ASPECTS OF CHILDHOOD IN IAN MCEWAN'S "THE CHILD IN TIME"

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Abstract: *The paper presents the various aspects connected to childhood presented in Ian McEwan's 1987 novel "The Child in Time", from childhood dreams to childhood memories, from novels about childhood and textbooks about bringing up children to pathological states connected to it, from losing a child to the miracle of giving birth to one.*
***Keywords*:** *childhood, memory, loss, birth.*

Ian McEwan was born in 1948 in Aldershot, Hampshire, England and is one of several postmodernist writers who graduated in English Literature alongside William Golding and David Lodge. He also took a creative writing course at the University of East Anglia taught by the novelists Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson.

Though he also wrote television plays (*Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration*; *Solid Geometry*; *The Imitation Game* - 1981) and film scripts (after his own *The Ploughman's Lunch* - 1985 or a film adaptation of Timothy Mo's novel *Sour Sweet* - 1988), he is primarily a novelist and short story writer. He was nicknamed Ian MacAbre, not without reason, since his writings centre mostly on dark themes, like deviant sexuality seen in various aspects (paedophilia, incest, rape, transvestism, sado-masochism), but also violence and murder, alienation and indifference. Lately, he has also begun to explore social and political issues and the way in which they determine one's personal life.

The novel *The Child in Time* was published in 1987, and was awarded the Whitbread Novel Award in the same year and Prix Fémina Etranger in 1993. In the centre of the novel we find childhood in all its aspects, from childhood dreams to childhood memories, from novels about childhood and textbooks about bringing up children to pathological states connected to it, from losing a child to the miracle of giving birth to one, surprised in minute detail. "Throughout the novel, McEwan represents childhood as a timeless state, a time of perceived freedom yet prone to violation, as he shows in Kate's kidnapping, and liable to have structure imposed upon it, as he shows through the '*Authorised Childcare Handbook*' of the novel." (Roger 1996: 22)

The novel has as a starting point the loss of a child, Kate, the 3-year old daughter of the main character, Stephen Lewis. She disappeared two years before the present of the narrative, while she was with her father at the supermarket, more precisely at the cash register. Though he had been looking elsewhere for just a few seconds, and all the people in the supermarket looked for the little girl, she could not be found. McEwan records every single detail that Stephen perceives on this occasion, however unimportant it might seem at first sight, presenting minutely his feelings and reactions. He then concentrates on the effect that the disappearance of the little girl had on her parents and on their marriage. In the immediately following period, Stephen started a door-to-door search for Kate, while his wife Julie, a violin teacher at Guildhall and member of a quartet, could not find within herself or elsewhere the power to cope with the tragic loss. She spent all her time at home, motionless in an armchair. At the beginning they did share their feelings, now of hope, then of despair, with each other.

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But gradually, their sorrows separated. Silence became dominant, until they could not bear each other's presence any more. Consequently, Julie retired to a monastery in Chilterns that rented rooms to people with problems, leaving behind a note and her armchair empty. After six months, she returned home, but could not resist there more than several weeks. There followed a break up. She bought a place out of London and moved there. They occasionally write to each other.

Stephen's own life after this becomes unbearable without drink. He spends it at home, in utter misery, with the bottle of scotch at his side, watching the Olympic Games, reading magazines, pretending to be writing when friends invite him to dinner or lunch, but unable to do anything. All the time he thinks mostly of his daughter, remembering her and trying in vain to find any even slight resemblance between her and every little girl he sees on the street, hoping against hope to find her by chance if he was not able to do so in an organized search.

However, his memories concentrate not just on his child, but also on his own childhood. It was spent mostly in warm countries, where his father, a sergeant major in the Royal Air Force, was commissioned. His parents seem to him at times extraordinary human beings, endowed with unique, almost magic qualities. Sometimes, however, he remembers terrifying images of a hateful father and terrible fights between his parents. Their lives, however they might have been, were dictated by the Royal Air Force, who established where they were to live, how they were to arrange their houses, to what schools they were to send their children, to what doctors to go or who their friends were going to be (as they were usually members of the same organization). A childhood dream of Stephen's is mentioned also: that of travelling by train in the cabin of the mechanic, thus being able "to look forward rather than sideways, to see not embankments or back gardens, but miles of metal ribbon spooling in, and railway furniture curving in on collision course to flip by with finely gauged accuracy." (McEwan 1988: 208)

