
Deceptive Style of Writing in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

Han Jie, Zhang Liming

College of Foreign Language Education and International Business, Baoding University, Baoding, China

Email address:

To cite this article:

Han Jie, Zhang Liming. Deceptive Style of Writing in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. *English Language, Literature & Culture*.

Vol. 5, No. 2, 2020, pp. 69-73. doi: 10.11648/j.ellc.20200502.13

Received: April 23, 2020; **Accepted:** May 22, 2020; **Published:** May 27, 2020

Abstract: Ian McEwan, together with Martin Amis is regarded as the best-known and controversial contemporary British novelist. He has been regarded as a serious, objective writer who is interested in writing about obsessive behavior, sex and moral corruption. When *Atonement* appeared in 2001, it received widespread praise from the reviewers, especially in respect of its style and narrative structure. This paper is concerned with the deceptive style of McEwan's *Atonement*, with the exposure of the narrative as an artifact. The identity of Briony is discussed from two aspects: on the one hand, she is a character who is as real as others. On the other hand, she finally becomes the real author of the novel, revealing the process of the construction of this story. Thus, by giving Briony two identities, the writer deceives the reader into his beautiful lie and awakens them with the same metafictional device, laying bare its nature of artifice. Through the study and analysis, it is safe to conclude that *Atonement* possesses the main features of metafiction. The application of deceptive writing renders the novel more aesthetic significance and meaning.

Keywords: Deceptive Style, Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

1. Introduction

Ian McEwan, together with Martin Amis is regarded as the best-known and controversial contemporary British novelist. "He has been regarded as a serious, objective writer who is interested in writing about obsessive behavior, sex and moral corruption". [1]

Atonement was first published in 2001 by Jonathan Cape, a subsidiary of Random House. It was regarded as the best of the McEwan books and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, James Tait Black Memorial Prize and Whitbread Book Award. It won the W. H. Smith Literary Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Santiago Prize for the European Novel. In addition to this, Time magazine named it as the best fiction novel in 2001 and it was included in the ALL-TIME 100 Novels. "Martyn Bedford comments that while *Enduring Love* had a superb opening but subsequently disappointed him..... *Atonement* rekindled his admiration for McEwan, who has rediscovered his vitality through adopting the persona of Briony Tarllis." [2] The Vancouver Sun comments, "Atonement is one of the rare novels to strike a balance between 'old-fashioned' storytelling and a postmodern exploration of the process of literary creation.

Atonement is a tremendous achievement, a rich demonstration of McEwan's gifts as a storyteller." [3] John Updike said in his review of *Atonement* in *The New Yorker*, "Ian McEwan, whose novels have tended to be short, smart, and saturnine, has produced a beautiful and majestic fictional panorama." "... a staggering book — something no American could have published." [4]

Postmodern metafiction employs a unique way of storytelling, which is characterized by its often playful, parodic, and deceptive narrative. This story is mainly told in the third person, with a touch of literature and writing, while the final part is narrated in the first person by Briony's monologue. The metafictional impulse is present in the novel in many ways. Sometimes the narrator indirectly reflects on the process of writing, sometimes through other metafictional devices. In the epilogue of the book, the narrator steps out to reveal the fact that the whole book is an artifact, leading the reader to question the true nature of reality. In fact, the double identities of Briony as a protagonist and author trick the readers into McEwan's postmodern deception, upon which this paper will expatiate.

2. Young Briony's Identity and Meditation on Writing

In McEwan's late novels, he tries to explore the purpose, meaning, and value of literature, by way of providing literary criticism or meditation on writing explicitly or implicitly. In *Atonement*, the metafictional comments are scattered throughout the novel, though the way of expressing it may differ from the typical postmodern one. As the pivotal character, and the unreliable narrator, Briony fabricates the novel of guilt and redemption through re-telling and re-memorizing history in a remarkable way. In fact, what deserves attention most is the identity of Briony and her desire for storytelling, which provide critical sources for the understanding of the whole story. It is crucial to notice that Briony is the God-like person who really manipulates the story, narrating the story according to her own wish. The fact is, Briony appears as the central character at the very beginning and the one who puts her atonement into practice. But at the end of the story, she turns out to be the narrator of the story and becomes the one who writes to atone for her sin. Thus, the role of Briony and her motivation merit special notice.

