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Love as Trauma: Revisiting Joe Wright's *Atonement*

Adnan Mushtaq¹, Prof:Sadaf Shah²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Jammu, Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir, India

Email: syedadnanmushtaq512@gmail.com

²Professor, Department of English, University of Jammu, Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir, India.

Email: aiz_syed@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper examines romantic love in the film *Atonement* as a traumatic experience structured through the concept of 'belatedness,' as theorized by Cathy Caruth. Rather than presenting love as immediate or fulfilled, the film constructs it as something understood only after its irreversible disruption. The study argues that trauma does not simply interrupt love but constitutes its meaning through temporal delay and retrospective recognition. Briony Tallis's false accusation functions as the central traumatic event whose consequences are not fully grasped at the moment of occurrence but unfold belatedly across time, transforming intimacy into absence and deferred meaning. Cecilia and Robbie's relationship exemplifies this belated structure, as their love persists not in lived presence but through memory, letters, and imagined futures. The film's non-linear narrative, repetition of key scenes, and shifting perspectives visually enact belatedness, reinforcing the instability of truth and the impossibility of immediate comprehension. Briony's later act of storytelling emerges as a delayed attempt to understand and reconfigure the past, yet it ultimately exposes the limits of narrative in recovering trauma. By foregrounding belatedness, this paper demonstrates that *Atonement* reconceptualizes love as a temporally dislocated experience, defined by absence, delay, and irreversible loss.

Keywords : *Belatedness, Trauma, Romantic Love, Memory, Narrative Structure.*

Introduction

Romantic love has long been represented in literature and cinema as a coherent and fulfilling emotional experience, often culminating in reconciliation, union, or closure. In this sense love acts as a centripetal force which acts as a catalyst to the resolution of conflicts and as a reconcentrating power for the restoration of narrative. A key organizing principle, love often seems to triumph where misunderstanding and social division let people down, as well as historical disruption in classical tragedy, realist fiction, and contemporary film. Although the experience of an obstacle is typically placed in the context of the possibility of ultimate recovery, the narrative of emotional experience is generally presented as coherent and as being open to resolution (Whitehead 3). Romantic love is frequently understood as an emotional attachment grounded in intimacy, continuity, and mutual recognition. Erich Fromm conceptualizes love as a mode of emotional connection shaped through care, attachment, and emotional continuity (23), while Roland Barthes associates love with longing, absence, and anticipation rather than fulfilment (13). Similarly, Julia Kristeva understands love as a fragmented emotional experience closely linked with memory and subjective instability (5), whereas bell hooks defines love through emotional vulnerability, care, and openness (15). These understandings become particularly significant in *Atonement*, where love survives not through stable presence but through memory, separation, and deferred emotional recognition. *Atonement*, however, defies this tradition in terms of love as fulfilled but also perhaps as unfulfilled, when the past and the present do not align, and when the moments do not connect, where seeing is temporary, and in the midst of delay, absence, and loss. The relationship between Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner exists between memory and anticipation, thus never realizing time of life. But their love is not fulfilled in the union, but in the memory of the love, in the longing for love, in the anticipation of the love to come, but not actually touch them together.

This disruption of romantic continuity necessitates a theoretical framework that not only addresses the emotional dimensions of rupture but also accounts for the temporal dislocations that shape such experiences. The concept of belatedness serves as a central paradigm for this transformation in this paper. Belatedness is related to the temporal structure of trauma, where an experience of trauma doesn't happen in real time, but is processed later and repeated in a delayed fashion. Caruth explains that trauma is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (4) which makes it appear later in sketched-out representations, making them disjointed or out of turn. In this context trauma is not a one off, but a process that takes a lifetime, there is always a temporal gap between experiencing trauma and understanding it because the event cannot be fully comprehended immediately (Caruth 5). Dominick LaCapra similarly argues that trauma repeatedly returns through unresolved memory, causing the past to persist within the present (LaCapra 21). It is not the on-the-spot nature of an emerging significance that is important, but the delayed return of it, for which understanding may only occur *ex post facto*, after the onset (Caruth 6).

