

THE ENGLISH NOVEL: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

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Lecture 36

Atonement: Theme, Form and Style

Hello students,

Let's discuss *Atonement* from the point of view of theme, form and style.

'Perspective' is key theme in *Atonement*, largely because it is quite complex. Briony sees what unfolds between Cecilia and Robbie through the perspective of a young child that does not understand matters of sexuality. All she can do is assume from what she already knows. She ends up being wrong, which has dramatic consequences. Cecilia and Robbie have very different perspective of the events in question because they experience them firsthand. It is revealed at the end of the story that the perspective readers have gained throughout the novel was wrong. Briony has created this story to make up for what she did as a child. This means that everything we have read has been through Briony's eyes. She has used outside sources to discover how others experience the events that unfolded, but it is solely her perspective. On the top of this, the reunion between Cecilia and Robbie is revealed to be fictional. As readers, we must now re-evaluate things from a new perspective. For example, on a first reading, the section in which Robbie is in Dunkirk during the war seems to be from his perspective. But it is actually a fictionalized version that is given from Briony's perspective. It is a novel and Robbie never really returned from the war to tell her his experiences.

'Misunderstanding' is yet another important aspect of *Atonement*. What happens in *Atonement* is all created by the imagination to misperceive observation. Briony is at the point where she is too young to fully grasp the adult world, she is quickly becoming a part of, yet, old enough to presume she understands her social environment on a mature level. This wavering transient positioning in her psychological development, along with the circumstances she happens to observe, the fountain scene, the letter, the library scene and the rape all led to a misappropriation of her emotions. Briony is still a child. There is no arguing that. Her obsession with order, her fantasizing about playwriting and fencing, and

the seriousness with which she takes her play all represents her at a point where she is too young to see the world beyond her own existence. This flaw is not her fault. It is a part of the psychological maturing process. It should be noticed how so much of the action takes place in a state where some senses are obstructed or absent while others are available. Briony can see the incident between Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain, but she can't hear it. Briony reads the word in the letter, but she does not know what it means. Briony sees the sex in the library, but nobody says anything about it. And finally, Briony hears Lola being raped but can't completely see what, who it is because of the darkness.

Thus, part one is all about perception and misperception. Objects in this section are metaphors that serve as agent to this theme, windows, doorways, light, darkness, etc. Even the narration of the novel plays on this idea. The author is continuously having to go back and repeat the same episode through different eyes so the reader can get the whole picture. By doing this, Briony as author is trying her best to make up for what she did not understand as a child and what she struggles with as an author.

The theme of 'guilt, forgiveness and atonement' should be extremely obvious. To anyone who reads the book, the entire plot of the novel enters on a woman who devotes her entire life repenting a crime she committed while still a young girl. Several articles raise the question like, is Briony the only person who should feel guilty? Who else is at fault for the crime committed on that hot summer night in 1935? Where is Lola's guilt for not saying anything? What about Paul Marshall, the real affluent who gets away with rape and stands silent while an innocent man goes to prison? McEwan exemplifies a profound melody that builds details throughout the novel *Atonement*. The use of guilt and the quest for atonement are used in the novel to convey the central dynamic aspect in the novel. McEwan expresses the emotion of guilt that is being explored through the main character, Briony Tallis. The transition of a child and entering the adult world focuses on the behavior and inspiration of the young narrator, Briony.

Briony writes passages that entail her endeavor to wash away her culpability as well find forgiveness for her sins. McEwan embodies the guilt which is illustrated throughout the novel with the element of symbolic references. How guilt refined the methods of self-torture, threading the beads of detailed into an eternal loop, a rosary to be fingered for a lifetime. The literature critic, Brian Finney enunciates McEwan's "fascination with evil behavior that projected a sense of evil in the stories one tries to imagine the worst thing possible in order to get hold of the good". The text demonstrates how the traumatic episode disrupts the attachment between the self and others. By challenging the fundamental

assumptions about moral laws and social relationship in a complex postmodern world. The adult remembers her past. She lives through the trauma that it has caused her as attempts to work through the guilt by seeking forgiveness for herself. Her atonement through fiction. Most importantly, she relieves and acts out with imaginative scenario that consequently caused her the action to perform she blends herself against with anguish and the pain for war by creating an extensible traumatic historical context in shaping a logical series of violent scenarios in her story giving life for her sister and Robbie in the novel is a real stand against oblivion and despair and her closest attempt at achieving atonement. An interesting point is to consider in terms of Ruth Ley's theory is whether the response and reaction to trauma by the protagonist in *Atonement* is driven by guilt or shame?

