

## Chapter 5

### A Rhetorical Analysis of the Two Cultures in Literary Fiction

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#### Abstract

This chapter reconstructs the debate between and about the “two cultures” from a rhetorical perspective. Science and literature are described as particular terministic screens, and the binary oppositions between these different “ways of seeing” are problematized. The major focus is on the importance of rhetoric and narrative in general and the role and function of the humanities—literary culture—in particular. Two novels (*Saturday* and *The Children Act*) are analyzed as a case study to reflect upon how the novelist Ian McEwan problematizes and thematizes the confrontation between art and science.

#### The Two Cultures

In this chapter we focus on the “two cultures” coined by C. P. Snow in 1959 to describe the gap between literary intellectuals and scientists. In its afterlife, the concept survived as a trope framing the debate between the humanities and science. We—the authors—belong to the first tribe (the humanities) and in our research and teaching we argue for the importance of narrative and rhetoric. In what follows, we thematize and problematize specific binary oppositions in general and we analyze two novels of Ian McEwan in particular as a case study to

reflect upon how a modern novelist deals with the ongoing debate between the two cultures.

As a scientist and literary author, Snow knew both academic tribes and could testify—as a kind of anthropologist—about the divide between them. Snow argues that the “members” rarely encounter each other in a fruitful dialogue or conversation. He warns that this indifference between the two cultures could become an obstacle for dealing with society’s major problems. Rhetorically, Snow addresses his colleagues from literary departments and makes them responsible for this absence of dialogue. An often quoted passage from the essay summarizes the major problem the author puts on the agenda: “A good many times I have been present at gatherings of people who, by the standards of the traditional culture, are thought highly educated and who have with considerable gusto been expressing their incredulity of scientists. Once or twice I have been provoked and have asked the company how many of them could describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics. The response was cold: it was also negative. Yet I was asking something which is the scientific equivalent of: Have you read a work of Shakespeare’s?” (*The Two Cultures* 14–15).

From a rhetorical perspective, Snow creates a scapegoat: the traditional humanistic literary scholar who lacks informed knowledge and so becomes out of tune in a world that has changed and is changing driven by major revolutions inspired by science and technology. It is difficult to deny—even for the hard-boiled humanist—that scientific and technological revolutions have changed society and have brought prosperity and comfort for those who can benefit from them. Probably traditional humanists can feel offended by two major suggestions: their lack of knowledge about science and the superiority of scientific knowledge. Although the debate of the two cultures can be described as a confrontation between science and the humanities, Snow mainly focuses on a gap between scientists and literary intellectuals. And indeed, the debate was further framed this way by the reaction of Cambridge literature professor F. R. Leavis, who attacked Snow with a number of ad hominem arguments: Snow was “portentously ignorant” about culture in general, “intellectually as undistinguished as it is possible to be” (54), and as a novelist, “[could not] be said to know what a novel is” (53–54). Leavis defends the major value of the humanities inspired by the attack—which he takes personally—from Snow. But there is more: Leavis was deeply concerned about Snow’s ideas about education in general and his utilitarian perspectives on economic development in particular (see Hughson and Tapsel for a discussion about the rhetoric of Leavis; see also van Oort in this volume).

In hindsight, Leavis makes a critical point that today is still high on the educational and political agenda: an economic logic based on technological development can hardly be considered the only mission for education. For example, Gert Biesta recently argued for the importance of value judgments “that are not informed by instrumental values but by what we might best call *ultimate* values” —a Burkean adjective—in this case, “values about the aims and purposes of education” (35–36; see also Jennifer Richards). The arguments of Leavis echo a concern we have to deal with today: science and technology should be confronted with social, political, and cultural values to avoid an overoptimistic technocratic naivety. So, the argumentation goes further and deeper, and becomes more relevant than the personal attack of Leavis on Snow.

The debate about the two cultures reappeared on the agenda in what has been coined “the science wars.” This controversy started in the 1990s with an attack on postmodern and poststructural thinking, and constructionism in general. It is a debate that also focuses on the nature of scientific research and theory and the status of the scientific method based on objectivity. It is very difficult to summarize this controversy in a fair way because both participants very often complain that the other did not understand or present their position in a correct way. The trope “the science war” can make us wonder about who started the war. From the perspective of science, it could be argued that the war began from the moment that scientific research was described as a series of changing paradigms (Thomas Kuhn). All this (and much more of course) inspired postmodern thinking that focused on the idea that scientific theories were social constructs (again problematizing objective scientific knowledge) on a complex continuum with some midway views. The attack focuses on postmodern anti-intellectualism and relativism as a “flight from reason” (Gross et al.). The science wars, then, can be described as a kind of revival of the two cultures controversy.

