

An Exploration of Briony's Atonement in McEwan's Atonement

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Abstract

Atonement is one of the classic masterpiece of the renowned British author Ian McEwan, published in 2001, which narrates a tale encompassing themes of love, guilt, and war. Within the realm of literature, the examination of the growth and psychological evolution of female characters has consistently been a significant subject of interest. As feminist criticism has evolved, an increasing number of literary works have begun to delve into the inner lives of female characters and trace their developmental paths amidst societal transformations. This paper will explore the reasons behind the formation of Briony's character traits and the impact of her upbringing on her development. It will analyze how these factors have shaped her character and the influence of Briony's atonement on her own fate as well as that of others. In terms of theoretical application, this study will integrate Freud's personality theory to dissect Briony's psychological changes and the process of self-awareness, using this framework to elucidate her growth and the motivations behind her acts of atonement. By investigating Briony's journey of atonement, this thesis not only uncovers the deep exploration of human nature and profound reflection on social realities within literary works but also offers new perspectives and approaches for research in related fields. Through a comprehensive analysis of Briony's character from her portrayal, growth, and atonement, this thesis aims to provide a nuanced understanding of her development and the broader implications of her actions within the narrative of Atonement.

Keywords

Atonement; Character Image; Growth; Personality Theory

1. Introduction

Ian McEwan (1948-) is one of the most influential writers in the history of English literature. Born in Aldershot, Hampshire, England, in 1948, he graduated from the University of Sussex, Brighton, and later received a master's degree from the University of East Anglia. McEwan was involved in the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s, but tired of the anti-rationalist cultural ethos, he settled in London in 1974. He has a strong personality, quick thinking and unremitting exploration spirit. He is good at depicting the inner restlessness and fear of modern people, and delicately and actively explores issues such as violence, death, love, good and evil (Chen,

2010). Most of his works are short stories, and the content is bizarre and absurd, which is called “black comedy”. McEwan’s writing career began with the 1975 short story collection *First Love, Last Rites*, which established him in the literary world and won him the Maugham Prize. His early works, such as *Between the Beds and Atonement*, dealt with the themes of adolescent growth, family ethics and social taboos, showing the psychological struggles and moral dilemmas of individuals in closed environments.

As he developed his work, McEwan gradually expanded his subject matter to cover a wider range of topics such as history, morality, and surrealism. *Amsterdam*, for example, explores the relationship between disease, gender dysphoria, and moral dilemmas; *The Nut Shell* reveals the complex relationship between the mother and society through the perspective of the unborn child. In addition, his science fiction novel *Machine Me* combines the ethics of artificial intelligence to explore the boundaries between human and machine consciousness.

Among them, *Atonement* won the Booker Prize for its deep emotional description and complex narrative structure, and was adapted into an Oscar-winning film. It is not only the concentrated embodiment of his literary talent, but also his profound exploration of humanity, morality, redemption and other profound themes. With a compelling narrative and deep themes, the book brings readers deep reflections on redemption and humanity.

The Cambridge dictionary defines atonement as: something that you do to show that you are sorry for something bad that you did. *Atonement* is both the title and theme of the novel, which explores atonement, forgiveness and the complexity of human nature through the perspective of Briony Tallis. In the early part of the novel, Briony’s false accusations against Robbie lead to irreparable consequences. She spent her life trying to make up for this mistake and sought to make amends through writing. The complex narrative structure, deep psychological description and ethical discussion in the book have been widely praised by readers. In the novel, Briony’s character and her inner world constitute a profound exploration of atonement, moral responsibility, and personal growth. Briony’s path to redemption is not only a personal journey of redemption, but also a reflection on history, memory, and narrative authenticity. *Atonement* takes a meta-novel approach, further blurring the line between reality and fiction through an afterword, and revealing Briony’s authorship. This narrative technique not only increases the complexity of the novel, but also causes readers to question the authenticity of the text. Briony’s narrative is full of self-reflection and moral exploration, and her writing is not only a look back at the past, but also a meditation on the future.

