The Constraints of the Social Class System on Human Agency in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, *Saturday*, and *The Child in Time*

MA Thesis Manon van Norden

Dr J.F. van Dijkhuizen

Second reader

Prof. Dr P.T.M.G. Liebregts

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“The Social Classes” Lovina Sylvia Chidi

I tried to measure my individual status
Against this worlds benchmark
Pondering on common open remarks
Researching from newspapers
And listening to the media
Learning from decades of history
Some of those events remain a mystery
Trying to unfold the logic
Of the class differences in today’s modern society

(First verse of the poem The Social Classes)
https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-social-classes/

Lovina Sylvia Chidi is a self-published poet and author.
In the first half of the 1990s, she was one of the leading Nigerian female chess players.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lovina_Sylvia_Chidi

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Introduction

In modern society, social class is still an important item. This is evidenced by the fact that many scholars in diverse scientific fields have studied the effects of social class. For instance, Anouk Kootstra who is a scholar in the field of social science argues that: “Social class presents itself in everything, once touched by it one can never get rid of it” (translation of “klasse zit in alles en als het je ooit geraakt heeft, raak je het niet zomaar meer kwijt”, (Kootstra 1)). Another example, a psychological study of social class by Michael Kraus and colleagues examined how class influences behaviour. This study asserts that one’s self-perception and one’s social interactions both depend on one’s materialistic circumstances and one’s comprehension of one’s social class (Kraus et al. 546). According to the researchers’ findings, “[p]reliminary evidence suggests that even in the constrained setting of a laboratory, social class signalling takes place” (Kraus et al. 562). In their view, the psychological study of social class could help to understand “how the material and rank-related conditions of social living influence how individuals perceive and relate to others” (Kraus et al. 563). Yet another example, a study into the economical basis of social class by John Goldthorpe and Abigail McKnight, argues that class positions are related to social relations in an employment situation (Goldthorpe and McKnight). Their research indicates that in contemporary British society “individuals in different classes do inhabit different economic worlds, as characterised by security, stability and prospects, then not only can their class positions be seen as constraining their life-chances in regard to mobility – as in a range of other respects – but, further, as shaping the life-choices that they make within such constraints, as, for example, their educational and occupational choices” (Goldthorpe and McKnight 1). In other words, both studies fit perfectly with Kootstra’s quote above; it seems indeed that social class is important in a diverse range of interaction.

The renowned English author Ian McEwan is also concerned with the effects of social class. In an article in *The Guardian*, Ian McEwan writes about “the layered linguistic density of English class”. According to him, his mother shaped his use of language, and consequently, his writing (“Mother tongue”). She had a “particular, timorous relationship with language” influenced by her awareness of the British social class system (“Mother tongue”). As McEwan noticed, “On one occasion a lady got in

who must have appeared to Rose [his mother] to have considerable social standing. They began to talk and I remember being surprised by the change in my mother's voice" ("Mother tongue"). Furthermore, McEwan detected an alteration in his mother's tone of voice, "[w]henever some gathering in the officers' mess obliged [her] to hold a conversation with the colonel's wife, the posh voice would creep in" ("Mother tongue"). Ian McEwan, as an author, is known for exploring challenging items and his narratives do not avoid disconcerting topics such as the constraining effects of the prevailing British social class system.

This thesis sets out to discover how the effects of social class on human agency are explored in Ian McEwan's novels: *Atonement*, *Saturday*, and *The Child in Time*. In these three novels, all characters are subject to the constraints of the social class system. Although researchers such as Dominic Head and David Malcolm have contributed to the debate around the social relevance of McEwan's novels, few researchers have analysed the three aforementioned novels in the light of social class and its effect on human agency. In the three aforementioned McEwan novels, the character's agency is hugely influenced by the social class system. This thesis will focus on the effects the constraints of their social class system have on the characters' agency. I am specifically interested in the interaction between social class and human agency. I will argue that all characters are subjected to these constraints. Moreover, the characters' agency is to a large extent dependent on the social class to which they belong.

The notion of human agency is an important theme in all three aforementioned McEwan novels therefore, I will shortly discuss this concept. Human agency is not an unproblematic term. In this thesis, it signifies a character's capacity to find a way of escape from larger social structures and dominant ideologies. In all three McEwan's novels, the protagonists are no heroes nor do the tales have a happy ending, thus reflecting a certain criticism on the class system that influences human agency. In *Atonement*, Briony Tallis is the main character. At the end, she is also presented as the author, and it turns out that the story is seen from her viewpoint. Although she tries to atone for a fault she made in her youth, she is not an unproblematic character, and she fails in her attempt to make things right. In *Saturday*, Henri Perowne is the protagonist, and Baxter its antagonist. The gap between

their worlds - that is a consequence of their social disparity - is the cause of their initial miscommunication and their later altercation. In *The Child in Time*, Stephen Lewis, the protagonist, has been plunged into depression because of the loss of his daughter who was under his care. Stephen finds some semblance of purpose in his role as a member of a child welfare committee, but his work for this committee turns out to be meaningless. In all three McEwan novels, the characters' agency is hugely influenced by larger social structures relating to the underlying social class system.

Inequality between characters due to the underlying social class system are at the core of all three novels analysed in this thesis. This inequality is related to the characters' opportunities in society, like their access to a formal higher education. Many scholars have researched the relation between education and the British social class system. According to Ron Thompson, "[i]nequality is a central theme in the sociology of education, and the relationship between educational attainment and social origins is the subject of an extensive academic literature" (Thompson 1). In his view, the social class system is the cause of a persistent inequality (20). Another scholar, Louise Archer, states that "[w]orking class children are less likely to follow routes into post-compulsory education" (5). Apparently, there is a clear connection between education and one's social class. This connection is also shown in the three McEwan novels examined in this thesis. In *Atonement*, Robbie Turner's university education does not benefit him because his working-class background proves to be more influential; in *Saturday* differences in education and social class are at the core of misunderstandings between the protagonist and the antagonist; and although in *The Child in Time* education is less obviously an important factor it is clear that wealth and education are related. In each of the novels, the protagonists' narratives and their deeply disturbing experiences are related to inequality in society. Furthermore, in each of the novels, the protagonists' narratives are placed against a wider story that underscores the inequality between the characters.

The first chapter of this thesis discusses *The Child in Time*. This is a different kind of novel than the two other novels that are examined in this thesis. *The Child in Time* is one of McEwan's early novels. In this novel, the first steps towards an exploration of social class can be found, but the focus on the relation between social class and human agency is not yet as clear as it is in the two other

novels. This novel is also interested in other forms of power. It examines how the fictional central government seeks to exercise extensive authority over its people. In *The Child in Time*, a form of nationalist ideology is presented via the quotations from the fictional 'Authorized Childcare Handbook' where many values are looked at through a special ideological prism. Furthermore, this novel examines society's attitude towards children and family. Next to this, the novel is interested in the gap between poor and rich. Moreover, in *The Child in Time* concerns with society are revealed throughout the novel. David Malcolm states that the novel demonstrates an overt concern with public history; "it is usually taken to be a critique of tendencies in the1980s British and, indeed, world politics" (Malcolm 90). The novel mainly focuses its critique on Margaret Thatcher's Britain. In the United Kingdom, the Prime Minister has great power. Thatcher was the first female Prime Minister of Britain therefore, she had great importance in contemporary British history. Moreover, the conservative economic and social policies of her government, and her long term in office as leader have hugely influenced British society (Jamie Gaskarth). *The Child in Time* often returns to themes inspired by this period. Next to this, this novel makes it easy to imagine how one's life can utterly change as something horrible suddenly occurs. In my analysis, I will show how concerns with society are an issue that is very much in the foreground. My analysis will also explore which influence the government's policy has on human agency. The narrative makes clear how human agency largely depends on material circumstances. My analysis of *The Child in Time* will focus on the privileged position that the characters belonging to the upper class have and how they benefit because of their wealth - even in extreme circumstances.

The second chapter of this thesis discusses *Atonement*. This novel deals with the deeply traumatising impact of the Second World War and the interaction between social class and human agency. One of the few scholars who have examined social class in *Atonement* is Ian Fraser. In Fraser's view, *Atonement* should be regarded as an examination "of class conflict in which the microcosms of English society are played out through characters in a country house shortly before the Second World War" (Fraser 465). Fraser argues that the character of Robbie Turner must be the exemplification of class and cultural dislocation. Robbie, "only son of a humble and of no known

father" (38) gets involved in the middle-class moral values of the upper-middle-class life. As he receives support from his patron, Jack Tallis, Robbie can attend grammar school and continues his education at Cambridge. My analysis of this novel will be concerned with the social disparity between the working-class characters on the one hand, and the upper-class characters on the other hand. Additionally, the chapter on *Atonement* will investigate the differences in these characters' ability to develop themselves considering their different backgrounds; an example is the difference between a gifted girl like Briony and a similarly gifted boy like Robbie.

The last chapter of this thesis discusses *Saturday*. In *Saturday*, the main narrative coincides with the British involvement in the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Despite mounting anti-war protests, British troops took part, together with their American allies, in a coalition invasion of Iraq. In her essay, "Performing innocence: Violence and the nation in Ian McEwan's *Saturday* and Sunjeev Sahota's *Ours Are the Streets*", Ana Maria Sánchez-Arce argues that the novel must be considered as a satire that questions the use of a rhetoric of innocence by the upper class. In my opinion, *Saturday* is not essentially a satire, but my reading will use this analysis of a rhetoric use of innocence by the upper class. A case in point, is the way the protagonist, Henry Perowne, communicates with the antagonist, Baxter. My analysis will show that *Saturday*, like *Atonement*, is concerned with the social disparity between the working class and the upper-class characters. However, in the former novel, this inequality is reversed to some extent. Whereas in *Atonement*, the upper class mostly has benefits because of their position, in *Saturday*, Henry Perowne becomes the victim of a crime, precisely because of his position. Nonetheless, the family is also saved from further violence thanks to their privileged circumstances.

My methodological approach will combine a close reading, in the light of relevant secondary literature, with the theoretical framework of cultural materialism as laid out by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield. To foreground how the relation between social class and human agency is pictured, I will use the technique of close textual analysis. In his scholarly work, *Readings: Acts of Close Reading in Literary Theory*, Julian Wolfreys argues that "there is no such thing as an innocent reading" (140). Therefore, reading always involves examining events from a certain perspective, and

choosing which aspects to ignore and which to highlight. Cultural materialism is concerned with the effect of a literary text, and whether such a text can provide a critical perspective (Sinfield). When analysing the above-mentioned novels, I will focus on the underlying class ideology that shapes the lives of the characters and is related to their social background. As Sinfield states, ideology is a concept that is produced by a society. An ideology also lays the base for "concepts and systems to explain who we are, who the others are, how the world works" (Sinfield, 32). The strength of an ideology is deeply rooted in its normality (Sinfield). This thesis includes a theoretical justification of the chosen methodological approach in the next chapter.

