

Into the Inscape of Human Psyche: A Journey through McEwan's Atonement

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Abstract

The quantity of criticism that surrounds Freudian concepts has never diminished their importance in assessing human inscape. It successfully explains the reasons behind human behaviour's complexities. Ian McEwan is a prodigy when it comes to delving into the human psyche. He is noted for his vivid, scenic, and startling storytelling style. In its description of the interior worlds and unpredictable workings of the human awareness, his prestigious book *Atonement* stands out. This paper attempts a deep examination of the characters' behavioural patterns and the function of the unconscious in influencing them. Although humans are victims of unconscious trauma, this study shows that positive sublimation can unquestionably save individuals and make them fit for society.

Keywords: Inscape, Unconscious, Atonement, McEwan, Social Psychology.

INTRODUCTION

Great adventures begin with the search for new discoveries or destinations. Literature, likewise, is primarily an investigation into the inscape. From the beginning of civilization, literature narrated many journeys through the inscapes of human mind. It formed searches for the inner worlds of the human mind. The novel is an excellent vehicle for telling the stories of such expeditions. Novelists' concern with the human interior is the basic material for his creations. They are indeed psychologists who specialise in the study of human behaviour. Ian McEwan is no different in this regard. He is a skilled artisan when it comes to delving into the complexities of the human psyche. He investigates this topic with greater scientific rigour than the work demands. *Atonement* (2001) exhibits his interest in human behavior's fundamental workings.

The *Atonement* is a fantastic examination of human behaviour. It reveals a side of human beings that is both familiar and immensely complex. Every character in the narrative is a representation of human convolutions. With his

precise precision, passionate language, and creative genius, McEwan, a maestro adventurer of human inscape, shows the various strata of human thoughts and acts. His characters' distinct yet bizarre behaviours find expression in this novel. The novel's narrative strategies are geared toward this behavioural investigation. The way individual characters perceive and interpret the events of their daily lives is illuminated by multiple tales of the same episode told from various perspectives. In her analysis of the novel, Laura Vipond stresses this point. She proposes,

The pivotal scene at the fountain is described in detail from the perspectives of Briony, Cecilia, and Robbie, and so the reader is not only prompted to empathise with each, but also to choose between them, demonstrating how the reader is still in command of the ultimate meaning. (10)

The novel's expertise resides in its thorough portrayal of each character's innermost mental process. The peculiar pretexts that control each individual could be deduced from a close reading of the work. A thorough examination of the novel reveals that the Freudian unconscious, which determines individual human behaviour, plays a critical part in regulating individuals' good or bad behaviour. As a result, this thesis attempts to derive a complete analysis of the characters in *Atonement* using Freudian notions as a foundation.

Briony's Undeniable Yearning for Order

Briony, the main character in the storey, is characterised as a typical order seeker. Briony's charm is her likable personality even when her behaviour is extremely difficult. Readers may be enraged by her behaviour at times, but they can't help but regret it later. Her role elicits sympathy as well as moral outrage from the audience. When the readers figure out what motivates her behaviour, they may be tempted to sympathise with her. Despite the fact that she is the villain in the novel's tragic plot, her helplessness forces one to make amends with her. Her erroneous interpretation of an incident is what causes the complexities and great catastrophes in her and her family's lives.

The story opens with Briony's narrative, a brilliant, gorgeous, and aggressive thirteen-year-old heroine. Beginning with the first narrations, readers develop an affection for her character. Her debut play, *The Trials of Arabella*, features her as the author, performer, and director. McEwan continues to describe how meticulous and serious a writer a thirteen-year-old girl may be. Order is a word that is really important in her life. Her preparations for the performance of her drama demonstrate this. Her first play was written "in a two-day tempest of composition, causing her to miss a breakfast and a lunch" (3). The description of Briony and her room by McEwan demonstrates her respect for order. "She was one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so," McEwan writes (4). Her room was a shrine to her dominating demon, and it was also the only room in the home that was clean. Everything in her room has its own place and status. They were neatly ordered and free of flaws. This behaviour progresses into a dislike for the shortcomings of her fellow human beings. McEwan narrates it with a touch of humour:

Her straight-backed dolls in their many-roomed mansion appeared to be under strict instructions not to touch the walls; the various thumb-sized figures to be found standing about her dressing table – cowboys, deep-sea divers, humanoid mice – suggested by their even ranks and spacing a citizen's army awaiting orders. (5)

Briony's aversion to flaws can be linked back to her hatred toward her older sister's room. She inhabits a more creative universe of order and harmony than the world of realities. Her world is more akin to the fantastical realms of the fairy tales she has been reading. Even her words are intended to bring order to a chaotic world. "Briony's plans for her play fulfilled her need to exert control over her environment; McEwan emphasizes too that the process of writing afforded Briony the gratification of creating a "world [. . .] in five pages," in which she could exercise her own principles of justice." Juliette Wells writes in her essay on the novel" (103).

