

An Analysis of Ian McEwan's *Saturday* From the Perspective of Space

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the spatial narrative of Ian McEwan's *Saturday* in terms of physical space, social space, mental space and textual space. Through the spatial images of the protagonist's home, the city square, and the nursing home, McEwan shows the strained relationship between him and his surroundings. By highlighting the prevalence of media's coverage of the forthcoming Iraq war, McEwan constructs a social space that is fraught with chaos and anxiety. By depicting the protagonist's spiritual space influenced by commodity fetishism and mass media, McEwan underscores the subtlety of intangible mental control and the consequent psychasthenia. By employing the writing strategy of stream of consciousness and the settings of multiple space types, McEwan reflects the loss of social authenticity and urbanites' lack of sense of security in the post 9/11 era.

Key words: Ian McEwan; *Saturday*; Space

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary British writer, Ian McEwan (1948-), by virtue of the collection of short stories of *the First*

Love, the Last Rites (1975), has become one of the most influential and outstanding writers in contemporary British literary arena.

According to the theme of his works, McEwan's road of creation can be mainly divided into two stages. The first stage is delimited from the middle of 1970s to the middle of the 1980s. At this stage, McEwan's creation was mostly based on a bizarre, highly Gothic style. His representative works of this stage mainly include *The First Love*, *The Last Rites*, *The Cement Garden* (1987), *In Between the Sheets* (1978) and *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981). The second stage is from the middle of the 1980s to the present day. At this stage, Ian McEwan was looking for a new voice to present a broad and complex ethical dilemma of humanity in his work, and has brought a new beginning for the novel, which has become a kind of moral medium in such an uncertain age of the postmodernism. The representative works of this stage are mainly consisted of *The Child in Time* (1987), *The Innocent* (1990), *Black Dogs* (1992), *Enduring Love* (1997), *Amsterdam* (1998), *Atonement* (2001), *Saturday* (2005), *On Chesil Beach* (2007) and *Solar* (2010).

Being published in 2005, *Saturday* is the ninth novel of McEwan, which was thought highly of after being published. The famous critic Ross, holds the opinion that "*Saturday* has emitted a strong atmosphere of realism, which is a typical novel that gives a description of the temporal situation of the UK" (Cited in Li, 2013, p.1).

Cutting from the author's life experience and his belief, etc, Martin Rely interprets *Saturday* from the latitude of the political ideology, he holds that "the novel reveals the human's mental state that full of morbidity and politics and the strong colonial tendencies that London to be as a multicultural metropolis in the world" (Rely, 2010, p.25). What's more, the relationship between science and art in cognitive science and neuroscience has also been favored by researchers, which has helped to enrich the connotation of the text.

At present, in the global context, by means of the public discourse, such as literature works, films and television works and so on, people's anxiety and responsibility can be amplified in the context of the post-9/11 era. This point is significantly reflected in *Saturday*. The depiction of doctor Perowne's one-day life is actually the epitome of the contemporary life. It has an obvious meaning of realism. And, this paper is mainly aimed at analyzing the spatial narrative of *Saturday*.

No matter how the theorists and novelists are argumentative on the views of the novel, they are mostly agreed to define the novel as an art of time. Elizabeth Bowen, a British writer, said that:

Time is a major part of the novel. I think that time is of equal value to the story and the characters. A writer who I can think of, or an instinctive understanding of novel techniques, has little to do with the time factor. (Bowen, 2008, p.117)

Of course, there are exceptions. Gertrude Stein, an American novelist, wants to "Liberate the novel from the tyranny of time concept". However, she failed because once the novel has completely been out of the concept of time, it would be not able to show anything. Of course, paying attention to the time can not lead to the neglect of space. That is to say, whether it is as a kind of existence, or as a kind of consciousness, time and space are an indivisible unity.

No matter in classic novels or modern novels, we can both find a typical text that molding the image of characters by forming a specific space. Therefore, if we want to generalize and analyze the characters' features in the text, we should only study about the "spatial images" that can express the characters. (Long, 2007, p.2)

It is because that they have got a good knowledge of time and space, a large number of modern novelists have a strong interest in the aspect of space. They are not only taking the space as the place where the story takes place and the narrative essential scene, but also using the space to represent the time, and using the space to arrange the novel's structure, even using the space to promote the entire narrative process. It is not difficult to find that this novel seems to use literary texts to practice the spatial narrative theory by reading McEwan's *Saturday*.

