

Original Paper

An Analysis of the the Mutual Construction of Individual Memory and Collective Memory in Atonement

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Abstract

Atonement is one of the masterpieces of British author Ian McEwan, which has attracted a lot of attention since its publication, and this novel won him the Pulitzer Prize for Literature. The novel's protagonist, Briony, makes a big mistake as an adolescent by indulging her imagination, breaking up her sister Cecilia and Robbie, and sending Robbie to prison. Robbie goes from being an Oxford student to a prisoner, and then he goes to the front line in the midst of World War II to get out of prison early. Cecilia, on the other hand, after known this terrible news, breaks with her family to become a nurse. Cecilia and Robbie are finally reunited at last. Briony finds them and repents deeply, telling the truth and apologizes to her sister and Robbie. It seems like an old fashioned happy-ending novel, except none of this reunion is reality. Just as the readers are immersed in the sense of redemption and happiness, the author ends the book with a meta-fictional message telling the readers that the previous happy ending is just a made-up one by Briony in her head, and she writes it down as if it is truly happened, in order to atone for her own sins. She changes the fate of two people and spends fifty-nine years in penance.

Previous research angles of scholars at home and abroad mainly focus on narrative art, metafictional ending, war and trauma, the theme of atonement, etc., and what exactly makes Briony made a big mistake, and how she carries out self-salvation, this will take Briony, the main character of the novel, as the object of study, and use Halbwachs' theory of individual and collective memory to explore her existential dilemma and her self-salvation through the freedom of choice to her self-rescue from her predicament, aiming to reveal McEwan's use of memory theory and his thoughts on human nature.

Keywords

Atonement, Individual memory, Collective memory

1. Introduction

Ian McEwan is one of the most iconic writers in contemporary British literature. This study focuses on McEwan's masterpiece *Atonement*, published in 2001. *Atonement* is considered to be one of McEwan's best novel. The novel is set in a country house in Surrey, where Briony, the thirteen-year-old protagonist, is in the midst of the transition from adolescence to adulthood. As a precocious and literary-minded teenager, the world as she sees is a distortion of reality. Although young Briony is unable to truly understand the world as she thought, she is driven by a variety of complex emotions to identify the innocent Robbie as a rapist and to make the rest of his life an unending pain. The body of the thesis consists of three chapters. The first chapter will discuss Briony's recreation of twentieth-century characters in her memoirs from a familial perspective, where Briony uses her individual memories as a tool to enter the inner worlds of all the characters she associates with in order to reconstruct their experiences and the process of characterization. The second chapter discusses Briony's experience of the Second World War through the collective memory of that time, then the metafictional ending of *Atonement* makes it clear that the second part of the novel is completed through Briony's imagination. She imagines Robbie's gruelling Dunkirk retreat on the basis of letters exchanged between Robbie and Cecilia, and letters sent to her by Corporal Knight, who travelled with Robbie. This arrangement targets the over-deification of Dunkirk heroism in Britain and the crisis of truth in historical testimony. The third chapter uses first-person narration to transform Briony from a character in the novel to a character narrating the novel, and serves as a climax by overturning the character's fate, provoking the reader to reflect on the relationship between imagination and reality. *Atonement* leaves an indelible mark on the reader's mind, forcing readers to constantly reflect on the biases that exist in individual and collective memory, and the moral weight of the novelist in between. By analyzing the different dimensions in *Atonement*, this paper argues that *Atonement*'s subversion of the novel's narrative conclusion represents what readers have imagined in their reading of the first two parts of the novel in terms of individually remembered experiences and collective cultural memory. It provokes popular reflection on traumatic history and dominant cultural memory. McEwan's skilful use of postmodern narrative techniques in this novel puts readers in a trance as they move between reality and fiction. Through a close reading of the text, this paper will analyse the truth and falsehood of the novel's narrative and explore the novel's metafictional characteristics from various angles, in order to help readers gain a deeper understanding of McEwan's unique narrative techniques and to appreciate the novel's artistic appeal.

