

Textuality of History and Historicity of Text: New Historical Analysis of Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*

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Abstract

This article intends to investigate Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs* from the perspective of New Historicism, focusing on the textuality of history and the historicity of text. Research shows that the textuality of history is embodied in the application of omniscient focalization and free indirect discourse presentation, while the historicity of text, crystallized in the influence of the historical background and the writer's own life experience on the novel and the reader's response to the novel. This paper concludes that the novel reflects on history through the unique reconstruction of the historical events.

Keywords: *Black Dogs*, textuality of history, historicity of text, New Historicism

1. Introduction

Ian McEwan is one of the most popular contemporary English novelist and screenwriter, and the novel *Black Dogs* is one of his representative works. This novel tells a thrilling experience, encountering two giant black dogs, of a new-married couple, Bernard and June, on their honeymoon after the end of the Second World War, and has aroused extensive concerns among scholars (e.g., Grimes, 1992; Malcolm, 2002; Judith, 2014) since its publication. The focus of these studies is, however, mostly on the themes of rationality and magic, violence and love, evil and science, and civilization and its abandonment, etc., but rarely on how history and texts are intertwined. Therefore, this paper will analyze *Black Dogs* from the perspective of New Historicism: the textuality of history and the historicity of text.

2. The Textuality of History

Since 1980s, New Historicism has become a new method of literary criticism, which is different from traditional Historicism in the aspect of treating the relationship between text and history. In traditional Historicism, the reality of history, or the object truth, is more important than literary texts. However, New Historicism deems that both history and literature belong to the same semiotic and symbolic system. History is an extended text, and text, condensed history. Therefore, literary texts present history, and different texts disclose different events in the same era. The textuality of history is embodied in the application of omniscient focalization and free indirect discourse presentation, through which the novel *Black Dogs* shows the cruel historical events in and after the Second World War.

2.1 Omniscient Focalization

"Omniscient focalization is a traditional narrative method, which is featured that the omniscient narrator can narrate from any perspective and from any time and space." (Shen, 1998, p. 204) A literary work narrated through omniscient focalization is like a film: The narrator is a photographer, and so "readers are given elaborate information about the thoughts of a character, which the other characters do not hear" (Bal, 1997, pp. 153-154) and they can follow the cinema scene to completely and objectively master the whole story line.

In part four, the narrator Jeremy plays a role of photographer. The camera lens focuses on the scene where Bernard and June went on their honeymoon in 1946 in France. There are four scenes in this part. The first cinema scene is that June alone encountered two giant black dogs, fought desperately with them and finally defeated them. She was scared out of her wit. In this scene, June is the focalized. The second cinema scene is in a hotel. Back to their hotel, Maire, the head of the village, shared the story about the black dogs in the war time.

The event in the war time is set in the third scene. These black dogs were trained by Gastapo to track down the Maquis hideaways. The Allies were landing in Normandy, but these black dogs were left behind and so they ran wild. In fact, the real use of the dogs is to rape women. This is narrated in the fourth scene through the argument between Maire and the Auriac, the manager of the hotel. "Bertand was in a bad way. Her clothes were torn, her nose was bleeding, and she had a cut above her eyebrow." (McEwan, 1992, p. 135) Auriac tried to justify Bertand and said that Bertand is raped by Gastapo. But Maire provided the evidence, "the Sauvy brothers saw this with their own eyes, through the window... and we heard later that this also used to happen at the interrogation centers in Lyon and Paris. The simple truth is, an animal can be trained—" (ibid., p. 136). Out of shame, Auriac did not want this story delivered and explored, and said that "you added to her shame with this story, this evil story" (ibid.). The focalized here is Maire and Auriac, readers and Bernard and June are focalizers. From the point of view of focalizers, they can tell from the argument about Bertand's bad experience that Bertand is raped by dogs but not by Gastapo.

Through the switching of four shot cuts, the event of black dogs is objectively presented and hence the narrative distance is widened. Readers, as audience, have already known well about the event and can make an ethical judgment: this event about black dogs does not just refer to the encounter between June and the two black dogs, but to the bitter experiences of Bertand. War is crueler than that presented on history textbooks and documentaries. Many crueler truths are waiting to be exposed.

The forth part, different from the preface and the previous three parts, uses omniscient focalization which makes this part more objective and authoritative, and proves that the historical event of the black dogs can be narrated, that is, the event is textualized.

