

## The Role of Guilt in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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### Abstract

The term "atonement" connotes the action of making amends for a wrong or sin. In Christian theology, it refers to the reconciliation of God and mankind through Jesus Christ. The movie *Atonement* is one of cumulative power, reflecting on the unfinished, unmoored mind of a vulnerable young woman, Briony Tallis, who is seemingly trapped by unimaginable guilt in a life of suspended animation. The denouement of the film siphons off with Briony atoning for her guilt that has, since her adolescence, tainted her life with treacherous effects. Her atonement comes off as a corrosively elegiac way of reconciling with the past, and is filmed beautifully, with pyrotechnic complexity, displaying adequately the scalding moral vision of war as a backdrop. With a luminous juxtaposition of the stream of consciousness mode of narration and multiple voices, montage and flashbacks, Joe Wright unilaterally weaves a tale of self-discovery and the retelling of a story that centers around

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guilt. Guilt, therefore, features as an inalienable poetry of experience in the film, coming off almost as apparent, real, and firm to the touch. In an interdisciplinary approach of psychological study of artistic work, this project illustrates the dynamics of guilt and atoning for it after over half a lifetime to reach psychological transcendence and attain a cohesiveness of the fragmented concept of "self".

### **Keywords**

Ian McEwan, Joe Wright, Briony Tallis, *Atonement*, Guilt

## **The Role of Guilt in Ian McEwan's *Atonement***

The movie ***Atonement*** is an adaptation of Ian McEwan's novel of the same name, directed by British filmmaker Joe Wright. With a running time of 123 minutes, it stars Keira Knightley, James McAvoy, Saoirse Ronan, Romola Garai, Vanessa Redgrave, Benedict Cumberbatch, Juno Temple and Brenda Blethyn.

Guilt is a cognitive or emotional experience that occurs when one realizes or believes accurately that they have compromised on their standards of conduct or have violated a moral standard, and that they bear a significant responsibility for that violation. From the morphological point of view, the word "guilty" means "having done something illegal or being responsible for doing something wrong or for something bad that has happened." According to Sigmund Freud, feelings of guilt may arise when an individual violates the ideals or values

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of the "superego" by responding to the impulses from the "id". (Freud, 1922)

In the film, Briony Tallis is a thirteen year old perched on the brink of adolescence. Gifted and precocious, she writes and directs dramatic plays as a childhood pastime in her father's country manor during the mid-1930s. Briony is infatuated with Robbie Turner, a servant's son, whose education at Oxford is funded by Briony's father, and who wishes to become a medical doctor. Briony tests whether Robbie loves her by leaping into a pond. He saves her, but is infuriated by her stunt and her schoolgirl crush. When Robbie asks her to hand-deliver a sealed note, containing romantic proposition, to her older sister, Cecilia Tallis, Briony, feeling spurned on having sufficiently gauged the preexisting romance between Cecilia and Robbie, opens and reads the message. This incident paves off as a massive misinterpretation of Cecilia and Robbie's love to Briony, and seals Briony's suspicions of Robbie as being sick with brazen lust. Later that night, Briony's psychological integrity is further disquieted by witnessing her sister and Robbie engaged intimately in the library. Post this incident, when Briony briefly witnesses the physical violation of her cousin, Lola, she knows and names the culprit without hesitation. Briony's testimony wrongfully sends Robbie to prison where, after four years, he procures early release only if he goes to fight the Nazis in France. Both Briony and Cecilia become nurses in the war effort, but remain estranged. Briony never has the courage to retract her sworn testimony. Eventually, Briony

is seen visiting her sister's apartment in London and finds Robbie staying there. She asks for forgiveness and though furious, Robbie and Cecilia tell her how to set the record straight. Before this can happen, however, a flash-forward reveals Briony as a celebrated novelist on the cusp of death. In a media interview preceding the release of her "twenty-first and final novel", she explains that Robbie and Cecilia were both killed during the war, and that the reconciliation between them never took place. Thus, Briony could never actually make amends for her once taken hasty decision that perhaps now is taking a toll on her life. Unable to reconcile the lovers in real life, Briony takes up her novel as a sluice for proffering Robbie and Cecilia the happy ending they deserved. As an embodiment of her elemental conflict between life and guilt, Briony names her novel "Atonement". Executing revenge for not getting the love we think we deserve from others has thus been disguised as "atonement". Through her atonement, Briony reconciles as much with her own true self, as she literally unites the two lovers.

In this study, the aim is to trace the extent of Briony's guilt, and how it leads to her expiation and reconciliation with her self.

## **Research Objectives**

To analyze the role of guilt and its atonement in order to reach psychological integrity and transcendence, in the movie "Atonement".

## Research Method

In conducting the study, the descriptive qualitative method has been employed along with library research.

