



LUND
UNIVERSITY

Postmodern or realist?

An inquiry into the nature of Ian McEwans *Saturday*

Maia Lovén
A60 Literary Seminar
Spring 2006
Department of English
Lund University
Supervisor: Cecilia Wadsö Lecaros

Table of contents

Introduction.....	1
The staging of a reality: Opening.....	4
“The layered achievements of the centuries”: Progress and modernity.....	9
“The lurid impression of a representation”: Fiction vs reality.....	13
Conclusion.....	17
Works cited.....	19
Appendix: The opening of <i>Saturday</i> by Ian McEwan.....	21

Introduction

The novel *Saturday* deals with just one day in the life of Henry Perowne, neurosurgeon, namely February 15, 2003. Throughout the day he deals with his normal Saturday tasks – picking up groceries, preparing dinner, playing squash. But behind this mundane surface is really a struggle to come to terms with the realities of postmodern life: how to deal with the notion of progress, when civilisation obviously lacks so much in humanity and fairness, how to link the biologist view of life that is the scientist's with the need for some sort of spirituality or meaning and if war on another way of life is really justified.

However, Perowne does not get to contemplate these things at his own speed. Instead he comes face to face with the injustices of modern civilisation in his own living room in a very violent way, when the street thug Baxter, who Perowne literally crashed into in the street earlier that day, forces his entry into Perowne's previously so secure house.

My aim with this paper is to examine to what extent *Saturday* is a postmodern novel, and with that follows the question how much it adheres to the aesthetics of the realist genre. The views of the function of the aesthetics differ greatly between postmodernism and realism. To write in the traditional realism vein is to uphold criteria as the order of the narrative like “chronological plots, continuous narratives relayed by omniscient narrators, [and] closed endings” (Barry 82). I will mainly use the concept of realism as something to contrast to the idea of postmodernism, which I will define in further detail in the text.

In the somewhat biased opinion of the French postmodern thinker Jean-Francois Lyotard, the role of realism is “protecting consciousness from doubt, [...] stabilising the referent, ordering it from the point of view that would give it recognisable meaning” (374). Implied here is the view that realism (realism in this broad definition is ascribed an agent that it undoubtedly has not) tries to conceal the facts that power structures are a part of language and also that words and signs do not have a stable meaning. The doubt of the consciousness that Lyotard mentions is the doubt that there might be no unity – that consciousness itself is fragmentary and in the extension identity, reality and language itself. There is no stable truth, only different attempts of ordering the world so that it might seem as the ultimate truth.

The postmodern critique of realism often ends in the fact that realism has always done the errands of the ruling classes, because it represents the society in an unproblematic way. Even though the characters of a realist story often experience conflict it is not a conflict that shakes the hierarchy or foundations of the society that they inhabit. At the resolution of a realist story, the status quo of the ruling order is not questioned. This is a status quo that also embraces the concept of unity - both in language, as I touched on before, but also in the whole view of identity, reality and truth. As Leah Wain notes, the postmodern thinker Fredric Jameson “reads the ‘reality myth’ as a capitalist construction and more explicitly describes it as the bourgeois self-justification” (368).

The realistic representation is seen as a transparent window to reality, unlike the postmodernism artefact, the function of which is to make us question the view of reality and the act of narrating itself. Therefore, the postmodern novel often draws consciousness to the act of ordering the view of the world, the narration, and tries to undermine and question the concepts of unified identity and blur the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. Even though postmodernist writing can be seen as a subversive act – as it draws attention to how power is immanent in language – it has also been criticised for being too relativistic and nihilistic to be able to muster resistance to power at all. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh infer that postmodernism “seems to plunge us into a situation of endless difference and of epistemological and cultural relativism which approaches a situation of nihilism” (410).

In this paper, I will examine to what extent *Saturday* is a realist or a postmodern novel. My overarching research question is:

- How are the two different views of reality – realism and postmodernism – dramatised thematically in the novel and how are they represented formally?

To be able to answer that main research question I have three sub-questions:

- 1) How are the two different views of reality – realism and postmodernism – dramatised thematically in the opening of the novel and can the views of reality be related to formal traits like the oscillation between the abstract and the concrete and the construction of the narrator?
- 2) Can the view of the concept of progress and modernity in the novel be called postmodern?

- 3) Does the novel deconstruct the binary opposition fiction and reality in a postmodern way and can the view of reality be compared to Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal?

In answering these questions I will first look at the opening of the novel. There I will examine if the formal and thematic traits can be seen as postmodern or realist. In the examining of the formal traits I will look at how the narrator is constructed and how it can be said to juxtapose the abstract and concrete and how that can be related to postmodernism or realism. In looking at the thematic content I will analyse how the novel deals with general postmodern concepts like reality, truth, identity and difference and to what extent its views can be said to adhere or differ from postmodernism.

