# The Resurgence of the Moral Novel in the Wake of 9/11

A Thesis presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of Missouri—Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Elizabeth Reilly

Dr. Samuel Cohen, Thesis Supervisor

MAY 2007
The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

THE RESURGENCE OF THE MORAL NOVEL IN THE WAKE OF 9/11

presented by Elizabeth Reilly,

a candidate for the degree of master of arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

______________________________

Professor Samuel Cohen

______________________________

Professor Karen Piper

______________________________

Professor Bradley Prager
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ........................................ ii
Abstract ................................................... iii

Chapter

1. Introduction ........................................... 1
   A Legacy of Moral Fiction

2. Saturday: McEwan’s Knee Jerk Response to 9/119 9

3. Claire Messud’s Counterattack to Revolution ......... 25

4. Roth’s Everyman: Seeking Absolution ................ 36

Works Cited .............................................. 53
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the generous assistance offered to me by my advisor, Dr. Samuel Cohen, who has read this paper almost as many times as I have. In addition, I would like to thank my committee members Dr. Karen Piper, and Dr. Bradley Prager.
Abstract

In this paper, I attempt to correlate the recent rise of the moral novel with the attacks of 9/11. In exploring the definition of moral fiction and briefly tracing its roots in recent history, I attempt to answer the question of what early 21st century readers ask from their fiction, and what purpose the novel strives to serve.

In examining the novels Saturday by Ian McEwan, The Emperor’s Children by Claire Messud, and Everyman by Philip Roth, I hope to locate and explore the trend in contemporary novel writing that is to reinforce scripted notions of right and wrong that recall both Judeo-Christian mythology and the nineteenth century literature that perpetuated those values.
A number of journalists and contemporary historians have shared a laugh at the expense of the likes of essayist Roger Rosenblatt and Vanity Fair editor Graydon Carter for having emphatically declared irony to be “dead” as a result of 9/11. Carter is said to have originated the movement with his prognostication in Vanity Fair shortly after the attacks: “There is going to be a seismic change. I think it’s the end of the age of irony.” Rosenblatt quickly followed suit with the Time Magazine article, “The Age of Irony Comes to an End: No Longer Will We Fail to Take Things Seriously.” However, upon further consideration, Rosenblatt and Carter may not have been as far off the mark as it once seemed.

Certainly, irony did not, as Rosenblatt would have his readers believe, crash down into obsolescence along with the Twin Towers. However, the events of 9/11, in temporarily turning the United States and its allies on their ears, did work to pave the way for more old-fashioned, less experimental literature that strives to uphold the Western values and traditions symbolically embodied by the World Trade Center. As Claire Messud’s old-fashioned omniscient narrator laments in her novel, The Emperor’s Children, in
the immediate aftermath of the events of 9/11, “So much for taking New York by storm. So much for revolution. The revolution belonged to other people now, far away from them, and it was real” (403). The lamentation is in reference to the “revolution” the tricky Ludovic Seeley was to introduce to New York through his newspaper *The Monitor*, a paper compared to non-fictional satirical presses such as *The Onion*, *McSweeney’s*, and *The New York Observer*. Seeley’s character is representative in the novel of postmodernism and irony, which are awkwardly conflated throughout the story. Like nearly everything else in the novel, save a few sacred familial relations and the moral truisms of one of the central character’s written work, the events of 9/11 demolish *The Monitor* before its first issue makes it to the printer.

*The Emperor’s Children* attempts to grapple with the future by reclaiming the simplicity and binary moral certainty of some fantasy of the past in its old-fashioned style, themes, and character development. Written at the dawn of the 21st century, and eager to retrace its steps to a more stable literary foundation of established values and conventions, Messud’s novel, along with a notable number of the works of her contemporaries, seems to be looking back to the novels predating the 20th century, back to the novels of the Victorian era, and to Messud’s liberal fantasy of a better, simpler time.
Along with Messud’s novel, Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*, for all its strict realism and its didactic moral message of defeating evil, showing forgiveness, and promoting faith in the possibility for redemption in the dark days following 9/11, also reveals a deliberate shift back towards the established conventions of the Victorian era. Traditional conventions of storytelling that the past hundred years worth of literature has served to question and deconstruct are being rapidly reconstructed and reinforced by some of today’s novelists. Philip Roth’s novel, *Everyman*, similarly evokes the Victorian moral tale in its striking and oft noted similarity to Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych*.

*Everyman* deviates from the moral relativism Roth pushed in his other novel about an aging man coming to terms with his own mortality, 1995’s *Sabbath’s Theater*. The protagonist of that novel, Mickey Sabbath, is, like the nameless protagonist of *Everyman*, an artist. However, unlike *Everyman*, whose commercial successes as an advertising artist supported the multiple families he started and left, the darkly brilliant Mickey Sabbath’s highest ambition, left unfulfilled, is to put on a finger puppet version of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*. For all his grotesquerie, Sabbath defies judgment and death by the end of the novel, with the closing lines: “He could not fucking die. How could he leave? How could he go? Everything he hated was here” (451). Conversely, *Everyman*, following the attacks of 9/11 and his consequent isolation, is forced to confront death
and all of the mistakes he has made in life in a way that could be described as religious.

A trend can be noticed in these three novels—Saturday, The Emperor’s Children, and Everyman—which may be classified together under the heading “literature of fear,” composed earnestly in the aftermath of tragedy. Such books are wary of the age of irony preceding them. This brand of literature stems from the recognition of instability and death, prompted largely in part by 9/11, and promotes a kind of faith in the possibility for redemption and self-improvement. While none of the three novels overtly endorses a specific god or religion, instead condemning religion and denying the existence of God through the mouths and thoughts of their main characters, the novels, in their adherence to a traditional structure and propensity for moral-message deliverance, behave almost in the same way as the scriptures of an organized religion.

John Gardner, in his book On Moral Fiction, published in 1977, criticizes the work of many of his 1960s contemporaries, calling for a return to “religious” texts, and pointing to Tolstoy as an example. In calling into question the value of the work of postmodernist Donald Barthelme, he writes:

The world would be a duller place without [Donald Barthelme], as it would be without FAO Schwartz. But no one would accuse him of creating what Tolstoy called ‘religious art.’ His world is not
one of important values but only of values mislaid, emotions comically or sadly unrealized, a burden of mysteries no one has the energy to solve. (80)

Gardner deplores work that is strikingly innovative, that seeks to challenge the values and conventions of that which has come before it; he cannot abide work with a fresh form, which he deems "a burden of mysteries no one has the energy to solve." Gardner calls for a recognition of and return to the production of true art as something that is purely moral: "it seeks to improve life, not debase it" (5).