Childhood is much present even in Stephen's adult life in that he is an appreciated author of children's books and a member of an organization meant to compile an authorised childcare handbook that would help in the bringing up of children. As compared to Julie, who is successful in a career that is genuine, Stephen became a writer of children's fiction by mistake. His first book was supposed to be inspired from his tour of Turkey and Afghanistan, taken after graduating University College. Its intended title was *Hashish* and its main character was supposed to be an educated girl sentenced to life imprisonment in Turkey. Lewis began writing a first chapter about the girl's childhood, meaning to contrast it with her subsequent life, but the intended chapter took an existence of its own, developing in a novel about eleven-year old children, placed near Reading. The novel was finished in three months and was entitled *Lemonade*. He took it to the Gott's, where everybody was enthusiastic about it, but considered it a book for children. Stephen did not like that, but the money he received made him accept the label. The novel sold very well, and Stephen continued to write children books.

During the negotiations with the publishing house, Stephen got to know Charles Darke, at that time its editor-in-chief. It was Darke who convinced him to accept to be published as an author for children. Along the years, they became very good friends, and Stephen witnessed Darke's extraordinary progress, from initiator of a

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literature club, editor-in-chief at the Gott's to director of an independent television company, politician, Member of Parliament and minister.

Charles was the one that introduced Stephen into the Parmenter subcommittee of the childcare organization. Stephen does not care about the debates concerning reading and writing that are the primary object of his subcommittee. Actually, his participation in its work is minimal, his only purpose being to *seem* attentive to what is discussed there. While the others talk or listen, he thinks only of the past, and for half of the novel, the action oscillates between the present of the sessions and Stephen's memories that come back to him during these sessions.

Three visits, also connected with childhood, interrupt Stephen's routine, posing him important questions about himself and the others. The first visit he pays is to his wife, in June. Heading towards her house, he finds a place that seems to him extremely familiar, though he realizes that he has never been there. Following the path, he reaches a pub, "The Bell". Outside the pub, there are two black, old-fashioned bicycles. Having the distinct impression that all these belong to another epoch, he approaches the pub and looks on the window, seeing a young couple. The man is talking, the young woman is listening, and looking at them Stephen realizes that they are his parents. The woman looks at the window, without seeming to see him, however, but Stephen faints. He wakes up in Julie's house, they make love, seem to get along well for a while, but then they separate again.

The second visit is to his parents, who are also devastated after Kate's disappearance. When he asks them about the place and the bicycles, his father totally rejects the memory, while his mother tells him several things, though not enough to clarify the situation.

The two visits are followed by a third that he pays to the Darkes'. Some time ago, the charming, educated man, who could succeed in everything he tried, resigned from all his duties, invoking health problems and shocking everybody. His wife Thelma, 13 years older than her husband, lecturer at the Physics Department at Birkbeck, was the one that communicated to Stephen their intention to sell their wonderful house and move to the countryside, giving up their careers. Thelma had wanted this for many years, but Stephen did not realize how she had managed to convince Charles. Now, during this most shocking visit, he has the opportunity to see with his own eyes that actually it was he who convinced her. Charles has a real problem: regression to childhood. The 49-year old man is unrecognizable in his short trousers showing wounded knees, with a catapult in his pocket and with a tree house built at what seems to Stephen a terrifying height. Charles is happy, though completely insane, his wife deals with the situation behaving like his mother and working at her scientific book, but their friend cannot stand the view and leaves them.

These visits that break Stephen's daily "program", without however taking him out of his depression, are followed by some cathartic experiences. The first one takes place in summer. As the committee is on holiday and Kate's 6th birthday is drawing near, Stephen thinks it a good idea to buy a present for his daughter, as if this, by magic, could bring her back. But instead of the one representative and well-chosen present that he intended, he finds himself home with more than fifteen, which seems to him grotesque. All symbolism is destroyed and so is his hope. The second experience happens before Christmas. A driver is taking him to lunch with the Prime Minister, when, looking on the window of the car, he sees his daughter playing with some girls.

