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Shifting Signifiers and Self-Referentiality in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*, a seminal work first published in 2001, is a new perspective on a major historical event, World War II. The metafiction novel was adapted into an award-winning film in 2007. The novel deploys structure, form and language to unique effect. Interspersed with the many narratives of the characters within the book, McEwan plays with words and meaning to bring out their essential unreliability. The novel uses a quintessential modernist technique, the stream of consciousness. However, while other writers in the past used this in order to show a train of thought, McEwan employs it to further enrich the modernist construction. The method he uses is to pick up a situation in the novel, and then present it from varied points of view. This achieves a dual purpose, firstly, to question the nature of reality and fixed meaning, and secondly, to bring out the fact that history itself is a construct and passes down through the coloured perspectives of its narrators.

At the level of language, a poststructuralist reading of *Atonement* would lead to many fruitful conclusions. McEwan debates with the idea of innate meaning and follows the poststructuralist idea that meaning is derived in relation to others. The text is entirely dependent on interpretation and there is no one right or correct way of reading it. D'Angelo asks, "Who is the 'reader' of a text in light of postmodern and poststructuralist theory? Do signs embedded within a text point toward a 'correct' reading, or do individual readers determine anew their own authoritative meaning?" (89). Thus, meaning is deferred and formulated keeping in mind who is granting it at the time. The role of language and its interpretation is major in the novel through the establishment of the various characters' relationship with literature. Briony, the protagonist, is a litterateur and her vision of the world is that of an author's. Both the lovers, Robbie and Cecilia, are described as avid readers. Robbie at many points attempts to write and put his feelings into words. Their argument over the relative merits of Richardson and Fielding in Chapter Two allows for the possibility of multiple perspectives on a text, even a canonical one. *Atonement* also questions the simplistic reading of a text through Briony's evolution as a writer. To elaborate, the novel follows a trajectory from the classic realist idea of language to the poststructuralist, deconstructionist one. The move is from stable referents and fixed signifiers to ambiguous and shifting ones. The child Briony's idea is that:

A story was direct and simple, allowing nothing to come between herself and her reader- no intermediaries with their private ambitions or incompetence, no pressures of time, no limits on resources...a story was a form of telepathy....Reading a sentence and understanding it were the same thing; as with the crooking of a finger, nothing lay between them. There was no gap during which the symbols were unravelled. You saw the word *castle* and it was there... (*Atonement* 37).

These lines are a classic example of the self-belief in Briony that she is almost like a magician with words and that they function at her beck and call, mirroring the

smugness of the humanist or realist writer that the conveyance of their intended meaning is a magical, seamless process. On the above extract, D'Angelo remarks:

Briony's description of the reader's relationship to a text seems little more than a form of mental telepathy, through which words and symbols transmit an author's meaning into the reader's mind, and no linguistic 'gap' exists. Presented early in the novel, the passage serves an ironic function for introducing McEwan's stance on the readers' relationship to his text (93).

This idea of the direct relationship between words and signifiers undergoes a sea change later, when she realises that this relationship is after all, strictly arbitrary. At the very end of the novel, her radical ideological transformation is reflected in the remark, "When I am dead, and the Marshalls are dead, and the novel is finally published, we will only exist as my inventions. Briony will be as much of a fantasy as the lovers who shared a bed in Balham and enraged their landlady" (*Atonement* 371).

This abdication of control over her own writing and admission that she has absolutely no power over how it will be interpreted reflects the long hard road from the amateur to the experienced that she has crossed over the years. The slightly priggish, self-righteous, smug child Briony has attained maturity and recognised her own helplessness in the face of the infinite possibilities of words and signifiers. Added, it shows the modernist revolution in language and the way in which representational codes have changed. Language can no longer be believed as forming a direct link between word and meaning. Briony's transformation is at many levels, above all, that of language. Her understanding of language games also parallels her movement from innocence to experience, and from a romanticised view of life to a critical one. This makes us think, as readers, of our own ideals at certain points in life and the transformation they undergo on reaching a stage of maturity.

Atonement then questions meanings, signifiers and the presence of a transcendent and states that the transfer of meaning is unstable and floating. This poststructuralist view is enhanced when D'Angelo adds, "She will experience a literal 'death of the author' after which only the text will remain" (102). The stage at which the author truly understands her calling is when she can embrace or at least accept the possibility of her eventual self-effacement. The idea of misreading as a theme takes these points further. There is a series of misunderstandings in the novel showing the floating poststructuralist signifier. Cecilia and Robbie misinterpret each other's intentions constantly, the family fails to see the signs of Paul Marshall's guilt and instead sees the so-called guilt of Robbie. The latter interprets Cecilia's undressing in front of him as a means to humiliate him. On the other hand, Cecilia thinks it was "reckless, ridiculous and above all, shaming" (*Atonement* 107). There is a "growing diversity of narrative viewpoints" (Noakes and Reynolds 34) that weave into a complex web by the end which is exceedingly difficult to disentangle. Finney asks, "Is not this succession of misinterpretations of the facts aimed at McEwan's implied reader? Is it not intended to prevent the reader from misinterpreting the long Part One as a classic realist text?" (80). The use of intertextuality also makes it different from the classic realist text and moves it towards the poststructuralist one since the comparisons and references increase the range of significations and meanings, proliferating narratives and perspectives. Language is often used to conceal rather than reveal. It proves to be difficult, always, to excavate Briony's motivations. There

