



Briony's Atonement: Long Road To A Brave New World

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APA Citation:

Dominic, R., Jayanthi, M.M., (2021). Briony's Atonement: Long Road To A Brave New World , *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(4), 3291-3297; 2021.

Submission Date: 30-10-2021

Acceptance Date: 31-12-2021

Abstract

Creative writing is an ordinary human's getaway into the extraordinary. An artist's observations and perceptions of ordinary life are astonishing. Artists sense the unusual in the usual. They sublimate even the bitter experiences into better ones. Life without art is, thus, unimaginable, as artistic or creative works are the best mediums that elevate one's drooping spirits. Briony, Ian McEwan's one of the most celebrated protagonists, is the epitome of creative writers. In *Atonement* McEwan traces the evolution of an artist and the grounds which make a person one. Through an in-depth examination of Briony's transformation into an artist, this paper tries to seek whether artists are born or made or what makes one 'artistically creative' applying Freudian and Jungian concepts on creative writing.

Keywords: Creative Writing, Freud, Atonement, McEwan, Jung.

Introduction

It is in the literature that the concrete outlook of humanity receives its expression. Accordingly, it is to literature that we must look... if we hope to discover the inward thoughts of a generation. (A. N. Whitehead, 2011, p.75)

Creative writing embodies the intricate human attributes. The role literature plays in amending, analysing, and inspiring the human world is extremely remarkable. Literature was part of the human race from time immemorial. Since literature shares the same cultural climate with the other remarkable areas of knowledge, its status or significance can never be disregarded. But, as Stephen Kellert (2008) suggests,

“In an atmosphere in which disciplines receive admiration or suspicion based on how close they are to physics, some may wonder whether non-scientific disciplines such as law and literature produce any genuine knowledge at all”.

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He continues,

“... indeed, the humanities have sometimes been treated as nothing more than holding pens for unsystematic considerations of phenomena that do not yet yield to our current experimental methods” (p. 16).

It is in this context discussions regarding the origin of trends like “two cultures” (Snow, 1998) arise. The wide acceptance that C. P. Snow received in presenting a divided world of two culture where one sides with science and the other with the humanities shows the weight the issue carries. The counter-arguments raised by critics like F. R. Leavis, to the greater part, failed to articulate the significant role literary works hold. In this scenario examining the roots of literature is very much the need of time as well as significant in changing the prejudiced opinions related to it. Hence, this paper seeks to find the real force or energy that drives a creative writer.

Creativity: A Theoretical Approach

Literary writing has an incredible place in the human world and hence, it is important to locate the source of such writings. In Carl Jung’s (1954) opinion “the human psyche is the womb of all the sciences and arts” (p.233-234). Such implications equally point to the eminence literature or arts holds in the human world. Hence this paper attempts to revisit the theories on creative writing and tries to come to a better understanding of the process of creative writing with the backing of Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*.

In critics’ opinion, creative writers draw their inspiration both from the socio-cultural matrix as well as subjective experiences. It was Freud (1995) who first came up with a justifiable scientific explanation on the subject. He, in his attempt to find out the basic thread that inspires a person to compose a piece of art, raises the following question:

“... from what sources that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material, and how he manages to make such an impression on us with it and to arouse in us emotions of which, perhaps, we had not even thought ourselves capable” (p. 436).

In his opinion creative writers are unsatisfied and the writer’s choice of subject matter is dictated by unfulfilled childhood wishes as well as by a recent provoking occasion which has some connection to these unfulfilled wishes. He also states that the artist dreams aloud and in public. In Freud’s opinion (1995), every human being has a poet inside and this creative sense has its origin from one’s childhood. He states,

“Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him?” (p. 437).

In his further analysis of the human psyche and fantasies, he suggests that the unconscious which is the repository of all repressed unfulfilled wishes and past experiences is the primary source for creative writers. The unfulfilled wishes later find their gratification in fantasies and daydreams. Creative writers channel or sublimate these unfulfilled wishes and their fantasies into wonderful works of art.

While Freud emphasized the role of unconscious and personal experiences, Carl Jung, one of his contemporaries and disciples, expressed his disagreement with quite a number of assertions of Freud. He stated that the unconscious is not only the repository of subjective experiences but also of the collective unconscious of the society. His studies added new heights and insights into the discussion. He believed that an author is predominantly led by objective and impersonal forces of creativity. He is even more persistent in his argument that great art escapes the personality of the writer himself. The above statement of Jung (1954) proves this argument:

Art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes him its instrument. The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purposes through him. As a human being, he may have moods and a will and personal aims, but as an artist he is "man" in a higher sense he is mankind. To perform this difficult office, it is sometimes necessary for him to sacrifice happiness and everything that makes life worth living for the ordinary human being. (p. 245)

Though these writers differ in their inferences, their basic claims always meet consensus. Both writers agree on the significant role the unconscious plays in forming a creative writer. As literature stems from this undeniable and unavoidable reality of human consciousness, it constitutes a substantial aspect of humanity and its significance can never be underestimated.