2. Briony’s “Crime” in *Atonement*

2.1. Overview of *Atonement*

Atonement is one of the classic masterpieces of British writer Ian McEwan, which

was influenced by British women's novelist Jane Austen. McEwan called *Atonement* "my Austen novel" in an interview, and said that he had been wanting to write a novel in tribute to Jane Austen for ten years. Since its publication in 2001, *Atonement* has received widespread attention for its complex plot, deep themes, and unique narrative style. The novel explores multiple themes of truth, lies, love, war, and atonement through diverse narrative strategies. Through the psychohistorical reconstruction of the protagonist Briony, McEwan peers into the microcosm of personal history to see the historical picture of the twentieth century, which spans more than 60 years. The narrative strategy adopted in the novel fits in with the return of realism in contemporary British and American fiction after the baptism of postmodernism.

The timeline of *Atonement* is drawn out over a long period of time, beginning with England in 1935, then extending through World War II, and ending with Briony's narrative in 1999. The center of the novel revolves around the three children of the Tallis family, particularly 13-year-old Briony. Briony is an imaginative girl who misunderstands the complex emotional relationship between her older sister Cecilia and the housekeeper's son Robbie (Chen, 2023). At a family gathering, Briony wrongly accuses Robbie of raping her cousin Lola, an accusation that leads directly to Robbie's imprisonment and eventual death in battle. Briony's path to redemption is one of the central threads of the novel. Through Briony's point of view, the novel shows the progression from her childhood misjudgment to her deep reflection and redemption of that mistake as an adult. Briony becomes a field nurse during the war and witnesses the deaths of countless soldiers, which adds to her guilt and attempts to atone for her mistake through writing.

Adopting a metafictional narrative technique, *Atonement* explores the line between truth and fiction through Briony's unreliable narrative. Through this narrative, McEwan not only reveals the devastation of war on humanity, but also reflects deeply on themes of class differences, family relationships, and personal responsibility. The ending of the novel is strongly realistic, as Briony openly admits her mistakes in her later years and seeks redemption through writing.

2.2. "Crime" in Childhood

In her childhood, Briony is at a self-centred stage. Due to the immaturity of her mental mechanism and lack of cognition, she is governed by her unconscious control, so she always fantasized about something. In the first part of the novel, Briony asked her two cousins to rehearse her new play, *The Ordeal of Arabella*, with her cousin. When confronted with her cousin Lola's request of wanting to be the female lead and director, a strong sense of resistance arose in her heart, but she did not want to show it for the sake of her face. Briony had already thought of a candidate for the female lead and director, but when confronted with Lola, she did not say so, and in the midst of her inner conflicts and struggles, she finally let Lola take the female lead.

This psychological stage of unconsciously pursuing one's own pleasure without regard to the feelings of others is just as Freud believed, children fundamentally follow the principle of pleasure, they are self-centred and self-righteous, and they do not care about the rest except for their own pleasure (Chen & Duan, 2023). This episode also lays the psychological foundation for Briony's eventual crime.

As for the understanding of love, Briony is in a stage of ignorance, and her understanding of heterosexual emotions is also in the stage of beautiful and romantic fantasies. In order to better reflect this point of Briony, take a passage from *Atonement* as an example:

There was something rather formal about the way he stood, feet apart, head held back{1}. A proposal of marriage {2}. Briony would not have been surprised {3}. She herself had written a tale in which a humble woodcutter saved a princess from drowning and ended by marrying her {4}. What was presented here fitted well {5}. Robbie Turner, only son of a humble cleaning lady and of no known father, Robbie who had been subsidized by Briony's father through school and university, had wanted to be a landscape gardener, and now wanted to take up medicine, had the boldness of ambition to ask for Cecilia's hand {6}. It made perfect sense {7}. Such leaps across boundaries were the stuff of daily romance {8}. (McEwan, 2013, p. 362)

In order to make the analysis of the passage more clear, a set of graphical marking methods is adopted: the key things that Briony imagined are bolded; Briony's main thoughts are underlined.

Looking through the material, in sentence{1} and {2}, Robby's normal actions are perceived by Briony as wanting to propose marriage, and looking at sentence{3} "not have been surprised" Briony's reaction combined with sentence{4}, it is also easy to see that she is very imaginative, "fitted well" in sentence{5} also shows that she is reasonable and agrees with this. In sentence{6} further rationalizes her ideas based on her own knowledge of Robbie's experience, and in sentence{7} Robbie would make the act of proposing "made perfect sense" reflects her self-centered image at this age. Through sentence{8} She thinks this behavior is a kind of romantic expression and also shows her characteristic of fantasizing. Meanwhile, the episode sowed the seeds of misunderstanding in Briony's mind.

