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THE CONCEPT OF TIME IN IAN MCEWAN'S *THE CHILD IN TIME*¹

ABSTRACT: The concept of time is a fundamental part of how people perceive the world and reality. Defined by science and physics, this concept has influenced different social sciences and humanities, especially literature. In the contemporary era, time is accepted as a part of space-time, a complex continuum that is non-linear and highly irregular. As such, it represents a significant part of different philosophical and cultural theories, one of which is Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. In McEwan's novel *The Child in Time*, time proves to be an important part of the story, a source of dynamics for the plot, and an indicator of contemporary human condition that is suffering over the loss of our inner children.

Key words: time, McEwan, *The Child in Time*, Baudrillard, cosmology

Introduction

One of the most appealing topics of human thinking is certainly the notion of time. Usually, we use the word "time" to describe a period or a specific moment in life in everyday speech. However, concerning the notion itself and its essential meaning, the definitions have been numerous and often incomprehensible and incomplete.

During history, the notion of time and its general understanding have changed in science and humanities, precisely physics and philosophy or metaphysics. The representation of time has been transformed from its original, absolute to its relative and relativistic version. Considering humanities, the notion of time followed the stream of thought in science and was originally regarded as objective and universal. In the contemporary era, however, the notion of time has been regarded as highly

¹ This paper is a form of the doctoral exam paper with the same title for the subject of *Novels by Ian McEwan*, supervised by Prof. Dr. Zorica Đergović-Joksimović.

subjective and dependent on the individual and their perception of the world and reality.

In terms of literature, it can be said that the notion of time was an important topic for this field of human thought, as well. As a practical experiment of philosophical theories, literature has often tried to explain what this notion essentially meant and to which depths of human existence it actually reached. Time in literature went from representing the linear, chronological order of events to the fragmented pastiche of events connected by memory and association. Often, time is an active participant in the plot, much like it is the case in McEwan's novel *The Child in Time*.

Time here represents an important element, to the point where it can be marked as a character on its own since it is a source of dynamics in the novel. McEwan deconstructs the given time categories and represents his characters as immersed in a warp of time so complex that it sometimes exists in its various forms at the same moment. Through these different levels of being in terms of time, McEwan tries to answer some of the metaphysical questions concerning the nature of time and its connection to life and human existence as well.

Theoretical Overview

The concept of time is one of the fundamental components of human understanding of the world. *The Oxford Dictionary* defines time as "the indefinite continued progress of existence and events in the past, present, and future regarded as a whole."² Hence, it can be defined as the succession of events, generally regarded as constant and unchangeable. However, the concept itself has proven to be prone to change during history. The earliest realistic conception of time regarded it as universal and absolute. Newton saw it as "immutable" and "external" (Callender 1994: 219). On the other hand, for Einstein and his General Relativity, time represents something relative and far more complex. He concluded that "every reference body has its own particular time" (Kern 2003: 19). Such plurality of time implies the essential change in perception of the concept itself. Furthermore, much like time, space became susceptible to existing in the plural as well. Such theses on space plurality directly influenced Foucault and his notion of heterotopias, which is described as "the coexistence [...] of a 'large number of fragmentary possible

² Definition taken from <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/time>

worlds” (Harvey 1990: 48). These pluralities further developed into one notion, which is widely known as space-time or space-time continuum.

Put in simple words, space-time continuum is a four-dimensional entity which constitutes the world. The most frequently mentioned characteristic of space-time is its curvature – “the warpage of time and space around the cosmic objects that inhabit our universe” (Thorne 2002: 1). Quantum physics extends this, arguing that space-time can also “curve even in regions that are empty” (Hawking, Penrose 2010: 60). Such possibilities imply a greater degree of irregularities and a far more complex structure of space-time. From such warpage of space-time emerged the possibility of wormholes in its texture. A wormhole can be described as some kind of a portal that connects two remote points in space-time by reducing the distance between them. Hypothetically, this initiated numerous debates on the possibility of time travel. However, even though it is considered to be hypothetically possible, time travel is still a field that is yet to be explored, much like the true nature of space-time itself.

Still, such theories from the domain of physics have impacted the way people think about time and reality they inhabit. Baudrillard argues that time as such cannot be grasped in its entirety at all, much like Minkowski’s model suggests that the space-time outside of the point of the present is unavailable for us to perceive, stating that “it resolves itself without past or future, in exhausting instantaneity” (Baudrillard 2009: 18). This claim strongly connects Baudrillard’s theory and metaphysics since, as Heidegger’s *Being and Time* suggests, everything that we generally consider as reality is unconsciously connected to the specific present moment. Julian Barbour even depicts a hypothetical realm in which time as a category does not exist; it is his Platonía, which consists of numerous present moments all happening at the same time, rather than in succession.