When analysing the narrator I will follow the use the terms and their definitions in Suzanne Keen's *Narrative Form*. She makes the distinction between an *overt* narrator and a narrator that is *covert*, and she states that the latter is "revealing no personality and avoiding direct address to the reader" (38). The degree of personality is the key here, and the degree of self-awareness as well as personality can be related to the difference between a realist and a postmodern representation. Moreover, the degree to which a narrator questions his or her own existence can be derived from this view of reality. There is also the distinction to be made between an *omniscient* and a *limited* narrator, which has to do with the extent of the narrator's knowledge. If he is omniscient, his knowledge is unlimited; he has access to every consciousness of the fiction. Naturally, there can be different extents of the limitations of the limited narrator, from knowing no one's inside to being internal to one character. When a third person limited narrator has access to the thoughts of one character only, that character is called the *focaliser*. Actually, Keen is in favour of calling that function *reflector* to emphasise the thoughts rather than the seeing of that character. Since that term is not commonly used I will stick to the more used term focaliser, however. I will also make use of the term *implied author* as defined by Keen as "the version of the author projected by the text itself" (33). It is a useful way of making a distinction between the narrator and the view of the novel without having to revert to the concept of the actual author, whose views we can never be sure of.

Secondly, I will devote one chapter to the analysis of the view of progress and modernity. As I will show it can be argued that the main aim of postmodernism is to deconstruct the idea of progress as just another grand narrative. I will examine to what extent the novel affirms or questions the idea of progress and if it in that way can be

seen to take the postmodern stance or not. Similarly, in the last chapter, I will look at the view of representation vs reality in the novel and examine to what extent it in that matter can be said to be postmodern or realist.

The staging of a reality: Opening

I have chosen to analyse the opening of the *Saturday* because the way the world of the novel is presented says a lot about its view of reality. In addition, many of the concepts that are contested by postmodernism and realism, like truth, reality, progress and difference, are dealt with here. Furthermore, the form in which these matters are discussed is important to look at. At the end of this paper I have included an appendix where the reader can find the fourteen sentences of the opening that I have analysed.

The first words in sentence one feel very typical of the novel, as they are a time indication. Time is important in the novel and the very fact that it deals with just one day – and that the title is *Saturday* – also points to this. The fact that this is an actual day and that the novel is referring to actual events on that day – for example the war march - does in a quite postmodern way blur the distinction between fiction and reality. The fact that the pending - and quite real! - war in Iraq is dealt with in the novel can be compared with Peter Barry's view that it could be dangerous to lose the distinction between real and unreal altogether. He asserts that "without a belief in some of the concepts which postmodernism undercuts – history, reality and truth, for instance – we may well find ourselves in pretty repulsive company" (90).

The novel does highlight the foregrounding of the media in what we consider real and dramatises the distrust of an absolute concept of the real that Perowne experiences. In a very postmodern way, Perowne refuses to take a standpoint, meaning that the truth always depends on who wins; whose story becomes history. In the heated discussion with Daisy, Perowne alleges that "this is all speculation about the future. Why should I feel any certainty about it? [---] It's all about outcomes, and no one knows what they'll be. That's why I can't imagine marching in the streets" (187). However, this also illustrates what postmodernism is criticised of; it is crippled due to its relativism. If nothing can be defined as being right and wrong, there is certainly no reason to take part in a protest march for anything. In that way, postmodernism actually defends what it says it tries to expose: the status quo.

The fact that the protagonist is introduced as a neurosurgeon implies something of the view of identity in the world of the novel; it is closely linked to profession. As it is stated later in the novel, “For certain days, even weeks on end, work can shape every hour; it’s the tide, the lunar cycle they set their lives by, and without it, it can seem, there’s nothing, Henry and Rosalind Perowne are nothing” (23). It seems the working life and the identity as a professional has become a possible grand narrative on which the characters seek to stabilise their view of the world. Frida Plasencia Skybäck has also noted how work is an important part of Perowne’s identity even though she does not interpret it in terms of the grand narrative. Instead, she views it as a microcosm “where he feels at home and in control” and stresses the fact that he “find[s] security in his medical identity” (5). I would certainly agree with that and make the relation to how important it is to feel that one’s purpose is centred by something larger than oneself, even if one states that one does not believe in grand narratives, like Perowne does (172). Plasencia Skybäck concludes her passage instead with the comment that “Always focusing on his job and living with the hospital as a blindfold, Henry is secluded from what happens outside of his enclave” (6). I only agree with that to a degree. Perowne does very much ponder what is going on in the world and is disturbed by it. In addition, neurosurgery as the choice of Perowne’s profession stresses the rational, scientific, and positivistic side of him and the way in which he manages to save lives stresses something of the wonder of human accomplishments through progress.