Gardner condemns that which is dubbed post-modern, and those critics who "labor to determine...exactly what the term post-modern ought to mean, distracted from the possibility that it ought to mean nothing, or nothing significant, that the critic’s interest in the idea rises from a mistaken assumption comparable to the assumption which led to the medieval category ‘Animals Which Exist in Fire’" (7). The “mistaken assumption,” for Gardner, is that art progresses over time. He insists, rather, that the nature and purpose of true art, "to beat back the monsters" and make "the world safe for triviality," has not changed since the times of Shakespeare and Dante, nor will it ever (6). He is quick to dismiss art that attempts to be innovative, to speak to a particular time and a particular place in history, as the product of some cheeky, young post-modern writers, for whom,
“in a world which values progress, ‘post-modern’ in fact means New! Improved!” (56).

The America of 1977, in which Gardner published his book, was reeling from a decade-long string of crises at home and overseas. Larry McCaffery, in his essay “Fictions of the Present,” anthologized in The Columbia Literary History of the United States in 1988, connects the shaky political climate of the late 1970s with the renewed thirst for conservatism and morality in fiction:

The self-reflexiveness, flaunting of artifice, and defiance of established conventions so evident in the fiction of [the 1960s] mirrored a similar process of self-evaluation occurring in the society at large over a broad range of social, political, sexual, and cultural issues. Such a process was profoundly troubling to a nation whose assurances about its national identity and value systems were already being shaken by political assassinations, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and a general loss of power, influence, and prestige abroad. Signaled by the election of Ronald Regan in 1980, the American public’s renewed faith in the old-fashioned, simplistic answers and assurances of militarism, patriotism, consumerism, and religion was a predictable outcome of this widespread national sense of bewilderment and uncertainty. (1162-3)
McCaffery’s assertions link the 1980s rise of minimalism and departure from the “excesses” of postmodernism to the shaky political climate of the times. He claims that uncertain economics and a loss of prestige abroad had succeeded in forcing Americans to question their value systems. They did not, therefore, seek out literature to question those values further. McCaffery’s article nicely provides an historical context with which to read Gardner. Gardner and his followers can be understood as using moral fiction to “beat back the monsters” of lapsed morals that resulted in the catastrophes of Vietnam, Watergate, and the political assassinations of the 1960s.

Likewise, certain novelists of the early 21st century strive to renew, through their fiction, faith in the established conventions of story-telling, as well as faith in the sunny future of mankind. Saturday, The Emperor’s Children, and Everyman behave as moral tales, written to instruct readers on how best to live: how to be kind, righteous, and not hurt others. It does not so much matter if the author claims atheism if her novel reinforces and promotes Western core values rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition. These novels are, in effect, modern day parables disguised as modern novels. They lack a certain level of complication, not asking us to question tradition, but rather to renew our faith in that tradition. What is more, this kind of novel is achieving its desired effect. Saturday, The Emperor’s Children, and Everyman received
highly laudatory reviews for the most part, and *Everyman* was awarded the Pen/Faulkner award, while *Saturday* and *The Emperor’s Children* were nominated for the Booker Prize. In this period of uncertainty, marked firmly in time by the attacks of 9/11, today’s novels are working to restore our faith in that which fiction of years past sought to undermine.
Chapter 2

Ian McEwan’s novel, *Saturday*, published to acclaim in 2005, serves as an example of an especially old-fashioned, moral novel that aims to reinforce the typically Western, bourgeois values that the events of 9/11 sought to undermine. The events of *Saturday* occur a year and a half after 9/11, in a London overtaken by war protesters. The Perowne family, firmly set in the comfortable reaches of London’s upper-middle class, is central to the action of *Saturday*, and Henry Perowne, the family’s noble, neurosurgeon patriarch, ever faithful to his wife and family, is at the center of the Perowne family and the story, which is filtered through his consciousness in the present tense over the course of a single Saturday.

McEwan does not challenge the reader to empathize with an unsavory protagonist. The underbelly of London is largely contained in the periphery of the storyline. We do not find beauty or humanity in the drug addicts Perowne glimpses on the streets from the bedroom window of his townhouse, or in the stereotypical thugs the Perowne family comes up against in the climactic scene. Instead, McEwan delivers it all to
us through Perowne, a quintessentially perfect man, husband and father, who constantly poses to himself the question, “How should one live?” His musing, and his actions, never diverge from the terribly obvious, Judeo-Christian response to this age-old question. Life never provokes Perowne to behave in a way that challenges established notions of right and wrong. His two-dimensional mind is never tempted by sin, or thoughts of revenge. Instead, he acts, and often questions himself on how best to act, according to the moral code inscribed within him by his culture, which in turn derives from the Church of England. Perowne, however, is a nonbeliever, a fact returned to repeatedly throughout the novel. McEwan’s consistent references to Perowne’s atheism somehow feel disingenuous, though. While Perowne may not attend services on Sundays, his life follows a kind of order and ethical decision-making process in keeping with that of the Church. He practices forgiveness and generosity, and his “goodness,” which he in turn shares with his family, seems to be at the crux of the novel, much in the same way as in the typical Victorian novel, where hard work, perseverance, and love carve an unfailing route to the ideal life.

McEwan paints each member of the Perowne family as a kind of two-dimensional caricature of an upper-middle class mother, father, son, and daughter in London, eighteen months after 9/11. The mother, Rosalind, is a bleeding-heart liberal of a lawyer, a real martyr of a woman, working on a Saturday in some small effort to improve the world. The
children, Theo and Daisy, are both talented artists, he a musician and she a poet, and get along well with each other and their parents, even if they sometimes disagree with Perowne over aesthetic and political principles. The family and the story work almost like a parable for believers, not in a Christian god necessarily, but in some higher order of good, such that forgiveness and family all seem like worthwhile things. While one might argue that Saturday is less heavy-handed than an overtly religious text, it is nevertheless equally discouraging of the possibility for outlining one’s own, individual moral compass. McEwan tells us how to read these easily identifiable characters, and never allows them to slip up or deviate to challenge our perceptions of them, or their own perceptions of themselves.

Saturday’s climax pits Henry Perowne against a street thug named Baxter. Perowne, ever the hero, wins the battle after Baxter breaks into his home and holds Rosalind, Perowne’s wife, at knifepoint. After saving the day, Perowne gives all the credit to his wife and children, and then performs brain surgery on the injured Baxter after he nearly rapes Perowne’s daughter, but decides not to after hearing her recite a Victorian poem. After Baxter comes out of the surgery looking like he’ll survive, Perowne decides he must convince his family and the police not to press charges, as Baxter suffers from a brain disease that will limit the remainder of his good years, and the way Baxter took to the
poem made Perowne think that Baxter could rehabilitate and atone for his sins.

