

## Quest for Atonement: ‘Atonement’ as a Trauma Narrative

Sharfudden M

*Research Scholar, Department of English  
Zamorin’s Guruvayurappan College  
Calicut, Kerala, India*

---

**Abstract:** ‘Atonement’ is a brilliant trauma narrative written by British author Ian McEwan. The novel speaks of the impact of dysfunctional behavior on relationships leading to the trauma of the victim. The story is shown to be narrated from its main characters Briony, Cecilia, and Robbie until the end when the reader realizes that they are written by the victim who imagines the series of events from the other characters in the story. Briony accuses Robbie of a rape that he never committed. This destroys the love life of her sister Cecilia and Robbie as the later ends up in jail serving the sentence. This is followed by Robbie fighting with his troops in the world war where he dies. Cecilia also dies in the world war leaving Briony in trauma as she could not atone for her sins. Briony spends her life as a nurse serving the patients. She writes the novel as an attempt to redeem from her sins. However, her quest to atonement remains unquenched as both Robbie and Cecilia have died. This study sheds light on how an individual’s personality can influence him in perceiving an event that leads to trauma. Right perception is a part of the healthy personality of an individual. Hence, it is important to understand the role of dysfunctional behavior to prevent trauma.

**Keywords:** Childhood Misunderstanding, Psychosexual Perception, Guilt, Trauma, Atonement

---

An individual’s personality is developed over different stages beginning from childhood. Noted psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud argues that a child undergoes many psychosexual changes to become a fully developed adult. Freud’s theory on personality development emphasizes internalized interactions and relationships and ways in which an individual maintains their sense of self and surroundings. According to Freud psychosexual stages of an individual comprises five stages including the oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital stage. Children develop their values and social skills during the phallic stage when they go to school and develop a circle outside of their family. A child can become fixated at any stage which can, in turn, impact their personality formation leading to psychosexual disorders. Such disorders can lead to recurring fantasies and behavior involving unusual situation or activity. Dysfunctional behavior can also impact the lives of people around the affected individuals in an irreparable manner leading them to lifelong guilt and trauma. Guilt often arises from one’s actions that could not prevent an unwanted event from occurring. When an individual realizes the role played by him in causing damage to another individual, they feel guilty. Intense stress becomes too much for the child to handle resulting in trauma. Such guilt leads to post-traumatic stress disorder where the individual may take full responsibility for the traumatic event (Caruth, *Unclaimed*, 59). As stated by Judith Lewis Herman states in her book “*Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse To Political Terror*” (13), the victim may choose various reactions to handle the scenario. The choice may be influenced by the basic attitude or situations surrounding the victim. But it is less likely that the victim expresses the guilt and trauma verbally. Instead, the victim chooses to alter his behavior to reflect childhood trauma. The altered behavior can be noticed as changes in eating patterns, sleeping patterns, or behavioral patterns. Such altered behavior helps the victim to cope with the trauma and makes them feel safe. In some cases, the victim may choose to change his temperaments for coping up with the painful memories of trauma. This may include numbness, anxiety, sadness, fear, anger, etc. Despite alterations in behavior the trauma can often lead to damage to the psyche of the victim leading to self-conscious emotions. Such thoughts are based on the victim’s perception of right and wrongdoings. The self-perception about the victim’s role in the devastating event also plays a crucial role in trauma. The victim may repeat the event in his mind and try to understand what could have been done differently to prevent the traumatic event. Hence, the victim changes his behavior as an attempt to prevent trauma in the future. But guilt continues to play a significant role in post-traumatic stress disorder. The self-guilt and negative perception of self leads to a disturbed state of mind. In some cases, such a state continues throughout the victim’s life. After Cathay Caruth and Shoshana Felman made their literary contributions to the discipline of trauma, the subject has attracted a deep interest in literary studies. Literature has helped in exploring and expressing trauma through language.