In the third part of *Atonement*, focusing on Robbie's narrative perspective, recalling the scene when he taught the young Briony how to swim. In that sequence, Robbie eagerly jumps into the water to save Briony, but confronted by Briony's confession. This memory sequence, which is interspersed with the main story line, may be a bit abrupt, but it is also a realistic portrayal of Briony's state of mind as a teenager. She was in love with Robbie, but she is too young to control her ego, she went to extreme lengths to make Robbie feel she is unreasonable. The plot here also echoes the first part of the sequence well, reinforcing Briony's self-centred state.

The twist before Briony commits her crime begins with the letter of apology Robbie writes to Cecilia. Robbie mistakenly slips Briony the first version of the apology let-

ter he wrote to pass on to Cecilia, and young Briony is at a stage where she is so curious about everything that she opened the letter herself and read it before giving it to Cecilia. When Robbie realized that he has given the letter to the wrong person, it is too late, and Briony's misinterpretation of Robbie deepens as she read the words in the letter, which boggle her mind. Later, after the party, Briony witnessed Robbie and her sister Cecilia in the library, which made her shocked, youthful and ignorant she saw such a scene, reinforced Robbie's bad image in her mind. "With the letter, something elemental, brutal, perhaps even criminal had been introduced, some principle of darkness, and even in her excitement over the possibilities, she did not doubt that her sister was in some way threatened and would need her help" (McEwan, 2013, pp. 432-433). After Briony has experienced numerous fantasies and transformations, her own ego power grew, a power that encompasses jealousy of her sister, Cecilia, as well as complex emotions towards Robbie. And then during the disappearance of the twins, Briony witnesses her cousin Lola being violated while searching for the twins, and it was at this point that Briony's inner desires and impulses broke through the boundaries. She did not see the face of the criminal who violated Lola, but is convinced that the rapist is Robbie only by the blurring of his figure and her egoistic fantasies. When the police and the inspector investigated her afterwards, she uttered one of the most regrettable dialogues of her life:

"You saw him then."

"I know it was him."

"Let's forget what you know. You're saying you saw him."

"Yes, I saw him."

"Just as you see me."

"Yes."

"You saw him with your own eyes."

"Yes. I saw him. I saw him." (McEwan, 2013, p. 495)

From Briony's conversation with the inspector, it can be seen that her heart is struggling, she can not be sure whether the rapist is Robbie, but out of her unconscious and the driving of the ID, she still chose to commit perjury. The accused Robbie had nothing to say and could only face five years in prison. In Briony's world, she always thinks she is more mature than her peers, but the truth is that her false accusations against Robbie are a sign of immaturity, and a bad judgment driven by the unconscious and the ID eventually leads to tragedy. Just as Liu Jiaojiao said, "Individual psychological activities and psychological changes have a driving and guiding effect on individual behavior" (Liu, 2020, p. 4). Then the 13-year-old Briony made such a criminal testimony, which can be attributed to her immature mind and poor moral concept.

3. Briony's Path to Atonement

3.1. The Beginning of Atonement

During her childhood, Briony committed an irrevocable mistake. As an adult, she gradually became aware of the wrongs she had made in the past and decided to take action to make amends, embarking on her own path of atonement.

As she grew older, Briony's perception of herself grew and she gradually realized the mistakes she made in her childhood. The third part of *Atonement* focuses on Briony's redemption. As an adult, Briony was so consumed with guilt that she gave up the opportunity to study at Cambridge University and chose to become a nurse in a war hospital to ease her pain and suffering. As Cecilia mentioned in her letter to Robbie "Clearly, not going up has something to do with it. She's saying that she wants to be useful in a practical way. But I get the impression she's taken on nursing as a sort of penance" (McEwan, 2013, p. 525). She spends her days immersed in work and writing, trying to numb herself with such behaviour so that the guilt in her heart can be less. She kept on writing to her sister Cecilia and seeking her forgiveness, but she never received a reply from Cecilia. In Cecilia's mind "Remember what a dreamer she is" (McEwan, 2013, p. 525). The incompleteness of Briony's atonement is also flanked in this letter.

