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HOW FAR CAN IAN MACABRE GO? UNVEILING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND PEDOPHILIA IN IAN MCEWAN'S *LESSONS*

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Abstract¹

Child sexual abuse and pedophilia are pervasive issues with profound and enduring effects on victims, shaping their emotional, psychological, and social development. This paper examines these themes in Ian McEwan's novel Lessons, exploring the complex interplay between child sexual abuse, pedophilia, and their long-term repercussions. It explores the lasting effects of such experiences, including the persistent intrusion of past traumas, the psychological and emotional scars borne by survivors, and the life-altering consequences of abuse. Furthermore, this paper interrogates societal myths and realities surrounding pedophilia and pedophiles, touching upon the broader discourse on this taboo subject. Through the story of Roland Baines, an adolescent boy subjected to sexual abuse by his piano teacher, Miriam Cornell, Lessons exposes the uneasy intersection of predatory behaviours and their permanent impact on childhood development. Thus, this paper, by employing trauma and psychosexual theories, addresses these unsettling realities and argues that McEwan's nuanced portrayal compels readers to confront the psychological and ethical complexities of abuse and its aftermath.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse (CSA), Ian McEwan, Lessons, Pedophilia.

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IAN MACABRE NE KADAR İLERİ GİDEBİLİR? IAN MCEWAN'IN DERSLER ROMANINDA ÇOCUK İSTİSMARI VE PEDOFİLİYİ AÇIĞA ÇIKARMAK

Öz

Çocuk istismarı ve pedofili, mağdurlar üzerinde derin ve kalıcı etkiler bırakan, yaygın ancak sıklıkla görmezden gelinen sorunlardır. Bu çalışma, Ian McEwan'ın Dersler adlı romanında bu temaların nasıl ele alındığını incelemektedir. Roman bağlamında çocuk cinsel istismarı ve pedofili arasındaki karmaşık ilişki analiz edilerek, bu tür travmatik deneyimlerin bireylerin duygusal, psikolojik ve sosyal gelişimleri üzerindeki uzun vadeli sonuçlarına odaklanılmaktadır. Çalışma, geçmişte yaşanan travmaların sürekli olarak zihinsel dünyaya sızmasını, hayatta kalmayı başaran bireylerin taşıdığı psikolojik ve duygusal izleri ve istismarın hayatı dönüştürücü etkilerini detaylandırmaktadır. Ayrıca, pedofiliye dair toplumsal mitler ve gerçeklikler sorgulanmakta; bu tabu konuyla ilgili daha geniş bir söylem açığa çıkarılmaktadır. Eserin merkezinde yer alan Roland Baines karakteri, ergenlik döneminde piyano öğretmeni Miriam Cornell tarafından cinsel istismara uğrayan bir çocuk olarak, avcı davranışlarının çocukluk gelişimi üzerindeki kalıcı etkilerini temsil eder. Dolayısıyla, bu makale, travma ve psikoseksüel teorilerden yararlanarak bu rahatsız edici gerçekleri ele alıyor ve McEwan'ın incelikli tasvirinin okuyucuları istismarın ve sonuçlarının psikolojik ve etik karmaşıklıklarıyla yüzleşmeye zorladığını savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çocuk Cinsel İstismarı, Ian McEwan, Dersler, Pedofili.

INTRODUCTION

Ian McEwan has dealt with the concept of evil in bizarre ways with his child characters since his debut novel. In his latest novel, *Lessons*, he has constructed a narrative that revolves around child sexual abuse (CSA) and pedophilia. While pedophilia denotes a psychiatric category referring to sexual preference, CSA designates the abusive act itself. Grooming refers to the gradual manipulation that precedes abuse, whereas trauma describes the psychic aftermath that exceeds the event temporally. McEwan's *Lessons* stages all four dimensions but is primarily concerned with trauma's belated structure rather than with diagnosis. Not surprisingly, Ian McEwan was well-known in the early years of his writing career as Ian Macabre because he was associated with evil, sex, trauma, and despondency. In *Lessons*, McEwan's exploration of evil takes on a distinctly contemporary and unsettling dimension. The novel's engagement with pedophilia and CSA shifts the focus from moral ambiguity to the systemic and psychological underpinnings of transgression. Unlike the isolated, almost claustrophobic settings of his earlier works, *Lessons* situates its narrative within a broader historical and social context, tracing the life of its protagonist, Roland Baines, against the backdrop of post-war Europe, the Cold War, and the shifting mores of the late 20th century. This expansive temporal framework allows McEwan to examine how evil is not merely an individual failing but a product of societal structures and historical contingencies.

