

# The Universal Pandemic of Violence: A Narratological Reading of Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*

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"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."  
(McEwan, "Adolescence and After" 526)

## Abstract

This paper aims to offer a critical reading of the contemporary English author Ian McEwan's fifth novel entitled *Black Dogs* (1992). I postulate that literary critics have frequently read his fiction for what it is not. As such, McEwan's thought-provoking engagement with cultural questions has more often than not gone unexamined owing to a critical blueprint that, reducing his oeuvre to the topoi of violence, or to a gallery of obnoxious characters branded as psychopaths, typecasts him as a writer of disturbing, salacious fiction. Arguing that McEwan writes to dissect and criticise contemporary culture, I offer a reading of his novel as a literary intervention into a cultural debate. I argue that of crucial importance in McEwan's novel is the question of the narrative structure through which the different segments of *Black Dogs* are recounted. Drawing on the narratological concepts and terminology introduced in the works of Gérard Genette and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, I examine the complexities of the narrative discourses of McEwan's novel and its interlinking thematic analogies. Based on this reading, I conclude that McEwan's intervention in the ongoing cultural debates of today makes of him a severe critic of our time.

Keywords: Narratology, Extradiegetic, Intradiegetic, Homodiegetic, Multiple Internal Focalisation, *Mise en Abyme*.

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## Introduction

Ian McEwan is a controversial figure in contemporary English literature. Since the publication of his first books of fiction in the 1970s, he has gained notoriety as a writer obsessed with violence and perversion. Dubbed “Ian Macabre” for the harrowing scenes of body violence in his short stories and novels, McEwan has been accused of writing deliberately to shock and disgust his readers. Like his previous fiction, McEwan’s fifth novel, *Black Dogs*, received rave as well as unfavourable critical receptions. Short-listed for the 1992 Booker Prize, the new novel was seen by some critics as further evidence of a shift in McEwan’s interests to recent European history. Praising McEwan for his “retreat from the cement garden of his earlier books”, M. John Harrison (1992), for instance, remarked that *Black Dogs* is “a complex statement about violence” and “an undisguised novel of ideas” (p. 20). Describing *Black Dogs* as a “humane, melancholy novel”, Peter Kemp (1992) too argued that “one of recent fiction’s most remarkable regenerations [is] McEwan’s transformation from a purveyor of knowingly nasty tales to a novelist unsurpassed for his responsive, responsible humanity” (p. 6).<sup>1</sup>

*Black Dogs* is unique in McEwan’s oeuvre for its narrative structure. The narrator of the novel, a publisher in his mid-forties called Jeremy, describes the book as his memoir of his parents-in-law, Bernard and June Tremain. He explains that since he was orphaned at the age of eight, he has always been seeking surrogate parents. Marriage offered him the opportunity to forge a close familial bond with Bernard and June, so he tried to find out more about them and the cause of their progressive estrangement from each other. Through a series of interviews with June and long conversations with Bernard, Jeremy learns that the rift between his parents-in-law started after June’s terrifying encounter with two black mastiffs during their honeymoon in the south of France. Bernard and June each construe the event differently

and Jeremy is at a loss as to which perspective is closer to the truth.

*Black Dogs* is structured on the basis of three different narrative discourses. Two of these, representing the viewpoints of June and Bernard Tremain, offer extremely conflicting interpretations of the incidents in the novel and remain unreconciled to the end. The third discourse is that of the novel’s narrator who constantly vacillates between the antithetical views of his parents-in-law. Of crucial importance in McEwan’s novel, therefore, is the question of narration - i.e., the voices through which the different segments of *Black Dogs* are recounted - and how the narrative structure of the novel requires of the reader that he or she assume the function of the recipient of the affects created by the text. Some of the questions that we may ask about the narrative structure of *Black Dogs* are: In what sense is the structure of the novel stratified into different, conflicting narratives? What effect does McEwan’s choice of a narrator have on the reading process? How are the narrative discourses of the novel interlinked through thematic analogies? Answering these questions calls for an exegesis of the narrative procedures and devices of *Black Dogs*. In what follows, I shall draw on the narratological concepts and terminology introduced in the works of Gérard Genette and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan to propose some answers to these and other questions.

