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**BACHELOR THESIS**

**The themes and narrative strategies in  
selected works of Ian McEwan**

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## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this bachelor thesis, entitled “The themes and narrative strategies in selected works of Ian McEwan”, is a result of my own work and that I used only the cited sources.

Prague, April 1<sup>st</sup> 2010

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this bachelor thesis is to focus on selected works of Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden* and *Atonement*. It attempts to compare and contrast the dominant themes and narrative strategies the author explores and employs in these novels. Also, the thesis concentrates on how the narrative techniques influence the structure of the texts as well as on how the readers perceive the main themes of his novels.

## **Keywords**

Themes, Narrative Strategies, Comparison, Style of writing, Developing tendencies

## **ABSTRAKT**

Hlavní pozornost této bakalářské práce se soustředí na vybraná díla Iana McEwana, romány *Betonová zahrada* a *Pokání*. Cílem práce je srovnat hlavní témata a narativní techniky, které jsou obsaženy v těchto románech. Práce se také soustředí na způsob, jak narativní techniky ovlivňují strukturu textů, a zároveň také na to, jak tato témata mohou být vnímána čtenáři.

## **Klíčová slova**

Témata, Narativní strategie, Srovnání, Styl psaní, Vývojové směry

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# INTRODUCTION

In my thesis I would like to focus on the analysis and, consequently, a possible interpretation of two Ian McEwan's novels, *The Cement Garden* (1978) and *Atonement* (2001), as far as the key narrative techniques as well as the prevailing themes he deals with in these books are concerned. The aim of my thesis is to explore the author's unique style of writing, which makes him one of Britain's most distinguished contemporary writers and, more importantly, which is well reflected in these two – in my opinion best – McEwan's novels. The author's fictional works will be discussed in relation to different theoretical issues, including postmodernism, imposed order, social background and the role of childhood. In order to analyze McEwan's writing I will use several relevant sources of information – not only the books which I consider very helpful (e.g. *Understanding of Ian McEwan* by David Malcolm or *An Introduction to Contemporary British Fiction* edited by Rod Mengham), but also the website [www.ianmcewan.com](http://www.ianmcewan.com) which offers a lot of useful material about Ian McEwan and his literary career. The reason why I chose this topic springs from my keen interest in his writing supported by my relish for his novels' film versions.

My thesis should not only provide a comprehensive summary of McEwan's favourite ideas, but also describe his unique stylistic means. Furthermore, considering the fact that there is a wide time span between the release of *The Cement Garden* and *Atonement*, I would like to compare both the novels in the light of the developing tendencies in McEwan's writing; in other words, whether we can find any similarities and differences between his early work, *The Cement Garden*, and the relatively recent *Atonement*. To answer this question I will concentrate on the changing as well as idiosyncratic attributes of the author's fictional world.

As for the structure of my thesis, its first part will offer a brief outline of Ian McEwan's prose style. In the main body I will discuss the most important themes and narrative strategies of both *The Cement Garden* and *Atonement*. Besides, I will concentrate not only on the mutual cohesion of both the themes and narrative

techniques depicted in these novels but also on the comparison of the novels in relation to their differentiating features. At the end of each thematic section I will add a short conclusion concerning the matter discussed. In the final part I will summarize the content of my thesis.

# 1. IAN MCEWAN'S WORKS AND THEIR CONTEXT

As its title suggests, this section should provide basic information about Ian McEwan's literary career with the emphasis on the two novels I will later discuss as well as on their context within his writing.

There is no doubt that in his third decade of writing, Ian McEwan has established himself as one of the "most accomplished, and most controversial, writers of his generation" (Ryan 203). This writer, who entered British literary scene in the mid-1970s with a collection of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), has been highly praised for his unique, precise prose style, yet considered to be rather shocking or even morbid for his obsession with obscenity and the macabre, "dissecting his characters with the clinic precision of a pathologist" and therefore "repeatedly running the risk of antagonizing or offending his readers, and of attracting the charge of compliance with everything from which he should recoil" (Ryan 203). This characteristic well corresponds to the rather gloomy tone of his first piece of a full-length fiction I will later take a closer look on, *The Cement Garden* (1978), which was well received both by critics and the reading public.

In an interview from 1985 McEwan himself points out he "had been labelled as the chronicler of comically exaggerated psychopathic states of mind or of adolescent anxiety, snot and pimples" (Malcolm 5) – it becomes apparent that the author himself was not particularly happy about this label. As a consequence of that, even though at the beginning of his career his works featured various taboo or otherwise shocking sexual practises, so far the dark, perverted and cruel McEwan's disquieting themes have made way for more introspective human dramas in his later works. Yet within this context it does not necessarily mean that his writing would suffer any damage either in terms of its quality or its popularity.

However, according to many critics, although in the following years McEwan produced several novels wreathed with the most prestigious awards, such as the longed-for Booker Prize for *Amsterdam* (1998), it would seem as if some of



his writings, particularly the novels written in the late 1990's, had lost its attractive features, mainly the previous originality so typical for his earlier works such as *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) or *The Child in Time* (1987). Malcolm describes the period of "fumble" as "(the author's) moving in a different direction from the one sketched out in the received wisdom of 1994" (6). But then McEwan came up with his novel, which will be later also put under discussion, *Atonement* (2001), and which – from the point of view of many reviewers and critics – can be regarded as a turning point in his career as well as an evidence of McEwan's literary geniality.

As Malcolm points out, "one does not know what he (McEwan) will do next" (19): whether it is the exploration of a terrorist menace in *Saturday* (2005), the conflict between the Victorian prejudices and the forthcoming sexual revolution of the early 1960's in *On Chesil Beach* (2007), or the theme of climate change in his latest novel *Solar* (2010). In this sense, Ian McEwan can be seen as a literary classic with an extraordinary sense of subliminal stress intensity as well as his characters' psychology, and his contribution not only to the English literature remains of great importance.

## **2. THE WORLD OF *THE CEMENT GARDEN* AND *ATONEMENT***

### **2.1 Aims and process of analyzing the novels**

In this section I would like to focus on the dominant themes dealt with both in *The Cement Garden* as well as in *Atonement*, and on how they are reflected in their narrative strategies; these features will be described individually in each subsection. In the final part of this section I will explore the main differences between the novels in the light of the prevailing/developing tendencies of McEwan's style.

