Exploring Gender and Family in Ian McEwan's *Lessons* (2022)

Stavroula Emmanouilidou

Culture and Change - Critical Studies in the Humanities
Master's (Two-Year) Thesis
30 credits
VT 2025
Supervisor: Asko Kauppinen

Abstract

The present thesis aims to explore how masculinities and femininities are performed in the context of the family in the novel *Lessons* (2022) by Ian McEwan, which follows the lives of individuals across generations and depicts the changing social and cultural climate in Europe from the 20th to the 21st century. Drawing on the theories on hegemonic masculinity by R.W. Connell, symbolic violence by Pierre Bourdieu, and motherhood as an institution and as an experience by Adrienne Rich, and by employing close reading, I critically analyse how gender dynamics and notions around motherhood and fatherhood manifest in the novel, taking into account the social and cultural context in which their stories unfold. I argue that the portrayal of the family unit and its members in *Lessons* serves as a reflection of the wider social and political changes occurring in Europe at that time and offers valuable insights about the intergenerational aspect and construction of gender norms. My discussion concludes with emphasizing the capacity of historical fiction to evaluate and shed light on the dynamics of transmission and perpetuation of gender beliefs and attitudes in society.

Keywords: Motherhood as an institution, gender norms, hegemonic masculinity, fatherhood, post-war Europe, Britain, generational change

Table of contents

1. Introduction

1.1. Background, material, and research aim

The portrayal of gender roles in fiction is a relevant topic of study for both literature and cultural studies, offering valuable insights into how gender dynamics, roles and expectations - or transgressions thereof - change, transform or persist across time. Fiction, and specifically contemporary fiction, affords opportunities to both author and reader to engage with the nuances of how gender impacts many facets of social and private life, through the creation of characters and plots that bring the complexities of gender to the fore (Ladzekpo, Attiye, & Davi, 2024, p. 26). Furthermore, because gender does not exist in a vacuum but is considered a social construct and process, produced and sustained through our interaction with others (West & Zimmerman, 1987), the analysis of gender in fiction provides important insights into the broader social dynamics and cultural norms of a given society or historical period in time. In English fiction, the anxieties and complexities of gender have been taken on by both authors and scholars alike throughout history, exploring for instance the fluctuating nature of what is meant by 'masculinity' and 'femininity' and how it is portrayed, or what the implications of resisting or enforcing gender stereotypes in fiction are (Rajput & Ekka, 2023, p. 322).

This thesis focuses on the novel *Lessons* by British author Ian McEwan, published in 2022, which follows the life of the fictional character Roland Baines from his childhood in North Africa and post-war Britain around the 1950s to his late-age years in 2022 London. Although it chronicles the stories and lives of fictional characters, the novel is heavily concerned with historical reality and is thus considered historical fiction, with crucial landmark socio-political events taking place in Europe and beyond serving as the backdrop for the personal narratives of the characters - and shaping, directly or indirectly, the way their lives unfold throughout the story. Scholarly work on *Lessons* so far has focused on the topic and functions of personal memory, which is a recurring subject in McEwan's oeuvre (Varghaiyan & Nayebpour, 2023, p. 169). Furthermore, a significant part of the life and character development of Roland Baines revolves around the sexual abuse he has been a victim of by his piano teacher, Miriam Connell: in "Trauma,

Testimony and the Limits of Healing in Ian McEwan's Lessons", Özer (2025) discusses the role of memory and testimony in overcoming trauma, suggesting that the novel foregrounds "the ongoing struggle to live with, rather than fully overcome, the burdens of trauma and history" (p. 133). The concept of collective memory as it occurs in the novel has also been discussed by Bohovyk & Bezrukov (2024), who explore the historical events covered in the novel through the lens of imperialism and conclude that *Lessons* warns against collective amnesia "as a kind of historical exploration of the sources of a new world order and its fragility" (p. 47).

At the same time, in *Lessons*, McEwan undertakes a detailed and nuanced exploration of family life, a key site where gender tensions and negotiations take place and where roles and norms attached to femininity and masculinity are either reproduced or challenged. The novel highlights how perceptions of masculinity and femininity ideals transform across time, affording both possibilities and restrictions to the characters as we move from one generational unit to the next. The text thus provides rich material for examining how masculinities and femininities are performed and embodied by the characters in a fast-changing 20th century Europe.

The novel is a contemporary work of fiction but set in different historical times of the past, with the narrator making sense of his and his family's intricate histories through modes of retrospection. Thus, *Lessons* as historical fiction becomes a particularly interesting choice for critically examining how gender norms and roles in the intimate environment of the family intersect political, social and cultural transformations in a Europe - and a world - in constant flux, with the novel attempting to map some of these changes in one story. The looking-back mode of the narrator is a reckoning, blending fiction, cultural commentary, history and traces of autobiography to create a multilayered narrative that partially engages with the collective anxieties that surround gender roles and the family in different eras.

In this thesis, I argue that McEwan foregrounds masculinities and femininities as historically situated and socially mediated identities, and the family unit as a crucial space where gender expectations are negotiated, transformed, or contested across eras. I offer a critical discussion of textual moments where the characters

wrestle with the gender order of their time within familial relations, relations which are simultaneously shaped by the national and international zeitgeist that the author weaves into the narrative. In my analysis, close attention is paid specifically to parenthood and spousal relations as gendered practices. I contend that the thematic strand of the novel that deals with family life is not merely a portrayal of domestic drama confined in the private sphere, but becomes a critical lens through which the author explores the political and social realities the characters navigate, including gender expectations and norms. Thus, the tensions between femininities and masculinities that occur within the family mirror the overall changing and turbulent cultural landscape of Western Europe in the timeframe the novel covers, revealing the synergetic relationship between the private (family unit and gender roles) with the collective (political reality and social norms).

1.2. Outline of the thesis

This introduction, which serves as Chapter 1 of the thesis, outlines the background and research aims. Chapter 2 is dedicated to a discussion of the key theorists, frameworks and concepts I will use for textual analysis and discussion of characters, plots and historical context as they appear in the novel. Chapters 3 and 4, along with their subchapters, comprise the main body of this thesis, where I discuss selected passages in the novel and, through close reading, I support my arguments presented in this introduction. These chapters are thematically organized and follow a generational timeline, beginning from an analysis of the family unit as portrayed through the Baines family during the Second World War and post-war era in England, followed by two subchapters dedicated to the discussion of the characters of Alissa and Roland and their gendered experiences as parents, spouses and individuals towards the end of the 20th century.

1.3. Men and women in Ian McEwan's fiction

The tensions between masculinities and femininities, is a theme that permeates McEwan's fiction from as early as his 1978 novel *The Cement Garden*. In her analysis of the way gender is constructed and portrayed in McEwan's fiction,

Magdalena Popiel (2007) discusses the "male-female opposition" that permeates McEwan's novels, concluding that his characters, who variably resist or conform to behaviors and expectations tied to 'masculinity' and 'femininity', ultimately make for a realistic and compelling depiction of the tensions and anxieties that accompany gender identity and roles (p. 194). Stolarek (2013) similarly notes that McEwan's increasingly more mature outlook towards gender identity, which becomes evident in his later work, notably in *The Child in Time* (1987) and *Amsterdam* (1998), results in the creation of a highly complex and intricate image of male-female relations, as the author focuses on the characters' gendered experiences and how they navigate them internally, opting to describe the characters' inner world, their thoughts and internal turmoil, emphasizing their need to overcome the isolation imposed by their gendered differences and find a way to communicate in an increasingly divided and cruel contemporary world (p. 164).

As a popular and critically acclaimed author, McEwan's portrayal of women and men has been a much discussed and debated topic among critics and a frequent subject of literary research. Thus, the present thesis is situated in the academic discussions of the theme of gender in McEwan's later fiction, through the analysis of his most recent novel and the critical insights it can provide not only about the characters, but also for the culture and society in which the stories are set. At the same time, this thesis aims to contribute more generally to the ongoing academic dialogue about the construction and literary portrayal of masculinities and femininities specifically with regards to the family unit, and affirm the potential of historical fiction to provide nuanced and critical perspectives on the past - including attitudes towards social and gender norms in previous eras.

1.4. Summary of *Lessons*

In this section, I provide a brief summary of the plot of *Lessons*, focusing on the main narrative moments and characters who are of significance for the purpose of my analysis.

The novel spans the life of Roland Baines, an English white man, from his childhood around the 1950s through the 2020 pandemic, as he narrates his life story through retrospection, attempting to piece together and work through the

significant personal and collective events that have shaped his life. The two major events in Roland's personal life in the narrative are, first, the sexual abuse he experiences by his female piano teacher at his boarding school in his teenage years, and his wife Alissa's disappearance, who leaves him and their young child Lawrence to pursue a literary career, becoming a world-famous, successful writer. Personal memories and Roland's narration take place against the backdrop of equally monumental political and social events, in Britain and in the world, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the fall of the Berlin Wall, Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic. Roland recounts his romantic relationships, past friendships, the various professions he takes on without ever truly settling on a career, as he embarks on an inward journey to decipher how many of his decisions have sprung from his own agency and how much from the inevitable external forces and the events that have transformed him.

There are various characters that the reader is introduced to in the novel, who come in and out of Roland's life - for the purpose of this analysis, I will discuss the ones relevant for this thesis. First, both Roland and Alissa's parents are recurring in the novel, as Roland recounts his own childhood years with a domineering father and a dutiful mother, and Alissa's own childhood with her English mother who abandoned her dreams to become a writer, and her German father. The tense mother and daughter relationship (Alissa and her mother), as well as Roland's negotiation with masculinity and fatherhood as he has experienced from his own father, are central to my analysis.

When Alissa first disappears, Roland - as a newly single dad - turns for support to Daphne and Peter, their family friends and neighbours. Daphne and Peter have a tempestuous relationship, and after Peter leaves Daphne and their children, Roland and Daphne begin a romantic relationship, forming a more flexible family unit - talks of properly merging their households are recurrent, but this is only actualized towards the end of Daphne's life and her battle with terminal illness, when she and Roland get married. Between Peter and Roland, symbolising two different embodiments of masculinity, as I later argue, old tensions start to brew after Daphne's death. Roland's extended family towards the end of the novel, around the 2020s, include his (now grown up) son Lawrence, his wife and their daughter, as well as Daphne's children.

The above summary includes mainly events and characters who will be central to this analysis; there is a considerable amount of many characters and storylines that are significant for Roland in *Lessons*, which are not covered here, as my analysis focuses mainly on the way gender intersects family life and organization. Overall, the novel highlights the continuous interplay between public and personal life, memory, trauma, as well as the formation of and search for one's identity in the face of a rapidly changing Europe and world from the 20st to the 21st century, as well as transformative events in the private lives of individuals.

2. Theoretical framework

To support my analysis, this thesis draws on theories and works by authors who view and discuss gender as a social construct and practice, and masculinities and femininities (and the way they intersect parenting and family life) as historically and socially situated practices. In this section I offer a brief overview of the key frameworks that have informed my approach and analysis of the novel. These three main theoretical approaches to gender dynamics allow me to approach the text on different levels, serving as a complementary combination, encouraging a varied and dynamic discussion on an interpersonal, structural, and institutional level simultaneously.

