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Disordering Fiction's Order
Irony underneath Homage in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

NAKAJIMA Ayaka

Introduction

The concluding section of Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* has attracted much critical attention since it was first published in 2001. In this section, seventy-seven-year-old Briony Tallis, a celebrated professional novelist, discloses that the whole story up until the coda, "London, 1999" is actually the final manuscript of her novels that represent her lifetime atonement. Briony proceeds to confess that the last pages of Part Three are nothing more than figments of her imagination and she justifies this deception by referring to a novelist's license to alter the facts to suit her artistic purposes. What happens in reality is "pitiless" and the lovers— Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner— have not actually survived the war and so they could never have been reunited (350). Some reviewers dismiss the coda in *Atonement* as "postmodern gimmickry" (Finney, 70). Anita Brookner criticizes the ending of the novel as being "too lenient" (44), and Margaret Boerner, who titles her review article "A Bad End," is the most strident in her condemnation of the conclusion. Boerner vehemently denounces the coda for destroying the whole structure of the novel McEwan has set up, and she says that McEwan has abandoned the fundamental responsibility to conclude his own story like "a novice writer who doesn't know how to close what he's begun" (46). These reviewers are, however, lulled by the length of Part One into the sense of security typically associated with the classic realist novel and then frustrated by its complete reversal.

Actually, however, in an interview with Lynn Wells McEwan ex-

plains that what he has tried to reveal in *Atonement* is "the humanly real" (Wells, 134). McEwan depicts this aspect of his characters and also the limits of fiction in a playful tone, concealing his irony and mimicking the narrative styles of his literary ancestors, such as Virginia Woolf or Henry James. Briony, who is suffering from memory disorder and extremely envious of her cousin Lola, has obvious potential to become an unreliable narrator and is too involved to fulfill the role of an omniscient narrator or godlike novelist. In the narrative, the fictional author, Briony embellishes and alters the facts deliberately, thus the readers cannot believe that Briony conveys the perfect truth to her readers. The very process of narrative itself implies the impossibility of perfect objectivity. To expose this limitation of fiction, McEwan purposely uses a narrative style which mimics prior English realist and modernist fictions rather than adopts more experimental styles of narrative. As Linda Hutcheon points out in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, postmodern fiction sometimes parodically subverts but also inscribes the conventions of realism (18). Therefore, in McEwan's method of exposing the limits of fiction, we can observe a strong sense of irony toward the English literary tradition.

1. Ambiguity in the Narrative Structure

The concluding section of *Atonement* has been controversial among the critics and reviewers since the book's publication. Nevertheless they have not paid much attention to a status of this section. Although it seems to remain ambiguous, most critics implicitly postulate that the final section is an excerpt from the diary of aging Briony, in which she writes privately and with no intention to publish. It is reasonable to assume that Briony's draft ends at the end of Part Three because it is concluded with the author's signature, "BT/ London, 1999" (330). Moreover, this final part is narrated from Briony's first-person perspective unlike the other sections. On the other hand, Brian Finney suggests an intriguing possibility that these pages can be read as an

extraneous commentary on Briony's novel (81). There is also another possibility that the whole story, including Part Four, might be the manuscript of Briony's autobiographical novel. In fact, Briony uses "you" and "we" in the concluding section as if she expects a certain listener for these pages as well as the previous ones (339, 342, 343). Wells suggests that McEwan's "narcissistic main character," Briony tends to aggrandize herself in the narrative (99-100), and both the opening and ending of the novel describe her own career as a writer in a self-centered fashion. In the light of Wells's expertise, the whole story appears to be thinly disguised as an autobiographical fiction of the now famous novelist, Briony Tallis. McEwan himself does not provide a clear ending for the novel and he leaves the individual readers to judge whether or not Briony is able to make amends. In postmodern fictions, as David Lodge observes, readers face "the multiple ending, the false ending, the mock ending or parody ending" unlike the closed ending of traditional novels (226). McEwan, too, virulently destroys the structure of the closed ending Briony has constructed at the end of Part Three, and Part Four can be seen as him mocking his readers with the indeterminate ending.

