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Peripheral Literary Motifs in *What We Can Know* by Ian McEwan

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Motive literare secundare în romanul *Ce putem ști*, de Ian McEwan

Rezumat

Ian McEwan este un scriitor britanic prolific, cunoscut datorită romanelor și povestirilor care s-au bucurat de aprecierea criticii literare. În cel mai recent roman al lui McEwan, publicat în 2025, *Ce putem ști*, sunt abordate două teme principale: (i) problema schimbărilor climatice și (ii) căutarea unei poezii pierdute. De asemenea, romanul implică o serie de motive literare secundare, care oferă o înțelegere nuanțată a temelor majore și scot la lumină complexitatea interioară a romanului. În articolul de față, prin utilizarea unei metodologii calitative, am identificat și analizat motivele literare secundare din romanul *Ce putem ști*: (i) arhipelag, (ii) inteligența artificială, (iii) fluturi, (iv) vremuri bogate, (v) feribot, (vi) fructe, (vii) științe umaniste, (viii) speranța de viață, (ix) Nigeria, (x) Oxford, (xi) rețele sociale, (xii) Districtul Lacurilor, (xiii) războiul împotriva Occidentului și (xiv) războiul împotriva Ucrainei. Rezultatele studiului contribuie la oferirea unei viziuni de ansamblu asupra romanului.

Cuvinte-cheie: literatură britanică, roman despre schimbările climatice (cli-fi), Ian McEwan, motive secundare, viziune de ansamblu.

Abstract

Ian McEwan is a prolific British writer, who is known for critically acclaimed novels and short stories. In McEwan's most recent novel, published in 2025, *What We Can Know*, two major themes are approached: (i) the issue of climate change and (ii) the search for a lost piece of poetry. In addition, the novel involves a number of peripheral literary motifs, which provide a nuanced understanding of the major themes and shed light onto the inner complexity of the novel. In the present article, by means of a qualitative methodology, the following peripheral motifs in the novel *What We Can Know* have been identified and analysed: (i) Archipelago, (ii) Artificial Intelligence, (iii) Butterfly, (iv) Copious Times, (v) Ferry, (vi) Fruit, (vii) Humanities, (viii) Life Expectancy, (ix) Nigeria, (x) Oxford, (xi) Social Media, (xii) The Lake District, (xiii) the War against Ukraine, and (xiv) the

War against the West. The results of the study contribute to providing a panoramic view on the novel.

Keywords: British literature, climate change (cli-fi) novel, Ian McEwan, peripheral motifs, panoramic view.

Introduction

The issue of climate change has been amply elucidated by numerous representatives of British culture, literature, politics, and the public at large (Kapranov 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). Furthermore, climate change has firmly established itself as a literary theme that is embraced by a number of British writers (Trexler and Johns-Putra 2011). For instance, Ian McEwan, who is an internationally renowned British writer, has recently published a novel that is centred on the depiction of dystopian climate change-ravaged future. The novel is titled *What We Can Know*. It was first published by Jonathan Cape in 2025. The novel depicts the calamity of climate change in the United Kingdom (the UK). In the novel, the UK, which is no longer a monarchy, is reduced to an archipelago of islands, with the major cities being flooded due to the climate change crisis and the ensuing wars. Against this background, McEwan portrays a literary scholar named Tom Metcalfe, who embarks upon the search for a lost poem which represents a symbol of the normal life in the UK before the climate crisis.

Accordingly, McEwan's novel *What We Can Know* is characterised by the two major themes, namely (i) climate change and (ii) a literary quest. In this regard, we should specify that literary themes

> are not ornaments placed on a story; they are its pulse. The study of literary theme is itself a journey – through history, cultures, artistic movements, and human memory. Themes evolve, expand, and transform with society, yet they also persist across time. As we explore the foundations of literary themes, we uncover how stories become mirrors – reflecting not only the world as it is, but also the world we long for it to be (Nikam 2025, p. 1).

