

Biblical Allusions and Literary Parodies in *Atonement*

Jie Han^{1*}

¹College of Foreign Language Education and International Business, Baoding University,
Baoding, Hebei, China.

Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Article Information

Editor(s):

- (1) Dr. Suleyman Goksoy, University of Duzce, Turkey.
- (2) Dr. Atila Yildirim, Necmettin Erbakan University, Turkey.

Reviewers:

- (1) Deb Proshad Halder, Jashore Government Women's College, Bangladesh.
- (2) Kawther Mahdi Al-Zwelef, Australia.
- (3) Onorina Botezat, "Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University, Romania.
- (4) Ragab Selim Ali, Mansoura University, Egypt.
- (5) Chandra Shekhar Ghanta, Telangana University, India.

Complete Peer review History: <http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/56152>

Received 29 February 2020

Accepted 04 May 2020

Published 26 May 2020

Short Research Article

ABSTRACT

This paper is intended to make an analysis of Ian McEwan's most outstanding work—*Atonement* in the light of postmodern narrative theories, regarding both biblical allusions and literary parodies. Since former research does not provide enough in-depth discussion on this specific subject, this paper may become useful and beneficial in that it gives a systematic study; which could serve as a guide in the appreciation of McEwan's novel and even the contemporary English novel represented by him. In conclusion, the use of these allusions and parodies reinforce the novel's fictionality.

Keywords: Biblical allusions; Ian Mcewan; parodies; Atonement; fictionality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Atonement was reviewed extensively by editors and critics, and this makes the readers more familiar with this work. Meantime, McEwan

himself has written some articles on his life and work. These are the most useful information to help appreciate this rebellious and innovative writer. When *Atonement* appeared in 2001, it received widespread praise from the reviewers,

*Corresponding author: E-mail: hanjie198262@163.com;

especially in respect to its style and narrative structure. “Martyn Bedford comments that while *Enduring Love* had a superb opening but subsequently disappointed him Atonement rekindled his admiration for McEwan, who has rediscovered his vitality through adopting the persona of Briony Tarllis.” [1] John Updike said in his review of *Atonement* in *The New Yorker*, “Ian McEwan, whose novels have tended to be short, smart, and saturnine, has produced a beautiful and majestic fictional panorama.” “... a staggering book — something no American could have published” [2]. The *Vancouver Sun* comments, “*Atonement* is one of the rare novels to strike a balance between ‘old-fashioned’ storytelling and a postmodern exploration of the process of literary creation. *Atonement* is a tremendous achievement, a rich demonstration of McEwan’s gifts as a storyteller” [3]. Some critics have mentioned the relationship between *Atonement* and other writers. Earl G. Ingersoll has discussed *Atonement*’s relationship with Hartley’s *The Go-Between*, This essay also explores the ways in which *Atonement* influences other works such as *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* [4]. McEwan’s pastiche and subversion of tradition is best exemplified in this essay.

2. BIBLICAL ALLUSIONS

The title of the novel, *Atonement*, is a fundamental doctrine in the Holy Bible, which is etched into the consciousness of every Christian. The theme of atonement is best exemplified in the Bible, which suggests that man is born with the “original sin”, so everyone must make atonement for the sin. In this novel, the title echoes with the *Atonement* in the biblical system.

The word atonement, in a religious sense, means “at-one-ment”, i.e. the condition of “at one” or reconciliation with God through the death of Jesus Christ. It is a common word in the Old Testament from the Authorized Version of the Bible, and only appears once in the New Testament. (Romans 5:11 KJV). Many of the translated versions use the word “reconciliation” instead of the original one--atonement. In the Bible, atonement or reconciliation is closely related to men’s sin, just as Briony’s atonement is associated with the sin she committed. Atonement is achieved through a series of religious rituals on “the Day of Atonement” which the Jews call “Yom Kippur”. According to the *Calendar of the Bible*, “the Day of Atonement” is the tenth day of the seventh month, which originated in the time of Moses.

And the LORD spake to Moses, saying, “on the tenth day of this seventh month shall be a day of atonement; it shall be a holy convocation unto you; and ye shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD. And ye shall do no work in that same day; for it is a day of atonement, to make atonement for you before The LORD your God” [5].

