

# The Effects of Conflict in the Novels of Ian McEwan

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*“So inevitably if you write novels you’re going to find yourself writing about – at some level – conflict between people.”*

– Ian McEwan

The novels of Ian McEwan, as with much great literature, are studies of human conflict. Not simply human conflict in general, for that is a vast and broad phenomenon, but more specifically the conflicts arising when, as Lee Siegel put it, our “accustomed world is about to fall to pieces”<sup>1</sup>, and we are brought into conflict, involuntarily. Most human beings of the western world are quite content with their daily routine, of leading an organized life, and of having a solid overview of what goes on around them. In a place as busy as our part of the world, this is certainly understandable. Human beings, by nature, adhere to organization and structure, plain and simple. If there is a red thread to be found in McEwan’s novels, it is the breach of these daily routines, and the effects that follow as a result. McEwan, to whom the novel is “an exploration of human nature”<sup>2</sup>, uses his protagonists to explore and develop these conflicts. Often, the protagonists of his novels find themselves lost in a world unfamiliar to them, isolated and thus forced to look inwards. Does a disturbance of our “accustomed world”, therefore isolate us, or force us into solitary, internal conflicts? Is a fundamental conflict between each of one us and everyone else? Is there an inherent conflict between good and evil?

The three novels *Enduring Love* (1997), *Atonement* (2001), and *Saturday* (2005), are examples of such McEwanesque themes. The latter two are more character based novels, where as, according to Ian McEwan himself, *Enduring Love* was the end of a “cycle of novels...in which ideas were dramatised or played out”<sup>3</sup>. To McEwan, the creation of character in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century novel is “unsurpassed”<sup>4</sup>, and Briony Tallis, the protagonist of *Atonement*, was the “most complete person [he’d] ever conjured”<sup>5</sup>. Likewise, *Saturday* is also very much character-led, following a fateful day in the life of neurosurgeon Henry Perowne. Although each of the three novels in question are, indeed, very different from one another, McEwan’s

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Siegel. “The Imagination of Disaster”, *The Nation*, March 24 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Ian McEwan, (September 22, 2002) Interview with Ramona Koval [Online], Available: <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwriting/stories/s679422.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Ian McEwan, “Interview with Ian McEwan” in *Ian McEwan: The Essential Guide* eds. Margaret Reynolds & Jonathan Noakes (Great Britain: Vintage, 2002), p. 23

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23

understanding of what conflicts arise when our daily lives are brought out of balance is evident in all three works.

In *Enduring Love*, the principal effect of the conflict between Jed Parry and the protagonist Joe Rose is emotional isolation between Joe and his girlfriend Clarissa, an entire new conflict in itself. This occurs early on in the novel, as it opens dramatically with the famous hot air balloon scene, in which Joe Rose suddenly becomes part of an unsuccessful rescue mission to save a boy, eventually culminating with the death of a man, John Logan. In trying to save the boy in the balloon, Joe emphasizes to the reader several times that there was a “lack of cooperation” and that the involved were “never a team”. It seems that Joe believes the absence of a leader, the pilot having “abdicated his authority”, prevented cooperation and thus everyone was “determined on [their] separate plans”. As the dramatic events unfold, Joe is constantly analyzing, quite scientifically, the process, the failures, and the “mammalian conflict”; us, or me. According to Joe, “someone said me, and then there was nothing to be gained by saying us”.

