

# Art and empathy: an analysis of Saturday and atonement



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In *Atonement*, McEwan reveals in the final section, 'London, 1999,' that the previous narrative had been a novel written by the character Briony, creating a metafictional lens and calling into question all the previous events the reader had assumed were objectively true. McEwan first signals this shift through a move to Briony's first-person perspective as a seventy-seven year old woman, and through the vague hints about her current novel. Eventually she directly discusses her 'last novel, the one that should have been (her) first' and its subject of 'our crime – Lola's, Marshall's, mine', both statements revealing the guilt that has dogged her and led her to create so many drafts of her retelling over fifty-nine years. Her attempt to achieve sympathy is purposeful, yet limited. Much the same approach to the issues of art and empathy emerges in another McEwan novel, the current-events-oriented *Saturday*: here textual and literary art forms bring characters towards somewhat greater states of understanding, but also and paradoxically serves to reveal lapses in empathy.

McEwan implies that the optimistic ending of the penultimate section is false, as well. Briony admits that 'it is only in this last version that my lovers end well', and that she has chosen this ending because she cannot see the purpose of telling a reader that 'Robbie Turner died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes' or that 'Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground Station'. These revelations heighten the mistake she made as a child, since her misunderstanding cost them all of the time they would have had, rather than only years out of the eventual lifetime that they would have together. The purpose of 'art' in the form of the novel Briony has written is now to atone for her past crime – a

lack of empathy and understanding – through attempting to empathise with Cecilia and Robbie by writing them. McEwan later wrote in the aftermath of 9/11 that ‘Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity,’ so this creative endeavour is her endeavour to repay a moral debt, and give ‘my lovers’ the happy ending they never experienced in reality.

The art in *Atonement* is often not a perfect conduit for empathy in its truest form, however, as indicated by the possessive ‘my lovers’: she is speaking as though she has created them herself and still cannot imagine them as people separate from her. McEwan introduces the novel with an epigraph taken from Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, where Henry Tilney chastises Catherine Morland for her outlandish suspicions prompted by a love of Gothic literature and an overactive imagination. In the last section, the older Briony assumes the role of Tilney in dismissing her younger self as a ‘busy, priggish, conceited little girl’ while watching the play she had written, as the presence of literature in the younger girl’s life has encouraged her to treat the people around her like characters to be directed or written.

Her affinity for the ‘miniature’ as a young girl represents a desire to move and control others through the process of fiction, rather than a desire towards the ‘telepathy’ through fiction she describes in the first chapter, the supernatural term reflecting its impossibility. This compulsion to move others as she wishes may corrupt her ability to atone through a novel, as the changing of the ending may be a moral choice for their memory and for the reader but could also be an attempt to absolve herself personally as she is only responsible for lost years together rather than lost lifetimes. The <https://assignbuster.com/art-and-empathy-an-analysis-of-saturday-and-atonement/>

deception involved hearkens back to her original mistake, and even she admits that in the latest draft of her novel she has ‘not travelled so very far after all, since I wrote my little play’ (referring to the constructed happy ending). While Briony chastises her younger self, she still acknowledges that in placing herself as the author and giving herself the ‘absolute power of deciding outcomes’, she has complicated her attempt at empathy as she has become Godlike with that ‘absolute power’ and there is no one to forgive her but herself. The art still allows her to imagine an empathy with Cecilia and Robbie, but the solipsism of the art form itself and her shaping of the ending prevents true ‘Atonement’: her empathy is misguided, and ultimately not sufficient.

McEwan wrote the novel *Saturday* in 2003 in reaction to the shock of 9/11 and what he saw as a crime of insufficient empathy, as the professionally comfortable and personally happy life of the central character is disrupted by unexpected violence. His reaction to the 7/11 bombings in London in *The Guardian* conveyed the shock of these terror attacks reaching the Western World: ‘We have been savagely woken from a pleasant dream. The city will not recover Wednesday’s confidence and joy in a very long time.’ When violence intrudes upon the Perownes’ house, equally, Henry is stirring from a ‘dreamy interlude’ of his own. The political repercussions of the real-world event are present in the background leading up to the Perownes’ personal attack, but Henry does not appear to be strongly empathetic to foreign struggles. When he and Daisy argue, he is aware that he is only responding to her adversarial tone, and that ‘they are fighting over armies they will never see, about which they know nothing.’ In an unconscious fulfilment of

