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Sustainability or Climate Change?

An Ecocritical Analysis of Ian McEwan's *Solar*

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Abstract

This essay is an ecocritical literary analysis of the novel *Solar*. The aim is to investigate the effect on the reader of the main characters, place, symbols and satire with focus on climate change and sustainability. The protagonist Michael Beard, a despicable, selfish antihero, consumes everything and everybody whereas Tom Aldous, the heroic character, is devoted to a life of sustainability. Beard represents the greedy capitalistic Western consumer society and its male leaders who close their eyes to the warnings of a changing climate, and Aldous represents the sustainable and alternative lifestyle. Humor and ridicule exhibits the weaknesses and greed of mankind in a satirical way. Symbols like cancer and the Co2 emitting transport system symbolize overconsumption and a stressed globe. The effect on the reader is a reflection about the ongoing struggle between climate change and sustainability and the demand for a change towards a sustainable lifestyle.

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1. Introduction

Environmental concerns are some of the most pressing problems and most discussed topics in Western society today. Through different media, we hear about the consequences of global warming, pollution, overpopulation and the hunt for resources. One of the major problems today is climate change and in order to find out how the climate change topic is approached in fiction, I have chosen to make an ecocritical analysis of Ian McEwan's novel *Solar*. My method is close reading which is used to notice details and selected literary effects in the text. My aim is to notice, analyze and interpret the details and literary effects in *Solar* concerning climate change and sustainability and examine the effects of my close reading of the novel on the reader.

In order to limit my essay, I have chosen to concentrate mainly on the characterization of the main characters but also on symbols, setting and style. I have limited the setting to the three most frequent places in the novel and the style is limited to satire. Through a thorough analysis of the main characters, symbols, place and style, the questions I want to answer are:

- What is the effect of characterization when it comes to climate change and sustainability?
- What is the effect of place, symbols and satire concerning issues of climate change and sustainability?

1.1 What is ecocriticism?

Ecocriticism is one of many theories within literary criticism. Ecocriticism emerged as a literary field in the US in the late 1980s, followed by the UK in the beginning of the 1990s. At the beginning, a struggle was going on whether ecocriticism was the right term or not, which has resulted in alternatives such as “green studies” (Barry, 239) or “environmentalism” (Sarver, n.pag.). Since ecocriticism first appeared, it has evolved, expanded and changed substantially. This development has caused critics today to talk about “first- and second-wave of ecocriticism” (Campbell,1). Recently, they have even started to define a new emerging third-wave of ecocriticism (Iovino, n.pag.).

With her anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Glotfelty was one of the founders in the field of ecocriticism. In this foundational work, she defines ecocriticism to be “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty, xviii); she claims that the typical aim of a theorist is to ask questions about the relationship between nature and human culture (Glotfelty, xix).

Another pioneer in the ecocritical field is Buell. Estok quotes him defining “ecocriticism as [a] study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis” (Estok, n.pag.). These definitions are very broad and uncertain. At the beginning of the ecocritical era, ecocriticism has been under attack for lacking a theory and a method. Ecocriticism was accused of copying other established literary theories such as feminism and Marxism. It was claimed that ecocriticism was not at all a theory but a *focus* (Sarver, n.pag.) or an *attitude*. (Estok, n.pag.).

We have to take the critical voices into account and recognize that ecocriticism has a problem. The problem is that ecocriticism is not theorized enough but it focuses too much on a naïve theme of

man versus nature (Estok, n.pag.). Another problem, which the early ecocriticism faced, was skepticism. When compared with the theories of feminism and Marxism, ecocriticism has had a hard time to be recognized and accepted. Estok proposes that the reason for this discrepancy is because people are less engaged “with environmental issues than they are with social ones” (Estok, n.pag.). Estok states two reasons why people are more engaged in social issues. The first one is that social issues are more concrete. Gender and race consist of people with flesh and blood, whereas the environment is more abstract. Secondly, we have well established terms for issues concerning gender, social stratification, racism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism, to mention some of them, but we do not have the terminology for fear which has been caused by environment (Estok, n.pag.).