In this thesis, I will take part in the still ongoing scholarly debate on how best to interpret McEwan's novels. My analysis not only presents a close reading, but it will also provide some new observations on how these novels deal with the effect of social class on human agency. By close reading the three McEwan novels, I will demonstrate the fault lines and breaking points that are related to social class and human agency. Sinfield argues that textual analysis readily demonstrates "dissidence being incorporated" into existing structures (47). This means that to oppose a system automatically means to be involved in this system. I will foreground the elements in the works' communication and contextualising to analyse the relation between social class and human agency. My analysis will be focussed on how society's institutions and systems influence a character's human agency.

Theoretical justification

This thesis examines how Ian McEwan's prose fiction explores the British class system, and his reflection on this system, by analysing and discussing three of his novels (*Atonement, Saturday,* and *The Child in Time*) in the light of the literary theory of cultural materialism. I base my analysis on concepts as outlined in the theory of cultural materialism. As Sinfield is a well-known cultural materialist, according to Barry even the best-known (Barry 182), and he elaborates his theory in his study *Faultlines*, I mainly base my theoretical justification on this work, which he created "to epitomize a way of apprehending the strategic organisations of texts – both the modes by which they produce plausible stories and construct subjectivities, and the faultlines and breaking points through which they enable dissident reading" (Sinfield 9). Sinfield's idea of plausible stories refers to the "production of ideology […] that produces, makes plausible, concepts and systems to explain who we are, who others are, how the world works" (32). The term 'subjectivities' refers to competing stories or characters that deviate from the seemingly unified whole. Predominant ideology in society is never a unified whole, and in the end in the three mentioned McEwan novels, it fails all characters.

The theory of cultural materialism explores how material structures influence phenomena in cultural life. Peter Barry states that "the term 'cultural materialism' was made current in 1985 when it was used by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield […] as it was used as the subtitle of their edited collection of essays *Political Shakespeare*" (Barry 182). In this work's foreword Dollimore and Sinfield define the term 'cultural materialism' as a critical method with four core characteristics. These characteristics will be discussed later. First, I will discuss some of the central ideas which are crucial for this theory and, therefore, also for my thesis analysis.

One of the key questions that Sinfield explores in his literary criticism is: "If we come to consciousness within a language that is continuous with the power structures that sustain the social order, how can we conceive, let alone organize, resistance?" (35). The central question then becomes, how might a literary work be critically examined, even though the text seems to confirm the dominating structures in society because it is a product of this society. To clarify this dilemma, "it is

not unpromising to seek in literature our preoccupations with class, race, gender, and sexual orientations: it is likely that literary texts will address just such controversial aspects" (Sinfield 47). In the three McEwan novels, one of the controversial aspects that is addressed, is the way the class system imposes its ideology on the characters. The way the characters in the McEwan novels think and behave, is controlled by ideology, which is shaped by economic and social conditions. Sinfield explains that through this ideology individuals "explain who we are, who the others are, how the world works" (Sinfield 32). Individuals have been shaped by unspoken rules of an ideology and learn to live according to them (Sinfield). McEwan's novels reveal the underlying cultural attitudes of a society, that is depicted by economic and political ideologies.

Another main idea is that cultural materialists should pinpoint the "uneven and changing relations between economic, political, military, and cultural power" that the dominant ideologies of a system present "as harmonious and coherent" (Sinfield 9). In other words, one should search for contradictions in the dominant ideology. Therefore, in my analysis I will seek fault lines that propagate through the narratives. I will concentrate on the fault lines as moments in the text when the dominant ideology (of the social class system) comes under pressure, thus showing contradictions in this ideology. For that reason, I will focus on instances that undermine predominant views whilst revealing a dissident perspective. As Barry notes, "cultural materialism […] reveal[s] the politics of our own society" (Barry 184). A case in point that reveals the politics of British society is Robbie's downfall in *Atonement*. Briony's lies, or rather her tale based on her overheated fantasies about Robbie, are taken for granted by the authorities because her story mirrors the presumptions, assumptions, and prejudices of the British society that considers the lower classes inferior to the higher classes, and poverty secondary to wealth. The underlying cultural material, on which Briony founds her disinformation, is what Sinfield defines as "the politics of plausibility" (29). The conditions for plausibility are defined by the ideology of a dominant culture. Sinfield argues that these conditions are crucial because "[t]hey govern our understandings of the world and how to live in it, thereby seeming to define the scope of feasible political change" (32). In *Atonement*, the discourses of the higher classes are considered as the most plausible. Therefore, Robbie is convicted. Moreover, even though

Briony belongs to the upper middle class, her atonement cannot be published until after Paul's death because his position, wealth and influence outrank Briony's. The Marshalls "could ruin a publishing house with ease from their current accounts" (370). Consequently, Briony can only publish her atonement after the death of the Marshalls.

Yet another key issue that Sinfield discusses in *Faultlines* is his argument that although a dominant culture is difficult to subvert, dissident reading is a way to analyse other features, such as intrinsic oppositions within a system because however dominant a culture may be, it "is never a unified whole" (Smith 127). Bruce Smith argues that "[t]he "faultlines" of Sinfield's title are the cracks in the social edifice produced by these oppositional forces" (127). An example of such a fault line in *Saturday* can be found in the encounter between Henri Perowne and Baxter. When Henri and Baxter first meet, two different worlds collide, namely Perowne's upper-class- and Baxter's working-class world. McEwan's novels, as pieces of literature, can be interpreted as examining the interconnections between class and social, political, cultural, and economic circumstances. Through a structure of class differences, McEwan introduces unequal power relations as a general condition, most specifically through his main characters who all are affected by the ideology of the underlying class system. Ian McEwan's novels focus on political concerns by creating characters who are – to a certain extent (and some more than others) - alienated from this community.

As said before, cultural materialism provides a critical method with four core characteristics. I will discuss these characteristics regarding the relation to the aforementioned McEwan novels. The method used by cultural materialists includes historical context, theoretical method, political commitment, and textual analysis. Firstly, the historical context does mean that "cultural materialism […] studies the implication of literary texts in history" (Dollimore viii). Literary texts are related to the contexts of their production, "the political and economic system […] and to the particular institutions of cultural production" (Dollimore viii). The aim of the historical aspect of cultural materialism is not restricted to the historical circumstances in which a text is produced, but "allow[s] the literary text to recover 'its histories'" (Barry 183). In this case, "its histories" refer to the context of exploitation. To recover the histories of the three McEwan novels would involve relating these texts to

the ideology of the social class system prevailing at the time, but also to examine what the novels signify, how they do this because what and how depends on the cultural circumstances in which the narratives are situated (Dollimore). However, literary texts are also "timeless in the simple sense that they are clearly not limited by the historical circumstances in which they were produced" (Barry 182-3). All three McEwan novels signify the political, economical, and social conditions, and examine the paradigms of society. In this thesis, to uncover histories "would involve relating" (Barry 183) the McEwan novels to the phenomena of social class and the histories in which each novel is set in a broader context. The novels are placed in a context that transcends the tale of the characters. The narrative of *Atonement* is set in British society in the 1930s and interwoven in the broader context of the Second World War. *Saturday* limits its time frame to one specific Saturday, on which coordinated protests started across the world against the imminent Iraq War. The developments in *The Child in Time* take place against the background of tendencies in the 1980s British politics and "is usually taken to be a critique of [these] tendencies" (Malcolm 90).

Secondly, "the emphasis on *theoretical method* signifies the break with liberal humanism and the absorbing of the lessons structuralism, post-structuralism, and other approaches which have become prominent since the 1970's" (Barry 183). Cultural materialism focuses on the structure of a "series of seemingly unrelated incidents of situations which turn out to be intertwined" (Barry 189). For instance, in *Atonement*, the last chapter reveals that the narrative tries to amend Briony Tallis's youthful error. She falsely accused Robbie Turner which led to his downfall. Her misstep interrelates with the existing class society and its prevailing deep differentiations.

Thirdly, political commitment is found in the influence of Marxist and feminist perspectives (Barry). Cultural materialism reveals the politics of a society by analysing what is emphasised or suppressed. It foregrounds the structural elements in a literary work that show the context of exploitation in which the text is developed. The concept of exploitation includes structural forms of inequality in society's institutions and systems. A brief example might clarify this concept. In *The Child in Time*, Stephen Lewis, the main character, encounters some "licensed beggars" (2). This

suggests the idea that a society not only allows beggars, but more importantly even facilitates this way of living instead of trying to provide more humane solutions.

Lastly, textual analysis involves the technique of close reading. It is employed, as Barry notices, "especially to mark a break with the inherited tradition of close textual analysis within the framework of conservative cultural and social assumptions" (187). More specifically, Sinfield proposes a dissident reading that focuses on institutions such as political, economical, and social systems, as well as on the text, and that seeks to uncover contradictions and conflicts shimmering through in a literary text. As Sinfield puts it, "[c]ultural materialism seeks to discern the scope for dissident politics of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation, both within texts and in their roles in cultures" (9-10). McEwan's novels uncover the struggle of individuals against class expectations, society's political oppression of individuals, and how individual characters are affected by these class systems. In *Atonement*, Robbie's tale is an example of all three items. In *Saturday,* these items are less clear-cut because Henri Perowne's favoured position also puts his family in a difficult situation. In *The Child in Time*, the characters' personal experiences are interwoven with the social, political reality of the narrative, thus showing the structural powers that limit human agency.

Chapter 1 *The Child in Time*

While *Atonement* and *Saturday* are clearly dealing with the relation between social class and human agency, as I will discuss in the next two chapters, the topic of social class is less foregrounded in *The Child in Time*. Throughout *The Child in Time*, the narrative centres around the disappearance of Kate, the daughter of Stephen and Julie Lewis, and the effect this loss has on their lives. The little girl was kidnapped while shopping with her father. Kate's disappearance runs like a thread through the narrative and haunts the protagonist, as Ian McEwan himself puts it in an interview: "The lost child is the ghost that haunts us" (Groes interview 145). However, this is not the topic of this chapter. Instead, I will focus on the effect wealth has on the agency of the characters in *The Child in Time*. Although the loss of their daughter has a negative impact on the lives of Stephen and Julie Lewis, Stephen is presented as a person who has "a lot of money" (24), and the couple's wealth and upper-class position ensure that they can continue to live a life free of mundane, everyday stress and troubles such as providing a means of living and working from nine to five. Even though Kate's disappearance places an intolerable burden on the couple, their load is lightened because they do not have to be concerned about how to make a decent living. Therefore, the novel indicates how differences in wealth may affect human agency. Next to this, I will examine how this novel explores different forms of power, and more specifically, how this novel examines how the fictional central government exercises authority over its people which limits the individual's agency. Throughout the narrative, questions are raised about the fictional authorities, thus showing how government measures directly involve the lives of individuals.