2. Reconstruction of the Past

Atonement begins with Briony's obsession with screenwriting. She loves to create a world of her own with her imagination. Before readers get to know Briony's personality, Briony shows a work of literary imagination written by herself. Although this *The Trials of Arabella* is almost seven pages long, Briony wrote this plot-rich story in only two days. Not only that, but she had planned out what roles each of

her cousins should play, and she wanted to have the play perfect by the time her brother Leon returned. While her creativity was appreciated by her family, she would often fall into self-doubt. “The innocent intensity with which Briony set about the project-the posters, tickets, sales booth-made her particularly vulnerable to failure” (McEwan, p. 8). In fact, not only the posters, tickets, sales booth, there are many reasons why the play was not presented in the end. Because Briony’s plan was so perfect in her imagination, she did not consider that her role as heroine would be taken by Lora, she did not even have the right to assign the role. “For Briony had not even been cast as Arabella’s mother, and now was surely the time to sidle from the room and tumble into facedown darkness on the bed” (McEwan, p. 13). Her twin cousins were unemotional in their recitation, “Each word was a name on a list of dead people” (McEwan, p. 13), and with only one day of rehearsals to go, the twin cousins’ negative emotions caused by homesickness made it impossible for the group to get together, which completely dashes Briony’s enthusiasm. She feels that the reality of the play is not what she wanted it to be, so she no longer accepts the reality of the play and gives up on it.

Briony loves to imagine and fantasize, which contributes to her love of literature. She would often have strange ideas that would fill her mind and keep her awake for hours. “Was everyone else really as alive as she was? For example, did her sister really matter to herself, was she as valuable to herself as Briony was? Was being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony? Did her sister also have a real self concealed behind a breaking wave, and did she spend time thinking about it, with a finger held up to her face? Did everybody, including her father, Betty, Hardman?” (McEwan, p. 40). She is a writer, but more importantly, she is also a girl on the verge of puberty. However, “young Briony could not distinguish between real life and the literature that shaped her life” (McEwan, p. 79). Gradually, the line between truth and imagination becomes increasingly blurred. In reality, Robbie, who comes from a lower class background, is about to go out to study medicine and decides to grasp this opportunity to change his fate. Whether in mother Emily’s description or in father Jack’s behaviour of spending tuition fees to finance Robbie’s schooling, it can be seen that Robbie is also a young man with a very promising future. Robbie, who is about to leave, however, does not want to part with the girl he loves, so he confesses his love to Cecilia before his departure. Whereas in Briony’s story, Robbie is the embodiment of evil and becomes the destroyer of order in her family. At this point Briony only wants to believe in her own fabricated image of Robbie and refuses to face reality. It is a sign of self-deception to pass off fantasy as fact, and Briony should not think that fiction can compensate for all the complexities of human existence. When in reality she has no idea what the facts are, or to ask Cecilia herself what really happened. “Now there was nothing left of the dumb show by the fountain beyond what survived in memory, in three separate and overlapping memories. the truth had become as ghostly as invention” (McEwan, p. 51). Briony blurs the line between fiction and reality, allowing herself to misinterpret and fictionalize the writing of the pool scene. After the pool incident, Robbie writes a letter of apology for Briony to pass on to Cecilia, due to Robbie’s negligence, he picks up the wrong letter and mistakenly hands over a sexually suggestive letter to Briony, who, out of curiosity,

reads the contents of the letter, which reinforces Robbie's role as the villain in her mind, so after the seemingly "rape" incident, Briony rightfully identifies Robbie as the rapist, this forms another misinterpretation of the facts on her part.

In terms of the relationship between individual and collective memory, Halbwachs argues that "the memory of the same fact can be placed in multiple frames that are the product of different collective memories", and that "the frames of collective memory qualify and bind our most intimate memories to each other" (Halbwachs, pp. 93-94). Collective memory gives meaning to individual memories, individual memories can only be understood if they are placed in the context of collective memory, or as if individuals are socially dependent in terms of memory. However, in *Atonement*, the image of Robbie that exists in collective memory is completely opposite to Briony's image of individual memory, so Briony utilizes her subjectivity to reshape collective memory. "The reason why memory is re-told means that memory is not just an object of time, but a power of subjectivity that is re-called in the seemingly repressed common experience of life" (Zhong, 2007).

