The intensity of the event: the impact of Ian McEwan's distended moments in 'Atonement,' 'Saturday' and 'On Chesil Beach'

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The Intensity of the Event

The Impact of Ian McEwan's Distended Moments in

Atonement, *Saturday* and *On Chesil Beach*

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Abstract

Ian McEwan has been a prolific and highly successful author – both critically and in the popular market – since the 1970s. Over that time his work has not remained stagnant – his style morphing as he explored different literary concepts and techniques. McEwan's early works gave him a 'shock horror' label – those who read his early short stories and novels came to expect the repugnant base elements of humanity (such as murder and incest) that filled his pages.

However, McEwan's style has indeed altered with time, and this thesis argues for a 'late' McEwan style – that found within his early twenty-first century novels. These novels – *Atonement*, *Saturday* and *On Chesil Beach* – marked McEwan's entry into the mainstream, and with this came a new signature technique. This thesis closely examines these three works, exploring the advent of the 'McEwan distended moment'. Each novel contains (at least) one pinnacle scene in the telling of which McEwan expands the moment, swelling the narrative time duration and acutely focusing readerly attention on the mind of the focalised character in their moment of personal crisis or import.

Utilising an in-depth structuralist approach to technical textual analysis, combined with theories of narrative exploration of character consciousness, and narrative time theories (specifically the work of Gerard Genette), the nature of these distended moments is closely examined. This thesis argues that McEwan engages elements of traditional novelistic, modernist and postmodernist techniques in order to produce a new (perhaps unique) combination during these pinnacle scenes. Specifically, it is revealed that in these distended moments, the realisation of *slowed scene* aids the

in-depth exploration of character consciousness (an expansion of the modernist 'flow of consciousness') within the moving moment of personal consequence.

Originality Statement

'I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, or substantial proportions of material which have been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at UNSW or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgment is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom I have worked at UNSW or elsewhere, is explicitly acknowledged in the thesis. I also declare that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, except to the extent that assistance from others in the project's design and conception or in style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged.'

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Contents

A Note on Referencing

The first reference for each of the three main works studied in this thesis – Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, *Saturday* and *On Chesil Beach* – will be footnoted as per all other references. Following this, all further references to these three works will occur in text rather than as footnotes. Page numbers will be bracketed, and will be preceded by the initial(s) of the appropriate text as follows:

A = Atonement

> Example of use: "quote" (*A*16)

S = Saturday

> Example of use: "quote" (*S*16)

CB = On Chesil Beach

> Example of use: "quote" (*CB*16)

Introduction

With his first collection of short stories published in 1975, Ian McEwan has been writing for over thirty-five years and in that time his style has not remained stagnant. Over the course of these years McEwan has written and published many works, including six screenplays, scripts or librettos for film, television or the stage, two children's books, two collections of short stories and eleven novels. This regular writing allows us to map the changes over his career thus far, and such an analysis reveals a pattern of change and growth in McEwan's personal style. In order to eliminate as many of the variables as possible, I have chosen to limit my study to a single literary genre – McEwan's novels (all but the most recent of which (*Solar*) were published before my final writing stages) – in order to isolate the changes in his adult fiction literary style. I believe McEwan's novelistic style can be broadly split into two eras – pre-*Atonement* and *Atonement*-onwards. Jack Slay, writing in the pre-*Atonement* era, describes McEwan's early style as a writer creating "dark portraits of contemporary society, writing to expose the haunting desires and libidinal politics that lurk beneath the façade of an everyday world."[1] Slay places McEwan alongside such contemporaries as Martin Amis and Salman Rushdie as a descendant of the "Angry Young Man generation of the late 1950s… who present mordant, even vicious, views of modern society… [They] repudiated and ridiculed tradition and, simultaneously, also questioned, in usually angry terms, the new society that emerged in postwar England."[2] Slay insists that although McEwan's writing – littered with 'strange' sexual fetishes, stalking, murder, incest,

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[1] Slay Jr., Jack. *Ian McEwan*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996. p. 1.
[2] *Ibid*, p. 3.

rape, and torture, among other unpleasant elements – could be repulsive because of his "desire to startle the reader,"[3] he was not merely a 'shock horror' writer because the "shock value is reflective of the world itself."[4] Peter Childs agrees that the start of McEwan's career was defined by his being "one of the *enfants terrible* of a new kind of writing that was emerging in the 1970s."[5] Childs singles out McEwan and Amis as the "mavericks"[6] of this generation, yet he goes on to claim that, while Amis continued on this outrageous path throughout his career, McEwan "developed in the 1990s into a serious and contemplative novelist, whose first book of the new century, *Atonement* (2001), places itself firmly in the mainstream literary tradition running from Samuel Richardson… through Jane Austen… to Henry James… and beyond."[7] Childs believes that what has remained constant in McEwan's novels throughout this transition is not the macabre, but the obsession with "delineating individual reactions to moments of crisis and presenting the tenderness and brutality of relationships without sentimentality."[8] This, I believe, is in parts both correct and firmly debatable. Although McEwan often details relationships in a somewhat detached manner, I believe the sentimentality of Cecilia and Robbie's relationship in *Atonement*, as well as the love of the family shown by Henry in *Saturday* refute the idea that McEwan never treats love and tenderness with sentimentality. However, I do agree with Childs' belief that the constant throughout McEwan's shift in style is his revealing how individuals cope in moments of crisis, or pivotal moments, in their lives.

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[3] Slay, p. 7.
[4] *Ibid*, p. 5.
[5] Childs, Peter. *The Fiction of Ian McEwan: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. p. 1.
[6] *Ibid*, p. 1.
[7] *Ibid*, p. 2.
[8] *Ibid*, p. 6.

I will expand Childs' contention a step further and assert that McEwan's work demonstrates an obsession with the mind of an individual in the moment, and it is through this that the secret aspects of humanity continue to linger in his later works. It would be simplistic to pass over the complexities of McEwan's oeuvre in order to claim that McEwan's early work concerned itself purely with the macabre – murder, incest and mayhem – while his later works, showing 'a maturity' in the man as well as the writer, have left this *enfant terrible* fascination behind in order to centre upon 'proper' subjects such as 'normal' people. This would be overlooking the subtleties of McEwan's transformation in style – true, the shocking subjects have moved away from the foreground (though story elements such as rape, terrorism and sexual abuse still feature in his later works), but McEwan is just as fixated as ever on detailing how a character deals with a pivotal moment in their lives. In his *Atonement*-onwards novels, the reader is allowed access to the mind of the character (through a first person narrator) in the pivotal moment as the action is moving. The character is not narrating, and therefore not censoring his or her thoughts – we are allowed this glimpse into their minds in the moment of crisis, and therefore we are given an honest (and often confronting) picture of their humanity. Instantaneous, intimate thoughts – whether flooded with sexuality, paranoia, racism or bigotry – are all delivered to us with immediacy as we read. A character's actions may be self-censored, their narration would definitely be so, thoughts can even be censored within the mind after they are initially realised – but those initial thoughts are always the most raw, the most secretive and the most true. These thoughts reveal the uncensored aspect of humanity and it is in this way that I believe McEwan has continued his interest in exposing the secretive interior of the human brain – the grimy

cogs and wheels beneath the shining clock face, the crumbling interior behind the gleaming façade.

While this legacy remains, McEwan's style has obviously matured as he has found less blatantly confrontational ways of dealing with provocative subject matter. His early novels focused on one sordid element of humanity – that is, the novels were almost solely about this unpleasant element, and once it had been played out the story was over. McEwan is now more subtle in his delivery – writing styles that may have scandalised in the 1970s through their freshness cannot do so today because of their familiarity, because of our saturation with these styles. Just as the film *Psycho* may have scared audiences in its day due to the novelty of such a horror film, those who are overexposed to terror elicited from the horror films of today – undoubtedly vastly more gruesome and terrifying – cannot be so frightened when looking back on Hitchcock's film. Provocative horror has a short life span, as it relies on the element of surprise. One must come up with newer and scarier ways of telling stories in order to keep alarming an audience. McEwan's early novels, read now, seem somewhat simplistic, while attempting to beat the reader over the head with the offending theme. In order to survive as a successful author, McEwan had a choice – to either develop new ways of scandalising and astounding a jaded readership, or to take his writing style in a new direction – he chose the latter. Interestingly, it was through stepping outside of what he was familiar with and what had thus far made him relatively successful – through appearing to abandon his shock horror past and step into the mainstream – that he really 'arrived' as one of Britain's top novelists. I believe his success stems from what he brought with him from his old style – transforming it and casing it in order to give it more subtlety and thus

make his readership work harder. In this way, with *Atonement* McEwan had developed a more complex style of novel.

McEwan has always been preoccupied with 'the moment' – that is, with a moment of crisis which is pivotal for a character both within the story and within their own life. It is through these moments that McEwan exposes humanity by exploring how the character deals with this situation, or what it means to them in the scheme of things. Through his implementation of key themes there has always been at least one pivotal moment in each of McEwan's works – a sort of climax in a broad sense – the act of murder in *The Comfort of Strangers* and *Amsterdam*, the incestuous moment of sex and the burying of the mother in cement in *The Cement Garden*, the chopping up of the murdered man's corpse in *The Innocent*. Over time, though, McEwan has developed these moments – not simply describing the action and allowing the uncomplicated nature of the appalling event to impact the reader, but instead giving the moment more importance in the telling. That is, McEwan began to alter his narrative style to suit the importance of the event; the event was given precedence through its narrative rather than just through its story elements.

This development can be seen in the novels *The Child in Time*, *The Innocent*, *Black Dogs* and *Enduring Love*. The first of these novels really demonstrates the beginning of McEwan exploring how the time of an event can appear to slow down or speed up for a character depending upon how important that event is to them – that is, McEwan uses one small scene in *The Child in Time* to explore the theory of the relativity and plasticity of time. Dominic Head explains that this novel is an explicit example of the author exploring the "popular discourse of the new science, especially…

the form mediated for general consumption by Stephen Hawking and others."[9] Head refers to a specific scene where the protagonist, Stephen, sees through the window of a café younger versions of his parents arguing, when his younger mother looks up at him. Later, Stephen's mother tells him that she and Stephen's father had long ago had an argument about whether or not to abort their unborn child (Stephen) when she looked up to see what she thought was her future child looking at her through the window. Head explains that "McEwan here employs the post-Einsteinian conception of the plasticity of time and space to allow his protagonist to intervene in the past and secure his own future."[10] Indeed, this is a brilliant example of McEwan's exploration of the scientific possibility of the fluidity of time in terms of order. However, this time-travelling event does not serve to mimic, in terms of narrative time duration, the relativity of time we all feel on a daily basis, and it is this relativity of duration that I will focus on, as it is this that McEwan exploits in the key scene (or scenes) of his later novels.

McEwan does not pick the obvious scene within which to explore duration in *The Child in Time* – the novel is about how a man deals with his life following the abduction of his young daughter, so the obvious scene would be the abduction from the supermarket. Instead, McEwan explores the relativity of time during a car crash as experienced by the central focalised character, Stephen. In this first foray into time theory, McEwan does not bend the narrative retelling much beyond the description of each part of the crash, except to allow us small glimpses into Stephen's mind as he notes how time feels slowed. The narrator explicitly remarks (telling us how Stephen felt) that

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[9] Head, Dominic. "Beyond 2000." In *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. p. 235.
[10] *Ibid*, p. 235.

"the rapidity of events was accommodated by the slowing of time."[11] Following a detailed description of events the narrator again reminds us that this occurred "in this slowing of time."[12] Explaining his reasoning behind a split second decision to release the breaks, Stephen feels that "it was as if he had just completed a monograph on the subject" – a process suggesting a lengthy weighing-up of options – yet "time was short, less than half a second."[13] Immediately following the accident, Stephen enthuses through third person narratorial thought reporting that "[t]he whole experience had lasted no longer than five seconds. [His wife] Julie would have appreciated what had happened to time, how duration shaped itself round the intensity of the event."[14] In this scene, then, McEwan is exploring the idea that time is relative to the moment, and that an intense event can warp and stretch it. The narrative duration, despite its detailed description of each moment of action, is not stretched beyond the story time duration, as the story time itself – as the narrator so obviously keeps reminding us – is also stretched. That is, Stephen feels like time is drawn out, therefore the narrative text fits this slowed duration. This scene marks the beginning of McEwan's references to the relativity of time felt by characters within pivotal moments, yet these ideas in *The Child in Time* are very schematic and imposed on the narrative discourse – an intrusion rather than innately or intrinsically part of the narrative.

In his next novel, *The Innocent*, McEwan begins to expand upon the idea of the relativity of time. The pivotal scene for the protagonist, Leonard, is not the fight that results in his girlfriend Maria and him killing Maria's ex-husband in self defence, but the scene that follows where the lovers realise they must cut up the body in order to

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[11] McEwan, *The Child in Time*. London: Vintage Books, 1992. p. 100.
[12] *Ibid*, p. 100.
[13] *Ibid*, p. 101.
[14] *Ibid*, p. 102.

smuggle it out of the apartment in a suitcase to avoid being caught. During this scene McEwan parts from his usual punctuation convention of speech marks to denote speech. Instead, for this scene only, the lovers' speech is marked purely by italics and so flows through from the narration without punctuation:

> *I know*, she said, meaning, *I share your question, I share your worry*. Or perhaps, *You've asked me this already, and I heard you*.[15]

This is a technique borrowed and adapted from William Faulkner who, in *The Sound and the Fury*, used italics as a narrative technique to denote something other than a title or a stressed word (the traditional uses of italics), allowing the italics to indicate shifts in time. McEwan, appropriating the technique, uses it here to denote the lucid flow of words and brain function. McEwan's italics are not only applied to the spoken word, but also to thoughts, allowing speech to drift into cognition and vice versa – a technique which has a distancing effect for the reader who cannot grasp at a delineation between the two processes in this fluid world. Instead of clear delineations between speech, thought, action and narration, each runs into the next until a fluid fog is cast over the scene where the 'real' or the 'truth' of what happened is pushed aside in favour of the fog and numbness felt by Leonard. This detachment from time is shown through the narrative telling – allowing the reader to experience Leonard's haziness concerning 'reality'. This scene in *The Innocent* thus again explores the warping of reality – the

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[15] McEwan, Ian. *The Innocent*. London: Vintage Books, 2005. p. 149

relativity of time – through an experimentation with textual markers within the narrative discourse.

McEwan's next novel, *Black Dogs* again privileges a single pivotal scene amongst the elements of a detailed plot and subplot – a scene given prominence by its reference in the title of the novel. Not the lead character this time, but instead the woman he is interviewing – June – is the character through whose eyes we witness this pivotal scene, a moment which scared her into believing in God. Walking in the French countryside in 1946 with her newly wedded husband, Bernard, June wanders further down the track on her own while Bernard remains behind. Around a bend she encounters two big, black dogs which slowly notice her, stalk her, pounce on her, and one of which she stabs to free herself. The dogs run away before Bernard has seen them, and so this experience is entirely her own. We later find out these were probably dogs trained by Nazis to rape women, and so the horrific nature of June's encounter is compounded. It is in this scene that McEwan really explores the nature of a mind in action during a moment of crisis. Through third person narrated thoughts we are privy to June's every thought as she attempts to calm herself and find ways to avert danger. During the scene the narration never backs away from June's mind – we are with her in every moment as we are delivered in full-sentenced form her thought processes as they flit from one fearful thought to another. These detailed thoughts occur in-scene – action markers like "[t]he dogs kept to their mutinous advance"[16] are littered throughout the text to keep us in the moment. Yet such action markers are designed specifically for their limitless time – who knows how long the dogs continued to advance mutinously? They could have done so for one second or three minutes, thus allowing the full

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[16] McEwan, *Black Dogs*. London: J. Cape, 1992. p. 147.

thoughts of June to fit within any time frame. The immediacy of the situation keeps us fearful and in the moment just as June is, but the narrative time duration has not been noticeably expanded here to accommodate her thoughts – the thoughts merely occur in a sort of untimed moment where the time could be any length within reason. Such untimed thoughts occur regularly in fiction, where a character may think a myriad of thoughts as they carry out a continuous, untimed activity such as walking – the walk may be twenty seconds or five hours long and, if so, the thoughts detailed over, perhaps, four pages of text are expanding, contracting or fitting the scene exactly, yet we cannot know which as the action has not been marked by specific time. McEwan is thus using the traditional novelistic technique of allowing a reader detailed access to a character's mind, but he is now applying this access to an intense moment of crisis rather than a traditionally languid activity.

The last of McEwan's pre-*Atonement* novels to show an interest in a character in a moment of crisis, and the effect this has on how that character feels time, is *Enduring Love*. This novel is slightly different from those that came before in that it is narrated in the first person by the character experiencing the past, and it is written in the past tense – in reflection. The immediacy of the event is thus removed; we cannot see Joe's thoughts in the moment – only his reflection on an important event that was traumatic at the time and has since changed this life. *Enduring Love*, then, is the precursor to *Atonement*, where an elderly writer details the traumatic events of her youth. The novel opens with Joe's description of the key scene. He frequently interrupts the action to explain the psychology behind what happened in each second, the background to why he was there in the first place, or to make ominous statements about the doom that this event would bring down on his life. The action, then, seems to stutter

as he starts and stops in his telling of the dramatic events of a child stuck in a hot air balloon, many men running to help anchor it, all-but-one letting go when a gust of wind sweeps the balloon off the ground, and that man falling to his death. The event itself is thus detailed in fairly equitable, or *scene*, narrative time duration[17] punctuated with pauses for description, and it is these pauses which McEwan experiments with as a means of dramatising the scene by delaying reader gratification. Joe describes how "[t]hose one or two ungrounded seconds occupy as much space in memory as might a long journey up an unchartered river,"[18] and yet the scene is never expanded to detail his thoughts in the moment – rather, it is his thoughts in reflection that pause the action. Thus here McEwan is yet again experimenting with another way of conveying the importance of a scene through the narrative – not merely allowing the actions to speak for themselves, but heightening the tension through narrative manipulation techniques.

The idea of 'the moment' is important to McEwan's writing, and this can be seen throughout his body of work. For McEwan, 'the moment' is significant both aesthetically, as exhibited through his textual emphasis and manipulation (especially of narrative time), and philosophically, as a portal through which he can craft narrative, narrator and character developments and implications. Of course, he is not the first to consider 'the moment' so highly – the modernists were obsessed with it. Leon Edel explains that "[t]he psychological [modernist] novelist attempts to arrest a moment of time at every step even as it flees before him."[19] 'The moment' was the impossible ideal of modernism – these writers (such as Woolf in "Kew Gardens", *Mrs Dalloway* and *To*

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[17] Meaning the narrative time duration more or less equals the story time duration (rather than elongating or summarising it). This is a term I have borrowed from Gerard Genette – an important conceptual source whose work I will further draw on and explore later in this introduction (see 'Time Theories', page 34).
[18] McEwan, *Enduring Love*. London: Vintage, 2006. p. 13.
[19] Edel, Leon. *The Psychological Novel: 1900-1950*. New York and Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1955. p. 146.

The Lighthouse, Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury*, Conrad's narrative crisis moments in *Lord Jim*, and Joyce's theory of the "epiphany"[20] as exemplified in his collection of short stories, *Dubliners*) were forever attempting to crystallise 'the moment' in writing, while remaining perfectly aware of the 'utter futility' of their task. Edel explains that these writers, in "trying to capture "the moment" – say the fall of a flower" begin to "question whether the moment ever existed."[21] One could describe the past leading up to the moment, one could describe the future leading away from it, but a single moment seemed impossible to capture.

Postmodernism largely left this 'pointless quest' behind – preferring to abandon temporal concerns (such as the pursuit of the arrested moment of time) and instead forge ahead through the terrain of space. Fredric Jameson explains this "predilection for space" amongst the postmodernists as a generational reaction against modernism.[22] This neglect of the temporal in favour of the spatial resulted in a lack of concern for arrested moments – for the slowing of narrative time duration to explore a minute detail of story – and thus, as Kathryn Hume explains, resulted in the speeding up of narrative time as a characteristic of postmodernism.[23] Of course, McEwan nods to the modernists in his pursuit of 'the moment', yet it is probably a sign of his postmodernism that he actually forces into representation what the modernists could not. While the modernists (like Conrad) told us 'he is going to jump' then switched straight to 'he had jumped', McEwan manages to write 'he jumps'. In drawing out his narrative time during these swelled scenes, McEwan can describe, in finite detail, what the modernists could not –

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[20] Examined in Edel, p. 144.
[21] *Ibid*, p. 147.
[22] Jameson, Fredric. "Conclusion: Secondary Elaborations." In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. p. 365.
[23] Hume, Kathryn. "Narrative Speed in Contemporary Fiction." *Narrative*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (May 2005). pp. 105-124.

he surpasses describing the moment as a frozen pocket of time and goes on to allow this moment to move – to allow the characters to think and the elements of the story to change through the moment. McEwan's commitment to accomplishing the much sought-after ideal of the modernists can be read as a coded fidelity to the temporal obsession of modernism – his exploration of 'the moment' raises all of the philosophical problems associated with it even as it confidently dispenses with them.

It is in three of McEwan's most recent works – *Atonement*, *Saturday*, and *On Chesil Beach* – that I believe he has fully developed his technique for conveying to the reader the importance of a pivotal scene, of 'the moment', for a character as well as the narrative. The novels prior to these were the experimental grounds where McEwan developed his technique. That is, the novels I have detailed in my previous paragraphs feature the early incarnations of the fully-developed technique which appears in my chosen three novels. In these three works McEwan is still obsessed with how a character deals within the moment with a pivotal event in their life. The author seems to believe that such an event would undoubtedly result in the warping of time – an important event would feel weightier, and thus lengthier, and it is this importance that McEwan has attempted to make the audience feel through expanded narrative time duration. These three novels convey, in painstaking detail, the myriad, minute thoughts of a character as their mind flits this way and that within a moment of crisis. This is achieved through a third person narrator focalising the scene through that character and allowing us detailed access to their thoughts through thought reporting. Yet, McEwan does not simply borrow the well-worn technique of flow of consciousness from the modernists to do this – instead he expands these modernist fragments to full sentences with proper grammar, and it is this detail that conveys the complete character consciousness within the

moment. This character consciousness is, undoubtedly then, raw, fresh and 'true' – it contains the immediate human response to a pivotal situation, and in doing so allows an audience to feel the importance of the event and the way in which humanity – through a single character – deals with it.

McEwan, then, over the course of his career has slowly developed the technique of allowing his readership detailed and somewhat covert access to a character's mind (in full sentenced form) in the moment, and as a consequence has developed the simultaneous technique of slowing the narrative time duration, which emphasises the moment to the reader. The former could survive without the latter – and readily does, not just in McEwan's fiction, but in the works of many other writers – if it were not for the simple phrase 'in the moment'. It is the fact that these detailed thoughts occur within the moving present moment (rather than in paused sections) that expands the scene, causing the swelling of the moment. In my reading I have not come across another author who has employed this dualistic technique in the same way as McEwan for the same effect, and so it may well be that McEwan is thus far unique in this employment – at any rate, he is certainly not part of a major movement of writers using the same techniques. However, it would be farcical to suggest that McEwan has invented this combination of techniques from scratch. He has indeed been influenced by literary movements that came before him, as well as a great many individual writers. McEwan's writing of the swelled moment of character insight is simply a new combination of existing techniques which, when combined, produce interesting results for his texts.

Modernism, Postmodernism and the Traditional Novel

The three great literary movements which have provided pivotal inspiration for the creation of McEwan's writing are that of the traditional (nineteenth century) novel, modernism and postmodernism. However, the second of these three movements – modernism – asserts itself as the clear frontrunner, exerting the greatest influence over his work. Peter Childs, Leon Edel and Robert Humphrey have each provided me with a background on modernism – a framework through which to view McEwan's work.[24] They explain modernism as a reaction against the previous style of realism, and describe a key technique employed by the modernists – stream of consciousness writing. Authors employing the technique of stream, or flow, of consciousness writing aim to replicate (as closely as possible within the limitations of the literary form) a human mind as it goes about its thought processes in the moment. This replication is achieved through fragmented sentences, or even just words, that skip from one topic to another in order to simulate the frenetic processes of the brain. The employment of this technique creates an intense focus on the mind rather than events themselves, and this inevitably results in an unreliable narrator where events are seen through, and altered by, the mind of a subjective individual. However, these theorists all stress that the character's thoughts are the important aspect within modernism, rather than the truth or otherwise of the events being relayed. Edel claims that this has important ramifications for time within the novel, as it is relative to the character whose thoughts we are reading[25] – 'true' story time is overlooked in favour of the way characters experience time. However, it is important to note that this technique did not swell the moment for the modernists – the

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[24] Childs, Peter. "Genres, Art and Film." In *Modernism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. pp. 72-128; Edel; Humphrey, Robert. *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954.
[25] Edel, *The Psychological Novel*, pp. 143-54.

fragmentary nature of the thoughts (rather than full sentences with explained thought

progressions) meant that these thoughts could occur within the natural space of a scene.

The influence of modernism on McEwan's work becomes markedly apparent when we

consider his appropriation of modernist techniques and his special interest in the

concerns of time.

However, McEwan writes within the period of postmodernism – such an

influential movement is bound to assert its influence, as indeed it does. Linda Hutcheon

explains what she sees as the central 'point' of postmodernism:

> In general terms... [postmodernism] takes the form of self-
>
> conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is
>
> rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting
>
> inverted commas around what is being said. The effect is to
>
> highlight, or 'highlight,' and to subvert, or 'subvert,' and the mode
>
> is therefore a 'knowing' and an ironic – or even 'ironic' – one.[26]

Hutecheon expands on this statement by explaining that that aim of much postmodernist

work is to denaturalise those elements of life that we take for granted as natural and to

reveal them in their actuality as "'cultural'; made by us, not given to us."[27] In the literary

genre, that generally means laying bare the process of the making of fiction, and

inserting the author to remind the reader that they are reading a composed text. Indeed,

Richard Todd explains that postmodernism's tautologous method statement is that of

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[26] Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Second Edition. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. p. 1.
[27] *Ibid*, p. 2.

being "self-aware, self-conscious, and knowing."[28] This is particularly apt in relation to the character as writer of her own story in *Atonement*, where the process of making fiction is laid bare and the reader is forced to question their own assumptions about the 'truth' of the story. Brian McHale argues that postmodernism "follows *from* modernism, in some sense, more than it follows *after* modernism"[29] – that is, postmodernism reacts against the previous form of modernism rather than simply following it chronologically. McHale claims that while modernism asks the question 'how can I interpret this world I live in, and what place do I hold within it?', postmodernism asks 'which sort of world is this, and what shall I do in it?'[30] – the questions have moved from epistemology to ontology.

As noted, *Atonement* reflects McEwan's greatest interest in postmodernist writing, but *On Chesil Beach* and *Saturday* also contain technical elements of the movement. All three novels contain a key postmodern technique – the deliberate use of intertextuality. *Saturday* is littered with literary references, including a disparaging remark by the protagonist about the strange magical realist elements of another of McEwan's novels, *The Child in Time* – a comic moment when the reader is reminded who has fabricated this story. All three novels contain references to the works of Virginia Woolf – either in similar story events, or through explicit references. The postmodern irony is present in both *Saturday* and *On Chesil Beach* – the former is a text almost completely focalised through a character who dismisses the power of literature, yet his story is told through the literary form, while the narrator of the latter constantly

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[28] Todd, Richard. "Confrontation within Convention: On the Character of British Postmodernist Fiction." In T. D'Haen and H. Bertens (eds.) *Postmodern Fiction in Europe and the Americas*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988. p. 118.
[29] McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York and London: Methuen, 1987. p. 5.
[30] *Ibid*, p. 10.

ridicules the key characters and their era, yet deems them worthy enough subjects for the novella. Indeed, it is clear that McEwan is not simply writing modernist novels (and nor could he even if he wanted to – his most perfect pastiche of a modernist fiction would be just that, and therefore postmodern by definition) – he has also clearly been influenced by the postmodern era throughout which he writes. However, despite the identifiable postmodernist influence in his works, modernism is still the movement that is the most influential for McEwan. Jameson observes that postmodernism is largely preoccupied with issues of spatiality as opposed to the obsession with temporality found within the former movement of modernism. He explains that "[t]he predilection for space, among postmodernism's theorists, is, of course, easiest understood as a predictable (generational) reaction against the official and long since canonized rhetoric of temporality of the critics and theorists of high modernism."[31] Jameson claims that the modernists were concerned with "what it felt like to be "modern""[32] and so came about this emphasis on time over space. Despite writing within the later literary movement, McEwan's overt concern with issues of temporality again places him akin to the modernists, rather than the postmodernists. Thus, picking and choosing techniques from these two movements, as well as the traditional novel – oscillating between the three literary styles while returning more often than not to modernism – McEwan has expanded upon the styles and techniques of these movements to create his own combination.

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[31] Jameson, p. 365.
[32] *Ibid*, p. 366.

Swelled Moments and Character Consciousness

Nowhere does the combination of techniques from these three distinct literary styles more earnestly display itself as within the key moments of McEwan's novels. McEwan has always focused upon a single scene within his novels – whether for shock factor (as an element of story) as his earlier novels display, or to allow an important moment for the focalised character to linger (as an element of narrative discourse) as exhibited in his later novels. I will be analysing the 'distended moments' of the pinnacle scenes, found within three of his most recent published works – *Atonement*, *Saturday* and *On Chesil Beach*. With *Atonement* came a shift from an old McEwan style to a new McEwan style, and one of the key elements of this shift was the fully-developed form of the swelled moment – not as an excuse to explore shocking story themes, but instead as a chance to explore narrative embellishment as a means of character consciousness exploration as well as textual emphasis. I will thus hereafter be referring to the distended moments found within these three 'late-style' McEwan novels rather than his previous works. These scenes feel swelled in narrative time – elongated beyond the other scenes of the novel – and thus by their contrast they are textually highlighted. However, the particular story events which find themselves swelled in narrative are not just given focus by the author for aesthetic reasons – rather, these scenes were vitally important (often traumatic and life-changing) for the characters involved. On a purely structural level, McEwan is emphasising selected moments within the narrative text through swelling, and, as a result, he is also emphasising them for his readers by drawing us in to these languid, tantalising passages. McEwan draws the reader into these moments in order to persuade us to place as much emphasis on them as the characters concerned do. We are involved in a readerly process, invoked by authorial skill through an intriguing

technical manipulation of narrative time, which aligns us with the characters involved during their own key moments. In short, McEwan has used this technique of the swelled moment to align reader experience with character experience.

On close analysis of these distended moments, it becomes apparent that these sections of text give detail not solely of a dramatic event, but also of a mind in the moment – that is, they deal specifically with character consciousness (thoughts, feelings, emotions) as that character deals with their dramatic event. The focus is shifted from the event itself to the way the character is dealing with the event internally. Character consciousness within the moment, then, becomes the focus of the moment – the stark humanity of the brain as it deals rapidly with an important situation. McEwan has sought to convey the relativity of time felt by his focalised character as he or she experiences their dramatic moment by swelling the text to incorporate all of the minutiae of the situation – by altering the narrative time duration. McEwan's employment of the distended moment directly correlates with instances of character thought. That is, it is the explicit and full-sentenced explorations of the rapid-fire thought processes of his main characters that appear to slow down the action (and therefore slow the narrative duration) of the scene. That is not to say that all instances of such thought reporting coincide with slowed narrative time duration. Like many novelists prior to himself, McEwan often employs such detailed character thought reporting within the narrative duration of *pause*[33] (that is, when the action has stopped to allow for such description), or within untimed duration (that is, when the author does not clearly indicate with action markers how long a scene takes in story time). This means

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[33] This is another of Genette's terms, on which I will later elaborate (see 'Time Theories', page 34).

that McEwan's slowing of narrative time duration is directly related to character consciousness and is thus a subjective category.

