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Diplomová práce

Disillusion in Ian McEwan's 21st Century Novels

Deziluze v dílech Iana McEwana z 21. století

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Abstrakt (česky)

Diplomová práce se zabývá deziluzí v dílech současného spisovatele Iana McEwana, a to zejména v jeho románech z jednadvacátého století. Práce zkoumá, jak McEwan dosahuje efektu deziluze u čtenáře, jak pracuje s tradiční narací a čtenářovým očekáváním a jakým způsobem manipuluje se čtenářem prostřednictvím nespolehlivého vypravěče v knihách *Pokání* (2001) a *Mlsoun* (2012), zobrazením sebeklamu v dílech *Sobota* (2005) a *Solar* (2010) a zachycením mezilidského i intrapersonálního nedorozumění v románech *Na Chesilské pláži* (2007) a *Myslete na děti!* (2014). Díla jsou analyzována metodou kritického čtení a interpretována v rámci hermeneutického přístupu v kombinaci s Iserovou teorií o čtenářově zkušenosti, s přihlédnutím k Foucaultově definici diskurzu a k některým obecně přijímaným tezím z psychologie. Výsledkem analýzy je závěr, že Ian McEwan používá deziluzi ve svých románech jako nástroj, jehož prostřednictvím se snaží povzbudit čtenáře ke kritickému zhodnocení svých předsudků o světě, navyklých vyprávěčských konvencí a sebereflexi, a zároveň vybízí čtenáře k diskuzi o tom, jakou narativní roli čtenář připisuje sobě a lidem kolem sebe. Tím, že vybízí čtenáře k vytvoření určité představy očekávaného rozuzlení příběhu, které je vzápětí rozvráceno, poukazuje Ian McEwan na to, že čtenář je uvyklý na určitý narativní diskurz, který má hluboce zakořeněný, ale kriticky nezhodnocený. Ian McEwan ve svých románech poukazuje na moc, jakou mají tyto narativně tradiční příběhy nad čtenářem, a upozorňuje, že čtenář by měl sám přemýšlet nad tím, kde leží hranice mezi žánry, a hlavně, jaký je rozdíl mezi fikcí a realitou.

Klíčová slova (česky)

Ian McEwan, deziluze, čtenářova očekávání, nespolehlivý vypravěč, sebeklam, 21. století

Abstract (in English):

The focus of this diploma thesis is disillusion in the works of the contemporary novelist Ian McEwan, particularly in his twenty-first century novels. The thesis analyses the disillusionment of the reader based on McEwan's work with traditional narratives and the reader's expectations, which is achieved through the employment of the unreliable narrator in *Atonement* (2001) and *Sweet Tooth* (2012), depiction of self-deception in *Saturday* (2005) and *Solar* (2010), and the misunderstanding on the interpersonal and intrapersonal level in *On Chesil Beach* (2007) and *The Children Act* (2014). The analysis uses the method of close reading and critical evaluation through the hermeneutic process in combination with Iser's theory about the reader, Foucault's definition of discourse and some generally accepted ideas based on psychology. The analysis reveals that Ian McEwan uses disillusion in his novels as a device through which he tries to encourage the reader to critically evaluate the reader's preconceptions about the world, the conventional narratives, and the roles the reader ascribes to him/herself and to the society around him/herself. By allowing the reader to build his/her expectations of the story's denouement and then crushing them, McEwan points out the reader's routine regarding a given discourse and demonstrates how deep-rooted and critically unevaluated these traditional narratives are and what power do they hold over the reader, but also suggests the reader should explore the limitations of the genre and the difference between fiction and reality.

Key words (in English):

Ian McEwan, disillusion, reader's expectations, unreliable narrator, self-deception, 21st century

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| 1. INTRODUCTION | 7 |
| 2. IAN MCEWAN | 12 |
| 3. THE DISILLUSIONMENT IN IAN MCEWAN'S 21 ST CENTURY NOVELS..... | 15 |
| 3.1 THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR OF <i>ATONEMENT</i> AND <i>SWEET TOOTH</i> | 20 |
| 3.2 THE DEPICTION OF SELF-DECEPTION IN <i>SATURDAY</i> AND <i>SOLAR</i> .. | 47 |
| 3.3 THE (INTER)PERSONAL MISUNDERSTANDING: <i>ON CHESIL BEACH AND THE CHILDREN ACT</i> | 75 |
| 4. CONCLUSION | 103 |
| 5. BIBLIOGRAPHY | 106 |

1. Introduction

During my bachelor studies, I remember hearing about the very popular contemporary writer Ian McEwan but I have not encountered any of his works until I went to see Joe Wright's motion picture *Atonement* (2007). I was stunned by the film's denouement and the complete collapse of the "happy ending for everyone" I was expecting to be served. I am certain I will forever regret seeing the film prior to reading the novel because it is hard to imagine the effect of the absolute destruction of the expectations I could have been building for nearly four hundred pages only for them to be shattered by one single sentence three pages before the actual ending of the book. I ran to the library the next day where McEwan's only available novel was *The Cement Garden* (1978) and I was again astonished, simply because the story was entirely different from what I was anticipating after my experience with *Atonement*.

I started to realise that all my assumptions were shaped either by heavy reliance on my previous experiences in the genre, cultural and social norms, or film and literary conventions, rather than my own critical thinking. It seemed that McEwan was aware of these concepts and played with the reader deliberately, only to show him or her how many norms we take for granted without questioning them, which to me, especially today, seems a very risky practice. I believe that McEwan's style could be in this sense perceived as a form of didacticism but the educational aspect is not openly stated and requires self-reflection or critical thinking to be revealed. I found the technique of playing with the reader's expectations interesting and wanted to analyse the technique McEwan uses to achieve such impact, which I hope to accomplish in this text.

In this thesis, I tried to analyse McEwan's work with disillusion, above all else the technique through which he builds the reader's expectations and how he draws the reader's attention towards humanity and its relatable and understandable motivations and mistakes. I worked mostly with online sources on McEwan's oeuvre, applying the method of close reading and critical evaluation through the hermeneutic process in combination with Iser's theory about the reader, Foucault's definition of discourse and some general ideas based on psychology.

This thesis considers McEwan's texts in the context of postmodernism, based on Hutcheon's following assumption:

[w]hat (...) debates have shown is that the postmodern is, if it is anything, a problematizing force in our culture today: it raises questions about (or renders problematic) the common-sensical and the "natural." But it never offers answers that are anything but provisional and contextually determined (and limited).¹

Aside from questioning the conventional, McEwan uses many literary devices that can be considered postmodern: metafiction, irony, intertextuality, foreshadowing, fragmentariness and temporal distortion in order to slow time and create suspense, but the most important for this thesis is his work with disillusion, however, considering Ian McEwan a postmodern author would be an oversimplification since McEwan also works with realism and to a certain level with the technique of the stream of consciousness.

Naturally, a lot has been written on McEwan's oeuvre, however, most of it concentrates on the analysis of his work from the political point of view of

¹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodern: History, Theory, Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) XI.

feminism or ethics, or focuses on McEwan's handling of evil or topics concerning moral perspective. The critical approach to McEwan is also restricted to his critically awarded or most famous novels, such as *Atonement* or *Saturday*, or pursue some of his older novels, *Enduring Love* (1997), *Child in Time* (1987) or *Amsterdam* (1998). However, I did not manage to find a text that would dedicate its content to McEwan's work with the theme of disillusion which is present in one form or another in every McEwan's text published in the twenty-first century. Although disillusion is one of the most human experiences and it is familiar to every person, most of the critics did not consider it significant.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse McEwan's work with various types of disillusion, its purpose in McEwan's novels, and the technique McEwan uses to engage the reader in constructing illusions that are destroyed near the last page, producing a strong emotional response from the reader. McEwan's work with the element of disillusion will be analysed in the six novels McEwan published in the twenty-first century² using the methodological framework of the hermeneutic spiral. By mutual comparison and evaluation of all McEwan's twenty-first century novels, I was able to designate three types of disillusion McEwan uses in his novels – the disillusion experienced after McEwan manipulates the reader into the expectation a different development of the narrative based on the decoys the writer weaves into his texts; the self-deception of the characters who are in their ignorance incapable of realizing that it is themselves who are their biggest enemies in their pursuit of happiness, and

² Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2007).
Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008).
Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006).
Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011).
Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Random House, 2012).
Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014).

which is often used as a complication plot device; and the disillusion of the characters on the interpersonal and intrapersonal level as a consequence of their lack of empathy.

This thesis approaches the element of disillusion as a common ground for both academic and casual reader and obliterates the difference between these two types of readers in order to focus on the aspects of McEwan's novels they may share, as the texts are often composed around emotional reactions. I selected Wolfgang Iser's publication *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in the Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (1978) as the cornerstone of the theoretical framework for this thesis. Iser concentrates on the reader-response criticism and provides a theory of literary and aesthetic responses from the reader intended by the author of the novel. The reader is the recipient of the author's intended affect and Iser claims that although the reader is not represented in the text, the author confronts him/her with problems arising from the reader's surroundings, social and historical norms and expectations, and offers the reader a chance to reflect his/her own position in the world and its social constructs. Since McEwan's works are written with the intent of affecting the recipient of his text, Iser's theory became an essential part of my research.

In order to understand McEwan's characters better and to be able to better grasp their significance for the reader, I also took into consideration some psychological aspects of the human experience, together with some contribution from the philosophical field of Michel Foucault's work on discourse in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. In his theory of discourse, Foucault suggests that a statement's meaningfulness depends on the conditions in which the statement exists and operates within a given field, and claims that a

statement is reliant on the statements that precede and follow it. Moreover, Foucault deals with the power relationships in various discourses expressed through language within specific historical periods, suggesting that discourse can be used to govern or influence social groups, and further speculates about how our society is shaped by language. In his novels, McEwan elaborates on the power language has over individuals and society, questions the constructed ideologies, genres, relationships and the individual's worldview.

Of course, any accessible monograph, article, or interview has been taken into consideration, evaluated according to its compliance with the aims of the thesis (independently of their purpose of origin), according to its content characteristics, according to its creative intention (e.g. the literary analysis of Ian McEwan's texts) and according to the origin of the sources and their subsequent usage in other publications.

The disillusion in McEwan novels is challenging not only the reader's assumptions but also the margins of the genre, narrative, and the borders between fiction and reality, questions the norms of the society, presents conventions in different contexts and challenges the reader's own understanding of the novel. In order to encourage critical thinking and not merely reshape the reader's cognitive pattern, McEwan uses three forms of disillusion that are present in various amounts in all of his twenty-first century novels – disillusion of the reader, self-delusion, and disillusion based on the character's expectations of others and themselves. Each of these aspects is critically analysed and described in the following chapters, revealing McEwan's technique of affecting the reader and, possibly, the reason for his popularity in critical but also general readership.

2. Ian McEwan

Ian McEwan's first works were characteristic with disturbing themes of sexual perversion and their shocking nature labelled McEwan's prose as the Gothic genre and earned him the nickname 'Ian Macabre.' His two collections of Gothic short stories - *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) (which was awarded Somerset Maugham Award in 1976) and *In Between the Sheets, and Other Stories* (1978) – were working with the topics of sexual and social peculiarities, and his first novels dealt with similarly disturbing themes – *The Cement Garden* (1979), adapted into a film in 1993, concentrated on the incestuous relationship between a brother and a sister, and *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), which was also adapted into a film in 1990, dealt with sadistic sexual tendencies.

After the dystopian novel *The Child in Time* (1987), and *The Innocent* (1990), a Cold War spy novel, McEwan started to shift towards the exploration of morality and the human consciousness and began his quest to depict the atmosphere in the contemporary world created by the historical milestones of our times. In *Black Dogs* (1992) McEwan reflects the aftermath of the World War II and the collapse of the Berlin Wall, both leaving marks not only on the protagonists but also on the entire society. These novels are also significant with self-exploration, self-understanding, and self-construction, search for identity and the moral and ethical dilemmas the characters are facing. In *Enduring Love* (1997) McEwan explores the relationship between a science journalist and a mentally ill stalker, and *Amsterdam* (1998), awarded the Man Booker Prize, is a story of a deteriorating friendship between two friends who made a euthanasia pact.

Since his 'macabre' era, McEwan's prose transformed into more mature style, McEwan gradually detached himself from the darker themes and moved

towards more complex and critically acclaimed topics. Although his prose cannot be labelled as purely postmodern, in his oeuvre he employs some postmodern elements, such as the difference between reality and fiction, frequent work with metafiction, combining history and fiction (or as Hutcheon labels it: “historiographic metafiction”), usage of intertextuality, or questioning the authority of genre, narrative, and the concept of truth as depending on the subjective point of view. The masterful work with prose and various literary devices are the reason for his success with literary critics and his engagement with human life with both its excellences and flaws caught the attention of the casual reader.

Furthermore, part of McEwan’s genius is disruption of the traditional conventions, mainly by mixing political and public issues with a detailed description of an individual’s psyche and problems, which further complicates the novel and urges the reader to cultivate critical thinking, question the culturally and socially established concepts, and reflect upon the reader’s interpersonal relationships. His novels also invite the reader to contemplate the moral choices of the characters since McEwan’s novels often deal with moral failures or depict characters performing questionable life choices.

This thesis focuses on McEwan’s twenty-first-century novels that take the more political and human turn. These include six novels, namely *Atonement* (2001), which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize award and adapted into an Oscar-winning film; *Saturday* (2005), awarded James Tait Black Memorial Prize for 2005; *On Chesil Beach* (2007), once again shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize award; *Solar* (2010) dealing with environmental issues; followed

by McEwan's twelfth novel *Sweet Tooth* (2012) and later by *The Children Act* (2014).

Today, Ian McEwan is considered one of the most respected contemporary British writers. He managed to achieve a remarkable objective - his fiction is popular with casual readers but his novels are also acclaimed by critics who praise him as "one of the most significant British writers since the 1970s," who "will continue to be studied in fifty years."³ McEwan's themes cover a wide range from politics, violence, ecology, morals, gender, and ethics, through topics that are considered taboo, interpersonal relations dealing with human nature and the human ability to love, to the role of the novel and its author in the contemporary society. His characters and their imperfections, insecurities, and mistakes are relatable and leave a deep impression on every reader. The writer's combination of traditional storytelling and unconventional writing techniques beg the question of the function of the novel and the role of the novelist in the contemporary world, and the topics he chooses encourage the reader's critical approach to the world around him/her.

Besides writing novels and short stories, McEwan also produces screenplays, TV scripts and children fiction, and his novels are often adapted into successful films starring famous British actors, such as *Enduring Love* (2004), the Oscar-winning *Atonement* (2007), and the currently being filmed *On Chesil Beach* and *The Children Act*.

³ Dominic Head, eds. *Contemporary British Novelists: Ian McEwan* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) 1.

3. The Disillusionment in Ian McEwan's 21st Century Novels

Ian McEwan has mastered the technique of manipulating the reader into building an illusion which the writer later crushes, leaving the reader frustrated and devastated. McEwan works within the scope of the realistic novel, offering the reader a world that is very familiar resulting in the reader's quick engagement both with the setting of the novel and the main character. The protagonist faces situations that are either relatable or represent a problem to which the reader already has his/her own solution. Iser claims that this concern "with social and historical norms that appl[y] to a particular environment, (...) establishe[s] an immediate link with the empirical reality familiar to its readers."⁴ This approach has, according to Iser, "a specific effect: namely, to involve the reader in the world of the novel and so help him to understand it – and ultimately his own world – more clearly."⁵ Iser further elaborates that the reader "discovers new reality through a fiction which, at least in part, is different from the world he himself is used to; and he discovers the deficiencies inherent in prevalent norms and in his own restricted behaviour."⁶

McEwan is encouraging his readers to examine critically not only the world around them but also the concepts that are naturally adopted as conventions, and which are seldom questioned by individuals. In order to achieve the effect of self-reflection in the reader, McEwan uses various techniques and devices to mislead, or rather manipulate, the reader into a certain position, in which the reader relies on the conventional patterns of literature and storytelling. In order

⁴ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in the Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978) XI.

⁵ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in the Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978) IX.

⁶ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in the Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978) XIII.

to disrupt the narrative and destroy the reader's expectations, i.e. force the reader to reflect on his/her fully developed and totalized pattern of recognition, McEwan questions the reader's deeply internalized and often socially affirmed habits and beliefs so as to show how limited such enclosed perspective is, and, through the device of disillusion, provokes the reader into re-evaluation of his/her conventional thinking.

As the story unfolds, the blank spaces in McEwan's narrative are often, and purposefully, filled with the reader's inventory of familiar narrations, concepts, and patterns, which McEwan intentionally elicits only to destroy them later in the novel.

Expectations aroused in the reader by allusions to the things he knows or thinks he knows are frustrated; through this negation, we know that the standards and models alluded to are somehow to be transcended, though no longer on their own terms. (...) Thus negation [i.e. disillusion] can be seen as the inducement to realisation – which is the reader's production of the meaning of the text.⁷

According to Iser, the confrontation with the unexpected necessitates readjustment in which the reader attempts to comprehend the new situation and which leads to self-analysis. After all, it is the change that forces the human being to adapt and improve, not the constant repetition of the same phenomena.

In order to manipulate the reader's expectations, McEwan uses not only various social and historical conventions, genres, and concepts, but also discourses that have the power to steer the reader's expectations into the desired

⁷ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in the Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978) 37.

direction. Foucault claims that discourse, as a set of authorised statements, has the power to influence thinking and behaviour of individuals. He sees discourse as a medium through which norms are prescribed and power is established:

in our societies (and no doubt in many others) the property of discourse – in the sense of the right to speak, ability to understand, licit and immediate access to the corpus of already formulated statements, and the capacity to invest this discourse in decisions, institutions, or practices – is in fact confined (...) to a particular group of individuals.⁸

Ian McEwan tries to show the reader that it is the individual who has the power to re-shape the “way of speaking,”⁹ and thus understand the world by challenging what the reader considers given and absolute. By moving within the frame of Foucault’s work, McEwan uses discourse to demonstrate how much power the language has over the reader, particularly the reader’s expectation in a given genre, situation, or narration, since he exposes language as a medium through which our cultural relations are constructed, social norms are shared, and conventions are established.

