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Trauma, Obsession, and Fragile Relationships: A Character Analysis of Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*

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Abstract

Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* explores the psychological effects of trauma, obsession, and emotional conflict through its major characters. This paper examines Joe Rose, Jed Parry, Clarissa Mellon, and John Logan to understand how a single traumatic event changes individual lives and human relationships. The balloon accident and the death of John Logan become the starting points of psychological disturbance in the novel. Joe experiences guilt, fear, and emotional insecurity after witnessing the accident. His condition becomes more difficult when Jed develops an obsessive attachment to him. Jed's behaviour presents a distorted form of love based on delusion rather than mutual understanding. At the same time, Clarissa struggles to understand Joe's growing fear and anxiety. Her doubts gradually create emotional distance and weaken their relationship. John Logan's death also remains an important source of guilt and moral conflict throughout the narrative. Using qualitative textual analysis and close reading, this study examines the actions, emotions, conversations, and relationships of these characters. The study finds that McEwan uses characterization to show that trauma does not remain within an individual. It affects trust, communication, intimacy, and emotional security. The paper concludes that *Enduring Love* presents love as a fragile human bond that can be deeply challenged by trauma, obsession, fear, and uncertainty.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, *Enduring Love*, trauma, obsession, character analysis, fragile relationships, psychological conflict.

Ian McEwan is one of the important contemporary British novelists who explores human emotions, relationships, moral conflicts, and psychological struggles in his works. His novels often present ordinary people who suddenly face unexpected situations that change their lives. Through such situations, McEwan examines fear, guilt, love, loss, and emotional conflict. His characters often struggle to understand themselves and the people around them when their normal lives are disturbed. *Enduring Love* is a significant example of this kind of writing. The novel begins with a tragic balloon accident that changes the lives of several characters. The accident becomes more than a physical tragedy because it creates lasting psychological and emotional consequences. Through Joe Rose, Jed Parry, Clarissa Mellon, and John Logan, McEwan presents different experiences of trauma, obsession, guilt, and emotional insecurity. Their experiences also show how unexpected events can affect trust and communication between people. Therefore, the characters in *Enduring Love* provide an important way to understand the connection between psychological disturbance and the fragility of human relationships.

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The central conflict of *Enduring Love* begins with a tragic balloon accident. Joe Rose and his partner, Clarissa Mellon, are enjoying a peaceful picnic when they suddenly see a hot-air balloon in danger. A young boy is trapped in the basket, while several men run towards the balloon to help. Joe, John Logan, Jed Parry, and others hold the ropes and try to control it. However, the strong wind lifts the balloon from the ground. The men begin to release the ropes one after another. John Logan continues to hold on and is carried high into the air before falling to his death. This unexpected death deeply affects Joe. He repeatedly thinks about the actions of the rescuers and questions his own decision to let go of the rope. The accident therefore becomes the beginning of Joe's guilt and psychological disturbance. It also brings Joe and Jed together for the first time. Jed interprets their brief encounter as the beginning of a special emotional connection. From this moment, the accident connects death, guilt, obsession, and love. McEwan uses this single event to show how a sudden traumatic experience can continue to influence the thoughts, emotions, and relationships of the characters long after the actual danger has ended.

After the balloon accident, Joe Rose finds it difficult to return to his normal life. The death of John Logan remains strongly in his mind. Joe repeatedly thinks about the accident and tries to understand why the rescue attempt failed. As a rational and scientifically minded person, he searches for a logical explanation for the actions of the men who released the balloon ropes. However, reason cannot completely remove his guilt and fear. His emotional condition becomes more complicated when Jed Parry begins to contact and follow him. Joe understands Jed's behaviour as a serious threat, but Clarissa does not immediately share his fear. This difference creates tension between Joe and Clarissa. Joe gradually becomes more anxious and watchful, while Clarissa begins to question his reactions. As a result, the sense of security in their relationship begins to weaken. Through Joe's character, McEwan shows that trauma can continue after the original event has ended. It can change a person's thoughts, behaviour, and relationships. Joe's experience therefore becomes central to the novel's exploration of trauma, fear, guilt, and the fragility of love.

