

Research Article

Power Dynamics and Human Relationships in Ian McEwan's Atonement

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Abstract: *Atonement* is a renowned work of Ian McEwan, exploring the theme of guilt, repentance, ethics, social hierarchy, and many more, but this paper attempts to find how gender norms, social power, and interpretative authority intersect in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* through the character, especially the protagonist Briony Tallis. The novel, set in pre-Second World War England, explores how cultural expectations and social structures shape people's perceptions and interpretations of reality. The story revolves around Briony Tallis, who misrepresents the relationship between her older sister, Cecilia Tallis, and Robbie Turner, resulting in a false accusation that changes the characters' lives forever. At the same time, the class structure in the Tallis house has a big effect on how believable various voices are. Robbi's role as the son of the family's housekeeper puts him at a structural disadvantage, even if he is educated and honest. This makes him a likely suspect in the household's social reasoning. The paper shows how broken observations slowly coalesce into a story that seems true by examining key parts of the book, such as the fountain scene, the letter scene, and the allegation of Lola's assault. The study examines the work's metafictional elements, focusing on the strengths and limitations of narrative as Briony attempts to articulate the past. Ultimately, this study asserts that *Atonement* exemplifies the interaction among gender, ideology, social hierarchy, and narrative imagination in shaping human perception and the construction of reality.

Keywords: Social Power; Misinterpretation; Narrative Authority; Class Hierarchy

Introduction

Atonement is an important work in modern British literature for its complex narrative structure and exploration of themes such as interpretation, responsibility, and truth. The novel examines how people's perceptions are shaped by cultural norms and social hierarchies, which can significantly affect others' lives. The novel takes place in the last years of the twentieth century in England before World War Second. The story revolves around a key mistake made by the main protagonist, Briony Tallis, who misinterprets the events. Her failure to grasp the bond between Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner results in a false charge that changes their lives forever. McEwan used this occurrence not only as a narrative device but also as a mechanism for investigating the intricate processes involved in constructing meaning. The novels show that interpretations are rarely impartial; human imagination, cultural expectations, and existing power systems instead shape them. The novels are set in 1930s British society, which remained rigidly divided into upper, middle, and working classes during the economic depression. Robbie's position as the son of the Tallis family's housekeeper places him at a structural disadvantage, making him vulnerable to suspicion despite his education and personal integrity. At the same time, prevailing attitudes toward sexuality and propriety shape Briony's understanding of adult relationships, contributing to her misreading of the events she witnesses.

This paper argues that *Atonement* reveals how the intersection of gender ideology and social power influences interpretation. By examining the dynamics of perception, class hierarchy, and narrative authority, the novel exposes the consequences of misinterpretation and highlights the complex relationship between storytelling and moral responsibility. Through its layered narrative and reflective structure, McEwan ultimately invites readers to question the reliability of perception and the authority of the stories through which reality is understood. To situate this argument within existing scholarship, it is essential to consider how critics have approached McEwan's work, particularly *Atonement*. The fiction of Ian McEwan has attracted extensive critical attention for its exploration of ethical dilemmas, narrative complexity, and social structures. Among his novels, *Atonement* has been particularly significant in contemporary literary criticism because of its intricate narrative design and its engagement with issues of perception, responsibility, and storytelling. Scholars have examined the novel from multiple perspectives, including narrative theory, ethics, class relations, and metafictional strategies.

One of the most influential studies of McEwan's work is provided by Dominic Head, who emphasizes the moral and philosophical dimensions of McEwan's fiction. Head argues that McEwan's narratives frequently explore the relationship between individual actions and broader ethical consequences. According to him, *Atonement* exemplifies McEwan's concern with moral accountability, particularly through the character of Briony Tallis, whose interpretation of events shapes the destiny of other characters. Head's analysis highlights how narrative perspective and moral judgment are intertwined in McEwan's fiction.

