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From the Romantic Child to the Postmodern Child: Reconstruction of Childhood in Ian McEwan's *The Daydreamer*

Romantik Çocuktan Postmodern Çocuğa:
Ian McEwan'ın *The Daydreamer* Adlı Eserinde Çocukluğun Yeniden Kurgulanması

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ABSTRACT
Scholarship in children's literature associates the rise of the genre with the development of the modern concept of childhood, and this connection makes it impossible to study children's literature at any historical moment without considering and critically examining the prevailing image of the child. Literary representations of children have long centered on a single stereotype–the Romantic child–whose ideological foundations were laid in the Enlightenment, deepened in the Romantic period, and ultimately solidified within literary tradition. Nevertheless, this long-established figure–an emblem of idyll and essential innocence–can no longer offer an authentic account of childhood in a postmodern world characterized not only by uncertainty, instability, and fluidity but also by pervasive violence and abuse embedded in social structures, ranging from the most intimate family units to the mass media that children consume. This paper explores the consequent shift from the Romantic child to the postmodern child and analyzes Ian McEwan's *The Daydreamer* (1994) to demonstrate how a new conception of childhood is reconstructed through the portrayal of a psychologically complex, profoundly ambiguous, and largely rebellious child protagonist, who innately uses daydreaming as a mode of liberation and a catalyst for self-directed awareness.

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Introduction

Notoriously dubbed "Ian Macabre" (Han & Wang, 2014, p. 134), Ian McEwan is a versatile, prolific, and controversial writer whose work has been widely acclaimed by both readers and critics, earning him numerous nominations and several prestigious literary awards, including the Booker Prize, the Whitbread Novel Award, and the Somerset Maugham Award. However, McEwan's two children's books, *Rose Blanche* (1985) and *The Daydreamer* (1994), have been largely overshadowed by the success of his adult fiction. Within the extensive body of critical essays and studies on McEwan's work, few address his contributions to children's literature. A closer examination of McEwan's oeuvre, however, reveals a sustained engagement with the concept of childhood and with representations of children and young adults across much of his adult fiction, often in unsettling and provocative ways that many readers find disturbing.

McEwan's representation of childhood and children in his adult fiction follows two dominant trajectories. *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) and *In Between the Sheets* (1978), for instance, depict children as sexualized and often violently transgressive figures. *First Love, Last Rites,* which "earned McEwan's writing 'the label literature of shock'" (Childs, 2007, p. 9), features unnerving

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narratives about a boy who feels no remorse at the sight of people dying around him; a teenager who seeks to compete with adults through drinking, smoking, and raping his sister; another boy forced to wear a girl's clothes as part of an adult fantasy; an adult who sexually harasses and then kills a young girl; and a male adult who was treated as a baby by his mother for much of his adolescence. *In Between the Sheets* similarly contains a story about a man who becomes sexually tempted by his own daughter, further highlighting McEwan's persistent tendency toward the sexualized portrayal of childhood. *The Cement Garden* (1978), one of McEwan's most controversial texts, proves even more unsettling for the uninitiated reader, as it centers on the impulsive, instinctual, and ultimately incestuous behaviors of four siblings following the deaths of their parents. While the text, on the one hand, exhibits psychoanalytic traces suggestive of the fulfillment of Oedipal desires, it also portrays the possible moral deterioration of children in the absence of consistent and sound adult guidance.

The second trend in McEwan's portrayal of children can be observed in his depiction of the child's gaze as frequently flawed and potentially destructive. McEwan indeed privileges the limited perception of children, young adults, or immature grown-ups toward the world (Louvel et al., 1995, p. 1). In his prize-winning and widely acclaimed novel *Atonement* (2001), for instance, McEwan emphasizes the child's perception as both naive and distorted through the character of Briony Tallis, who misinterprets her sister's relationship with her lover and irrevocably damages the lives of the young couple. Similarly, *The Children Act* (2014) centers on the adolescent protagonist, Adam, who develops an obsessive admiration for a High Court Judge as she attempts to save his life from leukemia. *Nutshell* (2016), meanwhile, reworks Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by adopting the perspective of a fetus who begins to grapple with existential concerns upon overhearing his mother and uncle's affair and their plot to murder his father.

McEwan's two children's books are similar to his fiction for adults in their portrayal of childhood and in their exploration of the concept of the child, although they differ in the degree of violence, sexualization, and destruction they depict. *Rose Blanche,* the English edition of a picture book by the Italian illustrator Roberto Innocenti, situates its young protagonist in unexpected and often harrowing circumstances. The titular heroine is killed by German troops while attempting to care for imprisoned children in a concentration camp. *The Daydreamer,* on the other hand, portrays an imaginative and assertive child protagonist, foregrounds the child's gaze as fundamentally incomprehensible to adults, and thereby explores the enduring dichotomy between childhood and adulthood.

First published in 1994 and illustrated by Anthony Browne, *The Daydreamer* comprises a preface, an introductory section, and seven stories that center on its ten-year-old protagonist, Peter Fortune, who habitually drifts into daydreams involving Ovidian and Kafkaesque metamorphoses, which reflect his vivid yet often misguiding imagination. In these daydreams, Peter transforms into or swaps bodies with a doll, a cat, a baby, and even an adult. While he at one point imagines his parents disappearing, at another he envisions his elderly neighbor turning into a thief. Peter frequently blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy through daydreams triggered by "big and little issues of a preteen boy" ranging from "sharing a room with his sister and her doll collection" to "facing the school bully" or "feeling confined in the family unit" (Martinez & Nash, 1995, p. 295). As the stories progress, readers witness Peter's philosophical contemplations, ontological questions, unsettlingly uncanny fantasies of escaping parental authority, and, ultimately, his gradual inclination to reconcile with the adult world and the very notion of adulthood.

The Daydreamer notably diverges from conventional children's literature through its experimental and unorthodox portrayal of childhood and its child protagonist. Although it has received relatively limited critical attention, the text reflects broader shifts in conceptions of childhood and its literary representation since the 1970s, particularly under the influence of postmodern discourses, which have destabilized grand narratives, problematized binaries, and challenged notions of singularity and objective truth. In this respect, drawing on the idea that

childhood is a social and cultural construct, this paper first explores the construction of the Romantic child and its literary representation, as well as its ideological underpinnings. It then examines the deconstruction and reconstruction of childhood and the child-adult binary in contemporary societies in relation to the postmodern condition. Subsequently, the study analyzes *The Daydreamer* as a text that reflects the repercussions of this radical conception of childhood, which can be aptly defined as the postmodern conception of the child. Consequently, the study points to childhood and children's literature as inextricably dynamic and discursive categories, each responsive to ideological positions, cultural transformations, and shifting socio-economic conditions.