Throughout the course of this Saturday, Perowne deliberates over the “right way” to live. His conscience is less conflicted than self-satisfied, though. His most tumultuous inner turmoil stems from the passing sensation of not being sufficiently masculine for never having wanted to cheat on his wife, or for having abused his physician’s license by lying to his mugger about the development of a cure for Huntington’s disease. Perowne’s perfection makes him feel like less of a modern protagonist than some caricature of a long forgotten hero, a gentrified pillar of the community who serves as patriarch to his family and physician to the people. The difference between Perowne and the roughly similar protagonists of McEwan’s earlier novels is that, while his tower of privilege is shaken, it is not broken. Daisy is not raped; Rosalind is not stabbed. Perowne is superior, professional, responsible, and unbelievably forgiving to the last moment. The end of the novel, when Perowne decides he must do all he can to ensure Baxter has proper care and is not cooped up in a prison cell for the remainder of his numbered days, reads like the heart-warming conclusion of an after-school special. Though Perowne’s family has been threatened, his own wife at knifepoint, he has not changed. They have not changed. McEwan closes Saturday with Henry finally falling asleep, “Blindly he kisses her nape. There’s always this, is one of his
remaining thoughts. And then: there’s only this. And at last, faintly, falling: this day’s over” (289). Presumably, on Sunday, life will go on unchanged for the Perowne family, despite their encounter with Baxter, because nothing has changed. The characters have not changed as a result of the threat on their lives and agency, and the world has not changed despite the mayhem of modernity and all that has accompanied it. Even the novel has retained its original form and scope despite the last hundred years of profound change.

Perowne, himself a throwback to a patriarchal figure of another time, does not, in following the list of reading materials drawn up for him by his poet daughter, Daisy, read books written within the last hundred years. Instead, he trudges reluctantly through *The Origin of Species* and a “seafaring” Conrad novel that goes unnamed, not finishing the books in time for Daisy’s long-awaited return at the end of the day from France. Perowne reads the books unenthusiastically not because he thirsts for something newer, but because he is not a reader. Perowne is not interested in literature or in dreaming. He is a neurosurgeon who prefers empirical studies and precision in all things. Fiction is not of interest to him, though he does reference William James, of whom he is quite fond:

He should look out what William James wrote on forgetting a word or name; a tantalizing, empty shape remains, almost but not quite defining the
idea it once contained. Even as you struggle against the numbness of poor recall, you know precisely what the forgotten thing is not. James had the knack of fixing on the surprising commonplace—and in Perowne’s humble view, wrote a better-honed prose than the fussy brother who would rather run around a thing a dozen different ways than call it by its name. Daisy, the arbiter of his literary education, would never agree. (56)

Perowne’s preference for William over Henry James, his resistance to literature and Modernist tendencies, his grand way of bourgeois life, and yearning for an earlier, better time are emblematic of an entire generation. Perowne has experienced loss and is wary of political extremism or of protesters advocating anarchy, just as McEwan is wary of writers advocating a departure from the traditional form and structure of the novel. Perowne’s language and politics, career and familial situation, bespeak a heavily privileged Western idealism of 2005. Perhaps the only moral ambiguity we can trace in the novel is in the form of Perowne’s indecisiveness with regard to the war. He would be against it, except for the Iraqi professor he knows who suffered under the Hussein regime.

Just as Perowne is less than impressed with the work of Henry James, who “would rather run around a thing a dozen different ways than call it by its name,” both Daisy and her grandfather, the venerated poet John Grammaticus, know to
rely upon established, Victorian principles of art when they are faced with a dangerous situation. After Baxter has forced Daisy to undress before him and her entire family, whereby revealing her pregnancy to her family, he demands that she read one of her poems from her own first book of published work. When the fair poetess Daisy protests to reading her work, exclaiming that she cannot do it, her grandfather instructs her, "'Daisy, listen. Do one you used to say for me'" (228). At this, Nigel, Baxter’s painfully stereotypical lager-lout-type sidekick, cries out, "'Fucking shut up, Granddad'" (228). Daisy at first does not understand her grandfather’s instruction, but promptly experiences a moment of revelation, recognizing that her grandfather is telling her to recite not one of her own modern confessional poems, but to recite an old, emotionally charged Victorian poem, a Matthew Arnold poem, all the while pretending to be reading from her own book.

The question of why Daisy chooses, at her grandfather’s bidding, not to read from her own book, reciting instead the Arnold poem, remains unanswered. What is clear, though, is the profound impact the Arnold poem has on Baxter, and Baxter’s consequential implied goodness in the mind of Perowne for having been impacted by the poem:

[The lines] are unusually meditative, mellifluous and willfully archaic. She’s thrown herself back into another century...Everyone else is watching Baxter, and waiting. He’s hunched over, leaning
his weight against the back of the sofa. Though his right hand hasn’t moved from Rosalind’s neck, his grip on the knife looks slacker, and his posture, the peculiar yielding angle of his spine, suggests a possible ebbing if intent. Could it happen? Is it within the bounds of the real, that a mere poem of Daisy’s could precipitate a mood swing? (228-9)

When Baxter commands Daisy to read the poem again, she does so more assuredly, and Perowne hears the poem differently:

Henry missed first time the mention of the cliffs of England ‘glimmering and vast out in the tranquil bay.’ Now it appears there’s no terrace, but an open window; there’s no young man, father of the child. Instead he sees Baxter standing alone, elbows propped against the sill, listening to the waves ‘bring the eternal note of sadness in.’ It’s not all of antiquity, but only Sophocles who associated this sound with the ‘turbid ebb and flow of human misery.’ Even in his state, Henry balks at the mention of a ‘sea of faith’ and a glimmering paradise of wholeness lost in the distant past. Then once again, 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.’ It rings like a musical curse. (229-30)

Despite his rigidly proclaimed atheism, Perowne catches a glimpse of Baxter glimpsing into the sublime through the recitation of the poem. While he, Perowne, “balks at the mention of a ‘sea of faith’ and a glimmering paradise of wholeness lost in the distant past,” he is able to hear “through Baxter’s ears...the sea’s ‘melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.’”

Baxter’s potential to admire literature is directly linked to his capacity for faith, for piety or holiness on some level. Perowne is left out of this circle of intellectuals, his daughter and father in law among them, who believe in literature in a religious sense, as an outlet for spirituality. It is at once his hyper-realist sensibility (he was entirely unable to read any of the magical realists Daisy recommended) that pushes him to narrate accordingly, like a brain surgeon, and the accompanying unwillingness to believe. Baxter, on the other hand, is capable of being moved by the Arnold poem, and is somehow deemed capable of redemption as a result. He is amazed that Daisy has written the poem, and immediately asks her to dress herself, abandoning his former threat to rape her.

