



Atonement: between guilt and desire for reparation

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the novel *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan from the perspective of psychoanalysis, emphasizing the affection: feeling of guilt and its representations, which links directly to the desire for reparation. The theoretical basis for the representation of affections is based on Sigmund Freud (1920), Antonio Imbasciati (1998) and Jacques Lacan (2005), the feeling of guilt and the desire for reparation have as their theoretical basis Sigmund Freud (1923) and Melanie Klein (1996). The analyses investigate the motivation of the protagonist in creating her own literary text, which derives from the feeling of guilt caused by the fear of loss of love. It is the intention of the protagonist, through writing, to satisfy her desire to repair an error of the past; however, the symptoms of guilt remain, which the narrative exposes clearly.

Keywords: *Atonement*. affections, guilt, desire for reparation

1. Introduction

The fictional work *Atonement* is composed of three parts and an epilogue. Each part deals with specific moments of the protagonist's life Briony, and of the relations that she establishes with the other characters. In the weaving of the narrative it is possible to accompany her adolescence, youth, adulthood and senility.

It is only in the epilogue that the truths about Briony's life are revealed and she describes the attempts to repair the huge mistake she had made in the past. Thus, I present an analysis of the affections (as representatives of the psychic and the unapprehensible elements of the human soul), according to the studies of Sigmund Freud (1920) [6], Antonio Imbasciati (1998) [13], and Jacques Lacan (2005) [14]; as well as the feeling of guilt and desire, more specifically the desire for reparation, having as theoretical basis, Sigmund Freud (1923; 1926) and Melanie Klein (1996) [15].

2. Atonement, by Ian Mc Ewan

The first part of the novel begins in 1935 with the protagonist Briony, who is thirteen, and has the desire to be a writer. She writes a theatrical play to be staged to her older brother Leon, who would arrive for vacation. The characters would be played by her cousins, the twins Jackson and Pierrot, nine years old and their sister Lola, fifteen. Briony's sister Cecilia Tallis also returns home after studying in Cambridge. Cecilia is confused about what she feels for her childhood friend Robbie Turner, the housekeeper's son whose studies were funded by Cecilia's parents: Emily and Jack Tallis and who had returned from Cambridge to spend the summer.

When Leon Tallis returns home with his friend Paul Marshall, Cecilia takes water from the fountain with a porcelain vase, a relic of the family inherited, from her uncle Clem. Cecilia argues with Robbie, and in that instant, the object falls and breaks. She undresses and goes into the fountain to pick up the pieces of china. Briony, seeing the scene through the window, interprets it in a totally wrong way.

In an attempt to apologize to Cecilia for misbehavior at the fountain, Robbie writes a letter to the young girl, in which he ends up writing his most intimate wishes; he puts on paper an obscene word. He writes quickly another version, but by mistake, delivers the first version to Briony, so that it is given to her sister. When reading the letter, Briony sees Robbie as a psychopath, from who she must protect Cecilia. Cecilia reads the letter, initially she feels hatred for Robbie, but realizes that he loves her, and they make love in the library of the house. Briony sees them and interprets the scene as sexual abuse. During dinner, the twin boys run away from home, leaving a note. Everyone looks for them. This evening, Briony meets Lola, who was abused by a man. Immediately, she blames Robbie, even without having seen him. The police go to the Tallis' house to investigate; when Robbie arrives with the twins, he is charged on the basis of Briony's testimony. Only Cecilia and Robbie's mother Grace believe in his innocence.

The second part, written from the perspective of Robbie, reveals the moments he experienced in World War II after spending three years in prison. Cecilia becomes a nurse and prefers to be away from the family. Robbie and Cecilia, whose communication happens only by letters, meet once after that. He tries to understand Briony's possible reasons for accusing him, and it is his love for Cecilia that keeps him alive.

In the third part, Briony recounts her life as a nurse trainee in London. She finally realizes the huge mistake she had made- lying and accusing Robbie. So, as a self-punishment and a way to relieve her feeling of guilt, she refused a Cambridge scholarship. Working as a nurse, she could help the wounded soldiers of war and, perhaps, Robbie. After a long time, she realized that it was Paul Marshall who had abused Lola that night. Then, finally, she visits her sister. Unexpectedly, she finds her with Robbie. Briony tells the two that she is sorry and asks for forgiveness. She promises to change her testimony and withdraw the accusation against Robbie.

