To Be, Unborn: Fetal Narration and Intertextual Critique in Ian McEwan's Nutshell

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Abstract

This paper examines how McEwan's *Nutshell* (2016) employs fetal narration to engage with Shakespeare's Hamlet and to offer a broader critique of Enlightenment epistemology. The novel is narrated from within the womb, a liminal space characterized by sensory immersion. This setting challenges traditional ideas of knowledge as primarily visual, instead emphasizing auditory and tactile perceptions. McEwan's story is told from the unique perspective of an unborn child, who provides insightful commentary on family relationships, betrayal, and moral ambiguity. By paralleling characters from Hamlet—Trudy as Gertrude, Claude as Claudius, and the unborn child as Hamlet—this paper demonstrates how, while maintaining the core of Shakespeare's exploration of existential dilemmas, McEwan's version critiques and reflects contemporary social issues. It uses textual analysis to explain how *Nutshell* highlights themes of violence and indecision, similar to those in Hamlet, emphasizing the complexities of identity formation within family settings. Additionally, the fetal perspective raises intricate ethical questions about complicity in judgment and the nature of trustworthy narration. The paper argues that McEwan's *Nutshell* acts as both a tribute to *Hamlet* and a recontextualization of its themes for a modern audience, showcasing Shakespeare's philosophical influence and lasting impact on literary tradition.

Keywords: Intertextuality, ethical narratology, unreliable narration, fetal perspective, *Hamlet*'s adaptation, *Nutshell*, McEwan

أن تكون، غير مولود: السرد الجنيني والنقد التناصي في رواية إيان ماك إيوان "قشرة الجوز "

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الخلاصة

تقدم هذه الدراسة تحليلاً لرواية إيان ماك إيوان (قشرة الجوز) مه التركيز على توظيف السرد الجنيني كوسيلة للتواصل التناصي مع مسرحية شكسبير (هاملت) وكمدخل لنقد الأسس المعرفية لعصر التنوير. تروى أحداث الرواية من داخل الرحم باعتباره فضاء حدي يُشكل التجربة الحسية حيث يقلب هذا المكان التصورات الكلاسيكية للمعرفة القائم على أساس بصري تحكي رواية ماك إيوان من منظور طفل لم يولد بعد حيث يقدم نقداً . ليرفع من شأن الحساسية السمعية واللمسية كمصدر للمعرفة ثاقباً عن العلاقات الأسرية ، الخيانة والغموض الأخلاقي من خلال محاكاتها لشخصيات هاملت حيث ترودي في دور جرترود،

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كلود في دور كلوديوس والجنين في دور هاملت. توضح هذه الورقة كيف إن نسخة ماك إيوان مع محافظتها بجوهر استكشاف شكسبير للمعضلات الوجودية ، تقدم نقاشاً نقدياً مع هموم المجتمع المعاصر. توظف الورقة البحثية التحليل النصي لتوضيح كيف تجسد رواية (قشرة الجوز) مواضيع العنف والتردد المتشابهة مع مواضيع هاملت مع التركيز على تعقيدات تشكيل الهوية ضمن سياق العلاقات الأسرية. بالإضافة إلى إن السرد الجنيني يثير أسئلة أخلاقية معقدة حول المشاركة في إصدار الاحكام و طبيعة السرد الموثوق نفسه وحدود المعرفة. ختاماً ، تستنتج الورقة إن رواية (قشرة الجوز) ليست مجرد تكريم خالد لمسرحية هاملت بل هي إعادة صياغة لمواضيعها لجعلها ملائمة للقراء المعاصرين يجعلها شاهدة على التأثير الفلسفي لشكسبير في التقليد الأدبي

الكلمات المفتاحية: التناص ، الاخلاقيات السردية , الرواي غير الموثوق ، المنظور الجنيني ، اقتباس هاملت ، قشرة الجوز ، إيان ماك إيوان

1. **Introduction**

Ian McEwan, born on June 21, 1948, is a contemporary British writer known for his provocative novels and short stories dealing with personal and political themes. He graduated from the University of Sussex with a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and began his writing career as a novelist. He succeeded with his debut major work, *The Cement Garden* (1978), and subsequent works gained critical and commercial acclaim (1, 2009). Moreover, as a prolific writer of novellas, short stories, plays, and screenplays, McEwan often explores the failure of the physical and moral boundaries of the individual and the risks of intimacy. He approaches the physical body as an expression of politics and ideology and discusses the relations between the natural and social bodies (2, 2015, 4-6).

As one of the leading contemporary British novelists, Ian McEwan's writing explores transgressed moral boundaries, psychological complexity, and the intersection of the personal and political. Atonement, for example, examines the ethical dilemmas that contributed to it winning the Booker Prize through formal innovation. Therefore, reinterpreting Shakespeare's Hamlet has become a well-established focus of Nutshell, as it shares themes of betrayal, revenge, and moral ambiguity with the Play, viewed through the innovative perspective of a fetal narrator.

