**Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty, Section:
Philosophy and Humanistic Sciences**

ISSN: 2284–5976 (print), ISSN: 2284–5976 (electronic)

Covered in: CEEOL, Index Copernicus, Ideas RePEc,
EconPapers, Socionet

**NARRATIVE ETHICS: IMAGINATION AND
EMPATHY IN IAN MCEWAN’S ATONEMENT**

Monica COJOCARU

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18662/lumenphs.2015.0302.06>

Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty, Section:
Philosophy and Humanistic Sciences, III (2), 67-75

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://lumenjournals.com/philosophy-and-humanistic-sciences/>

Published by:

Lumen Publishing House

On behalf of:

Lumen Research Center in Social and Humanistic Sciences

Narrative Ethics: Imagination and Empathy in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

Monica COJOCARU¹

Abstract

My paper starts from the assumption that empathy and imagination are closely connected, and that this connection offers rich ground for the exploration of moral values. However, as I aim at demonstrating, neither empathy nor imagination are presented as givens, but rather as means for rendering the infinite ethical complexity, guilt, ambiguity, contingency, and moral dilemmas faced by the characters' of Ian McEwan's 2001 masterpiece, Atonement. The paper calls attention to the novel's concern with the risks posed by inhabiting a fictional universe, with the amendments that universe grants to both readers and writers, and with the limitations it imposes on them. The novel's writer-protagonist possesses the power of inflicting trauma upon herself and other people as well as that of creating unity out of a chaotic and potentially destructive world through moral empathy and responsibility. My paper considers the novel's exploration of dramatic events that distort and reshape the characters' existence as a result of misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and misreading, with a view to highlighting the moral implications of telling stories and the power that a writer has to bend history to her own will.

Keywords: Ian McEwan; *Atonement*; empathy; narrative ethics; storytelling.

¹ Teaching Assistant, Lucian Blaga University, Sibiu, Romania,
monica.cojocaru@ulbsibiu.ro.

Atonement was reviewed extensively upon its release and received a few of the most appreciative appraisals of McEwan's career, evoking a novelist in his heyday. It was hailed as "a beautiful and majestic fictional panorama" (Updike, 2002) and "as easily his finest" novel (Kermode, 2001). Dyer (2001) lauded its "scope, ambition and complexity," comparing it to the great novels of the mid-twentieth century, especially the works of Virginia Woolf, whose literary influence on the writing of the heroine of *Atonement* is overtly mentioned in the novel, and of D.H. Laurence, whereas McFarlane (2001) drew attention to "its richness of detail, its gravitas and its length. Bedford (2001) remarked that *Atonement* revived his appreciation of McEwan, who regained his intellectual vigour through the portrayal of Briony Tallis, the novel's writerly (anti-heroine).

Many critics were perceptive in noting the novel's treatment of the theme of writing and storytelling. Sexton (2001), for instance, who, like Kermode, regarded the book as "McEwan's best novel, so far, his masterpiece, [...] the product of many years of steady development of his craft," a narrative "always alive with the thoughts of the characters, as if it were a transparent medium into other minds," read it as "a meditation on the impulse of storytelling itself, on the wish to give shape to experience which deceives no less than it illuminates." Messud (2002) commented that the novelist, "a vivisectionist of the human psyche [...] is painfully aware to the dangers of [...] the pernicious power of fine storytelling." Discussing the novel's concern with literary history, Lee states in her review that *Atonement* poses "interesting questions about writing," asking "what the English novel of the twenty-first century has inherited, and what it can do now." Lee (2001) gives an original answer that alludes to the role of feminist concerns in contemporary fiction, suggesting that "[o]ne of the things it can do [...] is to be androgynous," in McEwan's case, in a book "written by a man acting the part of a woman writing a 'male' subject."

The novel's main theme is concisely and pertinently stated by Dominic Head (2007) in his survey of Ian McEwan's works (2002), as being that of "guilt and atonement [...] inextricably linked to an investigation of the writer's authority, a process of self-critique conducted through the creation of the writing persona Briony Tallis" (*Contemporary British Novelists: Ian McEwan* 156). An extended study of its own composition, the book follows Briony—held by McEwan to be "the most complete person [he]’d ever conjured" (Noakes, 2010, p. 88)—from adolescence till old age as she reconsiders the terrible crime she committed at the age of thirteen with disastrous consequences on the lives of the people around her, misrepresenting it, accounting for it, and eventually attempting to atone for

it, looking for comfort in the act of storytelling. The coda written in first person reveals old Briony to be the narrator of the first three parts, and the readers must alter their belief that the narrator is omniscient in the previous parts of the novel, a complete understanding of the narrative technique being thus retrospective. Briony, whose descriptive powers (as a young teenager, she congratulates herself on her ability to shape the world into words, reflecting that “there was nothing she could not describe” (McEwan, *Atonement* 156)) turn out to be, as the critic Peter Childs points out, “both [her] gift and her curse” (*The Fiction of Ian McEwan. A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* 135), has spent her entire life writing drafts of this book as atonement (or “at-one-ment,” “a reconciliation with self,” as McEwan told *The Observer* (qtd. in Kellaway, 2001) for her crime.

