

An Analysis of Political Satire in the Cockroach from the Perspective of Magic Realism

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Abstract: *The Cockroach* is Ian McEwan's first satire on Brexit. This novel's main character, Jim Sams, is a cockroach that wakes up in Downing Street within the body of the British Prime Minister who pursues "Reversalism" to reverse the flow of the economy. This paper aims to interpret the magical realism in *The Cockroach*, focusing on magical characters, unique narratives, and symbolism to explore the novel's artistic techniques and real-world significance. By comparing politicians to cockroaches, McEwan mocks the irrational Brexit behavior of British politicians, expressing his deep concern and anguish over Britain's political dilemma.

1. Introduction

Magical Realism is a literary form that combines fantasy with social reality in a search for truth beyond the surface of everyday life. "Magical realism' relies most of all upon the matter-of-fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings" ^[1]. Thus, magical realism is such a narrative strategy: it combines a factual narrative with illusion or magic to explain or express the complexity and overlap between reality and history, intended to explore insights into human society and human nature.

As one of the most significant writers in the contemporary British literary world, Ian McEwan has maintained vigorous creativity in literary creation for years. *The Cockroach* is Ian McEwan's first Brexit satire. This novel integrates fantastical elements with a realistic backdrop, particularly through the setting of a cockroach transforming into a human to perform political satire, reflecting the absurdity of contemporary politics. This narrative strategy, a hallmark of magical realism, employs allegory and symbolism to deeply explore themes such as power, identity, and societal critique. The approach of incorporating supernatural elements as part of social reality allows Ian McEwan to offer satirical commentary on issues like Brexit, questioning political systems.

2. The Creative Background of *The Cockroach*

Britain's exit from the European Union on 23 June 2016 signaled an unprecedented historic moment for the nation. Robert Eaglestone once said, "Brexit is a political, economic and administrative event: and it is a cultural one, too" ^[2]. In a post-Brexit landscape, novels are already

appearing that could claim the tag of Brexit fiction, or 'BrexLit' (a term coined by Kristian Shaw in 2018), reflecting the divided nature of the UK and the ramifications of the referendum. McEwan asserted in the preface of the book that "With Brexit, something ugly and alien entered the spirit of our politics and to me it seemed reasonable to conjure a cockroach, that most despised of living forms" ^[3]. Like McEwan, "the response of the British literary world to the event was negative for a long time after Brexit" ^[4]. Besides, He regarded this novella as it is not only a parody of Jonathon Swift's political satire techniques, but also the necessary bow of acknowledgment to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

McEwan's novels break the illusion of mimesis created by realism in a variety of different ways. The supernatural and the unreality effect are combined in his texts. This novel begins with its main character, Jim Sams, a cockroach that wakes up in Downing Street inhabiting the body of the British Prime Minister who pursues "Reversalism" to reverse the flow of money. "As far as the Brexit campaign is concerned, two different formations soon divided: Leavers and Remainers, echoing the 'Reversalists' and 'Clockwisers' in the satire" ^[5]. The sudden occurrence of the Brexit event has caused significant reactions both domestically and internationally. This has also attracted many scholars from home and abroad to interpret Ian McEwan's work from various perspectives. This paper aims to analyze the magical realism aspects of *The Cockroach*, highlighting the portrayal of characters imbued with magical qualities, distinctive narrative techniques, and the employment of symbolic methods rich in allegorical significance.

3. Character Portrayals with Magical Realism

In *The Cockroach*, the character delineation is infused with remarkable magical realism, which figuratively reflects the author's profound insight into social phenomena and human nature. By dividing the characters into two categories, the author skillfully builds a unique contrast. On the one hand, the cabinet members led by Jim and the President of the United States Archie Tupper, who support the so-called "Reversalism", are depicted as cockroaches in the novel. This metaphor not only highlights their alienation in terms of political strategy, and morality, but also reflects the author's satire and criticism of such political behavior. Cockroaches are often seen in many cultures as unwelcome and creatures that need to be removed, and such an image suggests the negative characteristics of these characters and the destructive nature of their political ideologies.

In the narrative, the depiction of Jim's initial awakening to discover that he has transformed into a cockroach serves to convey his perplexity. His struggle as a cockroach is not just an exploration of self-identity, but also a symbol of the confusion and powerlessness of the individual in the face of power.

The irony is heightened during a Cabinet meeting on state affairs, where Jim finds himself preoccupied with a nearby fly, indicative of his transformation and the underlying cockroach instincts: "When a bluebottle has been dead for more than ten minutes it tastes impossibly bitter. Barely alive or just deceased, it has a cheese flavour" ^[3]. This depiction not only injects a sense of humor into the narrative but also enhances the depth of the character portrayal, allowing readers to see that Jim, distracted by thoughts of food during a meeting, is not suitable for the role of Prime Minister.

On the other hand, characters who consider the public interest, such as Simon and Benedict, are seen as truly human. The author employs extensive dialogue in the novel to enrich the character of Simon, demonstrating that Simon, as an assistant, is highly competent. He informs Jim that swinging Clockwise could secure him a majority of votes, enabling him to win the referendum. However, Jim requests him to write a resignation letter and to make it public through the media.

