SATIRIZING BREXIT. *THE COCKROACH* BY IAN MCEWAN: A POSTMODERN SATIRECostanza MONDO¹

Abstract

Apart from its political relevance, the phenomenon of Brexit has also wielded influence over literature, which has tackled this topic in various ways. One of the most interesting works addressing Brexit is *The Cockroach*, a political satire written by Ian McEwan. Its main character is Jim Sams, a cockroach which wakes up in Downing Street inhabiting the body of the British Prime Minister. This paper purports to investigate *The Cockroach* by focusing on two areas of interest. In the first part, light is shed on the tight connections between satire and reality. Indeed, I analyse some passages and aspects of the satire which share noticeable similarities with Brexit and its related political events, thereby adding to the satire's amusing and engaging narration. On the other hand, the second part of the paper highlights the satiric devices the author takes advantage of in order to comment on Brexit and lampoon it. As it will be demonstrated, the satiric inventory employed in the present satire is multi-layered and encompasses rhetoric devices such as pasquinade, parody and burlesque – as well as some echoes of Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. Combined together, the references to real events and the variety of satiric features contribute to making *The Cockroach* a gripping postmodern satire.

Keywords: Satire, Brexit, Postmodernism, Politics, Ian McEwan

The recent phenomenon of Brexit has had a considerable impact on Britain and, as a result, on its literature too. Indeed, the final part of 2017 was surprisingly characterized by an inundation of Brexit literature (Wally 75), trying to grapple with its causes, meaning and consequences. This has led Shaw to coin the term 'BrexLit' to indicate the birth of a new literary genre (Shaw 16). The importance of this unprecedented event has been compared only to the electoral victory of Donald Trump in the United States, which happened around the same period and represented an unexpected turn of events (De Búrca 46). For these reasons, it has been stated that Brexit and Trump's victory have led to a politicization of literature (Wally 63). Until then, Ian McEwan's works can be said to have dealt with everything but politics, at least on a regular basis, since political issues normally lie in the background. Even though he had been considering for a long time the idea of tackling political events, he decided to avoid them in his early fiction (Foley 138). As Boland stated though, contemporary political satire comes to terms with moments of crisis (Boland 443) and undoubtedly the Brexit phenomenon paved the way for numerous controversies and uncertainties about the future of the United Kingdom. It is a complex,

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multi-layered issue, whose traits and characteristics clearly transpire from *The Cockroach*, a political satire written by Ian McEwan. The aim of my paper is in the first place to explore how the historical context of Brexit glimpses through the pages of *The Cockroach*. Peppered throughout the plot, numerous passages portray in a mirror-like way current times and events which happened around the period of the referendum. After highlighting the strong ties between the satire and real events, the paper investigates the satiric devices employed by McEwan to comment on Brexit and spur fruitful reflections on the political phenomenon. Added to this, the author develops some themes which resonate with *A Modest Proposal* by Jonathan Swift. I have chosen to analyse *The Cockroach* since it employs interesting satiric devices and it focuses on a recent political event which caught the attention of Europe and the entire world. I claim that both elements add to the novella and make its satire particularly effective. As the writer admitted, literature “can make people a bit more mentally awake” (Dundas) and such awareness is heightened by literary techniques typical of the genre of satire.

The Brexit Phenomenon

At first sight, the relationship between reality and satire seems quite loose, since the plot is characterized by non-human characters, namely cockroaches. Indeed, the main character of the satire himself is a cockroach which one day wakes up in Downing Street inhabiting the body of the British Prime Minister, Jim Sams. After struggling for a while with his new aspect and repugnant physical traits, Jim sets about to carry out his mission: delivering Reversalism. The doctrine of Reversalism is concerned with the reversal of the money flow, which requires people to pay for their jobs and receive money when they purchase. The reason for Jim’s active engagement is discovered little by little by the readers, who are informed that he longs to impoverish humanity so as to pave the way for his species’ triumph and wellbeing. Indeed, cockroaches thrive in filth and poverty.

As McEwan admits though (Volmers), Reversalism is an economic and political project that mirrors Brexit, which is never mentioned throughout the satire. After a first glance, the similarities between the two events become clear-cut. Right at the beginning of the second chapter, Ian McEwan painstakingly reconstructs the origins of Reversalism, identifies its first supporters and shows the familiarity which progressively acquired in the political environment. In fact, Brexit was a phenomenon whose roots lie years before the date of the referendum and should rather be looked for in the signature of the Maastricht Treaty (Sampson 175). The treaty officially transformed the European Communities into the European Union and threw the germs of the European Single Market, which started in

1993 (Sampson 175). However, another important aspect, often overlooked, binds together the two projects. Ian McEwan chooses to introduce the chapter concerned with Reversalism with these words: “The origins of Reversalism are obscure and much in dispute, *among those who care*. [emphasis mine]” (McEwan 25). In fact, Brexit’s roots are truly difficult to find and pin down (Richardson and Rittberger 652), once one rejects the surface of it, namely the referendum of 2016. During an interview McEwan highlighted the fact that nobody clearly remembers the Brexit primer and expressed concern for a situation in which “a political project gets so intense that people forget what the reason of it is and begin to try and do things without reference to Parliament” (The Waterstones). As it will be later explained, the referendum caused clashes with the Parliament of no little importance.

In an article for *The Guardian*, Ian McEwan adopts Guy Verhofstadt’s words, namely a “cat-fight” (McEwan) among the Tories, to identify the origins of the referendum. Presenting the roots of Reversalism, the writer clearly portrays the political events which led to the call for the referendum in 2016: “In order to shore up its electoral support and placate the Reversalist wing of the party, the Conservatives promised in their 2015 election manifesto a referendum on reversing the money flow” (McEwan 28). These words perfectly frame the circumstances surrounding Brexit. In fact, David Cameron, at the time the Prime Minister, promised in January 2013 to hold a referendum on the topic within 2017, had he been reelected in 2015 (Offe 18). In this way he hoped to silence the issue of leaving the EU once for all, strongly backed and frequently raised by the UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) (Offe 17). However, the outcomes were unexpected and David Cameron resigned shortly after (Offe 22), exactly as the Prime Minister who “was never heard of again” (McEwan 29) in *The Cockroach*. After Cameron’s resignation, a stillstand situation and many uncertainties soon followed, since the political world was dazzled by the outcome and very unsure about the path to take, especially as the electoral promises were concerned (Wilkinson 132). A similar situation is depicted in the pages of the satire, as the “lukewarm” (McEwan 29) Jim Sams looks very hesitating. When the cockroach takes possession of his body though, he puts an end to all his uncertainties and shifts gears, embarking on the mission of delivering Reversalism at all costs.

However, the referendum was not devoid of controversies concerning its binding meaning and its power to trigger article 50. As Offe brilliantly explains, referendums have indeed multiple downsides, since they tend to consider only the plebiscitarian result and eliminate the process of compromise-finding which lies at the core of democracy (Offe 19).

