

An Ecofeminism Interpretation of Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*

HE Yuan

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs* reflects the anxiety and panic after the Second World War vividly with charming words. Based on Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*, many scholars have explored and acquired great achievements in trauma writing and historical writing. Through analyzing the similarities of the heroine's long-term neglected inner needs and the cruelly killed creatures in nature, this paper finds there is an intimate connection between female and nature in *Black Dogs*. However, instead of being in a constant state of repression, female and nature will fight back. To sum up, this paper attempts to make an ecofeminism interpretation of Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*. A conclusion may be reached that June's spiritual awakening resonates with enhancement of nature's power.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, *Black Dogs*, ecofeminism

Introduction

From Ian McEwan's novel *Black Dogs*, we can get a glimpse of the author's profound philosophical thinking. This novel reflects the anxiety and panic after the Second World War vividly with charming words, and gives posterity a glimpse into the mental state of the people living in a scarred Europe. By reviewing the relevant researches at home and abroad, it lays a solid foundation for the study of ecofeminism in *Black Dogs* in this paper.

Foreign Studies on Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*

Foreign research mainly focus on trauma writing, historical writing and ecological criticism. First of all, some scholars take trauma writing as a starting point to explore personal trauma experiences and reveal the latent depression in the heart of individuals. Brian Diemert notes that "Ian McEwan has spent much of his career using fiction to explore the unfolding of trauma, the subject of his writing" (Diemer, 2013, p. 216). Other critics points out that the protagonists' work, entertainment, travel and love in the novel are all under the special circumstances of repression and violence, and the traumatic experiences of the protagonists occurs in the broad context of European history in the 20th century (Muller-Wood, 2007, p. 51). Secondly, some scholars highlights the analysis of the specific historical background in the text. Jago Morrison combines historical memory in the novel to expose the ravages of neo-Nazism and people's condonement of atrocities (Morrison, 2001, p. 264). Tim Gauthier notices the novel's pervasive "post-Holocaust anxiety" (Gauthier, 2006, p. 84). Finally, some scholars study McEwan's novels from the perspective of ecocriticism, which reflects the thoughts

HE Yuan, Master of English Language and Literature, Foreign Language and Literature, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology.

of ecofeminists. Greg Garrard has pointed out that many of McEwan's novels are implicitly or intentionally related to important concepts of ecocriticism since the issue of *The Child in Time* (Greg, 2006, p. 32). Angela Roger argues that the female characters in McEwan's works are creative, sensitive, mysterious and close to nature, while the male characters are portrayed as insensitive and cruel, exploitative and destructive (Roger, 1996, p. 51). David Malcolm points out that McEwan believes men will destroy the world and women will save it (David, 2002, p. 25).

Domestic Studies on Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*

Domestic research mainly focus on narrative research, ethical criticism, trauma research and other aspects. First of all, a number of scholars have conducted narrative research on the novel from multiple dimensions, such as space, history and unnatural. Yao Zhen believed that McEwan tried to show the morbid human existence in modern society through the image of urban wasteland, showing contemporary people's resistance to *The Times* in the chaotic urban space (Yao Zhen, 2018, p. 29). Huang Yichang et al. focused on the unnatural narrative elements of the text and focused on the traumatic memory of the Holocaust (Huang Yichang, 2022, p. 40). Secondly, Guan Jianming has explored the evil and malignancy contained in the image of black dog, showing his concern about whether people can achieve moral salvation (Guan Jianming, 2018, p. 61). Finally, domestic trauma research presents the characteristics of combining multiple different research perspectives to analyze the trauma theme in depth. Zhao Xuan believes that the eco-ideology contained in *Black Dog* can deepen a understanding of the focus of violence, death and melancholy (Zhan Xuan, 2018, p. 28). Guo believes that although the full text is filled with pessimism, the protagonist also obtains salvation through the power of love, which makes people trust that there is still a rare warmth and comfort in this violent world (Guy Xianjin, 2017, p. 81).

It can be seen from the above analysis that some views expressed in McEwan's works coincide with the views of ecofeminism. However, so far, few scholars have analyzed this novel from the perspective of ecofeminism. Simultaneously, the existing studies mainly focus on Ian McEwan's most famous works, such as *The Child in Time* and *Atonment* while there is a severe paucity of literature on an ecofeminism interpretation of *Black Dogs*. Therefore, this paper attempts to dig out the ecofeminism consciousness shown in *Black Dogs*, aiming to better help us rediscover the mystery in *Black Dogs* and trigger people's reflection on female liberation and freedom.