In addition, the detail in which neurosurgery is described does reveal something of a realistic project. The realistic aim of the novel is emphasised in the Acknowledgement page at the end of the book where we can read that “It was a privilege to watch this gifted surgeon at work in the theatre over a period of two years, and I thank him for his kindness and patience in taking time out of a demanding schedule to explain to me the intricacies of his profession” (280). The message seems to be that McEwan is not making things up; he is doing a representation of reality that is realistic.

Furthermore, the indication of precise movements – “pushing back the covers from a sitting position” for example in sentence one – is also something that is repeated throughout the narrative. The precise indications of the movements and physical objects have perhaps the function of making it more realistic and its truth claim more authoritative. That can be compared to the view of postmodernism to question

authoritative claims rather than affirming them. As Rice and Waugh point out, “The relativization of styles which is postmodernism, throws into doubt the claims of any one discourse of story to be offering the ‘truth’ about the world or an authoritative version of the real” (326). The precise indications also makes this whole passage feel very concrete; concrete noun phrases such as his “limbs” and “his back and legs” in sentence three abound. Often, as in the noun phrase “the wintry bedroom air” in sentence four, the phrases are extended with attributes, which make them more specific and concrete. It is striking how the passage oscillates from the very concrete to the very abstract, like “the state of the world” in sentence seven. Of course, there is often the ambition of fiction to be concrete – what is literature other the dramatising, making ideas concrete and specific?

If one should relate this to the question of realism and postmodernism, one might argue that a concrete text is describing a certain view of reality rather than trying to question the condition under which it is conceived. Lyotard draws a distinction between the sublime and the beautiful, and means that the beautiful representation is in the realm of the conventional: realism. The beautiful representation is that which safely affirms reality, that which gives us pleasure in not challenging our view of the world. The sublime, on the other hand, is that which gives both pleasure and pain, in how it in a negative representation shows how the truth, which we can conceive of, we cannot represent. He argues that the postmodern representation is “that which refuses the consolation of correct forms, [...] to better produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable” (377-379).

So what is the form like in this opening passage? In looking at the narrator, at a first glance the first sentence of *Saturday* has an external perspective. The protagonist’s movements are narrated and his thoughts are not explicitly told. The impression is that of an external observer. However, the words “wakes to find himself already in motion” discloses the fact that the narrator has access to his interior, because an outside observer could not be certain at what precise point Perowne gains consciousness; that he did not wake up as he started moving. It is even clearer in sentence two that Perowne is the point of focalisation as we are told his experience of the events: “[i]t is not clear to him”. The pleasure of the experience is stressed in sentences three to five. The whole passage is in the present tense, with a covert narrator. The fact that the narration is in the present tense gives the impression of immediacy, and should perhaps represent something that is thought rather than written. In that case, a consciousness is

being represented. The fact that the narration is covert and does not draw attention to itself as narrating in a way that would question a unified consciousness that we take for granted, and make it belong to realism.

In sentence seven, we do get a sense of his thoughts (“He has no idea what he’s doing out of bed”) and this gives the sense of someone who is, perhaps habitually, scrutinising himself and his reasons. This also has to do with causation, starting with the purely physical (“he has no need to relieve himself”) moving to psychological (“nor is he disturbed by a dream or some element of the day before”) to the, along the same lines but far less personal (“or even by the state of the world”). In postmodern narratives, this causation is more often disrupted and questioned and our attempts at finding causation drawn attention to. This is more following the realism logic.

Figurative language is employed in sentence eight: “It’s *as if*, standing there in the darkness” [my emphasis]. The fact that Perowne’s feeling is that “he has materialised out of nothing” in, also in sentence eight, gives a sense of a birth, a beginning without memories. The words “[f]ully formed” in the end of sentence eight – stress further the feeling of birth; that someone is born fully formed is definitely worth noting. And the word “unencumbered” does perhaps denote that he feels freed from his past, his sense of being a human? The “elated” and “empty-headed” in sentence ten connects back to the “unencumbered” and “materialised out of nothing” from before. He is uplifted, not dragged down by concerns from the past or the future. He is totally in the moment.

This is something that will be further discussed in the novel, if having a consciousness in the human sense means to never be able to fully appreciate the moment. This is also brought up in the part dealing with the squash game, where we can read that “it’s possible in a long rally to become a virtually unconscious being, inhabiting the narrowest slice of the present, merely reacting, taking one shot at a time, existing only to keep going” (109). In this passage of the squash scene, time is made into a physical thing. The wording “existing only to keep going”, sound harmonious and uncomplicated. In that state, one is not questioning anything and certainly not the grounds for one’s existence, which is a part of being a human, or at least a part of being postmodern.