Throughout the novel, the focalization of the narrative alternates and interacts therefore, two different perspectives are offered. One perspective takes shape in the form of quotations from the fictional 'Authorized Childcare Handbook' that shows how the fictional government presents its ideals of a nationalist ideology. The other point of view is focalized through the protagonist. Concerns with society are reflected in both angels. An interesting example can be found in the opening sentences of the novel, which offer a critique of the fictional government's policy, and that picture public transport as inadequate: "Subsidising public transport had long been associated in the mind of [the] Government

[…] with the denial of individual liberty. The various services collapsed twice a day at rush hour and it was quicker, Stephen found, to walk" (1). This example is particularly interesting because in the first sentence it is not clear whose perspective is offered. From the second sentence on, it becomes clear that the narrative is focalized through the eyes of Stephen. These sentences not only show how the government presents reductions on the public transport as a basic principle of the free market economy, but also reveals the crippling effect these measures have on the public's interests. In this way, these sentences indicate how government measures influence society at large, but also extend to the private sphere. For which reason, the measures have far-reaching consequences for people who cannot afford a car or a taxi, and for whom walking is not an option either. In this way, the contrast between poor and rich is touched upon.

The Child in Time does not only involve itself with the impact that wealth has on human agency, but also deliberately misleads the reader, for example in creating genre expectations which it then frustrates. As David Malcolm puts it, "the novel warns the reader against an easy complacency" (Malcolm 109). It seems to start as a crime story that conveys suggestions of child abuse: "Stephen remained as always, though barely consciously, on the watch for children, for a five-year-old girl" (1). These words evoke an image of a child abuser on the prowl for his next victim. This is reinforced when the narrative continues: "It was not principally a search, though it has once been an obsessive hunt, and for a long time too. […] Now it was a longing, a dry hunger" (2). However, the narrative unexpectedly shifts from a public terror (society's fear of paedophilia) to a private one (the family's loss of a child) as it becomes clear that the protagonist is searching for his daughter Kate. Through the opening scene, McEwan creates a suspense that recalls a crime story revolving around child abuse and intertwines the public and the personal. In doing so, the narrative immediately engages the reader, and puts the audience on the wrong foot in their perception of the protagonist and story, thus, inviting the reader to ask questions about society and to read closely.

In *The Child in Time* concerns with society are revealed throughout the novel. One scene among many which may be used as an example, is when Stephen walks along the streets of his city while he encounters some "licensed beggars" (2). In the United Kingdom, in 2003, the government

and charity organisations agreed to the concept of licensed begging. The idea was that collecting on the streets became prohibited unless the fundraiser had received a permit (Gideon Burrows). This draws on an old law in Scotland, passed in 1424, "which permitted sick and impotent persons, who were unable to earn a livelihood, to beg, and indeed enacted that they should have a licence for that purpose in the shape of a badge" (Paul Balfour 169). According to David Malcolm, "[t]he implied reader is intended to recognize [this] phenomenon [the protagonist's encounter with licensed beggars] as logical developments of British Government policy in the 1980s, especially that associated with the governments of Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990)" (Malcolm 96). Stephen's encounter with "a skinny pre-pubescent" (3) girl puts him in a quandary as "[h]e felt the usual ambivalence. To give money ensured the success of the Government programme. Not to give involved some determined facing away from private distress" (3). Stephen's position, in which he feels as if he can choose, functions as a contrast to the beggars' situation, and in this instance in particular the teenager girl, who depends on the charity of their fellow humans. This scene also expresses critique on a society that legitimises begging instead of providing political, social, and economic solutions for poverty.

Just as in *Saturday*, a car crash is an important event in the protagonist's life. In the aftermath, his reflections on the discrepancy between wealth and poverty incite character development. After the car accident, on his way to his friends' estate, Stephen has an encounter with a group of beggars which makes him reflect on his position:

> He felt guilty of a betrayal. Here was a pale man in a white silk shirt with his bottles of champagne, here were the gypsies at the gate. For years he had convinced himself he belonged at the heart with the rootless, that having money was a merry accident, that he could be back on the road any day with all his stuff in one bag. But time had fixed him in his place, he had become the sort who casts about for a policeman at the sight of the scruffy poor. (110).

Stephen becomes aware of the differences between his privileged position and the vulnerable position of the beggars. Stephen is described as wearing 'a white silk shirt' and carrying 'his bottles of champagne', while 'the sight of the scruffy poor' makes him seek for a policeman. Although '[f]or years he had convinced himself he belonged at the heart with the rootless', the accident that happened while he "was driving a hired car along a deserted minor road" (99) and ran into a lorry, and moreover, his confrontation with a group of beggars after the accident makes him reflect on his fortunate

position. As a result of the car accident, he "had stopped in the nearby market town to replace the champagne. […] He was not prepared for the group of beggars gathering by the entrance" (109). Initially, Stephen feels annoyed as he ponders his confrontation with the group of beggars: "By law, beggars were not even permitted to work in pairs. They were supposed to be on the move all the time, down certain authorised thoroughfares. They were certainly not supposed to be crowding round entrances like this, waiting to pester the public" (109). Despite his initial annoyance, Stephen comes to realise that "[h]e was on the other side now" (109). This confrontation with a group of beggars makes Stephen aware of the disparities in resources that actually exist in society between individuals, thus showing the fault lines as laid out by Sinfield.

Through the fictional 'Authorized Childcare Handbook' McEwan explores the social, economic, and social constraints that frame the lives of each character. Each chapter in *The Child in Time* starts with a prelude that is a quote taken from this handbook, published as the work of the Subcommittee on Reading and Writing, a part of the Prime Minister's Official Commission on Child Care. Stephen participates in this commission, which has been given the task of creating a handbook on childcare for the government. However, he discovers that this book has already been written with the intention to publish it as the result of the work by the committee. Hence, the handbook highlights the power relations between the government and its citizens since "[i]deology is produced everywhere and all the time in the social order, but some institutions – by definition, those that usually corroborate the prevailing power arrangements – are vastly more powerful than others" (Sinfield 33). In fact, in this case, there are intimations of fake participation and deception. As Dominic Head argues, in this narrative, private and public themes are effectively interwoven, "especially through the business of the 'Authorized Childcare Handbook', which draws in all the principal characters, and which reveals the collision of personal and political concerns" (Head, 73). Therefore, the action advances not only through the narrative, but is also framed by the quotations from this handbook that interact with the narrative.

The influence of the handbook in the fictional world of the novel is pictured as quite considerable, even though initially a scandal around this work seems to be surrounding the

government. After "[n]ews of a childcare handbook secretly commissioned by the Prime Minister's office broke in a single column on the second page of the only newspaper which did not actively support the Government" (197) was denied by the Prime Minister, "[o]ver the weekend a copy of a photocopy [of a childcare handbook secretly commissioned] made its way to the Leader of the Opposition" (197), and soon "papers were running the story" (197), and "[a]n emergency debate was demanded and granted but delayed for a week" (197). During this week "in the interest of open government and informed discussion, the Prime Minister ordered two thousand copies of the offending book to be printed and distributed to newspapers and other involved parties. […] The reviews the following morning were at least favourable, and otherwise ecstatic. […] 'The Book' was exemplary and should be made widely available" (198). The choice of words like 'favourable' and 'ecstatic clearly show how well the first release of the book is received. During the emergency debate in the House of Commons, the Prime Minister brings to the fore that "[i]t had been shown that there was deep concern among parents and educators about falling standards of behaviour and lack of civic responsibility among many elements of society, particularly the young. […] There was a call for a return to common sense, and the Government was being asked to take a lead. This it was doing […]" (199-200). The Prime Minister's speech is received by the House of Commons with "loyal shouting and foot stamping" (200). Clearly, the introduction of the handbook met enthusiastic approval.

The novel is structured around quotations from the fictional 'Authorized Childcare Handbook', thus stressing the fact that the characters' lives are also subject to overarching power structures. Furthermore, the handbook parallels the narrative. The first quote from the handbook seems to warn parents for false authorities: "[F]or those parents, for too many years misguided by the pallid relativism of self-appointed childcare experts "(1). This is remarkable because this handbook is presented as being written by government-appointed childcare experts. Moreover, while the handbook is presented as a result of the work of the Subcommittee on Reading and Writing, it was written without any involvement of this board. Yet another example that shows how the handbook serves as a tool for disseminating nationalist ideologies, can be found in another quotation from this handbook: "We could do worse than conclude, as have many before us, that from love and respect for home we

derive our deepest loyalties to nation" (72). This quote indicates that it is in the county's best interest that citizens are loyal to their nation. Via this handbook the government refers to an underlying ideology that involves people to be loyal to their country. For this reason, the handbook highlights how human agency is restricted by the government.

Another example of how the handbook shows an explicit ideology, namely a nationalist, economy-driven society, can be found in the passage: "More than coal, more even than nuclear power, children are our greatest resource" (228). One could argue that these words express a great trust in children. However, to connect the word 'resource' to children indicates an ideology driven by economical motives. This line of reading is further supported by another quotation from the handbook. It expresses the position that "[i]ncentives, after all, form the basis of our economic structure and necessarily shape our morality; there is no reason on earth why a well-behaved child should not have an ulterior motive" (133). These sentences stress the fact that the economic structure and morality are intertwined, just as, in the government's view, the economic structure and how to raise children are related. An ideology which the handbook expresses very explicitly. The quotes suggest that social attitudes towards children and childhood have an ideological dimension, in that, for example, they are intertwined with nationalist and economic concerns. This ideological dimension also influences the private lives of the characters.

