

Narrative and Trauma: An Analysis on Briony's Traumatic Mind Tour in *Atonement*

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Abstract: On the basis of James Phelan's unreliable narrative, Northrop Frye's U-shaped narrative structure and Cathy Caruth's Trauma theory, this paper studies Ian McEwan's Booker Prize nominated novel *Atonement* and analyses the protagonist Briony's behaviour responding to a traumatic experience and her efforts to heal the trauma. It provides readers with ways to help them get out of similar predicaments, and a new research perspective combining trauma theory with narratology for the interpretation of novels.

Keywords: *Atonement*; Unreliable Narration; U-shaped Narrative Structure; Trauma Theory.

1. Introduction

Ian McEwan (1948-), a British writer, has been considered as one of the most influential writers in British literature. During his decades-long writing career, he has produced excellent works such as *The Cement Garden*, *The comfort of strangers*, *Enduring Love* and *Atonement*. Praised as "a writer who expands English literature from the exploration of gentle family life to the all-round examination of postmodern society" (Muchnick, 1990, p.102), he has been nominated for the Booker Prize six times since 1981 and finally obtained in 1998 for *Amsterdam*.

Among his works, *Atonement* attracts a majority of readers with its delicate descriptions and heart-wrenching storyline. This novel is praised for its unique narrative perspective as well as its cliff-hanging plot. The story is set in 1935, when Briony, the protagonist, is only thirteen years old and lives in English countryside with her parents and siblings. By coincidence, she misinterprets the love interaction between her sister Cecilia and Robbie Turner, the son of a servant, and thinks that her sister is being bullied by him. Thus, she falsely accused Robbie of raping her cousin Lola, resulting in Robbie's arrest and imprisonment. Five years later, Robbie is released from prison and joins the British army, witnessing the Dunkirk Evacuation. By then, Briony has realised her mistake, and instead of going to Cambridge, she chooses to become a nurse, so as to atone for her sins in Puritan-like asceticism while Robbie and Cecilia lead a relatively peaceful life. However, what is most admirable about this novel is its short epilogue. In a few strokes, McEwan reveals a subversive fact to his readers - the story is all autobiography written by Briony. Besides, instead of a happy ending, Robbie and Cecilia pass away in the middle of the war. James Wood (2002) praised this story as "the finest and most complex" (p.39) one in McEwan's novels, and thought it "represents a new era in McEwan's work" (p.39).

2. Literature Review

According to the papers concerning the analysis of *Atonement* in CNKI database, narratology, text close reading and psychology are three major perspectives.

From the perspective of narrative techniques, the study explores its unreliable narrative and metafictional

characteristics. For example, Chen Rong's *The Original Sin and Redemption of Historical Fiction: Analysing the Metafictional Ending of McEwan's Atonement* points directly to the original sin of historical fiction, and discusses the emerging mode of metafiction that *Atonement* employs - the metafictional mode (2008, p.92). Zhang Helong's *A Grand and Beautiful Epic: A Review of Ian McEwan's Atonement* captures the difference between *Atonement* and other postmodern novels in terms of narrative technique, and elaborates on the reflection of modern novels in terms of expression, narrative perspective, and experimental technique used by *Atonement* (2008, p.22). In short, unreliable narration, as an inescapable feature of *Atonement*, is a hot study point at home and abroad. Thus, this will continue to be examined in this paper. In addition, this research will also start with a new narrative angle to analyse the U-shaped narrative structure of *Atonement*.

From the perspective of close reading, the deep analysis of how a literary text works. Domestic studies apply this method to a large extent. Lin Fei's *On the Growth and Development of Individuals in McEwan's Pre-Novels ---- with a Perspective on Gender Differences and Gender Relations* explains that the individuals in the text start from the initial gender antagonism and the tragedy caused by the opposite sex, go through the cognition of the opposite sex, and finally to the growth process of transcending gender differences and completing the reconciliation of the sexes (2009, p.6). In addition, Yang Lili's *A Study from the perspective of bildungsroman in Ian McEwan's Novels* uses archetypal criticism pioneered by Northrop Frye to divide the growth process of McEwan's characters in his novels into three parts via archetypal experience: growing pains, refusal to grow up, and soul suspension, and calls on society to pay attention to the growth of children (2008, p.18). Therefore, inspired by researches of the protagonist's growth experience, this paper combines trauma theory and narratology to study the work of *Atonement* from the perspective of their interaction.

From the perspective of psychoanalysis, Yan Chunmei's *The Incomplete Redemption: A Psychological Analysis of Briony in Atonement* analyses the essence of the protagonist Briony's "ego" and the psychological motivation of her literature writing with the help of the personality theories created by Raymond B. Cattell, suggests that her quest for the truth originates from her "superego's" sense of morality and

righteousness, and that the essence of her quest for the truth is to seek peace of mind for her “ego” (2006, p.95). As the protagonist and narrator of the story, Briony is one of the most important characters in *Atonement*. The results of previous psychological analyses of Briony are also enlightening for the study of this paper.