Jed Parry plays an important role in increasing Joe's psychological distress after the balloon accident. During the rescue attempt, Jed notices Joe and develops a strong emotional attachment to him. He believes that a special connection exists between them, even though Joe does not share these feelings. Jed begins to follow Joe, wait outside his home, make telephone calls, and send letters expressing his love. His behaviour gradually changes from unwanted attention into a serious threat. Jed interprets Joe's rejection according to his own beliefs and refuses to accept Joe's actual feelings. His obsession therefore presents a distorted form of love because it is based on imagination and possession rather than mutual affection and understanding. Jed's actions also increase Joe's fear and place greater pressure on Joe's relationship with Clarissa. Through Jed, McEwan shows how obsessive attachment can cross personal boundaries and threaten another person's emotional security. Thus, Jed's character connects the themes of obsession, psychological disturbance, and fragile relationships and provides a sharp contrast to the mutual love that Joe and Clarissa attempt to maintain.

Clarissa Mellon is another important character in understanding the emotional conflict in *Enduring Love*. She is Joe Rose's long-term partner, and their relationship is based on love, companionship, and intellectual understanding. Before the balloon accident, they share a close and stable life. However, the events that follow gradually disturb their relationship. When Joe explains Jed Parry's obsessive

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behaviour, Clarissa does not immediately understand the seriousness of the situation. She begins to feel that Joe is becoming too anxious and deeply involved in Jed's actions. Joe, in turn, feels that Clarissa does not trust or support him. This difference in their understanding creates tension between them. Their conversations become more difficult, and emotional distance slowly develops. The external threat caused by Jed therefore becomes an internal problem in Joe and Clarissa's relationship. Through Clarissa, McEwan shows that love can become vulnerable when trust and communication are weakened. Her character also demonstrates that trauma can affect not only the person who directly experiences fear but also the people who share that person's emotional life. In this way, Clarissa represents the fragility of love under the pressure of fear, doubt, and uncertainty.

John Logan is another significant character whose death influences the entire course of the novel. During the balloon accident, Logan tries to save the child and continues to hold the rope when the situation becomes dangerous. His fall and death leave a lasting psychological effect on Joe. Joe repeatedly remembers the accident and questions whether Logan could have survived if all the men had continued to hold the ropes together. This thought increases Joe's sense of guilt and raises questions about individual and collective responsibility. Logan's death also causes deep emotional suffering for his wife, Jean Logan. Her grief becomes more complicated when she begins to suspect that her husband may have been involved with another woman before his death. Her uncertainty shows how loss can create doubt even within a loving relationship. Joe later becomes involved in discovering the truth about the circumstances surrounding Logan's final journey. Through John and Jean Logan, McEwan presents different consequences of the same traumatic event. John's death represents sacrifice and moral responsibility, while Jean's response represents grief, doubt, and the need for truth. Their characters broaden the novel's exploration of trauma by showing how death can continue to affect both survivors and family relationships.

The major characters in *Enduring Love* respond to the same crisis in different ways. Joe Rose experiences guilt, fear, and psychological pressure after the balloon accident. Jed Parry turns a brief encounter into an obsessive form of love. Clarissa Mellon experiences the gradual weakening of trust and communication in her relationship with Joe. John Logan's death raises questions about sacrifice and moral responsibility, while Jean Logan experiences grief, doubt, and emotional suffering. Although their experiences are different, they are connected by the consequences of the balloon accident. McEwan uses these characters to show that trauma is not limited to a single person or a single moment. It can move into personal relationships and change the way people understand love, trust, responsibility, and one another. Therefore, this paper analyses the major characters in *Enduring Love* with particular attention to trauma, obsession, guilt, and fragile relationships. Through a close reading of their actions, emotions, and relationships, the study examines how McEwan uses characterization to present the psychological and relational consequences of a traumatic experience.

A character-based study of *Enduring Love* is important because the psychological conflicts in the novel are closely connected with human relationships. The characters do not experience trauma, love, fear, and grief separately. Their emotions influence one another and shape the development of the story. Joe's trauma is intensified by Jed's obsession, while Jed's behaviour creates further tension between Joe and Clarissa. At the same time, John Logan's death remains a source of guilt and moral questioning, and Jean

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Logan's grief reveals another consequence of the accident. These interconnected experiences show that McEwan uses characterization to examine both individual suffering and relational conflict. This study therefore uses close reading and thematic textual analysis to examine the behaviour, emotions, conversations, and relationships of the major characters. It focuses particularly on the ways in which trauma creates fear, obsession challenges personal boundaries, and uncertainty weakens trust between individuals. By bringing these characters together within a single analysis, the paper aims to provide a clearer understanding of how *Enduring Love* presents human relationships as vulnerable when they are placed under psychological and emotional pressure.