It is not a new art that saves the Saturday. Daisy had the choice of reciting her own poetry to Baxter, as he commanded her to do. Yet, Daisy instead recites “Dover
Beach,” from the nineteenth century, which succeeds in imbuing Baxter with some trace of the divine, pushing his mood into an upswing that accompanies the Huntington’s Disease he suffers from. Baxter is saved, religiously almost, awakened by a Victorian poem. After invading the home of the Perownes, terrorizing them in the age of terror following 9/11, Baxter is saved by a Victorian poem, both on a spiritual and physical level (Henry might not have saved Baxter’s life or made himself a promise to keep Baxter out of prison had Baxter not been moved by the poem). With the novel’s emphasis on redemption through literature, both in Daisy’s attempt at improving her father through literary instruction and in the poem that saves Baxter, one cannot help but wonder if McEwan is attempting to save his own readers by the novel. Perhaps it is likely that McEwan hopes for his readership to be moved to moral correction in identifying with the fastidious Perowne. But might he be doing us a great disservice? What does this novel really accomplish? Yes it is beautifully written, and artfully executed. But what do we learn? How does McEwan challenge us to see the world differently, or reexamine our own lives by following the course of Perowne’s?

McEwan’s decision to make his protagonist and narrative filter a neurosurgeon with an obsession for mathematical precision and an acute absence of imagination cements the hyper-realist style of Saturday. In preparation for writing the novel, McEwan shadowed a neurosurgeon for close to two
years so that he might perfectly embody the language and
demeanor of Perowne in the novel. Perowne’s outlook on life
and precision with language is exacting. He leaves no room
for guesswork and while the writing might be described as
lyrical at times, it is very firmly entrenched in the “true”
or “real.” We can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell down to
the very minutiae of each minute of Perowne’s Saturday.
Perowne has no patience for the extraordinary in fiction.
The magical realists Daisy has him read leave a sour taste
in his mouth: “This reading list persuaded Perowne that the
supernatural was the recourse of an insufficient
imagination, a dereliction of duty, a childish evasion of
the difficulties and wonders of the real, of the demanding
re-enactment of the plausible” (66). These may as well be
McEwan’s own words, describing the aesthetics he invoked in
writing the novel. McEwan challenges himself to present to
the reader reality as he deems it to exist, or to “re-enact
the plausible.” His steadfast determination to do just that
results in the hyper-realist descriptions of surgical
procedures as well as of London street life on a Saturday.
McEwan’s close study of medicine and extensive passages that
precisely recall surgical routines makes it read less like
its postmodern predecessors from the 1960s, and more like
the sections of Leo Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina devoted to the
painstakingly precise descriptions of Levin’s agricultural
pursuits in rural Russia.
Such an old-fashioned, realist style, plainly criticized by John Barth in “The Literature of Exhaustion” as a style that ignores all the work that has come before it, does not feel hypocritical to the overwhelming multitude of critics who lauded McEwan’s novel in 2005 as a masterpiece. A few critics did find fault with the book, though, precisely for its dated, hyper-realism that invokes Tolstoy. Deidre Donahue wrote, in a lukewarm review in USA Today, that it “had the distinctive aroma of a novel McEwan researched rather than crafted from the heart.” John Banville, perhaps the only reviewer who outright panned the novel, wrote, in The New York Review of Books, that Saturday is “a dismayingly bad book.” “It would seem that, like one of the characters in Atonement, he had been ‘thinking of the nineteenth-century novel. Broad tolerance and the long view, an inconspicuously warm heart and cool judgment...’” Banville’s review confirms my claim that the fairy-tale of Henry Perowne and his perfect family rising up against Baxter and showing him mercy after all betrays a kind of fear in our culture that pushes us to embrace reaffirming moral binaries and didacticism in art.

Banville, justifiably, is equally, if not more concerned by the overwhelmingly positive reception of Saturday as he is by McEwan’s choices in writing the novel: Another source of dismay, one for which, admittedly, Ian McEwan cannot be held wholly accountable, is the ecstatic reception which
Saturday has received from reviewers and book buyers alike. Are we in the West so shaken in our sense of ourselves and our culture, are we so disabilingly terrified in the face of the various fanaticisms which threaten us, that we can allow ourselves to be persuaded and comforted by such a self-satisfied and, in many ways, ridiculous novel as this? Yes, human beings have an unflagging desire for stories, it is one of our more endearing traits. The great Modernists, with eminent exceptions, disdained this desire, as they disdained our longing for a recognizable tune, a pretty landscape, a poem that rhymes. These are legitimate if not particularly noble demands; it is the artist's duty and task both to respect and to overfulfill them by giving far more than his audience asked for. The post-millennium world is baffling and dangerous, and we are all eager for re-assurance.

The attacks of 9/11 are the catalyst of this fear, which has compelled McEwan to write an old-fashioned bedtime story for the masses. McEwan has, just as Banville accuses, written a novel that serves only to reassure his readers. Saturday does not “overfulfill”; McEwan does not give “far more than his audience asked for,” and in refusing to do so, he is failing to enlighten his readers. He does not push readers’ expectations and alter their understanding of their own
world, as one might argue is one of the chief duties of the literary novelist.

References to 9/11 resonate quietly throughout the novel, from the very first scene when Perowne spots a flaming jet careening toward Heathrow and muses on the ominous quality planes have come to possess: “Everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed” (15). The nostalgia apparent in McEwan’s outdated writing style is mirrored in Perowne’s ruminations of a purer past, pre-9/11 and of another time altogether. Perowne’s yearning for a simpler time serves as the driving force of this novel, which derives most of its weight from the time and place in which it is set: London, post 9/11, on the brink of war, and on the day of the protest march against that war, Saturday, February 15, 2003. Without these circumstances coloring Perowne’s thoughts to the point that even the Post Office Tower is reminiscent of better days gone by: “a valiant memorial to more optimistic days,” the book is merely a thin volume about a well-to-do doctor and his family getting robbed (2). And, of course, the redemption offered the robber and the forgiveness demonstrated by the good doctor and his family. For most of his readership, the circumstances of the day and our modern life are enough to grant significance to the novel, though not for Banville, and perhaps not for readers born ten years from now, reading the book twenty years past its initial date of publication. While McEwan’s fairy tale might be just
the thing to satiate our urgent fears in the aftermath of 9/11, its resonance could be lost entirely on a future generation living outside the age of terror.
Chapter 3

Messud’s novel, the action of which occurs during the months immediately preceding and following the events of 9/11, also derives much of its weight from the circumstances within the timeframe of its setting. Claire Messud began writing *The Emperor’s Children* in July of 2001, but discarded the first fifty pages after 9/11 and set to work on two other novels. In showing one of the novels to her husband James Wood, the critic for *The New Republic* who has written copious essays on the necessity of moral fiction, she quit working on it after he compared it to a special on Lifetime television, and once more began to write *The Emperor’s Children*.

