

Atonement – Revelations Withheld

Kevin Finniar shows how perspective is key to Ian McEwan's novel, revealing how false perspectives, misunderstandings and the decision by the writer not to reveal the true perspective from which we are viewing events creates a work that challenges our very expectations of fiction itself.

Incest, obscenity, dismembered corpses, eating faeces at the dinner table, urinating on yourself in public and a sexual relationship with an ape. It's not surprising Ian McEwan earned himself the nickname 'Ian Macabre' in the late 70s and early 80s, not through his own actions of course but those of his characters in *The Cement Garden* and his collection of short stories *In Between the Sheets*. Look carefully in McEwan's more recent novels, however, and you can still find glimpses of his younger self.

Playing With Perspectives

In Chapter 13 of *Atonement*, it is dark, and 13-year-old Briony Tallis is searching the grounds of her family's country home for her runaway twin cousins. For five pages, the tension rises and McEwan litters the narrative with words from the semantic field of violence, the kind of references you might expect in a horror novel: 'maniac', 'mad, axe, attack', 'wild', 'darkness', 'bodies', 'shadows', 'threat', 'brutal' and 'shout'. Finally, we seem to reach the climax when Briony looks through a window to find that she is looking at 'a disembodied human leg'. It seems quintessential McEwan until we read on:

Closer still, and she grasped the perspectives; it was her mother's [...] She was mostly obscured by the drapes, and one stockinged leg was supported by the knee of the other, which gave it its curious, slanting and levitated appearance.

He uses the same technique later in the novel when Robbie is returning to Dunkirk under the constant danger of German aerial attack. Having already encountered a leg dangling from a tree and other reminders of the horrific reality of war, we stumble into the sentence:

He had been going for ten minutes when he saw Mace's head on the grass by a pile of dirt.

It turns out that Mace is actually

shoulder-deep in a hole [...] digging a grave.

Perspective is central to *Atonement*. McEwan plays with perspective, manipulates it, weaves his exploration of it through the novel and slaps his readers in the face with it in the novel's final stages.

Piecing Things Together

Atonement's inclusion in AQA's new English Literature (B) A Level as a novel containing elements of crime writing is no surprise given the tendency in the novel to expose fragments of reality and explore how the characters and we as readers take on the role of detectives, investigating and imposing meaning on the evidence. Take the episode in Chapter 6, for instance, when Emily Tallis is cocooned in her bedroom, listening to the muffled sounds of the household and deciphering them into her own interpreted version of reality. She hears 'the scampering of a four-legged creature coming down the stairs' and knows it to be

the twins, wanting the pool and about to be disappointed.

From her partial experience of the household's afternoon activities, in this case limited to what she can hear from her bed, she constructs the whole with an air of confidence:

She lay in the dark and knew everything.

McEwan places Briony too in a position where sensory deprivation leads to a misinterpretation of events. In Chapter 3, Briony observes her sister, Cecilia, and Robbie, in a fountain beneath her. Reliant entirely on visual evidence and unable to hear their conversation, she constructs a 'scene', involving a marriage proposal, blackmail and drowning, all based on her fragmentary perspective of the situation.

Briony's tendency to piece together her version of the truth is what will ultimately lead to her 'crime'. When she secretly reads Robbie's note to Cecilia, her shock at the language used contributes to her perspective when she is later confronted with Robbie and Cecilia in a compromising position in the library. Her understanding of events is influenced and informed by her immaturity, wild imagination and a long-standing taste for melodramatic fiction; it's not surprising therefore that she perceives the scene to be that of an horrific 'attack, a hand-to-hand fight'.

The Perspective of Class

The other perspective that we can't ignore in *Atonement* is that of class. The historical backdrop for Briony's crime, her false accusation of Robbie, is the class-ridden society of pre-war Britain so it's the class-tinted spectacles of the real detectives, particularly when faced with the taboo language Robbie has used, that will ultimately lead to Robbie's imprisonment – yet another example of the significance of perspective in the novel. As Heta Pyrhonen puts it, when discussing Robbie's note:

It is disruptive, as it contains material the upper-class community finds distasteful and difficult to communicate. Not only is the word 'cunt' a taboo, but so is any overt expression of sexual passion. It provokes the community to react... Briony's false statement and class prejudice turn her version into the truth.