It is interesting, then, that McEwan has elected to incorporate third person narrators rather than first person narrators in the three novels I have mentioned – *Atonement*, *On Chesil Beach* and *Saturday* – which I have chosen to study in detail because these later works seem to contain the most perfected forms of these distended moments. One might think that surely a first person narrator would convey much more of a character's mind because it does not have to be filtered through a third party. Yet I have found that not to be the case in McEwan's works – the focalisation of the three specific characters in each of these three novels through third person narration actually aids the reader in 'getting closer' to the character. As I will explain in the chapters to follow, the specific techniques of focalisation employed by McEwan allow us to feel as though we are listening in to a character's uncensored thoughts without their knowledge. However, I must first define the much-debated literary critical terms for the varying explorations of character consciousness.

Thought Reporting

The literary techniques associated with 'thought reporting' (literally, reporting on a character's thoughts by an external narrator) have been defined many different ways under many banners and titles throughout literary criticism. As the McEwan works I am studying are all written in the third person with a narrator focalising different characters at different times, I will define the different ways characters' thoughts can enter the narrative through a third person narrator. In her seminal work, *Transparent Minds*, Dorrit Cohn splits third person character consciousness into three categories:

psycho-narration, *quoted monologue* and *narrated monologue*.[34] *Psycho-narration* occurs when the narrator conveys a generalised overview of what is going on inside a character's head without quoting any possible sentences of thought. It is usually characterised by phrases such as 'she remembered how…' or 'he thought about…'. *Quoted monologue* occurs when the narrator directly quotes the thoughts within the character's head. It is usually characterised by speech marks or such phrases as 'he thought', but can occur without these markers. *Quoted monologue* always occurs in the first person present-tense speech of the character. The third category, *narrated monologue*, is what is now quite commonly (though by no means universally) referred to as *free indirect discourse*. *Narrated monologue* occurs when the thought speech of the character enters the third person narrative without warning or indication. It is akin to *quoted monologue* in that it details the direct sentences occurring in the character's mind, however it is unlike *quoted monologue* in that the speech remains in the third person and in the tense of the narration (usually past tense). Here is an example of the differences between the three different types of character consciousness in third person narration. All of the illustrations begin with a sentence of straight third person narration then diverge into the three thought reporting categories:

Psycho-narration:

Jim's mother-in-law placed a plate in front of him piled high with

crabs, mussels and prawns. Surprised and taken aback due to his

strong dislike of seafood, Jim wondered how much of this meal he

would be expected to eat for the sake of politeness.

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[34] Cohn, Dorrit. *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*. Princeton and Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1978.

Quoted monologue:

Jim's mother-in-law placed a plate in front of him piled high with crabs, mussels and prawns. "Holy moly! I hate seafood! How much of this do I have to eat?"

or

Jim's mother-in-law placed a plate in front of him piled high with crabs, mussels and prawns. Holy moly! I hate seafood! he thought. How much of this do I have to eat?

or

Jim's mother-in-law placed a plate in front of him piled high with crabs, mussels and prawns. Holy moly! I hate seafood! How much of this do I have to eat?

Narrated monologue:

Jim's mother-in-law placed a plate in front of him piled high with crabs, mussels and prawns. Holy moly! He hated seafood! How much of this did he have to eat?

My examples demonstrate the way Cohn has broken down and clearly defined the three different ways such consciousness can enter third person narration, and I will be utilising her definitions in my analysis of McEwan's works.

However, although Cohn cleanly defines the different categories of character consciousness in third person narration, I do take issue with the names she has given them. Another who has taken issue with Cohn's titles is Alan Palmer. Palmer claims that

"it is vital to use names for the thought categories that separate them from speech."[35] Palmer asserts that this is because thought is not verbal in the literal sense (characters do not say their thoughts out loud), nor is it always verbal inside the head (thoughts can often be feelings, emotions, or sensory impacts rather than constructed sentences or even words). Palmer renames Cohn's categories as *thought report* (for psycho-narration), *direct thought* (for quoted monologue) and *free indirect thought* (for narrated monologue). I agree with Palmer's assertion that 'speech' must be replaced with 'thought', but despite his declaration that his terms are, "simple" unlike Cohn's,[36] I believe he has invented terms just as convoluted as, if not more convoluted than, Cohn's. Within the discipline of English there are no universally accepted terms, yet the definitions appear to coincide in most if not all cases. It can thus be deduced that this is because all of the terms suggested have been too convoluted or inadequate to describe these accepted narrative techniques. Since no academic consensus has been reached, my task, then, is to nominate terms which best describe the techniques I will be analysing in McEwan's fiction.

In terms of the first category, I believe Cohn's *psycho-narration* covers the field just as adequately as Palmer's *thought report* (both deal with the narrating or reporting of psychosis or thoughts), yet I believe *thought report* could be confused with the third category in that thought tends to imply a sentence rather than a generalised psychological process. For the second category, I believe a cross between Cohn's and Palmer's terms fits the field most adequately – *quoted thought* (because 'quoted' is more obvious than 'direct' when referring to verbalised-thought sentences). The final category

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[35] Palmer, Alan. *Fictional Minds*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. p. 54.
[36] *Ibid*, p. 54.

is the most tricky to label. Obviously, *free indirect discourse* is the most commonly used term,[37] yet I must replace 'discourse' with 'thought', which gives me Palmer's term. However, I find the words 'free indirect' to be confusing and less than accurate with our current definitions. Does indirect mean that they are not direct, quoted thoughts? In a sense the words are direct – they are clearly replicated sentence-thoughts just like *quoted thought*, with only the person and tense shifted in favour of the narrator. In what sense is this category free? Is it free in that it slips into the narration unmarked? As I have shown with my Jim example, *quoted thought* can be just as unmarked. Thus, just as the third category occupies a narrative space of cross-consciousness between narrator and character, we must find a term that equally matches that combination. As the character's consciousness reveals itself within the narration in verbalised (often, though not always, full-sentenced) form, I believe thought is an accurate term to reflect a verbalised thought rather than an unverbalised mood, feeling or emotion (which is most accurately related through *psycho-narration* where no verbalisation is necessary). In a nod to both Cohn and Palmer I would suggest that *narrated thought* is then the most apt term. Thus the three categories of thought I will refer to will be *psycho-narration*, *quoted thought* and *narrated thought*, following Cohn's clear definitions.

Time Theories

Now that I have defined my terms for analysing displays of character consciousness, I will now look to the other glaring element of McEwan's distended

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[37] Used in Fludernik, Monika. *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction: The Linguistic Representation of Speech and Consciousness.* London and New York: Routledge, 1993; Jahn, Manfred. "Frames, Preferences, and the Reading of Third-Person Narratives: Towards a Cognitive Narratology." *Poetics Today*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Winter 1997), pp. 441-68; Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms.* Seventh Edition. Fort Worth and Philadelphia: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999.

moments – the slowing of narrative time. Several different theorists have explored the concept of time in narrative. However, most have tended to dwell in the theoretical or philosophical realm of time theories, rather than developing a method which can be utilised to analyse a text. Mark Currie develops a complex theory of time that epitomises the theoretical level on which most of these theories sit.[38] Mikhail Bakhtin identifies a connectedness between temporality and spatiality in literature and labels the relationship as the *chronotope*.[39] He claims different *chronotopes* determine literary genre, as these are where the narrative events are shaped. However, Hume has developed a practical theory about the intense narrative speed found in much contemporary fiction.[40] She actually identifies the techniques used by these authors to create the sense of speed in their texts. Hume claims this excessive rapidity leads to the reader failing to grasp the logic of the text, and hence induces anxiety and disorientation. However, McEwan appears here and there to be doing the exact opposite – swelling scenes, slowing them down, in order to induce a thorough understanding of all aspects of the text's world in these moments. Paul Ricoeur discusses time and narrative on a theoretical level, focussing on fictional works of literature in the second volume of his influential set of works. He stresses that narrative voice (and point of view) and temporality are intrinsically connected, as the narrator determines the discourse of the story.[41] While this link may be obvious (the narrator tells the story, and therefore controls the time devoted to each story event within the narrative), it is a fundamental link that I have kept in mind

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[38] Currie, Mark. *About Time: Narrative Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, Ltd, 2007.

[39] Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. (Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist.) M. Holquist (ed.). Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

[40] Hume, "Narrative Speed in Contemporary Fiction," pp. 105-124.

[41] Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative, Vol. 2*. (Trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer.) Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985. pp. 88-99.

while examining McEwan's works. I do believe there is most often in modern fiction an explicit link between point of view (whether of the narrator, through focalisation or thought reporting) and the manipulation of narrative time. However, Ricoeur's theory still does not provide a method of dissection to identify certain techniques of narrative time manipulation.

Gerard Genette in *Narrative Discourse* uses his analysis of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* in order to develop a method of detailed structuralist analysis for narrative discourse.[42] Rather than employing textual analysis to legitimise conclusions about authorial intent or textual meaning, Genette sticks to a methodical analysis of the structure of Proust's narrative – the components, the parts, the technical way Proust has put together his narrative and the stylistic means he has employed to do so. Genette splits his analysis into five chapter sections – Order, Duration, Frequency, Mood and Voice. All five sections reveal intrinsic elements about the way narrative discourse is put together. Despite the fact that the last two chapters on Mood and Voice have had the most profound influence on narratology, the chapters titled Order, Duration and Frequency, containing Genette's theory of narrative time, are most relevant to my exploration of McEwan's use of narrative time. In these chapters, through a study of Proust's fiction, Genette reveals that narrative time should be analysed against story time in accordance with these three areas. That is, the order in which events occur within the text (whether or not they match the chronological order of story time), the length of text devoted to each event as opposed to the supposed 'real-time' story duration, and the number of times each individual story event occurs within the text –

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[42] Genette, Gerard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. J. E. Lewin. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989.

the frequency, or lack thereof, of repetition. Of course, this dichotomy is based on a fallacy (this fallacy being that fiction invents both so there is no base story) which I will explore further on, and so we must be careful when accepting this part of Genettian analysis without question. However, accepting this binary as an important illusion to maintain, Genette's theory of narrative time does provide a simple and clear-cut, and (almost) all-encompassing structuralist mode of analysing narrative time.

In his chapter on duration, Genette neatly outlines what he believes are the four possible variations between story time (the 'real time' duration of the events of the story) and narrative time (the length of narrative allocated to each of these events) using simple mathematical equations. Where NT is narrative time, and ST is story time:

pause: $NT = n$, $ST = 0$. Thus $NT \infty > ST$

scene: $NT = ST$

summary: $NT < ST$

ellipsis: $NT = 0$, $ST = n$. Thus: $NT < \infty ST$.[43]

Genette points out the asymmetry within his chart of equations – a cursory glance reveals the missing equation $NT > ST$, which would be situated between *scene* and *pause*. He hypothesises that this missing equation would represent "of sort of scene in slow motion", yet he goes on to say that, although such a scene would be "undoubtedly feasible as a deliberate experiment", he does not believe such a form has been "really actualized in literary tradition."[44] Instead, Genette claims that what we immediately recall as slowed scenes, are in fact sections of text where *scene* is interchanged with

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[43] Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 95.
[44] *Ibid*, p. 95.

pause – where the action is halted to accommodate "extranarrative elements or… descriptive pauses."[45] Indeed, Genette claims that the "canonical forms"[46] (whatever they may be in his view) are restricted to *pause*, *scene*, *summary* and *ellipsis*. In *Narrative Discourse Revisited* Genette attempts to clarify his opinion on the possibility of such a category of narrative time duration. Renaming duration "speed,"[47] he still asserts that the leading categories are *pause*, *scene*, *summary* and *ellipsis*, claiming that *summary* is the only category of the four that has a variable speed (the other three have given speeds: "isochronous for scene, nonexistent for pause, infinite for ellipsis"[48]). At the conclusion of his chapter on speed he somewhat reluctantly admits the possibility of a fifth type of speed – "more of a fermata than a *rallentendo*,"[49] though explains this as a narrative interrupting "itself to give up its place to another type of discourse"[50] – that is, an interruption of another type of narrative, a parenthesis, rather than the slowing of narrative time within the scene. Genette claims this to be merely another form of *pause*, and does not admit to the possibility of the existence of *slowed scene*.

I contend that such *slowed scene* does exist within literature, and it can be found in the three McEwan novels I will be analysing. Other scholars have disagreed with Genette's initial assessment of the lack of *slowed scene*. Mieke Bal, although claiming it "occurs very seldom... [and it is d]ifficult if not impossible", refers to the category of "slow-down,"[51] Seymour Chatman refers to "stretch" and assesses that the description of thoughts are the most frequent means of achieving such a narrative time

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[45] Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 95.
[46] *Ibid*, p. 95.
[47] Genette, Gerard. *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. (Trans. Jane E. Lewin.) New York: Cornell University Press, 1988. p. 33.
[48] *Ibid*, p. 35.
[49] *Ibid*, p. 37.
[50] *Ibid*, p. 37.
[51] Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative (Second Edition)*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press Inc., 1997. p. 106.

duration,[52] and Monika Fludernik reflects on three different names given to the category – *stretch*, *slow-down* and *time-extending narration* – and agrees with Chatman that this category comes about by "descriptive passages or the portrayal of mental processes."[53] I disagree with Fludernik's assertion concerning descriptive passages (as these regularly occur during *pause*), but agree wholeheartedly with her second assertion about mental processes. All of these scholars admit the possibility of such a category of narrative time duration, yet none provide a solid example from literature – examples the like of which can be found in my next three chapters of analysis. Admittedly, like the majority of fiction, most of McEwan's narrative falls into the *pause*, *scene*, *summary* and *ellipsis* categories of duration. However, certain sections of McEwan's text appear to fall squarely between *scene* and *pause*. These sections seem to be written (to borrow Genette's term) in slow motion – the action has not stopped to allow for mere description – the wheels are still turning, as it were – however the narrative time has been elongated so it cannot easily equate with the story time. The scenes seem slowed to allow us to capture every element of the action – McEwan does not stop his action to allow us (hypothetically) a description of a rose, but instead describes in infinitesimal detail the movement of the rose as it sways in the breeze. I do not believe that these sections of McEwan's text can comply with the temporal rules of either *scene* or *pause*. Rather, I would argue that these sections illustrate that *slowed scene* does exist within McEwan's works – the author's manipulation of narrative time a key element for conveying character consciousness, and thus the importance of the McEwan distended moment.

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[52] Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978. p. 72.

[53] Fludernik, Monika. *An Introduction to Narratology*. (Trans. Patricia Häusler-Greenfield and Monika Fludernik.) London and New York: Routledge, 2009.

Other Authors

Of course, McEwan owes a great debt to many individual authors for their invention or popularisation of certain techniques and styles, yet I do not believe any other author has appropriated and tweaked these styles and techniques in just such a way as to produce the same effect demonstrated within McEwan's distended moments. He stands outside of the out-and-out postmodernism of his contemporaries such as Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith (authors with flamboyant, magical realist, hard-hitting postmodern styles based around 'bizarre' story events), aligned more with the qualified or 'late' modernism of other contemporaries such as Kazuo Ishiguro and Iain Sinclair (authors committed to a particular style signature with an aesthetic dedication to the sentence as the medium – where language is the point). The intriguing aspect of McEwan's style is that he does not simply borrow and expand upon the techniques of one historical period of English literature – rather he combines (in a homage-like reverence) many different aspects of a range of movements, and adds a personal touch to create something new – something that may well be unique.

McEwan's inheritance stretches back to the nineteenth century – to the era of the traditional novel – where we can see an early incarnation of his obsession with the mind of a character as focalised by a third person narrator. Both Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady* are narrated in the third person, yet contain many sections where we enter the interior of the mind of a character.[54] Flaubert's narrator utilises *psycho-narration* and *narrated thought* to convey

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[54]Flaubert, Gustave. *Madam Bovary: Life in a Country Town*. (Trans. G. Hopkins.) London: Oxford University Press, 1959; James, Henry. *The Portrait of a Lady*. Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1996.

much about the title character, while James' narrator does the same for a few different characters. All of these sections in *Madame Bovary* and many of these sections in *Portrait of a Lady* occur within a general context – they either take place before or after a scene (usually at the beginning or end of a chapter), or within a space of time that could be any length (such as a character thinking while looking out a window). Like many writers since these two canonical authors, McEwan does employ the same technique, where an insight into a character's mind is given through third person narration in something of a 'limbo', where time is not precisely conveyed. This technique allows a full exploration of thought without extending the narrative time duration as compared to the story time duration. James goes a step further than Flaubert, presenting many of these sections as 'in scene', giving the impression of current character thoughts expanding a scene. However, this is merely an illusion, as these thoughts are not in fact current thoughts occurring to the character within the moment – rather they are usually background on what that character had thought prior to the current scene. This illusion of expanding a scene – of exploring a character's more detailed thoughts at the expense of keeping narrative time duration strictly in line with story time duration – despite being an illusion, is incredibly important. It is this technique that McEwan has borrowed and extended – getting much more fully into his characters' heads within the moment than either Flaubert or James. McEwan has taken the sentence by sentence, thought by thought, narration typical of these authors and applied the technique to a specific moving scene, expanding the narrative time duration and thus swelling the moment by allowing us access to current thoughts as they occur in the moment rather than past thoughts.

McEwan is certainly not a pioneer in the realm of expanding the narrative time duration beyond the story time duration. Indeed, the running joke in Laurence Sterne's eighteenth century novel, *Tristram Shandy*,[55] is that the narrator is taking so long to tell his own life that he will probably die of old age before he gets much past the narrative of his birth. However, McEwan's expanding of moments is quite unlike Sterne's – the latter expands the story by having his narrator frequently pause the narration in order to recount some prior scene, the telling of which is often paused to recount yet another scene, and so on and so forth. As such, although the first part of Sterne's novel begins on the night of the lead character's birth, and by the end of this long section of text that character has not yet fully been born, it cannot be said that Sterne has expanded the scene in the form of *slowed scene* – he has not swelled the moment as McEwan does, but rather he has paused it to tell another story, then paused that to tell another, and so on.

Marcel Proust was also a champion of the long and languid novel. Published in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, his *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*[56]) sees a character in his old age recounting several episodes from over the course of his life when he cannot sleep one night. Although the memory of this character expands a single sleepless night into seven novel-length parts, making the reader feel as though the narrative time duration has expanded well beyond the story time, this feeling of a swelled moment in time is, again, merely an illusion. Although the recollection occurs over the course of the night, the fact that the lead character is also the retrospective narrator means that he may manipulate his own past

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[55] Sterne, Laurence. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.
[56] Proust, Marcel. *Remembrance of Things Past. Part 1: Swann's Way*. (Trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff.) Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in association with Chatto and Windus, 1957.

story. These detailed recollections are more narrated past story events for a novel than in-the-moment, down to the finest detail, recollections. His mind may have remembered certain aspects of these past events, but there is no way that an elderly human mind could be so faultless in its attention to detail within so many different memories from times long ago. Proust has thus given the impression of a slow-moving narrative, yet it cannot be said that he employs in-the-moment character thoughts as they occur in scene to swell certain scenes beyond others. Although McEwan is not the first to swell scenes by expanding the narrative, he appears to have expanded on the techniques of authors such as Sterne and Proust by allowing character thought processes within the moment to expand the narrative time duration for key scenes as the action continues.

Proust brings me to modernism, which I believe has been the single most important influence on McEwan's work. However, McEwan has not simply replicated what the modernist writers have done – rather he has taken their techniques and expanded them. McEwan has borrowed quite directly from the style of Katherine Mansfield. Mansfield's short stories frequently feature focalised characters (through third person narration) whose minds the reader is allowed to access in great detail (much more thought detail than previous novels, such as those of James, Flaubert and Proust) through *psycho-narration* and *narrated thought*.[57] Going against the grain of the modernist technique of flow of consciousness, Mansfield expands her focalised characters' thoughts out into full sentences with proper grammar. Furthermore, these moments of character consciousness occur in the moving scene – the action does not pause to allow for a description of consciousness. This is a perfect description of the

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[57] Mansfield, Katherine. "Bliss," "Miss Brill," "Prelude." In *The Complete Stories of Katherine Mansfield*. Auckland and Christchurch: Golden Press Pty. Ltd., 1974. pp. 91-105, 330-6, 11-60.

technique employed by McEwan, and indeed he owes a large debt to Mansfield. However, there is one difference between the two authors' styles – Mansfield's forays into character consciousness occur in a similar 'limbo' zone to that of James and Flaubert, where the thoughts occur in moments where there is no dialogue, or in continuous action (like walking), and hence do not slow the narrative time duration as no story time duration is indicated. McEwan, while employing the same stylistic technique as Mansfield, arrives at a different result by virtue of marking the story time by scattering action markers amongst the thoughts, and hence allowing the reader to experience the narrative time duration of *slowed scene*.

The importance of the influence of key stylistic techniques of modernism on McEwan's writing is clearly evident in his works. The influence of Virginia Woolf in particular is marked – McEwan even goes so far as to refer to her writing in *Atonement*, inviting the reader to draw comparisons. My chapters to come will explore the link between McEwan's works and those of Woolf in more detail. McEwan has taken the *psycho-narration* and *narrated thought* which allowed writers such as James and Flaubert to explore character consciousness out of scene, and combined it with the pivotal modernist technique of flow of consciousness (used by prominent writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, among many others), where complete access to a mind in the moment is given so the reader may follow (and sometimes get confused by) a character's mind as it flits from one incomplete thought to the next. McEwan thus creates sections of text where we see a character's complete thought process (including the realistic, yet seemingly illogical, jumps from one subject to the next) within the moving moment of action, yet these thought fragments are expanded out to full sentences with complete grammar so we can fully grasp their content. The result of this

expansion while remaining in the moment is that the moment itself expands. These thoughts occur in scene – they are not narratorial explanations of previous thoughts or descriptions of inherent character traits – and thus they are part of the action. Each minuscule part of a continuous story action is bulged out to allow for these in-depth character thoughts – no action is missed, indicating to us that we have not missed story events while we have been inside the head of the individual character. The fact that thoughts take fractions of seconds to be thought, yet take lines, paragraphs or pages to write out in full, means that McEwan has expanded the narrative time duration beyond the story time duration in order to swell the moment.

The question, then, is whether or not McEwan is alone in this combination of techniques, or whether he is simply part of a bigger postmodern movement. My analysis of McEwan's manipulation of narrative time for the purpose of delving into character consciousness during his distended moments led me to wonder whether other postmodern authors concerned with time were manipulating narrative time in a similar way as a means to a more thorough exploration of character consciousness. Martin Amis in *Time's Arrow*[58] writes a life backwards. The story events themselves occur reversed to our understanding of the natural flow of life (birth to death), much to the bemusement of the protagonist who seems as perplexed as the reader by the reversed nature of his life. However, narrative time is not being manipulated in Amis' novel – rather the time of the story (in relation to the reader's expectations) is the focus of this manipulation. In Kurt Vonnegut Jnr.'s *Slaughterhouse Five*,[59] a character who is an author writes a novel (framed by his 'real-life' chapters at each end) about Billy Pilgrim, a time traveller.

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[58] Amis, Martin. *Time's Arrow, or the Nature of the Offence*. London: Penguin Books in association with Jonathan Cape, 1992.
[59] Vonnegut, Jnr., Kurt. *Slaughterhouse Five*. New York: Dell Printing Co. Inc. , 1978.

However, similarly to Amis' novel, it is actually the 'natural' order of life assumed by the reader, and not narrative time, which is so manipulated. That is, Vonnegut plays with the tension between assumed flow of story time and actual flow of story time, rather than manipulating narrative time (the order of telling). Although Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*[60] is similar to *Atonement* in that it is a confessional text about past events narrated from the present by one of the involved characters, Atwood does not manipulate time in the same way as McEwan. The story is an epic tale where most of the events of a life are narrated, with none given overt precedence over the others in terms of time. Similarly, the butler Mr Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*[61] recounts several episodes within the heyday of his service, giving no more importance to any specific memory recounted over the others through the manipulation of narrative time. David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*[62] feels incredibly slow to read, yet this is not because there is *slowed scene* – rather, almost all of the sections of the text are *scene* (with some sparse *summary* thrown in), with all approximately equal to one another in terms of narrative time duration. The text simply feels slow because there are so many story-lines, characters and time periods that Foster Wallace flits between in quick succession, meaning that it can be many pages before we return to a familiar story line and take it up again.

It seems, then, that McEwan is not part of a hoard of postmodern writers looking to manipulate narrative time through the swelling of scenes. It could be that McEwan's focus on character consciousness sets him apart from his contemporaries – while they are focusing on the issue of time itself, he is focused on exploring character

[60] Atwood, Margaret. *The Blind Assassin*. Great Britain: Virago Press, 2001.
[61] Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Remains of the Day*. London: Faber and Faber, 1989.
[62] Foster Wallace, David. *Infinite Jest*. London: Abacus, 1997.

consciousness with the swelled pivotal scene as a consequence of this focus. There are many contemporary novelists who do focus on character consciousness, however I believe they are simply retaining the techniques of the nineteenth century. For example, Tim Winton incorporates many sections of *psycho-narration* and *narrated thought* into his novel *The Riders*.[63] However, like Flaubert and James, these sections in Winton's text always occur in the 'limbo' of untimed narrative time duration – that is, in moments of *pause*, reflection, or continuous action like walking – and hence do not result in *slowed scene*. There is not a single novelist that I have yet come across that combines traditional literary techniques in the same manner as McEwan to create the same effect. This is not to say that another does not exist, but it certainly proves that McEwan is not part of a current large-scale movement. His distinctly marked distended moments then, remain his.

McEwan Critics

McEwan, then, appears to be doing something quite new in his distended moments, so I have looked to his critics to understand their views on the subject. Understandably (due to the rich melting pot of styles, themes, issues and techniques found within McEwan's works, and therefore the vast range of topics available for literary criticism), it appears that the attentions of his critics have largely been occupied elsewhere. *Atonement*, *Saturday* and *On Chesil Beach*, published in 2001, 2005 and 2007 respectively, are relatively new works within McEwan's long publishing history. Due to his early career success, the overwhelming majority of literary criticism about McEwan's fiction focuses on his early writing, and there is very little about *On Chesil*

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[63] Winton, Tim. *The Riders*. Sydney: Macmillan, 1994.

Beach especially. Peter Childs and Jack Slay Jr. both outline McEwan's transformation

from part of a rebellious group of shock horror writers in the 1970s to an accepted

mainstream novelist drawing on centuries of novelistic tradition.[64] Many criticisms

focus on themes found within McEwan's works, rather than the link between time and

consciousness in his distended moments. Childs claims McEwan has a preoccupation

with children becoming adults and adults returning to childhood.[65] *Atonement* criticism

(which is much more abundant than criticism of the other two novels) is largely

concerned with Briony as a child and a writer (Christopher Williams[66]), and the nature

of *Atonement* as a confessional text which hides its 'true nature' (that of the actual

narrator) until the dramatic revelation in the final chapter (Rebecca L. Walkowitz, Judith

Seaboyer, James Phelan, Elke D'Hoker, James Harold, Pilar Hidalgo[67]). Earl G.

Ingersoll takes this line of thought a step further, reasoning that the final 'jolt' forces the

reader to question the nature of fiction and the god-like status of the author.[68] Brian

Finney agrees that the novel is about the nature of fiction, narrative, narration,

interpretation and the creation of art, and the confusion that occurs with an attempt to

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[64] Childs, Peter. *The Fiction of Ian McEwan*, pp. 1-7; Slay, pp. 1-8.

[65] Childs, Peter. "'Fascinating violation': Ian McEwan's children." In N. Bentley (ed.) *British Fiction of the 1990s*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005. pp. 123-134.

[66] Williams, Christopher. "Ian McEwans's *The Cement Garden* and the Tradition of the Child/Adolescent as 'I-Narrator'." Atti del XVI Convegno Nazionale dell'AIA: Ostuni (Brindisi) 14-16 ottobre 1993, Schena Editore, Fasano di Puglia, 1996. pp. 211-223.

[67] Walkowitz, Rebecca L. "Ian McEwan." In B. Shaffer (ed.) *A Companion to The British and Irish Novel 1945-2000*. Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. pp. 504-514; Seaboyer, Judith. "Ian McEwan: Contemporary Realism and the Novel of Ideas." In J. Acheson and S. Ross (eds.) *The Contemporary British Novel Since 1980*. Houndsmith and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. pp. 23-34; Phelan, James. "Narrative Judgements and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative: Ian McEwan's *Atonement*." In J. Phelan and P. J. Rabinowitz (eds.), *A Companion to Narrative Theory*. Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005. pp. 322-336; D'Hoker, Elke. "Confession and Atonement in Contemporary Fiction: J. M. Coetzee, John Banville, and Ian McEwan." *Critique*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Fall 2006). pp. 31-43; Harold, James. "Narrative Engagement with *Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin*." *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 29 (2005). pp.130-145; Hidalgo, Pilar. "Memory and Storytelling in Ian McEwan's Atonement." *Critique*. Vol. 46, Iss. 2 (Winter 2005). pp. 82-91.

[68] Ingersoll, Earl G. "Intertextuality in L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*." *Forum of Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (July 2004). pp. 241-258.

combine them.[69] While incredibly engaging on a thematic level, unfortunately these criticisms of McEwan's texts (and of *Atonement* in particular) are largely extraneous to my technical exploration of character consciousness through the manipulation of narrative time within McEwan's key scenes, and so my research will begin to fill this gap.

This is not to say that no critic has touched on my area of study, as indeed, some have. Some critics have reflected on the influence on McEwan's works of the three literary movements I outlined earlier. Alistair Cormack in his analysis of *Atonement* reflects my thoughts on McEwan's work in general, in saying that this novel reflects features of postmodernism, modernism and the traditional novel, while never really belonging wholly to any one movement.[70] Sebastian Groes identifies the intertextuality between *Saturday* and modernist texts, linking McEwan's novel in particular to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, and Bellow's *Herzog*.[71] Groes also identifies elements of McEwan's specific use of focalisation techniques, claiming that "[r]ather than choosing the stream-of-consciousness technique of Joyce or Woolf, *Saturday* makes use of Bellow's more conventional mode of narration, the restrictive third person discourse combined with the use of free indirect style, which he intensifies by using the present tense mode."[72] However, Groes does not touch on the unique element of McEwan's use of focalisation

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[69] Finney, Brian. "Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*." *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Winter 2004). pp. 68-82.

[70] Cormack, Alistair. "Postmodernism and the Ethics of Fiction in *Atonement*." In S. Groes (ed.) *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009. pp. 70-82.

[71] Groes, Sebastian. "Ian McEwan and the Modernist Consciousness of the City in *Saturday*." In S. Groes (ed.) *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009. pp. 99-114.

[72] *Ibid*, p. 105.

– that, inspired by the modernists, each and every focalised character thought is conveyed (unlike traditional narration where only the most important thoughts make it to the page), all occurring within the moment (as opposed to the traditional place in *pause* or untimed duration).

A smattering of critics has touched on the link between character consciousness and narrative time in McEwan's novels, and it is this critical work which I am building upon. In his exploration of the relative order (as opposed to my study of duration) of temporality in *The Child in Time*, Head hints at the concept of a depiction of "personal time"[73] in McEwan's novels. Groes briefly claims that McEwan's work has a "distinctive character which explores questions of morality, nationhood and history, sexuality, and *the nature of the imagination and human consciousness*."[74] (My italics.) Matt Ridley talks about the way McEwan explores character consciousness in his novels:

> The novelist's privilege, according to Ian McEwan, is to step inside
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> the consciousness of others, and to lead the reader there like a
>
> psychological Virgil. Again and again in McEwan's books, it is the
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> interior monologue of the characters, and that monologue's
>
> encounter with the 'truth' in the outside world, that grips us.[75]

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[73] Head, "Beyond 2000," p. 235.

[74] Groes, Sebastian. "A Cartography of the Contemporary: Mapping Newness in the Work of Ian McEwan." In S. Groes (ed.) *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009. p. 2.