Nutshell was published in 2016 by Ian McEwan and is an adaptation of *Hamlet* set in contemporary London. The novel features the monologue of an unborn child in the womb of Trudy, a woman who is at odds with the child's father, John. The monologue reflects the child's observations and thoughts about the outside world, family, and society, revealing a wise and witty narrative. The narration combines the child's basic instincts and gradual understanding of the outside world, using the womb as a subjective container. The primary analysis method involves closely reading both *Nutshell* and *Hamlet*, focusing on character dynamics, thematic elements, and narrative structure. The study is grounded in intertextual theory, drawing on foundational concepts from literary theorists such as Roland Barthes. Barthes' notion of a text as

a "multi-dimensional space" is used to understand how *Nutshell* engages with *Hamlet* through a web of allusions and thematic echoes. This theoretical framework supports the argument that McEwan's narrative is not merely a retelling but an active dialogue with Shakespeare's work that invites multiple interpretations.

Ian McEwan's *Nutshell* acts as a satirical reinterpretation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, uniquely narrated from the perspective of a fetus. McEwan's admiration for Shakespeare is well-documented and manifests in his literary ventures. While direct citations of Shakespeare's language are sparse, *Nutshell* draws extensively from *Hamlet*'s themes and narrative structure. McEwan reimagines the main characters to establish intertextual links that deserve closer study. This paper uses textual analysis to examine the critique between the characters of Hamlet and Nutshell: Trudy as Gertrude, Claude as Claudius, the ghost King Hamlet as John, and ultimately, Prince Hamlet as the unborn baby.

2. Methodology

This article employs a dual methodological approach to analyze Nutshell's intertextual connection to Hamlet. First, a comparative close reading highlights similarities in narrative structure, character interactions, and thematic issues. McEwan's adaptation of Shakespearean motifs into a 21st-century domestic thriller is evident in the cross-referencing of key scenes from each text, such as Claudius' murder of King Hamlet and Claude's plot against John. The soliloquies of the fetal narrator align with Hamlet's famous monologues, such as "To be or not to be," to examine continuities and breaks in their existential reflections.

Second, a narratological analysis explores the implications of using fetal narration as an intertextual device. Using Gérard Genette's theory of narrative perspective (1980), the study demonstrates how the womb's enclosure shapes a narrative situation of internal focalization through a homodiegetic narrator. This voice combines limited sensory input (e.g., eavesdropped conversations, muffled sounds) with early observations about the nature of existence.

This strategy emphasizes the fetus's dual identity as both insider and outsider. This theme reflects Hamlet's sense of alienation but reverses its cause: Hamlet's isolation is philosophical and self-inflicted, whereas the fetus's situation is a biological inevitability. Trapped inside the mother, who witnessed his crime, the fetus—destined to be born into a world of revenge—is powerless to prevent it.

To contextualize these readings, the analysis draws on intertextual theory, especially Barthes' argument that "a text is a tissue of quotations" (3, 1977), to illustrate how the language, symbols (e.g., poison, decay), and moral ambiguities of Hamlet are repurposed and reframed in

Nutshell. Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotype" (4, 1981) also explains how McEwan transforms Shakespeare's expansive court drama into the spatiotemporal framework of a single London townhouse and a nine-month-old fetus.

3. Importance of Intertextuality in Literary Analysis

Literary theory and intertextuality are related on multiple levels as an interpretation of a specific intertextual element. Intertextuality has shifted the foundational concepts, objects, and construction of literary theory. It is the 'space' where relations between texts configure a dynamic field of meanings. In this field, a text's meaning emerges from its interplay with relevant contexts (5, 2013, 155). Further, according to Barthes, a text refers not only to a single work but to the complex networks of textual ties engaged in constructing this work, where no text is ever wholly original but is always a reproduction of preceding texts, originally appropriating or transforming them into new texts. Barthes states that a text is "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash." He views the text's intertextuality as endlessly expanding. A text is not a unified authorial consciousness but a plurality of voices, utterances, and texts: "the already read and the already written" (3, 146), and its meaning resides in its relations to other texts.

Intertextuality, the shaping of a text's meaning by another text, has garnered significant attention in recent years, particularly in discussions of how literature interacts with other forms of writing and artistic expression. Literary critics have debated the implications of various theories of intertextuality for the writing and reading of stories, poetry, and drama. At the outset, asserting that intertextuality is essential to any comprehensive literary analysis is vital. By recognising and explaining conscious, unconscious, and inadvertent intertextual references, the meaning and significance of a literary work are increased, resulting in a more complete understanding and interpretation (6, 2018, 85). Literary critics are often called upon to make connections between different texts in ways that broaden, deepen, and otherwise enrich the reading of a story, poem, or play. Therefore, exploring intertextuality is a logical first step toward considering various texts in Ian McEwan's *Nutshell* that interact somehow with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Furthermore, the significance of intertextuality extends beyond mere understanding and interpretation. It highlights the connections between literary works and various forms of writing, art, and culture, emphasising literature's dynamic nature. This focus on intertextual relations unveils the rich tapestry of influences, adaptations, and transformations that shape literary traditions, paving the way for new avenues of inquiry and exploration. Intertextuality challenges

the idea of a singular, fixed interpretation of a text, encouraging multiple readings and responses that reflect the audience's diverse experiences and perspectives (7, 1998).

