It is commonly accepted that one of the characteristics of Post-modernism is to highlight the ways in which language conceals truth. Without necessarily limiting yourself to the post-1969 novels on the reading list, consider how any one novel that you have studied deals with the idea of 'concealing truth'.

Kate Simpson

The Child in Time has been widely debated for its literary genre. As David James states, 'McEwan has taken on its [modernism's] legacy to provide answers for the question of where novelistic experimentation should go next, especially after the withering appeal of postmodern self-consciousness'.[1] The 1987 novel follows the life of Stephen Lewis in his attempts to overcome the disappearance of his daughter, Kate. The free indirect discourse provides a deliberately limited account of both Stephen's domestic life and his political associations in a dystopian Thatcherian government, set somewhere in the near future. The traumatized narrative juxtaposes scientific theories of non-sequential time introduced by the Quantum Physicist, Thelma. As a result, the novel begins to probe Stephen's perception of reality through his experiences and understanding of time in an attempt to find resolution for his loss.

In this essay I will discuss how McEwan's contemporary form of writing challenges the postmodernist assertion that language inhibits truth. Giving examples of how the subjective narrative conceals events, I will firstly explore how the novel self-consciously undermines its own depiction of an absolute reality. However, I will proceed to demonstrate the importance of McEwan's tangled plot; ultimately the narrative reveals truths about events that are implausible to the realist form. The theoretical fluidity of time manifests in Stephen's observation of anti-narratives and these plot deviations reveal to Stephen unknowable events. Therefore he, and the reader, speculates the existence of multiple possible plots occurring simultaneously, besides the one he follows. Consequently, I will conclude by discussing McEwan's suggestions about the contemporary novel's capability to present a singular truthful world.

The narrative opens with Kate's unresolved disappearance, described as a perpetuating point of reference for the whole book: 'Stephen remained as always, though barely consciously, on the watch for children, for a five-year-old girl'.[2] The event is a catalyst for the non-consecutive events to follow; Stephen deliberates what happened to Kate 'barely consciously' and becomes obsessed with its irreversibility. This lack of consciousness implies that his mind has become saturated by memory. By allowing the past to envelope him, he constantly looks to retrieve the truth and, therefore, his daughter. This juxtaposition between memory and the present suggests unreliability in the narrative; in the opening McEwan points

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[1] David James, *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p.144.
[2] Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time* (London: Random House, 1992), p.1. (Further references to the text will be made parenthetically within the essay.)

out the limitations of Stephen's perspective. We will not be permitted, as readers of his thoughts, the omniscient truth.

As the reader is introduced to Stephen's lamenting thoughts, the realist form invites us to empathise in the fictive world McEwan presents: 'Later, in the sorry months and years, Stephen was to make efforts to re-enter this moment, to burrow his way back through the folds between events, crawl between the covers, and reverse his decision. But time… monomanically forbids it' (p. 9). Stephen describes time anthropomorphically as he reflects on the choice he made to stay in bed with his wife or leave for the supermarket, which would host Kate's disappearance. He suggests it has a 'monomaniac' mind that cannot be changed, to allow him to retreat back and keep his daughter. He describes the following events as if they were the literal 'folds' in the bed sheets that he left, therefore inferring that the bed is a location in time that decided the fate of the day. It is the recurring image of the bed which returns as a place where there are dividing paths and hidden possibilities.

This metaphor of the bed as a host for the unknown is repeated when Stephen, unawares, conceives another child with Julie: 'They knelt face to face in the centre of the bed undressing each other slowly… Later one word seemed to repeat itself as the long-lipped opening parted and closed around him…a warm, humming, softly consonated, roundly vowelled word…home' (p. 68). Stephen regresses into the comfort of the bed which he left in the opening. The word 'home' is repeated as he unknowingly puts into motion what will reconstruct his family, another life. The bed is a place where truths are conceived and hidden from Stephen, but the language re-iterates a familial image. The narration seems to already be telling the reader that the bed is the setting for a future resolution, something Stephen does not, and cannot know, because his perspectives are restricted. It is only to Stephen, and therefore the reader, that the conception is hidden; it is not hidden from Julie or an omniscient narrator. It is the form of the novel, then, that conceals the child from the reader as they follow Stephen. In McEwan's fictive world, the baby still exists in the time that Stephen is unaware.

The metaphor is repeated again at the end of the novel, where the gender of the baby is left ambiguous. '"Well?" Julie said. "A girl or a boy?" And it was an acknowledgement of the world they were about to rejoin, and into which they hoped to take their love, that she reached down under the covers and felt' (p. 245). The structure of the novel creates a parallel between the beginning and the end through the familial image of the bed. Stephen and Julie welcome the baby as if it is a solution to their broken family. As Stephen is about to 'rejoin' the world, it is implied that this is only possible by regressing back into the covers of the bed. The new baby seems to be a replicated image of Kate, and as Stephen re-enters the bed he is somehow able to forget his loss. 'Reaching under the covers' for the new baby mirrors the opening moment where he wished to go back and bury himself in the 'covers' of his marriage. It is as if this moment is the same to Stephen; finally able to stay in the covers and keep his family.