Just as the literature of the nineteenth century triumphs in *Saturday*, so too does a more traditional approach to literature stand its ground in *The Emperor’s Children*. The action of the novel surrounds the two dueling forces of Murray Thwaite and Ludovic Seeley. Their direct opposition to one another is something classic, an Iago and Othello relationship of sorts. However, unlike the good Othello, Murray Thwaite, like Henry Perowne, does not meet his demise by the end of the novel, but rather his own resurgence of power and authority, vindicating him for all the world to see. Ludovic Seeley, Thwaite’s evil counterpart, is defeated with no concrete explanation for what has become of him. The tragedy of 9/11, occurring in
the last quarter of the linearly structured novel, succeeds in reducing the disruptive forces of Seeley, and reaffirming the need for the spiritually purposeful journalistic approach of Murray Thwaite. So, like Satan, Ludovic Seeley is defeated, reinforcing the traditional myth of good conquering evil in critical moments of reckoning, or precursory judgment days.

The characters of Messud’s novel all gravitate and circulate around Murray Thwaite, the “Emperor” for whom the novel is titled. Thwaite is a traditional patriarch not unlike Saturday’s Henry Perowne in his similarly pillar-like disposition, except that Thwaite makes his living by intellect alone and not by the use of his hands like Perowne the surgeon. Thwaite also sleeps with his daughter’s best friend, something the immaculate Perowne would never dream of doing. (Though, like Perowne might, he rises to the occasion when he finds himself in bed with the other woman on the morning of 9/11, looking out the window at the smoldering towers, and rushes home to be with his wife in the time of crisis.) Thwaite is a liberal thinker, an influential writer and celebrity intellect whose opinion influences the masses. His daughter Marina goes to all and any lengths to please him and win his approval, his wife Annabel (a perfect homemaker and lawyer for the poor not at all unlike Rosalind Perowne) adores and trusts Thwaite wholeheartedly, his nephew Frederick “Bootie” Tubb runs away from home to be near his uncle and bask in his genius, and
Danielle, Marina’s best friend, has an affair with Thwaite and falls madly in love.

Thwaite has strong convictions, political and ethical. He has been working in secret, for years, late at night, on a book called How to Live, though he worries the title might be a touch heavy handed. Ludovic Seeley, whom Danielle meets at the novel’s opening in Sydney, stands in sharp contrast to Murray Thwaite a la Superman and Lex Luther. Thwaite is good; Seeley is evil. This is made abundantly clear the moment Messud first introduces each character: the gaunt, touchy-feely creep Seeley with his “Nabokovian brow” versus the elegant and winsome Thwaite with his nice cologne and clever ideas and idealistic attitude about changing the world. Seeley is a dark foreigner who comes into town with a vague reputation for having achieved success by cutthroat ambition. He has no family to speak of or apparent morals (160). Seeley scoffs at the establishment, and talks eagerly of the “revolution” he hopes to bring to New York in starting his newspaper The Monitor, noted for its reference to Napoleon (who printed a paper by the same name), of whom Seeley is immensely fond.

Thwaite, on the other hand, discourages form over substance, concerned about a lack of seriousness in contemporary writing and culture (158-60). This feels like Messud talking, advocating the kind of novel she’s written: serious and substantial, something her husband would approve of wholeheartedly. Thwaite believes in “the establishment,”
both politically and aesthetically in his writing. Conversely, Seeley hopes to unmask the hypocrisy of an array of unspecified sources of established order to the people of New York and the world at large by his “revolution.” He is ever vague about what it is that he seeks to undermine by his revolution, but is consistent only in his determination to be contrary. Though Seeley, and for that matter Messud, never makes the terms of the revolution or the established order exactly clear in the novel, Marina’s pal Danielle, in discussing with Marina her tentative plans to document the revolution, compares Seeley’s *The Monitor* to the snarky, irony-laden periodicals *The Onion*, *McSweeney’s*, and the *New York Observer*.

Seeley describes his plans in terms of showing the public that the emperor, in fact, wears no clothes. He aspires to turn authority on its ear, and fingers Murray Thwaite as the chief authority with whom he can make an example. In a seemingly Shakespearian twist, Seeley captures the heart of his enemy’s daughter, Marina Thwaite, and marries her within a few months of their first meeting. Seeley enlists Marina not only as his wife, but also as his partner in launching the magazine of the revolution, *The Monitor*. While Seeley’s aura of dark mystery prevents the revolution from being made precisely clear to the reader, it is certain that he hopes to disrupt conventional thought and the authority of Murray Thwaite.
Danielle is intrigued at first by Seeley, partly for her developing crush, but also for the “revolution” of which he speaks so animatedly. Danielle is a documentary filmmaker and wants to produce a special on this “revolution” in the recent American media. Her conversation with Marina after having spoken to Seeley reveals Messud’s views on the revolutionary impulses feeding the media in the time leading up to 9/11:

‘I’ve got an idea for something about the current wave of satirical press and its role in shaping opinion. You know, about the blurring of left and right politics in pure contrarianism. People who aren’t for anything, just against everything.’
‘Is there a wave of it?’
“Well, The Onion moved here, and there’s the New York Observer, and McSweeney’s, and there’s a new paper starting up later this year, with this Australian guy I met over there.’
‘If you say so.’
‘My idea is that it’s kind of like Russia a hundred years ago, the nihilists, right? Like in Dostoyevsky and Turgenev.’
‘That’ll really fly with your bosses.’
‘I’m serious. Everybody just thought they were disgruntled misfits, and then there was a revolution.’
(36-7)
It is through Danielle’s consciousness that the omniscient narrator first introduces the reader to Messud’s fictional landscape, and Danielle’s observations regarding the world within the novel are perhaps the most level-headed. In other words, Danielle’s comparison of Seeley’s revolution and McSweeney’s to the Russian nihilists can also, as strained a comparison it may be, be construed as Messud’s own observation.

The irony found in *The Onion, McSweeney’s*, and *The New York Observer*, in Messud’s depiction, works to directly undermine the established cultural authority. The would-be Monitor, which never makes it to press as a result of 9/11, would have similarly served this function: “Nobody wanted such a thing in this new world, a frivolous, satirical thing...So much for revolution. The revolution belonged to other people now, far away from them, and it was real” (403). In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, when Messud wrote the novel, cries rang out all across the media that irony was dead. Messud’s strikingly earnest novel, grounded in tragedy and the forces of good conquering those that are evil, seems to lump her into the group of people who see 9/11 as having somehow made irony irrelevant, at least temporarily. In the novel, Seeley is defeated—his paper never debuts, his marriage begins to crumble—and Murray Thwaite (despite his nephew’s attack on his secret book, *How to Live*, which would have been published in the first issue of *The Monitor*) experiences a comeback: “[H]e did write
numerous articles, suddenly called upon to provide moral or ethical guidance, to offer a path for confused and frightened liberals through the mad alarums and self-flagellations of those hideous, tumultuous weeks” (412). Just as Murray Thwaite’s works of high-minded liberal intellectualism and an indefatigable sense of moral idealism intends to comfort and placate frightened Americans in the aftermath of 9/11, so too Claire Messud’s novel, where good is obvious and wins in the end, and the nasty transients are picked-out and vanquished, just as Baxter is in Saturday.