Character deficiencies are present in every McEwan’s twenty-first-century novel but in order to illustrate the character’s ignorance best, this thesis focuses on the two characters that provide the best example of self-delusion. The protagonists of *Solar* and *Saturday* are not fully aware of their imperfections and thus serve as the best illustrations for McEwan’s work with self-delusion. Through his novels, McEwan puts those readers, who are capable of self-reflection, to the position of social explorers who can analyse the novel critically

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002) 79-80.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002) 135.

and learn not only something new about society and the functioning of the Western culture, but above all about themselves. Especially in the case of *Saturday* and *Solar*, the aim of the chapter about self-delusion is to analyse how McEwan employs the motif of self-deception and how the reader should work with the difficulties suggested by Iser.

The final chapter concentrates mainly on the interpersonal aspect of McEwan's novels and the expectations his characters project on their relationships based on the cultural and social norms shaped by constant affirmation of familiar narratives. The protagonists of *On Chesil Beach* and *The Children Act* do not realize to what extent their perception of reality is influenced by narrative patterns and what degree of their behaviour is their genuine self shaped by the social roles they play, resulting in miscommunication and lack of empathy not only between the personas in the story but also in misunderstanding within one of the characters, once again drawing the reader's critical reading skills to re-evaluate his/hers surrounding but also his/her approach to the world and him/herself.

The central characters of McEwan's stories are flawed individuals with dark past, frequently unaware of the consequences of their actions, and oblivious to other people's feelings. Nevertheless, McEwan works with these aspects of humanity in such a way that the reader is made to understand that no one, not even fictional characters, are perfect human beings, however, if the character is not aware of his vices, the outcome of his pride, selfishness, or lack of empathy, it may result in the disruption of not only the protagonist but also the lives of his closest surroundings. The central character is not the only imperfect one in the narrative but it is usually the protagonist's inability to realise his weaknesses and the possible impact his actions can have on his life that head towards an act

of selfishness which harms the other characters and inherently leads to self-reflection, questions about morality and ethics. In his monograph, Head claims that “McEwan seeks to reconnect narrative fiction with moral sense”¹⁰ that has gradually vanished from the contemporary fiction. The moral relativism McEwan works with is, however, free of any judgement; McEwan merely lays the moral problem before the reader and leaves the approach towards it solely on the reader, allowing the reader to become aware of his/her limitations by comparing him/herself with the protagonist.

The reader’s self-reflection is only possible if the reader does not fully identify with the main character since in that case, the character’s behaviour would only work as an affirmation of the reader’s totalized concepts. McEwan, therefore, prevents the reader from full identification with his characters by making protagonists very complex (i.e. similar to people in the reader’s real life, in which it is hard to understand motivations of other people who are not close to the reader), with most of the actions the character performs being either impulsive or unfathomable and their motivation never explicitly revealed. The reader is thus manipulated into making his/her own judgement.

McEwan’s work with disillusion employs various devices that are analysed below; it concerns the device of unreliable narrator in *Atonement* (2001) and *Sweet Tooth* (2012), self-deception in *Saturday* (2005) and *Solar* (2010), and the disillusion of the characters on the interpersonal and intrapersonal level in *On Chesil Beach* (2007) and *The Children Act* (2014).

¹⁰ Dominic Head, eds. *Contemporary British Novelists: Ian McEwan* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) 7.

3.1 **The Unreliable Narrator of *Atonement* and *Sweet Tooth***

The unreliable narrator is one of McEwan's recurring literary devices, both before and after the twenty-first century. The unreliable narrator plays a crucial part in manipulating the reader; since the story is often narrated in the first person, the reader identifies with the narrator and perceives the first-person narrative as the most accurate version of the story. There is no reason for questioning the objectivity of the narration until the narrator makes a mistake by producing contradictory statements, illogical information, or until the narrator openly reveals his unreliability. Apart from the first-person narrator, McEwan also provides his novels with narrators that can be perceived as subjective. They present the story in the third person, however, it is heavily influenced by the main character's opinions, past experiences, and worldview, turning the text into subjective narrative. The credibility of such omniscient narrator is therefore as questionable as the typical unreliable narrator's because even the omniscient narrator's perspectives, opinions, and actions are influenced by the main character's perspective. The effect of the unreliable omniscient narrator is that the reader perceives the narration as objective and accurate, although it is just a modified form of the first-person narrative.

McEwan is aware of this effect and he uses it as a device through which he can manipulate the reader and thus enhance the reader's experience from the novel. Moreover, McEwan also challenges the traditional story-telling by experimenting with the form of narration, combining various types of narratives, and breaking the traditional concepts.

The combination of the first-person and the omniscient narrative is employed in most of McEwan novels but the most striking examples are

Atonement and *Sweet Tooth*, which both question the narrative forms, combine first- with third-person narrative and dissolve the boundaries between them, but also build the reader's expectations only to destroy them in the final pages through the usage of intertextuality.

Atonement is the first Ian McEwan novel published in the twenty-first century and it is regarded as one of his best works. It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize award in 2001 and adapted into an Oscar-winning film in 2007. The metanarrative and intertextual text work with the idea of misunderstanding but also play with the reader's expectations that are skilfully steered in the direction of McEwan's choice.

In *Atonement* McEwan manages to push the reader into his required direction. The obvious work with the tradition of the romantic story, in which two people from different social backgrounds must overcome obstacles on their path to the happy ending, one of them usually being the class system, is one of the oldest narratives in Western culture. This pattern can be observed in many literary works spreading through centuries and it is a well-known recurring narrative pattern. The novel's intertextuality also alludes to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740), Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), or, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), which shape the reader's assumption of the further development of the narration.

The epigraph of the novel is a direct quotation from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1803):

Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own

sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you.

Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them?¹¹

and prepares the reader for a story whose heroine has a vivid imagination which results in her falsely accusing someone else of a crime. However, Austen's novel is a satire and the accusations of her central character, Catherine Morland of General Tilney murdering his wife, cause no real damage to people around her, moreover, the Austen novel ends up in a happy marriage. Briony, on the other hand, manages to ruin lives of many other characters. The epigraph hints both at the similarities between Austen's and McEwan's novel but also at the differences. Furthermore, McEwan gives the reader another clue on how to approach his novel - the novel starts as a fiction within a fiction, a description of Briony's play 'The Trials of Arabella,'¹² already bringing the reader's attention to the novel's important work with fabrication.

In order to mislead the reader into believing that he/she is actually reading a traditional romantic novel, McEwan employs similar plot devices as Jane Austen. Like the children in *Mansfield Park* (1814), the Tallis family children are left without parental supervision with the male figure being gone most of the time and the mother suffering from illness and isolating herself from the children. Resembling Mr Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Robbie and Cecilia are from different social classes which causes problems in their social circles, and the discomfort of Cecilia and Robbie, a couple that grew up together as friends until they developed a romantic relationship, resembles of Emma Woodhouse and Mr Knightly from *Emma*

¹¹ Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2007) epigraph.

¹² Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2007) 4.

(1815). Besides being set in the English country, McEwan also uses the device of misinterpreting each other lover's feelings and intentions, and the motif of letters as a form of expressing the real feelings between them, which are devices that Austen (among many other writers of the romantic tradition) uses repeatedly in her novels. McEwan admits he was inspired by Austen's novels: "In my notebooks I called it [*Atonement*] "my Jane Austen novel." I didn't have "Northanger Abbey" or even "Mansfield Park" specifically in mind, but I did have a notion of a country house and of some discrepancies beneath the civilized surface."¹³ It is precisely these allusions to Jane Austen that lead the reader to believe the couple will have their happy ending and that Briony will get her atonement.

The thirteen-year-old Briony herself is heavily influenced by the English romantic literary tradition that alters her vision of the world, which is also suggested in the passage where she jumps into the lake in order to be saved by Robbie, pretending to be the lady in distress saved by the heroic male character, three years before Part One takes place,¹⁴ but also reflects in 'The Trials of Arabella' and her perception of the world based on romantic tropes, and manifests in the first misinterpretation of the fountain incident by considering it a marriage proposal. The 'Trials of Arabella' can also be considered a tool through which Briony may be appealing to her brother to find a wife and settle down instead of living a bachelor's life – again demonstrating Briony's romantic vision of the world. Briony's interest in Jane Austen is understandable as she can relate to the writer on many levels – she lives isolated in the country with her parents and siblings, the family has an established position on a social

¹³ Jeff Giles, "Luminous Novel from Dark Master," *Newsweek*, 18 Mar. 2002.

¹⁴ Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2007) 230-1.

level, servants work at the Tallis estate and Briony too is an aspiring writer. These established connections to Jane Austen and her work set the tone for Part One in a romantic literary tradition which works as a subtext for the rest of the novel although Part Two and Three shift between modernism and realism.

Part Two “draws on the historical memory of a military disaster that came to symbolize in the national imaginary the determination to [never give up].”¹⁵ Rather than anything else this part concentrates on the physicality of human experience, the pain, thirst, hunger, and the corporeality of the human body and objects, but also the feelings of fear and guilt. This part of the novel reflects the war literary tradition describing not only physical but also psychological suffering and as such should present the worst experience for Robbie – the suffering, or rather the trial of his love the hero must undergo before reaching his happy ending – winning the princess.

Part Three is written from Briony’s perspective and carries on in the theme of physicality – Briony nurses the broken bodies of the soldiers returning from war, faces physical discomfort and psychological trauma resembling those of Robbie’s: “she learned a simple, obvious thing she had always known, and everyone knew: that a person is, among all else, a material thing, easily torn, not easily mended.”¹⁶ Part Three should in a traditional sense of the narrative work as a catharsis of Briony’s mistake – she needs to suffer in order to redeem what she has done to Robbie and Cecilia.

As mentioned above, even though Parts Two and Three both contain many historical details and realistic descriptions of horrors of war (especially in Part

¹⁵ Pilar Hidalgo, “Memory and Storytelling in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 46.1 (2005): 6.

¹⁶ Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2007) 304.

Two which is written in short and (respectively) economical sentences which are in contrast with the pregnant prose of the previous chapter may be intended as resembling Hemingway's literary style) it is Part One that sets the discourse of the entire novel as romantic, due to being written in free indirect speech pioneered by Jane Austen.¹⁷ Although the following chapter is written in a slightly different manner, the romantic narrative still heavily resonates in Part Two and Three providing the entire novel with a frame of the romantic narrative.

The reader is led to believe that the end will fulfil the romantic tradition and the lovers will reunite in happiness. As the story unfolds and the reader learns in Part Three that Cecilia and Robbie are already together in London, the reader's focus turns from the loving couple, who has already reached their happy ending, to Briony struggling for forgiveness.

So far, even if the reader notices the numerous intertextual references in the novel that can make him/her alert, there is no reason for the reader to doubt the credibility of the story or the narrator, and since the lovers are reunited, it is logical for the reader to assume that when Briony convinces her family of her false accusation, this story line will reach its denouement as well and, like Cecilia and Robbie's story, Briony's will reach a happy ending. After all, the title of the novel suggests there is atonement to be expected at the end of the novel. McEwan is skilfully spreading the epilogue, 'London, 1999,' on almost twenty pages with a short summary of Briony's life so that the reader is ready for an epilogue that fulfils his/her expectation.

¹⁷ Pilar Hidalgo, "Memory and Storytelling in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 46.1 (2005): 85.

It is at this point when McEwan shatters the reader's illusion of participating in a traditional romantic novel and reminds him/her that we are living in a postmodern era. When Briony reveals that the story ends tragically instead of the expected happy ending, the reader is shocked not only because (s)he has emotionally invested in a story that is entirely fabled, but because the reader feels betrayed by his/her own pattern in thinking. The ending is nothing like the idyllic happy ending present in Austen's novels, which was exactly what the reader was led to be expecting. McEwan proves the reader that (s)he is so deeply rooted in the tradition of this particular narrative, which is constantly repeated to him/her in literature, music and media, constantly affirming this particular pattern, that it actually locks the reader in reproducing the same story again rather than forcing him/her to use critical thinking, adapt to a new situation and learn something new, maybe even fabricate his/her own version of a romantic story based on his/her own preferences that may differ from the general concept. By twisting the story at the end, McEwan introduces the element of the reader's disillusionment.

A similar technique is employed in McEwan's fifth twenty-first-century novel *Sweet Tooth*, published in 2012. The text combines not only narrative forms but also metanarrative elements and a mixture of genres that, particularly in this case, propel the reader's expectations. Once again there is the unreliable narrator, the reader is lead to a misconception about the narrator's identity, the reader again emotionally invests into a story whose veracity is ambiguous, and once more the reader is forced to face disillusionment. The similarities between

the novels were probably the reason for the novel's mixed reception and divided opinions among critics.¹⁸

Sweet Tooth, like *Atonement*, is introduced by an epigraph from a different novel, in this case Timothy Garton Ash's *The File: A Personal History* (1997), which is a non-fictional description of Ash's inquiries and research of his own file written by "Stasi", the East German secret police, that monitored him while he was living in Berlin after he graduated from Oxford in 1978.

Introducing *Sweet Tooth* with an excerpt from an autobiographic Cold War text already misleads the reader by creating the expectation of a realistic spy novel, whose credibility, as *The File's*, does not need to be questioned. The reader has no reason to doubt the narrator's identity, nor the accuracy of the events depicted, neither the existence of the narrator herself and not by a long sight the violation of the genre. These devices are masterfully employed by McEwan to create a suspense between what the reader assumes and what the reader receives, and, as in *Atonement*, to encourage the reader in raising illusions only to obliterate them in the last pages.

McEwan again 'exploits' the reader's internalized structure of a traditional spy novel that contains elements of romance as a subplot to the detective story. From the very beginning the reader is misled to expect a spectacular spy novel once again repeating the traditionally accepted narrative pattern in which a

¹⁸ For example, Kurt Andersen praised the book's optimism and amusing nature in *The New York Times'* review (<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/25/books/review/sweet-tooth-by-ian-mcewan.html>) and Julie Myerson from *The Observer* found *Sweet Tooth* comic, emotional and vivid (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/sep/02/sweet-tooth-ian-mcewan-review>). Amanda Craig from *The Independent* perceived the novel as disappointing but well-crafted (<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/sweet-tooth-by-ian-mcewan-8081149.html>), Justin Cartwright from *The Observer* considers it satisfying (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/02/sweet-tooth-ian-mcewan-review>), and *New Statesman's* Leo Robson states that McEwan achieves "rather too little with the qualities he does possess." in Leo Robson, "Vices of a virtuoso: Ian McEwan's taste for a tidy finish." *New Statesman*, 23 Aug. 2012: 40-42.

young, inexperienced yet clever Serena Frome solves a case on her own, which may eventually result in promotion and promising future career in British Intelligence Agency MI5, thus helping to break the glass ceiling and achieving great things in general. The first sentences deliberately raise the reader's expectations:

My name is Serena Frome (...) and almost forty years ago I was sent on a secret mission for the British security service. Within eighteen months of joining [the British security service] I was sacked, having disgraced myself and ruined my lover, though he certainly had a hand in his own undoing.¹⁹

This defining opening is McEwan's technique to engage the reader in the assumption that the novel contains an exciting espionage or some thrilling exposé made by Serena, who is in this initial sentence introduced with light undertones of the femme fatale. However, the reader's expectations are never fulfilled.

One of the main strengths of the text is the induction of the detective narrative, or rather the genre of spy fiction based on the tradition established by Edgar Allan Poe, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Ian Fleming. The genre of spy fiction, is according to David Seed, characteristic with "a covert action which (...) transgresses conventional, moral, or legal boundaries," it often works with the idea of national rivalry, it "constantly veers towards a paranoid vision of 'violation by outside agencies' and 'violation of individual autonomy by internal agencies'," and "the investigator is often himself an agent and therefore (...) is implicated in the very processes he is investigating."²⁰ McEwan also uses the traditional spy fiction conflict of the national rivalry – in this case the

¹⁹ Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Random House, 2012) 1.

²⁰ Dennis Porter, "The Private Eye," *The Cambridge companion to Detective Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 115.

Eastern Block versus the West – and abides the clear definition of black-and-white characters, therefore, “[a]s in any spy story, it’s unclear who’s lying to whom until late in the game.”²¹ Setting the novel in the Cold War Era and especially the 1960s confirms the embedding of the text in the spy fiction genre since 1960s were a period in which “espionage novels flooded the market and serious critical attention began to be paid to the genre.”²² Spy fiction was a product reflecting that “popular anxieties were growing over the credibility of government processes.”²³ According to Stafford, this was due to the “feeling of national insecurity in the face of changing international relations.”²⁴ Stafford adds that the heroes of these spy fictions were usually young, athletic men, which is a convention McEwan subverts. However, most of the typical characteristics of spy fiction do seem to be present in *Sweet Tooth*: Serena does participate in a mission, the story does have heroes whose motivations are so unclear that it evokes a paranoid suspicion of their loyalty as Serena’s colleagues, Serena is assumed to be the femme fatale, and the cleaning of the room with a bloody mattress does arouse some moral considerations, nevertheless, all these evocations are only illusions created by McEwan to mislead the reader.

Even though McEwan uses a similar technique as in *Atonement* (e.g. both novels share the misleading epigraph, the foreshadowing of an exciting plot development in form of the title, the intentionally unfulfilled promise of the

²¹ Kurt Andersen, “I Spy: ‘Sweet Tooth,’ by Ian McEwan,” *The New York Times*, 21 Nov. 2012.

²² Dennis Porter, “The Private Eye,” *The Cambridge companion to Detective Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 115.

²³ Dennis Porter, “The Private Eye,” *The Cambridge companion to Detective Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 115.

²⁴ Dennis Porter, “The Private Eye,” *The Cambridge companion to Detective Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 116.

desired idyllic ending), he is aware of the fact that *Atonement* is probably his most popular work and as such was read by many readers preceding *Sweet Tooth*, which is why he develops a new technique through which he builds up and shatters the reader's illusions. *Sweet Tooth* plays with the expectations based on the genre in general, rather than allusions to great literary works of English literature.

