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Childhood in Selected Novels by Ian McEwan

Bachelor’s Diploma Thesis

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I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently, using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.

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Author’s signature
I would like to thank my supervisor, prof. Mgr. Milada Franková, CSc., M.A., for her kindness and helpful guidance and for the professional advice she gave me. A big thank you to my friends who have always supported me during my studies, most importantly Agáta and Lenka. Největší dík však patří mým rodičům. Za všechno.
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1 INTRODUCTION

Ian McEwan is an author, who certainly should not be put into one category of writers, as the topics and his literary style change with almost every piece of his work. At the beginning of his career, he gained the nickname “Ian Macabre” owing to his choice of topics including murder, death, rape, violence or incest, and his depiction of them as something ordinary. McEwan sees the motives for writing his shocking first stories caused by his childhood introversion and withdrawness. “Like a man who had been alone too long, [his characters] had much to tell” (Mother Tongue).

According to Groes, the early McEwan’s work forms an intricate part of the entire oeuvre and an important foundation without which the later work could not have emerged. It also contains many of the themes and obsessions that he continues to explore, in a more subtle and refined way, in the later works (Groes). Naturally, McEwan’s writing style has developed and become less shocking and directed more to the problems of contemporary society. Even though, the range of his topics is considerable, some of them seem to be McEwan’s favourite, recurring in more of his books. One of these is the theme of childhood.

Since McEwan has undergone significant changes throughout his literary career, so has his approach to the theme and to the child and adolescent characters of his books. For the demonstration of these changes, I chose to compare and describe three novels from different time periods. The dark and gloomy The Cement Garden (published 1978) represents the macabre beginnings of McEwan’s work. It portrays children as unhappy victims of a dysfunctional family, isolated from the outside world. Sixteen years later, McEwan presents childhood in a completely different way, as a celebration of freedom and spontaneity. In his only book for kids so far The Daydreamer (1994), the main
character Peter Fortune lives in an exemplary family background and enjoys the carefree time of his youth. In the last novel examined, *Atonement* (published 2001), all the views of childhood are somehow combined and McEwan skilfully develops the key themes and narrative strategies of his previous works (Chalupský 64).

The thesis is divided into six main chapters. The introduction is followed by the chapter, which briefly summarizes the occurrence of the theme of a child, childhood and upbringing within English and American literature. The next parts are devoted to the novels examined and the treatment of the established topic within them. Each of these chapters includes an introduction of the novel, where a family background is outlined, a brief summary of the plot and an analysis of particular child or adolescent characters. The thesis presents the novels chronologically, according to the year they were published. The last chapter of the thesis concludes the outcomes of the previous parts and compares similarities of the characters from the selected books.


2 CHILDHOOD AS A THEME IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

The childhood as a term is hard to define, mainly from the perspective of its duration. Georgieva claims that psychologists and Children’s Studies specialists agreed that “childhood” refers to a set of experiences and behaviour, characteristic of the earlier part of our lives, meant to prepare us for adulthood and active life (Georgieva). The way the topic is represented in literature depends on changes in society and the conception of childhood itself during different time periods. Certainly, the understanding of childhood varies by class, gender, time and region.

Children have been appearing in literature often and for a long time; first significant examples can be seen in Elizabethan lyrics or in the work by Dryden and Pope. However, as a real and self-reliant theme, childhood arose with the novel and the Romantic Period. During the first half of the eighteen century, children were still perceived as unimportant and useless versions of adults, but in the second half of the century, the common opinion had changed, and the interest in children rapidly increased.

The Romantic writers were influenced by Rousseau, who had promoted his belief that children were originally innocent and important by themselves, not merely as miniature adults (Williams 212). In his poems, William Wordsworth praised mostly the communion between children and nature. For William Blake, the period of childhood represented innocence, although children lost it very quickly, while interacting with adults. Generally, it was believed that childhood was a celebration of pure mind and soul, imagination, sensibility and inborn goodness. Georgieva remarks that soon, childhood became a favourite theme of the sentimental novel and the poverty and misfortunes of guiltless, insightful and virtuous children were an object of considerable
import and frequent discussion in the works of many writers (Georgieva). Whereas the Romantic poets portrayed children in an optimistic background, Dickens and other novelists were mainly focused on the cruelty suffered by the kids from urban England. According to Coveney, “the first novel in the language with its true centre of focus on a child” (127) is *Oliver Twist*. Dickens offered a detailed picture of contemporary society through the eyes of the children in more of his novels. He could be considered a typical representative of the Victorian novelists.

Women writers such as Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, among others, tried to depict sexual discrimination, which was customary at that time. *Jane Eyre*, from the book of the same name, or Maggie Tulliver from *The Mill on the Floss*, had to struggle a lot to assert themselves within society. And yet, for all their hardships, children of both genders were generally perceived as being infinitely happier than their elders. Almost one hundred years after the publication of *Emile*, George Eliot depicted childhood in the same idyllic and nostalgic terms as Rousseau, as Williams observes (213).

The second half of Victoria’s reign brought many social reforms and spread of education. Therefore, more books intended for children were produced. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll, and *Peter Pan* written by J.M. Barrie, both represented the mood of that era, when adults longed to get back to carefree young age. An important representative of children’s literature from the United States was Mark Twain. In his books *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, the children are showed as happy by their disposition, but struggling with restrictions of society.

In the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud influenced authors by stressing the importance of infantile sexuality and Oedipal impulses. By consequent removal of the
Victorian taboos, the child/adolescent in fiction became more complex, realistic and less lovable (Williams 214). For example, *Sons and Lovers* by D.H. Lawrence or James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*, reflected the awakening of sexual desires, and the latter also the Oedipal complex and its influence on the development of a child.

Post-war literature portrayed children and adolescents of various kinds who were very often the narrators of their own stories. *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger can serve as an example. Poems from that time period depicted the children suffering during the war. Moreover, a new kind of books emerged – personal diaries, written by the children themselves (*The Diary of Anne Frank*).

The twentieth century is also the period when Ian McEwan wrote his first works. During the seventies, he published two collections of short stories, and his first novel, *The Cement Garden*, where childhood and adolescence play a huge part. The novel is often compared by critics to William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. In the dystopian story, the children also struggle to establish their own rules in a place without any grown-up authority. During his literary career, McEwan’s attitude to children has undergone a significant change. Byrnes says that babies and children appear in his short stories as remote, vulnerable and victimised (191). That applies to the portrayal of the siblings from *The Cement Garden* as well. Since then, a child is perceived more as a promise of redemption in McEwan’s work (*The Child in Time*) and childhood as a period of endless fun (*The Daydreamer*). The present thesis will deal with three novels from different times of McEwan’s career. Therefore, it will portray the remarkable change Ian McEwan went through when writing about children – from macabre beginnings at *The Cement Garden*, through optimistic stories narrated primarily to his own offspring (*The
*Daydreamer*) towards *Atonement*, considered by many critiques as one of McEwan’s best fictions.

