

# What's the Destination of Atonement: A Literary Darwinian Interpretation of Briony

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## ABSTRACT

Literary Darwinism, a new trend of literary criticism emerged in the late twentieth century, advocates the objective pursuit of true knowledge about literary works to identify the specific configuration of meaning in any text. *Atonement* by Ian McEwan is a realistic metafiction, which aims to explore the truth of fiction and encourage people to atone for their crimes. This paper incorporates Literary Darwinism and unfolds the mind pattern of the protagonist Briony and the interaction among the characters, the audience and the author.

**Keywords:** *Literary Darwinism, Atonement, Ian McEwan, configuration*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Atonement* by contemporary British author Ian McEwan is taken as a representative novel that assumes the role of literature via an integration of realism and post-modernism. Far from the traditional style, Literary Darwinism is a newly emerged literary criticism over the past decade, which bases on evolutionary psychology. Literary Darwinism researches on the typical motives of human kind and investigates the interaction among the characters, the audience and the author, thus generating an accurate and in-depth understanding of a given text<sup>[2]</sup>. This paper is designed to present Literary Darwinian interpretation of the protagonist Briony Tallis in *Atonement*. I am going to unmask Briony's cognition pattern—what cultivates Briony and how Briony influences the surrounding circumstance in her different life phases, the critical readership Ian McEwan expects to construct in this novel.

## 2. ANALYSIS

### 2.1. Little Briony

The absence of Briony's core family members during her growth serves as the prerequisite of her incomplete world view. According to the theory of parent-offspring developed by evolutionary psychologists, "Parents and children will get into conflict about the time at which the child should be weaned, the parents generally wanting to wean the child sooner and the child wanting to continue to receive resources longer."<sup>[3]</sup> Briony and her parents also confront such a conflict. Because of the scarcity of parents' time spent on Briony, she has to formulate a world view on her own. Briony distills a cognition circle concerning observing, reading and writing: Briony writes down what she observes and reads and in return, her writing influences

her observing and reading. So far, it seems that little Briony has found a way of how the world runs. In the following years, she adopts this cognition circle to comprehend the world, however, she is less likely to be aware of what's the aftermath of her cognition circle containing too much fictional prejudice.

In the rudimentary stage, the reading material Briony exposes to is traditional folk tales about princesses, and usually she regards herself as a female protagonist in stories. As Briony grows up and dips into moral drama, she becomes an active saver from passively being saved, who writes stories for a practical purpose. In this phase, her play *The Trials of Arabella* "was for her brother, to celebrate his return, provoke his admiration and guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, towards the right form of wife"<sup>[1]</sup>. Soon, Briony's self-identity that she has newly built intensely challenged by her cousin—Lola. On the one hand, Briony espouses tidiness, order and rationality, so she despises Lola's casual attire; on the other hand, Briony cannot refrain from fixing her eyes on Lola, "whenever she moved, the air about her tasted of rose water"<sup>[1]</sup>.

If Briony's self-identity is challenged by Lola, then hers is overturned by her elder sister Cecilia, when Briony comes across Cecilia's sex with Robbie in the study. Without knowing the hierarchy repelling and the sex attracting, Briony perceives the word as an eyesore for she thinks her affection is betrayed by Robbie and chastity violated seemingly, so she might be traumatic. Out of instinct, Briony triggers ego defense mechanism to defame Robbie as a villain in her mind who is going to do Cecilia's harm, in order to seek a certain consolation and ensure her ratioc function well as usual.