One of the most effective techniques through which McEwan manipulates the reader is the first person narrative form. As the reader, justifiably, assumes the novel is told from Serena's perspective, the revelation of the true author has a significant shocking value, and the reader is forced to re-evaluate the entire text because of the suddenly altered perspective. The "I" form of the narrative usually suggests the narrator took part in the described events directly, or that the narrator witnessed these events and now offers her own experience and opinions. The discourse of the first-person narrative is closely tied with diary entries, personal letters, or confessions, which establishes a close bond between the reader and the narrator since the reader believes the character has a motivation for confessing her story without a reason to lie.

Moreover, the first-person point of view is traditionally used in detective genre as early as the works like Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841) and Arthur Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes story *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), which are narrated from the first-person perspective of the detective's companion. Both Poe and Doyle use the less intelligent detective's assistant as a mediator between the brilliant detective and the reader, thus creating more suspense in the story, and providing space for explanation of actions the reader does not understand due to his/her lack of information – since the reader may not be as extraordinarily brilliant as Dupin or Holmes but he/she will certainly

be smarter than Watson – and who encourage the reader in investigating the story on her/his own. Serena works on a similar principle. She is not the brightest character in the novel, thus the reader may feel superior to her and feel encouraged to observe things that may for a few more moments stay hidden to Serena. However, the satisfying confirmation or disproof of the reader's deductions, in traditional detective stories presented at the end when the case is solved, never comes to pass.

Schiff claims that literary references “alert us to narrative's dependence upon artifice and a tradition of prior artists.”²⁵ Jacobi supports him by stating that

when we read a text we are never without preconceptions (...); some of these preconceptions we might realize we have but others, having become part of our assumptions about certain kinds of literature, we no longer see clearly at all. When we read a text, then, we risk letting these preconceptions inform our reading.²⁶

McEwan is skilfully using the assumptions the reader makes at the beginning of the novel so that the reader is misled by his/her own preconception based on the reader's previous reading experience, only to once more shatter these expectations of plot development at the very end of the novel.

Such frequent work with intertextuality inevitably raises the question whether a well-read and attentive reader could reveal McEwan's technique, adapt his/her expectations and thus spoil for him/herself the moment of disillusion? This may happen in any McEwan's novel, however, the amount of

²⁵ James Schiff, “Reading and Writing on Screen: Cinematic Adaptations of McEwan's *Atonement* and Cunningham's *The Hours*,” *Critique* 53 (2012): 8.

²⁶ Martin Jacobi, “Who Killed Robbie and Cecilia? Reading and Misreading Ian McEwan's *Atonement*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 52.1 (2011):71.

intertextuality together with the popularity of the novel brings *Atonement* as the perfect example in this discussion. D'Angelo claims that the characters' misreading of interactions, such as Lola's rape and the incident by the fountain, may alert the careful reader into realising that they are reading a work of fiction. She also states that "[t]he literary allusions actually point a critical reader to solve the crime before it takes place,"²⁷ and claims that the explicit reference to Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* in the debate between Robbie and Cecilia implies sexual violation of young women; the reference to Nabokov's *Lolita* in Lola's name draws attention to the relationship between Paul and the teenage girl; the epigraph suggests Briony's limited perception; Robbie referring to himself as Malvolio who is, like Robbie, a victim of the rich household together with Robbie's citation of Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" foreshadow Robbie's death.²⁸ However, misreading due to lack of information is a deeply human trait and thus easily justifies the reader's error in perceiving the narrative as a real-life story. Combined with the trust in the author depicting human behaviour in form of art, alluding to other literary works mainly as a form of providing credibility for the actions of the fictional characters, it is nearly impossible for the reader to guess the denouement accurately. As for the allusions, McEwan is aware of this danger and disrupts the expectations based on the reader's previous literary experiences soon after they are constructed. By mentioning *Clarissa* in their debate, McEwan encourages the reader to connect the rape of the young woman with Robbie and Cecilia, which is soon rebutted with Robbie and Cecilia's consensual sex in the library. Unlike Dolores in *Lolita*, Lola is

²⁷ Kathleen D'Angelo, "'To Make a Novel': The Construction of a Critical Readership in Ian McEwan's 'Atonement,'" *Studies in the Novel* 41.1 (2009): 95.

²⁸ Kathleen D'Angelo, "'To Make a Novel': The Construction of a Critical Readership in Ian McEwan's 'Atonement,'" *Studies in the Novel* 41.1 (2009): 95.

actually raped by Paul and it is not until late in the novel when the reader learns Lola is in a relationship with the chocolate magnate. Jane Austen's epigraph may as well refer to Briony's misinterpretation of Cecilia and Robbie's relationship and the incident by the fountain, and the reference to Shakespeare can be interpreted as the reflection of Robbie's arrest, since he was, in fact, a victim of the class system bias, and his death is unknown until the last pages. The cliché story of a couple divided and the title of the novel is also a distraction that pushes the reader into expecting a happy ending, and the romantic genre, characteristic of lower demands on the reader, with addition of a detective plotline, which occupies the reader's mind with solving the mystery of Lola's true rapist, also play the trick with the reader's demands and expectations.

Nevertheless, the novel's metanarrative elements may arouse suspicion even to the less skilled reader. The novel begins in a metanarrative sense – with Briony's first work of drama 'The Trials of Arabella.' D'Angelo also suggests that "Briony's narrative [i.e. *Atonement*], then, is little more than an updated version of the romantic melodrama of her youth."²⁹ 'The Trials of Arabella' is a melodramatic story of a girl (Cecilia) who falls in love with an impoverished doctor (Robbie, an aspiring doctor to be), but later it is revealed that he is a wealthy prince and the play ends in happy marriage on the seaside (the ending the reader is lured into expecting). However, as the plot of the play is written by a twelve-year-old, the play's development is likely to be unconsciously discarded as a work of a child with a tendency for melodrama, at which McEwan is aiming.

²⁹ Kathleen D'Angelo, "'To Make a Novel': The Construction of a Critical Readership in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*," *Studies in the Novel* 41.1 (2009):100.

The child's misunderstanding of the adult world works as a device through which McEwan builds the conflict in the novel. Hidalgo claims, the reader is "made aware of the perils of perception and, at the same time, of the narrative devices through which literature encodes experience,"³⁰ however, these preconceptions are still mediated through a child's eyes. The scene by the fountain is at first presented from Cecilia's perspective, as an awkward situation between childhood friends who have just realized they have developed romantic feelings for each other, but the next chapter offers Briony's misreading of the scene:

What was less comprehensible, however, was how Robbie imperiously raised his hand now, as though issuing a command which Cecilia dared not disobey. It was extraordinary that she was unable to resist him. At his insistence she was removing her clothes, and at such speed. (...) What strange power did he have over her. Blackmail? Threats?³¹

Hidalgo points out that at first Briony "reads the scene according to her experience of folk tales: as a young man of humble origins aspiring to the hand of a princess,"³² which is, ironically, closer to the truth than her subsequent viewing of Robbie as having some power over Cecilia. Nevertheless, the reader is presented first with the misconception and then the truth. This device appears again when Briony enters the library where she misinterprets Cecilia and Robbie's passionate sex as an act of violence from Robbie. The order of the truth and the misinterpretation is reversed in this scene, Briony first confuses what she sees and then Robbie gives the explanation in the following chapter,

³⁰ Pilar Hidalgo, "Memory and Storytelling in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 46.1 (2005): 86.

³¹ Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2007) 38.

³² Pilar Hidalgo, "Memory and Storytelling in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 46.1 (2005): 86.

nevertheless, what is important in these scenes is that McEwan explicitly points out the problem of interpretation between the child's imagination and the complexity of the adult world when Briony herself marvels at "how easy it was to get everything wrong, completely wrong."³³

In *Sweet Tooth*, McEwan employs a similar technique, yet, because of the experience the reader gained while reading *Atonement*, it becomes easier to notice the devices through which McEwan manipulates the reader's expectations. *Sweet Tooth* is also a form of coming-of-age story in which the reader is, once again, led to believe to be reading a traditional story of a country girl who manages to gain power and status despite the obstacles the man's world sets in front of her. The beginning of the novel promises a thrilling spy novel with a young woman being trained by her lover and recruited by MI5, but after that, the story shifts to Serena's personal life and her relationships. McEwan occasionally adds some notions of a spy thriller, such as stories mediated through Max about former agents and previous secret operations, suspicious behaviour of Max and Shirley, and the mission when Serena and Shirley clean up the room with a bloody mattress, yet Serena never faces any real danger. She is not portrayed as an exciting secret agent but as an ordinary person whose worries regard merely her everyday life.

In order to manipulate the reader into believing the narrative of *Sweet Tooth* is linear and traditional, McEwan presents the alleged narrator, Serena, as a casual and uncritical reader. Throughout the novel, she keeps clarifying that she reads purely for pleasure and claims that reading is her way of not thinking.³⁴ She does not "bother much with themes or felicitous phrases and

³³ Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2007) 39.

³⁴ Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Random House, 2012) 5.

[skips] fine descriptions of weather, landscapes and interiors.”³⁵ She wants characters in which she could believe, labelling them a “version of myself,”³⁶ she is not interested in stories without female characters and prefers “people to be falling in and out of love.”³⁷ Serena is a typical casual reader: “I read anything I saw lying around. Pulp fiction, great literature and everything in between – I gave them all the same rough treatment,”³⁸ and as such she is hostile to any form of literary experimentation: “No single element of an imagined world or any of its characters should be allowed to dissolve on the authorial whim. The invented had to be as solid and self-consistent as the actual.”³⁹ Roughly in the middle of the novel Serena speaks about one of Tom’s short stories which is:

narrated by a talking ape prone to anxious reflections about his lover, a writer struggling with her second novel. (...) Only on the last page did I discover that the story I was reading was actually the one the woman was writing. The ape doesn’t exist, it’s a spectre, the creature of her fretful imagination. *No*. And no again. Not that. (...) I instinctively distrusted this kind of fictional trick. I wanted to feel the ground beneath my feet. There was, in my view, an unwritten contract with the reader that the writer must honour.⁴⁰

Assuming that Serena is the narrator, the reader gets a sense of false security. Serena expresses her frustration of disillusionment well-known to the reader of *Atonement*, she points out the importance of mutual trust between the reader and the author, and she dislikes Tom’s short stories particularly because of their experimental nature. McEwan uses similar statements repeatedly to

³⁵ Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Random House, 2012) 6.

³⁶ Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Random House, 2012) 65.

³⁷ Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Random House, 2012) 6.

³⁸ Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Random House, 2012) 6.

³⁹ Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Random House, 2012) 193.

⁴⁰ Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Random House, 2012) 193.

endorse the reader to believe Serena would not resort to the employment of such devices in her narrative. The reader thus trusts Serena, the author, presents him/her with a traditional realistic work of literature. Moreover, Serena's interest in mathematics, which is an exact science, and her limited imagination together with the lack of critical thinking, again offer a false reassurance of a conventional story.

McEwan misleads the reader into expecting a realistic spy novel written in a form of personal confession by mixing fiction and realia, such as the fictitious Jane Austen Prize for Fiction which Tom wins competing with famous existing authors like Anthony Burgess, Iris Murdoch, J.G. Farrell, Muriel Spark and Margaret Drabble. Together with the autobiographical aspect of the novel, the incorporation of texts that are variations of McEwan's early short stories and passages in which Tom meets the existing writers, such as Martin Amis, but also his first publisher Tom Maschler, his friend Angus Wilson, and his mentor Ian Hamilton, give the novel the vibe of a realistic story. Like the central character Tom, McEwan also studied at the University of Sussex. The writer himself calls *Sweet Tooth* "a muted and distorted autobiography,"⁴¹ although McEwan jokes that "unfortunately a beautiful woman never came into my room and offered me a stipend."⁴²

The allusions to famous literary works in *Sweet Tooth* are limited and many of them refer to McEwan's own previous works, two collections of short stories *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) and *In Between the Sheets* (1978). However, the short stories are altered and thus bring attention to the persona of the author as the writer's own construction. Since McEwan slightly changes his original short

⁴¹ Rachel Cooke, "Ian McEwan: 'I had the time of my life'," *The Guardian*, 19 Aug. 2012.

⁴² Rachel Cooke, "Ian McEwan: 'I had the time of my life'," *The Guardian*, 19 Aug. 2012.

stories while ascribing them to Tom, he might be either drawing the reader's attention to the writer's opportunity to change what has already come to pass and what has an established position in the society, i.e. the author's power to bend reality according to his will, or imply to the attentive reader that what she/he is reading may not be entirely what the reader considers it to be. Nevertheless, these short stories, in *Sweet Tooth* ascribed to Tom, carry relevance to the relationship between Tom and Serena. Tom's stories incorporate not only the themes of man's dominance over woman but also love, betrayal and self-deception.

Furthermore, there is a certain level of ineptitude in the novel that is unusual in McEwan's work, attracting the reader's attention to realizing there is something off with the novel, yet it could be easily dismissed due to Serena's poor writing skills. Both Serena and Tom as characters are strangely stiff and awkward, but especially Serena's portrayal draws a lot of attention.

Serena seems very critical and strangely objective towards herself. She speaks about herself as "both clever and beautiful,"⁴³ believes that "[she] really was *pretty*,"⁴⁴ and that she "was also the first person in the world to understand Orwell's 'Nineteen Eighty-Four.'"⁴⁵ She is not a complicated character, rather contrarily, she is described as bland, not strong-willed, she gets her MI5 job on her lover's account and stays in that position because of another man. She often acts as a silly person without opinion.

From the first page, Serena is depicted as a conceited girl from a well-established family, "a girl with untutored tastes, [she] was an empty mind, ripe

⁴³ Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Random House, 2012) 4.

⁴⁴ Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Random House, 2012) 14.

⁴⁵ Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Random House, 2012) 9.

for a takeover”⁴⁶ yet she does not develop much throughout the novel. Her adoration of Tom is rather odd as she puts him on a pedestal in many ways, be it physical, psychological or sexual, and she turns down Max because of him. Although Serena is described as physically beautiful she is not exciting as a heroine, and Craig states it is difficult for the reader to like or side with Serena as “she is carefully calculated to annoy, and her sexual self-confidence rings utterly false to a woman reader.”⁴⁷ Andersen also notices that “[c]ompared with the lavish attention McEwan often devotes to physical description, “Sweet Tooth” is light on telling period detail.”⁴⁸ However, *Sweet Tooth* being a spy novel, the reader can easily dismiss the above mentioned red flags evoking a paranoid feeling as the intended effect of the spy genre.

It is only after finishing the novel when the reader realizes that *Sweet Tooth* is a variation of Tom’s short story in which a man falls in love with a mannequin. Serena, too, is only Tom’s fantasy of an ideal woman, a mannequin on which Tom projects his desires of a perfect woman according to his 1970s expectations.

McEwan’s aim in *Sweet Tooth*, in contrast to *Atonement*, is not to engage the reader in a melodramatic romance but to point out the problem of the border between reality and imagination. Alghamdi claims that McEwan “employs many of the tropes of an uncomplicated, linear narrative, but conceals a sophisticated contemplation of the nature and meaning of life and art.”⁴⁹ He

⁴⁶ Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Random House, 2012) 7.

⁴⁷ Amanda Craig, “Sweet Tooth, By Ian McEwan,” *Independent*, 25 Aug. 2012.

⁴⁸ Kurt Andersen, “I Spy: ‘Sweet Tooth,’ by Ian McEwan.” *The New York Times*, 21 Nov. 2012.

⁴⁹ Alaa Alghamdi, “The Survival of the Author in Ian McEwan’s Sweet Tooth,” *Arab World English Journal* 1 (2013): 90.

also states it is impossible for the reader to distinguish between the real Serena and Tom pretending to be Serena:

the story we are reading is that very thing that Serena desires, in the manner of a mirror that would root her more firmly in the manufactured world. Yet in the process, the illusory reality of Serena disappears, (...) indeed, we realize that she was never there at all, much like the happy couple in *Atonement*.⁵⁰

The reader is left questioning not only the credibility of the story but the existence of Serena herself – is she based on a real person or is she completely fictional?

Moreover, both novels lack unequivocal ending. At the end of *Atonement*, the novel's reality and the fictional story intertwine and even Briony's internal monologue in 'London, 1999' leaves the reader doubting the real ending of the story:

It is only in this last version that my lovers end well (...). All the preceding drafts were pitiless. But now I can no longer think what purpose would be served if, say, I tried to persuade my reader, by direct or indirect means, that Robbie Turner died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940, or that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station. (...) How could that constitute an ending? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of bleakest realism?⁵¹

The ambiguity of Briony's monologue and the polemics over the story's realism offer space for doubts not only about the ending but also about the

⁵⁰ Alaa Alghamdi, "The Survival of the Author in Ian McEwan's Sweet Tooth," *Arab World English Journal* 1 (2013): 94.

⁵¹ Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2007) 370-1.

credibility of the text as a whole. The narrator of *Sweet Tooth* makes a similar revelation in the final chapter:

This story wasn't for me to tell. It was for you. (...) I had to get out of my skin and into yours. I needed to be translated, to be a transvestite, to shoehorn myself into your skirts and high heels, into your knickers, and carry your white glossy handbag on its shoulder strap. On my shoulder. Then start talking, as you. Did I know you well enough? Clearly not.⁵²

Like in *Atonement*, even here is the credibility of the narrator questioned by the narrator himself, inevitably raising questions about the reality and fiction depicted in the novel, the re-evaluation of the entire story, the reader's expectations, and the narrator's perspective. Walker states that "[i]n part, *Sweet Tooth* is a variation on a deep-rooted English strain of modern fiction—the "condition of England" novel,"⁵³ which implies a conventional linear novel that would satisfy Serena's needs of a casual reader, yet it contains a postmodern experimental narrative that satisfies the more demanding readers.

The abovementioned excerpt from *Atonement* ends with another thought provoking sentence: "But what *really* happened? The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish. As long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love."⁵⁴ It adds more dilemma to the validity of the story and more confusion about the denouement. The reader is left asking: which version of the ending is correct? Do Robbie and Cecilia live happily ever after? Or do they die before seeing each other again? What does Briony mean when she states: "If I

⁵² Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Random House, 2012) 360.

⁵³ Laura Savu Walker, "'A Balance of Power': The Covert Authorship of Ian McEwan's Double Agents in *Sweet Tooth*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 61.3 (2015): 494.