Construction of the Romantic Child

According to Peter Hunt, one of the pioneers of children's literature criticism, the term "children" is "slippery"; however, children's literature as a recognizable form still requires a recognizable child and childhood (2005, pp. 3-5). Childhood, and the ideas associated with it, lie at the very core of how children are portrayed in literature produced within any given historical period. Therefore, scholars of children's literature frequently turn to the history of childhood and its shifting conceptions when tracing the origins of the genre and analyzing the ideological frameworks underlying representations of the child. In his controversial yet influential study *Centuries of Childhood,* Philippe Ariès argues that the concept of childhood was largely absent before the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. He observes that "nothing in medieval dress distinguished the child from the adult" (1962, p. 50), suggesting that children were perceived as miniature adults in medieval society. He thus links the absence of children's literature in the modern sense to the lack of a distinct notion of childhood. More significantly, however, Ariès emphasizes the constructed nature of childhood itself, arguing that it is "a product of a particular cultural setting, rather than something natural" (Vajda, 2020, p. 65).

The concept of childhood has indeed undergone significant transformations over time, reflecting its responsiveness to social, cultural, and economic dynamics. Childhood began to be recognized as a distinct category toward the end of the seventeenth century, largely due to Enlightenment ideas advanced particularly by thinkers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Locke's notion of *tabula rasa* and Rousseau's emphasis on education, most notably in *Émile; or, On Education,* positioned childhood as the most crucial stage of life, a period in which learning is most active and essential for the development of a well-rounded adult. After Rousseau formulated "the modern," "Apollonian," or "angelic" child in *Émile*, "the child was transformed into an epistemological landscape and came to be portrayed as the absolute other of the adult" (Güven, 2019, p. 899). Children were thus optimistically perceived as individuals who could be equipped with all the knowledge, values, and attitudes necessary for an ideal society and who, unlike adults, remained open to change, development, and guidance. Children's literature emerged alongside this conception of childhood under the influence of Enlightenment thought. Eighteenth-century children's books such as John Newbery's *History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* (1765) and Sarah Fielding's *The Governess; or, The Little Female Academy* (1749) consequently portrayed children as untainted and prepared for education. These narratives encouraged young protagonists to rely on prudence, scientific reasoning, and a secular moral framework distinct from Puritan doctrines, while also promoting hard work as the primary means of achieving social mobility.

It was, however, with the Romantic Movement that childhood came to acquire its widespread cultural meaning – namely, that children are innocent, naïve, idyllic, and sinless beings, inherently close to nature and untouched by the pursuits of the material world. The Romantic child, as it is often called, was positioned in opposition to the corrupt adult of industrial England and was envisioned as a healing force, promising hope and redemption. In doing so, the Romantic child reinforced the conflict between childhood and adulthood, a leitmotif that informs one of the central works of the Romantic Age, William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794), which emphasizes the tension between purity and corruption. The romanticized image of the child ultimately evolved into a recurring stereotype in children's literature, and this image

continued to offer a sense of relief and escape from the corrupted adult world even during times of crisis, such as the world wars or periods of economic depression. While Peter in J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1911), for instance, resists growing up and creates an Edenic realm open only to children, the Pevensie siblings in C. S. Lewis' *Narnia* series (1950-1956) first flee the Second World War by retreating to the countryside and later enter an adult-governed, evil-afflicted Narnia to restore peace and order.

Nevertheless, the construction of child-governed, and thus ostensibly peaceful, spaces, or the portrayal of children who resist entry into adulthood in order to preserve innocence in children's literature produces invisible hierarchies between adulthood and childhood, both within and beyond the text. In her seminal work, *The Case of Peter Pan, or, the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, Jacqueline Rose (1984) approaches children's literature from this perspective, arguing that its very existence relies on the perpetuation of adult projections onto children. Rose considers children's literature "impossible" because it presupposes the child as a passive recipient of the text, the production and consumption of which are entirely shaped by adult preferences (1984, p. 1). Within this framework, the adult writer ideologically constructs the child first as a literary character and then as an imagined reader. The child, therefore, remains at the periphery of the text as a passive subject through this dual positioning, whereas "the adult comes first," adopting the roles of "author, maker, giver," thereby establishing children's literature as a fundamentally adult-governed enterprise. (Rose, 1984, pp. 1-2).

The Romantic child thus emerges not as a natural and autonomous category, but as an object of adult desire and discourse, "contributing to prolonging and preserving […] values on the verge of collapse" (Rose, 1984, p. 44). In this sense, and by analogy with colonization, the child reader can be likened to a native subject continuously colonized and indoctrinated by the adult writer, positioned as the colonizer (Erdem Ayyıldız, 2018, p. 12). From this perspective, the relationship between adult and child extends into broader power relations within the text (Hunt, 1992, p. 11). Peter Hunt argues that addressing the text to "supposedly innocent readers" does not render the text itself innocent (1992, p. 14). Rather, the innocent child, as both reader and character, becomes "the product and promoter of adult ideologies" (Erdem Ayyıldız, 2018, p. 12).

On a similar note, in *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, Perry Nodelman highlights the impossibility of child-centered children's literature by emphasizing the presence of a hidden adult voice embedded in the text, which continuously addresses both child characters and readers through what he terms "shadow texts" (2008, p. 206). Accordingly, narrative features such as linguistic and contextual simplicity, as well as moral structuring in children's books, reflect adult preferences rather than inherent child needs. This enduring tension between childhood and adulthood paradoxically culminates in the marginalization of the Romantic child, who may also be "underestimated as an immature, illogical and lesser human being" (Güven, 2019, p. 899). Consequently, childhood emerges as a site of paradox and contradiction. While adults perceive children's uncultivated and uneducated state as positively malleable, they simultaneously project onto it a nostalgic longing for this perceived primitiveness and savagery.

