

## Original Paper

# On Violence Writing in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*

Jingyi He<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

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### Abstract

*Ian McEwan is one of the most preeminent contemporary British writers. His masterpiece Saturday is longlisted for the 2005 Booker Prize. Revolving around the protagonist Perowne's one-day life, the novel portrays a realistic picture of British society after the "9·11" terrorist attack. So far, scholars have interpreted Saturday from the perspective of space, trauma, intertextuality, culture, and ethics, while few studies have touched upon the violence writing in this novel. Therefore, this paper will explore the manifestations and roots of direct, structural and cultural violence in Saturday based on Johan Galtung's violence triangle theory. The study of violence writing in the novel can reveal not only hidden violence problems in British society but also McEwan's appeal for a harmonious society. Meanwhile, the solution to violence issues McEwan provides in the novel is also instructive for modern people to cope with violence dilemmas.*

### Keywords

*Ian McEwan, Saturday, Johan Galtung, violence*

### 1. Ian McEwan and *Saturday*

Ian McEwan (1948-) is a brilliant British writer and is acclaimed as "the 50 greatest British writers since 1945" by *Times* in 2008. Violence, love, goodness, and evil are always his subject matter. *Saturday*, his ninth novel, is no exception. In the novel, McEwan turns his attention to violence issues once again. *Saturday* discloses the hidden violence problems in British society after the "9·11" terrorist attack through the presentation of the protagonist's one-day life. The novel's background is set in London on February 15th, 2003. The protagonists are Henry Perowne, his daughter Daisy, his father-in-law John and the street thug Baxter. The storyline centers around Perowne's one-day experience in London. The main plot is Perowne's two confrontations with Baxter. More specifically, the two confrontations are the car accident between Perowne and Baxter in the daytime and Baxter's revenge on Perowne after the confrontations that night. As an urban flaneur, Perowne's life experience within 24 hours reflects the true social condition of England after the "9·11" terrorist attack.

Since its publication in 2005, *Saturday* has attracted a lot of attention at home and abroad. Scholars have studied the work from various perspectives. Generally speaking, scholars tend to interpret the novel from the perspective of space, trauma, intertextuality, culture, and ethics.

First of all, space is the most discussed angle among scholars. In “Narrative Space in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*”, Alenka Koron employs Marie-Laura Ryan’s categorization of space to interpret the novel and concludes that “McEwan promotes the conception of space that became prominent within the spatial turn in postmodern humanities” (p. 359). Laura Colombino notes in “The Body, the City, the Global: Spaces of Catastrophe in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*” that the novel “engages with catastrophic imaginaries and social anxieties by illuminating the entanglement of the spaces of terror with the bodily” (p. 1). Though the focus of these studies is space, they all give a glimpse of the violence phenomenon in the novel, which provides a basis for this paper.

Besides, scholars also explore *Saturday* from the perspective of trauma. In “Sudden Awakening: Traumatic Narrative in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*”, Wang Taohua and Li Yaqing analyze individual trauma, collective trauma and the recovery from trauma in the novel. They point out that the novel reveals “McEwan’s concern over history and deep thoughts on the topic of trauma” (p. 43). The trauma study is meaningful in that it not only delves into the psychology of the protagonist but also provides a solution to the trauma faced by modern humanity.

In addition, Starck Lindsay concentrates on the intertextuality between *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Saturday*, she argues that “the juxtaposition of Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* with Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* demonstrates how one’s experience of a text is doubled and amplified through repetition and remembering” (p. 328). Moreover, Tammy Amiel Houser analyzes the ethics embodied in the novel. In “The Ethics of Otherness in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*”, she argues that by subverting the liberal-individualistic ideology, McEwan is in favor of a radical notion of responsibility towards the different Other (p. 131).

Last but not least, scholars also pay close attention to the confrontation and integration of science and literature in *Saturday* as represented by Perowne and his daughter Daisy respectively. In “Revisiting C.P. Snow: Two cultures in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*”, Shang Biwu notes that “McEwan revisits C.P. Snow and explores the possibility of complementarity of two cultures, despite their seemingly exclusiveness” (p. 43). His exploration helps reveal the profound connotations about culture in the novel.

To sum up, though scholars from home and abroad have studied this novel from different perspectives, there are some spaces left for the study of violence writing. To make up for the deficiency, this paper will explore the violence writing of the novel through the analysis of direct violence, structural violence and cultural violence.