## Narrative Structure

The complexity of the narrative structure of McEwan’s novel becomes apparent from its opening pages. In the “Preface”, the reader is promptly alerted to the fact that “Black Dogs” is a designation for two fictions: the first is a narrative, written by Ian McEwan, about certain characters and certain events in their lives (I shall hereafter refer to this primary narrative as N1); the second is a narrative recounted by the narrator-protagonist of N1



and purported to be his memoir of his parents-in-law (this subordinate narrative will henceforth be referred to as N2). This structure is further complicated by the fact that N2 itself frames two other narratives (which are, in fact, different versions of the same events) by Bernard and June, both of which are recounted by the narrator of N1. To see the correlation between N1 and N2, we have to examine the stratification of narratives in *Black Dogs* and the thematic analogies through which they are linked.

### Narrating Levels

The structural interdependence of N1 and N2 will be understood better if we first consider the status of the narrator in them. This, according to Genette in *Narrative Discourse*, is possible only when reference is made to both the narrator's narrative level and the content of his participation in the story. Genette accounts for the subordinate relations between a primary narrative and the secondary narrative framed in it, by arguing that the act of narrating which produces the framed narrative is an event recounted in the framing (primary) narrative and, as such, the narrator of the framed narrative is a character in the framing narrative. He concludes from here that "any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed" (Genette, 1980, p. 228, original emphasis). Genette calls "extradiegetic" the narrative level of a narrator who is above the story he recounts and uses the term "intradiegetic" to refer to the story narrated by such a narrator. Genette also introduces a second set of criteria to determine the status of a narrator: he distinguishes between a narrator who is absent from the story and one who participates in it, calling the first type "heterodiegetic" and the second type "homodiegetic" (p. 224-45).

Genette's dual criteria reveal the complexity and

multiplicity of the narrator's functions in *Black Dogs*. N1 is a primary narrative which contains N2 as an embedded narrative. N2, in other words, is a *story within another story* and, as such, at a narrative level below the level of N1's diegesis, thus constituting a hypodiegetic narrative.<sup>2</sup> Hence, Jeremy's narration of N1 is extradiegetic in so far as the events he recounts are at a higher level than his narrating act. Yet he is also an intradiegetic narrator, for he functions as a character in the diegesis of N1. In N2, however, Jeremy is an intra-heterodiegetic narrator, since—like Scheherezade in *The Thousand and One Nights*—he tells a story (the "memoir") from which he himself is absent. It should also be noted that Jeremy is both a narrator and a narratee: he tells a story in addition to being told stories by June and Bernard. In being a storyteller, he is in N1 a homodiegetic narrator (i.e., a character in the events he recounts and, thus, part of the diegesis of N1), and in N2 a heterodiegetic narrator (that is, he plays no role in June's and Bernard's memoirs which make up N2). (Jeremy can also be described as an autodiegetic narrator, in Genette's terminology, in so far as he is the protagonist of N1: the novel begins with his external analepsis, i.e., a flashback through which he evokes a past chronologically prior to N1's starting point. This retrospection provides information about Jeremy's adolescent life and milieu and accounts for his keenness to find surrogate parents, thus establishing him as the figure around whom the subsequent action in Parts One, Two and Three – compilation of the Tremaines' memoir – revolves).

We can conclude that McEwan's use of a narrator that is homodiegetic in N1 but heterodiegetic in N2 has certain effects on the reading process. The homodiegetic narrator in N1 being also the protagonist of the novel, the narrative is rendered through an intervening medium (the narrating *self*) which is in N2 removed by heterodiegetic narration, thus creating for the reader the



illusion that June and Bernard shape their own narratives. This shift of narrative technique, together with the use of multiple internal focalisation (whereby the same events are presented twice over, once as focalised by June and once by Bernard), render June's and Bernard's perspectives all the more contrasting.

