

A “Culpably Helpless” God:
An examination of Henry Perowne in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*

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The main character of *Saturday* by Ian McEwan, Henry Perowne, begins his day like a god, observing a disaster from a removed perspective. After mysteriously awakening in the early morning Henry arrives at his window in a strangely euphoric state because he feels abnormally “unencumbered” by emotions (1). His bliss is interrupted, however, by the sight of a burning plane flying over London towards Heathrow. This opening scene establishes Henry as a character who is unsympathetic to the world around him. He delights in his feeling of nothingness and retains a disturbing emotional distance as he watches the plane crash. Henry justifies this remoteness, connected to the description of him as a god, by seeing it as a reaction to the overwhelming demand for his sympathy made by the media.

The demands made on his sympathies cause Henry to feel overwhelmed and vulnerable; his response is to carefully choose the people and events who deserve his sympathy, attempting to enact some control over his emotions. He is never able to completely sever himself from the events he does witness, like the plane crash, and feels guilt both because of his inaction during the event and as a replacement for sympathy he is trying to avoid. Guilt initially seems to be an emotion that Perowne can feel and then absolve, making it perfect for the level of control he is trying to maintain. This becomes a pattern in the first half of the novel, emotional distance resulting in guilt.

Not all guilt can be absolved, however, and it is this issue which complicates Henry's method. Despite his attempts at remoteness and control, Henry's confrontation in the end of the novel with a character that represents chaos and physicality has disastrous results. Through his use of guilt, Henry tries to create the perfectly contained emotional response – one that can be felt and then absolved, leaving him invulnerable to sympathy. Instead, in his attempt to atone for his guilt surrounding this uncontrollable character, Henry suffers the ironic conclusion that he has created a guilt which cannot be atoned for. Henry's characterization as a god slowly collapses over the course of the novel as both his control and his remoteness lessen. The novel concludes with a surge of uncontrollable emotion that

humanizes Henry. The god-like control that Henry seeks is something he can strive for but will never attain. McEwan demonstrates that even a god-like figure such as Perowne is vulnerable to fear, insecurity, guilt and consequences – all of the emotions that he attempted to control.

The reader's introduction to Perowne occurs as he mysteriously awakens in the middle of the night. Aside from his profession, a neurosurgeon, the introduction focuses on what Perowne is not. Perowne is not “alarmed” or “surprised” (McEwan, 1); he is not “disturbed by a dream or some element of the day before, or even by the state of the world” (1). Perowne is presented as created from nothing, and feeling nothing: “It's as if, standing there in the darkness, he's materialised out of nothing, fully formed, unencumbered”(1). All details that connect Perowne to the world – his memories, emotions, anticipations – have been removed. He is described as “empty-headed” (2). His actions occur without consciousness initially: “Henry Perowne ... wakes to find himself already in motion” (1). Even after he is awake though, he continues to move unconsciously with no apparent purpose. “With no decision made, no motivation at all, he begins to move towards the nearest of the three bedroom windows” (2). The word “unencumbered” most effectively describes his mental state at this moment because it is his complete detachment from the worries and concerns of the day that would generally occupy his mind which has such a profound effect on him. Perowne is instead overcome by a state of euphoria arising specifically from his excitement at his unencumbered state. He feels “inexplicably elated” and the “pleasurable sensation” of his empty environment (2, 1). Seeing Perowne in this unencumbered state in the beginning of the novel causes the reader to then compare this moment to his temperament in the rest of the novel as he undergoes various situations which alter and burden his mind.

The reason why Perowne delights in this moment of nothingness is revealed later in the novel when he describes a phenomenon of the modern world that has started to invade his life. The

phenomenon is what he calls “the expanding circle of moral sympathy” (128). In this passage he is referring to studies that reveal that fish feel pain as much as humans do:

Naturally, Perowne the fly-fisherman has seen the recent literature: scores of polymodal nociceptor sites just ours in the head and neck of rainbow trout ... Now it turns out that even fish feel pain. This is the growing complication of the modern condition, the expanding circle of moral sympathy. Not only distant peoples are our brothers and sisters, but foxes too, and laboratory mice, and now the fish (127-128).

That Perowne calls this expansion a “growing complication” reveals his prevailing attitude, which is adding to the sympathies he is already supposed to feel is an annoyance and a burden. He tellingly makes reference to not only the fish and foxes, but also to “distant peoples,” the people who were the first subject of this expansion. His complaint is then not just related to an argument about food sources, but an argument against the exposure of different tragedies of the modern world that arise through media coverage. Furthermore, he feels that if you are too widely sympathetic it will prevent your success in the world: “The trick, as always, the key to human success and domination, is to be selective in your mercies” (128). Perowne has created the formula to “success and domination”, a goal which has a slightly ominous tone, and the main factor relies on the human ability to choose who we sympathize with.

Perowne's desire to be rid of, or at least be selective in, his sympathies is confounded by two contrasting effects of the media exposure. Immediately after he reveals his methods to be less sympathetic, Perowne concedes that he is still at the mercies of the media because they have the power of sight on their side: “For all the discerning talk, it's the close at hand, the visible that exerts the overpowering force” (128). His manner here is dismissive, expressing how powerless he feels at the hands. He instantly negates the preceding sentences on how to control your sympathetic feelings because he, at least, feels like his own intentions become overwhelmed when confronted with images

and video in the news. At the same time, Perowne feels numbed by the repetitive disaster language that has become part of the modern condition. Perowne says, regarding the constant disaster preparation the hospital requires, that “words like 'catastrophe' and 'mass fatalities,' 'chemical and biological warfare' and 'major attack' have recently become bland through repetition” (10). As much as the visual aspect of the media creates a sympathetic investment in remote situations that Perowne resents, the repetition used in broadcasting simultaneously numbs him to the emotional connection that the media is trying to encourage through their coverage. This contradiction creates similar contradicting reactions from Perowne, who struggles with resisting and also giving into the ever expanding pool of subjects for whom he is supposed to feel sympathy.

