

The English Novel: Interdisciplinary Approaches
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***Atonement*: Scholarly Debates**

Hello, student. I'm here once again, Professor Smita Jha, to discuss the scholarly debates related to *Atonement*, a novel by McEwan.

Several commentators and critics consider *Atonement* a realist novel because they regard the novel's narrative to take place in a realistic framework where the reader becomes engaged in the immediacies of the depicted events and therefore view the narrative as plausible in the setting created. The commentators who regard the novel as realist have, in Finney's opinion, read the novel's ending to be an instance of postmodern gimmickry. Finney argues that the novel is concerned with the making of fiction and the implication that it has, "the dangers of entering a fictional world and the compensations and limitations which that world can offer its readers and writers." While Finney evaluates the ending to be indispensable to the story, Kathleen D'Angelo argues that the ending can be read as an abrupt rendering of a straightforward realistic narrative. In her article, 'To Make a Novel, The Construction of a Critical Readership in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*', she comments on Finney's reading and criticizes him for not taking into account that Briony is a fictionalized character in a fictionalized narrative. She argues that by making a fictionalized character, the author of the fictionalized narrative, the novel also has another narrative aspect that should be explored.

In this sense, the novel is not only about the making of fiction, but also about the reading of fiction, which makes the author-reader experience in the novel a crucial theme. What D'Angelo argues is that in line with how the novel explores a theme such as the making of fiction, it also explores the theme of how fiction is read and the options that the author has of manipulating its readers into believing a fictionalized narrative. In this sense, the novel can also be read in a realistic framework where the author-reader experience is explored. Many commentators and critics place the novel in the category of postmodern literature because they consider the novel's epilogue where Briony explicitly explains that she is the author of the story as a metafictional point of view on the story as a whole.

The critics who consider the novel postmodern regard the novel's epilogue as an abrupt turn from a considerably straightforward realistic rendition of a narrative to a metafictional

perspective of the narrative as a whole. Cormac therefore considers the novel and also Ian McEwan to belong to the group of English novelists who F.R. Leavis considered in his book *The Great Tradition* (1948) to be the best authors in English literature. The list includes Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad and D.H. Lawrence. They were characterized as having a serious and responsible attitude towards moral complexity of life. D.H. Lawrence was not included in the original list but was added later because F.R. Leavis believed that the list could evolve over time. As Cormac considers *Atonement* to belong to the canonical great tradition of English novelists, regards it as a novel which has been influenced by other great novelists but have eventually found its own voice, making it significant in the myths of all English literature. He raised the novel as a traditional, realist or modernist novel, which is most evident in the novel's epilogue, where, as Cormac argues, the novel's self-consciousness is most explicit. He argues that for the novel to be postmodern, readers have to be doubtful about what really happened. Cormac argues that the act of explaining explicitly in the text that the narrative is only a fictionalized reality of what really happened and that Cecilia and Roby are in fact dead makes the novel anti-postmodern. Additionally, he argues that even though the novel is playful about the writing of fiction, the fact that the connection between fiction and reality is explained in the end also makes it anti-postmodernism. That is, by referring to Austen, the novel explicitly attacks postmodern novelists and their celebration of the fictive. Against the danger of relativism and self-delusion implicit in postmodern poetics, a tournament pits a tradition of English empiricism. The novel's epigraph, a quote from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, therefore functioned as a way to alert the reader of the status of the novel, that it should be read as realistic like Jane Austen's other novels.

Cormac's argument is that even though modernist and postmodernist narrative styles are used in the construction of the novel, it overall belongs to the category of traditional realist fiction. His reading of the novel argues that the novel is a story about what happens when fiction is presented as a lie, "a lie that, if believed, comforts, distorts and finally produces unethical action." In fact, it's only a part of the storyline of what happens when fiction is presented as a lie. To consider the epilogue as a metafiction perspective will be like misreading of a novel that should only be considered a story of how lives change when events are misunderstood and presented as a lie. As established in the discussions, the novel moves through both realist, modern and postmodern narrative strategies, which make it difficult to give the novel a label as one of them.

The novel's structure of being divided into different sections that each use a different mode of writing creates an ambiguity that is whether to identify the novel as either the one or the other. Critics of the book such as Cormac, D'Angelo, Finney and Elam gave their arguments on how the book should be read and the indications that it speaks for reading it one way or the other. Both Cormac and D'Angelo identify the novel as classic realist and the use of techniques from both modern and postmodern modes of writing. They read the narrative of Briony revealing that she is in fact the author of the story as part of the plot of what happens when fiction is presented as a lie. Finney and Ellum, on the other hand, read this as a sub-narrative that gives a metafictional perspective on the story as a whole and thus the narrative is presented as a method to illustrate the power that an author has in the making of fiction that may seem real but is in fact presented as a lie. The idea of using several different narrative strategies is to demonstrate the ways in which one can convey a message through literature. It also illustrates the main theme in the novel, that is how Briony, through literature, attempts to atone for the damage she causes as a child. She uses literature to create an alternative reality in order to make up for her mistake, which is something McEwan attempts to illustrate by using different modes of writing. Through literature, he attempts to convey the effect that literature as it may be presented as reality, but it is important to remember how fiction will always have a certain angle that attempts to convey a message and will therefore always be presented as a form of lie.