### Thematic Analogies

Another way of formulating the structural interdependence of N1 and N2 is to examine the thematic analogies between these two narratives. The purpose of this examination is to show how McEwan reinforces the major themes of the novel by subordinating the embedded narrative to the primary narrative and mirroring the themes of the former in those of the latter. There are several such linking themes in the two narrative levels of *Black Dogs*, but I shall discuss them under the heading of "Apprehension About the Return of Evil" – a grouping which helps to maintain clarity in the discussion by integrating minor, related themes in the more dominant one.

### Apprehension About the Return of Evil

A common denominator between N1 and N2 is the sense of apprehension which runs through every major incident in the discomfiting worlds of these two narratives. This is an apprehension about the recurrence of an evil urge to violence, a longing for irrationality and destructiveness, latent in mankind. McEwan's conception of this evil is spelled out in what June tells the narrator:

The evil I'm talking about lives in us all. It takes hold in an individual, in private lives, within a family, and then it's children who suffer most. And then, when the conditions are right, in different countries, at different times, a terrible cruelty, a viciousness against life erupts, and everyone is

surprised by the depth of hatred within himself. Then it sinks back and waits. It's something in our hearts (p. 172).

Echoing a similar theme in *The Innocent* (McEwan fourth novel, published in 1990), the will to violence is characterised here as something deeply rooted in human nature, as an innate, irresistible urge whose disastrous manifestations can be seen as much in individuals and families as, on a wider scale, in the relations between nations. The periodic re-emergence of violence and our utter inability to curb it are the causes of the apprehension explored in the novel.

The supreme manifestations of evil in the novel are the two feral black dogs that June encounters in France in 1946. McEwan's minute description of the dogs ("the alien black gums, slack black lips rimmed by salt, a thread of saliva breaking, the fissures on a tongue that ran to smoothness along its curling edge, a yellow-red eye, and eye-ball muck spiking the fur, open sores on a fore leg, and trapped in the V of an open mouth, deep in the hinge of the jaw, a little foam to which [June's] gaze kept returning" (p.148) and his ensuing account of June's solitary fight with the beasts is terrifying and makes of *Black Dogs* – to quote John Carey's remarks on McEwan's *The Innocent* – "a novel where you are torn between itching to turn the page and dreading what you will find on the other side" (H1). This encounter constitutes the centrepiece of June's memories, an experience which she interprets as her confrontation with evil. Her apprehension is that evil "will return to haunt us, somewhere in Europe, in another time" (p. 174). This apprehension is reflected in a dream which has haunted and distressed her for forty years. In this dream, June sees the same black dogs running down a path and then heading into mountains far away; nevertheless, she is extremely anguished because she feels sure that they will return to set upon her.

The novel validates June's apprehension in other



episodes which are essentially analogous to the incident with the dogs. An episode takes place in Germany in 1989. Bernard Tremaine and his son-in-law have gone to Berlin to witness the fall of the Wall and celebrate the presumed triumph of liberty and democracy, but when Bernard intervenes to protect a Turkish revolutionary who is waving a red flag, he himself is assaulted by neo-Nazis who – like the ominous black dogs which set upon his wife – gather round him, ready “to kick him to death” (p. 98). It is significant that the neo-Nazis who attack Bernard in Berlin are wearing *black* boots. The text thus points to the formal as well as the thematic similarity of the two episodes. This colour symbolism is also evident in the description of the young, Turkish revolutionary: “He had *black* curls and *black* clothes – a *black* double-breasted jacket worn over a *black* t-shirt and *black* jeans” (p. 95, emphases added). By associating the communist revolutionary with the colour with which he also identifies the feral dogs and the neo-Nazis, McEwan signifies the potential of the victim to become a victimiser himself. This is another indication of McEwan’s idea of violence as a pandemic from which no one is exempted in the novel. Thus, June’s encounter with the beasts is echoed in Bernard’s confrontation with the neo-Nazis, and in the assault on the Turkish revolutionary. *Black Dogs* suggests that beyond the euphoria at the prospect of democracy spreading across Europe, McEwan discerns the possibility of the return of evil and the nightmares of recent history. As Kiernan Ryan (1994) notes, “the anxiety which lies behind the creation of *Black Dogs* ... is the widespread fear that, far from having left the apocalyptic horrors of both world wars, we may be en route to reliving them, because the human drives which fuelled them had merely been suppressed, and may never be eradicated” (p. 61). That McEwan views these drives to violence as ineluctable becomes evident, in part, from June’s recurrent dream, in which “the moment of terror that