As numerous reviewers and McEwan himself admit, *Atonement* concerns the relationship between fiction and reality. However, the boundary between the two remains obscure. In fact, ambiguity in the narrative structure is one of the aspects that control the whole story. Although most reviewers only emphasize the ambiguous ending of the final section, structural ambiguity is actually present throughout the novel. From the content of Cyril Connolly's rejection letter in Part Three, it is quite apparent that the fictional author, Briony, deliberately alters and embellishes what has really happened in the Tallis's country house during the summer of 1935. I do not intend to create a comprehensive list of all of the alterations, for much ink has already been spent on the examination of these differences.[1] Instead, the problem we should now concern ourselves with is that Briony might have

made "a huge digression" and doubled back to the "starting place" as she comes to realize (350). From the beginning of the novel, the girl in love with writing and reading novels has committed the "crime" in which Robbie is sent to prison after a conviction based on her false testimony because she has confused literary imagination with reality (349). Therefore, it is necessary for the aged novelist to distinguish between reality and fiction in her novels if she wants to make real amends for the dead lovers. Nevertheless, McEwan intentionally conceals the boundary between what really happens and what Briony creates with her imagination.

McEwan says in an interview with Jonathan Noakes that he has emphasized the process of Briony's atonement, not her crime itself, and that he uses "the notion of storytelling as a form of self-justification" (19-20). Through the rewriting-process as a lifetime atonement, Briony tends to justify herself by emphasizing innocence of children. Brookner regards this narrative manipulation as Briony's escape from reality and her crime (44). At the advice of her editor, Cyril Connolly, Briony includes the fictional plotline in which Robbie uses Briony as a messenger. In Part One, Robbie asks Briony to send an obscene letter, saying "In my dreams I kiss your cunt" (80) to Cecilia by his mistake but Briony reads it before sending to her sister. This scene is indispensable for adolescent Briony to misinterpret Robbie as a psychopath, although the whole episode never actually took place. The aged novelist deliberately adds this material for self-justification, with the narrator stressing that the crime has been done by little Briony "innocently" and "without guile" (158). The more Briony rewrites her stories, the further the content is distanced from the facts. Indeed, she eventually imagines another ending for the novel, which is even farther removed from reality: Robbie and Cecilia are still alive and in love, smiling while watching *The Trials of Arabella* at Briony's seventy-seventh birthday party (351). However, Briony— the novelist and also the God in her novel— can receive forgiveness only through

self-justification because there are no superior characters that she can appeal to or that can pardon her after the lovers have died. Therefore, we can conclude that the ambiguous boundary between reality and fiction implies the existence of a conflict between Briony's desire to justify her past actions and self-reproach, which is manifested through her desire to write about the actual events as well as her crime. As Kate Kellaway reports, the title "at-one-ment" indicates reconciliation not only for the dead lovers but also with oneself (3). Briony tries to appeal to her readers to sympathize with her, instead of the dead lovers, Robbie and Cecilia.

2. Dubiousness of "the Truth"

As we have seen in the previous section, Briony uses her narrative as a means for self-justification, as a result of which the truth narrated in *Atonement* cannot help being ambiguous. In the novel, the seventy-seven-year-old successful writer, Briony puts emphasis on "the truth" in her novel because the purposes of her writings are not only to atone for her past crime but also to demonstrate that the real culprit is Paul Marshall. In the final section, Briony confesses that she feels it is her duty to conceal nothing about "the names, the places, the exact circumstances" in order to accuse Marshall and his wife Lola of the crime (349), even if this attempt prevents her from publishing the draft. A few pages before, however, Briony paradoxically admits that if she seriously cared about the facts, she should write a different kind of book, and she excuses herself for her "convenient distortion" of the facts and claims that it is a novelist's license to alter the facts (336). Indeed, while there are eight different drafts of her novels, the readers can never know which one reports what had really happened. It is human nature to make excuses for oneself and this aspect of "the humanly real" is what McEwan has tried to show in *Atonement* (Wells, 134). McEwan focuses his attention on the emotions of the characters and self-justification, in which he plays with the notion of storytelling as a

form of self-justification by showing the readers how much courage is involved in admitting the truth to oneself.

