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# **Reflections on Hamlet in McEwan's Nutshell**

Literární aluze na Hamleta v románu Nutshell

Iana McEwana

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Adéla Rejmanová

## **Poděkování**

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## **Anotace**

Práce se zaměří na vyprávěcí perspektivu současného románu britského autora Iana McEwana *Nutshell*, který autor pojal jako literární experiment ve vztahu k literárnímu odkazu Williama Shakespeara a jeho klasické tragédie *Hamlet*. Práce v úvodní části představí autora v kontextu současné britské prózy a stručně zmíní díla současné literatury, která jsou součástí projektu The Hogarth Shakespeare Series (od roku 2015). Jádrem práce bude literární analýza McEwanova románu ve vztahu k tragédii W. Shakespeara, která se soustředí na identitu vypravěče příběhu, jeho existenciální zkušenost, vnímání světa a uzavřeného prostoru v matčině lůně. Závěrečná kapitola zhodnotí téma románu I. McEwana v porovnání s námětem klasické Shakespearovy tragédie.

## **Abstract**

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the narrative perspective in Ian McEwan's contemporary novel called *Nutshell*. The author approached the novel as a literary experiment related to the legacy of William Shakespeare and his classical tragedy *Hamlet*. Firstly, the thesis presents the author in the context of contemporary British fiction and briefly introduces the works included in a project called The Hogarth Shakespeare Series (since 2015). The core of this thesis is a literary analysis of McEwan's novel in relation to Shakespeare's tragedy. The novel focuses on the narrator's identity, his existential experience, his perception of the world and the closed space of his mother's womb. The last chapter then views the themes included in McEwan's *Nutshell* in comparison to the theme of a classical Shakespearean tragedy.

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## Introduction

This bachelor thesis will deal with the novel *Nutshell* by Ian McEwan as a postmodern take on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The main goal is to analyse the narrator's identity, his perspective and his attitude towards his mother's womb, in which he resides while the story unravels. Moreover, the thesis attempts to compare the child's views with those of Hamlet and find other allusions referring to the play as well.

The theoretical part of this thesis will introduce Ian McEwan in terms of his personal and professional life, with a focus on the latter. Additionally, it will present the works included in the Hogarth Shakespeare Series, a project launched in 2013 to give readers opportunities to experience William Shakespeare's works in new, modern retellings. Even though McEwan's work is not included in this project, its character connects it to this literary context, considering the inspiration by the Bard's works.

The third chapter, which also serves as the first one of the practical part, will include the novel's plot summary as well as an analysis of the narrator's perspective and identity, mainly concerning the space surrounding him. The following part is dedicated to the exploration of references to *Hamlet* with a focus on the comparison between Hamlet and his *Nutshell* counterpart, the baby narrator. However, the chapter will also examine other significant characters alluding to the play. The last chapter will then address some of the allusions to Shakespeare himself, as well as references to the overall literary context.

# 1 Ian McEwan

## 1.1 Early Life

Ian McEwan, born June 21, 1948, in Aldershot, a British military town, is a contemporary British novelist whose literary career spans from the 1970s till nowadays. He was born to the family of Rose Lilian McEwan and David McEwan, a Scotsman serving in the British army. His mother already had two children from a previous marriage with a man who died during the Second World War. As mentioned above, his father David was a British soldier who also later became an officer in the army. Thanks to the nature of his father's occupation, the family moved quite a lot during Ian's childhood. Not only did they go through several military bases in England, but they also experienced countries such as Libya or Singapore. The encounters with these foreign lands then had a forming influence on young McEwan. Since moving around quite a lot and originating in the working class, the family often lived on the margins of society, making McEwan understand the effects of class distinction. Moreover, he claims that in Libya, he got his first idea of what powers history and politics have for the course of events in the world. The main incident that made him realize these effects came in the form of the Suez crisis of 1956 when McEwan was 8 years old. The British families living in Libya were gathered in armed camps to ensure their safety due to the tense atmosphere revolving around the conflict. For McEwan, the experience of living in fear while being closed in tents with other British children made him acknowledge the real effects of political events. (Head, 2007; Malcolm, 2002)

At the age of eleven, McEwan was sent from Libya to a boarding school back in England, more precisely in Suffolk. After attending the boarding school, whose influence was crucial for his upbringing as well, he got an undergraduate degree at the University of Sussex with majors in English and French. He went through these studies between the years 1967 and 1970, after which he attended the University of East Anglia (1970–1971) with a focus on creative writing. The universities he attended were newly established institutions with interesting outlooks on education. McEwan became the first student of the creative writing course to reach his master's degree. This was also when he started working on one of his earliest works called *First Love, Last Rites*. (Groes, 2009; Head, 2007)

In the year following his M.A. studies, McEwan got a first-hand experience with the counter-culture, given that he followed the hippy trail to Afghanistan. In 1974, he moved to Stockwell, a district located in South West London. He also hired a literary agent for representation, so that his career could take off. Around this year, we can also mark McEwan's first writing accomplishments. (Groes, 2009) Therefore, the exploration of his life will continue in the following subchapter focusing on his professional career.

## **1.2 Literary Career**

### **1.2.1 Early Works**

The year 1975 represents a turning point in Ian McEwan's career, seeing as he published his debut, the aforementioned short-story collection called *First Love, Last Rites*. According to Childs (2005, p. 160), "the volume immediately won McEwan a reputation for writing 'literature of shock'," considering the themes of children sexualization or physical assault. Despite the fact that there were several cases of criticism of this work, McEwan was generally considered an author of quality and new approaches to storytelling. His debut even brought him the first achievement of his literary career, namely the Somerset Maugham Award of 1975. (Malcolm, 2002)

In 1978, he produced another volume of short stories – *In Between the Sheets*. It consists of seven pieces with varying subjects. The themes interwoven throughout the series are focused on relationships. Surprisingly, these relationships are not only between humans but, for instance, there is also a story called *Reflections of a Kept Ape* exploring a connection between a woman writer and an ape whom she keeps as a lover. As well as *First Love, Last Rites*, this collection brought McEwan critical acclaim along with outrage at its controversial themes. (Childs, 2005)

After the short stories, McEwan finally published his first novel, *The Cement Garden* (1978). Its plot revolves around the family of Jack, the 15-year-old narrator, his three siblings, and their parents. However, the father dies at the very beginning of the novel when attempting to cover the house's garden with cement. This event is quite ironically put into a time parallel with Jack's ecstasy of becoming an adult and having his first ejaculation, giving the reader a sense of what controversies are to come. Most prominently, McEwan works with taboo topics such as sexuality, gender or incestuous tendencies.



In *The Cement Garden*, the children are put into an obscure situation when their mother dies as well, making them parentless. They decide to withhold this information so that they do not end up in an orphanage or some other facility of that kind. What they do is that they bury their mother in cement in the basement. “With a small cast of barely more than six characters in the novel, there is as strong a sense of intimacy and insularity as in the stories, but at its core, the novel is about the ways in which a family of orphaned children stick together” (Childs, 2005, p. 161). Jack and his siblings each deal with the emotions on their own, struggling to go through everyday life. When Derek, a friend of Julie’s, Jack’s older sister, finds out about the burial of their mother along with a sexual, therefore incestuous, intercourse between Jack and Julie, he calls the police immediately after, making the main characters’ destinies set in stone. (Head, 2007) Here we can see why McEwan got his nickname of *Ian Macabre*, related mostly to his earliest works.