The ideological positioning of the Romantic child was reshaped once again in accordance with the intellectual and socio-political conditions of the late nineteenth century. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, as articulated in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), had already "debased the prestigious position of the Romantic concept of children" by stripping it of its assumed spirituality (Erdem Ayyıldız, 2018, p. 167). Under the influence of Darwinian thought, the Victorian era – an age defined by imperialism and colonial expansion – reconceptualized the child not merely as a site of innocence, but as an investment. Accordingly, the education of children gained strategic importance in sustaining Britain's imperial power (Erdem Ayyıldız, 2018, pp. 16-17). Within this context, the adventure novel, as a distinctively masculine literary space, emerged as a powerful medium for transmitting imperial ideologies to Victorian boys and for "shaping their perception towards a colonialist outlook" (Erdem Ayyıldız, 2018, p. 5). Adventure narratives such as R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1857) and R. L. Stevenson's

Treasure Island (1883) simultaneously employed colonial and patriarchal discourses in order to construct boys "as potential colonizers" who would serve the British Empire faithfully (Erdem Erdem Ayyıldız, 2018, p. 1; Erdem Ayyıldız, 2019, pp. 56-58). The literary representation of the Victorian boy – also referred to as the imperial boy – thus combines Romantic idealization with the ideological demands of colonial society. He comes to embody the imagined nobility of the British Empire in race and values, and ultimately promises advancement (Erdem Ayyıldız, 2018, p. 2). In this sense, the imperial boy is constructed not only as the hero of his personal narrative but also as a representative of imperial pride through his resilience, discipline, and commitment to duty.

Meanwhile, pioneering school stories such as Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857) and Frederic W. Farrar's *Eric, or, Little by Little* (1858) further reinforced the figure of the uneducated yet promising child. The male protagonists of these school narratives place their trust in the institutions of industrial society and in the British education system, which is presented as a powerful mechanism for producing moral, refined, and literate gentlemen. Nevertheless, Victorian children's literature, as a diverse and prolific body of writing, is clearly marked by gendered constructions. The Victorian girl, in contrast, is predominantly represented in domestic fiction and family narratives as obedient, angelic, and morally pure, and is often depicted as being prepared for her future roles as sister, wife, woman, and mother.

John Kincaid further adds a psychological, albeit controversial, dimension to the romanticized child of nineteenth-century literature in *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (1992), a pioneering work in childhood studies. While Kincaid affirms the popular idea that childhood is constructed by adults, he also argues that an erotic motivation underlies this construction. Kincaid does not suggest that children are erotic in themselves; rather, he draws attention to the Victorian obsession with the representation of children in arts and literature. From this perspective, the idealization of childhood innocence and immaturity stems from what he describes as "a sexualizing tendency" (Kincaid, 1992, p. 13). Kincaid's Freudian framework thus conceptualizes the child as a projection of adult psychological processes. David Rudd, however, criticizes both Rose and Kincaid for neglecting the child as "a social being" and for reducing childhood to "a cultural trope" (2005, p. 16). According to Rudd, the child as a social subject remains largely voiceless within social relations, and its literary representation not only emerges from this silence, but also perpetuates it; as a result, the possibility of liberating the literary child from adult construction and transforming it from a silenced object to a speaking subject depends on the emergence of the child's voice within and beyond the text (Rudd, 2005, p. 17).

In conclusion, the construction of the Romantic child is shaped by complex micro- and macro-level discourses produced and sustained by the adult world, and subsequently reinforced through cultural and literary representations. These discourses, which may be racist, sexist, classist, ageist, or at times discriminatory on the basis of bodily difference or disability, are themselves embedded in intersecting social and political structures. The Romantic child, including its various embodiments as the angelic, the Apollonian, the Edenic, the erotic, or the imperial, largely derives from the dichotomous relationship between adult and child, a division grounded in an ostensibly essential biological hierarchy. The Romantic child thus continues to function as an embodiment of the idealized, lost, or anticipated child of the adult imagination, even in much of contemporary literature and media. Nevertheless, from roughly the mid-twentieth century onward, narratives of childhood have increasingly experimented with the representation of the child, producing forms that subvert and destabilize the romanticized image of childhood. This shift in literary representation can be linked to the emergence of a new conception of childhood within the postmodern condition. Therefore, any analysis of Ian McEwan's *The Daydreamer* as an example of this reconfigured childhood first requires an examination of the reconstruction of childhood and the reconfiguration of the adult-child binary in the post-1970s postmodern context.

Reconstruction of Childhood in the Post-1970s

There are two major ruptures in the history of the concept of childhood. The first, as identified by Philippe Ariès, is the shift from the non-recognition of childhood to its gradual pedagogical, social, and cultural conceptualization in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The second rupture is the dissolution of this first normative, stereotyped image, roughly from the second half of the twentieth century onward within a postmodern context, and the introduction of a new conception of the child, which can be aptly called the postmodern child. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard (1979/1984) emphasizes that knowledge has become fragmented, discontinuous, multiple, and local in contemporary societies dominated by media, technology, and globalized capitalism. Accordingly, Lyotard (1979/1984) introduces the concept of "incredulity toward metanarratives," arguing that grand narratives such as the Enlightenment, religion, progress, nationalism, and historical truth have lost their validity in this chaotic and unstable postmodern condition (p. xxiv). With the growing doubt toward the narratives of the past, as articulated by Lyotard, few concepts, including childhood, have remained stable, and the child, once regarded as the epitome of innocence and purity, has indeed become a fluid and blurred category.

Scholars of childhood studies, such as Neil Postman (1983), Chris Jenks (1996), and David Buckingham (2000) use the expressions "the death of childhood" or "the disappearance of childhood" to address these changes in the conception of childhood. In *Childhood,* Jenks (1996) identifies the main factors behind the postmodern conception of the child as changes in family and other social structures, exposure to a myriad of media forms, and, most significantly, the disruption of the conventional adult-child binary. Buckingham additionally points to anxious parenting and increasing rates of divorce, as well as children's increasingly easy access to drugs, cults, or venereal diseases, alongside the pervasive presence of electronic media in contemporary societies (2000, pp. 21-22). In *Children without Childhood: Growing Up Too Fast in the World of Sex and Drugs,* Marie Winn (1984) suggests the erosion of the conventional experience of childhood mainly as a result of children's active participation in the adult world, particularly through media. As media has indoctrinated children into what were once considered the "secrets of adult life," children have become much closer to adults and have begun to appear older than previous generations of children in terms of how they dress, speak, eat, and conduct themselves (Winn, 1984, pp. 70-71; Buckingham, 2000, p. 26; Postman, 1983, p. 128).