Atonement constructs a temporal lag as both an architectural and emotional experience. The tension of the film has its focus around a crucial moment in which Briony Tallis falsely accuses Robbie Turner, triggering irreversible ruptures whose consequences are not immediately understood. While Briony acts as a conduit for perception, her imagination and narrative expectations fall to comprehend the situation in the moment and towards the failure of immediate cognition that is a hallmark of trauma theory. Their relationship shifts from physical presence to emotional absence of the instability of perception itself, of images being perceived not only through the subject's perspectives, but also through the subject's sensory appropriations (Caruth 7). Only later, when the ramifications of her action become apparent, does the meaning of her action become apparent. This belatedness serves as an example because

these events are unknown at the time of their occurrence but reappear later as knowledge, guilt, and as a reconstruction of events as narrative (Caruth 8).

The difference in time has serious ramifications for the depiction of love. At the outset it appears there is the potential for a consummation of Robbie and Cecilia's relationship, but Briony's accusation cuts short of it. But this interruption is not just an erasure of love, rather it is an aftertaste of love. Their relationship shifts between memory and the present moment. In absence, letters, imagination, and remembrance preserve emotional connection. This fragmented movement between past and present reflects what Anne Whitehead describes as trauma narratives that are "disrupted" and "fractured in time" (9). with the past lingering in the present in "unstable" ways (Whitehead 9) ways. This is seen in *Atonement*, where love is not real, but can be remembered as such after it has been forgotten.

Robbie's letters represent a delayed form of emotional expression to Cecilia. They lack an immediate connection, but they are a delayed form of expression of emotion containing the idea of "not there." Language is a way in which love is kept alive and is displaced as well, revealing the gap between feeling and articulating. In much the same way love develops when one is not around Robbie; Robbie is more attached to Cecilia when she's not there. This is in keeping with Caruth describes trauma as "belated," meaning that it is understood only after the event has occurred (10).

The film's narrative shape further emphasizes the lateness of the situation, through the non-linear narration, reiteration, and multiple point of view. The most important events are addressed several times, with each reworking adding a twist of the meaning. "This repetition has nothing to do with clarity; it is merely the strengthening of the fragility of truth. Mood and feeling are created in the camera's handling of time and perspective" (Bordwell and Thompson 75); how the narrative is created is far from linear and can defy logic and order. In *Atonement* this formal structure is echoed in temporal disjunction of trauma, and reinterpretations of meaning.

This repetition also "involves" the viewer in the structure of belatedness. The initial presentation puts events in particular ways such that they are accepted as Briony's narration. However, as other ideologies appear, this knowledge is disrupted, leading to a revaluation of a previously held, assumed knowledge. The viewer also participates in this delayed recognition and perceives this belatedness in the same way that the characters do, thus creating a reception of this delayedness as a condition both inside the story and in the perception of the viewer.

Again, Briony's telling of the story later in the book is another example. When she is older, she tries to make sense of her past using a story, in order to have an answer for that deficiency. But her imagined conclusion towards meeting Cecilia and Robbie again does not alleviate trauma, it shows it to be ongoing. While the effort to tell a trauma story might capture some phenomena of trauma, it cannot definitively tell the story; it can only point to its incompleteness: "Narrating the Trauma Does Not Completely Tell It" (Caruth 11). Briony's story is therefore of engagement delayed: understanding sought but never complete.

The act of Cecilia and Robbie never being reunited is a moment of delayed truth. That hidden disclosure calls for a rewriting of the entire story, and thus for its reinterpretation. Trauma narratives often reveal fragmentation and instability (Luckhurst 80). In *Atonement*, this constant movement between past and present ends in fragmentation rather than resolution. The novel offers no true closure because the past cannot be repaired. Love is understood only after loss, becoming something emotionally real yet impossible to recover.

Atonement foregrounds the belatedness of love, a dislocated temporal experience of delay, of the absence, of retroactive meaning. Love cannot be lived in the present but can only manifest in senses of memory and reinterpretation. The distance between the two love stories of Cecilia and Robbie between the here and the now has not resulted in their disappearance from lived reality, nor is it a remedy to their romantic struggles. It is not a present reality, but a

fragmented and postponed reality that holds Cecilia and Robbie together, through longing and imagination. The film represents a change in the traditional descriptions of romance and attempts to broaden the scope of trauma theory: trauma is not limited to the realm of violence but can involve intimate emotional experiences.