The abuse Roland suffers as a child at the hands of his piano teacher, Miriam Cornell, is rendered not as an isolated act of predation but as a symptom of a culture that silences victims and normalizes power imbalances.

Recent public attention about the release of court documents related to the Jeffrey Epstein case has intensified global discussions about CSA, elite protection networks, and the institutional silence that enables sexual exploitation (The Guardian, 2026). The Epstein files are not only a media spectacle, they have exposed how abuse is frequently sustained by structures of power, privilege, and social disbelief, especially when offenders are secured by wealth or status (Brown, 2021). This contemporary moment of disclosure provides a critical backdrop against which *Lessons* can be reread, as McEwan's novel similarly foregrounds the normalization of abuse through authority, secrecy, and delayed recognition of harm. Roland Baines's experience reflects a broader cultural pattern in which abuse is neither immediately legible nor socially acknowledged, but is instead absorbed into everyday life until it resurfaces belatedly through trauma, memory, and self-reproach. By situating *Lessons* within a cultural climate increasingly attentive to systemic sexual exploitation, the novel's ethical urgency becomes clearer: it is not only a narrative about individual violation, but also a critique of the social conditions that allow abuse to persist unchecked for decades.

This study is primarily based on trauma theory and psychoanalytic approaches to memory, the development of identity and selfhood, and temporality, or in other words, the relationship between past and present. Trauma theory conceptualizes psychological trauma as a response to overwhelming experiences that damage victims' sense of safety, agency, and trust, and produce disruptions in memory, identity, and relational capacity (Herman, 2022). Drawing on trauma studies, this paper reads *Lessons* as a literary articulation of how CSA shatters linear identity development and creates belated and recurrent symptoms rather than resolved recollection. Trauma theory emphasizes that traumatic events are not fully absorbed at the moment they occur but return compulsively through memory, behavior, and affect. This framework illuminates Roland Baines's lifelong entrapment within his childhood abuse. Furthermore, psychoanalytic concepts enrich this reading by foregrounding repression, repetition, and internalization of guilt and shame. This allows us to understand the novel's representation of Roland's emotional paralysis, compulsive behaviors, and impaired relationality as manifestations of unresolved psychic injury rather than moral failure. Psychoanalytic theory is employed here not as a diagnostic framework but as an interpretive lens that complements trauma studies and textual analysis, rather than offering a totalizing explanation of Roland's development.

In addition, this analysis draws on gender studies and feminist critiques of power, consent, and sexual authority, particularly as they relate to narratives of female-committed abuse. Gender theory provides a critical approach for

interrogating the cultural myths that obscure CSA when the perpetrator is a woman, including assumptions about male sexual invulnerability and the eroticization or minimization of abuse that occurs to boys. Placing Miriam Cornell's actions within broader structures of gendered power rather than considering them as abnormal exceptions enables an interpretation of *Lessons* that resists both exculpation and sensationalism. The intersection of trauma theory and gender studies allows this paper to examine how CSA is simultaneously a psychic wound and a socially mediated phenomenon, shaped by silence, stigma, and entrenched norms about gender, authority, and desire.

This paper examines how McEwan uses Roland's story to challenge societal myths about pedophilia and to highlight the long-term psychological, emotional, and social consequences of abuse. It also discusses the strategies pedophiles use to manipulate and silence children. It poses key questions about the effects of CSA, including its long-term impacts on education, career, relationships, and memory. Furthermore, the paper questions societal assumptions about female teachers and pedophiles; it also refutes the myth that boys abused by older women are "lucky." This paper focuses on Roland's mental and physical damages from CSA, including his relationships, sexual addiction, and inability to make decisions.

