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The Complexity of Class

A study of Ideology and the Power of Literature

in Ian McEwan's Narrative

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Introduction

From an early stage in his career, the British novelist Ian McEwan has been a writer who is very much interested in the human psyche. He often positions himself to explore diverse moral questions and dilemmas that human beings are challenged with. His novel The Child in Time (1987) served as an open critique to the Thatcher-era and labelled McEwan a political writer. McEwan himself has said that since writing The Child in Time he has:

...never really been interested in anything other than trying to find connections between the public and the private, and exploring how the two are in conflict, how they sometimes reflect each other, how the political invades the private world. (Louvel: 10)

With his three latest novels he seems to be moving back to depicting a more domestic domain, but it is hard to neglect that McEwan presents political discussions while examining these correlations, interweaving the political themes with depictions of family life.

His two novels Atonement and Saturday open up for discussion of the problem of class. This is complicated by the fact that present-day society gives people access to art and literature to a greater extent than before, which evens out the divisions of knowledge over class boundaries. As I will show in my essay, McEwan suggests that literature can pave the way for overcoming class differences through sympathy and identification. But what does literature represent; what is its significance in people's lives and in society, and what are its functions?

Terry Eagleton writes: "Literature, in the meaning of the word we have inherited, *is* an ideology. It has the most intimate relations to questions of social power" (1983:22). Traditionally, religion had been the ideological master but with "scientific discovery and social change its previous unquestioned dominance was in danger of evaporating" (1983:23). What the Victorian ruling class needed now was an alternative. Literature became the bearer of conveying moral values and a source to control the masses. Eagleton writes: "Like religion, literature works primarily by emotion and experience, and was admirably well-fitted to carry through the ideological task which religion left off" (1983:26). But literature is not just an ideological power-tool. Doubtless, literature is connected to aesthetics; it represents beauty. Literature can be used as a mirror to reflect one's life, applied as a tool for developing one's identity, but also work as a refuge from a chaotic world. Literature *can* be a class marker reflecting and enacting the symptoms of class society. But literature can also be a way of overcoming society as it really is; through narrative it is possible to make a change.

There is also some wariness in McEwan's writing concerning the power of imagination. Submitting too much to the realm of imagination as in the case of Atonement, where the protagonist Briony gets lost in her world of imagination and commits an immense mistake that alters the lives of her whole family, can cause great damage. I will examine how Ian McEwan seems to suggest that the complications of class society can be somewhat overcome by literature. His two novels Atonement and Saturday will stand as templates for this discussion.

Complications of a developing class society

British society in the 1930s was coloured by the dissolution of the British Empire as well as the Great Depression. Industrial prospects had not improved as expected and the decline of the coal industry was leading to major unemployment. Although the country saw an upswing in entrepreneurial activity as the industry bloomed again when producing equipment for the Second World War, the social machinery made the working class more vulnerable and dependent on patronage. The privileged gentry, sometimes living on 'new money' and with a capitalistic view of life, were using the proletariat for their own benefits. Education was of course for the bourgeois. In Atonement McEwan depicts this class related dependency by showing how Robbie Turner, who has been closely linked to the Tallis family since he was a child - being the housekeeper's son - is getting his college education at Cambridge funded by Jack Tallis. This is not accepted by the matron of the household, Emily Tallis. She reduces Robbie to "a hobby of Jack's" as well as positioning him as a larger threat; "Robbie's elevation. Nothing good will come out of it" (151,152). Emily sees Robbie's ambition as a threat to the order of things and does not like him being in a position equal to that of her own children. What she expresses here confirms the class mentality of the 1930s.

The irony of this, however, lies in the fact that Robbie's dependency on the Tallis' also gives him the platform for emancipation. While at Cambridge, Robbie gets in touch with different political theories and new values: "He liked people to know he didn't care - there goes my mother's employer's daughter, he once said to a friend. He had his politics to protect him, and his scientifically based theories of class, and his own rather forced self-certainty. I am what I am" (79). These new views on life make him see that he is free to choose his own path, without submitting to his origins; instead he gains self-confidence and aspires to become a doctor. Robbie learns to see through the illusion of class society, seeing it for what it is and knowing his own worth. But what he does not understand is the provocation he constitutes.