This can be related to the place in the novel when Perowne discusses what he thinks is the difference between novels and poetry. There he recognises the focusing properties of poetry whereas novels and movies are spreading in many directions:

“Novels and movies, being restlessly modern, propel you forwards or backwards through time, through days, years or even generations. But to do its noticing and judging, poetry balances itself on the pinprick of the moment” (129). The point here seems to be that novels, that could be argued to be a realistic genre, move us from different times without making us stopping and seeing the moment, unlike poetry, that is more focusing. This view of poetry could be compared with the feeling of “inhabiting the narrowest slice of the present” from the squash scene above. Perhaps poetry is the only tool that can help us regain the present, help us focus in from the never-ending flow of media and stories, no longer centred by grand narratives that surrounds us. Perhaps that is why the character Baxter is so moved by a poem in a way that Perowne can never be. Baxter is the street thug that Perowne encounters on his way to the squash game. He is subjected to a neurological disease that is incurable and that makes his nerve endings relentlessly degenerate. Therefore Baxter needs that pinpricking of the moment, because for him, every moment leads to a spiral leading downwards – he is the ironic opposite of progress.

Coming back to the opening, Perowne then states in sentence thirteen that he is not interested in dreams, but “that this should be real is a richer possibility”. The use of “real” here connotes a “traditional” usage of the word; a usage, which relies on its stable meaning and that does not question the difference between real and unreal. To use the word real in a way like this is to make a statement of one’s view of the world. Here “dreams” are not real, and in the extension the unconscious is not either, and one can perhaps assume or speculate that what is real is the tangible, the traditionally scientific, the physical. The obvious, the common sense, the status quo?

Maybe this view is mirrored in the almost over-simplified ordering of events and the very simple handling of time. As Ruth Scurr points out in her article “Happiness of a knife’s edge”, the novel is “conforming to the classical unities of time, place and action”. This unity makes one suppose that our conception of the world is not to be challenged in this novel and the hidden power structures not to be made visible through the subversive power of experimental art. As Keen points out in *Narrative Form*, there is a “common assumption that a disorderly narrative is more subversive than an orderly one” (107). Lyotard at least thinks that a disorderly narrative is more subversive because it makes visible the power structures that lie below what we conceive as reality. He says that realism (which one might equate with

an orderly narration) “can be defined only by its intention of avoiding the question of reality implied in the question of art” (Lyotard LT 374).

In the same vein, sentence fourteen starts with a statement of how Perowne perceives himself in this moment: “he is entirely himself”. So what does it mean to be oneself? In this context, it clearly means that he is not sleeping. In a broader sense, being oneself implies something essential in the view of identity. Here, it seems what it is to be himself can be measured, it is as it were “his rational core”, unobstructed by what is later referred to as insanity; the opposite of rationality. In a literal sense, an utterance like this verges on the silly – of course he is himself, who else would he be? But this denotes something about identity that confers that it is a stable, definable entity. In the same way as “finding oneself” is paradoxical – that denotes that one can have lost something that is expressed as something essentially and originally there.

The sentence continues with a row of the most abstract nouns yet: “difference”, “boundaries” and “essence of sanity”. The word *difference* also conveys a notion of what it is to know something, and suggests that we put things in relation to each other in order to know the one from the other. It is difficult to define sleep without stating what it is *not*; it is not being awake. Somehow this passage implies that it is this capacity, to define things in relation to other, to know the absolute boundaries between white and black and to be able to overlook the grey areas that make language possible. Because if we allowed ourselves to see all the grey, language, which depends on difference, would be an impossibility. That does not mean that all the grey is not there, it just means that artificial obliterating of it is a necessity to be able to grasp reality.

“The layered achievements of the centuries”: Progress and modernity

In the area of postmodern thought, there is general consensus that the postmodern project is a rejection of modernity and the enlightenment project of progress and reason (Rice and Waugh 325-326). Lyotard for example thinks that the idea of progress is just another meta narrative, which it is our duty to free ourselves from because it rests on an arbitrary foundation of power. Barry expresses this very clearly when he states that “For Lyotard the Enlightenment [...] is simply one of the would-be authoritative ‘overarching’, ‘totalising’ explanations of things – like Christianity, Marxism or the myth of scientific progress. These ‘metanarratives’ [...] which purport to explain and

reassurance, are really illusions, fostered in order to smother difference, opposition, and plurality” (86). At the same time, Lyotard does not reject knowledge and scientific enquiry all together. He suggests that postmodernism is not rejecting everything, that it is not an entirely negative school of thought, but one that questions different understandings of reality (375-377).

In the novel, Perowne is constructed as a progress-minded, positivistic scientist who gets angry with the, one might assume postmodern, university teachers at his daughter Daisy’s school who “thought the idea of progress old-fashioned and ridiculous. In indignation, Perowne grips the wheel tighter in his right hand” (77). However, the text itself has a more complex relationship to the view of progress and shows at some places how flagrantly narrow-minded and ignorant Perowne is in matters of, for example, literature. This suggests an ironic distance between protagonist and implied author. Perhaps this ironic distance also covers this one-sided view of progress that is expressed here.