Atonement is a bestselling trauma narrative written by British author Ian McEwan. Through his metafiction, McEwan explores the journey of a thirteen-year-old girl who is on her quest to personal atonement. The novel is divided into three parts. The first part of the story is based in the British countryside and showcases

the pre-world war era. This section begins in the summer of 1935 when Briony, the narrator of the story, is thirteen-year-old. She is preparing a play for her brother's homecoming when she witnesses sexual tension between her sister Cecilia and their house help's son Robbie. Briony wrongly interprets this as a forced sexual encounter and later misinterprets the letter sent by Robbie to Cecilia as the declaration of his lust towards Cecilia. Briony decides that Robbie is a pervert and frames him wrongly for the rape of her cousin Lola. Robbie is then arrested and sent to jail for the sin he never committed. Cecilia believes in his innocence and leaves the home to break all ties with her family. The novel then advances to the second part which advances five years and shows Robbie as an army personnel fighting in world war. The third part of the novel shows Briony as a nurse in London. She is grown up and understands the impact she has caused on the lives of Robbie and Cecilia. The epilogues show Briony as an old and dying novelist. It is through this part that the reader learns that Briony is imagining the novel from Robbie and Cecilia and that they are dead. The narrative explores the dangers of unwanted interpretations, guilt, war, pains, and trauma.

The novel begins with Briony's unatoned guilt as "If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration... Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at *The Trials of Arabella?* It's not impossible." (McEwan, Part 3). The narrative shows Briony Tallis as a thirteen years old girl who lives in the country estate of England with her mother and sister. Briony is an aspiring author and writes stories to gain acceptance from her family members. She is a strong believer in systematic and socially acceptable living. This is depicted in her writings that revolve around the concept of how everything in life should happen in perfect order. She observes the lives of people around her and imagines perfection in her thoughts, which are later depicted in her writings. At the age of thirteen, Briony has a deep observation of people to find out the imperfections and chaos in their lives which are corrected and ordered through her writings. Her obsession with orderliness can be read as: "In fact, Briony's was the only tidy upstairs room in the house. Her straight backed dolls in their many-roomed mansion appeared to be under strict instructions not to touch the walls; the various thumb-sized figures to be found standing about her dressing table – cowboys, deep-sea divers, humanoid mice – suggested by their even ranks and spacing a citizen's army awaiting orders (McEwan, Part 1)." Her idea of love is a strong legal marriage that is also approved by the family and society. She considers sexual relations before marriage as a sin worthy of punishment. In her deepest of the psyche, she fantasizes about a highly organized life leaving no space for chaos and unplanned events. Her views on marriage are: "Marriage was the thing, or rather, a wedding was, with its formal neatness of virtue rewarded, the thrill of its pageantry and banqueting, and dizzy promise of a lifelong union. A good wedding was an unacknowledged representation of the yet unthinkable – sexual bliss (McEwan, Part 1)." The first part of the novel begins with one of the important days when her brother Leon Tallis was coming back home after completing his studies. On the same day, her cousins Lola Quincey and twins Jackson and Pierrot Quincey were also coming to stay with the Tallis as the cousin's parents were undergoing a divorce trial. Briony considered divorce as an outcome of disordered life. She loved her family dearly and could not imagine the pain of divorce ever being inflicted on any of the members. Briony knew that her brother Leon had girlfriends which were an indication of chaos. Therefore, she wanted to influence him to live an orderly life that could give him happiness. For this purpose, Briony writes a play named "The Trials of Arabella" and attempts to stage it to welcome Leon. Her purpose was not only to attract Leon's attention but also to make him feel that casual relations are of no good. Briony's strong faith in marriage is a result of the commitment she observes in her parent's strong relationship. The culture of the society or nation often plays a significant role in molding the personality of an individual. So was, in the case of Briony where the then-existing socio-cultural beliefs of England's countryside influenced her thoughts, beliefs, and the whole personality. Briony's aversion from romantic relations out of marriage could be attributed to the culture of the British countryside existing during the twentieth century. It could be noted in the narration that; British society did not consider the topics of divorce appropriate of being spoken among the family members during the twentieth century. Apart from her mother and sister, Briony has the company of their house help Mrs. Turner and her son Robbie Turner. Despite being a house help's son, Robbie is a bright student. Understanding his talent, Briony's father Jack Tallis sponsors Robbie's education. Both Robbie and Cecilia study in Cambridge but they maintained their distance due to social and economic differences. After his studies, Robbie aspired to study further and become a Doctor. Briony's sister Cecilia secretly holds romantic feelings for Robbie. Robbie remains indifferent and pretends that he doesn't understand her feelings. In his mind, Robbie thinks that he is not an appropriate match for Cecilia because her father is their employer. He considers himself to be belonging to a backward economic class and avoids fostering romantic feelings towards Cecilia. At the same time, Briony has a crush on Robbie. However, he considered Briony as a child and had no love interest in her. On the day of Leon's homecoming, Cecilia takes a family heirloom vase to fix the flowers for his welcome. She finds Robbie working near the fountain. A mild argument disrupts between the two and Cecilia accidentally breaks the vase, the pieces of which fall in the fountain. While Robbie gets prepared to dive into the water to fetch the broken pieces of the vase, Cecilia quickly takes off her clothes and jumps into the water in front of

