



*Anthony Browne's illustration*

# Metamorphosis of a genre: *The Daydreamer* by Ian McEwan

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**ABSTRACT:** When a major author engages in writing a book for children, it always turns out to be more than a mere incursion into a less prestigious genre. This paper proposes a reading of Ian McEwan's *The Daydreamer* aimed at unveiling its different levels of signification through a study of its paratextual, intertextual, structural, and metafictional components, as well as of its illustrations, in order to show how they synergically contribute to the creation of a dense and most intriguing book capable of throwing new light on our very idea of "children's literature".

**KEYWORDS:** Ian McEwan, *The Daydreamer*, children's literature, metamorphosis, paratext, intertextuality, illustrations

**RIASSUNTO:** Quando un romanziere famoso decide di scrivere un libro per bambini, la sua esperienza va sempre ben oltre l'incursione in un genere minore. Questo saggio si propone di analizzare *The Daydreamer* di Ian McEwan studiandone i diversi livelli di significazione attraverso le componenti paratestuali, intertestuali, strutturali e autoreferenziali, nonché l'apparato di illustrazioni, al fine di evidenziare il modo in cui esse contribuiscono sinergicamente alla creazione di un libro denso e accattivante, capace di gettare nuova luce sulla "letteratura infantile" come genere.

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** Ian McEwan, *The Daydreamer*, letteratura per bambini, metamorfosi, paratesto, intertestualità, illustrazioni



*A children's story is the best art-form  
for something you have to say*

C.S. Lewis

*Children's books, the best of them, are  
not delightful. [...] The artists that do the best ones  
are able to make them delightful on one level,  
but that's just the whipped cream on top.  
Underneath there is something much more*

Arnold Lobel

"This is a species of literature whose boundaries are very hazy": Peter Hunt's lapidary statement in the "Introduction" to his 1990 volume *Children's Literature. The Development of Criticism* still sounds appropriate to describe a literary genre which, despite the amount of critical interest aroused in the last few decades, still eludes a clear-cut definition. The liminal nature of children's literature, inescapably suspended

between different worlds and dimensions –childhood and adulthood, the real and the magic, the human and the animal, the linguistic and the visual– prevents any easy categorization while simultaneously urging a multi-perspective approach capable of encompassing and addressing various interpretive challenges. This is even truer when some famous writer, a well-known poet or novelist, decides to engage in writing for children: the tendency to interpret this operation in the light of the author’s “major” work often implies relegating its specificity *qua* children’s literature to the background of analysis and consequently overlooking the actual contribution to the genre.

Ian McEwan’s *The Daydreamer*, first published in 1994 by Jonathan Cape with illustrations by Anthony Browne, has undoubtedly benefited from the author’s worldwide fame in terms of editorial success; at the same time, however, it has so far elicited limited critical attention on its own, although it poses a series of challenging questions as to its nature and fruition, probing into the field of children’s literature to explore the limits as well as the potentialities of the genre. This paper proposes a reading of *The Daydreamer* aimed at studying its different levels of signification, its paratextual, intertextual, structural, and metafictional components, as well as its illustrations, all contributing to the creation of a dense and most intriguing book that challenges our very idea of what children’s literature is or should be.

The preface McEwan wrote for the 1995 edition of *The Daydreamer* functions as a sort of *a posteriori* programmatic statement. After revealing the circumstances in which the book was conceived and written, a family setting with his two children attentively listening to their father’s reading of each successive chapter and providing “useful editorial comment” (McEwan, 1995: 7) for his revisions, McEwan acknowledges “[t]his pleasant, almost ritualistic exchange” (McEwan, 1995: 7) as the starting point for a deeper reflection on the importance of the sound of an adult voice reading aloud to a listening child. Hence, he decides that his story will be aimed at pleasing both ear and tongue, that is at involving the child as well as the adult in a common adventure promising to be rewarding for them both. Yet, if the author can instinctively decide what the right ingredients of a children’s story are –a good tale, a sympathetic hero, some sort of villain and a well structured plot– he is not so sure as to whether this kind of writing may actually appeal to an adult mind. An adult’s fascination with children’s books usually depends, McEwan convincingly argues, on a nostalgic attitude towards one’s own childhood as well as on “[one’s] children’s pleasure in them”, but the author is rather skeptical about grown-ups really liking children’s stories (McEwan, 1995: 8). Which literary formula, then, should be chosen for a story that might involve both the child and the adult? McEwan provides an answer to this question by describing his operation in terms of “a book for adults about a child in a language that children could understand” (McEwan, 1995: 9). In order to write such a book he decides “to forget about our mighty tradition of children’s literature” (McEwan, 1995: 8-9) and to rely on a simple prose that “need not deter the sophisticated reader” (McEwan, 1995: 9), as Hemingway and Calvino’s examples clearly witness.