In chapter 1, June's inner emotional needs have long been neglected by Bernard and the creatures in nature are cruelly killed shows that they are in a subordinated situation. In chapter 2, there is a transformation of female and nature's status. June starts to pursue reflections on the good and evil of human nature and nature takes a revengeful action. There is an intimate connection between female and nature in *Black Dogs*.

Chapter 1 Oppression on Nature and Female in *Black Dogs*

Men always takes it for granted that they are higher than nature in position for a long time and women are classified as part of since women were closer to nature. They believed that nature and women could be conquered and controlled. Therefore, women and nature have long been marginalized as victims of male's hegemony. The novel *Black Dogs* shows the similarities of oppression on nature and women. The next two parts will illustrate the oppression on nature and female in *Black Dogs* at length.

Oppression on Nature in *Black Dogs*

In *Black Dogs*, McEwan paints a detailed portrait of the devastated aftermath of the Second World war, in which the environmental destruction caused by war shows the subordinated position of nature. The details of “lurid graffiti”, “muddy path” and “abandoned buildings” (McEwan, 2010, p. 64) reveal the squalor and dilapidation of the place where the Berlin Wall has come down, as well as the environmental crisis and psychological trauma due to the war. The environmental description in *Black Dogs* reflects that nature has long been in a marginalized position. More specifically, the male oppression on nature can be shown from Bernard's attitude towards natural creature. While waiting for a train to Arles during their honeymoon, Mr. and Mrs. Bernard gets into a heated argument over a large, beautiful dragonfly. Bernard wants to kill the red dragonfly with insecticide and make it into a specimen. He believes that “Killing a few insects was irrelevant against this larger fact” (McEwan, 2010, p. 56). He firmly claims that this killing action is a righteous deed that can bring a contribution to Scientific undertaking. Instead of a heartfelt awe for nature, Bernard shows a disregard for life and a kind of cruel rationality. Additionally, when June is attacked by two black dogs, Bernard is watching caterpillars in another place. His sketches of the caterpillars are not accurate and inconsistent with the real images, not even sloppy. For Bernard, there is no difference among any kind of creature and object, all of whom could be used for scientific research. The caterpillar is regarded as a specimen to be observed and satisfy Bernard's scientific curiosity.

Oppression on Women in *Black Dogs*

June strongly opposes the killing and taxidermy of the dragonfly when getting into a heated argument with Bernard over his killing of dragonfly. At first, June holds the dragonfly in her hand, which shows her protection over the dragonfly. Since June has become pregnant, she feels “responsible not only for lifes that was growing inside her, but for all life” (McEwan, 2010, p. 57), and in her heart, she believes that killing the natural creature is an awful mistake and will brings the revenge of nature. June is awful towards nature and feels the responsibility to protect these small life. Therefore, June, as a female, has much more emotional resonance with the creatures in nature. June now feels the vitality of new life, in awe of nature and worried about her future. On the contrary, Bernard, as a male, does not have such empathy. He holds a kind of indifferent attitude towards creatures, and attempts to make dragonflies into specimens to achieve the purpose of controlling them. For Bernard, the priority is to arrange these insects in order, and the life and rights of these insects are not within his consideration. Additionally, Bernard manages to threaten June to hand over the dragonfly with scientific excuse and their profound feelings. When Bernard defends for his killing action, he is more like giving a speech rather than talk with June in an equal capacity. What June feels is his commanding and aggressive motion, so she has no choice but to give the dragonfly to Bernard. As a female, June fails in her attempt to protect the weaker life, and does not get full respect from Bernard in speaking out for dragonfly. Moreover, June, with her feminine subtlety of observation and sensibility, “She felt watched,analysed, she felt she was part of my insect collection” (McEwan, 2010, p. 56) from her husband's cold treatment of the dragonfly. Through June's comparative thinking about the symbolic connection between dragonflies and herself, the novel reflects the similar indifferent attitude that men holds towards nature and women, both of whom are in a weak position. Additionally, While June has to face two vicious black dogs on her own, Bernard focuses on sketching a

caterpillar on a country road, who is falling some distance behind June and failing to spot her danger in time. Although she finally fights off the black dogs, June is so frightened that she decides to change her plans and return to the safe haven of home. Bernard recognizes that "how foolish...miss the beautiful descent" (McEwan, 2010, p. 107) after learning what happened to June and her plans, and insists on completing the rest of the journey or it would be a pity to miss it. However, June persists in going home. Bernard could not feel June's helplessness and fear, nor does he care about his wife's fright. On the contrary, it can be seen from "trying to keep his irritation under control" (McEwan, 2010, p. 107) that Bernard is furious with the fact that his masculine authority is being challenged because his wife does not follow his order and plan.