2.1. Symbolic violence - Pierre Bourdieu

My analysis of characters' gendered experiences, with specific attention to the domain of the family, is informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his concept of the habitus, and more specifically how habitus is explained in terms of gender relations. In his book *Masculine Domination* (2002), Bourdieu provides useful insights to understand the subtle and almost invisible ways that patriarchy and deeply ingrained ideals of manhood affect the lives and actions of the characters of *Lessons*. Bourdieu (2002) analyses in his work the way the patriarchal system "inscribes itself in bodies through the tacit injunctions that are implied in the routines of the division of labour or of collective or private rituals" (p. 24), as well as the subtle ways that the reproduction of gender norms and divisions between women and men are reinforced and reproduced in society, including the family. The way people *embody* the prescribed structure of domination in a society is particularly important for my analysis, a process which happens in every arena of society, including early socialization or formation ('Bildung'); the eventual product of the absorption of such norms and behaviors, create for each "a body *socially differentiated* from the opposite gender (in all the culturally pertinent respects), i.e. as a male, and therefore non female, habitus or as a female and therefore non-male habitus" (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 24). I thus use Bourdieu's concepts to think with and analyse the characters and their situations and the way they are portrayed to adhere

to gender norms (in the subtle yet potent way that norms and beliefs exist in society, as Bourdieu describes), or when they break away from them, why, how - and with what implications.

2.2. Hegemonic Masculinity - R.W. Connell

To discuss the ways McEwan explores the way masculinities are constructed and embodied in different historical periods, I employ R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, to understand how characters support or deviate from socially prescribed notions of proper 'manliness' - and how masculinity is reconfigured as we move from one era to the next, and from one political and social reality to the next. The theory of hegemonic masculinity assumes that there is a plurality of articulations of masculinities in a given society, with *hegemonic* masculinity presented as an ideal, working through "cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and the marginalization or delegitimization of alternatives" that aim to subordinate the different types of masculinities under the most socially dominant one and encouraging its embodiment, which nevertheless remains more often than not an unattainable goal for most men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 846). Connell's discussion on masculinity hierarchies allows me to discern the subtle dynamics between men and women but also between men and other men in the novel, thus allowing an analysis that views masculinity, as in Connell, as a relational, not fixed system, changing with the times and prompting characters, such as Roland, to negotiate their place in relation to ideals of masculinity in society.

2.3. Adrienne Rich - Of Woman Born: Motherhood as an Experience and Institution (1977)

The theme of motherhood, which is prevalent in the novel, is discussed by drawing on the insights offered in the feminist work of Adrienne Rich *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, published originally in 1977, in order to understand the way motherhood becomes a contested space in the novel,

experienced by the women not only as a very private and emotional process, but also one entangled with norms and external systemic and social pressures. Adrienne Rich, a prominent second-wave feminist, is relevant to this analysis not only theoretically but also culturally: her insights echo sentiments and views articulated in an era and a historical moment in the Western world which the characters of *Lessons* navigate. Her work, blending personal narrative and her own experience with motherhood with social analysis and research, delves into the intricate ways that institutions and systemic patriarchy determine in many ways the private, individual experience of motherhood and the various emotions, thoughts and states it includes.

Apart from these central theoretical frameworks, my discussion further draws on research and literature that engages with family dynamics and upbringing as an institution, the role of gender in discussions of authorship and art, and the political and social reality of Europe in the 20th century, as well as critical discussions on fatherhood.

I now turn to my main analysis, starting with the family unit and gender in the middle of the 20th century with the Baines family in *Lessons*.

3. Gender in the Baines family

3.1. Robert Baines and hegemonic masculinity: the fathers of the war generation

In this chapter, I focus my analysis on the character of Robert Baines, Roland's father, and discuss how he embodies the historically dominant idea of masculinity of his generation and the effect this has on his relationship with his wife and son. Subsequently, I provide an analysis of the ways Rosalind Baines, Roland's mother, copes with the traumatic events which she endures as a woman of her time in a patriarchal society, and what this reveals about ideas of femininity she embodies. Through this analysis, I show how their construction and performance of femininities and masculinities reflect the historically situated gender order which they navigate. This chapter serves to provide a foundation for tracing the changes that gender and social norms undergo and the implications this has for the characters of *Lessons*, as the narrative progresses from the era of World War II to the 21st century.

In Part I of the novel, Roland's parents are introduced. The reader follows along as an adult Roland revisits his childhood memories as he finds himself abandoned by his newborn son's mother, Alissa. As Roland starts to reminisce about his childhood, switching between past and present - a single father in 1986 London - we learn about his family's history and dynamics when he was young.

Roland's father, Robert Baines, is presented in Roland's retrospection as the patriarch of the Baines family, which consists of him, Roland, and his mother Rosalind. Before Roland is sent away in his early adolescence to boarding school in England in 1959, the family spends six years in Tripoli, Libya, where Captain Baines is stationed with the British Army, "a remnant of the vast sweeping desert campaign of the Second World War" (McEwan, 2022, p. 42). As we read Roland's memories and perceptions of his father as a child, Captain Baines emerges as a domineering figure, whom young Roland and his mother simultaneously love and obey without protest:

> Years of being an infantryman in barracks in Fort George, Scotland before the war, low-paid and always hungry, had made Roland's father appreciative of the treats he could bestow on his son. He was also stern, dangerous to disobey. It was a

powerful mix. Roland feared and loved him. So did Roland's mother. (McEwan, 2022, p. 37)

An army man, devoted to a sense of military order and always ready to command, Robert Baines' relationship with his young son in Libya is largely based on the transmission of 'proper' masculine values and behaviors:

He taught his son Morse code and brought home two key sets and a hundred yards of wire. He drove him to the grand parade ground at Azizia so he could roller skate across great distances. Captain Baines took a manly view of swimming. He taught his son how to dive and hold his breath under water for half a minute and how to swim the crawl — the rightly named breaststroke was for girls. (McEwan, 2022, p. 47)

Similarly, Roland's signs of vulnerability and his attachment to his mother are frowned upon by his father:

Captain Baines thought his son was too girlishly close to his mother. He helped her out with the housework, slept in her bed when the Captain was away on manoeuvres, still held her hand, even at the age of nine. (McEwan, 2022, p. 42)

The above illustrate early on in the novel Robert Baines' embodiment of the socially ideal and acceptable type of masculinity, especially in the context of a British military family in post-war Libya: he values toughness, duty, repression over vulnerability (understood as a feminine, 'weak' trait unsuitable for a man), and exemplifies the authority he is expected to have as a war hero, a military man, and the provider for his family. Thus, in Robert Baines' actions, language and behavior we can see a portrayal of the gender order of which he is a part; more specifically, he embodies *hegemonic masculinity*, whereby patriarchy and the dominance of men in a given society and specific historical era is legitimized and upheld through mechanisms such as cultural ideals and institutions (Connell, 2005, p. 77). Especially in a military setting where the Baines family lives, the hyper-masculine values accepted as the norm of the era are further pronounced, even only symbolically yet for young Roland, since "the military institution is discursively constructed as a key 'masculinity maker'; compulsory military service is considered a disciplinary *rite de passage* that turns boys into men" (Christensen

& Kyed, 2022, p. 1). The central role that the military as a collective institution of power has in upholding masculine hegemony is also noted by Connell (2005), who views it as the ‘corporate display’ of acceptable notions of manhood which then in turn becomes an ideal in society, practised by individuals (p. 77).

Robert Baines, as part of this institution and through this form of gendered parenting, attempts to reproduce the prescribed norms that define manhood in his era through his son; and given that ideals of masculinity are constructed in relation to (and in contrast with) what femininity is (Connell, 2005, p. 68), the ‘girlish’ behavior of his son as a result of his attachment to Rosalind must be discouraged, since it threatens to destabilize the foundation on which dominant masculinity is hierarchized in society. This exposes the constant fight that hegemonic masculinity must put up in order to retain its legitimacy, and at the same time reveals its fragility: it must be defined against what is considered ‘other’, against femininities and ‘threatening’ configurations of non-hegemonic masculinity (Messerschmidt and Bridges, 2024, pp. 211-212).

As the absolute authority in the household, Robert Baines’ decision to send Roland to a boarding school in England at the age of 11 is received with fear and uncertainty by both mother and son. Rosalind is emotionally connected to her son; as the mother, she is also socially expected to be attuned to her young son’s needs and emotional world. It is her duty as a mother to take care of the emotional ‘business’ of the family - perform the work of managing emotions, impulses and tensions in the family. As a young child, noticing his mother’s repression and finding himself unable to meet the masculinity standards exemplified and encouraged by his father, he not only finds refuge himself in his mother’s company (“Roland was one of her close friends” (McEwan, 2022, p. 43)), but also feels the need to comfort his mother in turn (“Roland…got into his mother’s bed at night not only to receive comfort but to give it, just by being there. He was protective of her even as he needed her.” (p. 47)). However, Roland’s departure is an inevitable fact which they both accept - and Robert Baines’ dominance is once again highlighted. Retrospectively, we learn more about this decision:

Her choice, if she’d had one, would have been to return home to England to a normal life and a local day school for her son. The army was reducing its numbers

and offering early retirement on good terms. But his father, as well as being generous and stern, kind and domineering, was wary of change long before he had lined up his arguments against it. He had other motives for getting Roland out of the way. Two decades later, one evening over beers, Major (retired) Baines told his son that children always got in the way of a marriage. Finding a state boarding school in England for Roland was good for everyone 'all round'. (McEwan, 2022, pp. 42-43)

On one level, this decision is on par with the emotionally distant figure that Robert as a father is expected to - and feels inclined to - embody, as the patriarchal figure and with a military sense of duty and order: sending a son off to a boarding school signifies a rite of passage for a young man in the late 1950's, who is expected to set off in life alone and learn to fend for himself and become independent - and avoid the potentially dangerous 'pampering' he receives from the female figure in his life, avoiding weakness, maintaining the socially prescribed notions of what a 'real' man is. Robert automatically attempts to reproduce the norms and values he grew up with as a young man and a soldier through Roland, whereby fostering self-reliance in an all-male space is the cornerstone of self-actualization. This separation of son from the unit of the family and the mother is discussed by Bourdieu (2002) as an example of a "rite of institution" in patriarchal societies, which are accepted as 'natural' practises and behaviors, aiming to instil in persons what is considered gender-appropriate behaviors which socially mark them as male or female and ultimately enable the system of patriarchy (pp. 24-25). The separation, thus, is presented as a reasonable action, further justified by Robert on the grounds that a child is to be formed and controlled (with the marital unit remaining the primary part of a family).

Robert is portrayed as a father of his time, influenced by the contemporaneous ideas about parenthood being more about managing children and less about emotionally supporting them; where emotional closeness does takes place, it is more incidentally offered by the mother, as is the case with Rosalind, and 'unofficially', intercepted by the father's convictions about the proper and manly values which should be instilled in a young boy.

