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Light of Narration and Shadow of Narrator In

Ian Mcewan's *Atonement*

Abstract

Ian McEwan has used a wide range of narrative techniques in his novel *Atonement*. As the title of the novel suggest it is the story of confession to atone one's sin. Briony the protagonist as well as the author of the first three parts of the novel commits a grave sin and she uses literature as a mean to atone her crime. This paper mainly focuses on how the modernist discursive narrative strategies help both Briony and McEwan in shaping up the novel. Use of metanarrative devices, third person point of view and focalization will justify how the light of narration shadows the various narrators to express their different ideas that sums up into a novel.

An art is a conscious mixture of one's talent and imagination. The core concept of any art is its ability to arouse feelings and emotions, which makes it a beautiful and meaningful literary piece of work. The aesthetic beauty of any literary work increases with the successful mingling of various narrative styles and by the proper use of modernist discursive techniques. McEwan's *Atonement* published in 2001 is a combination of traditional realistic narratives, self-conscious devices and many modern experimental techniques. It became a bestselling book nationally and internationally. It is made into a film in 2007. This novel has achieved many awards and honour like the National Book Critics Circle in 2003. For this novel,

McEwan became the contender for Man Booker International Prize two times, in 2005 and in 2007.

Atonement is divided into four parts. The first part begins on a hot day of June 1935, where a thirteen year old, Briony Tallis witnesses many new incidents that leads her to carry out a crime. Her big brother Leon is coming home from London with his friend Paul Marshall. Her older sister Cecilia also has just returned from Cambridge with Robbie Turner, their childhood friend and son of the Tallis' cleaning lady. Her cousins from north, nine year old twins Pierrot and Jackson, and their fifteen year old sister Lola are also visiting their house. Briony has written a play *Trials of Arabella* to commemorate the returning of Leon. She starts rehearsing it with her cousins. But the play is not performed. Cecilia and Robbie experience an increasing pull of attraction for each other, which confuses both them and Briony. The sight of her sister stripping of her clothes and diving into the fountain to get back the piece of a broken vase in Robbie's presence is mistaken by Briony as an act of molestation. Briony's doubt grows as she reads a sexually explicit letter by Robbie to Cecilia. Then she witnesses the love making scene of Robbie and Cecilia in library and these all make her to regard Robbie as a sex 'maniac' - a term presented by Lola (McEwan 119). Later in the evening the twins escapes and when everyone is busy searching them Lola is raped. Briony sees a man run away and misinterprets him to be Robbie.

Part two take place five years later. Robbie has been in prison due to Briony's false accusation and now he is a soldier. Cecilia believes Robbie to be innocent and so she has distanced herself from her family and has become a nurse. They both stay in touch through letters.

Part three take place in London hospital the same year. Briony too is a nurse now. She has realized her mistake and she expresses her regret to Cecilia. Here it is confirmed that the true rapist was Paul Marshall and not Robbie.

Final part is an epilogue where we come to know that the previous three parts are Briony's own story, her lifelong attempt to make atonement for the crime she committed in 1935.

The final twist of disclosing the identity of actual narrator is what makes the novel worth re-reading. When the novel is read for the first time we consider McEwan to be the only author. But the epilogue forces us to re-evaluate the text with new light on characters and perspectives. We are informed that what we read was actually Briony's recreation of her past which haunts her throughout her life. It is her attempt to atone for her sins which she commits due to her inability to differentiate the reality from fiction.

Unlike the traditional narrative *Atonement* causes the reader a sequence of images, scenes, and illusions, by changing the character, notion, time and space. Sometimes there is a link between the adjoining paragraphs or parts. To be aware about the moving story the reader of *Atonement* must keep reading, memorizing and seeking each action seriously. *Atonement* basically is the story that describes the formation of another story, making it a metanarrative piece of work. McEwan uses unique metanarrative devices like prolepsis (foreshadowing) and analepsis (flashback) to present the ongoing actions of the novel in detail. McEwan emerges the linear growth of time, sometimes he portrays about the future events, sometimes he looks back to reveal things that happened in the past. For example, chapter six ends with Emily's meditation in bed where as chapter seven turns the picture to the island temple. Here McEwan alters the passage of time. The lapse of time is confusing, with the mention of future at the very beginning: "Within the half hour Briony would commit her crime" (156). Then the story moves back to Briony's search for the lost twins. Such prolepsis is not very clear to the first time reader. In the end of part two, Robbie is sick. His friend asks him to be quiet, and Robbie answers: "I promise you won't hear another word from me" (265). On reading it for the second time we will realize that it was a hint and that

Robbie will die and stop talking forever. This is a perfect example of prolepsis. The passing time, to and forth, controls the reader's expectation and understanding of the event influencing the creative mind of an author.