Another piece falling into the period of the author’s early literary career is *The Comfort of Strangers*, which also concludes this phase. Written in 1981, the novel deals with interpersonal relationships as well. In it, we meet a tourist couple, Colin and Mary, exploring Venice, meeting a man named Robert. After they get introduced to Caroline, Robert’s wife, they come to discover the couple’s involvement in sadomasochistic practices. The story then unveils a disturbing exploration of power dynamics, desire, and the fine line between pleasure and pain. The linking element to the first novel can also be found in the theme of incest. Even though Colin and Mary are a “normal” couple, they are so close that they can be almost seen as brother and sister. (Childs, 2005)

### **1.2.2 Late 1980s and ‘90s**

After *The Comfort of Strangers*, McEwan took a considerable amount of time to write another piece. His new novel, *The Child in Time*, was published in 1987, six years after the preceding work, which, taking his other works into account, can be seen as a longer pause. However, it is also relatable to the changes he went through in his writing style. “The Child in Time marks a turning point in McEwan’s career: it was his first fiction to be clearly longer than novella length, and his first sustained attempt at a social novel, in which the private and the public are systematically intertwined” (Head, 2007, p. 70). It tells the story of Stephen and Julie, a married couple whose child, more precisely a 3-year-old daughter, was kidnapped during shopping with her father. After this tragedy, the couple gets separated and Stephen

deals with the loss on his own. The plot is enriched by the man's involvement with a government project creating a childcare manual. This being a close topic for Stephen, he often contemplates the pros and cons of these new inventions. (Childs, 2005; Malcolm, 2002)

Other works produced by McEwan in the period between the late '80s and '90s were *The Innocent*, *Black Dogs* or *Enduring Love*, published in 1989, 1992 and 1997 respectively. The last piece of this phase is *Amsterdam* (1998), which, according to Childs (2005), steered away from McEwan's previous works. The most significant elements of the novel originate from the genre of black comedy and social satire. The novel is set in the mid-1990s and focuses on the relationship of two friends, Clive and Vernon, mourning the loss of their mutual former lover, Molly. The moral dilemma of the characters is explored while they travel to the funeral in Amsterdam, planning to kill each other, even though they are, supposedly, best friends. (Childs, 2005; Malcolm, 2002) *Amsterdam* can be seen as one of the author's most successful works, taking into account that it won him his one and only Booker Prize. It is, however, quite paradoxical, since the novel's reviews were really mixed in comparison to some of McEwan's other works which have not won any prizes. Head (2007) sees the problem in the fact that it appears McEwan got his award for an accumulation of his quality creations beforehand.

### **1.2.3 From Atonement to Nutshell**

In this phase, beginning at the turn of the century, Ian McEwan wrote 7 novels including *Atonement* (2001), *Saturday* (2005), *On Chesil Beach* (2007), *Solar* (2010), *Sweet Tooth* (2012), *The Children Act* (2014) and *Nutshell* (2016). After that, he also published the novels *Machines Like Me* (2019) and *Lessons* (2022), as well as a novella called *The Cockroach* (2019). However, this chapter will examine only some of these works, namely *Atonement*, *On Chesil Beach* and *The Children Act* to make a briefer overview of Ian McEwan's work.

*Atonement* is, according to Head (2007), the author's greatest achievement. He sees it as such not only from his own point of view but addresses several highly-estimated reviewers as well. The difference from McEwan's previous works stems from its setting, since "for the first time, he set a novel mostly before his own birth. Though it ends in the present, the narrative begins in the mid-1930s and centres on a child's disastrous misinterpretation of the sexual desires of an older sister and her lover" (Childs, 2005, p. 167). Booth (2015) comments on the narrative perspective mentioning its interesting metanarrative twist. It is when we find out that the happy ending to the story we just read is just a product of Briony's imagination.

*On Chesil Beach* showcases McEwan's talent in dissecting the intricate nature of relationships. Set in the 1960s, it tells the story of Edward and Florence, a young couple who just got hitched in Oxford. There is a contrasting feature between their love story and the arguments they have to face. The main conflict in this relationship is affected by their inexperience in terms of sexual relationships. Both being conventional for their times, they await their first intercourse until after the wedding. However, as opposed to Edward, Florence seems not to be ready to consummate their marriage even after the rings are on their fingers. When in an argument, they run out to the beach near which they are staying for their honeymoon. The beach serves as an important symbol in the novel, explaining the choice of the title. All in all, the novel explores the effect a personal history has on people, as well as the social conventions. (Adams, 2007)

According to Kellaway (2014), the narrative of *The Children Act* is centred at the character of Fiona Maye, a high court judge. It explores her struggles both in her personal and professional life. She gets into turmoil because her husband tells her he needs to have an affair before he dies. At the same time, she, as a family law expert, is concerned with one of the cases she has been working on. It revolves around a 17-year-old boy with leukaemia, whose parents strictly refuse to let the boy have a blood transfusion, given that they are Jehovah's Witnesses. Kellaway (2014) considers *The Children Act* McEwan's best work since *On Chesil Beach* thanks to the enjoyable portrait of Fiona's marriage and the depictions of the moral dilemma she has to face in her professional career.

## 2 The Hogarth Shakespeare Series

To bring today's generation closer to the works of William Shakespeare, in 2013, the Hogarth Press (a book publishing imprint of Penguin Random House) decided to launch a new project called The Hogarth Shakespeare Series. This project was based on asking several best-selling authors to try and retell Shakespeare's best-known plays, not only to bring new readers to this genre but to "contribute to the commemoration of the Quatercentenary of Shakespeare's death celebrated in 2016" (Giménez Yuste, 2019, p. 2). "According to Hogarth, 'the new versions of Shakespeare would be true to the spirit of the original dramas and their popular appeal while giving authors an exciting opportunity to reinvent these seminal works of English literature'" (BBC News, 2013). In 2015, the first book called *The Gap of Time* got published. It was written by Jeanette Winterson, and its story is based on *The Winter's Tale*. The collection then consisted of the following six pieces: Howard Jacobson's *Shylock is My Name* (*The Merchant of Venice*), Anne Tyler's *Vinegar Girl* (*The Taming of the Shrew*), Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* (*The Tempest*), Edward St Aubyn's *Dunbar* (*King Lear*), Jo Nesbø's *Macbeth* (*Macbeth*), and Tracy Chevalier's *New Boy* (*Othello*). There should have also been a retelling of *Hamlet* by Gillian Flynn, which, according to Murphy (2017), was announced to launch in 2021. However, it has yet to see the light of day.

### 2.1 The Gap of Time

As mentioned before, the first novel in this series is *The Gap of Time* by Jeanette Winterson, released in 2015. Written as a retelling of *The Winter's Tale*, the author takes us to London, Paris, or a fictional American city of New Bohemia, a modern take of Bohemia where *The Winter's Tale* took place. The author incorporates characters with names that bear a resemblance to those in Shakespeare's play, allowing readers to draw parallels between the two stories. Thanks to that we meet Perdita, Leo, Shep, Mimi or Xeno as representatives of Perdita, King Leontes, a shepherd, Hermione and Polixenes. According to Merritt (2015), Winterson played with the structure so the story would get a 'greater dramatic punch'. Merritt also pinpoints the paradox of a character directly quoting *The Winter's Tale* without realizing that they are actually living the story. However, she appreciates that Winterson's novel is written both with respect to Shakespeare's work and with a new, dynamic approach to storytelling.

## 2.2 Shylock Is My Name

The following work in the Shakespeare Hogarth Series is *Shylock Is My Name* by Howard Jacobson. “*Shylock Is My Name* is both a retelling of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* and a sequel to it. Jacobson’s characters are modern counterparts to Shakespeare’s, but the novel also carries the original story beyond the bounds of the play – at least, for one character” (Sargeant, 2016). What is interesting here is the fact that the main character, Simon Strulovitch, who is designed to be a modern counterpart of Shylock, actually meets Shylock himself. Merritt (2016) also highlighted Jacobson’s approach to the “examination of what it means to be Jewish”.

Jacobson’s part in the Hogarth Shakespeare Project was no coincidence. A “veteran Shakespeare scholar and teacher” who even used the Bard’s name in one of his titles also dedicated some of his latest works to the theme of anti-Semitism and the aforementioned question of what it means to be Jewish (Reich, 2016). A combination of these aspects then left no question of who should be entrusted with this take on *The Merchant of Venice*.

## 2.3 Vinegar Girl

Moving on to the third novel in the series, we get introduced to Anne Tyler’s *Vinegar Girl*, which took inspiration from *The Taming of the Shrew*. According to Drost (2018), the reviews for *Vinegar Girl* were quite mixed and the novel did not get as much appraisal as, for example, Winterson’s *The Gap of Time*. Groskop (2016) writes about the hardship of writing about Kate’s situation of being reluctant to marry someone as it is hardly as controversial as it had been in Shakespeare’s times. However, she appreciates how the writer dealt with it, using the character of Pyotr (counterpart to Petruchio), Kate’s father’s lab assistant who is on the verge of being deported from the United States. Kate is forced to marry him so that her father can reach his academic breakthrough. As mentioned before, Groskop appreciates some of the novel’s qualities, however, she argues that Tyler was weighed down by needing to interpret someone else’s story. She writes, “Instead of a tribute, it just feels like tying the hands of an author who’s perfectly capable of creating her own world and really doesn’t need to borrow someone else’s. No, not even Shakespeare’s. Verdict? Fun, accomplished, readable, enjoyable. But Anne Tyler originals do all this and so much more.”

