

THE ENGLISH NOVEL: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

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Lecture 35

Atonement: Background (Author and Context)

Hello Students,

I am here to discuss *Atonement*, one of the best novels written by Mac Ewan in 2001. The novel *Atonement* opens with a description of what it's like to invent a world. McEwan says, "You had only to write it down and you could have the world."

Well, Briony Tallis a 13-year-old girl, is enthralled by the power of storytelling. The background of the novel hovers around this. She has written a little play for her family. She has also designed posters, programs and tickets, constructed the sales booth out of a folding screen, tipped on its side and lined the collection box in red crepe paper.

The study unfolds from three central scenes. In the first, Briony observes Cecilia and Robbie in a lover's tryst. Briony observing unseen from a window, is 13 years old, naive and innocent, but with enough knowledge to understand that she is watching a love affair. The second scene involves a love letter from Robbie to Cecilia. Robbie makes Briony his messenger but she betrays him, opening the letter and reading it. Briony mistakes Robbie's word as an attack on her sister. In the third scene, Briony's cousin Lola is raped. Briony sees only the attacker's back but tells police and letter the court that the attacker was Robbie. Her motive is to protect her sister. But she is responsible for destroying her sister's love and convicting an innocent man. She spends the rest of her life atoning for her crime.

Every aspect of production of the seven-page drama written by her in a two-day tempest of composition fiercely belongs to her and McEwan hovers over her levers like God dictating the Genesis story. It's easy to forget the beginning of a novel that become famous in part for its tablecloth-pulling ending. However, *Atonement* has the power to send you scurrying back to its first pages once you finish, ready to play whack a mole with its wiggly circularity. It's a book about misinterpretations that Macron expects to be misinterpreted until its very last pages, when we find out that the entire book we have just read is the sixth

draft of a novel by a much older, quite successful Briony, making her both the unreliable narrator and the unreliable author.

One of the main ideas of this novel is contained in its title, *Atonement*. Briony is young, misguided, and naive at the beginning of McEwan's novel. This leads to her misperception about what occurs between Cecilia and Robbie. She is not malicious in sending Robbie to prison as she truly believes she is protecting Cecilia and other women from Robbie. This is also impacted by how Briony sees gender. She sees men as capable of dominating women. The novel is called *Atonement* because Briony spends the rest of her life trying to atone for what she has done.

She becomes a nurse instead of going to Cambridge as a way of giving back. She also constructs an entire story that gives Cecilia and Robbie the happy ending that she has robbed them of in real life. In this story, Briony apologizes and makes things right in a way she was never able to, in real life. In between, a plot is born of Austen and Richardson that swifts through the long 19th century of realist sagas, wiggles into modernism and ends on a postmodern questioning of the worth of the novel itself. It's a feat of pastiche that transcends pastiche. It preserves the intoxication of narrative fiction while admitting that it's farce. Critics and book buyers agreed that it is a masterpiece.

Atonement became one of the first additions to the 21st century canon after its publication in the U.K. 20 years ago, with a quarter million copies going into print in the U.S. alone before it won the National Books Critics Circle Award in 2003. When McEwan handed the *Atonement* manuscript, he informed his editor that they'd be lucky to sell 10,000 copies because it's really a book for other writers about reading and writing. His editor told him it would sell in huge numbers "because it's got the three elements that make it a must: A Country House, The Second World War, A Love Affair". It's now sold over 2 million copies worldwide.

Academicians wrote papers about it with hazy titles like "The Rhetoric of Intermediality" and "Briony's Being Forever". It was also made into a 2007 movie starring period piece queen Keira Knightley and directed by Joe Wright, fresh off his debut *Pride and Prejudice* remake. Readers still gush and whine on book forums and reading sites about that witchy ending. The plot of the novel is borrowed from romance and the memoir from *No Times of Mrs. A. Rudolph*. In an article in Mail on Sunday, Julia Langdon directly charges McEwan of plagiarism in *Atonement*.

It was the article on the similarities between McEwan's *Atonement* and Lucia Andrews' *No Time for Romance* in which Julia claims the plagiarism, but took it differently and suggests it is not in dialogue with Andrews' information. Rose Tremain rightly pointed out McEwan's ability to transform the source material into something singular and new. The debate has been giving on the phrases of Andrews' E-code in *Atonement*, but captures the attention of the reader that how the novelist uses historical material. In the novel, McEwan inserts Briony and her point of view, and the part three of the novel could not be possible without Andrew's work. It means that McEwan's novel relies on Andrew's in a different way.