The creative act which has its raw material in the human unconscious starts acting in a person even from his childhood. As Freud (1995) suggests "every child at play behaves like a creative writer" (p. 422). As every man has this creative instinct the creative process will never perish until the last man on earth dies. The creative energy that is revealed through the children's play later develops into a mature creative process that enlightens the whole of humanity. Both Freud and Jung agree on how a child's game depicts the beginning stages of imagination and creative writing and how it gets replaced by daydreams and fantasies. This happens, as Freud (1995) suggests, because,

We can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another. What appears to be a renunciation is really the formation of a substitute or surrogate. In the same way, the growing child, when he stops playing, gives up nothing but the link with real objects; instead of playing, he now phantasies. He builds castles in the air and creates what are called day-dreams. (p. 422)

But adults will always be reluctant to reveal their fantasies as they believe that they are the only ones who invent such fantasies and have no idea that creations of this kind are widespread among other people. But creative writers give a new form and name to these fantasies and by sublimating it produces great pieces of literature. Here, the writers are like God in the process of creation as they have every right over their creation at least during the writing process. They satisfy their unfulfilled wishes by creating a world that was denied to them by reality.

Briony's Creative Journey to Atonement

Atonement, a novel in the metafictional frame, is remarkable in depicting the progression of a creative writer. The protagonist, Briony Tallis, is a successful creative writer and she is portrayed as the author of the very book Atonement. The novel gives elaborate details of her writing process, the inspiration behind her writing, and the reasons behind her ambition to become a successful writer. The depiction of Briony's

evolution into a writer furnishes the readers with a clear cut idea about the process of creative writing. The specifics recounted in the novel throw light upon how Briony is a characteristic creative writer who generates her inspiration from the unconscious of her mind. As a child, like any other children of her age, she engages herself in a world of fantasy and plays. But unlike others, she holds an immense inclination towards this fantastical world. This is what makes her different from others. The reasons that make her different from others would answer the question of why only a small portion of humanity is driven by creative force while others who undergo similar situations are not.

One of the substantial reasons behind Briony's disposition towards creative writing could be her instinctual desire to establish order. In every writer, one can see this urge to create an ideal world. Briony is no exception there. Even as a child every one of her actions reflects the order seeker in her. The straight-backed dolls in her tidy room standing like an army awaiting order stands as a proof to her appeal towards creating order. Her fantasy, the plays she writes, the charges she makes against Robbie, all emerge from her inclination towards a perfect or ideal world. For Briony, the world around her is filled with chaos and she assumes that it is her duty to take things into her hands and make the world a better place. Briony's unfulfilled dreams for the world around her prompt her to write. This longing in her can be seen even in her first play which she has prepared in view of her brother's return home. McEwan's (2001) narration about the purpose of the play reveals this aspect,

Her play was not for her cousins, it was for her brother, to celebrate his return, provoke his admiration and guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, toward the right form of wife, the one who would persuade him to return to the countryside, the one who would sweetly request Briony's services as a bridesmaid. (p. 4)

The recognition and order which she lacks in her family are sought thus, through her writings. They can also be considered as tools of mental protest against the unappreciated feelings she harbours. Briony's writings are hence aimed at creating a well and orderly life. She tries to regain what is denied through reality in her fictional world. The need to get appreciated is very much visible in the way she presents her works to others. The following passage shows the presenting style she uses in reading her stories. She reads by

making big gestures with her free arm, arching her eyebrows as she did the voices and looking up from the page for seconds at a time as she read in order to gaze into one face after the other, unapologetically demanding her family's total attention as she cast her narrative spell. (McEwan, pp. 6-7)

Her creative attempts are techniques aimed at bringing the world under her control. She loves writing because it will help her to make a world in just five pages. The creative freedom kindles her innermost dreams of righteousness. The readers can see that it is Briony's over sense of righteousness that propels the incident which stimulates the thread of the entire novel. She as a child who dwells in the fantasy of her childhood blaze makes wrong assumptions about her sister and her lover based on her limited perceptions and thereby shatters their dreams of a bright future. Even the regretful actions which she committed stemmed out of her desire to correct things that seemed wrong and against her established sense of order. Through the entire course of Briony's life, one can see her attempts to recreate the order that is lost through the actions of herself or the people around her. In the second part of the novel, one can see her at a hard-core nursing job as a means to atone for what went wrong from her side. Even, Briony's

life long creation, the Atonement is “an attempt to atone for actions by writing about them and by turning them into a narrative” (Bentley, 2008, p. 150). Thus, one can clearly see that it is the innate desire for order in every human that turns them creative.