### **2.2 The Overall Atmosphere of the Novels**

It may appear from the very first sentence of *The Cement Garden*: "I did not kill my father, but I sometimes felt I had helped him on his way" (McEwan 9), that one can easily get the feeling this is rather an uncomfortable text and that the author has a lot of uneasy topics in store for his readers. The story and especially the central idea of four suddenly orphaned siblings who conceal their mother's dead body in a cement trunk in the cellar are certainly unsavoury. Moreover, based on its sterile language, the immoral behaviour of the characters as well as the desolate and isolated environment they live in, the novel evokes the atmosphere of Gothic tales, namely, as Malcolm observes, Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* and Hitchcock's *Psycho* (52). The setting, the local details, such as Jack's nightmares, or even the act of the mother's entombing himself clearly echo the gothic elements. Accordingly, most of the motifs from McEwan's early short stories can be found here, such as scenes of deviant behaviour, morbid imagery and gruesome details. Yet these are put together into a functioning compact unit which is both repulsive as well as – according to *The New York Review of Books* – "irresistibly readable" (Malcolm 45). From this perspective the readers can be slightly disgusted at first

sight but – in terms of the book’s message – there is certainly more than meets the eye.

Conversely, there is no sign of the writer’s previous shocking and macabre elements in *Atonement*. The atmosphere of the novel, slightly touching on themes of traditional English prose of the 1930’s, such as the class division and sexual repression, is more likely filled with the tension between the characters whose personal dramas are depicted against the background of more serious events, the fatal betrayal and the destructive power of war. The predominant motif of this “impressive, engrossing, deep and surprising” (Lee) novel, whose release was accompanied by rapturous acceptance, one’s facing up to the past, goes along with the surprising twist the author set up for the readers at the end of the book which puts the whole story into a different spotlight and therefore calls for multiple reading. What is more, as Petr Chalupský points out, “*Atonement* can be understood as a kind of common denominator that skillfully manages to develop and make profound many of the themes and narrative techniques of McEwan’s previous works, as well as adding several new ones “ (1). Considering the above mentioned, *Atonement* represents not only a turning point in the writer’s career, but also an interesting synthesis of general remarkable tendencies the contemporary British novel has inherited. The great evidence of how the novel can affect its readers is the combination of a refined narrative style with an impressive story which lingers in the readers’ minds.

## **2.3 Similarities of the compared novels – Dysfunctional Family, Imposed Order, Childhood-Adolescence Period, Atmosphere of Tension and Periphery of Vision**

### **2.3.1 Family Background as the Source of Conflicts**

The theme which should be mentioned first as it strikes the readers from the very beginning of *The Cement Garden* is the one of the dysfunctional family. The most significant contribution to this disharmony is undoubtedly on the side of the father, an “unloved and unlovable” (Malcolm 45) man who can be described as a domineering person, even a sadist, psychologically terrorising the rest of the family. His tyrannical approach towards his wife and children is well reflected in his rather one-sided sense of humour since any attempt of his being made subject of a joke is strictly suppressed. The father also sets up something like a list of official jokes based on humiliating others, and usually followed by an obligatory laugh: “There were a few running jokes in the family, initiated and maintained by my father. Against Sue for having almost invisible eyebrows and lashes, against Julie for her ambitions to be a famous athlete, against Tom for pissing in his bed sometimes, against Mother for being poor at arithmetic, and against me for my pimples(…)” (McEwan 15). Not only do these jokes predicate a lot about the father’s complicated personality – a strongly authoritative leader on the one hand, yet more likely an insecure coward on the other hand, one unable either of feeling empathy or of showing any parental love – but they inevitably result in a lack of communication and, consequently, in dysfunctional relationships between the members of the household. What is more, one’s disgust at the father comes to fulfilment when he or she learns about his perverted jealousy of his youngest son, “mollycoddle” Tom, as expressed in Jake’s comment: “So simple, so bizarre, a small boy and a grown man competing (for mother’s attention)” (McEwan 13). In this sense, it is not surprising that the reader (along with the children) feels almost relieved when the father passes away, while, ironically enough, ferociously cementing the garden.

As for the character of the mother, the most significant word she can be described with is frailty, both physical and emotional. In order to avoid the father's attacks – for the sake of the family – she voluntarily assumes a passive role and soon after her husband's death it becomes apparent that she as well is not able to maintain her parental responsibility. The disease she suffers from remains unspecified; with respect to the symptoms it can be a cancer, yet in the figurative sense the submissive mother sickens for pathological dependence on her domineering husband – as if after his death she had lost her meaning of life. As her illness proceeds, she keeps underestimating her health condition, irresponsibly neglecting the care of her children who remain abandoned after her death. In this sense, Jack and his siblings can be regarded as victims of their uncaring and unhealthy family background.

In the case of *Atonement*, one can easily get the feeling that the Tallis family seems to be more solid, representing a “traditional male-dominated patriarchal middle-class household” (Chalupský 5). However, when taking a closer look, the readers find out beneath the efficiently-looking surface there is a considerable amount of friction in the family, full of unspoken grievances and private tensions, to end in calamity. The father is absent all the time, officially bound to work at the Ministry in London, still more importantly involved in a long-standing affair everyone knows about. His wife Emily is constantly withdrawn into her migraines, pitifully contemplating her past, which represents her escape from the inconvenient reality and assuming responsibility in the family. The second male character, their son Leon, is also unable to take over the role of an authority. In fact, he is a person without personality, rather shallow and empty, whose “agreeable nullity (makes him) a polished artefact” (McEwan 109). Finally, his sister Cecilia, with a degree from Cambridge, is now at a loss, frustrated and dissatisfied with her position in the family as well as in her life, for her mother wants her to get married despite of Cecilia's independent attitude to life. From this perspective there is no wonder that the youngest member of the family, little Briony, an imaginative and sensible girl with the status of an only child, feels ignored by the adult world and suffers from not being paid much attention. She closes herself in the world of fantasy, which

leads to fatal consequences for Briony affects the lives of others, especially her sister Cecilia and Robbie Turner, the housekeeper's son and the family protégé. In order to be recognized and listened to, the confused Briony – on account of her vivid imagination – gives a false testimony, convincing herself as well as the adults that it is Robbie who has to be blamed for assaulting her teenage cousin Lola. Briony receives what she has been craving for: the adults' respect – but at the expense of an innocent man who is imprisoned and later sent to the war. The dissolution of the Tallis family is hence completed since all the characters believe Briony's story, except for Robbie's mother and Cecilia who therefore completely breaks away from her relatives.