As long as Briony's narration implies self-justification, the readers should not take her words at face value, even when she strongly argues that Marshall is the true culprit. Nevertheless, the majority of the reviewers and critics accept what Briony writes in her novel as the truth. According to Kathleen D'Angelo, for example, Marshall is "the novel's darkest character" like Lovelace in *Clarissa*:

> It seems no coincidence that Paul Marshall, perhaps the novel's darkest character and Lola's actual rapist, is an unabashed capitalist particularly skilled in unethical marketing practices. And while certain iniquities of capitalism depend upon *un*critical consumption, Marshall represents the kind of modern figure who often escapes critique. (103)

Marshall's face is described using the word "cruel" from the perspectives of Lola and Robbie in the novel (55, 119). This description is a clue which suggests that he is the real rapist although none of the members of the Tallis family ever suspect him. We must not forget, however, that it is Briony, and not Lola or Robbie, who regards and describes his face as "cruel". On the contrary, Masaaki Takeda questions the reliability and objectivity of this aged Briony as an omniscient narrator (319). He points out that it is impossible for Briony to report the rape as she never clearly witnessed the face of the rapist at the time the event took place. Moreover, at the end of the novel it is revealed that aged Briony suffers from vascular dementia and feels strong jealousy toward Lola who seems to have led a successful life without any sense of guilt. In the concluding section, Briony likens Lola to Cruella De Vil whose name is derived from "cruel" and "devil" in Dodie Smith's *The Hundred and One Dalmatians*. When Briony says she wears shoes, "low-heeled, of course" (340), it is clear that she is comparing herself with Lola who "still wear[s] high heels" and is "heavy on the

makeup" (338). Briony feels a sense of aversion toward Lola who has always been "superior" to her (341). Therefore it becomes necessary for the readers to closely examine Briony's narrative again by reconsidering the function of the narrator from Part One.

McEwan warns the readers in the final coda that the narrator in the novel— a measurer of a novel— must be measured by others. Indeed, he writes in *The Child in Time* (1987) that "[t]he measurers of the world can no longer detach themselves" and "[t]hey have to measure themselves too" (46-47). The readers must assess whether Briony is competent as the measurer of her own novel, and by doing so they will discover that "the truth," which Briony offers is highly suspicious.

From the beginning there are other possibilities for the identity of the actual rapist— for instance, "two tramps" that were squatting on the Tallis's estate (343). Nevertheless, other possibilities are never entertained by the policemen and they do not investigate the crime scene because there was the eyewitness testimony of thirteen-year-old Briony. At the same time, not only Briony but Lola, the victim herself, cannot actually see the face of the rapist in darkness. As time goes by, however, Briony at eighteen comes to realize her past mistake of having attested to having seen Robbie at the site of the crime. At this point she convinces herself that the true rapist is Marshall. Although she strongly believes this to be true, she can only say "[g]rowing up" to explain to Robbie and Cecilia why she comes to this conclusion (323). This explanation is clearly insufficient to warrant the denouncement of all other possibilities. Moreover, she jumps to this conclusion only based on ambiguous evidence: firstly, the rapist was nearly as tall as Marshall; and secondly, the scratch on Marshall's face corresponds with the ones found on Lola's shoulder:

> She felt the memories, the needling details, like a rash, like dirt on her skin: Lola coming to her room in tears, her chafed and bruised wrists, and the scratches on Lola's shoulder and down Marshall's

face. . . . (305)

As Wells points out, this evidence is inadmissible (99). During Lola and Marshall's wedding ceremony, Briony suddenly recalls a sequence of the past events in detail, however this memory conflicts with "the truth" that she provides in Part One. The scene where Lola comes tearfully into Briony's room is depicted just before the rape occurs, and after the incident Lola is taken to her own room by the Tallis's maids. There is no scene in Part One where Lola rushes into Briony's room. As for her chafed and bruised wrists or the scratches on her shoulder, Lola says that they were incurred during her brothers' attack in the bathroom in Chapter Ten. In addition to this, Marshall originally has "a two-inch scratch" on his face, which Robbie notices during dinner party in Chapter Eleven before the incident (119). Marshall says at dinner that he has to mediate the blows between the Quincey children, and therefore he might have received the scratch on his face from one of the twins. Therefore, the readers cannot simply conclude that Marshall is the true rapist because the evidence produced by the narrator is highly suspicious.