An undeniable and unending thirst to make things right is instinctual in every human and humans often deal with them through different means. It could be both positive and negative based on one’s choices. Creative writers are people who positively sublimates or tunes the different experiences of their life into beneficial ones. By analysing Briony’s character, one can find that it is her life as a writer which gives her hope for an endurable future which otherwise have become a disaster through a single perceptive mistake. Atonement is her lifetime work. Its progression spans from her teens to the late years of her life. It undergoes several editions and additions before it sees light at last. This one piece of writing is her redemption as only at the imaginary realm of writing she can redeem what is lost to her in reality.

She 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. Atonement, then, is concerned with the dangers of entering a fictional world and the compensations and limitations which that world can offer its readers and writers. (Finney, 2004, p.69)

As McEwan (2001) narrates in the novel, here the author Briony with her “absolute power of deciding outcomes” (p. 371) becomes the author God who has the power to decide destiny. Thus, she alters her unpleasant reality through her writing and finds fulfilment by giving an optimistic end to her novel. Briony, thus, is a standing proof of the Freudian idea that a writer is a person who attains fulfilment by way of writing.

Ian McEwan, the real author of Atonement himself, is a living proof to the influence, the unconscious exerts in moulding a creative writer. Childhood, adolescence and family relationships are recurring themes of Ian McEwan’s fiction. Every work of McEwan perceives childhood as a crucial and influential period in the life of an individual. A close journey through the themes of childhood in McEwan’s fiction shows the effect of past experiences, which constitutes one’s conscious, in an author’s creation. In one of his interviews on Atonement he has stated about his personal relationship with the character Briony:

I have a half –brother and a half-sister. He is 13 years older than me and she’s 10(years older), so by the time I was 7, they were both not at home. So psychologically, I was an only child. I was a rather intense, intimate child. Rather shy in groups but rather expressive when I was with another person. I just have a memory of myself, too, and in some ways, I was like Briony. (Wiegand, 2002)

The above testimony from McEwan shows the direct influence of the past that the author will have on his writing. McEwan (2001) writes through Briony’s words, “self-exposure was inevitable the moment she described a character’s weakness; the reader was bound to speculate that she was describing herself. What authority could she have?” (P. 6) Thus, McEwan states that an author gets the authority to describe something or somebody from one’s own experience.

As in the case of Briony, there is gradual progress in the writing style of McEwan, the writer. While his earlier writings earned him the nickname Ian Macabre, the later ones fetched him great laurels as a proof to his creative excellence. The second part of the novel, which narrates the II World War, is again a shred of clear evidence to the link between the author's past experiences and its influence in his creativity. McEwan's experiences as a post-war victim make his narration on the harsh realities of the war more picturesque. Again, the description of Vascular Dementia, a disease that Briony suffers, has a link with his personal life. From his biographies, one can see that his grandmother was a victim of this illness. Thus, every detail in the novel has a direct or indirect connection to the author's experiences. Therefore, a close analysis of *Atonement* gives testimony to the influence of unconscious in moulding a creative writer.

Conclusion:

Briony's as well as McEwan's progression as writers, thus, ascertains how both the collective and personal unconscious is a depository for creative writers. It also endorses how close-knitted both life and literature are as unconscious is an inevitable factor of both life and literature. Along with these elements, this paper specifically emphasises the importance of being appreciative of literature as with any other fields of knowledge. Briony mends the torn pieces of her life with her ability to create as an author. Her act of writing and its outcome, thus, depicts the power literature holds in amending and healing the wounds incurred by the complex realities of life. *Atonement* also depicts how knowledge of life is the basic thread of literature and how knowledge of literature builds upon improving life. Assessing literature as a mere product of a writer's wild imagination and hence worthless is the wrong assumption that annihilates the fruits of creativity. The protagonist Briony's experience as a creative writer in the novel confirms how literature is a safe shore which can revive the lost hopes of life and order lost through the chaos of life.

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