

Writing Trauma: Psychological Interpretation of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*



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Abstract:

The term 'trauma fiction' also signals the recent journey of the concept of trauma from medical and scientific discourse to the field of literary studies. The origin of contemporary trauma studies can usefully be dated to 1980, when post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was first included in the diagnostic canon of the medical and psychiatric professions (Whitehead 4).

Trauma can serve and be interpreted in several ways, and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* encapsulates the crisis of the situation, where a child witnesses something, unable to realise the real meaning and import of the incident. The misinterpreted event converts into the trauma that the child has to carry throughout her life. At the core of the narrative of the novel is a profound examination of how a child's cognitive limitations, when intersected with a hyperactive imagination, can catalyse a lifelong trajectory of psychological trauma. The character of Briony Tallis serves as a crucible for exploring the fractured lens of childhood perception—a lens that distorts reality into a recognisable but lethal fiction. This research article contends that the trauma depicted in *Atonement* is a dual-layered phenomenon: it is first the trauma of a premature witness to the complexities of adult desire, and subsequently, the trauma of an irreversible guilt that necessitates the creation of a surrogate narrative reality. This research thus tries to analyse the socio-familial environment of the Tallis household, identifying the emotional neglect that fosters Briony's hyper-imaginative defence mechanisms. It further examines the character of Lola Quincey, whose literal physical trauma is overshadowed by Briony's narrative hegemony, presenting a critique of how the dominant discourse of the observer often silences trauma. Through a rigorous examination of the novel's tripartite structure, this article illustrates how the act of writing becomes a recursive traumatic loop—an attempt to atone through fiction for a reality that remains stubbornly unchangeable. By synthesising trauma theory with McEwan's postmodern narrative techniques, this research concludes that *Atonement* represents the impossibility of absolute recovery, positioning the text as the only space where the fractured child-self can seek redemption.

Keywords: Child trauma, psychoanalysis, memory, desire, guilt

I. Introduction:

"The problem these fifty years has been the child actually saw something, or believed she did" (McEwan 320). The novel's central story oscillates around the events of the year 1935. The thirteen-year-old Briony finds herself at a developmental crossroads where her desire for narrative order clashes with the chaotic, unscripted nature of human passion. At the Tallis estate, she witnesses Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain. She is unable to comprehend the relationship of mutual consent between them. Her failure to recognise and interpret the events that she witnesses becomes the genesis of her trauma. As psychoanalytic theory suggests, trauma often arises not from the event itself, but from the subject's inability to integrate that event into a pre-existing symbolic order. For Briony, the library and the fountain become the arenas of display of adult emotion that she fails to comprehend, which further leads to a catastrophic misinterpretation that incarcerates a man and destroys a sister's future.

The intimation of an adult world where actions take on meanings that cannot be comprehended fully

represents an adolescent crisis for Briony, to which she reacts by trying to impose her own narrative on the events. This fictional misreading of the real situation is exacerbated in her observation of the lovers in the library (Bentley 153).

The novel's structure, shifting from the lush, posh and rich luxurious backdrop to the gruesome realism of the war-torn backdrop, mirrors the fragmentation of the traumatic mind. The shift in prose reflects Briony's own desperate attempt to nurse the world she broke. By analysing the intersection of childhood developmental psychology and postmodern narrative techniques, this article tends to explore how McEwan utilises Briony's crime to question the ethics of authorship. If the child's trauma is the loss of innocence through a wilful misunderstanding, then the adult's trauma is the realisation that no amount of literary reconstruction can achieve true absolution. Through this lens, *Atonement* is revealed as an exhaustive study of the permanence of psychic wounds, suggesting that while the text can provide a formal closure, the self remains perpetually haunted by the ghosts of its own creation.

II. Literature Review:

She would write it out again and again... until she understood that she had seen what she had seen, but she had not known what it meant (McEwan 156).