Despite this acknowledgement of Robbie's somewhat rebellious stance, there is something seductive in the way McEwan portrays the way the Tallis family lives. Hot summer days spent by the pool, sipping drinks, having nice dinners and not doing much but indulging:

Cecilia led the visitors into the drawing room, through the French windows, past the roses towards the swimming pool...and emerged onto a terrace of dazzling white stone from which the heat rose in a blast. In deep shadow, set well back from the water's edge, was a white-painted tin table with a pitcher of iced punch under a square of cheesecloth. (49)

Such activities paint a celebratory picture of a privileged lifestyle that the leisure class can busy themselves with when there isn't much else to do. However, the Tallis household is not described without an undertone of something flawed; there is a crack in the façade. The house, which is built with 'new money', oozes of bad taste and the will to represent some high class standards that are just not there; "Morning sunlight, or any light, could not conceal the ugliness of the Tallis home – barely forty years old, bright orange brick, squat, lead-paned baronial Gothic, to be condemned one day...as a tragedy of wasted chances" (19). Cecilia notices the details that reveal the flaws as she moves through the house; "She felt under her hand the black-stained varnished pine of the banisters, vaguely neo-Gothic, immovably solid and sham" (102). It is as if the fake of the house mirrors the fake of the Tallis family. On the surface, everything looks well, but underneath something is hidden and if you dig just a bit deeper, there is no real solid ground. The relationship of Emily and Jack Tallis is more or less a charade; "That he worked late she did not doubt, but she knew he did not sleep at his club, and he knew that she knew this. But there was nothing to say. Or rather, too much" (148). The Tallis family is on the verge of destruction and dissolution. This is also symbolized in the fate of the Meissen vase, which is secretly mended by Cecilia after she and Robbie's turmoil at the fountain but later irreparably broken when stashed away on the eve of the upcoming war.

Cecilia half-sees this 'cracked' state while home from her studies at university. "She had returned from Cambridge with a vague notion that her family was owed an uninterrupted stretch of her company. But her father remained in town, and her mother...seemed distant, even unfriendly" (20). Cecilia feels confined and wants out of the coagulated environment; she realises that her rather new-found insights have opened up a need for independence and another kind of life. But it is hard for Cecilia to break loose and she struggles with her family's values and the accepted class boundaries:

She had not thought it would be so easy to slip into the old roles. Cambridge had changed her fundamentally and she thought she was immune. No one in her family, however, noticed the transformation in her, and she was not able to resist the power of their habitual expectations. (103)

Cecilia does not blame anyone for this situation, but she is nevertheless torn between her loyalty towards her family and her rather new-found state of wanting to be her own. It is only later, however, once she has broken with her family after Robbie's conviction, that she really understands this to have been a problem of class. In one of her letters to Robbie during the war Cecilia writes:

Now that I have broken away, I'm beginning to understand the snobbery that lay behind their stupidity. My mother never forgave you your first. My father preferred to lose himself in his work. Leon turned out to be a grinning, spineless idiot who went along with everyone else. (209)

She strongly believes that the reason Robbie Turner is accused and convicted for the rape of Lola is due to his challenging the class structure of his time. Cecilia is truly having a hard time understanding and forgiving the social protocols that made her family all turn upon Robbie, feeling that this did not only wreck his life but hers as well.

Both Atonement and Saturday represent features of social inequity and the novels discuss how that affects the view of our fellow beings. Atonement experiments with different writing techniques and does not put the discussion about class upfront. Although, throughout the novel McEwan sprinkles class markers such as drinking bottles of 1921 Barsac, discussing when to remove one's jacket in the billiard room at the club; thus making the reader aware of the codes that lie underneath people's values. Looking at the mentality of the 1930s with the eyes of today, it seems clear that class society has changed and that one can penetrate the structures from a different angle. The last part of Atonement goes past the 1930s and illustrates a contemporary society where McEwan introduces a modern perspective of class. This last section of the novel shows how Lola and Paul Marshall have moved on. They are leading a privileged life, obviously possessing rank in the aristocracy when being titled Lord and Lady Marshall. The Marshalls have almost an air of celebrity status: "They still appear in the newspapers occasionally, in connection with their Foundation and all its good work for medical research, or the collection they've donated to the Tate, or their generous funding of agricultural projects in sub-Saharan Africa" (356-357). Having no contact with her former 'partners in crime', Briony reflects on the Marshall's lifestyle and position in society. Hiding under an umbrella when almost encountering them during a visit to the Imperial War Museum