Whereas literary themes are seen as the foundational macro-structural elements in a text, motifs are typically regarded as micro-elements, which in texts

> are usually recognizable as imaginative units of medium length. Although the boundaries are fluid, motifs are distinguished from smaller details, which can either serve as features of a motif (*Motivzüge*) or may not have any significant relationship to motifs at all, though they often lend themselves to symbolic usage in relation to abstract ideas or general themes. They frequently occur in texts of a realistic bent and can be said to belong, like individual phrases and figures of style, to the wide range of micro-elements (Wolpers 1995, p. 33).

According to Theodor Wolpers (1995, pp. 34-35), literary motifs could be operationalised as (i) central, *i.e.* those that are directly related to the main theme in a piece of literary writing and (ii) peripheral, *i.e.*, those that are indirectly involved in the development of the theme. In this light, the central motifs in *What We Can Know* could pertain to the prototypical manifestations of the issue of climate change. Among them, one may single out central motifs found in climate change discourse and literary works, such as climate catastrophe, the rise in sea levels, the rise in greenhouse gases, drought, environmental collapse, and extreme weather events (Fløttum and Gjerstad 2013a, 2013b; Gjerstad and Fløttum 2017; Kapranov 2024). In contrast, a peripheral motif in *What We Can Know* reflects the central theme of climate change only marginally, for instance, by depicting a ferry between the islands that remain after the apocalyptic tsunami, which, in turn, was caused by the climate change-related wars in the 2040s.

Having specified the central themes and having outlined the notions of central and peripheral motifs in the novel, it should be noted that the central themes of climate change and the literary quest in *What We Can Know* have started to attract scholarly attention (Kafkas and Akşehir 2026; Kapranov 2026). However, very little is known about peripheral literary motifs in the novel. To the best of our knowledge, there is no published research that prioritises the peripheral motifs in *What We Can Know*. In order to bridge the scholarly gap, this article introduces and discusses a qualitative study that aims at identifying and analysing peripheral literary motifs in the novel.

Hence, the focus of our investigation should be explained early in the article. First, although the themes of climate change and the search for the lost poem are the very core of *What We Can Know*, we contend that peripheral literary motifs may offer the readers even a deeper insight into the novel and unveil the interconnectedness of the main themes (Nikam 2025; Oleniak 2020, 2025). Our contention is anchored in Alessandro Barchiesi's dichotomy "centre vs. periphery", which

> can be understood in terms of attention, attention being a basic type of power-relationship: the core receives compulsory attention from the periphery, and can in its turn afford to ignore the periphery. When this dynamic shifts, we will have a different core (Barchiesi 2005, p. 394).

Second, paraphrasing Barchiesi (2005), we assume that the central themes cannot be separated from the peripheral motifs because they provide the necessary textual ties that deepen the meanings of the main themes, enriching their symbolic significance. In addition, the peripheral motifs contribute to the cumulative effect; that is, two or more motifs create a synergy that constitutes the complexity of the novel (Wolpers 1995). In this regard, we should emphasise that a substantial number of McEwan's literary works are characterised as being complex and panoramic, *i.e*. they are argued to contain several major themes and a multitude of motifs, inclusive of peripheral

motifs (Colombino 2017). Accordingly, delving into the peripheral motifs in *What We Can Know* provides an avenue to discovering the grand scale of the novel.

Third, based upon the prior studies (Kafkas and Aksehir 2026; Kapranov 2026), we argue that a scholarly focus on the peripheral literary motifs in *What We Can Know* provides the readers of climate fiction (cli-fi), including undergraduate and postgraduate students, with vivid and graphic examples of the issue of climate change, sustainability, the environment in the time of climate catastrophe, and the life of ordinary British people affected by climate change. In this regard, a qualitative analysis of the peripheral motifs in McEwan's novel *What We Can Know* can be relevant to the teaching and learning of English literature, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and English for Specific Purposes (ESL) (Johns-Putra 2016; Kapranov and Voloshyna 2023).

Taking into consideration the aforementioned points, the study seeks to answer the following **research question** (**RQ**):

RQ: What peripheral literary motifs are found in *What We Can Know* by Ian McEwan?