The central argument of this study is that McEwan uses characterization to show how an unexpected crisis can change both individual identity and human relationships. The characters attempt to understand their experiences in different ways, but they are unable to remain unaffected by fear, guilt, grief, and uncertainty. The novel also presents different meanings of love. Genuine love requires trust, communication, understanding, and respect, while obsessive love ignores personal freedom and emotional boundaries. This difference becomes important in understanding the relationships presented in the novel. At the same time, the characters' responses to danger reveal the difficulty of maintaining emotional stability after a traumatic experience. By examining these different responses together, this paper argues that *Enduring Love* presents trauma and obsession not merely as individual psychological problems but as forces that influence the lives and relationships of others. Such a character-centred reading provides a useful perspective on McEwan's representation of emotional vulnerability and demonstrates how easily love and trust can be challenged when individuals face experiences that disturb their sense of safety and certainty.

In this context, *Enduring Love* can be understood as a novel that closely examines human behaviour during and after a crisis. McEwan develops his characters through their different responses to the balloon accident and its consequences. Their experiences reveal that trauma can take many forms, including guilt, fear, grief, obsession, mistrust, and emotional isolation. More importantly, these experiences do not remain within the individual. They influence communication, intimacy, and the ability to trust others. The contrast between Joe's rational thinking, Jed's obsessive belief, Clarissa's emotional response, and the Logans' experience of loss creates a complex picture of human vulnerability. A close examination of these characters therefore helps to explain how McEwan connects psychological conflict with the instability of relationships. The following review of literature considers existing scholarly discussions of *Enduring Love* and identifies the critical areas that provide the foundation for the present character-based study.

Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* has received considerable critical attention because of its treatment of science, rationality, obsession, love, and psychological conflict. Scholars have approached the novel from different perspectives and have particularly examined the contrast between Joe Rose's scientific thinking and the emotional or irrational forces surrounding him. Dominic Head argues that the novel tests the limits of scientific rationalism and connects this conflict with wider questions of morality and human judgement. Similarly, Curtis D. Carbonell examines the relationship between science and the humanities in the novel. He identifies Joe as a science-minded character and places him in contrast with Clarissa, a literary scholar, and Jed Parry, whose religious and obsessive beliefs challenge Joe's rational worldview.

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These studies demonstrate that Joe's character cannot be understood only through his commitment to reason. His experiences expose the limitations of rational thought when he faces emotional uncertainty and psychological pressure. However, the present study moves beyond the opposition between science and emotion. It examines how the experiences of Joe and the other major characters reveal the interconnected effects of trauma, obsession, guilt, fear, and relational instability.

Jed Parry's obsessive behaviour has received considerable critical attention in studies of *Enduring Love*. Scholars commonly connect his character with de Clérambault's syndrome, also known as erotomania. This condition involves a persistent delusional belief that another person is in love with the sufferer. Ronan J. McIvor observes that McEwan's novel presents the destructive power of erotomania through Jed's obsessive attachment to Joe Rose. Jed interprets his encounter with Joe after the balloon accident as the beginning of a meaningful relationship, although Joe does not share this belief. His repeated letters, telephone calls, and physical presence near Joe demonstrate how his imagined love develops into stalking and psychological pressure. Similarly, RoohollahReesi Sistani, RuzySulizaHashim, and Shahizah Ismail Hamdan examine Jed's mental suffering and his difficulty in maintaining the boundaries between the self and the other. Their study connects his obsession with deeper psychological anxieties and his attempt to create an imagined relationship with Joe. These critical readings establish Jed as more than a conventional antagonist. His character represents a form of love in which personal desire replaces mutual understanding and respect. The present study builds on these discussions by examining how Jed's obsessive attachment affects not only his own psychological state but also Joe's emotional security and Joe's relationship with Clarissa.

