

The Unnaturalness as a Political Satire: Unnatural Narratology and Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach*

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Abstract By involving unnatural elements into the political satire, Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach* offers an uncanny experience of expressing trenchant criticism against Brexit. This article, in the conceptual system of unnatural narratology, first of all, attempts to examine the unnatural events by focusing on the human-cockroach transformation and the Reversalism. Secondly, it explores the unnatural acts of characters including the cabinet's metamorphosis, Jane Fish's mastery of politics and people's frenetic support. Thirdly, it tries to reveal the unnatural mind emerging in the protagonist, impossibly mixed with three original minds: a cockroach's mind, collective spirit and original human mind. Coupling unnatural techniques with political satire, McEwan depicts an anti-mimetic, anti-reality and nightmarish scenario originated from the metamorphosis, readily provoking a mockery of the turmoil and division that Brexit has given birth to. The unnaturalness not only generates defamiliarizing effects which directly challenges readers' cognition, but also amplifies McEwan's strong criticism against Brexit, propelling readers to reconsider Britain's decision.

Keywords Ian McEwan; *The Cockroach*; unnatural events; unnatural acts; unnatural minds

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Inspired by the UK's prolonged exit from the European Union, an increasing number of writers have resorted to fictional stories to offer more opportunities and perspectives to reconsider Brexit. Ian McEwan, one of the most prestigious writers

around the world, published *The Cockroach*, a novel political satire with which his prominent strength of unnatural narrative was integrated meanwhile. It starts with an inversion of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* that a cockroach wakes up to find himself taking over the body of Jim Sams, the Prime Minister of the country. With pieces of memory jigsaw gradually put together, he comes to realize that he and his ministers who are also taken over by cockroaches will accomplish an important mission—to implement Reveralism, the belief that the nation will thrive on the money flow reversal in the entire economic system, which is a metaphor for Brexit plunging people into turmoil and division. McEwan constructed such a fable to express his strong criticism against Brexit, utilizing the imaginative power of fiction to reflect the mess of the country.

The Cockroach is an avant-garde experiment of political satire. McEwan once said, “*The Cockroach* is a political satire in an old tradition” (McEwan 1). Actually, flavored with the unnatural elements to strengthen the sarcasm, *The Cockroach* is more than a modern take on old tradition. Satire has been defined as the ridicule of a subject to point out its faults (Beckson, Karl E., Karl Beckson 221). As Aaron Matz argued on satire's longstanding kinship with realism, satire must be realistic to persuade readers (Matz 3). Many of political satire novels establish the storyworld on the mimetic settings, utilizing satirical tools like exaggeration and parody with the intent of intensifying core conflicts and revealing inherent weaknesses. The miniature of reality in stories is the basis of traditional political satire as it immerses readers into the context, preparing them for the exaggeration and other satirical techniques. In contrast, with the metamorphosis and other unnatural elements namely “physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios or events” (Alber, et al. 2) in the story world, *The Cockroach* tells an impossible story, falling into the category of unnatural texts that “feature strikingly impossible or antimimetic elements” (Alber, et al. 1).

The creative mixture of unnaturalness and political satire aroused continuing controversy. Biwu Shang considers McEwan converts the difference between human and cockroach in external appearance to the opposition between two types of political and economic positions (Shang 95), which can let people have “some savage laughter in the dark” (Shang 107). Dandan Zhang emphasizes that reading the story through the perspective of unnatural narratives also invokes a reflection upon humanity and the difference between human and nonhuman (Zhang 144). Regarding *The Cockroach* as “the latest instalment in McEwan's imaginative scrambling of English social history and of reality itself”, Leo Robson believes that it performs an impressive display of McEwan's strength of resorting to

unnatural narratives (Robson 1). However, *The Cockroach* received more doubt about the design of inversed metamorphosis as well as more questioning remarks on its aim of integrating unnaturalness into the criticism on realism. After raising a series of “unanswered but nagging” questions on transformation details, like “[h]ow does a cockroach remember the 1960s song?”, Sam Leith points out that “the big problem is that it’s not clear at all how the Brexit spoof meshes with the cockroach-turned-human premise” (Leith 1). Philip Hensher compares this inversion of *Metamorphosis* with Kafka’s origin so as to argue that “it was a mistake to engage with *The Metamorphosis* because Kafka’s engine just can’t be run in reverse.” Besides, Hensher questions whether it is necessary to lump together various unnatural elements: “if the novelist is asking his reader to believe one huge impossible thing, it’s reckless to pile minor implausibilities on top” (Hensher 1). These negative voices demonstrate a limited understanding about how unnaturalness contributes to political sarcasm, which results from the mismatched analytical perspective.