Despite Henry's growing exasperation with sympathetic demands, he is still strongly affected by the media and their coverage of the plane crash he witnessed which sporadically appears throughout his day. Later in the novel, Perowne reveals that he not only feels at the mercy of the media, but that he's become passively complicit in their efforts to exert control over his emotions. The story of the plane crash he witnessed continues to be mentioned on the news over the course of his day allowing Perowne to shape his emotions along with the development of the story:

He suspects he's becoming a dupe, the willing, febrile consumer of news fodder, opinion, speculation and all of the crumbs the authorities let fall. He's a docile citizen, watching Leviathan grow stronger while he creeps under its shadow for protection. This Russian plane flew right into his insomnia, and he's been only too happy to let the story and every little nervous shift of the daily news process colour his emotional state. It's an illusion to believe himself active in the story” (184-185).

This complex passage reveals both aspects of Perowne's nature and the nature of the media he is succumbing to. He describes himself simultaneously as a “dupe,” implying that he's been tricked, and also as “willing,” directly contradicting the idea that he has been tricked by the media. This

contradiction embodies Perowne's complicated relationship to the media as he is aware of its ability to influence and manipulate him but oscillates between indulging in its influence and rejecting it. His passive response to the plane crash is also emphasized through the structure of the description itself. The plane, the subject of the sentence, flies into his insomnia, a state which is beyond his control; the plane acts upon him through his insomnia, the object of the sentence, and Perowne himself has no active role in the series of events. Finally, Perowne's description of the news which influences him emphasizes its trivial nature, inherently questioning profound effect it has on him. He calls it "fodder," "speculation," and "crumbs" which point out that it is everything that news shouldn't be; it is meant to fill time; it is subjective, possibly incorrect, and ultimately unimportant. Once again, he is both aware of his problematic response to this news and also unable to prevent it despite his desire to do so. It is the warring of these two contrasting responses within him, and his emotional solution to this problem that is explored during *Saturday*.

McEwan shows Perowne's reaction to three major events over the course of the day. Perowne's immediate reaction to these events is normally distanced and dreamy. It is only afterward, when the event returns to his thoughts like a repetitive news story and forces him to confront what happened that he suddenly feels guilt about his consistent lack of action. His guilt centers around feelings of helplessness. What distinguishes the feeling of guilt from any other emotional response Perowne might have is that guilt is an emotion with a solution. Guilt is an interesting emotion because it entails a transgression of internal moral boundaries to produce it; therefore, in a world where everything is equal, an act of atonement which reverses this transgression should theoretically dissolve any feelings of guilt. In this sense, it is an emotional problem with a definable cure. It is an emotion which has the potential to allow Perowne to return to the same state of unencumbered euphoria in which he began his day. Henry's feelings of guilt initially seem more controllable and more fleeting and because of that he

uses them as a self-serving response to the crashes he witnesses. Each event that Perowne engages with differs in important ways, and therefore his guilt has different meanings and different consequences as he applies it consistently throughout his day.

Almost immediately after the reader is first introduced to Perowne during his mysterious, euphorically empty, early-morning moment of consciousness, he witnesses, through his window, an object burning through the night-sky. He views the object with “eagerness and curiosity,” believing first that it is a meteor, then a comet, but finally it is the sound of the engines that make him realize this is actually a crashing plane, a “local” disaster not a removed astronomical event (12, 13). Perowne is described as “horrified” as would be expected, but his observations of the events never have a horrified tone (13). Instead, he calmly reflects on the plane crash; his description is drawn-out, interrupted with personal memories and conveys none of the “nightmarish” effect he insists the plane crash has (14). He both imagines the interior of the plane as a series of cliché, gore and heroism centered narratives and considers the stark reality of the survival scenario: “The fight to the death in the cockpit, a posse of brave passengers assembling before a last-hope charge against the fanatics. To escape the heat of that fire, which part of the plane might you run to?” (15-16). There is a unsympathetic detachment to his description which is realized in his narration of the passengers struggle and his mocking description of a flight attendant as “the thickly made-up lady who politely served you croissant and jam” (16). He even admires the beauty of the burning plane as it fades from sight: “the fire twinkles festively among the branches and twigs” (16). The resulting impression made by his description is of a person who has invested no personal emotion in the event but instead hypothesizes about the terror and suffering of the passengers. There is an overwhelming sense of his complete emotional detachment from the event itself.

His detachment is somewhat understandable when viewed through the context of the repetitive disasters that Perowne has previously mentioned lose their meaning through repetition. Perowne

describes this disaster as a “spectacle [which] has the familiarity of a recurrent dream” (14). The fact that he refers to it as a “spectacle” is an anticipation of the media's effect; Perowne knows already that this story will be repeated over and over again during the coming day until it has changed from a catastrophe to a spectacle, an event with an enraptured audience who also have no connection to the event. Perowne also clarifies that this “familiarity” arises not only from disastrous scenarios imagined on his own past flights, but also from the, then recent, attack on the World Trade Center. It is familiar to Perowne, post 9/11, to view a plane heading towards disaster from afar:

But the scene construed from the outside, from afar like this, is also familiar. It's already almost eighteen months since half the planet watched, and watched again, the unseen captives driven through the sky to the slaughter, at which time there gathered round the innocent silhouette of any jet plane a novel association (15).

This plane is even framed by his window like a video is framed by a television screen, further reminiscent of the repeated televised images of the planes crashing into the towers. An event that might otherwise stand out in his mind instead becomes associated with this past event. The two aren't just connected in his mind though, he goes beyond association and calls this event “familiar” which implies a repeated exposure possible only through the media's coverage of the event. The visual imagery of a catastrophic event such as 9/11 should not feel familiar, as familiarity necessarily arises from repetition and this event has not been and could never be repeated in the way it was originally enacted.

Nevertheless, Perowne has become familiar with the visual imagery through the media's repeated broadcasting of the planes crashing that dominated the news following the event; Perowne's phrasing “watched, and watched again,” although referring to the two planes, emphasizes both the repetition within the event itself and afterward when the video clips and images were constantly repeated by the media. This is the first example of a visual event, already similar to the remote events that the news covers, from which Perowne is emotionally distant. He argues later in the novel that it is “the visible

that exerts the overpowering force,” but despite the fact that he witnesses this event he is still emotionally distant from it. (128). His sympathies have been worn down through his repeated exposure to this type of imagery. Sympathy seems the more expected reaction to such an event – it’s an emotion that allows for connection to the people suffering without requiring any action on the part of the viewer. Henry rejects the necessity of this sympathy both during and after the event, choosing to do and feel nothing.