During the last twenty years, ecocriticism has undergone an immense change. In the late eighties, critics in the field focused on “the reappraisal of Romanticism” (Bergthaler, n.pag.). The first-wave ecocritics had a very narrow view of nature. To them nature was limited to the “traditional ‘natural’ settings - forests, fields, deserts, mountains, rivers”, to areas almost devoid of people (Campbell, 7). Another limitation was the emphasis on realism and the rejection of postmodern literature. It was argued that postmodern literature constructs nature and often focuses on the urban, and ecocritics “feared postmodernism and postmodern literature’s declaration of the death of nature and the simultaneous celebration of culture” (Campbell, 2). The ecocritics celebrated the accurate depiction of nature, not the constructed one, with the aim to connect the reader with nature (Campbell, 7).

Another typical feature of first-wave ecocriticism was the strong concentration on the local level. During urbanization, the human beings had lost the connection to nature. People consumed more and did not care where the products and resources came from and where they ended up. People had

detached themselves from nature and had no ecological awareness. As a response to this alienation, ecocriticism concentrated its efforts on “localisme”. Localisme was mainly expressed by the studies of place, such as romanticism, wildlife and wilderness, but it also included indigenous cultures. These studies were combined with ecological sustainable solutions (Kerridge, n.pag.).

Today, we see that ecocriticism has enlarged its area of interests from a local perspective towards a global one. Some of the most prominent environmentalists now use a “transnational and translocal” approach (LeManger, 3). The varieties of environmental issues, on a global scale, are immense. Some scientists choose to study images of Earth from Space such as Goolge Earth, others compare environmental imagination in different cultures about the globe. Yet some examine frictions between environment and science or environment and freedom. Finally, some choose to emphasize global economy, global capitalism, biodiversity or ecology and the list of subjects is far from conclusive (Lemenger 10-11).

During the first-wave period, most critics were “white men” (Cambell, 2). Eventually, they were criticized for having an ethnocentric and male view. In their approach towards analyzing literature, they were accused of choosing a primarily white, male perspective. The dominant white, male approach and the lack of perspective concerning gender, class and ethnicity were seen as one of the major problems (Campbell 6-9). Time had come for a change and voices were uttered that the obligation of the theorist was to reject the dominant idea of the rule of the Western man. The aim is to change the notion that the Western man stands above nature, which has prevailed for centuries (Coupe,2).

The discussion about gender, class and ethnicity caused the appearance of second-wave ecocriticism. As a result, two important areas have emerged, ecofeminist literary criticism and environmental justice criticism (Campbell, 6-9). Ecofeminism might ask questions about the relationship between women and nature or whether women and men view nature differently. Environmental justice criticism might explore environmental justice movements or the connection between environment and social justice. Together, the two branches have contributed to the fact that ecocritics now embrace more postmodern and urban-centered literature as well as issues concerning gender and ethnicity (Campbell, 14-18). Another important change which occurred was the view on the relationship between human beings and nature. During the first wave man and nature were seen as opposites to each other and the aim was to protect nature from man. The second wave ecocritics had another notion; they saw human beings and nature as intertwined and dependent on each other (Verderame n.pag.).

During the first wave of ecocriticism, the concept of nature was limited to “nature writing, ecocentric texts, and natural history” (Johnson, 9), but during the second wave, the concept of nature broadened to include even “the urban, the interweave of built and natural dimensions” (José, 95). The concept of nature moves from the “unbuilt” to the built environment and it extends its area of focus from the wilderness to include the urban landscapes “and ultimately all space including “nonspace”. A blank page may be an environment, just as an office cubicle is an environment” (Johnsson, 9). In other words, nature now includes all places and all space.

Ecocriticism today has burgeoned to include “environmental issues such as global warming, overpopulation, pollution and the hunt for resources. It also investigates human’s attitudes and reactions towards nature and how we treat nature (Haabeeb, n.pag.). Verderame predicts that the third

wave of ecocriticism will work towards a more global focus. It will also try to reduce the view of nature and humans as opposites. Finally, the ecocritical approach will be central to all analysis of literary texts exploring the social, economic, and physical dimensions and impacts of environmental processes. Another important feature of the third wave criticism is the cooperation with science; literary critics will work together with climatologists, geologists, and physicists (Verdame n.pag.).

