

# Identity Contingency in Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*— A Psychoanalytic Approach

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## **Abstract**

*Atonement* by Ian McEwan is a successful combination of traditional realistic narrative, self-conscious devices, and deconstructionism, presented with modern experimental techniques which practically enhance its aesthetic beauty. Erikson proposed a theory of psychological and identity development that he called Psychosocial Development, which emphasizes how individual's interactions with others influence the development of his/her identity. The protagonist (Briony Tallis) in McEwan's *Atonement* experiences identity crisis, relying on the social psychologist theory of Erik Erikson.

**Keywords:** realistic narrative, identity crisis, Psychological Development, Id, Ego, Super Ego

## **I. Introduction**

Literature is the art of written works. Literally translated the word literature means "acquaintance with letters" as in the "arts and letters". The two most basic written literary categories include fiction and non-fiction. Some books were even nominated for literary awards. From 1940 into the twenty first century, American playwrights, poets and novelists have continued to be internationally prominent. Ian Russell McEwan one of the renowned British author. *Atonement* is a postmodern novel written by him in 2001.

*Atonement* is a successful combination of traditional realistic narrative, self-conscious devices, and deconstructionism, presented with modern experimental techniques which practically enhance its aesthetic beauty. The novel's magnificence lies not only in the author's inheritance, but also in his innovation and subversion of tradition. The experimental techniques, such as the employment of point of view, narrative montage and flash-backs, make the novel a narrative of great power. *Atonement* is influenced by two important writers, Henry James and Virginia Woolf, both of whom are well-known for their art of dealing with points of view and psychological analysis. The novel signifies the way a story gets told, the mode established by an author by means of whom the reader is presented with the characters, dialogue, actions, setting, and the events which constitute the narrative in a work of fiction.

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R. B. Ewan in his *An Introduction to Theories of personality* says that: “according to Erikson, the Ego has an important role to fulfill the essential healthy tasks in addition to its role of defending against illicit instincts and anxiety. One of these tasks is to maintain the sense of identity”. (TP 12)

Fleming says that Erikson claims that the individual can feel alive in the social environment only with the sense of ego identity, and the lack of this sense may lead to committing crimes such as murders. This state is called by Erikson as identity crisis which includes an inner feeling of confusion, a little sense of defining one’s self and a failure to gain the support provided by a social role. Erikson remains true to Freud’s structure of identity by distinguishing the three entities that Freud suggested: Ego, Superego, and Id. Erikson argues that the Ego introduces the individual whole personality more than the Id though it is divided into two parts, one is conscious and the other is unconscious. He claims that even though the Ego plays the role of guardsman in arresting the Id illicit impulses and the Superego serves, the Ego has its independent life.

Erikson proposed a theory of psychological and identity development that he called Psychosocial Development, which emphasizes how individual’s interactions with others influence the development of his/her identity. Erikson’s theory focuses on different stages in one’s life and the relationship that people have with other people in each stage from infant till old age. Each stage in Erikson’s theory contains what Erikson terms a crisis, this crisis consists of interactions with others and through that interaction certain attributes and virtues are developed. Erikson suggested eight stages of personality development: Infancy (0-1), Early Childhood (1-3), Play Age (3-6), School Age (6-12), Adolescent (12-19), Early Adulthood (20-25), Adulthood (26-64) and Old Age (65+).

In each stage, the individual faces what Erikson called crisis which the individual must overlap to proceed with development of identity. Erikson believes that individual’s success of identity development depends on his overlapping these crises, and each stage is necessary for the development of the next stage. Boeree in his *Personality theories* claims that:

If a stage is managed well, we carry away a certain virtue or psychosocial strength which will help us through the rest of the stages of our lives. On the other hand, if we don't do so well, we may develop maladaptations and malignancies, as well as endanger all our future development. A malignancy is the worse of the two, and involves too little of the positive and too much of the negative aspect of the task, such as a person who can't trust others. A male adaptation is not quite as bad and involves too much of the positive and too little of the negative, such as a person who trusts too much. (PT 6)

The successful resolution of identity crisis will raise a positive strength or ego strength that Erikson called ‘basic strength’, and the failure in overlapping that crisis will result in what Erikson called ‘core pathology’. Erikson believed that individuals develop according to the ‘epigenetic principle’ which Erikson borrowed from embryology to mean that humans develop throughout a determined and fixed progress of their identity.

Erikson was mostly interested in the stage of adolescence and he considered it the most important stage in humans’ life. It is the period of time when the individual experiences a great change in his body and life.

Erikson claims that individuals during this stage should achieve a sense of personal identity (ego identity) and avoid role confusion.

The main task of this stage is what Erikson named identity crisis, it is an obstacle in the adolescent path that may lead them either to a healthy sense of identity if they manages it well, or to a confusion identity if they does not know how to get over it. Achieving the ego or personal identity means that individual should determine how they would deal with strength and weakness they faces, so they have to do an effort to obtain his/her personal identity. If the individual passes this stage successfully then they can carry what is called fidelity and he/she will live easily and will find a place in the society in which he/she will have the ability to contribute despite of their weaknesses and disorders of the society.

