

McEwan's *Atonement*: An Explorative Journey through the Inscape of Human Psyche

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Abstract

The amount of criticism which overshadows Freudian concepts has never reduced the relevance it carries in the assessment of human inscape. It successfully explains the reasons behind the complexities of human behaviour. Ian McEwan, who is known for his vivid, picturesque, and striking narrative style, is a prodigy in exploring the human psyche. His prestigious work *Atonement* remarkably stands out in its portrayal of the interior realms and unpredictable workings of the socially conscious. This paper attempts a detailed study of the behavioural patterns of the characters and the role of the unconscious in controlling them. This study concludes that, though humans are the victims of the unconscious trauma, a positive sublimation can unquestionably save individuals and make them fit for society.

Key Words: Inscape, Unconscious, *Atonement*, McEwan.

Introduction

Great explorations begin in pursuit of novel ideas or places. Literature, in turn is mostly an exploration into the inscape. Journey to the interior or search for the inner realms of human mind has been a part of literature from time immemorial. The Novel is a perfect medium in recounting the stories of such explorations. Novelists' interest in human psychology forms the raw material for his creations. They are the researchers of human behaviour. Ian McEwan is no exception in this attribute. He is a master craftsman in detailing the intricacies of human mind. He pursues this matter with more scientific rigour than the job

strictly requires. *Atonement* (2001) is proof of his interest in the inner layers of human behaviour.

Atonement makes a comprehensive study of human behaviour. It exposes the most familiar yet extremely complex side of human beings. Every character portrayed in the novel are the prototypes of rational convolutions. McEwan, a maestro adventurer of human nature with his intricate detail, vivid expression, and literary brilliance exhibits the manifold layers of human thoughts and actions. The unique yet strange behaviours of his characters get feeling thus. The narrative techniques used in the novel is in favour of this behavioural study. Multiple narratives of the same incident from diverse angles throw light upon the way individual characters perceive and process the occurrences of their daily lives. Laura Vipond emphasises this aspect in her analysis of the novel. She suggests,

The pivotal scene at the fountain is described in detail from the perspectives of Briony, Cecilia, and Robbie, and so the reader is not only prompted to empathise with each, but also to choose between them, demonstrating how the reader is still in command of the ultimate meaning. (10)

The novel's expertise lies in its meticulous narration of the innermost thought process of each character. From a close reading of the novel, readers could fathom the peculiar pretexts which control every individual. A systematic analysis of the novel concludes that Freudian unconscious, the deciding factor of individual human behaviours, has an extremely significant role in regulating individuals good or bad practices. Hence, this paper attempts to derive a thorough study of the characters of *Atonement* with the backing of Freudian concepts.

Briony, an Order seeker

The protagonist of the novel, Briony, is portrayed as a typical order seeker. She has a peculiar character type with whom nobody can thoroughly be annoyed. At times the readers may feel furious about her behaviour, but the next moment one cannot help regretting about it. Her character demands both sympathy and moral rage from the readers. The readers will be tempted to sympathise with her when they figure out the rationales that trigger her behaviour. Though she is the villainess of the tragic story which is evident in the novel, her helplessness compels one to cope with her. It is her misconceived view of an incident that leads to further complications and the extreme tragedies in her and her family's life.

McEwan is hugely concerned about justifying his protagonist's behaviour. The novel has its beginning with the narration of the smart, lovely, and assertive thirteen-year-old protagonist Briony. From the initial narrations readers begin to form a kind of fondness towards her character. She is the author cum actor-director of her first drama *The Trials of Arabella*. McEwan goes on narrating how systematic and serious a writer a mere thirteen-year-old girl is. Order is a word which is very crucial in her life. It is very visible from her preparations for the performance of her drama. She wrote her first play "in a two-day tempest of composition, causing her to miss a breakfast and a lunch" (3). McEwan's narration on Briony and her room is proof of her admiration for order. McEwan depicts her: "She was one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so" (4). Her room was a shrine to her controlling demon, and hers was the only tidy room in their house. Everything in her place possessed a specific space and rank. They are with no imperfections. This behaviour further develops into a dislike towards the flaws of her fellow beings. McEwan narrates it with a touch of humour:

Her straight-backed dolls in their many-roomed mansion appeared to be under strict instructions not to touch the walls; the various thumb-sized figures to be

found standing about her dressing table – cowboys, deep-sea divers, humanoid mice – suggested by their even ranks and spacing a citizen’s army awaiting orders. (5)

Briony’s animosity concerning imperfections is evident from her bitterness towards her big sister’s room. She lives in a more imaginative realm of order and harmony than the realities out there in the world. Her world is more similar to the creative field of the fairy tales that she has been reading through. Even her writings are meant to create a specific order in a chaotic world. Juliette Wells emphasises this view in her essay on the novel, “Briony’s plans for her play fulfilled her need to exert control over her environment; McEwan emphasises too that the process of writing afforded Briony the gratification of creating a “world [. . .] in five pages” in which she could exercise her own principles of justice” (“Shades of Austen in IanMcEwan’s *Atonement*”, 103).