Every country has its own version of ecocriticism due to different culture, history and literary history. The American ecocriticism traditionally embraces the wilderness and the force of life whereas the British ecocriticism is influenced by British Romanticism (Barry, 240-241). Compared to the U.S, Europe is densely populated, which means that Europe, and among them Britain, do not have much wilderness. Instead, the British are influenced by the “cultural landscapes and the pastoral” (Rigby, 2).

Ecocriticism is a very broad approach and works well together with other branches of science, especially natural science being an obvious partner. One essential question remains, however, which is how to analyze and interpret literature in an ecocritical way. The simple answer is that no common ecocritical model of interpretation exists (Oppermann II, 105). Some literary critics see this as a major problem.

Further, it is implied that ecocriticism is hardly capable of making “the connection between global threats and individual lives” (Estok, n.pag.). It is a kind of unidentified mass. If one is afraid of strangers we talk about *xenophobia* if one is afraid of homosexuality we talk about *homophobia* but we do not have an expression like “*ecofobia*” to explain fear of nature, it does not exist (Estok, n.pag.). A final argument against ecocriticism is that the approach is too anti- theoretical and the attitude too naïve. It does not have its own theory but draws on existing theories (Estok, n.pag.).

One can discuss whether ecocriticism lacks a theory and definition but it certainly has an aim. Ecocriticism emerged as a response to the diverse environmental problems the modern world faces today. The aim was to “bring ecological consciousness to the practice of literary criticism” (Oppermann I, 31). The aim of ecocriticism is to link meaning, value, language, and imagination in literature with the environmental problems and issues. Some critical voices have questioned whether ecocriticism is in fact too political but, all in all, literary critics agree that there has to be a political agenda (Oppermann I, 32). Buell expresses this well when he states that ecocriticism is all the more attractive “when it bites” (Buell, xvi).

2. Analyzing *Solar*

2.1 Characterization

The protagonist in *Solar* is Michael Beard and his obesity is described by “the new curtain- swag of fat that hung below his armpits, the innocent stupidity of swelling in gut and rear” (McEwan, 6). Tom Aldous is Beard’s contradiction. He is young with “his big-boned goofy face and flaring nostrils, his ponytail, his wrist bracelet of grubby red and green sting intertwined (McEwan, 28). He has also “boxed for Norfolk in the county championship, had rowed for his college at Cambridge, had come seventh in a San Francisco marathon” (McEwan, 28) and eats “his holier-than-you diet of salad and yoghurt” (McEwan, 28). Michael’s eating habits are somewhat different. Throughout the whole novel, he eats and drinks. He eats chocolate biscuits (McEwan, 32), and “after a meaty Germanic breakfast,” he is on the plane “with a “runway champagne...., a half hour later he was ripping open a sachet of a salt-studded, beef-glazed, toasted corn-type sticklet snack that came with a jumbo gin and tonic” (McEwan, 118), then “followed “quails’ legs wrapped in bacon on a bed of creamed garlic. Then cubes

of pork belly mounted on a hill-fort of buttered rice” (McEwan, 119). The desert consists of “chocolate under a chocolate sauce; goat’s cheese, cow’s cheese in a nest of white grapes, three rolls, a chocolate mint, three glasses of Burgundy” and when “his tray was removed, only the grapes remained” (McEwan, 119). At the end of the novel, he devours “[f]our wedges of skinless chicken breast, interleaved with three minute steaks, the whole wrapped in bacon, with a honey and cheese topping and served with a twice-roasted jacket potatoes already impregnated with butter and crème cheese” (McEwan, 278). Beard represents the financially well-established, middle-aged class in charge of society, keeping to the old traditions of materialism and consumption. He does not care whether the food he eats is healthy or produced in an environmentally friendly way. He just devours what he wants. His own needs are more important than nature and his own body. On the contrary, Tom represents the mainly young and rising generation, the one who cares about health and environmental issues who wants to live in harmony with nature instead of destroying it