In addition, referendum voters tend to take a decision which does not always correspond to the questions they are confronted with (Offe 20). For instance, the possibility of sending a hostile message to the government might outweigh the will of expressing an opinion concerning just the referendum issue (Offe 20). It should also be considered that the outcomes are usually taken as a “*fait accompli*,” whereas governments are always temporary and are substituted after certain spans of time (Offe 21). Of course, there is also a clash of powers with the Parliament. This led to the so-called Miller litigation, which had the aim of establishing whether the referendum alone was sufficient to trigger article 50 or whether an act of Parliament was needed (Eeckhout 169). The result confirmed the necessity for a Parliamentary statute, which however contained only the minimum required and did not lead to further participation of Parliament in the negotiations (Eeckhout 170). Moreover, at first the plebiscite was only politically advisory (Young 190) and therefore not necessarily binding. The question therefore is: “How did ‘advisory’ morph into ‘binding’?” (McEwan) The answer lies in the attitude of the political world which entrenched behind “the people have spoken” (Young 191) and the decision of carrying out their will. In *The Cockroach*, Reversalism as well is approved thanks to a referendum whose outcome was largely unexpected and references to the necessity of seconding people’s will are soon to be found. When Jim takes office, the readers are informed that he had promised to “honour the wish of the people” (McEwan 30). Furthermore, there is an interesting dialogue between Jim and Simon (the adviser who will be dismissed after a while) in which the two discuss about the strategy to adopt towards the consequences of the referendum. Simon takes the view that Jim should not second Reversalism and rather prorogue the Parliament for a couple of weeks – a controversial decision taken by Boris Johnson, who wanted to suspend the Parliament for six weeks (Fabbrini 62). At Jim’s puzzlement for this proposal and at his mention of the will of the people, Simon quickly silences him stating that the Prime Minister is in charge: “The whole thing’s a mess. Jim, time to call it off.’ Then he added slowly, ‘It’s in your power” (McEwan 17). As readers discover soon though, Jim is very willing to support Reversalism in order to impoverish the British, as Simon learns at his expense: “I want your resignation letter on my desk within the half hour and I want you out of the building by eleven” (McEwan 17). In my opinion, this quotation is paramount in the novella, since Jim’s opinion and political stance are made clear for the first time. As a result, readers can therefore surmise the direction of his future actions.

As far as the Brexit campaign is concerned, two different formations soon divided: Leavers and Remainers, echoing the ‘Reversalists’ and ‘Clockwisers’ in the satire. As Shaw

points out though: “Brexit did not divide the nation, it merely revealed the inherent divisions within society” (Shaw 16). Indeed, when called to cast their ballots, various aspects held sway over people’s choices. Plenty of research studies have tackled this topic and provided us with some interesting data about Leavers’ and Remainers’ traits (De Bùrca 49, Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley 9, Hill 187). The key predictors seem to be age and education, since young people with educational qualifications mostly voted to remain in the EU, whereas old people with fewer qualifications backed the Leave campaign (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley 9). On the other hand, there seems to have been no gender split, since men and women supported the fronts in the same proportion (Sampson 176). The composition of the voters looks therefore varied and multifarious. In his satire, Ian McEwan depicts the two slices of the voters, showing in particular the relevance of the age discrepancy:

The result was the unexpected one, largely due to an unacknowledged alliance between the working poor and the old of all classes. The former had no stake in the status quo and nothing to lose, and they looked forward to bringing home essential goods as well as luxuries, and to being cash rich, however briefly. The old, by way of cognitive dimming, were nostalgically drawn to what they understood to be a proposal to turn back the clock (McEwan 29).

Therefore, Ian McEwan also takes into consideration the economic factor, which some studies consider an element which can be associated with the tendency of voting Leave, but less decisive than age and education (Sampson 177). On the contrary, fundamental branches of society took a stand and supported the option of remaining in the EU, namely “most of business and the trade unions, agriculture, science, finance and the arts” (McEwan), as McEwan himself acknowledges. In his satire the same attitudes are portrayed:

Most economists, City journalists, business leaders and the entire financial sector predicted economic catastrophe if Sams went the way of the hard Reversalists. Banks, clearing houses, insurance brokers and international corporations were already relocating abroad. Eminent scientists, Nobel laureates, despaired in high-profile letters to the press (McEwan 31).

Apart from underlining that the drawbacks of Brexit were self-evident to some branches of society, the extract might raise the issue of ‘experts.’ In fact, it is clear that the opinion of experts played a minor role both in Brexit and Reversalism. After the publication of a report

commissioned by the Treasury which predicted recession, loss of jobs and pound devaluation as a consequence of Brexit, the Leave front expressed annoyance at the opinion of ‘experts’ (Armstrong 65), who were thus mostly unheard.

As the provision of information and beliefs lies at the core of every referendum (Armstrong 63), a campaign was organized by both fronts to promote their views. Slogans sprung up like mushrooms and the ones of the Leave party were particularly focused on the control and independence which the UK needed to regain (Young 189). Explicative in this sense is the expression “Having your cake and eating it” (Bickerton 136). Since Ian McEwan is not oblivious to slogans’ power (and their satirical potential), he inserts some of them in the plot, such as “Turn the Money around” (McEwan 29). In the shoes of an English reader it is almost impossible not to catch the reference to “Take Back Control” (Armstrong 65), a widespread Leave slogan. Furthermore, “Get Brexit done, Unleash Britain’s Potential” was the main Conservative electoral slogan during the 2019 General Election (Richardson and Rittberger 662). The verb ‘to unleash’ figures in the satire, maybe with the aim of echoing this slogan: “There’s general weariness. Creeping fear of the unknown. Anxiety about what they voted for, what they’ve unleashed” (McEwan 16). In this quotation, though, the verb ‘to unleash’ is used to express people’s concerns about the outcome of the referendum, rather than an exhortation to vote for Brexit.

The issue of slogans paves the way for a reflection regarding the role emotions played during the campaign, which was biased on feelings rather than reason, according to some viewpoints (Young 189). Nevertheless, in Staiger’s opinion emotions are deeply entwined with politics, thus enhancing people’s attention when taking part in decision-making processes (Staiger 232). However, feelings can also end up impairing judgements and Brexit is no exception (Staiger 230). Indeed, many Leave supporters frequently used highly emotional language during their speeches, thereby presenting Brexit as an opportunity to ‘take back control’ which was not to be passed up (Oppermann and Spencer 675). “It’s gone all mystical, all kind of milky-eyed mystical and religious” (Staunton) — states McEwan during an interview. A well-known politician of the UKIP, Nigel Farage, actually went one step further by claiming that choosing to support the Leave front was almost like a conversion (Staiger 234). Such hints of people’s involvement glimpse through the pages of *The Cockroach*, usually in the form of adjectives which are the best means to depict people’s feelings. For instance, after the referendum outcome, people’s cry to embrace Reversalism is “lusty and heartfelt” (McEwan 31). Similarly, “vocal and passionate” (Bellamy 225) are adjectives used to describe the Leave supporters and