That last sentence is an important quotation to bear in mind as one reads on. The opening of *Enduring Love* is, above all, a slow build up of the emotional conflict between Joe Rose and his girlfriend, Clarissa. During the events of the first two chapters, as a reader, one cannot help but wonder: where is Clarissa in all this? Earlier on even Joe ponders this question; “what was Clarissa doing?...I don’t know how she resisted the urge to run”. Clarissa is very absent throughout the incident, forcing the reader to wonder why she, too, was not pulling, struggling and running to save the unfortunate. If the rational Joe is right in feeling guilty as a result of Logan’s death, then how is the emotional Clarissa supposed to be feeling? After the death of Logan, as Joe drifts about in his wild, euphoric state, she attempts to calm him down by saying, as if to deny him an emotional reaction, “you’ve got to slow down”. It is clearly not Joe’s intention to let that prevent him from action, because “a man was dying in a field and no one was stirring”, and so he ignores her comment. Is this the first point at which, perhaps subconsciously, Joe is emotionally isolated from Clarissa? Joe has been part of catastrophic rescue mission, a man has died, and now he is reacting emotionally, even physically. Clarissa has remained absent, passive, in the background, and is “slow down” the only response

she can, at this stage, make? Is she afraid, and is Joe unwilling to listen? Should she have followed him down to the body of Logan?

The latter question is thought provoking. Upon returning home, and having retold and visualized the entire scene to one another, Joe tells “the prayer story as a comedy and [makes] Clarissa laugh”. But considering what is about to happen in the near future, those few minutes Joe shared alone with Jed Parry are all but amusing. Had Clarissa followed Joe, perhaps to support him, Parry might not have had the opportunity to speak to Joe, or at least Clarissa would have been witness to Parry’s unusual behaviour. Instead, her only impression of Parry is, at this stage, comic, and thus providing the grounds for her inability to take Joe seriously as Parry’s obsession grows, and Joe’s need for Clarissa’s love and support with it. Joe Rose eventually learns that Clarissa, when he mostly needed her support, was unwilling to grant it to him. That she was unable to trust him, to believe him, when it was all he needed from her. In the aftermath of Jed Parry, having read Clarissa’s “unreasonable” letter with its “self-righteous tone, its clammy emotional logic”, Joe concludes: “I didn’t ask to be lonely. No one would listen to me. She and the police forced my isolation”. The fact that Joe is alone in his confrontations with Parry is a result of having been left alone, the result of no one believing him.

The immediate break down of the calm and organized life of Joe Rose in *Enduring Love*, therefore, is what shapes the rest of the novel, what the emotional conflict between him and Clarissa builds on, if you like, and which isolates them from each other. This emotional isolation can be found also in *Saturday*, in which the protagonist, neurosurgeon Henry Perowne, “wakes to find himself already in motion”, and becomes witness to what he fears is the inevitable terrorist attack on London. Not knowing why he has got up in front of the window at 3: am, he is careful not to wake his wife, Rosalind, as he does not wish “to be asked what he’s about”, for he’s “selfish and solicitous”. When he firstly mistakes the burning plane for a comet, he is about to wake up Rosalind, as it is “too extraordinary not to share”, however, when he realizes it is not a comet, he “no long thinks of waking Rosalind. Why wake her into this nightmare?” suggesting a form of protection of his wife from the horrible disaster he thinks he is witnessing, therefore a

more voluntary emotional conflict. However, this scene is quite similar to the actual incident between Perowne and a thug, Baxter, whom he realizes is suffering from Huntington's disease. This event is a catalyst of an internal conflict within Henry himself, and he becomes in this sense emotionally isolated from his family since he does not, or is unable to, tell them what occurred until it is too late.

There are obvious similarities between Joe Rose and Henry Perowne. Like Henry, Joe, "a rationalist, a materialist, a man of science who speaks with confidence and certainty"<sup>6</sup>, has little room in his organized life for literature and poetry, an important difference between him and Clarissa, for "[she] was also in love with another man", by which Joe means John Keats. Joe, however, "knew little about Keats and his poetry" and hence does not share her passion for him. Their reaction to the dramatic incident of the novel is part of the reason for their isolation; unlike Joe, Clarissa "thought that her emotions were the appropriate guide, that she could feel her way to the truth". Similarly, Henry Perowne is the father of the "literate, too literate" Daisy, an aspiring poet herself, who for "some years now" has been "guiding his literary education, scolding him for poor taste and insensitivity". Perowne, however, concludes *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina* as "products of steady, workmanlike accumulation", and, "by nature being ill-disposed towards a tale of impossible transformation", only concedes to have been intrigued by Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. At an early point in the novel Henry Perowne wonders whether "he's becoming, in this one respect at least, like Darwin in later years who found Shakespeare dull to the point of nausea".