Yet, people generally have a tendency to try and impose order on time. This results in different simulacra. The most important one is the arrow of time, or a timeline – “a series of points along a line” that happen one after another (Bohm 1981: 256). Both Baudrillard and Bohm agree that the whole concept of a timeline is but a simplified version of the reality that we cannot grasp since “[o]ur intelligences are finite and participate bit by bit in the experience of the universe” and thus we “may have successive perceptions of things which do not in themselves stand in the order of succession” (Smith 1902: 386).

Another point at which quantum physics and Baudrillard’s theory overlap is strongly related to the motion of time. Namely, just because time does not flow linearly, it does not mean that it is necessarily static. A prominent phenomenon in

Baudrillard's theory is a notion defined by Alvin Toffler – the accelerative thrust. It concerns the notion of time in so far as it examines the rate at which the present moment becomes a past one. According to them, the contemporary space-time is a flux that is so rapidly moving towards the future that such speed of its progress further affects our understanding of time.

The Concept of Time in *The Child in Time*

In this novel, McEwan introduces time as an important element of the story, arguably even as important as his protagonists, which is a trait that is distinctly postmodern; the hierarchy in terms of the significance of literary elements in novels no longer exists. Time seems to dominate both the story and the characters. Moreover, it seems to have a will of its own, and the audience is often left baffled in its helplessness to demand a different or any resolution in the novel. McEwan here deconstructs the traditional timeline of successive events. The narrative of this novel resembles the one that the postmodern theory focuses on; its events are given in fragments and connected by association. The story is set simultaneously in the past, present, and future, in a realm that strongly resembles Barbour's timeless Platonia. The world of the novel is generally a future one; it seems to belong to some kind of a dystopian future, which is referred to as "near future" in science fiction.

The present moment of the novel is set two years after the tragic event in which the protagonist Stephen Lewis loses his daughter at the supermarket. The event itself is presented through Stephen's narration while he reminisces about the past. However, although we are aware that the event took place in the past, its power makes it appear as though Stephen is actually transferred to the past. Every time he thinks about it he appears to actually relive it anew. In a way, he becomes dislocated through the medium of his mind. Now, if we accept the metaphysical premise that our mind is the means by which we access the world, it can be said that Stephen shifts from the past to the present and vice versa effortlessly. For him, the past and present are practically fused, since the sad event is constantly present in his life.

Such fusion between the past, present, and future is perhaps even better depicted in strange, fantastical moments when Stephen experiences something that might be classified as time travel. While going to North Downs to meet his now estranged wife Julie, he encounters something that can be defined as a wormhole. He inexplicably gets dislocated and finds himself at a different time, although he is not aware that it is the past yet. Soon, however, he realizes that "[t]he day he now

inhabited was not the day he had woken into” (McEwan 1992: 57-58). Now, this episode has some aura of eeriness around it, yet McEwan depicts it as real; “not simply a hallucination, but a real experience” (Malcolm 2002: 62). Still, Stephen contemplates on his strong sense of déjà vu that he gets when he reaches the place. The whole scene is to some extent depicted as an act of remembering:

He had never been here before, not as a child, not as an adult. But this certainty was confused by the knowledge that he had imagined it just like this. And he had no memory of imagining it at all. With this, he knew that if he stepped from the grass verge and looked to his left he would see a phone box and, opposite, a pub set back in a gravel car-park. (McEwan 1992: 56)

Such awareness and knowledge of the place suggest the premise often advocated by Hawking and other quantum physicists that time can only exist as a mixture of all past, present and future moments that somehow all exist simultaneously. Hence, one should theoretically be capable of grasping time, and thus every single of its moments, simultaneously at every given point in life if the simulacrum that is the timeline is disregarded. It is precisely why Stephen, as opposed to the rest of humanity, can do this – he is someone who is completely dislocated in time and exists on different planes, both temporal and spatial:

He knew this spot, knew it immediately, as if over long period of time. The trees around him were unfolding, broadening, blossoming. One visit in the remote past would not account for this sense, almost a kind of ache, of familiarity, of coming to a place that knew him, too, and seemed, in the silence that engulfed the passing cars, to expect him. (McEwan 1992: 56)

In fact, he knows more than a place, he knows the day, knows that particular point in time: “But it was not just a place he was being offered, it was a particular day, *this* day,” (McEwan 1992: 57). However, he doubts this reality as much as the reader does. Stephen, after all, belongs to the community that rests upon order and rational explanations. This is precisely why he tries to explain the situation to himself in a rational way; he tries to connect the place to something that he saw in a film or otherwise experienced. McEwan here metaphorically reflects on the human need to rationally explain the world that we do not understand.