3. Witness of the Collective Memory

Individual memory is embedded with rich thinking memory, but the details of individual memory are often omitted in the research idea of collective memory, and we can't ignore the role of these details. In terms of the relationship between individual memory and collective memory, the reason why individual memory can become collective memory is that, on the one hand, this process is completed in dialogue, which is the result of mutual compromise between individuals; on the other hand, it is influenced by the historical background. The collective memory formed under the intertwined state of body and mind of individuals, and even this process is the history of the struggle of one person. However, in terms of power relations, it is not always the case that the collective memory dominates the individual memory; in many cases, the relationship between the two is one of complicity.

In the first part of *Atonement* the author uses a great deal of detail to construct a picture of Briony's relationships as a child. Briony was raised in an upper class family. This may seem like an ideal and warm childhood background. However, according to McEwan's description in the novel, "the harmony between the Tallis family was only superficial" (McEwan, p. 26). In fact, it was already an estranged family. Jack Tallis should be the head of the family, but in the novel, he never appears. He exists only in the thoughts of the other characters or in their dialogue. Ostensibly, Jack Tallis is the centre of the whole estate, whereas in reality, he is only a symbolic presence, an absent father figure. Briony's mother, Emily Tallis, suffers from migraines after she is born and gradually fades away from domestic chores and hides in her dimly lit bedroom. "Emily Tallis wanted to share only tiny frets about the household, or she lay back against the pillows, her expression unreadable in the gloom, emptying her cup in wan silence" (McEwan, p. 23). Although she thought Briony might need her, she got in the way of the illness and was very cold and at times incommunicative towards her daughter. The lack of motherly love has caused the relationship between mother and daughter to drift apart. Not only that, but

the bond between Briony and her siblings is not as strong as it could be. Her brother Leon, who works in London and rarely comes home, and her sister Cecilia, who spends a lot of time away at school, have become strangers to Briony, neither Leon nor Cecilia can understand Briony's love of writing, and even think that she is completely obsessed with it. It is in this emotionally detached situation, where Briony feels little love and care, that she develops her sensitive, self-centred and self-righteous character. In order to punish herself, she chooses to distance herself from her family and friends and to grow up alone.

In the second part of this novel, the author gives a detailed description of her personal experience in the war and the realities of World War II through Robbie's point of view, "everywhere there was a shuddering misery" (McEwan, p. 203). In a way, the ward is Briony's refuge as she tries to hide her true identity from the past separation and tries to accept and live in the collective memory. During the war, the sky of artillery fire, the bombers hanging overhead and the haunting nightmares show the severe physical and mental trauma left by the war. She is a witness to the war years and a narrator of the collective memory. McEwan recounts history in his own unique way, combining historical fact with fiction, blurring the line between history and fiction. Towards the end of the novel, McEwan refers to documents from the Imperial War Museum, saying that his portrayal of the Dunkirk evacuation at the beginning of the Second World War drew on the museum's documents. McEwan incorporates the battle into his work by depicting the horrors of the war in great detail. Readers can read about the many details and possibilities that have been overlooked by historians and learn and think about the truth of history. Whether or not these descriptions are true, they all seem very real in this novel. McEwan's reconstruction of history through his rich imagination shows the reader a fictional but real past, and makes the reader also get deeply involved in thinking about the relationship between fiction and reality.

4. Redemption by Memory

Briony first sees men weeping and crying as they nurse wounded soldiers in a traumatic war that separates loved ones, and Briony eventually realizes "how the war would aggravate her sins" (McEwan, p. 329). She goes through trials and tribulations and witnesses people and things she has never seen before. For Briony, what she sees and hears in the ward brings home the cruelty and ruthlessness of the war, but also the serious consequences of false accusations. She is even more remorseful that Robbie, who has joined the war because of her accusations, may suffer the same pain as the soldiers in the ward, and that the war has blocked Robbie's chance of reuniting with his sister Cecilia. By this time, Briony has developed her moral and social perceptions, for which she seeks to punish herself through this secret self-torture; she also gains self-awareness, which manifests herself in her writing and self-reflection. Although being a nurse exhausts Briony physically, she is psychologically unable to let go and finds another outlet in writing. Writing allows her to reflect, and letters to the editor make her think about her writing and her life. She comes to the sobering realization that the imperfections of her writing are a symptom of the imperfections of her own personality; the lack of mastery in her stories