PEDOPHILIA AND CSA IN *LESSONS*: ROLAND BAINES AS A CASE STUDY

Child sexual abuse is any kind of physical attack on children's bodies that affects the mind and the body together (Herland, 2024). Similar to it is pedophilia, which is a form of sexual perversion characterized by a sexual attraction to children and engaging in sexual activities with them. Sexual perversion is when "something goes amiss, [an individual may] select another object for his affections, such as members of the same sex, little children, old people, or animals" (Berne, 2011, p. 212). Pedophilia can be developed due to childhood sexual exploitation, and according to Eric Berne, all kinds of sexual perversions "are usually the result of not growing away from some childhood way of obtaining sexual pleasure" (p. 213). Some young people subjected to sexual harassment throughout childhood may exhibit pedophilic characteristics in maturity. Nonetheless, pedophilia is not the root cause of child sexual assault, and most victims of CSA do not display pedophilic inclinations in adulthood; in essence, pedophiles exploit CSA as a rationale to legitimize their abhorrent behaviors.

The American Psychiatric Association classifies pedophilia as a psychiatric condition and an unusual sexual disorder. Three criteria are established for diagnosing pedophilic disorder: the presence of intense fantasies and desires directed towards children, the individual has either acted on these sexual urges or experiences significant distress due to them, and the individual is at least five years older than the child and a minimum of sixteen years of age. However, Hagopian (2020) alerts

that “pedophilia as a disorder should be distinguished from the near universally regarded act of child molestation as a legal crime in virtually every nation on earth” (p. 3). Pedophiles can be categorized into two types: Those with a sexual preference disorder, classified as mental patients, and those who are sexually motivated criminals, driven by libido to exploit prepubescent children for the gratification of erotic cravings. However, both types of pedophiles are often perceived as threats to family safety and the well-being of children. While clinical and legal frameworks provide useful classifications of pedophilia, they cannot capture the full extent of the damage inflicted on victims. To understand the devastating consequences of CSA, it is necessary to turn to survivor testimony and psychological research.

Sanderson, in *Counselling Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, interviewed some adult people who had been abused sexually in their childhood and reported on a 25-year-old survivor that “child sexual abuse has a huge impact both in the short and the long term. They do not just [abuse] your body; they also [abuse] your mind” (2006, p. 40). Sanderson’s observation underscores the profound psychological damage caused by CSA, which is evident in Roland’s lifelong struggles with intimacy and self-worth. Clinical data show that CSA has negative consequences on the child and, subsequently, the adult. Sexual mistreatment in childhood falls within the scope of trauma and has physical, psychological, and emotional impacts. These harmful repercussions on children include loss of childhood and innocence, loss of trust in self and others, loss of safety and security, and loss of autonomy. In contrast, the repercussions of CSA on adult survivors are mostly related to sexual problems, depression, anxiety disorders, deflated self-esteem, hurtful secrets, schizophrenia, hostility, sleep problems, emotional trauma, and PTSD. In this context, Goldman (2004) confers that Lolita’s “normal sexual development is warped by a maniacal, myth-making pedophile [Humbert Humbert]” (p. 88); according to Goldman, Humbert obstructed Lolita’s natural sexual maturation in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, while Miriam Cornell similarly impeded Roland’s healthy exploration of his sexuality in McEwan’s *Lessons*.

Lessons introduces Roland as a vulnerable young boy and Miriam Cornell as his predatory piano teacher. It describes how Miriam manipulates and sexually abuses Roland. Her perfume played a vital role in seducing him because her “perfume overwhelmed his senses and deafened him” (McEwan, 2023, p. 3); her fragrance had always filled the room to the degree he believed that her breath was perfumed as well. McEwan’s portrayal of Miriam’s manipulation reflects broader psychological patterns of predatory behavior. This dynamic is often described in criminological and psychological literature as grooming.

