

IAN McEWAN. 2010. *SOLAR*.
RANDOM HOUSE, 304. str.

Solar, a novel by the British author Ian McEwan, was published in 2010. Through the prism of contemporary and most current problems that shake the human kind on a global level, McEwan once again harshly criticizes human society and depicts the character flaws of the 21st century man. Ian McEwan, known in the past under the nickname of Ian Macabre due to explicit scenes of violence in his novels, distances himself from his usual style in *Solar* and tries on a new, slightly comical approach with which he attempts to point out the difficulties contemporary society is faced with.

In *Solar*, McEwan tells us a story of Michael Beard, an ageing scientist and a renowned Nobel Prize winner. Initially, McEwan portrays Beard through his personal tragedy, that is the falling apart of his fifth marriage. His wife Patrice is being unfaithful while he is still passionately in love with her. Parallel to troubles in Beard's private life, McEwan allows the reader to have a look into Beard's professional life as well, his attempts and efforts to find the solution for global warming that threatens to change the way of living on planet Earth. The title of the novel itself, *Solar*, implies that the plot of the novel is tightly connected with the biggest star in the sky. Michael Beard is trying to save the planet from the imminent climatic changes by building a site in New Mexico which is to produce renewable and environmentally-friendly energy by using artificial photosynthesis. Global warming is the current problem that mankind as a whole is confronted with on a global level. This way, McEwan manages to get the readers' attention and draws them in his story which, even though it is fiction, cannot leave anyone indifferent because it discusses current problems in the real world.

This novel, interwoven with elements of satire, comedy and a crime novel, makes the reader ponder upon the questions and attitudes that McEwan brings out. The novel is divided into three chapters taking place in the year 2000, 2005 and 2009 and it chronologically follows Beard's life, both private and professional. McEwan manages to capture the readers' attention and to provoke highly emotional and moral reactions. The means with which he succeeds in this is the choice of the characters and clear insight into their personalities.

According to the choice of characters in the novel, *Solar* mostly resembles *Amsterdam* (1998). The difference between the two is that in *Amsterdam* McEwan conveys his ideas and critique through the prism of multiple characters whereas in *Solar* the whole plot is told through the person and actions of Michael Beard. This is very brave of McEwan since Beard is one of the most unlikeable McEwan's characters ever. According to his credentials, Beard is supposed to represent an outstanding member of society and an admirable intellectual who, through his research, helps the human kind to better understand the world that surrounds it. What is expected of such a man is a high level of critical thinking, understanding of the way the world functions and an overall love and care for the planet. Instead, McEwan paints a picture of a selfish and self-involved man incapable of taking care of himself, not to mention of others or the planet.

Michael Beard is being mercilessly criticized from the very beginning of the novel by the author. Balding, stout, slow, disinterested, unfaithful and selfish are some of the attributes that describe Beard's personality and physique. He enjoys the fruits of past glory, but it becomes clear to the reader that he is in no way familiar with the contemporary achievements in the scientific area of his interest and expertise. He consumes large quantities of food, drinks and women, not thinking about the consequences of his actions. In this sole character, McEwan epitomizes the problems of the whole human kind. Excessive consumption of food and drink leads Beard into sickness, just as the excessive and irresponsible consumption of energy by humans threatens to destroy the planet and life as we know it. At a certain point in the novel, McEwan describes Beard's childhood and growing up, his relationship with his parents. It seems like McEwan himself admits that he has taken it too far in denigrating his own character and is now trying to find an excuse for Beard's intolerable behavior. All of a sudden, Beard becomes even more real. The reader gets acquainted with his whole life, his thought process, his childhood, first marriage and career. If the aim of this is to justify his character in the eyes of the readers, then McEwan has not been successful. Although, it has to be acknowledged that by doing this, McEwan has developed his character and completely uncovered Beard's self-deception as well as his physical and moral degradation. Beard's life philosophy is that a profound inner change is impossible and the only thing one can expect in life is a slow deterioration of body and soul. Only one thing can be expected from such a man and such a philosophy, and that is disappointment.

