

The Ambivalent Force of Memory and Perspective-taking in Ian McEwan's *Lessons*

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Abstract

Representation of the enduring impact of memory on the fictional characters' minds has a crucial function in the construction of narrative plots in Ian McEwan's oeuvre. The construction of story world in McEwan's most recent novel *Lessons* (2022) is based on the abiding impact of memory on the central character's mental functioning throughout a long period of time. Storytelling in *Lessons* is tantamount to memory and acts of remembering. McEwan highlights the centrality of memory in *Lessons* by using a retrospective mode of narration. The third person narrator primarily traces the long-lasting effects of two formative experiences on Roland Baines's mind and behaviour throughout his entire life. However, his recollections and acts of remembering, as recounted and reported through the narrator's mediating perspective, ultimately fail to resolve Roland's inner turmoil. Rather, by revisiting two people whose memories have long troubled him, he revises his own memories, which greatly helps him to come to terms with his past. Therefore, as this paper argues, while consecutive acts of remembering in *Lessons* largely confine the central character to the limited atmosphere of his own perspective, his dialogues with two women from his life about their shared experiences foster his ability to adopt different perspectives and reframe his perception of himself and the others.

Keywords: Storytelling, retrospective narration, memory, perspective taking, *Lessons*, Ian McEwan

1. Introduction

The contemporary British novelist Ian McEwan (b. 1948) is a European writer in the sense that he consistently explores the profound impact of remembering in his oeuvre. In Suzanne Nalbantian's words: "A remembering human subject stands out in Western literature" (1). The act of remembering has a crucial function in the construction of narrative plots as much as in the formation and functioning of the characters' consciousness in McEwan's novels. McEwan achieves the impact of past events on the characters' present moment perceptions through retrospective mode of narration, which is nearly a standard practice in narrative representations. The characters' remembering process allows them to modify and revise their perspectives towards their lives through reviewing and re-examining their experiences at different stages in their past. To put it otherwise, the act of remembering is a prime aspect of the contemplating fictional minds in McEwan's fiction. Memory, therefore, changes into their device to overcome the splitting nature of time. Memory simultaneously connects characters to their past and formulates the construction of their identity in the present time. Memory in McEwan's fiction mostly transforms the central characters' lives from a linear order into a circular one.

Concern with memory and remembering acts are recurring themes in McEwan's fiction. Memory plays a central role in the construction of both narrative plots and fictional characters in his works. In Imogene Ash's words, "McEwan uses memory in his novels as a form of control for his narrator, as the information that is recalled in a reconstructive narrative" and "is highly selective." Reviewers of McEwan's fiction also highlight the centrality of the past and the acts of remembering in McEwan's

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