

Original Paper

The Narrative Agency of Matter in *Small Things Like These*

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Abstract

Ecological Postmodernism and New Materialism have driven the material turn of ecological criticism, making material an important critical springboard for studying novel texts. Scholars, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann were inspired to propose the concept of “narrative agency of matter”, which propelled the development of Material Ecocriticism. Material Ecocriticism (2014), a collection of papers co-edited by them, is a representative work in the theoretical construction of Material Ecocriticism. Small Things Like These is the second novella written by Irish modern writer Claire Keegan, which has won important literary awards upon its publication. Material Ecocriticism. Keegan resorts to “snow” and “coal” to integrate Irish traumatic history into her fictional imagination, telling a trivial but touching story. In this novel, “snow” and “coal” exist as images with discourse power, playing a crucial role in the construction of the entire story. The paper will focus on interpreting the narrative agency of these two materials, and will further explore Keegan’s unique writing style.

Keywords

small things like these, material ecocriticism, claire keegan, narrative agency of matter

1. Introduction

Material Ecocriticism takes postmodernism and new materialism as theoretical foundations, advocating the dissolution of anthropocentrism, which is the fourth wave of Ecocriticism. Material Ecocriticism holds that all human and non-human materials have the agency, breaking down the boundaries between humans and matter, culture and nature. It vastly enriched people’s understanding of the relationship between the human cultural world and the material world.

Material Ecocriticism embodies “material turn” in Ecocriticism, acting a correction of the “cultural turn” which had dominated the West since the 1970s that emphasized language, discourse, culture, and values. Western narrative scholar David Herman proposed the concept of “narrative beyond the human”. He argued that narratology has placed too much emphasis on human narrative roles over the years,

often neglecting the narrative role of non-human material objects. There is thus an urgent need to place organic and inorganic life, such as plants and animals, at the center of the narrative, which can shed light on the narrative structures and storytelling methods concerning “how we view our relationships with and responsibilities to other-than-human agents and communities” (Herman, 2018, p. 22).

In 2012, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann published “Theorizing Material Ecocriticism: A Diptych”, a milestone article that describes the basic premises for an ecocritical engagement with materiality. They state,

“Unlike the linguistic turn that placed a concerted emphasis on linguistic constructions of the world, the new materialist paradigm is premised on the integral ways of thinking language and reality, discourse and matter together...Material practices physical forces in natural and social life spaces) are always co-extensive with discursive practices”.

(Iovino and Oppermann, 2012, p. 462)

They two diligently delved into the handling of these issues, then outlined the propositions of Material Ecocriticism: “the world’s material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be read and interpreted as forming narratives, stories” (Iovino and Oppermann, 2014, p. 1). Narrative agency of matter is the core concept of Material Ecocriticism, which implies the integration of material and discursive aspects of matter, as well as the interpretation of its dynamic changes and social discourse. In other words, narrative ability is no longer exclusive to humans, but rather a fundamental attribute of all materials, including non-human nature, thus refuting the argument that humans are superior to non-human nature. All matter is a story matter, and the intra-action among matter drives the composition and change of the world (Iovino and Oppermann, 2014, pp. 1-2).

Matter is a non-negligible text. The “material turn” that began in the 1990s made material an critical springboard for studying novel texts. Literature acts a representative platform for the reproduction of narrative agency of matter. It has “symbolically expressed the fundamental interconnectedness between culture and nature” (Zapf, 2014, p. 57).

The ideas put forth by Iovino and Oppermann are the fundamental theoretical assumptions on which this paper rests, as they help elucidate how material realities merge into discursive dynamics and prompt readers to intentionally trace the signs of new configurations. Claire Keegan (1968-) is a highly popular novelist in Ireland in recent years. She managed to win major literary awards for her outstanding works, which include such as *Antarctica* (1999), *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007), and *Foster* (2010). Keegan is skilled at creating novels in a concise and stern style. Most of her works focus on the daily lives of ordinary Irish people, delving deep into the complex and hidden sorrows deep inside the hearts of ordinary people and aiming to depict dramatic conflicts in daily life from multiple dimensions. However, in terms of expressing themes, she often keeps readers in suspense and uses some certain materials to present the themes, leaving readers with infinite space for thinking. *Small Things Like These* is no exception. Given the Chinese academic community does not pay enough attention to her

work, this paper chooses this novel to be the object, aiming to analyze the narrative agency of “snow” and “coal” and to further reveal the collective trauma and moral dilemma rooted in Irish history in *Small Things Like These*.