### Third Culture

It seems difficult to avoid binary thinking in this debate. But how do we deal with binaries? Even Snow (*The Two Cultures* 9) was aware of the drawbacks of binary thinking, because the number two “is a very dangerous number: that is why the dialectic is a dangerous process. Attempts to divide anything into two ought to be regarded with much suspicion.” And he further elaborates: “The clashing point of two subjects, two disciplines, two cultures—of two galaxies, so far as that goes—ought to produce creative chances. In the history of mental activity that has been where some of the breakthroughs came. The chances are

there now. But they are there, as it were, in a vacuum, because those in the two cultures can't talk to each other. It is bizarre how very little of twentieth-century science has been assimilated into twentieth-century art" (*The Two Cultures* 16). Later in *The Two Cultures and a Second Look*, Snow suggests the importance of a possible mediating "third culture," a zone in which the humanities and science would communicate in equal dialogue. John Brockman took this statement from Snow pleading for "the third culture thinker" as the new public intellectual: "a synthesizer, a publicist, a communicator" (Brockman *The Third Culture* 19). From this perspective, scientists communicate directly to the general public. The project is also inspired by how science and technology affect our culture by posing a central problem: "What we've lacked is an intellectual culture able to transform its own premises as fast as our technologies are transforming us" (Brockman, qtd. in Leggiere).

This idea was the basis for Brockman's project, *Edge*, the Third Culture, with major scientists who published under this umbrella: evolutionary biologists such as Stephen Gould and Richard Dawkins, mathematicians such as Marvin Minski and Roger Penrose, physicists such as Paul Davies, philosopher Daniel Dennett, and novelists such as Ian McEwan. All are committed Darwinians inspired by perspectives of evolutionary biology and Darwin's natural selection. From the same Darwinian perspective, literary criticism coined "evolutionary literary criticism," inspired by the idea of looking for an evolutionary explanation of literature (with E. O. Wilson as a major influence and Joseph Carroll as a major promoter). Again, a Darwinian perspective is a major inspiration combined with strong criticism against constructionist, poststructuralist accounts of scientific discourse as linguistically determined (see, for example, the Sokal Hoax as a major attack).

Last but not least, we should mention the perspective of New Humanism, a movement made famous by Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), mainly argued for by attacking beliefs in God and advocating rationalism (see for example the *British Humanist Association* website). And we should add New Atheism as a similar contemporary movement in which "new" refers to more publicly oriented publications focusing on an aggressive stance against all beliefs in God as erroneous and even dangerous for society. Central here is the dichotomy between religion and science. And we could add more perspectives to problematize the binary model. As Stephen Jay Gould writes, all these extensions of perspectives lead to "the death of the dichotomous model that had sparked all the controversy in the first place! Thus, I view the history of discussion about Snow's 'Two Cultures' as a lesson in the fallacies and dangers of dichotomy (while I obviously

do not deny the value of such simplification in provoking discussion and better resolution)" (94).

Indeed, we can wonder what the validity is of all these binaries and how they create caricatures of a debate that is more complex. Even Snow became aware of the danger and he "explored the middle ground between these artificial end points" (Gould 94). Gould pleads for a more nuanced perspective by paying attention to "a vast mass of scholars, probably constituting the great majority in a continuum that certainly cannot be defined by the rare extremes of each terminus" (94).

## Binaries

We structure the world through language in binaries, and whenever there is such a polar opposition, one of the two assumes a role of dominance—overtly or covertly—over the other (deconstruction can be described as a critical reflection about this process). So even if we try to overturn the traditional opposition (for example a scientific perspective is superior to a humanistic perspective or a humanistic perspective overrules scientific perspectives), then this "just means that the underdog is defined as overdog, and we are still left with thinking in terms of dominance or hierarchy" (Elbow 51). Peter Elbow argues that the question is "not whether to deal with dichotomies but how to deal with them," and he suggests five options: "(1) choose one side as right or better. This is 'either/or' thinking; (2) work out a compromise or a dialectical synthesis, that is, find a third term; (3) deny there is any conflict; (4) affirm both sides of the dichotomy as equally true, necessary, important, or correct; and (5) reframe the conflict so there are more than two sides" (54).