are a vast number of versions of the truth and myriad hidden layers. The narrative itself is used to conceal and at many points, the truth is almost entirely reworked. For instance, in the first draft of the protagonist's novel, which she seemingly writes to give a voice to the lovers' story and her own role, she receives a response from the editors in the form of a letter. When discussing the fountain scene, the editor writes:

If this girl has so fully misunderstood or been so wholly baffled by the strange little scene that has unfolded before her, how might it affect the lives of the two adults? Might she come between them in some disastrous fashion? Or bring them closer, either by design or accident? (*Atonement* 313).

This startling statement reveals the extent to which Briony has manipulated the truth. She has completely concealed her role in the story and after all, succumbed to fear or guilt or cowardice. She says she is atoning but that also turns out to be a lie because she hides her crime. "In Part One, McEwan reflects upon language's separate materiality, its arbitrary (in the form of Saussurian linguistics) relationship with the world it represents, from a conspicuously postmodern point of view..." (Wells 104). Words and their ambiguous relationship with truth are seen throughout in various situations. The conversation between Lola and Paul in Chapter Five plays with words and their undercurrents. The innocence of Lola and her age makes her unable to comprehend Paul's double meanings. Lines spoken by her also reflect the disjunction between what is said and what is meant. The words "Then I'll thank you not to talk about them in front of the children" (*Atonement* 59) are misleading when read out of context. One needs to remember that despite the pomposity, they are actually being spoken by a child. There is also, like in the dining table scene, a sense of much going on that is not decipherable through the words spoken. The sexual undercurrents in the conversation are meant to be noticed by the reader and are not referred to overtly. The words "come back" that Cecilia uses to comfort Briony in her childhood reverberate throughout the text, each time acquiring a different meaning. They are used by her to still Robbie's rage during the reunion scene. They are used as a plea to him when he is arrested and is departing for prison. They can symbolically indicate Briony's own descent into forgetfulness and oblivion through the disease vascular dementia from which there is no return. These words are profound also because they can be a plea to come back from the innocence that has been lost, and from the split, the destruction and the alienation of the family and the various relationships. They take on tragic overtones by the end of the novel because from none of the above situations is it possible to 'come back.' Derrida's theory states that words change when taken out of their contexts into different ones and this is a strong instance.

Atonement is unique because it is an emotionally intense, human novel yet calls attention to the constructedness of its own self. It combines the humanist with the poststructuralist because it discusses with psychological skill a lived experience, yet intermingles it with a dubious narrative. Perhaps most intriguing of all, it questions its own truth and value. It even throws into doubt the texts and literary traditions it relies on; for instance, the stable world created in Austen and other Victorian novels is questioned. According to Head, "what is unsettling about *Atonement* is the manner in which its own aesthetic structure, and the inherited literary tradition on which it feeds, is partly undermined" (Head 25). Such reasons are probably why it is difficult to fit it into a particular genre or category.