Since 1960, Waugh argues, that people have shown a cultural interest in how human beings reflect, construct and mediate their experiences of the world. Metafiction pursues to understand this interest by exploring the relationship between fiction and reality. Individuals occupy roles rather than selves and fictional characters's points of view make it possible to understand the construction of subjectivity outside the fictionalized universe, he says, "if our knowledge of this world is now seen to be mediated through language, then literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of reality itself." Thus, fiction is no longer isolated from the real world, but is presented in all layers of real life, which John Fowles points out in his novel titled *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Although the term metafiction is new, Waugh argues that the practice of novels that draw attention to their own fictionality is as old as the novel itself. She argues that metafiction is a functional evident in all novels because they are all assimilated by a variety of discourses identified as representations of speech and of forms of narrative. Patricia Waugh argues that these discourses always in some way question and relativize each other's authority to which she refers to Mikhail Bakhtin who believes that the different languages of fiction, memoirs, journals, diaries,

histories, conversational registers, legal record, journalism, documentary, all compete with each other for the privilege of overall language of fiction. In other words, they "question and relativize each other to such an extent that the language of fiction is always, if often covertly, self-conscious." Bakhtin refers to this process as the dialogic potential of the novel, which means that while metafiction functions as a way to make this potential explicit, realist fiction often functions by suppressing this dialogic function. The conflict of language and voices is apparently resolved in realistic fiction through their subordination to the dominant voice of the omniscient godlike author. Novels which Bakhtin refers to as dialogue resist such resolution. The point is that metafictional novels are constructed as fictional illusion, as in classical realism, which is led bare in its narrative. To create a metafictional novel, you have to create a fictional universe while simultaneously making a statement about the creation of this universe. One can say Bakhtin and Fowles's points are therefore similar. They both see the metafictional perspective in the realist novel as well as in the postmodern novel. The only difference is that the postmodern novel makes the metafictional aspect explicit while this is only implied in the realist novel.

The metafictional aspect is used in novels to draw attention to their own status as artifacts. The purpose is to create a fictional universe that at some point will be broken by a frame structure describing how the realistic universe is fictionalized. A metafictional novel is, therefore, a novel that adds a new perspective to the classic realistic novel. The metafictional narrative perspective in *Atonement* is evident because of the novel's epilogue, where it is revealed that Briony is the author of the preceding three parts of the novel. The metafictional perspective in this story is therefore used as a way to tell a story of a girl who attempts to atone for an error she made as a child. The plot in *Atonement* is constructed from the beginning in a realistic setting where every character and event seems plausible in the structure of the plot. The fictional realistic universe portrait has another meaning once you get to the epilogue. The metafictional frame added to the plot structure in the epilogue has the effect that the narrative no longer functions as a fictional realistic universe but now also functions as a work of fiction that reflects on itself as fiction. The realistic illusion constructed in the novel is shattered, and one realizes that the realistic narratives have been manipulated by a narrator, who has changed events to make them fit into her own fantasies and imaginations. The effect that the metafictional frame has is that it poses questions between fiction and reality.

In other words, as the realistic illusion is shattered, it is questioned whether what has been narrated has been real or not. Mcwan's structurally undermines the authority of omniscient

narration by foregrounding Briony's construction of this perspective, thus highlighting the unreliability of memory and the subjective nature of his storytelling. This raises questions about the link between narrative creativity and confabulation as well as the functional benefits of narrative. Furthermore, the novel explores the notion of narrative, therapy and its potential for healing. Narrative therapy is a form of therapeutic intervention that focuses on rewriting the narratives we tell ourselves about our past, present and future. Through the use of narrative therapy, Briony was able to reframe her experiences and find healing and redemption. Briony was able to construct new narratives that challenged and transformed the negative or harmful stories she had internalized, allowing for personal growth and reconciliation. McEwan employs a metafictional approach by making Briony, the main character and narrator, a successful novelist who uses the act of writing as a form of atonement.

Contemporary British writers, especially those in the last two decades, are interested in the description of history and their works are generally regarded as new historical novels. Robert MacFarlane once commented that the questions of how the past is represented in language have become the central obsession of British fiction over the past three decades. Some representatives of this trend are A.S. Byatt, John Fowles and Ian McEwan. In response to Robert MacFarlane's review of *Atonement* for the *Times Literary Supplement*, Pilar Hidalgo observed that "the tendency has been far more marked in the 1990s and the early 2000s when British novelists have engaged with the past in ways that have little to do with the traditional forms of historical novel or with the self-conscious parody of the historiographic metafiction." Since *Atonement* is a new historical novel with elements of realism and metafiction apparently influenced by the trend of postmodernism, some related conceptions must be taken into consideration.