Hamlet's lasting legacy underscores its importance and its ability to inspire writers across eras. The core themes of both *Hamlet* and *Nutshell* include violence, betrayal, family relationships, and the burden of revenge. Both stories examine the existential struggles faced by their protagonists, set in turbulent environments marked by tragedy and moral ambiguity. As *Nutshell* is narrated in complex detail within the womb, paralleling Hamlet's plot of royal conflict, it offers profound insights into the human condition.

Hamlet's plot centers on the titular prince's existential crisis, filled with moral ambiguity and ethical dilemmas, as he navigates the dangerous world around him. Denmark symbolizes the standard of uncertainty in modern society, often described as a "rotten" kingdom—a theme echoed in Nutshell, which explores betrayal and family dishonesty. In analyzing character relationships, notable parallels emerge: Trudy represents Gertrude's reckless desires, while Claude acts as the calculating Claudius, further linking their motives. The tainted milk metaphor reappears—symbolizing corrupt family foundations—adding to a morally complex environment where agency and betrayal are prominent. Both stories examine relationships between parents and children, providing stark reflections on loyalty, fidelity, and the weight of inherited legacies.

Employing the fetus as a narrator calls into question traditional modes of engagement, demonstrating how McEwan interlaces psychological depth with social commentary in a manner reminiscent of Shakespeare's soliloquies. These dramatic monologues serve as windows into character consciousness, fostering a dialogue that critiques the human experience along generational lines.

3. **Ian McEwan's *Nutshell***

Nutshell (2016) adopts a unique voice, taking the form of an interior monologue spoken by an unborn child. By setting the novel in London townhouses, which become the centre of a duplicitous conspiracy. This perspective opens up a rich vein of philosophical and cultural commentary and a cascade of literary allusions that lend the narrative intertextual depth. This imaginative yet unconventional narrative is not only a retelling of the classic story of Hamlet but also presents a new twist, told from the perspective of the unborn child—an original approach that provides fresh insight into this literary tale.

Set against contemporary settings, it is neither an exact nor a complete retelling of *Hamlet*. There is a well-known literary tradition in which its textual shadows seem everywhere. The iconic phrases such as "to be or not to be," "avenge his foul and most unnatural murder," and

"get thee to a nunnery, go; farewell" are woven into the interior monologue and its irony (8, 2010). Though they seem to resonate, their echoes do not penetrate deeply into the current narrative and its contemporary setting. Nonetheless, one similarity remains: the centrality of the murder plot—the murder of Hamlet's father, King Hamlet, by his uncle, Claudius, early in one of the most popular revenge plays. There seems to be a shift in agency, too, as the murder plot in the current narrative redirects its actions toward the mother, unlike in the original *Hamlet* narrative.

The mother, Trudy, transforms into a woman of perilous desire and one of the courts, engaging in suspicious, duplicitous actions. Generally, this mother figure openly pursues her desire for a new man and schemes to kill her ex-husband. In other words, the story not only appears disturbing and unnatural but also depicts this maternal role as motivated by Machiavellian machinations of greed and murderous intent. Alongside the constant flow of torrents and their dampness, there is a thick layer of filth, blood, and horror, paired with an ironic sense of discomfort and moral disdain. This contrast broadens the perspective on morality, responsibility, justice, and evil. From the very first line, the novel establishes the narrator's intrauterine setting with a philosophical tone, implying that the unnamed narrator is inside a womb.

> So here I am, upside down in a woman. My arms are patiently crossed, waiting and wondering who I am and what I am in for. My eyes close nostalgically when I remember how I once drifted in my translucent body bag (9, 2016, p. 1).

The novel takes place in London, where the narrator observes events in his mother's life from inside the womb as she nears birth. The narrator wonders what the world outside will be like and how he will fit into it. He soon becomes aware he is in a precarious situation: his mother, Trudy, has become romantically involved with his uncle, Claude. Trudy and Claude plan to kill her husband, John, and secretly take control of his wealth and property. Knowing about the plot, the narrator tries to warn his mother while contemplating the philosophical and metaphysical aspects of his perspective. However, the fetus loves his mother and wrestles with conflicting feelings throughout the story.

> What ho! Another round here for us, friends! Nevertheless, no, she restrains herself for the love of me. Moreover, I love her—how could I not? The mother I have yet to meet, whom I know only from the inside. Not enough! I long for her external self. Surfaces are everything. I know her hair is "straw fair," that it tumbles in "coins of wild curls" to her "shoulders the white of apple flesh," because my father has read aloud to her his poem about it in my presence (9, 2016,p.14).