Elbow analyzes the different options and describes the first three as the most habitual way to deal with binaries, but he prefers the last two as more interesting perspectives. And he further argues, against any possible reproach, that he is "saving binary thinking." We concur with his argument: "Just so long as there's more than one! If we can see three or five sides, that's good—so long as that multiplicity isn't a cover for letting one side be the real winner." His real goal is "not to have pairs but to get away from simple, single truth—to have situations of balance, irresolution, nonclosure, nonconsensus, nonwinning" (Elbow 51). And we could not agree more with the kind of perspective that evolves from such an attitude, that is, "affirming both sides of a dichotomy as equally true or important, even if they are contradictory" (Elbow 51).

We should be careful here and Elbow certainly is; he does not go so far to say it is possible or necessary to balance every dichotomy: "it sometimes makes

sense to choose one side as right, the other wrong.” There are indeed good and bad dichotomies: “I’m just pleading for more effort to notice the many situations where the easy, good/bad distinction gets us in trouble and we need balance and irresolution” (54). The same perspective could be true for a constructionist perspective. In *The Social Construction of What*, Ian Hacking describes the constructionist perspective as a “primer for noncombatants” in the war by focusing on the different senses of the word “construction,” and indeed the book helps “the anti-constructionists get clearer on the actual contours of their enemy’s position” (Andrew Pickering qtd. in “*The Social Construction*”). Hereby Hacking defends the importance of such a perspective but also criticizes the aggrandization of the concept in the transformation of the construction of “everything.” Paul Boghossian describes this perspective as follows: “As Hacking rightly emphasizes, however, it is one thing to say that true and false beliefs should be treated symmetrically and quite another to say that justified and unjustified ones should be so treated. While it may be plausible to ignore the truth or falsity of what I believe in explaining why I came to believe it, it is not plausible to ignore whether I had any evidence for believing it” (7). Probably the main argument is that through the lens of social constructionism we focus not only on worldly aspects—facts—but on our beliefs of them.

In *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, Stephen Toulmin situates the two cultures debate in a historical evolution by making a distinction between the two cultures as they originated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Richard Rorty synthesized the view of Toulmin as a way of defending the humanistic literary tradition: “By showing how different the last three centuries would have been if Montaigne, rather than Descartes, had been taken as a starting point, Toulmin helps destroy the illusion that the Cartesian quest for certainty is intrinsic to the nature of science or philosophy” (qtd. in “*Cosmopolis*”). Toulmin argues for a tolerant perspective: “We are not compelled to choose between 16th-century humanism and 17th-century exact science: rather, we need to hang on to the positive achievements of them both” (71). The task, therefore, is neither to reject modernity nor to cling to it in its historic form: it is “rather, to reform, and even reclaim, our inherited modernity, by humanizing it” (71). As part of this humanizing perspective, Toulmin adds: “Since the mid-1960s, rhetoric has begun to regain its respectability as a topic of literary and linguistic analysis, and it now shares with narrative an attention for which they both waited a long time” (187). In the next part, we focus on the importance of rhetoric and narrative for our discussion in general and for the role and function of the humanities in particular.

## Rhetoric/Narrative

In what follows, we introduce rhetoric as part of a broader perspective that can be summarized as a rhetorical and narrative turn in the humanities and the social sciences. The “rhetorical turn” is inspired by the idea that we all have become a kind of *homo rhetoricus*, since we have become self-conscious about how language constructs reality (on this, see also Brummett in this volume). Such a perspective implies a metaperspective synthesized by Kenneth Burke as “a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing” (*Language* 49). Rhetoric makes us aware that ways of seeing the world can be considered as rationalizations. Burke described human beings as symbol using and misusing animals, and so he describes human action in symbolic terms in general with a central focus on the importance of language and culture in particular. For Burke, human beings experience their generic animality in terms of a specific symbolicity (*A Grammar*).

Inspired by Burke, Clifford Geertz described the human being as “an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,” and he takes “culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.” From this perspective, culture is described with the metaphor of a “text” (“the culture of a people is an ensemble of texts”) (452). In *Living and Learning as Semiotic Engagement*, Andrew Stables suggests that this perspective opens new approaches to knowledge: “if the world is a text, then literary studies may be the way to understand it” (2). In his introduction to Stables’s book, Richard Smith problematizes the fact that the hard sciences have become our primary model of knowledge and understanding and wonders “what a difference it would make if this model, were, say, literary criticism” (i). This perspective suggests a “reading” of the world in the same way that “a good reading of a poem, novel or film is . . . one that opens up further discussion, offering new insights to be debated or even new concepts in which to conduct the debate” (ii) (see also Rutten and Soetaert, “Signs and Symbols”). From the same perspective, Richard van Oort (2004) argues, “the human is a text to be interpreted, not because there is ‘nothing outside the text’ but because without the text there is no humanity. To the biologist or physicist (as for any natural scientist), it is certainly absurd to claim there is nothing outside the text. But to those concerned centrally with the study of the human (that is, those in the humanities and the ‘anthropological’ social sciences), it is literally quite true that without the mediating presence of the originary scene of symbolic representation—‘textuality,’ if one likes—there is no humanity and therefore no object of study” (638–39). (For an extended discussion on this see Rutten and Soetaert, “Signs and Symbols.”)