To further discuss the creative political satire which incorporates unnaturalness into the construction of political satire, it is essential to adopt unnatural narrative as an analytical standpoint. Consequently, we can take an overall look at the influence of unnatural elements, updating current comments on *The Cockroach*. Following the recent scholarship on unnatural narratology, this paper is going to examine the unnatural events by focusing on the cockroach-minister transformation and the Reversalism proposal firstly. Secondly, it explores the unnatural acts of characters correlating with core unnatural events. Thirdly, it tries to reveal the unnatural mind emerging in the protagonist, mixed with three original minds as ingredients.

Unnatural Events in *The Cockroach*

To begin with, it is necessary to figure out what unnaturalness refer to. Jan Alber defines “unnatural” as “physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios or events.” (Alber, Iversen, et al. 2). According to Brian Richardson, the fundamental criterion of unnatural narratives is the anti-mimetic nature that “violates mimetic conventions by providing wildly improbable or strikingly impossible events” (Richardson 67). To explore more about unnaturalness in unnatural texts, it is helpful to zoom in on unnatural elements, “the factors that cause different degrees of unnaturalness.” Regarding from which perspective to analyze unnaturalness, Biwu Shang pointed out “how unnatural a narrative text is, its unnaturalness as well as unnatural elements contained can be on display at the story level and/or the discourse level” (Shang 175). Following this way, I am going to focus on the

unnaturalness of events at the story level contained in *The Cockroach*. Equally unnatural are two events, which are against the governing laws of physics and logic: the inversion of “The Metamorphosis,” which can never take place in real world, lays a basic framework for the story world, generating absurd scenarios and ridiculous minds; the implementation of Reversalism, an ostensible economic engine in the storyworld yet a preposterous idea in real world, amplifies the unsettling strangeness and absurdity.

The unnaturalness is ingrained in the first event, the human-cockroach transformation of Jim Sams, the Prime Minister of the country. Its impossibility lies in both its violation against natural laws and its nonhuman narrator—a cockroach. In real world, it is not possible for a human being to be controlled by a cockroach. At the very beginning of the novella, Jim “woke from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into a gigantic creature” (9). He then finds his limb, arms, feet, face and organs all change into unfamiliar forms, which he calls “a grotesque reversal” (10). In other word, a cockroach’s mind has entered Jim’s body, dominating his thoughts and behaviors. More interestingly, Jim is not an ordinary person. Instead, he is the Prime Minister of the country. When a cockroach, the most despised creature living in slum, succeeds in taking over the Prime Minister’s body, the most powerful man representing the whole country, a sharp contrast emerges to amplify the impossibility of this event. The Prime Minister who is elected to work for people’s will and interest now turns to serve the whole community of cockroaches. He then cajoles people into supporting Reversalism in order to overthrow humankind domination, which makes the whole story more impossible. If this event came true in real world, what horrible consequences a cockroach-controlled Prime Minister could bring about.

Moreover, the process and feelings of taking over a humankind body is narrated in a cockroach’s perspective. It is impossible for a nonhuman creature to tell stories. Compared with Kafka’s metamorphosis, it makes the transformation much more unfamiliar. Kafka’s fable starts with a man’s mind enclosed within a giant insect, generating the feelings of helpless entrapment and growing alienation from normal life. A narrator of human mind makes it much easier to stir imagination and raise empathy. In contrast, the nonhuman narrator adopted by McEwan stimulates much strangeness, which is revealed in the inherent conflict between his physical form and internal cognition of self-identity. In real world, a cockroach mind does not work the same way as human being, making it unlikely to decipher a cockroach’s thoughts, emotions, judgements. McEwan grants cockroaches humanlike thinking mode—able to think, feel and judge for themselves. But the point is that despite