Finally, this paper calls for a rethinking of love as a structure formed only in its absence, a late final structure, or practice in which meaning can be seen to emerge only once the beloved has been lost. In applying Caruth's notion of belatedness, the study reveals how the film rediscovers the film's emotional experience as one that can be defined in terms of temporal disjunction. Love is part of the trauma, not a reaction to it, and shows the depth to which time, memory and feeling are intertwined.

Belated Trauma and Love in Absence

Atonement's narrative revolves around Briony Tallis's wrong accusation against Robbie Turner, a moment that has a narrative and emotional impact on both that is irrevocable. However, in the pivotal moment that occurs, this moment is not captured in its full meaning. Briony's perspective is influenced by her imaginative structure, her positioning within literary literacies, and her try to structure and straighten out ambivalent scenarios. Her act of witnessing turns into an act of misreading, and that is when perceptions are filtered by narrative expectation instead of reality. Consequently, whatever narrative she constructs, it has repercussions that cannot be known to her. She doesn't truly understand the escalation of her act until she faces the repercussions of her stirring accusation in its consequences. Rodriguez's discovery of the photograph in the later moment also resonates with Cathy Caruth's definition of the experience of trauma, which comes into awareness after the fact, often in a delayed more remote form, and after the event's completion (Caruth 4-5).

The delay in understanding trauma is not limited to Briony alone; it also shapes the emotional lives of Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner. Initially, there is tension, attraction and misunderstanding, hinting of a romantic fulfilment. This is represented in the fountain scene, when Briony watches as Robbie accidentally smashes a vase, and Cecilia takes off her clothes to throw herself into the fountain. Due to Briony's lack of insight, she sees them as odd and threatening but not intimate. In the same way, the later library scene, when Cecilia finally admits to her longing for Robbie and Robbie to his for Cecilia, is misinterpreted by Briony, who sees it as a fantasy and a moral failing rather than it being the reality of adults.

The intimacies between Cecilia and Robbie here hint at the possibility of change in their relationship but this is shattered by Briony's false charge. Their connection shifts from one of intimacy to one of distance, separation and loss. In the novel, love is thus not created through a life of mutual living and growing together, but is shattered by traumatic situations and forced separations. Their emotional ties, however, continue to speak in disjointed and decanted ways after they part- via memory, longing, letters.

Robbie's correspondence to Cecilia is an example of this mediation of intimacy. In these letters, Robbie promises to return to Cecilia, a future that is always outside of my reach. (McEwan) The letter becomes both a love letter and a symbol of absence, reminding Cecilia of what can no longer be experienced simultaneously. Communication no longer serves as an extension of being present as it does in the past, but it now serves as a substitute. Every letter strives to unite the two, but at the same time deepens the distance between them. Traumatic experience is commonly expressed indirectly as language points to the unretrieved, as Caruth suggests (Caruth 9). Robbie's writing is thus a kind of emotion in which articulation is lost in loss.

Cecilia experience echoes this displacement, because as she is far from Robbie, she becomes so attached to this little one. Her isolation from both Robbie and her family leads to an isolation in which memory is the main area of emotional continuity. Her love does not fade over time but is maintained and even enhanced by remembering and missing it. The fact that they were attached to this spill over into other time periods, which implies that emotional experience is not exclusive to the here and now feeling is not only what is lived but maintained through memory. The relationship is suspended within a fragmented temporality that joins the past and the imagined future.

The film in its visuality supports this condition with the theme of separating and distance. Their experience of time is reflected in their space, as is their experience of space reflected in their time. Throughout Robbie's journey in war-torn landscapes especially the Dunkirk sequence there is a sense that he is outwardly displaced. In a world of confusion and uncertainty, he lives with his past, with Cecilia still there, but not at his fingertips. Memory of intimacy is a sustaining and a reminding memory. In this respect, the trauma does not eliminate love, rather, it reconfigures, it makes it persistent in the absence.