[75] Ridley, Matt. "Foreword: Ian McEwan and the Rational Mind." In S. Groes (ed.) *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009. p. vii.

Ridley claims that McEwan "uses fiction to understand the mind and to explore human nature, as well as uses words to alter readers' consciousness."[76] That is, not only does McEwan explore how a character reacts to their world, but by employing specific textual techniques he also skilfully manipulates the thoughts of the reader into understanding or feeling these character reactions. Ridley's foreword does not allow room for analysis of McEwan's texts, and so he does not explore how McEwan achieves this thorough exploration of the minds of his characters in key moments.

Laura Marcus' research into temporality in McEwan's work has greatly influenced my own research. Marcus claims that "[a]t the heart of all Ian McEwan's fiction is a concern with time and the experience of temporality, from the time of the fiction – narrative duration [...] – to the ways in which characters and readers themselves experience time."[77] Marcus makes reference to McEwan's swelled moments, maintaining that his "signal narrative technique is his representation of the extended temporalities entailed in a singular occurrence."[78] Marcus links McEwan's exploration of temporality with the temporality found within modernist works (especially those of Woolf). However, she is careful to state that McEwan's later novels are not recreations, parodies or pastiches of modernism, but "rather, [they are] in dialogue with the structures of modernist fiction"[79] – he acknowledges his debt to the modernists whilst respecting the distance between his time and theirs. Like Cormack and myself, Marcus views McEwan's work as blurring the boundaries between modernism, postmodernism and the traditional (realist) novel. Indeed, Marcus touches on the link between time and

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[76] Ridley, p. viii.
[77] Marcus, Laura. "Ian McEwan's Modernist Time: *Atonement* and *Saturday*." In S. Groes (ed.) *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009. p. 83.
[78] *Ibid*, p. 83.
[79] *Ibid*, p. 85.

consciousness in McEwan's fiction, but in her short article she does not have space to fully explore it. Marcus's article outlines time as a feature of McEwan's novels, points out the swelled moments, but does not explore why these moments occur (and therefore the deep link between temporality and consciousness), or their implications for each text as a whole. My research will thus attempt to extend what Marcus has touched on in order to reach an understanding of the link between time and character consciousness so carefully bundled up in these distended moments.

Methodology

     In order to analyse McEwan's distended moments, a clear-cut analytical methodology is required. Searching through the myriad different ways of analysing literature, it becomes apparent that the only truth is that there is no one 'true' way of analysing a work of literature – the discipline does not have one (or two) accepted methodological approaches, but 'too many'. However, since McEwan is clearly doing something special with a particular textual technique within his distended moments, a detailed textual analysis seems the most apt methodological first step – as close to a scientific analysis as can be managed in the slippery world of literary criticism. No matter how the reader may interpret the work, the author has created an artefact from which a readerly response is gleaned – the author is doing something that, as the first step on the road to meaning, can be isolated, understood, defined and measured.

     As such, I turned first to early structuralist ideas about story and discourse to inform my research. This form of analysis, of course, began with Russian formalist criticism. Boris Eichenbaum provides an outline of the evolution of the Formal Method, describing Victor Shklovsky's progression of the idea of 'plot' from the traditional

notion of "a combination of a group of motifs... [into] a compositional rather than a thematic concept."[80] That is, plot changed from being about story (themes and ideas) to being about the construction of the text – an idea backed up by the Russian formalists by a list of formal attributes (devices and techniques) of the text. Shklovsky broke with the aesthetic approach to literary criticism, arguing that the writing of poetry is deliberate and hence poetic techniques could be dissected without aesthetic judgements of 'worth' or 'quality'.[81] Indeed, he was the first to make a distinction between story and plot – what we now call story and discourse – claiming that "[t]he idea of *plot* is too often confused with the description of events – with what I propose provisionally to call the *story*. The story is, in fact, only material for plot formulation."[82] Boris Tomashevsky attempts to explain this concept further, maintaining that story is the events, whereas plot is the arrangement of these events within the text – "[i]n brief, the story is "the action itself," the plot, "how the reader learns of the action"."[83]

The Russian Formalists were the first to explore the idea of the differing durations between story time and narrative (plot or discourse) time duration. Shklovsky claims that "'[l]iterary time' is clearly arbitrary; its laws do not coincide with the laws of ordinary time,"[84] while Tomashevsky argues that story time – the time of the events – and "reading time"[85] – the time it takes to read the text of these events – can differ

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[80] Eichenbaum, Boris. "The Theory of the 'Formal Method'." In *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. (Trans. Lee T. Lemon & Marion J. Reis.) Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965. p. 116.
[81] Shklovsky, Victor. "Art as Technique." In *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. (Trans. Lee T. Lemon & Marion J. Reis.) Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965. pp. 3-24.
[82] Shklovsky, Victor. "Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: Stylistic Commentary." In *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. (Trans. Lee T. Lemon & Marion J. Reis.) Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965. p. 57.
[83] Tomashevsky, Boris. "Thematics." In *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. (Trans. Lee T. Lemon & Marion J. Reis.) Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965. fn 5, p. 67.
[84] Shklovsky, "Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*," p. 36.
[85] Tomashevsky, p. 77.

greatly. Tomashevsky claims the reader can gauge the length of story time by one of

three methods – the date and time are given in-text, the "duration [is] indicated – 'lasted

for half an hour'… or an impression of the duration of time may be given, so that we

indirectly determine the passage of time by judging the length of the speech or the

normal duration of the action."[86] Not only, then, did the Russian formalists make a

distinction between story and discourse, but in doing so, they explored the notion that an

author could extend or contract the temporal duration of the narrative in contrast to the

story – that is, writers were not simply conveying exciting events, but they were

excitingly conveying events.

What the Russian formalists started, the structuralists carried on and expanded

upon, and it is this form of criticism which most informs my methodology. I have

attempted to dissect McEwan's novels – to understand how and what he, as a writer, has

deliberately composed and the result of such composition. In essence, it is the skill of

McEwan in conveying story events, and not his skill in inventing a story line, that I will

be assessing. Of course, structuralism was fundamentally uninterested in the skill of a

writer – preferring to focus on the impersonal structures and conventions of a text – a

disinterest that has since been largely (and I believe rightly) retracted as we study the

skill of a writer employing these specific structures and conventions in order to elicit a

readerly response. That is not to say that themes and issues are unimportant to

McEwan's work or to my analysis – rather that my focus will be on how McEwan's

textual composition skilfully illuminates his themes and issues. McEwan's distended

scenes engage temporal as well as character consciousness-based techniques. For my

analysis of the temporal, Genette's hugely influential structuralist work on story time

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[86] Tomashevsky, p. 78.

duration versus narrative time duration has become the backbone of my work. The structuralist ideology thus forms the foundations of my research – this bedrock of technical analysis has provided me with a solid base from which to explore and assess the humanistic impact of such techniques on the reader.

Since the time of the structuralists, the world of critical literary theory has moved on through the movements of postnarratology and poststructuralism. Andrew Gibson claims that narratology and structuralism share the same weaknesses – largely their "overly geometric schemetisation of texts," and their "drive to universalise and essentialise structural phenomena," though he does contend that not all resort "to implicitly geometric assumptions."[87] Gibson's militant opposition to previous theories does not actually help to define a new theory of analysis. Roland Barthes claims that the simple structural analysis of the structuralists is outdated, and notes that two streams of analysis have developed from this initial form. One form "seeks to establish a narrative model" (comprised of structure and grammar, amongst other technical elements) against which every narrative can be judged in terms of its divergence.[88] The other form (the method Barthes favours in his analysis of Poe's "Valdemar") involves the narrative being "subsumed... under the notion of 'text', space, process of meanings at work, in short, 'significance'," while the literary work is viewed as an unfinished product that is "in progress, 'plugged in' to other texts."[89] Thus Barthes has placed structural analysis in opposition to textual analysis, but requests that we do not declare them enemies. Barthes encourages the rejection of the idea of a determined link between signifier and

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[87] Gibson, Andrew. "From 'Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative'." In M. McQuillan (ed.), *The Narrative Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. p. 155.
[88] Barthes, Roland. "Textual analysis: Poe's 'Valdemar'." In M. McQuillan (ed.), *The Narrative Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. p. 130.
[89] *Ibid*, p. 130.

signified[90] – rejecting the former altogether in favour of endless versions of the latter, and in doing so rejecting the idea that an author can deliberately employ textual techniques to elicit a certain meaning. Barthes famously rejects the pre-eminence of the author, favouring instead the text itself as the superior element of the creation and execution of literature[91] – he would thus not reject my stress on a deep textual analysis, yet would presumably caution against the idea that this analysis could stabilise a specific 'meaning' inflicted by the author. Far from a singular specific meaning embedded by the author, pieces of literature are groups of words ordered just so by an author who is attempting to achieve some end-goals in regards to meaning, and may inadvertently achieve others due to the differing arrays of reader responses. Despite the varied reader responses, which Barthes heavily emphasises, I do believe skilled authors can order their words in certain ways to elicit certain meaning for the majority of readers, and so I cannot disregard the author as Barthes does.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues against narratological theories where the duality of story time verses narrative time is central to analysis.[92] She says this dichotomy is unfounded, as there is no "basic story"[93] – all attempts to define a basic story are simply other "versions".[94] This, of course, is literally true – all fiction has been invented, and there is no base story – rather there is just the telling. Nevertheless, there is always an implied base story to which readers attempt to refer. In this, I agree with Peter Brooks' assertion that it is good to have the distinction between story and

[90] Barthes, "Textual Analysis," p. 131.
[91] Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." In Vincent B. Leitch (ed.) *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001. pp. 1466-1470.
[92] Herrnstein Smith, Barbara. "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1, On Narrative (Autumn 1980). pp. 213-36.
[93] *Ibid*, p. 215.
[94] *Ibid*, p. 218.

discourse, or as he borrows the Russian Formalist terms, *fabula* (story) and *sjužet* (narrative discourse):

> ...the *fabula* – "what really happened" – is in fact a mental
> construction that the reader derives from the *sjužet*, which is all that
> he ever directly knows. This different status of the two terms by no
> means invalidates the distinction itself, which is central to our
> thinking about narrative and necessary to its analysis since it allows
> us to juxtapose two modes of order and in the juxtaposing to see
> how ordering takes place.[95]

I would agree that, although it is an illusion, it is a helpful illusion because it allows us to assess the deliberate variations in narrative that the author has created as compared to the 'story'. Thus, most authors rely on the fact that this illusion exists – that we, as readers, will compare the narrative variation to the perceived story events so the effect, or meaning, can be understood.

It may be intriguing to some that I have chosen such a structuralist methodology when I write within an era that has seen postnarratology and poststructuralism. The poststructuralists and postnarratologists would have us move away from a structural analysis of the text – favouring instead theories about how a text is completed (or even created) by the reader, and how it is endlessly changed by its connection to other texts that may come after it. However, I would argue that the crux of literary criticism – and indeed, the discipline of English – is to start with a deep textual

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[95] Brooks, Peter. "Reading for the Plot." In *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1992. p. 13.

analysis and then from there move on to further analysis such as that dictated by reader response theories. Thus I have chosen a specific form of textual analysis – Genettian – which looks closely at the issues of temporality which are so clear in McEwan's works. It is this textual analysis that my research seeks to achieve – from there it may be used in subsequent research to explain theories within the realm of poststructuralism, or indeed in future movements of criticism. However, although I cannot extend my work into the boundless realm of poststructuralism in the limited space I have here, I could not be content with a mere formal structuralist analysis of McEwan's works – that is, a strict outlining of techniques and styles without exploring the consequences or meanings of these textual features. Instead, this starting point will be used as a springboard from which I will attempt to ascertain what effect these textual features have on meaning for the novel, in terms of both themes and issues, and even the preliminary effect on the reader.

Though the term is flawed because the last book I cover is not the last he has published, I will be arguing for a 'late' McEwan style within a long, successful career. McEwan has always focused intensely on pinnacle scenes within his novels, and in *Atonement*, *Saturday* and *On Chesil Beach* these scenes are distended moments. McEwan packs thought reporting on the details of a character's consciousness into the moment, resulting in the slowing of narrative time (which again places emphasis on the scene within the whole text). The implications of these singled out scenes for each book as a whole is far-reaching not just in terms of character development, but also in terms of themes and issues, narrative and narrator, and, in some cases, for fiction as a genre. The following chapters will in turn explore each of McEwan's 'late' style novels –

Atonement, *Saturday* and *On Chesil Beach* – investigating the distended moments in each, the consequences of these scenes for the themes and issues dealt with in each novel, and the links between these early twenty-first century novels as they shape McEwan's ever-changing style.

Atonement

A Bid for the Mainstream

With *Atonement* McEwan displays a break from his previous style of writing – in its apparent bid for the mainstream this book represents the start of a new era in McEwan's writing. McEwan's career in narrative fiction to this point can be split into three largely chronological groups or periods. The first phase is that of the short story. Here, the shock horror element reigns supreme – across two collections (*First Love, Last Rites* and *In Between the Sheets*), McEwan creates short fictional works which revolve around, explore, and brutally expose some base element or other of human nature – usually manifesting itself in sordid sexuality, cruelty or murder. The short nature of the works means that this is the key element (and, for many of his pieces, the only element) of the story – each story simply being an exploration of that alarming element, with a lead up to the horrifying reveal and a short or absent denouement.

The second era flows directly from the first and in many ways is simply an extension of this first era. During the second phase, McEwan creates two full-length novels – *The Cement Garden* and *The Comfort of Strangers* – following the same pattern as his short stories. That is, despite being more fleshed-out in narrative length, these novels again centre almost solely upon a provocative theme. Each novel slowly builds in tension until the final revelation and the short denouement. *The Comfort of Strangers* in particular is reminiscent of McEwan's short stories – the reader acknowledging the tension building throughout the text without really knowing why it has been placed there, when in the final section it is suddenly divulged that this tension has been building to a surprise torture and murder scene, which is followed by an

extremely short wrap-up. *The Cement Garden* contains alarming elements throughout the text (as a group of young siblings deal with the sudden death of their parents by burying their mother in cement), however it is the incestuous sex scene – one of modern western society's last great taboos – at the conclusion of the novel (some of which is witnessed by an outsider) which is the really stunning element, and which is followed up with only one page of denouement. In these two phases, then, McEwan's aim is to shock – and in the novels, to do it in the final pages so that the reader does not have time to temper this stunned feeling, to feel the resolution that is usually provoked by a more elongated, satisfying denouement.

The third period represents a shift away from this emphasis on shock. *The Child in Time*, *The Innocent*, *Black Dogs* and *Enduring Love* are philosophical novels which, while all containing an alarming element, do not only seek to exploit this fright. That is, unlike the previous two eras, the narrative is not simply there to serve the interests of the shock concept and then, once this has been delivered, to abruptly end. Rather, these third era novels are also musings on less scandalous issues or elements. *The Child in Time* – I believe McEwan's most philosophical novel – explores the scientific concept of the relativity of time, and how this can be examined in the written form – McEwan creates a novel which is for the most part realist, but which at times enters the realm of magical realism. *The Innocent* serves as something of a bridge between the second and third eras – retaining the frightening element (the dismembering of a body accidentally killed in a fight) but elongating the denouement, whilst also exploring more philosophical ideas. McEwan' version of a spy thriller, *The Innocent* delves into the idea of the loss of innocence during the Cold War in Berlin. McEwan stresses the cost (rather than any gain) through the various losses of innocence

experienced by the protagonist – sexual (the sought-after woman is lost to another), as well as more sinister forms such as spying (unsuccessful) and dismembering a body (the disposal of the corpse is bungled). *Black Dogs* explores evil as inflicted by human kind in its various forms, referencing the commonly perceived 'most evil' time in recent western history – that of the Nazi regime in World War Two. This takes the form of a post-war encounter with now-wild German Shepherd dogs previously trained by Nazi operatives to rape women. These dogs embody the evil found within mankind, just as they shape a character's life for 'good' (retaliation in the form of a religious epiphany).

Enduring Love explores the power of love – not so much to create and nurture, but to destroy. This is a much more developed novel than McEwan's previous works – not propelling towards a pinnacle climactic scene at the end of the novel, but rather placing this scene at the beginning of the novel and allowing many themes and issues to develop from this moment in time. The pinnacle scene has thus become the catalyst for the novel's unfolding events, rather than the climactic endpoint which draws all of the threads of the novel together and abruptly terminates them – the rock which breaks the glass into a million shards rather than the glue which sticks the already-broken shards together. So far McEwan's development has been plotted chronologically, yet *Amsterdam*, written after *Enduring Love* but before *Atonement*, is a throwback to the second phase. It comes as a surprise following the development in structure and style found within *Enduring Love* – harking back to the previous McEwan era where a whole novel leads up to a climactic shocking scene (in the case of *Amsterdam*, the mutual murder of the two lead characters) followed by an extremely short denouement. This surprise reversion might explain why so many critics and readers were disappointed with the novel, and thought its hugely influential award (it won the Booker Prize in

1998) might have been given to atone for the lack of awards given to *Enduring Love* or simply to commemorate an important author's career. Apart from this momentary reversion, then, McEwan's third period remains largely chronological – departing from novels that simply lead up to a final frightening surprise in favour of philosophical exploration.

   Enduring Love is an interesting book, as it bridges the gap somewhat between the philosophical novel (third era McEwan) and 'late' McEwan (beginning with *Atonement*). Like *Atonement*, it features an unreliable narrator. Unlike *Atonement*, which only reveals this unreliability in the final section of the novel, we are quite aware right throughout *Enduring Love* that what we are reading may not in fact be absolute truth – rather, it could well be misinterpretation carried out by a paranoid mind. This oscillation between believing events as described and skepticism promotes the tension in the novel. *Enduring Love* is written in the first person and so we see events through the eyes of the protagonist, Joe. Joe's anxiety about his stalker, Jed, is left open for interpretation – we as readers are made aware that Jed has definitely taken an unnatural interest in Joe, yet to what extent we do not know. The skepticism of Joe's wife Clarissa is at times frustrating to us (when we believe all of Joe's thoughts), and at times points us towards the idea that perhaps not all is as it seems – that perhaps Joe has become unnaturally paranoid about Jed and is inventing (or misinterpreting) some of Jed's possible actions. It is in the final scene that *Atonement* springs the possibility of an unreliable narrator upon us, while it is the final section of *Enduring Love* which confirms Joe's point of view – eliminating the possibility of his unreliability through medical reports confirming Jed's psychiatric condition and his obsession with Joe. Thus we could say that in *Atonement* McEwan has again taken up and played with the idea of an unreliable

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narrator, taking the notion of *Enduring Love* – a novel which plays on the possibility

that the narrator is unreliable throughout the majority of the text, before revealing the

narrator as ultimately reliable in the final pages – and inverting this structure for

Atonement – where a seemingly reliable narrator is finally revealed as extremely

unreliable. The reader's willingness to believe what s/he is told to believe – a readerly

instinct which can be inverted so easily in a final reveal – is thus exploited by McEwan

in a self-aware postmodern manipulation of the written word. *Enduring Love*, then, is a

transitional text between the philosophical era of McEwan and the 'late' era, pointing to

a very self-conscious shift into playing with the structure of the written form.

Although McEwan begins to work on a more developed novelistic style in

Enduring Love, this novel still pivots around disturbing elements of human nature – a

trademark McEwan feature by this time. Indeed, with this novel (despite its obvious

relative complexity in style and structure) McEwan could not hope to shake his hallmark

'shock horror writer' label. The retrogressive second era style novel *Amsterdam*,

published only the year after *Enduring Love*, served to cement this label further, rather

than to help the author cast it off. It was with *Atonement* that McEwan really made a bid

for the mainstream, delivering an epic novel encompassing a range of traditional

mainstream styles – in parts fictional memoir, country house story, war story, home

front story, and (with a nod to the contemporary novelistic style) postmodernist text –

while abandoning the central shocking element of base humanity that enslaves his prior

works. The story times of all of McEwan's other texts (pre- and post-*Atonement*) take

place over short periods of fictional time (a year, a few months, a day or even only a few

hours), whereas *Atonement*, in a clear gesture to the tradition of mainstream fiction, is

the first McEwan text to cover an entire life – an extended period of story time over

which four distinct periods are given extended focus. This novel is not a small 'study' as some of his other works could be called – it is indeed a mainstream extended tale. The literary accolades that came pouring in for *Atonement* confirm McEwan's entry into the first rank of contemporary novelists. Indeed, this was the first of his novels to be so accepted and revered as to win multiple awards – taking out the W.H. Smith Literary Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Los Angeles Times Prize for Fiction, and the Santiago Prize for the European Novel, as well as being shortlisted for (but just missing out on) the Booker Prize.

In addition to the abrupt change in story time length, *Atonement* also does not contain any element as horrifying as those contained in his previous works, adding to his mainstream status. The most appalling elements of this novel are the rape of a girl (not detailed in the text, but rather carried on 'offstage', removing much of the potential horror), and a war sequence (although far from pleasant, the walk to Dunkirk does not contain any horrific battle sequences – there is nothing in this section that has not been explored in hundreds of other war stories, and the reader is much more willing to excuse any base elements of human nature displayed (or at least the shock is cushioned) when they occur during war, where all normal rules of decency are suspended). Notably, these scenes do not occur anywhere near the end of the novel – they are not its climax, and the narrative is not there to simply service the shock. Rather, in this novel McEwan uses these somewhat alarming elements to serve the narrative, unlike the reverse situation found within first and second era McEwan texts. Nor is this a novel concerned with philosophical exploration of a theme or theory; rather, McEwan uses *Atonement* to explore different styles and structures – ultimately enjoying manipulating his text, and therefore his readers who so readily believe the written word. The final revelation

remains, but it is not placed just so in order to frighten the reader with some horrible base element of human nature – rather it is used to reveal the textual manipulations McEwan has been creating along the way, and to expose in a postmodern twist the writerly and readerly processes involved in the creation of novels.

The Pivotal Scene

Importantly, one thing has remained intact through the break from the previous eras to *Atonement*, and that is the stress placed on a single scene. Early incarnations of this pinnacle scene occur throughout McEwan's novels, yet it is with *Atonement* that McEwan really presents the final polished product – utilising this distending technique to emphasise the importance of one moment over all others in the novel, and through it to make revelations about the nature of writing, 'truth', honesty and narratorial reliability. At first glance there would seem to be three key scenes in *Atonement* – all occurring in the first part of the novel set at the country house. These are deliberately conveyed as more important than the rest of the events through the narrative technique of frequency of repetition – all three scenes are detailed twice from two different points of view. These scenes are the fountain scene, the library sex scene, and Robbie's arrest. During the fountain scene a young girl, Briony Tallis, witnesses a strange interaction between her older sister, Cecilia, and the housekeeper's son, Robbie; during the library scene she interrupts them having sex (which she interprets as an attack); and during the last she witnesses the result of her troubled, complicated and misunderstood accusation – the dramatic arrest of Robbie. In order to understand why these scenes have been isolated as important, it is crucial to understand the complex narratorial situation of McEwan's novel.

In the fourth and final part of the novel (London, 1999), McEwan suddenly reveals that the third person story we have read thus far (parts one to three), seemingly narrated by an unbiased, reliable and fairly anonymous narrator, was in fact penned by Briony – now an adult and a successful author, but also an elderly woman torn apart by the guilt she feels for her actions on that fateful day in 1935 (the day with which the novel opens). Upon this revelation, we realise that it is in fact Briony who has given emphasis to particular scenes – scenes influential within her own life, and not necessarily the same scenes that would have been influential from the perspective of an impartial narrator. Part One sets up the chain of events which influences the young Briony, and thus (by nature of her authorship of much of what we read) influences the rest of the novel. With our newly-gained knowledge of the hidden, partial author casting her bias over her third person narrator, these three scenes – the fountain scene, the library sex scene and Robbie's arrest – are revealed not only as important to the young Briony on that day so many years ago, but moreso, important to the aged, dying woman who cannot forgive herself for what she saw, misinterpreted and acted upon during those scenes so many years before. All three scenes would have been highly traumatic for the young girl, and yet we see the old woman now attempting to atone for her mistakes by engaging with her profession – by getting inside the heads of the other participants. It is through Briony's belated attempted understanding of the actions and motivations of Cecilia and Robbie that we are thus given each scene from Briony's point of view, as well as that of one other participant – the repetition stressing the importance of each scene.

However, these three scenes are not treated equally in all other respects – there is one that sticks out from the others as the pinnacle moment. The library scene would at

first glance seem to be the obvious choice for the key scene of *Atonement*. It is dramatic for the reader in that it portrays sex – risky in its time setting (1935) in that it is outside marriage and outside of the traditional privacy of the bedroom – interrupted by an 'innocent' child (what Freud might have called a 'primal scene'). That is, the consummation of Cecilia and Robbie's relationship is cut short just before they reach their climax by the girl, Briony, who will then take action which results in the lovers never completing this act. In that, the library scene seems to be representative of the relationship between the three main characters as a whole. Nonetheless, while it may seem a perfect metaphor for the relationship between the three, it does not portray *Briony's* most significant memory. Briony is a child when she interrupts the two – she does not see the embarrassing and potentially scarring image of her older sister having sex. Instead, Briony's "immediate understanding was that she had interrupted an attack, a hand-to-hand fight."[96] Although worrying for the girl, this is not traumatising for her in that she knows where to place the information and how to react to the situation – her sister is being attacked but is fighting back, and she is helping to save her. This scene, for the child Briony, is merely a continuation of the powerplay she thought she witnessed while observing the events by the fountain (where she believed Robbie was somehow controlling Cecilia) – it is no longer shocking, merely compounding.

Nor is Robbie's arrest the most compelling scene of the three – although terrible to witness for the young girl who made the accusation, it appears Briony the author feels this is simply one of the many results (the other results are detailed in parts two and three) of her actions, and not the cause. It is the cause that has troubled her for so many years. Although not highlighted with repetition, one would think that Briony's

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[96] McEwan, Ian. *Atonement*. London: Vintage Books, 2007. p. 123.

reading of the obscene letter would be high in the trauma stakes – yet this is not as traumatic for the child in the moment as the other scenes are. Briony does not definitively and without doubt know the meaning of the word 'cunt' – she "had never heard the word spoken, or seen it in print, or come across it in asterisks. No one in her presence had ever referred to the word's existence," (*A*114) though she guesses (correctly) at its meaning and is wary of its power. Robbie, an adult fully aware of the meaning of the word and its power and implications if publically released into the world of 1930s Britain – just as aware as McEwan expects his readership will be – is, understandably, more upset and agitated by the release of this 'wrong note' than the not-fully-aware child Briony. In addition, for the adult author Briony, this is not the pivotal scene – this is merely another link in the chain, another nail in the coffin, of 'proof' leading to her 'crime'. None of these key scenes is therefore the most important in McEwan's novel.

The key moment in *Atonement* is, in fact, the fountain scene – specifically, the second repetition as focalised through Cecilia. This is the scene where Cecilia (daughter of the upper-middle class country house family) and Robbie (son of the housekeeper, given patronage by the master of the house), overwhelmed with unspoken and unacknowledged sexual and emotional tension, tussle over the filling with water of an antique family heirloom vase at a garden fountain. The vase is snapped and stubborn Cecilia compounds Robbie's guilt by giving him no means of redemption – stripping down to her underwear, jumping into the fountain to retrieve the broken pieces, then emerging dripping wet (with now-translucent underwear) to hurriedly and awkwardly dress and storm off back to her house. The scene, we learn from Briony's later telling, is witnessed and misinterpreted by Briony, unseen from a window in the house. This

fountain scene is the scene which really begins the slow cascade of important events in the novel, and it is the second repetition (Cecilia's version) which is given the most emphasis in a number of technical ways.

Despite its seemingly benign action when compared to later inferences of rape and depictions of war, there are a great many reasons why the fountain scene has been chosen by McEwan as the distended moment – the most important in *Atonement*. First of all, it is the event which launches the chain of events which leads to Briony committing her self-proclaimed "crime" (*A*156) – a crime which, we learn, is at the heart of the novel, motivating future events and even motivating Briony to detail her story in writing (her novelistic endeavors are what we read in parts one to three of McEwan's four part novel). This chain of events is the scene at the fountain; Briony reading the obscene letter (Robbie's accidentally-public tribute to Cecilia's "cunt" (*A*86)); cousin Lola – slightly older than Briony and therefore more wise in the latter's eyes – labeling Robbie a "maniac;" (*A*119) the library (interrupted) sex scene; Lola's rape; and finally Briony's 'crime' in naming Robbie as the rapist she "saw" (*A*181) – a false charge, yet not intended as such. These events kindle Briony's realisation, and then compound her conviction, that Robbie is a sexual predator whom her sister must fear, and from whom Briony must protect and shield her sibling. Thus these events lead Briony to claim she saw Robbie raping Lola (in fact, this 'seeing' is simply her believing the 'evidence' put before her) – a 'crime' which she only understands later and which haunts her entire life. It is clear, then, why the fountain scene, rather than the library scene, is so significant in this novel, given it is related to us by the adult Briony – a successful novelist, not an impartial narrator, obsessed with the past, with the root cause of her sin.

Rather than just in retrospect by the adult Briony as the root cause of her 'crime', the fountain scene itself – as a sealed moment in time witnessed by a confused young girl – is also immensely significant to the thirteen-year old Briony. The girl is shocked to witness her sister, Cecilia, stripping down to her underwear in broad daylight in the middle of a garden where anyone (family, workers or guests) might see, in front of Robbie – both male *and* the housekeeper's son. The story time is 1935 and this is simply 'not done' on many levels – Briony's shock (and subsequent belief that her sister must therefore be under the extraordinary control of Robbie) in the second repetition of the scene reveals to us the nature of Cecilia's indiscretion: in this time women do not strip in the garden during the day, they certainly do not do so in front of men, especially men they are not married to, and even more so not in front of men of a lower social class. Briony understands these social 'rules' and when she witnesses her sister violating them she immediately feels two things: immense "shame" on behalf of her sister, and an understanding that Robbie must have some "strange power" over Cecilia to make her perform such wild acts. (*A*38) While the library scene may have been terribly embarrassing to an adult who would have understood what they had interrupted, the fountain scene is the scene that traumatises the young Briony – she understands her sister has fallen from social grace and she feels shame on Cecilia's behalf. The young Briony attributes these negative feelings to (what she perceives as) Robbie's strange and frightening power, which the library scene only serves to confirm for her.

The fountain scene is not just a powerful, dramatic moment for the child Briony – it is also crucially important to Briony the author. This was the moment she remembers as being the catalyst for the major decision of her (professional, artistic) life – this was the moment she decided to become a writer. Witnessing this very strange

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adult scene from above, the child Briony – a budding young writer of fairytale-esque romances and formulaic plays where evil and good are clearly defined – realises she does not fully understand "the real, the adult world in which frogs did not address princesses, and the only messages were the ones that people sent." (*A*40) This realisation is Briony's coming of age – the moment she grasps that the worlds of children and adults are quite different and wishes to ascend to the next hierarchical level. This, then, is not just the first part of her life she decides to write, but rather the first event in her life that seems to insist on being written. From this scene stems her novel – her life's dogged work, her attempt at atonement – which powerfully conveys the scene's centrality not just narratively, but also aesthetically for the artist. Through writing the scene from differing points of view again and again over a lifetime, Briony the author slowly hones her atonement into the attempt to get inside the heads of those she misunderstood so long ago. This is Briony's great misread scene – the adult Briony believes that if she had only been a better writer at the time, able to more fully inhabit the minds of other people, then she may not have misinterpreted the actions she witnessed, and thus may not have committed her 'crime' – in turn, not ruining a number of lives (including her own) in the process. It is thus Cecilia's focalised version of the scene, and not her own (the young Briony's), that takes pride of place in the final novel as the distended moment.