It is only after his long, dream-like experience of the event itself that Henry seems to begin to process what he is feeling. He describes his inaction as if he has committed a felony: “His crime was to stand in the safety of his bedroom, wrapped in a woolen dressing gown, without moving or making a sound, half dreaming as he watched people die” (22). It begins to become clear that his guilt manifests in situations where medical help might be helpful or necessary and Perowne does nothing. His inaction in this situation, though, is understandable as there is really nothing he could do to help. His definition of what he is feeling clarifies further his guilt and why it arises. “Now that...he's in darkness again, he understands the extent of his turmoil... He feels culpable somehow, but helpless too. These are contradictory terms, but not quite, and it's the degree of their overlap, their manner of expressing the same thing from different angles which he needs to comprehend. Culpable in his helplessness. Helplessly culpable” (22). Perowne perceptively notes that these are “not quite contradictory terms” but have an important “degree of overlap.” Their connection is clear especially in the consideration of what causes Perowne guilt; it is the situations in which he is helpless to do anything helpful which cause him guilt. This is probably magnified by, but also partially why he became a surgeon, a job where he can not only help others but is lauded for his skill in helping his patients. The connection between helplessness and feeling culpable then makes sense for Perowne. Their contradiction though arises from a more complex relationship between action and inaction, morals and decisions.

A prominent theme of the novel is the relationship between decisions and consequences. As a

neurosurgeon Perowne values his decisiveness in his professional life. “[His] unassertiveness is misleading, more style than character – it’s not possible to be an unassertive brain surgeon ... in Perowne’s view, when things are difficult, tension is best maintained ... fantasising should be a solitary pursuit. Decisions are all” (21). Despite the emphasis Perowne puts on decisions in his professional life, demonstrated by this hyperbolic statement, it is the lack of a decision in moments of crisis that leads to his guilt during the novel. Specifically, as demonstrated in the plane crash, when faced with a crisis Perowne’s guilt does not arise from some wrong action, or even from a moral struggle between two possible responses, but instead arises from his complete lack of action.

In his work on shame, Douglas Cairns has grappled with the definition this emotion and how it differs from the often confused concept of guilt. Both arise as a result of some personal failure. Shame has normally been distinguished as the failure to achieve a goal and guilt as the transgression of an internal boundary (Cairns, 18). As Cairns notes, though, this distinction collapses easily when placed under semantic pressure: “It would be wrong to focus too closely on the supposed distinction between failure and transgression; any transgression of a boundary is a failure to observe it, and a failure to achieve a goal can be a transgression of an interdiction” (20). These loose definitions serve as a good starting point, but Cairns further refines the distinction by pointing out the verbs associated with each emotion. “In failing to achieve a goal or to meet an ideal one is failing to *be* what one would like to be; in transgressing a prohibition one is *doing* what one should not ... guilt is concerned with one’s actions as an agent, with what one does” (21). There is a clear distinction here between shame which arises from the invisible state of “being” and guilt which arises from the visible action of “doing.” This connection between guilt as a result of definable action leads to the important idea of atonement or “making amends” as Cairns refers to it (21). Each guilt-producing action should then logically create the possibility of an atoning action which will resolve that guilt. Guilt is, in this way, a unique emotion in that it would appear to have a definable cure. It is an emotion that Perowne could feel in order to

have some response to the visual stimuli the media, and by association the plane crash, presents him with, but he could still theoretically resolve the emotion and return to his euphoric empty state.

What is distinct about the guilt that Perowne experiences after watching the plane is that, unlike Cairns definition, he experiences the guilt of inaction or even apathy. It was his “helplessness” in the moment that created his feelings of culpability. Perowne is characterized through his job as a neurosurgeon as a man of decision and action. His professional motto seems to be: “Decisions are all” (21). McEwan implies through Perowne's characterization that his ability have decisive actions arises from the stark separation Perowne tries to maintain between sympathy and action. The separation is something he's gained through “experience” and it enables his “obligation to be useful” (10). It is something he has adapted out of necessity as a means of survival and success in his professional life. Action and decisions in his professional life have helped him gain success as a surgeon His methods recall his similar response to “the growing complication” “the expansion of moral sympathies.” In his work though he is not selective, but has instead completely banished sympathy in favor of confidence and control and action. His “helplessly culpable” emotional response following the event seems to arise from his positive associations between action and success as a surgeon. He is “helpless,” and therefore unable to act, which leads him to the guilty feeling that he has done something wrong. His inaction also provides a void, a lack of reaction to the event that could be fulfilled by an emotional reaction. But instead of succumbing to dreaded sympathy, Perowne gives into feelings of guilt, an emotion with more control and less negative connotations for him.

Perowne has already demonstrated his emotional distance during the plane crash, but this distance seems to expand and permeate all aspects of his life, especially the area that might be most emotional – his job. His description of his surgeries stresses the fact that a patient to him becomes just a body. “Once a patient is draped up, the sense of personality, an individual in the theatre, disappears...All that remains is the little patch of head, the field of operation” (255). He notes also that

his experience has been a toughening process in other ways. “Henry doesn't actually relish personal confrontation... But clinical experience is, among all else, an abrasive, toughening process, bound to wear away at his sensitivities” (85). This toughness he's acquired requires a confidence in his abilities and the assurance that he is in the right, both of which mean he has to remove himself emotionally from the relatives of those patients who have died under his knife. Whether the lack of sympathy in his professional life and his selective sympathies in response to the media are connected by Perowne consciously is unclear, but it is clear that there is a trend in his thinking that has established sympathy as an unproductive and constraining emotion and so in both cases he has made the choice to reject sympathy.

Henry Perowne's car crash is the second climactic moment of the novel comparable in many ways to the plane crash. After turning down a closed off street, Henry crashes into another car being driven by a man named Baxter. As the responsible party is unclear, there is a confrontation between Henry and Baxter which escalates until Henry is in danger of being beaten by Baxter and his two friends. Faced with this potential beating Perowne asserts his authority as a doctor and diagnosis Baxter with Huntington's, an degenerative disease. Although Baxter is already aware of the condition, Perowne purposefully discusses it in a way that is both misleading, playing on Baxter's hope for cure to an incurable condition, and embarrassing, playing on the fact that Baxter has kept it a secret from his friends. In this moment Perowne unsympathetically abuses the experience he has had as a doctor to manipulate Baxter for his own gains; whether he was justified remains unclear. Ultimately the distraction of Baxter's embarrassment allows Perowne to make an escape and successfully make it to the squash game to which he was originally going.