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* shifts the focus of this study to the trauma of misinterpretation. Briony Tallis observes events she cannot comprehend—a primal scene. McEwan highlights the child's inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Briony's life becomes a search for working through her trauma of misinterpretation. The inquiry into trauma theory anchors itself in the work of Sigmund Freud, specifically his pivotal 1895 *Studies on Hysteria* and his later shifts in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Freud's early recognition of the belatedness of trauma remains the cornerstone of this study. Freud introduces the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, or "deferred action". He explains that "a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma by deferred action" (The Standard Edition 3: 167). This is the idea that a traumatic event is not fully experienced at the moment of its occurrence because it is too overwhelming to be integrated. The main idea behind what we know about trauma today comes from the work of Cathy Caruth. She wrote an important book called *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (2016). In this book, Cathy Caruth says that trauma is something that you do not really understand when it first happens. However, as Dominick La Capra warns in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, there is a danger of acting out rather than working through. La Capra notes that "...a state in which the past is not only present but omnipresent. It is as if the traumatic event were happening again, with no distance between the self and the event" (La Capra 71). Briony's obsession with her childhood mistake suggests she remains trapped in the acting out phase for decades. Ruth Leys, in her book *Trauma: A Genealogy*, critiques the literalist fallacy. Leys argues that by making trauma unspeakable, we risk removing the agency of the subject. She contends: "The notion of a 'speechless' trauma—one that exists outside of representation or language—is a theoretical construct that fails to account for the subject's active, interpretive role in reconstructing the past" (Leys 105). Along with Ruth Leys, we can also integrate the postcolonial critique of Stef Craps. He argues:

Trauma theory as it stands is often blind to the suffering of those whose trauma is not a discrete event—a shattering of the self—but a condition of life. By focusing on the sudden rupture of a normal life, it universalises a Western, middle-class experience and fails to account for the insidious trauma of racism, poverty, and colonialism (Craps 22).

We can acknowledge that if memory is a creative reconstruction, as Elizabeth Loftus suggests in *Memory Distortion and False Memory Creation*, then "memory is not a tape recorder; it is a creative reconstruction" (Loftus 78). Therefore, the analysis of the child narrator is not as a source of fact, but as a source of affective truth. The Neurobiological Turn: Finally, the gap between Freud's mind and the modern brain can be bridged through the analysis of Bessel Van der Kolk. Van der Kolk explains:

When people are reminded of their personal traumas, their right hemisphere—the side of the brain responsible for emotions, sensations, and images—lights up. At the same time, we saw that Broca's area, the part of the left hemisphere responsible for putting feelings into words, went dark. Our scans showed that trauma, at its core, is a speechless experience (Van der Kolk 43).

Thus, the search for somatic narrative can be explored in these novels. As Van der Kolk notes, "the body keeps the score; if the memory is not verbalised, it is lived by the body in the form of symptoms" (Van der Kolk 46). The obvious trend in the English novel often speaks through the body of the child who has faced trauma in life—through illness, silence, or trembling. In the analysis of the traumatised child, it is observed that the wound does not merely interrupt the narrative; it becomes the narrative's gravitational centre. The child protagonist does not experience time as a sequence of and then, but as a series of always. This is a fundamental departure from the traditional Bildungsroman, which relies on the logic of cumulative growth. In the trauma novel, the child is often denied the future because their psychic energy is entirely consumed by the past-present.

III. Trauma in *Atonement*

Finally, the final nature of time in the postmodern trauma novel can be seen in *Atonement*. Ian McEwan uses the structure of the book to mimic the dissociation of the child. The first part of the novel is a dense, slow-moving afternoon that takes up nearly half the book. The second and third parts move through years of war. This temporal imbalance is a formal representation of how trauma stretches time. The thirteen-year-old Briony's moment of misinterpretation is so massive that it warps the rest of her life's timeline. This creates a kind of stuttering narrative. The reader is forced to revisit the fountain scene and the library scene from multiple perspectives. This is not for the sake of truth, but to demonstrate the impossibility of moving on.

Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that it's very unassimilated nature—the way

it is precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on (Caruth 4).