Both Joe Rose and Henry Perowne are accused by the literate women in their lives as being too rational. Joe, when he denies any meaning in the death of John Logan, and Perowne when he discusses the pending invasion of Iraq with Daisy. Thinking that "so many good moments in life are actually produced by clear thinking"<sup>7</sup>, Ian McEwan intended for *Enduring Love* to be a novel that "celebrated the rational", rather than following the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic literary tradition. This is reflected in the character of

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<sup>6</sup> David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), p. 169.

<sup>7</sup> Ian McEwan, (September 22, 2002) Interview with Ramona Koval [Online], Available: <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwriting/stories/s679422.htm>

Clarissa, who is, ultimately, wrong in her belief that Joe was making up, or exaggerating the threat of, Jed Parry.

The effect of isolation is also apparent in *Atonement*, most obviously when its protagonist Briony Tallis has committed her crime, and Robbie Turner and Cecilia are isolated as a result therefore. Robbie is imprisoned and later sent to war in France. More interesting, however, is the process in which Briony's crime is birthed as she watches Robbie and her sister by the fountain. Perhaps one could argue here that conflict is an effect of isolation? As she sits and philosophises, isolated as a result of her play, the *Trials of Arabella*, having been ruined by the twins, the order of her young world is "offended", as she begins to realize that "the world, the social world, [is] unbearably complicated", and that it was made up of billions of human beings, "everyone thinking they were unique, when no one was". The order of her self-contained world had been "defaced with the scribble of other minds, other needs", and she regrets not having written a story, "direct and simple, allowing nothing to come between herself and the reader- no intermediaries with their private ambitions or incompetence", to impress her older brother Leon upon his pending arrival. There is a process in her mind as Briony watches Robbie and Cecilia's fateful scene unfold by the Triton fountain. Her first impression of it is a marriage proposal; it made sense to her, for "she herself had written a tale in which a humble woodcutter saved a princess from drowning and ended by marrying her". But the "sequence was illogical – the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal". Thus, Briony is forced to accept that the complexity of the scene is beyond her understanding, and "she must simply watch". Witnessing this scene changes Briony. She makes a discovery, within literature, and realizes that "this was not a fairy tale; this was the real, the adult world". She realizes that there is a grey zone in the world, that it is more balanced and nuanced than simple good versus evil, and that, as a writer, "she need not judge". And yet she does. In fact, she fails to fully understand the extent of her discovery; she fails to put it in effect. Her strong emotional reaction to the letter for Cecilia, handed to her by Robbie, sparks further distrust of him. "Order must be imposed", she feels as she comes up with the idea for a story in which "a man whom everybody liked", is exposed by the heroine as being the "incarnation of evil". Her organizing mind contradicts and competes against her discovery of a much more complex world than that which she is

accustomed to. Thus it is with “a certain consolation” she agrees with herself, inspired by Lola’s reaction to the note, that Robbie is a “maniac”. Such is Briony’s reaction to the breaking down of her accustomed world, replaced by a more complex and intimidating one. Where there is no order, she will impose it. Unlike the two other novels, an interesting aspect of *Atonement* is the protagonist as the “catalyst”. Where as in *Enduring Love* and the *Saturday* it is Parry and Baxter advancing conflicts, Briony Tallis is the executioner of the dramatic events that reshapes the lives of others in *Atonement*, her sister, Cecilia, and Robbie Turner especially.

Joe Rose and Henry Perowne have an advantage that Briony Tallis does not: their “maniacs” are, in fact, to some extent, sick. Once Joe realizes that Jed Parry suffers from de Clerambault syndrome he is somewhat relieved as it is a phenomenon he can “tolerate”, which he is familiar with, and which brings the situation into an extent of order. In *Saturday*, Henry Perowne is able to recognize the symptoms of Baxter’s Huntington’s disease, and uses it to his advantage. By giving false promises to Baxter, and realizing the “shameless blackmail” is working, Perowne manages to victoriously battle Baxter’s street credibility amongst his two thuggish companions.

