

**Storytelling and Storytellers in Ian McEwan’s Novels:
An Ethical Perspective**

ABSTRACT

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2. Key words

Ian McEwan, storytelling, storyteller, narrative ethics, ethical criticism, morality, empathy, alterity, humanism, violence, imagination, atonement, unreliable narrators, instability, subjectivity, misreporting, misinterpreting, misevaluating, communication barriers, the third culture, the sciences, the humanities, temporal levels, contingency, pluralism, fragmentation, self-reflexivity, metafiction, authorship, reader, aesthetics

3. Abstract

The growing number of literary works thematising the act of storytelling attests to a revitalised preoccupation with the potential of narrative, with the ways in which writers create meaning through storytelling. The capacity of stories to impart knowledge and give shape to the disarray of human experience inevitably brings into question ethical considerations, in particular the problem of how stories are instrumental in configuring their recipients' ethical identities and shaping their ethos. If we assume that the stories we encounter in our quotidian lives influence our ethos, or the kinds of people that we turn out to be, that we use them as founts of wisdom, as tools to guide our lives, then an examination of narrative ethics becomes a pertinent and worthwhile endeavour.

Ethical critics have often been accused of being dogmatic moralists, mere censors who reduce literary texts to apologues as a result of their belief that the only task of literature is to teach moral lessons. The new and redefined ethical criticism that has emerged since the 1980s strives do justice to the venture of thinking about ethics in relation to literature by avoiding the prescriptivism with which it had been associated for too long, thus productively reinstating ethical analysis among the current practices of literary criticism. What the new ethical critics have in common is that they do not attempt to suggest that literature is an ennobling force that should be taken for granted. They do not conceive of morality as the normative provision of models of conduct, associated with coercion and censorship. Instead, they regard literature as capable of treating moral concerns in a variety of ways, and ascribe to morality a non-deontic sense, seeing it as a literary endeavour to uncover the unfamiliar and the unknown, to address and raise awareness about the marginal subject, and to enable access to a restricted universe. The 'return' to ethics does not imply going back to a pre-theoretical union between the literary and the virtuous. Nor does the revisited approach to ethics reside in casting off typically moral concerns, as major ethical issues are still highly relevant in interpreting literary works. Rather, it implies a recalibration of the old ways of probing and dealing with moral problems.

Moreover, the novel perspective on ethics does not lay bare the relativism of morality, nor does it claim that ethical truths depend entirely on the individuals that hold them. Paradoxically, the kind of understanding that the new narrative ethics facilitates affords a vantage point, but is hardly likely to make moral life easier, as it foregrounds ethical choice and ambiguity, reflected in narratives in which characters grapple with moral dilemmas and are subjected to the readers' ultimate judgement.

At first glance, McEwan's fiction may seem less suited to an ethical contemplation. On the face of it, McEwan's early novels and short-stories, with their extreme, morbid situations and unhinged narrators, written with too plain a desire to shock, were entirely devoid of morality and resistant to inspiring any feelings of compassion and humanity in their readers. Nevertheless, the novelist's mid-career and recent fiction, although preserving traces of the disturbing character of his juvenilia, is more overtly socially and politically engaged, approaching themes that range from childcare to German unification, international terrorism, global warming and new sources of energy. Indeed, since the 1980s, McEwan has grown increasingly aware of the possibilities of reconnecting narrative fiction with moral sense, particularly of how narratives might be ethical without relying on absolute truths.

In McEwan's fiction, ethics is responsible for giving a voice to the disadvantaged, marginalised, alienated, and vulnerable other, for marking the unmarked, for capturing 'newness,' and for particularising the universal. Pluralism, fragmentation, and the defamiliarisation of conventional themes and modes of writing in his novels are not marked by ethical indifference, but, on the contrary, open up new ethical facets, in particular an ethics of empathy. What the novelist seems to suggest is that the sole way in which we can meaningfully investigate aesthetic and ethical questions is by means of close attention to the distinctiveness of specific cases. It is mini-narratives that the novelist favours, stories that emphasise the lived experience and explain small practices, local events, rather than 'grand narratives' and all-encompassing concepts.