The fourth and last part of the work is the epilogue. Briony is in London in the year 1999. She is seventy-seven years

old and suffers from loss of memory; she feels she is dying. In the epilogue there is a revelation: the description of the meeting between her sister and Robbie, and the happy ending were created by the protagonist Briony. She confesses that the couple in love could never meet again. Robbie had died on the beach in Dunkirk, and Cecilia had been struck by a bomb thrown over the subway station. However, Briony wants to provide, at least in the novel, a happy ending for her sister Cecilia and Robbie Turner.

3. The feeling of guilt and the desire for reparation

In this study, the affection focused on the core of the reflections is the feeling of guilt, which is related to the desire for reparation. To introduce such affections, I present Freud's psychoanalytic studies on dream affections. As Freud states, even though the elements of dreams are imaginary and symbolic, the affects are real: Our feeling tells us that an affection experienced in a dream is by no means inferior to another of equal intensity felt in the waking life; and dreams insist more strongly on their right to be included among our actual soul experiences that regards their affective part than their content of representations. In our waking state, however, we cannot in fact include them in this way, for we cannot make any psychic evaluation of an affect unless it is tied to some material of representations (FREUD, 1900: 493).

In some dreams, representations distance themselves from psychic values; in dreams, affection is always tied to a theme. In the case of a psychic complex that has been under the influence of censorship, "affects seem to be the least influenced component and the only one that can give us an indication of how to fill the missing thoughts" (Freud, 1900: 494). Being an "imaginary version of desire that translates the relation of the subject to the being, in the plane of the body" (VIEIRA, 2001:106) ^[21], affects begins to follow varied subjective experiences. Psychoanalysis helps in the understanding and identification of the representation that corresponds to a certain affection that has been repressed and replaced by a substitute.

This study emphasizes the affect "feeling of guilt", which comes from the certainty and conscience about an attitude that is considered 'bad'. The feeling of guilt can be related to fear of the loss of love. People's attitudes are motivated by fear and there is feeling of helplessness.

This motive is easily discovered in helplessness and dependence on other people, and can be termed as fear of the loss of love. If he/she loses the love of another person to whom he/she is dependent, he/she also ceases to be protected from a series of dangers. Above all, he is exposed to the danger that this strong person will show his/her superiority in the form of punishment. At first, therefore, evil is all that, with the loss of love, makes us feel threatened. For fear of this loss one must avoid it (Freud, 1930, p. 128).

When there is the feeling of guilt, the Superego torments the Ego (that made the mistake) arousing some anxiety, while waiting for the moment to punish it through the external world. Consciousness becomes present in a second stage, it is taken into account that while an individual is well and has done nothing wrong, his conscience is quiet, but when a misfortune is caused by this, he seeks his soul, recognizing the sin committed, which makes consciousness raises its demands. Thus "abstinence is imposed and there is punishment with penances" (FREUD, 1930, p.130). The

renunciation of one's own satisfactions occurs with guilt. What sustains the movement of desire is language, because it is through this that attempts at the realization of desire take place, manifesting in various ways. The study of desire at this moment is specifically targeted to the "desire for reparation", the core of the reflections centered on *Atonement*. Reparation is "the strongest element of constructive and creative impulses" (HINSHELWOOD, 1992: 456). Melaine Klein (1996) ^[15] outlines in her works the human capacity to be pitiful and to wish to restore something committed. The psychoanalyst brings three different types of reparation: a) the manic repair: that brings in oneself the triumph; b) obsessive repair: a compulsive repetition of actions to try to nullify some mistake, seeking to placate in a magical way, and c) repair based on love and respect for the object. The reparation is related to the impulses, but at the same time it focuses on the fantasy of correcting the errors and the effects caused. Summarizing Klein, Laplanche and Pontalis describe the reparation as: "Mechanism described by Melaine Klein through what the subject seeks to repair the effects produced in his object of love by his destructive fantasies. This mechanism is linked to depressive anguish and guilt" (LAPLANCHE, 2001:447) ^[17].

In *Atonement*, the protagonist wants to restore the error committed, trying an obsessive repair: by sending several letters to Cecilia, writing and rewriting her text repeatedly until it is in a happy version. This process occurred for several years, and the persistence of guilty made this attempt to repair the mistake become an obsession.