Chapter 2 Rebellion of Nature and Female in *Black Dogs*

The extremely exploitation and destruction on nature will punish people in turn. Similarly, women are subordinated to men for a long time without self-consciousness. So the spiritual salvation of female can be seen as a rebellion to man. Besides, nature and female are closely intertwined, female can seek help and regain their courage and confidence in the beauty of nature. Therefore, the next two parts will illustrate the revenge of nature and June's self-salvation from the nature in *Black Dogs* at length.

Revenge of Nature to Humanity

McEwan's description of the magnificent strange rural landscape in *Black Dogs* makes readers feel the sanctity and nobility of nature, and also warns people that they will eventually undertake serious revenge if they do not respect nature. In *Black Dogs*, June and Bernard travel through a strange country in France, where the natural landscape is very spectacular. There are very few traces of human beings, and human beings are very small and powerless in front of the magnificent and mysterious nature. The description of "Deserted farms and hamlets sit in hollows of surprising greenness" (McEwan, 2010, p. 97) highlights the ephemeral feature of human agricultural activities compared with the exuberance of nature. No matter how frequent human activities are, it will eventually be replaced by the vast emptiness of nature. As mentioned in his work, "there are fewer people here now than there were a hundred years ago" (McEwan, 2010, p. 97), the prolonged war has brought about a sharp decrease in the number of population and reduced the destruction of nature by human activities. Therefore, the wildland has the power of development and shows its vitality through making human activities give way to the emptiness. This strange rural landscape is full of metaphors for the future of citizens. Human beings are unable to defeat nature and very vulnerable compared with nature. McEwan also expresses his concern and warning about the gradual decline of population in *Black Dogs*. In addition, June's psychological description of fear and awe in the face of the boundless countryside shows the mystery and greatness of nature. The beautiful scenery gives June an indescribable anxiety, "she felt a sourceless fear, too faint to be complained of aloud" (McEwan, 2010, p. 99). Some trees which take root in the crevices of the rocks shows the wild vitality of life in the worst and toughest places. This splendid scenery fills June's heart with awe and annoyance, which is a normal human psychology in the gorgeous presence of the creator. In another detail of *Black Dogs*, when Jeremy and Bernard have a heated argument about the truth of June's story, Jeremy asks Bernard what he thinks of the fact that his daughter has a sixth finger after he had killed a dragonfly, McEwan conveys his concern by linking the insect's revenge to the ominous sign of a sixth finger. When man destroys nature and kills its creatures, nature will respond accordingly. The excessive destruction of nature and its creature always

brings about disasters, which is a revenge and outcry of nature towards human and they must bear the bad consequence for selfish desire.

June's Self-salvation from the Nature

McEwan connects the important events in June's life with nature when shaping the female character, June. And in *Black Dogs*, June finally gains belonging and peace of mind from nature. At first, June joined a cycling club, the sights she saws while cycling through the countryside, such as "beech woods, cornfields, sunlights" (McEwan, 2010, p. 30) are associated with the Party. As a teenager, all her fantastic memories of the summer are linked to her idealistic aspirations to become a communist. Communism is inseparable from June's love of the countryside, and it is nature that drives her into the Party's embrace. However, June has witnessed too much social injustice, corruption and people's suffering during her honeymoon with Bernard. And these social problems she is unable to solve makes her suspicious of communism and lose the direction of life. In the countryside of France, she falls into a deep confusion and indescribable anxiety for her future, and starts to doubt her faith in the past. But as she sits on a boulder tomb, overlooking mountains and canyons in the French countryside, she begins to reflect on her own identity while enjoying the scenery, the details of "Every definition of herself she groped for in her discomfort urged her to enjoy the view and get on with the walk" (McEwan, 2010, p. 100) indicates that June has drew strength from nature, put aside her fears and summoned the courage to move on. Therefore, June realized what she really wanted to pursue obtained in nature, which is not the ethereal politics she had been pursuing all her adult life, but the philosophical reflection on human nature. June pays attention to inner enrichment and believes people should take the simple good things that life offers to us and be glad to have them, always reflects in silence. Besides, June opposes the behavior of Bernard who "never know a single moment's awe for the beauty of creation" (McEwan, 2010, p. 32). In the embrace of nature, June is suddenly enlightened and finds her life direction. Nature helps her to find herself again. Her subsequent conflict with two black dogs makes her thoroughly disillusioned with communism. Facing the Black dogs, she realizes that evil is everywhere and deeply embedded in human nature, so she turns to humanity for answers. Therefore, She leaves her family to grow fruit trees and raise poultry in the sheepfold in rural France, leading an idyllic life of self-sufficiency. She has spent most of her time studying, meditating and writing, for pursuing to spiritual enrichment. After her illness, June chooses to live in a nursing home and pursues a simple but rewarding pleasure in spirit. When she still has the strength to go out, she would go for a walk outside enjoying the scenery. In her spare time, she does not give up independent thinking and keeps writing. She has transferred her independence and freedom to the limited space. Even in the dying days of her life, she doesn't stop thinking, and constantly pursues spiritual abundance. In a word, nature plays an irreplaceable role in June's self-discovery process. In nature, she has more enthusiasm to start an independent life, pursue her own beliefs and think about the good and evil of human nature.