This representation suggests that romantic love is not as continuous nor self-sustainable as people believe it to be. But love in *Atonement* is a love that is made through interruption. In moments of presence it doesn't matter as much as it does from what has been considered, recognised and understood in retrospect. It's the unfinishedness of their relationship that gives it a level of emotional depth. Their love is never allowed to fully manifest itself; it is limited by what it might have been as much as by what it will be, swept into a state of potentiality. The suspension fits in with Caruth's belief that trauma is an interruption of the linear passing of time; a disruption that releases the past not fully into the present but in fragments (Caruth 7).

Cecilia and Robbie's relationship is marked not by fulfilment but by emotional lack, separation, and irreparable loss. though, which is no less a structural condition. They still love despite being out of the picture, In these manner, their connection is maintained, by means of memory, imagination, and longing. This change from presence to absence has completely changed the kind of intimacy one has: It is a posteriori experience of intimacy and only when it has been broken that one understands intimacy. The relationship is not actually experienced but rather a cluster of traces: letters, memories, imagined reunions, that can only serve as a way of reaching an unobtainable past.

Besides, the haunting feeling of this lack of resolution is exacerbated by the film's choice not to deliver that resolution. The reunion Robbie wrote so often about, and Cecilia's hope never come to fruition in the diegetic present. This sense of never ending has bolstered the temporal disconnect inherent in their relationship. This lack of closure serves to further reinforce the temporal disconnect of their relationship. Love is not going to end in fulfilment but waits, and it's meaning never comes to an end. While Caruth stresses that trauma never ends, it cannot be strictly put into a story that it cannot be narrative (Caruth 10). In *Atonement* resistance is expressed in the fact that one can never bring Cecile and Robbie's story to an end in lived time.

The film's ending embellishes the retro aspect of their relationship even more. As much as we know that Cecilia and Robbie may never meet again, the whole story changes because of that. At times, earlier moments when there was hope become moments of tragic irony. From a story that seems to be coming to a conclusion, the opposite is discovered – that it was actually designed from the top down around the absence of. This is a belated reappraisal which reinforces the role of emotional meaning in its construction through delay. Love is understood more deeply through absence than through fulfilment.

Atonement is such a redefining of romantic love, it makes temporal dislocation part of the experience. Cecilia and Robbie's relationship has become shattered by the nature of the present and fragmented between memory and anticipation. They hold on to each other by pieces

which do not fit together in a unified whole. Because of the impossibility of shared time, their intimacy takes on a different form and becomes a form of intimacy that has a different meaning.

Emphasizing the time arrangement of love, the film attests to the necessity of a place for emotion – a place not only physical but also psychological. By locating love in such a temporal framework, the film attempts to validate the notion that there should be a place for love, i.e., a physical place and a psychological space. Rather, it proposes that insight comes in the form of postponement, of coming back to the events over again and again, and of reinterpreting them. Love becomes intelligible not in the moment of experience but through absence and retrospection. This course of moving from being present to being in the past is a site of becoming to become and re-becoming, of language creation and defamiliarization, and of reconceptualization as it happens.

Ultimately, Cecilia and Robbie love story reveals the persistence of emotional attachment under traumatic conditions. since their love is not just interrupted, it's in fact transformed. Briony's accusation tears them apart, not just physically, but also by changing the temporal conditions of their relationship, memories left behind.

Atonement offers a profound reevaluation of intimacy through this reconfigured portrayal of love. It shows that love is not always constant, and it can be found in loss and discontinuity. Emphasis is placed on the temporality which gives rise to emotional experience, highlighting that it is possible to love through absence rather than through presence. It does this and disrupts some of the more traditional narratives of love, memory and time, within the context of trauma.

Narrative Belatedness and the Impossibility of Closure

Atonement manipulation of delayed understanding is accentuated by its use of non-linearity, repetition, and perspectival shifts, reinforced by the narrative structure. Instead of a chronological progression of events, the film goes back to the major scenes several times and views them from a different perspective especially the fountain and library scenes. The logic of the narrative is more or less clear and then becomes seriously flawed. At first the spectator agrees with Briony point of view, but alternative shooting angles raise doubts about his interpretation. This approach is not just to make a narrative complex – it reveals how unstable knowledge is as such, that that which is seen or believed at one moment can be changed/revised according to what can be revealed later. Cathy Caruth states that what it is traumatic, it's a lack of instant understanding, and it calls back for reinterpretation later (Caruth 4-5). The film's structure mimics this formally, forcing the viewer to reconsider some scenes in the light of later revelations.

