day, but that's the one I saw first. I'll never forget it."⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ian McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, (London: Vintage, 1997), 26-27.

⁷⁰ McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 32, 33.

⁷¹ McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 121-122.

Precisely, for his appearance, he is chosen by the other couple to gratify their sexual desires. Unfortunately, he stays so naive, not seeing the indications of the planned crime, that in the end, he dies slowly, in front of his love.

Mary

Mary is a minor character, in my point of view, as far as her actions during the story are concerned. On the other hand, she is the one who represents the women's problems of that period. She is responsive to "*the announcements and pronouncements from feminists and the far Left*" written on posters on the walls in a street. She considers Italian women "*more radical here, and more organized*". Looking at the posters, she states that "*It's a tactic. It's a way of making people take rape more seriously as a crime.*"⁷² Once more, the questions of gender equality and the same rights occur.

Another situation linked to the feminist issue occurs in the dialogue with Caroline, when Mary complains about the fact that the best theatre roles are written for men and if there is a play where only women play, they are probably waiting for one to appear. "*Well. You could have a play about two women who have only just met sitting on a balcony talking. Caroline brightened. "Oh yes. But they're probably waiting for a man." [...] When he arrives they'll stop talking and go indoors. Something will happen...*"⁷³ Mary sees women as independent, capable human beings whereas, Caroline cannot understand this point of view.

During the villainous killing of Colin, she is as powerless as she should be in the traditional subordinated position. Caroline comforts Colin, saying: "*Mary will be fine.*" [...] "*She had something special in her tea, but she'll be fine.*"⁷⁴

Robert

The other main character is Robert. He seems to be an experienced man, who inherited huge wealth from his father. He perceives his father as an omniscient god. "*Tell me, Robert, what have you been doing this afternoon?*" *I believed he knew everything, like God. He was testing me to find out if I was worthy enough to tell the truth.* As a small boy, he was traumatised by a revenge from his sisters. They challenged him to drink and eat a lot of chocolate, then they locked him in his father's study, where entry without their father was prohibited as was eating chocolate. Robert says that: "*Then Eva and Maria dragged me to my feet and pushed me out of*

⁷² McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 22-23.

⁷³ McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 71.

⁷⁴ McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 126.

the kitchen, along the corridor, across the big hallway and into father's study. They took the key from inside, slammed the door and locked it "Bye-bye Robert," they called through the keyhole. "Now you are big Papa in his study." The room was decorated with many expensive rugs on the walls and his father (a diplomat) kept important documents in there. The story continues:

Finally, I could not help myself. The lemonade came, and not long after the cooking chocolate and cake, like a liquid. I was wearing short trousers, like an English schoolboy. And instead of standing still, and ruining only one rug, I ran everywhere, screaming and crying, as if my father was already chasing me. [...] "Quick, quick! Papa is coming." [...] I ran to the desk and took some paper, and this was how my father found me, cleaning my knees with affairs of State, and behind me the floor of his study was like a farmyard.⁷⁵

Then he was punished, and he could not enter his father's study until he married. This experience left many mental wounds and after he married, he started to insist on a masochistic relationship with his wife. He also finds out that he is impotent, so nothing could arise from the sex with his wife. Caroline describes it: *"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 Robert, something wrong with his sperm. He's very sensitive about it."*⁷⁶

When he saw Colin first, *he came home so excited.*⁷⁷ He prepares a plan of gaining him and overcoming all obstacles. And finally, he succeeds in murdering him. It sounds very unconventional, but if I described Robert as a social, single-minded, well-educated, wealthy man, there are no negative connotations.

Caroline

Caroline is Robert's wife, accustomed to staying at home since she has married, and due to her aching back and legs, she has no other option. When both women met for the first time, and Caroline says that Robert is the owner of the restaurant they visited the previous night she says neutrally: *"You know more about it than I do, I've never been there."* Caroline makes her first impression by asking inappropriate questions about Colin's and Mary's private life. *"I expect you think I'm mad, as well as rude. Are you in love?" [...] "By "in love" I mean that you'd do anything for the other person, and ..."* She hesitated. Her eyes were extraordinarily bright.

⁷⁵ McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 35, 38-39.

⁷⁶ McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 116.

⁷⁷ McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 122.

*“And you’d let them do anything to you.”*⁷⁸ She seems to be lost deeply in her subordinated role, she even does not meet anyone, but she needs to confide to someone.

Caroline has her own story within the story. She tells it during the preparation of this special herb tea for Mary, which makes her numb. She speaks about her childhood and the cause of her aching back, the inability to become pregnant, the problem found with Robert, and him punishing her with sadomasochistic sex and violence.