The epigraph, the dialogue between Henry Tilney and Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* in which the young man reprimands Catherine for entertaining unfounded suspicions about General Tilney, signals a concern that will resonate throughout the novel—the tendency to overdramatise and fictionalise real events, while it also encourages us to find more general parallels between the two novels. In an interview with Jeff Giles (2002), McEwan describes *Atonement* as his “Jane Austen novel,” and in another interview, he explicitly comments on the analogy suggested by the epigraph:

What are the distances between what is real and what is imagined? Catherine Morland, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, was a girl so full of the delights of Gothic fiction that she causes havoc around her when she imagines a perfectly innocent man to be capable of the most terrible things. For many, many years, I've been thinking how I might devise a hero or heroine who could echo that process in Catherine Morland, but then go a step further and look at, not the crime, but the process of atonement, and do it through writing—do it through storytelling, I would say. (Noakes, 2010, p. 86)

As Brian Finney (2002) points out, the epigraph acts as both “a warning and a guide” to how the reader should approach *Atonement*. Indirectly, the reader is invited to compare Catherine Moorland to Briony with her excessive imagination. Like Catherine Morland's, Briony Tallis's judgment is warped by literature and by a flawed knowledge of the world, a weakness that will lead the heroine to push her convictions beyond acceptable limits. At the same time, the epigraph shows how aged Briony as narrator distances herself from the naive thirteen-year-old Briony (there are three Brionys in the novel corresponding to three stages in her life: thirteen-

year-old Briony, eighteen-year-old Briony, and seventy-seven-year-old Briony).

The first thing that we learn about young Briony is that she is an ambitious writer, who spends her time browsing dictionaries to increase her word stock and who channels her entire spirit into writing a play (*The Trials of Arabella*, a melodrama intended to “inspire [...] terror, relief and instruction, in that order” (*Atonement* 8)—an allusion to Aristotle’s *Poetics*), “in a two-day tempest of composition” that caused her to miss two meals, and for which she has also “designed the posters, programs, and tickets, constructed the sales booth out of a folding screen tipped on its side, and lined the collection box in red crêpe paper” (*Atonement* 3). These early details, presented from Briony’s self-absorbed and pretentiously literary perspective, establish the extent of her dedication to (and even obsession with) not only her writing, but also its reception, betraying her concern with how she is perceived by other people.

Considering the novel’s conflation of the image of the child with that of the writer, Childs notes that “the child and the novelist both specialise in fashioning worlds of their own imagining, are both ‘daydreamers’ in the novel’s terms” (Childs, 2006). For young Briony, writing is a form of extrasensory perception, of conjuring, a sleight of hand that grants her access to the marvels of the world, even “a kind of soaring, an achievable form of flight, of fancy, of the imagination” (*Atonement* 157), and a vehicle for projecting herself into the minds of her readers, her programmatic convictions about fiction being remarkably (and ironically) similar to those claimed by McEwan in his interviews:

In a story you only had to wish, you only had to write it down and you could have the world [...]. It seemed so obvious now that it was too late: a story was a form of telepathy. By means of inking symbols onto a page, she was able to send thoughts and feelings from her mind to her reader’s. It was a magical process, so commonplace that no one stopped to wonder at it. (*Atonement* 37)

She need only show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive. [...] And only in a story you could enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value. That was the only moral a story need have. (*Atonement* 40)

Yet for young Briony, the idea that other people’s inner lives are as “vivid” as hers is worrying, endangering her uniqueness with “irrelevance” and making the social world seem “unbearably complicated” (*Atonement* 36).

While she realises that it is improbable that she might be “surrounded by machines, intelligent and pleasant enough on the outside, but lacking the bright and private inside feelings she had,” she does so “only in a rather arid way: she didn’t really feel it” (*Atonement* 36).

Apparently, Briony’s character experiences a literary evolution, as she shifts from fairy tales to romance, in an attempt to produce her story: while witnessing a scene between her elder sister Cecilia and her father’s protégé Robbie Turner at the Tallises’ fountain and misinterpreting what she has seen, she envisages the prospect of more complex writing than her moralistic tales and begins imagining herself as a mature writer, in “her first, weak intimation that for her now it could no longer be fairy-tale castles and princesses, but the strangeness of the here and now, of what passed between people, the ordinary people that she knew” (*Atonement* 39). This appears to be a rite of passage, marking her progress from childhood and romance to adulthood and realism. Misinterpreting yet again the content of a letter that Robbie, in a Freudian slip, mistakes for another letter and then gives the young girl to take to her sister, Briony realises that, for the first time, she has a secret to share, her false certainty that she is growing up prompting her to reveal “the secret” to her cousin Lola, a fifteen-year-old girl who likes to appear more mature than she is (hence the allusion in her name to that of the female protagonist of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, another novel that raises ethical questions), partly to “show the older girl that she too had worldly experiences” (*Atonement* 119).