The critical reader McEwan has in mind is immediately involved in the intertextual game triggered by the epigraph of the book, the incipit of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It goes without saying that anyone writing about metamorphosis has to come to terms with Ovid's poem in some way or another, but the circumstances of its quotation at the very beginning of this children's book appear more than mere cliché. For his epigraph, McEwan borrows the 1955 translation by Mary M. Innes for the Penguin Books edition, in which Ovid's line, "In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora" is rendered as "My purpose is to tell of bodies which have been transformed into shapes of a different kind". The author's choice of this version can hardly appear accidental: compared to other translations,<sup>1</sup> Innes's overtly foregrounds the storytelling quality of the Latin work ("tell" is used for "dicere"), and it lays particular stress on authorial intention ("My purpose is"), thus emphasizing the kind of metaliterary awareness McEwan needs to affirm at the beginning of this new venture of his. At first sight, the evocation of what we can call, in Bloomian terms, the "great precursor" (Bloom, 1973) might be interpreted as a sort of ironical *reductio* of the invocation to the supernatural, be it muses or gods, which is typical of all classical poems and which, in Ovid himself, immediately follows the line quoted in the epigraph, as the "sophisticated reader" should well know. On closer scrutiny, however, by substituting the gods with the Author and his genius ("animus" in the Latin original), McEwan is *de facto* strongly affirming the centrality of imagination and of storytelling and consequently bestowing artistic dignity upon the work he is introducing.

In this light, even the title of the book may be interpreted from a double perspective: on the one hand, the daydreamer evidently refers to the ten-year-old protagonist, Peter Fortune, whose indulging in fantasy is the very source of both his extraordinary adventures and his problems with the adult world; on the other, the label may perfectly suit the author himself, capable of giving shape to imagination and its dreams through words. No wonder then if Peter is said to have become "an inventor and writer of stories" (McEwan, 1994: 14) in his adult life, which purposely adds an autobiographical flavour to the whole text.

McEwan's book, whose subject matter is "the imagination itself" (McEwan, 1995: 9), is made up of seven stories preceded by a chapter, "Introducing Peter", that functions as a sort of prefatory frame delineating the main features of the protagonist and his environment. Except for the third story, centred on Peter's curious experience with a vanishing cream, the others may be easily grouped in pairs: the first two, "The Dolls" and "The Cat", are stories of metamorphosis in the Ovidian sense of the word, since they recount Peter's taking up the body of, respectively, one of his sister's dolls and the family cat. On the contrary, chapter four, "The Bully", and chapter five, "The Burglar", deal with his encounters with two of

<sup>1</sup> Besides historical translations such as Arthur Golding's, "Of shapes transformde to bodies straunge, I purpose to entreate" (1567) and the one edited by Samuel Garth, "Of bodies chang'd to various forms, I sing" (1717), the most popular contemporary versions are those of More Brookes, "My soul is wrought to sing of forms transformed to bodies new and strange" (1922), and of A.D. Melville, "Of bodies changed to other forms I tell" (1986). For further comparison, see also A.S. Kline's 2000 online version, "I want to speak about bodies changed into new forms", later published in the Borders Classics Series in 2004.

the most common threats in a contemporary child's life by envisaging others' fearful transformations. Further metamorphoses occur in the last two stories, where Peter is led to experience the condition of a nurseling ("The Baby") and a twenty-one-year-old ("The Grown-up").

Peter Fortune belongs to a long genealogy of literary characters that strike for their ordinariness. His introduction by a heterodiegetic narrator in the opening paragraph of the book reminds us of the initial portrait of Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* insofar as it points out what Peter *is not*, despite what grown-ups think of him and, one may add, what the reader may expect him to be:

When Peter Fortune was ten years old grown-up people sometimes used to tell him he was a 'difficult' child. He never understood what they meant. He didn't feel difficult at all. He didn't throw milk bottles at the garden wall, or tip tomato ketchup over his head and pretend it was blood, or slash at his granny's ankle with his sword, though he occasionally thought of these things. Apart from all vegetables except potatoes, and fish, eggs and cheese, there was nothing he would not eat. He wasn't noisier or dirtier or more stupid than anyone he knew. His name was easy to say and spell. His face, which was pale and freckled, was easy enough to remember. He went to school every day like all other children and never made that much fuss about it. He was only as horrid to his sister as she was to him. Policemen never came knocking at the front door wanting to arrest him. Doctors in white coats never offered to take him away to the madhouse. As far as Peter was concerned, he was really quite easy. What was difficult about him? (McEwan, 1994: 7).

Unlike in Austen's ironic description, however, whose standpoint is that of an omniscient narrator who never renounces her role as a competent and sometimes proudly biased commentator, here the passage is character focused and Peter's point of view is set against the background of adult prejudice, immediately foregrounding the "clash of worlds", childhood versus adulthood, which all children's literature dramatizes.

The commonplaces and misunderstandings characterizing the adults' attitude towards children are further highlighted, in this introductory chapter, by some interspersed narratorial glosses in which storytelling shifts from the past of narration to the present of fruition and/or reflection:

Now, grown-ups like to think they know what's going on inside a ten-year-old's head. And it's impossible to know what someone is thinking if they keep quiet about it (McEwan, 1994: 7).

The trouble with being a daydreamer who doesn't say much is that the teachers at school, especially the ones who don't know you very well, are likely to think you are rather stupid. Or, if not stupid, then dull. No one can see the amazing things that are going on in your head (13).