The nine-month-old fetus who resides in Trudy's womb is listening and witnessing everything, although his mother, Trudy, is unaware of this fact: " I've no choice my ear is pressed all day and night against the bloody walls. I listen, make mental notes, and I'm troubled. … I'm terrified by what awaits me, by what might draw me in" (9, 2016,p.2)

4. **Intertextual Critiques in *Nutshell***

Nutshell offers one of the most unique perspectives in storytelling. The challenges of writing an entire narrative from the viewpoint of a baby in the womb are significant. Still, the author successfully overcomes the obstacles posed by the use of such an unusual narrator. The events are told from a womb, narrated by an unborn child who is a witness to conspiracies and murderous plots. Despite having a limited perspective and understanding as an unborn child, the narrator's interpretations of the events are compelling. The intertextual critique between *Nutshell* and Hamlet is rich and layered. Modeled after Hamlet, the plot encourages comparison of characters, foils, narrative perspective, and the autobiographical elements of both texts. While a departure in form, *Nutshell* continues McEwan's thematic interest in transgression. It uses classic Gothic features such as the claustrophobic setting of the womb and the psychological horror of intimate betrayal, engaging with conspiracy, murderous plots, existential questions, and "beyond" narratives, demonstrating Gothic elements. Rising in popularity from the late 1970s onward, the gothic narrative describes modernity's uncanny, unnatural, and mysterious aspects, often viewed through the darker lens of irrationality. Fitting with the critic Fred Botting, who states that modern Gothic tends to locate horror in the perversion of the familiar, here turning the domestic space and the maternal body into a site of unnatural threat. Thus, *Nutshell* is an appropriate demonstration of Gothic fiction (14, 1964

Telling the story of Trudy, a pregnant woman on the verge of escaping with her lover to murder her husband, an aspiring poet debates the perversity of the conscious experience. In a *Nutshell*, Ian McEwan's ambitious modern retelling of a well-known narrative unabashedly acknowledges its "dishonest" reworking of an iconic drama. Its opening line recalls a great English writer who, having completed a celebrated tragic drama, then deigned to take it in hand and scribble a ridiculous imitation, which is presented as an extravagant low-life parody of the high tragedy central to the former work of *Hamle*t.

Although Trudy is separated from her husband, John, she lives in the London home he inherited from his parents, while John lives in a small apartment. The house, as a family property, is worth millions of pounds, and she plans to kill her husband, sell the house, and reap the rewards.

Trudy is unfaithful to and contemptuously ridicules the baby's father, John. The unborn fetus learns of a murderous conspiracy led by Trudy and Claude, John's brother and Trudy's lover, aimed at violently usurping his father's wealth through parricide. Despite the absent mind of a fetus, confining the narrator with a lack of bodily movement and liberty, the adventure plunges into the dark underbelly of adult hearts filled with lust, greed, envy, and betrayal, discovering outside events revolving around the scandal and foreshadowing shocking family tragedies.

The different characters in *Nutshell* also serve distinctive functions to deepen the clash between free will and fate as their relationships develop. Both Trudy and Claude desire to make their own choices in life, but they also contend with their respective pasts. On the other hand, the Ghost explores the roles of fate and the call for revenge, illustrating the debate between destined revenge and self-imposed revenge. Lastly, different characters also embody various ideas of jealousy, with each person's experience and treatment of jealousy varying from one to the next. Here, jealousy is central to the story and adds a twist to the revenge plot, as Hamlet's jealousy results in the failure of vengeance.

The connection between characters is apparent in these two works. Trudy is seen as a mix of Gertrude, Ophelia, and Claude, combining traits of Claudius and Polonius. Additionally, Trudy, with her worldly experience, prepares to guide her child into this world. This contrasts sharply with Ophelia, who lacks such life experience. As a result, the connection combines Gertrude and Ophelia into a single character, making her both a target of righteous anger in *Hamlet*'s conflict to act and also showing the impulsivity and physical desire he condemns.

5. The Fetal Perspective: Questioning Narration and Reliability

Ian McEwan's novel *Nutshell* does not just retell Shakespeare's story but instead reimagines it in a modern yet refined setting through a unique first-person narrative voice. *Nutshell* also emphasizes guilt and jealousy, which are implicit in *Hamlet* but not particularly Shakespeare's own. Another important aspect of McEwan's art is his strong, dependable narrator—an unborn infant with extraordinary perceptions and intellectual abilities who conveys the thoughts and experiences of the nearby adults. This widespread perspective allows McEwan the freedom to be ironic, to make revealing allusions, and to enjoy clever wordplay while immersing the audience in a deep layer of irony.