Guided by the RQ, the article proceeds as follows. First, an outline of prior research on McEwan's literary works is provided. Second, the present study is introduced and discussed. Third, the conclusions are given in the final part of the article.

An outline of the prior studies on McEwan's literary works

Ian McEwan, born in 1948 in Aldershot, Hampshire (the UK), is a contemporary British writer whose novels and short stories have received both popular and critical acclaim (Head 2013; Wells 2009). Admittedly, literary critics and the public at large single out such works by McEwan as *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), *In Between the Sheets* (1978), *The Child in Time* (1987), *The Innocent* (1990), *Black Dogs* (1992), *Enduring Love* (1997), *Amsterdam* (1998), *Atonement* (2001), *On Chesil Beach* (2007), and *The Children Act* (2014). Several of McEwan's novels have won prestigious awards, for instance, the 1987 Whitbread Novel of the Year for *The Child in Time* and the 1998 Booker Prize for *Amsterdam*. Furthermore, four out of nineteen novels by McEwan have been adapted for the big screen, namely *Atonement*, *Enduring Love*, *The Children Act*, and *On Chesil Beach*.

Consequently, it is not at all surprising that McEwan's literary works attract attention of literary scholars and critics (Booth 2015; Diemert 2020; Golban 2011; Head 2013; Shang 2018; Wells 2009). For instance, it should be mentioned that just a simple search for the prior studies on McEwan's novels on scholar.google.com returns approximately 1500 hits. Given that there is a cornucopia of studies on McEwan and his works, the present outline of the literature does not pretend to be exhaustive. However, it aims at providing a brief overview of previous studies that address the complexity of McEwan's novels. The focus of the overview is accounted

by the fact that *What We Can Know* involves the complex themes of climate change and poetry in the form of a literary quest, which eventuate in two temporal dimensions at the start of the twenty-first century and one hundred years later in the early 2100s.

The view of McEwan's novels as complex and panoramic is found in research publications by Lyn Wells (2009), Petru Golban (2011), Biwu Shang (2018), and Aadil Zeffer and Tahir Zaffar (2023), who argue that his novels, which involve the theme of morality, branch out into a vast array of subtopics that encompass moral depravity, sexual scenes, murder, and morally twisted protagonists (Wells 2009). For instance, Golban (2011) indicates that McEwan usually produces a novel by incorporating a score of themes, such as morality, family chronicles, love narratives, and grand historical events – all grounded in science-based evidence and objective historical research. Identically to Golban (2011), Shang (2018) also subscribes to the view of McEwan's novels as all-embracing, especially as far as the themes of ethical dilemmas, ethical identities, ethical choices, ethical tragedies, and ethical choices are concerned. Furthermore, Zeffer and Zaffar (2023) posit that

> The novels of McEwan are usually concerned with issues like perversity, psycho-social problems, alienation, fear, violence and death etc. which disrupt the conventional moral standpoints. One common aspect of his novels is that they reveal the beastliness of men. The visceral images of society and the repulsive descriptions of the everyday world in the novels of McEwan open the darker side of humanity. His novels paint a picture of a world which is undone by sympathy and empathy (2023, p. 558).

McEwans' wide-ranging approach to the contextualisation of the protagonists is noted by Dominic Head (2013), Naomi Booth (2015), and Shabbir Ahmad, Muhammad Imran, Muhammad Iqbal and Samina Akhtar (2020). In this regard, Head (2013) argues that McEwan's novels commonly involve a score of grand themes, such as (i) politics, (ii) nature and the environment, (iii) science and rationality, (iv) love and ethics, and (v) violence. Moreover, Head (2013) observes that the recent novels by McEwan tend to focus on overtly political aspects of human existence. Despite the focus on humans as political animals, Head (2013) asserts that McEwan reverts continuously to the themes associated with love, nature, and science in, essentially, all of his novels irrespective of their main *foci*. By the same token, Booth (2015) posits that McEwan's narrative perspectives are reflective of the different approaches to focalisation across his novels. Specifically, Booth (2015) demonstrates that McEwan's narrative strategy combines multiple themes, focalisations and, therefore, multiple perspectives. A fairly similar contention is found in the article written by Ahmad, Imran, Iqbal, and Akhtar, who suggest that

> McEwan's narrative strategy associates with his attempt at a psychic exploration of characters in Child in Time (1987). In terms of the trauma representation under the third-person perspective, McEwan is in favor of the objective panoramic angle to

> reveal the trauma origin, traumatic moment, and the characters' post-traumatic life. The omniscient narration elaborates on the misery of the protagonist and indicates the stress spreading all over his life by presenting the traumatic events in a temporal narrative framework consisting of memory flashback and flash-forward (2020, p.160).