Moreover, the family situation of the fifteen-year-old Lola and nine-year-old Jackson and Pierrot cannot be regarded as an idyllic one as well. The marriage of their parents, Emily's younger and impulsive sister Hermione and her "meek, evasive" husband Cecil, is about to end in dissolution which makes their children "refugees from a bitter domestic civil war" (McEwan 8). Their presence in the Tallis household brings out so far unknown and rather unpleasant phenomenon: a divorce which, according to Briony's view of the world, "belonged to the realm of disorder, (showing) an unglamorous face of dull complexity and incessant wrangling" (McEwan 9). What the author introduces here is the idea of a dysfunctional family within another dysfunctional family – this combination, as it turns out later, can in the larger context of the book serve as a trigger for the upcoming tragedy. Not only do these dysfunctional relationships in their family cause the emotional deprivation of the children, Lola's being prematurely adult and the little boys' feeling confused and miserable, but they, more importantly, lead to the twins' escape and Lola's rape – the events which are crucial for the novel's course.

In both the novels McEwan expresses a heavy criticism of the unnatural patriarchal order. In *The Cement Garden* this order leads to a battlefield-like atmosphere in the family. In *Atonement* the author stresses the position of a child in a neglecting milieu, accusing the grown-ups of their hypocritical approach which results in a dysfunctional family. In this sense, the orphaned siblings as well as

Briony can be regarded as victims of their uncaring and dysfunctional family background.

### **2.3.2 The Imposed Order vs. Collapse of Norms**

Another theme McEwan often deals with in his writing is the one of an unnatural order which is imposed on people from outside. This goes hand in hand with the above described theme of a dysfunctional family, for the order is mostly represented by the patriarchal world “which, in its conceitedness, uncritically believes in the infallibility and unquestionable rightfulness of an exclusively male view of the world” (Chalupský 3). For example, the father in *The Cement Garden* is obsessed with a compulsive need to confirm his power and to gain control over the other family members – this obsession is well reflected in his trying to destroy the weeds widely growing in his anxiously cared about garden. Accordingly, there is an obvious parallel between the weeds – the irrepressible will to live – and the children who are in constant pursuit of getting out of the despotic oppression. Another important aspect which should be taken into consideration is the preserving of the deceased mother’s body in the cellar. Not only does this express “the teenagers’ fear of being put into care”, but it can also be seen as a “creation of an isolated, surreal micro-world” (Bradford 21), an establishment of a new order free of any parental or social authority as a contradiction to the one impersonated by the father.

The collapsed hierarchy is replaced by a new, alternative one, marked by the lack of any limits. Malcolm describes their house as “allowed to degenerate into a disorder of decayed food and dirt, while the children spend their days to no traditionally approved of purpose: in play (Tom), in escapist reading (Sue), in sleep (and) in masturbation (Jack)” (63). Besides, the social rules are questioned when Tom, supported by Julie and Sue, starts wearing girl’s clothes. His retreat from masculinity illustrates the author’s opinion that gender is something one can choose, a construction more socially rather than biologically determined. In this sense, Tom’s transvestism breaks the general assumptions about who should wear what,

the deep-seated idea of appropriate dressing given by highly polarized male-female world. The act of regression comes to fulfilment when he reverts to babyhood, demanding to be treated like a helpless infant. What is more, not only Tom's but also other characters' sexuality is set free in the final scene of incest between the two eldest siblings, Julie and Jack. Following the forbidden impulses they confirm their negative attitude towards society through the breach of an ultimate taboo. Nevertheless, the "old", norm-based order is re-established through Derek, Julie's boyfriend, who serves as a personification of the outside world. He seems to be a perfect authority, acting as – in Julie's own word – "big, smart daddy" (McEwan 133). Yet as soon as the readers as well as Julie learn that he in fact is a weak man (one of many in McEwan's books) living with his mother and being told what to do, the image of an ideal man along with the patriarchal delusion fades away. The children perceive him as an intruder who, feeling excluded by others, tries to reveal their secret. Eventually, after he finds out what is going on between Julie and Jack, Derek smashes open the cement trunk with its terrible content and informs the police, whose arrival will restore the order again.

In *Atonement* the theme of imposed order is presented in a less straightforward way. Unlike the children in *The Cement Garden*, it is little Briony who craves for living in a "harmonious, organized world" (McEwan 5). Her desire takes the form of writing which enables her to create and control her own world based on fairy tale-like perception of good and evil. This is mainly reflected in Briony's false interpretation of reality whose complexity is beyond her understanding, such as the scene full of unnatural tension between Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain as well as the content and sense of Robbie's letter. In this note he vulgarly expresses his lust for Cecilia which raises further distrust of him in Briony, only reinforced when she interrupts the love-making couple in the library and interprets it as an act of violence from Robbie's side. According to her mental projection of the adult world, Robbie's behaviour represents a disturbance which must be eliminated: where there is no order, Briony will impose it. Through putting Robbie into the category of maniacs the orderliness of Briony's world is re-established. Incidentally, it becomes clear that the products of her organized mind are derived from a patriarchal aureole



of her father, who in her eyes appears to be almost like a mythological god, ensuring safety and order in the house: “When her father was home, the household settled around a fixed point” (McEwan 122). At any rate, Chalupský suggest that “this innocent desire for such an unnatural order might (...) mean that (Briony) is no longer able or willing to distinguish between reality and imagination” (4). From this perspective, Briony as a great order-seeker triggers the advancing conflict which affects the lives of others as well as hers.

It can be seen from the above mentioned that the young characters deal with the imposed order in different ways in McEwan’s books: whereas *The Cement Garden* depicts the children deliberately living in social vacuum without any order, in *Atonement* the little heroine’s need for the order represents an essential feature of her personality, predetermining her to function as a catalyst of the story.

### **2.3.3 Childhood – Adolescence Transition Period, Loss of Innocence**

McEwan’s favourite theme which often plays a significant role in his fictions is that of childhood and adolescence, especially the process of growing up when one crosses the thin, unique borderline between childhood and adulthood. The author stresses the crucial importance of this transition period between infancy and maturity as a time lag in which not only one’s identity and character but also his or her lifelong attitudes are created. Furthermore, McEwan perceives the transition period as that of the loss of innocence, “leaving the haven of infancy behind and being absorbed into the adult universe of blame” (Ryan 215), since this process can be extremely demanding and frustrating, whether for the adolescents who enter the treacherous adult world and want to be accepted by him or for their parents who suddenly have to treat their children as their partners and mentors rather than as instructors and controllers.