1. PHYSICAL SPACE

1.1 Body

Saturday, the story of the novel, which takes place in London, tells a story of Henry Perowne, who gets up at four o'clock in the morning, and the author depicts everything happened to him in the next twenty four hours, and the surrounding people and the environment around him. At the beginning of the novel, in the morning, Perowne stood in his own window overlooking all what happened on the street outside. The book cited Harold's

poem: "Relies on the window, the night breeze blow gently" (McEwan, 2005, p.3).

The body is the smallest unit of space (Harvey, 2005, p.289). The novel of *Saturday* took place in London. This is a post-metropolitan area with a link that extends to every aspect of urban and regional development and has a penetrating effect. In this globalized city, as the smallest space, Henry Perowne's body is closely linked with the world, which is regarded as the largest space scale. Perowne got up in the morning and looked outside closely to window, accidentally seeing a plane crash event in the depths of the woods. Due to the novel's temporal setting is in 2003, just two years away from 9·11 Attacks, so he began to worry that this might be a terrorist attack of Taliban, so that he can no longer fall into sleep. Everyone agrees that in these days the planes in the sky can be very different, predatory or destructive, observing the disaster from a security point of view, watching the massive death, but will never see any people die, no blood, no screaming, no human body headquarters. Getting into this nothingness, the force of the imagination was released (McEwan, 2005, p.16).

In fact, the day of Perowne described in the novel was not an ordinary day. *Saturday* took place on February 15, 2003, the day when the British held a real world war against British and British invasion of Iraq. At that time, the main streets of London were covered with anti-war demonstrators' parade, and the story of Perowne's own is always closely related to the world of current events. At the beginning, Perowne watched the television reports about the plane crash at home, then he wanted to go out to play tennis to forget the anxiety, but at this moment he met the anti war demonstrators parade which was held to against the Iraq war. In order to get away from the traffic control and avoid from the crowd, he had a car accident, and he was in conflict with two young people who looked like the criminal syndicate. So in the later, the two young people followed by him and broke into his home to kidnap his daughter as a hostage. The whole plot is very thrilling and terrifying.

Through the one-day's movement of Perowne, the plot of novel is designed closely, extending from the most secret space of the body, and the family to the metropolitan area of London, and the public space of the British state, and all of these were deeply involved in the shadow of global terrorism. Therefore, body is a significant image in *Saturday*, which has shown us the true life in London in the 21st century as if we were there.

1.2 Spatial Images

Home is a space unit which is frequently showing up. Of course, home could give people a sense of belonging and security, but it also brings people a kind of captivity. In the beginning of the novel, it depicts the sense of captivity of home. The leading role Perowne's house, was in a 30 feet tall building, and his bedroom was in the shadow of the

layers of curtains, and outside the window, there was the garden, square, sidewalks, black wire rod, dustbins, Indian hotels, where there were both the young people kissing, and old lady crying. The hero "Perowne thinks the city is a success, a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece" (Ibid., p.2). In the history of Western literature, to the male, the significance of home was often complex. In *Saturday*, Perowne, left his home, and achieved his own value through men's competitiveness, in the tennis courts of big city, streets and hospitals.

The Fitzroy Square is a municipal building that was repeatedly mentioned in the novel, it is always pushing the line of sight of Perowne. In a most of time, it will bring Perowne the pleasure of aesthetics or an access to spiritual comfort. "He sees the paving stone micaglistening in the pedestrianised square, pigeon excrement hardened by distance and cold into something almost beautiful, like a scattering of snow" (McEwan, 2005, p.3). What attracts Perowne most is the vitality there. In Perowne's opinion, the square has a potential energy to release the main carnival spirit. People out from the office building are confident, happy and free. Here, as a product of urban civilization, square has caressed the individual subjectivity with its freedom, democracy and its tolerant attitude, it is also an ideal field that has been placed on the spirit of the city community. In this way, we can know that the meaning of space in literature is far more subtle and complicated than the common places and scenes.