The study of childhood in literature continues up to the present time. Nowadays, children are seen as important predecessors of adults. They are, and probably will be, the subjects of many books and researches. The history of childhood as a literary topic is suitably summarized by Georgieva:

Today, childhood is seen as essential for the critical understanding of the literary production of the nineteenth century and the Victorian period. In addition, the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries saw the steady emergence of a real literature for children, either for their instruction or entertainment. Thus, the child became either the central subject or object of plethora of writings since the eighteenth century (Georgieva).
3 THE CEMENT GARDEN

3.1 Introduction

In 1978, Ian McEwan published his first novel The Cement Garden. The book is gloomy by its atmosphere and McEwan shocked his readers in many ways, for instance by a detailed description of a corpse, its rotten smell pervading the whole house, or by leading his young characters into incest. Although the novel seems to be a very personal story, Jack, the narrator, is somehow detached. Even though he describes everything in details, he usually does not comment or expresses opinions of his own. The language is mostly simple, as the language of an adolescent should be, but frequent examples of complicated structures and sophisticated vocabulary such as “weary admonition” occur, as Malcolm points out (32). Even though McEwan is precise in describing the susceptibilities and sheer awkwardness of an apathetic teenager, he himself admits that his narrative hovers ambiguously between an adolescent consciousness and that of an adult (Williams 218). Since Jack’s age, at the time he writes the story, is unknown, the reader cannot be sure if the story is told by a teenager or retrospectively by a grown-up Jack.

The tragedy of the whole story is deep-rooted in the fact that the family is highly dysfunctional. At the beginning, everyone is bothered by a pedantic father. Later, after the deaths of both parents the household lacks any kind of rules. Neither of these circumstances allows the family to function well, the siblings are irretrievably affected and their story heads towards catastrophe.

McEwan himself lived under the influence of a domineering parent. In his piece Mother Tongue, McEwan confesses his own inability to confront his father. He rather saved all the darker thoughts for his fiction, where fathers are not presented kindly.
Especially the one in The Cement Garden, who needed to have everything under control and without any protests. Owing to his superiority and unkind behaviour, his children have no respect and no feelings for him. The main narrator, fifteen-year-old Jack, even describes the death of his father as an insignificant event for his story and whenever Jack mentions him, it is done with scorn. “He was a frail, irascible, obsessive man with yellowish hands and face. 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” (13). Furthermore, when he sees his father lying dead in the “cement garden”, Jack does not express any emotion. He stares at the dead body for a while, then smoothes away his impression from the fresh concrete. Jack metaphorically erases and thereby appropriates the inscription of his father’s patriarchal power (Wells 35). By this act, he determines himself as the new head of the family.

On the contrary, the Mother from The Cement Garden is depicted as a submissive, calm and loving person. She devotes all her time to housework and taking care of her children. Even though Jack goes through an adolescent revolt and thus does not always treat his mother well, he has some pleasant memories of her.

When I was eight years old I came home from school one morning pretending to be seriously ill. My mother indulged me. She put me into my pajamas, carried me to the sofa in the living room and wrapped me in a blanket. She knew I had come home to monopolize her while my father and two sisters were out of the house. Perhaps she was glad to have someone at home with her during the day (31).

McEwan developed a romantic notion that if the spirit of women was liberated, the world would be healed. His female characters became the repository of all the goodness
that men fell short of (Mother Tongue). Therefore, Jack’s mother seems to be an opposite of the father’s bad character and the children have feelings only for her.

Even though the parents from The Cement Garden do not act ideally, they are important as role models for their children. After they both die, the siblings live practically without rules. When they come to realize it is not functioning well, they subconsciously recreate the family by taking over their parents’ roles. Unfortunately, their immature personalities are not prepared yet to act as grown-ups. After getting as far as having sexual intercourse, an intervention from the outside has to come and return the children back to reality.

Each of the children is in a different stage of childhood or adolescence. The youngest one, Tom, is still a child and later he regresses back into babyhood. Sue is getting into puberty. She is a quiet withdrawn girl, who escapes from reality by reading books, mostly about girls of her age, living better than Sue. Jack already is an adolescent and demonstrates many features of pubertal behaviour – mostly the negative ones as rejection of authorities, general resistance or self-obsession. Julie, the oldest of the siblings, is on the threshold of adulthood. She attempts to act as a grown-up by smoking cigarettes, dating an older man and later by assumption of the mother role. This chapter of the thesis aims to profile all the siblings through the detailed description of the two male representatives. Tom is probably the most peculiar character of the book, constantly trying to find peace in changing his personality. Jack as the narrator is the most important, for the readers see the whole story through his eyes.
3.2 Plot

The story takes place during a hot summer of a non-specified year and it revolves around a family of six members living in a huge old house in the middle of a gradually abandoned area. The family is isolated not only by their location, but also socially. They do not have any relatives or family friends. “There was an unspoken family rule that none of us ever brought friends home,” reveals the narrator, Jack (26). According to Williams, “the greyness of the prose, its almost total lack of imagery, and the absence of cultural and historical reference points all serve to heighten our perception of the drabness and emptiness of an existence seemingly outside time and society” (220). The macabre atmosphere is completed by the formerly cherished garden, now covered in cement.

Both the parents suffer from serious health problems. Soon after the sudden death of the father, the mother is confined to bed. Her illness is not getting better even though she constantly assures her children that she will be better and their “old patterns re-established” (50). The siblings quite quickly adapt themselves and successfully keep the household running. Unfortunately, a few days after Jack’s fifteenth birthday, the mother dies too. The children leave her body in her bedroom for several days, unsure what to do. Afraid of being separated and put into custody, they decide to bury their mother by themselves and not to tell anyone. However, it is impossible to dig outside without being noticed. Jack comes up with the idea to bury the mother in a trunk in their big cellar, and cover the body with cement. The first part of the book ends with this morbid scene and foreshadows the consequences of the children left alone.

Without their mother’s moral guidelines, the children quickly lose the sense of routine, self-responsibility and motivation to communicate with the world outside their
house. Each of them copes with the new situation differently, mostly by trying to escape the reality. The narrator, now fifteen-year-old Jack, who had started to deny personal hygiene even before his mother died, now loses interest in everything, except himself and his body. Jack’s regular day consists of sleeping, masturbating and staring at himself in mirrors. The thirteen-year-old Sue is most of the time immersed in reading novels or she dreams over travel books. She also regularly writes letters to her mum, describing how the siblings cope without her. The youngest brother Tom all of a sudden confesses his wish not to be a boy anymore. With the help of his sisters, he begins to dress himself as a girl. Moreover, he seeks a substitute for the dead mother and finds it in Julie. As the oldest one, Julie takes over the responsibilities but sometimes, too certain of her authority, she becomes quite remote from her siblings. Julie denies the mother role at first, but she succumbs soon and becomes the new mum of the family.

The days seems to blend, Jack is not able to tell the date or what has happened the days before. The siblings live in complete passivity. “[...] the house seemed to have fallen asleep” (82). Their apathy is finally interrupted by a new member from outside – Julie’s older boyfriend Derek. When she invites him over, they finally clean up the house, cook a solid meal and begin to live within rules again. Derek evidently expects some respect from the children. However, no one, except Sue, who is exaggeratedly nice to him, seems to accept Derek as an authority. Jack is jealous and threatened by another man and Tom seems to care only about his new “mum”. Moreover, when Julie finds out Derek is a mama’s boy, she begins to avoid him, and thus he loses the power completely. He no longer corresponds to the dominant male behaviour Julie is used to and expects from a man. Therefore, she does not allow Derek to adopt the role of the father and metaphorically refuses the help from outside. Instead, Julie immerses herself
into the mother role and under her care Tom regresses into babyhood and pretends to be a toddler.

Meanwhile the cement trunk starts to crack and strange smell is blowing around the house. The children try to convince curious Derek that there is a dog buried in the cellar, but he does not believe them and is angry that they constantly lie to him. His toleration reaches its limit when he catches Julie naked in bed with her brother. Derek is furious and decides to find out what really is buried in the trunk.

According to Malcolm, this story is a frightening image of human potential. He does not see the children as evil, but as different from what society and readers are used to and consider normal and moral (36), which is proved by Derek’s reaction. He calls the siblings sick and brings the only possible solution – law to the house. While Julie and Jack continue in making love, Sue informs them that Derek is smashing up the cement coffin, metaphorically, breaking up their private world. The whole story ends while all the siblings are sitting in Julie’s room together, talking, remembering their mother and later peacefully falling asleep. After some time, they are woken up by the lights of police cars.