From this perspective, *The Cement Garden* can be seen as “a psychological study of adolescence (which) charts family relationships and tensions: between father and son, between mother and children, among siblings” (Malcolm 51). Jack, the fifteen-year-old narrator, represents a typical teenager falling into all the possible pitfalls in the period of adolescence, as these are concisely summarized by his mother: “You can’t get up in the mornings, you’re tired all day, you’re moody, you don’t wash yourself or change your clothes, you’re rude to your sisters and to me” (McEwan 29). There is nothing to marvel at for Jack has just discovered his sexuality and, consequently, has indulged in masturbation. He frequently becomes overwhelmed not only by his sexual fantasies concerning his sisters, but also by waves of quickly changing emotions, not mentioning the fact that neglecting his appearance is based on the adolescent defiance which has to cause resentment in others deliberately. All these aspects, Jack’s moodiness, self-centred personality and feeling of isolation, compose the character of a teenage boy searching for identity as well as for an authority which would set the norms and provide a behaviour model but which, as far as his parents are concerned, is missing. As for the community created by the siblings after their parents’ death, it can be also regarded as a teenage revolt with almost anarchist tendencies against restrictions. Moreover, Ryan believes that from a certain perspective their community as a whole is based on withdrawal and regression: not only does Tom regress to infancy, but in a way the children all do, “endeavouring to keep the bubble of childhood intact and the toils of adulthood at bay” (215). Nevertheless, the bubble bursts eventually and the reader witnesses the children moving from adolescence to maturity, losing their virginity, a necessary sign of innocence, in “the climatic or epiphanic moment of initiation after which things will never be the same” (Ryan 215), the moment represented by Jack and Julie’s sexual intercourse.

Accordingly, the central character of *Atonement*, the thirteen-year-old Briony, finds herself in the childhood/adulthood period in which identity is formed. Like in *The Cement Garden*, there is no grown-up which would lead her through all the hardships of this process providing a necessary support and showing an active interest – even though her parents are present, the parental authority is absent since

the attention of all the adult members of the family is given completely to their personal issues. Briony is therefore left alone to construct her social role, looking for inspiration in her own imagination. However, the sense of loss that accompanies the entry into maturity markedly differs from the one depicted in *The Cement Garden* based on an initiation in terms of sexuality; the transition from child's perception of the world is more significantly confronted with the "real, adult world in which frogs did not address princesses, and the only messages were the ones that people sent" (McEwan 40). It is the world Briony longs for to be accepted by on the one hand, but which she fails to understand because of her inexperience on the other hand. In order to win the adults' attention Briony makes a mistake whose extent she does not fully realize and, more importantly, whose consequences she carries for the rest of her life. Nevertheless, her loss of innocence is confirmed through this sense of guilt, through crossing a symbolic bridge between childhood and adulthood. Her becoming an adult is thereby finished: "She would simply wait on the bridge, calm and obstinate, until events, real events, not her own fantasies, rose to her challenge, and dispelled her insignificance" (McEwan 77).

Yet, despite the terrible damages which spring from her accusation, the author does not put the blame on Briony only, pointing out that she is "too young, too awestruck, too keen to please, to insist on making her own way back" (McEwan 170). In fact, he assumes the adult world personified by her parents is to be held responsible for her crime since Jack and Emily Tallis should have helped Briony on her way from childhood to adulthood and set the limits and rules so as to avoid the possible misunderstandings and problems.

Generally speaking, as "it is common in McEwan's novels (...) to find a preoccupation with children becoming adults and adults returning to childhood" (Childs 127), the focus on the transition period is evident in *The Cement Garden* as well as in *Atonement* allowing the author to comment on this issue. What he puts the greatest emphasis on is the negative way the adults treat their children – either neglecting their needs or suppressing their natural development.

### 2.3.4 Atmosphere of Tension and Sleepiness

The first important narrative strategy I would like to mention and which is to be found in *The Cement Garden* as well as in *Atonement* is the one of the atmosphere of tension, an uneasy stillness that foreshadows the storm is coming, breeding some unexpected events which will then change the course of the story completely, affecting the characters' lives, mostly in a bad way. In the case of *The Cement Garden*, the atmosphere is more likely filled with sterility, for its protagonists are, as Ryan points out, "housed in some suburban dead zone and sealed inside a situation from which the oxygen of emotion has been pumped" (Ryan 209). From the very beginning of the novel the readers are faced with a very unpleasant environment, a household whose members are deprived of their free will and vigour for the house they live in and especially the adjacent garden is a domain of their despotic father. As for the setting of the book, it also contributes to the feeling of stiff nothingness as well as timelessness, Malcolm even claims that "(references to place and time) manage to be both quite specific and yet strangely unlocalized and general" (55). Although it becomes clear from various phrases that the book is physically rooted in Britain of the 1970's, the plot is set into an unnamed urban wasteland, rather isolated and alienated. Accordingly, the summer with its hot climate in which the main action takes place evokes the air of tension. Needless to say that it is the seeming nothingness full of tension and sterility that escalates eventually in the alternative, conventions-free world of the children and later reaches its height in the final incest scene.

Moreover, the atmosphere of tension is connected with the leitmotif of sleeping and dream, noticeable particularly in *The Cement Garden*, which according to Ryan even "borders on hallucination" (209). The sleep-like atmosphere permeates through the whole novel resulting in the characters' loss of their notion of time as well as of a certain degree of plausibility – one can never be sure of what really happens, the distinction between reality and a dream becomes less determinable, as it is obvious from the last sentence of the novel: "Wasn't that a lovely sleep!" (McEwan 138). Incidentally, the novel is marked by the clear presence of Freudian imagery, centred on the character of adolescent Jack, his

indulgence in sleeping, his nightmares or hostility towards the father and rejection of the mother as well as the father's symbolic death Jack feels guilty for. In this sense, the entire story can be interpreted as a dream, stressing the signposts of Freudianism such as "the Oedipal myth of the death of the father" (Bradford 20), as well as the importance of the suppressed subconscious of the children in which the mother is entombed, but which begins to appear on the surface when her decaying body starts filling the house with the rotten odour. This idea also serves as a good example of the fact that one cannot fully entomb his or her past, as in the case of the siblings who are therefore not able to maintain any kind of a sustainable order.