From this perspective, the rhetorical turn can be linked with the narrative turn. Burke's study of rhetoric starts from an analysis of literature and drama as tools to comment on society and the nature of human symbol use in general (on this, see also Tietge in this issue). Burke described literature as "all medicine" and "equipment for living": "sizing up situations in various ways and keeping up with correspondingly various attitudes" (*Philosophy* 304). He compares the analysis of literature as a form of sociological criticism and so relates the metaphor of equipment to an ethical turn in literary theory, criticism, and education. The role of criticism and education—all kinds of reflection—can be summarized in another motto: we have to become symbol-wise (Enoch). But as symbol-using animals we should add we are all story-telling animals (MacIntyre). Walter Fisher introduced an extension of Burke's description of human beings by suggesting the narrative paradigm as an alternative to the rational paradigm. The metaphor "homo narrans" has become a master metaphor suggesting that human beings tell stories to describe, interpret, and evaluate the world they inhabit. As far as the narrative turn is concerned, we should mention the work of Jerome Bruner as one of the founding fathers defending the importance of narratives as a mode of knowing. Bruner confronted two complementary modes of knowing of indeed two cultures: the "logico-scientific mode" and the "narrative mode" (Bruner x). The logico-scientific mode focuses on general and empirically tested truths. The narrative mode looks for the motives of human actions (what and why?) and the context in which these actions took place (where and when?) (see also Rutten and Soetaert, "Narrative and Rhetorical Approaches").

## Ian McEwan

In what follows, we will introduce Ian McEwan's work as a case study—or as equipment—to explore the confrontation between different perspectives "on" and "in" the two cultures. First, we want to situate the position of McEwan in the debate about the two cultures that we reconstructed above. We argue that he participates explicitly and implicitly in this ongoing debate. As a public intellectual and essayist he echoes some of the critical and even sneering arguments of Snow against the literary intellectuals. McEwan seems to identify more with scientists than with his literary colleagues. As a novelist he is presented and presents himself as a fellow traveler with the Edge authors, and publishes on their website (see, e.g., "On Being Original in Science in Art") and he is introduced in the anthology as one of the usual suspects (see his introduction in Brockman). McEwan also publishes under the umbrella of evolutionary literary criticism (e.g.,



his chapter in Gotschall and Wilson's classic, *The Literary Animal*). McEwan also takes part—as a public intellectual—in the recent revival of humanism. He is announced on the website of the British Humanist Association as “Writer and distinguished supporter of Humanism.” In the periodical, *The Humanist*, his novel was recently announced as follows: “Humanists sit up and take notice—*The Children Act* is a cautionary tale for those of us who would encourage people doubting their faith to explore those doubts” (Kalmanson).

McEwan is also linked with the New Atheist movement in general (see, e.g., Dawkins's seminal work, *The God Delusion*) and *The New Atheist Novel* in particular (Bradley and Tate). McEwan describes 9/11 as a ground-breaking moment in his thinking about religion: “When those planes hit those buildings and thousands of innocent people died and tens, twenties, hundreds of thousands of people started to grieve, I felt, more than ever, confirmed in my unbelief. What God, what loving God, could possibly allow this to happen?” (Whitney). A momentum McEwan compares with how the death of his favorite daughter deeply changed Charles Darwin. He further argues that the secular spirit (inspired by science) is superior for making reasonable judgments and defends atheism and the secular state against religious “attacks.” So McEwan belongs to the “Third Culture Club” of scientists, linguists, and philosopher-scientists but still plays his role as a novelist. This creates a paradox because he is at the same time a novelist, writing fiction (belonging to the humanities), and a defender of the superiority and importance of science. It is not in the scope of this chapter, but in his later novels scientific issues play an important role, for example, science and superstition (*Enduring Love*), the new physics (*The Child in Time*), and ecological problems (*Solar*). About *Solar*, McEwan reflects on how we should talk about the state we have got ourselves into, “as a very successful, fossil-fuel-burning civilization?” (qtd. in Detmers et al. 210). The question how we can change ourselves is described as a matter of human nature and then literature appears as a tool for reflection: “There's all the science to consider, but finally there is a massive issue of politics and ethics” (Tonkin *I Hang On*).