Moreover, the novelist steers clear of writing prose works that are intended at persuading people of a certain point of view, of confining his work to the province of ideology, as he is wary of the danger of assuming “moral positions that might pre-empt or exclude that rather mysterious and unreflective element that is so important in fiction,”¹ as he states in an interview. He does not rule out the possibility of engaging in free investigation and writes not with the aim of illustrating or making a point but with that of exploring and questioning his concerns, which go beyond the inner and private spheres to open up into the wider circles of society and politics.

The aim of this dissertation is an inquiry into the possible ethical significance of humankind’s compelling preoccupation with stories, as evinced in Ian McEwan’s fiction. The ethical turn in Ian McEwan’s career echoes the insights formulated by ethical critics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is thus part of a greater cultural movement which endeavours to address inescapable questions of value and which regards imaginative literature as indispensable in this enterprise.

Our area of investigation includes McEwan’s mid-career and recent novels—*The Child in Time*, *The Innocent*, *Black Dogs*, *Enduring Love*, *Amsterdam*, *Atonement*, *On Chesil Beach*, and *Solar*—since, as we argue, these novels are ideally suited to the exploration of the novel as a form of ethical inquiry as they most coherently and compellingly articulate and reflect on a unique and sophisticated moral debate by drawing readers into a worthwhile reading experience. If in his early works it had been difficult to discern a moral perspective behind the apparently detached accounts of shocking details, in his later fiction, the novelist has refined his ethical sensibility becoming more overtly aware of the creative and destructive power of the imagination and of the influence of stories on our ethos. It is this overt ethical engagement of McEwan’s fiction that we will endeavour to examine in our thesis.

¹John Haffenden, “Ian McEwan (From *Novelists in Interview*),” *Conversations with Ian McEwan*, ed. Ryan Roberts (University Press of Mississippi, 2010) 31.

The approach that seems to us to be the most suited to the analysis of the above-mentioned novels is the integration within the theoretical framework of the new ethical criticism revived by critics in the recent decades, whose chief views we refer to throughout this thesis, of what we consider to be the four McEwanesque trademark tropes, for each being allotted an individual chapter: (1) the representation of empathy as an effective tool for improvement through storytelling; (2) the sense of narrative unreliability that permeates McEwan's fiction; (3) the apparent dichotomy between the sciences and the humanities; and (4) a distinctive self-reflexive style. The unique synthesis of these apparently disparate hallmarks give, in our opinion, the measure of McEwan's success as a novelist, while the ethical thread running through all of them acts as a binding agent that consolidates his work as a unified and complete whole, despite its protean nature, its eclecticism, and its diversity of themes.

After placing Ian McEwan within the context of the chief tendencies of contemporary British literature, we discern a number of recurrent concerns that shape the novelist's artistic stance. One of McEwan's primary preoccupations as a novelist is to trace the moral dilemmas that result from contingency, from randomness. The ballooning accident in *Enduring Love*, the encounter with a stranger on a street in *The Comfort of Strangers*, the abduction of a child in a supermarket in *The Child in Time*, the appearance of threatening dogs on a mountain road in *Black Dogs*, the death that destroys an old friendship in *Amsterdam*, the rape resulting in an unjust charge and imprisonment in *Atonement*, and the encounter with ruffians after a minor car accident in *Saturday* are all critical, life-changing occurrences that infringe upon his characters' daily routines, taking them aback and throwing their lives out of balance, or even twisting their fate. Their rendering suggests an impulse to dramatise chaos and the arbitrary nature of experience. The unexpectedness of one-off events, no matter whether they cause suffering or exultation, forces his characters out of a familiar and complacent confidence and urges them to look inward, reassess their lives and relationships, and take a stand by making decisions and living with their consequences. The moment of decision-making

acts as a leitmotif in his novels, making them suitable for an exploration of ethical questions that are seldom resolved.