In *Atonement* McEwan creates the atmosphere of sinister expectation as well, but here it serves more significant purpose since the first part of the novel contains the long overture within the range of the first twelve chapters (whose extent equals the whole of *The Cement Garden*) that is filled with impressions rather than actions. The readers encounter the characters, inhabiting an isolated mansion, on one day in the summer of an extreme heat-wave and rumours of the upcoming war. Although nothing much seems to happen – guests arrive, a dinner is planned to welcome them, Briony's play is rehearsed, an ancient vase is broken – the pages are thick with McEwan's typical sense of menace. Therefore, the readers anticipate that nothing positive is going to happen which will disturb the seeming stillness and the claustrophobic mood of the hot summer day. The author deliberately postpones the moment of escalation; instead, by means of this slowly formed ominous atmosphere he teases the expectations of the readers insomuch that one may be easily tempted by the idea of throwing the book away, feeling that such a protraction becomes almost unbearable and the story tends to be too lengthy. However, like the storm which brings rain in the summer sultriness, the unexpected tragedy occurs and the patient readers are rewarded with a sudden eruption of private tensions, witnessing a rapid chain of events which result in Briony's crime. As McEwan reproachfully suggests, "so much would not have happened, nothing would have happened, and the smoothing hand of time would have made the evening barely memorable (...)" (McEwan 162). Instead of that, the twins disappear

unexpectedly, Lola is assaulted, Robbie is unjustly charged with the attack, and, consequently, the romance between him and Cecilia is tragically aborted.

There is no doubt that McEwan indulges in building the atmosphere of tension and sleepiness. What is special about this strategy is the powerful narrative device of the shocking twist at the end of his novels. In comparison with the scene of incest in *The Cement Garden*, which comes rather expectedly in terms of the novel's constructed reality, in the final trick of *Atonement* the author combines reality and fiction in a way that makes the readers insecure as far as their assumptions about what they have just read are concerned. Besides, as Childs points out, some readers as well as "reviewers disapproved of the postmodernist shift at the end of *Atonement*" (143). There is no wonder for the main questions – will the lovers survive and spend the rest of their lives together? will Briony reach forgiveness? – remain unanswered and when these are revealed, one can feel bitterly disappointed with the outcome, not mentioning the disillusionment with the author because everything he or she hoped for came to nothing. At any rate, Child's opinion seems to be more relevant when he claims that "this trick as it has been pejoratively described is extremely important to the novel" (143). Unlike the endings of the author's early work which should overwhelm the readers with shock and even repel them as much as possible, the principle of the final twist in *Atonement* requires intellectually more demanding approach in terms of the readers' imagination. From this perspective, McEwan's final twists manage to be surprising as well as ambiguous, deriving an indispensable amount of pleasure from the act of reading.

### **2.3.5 Periphery of vision**

Another narrative strategy worth mentioning, as it proves the author's huge potential and therefore deserves more space in a secluded sub-section, is the combination of the detached narrator and what Chalupský calls "the narrative of the moments" (6), by means of which the author achieves the effect of periphery of

vision. As Chalupský further explains, “when it comes to an important moment or event in the story, it is perceived as if from the edge of the viewing angle” while the narration is at the same time “broken into fragmentary moments” (6-7). To put it simply, something notable happens but the narrator looks aside, drawing the readers’ attention to a seemingly less important action. One may consider this technique to be rather irritating, but in its consequence, the readers are let to depend more on their imagination. The best example of how this narrative strategy is employed in *The Cement Garden* is McEwan’s shift to the description of Jack’s first ejaculation, while his father dies somehow out of our visual field, as if his death did not deserve any attention. “I worked on myself rapidly”, we read but then suddenly comes the true climax: “My father was lying face down on the ground, his head resting on the newly spread concrete” (McEwan 18).

Nevertheless, this technique is dealt with best in Part Two of *Atonement*, which covers Robbie’s experiences in the battlefields of France during the Second World War. On more than one hundred pages McEwan proves his acute sense of entirely plausible details, based on the apparently deeply researched war documents; still the war itself is present only somehow marginally, without the actual warfare. Simultaneously, the narration adheres to its impersonal tone; the air is, once again, filled with the atmosphere of sinister expectations, in addition to the universal threat of death, but unlike the slow action in the first part, here it moves forward at higher speed.

As the best example of how the fragmentariness of the narration works serves the opening passage of the second part where Robbie discovers that the awfulness of war can consist in trifles: “There were horrors enough, but it was the unexpected detail that threw him and afterwards would not let him go. (...) It was a leg in a tree, (...) a perfect leg, pale smooth, small enough to be a child’s” (McEwan 192). Incidentally, the war scenes are interrupted by retrospections and flash-backs in which Robbie contemplates his meeting with Cecilia, the first one after being released out of prison, in a café: “They pursued him, the old themes. Here it was again, his only meeting with her. Six days out of prison, one day before he reported for duty near Aldershot” (McEwan 204). As far as McEwan’s original treatment of

the war theme is concerned, the author demonstrates his ability to avoid various clichés one would expect him to tend to since the theme of war has been made subject of many literary works. For instance, this applies to the scene in which, maybe surprisingly enough for the readers, the RAF pilot is being bullied by his comrades. Last but not least, in this part the author works with the narrative strategy of unreliability of one's perspective as well, for he lets the readers witness the retreat of the British rout at Dunkirk through Robbie's extremely tired, even wounded point of view which, as they learn, makes him see things one cannot regard to be true.

From this perspective, the powerfully detailed, even acrid account of Robbie's participation in war is, despite its terrible basic idea and tragic consequences for everyone involved, enjoyable to read, mainly due to the author's impressive narrative inventiveness.



## **2.4 Differences of the compared novels – Postmodernism, Role of the Narrator and Intertextuality**

### **2.4.1 Historiography and Metafiction**

Aside from the above described themes *The Cement Garden* and *Atonement* have in common, in the latter Ian McEwan introduces several new ones directly influenced by the features of postmodernism – that of the ambiguous relation between memory and history and that of the process of writing.