With the protagonist, Briony, a passionate writer, we get to see the mechanics behind the novel's formation and numerous outcomes that this action involves. Briony Tallis the author of the first three parts is aware about the last part of the novel. So, she is an intradiegetic narrator. Thus, Briony misuses her authorial power and filter her point of view about her fellow characters' conscience. This ventures her to recreate the past event and her own younger self likewise. In some way she masters what might not have even been in her real idea. While writing her novel, she actually goes through the story of her crime many time consistently, alleviating it through all her character's psyche, she in the end concludes this with her last draft and explaining it as her atonement in the diary entry provided in the epilogue by extradiegetic narrator, McEwan.

Briony wants to present her story in a more reliable way. So she uses third person point of view and focalization. The shifting third person perspective of first three parts is among Emily, Cecilia, Lola and Robbie. The coating of narrative outlook handles the notion of truth as a greasy and personal thing. In the end narrative shift to first personal narration, Briony an old women determined by neurological dysfunction. This part brings out the truth – the reunion of lovers, Robbie and Cecilia was just an imaginary creation to fuel up Briony's atonement. The guilt she faces makes her fill out the time by scavenging through war museum archives. The Dunkrik retreat is also revealed as a fact provided by Nettle, a comrade of Robbie in his old age. We are now completely aware that her story is a penance for her terrible untruth she once told because of her naïve imaginative character. This makes the whole narrator unreliable as it becomes difficult for readers to believe what is truth and what is not. She has beautifully adorned her novel to suit her purpose by creating a happy

ending. Cecilia and Robbie are reunited at least in fiction. But this pleasure last only for a while as the truth is revealed in the epilogue about their death.

Use of focalization is the second technique of reliability. These two concepts work in concurrence to the authority of characterization and to focus on the various versions of reality. This technique makes us aware about the reliability of narrators. Emily at one moment believes of Briony's false accusation of Robbie having raped Lola. Here we understand that Emily knows nothing about her own daughter Briony who in her imaginative world is incapable to differentiate reality from the fiction which she creates. This shows that Emily is also remote in believing that she is aware of everything but reality is she lives in her own world away from the reality. There are diverse kinds of focalization, such as internal and external. Briony as a narrator uses technique of internal focalization, since the events in the novel are viewed through the point of view of the character in it. Whereas McEwan's character Briony in her role as author is an external focalizer, as everything we read in the first three parts are filtered through her own psyche and pen.

Briony wants to instruct the truth so she has selected the means that gives her the most reliability: using third person point of view and focalization which creates the illusion of being heterodiegetic and covert. According to Jahn "a homodiegetic narrator always tells the story of personal experience, whereas heterodiegetic narrator tells a story about other people's experience" (Helander 14). A heterodiegetic always remain outside the main story, where they get a chance to operate a story as they want. As Jahn puts it "heterodiegetic narrators typically assume the position of omniscience... as if this were the most natural thing in the world." (14) Briony thus desires remoteness among her two selves because as narrator she is conscious that she has carried out a crime, and in her venture to atone for it, she desires to distance herself from the person she once was. Briony produces an illusion of being a covert narrator because regardless of the truth that she is talking about her own life, she

presents it as a third person to avoid her readers from realizing that a text is an autodiegetic narrative- “a special case of homodiegetic narration... in which the narrator is the protagonist of his or her story.”(14) This is depicted clearly as Briony hides behind another character that is her own character in the novel.

A writer's choice of narrator is important to discern the readers of the novel. Thus, the use of narrative technique justify that it plays a major role in presenting authors idea. In the article of Brian Finney, *Briony's Stand against Oblivion : The making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's Atonement* (2004) he identifies novel as being about the writing and making of fiction. this truly mean that it was only these narrative techniques that helped McEwan to create such widely acclaimed work. Although this work became popular only through many shortcomings like accusation of plagiarism of the wartime memoirs of a fellow novelist, Lucilla Andrews, then about McEwan's divorce story and his discovery of his adopted brother. Still we cannot neglect McEwan's ability to create such a story within a story, completely a new style of presenting once idea in a work of fiction. By analyzing both a realistic and a modern narrative in the story, McEwan presents a stimulated universe, in which character is set forth as credible, and by positioning both literary and ideological notions, he attains upshot plausibility. McEwan implicitly tells the reader that these narrative styles were chosen to make Briany portray each of the focal character's perspective in her act of atonement.

The concept of using various narrative strategies to show the ways in which you can bring out a message through literature is what I believe adorns the main theme in the novel: how Briony through literature tries to atone for the harm she causes as a child. She tries to achieve a different reality to blend her faults in her fiction and this is what McEwan strives to illustrate by accepting different modes of narrations. Through literature he tries to bring out the consequences that literature has – it may be demonstrated as reality but it is necessary to

recollect how fiction will always have certain angle that strives to convey the message that an author intent.

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