Beard and Tom are very different. Beard lives on his fame: “He held an honorary university post in Genova and did no teaching there, lent his name, his title, Professor Beard, Nobel laureate, to letterheads, to institutes, signed up to international initiatives, sat on Royal Commission on science funding” (McEwan, 14), and “he was always on the lookout for an official role with a stipend attached ... his university salary, lecture fees and media appearances were never quite sufficient” (McEwan, 16). Beard is a man who fits well into the individualistic, capitalistic and consumerist society. He admits to himself that “[i]n fact, greenery in general, gardening, country rambles, protest movements, photosynthesis, salads – was not to his taste” (McEwan, 87). He is not interested in climate change (McEwan, 24) and he does not care about other people (McEwan, 20); he has ruined five marriages and has had eleven affairs during the five years he had been married to Patrice his last wife (McEwan, 47).

The only thing he is interested in is himself and he consumes whatever surrounds him if he can benefit from it. Beard is not the morally ideal character, on the contrary, he is very human. Beard's prodigal, immoral, and greedy behavior breaks expected values and social norms. Further, greed, lust, and gluttony (three of the deadly sins) are represented by Beard. The breach of values and moral issues seems to have the function of distancing the reader from the main character. Thus, the characterization of Beard offers a critique against society and the way the environment is treated.

Tom Aldous has devoted his entire life to save the world from environmental disaster. When Beard claims that Tom is "naïve" (McEwan, 88), Tom confirms this and adds: "I do science and nothing else, I don't meet people, I don't go out. I go home and work in the studio" (McEwan, 88). Tom is a serious man with a personal mission to help solve the perils of global warming at all costs. Beard puts it in a more dramatic way: "climate change was consuming Tom Aldous" (McEwan, 36). Devoting his life to find solutions to the environmental crisis, Tom's hard work has not been in vain. He knows that he has found the solution to produce sustainable energy and tries persistently to convince Beard to work on solar: "I'm a simple man...I just want to do what's right for the environment": says Tom. "But I'm nothing, I'm no one. I want to show you my ideas and when you have looked at them I know you'll go for it. People will listen to you... it's our future, the whole world's future that's at stake" (McEwan, 34, 87). Tom is the new, pure and unselfish scientist, the hero and guarding angel. Tom and Beard represent the conflict between nature and culture between environment and consumerism and between unselfishness and greed. It is the battle between the old lifestyle and a new sustainable way of living where the environment is taken care of instead of being used and destroyed.

In Western culture, culture is perceived as masculine whereas nature is seen as feminine whose duty is to provide for the wellbeing of the human race (Nayar, 250). Nayar claims that some feminists suggest that these attributed characteristics are given by males. The consequences have led to the male dominance of both women and nature justifying male oppression and exploitation (Nayar, 250). Beard, representing the white male culture, is using his power to dominate Tom Aldous who represents female characteristics, such as caring for nature. Nature is like a child to Tom, he cares for it in an unselfish manner, devoting his life totally to it. Tom Aldous is a very sympathetic character and functions as the role model for how to take care of nature whereas Beard is repulsive and functions as a bad role model when it comes to living a healthy and sustainable life. During the extremities of Beard's and Tom's actions and values "man's position in the ecosphere" is exposed and the "environmental thinking and the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the global ecological crisis" become a theme (Oppermann I, 32).

Who will win the battle, the financially well-established class, represented by Beard or the new group of people thinking in sustainable solutions, represented by Tom? Beard wins, sticking to the old habits of consumption, he and his lifestyle will prevail because he has the power in society. He can change things if he wants, but he does not want to. His own desires precede and he wants revenge because he has caught Tom in his living room having an affair with his wife, Patricia. Patricia and Michael are still married but their marriage has come to an end, and Michael is to move out (McEwan, 81-89). When Michael indicates that he will fire Tom, Tom grows desperate and shouts that he will never be able to find another job and that "[t]his is too important for private revenge" (McEwan, 89). To Aldous, saving the world is more important than personal desire and demand, and he calls on Beard to think rationally instead of emotionally.

