

# An Analysis of Evil in Black Dogs from the Perspective of New Historicism

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**Abstract:** In the historical novel *Black Dogs*, Ian McEwan combines historical facts with fictional characters and reconstructs history, presenting the social conditions and human nature after World War II. He shows the harm and menace brought by war to European society, and the psychological changes brought by war to people. This thesis analyzes the evil in *Black Dogs* from the perspective of New Historicism. On the one hand, in the concept of textuality of history, this thesis focuses on the fragmented historical stories and the evil embodied in these stories. The evil exists both in European society and in people's hearts. On the other hand, in the concept of historicity of texts, this thesis focuses on the external influences on the creation of *Black Dogs* and the contemplation on the causes of evil. By analyzing evil from the perspective of New Historicism, the thesis demonstrates McEwan's humanistic care. McEwan aims to alert people to the evil of war in an era of peace. He also hopes that people can examine the evil in their own hearts and overcome it.

**Keywords:** *Black Dogs*; New Historicism; textuality of history; historicity of texts; evil

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## Introduction

Ian McEwan is one of the most influential writers in British literature. McEwan has been writing since 1975, when he published his first collection of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites*. He has published seventeen novels, two collections of short stories, five screenplays, and one work of children's literature. McEwan's creation of works has different stages, and the transformation is marked by the publication of *The Child in Time* in 1987. From 1975 to 1981, his works involved violence, incest and death, showing the dark, bold, and absurd colors. The public were so shocked that they called McEwan "Ian Macabre", and his works were included in the "literature of shock". After the transformation of McEwan's creation, he moved from a closed and dark Gothic space to a broader field of social history, with a wider range of subject matter and a deepening of social consciousness. McEwan's works such as *The Innocent*, *Black Dogs*, *Atonement*, *Saturday* in the middle stage of his creation all deal with real historical events, including the Holocaust, the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Dunkirk Evacuation and so on.

*Black Dogs* is one of his representative works. It expresses the deep thinking about human nature and the reflection on modern civilization. *Black Dogs* was published in 1992. The novel consists of a preface and four main parts. The narration is fragmentary. The events do not follow a linear and chronological order, and they are not limited to a fixed place. The time of the story is from the 1940s to the 1980s, with the narrative jumping between different periods. The story is set mainly on the European continent, with places shifting between London, France, Poland, and Germany. The sense of historical ambiguity created by the jumping and shifting is a representation of people's broken minds after World War II. Although *Black Dogs* is the work after McEwan's transformation, it does not completely abandon the atmosphere of horror. But unlike the previous horror, which mainly stimulates people's senses, *Black Dogs* reproduces the history of the post-World War II and Cold War periods, showing the aftermath of war, the lingering effects of war, and the crisis of civilization. There is still an unsettling element in the plot, showing the violence and evil beneath the surface of peace.

For *Black Dogs*, foreign and domestic studies mainly focus on historical, narrative, trauma, ethical, empathy perspectives and so on. For the historical perspective, the foreign scholars Anja Müller-Wood and J. Carter Wood argue that *Black Dogs* shows human's ability to bear and face the burden of the past rather than escape it <sup>[1]</sup>, while domestic scholars

mostly interpret Black Dogs from the perspective of New Historicism. This thesis combines New Historicism with the study of evil, providing a new interpretive dimension for the novel.

## 1 Theoretical Framework

This thesis analyzes evil in the novel Black Dogs from the perspective of New Historicism. New Historicism breaks the traditional binary opposition between history and literature. It no longer regards history as the background and it treats texts and history equally. Greenblatt uniquely transforms the capitalized “History” into the non-capitalized “history”. New Historicists make the grand and linear “History” complicated, and they change the capitalized “History” in singular form into the lowercase “histories” in plural form. New Historicism excavates and reproduces the diverse histories beyond the singular history in the description of the fragmented historical events, and it uses the individual and personal histories to reveal the grand “History”. New Historicists show an interest in some anecdotes, unexpected episodes, strange topics and so on. They pay attention to the discourse power of marginalized groups and marginal events in history, and break the dominant cultural codes in a particular historical context.