It is also interesting how McEwan plays with our perception of this scene. Later in the novel, the episode is confirmed as real, yet at the moment of its unfolding McEwan hints on its imaginary nature. Stephen is afraid that “[i]f he shook his head hard, he would be back among the orderly pines” (McEwan 1992: 57). He even mentions that if he had stepped in front of the cars, he would not be touched. This seems to suggest that Stephen is only a projection in this realm, or vice versa. However, soon it all proves to be real because he directly interacts with his mother. They only see each other through the window, yet it would later turn out that the very moment Stephen witnessed was the moment when his mother decided to keep the baby she was pregnant with; a baby that would, later on, turn out to be Stephen himself. Moreover, this very interaction would prove to be crucial for Mrs. Lewis’ decision. It is important to mention here that what we see in this scene, as Stephen experiences it, is the grown-up version of Stephen looking through that window. However, when Mrs. Lewis recalls it, we are told that what she saw was a face of a child and that she somehow knew it was her own child. This again is an amazing depiction of Hawking’s theory in practice. Stephen is, in this scene in particular, both old and young version of himself; he is simultaneously a child and an adult. In fact, this is an important message of the novel, it seems. Just like time contains all of the individual moments in itself at every point, so does a man contain all of the versions of himself at every point in his life. In other words, this is “a novel about the child within us all” (Head 2007: 74).

The Lost Child

Concerning the notion of a child, more precisely a lost child, on the most obvious level in this novel, this particular lost child is Kate, Stephen and Julie’s daughter who is quite literally lost. Stephen and Kate go to the supermarket, in a scene which is depicted as common and regular up to the point when Kate peculiarly disappears. Stephen later contemplates on whether or not he saw a figure behind her, thus trying to explain to himself just how exactly Kate has disappeared in the blink of an eye. This attempt again reflects the human need to explain the events that we do not understand.

The episode is in fact “so unreal in its maleficence and apparent lack of motivation that readers at one point ask themselves whether Stephen ever had a daughter in the first place” or the whole event was a figment of his imagination (Đergović-Joksimović 2009: 94). This presumption is particularly tempting later on

in the novel when he believes that one of the girls at the private school near which he passes is actually Kate. However, we recognize that particular event in the novel as an illusion, even though Stephen does not, whereas the event at the supermarket is by far more real in terms of its existence, it is just unbelievable in terms of a physical succession of events. Kate appears as though she herself has encountered a wormhole which swallowed her right there at the supermarket. Given the fact that Stephen and Julie, by the end of the novel, welcome (another?) baby into this world, a theory might arise that the very child is, in fact, Kate herself who has traveled through time and finally returned home. Yet, McEwan does not answer this question. The sex of the baby is not known since the novel ends just as Julie decides to check what it is. The question of what happened to Kate, therefore, remains unanswered, leaving the reader slightly frustrated, but reflecting the true nature of time that we have yet to discover.

However, Kate is not the only child that is lost in this novel. McEwan touches upon the topics of transience and human progress from childhood to adulthood. Hence, the child from the title represents practically every adult character in the novel, as well. Moreover, each one of us, the readers, is this child, "since we were all once children and those children have remained somewhere within us" and not only that, but the society in general is this child as well, "since through history, the society, just like every individual, goes through different phases of development, from its childhood to maturity" (Đergović-Joksimović 2009: 108). This implies another important theme of this novel and that is the notion of loss. Stephen and Julie have quite literally lost their daughter, but all the characters together seem to have lost their own inner children. In this sense, time here has a destructive connotation; it implies a change, usually for the worse. Stephen's father contemplates on how London has changed beyond recognition, and how in just ten years the old London has completely disappeared. This again evokes the representation of time that is marked by transience. It is only that here we are talking about the collective loss rather than the individual one.

