



Betrayal in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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Abstract

The novel, *Atonement* is composed in four parts. The first part has the narration of only twenty-four hours of an extreme hot summer of 1935 falling out mostly in Briony's house. The second part moves around France and London by the time of the Dunkirk retreat in 1940 covering some resplendent wartime merrymaking of Dunkirk and St. Thomas's hospital, where injured soldiers of war undergo treatment under the care of trainee nurses. The third part portrays the latest developments of the present-day London. The fourth part, the concluding Postscript speaks of an old Briony at her 77, enduring *visceral dementia* and finally getting consolation by achieving her lifetime dream of expiation. Briony, a creative girl of fantasizing to become a great writer who is behind the imprisonment of Robbie by mistake, feels remorseful for her oversight and strives to rectify the same. Briony's parents seem to be a contended couple to the outside world as they never show their difference of opinion apparently. Despite being fickle and adulterous, in other ways, Jack is an indisputable family head taking care of his household as well as simultaneously supporting his house keeper's son Robbie in pursuing his graduation in literature as a humanitarian. Cecilia wishes for mortifying him, seducing him to get over his attitude of gratefulness by showing her eye catching beauty. Being seduced smartly, he sends an overenthusiastic erotic letter to Cecilia through Briony. . McEwan gets usually succeeded in projecting the 'macabre' image depending on the narrative twist.

Keywords: Betrayal, seduction, war, treachery, love.

McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) is a splendid, attention-seeking, contemplative, flabbergasting and

unfathomable three time novel of 1935 England, Second world war England and France and present-day England encompassing “a headstrong 13-year old girl named Briony Tallis who witnesses a rape at her wealthy family’s country house, sends an innocent working class man to jail and ruins more than one life in the process” (Jeff, *Newsweek*). The novel was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for fiction in 2010. It is widely acclaimed as the best of McEwan’s fictional works that he has created ever.

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The first part of the novel takes place in the Tallis Estate, situated in the Surrey Hills in Southeast England. The first part depicts what is happening in the ‘Tallis’ mansion and surroundings including the fountain, the grove, a small bungalow of Tallis mansion’s house keeper Grace Turner and her son Robbie Turner. The middle-aged, mature couple, Emily and Jack Tallis has three children named Cecilia, Leon and Briony. Cecilia graduates in literature from Cambridge and Leon is a plain banker. Briony is a creative teen age girl being ahead of her peers. Jack Tallis is engaged in prewar preparations in the Ministry of Whitehall. He is an axiomatic libertine often staying away from Tallis Estate with false excuse of his busy schedule and indulging in fornication. Though Emily is aware of these all, she always engages herself in getting a kick out of the milk and honey of the Tallis Estate without bothering about that Jack is a salacious skirt-chaser.

Briony organizes to stage her play ‘The trials of Arabella’ at the time of her brother Leon and his friend Paul Marshal’s arrival. Emily’s only sister, Hermione’s children Lola, Jackson and Pierot have come to stay at the Tallis Estate as she is right now with her second husband in Paris after breaking up her first marriage. Briony’s effort of performing her play is not succeeded. Robbie Turner, son of the housekeeper Grace Turner, who is financially supported by Jack has just come back from Cambridge after completion of his graduation in literature like Cecilia.

While being watched by Briony through her window, Cecilia and Robbey have a heated argument about the vase that successively slips through their fingers and shatters. Cecilia takes off her clothing before Robbie and climbs into the fountain aiming to take his breath away or to get over the inhibition of her love towards him. Consequently, it makes them intimate and he sends Cecilia an erotic letter through Briony expressing his fantasy of performing cunnilingus. Though it arouses Cecilia, Briony gets disturbed. Unexpectedly, Briony catches sight of their lovemaking in the dark corner of the house. Hermione’s twins take to their heel just after this. While searching them extensively, Lola is molested by Paul Marshall. Robbie is sentenced to

five years imprisonment followed by Briony's misconception. On parole, Robbie is sent as a soldier to France to indulge in the war against the Nazis about 1940. He gets injured during the time of his army's retreat to the coastal area of Dunkirk. Anyway, he gets back to England and meets Cecilia, working now as a trained nurse. After coming to know that Robbie is irreproachable above suspicion, she joins as a trainee nurse to cure the wounds of the soldiers as a penitent act.

Briony, a creative girl of fantasizing to become a great writer who is behind the imprisonment of Robbie by mistake, feels remorseful for her oversight and strives to rectify the same. Eventually, she composes a novel namely *Atonement* at her seventy-seven, brilliantly covering up the demises of Robbie and Cecilia and uniting them together so as to get herself completely atoned and expiated. The novel delineates the socio-cultural transformations throughout the period of long seven decades from the pre Second World War to the end of the twentieth century. Some different seducing elements like betrayals pave way for the weird untoward incidents in the novel. In the first part, the author takes us to the domiciliary imbroglio turning into a crime story moving around an effervescent, overactive thirteen year old Briony. James Wood indicates: "Briony Tallis, a prim, yearning, intelligent child with a rage for order and a tendency to judge before comprehending, is one of the novel's achievements". (James Woods, *New Republic*).