In the first chapter, “The Ethics of Literary Empathy. Fiction as a Vehicle for Imagining Oneself as the Other,” we start from the assumption that empathy and imagination are closely connected in Ian McEwan’s fiction, offering rich ground for the exploration of moral values. However, as we attempt to demonstrate, neither empathy nor imagination are presented as givens, but rather as means for rendering the infinite ethical complexity, guilt, ambiguity, contingency, and moral dilemmas faced by the characters.

Drawing on the novelist’s own comments on the ethics of fiction as well as the views on literary ethics of a number of prominent twentieth century thinkers (Wayne C. Booth, Emmanuel Lévinas, Paul Ricoeur, Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, and Iris Murdoch), Subchapter 1.1., “Violence as ‘Failure of the Imagination’ and the Redemptive Value of Empathy,” discusses the relationship between literature and ethical theory, with emphasis on the idea of ethical responsibility for the other as a basis for an alternative ethics. In line with the above-mentioned scholars’ beliefs, McEwan argues that the novel is the most adequate literary form for expressing moral views and highlights empathy and dialogue in his approach to morality, which are seen as the aims of any ethical relation and as remedies for our self-sufficiency and inability to define ourselves as individuals and communicate with other people. We use this view as a starting point for our attempt to evince that McEwan’s novels highlight different aspects of authorial patterns of empathy, war, terrorism, and psychological flaws, offering the ground for balancing violence with potential humanism. Despite evident structural differences, McEwan’s two novels published on the cusp of the new millennium, *Atonement* (2001) and *Saturday* (2005), thematise an ethics of empathy, advancing the idea that storytelling stretches our innate capacity for empathy, our ability to take other people’s perspectives, as we aim to illustrate in our readings of each work.

Subchapter 1.2., “The Destructive and Healing Powers of Storytelling in *Atonement*,” examines the novel’s concern with the risks posed by inhabiting a

fictional universe, with the amendments that universe grants to its readers and writers as well as the limitations it imposes on them. McEwan's writer-protagonists possess both the power to impose trauma upon themselves and other people and that of creating unity out of a chaotic and potentially destructive world through moral empathy and responsibility. This subchapter considers the novel's exploration of dramatic events that distort and reshape the characters' existence as a result of misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and misreading, with a view to highlighting the moral implications of telling stories and the power that a writer has to bend history to her own will.

Subchapter 1.3., "The Limits of Empathetic Imagination in *Saturday*," centres on the novel's representation of the lack of an empathetic imagination leading to misunderstandings and traumatic events. Conversely, the ability to imagine oneself as another eventually proves a precious tool in the novel, charged with redemptive value, empowering a new vision of life. By drawing attention to the power and function of storytelling, McEwan points to the different ways of interpreting the world, and shows that we are confronted with a welter of contradictory yet not mutually exclusive truths, with a plurality of competing narratives, all reflecting coherent worldviews, none of which being granted a superior position.

Without any 'grand narratives' to support it, without a stable ground on which to place an absolute and universally valid system of values, morality emerges from McEwan's fiction as a subjective phenomenon which rejects any universal standards, and one in which empathy is an effective instrument for improvement through literature, an ethically indispensable value, and a litmus test for one's humanity. The novelist's literary credo that the inherently ethical function of novels is to give insight into others may be grasped as an insistent invitation for his readers to discover the self in others (be it real persons or literary characters) by projecting themselves not only onto their hopes and wishes, but especially onto their anxieties and fears. By drawing attention to the novel's power to produce a distinctive discourse, McEwan presents us not with

ethical models that we might wish to emulate, but with stories that “extend our sensibilities,”² that present the unique in ordinary lives.