Atonement is a story of how a young girl's desire to be an adult, in addition to a vivid imagination, leads to make a partially innocent mistake that has devastating consequences. The novel explores the distinction between childhood and adulthood, the nature of perspective, The pull of regret and perhaps most explicitly the power of storytelling. The theme is clear from the structure of the novel as a work of metafiction referring to the fictional nature of the narrative. Most of the part of the novel is told from a third-person point of view, with Part 1 switching between the perspectives of various members of the Talis, Quincey, and Turner families. Part 2 is told entirely from Robbie's perspective. Part 3 told entirely from Briony's perspective. Only in the epilogue, it is revealed that the book up to the point has been Briony's final novel, her attempt to atone for the consequences of her childish mistake, to read the story of Cecilia and Robbie and become invested in their fates, only to learn that they never had a happy ending, drives home how powerful stories can be.

In 13 years, Briony is on the cusps between childhood and adolescence and feels that she is ready for adulthood. This feeling intensifies during the inciting incident in the novel when she sees Cecilia and Robbie by the fountain. Watching their interaction causes Briony to realize there are situations she cannot fully understand. This realization frustrates Briony but she understands that this can be useful to inspire her writing. Though she sees Robbie as a threat, she views him and her sister more as characters in a story than actual people.

Briony's reaction shows how the nature of perspective can influence the way one sees reality, a theme that is integral to the plot. Her reaction also shows Briony's naivety despite her desire to be an adult, as well as how she sees the world through the lens of a story. Not only does this incident incite Briony to begin thinking in a new way, but the moment also alters the relationship between Cecilia and Robbie. Though they have known each other

since childhood, Robbie realizes, he is in love with Cecilia and writes her a letter that will change their fates forever.

The rising action occurs when Robbie gives Briony the wrong version of his letter, literally putting her between him and Cecilia. The note only confirms for Briony what she had suspected after seeing him with her sister by the fountain that Robbie poses a danger to Cecilia. Upon telling Lola what the note said, Lola confirms that Robbie must be a maniac. Though Lola attempts to behave and dress like an adult, her reaction, like Briony's, shows that she is still innocent in adult matters. In this way, the novel uses understanding of sexuality as what separates children from adults.

The action continues to rise when Cecilia and Robbie admit their feelings for each other and make love in the library only to be walked in on by Briony. While Briony believes she has just saved her sister from an assault, Cecilia and Robbie are frustrated by her interruption. Again, this scene shows how a person's individual perspective and assumption can shape what they perceive to be objective reality. Due to these assumptions, no one is aware of the real threat that is foreshadowed. Lola blames her scratches and bruises on the twins. Even Emily wonders how young boys could be capable of such a strength, while Paul blamed his own scratch on breaking up the fight. Due to Paul's wealth and background, no one suspects that he could be the true danger. Briony's revelation at the end that she has reshaped this story to her whims, turns her into a kind of God, master of all narratives and shaper of faiths. It leaves us, her pawns, delighted little fools pulled along on a con. *Atonement* is, as the title asserts, Briony's apology to the people whose life she has used to populate her story. But it is also her masterpiece proof that her regrets won't stop her from plundering one last time. Its ending reminds readers that fiction without misinterpretation is impossible.

Atonement's first three parts are told from multiple points of view, including that of Briony—the youngest of three siblings. The first and longest section is set in 1935 over the course of one roasting hot day and night at the Tallis, family's grand country home in the Surrey Hills. Precocious Briony has a passion for tidiness of all kinds. The darling of the family, her writing has been praised and encouraged to excess. Her older sister, Cecilia, a restless recent graduate of the ladies' college at Cambridge, is working through a newfound sex-tinged awkwardness with Robbie Turner. Their sure lady son and her childhood playmate, like any good mother and father in a coming-of-age novel, the Tallis' parents are a scant presence. When Briony sees Cecilia and Robbie arguing by the fountain under her bedroom

window, she imagines their quarrel, which is really over a broken heirloom vase, into her own (mis)understanding of how narrative works.