This fountain scene also becomes centrally important for Briony the artist as she matures, taking on the elements of the differing influential literary styles of her formative years – in particular, modernism – as she develops her own adult literary style. Watching the scene from her window, the young girl muses that she "could write the scene three times over, from three points of view" (*A*40) – an exercise which she

works on until the age of eighteen, when, as the letter from the editor "CC" (*A*315) in Part Three reveals, she sends her first draft to publishers titled "*Two Figures by a Fountain*." (*A*311) Briony is eighteen in 1940 – when the style and techniques of modernism were generally well-known and established. The fountain scene is clearly influenced by this style – particularly the modernist concepts of ambiguity and depersonalisation. Briony writes the fountain scene three times (two of which show up in her final novel) to demonstrate its ambiguity – the scene cannot be read one way, cannot be reduced to a single statement and it is this confusion, typical to the modernist aesthetic, which affirms the confusion of interpretation felt by the child on the day. The depersonalisation of modernism is also crucial here – Briony the author has written herself out of the text, allowing a third person narrator to detail the scene, and even allowing Cecilia's point of view to dominate her own. The irony of this is that Briony the author cannot be written out of the text – McEwan writes her back in in the final part of the novel, casting her presence over what we had previously read. This fountain scene, chosen by McEwan to be his distended moment, is also Briony's pinnacle moment – as a traumatised child, as a budding author heavily influenced by the style of modernism, and as a reflective adult author with the dual agenda of attempting to atone as well as produce an accomplished artistic work. Thus the fountain scene is central both narratively and for an aesthetics of modernism.

Modernism and Woolf in the Fountain Scene

Not content with 'merely' heavily referencing the style of modernism itself, McEwan has also given the fountain scene such prominence as a deliberate reference to one of the movement's key writers, Virginia Woolf, and specifically to her great work,

Mrs Dalloway. McEwan guides us to the link between the fountain scene and Woolf's works when CC wonders if Briony's short story "owed a little too much to the techniques of Mrs Woolf," (*A*312) and then details Briony's modernist writing techniques. *Mrs Dalloway*, one of Woolf's most famous novels, also contains a fountain scene where two lovers, Clarissa and Peter, quarrel, remembered decades on. Although the *Atonement* fountain scene does not seek to replicate the *Mrs Dalloway* fountain scene, there are many similarities between the two. "[T]hat scene in the little garden by the fountain" is mentioned in passing by Clarissa as she outlines "the grief, the anguish"[97] she has felt over the decades since it occurred. Later on in the novel Peter recalls "the final scene, the terrible scene which he believed had mattered more than anything in the whole of his life."[98] Thus it is clear that, just as McEwan's fountain scene impacts upon Briony's entire life, Woolf's fountain scene has a great emotional impact upon the characters involved for a great many years. Peter's more detailed memory of the scene retells how he asked Clarissa to meet him by the fountain where he pleaded with her to "tell me the truth"[99] about why she had decided to end their love affair in order to court her marriage to another man, Richard Dalloway. The lovers were interrupted briefly by an old man who "popped his head in… stared at them; gaped; and went away."[100] Peter continued his request, then Clarissa declared "[i]t's no use… This is the end"[101] as she turned and left him by the fountain. Thus, just as Clarissa and Peter forge through a significant event in their relationship, witnessed by an outsider, so too do Cecilia and Robbie witnessed by Briony.

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[97] Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway*. London and New York: Penguin Books, 1992. p. 8.
[98] *Ibid*, p. 69.
[99] *Ibid*, p. 70.
[100] *Ibid*, p. 70.
[101] *Ibid*, p. 70.

Even the description of the fountain in *Atonement* resembles that in *Mrs Dalloway*. Woolf's fairly defunct fountain is marked by "the spout (it was broken) dribbling water incessantly… [and] vivid green moss."[102] McEwan's fountain is modeled on the great Bernini's Triton, yet the water "pressure was too weak, so that instead the water slid soundlessly down the underside of the shell where opportunistic slime hung in dripping points." (*A*28) Obviously the *Atonement* fountain scene is not a clear reproduction of the *Mrs Dalloway* fountain scene. However, I believe the two fountain scenes have very similar elements – the two lovers in disagreement by a fountain which impacts the rest of their lives, the third watcher, the not-quite-working, mossy fountain. I believe that McEwan is deliberately referencing Woolf's scene in order to link Briony's obsession with the event she witnessed with her obsession with writing – in particular, with writing modernist texts. Briony places heavy emphasis on the fountain scene, both as a critical moment in her life, and as an opportunity to display her modernist writing techniques – an emphasis which reflects both her guilt and her reverence for the great writing style and authors of the time.

McEwan has thus layered the distended moment of *Atonement* with a modest, yet charged intertextual reference to one of Woolf's greatest novels and in doing so, is linking not only his novel, but specifically its narration and narrator, Briony, with the high aesthetics of modernism. Modernism was a revolutionary style poised between two very different literary styles – that of the traditional novel and postmodernism. This fountain scene is representative of that delicate position of modernism – the description of the late Victorian fountain at the country house pulls the scene in the direction of (and is, indeed, representative of) the traditional novel, while the fracturing of perspective

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[102] Woolf, p. 70.

pulls the scene in the opposite direction, towards a representation of modernism. This torn scene has also been carefully edited (in the form of both Briony the adult writer and McEwan) in the era of postmodernism, and thus cannot escape the influence of such a time. However, we cannot know about Briony's editing on a first reading of the fountain scene, and so the scene functions 'modernistically' until the final revelation where a retroactive 'postmodernisation' takes place. The scene is being pulled both ways – traditional, postmodernist – and bursts out in the middle in the form of modernism.

Briony's resolution of writing the scene three times over from differing perspectives, and the subsequent editor's letter regarding her work as 'too' modernist, confirms this assertion. However, by pure virtue of his time (to say nothing of the subtleties of his writing), McEwan cannot be a modernist writer, and indeed his writing of this scene is deliberately and self-consciously modernist – a definitive nod in the direction of that great mode. This self-awareness thus laces the scene (and thus the work as a whole) with a postmodern sensibility – a writer (McEwan), creating a writer (Briony) and her writing, who rewrites her modernist scene during the period of postmodernism. Of course, Briony's 'postmodernisation' cannot be noted on a first read, so it is only McEwan's postmodernism that can be noted at first – a postmodernism that becomes layered during the closing revelation. Briony and McEwan are thus both aware of the very deliberate employment of modernism in the scene – Briony looking back affectionately on her early years as a writer when she desperately tried to mimic Woolf, and McEwan creating a juvenile modernist writer and her words edited by time. The young Briony, represented through her writing of the fountain scene, is thus just as modernism was – caught up between two very different movements.

Of course, while Briony simply affectionately retains elements of her original draft, McEwan deliberately engages with modernist techniques in this scene, which again stress the importance of the scene. Briony was the original writer of the modernist scene which (with the benefit of years of hindsight and knowledge of literary styles) she later edits. Among numerous minor changes revealed to us by CC's letter of advice (like the vase changing makes from Ming to Meissen), she deletes Robbie's point of view, and takes CC's advice in stepping away from modernism to develop a plot based on this poignant scene – to detail the consequences of this specific moment, to fill it with narrative incident, in order to more thoroughly engage the reader. McEwan, however, has inserted remnants of modernist techniques into a traditional depiction of a scene in order to draw our attention to Briony's love of modernism. Cecilia's fountain scene goes on almost entirely within her head – we are given small snippets of action markers throughout long sections of her thoughts in order to reassure us that the action is still moving behind her thought processes. This excessive obsession with character consciousness – detailing a scene through the thoughts of a character in the moment – is typical of the modernist flow of consciousness technique. This allowed modernist authors to detail a mind in the moment, without the traditional novelistic convention of pausing the action for thought, detailing these thoughts out of scene (at the start or end of a chapter in reflection), or allowing them to occur over a period of untimed duration (for example, as a character gazes out a window, without any action markers allowing us to gauge story time). The upshot of this technique meant that these thoughts were detailed in rapid-fire succession – a thought almost always fragmented by the next coming in over the top. However, Briony has tried to temper this modernist technique, and McEwan has thus combined flow of consciousness in the moment with the full-

sentenced thoughts typical of the traditional novel to produce a hybrid form. Cecilia's fountain scene details her rapid-fire thoughts in the moment, however they are full-sentenced and grammatical for a fuller reader understanding. Briony writes the scene in an attempt to understand her sister's actions; McEwan writes the scene in order to detail the combination of styles found in the adult Briony's writing – a modernist scene somewhat-edited by a postmodern era author (Briony) who is too emotionally caught up in the plights of the characters to relinquish the techniques of understanding character consciousness found within the traditional novel.

Slowed Scene in the Distended Moment

One result of this hybridisation of styles – where the flow of consciousness is delivered in full sentences in the moment – is to retard the action. Of course, such retardation only serves to create a better understanding of character consciousness, as we become much more emotionally involved with a character when we fully understand each of his or her thoughts as s/he goes through a tension-filled event. Happily for McEwan, this retardation, this slowing of the scene into a *slowed scene*, also places greater technical significance on the scene, lending more literary weight to his infamous distended moment. Of course, using Genette's terminology, we could indeed easily label some of the fountain scene as *scene*. As Genette claims, "pure dialogue cannot be slowed down."[103] However, the focalisation of the third person narration swiftly settles itself in the character of Cecilia, and so the narrative time duration of the scene shifts. We are treated to Cecilia's thoughts as she thinks them at the time. Within the course of one short paragraph we follow her train of thought as she worries she has said

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[103] Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 95.

something stupid, watches Robbie and follows his line of sight over the park to the cows and the woods, remembers she ran through those woods that morning, worries that Robbie might have misinterpreted her innocent literary discussions as code to talk about her love of the sexual, wonders how to put that right, ponders the mix of the colour of his eyes, admits she likes his height, and interests herself in the strange combination of "intelligence and sheer bulk" (*A*26) in a man found within Robbie. It is clear that McEwan has written a sort of flow of consciousness narrative in this paragraph, although the sentences are much more formed and complete than those of the chop and change flow of consciousness found within modernist writing.

In this scene we are gaining complete access to a character's mind. This occurs frequently in this novel with a number of characters (especially Briony), however here there is a difference – rather than occurring around the margins of key scenes or during sections of untimed duration (both traditional novelistic techniques), these thoughts are occurring within the moving moment. The action has certainly not paused for mere description – we are receiving the active flow of thought from Cecilia, but the narrative discourse relative to the rest of the novel has been slowed down – the action has been retarded – so we can understand her jumps from one subject to another. This embedding of typical *psycho-narration* and *narrated thought* within the strict confines of a highly charged dramatic scene is atypical of its usual home on the margins of scenes – McEwan's specific placement engorging his pinnacle scene. Following this paragraph the third person narrator then regains authority over the narrative, describing in exquisite detail the attributes of the fountain. There are no marks of Cecilia's focalisation within this paragraph – we do not see thoughts jumping from one to the next, but rather a detailed description of an object she would have found mundane in its regularity. This

paragraph is quite clearly descriptive *pause* rather than *scene* or *slowed scene*, as no action is narrated other than the trickle of water – an intrinsic element of the fountain not unique to this story event. This short descriptive *pause* is embedded within the *slowed scene* section in order to sharply contrast with the slowing caused by Cecilia's complicated thoughts, which we are immediately thereafter returned to.

As the tension builds between the characters and as the action picks up, the narrative pace of the previous sections immediately quickens from *slowed scene* to *scene*. The physical climax – a struggle between Cecilia and Robbie culminating in the breaking of the priceless heirloom – is largely detailed in *scene* narrative time duration. The action quickly builds to this moment and thus the description is given in relatively racing narrative, sacrificing in-depth character consciousness along the way. We return to Cecilia's thoughts for only one sentence within this section: "[s]he had no time, and certainly no inclination, to explain that plunging the vase and flowers into the water would help with the natural look she wanted in the arrangement". (*A*29) She has no time to explain this to Robbie, yet the narrative takes the time to tell us, and so the narrative duration is slowed only momentarily to display the awareness of speed in Cecilia's mind before completing the physical climax description in *scene*. Following this, it is the immediate psychological contemplation of the broken vase – the almost instantaneous thoughts on this first physical dramatic climax – that are then detailed rather than any thoughts *during* that precise physically climactic peak. McEwan is thus making it perfectly clear that it is the psychology of the moment that is the real climax of the scene, the real focus, rather than the physical climax which is important only in so far as it acts as a catalyst for these thoughts.

The following section sees an immediate return to Cecilia's thoughts, and

hence to the *slowed scene*. As McEwan makes clear that the couple (but not the action

of the scene itself) have frozen "in the attitude of their struggle," (*A*29) we again gain

insight into Cecilia's thoughts of sweet revenge as she salaciously contemplates the

difficult situation Robbie now finds himself in. To keep us aware that we are within the

(moving) present moment McEwan carefully inserts a line of action from Cecilia's point

of view, "[s]he had the presence of mind to set the ruined vase back down on the step

before letting herself confront the significance of the accident." (*A*29) A short line of

dialogue (scene) then precedes a paragraph that constantly switches between *scene* and

slowed scene. Concise descriptions of action, such as "she kicked off her sandals,

unbuttoned her blouse…" (*A*30) – which can only be described as *scene* in duration –

are interchanged with Cecilia's thoughts about that action:

> Immediately she knew what he was about. Intolerable. He had
>
> come to the house and removed his shoes and socks – well, she
>
> would show him then. (*A*30)

The action within this part, like that of the struggle before the break (the first climax of

the fountain scene), is quite fast-paced and involves another psychological struggle

between the characters played out through a physical struggle, as they race to take off

their clothes and retrieve the broken pieces of the vase. It moves towards the second

climax of the fountain scene as Cecilia – half naked – jumps into the fountain. However,

this climax differs slightly from the previous one, in that we hear more of Cecilia's

thoughts. This climax therefore contains more sections of *slowed scene* than the

previous one, which is fitting given that it is the psychological climax of the scene rather than merely the physical climax.

Thus the majority of the fountain scene is *slowed scene* in narrative time duration. It is an important scene – for the characters contained within it as they negotiate power, for Briony's self-development as an artist as she writes and rewrites these events throughout her life, for the novel as a whole as the crux of Briony's guilt and need to atone (and hence her writing and narrating the novel) and as McEwan's distended moment. I believe that McEwan has employed *slowed scene* here as a means to emphasise the fountain scene – both to make the reader remember it due to its elongated narrative time compared to story time, and to allow us access to the intricate workings of a key character as it plays out – something that could not have been achieved with the use of *scene* or *pause*. We see here, then, a development of McEwan's execution of his pinnacle moment. For the first time he is engaging with a combination of traditional novelistic and modernist techniques in order to create a new technique – a new employment, a new combination – which retards the action, swelling his pivotal scene and thus giving it even more emphasis. In beautiful cyclical form, through an emphasis on character consciousness in the moment McEwan creates a technically embellished moment which in turn (by the pure nature of its relatively engorged narrative time duration) places emphasis on the scene and thus draws the reader's attention to the character's thoughts within that distended moment.

Inclusion and Omission of a Lifetime

Of course, the novel as a whole goes a long way in drawing attention to this distended moment – zooming in on short periods of time and allowing them to languish

amongst the description of almost an entire life. There are long periods of *ellipsis* within *Atonement* and it is these untold sections of story which firmly contrast with the sections of Briony's life which are detailed – clearly highlighting the importance of the latter. There are four major structural sections, or parts, of *Atonement* – the first three parts comprise Briony's novel, while the last part is outside of her fiction. Each of the four parts details a specific period of time within Briony's lifetime – a more or less complete detailed run-down of a single day, or number of sequential days. Part One details a single day and night in 1935 at the Tallis' country house when Briony is a girl of thirteen. Part Two skips ahead five years, and details a couple of days in World War Two from Robbie's perspective, ending the night before the evacuation of Dunkirk begins in 1940. Although Briony's life is not outlined in this second structural part, *a* life (Robbie's) within her lifetime is, and thus we can see that the story time does continue. Part Three is the home front story, outlining a number of days from Briony's perspective as a nurse dealing with the evacuated Dunkirk soldiers in London during the same year (there is thus an overlap in time between this part and the previous one). The last part, 'London, 1999', details a couple of days in that year, when Briony is an elderly woman of seventy-seven years dying of vascular dementia. If we are to assume that the story time of *Atonement* – a confessional, semi-autobiographical text – follows the life of the protagonist (and we are invited to assume this from the chronological layout and the Briony-centric life story), we must conclude that it 'begins' with her birth and 'ends' with her death.[104] The periods of omission are thus the first thirteen years of her life (preceding Part One), the five years between parts one and two, the nearly sixty years

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[104] I concede that this is problematic, given that Briony and her story are fictional and hence if the text excludes her birth and death, then they cannot really be said to exist. However, it is a useful fiction to indulge (one each reader will refer to in their own minds whilst reading, given the autobiographical nature of the story) which will aid my analysis of the text.

between parts three and four, and (considering her frail health in the final part) the small, undetermined amount of time between the end of the text and her death. Thus we can see that the majority of Briony's life story time is, in fact, *ellipsis* within the narrative time.

The deliberate choice of the four distinct time periods detailed in each part, in stark contrast to the elongated periods of *ellipsis*, is interesting to note, then, given that *Atonement* is a confessional text outlining a life. The choice of the single day in 1935 is obvious – this is the day during which Briony witnesses and misunderstands certain events that compound incorrect thoughts within her young mind, leading her to commit her 'crime' of accusing Robbie of Lola's rape. It is also the day when Briony first grapples with her inability to understand the adult world in black and white terms – an epiphany which sparks her desire to become an adult author. The choice of the time and place of the second part is interesting to consider when we remember that Briony is writing this section of her novel. She was not present at Robbie's side – she is imagining his life at war. In fact, the only fact from Robbie's 'real-life' story that she knows – that he died of septicemia at Dunkirk the night before the evacuation – she prefers to omit from her novel. Part Two, then, represents Briony's imagining of some of the horrific results of her crime. The *ellipsis* between parts one and two elicits a jolting effect – a slow, lolling, engorged, domestic country house story which takes up half the space of the novel is cleanly cut off and the reader is suddenly thrust into the aggressive horrors of a war story. This deliberate *ellipsis* suggests that Briony equates her crime with Robbie's 'punishment', the latter of which has such an effect on her conscience that she sees Robbie's wartime experience as part of her own life.

In a similar way, Part Three and 'London, 1999' reflect the last two important periods of Briony's life. The detailing of Briony's wartime nurse experiences demonstrates the adult author's need for her readers to understand that she also suffered as a result of her 'crime' – she was a nurse rather than an author or a student, voluntarily submitting herself to repulsive duties such as cleaning bedpans and repairing bodies as a kind of penance, while attempting to emulate her estranged sister's life (Cecilia was a ward sister). The lack of *ellipsis* between parts two and three is a deliberate ploy by Briony the author – leading us to equate Robbie's suffering with her own. It is in the third part that we read that Robbie has returned from war, has been reunited with Cecilia, and that Briony has gone to them promising to set matters aright concerning the rape. This semblance of a happy ending, as we learn in the fourth part, is a fabrication on the part of Briony the author – the lovers both died, never to be reunited after that fateful 1935 day, and Briony never saw them or set matters straight. It is here that Briony's novel ends, and thus we are to conclude that she believes the three important periods within her entire long life were those concerned with her crime, the results for the innocent, and her penance which 'sets matters aright' (in her head). However, McEwan's novel includes a final part of Briony's life just before she dies. There is a massive *ellipsis* between the third and fourth parts of the novel, leading to a readerly assumption that nothing of consequence to Briony happened in over half a century of her adult life. In the fourth section we find she has finally completed her novel – this is her final act in coming to terms with the pivotal moments of her life and her guilt. The four parts of *Atonement* thus represent the four key moments in time within Briony's life (whether she was present or not) – the *ellipses* between these parts serving to highlight these moments and lowlight the rest of Briony's life.

Although broad *ellipses* occur between some of the parts, the parts themselves are fairly devoid of elongated periods of *ellipsis* in order that Briony (and McEwan) can thoroughly detail each moment within these short time periods. The *ellipses* that do occur are minor, spanning no longer than a few minutes or hours, rather than days or years. The overwhelming majority of these sections are either *scene* or *summary* in nature, pointing to McEwan's adherence to traditional novelistic style for detailing events. Of course, throughout these parts McEwan regularly employs the traditional novelistic device of allowing complete access to a character's mind through *psycho-narration* and *narrated thought* – the same literary technique found within the fountain scene. However, apart from the fountain scene, these sections of thought all occur in 'limbo' or 'untimed duration' – on the margins of scenes and not within the moment – so they do nothing to add to the impact of any particular scene within the moment, and are rather just independent explorations of minds. McEwan's broad novelistic structure thus zooms in on four distinct time periods within an entire life – focusing our attention on them, and allowing the great periods of *ellipsis* to indicate that what we are reading is more interesting than what we are not (the 'rest of Briony's life'). In a nod to the traditional novel, the overwhelming use of *scene* and *summary* within these parts combined with numerous sections of intense access to character consciousness, contrasts with these *ellipses*, allowing us to really immerse ourselves within the worlds of these four important periods in Briony's life. The use of *slowed scene* within McEwan's pinnacle moment – the fountain scene – allows the scene a special contrast within its highlighted surroundings. This distended moment is brought to the forefront of the highlighted parts of Briony's life – it is pointed out as special even within the four most exceptional times of her life, and so is therefore given even more gravity. McEwan's

other works of fiction all span a relatively short period of story time, but in *Atonement* he has chosen to greatly emphasise his pivotal moment by placing it within a novel which spans almost an entire (long) lifetime. By contrast, this focus on one moment within this life draws our attention to it, making us aware of its vital significance for the whole life (and atonement) of this fictional author.

The Final Reveal

The first three parts of *Atonement* can be read with the traditional structuralist distinction between story and narrative discourse firmly in mind. Indeed, these parts actively encourage thinking and reading within the framework of this dichotomy by detailing three separate events from multiple points of view. That is, in three distinct instances (the fountain scene, the library scene, and Robbie's arrest), the same event (story) is told from different perspectives (narrative discourse). The story remains the same while the differing interpretations of those events result in differing narrative discourses. However, the last part of McEwan's novel disturbs this firmly planted dichotomy by revealing that parts one, two and three were, in fact, discourse, not story because they were all impartially experienced, remembered, written, edited and invented by Briony as an adult author. That is, the final part reveals that much of what we took in the previous parts to be 'true' story events presented by an unbiased, omniscient narrator were, in fact, invented by Briony the author. We learn that Briony's meeting with Robbie and Cecilia in London in Part Three was fabricated – that rather the lovers died without being reunited. We surmise, since Briony was the author, that Robbie's trials in war-torn France were the results of her imagination since she could not possibly have been there. Less dramatically, but no less importantly, we also realise that every section

focalised through a character other than herself must have been invented. Furthermore, we are left not knowing how much has been fabricated and how much was based on the 'reality' of the situations. The effect of the fourth part is thus to meld story and discourse within the previous three parts. Since we cannot find a 'true base story' from which the narrative discourse has emanated, we must view Briony's novel simply as narrative discourse. This final section, then, problematises the distinction between story and narrative discourse, with the result that the reader cannot trust in any 'base story' from which the whole has been constructed – all has become narrative, and that is the 'story' of the final part.

In writing this last section, then, McEwan seems to be using his fiction to promote the postnarratological viewpoint that there is no distinct story – that there is simply discourse. Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues that "[f]or any particular narrative, there is no single *basically* basic story subsisting beneath it but, rather, an unlimited number of other narratives that can be *constructed in response* to it or *perceived as related* to it."[105] [Herrnstein Smith's italics.] Herrnstein Smith argues against the story/discourse dichotomy, claiming it is built upon fundamental assumptions about a base story that simply does not exist. She believes that all attempts at isolating base stories are futile, as perceived base stories are, in actual fact, merely other "versions"[106] of the story (that is, simply other narrative discourses). The last part of *Atonement* seems to agree with, or at least put forward, this standpoint in revealing that what we (the readers) believed to be the 'true base story' of the first three parts was, in actual fact, Briony's fabrication – simply her version of (various other possible versions of) events

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[105] Herrnstein Smith, p. 221.
[106] *Ibid*, p. 215.

of which we cannot be certain. The story thus cannot be separated from the discourse –

for the reader, there is suddenly no surety about the 'true' events. The fact that we are

reading a fictional novel is thus absorbed back into the act of reading – certainty, truth

and facts all disappear into the vortex of fiction, of reading narrative. Rather than

present Briony as the author of parts one to three from the start, McEwan has

deliberately placed this news at the end of his novel. Had we been given knowledge of

Briony's authorship from the beginning of the novel, we would have viewed every event

with a cynical eye – we would constantly have been reevaluating each 'omnisciently

related' event with the niggling phrase 'oh, but that is simply how *Briony* wants us to

see it'. Instead, McEwan's deliberate deceit leads us to believe that what is presented in

parts one to three, written in a suitably realist style, is what 'really happened' to these

fictional characters in their fictional world. That is, McEwan deliberately leads us down

the path not only of accepting that there is a 'true base' story, but of accepting the sharp

dichotomy between story and discourse. He wishes us to thoroughly accept and believe

in the 'truth' of the story before abruptly confronting our assumptions about story in the

final part.

Readers crave a firm distinction between story and discourse – we wish to

know what 'really happened' and if we are refused that, we are quite content as long as

we know for certain that what we are reading is merely one character's view of the

situation. As Herrnstein Smith states, a reader will "usually attempt to construe some

chronology of events"[107] from the narrative discourse – that is, they will try to formulate

for themselves what they view as the 'base story'. Jonathan Culler takes up the issue of

omniscience, claiming that readers curiously accept as fact any third person narrative

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[107] Herrnstein Smith, p. 230.

statements – that only characters make us doubt the truth of such statements.[108] That is,

unless told the narrator is unreliable, readers tend to place implicit trust in words written

in the third person, while they understand that first person thoughts are always tainted

by character perspective. This trust placed in the third person narrator, together with the

craving for an undeniable base story from which discourse is gleaned, places the reader

in a perilous position at the end of *Atonement*, and it is from here that McEwan rips the

rug out from under our feet. The last part of *Atonement* is jarring for the reader because

it suddenly reveals a literary dishonesty – it reveals that our trust, both in the third

person narrator and the base story, was misplaced.

However, while at the base level of this specific novel this is the revelation of a

literary *dis*honesty, such a revelation is actually also a higher-order literary *honesty*.

That is, in making us aware that his fiction has 'lied' to us throughout the text, McEwan

draws our attention to the fact that all fiction does the same with our full knowledge and

approval as readers, and in doing so he has simply been truthful about the 'dishonest'

nature of fiction and the collusion in this dishonesty on the part of readers. While some

readers may become angry in response to this final surprise (some feel betrayed by the

'dishonesty'), for most it creates a feeling of exhilaration – exhilaration at the revelation

of a literary truth. Like crime fiction fans, many *Atonement* readers exult in the

revelation – some even rereading the novel to look for the 'clues' that they overlooked

in their foolhardy faith in the 'truth' of a novel they knew all along to be false simply by

its fictional nature. Rather than berating us for falling into the trap of trust, McEwan

places the evidence before us that what we have believed is unstable and untrustworthy

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[108] Culler, Jonathan. "Omniscience." *Narrative*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (January 2004). pp. 22-34.

itself. It is the last section which blows apart our faith in the story/discourse dichotomy and in the unbiased, omniscient third-person narrator.

In rendering the story/discourse dichotomy null and void, the last part places great emphasis on the telling rather than the events themselves. The last part thus prompts the reader to focus on Briony's telling itself – her writing, her version of events, and most importantly, her attempt at atonement. For, her discourse is in itself her attempt at atonement – in penance to her sister and her sister's lover, Briony lets the lovers live and reconcile as she could not do in 'real life'. The first three parts are assembled around how Briony sees events differently to Cecilia and Robbie. This difference in perception is what creates the calamities for which Briony feels she must atone. The final part, in quashing the story/discourse dichotomy, pushes forward the notion that events cannot always be seen for what they 'truly are' – rather that there are always differences in perception because there is no base story – there is only the myriad of interpretations that formulate it. The story does not matter – it is the discourse (Briony's attempt at atonement) that is important. Of course, this reveals a conundrum at the very heart of Briony's attempt at atonement – she believes she can only atone for something she did through her own reconstruction of it. That is, her confession (the nature of which is to aim for the revelation of truth) is simultaneously narrative (a 'lie') and this narrative is a projection of self – indeed, not just one of her works of fiction, but her final swansong, her greatest composition which she has worked on over a lifetime, to be published just after her death in a kind of summary of her life. In short, Briony's *telling* of the story (rather than the events she describes, 'truth' or otherwise) has become the story – discourse has supplanted story as story, replacing what we had naively taken to be the story up to that point. This narrative – even as it tightens the

screws of guilt and self-recrimination as it attempts to free the author of such constraints – is a projection of self, and this projection of self has become the story.

Herrnstein Smith asserts that different versions of narratives (that is, narrative discourses) are the results of the motives and interests of the narrators. She claims that stories are always told differently depending on what aspects the narrator wants to convey and emphasise. She maintains the view that utterances should not be viewed as "strings of discrete signifiers that represent corresponding sets of discrete signifieds but as *verbal responses* – that is, as *acts* which, like any acts, are *performed in response to various sets of conditions*."[109] [Herrnstein Smith's italics.] Herrnstein Smith explains that these conditions fall into two columns – the circumstantial (such as the context in which the story is told, the listeners or readers addressed, and the relationship between them and the narrator) and the psychological, such as:

> …the narrator's motives for telling the tale and all the particular
>
> interests, desires, expectations, memories, knowledge and prior
>
> experiences… that elicited his telling it on that occasion, to that
>
> audience, and that shaped the particular way he told it.[110]

Herrnstein Smith argues that these acts (and thus the circumstantial and psychological variables surrounding them) should be the focus of literary criticism. I believe this theory is particularly potent and relevant to *Atonement*, where the whole novel (whether we know it or not at the time of reading) is narrated by *Briony's* narrator – where a fictional author writes a novel (her attempt at atonement), and where our focus is acutely

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[109] Herrnstein Smith, p. 225.
[110] *Ibid*, p. 226.

drawn in the final part to the *telling* of the whole – the narrative discourse – rather than the story events which may or may not be 'true'. Of course, many novels are narrated by fictional characters inside their worlds – the distinction in *Atonement* is the temporal delay in making that known, and thus the clear consequences for the reader and the reader's interpretation of the story/discourse dynamic due to that weighty delay.

However, I disagree with Herrnstein Smith when she disregards the story/discourse dichotomy, claiming it is not useful for literary criticism. I would argue that it is. Although we can accept that the 'base story' is an illusion, it is a helpful illusion and even a necessary illusion. Moreso, when story is shown up as discourse, *story* itself does not disappear – rather the original presumed story disappears – supplanted by the story of the formation of the discourse. Narrative simply cannot work without some sort of a provisional, shifting, always skeptical reconstruction of story that flows out of discourse – the fact that this is fictional does not prevent it from operating and therefore it cannot be ignored. This dichotomy remains crucial for analysis, even when it is noted as illusory. It is also vital to remember that the base story is an illusion upheld by readers as they make their way through novels. Narrators narrate (and, indeed, authors write) the text with their own audiences in mind, understanding the central emphasis placed on the base story by their readers. As such, I believe poststructuralist narratology needs to be accompanied by certain reactivated elements of structuralist narratology, if only in order to accurately map the fictional base story – a base story sought by readers who, in the process of reading, attempt to isolate it from the narrative discourse in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the story, the narrative, the narrator and the novel as a whole.