The narrator's voice sounds here benevolent and at the same time competent enough to be able to expand from the particular to the general and consequently make what he is telling effectively bear on the reader/listener, that is, in McEwan's intention, on the adult as well as on the child and their respective experiences.

Once the actual stories begin, however, these narratorial intrusions change in tone and matter as they move from general statements on children and adults to direct interpellations of the reader, mainly aimed at encouraging identification through a sort of *captatio benevolentiae*: "You have to try and imagine" (McEwan, 1994: 24) or "If you believe it is strange [...] then you should know" (28). What accounts for this change? Does it allow us to hypothesize a shift of voice, despite the fact that the whole book is narrated in the third person? We may solve these doubts by paying specific attention to the closing words of the introductory chapter:

And Peter himself learned as he grew older that since people can't see what's going on in your head, the best thing to do, if you want them to understand you, is to tell them. So he began to write down some of the things that happened to him when he was staring out of the window or lying on his back looking up at the sky. When he grew up he became an inventor and a writer of stories and led a happy life. In this book you will find some of the weird adventures that happened in Peter's head, written down exactly as they happened. (McEwan, 1994: 14)

Now, if we are to trust these words, we must interpret *The Daydreamer* as a frame narrative in which the heterodiegetic narrator of the prefatory chapter –the one who willingly comments on children and adults– gives way, in the following stories, to an autodiegetic narrator who disguises himself behind a third person voice,<sup>2</sup> though maintaining the protagonist's point of view throughout. Far from being "authoritative and omniscient" (Malcolm 2002: 189), then, narration in the book seems to share the same metamorphosing quality of the adventures it describes and to subscribe to a tricky confusion of roles further enhanced by the fact that, as already suggested, Peter the writer-narrator-dreamweaver may autobiographically be assimilated to his own creator. This metaleptical correspondence overtly points to the author's intentional playing with the different *personae* of the narrative pact (writer, narrator, character) so as to warn his readers against any simplification as well as urging them to delve into a narrative reality where nothing can be taken for granted.

This reality is characterized by a voluntary blurring of the boundaries separating the real world and the dream, the passage from one to the other being "fairly seamless" (Malcolm, 2002: 188). Each story

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<sup>2</sup> Christine Reynier, who offers a Deleuzian interpretation of *The Daydreamer* as a sort of *Bildungroman* about the configuration of the self, defines it in terms of "une oeuvre où la biographie se confond avec l'autobiographie" (2002: 98).

follows the same structural pattern: within a realistic frame the daydreaming gives birth to a parallel world Peter enters in an abrupt though smooth, almost imperceptible way, and which significantly appears totally similar to the real one as for setting and characters.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the fantastic element –a vindictive staggering doll, a zip that allows a cat’s fur to magically open and let the animal soul out, or the magic effect of a vanishing cream– breaks into an everyday context whose ontological horizon is consequently destabilized.<sup>4</sup> Only at the beginning, namely in the introductory chapter, is the transgression of what Lotman (1976) calls the “frontier” between the IN of the real world and the ES of daydreaming explicitly signalled: here the heterodiegetic narrator evidently feels the need to pinpoint the moment of boundary crossing and he does so in all the three dreams he recounts, either through a verbal tense shift to the present (McEwan, 1994: 11) or by introducing such explicit expressions as “and away in his thoughts went Peter” (10) and “Peter let his mind wander off” (13). In the actual stories, on the contrary, reality slips into dream with no solution of continuity, thus highlighting the everyday quality of daydreaming in a child’s life. This should come as no surprise, after all, if we consider that the stories are supposed to be narrated by the protagonist himself.

The assimilation between the world of reality and the world of fantasy serves the author’s manifest purpose to mix entertainment with reflection. Although McEwan rejects the idea of *The Daydreamer* as a moralistic book –“I wanted self-enclosed, bedtime tales that would take twenty-five minutes to read, that would have strong plots, be surprising, and *contain no hint of moral instruction*” (Louvel, Ménégaldo, Fortin, 1995: 77, my stresses)– it is impossible to overlook the lesson Peter’s adventures implicitly entail.<sup>5</sup> By involving the protagonist in various sorts of metamorphosis, his own transformations as well as other people’s, the stories invite acknowledgement of “otherness” and empathic sharing of others’ points of view – a topical theme in McEwan’s adult fiction since at least *The Child in Time*<sup>6</sup> as part of a sound process of self-recognition which preludes to adulthood.<sup>7</sup> The meeting with the “other” takes on different forms and from the first story, “The Dolls”, to the last, “The Grown-Up”, one may trace an evolution in the

<sup>3</sup> In this sense, I do not agree with Peter Childs’ statement that “daydreaming is an out-of-body experience where the imagination takes the mind far from the individual’s physical environment” (Childs, 2006: 150). In fact, Peter’s adventures are all set in well known and recognizable spaces such as the house and the school, whose physical features are never altered.

<sup>4</sup> This element of “defamiliarization” has been convincingly traced back to McEwan’s early fiction, much of which shares the same atmosphere of ontological puzzling (Malcolm, 2002: 188).