campaign, which far outshone its rivals. A widespread opinion shows indeed the Remain front failing to put forward motivations for the necessity of integration with Europe (Bellamy 223). In his engaging scholarly work concerning Brexit and Linguistics, Buckledee takes the same view and maintains that Remain politicians were rather slow and inexhaustive in counterarguing Brexiteers' claims and addressing issues regarding EU regulations and the democracy of its system (Buckledee 74). Added to this, he shows that they frequently resorted to 'hedging' – in Linguistics the term is linked to a range of verbs and linguistic expressions employed to attenuate the strength of a statement and take distance from it – whereas Leave supporters forcefully made their points encircling them in a halo of unquestionable certainty (Buckledee 24, 35). As Buckledee explains, this effect was obtained through the confident use of modal verbs such as 'can' or 'will' (Buckledee 35). Language and its skilful use have always had the power to elicit emotions and the Brexit campaign was first and foremost a sort of 'linguistic battle.' Taking all the aforementioned elements into account, it is evident that "Brexiteers won the language war" (Buckledee 8). In my opinion, supporting Brexit or Remain became particularly entwined with people's feelings since it is a decision which will necessarily impinge on the future of the country and its identity – so far it is too early to say whether for the better or for the worse. Being an issue involving every citizen and affecting also the future and younger generations, the Brexit referendum triggered emotions and addressed concerns. As *The Cockroach* underlines, this tendency was further fueled by the skilful use of language in political communication and slogans.

Evidently enough, Leavers were against the EU for a series of reasons, which however did not seem to have been a cause of preoccupation in the previous years. In McEwan's eyes, this change of mind is astonishing:

Only a few years ago, asked to list the nation's ills – wealth gap, ailing NHS, north-south imbalance, crime, terrorism, austerity, housing crisis etc – most of us would not have thought to include our membership of the EU. [...] We weren't thinking then of Brussels (McEwan).

Data seem to support his view, as during the 2015 electoral campaign the possibility of holding a Brexit referendum was not estimated crucial for the victory of David Cameron (Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 4). Indeed, at the time less than 10% of the electorate regarded the EU as one of the most pressing problems the United Kingdom had to tackle (Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 4). Nevertheless, during the Brexit campaign many citizens had the firm

conviction that all the evils of the country were to be put down to the European Union. Therefore, the hypothesis of the EU as a scapegoat for problems rooted in social inequality (Sampson 179) gained ground. This attitude has a familiar ring when reading the following excerpt from the satire: “everything that was wrong with the country, including inequalities of wealth and opportunity, the north-south divide and stagnating wages, was caused by the direction of the financial flow” (McEwan 29). I am of the opinion that even in this case Ian McEwan proves to be an attentive reader of his time, since he inserts this widespread belief – referred not to the EU but to the regular money flow – in his satire.

Nevertheless, *The Cockroach* does not portray only people’s opinions, attitudes and beliefs, it even depicts political events. During a visit in Newcastle, Nigel Farage, a Leave supporter and leader of the UKIP, was hit by a milkshake thrown by a Remainer who clearly had different opinions from his. TV news ran this event and some fast-food chains such as Burger King and McDonald openly supported or condemned the action by continuing to sell milkshakes during the visits of politicians or not (CBS News). Since the event became famous, the reference to a milkshake during the dialogue between Jim and his assistant is noticeable. Indeed, Simon mentions “a Clockwise yob pouring milkshake over a high-profile Reversalist” (McEwan 16). Although names are not specified, Farage and the milkshake hurled at him immediately come to mind. I reckon that the pleasure of reading the satire is heightened by the reference to this well-known event, about which people might have heard from TV news and radio or even witnessed.

Despite Reversalism being approved through the referendum, it is the Parliament that delivers it, although without a fair play on Jim’s part. Indeed, as some of his supporters were required to go to an event organized in America by Archie Tupper, he asked the members of the opposition to pair with them. The pairing arrangement ensures that the same number of members of the opposition and the government are absent during the voting of a bill so as not to create advantageous discrepancies in numbers. However, Jim breaks this agreement calling back quickly his supporters from America and allowing them to vote the Reversalism bill, thus gaining the majority. When asked about the legality and justice of such process, the Prime Minister candidly moves the goalposts by taking advantage of the UK’s unwritten constitution: “Let me explain the fundamentals. In this country we do not have a written constitution. What we have instead are traditions and conventions” (McEwan 93). As he goes on to explain, there have been numerous precedents, therefore breaking the pairing agreement is legal and justified. Back to current times, UK’s unwritten constitution and its solidity have been challenged by the Brexit

process. What seems to have confirmed the constitution's stability is that the outcome of the previously mentioned Miller litigation declared that a Parliamentary statute was necessary to trigger article 50 and abandon the EU. However, Eeckhout dismisses this hypothesis, since he thinks that the constitution has not proven stable and that the only principle which is always respected is Parliament sovereignty (Eeckhout 166). Therefore, in my opinion the episode of the pairing agreement is particularly meaningful because it underlines the problems which could derive from the unwritten constitution.

As to the role of TV news in spreading information about political events, it should be pointed out that the media played a considerable role during the Brexit process. In fact, the benefits and drawbacks of the EU were underlined by members of the government and politicians, as well as by the constant stream of information provided by social media (Armstrong 18). In this sense *The Cockroach* is scattered through with references to means of communication, whose reliability is sometimes subjected to lampoon. Firstly, McEwan provides a bird's eye view of the most important British newspapers: *The Daily Mail*, *The Spectator*, *The Sun*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Observer* and even *The Guardian*, which runs the thorny news of a political scandal. Sometimes headlines and front pages of newspapers are described in detail, as in the case of Jim's photograph showing him waiting for the coffins of the English fishermen killed by the shipwreck of their boat. As far as titles are concerned, there are "Bin Dim Jim!," "In the name of God, go!" (McEwan 18) and "Who Put the Fire in Jim's Belly?" (McEwan 54). Apart from the traditional media, Ian McEwan draws the attention to social networks such as Twitter, compulsively used by the American President, Archie Tupper. Although not to think of Donald Trump is almost impossible, the focus here is particularly centred on how fake news can easily flow in social media, thus strongly influencing public opinion. This is another bridge with Brexit as an interesting viewpoint identifies fake news as the main source of the referendum outcome (Schnellenbach 159). Challenging this assumption, Schnellenbach circumscribes the power of fake news and claims that they reinforce people's ideas and convictions, rather than making them change their minds about certain topics (Schnellenbach 165). Whatever the extent to which fake news wield influence, it is evident that their spread can hold sway during important political events. In *The Cockroach* fake news are directly engendered and spread by Jim himself, who is willing to exploit the so-called Roscoff Affair and scapegoat the French. This diplomatic accident derives from the shipwreck of an English fishing boat, the 'Larkin,' which was accidentally hit by a French ship. By using the issue for his own ends, Jim pulls the wool over citizens' eyes and glosses over the fact that the Larkin was

illegally fishing in French waters. Therefore, the tragedy was not entirely the French's fault.