While the true purpose and definition of Seeley’s revolution is never made exactly clear in the novel, the closest thing to an explanation comes in the form of a conversation between Seeley and Danielle on the nature of revolution:

‘You make it sound like a sinister Frankensteinian experiment.’

‘Hardly.’

‘Or Orwellian.’

‘No, I think not. It’s the television that’s Orwellian. Your business, I’m afraid, not mine. I’m an old-fashioned fellow—I still believe in the printed word.’

‘As does Murray Thwaite.’

Seeley inclined his head in ironic assent. ‘It’s a matter, though, of the meaning of the words.’

‘Or of the words having any meaning at all if we’re getting po-mo about it.’
'Quite. That’s exactly right.’
‘Murray Thwaite thinks things do mean,’ Danielle went on. ‘And my sense is that you don’t, really.’
‘It’s not as simple as that—’
‘Not that you don’t think “table” will suffice to indicate this thing between us, that’s not what I’m saying—’
‘It’s more a matter of questioning the meaning of emotions,’ Seeley said, ‘or of asking what they are and how they color our reality. Of letting go of their falsehoods so you can see things for what they are.’

(110-111)

Seeley’s explanation for the impetus behind his revolution reads as fairly benign in this passage, to both the reader and Danielle. Seeley hopes to reveal truth by unmasking artifice. However, as the story beats on, Danielle realizes Ludo Seeley has no ethics or perverse ones at that, and understands his revolutionary ideals as destructive forces that leave nothing left to replace what they have destroyed, the very same accusation used by John Gardner to criticize irony or literature that favors experimentation and novelty over content and significance (160).

Messud joins with McEwan in peppering her novel with references to 19th century literature that hint at the superiority and moral importance of such works. War and Peace references abound, as do references to Emerson. Thwaite shares a fondness for William James with Perowne.
When running away from home, Bootie leaves behind Gravity’s Rainbow and Infinite Jest, but takes along Emerson and War and Peace as they are indispensable to him. Bootie snubs organized institutions of higher education, deeming them to be breeding grounds of mediocrity, and is constantly on the look-out for hypocrisy. He strives throughout the novel to improve himself via self-teaching, to pull himself up by the proverbial bootstraps of the liberal arts.

Just as McEwan does in Saturday, Messud adheres to a rigid realism in The Emperor’s Children. Katie Rolphe of Slate.com claims Messud’s book brings to mind a Jane Austen novel, or Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth. The writing style feels distinctly antiquated. An omniscient narrator swoops in and out of the minds of her acquainted characters of privilege, describing their thoughts and actions in hyper-eloquent, pin-prickingly realist language. It reads as a comedy of manners as well as a moral novel. The falseness Seeley perceives in Thwaite’s affected manner reflects the hypocrisy he points to in Thwaite’s writing style. The novel’s heightened language and the affectations and elegant language of the characters themselves is strikingly reminiscent of Victorian novels. Messud, then, can be further understood as advocating the kind of Emersonian, morally instructive writing Thwaite advocates within the novel.
Chapter 4

Roth’s novel, named for the medieval morality play
Everyman, is, at 182 pages, more of a novella than a full-fledged novel. Its brevity mirrors that of the play, as does the pervasive presence of death in the novel, denoted by the
book’s very cover even, which is pitch black. Unlike many of Roth’s other novels, which challenge the reader to question her prior conceptions of right and wrong, Everyman is something of a morality novella, or a “fairy tale” as John Banville might put it. Though the nameless protagonist, who shall henceforth be referred to as Everyman, is a conflicted man with a complicated past, the moral of the story is crystal clear and easily ascertained by readers of the petit novel: “Death will come, and you will be alone. Be good young man, for soon you will be old and die.” Like the morality play for which it is named, Roth’s novel is a tale of one man’s, or Everyman’s, reckoning with mortality.

Unlike the play’s Everyman, Roth’s does not seek Christian redemption by the end of the story. However, the message he learns deviates precious little from that preached through the text of the Christian original. Not coincidentally, Roth’s Everyman’s aging and lengthy confrontation with death in all its forms coincides with the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11, from which Everyman is left feeling vulnerable and which compel him to flee Manhattan to go out to pasture along the Jersey shore. The book may be taken as a kind of scripture for those Americans managing to piece together their lives in the wake of tragedy. Perhaps more definitively, the book may be read as the baby boomer’s guide to spiritual reconciliation, for which Roth abandons the elaborate fictional conceits of some of his more recent works in favor of a simpler, brief novel.
written in a traditional form with a basic plot largely borrowed from the medieval text, Everyman. The form and plot also evoke, as many critics, including James Wood, have pointed out, Leo Tolstoy’s The Death of Ivan Ilych, a novella highly recognized for its Christian moral underpinnings. With Everyman, Roth proves himself as a purveyor of moral truth.

The book opens with the funeral of the unnamed protagonist, understood as Everyman and as such potentially suitable as a stand-in for any one of Roth’s philandering male protagonists come to old age. Everyman lacks the morally upright posture of McEwan’s Henry Perowne or Messud’s Murray Thwaite. Rather, he is profoundly mortal, with a weakness for young women, good though realistic intentions, and a series of health problems encountered in middle age. The story unfolds through the speeches made by the attendants of Everyman’s funeral as they toss dirt into the grave: his beloved daughter Nancy from his second wife Phoebe, his devoted billionaire brother Howie, the two spiteful sons he abandoned along with his first wife, and Maureen, the nurse he carried on a post-op affair with during his third marriage. The funeral establishes the tone of the novel, which functions similarly as a universal funeral of sorts:

That was the end. No special point had been made. Did they all say what they had to say? No, they didn’t, and of course they did. Up and down the
state that day, there’d been five hundred funerals like his, routine, ordinary, and except for the thirty wayward seconds furnished by the sons—and Howie’s resurrecting with such painstaking precision the world as it innocently existed before the invention of death, life perpetual in their father-created Eden, a paradise just fifteen feet wide by forty feet deep disguised as an old-style jewelry store—no more or less interesting than any of the others. But then it’s the commonness that’s most wrenching, the registering once more of the fact of death that overwhelms everything. (14-15)

The third person narrator, filtered closely through the consciousness of Everyman, remains constant throughout the novel, despite the fact that Everyman is dead and the story is told through flashback. This post-mortem limited omniscience demonstrates a pointed spiritual recognition in the text. Essentially, the ghost of Everyman narrates the story, bouncing back and forth in time from the consciousness of a young Everyman riding the bus to the hospital with his mother for a hernia operation, to middle-aged Everyman leaving his first wife for Phoebe, the perfect one (not so unlike McEwan’s Rosalind or Messud’s Annabel), for whom Everyman later curses himself for having betrayed, to painting in his studio as an old man on the Jersey shore. Roth’s decision to open the novel with Everyman’s funeral
not only works to frame the story of Everyman’s life within the context of death, but also to verify for the reader that the spirit of Everyman does not cease to exist, despite his rigidly proclaimed atheism and denial of an afterlife during his lifetime. Everyman, though dead from the beginning of the novel, continues to dictate the course of the story.