<sup>5</sup> Several critics have pointed out the didascallic import of the book. According to David Malcolm “Many [stories] are rather moral and echo traditional moralizing children’s fiction” (2002: 189), while Head thinks that McEwan avoids the “risk of explicit moralizing” by rendering the moral lesson through “the boy’s excessive and sinister imagination” (Head, 2007: 206). *The Daydreamer* seems in fact to confirm Peter Hollindale’s conviction that the more gifted the writer, the more likely he is to “opt for more circuitous methods” of ideologizing his work: “If the fictional world is fully imagined and realized, it may carry its ideological burden more covertly, showing things as they are but trusting to literary organization rather than explicitly didactic guidelines to achieve a moral effect” (Hunt, 1992: 29).

<sup>6</sup> Ménégaldo has pointed out the recurrence of some “familiar motifs and images [...] used in other stories and novels –for instance the doll motif [...] in *In Between the Sheets*, or the dismemberment motif [...] used in various other stories and in *The Innocent*” (Louvel *et al.*: 77).

protagonist from a frightened and detached attitude to what Reynier calls “l’acceptation de l’autre” (2002: 95).

In the first story, Peter is forced to face and eventually partake of the condition of the fierce Bad Doll, an androgynous, deformed toy with a scornful smile and “left leg and right arm [...] wrenched from their sockets” (McEwan, 1994: 17). The Doll evidently embodies “the disfigured other” (Head, 2007: 206), which the child understandably tends to demonize, although some details in its description obliquely hint at a possible assimilation with Peter, for instance the smell in its breath that betrays a weakness for chocolate the child definitely shares. What the Bad Doll reproaches him is a total lack of empathy:

“That’s ridiculous,” Peter started to say. “You’re only dolls...”

Nothing could have made the Bad Doll more furious. “You’ve seen how we live”, it screamed. “Sixty of us squashed into one corner of the room. You’ve passed us thousand times, and you’ve never given it a thought. What do you care that we’re piled on top of each other like bricks in a wall. You just don’t see what’s in front of you. Look at us! No space, no privacy, not even a bed for most of us [...]” (McEwan, 1994: 23).

By the end of the story, the protagonist changes places with the Bad Doll: the latter borrows his left leg and right arm, leaving him with just two little springs in their place, and heads triumphantly towards the boy’s room, while mutilated Peter is carried off to the top of the bookcase from where he is to enjoy a totally different view of the world. Interestingly enough, in the last paragraphs this game of exchanged perspectives transcends the limits of diegesis to involve the reader who, when Peter’s sister, Kate, enters the room, is invited to “try and imagine the scene from where she stood” (McEwan, 1994: 24). The reader too, then, has to learn how to look at reality from different standpoints and McEwan’s stories may help a lot in this endeavour.

This first story also introduces another crucial paradigm of the book, the opposition order *versus* disorder, which is central to Peter’s adventures as a whole. In his facing reality and attempting to come to terms with it, the child is continuously trying to impose his own “order” on what looks like a complex chaotic world. In May’s words, “he is trying to make sense out of the ‘illogical order’ of the adult world” (May, 1995: 40). Each story variously dramatizes this dichotomy: in the first, for example, Peter and Kate try to organize their common room by drawing an imaginary line to avoid squabbling. On her side of the room, Kate is in total control over her toys, especially her dolls, which she arranges in well defined positions –“their special places [...] where they belonged” (McEwan, 1994: 25)– with the frightful Bad Doll sitting on a bookshelf as far from her bed as possible. When later on, in the protagonist’s dream, the dolls rebel against

<sup>7</sup> “Le moi semble aussi se constituer par rapport à l’autre dans ces textes qui métaphorisent l’éveil de Peter à l’autre, son passage de l’égocentrisme de l’enfance à l’acceptation d’autrui” (Reynier, 2002: 95).

the order Kate forces on them, claiming a right to freedom and making Peter share their disadvantaged condition, the child is obliged to see things from their point of view and consequently try and understand the other's reasons. Also in the third story, "Vanishing Cream", the child gives voice to his evident repulsion in face of the anarchy of a family world whose objective correlative is a kitchen drawer full of random objects. In his dream Peter succeeds in "clearing up" thanks to the vanishing cream he finds in the drawer: he first literally "erases" his sister and parents, the latter held responsible for the surrounding confusion, then he tidies the house up by throwing everything away. The result is a spotless, bare place, which suits the child's aspiration to order but eventually turns out to be full of weird noises that make him feel frightened and, above all, very lonely. An analogous lesson is the one provided by the last but one story, "The Baby": here the element of disruption resides in the unwelcome arrival of a baby cousin, Kenneth, a true invader of the family space. In Peter's eyes Kenneth behaves like a barbarian who grabs and chews everything, and the protagonist does not take long to realize that "The baby had taken over the house. There was not a corner into which his yells, smells and hyena laughter and grabbing little hands did not reach" (McEwan, 1994: 74). Once turned into Kenneth, however, Peter faces the difficulty and frustration of being small in a gigantic world full of dangers and is eventually forced to recognize that there is nothing wrong with his small cousin except for the very implications and hindrances of his age.