In addition, Perowne himself shows an almost overly piercing understanding of how people put their belief in grand narratives without being able to see how he similarly makes progress and science the centre of his own belief-system (172). Generally, postmodernism has much questioned the truth-claims made by science as just another grand narrative whose truth rests on rules that it has itself fashioned (Rice and Waugh 448).

In the description of the city different views of the city as a product of progress can often be detected. The city is at times explained as this perfect invention, at other times as something quite unnatural, and sometime there is a nostalgia for simpler times and the words that these times are “[b]affled and fearful” (4).

For example, a rather gloomy view of the city is present in the beginning of the first part, when Perowne is facing “the night, the city in its icy white light, the skeletal trees in the square, and thirty feet below, the black arrowhead railings like a row of spears” (4). An effect of contrast is gained here by the fact that there is the rhyming couplet “night” and “light”. This contrast perhaps implies a notion of how unnatural the city is; that it is light at night. Therefore it is challenging the binary oppositions of night and day and dark and light. It is unnatural; made by humans into something far removed from everything natural. The “icy white light” comes from sources that are human-made; they are not deriving from a natural source. Somehow, one is supposed to be sleeping in the middle of the night, but Perowne is not, and judging from this icy

white light there is a whole city that similarly should be sleeping but is not. This passage goes from the far-reaching and slightly abstract to the closer in distance and more concrete.

Furthermore, the passage goes on to say that “the streetlamp glare hasn’t quite obliterated all the stars” (4) and also here is a sense of juxtaposition of the far away and the close. Here “the streetlamp glare” is given a sort of agency in obliterating most of the stars. But, as it goes on, “above the Regency façade on the other side of the square hang remnants of constellations in the southern sky” (4). Of the constellations that were named thousands of years ago there are only parts left. This whole sentence reinforces the notion of unnatural light as the icy white light of the city has obliterated stars that in the days of old were symbols of the Gods. In this postmodern day, they are not important anymore. In this description there seems to be a lament for a happier, more natural age that was closer to nature. The insomnia of a big city seems to be caused by a lack of faith and forgetting of all things nature-made. The technological progress of the city described here seems fragmentary and impersonal and is perhaps not seen as progress at all.

There is a far more positive description of the view of the city from Perowne’s window just a few pages later in the novel: “a foreshortened jumble of facades, scaffolding and pitched roofs” is associated with a “city” (5). Then the city is compared to “a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece – millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef, sleeping, working, entertaining themselves, harmonious for the most part, nearly everyone wanting it to work” (5). In this wording the belief in progress is compared and juxtaposed with religion and creator: in the words “invention” and “masterpiece” a creator, an agent, is implied, even though the word “biological” suggests differently. The “accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries” also suggests, quite clearly, a view that is ascribing to the thought of progress – that civilisation is moving forward with the same logic as a successful businessman is accumulating wealth. The simile of the coral reef also implies something that is contrasting with the earlier words (masterpiece and invention) that were suggesting agency. The coral reef implies something of a collective of animals, going on instinct: “sleeping, working, entertaining themselves”. This view does echo of Darwin and *The Origin of Species*, which is also named in the novel as something that is on Henry’s reading list. In

addition, the use of the word “harmonious” in this context implies something positive in the view of progress that is not questioning.

The gazing eye is back to the local again after that:

And the Perownes’ own corner, a triumph of congruent proportion; the perfect square laid out by Robert Adam enclosing a perfect circle of garden – an eighteenth century dream bathed and embraced by modernity, by street light from above, and from below by fibre-optic cables, and cool fresh water coursing down pipes, and sewage borne away in an instant of forgetting. (5)

This description goes similarly from describing the concrete thing to letting it represent a whole view of world. Words like “triumph” and “perfect” are repeated, the proportions are congruent. He is describing the harmonious and symmetrical gardens of the classical era; as he says: “an eighteenth century dream”. Here artificial light has the role of bathing and embracing “and cool fresh water [come] coursing down pipes, and sewage borne away in an instant of forgetting”. We are not meeting the modernity of the holocaust or of nuclear bombs; instead it is a modernity that takes us forward into the perfect world.

Maybe the function of this is to lay bare how privileged Henry is – his part of the city is what the working ants from the sentences before have produced in centuries before him. And that which is produced is his science, his wealth and his perfect garden. Especially in last sentences imply that matters could be otherwise. “Cool fresh water” is certainly not something to be taken for granted; a sewage system that is working is not either. His part of the city and also his part of the world is privileged, and perhaps also his part of the family – we are still after all living in a patriarchal society and the fathers of families are ruling most of our part of the world. Perowne is aware of his privileged situation:

How restful it must have been, in another age, to be prosperous and believe that an all-knowing supernatural force had allotted people to their stations in life. And not see how the belief served your own prosperity – a form of anosognosia, a useful psychiatric term for a lack of awareness of one’s own condition. [...] No more big ideas. The world must improve, if at all, by tiny steps. People mostly take on an existential view – having to sweep the streets for a living seems like simple bad luck. It’s not a visionary age. The streets need to be clean. Let the unlucky enlist. (74)

Here Perowne's guilt in being the privileged man he is, is alluded to. There is also a strongly felt refusal of grand narratives. People are without vision and there seems to be a regret in that. Still he is relying on scientific terms like "anosognosia" in explaining the world, something that he does habitually throughout the novel. That is just how he grasps the world around him and how he constructs his reality.

