MULTIPLE FACES OF REALITY
IN THE NOVEL *BLACK DOGS* BY IAN MCEWAN

Drd. Ioana STOICA
Universitatea „Lucian Blaga", Sibiu

Abstract

What if you could see the world through the eyes of somebody else? That is what the postmodernist McEwan does at his best in his writings. One of his most valuable skills as a novelist is to show different faces of reality, according to different characters' perception of the events or even according to the same character's change of perception in time. What the reality is in fact and how the characters perceive it are different things. This difference leads to conflicts and misconceptions that affect in a deep manner the lives of the main characters.

Ian McEwan is one of the writers of the postmodern world who actually shocked the reader. His concern with exploring various manifestations of violence-such as sadomasochistic sex, incestuous relationship, dark and pathologic obsessions, crimes etc- in his early works[1] brought him the nickname Ian Macabre. However, together with *The Child in Time* (1987) a new stage of his writing has begun. His collections of stories and his first two novels, proved the author's technical talent, but in spite of their verisimility, they occurred in a somewhat isolated fictional world which didn't seem to have much connection to the world's social reality. Their ingenuity was exceptional as it was more concerned with exploration on Gothic adapted to modern times. "In The *Child in Time* McEwan moved his fiction into a different alignment with the real world and real human emotions."(Rennison 87)

Although his concern for Gothic elements remained, McEwan has broadened his area of interests, making his novel much more complex and believable and much less pessimistic. It seems to me that the writer's attitude towards his violent characters and violence itself has changed: in his first novels the author seemed somewhat fascinated by violence and the dark side of the human nature, being satisfied with just describing it in details, while later McEwan stopped showing the fascination for the macabre and started to investigate it as objective as he could. The result was that, trying to understand the causes and mechanisms of violence from multiple perspectives, he became somewhat more tolerant and sympathetic with his aggressive characters. The same multiple perspective is also used to

[1] Two collections of short stories- *First Loves, Last Rites* (1975) and *In Between the Sheets* (1978) and the novels *The Cement Garden* (1978) and The *Comfort of Strangers* (1981)

BDD-A23632 © 2009 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:50 UTC)

analyze the social, economic and political problems that trouble humanity of the contemporary world.

One of the most common features of all McEwan's works is the strength of the conflicts. And one of the main causes of most conflicts is the difference in the perception of reality. The multiple perspective technique comes to enlarge the differences and to enforce the conflict.

Black Dogs (1992), just like the novels which followed it*, Enduring Love, Amsterdam*, *Atonement* and *Saturday* are very complex novels, which, if we take into account the multitude and depth of the themes issued, could be considered continuous and profound contemplations on the nature of good and evil, while the author tries to investigate how people react when they are suddenly exposed to violence. Another thing those novels have in common is the fact that certain particular aspects in the life of the main characters are closely investigated on a social and political background, which background is different in each novel.

The events in the *Black Dogs* (1992), McEwan's fifth novel, are set on the background of the Berlin Wall. Unlike other novels by McEwan, which are usually written in the third person, in this one the events are seen through the eyes and memories of a narrator embodied by Jeremy, a young man who, as an orphan having lost his parents at an early age, confesses his fascination for other people's parents. The preface gets the reader acquainted with Jeremy's background and introduces the main characters of the novel -the parents of Jeremy's wife Jenny - June and Bernard Tremaine. The two met as members of the Communist Party and fell in love with each other but eventually their personalities turned out to be totally opposed. And this opposition has separated and taken them in entirely opposite paths in life. While June appears to be an intuitive being, with spiritual interests, a natural believer, Bernard, on the other hand, is an unshakable materialist, rational, always looking for a logical explanation and concerned only with matters that can be perceived through the five senses. She searches for the hidden truth of the universe while he believes there is no truth that science cannot ultimately reveal to humanity. The narrative of the novel does not proceed chronologically but it seems to be centred around an incident in 1946, when June and Bernard were in their honeymoon, in a village in France. One day, when they were out walking, June let Bernard far behind her and was confronted by two ferocious black dogs, which had been used by the Nazi to torture the prisoners during the war. Miraculously, June managed to escape, but the incident had a deep impact on her later life. That horrifying moment turned out to be some sort of spiritual awakening for her, a somewhat mystical experience which made her rediscover her belief in God. Unfortunately, it also meant the beginning of the rupture

