

# DEPICTION OF TEMPORAL EXPERIENCES THROUGH SYMBOLISM IN THE WRITINGS OF IAN McEWAN

**J.RAMONA**

**Assistant Professor of English  
Bon Secours College for Women  
&**

**Dr. J.UMA SAMUNDEESWARI**  
**Assistant Professor & Research Advisor**  
**Department of English**  
**AVVM Sri Pushpam College,**  
**Poondi**

## ABSTRACT

Ian McEwan employs symbols to his story lines to give a lively touch to the incidents that every character encounters in his novels. McEwan highlights the usage of symbols to guide the reader as they follow the attempts of the characters to discern the lucid meaning of life and to expose themselves to temporal experiences. In some novels, Ian was direct with his symbolism and in some he remains subtle leaving it upto the reader to disclose the meaning hidden between the lines. The author employs symbols not only to show another physical element of the story but also to hint at foreshadow, and to draw the line between reality and fantasy his character desire to believe.

Key Words: misconception, indictment, reunion, infuriation, unravel

Considering McEwan's two novels namely, *Atonement* and *Saturday*, the former speaks about the representation of figurative and the literal. A sequel of unfortunate incidents set in, when Briony, witnesses a flirtation between Robbie Turner and Cecilia near a fountain and misinterprets the flirtation to be a confrontation. Deceived by her misconception, the young girl Briony acts in accordance with her primary judgements without analyzing whether its right or wrong. She ruins the life of the lovers and neglects to acknowledge the truth. The scene that Briony happens to perceive and misinterprets to be a struggle between Cecilia and Robbie is a mere accidental incident. When Cecilia approaches the fountain to fetch water for a vase to fill with fresh flowers, Robbie insists that he will get water for her. This is resisted by Cecilia and at that moment they break the vase. Upon deeper inspection, this broken vase represents the love of Cecilia and Robbie being torn apart, due to Briony's misjudgement of the event. "With a sound like a dry twig snapping, a section of the vase came away in his hand and split into two triangular pieces which dropped into the water and tumbled to the bottom writhing in the broken light". (*Atonement*,28)

Furthermore, Cecilia tries to save the parts of the vase that fell into the fountain, just as she despairingly tries to hold onto her love for Robbie later in the novel. When the lovers are split apart due to Briony's false indictment about Robbie's intentions, Robbie is sent off to war. He and Cecilia communicate exclusively through letters, which are symbolic for the characters efforts to hold onto the dream that they will be together once more. "I'll wait for you. Come back"(201). Cecilia consistently tells Robbie, a written sign that he must not lose to the violence of war. The lovers carry on a hope for the future in what they call

their “Wiltshire Dream”, a cottage that they desire to stay at together. The cottage is a representation of their expectation to be reunited with one another and the vista of a positive future. However, the dream never comes, there is only the reality of war. Once again, McEwan draws the line between the characters wishes for the future and separates them from all too difficult truth. Nothing can be the same after the night Briony told untruth about Robbie. Letters may convey love but sometimes even the power of love can be broken by false perceptions just like a fragile vase.

Saturday, an entire novel following just one day in the life of a neurosurgeon, Henry Perowne, uses symbolism to emphasize that the things people see in everyday begin to take on deeper meaning when analyzed in the context of a lifetime. Symbols that would seem so ordinary to Perowne from day to day play a pivotal role as everything changes in twenty four hours. Being a neurosurgeon, Perowne is comfortable with the brain. It’s a physical feature of the human system that on a material world, it’s limits , and what it can sustain – consciousness, no less..... the mind is what the brain, mere matter, performs” (Saturday, 66). The brain serves as a double symbol in this story. It not only represents the piece of matter that both helps and hinders people to learn and develop, but it also represents the mind and imagination, the consciousness that one cannot see, but that pushes one to question and seek answers. Before the day that his life drastically changes, Perowne was only a logical, straight forward, simple person who rarely concerned himself with deep thought. Despite the fact that Perowne’s character has had high success regarding his work as a neurosurgeon, his intensive study of the physical brain prevented him from acknowledging the unlimited abilities if the mind. However, when so much changes in one Saturday, he finds himself unraveling, to reveal a character who knew from the inception that this particular day would be different by instinct. When he crosses paths with a man, Baxter whose brain is ravaged with Huntington’s disease, Perowne sees how hard this man is willing to fight his hopeless future seeing himself as a victim of fate. Furthermore, in Baxter’s mind he believes that he has right to ruin another person’s life since he or she does. As a result, when Perowne comes across Baxter, the latter becomes a dangerous figure and symbol of the negative events in Perowne’s life. Baxter is a man whose brain cannot be saved and thus , his mind grows infuriated with those people, including Perowne, he only sees as the enemy. Baxter travels a dangerous path, especially since he believes he has nothing to live for: “A man who believes he has no future... is therefore free of consequences... No amount of love, drugs, Bible classes or prison sentencing can cure or shift him from his course” (217). McEwan uses symbols of the matter so influential in the human life, the brain, as well as the complexities of the mind to illustrate how even one thought and one choice can change everything. When Perowne made one bad choice, he sets off a chain of events.

Symbolism play a crucial in Ian’s novels by adding another angle to his stories. Symbols lead the reader through Ian’s writing, alluding to the deeper meanings placed within his literary works.

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