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# The Distinctive Nuances Of Postmodern Elements As Revealed In Ian Mcewan's Atonement

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**Abstract**

Ian McEwan is one of the most renowned novelists of the modern British Literature. His innumerable application of postmodern elements in his novels make him a noteworthy as well as a successful novelist. His style of narration is most appealing and controversial. His *Atonement*, a famous novel is widely read for its postmodern narration and his art of handling metafiction. This paper focuses on the characteristics of the metafiction, its place in postmodern text and Ian McEwan's Atonement as a Metafiction.

**Keywords:** Metafiction, Postmodern elements, Atonement.

## 1. Introduction

Ian McEwan is a versatile creative artist; most widely read and critically acclaimed as a contemporary postmodern British writer. Over the last forty five years he has produced various genres in English literature viz. novels, short stories, collections, novellas, children books, film adaptation, screen plays, drama, an oratorio, libretto, interviews and lectures. Perhaps he has produced various genres but his richness, diversity, core of style, techniques, subject, and narration mode could be found primarily in his novels. His works explore various and multiples themes, morality, responsibility, history, sexuality, imagination and consciousness. Even though his primary themes focus on fundamental subjects, viz. childhood, moral, ethical issues, sex, children and parents relationship and children / adulthood relationships. Being a postmodernist writer, his narrative techniques and styles are all inclusive; he includes unreliable narrator, first and third person narrative, multiple – perspective narration, fragmentation, parody, unexpected final twists, playfulness, intertextuality, autobiographies and metafiction. He has produced multiple genres and forms, viz. gothic story, dystopia, spy thriller, satire, romance, psycho-thriller, parable, war narrative, postmodernist narrative and ecological fiction.

Generally the term postmodernism denotes a late twentieth century or middle of the twentieth century social, art and cultural movement; it has the features and characteristics of style, concepts in the genre of art, music, literature, architecture, sculpture, philosophy, painting, fine arts and criticism. These represent significant departures and expanding boundaries from modernism and is characterized by the selfconscious use of earlier styles, principles, conventions, a mixing of different artistic styles, medias,

press, mass communications, and a general distrust of theories. Like structuralism and post-structuralism, there is an extraordinary discussion, contention, judgment and perspection between how precisely innovation and postmodernism contrast. Generally the two concepts or theories flourished in different vintage. The theory postmodernism has a special place in the 1980s to understand the twentieth century cultural, social and political importance. On the advent of modernism some important art movements also shake the entire literary and non-literary worlds like Cubism, Dadaism, Magic realism, Surrealism and Futurism. Without an understanding of modernism it is impossible to understand postmodernism and twentieth century culture.

## 2. Implication of Metafiction in *Atonement*

McEwan called Atonement "my Jane Austen novel, my country house novel, my one-hot-day novel" (Kellaway 2001). In an interview with Lynn, McEwan confirmed the influence of nineteenth-century writings on his work; besides, he explains how Atonement could not have been written "without all the experiments in fiction and reflections on point of view" and, by default, the movements of modernism and postmodernism. He refers to Austen, Honoré de Balzac, Charles Dickens and Gustave Flaubert as examples of earlier authors who have taught the novelists how to look into the minds of others (51).

The tag which McEwan puts on Atonement can be confirmed by the epigraph quoted from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, the country house setting, the subtle challenge to class difference and above all the ironic depiction of the dangers of the literary imagination; however, this is the classic realist mode of narration that is undermined throughout the book. To express how incredulity gels with this "classic realism", which is generally unconcerned with the fictionality of the narrative itself, McEwan from the opening page of the novel introduces the theme of literary selfconsciousness, though it grows more colourful in the last part of the novel. This is what Finney invites our attention to, that self-conscious narrative is not limited to only the coda of the novel but it permeates the novel. In other words, Finney explains, "metafiction—as a tool that differentiates and instantiates text from world— consistently works over the course of Atonement's pages" (70).

The fundamental element of realism which Briony constructs in her first three parts of Atonement is verisimilitude which, according to Spiridon, can be defined as "the ability of a discourse to be recognized as acceptable [...], according to a series of signposts and under specific cultural circumstances. Subsequently, in order to be accepted by the reader, truth itself needs to become plausible" (32). At the age of eleven Briony writes half a dozen folktales and calls them later "foolish affair" since she realizes that the only way of compelling a reader's respect is "vital knowingness about the way of the world (McEwan, Atonement 6), which is ''the adult world'': ''the real the adult world, in which frogs did not address princesses and the only messages were the ones that people sent'' (40). Since the events of the fountain scene is not compatible with any of her read or written "fairy tales castles and princesses" Briony decides to leave behind her melodramatic impulse in favour of 'the strangeness of the here and now" and indulges in "what passed between people, the ordinary people that she knew" and practice her greedy illusion-making power over them (39).