From the outset, we can identify the gaze in *Atonement*. Again, this is not an academic exercise. Rather, gaze helps us carve out the three crucial scenes from the narrative. This, in turn, enables us to explore the intersubjectivity between characters, that is, how each character sees the scene, how they are displaced by it and how their actions are affected by it?

Arguments can be made on where the exact point is that Briony loses her innocence. Therefore, 'Innocence' is also one of the important themes. There are a few moments in part one that can be attributed to such a notion. Was it when she saw the scene at the fountain? When she gives up on her play? When she reads the letters from Robbie to Cecilia? When she witnesses Lola's rape? When she mistakenly observes Robbie and Cecilia making love in the library? Or when she officially accuses Robbie of the assault to authority? Each one of these is a plausible response. What is certain, however, is that somewhere during part one of the novel, Briony ceases to exist as a protected child in this world and enters the exposed world of adulthood. The narration of part one, which we learn later to be Briony herself, holds nothing back in informing the reader of this post-awareness.

Briony, the character, is too young to realise it at the time. She is caught in between worlds. Look at the moment when she searched parties take flight after the twins. Briony debates on whether she is old enough to search herself or if she should stay back under the protection of her mother, she decides on the former and this decision results in something that forever changes her life and the lives of everyone around her. There is a greater loss of innocence at play here as well. War rips the entire country apart and eventually the world. The blessed innocence that was being enjoyed by Europe following the war to end all wars is about to be stripped in force. This innocence is represented in Leon Tallis, a

character who leaves for the weekends in London, doesn't think there will be a war and feels all people are primitively good natured. It is not typical to say that war is a theme in any book, but it is a very important part of *Atonement* and something that needs to be addressed as a separate component to the overall themes of the book. McEwan is a known activist against war and as a writer who takes a personal interest in World War II history. His father was a major in the British Armed Forces and McEwan grew up in different areas of the world in army camps while his father was serving his duties. There is not too much to be said on it. The two world wars that took place in Europe in the first half of the 20th century are events that changed the course of human history. McEwan's *Atonement* draws focus on the lasting effects these events had on the British psyche in hopes of assisting in the prevention of it from ever happening again.

Social class is yet another theme or form of the novel. The inequities and injustices of social class appear throughout the novel. The most obvious example of the relationship between Robbie Turner, son of the Tallis' charwoman, and Cecilia Tallis' daughter of the ministry-employed and wealthy Jack Tallis. It is because Briony thinks that her older sister is in grave danger of falling beneath her class that she sets out to protect her. Placing social distinction above love to common sense for Briony and her condemnation of Robbie proves this faculty to hold up in the courts. As for Cecilia, she is the only character in the story to deal with these issues head on. After realizing her unfair behavior towards Robbie while at Cambridge together, Cecilia has the courage to announce her love for him when she defends the letter being passed around the living room for all to read as evidence of Robbie's sex maniac ways. Even when he is arrested, she stands by him and soon, thereafter disowns her family to become a nurse living in a terrible flat in North London. The only other person accused of the rape is the other servant, Danny Hardman. Even when his father provides a perfectly suitable alibi, it is not presented without question and doubt.

Paul Marshall, on the other hand, the filthy rich guest to the home who is actually responsible for the crime is never even considered or questioned. As part of Briony's self-administered punishment, she joins the nurses in the lower class where she sees herself as a slave. This may be an act of penance and nobility during the war, but its motives are questionable. Notice, how by the end of the novel, Briony is admitted back up the ranks of class, having a chauffeur and a lovely flat in Regent's Park. The reader is left wondering how much has really changed in 65 years, the novel has taken place. Here is the question to ask, who is Briony Tallis?