When we apply this approach to *Atonement*, the fountain scene becomes quite telling. Of course, the revelation within the final part changes the way we see what we previously viewed as story events. Rather than the lovers' actions and Cecilia's thoughts by the fountain, Briony's authorship causes us to conclude that these were in fact manufactured within Briony's imagination. However, as the reader is simultaneously realising that the entire base story itself cannot be trusted, this change in perception of story events is almost rendered trivial. What is interesting, then, is how the narrative discourse – Briony's telling – comes to be perceived differently, and what that means for Briony as a narrator. It is useful to employ Herrnstein Smith's set of conditions for understanding Briony's narrative act of atonement. Broadly, Briony writes her story as an attempt to atone for her 'crime' – this is the context through which we look back over the first three parts of the novel. She is dying and it is just before her death that she finally finishes her novel – death here, is obviously a key motivator for her to finally take responsibility for her actions and to make her last attempt to atone for them. Briony's novel addresses her readership (as a professional author) in general, but more specifically it addresses the dead Cecilia and Robbie. Her life has centred around the lovers, and it is for them – to apologise and to give them a happy ending in literature – that she writes her narrative discourse. However, even more so she writes for herself – to convince herself that she has atoned for her crime. This is the set of circumstances, unknown to us while reading parts one to three, through which we look back over Briony's novel.

Briony's motivation for compelling her narrator to deliver the fountain scene as it is delivered (that is, as a distended moment) reflects very clearly her motivations. The relatively elongated narrative time stresses the importance of the scene for the author.

This scene is rendered in print because it was the moment Briony realised she could not understand the adult world, and so chose to represent it instead by becoming an adult author. In addition to this motivation of the egotistical author, this scene was also the traumatic beginning of the chain of events which would result in Briony committing her 'crime'. The detailed account of Cecilia's thoughts appears to be the adult Briony's attempt to understand what she did not understand as a child, as a way of atoning for her mistakes. From reading the final section, we understand that Briony has written the fountain scene over and over throughout her entire life. It is the scene she decides, as a child witnessing the event, to write three times from the differing points of view of Cecilia, Robbie and herself. Thus we are treated to the fountain scene in just such a way because it was the start of her novel – the beginning of her attempt at atonement.

Indeed, we are privy in Part Three to Briony's letter from an editor, CC, which criticises an early rendition of the fountain scene. CC refers to Briony's use of "flow of thought" and the "crystalline present moment", linking her work to that of Virginia Woolf's. (*A*312) Indeed, it is previously revealed as Briony fingers her newly-completed version of *Two Figures by a Fountain* (about to be sent off to CC), that she is very much a fan of Virginia Woolf and the modernist writing style:

> It was thought, perception, sensations that interested her, the
> conscious mind as a river through time, and how to represent its
> onward roll, as well as all the tributaries that would swell it, and the
> obstacles that would divert it… She had read Virginia Woolf's *The*
> *Waves* three times and thought that a great transformation was
> being worked in human nature itself, and that only fiction, a new

kind of fiction, could capture the essence of the change. To enter a

mind and show it at work, or being worked on, and to do this

within a symmetrical design – this would be an artistic triumph.

(*A*281-2)

We can see that Briony has retained many of the modernist elements CC refers to in his

letter. Indeed, Cecilia's thoughts are detailed clearly in an elongated section of *psycho-*

narration and *narrated thought* which verges on flow of consciousness. The long

description of 'the moment' remains in Briony's final text – this, of course, is the scene

where *slowed scene* comes to the fore. CC advises her that, in addition to the child's

account, in hearing matters from both the man's view and the woman's, "we don't really

learn much that is fresh," (*A*313) and so it is in the final text that Robbie's account is

dropped (though we still hear from both herself and Cecilia). CC advises Briony to

develop her modernist account of the single scene with "an underlying pull of simple

narrative," (*A*312) going on to make suggestions about how that scene could be

developed into a full story – and so it is that Briony takes this advice and develops her

scene into a full-length novel. Thus there is a multitude of psychological motives and

interests behind Briony's inclusion of and emphasis on the fountain scene, but they

mainly fall under the headings of 'guilt, obsession and atonement' and 'authorial ego'.

However, drawing back to the level of McEwan as author, there is something else going

on here. Here is a novel that writes into its own narrative a description of its own

manner of construction. *Atonement* reflects on its own (lack of) capacity to distinguish

between story and discourse, and reveals the process of creation – even in a deeply

personal and emotional text – as dictated by mechanical, impersonal and institutional 'artistic' procedures.

The use of *slowed scene* within the fountain scene reveals a great deal about Briony – both artistically as an author and psychologically as a person. Briony originally wrote in the modernist style, so of course this scene (the only scene from her novel written during the period of her modernism obsession) will retain elements of modernism, such as flow of consciousness and 'the moment'. However, this *slowed scene* also reveals much about Briony's psychology – its use always coincides with the employment of *psycho-narration* and *narrated thought* that verges on flow of consciousness. The *slowed scene* is thus the result of the author forcing her 'impartial' narrator to allow as much access as possible – thorough and clear rather than fragmentary – to the mind of the focalised character within the moment. The *slowed scene* found within the fountain scene is thus the result of Briony's obsession with detailing the moment which launched her down the path to her 'crime' – of attempting to get inside Cecilia's head, to understand (in detail) exactly what her sister must have been thinking in order to make up for her own misinterpretation at the time. That is, the retardation of time in the fountain scene is the result of Briony's emphasis on that particular moment, but cleverly, it also functions as the technique through which McEwan emphasises the events contained within the moment by the fountain as vitally important to the narrator.

The final part of the novel places a final layer over our reading of the text – completely changing our understanding of what we had 'understood' before. The fountain scene is important not so much to story, but rather to the narrative discourse – to Briony's 'telling', and hence to Briony, the author in control of the narrator, herself.

In making us acutely aware of Briony's manipulation of story through discourse, McEwan also makes us aware of his own manipulation of the text – a manipulation that extends to the reader. This typically postmodernist self-awareness reveals the process of making fiction as equally manipulated and lacking in an impossible literary 'honesty' or 'truth' – a truth that we, as readers, expect to find whilst paradoxically knowing (through our understanding of the nature of fiction as fundamentally 'untrue') that this truth is an impossibility. Rather than making us aware of the 'author' from the beginning, the final reveal serves to make us question our own reading style – to abrasively wake us up to the nature of fiction – and also compels us to look back over the scenes we have read (often rereading the novel to look for the 'clues') and reassess them in light of this information. McEwan's new placement of his pinnacle scene is one aspect we reassess – we are disappointed in our expectation of a scene containing a shocking base element of humanity, and we are rather provided with McEwan's new signature element – his 'distended moment', a swelled moment in time that languishes in comparison to the rest of the text, laden with character consciousness, and implications for the narrator (and thus the author in charge of her narrator) as well as the text as a whole.

Saturday

Time and Place – Terrorism, Paranoia and Irony

In writing *Saturday*, McEwan has picked a very particular day through which to explore the mind of an individual in a city. This day is not 'just like any other' in any grand scheme of time – this day could not have been any day in the late twentieth or early twenty-first centuries. Rather, the novel is set within an extremely historically significant time and place which was selected with great care. Indeed, the epigraph that begins *Saturday* – a quote from Saul Bellow's *Herzog* – illuminates that the basis for McEwan's novel is in fact "what it means to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition."[111] The quote expands from individual consciousness to a certain place, to a certain time, to a certain social phenomenon – a mind in a city in a time of turmoil. McEwan has plucked a distinct day out of history – that of the anti-Iraq War protests on the streets of London on the fifteenth of February 2003. The date is significant – just a year and five months after the terrorist attacks on (amongst other American targets) the twin towers of New York by foreign religious extremists converted to terrorism whose stated purpose was to attack American icons – to attack the western way of life. As *Saturday*'s protagonist, Henry Perowne, explains, the western world changed with those attacks: "[t]he nineties are looking like an innocent decade… Now we breathe a different air." (*S*32) The events of September the eleventh 2001 shocked the western world, but there is a specific reason this novel is set in England rather than America – until the date McEwan has chosen to set his novel on, the threat to England was a vague, perceived, 'probable', though for all intents and purposes a possibly-mythical, one that,

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[111] Quoted in McEwan, Ian. *Saturday*. London: Vintage Books, 2006. Epigraph.

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unlike in America, had never yet been actualised. To the British, battle-scarred America was justified in its rampant fear, whereas any fear in England at this specific time could be passed off as paranoia about an unactualised fate.

Yet this paranoia did exist within the minds of the British; one such (albeit fictional) citizen – the protagonist of *Saturday*, Henry Perowne – reveals the fear ever-lurking beneath the public psyche:

> It's already almost eighteen months since half the planet watched,
> and watched again the unseen captives driven through the sky to
> the slaughter, at which time there gathered round the innocent
> silhouette of any jet plane a novel association. Everyone agrees,
> airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed.
> (*S*16)

'Everyone agrees' – everyone (at least in Perowne's London) looks with unease at certain benign objects, while still using them frequently. Perowne claims he is troubled by world events, yet he also claims he is equally troubled by his propensity to always jump to the conclusion that any disastrous, cause-unknown event is probably terrorism. After finding out the benign result (an engine malfunction) of a mysterious burning plane he witnessed in the night sky, Perowne chastises himself for automatically assuming it was a terrorist attack:

> This past hour he's been in a state of wild unreason, in a folly of
> overinterpretation. It doesn't console him that anyone in these
> times, standing at the window in his place, might have leaped to the

same conclusions. Misunderstanding is general all over the

world… He sees now the details he half-ignored in order to nourish

his fears… He told himself there were two possible outcomes – the

[Schrödinger's] cat dead or alive. But he'd already voted for the

dead, when he should have sensed it straight away… Not an attack

on our whole way of life then. (*S*39)

Perowne tells us that the immediate instinctual reaction for Londoners of his time, then, is to assume a terrorist attack, then immediately thereafter temper their gut-reaction with more rational thoughts. Rational thoughts were not required in 'war-torn' America, but they were still required in a country not yet attacked. In Britain between late 2001 and (at least) early 2003, one had to temper and censor one's immediate reactions.

However, this specific day in 2003 chosen by McEwan heralded a change in the political circumstances for the British people. This was the day of the massive peace rally in London – a protest against Britain's deciding to join America in its war on Iraq. Suddenly, the threat of an attack on London became much more real – a definite probability – with Britain engaging in a conflict against the country that allegedly housed and sheltered some of the threatening terrorists. Perowne explains the personal interest – the self-preservation – involved in protesting this war:

It's likely most of them [the protesters] barely registered the

massacres in Kurdish Iraq, or in the Shi'ite south, and now they

find they care with a passion for Iraqi lives. They have good reason

for their views, among which are concerns for their own safety. Al-

Qaeda, it's said, which loathes both godless Saddam and the Shi'ite

opposition, will be provoked by an attack on Iraq into revenge on

the soft cities of the West. Self-interest is a decent enough cause…

(*S*73)

Indeed, self-interest motivates thousands of Londoners to come out and march the streets against the war – as Perowne explains, claiming on the one hand to be overly concerned with the lives of Iraqis they did not care about before, whilst really protesting a frightening threat to their own lives. McEwan thus represents the collective consciousness of Londoners in 2003 using the mind of Perowne, a typical Londoner – that is, one who thinks he is smarter and more reasonable than the rest. In this way McEwan portrays the duality of thinking in this very specific time and place – rational and publically-acceptable thoughts attempting (and failing) to quash the paranoia lurking under the surface.

This paranoia reigns supreme in McEwan's novel, with Perowne's mind constantly returning to the idea of a London terrorist attack. His thoughts on this subject are sparked by his early morning viewing of the burning plane, which he immediately presumes is a terrorist attack. Throughout the day the protests against the Iraq War serve as a frequent reminder of terrorism – even sparking a heated debate about the ethics of that war between Perowne and his daughter Daisy. However, from a hectic scheduling perspective, Perowne's day should surely not simply revolve around the somewhat vague threat of terrorism – he carries out a great many everyday and special tasks this Saturday, including playing squash with a friend and shopping for an important family reunion dinner. After all, as Perowne reminds himself, "[t]here's a momentum to the everyday… that he doesn't have the strength of will to interrupt." (*S*102) Arguably,

then, Perowne should be preoccupied not with a burning plane he saw from a distance, but with these real, personal Saturday activities. 'Should' being the operative word – this comes from Perowne's own thoughts as his educated, socially-aware brain tries (and mostly fails) to keep his mind 'above' such 'low' prejudices associated with the paranoia about terrorism. He keeps reminding himself to remain on track with his private affairs while the extraordinary public affairs going on around him refuse to leave him alone. Perowne insists to himself, "[h]e has a right now and then – everyone has it – not to be disturbed by world events, or even street events" (*S*108) – this is his official line of thought (not wanting to know) while secretly wishing to be disturbed by, and even seeking out, such events.

It is this interaction which reflects that found within the novel as a whole – McEwan has chosen to not simply write a book about a man's private day and the extraordinary set of circumstances that occur within it, nor has he chosen to simply write a book about public, world events like a massive protest against a global war, but he has chosen to illustrate how the public and private can intertwine, and how such a man caught between the two negotiates his day. Perowne experiences some incredibly dramatic private traumas – the car crash encounter and the home invasion – which should serve to distract him completely from thoughts of terrorism. Yet amongst the myriad thoughts that Perowne thinks that day, McEwan has chosen to pepper his protagonist's mind right throughout the novel with terrorism. Perowne is never free of terrorism – it haunts the back of his mind, frequently slipping in and out of his thoughts when he should have enough to distract him elsewhere. Thinking about sex and the idea of instant gratification, Perowne's thoughts strangely turn to Saddam Hussein and the lack of complete gratification the dictator must feel whenever he sends someone off to

be tortured – these thoughts occurring well before any such catalyst like the protest appears in the narrative. Perowne himself wonders curiously at "how quickly he's drifted from the erotic to Saddam" (*S*39) – how terrorism and war are always ready to jump into his mundane, everyday thought processes.

During a changing room break in the middle of his squash game, Perowne looks up to see a television showing news footage concerning the plane crash – "briefly, enticingly, two men with coats over their heads – surely the two pilots – in handcuffs." (*S*107) Despite the 'enticing' nature of his terrorism assumptions looking like being confirmed, he then proclaims (quoted above) that he has a right to be left alone by world events. This contradiction – relishing thinking about terrorism constantly, not wanting to think about it at all – seems to represent the terrorism paranoia versus socially-acceptable mindframe of the time. It also pinpoints the contradiction in the British psyche – relishing the persecution of the Other whilst simultaneously feeling guilt for such oppression. Perowne's thought processes, then, for all their consciously-implemented liberality, display an underlying (guilt-ridden) relish for geopolitical violence. Later in the novel Perowne soaks in the news as an airport official tells a reporter that he will not comment on whether or not a Koran was found in the cockpit of the plane, and "even if it were true, he adds, it would mean nothing. It is, after all, hardly an offence." (*S*126) Perowne agrees with a "[q]uite so" (*S*126) – an educated opinion apparently devoid of prejudice. However, the Koran is deliberately suggested by the news reporter in order to place the idea of Islamic terrorism squarely in the minds of viewers – an idea which was, in fact, Perowne's first thought when witnessing the plane go down. This apparent and uncomfortable contradiction between the west wanting to think the 'right' way – free of prejudice, educated and open – and actually thinking in

another way – prejudiced and laced with fear – is epitomised in Perowne's thought processes throughout the day. Perowne himself volunteers that the possibility of the reoccurrence of a twin towers-like attack "is one thread that binds the days." (*S*176) McEwan has chosen to show us the mind of the 'good' British establishment man in a specific, uncomfortable time and place – that is, a consciousness ingrained with paranoia about terrorism, yet striving for an educated, unprejudiced outlook, in London in 2003.

In some ways (though the author and his characters could not know this), the paranoia displayed in the mind of Perowne is justified. *Saturday* spookily foretells the terrorist bombings of the London transport system which would occur on the seventh of July 2005 – a horrific series of events which McEwan did not know about, writing his novel before they occurred (*Saturday* was published in the early months of 2005). As Perowne returns to the window at the end of his long day he looks down on his city and very closely imagines the reality that will occur two years down the track:

> London, his small part of it, lies wide open, impossible to defend,
> waiting for its bomb, like a hundred other cities. Rush hour will be
> a convenient time. It might resemble the Paddington crash –
> twisted rails, buckled, upraised commuter coaches, stretchers
> handed out through broken windows, the hospital's Emergency
> Plan in action… The authorities agree, an attack's inevitable. He
> lives in different times – because the newspapers say so doesn't
> mean it isn't true. (*S*276)

Unlike the attacks on America which centred on prominent symbols – the World Trade Centre (capitalist business icon), the Pentagon (military icon), an attempted attack on Washington (political icon) – McEwan has uncannily predicted the reality of the London bombings, a peak hour series of attacks on the transport system centring on the tube system – that is, an attack not on symbols, but on the people. The images that would soon thereafter appear in reality of the bombed bus, the mangled railways and the wounded people pouring out of stations are closely predicted in Perowne's thoughts.

There is, then, an irony in *Saturday* which is inherent despite being unintended by the author. Aside from the very first readers of the novel (who read before the attacks), all other readers would view the novel from a position of knowledge about the London bombings, and therefore this inherent irony is devastatingly obvious throughout the novel, distancing us from the 'them' of the novel as we look back on very recent history. This irony makes Perowne's terrorism-dwelling thoughts particularly poignant – although seemingly paranoid, he is uncannily correct in his paranoia. Of course, he is incorrect in one detail – Perowne looks to the skies for foreign terrorist plots, whereas the London bombings were carried out by British citizens. However, these citizens admitted feeling a hatred for their nation stemming from religious extremism which they felt aligned them more with Middle-Eastern Islamic countries than those in Britain, and so the bombings, although home-grown, could also be said to stem from a foreign ideology. Thus Perowne's paranoid (and McEwan's predictive) imagination is not, as it turns out, all that paranoid in this instance – rather it is tragically foretelling – an irony the readership cannot but be aware of. The result of Perowne's (and therefore McEwan's) prediction 'coming true' in real life has a stark effect on a book of fiction set squarely in a historically accurate, pinpointed, real time and place. McEwan may have

meant to invite his readership to look on Perowne's prediction as the workings of a typically paranoid mind of that time, yet this has been turned around by real-world events – the readership now views the prediction as startlingly accurate. An authorially-unintended consequence of this conversion of Perowne from paranoid and (under-the-surface) frightened citizen to eerily accurate fortune teller is that he ends up looking much more justifiable in these thoughts, and, to McEwan's readership, this may then result in some of Perowne's paranoia becoming much more understandable.

Yet there is also another sense of irony within the text – a deliberate authorial irony somewhat akin to that found in *On Chesil Beach*. McEwan has deliberately set the novel in 2003 – after the world was changed by September the eleventh but enough time on so that the moment has 'passed' – on the eve of the imminent Iraq War. It is a world, artfully reflected by McEwan through the mind of Perowne, that has changed (from its past) while determinedly pretending to still be the same. The novel's characters do not know what the outcome of this war will be – Perowne is still wavering between the value of protesting a war that will bring the focus of terrorism onto London even more, and the merits of ousting a brutal dictator who has tortured and killed many innocent people. However, McEwan and his readers, from their position (at least) two years down the track, know the length and seeming uselessness of this ongoing war. McEwan and early readers cannot have known of Saddam Hussein's death (occurring in 2006), but they knew that a war justified by the idea of Weapons of Mass Destruction has resulted, several years on, in no WMDs being found. In short, two years is a tremendous length of time when dealing with up-to-the-minute changes in world events. McEwan has deliberately created just enough distance between characters and readers for there to be a knowledge gap – a deliberate irony stemming from the readers knowing the outcomes

the characters cannot. However, he has been careful not to develop too much of a gap so as not to generate a scenario where readers fail to associate with the characters – McEwan limits this gap so that readers may view the characters as earlier versions of themselves. Thus *Saturday* recalls one of the last recent moments of relative ignorance within the readers' own lives – a time before the knowledge we have now when we were on the precipice of gaining such knowledge. This irony plays a vital, haunting role in a novel so relevant to the times of the reader.

Early on in the novel, when Perowne is viewing the burning plane's descent into London, McEwan moves his protagonist's thoughts onto the memory of the Schrödinger's Cat theory – a theory which I believe categorises not just Perowne's wavering thoughts throughout the novel, but also the unknowingness of the Londoners in 2003. Perowne reveals that the physics theory centres on the idea of a cat in a box. The cat is either alive or dead, and it could be one or the other, or both, until the lid is lifted and the result known. Physics states that all possibilities exist until that moment of revelation when, as Perowne explains, "a quantum wave of probability collapses." (*S*18) Perowne refers to this theory when thinking about the fate of the occupants of the plane – either it is a terrorist attack or it is not, either the passengers are dead or they are alive. Either possibility could be happening and he will not know which until the news report confirms the truth one way or another. Interestingly, even as the theory unconsciously pops into his mind while considering the possibilities of the burning plane, Perowne dismisses the theory – claiming "[n]one of this has ever made any sense to him at all… it seems beyond the requirements of proof," (*S*18-9) and backing up his opinion with that of experts – claiming "[h]e's heard that even the physicists are abandoning it." (*S*18-9) Ever the determinist, Perowne insists that there is always only one truth – the cat

is either alive or dead, the burning plane is either a terrorist attack or not, the passengers are either alive or dead, and that it is "his own ignorance," (*S*19) and not the parallel possibilities, that collapses when the result is known. It is clear that there is no room for different possibilities in Perowne's conscious rational thinking – the outcome is always determined – and yet McEwan has planted the seed of doubt by having Perowne spontaneously think of the Schrödinger's Cat theory. McEwan thus invites us to speculate that perhaps, then, in the subconscious part of Perowne's mind, there is a small voice saying that maybe our fates are not so fixedly determined.

On a grander scale, McEwan has deliberately planted the theory of Schrödinger's Cat in the early pages of his text in order to comment on the specific historical moment in which his novel is set. This specific day of protest is, to the London participants, very much like the theory of Schrödinger's Cat. These protesters cannot know what effect their political actions will have on the future – like the cat, is the protest alive or is it dead? That is, will protesting have an effect on global political decisions – can the people prevent the war they seek to stop – or will it be pointless and have absolutely no effect – is history determined not by the masses, but by a few men in suits questionably given the power to dictate the futures of millions? Perowne's mind flickers between the possibilities throughout the day – although he does not join the protests, he is constantly influenced by them – they disrupt his traffic route just as they disrupt his thoughts. More than once throughout the day Perowne seriously considers his position on the issue, wavering between pacifist thoughts and a desire to aid in the removal of a dictator and prevent further human rights atrocities. Many citizens join in the protest in a hope it will change their future – buoyed by the success of many previous historical protests, skeptical of the modern times and politicians ignoring the

desires of 'the people'. The protesters cannot know the outcome of their actions on that day in 2003; only time will tell – time that we as readers have traversed, but that the characters have not. This irony plays strongly throughout the novel – the possibilities have all but one collapsed for us (we know the outcome of their efforts), yet this 'quantum wave of probability' remains intact for the novel's inhabitants. These characters are stuck in a turning point in history – a precipice of unknowingness, where determinism is questioned – while we as readers (and McEwan's narrator, inevitably, too – though s/he betrays no awareness in his/her text, no nods to the audience, as it were, foreshadowing the inevitable future) remain on the other side, knowing their protests are futile. Figuratively, then, Schrödinger's Cat comes to represent more than just Perowne's thoughts on a burning plane – the actual historical day chosen by McEwan as the setting of his fiction is the cat in Schrödinger's box.

As earlier noted, the distancing effect of this irony is similar (though less dramatic) to that found in *On Chesil Beach* – yet unlike *Chesil Beach*, *Saturday* is not presented by an intrusive narrator who invites us to laugh at the characters. The narrator in *Saturday* barely comments on the action or the thoughts of Perowne – his/her most deliberate interjections seem to be in explaining in simple terms the complex medical diagnostic terms that frequent Perowne's thoughts. Although the novel is written in the third person, and thus everything we read has gone through the filter of the narrator, this is a less interfering narrator. This may also be connected to the Schrödinger's Cat conundrum – a commentary by a knowing narrator on the events (and their futility) would destroy the historical world conjured up where there is an impossibility of knowing. This importance of the precise moment of history – that of the intense present moment before the consequences are laid bare – may also be why McEwan has written

the novel in the present tense. Unlike *Chesil Beach* there are no long sections of narratorial introduction, nor are there side attacks on the 'laughable' thoughts or actions of the characters. We are allowed almost complete access to the mind of Perowne throughout his Saturday (with the exception of the short periods of *ellipsis* between parts/chapters) – the narrator happy to sit back and become a medium through which Perowne's thoughts can flow to (and be translated, where necessary, for) the reader.

There is a very deliberate point to this – in *Chesil Beach* we are laughing at our past, but quite a distant past. In *Saturday* we are looking at ourselves only a few years back through the lens of Perowne. We are invited to look with irony at our recent past, not as a means to comedy, but so we are shaken by the rapid changes that have gone on in the first decade of the twenty-first century – our loss of relative innocence through the gaining of fear, and how we have handled (or not handled) these developments. *On Chesil Beach* contains a quaint world – *Saturday* contains a disturbing, doomed world. The same ironic technique is thus employed in both texts with the same primary effect – that is, distance between characters and reader, an ability to look back on the past with new knowledge – yet with a startling different secondary effect – that is, comedy versus a broad sense of tragedy. Of course, there is more than just tragedy in this distance between the time in the novel and our own – *Saturday* allows us to explore a moment of history before the 'knowingness of now'. The irony is that we as readers cannot undo our knowledge and so we cannot experience the events of the novel as a Londoner would have experienced them in 2003 – rather, the period has been recreated so we can remember and explore a time of relative ignorance – the thrill of possibilities before the box was lifted and the cat revealed as dead. This story of 'a day in the consciousness of a man in a city' is deliberately placed within a specific time and place – post-twin

towers attacks, pre-Iraq War – allowing McEwan and his readers to ironically explore

the paranoid mind of a typical Londoner in a particular historical moment.

Modernism and *Mrs Dalloway*

Of course, McEwan is following a great modernist theme in exploring a single,

specific day in the life of a city-dweller. As previously discussed, McEwan makes

reference to modernist texts in *Atonement* – particularly those of Virginia Woolf – and

in writing *Saturday* he has continued and expanded upon this referencing. Specifically,

Saturday seems to be inspired by the modernist 'day in the life of a person in a city'

stories, such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Indeed, although

McEwan's novel is not simply a reproduction of Woolf's novel, it very closely mimics

the attributes of *Mrs Dalloway*. Many critics have commented on the link between these

two novels – I have recorded the comments of Sebastian Groes on the link between

McEwan and specific modernist texts in my introduction, Dominic Head comments on

the "literary parallels"[112] between McEwan's and Woolf's texts in terms of flow-of-

consciousness throughout a day, while Laura Marcus claims that the words of Woolf

reverberate throughout McEwan's novel:

> Time and the city, time in the city, are at the heart of both novels.
>
> The structure of the day, the chiming of the hours, and the march of
>
> the city appear to propel the protagonists of both *Mrs Dalloway* and
>
> *Saturday* ever forward, but spaces of memory and subjectivity – the
>
> spheres of 'private time' – are hollowed out from within linear time

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[112] Head, Dominic. "'Accidents of character and circumstance': *Saturday*." In *Ian McEwan*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007. p. 192.

to produce, in Ann Banfield's phrase, 'arrested moments' (Banfield

2007: 56).[113]

Marcus here is revealing the *theme* of time common to both texts, rather than structural

time where an influence may be asserted over narrative time duration by extended

consciousness. I believe the 'arrested moments' she refers to may, in McEwan's novel,

include periods of *slowed scene*, but are not restricted to them – rather, both Woolf's

and McEwan's works contain many sections of explored consciousness in the form of

untimed duration, a traditional technique for the exploration of consciousness without

the temporal pressure of a moving scene. However, despite the addition of *slowed scene*

to McEwan's work (absent in that of Woolf), there is no denying that *Saturday* has,

indeed, been inspired by modernist writing – in particular that of Woolf, and in

particular her *Mrs Dalloway*.

     Just like Woolf's novel, *Saturday* spans a single, special day from early

morning to late at night. Both novels centre upon, and follow around, a central character

as we witness their experiences during that day. Both are written in the third person, yet

both central characters frequently inject their personality into the narration through

psycho-narration and *narrated thought*. Woolf's Clarissa spends her entire day

physically and mentally preparing for a party she is throwing that night, just as

McEwan's Perowne spends his whole day physically and mentally preparing for the

dinner party family reunion he is hosting that night. These preparations take both

Clarissa and Perowne out into their versions of the city of London – a busy city in both

stories, where much goes on throughout the day. Clarissa purchases flowers for her

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[113] Marcus, p. 95.

party, whereas Perowne purchases fish. Just as Perowne experiences a terrifying burning

plane episode which turns out to be banal (a fault fire with no one hurt rather than a

terrorist attack potentially killing hundreds), the people of Clarissa's London experience

a similar plane episode – the "sound of an aeroplane bored ominously into the ears of

the crowd… letting out white smoke from behind"[114] – a dramatic, ominous appearance

which turns into the banal when it is realised that the plane is not in trouble, rather it is

simply a skywriter. A key supporting character in *Mrs Dalloway* is Septimus, a shell-

shocked man who displays his insanity in the park as his wife tries to control him;

McEwan invents his own Septimus in the form of Baxter – a neurologically diseased

man who displays many of the characteristics of insanity in his intense highs and his

invasion of a stranger's home. It is clear, then, that after writing his *Mrs Dalloway*-

referenced *Atonement*, McEwan chose to further explore the modernist writers –

particularly Woolf – in writing *Saturday*.

Of course, it cannot be said that *Saturday* is merely a copy of *Mrs Dalloway*, as

there are many stark differences between the two texts – not least of which is the precise

historical (and therefore sociopolitical) coordinates of McEwan's text. On a more

narratologically technical level, *Saturday* is focalised entirely through Perowne, whereas

Mrs Dalloway ventures out of the 'host' mind of Clarissa and into a few other minds

such as Septimus (Baxter is never focalised in McEwan's novel). Woolf's text is written

in the modernist style of stream of consciousness which allows the reader a close

intimacy with the mind of the focalised character, whereas McEwan's text retains the

formal novelistic features of full-sentences, proper grammar and text delineation by

parts or chapters. Although both novels are written in the third person, Woolf's is

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[114] Woolf, p. 21.

written in the past tense whereas McEwan's is written in the present tense – a difference which lends immediacy to McEwan's text (an important aspect when considering the pivotal moments conveyed), and also an intimacy between reader and focalised character which counteracts any distancing caused by proper grammar. Head argues that McEwan's intense focus on Perowne's detailed thought processes during this particular day reveals the author's attempt at creating "a diagnostic 'slice-of-mind' novel – … the literary equivalent of a CT scan – rather than a modernist 'slice-of-life' novel."[115] McEwan has thus taken the modernist interest in consciousness as it experiences the driving events of a day and shifted this dual consciousness/events focus squarely onto the former – allowing the consciousness to bend, manipulate, stretch, shrink and alter the narrative detailing of the events of that day so that these events become the background to – the catalyst for – Perowne's thought processes. Indeed, McEwan's text therefore appears to be a reinvention of Woolf's – that is, he appears to have taken this 'day in the life' novel as the inspiration for his own novel, yet he has combined it with nineteenth century novelistic techniques, and also postmodern techniques (such as obvious intertextual references), in order to create not a copy, but a new form which pays respect to its inspiration.