Moreover, Briony is completely aware of the fault line between truth and verisimilitude and "how easy it was to get everything wrong, completely wrong" (39). She also suspects that only a few atypical readers would be prepared to accept her truthful report of the harsh facts:

> Who would want to believe that they [Cecilia and Robbie] never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? […] No one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel. I know that there is always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask: But what really happened? (371).

To sum it up, the transition of young Briony's poetics from the folktale world to her naive realist cosmos commences when she sees the events at the fountain scene. However, the shortcoming and

naivety of her imaginative ability prevents her from imposing a familiar order onto reality in this "adult world." As O'hara observes, "she can only watch, no longer interpret. Afterwards, she has her 'first, weak intimation' that life can indeed work in incongruous ways, ways that transcend preconceived narratives" (80). In other words, since fiction determines fact for her, Briony appears to fail to" grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you" (McEwan, Atonement 40). Because of this inherent self-deceit , she convinces herself that Robbie is the figure glimpsed running away from Lola in the dark and it is her novelist's need for order that clinches it: "The truth was in the symmetry . . . The truth instructed her eyes" (159).

The genealogical tree of Atonement indicates that the nurse Briony writes a novella Two Figures By a Fountain and sends the transcript to the prominent modernist literary magazine Horizon, edited by the well-known high modernist critic Cyril Connolly. As Briony discloses in "London 1999", she has revised Atonement eight times for an approximate period of fifty years. That fact implies that Two Figure was the first draft. Readers do not have any access to this initial draft and they can only infer Briony's narrative technique, plot, characters and so on from Connolly's elaborate rejection letter as well as the revised and developed version of the novella, which appeared as "Part One" of Atonement. Rejecting Two Figures, Connolly animadverts Briony for owing too much of "the techniques of Mrs Woolf". Indeed "the real" Cyril Connolly is a confessed anti-Bloomsbury figure who believes that Woolf's characters are "lifeless anatomical slices, conceived all in the same mood, unreal creations of genteel despair" and her prose is "lush feminine Keatsian familiarity that comes from being sensually too at home in the world"(Lewis 251). Tellingly, McEwan reproduces "the real" Connolly's standpoint that a writer influenced by Woolf should represent the world of which she is a part. Moreover, "C. C." makes other suggestions like developing of a story by adding the "underlying pull of simple narrative" (McEwan, Atonement 295); developing her main characters to portray rich psychological perspectives; tweaking events so that young Briony does not realize the vase has been broken in order to heighten her confusion over the fountain scene.

Connolly's letter thus connotes Briony's transitional poetics and gives an insight into the young Briony'sTwo Figures as an "underdone" modern novella, which is pushed forward through Connolly's advice to become a higher modernist work. Referring to McHale's definition of the postmodernism which is a shift from the epistemological preoccupations of modernism toward an ontological unhinging, Richard Robinson argues that Connolly's letter brings just such an ontological jolt, violating the boundaries between real and fictional worlds well before the metafictional adjunct of the epilogue ( 476).

To convert from realism and be baptized as a high modernist novelist, the younger Briony eschews the more traditional aspects of narrative, such as plot and character. For instance, to depict the scene at the fountain, she relies largely on image and language to convey the symbolic meaning of the text from a different perspective. As far as the character is concerned, a new type of selfhood that can subvert the controlling realism of Lawrentian stable-ego characters is restored in Atonement. According to Marcus's observation, McEwan turns to Woolf "to play out the dissolution and recreation of character in the novel" (94).

Comparing the fluently-plotted Atonement with its so-called early draft Two Figures By a Fountain indicates that Briony has considered all of Connolly's suggestions and only retained the lyricism of her first draft. Consequently the reader gains insight into the revision process that has shaped the Austenesque part of Atonement–"Part One." Briony's subscription to "defining uncertainty" of higher modernism is clear from her declaration:

What excited her about her achievement was its design, the pure geometry and the defining uncertainty which reflected, she thought, a modern sensibility. The age of clear answers was over. So was the age of characters and plots. Despite her journal sketches, she no longer really believed in characters. They were quaint devices that belonged to thenineteenth century. The very concept of character was founded on errors that modern psychology had exposed. Plot was like a rusty machinery whose wheels would no longer turn. A modern novelist could no more write characters and plots than a

modern composer could a Mozart symphony. It was thought, perception, sensations that interested her, the conscious mind as a river through time, and how to represent its onward roll, as well as all the tributaries that would swell it, and the obstacles that would divert it. (265).