The other principal effect of conflict evident in all three novels is that of guilt. All throughout *Enduring Love*, Joe Rose is subconsciously battling the guilt he feels for John Logan’s death, for not having been able to set aside self-interests to rescue the boy and prevent the man’s death. In *Saturday* Henry Perowne feels guilty for having used Baxter’s Huntington’s disease to save his own skin, and in *Atonement* Briony seeks to atone, through writing, her crime. Each of the three protagonists goes about this in different ways. Joe Rose realizes, as he pays visit to John Logan’s widow, that “[he] had come to explain, to establish [his] guiltlessness, [his] innocence of [Logan’s] death”. Following his visit, Joe drives back to the Chilterns, to the exact place where the entire ballooning incident had taken place and, driven by his guilt, he is perhaps attempting to confront the past, or, subconsciously, wanting to alter the past. He imagines Clarissa, John and Jean Logan, the unknown woman and Parry approaching him from all corners, without doubt that “they would come to accuse [him] collectively – but of what?” The ambivalence of not knowing what he should

feel guilty for - the doubt - is what pains Joe, and thus it is with a “kind of liberation” he returns home to Clarissa, having invaded her privacy by going through her drawers, and “being so entirely in the wrong”. Ultimately though, he is entirely in the right. Briony Tallis, however, as the author of *Atonement*, does travel back to change the past, to confront the past. In fact she has been doing so for fifty nine years. As she herself says, “she knew what was required of her... a new draft, an atonement, and she was ready to begin”. The novel she has written, and rewritten, for the last fifty-nine years has been her attempt at forgiveness, her confrontation with the past. But how “can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?” Thus, Briony never reaches forgiveness, for there is “no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to”, and realizes that, when she and the Marshalls are dead, “[they] will only exist as [her] inventions”, as fictional characters in the novel she has worked on for fifty nine years. Briony Tallis, as the only person who can grant herself forgiveness in her novel, wishes to “let [her] lovers live and to unite them at the end”, giving them happiness, yes, but she “was not so self-serving as to let them forgive [her]”. But Briony does achieve some level of, if not redemption, moral understanding of the past events, an ability to at least grasp what she failed to all those years ago. For with the novel, she is able to inhabit other minds, showing readers the “mechanics of misunderstanding, so you can be on both sides of the dispute”<sup>8</sup>. In *Saturday*, Perowne is forced to see his home invaded, and his family threatened, by the infamous Baxter and his two goons. The artistic imagination which Henry lacks is luckily something Baxter does not, so that when Daisy recites a poem by Arnold it causes an immediate mood swing from “lord of terror to amazed admirer”. In the meantime, Perowne is thinking only of how to protect his family, calculating when the right time to rush Baxter would be, as he exchanges looks with his son Theo. As Perowne and his son finally are able to rush Baxter, pushing him down the stairs, Perowne “thinks he sees in the wide brown eyes a sorrowful accusation of betrayal”. Henry Perowne genuinely feels, in some way, sorry for Baxter, this disoriented and degenerate lost man with an unfortunate set of genes, and in spite of the dramatic situation which has just taken place in his very home, agrees to operate on Baxter, whose condition has been worsened by the fall. Perowne feels guilty for having betrayed Baxter, a man whom life has