The question begs, then – why did McEwan choose to pay homage to an outdated style by reinterpreting the famous modernist novel, *Mrs Dalloway*? Woolf's text, by employing flow of consciousness so thoroughly, explores the mind experiencing reality rather than reality (story) itself. The modernists were caught up not with what happens, but with how people experience it (whether that be true, false, or a warped version of reality). That is, the only reality that was important to the modernists was the

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[115] Head, "'Accidents of character and circumstance': *Saturday*," p. 192.

reality of the mind experiencing the world. So, rather than *Mrs Dalloway* occupying the story terrain of 'a day in a city', it can be more accurately pinpointed as a novel which explores 'a day in the mind of a person in a city'. Due to the clipped version (fragmented sentences, lack of complete grammar) of flow of consciousness that the modernists engaged (which most accurately, they felt, reflected the mind as it flicked from one thought to another), *Mrs Dalloway* occupies the narrative time duration of *scene* or untimed duration. It is the conversion of these thought fragments into full sentences with proper grammar by the narrator which expands the action – causes the moment to swell – and results in the narrative time duration of *slowed scene*, and it is this technique that McEwan employs in certain scenes of this novel.

Saturday is about time – it is about the relation of consciousness to the time of the day, and to a determinate conjuncture in history. Just like *Mrs Dalloway*, McEwan's text is about how the mind experiences the events of a day within the moment. The action is never paused to explain the workings of Perowne's mind – the mechanics of this character's mind are explored in time – that is, in moving time while the action occurs simultaneously. Consciousness thus expands the moment. Perowne's day just happens to include a few very out-of-the-ordinary, traumatic events that make his mind work even harder than usual, and it is during these events that the moment swells in order to allow for the detailed account of his thoughts. It is an overly action-packed day, therefore the excerpts of *slowed scene* occur more than usual – there are three instances of this narrative technique in *Saturday*. McEwan has thus affectionately borrowed from a previous style – that of the modernists, and specifically Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* – and expanded upon those techniques and story themes in order to explore character consciousness in his particular way – that is, through allowing the moment to

swell on momentous occasions by employing the narrative time duration of *slowed scene*. Of course, these moments swell because they are momentous at the time – they occur in that specific moment, before the box is lifted and the cat revealed as dead or alive – they occur in an important crystallised moment of history when fates were being determined, yet these characters did not know what their fates would be.

Three Distended Moments

Let me now turn, then, to these specific moments of *slowed scene* in order to assess what specific aspect of Perowne's consciousness McEwan is drawing our attention to. In terms of my structural analysis of McEwan's works thus far, *Saturday* is a curious beast of a novel – written and published squarely between *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach*, it does not follow the pattern I have hitherto outlined for the first novel (a pattern followed by the third of the three) – that is, many languid passages which convey a sense (an illusion) of slowed time through their immersion in the minds of several characters, yet that contain just one key scene, a pinnacle scene to both story and character, that is *slowed scene* in duration. In contrast, *Saturday* inhabits the mind of just one character – Henry Perowne – and it is through his eyes in the form of third person focalisation that we witness the events of a single day in his life. In addition, the novel does not contain a single pivotal scene that is *slowed scene* in duration; rather, there are three scenes throughout the course of the novel (all important, though none more pivotal than the others) that seem to slow in narrative time duration. It seems, then, that this Saturday in Perowne's life is packed with events that feel (within the moment) important, out of the ordinary, and life-changing for the protagonist. Indeed, we feel the impact of these events just as he does within the moment due to the present tense of the

entire text. This feature is quite unlike *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach*, both of which employ the past tense and therefore evoke a sense of reflection – and it is only in this reflection on the past, this distance, that a key moment in a life (or lives) can be singled out. This may be why McEwan has chosen to fill *Saturday* with so many moments of *slowed scene* – purely because, at the time, in the moment, the intensity of many events is keenly felt – an intensity that can fade and be refined or redirected (both deliberately and subconsciously) with subsequent reflection.

Never forgetting the grand setting of the novel amidst the London protests against the Iraq War (which occur in the periphery of Perowne's activity), the minute detail of the action of Perowne's Saturday – the business of the novel – can be mapped out in terms of 'episodes'. The novel itself is split by the author into five parts, but each of these parts contains activities or events of varying degrees of importance, as follows:

ONE

- **Watching plane at window in the night**

- With Theo (son) in kitchen

- Sex with Rosalind (wife)

TWO

- Perowne wakes again

- Encounters traffic obstacle due to protest; car crash and **Baxter encounter**

- Squash game

THREE

- Perowne shops for dinner/mentally prepares for family

- Visits mother

- Theo's band rehearsal

FOUR

- Makes dinner

- Fight with Daisy (daughter)

- Grammaticus (father-in-law)/Daisy reunion

- **Home invasion**

FIVE

- Surgery on Baxter

- Back to window

Set against an extraordinary socio-political background, most of the episodes, or scenes, which Perowne experiences during his Saturday are normal, almost everyday private experiences – playing a regular game of squash with a friend, preparing for a family meal. These scenes occur in either *scene* or untimed narrative duration, as Perowne's mind wanders off exploring thoughts and memories. The three scenes which I have bolded are the three out-of-the-ordinary events in Perowne's private life – the three events sure to have a significant impact on him as he experiences them. These are, privately witnessing a burning plane's descent into London in the early hours of the morning (thinking he is witnessing a terrorist attack), a post-car crash encounter with a group of thugs led by Baxter in which Perowne narrowly escapes a thorough beating, and the armed invasion of Perowne's home by Baxter (and a crony) in which the neurologically-damaged man threatens Perowne's entire family, forces his daughter Daisy to strip naked and read a poem, holds his wife Rosalind at knife-point, breaks his father-in-law Grammaticus' nose, and which Perowne and his son Theo end by throwing Baxter down a flight of stairs. Just as his mind constantly flits back to his paranoia about

terrorism, these three private events reverberate throughout Perowne's day – even while he is thinking of other things his thoughts constantly return to terrorism and Baxter. These three events turn out to be less extreme in the passing of time – the plane fire turns out to be a simple mechanical fault rather than terrorism and no one is hurt, Perowne escapes unscathed from the car crash incident, and, barring Grammaticus' broken nose and Daisy's mental trauma (both relatively minor when compared to the threat of death), Perowne's family escapes relatively unscathed from the home invasion, with the threat of Baxter reduced to an invalid and the power restored to Perowne (who subsequently carries out a neurosurgical operation on Baxter's injuries from the fall). In past tense reflection, then (a power accorded by the narrators of Cecilia/Briony and Florence in their respective novels, *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach*), Perowne may not have described all three of these scenes and his thought processes in such painstaking detail. Yet this novel is written in the present tense, and these scenes for Perowne are dramatic, traumatic events at the time – in the moment – and so it is these three scenes that are thus detailed in the narrative time duration of *slowed scene*.

The first distended moment occurs when Perowne, waking in the very early hours of the morning and being inexplicably drawn to his bedroom window, witnesses a burning plane flying (or crashing) down into London. Somewhat expectedly in a novel focalised consistently through just one character, much of the novel is taken up with untimed introspection, where Perowne thinks his thoughts in full without specific action markers guiding the reader as to how fast these thoughts are occurring and over what space of time. This often occurs when Perowne is in the middle of a drawn-out activity which could take any length of time – his mind drifts, for example, as he sits in traffic. Therefore throughout much of the novel we do not know whether the scene has been

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slowed or quickened to accommodate his thoughts, as we have no physical or temporal gauge from which to judge against our knowledge of time, as it were, 'in real life'. Perowne's witnessing of the descent of the plane occurs over the space of six pages – a stretched length of text for such a short activity compared to that given to other longer events in the novel. His mind ranges within that space from one thought to another, constantly referring back to the changing state of the plane in the night sky. It is only from this constant referral back to the moment, and specifically to the moving action of the moment, that we can ascertain that Perowne's mind is not drifting from one elongated thought to another – rather, that his mind is frantically racing through a myriad of thoughts within a short space of time. The plane's descent thus exposes the narrative time duration of the scene as *slowed scene*.

McEwan never allows the reader to forget the urgency of this scene while Perowne's mind 'wanders' – the author peppering his text with constant referrals back to the state of the plane in its screeching descent to earth. We are deliberately requested to view Perowne's thoughts as racing when the narrator states that "[o]nly three or four seconds have passed since he saw this fire in the sky and changed his mind about it twice" (*S*14) – three or four seconds for an entire exploration of Perowne's mind as he wonders what the fireball is, settles on three different hypotheses, and even has time to explore his memory and contemplate his own actions in the possibility of waking his wife. Clearly, the narrative time duration has been greatly extended beyond the story time duration, and thus we can identify this section as *slowed scene*. The narrator again and again refers to the shortness of time – stating that Perowne thinks "[b]y the time the emergency services have noted and passed on his call, whatever is to happen will be in the past." (*S*17) Indeed, McEwan constantly reminds us of 'the moment of time' by

referencing the changing state of the plane. Perowne's hurriedly sprawling thoughts are littered with references to the position of the plane in the sky – "[i]t's directly south of him now, barely a mile away, soon to pass into the topmost lattice of the bare plane trees, and then behind the Post Office Tower, at the level of the lowest microwave dishes," (*S*14-5) later the plane finally passes "behind the tops of the trees" (*S*16) – those same plane trees referred to in the initial quote, later still the plane "emerges from the trees, crosses a gap and disappears behind the Post Office Tower," (*S*17) and further on in the text the plane finally "passes beyond the Tower" (*S*18) and out of Perowne's view. It is quite clear, then, that this plane scene is constantly moving – at no point does it pause to allow for description or out-of-moment memory – and so it must be concluded that the narrative time duration has indeed been stretched in this section.

The question, then, is why this scene has been given such intense focus through *slowed scene* – why we have been given such detailed access to the protagonist's thoughts in the moving moment. This scene cannot be read ironically – the reader cannot be familiar with this very specific (fictional) burning plane (and, indeed, we cannot be certain at this early stage of the novel that the author is not rejecting history in favour of fiction). As such, we are as much in the dark about its outcomes as Perowne. This scene seems to have been carefully chosen, then, to place the novel in a specific time and place – in the mind of a paranoid Londoner who believes any burning plane must be a terrorist attack. We are presented with Perowne's inner thoughts as he tosses to and fro, one moment consciously attempting to suppress the idea of terrorism whilst his subconscious keeps popping the subject back into his head. In this McEwan is presenting a mind of the times – a raw, uncensored mind that, in a traumatic moment, reverts easily to paranoia. This scene is so important to Perowne in the moment in terms

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of personal impact, yet it is far more vital still to the set-up of McEwan's novel. The burning plane scene occurs early in the novel – in it we are immediately exposed to the turmoil associated with an educated Londoner attempting to think thoughts 'above' the paranoia of terrorism, yet constantly and unwillingly compelled back to such paranoia. It is here that Schrödinger's Cat first crops up in Perowne's mind, and it is here that not only the specific time and place is set, but also the contradiction of determinism versus free choice – a rousing theme of the novel – comes to the fore for the first time.

McEwan again employs *slowed scene* in the second dramatic event of the novel – the post-car crash encounter with Baxter and his two thugs. Following a minor crash, where Baxter (clearly at fault) pulls out into Perowne's car in a deserted, closed-off street, the four men (including Baxter's two cronies, Nark and Nigel) slowly get out of their cars, assess their damage and come together in the street. The whole scene follows the same technical pattern as that of the plane crash – short descriptions of action, such as "he turns his whole body towards Perowne," (*S*91) are interspersed with, and thus strung out by, long sections of the full-sentenced and grammatical versions of Perowne's rapid-fire, adrenaline-filled, think-to-save-my-life mental maneuvering through which he desperately diagnoses Baxter's neurological medical condition and uses the man's illness to play the scene to his advantage:

Nark is already bunching his right fist. Perowne notes three rings
on the index, middle and ring fingers, bands of gold as broad as
sawn-off plumbing. He has, he reckons, a few seconds left. Baxter
is in his mid-twenties. This isn't the moment to be asking for a
family history. If a parent has it, you have a fifty-fifty chance of

going down too… Nark is drawing back his right arm to strike.

Nigel seems content to let him go first. Henry has heard that early

onset tends to indict the paternal gene. But that may not be right.

There's nothing to lose by making a guess. (*S*93-4)

This is a desperate scene in which Perowne is scared not only for major injury, but also

for his life. His best tool against such physical dominance is his intelligent mind, and he

uses it to full effect – he never stops assessing, brainstorming, diagnosing, maneuvering

and reassessing in order to preserve his own life. This is adrenaline-filled, rapid-fire

thinking, yet the whole interaction occurs across many pages with the action markers

dispersed sporadically throughout. The narrative time duration of this scene has thus

been stretched to the form of *slowed scene* in order for the reader to better understand

the minute, fear-filled calculations Perowne is making during this very stressful event.

This is the scene where Perowne meets Baxter, and it is the scene that first

brings together the two strongest issues of the novel. This encounter with Baxter is

traumatic on a personal level, but it also occurs in the shadows of the anti-war protests –

down a side street where none of the protesters witnesses the altercation. Just as

Perowne "feels the shoulders of both men pressing" (*S*90) in on him as Baxter's thugs

jostle him, all four men are distracted by the protesters:

At the sound of a trumpet expertly played, the four men turn to

watch the march… On Gower Street the concept of a reproachful

funereal march no longer holds… Now the chants and clapping rise

and fall in volume as different sections of the crowd move past the

junction with University Street. (*S*90)

McEwan deliberately contrasts the euphoria of a crowd intent on 'making a difference' in regards to international peace with the small altercation they bypass without notice – an altercation in which an innocent man may be beaten. This is important because it is in this scene that public drama meets private drama; no matter how many people step out in an attempt to change world events and stop the killing that occurs in war, a man's life may still be threatened on the periphery of this protest – distracted with world events, the people fail to witness (and stop) small events in their own land. The introduction of Baxter is vital not just as a plot device to aid the later climax of the novel, but also to prompt the contradiction which fills Perowne's thoughts from this moment on. That is, Baxter represents a man whose life, whose fate, seems to be determined by his genetic disease – Perowne exclaims in his thoughts, "[h]ere's biological determinism in its purest form." (*S*93) Perowne realises (and so we, in his thoughts, are informed) that Baxter does not have long to live, and the time that he does will be filled with confusion, loss of understanding of the self and pain. This is all predicted by his genetic make-up – Perowne believes he can predict the actions of Baxter simply by knowing the medical condition. It is in this way that Perowne manages to play Baxter off against his condition and escape the situation – using the advantage of his medical knowledge to manipulate the man's fear of his own disease. Although later expressing guilt at this manipulation, it never crosses Perowne's mind that Baxter may have flouted the rules of the expected textbook reactions to certain stimuli – it never occurs to Perowne that Baxter may have exerted a sense of free will over the determined genetic reactions. Perowne is lucky in this scene, but it is in the next section of *slowed scene* that this contradiction – determinism versus free will – comes to the fore and shocks the neurosurgeon.

The third and final distended moment (and thus instance of *slowed scene*)

occurs at the end of the fourth part of the novel during the home invasion. Baxter and

one of his thugs invade Perowne's home, put a knife to the throat of Perowne's wife

Rosalind and hold the entire Perowne family hostage. This scene is incredibly out-of-

the-ordinary for 'real life' (though home invasions are quite common in the realms of

fiction and film) and would be highly traumatic for all involved to experience within the

moment. Also, for Perowne only, this experience is an extension of his last traumatic

event – the post-car crash encounter with Baxter – yet this time the stakes are higher,

with not only his own life threatened, but also those of his entire family. Just like in that

last scene, during this scene we hear the rapid-fire mental calculations of Perowne as he

attempts to find a way out of this potentially fatal situation, and it is these thoughts –

detailed in full – which again stretch the narrative time duration to *slowed scene*. Several

action markers, such as "she stops and looks back at the doorway she has come

through," (*S*205) indicate that we have missed nothing of the action while we have been

ensconced within Perowne's brain. The scene is clearly moving – it has not paused for

description – yet it is the rapid thought processes of Perowne which are the vital

elements of this scene, and which expand the moment. After all, *Saturday* is Perowne's

story, not Baxter's or the Perowne family's; we experience the scene through his eyes,

and it is his thoughts and feelings that we are privy to as he experiences an incredibly

stressful and tense series of moments.

As the action increases towards the end of the scene – Daisy being forced to

undress (and thus reveal her previously unknown pregnant state) and recite a poem,

Perowne arguing his case about a 'new' medical trial – the introspection slightly

decreases and thus the narrative time duration moves slightly more towards *scene*

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(though not yet having left the domain of *slowed scene*). This, I would argue, is due to two factors, the first is that Perowne is not simply letting his thoughts wander widely – he is observing shocking changes in his daughter's body and so his thoughts have been acutely focused on this one issue – and the second is that he is talking, so his brain cannot be free to range in such detailed flow of consciousness whilst caught up in the (mentally-consuming) activity of speaking – after all, McEwan's distended moments always occur absent of dialogue. The introspection again picks up as Perowne leads Baxter upstairs to find the details for a mythical medical trial (fabricated as a distraction) – the doctor frantically trying to think what he will do when he reaches his study and cannot produce this paperwork.

There is one beautiful, pivotal moment at the conclusion of the scene in which story time finally expands beyond 'the normal' in order to fit the already stretched narrative time. Perowne and Theo throw Baxter down the stairs and experience the relativity of time:

> There's a moment, which seems to unfold and luxuriously expand,
>
> when all goes silent and still, when Baxter is entirely airborne,
>
> suspended in time, looking directly at Henry with an expression,
>
> not so much of terror, as dismay. (*S*227)

Narrative time duration has been stretched throughout the entire scene, yet in this moment, the story time also stretches – that is, the relative time felt by Perowne in the moment expands with the intensity of the event. Of course, the airborne Baxter flying through the air towards near-fatal injury – captured in this moving, yet slowed, moment

of 'not yet' (but impending) ruin, of terror and dismay – stealthily echoes the opening

moment of *slowed scene* as the plane burns slowly to earth. These two scenes, each

containing an object moving incredibly slowly through the air, indicate the powerful and

ideal story event for *slowed scene* contained within the depiction of the almost frozen

(yet still moving slowly) airborne object. It is this floating object – always moving

towards its doom, yet resisting such a fate through a perceived 'slowing' – that reveals

the power of thought to resist the laws of gravity and momentum – to bend them to the

will of the relativity of time. It is in this later scene, when Baxter is flying through the

air to his imminent doom, that story time finally expands to meet narrative time – when

the reader realises that their experience of the relativity of narrative time has been met

by Perowne's experience of the relativity of story time. Dramatic and traumatic though

the entire home invasion event is as Perowne is experiencing it, it is only in this freed

moment – when the immediate threat is removed and so he does not have to speedily

calculate for his and his family's futures – that he finally feels the stretch of the moment.

Saturday contains three clear episodes of *slowed scene* because the novel is written in

the present tense and these three out-of-the-ordinary experiences are truly traumatic to

Perowne as he experiences them. However, when reflecting on his life from the future –

just as *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach* reflect back on lives and find one pivotal

moment – it would perhaps only be this small moment of a man flying through the air

that might remain pivotal in Perowne's mind, and thus be detailed (in retrospective

narration) in the narrative time duration of *slowed scene*.

Determinism versus Choice

Of course, these distended moments are pivotal to Perowne on the personal level, but the larger question remains, for what narratological reason has McEwan chosen to zoom in on Henry Perowne's mind in such detail in these three *slowed scene* sections? I believe McEwan uses the mind of Perowne not just to explore the socio-political landscape of a particular time and place, but also to hash out a thesis on the contradictory ideas of determinism versus individual choice. That is, the consciousness of Perowne is a vehicle through which McEwan explores the contradiction between the idea that we are determined and the idea that we can control our destinies despite what the world and our genes have provided us with. Perowne is a neurosurgeon – a man of science who believes everything has a root cause in our bodies, and everything can either be fixed with the current knowledge of science, or will be fixed in the future with advancing knowledge. The narrator introduces Perowne in the first sentence of the novel not as a family man, an amateur squash player, a great maker of fish stew, or as one caught up in the throes of world terrorism (all of which apply to this protagonist), but rather as a professional determinist – the first line reads, "[s]ome hours before dawn Henry Perowne, a neurosurgeon, wakes to find himself already in motion..." (*S*3) He is not in surgery – there is no reason to introduce him such, except to say that his work defines him – he is a man concerned with how the body forms who we are and what he and his colleagues can do to fix that body. Perowne believes genetics determine who we are, and McEwan sets out his character's thesis in the first part of the novel:

It's a commonplace of parenting and modern genetics that parents

have little or no influence on the characters of their children. You

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never know who you are going to get. Opportunities, health, prospects, accent, table manners – these might lie within your power to shape. But what really determines the sort of person who's coming to live with you is which sperm finds which egg, how the cards in two packs are chosen, then how they are shuffled, halved and spliced at the moment of recombination. Cheerful or neurotic, kind or greedy, curious or dull, expansive or shy and anywhere in between; it can be quite an affront to parental self-regard, just how much of the work has already been done. On the other hand, it can let you off the hook. The point is made for you as soon as you have more than one child; two entirely different people emerge from their roughly similar chances in life. (*S*25)

Perowne is firmly on the side of cause and effect – our bodies determine who we are because our genes have been programmed just so, or because our brains have acted in this certain way.

Perowne is (perhaps too overtly) a 'science man', not an 'arts man' – he believes in the fixed, the facts, rather than the interpretation. He is not a literary man at all – we learn that his "literate, too literate" daughter Daisy has been "addressing what she believes is his astounding ignorance, guiding his literary education" (*S*6) for a few years. A good father, Perowne "submits to her reading lists... [as a] means of remaining in touch as she grows away from her family into unknowable womanhood," (*S*6) yet he still cannot connect with literature – he cannot see what she sees in it. Perowne reflects on the process of reading one of Daisy's "assignments" (*S*6) – a biography on Charles Darwin, a subject which surely should spark some interest in a scientific man. Rather, he

was behind in reading the book, he was listening to the news at the same time rather than giving the book his full concentration, he had to reread pages he realised he had not taken in, he felt "faintly depressed by the way a whole life could be contained by a few hundred pages," and as soon as he had put the book down he "remembered nothing more" of it. (*S*6) Literature (even on the most scientific of subjects) does not even interest Perowne, let alone move him. Indeed, McEwan goes so far as to jest at Perowne's views (and, to a certain extent, himself as a writer of such fiction) when Perowne dismisses magical realist novels as "irksome confections." (*S*67) In a nice postmodern touch, Perowne specifically condemns one such novel of this genre in which "[o]ne visionary saw through a pub window his parents as they had been some weeks after his conception, discussing the possibility of aborting him" (*S*67) – a key plot point in McEwan's *The Child in Time*, and a humorous self-reference which McEwan must have been sure his avid readers would pick up on.

McEwan has deliberately contrasted Perowne not just with people who like books, not just with people who like his own books (and thus, those reading about Perowne), but also with not one, but two extremely literary characters – his father-in-law, Grammaticus, is a world-renowned, "eminent poet," (*S*194) and Daisy is just about to release her first published collection of poems – a promising achievement from a poet in her early twenties. Perowne, in his scientific way, surmises that the literary gene has passed from grandfather to granddaughter through his wife rather than stemming in any way from himself – he seems to have no traces of what his daughter has, yet he does not seem bothered by this as McEwan implies he does not realise what he is missing. Perowne does not understand the ability of literature to move people, and so his close relatives' striking interest in the literary confounds him. This is all packaged, of course,

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in the delicious and supreme irony that we only know of Perowne's scientifically-bent, anti-literary consciousness through literature – and specifically through the highly aesthetic literary devices of *psycho-narration*, *narrated thought* and *quoted thought*.

Perowne is confounded that others may derive a deep, transcendent level of satisfaction, pleasure and meaning from the arts where he cannot. Although slightly taken in by the poem Daisy recites during the home invasion (due to his active imagination conjuring up the man who impregnated his daughter rather than any real literary interest), Perowne cannot understand the ability of the poem to move Baxter. He attributes the change he sees in Baxter to neurology – a sudden high typical of Baxter's disease – rather than the ability of literature to elicit euphoria. Perowne even finds it difficult to accept that a poem could be the catalyst for a neurological mood swing when he asks himself, "[c]ould it happen, is it within the bounds of the real, that a mere poem of Daisy's could precipitate a mood swing?" (*S*221) Of course, the fact that Perowne shares with Baxter a total ignorance of the poem's true author (Matthew Arnold rather than Daisy) adds another layer of irony for well-read readers.

However, not all of the arts are completely absent from Perowne's psyche in the same vein as literature – he does, in fact, have a sense of music. Perowne insists on classical music in his operating theatres – knowing the categorical information (specific title and orchestra) behind each track in a typically scientific and factual sense of knowledge. Despite his "doubts about the limits of the form," (*S*26) he is the one who introduced his nine-year-old son Theo to the blues chord progression – a set of chords that would form the basis of the adult Theo's life as a blues musician "of promise... who might one day walk with the gods." (*S*26) He enjoys hearing Theo play – experiencing a joy and longing for the "missing element" (*S*28) of freedom and inventiveness in the life

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of a surgeon. However, once again Perowne's simple appreciation for music is heavily contrasted with the skills, knowledge and transcendent satisfaction of his son – a professional musician set to be a success. There may be a very subtle classification of music by McEwan here – that, of all the arts, it is the least ideological and therefore the most open to being 'taken on' (in a limited form) by those opposed to the free-thinking ideology of the arts. Perowne is quite clearly on the latter side of the arts vs. science debate – he is obsessed with *the* answer, rather than appreciating that there can be many answers, responses or reasons.

Perowne is on the side of determinism – that our lives are already programmed when we are formed in the womb – and this belief is plainly evidenced during his encounters with Baxter. When Perowne first meets Baxter following the car crash, he feels a small sense of fear – "it occurs to him that he might be in some kind of danger" (*S*84) – a fear which will heighten as it turns out to be justified when he is almost beaten. However, following sharply on the heels of this fear, Perowne the neurosurgeon steps in. Most people would not have time for professional curiosity in a life-threatening situation, but Perowne is different – as soon as Baxter extends his hand to offer a cigarette, Perowne observes a "persistent tremor" – an "unsteadiness of the grip" which "draws Perowne's professional attention." (*S*87) Even as his life becomes more and more threatened throughout the scene, Perowne sets about analysing and diagnosing Baxter. In his own words, speculating about the cause of Baxter's tremor, agitation, violence and strange head and eye movements "soothes him," and "[p]erversely, he no longer believes himself to be in any great danger." (*S*90) That is, Perowne believes that as soon as he can pinpoint the cause of the disorder that is causing a man to threaten his life, he can predict Baxter's every move and thus be free from harm. In this, Perowne is

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thoroughly convinced that he is safe because Baxter's actions are determined by his genetic makeup (and thus can be predicted by the doctor) and free choice is therefore not playing a part in his decisions. He claims, "[*i*]*t is written*." (*S*210)

This conceit occurs once again in the home invasion scene when Perowne thinks he has greater knowledge than his family of what will happen due to his earlier diagnosis of Baxter. Watching his wife respond to being held at knife-point, Perowne worries that "[s]he doesn't know the background; she thinks these are mere burglars, that it is sensible to let them take what they want and hope they will leave. Nor does she know the pathology." (*S*207) *He does* know the pathology, therefore he thinks he should be the one to deal with the situation. Perowne believes Baxter has been determined by his genes and not by the choices he has made in life. Therefore, Perowne cannot accept the possibility of good or evil actions – self-willed evil does not exist for him because to him there is always a determining gene. It is for this reason that Perowne has mixed feelings towards Baxter – a man who threatens the lives of his entire family (and himself twice) in a single day, who he throws down a set of stairs then operates on, yet a man who, he believes, has no choice in his actions. Even these feelings have a determined root for Perowne – he must "in his usual manner, break them down into their components, the quanta, and find all the distal and proximal causes; only then will he know what to do, what's right." (*S*262) There is no such thing as a conscious choice for Perowne – it is simply a matter of determined brain waves. This is how he decides that Baxter must not be prosecuted, but rather helped – that his family would "all be diminished by whipping a man on his way to hell." (*S*278) Perowne will not feel vengeance towards a man condemned to a certain life by his genes.

However, rather than simply promoting Perowne's theory of determinism, *Saturday* invites us to question the lead character's assumptions by putting forward the case for the possibility of a chosen fate. The three key scenes of the novel – those which are *slowed scene* in narrative time duration – are the scenes in which Perowne's fundamental assumptions are questioned. In the plane scene Perowne believes that what he is witnessing is, without a doubt, a terrorist attack. He believes that London is simply waiting for its inevitable attack, and this is why his mind automatically assumes a burning plane is the result of terrorism. For Perowne, London's fate is determined – the personal choice of millions of inhabitants will not deter such an eventuality. Yet his assumptions are proved wrong when the plane episode turns out not to be the work of terrorists, but simply a fault fire with no one harmed. Perowne's determinist theory is questioned deeply in the encounters with Baxter. Perowne believes he has rendered the threat of Baxter null and void when he diagnoses him, yet he does not predict the free will of Baxter in commanding his thugs to hold Perowne up in a wall recess out of view of any public help. Suddenly the diagnostician is not in charge of the patient, and he does not understand how that could have occurred because he does not consider the possibility of free will.

The biggest shock to Perowne's view on the 'natural course' of life comes in the home invasion. It is not the disease that has caused Baxter to invade Perowne's home – rather, it is his free will in the form of revenge – a desperate soul with 'nothing to lose' intent on reparation for damages caused to his ego. Perowne "thinks he's making the right answer" (*S*209) in telling Baxter that Grammaticus is his father, yet his prediction based on determinism is wrong – Baxter's unpredictable free will asserts itself in breaking Grammaticus' nose. There is, of course, a higher irony here – all of

this is 'unpredictable' from the scientific viewpoint of Perowne, yet highly predictable from the vantage of literature, where revenge and violence commonly run amok to heighten the tension – especially in the final dramatic climax. Indeed, if Perowne could only see what we see through the literary angle – that Baxter is a kind of literary cliché of a villain, that his vengeful actions follow a dramatic story arc – then he might indeed be able to predict Baxter's actions. As it is, his scientific standpoint does not allow this and so he is constantly hammered with events and actions that defy the logic of his science. Finally Perowne begins to question his beliefs, stating "for all the reductive arguments, Perowne can't convince himself that molecules and faulty genes alone are terrorising his family" (*S*210) – yet backs away again from the idea of free will, blaming himself for the home invasion. Perowne realises that Baxter's condition "confers a bleak kind of freedom," (*S*214) yet qualifies his thought with the reassurance that Baxter probably would not know how far he would be prepared to go. It is in these three key moments that Perowne begins ever so slightly to question his steadfast view on determinism. Of course, on reflection we cannot (though I believe readers, caught up in the 'world' of the text in the moment of reading, often do) forget the perennial irony of characters reflecting on the debate between determinism and free will in a context in which their every thought and action has been predetermined by a narrator, and thus an author – an irony which tempers the tempting outright conflation of the literary with the realms of free will. Nevertheless, this debate is alive and well in *Saturday* – given power by the wavering thoughts of a character caught so determinedly on one side.

The key Baxter experience – the ultimate toying by McEwan between the ideas of determinism and choice – comes in the form of the ill man's reaction to Daisy's recital of *Dover Beach*. During his invasion of the Perowne home, Baxter spots Daisy's

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manuscript for her soon-to-be published poetry collection lying on the table. Seemingly short on direction when embarrassed that he has made this pregnant young woman strip naked, he demands that she read one of her poems aloud. Rather than read (and probably personally psychologically taint) her own work, Daisy is prompted by her grandfather to recite Matthew Arnold's 1867 poem – one of the poems Grammaticus taught her as a young girl. Following this recital Baxter is physically changed (slouching over, loosening his grip on the knife he holds at the throat of Perowne's wife, Rosalind) and it is here that Perowne wonders whether a poem could indeed invoke a mood swing. Baxter demands that Daisy read it again and following this we see through Perowne's eyes that the psychologically ill man "appears suddenly elated." (*S*222) Baxter is thrilled with the poem, amazed at the idea that Daisy actually wrote it, and tells her it is beautiful. Perowne has witnessed Baxter's transformation "from lord of terror to amazed admirer," (*S*223) as the latter seizes the manuscript, claiming he is keeping it, and tells the neurosurgeon he will start on the imaginary medical trial Perowne has conjured to distract him. It is through Perowne's eyes that we witness this scene, and thus it is through his medical opinion that the events are screened. Perowne wonders at the transformation and the potential power of literature, but then quickly reverts to his scientific standpoint, diagnosing the stages of Baxter's intense high and dismissing the idea of the power of literature. Perowne prefers to believe that Baxter must be 'determined' to respond to the poem in this certain way while believing himself determined by genes to be unaffected by literature – a notion we as readers have seen to be incorrect in at least a small way (even if Perowne has not) in Perowne's first personal reaction to the poem.