But the scene that she witnesses from the window of her nursery is something that is beyond her comprehension. Her sister, being humiliated by a man, whom she has considered as the ideal man of her life, is capable enough to destroy the orders in her organised world. So, she decides to re-establish the law that has been damaged by Robbie, her sister’s childhood friend and their charlady’s son. Here, her misconceived assessment of a mere adult play propels the terrible crime that she is about to commit. Briony’s disturbed mind becomes even more bitter from the isolation that she faces from the failure of her well-organised play. All on a sudden the harsh realities of the world manifests in front of her in the form of a disturbing demon. There she concludes that she can no more be a part of the fairy world of childhood and decides to write a plot . Even away from the childish fancies, she cannot part herself away from the idea of order.

Order must be imposed”, she feels as she comes up with the idea for a story in which “a man whom everybody liked”, is exposed by the heroine as being the “incarnation of evil”. Her organizing mind contradicts and competes against her discovery of a much more complex world than that which she is accustomed to. (Jensen 7-8)

Occupied with the preconceived notions of rightness, she fails to recognise the truth that is present in front of her. She instead engages herself in self-deception and is so adamant on establishing the truth which is more fit to her imaginative realm. It is Briony’s conditioned mind that triggers in her hatred towards Robbie. Without even pausing to think about the probabilities of the incident, she suspects him and opens his letter which is for Cecilia. The library scene further horrifies her and she names Robbie a sex-maniac. All these incidents persuade her to assume that it is Robbie who raped Lola despite her cousin’s lack of confirmation of the truth. McEwan here suggests how the eyes reflect the preconceived notions. He states, “It was not 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” (169). That is why she goes on with her confirmation that, “I saw him. I know it was him” (170). When she said it she was not dishonest, but she was confirming her perceived righteousness. But when the knowledge of the reality gets disclosed before her eyes, at the marriage of Lola and Paul Marshall, she gets shocked and decides to atone for the crime that she has committed. She leads the rest of her life by making amendments for her sin by utilising writing. In her novel *Atonement* she creates a fictional reality and in which she reunites the lovers, Robbie and Cecilia, even though the truth had separated them forever. Hence it shows her innocence and helplessness in controlling her actions.

Briony's character study, thus, depicts the influence of unconscious on human behaviour. In Briony's character one can see the reasons which motivate her crime. It has its origin in the pent-up frustrations of her psyche. Freudian analysis of unconscious, thus, confirms the role childhood experiences or past experiences play in deciding the adult behaviour of a person. In Briony's case, readers can grasp the influence of her childhood in determining her present.

Briony, an only child in a group of grown-ups' family, is practically lonely. Briony's loneliness naturally forces her into an imaginative realm. She enjoys reading fairy tales and lives in a fictitious world. It evidently prompts her to perceive things in the light of her knowledge that she earned from her books. So she is guided more by her preconceived knowledge than by reality before her eyes. She knows, well in advance, the flow of the incidents that are about to take place. For Briony, the scene near the fountain can be viewed only as a proposal of marriage. There is also a sequel to the continuation of events, that is, in McEwan's words: "the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal" (39). This is the suggestion that the girl's imaginative realm expects. But when something unexpected turns up, she falls into a state of dilemma and later reaches into a wrong conclusion.

Briony's strong desire to fix the wrongs emerges from her impending need to establish order. This might emerge from her need for attention. Briony is a typical attention seeker. A close analysis of her character provides umpteen numbers of proofs to this argument. All her actions are led by her need for attention, recognition, and affection. Briony's aspiration of becoming a writer is an indicator of her unfulfilled needs. She writes to get the attention of her parents and siblings. Věra Kutálková in her essay on Ian McEwan states about it:

Briony is searching for it, because her mother spends most of the time shut in her room due to sudden migraine attacks while her father works in civic administration and stays mostly in London. Her siblings are both much older and also away. Although Cecilia arrives home for the holidays and tries to compensate for their mother's lack of attention to Briony, she can never be able to fully take her place. Briony also suffers from the absence of her father, who she considers a "fixed point" in the family. Only "his presence imposed order and allowed freedom". Because of her father's absence, Briony has been searching for order by herself through her writing. ("Growing up" in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*", 14)

Briony's attempts to cover for her sister also comes from her desire for acceptance and affection from the elders. Its failure results in the ruination of the lives of the main characters, such as Robbie, Cecilia, and Briony. The words of appreciation elevate her spirits and she is ready to go to any extent for this unconscious need. She even dreams of her brother's appreciative and proud words to his friends about his sister who is a great writer. Even her attempts at reconciliation and the life of atonement indicate her longing to regain the lost affection and acceptance that she had with her sister and Robbie.