The perception of error, of guilt, occurs through the moral factor, a feeling of guilt refuses to abandon the punishment of suffering. According to Melanie Klein: "the feeling of guilt, and the need to make reparation are intimately linked to the emotion of love" (Klein, 1996: 362) ^[15]. It is possible understand the affections representation and the desire attempts for reparation through citations and examples of the novel *Atonement*.

4. Atonement: between guilt and desire for reparation

In *Atonement* the affects and their representations are revealed in different ways throughout the narrative, in attitudes, thoughts, aids and self-punishment. As previously read, representation, as an abstract and psychological equivalent of the mnemonic traits, would have, according to Freud (1996), a counterpoint to affection; although they have distinct definitions, affections, as conscious and unconscious, represented through gestures, glances and / or attitudes. In this analysis, these indicators are identified through the actions of the characters.

Regarding that affects depart from the psychic system of the subject, that is, they are internal objects, dependent on the objects that would be the influences, the presences or absences, in this novel the external object of the guilt's feeling would be the impossibility of Briony make Robbie and Cecilia live their love. On the other hand, as affection is linked to unconscious representations, Briony suffers from the repression of the desire to repair her past error. Her guilt remains in the unconscious, but as time passes, memories emerge, and the perception of error becomes conscious until it reaches its representation as an attempt for reparation.

In the novel, the perception of affections is exposed through an omniscient narrator, who is able to describe what is going on in the characters' minds and with their feelings. As a

young woman, at the age of eighteen, Briony became aware of the mistake she had made in the past: the lie in accusing Robbie of being a psychopath, an accusation for which he was arrested. In it, the feeling of guilt prevails, she realizes the accusation was made without having concrete evidence, only deductively through the connection among indications: the events by the fountain, the letter with the obscene word, the blatant in the library and her sharp imagination, which leads her thinking she'd seen him that night with Lola. In the written text, when reporting the events and at the same time writing reflections about them, her misperception of events is evident, as can be observed:

But there was a maniac treading through the night with a dark, unfulfilled heart—she had frustrated him once already [...] The pretense, and how she ached to expose it! Real life, her life now beginning, had sent her a villain in the form of an old family friend with strong, awkward limbs and a rugged friendly face who used to carry her on his back, and swim with her in the river, holding her against the current. That seemed about right—truth was strange and deceptive, it had to be struggled for, against the flow of the everyday (McEwan, 2001, p. 157) ^[18].

Briony's reflections on the actions and words said in the past brought her awareness of the exaggerated view she had of facts and her immaturity. Then she feels guilty and try to remedy her mistake. The feeling of guilt comes from the certainty and awareness of having had an attitude that is considered 'bad'. Freud's thought can be applied to the protagonist of *Atonement* because there is a kind of helplessness and dependence on the other people, caused by the fear of the loss of her sister's love.

Briony loved her sister and remembered how much her sister reciprocates this love. She wants to avoid the separation between her sister and Robbie. When there is a sense of guilt, the Superego begins to torment the Ego with some anxiety, that made the mistake, and waits for the moment to punish it through the external world. Briony's symptoms from guilt and anguish are: disorientation, commotion, and disturbance, in conscious and unconscious ways, which is, in thoughts and daydreams.

When Briony was a teenager, she felt calm because she had done nothing wrong. She felt like a heroine who warded off evil from her family and protected her loved ones. Her conscience was peaceful, but when a misfortune is caused by her, and when she recognizes the sin committed, conscience raises her demands - so "abstinence is imposed and punish herself with penances" (FREUD, 1930: 130). In the case of Briony, this implies the withdrawal of a good professional career, distance from her family and the exchange of her dreams by the work like a nurse. She thinks that she could be in the college where her sister had studied rather than in the hospital, but in the face of the error, she realizes that she should be there, and be part of the assistance to the soldiers of war. And even working: "Briony's thoughts remained fixed on her themes". (McEwan, 2001: 288) ^[18] However, she kept busy, that feeling lingered in her mind: Throughout the Day, up and down the ward, along the corridors, Briony felt her familiar guilt pursue her with a novel vibrancy (McEwan, 2001: 285) ^[18]. Briony sets aside her interests to try for forgiveness.