the external human form and internal humanlike mind, they still recognize their self-identity as cockroaches. When Jim examines every part of his new body, he is shocked to have four limbs, “feeling some nostalgia” for his own little legs (9). He finds it revolting to have “the organ, a slab of slippery meat, laying squat and wet in his mouth,” which obviously refers to his tongue (9). He also simplifies his shirt as “his coloring,” considering things he sees “oppressively colorful” (9). Seemingly, a little insect which happens to be a creature much more gigantic and powerful is supposed to be satisfied with the new form. However, Jim’s expression, such as “consternation,” “revolting” and “grotesque,” demonstrates strong aversion to human body (10). Living as a marginalized group as depicted in Jim’s memory, these cockroaches, dare to mock and contempt a far more “advanced” creature in charge of the world. Jim’s discomfort in the new shell brings about defamiliarizing effects and his unexpected attitude towards human beings makes this impossible transformation more ridiculous.

The unnaturalness is also contained in the proposal of Reversalism, inverting the money flow in whole economic system, which operates completely against principles of economy. Reversalists led by the cockroach-controlled Prime Minister aim to invert the entire financial system to accelerate cash flow and stimulate consumption demand. In this way, diligent workers who are supposed to get paid in return have to compensate their employers for their job and get paid for what they buy from retailers. High negative rates are set for savings to force a citizen find a more expensive job in order to spend their cash. Considering its mechanism without concrete support from physical industry and steady source of cash flow, it is quite clear that the logic behind the so-called Reversalism is too fragile to convince anyone educated before. If such an insane economic biosphere were designed in real world, it would hardly win any trust owing to people’s common sense in economy. But in the storyworld, such a ridiculous plan to overturn the economic structure has been approved and finally carried out. Many people are convinced by the Prime Minister’s ostensible argument that the economy will be boosted by more demand under Reversalism. Its popularity is not achieved immediately but with a long accumulation. The Reversalist Party is reviewed as a group “with populist, anti-elitist message,” distinguishing it from Clockwisers, the traditional parties (41). The past few years has witnessed a clear and rapid development of Reversalism: in Europe and the US, there have been a growing group of supporters attracted by its anti-mainstream proposal. And the Reversalists even won the approval of the American president, Archie Tupper, who is considered as Jim’s same kind afterwards. However, our basic knowledge tells us it should not have become

a popular policy for its irrational mechanism. Thus, the triumph of a complete insaneness illustrates that some people lose their mind for plausible chances of economic revival, adding to its impossibility.

Considering the metamorphosis of the Prime Minister, the chief Brexit leader is particularly targeted by McEwan. As the most essential event in the story, the metamorphosis not only ridicules the current Prime Minister, but also forms the basis of later development. By depicting the implausible success of Reversalism, McEwan expresses sharp criticism about the essence of Brexit, and many people's blind support. The metamorphosis and Reversalism, as the core plot of the story, sets path for the unnatural acts by characters and includes the manifestations of hidden unnatural minds. The unnaturalness in the two events sets the tone for the storyworld.

Unnatural Acts in *The Cockroach*

After the Prime Minister undergoes a transformation and the Reversalism is vigorously promoted, how will other people react to the unnatural events? Do they behave in a sensible way? Do they correctly judge the metamorphosed Prime Minister and the illogical economic plan? Regrettably, the answer is negative, revealed by the whole cabinet's metamorphosis, Jane Fish's unlikely mastery of politics and people's frenetic support for Reversalism.

It is already horrible that a Prime Minister falls into the grim command of a cockroach. Even worse is that there is no one able to stop Jim from carrying out the scheme since the whole cabinet has been infested with cockroaches. Almost all of ministers are also completely controlled by a united group of cockroaches with the ultimate order of the collective spirit. More than merely crazy, it is absolutely threatening when the most powerful political authority is almost totally manipulated by cockroaches disguised in superficial human form. The metamorphosed cabinet can arbitrarily lead the whole country to any direction they want by taking advantage of exercising executive power. It also implies that the collective spirit is of high intelligence and good knowledge of Britain's politics. Only a Prime Minister in control is not able enough to change the country and holding a group of cabinet ministers in hand is vital for collective decision-making.