As a result, in *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Neil Postman famously writes that the printing press created childhood, and now electronic media "disappears" it (1983, p. xii). As the boundaries between childhood and adulthood become increasingly blurred, childhood, in the postmodern context, thus evolves into a state resembling its premodern conception, in which children were regarded as miniature adults. Rousseau's primitive and idyllic child was the child of modernity, and it heralded growth, maturation, advancement, and thus the future, particularly as a product of the Enlightenment project (Jenks, 1996, pp. 98-101); nevertheless, the postmodern child signifies nostalgia rather than the future. While the nostalgia felt towards the Romantic child represents the adult's longing for innocence, the nostalgia felt towards the postmodern child stems directly from the loss of the child itself. However, the terms "death," "disappearance," and "loss" highlight the collapse of the traditional conception of the Romantic child, as children do not disappear as biological, social, and psychological individuals. The postmodern condition, which first deconstructs the child, subsequently reconstructs it in ways that respond to changing circumstances.

The contemporary child's participation in intricate social, cultural, and economic conditions marked by discontinuity, fragmentation, and fluidity ultimately culminates in a child figure that challenges the essentialism of the Romanticized subject. The traditional subject, as noted by Karen Coats, was understood as "the whole," "transparent," and "oriented toward some external standards" (2004, p. 162). The Romantic view of the child, therefore, similarly revolved around the idea of a "unified, reified and essentialized subject – at the centre of the world" (Dahlberg,

Moss, & Pence, 2000, p. 43). Nevertheless, the postmodern view has decentered the child, instead conceptualizing child subjectivity as something that "exists through its relations with others and always in a particular context" (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2000, p. 43). The Romantic child was already regarded as a social and cultural construct prior to postmodernism; however, postmodernism has underscored the multiple and variable constructions of the child and childhood. Postmodernism perceives the experience of childhood as complex, multifaceted, unpredictable, and shaped by discourses of gender, age, race, and other ideological formations. The postmodern childhood can thus be considered "a discursive product" which resists a singular, static, and essentialist understanding (Dodou, 2012, p. 238).

The postmodern conception of childhood has brought about a paradigm shift in the literary representation of the child. Writers of children's and adult literature have indeed begun to explore the transgressive landscapes of childhood, delving into the complexities of the child's psyche, and moving beyond stereotypical and reductive portrayals. Although the Romantic or Edenic child has never completely left the literary scene, British writers since the 1970s have increasingly depicted child characters that challenge this sanctified image. Contemporary authors such as Iain Banks, Doris Lessing, Martin Amis, and Ian McEwan, as observed by Katherina Dodou, for instance, "Gothicise" children in their works by portraying them as variably evil, aggressive, insidious, and sexualized (2012, p. 240). Deconstructing the "Utopian aspect of the children" (Sayım, 2014, p. 128), contemporary British writers present the child not only as "incomprehensible to adults" but also as "destructive of familial bliss," unlike its Romantic counterpart (Dodou, 2012, p. 240). Therefore, these writers construct "an unsentimental" image of the child that is shaped by the multidimensionality and contingencies of the postmodern era (Vajda, 2020, p. 74).

Children's writers, in the meantime, have experimentally and radically incorporated the postmodern child into their works. The savage, primitive, and idyllic child has been replaced by children who are unpredictable, unstable, as well as relatively autonomous and ready to challenge authority. Most significantly, the postmodern deconstruction of the conventional adult-child binary, as explored by Jenks, Winn, and Postman, has culminated in children's books in which child characters frequently display a marked resistance to adult figures and adult structures. Adults in postmodern children's books are often portrayed as negligent, unaccountable, and psychologically and socially frail individuals who are unable to offer their children either a functioning family environment or a stable world. Accordingly, the postmodern child is presented as assertively questioning the reliability and credibility of adults and consequently assuming parental roles. Nevertheless, this kind of substitution, as emphasized by Karen Sands-O'Connor, "places greater responsibility on child characters, sometimes allowing them temporary victories but more often occasioning emotional or physical distress" (2012, p. 236). Adults, in turn, become increasingly skeptical of children's intentions and goodwill, especially toward themselves. The postmodern view of childhood, in this context, renders the child difficult to predict and control, and thus paradoxically strengthens adult-child antagonism. The postmodern child thus emerges as an ambivalent, even uncanny figure that is at once fragile and threatening, delicate yet intimidating.

The conception of the postmodern child not only offers representations of childhood that are multi-layered, changeable, and unstable, but also introduces subject matters that were once considered taboo in children's literature. The postmodern child is often depicted as both a subject and an object of violence while navigating chaotic circumstances shaped by various external forces. Alternatively, postmodern children are situated within controversial contemporary themes such as environmental crisis, globalism, artificial intelligence, digitalism, as well as issues of homosexuality, abuse, suicide, racism, bullying, and immigration. Late twentieth-century children's literature, with its diversity and complexity, is thus arguably dubbed "the third golden age" of the genre, following nineteenth-century and post-war children's literature as its first and second golden ages, respectively (McCulloch, 2011, p. 42).

It should also be noted that child characters of earlier periods were also harmed, abused, and sexualized. In fairy tales, children "are subjected to physical and psychological violence of adult, sometimes of their own parents (particularly of mother figures) even in the heavily censored and mitigated later editions" (Güven, 2019, p. 907). Yet these narratives ultimately affirm the triumph and eventual reward of the victimized child in the face of evil adults, thereby ensuring a sense of justice and the protection of childish innocence. Such narratives therefore inculcate in both the child character and the child reader the virtues of patience and inherent goodness. The abused and tormented fairy-tale child, in other words, emerges largely unscathed and is able to live without psychological impairment. By contrast, the postmodern child is vulnerable to ongoing psychological and physical violence, particularly that inflicted by parental figures. The postmodern child is not only traumatized but also displays a tendency to perpetuate various forms of violence, redirecting them towards parents, peers, or even the self.