⁵⁴ Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2007) 371.

had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration...Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at *The Trials of Arabella*? It's not impossible"⁵⁵? The final chapter of *Sweet Tooth* ends in even more ambiguous manner – what happened between the lovers after Serena finished reading Tom's manuscript? Did they publish the novel together? Was there a real Serena or was it just a trick of a starting writer to draw more readers into his first book?

Both *Atonement* and *Sweet Tooth* intertwine the conventional and the experimental narrative, and in both texts McEwan leaves the interpretation to the reader's subjectivity, thus giving the reader the power over the text. As the reader faces disillusion, he/she is forced to re-evaluate his/her perception of the entire novel but also fabricate an ending.

In *Sweet Tooth*, Tom admits he gained all his information second-handedly, from Serena, Shirley, or Max, all of them working for MI5. Furthermore, this information is subjected to Tom's perspective and his narrative purposes. *Atonement's* first three parts are narrated in the third person (Part One from the perspective of four characters, Part Two from Robbie's point of view and Part Three from Briony's), and, as in *Sweet Tooth*, it is the final part, 'London, 1999,' that gives the reader the impression of the most credible version because it is narrated in the first person, immediately establishing a strong bond between the reader and the main character, however, the reader immediately realizes that the first person narrator equals the unreliable narrator. Briony reveals that the entire novel is, in fact, her version of the fabricated story to which she provides

⁵⁵ Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2007) 372.

a happy ending but she also claims she suffers from vascular dementia, one of the symptoms being memory impairment. Briony admits researching the novel in Imperial War Museum and talking to Robbie's war associate. Briony also claims that she worked in three hospitals during the war and she merged her experience in order to "concentrate all [her] experiences into one place,"⁵⁶ followed by a statement that it was the least of her offences against veracity,⁵⁷ which leaves the reader wondering which ones are the more significant offenses against veracity. Moreover, the credibility of the story is further threatened when the reader realizes that the critical remarks made by the literary critic and editor Cyril Connolly on Briony's first draft of the novel: "If this girl has so fully misunderstood or been so wholly baffled by the strange little scene that has unfolded before her, how might it affect the lives of the two adults? Might she come between them in some disastrous fashion?"⁵⁸ are integrated into the narrative. The reader is thus forced to either choose the alternative which is the most credible according to his/her opinion or, encouraged to invent his/her own version of the 'truth' that lies somewhere between the lines of the narrative.

Both Pastoor and Matthews point out the difficulties of a reader who reads a novel based on actual events that are altered to serve the narrator's purposes, when the actual events are fiction themselves, and where the feelings, characteristics and experiences of characters are the product of the narrator's imagination.⁵⁹ Matthews asks "How are we, as readers, to believe in the validity of the innermost thoughts and motivations of these characters when, as it turns

⁵⁶ Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2007) 356.

⁵⁷ Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2007) 356.

⁵⁸ Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2007) 313.

⁵⁹ Charles Pastoor, "The Absence of Atonement in Atonement," *Renascence* 66.3 (2014): 210.

out, they are told from the perspective of someone who has a clear interest in how we judge the story?”⁶⁰

The answer to this question is, however, irrelevant. The important aspect of McEwan’s narratives are the inquiries the reader is forced to ask facing the thought provoking idea of the literary tradition that shapes our concepts of reality. McEwan plays with the reader’s expectations that are shaped according to the tropes in a given genre. McEwan does not simply assume that the reader will follow his misdirection, he uses so many intertextual references, genre characteristics, and deceptions that he is sure the reader will fall into the routine and rely on his/her previous experience so as to misread the story even though the author offers the reader many warning signs. In doing so, McEwan challenges the act of reading itself, the literary discourse, and shifts the border between the novel’s reality and fiction.⁶¹

Many critics misunderstood McEwan’s intention in *Sweet Tooth* and were disappointed by his spy novel that fails to fulfil the expectations of the genre, but these critics did not realize this is exactly the novel’s aim. In *Sweet Tooth*, McEwan concentrates rather on the themes of writing, the ethics of literature, and wordplay. Near the end of the novel, Tom reveals to the reader the point

⁶⁰ Charles Pastoor, “The Absence of Atonement in *Atonement*,” *Renascence* 66.3 (2014): 210.

⁶¹ Ironically, McEwan claimed that while researching *Atonement* he drew inspiration from authentic historical documents but he faced an accusation of plagiarism since passages from Briony’s experience in the hospital were suspiciously similar to the autobiography of Lucilla Andrews’ *No Time For Romance* (1977), which raises further rather amusing questions not only about how much of the story did Briony fabricate but also how much did Ian McEwan. More on this topic in Glenys Roberts, “Plagiarism (or why I need atonement) by Ian McEwan”. *Daily Mail*, Solo Syndication, 4 Dec. 2006; and Ian McEwan, “An Inspiration, Yes. Did I Copy from Another Author? No.” *The Guardian*, 27 Nov. 2006 (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/nov/27/bookscomment.topstories3>).

of the novel: “The end is already there in the beginning. Serena, there is no plot. It’s a meditation.”⁶²

The dense intertextuality of his novels reflects the importance of interpretation, expectation and understanding of a text-based not only on the historical era but also on the conditions of the period. McEwan uses the elements of English literary traditions, e.g. famous literary works such as Henry James’s *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and “Jane Austen meets John Le Carré meets John Barth,”⁶³ combines them with the writers’ literary devices and themes, and reflects them with postmodern irony. The complete deconstruction on the final pages of his texts successfully provokes debates not only among readers but also among critics, and, what is more, encourages a second reading of the novel immediately after finishing it.

The element of disillusion is based on participating in what at first appears as a linear romantic story or a spy novel but ends as an ironically postmodern pastiche. The fact that the reader emotionally invests in characters that are masterfully crafted yet fictional appears in some form in all McEwan’s twenty-first-century novels and stems from the reader willing to be led by McEwan into the deception either by the genre, literary conventions, or intertextuality. Furthermore, McEwan achieves a strong emotional response by informing the reader about the death of the lovers in a casual fashion in *Atonement* and in *Sweet Tooth* by the revelation of the narrator’s true identity, which is in both texts juxtaposed to the bulk of the novel by being expressed in the last few pages.

Iser claims that the employment of the unreliable narrator results in “find[ing] ourselves subjected to this same interplay of illusion-forming and

⁶² Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Random House, 2012) 249.

⁶³ Scott Stossel, “‘Sweet Tooth’ by Ian McEwan,” *The Boston Globe*, 8 Dec. 2012.

illusion-breaking that makes reading essentially a recreative process.”⁶⁴ Iser further elaborates on this idea: “As the literary text involves the reader in the formation of illusion and the simultaneous formulation of the means whereby the illusion is punctured, reading reflects the process by which we gain experience.”⁶⁵ McEwan is aware of this effect of disillusionment and uses it to deepen the reader’s engagement and experience from the reading process as the reader gains the impression that he/she participated in the creative process of the novel even though McEwan has been in control the entire time.

⁶⁴ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in the Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978) 289.

⁶⁵ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in the Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978) 290.

3.2 The Depiction of Self-deception in *Saturday* and *Solar*

Even though McEwan's other twenty-first century novels do not employ the device of the unreliable narrator per se, they are written in a highly subjective manner reflecting the mental processes of the main character. The third-person perspective gives the reader a false impression of objectivity, however, every event in the novel is processed through the mind of the central character and interpreted according to the character's worldview, resembling of the texts of Virginia Woolf or James Joyce. This technique that mixes the third-person and the first-person perspective draws the reader at first glance into believing that what the main character does is justifiable but the second, more critical look and consideration of the consequences of the main character's behaviour reveal that the story is narrated in a subjective form only posing as an objective point of view, i.e. a self-deception the main character employs in order to avoid facing the unpleasant truth about himself.

Self-deception is another deeply human trait McEwan uses in order to create the illusion of an objective and justifiable perspective of the main character in the world which is subtly undermined throughout the novel and torn down at the very end when the character is forced to reflect his weaknesses and the consequences of his irresponsible actions. This technique is best illustrated on *Solar* and *Saturday*.

Saturday is a novel published in 2005 that concentrates on the world after 9/11 terrorist attack and the paranoia that haunted the society. The novel takes place in one day and is narrated entirely from the perspective of Henry Perowne, a rational surgeon whose perception of the world is based on cold facts and scientific researches. Henry states he is not interested in dreams, and

he believes that being able to distinguish between a dream and the reality “is the essence of sanity.”⁶⁶ Throughout the novel, Henry reminds the reader how a fact-oriented person he is, which, together with him being a neurologic surgeon, suggests that Henry’s point of view is trustworthy, reasonable, and objective. After all, he is a scholar with vast knowledge of the functioning of the most important part of the human body – the brain; he is a medical doctor with the godly power to decide whether a person will live or die. However, even though the medical discourse and the realistic tone of the text give the impression of an objective narrative, it could not be further from the truth since Henry lives in a closed comfort zone he has built around himself and his family.

The Perowne family lives almost idyllic life in an exquisite house in a prestigious neighbourhood. Henry is an experienced neurologist, his wife Rosalind is a successful lawyer and their marriage is perfect, full of love and it is faithful since “it’s familiarity that excites him [Henry] more than sexual novelty.”⁶⁷ Their two children are ambitious and talented, Theo intends to become a musician, and Daisy is a literature student and an aspiring poet. The children are intelligent, polite, reasonable, and Henry mentions no major conflict in the family. The harmonic atmosphere in the family is further underlined by the family’s possessions – not only is their house spacious and conveniently located but Henry drives an expensive “silver Mercedes S500 with cream upholstery”⁶⁸ and buys “prawns already cooked in their shells, and three monkfish tails that cost a little more than his first car”⁶⁹ for dinner, all suggesting financial wealth and abundance.

⁶⁶ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 4.

⁶⁷ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 40.

⁶⁸ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 75.

⁶⁹ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 98.

The idealistic picture of the family serves as a confirmation for Henry, who believes all life choices he, a white Caucasian male, made were right and the fact that he managed to rise from a poor student to a renowned surgeon, marry an upper-class girl, bring up two almost perfect children and buy a great house, all assure him that he is a privileged person in the Western society who has complete control over his life. He accepts the role of a successful member of the society with all its privileges and consequently perceives the world in this slightly altered and subjective perspective.

Part of Henry's self-delusion is his inability to admit to himself the world is an unpredictable and violent place. He perceives violence as a distant threat he can observe in television but he would not expect any form of violence in his own real-life. The media support Henry in this self-delusion by turning a simple airplane dysfunction into a dramatic news report, assuring Henry that he and his family are to be worried about terrorists from a removed country somewhere in the East. When Henry observes the falling airplane from the window of his bedroom, the first assumption Henry makes is that the plane was hijacked by terrorists:

The fiery white core and its coloured tail have grown larger - no passengers sitting in that central section of the plane could survive. That is the other familiar element - the horror of what he can't see. Catastrophe observed from a safe distance. Watching death on a large scale, but seeing no one die. No blood, no screams, no human figures at all, and into this emptiness, the obliging imagination set free. The fight to the death in the cockpit, a posse of brave passengers assembling before a last-hope charge against the fanatics.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 16.

When the Russian cargo plane engine accident gets covered in the news for the first time and Henry learns it was “not an attack on [their] whole way of life,”⁷¹ he proceeds in his everyday life yet the media keep picking at the accident and serve Henry a different dramatic news every time he engages in the mundane life, feeding his fear from terrorism. The second time Henry gets a glimpse of the news during his squash game, the pilots are shown handcuffed and he later finds out from Theo that the pilots are considered radical Islamists.⁷² Later, Henry finds out that none of the two pilots owns a copy of either the Koran or the Bible and that they are not responsible for the child pornography found in the cargo, which was probably the cause of their arrest.⁷³ Henry pays attention to the plane coverage but he stops paying attention whenever the news about the Iraq anti-war protest come in, demonstrating his self-assured position of the observer of violence that takes place far away from his comfort zone. He deliberately ignores the demonstration in order to remain in the role of observer and not a participator, and so that he can spare himself the realization of violence as imminent and not distant. Even though the potential terrorists may represent a threat to Henry’s family, it is a very distant danger, coming from the outside, from a foreign country in the Far East, representing an abstract threat and therefore not concerning Henry.

The different ways through which the plane accident is presented is also McEwan’s way of bringing the reader’s attention to the manner through which narratives shape our perception of reality. As the news change their point of view, Henry’s mood shifts from defensive and protective after he observes the

⁷¹ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 35.

⁷² Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 151.

⁷³ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 179.

falling plane, possibly resulting in his protective tendencies when dealing with Baxter, and once again when he watches the pilots being arrested in the middle of his squash game, Henry becomes aggressively competitive towards his colleague. The manner in which Henry reacts to the way media present the case suggests that Henry's perception of and perspective on the world are highly influenced not only by his position in the society but also by his surroundings. Yet he is unaware of these influences and considers it to be his own genuine point of view.

Henry's self-deception partly stems from his fear of not having his life under control and the fact that the world may not always move in predictable and premediated manner. In order to feel in control of the events that unfold around him, he tries to apply what he believes to be detachment and scientific rationality on everything that takes place around him. He dismisses novels, films and stories in general as useless, unable to recognize their value as devices that help people cope with reality, gain a new perspective and consequently learn to face their problems. As Root claims: "He believes he is thinking scientifically and therefore objectively,"⁷⁴ but this notion is subverted numerous times in the course of the novel. After suggesting his house is a safe place with its

three stout Banham locks, two black iron bolts as old as the house, two tempered steel security chains, a spyhole with a brass cover, the box of electronics that works the Entryphone system, the red panic button, the alarm pad with its softly gleaming digits. Such defences, such mundane

⁷⁴ Christina Root, "A Melodiousness at Odds with Pessimism: Ian McEwan's *Saturday*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 35.1 (2011): 70.

embattlement: beware of the city's poor, the drug-addicted, the downright bad,⁷⁵

Baxter manages to invade the house without any significant effort, making Henry's security system useless and practically non-existent. Even though he takes his daughter in firm embrace, notices there is something different with her, and the fact that his biological knowledge must be vast in many respects, he fails to notice Daisy's pregnancy because he is unable to acknowledge that she is a grown woman with her own life. Even though Henry reminds himself that Daisy "is no child. She's an independent young woman,"⁷⁶ he has difficulties perceiving her in that way. Henry also believes he has the upper hand during the incident on the street with Baxter but fails to realize how irresponsibly he acts when he deeply hurts and misleads Baxter by giving him a false hope, resulting in endangering the lives of his entire family. Henry also fails to recognize literature as a device capable of changing people's minds because he himself does not understand it ("The times are strange enough. Why make things up?"⁷⁷ "When anything can happen, nothing much matters. It's all kitsch to me."⁷⁸ the actual, not the magical, should be the challenge,"⁷⁹) yet in the end he stands corrected since it is Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach* that changes the mood and intentions of the intruder in his house, helping the family disable Baxter.

Ironically, Henry claims that he "is aware of the danger of being locked into a single line of thinking,"⁸⁰ nevertheless, he perceives the world in

⁷⁵ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 36-7.

⁷⁶ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 182.

⁷⁷ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 66.

⁷⁸ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 68.

⁷⁹ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 67.

⁸⁰ Christina Root, "A Melodiousness at Odds with Pessimism: Ian McEwan's *Saturday*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 35.1 (2011): 71.

generalizations, oversimplified manner, and oppressive terms. When considering Baxter, Henry defines him exclusively on the basis of his illness: “Here's biological determinism in its purest form, (...). It is written. No amount of love, drugs, Bible classes or prison sentencing can cure Baxter or shift him from his course.”⁸¹ Henry never perceives Baxter as an individual with unique personality and complexity of another human being and never understands his motivations. Similarly, he assumes that Daisy's poems describe her immediate experience and not a world created in Daisy's mind, and he consequently worries about his daughter's sexual escapades, which, as Root points out, is a proof of sexism, which she illustrates on Henry's speculation about Daisy's sex life:⁸²

the unconscious mixing of technical and in this context demeaning terms in his pairing of “girl” with “male”; the crude, careless shorthand for describing whom she might “end up with,” and, finally, his strangely misplaced worry about his fatherly softheadedness instead of the more understandable softheartedness (...) — these all suggest how inadequate his use of the language of sexual selection is (...) and how it masks a sexism.⁸³

The contradiction between how Henry perceives himself and how he actually behaves is also well illustrated on his objectification of Miri Taleb, an Iraqi professor, one of Henry's patients. Perowne “saw his [Taleb's] torture scars and listened to his stories,”⁸⁴ yet he still fails to see Miri without bias. He

⁸¹ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 94 and 210.

⁸² “The same fresh start purification was in her Newdigate launderette poem. Perowne knows the old arguments about double standards, but don't some liberal minded women now argue for the power and value of reticence? Is it only fatherly soft-headedness that makes him suspect that a girl who sleeps around too earnestly has an improved chance of ending up with a lower-grade male, an inadequate, a loser?” in Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 184.

⁸³ Christina Root, “A Melodiousness at Odds with Pessimism: Ian McEwan's *Saturday*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 35.1 (2011): 70.

⁸⁴ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 62.

describes Miri as “a man of slight, almost girlish build, with a nervous laugh, a whinnying giggle”⁸⁵ who “giggle[s] mirthlessly”⁸⁶ when describing the cramped cells of his imprisonment. Butler claims that “[t]his representation feminizes Miri and calls his mental health into question. By aligning Miri with women and the mentally ill, two groups who are commonly denied subjectivity, Perowne diminishes Miri’s own subjectivity.”⁸⁷ Similarly, Henry patronizes his black colleague Rodney by describing him as “a big lad, occasionally and touchingly homesick for Guyana where he has ambitions to set up a head injury unit one day. (...) He has a friendly, intelligent face, and the word is that women adore him and he puts himself about. Perowne suspects he’ll turn out well,”⁸⁸ and he mistakes his fourteen-year-old Nigerian patient Andrea’s rebelliousness for a side effect of her tumour, although it is rather the struggle of a strong personality resisting the stereotypical racial role imposed on her mainly by Henry and developing a unique identity of her own. As Butler claims: Henry “marginalizes any character who is nonwhite, nonmale, and nonwealthy.”⁸⁹

Moreover, Henry does not realize that he is moving strictly within the boundaries of the stereotypical representation offered by media and narratives affiliated with the stereotypical roles. Baxter is a violent, mentally ill thug, not a complete person or a victim of the class system; Daisy is his obedient virtuous daughter and not a woman who makes mistakes and lives her own imperfect life; Miri Taleb is nothing more than the feminized Easterner and the victim of the war; and the black characters are perceived only through the optics of the

⁸⁵ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 62.