Theo's advice to 'think small' and avoid acknowledging global suffering, Henry's sense of empathy only extends to his family. He cannot fully imagine the motivations of the protestors, but in listening to his son Theo's song, he is inspired towards ideological unity like that the protestors crave:

'There are these rare moments when musicians together touch something sweeter than they've ever found before in rehearsals or performance, beyond the merely collaborative or technically proficient, when their expression becomes as easy and graceful as friendship or love. This is when they give us a glimpse of what we might be, of our best selves, and of an impossible world in which you give everything you have to others, but lose nothing of yourself... Christ's Kingdom on earth, the workers' paradise, the ideal Islamic state.' (p 176)

The 'Islamic state' is still left until the end of that thought and triadic structure, almost as a dark punchline or inaccessible example that must be introduced by gradual escalations, but the art produced by his son allows the character of Henry to almost experience an idealistically united movement. This empathy is not inherent to the character; it is produced by the camaraderie of the band, the artistic medium and his emotional connection to his son.

As a scientific and non-literary man, he is unable to connect through his daughter's medium of literature, however. In the scene with Daisy reading the 'Dover Beach' poem, a powerful empathy clearly sways Baxter even as McEwan writes from the perspective of Henry who is confused and removed from this connection. The physical changes that Henry notices, like 'the

peculiar yielding angle of his spine', demonstrate that he has bodily been stopped by the poetry, rather than it engaging his mind only briefly, and Henry is taken aback by the power of this 'mere poem'. In listening to it a second time, he attempts to hear it 'through Baxter's ears' (another directly physical description) but incorrectly guesses that Baxter is picturing an adult version of himself on a beach lamenting the absence of love in the world, when in reality Baxter is enchanted through nostalgia, remembering where he grew up. This apparently shallow reason for connecting to the poet is perhaps an example of McEwan's elitism (although he defended himself in a Guardian interview, saying 'I think that elitism means having read some books, which I can't possibly see as elitism... this is one of life's pleasures.') Daisy also tries to read to him like 'a storyteller entrancing a child', which may show further condescension towards the spectacle of a working-class, uneducated man encountering his first literary experience. However, the fact that Henry is not literary either calls this interpretation into question; the voice she uses also proves that pure connection through art has not organically occurred here. The situation is already heightened, and hearing a pregnant woman read what, he assumes, she has created, emphasises what beauty there is in the art as that is an inherently emotive sight; his nostalgia also feeds the empathetic connection.

The fact that Baxter has halted his aggression to hear this poem, intensifying its bucolic imagery in contrast, may explain the difference in reaction between him and Henry: McEwan wrote that 'Baxter heard what Henry never had, and probably never would.' The reading of 'Dover Beach' evokes the most unlikely of connections, halting a violent crime for the sake of art,

but it also demonstrates the limitations of empathy. Henry can literally see the nerves in Baxter's brain during surgery, but he will not be able to understand this particular connection. This revelation is bizarrely morbid in a way, as McEwan appears to be portraying the connection between a woman and her attacker as more meaningful than that of a woman and her own father, perhaps due to its unexpected nature. As Henry clearly does have empathy for his own family, proven by his instinctual knowledge that something is different about Daisy before her pregnancy is revealed, McEwan appears to admit the limitations of art in inspiring empathy as well. Henry reacts to the collaboration of Theo's band, but the content of 'Dover Beach' holds no relevance for him by itself (and indeed neither do the poems that Daisy has actually written.)

In McEwan's novels, art is capable of creating empathy, but still has its restrictions, especially if a character is dictating the outcome of the art. In *Atonement*, the empathy is misguided, as she still wants to control the outcome based on her own position. The art is still a product of and conduit for empathy, as she has used it to resolve her own thoughts over the years, but the fact that this empathy is insufficient subverts McEwan's assertion that it is 'the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality.' The presence of the artist introduces the question of manipulation alongside their attempt at 'telepathy': even if used to diffuse a situation, as in *Saturday*, surely the artist's deliberate shaping of structure and voice to produce an emotional response, as well as a situation's inherent intensity, cheapens an empathetic connection, or at least proves that empathy and art alone are not enough for morality.