2. Narrative Agency of Matter in *Small Things Like These*

Small Things Like These tells the story of Bill Furlong, a coal and timber merchant living in a small town in Ireland, during the busiest season in the weeks leading up to Christmas in 1985. While delivering orders to customers, he accidentally discovers the secrets kept by the town’s convent and learns about some unexpected truths about his own life. Faced with the truth that the church keeps on a tight rein with social life and the silence and inaction of people around him, Furlong ultimately finds himself in a moral dilemma. In *Small Things Like These*, Keegan focuses on depicting the environment in the town of New Ross, using succinct utterance that allows readers to immerse themselves in it. She accurately captures the contradiction between warmth and repression in the small town through real-life scenes, presenting landscapes such as damp streets, rampant crows, swirling smoke from cooking fires, and dense fog. In fact, the dialogue and behavior of people in the book are no longer the center of the story. Keegan has entrusted the narrative agency of the story to natural materials, and the portrayal of the environment is not plain. These images create a secluded and mournful atmosphere and seem to be calling for something, pushing people to tear apart the warm illusion of the town and follow Furlong to unmask the truth.

The images of “snow” and “coal” appear multiple times in the novel. They are no longer just the background of the story, but enjoy the discourse power and play a key role in the construction of the entire story. Therefore, it is crucial to interpret the narrative agency of “snow” and “coal” based on the text.

2.1 The Narrative Agency of Snow

The winter in Ireland is characterized by less sunlight, heavy rain, strong winds and snow, reflecting the gloomy and restrained national background of Ireland. Winter sets the seasonal tone of Irish literature. The snow is white, light and it owns varied shapes, producing unique visual and ecological effects in nature. In previous Irish novels, snow often becomes a carrier of death and loneliness. However, in *Small Things Like These*, Keegan endows snow with a positive connotation of calling out humanity in the extreme cold. The cold air condenses in December, and the icy white snow is about to drift towards the town of New Rose during the week of Christmas, as if a force is about to erupt from a corner of Ireland. In the winter of 1985, Furlong witnesses the falling snow and also realizes the coldness of human nature. “The ordinary part of him” (Keegan, 2021, p. 59) and “the best bit of him” (Keegan, 2021, p. 108) are constantly in conflict, whether to choose to ignore and maintain the seemingly peaceful status quo like other people or to fall down just like rain and snow, washing away the dark reality. Furlong is caught in a moral dilemma.

Snow is silent, with various forms. It welcomes the beginning of all things and resolves the end of the living. Joyce ends the 15 stories in *Dubliners* with a fair snow that falls on all the living and dead in “The Dead”. *Small Things Like These*, Keegan also loads “snow” with significant thematic connotations. On Christmas Eve, Furlong has dinner with other fellow coal workers, “When he went out, it was snowing. White flakes were coming down out of the sky and landing on the town and all around” (Keegan, 2021, p. 96). Furlong watches “the river flowing dark alone, drinking the snow” (Keegan, 2021, p. 96), and swindles at different shops. During his walk, recalling Mrs. Wilson’s redemption and Ned’s warm companionship, he has a mix of thoughts. “The snow was still coming down, although timidly, dropping from the sky on all that was there” (Keegan, 2021, p. 101). This is an extremely subtle expression of character emotions, reminiscent of “snow was generally all over the Ireland” in “The Dead” (Joyce, 1957, p. 220). Joyce uses the snow that covers the plains and hills and falls into swamps and undercurrents to perfectly reflect the coolness and melancholy of Dubliners. While the snow in *Small Things Like These* brings solace and empowers Furlong. At the end of the novel, Furlong and Sarah carry on along and meet an entourage of people judging them, Furlong does not assure whether he has done the right thing, but he keeps asking himself:

“Was there any point in being alive without helping one another? Was it possible to carry on along through all the years, the decades, through an entire life, without once being brave enough to go against what was there and yet call yourself a Christian, and face yourself in the mirror?” (Keegan, 2021, p. 108)

After rescuing the girl Sarah, Furlong gets a sense of lightness in his heart, feeling “some fresh, new, unrecognizable joy in his heart” (Keegan, 2021, p. 108). The cold winter snow drifts through every corner of Ireland, intersecting with streams and rivers, meeting with mountains and fields, listening to the life that lingers in the world, witnessing the dissipation of all things. The snow not only refers to the cold and suppressed individual emotions of Furlong, but also falls into the broader Irish national environment. The cold reality has aroused the Irish people’s awareness and triggered the profound call for human goodness and human bravery.

2.2 The Narrative Agency of Coal

Another image that can’t be overlooked in *Small Things Like These* is “coal”. The coal depicted by Keegan is no longer an inanimate object. Coal, as the most frequently encountered substance in Furlong’s daily life, has long been embedded in his life memory. And as the story unfolds, the image of coal is endowed with multi-faceted symbolic meanings. As a window, “coal” introduces the power system surrounding Furlong. Due to the need to transport coal and firewood to various places, Furlong has witnessed “many unfortunate tragedies around town and out of the country roads” (Keegan, 2021, p. 12). He nearly sees all kinds of things in the world, and understands that “it would be the easiest thing in the world to lose everything” (Keegan, 2021, p. 12). Therefore, he lives cautiously, and protecting what he has owned is his greatest hope in life.