Parenting in the Baines family thus becomes a site of the reproduction of gender norms and roles, and in turn, Roland's socialization as a young child becomes evidently gendered as well. The extent to which young Roland can understand this

form of socialization that awaits him at Berners Hall inspires in him awe mixed with fear already before he sets foot at the school:

> The term would not begin for several days: The other boys would not be there. He was glad, for the thought of them made his stomach contract. The word ‘boys’, boys en masse, conferred on them an authority, a thuggish power. When his father referred to them as ‘lads’ they became taller in his thoughts, stringier, irresponsibly strong. (McEwan, 2022, p. 35)

Through the description of the relationship between husband and wife - Robert and Rosalind - the authority of Robert is further demonstrated. As is mentioned previously, Rosalind is a woman who obeys her husband, follows him wherever his military assignments are, and is also afraid of his temper. Roland’s memories of seeing his parents coexist reveals that the relationship was not equal, with his mother assuming a passive role confined to the domestic sphere (“A clean and ordered home remained her passion” (McEwan, 2022, p. 43)), and his father’s turbulent temper overtaking their lives to the point of becoming regularly threatening to Rosalind (“She was a small nervous woman, a worrier, very pretty, everyone agreed. Easily intimidated, fearful of Robert when he drank, which was every day (p. 43)). The difference between the gendered sphere of Rosalind and that of Robert, thus between the female and the male sphere, is portrayed in the book in moments such as the following, where Roland remembers the days before he is sent off to boarding school, and he and his parents are staying at his half-sister’s apartment and her family in London:

> They were walking to buy his father’s cigarettes and to escape the two small rooms Susan lived in with her husband and baby daughter. Already his mother had packed away the camp beds and was vacuuming the dustless carpets. The little girl, with two molars coming through would not stop crying. It was only correct that ‘the men’ should be out of the way. (McEwan, 2022, p. 36)

‘The men’ being out of the way of the domestic sphere is presented as something accepted, automatic, being naturally correct. I argue that the choice to put the phrase in quotation marks does not only serve as a reminder that these words are relayed to the readers by a young child, reproducing them verbatim and perhaps struggling to understand their true implications; this punctuation choice seems to

emphasize the widely socially accepted notion of ‘men’ as a totalizing and separate category - similar to the aforementioned ‘lads’ - which comes with its own expectations and responsibilities, forming a sphere of activity that is canonically separate from the home and the related tasks, which we deduct to be with no doubt the women’s sphere of activity. This punctuation choice conveys that in that moment, the binary of home/public is to be tied to the binary of women/men respectively. Being a man, just as being a woman, is not an innocent, neutral social category, but instead comes to permeate the totality of everyday life, with these gendered tensions making themselves visible in living spaces, household tasks, caring and emotional work related to children.

The above encapsulate Bourdieu’s *gendered habitus*, whereby the house and tasks related to the domestic life, as well as parenting, are automatically tied to gender expectations, in this case the women’s role of tending to such tasks, while the men are expected to clear the way - and presumably be responsible for more ‘public-facing’ activities, as is the case with Robert Baines’ military occupation and patriarch persona and the son and father ‘exodus’ from an emotionally charged household. This distinction of ‘male’ and ‘female’ spaces exemplifies the way the conceptual dichotomy between masculinity and femininity becomes codified in even the most ordinary things of the social world, both material and immaterial (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 30). Moreover, the fact that ‘it is only correct’ that men should avoid the female sphere of activity accentuates the taken-for-granted nature of the habitus, whereby gender expectations need not even be explicitly articulated or justified (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 9).

As the narrative chronologically progresses, the tough - but to some extent heroic in the eyes of a young child - exterior of Robert as a father and a husband increasingly becomes more and more demystified, as Roland can better understand the true implications of his father’s absolute rule and unbending character. In the beginning of Part II, during a visit to Aldershot to Roland’s parents with Alissa to meet them ahead of their wedding plans, Robert becomes overwhelmed by his father’s drunkenly behavior and his mother’s old fearful passivity:

He followed his mother into the kitchen. Her frets over the meal were only the outward face of her fear. The Major, lifted by their marriage news, was already

well ahead of his nightly drinking schedule. Rosalind was too loyal to speak of it. Things could turn nasty. (McEwan, 2022, p. 188)

The dinner scene follows a similar pattern to the old dynamics of husband and wife, whereby the kitchen and guest attendance remain Rosalind's responsibilities while Robert maintains a monopoly over the conversation ("He asked his mother about her small garden at the back of the house. She had bought new roses in the spring. How were they doing? She started to answer but his father spoke over her." (McEwan, 2022, p. 189). The awkward silence of Roland is only broken when his father, to the embarrassment of everyone, relays to the couple the story of his scamming a woman in the neighborhood, widow of a sergeant, by getting her to accept less money for the lawnmower she was selling:

'She was waiting outside. So I knelt down, son, and found the screw on the fuel feed, gave it a couple of turns. Then I tried to start it. Of course, it wouldn't go. She was watching. I tried a few more times. Examined it, tried again. I told her it needed a lot of work. Offered her five pounds. She said oh, I suppose it hasn't been used in a while. So there you are, son. Brought it home, almost new. Works a treat. Five pounds!'

There was silence. Roland could not bear to look in Alissa's direction. He set down his knife and fork, took his napkin off his lap and wiped his clammy hands. 'Let me get this straight.'

'What was that?' his father said abruptly.

Roland raised his voice. 'I want to understand this. You cheated. You tricked this woman who had lost her husband. A widow of a serving soldier, if that makes any difference. And you're proud of yourself, you—' (McEwan, 2022, p. 189)

This uneasy situation is only outwardly diffused when Roland realizes that his father's rage will be taken out on Rosalind after he and Alissa depart and drops the subject, while Robert tries to feign a non-chalant reaction to his son's straightforward address: "'Never mind son,' the Major was saying in the voice he reserved for jokes." (McEwan, 2022, p. 190). A moment of supposed pride for Robert on his 'trick' becomes a shameful act in the eyes of Roland, who, for the first time in the story so far, dares to speak out against his father's disillusioned entitlement. The moment Roland accusatively spells out the actual dishonesty and immorality of his father's actions comes in contrast with the facade the Major has maintained since Roland's childhood, one of (moral) superiority and authority - a

man who knows what is right and commands it. The disintegration of this guise which Roland had dutifully accepted in childhood reveals tensions in the model of masculinity that Robert has long embodied - the domineering manners of Robert as a patriarch might just be morally ungrounded, coming from a man who learned to prioritise competitiveness over understanding, dominance over substance, and a vague, army-mandated idea of honor over a deeper ethical stance on the world. Institutional and culturally accepted paradigms of hypermasculinity perpetuate and uphold the mechanisms for patriarchy to flourish; however, as the above passage shows, in the instances where the ideal of masculinity is challenged, it can reveal its fragility and incoherence, revealing a 'flimsy' domineering facade of the hypermasculine ideal in the society and time where Robert Baines came of age, worked, married, and became a father. Roland himself confides in Alissa this realization he comes to about his early socialization in his family, which he explains has contributed to his drifting and lack of direction in his adulthood:

> In our household there were no beliefs, no principles, there were no ideas that were valued. Because my father had none. Army drill and standing orders, regulations instead of morals. I see it now. And because she was frightened of him, Rosalind had none, or showed none. (McEwan, 2022, p. 193)

Robert's focus on military order and hard facade leaves him, towards and at the end of his life, an essentially lonely man. Roland later describes his father's funeral in 1997, composed mostly of his mother's acquaintances and friends: "The funeral guests were all family on her side, with a few neighbors coming out of respect for her. They had rarely spoken to the Major and he never could remember their names." (McEwan, 2022, p. 297). Furthermore, the oppressive 'drills' and 'regulations' that Rosalind and young Roland were subjected to in a household essentially managed by an emotionally alienated and repressed Robert are not depicted by McEwan as individual cases, but rather as an instance of a more common and socially expected characteristic of the father in the family unit in the post-war era. To contextualise this, Daphne, Roland's partner later in his life, describes a similar dynamic with her army father during an emotional conversation with Roland, while they visit the place where she and her father, who had served in the war, had sat fifty years ago:

He was not, she told Roland, a demonstrative man but he held her hand as he told her about his work and explained as best he could to a nine-year-old the system of triage. As their unit pushed further east, further from home he had written letters to Daphne's mother.
'I asked him what he wrote about. He said he described everything, even the wounds he had tended and told her that he loved her very much and that when he got back, they'd get married and one day have a little girl like me. I can't tell you, Roland, what a joy it was to hear him say that. He was an extremely reserved man. I'd never heard him use the word love. People didn't in those days, not to children. To hear him say that he loved my mother gave me a great glow of love for him.' (McEwan, 2022, p. 413)

This account reveals once again the connection between the military and the hypermasculinity ideal that discards emotionality as not-manly, but also an insight about the fatherhood norms in that time. In her study on family and fatherhood roles in Britain from 1914 to the 1960s, Laura King (2015) notes that in the early part of the 20th century it was common for parents, and especially fathers, to remain reserved and avoid open and explicit demonstrations of love and affection towards children (pp. 106-107), but that traumatic events, and in most personal accounts, the war, "had important consequences for the emotional relationships between fathers and children, particularly if the former were sent abroad on service" (p. 110). Correspondence served as an emotional repository, allowing some soldiers "to express their emotions more freely, whilst others felt compelled to do so because they were frequently facing the possibility of death" (King, 2015, p. 111). This is in par with the scene described above, where Daphne's father becomes emotionally triggered and eager to share his emotions with his daughter when the conversation turns to the war and his memory of his service abroad - revealing that he allowed himself to open up only in letters, when the the constant, looming prospect of death propelled him to be vulnerable with his wife at home. The emotional repression of men is depicted throughout the novel as a high cost that men 'pay' in order to present to the world a masculinity ideal that is ultimately oppressive, not only because of the way it keeps men alert to assert their manliness at all times, but also because it is ultimately a "system of demands which inevitably remains, in many cases, inaccessible" (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 50).
Having analyzed Robert Baines as an example of hypermasculinity in the war and

post-war era, I now focus my analysis on Rosalind Baines.

3.2. Rosalind Baines: domestic motherhood, performing femininity, and trauma

As discussed above, Rosalind is unavoidably affected by the patriarchal rule in her household and maintains, throughout the book, a role confined to domestic life. In the following section, I analyse moments from the novel that illuminate Rosalind's role as a mother and wife, and offer a critical reading of two major events of her life story.

Early on in Part I of the novel, the reader learns a little of the background of Rosalind and her life before and while she is married to Robert. Rosalind tells stories to a young Roland from her childhood: she came from a poor family in the village of Ash, and by the time she was twenty years old, she was already married to Jack Tate, who was her first husband, before Robert Baines. From her marriage to Jack Tate, Rosalind has two children, Susan and Henry, who are Roland's half-siblings. A young Roland hears the story and the events that led to her marrying his father:

> The war came to Rosalind in a startling moment. She was an assistant to an old lorry driver named Pop. They were delivering supplies near Aldershot. A bomb hit the road and the blast knocked their lorry into a ditch. Neither of them was hurt. She continued with Pop after the war. By then Jack Tate had been killed on active service and she was the mother of two children. Henry was living with his granny on his father's side. Susan was in a London institution for the daughters of dead servicemen. During the war there was plenty of work for women. In 1945, making regular runs to an army depot outside Aldershot, she became aware of the handsome sergeant in the guardhouse. He had a Scottish accent, an erect posture, a trim moustache. After many encounters he asked her to a dance. She was frightened of him and refused several times before she gave in. They were married in January two years later. The year after that Roland was born. (McEwan, 2022, p. 44)

After Jack Tate's death and Rosalind's marriage to Robert, Susan and Henry continue to live away from Roland's family and their mother. Roland, even as a young child, vaguely understands that his half-siblings "were the children of Jack Tate and there was something forbidden about them that rendered them indistinct",

and “was never encouraged to write to his brother and sister” (McEwan, 2022, p. 45). Furthermore, he is sternly instructed by his mother as a child to not reveal to anyone that he and his half-siblings have different fathers: “He was never, ever to tell anyone that he and his sister had different fathers. If anyone asked he was to say that his father was Susan’s father. Was that understood? He nodded, understanding nothing.” (McEwan, 2022, p. 45)).