Likewise, to break with the classical realist conception of the novel, McEwan frequently makes use of narrative anticipation in "Part One" and this is the point which Brian Finney highlights. He argues that, according to Genette, Western narrative tradition tends to use "temporal prolepsis" scantly because the "'concern with narrative suspense that is characteristic of the ' classical ' conception of the novel . . . does not easily come to terms with such a practice" (Finney 75). For instance, the third-person narrator refers to Briony's "passion for secrets" and her love for "hidden drawers, lockable diaries and cryptographic systems" (McEwan, Atonement 5). This personal characteristic proleptically suggests why she opens Briony's letter written to Cecilia. Another significant example is the direct reference to the composition of what Briony has done which is an anticipation of the last part, "London 1999" in future:

However, in her artistic apprenticeship, Briony misrecognizes the major tenets of modernist aesthetic. In terms of her understanding of Woolf, as D'Angelo puts, "Briony's rejection of 'character' removes the very human element that Woolf believes narrative must convey" (99).

Tellingly, Briony blindly believes in technique for the sake of technique, for producing "modern experience", while the modernist aesthetic explores "thought," "perception" and "sensation" by virtue of "conscious mind" to engender identification and empathy which are exclusively constructed (at least in the case of Woolf) in an identifiable story of a character. "Was everyone else really as alive as she was?" (McEwan, Atonement 34) is the question which the younger Briony struggles with. Nonetheless, Briony the novelist has clearly resolved this dilemma. The answer has become her calling as a writer: she must make all of these characters "as alive as she is"–even those who did not survive the story (D'Angelo 99-100).

As a matter of fact, the hidden intention behind Briony's rejection of character and plot, according to the principles of high modernism, and her indulgence in the narrative techniques is to bury her crime of accusing Robbie of raping Lola within the text. In other words, it is a definite indication that the ideology of modernism (especially its prioritization of stylistic innovation) has hidden moral consequences. Indeed, Briony discovers that style really has ethical implication. She later acknowledges:

The function of the novel has changed in the twentieth-century and Briony in the coda of Atonement shows that she is aware of those changes. Where the realists assumed the novel to be a tool geared towards reproducing reality, Briony refers to it not as a tool or something conceived with a view to a task defined in advance. In fact, the very act of introducing herself as the author who is as powerful as the Creator in originating characters and events indicates that she does not write Atonement in order to "translate" what existed before or exists outside it: to explain or to express reality, or to respect the truth. Her novel does not intend to inform the reader about reality but to constitute reality or, in other words, to create an aesthetic world which exists separately from the real world and does not necessarily correspond to it. This is how she is seeking atonement through constructing her fictional world.

The mutation which the function of novel undergoes is the outcome of the contemporary historical period which has been singularly uncertain, insecure, self-questioning and culturally pluralistic and, consequently, a novel cannot subscribe to the simplified wish fulfillments of classic realist fiction. "The development of nuclear weapons," McEwan has said, "shows the dissociation of science from feelings," of the outer and inner worlds we inhabit (Haffenden 187). Moreover, the Second World War which shocked the world with its agenda of massive ethnic cleansing and the consequent Cold War appear to have elicited aesthetic structures that reflect the complexity and horror of life in the second half of the twentieth century. As a result contemporary fiction clearly reflects this dissatisfaction with, and breakdown of, traditional values. Previously, as in the case of the nineteenth-century realism, the forms of fiction derived from a firm belief in a commonly experienced and objectively existing world of history. Modern fiction such as Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* or James Joyce's *Ulysses* was a

response to the initial loss of belief in such a world: any attempt to represent reality could only produce selective perspectives.

More precisely, there are two central claims which are crucial to the realist text whereas postmodernism objects to them. The first one is that the fictional world created by a realist text is "in its entirety" and it is "referential," since it is "analogous to the real world"; the second claim of any realist text is that the story told in a literary text is "natural" and "singular", since the narrator simply mediates an "existing story" (Nicol 24). Effectively, metafiction as the dominant form of postmodern fiction casts doubt on the legitimacy of the reader's investment in those two claims and self-consciously reminds the readers that what they have been imagining all this time—as if it were real—has simply been made-up. This is what Briony confesses to in the coda of Atonement, that she has fictionally reunited Cecilia and Robbie. She has written what seems a revisionist history in order to atone for her crime, swapping one lie for another. She further confesses that, largely due to her own actions as an adolescent, both Cecilia and Robbie died apart, casualties of the war.