## 2.4 Hag-Seed

In October 2016, Canadian writer Margaret Atwood published a novel called *Hag-Seed*, a retelling of *The Tempest*. While Winterson or Tyler stuck to the original plots quite heavily, Atwood steered more away in *Hag-Seed* (Drost, 2018). Muñoz-Valdivieso (2017, p. 105) introduces the novel as a tale of “the avant-garde artistic director of a Shakespearean Festival who is outed from his job by his more world-savvy deputy, lives in isolation for twelve years and plots his revenge, which will involve a staging of *The Tempest* at the local prison where he has been teaching for some time as Mr. Duke.”

According to St. John Mandel (2016), some elements which can be pretty unrealistic in modern times can serve as one of the hurdles for retelling. Atwood accomplished it quite well and that is one of the reasons why the reviewer deems Atwood’s reinterpretation quite successful. Graham (2016) writes about the paradox of a calm Canadian weather in an adaptation of *The Tempest*. However, we are met with a storm of an entirely different kind – the chaos and madness made by the characters. Thanks to that, we are in for a dynamic and captivating read.

## 2.5 Dunbar

Edward St. Aubyn’s *Dunbar*, a modern retelling of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, offers us an insight into the life of Henry Dunbar (Lear’s counterpart) who here is a media mogul whose daughters are planning to take over his company. Clanchy (2017) considers this piece the finest one of the Hogarth Shakespeare Series, mainly praising the work for its electrifying atmosphere and the psychological portrayal of the protagonist. Zimmerman (2017), however, sees the main strength in the character of Peter Walker, Dunbar’s friend representing the role that Fool played in *King Lear*. Therefore, Zimmerman feels the story lose its power after Peter’s departure.

In this case of a Shakespeare play and its novelization, we can see a parallel in the point of view from which the story is told. It never seems to deviate from the main character and his perspective (Clanchy, 2017). What is also interesting is the element of metaphor, which plays a significant role in the minds of our protagonists. The understanding of a metaphor is then a determinative factor of King Lear’s and Henry Dunbar’s actions (Braganza, 2020).

## 2.6 Macbeth

Another writer included in the Hogarth Shakespeare Project was Jo Nesbø. The most successful Norwegian author of all time was assigned to retell *Macbeth*, a tragedy of a man killing several people under the influence of his Lady and thirst for power. As Løfaldli (2022) points out, Nesbø did not just simply retell the play in the same genre, but he wrote it as one of his trademark crime novels. He set his story in 1970, which has proven valuable mainly due to the absence of phones. This may also serve as one of the reasons why Macbeth's crime goes so long without exposure. Poole (2018) also highlights the author's genius in creating suspense and overall depiction of the main character. However, Pilátová (2018) presents the argument that it seems like the writer does not know how to picture the fight between good and evil and Macbeth here is just a clueless individual not knowing what he should do.

## 2.7 New Boy

Tracy Chevalier's *New Boy*, published in 2017, brings us the story of *Othello* from a whole new perspective. The author takes us to the 1970s in Washington, but what is more interesting is the age of the protagonists. Othello's counterpart here is Osei Kokote, a young boy, whose parent is a diplomat. Because of that, the family moves around quite a lot, not being able to give Osei an opportunity to get closer to his peers. As a boy with black skin, he struggles to make friends in an all-white environment of a playground in Washington. That is until he meets Dee, the most popular girl in school, thanks to whom he manages to "survive". One of their schoolmates, Ian, then decides to split them up, doing whatever it takes. As well as in *Othello*, the themes of jealousy and discrimination then play a significant role while the story unravels. (Chevalier, 2016)

## 3 Nutshell

### 3.1 Plot Summary

Before delving into the plot itself, it is necessary to briefly present the key characters of the story. In the opening line of *Nutshell* - "So here I am, upside down in a woman" (McEwan, 2017, p. 1) - we are introduced to an interesting narrator - an unborn baby in a mother's womb, who also serves as a main character. Then there is Trudy, the baby's mother, and Claude, who appears to be her lover. Later on, it is revealed that Claude, as well as being Trudy's romantic partner, is actually her brother-in-law, therefore the baby's uncle. Since we know about them just from the baby's perspective, we learn new facts about them just little by little. Another significant character is John Cairncross, a struggling poet, and, most importantly, the actual father of the baby. Throughout the narrative, we encounter some other personalities, such as Elodie or Chief Inspector Allison. However, their part is to be further explored in the summary itself.

The introductory chapter (as well as some others), rather than being primarily set to reveal the plot of the story, is dedicated to the uniqueness of the narrator, his point of view and many thoughts about the world he is about to live in. From the first pages of the novel, we just find out about the characters and that Trudy and Claude are plotting something terrible, the foetus being "witness" to it. What we then do know, is that Trudy and John are a married couple who live separately, with Trudy currently occupying their marital home. Over dinner, John tells Trudy he wants to move back, but she is reluctant to let him do so, claiming she needs more space. John's wanting to move back may also be interpreted as one of the first catalysts for why Trudy and Claude want to get rid of him permanently. The terrible act they are planning is John's murder.

What follows is quite a detailed description of the couple's sexual intercourse, which is relatively frequent throughout the novel, emphasising its often naturalistic impression. While lying in bed, they then discuss Claude's upcoming meeting with his brother. Claude does not say his name, therefore the baby is still in the dark about an existing relationship between John and Claude. However, we are inching towards the reveal, which comes at the turn between the third and fourth chapter, where the foetus exclaims: "My uncle – *my uncle!*" (McEwan, 2017, p. 31). After that, there is no doubt about their relationship.



Returning to the aforementioned meeting Claude is supposed to have with John, Trudy wonders if it is a good idea. Claude wants to lend money to John under the guise of helping him get back on his feet as a poet and to pay the rent at his new place, but it seems more like a bribe to get him not to move back into the house. Even though the narrator believes that, due to his integrity, John will not take the money, the opposite happens. After Claude comes back from the meeting, he informs Trudy that her husband took the five thousand pounds offered to him and that he also announced his final decision of getting his home back. This occurs as the last straw that determines John's fate. Trudy and Claude will poison him.

While planning the act, the couple starts to get into arguments, which become rather frequent. Trudy's main concern is that Claude will betray her and run away with a solid alibi and no strings to her or John's murder case. After one of their arguments, John shows up in front of the house, bringing a lady with whom we have not yet been familiar. It is Elodie, John's friend and co-worker. However, that is something Trudy and Claude do not know. They are left to wonder about John and Elodie's relationship status, unaware that she already has a fiancée at home. During a dinner shared by the couples, we are witness to a tense atmosphere full of bitter remarks and an uncomfortable undertone. John seems not to be surprised by Trudy and Claude's already existing relationship. Afterwards, he decides to give a toast dedicated to the end of their marriage and new beginnings. He wishes Trudy and Claude a nice life together, but informs them that it has to be somewhere else – in the following days, he will be moving back to the house and wants them gone. As mentioned before, this is a sore topic for Trudy. It enhances her hatred and determination to get rid of John as fast as possible. At the end of the seventh chapter, she says: "I want him dead. And it has to be tomorrow." (McEwan, 2017, p. 72)

The following day, things begin to escalate. After shaking off the lingering effects of the hangover from the previous night, Claude proceeds to blend a smoothie filled with poison. The plan is as follows: John will drink the smoothie and die shortly after on the way home. When the police find the bottle of poison with no fingerprints on it, it will be justified by John always wearing gloves. The reason for that would be his self-consciousness due to psoriasis – a troublesome skin disease. The death will then hopefully be written off as a suicide, with Trudy's fabricated story about John's depression related to their dying marriage, his health condition and work struggles.

With John arriving at the house, the baby desperately tries to send him a warning. However, being confined within the womb, he is powerless to do so. John starts taking down some boxes with books, claiming a fumigator is scheduled to come the next day. Trudy and Claude invite him to sit down for a coffee and he obliges. They have a disagreement mainly about moving out, after which John decides to start reciting poems to Trudy, even though he knows she hates it. Afterwards, they offer John the smoothie laced with poison. As if having some kind of instinct, John refuses to take it and stands up to leave. In a last attempt at John consuming the smoothie, Trudy insists on a toast to the end of their love – and is successful, John drinks it and takes off. To add some drama for Trudy and Claude, John cannot start the engine for a while as they are anxiously awaiting his departure. After celebrating their success in bed, they wake up to the doorbell ringing – the police are there to inform them about John’s death. What makes them calmer later is an article in the newspaper which states that the police are not treating the death as a criminal matter.

