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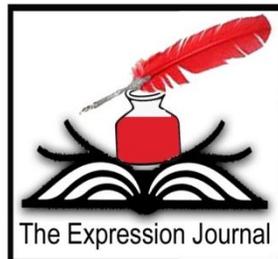
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SACRAMENTAL CONFESSION IN IAN MCEWAN'S *ATONEMENT*

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Abstract

Darker impulses of human nature are an ever present reality. Ian McEwan's *Atonement* stands testament to it. This novel attributes to the dark nature of human where the author skillfully presents the vulnerabilities of a human being as the foundation for his fiction. His fictional world is a distinguished yet alienated one, where the human mind is drawn to the other side which is shrouded in darkness. This article delves deeper into such forbidden emotions and discusses how such encounters reflect the choices of the protagonist, who falls a prey to her impulses. Briony Tallis, the novel's central character delineates darker side of human nature. Betrayal, suspicion and paranoia follow the criminal act of Briony who falls deeper into the grasp of darkness and evil. The aim of this study is three fold. First, it examines the deleterious cause and consequences of Briony's act. Second, it highlights Briony's attempts in redemption through repentance over an unforgivable crime. Thirdly, as though, Briony atones for the terrible ordeals that she caused decades previously, the overpowering guilt takes a toll on her, leaving her feeling trapped in the grips of her chastising conscience. However, the crime of Briony is accountable and by presenting arguments in favour of Briony, the protagonist has ultimately managed to achieve atonement through virtuous deeds. Briony makes a sacramental confession because she seeks absolution.

Key-Words

Confession, Guilt, Forbidden emotions, Absolution, Atonement, Ian McEwan.

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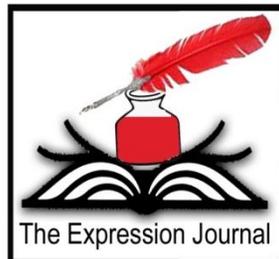
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Confession is the acknowledgement of one's mistakes to a certain moral obligation to be absolved. "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth, that you profess your faith and are saved." (Romans 10:10) The book of *Romans* highlights the road to salvation and stresses on confession, thereby man takes responsibility for his failings. Similarly, Briony in *Atonement* tries to atone for what she has done and so is assured of Salvation. "One important theme is the extent to which one can ever correct an error, especially outside any frame of religious forgiveness. All of us have done something we regret – how we manage to remove that from our conscience, or whether that's even possible, interested me." (Anonymous, The Daily Mail) Confessional writing in literature is in the first person narrative which is presented in the form of a diary or letter. *Atonement* is written in confessional tone as Briony presents her story to the readers as a novel. It is similar to Rousseau in his *Confessions* who "was also struggling to tell the truth about himself by his lights. His purpose was to convince his readers of his uniqueness." (Abbott, H. Porter 134,135)

A definition that is apt in this context by Catherine Brown who posits that "Atonement literally means at onement: making two things which were formerly separate "at one" with each other. It's a big word of ecclesiastical resonance. It rhymes with stone, as though turning the novel into a lasting monument of Robbie Turner's innocence". (Brown, 2013) This paper seeks to establish that *Atonement* by Ian McEwan, foregrounds the healing powers of the protagonist's attempt in achieving atonement for her sin. Briony lives a guilt and remorse for what she has done to Robbie and Cecilia and finds ways of punishing herself in order to cope with that guilt. The novel Briony writes is apparently her ultimate attempt in achieving atonement.

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Ian McEwan is a prominent author who has extended his interests into the grotesque and the mysterious human mind that in turn finds their place in his novels. This aspect that he presents in his novels brings a distinguished status in the contemporary fictional world. All of McEwan's novels deal with the gradual growth of a person from childhood to mental maturity. His remarkable amalgamation of diverse influences such as age, time, people and place make his novels an absolute success both in literary and didactic treatments. The structure of his novels is based on the process of initiation, which brings a newly acquired maturity in his naïve and inexperienced characters. He creates awareness about the cruel presence, not in the society but within the individual self and mind which seeks to inflict pain on others. Thus, by emphasizing the concept of general human nature, McEwan has attained universality through his works.