The chief purpose of Chapter Two, “Unreliability, Deception, and Fictional (Un)truth,” is to examine from multiple perspectives what we consider to be a central aspect to McEwan’s fiction: the ethics of narrative unreliability. We have essentially considered both the ethical dimension of the protagonists’ choices and the ethical dimension of the relations among narrator, implied author, and readers. In doing so, we have closely analysed not only McEwan’s novels whose narrative unreliability is the direct result of, following James Phelan’s taxonomy, the narrators’ misreporting, misinterpreting, and misevaluating of events (*Enduring Love* and *Atonement*), but also those novels that do not foreground unreliable narrators, yet manage to create a sense of unreliability through the representation of history as an imperfect and fragmented narrative discourse (*The Innocent* and *Black Dogs*), through the characters’ moral blindness and delusion (*Amsterdam*), or through the inadequacy of language and the protagonists’ failure to communicate properly (*On Chesil Beach*).

Subchapter 2.1., “History, Memory, and Unreliability in Ian McEwan’s Berlin Novels,” deals with the focus of McEwan’s two novels set against the Cold War, *The Innocent* and *Black Dogs*, on the interplay between narrative unreliability and the effort to attain objectivity, between the private and the public, biography and collective history, which turns the texts into effective tools for examining narrative ethics and the relationship between abstract values and actual lived experience. In both novels, history is shown to be the product of individual interpretation, and, therefore, just as unreliable, biased, and susceptible to manipulation as personal experience.

Subchapter 2.2., “Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators and Witnesses,” addresses McEwan’s use of the device of the unreliable narrator in *Enduring Love* and *Atonement*. The novelist places the unreliable narrators in his two

² Eric Schoeck, “An Interview with Ian McEwan” 16 Feb. 1998
<<http://www.capitolabookcafe.com/andrea/mcewan.html>>.

novels, Joe Rose (*Enduring Love*) and Briony Tallis (*Atonement*), in conflict with the values and norms of the fictional world. If Joe Rose is just unreliable enough as a narrator to tease the reader and create tension between narrative unreliability and credibility, with Briony Tallis, McEwan explicitly toys with the idea of narrative truthfulness in order to point to the moral implications of telling stories and to the power that a writer has to mould history to suit herself. In this well-crafted and compelling narrative, McEwan offers his readers the opportunity of seeing their preconceptions of the idea of truth destabilised and deconstructed and then rebuilt from a novel perspective, shaped with freshly gained knowledge. The instabilities and tensions that the novelist inserts in his text continually make demands on the readers' vigilance and only through a fully attentive reading of the novel can McEwan's clever effort at deception be fended off.

In Subchapter 2.3., "The Delusion of Grandeur as Cause of Unreliable Perception in *Amsterdam*," we attempt to analyse a different type of narrative unreliability, stemming from the protagonists' hubris, misanthropy, self-delusion, and inflated ambition. Employing the figure of a male composer who is determined to write a symphony heralding the new millennium but whose foibles cause him to end up with a flawed composition derivative of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, the novella relies on the discourse of music within the context of morality to satirise a decadent Romanticism and the romantic masculine worldview.

Subchapter 2.4., "Communication Barriers in *On Chesil Beach*," discusses the novella's enactment of the failure of intimacy as a consequence of a flawed language of the emotions inflicted by an oppressive *zeitgeist*. This offers the novelist the opportunity to scrutinise widespread norms regarding marriage and relationships between men and women and gives an ethical dimension to this work.

What we have found significant in our readings of the six novels is that narrative unreliability occurs not only at the level of facts and values, but above all at the level of perception, which is often biased, circumstantial, and selective.

Being inextricably linked to the storytellers' subjective perspective, unreliability functions, in McEwan's novels, as the hallmark of subjectivity.