The core of McEwan's portrayal of children lies in the postmodern view of the child and the persistent antagonism between adults and children. While some of his child characters display a tendency to eliminate adult figures in order to escape authority, others go astray due to the absence of consistent parental guidance. Accordingly, children's reasoning oscillates between naivety and animality, a tendency that stems primarily from disrupted socialization, often caused by isolation. McEwan's works evoke a pervasive sense of abnormality and mystery surrounding the concept of childhood. In McEwan's fictional universe, childhood emerges as a paradoxical site of fear, desire, and resistance, and it occasionally functions as a nightmare to be eluded, insofar as it embodies the untamed essence of the self. While children are often the victims of adult authorities, they can voluntarily turn into victimizers, threatening social order and conventional hierarchies. As a result, McEwan continually constructs, deconstructs, and reconstructs not only the childhood-adulthood binary but also such interrelated divisions as knowing and not-knowing, as well as sexuality and innocence (Colebrook, 2013, p. 47). McEwan's *The Daydreamer* exemplifies the literary repercussions of this postmodern conception of the child in children's literature through Peter Fortune and his complex daydreams. McEwan employs daydreaming as a narrative device that subversively functions as "an out-of-body experience," detaching "the mind" from its "physical environment" (Childs, 2005, p. 127). As such, Peter's imaginary journeys into his psyche open a window onto the hidden world of childhood, revealing the post-1970s reconceptualization of childhood, which also restructures the binary oppositions between the adult and the child, as well as between the adult writer and the child reader.

Restructuring the Hierarchy between the Adult Writer and the Child Reader

In *The Child in Time*, the protagonist Stephen Lewis, a children's writer himself, argues that "the greatest so-called children's books [speak to] the incipient adult within the child, to the forgotten child within the adult" (McEwan, 1992, chap. 2). Stephen challenges the traditionally designated differences between children's and adult literature, further maintaining that "the distinction between adult and children's fiction was indeed a fiction itself" (McEwan, 1992, chap. 2). Stephen's ideas about children's literature resist assumptions that consider children's literature linguistically and philosophically inferior, as well as trivial, because it is intended "for a lesser culture" (Hunt, 1992, p. 21).

McEwan adopts a similar approach in *The Daydreamer,* as he admits to drawing on the editorial advice of his own children while composing his "Peter stories," as he calls them (McEwan, 1995, p. 7). Contrary to Jacqueline Rose's view of the impossibility of children's literature, McEwan involves "the child as well as the adult in a common adventure" and aims to produce a text that is pleasing to both of them (Ferrari, 2014, p. 48). In doing so, McEwan confronts not only the author's godlike position but also the child's subservience to the hidden adult voice in the text (Hunt, 2001, p. 5; Nodelman, 2008, p. 206). Most significantly, however, by seeking to respond to the child reader's thematic and narrative expectations, McEwan formulates a new readership of children, who may be active participants in the text. In this sense, McEwan blurs not only the aesthetic, literary, and reader-oriented distinctions between adult literature and children's

literature, but he also restructures the hierarchy between the adult reader and the child reader.

Consequently, it becomes difficult to see a gap between "the childish and the adult" in *The Daydreamer*, as McEwan "manages to combine high literary reflexes with a raw domestic simplicity" (Winder, 1994, para. 2). *The Daydreamer*, in essence, functions as crossover fiction that appeals to both adults and children, and McEwan's "Preface" also confirms this when he suggests forgetting about "our mighty tradition of children's literature" and writing "a book for adults about a child in a language that children could understand" (McEwan, 1995, pp. 8-9). While the *Preface* briefly hints at a new conception of child readership, the narrative gestures toward an even more innovative reconstruction of the child character – and, by extension, of literary childhood – in the following chapters.

Demonizing the Child: "Introducing Peter"

The Daydreamer opens with the adult Peter revisiting his past and reflecting on the child Peter, who was regarded as difficult by the adults. As a child, Peter never understood the reason, but he now recognizes that he was considered difficult because he was different from other children. Peter is indeed unlike the Romantic, or the Edenic child, who disseminates joy and laughter. He is unusually quiet, prefers solitude, and often loses himself in deep thought. His curiosity is directed toward things which are, according to adults, highly unlikely to interest a child. Although "grown-ups like to think they know what's going on inside a ten-year-old's head" (McEwan, 1995, p. 11), they cannot truly know what is happening inside Peter's mind. Therefore, Peter is regarded as not simply difficult but, in fact, dangerous. As Peter's thoughts cannot be easily grasped, he can neither be controlled nor trusted by adults.

Even though curiosity, as emphasized by Nikolajeva, is an expected and encouraged faculty in a child, the stigmatization of Peter represents the conservative adult perspective and its judgment of childhood (2010, p. 173). The adults' perception of Peter as incomprehensible and therefore problematic can be further understood through Michel Foucault's concepts of discipline and biopower as means to regulate individuals, and, ultimately, populations. In *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault (1975/1995) refers to modern institutions such as the army, prisons, hospitals, monasteries, and schools, which use disciplinary methods in order to control "the operations of the body" (p. 136). These disciplinary methods, exercised within these enclosed spaces, produce "docile bodies" that are "subjected, used, transformed, and improved" (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 136). As a result, individuals are trained to be obedient subjects through such control mechanisms as surveillance, examination, and punishment. Foucault's conception of biopower explains how the child is subtly constructed and regulated through complex institutional and societal frameworks shaped by adults. Children's literature, written and controlled by adults, thus functions as another form of biopower that models, reproduces, and normalizes conventional constructions of childhood, as in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Nilay Erdem Ayyıldız, who provides a Foucauldian analysis of children's literature in *The Exercise of Biopower through Race and Class in the Harry Potter Series*, particularly points to contemporary fantasy school stories as offering responses to such power hierarchies. Erdem Ayyıldız, for instance, reads the *Harry Potter* series as a text that challenges hierarchical formations – particularly those related to race, gender, and class–through simultaneous representation and resistance (2020, p. 3). Erdem Ayyıldız's analysis is also relevant to *The Daydreamer*, because Peter is expected to navigate adult desires and fears in order to find acceptance as a normal and thus docile child. The positioning of Peter as "difficult" exposes adults' constructions of the normal and the abnormal, as well as their assumptions about how childhood should be experienced. Peter is encapsulated not only by his school but also by the adult community, which acts as an agent of surveillance, trying to regulate him. Nevertheless, Peter challenges the disciplinary discourses of the adult world by rejecting the notion that children are simple and transparent beings who are available for interpretation and communication, and thus can be regulated. Peter's daydreams grant him an individualized and

independent space rather than serving merely as an imaginative playground. His daydreams, at this juncture, function as a form of resistance to the regulating power mechanisms that organize and control childhood subjectivity.