The government's influence does not only involve society at large, but extends to the private sphere, and concerns the bringing up of children, as the government through the handbook attempts to disseminate standards and values, especially that are of vital importance to its view upon society:

> It was not always the case that a large minority comprising the weakest members of society wore special clothes, were freed from the routines of work and of many constraints on their behaviour and were able to devote much of their time to play. It should be remembered that childhood is not a natural occurrence. There was a time that children were treated like small adults. Childhood is an invention, a social construct, made possible by society as it increased in sophistication and resource. Above all, childhood is a privilege. (99)

The quote echoes what many historians have said about childhood for a long time. In fact, these sentences sum up in a nutshell the constraints and conditions to which all individuals in a society are subjected. Actually, with this wording, the government underlines that they have the power and that

they control the national resources. Therefore, it is the government's decision to give children the opportunity to play while they are young. Furthermore, this privilege strongly implies the government's ability to withdraw the support at any time. This passage shows how the government exercises its power. Moreover, this quotation indicates how the government seeks to extend its influence on the private sphere, but it also stresses the fact that being freed from the routines of work and of many constraints on one's behaviour and to have the opportunity to play is a privilege that is only possible when one has sufficient resources.

How political power is exercised comes to the fore in the figure of the Prime Minister. As Malcolm puts it, in *The Child in Time*, "[t]he figure of the prime minister looms large in sections of the novel" (Malcolm 96). Stephen meets the premier on two occasions. Both meetings between the protagonist and the Prime Minister highlight the well-to-do position Stephen holds. Moreover, they also underline the prevailing power relations in society. When the Prime Minister pays an unannounced visit to Stephen's committee and the members are asked whether they have any objections, there is "a stir of muffled no's around the table. Of course, there were no objections. Committee members were making small adjustments to dress, tucking in shirts, patting hair, fiddling with make-up. Colonel Tackle was putting his tweed jacket back on" (86). These sentences indicate the underlying assumptions about the public figure of the premier. The members clearly want to make a good impression, thus implying the respect they have for his function. This notion is reinforced during the introduction round because "[e]very member of the committee, however worldly-wise, was a little awed" (88). For Stephen, "[t]his was the nation's parent, after all, a repository of collective fantasy" (88). The use of the word 'parent' is noteworthy in the light of some important themes the narrative deals with, especially the view on parenthood that is expressed via the handbook. The influence the Prime Minister has on Stephen becomes clear "when the time came for Parmenter to announce his [Stephen's] name, he found himself bobbing and even smiling eagerly, like an attendant lord in a Shakespeare play" (88). The reference to Shakespeare evokes the idea of political power relations since this is one of the major themes in Shakespeare's plays. Furthermore, through this emphasis on the effect the Prime Minister has on the members of the committee, the narrative lifts a

veil on society's underlying assumptions about the inequality between the government's number one member and the committee's members. Therefore, this meeting shows how hierarchy is at the core of relations in society.

The second meeting between the protagonist and the Prime Minister illustrates how political power permeates even the private setting. When Stephen is just about to go out, he receives an unexpected phone call and "[a] woman's voice call[s] out with military precision, 'Movement here, wanting to talk to Mr Lewis.'" (203). These sentences point out to a binary opposition between power and powerlessness. The utterance of the words *military precision* and the brusque manner of the messenger both indicate the underlying assumptions about power. The woman continues and her instructions are terse and pointed. The unequal balance of power is reconfirmed when "[t]he line snapped silent while Stephen was demanding an explanation" (203). Even though Stephen is tempted to ignore the instructions, "curiosity kept him pacing in the hall" (203). Before the premier himself enters Stephen's flat, his house is overrun by subordinates. In addition to this, an unsolicited refurbishment of his flat is carried out by these associates without even asking Stephen's permission. Moreover, the invasion of Stephen's privacy takes place just because the premier wants information about Stephen's friend. It turns out that the Prime Minister wants "to communicate with Charles, in a personal way" (206). The premier's brief visit, for private purposes only, indicates the power that comes with the function, and that it can even be exercised in the private sphere. Furthermore, this meeting also shows the inequality between people.

One of the features in the novel that highlights the importance of one's social class comes to the fore in the inequality of opportunity. In this aspect, two characters in particular are important, namely the protagonist, and additionally, Stephen's friend, Charles Darke, a politician, and former editor, who can live an eccentric life because his high-ranking position and wealth allow him to do so. When Darke is introduced, his affluent position becomes clear: "The big house in Eaton Square was solidly established. […] so were the thick clean towels in the guest bedroom, the cleaning lady who came four hours every day" (29). Darke's regression into a simulated childhood as an escape from the pressures of his public life as a member of the Prime Minister's cabinet, shows his affluent position.

Like Stephen, Darke cannot cope with the pressure life imposes upon him. He suddenly disappears from public life, and he regresses into a childhood-like state, while being supported and protected by his upper-class position and wealth. When Stephen visits Darke's estate in the country, and "he [Stephen] was thirty feet away from [a] tree when a boy stepped out from behind it and stood and stared" (115). It takes a little while before Stephen recognises his friend because

> [h]e [Darke] was slighter and suppler in his movements. He had grown his hair forwards into a fringe and cut it short behind the ears. It was his wide open manner, the rapid speech and intent look, his unfettered, impulsive lurching, the way his feet and elbows flew out as they swung around a corner to take a second, even narrower path, the abandonment of the ritual and formality of adult greetings which suggested the ten-year-old. (116)

These sentences picture how Darke has chosen to live his life as if he was still a child. Darke could never have quit his working duties if he had not been in this position of wealth. He escapes the reality of everyday life through falling back on his wealth. If he had not had the means to support his way of living, he could have suffered the fate of the beggars that Stephen encountered. Therefore, Darke's privileged position highlights that people living in the same society do not have access to the same opportunities.

In *The Child in Time*, McEwan shows that no individual can escape the constraints that society imposes upon them. Throughout the novel, the narrative centres around the disappearance of Kate, the daughter of Stephen and Julie Lewis, while at the same time providing a critical note about society. In *A Child in Time*, the characters' personal experiences are interwoven with the social and political reality of the narrative, thus also showing the structural powers that limit human agency. In this novel the differences between social classes come to the fore in social-political critique expressed in various sections and through different characters. *The Child in Time* shows its readers a glimpse beyond the personal experience, and invites them to be aware of the social, economic, and political structures that reveal the constraints on human agency. The loss of the Lewis girl is repeatedly reflected in the larger context of the story. For instance, when the protagonist observes that "on Milbank there were only ex-children shuffling to work" (2). To describe adults as 'ex-children' expresses the underlying sense of loss that is connected to the reality of the protagonist's life. Moreover, the narrative reveals that the capacity of a character to act as an independent agent depends on material conditions. Wealth can open

a way for characters to rise above money problems. This phenomenon is most pronounced in Charles Darke's escape to childhood, and Stephen's escape from reality into alcoholism. Whether their escapes can be considered as a healthy and structural solution is a question that the novel does not answer, but the narrative certainly leaves the reader with a sense of hope when Julie and Stephen at the end have found each other again, and what is more, when it becomes clear that they are going to have a baby. Hope is expressed as the novel ends with the words: "And it was an acknowledgment of the world they were about to rejoin, and into which they hoped to take their love" (245). However, the phrase 'rejoin the world' also re-opens the door for society to impose its constraints.

Chapter 2: *Atonement*

McEwan's *Atonement* reveals contradictions in class perspectives and shows that a character is not always an autonomous agent because an individual is influenced by his/her social class. The novel is set in British society in the 1930s and 40s, a society in which social class largely influenced human agency. Although the living standards and the educational opportunities of the diverse layers in society were changing, and class divisions were slowly altering, people still either belonged to the upper-class, the middle-class, or the working-class. Upward mobility from the lower classes was extremely difficult (Corfield). In *Atonement*, inequality between social classes and its effect on human agency is at the core of McEwan's narrative. In this chapter I will argue that in McEwan's novel, all characters are constrained by the social class they belong to or as is the case with Paul, he is protected by his social status. However, the novel also shows that the impact of these constraints differs depending on social class.

A clear example that shows the importance of social class in society comes to the fore in the unequal position between Briony Tallis and Robbie Turner, the Tallises' gardener, and protégée. Even though Briony is a teenager with a lively imagination, her accusations are easily believed because of her high-ranking social position. Furthermore, although Robbie tries to improve his prospects through his study, at the same time he feels obligated to do something for society in return (Fraser). Moreover, both Robbie and Paul Marshall, try to improve their positions. The latter is honoured with the aristocratic title of Lord because of the wealth he and his family built especially during the Second World War, whereas Robbie, despite his high education, is the victim of a tragedy ultimately caused by differences in social class because prejudice, based on stereotypical assumptions concerning the working class, strongly influence his individual social status. Briony's testimony about Robbie, that led to his downfall, can be placed in the bigger picture of the underlying ideology of the prevailing social class system. Her story is easily believed because of the inequality in their social positions, even though the narrative itself shows that Briony's perspective is not necessarily a trustworthy one.

A shift in perspective at the end of the novel is used to cause a large impact on the reader's perception. It raises questions not only about the accuracy of the narrative itself, but also about "the manner in which those events have been narrated and the motivations of the author-narrator" (Marsh 1333). The book's epilogue reveals that the preceding narrative was written by Briony as an atonement for a deed she never forgot, although she now is 77 years old and suffering from dementia. This revelation at the completion of the story, which is built in the structure of the novel, has consequences for how the reader interprets the narrative (Marsh). It also raises questions about the reliability of the narrative because Briony can be considered an unreliable narrator. As Huw Marsh puts it, "Briony's version of what happened does not oversee the whole story" (1332). Therefore, "[u]nreliability and uncertainty are at the centre of McEwan's *Atonement*" (Marsh 1325). Throughout the novel it becomes more and more clear that Briony's view is not a reliable version. Three elements in this respect are important. Firstly, while the novel for the larger part is presented as a third-person narrative from different perspectives, this turns out to be untrue because at the end it reveals to be written solely from Briony's point of view. This revelation "require[s] a rereading that engages a more wholesome revision of one's understanding of the preceding story" (Marsh 1333). Secondly, at the end of the narrative it turns out that Briony is a dementia patient which is a disease well known for symptoms such as memory loss. So, she may not be an exceptionally reliable witness. Thirdly, Briony's version of happenings deviates significantly from other versions and springs from her overactive imagination. Briony's unreliability as a narrator is meant to confuse the reader, and as such, to put the reader in a similar position as the characters themselves, who are unaware of the underlying ideology of the social class system.