Knoll (2010) defines grooming as a gradual manipulation through which abusers establish trust, isolate the child, and enforce secrecy prior to and during sexual exploitation. Miriam exploited Roland’s vulnerability and lack of parental supervision and used grooming techniques to exploit Roland. Knoll (2010) also

debates that the process of grooming is easier for educator sexual offenders because “most children respond to positive attention from an educator, and the praise of teachers can be quite influential” (pp. 375-376). This theoretical framework clarifies how Miriam’s initial manipulation was not an isolated act but the foundation of a carefully staged process. McEwan dramatizes this in Roland’s adolescence, particularly when grooming turns into a dangerous escalation of sustained sexual abuse.

Roland’s entry into puberty marked a dangerous intensification in Miriam’s abuse, as she deliberately transformed her predatory grooming into a sustained sexual relationship. What seems like a sexual engagement between Roland and Miriam was, in fact, the culmination of Miriam’s manipulation. She fostered a premature sexual dependency and ensured his inability to recognize or resist the exploitation. Miriam’s own words, “I always knew that you’d come ... I’ve been very patient” (McEwan, 2023, p. 141), expose her calculated strategy; she was not a passive figure waiting for Roland’s compliance, but an active predator orchestrating his submission for years. His obedience was “not out of diligence or a desire to please her, but because he feared her” (McEwan, 2023, p. 64). Her threats of humiliation, such as forcing him into a pink dress, were not idle punishments but psychological tools designed to dismantle his confidence and reinforce her control. McEwan thereby presents Miriam not as a misguided teacher but as a deliberate manipulator who exploited Roland’s vulnerability to entrap him in a cycle of fear, obedience, and sexual exploitation.

Roland’s prolonged abuse illustrates what Talmon and Ginzburg (2018) describe as the enduring psychological consequences of CSA, particularly trepidation, body shame, and fear of others that hinder intimacy. Roland’s lack of family protection made him vulnerable to Miriam’s coercion, and instead of developing self-confidence during adolescence, he internalized fear and isolation. This is consistent with Sakson-Obada’s (2014) observation that victims of CSA often suffer from increased anxiety in social interactions and greater reluctance to seek help from others. Miriam exploited this fear systematically, she escalated the sexual exploitation from once a week to total control and persuaded him to abandon school and confined him in her house. Her “clever torture” (2023, p. 261) exemplifies the manipulative strategies Talmon and Ginzburg identify, in which the abuser enforces dependency and strips the victim of autonomy under the guise of intimacy. Like many male victims, Roland chose silence over disclosure, and his view of his confinement as a “sexy game” (2023, p. 257) exemplifies another tragic aspect of CSA: victims often misinterpret coercion as affection or play. McEwan thereby dramatizes how psychological theories of CSA trauma, like fear, dependency, and secrecy, manifest in lived experience; he also shows Roland’s entrapment not as isolated deviance but as a textbook case of predatory manipulation.

Miriam’s abuse of Roland is characterized by a planned assertion of authority that extends from the physical dimensions to the mental and psychological

ones. From the very beginning, she claimed ownership over his body and identity: “by assuming authority over his appearance, especially when she unbuttoned his shorts, she established complete rights or control, mental and physical” (McEwan, 2023, p. 64). Although Roland initially believed he was exercising choice, the novel makes clear that agency resided with Miriam, because “soon it was clear that there could be no release without her. She had chosen him” (McEwan, 2023, p. 65). Her dominance penetrates deeper than momentary control, for she “had seeded herself into the fine grain not only of his psyche but of his biology” (McEwan, 2023, p. 66). This aligns with Cantor et al. (2005), who argue that pedophiles seek not only sexual access but the sustained domination necessary to suppress disclosure. Miriam enforces this secrecy explicitly; she commands Roland hiding their encounters: “you’re not to speak about this to anyone. Not to your closest friend, no boasting about it, however tempting it is” (McEwan, 2023, p. 141). Her calculated silencing echoes Nabokov’s Humbert, whose control of Lolita is both narrative and physical. As Shelton (1999) observes, Humbert’s obsession lies in his continual need to “control and possess Dolly” (p. 280) at every stage of their relationship. Like Humbert, Miriam ensures Roland’s submission by expanding her authority beyond sexual encounters to every aspect of his life. She further entrenches this domination by corrupting his adolescence, teaching a fourteen-year-old “how to take a girl’s [clothes] off” (McEwan, 2023, p. 134), introducing him to alcohol, and deliberately pulling him “into bewildered childhood” (2023, p. 252). Her obsession with possession is explicit: “You belong to me, and to no one else. You’re mine and you’ll stay that way” (2023, p. 151). McEwan thus illustrates how pedophilic domination escalates into a totalizing system of power that makes the child increasingly aware of danger yet unable to imagine escape. McEwan’s deliberate echoing of Humbert Humbert, however, does more than establish a parallel of domination; it invites scrutiny of the gendered assumptions that shape how such abuse is recognized and judged.