The phenomenology of Peter's encounter with "otherness" appears extremely rich: not only is he confronted with different ages of life, infancy as well as adolescence, youth and old age, but he is also allowed a most exciting meeting with the non-human world thanks to his exchanging bodies with William, the family cat. Animals have always populated children's stories and McEwan could not avoid introducing a much loved pet in his description of an "ordinary" boy's life. In doing so, however, he falls prey to no mushy romanticism though granting space to a whole apparatus of magical objects and situations that render this story, together with "Vanishing Cream", the most fabulous of all. Unlike in traditional fairy-tales, though, the gap separating the human and the animal world is here never bridged, in the sense that the two spheres never mix. In fact, the author does not aim at a reassuring obliteration of difference; he rather wants to explore the possibility of coming close to that very alterity and understand it by putting oneself into another's shoes. Which is what Peter does by entering William's body and consequently facing the world through a different, sharper sensitivity: "How wonderful to see into dark corners, to feel every vibration of the night air on his whiskers, and to make himself invisible when, at midnight, a fox came up the garden path to root among the dustbins" (McEwan, 1994: 33).

What has been described as Peter's education to "empathic engagement through an imaginative projection that reverses a child's unpleasant impulses" (Head, 2007: 206) comes to a conclusion with the protagonist's last metamorphosis, which appropriately projects him into adulthood, that is the future he is soon going to experience. In "a humorous version of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*" (Louvel *et al*, 1995: 77), Peter

wakes up one morning “from troubled dreams to find himself transformed into a giant person, an adult” (McEwan, 1994: 89). As a twenty-one-year-old, he comes to know the palpitations of love and finally discovers that being an adult must not necessarily mean giving up adventure and fun, as he had always thought; rather it simply implies enjoying different things, among which, he realizes, “kiss[ing] Gwendoline” is definitely one of the best, the most “thrilling and strange” (McEwan, 1994: 93). As a consequence, Peter’s own attitude towards the grown-ups radically changes: “He felt differently about them now. There were things they knew and liked which for him were just appearing, like shapes in a mist. There were adventures ahead of him after all” (95).

Therefore, by changing sizes, like Alice in Wonderland, Peter changes his perspective on the world and on others. The ten-year-old boy of the opening of the book is twelve at its closing, ready to engage in the biggest adventure of all, life. Walking along the beach towards his friends who are playing on the shore, Peter turns to look at the grown-ups one more time. His is a liminal condition, in between childhood and adulthood, a prelude to the richness and complexity of a life which is overtly metaphorized in the final image of the ocean: “It was sparkling, right to the wide horizon. It stretched before him, vast and unknown. 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” (95).

By sharing the threshold condition of its protagonist, suspended as it is between a novel and a collection of stories,<sup>8</sup> McEwan’s metamorphic book purposely avoids the closure a perfect frame structure would impose. Instead of a circular movement, leading back to the heterodiegetic narration of the Introduction, the book projects both its hero and its reader towards a future that, like the ocean, promises to be generous and plenteous but, at the same time, lurks in the distance as a *terra incognita* still to be explored.

Peter Hunt has observed that, generally speaking, children prefer stories with an element of ‘closure’ – that is, where there is a ‘sense of an ending’. More than this, they prefer that something is resolved, that normality is restored, that security is emphasized. Classic children’s books conform to this pattern; [...] However disturbing the content of the book, resolution will at least temper the effects (Hunt, 1991: 127).

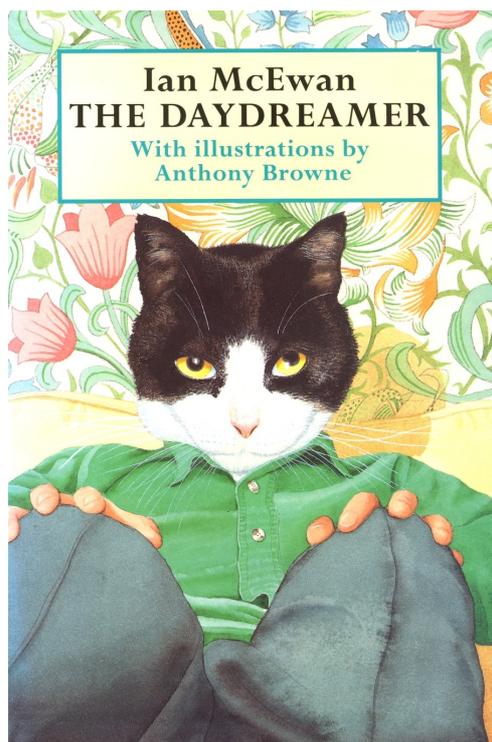
Contemporary children’s literature often transgresses, however, this traditional dictat by calling to its readers to become aware of the far-from-univocal nature of reality, of its ambiguities and aporias. From this point of view, McEwan’s book is no exception: if, on the one hand, Peter eventually realizes the positive implications of growing up, so that, as the author himself admits, “The future is redeemed” (Louvel *et al*, 2010: 77), on the other, the open ending cannot be totally reassuring because of the uncertainty it

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<sup>8</sup> The author himself has highlighted the hybrid nature of his book, defining it “a mating of novel with a collection of stories” (Louvel *et al*, 2010: 77).

inevitably entails. It is in this light that the above cited misquotation of Kafka in “The Grown-up” acquires full meaning: though necessarily far from the claustrophobic distressing atmosphere of its intertext, *The Daydreamer* nevertheless points to the complexity and sometimes apparent incongruity of the world in a similarly uncanny way, soliciting a fruition which is more than a simple enjoyment of a narrative fantasy.