Coal functions not just a livelihood for the lower classes, it can bring warmth to those in dire straits during the severe winter. The traits of things also point to the quality of people, and attributes like “coal” vaguely imply that Furlong’s life will undergo some changes. Although born into a tragic family, due to the kindness and teachings of Mrs. Wilson and Ned, Furlong is kind and down-to-earth, diligently earning a living with his own hands. His work is arduous, with only one day off per week. Due to dealing with coal, his face and nail crevices are often dyed black by coal ash. However, he always washes his hands carefully after work and then spends time with his family peacefully, not letting his fatigue and emotions affecting his daughters. Later, due to Furlong’s delivery of coal to the convent, he accidentally witnesses “more than a dozen young women and girls, down on their hands and knees.....not one of them with shoes.....one girl had an ugly style in her eyes, and another’s hair had been rough cut” (Keegan, 2021, p. 41). At the same time, a girl with a very sincere attitude begs him to take her away from the convent. Furlong realizes that the town’s discussions about the convent are very likely true. Although shocked and angry, he instinctively flinches. After a while, Furlong accidentally sees the trapped girl, Sarah, in the coal shed, and on the way back to the convent with her, He “shot the torch on her feet, saw the long toenails, black from the coal” (Keegan, 2021, p. 60). He learns about the girl’s tragic experience through the conversation along the way. When he meets the Mother Superior at the convent, he initially “stepped back” (Keegan, 2021, p. 63). When he returns home, he finds the hush money put in the envelope. Furlong “twisted up the envelope and threw it in the scene” (Keegan, 2021, p. 74). Best as he could he scrubbed his nails, trying to get the black out from under them” (Keegan, 2021, p. 75). Furlong absentmindedly attends Mass, feeling only a sense of emptiness and dread. Readers can see the inner torment and contradiction in Furlong’s heart. The indelible coal ash is like an indelible memory. All these appalling facts have brought Furlong to the realization that he can no longer stand by and do nothing.

3. The Contrast between Coal and Snow

Oppermann defines narrative agency as “a nonlinguistic performance of matter manifesting itself often in expressive collectives” (Oppermann, 2014, p. 30), which implies matter often manifests itself in interaction with other matter. It is true of *Small Things Like These*. On the surface, “coal” and “snow” seem vastly different, one cold and one hot, one white and one black. In fact, the contrast of the two creates tension in the narrative of the novel, dialectically highlighting the theme of the novel. The snowflakes dance with the cinder in the whirling air. This contrast between black and white mirrors the entire power structure: the heat of the coal melts the coldness of the snow, while the weight of the snow crushes the solidified class that the coal implies. As Christmas carols echo through the church dome, lives deliberately forgotten by society are imprisoned within the coal smoke blackened walls of the monastery. The crackling sound of coal burning in the fireplace is turned into the sobbing of a silent

woman curled up in the cellar. The dust seeps into the snowbank, and this slight filth reveals the greater filth, namely the sanctimony of monasteries.

The boundary between things and people becomes blurred, and coal and snow begin to bear some spiritual significance of the humans. The snowstorm calls for a new beginning, using purity and bravery to fight against the unbearable apathy and darkness. The bravery of human nature in *Small Things Like These* is just like a snowstorm that arrives as scheduled, implying that the power system of darkness has been replaced, and all things have ushered in a brand-new world. Furlong becomes gradually aware of the cruel practices of the convent's oppression of lower-class women. The hypocrisy of the Mother Superior's "Where's there muck, there's luck" (Keegan, 2021, p. 64) and the lingering questioning of inner conscience makes Furlong increasingly eager to make a change. At the end of the novel, in a tremor of moral awakening, Furlong finally pushes open the forbidden door and decides to "burn" the silent conspiracy of the local people just like "coal". He bravely saves those women who are deeply trapped in suffering and prevents them from silently disappearing in the inhumane darkness.

4. Conclusions

Small Things Like These is a novel rife with connotations, focusing on the bystanders of traumatic history and revealing the complexity of human nature. From the perspective of Material Ecocriticism, Keegan uses the binary discourse system of "snow" and "coal" to tear open the moral predicament in the gap between industrial civilization and natural ecology. The white winter snow is both a holy covering layer and a metaphor for collective silence, while the ashes of burning coal become the catalyst for moral awakening, peeling off the hypocritical veil of this Irish town layer by layer.

Keegan successfully presents the controversy and dilemma of Furlong and the cruel sufferings that women face in the 20th century via the "utterance" made by "snow" and "coal". She infuses tension into every detail, from the winter snow to the overflowing crows, Christmas cakes, and sparse conversations. She successfully implants a chilling ecological allegory in the religious atmosphere of the Christmas season, deconstructing the divine space into a focus of ethical criticism.

Keegan's restrained writing style allows the semantic blanks in the sparse dialogue to form intertextuality with the snow blackened by coal ash. The novel completes an ecological diagnosis of the spiritual wasteland of Ireland in the 20th century between the burning fireplace and the frozen conscience. Keegan uses succinct language to stir up ripples of seemingly peaceful life and gradually reveal the atrocious truth subtly, which fully demonstrates the narrative agency hidden in non-human material.

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