In Erikson's psychosocial stages of development, that is reaching maturity is a big deal, and by this age a person begins to take a reflective and evaluative analysis of their life. The individuals who pass the crises of the previous seven stages successfully can achieve the ego integrity and feel that their life is valuable and accept their lives without any regret. While, those who fail in resolving the previous crises will face a kind of despair which is the result of the feeling that they waste their lives.

Maturity stage may be seen as the most difficult of all stages. The individual in this stage will be detached from society, life troubles and from a sense of usefulness. Yet they will experience the old age body weaknesses. Erikson argues that wisdom is the basic strength of maturity stage which confirms that the individual had been managing his life in the appropriate way; however, disdain is the core pathology of this stage which indicates that the individual did not overcome the obstacles of the previous stages and did not manage his past life in a good way.

Psychoanalysis is an appealing field for theoretical inquiry, and it is commonly argued that it is instrumental to the literature production and reception as well. The protagonist (BrionyTallis) in McEwan's *Atonement* experiences identity crisis, relying on the social psychologist theory of Erik Erikson. By observing Briony's character through Erikson's perspectives, Briony encounter two of his eight stages; first, when Briony is at the age of thirteen, the child enters the adolescent stage, the age of physical and mental development; second, she becomes mature and reaches the stage which is associated with the last stage of Erikson's eight stages of development when one looks back at her life with a sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

Briony at the adolescence stage experiences identity crisis in a way that she tries to find her identity and role in her society she experiences some sort of mixed ideas and feelings about the specific ways in which she fits into the society and experiments with variety of behaviors and activities. *Atonement* is opened with a scene in Tallis's house on a warm summer day in which the reader makes acquaintance with the Tallis' family members and their siblings. The protagonist, BrionyTallis, is fond of writing and she spends the most of her time in writing short stories since the latter means a lot to her.

THE PLAY—for which Briony had designed the posters, programs and tickets, constructed the sales booth out of a folding screen tipped on its side, and lined the collection box in red crêpe paper—was written by her in a two-day tempest of composition, causing her to miss a breakfast and a lunch. (*Atonement* 1)

Briony spends most of her time in her bedroom behind the typing machine writing stories and trying to create an imaginary world and friends for her own to fill the vacuum in her life and fulfill her wishes. Briony uses the real events of her life to build and develop her short stories. Each moment and event in her daily life is significant and may help her to build a story “On the face of it, Arabella, whose hair was as dark as Briony’s” (*Atonement* 4). Briony considers each moment in her life as a treasure and she never leaves any moment or event without including it inside one of her stories. She uses the real characters and events to make her stories more vivid and a telescope by which she could view the world as she tries to find herself and her identity.

Briony expresses her thoughts and views through the character Arabella, the heroine of her play, who falls in love with an impoverished doctor who marries her later at the end of the play. When Briony was ten years old, she went with Robbie to the lake to teach her how to swim, where she pretended that she was drowning, because she thought that it was the best way to confirm that Robbie loved her or not. When Robbie saved Briony from drowning, her doubts were vanished. Thus, she took the opportunity to declare her love to him: “Do you know why I wanted you to save me? [...] Because I love you.” (*Atonement*, 129). Robbie had been astonished for he was an object of a school girl crush (Briony). He then told her that if he saved her it did not mean that he loved her; however, it was no more than a responsibility for him. Three years later, Briony wrote her play ‘Trails of Arabella’ to fulfill her wish and she gave her thoughts and features to Arabella whom she considered as a princess, and the prince who married her is given the features and traits of Robbie’s.

With her writing, Briony tries to attract her family members whom she feels far from her. After finishing her play *Trails of Arabella*; Briony runs toward her mother to know her opinion about the play. Briony writes her play for her brother’s homecoming and she tries to perform it for him. The reason behind Briony’s play *Trails of Arabella* and its performance is to show her family that she exists and she is in need for their care, attention and appreciation.

Briony is a day dreamer and she is fixed inside her imaginary world that she created to visualize the future and surroundings, and she sees the real world throughout her fantasies and children’s stories. Briony at the adolescence stage faces dilemma; she has an internal struggle of either being a child or an adult person. Briony at some occasion behaves in a childish manner and at other occasion she behaves like an adult. On one hand, she misunderstood some facts and thoughts as horrible mistakes due to her childish nature she has, and on another hand like a mature person.

Writing stories not only involved secrecy, it also gave her all the pleasures of miniaturization. A world could be made in five pages and one that was more pleasing than a model farm. The childhood of a spoiled prince could be framed within half a page”. (*Atonement* 3)

This shows that Briony had a simple view for the whole world to the extent that she can write it in merely five pages and she minimizes an extended and substantial period of a human life into only half a page. Briony has a naive and childish imagination; accordingly, she faces a dilemma in distinguishing reality from fiction. Her coalition with the events in children stories leads her to misinterpret the real.