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He stops the car, finds the girl in the school nearby, and keeps insisting she is Kate, despite the fact that the school staff, the girl herself and even his own eyes tell him that she is not. Finally, he has to admit he is wrong. It is the moment when he accepts that his daughter is lost forever. Returning home, he sleeps, then reorganizes his life. He moves the furniture, writes to Julie, and even starts working on a new book.

In February, Stephen has to opportunity to clarify the problem of the strangely familiar place, when he spends half a day with his convalescent mother, while his father is away. His mother tells him that was the place where she told his father that she was pregnant with him. The couple was not married at the time, it was during the war, and at the beginning Douglas Lewis seemed not to want the child, which made Claire not want it, or its father, either. But then, while they were talking inside the pub, she saw a child's face in the window, and had the distinct impression that it was the face of her own child. It made her realize that she wanted to have the baby, as much as she wanted to marry Douglas, who, far from not wanting to become a father, was only extremely scared by the new situation he was in.

Towards the middle of March, we find Stephen totally improved. He has given up drinking, and started accepting his friends' invitations, taking Arabic and tennis lessons, and visiting his ill mother. And all this time he has the feeling that a change awaits him, but he does not realize what, despite the fact that he has several visions of Julie trying to tell him something.

While he is alert to surprise even the very first signs of the change that he senses, he receives the visit of one of his colleagues, Harold Morley. Morley tells him that although the Parmenter subcommittee has just submitted its final report on reading and writing, and other subcommittees have not submitted theirs yet, the final report of the childcare committee was made up three months before and several copies were available secretly for certain members of the government. Morley has one of the copies, which he gives to Stephen, advising him to have it published by a newspaper.

The news about the secret textbook, that has made the work of the committee redundant, appears in the press. The book is published and has a huge success. No inquiry will follow to find its "guilty" author. That is because the Prime Minister knows very well who that is: Charles Darke, at the Prime Minister's own request. The leader of the government wanted to be sure that the book would contain the right things. Fragments from this book serve as mottoes for each chapter of the novel. They claim that the father and not just the mother should have a role in the education of a child, that childhood is a privilege made possible by the parents, that those parents who cannot be authoritarian should discipline their children by offering them rewards, that children are selfish because they must survive, or that childhood is like a disease that is cured when the child grows up. The motto of the last chapter states that "More than coal, more even than nuclear power, children are our greatest resource." (McEwan 1988: 205)

The book was the swansong of the promising politician. At Thelma's plea, one March evening, Stephen goes to Suffolk immediately, ignoring the telephone that starts ringing the minute he gets out of his house. Charles is dead. He has committed suicide, being unable to live torn between two opposing desires: to be the successful adult and to be the careless little boy. Probably he had always had some problems since he had chosen to marry a woman 13 years older than himself. Thelma had always tried to find an explanation for his unsolved Oedipus complex. They had frequently talked about it, but Charles had been afraid to really probe into it. His mother had died when he was 12,

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and his father was somewhat tyrannical. But that was not an entirely satisfactory explanation for Thelma, since many people in similar situations develop normally. Moreover, the fantasy of being a little boy that deserves punishment when he misbehaves dominated even his intimate moments. His wife was aware of the fact that at times he resorted to the services of a prostitute whom he required to beat him, while he was dressed as a child and pretended to be her pupil. But Charles also wanted the feeling of safety that childhood brings, the helplessness and liberty that come with it, the idea of not being preoccupied with anything (money, decisions, plans, demands). He was upset because he could not express his childlike qualities in his public life as well. So he begged Thelma to let him be a little boy, which she accepted for him, but also for herself. Thus, accompanied by his wife-mother, he rediscovered the world, and the happiness that the sat isfaction of the simple needs of sleeping, eating and playing can bring. However, with the bad weather, the cares and ambitions of adult life caught up with him. He started to worry about money and to be tempted by advancement in his career. He refused going to a therapist and became worse and worse until he committed suicide, a gesture which appeared to Thelma as a childish one too, like a gesture of revenge on her and on the world that did not grant him his wishes. What is interesting to note is that Thelma is an expert on theories of the nature of time and both her husband and their friend have strange experiences connected to it. Her husband is attempting to reverse time, trying to return to the edenic state, to a period in life associated with innocence, natural simplicity and spontaneity, things that he longs for and that he can no longer find in his adult existence. Marked by a personal tragedy, Stephen steps out of his own time, seeing his parents discussing him before he is born, an experience which helps him get over his loss and anticipates the ending of the novel. Stephen even asks for Thelma's opinion about his "hallucination". Though unable to explain it with the instruments of physics alone, she presents to him her views on the fact that time cannot be conceived as something linear and sequential, coming from the past and going through the present into the future, but as something variable, fluid and inseparable from matter and space.