Building on Greenblatt’s ideas, Louis Montrose further proposed two main terms: the “textuality of history” and the “historicity of texts”. The “textuality of history” means that we can learn about the past through texts. But there are some fictions in the reproduction of historical events in texts. The real history, in the process of textualization, is inevitably influenced by the subjectivity of the writers. There can only be various interpretations about the history, and none of them is final. In Black Dogs, McEwan combines real historical events with fictional characters to reconstruct history, revealing the other side of the official history and showing the deep meaning of these historical events. McEwan criticizes the brutality and evil of war and its lasting impact on civilization and humanity. McEwan aims to alert people to the evil of war and to make people reflect on modern civilization. McEwan pays attention to the impact of the capitalized “History” on ordinary people. He shows the personal “histories” through fragmented narratives, giving individuals and small events a chance to be heard.

The “historicity of texts” means that the creation of texts is influenced by the historical, cultural, and social background of that time. At the same time, the texts reflect and respond to their historical situation. Texts are one of many elements that help shape culture and history. In Black Dogs, on the one hand, the story is set between the 1940s and the 1980s in Europe. It was the post-World War II period and a period of Cold War. The creation of the novel was influenced by the post-war era. McEwan also felt the shadow of war in his father’s memories. On the other hand, the novel reflects the historical situation of that time. It reflects the persistent and ghostly effects of war, and the psychological changes the war brings to people.

## 2 Textuality of History in Black Dogs

This part of the thesis analyzes three fragmented historical stories and the evil embodied in them, showing the other sides of history and the profound meanings in the historical stories.

### 2.1 Fragmented Historical Stories

In New Historicism, the capitalized “History” in singular form is changed into the lowercase “histories” in plural form. McEwan uses fragmented narratives, and he uses the individual and personal histories to reveal the grand “History”, combining historical events with personal experiences. McEwan pays attention to the impact of the capitalized “History” on ordinary people. He gives individuals and small events a chance to be heard.

#### 2.1.1 Collapse of the Berlin Wall

The non-linear and fragmented narration is very evident in Part Two of the novel. Part Two focuses on the historical event of the collapse of the Berlin Wall. It mainly tells that Jeremy accompanies his father-in-law Bernard to Berlin to witness the momentous historical occasion of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and during their walk through the city, Jeremy engages in conversation with Bernard to learn Bernard’s memories of June. The novel’s narration shifts from their conversation to the descriptions of the Wall’s surroundings frequently, which emphasizes the textuality. At the beginning of Part Two, the story is set in a family reunion. When Jeremy receives a phone call from Bernard to learn that People are taking down the Berlin Wall, Jeremy and his wife Jenny turn on the television and feel the excitement and cheers of the

people, and Jeremy and Jenny burst into tears. Here private lives and political events are closely intertwined to demonstrate the impact of historical events on individuals.

When Jeremy and Bernard arrive in Berlin, they walk to the Brandenburg Gate, and like all the crowds, they hope to see the Berlin Wall coming down at this most important moment. But a long time passes with nothing happening to satisfy the crowds. Even before this positive moment in European history, there are also potentially terrible omens. Jeremy feels that “the advertisement was more lurid than any Kurfurstendamm neon” [2]<sup>69</sup>. Jeremy’s feeling foreshadows the next plot. A young communist revolutionary who is also a Turk is waving a red flag. This provocation irritates some young German boys with swastikas who are very bored for a long time. Therefore, Bernard is attacked by these boys for trying to protect the Turk.

The popular cheers after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the conflicts between the public and the soldiers clearly refer to the real events that took place in Berlin in 1989. In a broader sense, the demolition of the Berlin Wall marked German unity, but peace did not really come [3]. The evil force of fascism is not completely eliminated. The Nazi force reappears, and the perpetrators of the violence are able to vent their anger and get away with it for a variety of reasons. The collapse is only an illusion of peace.

