

**The Anatomy of Guilt: Reparation and Purification in Ian Mc Ewan's
*Atonement***

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Abstract

Guilt is so a rudimentary element to earthly concerns that shoots up early in the 'Book of Genesis' and in a mile a minute intruded into the world of art and literature. In general, one considers guilt as an emotion that aligns itself with despair and grief. It is proposed that an individual fabricates a defence mechanism to cushion oneself from the guilt that he experiences when he turns out to be aware of his ghastly desires. Expounding guilt as a deviation from ethical values, psychologists extol guilt as a virtuous motivator. It has been a path-breaking milestone in the domain of literature from Greek tragedies to Shakespeare's remarkable tragedies *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Karl Jaspers' theory of guilt which is distinguished into four types in a way is made to sway the very depth of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. Freud's child's play hauls the psychological pattern of the protagonist in false accusation and misapprehension. This fraternized force tumbles upon the conscience of its very readers to extract solace out of their cataclysmic guilt, later christening it as catharsis.

Key words: Guilt, Karl Jaspers, *Atonement*, false accusation, misapprehension, solace.

Paper

Guilt is considered to be one of the oldest and the most recurring keynotes of art and literature. It has turned out to be a subject of many experts' interpretations. The German liberal, professor of philosophy and psychologist, Karl Jaspers, framed out the theory for guilt which is considered to be one of the most important concepts in world history. Jaspers' theory of guilt gets distinguished into four kinds: criminal guilt, political guilt, moral guilt and metaphysical guilt. Minshall showcases these four types of guilt as, "... criminal guilt (overt acts); political guilt; ... moral guilt (a matter of private judgement); and metaphysical guilt- a universally shared responsibility..." (102). Criminal guilt implies the crime based on deeds that are illegal. It emanates from violating the laws. Political guilt encloses the actions of lawmakers and implicates the dwellers of a state for having to endure the aftermaths of the deeds of the state whose power administrates them and under whose order they live.

The penultimate guilt is the moral guilt, which encapsulates all the immoral actions

Both moral guilt and metaphysical guilt are the worst of the other kinds. Eventually, they lead to moral insight, repentance and renewal. They spur up the transfiguration of self and the beginning of a new inner life. The gaffes or flaws that one does lead to certain reverberations. Jaspers claims that:

... these distinctions emerge from the basic principle that a person's degree of responsibility is proportionate to the extent of one's participation.... Each of these four types will require truthfulness before the appropriate tribunal—respectively, a legitimate court with formal jurisdiction in a specific case, the parley of the victors, one's own conscience, and God. (xi)

From a cognitive perspective, guilt is an emotion, that makes people feel convinced that they have caused harm. Cognitive therapy often indulges in illuminating people to do away with their entangled thoughts that they have made others suffer.

The concept of guilt has to be reconnoitered by venturing through various disciplines, literatures, religions and philosophies. It often gets manipulated in the field of literature in a distinctive and extreme psychological manner. A substantial reputation is annexed to the theme of guilt beginning from the oldest example of the Greek tragedy about Oedipus penned by Sophocles to the Shakespeare's effective use of guilt in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. According to Westerink, "Oedipus's quest to find the cause of Thebes's misery was not one designed to expose repressed guilt feelings. He was simply ignorant. Thus, on a conscious level, the myth illustrates the quest for guilt. With *Hamlet* however, guilt feelings are repressed and have formed a conscience whereas this cannot be the case with Oedipus" (87).

Guilt has always been a backdrop of one's thinking. Recent days have witnessed more people than ever before, scrutinizing their conscience influenced by miscellaneous forms of literary genres. People who whirl under guilt or sin try to reform their way of life by expressing their guilty conscience and by atoning for their wrongdoing. Ian McEwan is one of the few writers who has dealt with this theme in a more constructive and effective manner.

Ian Russell McEwan is one among those treasured British writers whose productions acquired both literary and critical acclaim. Penning from about 1975, his novels are classified as novels of ideas, domestic, historical, psychological, bildungsroman, social and documentary fictions. The scope of his themes began with microscopic issues such as domesticity, internal disputes, innocence and maturity motifs. This gets expanded to macroscopic matters such as violence, environmental and global issues, terrorism and traumatic Iraq War. Head in his work, *Ian McEwan: Contemporary British Novelists*,

affirms that, “His novels treat issues that are central to our times: politics, and the promotion of vested interests; male violence and the problem of gender relations; science and the limits of rationality; name and ecology; love and innocence; and the quest for an ethical world review” (2). McEwan has authored fourteen novels, collections of short stories, screen plays and has been lauded with copious honorary degrees and awards but among all, *Atonement* (2001) is the sole survivor to relish commercial and literary success.