So, Identity, too, is an important factor to be discussed. Is she a child criminal, a repenting nurse, a writer, all of them? Is she a good person, an evil person? Any novel that stretches over a 65 years period is going to observe the characters go through periods of change and development. But *Atonement* works on a different level when it comes to identity as a theme. Briony Tallis has the imagination to make herself anything when the story opens. She is Briony the serious child, Briony the famous writer and Arabella the star of a play she has just written. Whenever Briony is upset, she wanders by herself to wait her where she can daydream into any persona she wishes, a murderer, fencing champion, successful author. Notice the water motive for this, a formless element.

Throughout his literary oeuvre, Ian McEwan has employed various narrative techniques, such as a stream of consciousness, flashback, foreshadowing, unreliable narrator and multiple points of view and so on. The purpose of using these techniques is to make his novel more interesting and establish a strong bond between the reader and his text. There is no doubt that McEwan is a well-received writer by readers as well as critics and this highlights the fact that he has been successful in using these narrative techniques in his novels. The utilisation of these techniques has rendered excellence and artistic beauty to McEwan's novel.

Atonement is told by an omniscient narrator, making the event described inherently untruthful. Briony, the all-knowing narrator and one of the main characters takes this to a whole new level. By the end, most of the events of the movie can be questioned as to what is real and what is not. Even in the novel also, all we know for certain is that movie or novel directed by Joe Wright follows the story of a novel within the fictional world of the film. The author always decides what happens. And all loose ends can be tied as they see fit. This is evident when she claims to see Robbie rape Lola. It fits her suspicion of the family servant when she comes up with throughout the day as she observes Robbie and Cecilia relationship. Without bothering to know the truth, she concludes that her crush must be a sexual predator.

The end of the book reveals that all of *Atonement* is a semi-autobiographical novel that Briony has written decades after her youthful mistakes took place. This framing device gives new signifying power to the self-conscious storytelling and narration that appear throughout the plot. As Briony grows up, her approach to storytelling evolves to reflect her maturity as a human being. The novelist's characteristics of intertitles at different levels, including Part 1, Part 2, Part 3, London 1999, and 14 headings from chapter 1 to chapter 14 in part 1. As mentioned above, the title *Atonement* is significant to the presentation of

the text, whereas part 1 and its 14 headings reveals of the little textual information, so the reader can non-directly deduce the textual intent of the first part simply from the literal meaning of these headings. On surface, these headings arranged are a little wordy, but they allow the reader to construct their cognition about the narrative techniques of the text. This also reflects McEwan's originality in narrative strategy.

Part 1: Instead of adopting an omniscient narrative perspective, narrates the story from third-person internal focalization by different characters, hence the headings of 14 chapters. With the constant shifts of third-person internal focalization, the reader has to work out the narrative meaning in complex narrative structure until the reader gradually perceives the complex internal focalization and constructs their understanding about narrative significance. Indeed, McEwan requires active readers to participate in the construction of the meaning of the text. The initiative is inseparable from the well-designed chapter layout.

If the headings of 14 chapters were all deleted, the boundaries of multiple internal focalizations would be removed which is not conducive to the communication of author's narrative strategy with the reader or to the construction of the textual meaning by the reader. Therefore, the 14 chapters as a paratext that facilitate the presentation of the complex narrative strategy in part one and constitute the important clues deserved for the reader to understand the narrative, structure, and actively construct the textual meaning. The novel also showcases a great amalgamation of both traditional and contemporary narrative techniques. It is written in the form of metafiction, which despite of being in practice, earlier is associated with post-modernism and contemporary literary trends in fiction. Other techniques such as stream of consciousness and flashbacks are associated with the modern period which ended in late 1920s of English literature. Techniques such as flashback, foreshadowing, unreliable narrator and multiple points of view give a rich and complex structure to the novel. The techniques also help in binding readers to the text and engage critics for a long time.