3.3 Tom

At the beginning of the story the youngest child, six-year-old Tom, is not any different from boys of his age. He is mostly out of the house, playing with a boy from the neighbourhood. He is fixated on his mother and demands attention of the whole family. Seemingly, Tom accepts all the subsequent changes quite well and continues in careless games with his friend. However, after some time, Tom starts to look for ways to
escape reality. For his immature mind, nothing is impossible. He decides to change his gender and later to regress into babyhood.

It is evident that Tom does not get along well with his father. They compete together for the mother’s attention. “I thought about it for a long time. So simple, so bizarre, a small boy and a grown man competing,” Jack remarks (17). When he becomes a semi-invalid, the father loses his self-confidence and consequently behaves more immature than his child. When he realizes that Tom has more attention, he employs his adult superiority and takes it out on him. Williams claims that McEwan’s male characters just cannot cope with a radical change and either stick stubbornly, and childishly, to known ways or else they implode under pressure (223). The father from *The Cement Garden* is another example of a failing parent figure. The result of his behaviour is that Tom is scared of his own father and probably has no deep feelings or affection for him. It is not mentioned that Tom would be sad or miss his father after he died at all.

Tom encounters a school bully and becomes curious about what it is like to be a girl because “he [is] tired of being a boy and he [wants] to be a girl now” (54). He comes to a notion that he can be whoever he wants. And since girls are not beaten, he feels a strong desire to be one. His sisters excitedly help him “change” his gender, give him a wig and girls’ clothes. Jack does not approve of that idea, afraid that Tom will be victimized again. Surprisingly, the children around do not seem to care. McEwan suggests the self-absorbance of children and possible unimportance of gender in early childhood. Tom uses his new identity in games with his friend, pretending to be Julie and Jack or later Julie with Derek. Derek again represents the mirror of society when he breaks the silence and remarks that it is odd for a boy to dress himself as a girl. “It could
affect him in later life, you know,” he addresses Jack (127). Jack stands up for his brother, already not able to distinguish what is normal and what is not.

Tom, as a six-year-old child, is really fixated on his mother. After her death, his days continue as they used to but as Jack describes “As soon as it was dark and we were all indoors, Tom become fearful and miserable again […] He whined and cried about the slightest thing [...]” (68). Tom obviously misses his mother and achieves to find a suitable substitute in his sister Julie. At first she denies this role. Jack describes that she is often irritated with Tom and “Once [Tom] tried to climb onto Julie’s knee and I heard her say as she pushed him away 'Go away, please go away’” (66). Nevertheless, with all the responsibilities Julie takes on her back, she decides to accept her position altogether and takes over the mother role.

When Tom realizes that being a girl is not enough to escape the fearful reality, he simply gives up and regresses into babyhood, a period representing harmony, order and safety.

In the living room Julie was sitting by the table which had dirty plates and frying pan on it. She was looking very pleased with herself. Tom was sitting on her lap with his thumb in his mouth, and round his neck there was a napkin tied like a bib. 'Don’t be so surprised,' Julie said, 'Tom wants to be a little baby' (119). Julie joins Tom in his game and by rejecting Derek she invites Jack to complete their newly created family. The absurdity of the whole situation reaches its climax in the final scene when Tom is peacefully sleeping while his “new parents” are making love next to his crib.
3.4 Jack

At the age of fifteen, Jack struggles with many attributes of puberty. His skin is badly covered with acne, but instead of trying to cure it, Jack decides to completely deny personal hygiene. “I no longer washed my face or hair or cut my nails or took baths. I gave up brushing my teeth,” Jack narrates and contradicts his mother [...] “If people really liked me, I argued, they would take me as I was” (26). Neither negative and disgusted comments from his siblings, nor the death of his mother make him wash himself. As it is quite common for teenagers, Jack needs to oppose the world around him. He does not see the advice, but an attack on his independent self.

Jack finally takes a bath after he notices a strange putrid smell on his fingers. “I found the home medical encyclopedia and looked up cancer. I thought I might be rotting away from a slow disease” (121). Only a fear for his own life forces him to change something. Jack is obviously excessively concerned about his body and rather self-centred. Among his regular daily routine he acknowledges staring at himself in mirrors for hours and frequently masturbating. When Sue accuses him in her diary of being selfish, Jack is surprised. “You never did anything to help. You were always too full of yourself, just like you are now [...] That’s why you want to look in my diary, to see if there’s anything about you in it” (108). Jack is so absorbed in his own world that he is unable to understand people around and participate in the run of the household. His passivity and rude behaviour towards his siblings only deepens the imaginary gap between them and makes Jack even more self-immersed.

Probably the most astounding example of Jack’s egocentrism is demonstrated in the scene just after the death of his mother. She did not manage to tell Julie that Jack is, too, in charge of the household. So when he cries, it is not for the mother but for the loss
of his power. Moreover, the grieving itself is not as important to Jack as the fact of getting the role of a mourner, and thus being somehow special. “I perceived clearly the fact of her death, and my crying became dry and hard. But then I pictured myself as someone whose mother had just died and my crying was wet and easy again” (61).

Jack’s whole attitude towards his mother’s death seems to be quite ambivalent. When his two sisters are crying and holding each other, he feels excluded and wants to join them. However, at the same time he feels a really selfish desire to go and look at himself in a mirror. Moreover, when the siblings manipulate with the corpse, Jack even giggles and laughs. However, McEwan presumably implies that the children are affected and do not get what is really happening, until they are really prepared to bury their mother into the cellar. “When we set her down on the sheet, she looked so frail and sad in her nightdress, lying at our feet like a bird with a broken wing, that for the first time I cried for her and not for myself,” Jack admits (72). The reality suddenly strikes him. The same night, Jack does not want to be alone and takes Tom to his bed. With the mother’s death the last authority leaves the house and the siblings are truly left alone (Kobrlová 17). Their isolation is ultimate.

Since their early childhood, there has been a noticeable sexual tension among the siblings. Jack recalls a game in which he and Julie stripped Sue’s clothes and together they were exploring her naked body. This game stopped when Sue started to be reluctant and Jack himself admits that he does not know why because “[it] was not something we could talk about” (36). The siblings apparently did not get any kind of sexual education from their parents. The mother even attributes all the negative changes in Jack’s life to masturbation and scolds him for it. “You are going to do yourself a lot of damage, damage to your growing body.” (35). Jack is at the age when his sexuality
overwhelms him and does not have anyone to consult. Moreover, living in isolation results in the sexual longing towards his own sisters. “I worked on myself rapidly. As usual, the image before me was Julie’s hand between Sue’s legs” (23). Furthermore, when Julie takes over the maternal responsibilities, Jack’s Oedipal desires transfer mainly on her and he is naturally jealous of her boyfriend.

Jack intends to take over the role of the father, but Derek proves him that he is not prepared to become an adult yet. When he takes Jack to play pool, he metaphorically takes him into the world of grown-ups. Jack feels powerless and humiliated there. He even starts to cry and runs back to the safety represented by their home. Unfortunately, Julie is also too young and immature for entering the grown-up world, thus their recreated family is predestined to fail. However, by passively waiting for the police, in the final scene, Jack and Julie show that they have successfully negotiated their Oedipal paths and that they are mature enough to accept the consequences (Wells 36).
4 THE DAYDREAMER

4.1 Introduction

Children appear in Ian McEwan’s fiction quite often, however *The Daydreamer* is the first and so far his only book primarily aimed at them. In 1985 he translated an Italian picture book for children about the sorrows of the Holocaust written by Roberto Innocenti - *Rose Blanche*. For a collection of McEwan’s own stories the readers had to wait until 1994, after he experienced the world of children from a parent’s point of view. McEwan dedicated this book to his two step-daughters Polly and Alice and his two sons William and Gregory. In an interview with Annalena McAfee he reveals that it was Alice who asked him to write down some stories he had made up for her on a holiday (21). Moreover, McEwan wanted to get back and write some short stories again.

