

Tereza Zemanová, *Disillusion in Ian McEwan's 21st Century Novels*

MA thesis

Supervisor's Report

The thesis examines six novels of the renowned contemporary British writer Ian McEwan, from *Atonement* (2001) to *The Children Act* (2012), covering the author's post-millennial period. The student sees this phase of McEwan's career as distinguished from the earlier period by the employment of postmodernist elements and experimentation, combined with addressing serious social, political and psychological issues of the present times and raising important moral questions. The analysed novels thus seem to be more complex than the works of McEwan's previous phases, the "macabre" one of the 1980s and the rather conventional one of the following decade. In this sense the thesis studies McEwan's period of full maturity and creative achievement.

The central term with which Zemanová works in her analysis is "disillusionment", a strategy she finds especially pertinent to McEwan's later texts. The term is derived from Wolfgang Iser's commentary, in *The Implied Reader*, on reading as communicative process in which the reader is actively involved and during which expected meanings prove invalid and new meanings must be created to take their positions. It is debatable if this process should be called "disillusionment" (does Iser use this term?) as more than this seems to be included – the specific narrative strategy not only frustrates the reader's expectations but at the same time invigorates his imagination to participate in creating new, fresh, semantic encoding.

The most extended Chapter 3 discusses and analyses three types of this disillusionment. *Atonement* and *Sweet Tooth* are conceived as metafiction and the student focuses on the narrative strategies which first create an illusion of presenting traditional well-established genres, making use of ample intertextual references, and then frustrate the reader's expectations by disclosing the fictional character of what was presented as reality. This strategy imbues especially McEwan's endings with intense ambiguity and readers' uncertainty. Zemanová's reading of these two novels implies that they are intentionally reader-oriented and in this way manipulative. The second type of ambiguity, self-deception, which is best represented by *Saturday* and *Solar*, however, calls for a different type of the reader's participation: the reader is invited to constantly judge the motivation and conduct of

the two egoistic protagonists, Perowne and Beard, and in this way to reflect on his/her own moral standards. These two texts thus, in Zemanová's view, activate the reader's critical skills and moral integrity. If these two novels, unlike the previous two, have this specific function (through their narrative strategy, which is free indirect discourse now), do Iser's criteria of disillusion still apply? Do these texts too work with the reader's expectations and their subversion? Or does disillusionment refer to the characters more than the readers in this case? The same question, it seems, can be asked about the third type of disillusionment, the (inter)personal misunderstanding, demonstrated on two shorter novels of the period, *On Chesil Beach* and *The Children Act*. The problem is thus methodological: is the same presumption valid in all the types of the central term, which serves as a critical clue to the analysed texts, or not?

Whatever the answer to this question, Miss Zemanová's thesis excels in detailed analysis of contemporary literary texts and I have no objection concerning its recommendation for defence. My preliminary suggestion of the grade is **výborně** (excellent).

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