As we already argued, McEwan's work can be linked with the debate about the two cultures, but Snow published his ideas in the genre of the essay, and although McEwan also wrote essayistic reflections, his main work consists of novels. Although these fictional works have essayistic characteristics, he belongs to the category of those authors who “accommodate facts and arguments into a prose that resists being candidly discursive” (Robson). At the same time, he problematizes and thematizes the role of narratives in general and literature in particular. Very often, themes that are central in constructionism and postmodernism play a central role, for example, Joe Rose in *Enduring Love* elaborates on

the axiom that “there can be no thought without language” and even implicitly refers to the Snow debate: “Did the scientific illiterates who ran this place and who dared to call themselves educated people, really believe that literature was the greatest intellectual achievement of our civilization?” (*Enduring Love* 45–46). The power of stories is problematized: “What I liked here was how the power and attractions of narrative had clouded judgment” (*Enduring Love* 41) (see also Amigoni; Carbonell).

McEwan thematizes and problematizes literature in his work. He remains fascinated by the question: what is the role of art in general and the humanities in particular? McEwan testifies: “I hold to the view that novelists can go to places that might be parallel to a scientific investigation, and can never really be replaced by it: the investigation into our natures; our condition; what we’re like in specific circumstances” (qtd. in “Ian McEwan”). The idea that novelists have their own place to participate in the debate about the two cultures inspired Amigoni in arguing, “The crucial point about humans is that they are necessarily in two places at the same time—the order of nature, and the fields of inherited social practice and culture, and much of the most exciting work currently is concerned to break down the conceptual divide between the two . . . Even so, the orders and branching of biogenetic evolution and cultural-linguistic evolution will continue to work in different ways” (Amigoni 166). In what follows we will elaborate on how “cultural-linguistic” research is done by McEwan, focusing on the importance of narrative and rhetoric. We concur with Amigoni who further writes, “If the Third Culture contends that culture is now science, then McEwan’s fiction subtly and respectfully contests this view by seeming to suggest that it is necessary to be in two places at the same time—literature and science—when reflecting on where, as a species, our narratives are taking us” (166).

In the next part, we will focus on two novels—*Saturday* and *The Children Act* as case studies. In *Saturday* McEwan immerses himself in brain surgery, whereas in *The Children Act* he focuses on the rhetoric of the law. In an interview (McCrum) McEwan testified, “I love professions,” and, “I’ve always liked research, and I love people’s expertise.” McEwan describes the training and the occupation (the terministic screens) of his characters in a narrative form as a trained incapacity or an occupational psychosis. Burke (*Language* 45) introduced the concept “terministic screen” to describe the way we select symbols—a discourse—to frame reality. Particular screens create a particular way of seeing, thinking, and acting. Terministic screens can also be described as a “trained incapacity”—another central concept from Burke in which he focuses on how language and stories allow

us to think and to act in a particular way, but also prevent us from choosing alternative ways. A similar concept is “occupational psychosis,” described as “a certain way of thinking that went with a certain way of living” (*Permanence* 240). Later in this chapter, we will illustrate how McEwan confronts different terministic screens, inspired by a particular training or psychosis.

### *Saturday*

*Saturday* is narrated by Henry Perowne, a neurologist, and follows one dramatic day in his life. In the background there is a political confrontation, foregrounded in debates with his daughter inspired by the world after 9/11. Because of the perspective of our chapter we focus on the conflict between the two cultures on different levels in the story. First, the family level, which is presented through the worldview (terministic screen) of Perowne and the confrontation with his children. Perowne espouses scientific positivism as an essential aspect of his profession as a neurosurgeon: “A man who attempts to ease the miseries of failing minds by repairing brains is bound to respect the material world” (*Saturday* 67). But Perowne is also a man of two cultures. In his family, artistic types surround him and he wants to learn from them or at least understand what drives them. As a father and family man he listens to the jazz band of his son, reads the book list suggested by his daughter, and also wonders what drives his father-in-law John Grammaticus (what’s in a name?), a poet, or anyway a kind of literary bohemian. The characters appear as pawns in a game, in an ongoing debate between the two cultures: science and art.