### 2.1.2 The Concentration Camp of Majdanek

Part Three of the novel mentions the concentration camp of Majdanek. After arriving in Poland, Jeremy’s wife Jenny asks Jeremy to come to Lublin to visit the concentration camp of Majdanek. This is Jeremy’s second visit to the camp. The camp and Lublin are very close, but it is this camp adjacent to the civilized city that devours all the Jews who makes up three quarters of the city’s population. A sign outside the camp’s main entrance indicates that hundreds of thousands of people from many countries have died there. But Jenny finds that there is no mention of Jews at all. The capitalized “History” has caused some oppression to modern people, as the imageries of the watchtowers, huts, shaky wooden ladders, and the incinerator in the camp bring a dangerous, gloomy and horrible atmosphere. Jeremy and Jenny do not speak for an hour. They enter into three huts and see more and more shoes, and in the third hut there are thousands of shoes scattered on the floor, among which there are also baby shoes with obvious patterns. That’s millions of lives. Finally, it is told by Jenny that the German authorities killed 36,000 Jews from Lublin in 1943.

### 2.1.3 Encounter of Black Dogs

In the novel, the “black dogs” is mentioned many times, connecting different parts of the novel. Jeremy wants to write a memoir for his mother-in-law June about June’s encounter with the black dogs. In Part Four of the novel, June’s story is finally revealed. In 1946, June and Bernard go on a honeymoon in France and Italy. In a French countryside, June sees two unusually large black dogs, and the fear makes her feel weak and sick. Bernard is far away from June, so June fights against the two dogs alone. She picks up some rock, leans against a tree and holds her bag in front of her. When one dog springs up and comes at her, she stabs the dog with her knife. The two black dogs run away at last. While June is facing the danger alone, Bernard is observing the caterpillars in the distance. Immersed in the pleasure of science, Bernard is unaware of the danger that June encounters. He does not even comfort June timely after the danger. June believes that the black dogs symbolize evil, and she believes that an extraordinary colored light that surrounds her saves her. This encounter causes a great divergence of viewpoint between the couple and finally leads them to live apart. June turns to God and mysticism to seek spiritual progress. But Bernard thinks that this encounter with evil is June’s imagination. He still believes in reason and rationality.

## 2.2 Black Dogs as Evil in Historical Stories

The evil embodied in each of the three stories is analyzed. Evils are like black dogs, and evils exist both in European society and in people’s hearts.

### 2.2.1 Evil of the Recurrence of Nazism and Human Indifference

It is at the collapse of the Berlin Wall, a moment that marks a new course in the cause of peace for mankind, that there is a discordant tone of violence. A Turkish revolutionary is waving a red flag and he is hit by two solicitors. Seeing this Turkish man punched in the head and believing that someone needs to be blamed for something, a group of young Germans

with swastikas walk towards this Turk and plan to vent their frustration and dissatisfaction by beating this Turk. Bernard, who steps forward to stop the young Germans, becomes a scapegoat for the beating. The images of the young Germans are portrayed in the novel that “collectively they exuded a runty viciousness, an extravagant air of under-privilege, with their acned pallor, shaved heads, and loose wet mouths” <sup>[2]73</sup>. Their images are like that of the black dogs, and they represent the specter of Nazism. So “black dogs” symbolize the evil in European society, that is, the evil of the recurrence of Nazism. More than forty years have passed since World War II, but the specter of Nazism is recurred again in the time of peace and celebration.

The evil that lives deep in people’s hearts is reflected in human indifference. No one steps forward to offer help in this violent conflict. The two solicitors, amazed at the consequences of their violence, retreat into the crowd and become spectators. Jeremy looks around and wants to ask for help, but the American sergeant and two soldiers have their backs to them and ignore them. Even the Turk has already slipped away. It can be seen that violence spreads not only through those who clearly support it, but also through those who refuse to do anything out of fear, indifference, and even “a sense of their own powerlessness” <sup>[4]</sup>. Such inaction is a form of complicity and conspiracy.

#### 2.2.2 Evil of the Atrocity of Nazism and People’s Forgetting

The Holocaust is an incomparably tragic page in the history. The concentration camp of Majdanek has been preserved as a sign of inhumanity that shows the tragedy of history.

Jenny comments on the sign outside the camp that “no mention of the Jews. See? It still goes on. And it’s official” <sup>[2]87</sup>. Then Jenny adds the words “the black dogs”. Only some of the victims are mentioned on the official sign and the fact that the thousands of Jews are killed is ignored. This undoubtedly shows that the fact of the murder of Jews is officially neglected and disregarded, and the authorities and officials recognize this disregard, forgetting and oblivion. “Black dogs” mentioned by Jenny symbolize evil, and the evil refers not only to the atrocity, brutality and inhumanity of the Holocaust, but also to people’s connivance and acquiescence to evil and people’s forgetting.