What the readers should not forget here is that all these descriptions are written by Briony herself. It is obvious that aging Briony, suffering from a memory disorder, confuses the events both preceding and following the rape. In fact, even the location of Lola's scratch sometimes changes depending on the chapters. As mentioned above, Lola receives the scratch on her shoulder and Marshall on his face at first. The location of Lola's scratch, however, changes to her face in Chapter Eleven and Twelve, and then it reverts back to on her shoulder again in Part Three. From these descriptions, it becomes clear that the aged and senile Briony has mistakenly confused the location of Lola's scratch confusing with that of Marshall's scratch.

What this implies then, is that McEwan destroys Briony's narrative omniscience by revealing the human qualities of the godlike novelist.

This novel which disguises the narrator as omniscient is actually written from the perspective of Briony who was directly involved in the story's central events, so from the beginning there cannot exist any salvageable form of objective truth. In *Enduring Love* (1997), McEwan observes that "believing is seeing" (131, 196). Briony also writes in *Atonement* that it is "not simply her eyes that told her the truth" (158). In this same way, she sees Robbie or at least thinks she has seen him at the scene of the crime because she believes he is a "maniac" (112). Aged Briony, believing that Robbie is *not* the culprit, shifts the blame onto Marshall even though Marshall too may in fact be innocent as well. Therefore, the means by which one makes an atonement could potentially cause another crime.

McEwan reveals the dubiousness of "the truth" which Briony tries to make her readers believe. Concerning the distinction between the fictional and actual author, Marthe Robert says in *The Origin of the Novel* that there are only two poles in fiction writing: one tries to make the readers believe in its verisimilitude like Virginia Woolf, and the other overly stresses the fictitious nature of fiction like Franz Kafka (15-16). If Briony is a fictional author who admires Woolf's techniques and adopts Woolf's approach to writing novels (265, 294), McEwan, as the real author, stands in the latter position. In fact, aged Briony confesses that she loves the pointillist approach to "verisimilitude [and] the correction of detail that cumulatively gives" her satisfaction (339). On the other hand, McEwan forces Briony— the God of her novel— to eternally make amends and what he finally reveals discredits her narration. McEwan stresses the artfulness of her fiction by using a device of meta-fiction. He also shows how Briony's story, which is closed and settled, mirrors her "orderly spirit" (5), is artfully created. Briony who is obsessed by a "controlling demon" since she was a child (5), prefers the closed ending found in the traditional realist novels. Although Boerner asserts that McEwan destroys the structure which he has set up at the end of the novel, he in fact deliberately demolishes the struc-

ture which his fictional novelist, Briony has set up. Therefore, we can find in *Atonement* a conflict between the fictional novelist, Briony who composes an ordered story and the real novelist, McEwan who prefers disordering his character's memory and story.

3. Irony Hidden behind Homage

Atonement makes many references to the great tradition of English literary works and writers from Shakespeare to Virginia Woolf. Numerous attempts have been made to identify and interpret the intertextual allusions and influences that McEwan includes. Among the various works that are cited, it is apparent that this novel is profoundly influenced by Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. In the epigraph, McEwan clearly demonstrates that he is inspired by *Northanger Abbey*, in which Catherine Morland, who loves to read Gothic novels, confuses fictive writings with the real world. McEwan admits in an interview that he is thinking for many years how he might devise a hero or heroine who could echo the process that occurs in the mind of Catherine Morland (Reynolds, 20). Unlike *Northanger Abbey*, Briony does not have an admonitor such as Henry Tilney, and as a result she ends up committing the irreparable crime for which she has to make eternal amends. Considering that the Tallis's country house changes into "Tilney's Hotel" at the coda (342), it is reasonable to conclude that Tallis is renamed from Tilney by McEwan in order to pay homage to Austen, who F. R. Leavis includes in "the great tradition of the English novel" (27).