Prejudices relating to social class differences shimmer through in Briony's version of reality. A clear example illustrates this point. From a window of the family's property, Briony witnesses a meeting between Cecilia and Robbie. Accidentally, the two of them damage a family heirloom, namely a vase, in front of the Triton fountain. Briony misinterprets the scene as if Robbie is forcing her sister into diving into the water after taking her clothes off. Kogan argues that "Briony interprets the scene at the fountain between Robbie and Cecilia in a way that sets in motion a series of wrong

and hateful accusations that will have lasting repercussions for all" (Kogan 52). However, this scene is not only an accelerator for the future developments, but more importantly shows that Briony interprets occurrences based on class biases. She tries to relate this gathering to

> [a] proposal of marriage. Briony would not have been surprised. She herself had written a tale in which a humble woodcutter saved a princess from drowning and ended by marrying her. What was presented here fitted well. Robbie Turner, only son of a humble cleaning lady and of no known father, Robbie who has been subsidised through school and university, had wanted to be a landscape gardener, and now wanted to take up medicine, had the boldness of ambition to ask for Cecilia's hand (38).

This scene exemplifies "the cultural connections between signification and legitimating, the way that beliefs, practises and institutions legitimate the dominant social order" (Dollimore 6). In Briony's view, Robbie tries to climb the social ladder through establishing a matrimony with her sister. The idea of trying to improve one's position via foul play ties in with the underlying prejudices based on stereotypical assumptions concerning the working class. The choice of wording in this scene is particularly interesting. Firstly, the word *humble* is repeated to emphasise Robbie's modest social position. Secondly, the word *only* allows for two different interpretations. The first meaning is that Robbie is an only child, but *only* can also refer to just. The latter seems a more significant connotation given the context of Briony's concoctions. In this context the use of the word *only* stresses the fact that Robbie is no more than just the son of a cleaning lady. Thirdly, the phrase "has been subsidised" focuses attention on the fact that Robbie is depending on Briony's father's help and goodwill. Here, to be helped for Robbie also means that he is without agency. Lastly, the last sentence in which Robbie "had the boldness of ambition to ask for Cecilia's hand" highlights the differences in their social status, in this way, showing how Briony's version comes with a class prejudice.

When the same encounter is described from what is seemingly Cecilia's tale, and focalized through her perception again class differences are stressed:

> She was being mocked, or she was being punished – she did not know which was worse. Punished for being in a different circle at Cambridge, for not having a charlady for a mother [she is Cecilia] (27).

The intensity of Cecilia's emotions reveals that she is hiding amorous feelings for Robbie, but more importantly, it also shows the importance of social class. Here, the phrase "a different circle at Cambridge" serves as a metonymic synonym for highlighting the class differences that are prevalent. The phrase stresses that Cecilia and Robbie both belong to a different social class. The contrast with the word *charlady* which is an old-fashioned word that denotes a woman who works as a cleaner, especially in someone's house ("charlady"), emphasises the difference in class existing between Cecilia and Robbie. In this scene expectations related to social class play an important role, thus showing an inherent inequality between the diverse layers of society.

The narrative takes place in the middle of a historical event, namely the Second World War, while the consequences of this war reflect the inequality between the characters. The characters' developments are placed against an extensive political and historical background, and the narrative is interested in "the relation between individual agency and larger forces of history" (Dijkhuizen 152). To stress the contrast in chances given by society to Paul Marshal and Robbie, the narrative juxtaposes Paul's 'war' tale to Robbie's. On the one hand, Paul who flourishes during and due to the Second World War. On the other hand, Robbie who is deeply affected by the war negatively. Robbie can only end his prison sentence by enlisting in the army and participating in the war. To stress the horrible effect of the war on Robbie, the narrative zooms in on a specific moment in history, namely the retreat and evacuation from Dunkirk. Robbie's downfall is highlighted against the background of the horrors of the global war: "There were horrors enough, but it was the unexpected detail that threw him and afterward would not let him go" (191). The atrocious context of the battle is shown through Robbie's exhausted, desperate view of the ghastly aftermath of a bombing:

> He folded the map away, and as he straightened from picking up the coat and was swinging it around his shoulders, he saw it. The others, sensing his movement, turned round and followed his gaze. It was a leg in a tree. A mature plane tree, only just in
> leaf. The leg was twenty feet up, wedged in the first forking of the trunk, bare, severed cleanly above the knee. From where they stood there was no sign of blood or torn flesh. It was a perfect leg, pale, smooth, small enough to be a child's. The way it was angled in the fork, it seemed to be on display, for their benefit or enlightenment: this is a leg. (192)

In this scene two seemingly unrelated elements next to one another convey the message of the conflicted feelings experienced by Robbie. The first element is the leg which is depicted as a metonymic symbol for a human being, and more specifically for a child. The second element is represented by the tree which functions as a metonymic symbol for life itself. As such, the narrative presents this specific scene as a symbolic representation of the war as a whole. By using this *pars pro toto* technique, the impact of this scene is profound. The reader is drawn into the atrocities of the war through the detailed and direct observations of Robbie. Hence, one experiences the deep impact the war has on Robbie, who functions as a foot soldier in the war, and who unlike Paul suffers the terrible consequences of this conflict.

The greater history of the Second World War provides Paul with the means to improve his position, thus highlighting the contrasting consequences the war has for him and Robbie. Paul owns his wealth to the production of a candy bar. This piece of chocolate is produced during the second World War as food for the soldiers. It is meant to keep them going for the war machine: "The launch of Rainbow Amo [a candy manufactured by the Marshal family's factory] had been a triumph" (49). With this sentence McEwan emphasises the relation between the wealth of the Marshalls and the global conflict. In this respect, several words are particularly interesting. Firstly, the word *launch* evokes thoughts of a military campaign, and conjures memories of the Normandy Invasion, in which the Allied invasion of Western Europe began on 6 June 1944. Furthermore, the word *Amo* is a pun playing with its contrasting meanings. It can refer to the Latin phrase which translates to "I love". However, it also recalls the word *ammo*, an abridged version of ammunition and thus referring to weaponry. Next to this, the word *triumph* induces connotations with a battle. Especially invented for war purposes, Paul's factory has started the production of the

> Army Amo, the khaki bar […]; the concept rested on an assumption that spending on the Armed Forces must go increasing if Mr Hitler did not pipe down; there was even a chance that the bar could become part of the standard-issue ration pack; in that case, if there were to be a general conscription, a further five factories would be needed; there were some on the board who were convinced there should and would be an accommodation with Germany and that Army Amo was a dead duck; one member was even accusing Marshall of being a warmonger (49-50).

In this phrase some critique of capitalism resonates through the opinion of the one board member who accuses Paul of being a warmonger. In this way, it raises questions about Paul's wealth and his morality. More importantly, this critique reveals a fault line as laid out by Sinfield because it shows a moment where the underlying ideology (of capitalism) is questioned. Furthermore, McEwan uses irony to highlight how Paul profits from the war. The phrase "Mr Hitler did not pipe down" is an informal ironic description that that diminishes the threat of the coming war and stresses the entrepreneur's interest in making money. This wording shows the connection between the state of war and the rise in profit for Paul's company. The Amo Bar is a symbol of the affluent position gained by Paul, while the way it is depicted throughout the novel gives room to question the morality of the factory owner. Moreover, Paul's comfortable position forms a sharp contrast with Robbie's misery. Therefore, the contrast in the consequences the war has on Robbie and Paul highlights the inequality in their positions that are causally related to their social class.

One of the themes that *Atonement* deals with is the question of how talent is related to social class. The novel explores in which environment talent can thrive and how social class influences one's chances of success in society. As Fraser argues, "Thompson's theme of agency is important here because despite the freedom Robbie has received by transcending his class origin in terms of his education and upbringing, we are led to believe that this was accomplished under structural constraints" (Fraser 471). While studying at Cambridge, Robbie does not attempt to fit in with his higher-class fellow students, which makes him a successful student, but when "he returns to the Tallis Estate on the fateful day in 1935, it appears that he is becoming assimilated into upper-middle-class society and thereby forgetting his roots" (Fraser 470). Therefore, the fact that Robbie seems to forget his own lowly background and tries to become one with the members of the upper-middle-class, is the cause for his downfall. Furthermore, Robbie's choices of education are determined by his need to repay his debt to society. Robbie is a character who possesses several creative skills: he has studied literature at Cambridge, he has been a teacher of children before starting his university studies, and he is a landscape gardener. The moral dilemmas he was confronted with during his literature study has inspired him to become a doctor (Fraser). As a result of the chances his employer has given, Robbie

feels the need to pay back to society. Consequently, Robbie's choices are limited by the fact that he belongs to the working class.

While Cecilia is a member of the upper-middle-class and has the wealth and status of her family to support her, she also "is a prisoner of her upper-middle-class milieu and the low expectations her family, particularly her mother, have of the role of women in society from her background: get married to someone wealthy and have children" (Fraser 471). The expectations of her family and society are deeply embedded in Cecilia. Despite her unsettling erotic feelings for Robbie the first time she meets Paul, she "wondered, as she sometimes did when she met a man for the first time, if this was the one, she was going to marry (47). This sentence strongly suggests feelings of fatality, as if Cecilia herself has no say in her future and whether she will marry, and to whom. These feelings of impending doom are further enhanced when Cecilia ponders while Paul takes "control of the conversation with a ten-minute monologue" (49):

> Watching him during the first several minutes of his delivery, Cecilia felt a pleasant sinking sensation in her stomach as she contemplated how deliciously self-destructive it would be, almost erotic, to be married to a man so nearly handsome, so hugely rich, so unfathomably stupid (50).

The wording of this scene evokes emotions of fatality, but also combines an erotic suggestion with feelings of self-destruction and enhances how implanted the principles of the society she belongs to are in Cecilia. However, as the narrative unfolds, Cecilia, because of her love for Robbie and her growing awareness of "the expendability of people from lower-class backgrounds to those above them", develops "a growing class experience into class consciousness" (Fraser 471). It is this realisation that gives Cecilia a motivation to break with her family, and not fulfil the expectations posed upon her by her background; instead, she chooses a serving life as a nurse. The boldness of this choice shows Cecilia's strength. She is a young woman of many talents. From their early childhood on she is the one who comforts her younger sister when suffering from nightmares. Furthermore, Cecilia studied at Cambridge. Moreover, she is the only one who dares to stand by Robbie when he is accused of raping her niece. She even comes to the brave decision to leave her comfortable home and to separate herself from the safety and wealth of her family. In this occasion the narrative seems to

diametrically undermine the central argument of this thesis because Cecilia overcomes class restrictions. However, she has to pay heavily for this path: she must give up all her privileges as well as her family. Moreover, despite her talents, her separation from her family, and her cutting loose from the benefits of her family's social class by throwing in her lot with Robbie, she cannot liberate her lover from the class constraints.