Besides the square and Perowne's home, in the novel, the old people's home plays an important role as reflective of the spectacularity of London's architecture. They seem to give residents a sense of belonging, creating a home-like atmosphere. However, due to standardization and homogeneity of the building, old people's home does not engage in dialogue with their residents. Undeniably, they have the function of accommodating the elderly, but some of them people lose their requirements for quality of life, the need for private space, the conception of the warm family. As a spatial image, old people's homes, to some extent, are indifferent to their residents' conception of home, ignore the emotional appeal of residents and their desire for home, and make up for their spiritual emptiness with inadequate subsidies.

2. SOCIAL SPACE

2.1 The Influence of War

The twentieth century is both an age of science and technology, and a time of massacre and concentration camps (Hu, 2013, p.156). The terrorist attacks in America and the Iraq war in the Middle East and other world events make London, the world system metropolis, seem to be dark and gloomy, it just like a maze that filled with ominous clouds. The hero Perowne, who left his home, was faced with danger in the city that under the terrorism.

In the labyrinth of narrow alleys, army and police suppressed a demonstration of ordinary people and the government is ready to deal with potential civil unrest. All of these are involved in the shadow of global terrorism in the post-9/11, which has directedly resulted in the missing of public's security, and at the same time, it has increased various uncertainties of the society.

2.2 The Social-Class Gap

On Saturday, the man Perowne hung around, doing nothing. His eyes swept past the kinds of goods one by one. Looking at the heavy traffic, and the material exchange never stops flowing and seeing the police is in maintaining the order of the demonstrators, he also observed the power relationship in the city space. Cleveland street once was famous for sweatshops and prostitutes, now there were the Hotel of Greece, Turkey and Italy in this street with different shapes. Maple Street reminded Perowne of the shabby office buildings and dormitories in that previous street. London's city square is a space in which people can perform their lives, and people wander to the square to perform their lives. Obviously, the street can not meet their needs. Passion needs space, and the theater can provide space for performance.

Here, there were teenagers and wives who fell their husbands' phones to the ground, and a young man who was calling for two hours, and a man wearing a dark suit, kneeling on the ground crying, and an old lady who had been screaming for three hours as well as a couples who were crying on a bench in the square (McEwan, 2005, p.35). The public nature of the square embraces the privacy of these private dramas. Out from the city hall apartments or even the small room, from the narrow path to the wide sky and looking at the tall trimmed trees in the green ground, people thought of their most basic needs, and these needs were not being satisfied. Therefore, the vivid square that mentioned above is actually constructing a kind of illusion perfected by the appearance of monopoly, hiding the social reality of class division and rank order.

In the second, there also exists a difference between the doctor Perowne and the street gang Baxter. As a neurosurgeon, Perowne has professional knowledge of medicine. However, Baxter is just a street gang with a low level of knowledge. Therefore, Perowne is accustomed to suppress Baxter in a proud voice, obviously, what he gets from Baxter is always the antipathy. Then it comes to the medical trouble. Medical trouble is often hidden in the deep social conflicts, the conflict between Perowne and Baxter reflects the imbalance in the relationship between the upper class and the lower class in London and British society increasingly sharp class contradictions (Li, 2013, p.39). It seems that the trouble of interpersonal communication has been strengthened by the social-class gap, and also caused the trust crisis.

2.3 Global Environment

The order and vitality in contemporary London make Perowne put himself in it and so he can feel a spiritual self satisfaction. On the way of Perowne's drive to visit his mother,

a long turn to let him through rows of reinforced concrete buildings. It is not night, but early spring in February has bright lights in the afternoon. Perowne sees people dressed as a building inside work template as straight, all sitting on a desk, facing the computer, as if today is Saturday. (Ibid., p.128)

The uniform space form has reinforced the regulations to efficiency and the requirements to homogenize standardized construction, which is showing a picture of a busy work to Perowne. It also shows the high vitality of modern capitalist production. The spatial order does not cause any damage to the subjectivity, this kind of logic has launched its own narrative, but actually covered the existence of social nature. In efficiency and function of cities, the stiffness is decisive and lively space. However, it completely ignores the communication between person and person, and ignores the small experience person with space. With rapid development of the urbanization process in London in the early decades of the twentieth century, the number of buildings increased dramatically, but the authorities care for nothing but the scale and speed of housing construction, much less the aesthetic function of the house and the inner feelings of the residents.