All of the references to other texts in *Atonement* are not necessarily included as tools to forward the plot. Hutcheon points out in *A Theory of Parody* that an excessive interest in intertextuality is capable of eliminating the role of the author because intertextuality can be found "in the eye of beholder" and is not necessarily a product of the communicator's intentions (84). In fact, McEwan says in an interview with Wells, that the intertextuality in *Atonement* just incidentally occurs

when he has decided to include Briony, a young girl in love with writing, in his story (Wells, 134). Moreover, while numerous reviewers individually offer their conclusions as to the sources of the literary allusions in the novel, these arguments lack any overall cohesion. Finney suggests that *Atonement* makes literary allusion to Richardson's *Clarissa*. According to Finney, Arabella, the melodramatic heroine in *The Trials of Arabella*, which thirteen-year-old Briony wrote as her first composition, shares the name of Clarissa's older sister (Finney, 73). Briony's older sister, Cecilia is spending her summer vacation after graduating from Cambridge reading *Clarissa*, which Robbie considers psychologically more subtle than Fielding's novels, but she finds it very "[b]oring" (24). In contrast to *Clarissa*, however, in which the rape leads to the protagonist's death, Lola's rape is linked with her successful marriage with "the rapist" Paul Marshall and the death of the innocent lovers during the war. Therefore, it becomes clear that McEwan uses the allusion to *Clarissa* as a form of irony, not as homage.

Kathleen D'Angelo demands of the readers that they critically engage the text, and she reproaches "casual" readers who overlook the various literary allusions (95). According to D'Angelo, the name of Lola is a hidden reference to Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and the readers should pay particularly close attention to Lola's interaction with Marshall before the crime takes place. I do not share this opinion because she provides no evidence beyond the resemblance of their names. How many readers can really notice that Marshall is Lola's actual rapist on their first reading? Most readers necessarily fall into the category of "casual" readers and there are a variety of pitfalls in place in Briony's narrative to lead them to false conclusions. The characters Cecilia and Robbie for a long time falsely believed that Danny Hardman, a young servant of the Tallis estate, must have been the rapist. Emily, Briony's mother who has a sixth sense, also thinks Marshall is not "a bad sort", unlike a typical entrepreneur (66). Moreover, the fictional author, Briony calculatingly describes the scene where Danny

Hardman "leer[s]" at Lola (84), and skillfully diverts the reader's attention from Marshall. From the beginning, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, "the truth" that Marshall is the culprit is not certain. D'Angelo does not notice the dubiousness of "the truth" which Briony believes and calls Marshall the most vicious, and her excessive interest in intertextuality leads to her misunderstanding of the author's intention.

What McEwan has tried to do by using these references to the canonical English works is to reveal the limits of fiction. As Alistair Cormack observes, the narrative in *Atonement* involves "a collision between different styles and modes of representation" (70). In an interview with Ian Hamilton, McEwan states that he had written "a kind of pastiche of a certain style" and that his earlier novels are always slightly parodic (Roberts, 13). It is commonly believed that McEwan imitates realist and modernist narrative styles in *Atonement*, but he does this—including his references to realist works—with his irony which is concealed behind what at first glance appears to be homage. Therefore, some critics and reviewers such as Boerner and D'Angelo interpret the novel as being realist or modernist because they overlook McEwan's ironical deployment in these works. As Cormack suggests, however, McEwan criticizes modernist writing in *Atonement*: although Briony's later works are viewed as representations of the amoral disengagement of modernism, McEwan's *Atonement* has moralistic complexity (Cormack, 77). Eighteen-year-old Briony who admires Virginia Woolf, thinks plot and character are obsolete and she remarks that modern novelists can "no more write characters and plots" than modern composers could write Mozart symphonies (265). On the contrary, McEwan has skillfully created characters like Briony and superhuman Emily. Moreover the complex multilayer plots unfold like a Chinese-box. In *The Child in Time*, McEwan writes about the end of modernism: his character, Thelma declares that modernism is just "some local, passing fashion" and not an intellectual achievement

(47). Here McEwan suggests that modernism was only a transient phenomenon and is now completely obsolete.