shows that she does not have the courage to admit her mistakes. So Briony embarks on a journey of redemption through her writing, insisting on writing a story where everyone is happy, even though she knows that writing is useless. In this story, the reader forgives Briony as she eventually matures and bravely admits her mistake, and the lovers are finally reunited; from her narrative, it can be seen that her heart is gradually realizing the crime she has committed. When she enters the church and sees her cousin Lora and the man she is to marry, Marshall, the true rapist really comes into focus in Briony's mind, and she realizes very clearly the mistake she has made and that she will have to spend the rest of her life atoning for it. Through this narrative, McEwan gives the reader clues and allows the reader to speculate about the direction of the story. Throughout the novel, McEwan alternates between the inner monologues of the characters, each giving their views and visions of life. This alternation of the characters' inner monologues with each other, lurking in the shadows, allows the text to intertwine and create a new text.

In her old age, Briony admits that she made a big mistake when her overactive imagination prevented her from making an objective judgement: Briony distorted the facts and identified Robbie on the basis of her own suspicions without solid evidence, changing the fate of her sister Cecilia and Robbie, and at the same time Briony spends her whole life atoning for her sins. It is this intersection between reality and fiction that makes the story more vivid and the characters more distinct, and it also sets the stage for the appearance of Briony, the writer, at the end, and brings the author onto the stage.

In the last part of the novel, Briony realistically describes everything that has happened except the ending. The real ending is that Briony and Cecilia are long gone; Robbie doesn't make it back from France; instead he died of septicaemia on the beach at Dunkirk, and Cecilia is killed in the explosion at Barham station, and neither couple are ultimately reunited. It was a lifetime of great pain and regret for Briony that, because of this reality, she would never again have the opportunity to apologize to them in person and make amends for the harm she had caused them. It is also because of this reality of tragedy that Briony is reluctant to present the truth to the reader, preferring instead to create a happy ending while keeping the painful regrets to herself. In the novel, Briony travels to Robbie and Cecilia's home to make amends for his crimes. In the novel, Briony finally gets the chance to apologize to the people she has hurt. Although it didn't happen in reality, Briony wants the world to know that this is what she most wants to say to Robbie, her sister and the world.

5. Conclusion

The three major themes of love, original sin and redemption in the film correspond exactly to Briony's childhood, youth and adulthood. In childhood, she commits perjury as a result of her misinterpretation of love; in adolescence, she repents of the original sin of her childhood transgressions; and in adulthood, she embarks on a lifelong process of self-redemption and spiritual salvation as a result of her repentance of original sin. Through the intersection of individual and collective memory, the author shows us Briony's process of redemption and her complex spiritual development, which is also an

important theme of the novel: epiphany or awakening. For Briony, the journey of writing is a process of moral growth and awakening. The purpose is to achieve atonement through the creation of her own individual memories, in which she recreates the happy ending of Robbie and Cecilia in the form of a fabrication, in order to spiritually anaesthetize herself and achieve liberation to mitigate original sin, and at the same time of sublimation of her spirituality, her lifelong atonement is also finally completed. McEwan's brilliant and delicate writing describes Briony's growth from an ignorant 13-year-old girl to a mature and stable 77-year-old writer; from mistake to atonement, Briony makes a magnificent turn and achieves self-redemption. The author not only successfully portrays Briony's main character through the clever use of Halbwachs' theory of individual and collective memory. He also uses metafiction at the end of the novel to create the most profound evocation. *Atonement* uses the first person only in the last few pages, and most of the the novel is told in the third person. Briony, the protagonist of the novel, begins as a fictional character who has had a keen interest in writing since childhood, and although the work she produces is not very mature, McEwan has also constantly allowed the fictional character Briony to reflect on her own creative process, and this reflection is presented through the use of a self-conscious narrative. McEwan uses skilful narrative techniques to explore the protagonist's adolescent dilemma and to find a way out for her through meticulous descriptions and constant reflection in his writing; the novel not only embodies the author's humanist concerns, but also provides the reader with lessons on how to solve the adolescent dilemma. Whether it is young or old Briony, or any of McEwan's characters, the answer to the question of what happened is entirely up to the reader. The answer to that question is one about which the reader has every reason to wonder and speculate, for McEwan concludes: "There is no redemption, either from God or from the novelist. Robbie and Cecilia are still alive and still in love. ...and it's not impossible" (McEwan,p. 329).

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