The adults' failure to empathize with Peter's imaginative mind leads him "to deliberately disregard parental rules," eventually distancing him from adulthood, which he seems to approach with extreme anxiety (Sands-O'Connor, 2012, p. 229). Therefore, the text immediately foregrounds the "clash of worlds, childhood versus adulthood," by setting Peter against "adult prejudice" (Ferrari, 2014, p. 50). Nevertheless, it soon becomes evident that the narrator addresses the reader from a more objective, retrospective standpoint. The adult Peter, now an inventor and writer, records his childhood daydreams in order to render the child Peter more comprehensible. This metafictional approach reduces the distance between the child and "the hidden adult," as conceptualized by Nodelman, and proves to be a conscious attempt to provide an authentic experience of childhood, articulated through the adult self. The adult Peter's record of his daydreams recalls Briony Tallis in *Atonement*, who is similarly "able to judge events from others' perspectives" when she becomes an adult and a writer (Childs, 2005, p. 132). Consequently, McEwan underscores the possibility of reconciliation with the child gaze through writing, as both Briony and Peter are able to process their former disconnection from the adult world by translating their childhood illusions into narrative form.

Body Swaps and Self-Education: "The Dolls" and "The Cat"

The first stories of the collection present Peter's anxious self, his prejudices, and ontological contemplations through his relationship with non-human entities, respectively his sister's dolls and their family cat, William. "The Dolls" portrays Peter's fight against his sister's eerie dolls of various sizes, colors, and types, which appear to watch Peter with an angry stare and talk behind him. Peter's antagonism against the dolls can be examined through two axes. From a psychological perspective, Peter's ambivalent feelings toward them, including curiosity and fear, symbolize his separation anxiety, as Peter harbors a simultaneous innate desire and fear of moving into a separate room from his sibling. Most significantly, Peter's fear and dislike of the particularly androgynous and limbless doll, which he calls "The Bad Doll," introduces additional binaries to the narrative as a postmodern text, such as the human-nonhuman and child-toy binary.

Children's literature, as pointed out by Robyn McCallum, is associated with "the premodern conception" of the self and the child as conceived within liberal humanism and romanticism (1999, pp. 3-4). The Romantic child, as the product of this conception, reverberates with middle-class values of progress, development, as well as "family and altruism" as an epitome of humanist ideology (Erdem Ayyıldız, 2025, p. 318). These associations and moralistic expectations in children's literature, render it into a largely human-centered category. Nevertheless, Peter's daydream disrupts such anthropocentrism, inviting posthuman discussions into both the narrative and these premodern, or Romantic, conceptions of the child. As an uncanny source of mystery and disfigurement, the dolls, which come to life, curse, and attack Peter, then immobilize him by tearing off his limbs and displaying him on the shelf. Peter's extremely grotesque daydream not only breaks the conventional association between children and toys, which are supposed to bring joy and comfort, but also rejects the innate goodness conventionally associated with childhood. Peter, as well as the dolls who replace their lost limbs with those of Peter, become simultaneously posthuman and postmodern subjects of fragmentation that resist wholeness and unity, both as half-human, half-doll figures.

McEwan extends this discussion through another daydream in which Peter exchanges bodies with the family's elderly, solitary, and seemingly wise cat, William, who never rushes, unlike the other family members, who appear to be alienated from each other, sharing almost nothing. Peter's existential questions amidst the meaningless daily routines of modern life, such as schooling, stimulate a desire to become a cat. Peter's impersonation of a cat lying next to William in an attempt to perceive the world through his eyes culminates in an unsettling act of body-

swapping, further emphasizing the fragmented self through the division of body and soul (McEwan, 1995, p. 44).

While Peter's daydream with the dolls emerges as "a lesson against demonizing the other" (Head, 2007, p. 206), his subsequent realization of the dangerous as well as the monotonous nature of cat-life, alongside the burdens of old age, turns into a form of self-awareness, through which Peter learns to appreciate his body, his youth, and his responsibilities. Ultimately, Peter's imaginary transcendence of boundaries between the human and the nonhuman through exchanges of bodies critiques the anthropocentrism that dominates children's literature. McEwan thus moves beyond explicit moralizing in *The Daydreamer* (Head, 2007, p. 206). Peter's capacity to empathize surpasses anthropocentric models in conventional children's literature, resonating with posthuman and postmodern problematizations of binaries and the humanist understanding of a unified self.

Child Gaze in "The Bully" and "The Burglar"

Peter's daydreams in the next stories, as emphasized by Roberta Ferrari, represent his anxieties about "two of the most common threats in a contemporary child's life," which are a bully at school and a burglar at home (2014, p. 50). Peter's encounters with these threatening figures invite the reader to particularly consider such intricate issues as the notion of simulation and the child gaze in terms of how the child perceives and interprets the world, in tandem with discussions of postmodern childhood. In "The Bully," Peter and his friends are unable to comprehend the source of the fear they feel toward Barry Tamerlane, who is notoriously known as the bully of the school. Peter, however, embarks on contemplative reflections after witnessing Barry acting as a regular child, joining in games, laughing, helping his parents, and even keeping a teddy bear in his room (McEwan, 1995, pp. 76-77).

Peter experiences a moment of ontological uncertainty about life itself, which echoes Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), which, in the narrowest sense, suggests the replacement of reality and meaning by images and symbols in the postmodern world dominated by media. Drawing on the discrepancy between Barry Tamerlane's identities constructed at school and those at home, as well as his school friends' conversation suggestive of simulation, Peter comes to suspect that he is living in a simulated world. Reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe's "A Dream within a Dream," Peter's thoughts about "dreaming about daydreaming" in the simulated world highlight the self as a product of a continuous chain of discursive acts (McEwan, 1995, p. 80). Peter ultimately realizes that Barry's power is illusory – and that they have "dreamed him up as the school bully" (McEwan, 1995, p. 84). As such, Ian McEwan's text delves into postmodern discussions of the impossibility of the real, as well as the critique of metanarratives of universal and totalizing truth, as suggested by Baudrillard and Lyotard respectively (1981; 1979).

"The Burglar" similarly presents Peter's encounter with the Other for the second time, further highlighting the child's gaze as juxtaposed with that of the adult. McEwan transmits his view of the disrupted and destructive child gaze from his adult fiction into *The Daydreamer* in a lighter manner, showcasing Peter having illusions shaped by prejudice and misjudgment. Peter as an imaginative, creative, and unconventionally curious child, constructs a narrative around the mysterious local burglar, whom he names "Soapy Sam" (McEwan, 1995, p. 93). His preparations for the burglar with nets, super glue, electric cables, imitation guns, poisoned darts, lassos, pulleys and ropes, and hammers align with McEwan's use of the grotesque in his depictions of the child (McEwan, 1995, pp. 96-97).