she notices kind of acidly that Paul Marshall “at last appeared the cruelly handsome plutocrat, though somewhat reduced” (357). Continuing with: “It has often been remarked upon, how much good he did in the world. Perhaps he’s spent a lifetime making amends. Or perhaps he just swept onwards without a thought, to live the life that was always his” (357-358), Briony ponders the guilt the three of them share. It seems as if they all still are trying to wash themselves clean of responsibility for framing the working-class Robbie for a crime he did not commit about sixty years earlier. But they are clearly doing that in diverse ways. The Marshalls by different kind of charity work, and Briony by sinking into the realm of fiction, trying to atone for her crime when writing a novel telling the truth of what really happened.

At least Briony has tried to change her view and relation to class. As she is on her way to her childhood house for her birthday party, Briony is picked up by a young West Indian taxi driver. The taxi driver’s ethnicity is not something unusual in contemporary London and Briony’s stance on this is shown when discussing the young man’s background and education. He is a man who comes from a family of small means but it turns out that he is a lawyer just about to write a doctoral thesis on law and poverty: “It is quite impossible these days to assume anything about people’s educational level from the way they talk or dress or from their taste in music. Safest to treat everyone you meet as a distinguished intellectual” (362). Briony has learnt that the modern world enables opportunities regardless of background, something that was not common in the 1930s. Even the old Tallis mansion has not been spared transformation when turned into a hotel - with its own golf course - serving as a recreational spot suiting the modern man and lifestyles of today.

An insecure society, class in a contemporary setting

As we see at the end of Atonement, the greatest change in British society of today is the country’s struggle with its identity as a nation. Globalization has led to a different kind of society. We live in a world of ethnic diversity, mixed cultures and new values. The multiculturalism of huge cities like London blends and gathers the whole world in a small space, which forces us to confront disparate cultural differences on home ground. In the wake of 9/11 acts of terror have moved in to our living rooms and shake the foundations of many countries and the feeling of homeland security. The world seems more uncertain and unreliable.

In Saturday, McEwan explores what this change in world order has meant for British society as a whole. Inequality in society still exists but it looks quite different. As the class

system changes, the expression of that very same kind of mentality is not as overt; the clash of the protagonist Henry Perowne and the under-privileged Baxter represents the type of class differences of modern time. Henry Perowne is a successful neurosurgeon near his fifties. He is in good health, lives in a beautiful house in central London, has a loving wife (and of course a good sex life) and two greatly accomplished kids. Even though Henry seems to be almost overly content he is not without unease about his own family history. His relation to father figures is somewhat complicated; although “growing up in the suburbs in cosily shared solitude with his mother, Henry Perowne never felt the lack of a father... fathers were distant, work-worn figures of little obvious interest” (194). But this loss of a father has some present complications. Nowadays he lives with an importunate conflict with his father-in-law, the great poet John Grammaticus, who has never really had much interest in Henry. Although this too nags at Henry, their relationship is of mutual distance; “The two men are superficially friends and at bottom bored by each other” (195). Henry sees his approach to Grammaticus as something inherited from his early years; he feels he has “no place in his constitution for a father figure” (196). But Henry’s stance towards his father-in-law could also be a result of Grammaticus being dismissive of Henry because of his innate but former class status. Henry lacks the pedigree of his wife Rosalind and is therefore seen by Grammaticus as an unsuitable match for his daughter, despite Henry’s present high status profession. Henry’s stance towards literature could also be responsible for their bad platform; they neither respect nor understand each other very well. “Right from their first meeting in 1982... Perowne was determined not to be patronised... He was an adult with specialised skills that could stand alongside those of any poet” (194). Henry is not afraid or ashamed to state that he does not read poetry and is not going to bend to some grumpy old man in order to be accepted.

When being assaulted by a petty criminal, named Baxter, on his way to his weekly squash game the core of Henry Perowne is revealed but also shaken. Overall, Henry is a man with a rational, scientific, view of life. He is a “habitual observer of his own moods” (5), rationalising his feelings as biological, chemical reactions. He bases his life on empirical knowledge and has given up on religion and belief in the supernatural: “It isn’t an article of faith with him, he knows it for a quotidian fact, the mind is what the brain, mere matters, performs. If that’s worthy of awe, it also deserves curiosity; the actual, not the magical, should be the challenge” (67). Henry defines his world through the lens of science and wants to keep unfamiliar, unpleasant elements like Baxter at arm’s length.