The collective spirit grants the metamorphosed cabinet extreme unity. The arduous seesaw game in politics has been changed into a once-for-all decision-making by the metamorphosed cabinet. A policy now can be hammered out within one round of meeting, going smoothly without disagreements and impediments. The scheme of promoting Reversalism representing the interests of cockroaches

is forcefully pushed forward and loyally carried out by cockroach-ministers. No one sitting in the cabinet cares about the country or the people. What a sarcastic scene that the cabinet's decision-making completely follows the cockroach's will, concentrating all resources into a policy to deteriorate the country! They are as solidary as cockroaches, as Jim's comments on his mates:

"They are precisely his own. Bound by iron courage and the will to succeed. Inspired by an idea as pure and thrilling as blood and soil. Impelled towards a goal that lifted beyond mere reason to embrace a mystical sense of nation, of an understanding as simple and as simply good and true as religious faith" (35).

When the cabinet is totally manipulated by a collective spirit, especially a malicious one, it is likely to lead the whole country to follow a wrong track. The metaphor implicates McEwan's outrage at the cabinet full of Brexit hardliners that will continue to tear the country away.

Among the metamorphosed ministers, McEwan gives more attention to Jane Fish who is depicted as a typical politician. Although dominated by a cockroach, she is so sly and intelligent that her political performance stands out among her colleagues, making her a capable aide. No one knows how a cockroach grabs the key to a qualified politician. Adept at capturing latest heat topics, she flexibly adjusts her behaviors to cater to voters' tastes which have nothing to do with her real thoughts. She intends her image in political sketch to be always "pipe-smoking" to leave a deep impression on voters though she never smokes (94). She used to be a "passionate Clockwiser," but the rapidly increasing popularity of Reversalism immediately converts her to a firm Reversalist (95). Moreover, she has no bottom line of moral principles. On understanding Jim's implied intention to set Benedict up, she "confides" that she has "always" had doubts about him and in no time spins a fake story to frame Benedict for harassment and bullying (95). Without hesitation, she arms lies and deceit as a weapon to achieve further promotion. As a lackey, she is skillful at taking cues from her boss and making up artificial flattery, which is an essential characteristic of a canny politician. When cockroaches gather to celebrate the success of the scheme, Jane "calls out beloved slogans to Jim, overcome with emotion" (123). Such an outstanding metamorphosed minister zoomed in Jim's perspective reflects the familiar hypocrisy and immorality of politicians and the contrast between its essence as a cockroach and its performance as a qualified politician serves to highlight the satirical tone.

Unexpectedly, Reversalism receives frenetic support from people, leaving

readers confused. In the storyworld, the history of Reversalism shows that its popularity does make sense because there seems to be lack of normal people who are armed with basic knowledge and ability of judgements to spot clumsy deception. It has attracted a group of supporters among the working poor and the old of all classes despite its absurdities and lack of basic economic knowledge. According to the narrator, the reason why the poor favor Reversalism lies in their dissatisfaction with current inequalities of wealth and their desire to bring luxuries with cash subsidy. The old's reason for support is even more ridiculous, being "nostalgically drawn to what they understood to be a proposal to turn back the clock" (43). After the Reversalism was finally put into practice, the shop was stripped clean of goods, which is "a great boost" to the economy in some people's view (121). The poor and the old are also motivated by "nationalist zeal" presented in the Reversalists' promise to achieve a national revival by upending the existing order (43). The popularity of this absurd idea is not only owing to the idea itself but to the manipulation of public opinion. The existence of Jim's tough figure is to satisfy people's political tastes. The cockroaches who "were mindful of" this phenomenon try to establish a determined and fearless figure who fights against the conservatives for country revival, taking advantage of people's voting preference. Even as a cockroach, Jim's "antennae" are "finely attuned to public sentiment" (83). With signs of nationalists' recovery awaiting catalysts for further growth, he fans the flames. Following the route, Jim stands alone to welcome coffins in heavy rains, deliberately exacerbating the diplomatic conflict to stimulate people's resent to France. More people are magnetized and united by potent leadership and external threat, rallying for Jim and his Reversalism. The fanatical belief pandering to people's greed and ignorance reflects the McEwan's disagreement with these ordinary people who are blinded with their complaints about current society and are enticed by the promising future printed by Brexiters.