The baby's gender is deliberately left unstated. The last image is of Julie reaching under the covers as the reference back to the introductory 'folds of events'. The 'covers' are repeated as a figurative place of uncertainty and anthropomorphically offer different possibilities. The bed, for Stephen, is therefore one of options, memory, and ultimately reconciliation. McEwan withholds the information from the reader deliberately to suggest gender is one path the child will take, instead of others. It is a division between male and female which, when known, will dictate its identity, and therefore put into motion the succession of events in its life. Ambiguity opens and closes the novel, and exemplifies how the structure of plot and language can conceal from the reader, and Stephen, what it chooses.

Kiernan Ryan states that 'The Child in Time is aware of the impossibility of leaping out of history into a purified space… For one exquisite moment mother, child, and father are suspended in a kind of ecstasy, caught in a fleeting trance of unblemished hope and limitless possibility… The imminent discovery of the baby's sex will confer it on the gender bound to shape its social destiny, turning it from a child outside time to the child in time, weaving it into the web of complicity human creatures unable to evade'.[3] While McEwan self-consciously draws attention to a moment held still in time in the moments in bed, I would amend the term 'purified space' to one that is imprinted with the memories of Stephen and Julie. The space which they occupy in the moments where the baby is held 'out of time' is one hauntingly familiar to the moments they shared before the disappearance of Kate and when their marriage could either be reconciled or destroyed. This space, then, is one overwhelmed by memory, and it is as if they wish to leave the gender concealed not because of its untainted purity, but because it will determine paths for a child which is not Kate. In this moment of joy they wish not to leave the idealised image of the familial bed, nor do they wish to reach under the figurative covers to present a new reality which is not the same.

The hidden gender marks one of the defining points in the novel where there can be many possible outcomes, and the events in the baby's life will be decided based on this initial revelation. Thus far I have discussed the instances in the novel where events are hidden from Stephen, and therefore the reader. However, the plasticity of time in the novel's structure often presents truth as unattainable rather than concealed. This unattainability is parodied when Stephen perceives alternative narratives. The text provides instances where time is distorted, not to contemplate the unknown, but for implausible experiences of time to occur where new truths are speculated. This warping of time creates the fantastic in the realist narrative and defines McEwan's novel as a contemporary experiment of both language and plot intertwining.

The novel engages with modern scientific theory of Quantum Physics through the character of Thelma who 'told tales of Schroedinger's cat, backward flowing time, the right-handedness of God and other quantum magic' (p. 43). Stephen is introduced to the cynically described 'tales' of alternate realities as she explains theories of malleable time. The concealments of the baby's conception and gender establish possibilities in the plot as paths in time. Derek Wright says that '[e]very transaction in the quantum universe is optional and infinite in possibilities, yet once these have been collapsed into a finite sequence of happenings, they become irreversibly trapped in actuality and the cohabitation of options abruptly ceases'.[4] The concealed gender of the baby can be seen as such; until they announce whether it is a girl or a boy, the idyllic reality that exists for them, and the reader, is one wherein the child is neither.

Therefore, perhaps it is the theory of alternate possibilities that haunts Stephen throughout the narrative, rather than one single truth which he cannot know. There are instances where the theories themselves begin to present anti-narratives and time-reversal. In an episode close to magic realism, Stephen witnesses his parents in a pub and recognizes his newly pregnant mother through a window, regressing back through time into an embryonic state:

> [H]is knees rose up underneath 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

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[3] Kiernan Ryan, *Ian McEwan* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), p. 54.
[4] Derek Wright, 'New Physics, Old Metaphysics: Quantum and Quotidian in Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time*', *Revista alicantina de estudios ingleses,* 10 (1997), p. 225.

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had 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' (p. 63).

The language used to express his experience describes absence. Stephen recognizes 'nothingness' in his own existence as he is transported back. Looking in at himself, newly conceived, he suggests that 'he was not expected', as if he has lost all sense of purpose while his life hangs on the balance of his parents' decision to abort or proceed with the pregnancy. It is at this point in the narrative that we see Thelma's theories of new science invading his perception of himself. Like Schrodinger's cat, Stephen feels an absence of language to describe himself because he realizes that until his parents make a decision, he is neither alive nor dead. The truth revealed to Stephen is that his life, like the disappearance of Kate, is one of many possibilities. It is at this point that Stephen himself becomes the 'child in time', or more aptly one who exists, momentarily, out of time. As he spins round the 'fixed point' of his existence, he recognizes there are points in time which we can't change. McEwan's repetition of the negative 'no, not, nowhere' shows how Stephen's regression in time is unnatural and he feels distressed to be put into a time which he does not belong. The non-chronological plot, then, reveals to Stephen and the reader the limited capabilities to see all of reality through the eyes of one character. The unexpected regression in the realist plot is described through an absence of language, which suggests that 'truth' is not always hidden, but concealed by the limits of Stephen's perception.