The Larkin issue is actually very interesting as Jim successfully uses an accident in order to inflame a debate. By unleashing a diplomatic scandal, the Prime Minister manages to beguile public opinion and divert its attention from the disastrous impact Reversalism is bound to have on the British economy. The trade issue lies indeed at the core of both economic projects and Brexit deals were centred on this pressing topic. After strenuous negotiations, Brexit was officially delivered on the 31st January 2020. In the end, the UK left the European Single Market, a challenge for its external trade (Zimmermann 28). Currently pros and cons springing from these agreements cannot be weighed, although plenty of viewpoints keep blossoming around the topic. In the satire trade deals are of vital importance, as reversing the money flow necessarily hinders commerce with countries which keep the regular one. Jim is perfectly aware of the fact that the only potential trading partners are St Kitts and Nevis, therefore he even tries to convince the President of the United States. Indeed, Archie Tupper's favourable decision could make the difference in leading other countries to go along with Reversalism and reverse their money flows. Having an ambiguous opinion towards the economic project, Archie Tupper changes his mind various times, "playing with the idea" (McEwan 65) and engaging quarrels with the Federal Reserve which labels the project as "loopy" (McEwan 65). As it is perfectly clear that behind this name hides the former president of the United States, it is interesting to investigate the aspects in which *The Cockroach* portrays his attitude towards Brexit. Indeed, Trump and his electoral victory are usually associated with the same forces which engendered Brexit (De Búrca 46), not to mention his new approach towards trade and fundings, which bears some similarities with the Brexit program (Bowsher QC and Yukins 259). Furthermore, many Leave supporters harboured the hope that an US-UK agreement could be drawn up, so as to booster the trade and incentivize the EU to accept more balanced trade deals (Zimmermann 39). In contemporary times as in the satire, therefore, ties between the US and Britain are a recurring feature binding together the two dimensions.

However, America is not the only country with whose representatives Jim exchanges opinions and dialogues. The Roscoff Affair is a diplomatic fracture between the UK and France, stemming from the shipwreck of the Larkin. As pointed out before, Jim manages to exploit the event for his own ends by distracting the public opinion from the controversies surrounding Reversalism. Back to current times, Britain and France are in good terms, although France's reaction to Brexit was definitely a particular one. It must be

pointed out that France has always been firmly attached to the EU and welcomed the perspective of the UK abandoning the Union as a further opportunity to thrive (Drake 97). On the other hand, *The Cockroach* presents an important dialogue between the German chancellor and the British PM in which Jim tries to draw up an agreement regarding the exportation of English wine. All of a sudden, the chancellor asks him a barrage of questions related to the decision of delivering Reversalism and its tragic consequences for the British people. That scene is particularly important as McEwan does not miss out the opportunity to criticize the shaky grounds of Brexit and the motivations behind it.

Ian McEwan's satire presents a fine-grained picture of real events which undoubtedly enhance readers' pleasure in reading it. By retracing in the plot events which they witnessed while perusing British newspapers and which necessarily involved them – since British citizens were called to cast their ballot and express their opinions – readers might or might not experience laughter depending on their political stand. What is certain though, is that the satire becomes more and more refreshing since its lymph is drained from reality and current times, regardless of its viewpoint towards Brexit. Having underlined that, in the next part I will analyse the devices through which this mind-searing satire finds expression.

Satiric Devices in *The Cockroach*

Having been extremely long, tangled and full of political plot-twists, the Brexit process is difficult to summarise. Due to the intrinsic irony characterizing the event, it has been argued that satire has the power to comment on Brexit in a way which is not accessible to other serious political commentators (Weaver 155). Although *The Cockroach* is his first political satire, Ian McEwan had already experimented with his creativity and created main characters who are very different from regular ones, as it happens with the foetus narrator in *Nutshell*, for instance (Müller 378). According to Müller, in that novel the narration does not completely exclude the author (Müller 386) and this feature is present also in the political satire. Needless to say, the author must have a clear point of view so as to write an effective satire. All may be said, but that Ian McEwan does not have a strong opinion which transpires from the pages of the novella: "I make no pretence of wanting to be even-handed on this. I don't think satire works even-handedly. I'm completely *parti pris*" (Staunton).

Although McEwan's satire finds expression in various ways and through various devices, the main character himself is a powerful satiric attack to Brexit and the political

environment. Jim Sams is indeed a cockroach inhabiting the body of the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Comparing politicians to cockroaches stems from an unhappy tradition (O'Toole) and the choice of insect is not related only to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, one of the works parodied in the satire. Disgusting as they may be, cockroaches bear indeed an unexpected satirical meaning as the author reveals: "Kafka doesn't really name his bug. But it's the one insect which we seem to have universal disgust for. They are associated with poverty and bad living arrangements. So I wanted an insect that would really benefit from Brexit" (Staunton). Indeed, Jim's mission is to deliver Reversalism and guarantee the prosperity of cockroaches, as the English will be inevitably impoverished by Reversalism – or Brexit. After a few pages the readers discover that Jim is not the only undercover cockroach and that almost all the ministers share his roots, as the cockroach happily notices. In Shaw's opinion, by comparing the PM and the ministers to cockroaches, McEwan "proffers an oblique commentary on the ways by which those that thrive on squalid societal conditions exploit the insalubrious political landscape for personal gain" (Shaw). Yet, Jim does not embody only filth and future poverty, but also an interesting aspect regarding the "spirit of Brexit" (Staunton). According to McEwan this spirit is based on politicians lying through their teeth: "I'm lying. You know I'm lying. I know that you know I'm lying. And here's the lying. And that's exactly what I witnessed. And that's cockroach behaviour" (Staunton). This attitude shines through the pages of *The Cockroach*, especially in occasion of the dismissal of Jim's main political opponent. Benedict St John, the foreign minister, is indeed a human and therefore poses a threat to Jim's plan. Consequently, the cockroach and the minister for transport, Jane Fish, spread lies in order to create a political scandal which inevitably leads to Benedict's resignation. When the minister is summoned to hand in his notice, the cockroach pretends for a while not to be the mastermind behind the scenes and not to have conjured against the opponent, who is totally aware of Jim's lies though. Deceptions and lies are indeed typical weapons used by the Prime Minister in order to achieve his aims. Although the Roscoff Affair is a capital example regarding diplomatic relations, lies are embedded in many other aspects of the cockroach's policy, such as his relationship with the citizens, the press and political opponents.

Far from being only a satiric attack, the character of Jim Sams might be also a kind of pasquinade, an interesting satiric device. Pasquinade is concerned with brief comments ridiculing a contemporary leader or a national event (Kuiper 178). In this case there is no brief comment though, but rather a character which speaks exactly like a well-known

politician, thus ridiculing him. Although the novella is not a *roman à cleft*, Jim Sams undoubtedly shares some features of Boris Johnson and Theresa May (Staunton). Taking advantage of a speech held by Johnson, the writer manages to make such similarities explicit, but only in a couple of passages. During an interview for *The Waterstones*, Ian McEwan admitted that “I came to a point where I wanted to sum up my cockroach prime minister’s first statement to the House of Commons, so I looked in Hansard and I looked at Boris Johnson’s sort of mission statement. I thought: “I cannot better this”” (*The Waterstones*). The first example of pasquinade is indeed the cockroach speech at the House of Commons, resonating with Boris Johnson’s words. Due to the bounty of exact quotations, the following excerpt deserves to be quoted at length with emphasis added to Johnson’s own words:

When the bill returns to this house, Mr Speaker, *our mission* will be *to deliver Reversalism for the purpose of uniting and re-energising* our great country and not only making it great again, but *making it the greatest place on earth. By 2050 it is more than possible, and less than impossible, that the UK will be the greatest and most prosperous economy in Europe. We will lie at the centre of a new network of reverse-flow trade deals [...]* We stand *at the beginning of a golden age. Mr Speaker, I commend this future to the house just as much as I commend this statement* [emphasis mine] (McEwan 45-46, 48).

