



Melius: Journal of Narrative and Language Studies

Melius, 2023, 1(2): 32-35

Received (Geliş Tarihi): 03.12.2023
Accepted (Kabul Tarihi): 20.12.2023
Published (Yayın Tarihi): 30.12.2023

Lessons by Ian McEwan

Ian McEwan'ın *Lessons* Adlı Romanı

Meryem ODABAŞI¹

Abstract

This review explores Ian McEwan's *Lessons* (2022) through an analysis of Roland Baines' life, which mirrors some aspects of McEwan's experiences. The novel probes into trauma, the complexities of parenting, and unexpected encounters, interweaving present situations with past reflections. It contemplates life's unforeseen turns and the wisdom they bring, showcasing McEwan's storytelling prowess and philosophical musings on human existence.

Key Words: Ian McEwan, *Lessons*, trauma, child abuse, parenting

Öz

Bu yazı, Ian McEwan'ın *Lessons* (2022) adlı romanının bir incelemesini sunmaktadır. İnceleme, McEwan'ın hayatının bazı yönlerini yansıtan Roland Baines'in hayat deneyimleri esas alınarak yazılmıştır. McEwan bu eserinde travma, ebeveynliğin karmaşıklığı ve beklenmedik karşılaşmaları irdelerken, şimdiki durumlarla geçmişin yansımalarını iç içe geçirmektedir. Hayatın beklenmedik dönemeçleri ve bunların getirdiği bilgelik üzerine düşündüren eserde, insan varoluşu üzerine felsefi düşüncelerin sergilendiği görülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ian McEwan, *Lessons*, travma, çocuk istismarı, ebeveynlik

¹ Lecturer (PhD), Atatürk University, School of Foreign Languages, meryemodabasi@atauni.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-3877-2319

Review

A prominent figure in British literature as novelist, story writer and screenwriter Ian McEwan is known for his distinctive literary style. He mainly focusses on the exploration of human psyche and skilfully portraits the dark and bright sides of human psychology using different and imaginary landscapes in his literary works. His creativity at delving into the realities between imagination and reality garners praise from both readers and critics.

His creativity at constructing gripping fictional landscapes and his aptness at focusing on every single detail is acclaimed by both readers and critics. He meticulously adeptly explores the complexities of human psychology dealing with its brighter and darker aspects and delves into the moral problems of humanity.

His latest novel, *Lessons* portrays the life of a man who is trapped between his past and present. In the novel, McEwan explores Roland Baines's psyche from his adolescence to adulthood. Set during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, the story begins with presenting the relationship of 11-year-old Roland Baines with his music teacher, Miss Cornell, who is a 25-year old. Roland Baines as a teenager wants to explore his sexual life, but he is abused by his teacher, which will continuously affect his life in future. Basing the story in post-war era, the book questions the complexities of human psyche and also the missed opportunities of that generation who must endure the vagueness of the era. Although there are many changes in his life along with the changes in society, Roland remains passive, portraying societal passivity and missed opportunities in that era.

Lessons intricately intertwines significant global occurrences such as the Cold War, Chernobyl, the fall of the Berlin Wall, Brexit, and the COVID-19 pandemic with the personal chronicle of Roland Baines, a character bearing a striking resemblance to Ian McEwan himself. This narrative meticulously echoes McEwan's familial dynamics, formative years, and educational background (Begley, 2022). Nonetheless, as Roland progresses toward adolescence, his narrative deviates from the author's own experiences. McEwan also makes clear that it is not his biography by stating that "I raided bits of my own life, which I've never done before: the family life, my lost brother, the boarding school. The piano teacher, though, is totally fictional, and the story of my brother was made to fit the narrative" (Ermelino, 2022). A pivotal and transformative incident alters Roland's life trajectory, exerting a profound influence on his subsequent decisions and encounters. This narrative intricacy invites readers to juxtapose Roland's journey with the factual events of the author's life.

The story begins with the dreaming of Roland, a new father looks back on significant past events, notably the troubling encounters when he was 14 with his piano instructor, Miss Miriam

Cornell, resulting in a manipulative relationship. Miriam, physically harms the boy by pinching his thigh, advancing her hand toward his groin, and striking his knee with a ruler, all of which are presented as instructional actions. And Roland aims to have a sexual encounter before everything vanishes because of a possible nuclear war. However, as life persists, “so does their intoxicating and destructive relationship” (Flaherty, October 24, 2022). Ian McEwan vividly illustrates the upheaval caused by this mistreatment in Roland's life, delving into the lasting effects of his early traumas.

The story then shifts to Roland's current challenges as a financially struggling Londoner, dealing with his wife's sudden departure and, at the same time, taking care of their baby. The portrayal of parenthood in the narrative presents both its complexities and touching instances of connection and development, adding depth and humour to the story. His wife Alissa has a strong commitment to writing, putting it ahead of family responsibilities she sees as obstacles to her creative pursuits. She considers their child an obstacle to her pursuit of creativity and removes this obstacle by leaving her 7-month-old baby with a note attached to the pillow. Her decision reflects the idea of artists being solely focused on their work and raises questions about what sacrifices are being made for one's passion and who gets to make those decisions. The story also looks back at key moments: Alissa's parents in World War I, Roland's unique upbringing in Libya due to his father's job after the war, and Roland and Alissa's first meetings in Germany. As Roland moves through time, from the 1990's to the 2000's, his failed relationships make him want to reconnect with Alissa and Miriam. He tends to revisit the past compulsively to cope with life's complexities.

He eventually reconnects with Miriam and Alissa. Miriam apologizes, and Roland takes charge by deciding not to pursue legal action, seeing her as a different person now. Alissa, with health issues and a heavy smoking habit, showcases a sorrowful conclusion. Roland observes that her commitment to writing has come at a great price to her, considering the family ties, especially her relationship with her son. Unexpected reunions bring both hope and pain. Roland also meets his long-lost brother, an unlikely but real-life moment between two older men. His friend Daphne returns, too, and Roland proposes to her, feeling empowered by making choices. But his hope fades fast when Daphne reveals she has terminal cancer. Roland copes with her illness and, after her death, scatters her ashes at the point where she has marked on the map. The story shifts from Daphne's life to Roland's memories, focusing on his perspective.

In the later part of the book, we see Roland become a grandfather and his granddaughter Stephanie enters the story, offering a new outlook. They bond over the beloved tale “The Owl and the Pussycat,” passed down through generations, a comfort during a COVID-19 lockdown.

Towards the end, Roland sees the importance of preserving stories without imparting a moral, sharing with Stephanie an imaginary book holding everyone's tales, including hers. This shows how a story can become both a beginning and an end. At the end of the novel, McEwan tells a story of his English teacher, Neil Clayton to make Roland realize that life is composed of various lessons which find us unexpectedly, and we later understand that they are not deliberate teachings but gifts for our lives.

In conclusion, Ian McEwan's *Lessons* mirrors McEwan's own life including the global events that have significant effects on the life of Roland Baines. Beginning with the abuse of his piano teacher, the story unfolds this trauma and its repetitions in Roland's adulthood when he is abandoned by his wife leaving their child behind. Roland's life fluctuates between optimism and grief while he is struggling with the sacrifices and complexities of parenthood and unexpected reunions. The narrative navigates through Roland's present and past experiences by focusing on the confusion and uncertainty of his life and his inner world. The novel ends with Roland's granddaughter, Stephanie, representing a new perspective to pass down the tales over generations. McEwan beautifully demonstrates his aptness at storytelling the unexpected lessons in life as gifts, instead of imposing them as moral teachings.

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