Revenge strikes as Tom, in his desperation running to beg for mercy, trips over the polar-bear rug on the floor. It was not only lying there passively but it “was waiting for him. It came alive” (McEwan, 89). He runs with his “arms outstretched” and flies through the air. Finally the back of his head “smashes into the corner” of a glass table, and he is killed instantly (McEwan, 89). This passage is similar to a crucifixion. With the “arms outstretched” Tom is crucified and, like Jesus, he dedicated his entire life to save the world. Both were seen as a threat to the well-established rulers and had to be eliminated.

Michael builds his future on Tom’s spirit (McEwan, 186). Seeing the potential of personal gain, he starts his own company with his partner, Tony Hammer. Beard, however, does not start his project on idealistic or moral grounds: “Beard was not wholly skeptical about global change. It was one in a list of issues, of looming sorrows ... he read about it, vaguely deplored it” (McEwan, 15). Beard is a scientist and believes in scientific proofs, so he accepts that climate change exists (McEwan, 15, 214-216) but he expects “governments to meet and take actions” (McEwan, 15). “[E]veryone but Beard was worried about global warming” (McEwan, 67) and “he himself had other things to think about” (McEwan, 15). Beard accepts that global warming is a fact but he does not care personally, he does not want to take action but expects other people to solve the problem. Here, Beard could be read as a representative of a whole range of people worldwide who know there is a problem, but close their eyes to the evidence that climate is changing and they keep living their comfortable lives as they have always done expecting or hoping the worldwide leaders and new inventions will solve the problems.

As a representative of human culture, Beard does not want to hear about the “wild commentary” of world “peril” and “calamity” (McEwan, 15). He compares the warning of natural disaster with the warnings of doomsday in the Bible. He refuses to believe in “the apocalyptic

tendency” whether it is a religious one or a threat to our natural environment proved by scientific facts (McEwan, 16). The reason why he did not care about the end of the world is because it “was never pitched in the present, where it could be seen for the fantasy it was” (McEwan, 16). Beard concludes that there is always something for people to be afraid of. He has heard about so many threatening disasters that he does not believe in them anymore; this includes the risk of global warming.

Beard has all the things, food and drink a man needs: “What other concerns could a rational man have“? (McEwan, 184). “Was he unhappy, reading of this man-made mess? Not at all, he had been content” (McEwan,184). He was a “serious man at work” (McEwan, 184). Since he found out that Aldous’ file had great potential, Beard has worked very hard to build a consortium, seeking financial support and venture capital as well as working at the technical aspects. “All Beard asked, beyond a reasonable return, was sole attribution” (McEwan, 186). Beard represents a great number of VIPs and other powerful leaders, who do not care about the environment but only about short headed, immediate gains for themselves, their companies or countries.

Beard’s partner on the solar project, Toby Hammer, represents the notion of the ignorant American. Beard and Toby have been partners for many years but they have never discussed the “big issue,” global warming. Just before they are to launch their ground breaking solar complex in the New Mexican desert, Toby Hammer asks Beard if it is actually true that the planet is “getting cooler” (McEwan, 215) which he hears everywhere from business people and on the news (McEwan, 215). Michael Beard is shocked and tries to convince Toby Hammer with facts and evidence that this is not true (McEwan, 215-218). Toby Hammer is still not convinced and finally says that he puts in “all this work then guys in white coats come on TV to say the planet’s not heating. I get spooked” (McEwan, 217).

Beard and Toby are driven by desire and greed, Toby even eats Beard's butter and syrup soaked pancakes after completing his own immense portion (McEwan, 184) which indicates that Toby might be even greedier than Beard. Beard and Toby never change but remain static throughout the novel chasing the prospects of personal profit using global economy and capitalism to reach their goal. They are the antiheroes finally destroyed by their own greed and immoral behavior in the end. The unselfish Aldous, the image of how to live a sustainable life, succumb to the greed of man. To the implied reader, the effect of the characters imply a feeling of sympathy for Aldous and his sustainable way of life whereas Tony and especially Beard seem greedy and repellent. The characters are either black or white, likeable or abominable, but they are also very human. Through the behavior and values of the characters, the climate change issue is simplified to the individuals in the story (Huges, 5) where Aldous represents the solution and where Beard and Toby represent the horror of climate change. The contrasts of the static characters and their values and behaviors make the implied reader think about what is right and wrong when talking about climate change, and its moral aspects.