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A Revelation Withheld

Briony's perspective is, of course, the most significant aspect of the whole novel – or, at least, you realise it is once you reach the last few pages. Until that point, you think you're dealing with an extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator, that is one who is outside the text and does not exist as a character within it. (If you want to explore Gerard Genette's classification of narrative voice in more detail, Richard Walsh's paper 'Who is the Narrator?' is well worth a read:

http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/52477/1/Narrator_Poetics_Today_.pdf.) By the end of the novel, we're left stunned and perhaps slightly cheated by the fact that everything we've read has, in fact, been Briony's creation when we encounter at the foot of the page: 'BT, London 1999'.

It's a masterstroke on McEwan's part to frame the narrative in this way and to use the metanarrative section at the end of the novel to throw the whole of the rest of the text up into the air and demand a re-reading. He's not the first author to do so, of course, as John Mullan points out in his very readable article 'Beyond Fiction' (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/mar/29/ianmcewan>). Mullan calls this final section 'a revelation withheld'. In terms of our detective work as readers, it makes us reconsider everything and throws new light on Briony's own representation of her 13-year-old self as well as causing us to re-evaluate our relationship with an author who could pull such a dirty trick. The whole point of the novel becomes clear to us at this point: to explore the power an author has over a reader. Briony, our narrator, is a construct of the author as much as the whole world she herself has created. Aware of this, there is, for us, some irony in Briony's final thoughts:

How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to [...] There is nothing outside her.

A second reading of the novel sheds new light on the early descriptions of Briony as a figure of control. Our 77-year-old narrator even admits to a 'controlling demon' in her younger self. Look at the way those farmyard animals are 'neatly corralled' and the 'straight-backed dolls' are 'under strict instructions'. McEwan's work may no longer be quite so explicitly horrific, macabre or taboo but, with the perspective of a reader now fully aware of the power of the author, there is something quite sinister about the description of Briony's mother reading

The Trials of Arabella [...] with the author's arm around her shoulder the whole while.

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Slips and Shifts – Time and Viewpoint in *Atonement*

Professor John Mullan unravels the complex organisation of the novel – in particular how it jumps backwards and forwards in time. He asks why McEwan wants the reader to be so aware of what is to come and see further ahead than his characters, and how the time shifts allow us to see things from their different points of view.

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* is a novel about a 13-year-old girl who, in part because of her love of story making, misunderstands what she sees – and then sees what is not there. The book opens with an epigraph from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, in which the heroine, Catherine Morland, has her illusions, formed by her reading of Gothic novels, sharply corrected by the hero, whom she will eventually marry. In *Northanger Abbey*, fantasy is banished and there is a happy ending. In McEwan's novel, Briony's delusions have catastrophic consequences for which she must spend a lifetime trying to atone.

Shifts in Narrative Viewpoint

It is not surprising, given the substance of this story, that shifts in narrative viewpoint are so important. Part 1, which takes up more than half the novel, moves between the points of view of several different characters: at different places we inhabit the thoughts of, variously, Briony, Cecilia, Robbie, Lola and Emily. This section alone is divided up into numbered chapters. Part 2 describes the retreat of the British army to Dunkirk entirely from Robbie's point of view. Part 3 describes Briony's experience of working as a lowly nursing assistant at St Thomas's hospital, and then her walk across South London to Balham, where Cecilia and Robbie are living in rented rooms. A kind of epilogue, labelled 'London, 1999', is narrated by Briony as an old and ailing woman.

Reading this final section we realise that the rest of the novel has been written (and re-written) by Briony. It could have ended differently – and less happily: an earlier version was closer to the real events it thinly fictionalises. There are, in retrospect, plenty of clues as to the sadder outcome that the aged Briony describes in the book's final paragraphs. On a second reading we might notice how the narrative of Part 2, told from Robbie's point of view, slowly becomes delirious. He has been wounded and begins to notice the signs that the wound is infected. In Part 3, as Cecilia and Robbie walk the penitent Briony to the underground, a future-seeing narrator intervenes.

They stood outside Balham tube station, which in three months' time would achieve its terrible form of fame in the Blitz.