Robbie. He stares at her in silence. Briony witnesses the whole scene from her window and feels threatened by what she witnesses between Robbie and Cecilia. Influenced by her dysfunctional behavior and misinterpreted perception, Briony fictionalizes the whole scene adding the hints of melodrama to it. In her literary world, she imagines Robbie ordering Cecilia of something upon which the later removes her clothes and jumps into the water. In her thoughts, Briony criticizes Robbie of being a cleaning lady's son aspiring for her sister's hand. At the same time, she is threatened of losing her crush to her sister. Briony imagines Robbie to be an ill-fitted proposal for Cecilia. To meet the logic of her literary world, she thinks of Robbie as a potential threat to Cecilia. Briony knows that he had seen Cecilia almost cloth less. She feels that Robbie can cause sexual harm to Cecilia. Her imaginations have been stated as: "What was less comprehensible, however, was how Robbie imperiously raised his hand now, as though issuing a command which Cecilia dared not disobey. It was extraordinary that she was unable to resist him. At his insistence she was removing her clothes, and at such speed. She was out of her blouse, now she had let her skirt drop to the ground and was stepping out of it, while he looked on impatiently, hands on hips. What strange power did he have over her. Blackmail? Threats? (McEwan, Part 1)." In her heart, Briony admires Robbie and sees him as her love interest. She considers Robbie's caring gestures like that of a lover. She feels traumatized when she watches Robbie and Cecilia in unimagined proximity by the fountain. Briony feels threatened by Robbie's attention to Cecilia. She feels losing him to Cecilia. The scene by the fountain leaves her in a state of trauma. She creates a world of imagination to destruct their bonding. Briony imagines Robbie as a threat to Cecilia. While fictionalizing the characters around her she doesn't shy away from destructing their ethical values. Briony was also willing to put the emotions and honor of the innocent lives at stake. As Cecilia leaves the fountain, Robbie realizes his mistake of arguing with Cecilia which led to the breaking of the vase. He feels guilty of upsetting Cecilia and drafts an apology letter to her. Instead, he passes on a wrong draft to Cecilia through Briony. Briony opens and reads the sealed letter that Robbie had sent for Cecilia. Her imaginations intensify further upon reading the vulgar contents of the letter. Briony's unapologetic evasion of Robbie's private feelings can be noted as: "A savage and thoughtless curiosity prompted her to rip the letter from its envelope – she read it in the hall after Polly had let her in – and though the shock of the message vindicated her completely, this did not prevent her from feeling guilty. It was wrong to open people's letters, but it was right, it was essential, for her to know everything (McEwan, Part 1)." In her deep beliefs, Briony knows that it is not civil to read others' private letters, but she was restless to know the bare truth such that she reads what Robbie had written to Cecilia. Briony was just thirteen-year-old and understanding adult human emotions were beyond her capacity. Due to childhood misunderstanding, she fails to process Robbie's emotions towards Cecilia and traumatize Briony's psychology further. She felt disgusted by the very thought of it as explained: "That the word had been written by a man confessing to an image in his mind, confiding a lonely preoccupation, disgusted her profoundly (McEwan, Part 1)." Briony feels devastated by her understanding that Robbie will never reciprocate her feelings of love. With passive pain, she learns that Robbie and Cecilia love each other. However, Briony handovers the letter to Cecilia. By the time Robbie realizes his mistake of sending the vulgar note, he comes to apologize to Cecilia which turns out into passionate lovemaking in the Tallis' library. Briony feels distressed. Due to her psychosexual perceptions, Briony imagines Robbie as a threat to Cecilia.