As mentioned above, the author decided to thoroughly describe the sexual intercourse between Trudy and Claude in several parts of the novel. In chapter thirteen, Claude insists on him and Trudy making love. She, however, rather than being a particularly willing participant, just lays there and lets Claude do things to her. Up until now, the plot has mainly revolved around the “live” humans with the baby just as a narrator and most often having varying thought processes about the world and events around him. Now, the foetus decides to intervene. He wants to strangle himself on the umbilical cord to “rescue” Trudy from Claude, to cause tragedy and mainly, to make Claude a murderer. At last, despite several attempts, he is unable to do it.

After the act, they have another argument, which is then interrupted by the doorbell. This time, it is not the police who stand at their door, it is Elodie, deeply grieved by John’s death. She cannot stop crying, cannot understand why he would kill himself. She is also planning a poets’ reading in his honour. Trudy and Claude just sit there and try to explain to her John’s reasons for suicide, which serves as a rehearsal for the police in case they are interrogated. During the talk, they also find out about John and Elodie’s non-existent romantic relationship. She claims he just brought her to the house to make Trudy jealous.

The next day, they are paid another visit by the police. This time it is Chief Inspector Clare Allison ready to ask them some questions. From the beginning, there is an underlying thought of her not believing Trudy and Claude's words, but she stays and listens. After taking a look around the house, Inspector Allison tells them that there were no fingerprints on the bottle of poison. Trudy discloses the rehearsed note that John wore his gloves because of his skin disease. The problem is that spiders were found in John's gloves, which means he could not have worn them. The Inspector leaves with this information, indicating she is onto the guilty couple. They are wondering why she has not arrested them on the spot, but suddenly have no time for that since they have to pack for their runaway.

In their haste to pack everything important, they suddenly see a vision of John's ghost, which scares them immensely. Another huge hurdle comes just a few minutes later when the foetus does not want to be just a powerless observer and decides to take matters into his own hands. Using his nails, he tries to make a rupture in the amniotic sac encasing him. Unlike the suicide attempt, this is something he can do, making Trudy's water break. When she asks Claude to call an ambulance, he does the thing she has been worried about all along. He asks where his passport is. He wants to abandon her. Since she knew that something like that could happen, she hid the passport beforehand. At last, Claude stays with Trudy and helps her get the baby into the world. Shortly after that, the police turn up at their house, setting their fate in stone. The closing line – "The rest is chaos" (McEwan, 2017, p. 199) – then brings the story to a conclusion.

### 3.2 Narrative Perspective

Due to the nature of the narrator's age and location (i.e. mother's womb), the vantage point is limited, therefore creating a shining example of a restricted narration. This type of narration seems to be quite common in McEwan's literary work, as seen in *The Cement Garden* with 15-year-old Jack as the main protagonist or in *Enduring Love*, using Joe's various viewing positions. In his later novels, such as *Amsterdam* or *Solar*, the author steered away from his often-used first-person narrative and explored new ways of delivering his stories. His main goal was to let the reader make his own judgement of what is happening. Another specific type of McEwan's work came with the novels *Atonement* or *Sweet Tooth*, where we can experience metanarrative turns changing the point of view and the whole understanding of these novels. (Booth, 2015)

In *Nutshell*, McEwan brings back the restricted point of view with the baby clearly being a constant narrator throughout the novel, introduced in the very first lines: "So here I am, upside down in a woman. Arms patiently crossed, waiting, waiting and wondering who I'm in, what I'm in for." (McEwan, 2017, p. 1) Being confined within the womb, the foetus is bound to use various ways of delivering new information. As he cannot see anything, he is forced to rely mainly on hearing as the most important sense, and imagination, which plays an important role in his perception of the world. This can be seen from the very beginning when he says: "When I hear 'blue', which I've never seen, I imagine some kind of mental event that's fairly close to 'green' – which I've never seen." (McEwan, 2017, p. 1) Almost any visual aspect in the story cannot be fully believed to exist, because everything we read is just the baby's colourful imagination.

Another example of developing the plot using imagination is when Claude plans on having a conversation with John concerning their living situation. As mentioned in the plot summary, Claude is set on lending five thousand pounds to John under the guise of helping him pay the rent when, in fact, he just wants to get rid of him. Since the child cannot go and watch the meeting, he starts imagining the whole scene in his head: "To divert myself I send my thoughts ahead to spy on them. Purely an exercise of the imagination. Nothing here is real." (McEwan, 2017, p. 35)

What follows is a detailed description of the setting of John's office, in which the brothers' conversation takes place, and the dialogue itself. John refuses to take the money, sees Claude out and everything seems forgotten. After that, the narrator says: "As though from a long journey, I return to the womb." (McEwan, 2017, p. 38), which reminds us that what we read is a product of pure imagination. This is confirmed by the fact that Claude arrives at the house and tells Trudy what really happened.

One more element used in the story, which is also closely related to imagination, is dreaming. Whether it appears during sleep or it is a case of daydreaming, the child is frequently subject to it. When daydreaming, he is often thinking about the problems occurring in the current world. Thanks to that we get a perspective on conflicts such as Russia vs. Ukraine, the problems of the Middle East, Africa and so on. The child's concerns often turn to Europe as well, the continent being the place he is about to live in. In one part of the novel, the child also has his first "real" dream. This dream where he meets a mysterious man with whom he has a conversation, may play a significant role for the baby's identity, as the man can be seen as Hamlet himself.

At the beginning of the ninth chapter, we are witness to a diversion from the narrative. There is a part written in epistolary form, as a letter from the baby to John, trying to warn him about Trudy and Claude's murderous intentions.

Throughout the novel, there are several passages where the child uses physical contact with the mother's body to interpret her reactions and therefore get a new perspective other than to hear what Trudy has to say. Thanks to that, we find out that the woman is angry (angry blood coursing through the body), nervous (trembling) or relaxed. Trudy's position is not described directly but through the baby's orientation. For instance, instead of saying that Trudy is lying, the narrator says he is horizontal, and when his mother is standing up, he is suddenly "on a slope". Not only is he reliant on his mother's body as a source of life, but the perspective is often influenced by Trudy's actions as well. Even though she is pregnant, she seems to enjoy a glass of wine quite often. Her being drunk then causes the baby's intoxication as well. That, as well as other factors, are reasons that make the child's narration even more unreliable. The sentence "However close you get to others, you can never get inside them, even when you are inside them" (McEwan, 2017, p. 113) then further proves the point of the narration being unreliable and open to interpretation.

### 3.3 Narrator's Identity in Relation to Space

An aspect playing an important part in the narrator's identity is the space around him. As mentioned before, the narrator is a foetus situated in his mother's womb. He has been there for around eight months, therefore the space around him is quite reduced. In the introductory chapter, he says: "My eyes close nostalgically when I remember how I once drifted in my translucent body bag, floated dreamily in the bubble of my thoughts through my private ocean in slow-motion somersaults, colliding gently against the transparent bounds of my confinement, the confiding membrane that vibrated with, even as it muffled, the voices of conspirators in a vile enterprise. That was in my careless youth. Now, fully inverted, not an inch of space to myself, knees crammed against belly, my thoughts as well as my head are fully engaged. I've no choice, my ear is pressed all day and night against the bloody walls." (McEwan, 2017, p. 1) The contrasting attitude to his "youth" and current times seems apparent, mainly in the way that he is more troubled now that he does not have as much space around. That may be one of the aspects contributing to him wanting to finally get out of the confinement. The fact that he cannot change position in relation to his mother's body often makes him sick and even more annoyed with this claustrophobic situation.

Not only can we talk about the size of the baby in relation to the size of the womb, but the fact that it is closed off to the world is important as well and plays a significant role in the baby's identity. As opposed to the aspect of size, where the baby's outlook on it is at all times negative, the thoughts on the space being closed seem very mixed. The narrator often contemplates the pros and cons of living this way, coming up with several contrasting notions. He feels free in the way that he has "nothing to do but be and grow" (McEwan, 2017, p. 74) and is able to have his freedom of speech (or rather freedom of thought). In that way, the fact of being alone seems beneficial for him as well, so that he can contemplate. The solitude, however, may be regarded as negative as well, as he has time for his mind to wander. Another problem is that these long days with nothing to do but think are a great source of boredom. The womb, however, serves as a secure place for the child, since he is fearful of the world awaiting outside. Because of that, the question of wanting to live on arises. As the birth is approaching, the baby feels he has to act sooner rather than later.

All these negative thoughts and other elements such as hatred or helplessness then compel the foetus to try and commit suicide. Due to being confined within the womb, the baby does not have many options for ending his life. However, he comes up with an idea to strangle himself on the umbilical cord. There are several reasons for that, such as the absence of power to prevent John's murder, the feeling of not being loved by his mother or the want for revenge. Also, he wants to stop Trudy and Claude from their sexual intercourse.