Cecilia is the victim. Robbie the dastardly villain. Later in that evening, she'll misunderstand twice. First, she sneakily opens a letter from Robbie to Cecilia that ends with the line, "In my dreams I kiss your cunt, your sweet we cunt". She determines he is a maniac and later, when she walks in on them screwing in the family's library immediately assumes Robbie is raping her sister letter out search the grounds for her visiting relatives. She makes out two figures in the tall grass, one backing away from her and beginning to fade, the other a frantic, dissolved Lola, her 15-year-old cousin. The next two sections are set five years in the future, in 1940, as Europe steps into war. We first follow Robbie released from prison to serve in the military as he walks 25 miles towards the beach at Dunkirk determined to return home, to Cecilia despite the sharp nail lost just below his heart.

The next part returns to London, and to Briony, now 18, training as a war nurse and drafting two figures by a fountain. A novella in impressions, based on the argument between Cecilia and Robbie that she saw from her bedroom window. Now, wise to her own self-delusion and exhausted by guilt, she visits Cecilia to recant her accusation and sees her sister reunited with Robbie, who insist that Briony do everything in her power to clear his name. Until now, a lovely, straightforward British wartime novel, full of wispy, silky chiffon skirts and the budge of RAF but then comes the coda.

Leaping forward to 1999, we meet 77-year-old Briony as an established novelist, finishing up what will be her final manuscript. The novel we have just read, made of her memories, altered and reframed. She explained that Cecilia and Robbie really died in the Blitz and Dunkirk's respectively. "But how could that constitute an ending", Briony asked. What sense of hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Distance and six full drops have allowed her to riff. In the third section, as an 18-year-old, writer Briony receives a helpful rejection letter from real life, as in actually real-life magazine editor Cyril Connolly. He praises *Two figures by a Fountain* as 'arresting', though her style "owed a little too much to the techniques of Mrs. Woolf".

He reminds her to think of her readers. They retain a childlike desire to be told a story, to be held in suspense, to know what happens. Those last two phrases are diametrical, of course, when encapsulates the experiment of *Atonement* itself. In Postmodernist fiction, the ontological landscapes projected by the characters are never fixed or static. Reality is

seen as a social construct which is shaped by the characters' behavior, their utterances and interactions with other characters and their system of beliefs and ideologies among others. For postmodernist writers, reality can never be read on a surface level. On the contrary, when a reader interprets a literary text, he or she is also embarking on the challenging task of unveiling both the linguistic role that each character performs, the impact of their linguistic samples and the implications of their ontological worlds with respect to other character. However, in Postmodernist fiction, this is not easily attained due to the fact that events do not follow a linear sequence. There is total rejection of any fixed rule. In *Atonement*, novelist Ian McEwan makes use of literary device known as Chinese boxes, which defines the masterpiece as Postmodernist by including a fictional world within another bigger fictional world, which is the novel itself. This post-modern, one-two punch knocked readers while even the most formidable reviewers adored *Atonement* genius, calling it a tour de force and a beautiful and majestic fictional panorama. What criticism they did have was reserved for its last pages.

James Wood, then ascendant at the New Republic considered it McEwan's finest and most complex novel, while declaring the twist ending unnecessary and decrying its neatness. *The Sunday Telegraph* declared it frustrating and Anita Bruckner questioned its wisdom. Hermione Lee in *The Guardian* called it a quite familiar fictional trick. The general public is still at war with itself over how they feel. *The Washington Post* reported on a reader-generated list of literature's all-time most disappointing endings. *Atonement* was ranked second, just after *Romeo and Juliet*. While the trick at the end is the big reveal, the more rewarding aspect is the knowledge that hints about *Atonement's* meticulous construction are hidden along the way.

