

The Post-9/11 Writing of London in McEwan's *Saturday*

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Hailed as “the greatest living novelist in the British Isles”, McEwan’s novel *Saturday*, published in 2005, is set in the cosmopolitan city of London. The story takes place on February 15, 2003, when Europe is still covered by the haze of September 11. The London described by McEwan is full of fear of terrorist attacks. The city is in chaos and disorder, and emptiness and alienation are filled in the hearts of London citizens. This paper attempts to analyze the post-9/11 London cityscape in this novel, and to analyze the social status quo of London under McEwan’s description, so as to further interpret the social deformity and spiritual wastage in the novel.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, *Saturday*, post-9/11 writing

Introduction

Ian McEwan (1948-) depicts a picture of London in his novel *Saturday*. Similar to Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Saturday* is also a story that takes place within one day. Previously, scholars have analyzed the London urban space in *Mrs. Dalloway*, believing that there is a huge gap between the rich and the poor hidden under the surface of its prosperity, which is an authentic portrayal of London’s social life in 1923 (Wei, 2012). There is an intertextuality between *Saturday* and *Mrs. Dalloway* in narrative structure. They both use the writing technique of stream of consciousness to describe what happened in a day by imitating the flow of human consciousness. The two novels also use two-line narration to reflect the diverse social life of characters of different classes. Some scholars have pointed out that *Saturday* reflects the plight of human beings living in the bustling city and reveals many diseases existing in the contemporary society, which is the embodiment of McEwan’s sense of responsibility and human concern (He, 2020). The story in the novel takes place in 2003, just over a year after the September 11 incident. People have a deep distrust of society and become increasingly anxious and worried about gains and losses (Qu & Meng, 2013). McEwan admitted in an interview that he had been thinking about how people went on with their lives after the terrorist attacks. The shadow of terrorism was hanging over Europe, and people would fantasize that they might be involved in a huge disaster at some point. Ian McEwan describes such a post-9/11 London, a metropolis of both the classical and the modern.

The protagonist in *Saturday* is called Henry Perowne. He is a neurosurgeon; this Saturday he woke up first to see a burning plane falling, out of the door after he encountered a series of trouble: with other people’s vehicles, and colleagues stadium dispute, home invasion robbery... In this process, he acted as an “urban wanderer”, observing the urban life in London, knowing what happens around him, and describing the social life scenes of the city. Zoe Heller, in a separate Op-ed in *The New York Times*, said that McEwan believes that

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these private pleasures, mined from the hustle and bustle of the world, are the things that sustain us the most. In fact, McEwan sets out to describe what happened this Saturday, revealing the emptiness of the soul, the loss of emotion, and the alienation of the individual hidden in this seemingly prosperous urban life, thus describing the emptiness and degradation of social life under the industrial and mechanical civilization. This paper attempts to restore the social style of London in the novel, and further analyzes London in February 2003 from the two aspects of alienation and emptiness of human heart in London, European, and American society and urban life under the shadow of 9/11 incident, so as to better understand the alienation and trauma brought by mechanical civilization and terrorist attacks to human heart.

London Under the Shadow of 9/11

The collapse of the twin Towers in the wake of The September 11 attacks caused great shock around the world and had a profound psychological impact on people. Michiko Kakugani ranks McEwan's *Saturday* among the post-9/11 novels, in which Londoners are imbued with the trauma of the terrorist attacks. February was bleak, cold, bleak, lifeless. The city was shrouded in mist, only a few dead trees hanging from the square in the milky light of the night. As the burning plane streaks across the sky, Perowne thinks: He no longer wants to wake Rosalind, why bring her into this nightmare? In fact, it was as if the scene had been recreated (McEwan, 2005, p. 12). So here can echo the above mentioned, after September 11 times, people began to fear attacks from the deep heart's core and fantasy such incidents happened in their side, so to see the fall of the fire, Perowne at worst instinctively thought; thought is the reappearance of fantasy; he even used to worry that you will also be assassinated. Eighteen months after the terrorist attacks, airplanes are no longer associated with transportation, but with weapons of terror that can kill everyone. London, he laments, is as vulnerable as his corner, as hundreds of other cities could be bombed at any moment. The discovery that the accident was not a terrorist attack, but the result of a fire in the plane's engine, gave Perowne a sense of relief, even a narrow escape. Here's the description of London in the novel: "...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" (McEwan, 2005, p. 7).