*The Daydreamer* is different from McEwan’s other books not only by the target audience, but mainly because of the optimistic atmosphere pervading each of the stories. The portrayal of a happy and well-functioning family is unexpected and new for McEwan’s work. However, the book bears a relation to some of McEwan’s previous works of a similar topic (*The Child in Time*, 1987) and anticipates *Atonement* (published 2001). Hence, *The Daydreamer* could be understood as a link between McEwan’s earlier work and his masterpiece (Chalupský 58).

The chapters are quite short, with uncomplicated grammar and familiar expressions suitable for young readers. Each story includes a moral message set into everyday life situations every child can experience. According to Chalupský, the aim of the book is to emphasize and celebrate the crucial role of the child’s imagination and to show how often it can be misunderstood by adults (64). Even though it is a book for children, *The Daydreamer* got its credit among adult readers too. On the example of a
boy stricken with enormously vivid imagination, grown-ups can better understand what is going on in the head of a child of this age.

4.2 The Plot

The whole book revolves around a ten-year-old boy named Peter Fortune and his harmonious family. Peter’s parents Viola and Thomas Fortune are caring and understanding, he gets along quite well with his younger sister Kate, and the picture of their idyllic family is completed by an old black cat named William. The book itself is divided into seven interlinked chapters which follow two years of Peter’s life. The stories shift between dreams and reality. Due to Peter’s excessive imagination nothing is impossible and he is happy in his own world, but very often misunderstood by adults who consider Peter to be a “difficult” child (1). Always silent, lost within various adventures in his mind, Peter looks suspicious and inattentive for them:

Of course, Peter’s parents and his sister Kate knew that Peter wasn’t stupid, or lazy or bored, and there were teachers at his school who came to realise that all sorts of interesting things were happening in his mind. And Peter himself learned as he grew older that since people can’t see what’s going on in your head, the best thing to do, if you want them to understand you, is to tell them (9).

As McEwan implies, the imaginary gap in understanding between kids and adults is caused mainly by the lack of communication. Peter does not think himself to be different; he sees the problem in a lack of understanding on the adult side.

The first story called The Dolls is probably the darkest one due to its atmosphere. Peter imagines himself to be chased by a group of his sister’s dolls,
magically brought to life. One of them is really ugly and both children are afraid to throw it away in case it comes back to take its revenge. This so-called “Bad Doll” represents evil within the story and keeps the reader excited. On another level this story is a metaphor of Peter’s relationship with his younger sister Kate. “Ambivalence between them is strong and Peter is aware of both his love and hate at different times” (Byrnes 72). Peter and Kate share a room together. Even though they divided it by an imaginary line respected by both of them, at this age it is impossible to avoid quarrels and getting on each other’s nerves. Fortunately their parents intervene soon enough and each of the siblings gets a room of their own. After his moving out, the old room starts to represent Kate herself for Peter. “When he breaks the taboo and enters her [Kate’s] room in her absence, his guilt is at once transformed into a paranoid feeling that the dolls are looking at him with hostility and disapproval” (Byrnes 73). Peter’s unconscious lets him know that he will have to provide Kate with more privacy. They are both getting older, mature and the differences between their opposite genders will be more and more apparent.

*The Cat* is the first of three stories in which Peter leaves his body and becomes someone or something else. In this one he swaps himself with their cat William. Apart from exploring the world from a perspective of an animal, Peter helps William get back respect and power over the cats from the neighbourhood, and come to peace before this old pet passes away. Simultaneously, this story is also about dying. The loss of a pet is painful but by creating a nice family funeral for the cat, McEwan shows to Peter that dying is a natural process of life. Therefore, he softly prepares young readers for presumable losses of friends or family members in their future. Furthermore, this story is pointing out how easily a group of individuals can arouse aggression. William’s duel
with the younger Tomcat illustrates the power of a crowd. According to Byrnes, territory and status need to be approved and ratified by the group (75). McEwan repeats and emphasizes this fact to Peter in one of the later stories, when he is confronted by a school bully.

Peter’s unavoidable heading towards puberty is clearly visible in chapter three - *Vanishing Cream*. Peter is bored and fed up with his family and longs for a change of any kind. When he finds a jar of vanishing cream, he immediately acts. McEwan plays with the contrast here – he makes Peter admit that he loves his relatives and at the same moment lets them disappear for good. “There was no doubt in Peter’s mind that he loved his mother dearly, and that she loved him [...] But he had made his decision, and she had to go” (43). Step by step he puts the magic cream on his mother, dad and sister and makes them all vanish. Peter is happy with his newly gained independence, but after a while a wave of panic and helplessness strikes him. He overhears that there is some slimy creature upstairs and gets frightened. Peter looks for help to his father, then his sister but no one is around so he hides himself in the only safe place - his bedroom. Peter runs away from the previously desired change back to the old and familiar hospitality represented by his room. When he wakes up from this daydream he is really relieved that everything is back to normal. Peter is maybe one step closer to maturity but evidently not prepared to step into adulthood yet. He still needs his parents and the feeling of safety they represent for him.

In the fourth chapter *The Bully* Peter has to confront the school aggressor Barry Tamerlane. Once again (as in *The Cat* story) Peter discovers that the bully is not in fact a single person but it is a crowd that holds the real power. In his speech, Peter opens the eyes of the kids standing around. “We’ve dreamed him up as the school bully. He’s no
stronger than any of us. We’ve dreamed up his power and strength. We’ve made him into what he is” (58). Thanks to Peter they are finally able to see that Barry’s dominion was just a projection of their own fear and the bully is now completely powerless. Byrnes recognizes even more than a children row within the story. There is always some kind of a relationship between the victim and the aggressor. And if one of them refuses to play the game, the roles are inverted as one can see in Peter’s victory over Barry. Here McEwan revisits his evergreen themes of evil and sadomasochism in the common and comparatively innocuous setting of the school playground (78).

The chapter *The Burglar* bears features of a detective story and offers a lot of space for Peter’s imagination. There are several break-ins in the neighbourhood and the police cannot catch the thieves. Peter decides he will be the one who solves this problem. In his naive mind the only evil he can imagine is embodied in Mrs. Goodgame, a grumpy old lady who does not like children and who regularly shouts at everyone who dares to come close to her house. She is probably the only bad person Peter knows, therefore she is the only person capable of a crime. In his dreams Peter surprises Mrs. Goodgame during a burglary into their own house. He lets her leave without punishment but under the promise that Mrs. Goodgame returns all the stolen things and that she will not continue in the burglaries. In reality, Peter sleeps through the break-in and the real thief is not revealed.

