

Briony's Predicament in Atonement

WangRumeng

Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an Shaanxi, 710128;

Abstract: Atonement is one of McEwan's masterpieces. The author of the novel reveals that Briony made a wrong judgment about her surroundings when she was a girl due to the lack of education and management of her parents. The cognitive bias caused by the lack of education and the girls' wrong control of their emotions led to the final tragedy. Based on literary ethical criticism, this paper analyzes the reasons why Briony falsely accused Robbie when she was young from the perspectives of family, reason and self.

Key words: McEwan; Atonement; sense; self

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Introduction

Ian McEwan is a famous contemporary British writer who has made outstanding contributions to modern British literature. Ian McEwan has a strong character, a quick mind and a tireless spirit of exploration. Many of his works reflect the power of sex to dominate people and the distortion of human nature under the influence of sexual desire. Atonement, one of McEwan's most famous novels, won the Booker Prize in 2001.

1 Writer and Works

Ian McEwan specializes in sketching the inner insecurities and fears of modern people with his delicate and sharp writing style, and actively explores the issues of violence, death, love and lust, good and evil. Most of his works are short stories, most of which are bizarre and absurd, and are known as "black comedies". Atonement is a novel about growing up and morality. Fourteen-year-old Briony has a vivid imagination, and she excels at and loves writing. Briony's father is an official, and due to his busy schedule, he often stays in town and doesn't come home. Her mother is sickly and rarely interacts with her daughter. Her sister, Cecilia, and brother, Leon, are busy with their own affairs and are rarely home. So Briony puts her energy and time into writing. Gradually, Briony develops her own perception of things around her. In her eyes, the world should be in order, the toys in her house are put in order, and she has her own unique views on marriage. The story takes place on the day her brother Leon brings his best friend Paul Marshall home.

Robbie, the housekeeper's son, who was also invited, has a daytime encounter with Briony's sister, Cecilia. During the day, the two of them have a subtle friction in the atmosphere by the pool over a vase, which happens to be seen by Briony, who is in her room, and at this moment, Briony's inner opinion of Robbie changes subtly. The encounter with Cecilia brings back memories for Robbie, who wants to write Cecilia a letter of apology for his rudeness to her by the pool, but can't control his restless heart to write a letter with erotic words. In his haste to leave for the party, Robbie mistakenly took the letter with the erotic words. Ashamed, Robbie asks Briony to deliver the letter for him. Curiously, Briony sneaks a peek at the contents of the letter and confirms her suspicions. Confused as to whether she should show the contents of the letter to her mother, Briony stumbles upon Cecilia's intimate encounter with Robbie in the study, and without being asked for confirmation, Briony imagines Robbie to be a pornographer. At the evening party, Briony accuses Robbie of being the aggressor of her cousin. Robbie chose to enlist in the military to wash away the humiliation after three years in prison. The truth later comes out that it was Paul who violated his cousin, and as an adult Briony is so remorseful of her false accusations that she chooses to work as a nurse in a hospital. Beyond that, Briony chose to go through her penance by writing.

2 Theoretical Basis

In the perspective of ethical literary criticism, literary works serve as moral guides for society, and are the specific expression of ethical morality in a certain historical environment. That is to say, literature is a unique expression form of ethical concepts and moral life in a specific historical stage, and literature is essentially an ethical art. Therefore, it requires analyzing and deconstructing literary works in a specific ethical environment, as different historical periods have their fixed attributes, specific historical ethical environment and ethical context, so understanding literature must let it return to its ethical environment and ethical context, which is a prerequisite for understanding literature.

Ethical literary criticism has its own system, such as ethical dilemma, ethical environment, and ethical choice. Ethical predicament refers to the inevitable contradictions caused by confusion in the text, which is very common in literary works. "In literature, ethical predicament is often associated with ethical selection, and ethical selection is indispensable to solve ethical dilemma"^[4] (Nie 268) Ethical literary criticism is not simply judging the merits and demerits of a work from a moral perspective, it emphasizes analyzing and understanding a work in a specific historical context, it analyzes the ethical factors that influence characters' fates in literature, explains events, characters, and literary problems from an ethical perspective, and conducts moral evaluation from a historical perspective.