In this sense, the stuck time of the novel is an act of becoming a witness. By refusing to let the child grow up and move past the wound, the author forces the reader to acknowledge the permanence of the damage. The circularity is an ethical refusal to provide the healing that a linear narrative would falsely suggest. The unreliability of the child narrator is rooted in what can be defined as cognitive dissociation. As established through the work of Cathy Caruth, trauma creates a crisis of truth because the event is not fully known at the time of its occurrence. For a child, this crisis is compounded by a lack of emotional and linguistic context. When a child narrator misinterprets a violent act as a game, or a predatory encounter as a moment of affection, they are not lying. Instead, they are demonstrating the Linguistic Void that trauma carves into the developing psyche. This form of unreliability serves as a protective shield for the child protagonist. By misreading the trauma, the child attempts to maintain a sense of safety in a world that has become predatory. This creates a specific tension for the readers; we must look through the distortions of the child's narrative to find the truth hidden beneath. As Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman suggest in *Testimony* (1992), the unreliable witness to trauma is often the only one who can convey the unthinkable nature of the event, precisely because their narrative is as broken as the experience itself (Laub 58). The recurrence of the trauma, which comes back to bother the person who went through the trauma over and over again. Cathy Caruth explains this idea that trauma is something that she is trying to help us understand. She wants us to see that trauma is not something that happens and then it is over. Trauma is something that can stay with a person for a long time. The term trauma has, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, migrated from the confines of clinical pathology into the vibrant and discursive landscape of literary criticism. Derived from the Greek trauma, meaning wound, the concept originally referred to a physical injury—a breach in the protective envelope of the skin. However, as it transitioned into the realm of the psyche, the wound ceased to be a visible laceration and became a structural disruption of consciousness. In the context of the English novel, trauma is not merely a theme; it is a formal disruption that challenges the limits of representation and narrative linearity. Early investigators like Jean-Martin Charcot and Pierre Janet began to notice that certain events left a residue in the mind. These residues were not memories in the traditional sense; they were intrusive and resistant to verbalisation. Janet, as cited by Bessel van der Kolk, observed that “the person often

remains ‘fixed’ or ‘stuck’ in the moment of the trauma, unable to integrate the experience into the continuous stream of their life history” (Kolk 42). This clinical backdrop provides the necessary scaffolding for the literary analysis. If trauma is a breach, then the literary text becomes the site where the breach is performatively re-enacted.

IV. The Birth of Briony's Trauma:

The misinterpretation of the event by Briony is the result of the surroundings and environment that are around her. It is the emotional vacuum of her household that makes it impossible for her to discuss her doubts or misgivings with anyone. Instead, she maintains a mature stance and tries to be in charge of the situation. Briony's father, Jack Tallis, is a ghost-like figure who is mostly absent from the household, catering to his business engagements. Emily Tallis, although at home, is mostly confined to her bedroom because of her migraines and turns a blind eye towards the family affairs. Thus, the general lack of parental guidance and consolation drives Briony to take charge at all given instances.

In McEwan's interview with Deveney, he explains how this novel is about ‘absent parents’. He also says how it addresses the sentiments he had while growing up, in which he wished his parents would ‘somehow painlessly melt away’ as this would leave the ‘ground cleared for him (Deveney, 2005). This daydream echoes the Freudian formulation of the family romance, where the child imagines being free of his or her parents, and is connected to the process of growing up and separating from the once idealised parents (Ellam 5).

She tries to pose a level of maturity and deciphers the events that happen around her with her own perspective. The fountain scene is the first sight of this cognitive failure. When Briony observes Cecilia and Robbie from the nursery window, she is unable to comprehend the situation. Her linguistic ability also fails as her maturity level has not reached the threshold of understanding what she was witnessing. Briony, at the sight of her sister stripping to her underwear and Robbie standing over is a point where her childhood perception fails. Psychologically, it is a traumatic event for her. The entry of sexual tension into her fairy-tale world. Unable to comprehend the erotic nature of the relationship between Robbie and her sister, she transforms it into a villainous act on the part of Robbie. Later, the library scene acts as the reconfirmation of this distorted reality. Inside the library, when Briony witnesses the carnal pleasure exchange between Cecilia and Robbie, she immediately labels it as maniacal. MacEwan here introduces the psychological fissure in the mental state of Briony. Briony at once feels Robbie to be the

sexual predator, and this is the classic psychological defence mechanism where the child replaces a complex, threatening truth with a simple, manageable lie. However, as the night progresses and the search for the twins begins, this internal fiction created by Briony externalises by trapping not only Robbie but Briony herself in a cycle of false witness. This cognitive failure and externalisation of her false testimony haunt her for the next six decades, and the Tallis household is literally dismantled due to the failure of cognitive understanding; a child trapping the Tallis Estate is a lifelong trauma.