As far as one's memory is concerned, it plays a significant role in terms of both the story depicted in *Atonement* as well as of the novel as a whole, since according to the author it is exactly our memory which tends to reshape our past, being then revived in a never-ending set of different versions. This new view of history is well reflected in the characters' perception of the fountain scene with the broken vase. The readers get this incident from two perspectives; Cecilia's and Briony's. Briony misinterprets it as a marriage proposal although she has to admit that "the sequence was illogical – the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal" (McEwan 39). Because she cannot understand it, she decides to write this scene in the form of fiction, applying her interpretation on reality which is all the same subjective and unreliable: "Now there was nothing left of the dumb show by the fountain beyond what survived in memory, in three separate and overlapping memories. The truth had become as ghostly as invention" (McEwan 41). What the author states is that the subjectivity and unreliability of one's memory leads to the fact that the past cannot be objectively explained and that each recollection is in fact a fiction. Accordingly, as Chalupský suggests, "the power of history lies not in a few historical facts or data, but in its infinite potential of reinvention, serving thus as a permanent challenge for the natural human need to make up and tell stories" (8). In this sense, it is only when the reader reaches the third part of the novel that he or she finds out that the

whole book is indeed based on memories, on one's changing and confronting the past.

The final chapter is narrated by the seventy-seven-year old Briony, a famous writer suffering from the onset of a mental illness (the idea both interesting and frightening enough in the novel deeply concerned with the role of memory), who keeps re-telling the same events throughout her life, the circumstances of her crime as well as its consequences which she distorts and rationalizes, now "able to judge events from others' perspectives" (Childs 130). The story of *Atonement*, Robbie and Cecilia's love and their seeking for happy-ending, is just the last version of many Briony has invented so far. In reality, unlike in her work, the separated lovers do not reunite for Robbie dies of sepsis during the retreat of British soldiers at Dunkirk several months before Cecilia finds her death in the bomb attacked London underground air raid shelter. Nevertheless, the readers of her novel will never learn about this. Given the sentimentality of old age as well as Briony's nearing dementia, she reaches the conclusion that there is no need for her to reveal the real tragic ending to the readers, claiming that the fiction can be in this case more merciful to Robbie and Cecilia's fate: "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" (McEwan 371).

The last significant theme of *Atonement* inseparably linked to the relation between the past and the present is that of the process of writing itself, as well as the constant fight between the imagined and the real. The two Brionies become a metaphor of the narrator: the first Briony at the beginning of the novel, adolescent and very ambitious, is rather untrustworthy with one foot in the world of imagination whereas the second, elderly one at the end of the book, is a professional writer on the one hand, yet fraught with guilt on the other hand. From this perspective, the whole novel can be read as the writer development, for it starts with Briony's play called *The Trials of Arabella* which is absurdly naive and enjoyable at the same time, and ends up as a book she has been writing from 1940 to 1999. What is more, not only does McEwan concern with the role of the narrator or the theme of metafiction that has been made subject of many other writers' novels, but

he also provides an enriching concept which, as mentioned above, crucially changes the perspective – he perceives the novel as one’s personal penance in the form of writing whose narrator uses letters to create something what on account of his or her own fault could not have happened. From this perspective, the whole novel can be seen as Briony’s continuous attempt to atone – first when she follows her sister’s footsteps and instead of studying takes care of wounded soldiers in the hospital, later when she goes to ask for Robbie’s forgiveness by means of revision of her testimony, and finally when she fulfils her literary ambitions in her unpublished book, *Atonement*, and thus turns out to be the fictional author of the entire novel. As a novelist, Briony asks herself the most crucial question whether she can find atonement if the reality does not exist anywhere else than on the pages of her book: “How can a novelist achieve atonement, when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?” (McEwan 371). The answer is simple – she can compare herself to God only within the limits of her fiction: “There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her” (McEwan 371). Briony Tallis can therefore never reach forgiveness, although she does achieve some kind of reconciliation with her past.

As far as the theme of writing about writing is concerned, one cannot ignore the fact that it largely contributes to the novel’s ambiguity. To give the best example, in Part Two, Briony intends to publish her short story, *Two Figures by a Fountain*, where she in fact describes the events from the first part of *Atonement*, in a literary magazine. As a response to her attempt, she receives a letter from Cyril Connolly, the real-existing editor of *Horizon*, in which he advises her to consider revising, regarding particularly the story’s abrupt ending: “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?” (McEwan 312). Supposing Briony followed Connolly’s advice, the whole Part One can be read as a revised version of her short story. This presumption inevitably raises the question, where the difference between reality and the modified fiction is. Can Part Three also be considered to be altered? If so, who can decide, what the original is.

There are many possible readings of *Atonement*: as a war novel, a love story or personal drama of crime and punishment. As far as the final part is concerned, it does not result in catharsis, the author does not absolve his characters of sin nor does he offer any comments on the issue of morals and guilt. It would seem that it is only the surprising twist the novel resonates with most. Nevertheless, *Atonement* leaves a great deal of impressions behind, such as interesting observations about memory and writing, perhaps even about human nature as such.

#### **2.4.2 First Person Narrator vs. Multiperspectival narration**

Following his tradition of focusing on children and adolescents, McEwan employs the traditional first-person narration in *The Cement Garden*, realized by the fifteen-year-old Jack. He stands for a specific teenage narrator who gives his personal opinions on what is happening around him, “maintaining a running conversation with us about how the novel is going (and therefore) creating an illusion of unmediated intimacy” (Ryan 213). As far as his narrative style is concerned, it mirrors Jack’s self-centred personality in a way which can often be called off-putting, yet which manages to absorb the readers into the story, described from a position of someone, no matter how unpleasant that person might be, who is affected by it. Accordingly, an important aspect which evokes the effect of descriptiveness of Jack’s narrative voice – including his being extremely disgusting – is his obsession with details he goes into sometimes in rather odd situations, for instance, when examining his ejaculate: “a little patch of liquid, not milky as I had thought, but colourless” (McEwan 18), when reflecting upon his appearance or, more importantly, when describing the act of having sex with his sister. From this perspective, Jack performs a role of an active participant of the plot, one whose comments are crucial for the readers’ understanding of the text.