In a similar vein, McEwan's approach to the narrative is discussed by Brian Diemert (2020), as well as by Saswati Swayamprava and Kumar Nagendra (2025). These authors indicate that the literary universe in the later novels by McEwan is tangent to the central themes of global importance, for instance, the collapse of communism, the Iraq War, the issue of climate change, and ethical considerations associated with technological advances, such as ethics and artificial intelligence. On this account, Swayamprava and Nagendra (2025) demonstrate that the theme of artificial intelligence (AI) is portrayed in McEwan's novel *Machines Like Me* (2019) by means of presenting a polyphonic space, built with an array of interrelated themes, such as AI, persons and nonpersons, AI's personhood, ethics, human vs. machine consciousness, perception, and cognition.

The present outline of the literature indicates that McEwan's novels are truly global, complex and wide-ranging. Drawing on the prior studies, we proceed to the present investigation of McEwan's novel *What We Can Know*, which, arguably, contains several peripheral motifs that contribute to the novel's grand scale of themes and motifs.

The present study and its methodological considerations

Having outlined the literature on McEwan's works, we should reiterate that *What We Can Know* involves the central themes of (i) climate change and (ii) the scholarly quest by Tom Metcalfe to find a lost poem. As previously mentioned in the introduction, Metcalfe is a literary scholar employed by the University of the South Downs, which is situated on one of the few remaining islands of what used to be the UK. Tom Metcalfe's research area is the early twenty-first century literature and poetry. He is portrayed as a scientist, whose aim is to find the lost poem by Francis Blundy, who dedicated it to his wife Vivien. Particularly, Tom Metcalfe searches for the legendary poem "A Corona for Vivien", that was read aloud only once in 2014.

The lost piece of poetry represents a metaphor of human life at its zenith in the twenty-first century, a decade before the climate change Armageddon. The very start of the twenty-first century looks appealing to Tom Metcalfe, as it is a time of freedom, boundless possibilities, and economic prosperity. All of that allure vanishes, when the climate catastrophe and wars form part of the new reality in the 2040s. Hence, the poem dedicated to Vivien becomes a myth and a symbol of life that can be epitomised as a Fata Morgana of the UK. In this light, the plot indicates that the novel pertains to the literary thriller genre and is a piece of climate change fiction.

At the same time, there are peripheral literary motifs that are instrumental for a deeper understanding of the nuances of the novel. Whilst some of the motifs are not directly related to the central themes of the novel, their presence contributes substantially to the fine-tuning of the plot development. Accordingly, the present study seeks to unveil the peripheral motifs in McEwan's *What We Can Know* (see the RQ in the introduction) by means of applying a qualitative methodology developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006) and modified by Muhammad Naeem, Wilson Ozuem, Kerry Howell, and Silvia Ranfagni (2023).

