

Visions of the Immoral Scientist: Morality and the Perception of Science in Ian McEwan's *Solar* and other Contemporary Climate Change Stories

Anton Kirchhofer, Anna Auguscik

The critical reception of Ian McEwan's novel *Solar* has been decidedly mixed. Widely anticipated as one of the first fictional engagements with the topic of climate change by a major novelist, and widely reviewed and discussed across the media, a substantial number of responses to the novel were reserved or ambivalent. This was due largely to McEwan's off-putting choice of protagonist – the selfish, immoral, misogynist physicist Michael Beard, who lives by exploiting and abusing all who respect, support or love him. Reviewers have described this “one-dimensional self-deceiving man of science” as “repulsive” (Cowley Observer, 14 Mar 2010), and have been led to disqualify the novel as “purely light entertainment” (Urquhart, Independent, 14 Mar 2010). Scholars have deplored that “the novel is limited by the choice of satirical allegory as a genre” and called it a “great disappointment” (Garrard, “Apocalypse Not”).

Our contribution will seek to contextualise and partly revise these views by (1) offering a ‘closer’ reading of the character of Michael Beard and of its perception in the novel, by (2) placing the novel and its hero alongside other recent climate change stories (e.g. Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*), and by (3) analysing in greater detail the contrasting critical responses in literary reviews and science journals respectively. What will emerge from our reading is a novel whose choice of protagonist is designed to call into question the moral conventions which inform our views of literary characters, of scientific processes, and above all of eco-political challenges such as climate change.