Why tell us this? Because, in a 'pitiless' first draft of the story, Cecilia was killed in the (real) bombing of the station in September 1940.

Divisions in the Narrative

Divisions in the narrative allow for shifts in viewpoint. By narrating Part 3 from Briony's point of view, McEwan seals us off from Cecilia's righteous fury and from Robbie's bitter anger. We experience the uncomfortable intimacy of those rented rooms with Briony; we know the courage that it has taken for her to face her sister and the man whom she has falsely condemned. In this section of the novel, Briony (ever the narrative maker) is our guide to what has really happened. As she watches the last phases of the wedding of Lola and Paul Marshall, it is in her mind that we make those connections that a few readers will have inferred. Of course: Lola's bruises, blamed on her twin brothers, were evidence of

Paul Marshall taking brutal possession of 15-year-old Lola. And now, five years later, Lola is poised – the narrative is suddenly blunt – ‘to marry her rapist’.

Yet if we think about how and why narrative viewpoint shifts in this novel, we should ask why it is that only its first part has numbered chapters. Partly it is in order to signal shifts in narrative viewpoint, but also, more elaborately and unsettlingly, to allow for chronological shifts. In between the numbered chapters of Part 1, time often slips. Precisely because the chapter breaks also involve shifts of viewpoint, readers hardly notice these little jolts.

Slipping Backwards

Strangely, most of the time slips in Part 1 take us slightly backwards in time. The first of these occurs between Chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2 narrates, mostly from Cecilia’s point of view, but partly from Robbie’s, their meeting by the fountain and their tussle over the vase. Chapter 3 follows Briony’s attempts to conduct rehearsals of her play, and then afterwards her retreat to the nursery, through the window of which she sees the encounter between Cecilia and Robbie that we have already witnessed. The scene is replayed. Except that to Briony, watching from a distance and unable to hear their words, the little drama – in which Cecilia takes off her clothes and immerses herself in the fountain, and then, having emerged from the water, puts on her clothes and leaves Robbie without speaking to him – is utterly mysterious. Suddenly, it seems, she has access to adult behaviour, to rites and conventions she knew nothing about, as yet.

The recording and interpretation of this scene will be the beginning of her vocation as a novelist.

Telling it Two or Three Times

She could write the scene three times over, from three points of view.

Which is what McEwan has done. In order to do so he has slipped back in time from the end of Chapter 2 to the beginning of Chapter 3, so that Briony can experience as truly surprising a scene that the reader already understands. This particular time shift was replicated in the film adaptation of *Atonement*, which gave us the fountain scene twice, from different perspectives. Yet the film made no attempt to do justice to all the novel’s other slips in time. In Chapter 6, for instance, we are in the mind of Emily Tallis, struck down with one of her habitual migraines, as she lies in her bedroom and listens to the sounds of the house. Halfway through the chapter she hears the sounds of a conversation between Paul Marshall and the Quincey children that has already taken place in the previous chapter. Then, after the sounds of the Quincey twins having their bath, something else.

There was nothing, and then, like a lamp turned on and off in total darkness, there was a little squeal of laughter abruptly smothered. Lola then, in the nursery with Marshall.

It is the clue to Marshall’s predatory advances, and Lola’s subjection.

Backward Jumps, Different Narratives

The chronological shunts emphasise the separateness of different points of view, as if each character were living out a different narrative. At the end of Chapter 3 we have left Briony contemplating how she will write the story of Cecilia and Robbie’s exchange by the fountain. When we return to her in Chapter 7, she is on the island slashing angrily at nettles and hearing the horse and trap arrive with her brother, Leon. But this arrival, seen from Cecilia’s point of view, has already taken place in Chapter 4, where Paul Marshall has already remarked on seeing Briony, ‘giving the nettles a good thrashing’. What appears to be a sequential narrative in fact proceeds by a series of backward jumps.

The Last Jump

Perhaps the most striking of these is the last of them, which takes place between Chapters 12 and 13. The former is narrated from Emily's viewpoint and ends with Lola being escorted into the house, her face 'white and rigid, like a clay mask'. Emily 'instantly knew the worst'. Leon guides his mother into the drawing room; 'he wanted her seated before he broke his news'. There the chapter ends. Whatever Emily thinks she knows, the first-time reader will have to wait a little longer for an explanation; when you turn the page and the new chapter begins, you are with Briony, earlier in time. The chapter's first sentence acknowledges that it is heading for a catastrophe that we have already seen, from a different angle:

Within the half hour Briony would commit her crime.