In order to reduce the guilt on her own, Briony chose to grow up alone, away from her family and friends. In the process of working as a nurse, Briony witnessed too many soldiers injured on the battlefield, and at the same time realized the cruelty of war. In this process, she is more able to appreciate that her behaviour of perjury has caused Robbie to suffer great harm and made her feel more guilty. The positive portrayal of the war in the novel does not occupy a great deal of space, but mostly the portrayal of the soldiers. From Briony's point of view, he saw a steady stream of wounded in the field hospital and imagined that one of these soldiers could be Robbie, so that when he recognized her when she bandaged his wounds, Robbie can be grateful to her, forgiving her, and can make the guilt less in her mind. But that was not the case, and even at eighteen, Briony still had unrealistic illusions about reality, and the absence of Robbie among these men did not make her sins any less.

While tending to the wounded, she befriends a soldier named Luc. He is a French-speaking soldier, and she was assigned by the Sister to bind up his wounds because she can speak French. Luc's wound is very serious and in talking to Briony she knew the young soldier's memories of a good time, of the girl he remembers as beautiful. The boy's behaviour also touched Briony, and Briony also finds a glimmer of warmth in the tangle and struggle of redemption through their communication. She knew that the boy in front of her is not long to live, and she can do nothing but respond to the boy's confession. In the end, Luc passed away. Experienced this incident, Briony's heart has a great touch that she knew the war is cruel and "She imagined the unavailable future" (McEwan, 2013, p. 619). She did not know when the war would end, just as she did not know when she would be able to cleanse her own of sins.

While working as a nurse, Briony did not give up writing for spiritual solace. She

wrote a book and sent it to a publisher, but never heard back from the publisher before. After the experience, Briony received a letter from the publisher. In this letter, Briony also came to the sobering realization that her writing was not perfect and neither was her personality. The lack of mastery in her story also showed that she did not have the courage to admit her mistakes (Ruan, 2023). At that moment, Briony decided to take her journey of atonement a step further by writing.

3.2. The Deepening of Atonement

In personality theory, the ego is the executive of personality, the coordinator between the id and the superego. The further deepening of Briony's atonement began as she started to correct her past mistakes in a fictional world through the creation of a novel. In Briony's novel, she attended her cousin Lola's wedding, where she came to a realization of the truth of that childhood crime. The guilt in her heart is also deeply reflected in the priest's wedding vows. "Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication, that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body" (McEwan, 2013, p. 631). It was a sin that Briony had committed, a sin that she would not be able to erase for the rest of her life. Despite the fact that she already knew the truth, she was still cowardly, she could not stand up and tell the truth to everyone. "She remained in her seat with her accelerating heart and sweating palms, and humbly inclined her head" (McEwan, 2013, p. 633). Her heart was full of kinks and pains, but she still could not gather the courage to expose Paul's crime in public, and finally left the church. The atmosphere of the church magnified the guilt in her heart, and she was so afraid that she would be punished by God that she could only carry out self-punishment through self-torture, in the hope of obtaining God's forgiveness (Fu, 2021, p. 80).

After leaving the church Briony went to her sister Cecilia's house, she knew that the mistake she made is unforgivable but still decided to let the truth be known, "And if I can't go to court, that won't stop me telling everyone what I did" (McEwan, 2013, p. 644). Briony was filled with solace when she knew that Robbie is still alive, but her heart was in a panic when she faced Robbie, which also side-steps the guilt she felt inside. Briony found the courage to apologize and confess to Robbie and seek his forgiveness. At the end of the story, Cecilia and Robbie finally got together and Briony managed to reveal the truth about what happened and the real culprit to the public.

Briony gave the novel a happy ending, which is a reflection of her quest for superego values and her unconscious behaviour. In her view, "I like to think that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end" (McEwan, 2013, p. 677). It was a defence she gave herself, more like a reassurance that there was still an uneasiness in her mind. It was an atonement that she thought will alleviate her sins, but it will

not truly atone for it.

3.3. Reflections in Old Age

In her old age, Briony continued to look back on her crimes through her memories and writing, knowing that her actions as a young woman not only ruined Cecilia and Robbie's lives, but also put her in endless pain. To atone for her sins, Briony brought the truth to light, but she also knew that the truth in the novel is not entirely true. Reality is always harsh and Cecilia died in an explosion and Robbie died in the war from septicaemia. She doubted that "How could that constitute an ending? What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism?" (McEwan, 2013, p. 676) She dared not publish the novel while the real criminal is alive because she knew that she cannot fight it, she can only wait for the real criminal to pass away before she can bring the truth to light. Essentially, she was still cowardly, writing is only a comfort to her own mind, the mistake has been made and nothing can be done to undo it. She was aware of "No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all" (McEwan, 2013, p. 676). In "superego" sense of morality and justice, she did not need to care about the outside world, but only need to seek her own inner peace (Chen & Duan, 2023).