This raises a crucial question about the gendered dynamics of abuse. While both literary and real-world accounts overwhelmingly cast pedophiles as male, McEwan unsettles this assumption by presenting a female predator whose actions mirror and in some respects surpass those of Humbert. In *Lolita*, Nabokov depicts a male doctor exploiting a young girl, what Shelton calls “a grown man’s sexual affair with a young girl” (1999, p. 273). By contrast, McEwan places a female piano teacher in the role of abuser and a vulnerable boy as her victim, thereby reversing expectations and exposing cultural blind spots in how abuse is perceived. McEwan makes the gender bias surrounding abuse unmistakable. When a policeman comments on Roland’s case, “but female on male. We only get a few cases like yours” (McEwan, 2023, p. 335), the remark carries more than surprise; it reveals how deeply male victimhood is treated as an anomaly. The same assumption shapes the investigation into Alissa’s disappearance. Roland becomes the immediate suspect, not because of evidence, but because of expectation: “when a missing wife’s

dead it's the husband that's killed her" (McEwan, 2023, p. 16). These examples highlight what Landor (2009) identifies as a cultural bias: female sex abusers are often portrayed by the media as tragic or broken women rather than as predators, while their male counterparts are unequivocally condemned as criminals. This discrepancy extends into the legal sphere, where Zack et al. (2018) document a persistent double standard in judicial treatment, with female perpetrators judged more leniently than men. McEwan's novel, therefore, not only dramatizes Roland's victimization but also critiques the gendered narratives that obscure or minimize female sexual abuse.

McEwan's challenge to gendered assumptions about abuse resonates with broader scholarly critiques of the myths surrounding CSA. Sanderson (2006), for instance, dismantles two persistent misconceptions: that girls are always at greater risk than boys, and that women are incapable of sexual abuse. He also emphasizes that children cannot consent to sexual activity, regardless of the abuser's gender or methods. While statistics indicate that girls experience higher rates of sexual assault, this disparity may be influenced by the greater likelihood of girls reporting such crimes compared to boys, who often face heightened shame and societal pressures that hinder their ability to disclose instances of sexual violence. This suggests that the perceived prevalence of female victimization may partially reflect systemic underreporting by male survivors, thereby complicating the narrative of risk and prevalence. Therefore, these numbers may not fully represent the true state of CSA. Another misconception is that women never mistreat children sexually, conceivably due to cultural assumptions about females being submissive receivers more than keen initiators, and being mothers and nurturers makes it challenging to acknowledge that women are capable of sexual aggression or violence towards children.

Recent feminist scholarship has increasingly challenged simplistic ideas that cast women as victims and men as perpetrators, and emphasizes the contextual and relational nature of agency within gendered power structures. Judith Butler's (2004) theorization of gender as performative demonstrates that women's actions, including harmful ones, are shaped by normative frameworks without absolving them of responsibility. From this perspective, acknowledging female agency in acts of sexual harm does not weaken feminist critiques of patriarchy but exposes the very cultural assumptions that equate femininity with sexual passivity and moral innocence. Similarly, Lois Pineau (2001) contends that denying women's capacity for sexual harm ultimately reinforces sexist myths by refusing to recognize women as fully accountable sexual agents. Kelly Oliver (2004) further emphasizes that ethical responsibility is inseparable from subjectivity and argues that feminist ethics must confront women's potential for harm in order to avoid collapsing into moral exceptionalism. Read through these feminist frameworks, *Lessons* reveals how Miriam Cornell's abuse of authority is enabled by institutional power and cultural denial rather than personal pathology alone. McEwan's novel thus shows that female-perpetrated abuse can be critically examined without undermining feminist

politics, instead strengthening them by insisting on accountability, ethical clarity, and a nuanced understanding of gendered power.