Even though Briony's talent can flourish thanks to her background, it is also her upbringing that makes her incapable to "empathize with the suffering of her victim" (Kogan 51). In Kogan's view, "Briony's relationship with her absent, depressed mother and her deceptive, emotionally remote father has enhanced her longing for substitute parents" (55). For her, Cecilia, and Robbie, are an alternative mother and father, which has "a great impact on Briony's further psychic development" (Kogan 55). Throughout the novel, Briony is portrayed as a talented character. From an early age on Briony loves to invent tales, "[a]t the age of eleven she wrote her first story" (6). Her talent was recognised and encouraged by her family at an early stage, and when Briony is nearing the end of her life, she is celebrated by her remaining relatives. However, her talent to invent tales is at the heart of Robbie's downfall, and although she writes her atonement to redeem her fault, she cannot make it public until after the Marshalls' death. Briony's upbringing is a clear example of how her actions are constrained by her social background. Furthermore, the fact that Paul and his wealth can silence her shows how social class and status influence one's agency.

Atonement, as a piece of literature, can be interpreted as a historical representation of the social inequalities that existed between the different classes at the time. A clear case in point is the contrast between Paul Marshall's and Robbie Turner's position. Whereas Robbie becomes a victim of class prejudices, Paul profits from the class system. Even though the latter is the possible perpetrator, he gets off scot-free because of his wealth and social position. Furthermore, he flourishes during and due to the Second World War. By contrast, Robbie can only end his sentence by enlisting in the army and participating in the war. However, not only the lives of working-class characters are dictated by circumstances beyond their control, but all characters, except for Paul, are subject to constraints of the class system. The three main characters, Robbie, Cecilia and Briony, all are victims of their social

background. Despite Robbie's social skills, his successful education, and the fact that he is willing to develop himself through study, the class biased thinking of society against the working class are at the core of his fall. Cecilia "is deeply imbued with the identities relating to an upper-middle-class background, but what happens to Robbie, and the class prejudice of her family that allows him to become victimised in this way, begins to fragment her class identity and make her more class-conscious of those below her in the class system" (Fraser 466). She shows the ability to outgrow her background and the expectations that go with it. However, despite her courage and strength she cannot save Robbie. The only character in the narrative that flourishes because of his wealth and status is Paul, the anti-protagonist. He is the prototype of the rich entrepreneur, who climbs the social ladder in society because of his success story with the Amo Bar, a chocolate that itself serves as a symbol for capitalist exploitation. However, even Paul feels obliged to live-up to the standards of the higher class and eventually becomes a well-known philanthropist. The main character, Briony, not only has a vivid imagination, but also thanks to her background, she can become a successful writer. However, it is also due to society that she cannot publish her atonement before the death of the Marshalls. Early in the narrative Briony's vivid imagination is one of the main causes for Robbie's fall, while at the end her creative power produced her "fifty-nine year assignment" (369) which leads to the question: "how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?" (371). The narrative does not give an answer for this dilemma but does give the reader food for thought.

Chapter 3 *Saturday*

Saturday examines the contrasts in perspectives that cause a clash between the protagonist and the antagonist, and which are a direct result of the differences in their social background and of the constraints the social class system imposes on human agency. The narrative starts early on a Saturday morning and describes this particular day of the protagonist, Henry Perowne, an affluent, 48-year-old neurosurgeon. The story is set in London. As Perowne drives through the capitol on his way to a scheduled game of squash, he encounters a crowd heading downtown for a large protest. The demonstration is organised to protest the British involvement in the invasion of Iraq. This conflict between the government and the demonstrators foreshadows the hostile encounters between Perowne and Baxter, the antagonist. In their first encounter, Perowne's Mercedes runs lightly into Baxter's BMW. Although it was a minor accident, their meeting has unforeseen and violent consequences. As a result of the differences in social background between them, Perowne opens the door of his family home to a private terror, albeit unintentionally.

The narrative explores the relation between Perowne, as a representative of his upper-class milieu, and Baxter as a working-class character. Both characters act and think according to the constraints of their social class, which is the underlying cause of their conflict. On the one hand, Perowne who is unable to communicate effectively with Baxter because he is thoroughly trained and formed by his privileged, academically educated background. A clear example of his scientifically inclined mind can be found when Perowne "[s]ome hours before dawn […] wakes to find himself already in motion" (3). He "wonders about this sustained, distorting euphoria. Perhaps down at the molecular level there's been a chemical accident while he slept" (5). Words like 'molecular level' and 'chemical' indicate that Perowne's self-reflection is based on scientific observations. On the other hand, Baxter whose inability to step out of his disadvantaged background is reflected in his violent and revenge-seeking actions as is shown in his reaction to Perowne's inquiry into his health-related history: "'You streak of piss' […] as he pushes [Perowne] in the chest" (98). *Saturday* illustrates how the constraints on human agency that are the result of the existing class system put characters in opposite worlds. Perowne is a member of the upper class and his thoughts and actions spring from his

background. Baxter is a member of the working class and, as with Perowne, his perception of the world is moulded in such a way that he cannot step beyond the unwritten rules of the class system. However, *Saturday* also reflects how class ideologies can be temporally disrupted. Anomalous situations, threat, times of great stress, vulnerability, and strong emotions cause fractures in the underlying ideology, thus showing the fault lines as laid out by Sinfield.

Inequality between the protagonist Perowne and the antagonist Baxter is a central theme in McEwan's novel. This inequality between the two main characters is emphasised because *Saturday* offers internal focalization through the main character, whereas all the other characters are never focalized except through the observations of the protagonist. The novel is written from the protagonist's perception, the story throughout. The narrative presents all information from Perowne's point of view, consequently it reflects a subjective perception. As a result, the reader only sees Baxter through his opponent's eyes. Therefore, the character of Baxter remains rather mysterious; the reader mostly must guess Baxter's motivations based on Perowne's thoughts and observations. This is problematic because the narrative also presents Perowne and Baxter as almost complete opposites therefore, the question is raised whether Perowne can fully understand Baxter's behaviour and underlying motivations.

One way in which the narrative presents the two main characters as belonging to different social classes comes to the fore in how they are first introduced to the reader. Baxter is described as "dressed as a scarecrow, in mangy fleece, his sweater with its row and holes, his paint-stained trousers supported by a knotted cord" (86). It is only then that the name Baxter is introduced. The depiction of Baxter, even before his name is revealed, forms a sharp contrast to the first introduction of "Henry Perowne, a neurosurgeon" (3). This distinction serves to highlight the divergent positions the two men take in society. On the one hand, the protagonist is introduced with both his Christian and his family name. Moreover, who is introduced via his respectable job, a doctor, in this way, highlighting his privileged position. Besides his work, he also wants to add his bit to society as he "runs a half-marathon for charity every year" (21). On the other hand, the antagonist, who the reader only gets to know via Perowne's point of view. Baxter is pictured as a man wearing shaggy work-stained clothes

and as a smoker who "blows the smoke past Henry" (87). These last words seem to indicate that Baxter does not maintain his physical health, nor does he seem to take the well-being of others into consideration. However, since Baxter is described through Perowne's point of view, it is difficult to form one's opinion about the antagonist. As Tim Gauthier argues: "The antagonist is never provided an opportunity to offer an alternate cultural conceptualization (unattractive though it may be) or to voice a grievance against perceived injustice (ill-conceived though its expression may be). The threatening other is simply the embodiment of a defective, irrational stance that is the product of arrested intellectual and emotional development" (12). In my opinion, Baxter is not so much 'the threatening other', but the narrative and Perowne's reaction suggest that Perowne is initially just annoyed by the other. Moreover, the fact that the announcement of Baxter's name is delayed indicates how he is reduced to a non-individual and nothing but archetypical for his working-class milieu.

The contrast in the protagonist and antagonist social positions are at the heart of misunderstandings between them. As Ana María Sánchez-Arce argues, "McEwan parodies the perspective of British normative society by allowing his main character, a representative of the establishment, to appropriate the narrative to justify his privileged position under the guise of arguing for the current social and international status quo" (Sánchez-Arce 195). On the one hand, Perowne is portrayed as "a neurosurgeon" (3) who "works hard" (7), to whom "minor operations can still give […] pleasure – he likes to be fast and accurate"(7), he is never wearied by "operating – once busy within the enclosed world of his firm, the theatre and its ordered procedures, […] he experiences a superhuman capacity, more like a craving for work" (11), and "professional jargon [is] second nature" (12) to him. Perowne likes to be admired, and he is aware of his value as he, "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" (23). The Perowne family is well-to-do as they live in "the big house" (195) and own a "Mercedes S500" (75), a car that he "doesn't even love […] – it's simply a sensual part of what he regards as his overgenerous share of the world's goods" (75). In other words, Perowne is presented as a successful member of the upper-class. Baxter, on the other hand, lives in his "dad's old flat" (96), and "didn't get on with school" (96), and

"probably dropped out of school long ago and regrets it. No parents around" (96) with "[n]o one [that] can help" (96), who, when he "believes he's been cheated of a little violence and the exercise of a little power" (96) becomes angry and acts violently. Clearly, the two main characters are pictured as opposites.

The two main characters are pictured as opposites, but they are not simply flat characters. *Saturday* tells a dynamic story since both Perowne and Baxter are round characters as they come into conflict with each other in a believable way, hence spurring character development. In Perowne this development is shown in his change in attitude towards his opponent. At their first encounter Perowne could not step into Baxter's shoes, and he was not willing to settle a minor conflict on Baxter's terms, as I will discuss in the paragraph about the accident. At their second encounter something changes. After Baxter and Nigel (Baxter's mate) have forced themselves violently into Perowne's home, Perowne "can't convince himself that molecules and faulty genes alone are terrorising his family […]. Perowne himself is also responsible. He humiliated Baxter in front of his sidekicks" (210). Perowne gained insight and a proper understanding of his opponent. Baxter's development is shown in his reaction to Daisy (Perowne's daughter) when she recites Matthew Arnold's iconic "Dover Beach". Baxter is almost literally swept of his feet as "[h]e's hunched over, leaning his weight against the back of the sofa" (221). After Daisy recites the poem again, "Baxter appears suddenly elated" (222). His threat has lifted as "[h]is right hand has moved away from Rosalind's [Perowne's wife] shoulder and the knife is already back in his pocket" (222). Baxter has been changed by poetry as he "fell for the magic, he was transfixed by it" (278).