Ian McEwan explores the literary technique of stream of consciousness in his many novels and it is employed in *Atonement* too This construct and immersive and rich reading experience. Stream of consciousness is a narrative device that gives a written description of a character's thoughts and emotions in the reader's mind. This technique has been used rigorously and was famous during modernist period of English literature. In *Atonement*, based on the World War II, McEwan has used this technique to provide a sneak peek into the inner conflicts and wars of central characters like Briony, Robbie and Cecilia. Their fragmented nature of thoughts and emotions experienced by the major characters has been

described into the novel by the use of this technique. Briony, a writer herself, is compared with Virginia Woolf, who is credited for establishing a stream of consciousness technique by her editor who thinks that the writing of Briony are imitations of the Woolf's technique.

Ian McEwan also uses the narrative techniques of flashback which helps him in creating a complex and layered structure for his novel. As the name signifies, the flashback technique is used to achieve a shift in action from present time to a time period which has passed. The technique of flashback plays a significant role in the novel. *Atonement* as a story is divided into three time periods. First before the world war, second during the war and third long after the war. This division needs frequent movements or shifts to previous time and incidents to establish a strong narrative.

The technique is employed from the very beginning of the story when the reader is introduced with the childhood of Briony Tallis and the nature of her relationship with her sibling. The main purpose of this technique is to provide the reader the necessary information about the characters, their behavior and their relationships, and help the reader to enjoy a better understanding of their actions. McEwan is known as a writer who allows his novels to evolve naturally, and for this, he incorporates different point of views. The understanding of the readers about the story and events is based on several viewpoints of the characters and not on the authorial voice. He, through the use of various viewpoints, successfully depicts that how a single event is capable of distilling totally different interpretations and have different impacts on the lives of characters.

Apart from ever mentioned narrative techniques, Ian McEwan also employs unreliable narrator in *Atonement* who cannot be trusted for certain regions to add a different level of complexity to the plots of his novel. The technique also enhances interest of the reader as it creates suspense and thrill and highlights the issue of lack of trust. In *Atonement*, Briony is an unreliable narrator who cannot be trusted by the reader and the reason behind this unreliability is Briony's narcissist attitude, immaturity and tendency to change reality by using her imagination. Briony is very young when the novel begins and she develops a tendency to distort incidents. Through her imagination, she wants to be the centre of attention of everybody. And she is ready to do anything for it. Her false accusation of Robbie's Lola's rape is also inspired by the fact that she misunderstands because she wants to see the things the way she wants them to be. All this contributes to the heightened unreliability of Briony as a narrator. Moreover, Briony does not reveal that she is a narrator of the novel till end and this also adds to the distrust about her story of happy reunion of Robbie and Cecilia in the end. The unreliable nature of narrator in the novel, *Atonement*

leaves reader to speculate at several point. Like so many epistolary works, *Atonement* offers a material exploration of letters. Robbie's letter is the signifier in the story. But there are eight different letters in the text, each a signifier in its own right, each making up a signifying change. The novel considers the line between what is public and private in letter writing. In the 18th and 19th centuries, letters were frequently read aloud. This practice is echoed, but with a difference. When Briony purloins Cecilia's letter and brings it downstairs for everyone to read, Briony knows it is wrong to read Cecilia's letter but she feels justified that she is catching a killer.

To conclude, *Atonement* is a work of social criticism. In the time-honored tradition of the epistolary novel, just like Victor's Shklovsky, McEwan politicizes what is not political and depoliticises what is the war. In the end, the war is won, but everything is lost. The lovers, the people and the grand family manor, which is in the end converted into a hotel for tourists. The critic of wartime England extends beyond that. Like so much of McEwan's oeuvre, to English society, Briony's lies and cowardice are reflected in the external story, Britain at War. Macron makes both Briony and Cecilia nurses toppling existing social order by casting them in an occupation that at that time would have been seen as working class, though it would ultimately have a significant impact on women's right in post-war era.

It is no accident that the older Briony's cabbie in the postscript is a cheerful West Indian lad studying at LSE, writing a doctoral thesis on property law in the developing world. He gave me his condensed version. No property law, therefore no capital, therefore no wealth. McEwan is laughing with us and at us.

With this, I conclude the discussion on *Atonement*.

Let us meet in the next lecture with another theme and motive.

Thank you very much.