Chapter Three, "The Inadequacy of the Science-based Ethics," aims to investigate the apparent dichotomy between the sciences and the humanities that forms the essence of McEwan's four novels discussed here, *The Child in Time*, *Enduring Love*, *Saturday*, and *Solar*. We have chosen for investigation the four novels as we believe they best confirm Patricia Waugh's pertinent remark that "McEwan [...] is writing in a tradition of British fiction that has always sought to subject scientific claims of epistemological exclusivity to its own broader conceptualisation of knowledge, reason and understanding,"³ and they most fittingly attest to their author's refusal to take for granted scientific doctrines, or, for that matter, any kind of dogmas. Nevertheless, as we argue, this refusal is not readily apparent since it is camouflaged by the main characters' overtly or covertly rationalistic and scientific interpretations of events.

Subchapter 3.1., "*The Child in Time* and the 'New' Physics," explores the novel's appropriation of current scientific theories of time for the purposes of a literary experiment. As we attempt to demonstrate, what the novel ultimately communicates is the fact that we continue to describe time in mathematical terms, that our intellectual and moral mindsets are still governed and pervaded by a limited, Newtonian approach to time. The novel is remarkably successful in its endeavour to show that Newtonian physics are still able to gauge the visible world, and this accomplishment undoubtedly compensates for its limitations.

Subchapter 3.2., "Reconciling the Competing Narratives of Science and the Humanities in *Enduring Love* and *Saturday*," examines McEwan's focus on the reductive antagonism between science and humanism and his portrayal of the exponents of different ways of thinking (scientific, artistic, religious). Nonetheless, instead of favouring a specific model, the two novels promote epistemological diversity and reinforce the warning that science and humanism cannot join forces before acknowledging the deficiencies of their own and each

³ Patricia Waugh, "Science and Fiction in the 1990s," *British Fiction of the 1990s*, ed. Nick Bentley (Routledge, 2005) 67.

other's ideologies. The doubts raised by scientific rationalism offset the perils of doctrinism and complacent liberalism; yet scientific thought also stands a chance of turning into dogmatic discourse when it becomes the only authority that steers human action, since it cannot compensate for the subtle understanding of the world that unforeseeable events call for. Viewed within the framework of the rising third culture, *Enduring Love* and *Saturday* reward their readers with a positive, moral glance at what McEwan calls the “metaphorical convergence of these two noble and distinct forms of investigation into our condition: literature and science.”⁴

McEwan's preoccupation with the two cultures debate between the sciences and the humanities foregrounded in *The Child in Time*, *Enduring Love*, and *Saturday*, is reiterated in *Solar* within the context of one of the most complex and controversial issues facing scientists—climate change. Subchapter 3.3., “Saving the Planet from Environmental Disaster: *Solar*, Climate Science, and Flawed Humanity,” concentrates on the novel's treatment of this theme and aims to show how McEwan adopts and handles it, as in the preceding novels, as a tool for the novelist to reveal that the protagonist's scientific outlook hinders an appreciation of other systems of knowledge that are equally valuable and pertinent.

One needs to refrain from the impulse of situating McEwan's fiction as contentedly resting within a ‘two cultures’ framework, as a careful examination of his texts demolishes such a view. By creating characters who are proven wrong for exclusively endorsing one side of the conflict, McEwan engages in the two cultures debate and challenges the significance of science in a dehumanised, globalised world, marked not only by material prosperity but also by numerous dangers, such as terrorism, wars, violence, to name only a few. The outcome of his ambitious endeavour is a cogent testimony of the impossibility of any scientific explanatory pattern to elucidate quotidian disorientation and personal trauma. His works make a perceptive and creative contribution to the act of

⁴ Ian McEwan, “Literature, Science and Human Nature,” *Human Nature: Fact and Fiction*, ed. Robin Headlam Wells and Johnjoe McFadden (London and New York: Continuum, 2006) 58
<<http://books.google.com>>.

challenging scientific discourses that are ineffectual unless validated by a wider cultural narrative, encapsulating the humanistic values that are also part of the contemporary civilisation.