2.2 Symbols and place

One of the places in *Solar* is London. London is the industrialized urban area, a "colossal disc" which is "turning like an intricately slotted space station in majestic self-sufficiency" (McEwan, 108). It is a "giant concrete wound dressed with steel, these catheters of ceaseless traffic filings to and from the horizon – the remains of the natural world could only shrink before them" (McEwan, 109). Here, "the blind forces of desires and needs looked unstoppable and were generating heat... the hot breath of civilization" (McEwan, 109). London is the man-made threat to nature. In *Solar*, the Arctic and the

desert are the last remaining parts of wilderness. The Arctic is a hostile place for human beings, especially for Beard, who is inexperienced and in bad shape to meet the “frozen dark” (McEwan, 61). Most of the time he stays in camp, in the comfort of civilization, but when he does go outside he struggles for survival. His penis almost freezes off and he is almost eaten by a hungry polar bear. (McEwan, 55-71). It is a battle between nature and man where the male dominance and masculinity are questioned and threatened by nature (Coupe, 2).

The desert can also be deadly. When Beard drives in his air conditioned SUV through the New Mexican desert, it is 112 degrees Fahrenheit (about 44 degrees Celsius). Beard wants to feel the heat and pulls over. When he gets out of the car he is hit by “the savage heat ... he felt dizzy, his consciousness partially faded and his knees gave way” (McEwan, 232). He almost fainted and he was just out of the car for less than fifteen seconds. He almost succumbs to the savage heat, but is finally saved by the manmade comfort of the car (McEwan, 232). Both the Arctic and the desert could be seen as symbols of hell on earth indicating a future scenario if the way of living and continuous burning of fossil fuel is not changed. The Arctic and the desert are parts of a “wasteland outside of modernity’s plenty” (Berry, 82), out of reach of the “eternal urban feast”. (Berry, 82) The desire to dominate these remaining uninhabited spots “represents an ancient yearning for control over nature (Berry, 82). The desert and the Arctic attack Beard when he tries to interact with or control them. Here nature does not give in to Beard’s desire to control and exploit.

The “Polar Bear Rug”, in Beard’s house, represents the wilderness which has been tamed or even killed by man. It has been tamed but it might wake up suddenly and strike back to become lethal to mankind, just as it was to Tom Aldous (McEwan, 89). Nature is not a passive part but wild and

threatening signaling that nature might strike back if the continued human abuse of nature causes an irreversible climate change.

The blemish on Beard's hand is another symbol, a dangerous skin cancer symbolizing Beard's unhealthy lifestyle as well as the suffocating nature. It appeared three years ago, was frozen but returned nine months ago. The appearance has changed and the blemish has now spread and darkened (McEwan, 205). The blemish represents the state and health of the Earth, both ill from human consumption. When the doctor tells Beard that the blemish is a melanoma, a very dangerous skin cancer and ill sign for recovery, Beard reacts by denying it. He was "generally adept at avoiding inconvenient or troubling thoughts" (McEwan, 238) and answers that he does not have time to remove it. The doctor concludes that Beard is behaving irrationally, that there is "no time to lose" and it is "on the edge of no return" (McEwan, 238). The doctor continues, "'don't be a denier.'" He then appears to refer back to their climate-change chats. "It won't go away just because you don't want it or are not thinking about it" (McEwan, 238). The blemish grows more dangerous if it spreads just like the risk of climate change. Beard denies both of the problems, closes his eyes and does nothing to solve them

It is not only the blemish but Beard's health in general which is in ill shape. Due to his devastating lifestyle, his health worsens throughout the novel. At the end, the doctor explains Beard's situation this way: "No one... not even Beard, would choose to walk around with a body like Beard's" (McEwan, 239). He has swollen joints, an enlarged liver, high blood pressure and high levels of cholesterol and other symptoms caused by an extremely unhealthy lifestyle. Beard knows that he ought to change his lifestyle but he "could not command his body to do it, he had no will for it. He would rather die than take up jogging or prance to funky music in a church hall with other tracksuited deadbeats" (McEwan, 24). His excessive consumption is constituted by "all the hours he spent on

journeys” (McEwan, 49). Here, the important point is not his consumption of time but his large consumption of natural resources when transported. Beard’s abused body reflects his lifestyle and it is a symbol of the condition of the Earth, which is abused by human consumption and greed

