The Oxford English Dictionary defines headache as:

An ache or continuous pain, more or less deep-seated, in the cranial region of the head.

Compared with the richness and variety of definition to be found in the IHS classification of headache,1 the OED seems a little prosaic. Although accounts recognisable as descriptions of migraine may be found in the remaining works of several ancient civilizations,2 the earliest reference to headache acknowledged in the OED comes from a Saxon document of ca. 1000 AD, followed by a quote from a work of John de Trevisa dated 1398:

Also heed-ache cometh of grete fastinge and abstynences

The first literary reference to headache mentioned in the OED is from 1581, Sir Philip Sidney’s (1554-1586) An apologie for poesie.

How many head-aches a passionate life bringeth us to

Not mentioned in OED, but perhaps the first literary work devoted to headache is a poem of 1648, entitled The Head-ake by Robert Herrick (1591-1674), in his collection Hesperides (H-591):

My head doth ake, O Sappho! take
Thy fillit, And bind the paine; Or bring some bane To kill it.

But lesse that part, Then my poore heart, Now is sick: One kisse from thee Will counsell be, And Physick.3

One wonders whether this might be an example of art imitating life: did the author’s experience of headache prompt the writing of the poem? [There is another possible reference in one of Herrick’s poems entitled Upon Love, H-509: I held Love’s head while it did ake/But so it chanc’t to be/Th’ cruel paine did his forsake/And forthwith came to me.] A similar question may be addressed to the many writers who have mentioned headache in their works, some of which have already been documented.4 For example, did Charles Lutwidge Dodgson’s characters’ headaches influence the pseudonymous Lewis Carroll’s depictions of Alice in Wonderland? Seldom can this question be definitively answered, although Vlad Zayas has skilfully traced the possible links between the character Pontius Pilate’s headaches in The Master and Margarita and the author Bulgakov’s (1891-1940) headaches.5

Herrick’s poem is quoted in full in one of his earliest extant letters (November 1898) by the American writer Jack London (1876-1916).6 Interestingly, headaches crop up in several of London’s books: The People of the Abyss (1904; chapters 23,24); and Enduring Love (1997). In Atonement,7 the matriarch Emily Tadills suffers from “the beast migraine”:

She was not in pain, not yet, but she was retiring before its threat. There were illuminated points in her vision, little pinpricks, as though the worn fabric of the visible world was being held up against a far brighter light. She felt in the top right corner of her brain a heaviness, the inert body weight of some curled and sleeping animal; but when she touched her head and pressed, the presence disappeared from the coordinates of actual space. … It was important … not to provoke it; once this lazy creature moved from the peripheries to the centre, then the knitting pains would obliterate all thought … It bore her no malice, this animal, it was indifferent to her misery.

As for the pain: “At worst, unrestrained, a matching set of sharpened kitchen knives would be drawn across her optic nerve, and then again, with a greater downward pressure, and she would be entirely shut in and alone”. This is set in 1935, and no specific treatment is mentioned. But is it purely chance that one of the plants growing in the cracks

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between the paving stones on the terrace is feverfew, sometimes prescribed as a prophylactic?

As a consequence of her migraine, Emily has developed an “expertise born of a thousand headaches, avoiding all things sudden or harsh”, wearing dark glasses before going outside to fetch her daughter, and has “learned her patience through years of side-stepping migraine”. Nonetheless, when unforeseen trouble comes, “she rose to the crisis, free of migraine and the need to be alone”. The migraines also impact on the family: “As children they claimed to be able to tell from across the far side of the park whenever their mother had a migraine by a certain darkening at the windows.” Her daughter avoids troubling her mother, since “nothing but migraine would have come of it”. At another time, they see the migraines as “a comic interlude in a light opera”.

McEwan is perhaps less secure in a later description, which purports to be of vascular dementia. A seventy-seven year old woman reports:

My headaches, the sensation of tightness around the temples, have a particular and sinister cause. He [the doctor] pointed out some granular smears across a section of the [brain] scan… I was experiencing, he said, a series of tiny, nearly imperceptible strokes. The process will be slow, but my brain, my mind, is closing down. … I have vascular dementia, the doctor told me … it’s not as bad as Alzheimer’s, with its mood swings and aggression.

Yet later she reports, “I fell asleep again and when I woke … a painful tightness was around my forehead. I took from my handbag three aspirins which I chewed and swallowed with distaste. Which portion of my mind, of my memory, had I lost to a minuscule stroke while I was asleep?”

Surely these are tension type headaches, possibly medication overuse headaches (waking from sleep, excessive analgesic consumption) and the scan appearances entirely incidental and appropriate for age? Has this fictional doctor (or possibly McEwan’s source) had any training in the disciplines of headache or cognitive disorders? It is surprising that the careful research done for the historical parts of the book is not matched when it comes to medicine. Artistic licence, no doubt; the need for melodrama, possibly.

References
In Part 1, we described methods, pathophysiology and anatomy, and history of neurostimulation in the treatment of headache, as well as reviewing the literature on peripheral neuromodulation for primary headaches. Peripheral targets for stimulation include percutaneous nerves, transcranial holocephalic, occipital nerves, auriculotemporal nerves, supraorbital nerves, cervical epidural, and sphenopalatine ganglia. In Part 2 Chronic Headache “A Comprehensive Guide to Evaluation and Management will be of great interest to neurologists, primary care physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, medical students, and other clinicians with an interest in chronic daily headache.

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