There are many similarities between the plane crash and the car crash beginning, obviously, with the fact that they are both described as “crashes.” Perowne's unsympathetic manner of thinking

during the event has a similar removed but ironic quality to the way he imagines the interior of the plane:

But here on University Street it's impossible not to feel that play-acting is about to begin ... He is cast in a role, and there's no way out. This, as people like to say, is urban drama. A century of movies and half a century of television have rendered this matter insincere. It is pure artifice (86).

Perowne makes a connection between his understanding of this interaction and an exaggerated movie narrative, a connection which fosters his emotional disconnect and disinvested tone through movie narratives' repetitive nature. When viewed as mimicking the distant events of a movie screen, the danger of the situation no longer seems present: "Perversely, he no longer believes himself to be in any great danger. It's hard to take the trio seriously; the cash idea has a boyish, make-believe quality. Everything said seems like a quotation from something they've all seen a dozen times" (90). Even now, when the window framing the event has disappeared, and his physical distance from the event has collapsed to the point where he is touching shoulders with the men threatening him, Perowne can't help but connect the whole encounter to a movie. In the absence of a frame, Henry has imposed his own. Although movies and news are clearly different mediums, the type of narrative he's referring to is the same. Perowne has been most influenced by the sensationalist narratives which exaggerate reality and render sincerity obsolete, which are produced and played repetitively by both mediums.

It is his detached observation of the event, reminiscent of his unsympathetic professional manner, which actually allows him to focus on the minute diagnostic observations he is habitually making during his interaction with Baxter. In the face of a "thorough beating" Perowne instead focuses on the "persistent tremor" in Baxter's hand (87, 94). This observation grows in importance: "Perowne's attention, his professional regard, settles once again on Baxter's right hand. It isn't simply a tremor, it's a fidgety restlessness implicating practically every muscle. Speculating about it soothes him, even as he feels the shoulders of both men pressing lightly through his fleece" (90). As the threatened violence

seems more and more likely to become real, Perowne's observations sharpen into a potential diagnosis which he exploits to escape the situation he has helped to create: "Perowne is counting on Baxter knowing about his condition. If he does, he won't have told Nigel or Nark or any of his friends. This is his secret shame" (95). Perowne's emotional detachment from the situation allows him to take advantage of the emotional connection he recognizes in Baxter's shame. He makes use of this shame for his own "shameless blackmail" (95). Perowne even identifies himself as "incapable of pity" and attributes his unsympathetic treatment of Baxter to his attempt to "safely end this encounter" (99). Although Perowne at first seems that he will be overwhelmed by the strength of these three men, he demonstrates through a similar emotional detachment that he employs during surgery that he is not, and successfully escapes. Unlike the plane crash or surgery, however, Henry is not actually distant from the person on the receiving end of his emotional distance. In surgery the patient becomes just a body and the plane crash was an accident without any visible deaths: "Watching death on a large scale, but seeing no one die. No blood, no screams, no human figures at all" (15). These are events where his emotional distance either has no effect or helps him to perform because there is no secondary human element to consider. If emotional detachment has invaded all aspects of his life then there is a possibility of unforeseen consequences due to his inability to sympathize with the other person, in this case Baxter.

Following his unsympathetic, exploitative response to Baxter, Perowne's following guilt seems even strange because Henry never considered the morality of his decision at the time. It's clear he feels he's crossed a moral boundary of his, but the fact that there was no conscious consideration of that boundary before he crossed it makes his guilt seem. As soon as he arrives at the squash games feelings of guilt and discomfort are already beginning to bother him. "He's already feeling a rising unease about the encounter, a disquiet he can't yet define, though guilt is certainly an element" (103). Similar to the plane crash it is separation from the event that allows his feelings about it to form. The guilt that he

forms in response to his encounter with Baxter is slightly different in origin from the guilt that forms following the plane crash. In this case it is still a case of inaction that causes him guilt, but it is his promised future action to help Baxter with Huntington's that will never actually occur. Perowne made a promise at the time that he never intended to keep; he made it only because he thought the misdirection and distraction of bringing up Baxter's disease might help him escape. His inaction in this case is no longer a response to helplessness but a calculated move; his guilt seems more appropriate in response to his decisions here, but his reaction to the guilt itself demonstrates that he sees it more as an inconvenience in this case.

When he considers the event at length he judges himself as absolved because of the pain he suffered from being punched in the chest, but he strangely still wants to help Baxter. The back-and-forth thinking that Perowne goes through, and the roundabout logic he employs to relieve himself of guilt are indicative of the subjective nature of what he considers atonement:

“Did he, Henry Perowne, act unprofessionally, using his medical knowledge to undermine a man suffering from a neurodegenerative disorder? Yes. Did the threat of a beating excuse him? Yes, no, not entirely. But this haematoma, the colour of an aubergine, the diameter of a plus – just a taste of what might have come his way – says yes, he's absolved ... So what's troubling him? Strangely, for all the violence, he almost liked Baxter. That's to put it too strongly. He was intrigued by him, by his hopeless situation, and his refusal to give up”(113).

Henry cannot decide on whether the threat of further violence excused his actions, alternating between “yes, no, not entirely.” The proof of the bruise on his chest seems to resolve his reservations about absolving himself. Henry attributes the agency to the bruise itself, it “says yes, he's absolved.” The fact that Perowne absolves himself before he is even convinced that he did something wrong makes it clear that this event is nowhere near resolved in his mind, and that he has more reservations about what actually happened than is immediately transparent.