In terms of children and disappearance, apart from Kate, everyone else is metaphorically a lost child. The difference is that Stephen looks for Kate, whereas when it comes to him and the rest of the characters and their inner children, they just seem to accept the loss; although it would not be wrong to say that they are not even aware of this fact. The exception is Charles Darke, Stephen's friend who goes so far in his quest for his inner child that he actually puts all his efforts in quite literally becoming a child again. Now, Charles can be described as a truly tragic figure of

this novel. He is depicted as a successful man, with a promising future, yet all he wants to do is return to childhood, which is an extreme reaction to the decay of the world he has found himself in. He tries to fit his adult body into children's clothing and patterns of behavior, but the irony, as Malcolm notes, is that he is the one who wrote the strict *Childcare Handbook* while simultaneously trying to escape authority and responsibility (Malcolm 2002: 105). Tragically, his attempt is doomed to fail, because as physics teaches us, reversibility is not an option. Furthermore, Charles does not actually turn into a child; physically, he is still an adult. Precisely because of this, Charles cannot sustain his artificial childhood – his is a hyperreality, “a simulated childhood” (Malcolm 2002: 92). The child within him cannot exist in its previous form; it can only exist through his present self. The problem, however, is his rotten adulthood; the one that excludes the presence of a child within. Another aspect of such rotten adulthood comes from the aforementioned society. British society, as depicted by McEwan, has reached the point of “destructive maturity” (Đergović-Joksimović 2009: 109). This is seen from its desperate attempt to impose order and control over every aspect of life, even childhood, which is in terms of time a period that represents purity and innocence. On the example of the said manual, we see even the moral and ethical decay of the society; the handbook reflects the hypocrisy and manipulation behind every government's action.

Interestingly enough, Stephen also becomes a child in a way, yet does not get destroyed by it, as opposed to Charles. His transformation into a child happens when he experiences time travel while appearing to his future mother as a child. Furthermore, his reaction to this event is that of a child, even more of a child at its earliest, fetus stage:

He fell back down, dropped helplessly through a void, was swept dumbly through invisible curves and rose above the trees, saw the horizon below him even as he was hurled through sinuous tunnels of undergrowth, dank, muscular sluices. His eyes grew large and round and lidless with desperate, protesting innocence, his knee rose under him and touched his chin, his fingers were scaly flippers, gills beat time, urgent, hopeless strokes through the salty ocean that engulfed the treetops and surged between their roots; and for all the crying, calling sounds he thought were his own, he formed a single thought: he has nowhere to go, no moment which could embody him, he was not expected, no destination or time could be named; for while he moved forward violently, he was immobile, he was hurtling round a fixed point. (McEwan 1992: 60)

This particular scene can be interpreted in two ways, both of which carry the same message to a certain degree. The first one is that Stephen is being sucked into a wormhole, which is a logical explanation of how he is to return from the past. This interpretation also suggests that forward is the only possible way of moving, as opposed to reversal. While experiencing the past he frequently says that he could go back, but he wants to continue. This will result in him gaining some kind of knowledge since such return from the past signals the beginning of his self-transformation. The second interpretation reads this scene as a scene of birth. Indeed, Stephen is depicted in a fetal position, swimming through “salty ocean” of mother’s womb and is, accompanied by “all the crying,” delivered to reality without being actually aware how it happened. In fact, such interpretation highlights another important aspect of this novel and that is the notion of birth.

Birth and Feminine Aspect of Time

The birth of their new child will help Stephen and Julie overcome their tragedy. This introduces time as a feminine principle. In this way, McEwan “ascribes a motherly, creative role to time, as opposed to the usual representation of time as a destructive phenomenon” (Đergović-Joksimović 2009: 106). Furthermore, McEwan names Stephen’s mother Temperley (Latin *tempus*, *temporis*) which “indicates the intuitive and natural connection between women and time” (Đergović-Joksimović 2009: 106).

However, this point seems to be ambiguous in so far as Stephen is an active agent in all typically feminine roles. What is more, Malcolm writes that “McEwan has Stephen usurp female roles on several occasions” (Malcolm 2002: 13). Namely, Stephen in a way helps his own birth in his encounter with his mother, after which he proceeds to conceive a child of his own with Julie. Eventually, he helps Julie in delivering their baby and he also performs something that can be seen as him assisting in delivery again when he “saves a man from the crashed wreckage of a car, which is deliberately constructed so as to remind one of delivery” (Đergović-Joksimović 2009: 111). Yet, McEwan here merely adds the masculine agent to the typically feminine roles; Stephen does not rob time or women of their feminine roles, but he actively participates in all of them so as to show the unity of the principles in the creation of a new life. A child, therefore, in this novel is not strictly connected to the notion of loss, but to the notion of rebirth as well. Following this

idea, Malcolm writes that the child implies “the world [...] can be redeemed” (Malcolm 2002: 109). Therefore, what McEwan seemingly suggests here is that the future does not necessarily bring destruction, but offers a possibility of hope and joy, as well.