So, what is the function then of mixing the concrete with the abstract like this? For one thing, the representation of consciousness gets more realistic – consciousness does work in associations and having Henry pondering a view of progress is not believable if there is not something that has triggered it, linking it to his surroundings. It also anchors the narration in the here and now of the plot. Throughout the novel, it is like that; there are digressions, there are views and opinions of the world, but we know all the time when and where the protagonist is and how he has come to think of these things. They do not hang loose; they are chained by the Saturday, in a way that seems to affirm the realist aesthetic that is pro-unity.

“The lurid impression of a representation”: Fiction Vs reality

An important part of postmodernism is the questioning of the real and few have done it as piercingly as Baudrillard. For him, the postmodern age is the age of the hyperreal. The hyperreal is the representation that is not a representation of a referent in an outside, real world but a representation of other representations. Reality in the hyperreal becomes a simulacrum; what we conceive as real is shaped by representations. The hyperreal, according to Baudrillard, is “that which is always already reproduced” (338). The hyperreal is a product of the media, in the sense that in the hyperreal world the media constitutes our reality and manufacture it with a capitalist logic. Wain has in a more poststructuralist fashion commented on its effect on language and emphasises that “[i]n the world of the hyperreal, events and language lose fixed meanings and we can no longer say with confidence what they mean because the meanings are generated as competing truth claims which, political in themselves, allow no access to the real” (367).

At the same time that Perowne is expressing his distrust of stories, texts and all things not strictly physical, he concedes that the world around us to a large part consists of role-play. That our view of what is real is coloured by representations that

become more real than reality itself, and that the objective news stories perhaps are not so objective but rather follow the logic of a good story. He comments that “[p]eople often drift into the square to act out their dramas. Clearly, a street won’t do. Passions need room, the attentive spaciousness of a theatre” (60). Here the word theatre is highlighting the constructedness of what we view as reality and the fact that it is blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality in a very postmodern way. Postmodernists has opposed this binary opposition, because if one labels one thing fiction then everything that is not labelled fiction is non-fiction, which is to say, “true” or “describing reality”.

Similarly, the encounter with Baxter gains the same air of charade: “This, as people like to say, is urban drama. A century of movies and half a century of television have rendered the matter insincere. It’s pure artifice” (86). This seems like a direct allusion to Baudrillard and his view that “artifice is at the very heart of reality” (340). In addition, it is a clear demonstration to what is meant by Baudrillard’s sometimes elusive points. Movies, that is to say the representations, constitute what is real and how a certain situation is to be enacted. So instead of having representations mimic an external reality, reality mirrors art.

In addition, when he is watching the burning plane from his bedroom window he witnesses that “[t]he leading edge of the fire is a flattened white sphere which trails away in a cone of yellow and red, less like a meteor or a comet than an artist’s lurid impression of one” (15). In the same way, this passage is describing the hyperreal. The same thing would be happening if one was looking up to the sky commenting how marvellous it is that the sky looks exactly like the sky in the intro to the Simpson’s with its unrealistic Technicolor.

In the same way the novel shows how a news-story really becomes a story in the word’s original meaning when the burning plane becomes an item in the news: “[t]he fading life-chances of a disappearing news-story – no villains, no deaths, no suspended outcome – are revived by a dose of manufactured controversy” (70). This supposedly non-fiction of the news is actually constructed in a way that creates reality for those watching. This can be compared to Baudrillard’s famous claim that “the Gulf War never happened”. He meant that the whole war was a creation of the media. Barry means that this is Baudrillard when he perhaps went a bit too far, and he observes that “this may seem to legitimise a callous indifference to suffering” (89).

The novel also manages to play with the idea of fiction itself by comparing it to actual utterances – the kind that we do judge on the basis of them being true or not. “He thought he caught in the poem’s art essential but – he had to suppose – forgivable dishonesty” (139). To call fiction dishonest because it is just fiction draws attention to the fictionality itself. Dishonest is what is not true, and there are different rules in fiction and reality. Jonathan Culler discusses this when he outlines the concept of the performative. He states that “[literary language] does not refer to some prior state of affairs but creates this character and this situation” (96) and he goes on to assert that “the performative breaks the link between meaning and the intention of the speaker, for what act I perform with my words is not determined by my intentions but by social and linguistic conventions” (97). In that way, performative language does not describe the world but creates it. It seems the implied author is using irony in letting his protagonist blur fiction with reality in this way.