Though Roth may be understood as the semi-omniscient narrator who is writing the words, it is Everyman’s memory of the past that comprises the story. Occasionally, the third-person limited omniscience flickers more closely into the mind of Everyman, and he regains control of his own language. Such shifts occur during moments of heightened tension and emotion. For instance, when the narrator is describing Everyman’s thoughts regarding his two sons from his first marriage, Everyman grows angry over the resentment his sons have fostered for him and tenaciously clung to over the years:

You wicked bastards! You sulky fuckers! You condemning little shits! Would everything be different, he asked himself, if I’d been different and done things differently? Would it all be less lonely than it is now? Of course it would! But this is what I did! I am seventy-one. This is the man I have made. This is what I did to get here, and there’s nothing more to be said! (97-8)

Though Everyman’s non-living status precludes him from possessing the story entirely, and voicing a first-person
narrative to create something akin to Portnoy’s Complaint or one of the Nathan Zuckerman novels, his spirit and memory clearly do live on. Everyman’s spirit pushes the anonymous third-person narrator to tell his story, despite the fact that his funeral occurred within the first few pages of the novel. Everyman’s spirit is present at his own funeral, dictating and informing the third-person narrative with the knowledge of his life. The Guardian’s Tim Adams reads the bulk of the novel, between the funeral beginning and the death marking the end, as Everyman seeking penance in the form of winning his readers’ sympathy: “When the mourners have departed, Roth’s Everyman faces not his maker, but his readers, and makes his case for sympathy or absolution.” This is a strong point, and nicely serves my own reading of the novel. However, the question of from whom Everyman seeks forgiveness it is of no tremendous importance. What is significant is the fact that despite Everyman’s constant insistence that life or a spirit of any kind is exterminated at the time of the death of the body (to the point that he claims his autobiography would be titled The Life and Death of a Male Body), he is indirectly revealing the story of his life from the grave. In setting the novel up in this way, Roth is perpetuating the religious belief that the spirit lives on after the body.

The “commonness” of death, referred to in the funeral passage above, is embodied in Everyman’s allegorical namelessness, and in the difficult awareness of death he
achieves in aging. As a young boy, as Howie indicated in his speech, death did not yet exist for Everyman or Howie, as they had not yet encountered death, protected as they were by their “father-created Eden...disguised as an old style jewelry store.” The boys’ father sheltered them in a way that Everyman regrets not having sheltered his own sons, keeping them in Eden where death did not exist. The Eden of the jewelry store is visited in Everyman’s exploration of the past, and the diamonds the boys’ father sold are repeatedly recalled by Everyman as “imperishable” (57). While death does creep closer to Everyman throughout his life, it is not until old age that he is made truly aware of death’s presence at his door, visiting him not only in the form his own infirmity but also in the form of his family’s and friends’ failing health and deaths. The events of 9/11 serve as the novel’s marker of Everyman’s physical departure from Manhattan and metaphorical departure from Eden, or from the remnants of his father’s legacy of protection. Everyman’s Eden enabled and justified his youth’s carefree, often adulterous and hurtful behavior. Fleeing Manhattan in the aftermath of 9/11, Everyman is banished into an existence of isolation and waiting for death.

Like the Everyman in the original morality play, Roth’s protagonist is abandoned by friends and family members he turns to in his time of need. By the time death comes knocking at Everyman’s door in the form of yet another surgery, this time on his right carotid artery, the third
wife he abandoned Phoebe for has in turn abandoned him. His daughter, Nancy, has taken Phoebe in to live with her after Phoebe’s stroke, eliminating the possibility of Everyman moving in with Nancy himself. His brother, Howie, is off traveling in Tibet with his own family, and the female jogger he approaches, a woman who Everyman is certain he could have seduced in years past, does not phone him as she said she would. In the medieval version, Everyman laments his lapsed faith upon realizing that he has no one or thing to turn to but God in his time of death. He must die alone, as must we all.

Conversely, in Roth’s Everyman, the protagonist laments having abandoned Phoebe, his second wife who he belatedly realizes would have stayed with him had he not mistreated her and violated her trust in him. Nancy, the daughter he had with Phoebe, serves as a reminder of his former wife’s perfection:

She had been permeated by the quality of her mother’s kindness, by the inability to remain aloof from another’s need, by the day-to-day earthborn soulfulness that he had disastrously undervalued and thrown away—thrown away without beginning to realize all he would subsequently live without. (104)

Roth’s Everyman shows remorse for his mistreatment of other people, particularly Phoebe but also his two sons, as
opposed to the medieval Everyman who regrets having given too much thought to those on earth, neglecting God.

The novel’s undercurrent of the sublime is tightly wrapped around the idea of love, especially familial love, and symbolically manifested in the “imperishable” diamonds Everyman’s father peddled during the innocent days of his and Howie’s childhood. The ultimate betrayal of Phoebe and Nancy that Everyman repeatedly returns to in his musings occurs not when Everyman first commits adultery, but when he buys a diamond necklace for his mistress, reminding her that diamonds are “imperishable” as he places it around her neck. After Phoebe confronts him about the affair and his violation of her trust, she leaves him and he marries his mistress, as it seems the “simplest way to cover up the crime” (124). The mistress proves to be a useless wife and the marriage dissolves quickly. In alienating himself from his various families, both the one he was born into and the three he attempted to create for himself, Everyman destroys his life and feels as though he is serving a kind of penance for all the mistakes he has made:

That left Howie, whom by then he hadn’t phoned in some time. It was as though once their parents were long dead all sorts of impulses previously proscribed or just nonexistent had been loosed in him, and his giving vent to them, in a sick man’s rage—in the rage and despair of a joyless sick man unable to steer clear of prolonged illness’s
deadliest trap, the contortion of one’s character—had destroyed the last link to the dearest people he’d known...He’d made a mess of all his marriages, but throughout their adult lives he and his brother had been truly constant. Howie never had to be asked for anything. And now he’d lost him, and in the same way he’d lost Phoebe—by doing it to himself. As if there weren’t already fewer and fewer people present who meant anything to him, he had completed the decomposition of the original family. But decomposing families was his specialty. Hadn’t he robbed three children of a coherent childhood and the continuous loving protection of a father such as he himself had cherished, who had belonged exclusively to him and Howie, a father they and no one else had owned? (157-8)

Entirely isolated and on the verge of death, Everyman does not renew his faith but struggles inwardly to confront and acknowledge his mistakes and the eternity that awaits him alone. He recognizes finally the significance of others and family and faithfulness, and genuinely appears to regret the choices he has made.