However, the scene itself seems to contradict Perowne's intense belief in determinism, opening it up for questioning even as Perowne insists upon it. We as readers begin to wonder whether it is Baxter's disease that predisposes him to irrational, emotional outbursts, and therefore to the 'irrational' emotion of poetry (Perowne's belief), or whether it is in fact Baxter's individuality that results in his intense reaction to the poem. Despite Perowne's insistence early in the novel that he is unaffected by literature, his imagination is, in fact, fired up by Daisy's first reading – the words conjuring up for him the image of Daisy's mystery lover. It is suggested, then, that it may in fact be the power of this poem to spark the individual imagination, and not the literary gene, which results in the varied positive reactions. Perowne insists that it is Baxter's disease which determines his reaction, but his own thoughts betray this idea, hinting that this is not the case. Perowne claims that Baxter's disease results in frequent losses of short term memory – during his mood swings "he inhabits the confining bright spotlight of the present." (*S*224) Here it may be that McEwan suggests that, contrary to Perowne's views, Baxter is in fact more free than Perowne. Due to Baxter's lack of a past, his intense present is all that counts – and it is here that he is free to make seemingly embarrassing or irrational decisions based on what he feels at that exact moment. This is a freedom that Perowne, who is constrained by his fiercely intellectualised determinism, cannot experience. Perowne is strapped back by circumstance, rationality and social mores, and so he cannot (will not let himself) feel the pure, intensity of feeling and emotion – irrespective of circumstance – that Baxter feels in reaction to the aesthetic qualities of literature. Therefore, through the eyes of the diagnosing determinist, we witness an ill man not determined to certain feeling and action by his disease, but instead freed by it – freed to feel what he wishes to feel within

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the moment. In this way, it may be that Baxter's reaction stands outside of all rational causality, and it is here that McEwan most strongly questions the idea of determinism through the eyes of one convinced of it.

These three distended moments are when the debate on determinism versus choice becomes important to Perowne – when his whole life's beliefs are questioned – and because we experience the events of the novel through his consciousness, these three scenes are emphasised. These scenes are important to Perowne's mind and it is his mind in the moment that is explored. These *slowed scene* moments thus occur in the novel as a result of McEwan's attempting to highlight Perowne's inner debate around the issues of free will and determinism. McEwan has created a lead character who is steadfastly determinist, yet the author has given him powerful opposition in his family – a daughter, a son and a father-in-law all of whom are advanced figures in the world of the arts – the world of the experimental, the interpretive, rather than the determined. McEwan also asks us to question Perowne's beliefs in placing before us the alternatives of the debate – just when Perowne 'knows' that he has figured out Baxter, he is surprised by Baxter's choices. Perowne does, in fact, go to bed at the end of the day believing once again in determinism, but we finish the book questioning Perowne's beliefs. For the reader, one man's consciousness has illuminated the whole debate on determinism versus choice – a consciousness bent on determinism, tantalised by, yet dismissive of, the concept of choice, and this consciousness deliciously delivered to us through literature – through a medium of interpretation, gray areas, and decidedly on the side of free will, despite, by its very nature, being completely crafted and inexorably determined.

This inner turmoil about determinism versus choice is obviously raging against the pertinent background of the specific day that Perowne is living through – that of the London protests against the Iraq War. Perowne's inner turmoil as he explores this debate on a personal scale in his encounters with Baxter reflects the unknowing period of history on a public scale. Perowne wonders whether or not he should participate in the protests (whether his presence will have any repercussions), and the Londoners of the novels do not know whether the protests will make a difference at all in terms of the war. However, we, as readers, do know – we know Britain went to war, we know the indecisive and arguable outcome of that war. Furthermore, we know more than McEwan had intended – we know of the London bombings of 2005 (a repercussion of Britain's participation in the Iraq War), which are predicted with eerie accuracy by Perowne in his 'paranoid' musings over the immediate future of his city. We know some of the outcomes by virtue of our distance from our past – Perowne's present – and it is this ironic knowledge which drives the novel.

The protests are represented in the theory of Schrödinger's Cat – we as readers look on McEwan's recreation of the recent past, this small pocket of time in which any outcome was potentially possible. This historical time and place is focalised through the mind of an official determinist – one who outwardly dismisses the idea of free choice effecting the future, yet who is met with countless people and experiences throughout this one important day which force him to (however subconsciously) question the idea of fixed determinism. This 'not knowing' (however subtly exposed in Perowne) reflects the not knowing of the time – that is, whether or not mass action by the people can decide the fates of the people. The fact that this 'freedom' of Londoners to protest their fates did not make a difference (that their fates were already determined by their

supposed representatives, and so they did not in actual fact have this freedom – though they did not know this) fulfils the ironic perspective through which McEwan wishes his readership to gaze back on this specific pocket of history. In *Saturday* McEwan has created a portrait of a mind in a city in a specific historical day in the recent past – a day on the brink, fraught with questions over whether the future is already determined, or whether free will can play a part in determining a number of different possible futures – a day in which only the reader and the unobtrusive narrator know the outcome.

On Chesil Beach

The distended moment in McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* is overtly easy to identify – the novella focusing squarely on one night rather than an entire lifetime, with the characters (newlyweds Florence and Edward) directing our focus to this scene through their constant obsessing over the moment when they will consummate their marriage in the nextdoor bedroom of their hotel room. The sex scene in the bedroom of this hotel on Chesil Beach is the pivotal moment of this night in 1962 – a scene which, the narrator reveals in the final pages, haunts the characters for the rest of their lives. Indeed, it is so much the focus of the novella, both for the characters as well as structurally, that it seems incredibly obvious – almost too obvious. McEwan seems to have recognised not only that he has a signature technique (the distended moment), but that his regular readership come to his twenty-first century works with the expectation that they will find this technique embedded, and so actively seek it out. *On Chesil Beach* seems to play on this expectation – McEwan going over the top in the delivery of his signature technique, playing it up to gently mock his own work in a postmodernist self-awareness. This is a novella – a short work within which the pinnacle scene must be presented in stark contrast to those scenes around it in order for it to stand out. McEwan delivers on this, hamming up his presentation of this distended moment in order to give it an exaggerated, self-aware outing. It may well be that this is McEwan giving his signature technique a final, climactic send-off – his distended moment receiving its final showing in a novella tightly worked around a single night, and within that night, around a single moment.

The Bedroom Scene as Distended Moment

Florence and Edward are obsessed with how they will negotiate their first sexual act together, and it is this moment of failed negotiation in the bedroom that the novel pivots upon. The pages leading up to the bedroom scene are filled with Edward's desires and fears, and Florence's terror, concerning "[t]he moment,"[116] while the pages after conduct a post mortem of the moment, revealing the results of the failed sex act. Thus the novella follows the classic narrative structure of rise to a climax, then fall to a denouement. The climax of *On Chesil Beach* mirrors Edward's personal climax – his premature ejaculation is *the event* of the novella. The novella is split into five parts – the odd parts (plus the last few pages of Part Four) set in the present wedding night, with parts two and four filling in the lovers' back-stories. Although the whole of parts one, three and five feel slowed in their obsessive concern with the tension between the lovers in a single, momentous night, the narrative duration throughout these odd parts reflects this narrative climax. As Florence leads Edward to the bedroom the narrative duration slows, peaking in *slowed scene* surrounding the moment of ejaculation. The narrative duration then gradually quickens towards the denouement. Contained wholly within Part Three, it is the bedroom scene (and specifically the moment surrounding the ejaculation), then, that possesses the clear features of *slowed scene*, and is thus the most important scene for McEwan's novella. It is intriguing, then, that McEwan has decided that his distended moment (always detailed in *slowed scene*) for *On Chesil Beach* should be the moment in the narrative when too-quickness takes over. That is, there is a dramatic build-up to this 'momentous' event (the first sexual act between the newlyweds), which actually plays out as a disappointment – a hurried, unsensual, messy

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[116] McEwan, Ian. *On Chesil Beach*. London: Vintage Books, 2008. p. 33.

moment where Edward sees himself as embarrassingly emasculated and Florence witnesses herself in a flight of 'over-reacting' hysteria. McEwan is playing with our expectations – delivering the distended moment we so expect, yet choosing to use this swelled moment to illustrate an anti-climactic mess of an event. This event is an allegory of 'The McEwan Distended Moment' in that McEwan uses a premature ejaculation as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the aesthetics with which he is associated – his typical drawn-out, dramatic, life-changing, *slowed scene* moment is transformed in this novella, instead detailing a disappointing, overly-hurried moment. In this self-conscious delivery of his definitive stylistic technique he is telling us he is aware of his reputation, and he is almost light-heartedly and humorously drawing our attention to his knowledge of his own indulgences. Perhaps in this anti-climactic climax, he may be giving his distended moment a 'last hurrah' – one that ends in an embarrassed, self-effacing whimper rather than a bang.

In order to elicit the languid feeling of this one night, McEwan uses the even parts (minus the last few pages of Part Four) of his five part novella to provide the pacing contrast. With the exception of three brief sections of *scene* in Part Two, these even parts are almost entirely made up of *summary* and *ellipsis*, in comparison with the *scene* and *slowed scene* found within the odd parts (plus the last few pages of Part Four). Although more story events seem to occur within the even sections – the couple's lives before they meet, how they meet, negotiating family, jobs, life, sexuality and each other leading to their wedding day – McEwan directs our focus to one night which is fairly devoid of numerous story events, rather than the lead up. Unlike the back-stories, the detailing of the first night of matrimony is strongly characterised by Edward's and Florence's thoughts through *psycho-narration* and *narrated thought*, and so in focusing

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our attention thus, McEwan's intention is made clear – we are to concentrate on the intimate thought processes of a couple as they negotiate their desires and fears over the course of as little time as an hour or two.

The bedroom scene is strung out with such tension because it occupies the physical space where we as readers know the inevitable – the moment the lovers anticipate, fear and dread – must occur. This anticipation is also increased by regular McEwan readers who are themselves awaiting the delivery of his distended moment. The year is 1962, prior to the sexual revolution, and it is obvious from the deliberate set-up of the first line of the novel, where we are told that the characters "lived in a time when a conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible," (*CB*3) that we should expect nothing unconventional – nothing (in the conservative social view of the time) lewd, perverted, obscene, deviant, or even a little experimental – from Florence and Edward's wedding night. It is in the bedroom of their hotel room that they will confront sex together for the first time, and so it is this space that haunts their thoughts throughout the night. It is in the bedroom of their hotel room that Edward believes he will reap the reward for his abstinence, and yet he worries about this moment and the possibility of his "failure." (*CB*7) It is in the bedroom that Florence believes she will force herself to endure the most horrifying and disgusting experience she can imagine, all the while worrying that her "problem" (*CB*9) will come to the fore. The bedroom becomes bigger than itself – it becomes more than just a room; the bedroom becomes a space of ritualistic significance that troubles the lovers' thoughts throughout the novel. It also becomes the place in which we expect the McEwan distended moment to occur, and so it preoccupies our thoughts in the same way.

The idea of the bedroom as the place of significance is utilised to great effect in building the tension in Part One. Whether in the form of Edward's "eagerness – for rapture, for resolution" or Florence's "visceral dread", (*CB*7) we continually hear these characters' thoughts as they obsess over the events which are to occur within that space. The fact that the bedroom is ever-present – looming in on them from the next room – means that they cannot help but dwell on the event to come, and therefore cannot relax into, and enjoy, each moment as they eat dinner. In an expert manipulation of suspense through delay, McEwan expands the narrative of the wedding night as the lovers move slowly towards their fate even as he propels the characters's minds forth towards the bedroom scene. The tension is thus twofold – the reader shares the characters' fears of the unknown as they anticipate the inevitable sexual end to the evening (every painstaking moment that passes hurtling them towards this climax), while the greater tension is not actually the impending doom, but rather that taking place between the minds of each character – the contradictions of thought that the reader becomes privy to. It is this psychological tension – that created when the narrator allows us such extended access to Edward's and Florence's thoughts – that becomes the focus of the novella.

Character Consciousness in the Distended Moment

On Chesil Beach shifts back and forth right throughout the text from a third person narrator to third person focalisation through the primary characters of Edward and Florence. All three techniques of allowing character consciousness to infiltrate third person narration – *psycho-narration*, *quoted thought* and *narrated thought* – occur within these sections of focalisation. *Psycho-narration* is the most common form throughout the novella, but the bedroom scene specifically allows for more *narrated*

thought to enter the text. Thus we are privy not only to generalised thoughts, feelings and emotions of the characters, but also to direct thoughts from the heads of the characters without interruptions to the narration (as *quoted thought* would do), and therefore without any stalling to the flow of the action. I believe it is this combination of the three categories of character consciousness – *psycho-narration*, *narrated thought* and *quoted thought* – through third person narration in extended form (while the action continues in the background) that retards the narrative time duration. Florence is focalised in the bedroom scene, and thus it is her perspective and reactions we hear through an ebb and flow between *psycho-narration* and *narrated thought* (and briefly, *quoted thought*). Like Cecilia's thoughts in *Atonement*'s fountain scene and Perowne's thoughts in *Saturday*'s three key scenes, Florence's thoughts at times verge on a full-sentenced, grammatical version of flow of consciousness, and it is this technique that is always present in McEwan's distended moments. In this, McEwan has mimicked the modernist ideals by shifting the focus from the event-based physical climax (Edward's ejaculation) to the psychological climax (Florence's reaction), pushing the focus of the novella away from the story and thoroughly onto the narrative – that is, the telling.

Although the narrator litters the bedroom scene with a few sparse, concise descriptions of pure action, this scene is almost entirely focalised through Florence alone – it is telling that during this section we are not privy at any time to Edward's mental state. The pivotal scene of *On Chesil Beach*, then, is actually Florence's pivotal scene. It is her trauma we witness in detail – it is through her eyes that we witness the horrific events of that scene. Following the format of focalisation within the novella as a whole, this scene is largely characterised by *psycho-narration* of Florence's mental state by the narrator. The narrator relates Florence's "relative optimism", explains how she

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"felt disappointment" and describes her "immediate preoccupation." (*CB*103) The narrator paints a sweeping picture of the minute changes in Florence's mental state as they alter moment to moment. Florence's mind is not just absorbed with an unchanging state of fear – the narrator details many minor and major alterations through *psycho-narration* as the events unfold. When Edward rolls on top of her, Florence feels "pinned down and helpless;" (*CB*103) immediately following she feels "disappointment that he had not lingered to stroke her pubic area;" (*CB*103) she is preoccupied with keeping up appearances, and desires only to please Edward as his penis bumps into her urethra; in charge of her "panic and disgust," (*CB*104) and pleased with herself at remembering her sex manual, she bravely touches his groin; "not at all afraid now" she explores his testicles and penis, "noting with interest" the different features as she is "amazed by her own boldness". (*CB*104) Following Edward's ejaculation we learn of Florence's "horror," we witness a suppressed, traumatic event suddenly resurfacing in her mind, then we are told of her "primal disgust, her visceral horror" at being covered in semen. (*CB*105) Most interestingly in viewing a speeding mind at work, we then witness Florence's mind 'splitting in two' – one half of her desperately wanting to be clean and the other half watching her 'embarrassing' actions shamefully. Thus, rather than briefly informing the reader of Florence's misgivings about the looming (then actualised) event of the bedroom scene, then detailing the action as focalised through her, the seeming contradictions of Florence's active mind are given full, moment by moment *psycho-narration*.

As the scene intensifies towards the climax of Part Three, so too does the density of *narrated thought*. Early on in the scene we hear Florence tell herself "[s]he was going to get through this." (*CB*103) As the moment of Edward's climax occurs we

are suddenly bombarded with Florence's *narrated thought*. Indeed, the narrator even sees fit to invert the order of cause and effect by telling us Florence's immediate reaction before detailing the action itself – a clear indicator that the former is more important than the latter. She asks herself, "[h]ad she pulled on the wrong thing? Had she gripped too tight?" (*CB*104) which is immediately followed by the description of the ejaculation. Curiously, the story event climax – the physical description of Edward's ejaculation – is the point at which Florence's detailed mental commentary momentarily breaks off (although her focalisation remains). The account of Edward's ejaculation is given in short, to the point, action descriptors:

> In horror she let go, as Edward, rising up with a bewildered look,
> his muscular back arching in spasms, emptied himself over her in
> gouts, in vigorous but diminishing quantities, filling her navel,
> coating her belly, thighs, and even a portion of her chin and
> kneecap in tepid, viscous fluid. (*CB*105)

There is no cerebral commentary from Florence (or even Edward) throughout this description – it is whole and complete as it describes the entire moment of ejaculation from start to finish without temporal embellishment. Just like the vase snapping in the fountain scene of *Atonement*, it is the pivotal physical event – the precise moment – in *On Chesil Beach* that is delivered in temporally-unembellished narrative, immediately surrounded by sections of text filled with extended, of the moment, character consciousness which serve to retard the narrative time duration.

Immediately following this physical description, the narrator returns us to Florence's thoughts as she reacts to and digests this momentous event. We are privy to Florence's mind as she berates herself for her self-perceived mistakes:

> … it was all her fault, that she was inept, ignorant and stupid. She
> should not have interfered, she should never have believed the
> manual… How typical, her over-confident meddling in matters of
> awesome complexity; she should have known well enough that her
> attitude in rehearsals for the string quartet had no relevance here.
> (*CB*105)

As Florence watches herself from her split-mind viewpoint, her upset half is given brief access as she claims (concerning removing the semen) "[a]nd actually, it was not so easy." (*CB*106) Her shamed half is then given pride of place through *narrated thought* from her watchful standpoint:

> … It was unbearable that he should watch her, the punishing,
> hysterical woman he had foolishly married. She could hate him for
> what he was witnessing now and would never forget. She had to
> get away from him… She could not look at him. It was torture to
> remain in the room with someone who knew her like this. (*CB*106)

This intensification of the amount of *narrated thought* is a contributing factor to the slowing of the narrative time duration during this scene. In a cyclical situation, this *slowed scene* in turn places emphasis for the reader on what they are reading – thus

Florence's thoughts slow the narrative time duration, the result of which is to focus readerly attention on Florence's thoughts.

Although Edward (and hence the action) has climaxed, the true climax – within Florence's mind – is yet to occur. Buried amongst a short section of *psycho-narration* (that occurs within the ellipsis of the last section of text I quoted) is a sentence that is perhaps the nearest to Florence's literal thought process. For one brief moment the narrator allows *quoted thought* (highlighted by McEwan in italics) to infiltrate the narrative:

> And still, her other watching self appeared to be telling her calmly,
> but not quite in words, *But this is just what it's like to be mad*.
> (*CB*106)

McEwan is clearly alluding to the non-verbal nature of the mind when his narrator claims the thought was 'not quite in words', yet this is the closest we get to a literal quote of Florence's mind. The intensely close proximity between reader and character consciousness that comes from *quoted thought* is important to this quote because it is here that Florence's climax occurs – it is here that she is simultaneously experiencing, and watching herself experience, a traumatic breakdown. This pivotal (and extremely short) section of *quoted thought* is immediately followed by *narrated thought* so as not to halt the action. However, coming across this interruption to the expected narration – this almost alien deliverance of character consciousness (clearly marked as different by the use of italics) – momentarily causes the reader to pause. In ultimately slowing the narrative time duration at this point of *quoted thought*, McEwan, through his narrator,

manipulates the reader into believing that it is Florence's mental breakdown rather than the physical climax that is the pivotal moment of the scene.

Historical Irony

A scene of sexual dysfunction – still with the power to be one of the most awkward human experiences today – could potentially formulate the pinnacle moment for any work. However, it is emphasised beyond the 'norm' in this novella through the historical time and place setting. The reason it is so central to this work is because it is so traumatic for Florence (and, to a slightly lesser extent, Edward) – the newlyweds' expectations and views so conditioned by their historical placement to find sex embarrassing, a topic not to be discussed. *On Chesil Beach* is written from a position of retrospect, and it is because of this position that it becomes a novella of historical irony. The voice of the narrator is very clear throughout the text – it is s/he who invites us to view this quite alien (to an audience in the twenty-first century) pocket of time within history – and, particularly, to laugh at its peculiarities. This historical irony, emphasised so heavily by the narrator, serves to put distance between the reader and characters. In so doing, the bedroom scene – an embarrassing and traumatic moment – becomes crucial for a narrator who wishes us to laugh along with him/her about these quaint inhabitants of the past.

Thus historical irony is thickly layered over the events of the distended moment in *On Chesil Beach* in order to allow this scene to make a (sometimes disparaging, often condescending) comment about a historical time and place – a comment which can only be made when there is an ironic distance between reader and characters. The narrator sets up this distancing effect in the very first sentence of the novella:

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> They were young, educated, and both virgins on this, their wedding
>
> night, and they lived in a time when a conversation about sexual
>
> difficulties was plainly impossible. (*CB*3)

Immediately the text is removed from the present – the fact that the newlyweds are virgins on their wedding night sounds some bells (a somewhat infrequent, but not completely uncommon, occurrence in the modern world), yet it is the reference to a time when discussions of sexuality did not take place that confirms the removal from the present. In the twenty-first century sex-saturated western world where every problem one may (or may not) have is relentlessly dissected, a discussion with the one you are to marry about your sexual worries seems completely normal and, in fact, necessary. The phrase 'lived in a time' is reminiscent of the 'once upon a time' of fairy tales. This reference to long-ago tales in a distant land, appearing as it does in the first sentence of the text where it traditionally occurs in fairy tales, informs the reader that the fiction is not set within their own world of today. Through this simple yet telling phrase, the narrator is informing us that not only is the story set in the past, but it occurs in a time and place so distant from anything we might know that we are encouraged to view it through the stylistic sheen of fairy tales and legends. Thus in the first sentence of the novella the reader has not only been distanced from the historicised time of the fiction, but the narrator has also effectively placed the central premise of the text squarely in front of the reader: this book will detail the slips in understanding – whether funny or tragic – that occurred in that era before people could talk about sex.

The narrator gives many clues in the first section of the text as to what period of time the novella is set in. Readers would immediately believe that the time must be prior to the sexual revolution of the 1960s, but how long before that time they cannot immediately be sure. We learn in the first few sentences that the couple is in a "Georgian Inn," (*CB*3) denoting that the novella's setting must be sometime post-eighteenth-century. When we hear they have driven a car to get to the inn, we are immediately flung into the twentieth-century (remembering that the time must be prior to the mid-sixties). A few pages on the narrator finally reveals (although not explicitly) the decade the novella is set in:

> This was still the era – it would end later in that famous decade –
>
> when to be young was a social encumbrance, a mark of irrelevance,
>
> a faintly embarrassing condition for which marriage was the
>
> beginning of a cure. (*CB*6)

Of course, that 'famous decade' (within our narrowed field of the twentieth-century) can only really be referring to the revolutionary period of the 1960s. Indeed, this is backed up by the references to youth as an embarrassment – something which would change in the youth-led 1960s revolution – and so we are placed squarely at the start of that decade, pre-revolution. Later in Part One the narrator tells us that Edward had once snuck a look at Florence's intelligence test results, and that "[t]his was an age when these quotients were held to measure something as tangible as height or weight" (*CB*16) – clearly outmoded in our age of inclusion and skepticism about 'definitive' testing. Again and again the narrator drills into us the distance between our time and the

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characters', saying that "[i]n just a few years' time, that would be the kind of thing quite ordinary young people would do. But for now, the times held them." (*CB*18) *That*, of course, being the 'wild' notion of taking a bottle of wine down to drink on the beach. We are then informed that "being childlike was not yet honourable, or in fashion." (*CB*18) The narrator refers to Edward as one of the "young men of his time" (*CB*20) before explicitly stating his birth year as 1940. We are then told that the language of therapy was "not yet in general circulation" and to regard oneself as special was "not yet customary." (*CB*21) When the sounds of the radio drift up from below, the subjects of the text are once again historicised by the reference to the old wartime habit of gathering around the radio for the news bulletin. The news bulletin reveals many specific historical details, including that Prime Minister Harold Macmillan has been addressing a conference on the arms race. These historical details conclusively place us in the year 1962, and it is with great pointedness that the narrator has not allowed us to feel close to this time – instead distancing us from this markedly historicised era.

Yet, although the narrator has gone to great lengths to indicate to the reader the time-period setting of the novella, this is not simply the end goal – if that were so, the year would have been clearly printed somewhere early in the text. Rather, the result of these constant references to the characters' era is to doggedly position them far from us – to point out the great knowledge gap between the characters and the reader, and therefore to position, to align, him/herself (as a knowing narrator) with the knowledgeable side. In short, the narrator is with the reader, in this era of relative knowledge, and s/he will point out the follies of these relatively unknowledgeable characters in their relatively unknowledgeable era. By aggressively playing up the gulf in knowledge between the characters and the reader (rather than choosing to simply

immerse us in the reality of a past world), the narrator is deliberately enfolding the characters in a kind of ignorance. However, the narrator does not choose to stop at creating a distance between the 'knowledgeable' reader and the 'ignorant' characters – rather this intrusive, directing narrator exploits this gap, encouraging us to laugh affectionately at this somewhat alien part of our (somewhat distant) past. In Part One a reference is made to Florence's "modern, forward-looking handbook that was supposed to be helpful to young brides, with its cheery tones and exclamation marks and numbered illustrations." (*CB*7) This handbook is filled with correct, formal sexual terminology such as "*mucous membrane,… glans…* [and] *penetration*," (*CB*8) yet it has "two smiling bug-eyed matchstick figures holding hands, drawn clumsily in white chalk, as though by an innocent child" on its "garish red covers. " (*CB*11) Such a book is clearly outdated in our era of sexualisation, casual sexual language and internet searches, and the narrator is here encouraging us to chuckle at these early attempts at female education by juxtaposing the complex adult sexual world with childlike drawings and over-enthusiastic punctuation marks.

Quite early on in the text, the narrator invites us to join him/her in being amused by the historical era by ridiculing the English cuisine of the time. His/her condescending description leaves us in no doubt as to how to respond:

> This was not a good moment in the history of English cuisine, but
> no one much minded at the time, except visitors from abroad. The
> formal meal began, as so many did then, with a slice of melon
> decorated by a single glazed cherry. Out in the corridor, in silver
> dishes on candle-heated plate warmers, waited slices of long-ago

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roasted beef in a thickened gravy, soft boiled vegetables, and

potatoes of a bluish hue. The wine was from France, though no

particular region was mentioned on the label, which was

embellished with a solitary, darting swallow. It would not have

crossed Edward's mind to order a red. (*CB*4-5)

Immediately the narrator sets us up to be disappointed with what should be a special,

celebratory meal for the couple on their wedding night by telling us it was 'not a good

moment' for English cuisine. The fact that 'no one much minded at the time' serves to

distance us from the inhabitants of that period in history – allowing us to feel superior in

our knowledge that *we* know what a good meal is whereas *they* did not. The narrator

flatters our own 'superior knowledge', giving us an advantage over the protagonists

through a very heavy exercise in authorial irony. The phrase 'as so many did then' again

enforces the distancing effect, as does the reference to 'candle-heated plate warmers'

(where we now have electric ones). The meal itself sounds disappointing to our modern

standards of a formal meal – not only the kitsch glazed cherry on the slice of melon, but

the 'long-ago roasted beef' (where only freshly cooked food will do nowadays), the 'soft

boiled vegetables' (where briefly steamed is now preferred), the potatoes that have a

'bluish hue', and the wine, although (positively) from France, not displaying its region

and therefore a generic rather than a quality pick. The narrator then guides us to chuckle

again at the English citizens of that time in his reference to Edward's lack of knowledge

that red wine should accompany red meat. Part One of the novella is littered with such

instances where the narrator, instead of merely describing the action, places a spin on it

so that we are encouraged not only to feel distant from the era in which Florence and Edward reside, but also to be affectionately amused by it.

This is clearly the pre-modern era for readers in the twenty-first century. It is our knowledge of their time and of the sexual revolution that is about to take place that creates the humour in these instances. The scenarios are not simply funny because they are different from our own lives, but because we realise the great upheaval that is about to revolutionise the characters' worlds – because we have knowledge that the characters do not. Thus the scenarios are humorous because irony is deep at work, and it is this irony that gives much more weight to the bedroom scene as the distended moment. This mishandled sexual moment between a man who experiences a common 'problem' and a woman who has a visceral dread of the sexual act (a dread that begins to fade before being reinforced by the events of the night) seems so far from our times because of its historical setting. We watch the scene, knowing that the knowledge and power of the sexual revolution are just around the corner, and so we cannot help but wonder how the moment would have played out with that power and knowledge in a time like our own. Of course, on reflection it cannot be definitively said that the scene would have played out differently in our own time, but the narrator's lashings of blatant historical irony insist that we consider that possibility – that we see the scene not only as a product of its time, but as representative of its time. This era is clearly the last moment in western history that – as historicised fiction – can elicit this strength of this type of irony. Although *Saturday* works with the same form of historical irony, the lack of distance between the characters' time and ours in that novel, the lack (comparatively speaking, when referencing against *On Chesil Beach*) of social upheaval between that time and ours, means that the historical irony in *Saturday* works much less strongly than in this

novella, and for a different effect. The Britain of *On Chesil Beach* is a distant (almost alien) memory, whereas the Britain of *Saturday* is only back around the corner in our history – much closer to ourselves as we are than to our long-distant heritage. *On Chesil Beach* is fundamentally ironical – the novella is built upon the irony between our knowledge and that of the characters, and it is this that the narrator exploits in order to encourage the magnifying glass effect.

This novel quite clearly relies heavily on the workings of irony, and so for a more thorough understanding of its mechanism I have looked to Wayne C. Booth, who in *A Rhetoric of Irony* clearly outlines the four-step reading process that accompanies determining that a section of text contains stable irony. Irony cannot simply be self-contained within a text – for it to be realised, the second element of the process – reader response – is crucial. Booth claims that first the reader must "reject the literal meaning"[117] of the given phrase. This occurs when the reader recognises "either some incongruity among the words or between the words and something else that he knows."[118] During step two the reader considers alternative theories as to why this may be the case – including that the implied author may not be smart enough to realise that that phrase cannot be believed. Step three involves a decision about the implied author's knowledge; if the reader determines that the phrase s/he has rejected is also rejected by the implied author, and that the implied author would have reason to expect the reader to reject the phrase in a sort of collusion, then the phrase is indeed ironic. To complete the irony, during step four the reader settles on a new, secure meaning for the phrase. Unlike the literal meaning of the phrase, "the reconstructed meanings will necessarily be in

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[117] Booth, Wayne C. *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974. p. 10.
[118] Booth, p. 10.

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harmony with the unspoken beliefs that the reader has decided to attribute to [the implied author]."[119] Thus the implied author writes the irony into the text hoping for (and expecting) collusion from the reader, and it is only the reader who can complete the technique by rejecting the literal text and arriving at the implied meaning.