Her emerging “adulthood” also causes her to feel “responsible [...] for everything that was about to happen” (*Atonement* 122). Nevertheless, as Briony wonders “whether having final responsibility for someone, even a creature like a horse or a dog, was fundamentally opposed to the wild and inward journey of writing” and concludes that “[p]rotective worrying, engaging with another’s mind as one entered it, taking the dominant role as one guided another’s fate, was hardly mental freedom” (*Atonement* 159), it becomes clear that she is not yet ready to assume responsibility. Moreover, by the end of the novel, as we learn that she is a successful novelist (whose fiction is “known for its amorality” (*Atonement* 141)—another indication that she might still be not much unlike her young self), we also discover that there is one story to which she keeps returning and that she has drafted and redrafted throughout her life, the only one that counts for her, the one that she must make sense of in order to come to terms with her life.

It is the early portrayal of Briony as a committed and somewhat precocious writer, rounded off by her characterisation as a girl “possessed by a desire to have the world just so” (*Atonement* 4), with a “passion for secrets”,

a liking for harmony, a rigid tendency for control and order, a fascination with words (of which she often makes clumsy use), and a “taste for the miniature” (*Atonement* 5) (stories enable this “busy, priggish, conceited little girl” (*Atonement* 367), as older Briony labels her adolescent self in the novel’s coda, to turn reality into a miniature representation of the world that she can arrange, discard and stage-manage at will), which offers the first clues that her self-conscious fictionalising may prompt self-delusion and the denial of truth, carefully laying the basis for the spiral of events leading to the inevitable crisis of the novel. Coupled with these inclinations, with her immaturity and with her lack in the ability to empathise with the others, “the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you” (*Atonement* 40) (for instance, she has no sympathy for her distressed cousins, victims of their parents’ broken marriage, and will not mind the suffering of Robbie’s mother when her son is taken away by the police), her overindulgent imagination will create the misunderstandings that not only wreak havoc on the lives of those around her, but also force her to understand, though not fully, as it is revealed at the end of the novel, the irreversible and adverse effects of inventing stories and modelling her behaviour on a constructed world.

A great deal of the first part of the novel is concerned with outlining the context for Briony’s misconstructions, through the painstaking account of the convergence of characters and of the events that occurred on a very hot day of the year of 1935. McEwan includes several crucial scenes where external influences generate misunderstandings, such as those where Briony interprets a few adult gestures through the distorted lens of her adolescent feelings and confusion, lies becoming tools to block the harsh reality setting in. Many of the events are glimpsed through different framing devices (window frames, skylights, mirrors), through the haze caused by the heat wave, or through the darkness, and often appear to be staged from above as if from a director’s perspective. The aim of this narrative strategy is to heighten the sense of elusiveness and visual confusion as well as of dramatic exaggeration. Briony runs into Lola and her attacker in the darkness and sees only the latter’s receding figure, yet she infers that the figure is Robbie’s and concludes that “[h]e was a maniac after all” (*Atonement* 158), allowing her interpretive judgment to prevail over her moral one: she is convinced that the silhouette she saw withdrawing from the scene is Robbie’s only because her interpretation matches the story that she is piecing together following her previous encounters with Robbie (McEwan exposes her judgements as false through several scenes that present Robbie as a worthy young fellow who nurtures passionate love for Cecilia.). Once she has voiced her story, it

becomes impossible for Briony to back it up or soften it, as the passage below reveals:

As early as the week that followed, the glazed surface of conviction was not without its blemishes and hairline cracks. Whenever she was conscious of them, which was not often, she was driven back, with a little swooping sensation in her stomach, to the understanding that what she knew was not literally, or not only, based on the visible. It was not simply her eyes that told her the truth. It was too dark for that. [...] Her eyes confirmed the sum of all she knew and had recently experienced. The truth was in the symmetry, which was to say, it was founded in common sense. The truth instructed her eyes. So when she said, over and over again, I saw him, she meant it, and was perfectly honest, as well as passionate. What she meant was rather more complex than what everyone else so eagerly understood, and her moments of unease came when she felt that she could not express these nuances. She did not even seriously try. There were no opportunities, no time, no permission. Within a couple of days, no, within a matter of hours, a process was moving fast and well beyond her control. (*Atonement* 168-9)