### Analysis

***Atonement*** is influenced by what Genettes (1972) calls variable internal focalization, homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator in the movie, with the former referring to the presentation of an event from a different point of view, the latter related to the identity of the narrative voice. (Hidalgo, 2005) The movie is primarily depicted from Briony's point of view, changing with the development of the story, and with her successive progression through the stage of teenage vulnerability to maturational understanding of human relations. Hence, at each point in time, Briony's identity creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and elusiveness, enhancing the sense of ambiguity, and intensifying the undertone of guilt in the narrative. It is not surprising to notice that the whole story turns out to be based on old Briony's memory, which can scarcely be called reliable since she's a prey to the degenerative disease- vascular dementia. Thus, by abandoning the traditional third person point of view, Wright, deftly captures on celluloid the post-modern self conscious narrator, making the viewer question the narrative, and the relationship between fiction and real life. (Han and Wang, 2015)

Modern psychology draws a very fine line between guilt and atonement. Although guilt, traditionally has a

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negative connotation in Jewish, Catholic and Puritanical faiths, psychologists keep finding evidence of its usefulness. Alan Carr views atonement as a positive process. (Carr, 2011) To him, forgiveness and atonement are ways of repairing relationships that have been damaged by transgressions. Briony Tallis devotes her entire life repenting a crime she committed while still a young girl. Consumed by detrimental sentiments, Briony is outweighed with the burden of atonement for life, despite all her longings for serene happiness. The film expands on the destitution of happiness in Briony's family, work, and life. It dwells on the fabrication of happiness in terms of Briony's obsession with self-perfection, social recognition and manipulative power. It elaborates on the extinction of happiness issued from the incessant torment of a guilty conscience and further approaches the possibility of achieving innermost salvation and spiritual happiness via resignation. Briony, after coming to realization of what her false testimony amounted to, devotes her entire life trying to make reparations for it to redeem herself. Her relinquishing of an education at Cambridge and joining of the nursing services to help injured soldiers; her leaving behind of her family, and her writing of the novel as her final act of atonement- everything revolves around Briony's hedonistic search for inner peace and salvation. Her novel "Atonement" thus comes off as a "final act of kindness" for Robbie and Cecilia. With saying that "[i]t's not impossible to imagine Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at the

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*Trials of Arabella*", Briony gives a fictional happy ending to the estranged lovers. The novel becomes the symbol of atonement for her sins.

This very metaphorical reparation of hers as a veritable extension of self-mediated punishment, can be explained in light of a few psychological theories, which expound guilt as a private, intra-psychic, rather than an inter-psychic phenomenon. In the book *Self-Consciousness and Social Anxiety* (1980) Arnold H. Buss writes that guilt is connected to the private self-reflection, which does not necessarily include other persons, or their perspectives. "Guilt is essentially private. The best test of guilt is whether anyone else knows of the transgression" (p.159). The fact that no one has to know about one's guilt, confirms its intra-psychic nature. Hence, the fact that Briony chooses to cage in her guilt and suffering in her own little box of solitude, through six decades of her life, corroborates with Buss' perspective on guilt. A behavioristic perspective is maintained by D.L.Mosher in his article *'Interaction of fear and guilt in inhibiting unacceptable behavior'* from 1965. He writes that "guilt may be defined as generalized or expectancy for self-mediated punishment for violating, or anticipating the violation of, or failure to attain internalized standards of proper behavior" (p.162). His reference to a self-mediated punishment makes it clear that the focus for guilt is not from other persons, but something negative that one does to oneself. Guilt, in a behavioristic perspective, is thus, an anticipation of self-injury, and a solely intra-

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personal phenomenon, as is the force majeure in Briony's life. In the book *Social Evolution* (1985), Robert L. Trivers writes from an "evolutionistic perspective" that human guilt and shame comes from a natural selection because these emotions prevent humans from carrying out actions that could harm their relations to others. This is because such relations are important for their survival. Briony's actions gave a hefty weight to her conscience of moral imperatives. Guilt, in this context, stands out as a prime example of the moralizing role of emotions. The act of dedicating her final most book to Robbie and Cecilia thus transforms into a strongly meaningful deed for Briony, as she is bathed in the emotional release of guilt from her trove of moral imperatives, half a lifetime ago.

In Christian theology, the word "atonement" is described as the reconciliation of man with God, through Christ's sacrificial death. (Oxford University Press, 2005) A rephrasing of the basic question leads to Briony's tussle with her morality: "How can I be rewarded my forgiveness if I am the one who gets to decide what happens?". In other words, Briony is aware that one cannot self-ascribe atonement. One can only seek it, but it can be granted by the only ones who have been wronged. Being an author of the story places Briony in the apex because of her absolute power to decide outcomes. Her position on the pedestal makes her question if she is not "also God" to the characters in her book. She is. She recognizes her power but concludes that there can be "no atonement

for God or novelists" and that only the attempt matters. (Nelson, 2013)

## **Conclusion**

Based on the analysis, two broad conclusions can be drawn upon. The first conclusion concerns the extent of Briony's guilt spanning six decades culminating in her emotional turbidity, and the second pertains to Briony's atonement of her guilt, through her fictional penmanship.

Briony's guilt leads her to practice a life of simplicity and penance, subsuming all her emotions for her entire life. The very motif of her life centers around seeking of ways to expiate her wrongdoing. She seeks social justification and leaves behind a life of prosperity to nurse wounded soldiers. At each stage in life, spanning over six decades, Briony is seen engaged in venting out her accumulated emotional turmoil. As a novelist, she delivers herself from her jargon of culpability and self-reproach by fictionalizing a happy ending for Robbie and Cecilia. The fiction thus becomes as much an act of atonement for Briony, as it becomes a tribute to love-an emotion that Briony kept swaddled in secrecy her entire life.

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