This is confirmed by Anthony Browne’s illustrations in the English and American editions of the book, which provide a powerful visual comment on the text, helping to explicit many of its implied meanings.

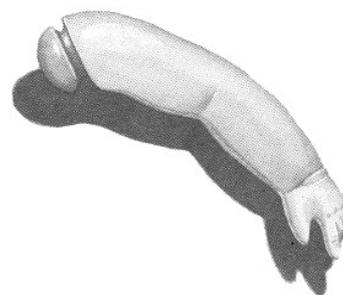
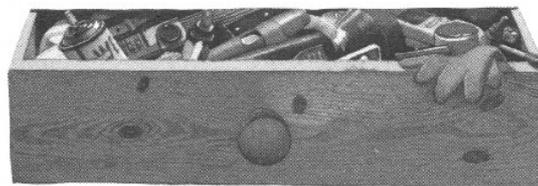
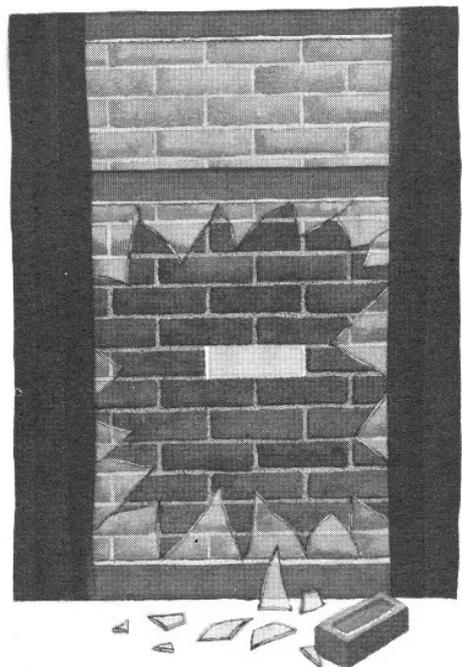


Together with John Burningham, David Macaulay, Chris Van Allsburg, David Wiesner, Browne belongs to a generation of illustrators who have revolutionized the very idea of the picture book by borrowing postmodernist metafictional techniques to produce works characterized by “narrative fragmentation and discontinuity, disorder and chaos, code mixing and absurdity” (McCallum, 1999: 141). In the case of McEwan’s book, Browne’s illustrations consistently add to the mysterious and intriguing nature of Peter’s adventures: except for the cover picture, a coloured portrait of Peter the Cat comfortably sitting in an armchair and enticingly looking at the reader, all illustrations inside are black and white, a choice which can be explained with the intention to avoid an all too easy visual fascination and prompt a deeper observation and interpretation of the images, and consequently of the stories they refer to. Let us concentrate, for instance, on the very first illustration, a couple of pages into the introductory chapter.



It is an apparently realistic portrait, with the protagonist looking neither strange nor particularly “difficult”; his hair is neatly combed and he is wearing a long-sleeved shirt, a pair of dark trousers and belt and a watch on his right wrist. His position is the same as the cat’s on the front cover, literally sunk in the floral patterned armchair. On closer inspection, yet, the picture turns out to be far from reassuring for a series of reasons. First of all, Peter’s look is not relaxed, his eyes are fixed in the distance with a slightly furrowed brow. He is evidently thinking and the setting of his daydreaming can be easily spotted on the left hand side of the picture, where a snowy mountain unrealistically lurks from behind the armchair. In his hand he is holding the coat hanger he intends to use to come down from that mountain sliding on “a length of wire stretched tight between the pine trees” (McEwan, 1994: 10). The picture, then, immediately highlights the inextricable intermingling of reality and daydreaming that is the very key to Peter’s experience. At the same time, it also overtly points to another central concern of McEwan’s book, the unbalanced relationship between childhood and adulthood, here symbolized by Peter’s father menacingly standing on the back of the armchair where he climbs to fix some Christmas decorations. Thomas Fortune’s looming over Peter’s head is a clear metaphor for the adult’s attitude towards the child, who is always expected to conform to the grown-ups’ outlooks, as Peter’s sombre clothes seem to further indicate. The closing of this introductory chapter, however, appears to somehow reassert the power of fantasy thanks to three tiny pictures –a cloud, a glittering eye, and a closed mouth– that obliquely refer to the protagonist’s character and attitude (his head constantly among the clouds, his eye gleamingly lost in some fantasy, and

his mouth that never lets a secret out) and simultaneously foretell the kind of stuff Peter's subsequent dreams will be made on.