On a first reading, McEwan's breadcrumb trail is barely visible, but on the second, it's practically day glow. The ending is not a feather in the novel's cap, tacked on unnecessarily as some critics lamented. It is the novel's reason for being. The little girl whose play once crumbled into a mire of familial infighting pulls off an incredible caper. She is both offered a lengthy apology and finally written the ravishing novel that she once imagined. Just minutes after watching that argument between Cecilia and Robbie by the fountain, she senses she could write a scene like the one by the fountain and she could include a hidden observer like herself. She could imagine herself hurrying down now to her bedroom to a clean block of lined paper and her marbled bakelite pen. Briony knows that her novel won't be published until after her death or incapacitation. She won't experience censure or scandal perhaps the most subversive thing about *Atonement* is that its narrator is not hobbled by

the weight of her guilt. Instead, she is victorious. She was under no obligation to the truth. She has promised no one a chronicle. There is no denying that novelist Ian McEwan is a master storyteller and nowhere is his skill more evident than in the novel. *Atonement* an expansive, complex and ambitious novel is in three acts. The author employs a range of narrative technique, including shifts in perspective and the use of different narrators to tell the story.

Atonement is set between three time periods, first in England in 1935, during the Second World War in England and France 1939 and 1945, England in 1999. Before the book even starts, the reader is given a romantic novel quote, something out of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. This sets the tone for a book that will be packed with literary allegory. Even the form of the book walks the reader through some of English lit's historical period. Part 1: Austenesque Romanticism Part 2: Historical Fiction War Story Part 3: Victorian or Modern Memoir, and Part 4: Postmodern Speculation and Theory. It sets the scene for the first part of the book like Catherine in *Northanger Abbey*, Briony Tallis is a young girl with an overactive imagination. The consequences are a lot more serious in *Atonement*, though.

Briony's imagination leads her to create her own narrative which has life-changing consequences for her sister Cecilia and Robbie, the gradiner's son. The first section of *Atonement* begins in the Tallis' family's large country home in the English countryside in 1935. The family consists of Father Jack, who works a busy government job, mother Emily, and their three children, Leon, Cecilia and Briony. Leon is the eldest and is coming back to the family home to visit his wealthy friend, Paul Marshall. Cecilia is also returning after completing her degree at Cambridge University. At the same time, the family is being visited by their cousins, twins Jackson and Pierrot and their 15-year-old sister Lola. Their parents have recently gone through a divorce. Jack is often away at work and Emily is often incapacitated with a headache while these visitors are present. In the midst of all this, romance is developing between Cecilia and Robbie.

They are childhood friends and very close. Their flirtations are witnessed through the naive and misguiding eyes of 13-year-old Briony. Through a window, she sees Cecilia stripped down to her underwear in front of Robbie and get into a fountain. Though, the two are awkwardly flirting, Cecilia is in reality getting into the fountain to retrieve broken piece of a vase. Briony sees it as coercive situation in which her sister is in trouble. This perception is increased by a vulgar note that Robbie gives Briony to deliver to Cecilia. Briony is instructed not to read but she disobeys. Later in the evening, Briony catches Cecilia and Robbie making love in the family library. It is consensual, but she perceives it as an assault.

The second part of the novel begins in 1940 during the Second World War. Robbie has been released from prison on the condition that he joins the British war effort. Cecilia has become a nurse. The two are only able to meet briefly before Robbie is sent to France. Readers see Robbie in Dunkirk not long before the evacuation. Both he and the war effort are struggling. He is only sustained by thoughts of Cecilia and the letters she has been sending him. Robbie collapses on the beach, too weak to carry on.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* marked a new literary form in Romanticism in literature. In that, it was a story inside a story. At the very centre of the notable novel, the monster is telling his story in the first person to his creator, who is telling his story to a ship captain, who is writing his story to his sister, who is the author of the book. Ian McEwan's *Atonement* plays with this layered tradition, a story being told by one of the characters, not revealed until the end, in the third person that shifts to the first person in the final section of the book when the reader realizes, Who the narrator is? During this chapter, we learn the story was told through letters between Cecilia and Robbie and even correspondence between corporal Nettles and Brioni.

The question is left upon at the end of the novel. Does Briony finally achieve her atonement by writing her story and keeping her lovers and allowing their love to survive? The second layer to the 'guilt' theme has to do with the history of literature. Aside from the crimes she committed as a child, Briony feels guilty for her powers as a writer. She knows she has the autonomy to write whatever story she so chooses. That is the exact point Briony or is it McEwan is trying to draw out? Who is capable of telling a complete story about what really happened? All authors are subject to their own interpretation of events and it is this in empirical science that is literature that can cause no much power over other human beings.

With this, I conclude my discussion. Let us meet in another discussion on *Atonement* with the intertextual or textual analysis process.