McEwan's novels are statements about human worth and the need to maintain human values in life and in society. It is also a given, not to externalize but internalize one's confrontation with conflicting values. Adolescent fantasies, death, dismemberment, violence, perversion, madness and numerous other aberrations form the bulk of his writings, which are highly solipsistic, technically complex and intricate. His characters often uncannily fall to the sinister side of human nature, and then struggle to gather themselves as an aftermath. He highlights the realization of people about the existing vice within themselves. Innocence indulged in horrifying atrocities of human mind is exposed in McEwan's works. In a shaded and unclear view of men or women, the darker impulses get caught between naivety and experience leading to unpleasant events in life. McEwan deftly elucidates this notion of Naivety and Experience in the case of Briony in *Atonement*.

"Atonement is a work of astonishing depth and humanity." (New Statesman 49)
McEwan's *Atonement* is a 2001 British novel concerns with the understanding and response to the need for personal atonement. It covers an upper-class girl Briony Tallis' unintentional mistake that ruins lives: her adulthood haunted by that mistake; and reflections evident through her fiction. It also gives account of Briony's pain and eventually her atonement through introspection. The novel *Atonement* revolves around an episode which occurs in 1935 England, on a hot summer day, in which Briony Tallis, an imaginative thirteen year old girl, wrongly accuses her family friend Robbie Turner, who is in love with her elder sister Cecilia, of raping her fifteen year old cousin Lola. The most essential theme of *Atonement* is the way an individual's perception shapes her reality. A fitting example of perception influencing reality is Briony's inaccurate incrimination of Robbie. Her childish imagination leads her to fabricate a sinister backstory which ruined the lives of her own sister and Robbie.

CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCES OF BRIONY'S SIN

Atonement focuses on Briony Tallis, the thirteen year old youngest daughter of Tallis family, who aspires to be a writer. She has written a play called *The Trials of Arabella* to be

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performed for the homecoming of her elder brother Leon, and stages it herself. Her three cousins Jackson, Pierrot and Lola stay with the Tallises for the summer because of their divorced parents. Before the play can be properly rehearsed, Briony witnesses her older sister Cecilia and the son of the family charwoman Robbie Turner at the fountain in front of the family estate. She misconstrues the situation and concludes that Robbie is acting aggressively toward Cecilia. The family has always been kind to Robbie who paid for his time at Cambridge and his plans on going to medical school. Robbie meanwhile realizes he is attracted to Cecilia and writes several drafts of love letter containing lewd and vulgar references, which he has delivered through Briony. After the fountain incident, the suspicious impulses of Briony lead her to read the lewd letter which Robbie sends to Cecilia. Briony becomes disturbed to Robbie's intentions and conclude that the young man is a depraved maniac. Later she happens to witness Robbie and Cecilia making love in the library. Briony misinterprets the sexual act as rape and believes Robbie is dangerous. Later on, in the darkness, Briony discovers her cousin Lola, being raped by an assailant she cannot clearly see. Lola is unable or unwilling to identify the attacker, but Briony decides to accuse Robbie and identifies him to the police as the rapist, claiming she has seen Robbie's face in the dark.

First, Briony's resentment arises from feeling neglected by Robbie owing to Cecilia's mutual love predisposes her to view Robbie negatively. Together, these hasty conclusions and unnoticed biases convince Briony that she saw Robbie assault Lola, and attests her misconception to the police. However, Briony's biased reality bears painful implications on Robbie as he is taken away to prison.

Briony's overactive imagination convinces her to falsely accuse Robbie that leads to a devastating impact on the rest of the characters' lives. Robbie is convicted of a crime he did not commit and is therefore separated from the woman he loves and is unable to pursue his coveted medical career he desires. Cecilia watches her lover being taken to prison and blames not only Briony, but also the rest of her family for believing what she considers to be the fantasy of a silly little girl, thus deciding to leave them. However, Briony, is consumed with guilt because she feels responsible for Robbie's suffering as a prisoner and as a soldier.