McEwan states that 'there can be surely no more mileage to be had from demonstrating yet again through self-enclosed 'fictions' that reality is words and words are lies. There is no need to be strangled by that particular loop — the artifice of fiction can be taken for granted'.[5] While this statement affirms his own writing as a synthetic world distinct from our own, comparable to metafiction, the novel offers multiple possibilities in Stephen's life; just as the reader is offered the text as one chosen from many others which could have been told.

There are moments in the text where Stephen recognizes different choices and possible consequences, just like the labyrinth in Borges' story, 'The Forking Paths'. In the story, Ts'ui Pen pursues all possible paths in a labyrinth as choices in time, rather than space: 'In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually impossible- to disentangle Ts'ui Pen, the character chooses — simultaneously — all of them. He creates thereby, "several futures," several times, which themselves proliferate and fork'.[6] *The Child in Time* explores differing paths as anti-narratives in Stephen's perception. When Stephen visits Julie, he visualizes himself, ethereally, pursuing different options. He considers whether to leave the bedroom before they unknowingly conceive their second child, and visualizes himself following more than one option:

Their hesitation was brief, delicious before the forking paths. Had he not seen two ghosts already that day and brushed against the mutually enclosing envelopes of events and the time and places in which they occurred, then he would not have been able to choose, as he did now, without deliberation and with an immediacy which felt both wise and abandoned. A ghostly, fading

[5] James, *Modernist Futures*, p. 142.
[6] Jean-Luis Borges, 'The Garden of Forking Paths.' In *Collected Fictions.* Trans. Andrew Hurley. (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 125.

> Stephen rose, smiled, crossed the room and closed the bathroom door behind
> him, and innumerable invisible events were set in train (p. 67).

Affected by the regression he experiences when looking into the eyes of his mother, Stephen sees their 'forking paths' as a point in time with many trajectories. In a moment of 'hesitation' time decelerates and he imagines making different decisions. Reflecting on how he earlier witnessed his life as one possibility amongst others, he realizes how one choice follows a 'path' and this in turn leads to different diverging consequences 'set in train'. The 'envelopes of events' create, once again, linguistic parallels to the images of the bed covers as a setting for possibility. Furthermore, depicting himself as a 'ghost', there is a suggestion that the alternate realities exist in the unknown, and it is not until we choose which one we are willing to live in, that it takes visible shape.

The plot's revelation of his conception provokes him to question simultaneous realities. He seems to choose this act of reconciliation with Julie, based on his implausible witnessing of, and implied inducement of his mother's pregnancy. McEwan consciously references Borges' 'forking paths' to undermine the choices made in creating a narrative. The story given to the reader is one chosen from many possibilities. Likewise, Stephen's trauma cannot be resolved until he realizes the truth of Kate's disappearance may not be concealed, but is one of many possible realities, in which she might still be with them, if he chose to 'burrow his way through the folds between events, crawl between the covers and reverse his decision' (p. 9).

As many of Borges' 'forking paths' are perceived by Stephen throughout the novel, he begins to realize that the life of his daughter Kate is one that will remain unknown to him and this is something he cannot change:

> He was beginning to face the difficult truth that Kate was no longer a living
> presence, she was not an invisible girl at his side whom he knew intimately...
> he understood how there were many paths Kate might have done down,
> countless ways in which she might have changed in two and a half years and
> that he knew nothing about any of them' (p. 168).

Like the ghosts of himself and his parents that he saw in alternative realities, he begins to assign this absence to Kate, as someone neither dead nor alive. As the plot conceals the location of Kate, Stephen's understanding of the 'difficult truth' is one that resonates in the entirety of the novel; when we cannot know the absolute truth of one situation we have to live in the possibility of them all like the anti-narratives he is witness to. What the novel's non-sequential plot prevails in doing is to assert that truth is in fact not concealed through the language we are told, but is one of many. Therefore, unknown truths are offered to Stephen as possible realities, and so it is suggested that the reader remember the singular narrative of fiction as one a presentation of events.

McEwan's novel itself is written as one narrative amongst many anti-narratives. Undeniably Kate's whereabouts and the closing scene are left ambiguous to exemplify the open-endedness of possibility, and therefore truth, which will take shape only when disclosed to Stephen and the reader. This reinforces the idea that truth, if not hidden in language, is purely one idea offered alongside many others. As Jago Morrison aptly puts, '[i]f, traditionally, it has been the author's implicit responsibility to offer the promise of transcendent resolutions for narratives and lives, *The Child in Time* exemplifies the fact that for the contemporary writer this is very clearly a problem'.[7] If the post-modernist thought is

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[7] Jago Morrison, *Contemporary Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 73.

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that language obstructs this resolution of truth, then McEwan's elastic and indefinite plot creates a novel which poses a contemporary solution embracing aspects of both realism and post-modernism, problematizing a resolvable truth in fiction.

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