In line with these authors, the methodology of revealing the peripheral literary motifs in *What We Can Know* was comprised of the following steps. First, the author of the article read the novel several times in order to get familiar with the protagonists, the plot and the chronological sequence of events in it. Second, the article's author searched manually for recurring meaningful words and word combinations, which encapsulated the plot. In the search, the following notions associated with the central theme of climate change were factored out: anthropogenic climate change, carbon trading, carbon emissions, carbon cuts, carbon reduction, climate change, climate change adaptation, climate change demonstration, climate change mitigation, climate change policy, climate risk/risks, CO2 absorption, CO2 capture and storage, CO2 emission/emissions, CO2 emission reduction/reductions, extreme weather event/events, extreme drought, extreme rain/rainfall, global warming, green energy, green technology, greenhouse gases, net zero, rise in sea level/levels, wind energy, and the (negative) consequences of climate change. Furthermore, the search eliminated the following notions related to the other central theme in the novel, namely the literary quest: genre, (literary) author, (literary) criticism, literature, period, poetry, poet, prose, rhyme, verse, and writer. Third, the coding of the motifs was executed in Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, which was used to assign codes to the passages of the novel that captured the underlying and recurrent messages. Fourth, the codes were grouped into meaningful clusters that were indicative of patterns. Finally, based upon the previous steps, the peripheral motifs were labelled and systematised. Importantly, it should be reiterated that the motifs directly related to the central themes of climate change and poetry were excluded from the analysis.

The results of the qualitative investigation and their discussion are presented in the following section of the article.

Results and discussion

The results of the qualitative analysis reveal that there are several peripheral motifs in *What We Can Know*, which are summarised in Table 1 in unity with the relevant examples taken from the 2025 edition of the novel published by Jonathan Cape in London.

Table 1. The Peripheral Literary Motifs in *What We Can Know*

#	Motifs	Examples
1	Archipelago	"Britain became an archipelago, its population halved. However, none of the twenty-first century's nuclear exchanges led to total war and humanity's extinction" (McEwan 2025, p. 106).
2	Artificial Intelligence (AI)	"As winter drew in, I was diverted by a related project. Rose suggested that we could draw our students into the history of the rise and fall and partial rise of AI" (*Ibidem*, p. 118).
3	Butterfly	"… I saw a cloud of butterflies. Apparently, this eruption of colour and erratic motion happens every year and I'd never noticed. On an afternoon stroll I saw a dog leap up and snap a tortoiseshell out of the air. I was shocked and wondered if an early symptom of ageing was fretting about and caring for the natural world. To honour the victim I taught myself some common names: meadow brown, ringlet, gatekeeper. I read about the butterfly's brief life cycle and learned that right across the archipelago there are as many as eight species. But in Francis and Vivien's time, I discovered, there were fifty-seven resident species, and I was reminded again of our diminished world" (*Ibidem*, p. 109).
4	Copious Times	"The times were copious, like rivers in spate. Its teeming hordes of novelists, poets, and dramatists formed a giant army massed against its readers, who were never quite sure of what was good. So the arguments were insecure and loud, and that was fine, a democracy of contesting tastes, a chaos of unconformity. I treasured the crazy music and fads and troubled movies and serious science, serious history, serious biography. My list was long – the suspension bridges, the orchestras, street parties and a thousand forms of music festivals, and people's gardening and cooking, their need for holidays, extreme sports, historical enactments, gay-pride carnivals, the risks they took with AI, the sense of humour, the safe airplanes, the passion for pointless sports. A hundred thousand at a football match! An astronaut playing golf on the moon!" (*Ibidem*, p. 99).
5	Ferry	"It was a rough passage home from the Bodleian, southward through the Irish Sea, and I was very sick. I paid extra for a miniature cabin. I lay there, repeatedly vomiting and gripping a rail with both hands for fear of being thrown against the adjacent wall. By recalling accounts of seasick sailors who jumped overboard, I persuaded myself that my bout was mild. We came at last through calmer waters of the old Severn Estuary then turned east towards Port Marlborough. It was midday when we tied up and the oppressive hum of the ferry's electric motors faded" (*Ibidem*, p. 42).
6	Fruit	"We know, for example, that Francis Blundy was fond of apples. He had a good supply each late summer and autumn from the generous neighbour with an orchard. There are three Bundy poems about apples, the best known of which is often anthologised" (*Ibidem*, p. 13).