The novel is full of scenes where Beard is travelling somewhere, scenes where he is transported by cars, planes or even snowmobiles. At one of his uncountable airplane trips, he gazed down at London from “his wondrous, and wondrously dirty machine” (McEwan, 109). Here, “dirty” could refer to dirty oil and the dirty burning of fossil fuels. On Beard’s first snowmobile ride, he “slid forward with a shriek of overworked engine and a puff of stinking black exhaust” (McEwan, 56). Going from “London to Dallas to El Paso, picking up at the airport the outsized SUV” (McEwan, 204), he drives through the dessert “at a lordly pace, with the big engine barely turning” (McEwan, 230). These scenes show that Beard uses a very large amount of fossil fuels polluting the air, which eventually causes global warming. Beard’s consumption, selfishness and resistance towards changing his lifestyle eventually cause his own destruction. All the people he has misused turn against him in the end. When he finally realizes that his life and business are falling apart, his answer to the problem is that “[i]t would take care of itself. He would do nothing about it” (McEwan, 278). The use of symbols is a technique which helps emphasizing environmental problems and helps displaying the absurdities of modern lifestyle and forms a critique of the norms and immoral behavior displayed in *Solar*.

2.3 Satire

Beard’s life is highly satirical, but what is satire and how does it work? We do not have a commonly unified definition of what satire is but Megan LeBoeuf describes satire as “a very powerful artistic form

used to critique specific human behaviors” (LeBoeuf, 2). Mary Ann Richel defines satire as “the criticizing of society in a humorous way. Its main purpose is to reform society; the writer’s intention is to expose stupidity, excess, incompetence and evil” (Richel, 141). LeBoeuf’s definition of satire contains three important characteristics: critique, irony and implicitness. Critique is used to criticize human behavior and folly to encourage social change. Irony is used “to point out the problems with the behavior being critiqued” (LeBoeuf, 3). Implicitness is the way the satire is used and it is never expressed directly. Instead, it appears in an absurd way where things are often exaggerated (LeBoeuf, 3).

With his greedy, socially incompetent and despicable character, Beard exposes stupidity and incompetence. The critique is not expressed directly but through Beard’s actions and behavior. The materialistic American lifestyle is also exposed to satire. Beard’s American partner, Toby Hammer is “lean and strong” and a self-made man, he “knew people and introduced them, and fixed up deals” (McEwan, 210), and “he had even squeezed money out of the Bush people” (McEwan, 211). He does not believe in global warming and gets his information from business people and public television (McEwan, 215). When finally the solar plant is ready, Hammer exclaims that “sunlight, water and money make electricity makes more money!” (McEwan, 214). Another satirical element is when the American doctor, who is an “ardent believer in climate change” explains that he has “bought a piece of real estate in Newfoundland which, he was certain, would be capable of sustaining a wine yard within ten years” (McEwan, 205). Even the most ardent believer in and advocate of fighting climate change seizes his chance to make money on climate change in a very capitalistic way.

America is also represented by some public institutions, like the Homeland Security, which “were suspicious of Beard’s alien status, and letters from prominent American science academies made

little difference” (McEwan, 211). To celebrate the inauguration of the huge solar power plant, another institution, the New Mexican Chamber of Commerce, has “lined up an army marching band” and arranged “a fly-past from the air-force base” (McEwan, 214). McEwan displays the American society as ridiculous, greedy and vain with ill-educated as well as well-educated people hunting for personal gain and success at the expenses of the environment.

The political climate in Britain is also ridiculed. The politicians “wished to be, or appeared to be, practically rather than merely rhetorically engaged with climate change and announced a number of initiatives, one of which was the Centre, a facility for basic research in need of a mortal at its head sprinkled with Stockholm’s magic dust” (McEwan, 16). The Centre was supposed to resemble a center for renewable energy in Colorado. The Centre shared the same aim as the American center, but not its acreage of funding” (McEwan, 15). The newly appointed Minister, “with a populist’s touch” (McEwan, 16), encouraged people to send in “clean-energy ideas” and promised everybody a personal reply. This caused that all resources were wasted on meaningless answers. “The revolutionary lone inventor was a fantasy of popular culture - and the Minister” (McEwan, 19). The British government is ridiculed for being vain and populist and the only reason for doing something for the environment is, even here, for personal gains.