Clarissa Mellon has an important position in critical discussions of *Enduring Love*, particularly in relation to Joe Rose and the conflict between emotion and rationality. Curtis D. Carbonell examines Clarissa as a literary scholar whose humanistic perspective contrasts with Joe's scientific way of thinking. This difference becomes significant after the balloon accident and the arrival of Jed Parry. Joe attempts to understand the situation through observation, evidence, and rational explanation, while Clarissa responds more emotionally and questions some of Joe's conclusions. Alan Palmer also examines the different ways in which Joe and Clarissa understand Jed's behaviour. Their interpretations of the same events gradually move apart, and this difference weakens their ability to understand each other. James Phelan further observes that Clarissa's response to Joe can be understood within the novel's larger conflict between love and logic. These studies show that the crisis between Joe and Clarissa is not caused only by Jed's presence. Their different ways of interpreting experience also contribute to the breakdown of communication and trust. A recent study by Siddhartha Dey similarly argues that Joe's reliance on rational interpretation ultimately damages his relational engagement with Clarissa. The present study develops these observations by considering Clarissa not simply as a contrast to Joe's rationality but as a character through whom McEwan reveals the vulnerability of love when communication, trust, and emotional understanding begin to fail.

John Logan's death in the opening balloon accident has been widely connected with questions of guilt, morality, and human responsibility in *Enduring Love*. Peter Childs observes that the rescue scene raises an important question about the responsibility that individuals have towards other people. The men initially work together to save the child, but their common effort breaks down when the danger to their

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own lives increases. John Logan continues to hold the rope and eventually falls to his death. His action stands in contrast to the instinct for self-preservation shown by the other rescuers. David Amigoni also explains that Joe attempts to understand the accident through a Darwinian view of human behaviour. Joe sees the conflict between cooperation and selfishness as part of human nature. However, this rational explanation does not completely free him from the emotional burden of Logan's death. He continues to experience guilt and repeatedly thinks about whether the tragedy could have been prevented. Dominic Head similarly identifies morality, judgement, and self-interest as important concerns in McEwan's treatment of scientific rationalism. These studies show that the balloon accident is not simply the starting point of the plot. It creates an ethical problem that continues throughout the novel. The present study builds on these discussions by examining John Logan as a character whose death shapes Joe's psychological condition and becomes an important link between trauma, guilt, moral responsibility, and the fragility of human relationships.

Jean Logan provides another important perspective on grief, uncertainty, and the loss of trust in *Enduring Love*. After the death of her husband, John Logan, Jean struggles not only with bereavement but also with questions about his behaviour before the balloon accident. The objects found in his car lead her to suspect that he was travelling with another woman and may have been involved in an affair. Her grief therefore becomes connected with doubt and a strong desire to discover the truth. Jonathan Greenberg draws attention to the importance of narrative in the novel and observes that Jean creates an explanation of her husband's supposed infidelity under the influence of grief. Her interpretation demonstrates how emotional suffering can shape the way an individual understands uncertain events. Jean's suspicion is later proved to be mistaken when the circumstances surrounding John's journey are revealed. The discovery of the truth does not immediately remove her suffering because she must also face her guilt for having doubted her husband. In this way, Jean's experience presents grief as a complex emotional condition involving loss, suspicion, guilt, and the search for certainty. Her character also provides an important parallel to the difficulties experienced by Joe and Clarissa, whose relationship is similarly affected by doubt and conflicting interpretations. The present study therefore considers Jean Logan as an important character through whom McEwan demonstrates how trauma and uncertainty can weaken trust and disturb an individual's understanding of love and loyalty.

Previous studies on *Enduring Love* reveal that the novel has been examined from several psychological, narrative, and thematic perspectives. Scholars have discussed Joe Rose's rational thinking, Jed Parry's obsessive behaviour, Clarissa Mellon's different understanding of events, and the psychological consequences of the balloon accident. Sistani, Hashim, and Hamdan mainly examine Jed's mental suffering and his obsessive attachment to Joe. Ramin and Marandi focus on narrative and identity construction and explain how the balloon accident contributes to the fragmentation of Joe's identity. Other critical discussions have considered the contrast between scientific rationality and emotional experience in the novel. Trauma has also been identified as an important element in understanding Joe's psychological journey after the accident. These studies provide valuable interpretations of individual characters and particular themes. However, there is still scope for a more integrated character-based analysis that examines how the experiences of the major characters are connected. Joe's trauma, Jed's obsession, Clarissa's emotional uncertainty, John Logan's death, and Jean Logan's grief do not function

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as completely separate experiences. They influence one another and contribute to the novel's larger representation of unstable human relationships. Therefore, the present study brings these characters together to examine how McEwan uses characterization to connect trauma, obsession, guilt, grief, mistrust, and the fragility of love.