The ‘forbidden’ nature of the fact that Susan and Henry are Jack Tate’s children can be understood through the lens of hyper-masculinity that Robert embodies as discussed in the previous chapter. His wife’s first husband, whose name even “had a heroic sound to it” (McEwan, 2022, p. 44), poses a threat to Robert’s position as the sole strong, masculine figure in their lives. Rosalind, complying with her husband’s insecurity, always speaks “of her first husband in a low voice” and young Roland understands quickly that “this man was not to be mentioned in front of his father” (McEwan, 2022, p.44). This preservation of Robert’s personal idea of a code of honor is fully embodied and complied with by Rosalind, to the point where she accepts that Susan and Henry, considered a shameful ‘proof’ of Jack Tate, are to live away from her according to her husband’s wishes.

Towards the end of the novel, and the end of Rosalind’s life in the narrative, a critical revelation takes place which upends the stories Roland has understood to be true for most of his life, and the reasons Susan and Henry and Jack Tate are avoidable subjects in the family take on a new meaning. Shortly after Robert passes away, Rosalind visits Roland in London. During her stay, relieved of the weight of secrecy imposed while her husband was alive, she reveals that she and Robert had in actuality met while Jack Tate was abroad in service, and not after his death, per the account originally known by Roland:

> Rosalind did not seem to be in mourning. She had cared for her husband tenderly to the point of exhaustion, she had lived a half-century in his domain as a compliant army wife. Now, after a glass of sherry before dinner, she laughed easily, she was animated, expansive. Roland had never seen her like this before. She had met Sergeant Robert Baines in 1941, she told Roland and Daphne when the children were in bed.
> ‘You mean 45,’ Roland said.
> ‘No, 1941.’ She seemed unaware that she was contradicting the usual version. (McEwan, 2022, p. 300)

Rosalind, in this account, confirms that their contact was limited to a public dance outing and ‘going about together’ (McEwan, 2022, p.300), since she was a woman married to a soldier in the battlefield with two children. Although later in the novel she contradicts herself again, switching between the actual date of their meeting (1941) and what she had conditioned herself to say publicly (1947), Roland assumes that her eventual cognitive decline due to dementia is the culprit. However, in Part III of the novel, during a visit to see a very ill Rosalind at her care home, Susan reveals that she has received news about a potential lost family member in their family:

> She had received a letter from a Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Brudenell-Bruce of the Salvation Army. His work was to help people trace lost family members. […] If her mother’s maiden name was Rosalind Morley of Ash in Hampshire then she might be interested to know that she had a brother. He had been adopted soon after his birth in November 1942. His name was Robert William Cove and he would like to get in touch with his biological family. (McEwan, 2022, p. 376)

It quickly dawns on Roland that this man is his full brother, the first son of Robert and Rosalind, whom they gave away in 1942 out of fear of the shame and ostracization that an illegitimate child would bring to both of them. Roland observes that the true date of meeting Robert that his mother let slip out a few years ago - 1941 - was not wrong or due to dementia, but a revelation of the suppressed truth of the affair, at last: “their mother had simply forgotten to lie” (McEwan, 2022, p.377)). A few days later, Roland meets Robert, his brother, for the first time, and together they visit their aunt Joy. As the only living person who can tell them the truth, Joy recounts the story of how she and Rosalind, with a baby Robert in her arms, delivered him to his new adoptive family in complete secrecy:

> On the train to Reading she had tried to get her sister to change her mind. It wasn’t too late. They could avoid this couple at the station, catch the first train back and go home with the baby.
> ‘She wasn’t having it. All Rosalind kept saying in a quiet voice over and again was, “I have to do it. I have to do it.” I’ve never forgotten, when she spoke she wouldn’t look at me.’
> Even on the way home to Aldershot, when both sisters were in a state of great distress, Joy told Rosalind that they could still go back, tell the Coves she had changed her mind, bring little Robert away. Rosalind wept and shook her head and would say nothing. When they were back on the platform at Aldershot station she

made her sister swear never to speak of what they had done. Joy kept her silence. (McEwan, 2022, p. 383)

First, the hurtful separation of baby Robert from Rosalind is a prime example of what Adrienne Rich (1976) calls the differentiation between motherhood as an experience and as an institution. The individual, complex relationship that a woman, once a mother, experiences with the idea of motherhood and her own child, is intercepted by the socially prescribed notions of what 'proper' motherhood is. Rosalind, before she even has a chance to experience the complex, personal, bodily connection to her child, is essentially forced to give away a son termed by a patriarchal society as 'illegitimate': castigating an 'illegitimate' child is part of the *institution* of motherhood, shaped by religious dogmas and the view of the family as man's property, and not a natural, expected phenomenon tied inherently to motherhood as an *experience* (Rich, 1976, pp. 60-61). Even though the patriarchal system forces an idea of motherhood as the highest form of pure femininity that women can reach, there are conditions for 'good, proper' motherhood, which bearing a child out of wedlock does not fulfill; as Rich (1976) writes:

> The institution of motherhood is not identical with bearing and caring for children, any more than the institution of heterosexuality is identical with intimacy and love. Both create the prescriptions and the conditions in which choices are made or blocked; they are not "reality" but they have shaped the circumstances of our lives. [...] Motherhood is "sacred" so long as its offspring are "legitimate" — that is, as long as the child bears the name of a father who legally controls the mother. (Rich, 1995, p. 42)

It was a possibility, as her sister Joy keeps reminding Rosalind in the passage, to ultimately keep the baby. However, this is more of a rational potentiality and less than a viable choice: it comes with catastrophic material and social consequences, a grave situation which Roland later comes to understand better. There is a whole entangled system of norms, institutions, and social restrictions in place affecting her actions: along with the "shame and secrecy, the fury in the family, the gossip in the village", Robert Baines would potentially face "the prospect of a court martial" (McEwan, 2022, p. 378). In this light, Rosalind's insistence ("I have to do it") reveals the true dimension of her severely limited agency as a woman and a mother

in a small rural village during the war. Going ‘against the grain’, the forceful norms of society that dictate her life at this point in history, is not an easy task nor the expected or natural response, even in the mind of the woman who experiences oppression firsthand.

This is a form of what Bourdieu calls *symbolic* force, operating almost ‘invisibly’: force that is exerted on gendered bodies, not through physical violence, but through social norms and dispositions which are part of the structure of domination, which an individual is familiar with from early socialization (2002, p. 38) - and Rosalind is the recipient of both symbolic and physical violence, since she is also physically abused by her husband. Rosalind is experiencing, besides her personal grief for surrendering her newborn, tremendous shame and guilt for this act which is signalled by the secrecy she urges her sister to keep about their actions - but she is also experiencing shame in the prospect of her illegitimate child and her extramarital affair becoming the ridicule of a small community. These complex and contradicting emotions (shame, guilt, anxiety, but also attraction towards Robert, loyalty, worry about his military career) are, according to Bourdieu (2002), “passions of the dominated habitus…a somatized social relationship, a social law converted into an embodied law” which cannot be “suspended by a simple effort of will, founded on a liberatory awakening of consciousness” (p. 39). Thus, an insurmountable mental struggle for Rosalind takes place: even though she can understand (and feel intensely the consequences of) the personal sacrifice she is committing, she has been forced to embody the gendered and social norms of her time to the point where she succumbs to the most socially acceptable or sound option - convincing herself on the way that this is best for everyone and keep her life ‘within bounds’.

This choice is not a testament to Rosalind’s agency - choosing to give up a child on her own free will - but to her lack thereof. Similarly, she obeys her husband’s wish to send her other three children away, Susan and Henry because of Jack's memories, and Roland as a young boy who ought to be socialized in all-boys school, encouraging the reproduction of the structure of domination through the ‘masculinization’ of the body (Bourdieu, 2002, pp. 55-56). It exemplifies once more how the family, and the private lives of individuals, are always subject to social norms that keep ‘pushing through’ the seemingly private sphere, altering in

many cases the trajectory of people's lives irrevocably.

After the true story is revealed and the brothers reunite, Roland can now understand the childhood impression of his mother's sadness, that "lay hidden in her subdued tone, her nervousness, the way she paused in a task and looked away, drawn into a daydream or a memory" (McEwan, 2022, p. 46). He understands that surrendering his brother to a new family, as well as keeping this act a secret, was to avoid the unthinkably catastrophic consequences: "the contempt of the village, and attached to her child the stigma of illegitimacy — a vehement social disgust" (McEwan, 2022, p. 386).

This observation about stigma is significant: Rosalind would be, according to Goffman (1963), considered a stigmatized person, and more specifically a 'discreditable' one (as opposed to a an already 'discredited' individual): she is a woman who has secretly given birth to a child out of wedlock and thus, her social "differentness is not immediately apparent" to her environment (p. 42). Rosalind, to avoid the aforementioned dangers, copes with this transgression that would guarantee her an outsider label by conducting 'information management' about her secret 'failing': she confides only to her sister Joy, whom she trusts, and urges her to keep this a lifelong secret, thus keeping the secret between the narrow circle of herself, her sister, and Robert, father of the child. Contrastingly, she keeps the truth hidden from anyone else up to her very death, including her children. As Goffman (1963) notes, information management is a "widely employed strategy of the discreditable person" whereby the individual controls the social narrative of their life "by dividing the world into a large group to whom he tells nothing, and a small group to whom he tells all and upon whose help he then relies" (p. 95).

Rosalind's life has been one of self-policing, having internalized the potent social norms of her time. From the above traumatic event in her life, it is understood better why her lifelong secrecy has been a weight on her that she has been secretly carrying - along with the dispositions she has absorbed through her gendered habitus: obedience to Robert, commitment to marriage as the prime site of stability to be preserved at all costs, acceptance of the patriarchal organization of her household and Robert's preservation of his code of honor. This way of being does not however begin simply with the trauma of an extramarital affair and subsequent pregnancy: she is a already a woman who has been socialized in a small, poor

British village during the war, with a limited field of action to begin with, with class barriers higher and stronger than any traces of her own will or agency. In contrast with Robert, who has himself risen through the ranks from being “an infantryman in barracks in Fort George, Scotland before the war, low-paid and always hungry” (McEwan, 2022, p. 37), Rosalind does not have any other imaginable future, any other ‘out’ from the limited position that both her class and gender have imposed; even the work she had as a helper for a driver vanishing after the war ends and female labour is no longer needed, returning eventually to her domestic role as a wife and mother.

The tight grip that performing and self-policing have had on her is further emphasized by the fact that it is only when Roland’s father dies and her mental decline begins to unravel that the truth almost slips out of her. The mechanisms of self-presentation (and self-preservation), like hiding the true dates of events and never talking of Jack Tate in front of her family, start to break down, as in the scene discussed previously in this chapter. After Robert’s funeral, Rosalind feels free to start talking again about Jack, in a loving, proud way - “He shone now and she could claim him” (McEwan, 2022, p. 302). Ironically, the early signs of eventual dementia, as well as the fact of her domineering husband of fifty years passing away, allow Rosalind to almost reveal the true story. Her body remembers - even though the institution of motherhood, her gendered habitus, and her lifelong management mechanisms of her guilt and shame have forced her to perform another self, another story. The long discipline she has been subjected to, as Roland realizes, have made her almost assume - perform - a different identity for most of her life, leaving no room to really understand his mother due to the barriers of social control from the outside and from the inside. Roland laments that he never really got to know her, with the act of giving away her child the ‘final blow’: “the young woman in the photograph vanished on Reading Station in 1942” (McEwan, 2022, p. 387). Her suppressed emotions finally start to surface when it is already too late, with her dementia advancing rapidly, and her ability to tell the coherent and full story gone. Thus, the momentary disintegration of the facade she has maintained for years due to dementia - when her body finds it more difficult to perform - accentuate the deeply ingrained, fully embodied dispositions Rosalind has absorbed throughout her lifetime; how to be as a woman, a wife, and a mother.