The narrative is drenched in the knowledge of what is to come. This is in evidence from the first chapter, where we are introduced to Briony's hopes for her recently written play.

Briony was hardly to know it then, but this was the project's highest point of fulfilment.

What Briony does not yet know is not just the narrative future, but a whole realm of human experience. Disturbed by talk of the divorce of her aunt and uncle, she thinks about marriage, and how important weddings are to the plots that she enjoys reading or writing.

A good wedding was an unacknowledged representation of the as yet unthinkable – sexual bliss.

'Unacknowledged ... unthinkable ...': it is an odd observation, the novel letting us into Briony's thoughts in order to tell us about what she cannot think, what she cannot let herself imagine. It is as if actions and events cannot be described without an awareness of what comes afterwards.

Why is the novelist seeing ahead of his characters? Why does he like to know better than them? Because, of course, the novelist is Briony herself, fictionalising the events of her teens, and particularly that one disastrous day in the summer of 1935, in order to atone for her youthful 'crime'. Those backwards time slips and those glances forwards, at consequences that the characters cannot know, are both evidence of the real subject of this novel: the organising intelligence of a novelist, working to make a novel that is not just like life, but happier than life.

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Atonement and Postmemory

Dr Natasha Alden, lecturer at the University of Aberystwyth, writes about the way in which the concept of the 'postmemory' text can help us understand both the ideas and narrative choices of Ian McEwan's novel about the 2nd World War.

Reading *Atonement* as a postmemory text – one engaged with trying to recover a lost past – casts a useful light on the beliefs about the relationship of fiction and history that form the novel's central theme. It illuminates how, and why, McEwan structures his novel around Briony, an unreliable narrator with a serious ulterior motive, and invites us to consider the ways in which fiction can create connections between the present and the past.

Postmemory is a fairly recent critical term, coined by Holocaust scholar Marianne Hirsch in the 1990s to describe the experience of children of Holocaust survivors, born after the war but deeply affected by their parents' experiences. Hirsch explains:

Postmemory describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation ... [the second generation are] shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension.

Hirsch, postmemory.net

In her second book on postmemory and contemporary culture, *The Generation of Postmemory*, Hirsch suggests that it's possible to use this model of transmission to understand art and writing by other 'second generations' beyond the Holocaust survivors' community. Obviously, the order and magnitude of the inherited trauma of the Second World War for those born after 1945 is very different than that of the children of the survivors of genocide. The experience of 'coming after' felt by the children of British war veterans is related to their sense of belatedness, of having been born after the most significant, influential moment of their era, rather than of their having been born after an appalling attack on their community. Having said that, there are clear parallels between the way that second-generation Holocaust survivors and the children of British war veterans write about their parents' experiences, as we see with *Atonement*.

Growing up with family stories that were constantly told and retold – as McEwan was – or, alternatively, with a knowledge of the gaps left in the family through death, or of silences around their parents' generation's wartime experience, the events of the war become the second generation's

meaningful history, the history it is urgent to know because it belongs to one's life, because it shapes ancestral fate and one's own sensibility

as Eva Hoffman explained of being the child of Holocaust survivors. The writer Andrew Motion, who was born in 1952, writing on the anniversary of D Day in 2004, explained how he had been shaped by his fascination with an experience he only knew in a limited, second-hand way:

Like everyone else born shortly after 1945, I saw the war flickering at the edge of my childhood. My father stayed in the Territorials, my TV screen was filled with soldiers, and so was my weekly comic

(The Victor). But for all that, the fighting felt remote – and all the more so because my father very rarely talked about it. I used to think that this was his modesty and reserve – and so it was. Now I realise that it was also because he didn't want the shadow of what he'd been through to fall across my own life. I've always been grateful to him for this, but I've also wanted to know his story. It's been one of the shaping paradoxes of my life.