Baxter turns out to be marked by a fatal disease and the two of them have a fundamentally different approach to life. Baxter is desperate and has a ‘nothing left to loose’

attitude and Henry sees him as someone who “gives an impression of fretful impatience, of destructive energy waiting to be released” (88). Baxter is torn between his angry state, which is nurtured by the fact that he is a neurologically defect outcast in society, and the search for a miracle that could cure his condition. Henry, acting on reflex, does not hesitate to protect his own backyard with ‘cheap shots’ of medical authority. It seems that this is due to his being unused to getting challenged by the social community that Baxter represents. During the encounter with Baxter, Henry surprises himself by submitting to a different way of talking, using a more formal and authorial vocabulary, but thinking: ”Deploying it entails decisions; he isn’t going to pretend to the language of the street. He is standing on professional dignity” (89). This puts him in a somewhat superior position but it is nevertheless “a false sense of superiority” since Henry is blocking out the danger Baxter constitutes because of his vulnerable state (91). “Baxter believes he’s been cheated of a little violence and the exercise of a little power, and the more he considers it, the angrier he becomes” (98). Henry is rather naïve in not understanding that he is a walking provocation, a thorn in Baxter’s side with his fancy Mercedes car and educated language being used in order to impose authority. He is even so entangled in his neurosurgical identity that he cannot cease to look at Baxter with diagnostician’s eyes even as he is being attacked. In spite of the hostile and frightful situation, what saves Henry in the end is his stubbornly scientific mind, which diminishes the threat of the ‘villain’ when labelling Baxter with the right diagnosis of Huntington’s disease. But this mind-play seems to work as a defence for Henry by putting up mental walls around him in order not to fully and emotionally assimilate the world.

Henry Perowne’s rather one-dimensional point of view gives Saturday a somewhat thought-provoking tone. The depiction of the overly successful Perowne family is efficiently introducing the pervasive inequities of today’s society. The differences in social status are, for example, represented by giving the working class Baxter a BMW -a somewhat faded and rather tacky luxury symbol- while the successful neurosurgeon Henry Perowne has a Mercedes. McEwan also very skilfully uses a poem by Matthew Arnold to work as mediator between the different social groups. Deploying a text by Arnold, who is known as a writer with social awareness could, if McEwan plays with these kinds of subtexts, hint his own stance on the subject.

What McEwan seems to suggest is that literature can challenge how we perceive the world and can also have a tutoring and mending effect on the human mind. However, does the way we receive art depend on the different environments we come from and live in?

The power of language and print competence

In Britain's imperial age, knowledge in higher arts was only accessible to the aristocracy; thus the possessed accomplishments in arts very much depended on which class one belonged to. The rise of the middle-class altered the archetypal codes of society; constructing a new kind of class community which emerged on the world scene. In a world where literacy and education provide opportunities for ordinary people, inherited aristocratic social class no longer has the exclusive right on power and status as formerly and both Atonement and Saturday describe this 'new order'. As briefly discussed above, Henry Perowne comes from a family of small means. However, he manages to attain a privileged lifestyle through an extensive education and hard work and this lifestyle is something he takes pride in and wants shielded. The same thing applies to the Tallis family; they do not want their status to be threatened by a working class intruder (Robbie). However, their status is built on 'new money' which make them even more vulnerable to intrusion; thus Robbie's education and expanding print competence constitute a larger social faux pas, which was harder to accept in the 30's than in today's society.

The condition of society, with all its hierarchies, has been portrayed in English novels notably since the Victorian era. As the condition of the world and England has radically changed the past century, so has the 'Condition of England-novel'. Michael L. Ross discusses these assortments of books, drawing parallels between McEwan and Victorian novelists such as Gaskell and Dickens:

Whatever the [Victorian] authors' explicit political allegiances, their novels, broadly speaking, project a liberal vision, manifesting a compassionate concern with the lives not only of the most privileged but also of the most oppressed members of British society. (75)

Saturday shows, that these novels have emerged from depicting a socially varied range of characters to the more modern approach of treating such subjects. The typical conflict of the "elite against...the marginalized" (76), which is skilfully described in the scene with the car incident, presents the still existing inequalities between modern-day people such as Perowne and Baxter. Ross means that Saturday depicts a world where "the liberal vision that...once energized the Condition of England novel" has hardened and points out that the nonaffluent more or less has disappeared from the "contemporary social consciousness" (93).