Surprisingly, the couple's frequent lovemaking is a source of conflicting thoughts for the foetus as well. There is a naturalistic element of a detailed description of the acts, with the baby feeling Claude's penetration. Since being confined within the womb, the child is powerless to get away. "On each occasion, on every piston stroke, I dread that he'll break through and shaft my soft-boned skull and seed my thoughts with his essence, with the teeming cream of his banality. Then, brain-damaged, I'll think and speak like him. I'll be the son of Claude." (McEwan, 2017, p. 21) Here we can see that his main concern is his connection with Claude, which is closely related to his hatred for the man. At the end of the novel, when the baby decides to be born, he suddenly remembers that on his way out of his mother's body, he is going through places where his uncle's manhood went through as well. This seems to remind us of the rivalry he feels toward Claude.

When mentioning the labour taking place at the end of the novel, another aspect related to space arises. It is the contrast of light and dark, seeing as we can connect it to the space within the womb being dark and the world outside occurring as the light area. The motif of light can also be seen as a metaphor for finally seeing things clearly, not having to imagine everything. Before the birth, there is also one part where Trudy is sunbathing and thanks to the light shining through her skin, the baby is suddenly able to see some of his features. This serves as the first glimpse of light and the ability to see something. It can also be interpreted as a symbolic light of hope, something to encourage the child to enter the world. These hopeful thoughts may be squashed a little by the fact that Trudy will probably be arrested for the murder, therefore imprisoned and living in a dark place or in the presence of only artificial light. Even though he knows that he will move from the prison that is the womb for him to a literal prison cell, the baby still wants to experience life and does not want it to be taken away from him in the end.

## 4 Reflections on Hamlet in Nutshell

“Oh God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and  
count myself a king of infinite space – were it not that  
I have bad dreams”  
(Shakespeare, 1603/2016, 2.2.251–253)

These lines from *Hamlet* were used by Ian McEwan as an epigraph to the novel, indicating a relationship between these two works. As we get deeper into the novel, we can notice quite a number of elements alluding to the Bard’s play, leaving no doubt about the interconnection. Besides the epigraph, one of the first references can be found in the names of the main characters – Trudy and Claude – as counterparts to Gertrude and Claudius. When looking for some other examples of allusion to *Hamlet*, we can notice the repeated phrase *to be*, the motif of wine, the use of stage notes or mentions of Denmark. Most importantly though, the parallel lies in the identity of Hamlet and his *Nutshell* counterpart. There are several references to Shakespeare himself as well, for instance, the use of words from his coat of arms or references to some places where he lived or stayed throughout his life. We can also recognize some quotes from Shakespeare’s contemporaries, mainly poets. All of the examples above are now to be further explored in the following subchapters.

### 4.1 Hamlet vs. Hamlet Unborn

The aspects of perspective and identity explored in the preceding chapters are related to the comparison between *Hamlet* and *Nutshell*’s main protagonists as well. One of the main differences between them is the age and point of view, according to the fact that the baby, not being born yet and being confined within the womb, is powerless to act in times that he needs it the most. To explore the topic of the age difference, we can say that despite not even being born, the baby often acts like an adult, being very intellectual in his thoughts. This may be caused by the fact that he educates himself by listening to podcasts and lectures his mother likes to play and often contemplates events occurring in the world. As opposed to the baby, Hamlet is an adult who, at the beginning of the play, gets back from his studies in Germany in light of his father’s death. Therefore, it is expected of him to be experienced and well educated.



Having the ability to act however he wants also comes with the dilemma of how to approach various situations he gets himself into. The more options he has, the harder it is to decide which one to choose. For the child, another problem lies in the absence of contact with the world and the people in it. We can say that Hamlet has at least some friends and family, with whom he interacts, giving him new perspectives on how to act. To give an example, in the play, we have the character of Horatio, Hamlet's best friend and confidant. The absence of such a character in the novel may be one of the aspects of the child feeling even more alone. The disadvantage for Hamlet, however, is the fact that the more people he has around him, the more people he has to lose, which, considering the tragic character of the play, seems inevitable.

Another significant feature related to contact with people is the baby's relationship to Trudy and Claude. The foetus frequently ponders upon the love for his mother, putting it in contrast to the hatred he feels for the woman's betrayal of John, his father. When, in an argument occurring during the play, Gertrude asks Hamlet whether he forgot who she is, he says:

“No, by the rood, not so.

You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife.

But – would you were not so – you are my mother.”

(Shakespeare, 1603/2016, 3.4.14–16)

Analogically, the narrator in *Nutshell* often puts his feelings in contrast as well: “I try to see her and love her as I must, then imagine her burdens: the villain she's taken for a lover, the saint she's leaving behind, the deed she's spoken for, the darling child she'll abandon to strangers. Still love her? If not, then you never did. But I did, I did. I do.” (McEwan, 2017, p. 47) Here we can see the apparent parallel in Hamlet's and baby Hamlet's relationship to their mothers. Since Gertrude was not a part of King Hamlet's murder, her son does not blame her for it. He, however, sees the greatest issue in her relationship with Claudius. According to Liu and Wang (2011), *Hamlet* includes a shining example of the Oedipus complex, a matter first explored by Sigmund Freud. The Oedipus complex generally refers to the fact that a boy loves his mother not only in the way of a typical mother-son relationship but feels sexual desires and romantic connections as well.

That being the case, the child would even have a problem with his biological father as a romantic partner to the mother. In *Hamlet* and *Nutshell*, the hatred seems to be heightened by the fact that Claudius/Claude is not even Hamlet's/the baby's father, but a loathed uncle.

As mentioned above, Hamlet hates his uncle for being Gertrude's husband, which makes the young man very jealous. However, that is not the only problem. It seems that even without the issue of interpersonal relationships, Hamlet genuinely thinks that Claudius is a stupid, primitive man, which is something he addresses several times. We can say the same about the baby Hamlet, who, for example, says: "And Claude, like a floater, is barely real. Not even a colourful chancer, no hint of the smiling rogue. Instead, dull to the point of brilliance, vapid beyond invention, his banality as finely wrought as the arabesques of the Blue Mosque. Here is a man who whistles continually, not songs but TV jingles, ringtones, who brightens a morning with Nokia's mockery of Tárrega. Whose repeated remarks are a witless, thrustless dribble, whose impoverished sentences die like motherless chicks, cheaply fading." (McEwan, 2017, p. 20)

Claudius is also the murderer of Hamlet's father. Hamlet finds out the reality thanks to the meeting with the ghost of King Hamlet, who tells him it was Claudius who poured poison into his ear. This statement then stirs up Hamlet's desire for revenge. The theme of revenge is very important in both the play and the novel. For Hamlet, the main driving force is the voice of his late father. The baby, however, tries to take matters into his own hands mainly due to his own emotions originating from his love for his father, hatred for his uncle, and mixed feelings toward Trudy.

Some of the most important themes recurring throughout the novel and the play are the question of human existence, life and death and their relationship to the main protagonists' identities.

"To be, or not to be; that is the question"

(Shakespeare, 1603/2016, 3.1.57)

This famous line serves as a base for questioning human existence. In the novel, the phrase *to be* is used several times with the same effect.

The baby starts addressing this issue at the very beginning of the novel, when he says: “Long ago, many weeks ago, my neural groove closed upon itself to become my spine and my many million young neurons, busy as silkworms, spun and wove from their trailing axons the gorgeous golden fabric of my first idea, a notion so simple it partly eludes me now. Was it *me*? Too self-loving. Was it *now*? Overly dramatic. Then something antecedent to both, containing both, a single word mediated by a mental sigh or swoon of acceptance, of pure being, something like—*this*? Too precious. So, getting closer, my idea was *To be*. Or if not that, its grammatical variant, *is*. This was my aboriginal notion and here’s the crux — *is*. Just that. In the spirit of *Es muss sein*. The beginning of conscious life was the end of illusion, the illusion of non-being, and the eruption of the real. The triumph of realism over magic, of *is* over *seems*.” (McEwan, 2017, p. 2–3)

Both Hamlet and baby Hamlet doubt their place in the world, the difference being that the child has not come into it yet. According to Muro (2017), it is also questionable whether an unborn baby can even have an identity due to not experiencing the actual existence and not having a name. However, it seems like identity is something the baby is looking forward to having as his true possession. He also contemplates whether it is something you are completely in charge of or biologically determined. In that way, he is afraid that he will inherit his parents’ bad traits and not be his own person. In addition, the frequent sexual intercourses between Trudy and Claude make him afraid that he will partly become the man’s son as well.