In the preface to the novel, McEwan quotes Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, arguing that the world is in a state of radical change, where a flourishing population makes life worthless in a society where collective consciousness is scarce and individual values are devalued...is the way it (the world) runs (McEwan, 2005, p. 4). In this city there is a bleak night, but at the same time it is a great and prosperous city bathed in modern civilization. This great city, with its powerful sewage system, classical and modern plazas, and some of the world's greatest literature, art, and history, is still under the shadow of a terrorist attack. The novel takes place on February 15, 2003, the same day as a massive anti-war demonstration. It was one of the biggest anti-war demonstrations in recent years, and as people gathered in the square to protest against the war in Iraq and crowds of flag-waving citizens and microphones poured into Hyde Park, Perowan thought this could also be the end of the disaster and the beginning of a turnaround. But when the demonstration faded, the streets of London were left with litter and traffic chaos, not politics. People are still reeling from 9/11, and the war in Iraq has heightened fears and anxieties about terror. At the same time, some scholars point out that Baxter's invasion and robbery of Perowan's house at the rare moment of family reunion is actually an epitome of the September 11 incident

(Dan, 2017). This is a violent event, the original harmony is broken by a sudden intruder, and Baxter's violence against Perowne's daughter and father-in-law is also a disaster to innocent people. In the context of post-9/11, the streets of London are full of terror and violence, and the city presents a kind of pathological terror. People begin to have extreme fear of war, and people are filled with anxiety. Even a small event can remind people of the disaster more than a year ago. The memory of the disaster of September 11 has been deeply engraved in people's hearts, and people's psychological wounds are difficult to heal. In such an environment, the relationship between people has become distorted and fragile. The novel not only aims to show the city of London under the shadow of post-9/11, but also reflects McEwan's deep concern for the physical and psychological conditions of human beings after such historical events.

The Alienated Mind Under Urban Life

Under the influence of such a post-9/11 factor, some social psychological problems also gradually surface, a kind of nothingness overlying people's minds. The hero Henry Perowne realized he might have a distorted "euphoria"; this happiness is a kind of morbid psychology; Perowne think this kind of disease is mainly because his own body quietly appears symptoms and produces a kind of chemical reaction, or a bad thing because of overwork, which became very excited. Perowne seems to live a glamorous life, with a decent job, a huge house, and a happy family, but in this life, except for work and sex, he is like an empty shell, knowing nothing about literature and art. His life is filled with work, but he has no time to appreciate literary works. This is also a symptom of human social life under industrial civilization: "Boredom with things outside of work". On weekend evenings, when he and his wife worked side by side on the computer, he felt like they were mating animals. Mumford divides the development of cities into six stages, and at the highest stage, "the physical town is nothing but an empty shell without heart and emotion, and contemporary urban life is nothing but parody and mechanical replication" (Liu, 2016, p. 142). This distorted euphoria surrounds the citizens of London, squeezing those who work in a fast pace under the industrial and mechanical civilization into working machines and slaves of the modern world. They have a bright appearance, but only endless emptiness in spirit. Perowne also carries the inherent prejudice of his own class, which makes people feel arrogant or physical in their behavior, and thus causes many problems. He has some generation gap with his children, father-in-law, unable to communicate with them; his wife is more desire. This is also what modern cities give us: cold interpersonal relationships, the inherent superiority of class, alienated hearts.

Baxter's novels reflect the living conditions of people at the bottom of society. Baxter and his friends are London street thugs who use violence to solve problems and even commit crimes. Baxter was blunt about his disdain for the police when Perowne mentioned them, calling the demonstrators jerks. The established order of modern society is no longer working for Baxter, who ignores the rules of society. He suffers from Huntington's disease, an incurable disease, and while he seems disdainful of treatment, deep down he hopes to live. This is a very different life from Perowne's: a down-and-out street thug. Such a rascal, but in the final moment Daisy read Arnold's "Dover Beach", the beauty and pathos of the poem cannot help but remind him of his own childhood; the grumpy heart gradually calmed. He found salvation in art. The fact that society has made Baxter twisted and violent man, and that he is finally moved by the power of literature and art, shows that literature has its redemptive power to soothe people's restless hearts. Even if Arnold's poetry and modern medicine temporarily soothes Baxter's mind, how to recover from the incurable disease and his own trauma remains a challenge.

Urban life is highly mechanized and industrialized. Under such a post-modern “utopian posture”, there are cold people and inaccessible hearts. These individuals become sad, empty, or arrogant or violent—all symptoms of modern social life, cruel and inhuman, and a person is a lonely individual.

Conclusion

In *Saturday*, McEwan focuses on the living conditions of contemporary people and expresses his deep concern for the physical and mental health of human beings in the post-9/11 era. Perowne finally realized his mistake and took positive measures to heal the trauma, which is the author's “medicine” for the Western society under the shadow of terror (Wang & Li, 2019). London in his works is full of the shadow left by 9/11, gloomy London, fearful crowds, anti-war resistance, and alienated hearts. McEwan tries to give people a different life experience about urban landscape and presents a picture of the holes after the September 11 urban society of London, and only people have the consciousness of active, not being a slave of industrial civilization, only time can go to the horrors of healing and civilization and only can save the lost heart of poetry and art, only then can the society gradually emerge from the shadow of post-9/11 and the city of London regain its original vitality.

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