Interestingly, Ross also stresses the "social imbalance enforced by print" (86). Today's massive access to culture, literature and arts somewhat complicates class. Ross

suggests: “print competence has also been crucial in determining which subgroups have a controlling stake in the nations thus formed” (85). The power lay in the hands of the well-educated whose print competence and cultural capital give them an elevated status in society. Baxter, who “springs from the have-not underclass” (86), is excluded from the “hyper-literate” community which the socially more privileged Perowne family represents. Baxter’s literary ignorance saves the Perownes from disaster, but while Henry is mistaken on the poem’s originator too, Henry’s ‘superior status’ makes him look at the situation as something “merely amusing than disabling” (87). Henry’s blank spot when it comes to poetry is not a real threat to his position in society, since he rests on firm ground from controlling other kinds of print. Ross means that Perowne’s thoughts on Baxter’s existence show no real sign of true understanding; “...they are at bottom diagnostic, betraying a frantic class defensiveness, the troubled awareness of one whose elevated status rests on chic possessions and the nonchalant mastery of print” (89). Henry vaguely senses his fragile superiority based on his capitalistic assets, but he does not seem to know where this uncertainty stems from or what to do about it. To understand the world he leans on media coverage and empirical knowledge even though, as revealed in the novel, it does not always do him good.

Henry Perowne’s attitude to literature has to do with thinking that “fiction is too humanly flawed” and not able to “inspire uncomplicated wonder at the magnificence of human ingenuity, of the impossible dazzling achieved” (68). However, he does try to get into the realms of literature through his super-literate daughter Daisy, who tries to show her father that literature can emanate a broader understanding of the world and Henry considers her view: “Perhaps it’s one of those cases of microcosm giving you the whole world. Like a Spode dinner plate. Or a single cell. Or, as Daisy says, like a Jane Austen novel... To see the world in a grain of sand” (27). Henry rightly acknowledges that the novel has “schooled her in the accurate description of feelings” but fails to see that he can benefit from such experiences himself (204). The reading list she gives him in an attempt to tutor him in fictional literature, is just briefly skimmed through. Although “he thinks it would be no bad thing to understand what’s meant... by literary genius”, Henry makes the conclusion that storytelling is quite unnecessary, something disposable: “This notion of Daisy’s that people can’t ‘live’ without stories, is simply not true. He is living proof” (66, 68). But as Kathleen Wall points out: “The trajectory of the plot suggests” that Henry “couldn’t be more wrong about the irrelevance of stories” (777). On Daisy’s reading list is Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, a book which Henry dismissed as a bit intriguing but not important. Wall establishes that Kafka’s narrative could have been very useful to Perowne in his clash with Baxter; “has not Baxter awoken one

morning to find himself utterly changed... Does he not find the world unfriendly toward this transformation?" (784). Henry constantly fails to take notice of the "aesthetic subtexts" and "to pay attention to the particularities of the story that constitutes Baxter's frustrated life" (776, 779). So instead of just technically diagnosing Baxter, Perowne could have perceived that behind Baxter's behaviour there is a story to be acknowledged. If Henry had opened up to the details he might have had the chance to enter the sphere of another, in this particular case, Baxter.

With the character Henry Perowne, McEwan has created a man very much affected by today's society. A society intensely dominated by media, making one feel that one has the whole world at the doorstep. The access to worldly news through television and internet creates in him a need for constant update; "...he's feeling the pull, like gravity, of the approaching TV news. It's a condition of the times, this compulsion to hear how it stands with the world, and be joined to the generality, to a community of anxiety" (176). It is almost as though Henry does not trust his own judgement; he needs to define the world through what he experiences from media; he needs someone to define the world for him. "The habit's grown stronger these past two years; a different scale of news value has been set by monstrous and spectacular scenes. The possibility of their recurrence is one thread that binds the days" (176). What news networks rely on is the demand for exclusive, dirty exposures and the desire for front row experience of it and Henry, is absorbed in that neurosis. Thus, Perowne's rather uneasy state and ambivalence can also be understood through his reliance on media. Wall suggests that media have cast Perowne in a role, and the car incident is almost made into a parody of misunderstandings and difficulties quite typically depicted in urban dramas:

He is cast in a role, and there's no way out. This, as people say is urban drama. A century of movies and half a century of television have rendered the matter insincere. It is pure artifice. Here are the cars, and here are the owners. Here are the guys, the strangers, whose self-respect is on the line. Someone is going to have to impose his will and win, and the other is going to make way. Popular culture has worn this matter smooth with reiteration. (86)

According to Wall, this is "a role he simply acts out" (779) and is partly responsible for Henry being unable to reach any real sympathy for Baxter. But while seeking comfort from life's uncertainties via media Henry suspects that; "He's lost the habits of scepticism, he's becoming dim with contradictory opinion, he isn't thinking clearly, and just as bad, he senses he isn't thinking independently" (181). Perowne's need of constant up-date has adjusted his world view into a worried, slightly fearful attitude. One problem of the media coverage is that

the message carried out to the public is dictated. This suggests that there is a power-structure embedded in society which permeates the consciousnesses of us all. Do we notice what values are conveyed in media and literature? Is there anyone who is free from submitting to the ruling ideology? Terry Eagleton suggests that what Marx calls 'ideology' "signifies the way men live out their roles in class-society, the values, ideas and images which tie them to their social functions and so prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole" (1976:17). This 'false consciousness' works as a form of blinders when it comes to understanding society's functions; "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness" (1976:4). Henry wants to keep the real world at a distance and he does not want to pass the line of being engaged in society as a whole. He wants his simple, privileged life, his routines, his weekly squash game; it is easier to comprehend. While looking out over the square just outside his own house, Henry muses on the mix of people situating the city:

So much divides them from the various broken figures that haunt the benches. Work is an outward sign. It can't just be class or opportunities – the drunks and the junkies come from all kinds of backgrounds, as do the office people. [] Perowne, the professional reductionist, can't help thinking it's down to invisible folds and kinks of character, written in code, at the level of molecules. [] No amount of social justice will cure or disperse this enfeebled army haunting the public places of every town. (272)

Both Atonement and Saturday discuss conflicts due to class. In the latter novel, Baxter has a somewhat pre-programmed inferiority. Society as well as his genetics has let him down. His madness and hostility towards the rich manifests these conditions. Perowne is not totally shut off from reflecting upon his privileged situation in life and what that signals to Baxter:

There's a moment, which seems to unfold and luxuriously expand, when all goes silent and still, when Baxter is entirely airborne, suspended in time, looking directly at Henry with an expression, not so much of terror, as dismay. And Henry thinks he sees in the wide brown eyes a sorrowful accusation of betrayal. He, Henry Perowne, possesses so much – the work, money, status, the home, the family...and he has done nothing, given nothing to Baxter who has so little. (227-228)

Henry manages to come a bit closer in recognizing the fact that it has taken him long to get the whole picture.

As for Atonement, the class-theme is of great importance for unfolding the story. Robbie's 'elevation' shows that; just because there is an opportunity to climb the social ladder, does not mean that the class society disappears. Both Atonement and Saturday depict how these structures are a part of the British society's soul. As shown in Saturday, literature

can work as a weapon to diminish the ‘villains’ of the under-class, but can literature have other impacts?

Literature, a mending force?

In *Atonement*, Robbie Turner liberates his mind through literature and this enables him to make “his own decision” (91) about his aspirations in life. Literature also serves as something that will make him a better human and more skilful in his medical practise. Robbie concludes that writing will assist him in his future efforts:

For this was the point, surely: he would be a better doctor for having read literature. What deep readings his modified sensibility might make of human suffering, of the self-destructed folly, or sheer bad luck that drive men towards ill health! Birth, death, and frailty in between. Rise and fall – this was the doctor’s business, and it was literature’s too. (93)