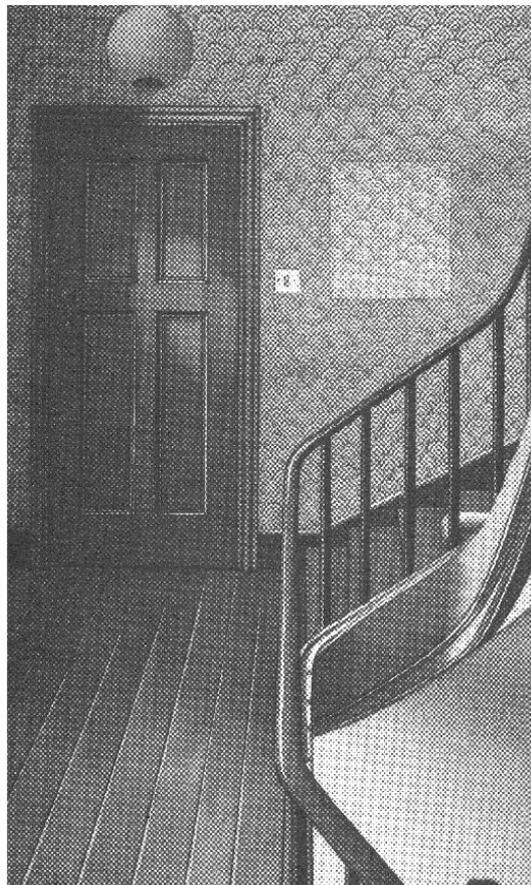
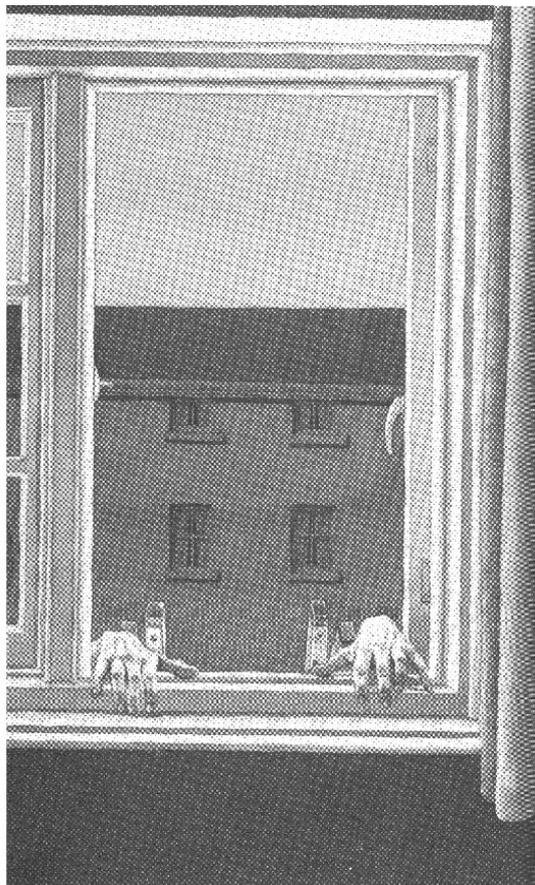
Each chapter of the book is in fact sealed by a small image intended to sum up its content but, instead of visually glossing the comforting outcome of the protagonist's adventure as one would expect, these pictures tend to recall one of its unsettling details: the plastic arm of the Bad doll, the untidy kitchen drawer, the broken glass left by the thief.

Elsewhere, the final image represents the central figure of the story, as in the case of the cat and the baby, whose very essence it intends to capture: cat William is portrayed in a tired, melancholy pose, perfectly suitable to a gentle old pet, whereas cousin Kenneth is playing with a tiny toy house, in an ironical reversal of Peter's own metamorphosis which also prefigures his next transformation into a "giant".



Browne's illustrations effectively catch the disquieting atmosphere of McEwan's stories and they do so by introducing alien elements in an everyday setting: this is the case with the two wrinkled hands groping over the ledge of the window in "The Thief" or with the indecipherable black spot that is half hidden in the lower part of the house interior in "Vanishing

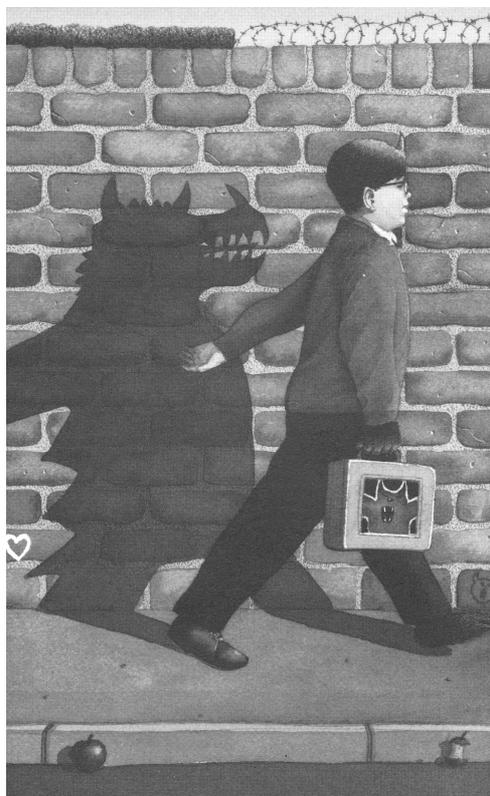
Cream”, where a desolate hallway with a closed dark door on the left and a mounting staircase on the right gloomily objectify Peter’s worst fears.