⁸⁶ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 63.

⁸⁷ Heidi Butler, “The Master’s Narrative: Resisting the Essentializing Gaze in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 52.1 (2011): 102.

⁸⁸ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 249.

⁸⁹ Heidi Butler, “The Master’s Narrative: Resisting the Essentializing Gaze in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 52.1 (2011): 102.

victims of slavery and injustice. Henry thus applies the old-fashioned narratives connected with different races and genders to categorize the world into boxes that suit his understanding, incapable of seeing the real people behind these imposed roles, but still considering himself open-minded and not realizing his limitations in this regard.

The mild sexism and racism presented in the novel are Henry's devices through which he tries to maintain a sense of control over the vast complexity of the world which he has difficulties comprehending. Root points out that "[e]very moment of Henry's awareness involves competition for control, for authority, for possession,"⁹⁰ which can be observed in his squash game: "[t]here's only the irreducible urge to win, as biological as thirst,"⁹¹ but also in his confrontation with Baxter, in which Henry reaches to his medical practice to get the upper hand in the situation, and even in situations when he is observing the people around him: "People mostly take an existential view - having to sweep the streets for a living looks like simple bad luck. (...) The streets need to be clean. Let the unlucky enlist."⁹² When he discusses the War in Iraq with Daisy, Henry is taking the buck-passing approach of letting "the war go ahead, and in five years if it works out [he is] for it, and if doesn't, [he is] not responsible,"⁹³ because he cannot bear the fact that there may be something over which he has no command.

The squash game also reveals Henry's discontent with the disruption of his idyllic perception of his own life. The game ends with Henry colliding into his colleague and the clear winner cannot be determined. After a short discussion,

⁹⁰ Christina Root, "A Melodiousness at Odds with Pessimism: Ian McEwan's *Saturday*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 35.1 (2011): 65.

⁹¹ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 113.

⁹² Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 74.

⁹³ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 188.

they reset the game and Henry loses to his colleague again. What is interesting in this passage is the fact that Henry cannot leave the game unresolved – his world is either white or black, he is either the winner or the loser, nothing in between. In order to make sense of the world, Henry needs clear boundaries, however, it also means applying order to things that are not clearly defined and, in the case of other characters, immensely complex. By repeating the game, Henry demonstrates the need to apply his own black-or-white perspective to the world, thus denying the unpredictability and authenticity of life. The reader is then encouraged to perceive Henry's subjective perspective in the narrative sceptically since Henry cannot see the world in different tones of grey but he feels the urge to clearly distinguish between the dichotomy of either one or other. This oversimplification of his surroundings further reveals Henry's self-deceit and echoes McEwan's novels analysed in the previous chapter, *Atonement* and *Sweet Tooth*, leaving the reader wondering how much of the novel's reality is bent to suit Henry's perspective.

The loss of control would represent a threat to the world Henry so carefully cultivated around himself and to his privileged position in the old-fashioned class system which, according to McEwan, is still present in the contemporary British society. The new classless, multicultural, and feministic world is baffling for Henry, who, as a surgeon, feels the need to compare the real world to a brain in which every neuron has its specific place and function.

However, even though Henry deliberately lives in a self-deluded state, he is confronted with Baxter, who reveals how little in control Henry is, which, if the reader is optimistic, may result in Henry realizing his self-delusion and changing his worldview. Even though *Saturday* ends without openly stating the beginning of Henry acknowledging his limitations, there is still space for hope.

In McEwan's other novel, *Solar*, the reader repeatedly faces the moment of disillusion after the central character promises to change but he never does.

The central character of *Solar* is the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Michael Beard. Since Beard perceives the award as the peak of his career, he no longer cares about anything but his own well-being. McEwan describes Michael as an unsympathetic character, selfish, narcissistic, and inconsiderate man favouring double standards. He is an intelligent man but he is not interested in his work, friends, family, or the future of the humankind, he is jealous of the students who are smarter and younger than him, his fifth marriage is falling apart but he does not attempt to save his relationship until he learns Patrice, his fifth wife, is having an affair (even though he himself cheats on his women on regular basis), he covers up the accidental death of his wife's lover and his colleague Tom Aldous, frames Patrice's ex-lover and steals his dead colleague's work. Beard is made to be disliked, especially when juxtaposed to the optimistic, young, and talented Tom Aldous who is, unlike Beard, passionate about potentially the biggest crisis humanity is facing – global warming – and hopes to save humankind regardless of the profit.

Beard himself does not believe in global warming and the only passions the physicist has are the physical pleasures – food appetite and desire for sexual pleasure. These two delights are so important for him that when the Nobel Prize winner is confronted with the possibility of losing his penis due to its freezing to the metal zipper of his snowsuit, Beard imagines the life without a penis as a personal tragedy. “How his ex-wives, especially Patrice, would enjoy themselves. But he would tell no one. He would live quietly with his secret. He

would live in a monastery, do good works, visit the poor,”⁹⁴ suggesting that without a penis Beard would lose his status of a privileged member of the patriarchal society and would have to descend to the level of workers and poor people. Beard cannot imagine a full life without the phallic symbol of power. The possibility of losing his penis also shows Michael’s selfishness when considering sexual intercourse only from his side: “There were other kinds of sex they [he and his lovers] could have, or that she could have. What would be the point of that?”⁹⁵

Michael’s other pleasure, food, takes more place in his heart than all the women who were his lovers. The description of a fridge Michael pillages in the middle of the night is more intriguing than Beard’s description of any woman in the novel:

There he stood in the gloom before the man-sized fridge, hesitating a moment before pulling on its two-foot-long handle. It opened invitingly with a soft sucking sound, like a kiss. The shelves were subtly lit and diverse, like a glass skyscraper at night, and there was much to consider. Between a radicchio lettuce and a jar of Melissa’s homemade jam, in a white bowl covered with silver foil, were the remains of the chicken stew. In the freezer compartment was a half-litre of dark chocolate ice cream. It could thaw while he got started. He took a spoon from a drawer (it would do for both courses) and sat down to his meal, feeling, as he peeled the foil away, already restored.⁹⁶

The endearment of the description illustrates Beard’s attachment to food rather than people. The kissing sound of the fridge puts Beard’s food passion on the same level as his sexual desires but unlike his sexual desires, Beard’s gluttony

⁹⁴ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 82.

⁹⁵ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 88.

⁹⁶ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 261-2.

dominates his whole world. One passage in the novel describes Beard eating smoked-salmon sandwiches not because he was “at that moment truly hungry, but he was, in his own term, pre-hungry,”⁹⁷ suggesting his inability to fight his urge to devour anything edible in sight. Although Beard experiences health issues he cannot stop devouring comfort food and he gradually gets fatter and more ill, revealing his inability to take responsibility for his life, break out of oblivion and face the reality.

Michael refuses to realize his vulnerability so he degrades all his partners to the level of a commodity and a source of immediate satisfaction of his sexual needs: “When he was away from her [Melissa] he could only recall in shadow play (...) the full vibrancy, the plain and overwhelming fact of her.”⁹⁸ His lover Darlene merely “fulfil[s] Beard’s old fantasy of the grand lowlife,”⁹⁹ and the fact that Patrice is his fifth wife indicates Beard’s inability to connect with any woman that appeared in his life, not even with his daughter later in the text around whom he feels guilty and uncomfortable.

Beard is also portrayed as having some sexist tendencies when he claims that the difference between men and women is given by a genetic determinism in a public debate on ‘Women in Physics’, after which he throws a tomato on a woman protester. Beard claims he throws it back underarm, in an “entirely playful gesture (...) without anger or malice,”¹⁰⁰ yet the woman drops to her knees and covers her face with her hands. As the novel is narrated in the highly subjective perspective, the force and intention of the throw is at least questionable and proves his negative attitude towards women.

⁹⁷ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 202.

⁹⁸ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 232.

⁹⁹ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 338.

¹⁰⁰ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 195.

What Michael is unaware of is that his hostility towards women stems from the unprocessed death of his mother who died of breast cancer when Beard was finishing his second year at Oxford. His mother is described as a beauty who expressed her love towards Beard through the medium of food. Beard claims that “Early in the marriage, for reasons that remained private, she withdrew her love from him [her husband]. She lived for her son and her legacy was clear: a fat man who restlessly craved the attentions of beautiful women who could cook,”¹⁰¹ and confessed on her deathbed having seventeen affairs in eleven years in what Beard considered a desire for “forgiveness for ruining his childhood.”¹⁰² Yet the marriage is more complex than Beard realizes, since he admits that his mother began the affairs after his father took tranquil interest in his car, his roses and golf with his friends from war, and he “registered no outward hostilities or silent tensions in the home”¹⁰³ after his mother allegedly withdrew her love from her husband. Nevertheless, Michael clearly victimizes his father, since he believes his father did not know about his mother’s affairs, and blames his mother for being unfaithful, withholding love from his father, for ruining his childhood, and for dying, i.e. abandoning Michael, which was an experience he never coped with since his father and him never discussed emotions. Michael is unable to face all his suppressed experiences and emotions, which results in his food and relationship issues, and his inability to take responsibility for his life.

Moreover, Michael Beard is portrayed as a contemptible man, however, the subjective narrator justifies his behaviour by claiming that he is “an average

¹⁰¹ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 266.

¹⁰² Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 268.

¹⁰³ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 266.

type, no crueller, no better or worse than most. If he was sometimes greedy, selfish, calculating, mendacious when to be otherwise would embarrass him, then so was everyone else.”¹⁰⁴ A few lines later the narrator states:

Beard comfortably shared all of humanity’s faults, and here he was, a monster of insincerity, cradling tenderly on his arm a woman he thought he might leave one day soon, listening to her with sensitive expression in the expectation that soon he would have to do some talking himself, when all he wanted was to make love to her without preliminaries, eat the meal she had cooked, drink a bottle of wine and then sleep – without blame, without guilt.¹⁰⁵

Since *Solar* is narrated in the highly subjective manner and Beard shares unconscious yet individually distorted perspective of the world with Perowne, a similar question as in *Saturday* arises – how much of the narration is adjusted to the role into which Michael posits himself, i.e. the ordinary member of the society sharing all of humanity’s faults, and how much can be considered an objective description of Beard’s surroundings?

Some critics interpret *Solar* as a fable or a cautionary tale in which Beard serves as the parable for the humankind and its devastation of the planet, seeing Beard’s inability to change his lifestyle as a simile to consumerism and environmental destruction of which people are aware but choose to ignore due to the unwillingness to sacrifice their level of comfort. For instance, Jones claims:

Through a combination of incontinence and inertia, Beard – gluttonous, avaricious, lustful, slothful, proud, envious, angry – abuses his spherical

¹⁰⁴ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 236.

¹⁰⁵ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 237.

body for the sake of instant gratification in a manner that all too obviously echoes the way his species abuses the planet,¹⁰⁶ which is supported by Beard vomiting after his lecture on the planet's sickness, i.e. global warming, because he ate salmon rolls he did not need but wanted. Hsu quotes Bauman claiming that "living in a consumerist society of constant change, people tend to care little about the past and do not let worries about the future contaminate their present; the "consumer's life is a life of rapid learning—and swift forgetting,""¹⁰⁷ which reflects Beard's focus on the present, his disinterest in his previous marriages, and the future of the planet due to inability to cope with his feelings of hatred towards his dead mother.

Beard is also depicted as lacking moral compass since he has no moral dilemma covering Aldous' death, stealing his research and Tarpin's imprisonment, since "the underclass in a consumerist society are those "uncommoditized men and women" banished from the world of ethical duties."¹⁰⁸ This unwritten rule of the consumer society serves as an affirmation of Beard's idea about the class system, similar to Henry Perowne's.

Beard may serve as a personification of a consumer society of selfish individuals, but in his delusion, he views everyone else in the novel in the same perspective. Beard does not consider himself a good person but he does not have enough psychological strength to face this truth and to deal with the consequences of such realization. Since Beard cannot take responsibility for his life, he uses the harmful experiences, such as his family issues, as a justification

¹⁰⁶ Gregg Garrard, "Solar: Apocalypse Not," *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspective*, ed. Sebastian Groes (London and New York: Continuum, 2013) 127.

¹⁰⁷ Shou-Nan Hsu, "Truth, Care, and Action: An Ethics of Peaceful Coexistence in Ian McEwan's *Solar*," *Papers on Language & Literature* 52.4 (2016): 335.

¹⁰⁸ Shou-Nan Hsu, "Truth, Care, and Action: An Ethics of Peaceful Coexistence in Ian McEwan's *Solar*," *Papers on Language & Literature* 52.4 (2016): 336.

for his own character flaws. In order to avoid feeling vulnerable by being honest, Beard consents to lie, mistreatment, and hostility towards others. Beard's insecurities make him view the world in the perspective that justifies his own behaviour towards other people, resulting in him perceiving others just as corrupt as himself. The North Pole expedition, in which Beard is the only scientist, elaborates on the ideas of stopping global warming and changing people's mind about consumerism, finding how to help each other and become more considerate to each other and to nature, yet Beard is mostly concerned by their inability to keep in order the room where they all store their equipment. Beard wonders: "[h]ow were they to save the earth – assuming it needed saving, which he doubted – when it was so much larger than the boot room?"¹⁰⁹ not realizing that a group of bohemian artists may not care whose equipment belongs to whom and are simply eager to share. The North Pole expedition group is staying on a "well-appointed, toasty-heated vessel of richly-carpeted oak-panelled corridors with tasselled wall lamps,"¹¹⁰ there is an internationally renowned Italian chef preparing the food and their guide is offering them help in killing polar bears. Beard states that

[t]he foundation would bear all his expenses, while the guilty discharge of carbon dioxide from twenty return flights and snowmobile rides and sixty hot meals a day served in polar conditions would be offset by planting three thousand trees in Venezuela as soon as a site could be identified and local officials bribed.¹¹¹

He views even his friends and family selfish: Melissa wants a child so she stops using birth control without consulting Beard because she knew he would resist

¹⁰⁹ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 109.

¹¹⁰ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 62.

¹¹¹ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 63.

her. Although she loves Beard and suggests that if he does not want the child, she can raise it herself and Beard does not have to participate, Beard feels cornered and considers Melissa inconsiderate and selfish. Even Tom Aldous, the scientist who has a plan to save the humankind, has an affair with Beard's wife and when caught in the act, is depicted telling to Beard that his work is "too important to let go, it's our future, the whole world's future that's at stake, and that's why we can't afford to be enemies,"¹¹² which suggest that Tom wants to have his cake and eat it all – continue his affair with Patrice and using the name of the Nobel Prize winning physicist in connection with his science experiments.

In Beard's perception of the society this corrupt, it is easy for Beard to count himself among many who are, according to him, interested only in their own well-being, nevertheless, that is the cause of Beard's self-delusion – the idea that only because everyone around him behaves in a selfish manner, he is justified to do the same. What makes Beard self-deluded is not only his distorted perception of people around him, but also the fact that he considers his perception of the consumerist behaviour a standard, and sees himself as merely adapting to this lifestyle. He has no remorse because he believes that in a society which considers individual's comfort and happiness a priority, Beard is not doing anything wrong, he just pursues his happiness regardless of the costs it takes on others, being it cheating on women, murder or theft.

Moreover, even though McEwan provides Beard with many opportunities to change and fulfil his capacity to become the novel's proper hero it is only another game McEwan plays with the more optimistic readers. As the novel

¹¹² Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 121.

advances, Beard constantly promises that he would change: “he reminded himself over the cocoa that his life was about to empty out and that he must begin again, take himself in hand, lose weight, get fit, live in a simple, organised style. And get serious at last about work,”¹¹³ – he will stop eating junk food, he will exercise, he will become a better man in general – and the more optimistic reader may hope that either Beard’s success (despite being provided by Aldous’ research) will re-ignite his scientific enthusiasm, or that his health problems will force him to change his diet, or that having a daughter will actually change his worldview because now there is someone for whom Beard might want a better future, the more disappointed the reader is. Beard’s hopeful promises appear in the crucial parts of the novel when Beard stands before a life-changing event that may serve as his motivation but they remain just empty promises. Even the open-ended final page of the novel puts Beard before an opportunity: when Beard knows the end of his life is near and he raises from the table at a restaurant to greet his approaching daughter, the only woman in his life who loves him unconditionally, feeling “in his heart an unfamiliar, swelling sensation, but he doubted as he opened his arms to her that anyone would ever believe him now if he tried to pass it off as love,”¹¹⁴ the reader can interpret the passage as Beard’s suddenly found unconditional love for Catriona, yet the tone of the novel and the constant disappointment in the reader’s hope for Beard’s change speak rather for a starting heart attack.

Furthermore, the anecdote with the stranger on the train whose crisps Beard accidentally eats is another of McEwan’s techniques through which he reveals that the protagonist’s narrative cannot be trusted. Since the novel is presented

¹¹³ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 99-100.

¹¹⁴ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 384.

from the highly subjective perspective, the reader can wonder about the authenticity of the narrative, however, it is only after the crisps anecdote is addressed by one of the lecturers on a fund-managers' meeting when Beard's credibility is openly undermined. The anecdote could have been perceived by the reader as a passage that should humour him/her but the fact that one of the other characters questions the authenticity of Beard's experience produces the same effect McEwan employs in *Atonement* and *Sweet Tooth* – the reader is once again forced to critically re-evaluate the authenticity of the entire novel. If the character in the novel knows the anecdote passes around for years, even pointing out that “[b]y claiming it as a personal experience, people localise and authenticate the story,”¹¹⁵ he clearly accuses Beard of lying. What if Beard actually is lying? Could he be lying to the reader about something else? The reader is left with the similar questions about the narrative's credibility as in the case of *Atonement* and *Sweet Tooth*, which once again encourages the reader to approach carefully what he considers reality.