Atonement begins with Briony Tallis's melodrama, *The Trials of Arabella*, which she creates to perform for her homecoming brother. Actually, when she was very young, she has written her first story about a foolish affair, which makes her realize that imagination itself is the source of secrets. Ironically, her desire of writing has been further encouraged by her mother and other family members, which lays the practical groundwork for the final disaster. Briony's fascination with storytelling is a kind of instinct and can not be held back by anyone else. The whole novel is the result of her crime, which is fundamentally caused by her imagination and indulgence in writing. And, the root of her obsession is her passion for secrets and her isolated life. Thus, Briony is characterized by the following features: her love of writing, obsession with orders and desire for secrets. Although Briony intends to have some secrets kept in her secret drawer, it can be detected from the novel that her secrets are not secrets and nothing can conceal her from the secrets, for she does not have secrets at all. In consequence, she resorts to writing and drama, which is exhibited in her melodrama, *The Trials of Arabella* and the later novel she creates for her crime.

As the central character and genuine narrator, Briony's life can be divided into three periods, which correspond to the time sequence of the novel. From the very beginning, Briony's desire to be a writer is the key factor to the formation of her character and the development of the story. In addition to the old Briony's exposure of storytelling in the final part, the novel is also permeated with meditation on writing, which is more or less expressed in a self-conscious way. Annoyed by the rehearsal of the drama, Briony can not help pondering about the relationship between story and drama through an internal monologue.

"A story was direct and simple, allowing nothing to come between herself and her reader—no intermediaries with their private ambitions or incompetence, no pressures of time, no

limits on resources."^[5]

It seems that this is a writer's reflection on writing, but in fact this is a childish girl's random thinking. Briony believes that she should have written a story instead of a drama, for there will be no real participants for the story's presentation. When she makes the decision of giving up her drama, she is imprudent and thoughtless. So this is the young girl's meditation, at which those who know more about literature than her will definitely laugh. Perhaps, she never knows about melodrama, but it is she who creates the whole story and lures the reader into her fantasy. In fact, the novel employs a kind of self-conscious narrative by making Briony, who is later known as the real author of the novel, ruminate over storytelling. Notice that when Briony stops her wondering about the story and drama, she encounters the scene at the fountain where the reflection on writing reemerges. Here, Briony contemplates on the consciousness of other people which is vital to the theory of mind and fiction writing. Besides, the moral of a story is revealed here, that is "only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value."^[5]

So far as that is concerned, the careful reader may realize that what they are reading is in fact what the young Briony has planned to write.

"Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through a whole history of literature, beginning with stories derived from the European tradition of folktales, through drama with simple moral intent, to arrive at an impartial psychological realism which she had discovered for herself, one special morning during a heat wave in 1935."^[5]

Actually, this is the old Briony's writing about the young Briony's imagination, and the reader may be confused by the narration, for they are not aware of her status. In a sense, this can be interpreted as the old Briony or the writer's dialogue with the reader, indicating that Briony's identity as a writer in the 1990s, and whose identity is decided when the story starts. At the same time, the readers encounter the problem of the implied writer, who is the real storyteller and the God-like decision maker, without whom there will be no story being told. The fact is that although McEwan drops some hints in the novel which may facilitate the reader's estimation, they are not sufficient to make the right judgment. Only through the understanding of Briony's identity can the readers achieve a better understanding of the novel and its metafictional devices which are represented by Briony's meditation and other literature related narration. For the moment, suffice it to say that this is the real writer's reflection on her own writing process (if not notable for the common reader). More evidence will be given later as the story develops.

Since the process of writing itself is a major subject of the novel, those reflections and narrations on writing deserve special attention in this paper. In fact, the reflection on writing either from young Briony or old Briony, is abundant in the novel. A further description on writing is given in chapter ten through young Briony's contemplation on story

telling. The young girl believes that she is entering an arena of adult emotions which will definitely assist her writing. When she sees the letter which bears the filthy word, she plunges herself into whirls of thoughts and begins to dramatize the event, impregnated with childish bias and miscomprehensions. Her image of herself as a writer is self-evident, for her theory of writing is forming and develops with the transformation of her thoughts. In spite of the old Briony's occasional intrusions, Briony's pondering on writing which can be appreciated from two levels, either specifically or in general, is noticeable in this part.