The other protagonists of the novel are not free from misapprehensions either: duped by class prejudice, Cecilia is convinced that Danny Hardman, a worker on the Tallis estate, is her cousin's rapist, with no more proof than Briony had when she held Robbie responsible for the sexual assault on Lola (no one considers voicing any suspicions against Paul Marshall, the unpleasant and arrogant chocolate manufacturer who marries his victim to keep his crime secret, ironically ennobled as Lord Marshall by the end of his life). Cee's discernment difficulties, suggesting her family resemblance to Briony, are also alluded to when she sees her appearance distorted and "Picasso-like" (*Atonement* 99) in a mirror. Emily Tallis, Briony and Cecilia's mother, views herself as all-knowing and clear-sighted, as a controlling presence in the house who senses all that is happening, but her actions (and their absence, for that matter) suggest the opposite and expose her as being complacent, socially myopic, and just as bound by prejudice and prone to fabricating truth as the other characters. Even Briony's victim, Robbie Turner, portrayed as a selfless and genuinely likeable person throughout the novel (his compassion and generosity are apparent especially in Part Two, in the evocation of the retreat of the British army to Dunkirk), ponders for years about Briony's motives of her accusation which secured him the imprisonment and separated him from the women he loved, misinterpreting her childish thoughtlessness and confusion (an

understanding of which she ironically appeared to have reached just a few hours before committing her crime in her remark about literary genres: “It wasn’t only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding.” (*Atonement* 40)) as deliberate cruelty and revenge for his preference for her sister. Even though he is aware that she is at a “stage in her life [when she] inhabited an ill-defined transitional space between the nursery and adult worlds which she crossed and re-crossed unpredictably” (*Atonement* 141), it never occurs to him that an imaginative thirteen-year-old girl might have a view of the world very different from that of a young adult, and reinvents the past by reinterpreting the events that led to his imprisonment in the light of his conviction that Briony fostered unrequited love for him. These misinterpretations offer a plethora of evidence of the novel’s concern with the difficulty of clarifying the motivation behind another’s actions, with the recognition of another’s consciousness and the dangers of misreading, aspects that are central to McEwan’s fiction and its preoccupation with morality.

McEwan inserts into Briony’s account proleptic details that, with the benefit of hindsight, signal the outcome of the novel. For instance, at the end of the novel’s second section, Robbie’s last words are “I promise, you won’t hear another word from me” (*Atonement* 250). In other words, at this stage of the novel, the readers do not find out whether Robbie gets evacuated or dies. Although the novel’s third section seems to clarify that dilemma by showing Robbie reunited with Cecilia, in retrospect, the flash-forward at the end of the second section of *Atonement* seems to prepare the readers for the realisation that Robbie did not stay alive until the retreat. Another key fragment in the third section, describing the real Briony going back to the hospital, while her other self, “no les real,” her “imagined or ghostly persona” (*Atonement* 311), continues her wander towards Cecilia and Robbie’s place, traces the fine distinction between what is real and what is unreal, between what is true and what is false, but cannot be fully understood until the last chapter. The beginning of the coda, where Briony states that she has “always liked to make a tidy finish” (*Atonement* 353), anticipates the end by putting the readers on their guard that what they are reading may not be compliant with the truth and that the self Briony is trying to atone through an entire life of writings and re-writings is the self whose need for order causes her crime.

REFERENCES

- Bedford, M. (2001). She Stripped off and Plunged In. Review of *Atonement*. *Literary Review*.
- Childs, P. (2006). *The Fiction of Ian McEwan. A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dyer, G. (2001). Who's Afraid of Influence? Review of *Atonement*. *The Guardian* "Saturday Review".
- Finney, B. (2002). Briony's Stand against Oblivion: Ian McEwan's *Atonement*.
- Giles, J. (2002). Luminous Novel from Dark Master. *Newsweek*.
- Head, D. (2007). *Contemporary British Novelists: Ian McEwan*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- Kellaway, K. (2001). At Home with His Worries. *The Observer*.
- Kermode F. (2001). Point of View. Review of *Atonement*. *London Review of Books*.
- Lee, H. (2001). If Your Memories Serve You Well... Review of *Atonement*. *The Observer*.
- McEwan, I. (2002). *Atonement*. London: Vintage Books.
- Mcfarlane, R. (2001). A Version of Events. Review of *Atonement*. *Times Literary Supplement*.
- Messud, C. (2002). The Beauty of the Conjuring. Review of *Atonement*. *Atlantic Monthly*.
- Noakes, J. (2010). Interview with Ian McEwan. in Roberts R. (Ed.), *Conversations with Ian McEwan* (pp. 79-88) The University Press of Mississippi.
- Sexton, D. (2001). McEwan's Finest Shock Tactics Yet. Review of *Atonement*. *The Evening Standard*.
- Updike, J. Flesh on Flesh (2002). Review of *Atonement*. *The New Yorker*.