Similarly, Peter Childs examines the thematic and structural features of McEwan's novels in his study of contemporary British fiction. Childs notes that *Atonement* foregrounds the problem of interpretation, showing how characters construct meaning from limited or incomplete information. He suggests that the novel critiques the human tendency to impose narrative order on ambiguous experiences, thereby exposing the fragile boundary between perception and reality. Childs's work is particularly useful in understanding how misinterpretation functions as a central narrative mechanism in the novel. Another important contribution comes from David Malcolm, who analyzes McEwan's narrative techniques and character construction. Malcolm emphasizes that McEwan frequently employs multiple perspectives and shifting narrative voices to reveal the instability of truth. In his reading of *Atonement*, Malcolm suggests that the novel challenges the reliability of perception and raises questions about the authority of narrative representation. His analysis highlights how storytelling itself becomes a powerful instrument capable of shaping social and moral realities. Critical discussions of *Atonement* also frequently focus on its metafictional structure. Brian Finney argues that the novel deliberately exposes the process of storytelling in order to question the possibility of narrative redemption. Finney's analysis emphasizes Briony's role as both character and author, suggesting that her attempt to reconstruct the past through writing reflects the limitations of fiction in addressing moral responsibility. His interpretation underscores how narrative authority becomes a central issue in the novel.

Theoretical perspectives on gender and power deepen the text's critical understanding. The concept of gender as a socially constructed framework, articulated by Judith Butler, provides a useful lens for examining how characters interpret behavior in line with cultural expectations. In *Atonement*, Briony's perception of Cecilia and Robbie's relationship is shaped by conventional assumptions about sexuality and propriety. Likewise, the analysis of social power structures can be informed by Michel Foucault's theory of power, which emphasizes the intertwining of authority and knowledge within social institutions. The accusation against Robbie demonstrates how class privilege and social credibility influence the construction of truth. While previous critics have examined the ethical and metafictional aspects of *Atonement*, the intersection of gender ideology, social power, and interpretative error deserves further attention. By focusing on these elements, this present study seeks to demonstrate how the novel reveals the complex relationship between perception, authority, and narrative construction.

As I discussed, the work has been done. However, I found that in *Atonement*, Ian McEwan situates the narrative's central events within the rigid social environment of pre-Second World War England, where gender expectations and moral propriety strongly influence how individuals interpret behavior. The cultural norms governing relationships, sexuality, and femininity shape not only the characters' conduct but also their perceptions of one another. Within this social framework, acts of observation are filtered through deeply ingrained assumptions about appropriate gender roles, which ultimately contribute to the tragic misunderstanding at the novel's center.

Cecilia Tallis's character shows the conflict between what she wants and what society expects from women in upper-class British society. Cecilia is the educated daughter of an affluent family, which puts her in a privileged social position. However, she is also limited by societal norms of femininity that require her to be modest, restrained, and morally upright. Her connection with Robbie Turner challenges these expectations, which goes beyond emotional and social limits. In the fountain scene, Cecilia Tallis expresses mixed emotions; she kicked off her sandals, unbuttoned her blouse and removed it, unfastened her skirt and stepped out of it, and went to the basin wall" (McEwan 30). The scene shows not just her anger and disobedience, but also a brief rejection of the strict rules governing how women should act. However, this moment of intimacy is witnessed by Briony, whose interpretation of the scene is shaped by her limited understanding of adult relationships and by the moral conventions she has internalized.

Briony's perception of events reveals the powerful influence of gender ideology on interpretation. As a child raised in a socially conservative environment, she tends to view the world through rigid categories of innocence and wrongdoing. Her imagination, nourished by romantic literature and theatrical fantasies, encourages her to impose narrative patterns on the actions she observes. Consequently, when she sees Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain, she interprets their interaction not as a private moment between two individuals but as a dramatic scene involving coercion and impropriety. The episode demonstrates how social expectations surrounding female vulnerability and male aggression shape Briony's understanding of what she witnesses. Instead of recognizing the complexity of the situation, she interprets the event through a framework that assumes male dominance and female victimhood.