Within these gendered and institutional power structures, sexual abuse is often enacted not through overt violence but through forms of psychological manipulation that obscure exploitation and undermine the possibility of resistance. Thus, Roland's willingness to engage sexually with Miriam cannot be understood as desire but as a coerced surrender that shaped his entire sexual development. One of the possible damaging consequences of her abuse is the sexual addiction that followed him into adulthood. McEwan portrays Roland as "pathologically addicted to sex as others were to drugs" (2023, p. 162) and condemned to "a life of erotic bliss" (2023, p. 248) that brought him neither stability nor fulfillment. His compulsive arousal during childhood, arriving at lessons "pedaling with half an erection" (2023, p. 145) and losing concentration while reading underscores how Miriam corrupted his capacity for normal development. Maltz (2012) asserts that CSA survivors either develop a disinterest in sex or experience sexual addiction, oscillating between aversion and intense affection for it. There exists no intermediary state, as they are unable to have a healthy sexual life. Roland's trajectory exemplifies this pattern: in his twenties and thirties, he remained "hungry for sex" (McEwan, 2023, p. 286). He pursued relationships defined not by intimacy but by an insatiable drive in which "the only happiness and purpose and proper paradise was sexual" (2023, p. 160). His wife, Alissa, asked him pointedly, "Was your mind ever off sex?" (2023, p. 191). His compulsive sexual behavior, while narratively evident, also aligns with psychoanalytic theories that locate the roots of sexual addiction in formative childhood experiences.

Drawing on classical psychoanalytic perspectives, Sigmund Freud (2016) addresses the causes of sex addiction and discusses that sexual desire in childhood is partially or totally latent, like a dam. Factors such as shame, sublimation, education, culture, and family restrain its flow until other external factors reactivate it; in Roland's situation, these factors are Miriam's sexual triggers. Moreover, Freud (1920) calls people like Roland "groups of human beings whose sexual life deviates strikingly from the average" (p. 263). He asserts that, based on psychoanalytic research, the majority of sexual issues "have their origin in childhood" (1920, p. 268). Freud's theories on childhood sexuality help illuminate Roland's early sexualization and subsequent addiction, as seen in his obsessive behavior and inability to form healthy relationships. Crucially, Roland's eventual confrontation with Miriam forty years later provides the novel's definitive judgment: her confession that he "was a child and it was a crime" (2023, p. 439) authoritatively dismantles any notion of consent. The permanent damage inflicted upon Roland, culminating in Alissa's diagnosis that his piano teacher "rewired" his brain, confirms that such childhood sexual abuse is not love but a catastrophic act that forecloses the possibility of healthy adult intimacy.

THE LIFELONG IMPACT OF CSA ON ROLAND BAINES

Roland Baines's trajectory illustrates the devastating persistence of CSA. Even decades after the abuse, he remains haunted by his piano teacher's predation. The encounter with Miriam, described as hellish, reveals the deep-seated fear and dread that persisted into his seventies. Her round white face and large eyes, which once terrified him, continue to elicit physical and emotional responses: his knees tremble, he struggles to control his reactions, and he does not "want her to come any closer" (McEwan, 2023, p. 350). Her observation of him as a "poor thing" who has "not got over it" (McEwan, 2023, p. 348) underscores the permanence of these effects. The narrator confirms that the residual trauma shaped not only his memories but his sense of self, and left him uncertain about his desires or the purpose of revisiting the past.