Expecting to confront a violent male criminal, Peter discovers that the burglar is Mrs. Goodgame, who is described as "one of those rare unhappy grown-ups who are profoundly irritated by the fact that children exist" (McEwan, 1995, p. 92). The persistent divisions between adult and child, grown-up and young, and old age and youth manifest through children's relationship with the old grumpy Mrs. Goodgame. This antagonism ultimately translates into Peter's daydreams and provides him with a space in which he can physically challenge the disparaging adults. *The*

Daydreamer thus employs the child gaze as what Greenwell reframes as "a distinct narrative mechanism rather than a passive thematic element," which is socio-politically situated (Jiang & Li, 2025, p. 363). Peter's envisioning of Mrs. Goodgame as a villain to be fought specifically renders the child gaze, in Greenwell's words, as "the countersurveillant gaze" (Jiang & Li, 2025, p. 364). Through this mode of the child gaze, children become active agents who deliberately resist those who "hold the power of observation" (Greenwell, 2024; Jiang & Li, 2025, p. 364).

Peter's attempt to exclude Mrs. Goodgame from the community is caused by her constant surveillance of children from her window, through which she monitors, scolds, and controls them. Overall, McEwan's representation of the child gaze reiterates its conventional configuration as limited and thus unreliable, whilst simultaneously empowering it as "an active, critical observer who can subvert dominant power structures" (Jiang & Li, 2025, p. 364). Peter continues to believe that Mrs. Goodgame is actually the burglar even though there is no evidence to support this claim. Daydreaming, which also disrupts the physical connotations of seeing and looking, thus again opens a liberating space for the child gaze to contest hegemonic power structures.

From Idyll to Unruly: Overthrowing Parental Authority

In his interview with Catherine Deveney, McEwan reminisces about his childhood, recalling how he dreamed of being free from paternal authority. He imagined his parents would "somehow painlessly melt away" and disappear, leaving "the ground cleared" for him (qtd. in Ellam, 2009, p. 5). In another interview with Antony Gormley, McEwan (2006) refers to his eight-year-old self, who enjoyed spending his days alone on the beach in Tripoli, when his parents were at work. Being free from adult supervision and control was undoubtedly both liberating and enriching for someone as imaginative as McEwan, who aspired to become a writer.

This parental absence carries both psychological and socio-political dimensions, particularly as it is reconfigured within children's literature. Julie Ellam argues that McEwan's childhood dream reflects a "Freudian formulation of the family romance," in which children dream of independence from their parents as part of the process of growing up (2009, p. 5). In addition to this psychological aspect, the absence of parents also signals a form of liberation from socio-cultural norms, and, in Foucauldian terms, from the mechanisms of biopower imposed on the child. In children's literature, the child is also archetypically required to be free from parental control in order to embark on independent journeys or create idyllic spaces that are closer to nature, unburdened by adult duties and authority.

While the notorious Peter Pan exemplifies this tranquil desire of the Romantic child, his namesake, Peter Fortune, diverges sharply from this conventional representation of the idyll, instead navigating a more unruly imaginative terrain. In "The Vanishing Cream," Peter perceives his family as hopeless, as they sunbathe in the garden "with the debris of their wasted Saturday afternoon – teacups, teapot, newspapers, half-eaten sandwiches, orange peel, empty yoghurt cartons" (McEwan, 1995, p. 65). The kitchen drawer where they keep a collection of random, broken, or useless objects functions, in Ferrari's words, as their "objective correlative," standing for "everything that is wrong with his family" (2014, p. 54; McEwan, 1995, p. 63). Peter's perception of himself as an organized and rational child, juxtaposed with his careless parents, positions him as a rule-maker and order-seeker, thereby challenging the traditional adult-child binary. Peter searches for meaning in a meaningless world, and he comes to view the reckless adults as an impediment to his endeavors. His act of erasing his family by using vanishing cream thus amounts to a form of symbolic annihilation, which cannot be read as an innocent fantasy of escape but rather a violent gesture directed at the adult world.

However, Peter soon experiences a profound sense of fear and loneliness following the disappearance of his parents, and this emotional void can be explained in terms of what Maria Nikolajeva regards as "the dilemma in contemporary juvenile novel" (2010, p. 119). Although contemporary children's literature is expected to emancipate itself from the "didactic" function and the "omniscient adult voice," it is never entirely possible to eliminate the linguistic and

narrative control exerted by the adult over both the young character and the reader (Nikolajeva, 2010, p. 204). Kimberley Reynolds similarly captures this paradox by defining children's literature as "a curious and paradoxical cultural space," one that is simultaneously "regulated and overlooked, orthodox and radical, didactic and subversive" (2007, p. 3). Therefore, Peter's uneasiness caused by his family's physical absence and resulting silence symbolically reflects the literary child's ambivalent relationship with the adult voice, the lack of which leads to feelings of anxiety and emptiness.

The Daydreamer, at this juncture, closely parallels *The Cement Garden*, in which children seek autonomy by escaping parental authority. After the traumatic loss of their parents, the children in *The Cement Garden* begin to explore their sexuality and assume parental roles; however, they can no longer remain fully siblings, nor can they be clearly defined as either children or adults (Erdem Ayyıldız, 2022, p. 30). The parental absence ultimately leads them to detach from the external world, experience a distorted perception of the self, and lose a conventional sense of time (Erdem Ayyıldız, 2022, p. 30). Although Peter's adult-free life does not lead to grotesque consequences, his desire for such a life, as reinforced through his daydreams, culminates in a disruption of his sense of reality, unity, and wholeness. This is symbolically paralleled by the episodic and atemporal structure of the text across its stories. Peter's escape from parental authority through his imaginary journeys ultimately leaves him without guidance, thus "bruised," yet "wiser" (Winder, 1994, para. 4). Unlike in *The Cement Garden*, Peter's experience evolves into an ultimately insightful one, which helps him not simply realize his love for his family but, more significantly, restructure his relationship with authority and move closer to reconciliation (Winder, 1994, para. 4).