## 2. Johan Galtung’s Violence Triangle Theory

Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung is famous for his philosophy of peace and is internationally recognized as “the father of peace studies”. In 1969, Galtung first distinguished between direct violence

and structural violence in “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research”. He notes that if there is a sender, an actor who intends the consequences of violence, then it is direct violence; if not, it is structural violence (Galtung, p. 2). In other words, direct violence is intentional and has real perpetrators, while structural violence does not.

Direct violence is obvious. It includes threats, rape, murder, war, genocide, psychological abuse, and other intentional behaviors which may cause physical or mental harm to victims (Ruolan, p. 98). Structure violence is less obvious. It comes from “the social structure itself—between humans, between sets of humans (societies), between sets of societies (alliances, regions) in the world” (Galtung, p. 2). That is to say, structural violence is built into the social system and manifests in unequal relations.

Later in 1970, Galtung added cultural violence into his classification of violence in “Cultural Violence”. At this point, Galtung’s direct-structural-cultural violence triangle took shape. According to Galtung, cultural violence refers to “those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) — that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence” (Galtung, p. 196). It means that cultural violence is the prevailing attitude and belief that makes direct and structural violence justified.

In the wake of the discussion mentioned above, the three kinds of violence are interdependent. Cultural violence preaches, teaches, admonishes, eggs on, and dulls us into seeing exploitation and/or repression caused by structural violence as normal and natural or not seeing them at all (Galtung, p. 200). “Then come the eruptions, the efforts to use direct violence to get out of the structural iron cage (Galtung, p. 200)”. Therefore, there is “a causal flow from cultural via structural to direct violence” (Galtung, p. 200). This indicates that direct, structural and cultural violence are interrelated.

McEwan’s *Saturday* is stuffed with direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence which echoes Galtung’s Violence Triangle Theory. Therefore, employing Galtung’s violence theory, this paper explores the violence issues in McEwan’s *Saturday*, hoping to clarify the manifestations and roots of violence in the novel and find solutions to cope with this threat.

### 3. Direct Violence in *Saturday*

Galtung notes that direct violence can be “divided into verbal and physical, and violence harming the body, mind or spirit. All combinations leave behind traumas that may carry violence over time” (p. 31). In *Saturday*, direct violence mainly manifests in Perowne’s verbal violence towards Baxter and Baxter’s physical violence towards Perowne and Perowne’s family members. This part will delve into the manifestation of verbal and physical violence and analyze the causes of these violent phenomena.

Perowne’s verbal violence towards Baxter is reflected in their car accident. Perowne establishes a subject position in their confrontation by holding discourse power in his relationship with Baxter. Baxter gives Perowne a blow in the heart after the accident because Perowne refuses Baxter’s extortion. To get rid of Baxter’s physical violence, Perowne cheats Baxter that he knows a treatment plan that could cure

Baxter's incurable Huntington's disease. Lured by the hope of curing, Baxter becomes less hostile to Perowne.

Seizing the discourse power, Perowne exercises verbal violence on Baxter indifferently and ruthlessly. Considering little on Baxter's dignity, Perowne directly tells Baxter and Baxter's friends that "your father had it. Now you got it too" (McEwan, p. 68). It means that Baxter has inherited Huntington's disease from his father. Then, Perowne continues to bombard Baxter with questions like "I'm a doctor. Has someone explained to you what's going to happen? Do you want me to tell you what I think your problem might be?" and "what has your doctor told you?" (McEwan, p. 68, p. 70). On the surface, Perowne is performing a doctor's duty to inquire about a patient's condition. Whereas the truth is Perowne is depriving Baxter's discourse right, making Baxter flummoxed and flustered. As Li Juhua points out Perowne is cheating and disciplining Baxter in the name of humanism (p. 42). In other words, Perowne is exercising intentional verbal violence on Baxter, harming Baxter's dignity mercilessly.

As for the cause of Perowne's verbal violence, the fear of being beaten by Baxter certainly comes first. However, the deeper cause is Perowne's worship of scientific and technological rationality. To be specific, as a doctor, the belief in science and rationality makes Perowne have little humanitarian spirit, and he has lost the ability to empathize with others due to years of clinical experience. Thus, he keeps asking Baxter questions with no compassion.