While the family is preparing to have dinner with Leon and cousins, Briony notices the absence of Robbie and Cecilia. She searches for Cecilia and follows the noise coming from the family library. She opens the door to find Cecilia and Robbie in the act of romance. Briony doesn't leave the room. Instead, she confirms her doubts by staring at them until they get dressed. Her misunderstanding strengthens further and strongly believes that Robbie is a threat to Cecilia. She feels damaged and betrayed by the actions of Robbie and Cecilia. Her emotional condition doesn't allow her to call for help from either her sister Cecilia or her family. Briony feels powerless by the extreme threat of losing Robbie to Cecilia. The sudden feeling of losing Robbie to Cecilia traumatizes Briony to the extent that she decides to put an end to their relationship by any means. The special dinner has been arranged for Leon's homecoming being attended by Leon's friend Paul Marshall, Robbie Turner, the cousins, and the Tallis family. When the dinner is being served the family learns that the twins have run away from the house leaving a letter behind. Amidst the chaos, the guests split themselves into search parties to find the twins. Both Leon and Cecilia are searching in one direction and the rest of the members search in separate directions. Looking for twins alone, Briony hears some movements in the bushes and a familiar voice calls her for help. On moving closer, Briony finds Lola being raped and watches the assaulter disappear in the darkness before she can even recognize him as: "The vertical mass was a figure, a person who was now backing away from her and beginning to fade into the darker background of the trees. The remaining darker patch on the ground was also a person, changing shape again as it sat up and called her name (McEwan, Part 1)."

In her mind, Briony is determined to separate Robbie and Cecilia. She views Lola's condition as an opportunity to nail Robbie for Lola's rape. Briony imagines and prepares the rape scene in her fictional world

and makes Lola believe that she has recognized the rapist as Robbie. Her organized imaginary thoughts have been explained as: "Though she had not turned, or moved at all, it was clear that something was changing in Lola, a warmth rising from her skin and a sound of dry swallowing, a heaving convulsion of muscle in her throat that was audible as a series of sinewy clicks. Briony said it again. Simply. Robbie (McEwan, Part 1)." Lola is not sure if it was Robbie and repeatedly asks Briony if she saw Robbie. But Briony convinces Lola to the extent that the later believes Briony without any doubts. In the process, Briony connects her imaginations to her undoubted conviction stated as "Everything connected. It was her own discovery. It was her story, the one that was writing itself around her. It was Robbie, wasn't it? (McEwan, Part 1)" Briony helps Lola get back to the house and quickly presents her version of the event. Her fiction takes a life of its own where Robbie is framed as the assaulter who should be punished severely. After searching for the twins, the whole night when Robbie returns the next morning, he is arrested by the police based on Briony's witness. By now, it was too late for her to react and correct her mistake. Briony's cowardice shatter her guts to face the truth or bring the truth into the light. When asked about the incidence by the police, she repeats the story with utmost faith along with the aggression to malign Robbie as "It was him. I saw him. Her tears were further proof of the truth she felt and spoke, and when her mother's hand caressed her nape, she broke down completely and was led towards the drawing room (McEwan, Part 1)." Briony wanted to make sure that Cecilia's relationship with Robbie ends. To nail Robbie further, Briony stole the letter that Robbie had written to Cecilia and handed it over to the investigating officers. Later, the letter was passed on to everyone in the room. It helped her confirm their doubts on Robbie's intentions and framed him as the culprit. Briony feels like the hero of the fiction protecting Cecilia from Robbie's clutches. During the interview with officials, she is careful in narrating her unwavering version of the incidence in the library and shows them the precise locations where Robbie and Cecilia had been. This has been explained as: "Since she was able to show them the precise location of Robbie's attack on Cecilia, they all wandered into that corner of the bookshelves to take a closer look. Briony wedged herself in, with her back to the books to show them how her sister was positioned and saw the first mid-blue touches of dawn in the panes of the library's high windows. She stepped out and turned around to demonstrate the attacker's stance and showed where she herself had stood (McEwan, Part 1)." The investigation concludes with Robbie's arrest that separates Robbie and Cecilia mercilessly. Cecilia understands Briony's involvement in framing Robbie and feels betrayed by her. She knows that the letter and incident at the library were romantic and consensual. Cecilia understood that Robbie is being framed by Briony for a wrong cause, but she is left with no proof to prove Robbie's innocence. Being unaware of the true consequences that followed her fantasies, Briony feels proud of her perceived heroic deed. Cecilia cuts of relations from her family and never visits them again.