3 Reasons for Briony's Fault: Ethical Predicament

According to the ethical literary criticism, an ethical predicament refers to the difficult and conflicting situations that characters face due to ethical confusion. In the novel *Atonement*, Briony, who was obsessed with order, made a wrong accusation against Robbie based on her imagination and judgment, leading to a tragedy. The reason behind this accusation is rooted in deep layers. The influence of family environment and the alienation of family relationships, immature self-awareness at a young age, and a fanatical pursuit of reason and order are all the triggers of this tragedy. This chapter focuses on Briony's ethical predicament when she was young.

3.1 Shortage of Family Care

Briony's father was a cabinet member and rarely came home due to his political commitments. The wife, Emily, then becomes the theoretical head of the family. The traditional ethical paradigm of the man as the head of the household is unmistakable. Briony herself has rich imagination, which is one of the main reasons why she loves to write. However, this also reflects that Briony needs someone to guide her to correctly perceive herself, and her father is the most suitable guide, but he is often absent from Briony's growth due to his work, so Briony is immersed in literary creation all day long and lacks the experience of constructing the order of the real world.

In the long run, Briony sees the external world as a counterpoint to her own internal world and interprets it for herself. In the transition period of her teenage years, Briony peers into the complexity of the adult world, but due to the lack of guidance, Briony does not fully understand the adult world that she sees, and what she sees and hears is so different from her own inner setting that she cannot understand it, nor can she find a good channel to dissolve the discomforts of this transition period. Briony's false accusation against Robbie was closely related to the absence of paternal love. As Robbie's benefactor, Mr. Tallis had high expectations of Robbie. However, when Robbie was sent to prison due to the accusation, Mr. Tallis did not stand up to defend Robbie, which implied that he believed Briony's accusation against Robbie at the age of 14. This objective fact pushed Briony into a false psychological state. For Briony, the role of father was very important. The father has a significant impact on the family, bringing order, safety, and harmony. "According to Briony's description, the father should fulfill his role in three aspects. Firstly, the father's role at the macro level can effectively construct the family order. Without issuing any orders, the father can exude an aura of authority, and the family order will become effortless. Secondly, the father's presence can greatly improve the family ethical relationship, infuse the family with vitality and vitality, and alleviate the pressure of members who are tired of dealing with it. Thirdly, the father can resolve family conflicts and guide children in life choices."^[2] (Huang 115) If the father were present, the master-servant conflict in the kitchen would be resolved easily, which shows that the father has an important role in constructing family order and improving family ethical relationships. Briony longed for but also lacked the kind of guidance and care from her father, but this kind of care was lost due to her father's long-term absence. Therefore, the absence of paternal care is an important factor in Briony's ethical predicament.

Briony's mother is frail and often in bed. "But her father always stayed in town, and her mother either had migraines or was very cold, even unreasonable."^[11](McEwan 48) Like her father, her mother's care for Briony is lacking. Due to her father's busy schedule, the burden of taking care of the family's affairs falls on her mother, which is an important factor in maintaining the family's harmony and stability. However, her mother fails in her duties on several occasions. Firstly, in terms of household chores, due to her poor health, her mother was always bedridden and therefore could not take care of many matters herself. She always relied on her voice to perceive the family's control and management. She had to worry both about Leon's future, Cecilia's marriage, and Briony's future. The mastery of her family's movements appears only in her floating thoughts. Secondly, her physical condition makes it impossible for Mrs Tallis to do her duty. The mother either complains incessantly to Cecilia when she is fresh or remains silent because of her migraines. From Mrs Tallis' complaints, we can appreciate her helplessness in the family construct. On such detail in the novel, the argument over whether to make potatoes or salad for the dinner party makes Mrs Tallis's position in the family structure clear. The servants are busy in the kitchen grilling potatoes for the day, but Emily asks for some salad to be prepared, using the heat as an excuse. "'Take it down!' The cook exclaimed. No doubt her fire was directed at Mrs Tallis."^[11] (McEwan 232) The kitchen maid bluntly expresses her dissatisfaction with Emily's construction of family structure and order, reflecting more directly Emily's failure to take responsibility for the construction of her family, as well as her lack of education for her children.