Benedict is likely the traitor at his side, the kind who might rebel and vote to bring down his

government. “When Jim had looked into the eyes of Benedict St John, the foreign secretary, he had come against the blank unyielding wall of a human retina and could go no further. Impenetrable” [3]. Jim thought this must be dealt with, Jim realized it was too late to commission the foreign secretary’s murder. Jim cooked up a scandal for him, which took him two hours to write his article. However, this portrayal technique not only emphasizes the sense of justice and humanitarianism in humans, but also highlights the cunning and selfishness of cockroaches in stark contrast. Through this opposition between cockroaches and humans, McEwan deeply reveals the moral divisions in society and politics as well as the complexity of human nature.

4. Unique Narrative Approaches

In the realm of contemporary literature, Ian McEwan’s *The Cockroach* stands as a quintessential example of non-traditional narrative structures that explore the interplay between the bizarre and the allegorical, challenging conventional boundaries of narrative and realism. This novel, with its central premise of a cockroach metamorphosing into the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, not only captivates with its bold and magical narrative but also engages in a profound allegorical exploration of themes such as power, identity, and transformation. The setting, while initially shocking to the reader, catalyzes for deeper reflection on the dynamics of political and personal change.

The Cockroach further distinguishes itself through the introduction of “Reversalism,” an ostensibly absurd economic policy that nevertheless underscores the author’s critique of contemporary economic and political systems. This policy, integral to the novel’s plot, catalyzes the development of characters and the unfolding of the narrative, inviting readers to contemplate the viability and consequences of such radical ideas in the real world.

In this novel, the narrative perspective of the work shifts back and forth from a third-person narrative perspective to an omniscient narrative perspective, which also makes the relationship between readers and the work closer. Additionally, Ian McEwan intriguingly employs an internally focalized narrative strategy, told from the perspective of a cockroach. This approach, through Jim’s internal focus, offers a unique and fresh viewpoint, different from the traditional human narrator.

In *Narrative Discourse*, Genette argues that there are three types of focalizations, nonfocalized narrative, narrative with internal focalization, and narrative with external focalization. In what Genette calls internal focalization the narrative is focused through the consciousness of a character. whereas external focalization is something altogether different: the narrative is focused on a character, not through him [6]. Consequently, internal focalization narrows the distance from the reader, providing greater opportunities for readers to resonate with the characters.

McEwan uses a narrative with internal focalization to depict Jim’s cockroach traits, showing his physical changes and his affinity for darkness, horse manure, flies, and his transformation to cockroach. Jim’s conduct unreservedly exposes the cockroach’s predilection for darkness, filth, and its repugnant traits. McEwan intends to employ the imagery of the cockroach to critique the narrow-mindedness and selfishness inherent in right-wing populism.

In conclusion, *The Cockroach* exemplifies how a novel can transcend traditional storytelling techniques to deliver a story that is as thought-provoking as it is unconventional. McEwan’s narrative approach, characterized by its blending of internal and external perspectives, not only amplifies the story’s complexity but also prompts readers to engage in a critical examination of reality, identity, and authority. With this innovative narrative technique, Ian McEwan draws readers into a multifaceted story world. Here, the peculiar perspective of a cockroach serves as a lens, offering diverse angles from which to interpret his thoughts and actions. This unique viewpoint enables readers to gain insights into McEwan’s critical stance and his evident disdain for the

cockroach's behaviors.

5. Profound Symbolism and Political Satire

In *The Cockroach*, Ian McEwan employs symbolism by likening politicians to cockroaches. *The cockroach* is not only the title of the novel but also an incarnation of the protagonist. With the nation's power in the hands of a cockroach, one can imagine how tragic the ending will be. Professor Biwu Shang posits that McEwan's depiction of the stark contrast between humans and cockroaches serves as an allegory for the clash between differing political and economic ideologies^[7].

By depicting the incredible success of Reversalism, McEwan offers a sharp critique of the essence of Brexit and the blind support of many. The shortcomings of Reversalism quickly become apparent in the novel, affecting not only ordinary citizens but even the nation itself, leading to economic crises. The protagonist, Jim, has led British society down an inevitable path of division, with the author subtly expressing his concerns about certain latent crises in British society through techniques such as symbolism.

Apart from Brexit, other contemporary issues mentioned in the novel could also be real, serving to provoke readers' reflections on Brexit. While it is generally believed that satirical works cannot alter reality, especially established political circumstances, this genre of literature can serve as a wake-up call to readers and the public, preparing them for any contingencies. It enables people to remain vigilant and prevent society from descending into a more undesirable state while keeping a clear view of reality.

6. Conclusion

Ian McEwan's application of magical realism in *The Cockroach* enriches its satirical impact, skillfully intertwining the fantastical with the grave realities of British politics to deepen the critique. This narrative strategy, featuring a surreal protagonist transformation juxtaposed against genuine political operations, underscores the often perplexing nature of political decision-making. Moreover, it transcends mere satire, offering a poignant Brexit critique and warning against political dogmatism's risks. McEwan's work, through its inventive satire, serves not only to engage but also to prompt critical reflection on the ramifications of political divisiveness, positioning *The Cockroach* as a crucial commentary in contemporary political discourse.

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