In this subchapter, I have discussed Rosalind and the grave consequences of the facade that she maintains throughout her life, as a result of both a gendered habitus, motherhood as an institution, and the ways she is forced to manage the social impressions of her - with traumatic consequences. This concludes the chapter on the Baines family and the discussion on the family unit and gender relations in the beginning to the middle of the twentieth century.

I now continue my analysis with the character of Alissa Eberhardt, Roland's wife and mother of their son, and the different challenges in her role as a mother, artist, and wife, in her generational unit and different social and cultural milieu.

4. The new family unit towards the end of the century

4.1. Alissa and the rupture with the old: between being a wife, a mother, and an artist

Alissa Eberhardt is a central character in Lessons, Roland's ex-wife and mother of their son Lawrence. Her departure from the family unit and her subsequent fame and success she achieves as an accomplished author compile a significant part of the plot of the novel - a choice that affects both of them in different ways until the end of their lives.

Before I dive into a critical discussion of Alissa, her life trajectory and the choices she makes with regards to motherhood and artistry, it is relevant to start off this chapter with context on the cultural and social climate Alissa came of age, as well as a brief introduction of her family background, and specifically her mother, Jane. As will be discussed, her mother's past and suppressed literary ambitions play an important role in her decision to pursue writing and reject domesticity altogether.

Roland meets Alissa in 1977, while taking German language classes at the Goethe Institute in London. Alissa is the teacher of the course; she is 29 years old at that time, an only child "born in Bavaria to an English mother and German father" (McEwan, 2022, p. 159). In Part I of the novel we learn about her mother, Jane:

> Jane Farmer was born in Haywards Heath in 1920, the daughter of two schoolteachers of modern languages. After grammar school where she excelled at French and German, she did secretarial training — the question of university 'never came up'. She was a ninety-words-a-minute girl. (McEwan, 2022, p. 75)

Through conversations with his mother-in-law, Roland learns that Jane has always had literary aspirations. She started working at a magazine called *Horizon* in 1943; with the end of the war, her ambition was to "travel across Europe and 'report back'" (McEwan, 2022, p. 76). In 1946, when she was 26 years old, she became Horizon's 'European correspondent at large' (p. 77) and left England to travel to Munich, where she would go on to investigate and report on the history and survivors of the anti-Nazi student group called the White Rose. Her notes, reports, and reflections from this endeavour are all kept in her personal journals, which she shares with Roland and her daughter years later - these journals provide an insight into her impressive, thorough investigation on the White Rose, the stories she

collects from people in Germany that were or knew of members of the resistance group, as well as her personal anecdotes as a young female reporter in post-war Europe.

It is during this investigation that Jane meets Heinrich Eberhardt, who would go on to become her husband and Alissa's father. Heinrich at that time was a "a mature law student at Munich University" (McEwan, 2022, p. 92) who was acquainted with the students and mission of the White Rose and therefore accepted to be interviewed by Jane to help her write her story. The two quickly fall in love and begin a relationship; Jane is enthralled with both the intricate history of the White Rose which is discovering and her new found romance with Heimrich - but, as she writes in her journals, ultimately leaves her reporting project unfinished:

> And so it was that after Jane became pregnant in January 1947, and when they were quietly married in the same month, the thrilling idea of moving to Murnau took form. They rented a house and moved in during the spring.
> By the time they were unpacking their possessions in the three-storey chalet, Jane was coming to terms with the fact that she was never going to write her piece on the White Rose. She was in love, visibly pregnant and committed to a new existence. Heinrich had found work in the office of a country solicitor dealing in agricultural conveyancing. She was absorbed in setting up a home for the baby. With much guilt and many drafts, she wrote her letter of explanation to the Horizon office. (McEwan, 2022, p. 97)

The excitement of Jane's 'commitment to a new existence', that includes domestic motherhood and quiet obedience to her husband, will wear off in the years to come. The eventual realization that "She never went to university like her brother, never became a published writer, never 'popped' across the Alps to relay the secrets of the ultimate osso buco to the unsensual English" (McEwan, 2022, p. 98) start to leave her more and more embittered as the years pass - there is "a touch of sharpness, even sourness, of disillusion in her manner" (p. 98). She realizes that she has settled for a life that is different from the one she set out to have unconsciously:

> Jane hardly noticed how conventionally obedient she gradually became to her husband's wishes. Reciprocally, he had no awareness of his own domineering manner, his expectation that she should serve him in the home. (McEwan, 2022, p. 98)

The domestic scene described above is reminiscent of Rosalind's life, a domestic existence where gendered expectations are firmly delineated: servitude towards the head of the family, acceptance of his temper, unconscious obedience. The almost unconscious manner in which Jane feels herself entering such a role as well as the subsequent bitterness she feels over this fact are crucial. In a strikingly similar sentiment in the beginning of *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich also describes a similar difference between the life she envisions for herself and the more 'conventional' lifestyle she is urged by society to embody:

> In 1945 I was writing poetry seriously, and had a fantasy of going to postwar Europe as a journalist, sleeping among the ruins in bombed cities, recording the rebirth of civilization after the fall of the Nazis. But also, like every other girl I knew, I spent hours trying to apply lipstick more adroitly, straightening the wandering seams of stockings, talking about "boys". There were two different compartments, already, to my life. (Rich, 1995, p. 25)

Jane's eventual confinement to a domestic existence, hurtful because it is completely different from the one she had set out to construct for herself, exemplifies the *symbolic force* of the gender hierarchy at play that slowly becomes embodied by her, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, acts almost 'invisibly'. Bourdieu (2002) writes that symbolic violence

> finds its conditions of possibility, and its economic equivalent (in an expanded sense of the word 'economic'), in the immense preliminary labour that is needed to bring about a durable transformation of bodies and to produce the permanent dispositions that it triggers and awakens. This transformative action is all the more powerful because it is for the most part exerted invisibly and insidiously through insensible familiarization with a symbolically structured physical world and early, prolonged experience of interactions informed by the structures of domination. (p. 38)

It is understood that Jane is familiar with the 'structures of domination' of her time and has been socialized in such a way so as to understand her limitations: for instance, her brother goes to university, whereas the possibility of her attending is dismissed early on. She carries - already, as Bourdieu suggests - within her dispositions, a system of beliefs and expectations about her possibilities as a woman, transmitted through social institutions and cultural narratives, which are then 'activated' once she finds herself married. Her joyful attraction to Heinrich

ends up with her gradually assuming a domestic role as an almost self-evident choice. When the implications of this existence make themselves visible and felt (gendered expectations like obedience and tending to the house), this gives rise to anger and regret, finding herself split between what she knows is a limiting gender hierarchy and the fact that she has succumbed to it - an "internal conflict" (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 39). However, it is important to note that although there are similar mechanisms at play between Rosalind and Jane as women of the same generation, there are vast differences in the ways they are portrayed to experience these oppressive forces as women, primarily due to their class difference (Jane has had the opportunity to pursue education and employment, for instance). This is a reminder of the crucial role that intersecting identities play in the ways women are variably affected by patriarchy - without diminishing their individual struggles.

I now turn my discussion to the complex relationship between mother and daughter to discuss Jane and Alissa, and the way their relations are shaped by both Jane's resentment over her unfinished dreams and Alissa's own choices.

Alissa, Jane and Heinrich's only child, was born in Murnau in October, 1947. When Roland meets her for the first time in London during the German lessons she was giving at Goethe Institut, Alissa had just "completed her MA at King's College London" and "would be married next spring", but reveals to her students that "her ambition was to be the greatest novelist of her generation. She said it with an ironic smile." (McEwan, 2022, p. 159). When Roland and Alissa bump into each other again four years later at a concert in 1981, she is working "as a classroom assistant at Holland Park School" (p. 182), while writing a novel. Since Alissa is no longer engaged and based on mutual attraction, they quickly fall in love and become a couple; in 1985 they "took the final step towards a public existence when they bought the shabby two-storey Edwardian house in Clapham Old Town" (p. 195) and a few months later, their son Lawrence was born.

Even before Alissa ultimately leaves the family unit to pursue a writing career, Roland notes the tension between mother and daughter that has been brewing for years. During a visit to her parents, Alissa confides in Roland that she feels her mother's resentment and attributes it to the different opportunities they were afforded:

‘She’s jealous of me. She got wartime London then marriage and childcare. I got the German economic miracle, two universities, the pill, the sixties. You heard her. School teaching isn’t good enough. When you weren’t there, she said marriage would obliterate me.’ (McEwan, 2022, p. 191)

Alissa sums up the different social and cultural climate she came of age as a woman: access to more education than her mother had, economic stability, progressively more reproductive freedom, the sixties’ sense of freedom and changing norms. More than that, she points out her mother’s encouragement to her to avoid the ‘fate’ of Jane, who “resolved her destiny in the home” and accepted early on that “she had ended up with a safe life and a dull marriage” (McEwan, 2022, p. 98). Most of all, Jane seems fearful of the fact that her daughter might settle, unconsciously let herself drift into marriage and motherhood in the same way that Jane accepted domesticity over ambition because it seemed like the ‘natural’ choice, as prescribed by the cultural norms of her time.

In 1986, Alissa visits her mother after choosing to leave Roland and their newborn son Lawrence for good to pursue a literary career. Jane relays to Roland their explosive encounter that day:

‘She said, “Mutti, I grew up in the shadow, the chill of your disappointment. My whole childhood was lived around your sense of failure. Your bitterness. You didn’t become a writer. Oh, how terrible that was. You didn’t become a writer. What you got instead was motherhood. You didn’t hate it. You put up with it. But you barely tolerated it, this second-rate life. You think a child doesn’t notice? You certainly never wanted another baby, did you? And the man you thought you married turned out to be someone else. Another disappointment and you couldn’t forgive him. You were marked out for something better and it didn’t happen. It made you sour, ungenerous, suspicious of anyone’s success.” (McEwan, 2022, p. 218)

Alissa is deeply aware of the fact that she is following her mother’s path, including marrying and having a child:

She too deceived herself in marriage. She thought you were a brilliant bohemian. Your piano playing seduced her. She thought you were a free spirit. Just the way I thought Heinrich was a hero of the resistance and would go on being one. You misled her. “He’s a fantasist, Mutti, he can’t settle to anything. He’s got problems in his past he won’t even think about. He can’t achieve anything. And nor can I. Together we were sinking. Then there was the baby and we sank faster. Neither of us were ever going to achieve anything. You taught me, a baby is second best. Not

even second. But we even talked about having another because an only child is the saddest thing in the world. Isn't it, Mutti?"
'At this point, she stood up, so I did too. She said, "This is what I've come to tell you. Try and think of it as good news. I'm not going to sink. I'm leaving him. And the baby. No, don't say anything. Do you think it doesn't hurt? But I have to do this now before it becomes impossible. I'm also leaving you. I refuse to follow you." (McEwan, 2022, p. 219)

Jane accepts that Alissa's complaints and her mother being a reason for her regret about her life choices are true to an extent. However, she insists, just like Alissa had revealed to Roland, that the more progressive (at least outwardly) climate in which Alissa was raised, the opportunities she had, might have helped her ease her regret and carve a different path for herself with the larger amount of opportunities she had compared to Jane: "'...see it from the point of view of our war generation. She was blessed. History was kind to her. So was the government. Nice schools, free dance and music lessons. Each year everything getting slightly better. Compared to what went before, tolerance everywhere. And we doted on her.'" (McEwan, 2022, p. 220). This conflict that arises because of the ambition of both women alters their relationship forever. Adrienne Rich writes:

The woman activist or artist born of a family-centered mother may in any case feel that her mother cannot understand or sympathize with the imperatives of her life; or that her mother has preferred and valued a more conventional daughter, or a son. (Rich, 1995, p. 229)

Although it is not that in Jane's case her wish to have a more conventional daughter is present - she knows firsthand the desire of ambition and has tried to warn her daughter against the 'traditional' route of marriage and children - she nevertheless feels compelled to see her daughter salvage her marriage; she questions whether Alissa's desire to leave her household is not a result of postpartum depression, a question that leaves Alissa furious ("Very quietly she said, "You haven't understood a thing."" (McEwan, 2022, p. 219).
The awareness of the different historical realities the two women navigate in their lifetimes is a crucial factor in their relationship, and emphasizes the mutual influence between private and social life - the vast difference the contingency of being born in a different time, a different era, makes for an individual. More significantly, the sentiment that female ambition is always in some ways

endangered and subject to limitation, even when social and political reality seems to progress and encourage women's choice to create their own path, is illuminated here. Even though Alissa lives in an era when the second wave of feminism has already left its mark, and is, as mentioned before, afforded more political and social provisions to be a mother *and* a working individual, the fact that she has followed a conventional path that cannot allow her to pursue her art in a meaningful way - feeling drowned by domesticity - leaves her unable to continue in this role. In a way, Alissa foresees the unconscious transition into an obedient domestic role that her mother herself was described as drifting into :

> …I was living my mother's life, retracing its pattern exactly. Some literary ambition, then love, then marriage, then baby, the old ambitions crushed or forgotten and the predictable future stretching ahead. And bitterness. It horrified me, how her bitterness would become my inheritance. I could feel her life dragging at mine, pulling me down with her. These thoughts wouldn't go away. I kept thinking of her journals. The story of how she almost became a writer, how she failed and how her failure was what I grew up with. (McEwan, 2022, p. 237)

The expectations of the institution of being a wife and mother, as seen in Rich's work, feel threatening to her, all the more because she has seen her mother experiencing them. The fear this evokes in her propels her to make a decision that comes with immense emotional consequences - not only to leave her child behind, but also refuse to have any contact with him, out of fear that she will cave in and return to an existence that does not serve her.

The question of why Alissa could not have written *while* being a mother and a wife torments Roland when he reads her first novel, *The Journey*. The fact that it is a piece of great literature arouses conflicting feelings in him:

> Would she, could she, have written The Journey there? [...] No, impossible, no one could conceive a book of such ambition and execution in that house. Unless she was alone there. Or rather, taking the other view, yes, it was more than possible — it was her duty to write in whatever place, in whatever situation, including motherhood, her own grown-up decisions had landed her." (McEwan, 2022, p. 243)

Roland's position as a father who felt deserted by his wife and challenged to take on the roles of both mother and father still leaves him embittered over Alissa's

abandonment. Yet he can acknowledge that solitary writing is needed to achieve the literary feat that is the book - as well as the fact that a man leaving his family to pursue his art is more common historically and frequently represented in cultural narratives: “men paid a lower price — the literary biographies teemed with wives and children abandoned for the higher calling” (McEwan, 2022, p.467). This phenomenon, as well as the socially more tolerable (or at least more represented) notion of a man leaving his family for the sake of art, is a prevalent and diachronical one. A woman is expected, even if left alone, to continue taking care of the household, the children - the notion of femininity being tied to domesticity is a persistent one (Bourdieu, 2002, pp. 93-94).

Years later, towards the end of the novel, when she has spent her life as a world-famous, critically acclaimed author, Roland visits an aging and ill Alissa after the publication of one of her books. In a tense reckoning, she confesses once that their married life was unbearable for her, that the way she escaped married life and motherhood was not an easy choice. Roland observes this ambivalent sadness: “she paid for her dozen books with two loves, a son and a husband. Now, she had no one, no family. No close friends…” (McEwan, 2022, p. 467).

Alissa’s eventual solitary pursuit of her art is, I argue, presented neither as completely heroic nor completely cruel - the novel foregrounds the complex gender expectations at play coupled with personal ambition that culminate in a decision that has undoubtedly immense emotional cost for all involved (Roland as a father, Alissa as a mother, and Lawrence as a child), but one that is nevertheless necessary for Alissa as an artist. When Alissa meets Roland for the first time after leaving him she recounts to him her struggles as a new mother and a wife: “But the baby ... his needs, he was annihilating me. The two of you . . . I was nothing. I had nothing. No thoughts, no personality, no wishes except for sleep.” (McEwan, 2022, p. 238). In their first meeting after her disappearance, he gives him a copy of her upcoming debut novel:

‘It’s the English proof. It’s coming out the same time as here. In six weeks.’
He slipped it into his backpack and got ready to go. “Thank you.’
‘Is that all you’re going to say?’

He nodded. ‘Do you remotely understand how difficult it’s been historically for women to create, to be artists, scientists, to write or paint? My story means nothing to you?’ (McEwan, 2022, p. 238)

Though Roland’s personal feelings of abandonment and his struggle with being a single father to a baby are present, Alissa explicitly points out the special expectations that accompany motherhood with having an artistic calling, invoking the historical struggle of women to feel - or even be - free to create. Alissa’s story of ‘escape’ from the household is one that raises questions about women’s authorship, what artistic pursuit can mean for a woman that is simultaneously tied to motherhood and domesticity.

Although set in different historical realities, with different practical and systemic circumstances for women, these questions Alissa raises relating to the persistent hindrances to pursuing art for women are central in Virginia Woolf’s seminal 1929 essay *A Room of One’s Own*, where she discusses the vitality of financial and intellectual autonomy for female creativity through a semi-fictional exploration of British literary history and women. Woolf examines the barriers that women with an artistic calling have faced through the centuries, resulting in either their complete exclusion (‘silencing’) from writing or, in another case, how the work women did write was influenced by imposed restrictions. With the proclamation that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf, 2004, p. 4), she evokes, along with the necessity of financial independence, the need “for autonomy and freedom from the demands of domestic life and other-directed responsibilities; the privacy necessary to listen to own’s own voice and create” (Rosenman, 2015, p. 183). The domestic commotion that Alissa describes in her life with Roland, along with the physically and mentally demanding experiences that are part of motherhood, posed a barrier to her developing her genius, one which could not be overcome except by fleeing. Undoubtedly, it should be noted that Alissa is in a position where this is, at least materially, a feasible option; for instance, she confesses that she was confident that Roland would be a good father to Lawrence in her absence; there was no element of violence - in contrast with Rosalind’s situation, for example - that would physically prevent her from leaving; she was indeed financially stable, employed, and in possession at least of enough money to start anew on her own. Thus, my

discussion on Alissa is more geared towards the fact that it exemplifies the tensions between domesticity/art as a painful dichotomy for women writers; the gendered expectations tied to household tasks and the appropriate, selfless emotions towards motherhood that women are frequently expected to showcase; how these ideas are generationally and culturally transmitted, a theme that is recurrent in *Lessons*.

Another relevant metaphor through which to interpret Alissa's journey is Woolf's 'killing the Angel in the House'. The struggle for autonomy from gendered expectations may not just be spatial, physical - as in escaping the family household and all its impositions - but also mental, intellectual, the very subject and attitude of a woman's writing. In her essay *Professions for Women* delivered originally as a speech in 1931, Virginia Woolf uses the phrase 'The Angel in the House', from the title of a poem by Coventry Patmore, as the encapsulation of the Victorian ideal that, as Patmore's poem describes, views women's role as virtuous, serving and selfless presences in the family unit - a woman's identity being tied solely to her domestic duties. Woolf describes her struggle as a writer to rid herself of ("kill") the Angel's commands:

> She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. [...] And when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words. The shadow of her wings fell on my page; I heard the rustling of her skirts in the room. (Woolf, 2008, p. 141)

There is the presence of this impulse to be a certain way, as described in Woolf's words, in Alissa - even if not commanded by Roland directly, she feels the forthcoming of this anxiety that might mean annihilation of one's self, one's needs in the family unit and all its responsibilities, its daily needs and interruptions - which for women, as discussed above, tend to be "infinitely more formidable" (Woolf, 2004, p. 61). The metaphorical struggle with the Angel in Woolf's essay reveals the internal fight to overcome the outside pressures for a woman to feel intellectually free to write without constraint, with a unique voice: as Woolf writes, the Angel "...would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found,

directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex." (Woolf, 2008, p. 142). Though undoubtedly important and influential, in Elaine Showalter's view, Woolf's theory on being authentic as a female writer culminated in a "neutralizing her own conflict between the desire to present a woman's whole experience, and the fear of such revelation" (Showalter, 1992, p. 208) and that in Woolf's work there is a disapproval of the anger that results from oppression and surfaces in women's writing, such as Charlotte Brontë's (Showalter, 1992, p. 209).

When it comes to Alissa's writing, the reader gets a glimpse of it through short summaries that the narrator relays. In the novel she is about to release shortly before her health takes a turn for the worst, the female protagonist flees an abusive partner and murders him in the end of the story. Anxious about the prospect that readers and press will assume he is the inspiration for the partner in her novel, he asks her to omit or clarify this detail, to which a frustrated Alissa responds that it is a complete invention to which she is entitled as a writer and not a purposeful attack: "I borrow. I invent. I raid my own life. I take from all over the place, I change it, bend it to what I need" (McEwan, 2022, p. 462)). On the contrary, she confesses that she has purposefully omitted Roland and their life together from her work, avoiding to write a memoir that includes him:

> How you stuffed me, eyes, ears, mouth, with your needs. Not only your God-given right to some ecstatic union of minds and bodies in the clouds. But your oh-so-cultivated version of what you might have been. That refined sense of failure and self-pity for what life had stolen from you. The concert pianist, the poet, the Wimbledon champ. Those three heroes out of your reach took up a lot of room in a small house. How was I to breathe? Then you invented fatherhood, parenthood and couldn't stop talking about it. Meanwhile, all around you, junk, squalor, piles of your unwanted crap everywhere. I couldn't move. I couldn't think. (McEwan, 2022, p. 463)

From here, Alissa's frustration and her fear of the idea that she should absorb Roland's own demands and repressed ambitions - fearful all the more because of seeing her mother's slow succumbment to her husband's ego - become clearer. Moreover, the voice she ends up channeling in her writing can be viewed as one that includes the anger discussed previously that women writers might showcase in

their writing: “My novels are filled with stupid, demanding, contradictory women who run away.” (McEwan, 2022, p. 464)). In writing about intimate partner abuse (which Alissa confesses she has been a victim of, though not by Roland, but by a previous boyfriend), the literal and metaphorical murder of the cruel husband, for instance, alongside what she considers her own personal failures and mistakes, her novels seem to aim to encompass this whole varied spectrum of her experiences, contradictory, yet human. Elaine Showalter notes this creative freedom, and more specifically on the freedom to express contradictions and anger, which was found in the (then) contemporary literature by women (and rings true for the historical time in which Alissa in the novel becomes a writer):

> There is a great deal of anger in some of these books. Virginia Woolf might not have approved of their rancor, nor of their insistent femaleness but I think she would have envied their authors' freedom. [...] If few women feel this rage, even fewer can still pretend not to hear it expressed. (Showalter, 1992, p. 220)

Lastly, it can be interpreted that Roland’s frustration and his urging Alissa to alter the detail that could target him is a symbol of the very outside pressure that Alissa wanted to avoid by choosing a solitary writer’s life. Although not entirely selfish, his interpretation and anxiety could potentially have been an impediment to her creative freedom, and risk her ability to write freely as a result of an internalized (male) gaze, or even the need to be accommodating - for practical or other reasons - in her writing; to be ‘digestible’ for a society that prescribes a gendered code of conduct, in various ways and across eras.