#	Motifs	Examples
7	Humanities	"They sign up to the humanities because they lack mathematical or technical talent. We are the poor cousins and we don't get the smartest bunch. Our offices are dilapidated. Many of them leak. Our salaries are fixed at one half of the rate for our scientific colleagues. We console ourselves that we are more in touch than they are with the bottomless ignorance of the generational zeitgeist" (*Ibidem*, p. 73).
8	Life Expectancy	"All those about to sit down at table in the Barn that October evening in 2014 would live past their mid-sixties. Average life expectancy today is sixty-two. Then as now, cancer, heart disease and dementia were what did and do for most" (*Ibidem*, p. 37).
9	Nigeria	"The knowledge base and collective memory were largely preserved, along with the internet, mostly maintained later by Nigeria, whose rise we also covered" (*Ibidem*, p. 145).
10	Oxford	"After marrying Harriett, his girlfriend from schooldays, and they had moved to Oxford, into the house the Harriett's real-estate parents had found for them, Chris built or fixed things for people, arranged things, delivered things, was a good carpenter, could bring in the right people, and was generally known around north and east Oxford and Jericho as a capable guy you could trust" (*Ibidem*, p. 30).
11	Social Media	"I prefer teaching the post-2015 period, when social media were beginning to be drawn into the currency of private lives, when waves of fantastical or malevolent or silly rumour began to shape the nature not only of politics but of human understanding" (*Ibidem*, p. 175).
12	The Lake District	"But here I must pause to reflect on a subject of deep sentiment, of a familiar feeling I can no longer suppress. Typing the words "the Lake District"… In my teens I became absorbed in the poetry of Wordsworth, the notebooks of his sister Dorothy and their youthful friendship with Coleridge. I was in love with simple Dove Cottage. They became mine, those 900 square miles of mountains and lakes, this "rocks, and stones, and tress". Submerged long ago, they remain a familiar terrain, boundlessly free" (*Ibidem*, p. 77).
13	The War against the West	"This was because of a catastrophic distraction, the Inundation of 2042. The long-predicted war between Russia and the West began with yet another pre-emptive strike, this one aimed most likely at US military installations in New Mexico. Faulty engineering caused the missile to drop 4,000 miles short. The outsized hydrogen bomb hurled seventy-metre-high waves towards Europe, West Arica and North America. Too deadly to be the accident the Russian authorities claimed? That question was never resolved" (*Ibidem*, p. 105).

#	Motifs	Examples
14	The War against Ukraine	"The Russian annexation of Crimea in February came up, as it had before. The view around the table was almost unanimous, as far as one can tell, with Francis dissenting and Vivien remaining silent. Crimea had always been Russian. Didn't Pushkin go there to write? Surely, Ukraine was so vast it could afford this small triangle of land. It was hardly worth risking a Third World War to reclaim it. Francis insisted that the Russians should be forced to withdraw, otherwise they would be tempted to greater aggression. Eight years later, when Russia invaded Ukraine and a new chapter in European history began, the record shows that the other guests forgot their earlier views" (*Ibidem*, p. 39).

As shown in Table 1, there are 14 peripheral literary motifs in the novel, namely (i) Archipelago, (ii) Artificial Intelligence (AI), (iii) Butterfly, (iv) Copious Times, (v) Ferry, (vi) Fruit, (vii) Humanities, (viii) Life Expectancy, (ix) Nigeria, (x) Oxford, (xi) Social Media, (xii) The Lake District, (xiii) The War against the West, and (xiv) The War against Ukraine. It follows from the analysis that, at least, some of the motifs are interrelated and, consequently, can be grouped and discussed together.

The first group of peripheral literary motifs is represented by Archipelago and Ferry, respectively. These two motifs are found both in Part 1 and Part 2 of the novel. The reason for their occurrence is explained by McEwan's portrayal of the UK after the climate crisis and, concurrently, after the devastating series of wars. Whilst we will return to the motif of war later in the discussion, it should be mentioned that the novel depicts the UK of the future, in which the British Isles are reduced to a small archipelago of islands that are connected by numerous ferries. Consequently, we argue that McEwan uses the motif of Ferry to amplify the depiction of the UK as "an archipelago, its population halved" (McEwan 2025, p. 106). Seen in this light, the motif of Ferry foregrounds the idea that the prosperous UK of the early twenty-first century is gone and will never re-emerge from under the risen sea as a territory and as a nation that used to be affluent, free, and even carefree.