The daughter plays a major part in the story and can be interpreted as an antagonistic character representing the perspective of the humanities in general and literary culture in particular. She more or less educates the father (or humanizes him, one could argue) by presenting him with a reading list because he lacks “imagination,” which makes him a “coarse, unredeemable materialist” (*Saturday* 134). Perowne is doubtful about what literature can mean for him, compared with his daughter who believes in the saving powers of literature. Are we story-telling animals? McEwan seems to argue that some of us are not, and Perowne is presented as the “living proof” that people can live without stories (*Saturday* 68). The discussion is presented through a dialogue between father and daughter. Perowne asks her not to suggest novels with a magic realistic touch anymore: “Please, no more ghosts, angels, satans or metamorphoses. When anything can happen, nothing much matters. It’s all kitsch to me.” And the daughter answers: “You ninny,” she reproved him on a postcard, “you Gradgrind. It’s

literature, not physics” (*Saturday* 66–67). So Perowne does not just read the novels but he also is a reluctant, critical reader who problematizes “his” literary education, complaining that his daughter Daisy’s “reading lists have persuaded him that fiction is too humanly flawed, too sprawling and hit-and-miss to inspire uncomplicated wonder at the magnificence of human ingenuity, of the impossible dazzlingly achieved” (*Saturday* 67). On the other hand, it is through a novel that these questions about novels are posed. Apart from problematizing the function of reading literature, McEwan thematizes postmodern literary cultural perspectives and attitudes. The father also educates the daughter (or the scientist educates the literary humanities).

McEwan uses his story to educate the reader about the science wars and argues against particular aspects of the humanities in general and postmodernism in particular. McEwan/Perowne refers to a debate with his daughter about postmodern, constructivist perspectives on what he considers his own field or scene: madness as a social construct (echoing ideas from postmodernism in general and probably Foucault in particular, but also focusing on the teaching of literature at university level): “In her second year at Oxford, dazzled by some handsome fool of a teacher, Daisy tried to convince her father that madness was a social construct, a wheeze by means of which the rich—he may have got this wrong—squeezed the poor. Father and daughter engaged in one of their energetic arguments which ended with Henry, in a rhetorical coup, offering her a tour of a closed psychiatric wing. Resolutely, she accepted, and then the matter was forgotten” (*Saturday* 92). So McEwan—through a confrontation between his characters, father and daughter—rhetorically wins the argument between realism and constructionism, between science and (some extreme aspects of) postmodernism.

Probably another example of the superiority of science could be the fact that Perowne recognizes the neurological conditions of a dangerous man, Baxter, who attacks him in the street. As a brain specialist, he notices Baxter’s odd movements and diagnoses these as the effects of Huntington’s disease: “Your father had it. Now you’ve got it too.” (*Saturday* 95). Perowne explains that there are new medications for curing this disease, and he can escape, thanks to this *deus ex machina*. And the same perspective is more or less repeated in the book’s final chapter: again the doctor tries to convince Baxter of the state of his illness and the fact that he can be cured. But he uses this knowledge to eliminate his attacker. Later, he wonders if he has broken the moral code as a doctor, sinned against the Hippocratic oath. But in the last episode, we can see how he follows his Hippocratic oath

when he drives to the hospital to perform emergency surgery on the man who assaulted him and his family and even tried to rape his daughter.

The last scene also contains an ultimate reflection on the function of art. The attacker has entered the house of the Perownes and threatens to rape the daughter. The tension is created in a stereotypical scene: a dangerous mentally deranged man with a knife against a nice, vulnerably naked woman. And then a *deus ex machina* is introduced to save the situation. The daughter recites a Victorian poem, Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," and this creates a miraculous transformation in the character of the attacker. He is so moved by the poem that he leaves his victim alone: "It's beautiful. You know that, don't you. It's beautiful." Can such a scene be read as the proof of the importance of poetry? As an illustration of the liberating and humanizing qualities of literature? Can literature be described as a way to stimulate empathy even for a mind as deranged as Baxter's? Can we believe this denouement? Can we believe in the civilizing effect of literature on the brain level? As a reader, you cannot help thinking about Perowne's own words: "It's all kitsch to me." In fact, such a story is exactly what Perowne despises in literary fiction. And yet the transformation of Baxter teaches Perowne (and of course the reader too) about this other perspective on life or this other literacy.

It is probably not just a coincidence that McEwan has chosen a poem by Matthew Arnold. On the level of the story, it teaches us something about cultural literacy. Baxter, an uneducated thug, thinks the poem has been written by the daughter and even Perowne—who as her father has read all her poems—is not aware it is not a poem of his daughter's and is affected by the words. What point is McEwan trying to make? "Is he commenting on literature's life-changing abilities? Is the novel's denouement—Baxter's under Perowne's knife—meant to indicate that the sciences have the same life-changing capacity as poetry?" (Fang). That kind of question focuses on the function of literature in general but also on the possible function of literature as "medicine." The importance of a literary education as part of medical training (or any other profession) is high on the educational agenda today. In previous works McEwan has focused on this question. For example, in *Atonement* a similar case was presented through the character of Robbie Turner, who started studying English literature but changed his mind and decided to study medicine. This binary opposition is transformed into a fruitful dialogue: "For this was the point, surely: he would be a better doctor for having read literature. What deep readings his modified sensibility might make of human suffering, of the self-destructive folly or sheer bad luck that drive

men towards ill health! Birth, death and frailty in between. Rise and fall—this was the doctor’s business, and it was literature’s too” (*Atonement* 93).