To revisit the theme of human existence, it needs to be said that Hamlet was written in the Renaissance period, which is closely related to the intellectual movement of Humanism. This movement is centred at humans and their nature and believes that people should embrace their accomplishments in all fields of life (Kennedy, 2021). In both the novel and the play, humans, their psychology and their place in the world play a central role. Hamlet’s thoughts are often reflected through his soliloquies, monologues with no other figures present. In that way, we can say that *Nutshell* is a complex soliloquy, mainly due to the fact that we get the child’s thoughts throughout the novel while he is being alone in the womb. There are some parallels as well as differences in Hamlet’s and the baby’s reflections.

The first and the seventh of Hamlet's soliloquies focus on the general role of humans for the nature. The latter contemplates whether people's lives are worthless unless they act, even if it means they have to suffer from bloodshed.

"O, from this time forth  
My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!"  
(Shakespeare, 1603/2016, 4.4.65–66)

This may be put in parallel with the baby mulling over the reasons why people fight and suffer all around the world. He tries to find the background behind their actions and find out if there is any way to stop the conflicts and the existing misery. This is also a sign that McEwan tried to delve deep into human psychology, staying consistent with the humanistic philosophy.

In the third of his soliloquies, Hamlet criticises his cowardly ways, his not being brave enough to act. He decides that he has to somehow flush out the fact that Claudius killed his father. In the soliloquy, he admires the actor's work for being able to show any emotion, any scene, on demand. He wants them to play out the scene of King Hamlet's murder so that when Claudius sees it, he proves himself guilty. Later on, when giving the actors instructions not to overplay anything, he tells them:

"For anything so overdone  
is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the  
first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up  
to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own  
image, and the very age and body of the time his form  
and pressure."

(Shakespeare, 1603/2016, 3.2.20–25)

It seems like both Shakespeare and McEwan decided to utilize their work in this sense, to hold a mirror up to nature. Since both the novel and the play are centred at people and their thoughts, doubts and flaws, we get a deeper insight into their psychology. Another element showing this reflection is also the critique of humanity and its actions all around the world. This element of critique is to be further described later in this chapter.

Another motif recurring during Hamlet's soliloquies is the contrast between Heaven and Hell. At one time, he has an opportunity to kill Claudius. However, it is at a time of the King's prayer (or at least Hamlet thinks that Claudius is praying). Hamlet is afraid that by killing a man who just purged his soul of all his sins, he will send him to Heaven, which is unacceptable for the man. As opposed to Hamlet, the baby does not feel that great of a distinction between these realms. What matters to him is that he will experience life, no matter where he ends up after. "It's not the theme parks of Paradiso and Inferno that I dread most—the heavenly rides, the hellish crowds—and I could live with the insult of eternal oblivion. I don't even mind not knowing which it will be. What I fear is missing out. Healthy desire or mere greed, I want my life first, my due, my infinitesimal slice of endless time and one reliable chance of a consciousness. I'm owed a handful of decades to try my luck on a freewheeling planet. That's the ride for me—the Wall of Life. I want my *go*. I want to *become*." (McEwan, 2017, p. 128–129) This part comes after the baby attempts suicide. In contrast to the preceding segment, the hope of life is reappearing for the foetus as he is glad he did not manage to go through with the suicide. As mentioned in the cited paragraph, his greatest fear is that of missing out.

What the child also has in common with Hamlet is the effort to distinguish between right and wrong. These contemplations are related to some conflicts in the world where he judges people's values. Most importantly though, the child's sense of right and wrong often comes to his mind in association with the crime his mother and uncle are planning. He tries to see their reasons and the psychology behind their acts. This may be related to the fact that he sometimes tries to defend his mother's actions due to a great love for her. When it comes to Trudy, the lines between right and wrong get blurred for the child, again making him unsure of his views. At times he comes to realize there is nothing he can do to prevent the heinous act, he believes in a higher force. He addresses Leviathan, a philosophical work by Thomas Hobbes, in which the author "articulates a political philosophy that views government primarily as a device for ensuring collective security" (Sorell, 2023). The child is relieved that the police come to the house, ensuring him that the law will eventually fulfil its task.

When it comes to the topic of government and its system, both Hamlet and the child do not feel very optimistic about their respective countries. There is a strong sense of critique of Denmark in *Hamlet*, as well as the United Kingdom in *Nutshell*. “My immediate neighbourhood will not be palmy Norway—my first choice on account of its gigantic sovereign fund and generous social provision [...] Instead I’ll inherit a less than united kingdom ruled by an esteemed elderly queen, where a businessman-prince, famed for his good works, his elixirs (cauliflower essence to purify the blood) and unconstitutional meddling, waits restively for his crown. This will be my home, and it will do.” (McEwan, 2017, p. 3–4) The mention of Norway is a reference to the play as well, seeing as Denmark is in contact with their neighbour pretty often, with Prince Fortinbras as one of the characters. The child criticises not only his country but the aforementioned conflicts occurring in the world as well. Hamlet is also seen as someone having negative feelings toward the country he lives in.

“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.”

(Shakespeare, 1603/2016, 1.4.90)

Even though this line is not said by Hamlet himself, but by Marcellus, one of the guards at Elsinore Castle, it reflects the main protagonist’s feelings as well. It can be confirmed by the fact that Hamlet once says:

“Denmark’s a prison.”

(Shakespeare, 1603/2016, 2.2.241)

This line occurs during a conversation of Hamlet with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his childhood friends sent by King Claudius to get information out of him. In this dialogue, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ask Hamlet if he feels this way because Denmark is too small for his ambitions. This is the time he says he could be bounded in a nutshell and still feel extremely powerful. Here we can see that he feels squashed in the state he lives in, making his relationship to Denmark one of the influences for his identity. The same can be said about the baby, whose fear of living in the current world makes him consider suicide. He, however, is almost literally in a nutshell, not making him a king of infinite space, but at least his own thoughts.

A motif that also appears numerous times is a dream. As already addressed in the chapter about the narrator's perspective in *Nutshell*, dreaming is an important part of his consciousness. Hamlet as well reflects upon the role of a dream for a person. In the fourth of his soliloquies, he weighs the differences between life and death (to be, or not to be), wondering why would people not end their lives, why would they suffer, if they were not afraid of what comes after death. He also thinks about what the afterlife looks like in terms of dreaming:

“To die, to sleep.  
To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub.  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause.”

(Shakespeare 1603/2016, 3.1.65–69)

In the novel, there comes a moment where the child has his first “real” dream. In it, he meets a man pouring wine with whom he has a conversation and feels an instant connection to him. “This blurring of identity is one aspect of the love I feel for him, which almost smothers the guilt I want to leave behind.” (McEwan, 2017, p. 106) This dream may be interpreted as the foetus meeting Hamlet himself, explaining the intense feeling the child has. In both the novel and the play, dreams can also be considered important means of escaping reality, which, for both characters, seems to be essential for their sanity.

A parallel between *Hamlet* and *Nutshell* can be found in the use of irony. According to Shackford (1926), Shakespeare's works often worked with irony, seeing as the author had this “gift” himself. *Hamlet* is considered his most ironic play, working with this element numerous times, the main protagonist being seen as a master of it. The same can be said about the baby, who also often copes with issues using irony. It is also ironic, or rather paradoxical, that the baby is behaving like an adult intellectual, even though his cognitive functions should not even have been developed in that way.

There is an aspect explored in the novel that is not exactly an allusion to the play, however, we can use it to compare the main characters' opinions. It is the theme of gender. The main difference between the approaches to this feature lies in the changes which society experienced throughout the centuries. Hamlet is way more judgmental of women and sees them mainly as a source of problems and misery. This view is probably also influenced by his complicated relationships with Gertrude and Ophelia, the main female characters in the play. The baby, even though he also has mixed emotions about his mother, seems more open to the topic of gender differences. The majority of the fifteenth chapter of the novel is dedicated to this matter. The child knows he will be a male, due to feeling "a shrimp-like protuberance between his legs" (McEwan, 2017, p. 144). However, he does not care what gender he is, the important thing being that he will exist. "I'll feel, therefore I'll be." (McEwan, 2017, p. 146) Furthermore, the baby seems to be synchronized with the contemporary outlook on gender in the way that you are who you identify as.

"The rest is silence."