Indeed, what makes metafictionist novelists more distinctive as compared with the novelists of other schools of thought ( e.g. realism) is their attempt in questioning and rejecting the forms that correspond to the conventions of ordered reality: "the well-made plot, chronological sequence, the authoritative omniscient author, the rational connection between what characters 'do' and what they 'are', the causal connection between 'surface' details and the 'deep', 'scientific laws' of existence (Waugh 7). In the case of the metafictional layer of Atonement, it neither ignores nor abandons those conventions of realism radically, but it lays those established norms bare. Indeed, the realistic conventions which supply the "control" in the norm and background throughout the first three parts of Atonement fade into the foregrounded experimental strategies of the section "London 1999" of the novel. Moreover, the realistic conventions obviously allow for a stable level of readerly familiarity. What Briony does in "Part One" is that she partially abandons "the real world" for her narcissistic pleasures of the imagination and in "London 1999" she re-examines the conventions of realism in order to discover – through its own self-reflection – and tries to show readers how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, and her metafiction helps readers to understand how the reality they live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly "written."

Examining some alternative definitions of self-conscious writing, there are similar modes variously termed "fabulation", "the introverted novel", "surrealism", "the anti-novel", "the self-begetting novel" or "surfiction." Atonement can be fitted into the amalgamation of the last two modes. It is a "self-begetting novel", since Briony gives an account of "the development of herself as a character to a point at which she is able to take up and compose the novel we have just finished reading by the end of "Part Three." Therefore, the emphasis is on the development of the narrator, on the modernist concern of consciousness rather than the postmodernist one of fictionality. On the other hand, Atonement is "surfiction" which constantly renews reader's faith in Briony's imagination and not in Briony's distorted vision of reality (Federman 7). In fact, "surfiction" is the entry of the narrator into the text which happens overtly in "London 1999" section of Atonement.

Frames as constituting an established order, plan or system are essential in all fiction; however, by posing ontological questions such as "what is a frame?", "What is the 'frame' that separates reality from fiction?", metafiction breaks the fame to lay bare procedures in the construction of the real world and of novels. In fact the very act of breaking the frame "defamiliarizes," to borrow Shoklovsky's terminology, automatized and inauthentic fictional conventions to release new and more authentic forms (qtd. in Waugh 65).

To undergo the ordeal of settling in the promised land of metafiction, Briony trespasses three demarcations including past/present narrative, first person/third person narrator and history/fiction discipline in Atonement. Briony's systematic transgression of those "redlines", which separate various types of fiction and demarcate its adjacent disciplines such as history, biography or autobiography, connotes the extent of Briony's consciousness of her rite of passage. She is ready to face this hardship even at the cost of the unreliability of her narrative and narration. The salient point which deserves

considerable attention is that the author does not attempt to shatter these three frames simultaneously. As a result the linearity of the solid base of the narrative remains intact.

As far as the demarcation of first/third person narrative is concerned, Atonement basically consists of two narratives, one that presents itself very much like a traditional realist narrative throughout the first three parts of the novel and a second one which is blatantly metanarrative—"London 1999". The signature "B[riony]. T[aliss]."at the end of "Part Three" completely shatters the fictional world of the main narrative, which has been constructed yet, by drastically shifting the reader's perspective. In fact, Atonement is the third-person/first-person intrusion narrative (such as Slaughterhouse- Five and The French Lieutenant's Woman) in which an apparently autonomous world is broken into by a first person narrator who attempts desperately to hang on to her 'real' identity as the creator of the narrated text; however, when Briony enters the text, her own reality and reliability are also called into question. The author Briony produces the language of the text as she herself is the production of the language of the text. The reader is made aware that, paradoxically, the "author" is situated in the text at the very point where she asserts her identity outside it. As Jacques Ehrmann argues, "The 'author' and the 'text' are thus caught in a movement in which they do not remain distinct (the author and the work; one creator of the other) but rather are transposed and become interchangeable, creating and annulling one another" (32).

In one of the significant passages of "London 1999", the novelist Briony forces readers to recall that what they are reading is fiction and alerts them not to trust the author (be that he or Briony) as well as warns them of the dangers of the literary imagination. In fact this passage comes after the happy ending closure of "Part Three" where the lovers have reunited:

It is only in this last version that my lovers end well, standing side by side on a South London pavement as I walk away. All the preceding drafts were pitiless. But now I can no longer think what purpose would be served if, say, I tried to persuade my reader, by direct or indirect means, that Robbie Turner died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes on 1June1940, or that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground Station.(McEwan, Atonement 370).