She says that it was hard to become accustomed to that kind of treatment. First, she did not like it. This statement rises some questions. What makes her stay in such a relationship? She married into the completely patriarchal system; she practically became the property of her husband, they could not have children, so they lost their future, and they stay stuck in their past lives. Caroline is so dependent on Robert that she cannot reject his desires. As time passes by, she starts to accept it and then also like it.

4.2.6 Themes and motives

The book contains several themes and motives related to feminism in the 1970s. As for usual the patriarchal leaders influence everything, their women stay at home and if they have no children, they are useless. *“Women are more radical here [...] and better organized.”*⁷⁹

The story brings up the question, of whether there is something as a convention in the private sex lives of people, without the narrator judging the characters’ behaviour. Instead, two ways of handling controversial desires are presented. Colin and Mary have also their scene when they talk about their fantasies, but they do not want to accomplish them:

*Mary muttered 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. Colin invented for Mary a large, intricate machine, made of steel, painted bright red and powered by electricity; it had pistons and controls, straps and dials, and made a low hum when it was switched on. Colin hummed in Mary's ear. Once Mary was strapped in, fitted to tubes that fed and evacuated her body, 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.*⁸⁰

⁷⁸ McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 65-66.

⁷⁹ McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 23.

⁸⁰ McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 86.

They speak about it, but they know about the consequences of such treatment. When they love, they do not want to maltreat each other. On the other hand, the second couple made their fantasies real, irrespective of the consequences.

4.2.7 Narrative Style

The author gives his readers a slightly mysterious story, where the naive couple moves through an unknown town, and unknown streets, meeting strangers and blindly following them. The only certain things are omnipresent heat, non-availability of water, or one's presence for the other one.

Ian McEwan tells the story through the omniscient third-person narrator, emphasizing details. The narrator flows above the whole story, not commenting, not judging anyone. Readers get the description of the setting, character, and expressions, but then they must form their opinions on their own. The claustrophobic atmosphere is present in this story as well – the motive of the place closed from the world, the phone, disconnected and the help, that will not come, is thrilling, and destroying in the end.

The story creates strong connections to the past lives of all characters, their deterministic view of character's actions is probably the most significant naturalistic element. The behaviour of each of them depends on the traumas they received from their parents, siblings, and the patriarchal society. They often behave as they are used to, not willing to change anything.

Many moral questions are arising, but the author does not provide any answers. How could society find a middle ground when creating laws? What is the worth of a human's life? And what kind of life is worthy of living? Can a person be the property of someone else?

The good and evil as two contracting elements are not distinguished clearly by the author. The same question returns – could anyone judge? But in this case, it is more complicated – a murder is in question. If no one have the right to kill, how could anyone else has the right to kill a murderer? Does the Bible provide advice? The Old Testament preaches the equality of punishments, but the Evangelists show a new way, the way of forgiveness. This is the question that has no clear answer yet. Who is authorised to condemn a person to capital judgement?

4.3 Comparison

Both works keep alive the naturalistic way of telling a story, both of them present settings full of problems and full of uneasy context. Both of them miss the element of normal family life, even though the characters made efforts. This might be the slightly autobiographical element of these two McEwan's works – missing a conventional, harmonious family. Another autobiographic element could be also the mixing of German and English together. In *The Cement Garden*, Julie uses a mixture of these two languages to sound as a doctor “*Vot to you think of zis, Herr Doctor?*”⁸¹, and there is a song at the beginning of *The Comfort of Strangers* with German lyric “*Mann und Weib, und Weib und Mann*”⁸²

Both are linked by the claustrophobic atmosphere, which is achieved through a great number of details: often unpleasant things one cannot hide or run away from. The described situations are so different from the reality around, that it is very difficult to find the way out of them.

Another interesting element is the choice of the titles. Both contain a paradox. Can a garden be made only out of cement? Can comfort be provided by utter strangers? The unconventional manner is already in the titles.

The main difference is in the chosen type of narrator. While Jack is a real person, an actor in story, the omniscient narrator is not included in it.

With hindsight, some situations cease to be surprising or shocking in the passage of time, but the questions arising from them remain as actual as ever.

⁸¹ McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 12.

⁸² McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 11.

5. Conclusion

As a conclusion to my thesis, I think that Ian McEwan earned his nickname "Ian Macabre" by his early works rightly. He pictures such negative situations as incest or murder with his extraordinary sense of detail without closing a way for questions. Not answering these questions, he promotes interest and profound thoughts about life and death, love and sexuality, and the value of a single individual and a family. He reminds us that negative aspects of life is inevitable, and their solutions are necessary.

Although Ian McEwan deals with such negative themes henceforth, his later books abandon such claustrophobic settings and also convey some peaceful and pleasant aspects of life. From reading his early novels and later work, I conclude that the most important things that appear in his novels are good family relationships and personal moral values..

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