"Due to the commodity, people become the victim of efficiency, become the standard space under the dominance of passive numb machine" (Wang, 2005, p.12). This is also the negative effects that brought about by post-industrial society.

3. THE PROTAGONIST'S SPIRITUAL SPACE

3.1 The Third Space

The third space is a multiple space that put all the subjectivity and objectivity, abstract and concrete, real and imaginary, known and unknown, the spirit and the body, consciousness and unconsciousness together in (Soja, 2005, p.13). As to the third space, Homi Bhabha puts forward that the third space is not only based on multiculturalism or mixed exoticism, but also on cultural hybridity of writing and expression (Bhabha, 1994, p.122).

In the opinion of Soja, the greatest feature of the third space is the super reality and the consequently mental decline, which is most serious in the core areas of the post metropolitan areas. This typical neurasthenia symptoms not only occur in the hero Perowne himself. The essence of the city is to cultivate insomnia. The city itself is an entity that does not sleep and its line will never break. In the tens of millions of people, there are always people stared out of the window when they should sleep, and

every night, the people is not the same people. In this way, people suffering from neurasthenia will appear in the streets of London anywhere, even if the object of the car accident of Perowne is not an exception. Due to the traffic jam caused by the demonstration crowd, lonely Perowne meets a punk style characters—Baxter. Baxter was suffering from Aminobutyric acid deficiency of the central nervous system. In fact, the plot of the novel is closely related to the neurasthenia of the two main characters.

In *Saturday*, the Iraq war was approaching, and although most of people are against the war, the office discourse of spectacular media spared no effort to propagandize for war:

There's the Kuwait-Iraq border, and military trucks moving in convoy along a desert road, and our lads kipping down the tracks of their tanks, [...]. An officer, barely in his twenties, is standing outside his tent pointing with a stick at a map on an easel. (McEwan, 2005, p.183)

Therefore, when Perowne realized that, of course he will be caught in the trouble of "choosing", which also reinforced his psychasthenia.

3.2 Commodity Fetishism

In the society of consumption dominated by visual images of commodities, the public pay more attention to the material culture rather than the spirit culture. In the novel, Perowne likes the spirit of enjoyment that brought by commodity image, likes to stop outside the shop window, and likes to stare at the commodity on display inside, but extremely loathes reading literary works. He can stand to do surgery in consecutive seven hours, also have enough strength to participate in the London Marathon, but can't endure reading. Although his daughter, Daisy, often criticizes his astounding ignorance, led the father to accept the influence of literary works, scolded him for poor taste and insensitivity, it is tantamount to cruel torture and ordeal (Ibid., p.25).

In *Saturday*, Too much reliance placing on commodities show us a picture that whether they annoy you or you like them, those commodities in their various forms have already pervasively permeated our lives, and people are powerless to change their destiny, also have no way to escape but only yield to spectacular commodities. Eventually consciousness of criticism and self-examination lost, in this respect, the depiction reflects that the contemporary London remains its darkness.

3.3 The influence of Media

On the other hand, because of the development and dissemination of all kinds of media, the spirit of people is also under great control. For example, the hero Perowne saw the plane crash through the TV report in the morning, and also, the radio equipment were constantly broadcasting news reports about the war between America and Iraq and other various agitation, so he wanted to have a relax by playing squash, but when he arrived at the

squash courts, he found himself can never get rid of the influence from media information and dissemination of those annoying news. Therefore, in contemporary society, western people's spiritual space is mostly filled with anxiety and emptiness. According to the analysis, we can truly feel that people at that time had lost their own minds and freedom when they were the under the intangible control of media.

4. TEXTUAL SPACE

4.1 Stream of Consciousness

In literary criticism, stream of consciousness denotes a literary technique which seeks to describe an individual's point of view by giving the written equivalent of the character's thought processes. Stream-of-consciousness writing is strongly associated with the modernist movement. Its introduction in the literary context, transferred from psychology, is attributed to May Sinclair.

Susan Green thinks that "through the characterization, focusing and conceptual metaphor, *Saturday* is aimed to explore the process of contemporary consciousness of human mind" (Green, 2010, p.58). Stream-of-consciousness writing is usually regarded as a special form of interior monologue and is characterized by associative (and at times dissociative) leaps in syntax and punctuation that can make the prose difficult to follow, tracing as they do a character's fragmentary thoughts and sensory feelings. Stream of consciousness and interior monologue must be clearly distinguished from dramatic monologue, where the speaker is addressing an audience or a third person, and is used chiefly in poetry or drama. In stream of consciousness, the speaker's thought processes are more often depicted as overheard (or addressed to oneself) and are primarily a fictional device.