The original purpose of the preservation of the concentration camp should be to fight forgetting, to commemorate the victims who die, to arouse the sympathy of visitors for the suffering of all the victims, as well as to indict the dehumanization of the fascist perpetrators, and to remind future generations of the atrocities of the Holocaust which are unprecedented in history and trample on human rights and lives. It aims to let people respect the victims and defend the dignity of the victims’ lives. In contrast to Jenny’s sympathy for the victims, the obvious oblivion of Jewish victims by authorities reflects connivance and acquiescence to evil, which goes against the original purpose of commemorating the Holocaust and has in some way condoned the extremely terrible massacres and holocausts in history. Moreover, misled by the incorrect attitude of the authorities, the public and the whole society forget the truth and become as cruel and ruthless as the Nazis. They also conspire with the Nazis.

So those Germans who are complicit with the Nazis, whether passive onlookers or active conspirators who have national hatred of the Jews, all should be held accountable for the Holocaust <sup>[5]</sup>. Humans bear collective responsibility for the Holocaust. In this way, Jenny’s mention of the “black dogs” has the symbolic implication that human beings should bear collective responsibility for the history of violence and atrocity.

Jeremy’s experience of visiting the concentration camp further confirms the indifference, neglect, forgetting, and oblivion of the fact of the Holocaust and the Jews, which shows the evil that lives in people’s hearts. The atrocity of the Holocaust is embodied by physical evidence. But when Jeremy sees thousands of shoes on the ground, he does not feel sad and sympathetic for the misfortune of the victims and feel indignant at the inhumanity of Nazis, instead, he thinks that these lives turn to cheap goods. Jeremy becomes insensitive, as if he has lost his emotions. He just wanders around the camp like the former commander of the camp once does. Jeremy, even after he cannot stand the tragic scene of the victims, begins to think about those who persecute them. He is surprised at the good construction of the huts, the integrity of the preservation, the cleanliness of the roads, the huge scale and the great energy of people to build the camp. Jeremy indicates that “I sank into inverted admiration, bleak wonder” <sup>[2]89</sup>. He seems to have developed an admiration for the Holocaust on such an unprecedented scale.

Jeremy looks at history as a bystander, lacking the ability to actively intervene in historical events and act morally and

rationally to suppress evil, but it is this forgetting that allows him to get rid of the burden of history.

### 2.2.3 Evil of the Remnant of Nazism and the Darkness of Humanity

After the encounter with black dogs, June and Bernard return to the hotel. June tells Madam Auriac about her experience. So Auriac asks the village chief, Hector, to explain in detail the origin of the black dogs. Hector tells the story about the Gestapo dogs. During the war, this village is a stronghold in the anti-enemy traffic network, and after being informed, the Gestapo comes with dogs to track the hiding places of the guerrillas in the mountains. The dogs, who are later abandoned and have survived, are the remnants of Nazism. The black dogs symbolize the evil in European society. They are fierce, vicious and ugly.

However, according to Hector, the real purpose of these dogs is much darker. Rumor has it that they are trained to torture and rape women. Hector mentions a woman named Danielle Bertrand, and he says that the drunken Sauvy brothers have witnessed the rape of Danielle by black dogs brought by the Gestapo. Hector believes in the Sauvy brothers and concludes that what he himself says is the truth. But Auriac disagrees with him and declares that no one could prove that such a story is true. "You added to her shame with this story, this evil story... It gave you so much pleasure"<sup>[2]136</sup>. Auriac's questioning and criticism of Hector's words reveals the dark side of Hector in telling stories about the women who are victims. Hector seeks the pleasure of humiliating the victims from the wicked stories. He and the other men in the village do not sympathize with the suffering of Danielle; on the contrary, they reveal their evil mind through the complicity with the perpetrators, the Gestapo. The humiliation finally makes Danielle leave the village. The darkness of humanity shown in these men represents the evil that lives deep in people's hearts. This wicked story ultimately reinforces June's thought that the black dogs she encounters symbolize evil, both the evil in European society represented by the remnant of Nazism and the evil in people's hearts represented by the darkness of humanity. So, this experience becomes a turning point in June's life. From then on, she lives in seclusion in France in search of spiritual comfort.

