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Offer a critical commentary which compares and contrasts TWO (2) of the following passages. [Passages 7 and 9]

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The extracts from Julian Barnes' *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* and Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs* are related by their postmodern ideas about the construction of history and memory, and the fabulations we make to fill in the gaps. Where the *History* passage hybridizes genre to undermine various authorities, McEwan's passage creates doubt through its unreliable narrative voice.

One striking initial observation of Barnes' passage is that it is written in the genre of non-fiction. It takes place in the chapter 'Three Simple Stories', which can be read as a microcosm of the novel as a whole, and is narrated by a non-fictious voice, possibly Barnes himself. The passage includes real historical people such as James Bartley and M. de Parville, with real dates, quotes and events. This creates an immediate tension for the passage, as the reader must be somewhat doubtful of its authority. The reader knows that the paratext of the passage means that these 'facts' don't necessarily have to be true: Julian Barnes has not written a peer-reviewed essay in a historical journal, but a novel. Novels tell lies; nevertheless, Barnes has written a text which, although he may not call it "truth", shows great care given to researching historical fact. By introducing this strange ambivalence, Barnes establishes the central aim of the passage: to undermine the various discourses of authority.

Barnes pits competing authorities against one another. The scientific editor in 1914 who claims Bartley's case to be 'worthy of belief' is refuted by modern scientists, who the narrator in turn questions: 'Do we believe modern scientists, none of whom has actually been inside a whale's belly?'[1] Thus, Barnes calls into question the nature of scientific research as

an ongoing, fallible process: just as scientists in 1914 didn't have the monopoly on what is true, nor do scientists of today. Barnes undermines the authority of scientists by claiming 'Many people (including me) believe the myth of Bartley, just as millions have believed the myth of Jonah.' One can ask, given the generic hybridity of the novel, whether Barnes' self-referentiality here can even be considered metafiction. This aside further calls even the authority of the narrator/author into question, showing that authors too are not monolithic figures, but fallible like everyone else.

The passage sets up a Biblical fable alongside a more modern myth, and through its formal intricacies, Barnes has disrupted the reader's sense of certainty of what is real.

> 'You may not credit it, but what has happened is that the story has been retold, adjusted, updated; it has shuffled nearer. For Jonah now read Bartley. And one day there will be a case, one which even you will believe, of a sailor lost in a whale's mouth and recovered from its belly; maybe not after half a day, perhaps after only half an hour.'

Here, Barnes admits that belief in what is true does not work based on evidence, but how the facts can be 'shuffled nearer' to reality so that it is enough that they *seem* true – essentially, verisimilitude, or suspension of disbelief - suggesting that historical truth works on the same basic principles as narrative truth. Barnes redefines history as fabulation: simply a personal choice about whether to believe or not, raising the postmodern question of how much we can ever truly know the past. This idea reverberates throughout the novel. In 'The Survivor', there is a fabulation of an alternate history of nuclear catastrophe, as Kathleen avoids dealing with her own personal stress. 'The Stowaway' is an update of the story of Noah's Ark, 'shuffled nearer' by a more ironic view on Noah and God, and because of its rootings in modern day atrocities. And prior to the passage, in 'Three Simple Stories', a survivor of the Titanic boards a facsimile of the Titanic as an extra, in a modern retelling of the event. The novel manifests fabulation as a rational, if not legitimate, way of interpreting events, that it is a version of the

truth, and in turn, acknowledges the absurdity of placing history within any historiographical metanarrative.

By comparing the striking similarities of two events centuries apart, Barnes shows that history is neither narratively progressive nor emancipatory, but cyclical, repetitive, episodic. The central tension which the novel's title ironizes is that history cannot be fit into any novelistic structure, because it is too unwieldy; it lacks meaning other than itself; it can never be narrativized. This explains the constant need for the novel to keep reinventing itself and changing forms, as it reckons with the intangibility and impossibility of its task.

In the *Black Dogs* passage, fabulations are created by the unreliable narrative voice. The truth of June's encounter is distorted by a host of different factors: firstly, by the decades since it happened; secondly, by Jeremy's self-conscious retelling of it as a memoir; and thirdly, by the fact that this information is given to Jeremy by Bernard rather than June.[2] The truth of the event is thus distorted by layers of partiality, which manifests in the passage as ambiguity about the size of the dogs: at first they are the size of 'mythical beasts', and then 'giant mastiffs'; and June considers that there 'was no use for dogs the size of donkeys', which raises the question of whether they were even there at all. Like Barnes' novel, this passage is concerned with the fallibility of historical accounts – this time personal history, or memory. The passage is the result of several attempts to reconstruct the event, as Jeremy takes on the voice of June and presumes to know her experience ('She felt weak and sick with fear'), which introduces again the question of whether we can really know the past.

June is more concerned with the messages and meanings behind the dogs than the dogs themselves. Even as she stands in the scene, she thinks of it as a 'tableau', connoting a representation of history – the narrative voice gifts her the ability to predict the effect the event will already have on her. The black dogs are an 'allegory for her decipherment alone', the 'emblems of the menace she had felt,' the 'embodiment of the nameless, unreasonable,

[2] Seyed Javad Habibi, 'Confabulation of Things Past in Ian McEwan's Black Dogs', *The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies* 20:1 (2014), 101-114.

unmentionable disquiet', evoking a Lovecraftian quality. They are defined by what they are not: they are *black* dogs - merely a shadowy form. The concern with meaning centres the narrative around June's own partial subjectivity, bringing doubt to the truth of the event, and bolstered by the fact that Bernard never sees them. The metaphor the black dogs conjure, itself rooted in classical mythology and medieval folklore, adds doubt to the legitimacy of June's memory. Both collective memory, or history, in Barnes' novel, and individual psychological memory in *Black Dogs* are marred by fabulations and myths, in the determination of the human collective and individual to have the past make sense in a meaningful, narratological way.

The passage sits at the back of the novel, and yet describes an event which has a defining impact on the rest of June's life. The 'syuzhet' thus contorts, so as to leave this formative event until the end, where it waits for the reader, as its own metatextual haunting. The black dogs metaphor can be read as a refutation of Barnes' postmodern deconstruction, as the scene marks the point at which June rediscovers God, restoring her own sense of an historical metanarrative. In light of this, the admission that 'What she feared more than the presence of the dogs was the possibility of their absence, of their not existing at all' can be read firstly as her fear of madness (further obscuring the possibility of true knowledge of the past); and secondly that what frightens June is not the possibility of a malign force in human affairs existing, but the possibility that it doesn't. June prefers a world guided by morality and religion, rather than Bernard's and Barnes' inscrutable, postmodern one, even if this means the presence of evil. Both novels, then, interact with postmodern sensibilities of incredulity towards metanarratives; at the same time, however, both leave open the possibility that one may exist. Barnes offers up a reconstructive view of history as determined by love in the half-chapter 'Parenthesis'; June's metanarrative, on the other hand, manifests as a destructive evil.

In conclusion, the form of both passages enact the content, through McEwan's contortions of chronology and narrative voice to show the unreliability of memory, and through Barnes' genre hybridity to undermine the discourses of authority on history. Both McEwan and

Barnes see history and memory as indistinguishable from fabrication, and both novels enact that fabrication through their form – *Black Dogs* is written as a memoir-novel, while *A History of the World* hybridizes genre, freely combining fiction with non-fiction.

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