This chapter aimed at analysing Alissa’s negotiation of motherhood and artistry in the context of the gender expectations of her time. In the following subchapter, which serves as the last part of my analysis, I turn to Roland and the theme of fatherhood and masculinity.

4.2. Roland’s negotiation of fatherhood and hegemonic masculinity

In this final chapter, I provide a discussion of Roland Baines, the protagonist of the novel, through the lens of gender, and more specifically how he negotiates the new

ideas surrounding masculinity and fatherhood towards the end of the 20th century. In *Lessons*, as mentioned in the introduction, the focal point is Roland's life and how it intertwines with other events, characters, situations; the point of view that the novel is written in is third-person limited perspective, which means that the reader (through the narrator) follows all the internal emotional states and thoughts of Roland. Therefore, whereas my critical analysis of the previous characters relied only upon the information, perceptions, and materials that Roland has access to and relays to the reader, in this section I base my analysis on selected descriptions of Roland's inner life and train of thought, and pay close attention to passages and scenes that reveal his reckoning with the challenges and ideas of fatherhood, family, and masculinity - as those intersect with the wider societal and political reality he navigates.

To begin with, Roland embodies and reflects a quite different kind of idea of fatherhood than his father, and the characters that belonged to his father's generation. His wish to be more emotionally connected to his son Lawrence for instance is evident throughout the book, which, as I argue, is portrayed as springing from both his personal difficult relationship with his father, Robert Baines, and the changing ideas around the role and significance of fatherhood in Britain in the second part of the 20th century.

In Part I of the novel, following Alissa's sudden disappearance in 1986, the reader meets Roland as a single father, clueless as to his wife's whereabouts and struggling with his newly found position as a single parent to a 7-month old child and all its practical and emotional responsibilities. From household chores to being attentive to Lawrence's needs, the anxiety and sleeplessness that come with caring for his child, Roland tries to manage his contradicting emotions that his internal monologue reveals: "In the two bedrooms the order he imposed was cosmetic but the slide towards chaos was stayed…Alissa was no better at this stuff than he was. In fact – but no, today he was not thinking of her" (McEwan, 2022, p. 27). A bit later, as he takes Lawrence out for the daily errands, he starts to feel slight contentment with his situation and imagines how his circle might view him:

> They would admire his resilience. To some women a man caring alone for a baby was an attractive even heroic figure. To the men he would seem a dupe. But he was

a little proud of himself, of the laundry churning in the washing machine even now, of the clean hallway floor, of the contented well-fed child. (McEwan, 2022, p. 29)

This passage encapsulates the vast difference in social perception of fatherhood that has emerged since the historical milieu of Roland's father - and some gendered expectations that persist. Roland perceives single-fatherhood to be received by women not as a deficit but as an appealing feat. The word 'heroic' is particularly interesting when juxtaposed with the previous instance we read it in the novel, where even Jack Tate's name (Rosalind's first husband, and a soldier) "had a heroic sound to it" (McEwan, 2022, p. 44). The choice of the word 'heroic' and the different connotations attached to it in each case are clear, symbolising the different eras: whereas heroism in Jack Tate's time signifies self-sacrifice, hypermasculinity and duty, in 1980s Britain, single fatherhood is perceived as heroic because of the emotional care and attentiveness in parenting, that becomes all the more noteworthy because it is given (solely) by the father.

On the contrary, he understands this perception of his situation will vary by gender. Men, he presumes, might think him a 'dupe': a man who has been "cheated" into bearing the entire burden of raising a child, which includes the care work that goes into parenting, and which usually falls under the mother's responsibilities. This moment reflects the fact that in the second half of the 20th century in Britain - an era outwardly heading towards greater gender equality, and around which discussions of 'postfeminism' are gaining traction - assumptions and beliefs about the gendered division of household and emotional labor are present, revealing the subtle yet powerful tensions and contradictions in everyday life. Miller's (2011) study on fatherhood as a gendered practice notes that this increasing participation of men in the emotional labor of parenting in family life is evident through the years, but emphasizes that "the *legacy* of patriarchal and structural arrangements, men's power and 'choices' cannot be erased from contemporary debates or experiences even if there is a desire to do so" (Miller, 2011, p. 12).

The juxtaposition of private and public emergencies is exemplified early on in Part I. The day Roland takes out Lawrence for his errands, news of the Chernobyl disaster reaches Britain: "It was not possible to buy a paper without seeing its headline. 'Radiation cloud reaches Britain'." (McEwan, 2022, p. 30). Although his

private struggles with the disappearance of Alissa have made him shy away from keeping up with national and international affairs, which he otherwise has always followed ("...to read a report of a speech by Reagan or Thatcher or her ministers made Roland feel excluded and guilty for not paying attention" (McEwan, 2022, p. 26)), the possibility of an emergency that would directly affect he and his child make him anxious, as he switches between optimism and fear:

He imagined it was his love that protected his child. But when a public emergency erupts it becomes an indifferent leveller. Children welcome. Roland had no special privileges. He was in there with the rest and would have to listen out for public announcements, the quarter-credible assurances of leaders who, by convention, talked down to the citizenry. What was good for a politician's idea of the masses might not be good for any individual, especially for him. But he was the mass. He would be treated like the idiot he always was. (McEwan, 2022, p. 30)

Roland struggles internally with the idea of agency he has as a parent here, or his lack thereof - which is tied to the political reality of his era, being a part of the 'mass'. This scene comes in stark contrast with a memory that Roland recounts a little later in the novel from when he was a young boy witnessing a motorcycle accident with his father, who rushes in to assist:

As a young soldier in the Highland Light Infantry, twenty-three-year-old Corporal Baines had been on the beach near Dunkirk and had seen much death and men split apart by bombs, still alive. He knew not to move the motorcyclist off the road. He put an ear to the man's mouth to check his breathing and felt for his pulse in the bloodspiked hair at his temples. Roland watched closely. The Captain turned the man onto his side and parted his legs for stability. He took off his own jacket, folded it and tucked it under the man's head. They went over to the car. By now, there was a crowd. Captain Baines was not alone — all the men, except the youngest, had been in the war and knew what to do, Roland thought. (McEwan, 2022, p. 38)

His view of himself as 'an idiot' that belongs to 'a mass', unable to protect his child in a crisis that is out of his hands and bigger than his situation, is contrasted with his memory of his father as a heroic figure, knowledgeable in emergencies from the time of war and his military training.

Roland's role (and how he views himself) as a single parent can be analysed through the historical reality he inhabits. First, he becomes a father in the 1980s, an

era marked by the wave of neoliberalism associated with Margaret Thatcher's leadership and its focus on, among other things, the free market economy. This is reflected in the novel through Roland's improved financial situation when he participates in his friend's new enterprise, encouraged by the increasing flourishing business initiatives:

> Oliver Morgan of Epithalamium Cards had scaled the rungs of entrepreneurship, had become, to the amazement of his friends, a young hero of the new business culture. A greeting-card corporation had offered a buyout but so far Morgan clung on at the top, surveying his next move, letting the company grow. Like the dizzy cameraman, Roland had struggled up the ladder on his patron's heels, for months pouring out wised-up doggerel — on behalf of birthdays, anniversaries, newly-weds, retirees, recovering drug addicts and alcoholics, ingoing hospital patients, outgoing neonates. (McEwan, 2022, p. 204)

Though feeling ashamed that his ambitions to become a respected poet are replaced by this vocation, Roland receives a considerable amount of money through this job to be considered "relatively rich" (McEwan, 2022, p. 204). He is by all means, regarded at this moment as (literally and symbolically) the sole breadwinner of his family - himself and Lawrence. This is naturally not so much a matter of choice as it is of necessity, since Alissa will only start supporting them later in the narrative once her novels return financial gains. However, the respectable returns from this job reveal that for one, he fully embodies the spirit of times, and fulfills his role as the 'breadwinner'.

At the same time however, notions around fatherhood at this point in time are slowly changing, with paternal involvement in childcare in the household becoming more common than in previous generations (Lamb, 2000, pp. 33-34). Again, Roland is expected to fulfill this role alone, at least in the beginning of fatherhood when Lawrence is still very young, a responsibility he seems to succeed in and receive increasing fulfillment from throughout the novel. In contrast with his distant and repressed father Robert, he represents a new idea of fatherhood, a role that includes emotional closeness with being a breadwinner. Although this circumstance is not by design (and noting that he does receive state support as single parent at certain points) at least on a symbolic level, Roland embodies what

can be considered early traces of what Gruson - Wood et al. (2022) discuss as "postfeminist fatherhood", which is entangled with neoliberal structures:

> Postfeminist fatherhood is the hegemonic discourse for fathers that involves being the breadwinner, involved spouse, equal domestic partner and nurturing parent. Embodying contradictory actions, roles and gendered performances leads to feelings of personal failure and interpersonal conflict, while dominant norms of masculinity and heteronormativity are maintained. (Gruson - Wood et al., 2022, p. 267)

Although this ideal of fatherhood is not yet as prevalent or 'hegemonic' as today, I argue that in Roland these conflicting roles and expectations that have become his sole responsibility can be discerned, as he struggles with managing this whole new repertoire of challenges - as he notes later in the novel, "the common tightly encircled fate of single mothers was his" (McEwan, 2022, p. 101).
Although Roland showcases a stronger, more emotionally close relationship, his father's parenting is portrayed in the following passage as a 'shadow' lingering in his life. Specifically, he struggles with reconciling the loving, affectionate memories of his father as a child with the imposing, abusive, distant figure he was simultaneously for him and Rosalind. When the news of Robert Baines' passing reaches Roland, he contemplates:

> Robert Baines entranced his grandson with his absurd bagpipes and growling noises. He had got his hands bloody helping the injured motorcyclist.
> He had got up in the night, past 3 a.m., to drive forty miles to collect eighteen-year-old Roland from a motorway hitchhiking drop-off. And was cheerful when he greeted him. Always keen to press a five-pound note into the teenager's hand. Gave him his first driving lesson, reminding him that when he sat behind a steering wheel he was in possession of a three-quarter-ton steel weapon. Perhaps Robert had taught Roland how to be a father. If so, there were things to unlearn. The man whose love for him was so fierce, so possessive, so frightening when he was small, was also the man who hit Rosalind, who swindled a widow and boasted about it, who dominated all domestic occasions, often drunkenly, who mercilessly repeated his thoughts, who had done some untold thing to earn Susan's hatred. In everything his father was, Roland was implicated. (McEwan, 2022, p. 298)

First, Roland's memories reveal a very different manifestation of what was considered 'care' or expression of love for Robert from what 'care' means for Roland. The glimpses the reader gets into how Roland's father showed (albeit in a

limited and contradicting manner) his love for his child relate to my discussion in previous chapters about the different ways men channeled their affection in a heavily patriarchal, hypermasculine society. In their article “From Fatherhood to Fathering: Transmission and Change among British Fathers in Four-generation Families” Brannen and Nilsen (2006) stress this difference in understanding what counts as ‘care’ intergenerationally, emphasizing that it is a concept that transforms and evolves and can acquire different connotations and understanding based on the contemporaneous (gender) norms of each historical era and reality (p. 349).