The self referentiality of the text calls to mind the role of fiction in *Atonement*, which is profoundly significant and challenged at many levels. McEwan and his protagonist lay much emphasis on the act of writing as an instrument of atonement. In a state of overwhelming guilt, writing can possibly provide catharsis and compensation. However, both are ultimately proven to be wrong. According to D'Angelo, "Although atonement is only possible through the act of writing, the result of that writing remains limited by the restrictions of fiction. To put it simply, fiction cannot absolve or undo transgressions that have taken place in the real world" (88). In order to solve this problem, the author places the entire onus on the reader who needs to exercise his/her own judgement. The reader is given ethical responsibility to provide the final word or opinion. As D'Angelo remarks, in this book it is up to the reader to "grant or deny Briony's atonement" (101). There is much emphasis on the development of the writer and Briony's journey then becomes not just a journey from guilt to atonement, or from innocence to experience, but also a road to discovery of what being a writer truly means. She starts out at the beginning of the novel with the extremely narcissistic view that as an author, she has the right to know everything. She is so self-enclosed that she does not recognise even the existence of other people. She does not consider that Cecilia and Robbie, for instance, are real people, with their "own, better informed perspectives [and not just] source material for her imagination" (Childs 135). The arrogance of an author in general is brought out through the representative figure here. She says "It was wrong to open people's letters, but it was right, it was essential, for her to know everything" (*Atonement* 113). There is an inherent unshakeable belief here that she has a right over everything and everyone because she herself is placed, in her own mind, on a superior moral vantage point. This proprietorial attitude over other people almost makes her in particular and the writer in general appear like a totalitarian dictator. Briony is shown as labouring under the delusion that she has a license to judge people and turn their life and pain into stories. She has delusions of omnipotence and believes herself to be God who has "absolute power of deciding outcomes" (*Atonement* 379) It becomes a seizure of power that is disturbing and self-defeating. This is also the moral dilemma of the author in general which troubles McEwan and which he has expressed in many of his interviews. The question is, what right do authors have to use other people's personal lives as subjects of their art? Thus, while McEwan has a somewhat simplistic view of the moral imagination possessing the power to reform, he also critiques it in the novel, pointing out that this kind of faith can be debilitating and dangerous. The novelist cannot be seen as a God-like figure. Head talks about the role of ethics in the position of the novelist, in the way in which "the novelist takes inspiration from the lives and accounts of other individuals" (Head 166). Briony feels the right over everyone's lives simply because she is an author. What is the moral basis behind using their lives for a story, even if it is for atonement? The role of fiction is also problematised. Briony believes throughout that her fiction has the solid purpose of setting the record straight. Towards the end of the text, we come across these lines "I've regarded it as my duty to disguise nothing- the names, the places, the exact circumstances- I put it all there as a matter of historical record" (369). However, the novel again takes its usual technique of undercutting this sentence by the next one, "But as a matter of legal reality, so various editors have told me over the years, my forensic memoir could never be published while my fellow criminals were alive...To be safe, one would have to be bland and obscure" (369). Additionally, she also remarks casually that she has made "half a dozen different drafts" (369). This, of course, makes the reader wonder just which draft he/she has read (Wells 107). The protagonist's

upholding of the value of fiction is invalidated here, bringing out the shortcomings in the theory of the redeeming power of fiction. Another reason she writes is the major one of compensating and atoning to them for destroying their lives. This again brings out the problematic nature of fiction. Is it really true that her intentions are noble towards the lovers or is it that she is 'using' them for the purposes of her fiction? The novel is morally ambiguous because is Briony atoning for the characters or are they merely puppets or instruments in her writing? Also, the idea is put forth that pleasure takes precedence over truth, not just in *Atonement*, but in all forms of writing in general. Bradley remarks that "the childish desire to please and be pleased is what writing and reading novels, even this one, are all about. We are all Brionys" (28). Thus, it is not as if the aesthetic value of her writing is overlooked by Briony in the face of her moral obligations to her sister. In this light, she covers up the fact that the lovers actually died without ever being re-united and instead creates an alternative ending that caters to wish fulfilment:

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? I couldn't do it to them (*Atonement* 371).

The author has after all, made her choice; that her book should appeal is prioritised over and above the truth. The novel brings up similar moral questions but does not really resolve them. That is the point of the fiction in *Atonement*; that moralities and dilemmas do not really have a clear answer. However, there is also a contradiction within the exploration of fiction; the author does not provide a morally correct position or even a model for one but on the other hand he talks about the dangers of misreading and hiding the truth in fiction. He is clearly against the manipulation of words in a literary composition while at the same time bringing out the arbitrariness of language. Is the book projecting that if one deviates from actuality in writing, such as Briony does, the consequences are disastrous? In that case, it is certainly defining actuality and creating fixities.

To examine a differing trajectory from the above as one of the stances of *Atonement*, it calls attention to the fictive nature of its own story and discusses the way in which fiction questions truth. This kind of exploration places it in the category of a postmodernist text and is a recurring strand in much of McEwan's work. To establish the fictionality, it works on a paradox. It creates characters and a tragedy that require emotional investment and then argues that they are created or constructed. This has shock value especially because it is discovered when it is too late, so to speak, that is, when the emotional attachment has probably already taken place. The attempt is to shake the reader out of his/her complacency and enforce a re-examination of traditional belief in stability and structure. As Head points out, "The novel form is used in *Atonement* to raise questions about morality and authorship in a highly self-conscious way, while simultaneously and paradoxically casting doubt on the novel as an inherently moral medium" (Head 162). McEwan believes that fiction has social purpose, and that the moral imagination can be used for reform. On the other hand, *Atonement* has an ambiguous position on this subject because the suffering is not only for the guilty but also the innocent. Perhaps it really means to convey the message that fiction need not take a moral position but has a powerful role

in providing a canvas for exploring many issues and enabling participation and thought on them.

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