Rooted in the above-mentioned unnatural events, the unnatural acts of characters demonstrate abnormalities in characters' minds and behaviors, bringing out less normality and more strangeness which consequently adds to the impossibilities of the storyworld. Those ridiculous acts intentionally stir readers to consider those who are playing similar parts in promoting Brexit. Regarding the aim of designing these impossible acts, McEwan bitterly ridicules the newly appointed cabinet composed of Brexit hardliners by delineating the metamorphosed cabinet and the typical politician cockroach. He also criticizes politicians for maliciously manipulating public opinion and aggravating social division in the country.

Unnatural Minds in *The Cockroach*

Along with the metamorphosis, Jim Sams has undergone considerable changes, which are worthy of mention since the protagonist's transformation is highly related to the theme of the novella. Among these changes, the most notable one is Jim's metamorphosed mind: it has been profoundly transformed into a compound of three different minds after being taken over by the cockroach, challenging our natural notion of how consciousness works. The newly compound mind of Jim is no longer a mind that nature gives birth to but rather falls into the category of the unnatural minds, which "a presented consciousness that in its functions or realizations violates the rules governing the possible world it is part of in a way that resists naturalization or conventionalization" (Iversen 97). Stefan Iversen focused on metamorphosed minds, especially the outcome of human-animal transformation in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Marie Darrieussecq's *Pig Tales*: a mind with the memory of the desires and beliefs of its former body as well as with new urges and experiences, brought forth by the new body. He found that the "double estrangement" results in uncanny effects of these narratives (Iversen 110).

Similarly, in *The Cockroach*, the metamorphosis brings about uncanny influences by giving birth to the impossible combination of three different minds in Jim's brain. Before the metamorphosis, Jim has undoubtedly one mind in his brain. The transformation penetrates a cockroach's mind into his brain as well as the collective spirit to recall an important mission namely the Reversalism. While the original human mind of Jim has been exiled to the cockroach's body, a basic component of human mind remains in Jim's brain by which the "new" Jim learns to master human behavioral patterns, getting accustomed to the role of a Prime Minister and social life. Thus, the combination in Jim's brain is mainly controlled by the cockroach mind and its collective spirit, influenced secondarily by the human mind.

The cockroach mind plays a primary role in Jim's brain, retaining his grotesque and eerie instincts to distinguish himself from normal human beings. When Jim woke up to find himself transformed into a four-leg mammal, he examines critically his new body including legs, mouth, eyes and flesh, "feeling some nostalgia" for his former appearance as an insect (9). A mosaic of memories reminds him of his life pattern as a cockroach: dashing to the gutter, eating a discarded slice of pizza, encountering delicious dung. As a member of the marginalized group in the community, little and powerless, he once lived in the darkness, struggling to feed himself in the rubbish bin, but he is now transformed into the Prime Minister

in charge of the whole country. Despite his reluctance to stay in a burdensome human body and his worries about whether he can get accustomed, he continuously reassures himself with his “proud cause”, which reveals his pride for his population (22). Manipulated by the cockroach mind, Jim tends to maintain insect instincts within this humankind shell. He can hardly resist the temptation of some “delicious” food which is absolutely disgusting for real human beings. When recalling the warm and “faintly steaming” horse dung, he felt joyful to reach such fresh dung based on his judgements as a “connoisseur” in this field (14). He also bears the inhuman qualities of the insect, such as cruelty and indifference to lives. When handling the collision of a British illegal fishing boat with a French frigate, he takes a considerably hard line on French, which leads to a severe result: the foreign affair escalates into diplomatic crisis. The cockroach in a human shell succeeds in making his current social identity—the Prime Minister—revolting and barbarian. His figure is as grotesque as what Jim said to describe his metamorphosed cabinet, “[h]ow eerily they resemble humans” (35).