During finding the twins, in the darkness, she doesn't know who the figure is, she just makes an arbitrary judgement—he is Robbie. To make the judgement convincing, Briony fetches the dirty letter and gives it to her mother. What stimulates Briony is that she harbors the belief that she is going to build up her own establishment by accusing Robbie of rape and she is going to admirable

and influential. When Briony is interviewed by a policeman, she reiterates her testimony—I saw him, and she is perfectly honest, passionate as well. Being carried away, Briony doesn't realize her narrative violence upon Robbie. "How guilt was refined the methods of self-torture, threading the beads of detail into an eternal loop, a rosary to be fingered for a lifetime"<sup>[1]</sup>. This is where Briony's atonement starts. Briony's atonement is not a coincidence. In the epigraph of this novel, Ian McEwan quotes an excerpt from *Northanger Abbey* as a hint: "Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from?"<sup>[1]</sup> In fact, what Briony has done echoes what this excerpt predicts.

## **2.2. Young Briony**

Youth is a transitional part of Briony's whole life during which she gets a better understanding of herself, people around her. On the journey of redemption, Briony takes initiative by attending nurse training school, making friends and keeping on writing, but to some extent, Briony's efforts fails to surpass some uncontrollable events that make her atonement impossible, such as war and the wedding of Lola and Paul.

Evolutionary psychologists argue that to reproduce, the bottom line of evolutionary process, organisms must survive—at least, for a while.<sup>[3]</sup> Part of the purpose of becoming a nurse was to work for independence. As a new comer to the complicated society, Briony must take survival as priority. Briony has to give in to the formidable social norms. Little Briony is an order giver who tells her servant what to do in the reality and manipulates character's lines and motions in a story. But now young Briony is an order receiver who is afraid of wrongdoings in every corner. Briony is so weak to survive that she needs friends' support. St Thomas' Hospital is a new circumstance to Briony and she finds herself hard to adapt it but she has to. According to the theory of reciprocal altruism in evolutionary psychology, "adaptations for providing benefits to nonrelatives can evolve as long as the delivery of benefits is reciprocated at some point in the future"<sup>[3]</sup>. Briony wants a girl to be her friend with whom she appears more fit for St Thomas' Hospital community and sometimes she can play in her spare time, therefore, Briony does Fiona's favor. Fiona is not capable of using the scissors to cut the fingernails of her right hand and her mother always does this for her. On the first night of preliminary training, Briony helps Fiona and they become good friends.

On the one hand, Briony feels immensely uncertain about St Thomas' Hospital, on the other hand, writing is the only certain thing to Briony. "And at a time when she was cut off from everything she knew—family, home, friends—writing was the thread of continuity. It was like what she had always done."<sup>[1]</sup> For the sake of better regulation, everyone in St Thomas' Hospital is stripped away of self-identity. Briony is not the mighty hero who challenges what has been established and carries out new

era reforms, but a sinner struggles to survive in an unpredictable context. The same as her forefathers adapt themselves to nature, Briony adapts herself to society by means of writing: she looks like and behaves like and lives the life of a tamed and naïve trainee nurse, but she is indeed a gifted and skilled writer in disguise.

Regardless of Briony's efforts to make up for her wrongdoing, fate presents Briony a tragic result on account of warfare and Lola and Paul's marriage. Briony attends nursing school partly because she envisions that one day she might look after Robbie and beg for his forgiveness. But when she is informed of the strategic withdrawals to previously prepared positions of the British army in northern France, Briony senses a muted dread around her. Warfare is set to exacerbate Briony's crime. The moment the war reaches her life, she falls apart inside. It is so disillusioned to Briony that she is forced to know her atonement in *Two Figures by a Fountain* is nothing, of little significance and consciousness stream never freezes what is real. Thereafter, Briony gradually abandon intangible elements like thoughts and feelings and cherish raw material which is useful to convey what happens, what it looks like, who is there and what is said. War demolishes Robbie and Cecilia's happiness ever after, so does Lola and Paul's marriage. Briony gets this news from his father's letter and then she senses a familiar guilt vigorously pursues her. When Briony steps into the Church of the Holy Trinity, "She felt the memories, the needling details, like a rash, like dirt on her skin...And what luck that was for Lola- barely more than a child, prised open and taken-to marry a rapist."<sup>[1]</sup> From nowhere can we find out ridiculous and unbelievable reasons to make this wedding come true, but it does happen. Since then the truth can never speak for itself.