In chapter six called *The Baby* Peter swaps his body with his cousin Kenneth and for the first time he experiences jealousy towards another boy. Peter’s aunt Laura moves in for a while and her toddler immediately becomes the centre of everyone’s attention. Kate has to let off her room for them and move into Peter’s. It is hard to accept that Peter is already not the only boy in the household. Moreover, it seems impossible to
escape from Kenneth’s presence, the child is just everywhere. Peter’s tolerance reaches its limit when Kenneth swallows his precious gem. Kate decides to punish Peter for his anger. With her magic wand she puts Peter into the baby’s body, to teach him a lesson. Surprisingly, Peter starts to enjoy being a baby again. “Peter rediscovers the lost world of part objects, discontinuous time and the frustrations of trying to make benevolent giants understand the non-verbal communications of baby. He also relives the delights of immediate experiences” (Byrnes 80). Peter is highly immersed into discovering the world around. All the food tastes better and everything is more interesting for him. After this experience, when he is back in his body, it is easy to empathise with Kenneth. Peter’s jealousy is gone. Furthermore, this story can be seen as another example of the concept of the inner child which appeared in a few of McEwan’s works. Peter had to discover his inner baby to understand Kenneth and children in general.

The last story called The Grown-up portrays the obvious change Peter has gone through since the first chapter. The book begins when Peter is ten-year-old boy, thinking only about the present and how to enjoy it, and ends when Peter is almost twelve and fully aware that soon he will step into another period of his life and become more mature. Peter enjoys holidays on the Cornish coast having fun with other kids when he more and more starts to notice the only older girl Gwendolin. Later in his dream Peter is transformed into an adult-self, falls in love with Gwendolin and together they explore the grown-up life which Peter previously described as boring and without any fun:

Peter suddenly grasped something very obvious and terrible: one day he would leave the group that ran wild up and down the beach, and he would join the group that sat and talked [...] How could he be happy at the prospect of a life
spent sitting down and talking? Or doing errands and going to work. And never playing, never *really* having fun (97).

Gwendolin represents the imaginary bridge between childhood and adulthood. Before Peter kisses her, they both have to go through a dark tunnel which represents the danger of secrets and sexuality (Byrnes 81). But Peter does not aspire to explore these paths now, he is dreaming about his twenty-one-year-old self and he comes to realize he will be able to live an adult life. Love and a relationship with a woman will be his reward for growing up and giving up childhood. When Peter wakes up, his opinion about adult life has changed: “There were things they knew and liked which for him were only just appearing, like shapes in a mist. There were adventures ahead of him after all” (103). By going back to play with “The Beach Gang” Peter indicates he is still in his boyhood period but the adult world, which was so distant for him in the first chapters, is now more clear and understandable. Peter is no longer scared of what will happen in the future.

### 4.3 Peter Fortune

The narrator and main character of *The Daydreamer* is Peter Fortune. Within the book he is ten years old but the preface reveals that the whole story is written by his adult self. It is believed among the critics and readers that Peter is a child version of McEwan himself. According to Byrnes, more of McEwan’s male characters can be viewed as approximate equivalents to his persona:

These are shy, repressed, unhappy and often orphaned boys and confused adolescents who grow up to be troubled but sensitive men and eventually shed their complexes, find a strong masculine identification, show conspicuous
intellectual development, and achieve affluence and high social status ... Peter Fortune is the only boy lucky enough to escape major traumas, and seems to represent an ego ideal (188).

Obviously, there are some details in Peter’s life which resemble the life of McEwan. They are both overloaded with imagination and they both grow up to be writers. As McEwan emphasizes, having a great imagination is an important feature of each personality. Being deeply immersed into one’s dream world could be seen as an attempt to isolate oneself from the world around, but in fact it should be seen as the way of exploring the ways to connect with people around. McEwan thinks that “it is a crucial part of one's sanity to imagine things other than they are. The ability to imagine yourself as someone else must be at least part of the basis of morality. Behind cruelty must lie a failure of the imagination, of empathy” (McAfee 21). Therefore, McEwan enables Peter to see the world through the eyes of a cat, baby or an adult person.

During the interview with McAfee, McEwan also reveals that he gave Peter Fortune all the things that he himself missed at his age. Back in his childhood the communication with parents was more difficult (21). Peter seems to have caring, almost ideal parents. There is no doubt he loves them, as he himself admits. “Now, there was no-one in the world Peter loved as much as his father, except his mother. And it was as clear as sunlight that his father loved him” (44). But what comes with age, the older he is the more rebellious he appears to be. Fooling his mother that he is ill, swearing in front of the baby Kenneth and getting rid of his whole family by the vanishing cream. What could also strike the reader’s attention is Peter’s writing about his parents in their full names. “Viola Fortune mumbled something that sounded like a yes [...] all that was
left on the grass were Thomas Fortune’s reading glasses” (43). Though, when Peter addresses his parent, he calls them Mum and Dad like all the other children of his age.

Owing to similar character features Peter is often compared to Briony from *Atonement*. However, Peter’s childhood is by no means marked by his parents’ neglect like Briony’s childhood is, thus his isolation and fantasies are strictly bound to his own world and never interfere fatally with the outside world (Chalupský 59). Peter’s imagination is a great gift, but unfortunately it comes with disadvantages in the form of being misunderstood by the people around him.
5 ATONEMENT

5.1 Introduction

Atonement is a tragic story of a novelist, who attempts to atone for a mistake she made as a child. Briony Tallis, as the youngest of three siblings, lives surrounded only by adults, and struggles to understand their world. She finds a consolation in reading books and writing her own fiction, where everyone acts according to her will.

Seemingly, the novel is told by more characters. In fact, there is only one omniscient narrator, who turns out to be Briony. Often, she enters the story and adumbrates some of the forthcoming events. McEwan thereby deprives the reader of a moment of surprise, yet he makes him more immersed in the reading and focused on how it all will happen. The language is quite variable, each of the characters is distinguished by a different style of speech and vocabulary. At the beginning of the book, Briony’s attempts to use more sophisticated words only make her look ridiculous. Her excessive effort to enrich her writings by new terms, demonstrates Briony’s naivety and infantility.

Literary critiques have agreed that Atonement represents a turning point in Ian McEwan’s career. As Finney points out, the book stayed at the top of the best seller lists of the New York Times for many weeks, and was greeted by most book critics as a masterpiece (Finney). According to Hidalgo, it was inevitable that as he grew older, McEwan would leave behind the cool analysis of incest, sadism, and abjection that had gained him notoriety and would explore the power of evil in twentieth-century European history (83). Atonement really is quite different from McEwan’s previous work, mainly by its complexity in narrative techniques, and variety of themes in the background of the war.
The story revolves around the Tallises, who represent a traditional upper-middle class family of that time, having a huge estate and their own servants. However, the Tallis clan is far from being a well functioning family. Primarily, due to the fact that both parents are somehow absent. The family structure is patriarchal and father seems to be truly respected and important for the members of the family, as it is evident from Briony’s description: “[…] his presence imposed order and allowed freedom. Burdens were lifted. When he was there, it no longer mattered that her mother retreated to her bedroom; it was enough that he was downstairs with a book on his lap” (122). Unfortunately, those moments are infrequent. Jack Tallis is mostly in London, carrying out his duties as a senior civil servant.

The mother, Emily Tallis, is present in the house, nevertheless, she suffers from recurring migraines so she spends most of the time locked in her bedroom. The conversation between the two older offspring Cecilia and Leon nicely portrays the common state of the household: “‘Emily’s lying down.’ […] ’And the Old Man’s staying in town? ’ 'He might come later’” (48). Coming back home, always means to get back to the accustomed roles.

There was nothing new in the arrangements and [Cecilia] was not distressed. […] Briony had always required mothering from her older sister […] She had not thought it would be so easy to slip into the old roles. Cambridge had changed her fundamentally and she thought she was immune. No one in her family, however, noticed the transformation in her, and she was not able to resist the power of their habitual expectations (103).