In addition, Emily's class consciousness indirectly encourages Briony's childish lies. Emily has always been prejudiced against Robbie, even opposing her husband's academic support for Robbie. She has never considered Robbie as a candidate for a son-in-law, despite his integrity, kindness, excellence and reliability. Instead, she was very supportive of Cecilia and Marshall being together. That's why she chose to side with Briony when she saw Robbie's note to Cecilia. Briony was also subconsciously affected. "It's really not surprising that he had the guts to court Cecilia. There should be a lot of love like that across the gentry every day."^[11](McEwan 86) After Briony sees Robbie's letter to Cecilia, her first thought is shock, but then he convinces himself with the reasoning that Robbie wants to make a class leap in this way.

3.2 Influence of Self-made Order

Briony's world was an orderly world, and this order was the source of Briony's sense of security, but it was also her shackles. As a teenager, Briony showed a fanatical obsession with order. "In fact, Briony's room was the only tidy room on the upper floor of the house. Her dolls, who lived in spacious model houses, seemed to have been given strict orders not to lean against the walls. They stood up straight, one after another; her cowboys, deep-sea divers, and anthropomorphic mice, which were lined up on her dressing table, looked like militia waiting for battle orders."^[11] (McEwan 11) Briony's room was tidy and orderly, and she put her favorite models on display on the windowsill. "They all faced the same direction - towards their owner - as if they were about to burst into song, even the hens in the yard were neatly confined in their enclosure."^[11](McEwan 11) Briony's handling of the miniatures showcased her obsession with order and her strong desire for control. She established an order in her own thought realm, and then used reality to compare it. For her, anything that did not conform to the order she had set up was unreasonable. During the dress rehearsal, she was very strict, with every detail following her own ideas, but she did not seek the actors' agreement. She was just as strict with the young cousin as well, and once the progress was interrupted, she became anxious and impatient, hoping that the dress rehearsal would go smoothly without any hitches, so as not to disrupt her plans. From her dress rehearsal, we can see that she is a girl with strong control desire.

Furthermore, Briony's insistence on order and reason doomed her to have an immature understanding of emotions. This can be seen from her play *The Trials of Arabella*: in the play, Arabella disregards her family's advice and elopes with a foreign duke out of impulse, which leads to her being punished with cholera and being abandoned by the duke. Later, a prince who turns out to be a doctor saves her and they live happily together. "Briony's story embodies what she identifies as intellectual love: equality between men and women; Men act as protectors in sexual relations; The love of men and women should comply with morality, from love to marriage"^[7](Zhang Xi o41) In accordance with specific procedures. Briony's story reflects the love she believes in. Rational love will persist to the end, but impulsive love will be punished. Therefore, when she saw Robbie's letter to Cecilia, she considered it an irrational and incorrect emotion. "Something completely human, or masculine, was threatening the order of her family. Briony knew that unless she helped her sister, they would all suffer. It

was also clear that she had to help her sister in a delicate and clever way. Otherwise, based on past experience, Briony knew Cecilia would turn against her.”^{[11](McEwan 257)} Briony saw Robbie’s feelings for Cecilia as a dangerous thing, as she believed that this feeling would disrupt the balance and harmony that she considered secure. This important change, in her eyes, must be suppressed because it not only threatens order but also puts her family in danger. Briony’s conclusion, which aligns with the rules she has built with reason, traps her in the trap of reason. As a young girl, Briony did not develop a complete and healthy understanding. She could not understand that male and female emotions cannot be measured and judged with reason and order.