Although differences are present, sometimes McEwan perfectly cites Johnson’s words, which ring familiar to British people and are therefore recognizable. In other excerpts readers are confronted with very specific words which can be easily associated with the current Prime Minister of the UK. Employed to highlight the resolution of eliminating the Clockwise incubus (McEwan 22), the verb ‘to pitchfork’ reminds Boris Johnson’s decision to pitchfork the EU incubus off the nation’s back (McEwan). Another example thereof will be provided when discussing the exchange between the German chancellor and Jim Sams.

It has been stated that “Satire frequently involves the imaginative creation of absurd and even grotesque worlds” (Gordon). As if a UK in which a cockroach takes office in Downing Street were not sufficiently grotesque, the author puts forward an economic project which is definitely harebrained and absurd. While having a bath (Volmers), McEwan suddenly came up with an idea as “absurd and pointless” (Staunton) as Brexit, which

however deals with the flow of money rather than with the membership in the EU. The blind optimism with which citizens welcome Reversalism reflects “the economic illiteracy of Brexiteers in perceiving a brighter financial future outside of EU control” (Shaw). The writer peppers the satire with references which easily allow readers to catch the similarities between the two. In the first pages, Jim remembers the risks he had to run in order to reach Downing Street, among which the danger of being smashed on the ground as he encountered a group of demonstrators: “He saw their banners streaming, their flags bearing down, yellow stars on a blue ground. Union Jacks too” (McEwan 7). The cockroach’s opinion of such people is poor and he angrily remarks that “they should have been at home” (McEwan 6). In the aftermath of the referendum it was quite usual to see such demonstrations of Remainers. Another interesting hint is linked to the fact that Reversalism seems to find an application only in Britain while failing to spread in other countries. Of course, there are even more explicit references which involve the scatological (Martiny). While reaching Downing Street, the cockroach encounters a pile of dung behind which he rests for a while before setting up again. McEwan has admitted that that image corresponds to his view of Brexit (Volmers). What is very interesting about this scatological reference is that it was used centuries before by Swift. The satirist had indeed used the same image to indicate the Presbyterians (Holmes 433). It is also very telling that the cockroach recalls that, after having been near the dung for a while, he “had parted company with his own free will, or the illusion of it, and had come under the influence of a greater, guiding force” (McEwan 6). Of course, the guiding force is the one spurring him to embrace Reversalism and allow cockroaches to be in charge of a poor world where they can prosper.

The reference to the leading influence can easily introduce the discourse about clarity and light in the satire. When discussing Brexit and its enabling factors, McEwan talked about “magic dust” (McEwan), which has been used to prompt people to pursue Brexit at all costs and in spite of every possibly reasonable argument. Although in the satire the specific reference to magic dust is not to be found, numerous are the circumstances in which clarity lacks, both in the sense of clarity of reasoning and in the more immediate one of light. Indeed, Reversalism is presented as 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” (McEwan 21), thus highlighting its power to blind people’s reasoning skills. Therefore, expressions such as “Blind collective obedience” (McEwan 32) and “follow us blindly into the future” (McEwan 84) are very appropriate. Furthermore, darkness is embedded in the nature of the cockroach, as Jim evidently loathes light and clarity. When

he wakes up in Downing Street, he is annoyed by the morning sun and whenever he decides to take decisions regarding his policy or the elimination of political opponents, he works at night. All these hints portray a ruthless character who thrives in the dark like his peers, who are used to “amassing in the darkness” (McEwan 45). At the end of the satire another striking remark seals cockroaches’ obscure nature one for all, as the meaning of their Latin name ‘blattodea’ is revealed, namely insects which shun the light.

On the other hand, clarity is to be found in the rationality of the cockroach and his careful planning to deliver Reversalism. In this “political satire in an old tradition” (Cain), the author satirizes the political world and its functioning not only through the character of Jim and Reversalism, but also through a paradox. Indeed, as brilliantly expressed in a review of *The Guardian*: “The world of *The Cockroach* is more like one of Swift’s parallel universes where political and intellectual idiocies are not so much reduced to absurdity as magnified into towering follies” (O’Toole). The concept itself lying at the core of Reversalism is imbued with references to reversal, concerning the money flow, trade, wages and purchases made by people. Nevertheless, the project seems “stupidly coherent” (Volmers) at a superficial level. A similar ‘logical reversal’ can be found in *A Modest Proposal*, where an absurd project is spelled out so clearly and rationally that the readers might even be convinced by it, provided that they forget what kind of goods will be sold. In a similar vein, Reversalism might even be convincing, as long as people ignore the economic problems it will inevitably cause. Jim Sams painstakingly plans the details of his mission and surgically removes the obstacles on his path. After having been informed of the cabal organized by Benedict St John to undermine the stability of Jim’s government, the cockroach immediately sets his wheels in motion to identify his supporters and draws up a list of people who could help him to get rid of the foreign minister. Indeed, after this moment of reflection he manages to find a solution, although based on falsehoods. His glacial rationality is depicted when facing another issue regarding Benedict and his mounting popularity. In fact, Jim starts reflecting and rationally analyses the possible solutions: “Jim felt his heartbeat slowing and his thoughts arranging themselves into patterns as neat and self-contained as the little houses he was passing. It was as if he was in possession of an ancient brain that could solve any modern problem it confronted” (McEwan 88). Therefore, absurdity of project and meticulous planning go hand in hand in this nonsensical political world.

The same awareness and logical thinking are applied towards the relationship with the media, whose far-reaching power Jim soon learns to take advantage of. The lampoon

of excessive mediatic influence is a dear theme to Ian McEwan, who maintains that British citizens' choice was partly determined by political and mediatic forces (Volmers). The more effective way to satirize the media is to show how easily information can be misread or, even worse, influenced or exploited. Since the beginning, Sams blithely advises the press before dismissing his adviser and Benedict St John, thus putting them in an embarrassing and humiliating situation. In addition, it is clear that the Roscoff Affair was literally built thanks to the aid of social media (Twitter in particular) and a mediatic confection organized by the Prime Minister. As far as Twitter is concerned, there is a stunning passage where Jim takes twitting lessons from Archie Tupper and lampoons the way in which reality is altered and doctored. In order to better understand the influence of media in the satire and Ian McEwan's irony, the excerpt is worth quoting at length:

'Tiny Sylvie Larousse sinking English ships. BAD!' It was poetry, smoothly combining density of meaning with fleet-footed liberation from detail. Larousse was emasculated, then diminished with a taunt that, true or not (his name was Sylvain, he was five foot nine), must forever be his badge; the fishermen's boat became a ship, the ship became ships; no tedious mention of the dead. The final judgement was childlike and pure, memorable and monosyllabically correct. And the parting flourish of those caps, that laconic exclamation mark! (McEwan 55)

Therefore, the cockroach quickly learns the power of media on the President of the United States' knees. However, an eye for scenarios and details is not missing. When waiting at the airport for the coffins of the departed British trawlermen, the Prime Minister manages to make all the right noises to obtain perfect photos published on newspapers, thereby increasing his popularity. Possessing a streak of theatricality, Sams stands still under the drizzly rain, refusing an umbrella and giving the impression of being so distraught that some tears flow on his cheeks. Needless to say, the cockroach does not feel empathy or grief whatsoever, he is just interested in the beneficial results of such mediatic strategy.