The poem "Dover Beach" is essential in *Saturday's* plot; therefore, I will now discuss the function of this poem in the narrative. One of the moments when Perowne and Baxter move more closely to one another is when they are both touched by this famous poem. For Baxter, the poem "makes [him] think about where [he] grew up" (222). Apparently, Daisy's poetry reading reminds him of the coast where he "grew up in Folkestone" (96). However, "Dover Beach" is not a detailed prescription of a specific place, but "a great many British poets and novelists of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries" hold the view that "'Dover Beach' is a quintessential articulation of the

British crisis of modernity" (Helena Feder 201). In *Saturday*, the poem is essential for the first rapprochement between the protagonist and the antagonist. It is a critical moment when "the diseased man and the doctor share a moment of profound misprision, both in the sense that the reading is profoundly mistaken, and that the moment of misreading is profound in its implications" (Molly Clark Hillard 183). Perowne comprehends his daughter's poetic diction as "unusually meditative, mellifluous, and wilfully archaic. She's thrown herself back into another century" (220). Daisy's performance makes him feel "slipping through the words into the things they describe. He sees Daisy on a terrace overlooking a beach in summer moonlight" (220). When Baxter orders Daisy to read it again, Perowne "sees Baxter standing alone" and "it's through Baxter's ears that he hears the sea's 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, retreating, to the breath of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear and naked shingles of the world' (221-2). This moment is crucial because it reveals a fault line and breaking point as defined by Sinfield. For the first time the two opponents might open up to one another because they both share an experience in which their worlds come together - if only for a moment, and even though this moment is based on their mutual misreading of Matthew Arnold's famous poem.

The clash between Perowne and Baxter is clearly linked to their social backgrounds. The way they appreciate life differs significantly, which causes the misunderstanding between them. After the minor crash between Perowne's and Baxter's cars, it becomes clear that they communicate differently. Their communication is coloured by their social backgrounds. The way Perowne solves a conflict is moulded by his upper-class background and scientifically inclined mind. When he first meets Baxter, he seeks for a possible diagnosis for his opponent's behaviour and demeanour. Moreover, Perowne's dismissive treatment triggers a violent reaction in Baxter. Perowne does not take Baxter seriously, nor does he treat him as an equal, but merely as an obstacle on his way to an important (but non-existent) meeting. When Perowne tries to come up with a solution for the damage, he manifests his upper-class social background when,

> he says dismissively 'I'm not giving you cash. I'm giving you my details. If you don't want to give me yours, that's fine. Your registration number will do. I'll be on my way.' He then adds, barely truthfully, 'I'm late for an important meeting.' (91).

This scene exemplifies how Perowne's course of action is influenced by his social class and background. The term 'dismissively' has the connotation of disdain in a manner that suggests that something or someone is unworthy of consideration. Furthermore, the fact that Perowne refuses to come to an agreement on Baxter's terms indicates that he is used to being in control. In addition to this, the kind of solution Perowne offers fits into an educated higher-class paradigm. Moreover, Perowne's lie about an important meeting illustrates his uneasiness in dealing with his opponent. Baxter suggested a solution for the accidental collision between their cars in terms of money: "Fortunately for you, I got a mate does bodywork, on the cheap. But he does a nice job. Seven fifty I reckon he'd sort me out" (90). In this wording, several items are noteworthy and indicate that Baxter belongs to the working class. Firstly, the language Baxter uses is colloquial and informal, like the solution for the problem which he proposes. Perowne's language, as shown in the passages quoted above, is more formal. Secondly, Baxter's reference to 'a mate [who] does bodywork' places him in a working-class milieu. Lastly, Baxter's emphasis on cash indicates his need for it and shows that he is used to operating in informal economic networks. If Perowne had agreed to the cash settlement, the clash with Baxter, whose violence and irrationality are certainly triggered by his encounter with Perowne, would have had a different outcome. The differences in their reactions to the minor accident are a good indicator of the disparity in their social background.

In the light of this class opposition, the naming of both characters is a further interesting point, as the names of the protagonist and antagonist indicate their social class. Characters in novels are 'baptised' by the author; their "literary names are not inherited: they must be found or invented" (Fowler 99). As the Latin proverb *Nomen est omen* indicates, it is in the nature of a name to express more than the name itself; a name always evokes certain associations. Whereas names can provoke various responses, they all share that the name itself is important. As Ian McMillan argues, "the essence of a place is in its name" (McMillan 61). In *Saturday,* the names of the two main characters, can be related to an important development in the English language. A sketchy picture of the English language shows immense changes in its vocabulary after "the conquest of England by a French-

speaking people in the year 1066" (Baker 9). The words that survived from Old English "are some of the most common in the language" and a lot of them denote everyday concepts (Baker 9). The name Baxter finds its origins in "Old English bæcestr, the equivalent of baker" ("baxter"). Considering the fact that the origin of the antagonist's name comes from an everyday concept, the effect of Baxter's name will evoke more common class images, whilst the name Perowne derives from "Anglo-Norman and Middle French" ("perowne"), and as such the name relates more naturally to a higher-class milieu.

In *Saturday,* misunderstandings between characters are a recurring theme and functions to underscore the underlying class structures. The encounter between the two main characters is foreshadowed when Perowne and his wife, Rosalind, accidentally bump into Tony Blair:

> In a sudden press of bodies they were introduced to the Prime Minister. He took Rosalind's hand first, then Henry's. The grip was firm and manly, and to Perowne's surprise, Blair was looking at him with recognition and interest. […] He said, 'I really admire the work you're doing' (143).

For a moment, Perowne is convinced that the country's leader really knows about his hospital and his excellent work, but it does not take long before "Henry realised what an absurd notion that was" (144) as it turns out that Blair has mistaken him for a painter. The effect here is manifold. Firstly, the car crash between Perowne and Baxter echoes through the words "in a sudden press of bodies". Secondly, Tony Blair looks at Perowne "with recognition and interest" although as it turns out that he has no idea who Perowne is, nor does he know anything about his work. This reflects Perowne's dismissive treatment of Baxter at their first encounter. Thirdly, the fact that the Prime Minister mistakes Perowne for a painter, and as such associates him with art and as a scholar of the humanities, contrasts to the fact that throughout the novel Perowne is depicted as an outstanding scholar of an exact science. This bend serves to highlight the underlying lack of understanding in Perowne's attitude towards Baxter. Just like the Prime Minister in this scene acts on false assumptions, Perowne's attitude toward the world around him is based on assumptions related to his social background.

Despite the miscommunication between Perowne and Baxter at their first accidental meeting, and despite Baxter's forced entry into his family home, Perowne gains an insight into his opponent's

world and motivations. He comes to the realisation that he and Baxter live in different worlds with divergent opportunities, as he reflects:

> He, Henry Perowne, possesses so much – the work, money, status, the home, above all, the family – the handsome healthy son with the strong guitarist's hands come to rescue him, the beautiful poet for a daughter, unattainable even in her nakedness, the famous father-in-law, the gifted, loving wife; and he has done nothing, given nothing to Baxter who has so little that is not wrecked by his defective gene, and who is soon to have even less (227/8).

The contrasts in perspective that cause a clash between the protagonist and the antagonist, and which are a direct result of the differences in their social background and of the constraints the social class system has on human agency, are brought out clearly. As Perowne reflects on the implications of the differences between them, he realises that he has everything, while Baxter 'has so little' […], various shifts in his attitude to Baxter, some clarity, even some resolve, is beginning to form" (233). He decides to really help Baxter by performing the surgery on him and after the operation he "brings a chair over and sits down." […] He slips his hand around Baxter's wrist and feels for a pulse. It's quite unnecessary because the monitor's showing a reading in bright blue numerals […]. He does it because he wants to. […] simple, a matter of primal contact" (262-3). This is another crucial moment because again it reveals a fault line and breaking point as defined by Sinfield. For the second time, Perowne opens up to Baxter and treats him with compassion and respect.

The importance of social class in facilitating talent is another way by which *Saturday* explores the constraints of the social class system on human agency. Perowne's gifted female offspring, Daisy, is introduced to the reader "as his literate, too literate daughter" (6). A condescending attitude towards the humanities is suggested in Perowne's stress on "too literate". Like *Atonement*, *Saturday* examines the relation between talent and social class. However, in contrast to McEwan's redemption narrative, *Saturday* not only investigates the relation from the perspective of the gifted children but also takes into consideration the relevance of the connection the other way around. Daisy invests in her father's literary education by providing him with titles of books and names of authors that he should read. She "sent the biography of Darwin which in turn has something to do with a Conrad novel she wants him to read" (6). In the light of the depiction of Perowne's character, the presentation of these two authors as being somehow related, is quite ironic. On the one hand, Charles Darwin, who became famous for

his work on the theory of evolution, by many readers will be associated with an exact science. Joseph Conrad, on the other hand, is considered as one of the greatest novelists to write in the English language. For that reason, many readers will connect him to art and the humanities. Another point of interest in this aspect is Andrew Bennet's observation about Joseph Conrad. As Bennet puts it, "it might be said that Conrad wants us not to see but to see – to see ghosts, phantoms, spectres of character and motivation – wants us not to be blind but to be blind, not to know and yet to know, finally, that seeing is not knowing (Bennett 148). When Perowne dismisses Conrad's novel because "seafaring […] doesn't much interest him" (6), his blindness, his not knowing permeates through. Therefore, even though Perowne is offered an opportunity to improve himself under the guidance of Daisy, who studied literature and is a literary talent, he cannot step out of his lifelong training in thinking as a man who is practising an exact science.

As said before, misunderstandings between characters are a recurring theme in *Saturday*. The conflict Daisy and her grandfather, John Grammaticus, get involved in, echoes the altercation between Perowne and Baxter, but also highlights the gap between exact science and art. Daisy's talent functions to highlight her father's perception, but also via her role the narrative explores the relevance of literature. Daisy is an incredibly talented character as she "[a]s early as her final year at school, just eighteen, head girl and academic star of the sixth form […] won the Newdigate" (136). She tries to fill in a gap in her father's education and "[f]or some years now she's been addressing what she believes is his astounding ignorance, guiding his literary education" (6). During a family dinner at Perowne's father-in-law's Château St Felix in the south-west of France, Grammaticus, out of nowhere verbally attacks his granddaughter. He criticises her poem and tells "her that her poem was ill-advised and not the sort of thing that generally won the Newdigate" (136). This scene not only reflects the family's struggle with Baxter, but also emphasises the role of literature which foreshadows the dramatic anti-climax of the narrative. In this way, the narrative highlights the importance of literature but also emphasises the fact that even two literary worlds (Daisy's and John's) can collide when people are not on the same page.