If literature is described as equipment—or as a possible medicine, we can wonder what kind of evidence-based research will back up this hypothesis from a more scientific, empirical perspective. McEwan shows the complexity. As Jane Mcnaughton argues: “*Saturday* does not make a convincing case for the efficacy of a literary education for doctors.” Indeed, “Perowne can live without fiction and is clearly able to be responsive to his patients’ stories without first having his sensibilities refined by literature” (qtd. in Fischer 108). Fischer further comments, “Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* is a particularly rewarding novel for discussions within the medical humanities—not because it provides answers about the relative value of literature and medicine or any concrete advice for doctors, but because it illustrates the interface between these worlds, the novel also highlights the radical differences between them. Most remarkably, *Saturday* contains an implicit critique of ingenuous readings that disregard the specificity of literary communication” (108). But the importance of *Saturday* is that the novel “provides a meditation on how we might further bridge the gap between the humanities and the sciences of mind through cautious collaborations based on the biological rootedness of storytelling, the centrality of feeling to thinking, and a shared empiricism that embraces human activities of interpretation balanced by testing, calibration, and revision” (Thraikill 171). Anyway, Perowne tells a story doubting the importance of storytelling. He does a rhetorical reading of the perspectives of others, he tries to understand their ways of seeing, problematizes the binaries, and learns the rhetorical lesson as expressed by Burke: “a way of seeing is a way of not seeing” (*Language* 49). The novel can thus be read as equipment for living.

### *The Children Act*

The second novel we discuss, *The Children Act*, can be described as “in a sense a companion piece to *Saturday*” (Gardner) because the novel again focuses on a profession and the relation between the two (and even more) cultures: science (again represented by medicine), art, and religion (confronted with the secular law). Apart from the thematic parallels, the main characters live in the same class or social world and in both stories medicine plays a role (both cases of medical emergency). The novel tells the story of Fiona Maye, who is trained as a lawyer and works as a high court judge dealing with cases in the family court. The story opens with the crisis in her (childless) marriage because her husband argues that he—in his early sixties—is entitled to enjoy a more passionate affair

with a younger woman (his 28-year-old statistician). The novel can also be read from the perspective of terministic screens, law and art, which dominate her life, or as an occupational psychosis or trained incapacity which inspires her actions. The real plot starts with the fact that Fiona has to deal with an urgent case and has to make a decision whether a young boy (a few months shy of his eighteenth birthday) with leukemia should be forced to undergo a blood transfusion that is necessary to save his life but which his religion, Jehovah's Witness, prohibits. Should the secular court overrule the faith of the family and the boy? The doctors feel they cannot follow the religious arguments because it is against their Hippocratic Oath (an echo from *Saturday*). But the judge has to decide. We are between a religious and a scientific or secular (medical) perspective. So McEwan adds a third player in the two cultures debate: religion. But the novel also deals with humanism in general and with an aspect of traditional humanism: the importance of kindness.

Fiona appears to be kind, decent (in her work) and faithful (in her marriage), but this combination seems problematic: she cares too much for others and in the long run this is "imperiling her marriage" and "preventing her ever getting round to having children of her own" (Leith). She is described as if she belongs to the law "as some women had once been brides of Christ" (McEwan, *The Children Act* 45). She represents the secular Western Enlightenment, the "good Englishman" as portrayed in Dickens' *Bleak House*: "John Jarndyce of Bleak House, the soul of kindness" (Wilentz).

The words "kind" and "reasonable" are buzzwords throughout the novel. Yet, as McEwan illustrates, both concepts are complicated. Complicated when confronted with religion: Orthodox Jews or Catholics make decisions for their children so as not to interfere with God's purpose. Complicated because arguing with the family seems complex: the reasonable arguments of Fiona do not change the opinions of the boy and his family; they even make them stronger. Complicated also because indeed, "the problem is that kindness is voluntary, unwarranted by law" (Wood), and how far does engagement reach? We do not want to spoil the plot, but although she does help the boy on a professional level, at a certain moment she fails him—a poet, a musician—on a personal level. Intervening seems complex. Although the novel focuses on the particular law case in which Fiona is involved, it leads to a much wider political question. How far can we go in intervening? Is it right to "intervene" to save a life?