Roth’s Everyman aggressively proclaims his atheism and, rather than turning to the possibility of God in his demise, he wholeheartedly resists religion and the notion of spirits continuing on after the death of the body. His resistance is
so strong, it leads him to the graveyard where his parents are buried, and where he will soon join them, to visit their bones, assure himself of death, and learn about the process of burial from a gravedigger he encounters there:

They were just bones, bones in a box, but their bones were his bones, and he stood as close to the bones as he could, as though the proximity might link him up with them and mitigate the isolation born of losing his future and reconnect him with all that had gone...The flesh melts away but the bones endure. The bones were the only solace there was to one who put no stock in an afterlife and knew without a doubt that God was a fiction and this was the only life he’d have. (170)

While Everyman does remain convinced of the absence of God and of his faith in flesh and bone right up until the very end, a God-like presence is abundantly present in the novel. Not only is Roth making a statement about the existence of an afterlife by framing the story between Everyman’s funeral and the moment of his death, revealing the story of his life within the context of his death, he also ends the story with a kind of “light at the end of the tunnel” moment:

The words spoken by the bones made him feel buoyant and indestructible. So did the hard-won subjugation of his darkest thoughts. Nothing could extinguish the vitality of that boy whose slender little torpedo of an unscathed body once rode the
big Atlantic waves from a hundred yards out in the wild ocean all the way in to shore. Oh, the abandon if it, and the smell of the salt water and the scorching sun! Daylight, he thought, penetrating everywhere, day after summer day of that daylight blazing off a living sea, an optical treasure so vast and valuable that he could have been peering through the jeweler’s loupe engraved with his father’s initials at the perfect, priceless planet itself—at his home, the billion-, the trillion-, the quadrillion-carat planet Earth!

(181-2)

There does not appear to be even the slightest trace of irony in Roth’s description of Everyman having his past flash before his eyes as his spirit is whisked off into outer space, looking through his father’s old jeweler’s loupe at the planet Earth, which might, arguably, take on the status of “imperishable” given its substitution in the scenario for a diamond.

Roth’s Everyman’s flight from Manhattan post-9/11 results in his heightened sensitivity to his own mortality, as he ruminates over his past, painting by the sea. The retirement he imagined as pastoral bliss is, in experience, exile: “Even before 9/11 he had contemplated a retirement of the kind he’d been living for three years now; the disaster of 9/11 had appeared to accelerate his opportunity to make a big change, when in fact it had marked the beginning of his
vulnerability and the origin of his exile” (135). For Everyman, the events of 9/11 serve, literally, as an impetus to the moment of reckoning; 9/11 has awakened Everyman to the onset of death and forced him to confront his past and atone for what he can. In solitude, Everyman is incapable of thinking of anything other than death’s approach, but, afraid to return to Manhattan, he attempts to distract himself by teaching a painting class.

Painting, Everyman’s preferred art, does not serve its intended purpose, as an outlet to Everyman’s emotion and way to pass the time. Instead, Everyman is profoundly frustrated by his painting and disappointed with his progress:

It was as though painting had been an exorcism. But designed to expel what malignancy? The oldest of his self-delusions? Or had he run to painting to attempt to deliver himself from the knowledge that you are born to live and you die instead? (103)

In failing him, painting reveals itself to Everyman as yet another mere earthly distraction, failing him like all of the others at the moment of reckoning just as they did his medieval counterpart. This failure seems like a more surprising moral revelation than the others—namely the fleetingness of wanton behavior, and the importance of love. Yet it is a somewhat more complicated, less straightforward revelation. After all, Everyman finds redemption through the composition of the novel, in that it provides an opportunity
for Everyman’s self-reflection and penance in the form of revisiting all of life’s difficult times. The art of the novel exists as something more sacred than other arts within this moral fable.

James Wood, in The New Republic, recognizes the weakness of the didacticism that characterizes Everyman, and links it to the didacticism evident in Tolstoy’s The Death of Ivan Ilych:

But Roth's novella is most like Tolstoy's in its relentless didacticism. You must listen to the news I bring, both writers are saying; you must absorb it, you must change your life. Both books can make us feel that we are being bludgeoned into apprehension.

Though Wood does admire aspects of Roth’s novel, even he, an ardent supporter of the moral novel, has little patience for being “bludgeoned into apprehension.” Wood makes the argument that the didacticism of Roth’s novel is not warranted as it is in the case of Tolstoy’s, as Tolstoy’s didacticism arose out the novella’s purposeful Christian preaching. While Wood does admire the purposefully moral novel, he seems to lack patience with Roth’s lapses into sentimentality and his impulse to universalize death, rather than focusing in on Everyman’s experience as Tolstoy did with Ivan Ilych.

On a different note of frustration with writers mimicking the work of Tolstoy, John Barth criticized, in his
1967 essay “The Literature of Exhaustion,” an abundance of “technically old-fashioned artists” for ignoring the work of their predecessors:

In this first category I’d locate all those novelists who for better or worse write not as if the twentieth century didn’t exist, but as if the great writers of the last sixty years or so hadn’t existed. Our century is more than two-thirds done; it is dismaying to see so many of our writers following Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy or Balzac, when the question seems to me to be how to succeed not even Joyce and Kafka, but those who succeeded Joyce and Kafka and are now in the evenings of their own careers. (66-7)

While Barth did retract, or at least soften this comment some in a later publication of the essay, it is significant not for its truth or bearing, but for the cyclical trends it signifies. As evident in the close examination of Saturday, Everyman, and The Emperor’s Children, 9/11 has sparked a renewed trend of keenly moral fiction. Such fiction might, as these books certainly have, win the appreciation of readers and critics. Praised as their authors are for the distinctiveness with which they present these stories, so different from those immediately preceding them, the forms and themes employed by these novelists will, very soon, grow exhausted. At which point, a series of novels will appear
that challenge the ideas conveyed and conventions employed in these three novels.

Works Cited


Barth, John. The Friday Book. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons,
1984.
Donohue, Deidre. “Sleepy Saturday is No Sunday Picnic.” USA Today. 23 March 2005.