In *Saturday*, Baxter commits two physical violence. One is the blow he gives to Perowne in the car accident as mentioned above. Baxter's Huntington's disease is the main reason why he loses control in this confrontation. As Perowne analyzed and diagnosed, "poor self-control, emotional lability, and explosive temper" are all symptoms of the disease (McEwan, p. 66). This indicates that Baxter's physical violence is caused by the disease.

Baxter's the other physical violence manifests in his intrusion into Perowne's house at night. In this confrontation, he threatens Perowne's wife with a knife and attempts to affront Perowne's daughter. In this intrusion event, Perowne's verbal violence is the main cause though Baxter's Huntington's disease is still a factor. Exposing Baxter's disease in front of his friends, Perowne damages Baxter's self-esteem and dignity. As Perowne's son Theo evaluates Perowne's behavior and attitude towards Baxter, "You humiliated him. You should watch that" (McEwan, p. 106). Theo knows that "the street guys can be proud" (McEwan, p. 106). However, Perowne doesn't. Thus, he hurts Baxter fearlessly, which compels Baxter to take revenge. As Geng Xiao notes, counterviolence is the only way Baxter could employ to save his dignity because he is a member of the lower class (p. 37).

It is worth noticing that Baxter's counterviolence also brings Perowne's counterviolence. At last, Perowne and Theo subdue Baxter by flinging Baxter down the stairs, which throws Baxter into a coma. Here appears a vicious circle of violence. Perowne's verbal violence leads to Baxter's counterviolence. At the same time, Baxter's counterviolence also brings about Perowne's counterviolence. It is conceivable that if Perowne didn't give up his hatred and had surgery for Baxter in person at last. This

vicious circle of violence and counterviolence may not be broken. Hence, McEwan shows readers that violence may bring violence. McEwan not only opposes violence but also disapproves of counterviolence. In conclusion, Perowne's verbal violence stems from his rationality. Baxter's physical violence is rooted in his Huntington's disease and Perowne's verbal violence. And what McEwan calls for is a harmonious and friendly interpersonal relationship.

#### 4. Structural Violence in *Saturday*

According to Galtung, "structural violence divides into political, repressive and economic, exploitative; supported by structural penetration, segmentation, fragmentation and marginalization" (p. 31). This part will deep into the structural violence in *Saturday*, specifically political repression and patriarchal oppression, and explore the roots of them.

In *Saturday*, the ruling class represses the British public's political will by controlling media, thus marginalizing the British public. Against the backdrop of the 9/11 terrorist attack, British people are anxious about their safety and are fear of war. Facing the impending Iraq War, the British public held protest marches to express their wish for peace. The Anti-Iraq War Demonstration described in the novel is the "largest gathering of humanity in the history of the islands" (McEwan, p. 87).

However, there is little report of the anti-war movement on TV and radio. Reports are always the government's preparation for the Iraq war like "there's the Kuwait-Iraq border, and military trucks moving in convoy along a desert road, and our lads kipping down by the tracks of their tanks" and "an officer, barely in his twenties, is standing outside his tent pointing with a stick at a map on an easel" (McEwan, p. 122).

The political repression in *Saturday* roots in social structure. It can be seen that there is a sharp contrast between the British public's will and the British government's will. Whereas what the mass media is reporting aligns with the government's will. Therefore, the media becomes a ruling tool, propagandizing the ruling class's political will. The ruling class holds more discourse power in national affairs and the public arena, thus marginalizing the public's will. Galtung mentions that structural violence "comes from the social structure itself" (p. 2). Thus, the political repression in *Saturday* belongs to structural violence. In *Saturday*, patriarchal suppression mainly embodies in Perowne's daughter Daisy and her grandpa John. As the elder and first literature teacher of Daisy, John always attempts to impose his male authority upon Daisy. When Daisy's poem wins the Newdigate prize, there is a confrontation between John and Daisy. John doesn't praise Daisy for her achievement. On the contrary, John belittles Daisy's achievements and thinks lightly of Daisy's poem. He comments Daisy's poem as "ill-advised and not the sort of thing that generally won the Newdigate" (McEwan, p. 94). And he tells Daisy his comments as though "she must know it already and was bound to agree" (McEwan, p. 94). Taking advantage of male authority, he intends to impose his literary taste on Daisy. Facing John's oppression, Daisy responds with silence. However, Daisy's silence doesn't satisfy John. "Encouraged by his granddaughter's silence, John went on a roll,

warming to his own authority, stupidly affectionate in his manner” (McEwan, p. 94). John keeps expressing his criticism of the poem.