## 3 Historicity of Texts in Black Dogs

The creation of texts is influenced by the historical, cultural, and social background of the time. And the texts reflect and respond to their historical situation. Black Dogs reflects the continuous and ghostly effects of war of that time, and the psychological changes the war brings to people. This part of the thesis focuses on the external influences on the creation of Black Dogs and the contemplation on the causes of evil.

### 3.1 External Influences on Black Dogs

The creation of the novel is influenced by the post-war era. McEwan also felt the shadow of the war in his father's memories.

#### 3.1.1 Historical Context

In the novel Black Dogs, the story is set in European society between the 1940s and the 1980s. At that time, Europe was struggling to move forward with the pain of World War II. The World War II caused unprecedented catastrophe to human society and world civilization, and came as a huge blow to the European economy and politics. Then many years of Cold War ensued. So, people moaned in the painful memories of World War II, and at the same time trembled in the shadow of the Cold War. The unprecedented killings and atrocities of World War II and the Holocaust left an unhealable mental wound on people, and the lack of material life in the aftermath of the war exacerbated their mental suffering. The hurt left by the war has always lingered, just like the two black dogs are the apparition of Nazism that cannot be erased from June's heart.

The war also brought about a crisis in the field of ideology. The death, poverty, and famine brought about by the war have thrown people into a serious existential crisis and ideological crisis. People went to the battlefield with the ideals of democracy, only to find that the freedom and equality they believed in were only illusions. The deeper suffering was spiritual emptiness, loss of faith and so on. Europeans began to seriously search for salvation, and various trends of thoughts emerged, among which the most prominent were rationalism and mysticism. The dominant ideology before the two world wars was religion. Then the Enlightenment made people turn to reason and science. However, reason and scientific progress not only brought convenience and material prosperity, but also brought the brutality of war<sup>[6]</sup>. As a result, rationalism was

questioned. Therefore, people swung between mysticism and rationalism, which can be seen from the opposition of beliefs between Bernard and June in *Black Dogs*. The differences in their beliefs not only alienate them, but also leave the later generations at a loss for their beliefs. So, Jeremy has no belief.

### 3.1.2 McEwan's Life Experience

As a generation born after World War II, McEwan did not experience the war, but he felt the shadow of the war in his father's stories and memories. McEwan's grandfather and father were both involved in the war, and McEwan often listened to his father's memories of the Dunkirk Evacuation. This awakened in him a sense of guilt that he was not present but was still responsible for the war. Moreover, as a family member of the army, McEwan was personally on the border of the war when he was a child. When the Suez Crisis occurred, McEwan was even on the front line of confrontation. The menace of war left a strong shadow on McEwan. McEwan recreates the cruel and violent scenes of wars, including both the recollection of the war scene and the aftermath of the war. He criticizes the atrocity and evil of war and its impact on humanity.

## 3.2 Contemplation on the Causes of Evil

This part focuses on contemplation on the causes of evil based on the historical context and the background of the novel.

### 3.2.1 Contemplation on the Persistent Harm of War

McEwan himself has some concerns about the recurrence of the specter of war. He once expressed that there had been a worrying anti-Semitism in France. In north London there were even Nazi signs on the walls, and there were similar signs in cemeteries in the Soviet Union<sup>[7]</sup>. This is what makes McEwan's thinking about war unique. He focuses on the continuity of the dangers of war rather than simply presenting the past<sup>[8]</sup>. The essence of his retrospection of the violence and evil of war is a concern for the present human condition. The cruelty and evil of war exist not only in the real historical scene, but also in the persistent harm to individuals and civilizations. The war has a ghostly impact on the peaceful present, which causes the evil of the recurrence of Nazism and the evil of the remnant of Nazism. They are the evils in European society.

These evils do not withdraw from civilization with the end of war. They will return to haunt people in another time. People should be vigilant.