However, the notion of rebirth and thus overcoming of obstacles and tragedies can also signal another rotten point of today’s society. This point concerns the way people around Stephen insist on him letting go of his sorrow and continuing with his life. Such insistence on moving forward can be connected to the notion of the accelerative thrust. Namely, society nowadays appears to be obsessed with getting to the future. Stephen is urged to carry on; the world does not even allow him enough time to mourn, it needs him to continue to participate in the outside social reality and its rhythm of time. This also opens a discussion over the personal and collective passage of time, specifically over the perspective on time passage. The world goes on, with or without Stephen, with or without everyone else. Time for Stephen becomes distorted after the loss of his daughter, yet for the world outside time continues to be unchanged. It is precisely because of this that Julie has to isolate herself in order to overcome her tragedy and create a new life. As opposed to Stephen, who is at first fighting with the forward movement of time, Julie surrenders herself to both sorrow and time and it carries her directly to the eye of the storm. Around the cottage, time is warped, which Stephen will experience firsthand, but the cottage itself is a safe place; a place that is to give birth to a new life after the complete destruction of the old one.

This is precisely why Julie seems to be the one who invokes triumph over tragedy for both her and Stephen. In her feminine connection with time, she intuitively knows what she needs to do to overcome her situation. Stephen, as opposed to her, does not. It is why it seems that he suffers more – he fights against the flow of time. He is obsessed with solving the mystery of Kate’s disappearance; a realistic man that he is, he needs to solve the crime, and he tries to do so by attempting to return in his memory to the place of the accident, but his attempts prove to be futile, since the past cannot be changed.

Conclusion

In *The Child in Time*, McEwan plays with the human conception of time and its nature. He completely deconstructs the human simulacra of time categories. Yet, it does not mean he tries to advocate the postulates of quantum physics. Quite the

contrary, he often masks the episodes that fall under the relativity theory as somewhat fantastical, thus leaving the decision to his reader.

Time in this novel is an active participant. It governs the lives of the protagonists and seems to flow differently for each one of them. For Charles and up to a certain point for Stephen as well, it flows backward. Furthermore, for Stephen, time seems to constantly shift its direction of flow, at times appearing as though it exists as a mixture of the past, present, and future. The natural way of moving is depicted as moving forward, a manner which is represented by Julie. Yet, even though it appears to be the "right" way of accepting and perceiving time, the reader is left with bitter feelings about the fact that the question of Kate's disappearance is left unanswered. Stephen and Julie finally decide to move on, but the question that looms large behind the ending of the novel is a dilemma that is common for McEwan's prose. Namely, if they choose to remember Kate, how will they ever be able to truly continue with their lives knowing that they did not resolve the question of her disappearance? And yet, if they choose to let her go, what kind of parents does that make them? This question further implies human helplessness, a bitter feeling present in all McEwan's novels.

The notion of time is here, most importantly, used to discuss different notions of the human condition; precisely the notions of loss, transience, and progression from childhood to adulthood. Critics often name *The Child in Time* as the novel that marks the change in McEwan's writing, as well as the novel that is perhaps most deeply concerned with people and human emotions (Malcom 2002). Apart from this, *The Child in Time* is also, it seems, the novel that deals with the essential questions of human existence, above all that of how to preserve the child within.

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Slađana Stamenković

POJAM VREMENA U ROMANU *DETE U VREMENU* IJANA MAKJUANA

Rezime

Pojam vremena je osnovni deo ljudskog poimanja sveta i stvarnosti. Definisano u nauci i fizici, ovaj pojam je uticao na društvene i humanističke nauke, pre svih na književnost. U savremenom svetu, vreme se smatra delom prostor-vremena, složenog kontinuuma koji je nelinearan i umnogome neredovan. Kao takav, on predstavlja značajan deo raznih filozofskih i kulturoloških teorija, među kojima je i Bodrijarova teorija hiperrealnosti. U Makjuanovom romanu *Dete u vremenu*, vreme se pokazuje kao bitan deo priče, izvor dinamičnosti i zapleta romana, kao i pokazatelj savremenog ljudskog stanja poput patnje za izgubljenom decom u nama samima.

Ključne reči: vreme, Makjuan, *Dete u vremenu*, Bodrijar, kosmologija