The repetition of the fountain scene is especially important in this regard. The conflict between Cecilia and Robbie is unclear and potentially threatening, initially seen from a distance through Briony's interpretive, distanced point of view. The earlier interpretation, however, gets thrown into disarray when it is narrated from Cecilia's and Robbie's points of view at the same time. The attempt at force seems to become an emotionally charged scenario of frightening emotion and misunderstanding in the eyes of everyone. This revision isn't just a corrective edition of the previous one, but a glimpse into an impossibility: to garner a perfect record in one snapshot. Meaning is never deduced in an all-at-once way, but over the accumulation of perspective. The film is thus in line with Caruth's claim that understanding is not simultaneous to experience but generated through delayed recognition (6).

A similar pattern exists in the library sequence of desire, confusion and vulnerability. Briony's misunderstanding of this moment is directly responsible for her accusation, and then, towards the end of the movie, the viewers realize that she has interpreted one image while the

other wasn't. This scene's revisitation reinforces the idea that interpretation is subjective based on context, perspective, and assumptions. Sometimes narration in the films uses limited information to elicit a response on the part of the viewer and later broadens or changes the information (Bordwell and Thompson 93). In *Atonement* this approach is the focus of the film's themes, which examines the associations between perception and its dynamism and corrosiveness. The repetition of scenes is not a repetition of what seems redundant but rather a way of portraying the instability of truth.

This act of interpretation is complicated further by Briony's narration of the story later. As a grown woman, by writing, she attempts to make sense of it, structure what was missing in her comprehension of the past. Her admission 'I gave them their happiness' packs the conflict between invention and reality. It is not history in itself, it is Her's intellectual ability to come up with answers. Hence, instead of reconstruction, the narrating shows the differences between worlds of living and between worlds of presentation. As Caruth says, trauma always occurs in an incomplete fashion since, when we say trauma, the actual trauma eludes incorporation or expression in language. Briony's novel is a good illustration of this limitation: it is an attempt to participate in the past, but it shows that it cannot do so.

In the very last moment of the film, it becomes clear that Cecilia and Robbie never got to meet the entire narrative is retrospectively reinterpreted. It is revealed in Briony's videotaped interview, in which she says "I can't do that to them... I'm too old to invent." This moment becomes the moment when the previous resolution, seemingly that of closure, is revealed as fiction and becomes revision. Its timing is critical, since it comes at the end of the audience's hopes that there might be a chance of being reunited, making it that much more powerful. In the trauma narrative there is often a delayed revelation of truths; once a scene occurs the truth may only be revealed later, compelling the reader to rethink their previous thinking, Luckhurst argues that trauma narratives often reveal truth through delayed recognition, forcing readers to reinterpret earlier events: "Trauma stories tend to reveal themselves through a delayed revelation, such that the truth does not become apparent until after the story has come to a close" (80). It cannot be avoided in *Atonement*, however, where the ending throws earlier events into a new light, drawing attention to what desires the story and what is historical truth.

The lack of closure is a departure from typical expectations of the romance genre, whereby default endings occur when the lovers return home. Rather than that, *Atonement* offers a refusal of fulfilment, and clings to the ongoingness of loss. Although the reuniting in imagination is moving, it has nonetheless been made clear that it is not a reality, but rather a compensatory narrative. The theory of narrative is capable of ordering and contributing to the understanding of experience, but not to fully regain the past as it is lived, as Paul Ricoeur claims (246). Briony's story shown this is such that she tried to provide the ending she wanted and it was clear that this was not possible.

The film also inculcates the audience in this process of deferred understanding. Initially presenting the narrative with a supposedly coherent story and then tearing down the foundations brings a reader right into the story's mode of revision for the characters. The return of the characters is unsettling, frustrating and charged with emotion from the viewer, the pivotal reveal introducing a loss focused disillusionment in the experience. Such consistency between the forms of the narrative and experience of the viewer does much to reinforce the notion that comprehension exists in the process of discovery, is not final, and always subject to revision.