BDD-A23632 © 2009 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:50 UTC)

between June and her husband. Many ears after, in 1987, June is dying from leukaemia at a nursing home, in Wiltshire, where Jeremy visits her. He makes notes from what June tells him, as he considers writing a biographical essay. Throughout the novel, Jeremy listens to June telling him about her relationship with her husband, and at the same time, he also hears Bernard version on the same topic, and then reflects upon his conversations with June and Bernard. Thus he becomes some sort of "middleman" between this estranged and separated couple with their conflicting beliefs. As he learns from both of them more details of their conditions and the circumstances of their marriage, Jeremy more and more becomes a representation of the novelist, the objective mind who tries to figure out things by separating subjective opinions of others. But objective doesn't necessarily means not involved. Jeremy felt deeply attached to both of his parents-in-law and to some extent, he was the only link between them. Though June and Bernard loved each other deeply, they could not save their relationship and after the incident that made June redefine herself, she also began to realise that they were too different to survive as a happy couple. She also became more and more convinced that the evil of the society is in fact due to the evil that is innate to each individual and that is why the problems of the society cannot be solved unless each individual manage to deal with the evil within, so isolation was somewhat inevitable.

Bernard, on the other hand, although he never stopped loving her, was angry at her seclusion and her lack of social responsibility. He remained a materialist and a rationalist until his death, and was never capable to understand her. Their relationship was great as long as they seemed to share the same beliefs, but when June changed, none of them could cope with the differences between them. I suspect June was deeply disappointed as she didn't feel that Bernard to be by her side when she had that life changing experience, and even more disappointed as she realised Bernard could never actually be at her side and understand what she has been through, because he was incapable to understand something he never experienced. But her knowing those facts didn't make her accept the fact he couldn't change. At least no more than he could accept the fact that she has changed. The same incident was perceived differently by two people. After that incident, after realising he could no longer be part of her experiences, the communication gap between them became visible and continued to grow. Love was no longer enough to make the relationship work. So, Jeremy became the link between them, and maybe the only one who managed to some extent to understand, accept and respect both of them. I believe that for Jeremy it was, apart from the need of parents, a matter of identity search. He tried to understand both of them in order to find inside them things he could identify within himself because many times observing others helps us finding out who we really are. And I also believe that, in spite of the affection he felt equally

BDD-A23632 © 2009 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:50 UTC)

towards both of them, Jeremy still felt a deeper connection with June, as she proved to be more communicative and more complex as a character. More complex because she undergoes a deep change in her life, while Bernard hasn't show any significant transformation along the years. The real black dogs which attacked June were the factor that produced some sort of spiritual enlightenment inside June as they developed into symbols to the pure evil which exist inherently within each individual. Jeremy somewhat understood June's transformation. Bernard never did. And how could he? He didn't even see the real dogs and he never actually acknowledged in what danger his wife was and how inexplicably she escaped death. Nor was she willing to share the experience with him. Instead, many years after, she chose to share it with her son-in-law, so he understood the meaning of the black dogs almost the way she did:

"Recently I came across two pages of shorthand dating from my very last conversation with June: 'Jeremy, that morning I came face to face with evil. I didn't quite know it at the time, but I sensed it in my fear-these animals were the creations of debased imaginations, of perverted spirits no amount of social theory could account for. 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 sits back and waits. It's something in our hearts. I can see you think I'm a crank. It doesn't matter. This is what I know. Human nature, the human heart, the spirit, the soul, consciousness itself-call it what you like- in the end, it's all we've got you work with. It has to develop and expand, or the sound of our misery will never diminish. My own small discovery has been that this change is possible, it is within our power. Without an evolution of the inner life, however slow, all our big designs are worthless. The work we have to do is with ourselves, if we're ever going to be at peace with each other.. I'm not saying it'll happen. There's a good chance it won't. I'm saying it's our only chance. If it does, and it could take generations, the good that flows from it will shape our societies in an unprogrammed, unforeseen way, under the control of no single group of people, or set of ideas…'(…)

June told me that throughout her life she sometimes used to see them, really see them, on the retina in the giddy seconds before sleep. They are running down the path, into the Gorge of the Vis, the bigger one trailing blood on the white stones. They are crossing the shadow line and going deeper, where the sun never reaches, and the amiable drunken mayor will not be sending his men in pursuit, for the dogs are crossing the river in the dead of the night, and forcing a way up the other side to cross the Causse; and as sleeps rolls in they are receding from her, black stains in the grey of the dawn, fading as they move into the foothills