In addition to the cockroach’s own original mind, the collective spirit plays a dispensable role in Jim’s brain, guiding him to replace Prime Minister and promote Reversalism to deteriorate human society and flourish the cockroaches. The collective spirit results from cockroaches’ implacable hatred against human beings. Before the transformation, it intentionally replaces the cockroach’s own will when he is scaling the vertical granite wall of the kerb. It acknowledges that “the peculiar madness,” Reversalism, can throw the general human population into chaos and poverty (126). In addition to the metamorphosed cabinet, the collective spirit not only takes advantage of people by cajoling them to support Reversalism, but also makes use of diplomatic affairs to press for its proposal. In this way, the collective spirit makes almost everything “tiny elements in a scheme of magnitude” (15). It demonstrates that the collective spirit is intelligent and ambitious, equipped with a comprehensive knowledge of human society. The exact inspirational prototype of the collective spirit is very clear. McEwan was outspoken about his comments on Brexiters: “a reckless, self-harming, ugly and alien spirit has entered the minds of certain politicians and newspaper proprietors. They lie to their supporters. They express contempt for judges and the rule and norms of law. They seem to want to achieve their ends by means of chaos” (McEwan 1).

Although the free will of Jim Sams, the original humankind, has been stripped off his brain, part of his human mind has been left over to assist the cockroach in fitting the new role. Jim inherits knowledges, judgements and habits from the remains of human mind. Accordingly, this metamorphosed Prime Minister knows

his previous habit of everyday coffee-drinking and how to react appropriately to his subordinate officers. It teaches him to learn how to run a cabinet and how to be a leader. When Jim is hosting a cabinet meeting, he takes control of the pace of speaking, “knowing enough to allow a short silence before saying” in order to arrest everyone’s serious attention (55). Nonetheless, the remains of human mind operate objectively without any capability to change or affect Jim’s decision. If not, he would object severely to Reversalism just as what he did previously as a determined Clockwiser and stop the crazy scheme from achieving final success.

Although Jim preserves his knowledges, judgements and habits as a human being, he is transformed into a cockroach with his own will controlled by the collective spirit and thinking mode reshaped by cockroaches. With three minds together emerging in his brain, it is unlikely for Jim Sams to assume ministerial responsibilities and lead a country to a bright future. Apparently, it can never happen to a Prime Minister in real world, but it is a striking metaphor for both the current Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the previous Theresa May. McEwan zooms in on the metamorphosed Prime Minister to voice bitter criticism against the primary Brexiters who are proposing radical changes to the country. His metaphor implies that political leaders who press for Brexit, the harmful and unreasonable proposal, are either genuinely stupid or particularly treacherous. By depicting the unnaturally transformed mind in Jim, he seems to mock Brexit leaders’ chaotic and abnormal minds that stick with Brexit, telling readers that they are far less reliable than expected.

What is the aim of adopting unnatural techniques in a political satire? Brian Richardson mentions that “a primary value of anti-memetic strategies of narration is to draw attention to the way narratives are constructed and point to the desires that such constructions serve” (Alber, Nielsen, et al. 17). As what has been discussed above from three aspects, we follow the way McEwan constructs the unnatural texts which depict a nightmarish scenario originated from the metamorphosis, readily provoking a mockery of the turmoil and division that Brexit has resulted in. McEwan is a determined and outspoken Remainer. As he said in an interview regarding his motivation to write *The Cockroach*, “as the nation tears itself apart...a writer is bound to ask what he or she can do. There’s only one answer: write...mockery might be a therapeutic response” (McEwan 1). McEwan’s desires are already revealed in the intention of using unnatural elements since unnaturalness is a clear allusion to the abnormality of Brexiters’ success. His bitter criticism against Brexit then goes through the scathing parody of British politics and society. Parody is a significant satirical device. Compared with conventional parodies,

unnatural representations seem to exaggerate narrative tension to and beyond the utmost, making narration more challenging than the worst situation readers can expect. In this way, he managed to encapsulate the sense of outrage at political deviousness and hypocrisy, worries about deeper social division and bewilderment about Britain's future into this creative political satire. The defamiliarizing effects directly challenges readers' cognition so that readers will feel McEwan's strong aversion to Brexit, starting to reconsider the comparison between storyworld and reality. Then to reconsider the Brexit itself, as McEwan wished.

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