John’s negation of Daisy’s poem reflects the patriarchal oppression of women. Women’s talents are denied by arrogant men. Correspondingly, female literature is always marginalized compared with male literature. The root of the inferior position of female and female literature is the social structure that gives males the privilege to dominate society. Consequently, John’s patriarchal suppression of Daisy belongs to structural violence.

In a nutshell, both the British government’s political repression of the public and John’s patriarchal suppression of Daisy roots in social structure. Thus, the two types of violence are structural violence. Through the presentation of structural violence, McEwan is appealing for an equal society, free of repression and oppression.

### 5. Cultural Violence in *Saturday*

Galtung emphasizes that “the study of cultural violence highlights how the act of direct violence and the fact of structural violence are legitimized and thus rendered acceptable in society” (Galtung, p. 292). He further points out that cultural violence works in two ways. One is by changing the moral color of an act from wrong to right or at least to acceptable; another way is by making reality opaque, so that we do not see the violent act or fact, or at least not as violent (Galtung, p. 292). Thus, this part will probe into the cultural violence represented by extreme scientism and individualism in *Saturday* and explore how they work.

In *Saturday*, science is represented by the neurosurgeon Perowne. “He advocates science and hates literature. This kind of extreme scientism extends from Perowne’s career to his daily life. He reads for his profession rather than for fun. For fifteen years he barely touched a non-medical book at all” (McEwan, p. 10). He submits to his daughter’s reading lists of literature only because “they’re his means of remaining in touch as she grows away from her family into unknowable womanhood in a suburb of Paris (McEwan, p. 10).”

Perowne’s extreme scientism leads to his verbal violence on Baxter opaque. When Perowne keeps asking Baxter about Huntington’s disease, he is acting verbal violence as mentioned in the third part. As Shang Biwu argues the real intention of Perowne is to control Baxter through medical knowledge and to disgrace Baxter in front of his friends (p. 41). Medical science provides a protective barrier for Perowne’s verbal violence, beautifying it as a doctor’s ordinary inquiring about a patient’s condition. As a result, cultural violence represented by Perowne’s scientism successfully justifies his verbal violence on Baxter.

Besides, Perowne’s extreme scientism also becomes a justification for his physical violence. In his second confrontation with Baxter, Perowne and his son push Baxter down the stairs, which is a manifestation of immoral physical violence. However, Perowne covers up his immoral behavior with the pretext that Baxter will lose control because of Huntington’s disease if not conquered by violence. Hence, Perowne’s

physical violence toward Baxter is justified by medical science which is the representation of cultural violence.

In *Saturday*, cultural violence also takes the form of extreme individualism, which is embodied by the British ruling class and John. The British ruling class's individualism mainly manifests in their manipulation of media to propagandize their own political will as mentioned in the fourth part. Individualism is entrenched in the ruling class, thus they manipulate national affairs according to their own will, ignoring the voice of the public.

In addition, John's patriarchal suppression of Daisy is also a kind of individualism. When commenting on Daisy's poem, the deep-rooted individualism makes John self-centered. He only cares about his criticism and evaluation of the poem, neglecting Daisy's dignity and feeling. It can be seen that the structural violence of political repression and patriarchal suppression derives from the cultural violence of individualism. That is to say, the Western culture of individualism becomes the soil of structural violence.

To wrap up, extreme scientism and individualism are the manifestation of cultural violence in *Saturday*. By exposing cultural violence, McEwan expresses his appeal for humanism and love in society.

## 6. Conclusion

Against the backdrop of the "9·11" terrorist attack, *Saturday* exposes the violence problems in British society, including direct violence, structural violence and cultural violence. Through the exposure of violence problems, McEwan conveys his ideal for a peaceful society free of violence. For McEwan, violence will bring violence so that a vicious circle may come into being. Meanwhile, McEwan also provides a solution to violence problems in society, which is also meaningful for modern people's violence dilemma. That is to cope with violence with empathy and love as manifested in Perowne's reconciliation with Baxter. As Colombino points out, the end of the novel suggests our biological predisposition to human empathy and implies that only a narrative of human interconnectedness can reconcile us with the world and ourselves (p. 17). Therefore, what McEwan envisions and appeals to is a world of equality, harmony and love.

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