At the end of the third chapter Briony reveals her desire to make a textual production. She declares she is ready for a new start: "She was calm as she considered what she had to do. Together, the note to her parents and the formal

statement would take no time at all. Then she would be free for the rest of the day. She knew what was required of her. Not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement, and she was ready to begin" (McEwan, 2001: 349) ^[18]

However, such forgiveness did not happen, because it was only a creation: the protagonist/ "author" imagined this moment, a moment that she wishes had happened. So, in reality she did not achieve forgiveness.

In the epilogue, in 1999, at sixty-seven, Briony explains that the entire work had been written as an attempt for reparation. She used the potential of literary writing to make the facts more acceptable and relationships happier. Ian McEwan gave voice to a writer, and *Atonement* is the result of a metafictional production.

Thus, the motivation for the creation of Briony's work is due to the feeling of guilt that prevailed throughout her life. She seeks to repair her past error through repetition: she uses the symbolic, that is, the literary production in an attempt to redeem herself. The whole narrative takes place behind masks, and the truth is revealed only in the epilogue of the work.

In *Atonement*, the attempt to hide the truths that hurt the protagonist and at the same time to describe about her own life can be observed in the following quote:

The interminable pages about light and stone and water, a narrative split between three different points of view, the hovering stillness of nothing much seeming to happen—none of this could conceal her cowardice. Did she really think she could hide behind some borrowed notions of modern writing, and drown her guilt in a stream—three streams!—of consciousness? The evasions of her little novel were exactly those of her life. Everything she did not wish to confront was also missing from her novella—and was necessary to it. What was she to do now? It was not the backbone of a story that she lacked. It was backbone (McEwan, 2001: 320) ^[18].

The fate of desire is always the search for the lost object; it is focused on the lack. In Briony's case, the desire and the search for reparation are directed to the lack of forgiveness. In the text of Briony in which she recounts her imaginary meeting with her sister, the desire of repair is reduced to take the testimony of official and legal way, acquitting Robbie. Everyone would then have a chance to start over.

5. Conclusion

The backbone of the story was what in her initial production: *Two Figures by A Fountain*, she tries to mask her crime. For the protagonist, there is no reparation: "Together, she and her sister and Robbie had only one subject, and it was fixed in the unchangeable past (McEwan, 2001: 348) ^[18]. Although she achieves her goal in elaborating the literary text through which her "truth" prevails as long as the work exists, the question of the viability of forgiveness continues: "The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to or be concealed with, or that can forgive her [...] In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms (McEwan, 2001: 371) ^[18].

The protagonist reveals the attempt to repair her mistake through writing. She states: "There was our crime—Lola's, Marshall's, mine—and from the second version onward, I set out to describe it. I've regarded it as my duty to disguise

nothing—the names, the places, the exact circumstances—I put it all there as a matter of historical record” (McEwan, 2001: 369) ^[18].

In the epilogue, in 1999 in London, Briony describes the conclusion of the work she begun at age 18 and completed at age 77. She underlines that some elements of the text indeed have happened as she wrote. In this final part, the narration is made in the first person. Briony evaluates her thoughts as she stands in front of the window of the bedroom in the house that belonged to her family:

I’ve been standing at the window, feeling waves of tiredness beat the remaining strength from my body. The floor seems to be undulating beneath my feet. I’ve been watching the first gray light bring into view the park and the bridges over the vanished lake. And the long narrow driveway down which they drove Robbie away, into the whiteness. I like to think that it isn’t weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet. If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration. Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at *The Trials of Arabella*? It’s not impossible. (McEwan, 2001: 372) ^[18].

Therefore, in *Atonement* the protagonist wanted to restore the error committed in the past, by trying obsessive reparation: she sent several letters to Cecilia, wrote and rewrote her text repeatedly until she got a version with a happy ending. The fear of losing her sister’s love and so, to relieve the weight of guilt motivated her to write. However, the satisfaction of the protagonist’s desire remained in her mind, she reached a substitutive satisfaction through the symbolic, the novel written by Briony. In the end of the narrative her anguish continued, despite the attempts, she did not obtain the satisfaction of her desire of reparation: “No Atonement for God, or novelist, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all” (McEwan, 2001: 371) ^[18].

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