jolts her” (p. 62) is that she knows the black dogs will return, “somewhere in Europe, in another time”.

The ubiquity of this apprehension is signalled by the vast spatial setting of *Black Dogs*: the action of the novel takes place in England, France, Germany, Italy and Poland. The novel’s temporal setting reinforces the hint about McEwan’s engagement with recent European history: Bernard and June first meet each other towards the end of the Second World War in 1944 and the action of the novel continues until 1989, when the Berlin Wall is dismantled. After the end of the war, Bernard and June spend six weeks of their honeymoon doing voluntary work in a Red Cross station in Italy, assuming that they are “helping to ‘build a new Europe’ ” (137). Memories of the war are evoked by the Maire of St. Mauriac (the village where June and Bernard stay in the south of France) when he gives a long explanation that the black mastiffs are abandoned by Nazi tracker dogs and also in Jeremy’s account of his trip with Jenny to Majdanek, a concentration camp in Poland. Contextualising the theme of apprehension about the return of evil in a pan-European setting, these references to Europe indicate McEwan’s literary/cultural intervention in the debates about the durability of peace in Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. His vision is one of pessimism: devastating wars, local and global, are bound to break out. War is not the outcome of specific historical circumstances but the inevitable consequence of man’s inability to overcome his own desire for violence. As such, war is a continual threat terrifying us by the prospect of imminent death and destruction. Thus, the recurrent dream that disturbs June is, in fact, man’s horrible nightmare about the fragility of peace.

In N1 as in N2 violence is depicted as a universal urge from which no one, including the novel’s protagonist, can be immune. One of the best illustrations of this theme in N1 comes in Part Three of the novel. While dining at Hôtel des Tilleuls in Provence, Jeremy



witnesses the ruthless beating up of a child by the child's parents. McEwan draws the reader's attention to the similarity between Harper (the second husband of Jean, the narrator's sister, who behaves violently at home beating his wife and leaving their daughter, Sally, terrified and always looking for protection) and the French man who knocks down his own son with heavy blows, a similarity that extends from violent behaviour to include physical appearance as well: the French man has "a caduceus tattooed on each of his forearms" (p.130), like "sadistic Harper" who has "red and black tattoos of strutting cockerels on his tuberous forearms" (p.13). More significant, however, is Jeremy's (over) reaction in this episode. He challenges the French man to a fight and hits him so fiercely on the face that he breaks his own knuckles as well as the man's nose. Jeremy takes so much pleasure in beating up the French man that he goes on to "hit him with the left, one two three, face, throat and gut, before he went down" (p.131). In this way, McEwan draws a parallel between the neo-Nazis who set upon Bernard in Berlin "ready ... to kick him to death" and Jeremy who acknowledges his own impulse to go so far as to kill the French man: "I drew back my foot and I think I might have kicked and stomped him to death" (p.131). Through this episode McEwan underscores the omnipresence of an evil urge to violence, in Germany, in France, or indeed everywhere, and in everyone, including the narrator of his novel: "I knew that the elation driving me had nothing to do with revenge and justice" (p.131).