It is clear to Henry that he feels guilty, but his confusion over whether he did something morally wrong to cause that guilt shows that he isn't aware why he is feeling that way. If he refuses to acknowledge what he did was wrong, or if he isn't clear on what he did that was wrong, how can he take any action to atone for the guilt he is feeling? This is why, despite Henry's insistence that the bruise on his chest absolves him, he still feels the need to see Baxter again. Later, when he gets stuck in traffic, he thinks, "he wouldn't mind talking to [Baxter]. His case is interesting, and the offer to help was sincere" (142). The dissonance of his desire to rid himself of guilt and his refusal to acknowledge that he hasn't yet truly atoned causes Henry to convince himself that he was sincere. During their actual confrontation Perowne admits that "There's no way out for [Baxter]. No one can help" (99). Clearly his later offer to help can't be anything other than a lie. Immediately after Perowne claims that he has a sincere desire to help Baxter, he contemplates the facial cues that expose liars. He says, "the first and best unconscious move of a dedicated liar is to persuade himself he's sincere. And once he's sincere, all deception vanishes" (143). The repeated word "sincere", first in the previous quote and then here twice, makes the conclusion that Perowne himself is lying compelling. He lies to himself about his intentions as a sincere offer of help during his confrontation might be enough to absolve the guilt that he acted unprofessionally.

Both the plane crash and the car crash have already become conflated and confused in Henry's mind. "His own word "crash," trailing memories of the night as well as the morning, fragments into a dozen associations. Everything that's happened to him recently occurs to him at once" (107). The reader is encouraged through Henry's own confusion of the two crashes to make a comparison of the two events. There are important similarities between the two, his detached narration of the events as they happen and the guilt he feels afterward due to his inaction. In both cases Henry's guilt arises because of his necessity to give in to the visual sympathetic cues without wanting to feel actual sympathy. He instead indulges guilt as it is a resolvable emotion. While this response is disturbing

because of Henry's extreme aversion and lack of sympathy, it is the differences between these two events that crystallize the extreme nature of Henry's unsympathetic nature.

The immediately obvious difference between the plane crash and the car crash is the difference between Henry's physical and emotional distance to both events. The distance of the plane crash plays a key role in Henry's reaction to it as he is immediately able to connect it to coverage of 9/11. The familiarity of this event and the television-like framing his window provide an easy reversion to his habitual removed response to sympathetic cues from the media. The confrontation with Baxter, however, provides none of these visual cues, either the visual framing or the familiarity to a media event. Instead, it is Henry who compares the event to an "urban drama" and then plays his role accordingly. He is so disconnected from the confrontation itself that he almost further endangers himself. During the fight itself it seems he is following a script he isn't even aware of, his role unconsciously already decided. "He surprises himself. This fussy, faintly archaic "indeed" is not generally part of his lexicon. Deploying it entails decisions; he isn't going to pretend to the language of the street. He's standing on professional dignity" (89). Although he acknowledges that decisions are being made by the words he uses, he never directly states that he is making these very important decisions. He acknowledges later: "His attitude was wrong from the start, insufficiently defensive; his manner may have seemed pompous, or disdainful. Provocative perhaps" (114). When he is confronted with a real, physical event that is in no way removed from him and may have consequences, Perowne continues to react in the same emotionally distant manner that he has adopted as part of his professional life and as a guard against the media. It is the fact that his reaction is so similar to the reaction he has to the remote plane crash in which he really couldn't have had any helpful action that is so disturbing. Perowne's remoteness has invaded all areas of his life, and his useless guilt, an emotion that only absolves him, has come with it.

The third event of Perowne's Saturday, visiting his mother, strongly contrasts the two guilt inducing crashes which began his day. Perowne's mother's mind has completely succumbed to dementia to the point where Henry's visits are meaningful only to him: "She does expect him and wouldn't be disappointed if he failed to show up. It's like taking flowers to the graveside – the true business is with the past" (125). As his mother can no longer miss his absences, Henry's motivations for going to see her arise as a means to quell his own guilt. Whereas the other two events created guilt within Henry, his visit to his mother is an example of his confrontation with a guilt he already feels.

His guilt about his mother is a reaction to both past and present events. Henry feels guilty about how he treated his mother, Lilian, when he was younger, but he also feels guilty for never apologizing to her in the present: "He had no business as a young man being condescending towards her. But it's too late for apologies now" (159). His guilt arises from his treatment of his mother when he was younger, but also his inaction in the present – the unsaid apology which would have absolved his guilt. Because it is now impossible to communicate with his mother this situation has resulted in an ever-persistent feeling of guilt which is only temporarily assuaged by Henry's sporadic visits: "He hates going to see her, he despises himself if he stays away too long" (125). Henry's guilt has become a cycle in this sense; he hates seeing his mother because she reminds him of a guilt he can never absolve due to her disease, but he also feels guilty for not seeing her because he clearly loves her even if he didn't express that at when he was younger. There also seems to be a return of the helpless aspect to Henry's guilt. In this case he is helpless to cure her because dementia, like Huntington's is incurable. His guilt could theoretically be absolved, but not without the medical he can not give her.

Of the three instances of guilt in the novel, his interaction with his mother is the first where Perowne demonstrates sympathy. Henry is interestingly placed in a position of power due to her degenerative mental disease, in this sense he simultaneously helpless to cure her but has the power to temporarily help her. He uses his position of power to manipulate her emotions in the same way he

suspects the media manipulates him: “If she becomes too agitated by the story she's telling, Henry will cut in and laugh loudly and say, 'Mum, that's really very funny.' Being suggestible, she'll laugh too and her mood will shift and the story she tells then will be happier” (159). Her brain function has degenerated to the point that she is completely powerless against his manipulation; furthermore, she will not notice that her mood has even changed. This kind of manipulation could be sinister, but Henry's goal is to make his visits easier on Lilian. His placation is meant to protect her from the memories and knowledge she has lost. Her disease has left her completely vulnerable; she is, in her mind, constantly surrounded by strangers in a place she has never seen before and she will never regain the mental ability to correct this flawed perception. Instead her happiness relies on distraction and being completely submerged in her own past. Henry uses his abilities to help her the only way he can as there is no cure. Unlike his self-serving promise to help Baxter, his manipulation of Lilian's mood is an attempt to help her with her suffering. He finds a way to help in a situation where he is still essentially helpless and he continues to return both because of and despite his guilt. Perowne demonstrates his love and sympathy for Lilian through his commitment to her despite his same “helpless culpability” in this situation.