V. The Victim in the Shadows: Lola Quincey's Material Trauma

While Briony's psychological turmoil occupies the narrative foreground, the material trauma of Lola Quincey represents a profound ethical silence at the heart of the novel. Lola, at fifteen, is the actual victim of physical violence, yet her trauma is systematically appropriated and erased by Briony's imaginative hegemony. This section argues that Lola's experience constitutes a double trauma: first is the initial assault by Paul Marshall and the subsequent narrative assault by Briony, who uses Lola's tragedy as the raw material for her own moral drama. In the Tallis household, trauma is not treated as a wound to be healed but as a textual event to be interpreted, leading to a chilling dynamic where the real victim is marginalised by the creative observer.

The trauma of silence surrounding Lola is a critique of the British class structure and familial preservation. Lola's refusal to identify her attacker is a complex psychological response to betrayal trauma, where the victim realises that the social structures meant to protect her (her family and the legal system) are more interested in maintaining decorum than seeking justice. Robbie Turner is allowed to be blamed, and Lola enters into a pact of silence with her rapist, Paul Marshall, which eventually culminates in their marriage. This union is perhaps the most grotesque manifestation of unresolved trauma in the text. Lola remains tethered to her abuser in a perpetual state of victimhood disguised as social status. McEwan highlights the irony that while Briony seeks atonement, Lola seeks concealment, illustrating how trauma can lead to a complete fossilisation of the self.

Briony's role in Lola's trauma is one of epistemic violence. Briony's belief that she saw Robbie deprives Lola of her own voice and her own truth. In the darkness of the woods, Briony's hyperactive imagination functions as a tool of oppression. She does not ask Lola what happened; she tells Lola what she saw. This interaction demonstrates a narcissistic response to trauma, where the witness (Briony)

centres her own emotional reaction over the victim's physical suffering. For Briony, Lola's rape is merely a plot point that confirms her suspicions about Robbie. The fractured lens here is not just one of misperception, but of moral blindness. Consequently, the material reality of Lola's trauma remains the unspoken ghost of the novel—a debt that Briony can never truly repay because she has already rewritten the victim out of her own story.

VI. Narrative as Atonement: The Compulsion to Repeat

The transition from the pastoral confinement of the Tallis estate to the visceral horror of the Second World War represents more than a shift in setting; it signifies the externalisation of Briony's internal psychic fracture. In Part Two and Part Three, the narrative adopts a discourse of labour, where Briony's attempt to mitigate her guilt takes the form of physical and literary penance. Having realised the magnitude of her false witness, Briony rejects her path to Cambridge; it is a move that scholars often interpret as a symbolic suicide of her intellectual ego. Instead, she chooses the gruelling, anonymous life of a nurse. This section argues that Briony's nursing is a somatic expression of her trauma, an attempt to scrub away the moral stain of 1935 through the ritualistic cleaning of literal wounds.

The compulsion to repeat, a Freudian concept wherein the traumatised subject endlessly reenacts the original crisis, is evident in Briony's nursing duties. In the London hospital, she encounters shattered bodies that mirror the shattered lives she left in her wake. Every soldier she treats is a surrogate for Robbie Turner, and every bandage applied is a futile gesture toward healing a wound she cannot reach. This period of her life represents the trauma of recognition. As she cleans the visceral remains of dying soldiers, she is forced to confront the material reality of human fragility. It is a reality that her thirteen-year-old self had treated as mere fictional clay. The war, in this sense, serves as a macrocosmic reflection of the personal devastation Briony caused, stripping away her narrative arrogance and replacing it with a crushing empathy. However, the most significant act of atonement is the act of writing itself. Briony's lifelong project takes shape in the form of the novel *Atonement*. It is a literary reconstruction of the lives she destroyed. By creating a fictional space where Robbie and Cecilia survive the war and find a redemptive union, Briony attempts to undo the trauma of the past. Yet, as the text suggests, this is a failed working-through. "What's done cannot be undone" (Shakespeare 71). The Postmodern Twist at the end of the novel reveals that the happy ending is a fabrication, a solipsistic gift from the author to her victims. This revelation

suggests that narrative cannot function as true atonement because it cannot alter the irrevocable facts of death and time.

Briony, at the age of thirteen, is already committed to the life of a writer. She ruthlessly subordinates everything the world throws at her to her need to make it serve the demands of her own world of fiction. Brought up on a diet of imaginative literature, she is too young to understand the dangers that can ensue from modelling one's conduct on such an artificial world. When she acts out her confusion between life and the life of fiction, the consequences are tragic and irreversible - except in the realm of fiction. She attempts to use fiction to correct the errors that fiction caused her to commit. (Finney 69)

Briony's writing is thus a recursive loop. She writes to escape the trauma, but the act of writing only serves to re-inscribe the permanence of her guilt. Through this lens, the novel becomes an elegy for the lost, proving that while art can provide a formal symmetry to trauma, it remains powerless to resurrect the lived reality it has broken.