In contrast to the UK, Nigeria has unexpectedly resurfaced as a new centre of power. McEwan repeatedly evokes the motif of Nigeria in the novel and paints it as the country that has risen from the ashes of the series of wars. McEwan mentions the rise of Nigeria as the country whose prominence is associated with the preservation of the Internet, which gets "mostly maintained later by Nigeria" (*Ibidem*, p. 145). Furthermore, McEwan indicates that British young people seem to be overly enthusiastic about Nigerian culture and social media. The motif of Nigeria, arguably, is purposefully deployed by McEwan to show that in the wake of the apocalyptic events it appears that the old centres of power, such as the UK, disappear, thus giving rise to Nigeria, a former outsider from the Global South.

Given that we mentioned the motif of Nigeria as the keeper of the Internet in the dystopian future, we should note that McEwan consistently refers to the

motifs that are related to the digital artefacts and artificial intelligence (AI). These references are evident from the motifs of AI and Social Media. The motif of Social Media demonstrates that Social Networking Sites (SNSs) play a key role in the early twenty-first century creative sector and influence the British literary circles. At the same time, McEwan mentions the motif of AI. This finding resonates with the prior study by Swayamprava and Nagendra (2025), who contend that the motif of AI is addressed in the recent novels by McEwan, especially in his *Machines Like Me* (2019). Unlike in his other novels, however, McEwan does not seem to dwell upon the motif of AI in *What We Can Know*. Instead, he uses the motif of AI as a stark reminder of the human failure to curb its own ambitions at the beginning of the twenty-first century, which, eventually, results in the period of climate Armageddon and catastrophic wars.

The idea of war is represented in the novel by two distinct motifs, namely (i) The War against the West and (ii) The War against Ukraine. Despite their affinity, these two motifs are argued to be separated due to their temporal embeddedness. Specifically, the motif The War against Ukraine occurs as a real event of the early twenty-first century, which starts with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and culminates in the full-scale invasion in 2022 (Kapranov 2016a, 2016b), whilst the motif The War against the West reflects a fictional war, which McEwan imagines in the 2040s. The motif of The War against Ukraine is employed by McEwan to portray total indifference on the part of the West, when Crimea gets annexed (Kapranov 2018). This leads to the series of wars, first as the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and, subsequently, the global catastrophe taking place in 2042. Namely, the motif of The War against the West eventuates as the Russian aggression against the USA with Russia sending missiles that fail to reach their target and explode in the Atlantic Ocean, thus causing a megatsunami that obliterates a score of coastal cities in Europe, Africa, and North America. The presence of the motifs of war in the novel is in harmony with the war-driven motifs that can be considered typical of McEwan's novels in the early 2000s. This contention is in line with the studies conducted by Head (2013) and Diemert (2020), who indicate that McEwan's literary universe centres on war in an attempt to address a number of global issues (Booth 2015).

The wars in the 2040s signify the end of the era of prosperity, which is manifested by the motif of Copious Times. Specifically, McEwan emphasises that the period of time before the climate crisis and the ensuing wars is "copious, like rivers in spate" (McEwan 2025, p. 99). It represents the golden age of the Western civilisation with its lavish life style, ability to travel and to enjoy life at its fullest. In a similar manner, the prosperous lives of Britons in the early twenty-first century are expressed by the motif of Fruit. This motif is introduced by McEwan to show that the abundance of food, particularly fruits and vegetables, back in 2014 is in stark contrast to the life on "the archipelago Britain" 100 years later. The motif of Fruit feeds into the motif of Copious Times, which is presented to the readers in a comprehensive manner. The

global way of narration in McEwan's novels is also noted in the prior study by Booth (2015). In *What We Can Know*, McEwan adopts the all-encompassing approach to the depiction of the Western civilisation before its demise from overindulgence, excess, risk-taking, and a reckless disregard of the climate crisis that the West has failed to mitigate. All in all, the motif of Copious Times serves as a reminder of the past grandeur, on the one hand, and as a measuring stick to illustrate the modest and even frugal life style of the early twenty-second century, on the other hand.