Jack Tallis is absent even from the story itself, whereas Emily’s personality is described directly in chapters devoted to her. It is obvious that the children do not take
the mother seriously enough; Emily’s dominance is only pretended. “Whenever Mrs Tallis exercised authority in the absence of her husband, the children felt obliged to protect her from seeming ineffectual” (127). Emily might support Briony in writing on one hand, but otherwise does not fulfil her maternal role at all. Briony must find her woman model in her older sister Cecilia, who has not a good relationship with their mother either. Emily does not encourage her in getting education; she would rather see Cecilia married. Probably, due to her social rank and society of that period, Emily has quite conservative beliefs, portrayed also in her attitude towards Robbie, son of their cleaning lady. She does not approve paying for his education, because she does not approve any movement between the social classes. When Robbie is accused of committing a rape, Emily is not surprised. It is just the type of behaviour she would expect from a man of the working class. On her example, McEwan refers to the problem with class distinction. No one would ever suspect the real attacker, Paul Marshall, who comes from a good family. Paul represents the kind of a modern figure who often escapes critique, even though he is probably the darkest character of the whole book (D’Angelo 103).

From the beginning, it is clear that Emily and Jack Tallis both live in different worlds. However, they respect each other and pretend their relationship is harmonious, to set an example for their children. Even though Briony feels to have a lack of attention from them, it cannot be said that she is completely neglected. Her parents encourage Briony in the writing career and she is financially secured, having everything she needs and wants. Nevertheless, the parent-child support must have some borders. When Briony falsely accuses Robbie, “they chose to believe the evidence of a silly, hysterical little girl. In fact, they encouraged [Briony] by giving her no room to turn back” as
Cecilia describes (209). The Tallises are probably aware that they do not pay enough attention to their children. When they want to make it up for Briony, they cause a catastrophe. By an exaggerated encouragement of Briony in her inventions, they manage to destroy the lives of more than two people in love.

5.2 The Plot

_Atonement_ is divided into three parts and ends with an epilogue. The first part, which is significant for the thesis, is set in the country estate of the Tallis family, and narrates the events of one crucial hot day in 1935. Thirteen-year-old Briony expects the arrival of her three cousins Lola, Jackson and Pierrot, who will be staying with the Tallises until the Quinceys sort out their marriage crisis. Briony, as a prospective novelist, has just finished writing her very first play _The Trials of Arabella_. She intends to employ the cousins and perform it for her older brother Leon, who will arrive later in the evening.

Cecilia, Briony’s older sister, has returned home after graduating from Cambridge. She runs into Robbie, the son of their cleaning lady, who grew up with the three Tallises siblings, financially supported by their father. Cecilia is not able to get Robbie out of her mind and finds his presence highly irritating. They have a row during which a priceless family vase is broken and some shards fall into a fountain. To humiliate Robbie, Cecilia refuses his help, takes off her clothes, and jumps into the fountain to collect the broken pieces. Then, she leaves him there, without saying a single word.

Briony accidentally observes the whole scene from her bedroom window, trying to take advantage of the opportunity and make a story out of the incident. Nevertheless,
she is confused because “the sequence was illogical – the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal” (39). When Cecilia strips herself, Briony’s fairy-tale scenario vanishes and she comes to the conclusion that Robbie is a manipulator, having some power over her sister. Briony does not understand what has just happened. However, she realizes that her fairy-tale books are no longer able to give her a plausible explanation.

Briony had her first weak information that for her now it could no longer be fairy-tale castles and princesses, but the strangeness of the here and now, of what passed between people, the ordinary people that she knew, and what power one could have over the other, and how easy it was to get everything wrong, completely wrong (39).

Moreover, she foretells the upcoming events. This fixed idea in Briony’s head then causes a great change in the lives of everybody involved, including her.

After the fountain scene, Robbie is invited to a family dinner by Leon, who has just arrived from London, accompanied by his friend Paul Marshall. Robbie feels awkward, so he decides to write Cecilia an apology for his former behaviour. While writing the letter, Robbie realizes his feelings for her, and adds an obscene ending to the text, expressing his sexual desires towards Cecilia. Then, he rewrites the whole letter, and prepares himself for the evening.

Lola, Jackson and Pierrot, needless to say, do not act according to Briony’s commands, while rehearsing her play. The disillusioned girl gives up all the practising and goes to wander outside, immersed in her thoughts. She meets Robbie, who asks her to pass his letter to Cecilia, to give her enough time for reading it, before he arrives. After Briony takes the letter, and runs away, Robbie realizes that gave her the wrong,
obscene version. Out of curiosity, Briony reads the letter and she is shocked and dismayed. Together with Lola they label Robbie as a “maniac” (119).

When Cecilia sees the letter, she finally becomes aware of her own feelings and lust for Robbie. While making love in the library, they are interrupted by Briony. Cecilia and Robbie walk out of the room, without saying a single word, and leave Briony confused. Again, she misinterprets the scene, now as a violent act towards her sister. Briony is speechless and considers it her duty, to protect Cecilia from this man.

Later, during the dinner, the Tallis family finds out that Pierrot and Jackson have run away. They split and search for the boys outside. Briony witnesses Lola being raped. Due to the darkness, the man is unrecognized and she convinces both herself and Lola that it must have been “the maniac”. Now that she finally gets everybody’s attention she desired, Briony does not hesitate and testifies against Robbie. “’You saw him with your own eyes.’ ’Yes. I saw him. I saw him’” (181). As a proof that Robbie really is a pervert, she shows everyone his inappropriate letter for Cecilia. When Robbie comes back, having found the lost boys, he is arrested.

The second part of the novel is set in 1940 and narrated by Robbie, who is released from prison to join the army. Through the letters, he keeps in touch with Cecilia, who works as a nurse and has abandoned her family for believing her foolish little sister and not accepting Robbie’s innocence. Cecilia’s letters help him to stand all the cruelties of the war. The section ends with Robbie, terribly wounded and falling asleep in Dunkirk, one day before the evacuation.

The third part of Atonement shifts the reader back to Briony, now eighteen-year-old woman. She refuses to study at university and enters the nurse training instead. Working at the hospital, full of war-wounded men, teaches Briony a lesson. Moreover,
she is aware now that the real rapist is Leon’s friend, Paul Marshall. Unfortunately, the legal exculpation is impossible. Paul has married Lola, who would never speak against him now. Briony finds out Cecilia’s address and decides to visit her. Surprisingly, Robbie is there with her sister, but neither of them seems to be able to accept Briony’s apologies. At least, they agree that Briony will write an explanatory letter to their parents.

The last part of the book takes the reader to the year 1999, and reveals that the whole story is a fiction, written by seventy-seven-year-old Briony Tallis. Her novel is a testimony of a crime she committed as a child, thus based on a real story. Unfortunately, life does not favour the two lovers. Cecilia and Robbie do not see each other after the war. Robbie dies in 1940 in Dunkirk and Cecilia is killed three months later, during the bombing in London. Diagnosed with vascular dementia, Briony knows that this version of her novel is the final one. She atones for her mistake by reuniting her sister with Robbie, at least within the pages of her novel.

5.3 Briony Tallis

Throughout the novel Briony emerges at three stages of her life. Firstly, as a thirteen-year-old girl, overwhelmed by her imagination, then five years later, growing up into a woman and getting experience from real life in a hospital for war-wounded, and at the end of the novel as a seventy-seven-year-old author of the whole story. Briony’s passion for writing is presented from the very first pages. The reader is able to follow her literary development from folk tales, written when she was eleven, through melodrama, to modernist Two Figures by a Fountain and finally realist fiction, the novel
itself (Hidalgo 85). The paper focuses on the first part of *Atonement*, where Briony is on the margin of childhood and adolescence.