(Shakespeare, 1603/2016, 5.2.366)

These are Hamlet's last words before he dies. It induces an atmosphere of a definite end to a human existence. This line also relates to the fact that almost all the important characters have died and there is nothing left but silence. As a reference to the play, however contrasting it is, McEwan (2017, p. 199) uses the sentence "The rest is chaos" as a closing line to the novel. As opposed to *Hamlet*, the only person dying in *Nutshell* is John, leaving the story not that tragic after all. Additionally, the contrast to the play lies in the fact that the ending also serves as a beginning of a new life, the baby's life, and stirs up hope for the upcoming times. Therefore, the novel's ending is way more open and leaves the reader to wonder how the characters' destinies will play out.



## 4.2 Other Significant Characters in Nutshell

### 4.2.1 Trudy

Even though Trudy is inspired by *Hamlet's* Gertrude, there are several differences between these primary female roles. One of the aspects making those differences is the period in which each of them lives. Since women's position in society has changed throughout centuries since Gertrude's medieval times, we can say that Trudy represents a modern-day, way more emancipated version of the queen. Even though we cannot say that for sure as it has not been directly addressed in the play, in terms of fidelity, it seems that Gertrude has always been a loyal wife, whether with King Hamlet or Claudius as her husband. That cannot be said about McEwan's Trudy, who, even though her husband John is still alive, has an affair with his brother Claude. That may also be perceived as something related to societal changes.

We can say that thanks to Trudy's social status, she has gotten a more prominent role in the events unfolding during *Nutshell*. There is one place in the novel where she contemplates her devotion to Claude, asking whether she is a woman or a mouse to him. That is not very surprising, seeing as she wants to take charge. The question of Trudy being a mouse to Claude refers to Shakespeare's play as well, seeing as Hamlet, in his argument with Gertrude, says: "Let the bloat King tempt you again to bed, Pinch wanton on your cheek, call you his mouse..." (Shakespeare, 1603/2016, 3.4.185-186). As opposed to Gertrude, who does not know that Claudius killed her late husband, Trudy is conscious of the murder plotting. Not only does she know about the plan, but she is also a significant part of it. At first, it seems like Claude has to persuade her to help him. She is very scared of the consequences. However, she slowly turns into the person driving the whole "operation". It is she who chooses murder by poison and who repeatedly says that she wants John dead as soon as possible. As opposed to Claude, however, she quickly starts to regret everything as the guilty conscience creeps in. Here we can see that she is quite unstable and, as well as with Gertrude, it seems quite complicated to read her character. Both female protagonists are blind with physical love and lust, immorality and sin.

A motif that can be recognized as closely related to Trudy's character is wine. Although pregnant, she indulges in drinking it rather often. Her drunken state then sometimes determines her actions. While in the womb, the baby not only knows about his mother's wine consumption, he himself feels intoxicated by it. Revisiting the baby's identity, we know that he seems quite mature and well versed in the life of adults. That may be also said in relation to his knowledge of wine. One of the reasons for that is that Trudy (and therefore he as well) often listens to a podcast called *Know Your Wine*. Even though the baby knows that alcohol "lowers everybody's intelligence" (McEwan, 2017, p. 7) he says he likes to share a glass with his mother, which may signalize addiction. Several times throughout the novel, he ponders upon the choice of wine and its characteristics. As for the wine being an allusion to *Hamlet*, the reference lies in the beverage being a "murder weapon" for Claudius to get rid of Hamlet. He pours poison into a cup of wine which his nephew is intended to take. However, the person drinking from the poisoned chalice is no other than Gertrude, who dies immediately after. In *Nutshell*, the consequences are not that fatal. Even though John dies from poisoning, it is not related to the motif of alcohol. In the novel, nobody dies from wine drinking. However, alcohol may serve as a symbol of means to an impending doom as well – the difference being that in the present, the alcohol itself is the poison, that, if we are not considerate with its consumption, can kill us or ruin our lives sooner than we may think.

#### 4.2.2 Claude

Despite Claude as a counterpart to King Claudius being an important part of the novel, we can say that his role is a little diminished by Trudy's stronger presence, originating from her higher status as a woman. However, his character is still essential for the plot and the narrator's identity, and we can follow some parallels between him and the King while the story unravels. In *Hamlet*, we get a deeper insight into Claudius' psyche as he gets more attention.

"O, what form of prayer  
Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?  
That cannot be, since I am still possessed  
Of those effects for which I did the murder –  
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen."

(Shakespeare, 1603/2016, 3.3.52–56)

The lines above are a part of Claudius' soliloquy where he feels some guilty conscience over his acts. He contemplates whether there is a way for God to forgive his sins. However, it seems that he still does not regret them, as it has gotten him all the things he wanted. There is no such feeling of guilt for Claude. This man seems way more selfish and cold blooded than the King. They both want to appear as if they care about others, but in fact, they do everything for their own gain. They love Trudy and Gertrude in their respective ways, however, the women are still secondary in their desires. With King Claudius, it has already been addressed that his goal is to sit on Denmark's throne. For Claude, one of the main aims is to get the house in which Trudy and John lived together and which serves as a parallel to Elsinore Castle.

Betrayal is another feature that the men have in common. Even though Gertrude's killing is unintentional, it is still Claudius who pours the poison into the wine she later drinks. Therefore, with the King being Gertrude's killer, we can say that there is a form of betrayal from him. Since Gertrude does not have a role in her late husband's murder and does not know about Claudius' involvement in it, there are no doubts about her love for the King. Contrary to that, in the novel, Trudy has some doubts about Claude and often worries that he will abandon her after the deed is done. This worry is fulfilled when she goes into labour during the time she and her lover want to run away so they do not get arrested. When Trudy orders him to call an ambulance, Claude asks her where his passport is instead, indicating he wants to flee without her and therefore betray her.

Another allusion to the play comes when Claude says: "In my heart of hearts, I always thought [...]" (McEwan, 2017, p. 119), followed by one of his earlier expectations about him and Trudy selling the house. In the play, Hamlet says to Horatio:

"Give me that man  
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him  
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,  
As I do thee."

(Shakespeare, 1603/2016, 3.2.71–74)

It seems quite ironic that Claude says a phrase that belongs to Hamlet, mainly in the way that Hamlet's use of it has a deeper meaning. In this aspect, this may emphasise Claude's shallowness, which is addressed by the narrator several times as well.

### 4.2.3 John

The main difference between John and his counterpart from the play, King Hamlet, is the fact that the former is alive for over a half of the story. Despite this distinction, their roles in the respective works can be perceived as equally important. While John should be mainly considered a driving force behind Trudy and Claude's actions, King Hamlet appears as a ghost throughout the play whose biggest influence falls on his son Hamlet.

There is an allusion to being a ghost in the novel as well. After John's death, when Trudy and Claude try to pack up for their runaway, the man's body suddenly appears before them: My father wears the clothes he died in. His face is bloodless, the already rotting lips are greenish-black, the eyes tiny and penetrating. Now he stands at the foot of the stairs, taller than we remember him. He's come from the mortuary to find us and knows exactly what he wants. I'm shaking because my mother is. There's no shimmer, nothing ghostly. It's not a hallucination. This is my corporeal father, John Cairncross, exactly as he is." (McEwan, 2017, p. 187) Besides the child's inexplicable intellect, this appearance reminds us that there are several Gothic elements to the story as well, making some of the events fall in the realm of the supernatural.

The inspiration from the play was also taken from the fact that the cause of John's death was poisoning. The difference is that John was killed by a smoothie laced with poison, whereas King Hamlet passed away after his brother Claudius poured the poison into his ear. There is, however, a significant reference to this specific type of murder, when Claude wonders what type of poison he and Trudy should have used: "It's what we should have used. Diphenhydramine. Kind of antihistamine. People are saying the Russians used it on that spy they locked in a sports bag. Poured it into his ear. Turned up the radiators before they left so the chemical dissolved in his tissues without a trace." (McEwan, 2017, p.117)

At one point, the narrator poses a question: "Is big John Cairncross our envoy to the future, the form of a man to end wars, rapine and enslavement and stand equal and caring with the women of the world?" (McEwan, 2017, p. 18–19) Here, John as a character can be seen as king-like and a portrayal of someone truly heroic and noble. However, it may be considered a case of irony, seeing as John Cairncross was, according to Jafarova (2017), a lesser-known essayist from Shakespeare's times. Analogically, John Cairncross in *Nutshell* is a struggling poet who could hardly make a difference in the world with his actions.