The undermining of Beard's credibility suggests, as in McEwan's other novels, that Beard is again succumbing to the image constructed by society – a person who has fulfilled his purpose in life, won the Nobel Prize, helped the humankind and the scientific field, and now he feels burnt-out since he managed to achieve what his field values the most earlier in his life. Beard is not able to set his own goals and model his life independently on the expectations and conventions of society. Incapable of evaluating his life individually, he is subordinated to the social role imposed on him by the general public, which gets gradually worse as Beard's public image suffers damage, up

¹¹⁵ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 218.

to the point where Beard becomes the true villain not only in his closest social surroundings but for the world-wide public.

The worlds of *Solar* and *Saturday* are comprehensible yet heavily subjective. Both Michael and Henry live in the illusion of the world they created around themselves. Michael Beard by persuading himself that everyone he meets is as corrupt as he is and Henry by refusing to admit himself the world is a confusing and unpredictable place. None of them realizes their perception of reality is altered and the reader is forced to reassess the constitution of the world laid before him/her by the protagonists. Neither Beard nor Perowne is able to sympathise with the characters they interact but they believe their perspective is the right one.

Both protagonists use scientific discourse to objectify and justify their worldview but lack the self-reflection to realize they are hiding their fears and imperfections mainly from themselves. McEwan repeatedly demonstrates how self-deceived both men are. At one moment Henry claims that Daisy's notion "that people can't 'live' without stories, is simply not true. He is living proof,"¹¹⁶ yet immediately after this statement Henry picks up the newspaper and looks for the story of the airplane he has been following all day long. By employing such devices McEwan demonstrates to the reader that what Henry believes and what is actually true are two different things, and presents Henry as a person who does not understand himself, living in a state of constant self-assurance of the truths he wants to believe but which are actually false. As Wally claims:

¹¹⁶ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 68.

“Henry Perowne in *Saturday* (...) fails to understand that his view of the world might not be the only one possible.”¹¹⁷

Michael Beard, on the other hand, has grown up in a world where men did not express any emotions and believes that in order to be an adequate member of patriarchal society, he should shove his emotions deep down into his body. He does not realize that his shortcomings stem from the unprocessed death of his mother and the situation between his parents he never understood. As a child, he observed and internalized the behaviour he saw around him, resulting in the similar affirmation about the rightness of his behaviour as Henry – he fitted in his family, which equals fitting in society, therefore his behaviour must be the right one.

Epigraphs in both novels are of similar nature, both preparing the reader for a selfish and misjudging character through which the reader can reach self-reflection.

In *Solar*, the epigraph from John Updike’s *Rabbit is Rich* (1981): “It gives him great pleasure, makes Rabbit feel rich, to contemplate the world’s wasting, to know that the earth is mortal too,”¹¹⁸ prepares the reader for Beard’s negativity and mischievous character. Similar to Rabbit, Beard is rich in the sense of the Western world; he has a career at university, he makes enough money to sustain himself and his family in a nice house, and eventually manages to be even more successful in his job and in his relationships, since he has a partner, a daughter, and a lover, but except for the moments when he is eating, he is never depicted as truly happy.

¹¹⁷ Johannes Wally, “Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* as a New Atheist Novel? A Claim Revisited,” *Anglia - Zeitschrift für englische Philologie* 130.1 (2007): 102

¹¹⁸ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) epigraph.

The epigraph to *Saturday*, from Saul Bellow's *Herzog* (1964) foreshadows Henry's error in putting faith in beliefs that crumble in front of Henry near the end of the novel:

[W]hat it means to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition. Transformed by science. Under organized power. Subject to tremendous controls. In a condition caused by mechanization. After the late failure of radical hopes. In a society that was no community and devalued the person. Owing to the multiplied power of numbers which made the self negligible. Which spent military billions against foreign enemies but would not pay for order at home. Which permitted savagery and barbarism in its own great cities. At the same time, the pressure of human millions who have discovered what concerted efforts and thoughts can do. (...) The beautiful supermachinery opening a new life for innumerable mankind. Would you deny them the right to exist? Would you ask them to labor and go hungry while you yourself enjoyed old-fashioned Values? You - you yourself are a child of this mass and a brother to all the rest. Or else an ingrate, dilettante, idiot.¹¹⁹

Part of Henry's system of beliefs is his dependency on the idea of a society that works as a community against the evil from the outside and that the individual matters as much as every single neuron in a human brain, with the entire society moving the civilization further. He trusts the government in the battle against foreign enemies not realizing the problems the persisting class system in Britain causes in his immediate surrounding. When Henry passes the sweeper "oddly intent on making a good job,"¹²⁰ it makes Henry uncomfortable to watch and "[f]or a vertiginous moment Henry feels himself bound to the other man, as

¹¹⁹ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) epigraph.

¹²⁰ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 74.

though on a seesaw with him, pinned to an axis that could tip them into each other's life."¹²¹ Then Henry looks away and wonders "[h]ow restful it must once have been, in another age, to be prosperous and believe that an all-knowing supernatural force had allotted people to their stations in life."¹²² Although Henry feels shame because he realizes he should not be disdainful towards the sweeper in the twenty-first century, he turns to the Victorian morals that are still present in the contemporary British society for affirmation of his behaviour, oblivious to the fact that it is people like him who keep the class system and cultural bias surviving. Henry, in fact, is the ingrate, dilettante Bellow describes above, an idiot who asks other to labour while he lives according to the old-fashioned values.

Both novels are written in free indirect discourse through which McEwan gives the reader access to the main character's consciousness and the character's interpretation of the world around him. By mixing the narrator and the character, McEwan creates the effect of a complex human mind (since there are in a way two narrators – the narrator and the character's internal monologue) but also "[r]ather than being narrated, consciousness in this style is represented unmediated by any judging point of view."¹²³ Gunn claims that the free indirect discourse "has often been characterized as innately disruptive and destabilizing—a technique that allows other voices to compete with and so undermine the monologic authority of the narrator or the implied author."¹²⁴ The free indirect discourse thus provides space for reader's input and evaluation

¹²¹ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 74.

¹²² Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 74.

¹²³ Joe Bray, "The 'Dual Voice' of Free Indirect Discourse: A Reading Experiment," *Language and Literature* 16.1 (2007): 40.

¹²⁴ Daniel P. Gunn, "Free Indirect Discourse and Narrative Authority in *Emma*," *Narrative*, 12.1 (2004): 35.

of the protagonist's behaviour from various angles.

Iser claims that if the reader had access to all information in the narrative, there would be no space for the reader's imagination, which would result in boredom.¹²⁵ Through the free indirect discourse device, McEwan reveals the character's thoughts but not his motivations, which makes the reader fabricate a reason for the character's action. Iser claims that the omissions left in the character's motivation

are repaired by the reader's own imagination. As the text invites him to imagine for himself what would be the right reaction to the given situation, he is bound to make the necessary adjustments consciously, and this process must, in turn, make him conscious of himself, of his own conduct, and of the customs and prejudices that condition it.¹²⁶

Since the reader does not understand why such an act was performed and thus cannot fully internalize the character's personality or motivation, he/she is distant from the protagonist which allows the reader to judge the character's behaviour based on his/her own opinions and experiences. By placing the reader into the role of a judge, the reader is pushed towards a critical analysis of the situation and the character's worldview. Iser claims that it is the discrepancies between the reader's expectation and the text that is "compelling us [the reader] to conduct a creative examination not only of the text but also of ourselves."¹²⁷ Through reflection and self-reflection, evaluation of the moral aspects of the character's behaviour, and after finishing the novel, re-evaluation

¹²⁵ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in the Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978) 275.

¹²⁶ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in the Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978) 36.

¹²⁷ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in the Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978) 290.

of the previously developed stance, the reader of the McEwan novel revises not only his/her opinion on various topics but has a chance to see him/herself from a different, more critical perspective.

Furthermore, in *Saturday* and *Solar* McEwan continues questioning the role of narratives, social conventions and social roles in human lives, exploring the power of the social discourse and the human tendency to accept a given social role without realizing it. The more observant and self-critical reader has the opportunity to view his/her life from the new perspective and evaluate not only him/herself but the world around him/her from the perspective of a different narrative, and observe how (s)he and the people around him shape who they are, their perception, and maybe even the meaning, of the world.

McEwan's intent of presenting the protagonists of *Saturday* and *Solar* as seeking only their selfish goals is calculated to evoke self-reflection in the reader which may result in the cultivation of the reader's self-awareness of his/her limitations in regard of a single line of thinking, his/her approach to his/her surroundings and the world. Some of the critics support this reading since they consider Henry to be the new western atheist everyman,¹²⁸ and as stated above, Michael to be the personification of the consumer society. The notion of self-examination is strengthened by various questions both Henry and Michael are asking not only themselves but above all else the reader. They vary from the field of personal opinion: "Perhaps Henry's too preoccupied, or too impatient, to make a decent job of this reunion. Does it matter? If Daisy has outgrown one more tutor in her life, what's he supposed to do about that?"¹²⁹ in *Saturday*, and

¹²⁸ For example Christina Root or Lee Siegel in "The imagination of Disaster," *The Nation*, 24 Mar. 2005 (<https://www.thenation.com/article/imagination-disaster/>).

¹²⁹ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 201.

“How could he possibly keep hold of a young woman as beautiful as she was? Had he honestly thought that status was enough, that his Nobel Prize would keep her in his bed?”¹³⁰ in *Solar*, to deeply existential worries, such as: “Misunderstanding is general all over the world. How can we trust ourselves?”¹³¹ in Henry’s case, and “Was he really the same Michael Beard whose paper caused Richard Feynman to explode with excitement and interrupt the proceedings of the 1972 Solvay Conference? Did anyone still remember or care about that famous Solvay ‘magic moment’?”¹³² in Michael’s.

Iser states that the reader's active participation in the composition of the novel's meaning is fundamental.¹³³ McEwan is aware of the reader’s active engagement in the story and obliges the reader in providing him with his/her own discovery of

the meaning of the text, taking negation as his [the reader’s] starting point; he [the reader] discovers a new reality through a fiction which (...) is different from the world he himself is used to; and he discovers the deficiencies inherent in prevalent norms and in his own restricted behaviour.¹³⁴

Iser also points out that the act of discovering is one form of aesthetic pleasure which offers the reader an escape from what the reader is, the restrictions of the reader's own social life, and active exercises of the reader's emotional and cognitive faculties.¹³⁵ McEwan uses the device of self-delusion to evoke judgement, rather than the identification with his characters. In order to engage

¹³⁰ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 7.

¹³¹ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006) 39.

¹³² Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Vintage, 2011) 69-70.

¹³³ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in the Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978) XII.

¹³⁴ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in the Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978) XIII.

¹³⁵ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in the Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978) XIII.

the reader in the act of self-reflection, McEwan employs questions which force the reader to develop an insight into the character's situation, and consequently the realization of the reader's own possible self-deception. This technique also provokes a strong emotional response from the reader and add another value to his literary experience, which is a method McEwan uses in all of his twenty-first-century novels, which may be one of the reasons why Ian McEwan is both popular and critically acclaimed author.

3.3 The (Inter)Personal Misunderstanding: *On Chesil Beach* and *The Children Act*

The third type of disillusion McEwan employs in his novels is another deeply human trait – the assumption that people are inherently capable of sharing emotions, understand each other on some unarticulated level, read other people’s feelings and consequently understand their thought process in order to form strong and stable relationship – i.e. assuming that people can understand each other and themselves without verbal communication and personal evaluation. However, the characters in McEwan’s novels are often incapable of decoding their own emotions or the feelings of others and instead of making effort to empathise with the others as well as themselves, the protagonists resort to social, or better, the narrative roles which they believe are ascribed to them and the people around them. It is only when the other characters step out of their traditional role and prove the protagonist they are so much more than a pre-defined figure fulfilling a role in the narrative, when the protagonist is forced to see how complex the world and the people around him are, that they have unexpected but deeply human traits and problems the protagonist failed to see until now, either because of his selfishness or his lack of empathy.

The method McEwan uses to build the character’s expectations and then shatter them at the end of the texts is best illustrated on his third twenty-first century work, the novella *On Chesil Beach*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize Award in 2007, and McEwan’s penultimate twenty-first century novel *The Children Act*, published in 2014 and receiving mixed reviews from critics. What both novels have in common is the engagement with the lack of empathy: in *On Chesil Beach* the couple fails to express empathy towards each other, there

is the absence of interpersonal communication between the protagonists and the other characters, and their inability to put themselves in the position of the other has dire consequences for their marriage. Fiona in *The Children Act* has no problem expressing sympathy with other people but forgets to save some for herself. Her lack of self-care and inability to treat herself with the same patience and gentleness as she expresses towards others endangers her marriage and her career.

In *On Chesil Beach*, McEwan works with a similar romantic narrative trope as in *Atonement*. The story is a variation of a fairy-tale-esque narrative in which a poor man falls in love with a princess, marries her and they live happily ever after. In this story, Edward is the beggar boy who comes from the socially inferior family, in which his mother suffered a head injury and the schoolteacher father is forced to take care of the household and Edward's sisters, leading to the family's lack of means. Florence, on the other hand, comes from a wealthy, well-established family, she is well-brought-up, spends time with her friends or playing classical music with her string quartet.

The couple fits into the traditional story of lovers from different background who, despite various obstacles, reach their happy ending. Florence and Edward seem a perfect match since they could easily complement each other's limitations: she is ambitious about her future career as a violinist and the reader can easily picture her helping Edward build his own future goals, turn him from the uncouth man to a brilliant husband and a father; and Edward could teach Florence the benefits of discarding the prudish and oppressive morals of the Victorian era Florence was taught to obey, and make her generally happy. As the story is filled with the lovers' reflections on the time they spent together

falling in love and the reader, as the lovers, is convinced of their love, neither the reader nor the characters themselves have reason to doubt their happy-ending represented by the act of marriage. However, Florence and Edward willingly participate in the traditional narrative pattern themselves, which makes the reader enquire to which extent are the characters genuine in their experience and to what extent are they participating in one of the oldest narrative patterns in history. In *On Chesil Beach*, Florence represents the lady whom Edward, the poor yet charming knight, wins after overcoming the obstacles, interestingly not represented by the wealthy Ponting family but by their wedding night of which they are both afraid, followed by the happily-ever-after ending. McEwan is aware of the reader's assumptions concerning this well-established narrative pattern but he intentionally creates characters that mirror the reader's expectations, especially regarding the denouement of the story.

The reader and the lovers in the novel both follow the discourse of a romantic narrative in which the lovers face a problem that can be exceeded only by their collective power. Adam claims that “[t]here is a fairy-tale quality to the book, in that everything that follows seems inevitable,”¹³⁶ and it is this feeling of the inevitable happy ending that powers the reader, but also Florence and Edward. They are too shy to bring themselves to admit each other's imperfections but they are both aware of their own personal limitations, yet they believe that with marriage, the ultimate epitome of the happy ending, all their problems will be magically resolved. The marriage represents an abstract idea of joy, a life goal they both strive for. Nevertheless, they do not realize that

¹³⁶ Tim Adams, “On Chesil Beach by Ian McEwan – review,” *The Guardian*, 25 Mar. 2007. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/mar/25/fiction.ianmcewan>).

their idea of marriage as a happy ending is a narrative construct based on literature and stories they encountered throughout their lives and that there is a difference between the fictional depiction shaped by tradition and the real-life.

Although *On Chesil Beach* can be perceived as a historical novel and the conflict can be viewed as an issue of the 1960s, concerning mainly the lack of discussion about sexual intercourse between the young lovers, it is only the surface of McEwan's novel and beneath it lies McEwan's concern with psychological problems that are still hard to address even today. As Head points out,

[f]or both protagonists, Edward Mayhew and Florence Ponting, there is an element of dysfunctionality in their upbringing (...) and this implies a degree of emotional and psychological disorder for both that could be taken as an explanation of their failure to connect.¹³⁷

Edward grew up in a family which did not represent the traditional nuclear family and the common gender roles of that era were reversed in the Mayhew household, with mother spending time with her hobbies and the father taking care of the household since Edward was a child. Moreover, the entire family keeps itself "content with the notion, an elaborate fairy tale"¹³⁸ that the house is running smoothly thanks to the work of the mother,¹³⁹ with the children growing up in it, "neutrally inhabiting its absurdities because they were never defined."¹⁴⁰ Edward's father keeps the children in this make-believe until Edward is fourteen and his father finally reveals the reason for the unorthodox organization of their household is a result of his mother's brain-damage. After

¹³⁷ Dominic Head, "On *Chesil Beach*: Another 'Overrated' Novella?" *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspective*, ed. Sebastian Groes (London and New York: Continuum, 2013) 118.

¹³⁸ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 67.

¹³⁹ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 67.

¹⁴⁰ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 67.

this, Edward immediately distances himself from his family feeling betrayed: “Brain-damaged. The term dissolved intimacy, it coolly measured his mother by a public standard that everyone could understand.”¹⁴¹ Not only has Edward been living a lie his entire life, but he suddenly ostracizes his lunatic mother and feels the urge to leave and return only as a visitor,¹⁴² based solely on the socially accepted definition of a crazy person as someone who needs to be hidden from the public sight because such individual would be embarrassing for the family, a stigma that endures until today. Furthermore, Edward feels the need to re-define his position towards the family and the world by stating he is not a part of the family anymore: “[s]he was brain-damaged, and he was not. He was not his mother, nor was he his family.”¹⁴³ Head claims that Edward’s inability to sustain a healthy relationship with Florence but also other women later in his life is due to “the lack of a domestic model on which to found his expectations, and the absence of an emotionally sustaining upbringing.”¹⁴⁴ Moreover, Edward’s traumatic experience when his mother turned from eccentric to brain-damaged in one minute and his father from his male role model into a house-husband results in bouts of aggression and violence he calls ‘madness’¹⁴⁵. Edward does not trust himself on his wedding night since he “could not be certain that the tunnel vision and selective deafness would never descend again, (...) obscuring his more recent, more sophisticated self.”¹⁴⁶ This behaviour suggests that Edward did not manage to cope with his psychological problems and, like Michael Beard, eventually feeling betrayed by women, is unable to

¹⁴¹ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 72.

¹⁴² Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 72.

¹⁴³ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 72.

¹⁴⁴ Dominic Head, “*On Chesil Beach*: Another ‘OVERRATED’ Novella?” *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspective*, ed. Sebastian Groes (London and New York: Continuum, 2013) 119.