The frugality and poverty caused by the series of wars and the climate apocalypse are skilfully painted by McEwan by means of the motif of Butterfly. He uses the symbolism of a butterfly to render the ideas of ageing, death, and transience of human life that is short and ephemeral. The motif of Butterfly amplifies the motif of Life Expectancy, because age, aging and life expectancy are added by McEwan as a means of providing specific details about Francis Blundy, the poet whose poem forms one of the central themes of the novel. His age resurfaces several times, for instance, McEwan specifies that "All those about to sit down at table in the Barn that October evening in 2014 would live past their mid-sixties" (McEwan 2025, p. 37). Nearly 100 years in the future from 2014, and the dystopian UK is a rather poor place with the average life expectancy of sixty-two years (*Ibidem*). Clearly, a short lifespan of people who live in the submerged UK is comparable to the metaphoric butterfly, who lives fast and dies faster.

A motif similar to Butterfly is the one of Humanities. This motif reverberates with the meagre existence of people in the early twenty-second century and reflects the fact that humanities, *i.e*. soft sciences, are regarded with a certain degree of contempt in the future. They are underfunded and sidelined by the so-called hard sciences, which attract more academically successful students and get more funding. Arguably, the motif of Humanities contributes to creating a more detailed and fine-grained view of what the future holds after the climate catastrophe and the series of wars.

Finally, we should discuss the peripheral motifs that are heritage-, culture-, and geography-related, namely the motifs of The Lake District and Oxford, respectively. McEwan evokes the reference to The Lake District as a place submerged under the water of the Atlantic Ocean. Nevertheless, it triggers a multitude of associations on the part of Tom Metcalfe, the novel's protagonist. He, as a literary scholar, is deeply aware of the natural and literary beauty The Lake District was known for in the early twenty-first century. Tom bemoans the loss of this heritage site to the risen ocean that conceals its literary and cultural aesthetics forever. In addition to the motif of The Lake District, McEwan employs the motif of Oxford recurrently in the novel to emphasise the protagonists' status. The motif, arguably, is intentionally deployed in the novel in order to illustrate the transience of prestige associated with Oxford. Therewith, McEwan sends a subtle message of ephemeralness related to power, prestige, and money, with all of them obliterated by the climate crisis and wars.

Conclusions

The qualitative analysis reveals that there are 14 motifs in the novel, namely (i) Archipelago, (ii) Artificial Intelligence (AI), (iii) Butterfly, (iv) Copious Times, (v) Ferry, (vi) Fruit, (vii) Humanities, (viii) Life Expectancy, (ix) Nigeria, (x) Oxford, (xi) Social Media, (xii) The Lake District, (xiii) The War against Ukraine, and (xiv) The War against the West. It can be concluded that a group of the aforementioned peripheral motifs in *What We Can Know* contributes to orchestrating several critical undercurrents in the novel, which, first of all, show the drastic consequences of the dystopian life in the twenty-second century. These motifs are Archipelago, Butterfly, Ferry, Humanities, Life Expectancy, Nigeria, and The Lake District. In their totality, the motifs facilitate the depiction of the post-apocalyptic society and the way of life after the series of catastrophes. McEwan employs the motifs to portray a view of the "brave new world", in which the UK as we know it no longer exists and in which Nigeria is a cultural superpower.

McEwan uses the motifs to depict the grand scale of events in the twenty-second century that are marked by poverty and limited resources, as well as the loss of dry land. The name UK itself is not used in the twenty-second century, for it is a republic that consists of several islands that form the archipelago, with the rest being submerged forever by the Atlantic Ocean. McEwan skilfully deploys the motifs of Copious Times, Fruit, Oxford, and Social Media in order to recreate the seemingly affluent way of life in the UK in the early twenty-first century, with its abundance of food, cultural life, heritage, and varied pastime. However, we can conclude that the peripheral motifs associated with war, *i.e.* the War against Ukraine and the War against the West in 2042 create a synergetic effect with the theme of climate change. Their synergy suggests that neglecting the issue of climate change and disregarding aggression are, essentially, identical factors that lead to the demise of the Western civilisation as we know it.

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