Furthermore, the film uses film techniques and structures (cross-cutting, time shifts, repeated framing etc.) to help bring about this instability. For instance, the Dunkirk sequence is an extended tracking shot that is not easily orientable temporally, merging memories with experience, a present moment. In this sequence, Robbie's memory of Cecilia— "Come back to me"—continues to repeat in the present, giving the impression that the past is enduring. Having one's time manipulated, as Bordwell and Thompson point out, is a disturbance of linear

continuity, and the experience of the narrative becomes more apparent (Bordwell and Thompson 102).

At the end, however, the film illustrates how its concern with temporal disjunction ultimately limits the possibilities of narrative. There is never an end to the efforts to bring coherence to the past, but always a greater realization that understanding will not change what has happened. The past is unavoidably “reconstructed” and recalled from the standpoint of the person recounting it, a standpoint that is always present. This restriction is intrinsic to Caruth’s understanding of trauma, where the traumatic experience may not be grasped in a direct way but only through its symptoms or traces (Caruth 7).

Atonement ultimately shows us the power of narrative in terms of ways to solve the problem. Storytelling is an effective way to interact with the past, but it can’t replace what’s missing, and it can’t close the gaps that help make up their experiences. By making these gaps the film’s recurring leitmotif, with meaning deferred time and again, the moviegoer is reminded of the film’s ongoing qualitative changes and therefore of its ephemeral nature of meaning. Instead of closure being achieved, it is revealed as an illusion, one that cannot be attained.

Atonement centres on the faultiness of perception, the slowness of understanding trauma and the limitations of representation, presenting a finely nuanced study of the nature of narrative in relation to trauma. It shows that a desire to interpret the past is inevitably incomplete since the actions of understanding can never fully recover what has been lost. Instead, as this film suggests, narrative isn’t a vehicle for resolution. It’s a place where loss always keeps coming up and where you’re always negotiating it, in order to establish a fidelity to what is coherently missing in the story.

Conclusions

Atonement reconceptualizes romantic love as a belated experience shaped by temporal delay, absence, and retrospective meaning. Through the framework articulated by Cathy Caruth, the film demonstrates that love is not fully lived in the immediacy of the present but becomes intelligible only through processes of loss, memory, and return. Cecilia and Robbie’s relationship does not unfold as a continuous or fulfilled reality; rather, it exists as a fragmented and deferred experience sustained through longing and imagination. Their intimacy is displaced from shared time and reconstituted within absence, where emotional meaning emerges only after the possibility of fulfilment has been irreversibly lost. In this sense, love is not diminished by separation but intensified through it, revealing how deeply emotional experience is shaped by temporal disjunction.

By structuring both narrative and emotion around delay, the film challenges conventional representations of love as fulfilment and closure. Instead, it presents intimacy as something that becomes meaningful only in its aftermath, when it can no longer be lived. The absence of reunion and the exposure of narrative illusion ultimately deny closure, emphasizing the persistence of loss rather than its resolution. This refusal of closure does not simply negate the possibility of happiness; it foregrounds the limits of narrative itself, showing that storytelling cannot fully recover or repair what has been lost. Belatedness thus provides a unified framework for understanding the film’s treatment of love, demonstrating that trauma is not external to intimacy but constitutive of it. In this way, Atonement offers a powerful rethinking of emotional experience, showing that love exists not in presence but in its aftermath, where meaning is continually deferred, reshaped by memory, and never entirely complete.

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Author's bio-note

Adnan Mushtaq is a Ph.D. Scholar in the Department of English, University of Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir, India. His research interests include trauma studies, pandemic literature, and contemporary American fiction.

Sadaf Shah is a Professor in the Department of English, University of Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir, India. She also serves as the Coordinator of the Literary Club and the Associate Director of the SIIEDC at the University of Jammu. She has participated in numerous national and international conferences and has published around forty research papers in reputed national and international journals. Her research interests include New Literatures, Indian Writing in English, and related areas of literary and cultural studies.