### 3.2.2 Contemplation on the Fragility of Empathy

Jeremy, during his visit to the concentration camp, shows the fragility of empathy of people after the Holocaust. People in the 20th century became weary and numb after learning too much about the cruelty of human nature<sup>[9]</sup>. They showed indifference rather than meaningful empathic concern for those who are unfortunate. Simon Baron-Cohen also points out in his research that in a specific historical context, people's ability to empathize will decrease<sup>[10]</sup>. They treat others as objects and ignore their emotions and thoughts, thus showing the violent side of human nature. So, at that time, the vulnerability of empathy is largely due to war.

Jeremy's experience in the camp is like watching a violent erotic show and getting a glimpse of his own hidden violent tendencies and evil. Jeremy uses the word "morbid" to describe his second visit, which has the connotation of satisfying his expectations and excitement. And seeing the shoes of countless victims, he does not empathize with the pain of the victims, instead, he acknowledges that the noble compassion of humanity has vanished. Jeremy seems to treat the victims as objects, ignoring the subjectivity of their existence and their thoughts and feelings. Jeremy shows the fragility of empathy.

Jeremy's attitude towards the Holocaust also shows the fragility of empathy of the contemporary people. They do not deny the facts of the Holocaust, but they also do not show empathy for the victims, which is the cause of the evil of people's neglect and forgetting of the Jews. This is the evil that lives in people's hearts. McEwan thinks that empathy is the starting point of morality, and once a person shields empathy from others, there is no morality. Therefore, people should reflect on their empathic ability in various situations, and then make moral judgments anew.

### 3.2.3 Contemplation on the Inability of Thinking

When Hector tells June about the origin of the black dogs, Hector turns Danielle's pain into a talking point. Although Hector also condemns the inhumanity of the Gestapo, he tells unmentionable and unsupported stories about Danielle over



and over again, spreading rumors with the Sauvy brothers. They ruin Danielle.

The reason why Hector commits evil is because he has lost the ability to think independently. The inability of thinking causes the evil that lives in people's hearts. Hector does not think carefully and judge the truth. He just believes the words of two drunks and enjoys the pleasure of spreading rumors. Hector and the Sauvy brothers apparently do not consider the disastrous consequences of their actions for Danielle and the harm that rumors can do to a person. To a certain degree, this is also due to the war which makes people become disappointed, indifferent and numb. They do not bother to think. Some villagers also believe this evil story even though they know that the first to spread the rumor are two drunks. They also lack the ability to think independently. The blind obedience of the crowd works. Hitler, who killed many Jews, also did not realize the seriousness of the matter. If he had considered the causes and consequences of genocide, he would have learned from it and avoided such acts at the expense of innocent lives.

Knowledge is a "valuable and desirable cognitive state" <sup>[11]</sup>. In addition to the knowledge of objects and the knowledge of good and evil, knowledge also includes knowing who we are, what we are doing, what we have done to others, and the purposes and ways of our actions. It is not difficult to acquire the knowledge of objects, but the knowledge of ourselves and the nature of what we do needs thinking. Therefore, we should know what is good and what is evil, and think about the future before making a choice.

## 4 Conclusion

Extreme violence such as world wars and the Holocaust have filled people's memory of Europe in the twentieth century. McEwan reconstructs history between truth and fiction and shows many human sufferings. From the perspective of textuality of history, McEwan combines historical events with the personal experiences of the characters through fragmented narration, showing the small and marginal events under the grand narrative and the deep meaning of these historical events. War brings evils, and the evils, like black dogs, sink in European society and in people's hearts. From the perspective of historicity of texts, influenced by the shadow of World War II, McEwan wrote this novel to reflect the history, showing a responsible attitude towards the war. The hurt caused by war is persistent, and the Nazi ghost continues to recur. To some extent, the war also leads to people's fragility of empathy and their inability of thinking, which causes the evil in people's hearts.

McEwan traces the history, criticizing the atrocity and evil of war and its impact on humanity. He aims to show the dangers and threats of war to civilization, and to make people vigilant. McEwan also warns people to reflect on the weakness of human nature. People should be vigilant against the harm and evil brought by war and replace the impulse of force with rational communication. People should also examine the evil in their hearts and overcome it. They should find the meaning of their life and be full of hope for the future.

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