Charles's case seems to his wife to be the extreme form taken by a general problem. Thelma's phone starts ringing just as they begin discussing Stephen's situation. It is Julie and Stephen leaves immediately, not realizing, however, why his wife is calling him. Still, he has a sense of urgency, and hurries. He takes Thelma's car to the railway station, then a train from which he gets off too early, then a taxi to the right station, only to find that the following train to Julie's place will leave hours later. Desperate, he takes a maintenance train, whose mechanic, smiling when he hears where Stephen is going and when he saw his wife for the last time, takes him in his cabin, thus fulfilling both the writer's most ardent wish since childhood and his present desire. Some time later, walking up the path where his parents discussed their fate about 43 years ago, accompanied by their images, Stephen understands that he had the respective experience in that place for a reason and realizes why Julie wants to see him. "It was then that he understood that his experience there had not only been reciprocal with his parents', it had been a continuation, a kind of repetition. He had a premonition followed instantly by a certainty, borne out by Thelma's smile and Edward's instant understanding of the months, that all the sorrow, all the empty waiting had been enclosed within meaningful time, within the richest unfolding conceivable. Breathless

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as he was, he gave out a whoop of recognition, and ran on up the rise, and along the path that led to Julie's cottage." (McEwan 1988: 211)

In Julie's place he finds a home, quiet and warm, with the door unlocked, and he finds his wife almost about to give birth to their new child. She tells him about her fury when she found she was pregnant, about her desire to have an abortion, then about her sensation that this child was a gift that God sent to both of them. Still, she did not tell Stephen about it until she accepted, with much difficulty, that she would never see Kate again, until she rediscovered the pleasure of playing the violin and the fact that she loved her husband. For the first time in three years, they cry together over Kate's loss and feel deep in themselves the power to change the whole world for the better. "It was then, three years late, that they began to cry together for the lost, irreplaceable child who would not grow older for them, whose characteristic look and movement could never be dispelled by time. They held on to each other, and as it became easier and less bitter, they started to talk through their crying as best as they could, to promise their love through it, to the baby, to one another, to their parents, to Thelma. In the wild expansiveness of their sorrow they undertook to heal everyone and everything, the Government, the country, the planet, but they would start with themselves; and while they could never redeem the loss of their daughter, they would love her through their new child, and never close their minds to the possibility of her return." (McEwan 1988: 214-215)

Only now are they really ready for the arrival of the new child. And, as the midwife is late, Stephen helps his wife deliver the baby, living the richness of the experience to the full. And only when they hear the midwife's car outside, do they wonder whether they have a son or a daughter, and Julie feels under the blankets.

Angela Roger notes that Julie appears as "an archetypal mother-figure, a bearer of future children and comforter for Stephen." She has "the capacity not only to heal herself, to remake herself, but also to heal Stephen, to remake their relationship, and to create a new family through their new child." (1996: 23) She is more a symbolic mother than a real one, but functions as a mother-figure for Stephen, too, in this respect, much like the other feminine character in the novel, Thelma.

It is interesting to note that the new born baby is at the centre (privileged position, granting protection against all evil) of several concentric circles that function as maternal symbols. The first circle is represented by the forest where Julie's cottage is. A source of both life and mysterious knowledge, of shade, water and warmth, the forest appears as a natural sanctuary and a centre of life. Situated in the middle of the forest, there is another feminine symbol, the house. Also a sanctuary, the house is considered at the same time the centre of the world and the image of the universe. It offers refuge and protection, much like the fortress and the temple, and actually, in this case, it functions as both, isolating and protecting Julie from the world for a while, and then being the place where the supreme act of creation and of communion with the divine takes place. The final circle around the baby is Julie's womb, the source of life and maternal symbol by excellence. In addition to that, night, the time when this happens, is a time of germination, a symbol of the unconscious, but also of the virtualities of existence.