Briony’s life seems to be quite uneventful and isolated, mainly from children of her age. Owing to her vivid imagination and curiosity, she finds her passion in writing, which allows her to experience whatever she wants. Briony is highly encouraged by her parents and siblings, when they “began to understand that the baby of the family possessed a strange mind and a facility with words” (6). She regularly reads for them in the library and demands “her family’s total attention as she cast her narrative spell” (7). When Briony performs, she is no longer the shy withdrawn girl. She feels to be successful and good in this activity. However, as a naive girl, Briony does not understand that her family is not an objective audience. Yet, she uses writing to draw attention of them or the adults in general and sometimes even to manipulate people around her. One of the examples is a hidden message inserted in the play *The Trials of Arabella*. Briony therein indicates that her brother Leon should give up his “careless succession of girl friends” (4), find a serious relationship, get married and live according some rules, preferably those Briony knows from the fairy tale world.

Briony’s personality is formed by exaggerated imagination that originates also in the fairy tale books she reads. She immerses herself into those simple stories because they represent order and harmony for her. Fairy tales are predictable, with everything divided into good and evil, and everything making sense in the end. The same principles Briony transfers into her own stories, where “all fates are resolved and the whole matter sealed off at both ends” (6) and “her heroines and heroes reached their innocent climaxes and needed to go no further” (9). In Briony’s world, everything must be in order, and if not, she tries to re-establish it. From the initial pages of the book, it is
obvious that she is quite different from her mostly careless and playful peers. “She was one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so” (4). Briony’s excessive need of order is firstly expressed in the neatness of her room and strengthened by apparent lack of order shown by other family members. “Whereas her big sister’s room was a stew of unclosed books, unfolded clothes, unmade bed, unemptied ashtrays, Briony’s was a shrine to her controlling demon [...] Briony’s was the only tidy upstairs room in the house” (4). Naturally, she tries to establish some order, whenever it is possible. Chalupský mentions that the need for a certain order as the source of a feeling of security and comfort is natural, if not necessary, for each child. However, Briony’s obsession exceeds the borders of naturalness and her acts have disastrous consequences. She is not able to distinguish between reality and imagination (62).

Escaping from reality deep into one’s mind is a feature Briony shares with Peter Fortune from The Daydreamer. They both live within their imaginative worlds, unable to understand adults. However, Peter is still in the period of childhood, therefore, he keeps his daydreams only for himself, and does not need to interfere outside world. On the contrary, Briony meddles into the lives of people around her, not thinking about the consequences. She just selfishly wants to be seen and accepted by grown-ups.

Surrounded mostly by adults, Briony longs for being accepted and taken into their company. Much more so, when she meets Lola, who is only two years older, but has already promoted herself to a grown-up woman. Lola tries to behave and look like an adult, she wears make-up, jewellery and uses rose water. She persistently distinguishes herself from her younger brothers and Briony, thus pointing out their childishness. When Paul Marshall wants to talk about the problems within her family, she asks him “not to talk about [it] in front of the children” (59).
Before meeting Lola, Briony does not have anyone who would help her handle all the changes coming with her age. Her mother Emily is always in her bedroom and Cecilia has her own problems. Besides, she is absent from home during the school year. Again, books are Briony’s only guide for life, and her imagination the only place where she can find all the needed solutions. When she realizes that Lola is the first and only girl close to her age, who could be her eligible mentor for the adolescent period, Briony tries to get along better with her. She begins to see Lola as her model. “[Briony] should have changed her dress this morning. She thought now she should take more care of her appearance, like Lola. It was childish not to” (35). Briony feels that she already is at the threshold of adolescence, which demands some changes in her manners and behaviour. However, a few pages later she demonstrates that she does not pass the imaginary border into the grown-up world yet, when she wipes her dirty hands on her white dress, as only a child would do.

Another part of Briony’s upbringing where the Tallises have irreparably failed is her sexual education. In Emily’s old-fashioned view of a family there are quite a lot of topics, which cannot be talked about. When Briony opens Robbie’s letter, she is shocked, because:

She had never heard the word spoken, or seen it in print, or come across it in asterisk. No one in her presence had ever referred to the words existence, and what was more, no one, not even her mother, had ever referred to the existence of that part of her to which – Briony was certain – the word referred (114). Confronted with adult sexuality probably for the first time, Briony is not able to unravel what is happening between Cecilia and Robbie. Therefore, she cannot understand the scene by the fountain and stays speechless by the obscene letter. The final highlight is
the sex scene in the library, which Briony’s infantile mind sees as a brutal act on her sister. There are no such incidents in her fairy-tale fictional world. When Robbie does not conform to the notion of what she expects of a prince, he immediately falls into the category of a villain (Chalupský 61). Thereafter, according to good and evil principles, he must be punished and order and safety of the family re-established.

Briony’s desire to have some drama in her life and her childish inability to empathize completes the disaster, initiated on that certain day in 1935. When she labels Robbie as the villain, Cecilia becomes the victim and Briony falls upon the role of the heroine, who tries to save the whole family.

She must first protect her sister against him, and then find ways of conjuring him safely on paper. Briony slowed to a walking pace, and thought how he must hate her for interrupting him in the library. And thought it horrified her, it was another entry, a moment of coming into being, another first: to be hated by an adult [...] to be the object of adult hatred was an initiation into a solemn new world. It was promotion (157).

Briony sees the whole situation as turning point and the longed-for acceptance into the company of adults. At this point, she does not think about the effects her act would have upon her sister and Robbie. It does not matter that the villain hates her, Briony will save her older sister and be admired. And really, when Briony testifies against Robbie, she finally has attention of everyone. As the only witness of the crime, she is essential for the investigation and irreplaceable for the adults around. Briony finally feels to be accepted among grown-ups. At the end of the day she declares that “her childhood has ended” (160). However, it will take her more time to mature. Briony loses her naivety and fully grows up later in the story, when she works as a nurse and
sees all the men ruined by the war. There “she learned a simple, obvious thing she had always known, and everyone knew: that a person is, among all else, a material thing, easily torn, not easily mended” (304). Neither her writing, nor her imagination is able to give her back her sister Cecilia.

Whether Briony honestly believes in Robbie’s guilt, or not, is up to the reader’s consideration. According to Wells, self-conscious fictionalizing can result in a denial of truth in favour of the projection of wilful self-delusion. Briony brought on false claim against Robbie because of her exaggerated sense of her own interpretive powers as a neophyte author (99). Finney agrees that it is less a lie than a misconstruction of the adult world she has been observing with the predatory eye of an aspiring novelist (Finney). Briony is excited to finally have some real events to write about, a drama of her own, so she gets carried away easily. At this point her vivid imagination is a Greek gift and she is not the only one to blame for the subsequent tragedy. Cecilia and Robbie do not give Briony any explanation of their behaviour. Unfortunately, it is totally up to her how she interprets their actions.
6 CONCLUSION

McEwan strongly believes in fiction as a medium improving our understanding and treatment of one another. He reflects this belief in his work by presenting scenarios where his characters grapple with moral choices, and are placed in hands of the reader for ultimate judgement (Wells 21). Right from the early age, McEwan’s characters must face a lot of inconvenience. He does not spare children and adolescents anything, maybe because of the fact that his own childhood was far from easy. Therefore, McEwan lets the children act in order to be judged as adults are. Maybe except Peter from The Daydreamer, whose behaviour is almost exemplary and every problem is solved and averted, resembling the world of fairy tales, where Briony from Atonement often escapes.

As was mentioned before, in each book examined in the paper, McEwan treats the children and adolescents in quite a different way. However, there are certain aspects which are similar, and some parallels among the characters can be found and compared. One of the connecting motifs is a problematic family background. It seems that the parental figures do not really know how to treat their children and how to handle the changes coming with their age.