Later on, he continues that he had

always thought it would be a mistake, and presumptuous, to try to possess that time in my poems. It doesn't belong to me, however fascinating I might find it. But I've also wanted to map its effect on my father – to sympathise with him in my imagination, to measure the distance between his life and mine, to perform my own acts of remembrance. Perhaps some of my contemporaries – Ian McEwan [is] a conspicuous example... are driven by some of the same mixed feelings. We want to feel our inheritance on our pulses, and understand its power in our present.

A Second Generation Novel

Much of the criticism on *Atonement* has looked at the experimental aspects of the texts (such as McEwan's use of intertextual allusions), or the questions it raises about time, narrative and history (Finney, 2004, Hidalgo, 2005, Childs, 2005). It's obviously a metafictional piece – that is, it's a novel that deliberately makes us aware of its own constructed, fictional nature; but its treatment of the past – the central theme of the book – is also shaped in significant part by McEwan's position as a member of the 'second generation'.

Postmemory fictions, such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, or W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, often focus on memory, foregrounding issues of veracity and the nature of narrative, as Eva Hoffman explains:

[In] literature by children of survivors, intimate history is not so much given as searched for; the processes of overcoming amnesia and uncovering family secrets, of reconstructing broken stories or constructing one's own identity, are often the driving concerns and the predominant themes.
Hoffman, After Such Knowledge

The quest for the past, and the difficulty of knowing and representing it, is always key for postmemory texts.

Overcoming Amnesia

In *Atonement*, the desire to 'overcome amnesia' is evident on two levels. On a broad scale, it suffuses the whole novel, providing its narrative drive. On a basic level, we see it in McEwan's presentation of the evacuation of Dunkirk, which his father witnessed. McEwan grew up hearing his father's often-repeated stories about the retreat:

My father was at Dunkirk and he told many stories about it, God yes, especially in his dying years: he had emphysema. He did this three-day walk across the landscape there, although, actually, not all of it was walking. He was a dispatch rider and he got his legs badly shot. He teamed up with a guy who'd had his arms badly shot. Between them they worked the controls of the bike.

Evening Standard, 26.9.01

(You might recognise these men from *Atonement*, where McEwan Senior makes a cameo appearance, riding past Robbie.)

McEwan does not simply want to record his father's experience, he also wants us to realise that the 'national myth' of Dunkirk leaves a lot out:

65,000 died there. Dunkirk is not simply the miracle of the little boats. Before that there was a war crime. The Germans bombed and shelled the civilians packing the roads in order to block the military traffic. It was a great atrocity.
Evening Standard

Thus his depiction of Dunkirk ends just before the well-known moment of the rescue begins, as Robbie falls asleep (or dies).

Trying to Capture the Past

But of course, we realise at the end of the novel that this apparently first-person witnessing is nothing of the sort, but rather Briony's reimagining. This makes us doubt the text: have we been taken in by a consoling lie? The whole of *Atonement* is a meditation on the desirability, and difficulty, of capturing the past. Not revealing Briony's real role until the end of the novel focuses our attention on this brilliantly: the text had, until this point, seemed (mostly) realist, but its nature is now thrown into doubt. To paraphrase Henry Tilney, in *Atonement*'s epigraph, what have we been reading? Making Briony our (unreliable) narrator places the reader in the same questing role as Briony and McEwan themselves, trying to piece together the fragments of information they have, but horribly aware of their unreliability and incompleteness.

Other narrative tropes contribute to the novel's meditation on how we know the past: the narrative itself is fragmented, and told from multiple, and sometimes conflicting points of view (i.e. Robbie's misinterpretation of Briony's motives for accusing him, or his belief that Young Hardman raped Lola). In Part One, we are sometimes presented with moments from the afternoon before Lola's attack from different viewpoints, though the crucial ones – Lola's and Marshall's – are necessarily missing. McEwan also uses prolepsis, the sudden leap into a different time, in Part One, to allow the elderly Briony to comment, wryly, on her younger self. On a second reading, the reader recognises these clues that this is not a realist text, and might also notice that Part One bears a strong resemblance to Briony's first novel 'Two Figures at a Fountain', with all the revisions suggested by Cyril Connolly dutifully made. Knowing that Parts One, Two and Three are 'by' Briony undercuts our assumption of their reliability, merging fiction and reality and undermining both. Postmemory fictions aim to unsettle us in just this way. They are a complex form of mourning – for lost people (Robbie and Cecilia, and also McEwan's father, to whom the book is a posthumous tribute), but also for our inability to access the past in anything other than this incomplete, imaginative way.