At that moment, that is the time when her mind is occupied with imaginations and illusions, she has a desire to write regardless of what to write about. Here, notice the young girl's psychological development concerned with writing. At the very beginning of the chapter, Briony wonders what to write about, and how to write. Later in the rumination, she realizes that she is able to describe things in a realistic way, although she lacks the technique of capturing and conveying emotions. The following are evidences of her view on writing. "But how to do justice to the changes that had made her into a real writer at last, and to her chaotic swarm of impressions, and to the disgust and fascination she felt? Order must be imposed." [5] Thus she makes up her mind to start a simple description of what happened at the fountain.

However, what else is in the mind of the little girl or to be exact, the little writer in practice prior to the writing? As McEwan writes she is put into a dilemma and wondering whether to be simple or to be great and superb. Later, the young writer makes comments on her writing: "How to do feelings? All very well to write, She felt sad, or describe what a sad person might do, but what of sadness itself, how was that put across so it could be felt in all its lowering immediacy?" [5] Apparently, this is a common subject discussed by writers instead of common people.

Metafictional novels adopt a way of self-reflexive narration, that is to say the writer may sometimes comment on the story or story writing itself, in order to achieve the theme of "storytelling". Though until now, the writer does not reveal the truth that Briony is the real author of the novel and the status of his novel as an artifact, the reader has accumulated enough evidence to question the credibility of the story and the narrator, which will be without doubt the key to appreciating the explicitly metafictional strategies in the novel. Based on this argument, it will undoubtedly facilitate the comprehension of the point that Briony's meditation is actually the writer's reflection on storytelling, no matter whether it is direct or indirect.

As the storyline develops into part three which focuses on the London hospital, Briony becomes more mature both in her mind and her art of writing. In the past she is a young writer, who does not know so much of what literature really is, self-conscious and self-centered. Now, she is a probation nurse who proceeds with her writing career with more experience and knowledge, in contrast with that young and naïve girl. Though working in the hospital, Briony keeps writing a diary at night which is not allowed at that time.

From the journal she writes, the reader may find that she is still regarding herself as a great writer in the future, though she is no longer the young girl. It is writing that connects her with the past and her future. At the same time, the novel reveals a crucial message to the reader, a story written by Briony before her training in London. Notice that her long draft is grounded on the events described in part one of *Atonement*, and sent to a new literary magazine, *Horizon*, without a reply until now, for this lays a foundation for the final exposure of the novel's nature.

Some contemporary metafictional novels directly reflect the process of fiction writing or take literary criticism as its fictional object. Some highlight the artificiality of its construction with intrusive authorial comments. Here in this novel the metafictional technique is achieved through the writer's elaborate design which is quite different from the former, making it a novel and creative chef d'oeuvre. In one sense, McEwan's novel dramatizes the critic more implicitly than others, and in another it allows the dialogue between the fictional character (or writer) and the modern critic, thus achieving a special metafictional effect, internalizing the relationship between fiction and criticism, author and writer.

More significantly, the reader is led to question the credibility of the novel with the introduction of the letter from "CC", the editor of *Horizon* and who may be the famous critic Cyril Connolly. The letter is a detailed criticism on Briony's early story *Two Figures by a Fountain*, to be more exact, the incident at the fountain performed by Robbie and Cecilia. Although the reader does not have a chance to read the version which Briony sends to *Horizon*, it is recognizable that some of the parts of *Atonement* is influenced by the critique and has been corrected. As the old Briony admits that the story has been drafted and re-drafted in order to achieve the effects of realism, so it is understandable that some of the details are different and some of the scenes are moderated according to Connolly's suggestions. Now, the theme of storytelling is unquestionably clear, from the early innocent idea through the first draft to the critical guidance from the editor of *Horizon* and the final completion. It is observed that the novel is an extensive study of its own composition, which will be further proved in the epilogue.

As discussed earlier in this paper, Briony applies the technique of stream of consciousness and impressionistic writing, which is popular in the twentieth century. In the critique, Cyril Connolly argues that "You both capture a flow of thought and represent it with subtle differences in order to make attempts at characterization. However, we wondered whether it owed a little too much to the techniques of Mrs." [5]

In fact Connolly is criticizing her modernist obsession with the consciousness which sacrifices the important element, plot. Briony was greatly influenced by the twentieth century modernism, and practicing it in an experimental period. So it is clear that the version under discussion currently is not a mature one, let alone a perfect one. McEwan once expressed his view on fiction writing, as, "when you open a book, it not

only shows the rules of itself but also tells you how to write a novel.”[6] In the free indirect speech, the critic's comments reveal the art of writing to Briony and at the same time to all the readers who are interested in the process.