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<sup>8</sup> Ian McEwan, “Interview with Ian McEwan” in *Ian McEwan: The Essential Guide* eds. Margaret Reynolds & Jonathan Noakes (Great Britain: Vintage, 2002), p. 18

betrayed, who does not possess “the handsome healthy son”, the “beautiful poet for a daughter”, the “famous father-in-law” or “the gifted, loving wife” as Henry does. Baxter is without love, without friends, and all that is left from his parents is a fatal neural disease. Rosalind, however, is concerned that Perowne is in a state in which he cannot operate, possibly with revenge on his mind; however, Perowne assures her he is not about to do anything of the sort (in fact, later, Rosalind admits it was her own thoughts she was afraid of). “[Perowne] has to see this through. [He’s] responsible”. He is, in fact, relieved, feeling a “clarifying pleasure in the cold”, and “in being briefly alone”. Tumultuous changes await Henry Perowne, who ends his eventful day in the place where it began, reflecting, realizing that since Baxter may not be fit to stand trial, he can “do what he can to make the patient comfortable, somehow”. Is that forgiveness? Unlikely, he concludes, for “he doesn’t know, and he’s not the one to be granting it anyway”. Besides, he continues, “by saving [Baxter’s] life in the operating theatre, Henry also committed Baxter to his torture. Revenge enough”.

“Open the wrong door, turn down the wrong street, lose attention for a moment, McEwan suggests, and you can step into a nightmare”<sup>9</sup> David Malcolm argues. By complete coincidence, in a matter of minutes, our “accustomed world” can deteriorate. Joe Rose picked the wrong place in the Chilterns to take Clarissa to, Henry Perowne, by chance, had a minor car accident with Baxter due to the anti-war protests, and Briony simply happened to look out of the window as Robbie and Cecilia’s scene by the fountain unfolded. Malcolm, however, goes on to say that while McEwan is “often seen as a writer who argues for the redeeming power of love, he is also one who suggests love’s fragility”<sup>10</sup>. So while McEwan can be viewed as a writer suggesting “the power of love and the possibility of redemption”<sup>11</sup>, Malcolm’s last remark provides a rightful balance to the equation. This especially true in the case of *Enduring Love*: the fragility of Joe and Clarissa’s love is indicated by their different reactions to the ballooning incident, and, catalysed by Jed Parry, these differences eventually lead to the decline of their relationship. This effectively contrasts with *Saturday*, in which the invasion of privacy, the threatening of the Perowne family strengthens the family bond, arguing for the “redeeming power of love”, as Malcolm puts it. Henry Perowne even expresses admiration for his

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<sup>9</sup> David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), p. 156.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p.156

<sup>11</sup> Kiernan Ryan, *Writers and their Work: Ian McEwan* (United Kingdom: Northcote House, 1994), p.2

father-in-law, John Grammaticus, claiming his handling of the situation was “magnificent”. Similar is the love of Cecilia and Robbie in *Atonement*, enduring the punishment of the crime Robbie did not commit; the bitter impatience, the unfairness, the war.

Ian McEwan ultimately suggests to the reader, that the effects of conflict often involve a new conflict in themselves, within us. That as a result of the demise of our “accustomed world”, we are isolated with internal conflicts, involuntarily forced to reassess our lives, our existence, and our relationship with the people we love. Joe Rose, throughout *Enduring Love*, begins to question his career as a science writer, his desire to have become an actual scientist, and, ultimately, the nature of his relationship with Clarissa. Henry Perowne is approaching fifty, soon to give up squash and marathons, awaiting a grandchild, and the “business of raising children, launching young adults, over”. Briony Tallis has been diagnosed with vascular dementia, and in a slow process, she will begin to lose her mind, ultimately reducing her to nothing but that 13 year old fictional character in her novel. The effects of conflict, therefore, can prove to be a positive outcome, as in the case of Henry Perowne. Ultimately, as he goes to sleep, he is deeply content with his life. On the other hand, Briony Tallis, in *Atonement*, has in part spent the remainder of her life in deep, deep conflict with herself, desperately clinging on to the memory of the events in her as of yet incomplete novel. Joe Rose, in *Enduring Love*, has come to realize that the woman he loved was unable to support him when he mostly needed it (“Clarissa said me, and then there was nothing to be gained by saying us”). Ultimately, the effects of conflict force McEwan’s heroes to look inwards, to experience that mammalian conflict, and ask themselves: us, or me.

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