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Atonement - questioning the imagination

Neil King suggests that at the heart of Ian McEwan's 'country house' novel is an exploration of the imagination and the dangerous power of the novelist.

Imagination rules the world.

Albert Einstein

Is imagination always a good thing? Einstein seemed to think so. But can it be dangerous? Ian McEwan poses this question in his novel *Atonement* through his exploration of one girl's imagination and where it leads her.

Some years ago a student entering Year 12 with ambitions (since fulfilled) of becoming a doctor, asked me whether she should study English Literature A level. I replied that she would be a better doctor for the imaginative breadth which reading fiction would give her. I experienced an uncomfortable sense of déjà vu when I read Robbie's self-reassuring thought that:

he would be a better doctor for having read literature. What deep readings his modified sensibility might make of human suffering.

His study of literature, culminating in his First Class Honours degree at Cambridge, will make him, he feels, a doctor who would be alive to the monstrous patterns of fate, and to the vain and comic denial of the inevitable... There was a story in which he was plotting himself as the hero.

Are we, as Ian McEwan has said, all writing the imaginative narrative of our own lives as we go along? And do we all colour these compositions with self-deception? Probably, though perhaps not with the devastating consequences of the narrative constructed by Briony in *Atonement*.

Imaginative havoc

For an epigraph to *Atonement* McEwan chooses a quotation from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), a novel which he has described as 'about someone's wild imagination causing havoc to people around them'. In that novel the naive heroine, Catherine Morland, is led by her reading diet of Gothic fantasies into imagining that her host in an English country house is a villain. Her mistaken fantasy is comical and has no dire outcome, unlike that of Briony's lurid imaginings bred from the books she has read. Yet both Catherine and Briony fail to distinguish between the fictional and the real, and Austen could, like McEwan, have decided to portray serious harm done as a result of Catherine's imaginative interpretation of events. Agreed, such a possibility is not within the scope of her parodic intention, and perhaps would not have been appropriate to the contexts within which she was writing. Yet in McEwan's stories we frequently see the imagination generating obsessions which become destructive, and McEwan's epigraph may be seen as warning us in advance of the power - and possible danger - of the highly active imagination of the immature Briony.

Briony's kind of imagination is inward looking, not outward looking: it is imagination without that compassion which McEwan has said he believes is crucial for the novelist to imagine him or herself into the sensibilities of others. The 13-year-old Briony is only interested in an imagination that makes everything fit into her sense of order. And this sense of narrative order is offended when she thinks she sees Robbie propose, and then Cecilia jump into the fountain:

... the drowning scene, followed by the rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal.

Having witnessed and misinterpreted the scene in the library, through lack of maturity and experience:

she did not doubt that her sister was in some way threatened and would need her help, and that the scene was so entirely a realisation of her own fears that she sensed that her overanxious imagination had projected the figures onto the packed spines of books.

In other words, she has blurred reality and imagination in a way that will neatly align with her interpretation of later events. The letter and Lola's word maniac all fit when she 'sees' the rape and 'knows' the man is Robbie ('The truth was in the symmetry... The truth instructed her eyes'). It is like an academic or a policeman who almost unconsciously falsifies evidence in order to fit a theory which will provide an orderly outcome, and hence closure.

Briony's 'failures' of the imagination are more complex and interesting than might at first appear. One reviewer of *Atonement* has written of Briony's 'scheming imagination', as if Briony is deliberately using her imagination in malign ways, while a second reviewer exclaims:

How wild and rampant the imagination is. How the imagination can destroy lives!

as if Briony is subject to a force of such power that she is unable to control it.

A third view might be that Briony's imagination does not go far enough, that it's her desire 'to have the world just so' that leads her to create and stick to such a neatly packaged story. This is an imagination unable to empathise with and respond to the experiences of others; it is an imagination which confines reality to its own limits.

Or alternatively, perhaps she simply fails to recognise the difference between the stories in fiction and the stories she constructs to help her make sense of the real world. She is so caught up in the world of books herself, that she overlooks the fact that real people are independent living beings, and imagined people are literary constructions.