Henry’s other objection to literature has to do with its being unrealistic, as well as being insincere. He believes that “Unlike in Daisy’s novels, moments of precise reckoning are rare in real life; questions of misinterpretations are not often resolved. Nor do they remain pressingly unresolved. They simply fade” (156). Here a view is expressed that reality does not follow the logic of the (realist) story and that events in real life do not lead to another. Postmodernists argue that the desire for story and for realism is due to a desire to understand the world; one wants to believe that there is a meaning in life, which makes events not occur randomly but following a causal logic. Jonathan Culler demonstrates that “[w]e make sense of events through possible stories; philosophers of history has even argued that the historical explanation follows not the logic of scientific causality but the logic of story” (Culler 83). This is a view that is shared by postmodernist writers, who therefore challenge conventional forms just to put this desire for causation out in the open.

There are also other reasons why Perowne is not impressed by fiction. He just does not approve of it as an art form: “[s]o far, Daisy’s reading lists have persuaded him that fiction is too humanly flawed, too sprawling and hit-and-miss to inspire uncomplicated wonder at the magnificence of human ingenuity, of the impossible dazzlingly achieved. Perhaps only music has such purity” (68). Perowne’s view of the aesthetic is that it should be “genius” – that is, the notion of the original and beautiful. With postmodernism has come the view that there is no such thing as the original – everything is always a quote of everything else. His view is not that literature should

be questioning our view of reality or exposing power structures hidden in discourse. The word purity also exposes the poststructural notion that the meanings of words are floating, constantly changing and changing each other, always contaminated with its opposites and exclusions. The pure can only be that which is “outside” language. Or one could go further, as Eagleton does when describing poststructuralism: “because language is the very air I breathe, I can never have a pure, unblemished meaning at all” (113).

Furthermore, there is also an expression of disdain of the make-belief in Perowne’s discussion of the magic realists¹: “What were these authors of reputation doing – grown men and women of the twentieth century – granting supernatural powers to their characters” (67)? This can be seen as an expression of what Lyotard calls the “the endemic desire for Reality” (374) where one wants one’s view of the world comfortably confirmed and not challenged.

Reviewers of the novel have also grappled with this contrast between the view of the protagonist and the view of the novel as being a piece of literature and most have found it being ironic. Mark Lawson in his review “Against the flow” in *Guardian Unlimited Books* even states that the novel “succeeds in ridiculing on every page the view of its hero that fiction is useless to the modern world”. This does not say more of the function of this view of the hero than that the novel, presumably because it is so good, shows the importance of literature. Ruth Scurr of *Times Online* instead sees this opinion of the protagonist as something that makes the novel more realistic, as she points out that this is the view of doctors in general: “Many doctors have neither the time nor the inclination to read fiction — lots of them say they don’t need it”.

What the function may be, if it is to show the poststructural notion of meaning as never fully present in language or just to show how unimaginative a middle aged doctor can be, will perhaps never be resolved. One might quote McEwan himself though, who in an interview with Carlos Caminada at *Bloomberg.com* on 16 July 2004 stated that his view of life, as an atheist, is that it is based on randomness. Tiny decisions can shape a whole life. The function of the writer, he says, is “making sense of that randomness”. His view indeed seems to be that literature should affirm our

¹ Magic realism is a term appointed to those, mainly Latin American writers, which mixes supernatural elements into an otherwise realistic style, description and setting. Gabriel Garcia Marquez is probably the best known writer of this genre. (*Reference.com*)

conceptions of life, render it more “beautiful” rather than sublime in the Lyotardian sense.

An art form that has been closely connected with postmodernism is the pastiche. When describing a Regency facade it is stated that it is pastiche (4). The word pastiche draws attention to the facade as representation rather than as reality – it is a representation of a Regency house, and maybe not so much an actual Regency house but an idea of what those houses were like. The passage goes on to describe that landmark of the London skyline that is the Post Office tower. In the scope of that sentence it allows it to go from being reality to being a sign; from literality to figurality, in a way that could illustrate the movement from realism to postmodernism: “the Post Office Tower, municipal and seedy by day, but at night, half-concealed and decently illuminated, a valiant memory to more optimistic days” (4). It becomes a symbol, a sign, through the illusory power of light and shadow. The tower was built in 1961. Perhaps the sixties here represent the modernistic optimism that is no more?

The novel in its form does not question the concept of reality but in its discussion of media it clearly has a postmodern, questioning view of reality. This view might be most stringently expressed by Leah Wain: “Postmodernism responds to reality, not unlike its treatment of history, as a myth which is perpetuated in order to sustain political ideologies” (367)

Conclusion

My aim with this essay was to examine to what extent *Saturday* is a postmodern novel, and to what extent it conforms to the realist aesthetics. In a way I think I have shown that the answer to both questions is that it does to a large extent.

In this postmodern age I do not think that anyone expects matters to be uncomplicated, and this novel is no exception. Indeed, one may call this a very postmodern novel considering its themes and contents. In the following paragraphs I will account for my answers to research question 1 to 3.