The title could be interpreted at different levels. On the one hand, it refers to Briony’s nursing practices, which in the eye of Cecilia and Robbie is a kind of atonement for the troubles and harmful consequences she causes. On the other hand, it also indicates Briony’s storytelling as a confession. This is accomplished through her final revelation of the purpose of writing in the interview. She states that the writing of *Atonement* is her way of redemption for the misdoing she did and the aftermath of it. But, in a larger sense, the crime Briony committed is not serious and cruel at all when it is compared with another one—the Second World War, which brings about trauma and disaster to the people involved, not only Robbie, Cecilia and Briony, but also to tens of thousands of innocents like them. So, in some way, McEwan is disclosing another crime which will change all of life and which thereby deserves atonement. Though McEwan does not denounce the crime of Hitler overtly, his genuine depiction of war engages the reader to recall and reflect on the brutality and agony of war. The war is not only about destruction and suffering but also about guilt. Hitler and his soldiers are guilty of launching the war. Moreover, the whole society is also guilty of allowing the war to happen and proceed.

Although it may tend to be partial, *Atonement* makes another Biblical allusion of the scapegoat. This word originates from the Old Testament of the Bible, in which God tests the loyalty of Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac for the sake of God. Moved by Abraham’s devotion, God renders him a choice of burning a goat instead of his son. Later in the New Testament, Jesus Christ is regarded as a lamb of atonement, for he willingly sacrifices himself on behalf of the common people. In fact, the image of scapegoat represents the nature of atonement. It is a widely used archetypal motif in literature. The scapegoat motif appears in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Faulkner’s *Dry September* and many other literary works.

According to the allusion of scapegoat in *Atonement*, Robbie plays the role of scapegoat.

In the ritual, the scapegoat will be separated and punished. Robbie is isolated in the prison, separated from the collective and humiliated by the majority of the Tallis family. He suffers familial isolation, alienated from his mother, his lover and his long lost father. So Robbie makes atonement for the sin committed by Paul Marchal and even Lola and Briony. The first punishment for him is the imprisonment, later it develops into the final punishment as he perishes, which is just the same as the death of Christ to atone for man's sin. As for the episode of Resurrection of Jesus, Briony accomplishes that through the revival of Robbie in her novel in spite of his death in real life. Furthermore, Briony is also a scapegoat for children in the way she suffers from the absence of true parental love and her wild imagination. And later, in the Dunkirk scene, when the "RAF" man is beaten by the infantrymen, he becomes a scapegoat for the frustration and agony of the soldiers. Like Robbie, he is not sinful at all, but a victim of his own identity, which is ethically inferior in the war.

The biblical references are not limited to the motif of atonement. The doctrine of Christian Trinity is also visible in this novel. According to the tradition, "Trinity" refers to the Christian church's belief that God is one. Three persons exist in God, as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Though there is no mentioning of the word "Trinity" in the Bible, the following illustration of the "Shields of the Trinity" will make a clear demonstration.

The influences of "Holy Trinity" are embodied in the novel in the following aspects. The image of the broken vase is a representative of three at one, for it breaks into three parts. The three characters at the fountain scene and the three soldiers on the march are further proof to support the idea. Also, the three children in the House, three stools in a row, three loose silver bracelets, three fluted pillars, the three aspirins Briony took and the many other deliberate uses of "three" in the novel are all associated with the Holy Trinity. At a higher level, the main body of the novel adopts the structure of three parts, named after three places to form the narrative as an organic whole, with a final direct reference to the church of the Holy Trinity.

In a certain sense, the Holy Trinity bears some resemblance to the three unities of Aristotle, which lay emphasis on the unity of time, place and plot, a new form of three in one. The story in part one takes place in a single day, exactly

follows Aristotle's "unity of time". This may remind some critics of James Joyce's single day novel, *Ulysses*. Actually, the fountain scene could also be interpreted as an instance of three unities. The scene at the fountain itself is a drama in the eyes of Briony, which she could write "three" times from "three" points of view.

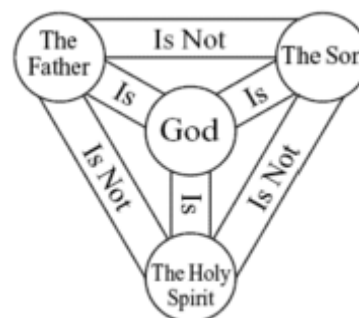


Fig. 1. Shield of the Trinity – Wikipedia [6]

3. PARODY OF WRITING STYLES

In considering the literary allusions, the reader must be haunted by the frequent reference to other works and literary figures, which give a richer reading of the text. McEwan does interweave some specific writing styles with his own writing, without which this novel would become totally different. To be more specific, this novel is deeply indebted to Virginia Woolf, precursor of modernism in the 20th century, who wrote *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and many other excellent works. Virginia Woolf exerts great influence on the writing style of Cecilia, making *Atonement* a kind of Woolfian. The lyrical style of Cecilia resembles the style of *The Waves* and *To the Light House*. The use of stream of consciousness is also a reappearance of Woolf's style. In addition to Woolf, the style of Henry James recurs throughout the text, achieving an effect of narrative ambiguity. Henry James develops the term of "centre of consciousness with the aid of multiple points of view to go deep into the characters' consciousness". This thesis will elaborate on the above two aspects in detail as it moves to the section on narrative technique.