At the adolescent stage, individuals especially girls will seek instinctively for a partner to love, thus Briony during her search for a partner she finds Robbie on her way, but he is not the appropriate choice for her. Briony's dreams and wishes go with the wind; so she transfers her real life story into a tale which has a happy ending to fulfill her wish.

Briony is influenced by the childish and naive world of the stories she writes to the extent that she misunderstands Cecilia's and Robbie's situation and she interprets it as Robbie is asking her sister to marry him; the same happens in the fairy tales when the prince bows on his knees and asks the princess if she would marry him. But later Briony remarks that her sister is putting off her clothes and Briony miscomprehends and misinterprets the scene and she thinks that Robbie is abusing Cecilia and he forces her to put off her clothes and in an intention of trying to complete the scene; she does not even hear the speech between Cecilia and Robbie. It never strikes her mind that her sister has put off her clothes and stays on her blouse only to bring out the broken piece of the vase from the fountain; however, Briony understands what she wants to understand.

Briony is eager to have some secrets, private matters and interests of her own from nothing just to feel that she has things of her own and to make others engross in her life. After Robbie gives the wrong letter to Briony to pass it to her sister Cecilia, she opens it and reads the content of that letter, but she faces a problem in understanding an offensive term; thus, she goes back by the time and tries to remember if she heard this term once from her family members or in the stories she read, but the term has never passed through her ears, so she tries to understand it from the context of the letter. Briony is disturbed from the letter that Robbie wrote to her sister, not because of the offensive expression; the reason behind her disturbance is because she loves Robbie and she was not expecting that he is in love with her sister. Briony misunderstands some facts that happened between Robbie and her sister and she comes to a conclusion that Robbie is a malignant person and he abuses her sister and says: 'When she took another few steps she saw them, dark shapes in the furthest corner. Though they were immobile, her immediate understanding was that she had interrupted an attack, a hand-to-hand fight.' (*Atonement* 68)

Briony going down stairs passes by the library and sees the door of the library open and hears a noise that attracts her attention. When she enters the library she sees her sister and Robbie coupling, she interprets this situation into a fight; whereas, she thinks that Robbie is attacking her sister; and gets afraid of him. Briony leans back and she gets astonished when Robbie left the library without any intention of attacking her. Briony yearns to behave and understand things like an adult so she starts to observe and imitate her mother's and sister's attitude and thinks with her childish mind that she became an adult and could understand and interpret things like a mature person; however, she mixes up things and understands facts and scenes wrongly.

Briony likes to put everything that surrounds her under her control. Briony's control and order appears in everything she does starting from her bedroom. Briony's interest in dolls reflects her imagination of motherhood; whereas, she imagines herself as a mother and the mother's role is to control and order everything in the right way in her community. Briony and after she recognizes that Lola had been attacked, she claims that Robbie was the attacker as she tries to convince Lola of that and send him to jail:

Oh Lola. Briony put out her hand to touch her cousin's face and found her cheek. It was dry, but it wouldn't be, she knew it wouldn't be for long. Listen to me. I couldn't mistake him. I've known him all my life. I saw him. (*Atonement* 94)

Briony when she enters the last stage of Erickson's theory has lived with sense of regret that she could not free herself from guilt. Briony's super-ego punished her later with feeling of guilt and regret: "I occasionally think of the Marshalls whenever I see a parked Roll without a driver" (*Atonement* 201). At her maturity stage, Briony tries hardly to avoid thinking of the Lord Marshall and Lady Marshall, but she finds herself thinking of them unconsciously or whenever she sees a parked Rolls Royce car. Whenever she sees Lola and Paul, she realizes how much awful the mistake she has committed and still carrying the guilt of separating her sister from Robbie and her family's unity as well: "Seeing them laid something heavy on my heart, and I was trying not to think about it, or feel it now". (*Atonement* 202)

Briony is worried and waiting for the Marshalls to pass away and she hopes if they pass away before she publish her novel and to release from her guilt that she carried her whole life and feel free at least for a short time. Briony holds herself responsible for the fault; she feels regret and tries to forget the horrible day but everything that surrounds her reminds her about that horrible day. It is as: "The woods that surrounded Grace Turner's old bungalow were still there, and as the drive cleared a last stand of beeches, the main house came into view. There was no need to be nostalgic—it was always an ugly place" (*Atonement* 204).

Briony after the fountain scene and the letter tries to convince herself that Robbie is dangerous; thus, she assumes herself as her sister's and family's protector from Robbie. After these incidents, Briony wants to take up the responsibility, to identify her role in life and feels that she has something interesting in her life and she wants to feel that she is the hero that fights the evil and wins at the end.

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