In the chapter on the opening I showed how the novel used concepts of fiction, identity and the unreliability of truth in a mostly postmodern way, at the same time as its form strived for unity and realism. The details, the specific and concrete, the covert

narrator, the ordering of sentences according to a chronological and causal logic – it all conforms to the aims of realism.

In the chapter on progress and modernity there was a similar lack of unambiguous answers. The way the novel dramatised this theme was complicated and pointing in many directions, seeming to both want to cherish and to defend the notion of progress as well as criticising and questioning it. There was also a clear ironic distance between the views of the protagonist and that of the implied author. The latter seemed more to criticise the very things that the protagonist seemed to defend.

The last chapter on reality vs representation I think is the key in understanding the novel. Here, almost everything points in the direction of the postmodern. Here I showed how the novel deconstructs fiction and reality by stressing how the fiction decides our reality, and the constructedness of what we view of real life. It also brought up the concept of the hyperreal in how it makes obsolete the old distinction between real and representation. However, it also shows how in the novel a desire for unity is dramatised, and there is a suggestion that we somehow need the illusion of unity rather than the questioning of it, which would have been postmodern.

In conclusion, the answer to my overarching research question is that postmodernism is largely thematised in the novel, and that the formal traits of the novel more point to an adherence to realism. Therefore, I will conclude that *Saturday* in its themes and concerns to a large extent is a postmodern novel, but that it also cherishes a function of literature that is fundamentally realist, namely that the role of literature is to uphold the illusion of unity that we are losing in this postmodern society.

Works cited

Primary Source

McEwan, Ian. *Saturday*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2005.

Secondary Sources

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory, An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002.

Baudrillard, Jean. From "The orders of Simulacra" (1983). *Modern Literary Theory, A Reader*. Ed. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh. London: Arnold, 2001. 338-340.

Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory, A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory, An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.

Keen, Suzanne. *Narrative Form*. Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. "Answer to the Question, What Is the Postmodern?" *Literary Theories, a Reader and Guide*. Ed. Julian Wolfreys. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999. 371-380.

Plasencia Skybäck, Frida. "A Universal Day, Microcosm and social criticism in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*". Unpublished term paper. Lund: Department of English, Lund University, 2005.

Rice, Philip and Patricia Waugh. *Modern Literary Theory*. Ed. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh. London: Arnold, 2001.

Wain, Leah. "Postmodernism? Not representing postmodernism." *Literary Theories, a Reader and Guide*. Ed. Julian Wolfreys. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999. 381-394.

Internet sources

Caminada, Carlos. "Ian McEwan, Finishing New Novel, Ponders World After Sept. 11". *Bloomberg.com*, 2004.

28 May 2006

<<http://quote.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=10000085&sid=a4L6SJH6SmN0&refer=europe>>

Lawson, Mark. "Against the flow". *Guardian Unlimited books*, 2005.

28 May 2006

<<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,1395825,00.html>>

Reference.com. Search words: magic realism.

10 June 2006 <<http://www.reference.com/browse/columbia/magicreal>>

Scurr, Ruth. "Happiness on a knife-edge". *Times Online*, 2005.

28 May 2006 <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,923-1459067,00.html>>

Appendix: The opening of *Saturday* by Ian McEwan.

In the following extract the sentences have been numbered in order to facilitate the discussion.

1. Some hours before dawn Henry Perowne, a neurosurgeon, wakes to find himself already in motion, pushing back the covers from a sitting position, and then rising to his feet. 2. It's not clear to him when exactly he became conscious, nor does it seem relevant. 3. He's never done such a thing before, but he isn't alarmed or even faintly surprised, for the movement is easy, and pleasurable in his limbs, and his back and legs feel unusually strong. 4. He stands there, naked by the bed – he always sleeps naked – feeling his full height, aware of his wife's patient breathing and of the wintry bedroom air on his skin. 5. That too is a pleasurable sensation. 6. His bedside clock shows three forty. 7. He has no idea what he's doing out of bed: he has no need to relieve himself, nor is he disturbed by a dream or some element of the day before, or even by the state of the world. 8. It's as if, standing there in the darkness, he's materialised out of nothing, fully formed, unencumbered. 9. He doesn't feel tired, despite the hour or his recent labours, nor is his conscience troubled by any recent case. 10. In fact, he's alert and empty-headed and explicably elated. 11. With no decision made, no motivation at all, he begins to move towards the nearest of the three bedroom windows and experiences such ease and lightness in his tread that he suspects at once he's dreaming or sleepwalking. 12. If it is the case, he'll be disappointed. 13. Dreams don't interest him; that this should be real is a richer possibility. 14. And he is entirely himself, he is certain of it, and he knows that sleep is behind him: to know the difference between it and waking, to know the boundaries, is the essence of sanity. (3-4)