One of the most absurd scenes is Michael Beard’s trip to the Arctic. He is one of twenty artists and scientists “concerned with climate change” who have been invited to see the consequences of global warming on a “dramatically retreating glacier whose sheer blue cliffs regularly calved mansion-sized blocks of ice into the shore of the fjord” (McEwan, 46). Accommodation is described as a “well-appointed, toastily-heated vessel of richly-carpeted oak-panelled corridors with tasseled wall lamps... placidly frozen into a semi-remote fjord” (McEwan, 46). There are competent guides to take care of

them and “predatory polar bears would be shot if necessary by a guide with a high-caliber rifle” (McEwan, 46). To compensate for the Co2 emissions, caused by the flight, snowmobile rides and board and lodging for twenty people in the Arctic, 3000 trees are planned to be planted in Venezuela when a place has been found and “local officials bribed” (McEwan, 46). What is contradictory is that twenty people, who are concerned with climate change, emit large amounts of carbon dioxide on a trip to the Arctic. They shield themselves from the dangerous nature and live their protected and luxurious lives compensating their guilty conscience by bribing some local officials in Venezuela. Another humorous scene is when, on a snowmobile ride, Beard’s penis freezes and all of a sudden he feels that “something cold and hard had dropped from Beard’s groin and fallen down inside the legs of his longjohns. Beard is totally convinced that his penis has fallen off until he realizes that it is his lipsalve (McEwan, 63). Beard thinks that he has lost his manhood in the wilderness. Beard, a representative of the city dweller, who is totally alienated from nature, who would never survive in the wilderness without the modern, Co2 emitting commodities, is subjected to ridicule.

Beard’s greed and uncontrolled consumption, the vain British Minister, American institutions and the alienated city dweller display a comic and ridicule picture of institutions, governments, scientists, city-dwellers, Americans, business people and the capitalistic, consumerist, male Western society in general. The satirical depiction of human flaws, weaknesses and self-importance questions modern lifestyle conducted by Beard and Toby. Their greed for more, on behalf of the environment, becomes evident. The ridiculed public institutions expose the powerful people as vain and self-important with no interest in global environment issues unless beneficial to themselves. The effect of satire in *Solar* is that the implied reader thinks critically about the role and responsibilities of public and private institutions concerning climate change and thus calls for a change.

3. Conclusion

The main character, Michael Beard, is profoundly abominable and immoral. He is vain, self-centered and cannot control his desires. He represents Western over-consuming society running toward destruction of the planet. Young Aldous represents the solution and hope for the future. Unfortunately, he is destroyed and the selfish evil, represented by Beard, wins over the idealistic goodness. Toby Hammer, the American businessman, enhances the view of the Western man as greedy and selfish, denying the risk of global warming.

During the actions and values of the characters, man's position and role on the Earth is questioned. The responsibilities towards the risk of climate change are exposed and an alternative lifestyle, represented by Aldous, is shown.

The desert and the Arctic are wild and dangerous places for Beard, whereas the London area is tamed by man. The desert and the Arctic are symbols of hell on earth and the victory of the wilderness over man. The growing blemish and Beard's degrading body are symbols of the stressed state of the Earth. Beard's use of oil consuming transportation is symbol of his extravagant lifestyle build on the consumption of natural resources. These symbols underpin Beard's greed and man's resource demanding desires on behalf of nature.

Satire gives a hilarious, humorous and grotesque picture of the destructive Western lifestyle, with its focus on consumerism, egoism and profit. Characterizations, places, symbols, and satire in *Solar* display modern lifestyle problems and reflect aspects of the contemporary society, such as, the lack of actions from leading politicians, businessmen, and scientists in terms of pressing global

environmental issues. Beard represents the problem whereas Tom represents the solution.

Characterization, symbols, and satire promotes a moral standpoint in favor of the environment.

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