JOURNEY TOWARDS ATONEMENT

Misinterpretation of events and actions is the pivotal crux of *Atonement*. Briony lives in guilt and remorse for what she has done to Robbie and Cecilia and find ways of purging. According to McEwan, "the beginning of her atonement is her decision not to go to Cambridge and to follow her sister into nursing instead." (Anonymous, The Daily Mail) Remorseful Briony rejects an offer from Cambridge and instead resorts to be a trainee nurse in London. She realises the full extent of her mistake and discovers it was Paul Marshall, Leon's friend, who raped Lola. As years go by, she comes to realize that the person she had seen might not have been Robbie but Paul Marshall. At the time of the crime she acted

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according to her beliefs. Therefore she cannot be accused of falsely testifying, for she expresses what she believes to be the truth. Briony was only a thirteen year old girl who witnessed acts she did not understand. Briony was a naïve adolescent to understand the events that were happening around her and her inability to take control over her life which wrecks her mind. The problem lies in her immaturity and her age. Her rejection to yield from a high level learning may be seen as self – chastisement, and the days she devoted as a nurse captivated orders, being shrieked at, scrubbing and washing bedpans make things a lot tougher for her. Moreover, she treats the injured soldiers who arrive at her hospital in an attempt to fight against her venality, which contributed to her “crime”, thereby becomes compassionate towards others which she lacked when she was young.. As Elsa Cavalie puts it: “by nursing a French soldier just out of Dunkirk, Briony symbolically tries to redress her wrongs.” (Cavalie, 2009:14) In addition, Briony apparently neither marries nor indulges in s any romantic relationship. Therefore it is inferred that she has chosen to deprive herself from love as a punishment for having destroyed her sister’s and Robbie’s lives. .

According to Briony, the only thing that can change the consequences of her actions because of her overactive imagination, is to use fiction against itself. Finney states that Briony “attempts to use fiction to correct the errors that fiction caused her to commit. But the chasm that separates the world of the living from that of fictional invention ensures that at best her fictional reparation will act as an attempt at atoning for a past that she cannot reverse.” (Finney 69) Briony’s character is naïve and readers recognize that what Briony interprets as ugly, brutal or threatening, is actually a suffering derived from Briony’s limited understanding of her immaturity.

Briony attains atonement through her act of self – writing and her novel is about redemption or strives for atonement through fiction. In writing the novel, she has achieved what she has been striving for the greater part of her life. In the last part of the novel, it is revealed that *Atonement* is Briony’s twenty first novel. Due to this revelation, readers are informed that all the events in the novel are told by Briony, rather than McEwan. It is therefore, not the real Robbie and Cecilia who are present within the pages of Briony’s *Atonement* but character versions of the two, drawn from Briony’s memory who attempted to “project herself into the thoughts and feelings of her characters, an act that is crucial to her search for forgiveness.”(Finney 75) Briony tries to do justice for what she did to her “sister and her medical prince.” (McEwan 371) By delineating Robbie and Cecilia’s love as central theme in her novel which is partly in Briony’s attempt to give them what they lost in life, is compensated in fiction just to give them happiness. Her choice to rewrite is crucial to the unfolding of the plot. The “scenes of [Robbie and Cecilia] together in the book are Briony’s atonement. She has given them in fiction the happiness which, thanks to Briony’s [the character’s] crime, they never had in fact.” (Cohen 43) Being an author Briony tries to change her reality in giving Robbie and Cecilia fictional “happiness” (372) instead of the

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4132 factual tragedy they both endured. Therefore Briony is able to give life to the characters in fiction that she ruined in real life. However, Briony does not attempt to reverse the past or to change it altogether. Her attempt is to atone by simply rewriting a past. Due to the power of the written word, the version in print will be remembered rather than true reality.

Briony's over active imagination doomed Robbie to prison. The same wild imagination revives Robbie and Cecilia to have a happy life in her novel. Her confession is sacramental since fate instigates her to misjudge and commit mistakes from which she later tries to make amends. After a period of isolation, estrangement and affliction, Briony seeks redemption and attempts to reestablish her relationship with her sister. Briony becomes aware of her mistakes when she realizes that she is the reason for Robbie and Cecilia's miseries. She then recollects and confesses her earlier life through introspection. Through this inward quest, Briony pours forth her desires, choices and repercussions by channeling them through her writing. Briony - the Confessor, through her confession and inward quest attains atonement which transforms her into a better human being.

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