Conclusion

To sum up, this paper analyzes the nature-female relationship in *Black Dogs*. There are an ecofeminism consciousness shown in *Black Dogs*. Due to the nature's magic power, June has gained courage to achieve spiritual transformation from being oppressed to pursuing freedom. The natural elements can be the Microscopic lens of observing heroine's psychological world.

References

- Diemert, B. (2013). *Checking out: Trauma and genre in Ian McEwan's The Child in Time.* "Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature" (pp. 216-240). J.-M. Ganteau & S. Onega (Eds.). New York: Routledge.
- Gauthier, T. (2006). *Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations: A.S. Byatt, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie.* New York and London: Routledge.
- Groes, S. (2009). *Ian McEwan: Contemporary critical perspective.* London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Head, D. (2007). *Ian McEwan*. Manchester: Manchester UP.
- Müller-Wood, A., & Wood, J. C. (2007). Bring the past to heel: History, identity and violence in Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*. *Literature & History* 16(2), 43-56.
- Malcolm, D. (2002). *Understanding Ian McEwan.* Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press.
- McEwan, I. (2010). *Black dogs* (G. L. Guo, Trans.). Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House.
- Roger, A. (1996). *Ian McEwan's portrayal of women.* *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, (1).
- Roberts, R. (2010). *Conversations with Ian McEwan*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi.
- Wells, L. (2010). *Ian McEwan*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 郭先进. (2017). 个人的抑郁与文化的抑郁——《黑犬》的创伤叙事研究. *当代外国文*, 38(01), 75-82. doi:10.16077/j.cnki.issn1001-1757.2017.01.012.
- 格雷格·杰拉德. (2010). 伊恩·麦克尤恩的新作和生态批评的未来. 柯英, 译. *鄱阳湖学刊*, (5).
- 管建明. (2018). 麦克尤恩《黑犬》中的历史伦理. *广东外语外贸大学学报*, 29(05), 55-62.
- 胡慧勇. (2016). 理性崇拜与神秘主义——小说《黑犬》的历史反思. *外国文学动态研究*, 265(01), 83-90.
- 黄一畅, 赵桢萱. (2022). 非自然创伤叙事的认知迷宫——以《黑犬》中的创伤记忆呈现为例. *江苏外语教学研究*, 83(03), 39-42.
- 金燕, 夏佳雯, 胡慧勇. (2020). 论小说《黑犬》的历史书写. *文学教育(上)*, 505(05), 54-55. doi:10.16692/j.cnki.wxjys.2020.05.024.
- 罗媛. (2015). 《黑犬》“移情脆弱”主题论析. *外国文学*, 257(06), 82-90+159. doi:10.16430/j.cnki.fl.2015.06.012.
- 杨宗良. (2021). 非自然叙事视角下《黑犬》中的创伤研究 (MA Thesis: 江西师范大学).
- 姚臻. (2018). 伊恩·麦克尤恩小说的空间叙事研究 (PhD Dissertation: 南京师范大学).
- 赵萱. (2018). 理性主义与神秘主义冲突下的创伤与救赎——从生态批评视角解读麦克尤恩《黑犬》. *短篇小说(原创版)*, 765(05), 28-29.