

A day in the life in the future: the contemporary man in saturday



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In Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, the protagonist Henry Perowne is given the task of representing the trials of being a contemporary man. However, he seems to be more than just an average contemporary man. McEwan gives Henry the characteristics of a somewhat perfect man, an individual who society in a post-terrorism world may strive to be like. These actions make it seem as if McEwan is writing Henry as a response to the war-driven world. McEwan does this by making Henry neutral when it comes to situations where violence would be seen as acceptable. The image of the future man is increased by Henry's negative viewpoint on old views and positive outlook at artefacts of the future. First, Henry has the characteristics of a man who is against quick action in the form of violence. His thoughts on the initial reaction of the world responding to terrorism with war are given early, where he thinks to himself that the "idea...was all an aberration, that the world would surely calm down...that solutions were possible, that reason [was a] powerful tool"(McEwan 30). Here, Henry describes his initial thoughts surrounding how terrorism was to be handled, through reason rather than war. He seems to be convincing himself that the rest of the world thinks like he does. This, juxtaposed with the anti-war protest in *Saturday* gives Henry the image of a representative of a group of future-thinking individuals. Additionally, the relationship between those like Henry, who are against violence, and the war-prone remainder of society is shown symbolically through Henry meeting with Baxter after their minor car accident. A metaphorical relationship between the character of Baxter and war is unmistakable. He is described as wearing a "sixties-style suit [with] tightness in the fabric round the biceps"(McEwan 74) and also "[gave] an impression of fretful impatience, of destructive energy waiting to be

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released”(McEwan 74). Looking closely, at the physical description, the clothing suggests that he represents a historical view of war in society, the tightness of the fabric around the biceps implies a more violent past and weapons that have intimidation over society, as it intimidates Henry who notices it quickly. His impatient and destructive demeanour also contribute to this vision of a representative of war when compared to Henry’s more rational approach of “ reason” on situations. Henry’s rationality is clearly put when he mentions that “...self-interested social organisms find it rational to be violent sometimes”(McEwan 74). This further distinguishes Henry from the rest of society because this description of violence implies the notion that what is rational is not always reasonable. By stating this, Henry suggests that the easiest solution for one is not always best for the masses. This description moves away from the standardized government-dictated society that the world is living in, which contributes to Henry’s image of a future man. Moreover, Henry applies his theories of violence when his family is being threatened by Baxter. During his initial encounter with this forced scenario, he “...tries to see the room through [Baxter’s] eyes, as if that might help predict the degree of trouble ahead...”(McEwan 166). Even though the opportunity of a counter-attack is possible – “[Henry and Theo were] in a good position to rush him”(McEwan 167) – Henry still surveys the situation and waits for the best possible option. Again, McEwan seems to be commenting directly on Britain’s response to terrorism in the novel, whereas one party may resort to a counter-attack immediately after an invasion as a sort of primitive revenge; a more modern mentality on the other hand may be that “ When anything can happen, everything matters.”(166). If the house can be represented as a country, then McEwan taking into account the well-
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being of all of its citizens before any potentially rash action has taken place. Although Henry ultimately resorts to “[flinging Baxter] down the stairs”(McEwan 183) it only happens when every other available option have been exhausted, this is what separates him and the rest of the anti-war population from the rest of society, and what ultimately makes him a future man. Furthermore, what links Henry to the future are his views on the past. More specifically, of past fixations of man compared to more modern views. An example of this would be the comparison of young and old minds with regards to architecture. Henry and Grammaticus have a dialogue where Grammaticus argues that the “[Post Office Tower has] No grace, no warmth. It would have put fear in [Adam’s] heart.”(McEwan 159). Here, Grammaticus gives the buildings a religious quality, perhaps from coming from an age where the ideal was that taller buildings were considered religious ones, and that was their purpose, hence the reference to “ Adam”. Henry’s description of the tower is quite different: “...Post Office Tower - less ugly these days with its aluminium entrance, blue cladding and geometric masses of windows and ventilation grills”(McEwan 66). His description tends to be more apathetic when it comes to personal emotion towards the building, as if he acknowledges its purpose and sees it as nothing more. This is further realized when the specific traits he points out on the building tend to be more for functional purposes rather than beauty. Therefore, Henry’s belief of a function over form as a positive attribute to buildings reveals a more realistic future of man, that beauty in the modern world and future is seen in its ability to provide as much function as possible rather than focus more on artistic qualities directly. Overall, Henry Perowne in Ian McEwan’s Saturday is portrayed as a futuristic man. McEwan accomplishes this by juxtaposing <https://assignbuster.com/a-day-in-the-life-in-the-future-the-contemporary-man-in-saturday/>

Henry with a anti-war protest and gives his the attributes of an individual who has already seen what the war will bring, someone who is more analytical in their actions, rather than quick to violence. He also does this by giving him a positive view on the beauty of function, rather than beauty for beauty's sake.