

lan mcewan's
saturday: criticism of
the post-9 11 society



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The events of 9/11 were a shock for not only the United States but also for the whole world. Suddenly, the country that was often perceived as impenetrable and unbeatable had to deal with the repercussions of a terrorist attack, shattering its masculine image (Carpenter 150). New, stricter guidelines were introduced at airports around the world and the war on terrorism officially became one of the main focal points of American politics. In *Saturday*, the novel by Ian McEwan published in 2005, the nature of post-9/11 society plays a central part. Set in London on February 15, 2003, the day of the massive demonstration against the war in Iraq, the narrative follows neurosurgeon Henry Perowne as he experiences this memorable Saturday.

Perowne's day starts in an unusual way: he wakes up feeling euphoric in the early hours of the morning, walks over to the windows, and observes what he assumes to be a plane taken over by terrorists making its way to the Post Office Tower. He later discovers it was simply a Russian cargo plane making an emergency landing at Heathrow airport. Apart from this incident, Perowne's day starts off looking positive: "Perowne returns to bed, makes love to his wife, gets up and chats with his son in the kitchen, and later sets out for the tasks of the day. These involve a game of squash with a colleague, the purchase of seafood from his favourite fishmonger, a visit to his mother in an old people's home, a brief appearance at his son's band rehearsal, and the preparation of dinner for the grand family reunion with poets John Grammaticus [Perowne's father-in-law] and Daisy [Perowne's daughter] coming from France." (Eckstein 3). However, a run-in with criminal Baxter and his cohorts while on his way to the squash game sets off a chain

of events that turn the day sour. Perowne manages to throw Baxter off after receiving only one punch, by recognizing he has Huntington's disease, "confronting him with his diagnosis, revealing his own profession as neurosurgeon, and offering some fake ideas for possible cures." (Eckstein 3)

While the rest of his day seems to sail by smoothly, it's at the dinner party that the climax of the novel takes place: Baxter, joined by one of his partners-in-crime, breaks into Perowne's house, causes physical harm to both Grammaticus and Rosalind - Perowne's wife - and intends to rape Daisy. Once he has forced her to undress he discovers she's pregnant, which leads him to abandon this intention and makes him focus on the volume of her recently published poetry. After she recites Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach", pretending it is her own work, Baxter's mood changes and he agrees to go upstairs to look at some research about treatment for his disease. Though the research was a figment of Perowne's imagination, it suffices to give both him and his son, Theo, a chance to overpower Baxter. After they throw him off the stairs, Perowne operates on Baxter in the hospital to repair the brain damage the fall caused. The day ends with Perowne making love to his wife yet another time. Apart from the obvious allusion to 9/11 in the opening scene (Ross) and the demonstration in London, there are many more references to the post-9/11 world, often accompanied by critical notions (Hillard 186). Saturday offers critique of British society in the post-9/11, which can be found in the texture of its story and especially in its characters.

A theme that frequently makes an appearance in Saturday is terrorism,

including the terrorism that is involved in the ongoing wars. As Carpenter
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explains, the figure of Baxter is used as a personification of terrorism itself (150). His actions mirror the events of 9/11, as he turns what seems to be a peaceful day into a nightmare by breaking into the Perowne residence and terrorizing the frightened inhabitants and visitors. Baxter's irrational and sudden mood swings and unpredictable behavior, which are largely attributed to him having Huntington's disease, can be used as an explanation for the motivations behind terrorist attacks: after Daisy recites "Dover Beach", his mood turns in an unexpected way. "... his sudden abandonment of his contempt for Perowne and all he represents suggests that the terrorists' reasons for hating those whom they terrorize are also not deeply rooted and rational, but stem from an irrational desire to humiliate those who make them aware of their relative lack of power and privilege" (Carpenter 151). The gap between those with power and wealth and those who don't lead such a comfortable, privileged life is portrayed by the contrast between Perowne and Baxter, as well as by the difference in status between Perowne and the average Brit: "In this reading, Perowne becomes the voice of white, male, professional-class privilege, deploying what Elaine Hadley calls a 'surgical act of liberal detachment' from other people, or rather from the people (97)" (Hillard 186). Eckstein adds: "Inversely, I cannot remember reading another novel in recent years in which class division, here between Baxter and the Perownes, was so starkly exposed" (4).

The clash between upper middle class and the less well-endowed becomes literal when Perowne's Mercedes collides with Baxter's old BMW; the scene that follows emphasizes the gap even more as Perowne manages to get

away after a single punch by using his intellect and medical skills. One of the causes for the accident is the fact that several roads are closed down to make sure that the protesters can get through, since the novel is set on the day of the massive protest march against Britain partaking in the Iraq war. Though Perowne has no intention of joining them, “. . . the book is saturated with debates about the war” (Groes 101).

Saturday addresses many issues, though the ones that stand out – like terrorism, the war and class segregation – seem to revolve around a clash between two sides, a feeling of ‘us versus the other’. It’s not a manual for coping after 9/11 and doesn’t offer a clear solution, but Carpenter proposes that the novel does seem to hint towards a different look on masculinity: “[Saturday] proposes an alternative to the American model of masculinity, in which force must be countered with greater force, and in which any emotions which might make one qualify the amount of shock and awe one is willing to dole out—including any degree of sympathy with one’s enemies or reservations about the justice of punitive measures—is badly misplaced. Saturday endorses a vision of masculinity whose magnanimous, paternalistic grandeur is more in keeping with the imperialist ethos of Arnold’s Victorian era when Great Britain reigned supreme than with the contemporary world” (Carpenter 150). The critique Saturday offers is shown in the characters and in their interactions with each other, as well as in the storyline.