This is not the only time Robbie feels that writing is beneficial for him. In prison, when Robbie and Cecilia are not able to write to each other in explicit manners, they are using literary subtexts to communicate their mutual understanding and love for each other: “they wrote about literature, and used characters as codes. At Cambridge, they had passed each other by in the street. All those books, those happy or tragic couples they had never met to discuss!” (204). Later on during the war, it is Cecilia’s letters that help Robbie to stay alive: “He knew these last lines by heart and mouthed them now in the darkness. My reason for life. Not living, but life. That was the touch. And she was his reason for life, and why he must survive” (209). Written words can thus render hope, something that is also introduced in *Saturday* when Baxter hears Matthew Arnold’s *Dover Beach*: “Baxter fell for the magic, he was transfixed by it, and he was reminded how much he wanted to live” (278). He is yearning for something to describe his state of mind; he needs someone to define his incipient hope for a better future. Baxter is starved of art, of aesthetics and literature that speaks to him in a direct emotional language and now when experiencing it at first hand; it alters his perception of the world. The rationalist Henry Perowne, on the other hand, doubts whether poetry can change moods but finally admits that it is actually possible. Baxter is so touched by the recitation of a poem that his vice turns into awe and curiosity and succumbs to a will of thinking in another direction, which totally changes the situation. Literature works here as a messenger of hope and understanding.

As Kathleen Wall points out; not just Kafka but “Arnold [too] can tell Henry something about Baxter, about the particularities of Baxter’s experience that Henry had

missed” (785). And even though Henry does not see this distinctly he actually manages, for at least a short while, to experience the world through Baxter’s eyes and ears when hearing the poem for a second time. Maybe it is this experience that makes him persuade his family not to press charges against Baxter but instead help him to get into a medical facility rather than prison. McEwan seems to suggest that literature, apart from being a messenger of hope, can penetrate people’s minds so that a new understanding of life and the world is possible. Wall identifies these ideas: “Arnold’s *Dover Beach* does exactly the work of the aesthetic: it allows Perowne to see the world through the eyes of the other, and it enacts its own uncertainty and ambiguity” (786). It is the element of aesthetics, which reaches through logic and empiricism that makes literature so efficient in teaching other people’s sentiments.

Literature, as Wall observes, can actually help narrow the divides between people and thus create a community: “There is a correspondence between aesthetic unity and human community to engage in a conversation about the role beauty plays in helping us to see what we value in common” (780). Stories are thus used to glue things together, provide explanations to the world’s irrationalities and uncertainties and make our existence more intelligible. Saturday shows how the Perownes are trying to impose order to their chaotic experience of Baxter’s assault by telling stories about what happened. Wall writes: “with stories, they can negotiate and act in concert, create a community, possibly even endorse or create a change” (783). And that, a change is exactly what Briony Tallis aims for in Atonement when uniting the two lovers Robbie and Cecilia, turning their fate into something it ought to have been. Consequently, mending her ways from early childhood, trying to fix a ‘broken state’ through narrative and placing herself in the perspectives of others, somewhat provides for her atonement.

The danger of imagination and the healing of storytelling

Atonement issues a warning though: fully submitting to the realm of imagination could be of risk. The imaginary universe that the young Briony Tallis is absorbed in, presents a fuse to her fatal mistake. On the other hand it is the conditions she lives in that grants her escapism. Briony, growing up in the Tallis mansion on the countryside with the privileged living of the gentry, nurturing a vivid imagination and desire for attention, is pretty much left on her own in a world not really connecting to the real. Briony misunderstands the scene with Robbie and Cecilia at the fountain because she is so obsessed with literature and the fictional world. She misinterprets at first what happens in front of her as being an act of romance. But as she

follows the scene's development she discovers; "The sequence was illogical – the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal". She is thrown right into an adult world, which she does not yet understand and so "she must simply watch" (39).

The conclusion she draws from the scene makes her change her whole perspective on writing, suddenly realising that; "This was not a fairy tale, this was the real, the adult world in which frogs did not address princesses, and the only messages were the ones that people sent" (40). Instead of the romantic stories Briony has been holding on to, she can now imagine herself writing a scene like the one which she just have witnessed, reflecting;

There did not have to be a moral. She need only show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive. It wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value. (40)

Already at this point, Briony gets a clue of what to do with this access to another person's inner qualities, but she is not schooled in using a broader perspective and therefore she sustains in the world of fiction and thus not connecting it to the real. Brian Finney claims that the measure Briony failed to take in the summer of 1935 was to "project herself into the feelings and thoughts of these others, to grant them an authentic existence outside her own life's experiences" (81). Briony's imagination is of course partly responsible for creating her crime, but at the same time it is eventually functioning as a tool used for atoning for that very same thing. Would Briony have accused Robbie if she truly understood what she was doing? Ian McEwan says; "You cannot be cruel to someone, I think, if you are fully aware of what it's like to be them" (Koval: 2004). Exploring the realm of literature can generate self-knowledge; which is essential for developing true empathy for one another. Through using fiction as an instrument to pay attention to the particularities, Briony manages to penetrate her world-view and along the way she penetrates the mind of class society and gains the power of insight.