Although Briony's play has been mentioned in the novel, it is not clear enough that this has any connection with the novel. The letter can be considered as an interpolatory narrative which gives clues that Briony has written the first part of *Atonement* and in fact the whole story, for it is the first time the novel turns to its own composition directly. The criticism forces the reader to reflect on the process of writing and the artificiality of the fictional process, with the mere touch of metafictional device.

3. Old Briony's Disclosure of Fiction Writing

By examining the elements as history, imagination and fabrication which are critical to the artistic creation, McEwan delves into the kingdom of fiction writing. Though this novel exams extensively the process of fiction writing, for many of the readers the novel's nature of fabrication can not be detected with no difficulty. In the epilogue, McEwan's protagonist, Briony displays her identity as the real author of the novel by directly stating to the reader, revealing the fact that the whole story is a beautiful lie. Briony's revealing of herself as the ultimate author of the novel forces the reader to reevaluate the novel instead of doubting its reliability. Now the reader may realize why at the end of Part Three the signature is “BT London 1999”. Apparently this is the writer's indication that the whole book has been written by Briony Tallis (BT in short).

In the first three chapters the story is narrated in the third-person, but in the final part it turns to the first-person evaluation by the self-conscious narrator. Owing to this, the readers may have a more direct access to the inner life of the writer. So the coda can be interpreted as a confession of Briony and a commentary by the writer. The final part expresses the origin of this story, revealing that fiction writing is the way of atonement. Apart from this, the epilogue employs the postmodern open ending, for the writer gives the reader two endings for them to choose, but actually none of them can be as real as the truth.

In postmodern novelistic practice, metafictional writers always explicitly or overtly lay bare the condition of artifice by exploring the relationship between fiction and reality. Most of the metafiction may exhibit the process of their construction, either having the writer step out to reveal the truth or making comments on a specific work. Like the common practice, McEwan creates a fiction and makes a statement on the creation of this fiction. It is safe to say that this is a novel about fiction, and fiction writing, but more significantly it is about construction and deconstruction. The novel's extensive focus on storytelling is a salient feature of itself as contemporary metafiction.

By authorizing Briony as the real narrator of the novel,

McEwan tries to force the reader to reflect on the art of composition, the role of the writer and the chasm between fiction and life. The epilogue is metafictional in that the real writer steps out of the novel and makes comments on the process of writing. It is its thorough deconstruction that makes it a typical postmodern artifice. First of all, the appearance of Briony as the narrator “subverts the readers trust in the reliability of what had presented itself as third-person narrative, so that suddenly gaps are opened in the potential of the narrative to make true-claims...”[7] This lays a solid foundation for the further subversion of the whole story. Furthermore, the double ending puts the reader into a postmodern dilemma, in which everyone loses their ability to tell fiction and reality. Did Briony really commit the crime which the whole novel is based on? Are any of the two endings real or not? What is real and what is fictionalized? Unfortunately, maybe there is no absolute answer to this philosophical question. Maybe Harold Pinter can answer this question with his Nobel Lecture, according to him, “There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.”[8] Thus, the novel creates a sense of uncertainty and postmodern ambiguity.

Special attention should also be paid to the novel's double endings. Briony shows the reader the first version of the ending in part three, which is the reunion of the two separated lovers in England and their meeting with Briony who promises to write an explanation to atone for her false accusation of Robbie. At the same time, Briony is conceiving her new version of story which will be her atonement for the sin. The writing of her own atonement story is actually a comment on the right and obligation of the writers to explore the psychological activities of the characters created by them. So the writer should be able to imagine what is likely to be someone else in order to achieve the sense of compassion.

In the last part, Briony is a famous novelist in her old age. She is suffering from a fatal disease, dementia which will make her lose her memory and other abilities until she dies in a few years. She reveals that this novel is a combination of her many earlier drafts written during her life, with the hope of atonement.