The previously established idea of repetition as distancing becomes complicated by Henry's relationship with his mother. Repetition, in this case, has not caused Henry to become familiar or numb to his mother's effect of him. If anything, the repetition of his visits feeds both his unassuageable guilt and his unending commitment to her. This contrasts with the familiarity of the burning plane, seen hundreds of times on the news post-9/11, and the Henry's imposition of movie stereotypes on his confrontation with Baxter. Henry's thoughts during these moments are unemotional and remote, presumably due to the emotional distance that Baxter claims repetition creates. McEwan complicates Henry's simplistic view of repetition by including his interactions with his mother in which repetition creates a deeper attachment to his mother in Henry.

This attachment is countered by a belief Perowne expresses after he admits to his feelings of guilt about his mother. Perowne has a belief that most feelings simply fade when subjected to the power of time: “Unlike in Daisy's novels, moments of precise reckoning are rare in real life; questions of misinterpretation are not often resolved. Nor do they remain pressingly unresolved. They simply fade. People don't remember clearly, or they die, or the questions die and new ones take their place” (159). There is a significant contrast between Henry's actions in this moment and his beliefs that McEwan is pointing to. Both his guilt regarding the plane crash do seem to be fading over the course of the day, occasionally returning to the surface when exterior elements trigger Perowne's memory. The cycle of guilt surrounding his mother does not seem like it will ever fade though, demonstrated by the fact that he continues to visit her. McEwan seems to be signifying two different types of guilt in this moment. There is the superficial kind of helpless guilt that Perowne feels in reaction to the plane crash. This guilt, as it is due to inaction, doesn't have a definable act of atonement for Henry to strive for and so it simply fades from his mind. His mother, on the other hand, represents an unattainable act of atonement. In her case, Henry has settled for smaller acts of atonement, the process of keeping her happy. The question then becomes, what kind of guilt will Baxter represent. The act of atonement that Henry originally envisions, helping Baxter with his disease, seems unattainable as it is unlikely that he will see Baxter again. McEwan refuses to allow this response though and in the final chapters of the book Baxter returns.

Baxter's return in the final chapters of *Saturday* continues McEwan's complication of the ideas of repetition, emotional distance, sympathy and guilt that pervade the novel. Henry and his family, including his wife, daughter, son and father-in-law, are all held at gun-point by Baxter and one of the men who was with him during the car crash. Baxter's goals are unclear; it is apparent that he is seeking revenge or reparations of some sort and that he is dangerous, but Baxter never specifies his desired outcome of this encounter. Baxter's invasion into Perowne's house is a nightmarish realization of the

claim that Henry makes at various points throughout the day, that he wishes he could see Baxter again.

Henry's moments of speculations about Baxter's return that are scattered throughout the novel focus more on the novelty of the situation than the reality; he views Baxter more as an interesting case study. Perowne's inability to perceive Baxter as a possible threat following what Theo, his son, calls his "humiliation" of Baxter indicates that Henry's emotional distance from the event has continued even after their confrontation ended (154). The only emotion Henry felt in response to their encounter was guilt, an emotion which only addresses how the event affected Henry. He cannot feel the sympathy for Baxter that would allow him to anticipate that he might have humiliated him.

The emotional distance from Baxter that Henry maintained during and after their first confrontation is destroyed upon their second meeting. The physicality of Baxter that previously did not penetrate Henry's remoteness now has an immediate effect on Henry: "But he'd almost forgotten about Baxter, not the fact of his existence, but the agitated physical reality, the sour nicotine tang, the tremulous right hand, the monkeyish air, heightened now by a woolen cap" (214). Despite their physical closeness in their first encounter Perowne was able to maintain his emotional distance; there is something different in their second encounter which makes this impossible for him. Partially, it seems to be Baxter's actual invasion into the private space of his home. There is also, however, some strong similarities between the way repetition here begins to work similarly to the way repetition effects Henry's relationship with his mother. When Henry assumed that his interaction with Baxter would never be repeated he was able to feel only his own reassuring guilt. Any doubts he had about their encounter were transformed into guilt which he then absolved himself of, counting Baxter's punch to his chest as atonement. The reappearance of Baxter forces Henry to revisit these feelings of guilt and the promise of help that he made to Baxter. Specifically, the guilt he feels towards Baxter begins to resemble the pattern of guilt and unattainable atonement which he feels for his mother. This growing relationship is further explored in the consideration of consequences which concludes the novel.

The end of the novel addresses the unforeseen consequences of Henry's response to Baxter. Because of Henry's brash actions earlier in the day, a mentally unstable man has now invaded his home and is threatening Henry's family. It is only when the event is underway that Perowne finally understands the role he has played in this sequence of events: "Why could he not see that it's dangerous to humble a man as emotionally liable as Baxter? He used or misused his authority to avoid one crisis, and his actions have steered him into another, far worse. The responsibility is his" (219). The reason why Henry couldn't anticipate Baxter's reaction was because of the remote and unsympathetic perspective he maintained during their initial encounter. In his attempts to protect himself from Baxter's pitiful case, and also in his attempt to manipulate Baxter, Henry was blinded to the potential danger he was creating. His careless attitude has created this notion of responsibility within him which is comparable to the responsibility he feels for his mother. His daughter, Daisy, is the one who makes the connection between consequences and responsibility earlier in the novel.

During a rare fight, Daisy accuses her father of refusing to have an opinion on the Iraq war. Her accusation more broadly relates to the relationship between responsibility and consequences. She says, "If you think that's a good idea, fine, say so, make the argument, but don't hedge your bets. Are we sending the troops or not? It's happening now. And making guesses about the future is what you do sometimes when you make a moral choice. It's called thinking through the consequences" (193). Daisy does not define a decision as an action, but as a moral choice. As guilt arises from the transgression of a moral boundary, making a moral decision creates an opportunity for guilt as it is the creation of that boundary. It makes Henry vulnerable in a sense, something he seeks to avoid. Her accusation reveals how easy it is to remain ambivalent about an event that is so distant from yourself. Even though the war will clearly have an impact on Henry's life, he has not felt that it was imperative to make a choice and so he hasn't.