Scholarly research contextualizes Roland's experience within broader patterns of victims' struggles. Kendall-Tackett (2012) and Hall (2011) assert that CSA survivors are prone to have grave and potentially fatal ailments. Furthermore, Maltz offers a comprehensive insight into the permanence of CSA: "Sexual abuse has serious long-lasting effects. The trauma of sexual abuse can be at the root of many psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, self-abusive behaviors, social problems, sexual problems" (2012, p. 18). This perspective is reinforced by Denov (2004), who notes that the repercussions of CSA pervade daily life and can manifest in suicidal tendencies and substance abuse. Denov interviewed 14 adult victims and recorded from (Man 4): "I'm constantly haunted by [the sexual abuse]... [It's] part of my daily existence" (p. 1143). Denov affirms that the repercussions of CSA have a persistent influence on the individual's daily life, which captures the paralysis of survivors who seek relief but remain unable to sever the bond to their abuser.

Roland's life mirrors these findings. Though he physically escaped his abuser as a teenager and rejected a later encounter with her, the psychological damage remained entrenched; roughly "seventy-two and not quite cured. The experience remained with him and he could not part with it" (McEwan, 2023, p. 437). His work, relationships, and sense of purpose were shaped by the lingering specter of Miriam, who transformed his world into one "brimming with pointless endeavour" (McEwan, 2023, p. 259), and left him navigating a mysterious spiral he could not escape. Building on both the novel's representation and existing research, this section examines four lasting consequences of CSA in Roland's life: academic underachievement, career setbacks, marital breakdown, and impairments in memory and recollection.

Roland's inability to succeed academically demonstrates how sexual abuse can derail a child's intellectual development. His grades were consistently poor, even in English, a subject in which failure was seen as a mark of stupidity. He recalls being branded a "Failure, a Fraud and a Fool" (McEwan, 2023, p. 246). His intellectual energy was absorbed entirely by his piano lessons, leaving little capacity

for schoolwork; his “intellectual moment was confined to the piano and could not translate into academic results” (McEwan, 2023, p. 100). Significantly, when temporarily freed from Miriam’s influence, he showed immediate improvement. During a brief separation, he rewrote his *Lord of the Flies* essay and received an A+ after a series of failures; the same week, his performance in translation class also improved. These fluctuations indicate that Roland’s academic struggles were not due to a lack of ability but to the psychological burden of abuse that consumed his attention and displaced his sense of reality. Academic studies corroborate these assumptions. Shakeshaft (2003) argues that students who were victims of CSA “do less well in school” (p. 12) than the students who were not exposed to CSA. Moreover, these victim students show “behaviors that would negatively affect academic achievement” (Shakeshaft, 2003, p. 12). Roland’s case exemplifies these findings: when under Miriam’s influence, he lived in what the text describes as an alternate reality, one that detached him from academic pursuits; only in her absence could he re-enter the tangible world and recover his focus.

Secondly, Roland’s fragmented career path illustrates how the trauma of childhood sexual abuse can unsettle an individual’s capacity to sustain a coherent professional identity. Rather than pursuing a single vocation, he drifted from one short-lived occupation to another. He describes himself to Alissa as “rootless” after leaving school early and changing “scores of jobs” (McEwan, 2023, p. 193). The abuse that disrupted his education also undermined his prospects for stable employment. His work history, including manual labor, dishwashing, photography, piano playing, tennis coaching, and magazine reviewing, suggests not versatility but dislocation. Even in later life, he remained semi-impoverished, reliant on state support and inconsistent income. Intellectuals confirm that CSA might translate into diminished career outcomes. Robst (2009) finds that survivors earn less than their non-abused peers due to unstable employment. Comparatively, Currie and Widom (2010) demonstrate that childhood abuse correlates with long-term economic disadvantage. Adult survivors report lower employment rates, reduced earnings, and fewer assets. Those “with documented histories of childhood abuse have lower levels of ... employment, earnings, and fewer assets as adults” (Currie & Widom, 2010, p. 111).