It would seem that on account of “the protagonist being deeply involved in the novel’s action” (Malcolm 46), the events related by Jack are credible enough. Yet, on the contrary, Jack is in fact unable to keep distance from the events,

therefore his subjectively tainted voice can be more likely regarded as unreliable. The readers are thus left to fully depend on his perspective which inevitably leads to the lack of credibility based on his noticeably doubtful estimations of various situations. This discrepancy in his perception of things around him is revealed when Jack is confronted with the objective reality in the form of Sue's diary where she depicts several incidents the readers know very little about, such as Jack's aggressive tendencies or his false memory: "Julie talked about her bloke who is called Derek. She said she might bring him home one time and did we mind. (...) Jack pretended he didn't hear and went upstairs.' (...) For several minutes after we argued wearily about what Julie had said at lunchtime" (McEwan 97-98).

Furthermore, the narration in *The Cement Garden* is marked by a certain sense of detachment which is, according to Chalupský, "indirect, unstraightforward" because of its "willingly or unwillingly uninvolved narrator" (6). By means of this narrative strategy the author achieves an interesting effect on the readers who, as Chalupský continues, "find themselves simultaneously within and without the narration" (6). To illustrate these thoughts, not only Jack's moodiness and even catatonic lethargy, but also his language must be taken into consideration. For example, when commenting on his father's death, one would expect his son to show some emotions – at least grief, maybe even, considering the father's personality, a relief – yet, strangely enough, Jack remains somehow distant, impassive and noncommittal, as clear from his impersonal remark: "I am only including the little story of his death to explain how my sisters and I came to have such a large quantity of cement at our disposal" (McEwan 9). The same can be found in his egocentric reaction to his mother's death: instead of mourning because of this sad event, he becomes preoccupied with the fact that his mother appointed Julie to be in charge of the household: "'I'm in charge too,' I said and began to cry because I felt cheated. My mother had gone without explaining to Julie what she had told me. Not to hospital, but gone completely, and there could be no verification" (McEwan 53). Simultaneously, as for the stylistic features of the narrator's voice, Jack has an "informal, everyday vocabulary" (Malcolm 49). On the other hand there are several passages in the book where these simple sentences are

replaced with more sophisticated ones, as obvious from Jack's description of his reflexion in the mirror: "Coloured light through the stained glass above the front door illuminated from behind stray fibres of my hair. The yellowish semi-darkness obscured the humps and pits of my complexion" (McEwan 21). In this sense, it is not surprising that, as a logical result, the readers are incapable of identifying themselves with the uninvolved and somehow unbelievable narrator, nor can they feel any sympathy with the silly and unnatural Jack, as he seems to be, given his unreliability and neutral tone, the author's invention rather than a living person.

In comparison to *The Cement Garden*, the position of the narrator is questionable in *Atonement*. The first three parts are marked by the third-person omniscient narration, while in the fourth part the author switches to the subjective first-person narration – this tendency plays, as mentioned earlier, a pivotal role in the general tenor of the book. What is innovative in terms of narration as well is McEwan's giving voice to several different characters, which enables us to enter their mental processes in a way that almost borders on the technique of stream of consciousness. This is shown in Emily's drift of thoughts, while lying in the bed, about her family, her migraines, her awareness of being unable to act: "Emily successfully resisted the pursuit of this line, and seemed to drift away then, not quite into sleep, but out of thoughts into invalid nullity" (McEwan 66). The convincingness of their inner life, whether the author occupies the mind of a shallow, snobbish, middle-aged woman or an educated young man full of expectations, comes naturally from the text. It allows the author to touch on various motives, such as the sudden awkwardness in relationship between Cecilia and Robbie they both are aware of but none of them knows how to handle, or Briony's hidden aversion and jealousy of her manipulative teenage cousin Lola.

Moreover, as Chalupský observes, these episodic descriptions of the characters' way of thinking are "made substantially more complex through obtaining the same information from various characters' point of view" (7). To give the best example, this tendency is employed when depicting the earlier mentioned fountain scene whose meaning differs crucially in both Briony's and Cecilia's viewpoints. Also, there is a clear similarity in the passage soon after

Robbie's detention in which Cecilia approaches him on his way to the police officers' car, assuring him of her love and trust, while Briony, carefully observing this scene, thinks Cecilia is "delivering the bitter indictment Robbie deserved to hear" (McEwan 185). This narrative strategy is used to the benefit of the readers who are thus free to judge whose perspective can be most likely seen as the plausible one, yet this unstable idyll, along with the readers' expectations and even human emotions in general, is disturbed in the final part of the novel, where the viewpoint and identity of the true narrator is uncovered.

As for the narrative style, Bradford believes that McEwan's narrators (such as the one in *Atonement*) "maintain a modest, learned elegance of manners; their style is unobtrusive yet quietly, sometimes frighteningly, evocative" (18). Indeed, this description well corresponds to the author's choice of the language means; from the stylistic point of view the formal language as well as the accumulation of details contributes to the complexity of the precisely arranged structure of the book. Moreover, in terms of the narrative voice, not only can the narrator be regarded as omniscient, but he also performs a function of the authorial narration, including several predictions and warnings about the future in the text, such as the sentences introducing and immediately following the chapter in which the circumstances of Briony's fatal deed are depicted: "Within the half hour Briony would commit her crime" (McEwan 156) and "Her memories of the interrogation and signed statements and testimony, or of her awe outside the courtroom from which her youth excluded her, would not trouble her so much in the years to come as her fragmented recollection of that late night and summer dawn" (McEwan 173). It is evident that the author uses this strategy in order to manipulate with the readers as well as to show his dominion over the development of the events.

When comparing the narration of *The Cement Garden* and that of *Atonement*, the greatest similarity lies in the fact that both novels are – although in the case of the latter this is not as straightforward as in the first book – told from the perspectives of children, let us say, teenagers. What connects them is the fact that both Jack as well as Briony can be regarded as egotistical, self-absorbed and therefore unable to feel for others. Besides, whether in the first-person or the third-

person, it is for sure that the narrators can be regarded as untrustworthy, as if there were things they would like to hide from the readers or which should remain unsaid. Nevertheless, the novels differ crucially in the degree of the narrators' involvement in the story: whereas Jack as a narrator is uninvolved and strangely unemotional, Briony, on the contrary, participates actively in the novel's action, for she in fact functions as a creator of the story, changing and adding several aspects of it, as explained in the final chapter.