In the same way Henry is reluctant to sympathize with “distant people” he also seems to want to avoid creating any connection with this issue of war. In response to the earlier plane crash he said: “Whatever the passengers' destination, whether they are frightened and safe, or dead, they will have arrived by now” (18). His emotional distance allows him to view their fate, the consequence of the plane crash, as separate from himself; at the time he made no moral decision about the plane crash and so the consequences and whether they might have made him vulnerable to guilt are of no consequence to him. Henry is trying to mimic his immediate response to the plane crash in his stance on the Iraq war, but Daisy refuses him this distance and calls into question his entire mode of thinking.

The earlier plane crash prompts Henry to remember the thought experiment of Schrödinger's cat. The conditions of the experiment are that there is a cat in a box which may have been killed by the release of a poison, but there is no way to know if the cat is alive or dead until the box has been opened. The more theoretical implications of the thought experiment is to point out that multiple, contradicting truths can exist simultaneously in the unexamined future because without anyone to witness the result there is an equal likelihood of both outcomes. Henry, however, think this thought experiment is pointless: “To Henry it seems beyond the requirements of proof: a result, a consequence, exists separately in the world, independent of himself, known to others, awaiting his discovery. What then collapses will be his own ignorance. Whatever the score, it is already chalked up” (18). Henry sees the experiment as pointless because he views himself as having no effect on the ultimate outcome – the consequence – as long as he remains emotionally remote. Daisy's point is that there are certain things about which it is impossible to stay remote without a detrimental effect to yourself, in this case the unexpected reappearance of Baxter.

The point of Henry's emotional distance is so that he remains as unaffected by these remote situations as they are by any reaction he would have. Henry allows himself to be vulnerable to the emotional impact of the plane crash and the repeated new of it. This vulnerability is ultimately let down

as the story collapses, there was no scandal or death to make it a successful news story. Although he cannot be responsible for the plane crash in the same way that he is responsible for his mother, he does have a possessive attitude towards the new story itself which is then let down by the failure of the story. Henry's reaction to Baxter transforms over the course of the novel, changing from his remote attitude reserved for the events and people which are impositions on his sympathies to a complex attitude that more closely resembles his attitude towards his mother. The final events of the novel seem to be Perowne's efforts to simplify his relationship with Baxter, but the novel's ending leaves the reader to question if he has accomplished this goal.

Baxter is eventually physically overcome by Perowne and his son, but in the process he falls down a flight of stairs, severely injuring his head. Henry immediately begins to help him while an ambulance is called. After reconvening with his family, Perowne receives a call from the hospital asking him to come and operate on a new patient with a head injury. He knows from the description of the the patient's wounds that it is Baxter, but, despite his awareness of the moral complications of the surgery, Perowne agrees to operate on Baxter.

Baxter has been a disruption in Perowne's perfectly planned Saturday, in some ways even more disruptive than the plane crash. Although Perowne was emotionally disconnected from plane crash, the plane itself was completely removed from his sphere of influence. His remoteness led to his inaction which later causes him guilt. The plane, however, is never positively or negatively affected by his inaction. In this particular case Henry's belief proves true, the consequences do exist separate from himself (18). Baxter is a more complex problem though. His invasion of Henry's home is a direct contradiction of Henry's belief about consequences; even Henry admits that the situation he finds himself in is his responsibility (219). His decision to do the surgery is then a continuation of this responsibility and his first attempt at atonement; he feels he is responsible for Baxter's life and that it is

necessary for him to save him.

There surgery that Henry successfully performs on Baxter is a foil to their disastrous first and second encounters. The hospital is a space in which Henry maintains complete control. It is in this environment that Henry had desired to encounter Baxter almost immediately after he suspected that he had done something wrong in their first confrontation (104). When he arrives at the hospital he is immediately relaxed because he is at last in an environment where he is in complete control. “Though things sometimes go wrong, he can control outcomes here, he has resources, controlled conditions” (253). This surgery allows him to have the power over Baxter that he has desired and attempted to attain in each of their encounters. It is a superficial control, though, that relies on anesthesia and the reduction of Baxter under the sheet to simply a “patch of skin:” “Once a patient is draped up, the sense of a personality, an individual in the theatre, disappears. Such is the power of the visual sense. All that remains is a little patch of head, the field of operation” (255). Baxter has become an inert body devoid of personality and threat, but also the challenge he posed to Henry. The surgery is technically successful, but Henry's feelings remain unresolved afterward and seem more confused and convoluted than they were originally.

Henry's feelings following the surgery are initially similar to the euphoric feelings he experiences during the opening of the novel: “He's been delivered into a pure present, free of the weight of the past or any anxieties about the future ... He feels calm, and spacious, fully qualified to exist. It's a feeling of clarified emptiness, or deep, muted joy” (266). Again his profound happiness stems from a complete dissociation from all memories and worries. The return to this euphoric state might indicate that Henry is once again “unencumbered,” but if that is so then the state is fleeting. The surgery is revealed to only be a temporary solution to the feelings of guilt and responsibility Perowne feels towards Baxter, further strengthening the comparison between his relationships with Baxter and

his mother.

In an attempt to analyze his feelings towards Baxter, Henry visits him after the surgery while Baxter is still unconscious. He is particularly bothered by the conflicting nature of his desires:

He's alive to too many contradictory impulses. His thoughts have assumed a sinuous, snaking quality, driven by some undulating power that's making space in the long room ripple ... Feelings have become in this respect like light itself – wavelike ... He needs to stay here and, in his usual manner, break them down into their components ... only then will he know what to do, what's right (271).

Henry is reduced to taking Baxter's pulse, a familiar action, to help clarify his thoughts. As the moment extends Henry realizes that he is effectively “holding Baxter's hand” (271). This moment is representative of the final breakdown of his emotional barrier between him and Baxter. This moment provides the gateway for the overwhelming number of emotions that Henry experiences at the end of the novel. There is a surge of sorts as the emotions rush to overwhelm him.

In the final pages of the novel Henry has shrunk from feeling magnanimous to feeling feeble in the face of the future. The happiness he felt after the surgery has faded and instead he's become consumed by thoughts of death and how little we really control. “All he feels now is fear. He's weak and ignorant, scared of the way consequences of an action leap away from your control and breed new events, new consequences, until you're led to a place you never dreamed of and would never choose – a knife at the throat” (287). Henry has returned to the world outside of his “theatre” and has become almost paralyzed at his window at the thought of all that is beyond his control. His refusal to consider possible consequences has culminated in a fear of consequences – a fear so penetrating that it would make action impossible. Baxter's invasion seems to have changed Henry completely. Before he was detached from the moral implications of his actions, resolving them only afterward by indulging in a self-serving guilt. Now he is overcome by the fear of consequences.