## 5 References to Shakespeare and the Literary Context

Ian McEwan uses not only *Hamlet* as an inspiration for his novel, but he also refers to Shakespeare himself, his work and his contemporaries to create new elements of allusion. Firstly, in one of his interviews, the author said that William Shakespeare was reflected in the narrator himself, with his identity, elevated speech and vocabulary (Civelekoğlu, 2019). As mentioned above, the baby behaves very intellectually for his stage of development. This is depicted not only by his advanced thoughts and ideas but by his language as well. Here we can see this is also a sort of reference to the Bard's work.

When the child ruminates about what his future life will look like, he says: "And more, I'll hoard grain, be rich, have a coat of arms. NON SANZ DROICT, and mine is to a mother's love and is absolute." (McEwan, 2017, p. 44) The reference to Shakespeare lies in the fact that this motto was included in his coat of arms. It means "not without right" in Old French (Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, n.d.) and the choice to use it may be deliberate concerning the baby's identity. When he makes up his mind about the life he wants to live after not going through with the suicide, he decides he wants a chance to experience it. He does *not* want to be *without a right* to live and to be loved by his mother. Shakespeare's life is also referred to when choosing some places of events. For example, the house in which John stays temporarily while on a pause with Trudy is situated in Shoreditch, a district in the East End of London where Shakespeare lived and wrote before the Globe Theatre was built (Oakley, 2022).

Some of Shakespeare's other works, such as *Macbeth* or *Richard II*, are pointed to in the novel as well. When John reads Elodie's fictitious poem about an owl, it starts with: "Blood-wise fatal bellman" (McEwan, 2017, p. 37). It is inspired by a line from *Macbeth*, which reads:

"It was the owl that shrieked, the fatal bellman"

(Shakespeare, 1606/n.d., 2.2.5)

Bowie (2020) observes that "that bellwoman is what Elodie is later to be, instrumental in befuddling the murderers and turning the police against them."

At one point, John also recites lines from *Richard II*: “Ah, England, bound in with the triumphant sea, whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege.” (McEwan, 2017, p. 95) This quotation comes in contrast with the attitude that the baby feels toward his country.

Returning to the character of Elodie, at one point in the novel, Trudy mispronounces her name as Threnody. “A threnody”, however, “is a song for the dead” (McEwan, 2017, p. 90), as John points out to her. Elodie’s name, which rhymes with *melody* or the aforementioned *threnody*, can be also interpreted as a reference to art, or, more accurately, music. This is not the only element alluding to arts. The themes of theatricality, plays and poetry, which are closely related to Shakespeare as well, get addressed several times in the novel. In *Hamlet*, a component of play within a play can be found when the main protagonist wants to convict King Claudius of murder. The child’s observations in the novel may also be interpreted as him watching a play, making it a feature directing to the theme of theatricality. Additionally, McEwan used stage notes in some contexts. “Enter Claude. [...] Exit Claude.” (McEwan, 2017, p. 23) The irony, however, lies in the fact that these notes do not talk about the character entering/exiting the stage but refer to the sexual intercourse between him and Trudy. According to the fact that Claude enters the baby’s “realm” with his penetration, the notes may allude to this as well. The use of a stage note is also apparent in this segment referring to the poison’s effect: “Nausea, vomiting, hyperventilation, seizures, heart attack, coma, kidney failure. Curtains.” Here the word *curtains* means a euphemism for *death*. “The curtains come down.” (McEwan, 2017, p. 70) This sentence then serves as a metaphor to the end of John and Trudy’s love.

In terms of poetry, we can observe the fact that John and Elodie are poets and in the novel, there are several expressions related to the theory of verse, such as iambs, pentameters or trochaic tetrameters catalectic. In addition, some references to poets from the Renaissance Period can be found in the novel. “John Cairncross may be considering one last poem. He could wheel out, as he used to before journeys, ‘A Valediction Forbidding Mourning.’ Those soothing tetrameters, that mature, comforting tone, would make me nostalgic for the sad old days of his visits.” (McEwan, 2017, p. 93–94) The work mentioned in this quote was written by John Donne, “one of the major poets of Shakespearean England” (Gililov, 2003, p. 426).

Andrews (2014) considers Michael Drayton, another poet whose artwork appeared in the novel, a person resembling Shakespeare's shadow, seeing as they were peers and there are many connections between their lives and works. In the novel, his poem called *Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part* is, again, recited by John in the light of his farewell to Trudy. As mentioned in the chapter about John's character, in reality, John Cairncross was one of Shakespeare's contemporaries, making his name another reference to Shakespearean times. Another artist referenced in the novel is also John Keats, who, even though he was a representative of Romanticism, was, according to Flesch (1995), largely influenced by Shakespeare.

## Conclusion

To conclude this thesis, the main findings will be pointed out and summarized in an attempt to evaluate the work's accomplishments of achieving the main goals.

The theoretical part of the thesis deals with the author of *Nutshell*, Ian McEwan, as a contemporary British novelist. Firstly, it presents his early life concerning his childhood and education in the aspects that had a forming influence on him, such as frequent moves with his family during Ian's childhood or studies at newly established English universities. After that, McEwan's career gets explored with a focus on his most prominent works. The part about his professional life is divided into three segments determined by periodization. Here we can see his interest in controversial topics and curious types of narration that later reflect in the novel *Nutshell* as well. The second chapter of the thesis delves into the works included in the Hogarth Shakespeare Series, a project created to retell Shakespeare's works for modern readers. This chapter is divided into seven parts, each of which explores the individual novels, namely Jeanette Winterson's *The Gap of Time* (*The Winter's Tale*), Howard Jacobson's *Shylock is My Name* (*The Merchant of Venice*), Anne Tyler's *Vinegar Girl* (*The Taming of the Shrew*), Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* (*The Tempest*), Edward St Aubyn's *Dunbar* (*King Lear*), Jo Nesbø's *Macbeth* (*Macbeth*), and Tracy Chevalier's *New Boy* (*Othello*).

The practical part is dedicated to an analysis of the novel *Nutshell*. Firstly, we get introduced to the plot of the story: The narrator, a child confined within his mother's womb, reflects on his findings about what he hears in the outside world. He finds out his mother Trudy and her lover Claude plan the murder of the baby's father, John Cairncross. Later on, he also discovers that Claude is actually John's brother, making him the baby's uncle. Throughout the narrative, we are not only introduced to the plot itself, but it is also highly focused on the baby's contemplations about life and death, personal relationships and his feelings toward the space he is surrounded by. After Trudy and Claude go through with the murder, the baby attempts to commit suicide by strangling himself on the umbilical cord, luckily not reaching the goal. This is not the only part where the baby tries to take action to ruin the murderous couple's plans. In the end, when they try to run away so that they do not get arrested, the baby decides to be born.



The other parts of the chapter about *Nutshell* revolve around the narrative perspective and the narrator's identity in relation to space. The former explores ways of performing narration despite the restricted point of view. The main features used are hearing, imagination, contact with the mother's body or inner monologues of the narrator. The latter then contemplates the baby's attitude toward the space he is confined within. There is a negative aspect lying in the fact that the baby starts to feel too big in size for the womb, as well as his fears concerning the powerlessness he feels due to not being able to prevent his father's murder. On the contrary, he perceives the womb as a secure place where nobody can hurt him or influence him in his thoughts. He feels that he has all the freedom he needs in this respect.

The fourth chapter of the thesis focuses on the novel in relation to *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. The first part concerning the comparison between Hamlet and "Hamlet Unborn" may be the most significant in its findings. Not only is there a parallel between the characters' identities regarding themes such as human existence, life vs. death, right vs. wrong or familial relationships, but there are also some direct quotes or references to the play itself. There is a recurring phrase *to be* in several contexts, which, analogically to *Hamlet*, serves as a base for questioning human existence. As another example, I have chosen the closing line of the novel, which reads: "The rest is chaos." It is a direct reference to Hamlet's last words: "The rest is silence." Seeing as the words *chaos* and *silence* are contrasting in their meaning, we can observe the differences between the outcomes of the respective works. *Nutshell's* ending marks the beginning of the baby's life, bringing hope, whereas in *Hamlet* there is only silence indicated by the fact that the majority of the characters die. Additionally, the fourth chapter also explores parallels between other significant characters, such as Trudy (as a counterpart to Gertrude), Claude (Claudius) or John (King Hamlet).

The last chapter of the thesis investigates new references, however, this time they are not related only to *Hamlet*, but to the personality of William Shakespeare himself and the literary context in which he wrote. Shakespeare was supposedly reflected in the baby's identity as well, considering the narrator's advanced language. Another reflection lies in the use of terms related to poetry, drama and arts. Lastly, some allusions to Shakespeare's contemporaries were also found. To name some examples, we can notice the references to John Donne, Michael Drayton or John Cairncross.

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