Metamorphosis as a Means of Reconciliation: "The Baby" and "The Grown-Up"

Peter's last two metamorphoses into a baby and a grown-up respectively provide *The Daydreamer* with both structural and thematic closure. These transformations guide Peter toward reconciliation not only with his inner conflicts but also with the adult world, marking the beginning of a new phase in his development. First, Peter switches bodies with his baby cousin Kenneth, whom he dislikes because the baby receives all the attention in the household, and also prevents Peter from spending time with his aunt, namely his favorite adult. Once Peter swaps bodies with Kenneth, he "faces the difficulty and frustration of being small in a gigantic world full of dangers" (Ferrari, 2014, p. 54). This realization points instead to a broader and deeper form of contemplation. Peter's metamorphosis echoes fairy-tale transformations, as discussed by Bruno Bettelheim (1977), functioning as a symbolic representation of his moral and social development through processes of identification and empathy. Stories abundant with transformations are aimed at transforming their readers in unexpected ways, and Peter's "shape-shifting" holds such "transformative power" and helps him cross physical borders (Tatar, 2010, p. 55). Peter not only identifies with babyhood, with its vulnerability and incapacity, but also develops a sense of gratitude toward the adults who feed and care for him. While transformation, herein, largely serves "as a solution to a relationship too difficult to manage and comprehend" (Bettelheim, 1977, p. 67), it simultaneously introduces a postmodern sense of disruption by blurring the boundaries between baby and child, as well as between child and adult, thereby destabilizing conventional developmental categories.

Peter's metamorphosis into a grown-up finally completes not only this chain of identification but also the narrative's cyclical structure by returning to the childhood-adulthood binary established early in the book through the adults' stigmatization of Peter as difficult. The dissolution of the adult-child binary unfolds on two key levels. Firstly, twenty-one-year-old Peter struggles to make sense of adult routines and amusements, which he perceives as monotonous and devoid of meaning when compared with the dangerous yet equally enjoyable experiences of childhood. Secondly, adult Peter realizes that he no longer possesses the inexhaustible energy of a child and instead experiences the chronic fatigue that seems to dominate the adult body. Peter's experiences of babyhood and adulthood, as two extremes, point to the liminality of childhood as a stage existing "betwixt and between the positions" (Turner, 1969/1991, p. 95).

Hence, children can be understood, in Victor Turner's words, as "liminal *personae*" or "threshold people," struggling with the anxiety of ambiguity and uncertainty as beings who are no longer babies yet not fully adults (1969/1991, p. 95). Nevertheless, the liminality of childhood, as exemplified through Peter's experience, also serves as a threshold of transformation and growth "in which meaning is questioned, authority unsettled, and subjectivity re-formed" (Nigar & Marshall, 2025, p. 305).

Peter's imagined intimacy with the nineteen-year-old daughter of his parents' friends, in the meantime, offers him a glimpse into other aspects of the adult world, subtly suggesting that adolescence – and with it the awakening of his sexuality – is approaching. Peter's unsettling realization that he, too, will inevitably become an adult carries a quiet sadness, representing not a simple desire to evade future responsibilities, as in *Peter Pan*, but rather a mourning for a childhood that has not yet been lost. As Peter finally contemplates the inevitability of adulthood, he begins to draw Heraclitean inferences about time and change, thereby signaling a sincere acceptance:

> One after the other the endless waves came tumbling and tinkling against the shore, and they seemed to Peter like all the ideas and fantasies he would have in his life. […] And behind all this human movement the ocean bobbed and folded and slid, for nothing could keep still, not people, not water, not time. (McEwan, 1995, pp. 143-144)

In conclusion, Peter's daydreamed metamorphoses are paradoxically both liberating and transformative, as they enable a reconciliation between the child and the adult, a relationship conventionally understood as "impossible." Although instructive in nature, McEwan never drifts into puritanical moralism, Enlightenment idealization, or fairy-tale sentimentality through Peter's metamorphoses. Peter's contemplative metamorphoses instead set him apart from his romanticized and ideologically positioned predecessors, thereby positioning him as a child of the postmodern age who resists binaries. His transformative daydreams symbolically reflect his self-directed inner development and his evolving understanding of his own subjectivity in relation to the external world.

Conclusion

Consequently, this study aims to contribute to McEwan scholarship by reading *The Daydreamer* as a multifaceted and multi-layered text that integrates McEwan's subversive themes, narrative techniques, and philosophical perspectives within a child-oriented framework. McEwan's *The Daydreamer* indeed stands out as a statement of radicalism, reflecting the changing conception of the child in the postmodern age and exemplifying the shifting conventions within the field of children's literature, both of which appear to have long rested on unshakable foundations. *The Daydreamer* is simultaneously intuitive and anti-romantic, undidactic yet educational, and a narrative that transgresses generic boundaries, pointing toward a fluid worldview in which singularity gives way to multiplicity and subjectivity.

The child's gaze, conventionally considered unreliable, is thus ironically affirmed through Peter's daydreams, which blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality, rendering Peter an incomprehensible figure for the adults. Nevertheless, this conventional configuration simultaneously and paradoxically introduces a subjective and individualized space for the child to challenge dominant power mechanisms and discourses that designate him as abnormal. As an unconventional and nonconformist text, McEwan's *The Daydreamer* explores the possibilities of breaking taboos in children's literature at the expense of the sanctified Romantic child, since the Romantic perspective on childhood fails to capture the lived experiences of the child positioned at the threshold of the new millennium. Peter, therefore, as a representative of the postmodern child, dismantles the idealized, angelic, and innocent Romantic child image that is deeply embedded in the history of modern children's literature itself. In this sense, Peter becomes the peculiar and incomprehensible child he is perceived to be, and his dreams serve as an emblem of liberation, particularly insofar as they remain unvoiced. McEwan's experimental fiction for children may be unsettling for the orthodox reader of children's literature. Nevertheless, by

drawing attention to the social, cultural, philosophical, and artistic multidimensionality and dynamism of the concept of childhood, *The Daydreamer* also highlights the different perspectives that children's literature opens up for both the writer and the reader through this very dynamism. Ultimately, McEwan presents childhood as responsive not only to emerging artistic and cultural movements but also to shifting ideological configurations.

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Declaration of AI Use

Any AI-assisted tools, if used, were limited to language editing. No AI tools were used for data collection, analysis, or interpretation of findings. The author(s) assume sole responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and final content of the manuscript.

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