Briony knew that this was not true atonement, and that even if she brought the truth to light, it will not clear her of the crime what she has committed. Just as she thought, "It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all" (McEwan, 2013, p. 677).

3.4. Implications

Atonement shows Briony's atonement process from multiple perspectives. After exploring Briony's path of atonement, witnessed her psychological changes and growth process, and gained a lot of insights from it. From Briony's growth experience, can be seen that the lack of correct value guidance may lead individuals to the wrong path. Family education plays a crucial role in adolescent growth. Chen Xin and other scholars point out that adolescence is a stage when the individual's psychological mechanism and cognitive ability are not yet mature, and it is necessary to prevent the occurrence of psychological problems through a good family education environment (Chen & Duan, 2023). Her father was busy with his work and was always away from home, and even though her mother knew "Her daughter was always off and away in her mind, grappling with some unspoken, self-imposed problem, as though the weary, self-evident world could be reinvented by a child" (McEwan, 2013, p. 391) she did not make practical moves to educate her, which made Briony lack of emotional support and correct value guidance in her growing

up process. Briony's atonement process is also a reminder that the growth of an individual is not only a process of self-realisation, but also a process of assuming social responsibility. Through Briony's story, McEwan urges readers to pay attention to the developmental problems of adolescents and to think about how to help them grow into responsible people through education and social support.

Individual factors contribute to the tragedy, but the war is also a major factor in the tragic fate of the characters. Without the war, Robbie perhaps would not have been forced to join the army after his imprisonment and died in the war, and his sister Cecilia would not have been killed in an accidental explosion, and perhaps the two of them would have met after Robbie's release from prison. In the second part of the novel Robbie's perspective was also mentioned "Briony would change her evidence, she would rewrite the past so that the guilty became the innocent. But what was guilt these days? It was cheap. Everyone was guilty, and no one was. No one would be redeemed by a change of evidence, for there weren't enough people" (McEwan, 2013, p. 572). In the war, the pursuit of guilt and innocence has long been meaningless, there is no enough time to find the truth, and no one cares about the truth, in such a social context was hard to live.

Atonement also employs a metafictional narrative technique that closely aligns Briony's writing process with her journey to atonement. This narrative not only enhances the complexity of the story, but also makes the reader realize that literary creation itself is also a process of self-redemption. Through this technique, McEwan shows readers the complexity of Briony's character, explores the relationship between literature and human nature, and reveals the moral dilemma and psychological struggle behind literary creation. This contradiction reflects the theme of redemption in literary creation: true redemption requires individuals to face up to their mistakes and take responsibility for them.

4. Conclusion

Briony's atonement is a complicated process, subject to many conditions, and her atonement is not a complete success, perhaps a continuation of mistakes. Through an in-depth exploration of Briony's path to atonement in Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*, this thesis reveals the reasons for the formation of her character traits, the influence of her upbringing on her, and how these factors shape her character. Combined with personality theory of Freud, the study analyses Briony's psychological changes and self-perception process, and elucidates the motivation for her act of atonement. The study also finds that Briony atones for her sins through writing, an act that reflects not only her deep reflection on her past mistakes, but also her efforts to seek inner harmony and balance.

This article is important for understanding the growth and psychological changes of female characters in literature. By exploring Briony's path of redemption, it reveals the literary works' deep excavation of human nature and profound reflection on so-

cial reality, providing new perspectives and ideas for research in related fields. In addition, the thesis also stresses the important influence of family education and personal growth environment on individual character formation and behavior choices. Freud's personality theory is used to provide an in-depth analysis of Briony's psychological changes and atoning behaviour, which provides a theoretical basis for understanding the inner world of female characters in the novel. At the same time, the study also reveals the unique value of literary works in human nature exploration and social criticism, offering new methods and paths for literary research and criticism.

Despite this study having achieved certain results, there are still some limitations. For example, the study is mainly based on textual analyses and lacks the support of empirical data. Moreover, the exploration of Briony's motives and influences on her act of atonement can be further deepened and refined. Future research can further expand into the empirical field by investigating readers' perceptions of female characters' growth and atonement behaviour in the novel to validate and enrich the results of this study. Meanwhile, other psychological theories or literary criticism methods can also be used to deeply analyze Briony's inner world and path of atonement, providing a more diverse perspective for understanding female characters in literature.

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