It may be stated with some degree of safety that without understanding of postmodernism and historiographic metafiction, there can be no real and full understanding of McEwan and even the contemporary British literature. In terms of the relationship between history and fiction, Aristotle states that the historian could speak only of what has happened; the poet, on the other hand, spoke of what would or might happen. To Linda Hutchion, 'historiographic metafiction', as part of the phenomena of metafiction and a variant of historical novel reveals the best combination of history and fiction. By labeling it, she means those popular novels which are both self-reflective and paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages. Such novels redefine the concepts of reality, history and truth and blur the line between fiction and history. Postmodern novels utilize various

devices to help the reader appreciate the theory and practice. Apart from the other traits, it often employs intertextual references and allusions by discussing and presenting fictional works to achieve its styles of writing. *Atonement* is a self-aware novel in terms of the many literary precedents and works it mentions and discusses. In fact, Ian McEwan has consistently drawn attention to the status of his fiction as an artifact in his early works. By alluding to or parodying traditional literary genres, he makes the reader pay more attention to the presence of a self-conscious narrator.

McEwan employs two different strategies to ensure that upon finishing the novel, his readers will view the twist ending not as a cheap trick, but as a surprise that was cleverly prepared for over the course of the narrative. First, as many scholars have noted, McEwan composes Briony's novel in such a way as to invite readers to see a range of literary allusion in the text. While these allusions are generally attributed to McEwan and not to Briony. This technique generates a pattern of authorial control and awareness that encourages readers to see the coda as the work of a masterful implied author as opposed to the act of destructive lunacy referred to by Boehner. Secondly, he cunningly includes hints of Briony's own revision of her novel, inviting attentive readers to trace the shadowy palimpsests of earlier versions behind the final draft. As has been observed by a variety of scholars, McEwan's novel is rife with literary allusions. Beginning with an explicit mention of another text in an epigraph from *Northanger Abbey*, in addition, the characters themselves often refer to other works in both their thoughts and conversation. These include references to Fielding and Richardson, a conversation between Robbie and Cecilia. Auden's *elegy* for Yeats (carried by Robbie during the Dunkirk retreat), and allusions to a variety of modernist literary figures, most especially Virginia Woolf (in the rejection letter Briony receives from Horizon discusses) more oblique references have been highlighted by critics.

Kathleen D'Angelo reads Briony's play 'The Trial of Arabella', as a covert reference to Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, with which McEwan reminds readers to be critically engaged with the text. Responding to Robert MacFarlane's observation that the question of how the past is represented in language has become the central obsession of British fiction over the past three decades. Pilar Hidalgo argues that McEwan's novel is thematically engaged with the whole of British literary history including *Mansfield Park*, *Howard's End* and *Bridgeshed Revisited*. Anna Grmelova goes so far as to argue through reference to implicit allusions to Auden's 'Musee des Beaux Arts' and Breughel's 'Icarus' that "there is hardly a dichotomy between the first metafictional part of the novel and the

second realist one as it is sometimes claimed; both parts of the novel are discursive." Across his fictional writing, McEwan apparently exhibits a deep interest in the nature of relationship between what is real and what is fantasy, between what is historical, what is fictitious. Likewise, McEwan would demonstrate a tendency and practice of intertextuality in his fictional writings. Such inclination in writing would be assumed to be closely connected with certain metafictional writing techniques of postmodernism. Looking at overall form and unity of *Atonement*, it could initially be argued that both the novel's tone as well as the styles get more and more momentous as its narrative assists a full reader's engagement.

It is argued that the novel holds the reader back as the writing also shares the almost stilted diction of McEwan's novel *Atonement*, a diction used with immense care to create distance and irony without creating too much of either. Both its narrative text and in its adoption as a movie seems to deliberately challenge the traditional perception of heroism. The novel presents Robbie as a hero. Nevertheless, he is a hero who gets defeated and his audience get no solace as the scenes of defeat are gory and eventually inefficient and futile. Void of and lacking in patriotism and loyalty, McEwan has been the subject of criticism for presenting this dangerously unwarranted phase in the history of Britain as such. Yet those who have frowned on of the novel and its movie adoption earlier have found it problematic to do so when perceiving the novel and its movie adoption as an attack on and disapproval of devastation and ruin. In terms of the philosophy of self and morality, *Atonement* is argued to be associated with "the hue of postmodern relativism, especially insofar as it establishes the constructed nature of dramatized self in the novel." In addition to the significance dedicated to negotiation, arbitrariness and lived experiences, the novel is observed to attain the self and moral dimension through the exploration of its characters, predicaments and moral activities as shown in its narrative.

Atonement, therefore is assumed to be a story about the art of telling stories and its element such as imagination truth and its nature and even the concern over and strategies of writing itself. In that order, imagination and other elements mentioned appear to seize the writer's attention as they turn to be vitally important constructing the events of the novel from the beginning all the way through its conclusion. Though perceived at certain time as a realistic novel, *Atonement* has been discerned through solid argument and supporting statements to have reflected and reproduced those postmodern metafictional aspects in its narrative text.

To conclude, the way McEwan has composed his fiction *Atonement*, he has effectively and uniquely shown and communicated his perception of and familiarity with the art of fiction

writing by giving prominence to revelation which is eventually a proper manifestation of postmodern metafictional narrative. With this, I conclude the entire discussion on *Atonement* and I'm sure that it is going to strengthen your understanding of the novel for academic purposes and also research purpose. T

Thank you very much.