Even in Saturday, McEwan shows that imagination can be responsible for misinterpretations. In the opening scene of the book, Henry Perowne sees a burning plane on its way to an emergency landing at Heathrow. At first, he mistakes the plane for a meteor, then a comet and while trying to figure out what the burning phenomenon is, memories of 9/11 are evoked. His trepidation is shown when anticipating the worst - a terrorist attack. The search for an answer actually permeates his entire day and adheres to the collective fear that

Perowne is caught in. But here the consequences of his imagination are not as severe and fatal as in Atonement. Still, this fearful mentality lays the foundation for an imagination of suspicious kind.

Conclusion

Increasing globalization is supposed to bring people closer together. But the barriers segregating social classes have been affected by globalization in a 'backward' sense, instead of bringing us closer to each other the divide has deepened. The educated elite share a bond and feel a special kinship, even passing national borders, and which they are eager to protect from the somewhat unsophisticated and claiming underclass. Saturday expresses a good deal of these structures. One can ask why McEwan is writing from such a limited point of view as Henry Perowne's. Is he affirmative to Henry's stance on life? Well, I find it hard to see McEwan writing a totally embracing novel about the privileged life of a successful middle-class family without having an agenda of wanting to discuss and explore what it means to be part of that community, in a cosmopolitan city of today.

When stories come from a place other than one's own they permit an involvement of the imagination that *can* liberate the mind. But there is a fine line between what the author wants us, through his/hers imagination, to perceive and what one really reads into a novel. Interpretations are arbitrary and do not always take the road wanted by the author. The class theme in Atonement and Saturday is not over-explicitly discussed, but there is all the same a present ideological factor that plants a somewhat inconvenient truth into these novels.

Imaginative narrative can lead the way into consciousnesses and feelings that are not easily accessible to us in real life. One role of McEwan's writing is to explore with wariness the function of imagination. In the case of Saturday, McEwan examines how the receptiveness of narrative differs depending on the psychological baggage one has. Comparing Henry and Baxter shows; that Baxter is the one more responsive to poetry because Henry is prevented by his habitual "intellectual game of diagnosis" (91). But why is that? Could it be due to Henry Perowne's feeling of wanting everything to be scientifically explained? With literature and art there are not always clarity; there is room for interpretation and there are emotions involved. For an empiricist like Perowne, relying on such sources is dangerous. At the other end, there is Baxter, who might be more responsive to art because of his vulnerability. The upside of Baxter's condition could be that he is in touch with his inner core of feelings. That and his starvation of art makes the Arnold poem go right into his heart and is what transforms him. In

the end Henry Perowne manages to sympathize with Baxter, but only to the extent that he can due to his rejection of literature.

Atonement takes another turn. While exploring the dangers of sinking too deep into an imaginary existence McEwan also shows that; seeping into a text and successively taking part of someone else's inner universe allows our perspective to expand. Briony Tallis actually learns to understand the power of literature and uses that in her endeavours to atone for her fatal mistake. But even though she penetrates the class structures with help of her imagination, she does not completely succeed because there is no way to turn back the time.

Certainly, there are limitations to what literature can achieve in terms of overcoming and transcending class structures. So, is there anything one can do in order to correct fatal mistakes like Briony's or to change the maintaining of inequalities? Brian Finney suggests: "the attempt to imagine the feelings of others is perhaps the one corrective that we can make in the face of continuing human suffering" (82). At least, the ability of imagining other people's situations and perspectives could be an important tool for understanding the world as well as for evolving on a personal level. Although there is wariness in McEwan's representation of what imagination and narrative can perform, it is his total fearlessness in exposing himself to the risk of cutting the ground from under his feet that makes him such an interesting writer. Kiernan Ryan writes; "what binds all McEwan's books together is their power to unseat our moral certainties and sap our confidence in snap judgements" (5). Maybe the matter of letting an outside voice challenge our mindset can start a reassessment of our own perceptions and thus create a dialogue with ourselves as well as with others. In that way literature can work as a mediating platform. McEwan does not back away from exploring the world's unease, not even his own, and invites the reader to do the same.

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