¹⁴⁵ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 92.

¹⁴⁶ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 95.

connect with them emotionally, but still expects Florence to fulfil the role of the perfect nuclear housewife and a passionate lover – i.e. his idea of a happy ending generally accepted as ideal by society and fitting in the typical nuclear family model. The anticipation of this form of the happy ending is Edward's compensation for the years in the family he perceived as perverted from the norms, and now he projects everything his mother lacked upon Florence, believing she would fulfil his desire of an ideal domestic model.

Florence, on the other hand, expects her marriage to erase her traumatic past and turn her into a happy wife. However, she has never processed the sexual harassment she suffered at the hands of her father and the memories “she had long ago decided were not really hers”¹⁴⁷ come back to her in the form of anxiety and post-traumatic stress, causing her muscles jump and flutter¹⁴⁸ or making her leap “out of her seat and into the aisle like a startled gazelle”¹⁴⁹ whenever Edward touches her. Immediately before Edward lies with her, Florence remembers one of the nights she travelled with her father on a boat:

She was twelve years old, lying still like this, waiting, shivering in the narrow bunk with polished mahogany sides. Her mind was a blank, she felt she was in disgrace. (...) It was late in the evening, and her father was moving about the dim cramped cabin, undressing, like Edward now. (...) Her only task was to keep her eyes closed and to think of a tune she liked.¹⁵⁰

As Florence speaks about spending time with her father more regularly, stating “the journeys: just the two of them, hiking in the Alps, Sierra Nevada and Pyrenees, and the special treats, the one-night business trips to European cities

¹⁴⁷ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 105.

¹⁴⁸ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 86.

¹⁴⁹ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 90.

¹⁵⁰ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 99.

where she and Geoffrey [father] always stayed in the grandest hotels,”¹⁵¹ it suggests that she may have been abused regularly by her father. This is further endorsed by Florence claiming that she and her father

never talked about those trips. (...) But sometimes, in a surge of protective feeling and guilty love, she would come up behind him where he sat and entwine her arms around his neck and kiss the top of his head and nuzzle him, liking his clean scent. She would do all this, then loathe herself for it later.¹⁵²

The unusual behaviour between father and daughter gets noticed by Edward yet he is not aware of the true nature of their relationship: “As far as Edward could tell, father and daughter rarely spoke, except in company, and then inconsequently. He thought they were intensely aware of each other though,”¹⁵³ but being raised in the unorthodox family himself, it does not strike Edward as strange. Since Florence never had a chance to therapeutically process her traumatic experience, it results in the typical post-traumatic behaviour pattern of a rape victim, in suppressed feelings of anger, shame, and fear of physical contact. Florence had no opportunity to work with her traumatic past which resolves in her believing “there was something profoundly wrong with her, that she had always been different, and that at last she was about to be exposed”¹⁵⁴ on her wedding night. She considers the rape to be her fault, not her father’s, which makes her think that Edward’s premature ejaculation was her fault too, however, like Edward, she too expects her wedding night to mend her imperfections and projects into Edward everything her father was not – she

¹⁵¹ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 54.

¹⁵² Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 50.

¹⁵³ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 115.

¹⁵⁴ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 8-9.

perceives Edward as sensitive, tolerant, and helping rather than pushing her, and she hopes in marrying him she will change from the unfitting social outsider she believes she is into a perfect wife.

The couple's delusion concerning the institution of marriage stems from the social conventions of the era:

when to be young was a social encumbrance, a mark of irrelevance, a faintly embarrassing condition for which marriage was the beginning of a cure. Almost strangers, they stood, strangely together, on a new pinnacle of existence, gleeful that their new status promised to promote them out of their endless youth - Edward and Florence, free at last! One of their favourite topics was their childhoods, not so much the pleasures as the fog of comical misconceptions from which they had emerged, and the various parental errors and outdated practices they could now forgive.¹⁵⁵

Both Florence and Edward perceive marriage as a ritual that would change them into responsible and dignified adults, that it will free them of their insecurities and errors they made in their childhood and young adulthood. In their eyes, marriage is a construct with almost supernatural powers to turn the inexperienced young couple into the wise and seasoned marital experts overnight. The conventions of the era and the narrative patterns they encountered never spoke about the hard work, tolerance, empathy, and time that it takes to become mature husband and wife, therefore when it turns out in the middle of their wedding night that they are still the same self-conscious individuals, they both face disillusion.

McEwan illustrates the limitations of the 1960s in the discourse by stating that Florence and Edward "were young, educated, and both virgins on this,

¹⁵⁵ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 6.

their wedding night, and they lived in a time when a conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible.”¹⁵⁶ None of them has a source that would give them precise information about sex which also adds to their expectations they impose on each other. Florence’s only resource of information about intercourse is a childish paperback guide with “two smiling bug-eyed matchsticks figures holding hands, drawn clumsily in white chalk, as though by an innocent child,”¹⁵⁷ which does not help her with her feelings of “a visceral dread, a helpless disgust as palpable as seasickness,”¹⁵⁸ but she cannot express her psychological distress to anyone since “her sister, was too young, and her mother was too intellectual, too brittle, an old fashioned blue stocking;”¹⁵⁹ she cannot trust her friends, and she even lacks a discourse in which she could address her problem. In order to find a role that would help her in her distress, Florence resorts to identify herself with the role of a wealthy girl that falls in love with the poor boy. Florence is motivated by the fear of losing Edward whom she loves deeply and she perceives sex with him as the price she must pay for her idyllic future and joyous life. Edward, in contrast, is motivated by his sexual urges which he believes Florence shares with him, masking her “richly sexual nature”¹⁶⁰ with coyness. “He [Edward] persuades himself that he preferred her this way,”¹⁶¹ and asks her to marry him in the state of arousal because Florence wants to please Edward by showing him physical affection with which she struggles. Edward’s only source of information about sex are cautionary tales about men who slept with a girl, got her pregnant, had to marry

¹⁵⁶ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 3.

¹⁵⁷ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 11.

¹⁵⁸ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 7.

¹⁵⁹ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 10.

¹⁶⁰ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 21.

¹⁶¹ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 21.

her and drifted away from Edward's scope, telling dirty jokes and sexual boasting in a group of virgin boys. However, although he feels "anguish and troubled feelings in anticipation of his first sexual experience,"¹⁶² he has at least some notion of a sexual intercourse and believes he "merely suffer[s] conventional first-night nerves."¹⁶³ Edward too accepts the suggested role of a poor knight in their narrative and expects to get his queen and a part of the kingdom in the form of a position at Florence's father's company.

Even though they both willingly participate in a certain narrative structure, their expectations of the role played by the other differ significantly since they are based on different social backgrounds. After their wedding night turns out different from their expectations, Edward feels deceived by Florence. His idealization of Florence, i.e. believing she is masking her sexual appetite with pretended diffidence required by the social standards, shatters, leaving Edward ashamed and angry: "You don't have the faintest idea how to be with a man. If you did, it would never have happened. (...) You carry on as if it's *eighteen* sixty-two. You don't even know how to kiss."¹⁶⁴ Edward assumes Florence was dishonest to him and married him not because she loved him but because it was expected of her. Florence is disappointed by Edward's lack of understanding and sympathy for herself and reveals that she felt being pushed into marriage by Edward: "You're always pushing me, pushing me, wanting something out of me. (...) There's this constant pressure. There's always something more that you want out of me."¹⁶⁵ Moreover, both the couple and the reader expect the

¹⁶² Mina Abbasiyannejad, Rosli Talif, "Cultural Conflict in Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* through Semiotics," *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities* 21.4 (2013): 1302.

¹⁶³ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 7.

¹⁶⁴ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 144.

¹⁶⁵ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 145.

narrative to end with a cathartic argument but the couple does not reach an agreement and they fail to understand not only each other's mistakes but also their own. They face disillusion from seeing for the first time their true self, what kind of person is the other, and the fact that marriage did not turn them into the dignified adults overnight.

Furthermore, both Edward and Florence are forced to face their misconceptions about each other. Florence believes her traumatic experience is buried so deep in herself that she would never confront it again, and that although she is terrified of sexual intercourse, she will endure the act because she loves Edward, whom she expects to be gentle and understanding with her. Edward imagines Florence as a passionate woman who is forced to act coyly because of the early 1960s conventions and her family's Victorian morals. Just as they expect the act of marriage to change themselves, they also believe it will reveal the true nature of the other one, and that it will be the personality they constructed and consequently expected to see on their wedding night. Living in an era which lacked discourse for sexuality, "when a conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible,"¹⁶⁶ they were not only incapable of revealing their true expectations and feelings to each other, but they also did not know each other as individuals since they both behaved according to the expectations of the narrative pattern, or the romantic story discourse, they adopted as their own life story.

It is the confrontation on the beach in which Edward and Florence face their disillusion due to their unrealistic expectations from each other. Florence fights for her marriage proposing the unconventional idea of an open marriage and

¹⁶⁶ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 3.

tries to prove Edward this alternative life can work by comparing their marriage with a similar unconventional couple of gays: “We’re free to make our own choices, our own lives. (...) Mummy knows two homosexuals, they live in a flat together, like man and wife. (...) And we can make our own rules too.”¹⁶⁷ Yet Florence cannot see that Edward is not as open minded, understanding, and non-judgemental as she is, and she does not realize that it is her traumatic past that made her tolerant to unconventional ideas and taught her not to judge people rashly, but she is not able to share her experience with her husband. Edward expects Florence to be a sexual goddess and when his ideals collapse, he is once again forced to undergo the disillusion in which the most important woman in his life turns out to be a lie, just as his mother. In his prejudiced perception of the world, he is able to think only in clearly opposing binaries, and considers Florence’s advanced idea and her comparison with a liberal couple of gays insulting, an act of emasculation, and the end of their relationship. Considering Edward and Florence’s upbringing, Head claims that they are both

entirely unsuited to establishing a domestic life of their own, with a healthy sexual relationship at its heart – not, at least, without prior therapy. Their home lives, from which model experience is absent, have caused both of them to develop in ways that militate against marriage.¹⁶⁸

Florence and Edward’s problems are not the result of only the 1960s society, their issues transgress the genre of a period novel and present the inability to communicate as a cause of broken relationship that can affect individuals in any given era. Not only has the couple misjudged each other, but they also

¹⁶⁷ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 154-5.

¹⁶⁸ Dominic Head, “*On Chesil Beach*: Another ‘OVERRATED’ NOVELLA?” *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspective*, ed. Sebastian Groes (London and New York: Continuum, 2013) 121.

misjudged the nature of their relationship and their inability to open to each other was their condemnation.

Moreover, the couple adopts the roles imposed on them by the society which, once again, shapes their perception of themselves and of others. In the case of *On Chesil Beach*, these roles paint a rosy picture of perfect young and uncomplicated people who are to become married. This idyllic image does not prepare them for the true selves they are about to be revealed and distorts their expectations which remain unfulfilled. Florence and Edward, like most of McEwan's other protagonists, participate on the pre-shaped roles and pre-defined narratives they believe to be the reflections of the reality, and they do not realize that between fiction (i.e. the narrative) and reality (i.e. their genuine selves) is a difference and that they have choice between blindly following the norms and conventions of the period and society, and creating their own unique role.

In *The Children Act*, McEwan works with a premise of a similar sort. There is again a motif known from many narratives, although it is much less conventional than the poor knave marrying a princess. In *The Children Act*, McEwan plays with the plot of a boy falling obsessively in love with an older woman who does not reciprocate his feelings, echoing the obsessive pursuit of a rejected relationship described in his previous novel *Enduring Love*.

This novel, however, has deficiencies in the quality of the plot (as stated above, the novel recycles the theme of a relationship between a stalker and his victim), the thought-provoking material or allusions to the contemporary state of society are significantly reduced, and the ending, unlike in McEwan's other novels, fulfils the reader's expectation. *The Children Act* thus differs from the rest

of McEwan's twenty-first-century novels because it is not an innovative text that plays with the reader but it is a masterfully done character study revealing the psychological state of the protagonist without using the technique of the stream of consciousness, therefore representing a more challenging approach regarding the analysis.

Although the central character of *The Children Act*, Fiona, is fifty-nine years old, married, working as a judge, she stands an interesting parallel to Florence and Edward, since she, too, misjudges the situation, the dedication of the eighteen-year-old Adam, and the power of communication between her, Adam, and her husband Lionel. However, Fiona's misinterpretation stems from the lack of self-understanding and empathy to herself. Fiona is carefully hiding all her emotions, believing she has them under control and she does not speak about her problems even in front of her husband, which leads her to base decisions solely on her own opinion, and causes the feeling of alienation in their marriage. Her work always comes first and it is only after a series of difficult cases when Fiona's personal life starts to crumble and she realizes she needs to approach herself with the same empathy she approaches her clients at courts.

As the only female High Court Judge, Fiona feels obliged to fulfil the role of a woman who is as professional as her male co-workers. She puts her career first, works hard to get a promotion, and acts pragmatically so that her decisions can be perceived as rational and not emotional, based on the careful consideration of the situations and not on her current mood. When Fiona needs to decide the case of conjoined twins, Matthew and Mark, she makes the rational choice – to save Mark, the twin that has bigger chance to survive if separated from Matthew. Although Fiona believes that her decision to save

Mark and let Matthew die was rational and right, the separation means the verdict of death for Matthew, and Fiona needs to deal with the psychological consequences of her judgement: “she was unhappy, couldn’t leave the case alone, was awake at nights for long hours, turning over the details, rephrasing certain passages of her judgement, taking another tack. Or she lingered over familiar themes, including her own childlessness.”¹⁶⁹ But Fiona cannot bring herself to admit she is a highly sensitive person having difficult time coping with the case of the conjoined twins, resulting in her being haunted by the thought that she has, in fact, gave an order to kill a baby: “She was the one who dispatched a child from the world, argued him out of existence in thirty-four elegant pages.”¹⁷⁰ Fiona perceives emotions as a weakness, since making a decision based on emotions is not considered an informed one in her profession and it may weaken her position as the only female High Court Judge. She refuses to admit that her work can be sometimes challenging even for a seasoned judge and she has no compassion for herself considering it unprofessional. However, McEwan reveals that Fiona’s unprocessed emotions cast her into a state of depression.

Fiona has not had sex with her husband for “seven weeks and a day, a period that began with the final stages of the Siamese twins case,”¹⁷¹ she claims she is unhappy, only able to sleep after taking sleeping pills, feeling “numb, caring less, feeling less, (...) barely able to look at her own or Jack’s [body] without feeling repelled.”¹⁷² She is constantly worried about what her husband, her colleagues, or a convenience store worker think of her, feeling being judged

¹⁶⁹ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 29.

¹⁷⁰ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 31.

¹⁷¹ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 24.

¹⁷² Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 30.

by the others, afraid of being pitied which she considers a form of social death,¹⁷³ and her mind often slips to self-pity and feelings of emptiness.

McEwan draws an interesting parallel between the two main characters of *The Children Act*, in which Adam openly expresses his feelings but Fiona perceives such emotional openness an immaturity. Fiona is afraid to admit to herself that she is only a human being, moreover, she is afraid to accept herself as a woman with strong emotions. She believes she has her life under control and does not allow her emotions to interfere in her professional life. It is only after a series of crises – the aftermath of the Siamese twins' case, judging more cases of divorcing parents and the custody of their children, meeting Adam, and her husband leaving for one last passionate affair – which sends Fiona into a personal breakdown in which she realizes she can no longer suppress her emotions. For the first time, she seems overwhelmed by feelings, which makes her uncomfortable: “Her hope was that she didn't look too much like a woman in crisis.”¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, as Fiona's emotional state shifts from rational to unstable, she stops understanding herself and starts making mistakes both on the personal and the professional level.

After Fiona kisses Adam, she is embarrassed by her own initiative: “She was not prone to wild impulses and she didn't understand her own behaviour.”¹⁷⁵ She believes that her occupation calls for cold rationality which is the reason why she distances from her emotions: “Her emotional tone, as she sometimes referred to it and which she liked to monitor, was entirely novel. A blend of desolation and outrage. Or longing and fury. (...) Was that it, was that

¹⁷³ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 57.

¹⁷⁴ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 41.

¹⁷⁵ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 172.

the shame?”¹⁷⁶ Fiona is unable to process her emotions, labelling them as ‘it,’ a thing she needs to monitor as if it was some phenomenon, or even a machine, separate from her own being. Her dread of expressing emotions causes her to pretend that she does not have any: “She had been humiliated and didn’t want anyone to know and would pretend that all was fine.”¹⁷⁷ Fiona does not understand herself which reflects not only in her confusion about her own emotional state but also in her judicial decisions. When Fiona is on her way to visit Adam in the hospital, she speculates what caused her into seeing the boy:

This (...) was either about a woman on the edge of a crack-up making a sentimental error of professional judgement, or it was about a boy delivered from or into the beliefs of his sect by the intimate intervention of the secular court. She didn’t think it could be both.¹⁷⁸

Yet it *is* both, which demonstrates Fiona’s momentary poor judgemental skills, her misunderstanding of her own internal processes resulting in poor judgements. There is a passage in which Fiona states she does not “trust her current mood,”¹⁷⁹ suggesting that she is incapable of reading others if she cannot trust herself. At this point, McEwan undermines Fiona’s credibility as a judge since a person who makes such poor personal choices is inevitably in the reader’s mind re-evaluated as incompetent in her job.

Whenever Fiona feels overwhelmed by her emotions, she compulsively turns to her work for stability and affirmation. Whenever she argues with her husband in their living room, she keeps escaping the situation by reading or considering either a case of the two Jewish schoolgirls or a divorce of a famous

¹⁷⁶ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 92.

¹⁷⁷ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 92.

¹⁷⁸ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 91.