According to John Friedmann's spatial narrative theory, "characters' movements in the horizontal axis are confined to the textual world" (Friedmann, 2001, p.24), so the analysis on *Saturday* could be based on the classic narrative methods. Therefore, we can discuss about the narrative features of *Saturday* from two aspects, one is the narrative perspective, the other is spatial scene. The omniscient perspective is a common narrative form in novels. It is mainly narrated by the third person out of the story. The omniscient perspective is in the position of domination. Everything in the story, including the characters, plots and scenes, is in his control. In addition, in order to make up for the shortage of the omniscient narrator perspective and make the novel become more authentic, the limited perspective of the third person is often adopted in *Saturday* by Ian McEwan. Not only that, but the writer combined the omniscient narrative perspective with the third person limited point of view and free indirect speech, so that readers can witness the development of the plot from outside or by a certain

characters in the novel in a closer distance. In this way, the narrative discourse will no longer be unified to a single narrator. It seems that there is a stealth camera that always changing the angle of photography along with the development of the narrative process. For example, in the third part, when Mr. and Mrs. Perowne accidentally met Prime Minister Blair, the scene was described as follows:

Helplessly, the Perownes watched them all approach. In a sudden press of bodies they were introduced to the Prime Minister. Blair was looking at him with recognition and interest. He said, "I really admire the work you're doing". Perowne said automatically, "Thank you." The Prime Minister, who still had hold of his hand, added, "in fact, we've got two of your paintings hanging in Downing Street. Cherie and I adore them". You are making a mistake. And on that word there passed through the Prime Minister's features for the briefest instant a look of sudden alarm, of fleeting self-doubt. (Ibid., pp.145-146)

The writing style of Ian McEwan is too delicate. In an ordinary Saturday, everything that happened within 24 hours in his works is almost as clear as subcutaneous capillaries under the microscope. It is complicated, but in an orderly way. The images that Perowne saw and felt was so meticulous that readers could also feel what he felt and think what he thought. *Saturday* is one of the best novels in the aspect of stream of consciousness. The novel is full of worries of modern people. Facing with the coming Iraq War and being threatened by the terrorist attacks, people are forced to think about their lives, relationships with others repeatedly.

The novel throws all of these multifarious objects into a nuclear, so when readers are immersed in the plot, they will never stop realizing that they are understanding this world through the eyes of a surgeon expert. The debate caused by the war, democracy and dictatorship, comments and silence, inheritance and innovation of poetry, the development of jazz, parents and children, as well as the gap and love with the next generation of the family, the encounter of strangers, career and personal interests, childhood memories and adult personality, disease and treatment of patient, terror and attack, the middle class life attitude, tired spirit and competitive disposition and so on, they were all shown one by one here. The novel describing only one-day life should include so many images, we can see that McEwan has successfully created a self-contained small universe.

4.2 The Settings of Multiple Space Types

4.2.1 From Body to the World

In the aspect of the settings of multiple space types, we can see the big world through the small one in *Saturday*. Ian McEwan not only regards the space as a stage of characters' movements, but also takes the spaces as the frame of the novel to develop the story's plot. *Saturday* is divided into 5 parts, scenes are spread in the sites of Perowne's one-day activities, including his home, street and squash court, street and old people's home,

hospital and home. Therefore, the shift of the plots are in accordance with the change of space scenes. Furthermore, by means of televisions, radios and other modern medium, McEwan put the small home space and broad world together to interpret the political relationship among countries, relationship with families and surroundings. This kind of spatial frame has strengthened the consensus of mental panic and anxiety of western people in the post-9/11 era.

4.2.2 From the First Space to the Third Space

Other than that, the spatial narrative also consists of the first space, the second space, and the third space, which has formed a concept of spatial scale. Space scale is an important term of spatial narrative. In the first space, more emphasis on perceptual experience and practice in the past is taken. In the second space, focus shifted to the space of conception and imagination, especially the academic expression and conceptualization formed in the post metropolis space. The third space will integrate the perception with conception, objective reality with subjective imagination in a wider scope. So in the third space, surreality melts into the daily life and spreads. In the third space, the phenomenon of surreality and the subsequent mental breakdowns become more serious in big cities. In the third space of the post-modern city, the so-called neurasthenia is actually a kind of disorder between the surrounding environment and egos (Soja, 2005, p.303).