Although Perowne and Baxter both belong to a different social class, they are both juxtaposed with the poetically talented Daisy in this way the narrative calls attention to the significance of poetry. When Baxter and his associate force themselves into the Perownes' home, at the time a family gathering is happening, the former violently knocks out Grammaticus. This scene reinforces the earlier conflicts in the narrative: between Perowne and Baxter, and between Daisy and her grandfather. The villains overpower the family members, Baxter forces Daisy to undress and when he discovers she is a poet, he commands her to recite one of her poems. Daisy, standing naked, while her nudeness reveals her pregnancy, recites “Dover Beach”. She prefers not to reveal the poetry of her hand but pretends to read out loud from her book while reciting Matthew Arnold’s well-known poem. Baxter, who is convinced that he is listening to a product of Daisy’s own talent, strongly reacts to the poem which practically disarms him. According to Head, the scene “is not, of course, a simple celebration of the ‘power’ of poetry, though the emotional impact of poetry is strongly registered” (Head 189). Even though the quite astonishing effect of the famous verse is perhaps an implausible outcome, the anti-climax indeed highlights the importance of poetry. The poetry recital by Daisy, which was most disarming in its effect, alludes to the myth of Orpheus who enticed the god of the underworld and all his guardians with his mourning song for his beloved Eurydice. In this way, the importance of poetry is underscored. Next to this, Daisy is portrayed as entirely harmless, which is expressed not only by her nudeness, but moreover, via the revelation that she is with child. Therefore, she refuses to uncover even more of herself, but instead uses poetry as her defence. Her choice to perform the honoured Arnold’s poem was not without risk. If Baxter had been more literate, he could have become even more dangerous. In presenting a poem as the saviour of the Perownes, the novel toys with both Baxter's and Perowne’s illiteracies. However, it also draws attention to the relevance of poetry.

The portrayal of Theo’s character, Perowne’s talented musical son, “[i]n the confined, gossipy world of British blues, Theo is spoken of as a man of promise […] who might even one day walk with the gods” (26), functions to underscore the limitations of Perowne’s character and again juxtaposes exact science and art. Before the reader gets acquainted with Theo, the narrative offers a view on Perowne’s perspective on his son as he asks: “How have he and Rosalind, such dutiful, conventional

types, given rise to such a free spirit?" (26). Theo is a talented blues musician. The elevating effect art can have, may have been foreshadowed in the novel when Perowne visits his son's rehearsal. The new song that Theo and his fellow musician sing in close harmony, evokes a strong response in Perowne: "He can go for miles, he feels lifted up, right high across the counter. He doesn't want the song to end" (172). Although Perowne acknowledges his son's talent, and was the first to teach him about blues music, he worries about the boundaries of this specific music genre because he is afraid that it is too limited. In Perowne's view, blues is restricted to "twelve bars of three obvious chords" (27). As such, reducing this music genre to its strictly technical form, Perowne again shows his limitations in his way of thinking. He fails to understand that music "[j]ust as phenomenological metaphors integrate different concrete images into a dynamic mental simulation" (Marco Caracciolo 61). So, in other words, music may enrich a listener and even assist in the general development of the audience. However, this time Perowne is aware that he is missing something when he realises why "Theo's guitar pierces him because it also carries a reprimand, a reminder of buried dissatisfaction in his own life, of the missing element" (28). In this way, the narrative points out to the limitations in Perowne's way of thinking, which was also part of the underlying cause for the miscommunication between him and Baxter.

In this novel, poetry plays an important role in overcoming the differences between the protagonist and the antagonist. The main character, Perowne, "for fifteen years [has] barely touched a non-medical book at all [as] he thinks he has seen enough death, fear, courage and suffering to supply half a dozen literatures" (6). Paradoxically, *Saturday's* epigraph opens with literature via a quotation from Saul Bellow's novel, *Herzog*. In this epitaph, the question is posed "what it means to be a man". In the subsequent sentences this inquiry is placed in its broader context: "In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass. Transformed by science" (epigraph *Saturday*). In its smaller context, this transformation by science connects to *Saturday's* openings page in which the main character is introduced as "Henry Perowne, a neurosurgeon" (1). The epitaph, in its wider context, relates McEwan's narrative closely to the conditions that apply to the lives of the characters in the novel. The narrative shows a world view through the eyes of the main character, Perowne. He is a successful

member of the higher rankings of society whose world clashes with the working-class background of the antagonist, Baxter. It is Daisy's upbringing that inspires her to recite the poem "Dover Beach", which disarms Baxter because he is so impressed that he repeatedly exclaims: "You wrote that" (222-3). In *Saturday*, two opponents clash who both act and think according to the constraints of their social class, and whose background and social position is the underlying cause of their conflict. However, by the elevating effect of art they briefly bridge the gap between them. While both characters fail to recognise Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach", they are both touched and changed by it. The differences in social background and the constraints the social class system have on human agency, result in clashes between the protagonist and the antagonist. However, in this novel, the elevating effect of poetry makes it possible for the two opponents to move closer.

Conclusion

The preceding chapters have explained how the dominant ideology of the prevailing social system is questioned in all three discussed McEwan novels. My analysis of these novels focussed on the relation between the social class system and human agency. In both *Atonement* and *Saturday*, it has become clear that the social class system imposes constraints on human agency. In *The Child in Time*, this relation is less definite, but this novel expresses concerns about the effects of the dominant ideology – economically based - on society, and my analysis has zoomed in on the gap between rich and poor as portrayed in the narrative. My analysis of the three McEwan novels has revealed and discussed the fault lines as laid out by Sinfield. This chapter will compare the findings of the previous chapters and from there, draw a conclusion on the consequences of the effects the constraints of the social class system have on human agency as pictured in the three discussed Mc Ewan novels.

The characters in the three McEwan novels are unaware of the larger structures that influence their capacity to act independently. However, "the individual [is not] outside politics. To the contrary, "the individual" is an ideological concept, and the whole idea of being outside politics is a political idea tending to inhibit understanding and action" (Sinfield 14). The novels reveal those larger structures to the reader in several ways. Sometimes limited disclosure is permitted to a character. Furthermore, the underlying structures unfold through fault lines and breaking points as defined by Sinfield. However, McEwan also plays with his readers. In all three novels, the audience is deliberately kept in the dark and put on the wrong track to create a similar world of unawareness for the readers as the characters experience in their imaginary worlds.

The three discussed McEwan's novels show that social class forms a constraint, which unconsciously perpetuates a discriminating restriction on human agency and latently frames the capacity of all characters to be able to achieve control over their lives. However, these novels also reveal major differences between the characters in connection to social class and agency. Agency is mainly presented as depending on wealth and class status. Considerations of wealth and class status often crucially dictate the characters' agency. It is not crystal clear whether McEwan intends the

reader to judge these disparities or to contribute to the reader's understanding of how one's social status influences one's agency, but ultimately, the three novels present a vision of societies that celebrate wealth and status and in which all principal characters experience a process of change, but the narratives also picture a relation between social class and human agency; the higher one's status or the wealthier a person, the more agency a character can express. The dominant ideology of the social class system in all three discussed McEwan novels is questioned because of the effects the constraints of the system have on human agency. Fault lines as laid out by Sinfield shimmer through in all three novels.

In *The Child in Time*, the fault lines that propagate through the narrative can be found in the contrasts in social positions between two main characters, Stephen, and his friend Charlie on the one hand, and the less fortunate in society such as beggars on the other hand. The protagonist, Stephen, can afford himself to slide into alcoholism after the dramatic loss of his daughter. While Charlie allows himself to lose track of reality and flees into a simulated childhood as an escape from the pressures of his public life as a member of the Prime Minister's cabinet. Furthermore, fault lines are revealed in the quotations from the fictional 'Authorized Childcare Handbook' where many values are looked at through a special ideological prism. Through the ideas in this handbook the fictional government shows its economically driven ideology.

In *Atonement*, the fault lines that reveal how the underlying social class system affects, and in Robbie's case ruins his life, shimmer through in the disparity between the diverse layers of social class. Robbie, as a member of the working class, despite his obvious talents and his industrious work ethics, comes to pay a heavy price that is causally related to class biases. Although Robbie, who shows to possess a wealth of talent, could have achieved success in whatever field of endeavour he would have chosen, he becomes the victim of his lowly background. While, Paul, as a member of the upper class, thanks to his thriving business and position, and despite his dubious morality, basically is untouchable. He gets away with a crime; and moreover, he even is rewarded with the aristocratic title of Lord because of his wealth. Briony tries to redeem for her accusations that are easily believed because of the inequality between her high-ranking social position and Robbie's working-class

position. However, her efforts are futile because Paul uses his high-ranking position and wealth to protect his family name at all costs. Cecilia is the only character that transcends the class expectations of her family and society, which are deeply embedded in her. However, she pays a heavy price because she breaks with traditions that are prescribed by her social class. Moreover, despite her courageous actions she cannot change Robbie's tragic fate.

Saturday pictures a clash between Henry Perowne, as a representative of his upper-class milieu, and Baxter, as archetypical for a working-class member, as quite inevitable. The fault lines that expose the effects of the underlying social class system are given shape in the differences between the protagonist's and antagonist's social conventions. Because their expectations about how to settle a minor car accident diverge, a trivial issue subsequently triggers a traumatic series of events. Both characters are unable to come to an agreement because they come from different backgrounds which is expressed in the differences in the expectations held by their different social groups. The novel explores the divergence in social positions between the protagonist and the antagonist that plays a role in the conflict between them. The two main characters are pictured as two opposites: on the one hand, Perowne, who has an affluent position while he acquired much of his world knowledge through his medical education and who has a scientifically trained mind, and, on the other hand, Baxter, who is at disadvantage because of his working-class background, and the poor education he received. However, the reader should be aware that the way the characters are pictured, and the way the story unfolds, is focalized only from Perowne's point of view. The novel also shows how Perowne's children can save their family precisely thanks to the fact that their talents could thrive because of their education, talent, and social position.

Ultimately, the three discussed McEwan novels present a vision of life as a process that is influenced by one's social class or wealth and society's underlying class ideology. The novels explore how the effects of one's social class and one's wealth constrain the characters' agency. The extent to which characters can improve their lives depends on their social class and wealth. Therefore, the level to which characters exert agency are readily influenced by these two items. Although characters are not necessarily unequal in talent and education, in all three novels, members of the upper class or

people of wealth are less constrained in their agency. In this light, a famous quote of George Orwell is applicable: “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (63). With this final quote in mind, it is my conclusion that in all three previous discussed McEwan novels the importance of the effects on human agency as a direct result of the prevailing British social class system is an important theme. All characters are subjected to the effects the constraints of their social class or wealth have on the characters’ agency, but some more than others.

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