### 2.4.3 Intertextuality

The last significant contrast between the novels can be found in the degree of intertextuality. Although the main idea of *The Cement Garden*, childhood indifference to social norms, echoes "other British adolescent dystopia" (Malcolm 52), *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, the novel itself contains almost no reference to other texts, with the little exception of an untitled science fiction novel of an apparently low quality: "On its cover a great, tentacled monster was engulfing a space ship and beyond the sky was black, pierced by bright stars" (McEwan 35). The tendency of a novel being devoid of any reference to the outer world is used, as mentioned earlier, in order to enhance the effect of isolation and timelessness.

In *Atonement*, on the contrary, the significance of the intertextual references to other literary works, which penetrates through the whole novel, contributes to its complexity as well as to, as Anna Grmelová points out, "multiplicity of meanings in the reader's mind" (154). Aside from "Henry Jones, whose *What Maisie Knew*, along with the *Go-Between* by L.P.Hartley stands behind McEwan's story of an adult's world seen through the eyes of a child" (Childs 130), the best example of how intertextuality is employed within the context of *Atonement* serves the epigraph to the novel, a quotation from *Northanger Abbey* by Jane Austen, which relates to the predominant motif of the book, Briony's crime based on misinterpretation. The author further explains the meaning of the motto in a radio interview with Ramona Koval: "Briony witnesses an event which we've already been party to – that is



Robbie and Cecilia by a fountain – she misunderstands that, her misunderstanding is very much drawn on the literary side from Catherine Moreland of *Northanger Abbey* and her recasting of events around her through the prism of the Gothic novel” (Koval). In the epigraph, Catherine Moreland, the main heroine of *Northanger Abbey*, is criticized for her foolish beliefs in Gothic horrors and mysteries; in other words, her eyes tend to transform the reality so that it fits to her view of the world, “causing a havoc around her when she images a perfectly innocent man being capable of the most terrible things” (Childs 131). Similarly, Briony’s labelling Robbie as a maniac and her consequential testimony of the rape, for which an entirely different man is responsible, are based on what is the probable and expected rather than what she knows to be true: “Her eyes confirmed the sum of all she knew and had recently experienced. The truth was in the symmetry, which was to say, it was founded in common sense. The truth instructed her eyes” (McEwan 169). The common sense is of fundamental importance to Austen’s novels. Considering the final twist, the motto taken from her book can serve as a warning for the readers that they, along with Briony, should not follow their presumptions only. Incidentally, the whole first part can be regarded as a skilful pastiche of Jane Austen’s writings, for it centres on the upper-class family living in the secluded English countryside environment, not mentioning Austen’s characteristic emphasis on hidden passions and conflicts of upper-class society McEwan concerns with as well.

What is more, not only the ones to Jane Austen, but also other allusions can be found in the novel referring to famous literary works – these are, in Child’s point of view, connected with Robbie who “too has a deep relationship with writing and storytelling” (131). When taking a closer look at his room, the choice of the books it is equipped with reflects Robbie’s university education, such as “his third edition of Jane Austen, his Eliot and Lawrence and Wilfred Owen, the complete set of Conrad, the priceless 1783 edition of Crabbe’s *The Village*, his Housman, the autographed copy of Auden’s *The Dance of Death*” (McEwan 93). Besides, the impact of literature on the course of the novel is presented in the scene where he formulates the letter about his sexual fantasies with Cecilia, subconsciously

influenced by, expressively enough, a human anatomy textbook, *Grey's Anatomy*, namely its “Splanchnology section, page 1546, the vagina” (McEwan 94). Another example of this tendency worth mentioning can be traced in Part Two when Robbie, surrounded by the disheartening milieu of war France, recalls the correspondence between him and Cecilia while having been in prison based on transmitting the mutual passion in the form of allusions to well-known love couples: “Some letters – both his and hers – were confiscated for some timid expression of affection. So they wrote about literature, and used characters as codes: (...) Tristan and Isolde, the Duke Orsino and Olivia (and Malvolio too), Troilus and Criseyde, Mr Knightley and Emma, Venus and Adonis. Turner and Tallis (McEwan 204).

As clear from the previous lines, intertextuality plays a significant role in terms of the content and context of *Atonement*, confronting the book with the world of literary texts, enriching the concept of the traditional English novel and, last but not least, declaring the author's deep respect for his eminent predecessors by means of both implicit as well as explicit allusions to their works.

## CONCLUSION

The similarities and differences between *The Cement Garden* and *Atonement* well reflect the developing tendencies of McEwan's literary style. Since the former represents the author's novelistic debut, it focuses on the themes and narrative strategies which were typical for McEwan's then area of interest, that is, childhood-adolescence transition period with its perverted sexual fantasies, anarchism and identity/gender problems on the one hand, and with its spontaneity, open-mindedness and innocence on the other hand. A related theme, the scandalous breach of various taboos, is explored by means of the luridly detailed, macabre voice of the first-person adolescent narrator. What makes the novel stand above McEwan's works of the 1970's is its complexity in terms of the possible readings and interpretations, for example as a social study of a community marked by the absence of restrictions, or as a quasi-romance, a far-fetched love story resolved around the protagonists' socially unacceptable affair. The novel also anticipates some of the author's characteristic narrative strategies, such as the atmosphere of seeming nothingness and escalated tension, and the narration as if from the periphery of vision.

Although several of the above mentioned features can be traced in *Atonement*, namely the author's interest in the child-like perspective of the world, his critical attitude towards the strictly patriarchal oppression with its imposed norms, or his sense of the subliminal tension and the unreliability of the novel's constructed reality, the books differ qualitatively thanks to the author's concern with new themes and motifs. *Atonement* can serve as a proof that McEwan has abandoned his attempts to shock and repel, as well as that he has moved in a different direction since his early works. The most dominant change is represented by the shift of his attention to perhaps more sophisticated (post)modernistic narratives as well as thematic concerns of the twenty-first century literature. By the deliberate switching of narrative perspectives, McEwan explores the theme of metafiction, the role of a writer and his or her pursuit to change the course of the novel, which for him has been till then an unexplored area. This technique allows

him to comment on the interpersonal relations in various situations, stress the importance of the human memory and its impact on one's past/present, and, last but not least, play with the readers' expectations in an inventively surprising way. The novel is also remarkable for its degree of intertextual references. From this perspective, *Atonement* both develops some of the key themes and narrative techniques already dealt with and employed in *The Cement Garden* and, at the same time, adds new ones, which illustrates the author's progression between his early and mature works.

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