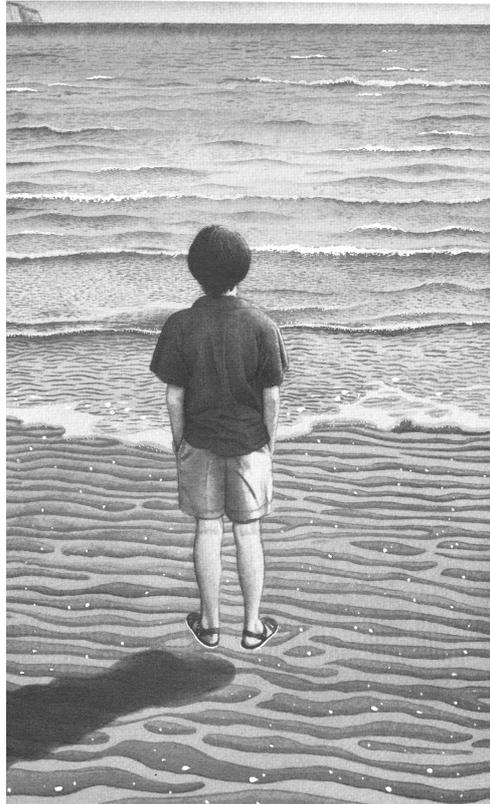
Dark shadows insistently recur in the pictures, menacingly cast by familiar figures and objects, and their variegated occurrence seems to serve a double purpose: on the one hand, it enhances the sense of mystery inherent in the child’s perception of reality; on the other, it warns against the all too frequent danger of projecting unfounded fears onto the others. In “The Bully”, for instance, Peter discovers that Barry Tamerlane (what’s in a name!), the much feared tyrant of his school, is in fact a mummy’s boy with a teddy on his bed and Peter consequently faces him to put a stop to his vexations. These are the protagonist’s reflections:

What made pink plump Barry so powerful? Immediately, from out of nowhere, Peter had the answer. It is obvious, he thought. *We* do. We’ve dreamed him up as the school bully. He’s no stronger than any of us. We’ve dreamed up his power and his strength. We’ve made him into what he is. When he goes home no one believes in him as a bully and he just becomes himself (McEwan, 1994: 55-56).

These thoughts are excellently illustrated by Browne's picture, where Barry appears as a fleshy harmless boy walking along a wall with barbed wire on top (a clear symbol of incomprehension and closure) onto which he casts a monstrous wolfish shadow.

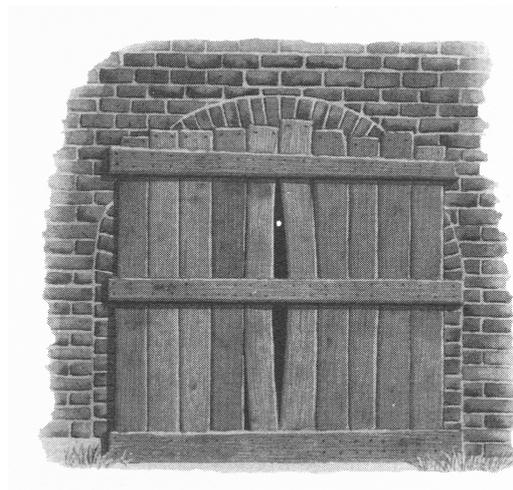


The illustrations for the last story also deserve specific attention. As already pointed out, “The Grown-up” is a metaphor for Peter’s approaching adult life and Browne’s picture stresses this liminal condition of his by depicting him on the seashore, looking into the distance at the ocean and the far-off horizon.



His feet are not washed by the nearby waves for he has not yet been involved in the real turbulence of life and the shadow he casts on the sand looks like an amorphous dark spot, still to be shaped into a well defined personality. The luminous point spots interspersing the sand and progressively disappearing into the water seem to serve as a metaphor for Peter's fantasy and daydreaming, which will accompany him in his journey towards adulthood and will resurface now and then in his life, as the shining foam of the waves here suggests.

For the time being, however, Peter can only curiously peep into the future and the closing image of the book specifically envisages his present condition by representing an arched opening barred with provisional boards.



In its centre two planks look slightly parted and in the darkness behind, one can easily detect the presence of a white spot, probably a twelve-year-old eye that has just started to foretaste his life to come. An image of closure perfectly fits the ending of storytelling but in this case the metafictional bearing of the final illustration happens to be much subtler. After going over the last words of the book, its readers have just stepped out of it and are now looking at Peter's world from outside. What they notice is a minuscule white spot standing out of the dark and they cannot help referring it to Peter the writer-narrator-dreamweaver, the metamorphic hero who has accompanied them so far and now keeps watching over them as they leave. He has taught them how to face problems and overcome fears, how to share others' concerns and standpoints, never proposing any easy solution but always showing the complex and often puzzling essence of reality and the human mind.

With *The Daydreamer* McEwan has created a powerful children's book capable not only of capturing the young mind but also of interrogating the adults' conscience as to their parental and educational role. The author's skilful use of textual strategies, complemented by the visual support of Browne's illustrations, has allowed him a masterly incursion into a genre *The Daydreamer* contributes to firmly establish as literature of the best sort.



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