McEwan also reveals the limits of realist fictions. The controversial scene depicting the happy reunion of Robbie and Cecilia at the end of Part Three more or less destroys the novel's foundation of realism. Briony asks herself in the coda what sense or hope or satisfaction the readers can draw from a catastrophic ending, and she condemns people who ask what *really* happened as "the bleakest" of realists (350). At the end, she finally abandons writing undisguisedly about "pitiless" reality although until that point she has imitated the writing styles of these literary ancestors and made many references to them. Nevertheless, this aged Briony oddly depicts an imaginary Briony at the end of Part Three as if she were a ghost. Only in the scene where Briony is walking along the street toward her sister's apartment, is the ghostliness of her presence artificially stressed:

> She left the café, and as she walked along the Common she felt the distance widen between her and another self, no less real, who was walking back toward the hospital. Perhaps the Briony who was walking in the direction of Balham was the imagined or ghostly persona. This unreal feeling was heightened when, after half an hour, she reached another High Street, more or less the same as the one she had left behind. (311)

At Cecilia's apartment, Briony also feels as if she was not quite there, "obliterated, expunged from the room" (325). Why does aged Briony describe the scene using such words? I believe it is because she did not have enough power and courage to write the real eighteen-year-old Briony as a fictional character who is able to reconcile her relationship with Robbie and Cecilia. She is always torn between the above-mentioned desire for self-justification and a sense of duty that would lead to self-reproach. In *Atonement*, therefore, McEwan ironically shows that it is impossible to narrate perfect objectivity as long as

there is an apparently omniscient but actually unreliable narrator like Briony. Here he plays with the limits of realist novels in a manner which postmodernist writers prefer.

The style of writing, viewed by most as a mixture of realism and modernism, is in fact ironically used by a postmodernist, Ian McEwan. The reader, therefore, should distinguish between McEwan as the real author and Briony as the fictional author. Critics equating McEwan with Briony are unable to observe how the real author's irony is hidden underneath the fictional author's homage to the canonical English literature. Indeed the fictional author, Briony, imitates the style of writing of modernist writers such as Woolf or James, yet, on the other hand, the real author, McEwan, perversely challenges some of the presuppositions of fiction by playing the role of his benighted character. In order to understand this novel, the reader must keep in mind that McEwan is a strong ironist who always keeps some distance from his characters and exhibits a wry sense of humor that may not become apparent during a "casual" reading.

Conclusion

Atonement has been criticized by numerous reviewers who claim that McEwan destroys the whole structure of his novel in the concluding section. The mistake that these reviewers have made, however, is to regard the previous sections as merely fiction that's echoes earlier realist and modernist novels. Instead they should consider how McEwan, a postmodern ironist, imitates the style of writings of the English traditional novels and Englishness of the settings of the country house, and at the same time inserts many literary allusions in order to both reveal and play with the limits of fiction. This novel at first appears to be homage to these literary works, but actually McEwan refers to them quite ironically. He reveals that Briony's novel has verisimilitude but not absolute "truth" and he warns the readers that her omniscience is very questionable. Moreover, he emphasizes the artfulness

of her novel and reveals the limits of fiction from within the novel itself. Although the multilayer narrative makes it difficult to determine what exactly the irony is really signifying, the answer emerges by distinguishing the difference of between McEwan and Briony's stance on fiction.

After publishing *Atonement*, McEwan has continued to challenge the frontiers of the novel and maintains his attack on the conventions of fiction from the perspective of the novelist. In *On Chesil Beach* (2007), for example, he imitates the style of writing found in erotic novels, but there he skillfully depicts the subtle psychological nuances and miscommunication of the characters and by doing so tries to destroy the boundary between high and low culture. Therefore, Ian McEwan who is skeptical toward the conventions of literature continues to try to challenge them through his usage of irony and subversion.

Notes

1. Several other studies point to these deliberate alterations by the fictional author, Briony, see Kermode 8-9, Takeda 318-321, Robinson 474-477.

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