It is recommended that the reader imagine Hamlet's character, soliloquizing inside his mother's womb, visualizing himself as a nine-month-old fetus. This fetus is aware of his mother, Trudy, who is portrayed as both beautiful and cunning, and Uncle Claude, depicted as a dull and

oversexed fool plotting his father's murder. The use of a first-person narrator is both practical and effective, enabling a sophisticated and engaging exploration of deep themes such as madness and murder. The perspective of the unborn child is a tragicomic view: humorous in the sense of adults' foolishness in ignoring what is truly important, and tragic in that the most vital understanding of life remains forever out of reach for humanity.

Encountering a fetus contemplating is a novel and evocative idea. Still, it becomes even more remarkable when the unborn are depicted performing philosophical rhapsodies and solving a murder mystery before birth. Although this concept leans more toward fantasy than reality, it remains captivating. Ultimately, as readers and humans, we cannot remember what it was like to be a baby. How much awareness did we have of our environment? What would it feel like to be highly observant and unborn? "I consider myself an innocent, unburdened by allegiances and obligations, a free spirit, despite my modest living room. No one to contradict or reprimand me, no name or previous address, no religion, no debts, no enemies" (9, 2016, p.10).

The pregnant woman's fetus narrates the story, giving the novel a distinct viewpoint. Luckily, he is a quick learner and a bright unborn baby. The fetus can hear and understand everything. He can even discuss vintages he knows her wine. Pregnant women are not supposed to drink wine, but the fetus's mother seems careless about his health and safety:

> Trudy cools our wine with plastic cubes of frozen ethanol. I occasionally get a herring craving. Across my back, I feel a book resting on her stomach. The podcasts she listens to on her earphones and the radio teach him a lot. Like a tight-fitting cap, I wear my mother (9,2016,p.29)

In *Living to Tell About It* (2005), James Phelan argues that narrative form preeminently says something properly ethical, influencing readers' judgments through a formative dynamic of voice, focalisation, and reliability. In a *Nutshell*, Ian McEwan uses the fetus's paradoxical narration — simultaneously naive and cynical, intimate yet detached — to unsettle the reader's empathy and complicate ethical judgment. Through Phelan's lens, the fetus becomes a master class in rhetorical unreliability, its voyeuristic closeness and Trudy's betrayals prompting readers to contend with a maze of complicity and critique.

Phelan characterises such a dynamic under the rubric of unreliable narration that the narrator's version of events "those principles (those audience expectations, the norms," implied by the author) [that] the reader may 'resist, correct, or reject' the narrator's frame of reference (10, 2005). The voice of the fetus embodies this tension. Though ostensibly innocent — a "free spirit" unencumbered by "debts or enemies" (9, 2016,p.10) — its observations are steeped in irony and world-weariness. Between the touch of a mother and the gaze of an overseer, for

example, the narrator describes Trudy's body with tactile immediacy — "her breasts brush my forehead" (9,2016,p.14) — collapsing the distance between womb and voyeurism. This double perspective compels the readers to wonder whether the fetus is a passive observer or an agent in Trudy's moral corruption, reflecting Phelan's observation that "unreliability can unsettle our ethical bearings" (10, 2005).

This dual perspective of the "experiencing self," the naïve fetus, and the "narrating self," the retrospectively reflective voice, coexists (10, 2005) in the fetus's narration. The fetus's declared innocence, "I count myself an innocent", contradicts its sardonic commentary on Trudy's "straw fair" hair and Claude's "vapid" charm (9,2016, p. 22). This division generates ethical tension: the reader must reconcile the narrator's childlike innocence with its Shavian critique of adult duplicity. When he ponders, "I am the ultimate insider, yet shackled to the ultimate outsider" (9, 2016, p. 25), she captures Phelan's idea of what can be called "bonding unreliability," where the narrator's shortcomings serve ironically to deepen reader connection (10, 2005).

The fetus's embodied closeness to Trudy's transgressions — overhearing conspiracies, tasting her wine, feeling her shudder — implicates it in her sins. Phelan claims that narrative proximity can "raise ethical stakes" by … "aligning readers with morally fraught perspectives" (10, 2005). Take, for example, when the fetus latches onto Trudy's "apple flesh" shoulders (9,2016,p.14), and the sensory detail sways between maternal bonding and sexual objectification. Readers are forced to question their ethical standing: Does fetal helplessness make its voyeurism acceptable, or does the silent witness imply implicit consent?

It reinterprets *Hamlet*'s ethical dilemmas through a Phelanian lens, using McEwan's narrative approach. Even as Hamlet's soliloquies encourage introspection, the fetus's narration involves readers in its moral struggle. The question "to be or not to be" shifts to an existential and ethical issue: how to judge a narrator whose innocence is challenged by its physical entrapment. By grounding *Hamlet*'s themes in an unreliable fetal voice, McEwan critiques the idea of objective morality as an illusion and instead advocates for the power of narrative to "shape and unsettle" ethical certainty (10, 2005).