The scene at Hôtel des Tilleuls is particularly thought provoking because McEwan has earlier portrayed the narrator himself as a *victim* of violence. In Part One of the novel, what Jeremy remembers of his adolescence are mostly scenes of domestic violence between Jean and Harper, distressful memories which make him feel protective towards his niece. The question that arises is:

How come that the victim is also portrayed as perpetrator? In *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Jacqueline Rose argues that the question of identification between aggressor and victim has to be considered in the context of the workings of fantasy. She notes that among the survivors of the Holocaust and their children, it is not uncommon to encounter patients who, in their fantasies, identify themselves with the Nazis. Curiously enough, fantasies of the children of Nazis reveal similar vicissitudes of identification. Rose (1991) cites the example of the daughter of a German military family "caught in a double role as victor and vanquished, and who thus mirrored ... the children of Jewish survivors who identify with the aggressor and victim alike" (p. 209). These oscillations, Rose suggests, stem in part from the rationale of the patients' positions during the Holocaust: the aggressor needs to experience himself as a victim so that he could justify his aggression; likewise, the victim needs to be the aggressor in order to retaliate. This interchange reveals the unconscious positions that these patients occupy. Their conscious identities being completely one-sided, they unconsciously need to adopt those very psychic positions which they had most repudiated. The acting out of that which is categorically disavowed is illustrated by nuclear rhetoric that "endlessly reproduces and legitimates a violence which it always locates outside itself, whose cause always, and by definition, belongs somewhere else" (p. 211). The paradoxical conclusion that Rose draws also applies to the narrator of McEwan's *Black Dogs*: "[B]eing a victim does not stop you from identifying with the aggressor; being an aggressor does not stop you from identifying with the victim" (p. 210). Jeremy's assumption of the roles of perpetrator and victim of violence illustrates the hidden danger of denial and psychic exclusion. It is through recognising the Other that one can come to terms with one's own self.



## Conclusion

Based on the foregoing analysis we can formulate the structural relation between the two narrative levels of the novel by saying that the patent thematic analogies between the primary and the hypodiegetic narratives make N2 a *mise en abyme* of N1. Like Matisse's famous painting, in which one can see a smaller replica of the same painting hung on a wall, the embedded narrative in *Black Dogs* mirrors the themes of the framing narrative. Violence is in N1 pictured as a destructive drive which traumatises children and ruins marriages. The recurrence of violence in different generations and the resort to violence by characters who are themselves shown to be the victims of violence, create the apprehension that it is an inexorable and universal urge. N2 augments this apprehension by depicting violence as a force in history whose periodic re-emergence diminishes hopes of a better future for mankind. It is through the structural interplay of the two narrative levels of *Black Dogs* that McEwan creates the thematic resonances of the whole novel.

## Notes

1. One can detect a thinly-veiled rebuke in Kemp's lavish praise for McEwan, though. His "knowingly" suggests that he believes McEwan deliberately wrote to shock his readers. Kemp's censure becomes explicit when he adds that McEwan's previous fiction "witnessed, with calculatedly unnerving nervelessness, killings, castration, mutilation, sexual tamperings with pre-pubescents and the drowning of youngsters by deranged adults" (6). Even when admiring his achievements, McEwan's critics perpetuate negative stereotypes which either reduce

his work to a series of (presumably) unsavoury topics or, worse still, cast doubt on his moral intentions as a writer of fiction.

2. I am using "hypodiegetic" (a term coined by Mieke Bal, and one which is also used in the work of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan), in preference to Genette's "metadiegetic", to refer to a narrative embedded/framed within a primary/framing narrative. "Metadiegetic" seems a confusing term, since the prefix "meta-"—as Genette himself admits (*Narrative Discourse* 228)—is used in logic and linguistics to refer to a higher level—not a lower level, which is the case in embedded narratives.

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