In Chapter Four, “Self-reflexive Ethics and Ethical Self-reflexivity,” after considering Ian McEwan’s place within the framework of the realist and experimental tendencies of contemporary British fiction, we embark on a discussion on the self-reflexive component of Ian McEwan’s novels, in general, and on the extent to which this self-reflexivity is conducive to the creation of the imaginative circumstances for entering the mind of another and attaining higher moral awareness, in particular. Although we draw in examples from other texts by McEwan, we shall insist on those novels that we believe to be his most metafictional ones (*Black Dogs*, *Enduring Love*, and *Atonement*).

Subchapter 4.1., “*Black Dogs*: Writing (Auto)biography,” analyses the human need to express oneself through storytelling as portrayed by Jeremy, the narrator and protagonist of the novel. At a loss when it comes to harmonising the conflicting stories of his parents-in-law, Jeremy seeks to create balance through writing, an endeavour that places him in what we regard as McEwan’s preferred typology: the character who strives to attain empathetic appreciation of other people through storytelling.

Subchapter 4.2., “*Enduring Love*: Achieving Meaning and Coherence through Storytelling,” also calls attention to the thematisation of storytelling and to the way the characters make sense of their traumatic experiences by turning them into stories. If McEwan’s chief focus in *Black Dogs* is on the self-reflexive exploration of the significance of recording private memories and on the urgency of confronting the legacies of the post-war period so as to make them meaningful, themes that qualify the novel as ‘historiographic metafiction,’ in *Enduring Love*, the novelist chooses to highlight the processes of reading, writing, and interpreting fiction in a context that is free of historical circumstance, allowing for a fine delineation of the subtext of the pathology of madness, as we try to evince in our analysis of the novel.

Subchapter 4.3., “The Coda of *Atonement*: A Metafictional Twist,” examines McEwan’s manipulation of the rhetorical device of the coda, which, by turning into metafiction what has previously been believed to constitute the diegetic narrative, shatters the illusion created by the fictional world of the main narrative, forcing the readers to consider the text from a novel perspective and highlighting the inadequacy of their perceptions. Thus, the novelist shifting the interpretive burden from writer to reader, a strategy that allows him to explore the readers’ ethical engagement with fiction.

Our close readings of the above-mentioned novels reveal the extent to which the self-reflexivity of McEwan’s fiction places further tension on the relationship between the ethical and the aesthetic. The writer seems to place himself mid-ground between favouring a fiction that asserts its own fictionality, interrogating itself and alerting readers of its status as literary construction, and texts depicting morally engaging issues. What singularises his metafictional style is its ethical character and, conversely, the distinctive character of his moral meditations resides in the degree to which he undermines his own certainty in this area.

Throughout our endeavour, our emphasis has been on those aspects which are illuminating with respect to the ethics underlying the aesthetics of McEwan’s novels. We have attempted to throw a fresh light upon Ian McEwan’s mid-career and recent fiction by adopting and marshalling the various theoretical perspectives of the above-mentioned critics, by engaging into careful and close readings aimed at giving insight into each novel’s unique moral philosophy, and by airing personal opinions. Without aiming at comprehensiveness, aware of the fact that all the complexities of the literary works of one of the most popular novelists of contemporary British fiction are difficult to grasp within the confines of a doctoral study, we have considered how the texts herein examined can be read as encapsulating an ethical crux that is significant for the cultural attributes that mark narrative and storytelling. We regard our research product as an extended case-in-point for a discussion on literary ethics, its originality residing in its persistent attention to McEwan’s distinctive system of ethics,

which blends into a coherent whole, as we have tried to evince, a humanistic philosophy of empathy and alterity, a lifelong interest in science, and a self-conscious preoccupation with storytelling. Finally, we have sought to steer clear of the dogmatism of which any discussion about ethics is at risk, and preserve a freedom of perspective, which has allowed us to reflect on the fictional worlds created by the novelist as detached, objective observers as well as vicarious, empathetic readers.