What's more, Henri Lefebvre pointed that "space is social. Space is involved in the social relationship of reproduction, that is physiological relationship among sex, age and specific family structure, and it also refers to the productive relations" (Lefebvre, 1991, p.124). McEwan tries to center on his home to understand the relationship with the world, other people, and surroundings around them. The design of the characters also gives expression to the arrangement of space. Perowne is a neurosurgeon. Everyday he comes into contact with the practical science, however, people in his family are all art lovers: his daughter is a poet, his son is a music lover, and his father is a professor in university but also a famous poet. The design like this is actually not a coincidence. The sense of research of Perowne is in a condition of the first space. But in the process of narration, there are always some events of social life and history happening in the space where Perowne lives in. These belong to the second space. However, when Perowne began to have a study on the music and some poems in art under the influence of his families, then his art imagination is in the third space.

Perowne was shuttled back and forth among the three spaces, which have fully reflected the life in the twenty-first century. As a doctor of neurosurgery, the structure of brain can be very clear to Perowne. However, he can not fall asleep again after waking up in the dawn, and "he is alert and empty-headed and inexplicably elated" (McEwan, 2005, p.332). The symptom of neurosis is

not only embodied in Perowne. The other characters in the novel also show their anxiety and unease.

In the world of the third space, the simulacra always comes up instead of the reality. Because of the torment of disease of nerve, Baxter broke in Perowne's home, then the simulacra in the third space will be like a means to solve the problem.

Baxter intruded into the home of Perowne, he threatened Perowne's daughter violently and tried to rape her, but in the nick of time, simulacra saved everyone. When the gun pointed to her, and forced her to take off her clothes, Perowne's daughter was so afraid that she began to recite the poems of hers: "The sea is calm tonight. The tide is full, the moon lies fair upon the stairs—on the French coast the light gleams and is gone..." (McEwan, 2005, p.229). To our surprise, at this time, Baxter was so excited that he took back his gun and shouted: "you wrote that, you wrote that, you know that, don't you? It's beautiful. And you wrote it. It reminds me of where I grew up" (McEwan, 2005, p.231). This kind of literary simulacra makes the scene of horror became soft all of a sudden, and even prevented a crime.

Therefore, the real world and the imaginative world are in coexistence. In addition, the son of Perowne, is a jazz player, his pieces of music bring an atmosphere of relaxation into Perowne's stressful work. And as a college professor, Perowne's father and his daughter can help him escape from his work—the objective analysis of human brain, and enter the complicated third space that can be felt and experienced individually.

CONCLUSION

The Contemporary British novelist, Ian McEwan's *Saturday* depicts a unique reflection of London with spatial elements dominated by visual images. The social authorities manipulate urbanite's spiritual life through spectacles as architecture, commodity and media, deprive human being's free will, and eventually make people the slaves of these spectacles. McEwan upholds the advantage of the speedy development of the city, at the same time he condemns the ignorance for the spiritual world of people.

In spite of London's material prosperity and cultural pluralism, there are too many questions confronting people all without the necessary sequence and order. McEwan tries to tell readers the world is so chaotic and there has been dissatisfied restlessness under the placid surface of life.

The influence of the Iraq war on international politics and the public is also one of the novelist's social spatial focuses. An air crash can cause Perowne's great panic and is related to terror attacks, it can be seen that people are panic-stricken for war. Exactly because of the lack of a sense of security, the citizens strive against their government and make a gigantic demonstration

clamouring for peace. They live under the shadow of global terrorism, which exposes people to sudden violence so that it is more than threatening.

McEwan penetrates into social maladies through spatial narrative and thus give prominence to the function of the third space as an anecdote to social chaos and uncertainties. Art, affection and cohesion of a family, and the protagonist's fantasy of living in a peaceful world bring solace to him. The combination of the realistic and the imaginative makes for a unique spatial narrative of London, which manifests McEwan's profound meditation on and his deep concern with urban life.

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