2.2 Free Indirect Discourse Presentation

The character discourse is an important part in a novel and free indirect discourse is the most important character discourse. Free indirect discourse is "a form of interference between narrator's text and actor's text" (Bal, 1997, p. 50) and it "not only can reflect character's subjective consciousness, but also can express narrator's attitude. Sympathy is a representative narrative attitude." (Shen, 1998, p. 297) The narrative voice from a compassionate narrator is full of sympathy for the character and can easily exert influence on readers. The novel *Black Dogs* uses many free indirect discourses, especially those by June, from which readers can feel June's subject consciousness and the narrator's sympathy. Here is an example:

Example 1. She was drawn to the idea now because the creatures were familiar. They were emblems of the menace she had felt, they were the embodiment of the nameless, unreasonable, unmentionable disquiet she had felt that morning. (McEwan, 1992, p. 120)

Before meeting with the two black dogs, June had a fear without reason. Having met with the two black dogs, she began to realize why she had such a fear. The second sentence in example 1 is a free indirect discourse. If it is changed into a free direct discourse, *that is why I felt the nameless, unreasonable, unmentionable disquiet*, readers will directly read into the character's mind. This means that the character's thought is not related to the narrator. In a free indirect discourse, however, the narrative voice can be heard. In example 1, the narrative voice not only is compassionate but also shows the tension between June and those two dogs, which also strengthens the suspense of the plot.

During the fight with the two black dogs, June felt the existence of God, "if this was God, it was also, incontestably, herself. Could it help her? Would this Presence be moved by a sudden, self-interested conversion?" (ibid., p. 125) From this free indirect discourse, readers can feel the narrator's attitude towards June: God could help June at this critical moment. When reviewing this scene after finishing the whole novel, readers are reminded of Bertand who is raped by these dogs. At that time Bertand was the most helpless person in the world because nobody was brave enough to rescue her from Gastapo. Therefore, this free indirect discourse expresses both the characters' and the narrator's helplessness and pity.

After the long time fighting, June lost her weapon. She trembled and drew in her arms and legs and covered her face in her hands. "It can come now, was her only thought. It can come." (ibid., p. 127) The only thing June could do is to be violated. Similarly, Bertand was also desperate because she could do nothing to resist. Through reporting June's thought, the narrator creates an atmosphere of tension and manages to frighten everyone. Therefore, this free indirect discourse makes readers not only feel June's fear but also feel that the narrator is not always objective: He also has his own attitude towards the characters.

Everything was past. June's life returned to normal. "Thrilled, already seized by an excited premonition of a joy that would fill her life" (ibid., p. 142), "she felt a peace and spaciousness spread in her. Her contentment had a

depth and tranquility that made her think she had never really known happiness before.” (ibid., p. 144) This is another example of free indirect discourse. From this example, June’s sense of safety is shown to readers. However, Bertand’s sense of fear again occupies the readers’ mind. June is Bertand to some degree. The only difference between them is that June was not raped after the war and Bertand was raped in the war. Therefore, the narrator feels grateful for June and feels deep regret for Bertand.

Ian McEwan’s use of free indirect discourse presentation is successful. He completely puts June’s thoughts on paper, develops the plot, and makes the unreal truth appear in the text. More importantly, readers are deeply impressed by the narrator’s attitude of sympathy and are convinced of the reality of this story. Therefore, the application of free indirect discourse presentation confuses the distinction between history and literature, and proves that history is textualized and needs to be understood and interpreted through fragmented materials.

3. The Historicity of Text

Another important notion of New Historicism is that the text is created under the influence of the historical background and the writer’s own life experience, and that the text in turn exerts influence on readers in the then historical context. Or in Montrose’s (1989) words, “the writing and reading of texts are being reconstructed as historically determined and determining modes of cultural work”. Therefore, the production of *Black Dogs* must be influenced by the social background and traditional culture, and the publication of *Black Dogs* must also affect people in the then society. Hence, the author’s creating process and the readers’ interpreting process are the manifestation of the historicity of text.

3.1 Author’s Creation Process

The historical, social and material backgrounds in writing build up a historical atmosphere of literature. Ian McEwan, deeply influenced by his family and the society, creates such a fiction reflecting the then society.

Ian McEwan was born in a British military family. “The early years of McEwan’s childhood were spent on British military bases in England, and then in Singapore and Libya. [...] It was in Libya that McEwan claims to have had his first sense of the force of history and politics.” (Malcolm, 2002, p. 1) The military family background and the army life exerted influence on Ian McEwan, especially on his writing style. His works are mostly related to history and war and have overtones of politics and history. *Black Dogs* is no exception. Although it is set in the 1980s, the major event happens in the Second World War.