Modern child development theories also emphasize the importance of healthy childhood experiences in moulding adults of greatness and calibre. Famous child psychologist Elizabeth B. Hurlock speaks about the importance of family in moulding responsible and socially fit individuals. She states, "From contacts with family members, children lay the foundations for attitudes toward people, things and life in general. They also lay the foundations for patterns of adjustment and learn to think of themselves as the members of the family think of them" (*Child Development*, 494). Thus, we can see the

influence of unconscious in controlling human lives. Individual persons like Briony shouldn't be accused for such behavioural problems which one cannot control. Thus, Ian McEwan makes a perfect behavioural study of human beings through his fictional character Briony.

Robbie Turner

Robbie Turner is the second most important character in *Atonement*. Like Briony, Robbie also dreams about a bright future which will bestow him with the opportunity to fulfil his wishes that the past has denied him. He too is a victim of the unpleasant past experiences. Robbie's position as the son of a lowly charlady leaves him with bitterness in his growth to adulthood. It is very visible from his behaviour in the university. He is determined to keep a distance from Cecilia and their meetings end up in awkwardness. His rude behaviour towards his childhood friend springs up from his lack self-esteem.

Robbie's desire to be a successful doctor can be interpreted as his efforts to gain what was denied to him by the society. As a fatherless low class child he had no rights for his choices. His life was always under somebody's generosity. Even in the university everything was chosen for him by his professor. So, he is determined to make a choice for himself by choosing medicine. McEwan is very specific in revealing such minute but important details to throw light upon the psychological effects that individuals bear. He justifies Robbie's motives behind his decision to choose medical profession,

For Robbie the matter was simpler and more personal: his practical nature and his frustrated scientific aspirations would find an outlet, he would have skills far more elaborate than the ones he had acquired in practical criticism, and above all he would have made his own decision. He would take lodgings in a strange town – and begin. (91)

The intensity of hatred that he develops against Briony is a proof to his frustration derived from denied wishes. His longing to become a father also come from his desire to give what was denied to him by destiny. Thus one can see how relevant and helpful the Freudian ideas are in understanding individuals.

Emily Tallis

Emily Tallis is a character, who, with her absence makes her presence in the novel. One could see her as always withdrawn and away from the responsibilities of a mother. From a keen analysis of her character the readers can understand that she is the one who is responsible for all the tragic incidences of her family. It is her irresponsibility as a mother that leaves her children in a total dilemma. But McEwan is very keen on justifying her strange behaviours by presenting the reasons behind her failure as a mother and a wife. Her childhood memories reveal that she too was a child who was always neglected by the elders because of her pretentious and desperate showy sister. Even as a grown up woman she cannot remember it without bitterness. She ponders: “There were always adults available to encourage this relentless preening” (147). She is more of a “wronged child, (and) wronged wife” (148). So she escapes into her comfort zone by leaving her responsibilities behind. As she fails to get attention from others, she develops a tendency to withdraw from situations which demands her actions. Her migraine is the physical expression of this mental conflict. She tries hard to protect the lonely child in her with the defence mechanism of denial. This involves blocking external events from becoming part of her conscious. In denial she lives in her comfort zone. “She did not wish to know why Jack spent so many consecutive nights in London. Or rather, she did not wish to be told” (149). All these characteristics in her behaviour thus explains how human behaviour gets controlled by the past experiences.

Other Characters

Other major characters such as Cecilia, Lola, Jackson, Pierrot,

Leon, Paul Marshall, and Jack are no exceptions to the influence of their past over deciding their present and future lives. Cecilia's untidy surroundings reveal her inner state of confusion and instability. Cecilia's room reflects the interior dilemma with which she lives. McEwan narrates her room as a "stew of unclosed books, unfolded clothes, unmade bed, (and) unemptied ashtrays" (4-5). She is forced to take the responsibility of her family because of the unavailability of her parents and her easy going brother. This leaves her in a state of dilemma.

Lola is yet another important character whose behaviour is a proof to the influence of parents on their children. McEwan narrates her, "it was mummy whose spirit she was keeping alive" (147). She, like her mummy and so many other characters in the novel is "bound by an iron principle of self-love" (147). Her self-love goes to the extent of even cheating others. Like her mother, she succeeds in finding her happiness at the cost of others. In other characters like Jack, Leon, Paul Marshall etc. one can apprehend the influence of the unconscious.

Conclusion

The mental trauma the characters of the novel undergo is the result of the repressed feelings in the unconscious. Each of them has their own ways of ventilating it. Briony sublimates her repressed feelings and becomes a successful writer. But other characters are not that successful in turning their bitter experiences into salvific ones. Briony is the representative of the flawed humans who needs redemption through sublimation. McEwan's successful exploration into the inscape of human psyche, thus, reveals the basic reasons behind human behaviours and the means to overcome it. Briony shows, how human beings can overcome the problems of their lives by positively sublimating it.

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