One salient feature associated with the language style of *Atonement* is that somewhere in the novel the writer adopts the everyday language, which was advocated by William Wordsworth in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. In the description of Robbie, readers could recognize his language of everyday life, which characterizes his own feature. He uses simple

language to describe life in depth. That is why he succeeds as a first class degree in literature. On the contrary, Cecilia's character is exemplified through her choice of flowery poetic language. In addition to this, Atonement echoes with another novel, *Dusty Answer* written by Rosamund Lehmann in 1972 both in style and content, forming an amazingly parallel structure [7]. Lehmann is a novelist and stylist who is good at the depiction of girl's growing-up story and the exploration of the consciousness of female instead of male.

As for the aspect of parody and pastiche of others, the dispute of plagiarism has to be taken into consideration. Atonement is well-known not only because it is a great literary success but also because it is accused of stealing ideas from another romance writer, namely, Lucilla Andrews with her *No Time for Romance* [8]. The facts are: McEwan's Booker-Prize nominated novel *Atonement* bears remarkable resemblance to Lucilla Andrews's memoir of the war, for instance, the scene in the London hospital is similar to the scene in Ms. Andrew's book, with the same details on the treatment of the wounded patients. In the description of medical treatment, McEwan mentioned the dabbing gentian violet on ringworm, aquaflavine emulsion on a cut which is also used in Andrew's work.

Natasha Alden argues that part three of *Atonement* is closely based on *No Time for Romance*, but due to McEwan's acknowledgement she does not use the word plagiarism to explain the similarities. Later, Jack Shafer attacks seriously McEwan's copying of Andrews with an article entitled "What Did Ian McEwan Do?" [9]. It is a controversial issue to discuss whether McEwan plagiarizes or not, with so many opinions on it. Writers like John Updike, Margaret Atwood, Zadie Smith, Martin Amis and even Tomas Pynchon write articles in defense of McEwan.

"If it is sufficient to point to a simultaneity of events to prove plagiarism, then we are all plagiarists, and Shakespeare is in big trouble from Petrarch, and Tolstoy stole the material for *War and Peace*," wrote the Australian writer Thomas Keneally, the author of *Schindler's List*. "Fiction depends on a certain value-added quality created on top of the raw material, and that McEwan has added value

beyond the original will, I believe, be richly demonstrated." If not, Mr. Keneally added, "God help us all" [10].

McEwan is good at the handling of intertextual references and borrowing from other literary works. But in some way, the borrowing from Ms. Andrews makes him a controversial and misunderstood figure. In fact, McEwan has claimed that he did have inspirations from others but emphasizes that those inspirations are not copying. Anyway, this paper does not intend to make a rush and authoritative judgment on this issue, being in fact a mere discussion of the application of intertextual references and other related aspects.

4. CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the paper, postmodern metafiction utilizes various devices to help the reader appreciate the theory and practice. Apart from the other traits, metafiction often employs literary references and biblical allusions by discussing and presenting fictional works to achieve its style of writing. The use of these allusions and parodies reinforce the novel's fictionality and self-consciousness.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

REFERENCES

1. Peter Childs. *The fiction of Ian McEwan* (Palgrave Macmillan). 2006;129.
2. John Updike. *Flesh on flesh*, New Yorker. 2002;80.
Available:<http://www.randomhouse.ca/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780307396785>
3. Ingersoll Earl G. Intertextuality in LP Hartley's the go-between and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*. 2004;241-258.
4. *The Holy Bible*, (Canada: World Bible Publishers), Leviticus 23.27 KJV.
5. Available:http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shield_of_the_Trinity
6. Sarah Lyall, *Novelists defend one of their own against a plagiarism charge*. *The New York Times*; 2006.

7. Available:http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/07/books/07pync.html?_r=1
8. Kynes W. Beat your parodies into swords and your parodied books into spears: A new paradigm for parody in the Hebrew Bible. *Biblical Interpretation*. 2011;19(3): 276-310.
9. Paulson R. Hogarth's Harlot: Sacred parody in enlightenment England. JHU Press; 2003.
10. Cunnar ER. Donne's witty theory of atonement in "The Baite". *studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*. 1989;29(1): 77-98.

© 2020 Han; This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Peer-review history:
The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:
<http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/56152>