The novel can be read as "a kind of fable about Faith versus Science and the State" (Friedell), but is more than "a feelgood fable of secular enlightenment" (Tonkin "The Children"). The story does not give solutions, but thematizes and



problematizes major issues. As we have discussed, a major topic is the binary between science and religion. But there is more: the whole story is also embedded in the debate between religion versus humanism, and in a sense about the confrontation of the humanities and art in particular. Apart from the controversy between science and religion, art plays a central role in the novel in the lives of the main characters. As in *Saturday*, poetry plays a role in *The Children Act*, more precisely, Yeats's "Down By the Salley Gardens" creates a bridge between the lawyer and the boy. Moreover, the boy appears to be a gifted poet and Fiona appreciates his romantic poetry.

Music again plays a central role in the story. The focus is on classical music and especially on a concert as a major event in Fiona's life, in which she plays with her lawyer colleagues. The scene in which she performs Schubert successfully tells us something about the function of art: she forgets about her duties as a judge because she is absorbed by the music and her responsibilities towards her fellow musicians, the audience, and the composer. Her mind is filled with Mahler and Schubert. McEwan confronts the two cultures (law and music) in Fiona. She gives an excellent performance but hardly enjoys the applause, because she is thinking about other duties she has to fulfill: she did not succeed in rescuing the boy who trusted her. The relation between art and life appear to be complex and hard to measure. There is also a confrontation between jazz and classical music, which teaches us something about the character and profession of Fiona's trained incapacity, that is, she can't play jazz: "No pulse, no instinct for syncopation, no freedom, her fingers numbly obedient to the time signature and notes as written. That is why she was studying law, she told her lover. Respect for rules" (*Children Act* 193). McEwan confronts both perspectives as a trained incapacity or an occupational psychosis through musical preferences.

In general, the novel focuses on the ethical decisions we inevitably have to make in life. The story illustrates the complexity of rules and interventions, combines the personal and the social, and gets inside the law and can be read as a kind of ethnography or, indeed, equipment. It shows the power and complexity of storifying the world: "*The Children Act* presents a scenario in which the virtues of the secular life, poetry included, fight against the consolations of religious belief and no winner is declared. All the things that Fiona lives by—most importantly, music and the law—are found in some way wanting. It may be a different, more supple and surprising argument but it is an argument nonetheless" (Robson). Again, the role of art is thematized in the novel, and both novels thematize the role of literature: "McEwan may disdain belief in the supernatural,

but the powers he claims on behalf of literature must also be taken on faith” (Friedell).

## Conclusions

As far as the debate between the two cultures is concerned, McEwan seems to follow the suggestions of Snow in trying to bridge the gap between them: “Although he never explicitly refers to C. P. Snow, it seems that of all contemporary novelists writing today, he is the most devoted follower of Snow’s recommendations” (Fabiszak et al. 449). On the other hand, he follows up the arguments of Leavis and reflects upon the function of literature.

McEwan participates in the debate about the two cultures with novels with essayistic ambition on the one hand, but on the other hand, as we already stated above, he accommodates facts and arguments “into a prose that resists being candidly discursive” (Robson). The fact that McEwan uses the novel as a vehicle to reflect upon the relation between art and science implies that he uses the novel as a kind of allegory to discuss major social and cultural problems. Both works of McEwan that we discussed can be read as part of an ethical turn in literature and a revival of humanism in twenty-first-century literature. Both novels reflect upon traditional humanistic values in general and the function of literature in particular. In an interview McEwan presents a perspective on the purpose of the novel:

The novel is famously good at revealing, through various literary conventions, a train of thought, or a state of mind. You can live inside somebody else’s head . . . I think that quality of penetration into other consciousnesses lies at the heart of its moral quest. Knowing, or sensing what it’s like to be someone else I think is at the foundations of morality. I don’t think the novel is particularly good or interesting when it instructs us how to live, so I don’t think of it as moral in that sense. But certainly when it shows us intimately, from the inside, other people, it then does extend our sensibilities. (“Ian McEwan”)

From this perspective of “extending our sensibilities,” McEwan’s work can be read as an analysis of the struggle between sense (rationalism) and sensibility (emotionalism) (De Canha), so he problematizes and thematizes the perspectives of the two cultures confronting the reader with “a perspective of perspectives” (Burke, *Grammar of Motives* 513) through literature.

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