As mentioned previously, McEwan uses Jim's character to satirize the political world. However, there are other characters embodying political leaders who are either the butt of satire or means through which satire finds expression. In order to stress the satiric message, the author also uses linguistic strategies. Although Archie Tupper is criticized in numerous ways, in this case more than ever does Ian McEwan take advantage of the satirical power of adjectives. Resembling him from the very name, Archie Tupper is tailored to Donald Trump and he is a cockroach, at least in Jim's opinion. Apart from flip-flopping,

constantly changing his mind about Reversalism and spreading false information via Twitter, Tupper's range of vocabulary is extremely poor. In fact, it is restricted almost only to three adjectives usually avoided because of their vague and banal meaning, namely 'good,' 'bad' and 'great.' In order to highlight his monotony, the writer inserts repetitions. For instance, during the phone call with the British Prime Minister, Tupper states: "Murder isn't good" (McEwan 59) and after a few lines: "Shake things up is good" (McEwan 59). It could also be pointed out that defining murder as despicable involves no particular wisdom, as it is universally acknowledged and usually taken for granted. As far as personal opinions about Jim Sams and Reversalism are concerned, they are respectively "a great man" (McEwan 65) and "good" (McEwan 83). Lacking details and being extremely volatile, such adjectives go hand in hand with the character's poorness of ideas and inconsistency. As if the character were not ludicrous enough, he also makes a slip of the tongue of no slight importance. Instead of using the word 'Reversalism' to make reference to the British economic project, the President utters the term 'Revengelism,' built on the verb 'to revenge' and therefore implying that the entire idea is just a way to take revenge on the European Union. It is no wonder then, that Tupper encourages Jim to carry out his mission to give the EU "a bad time" (McEwan 59).

On the other hand, the German chancellor is presented as an extremely intelligent person who asks questions about Reversalism because she cannot get her head around the fact that Jim is truly in favour of this shambolic project. In this case questions are a powerful means to 'question' the grounds of Reversalism (and Brexit!). Jim Sams has a conflictual relationship with questions, since he constantly dodges them. Throughout the plot there are numerous circumstances in which this feature is stressed such as: "Refusing questions, he abruptly turned away and went back inside Number Ten" (McEwan 53), or "Preferring not to take questions, he patiently explained how their different sectors would blossom in the new regime" (McEwan 64) and "He was giving no interviews" (McEwan 69). It is evident that he has a talent for speeches where he can con the audience, but for the rest he is rather dodgy. However, this time he cannot escape and is confronted with a series of precise questions: "Why are you doing this? Why, to what end, are you tearing your nation apart? Why are you inflicting these demands on your best friends and pretending we're your enemies? Why?" (McEwan 86). Questions lie at the core of critical thinking and of the ability to spot contradictions, instead of acquiescing to the cockroaches' "collective pheromonal unconscious" (McEwan 7). Jim is taken aback and casts about for words for a while. His thoughts can be better paraphrased by Ian McEwan who pins Brexit

motivations down by saying: “we are leaving because...because we said we would and because the people said they wanted it” (The Waterstones). The lampoon of Brexit reasons is perfectly engendered by the exchange between the German chancellor and the Prime Minister. According to Langenbacher, Germany and other countries could not understand the British expectations from Brexit (Langenbacher 72). Indeed, it was like “nailing a pudding to the wall” (Langenbacher 72), which is exactly what happens during the dialogue between Sams and the chancellor. After having been caught off balance, Jim solemnly replies that they are delivering Reversalism to become: “clean, green, prosperous, united, confident and ambitious” (McEwan 87). Were it not evident enough, the Brexit satire is further underlined by this barrage of adjectives, the same used by Boris Johnson during his mission statement (BBC News).

In the inventory of satiric techniques there is also burlesque, which tinges the satire with funny hues. The term derives from the Italian word ‘burlesco’ and is concerned with overstating or downplaying the importance of some issues (Gordon). Gordon makes a distinction between high and low burlesque, as the first one involves low matters which are considered of vital importance while the latter ridicules an extremely serious issue (Gordon). Personally, I reckon I have found two examples of high burlesque figuring in the plot. The first example deals with a political event which took place during the Brexit campaign, namely the aforementioned milkshake issue. Jim’s adviser expresses concern at the fact that an extreme Reversalist beheaded one Clockwiser and that a Reversalist was hit by a milkshake. Of course, it is evident that the two episodes have not the same gravity and that the first one is definitely more worrying than the latter. Nonetheless, Jim’s reply does not even consider the beheaded Clockwiser and jumps to the Reversalist’s stained clothes: “That was shocking,” the prime minister agreed. “His blazer had only just been cleaned” (McEwan 17). Another occurrence features during the summit of the European Union, called to discuss whether it is possible to invert the money flow or not. After various debates and even a physician explaining the second law of thermodynamics, the issue is quickly dismissed: “A fierce debate on Moldovan ice cream was pending” (McEwan 82). Even in this instance, a matter of vital importance from which depends the entire economic system of a member state is cast aside because of an issue of minor importance.

Scattered throughout the plot readers come across various literary sources. Many of them are high-brow sources, which strengthen the satire by adding literary echoes to profane situations. This is the perfect terrain to use another “of the satirist’s favourite

weapons” (Gordon), namely parody. Engaging an educated readership, parody involves the imitation of an author’s style, although it presents some differences from the original which result in an entertaining effect (Gordon). As highlighted by Gordon, parody displays no bitterness but it rather presents a tribute paid to an important author and his works (Gordon). The first literary item to be parodied can be spotted in the very first lines, namely *The Metamorphosis* by Kafka (Martiny). Indeed, *The Cockroach* opens with the description of Jim’s new body, which is definitely not to his tastes, similarly to Gregor Samsa’s disgust for his insect-like appearance. Furthermore, Jim Sams is a name echoing the main character of Kafka’s work. A review from the *London Magazine* even draws parallelisms between *The Cockroach* and Aesopian tales or George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (Martiny).