In The Cement Garden, the parents establish a patriarchal structure, with a submissive mother and a despotic father. McEwan admits that his early prose was influenced by the situation within his own family. “The drunkenness distressed [mother], but she never dared challenge him. She was always frightened of [father], and so was I. When I came to early adolescence, I was like her, too tongue-tied to face down his iron certainties” (Mother Tongue). The parallel with the siblings from The Cement Garden is obvious. They do not have any respect towards the father, however, they
hardly dare to contradict him and passively accept the rules set. The Tallis family situation is far from flawless, too. Again, the structure is evidently patriarchal, with a weak mother, who tolerates her husband almost everything, even a mistress. However, the Tallises are absent from the lives of their offspring only due to their own fault. Jack Tallis gives preference to his career and Emily Tallis is hiding from the world in her bedroom. The family depicted in The Daydreamer is almost idyllic and in a huge contrast to those previously mentioned. For once, McEwan is optimistic about the world around and the book really differs from all his work. Probably after experiencing parenthood on his own, McEwan comes to the conclusion that it is possible to have a contended family and he tries to communicate this to his young readers.

The lack or the absence of the parental figures unconsciously drives the adolescents to adopt new roles and become the grown-ups too early. Again, there is a resemblance between The Cement Garden and Atonement, where the oldest sisters Julie and Cecilia take over the maternal function and indicate the importance of a mother within the family. However, both girls are too young and not ready to become mothers yet. It is inevitable for them to lapse somehow. Cecilia is unable to explain her behaviour towards Robbie to Briony and help her little sister to gain insight into the adult world and sexuality. Even though she tries, Julie is still too young and she demonstrates her childishness in many ways, mainly by denying the help from the adult world, represented by Derek. Peter from The Daydreamer does not need to take over an adult role, but when he tries to transfer himself into an adult, he realizes that he is not yet ready either.

One of the recurring topics of McEwan’s work is also the longing to return into one’s childhood, or become aware of one’s inner child. Both Atonement and The
Daydreamer are retrospective writings of two adult authors, who cast their minds back to their childhoods, each for a different reason. The presumable motive for writing The Daydreamer is to remind the author himself, and maybe other adults of the fine lightheartedness and contentment of the young age. Atonement is an act of dealing with a mistake the author made as a child. Furthermore, the two main characters, Briony and Peter, are quite similar in their personalities. Being withdrawn and abundant in imagination, they resemble not only each other, but McEwan himself. In an interview with Wiegand, McEwan confesses that he was also a rather intense, intimate child, shy in groups, however, rather expressive when he was with another person. “I just have a memory of myself, too, and in some ways I was like Briony (the young would-be writer at the heart of Atonement) - not the conceited showoffy part, though” (Wiegand).

In The Cement Garden Tom gets back in time literally. Threatened by reality, he regresses into babyhood, the age associated with a passive accepting of the outside world and having no worries or troubles. McEwan demonstrates on Tom’s example that the period of childhood or babyhood is often seen as safe and peaceful. However, Peter is bullied by his class mate Barry and Tom is threatened and beaten by one of the older kids from his school. Therefore, McEwan simultaneously deconstructs this idea by portraying of how violent and evil children can be, mainly towards one another.

Each of the main characters from the three novels seems to be rather self-centred, which is probably related to their age. Peter Fortune is the youngest, according to his age, still a child. Even though he demonstrates some concern in people or animals around him, most of the time he lives immersed in his imagination and does not care what happens in the world outside. In his mind, he creates his own interesting events, which he does not need to share with anyone else. Contrariwise, Briony is concerned
with her surroundings probably way too much, longing to have everything under control. Besides, she constantly attempts to get back the attention of adults, which she probably used to have as a little child. Nevertheless, Briony is almost ten years younger than her siblings, and as the baby of the family, she is not taken seriously among the grown-ups. Briony is self-involved and so focused on her task that she is unable to empathize with people around. One of the examples is presented right on the initial pages, when Briony does not care about the feelings of her cousins. Even if they are confused or sad, she pictures only herself being admired by the whole family, when showing them her play. Wells observes that the failure to recognize one’s responsibility for others is the first step towards violence and oppression and McEwan frequently uses the characters in these dramatic encounters as object lessons of the negative consequences that come with choosing self-interest over caring for the others (15). Briony is therefore punished for the rest of her life. The novel itself is her attempt to do what she failed to do at the time – to project herself into the feelings of Cecilia and Robbie, whose lives her failure of imagination destroyed (Finney).

Jack is probably the most self-centred of the characters discussed. Basically, he is only engaged in his body and watching all the changes puberty breeds in him. Sometimes, Jack attempts to participate in the course of the household, to communicate with his siblings. However, most of the time he does not bother himself with what happens outside his room or their house. Jack’s remarkable self-immersion makes him incapable of understanding people around him and therefore he is unable to integrate himself even within his own family.

The paper demonstrates that Ian McEwan generally portrays his children and adult characters in quite a similar way. The most evident outcome of the analysis I
consider to be the importance of a good family background and a smooth child-parent relationship, which McEwan implies in more of his stories. Briony is perpetually haunted, by her childhood mistake, because she lost not only her sister, but also her substitute mother Cecilia. The siblings from The Cement Garden are unable to act according to morals and expectations of society, since they do not have any model figures present. Their future is not known, but the readers can assume it will not be a marvellous one. On the contrary, Peter Fortune, who grew up supported by loving parents, always fully at his disposal, seems to have grown up into a contended man. As an author, he looks back to his childhood happily, perceives this age as such a cheerful period of his life that he even wants to share it with the readers. McEwan’s vision of childhood is obvious. Parents play a major role in the early age of an individual and their absence or insufficient guardianship could have unchangeable consequences and influence children for the rest of their lives.
WORKS CITED

Primary sources


Secondary sources


RÉSUMÉ

Childhood is a recurring topic in Ian McEwan’s work. The aim of the thesis is to examine and describe McEwan’s treatment of childhood and adolescence in three of his novels – The Cement Garden, The Daydreamer and Atonement. Each of the books is from a different period of the author’s career, therefore they are optimal for comparison and demonstration of the change in McEwan’s approach to the topic.

The thesis is divided into six main chapters. The introduction is followed by the chapter, which briefly summarizes the occurrence of the theme of a child, childhood and upbringing within English and American literature. The next parts are devoted to the novels examined and the treatment of the established topic within them. Each of these chapters includes an introduction of the novel, where a family background is outlined, a brief summary of the plot and an analysis of particular child or adolescent characters. The thesis presents the novels chronologically, according to the year they were published. The last chapter of the thesis concludes the outcomes of the previous parts and compares similarities of the characters from the selected books.
RESUMÉ

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá přístupem Iana McEwana k období dětství a dospívání v románech Betonová zahrada, Sníleek a Pokání. Knihy jsou analyzovány jednotlivě a řazeny chronologicky dle data vydání. V poslední kapitole jsou pak hlavní hrdinové jednotlivých románů srovnáni a práce poukazuje na změnu v přístupu ke zkoumanému tématu v různých fázích autorovy spisovatelské dráhy.

Práce je rozdělena do šesti hlavních kapitol. Po úvodu následuje stručné shrnutí tématu dětství v britské a americké literatuře a připomenutí nejznámějších děl od romantismu až po literaturu současnou, kam patří i Ian McEwan. Následující kapitoly jsou věnovány jednotlivým románům. Každá z knih má svou úvodní podkapitolu přibližující samotné dílo a nastiňující rodinné zázemí jednotlivých hrdinů. Dále je popsán děj románu a po něm následuje samotná analýza dětských a adolescentních postav.