The end of this novel is regarded as open and uncertain. In fact, according to the theory of narratology, the ending alone could be meaningful in narrative. Though some of the modern critics consider the epilogue as frustrating and unnecessary, it is indeed significant in this novel and the appreciating of the novel. Without this twist, the novel may run the risk of stopping the reader questioning the reliability of the narrative and understanding the transformative power of writing. In contrast to the ending given earlier, the real ending appears with much authenticity and melancholy. Briony confesses that she has been conceiving the happy ends of the two lovers all night, for she has been traveling in a wrong direction for a while. It is only in the last version that the two lovers united, which is quite different from the preceding drafts. As a matter of fact, “I tried to persuade my

reader ...Robbie Turner died of septicemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940, or that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station.” [5]

Hence, McEwan’s epilogue possesses the features of open ending, deconstruction and post-modern twist. It subverts the reader’s trust of the preceding narrative with the reunion of the two lovers. The revelation of the “real life”, forces the reader to reconstruct what’s in their mind and revalue the end of the novel. Thus the “real world” becomes an illusion, and the truth turns out to be an elusive one. Due to the torturing of vascular dementia, Briony is losing her memory and other mental functions. This may lead the reader to ask what really happened in the novel, how reliable Briony is as a narrator. In some way, *Atonement* demands the reader’s participation and empathy. It is the reader who makes decisions of what to believe and what the reality is in the novel.

Now the relationship between fiction and reality accumulates to its climax in the novel. “What really happened?” The writer’s answer is the reunion of the lovers despite the fact that they are both dead finally, because this is what she has written in the novel. Therefore, it is what really happened in the novel. It is the fictionalized reality. Now, what really happened becomes an unnecessary question, for the reader is quite conscious of the boundary between fiction and reality. In real life, nothing has happened, it is only a story made up by Ian McEwan. The epilogue enhances the reader’s awareness of the fact that the whole novel is but an artificial construction.

4. Conclusion

Apparently, Briony possesses the power and authority as God in that there is no person, no entity higher than her. Here, the book poses the question: “When one’s own understanding and morality are the only touchstones, without God, how can the individual find atonement?”[9] The problem put forward by Briony is hard to answer. Since the novelist is also God in the sense of seeking atonement, the only way available for atonement is to reveal or as it actually is to fabricate the truth, even though the truth is not accessible and elusive. McEwan once said writing fiction is “about showing the possibility of what it is like to be someone else. It is the basis of all sympathy, empathy and compassion. Cruelty is a failure of imagination.” [10] Hence, Briony writes a story with her fictionalized reality for the purpose of achieving atonement, for by giving the two lovers a happy ending she achieves her atonement to a certain extent. More importantly, this reflection echoes with the title of this novel, by commenting

on the storytelling in a self-conscious way. The novel ultimately upgrades to a more direct and clear level of metafictional meditation upon life and novel writing

The metafictional devices blur the lines between fiction and reality, combine the literary criticism with the writing process itself, and signify the artificiality and self-consciousness while depicting a real story, rendering richer aesthetic meaning and significance to the novel. “The real and the imaginary, the present and the past merge for the reader.” [11] In some way, “it is a novel about the past and future of the novel sequence.” [12]

Acknowledgements

This paper is under the project of The Cultivation of Culture Awareness in English Literature Teaching.

References

- [1] Han Jie, “Postmodern Strategies in Ian McEwan’s Major Novels,” *Advances in Literary Study*, 2014, 2, 134-139.
- [2] Peter Childs, *The Fiction of Ian McEwan*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 129.
- [3] <http://www.randomhouse.ca/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780307396785>
- [4] John Updike, “Flesh on Flesh”, *New Yorker* (13 March 2002), 80.
- [5] Ian McEwan, *Atonement*. New York: Anchor Books, 2007, p 47, 51, 39, 147, 148, 402, 478.
- [6] Zhai Shijing, “The Characteristic of Contemporary Young English Writers’ Works”, *Academic Quarterly*, 1995, 1, 176.
- [7] Earl G. Ingersoll, “Intertextuality in L. P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between* and Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*”, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 40: 3, (July 2004): 241-258.
- [8] <http://www.stthomasu.ca/~hunt/reviews/birthday.htm>
- [9] Peter Childs, *The Fiction of Ian McEwan*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 136.
- [10] <http://www.randomhouse.ca/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9781400025558>
- [11] Linda Hutcheon, The “Real Word(s)” of Fiction: *The French Lieutenant’s Women*, *English Studies in Canada*, (1984), 84.
- [12] William Palmer, *The Fiction of Jane Fowles: Tradition, Art, and the Loneliness of Selfhood*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974, 30.