3.3 Misunderstanding in Childhood

Briony was at a stage of transition from childhood to adulthood at the age of 14. On one hand, she had not yet shed her childishness, and on the other hand, she could not understand the emotions between adults. At this stage, girls are prone to fantasizing that they have transitioned to the adult world, so they think they have mature and correct ideas about love like adults. Briony could not understand the relationship between Robbie and her sister, nor could she clarify her own feelings for Robbie. Therefore, Briony deliberately jumped into the river to let Robbie save her. In her eyes, Robbie’s willingness to sacrifice his life to save a drowning her was enough to prove that Robbie had feelings for her. “Because I love you.”^{[11](McEwan 524)} Briony mistakenly thought that her feelings for Robbie were a kind of adult love. Therefore, when she found out that Robbie had feelings for her sister, Briony thought it was a betrayal of her own feelings. “In her mind, his infatuation with her sister was a betrayal of her own love.”^{[11](McEwan 528)} Briony could not accept that her own feelings had been abandoned and betrayed. Therefore, for Briony, accusing Robbie was a way of compensating for her feelings being betrayed.

In addition, when Briony saw her cousin being molested, her initial hesitation was gradually broken by her own fantasies. In fact, her cousin did not deny her guess but did not confirm it either. Briony pushed her interpretation of the event towards her own imagination. “Every time her cousin showed signs of self-doubt, Briony’s confidence grew.”^{[11](McEwan 381)} Briony ignored her cousin Lola’s hesitation and indecision when she was questioned and constantly gave herself psychological suggestions, believing that her guess was the truth. The misunderstanding by the fountain, the intimacy in the study room all made Briony believe that she had a duty to save her cousin from what she thought was a predicament, namely getting rid of Robbie, the pervert, otherwise the family order would be threatened. She was excited about her fantasized heroic deed. She accused Robbie, but when she saw Robbie bringing the two cousins back, “She felt betrayed. Now, Robbie was appearing as the benevolent savior of a missing boy. Who would believe her now? All her efforts, all her courage and clear-headedness, all she had done to get Lola home had been in vain. They - her mother, her brother, the police - would no longer listen to her, they would form an alliance with Robbie Turner to be against her.”^{[11](McEwan 417)} She imagined the humiliation of losing her credibility and authority in front of her loved ones, and could not accept it. So even though she doubted her own answer, she persisted in her false accusation. In Briony’s imagination, Robbie was a betrayer, an intruder, a destroyer. She saw herself as the only warrior who knew all the truths, trapped in the dilemma of her own imagination.

4 Conclusion

Briony’s father, preoccupied with work, lacks the care and guidance necessary for Briony. Similarly, her mother is unable to manage the family due to her health condition. The absence of proper familial guidance has led Briony to develop a skewed understanding of the world during her formative years. Feeling isolated in her own imaginary realm, she sought truth within her beliefs. Immersed in writing and her vivid imagination, she mistakenly perceived her thoughts and observations as absolute truths. Driven by an obsession with order, Briony adamantly refuses to allow any disruptions to upset the delicate balance she strives to maintain. Upon discovering Robbie’s letters, she views him as an intruder who threatens this harmony and assumes the role of peacekeeper. In Briony’s eyes, Robbie’s affection for Cecilia represents a disruption of order and reason; unable to comprehend adult love, she measures it against her own standards of order. However, what transpires between Robbie and Cecilia defies simple explanation or rationality—ultimately contributing to tragedy. In Briony’s fantasies, Robbie becomes the agent of chaos who disrupts all equilibrium; seeing herself as both victim and valiant warrior fighting against him only plunges her deeper into a self-created predicament

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