BDD-A23632 © 2009 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:50 UTC)

of the mountains, from where they will return to haunt us somewhere in Europe, in another time."(171-172)Bernard, on the other hand, had a different point of view: "*As soon as I had finished reading, Bernard's ghost was before me(…): 'Face to face with evil? I'll tell you what she was up against that that day- a good lunch and a spot of malicious village gossip! As for the inner life, my dear boy, try having one of those on an empty stomach. Or without clean water. Or when you're sharing the room with seven others.(…)you see, the way things are going on this overcrowded little planet, we do need a set of ideas, and bloody good ones too!'"* (173)

But the incident with the black dogs wasn't the only one June and Bernard shared with Jeremy. Many important aspects of their relationship were revealed to him by both of them. And it's quite fascinating how the same event is perceived so differently by two different persons who take part in it, because the incident with the black dogs was somewhat special and the two of them didn't participate to it equally. It was actually June's experience and Bernard did not take part in it, he just arrived after it had been finished and June refused to share it with him. So the difference in perception and the communication gap between them was somewhat justified. But things are different with other moments of their relationship, namely with those which they both take part in equally. For example, their first sexual experience together: The difference in perception and the communication gap were as obvious as in the "black dogs" moment. And I am not talking only about how different their feelings and the perception of the event was but also how distorted they perceived each other's feelings and sensations. This also proves how people perceive reality distorted as they are subdued to their own subjectivity. Bernard and June's beliefs are extremely opposite. That is why, in order to have an objective view, the author uses Jeremy who is skeptical of both their beliefs and prefers the middle way. Jeremy's objectivity is also indicated by the constant reminding of his notebook. Thus, the possible memory tricks can always be corrected due to the notebook in which he wrote his memories as they occurred. This adds a note of verisimility to the novel, as Jeremy is very careful to explain the sources of his knowledge. As June and Bernard's memories cannot be entirely trusted, Jeremy remains the voice that reunites all the perspectives and transforms the subjective dispatched memories into a unified and much more believable view. Jeremy tries to put things in order and find his way through their memory tricks and the illusions of their own subjectivity: "I *once asked Bernard about his first meeting with June during the war. What drew him to her? He remembered no first encounter."*(23). "*'What's she doing, making that up?' he exclaims.' Cooking the books, that's what!...She's rewritten it for the official version. It's airbrush all over again."*"(63) This novel, according to David Malcolm, "is to some extent organized as a debate between June

BDD-A23632 © 2009 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:50 UTC)

and Bernard, with Jeremy as an undecided observer ripe for conversion."(150) Now I must confess Jeremy does not strike me as an "undecided observer ripe for conversion" at all. I do not actually think that he is trying to decide who is right and who is wrong and not whose side he should take. His childhood trauma of losing his parents at an early age must have given him some feeling of loss of identity and he desperately tried to overcome the loss. That is probably why he has been interested in other people's parents. He was most probably looking for his own parents in his wife's parents, in order to integrate their opposed beliefs and feelings into his own personality and regain completeness of his identity. As strange as it may seem, his childhood trauma made Jeremy an objective narrative voice, as he never cared to judge June and Bernard, but to understand and somehow assimilate them into his own consciousness. The unusual preface, the structure of the novel and the apparent lack of order also prove that we deal with a person in search of identity. Certainty of the facts has no importance as Jeremy is able to see and understand things from both June and Bernard's opposite points of view and keeps a balance of view.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND RESOURCES:

1. Adams, Michael. "Black Dogs." Magill Book Reviews. Salem Press, 1992. eNotes.com. 2006. 10 Sep, 2009 <http://www.enotes.com/black-dogs-salem/
2. Childs, Peter. "Black Dogs". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 8 January 2001. [http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=6334, accessed 10 September 2009.]
3. Malcolm, David *Understanding Ian McEwan*: University of South Carolina, South Carolina 2002
4. McEwan**,** Ian. *Black Dogs:* Toronto: Vintage Books, 1993
5. Rennison, Nick, *Contemporary British Novelists*: London & New York Rutledge, 2005

BDD-A23632 © 2009 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:00:50 UTC)