VII. Theoretical Synthesis: Memory, Dementia, and the Erasure of Self

The final section of the novel, the 1999 Coda, provides the ultimate theoretical resolution to the trajectory of Briony's trauma. Decades after the central crisis, we encounter a Briony who is at once a venerated author and a woman facing the dissolution of the self through vascular dementia. This neurological decline serves as a profound metaphor for the erasure of trauma. Throughout her life, Briony's consciousness was defined by the hyper-retention of her guilt—a memory so vivid it necessitated thousands of pages of revision. However, the onset of dementia introduces a biological irony: just as she completes her final draft of *Atonement*, the mental apparatus required to hold that guilt begins to fail. This section argues that dementia acts as a final, involuntary atonement, where the fractured lens is not repaired, but discarded entirely.

The theoretical synthesis of memory and trauma in the Coda highlights the paradox of the last word. Briony's dementia creates a temporal collapse where the 1935 version of herself and the 1999 version merge. As her short-term memory evaporates, she is left only with the long-term haunting of the fountain and the library. Psychologically, this represents the ultimate entrapment within the traumatic kernel. Even as she loses the ability to recognise her own family, the image of Robbie and Cecilia remains imprinted on her synapses. This suggests that trauma is not a narrative event that can be closed, but a physiological scar that outlasts the personality

itself. Briony's authorial control—the very thing she used to ruin Robbie and later tried to use to save him—is finally stripped away by a force of nature that refuses to be edited.

The revelation that Robbie and Cecilia died in 1940 fundamentally alters the reader's epistemological relationship with the text. The Happy Ending of the previous section is exposed as a coping mechanism, a psychological splint designed to hold together a broken reality. This postmodern erasure challenges the reader's own trauma-processing. We are forced to confront the unreliable nature of memory and the futility of fiction in the face of historical and biological finality.

...it forms an attempt to atone further by giving Robbie and Cecilia the happy ending in fiction denied them in real life. McEwan's novel is a novel-within-a-novel that reveals the (rewritten) stories behind stories; it brilliantly shifts between ontological levels and epistemological parameters, deliberately confusing the reader to the extent that we no longer know whose text we are reading (Groes 70).

Briony's final act as an author is to admit that she is a weak god who can give her characters "no more than a few moments of happiness" on paper (McEwan 371). The synthesis of medical trauma (dementia) and moral trauma (guilt) concludes that the only true escape from the fractured lens is the total silence of the mind. Thus, McEwan positions the death of the author not as a literary theory, but as a merciful conclusion to a life defined by the agony of remembering.

VIII. Conclusion

The psychological landscape of *Atonement* suggests that trauma, once woven into the fabric of a life by a childhood error, becomes a permanent structural element of the soul. This research has demonstrated that Briony Tallis's fractured lens was not merely a momentary lapse in judgment but a foundational rupture in her cognitive and moral development. By analysing the novel through the prisms of psychology and trauma studies, it becomes clear that McEwan's work is an exhaustive study of the irreversibility of time. The trauma of 1935 remains an unclosed wound, resisting the sutures of prose and the anaesthesia of fiction. Briony's journey from a hyper-imaginative child to a guilt-ridden nurse and finally to a confessional author illustrates the tragic paradox of human existence. The study concludes that the act of writing, for the traumatised subject, is both curative and compulsive. While Briony uses her novel to provide a formal order to the chaos she unleashed, the ultimate revelation of the factual deaths of Robbie and Cecilia serves as a stark reminder of the limitations of art. *Atonement*, in its true sense, remains an impossibility because the

victims are no longer present to receive it. It is a way for the perpetrator to live with herself rather than a genuine restoration of the wronged.

Atonement positions trauma as the ultimate narrator. It is the trauma of the unseen and the misunderstood that dictates the pace, tone, and eventual collapse of the Tallis family history. By deconstructing the myth of redemption, McEwan asserts that while stories can offer consolation, they cannot offer absolution. The last word belongs not to the writer, but to the silence that follows the realisation that some mistakes are, in the most literal sense, un-writeable.

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