But the scene she sees through the window of her nursery is beyond the comprehension of her imaginative realm. Her sister being humiliated by a man of her ideal world has the potential to destabilise the order in her controlled universe. As a result, she decides to restore the order that Robbie, her sister's childhood friend and their charlady's son, has ruined. Her erroneous evaluation of a simple adult play sets the stage for the heinous act she is about to perpetrate. Briony's disturbed mind becomes even more bitter as a result of the isolation she feels as a result of her well-planned play's failure. The harsh facts of the world appear in front of her in the guise of a terrifying demon all of a sudden. She comes to the realisation that she can no longer be a part of the magical world of childhood and resolves to compose a more realistic plot. She can't get away from the idea of order, even when she's away from the childlike fancies.

Order must be imposed", she feels as she comes up with the idea for a story in which "a man whom everybody liked", is exposed by the heroine as being the "incarnation of evil". Her organizing mind contradicts and competes against her discovery of a much more complex

world than that which she is accustomed to. (Jensen 7-8)

She fails to recognise the truth that is right in front of her because she is preoccupied with preconceived concepts of rightness. She prefers to indulge in self-deception and is adamant about establishing the truth that is more appropriate for her imagined sphere. Briony's prejudiced mind is the source of her animosity for Robbie. She suspects him and opens his letter addressed to Cecilia without hesitating to assess the likelihood of the situation. She is even more horrified by the library scenario, and she labels Robbie a sex-maniac. Despite her cousin's lack of confirmation of the truth, all of these instances lead her to believe that Robbie is the one who raped Lola. McEwan illustrates how preconceived thoughts can fool the gaze. He states, "it was not her eyes that told her the truth. It was too dark for that [...] her eyes confirmed the sum of all she knew and had recently experienced. The truth was in the symmetry, which was to say, it was founded in common sense. The truth instructed her eyes" (169). That is why she continues with her statement, "I saw him. I know it was him" (170). She wasn't lying when she said it, but she was affirming her own sense of righteousness. However, when the truth is revealed in front of her eyes at Lola and Paul Marshall's wedding, she is appalled and chooses to atone for the crime she has committed. She spends the rest of her life trying to make amends for her crime through literature. In her novel *Atonement*, she created a fictional reality in which she reunites the lovers Robbie and Cecilia, despite the fact that reality had permanently separated them. This demonstrates her innocence as well as her inability to control her actions.

Briony's character study, thus, demonstrates the impact of the unconscious on human behaviour. The motivations for Briony's crime can be seen in her character. It stems from her subconscious' bottled-up frustrations. The role of childhood or prior events in determining a person's adult behaviour is thus confirmed by Freudian unconscious analysis. In Briony's instance, readers can see how her childhood influenced her current situation.

Briony, an only kid in a family of adults, is practically alone. Briony's loneliness inevitably propels her into a realm of fantasy. She likes to read fairy tales and lives in a fantasy world. This obviously causes her to see things through the lens of the knowledge she has gained from her books. As a result, she is directed more by her preconceived notions than by the reality in front of her. She knows, well in advance, the sequence of events that are about to take place. For Briony, the scenario beside the fountain can only be interpreted as a marriage proposal. But "the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal" (39). That is the only order which she can process. The girl's imagined realm anticipates this idea. But when something unexpected happens, she finds herself in a bind and reaches the wrong decision.

Briony's strong urge to right the wrongs stems from a pressing need for order. This, in turn, is a result of her desire for attention. Briony is an attention seeker in the classic sense. A detailed examination of her personality reveals a plethora of proofs for this claim. Her need for attention, recognition, and affection drives all her actions. Briony's desire to become a writer is an indication of her unmet needs. She writes or creates to get her parents and siblings' attention. VraKutálková writes about it in her essay on Ian McEwan:

Briony is searching for it, because her mother spends most of the time shut in her room due to sudden migraine attacks while her father works in civic administration and stays mostly in London. Her siblings are both much older and also away. Although Cecilia arrives home for the holidays and tries to compensate for their mother's lack of attention to Briony, she can never be able to fully take her place. Briony also suffers from the absence of her father, who she considers a "fixed point" in the family. Only "his presence imposed order and allowed freedom". Because of her father's absence, Briony has been searching for order by herself through her writing. ("Growing up" in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*", 14)

Briony's attempts to lie for her sister are motivated by her desire for elders' love and

affection. Its failure causes the lives of the main characters, such as Robbie, Cecilia, and Briony, to be ruined. The words of appreciation always lift her spirits, and she is willing to go to any length to fulfil this unconscious urge. She also has dreams of her brother praising and bragging to his friends about his sister's talent as a writer. Even her efforts at reconciliation and living a life of atonement reveal her desire to reclaim the affection and acceptance she once enjoyed with her sister and Robbie.