Existing studies on Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* have explored several important aspects of the novel, including scientific rationality, psychological conflict, obsessive love, religion, and the relationship between science and literature. Considerable attention has been given to Joe Rose as a rational and scientifically minded narrator and to Jed Parry as a character affected by obsessive and delusional love. Scholars have also examined Jed's psychological suffering and his inability to establish a healthy relationship with Joe. Other studies have discussed the emotional and psychological conflicts experienced by the major characters. However, there remains scope for a more integrated character-based study that brings Joe Rose, Jed Parry, Clarissa Mellon, John Logan, and Jean Logan together within the themes of trauma, obsession, guilt, grief, and fragile relationships. These characters respond differently to the balloon accident, but their experiences are closely connected. Joe experiences guilt and fear, Jed develops an obsessive attachment, Clarissa struggles with doubt and emotional distance, John Logan's death creates questions of moral responsibility, and Jean Logan experiences grief and suspicion. The present study therefore examines how McEwan uses these interconnected characters to show that trauma and obsession affect not only individual psychology but also trust, communication, love, and human relationships. In this way, the study offers a character-centred understanding of the relationship between psychological disturbance and relational fragility in *Enduring Love*.

Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* presents a complex picture of human behaviour through characters who experience trauma, obsession, guilt, grief, and emotional conflict. The balloon accident becomes the central event that connects their lives and changes their relationships. Through Joe Rose, McEwan shows how a sudden traumatic experience can disturb an individual's sense of security and certainty. Joe attempts to understand the accident through reason and scientific thinking, but his guilt over John Logan's death continues to affect him. His experience shows that rational explanation cannot always remove the emotional effects of trauma.

Jed Parry presents a different form of psychological disturbance. His obsessive attachment to Joe transforms love into a source of fear and danger. Jed believes in a relationship that does not exist and refuses to accept Joe's rejection. His behaviour demonstrates the difference between genuine love and obsessive possession. Love requires mutual understanding, respect, and acceptance, while Jed's love is controlled by his own beliefs and desires. His obsession therefore affects not only his own life but also Joe's emotional stability and personal relationships.

The relationship between Joe and Clarissa further demonstrates the fragility of love under psychological pressure. Their relationship is initially based on affection, companionship, and intellectual understanding. However, Joe's growing fear of Jed and Clarissa's doubts about Joe's interpretation of events gradually weaken their communication. Their different responses create emotional distance between them. McEwan therefore shows that an external threat can become an internal conflict within a

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relationship. Love may continue to exist, but trust and intimacy become difficult to maintain when fear and uncertainty dominate communication.

John Logan and Jean Logan extend the novel's exploration of trauma beyond Joe, Jed, and Clarissa. John's death raises questions about sacrifice, survival, and moral responsibility. His actions during the balloon accident remain important even after his death because Joe continues to question his own responsibility for the tragedy. Jean Logan experiences another form of suffering through grief and suspicion. Her search for the truth about her husband demonstrates how uncertainty can intensify emotional pain. Together, John and Jean show that the effects of trauma continue through memory, guilt, grief, and relationships.

The character analysis therefore reveals that the psychological conflicts in *Enduring Love* are deeply interconnected. Joe's trauma cannot be separated from Logan's death, and his growing anxiety cannot be separated from Jed's obsession. Similarly, Jed's behaviour places increasing pressure on Joe's relationship with Clarissa. Each character responds differently, but their experiences collectively demonstrate how one traumatic event can produce several forms of psychological and relational disturbance.

The study concludes that McEwan uses characterization to move beyond a simple opposition between reason and emotion. Joe represents the struggle for rational control, Jed reveals the destructive possibilities of obsessive love, Clarissa exposes the vulnerability of trust and communication, and the Logans represent sacrifice, grief, and moral uncertainty. Through these interconnected characters, *Enduring Love* demonstrates that trauma is not confined to the individual who experiences it. It can enter relationships and change the ways people understand themselves and others. McEwan ultimately presents human relationships as valuable but vulnerable bonds that can be tested by trauma, fear, obsession, guilt, and uncertainty. Thus, the novel's character relationships provide a powerful exploration of the psychological complexity and fragility of human love.

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