## **2.3. Old Briony**

Old Briony, a seventy-seven-year-old prestigious novelist, has suffered from vascular dementia. Before her oblivion starts, Briony wants to make her last novel for atonement public, read by a large scale of people and gets to the bottom of Robbie's injustice, thus her fifty-nine-year assignment is over. Briony's guilt roots in fabricated imagination, so she must take it as her duty to disguise nothing in her novel, the names, the places, the exact circumstances, make her novel as a matter of historical record. In the meantime, Briony also contemplates the question: is absolute truth universally good? Where the significance lies in if she informs her readers of the facts that Robbie Turner died of septicaemia at Bay Dunes on June 1940, Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station and herself, a coward cherishing no courage, failed to visit Cecilia and Robbie's residence and beg for their forgiveness. Briony finally decides to have her lovers, Robbie and Cecilia, survive and flourish. Again, in her writing, Briony determines the destinations of characters' life—she gives Robbie and Cecilia happiness ever after while she approaches to the end of her lifetime atonement.

The fiction of Robbie and Cecelia's reunion and happy ending does not refer to weakness or evasion, but an act of benevolence, a stand against oblivion and despair at last. Eventually, Briony dedicates herself to the expedition of writing—to atone for what is wrong, to empathize with acquaintances and strangers, to empower the underprivileged, to hold the torch flickering the darkness, to emancipate, to guide, to inspire and to motivate.

McEwan strongly expects the interplay between authorship and readership so that he strives to trigger audience's critical thinking by following his narration. McEwan has designed a maze game in the form of his novel—*Atonement* in which he has set some confusing hindrances by means of narrative strategies, and in order to interest the participants or active readers, he also has left some hints for example, some deliberately vague description and allusion elements. Some readers may have empathic identification with Briony and her long journey of atonement rather than rebuke her for permanently separating Robbie and Cecilia. This is one of Ian McEwan's narrative art. Ian McEwan employs omniscient point of view and he penetrates the psyche of every characters. Though revealing Briony's mindset in former part of this novel, McEwan build up bilateral trust between Briony and audience. McEwan's goal is not to puzzle readers but to arouse readers' critical thinking so he deliberately leaves some hints to indicate truth. The most notable signal must be "London, 1999"<sup>[1]</sup> after which old Briony sincerely retell what has happened in the last fifty-nine years. In fact, before old Briony's monologue, readers are presented with some tiny but vague description of what is true. "I won't say a word," he said, though Nettle's head had long disappeared from his view. "Wake me before seven. I promise, you won't hear any word from me."<sup>[1]</sup> Robbie says he won't say a word because he doesn't want bother other soldier by murmuring at night, however it is also an indirect way to inform audience of Robbie's death. Besides, McEwan presents some intertextual elements. As scholar Kathleen D'Angelo puts it, "readers approaching the text through the lens of literary history will find layers of meaning unavailable to a general reader." For instance, "the presence of Clarissa directs readers to consider the lurking threat of sexual violation that surrounds these young women"<sup>[5]</sup>.

### 3. CONCLUSION

This thesis has mapped out the cognition pattern of the protagonist Briony in *Atonement* by McEwan and sought to interpret the major question—what is the destination of atonement. Little Briony forms a systematic cognition pattern that she learns some basic rules from literature and then she puts the learned rules into practice and finally she enriches her understanding. Briony ruins Cecilia and Robbie' happiness ever after due to her wild imagination. As Briony steps into adolescence, she gradually understands what mistake she has made. Young Briony decides to do some practical things to atone and learn to

survive independently. In the final part of this novel, old Briony's self-revelation implies the former part is kindly fictional and the latter part is cruelly true. This design also reveals Ian McEwan's intention to create such a realistic metafiction that McEwan strives to construct critical readership and arouse public's awareness of distorted truth<sup>[4]</sup>.

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