Stephen's ascension to Julie's place can be, in its turn, symbolically associated with climbing up a mountain, which is an ascension towards Heaven, a way of getting in touch with the divine figure. The ascension that is not prepared by spiritual means as well has dangers and difficulties, therefore is subjected to failure. Hence, the necessity

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of Stephen's being prepared for this final step before taking it. Thus, the book can also be read as a novel of initiation, all Stephen's experiences leading him and preparing him for this ultimate challenge, the ultimate experience of assisting and helping with the birth of his own child. The fact that they do it by themselves, without the midwife's or a doctor's help, in a house in the middle of a forest, suggests the atemporal character of the situation, and lends them the quality of the primordial family. In this general context, the sex of the child does not even matter any more, which is why we are not given information about it.

As we have seen, the new baby is born when both its parents are prepared for it, when both have accepted that their life must go on even after their tragic loss of another child. It is also to be noted that Julie's hesitations regarding the perspective of becoming a mother again re-enact those of Stephen's mother. Thus, the three instances that associate Stephen with "The Bell", paralleling one another and connected respectively to the conceiving of his second child, his own conception and the birth of his child, seem to anticipate the final event and stress its importance. "*The Child in Time* is not science fiction; there is no question of the kind of 'second chance' that would see Stephen travelling through SpaceTime in order to alter the sequence of events that led to Kate's abduction. However, something very like time travel enables a second chance more familiar to novelistic realism. In one of his experiences of the bending of SpaceTime, Stephen undergoes a phylogenetic journey during which, conceived but as yet unborn, he observes his courting parents and, as he learns later, is observed simultaneously by his pregnant mother. The experience leads, eventually, to a redemptive understanding of a shared sociobiological history, and Stephen is able to occupy a SpaceTime that is haunted by his parents' love for each other and for him, his and Julie's love for each other, and the love they all have for the lost child. (…) The baby (the second – my note) is not a replacement but a repetition with a difference of the biological mystery of love and changeful continuity that signals a shift away from melancholia." (Seaboyer 2005: 26) Paul Smethurst interprets Stephen's experiences in a different way, speaking about their political and ideological implications. "In the chronotopes of postmodern novels, non-linear time and temporal displacement are often integral to the thematic structure and *content* of the novel: they are not just stylistic elements of the novel. Although there are sometimes rational explanations for the reversals of time and time slips in these chronotopes, they are designed to problematise scientific, social and cultural constructions of time, constructions that are associated with western concepts of reality. Non-linear time in particular has a number of political and ideological implications in the postmodern novel. This is most clearly the case in Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time*, where the time of childhood is becoming re-institutionalised as a political act, where one man regresses into childhood, and another man is able to enter a moment of time between his conception and his birth. This is a political novel, and one that recognises time as a persuasive social construction rather than the hard-edged and incontrovertible reality that supports the tyranny of the clock." (2000: 175)

Last, but not least, we should mention that the action of the novel takes place during ten months (from late May till March), but the novel has nine chapters, the number of months during which a foetus develops in its mother's womb. On another plan, 10 is a symbol of universal creation, but also of totality and perfection, while 9 signifies the end of a cycle which is at the same time a beginning on a new level.

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Critics noted that the maternal aspect of women, prominent in *The Child in Time*, is a theme which McEwan had not developed until then, but on which he started to concentrate probably as a consequence of the birth of his two sons.

McEwan himself stated his favourite topics: "I value a documentary quality, and an engagement with a society and its values; I like to think about the tension between the private worlds of individuals and the public sphere by which they are contained. Another polarity that fascinates me is of men and women, their mutual dependency, fear and love, and the play of power between them." As for his style, "I like precision and clarity in sentences, and I value the implied meaning, the spring, in the space between them." (see Matthews 2002)

All these are to be found in *The Child in Time*, which appears thus as a synthesis of the present preoccupations of its author. Besides the various situations connected to childhood, the book also surprises other problems: the beggars, authorized by the government and subjected to various laws, the discussions during the sessions of the subcommittee, the Olympic Games, or the situation of the Prime Minister, incapable of obtaining a minute of privacy in order to talk with his good friend Charles Darke. While these social and political aspects anchor the book in the reality of the 1980's, its preoccupation with various aspects connected to childhood render it universal and atemporal meaning.

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