In addition to his own family background, Ian McEwan’s creation is inextricably linked to the then social circumstance. In 1989, the Berlin Wall collapsed and the Cold War came to an end. This forces Ian McEwan to write a novel to reveal the violent and evil society. Creating characters to disclose the real society becomes McEwan’s choice. For example, June in *Black Dogs* says, “if one dog was a personal depression, two dogs were a kind of cultural depression” (ibid., p. 82). Actually, McEwan is always trying to expose the society because he thinks that “what is going to compel me into writing fiction is not what is nice and easy and pleasant and somehow affirming, but somehow what is bad and difficult and unsettling” (Ricks, 2010, p. 19). That is the kind of tension that propels McEwan start to write. Beyond that, McEwan says, “I’ve always been trying to assert some kind of slender optimism in my stories, and I don’t think I can really do that unless I can do it in a world that seems to me to be fundamentally threatening, so what I really worry about is gratuitous optimism, not gratuitous violence” (ibid., pp. 19-20). “Our society is violent, and writers are bound to reflect this. The important thing is not what is described but why it is described.” (Casademont, 2010, p. 56) What Ian McEwan is interested in is “how a violent impulse grows inside us” (ibid.). Consequently, the two black dogs in the novel are exactly the outward manifestation of human beings’ violence, and the two black dogs are the epitome of the society McEwan wanted to reveal.

Therefore, Ian McEwan has strong consciousness of politics and history under the influence of both his family and the social circumstances. Literary creation becomes his weapon to reconsider history and criticize reality. Through inventing such a fictitious story of black dogs, Ian McEwan provides an alarm bell for people nowadays and warns against being wildly optimistic.

3.2 Reader’s Interpreting Process

A novel is produced under specific historical and cultural circumstances, and in turn, it produces an effect on readers in the then society. Although *Black Dogs* is set in the 1980s and the major events happened in the 1940s, it was published in 1992. The international situation was changing constantly in the 1990s. With East European upheaval and Soviet disorganization, East European countries are confronted with a turbulent political scene. What influences of the publication of *Black Dogs* is to exert on British people against the international backdrop?

“The world of a great novelist [McEwan] is continuous not only with our daily, lived world, but also with the slightly distorted, hyper-real, eerily patterned but surprisingly free world he has populated with all his fictional characters” (Lesser, 1992, p. 19). The purpose of McEwan’s *Black Dogs* is to ask us to fear the past. The central debate in *Black Dogs* is the same one that surrounds McEwan’s career, “whether we are continuous with our own past or divorced from it. “We” in this case includes not only novelists and readers, but citizens of real life; and ‘our past’ is not just the one we have lived for ourselves, but the one history has lived for us” (ibid.). If people are sensitive to history and are brave enough to face history, why could Lesser come to such a conclusion? Thus it can be seen that *Black Dogs* awakens people’s awareness of history and makes them to realize “we need to think about history, but we also need to feel it” (ibid.).

Publishers Weekly editorialized on the *Black Dogs* soon after it was published in 1992, indicating that the influence of *Black Dogs* was not limited in Britain, but extended to the whole world. The editorial claims that “the work is impressive; McEwan’s meticulous prose, his shaping of his material to create suspense, and his adept use of specific settings—Poland’s Majdanek concentration camp, Berlin during the dismantling of the Wall, a primitive area of the French countryside—produce a haunting fable about the fragility of civilization, always threatened by the cruelty latent in humankind”. Therefore, McEwan’s unique writing skills, his use of specific historical events, and the record of sexual abuse give deep impressions to readers and makes readers realize the existence of the potential cruelty of human nature. Reviewing such a kind of history, readers could admit that the real society is crazy and cruel, and the reason why the society is cruel is that human being is born to be evil. Disclosing the bad side of the society is of importance, which makes people acknowledge the core problem and take actions to deal with such a difficult situation.

Therefore, Ian McEwan’s *Black Dogs* awakens people’s consciousness of history and urges them to reconsider history; it reminds people of their evil nature and deepens their understanding of the history of Britain and Europe.

4. Conclusion

Black Dogs is a product of the specific cultural and historical context. The textuality of history in the novel is embodied in the application of omniscient focalization and free indirect discourse presentation, and the historicity of text is realized in the influence of the historical background and the writer’s own life experience on the novel and the readers’ response to the novel. Through novelizing and dramatizing the history, Ian McEwan blurs the limit between history and literature and provides materials for us to better understand the history.

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