Imagination, compassion and morality

McEwan's view of the importance of the imagination extends beyond his fiction writing and throws interesting light on what he was trying to explore in *Atonement*.

Of the terrorist attack in New York on 11 September 2001 McEwan has written:

Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality... If the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers, they would have been unable to proceed.

Elsewhere he has said that 'cruelty is a failure of imagination' and that his novels are about 'showing the possibility of what it is like to be someone else'.

It is ironic that Briony's witnessing of the scene by the pond triggers both her fatal misunderstanding and at the same time an understanding that it

wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value.

At least, she half-grasps the reality of others, realising that it

was overwhelmingly probable that everyone else had thoughts like hers. She knew this, but only in an arid way; she did not feel it.

She observes, as a writer must, but she does not understand. In the end, Briony's interpretation of the events is wrong, based as it is on misunderstanding and incomplete knowledge. Consequently the narrative she imaginatively constructs is based, not on truth, but on a limited understanding of both the adult world and literature.

The complexity of McEwan's exploration lies in this fact, that despite Briony's living through the imagination, she experiences a failure of imagination that has catastrophic consequences. Perhaps, in the end, the key factor with Briony is her obsessive need for order.

This controlling demon makes her forget the complexity of things in real life; for, as an aspiring novelist, 'order must be imposed and the confusion of feeling contradictory things' must be banished. Briony's desire to have a coherent story to tell seems to override everything else. When Briony experiences anything, she considers 'how she might describe it'. Even as a child she experiences life at one remove, through the controlling and distancing lens of language. Having witnessed the fountain scene from afar, Briony understands enough to realise that

this was not a fairy tale, this was the real, the adult world in which frogs did not address princesses, and the only messages were the ones that people sent.

Her next impulse is

a temptation to run to Cecelia's room and demand an explanation

but her 'impatience to begin writing again' wins out. Had she talked to Cecelia, all might have been explained (at least, Cecelia's perspective on the event given), some kind of truth constructed, and Briony's imagination set at rest. But she

resisted because she wanted to chase in solitude the faint thrill of a possibility she had felt before, the elusive excitement she was coming close to defining, at least emotionally.

Imagination and the unreliable novelist

Perhaps, here McEwan is identifying the limitations not just of Briony but also of the novel and the novelist, who only tells a single, partial story when so many others are available and who depends on a 'fiction' of authorial reliability. McEwan's interest in the idea of what is fiction and what is real in the world of the novel is evidenced in Briony's later statement that all novelists commit 'offences against veracity'. In an earlier draft of the novel McEwan included a biographical note entitled 'About the author Briony Tallis (1922-2001)', deliberately confusing us about whether we've been reading fact or fiction and the inclusion of real people such as Cyril Connolly, Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene and Julie Christie helps to blur the boundaries between reality and a work of imaginative fiction.

The end of the narrative (that is, Part Three) is signed 'BT', Briony Tallis's initials, and 'London 1999', to be followed by the 'coda' which is also entitled 'London 1999'. Our suspicions are aroused, confirmed in the coda, that Briony is the author of the story. Therefore how far can we trust what we have been told? How accurately has she pieced together the perspectives of all the others? Despite this knowledge, on a second reading perhaps we do, as John Mullan noted (The Guardian, 29/3/03), 'believe in the characters and situations as thoroughly as on the first reading.' However, at the same time (for this reader) a second reading was a very different experience - more so than for any other work of fiction: and a re-read is a must, as one inevitably approaches it from a changed viewpoint.

Achieving atonement through the imagination

At the end Briony accepts that it is impossible to conjure up Robbie and Cecelia at her birthday celebration,

still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at The Trials of Arabella

yet a possibility is left of another draft in which the two lovers forgive her. After all Briony's re-workings of her novel over 59 years, imagining and re-imagining, she understands that, before she slips into the oblivion of her terminal illness, she can, through fiction, imagine the world as better than it actually is. And this, in the end, is the best atonement she can offer her sister and Robbie for the 'real' happenings - her crime, Robbie's death at Dunkirk, and Cecelia's at Balham tube station. She wonders,

How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?

Perhaps her atonement, the best atonement that anyone can manage, is the attempt to imagine herself, with some success, into the feelings of others.

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