Thirdly, Roland’s failed marriage exemplifies how the effects of childhood sexual abuse can destabilize adult intimate relationships. Roland’s relationship with Daphne ended shortly, and his union with Alissa lasted less than two years and was full of strain and culminated in abandonment. After her departure, Roland conceded that the root cause was “singular, his problem, the old one. He couldn’t help himself” (McEwan, 2023, p. 290). The “old problem” was not only incompatibility, but also the unresolved trauma of Miriam’s exploitation. This association between CSA and marital instability is supported by academic investigations. Roberts et al. (2004) demonstrate that individuals with histories of sexual maltreatment report lower marital satisfaction, relational difficulties, and higher rates of divorce. Likewise,

Denov (2004) finds that men who were abused in childhood may experience “strained relationships with women” (p. 1156). CSA profoundly shaped Roland’s expectations of intimacy and intensified his emotional volatility, yet the novel also portrays his passivity, historical dislocation, and artistic indecision as independent factors contributing to relational and marital collapse.

Lastly, Roland’s inability to escape his past illustrates how CSA embeds itself in memory with a destructive force. From the novel’s opening sentence, his story is framed not as a dream or fantasy but as a relentless recollection, an “insomniac memory” that defines his existence (McEwan, 2023, p. 3). Although the physical mark Miriam left on his thigh faded, the psychological imprint remained indelible. He acknowledges that his “memory would never leave him” (p. 133) and the memory stayed linked to the crime. The persistence of memory thus becomes both punishment and prison, a reminder of the paradoxical intimacy that corrupted his sense of self. In this context, experts affirm the potency of traumatic recall in CSA survivors. Duncan (2004) argues that survivors often retain sensory memories, sounds, images, and touches that can be triggered later in life, producing renewed distress, nightmares, or psychosomatic responses. Roland “was damaged by his past” (McEwan, 2023, p. 163); the past that haunted him for a long time, seeing that “the attraction of the past has proved so strong” (Hidalgo, 2005, p. 82). Traumatic memories are unalterable by current experiences upon retrieval because they establish a deep presence within the psychic-associative framework.

CONCLUSION

Ian McEwan’s *Lessons* situates Roland Baines’ life as a case study of how childhood sexual abuse exerts a corrosive influence across decades, infiltrating education, career, relationships, and memory. Far from portraying the abuse as an isolated episode, the novel demonstrates that CSA functions as a structuring force that distorts identity and undermines stability. Roland’s academic underachievement, professional drift, marital collapse, and inability to escape traumatic memory align with psychological and sociological research that documents the long-term consequences of CSA. By embedding these scholarly insights within Roland’s trajectory, McEwan challenges readers to confront the enduring reach of trauma while refusing to sanitize or diminish its destructive effects.

At the same time, *Lessons* interrogates the cultural silence and complicity that allow abuse to be reframed as “love,” leaving victims doubly burdened by both injury and stigma. McEwan’s novel thus compels a reconsideration of the boundaries of literary representation: how far can an author go in depicting pedophilia without replicating its harms, and to what extent can literature ethically expose the lifelong scars of CSA? By pushing against these limits, McEwan not only reveals the profound psychological damage inflicted upon survivors but also invites broader critical reflection on the intersections of art, ethics, and trauma. *Lessons* shows that

child sexual abuse is not a closed chapter in a victim's life but a narrative that echoes indefinitely, shaping subjectivity, relationships, and memory across the lifespan.

Ultimately, the representation of child sexual abuse in fiction raises pressing ethical questions regarding voyeurism, retraumatization, and the potential normalization of harm. In *Lessons*, McEwan navigates these risks by refusing eroticization and by centering the narrative on the survivor's long-term psychological damage rather than on the abusive act itself. The novel's ethical force lies in its insistence that pedophilia be understood not as transgressive desire or tragic romance but as an abuse of power with enduring consequences. By foregrounding Roland's fractured development, chronic shame, and emotional paralysis, McEwan aligns literary representation with ethical responsibility, using fiction not to exploit trauma but to expose its permanence and social concealment. In doing so, *Lessons* demonstrates that confronting CSA in literature, when handled with critical restraint and moral clarity, can function as an act of witness rather than harm, compelling readers to acknowledge realities that are too often minimized or silenced.

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