McEwan often criticizes society in his novels. The same is in his satirical *Solar* which highlights the mechanisms of self-deception so typical in today's society. The main character traits that McEwan describes through his anti-hero Michael Beard are selfishness, apathy, disinterestedness and total neglect of any events that are outside one's own micro-cosmos. Ideals might not have vanished completely, but the hero who stands out in a community and saves the world, does not exist anymore. As in Joyce's *Ulysses*, the hero is a myth unattainable in today's world. McEwan does

count on the human need for this hero, a character who would be honorable, capable and adventurous. The readers search for this hero in vain in *Solar*, as they did in McEwan's novel *Amsterdam*.

A bit peculiar and new for McEwan are the commical elements which can be found in this novel. There are a few commical situations such as the scene where Beard finally makes the decision not to marry anymore and to take care of himself, but immediately after making the decision has difficulties putting on his winter gear and is a spitting image of a lost and incompetent child. There is also an unusual episode on the train where Beard unknowingly takes a stranger's bag of chips.

To convey a certain message in his novels, McEwan uses carefully chosen settings and the climate. In his novels *The Cement Garden* (1978) and *Atonement* (2001) characters act as if in a daydream due to the summer heat. They cannot think rationally or perceive the events they are witnessing in the right way. His first epiphany, the need to profoundly change his life, to start exercising, eating healthy and to regain the flair for his work, Beard experiences in the cold north. On the other hand, the time spent in the hot New Mexico is marked by alcohol, carelessness and wantonness.

There is a certain kind of tension at the beginning of every McEwan's novel. In his earlier works, McEwan got his readers accustomed to expect the unexpected and to simultaneously await and be disgusted by bloody scenes so common in his novels. The readers carefully search for minute signs in the text that point to what is about to happen. One of such signs in this novel is the polar bear rug which is just casually mentioned, but receives a major role later in the novel. The rug is also a symbol of the absurd relationship between Beard's personality and his position in society. The fact that Beard is not bothered by having a rug made out of an endangered animal in his house while at the same time he is trying to find a way to save that same species from extinction tells a lot about how seriously Beard takes his profession and his role. The clear symbolism in this novel cannot stay undetected. Another symbol is the locker-room containing winter equipment during his visit to the Arctic. The members of the expedition are scientists and artists whose tasks are to ponder over the topic of climatic changes and find a solution for this problem. However, these people are not even capable to keep a locker-room in order. Each member of the expedition takes the highest quality equipment for himself, while the shabbier equipment is left to others for the taking. The welfare of an individual comes before the welfare of the community which is absurd when the reason for the expedition is taken into consideration.

What is exceptional with McEwan's writing is the level of tension he manages to awaken in his readers and which is present throughout the whole work. The awakened feelings are always intense, whether they are wishes for the characters' happy ending or their doom. These intense feelings are especially present in the novels *The Cement Garden*, *Atonement* and *Amsterdam*. In his latest novel, *Sweet*

Tooth (2012), McEwan manages to keep up the tension until the very last sentence, accomplishing to hide from his readers how he is going to end his story. However, around the middle of his novel *Solar*, it becomes clear how Beard will end up. The ending is just too obvious. Some feel that McEwan went too far with the bloody details in *The Innocent* (1990). The same way he goes too far in making the reader despise Beard. The reader is disgusted by his incessant eating and drinking, but at the same time wants Beard to find a way out of his impossible situation only because Beard is the one who is supposed to save the world.

McEwan wants to say that there are no heroes. There are only people, more or less corrupted, more or less selfish, more or less able to rise above their own personal hell and do what needs to be done. There is no one truth, absolute and undisputed. There are always different perspectives regarding the same situation, and therefore different „truths“. The climatic changes, which are a global problem of the whole human kind, should make people worry and care more, but in the end it seems that everything boils down to profit.

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