The review of the *New York Times* claims that literary references in *The Cockroach* are “plummy and tortured” (Garner). The references are certainly refined but not ‘tortured,’ since they are actually brilliant and always meaningful. For instance, a graphic satire alluding to Jim’s hesitation in embracing Reversalism clearly echoes Shakespeare: “Jim Sams as Shakespeare’s Gloucester, blinded, teetering on the chalk cliff’s edge while Edgar, a tough John Bull Reversalist, urged him to jump” (McEwan 31). Of course, in this case the reference is to *King Lear*, the famous tragedy concerned with power. However, there might be specific reasons which could have prompted McEwan to choose that particular tragedy work among all the prolific playwright’s plays. Presenting *The Cockroach* in an interview with Marco Damilano, the writer stated that power is often taken by undeserving people who are honoured by their position and do not honour it (L’Espresso). In harmony with this, he remembered a quotation from *King Lear* observing that even a dog will be respected, if in charge (L’Espresso). I reckon that the exact excerpt is the following one: “The great image of Authority: A dog’s obey’d in office” (Shakespeare 208). Therefore, the Shakespearean reference is very appropriate, as in this case an entire nation is trusting and respecting a cockroach which has taken office in Downing Street. Furthermore, the unsettled weather conditions happening after the approval on Reversalism could also be interpreted as another reference to a Shakespearean tragedy, namely *Macbeth*. Even in that case, after king Duncan’s murder nature is unhinged and unusual weather conditions ravage the countryside.

What really engrossed me was ‘Larkin,’ the name of the sunken British ship. It reminded me of Philip Larkin, the famous 20th century poet which was very influential also for Ian McEwan. In fact, he stated: “There are many writers of my age who are steeped in Larkin and, like me, incorporate the cadences of his lines, often without being aware of it.

His poems are part of my mental furniture” (Ash). He then goes on admitting that the poet has been very inspiring for his prose (Ash). Therefore, I decided to contact Ian McEwan to ask him whether the name of the boat was a reference to Larkin or not. He kindly replied that in the satire there are “some clues as to why the ship is named after the poet” (McEwan). As to my knowledge, I think I have retrieved the clues he was talking about. The most evident is to be traced in the fact that ‘Larkin’ is a name given to a trawler. Indeed, one of Larkin’s most famous volumes of poetry is entitled *The North Ship* (Sanders 613). Secondly, he lived most of his life in Hull, where he worked as a university librarian (Pollitt 250) and wrote his poems until his death in 1985 (Sanders 612). It suddenly dawned on me that Hull is mentioned twice in the satire, always with respect to the events surrounding the shipwreck of the Larkin and the funeral of the fishermen. Readers are informed that the trawlermen protesting in front of the French embassy “had travelled from Hull in buses laid on by the Reversalist Party” (McEwan 51) and grief was expressed by collecting flowers, teddy bears and other toys “In Hull and near HMS Belfast in London” (McEwan 63). Furthermore, during his life Philip Larkin was considered the other poet laureate of England (“Philip Larkin”) and was always under the limelight (much to his dismay!). Similarly, the diplomatic accident involving the Larkin is on every newspaper’s front page and outrages an entire nation, thanks to Jim’s mediatic skills. As far as other literary references are concerned, I noticed that in the first chapter the words “death rattle” (McEwan 19) were employed to define bipartisanship and I wondered whether they were a reference to D.H. Lawrence and his opinion of James Joyce’s and Dorothy Richardson’s writing style (Sanders 527). Having asked McEwan about this, he answered though that: “Death rattle’ does not allude to anything concerning Lawrence and Richardson” (McEwan).

Apart from high-brow sources, some reviews highlight a close relationship with a TV series entitled ‘The Thick of it’ (“*The Cockroach* Ian McEwan”). Recounting the events taking place at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Citizenship, the series has as a main character Malcolm Tucker, the bad-tempered Director of the Government’s communications. Watching the TV series, I spotted some similarities with the environment of *The Cockroach*. In the first place there is the bittersweet relationship with the press and the vital importance of keeping up appearances in front of the public opinion. In fact, the series is centred on the mistakes made by the Minister of Social Affairs and Citizenship and the plans hatched by Malcolm Tucker to paper over them. In fact, both Jim and the ministers of the series are desperately in search of popularity among citizens. Press and

mediatic attention are also taken advantage of though. Tucker himself is forced to resign and acknowledges that the press has been informed of his resignation before him. There are certainly some similarities with Simon's dismissal, as the fired adviser abandons Downing Street with journalists swarming around him. One interesting aspect is presented by leaks of secret information to important newspapers. Despite being illegal, in Malcolm Tucker's opinion leaks are fundamental to give the political opponents a hard time. Revealing that the fishing accident was not the French's fault, a leak is present even in *The Cockroach* and deeply disappoints Jim. Moreover, Tucker's opinion bears some similarities with Sams's view of breaking the pairing arrangement which is "a long and honourable tradition in the house" (McEwan 93). Apart from the bond between political world and information, a recurring feature is the presence of cockroaches, which in the series are used to nastily define journalists and political traitors. When one of his colleagues advises Tucker that one former colleague now employed by the opposition would like to climb the stairs to reach their office, Malcolm angrily asks him why he is bringing that to his attention: "When the queen's butler finds a cockroach in the pantry, he just stamps on it. She doesn't even know" (*The Thick of It*). As a matter of fact, the political world satirically depicted in 'The Thick of it' is a dog-eat-dog environment. Sams himself is a rather Machiavellian character determined to remain in charge.

Although he uses a vast range of sources and models, the writer draws the conclusion that "if I had to put my finger on a literary precedent I would say it was Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* in which the grotesque features strongly" (Dundas). This is certainly true, since the famous pamphlet written in 1729 takes the view that eating Irish children could be an effective solution to bolster the unstable Irish economy. As regards a possible juxtaposition between the Swift's satire and McEwan's novel, the most striking similarity is the theme of cannibalism. In *A Modest Proposal* the topic is brought up in some biting passages, where Swift's irony shows all its might. In *The Cockroach* cannibalism lies somewhat in the background of the whole narration but it pops up in some particular scenes. The absolute lack of grief for the death of the six trawlermen finds a spine-chilling explanation in the following excerpt: "The prime minister and his colleagues had grown up with death as a daily feature, with customary posthumous feasting as a hygienic necessity" (McEwan 38). Despite the theme figuring just occasionally in the whole plot, cannibalism is the note on which the satire ends. After having fulfilled their task and reacquired their beloved cockroach appearances, the former ministers and Jim abandon Downing Street to come home. Crossing the road on a red light, the former chancellor of the Duchy of

Lancaster is run over by a car and lies dead on the asphalt. "From under his shell, there was extruded a thick, off-white creamy substance, a much-loved delicacy" (McEwan 100). Therefore, the ex-ministers lift the corpse of their friend with the aim of bringing it with them and feeding on it, rather than celebrating his funeral.

Since Jim is not fazed by the prospect of devouring a member of his own species, the readers are not surprised to read his murderous thoughts about Benedict St John, the mastermind behind the scenes of the cabal. Far from portraying only its classic meaning, the satire presents a more subtle, metaphorical kind of murder. During the first encounter between Jim and Benedict, the Prime Minister blithely imagines his rival's "inexplicable death" (McEwan 37) and even chooses the song that will be played at his funeral. Nevertheless, he then realizes that it is clearly impossible for him to arrange his murder, but it dawns on him that "There were other, gentler forms of murder" (McEwan 70). As a result, he organizes a scandal overwhelming Benedict, who is completely innocent though. It would be useless to underline that murder features in the Swiftian satire as well, where the Projector even calculates the number of children which would be butchered to appear on the tables of "gentlemen of fortune" (Swift).