The cultural attitudes toward sexuality prevalent in the 1930s further intensify Briony's misinterpretation. At a time when open discussion of sexual relationships was socially discouraged, young people often acquired fragmented or distorted knowledge about adult intimacy. Briony's reading of Robbie's explicit letter to Cecilia reinforces her belief that Robbie's intentions are morally corrupt. Because she lacks the emotional maturity to contextualize the language of desire, she interprets the letter as confirmation of a threatening male sexuality. In doing so, she transforms her earlier suspicions into apparent evidence of wrongdoing. Gender norms, therefore, play a crucial role in shaping the chain of misunderstandings that structure the narrative. Briony's perception of Robbie as a potential aggressor and Cecilia as a vulnerable woman reflects broader cultural narratives about masculinity and femininity. These assumptions guide her interpretation of later events, including her identification of Robbie as the perpetrator of Lola's assault. By depicting how gendered expectations shape Briony's judgment, McEwan reveals how social ideologies influence not only behavior but also the interpretation of reality. The novel thus suggests that acts of perception are deeply embedded in cultural frameworks that shape how individuals understand and evaluate others' actions.

In *Atonement*, Ian McEwan presents a detailed portrayal of the rigid class structure that characterized British society in the 1930s. The social hierarchy within the

Tallis household reflects broader cultural divisions between the upper class and subordinate social groups. Through the character of Robbie Turner, McEwan demonstrates how class identity shapes both social relationships and the distribution of power. Although Robbie benefits from education and intellectual opportunities, his background as the son of the Tallis family's housekeeper continues to define his social identity. This structural inequality plays a crucial role in the events that lead to his wrongful accusation.

A paradoxical mixture of familiarity and exclusion marks Robbie's position within the Tallis household. He grows up alongside Cecilia and the other members of the family, enjoying their patronage and encouragement. However, despite this closeness, he remains conscious of the invisible social boundary that separates him from them. The narrative makes this distinction clear when it observes: "So the cleaning lady's son gets a scholarship to the local grammar, gets a scholarship to Cambridge, goes up the same time as Cee— and she hardly speaks to him in three years! (McEwan 52) Robbie Turner had always been treated as a member of the family, but he was not one. This statement highlights the subtle but powerful ways in which class hierarchy operates. Robbie may share the Tallis family's intellectual aspirations and participate in their domestic life, yet his origins prevent him from being fully accepted as their equal. The family's apparent generosity does not eliminate the structural inequality that defines Robbie's place in their social world.

The influence of class hierarchy becomes particularly evident when suspicion falls upon Robbie following Lola's assault. In the absence of concrete evidence, the characters rely on assumptions shaped by social expectations. Robbie's position as the housekeeper's son makes him a plausible suspect within the social imagination of the household. The narrative captures the logic of this assumption in the observation: "The truth was in the symmetry of a common sense. The truth instructed her eyes. So when she said, over and over, "I saw him," she meant it and was perfectly honest, as well as passionate. (McEwan 169). This phrase reveals how social prejudice can transform speculation into apparent truth. The "common-sense assumption" reflects a belief that someone from Robbie's social background is more likely to commit a crime than a member of the privileged class. As a result, Briony's accusation is readily accepted because it aligns with existing social expectations.

The intersection of class privilege and gendered authority further strengthens this dynamic. Lola, who belongs to the upper-class environment surrounding the Tallis family, possesses a form of social credibility that Robbie lacks. Her presence within the same social circle reinforces the plausibility of Briony's interpretation. When the accusation is made, the adults and authorities show little hesitation in believing Briony's testimony. Robbie's attempts to defend himself carry limited weight because the social hierarchy has already positioned him as an outsider. Therefore, McEwan shows that Robbie's destiny is influenced by a societal structure that gives certain voices more weight than others, as well as by Briony's misunderstanding. Class hierarchy serves as an unseen foundation that establishes who can be trusted and who cannot. The devastating consequences of the accusation show how power operates in everyday