6. Ethical Narratology and the Womb's Witness: Judgment in *Nutshell*

Ethical narratology argues that narrative form — how stories are told — is inseparable from moral meaning, directing how readers understand characters, actions, and values. Ian McEwan's *Nutshell* — its fetal narrator poised between innocence and complicity, observation and impotence — is a radical case study of how the design of a narrative alters the reader's ethical judgment. By placing the reader inside the womb's claustrophobic space, McEwan sets a

rhetorical snare: we are made voyeurs to a plot to commit murder, forced to construe ethicality through a narrator whose own agency is as curtailed as the confines of his physical being.

Martha Nussbaum claims that literature cultivates ethical insight by encouraging empathy for others' experiences (11, 1995). However, *Nutshell* complicates that premise. The fetus's narration evokes empathy through its helplessness: "I am terrified by what might draw me in," but also implicates readers in its helpless complicity. As the fetus eavesdrops on Claude's plans to poison John, we feel its visceral dread — "a sourness floods my inner sea," says the narrator (10, 2016, p. 45) — while helpless to intervene, parallel to the narrator's paralysis. This narrative strategy, according to Wayne C. Booth, is helpful in that it "binds [s] the reader to the protagonist's perspective, for better or worse" (12, 1961, p. 9). The binding is literal here: the womb becomes an unethical echo chamber where readers grapple with their moral limits.

James Phelan's theory of "dual focalisation" (2005) makes evident the fetus's double life as a naïve observer and a cynical commentator. For example, the narrator describes Trudy's "straw-fair" hair as "tumbling in coins of wild curls" (10, 14), which at first calls up maternal tenderness. However, this lyricism is at odds with his later critique of her "greedy, stupid" affair (9, 2016, p. 67), manifesting a voice that swings between romanticism and disillusionment. This unreliability, according to Phelan, "destabilises the reader's ethical footing" (10, 2005, p. 11), challenging us to wonder whether the fetus is a victim of circumstance or a juror in utero.

McEwan uses dramatic irony to create a disparity between the fetus's knowledge and the reader's. Where the narrator gets it as a sensory indulgence, "ethanol warmth", its readers see it as reckless endangerment — a breach of maternal duty. This irony, as Adam Zachary Newton argues, "heightens ethical stakes by exposing the limits of the narrator's world" (Newton, 1995,p.23). The fetal ignorance of birth's necessity, "What awaits me?" deepens its existential naïveté, for the reader's knowledge of morality outside its womb proves vast.

6.1 Intertextuality as Ethical Critique

Sentimental revisions to the prose at hand extract comic value from reimagining *Hamlet* in a novel that reinterprets the ethical dilemmas of its Shakespearean original through a narratological perspective. Where *Hamlet* debates action versus inaction, the fetus's passivity is biologically necessary, rendering traditional ideas of agency irrelevant. Because Claude's murder plot parallels Claudius' regicide, it unfolds as a mundane domestic matter governed by the laws of amniotic fluid rather than by courtly schemes. This change critiques the gendered ethics of tragedy: Gertrude's sidelining of *Hamlet* is perversely reversed in Trudy's heteronormative centrality, her agency vilified and justified both through the fetal perspective.

The womb's physical limitations — its muffled sounds, distorted perceptions, and temporal stasis — correspond to the fetus's moral limitations. Merleau-Ponty notes, "The body is our medium for having a world" (13, 1954,p.147), and here, the body becomes a narrative prison. However, the fetus, despite its cognisance, cannot act — a parody of Kantian ethics, moral obligation, but no agency. This paradox leads readers to wrestle with their impotence, not unlike Hamlet's "thinking too precisely on the event" (13, 1954, p. 41), and whether judgment without action is a moral failure in its own right.

Using the tools of ethical narratology, *Nutshell* becomes a metafictional critique of the power of storytelling to both implicate and exonerate. The fetus's narration — a stroke of unreliable empathy — compels readers to wrestle with the uncomfortable fact that ethical judgment is often a luxury of the able-bodied, action-oriented, non-fetuses. Thus, McEwan's womb becomes a microcosm of the narrative itself: a place where morality is felt, argued, and deferred but rarely resolved.

7. Echoes Across Time: Comparing *Hamlet* and *Nutshell*

The basic plots of Duncan's murder by Macbeth and Claudius' murder of King *Hamlet*, along with his marriage to Gertrude, are once again paralleled in the murder scheme against an innocent husband by his wife in Nutshell. McEwan keeps *Hamlet*'s most powerful plot device in his story. As the quotes demonstrate, Claude is portrayed as pretentious and self-important, seeking pleasure in trivial matters. Phrases like "irritated grasp" and "snapping of dry fingers" reveal Claude's impatience and craving for attention. "There follows in sequence Claude's irritated gasp, an imperious snapping of dry fingers, the kind of obsequious murmur that emanates, so I would guess, from a waiter bent at the waist, the rasp of a light" (9, 2016, p.13). He is also described as "And Claude, like a floater, is barely real. Not even a colorful chancer, no hint of the smiling rogue. Instead, dull to the point of brilliance, vapid beyond invention, his banality as finely wrought as the arabesques of the Blue Mosque" (9, 2016, p.22).