On Chesil Beach contains a third person narrator who directs the story – who allows us access to the characters' minds through third person focalisation if and when s/he deems it appropriate, and who quite clearly is asking us to enter into a collusion whereby we (both narrator and reader together) look back on this distant era and communally laugh at it. McEwan has thus, by the standards of postmodern narration, created a very old-fashioned sort of narrator – one aligned with the 'knowledgeable' superiority of the narrators of ironic fairytales and the kinds of pleasure generated during the Enlightenment at the expense of traditional folktales. When we enter Florence's and Edward's minds we are presented with their 'real and desperate' woes that the narrator tells us 'cannot' be talked about. Yet it is these statements we immediately reject as false – reading from our sexualised and psychologised era (and knowing the couple are about to enter the sexual and psychological freedom of the 1960s) we recognise that the narrator is directing us to a place of exasperation – prompting us to feel superior in our (somewhat unfounded, given our hypocritical natures) knowledge that these problems could be made all the smaller simply by expressing them aloud to a compassionate lover. Thus, to fulfill the test of irony, statements are given about the characters' difficulties and the 'impossibility' of expressing them, we realise such statements are false (they *can* talk about their problems – they just *will* not), because of all the hints provided by the narrator (where s/he invites

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[119] Booth, p. 12.

us to collude in amusement about the era) we realise the narrator cannot be guiding us towards a literal interpretation, and so we fix on an alternative meaning – that the characters feel they are held mute, yet we know this is simply an artificial product of their times – times that are so very soon about to change dramatically.

Indeed, the whole novella is structured by an irony which evidences itself in the clash between character consciousnesses. *On Chesil Beach* is about two characters in one of the most intimate relationships two unrelated human beings can be – marriage – who do not know one another. The unfortunate part of this is that they believe they *do* know one another – having enjoyed a long, personally intimate (though not sexual) courtship. Pain develops from this lack of understanding of one another and we as readers relish this pain (often while laughing at it) as *we do* know each of them – we are privy to both of their conflicting thought processes. It is the irony we read between the double, conflicting interpretations of the same situation that is so gratifying to readers reading from the current era of relative freedom and sexuality. In writing the novel entirely in the third person – even when focalised through Florence and Edward, even when these characters' consciousnesses filter through into the narration in the form of *narrated thought* – McEwan has ensured that the intrusive third person narrator is always in control. We can only read what that narrator allows us to read, and it is in this way that the narrator plays Edward's and Florence's most intimate thoughts off against one another. Nowhere is this clash of consciousnesses more evident than in the bedroom scene. Indeed, nowhere is the reader's 'superior' knowledge flattered more greatly than in this scene, where we believe that, although embarrassing, such a situation does not need to be traumatic – it does not need to end a marriage. The narrator allows us to hear Florence's and Edward's thoughts on this sexual moment – the characters resign

themselves to the idea that such a traumatic and humiliating moment can never be redeemed. The irony of the novel has the reader reject these assessments as untrue, favouring a less dramatic evaluation of what the damage could be if only the characters were not caught by their times.

However, this lack of understanding between the lovers is not used as a tragic device for the entire novella. Indeed, the comedy of errors that arises from the differing consciousnesses of Edward and Florence fills the whole work until the end of the bedroom scene. The narrator explicitly encourages us to enjoy the misunderstandings from our privileged position of knowledge – both in terms of the characters and the era. Within the first few pages we see the unwillingness of the characters to express themselves fully to one another. Edward fails to tell Florence that he has never stayed in a hotel before (whereas she is an "old hand" (*CB*3) at it); despite believing it is warm enough to eat outside on the terrace, he does not think of contradicting her; finally the narrator sums up their relationship, explicitly declaring them to be "[a]lmost strangers." (*CB*6) Edward's attempt at making light of their both listening to the radio results in Florence thinking he is "criticising her for preferring the wireless to him." (*CB*26) The clash in thoughts occurs again when an extremely uncomfortable Florence believes her meant-to-be-encouraging smile is "rigidly unconvincing" whereas at the same moment Edward "had never seen her looking lovelier." (*CB*27) The misinterpretations increase as Florence, attempting to pull out of each current uncomfortable moment, commits herself to a worse one. Despite the fact that she only suggests lying on the bed to try and prove she is not interested in the radio, Edward is elated that the sexual suggestion is hers and not his. While feeling attacked by Edward's tongue during a long kiss, Florence feels like she is going to vomit. Immediately following this we hear Edward's reaction

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to her nausea: "[w]hen he heard her moan, Edward knew that his happiness was almost complete." (*CB*30) In this the narrator deliberately leads us to see the irony of Edward's misinterpretation of Florence's moan (as a moan of pleasure instead of pain) – and to be somewhat amused, somewhat appalled, by his surety. It is only during and after the sexual climax that the irony we read emanating from the lack of understanding between the couple loses the comic touch and takes on a more dramatic, sinister edge as the relationship falls apart on Chesil Beach.

Following a long section of focalisation through Florence which reveals her abject terror at what is happening in the bedroom, we hear Edward's self-reassuring thoughts about his wife's supposed positive encouragements:

> … she was the one who had led him to the bedroom, removed her
>
> shoes with such abandon, let him place his hand so close… she
>
> continued to gaze at him so invitingly… his caution was surely
>
> absurd… she was encouraging him, urging him on, desperate for
>
> him to take the lead. (*CB*90)

In full knowledge of Florence's fear (a knowledge Edward does not seem to have), we are awaiting the disaster that will occur with the final clash of attitudes and feelings – the sexual climax. The narrator does not disappoint such a big lead up – such a 'disaster' does occur in the form of Edward's premature ejaculation onto Florence's body. Florence's lack of knowledge spills out as she frantically questions herself as to how her miscalculated actions may have resulted in this; Edward's abstinence pre-wedding proves a waste of time as his fears are realised by "arriving too soon." (*CB*7) This is an

absurd, somewhat comic moment for the reader – such a large, tension-filled build-up to the sexual consummation of the lovers' marriage is abruptly ended by a (messy) failure to consummate; the dramatic climax is 'ruined' by a sexual anti-climax.

Only from our position within an era overly concerned with the knowledge of, and cure for, premature ejaculation, can we feel superior in our 'knowledge' that this is not the end of the world as it seems for the characters themselves. The narrator is thus playing off the established 'ignorance' of the characters against our relative position of knowledge – both of the characters' intimate thoughts, which readily clash with one another, and of the era the characters inhabit – in order to convert what the characters see as a mortifying tragedy into a somewhat comic moment. This is accomplished through heavy reliance on the irony set up so forcefully by the narrator, and embodied with such commitment throughout his/her text. Of course, it is the distended moment in the bedroom – the key sexual moment – that turns the tables on the results of this irony. While the first half of the text can be read comically, this key sexual moment turns the text to a kind of tragedy. The results of this one tiny moment for both characters (in the split of their marriage), but especially for Florence (in the reinforcement of her fear of sexual intimacy), can be read as tragic from our viewpoint looking back on the scene through the 'knowledgeable' lens of historical irony. It is this scene that matters so much to the characters, it is this scene that the narrator suggests represents the problems of 'the age' within which the work is set, and it is this distended moment that changes the tone of the entire novella. These three incentives are why McEwan has chosen to detail the bedroom sex scene in *slowed scene* – to allow for in-depth character consciousness within the moment and to emphasise its importance not just for the characters, not just for the narrator's agenda, but for the flow of the text as a whole.

Feminism and Florence

The focalisation of *On Chesil Beach* reveals much about the intentions of the narrator (and author) in regards to this grand schema, at the centre of which sits the bedroom scene. On first glance the novella seems to be split more or less evenly between the third person narrator, focalisation through Edward, and focalisation through Florence. This quite false (as we shall see) impression is created in the first part of the novella, which sets up a pattern whereby the narrator introduces a section, then allows for more or less equal amounts of focalisation for both Edward and Florence. Part Two and the large majority of Part Four both occur out of the present night and exist to provide background information about the couple as the action on the wedding night is paused. Both of these parts follow the pattern of Part One – helping to disguise the unequal focalisation of the majority of that present night by providing equal amounts of background information on both Edward and Florence. Yet these are 'filler' chapters – they (frustratingly for the reader) *interrupt* the urgent, current action of that first night of marriage in order to provide background information that furthers our understanding of the characters' thoughts *during* that night. The title of the novella itself clearly declares the true subject of the text – not Edward and Florence's relationship, but that night '*On Chesil Beach*'. That is, the even parts of the novella exist to give us more knowledge and understanding about Parts One, Three and Five (and the last few pages of Part Four) – they are subservient to the current action.

Having beautifully set up his red herring, whereby we are suitably distracted by the false impression of equality given at the beginning of the novella and in the 'history' sections, McEwan then allows the focalisation to skew very sharply in favour of

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Florence. This false impression means that we do not feel we are reading a novella about a couple that, in fact, sides with the woman; we do not realise that we are being subtly guided to understand Florence's side of the equation more fully than Edward's, and it is this subtlety that prevents the novella from being dismissed as an unequal, biased, man-misunderstanding, feminist text. However, the statistics very clearly expose the bias towards Florence in the latter two thirds of the present night sections (in approximate number of pages):

Part One:

Narrator:	10 ¼
Edward:	10 ½
Florence:	8 ½
All (focalisation switches rapidly):	1 ¾

Part Three:

Narrator:	0
Edward:	9 ¾
Florence:	18 ½

Last five pages of Part Four:

Narrator:	0
Edward:	5 ¼
Florence:	0

Part Five:

Narrator:	0
Edward:	2
Florence:	18 ½

The fairly repetitive structure of Part One accounts for the narrator's strong perspective in this part. In a narrative where only the focalisation shifts, and not the actual narrator, it is a curious (though not unique when we remember the multi- and equal-focalisation of Woolf's *The Waves*) incidence that two characters should receive just as much 'stage-time' as the third person narrator – yet this is what McEwan has achieved in Part One. Edward's and Florence's thoughts are therefore introduced not simply as a means to assist the story – they are the story themselves. This egalitarian split between narrator, Edward and Florence slips away when the third person narrator set-ups completely disappear from the rest of the parts. These narrator set-ups only return at the very end of the novella in a 'where are they are now' style section which summarises the remainder of Edward's and Florence's lives (and hence cannot be included in the wedding night analysis). This disappearance of narratorial introductions starkly reveals the importance of Edward's and Florence's thoughts as these characters' consciousnesses take over the narrative – such foregrounding revealing the centrality of psychology over events for this novella.

The analysis of Part Three shows us the sudden contrast in page numbers devoted to each character, with Florence receiving twice as much attention as Edward. Edward is allocated a very small section at the end of Part Four to introduce Part Five, in which Florence takes over almost completely. The heavily Florence-skewed Parts Three and Five are cleverly split up by the equally-focalised 'history' section of Part Four –

McEwan never allowing us to realise that we are being subtly swayed and manipulated in slight favour of Florence. Thus the total numbers of pages (in the present night on Chesil Beach) dedicated to pure third person narration or focalisation are as follows:

Narrator:	10 ¼
Edward:	27 ½
Florence:	45 ½
All:	1 ¾

As approximate percentages, the figures look like this:

Narrator:	12%
Edward:	32.5%
Florence:	53.5%
All:	2%

Thus the narrator has only just over a tenth of the present night of the novella, Edward's focalisation takes up just over a third, whereas Florence's focalisation takes up over half of the entire present sections. It must be noted that the pinnacle bedroom scene occurs in Part Three – a part where Florence is given twice as much focalisation as Edward. The distended moment itself – the scene the whole novella leads up to and away from, the only scene detailed in *slowed scene* and thus the scene given pride of place – is entirely given over to Florence. Thus, although McEwan leads us off the trail with Parts One, Two and Four, the novella uses carefully placed focalisation (including focalisation of a

certain character in *the* key scene) in order to subtly pull the reader in favour of Florence's point of view.

Not only does the novella move towards Florence technically, but it also moves towards her ethically. Within the first few pages of *On Chesil Beach* the narrator reveals that Florence's anxieties about her sexual union with Edward are "more serious" (*CB*7) than Edward's. We learn that, although Edward's fear of "arriving too soon" is "great, his eagerness – for rapture, for resolution – was far greater." (*CB*7) Edward's is a "conventional" (*CB*7) worry felt similarly by many men embarking on their first sexual experience with a partner – one that is easily trivialised by excitement at the prospect of such an experience. However, Florence's anxieties are "unutterable… she experienced a visceral dread, a helpless disgust as palpable as seasickness." (*CB*7) The narrator, through Florence's sections of focalisation, allows us to understand her complete and utter revulsion towards the impending sexual act. Against his normal nerves, hers is a real fear – something that would, in our day and age, be talked about with a therapist. Already then, just due to the nature of her anxieties, we are prompted by this intrusive narrator to place our sympathies more with Florence than with Edward.

Florence's plight is made all the more tragic when we as readers realise that, handled carefully by a compassionate lover, her fears may well have been overcome. McEwan hints that this may be the case when Florence begins to feel desire awakening in her body. Nervously sitting on the bed, Edward places his hand on his wife's thigh, massaging her leg and unknowingly brushing against a hair poking out from her underwear. Florence detects "a mere shadow of a sensation" (*CB*87) which begins to grow and swell. She does not dare believe it – the narrator revealing "[s]he doubted it, denied it, even as she felt herself sink and inwardly fold in its direction." (*CB*87)

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Florence slowly accepts the feeling – surprised and happy at the discovery of this "pleasurable aching emptiness… extending in concentric waves across her body and now moving deeper into it." (*CB*87) She exults in the knowledge that her love of Edward is finally associated with a physical sensation, and happily acknowledges the "beginnings of desire, precise and alien, but clearly her own." (*CB*87) However, her apprehension does remain in some way, and keeps the "relief that she was just like everyone else" (*CB*88) just beyond her for the moment. As readers, we feel that had Edward not rushed her – had he slowly allowed her to explore her bodily sensations – this desire may have overcome Florence's fears. It is tragic to us, then, that the potential for a whole life of enjoyable sexuality teeters on the brink in this moment – with desire pitted squarely against fears – and is abruptly and resolutely lost through a premature ejaculation and the lack of understanding from her lover.

This sympathy we feel for Florence is compounded by the hints given throughout the text that she was sexually abused by her father as a child. It is through Edward's perception that many of the hints emerge; he notices how Florence can always get her way with her frightening father, and also observes the strange relationship between father and daughter:

> Florence never seemed to want to join them for these garden chats, and perhaps [Geoffrey] Ponting did not want her there. As far as Edward could tell, father and daughter rarely spoke, except in company, and then inconsequentially. He thought they were intensely aware of each other though, and had the impression they exchanged glances when other people were talking, as though

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sharing a secret criticism. Ponting was always putting his arm

around Ruth's shoulders, but he never, in Edward's sight, embraced

her big sister… [Ponting] was the one… who became excited by

the news of the engagement… It crossed Edward's mind, barely

seriously, that he was rather too keen to give his daughter away.

(*CB*115)

Edward has thus observed for us that father and daughter share a secret that results in his

not touching her and her not wanting to talk to him properly. The sections of focalisation

through Florence expand upon what this secret may be without fully revealing the

details:

… her father aroused in her conflicting emotions. There were

times when she found him physically repellent and she could

hardly bear the sight of him… She hated hearing his enthusiastic

reports about the boat, the ridiculously named *Sugar Plum*, which

he kept down in Poole harbor… He used to take her out with him,

and several times, when she was twelve and thirteen, they crossed

all the way to Carteret, near Cherbourg. They never talked about

those trips. He had never asked her again, and she was glad. But

sometimes, in a surge of protective feeling and guilty love, she

would come up behind him where he sat and entwine her arms

around his neck and kiss the top of his head and nuzzle him, liking

his clean scent. She would do all this, then loathe herself for it later.

(*CB*49-50)

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The boat trips are clearly linked here with Florence's dual feelings of repulsion and love towards her father. These are the boat trips they never spoke about again – their secret. Her sudden bursts of physical affection which result in self-loathing clearly point to a problem with physical affection between father and daughter – a contradiction in feelings which can be linked to the abused child. Florence refers to her adept skills of "concealing her feelings from her family" (*CB*50) – skills that may have resulted in the kept secret of her abuse. She constantly refers to her father as Geoffrey (a distancing title) rather than the affectionate term dad, and reveals the special attention her father paid her growing up which culminated in "the journeys: just the two of them, hiking in the Alps, Sierra Nevada and Pyrenees, and the special treats, the one-night business trips to European cities where she and Geoffrey always stayed in the grandest hotels." (*CB*54) Such unique, special treatment and so many nights away from the rest of her family, alone with her father – it is these that colour our attitude towards her angst about her father, and it is there that something may have occurred (over and again) that must have been kept a secret.

Although never explicitly stated, it is in the bedroom scene that this sexual abuse by Florence's father is hinted at most forcefully. This abuse would reveal why this bedroom scene has been so highlighted in a novella skewed towards Florence – this is her first contact with a man outside of her (possible) abuse, and so it is laden not just with traumatic, repressed history, but also with fear and expectation about a 'normal' and 'expected' activity with the man she loves, her husband. Just as Edward has laid Florence down on the bed ready for sex, Florence's memory is jolted, turning to a similar time she had lain waiting:

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She was twelve years old, lying still like this, waiting, shivering in

the narrow bunk… Her mind was a blank, she felt she was in

disgrace. After a two-day crossing, they were once more in the

calm of Carteret harbor… It was late in the evening, and her father

was moving about the dim cramped cabin, undressing, like Edward

now… Her only task was to keep her eyes closed and to think of a

tune she liked. Or any tune… She was usually sick many times on

the crossing, and of no use to her father as a sailor, and that surely

was the source of her shame. (*CB*99-100)

Just as she waits now for sex, she waited then. Just as Edward moves around undressing

to get ready for sex, so her father moved around undressing. Why would her job have

been to think of a tune if not to distract her from unpleasantness? Her memories of

feeling disgraced and guilty are strong and she attributes these to her uselessness as a

sailor; however, the word 'surely' questions this – arguing that perhaps her feelings of

guilt can be attributed elsewhere.

Dominic Head argues that Florence's guilt stems from her seasickness making

her useless to her father in another capacity. Head claims we cannot help but wonder

what would possess a father to take a daughter who gets seasick on a boat journey, and

argues that the current unwanted sexual encounter with Edward is simply "the repetition

of an earlier horror."[120] Edward's sudden ejaculation summons up involuntary memories

that Florence had "long ago decided were not really hers" (*CB*105) – that is, that she had

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[120] Head, Dominic. "*On Chesil Beach*: An Overrated Novella?" In S. Groes (ed.) *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives.* London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009. p. 121.

repressed. Florence is repulsed by the semen on her skin as "just as she knew it would, it seemed to scald her." (*CB*105) This seems to refute the idea that Florence has had no contact with a sexual man – how else would she know the effect of semen on her skin? The semen on her skin is the catalyst for the unlocking of Florence's repressed memories – "its intimate starchy odour, which dragged with it the stench of a shameful secret locked in musty confinement." (*CB*106) Indeed, this variety of subtle hints strongly suggests that sexual abuse carried out by her father is the cause of Florence exhibiting behaviour that Edward calls "frigid." (*CB*156) Yet these hints do not slam in the face of the reader – they are subtle enough to play around in the background of an incredibly dramatic scene, adding more sympathy to her case without us overtly thinking about her abuse. McEwan does not allow his gloating, superior narrator to overtly and definitively proclaim either Florence's sexual abuse or her virginity, and so the reader is not confronted with a sympathy card for Florence either way – thus, we are not tipped off to the gentle pressure the author is exerting over us in favour of his female protagonist.

The sympathy we feel for Florence's case is furthered when she makes her offer to Edward on Chesil Beach and he violently rejects it. Florence offers Edward the chance to be married to her – to be her companion for life – with the condition that he give her the freedom not to have sex with him. In exchange she offers that he may have sex with any number of other women to satisfy his desires. To readers of the twenty-first century (post-sexual revolution), this might seem like a win-win situation: she gets her partner for life and does not feel pressured, he gets his partner for life with a ticket to commit adultery guilt-free. Indeed, Florence goes so far out of her comfort zone to offer a late 1960s-like relationship that she seems more a product of our time than of hers.

Edward's violent rejection of her seemingly reasonable offer only serves to side us once again with Florence – from being in her thoughts for so long, we recognise the bravery with which she has delivered her offer, and the insensitivity with which he rejects her, claiming her idea is "disgusting and ridiculous." (*CB*156) We know, even if Florence does not, that she is reaching beyond the constraints of her era – just a few years into the future where her suggestion would probably have been received warmly. This historical irony results in a compounding of our sympathy for Florence and condemnation of Edward's rejection of his wife as we watch a damaged young woman bravely attempt to break free of her socio-historical constraints to take control of her life. Though not overtly, McEwan has certainly, then, set up his novella to be a kind of feminist text – albeit one buried in layers of irony and plausible deniability so that nothing is clearly stated and the reader feels they have come to their own conclusion about the characters. We are subtly positioned – both technically and ethically – to side with Florence, and it is this subtlety that is far more effective than blatantly declaring a radical feminist viewpoint.

Thus it comes to light that 'The Event' that falls between the characters' world and our own is precisely the revolution that could have 'saved' them – that revolution which gave sexual freedom to all, but more importantly, which aimed at complete freedom for women. The narrator doggedly reminds us again and again of the differences between our world and the characters' –repeatedly reinforcing the 'knowledgeable superiority' of our time compared to the 'unknowledgeable ignorance' of Edward and Florence's time. This narrator, inviting us to laugh at these characters then shake our heads knowingly at their 'tragedy', has consistently driven a wedge between the characters and ourselves – their time and ours. The difference between

these two worlds is of course the sexual revolution of the 1960s, and the incredibly powerful (second) wave of radical feminism which largely liberated women of the West out of subservience, fear and shame for their sexualities. Of course, McEwan does not have to overtly state his feminist agenda because his readership is so drilled in the knowledge of that movement. Indeed, if he were to overtly state such an agenda, his readers would immediately pull back from the novel, realising, due to their awareness of feminism, that they were being manipulated. McEwan had to be subtle in creating a novella with a feminist persuasion, carefully falling short of overt signage of his sympathy for Florence – sympathy we, today, feel due to our feminist knowledge as compared to the relative ignorance in that field of the characters in the novella.

Yet it is not that we as readers are manipulated into adopting a completely Edward-hating stance – the positioning is far more subtle than that. We do hear Edward's fears and confusion throughout the novella – we are repeatedly invited to giggle at his misinterpretations of Florence's signals. Edward is a true product of his time and his premature ejaculation is an allegory for resounding patriarchy's last 'hurrah' (or more accurately, fizzle). Judging from Edward's early portrayal we predict that the 1960s sexual revolution will come as a great shock to his ideals because he is so fixed in the way things should be that he cannot appreciate Florence's offer for change. It is in the sudden speeding up at the end of the novella that Edward is most markedly semi-redeemed. In this section of *summary* the narrator reveals how Edward (with surprise and in a state of bliss) does change with the decade and comes to realise that Florence's proposal was not as strange as he first thought:

…it no longer seemed quite so ridiculous, and certainly not

disgusting or insulting. In the new circumstances of the day, it

appeared liberated, and far ahead of its time, innocently generous,

an act of self-sacrifice that he had quite failed to understand.

(*CB*160-1)

In short, Edward comes to reflect the feelings of the reader – albeit several years too

late. It is only with his own historical irony that he can look back on his past and

interpret the scene as we do from our historical vantage point of knowledge. In this, it

seems that it was the decade, and not Edward himself, that was really the cause of his

outburst. However, he is not entirely blameless – he fails to even realise years later that

Florence's quartet is playing at the Wigmore Hall, yet she "could not help her gaze

travelling to the middle of the third row, to seat 9C" (*CB*163) – the seat he had promised

to sit in at that very concert. Even Edward's recognition that Florence's proposal was a

selfless gift is centred on him – it is not about her. Although he regrets not telling her he

loved her on that beach, it is not for her that he regrets; he regrets the life he might have

had – a more "focused and ambitious… life, [where] he might have written those history

books," (*CB*165) with his "unborn children [that] might have had their chances"

(*CB*166) by his side. So although Edward is clearly not evil (rather, a product of his

time), we are not directed to feel he is anything less than selfish. Edward may be part-

way redeemed in the final pages of *summary*, but it is with Florence that our

sympathetic thoughts largely reside. This sympathy is intrinsically caught up in

McEwan's selection and depiction of the distended moment for this novella – the

bedroom sex scene – and so the entire structure of the novella, based around this single

moment, allows us no other course than to definitively side ourselves with Florence.

In *On Chesil Beach* McEwan has created a novella which centres on the first

night in the minds of newlyweds. More than this, the whole piece leads up to, then falls

away from, the bedroom sex scene – the distended moment of the work. The characters

obsess over this moment to come just as McEwan's avid readers, aware of his style in

Atonement and *Saturday*, anticipate his 'McEwan distended moment'. Self-consciously

aware of this expectation, McEwan delivers his highly-anticipated stylistic technique

with all the usual adornments – utilising *slowed scene* around the climax to really stress

this scene as important through narrative time duration, as well as to allow detailed

access to the character's mind in the moment – a definitive, scarring and life-changing

moment for Florence. However, this scene has the hallmarks of an author hyper-aware

of his tendency to include this stylistic feature, and so he plays it up – making fun of it

even as he cannot fail but to include it. In a self-consciously postmodern twist, McEwan

has ironically made his distended moment about a moment of too-quickness. The

climactic event is brief, messy and embarrassing even as the narrative time duration

slows to linger on it for longer, allowing us to fully experience Florence's thought

processes in the moment. After all, this is Florence's story – McEwan has subtly skewed

his novella in favour of Florence, and thus of feminism, without over-indulgently

allowing himself to hammer home his point (and thus alienate his readership). To do this

he has deliberately engaged an intrusive narrator with an air of superiority who

encourages us to feel the same while guiding us to look back on these 'ignorant'

characters. The gulf that spreads between characters and readers only serves to

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emphasise the gap in knowledge between the two groups. That gap in knowledge is, of course, the sexual revolution and, more importantly, the changes wrought by radical feminism. The narrator pushes forth this irony in order to position these great political movements in our minds as we read McEwan's technically Florence-skewed novella. Thus the distended moment – Edward's fizzling failure – comes to represent the last hurrah (the last fizzle) of patriarchy before its relative 'death'. However, it may be that this particular self-consciously self-effacing employment of his signature distended moment is simply McEwan giving his technique a final send-off. It may be that McEwan is including it whilst allowing it to cancel itself out (the ultra-slowed technique detailing not a dramatically thrilling moment, but an anti-climactic moment of too-quickness), and thus potentially giving 'the McEwan distended moment' its last outing as his signature technique.

Afterword: *Solar* and Beyond

Since the completion of my research, McEwan has published another full-length novel – one which will be interesting to consider in light of the direction in which his style seems to be heading. McEwan's latest novel, *Solar*, was released too late to include in the body of this thesis, but I feel it necessary to include a brief comment on it here. An early extract from the novel titled *The Use of Poetry*[121] appeared to point to a new direction in McEwan's writing style. The extract seems to hark back to a fairytale-like language in its telling the story (in broad overview) of the protagonist Michael Beard's life. The narrator briefly dips into both Michael's and his wife Maisie's points of view through a cursory focalisation in the form of *psycho-narration*, however this is very sparse, and never develops into the full-sentenced version of *narrated thought* we see in my chosen three novels. The narration in this excerpt is thus quite distant and does not read like the detailed focalisation found in *Atonement*, *On Chesil Beach* and *Saturday*. If anything, it seems McEwan has taken the distant, semi-mocking narrator of *On Chesil Beach* and developed it by removing the comprehensive insight into the characters' minds. Of course, this is only a brief extract, and, although taken almost directly from *Solar*, it does not represent the overall narratorial style of the full-length novel. In *Solar*, McEwan does not keep his narrator at a distance from the characters for the whole of the text as the excerpt would indicate – rather he allows the reader detailed insight into the mind of Michael Beard repeatedly throughout the novel. This thought reporting mimics that found within McEwan's other works, as well as many works

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[121] McEwan, Ian. "The Use of Poetry." *The New Yorker*. 7 December 2009.
http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/features/2009/12/07/091207fi_fiction_mcewan. Accessed 19/01/10.

before his since the advent of the traditional novel – that is, it occurs on the margins of scenes or in periods of untimed duration. Thus in *Solar* McEwan continues his conventional in-depth exploration of character consciousness through the third person narration of a distinctly disparaging narrator – one who presents his focalised character's mind in all its repellant 'glory'.

McEwan does not completely break free of the attribute of his signature distended moment. Rather, the *slowed scene* moment in *Solar* tells the tale of a relatively minor event in the protagonist's life. The scene to which I am referring is Beard's role as "the Unwitting Thief."[122] Sitting opposite a stranger on a train, Beard opens up and proceeds to eat what he believes is his packet of crisps on the table in front of him. The stranger engages in a silent standoff with Beard – staring at him and eating from the same bag, matching Beard crisp for crisp. Once the train stops and the man disposes of the packet, lifting Beard's luggage down for him with "an expression of sorrow or pity"[123] then departing, Beard discovers that his crisps packet is still resting unopened in his pocket – that he has just devoured the stranger's crisps, and that *he* (rather than the stranger) has been the "vicious madman"[124] in the situation. Throughout this standoff we are privy to Beard's internal thought processes as, enraged, he considers what action to take. His mind races through possibilities as he analyses the situation and develops a hatred for the man opposite him, all the while McEwan's narrator is clearly indicating which crisp is where in the moving moment. Beard's whole understanding of the situation crumples at the conclusion of the scene – he is embarrassed, but not so

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[122] McEwan, Ian. *Solar*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2010. p. 157.
[123] *Ibid*, p. 126.
[124] *Ibid*, p. 127.

embarrassed that he does not use the incident to humorously illustrate a point he makes later in a work presentation.

This scene reveals a great deal about Beard's character, and so it seems that it has been included by the narrator as an exposé, rather than as an important, life-changing distended moment for Beard. The narrator claims that Beard places a personal importance on the scene:

> This was the moment that would remain with him, and come to
> stand for every recalculation he would ever make about his past,
> every revised or improved perspective he would ever gain on his
> own history, his own stupidity and other people's motives.[125]

However, this statement does not ring true with the character we have grown to know in this novel. It may be that McEwan has poorly attempted to layer importance over quite a trivial moment simply for its entertainment value. However, with such a skilled writer it seems more likely that the above narratorial comment is intended to be read ironically – after all, Beard's number one trait is his selfishness. He is a repugnant character, solely caught up in his own importance, changing his steadfast views (such as those on climate change) only when he can see it will make him some money. The reader knows that it is unlikely Beard has ever considered his own stupidity, or that his perspectives in relation to other people would ever be improved. This crisps scene is a humorous moment – an aside which should not bear up against such life-changing incidents experienced by Beard as covering up the scene of a death in order to clear himself of (unfounded)

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[125] McEwan, *Solar*, p. 126.

possible charges and send an innocent man to gaol. It seems, then, that in *Solar* McEwan has attempted to invest less importance in his distended moment as a life-changing incident of drama for the focalised character – instead allowing it to reveal facets of, and make unflattering narratorial comment on, the mind of an unlikeable character.

I can only but briefly touch here on *Solar*, a novel rich in complexities that stands up well within McEwan's oeuvre. More research must, and will, be done into these complexities to gain a thorough understanding of what this novel indicates for McEwan's ever-evolving writing style. However, I have found that in writing *Solar* McEwan certainly has not given up completely on his distended moment. Rather, he seems still to be engaging with this set of techniques – using them not to illustrate the climax or central scene of the novel, but rather a less story-significant scene. Thus *Solar* seems to be heralding a change in McEwan's style – instead of applying his signature technique to a scene of central importance he applies it to a minor scene in order to allow his readership a more full understanding of the grotesque mind of his protagonist. It will be thrilling to see where McEwan's next work takes him – whether he extends this different application of the distended moment, or whether he culls it completely from his works to begin a new era of McEwan. We shall then know whether *Solar* begins a new wave of his writing, or whether it is a tag-on to the previous wave. Whatever the results, it can be certain that McEwan's first three twenty-first century works – *Atonement*, *Saturday* and *On Chesil Beach* – form the body of a distinct era of his writing – 'late' McEwan – characterised by his signature technique, the distended moment.

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