Briony wishes to welcome her elder brother Leon in a grand way on the eve of his arrival to Tallis Estate by staging her own play *The Trials of Arebella* in which Lola and her twin brothers are also expected to act. The play admired by her mother Emily as 'stupendous' was 'at some moments chilling, at others desperately sad' (3). Briony believe that she would be able to create a stable, prudent and well organized world out of disorderly and disruptive world through writing only. On composing the novel, McEwan, must have pondered on 'the pitfalls of being seduced by one's own literary powers' (The Economist, Review 2001). It is remarkable here that Briony rides two horses at once willing to be a writer as well as an adult. Therefore, she would like to be a fly on the wall enticed with all affairs of the well-defended Tallis Estate. As she is not able to impress his brother through her unsuccessful play, the most disappointed Briony starts fabricating stories as a child writer by giving vent to her literary creativity. She sees Cecilia and Robbey squabbling and shattering the vase at the fountain through her window, looks on at Cecilia's stripping off her clothes before Robbie and after reading Robbie's amorous letter, intrudes on their passionate bonking in the dark space of the library causing them to move apart from their intensive lovemaking. Eventually, she glimpses Lola molested by Paul Marshall and creatively misrepresents that it was Robbie who raped Lola for his ostensible carrying-on. Cecilia and Robbie's ardent love along with their dream-life is devastated with the false allegation of Briony on the basis of her creative presumption. She betrays not only herself but also all of the family especially, Cecilia and Robbie:

She trapped herself; she marched into the labyrinth of her own construction, and was too young, too awestruck, and too keen to please, to insist on making her own way back. She was not endowed with, or old

enough to possess such independence of spirit ... She was able to keep from mind the damage she only dimly sensed she was doing. (170)

In fourth part of the novel, Briony is enticed with the idea of Robbie's love. She comes out with the remark that she is to be denoted as Briony Tallis instead of Nurse Tallis against the Constitution of Florence Nightingale. She secretly reads Robbie's erotic letter to Cecilia expressing his wish for kissing Cecilia's pudendum owing to her frail and vacillating mind smartly allured and attracted with the idea of becoming an adult writer. Anyway, she consciously and intentionally brushes aside that she betrayed innocent and true-blue Robbie by reading his letters to Cecilia and exposing the contents to Lola: Listen to me, I couldn't mistake him. I've known him all my life. I saw him ... It was the sound of his voice, breathing, noises. (167)

Cyril Connolly depicts her uncorroborated and improbable creative ideas giving back advising what Briony saw as the outright truth: "Your address suggests you may be either a doctor or suffering from a long illness; if the latter, then all of us wish you a speedy and successful recovery" (315). Briony is never able to get out of that terrible night of rape in 1935, her lamenting confession of incarcerating Robbie with her presumptive false charges and concomitant separation of Cecilia from Robbie. She crazily follows Cecilia and Robbie to express her inclination to abjure the testimony. She is relentlessly temped and preoccupied with the thought of atonement so that she determines immediately to write a story with the happy ending of uniting Cecilia and Robbie. Thus, she attempts to make her beyond reproach and wipe out the evocation of her betrayal.

Briony's parents seem to be a contended couple to the outside world as they never show their difference of opinion apparently. Jack is a civil servant in the Ministry mostly staying away from his Tallis Estate and indeed, indulging in extra marital affairs by hiding it from his wife and betraying her. Though his wife Emily knows everything about him, she loves Jack's social and pecuniary status betraying herself. In spite of his criticism upon Jack's prevalent double dealing, McEwan exalts the couple's mellowness, having kept them united.

Despite being fickle and adulterous, in other ways, Jack is an indisputable family head taking care of his household as well as simultaneously supporting his house keeper's son Robbie in pursuing his graduation in literature as a humanitarian. In spite of being an inefficacious, accepting and victim of chronic migraine, Emily also never shrinks from helping Robbie who resides with his mother Grace in a cottage on the Tallis Campus. He starts indulging in romantic fantasies of Cecilia since he espied her half-naked wet voluptuous body at the fountain. Having seduced by each other, both Robbie and Cecilia never propose their love. In order to impress him and get out of her own disappointment due to his detachment pococurante attitude, she strips off:

She kicked off her sandals, unbuttoned her blouse, and removed it, unfastened her skirt and stepped out of it and went to the basin wall. He stood with hands on his hips and stared as she climbed into the water in her underwear. (30)

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by showing her eye catching beauty. Being seduced smartly, he sends an overenthusiastic erotic letter to Cecilia through Briony. As a result, a false allegation is charged against him by Briony and he is sent to prison. Both Robbie and Cecilia find no other way but quietly accepting their fate. James Wood specifies: 'Cecilia's provocative stripping had more to do with erotic challenge than submission of fear' (Wood, New Republic) but she is not able to sustain the frame of mind and the boldness. She shrinks inside without showing any resistance though she is fallaciously punished. Robbie's seduction on Cecilia betrays Briony because of his lapse of memory of one old swimming tank matter with Briony. He wants to get back England from France after his flame of hope is ignited with Cecilia's letters expressing her lifelong hankering to wait for him.

In the end, it is learnt that the estrangement is also a kind of treachery with self and humanity from the Dunkirk retreat casualty and Hermione's running away to Paris. As a wicked act, the wedding of Lola and Paul Marshal is a bolt from the blue for Briony, a solace for Cecilia and a simple reaction for Robbie. McEwan gets usually succeeded in projecting the 'macabre' image depending on the narrative twist.

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