¹⁷⁹ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 134.

guitarist and his almost famous wife. When her husband corners Fiona and starts apologizing for his foolish behaviour, Fiona spreads a few papers around herself as a form of protection or at least clutches her briefcase against her stomach.¹⁸⁰ She has no case in her hands yet she keeps using an object connected to her job as a connection to her cold rational mind and refuses to let her emotions overpower her. In the passage where Fiona and Jack babysit their nieces' two girls for the weekend, she speaks about two times when "a wave of love for the child constricted her throat and pricked her eyes,"¹⁸¹ but although she feels "the mild enveloping sorrow, a form of instant nostalgia, that the sudden absence of children can bring on," which later "swelled into general sadness,"¹⁸² she again escapes to her work for comfort: "It [the sadness] only began to fade when she sat at her desk to prepare for her first case of the week."¹⁸³ If Fiona has a moment in which she could think about her situation, she occupies herself with work or listens to the news on the radio, afraid to take a moment to consider her emotional state. However, Fiona does not realize that she uses her work as an escape and that she does not treat herself with the same carefulness, sympathy and empathy as she does her judicial cases. As she is incapable of identifying the cause of her distress, Fiona also fails to evaluate the consequences of her behaviour towards others.

She is unable to read her husband, since she believes he is happy in their marriage but then is shocked by his announcement of intending to have an affair with a younger woman because Fiona is so swamped by her work that she has no time to dedicate to him, but also because Fiona never explains

¹⁸⁰ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 126 and 129.

¹⁸¹ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 135.

¹⁸² Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 135.

¹⁸³ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 135.

herself to him and he is bothered by her alienation. And even though Fiona is going through the same crisis as Adam, in her depressed state, she does not have the energy to empathise with him. When Jack leaves, Fiona's world falls apart because she loses one of the certainties in life, resulting in her feeling abandoned, lost, and scared. Yet when Adam loses his faith in God and goes through the same emotional struggles – his entire world is upside down since everything he believed in has lost its meaning – she does not recognize his cry for help and dismisses Adam as a part of the case that is already behind her. As in many other cases, Fiona relies on the rational and emotional aspects of the judicial decision but she does not take herself into consideration.

McEwan reveals that Fiona has been out of touch with her inner emotional self for a longer period which is also reflected in her music: in one of her discussions with Jack, Fiona states that “she could not play jazz. No pulse, no instinct for syncopation, no freedom, her fingers numbly obedient to the time signature and notes as written. That was why she was studying law (...). Respect for the rules.”¹⁸⁴ She can faultlessly perform Bach's second partita but she cannot play jazz precisely because she controls herself to such an extent that she cannot be free.

Furthermore, in her profession, besides her feelings and reason, Fiona can also rely on books and laws that help her make decisions, and she has judicial clerks, law experts and lawyers who provide her with their opinions. On the other hand, in her personal life, there is no one who would advise her or provide a different perspective. In court, she knows her ground, aware that she must carefully evaluate every opinion because she is deciding “[b]etween cultures,

¹⁸⁴ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 193.

identities, states of mind, aspirations, sets of family relations, fundamental definitions, basic loyalties, unknowable futures,”¹⁸⁵ considering her own judgements as well written and claims she is “praised, even in her absence, for crisp prose, almost ironic, almost warm, and for the compact terms in which she laid out a dispute. (...) ‘Godly distance, devilish understanding, and still beautiful.’”¹⁸⁶ Fiona assures herself that her cases are in agreement with The Children Act which states that “[w]hen a court determines any question with respect to ... the upbringing of a child ... the child’s welfare shall be the court’s paramount consideration,”¹⁸⁷ however, as she forgets to treat herself with the same thoughtfulness as she treats her clients, her decisions are becoming flawed and impaired.

In chapter One, Fiona judges the case of two schoolgirls, deciding between the custody of the mother and the strongly religious Chareidi father. She evaluates the case with rationality and objectivity and in the end decides to place the children in custody of their mother because she believes a social worker’s opinion claiming that if the girls lived with their religious father, they would be oppressed by the strict religion rules, but her judgement is more than twenty-one pages long, well crafted, illustrating every aspect of the case Fiona has taken into consideration before making a decision. The Chareidi family then stands as an example, a norm, of Fiona’s skill but after Jack leaves, the reader is provided with cases that are sloppy and rash. When considering the case of a five-year-old girl of a Moroccan Muslim businessman and an Englishwoman, Fiona does not believe the mother’s fear that the father will

¹⁸⁵ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 13.

¹⁸⁶ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 13.

¹⁸⁷ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) epigraph.

abduct the girl is legitimate and does not intervene, however, although the father assured the court he would not take her to Rabat, the girl's whereabouts are unknown but it is confirmed that the girl has been removed to jurisdiction in Rabat. The mother thus stands no chance of getting the custody of her child. In Adam's case, she acts according to the same principle, assuming that the parents' behaviour is not in agreement with the child's welfare. She believes she is doing the best according to law that treats the children's well-being as a priority in an objective sense yet she misjudges Adam's attachment to herself and mishandles the situation to such an extent that Adam dies.

These two cases reflect the chaos inside Fiona's brain. Her inability to cope with her emotional state, the suppressed feelings and the lack of understanding she has towards herself result in questionable decisions she makes on some arbitrary aspect, not being able to recognize the mother's distress, incapable of empathising with her, and failing to realize what damage she can cause in a life of a boy who lost his purpose.

Moreover, McEwan portrays Fiona as suffering a temporary crisis by juxtaposing her current problems with her idyllic memories – although she has not had sex with her husband for weeks, she remembers how fulfilling their sexual life was in the past; she mentions no other particular case which would leave her as unstable as the Siamese twins; her professional career proves she is a good judge and she is skilled in reading the people both at court and in her personal life. Yet now, Fiona fails to acknowledge that she isolates herself from her husband and she does not realize the seriousness of the possibility of abducting the child in the case of the Muslim father. However, the cause of Fiona's interpersonal misunderstanding is revealed in her relationship with Adam.

From the first moment Fiona encounters Adam, she immediately adopts the role of a parental figure that wants the best for the child because she believes that is something Adam's real parents fail to accomplish, simultaneously being unable to read Adam's romantic feelings towards herself.

Her motherly approach to Adam can be observed when she sees him lying on the hospital bed: "His elbow, slightly crooked, looked pointed and fragile. Irrelevantly, she thought of recipes, roast chicken, with butter, tarragon and lemon, aubergines baked with tomatoes and garlic, potatoes lightly roasted in olive oil. Take this boy home and feed him up."¹⁸⁸ This case becomes personal for Fiona because she projects her unfulfilled potential of a mother into her relationship with Adam. She does not fully realize that but in a selfish pursuit of the role of a mother, Fiona perceives Adam, with whom she shares passion for poetry and music, as a child she must protect, a victim of a religious sect that kept him in the state of ignorance and "a fresh and excitable innocence, a childlike openness," his "unworldliness made him endearing, but vulnerable. She was touched by his delicacy,"¹⁸⁹ however, Fiona sees Adam according to her own expectations and labels him as a young, inexperienced boy without opinion, and treats him as a substitute for the child she never had. When Adam reads her his poem, Fiona feels the pressure of a mother whose child is eager for praise and constructive criticism and she cannot fight her motherly instincts. After Adam plays 'Down by the Salley Gardens,' she reminds him in a motherly reprimand to "[r]emember that in this key the C is sharp,"¹⁹⁰ and when Adam pleads Fiona to stay a little longer, she tells him she needs to leave

¹⁸⁸ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 106.

¹⁸⁹ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 108-9.

¹⁹⁰ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 116.

with the typical parental resolution. Her behaviour towards Adam proves that she has the best intentions with him yet at the moment she lacks the mental capacity to realize the magnitude of extracting Adam from his cultural and religious belief only to leave him in a void, dismissing the case as finished, and once again suppressing her unprocessed remorse from not having a child of her own.

As Fiona is afraid to face her suppressed grief of not being a mother, she refuses to maintain contact with Adam. She does not reply to his letters and remains deaf to Adam's cry for help. As always, she uses her work as a distraction so that she does not have to face her unprocessed grief. She believes that her judgement was right and the situation is resolved in the most rightful manner. As in many other cases, Fiona relies on the rational part of the case but this is the first time when her emotional baggage starts affecting her life. Fiona fails to realize that Adam has just lost God, the power that gave his life a meaning, and expects her guidance: "I read your judgement. You said you wanted to protect me from my religion. I'm saved!"¹⁹¹ "Your visit was one of the best things that ever happened."¹⁹² "I want to come and live with you. (...) I could do odd jobs for you, housework, errands. And you could give me reading lists, you know, everything you think I should know about..."¹⁹³ In fear of another confrontation with her suppressed emotions from childlessness, Fiona fails to realize that Adam ascribes his survival, i.e. his salvation, to Fiona, who, afraid of being confronted with the full realization of her mistake in the past, does not comprehend that the eighteen-year-old boy has just been

¹⁹¹ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 158.

¹⁹² Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 163.

¹⁹³ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 166-7.

disillusioned, feels confused, lost, and believes Fiona is the only person interested in his well-being. After Fiona accidentally kisses Adam, she can think only about the consequences the incident may have for her career:

Hard to believe that no one had seen her (...). Easier to believe that the truth, hard and dark as a bitter seed, was about to reveal itself: that she had been observed and hadn't noticed. (...) That one day soon she'd hear on her phone the hesitant embarrassed voice of a senior colleague. (...) Then, waiting for her back at [home], a formal letter from the Judicial Complaints investigation officer.¹⁹⁴

Nevertheless, it is because her work is the only certainty Fiona has left in her life and the reason why she gave up having children. Losing her job would destroy Fiona and since these problems fully occupy her mind, Fiona once again fails to realize the position in which Adam finds himself after the kiss, suggesting that the lack of self-compassion may eventually result in the lack of empathy towards others.

Fiona's seemingly selfish behaviour can be ascribed to her depressive state, since the thoroughness with which she considers the first case is striking, she even has a "letter to draft about a special school for the cleaning lady's autistic son"¹⁹⁵ on her schedule among many other commitments. Fiona, in fact, cares deeply about everyone in her life at the expense of herself. Because she does not pay the same attention to herself as she does to her clients, the grief from not having a child accumulates until it manifests itself in depression and ill judgement, causing Fiona to often blame herself for various mistakes, hate herself physically, doubt herself, experience feelings of loneliness or emptiness,

¹⁹⁴ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 173.

¹⁹⁵ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 4.

and at moments perceive her work as pointless. It is only after Adam's death when Fiona realizes she needs to process her feelings with the same care she dedicates to people at court. This realization has religious undertones, as Fiona realizes she acted towards Adam the same way he describes Satan when talking to Fiona in the hospital: "The thing about Satan is that he's amazingly sophisticated. He puts a stupid idea like satanic whatever, abuse, into people's minds, then he lets it get disproved so everyone thinks that he doesn't exist after all, and then he's free to do his worst."¹⁹⁶ Admittedly, Fiona is an intelligent woman, she lets Adam believe that obeying his church is wrong, does not reply to his letters, or his pleas, and when Adam confronts her personally, asking her if he could live with Fiona and her husband, Fiona sends him away. The kiss that accidentally happens in their parting is interpreted by Adam as the kiss of Judas. After that, Adam assumes that Fiona tricked him into believing she likes him but now she negates these feelings, refuses to give Adam the protection she promised in her judgement, which drives Adam back to his family's religion and consequently leads to his death. In his youth, Adam cannot realize that Fiona is avoiding him because she is afraid of facing her 'motherly-self' she becomes when with Adam because she deeply regrets never having chance to raise a child, moreover, Fiona herself does not realize this is the root of her current depressive state.

What the protagonists of these two novels have in common is their lack of empathy because of the role they decide to play in the narrative of their lives. Rather than trying to understand each other or make an effort imagining how

¹⁹⁶ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 106.

the people around them may feel, Edward and Florence project their own expectations of the desired behaviour upon them, which results in their disillusion. Fiona fails to empathise with herself, considering her emotions marginal in her life, and dismissing her internal well-being as unimportant. As none of the abovementioned characters understands their emotions completely, they do not understand the thinking processes of the others because they are not able to reveal their true feelings even to their closest family.

Right before Fiona sends Adam away at the end of the novel, she imagines him “likely to succeed brilliantly at his postponed exams and go to a good university.”¹⁹⁷ It is a self-assuring lie Fiona tells herself so that she does not have to process another emotionally challenging trauma and the likely tragic fate of a disillusioned young man. It is only after she learns about Adam’s death when Fiona experiences an emotional breakdown which serves as a cathartic denouement for her long-term suppressed emotions and unprocessed feelings of pain. This development, however, raises a question if Fiona would ever be able to reach the cathartic confession to her husband at the end of the novel if Adam’s leukaemia had not relapsed since her life with Jack has returned to normal, nearly happy state when she receives the news about Adam’s death.

The ending of *On Chesil Beach* is closed in a similar manner: it is only years later when Edward contemplates his life, his inability to make an intimate connection with any woman when Edward reflects on the scene on the beach and realizes how ahead of time Florence’s proposal of an open marriage was. Edward’s life is described as aimless, unlike Florence’s, who became a successful violinist, and wonders if his life would have been better if he had

¹⁹⁷ Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Random House, 2014) 182.

overcome his pride and accepted Florence's proposal. Although the couple does not have the language through which they could discuss their problems regarding sexuality and the time period forbade them from revealing their true feelings and their true selves, Edward realizes that they could stand a chance if they tried to accept each other as they were, if they were both capable of overcoming their selfishness and tried to look at each other with empathy: "This is how the entire course of a life can be changed – by doing nothing."¹⁹⁸

It is only after the characters gain distance from their behaviour when they realize they allowed themselves to be limited by social roles which shape their expectations from each other but also from themselves. Although Edward and Florence try to overcome their social background, they do not try to openly discuss their class differences upon which they assume each of them is defined, therefore are unable to transgress the roles in the narrative they come to accept as norms. Fiona is locked in the role of the High Court Judge, believing that as a woman with power and important profession her priority is taking care of others and having no mercy on herself. She embraced the role of a judge with the notion of objectivity, choosing the career over the family, believing that her subjective self has no place in her life anymore.

Empathy is an important quality for McEwan himself who claimed in the article for *The Guardian* after the terrorist attack on The World Trade Center, that the hijackers were able to crash the plane full of people only because they had no sympathy for their victims: "Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of

¹⁹⁸ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Vintage, 2008) 166.

compassion, and it is the beginning of morality,”¹⁹⁹ suggesting that, for McEwan, the empathy is the key device that defines what crimes people are capable of and it is mainly the critical and the individual thinking that gives power to the singular human.

McEwan is aware that in order for the people to understand each other, they must be capable of empathy both with themselves and their surroundings. In *On Chesil Beach* and *The Children Act*, he invites the reader to cultivate his empathic skills and puts emphasis on communication as the device that can be used to prevent misunderstandings that are inevitable without expressing one’s feelings. Moreover, by illustrating the interpersonal and intrapersonal misconceptions, McEwan once again encourages the reader to critically evaluate the role of the conventional norms of the society, suggesting that if the reader does not cultivate the individual approach to life, (s)he is condemned to unhappy life in repetition of the fictional narratives circling in the society that do not reflect the real-life.

¹⁹⁹ Ian McEwan, “Only love and then oblivion. Love was all they had to set against their murderers,” *The Guardian*, 15 Sept. 2001. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/15/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety2>).

4. Conclusion

Ian McEwan uses the element of disillusion in his novels as a device through which he tries to encourage the reader to critically evaluate his/her preconceptions about the world, the conventional narratives, and the roles the reader ascribes to him/herself and to the society around him/herself.

By allowing the reader to build his/her expectations of the story's denouement and then crushing them, McEwan points out the reader's routine regarding a given discourse and demonstrates how deep-rooted and critically unevaluated these traditional narratives are and what power they hold over the reader, but also suggests the reader should explore the limitations of the genre and the difference between fiction and reality. McEwan also offers the reader a certain extent of comfort when he offers a highly subjective perspective that is not virtuous, on the contrary, it comes from the mind of a flawed character, yet it is this very aspect of McEwan's novels that should lead to the reader's self-reflexion and self-evaluation. McEwan's protagonists are not heroes but labelling them as "bad people" would be an oversimplification leading to the reader's neglect of self-exploration. The stories and the characters should rather serve as cautionary tales and suggest that without communication and attempt to understand other's feelings no relationship has a chance to develop. McEwan addresses mainly issues that are up-to-date, and the miscommunication between people and misunderstandings within oneself are a few of them.

Human beings learn new skills through the process of making mistakes, of which is McEwan clearly aware. Moreover, by being conscious of the reader's development, McEwan employs a slightly different strategy to mislead the reader in each of his novels, thus engaging reader in a form of play, which is another successful method in the development of human qualities.

Although it would be farfetched to consider Ian McEwan didactic, he is conscious of the current problems in society and, I believe, tries to turn his readers into more advanced individuals, regardless whether they are casual or critical readers. McEwan believes that literature has the power to teach the reader empathy, patience and understanding with fictional characters and, consequently, with people in his/her surroundings, which is demonstrated in the power literary works hold over his characters: Briony's limited literary experience drives her towards dramatic conclusions. Serena cannot evaluate literature's quality, looks only for images of herself in the novels and ends up taken advantage of by Tom to finish his book. Henry Perowne does not understand the art of literature and he is not interested in reading, which results in him being unable to look at the world from Baxter's perspective, which may have resulted in a different string of events, and it is poetry that saves his family's lives. Michael Beard's only literary experience is with memorizing passages of Milton to impress girl schoolmates and he too fails to feel empathy towards his wives, lovers, his daughter, his parents, and ultimately to the world. Fiona was interested in poetry as a young woman but she abandoned literature for law, resulting in her losing touch with her inner self, and Edward's interest lies in history books, not in fiction, making him incapable of understanding Florence's turmoil.

All these characters suggest that in McEwan's world it is art, mainly literature, that increases the emotional intelligence, self-knowledge, and empathy. Suzanne Keen claims that

psychologists (...) and many defenders of the humanities believe that empathic emotion motivates altruistic action, resulting in less aggression, less fickle helping, less blaming of victims for their misfortunes, increased

cooperation in conflict situations, and improved actions on behalf of needy individuals and members of stigmatized groups,²⁰⁰ and that “reading experiences may indirectly lay the groundwork for real-world transmissions of empathy from fleeting feeling to willed steps taken on another’s behalf.”²⁰¹ McEwan shares Keen’s opinion and through the process of disillusion offers the reader a better understanding of him/herself and the others that can help the reader develop on many levels.

²⁰⁰ Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) vii.

²⁰¹ Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) xiii.

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