Henry claims that his decision not to prosecute Baxter and to instead help him to receive the best care possible provides an anchor for him to combat his fear of consequences, but this doesn't seem to anchor him so much as revive the continued questions Henry has about the roles of victim and criminal and how they apply to him and Baxter: "Is this forgiveness? Probably not, he doesn't know, and he's not the one to be granting it anyway. Or is he the one seeking forgiveness? He's responsible, after all" (288). Although his relationship with Baxter did seem to be evolving into something resembling his relationship with his mother, it has actually become more complex. Perowne feels definitive guilt about his treatment of his mother, this inspires his benevolent manipulation of her and his sympathetic commitment to her. Henry is unsure as to who is guilty between him and Baxter. He doesn't know if he has forgiven Baxter by saving his life, if he needed to forgive Baxter in the first place, or if he is even the person who should forgive Baxter. This culminates in Henry's vision of a relationship which is persistent and manipulative, but without the sympathetic nature that justifies his relationship with his mother: "By saving his life in the operating theatre, Henry also committed Baxter to his torture. Revenge enough. And here is one area where Henry can exercise authority and shape events. He knows how the system works – the difference between good and bad care is near-infinite" (288). Henry has undergone a profound change by the end of the novel. Baxter has broken down Henry's barriers against sympathy and has as a consequence been saved by Henry. This is an act that is contradictory in itself though, it is both profoundly sympathetic to save a man's life and profoundly cruel to save Baxter's. Henry was fully aware of Baxter's disease and the type of quickly degenerating life that Baxter would face if he saved, and yet he still did without ever knowing whether he did it out of sympathy or revenge. In this final act Henry has embraced the challenge set before him by Daisy, to make a decision without knowing the outcomes. The ending of the novel is an example of the contradictory nature of the Schrödinger experiment which Henry previously eschewed; Henry is at once both benevolent and vengeful.

Following that monumental change Henry simply sinks into “oblivion” a word which is reminiscent from his “unencumbered state” that began his day: “This time there'll be no trouble falling towards oblivion, there's nothing can stop him now” (289). The similarity between the end of the novel and the beginning calls to mind Henry's description of an aria, specifically the aria he listens to while operating on Baxter. “The last exultant chords fade away, a few seconds' silence, the Aria returns, identical on the page, but changed by all the variations that have come before” (262). As sleep “[conveys] him into Sunday,” the reader is left to wonder how significantly Perowne has been affected by this Saturday (289). Despite his significant changes, he seems to have ended it just as he begun. McEwan provides no obvious answer to this question though; the reader's knowledge is restricted to Saturday.

Guilt and control are two themes that are a continuation from Ian McEwan's preceding novel, *Atonement*. In *Atonement*, the author figure, Briony, asks:

How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside of her. In her imagination she has set the limits and terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all (350-351).

McEwan's themes in *Saturday* appear to be a continuation and development of this conundrum. Despite the strong connections that exist between *Saturday* and *Atonement*, there hasn't been any scholarship addressing the presence of these themes withing *Saturday*.

Perowne, similar to Briony, is also described as a god a moments during this novel, although always as “a god” not as “God.” One of the most interesting descriptions of Henry is the image looking down from his window over the square below. “He not only watches them, but watches over them,

supervising their progress with the remote possessiveness of a god” (12). This description of him as a “remote possessive god” happens early on in the novel, allowing it to shape and influence the reader's understanding of Henry. Henry shares many of the typical characteristics of a god. His remoteness at times seems almost inhuman; he describes the people below him in the square as “hot little biological engines with bipedal skills suited to any terrain, endowed with innumerable branching neural networks sunk deep in a knob of bone casing, buried fibres, warm filaments, with their invisible glow of consciousness” (12). He doesn't focus on these people as a whole, but observes them as if he has a cross-section of their bodies and a microscope. The strong scientific element to his analysis of these people makes him seem both physically and emotionally removed from them; there is no element of human sympathy in his thoughts. This god-like description of Henry is also directly connected to his job as a surgeon. He describes himself descending from the operating room with the all-important knowledge of the results of the surgery. “Henry can't resist the urgency of his cases, or deny the egotistical joy in his own skills, or the pleasure he still takes in the relief of the relatives when he comes down from the operating room like a god, an angel with the glad tiding – life, not death” (23). He takes pleasure in the reliance that others have on him and the broad effects of his own abilities.

To answer Briony's question through Henry's experiences, it seems that a god is able to absolve himself of guilt even if he can't atone for it, but that only works sometimes. In cases such as his mother and Baxter, Henry like Briony is faced with an unattainable atonement. The key difference is that Henry's inability to atone results specifically because he is not all powerful, as Briony is. He cannot restore his mother's sanity so that he can apologize to her and he cannot absolve himself of the responsibility he feels towards Baxter. Their incurable brain diseases remain incurable, even for a renowned neurosurgeon. In this way Henry is fallible in a way that Briony never is. He too cannot achieve atonement, but for different reasons. It is because of this fallibility that McEwan differentiates between Briony as “God” and Henry as “a god.” Henry seems closer to the ancient Greek and Roman

gods; he is disconnected from human society, but still retains human flaws.

Henry's mantra throughout the novel is the phrase: "There's a grandeur in this view of life" (263). Henry does not seem grand, however, as the novel comes to a close. He is now infinitely bound to Baxter, in a relationship which is both revenge and sympathy. As readers we are meant to be critical of Henry insistence on guilt and remoteness as solutions to his problems of sympathy. While he is in some ways effective, it remains deeply problematized. McEwan does propose an alternative reaction though in his inclusion of the poem "Dover Beach." The final stanza of the poem is:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! For the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night (Matthew Arnold, 29-37).

McEwan includes this poem to remind us that sympathy is really all we can rely on in this world. The fears and uncertainties that Henry faced are also faced by the narrator of the poem. He does not respond with remoteness but insists, "love, let us be true" – the answer McEwan intends for us to see.

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