Secondly, Roland wonders whether his parenting practices are a legacy of his father, learning from Robert how to practice fatherhood. He paradoxically asserts that he is ‘implicated’ in Robert’s contradictory actions and behavior - although from his story the reader witnesses a very different ideal of fatherhood and masculinity in Roland. This assertion works perhaps as a reflection on the fact that there is unavoidably both “both transmission and change in fathering” (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006, p. 347), that there are values and beliefs that undoubtedly get passed on from generation to generation which are either rejected or reinforced.

Finally, I conclude my discussion on Roland with a brief analysis on how he negotiates new ideas around masculinity through a comparative analysis of his character with Peter Mount, through the lens of hegemonic masculinity.

Peter Mount is Daphne’s (Roland’s wife towards the end of the novel) ex-husband, and an old friend of Roland’s. When Alissa first leaves Roland, Daphne and Peter (neighbors and family friends of Roland and Alissa) provide support to Roland as he navigates his new position as a single father - especially Daphne, who “had been Roland’s main support and guided him as Lawrence worked through the scary rota of early childhood illnesses” (McEwan, 2022, p. 208). Peter and Daphne have a tumultuous relationship, with Daphne admitting that Peter hit her in some instances.

Roland and Daphne become romantically involved in a kind of on-and-off relationship, setting up a new sort of ‘arrangement’ that is flexible and veers off the traditional family structure, with overnight stays at each other’s houses, each one caring for the other’s children, and their kids developing a close bond. Daphne and Roland get married late in their lives, when Daphne is diagnosed with terminal cancer and has little time left to live. After Daphne’s death, around 2016, Roland

prepares himself to scatter her ashes as per her instructions regarding location and manner. This task, however, ignites the antagonism that has been brewing between Peter and Roland for years. Roland admits that he "had come to loathe everything the man stood for" (McEwan, 2022, p. 403), which includes, besides being abusive and unfaithful towards Daphne, his enthusiastic involvement in and endorsement of the Brexit cause.

Peter insistently demands that he be involved regarding the disposal of Daphne's ashes, ignoring Roland's reminders that Daphne had left him her specific wishes on the rite which did not include Peter:

> Mount's posthumous love for his ex-partner had narrowed to an obsession with her ashes. He knew where she wanted them thrown. Thirty-five years ago, she had marked the place for him on a map. He had recently offered to go and do it himself. That was not going to happen. Her remarks to Roland as well as her letter were specific. That letter was in his luggage. Peter had left her twice and done it messily, and there were the episodes of violence, which he owned up to without contrition. At the time, apparently, he claimed she had driven him to it. In her last weeks, Daphne had decided not to forgive him. (McEwan, 2022, p. 404)

Peter goes as far as to follow Roland to the designated place Daphne has instructed Roland to dispose of her ashes in her letter, convinced he is entitled to be there as the first husband of Daphne: "Yes, here he was, Lord Posse Mount, formerly of Clapham Old Town, coming to reclaim Daphne from him by some tainted logic: I met her before you did." (McEwan, 2022, p. 425). It is interesting to note that the words used in this scene are all related to notions of ownership and entitlement. The word 'reclaim' above, when Roland contemplates, "Which of them would own her memory?" (McEwan, 2022, p. 406), and when Peter demands from Roland to be involved: ""I loved her far longer than you did. I have a right.'" (p. 405). Peter believes that he is entitled to Daphne, even after his abuse towards her, and even after her death - the language he uses reveals his desire to continue to possess her, instead of honoring her memory by respecting her decisions.

The tense meeting of Roland and Peter near the river culminates in a physical fight, from which Peter emerges a 'winner':

> He was on the bridge emptying the last of Daphne's ashes into the midstream tumult. He saw Roland, lifted the jar above his head football-trophy style and gave

him a cheery smile. Roland closed his eyes. None of it mattered. Whoever put them there, her remains were in the river, heading towards the Irish sea, just as she wanted. (McEwan, 2022, p. 429)

The difference between Roland and Peter is symbolized in this scene, and conveyed through the literal and metaphorical fight between them - between the different masculinities they embody. Again, the word ‘trophy’ evokes the possessiveness of Peter towards Daphne that continues even after her death - what should be a somber and respectful moment is treated by him almost as a competitive sport (“football”), a challenge to compete with and prove his superiority against a ‘weak’ Roland. Roland laments the detestable behavior of Peter, noting that “For now, in this small corner of the world, it was Peter Mount and his kind who ruled.” (McEwan, 2022, p. 431).

Peter’s character comes in stark contrast with the way Roland conceptualizes masculinity. It can be interpreted through Peter’s descriptions of his character and his actions that he embodies masculinity associated with aggressiveness, entitlement, and competitiveness. Furthermore, the comment by Roland that it was ‘his kind’ who ruled at that point is an example of *hegemonic masculinity*, masculinity that is upheld as an ideal and showcased as the prime example of being a man, contrasted with other other forms of masculinities and femininity; a masculinity that is ‘normative’ and prescribes “the most honored way of being a man” and “required all other men to position themselves in relation to it” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). Adding to the above, Peter’s association with and endorsement of Brexit in the narrative relate to Achilleos-Sarll & Martill’s (2019) discussion on the relation between gender and Brexit, who find that “Brexit discourse fixated on the promulgation of market logics and values linked to success in the ‘business*man*’s world’” that is linked to “the reproduction of gendered stereotypes” (p. 23), which can be observed in the portrayal of Peter in *Lessons* (gender-based abuse, neoliberal ideology, competitiveness and dominance as keys to manhood). The opposing ways of ‘doing gender’ that the two characters exemplify here reveal the contemporary tensions that unfold well into the 21st century, inseparable from the rapid political and social changes continuing to happen nationally and internationally.

5. Conclusion

The present thesis aimed to critically discuss *Lessons* through the lens of gender roles, norms and dynamics. My discussion focused on *Lessons* as a political and historical commentary and fiction, and the way gender roles - and how they are adhered to or subverted, and with what consequences - are portrayed in the novel. I argued that the family and the characters' roles in the family environment are themselves indicative and symbolic of a culture in flux which the novel aims to depict, and where the political and the personal are intertwined. My thesis demonstrated how *Lessons* portrays gender roles and expectations as historically situated, as we move from one generation to the next, and how they are constructed and subject to change. My discussion also demonstrated that the novel depicts oppressive gender ideals as persisting across time, but are reconfigured according to the historical era, complicating the lives of individuals, against the backdrop of a rapidly changing Europe. The generational order of the analysis of this thesis aimed exactly at illuminating these transformations, whether these are subtle or resounding, and tracing the gender dynamics and how they change from one family unit and generation to the next.

The potential for realist historical fiction to illuminate cultural and social change in terms of gender roles is thus affirmed in *Lessons*. Given the limits set by the scope of this thesis and the expansive and prolific novel that is *Lessons*, this thesis touched only upon a selected few key moments for the purpose of analysis; there are undoubtedly more scenes, characters and meanings that could be uncovered and analysed in future research. Simultaneously, it is crucial to note that gender roles and their transformation across time and generations is an important topic that is and shall be continued to be explored in fiction not only produced and confined in the Anglo-American sphere, but also in non-western (intergenerational) narratives, forming a plurality of different perspectives, voices, and takes on political realities. The present thesis aimed to only analyse one instance of how gender in fiction is portrayed, and the insights it can provide about the transmission and persistence of gender norms, primarily within a western European context.

6. References list

Achilleos-Sarll, C. & Martill, B. (2019). Toxic Masculinity: Militarism, Deal-Making and the Performance of Brexit. In Dustin M., Ferreira N. & Millns, S. (eds.). *Gender and Queer Perspectives on Brexit*. Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 15-44. https://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-030-03122-0_2

Bohovyk, O. & Bezrukov, A. (2024). Collective Amnesia in Ian McEwan's Lessons: A (New) World Order, Historical Memory and Phantom Pains of Greatness. *Ostrava Journal of English Philology* 16(1): pp. 35-50.

Bourdieu, P. (2002). *Masculine Domination*. Translated by R. Nice. Stanford University Press.

Bradshaw, D. (ed.) (2008). *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*. Oxford University Press.

Brannen, J. & Nilsen, A. (2006). From Fatherhood to Fathering: Transmission and Change among British Fathers in Four-generation Families. *Sociology* 40(2): pp. 335-352. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0038038506062036

Connell, R.W. (2005). *Masculinities.* 2nd ed. University of California Press.

Connell, R.W. & Messerschmidt, J.W. (2005). Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept. *Gender and Society* 19(6): pp. 829-859. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27640853

Christensen, A.D. & Kyed, M. (2022). From military to militarizing masculinities. *International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 17(1): pp. 1-4. https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2022.2028428

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity.* Simon & Schuster.

Gruson-Wood, J., Rice, C., Haines, J. & Chapman, G.E. (2022). The emotional toll of postfeminist fatherhood. *Gender, Work & Organization* 29(1): pp. 256-272. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gwao.12712

King, L. (2015). *Family Men. Fatherhood and Masculinity in Britain, 1914-1960*. Oxford University Press.

Ladzekpo, G.K., Attiye J.K. & Davi S.K. (2024). Exploring Gender Roles and Stereotypes in Literature: An Analysis of Contemporary Works. *International Journal of Gender Studies* 9(2): pp. 25-40.

Lamb, M. E. (2000). The History of Research on Father Involvement. *Marriage & Family Review* 29(2-3): pp. 23-42. https://doi.org/10.1300/J002v29n02_03

McEwan, I. (2022). *Lessons.* Penguin Random House.

Messerschmidt, J.W. & Bridges, T. (2024). Legitimation as linchpin: On Raewyn Connell's changing conceptualization of 'hegemonic masculinity'. *International Review of Sociology* 34(2): pp. 211-239. https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2024.2388616

Miller, T. (2011). Falling back into Gender? Men's Narratives and Practices around First-time Fatherhood. *Sociology* 45(6): pp. 1-16. http://soc.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/11/18/0038038511419180

Özer, S.D. (2025). Trauma, Testimony and the Limits of Healing in Ian McEwan's *Lessons*. *IDEAS: Journal of English Literary Studies* 5(2): pp. 121-134.

Popiel, M. (2007). Masculinity versus femininity: constructions of gender in Ian McEwan's fiction. *Acta Philologica* (33): pp. 188-194.

Rajput, P.S. & Ekka, A. (2023). Gender Roles: A Critical Examination of Their Construction, Evolution and Impact in English Literature. *International Journal of Humanities Social Science and Management (IJHSSM)* 3(4): pp. 322-337.

Rich, A. (1995). *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Norton.

Rosenman, E. (2015). *A Room of One's Own* in Transracial Perspective. In Bordo, S., Alcalde, M.C., Rosenman, E. (eds.). *Provocations: A Transnational Reader in the History of Feminist Thought*. University of California Press.

Showalter, E. (1992). Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy of Women Writers. *The Antioch Review* 50(½): pp. 207-220.

Storalek, J. (2013). Portrayal of men and women in Martin Amis's and Ian McEwan's fiction. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280577867_Portrayal_of_men_and_women_in_Martin_Amis's_and_Ian_McEwan's_fiction

Varghaiyan, N. & Nayebpour, K. (2023). The Ambivalent Force of Memory and Perspective-taking in Ian McEwan's Lessons. In: *9th International KTUDELL Conference: Language, Literature and Translation*. Trabzon, Türkiye 25-26 September, pp. 169-175.

West, C., Zimmerman & D.H. (1987). Doing Gender. *Gender and Society* 1(2): pp. 125-151. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002

Woolf, V. (2004). *A Room of One's Own.* Penguin Books.