In *A Modest Proposal* the presence of animals, namely the Irish themselves who are treated like cattle, is extremely noticeable. In *The Cockroach* an insect is not only the main character, but also a powerful politician who takes important decisions and whose origins are shared by the ministers. Like Swift, McEwan uses animals to lampoon certain behaviours and political events. Apart from stating that his secretary reminds him of a stag beetle, Jim is enthused at the prospect of attending the PMQs, with which he seems to be already familiar: "the brilliant non sequitur replies, the festive jeers and clever imitations of sheep" (McEwan 10). Furthermore, the cockroach shows animal behaviours, although inhabiting a human body. Eyeballing is a frequent intimidatory signal used by predators to frighten other animals and scare them away. Since the opening of the Minister Cabinet, the readers are informed that Jim's "opening words were best preceded by silence and steady eye contact around the room" (McEwan 20). Far from being a gaze aimed at creating a solemn atmosphere, Jim's glare is rather frightening, as the reactions of the ministers prove: "None of them dared look at him directly" (McEwan 12) and "Humphrey Batton [...] found something of interest in his water glass" (McEwan 41).

Similar as they may be, it must be highlighted that *The Cockroach* involves other aspects which are not included in the Swiftian work. For instance, McEwan criticizes even the human body through the eyes of the cockroach. The insect is indeed disgusted by his

appearance and describes it painstakingly. Even in this case, the writer employs linguistic devices such as alliterations. Good examples thereof are: “thick pink stalk of neck” (McEwan 11) or “a slab of slippery meat, lay squat and wet” (McEwan 1). In the first phrase the repetition of “t” and “k” conveys the image of physicality, whereas sounds in “s” evoke the image of the tongue and its moistness. Apart from these funny descriptions of physical traits and characteristics, the satire overcomes the surface and cuts right to the chase by criticizing human intellect and emotions. As Jim confesses, it is not easy to be a Homo Sapiens, since very often their desires and intelligence end up clashing and engage a fight. Probably though, the heavier blow is dealt by the comment on human heart and its ‘skills’: “Jim was amazed at how it was possible to feel such joy and such hatred at the same time. A human heart, of which he was now in full possession, was a wondrous thing” (McEwan 43). Notwithstanding these numerous flaws, during his final speech to his cockroach-peers Jim admits that humans are not committed to the dark as cockroaches are. One would say, there’s still hope for the future.

Not content with presenting Jim, McEwan decides to portray other important characters, differently from Swift. Participating in the political scandal overwhelming St John, Jane Fish is indeed Jim’s right-hand woman and another example of ruthless person. Her character reinforces cockroach characteristics and keeps underlining them. Despite some reviews identifying traits of Theresa May in Jim Sams (Staunton), I reckon that Jane Fish might be similar to the politician, because of an introducing comment on her opinions regarding her past as a Clockwiser. Indeed, she had been against Reversalism during the campaign but then decided to support it so as to second the will of the people. The satiric bite is not late coming: “She was admired for speaking well for both” (McEwan 72). A similar change of heart was pointed out about May, since she had stood against Brexit and then embraced it after the referendum outcome (Langenbacher 71).

Among the criticisms delivered to *The Cockroach* in the review of *NB Magazine*, there is: “Perhaps he [McEwan] needed to add a decent politician (or butterfly), not taken over by egotistical inhuman greed, to win the day and make sure Britain was great again...” (Coughlan). As a matter of fact, and differently from Jane Fish and Jim, St John represents the proper, right behaviour, thus creating a fracture with the cockroaches and further satirizing their characteristics. Evidently enough, Fish and St John are like day and night, as the foreign minister is loyal, sincerely committed to his job and continually in pursuit of truth. Indeed, he is definitely a man honouring his position and not being raised by it, not to mention the fact that he is the only human among the ministers, as Jim resentfully

acknowledges: “Nothing there. Merely human” (McEwan 21). Funnily enough, in the whole work the word ‘satirical’ is used only once and it is referred to St John, the least satirical character: “Was Benedict being satirical?” (McEwan 36) Again, the cockroach loves using intimidatory glares to remark his superiority and power. Yet Benedict is never intimidated by Jim and never averts his gaze. Expressions concerning dialogues between the two always report Benedict’s steady gaze: “He paused and looked at the prime minister” (McEwan 39), “He was staring straight ahead” (McEwan 43), “He continued to stare steadily at Jim. It was disconcerting” (McEwan 79), “Benedict St. John didn’t even blink” (McEwan 80) and many others. Therefore, I posit the theory that such character is an optimistic hope for the future, representing the possibility to identify and fight future cockroaches.

In conclusion, Ian McEwan adopted various devices to convey the message of his satire and beautify it. Pasquinade, parody, burlesque and the skilful use of adjectives and themes are perfectly in line with the creative power of satire (Gordon) and its frankness. Belonging to the ancient satiric traditions, these devices can be used to enhance the effectiveness of satire and increase the pleasure of reading it. Apart from encompassing potential satiric butts, expressive means and tones, the present satire looks at the future as well. In fact, *The Cockroach* is future-oriented and concerned with the necessity of raising awareness. The satire presents readers with a cockroach which manages to reach its goals and deliver Reversalism – or Brexit. Notwithstanding this victory, it is not time to despair as the writer states that there are many other cockroaches to come and that they will take different forms (McEwan, *Lo scarafaggio* 108). Indeed, cockroaches and their spirit inhabit not only people in flesh and blood, but most importantly projects. If people learn the cockroach rhetoric and behaviour, they will be able to identify them and take action against them (McEwan, *Lo scarafaggio* 108). Strewing “magic dust” (McEwan, *Lo scarafaggio* 106), some cockroaches are already crawling on earth and obnubilating people’s critical-thinking skills. Examples thereof — such as the wall at the Mexican border in the USA and the treatment of the Amazon rainforest in Brasil — are provided by the author (McEwan, *Lo scarafaggio* 106). Therefore, apart from Brexit the author stresses other current issues with the aim of spurring fruitful reflections, which could hone the readers’ attention and critical sense. Although it is frequently argued that satire fails to spur changes, the genre is necessary to keep people “mentally awake” (Dundas) especially as far as politics is concerned. Politics is indeed of vital importance and can change people’s lives – McEwan himself stated that only a good government can help us to

overcome the pandemic of COVID-19 and protect the environment (McEwan). “Mockery [...] is hardly a solution” (Cain) — admits the author, but now more than ever it can make the difference in our future. By reading *The Cockorach*, people – be they British or from other countries – have the possibility to understand how some political projects unravel and McEwan’s perspective on Brexit. The fact that the novella makes reference to a recent, controversial political event adds reality to satire’s reflections and is fascinating for readers.

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