In *Hamlet*, Gertrude is not an evil or scheming woman, but she colludes with Claudius after betraying her son, Hamlet's rightful claim to the throne. Similarly, in Nutshell, such a woman conspires with her lover, Claude, against her innocent husband, John, for his wealth. Although the outcomes are different in these cases, the core nature of these characters remains the same.

In analyzing Hamlet and the unborn child in Ian McEwan's Nutshell, a shared thematic engagement with existential questions can be identified, although it is contextualized within different settings. As the central figure in Shakespeare's tragedy, Hamlet faces complex moral

dilemmas stemming from revenge and the weight of family duties after his father's murder. Through his soliloquies, he expresses deep introspection, struggling with indecisiveness and contemplating the philosophical issues related to life, death, and human existence. Conversely, the unborn baby in *Nutshell* offers a different perspective, providing observations from within the womb that contrast innocence with a growing awareness of the outside world. While *Hamlet* articulates his inner struggles through eloquent and poignant monologues full of despair, the unborn child's reflections are characterized by a mix of instinctive reactions and emerging understanding, emphasizing a more immediate, visceral engagement with family bonds and societal structures. This contrast highlights the various ways existential inquiry can be expressed and explored through literature.

Despite their different contexts, Hamlet and the unborn child show similar experiences of confinement—Hamlet is stuck in a morally corrupt court, while the physical space of the womb restricts the unborn child. The stories overlap around common themes of betrayal and moral uncertainty; Hamlet's quest for revenge is mirrored in the unborn child's perception of Trudy's treacherous behavior and her interactions with Claude. Essentially, Hamlet is a tragic figure wrestling with existential questions amid widespread deception. Meanwhile, the unborn child offers a fresh perspective on these issues, highlighting recurring patterns of family dysfunction and moral complexity that span generations. This connection between the texts deepens both characters' stories, showing how McEwan's reinterpretation echoes Shakespeare's deep exploration of the human condition.

Trudy reflects Gertrude in her motivations and decisions amid family treachery. In *Hamlet*, Gertrude's quick remarriage to Claudius after King Hamlet's death raises important questions about her loyalty and moral character. Similarly, Trudy's illegal relationship with Claude, her brother-in-law, complicates her characterization, making her appear as a traitor within her family. Both women navigate patriarchal social structures where their choices are continually scrutinized, highlighting broader themes of female agency and complicity.

The characters of Gertrude and Trudy illustrate notable contrasts in their portrayals and the narrative environments they occupy. Gertrude's motivations often lack clarity, characterised as a passive figure ensnared in the schemes of the male characters, notably Claudius and Hamlet. In juxtaposition, Trudy emerges as a more assertive agent in her narrative, driven by her ambitions, which propel the story forward. McEwan grants Trudy a degree of agency, enabling her to partake in strategic behaviours such as manipulation and deceit, differentiating her from Gertrude’s more subdued disposition in *Hamlet*. Furthermore, Gertrude's arc is tragic, culminating in severe repercussions for her decisions. Conversely, Trudy's storyline unfolds in a

contemporary framework, facilitating a satirical critique of her actions. This transition from a tragic backdrop to one imbued with dark humour in Trudy's depiction signifies McEwan's modern interpretation of Shakespearean motifs, underscoring the intricate layers of female identity and morality in the current socio-cultural landscape.

John, the father of the unborn child, and King Hamlet, the ghost from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, present parallels and contrasts that enhance their respective stories. Each character plays a crucial role in driving the narrative forward, particularly regarding themes of betrayal and moral ambiguity. King Hamlet's ghost represents unresolved conflicts surrounding his murder, prompting his son to seek revenge on Claudius and initiating the play's central conflict. In a comparable vein, John poses a significant threat to family equilibrium; his deceitful relationship with Trudy reflects the betrayal associated with Claudius. Both figures generate an atmosphere of impending doom and serve as reminders of unresolved moral failures haunting the present—King Hamlet through his ghostly apparition and Claude through his cunning behaviours.

Significant differences become evident when examining the portrayals and narrative functions of King Hamlet's ghost and John. King Hamlet's ghost is characterised as a supernatural figure that encapsulates themes of guilt and vengeance, issuing a clear directive to Hamlet that propels him toward action. In contrast, John is a living character whose motivations come from modern hopes and desires. The ghost operates within a moral framework that calls for retribution for his murder, while John's character shows a more subtle ambiguity; he chases personal goals without being limited by the ethical duties that guide King Hamlet's choices. Additionally, King Hamlet's ghost is caught in tragedy, symbolizing unresolved tensions within the royal family. On the other hand, John's role in *Nutshell* includes elements of dark humor and satire, reflecting McEwan's modern reinterpretation of Shakespearean themes. This comparison highlights how both characters engage with ideas of agency and consequence; however, the different settings in which they act significantly shape their narrative roles and meanings.