social interactions. Atonement reveals how social hierarchy affects perception, power, and justice by illustrating the terrible consequences of class discrimination. More general theoretical theories of power can also help us understand the dynamics of authority and credibility in *Atonement*. According to Michel Foucault, power functions not only via formal institutions but also through social discourses that establish the legitimacy of certain voices. The Tallis family holds a position of social dominance in the novel, enabling their interpretations to take center stage. Despite his education and moral rectitude, Robbie Turner falls outside this framework of credibility because of his status as the housekeeper's son. Because Briony's charge aligns with the household's class-based social norms, it is accepted right away. The credibility given to Briony's statement illustrates how power operates through social privilege and cultural presumptions, turning a child's incorrect understanding into an acknowledged reality. As a result, McEwan reveals the nuanced ways in which social power shapes reality, showing how people positioned outside dominant social institutions often lack the capacity to question narratives thrust upon them. A central thematic concern of *Atonement* is the process through which incomplete observations and subjective perceptions are transformed into authoritative truths. McEwan demonstrates how imagination, prior assumptions, and social context often shape interpretation. Through the character of Briony Tallis, the novel reveals how acts of misinterpretation can acquire the force of certainty and produce irreversible consequences. The narrative carefully traces how a series of misunderstandings gradually evolves into a coherent but fundamentally mistaken narrative that ultimately determines Robbie Turner's fate.

The first crucial moment of misinterpretation occurs during the famous fountain scene, when Briony observes Cecily and Robbie from the Tallis house's window. Lacking knowledge of their emotional relationship and adult experience, Briony attempts to interpret what she sees through the narrative frameworks she knows from literature. As the narrator describes:

"The scene by the fountain had the quality of a story. First there was the setting, then the action, and finally the revelation. In Briony's mind, the truth of the event arranged itself into a clear narrative." (McEwan 113).

Briony interprets the fountain scene as a story, arranging it into setting, action, and revelation. Instead of recognizing the ambiguity of the moment, Briony organizes the event into a dramatic plot structure. Her imagination converts an uncertain observation into a meaningful story in which Robbie appears as an aggressor and Cecilia as a victim. This interpretative act reveals how Briony's desire for narrative order encourages her to impose meaning upon events she does not fully understand.

The misunderstanding intensifies when Briony reads Robbie's letter to Cecilia. The explicit language in the letter shocks her and confirms the suspicions she had formed during the fountain scene. Because her understanding of sexuality is limited and shaped by moral conventions, she interprets the letter as evidence of Robbie's immoral character. The narration captures her reaction to the word she had seen, the shocking word, which seemed to glow upon the page. It confirmed everything she had suspected about Robbie Turner. This moment demonstrates how prior assumptions

influence interpretation. Briony does not approach the letter with openness or uncertainty; rather, she reads it through a framework already constructed by her imagination. Therefore, the letter becomes proof of a narrative she has already created.

The final and most devastating act of misinterpretation occurs during the night of Lola's assault. In the park's darkness, Briony sees a man fleeing and immediately identifies him as Robbie. Her certainty is not based on clear evidence but on the accumulation of earlier impressions. The narrative reflects the way her previous interpretations merge into a single explanation: She did not doubt that she had witnessed the truth. The fragments she had gathered, the fountain scene, the letter, the darkness by the temple, had arranged themselves into a single, coherent story. This passage reveals how Briony constructs a narrative from scattered observations. As she pieces these fragments together, the story becomes true to her, and her confident testimony convinces the adults and authorities of Robbie's guilt.

McEwan uses these episodes to demonstrate the powerful role of narrative imagination in shaping human judgment. Briony's interpretations are not intentionally malicious; rather, they emerge from a combination of youthful imagination, moral assumptions, and social expectations. However, the consequences of these interpretations are profound. By presenting misinterpretation as a process of narrative construction, the novel highlights the fragile boundary between perception and truth. In doing so, *Atonement* reveals how stories, whether imagined or believed, can acquire the power to shape reality and reshape individuals' lives.