Much before Robbie's release, the Second World War breaks out and Robbie is released on the condition that he joins the army. Robbie manages to meet Cecilia at a Café for half an hour before moving to France for the war. The reunion is short and awkward but ends up in a kiss before Cecilia returns to resume her duties in the hospital. On the other side, Briony has grown up and realizes the impact she had created on the lives of her sister Cecilia and her boyfriend Robbie. Guilt creeps in along with the realization and haunts her to the extent that she resigns from her dreams of becoming an author and rather commits her life to service of the sick and injured in London. Briony's post-traumatic stress disorder can be noted in her attempt to keep a limited connection with her family. Briony's attempt to avoid studying in Girton that was an alma mater of Robbie and Cecilia is done to avoid the memories of trauma. Briony's post-traumatic stress disorder is evident in her choosing the nursing career so that she could escape the memories of her self-inflicted childhood trauma. It was Briony's coping mechanism from the guilt that she carried within. Briony's attempts to seek redemption by meeting Cecilia and rectifying the mistakes that she had made in the past. Briony offers to change her statements legally as well. But this could not be brought to fruition because both Robbie and Cecilia were killed as the victims of the war. Briony understands the impact of distress she had caused as neither she nor the war could destroy the love of Robbie and Cecilia. Briony also realized the impact of her lie on the family and its bonding. She had not just destroyed Robbie and Cecilia but their families as well. Briony continues to seek atonement, in the backdrop of the Second World War, by serving the wounded and traumatized soldiers coming from Dunkirk. She chooses to work in the hospital that Cecilia worked so that she can seek redemption for her sins and reunite with her sister to seek an apology for her sinful deeds. However, she never got a chance to recover from the impact of her trauma. Briony continues to undergo the deep pit of guilt and decides to seek redemption by creating an alternate reality through a new fictional narrative. She used her constructive imagination as a coping strategy towards childhood trauma and guilt as "Then she would be free for the rest of the day. She knew what was required of her. Not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement, and she was ready to begin (McEwan, Part 3)." In her fiction to atonement, Briony creates an alternate reality of happy endings where she meets Robbie and Cecilia in the latter's house and mends the damage. The depths of her guilt have been narrated through the fiction where she attempts to redeem from her sins by uniting Robbie and Cecilia as "I like to think

that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness (McEwan, Part 3)."

In real life, Briony couldn't gather the courage to redeem from her sins but an attempt has been made for recovery through the happy ending of her novel where both Robbie and Cecilia are united by the author. Though Briony attempted redemption from her trauma, guilt, and sin she never recovered from it as she states "I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet (McEwan, Part 3)." Briony's guilt was not redeemed successfully as both Robbie and Cecilia died during the war as she failed to seek an apology from Robbie and Cecilia in person. She continued to live her life in guilt throughout. At a later stage of her life, she develops vascular dementia leading to a gradual decline in her mental health and death later.

Atonement is an exceptional depiction that explores trauma and its psychological impact on the victim. The psychological sufferings of Briony have been explored exceptionally by McEwan as she struggles to gather courage for fighting the demons of trauma throughout her life but remains unsuccessful in gaining redemption from her sins. Briony's guilt drowns her in a pool of guilt where she stays till the end of her life.

### **Works Cited**

- [1]. Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience*. 1996.
- [2]. Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. 1992.
- [3]. McEwan, Ian. *Atonement*. 2001.