> John Cairncross is different. Here are my reasonable inferences. Born under an obliging star, eager to please, too kind, too earnest, he has nothing of the ambitious poet's quiet greed. He believes that writing a poem in praise of my mother (her eyes, her hair, her lips) and coming by to read it aloud will soften her and make him welcome in his own house (9,2016, p. 17)

The narrator describes his father as someone who inherited a sense of gentility and good nature, who is a romantic poet but unfortunately lacks worldly awareness, messing up the description as "too earned, too kind, "which may be misplaced or ineffective in the context of his relationship with the narrator's mother. John decides to write a romantic poem praising Trudy's

outer beauty, reflecting a more traditional, romantic view of poetry that may not align with her expectations or desires.

8. Conclusion

It is shown that McEwan's reimagining of *Hamlet* honors the original text and acts as a way to explore modern themes such as betrayal, family relationships, and moral ambiguity. The unique perspective of an unborn child as narrator offers a fresh take on these themes, offering insights into the complexities of identity and agency within family dynamics.

By paralleling characters from *Hamlet*—Trudy as Gertrude, Claude as Claudius, and the unborn child as Hamlet—McEwan intricately weaves a narrative that reflects both the psychological depth of Shakespeare's characters and the socio-political context of modern society. Intertextuality enhances the reading experience, encouraging readers to engage with the text on multiple levels. As McEwan's protagonist observes the world from within the womb, he embodies a unique combination of innocence and wisdom that critiques the moral shortcomings of the adult characters around him.

Both texts' exploration of violence and betrayal reveals a shared human experience that goes beyond time. The moral dilemmas faced by characters in *Nutshell* resonate with those in *Hamlet*, highlighting that loyalty, fidelity, and revenge remain relevant today. The metaphor of tainted milk serves as a powerful symbol of corrupted family roots, emphasizing that inherited legacies can influence individual identities and choices.

Furthermore, the context of the adaptation suggests new interpretations of the classic text that resonate more closely with McEwan's modern era, such as exploring *Hamlet*'s concern with the underlying anxiety that emerges as Shakespearean language and form are reimagined for today. Additionally, there is a shift from soliloquy to surveillance, and from personal to political observation, regarding authorship, creativity, and textuality. McEwan's *Nutshell* ultimately adopts a contemporary conversational tone and a lively quality in its retelling, recontextualization, and reaffirmation of Shakespeare himself, coinciding with the 400th anniversary of his death. The literature, the stories, and the storytelling, once and many times, are reinterpreted to reflect the core of humanity and are understood within a broad context.

McEwan's *Nutshell* exemplifies Shakespeare's enduring influence on literature and storytelling. By engaging with *Hamlet* through intertextuality, McEwan reaffirms the cultural importance of Shakespeare's work and encourages readers to consider their perspectives on morality, agency, and identity. This dialogue between past and present deepens our appreciation

for both texts, showing that literature is a continuous conversation that remains relevant across generations. *Nutshell* vividly demonstrates how classic stories can be reimagined to address modern issues while preserving their central themes.

As an adaptation, Ian McEwan's *Nutshell* extends beyond its role as a *Hamlet* spin: it explores Shakespeare's existential and ethical complexities. It reinterprets them through the radical perspective of fetal narration. By positioning an unborn child as witness and heir to adult treachery, McEwan transforms the revenge tragedy into a phenomenological Experiment where knowledge flows through the body as if the child's mind were a video feed, with agency subdued by biological determinism. This intertextual critique of the novel is woven not through direct homage but through its subversion of Hamlet's logocentric despair. Unlike Shakespeare's prince, who uses soliloquies as tools of introspection, McEwan's fetus grapples with morality through Merleau-Pontian embodied perception—judgments shaped by the taste of poisoned wine and the tremor of Trudy's guilt.

The unreliability of the fetal narrator, as shown by James Phelan's ethical narratology, reveals the feebleness of moral certainty. Its voice — both naïve and cynical, personal but detached — also implicates readers in a voyeuristic compact, collapsing distinctions between innocence and complicity. This narrative strategy displaces conventional ethical binaries; instead, judgment, like perception, operates from a point of view. The womb, as chronotype, becomes a metaphor for narrative: a limited space in which ethics is sensed but deferred, debated but unresolved.

Finally, *Nutshell* critiques the kind of agency that supports *Hamlet* and humanist ethics. The fetus's paralysis — "to be, unborn" — reflects modernity's existential precariousness, where knowledge of corruption rarely grants power. Nonetheless, McEwan's talent lies in transforming that helplessness into narrative strength: by crafting a tragedy in a Nutshell, he reminds us that literature's most significant role is not to resolve moral questions but to amplify them, causing readers to witness the perceptual and ultimately existential burden of "being" in a world whose terms they did not choose.

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