As McEwan has said, it is no longer possible to trust the omniscient point of view (Ellam17), and readers, by observing Briony's signature, must re-assess what have been narrated so far. Besides, the reliability of the narrator becomes a subject of enquiry since, as Briony explains in the last section "London, 1999," her entire narrative of the novel is, in fact, her endeavour to atone for lying about Robbie raping Lola and unification of the lovers(i.e. Cecilia and Robbie).

By breaking the narrative framework by the first person narrator, the reliability of Briony demands more attention. The hypothesis which can be introduced here is that the more the narrator becomes self-conscious, the less she becomes reliable. Broadly speaking, the classical realistic novels with omniscient narrators are near to "narrative unconsciousness" and narrators in fiction of (high) modernism and postmodernism proximate another pole, the "narrative self-consciousness." In respect to Atonement , there is the slightest of awareness in the omniscient narrator of the first three parts and their narrator is near to" the implied metacommentary" , while in "London 1999" the narrator reveals her identity as the author of aforesaid narrative and shows her continual self-consciousness.

In fact, by disclosing the death of the lovers and the atonement-seeking intention of writing the novel, Briony portrays the image of an unreliable narrator, an unreliable author and finally an old woman suffused with guilt for the sin she committed over 60 years ago . During the last chapter, we learn that the story was told through letters between Cecilia and Robbie, and through correspondence between Corporal Nettles and Briony. It leaves the question very open, "Whose story is this?" She is invariably ambiguous and difficult to believe in. As a result, readers' identification with and empathy in her get shattered, thus, their making an ethical decision about atoning for her sins can be without the instruction of the author. After all she is the cause of the tension that the novel depends on and is also the means for reminding the readers that this is a work of fiction (Ellan 42).

Moreover, the ending of the novel remains open and dark since Briony in the penultimate paragraph of "London 1999" plays with the idea of writing a new draft that would finally allow the two lovers to forgive her. She discloses, "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, Atonement 351).

The Temporal frame of the novel is the next element which is broken by shifting from past tense narration of the first three parts to present tense in the last section. The past- tense narration gives this chance to the "extradiegetic" narrator, to use Genette's term, to shift from one focalizer to another and occasionally shows the power of narrative anticipation. Besides, the past tense bestows upon Briony the role of a concealed narrator with a tremendous amount of power to stand "above" and create her fictional world. That is why in "London 1999" she omnisciently compares herself with God (McEwan, Atonement 371). Making use of a grammatical tense other than the past tense does not enable Briony to "refine itself out of existence," borrowing Joyce's view, "like the God of the creation . . . within or behind or beyond his handiwork, paring his fingernails" (Joyce 233).

Rendering the coda of the novel in the present tense and breaking with the past tense sounds reasonable since McEwan plans to portray a self-conscious narrator converted author whose narration is alive and present. There is no temporal barrier or even delay between what the mature author, Briony, accounts for and what her readers infer. In fact, through present tense discourse, Briony's virtual readers get directly addressed by her atonement-seeking confession.

Dovetailing the temporal frame-breaking in Atonement with old Briony 's irreversible ill "vascular Dementia" connotes that the notion of time via English tenses moves from the past , runs through the present and finally ends with silence: "loss of memory, short- and long-term, the disappearance of single words—simple nouns might be the first to go—then language itself" (McEwan 354-55). In other words, as Briony marks, Atonement can be published only after her death or that of her fellow criminal, the Marshall. Therefore, when the reader reads the novel, Briony is beyond reach. However, as Ingersoll has observed, the monument of a lifetime's artwork can, in time-honored fashion, preserve Briony and her unageing lovers who have long been extinct in life (254–55).

## 3. Conclusion

"Narrative distance," according to Crosthwaite, is the temporal distance between the story-now (the point in time occupied by the characters) and the discourse-now (the point in time occupied by the narrator) (59).In majority of the realist novels there are an indispensable distance between these two occupied points particularly when the omniscient third-person narrator narrates in past tense-- like the Atonement .However, by entering the text, introducing herself as the author and rendering her account in present tense, Briony unifies story-now and discourse-now in "London 1999".In fact Briony, via a shift to the present tense, plans to reduce the narrative distance as much as possible which simultaneously increases the dramatic aspect of the last section. The said frame-breakings in Atonement highlight the fact that textual contradictions, which have always finally resolved in realism at the level of plot and in modernism at the level of consciousness, in metafictional texts remain unsolvable and lead to a structural uncertainty at temporal, narrative and generic levels.

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