This research article envisages unearthing the nature of tranquillity and ebullience within the multifaceted aspects of guilt through the protagonist Briony. This gets executed by meddling with Karl Jaspers’ theory of guilt and Sigmund Freud’s “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming.” It also ponders over the unexplored query of how the protagonist would restore the deconstructed lives by her sharp pangs of guilt.

The research paper titled “The Modernism of Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*” by Richard Robinson delineates the distinct literariness of the novel by erupting the concepts of metafiction, intertextuality and the manipulation of relationships using narrative control. The article, “Ian McEwan, *Atonement*” penned by Stovel, deals with the psyche of a thirteen-year-old, Briony and views the novel through the lens of bildungsroman and kunstlerroman and also establishes the study of themes such as misjudgment, false witness, crime and punishment.

This research article, “The Anatomy of Guilt: Reparation and Purification in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*,” aims at representing the purificatory role of guilt. It also tries to defend the young girl who misinterprets and dismantles the life of young lovers by inoculating Freud’s child’s play. With much vigour, it sets out the reason for Briony’s misinterpretation and her quest for atonement. It strives to enhance the protagonist’s endeavour to rebuild the innocent love of Robbie and Cecilia through guilt and reparation.

McEwan begins the novel by sketching a fourteen-year-old protagonist, Briony who restructures her dilapidated family with the aid of writing. The feeling of guilt is employed as a scaffolding for the novel. Briony’s attempt of atoning for the trespass and its related themes such as love, innocence, misinterpretation and forgiveness are marshalled to construct an ordered world. In order to apprehend Briony’s sense of guilt and reparation, it is necessary to invade the cause or misreading which made her atone. Her inability to identify fact and imagination, the fictional characters invented for her play ‘The Trials of Arabella,’ her behavioural pattern; all play a crucial function in her sense of guilt. The article, “A Thin Line Between Imagination and Reality in “*Atonement*” by Ian McEwan” exclaims that, “Briony was an extremely confounding character since she had a difficult time judging the distinction amongst the real world and the imaginative world.”

The way Briony gets prepared for the play showcases her need for order, manner,

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and the thirst to have the world just so. Her false accusation of Robbie is much interrelated to the imaginary world or her own world that she creates in the play 'The Trials of Arabella.' "She herself had written a tale in which a humble woodcutter saved a princess from drowning and ended by marrying her. What was presented here fitted well. Robbie Turner, only son of a humble cleaning lady and of no known father, ... now wanted to take up medicine, had the boldness of ambition to ask for Cecilia's hand" (*Atonement* 38). She is guilty of interloping fiction on reality.

Briony at a young age desire to behave like an adult and to comprehend things as an adult does. This would almost declare the reason for her misinterpretation that leads to guilt. As Freud in his "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" claims that, "A child's play is determined by wishes.... He is always playing at being "grown-up," and in his games he imitates what he knows about the lives of his elders" (422).

Briony turns out to be a strong observer of the erroneous demeanour like class prejudice that she witnesses in her Tallis family which finally makes her adhere to social classes above other ethical values. Her biased and stereotypical thoughts about Robbie as a 'sex maniac' triggered her to screen the truth. The fountain and the library scene, the two most important scenes revolve around the trio: Briony, Cecilia and Robbie. Briony who witnesses the scenes in an obscure manner misunderstands and allegedly accuses Robbie of raping Lola instead of Paul Marshall. "It wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you" (40).

The Tallis family also plays a major role in Robbie's confinement. Even though they fund for his education, seem to treat him equal; they hover with the idea of class prejudice which is later acquired by Briony and expressed through child's play. They go along with Briony and her false accusation. Cecilia later denotes this to Robbie through her letter as, "They turned on you, all of them, even my father.... They chose to believe the evidence of a silly, hysterical little girl" (209).

On exploring Jaspers' theory of guilt, the whole of Tallis family and their guests are found guilty in criminal, moral, and metaphysical points of view. In such a theory, one is found guilty even if one performs an immoral act under a life threat. The entire family performs such an act under the threat of humiliation, dignity and family status which is associated with moral guilt. Criminal guilt is identified in the actions executed by Paul Marshall and Briony. The metaphysical guilt in the novel makes one feel that every person is responsible for every act of injustice that happens on earth.

Briony's traumatic guilt which she has obtained in her childhood days makes her yearn for atonement. Later in life, she slams her dream of becoming a writer and decides to

become a nurse which would soothe her with eternal solace. She assumes of nursing Robbie's internal and external wounds thereby cleansing her penalizing lies. By picking up such a profession, she gratifies her readers to accept that her actions are now purely altruistic and socialized. The last section of the novel "London, 1999," explains that Briony has written the entire novel, having become aware of her grievous fault and enveloped with the sense of guilt, and having punished herself by rewriting Cecilia and Robbie's life she has atoned and truly deserves the readers' sympathy. The novel then remains as an asset in idolizing consolation and emancipation and in the end to maroon oneself from the sense of guilt that has been haunting Briony for years.

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