The final section of *Atonement* by Ian McEwan shifts the reader's attention from the events themselves to the act of storytelling through which those events are remembered and reconstructed. Throughout the novel, Briony Tallis is presented not only as a character within the narrative but also as the author who ultimately shapes the story. This revelation transforms the novel into a reflection on narrative authority, raising important questions about the writer's ethical responsibilities and the limits of fiction in correcting past injustices. As the novel progresses, McEwan increasingly foregrounds the relationship between storytelling and moral responsibility. The final section reveals that the narrative the reader has encountered is itself Briony's literary attempt to confront the consequences of her childhood mistake. By rewriting the past, she seeks to give Robbie and Cecilia the happiness that reality denied them. However, this fictional reconstruction also exposes the limitations of narrative authority. Briony may control the events within her story, but she cannot alter the historical reality of the injustice she helped create.

Briony has a strong urge to use stories to make sense of the world from a young age. Her childhood love of writing and acting shows that she thinks tales may make sense of the complicated ways people act. At the beginning of the book, her imagination leads her to see real-life occurrences as if they were parts of a dramatic story. When she sees Cecilia and Robbie by the fountain, this propensity is quite evident. Briony's literary imagination changes an unclear conversation into a meaningful tale by filtering the experience through her: the scene near the fountain was like a tale, first came the setting, then the action, and then the big reveal. Briony saw the event as a clear story;

she saw the only one who could make sense of what she had seen. At this point, Briony acts like an author, making sense of things she does not fully understand. Instead of admitting she does not know what will happen, she frames the events she sees in a clear story. Her belief in this interpretation shows how powerful stories can be in turning unclear situations into clear truths, because Briony's made-up tale serves as the charge against Robbie Turner; the act of telling a story and the act of judging become one and the same. This ethical dilemma is articulated in one of the most significant passages of the novel:

“How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form, that she can appeal to or be reconciled with. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination, she has set the limits and the terms”(350).

This reflection highlights the paradox of narrative authority. As the author of the story, Briony possesses complete creative control, yet this power also exposes the inadequacy of fiction as a means of moral repair. Although she can grant Robbie and Cecilia a symbolic reunion within the narrative, she recognizes that this act cannot truly undo the harm caused by her earlier misinterpretation.

McEwan further emphasizes the ethical weight of storytelling by acknowledging the irreversible consequences of human actions. At one point, the narrative reflects on the vulnerability of individuals within the structures of society: “A person is, among all else, a material thing, easily torn and not easily mended” (287). This observation reinforces the idea that the damage caused by Briony's accusation cannot be fully repaired by literary imagination. While storytelling allows her to revisit and reinterpret the past, it cannot restore the lives that were permanently altered by her mistake. Through this metafictional framework, *Atonement* ultimately invites readers to question the reliability of narratives and the authority of those who construct them. By presenting Briony as both participant and author, McEwan reveals how stories are shaped by personal perspective, cultural assumptions, and ethical choices. The novel thus transforms the act of narration into a profound meditation on responsibility, demonstrating that while storytelling may offer reflection and acknowledgment, it cannot entirely resolve the moral consequences of misinterpretation and social injustice.

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* offers a sophisticated analysis of how perception, societal constructions, and narrative imagination shape human understanding of truth. The story of Briony Tallis's accusation against Robbie Turner shows how bad things can happen when people's judgments are based on insufficient information and cultural biases. McEwan tells a story in which personal judgment is closely tied to wider systems of gender ideology and social hierarchy. This shows how our perceptions of gender norms are shaped. Society's views on sexuality and proper behavior affect how people judge others' actions. Briony's misunderstanding of the relationship between Cecilia and Robbie stems partly from the moral lens through which she views adult relationships. Her limited comprehension and artistic tendencies compel her to perceive complicated situations via rigid dichotomies of innocence and guilt. As a result,

her view of what happened shows how powerful conventional conventions regarding gender and sexuality are. Briony's tendency to interpret events within a narrative framework illustrates how the human desire for coherence can transform equivocal observations into definitive judgments. The complex story structure and social criticism in *Atonement* make readers question the reliability of perception and the moral duties that come with interpretation. McEwan demonstrates that understanding reality requires a nuanced comprehension of the social and cultural frameworks that influence human judgment by exposing the effects of gender standards, socioeconomic hierarchy, and narrative imagination on the formation of truth.

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