Modern child development theories also stress the value of positive childhood experiences in shaping outstanding and capable adults. Elizabeth B. Hurlock, a well-known child psychologist, discusses the role of family in shaping responsible and socially healthy persons. "From contacts with family members, children lay the foundations for attitudes toward people, things and life in general. They also lay the foundations for patterns of adjustment and learn to think of themselves as the members of the family think of them," she says (Child Development, 494). As a result, we can see how the unconscious influences our lives and individuals like Briony should not be completely held responsible for uncontrollable behavioural issues. Thus, through his fictitious character Briony, Ian McEwan creates a perfect behavioural study of human beings.

Robbie Turner

In *Atonement*, Robbie Turner is the second most essential character. Robbie, like Briony, dreams about a bright future in which he will be able to realise his aspirations that the past has denied him. He, too, has been a victim of his bad luck in the past. Robbie's upbringing as the son of a humble charlady has left him resentful throughout his life. His behaviour at the institution demonstrates this. He is adamant about keeping his distance from Cecilia, and their encounters are unpleasant. His lack of self-esteem is shown in his harsh behaviour toward his childhood pal.

Robbie's goal to become a successful doctor can be regarded as an attempt to obtain what society has denied him. He had no rights as a low-income child without a father. His life was always dependent on the kindness of others. Even at university, his lecturer made all of his decisions for him. As a result, he is determined

to make a decision for himself, opting for medicine. McEwan is meticulous in presenting such minor but crucial information in order to provide insight on the psychological impacts that individuals face. He defends Robbie's motivations for choosing medicine as a profession thus,

For Robbie the matter was simpler and more personal: his practical nature and his frustrated scientific aspirations would find an outlet, he would have skills far more elaborate than the ones he had acquired in practical criticism, and above all he would have made his own decision. He would take lodgings in a strange town – and begin. (91)

He develops a strong loathing for Briony as a result of his anguish at having his demands thwarted. His ambition to become a father stems from a desire to give back what fate had taken away from him. As a result, one can see how important and useful Freudian theories are in comprehending others.

Emily Tallis

Emily Tallis is a character who makes her presence felt in the narrative despite her absence. She appeared to be perpetually aloof and uninterested in the obligations of a mother. Readers can deduce from a close examination of her character that she is the one who is to blame for all of her family's tragedies. Her negligence as a mother has put her children in a difficult situation. McEwan, on the other hand, is adamant on excusing her odd behaviour by laying out the reasons for her failure as a mother and a wife. Her childhood memories reflect that, like her arrogant and needy flamboyant sister, she was a youngster who was constantly neglected by the elders. She can't remember it without resentment, even now that she's an adult. "There were always adults available to encourage this relentless preening," she ponders (147). She's more of a "wronged child, (and) wronged wife" (148). As a result, she abandons her obligations and retreats into her comfort zone. She develops a tendency to withdraw from circumstances that require her actions as she fails to gain attention from others. Her migraine is a physical manifestation of her emotional turmoil. She uses denial as a defence strategy to shield the lonely child within her. This entails preventing external events from entering her consciousness. She lives in her comfort zone in

denial. "She did not wish to know why Jack spent so many consecutive nights in London. Or rather, she did not wish to be told" (149). All of these qualities in her behaviour help to understand how past events influence human behaviour.

Other Characters Other major characters such as Cecilia, Lola, Jackson, Pierrot, Leon, Paul Marshall, and Jack are no exceptions to the influence of their past over deciding their present and future lives. Cecilia's unkempt surroundings reflect her inner condition of insecurity and bewilderment. Cecilia's room symbolises the internal conflict she is experiencing. McEwan narrates her room as a "stew of unclosed books, unfolded clothes, unmade bed, (and) unemptied ashtrays" (4-5). Due to the absence of her parents and her laid-back brother, she is obliged to assume responsibility for her family. This puts her in a difficult situation.

Lola is another prominent character whose actions demonstrate the power of parents over their children. McEwan narrates her, "it was mummy whose spirit she was keeping alive" (147). She, like her mother and many of the novel's other characters, is "bound by an iron principle of self-love" (147). Her self-love extends even to the level of deceiving others. She, like her mother, achieves enjoyment at the expense of others. The impact of unconscious can be discerned in other characters such as Jack, Leon, Paul Marshall as well.

Conclusion

The novel's characters suffer mental anguish as a result of repressed feelings in the unconscious. They each have their own methods for ventilating it. Briony manages to channel her suppressed emotions into a successful writing career. Other characters, on the other hand, are less successful in turning their negative experiences into positive ones. Briony is a symbol for the flawed humans who need to be redeemed through sublimation. Thus, McEwan's effective journey into the inscape of the human mind shows the fundamental reasons for human behaviour as well as the tools to transcend it. Briony demonstrates how positive sublimation

can help people overcome obstacles in their lives.

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