In a nutshell, many of the existing studies have started from the perspective of narratology and psychoanalysis. However, few people combine these two perspectives together to provide a comprehensive idea. Thus, on the basis of previous narrative analysis and psychological analysis, this paper aims to conduct a more specific traumatic narrative study on the protagonist as well as the narrator Briony, to fill the study gap.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Trauma Theory

The pathological study of “trauma” began to be studied as a kind of hysteria in the 1870s and has been going on for more than 100 years. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) included Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a mental and behavioral disorder that develops from experiencing a traumatic event, in its diagnostic manual for the first time, and the symptom of psychological trauma was finally officially recognized.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud proposed the “intrusion of trauma”. He regards the human brain as an organization with a “protective layer”, which can resist the harmful “stimulation” of the outside world and protect the “central psychological device”. Therefore, only some events without psychological preparation will cause trauma. Decades later, Cathy Caruth (1995), a leading figure in psychoanalytically informed literary theory and humanistic approaches to trauma proposed that many traumatized persons experience long periods of time in which they live, as it were, in two different worlds: “the realm of the trauma (what I will call a fictional world in the brain in order to avoid trauma) and the realm of their current, ordinary life (the real world).” (pp.176-177)

At the same time, Janet also emphasized the need for traumatized people to recall the past and convert traumatic experiences into narratives, thus integrating traumatic experiences into normal memory. Cathy Caruth (1996) writes in his book *Unclaimed Experience Trauma, Narrative and History* that:

Literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. (p.3)

Healing trauma with literary narration has been proposed as early as Freud’s time. Decades later, in *Trauma: Explorations in memory*, Cathy Caruth (1995) proposed that “traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences” (p.176) and she advocates that people should remember trauma at times and transform these experiences into narrative language. This process may be painful, but it can have a positive effect on healing the trauma.

It is thus clear that there is a consensus on interpreting literature through trauma theory, as well as recognizing and healing trauma through literary narratives.

3.2. Unreliable Narration and U-Shaped Narrative Structure

Wayne Booth (1983) first introduced the concept of “unreliable narrator” in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and used it to refer to the speaker who “does not speak for or acts in accordance with the implied author’s norms” (p.158). In explaining it, He argued that “a narrator may be unreliable about either facts or values” (Booth, 1983, p.158). Later, his student James Phelan (2004), a leading figure in rhetorical narratology, summarized the two elements of this theory as “axis of events” and “axis of ethics”. In addition, he pointed out the limitations of Booth’s theory and proposed “axis of knowledge and perception” (p.53), thus expanding the two axes to three. Regarding the violation of “axis of events”, an unreliable narrator either misreports—providing inaccurate information about the events—or underreports—inadequately conveying the facts. A narrator’s misinterpretation of a character’s motivations or actions can lead to an incorrect evaluation. Thus, an unreliable narrative may violate the “axis of values” due to their limited perspective. Lastly, if a narrator deviates from the “axis of knowledge and perception”, it indicates that they are either misreading due to mental disorder or underreading because they are unable to recognize the relationships between several events.

The concept of the U-shaped narrative structure was first proposed by the famous literary critic Northrop Frye in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. Frye (1982) begins with the *Book of Judges* in the *Bible* and explores an “apostasy being followed by a descent into disaster and bondage, which in turn is followed by repentance, then by a rise through deliverance to a point more or less on the level from which the descent began” (p.169). This, is imaginatively called the U-shaped narrative structure, and Frye puts forward that the development track and narrative context of the whole *Bible* story follows this U-shaped narrative.

4. Unreliable Narrator and Traumatic Experience

One of the striking features of the novel *Atonement* is its unconventional narrative technique. The most traditional type of narration is linear narrative, in which the events are mostly presented in a chronological order, recounting the events as they happened. However, in *Atonement*, McEwan breaks this traditional pattern with “multiple internal focalization” (Genette, 1980, pp.189-190) and employs a fictional narrative agent -- Briony. In Part I, the words are turned into the lens of a film, presenting what the characters see and hear and their psychological activities in the same or different events in front of the readers who are taken step by step through the characters’ lives as they move from quiet beauty to tragedy and torment. When the readers finally rejoice in the happy ending of the bittersweet couple, Part IV drops a bombshell to reveal that this is all Briony’s story, and that it is she, the 77-year-old, not McEwan, is the third-person narrator of the first three parts. After decades of changing her manuscript, she finally dares to gaze at the sins she has committed at the end of her life and tries to atone for them with this novel. In reality, the heroine of the love story loses her life in an underground explosion, and her “medical prince” (McEwan, 2003, p350) is also unable to escape the fate of death. Beyond that, the reader will never know how much of the story recounted earlier is true and how much are fabricated by a

woman suffered from traumatic events such as the rejection from her crush, the betrayal from her sister and the threat of the war to life. At this point, the reader, while lamenting that he or she has been “tricked”, is more likely to marvel at the masterful narrative design.

4.1. Unreliable Narration of Protagonist

Briony, the narrator in *Atonement*, falls into the category of unreliable narrator as defined by Booth for her narrative deviates from Phelan’s “three axes” in many ways, making *Atonement* a prime example of an unreliable narration.

Briony is brought up on the Tallis estate, a closed environment as a prison confining her both physically and mentally. At the same time, her father’s constant absence from the house and her mother’s worrying health as well as indifference to her children made young Briony suffer from the absence of the role of parents. As a result, her unguided understanding of “sex” is skewed. Meanwhile, as a young child narrator’s understanding of events and characters may differ from the “judgement of the implied author” (Tan, 2005, p.106), the lack of parents’ education that comes with age makes her extremely innocent and even becomes an “unreliable” homodiegetic narrator. For instance, when Cecilia takes off her clothes and jumps into the fountain while Robbie stares at her, the sexual tension is completely beyond the childish mind of the ten-year-old so she fails to understand it. The ambiguous behaviour between them is judged by Briony to be blackmail or threat by Robbie against her sister, and thus her interpretation and judgement of this incident is unreliable in terms of “axis of ethics” and “axis of knowledge and perception” for the limitations of her perspective on this matter and the emotional role of subjective assumptions.

Another misconception is about the letter. When Briony receives Robbie’s letter to her sister, and after opening it privately and reading it, the book reads:

With the letter, something elemental, brutal, perhaps even criminal had been introduced, some principle of darkness, and even in her excitement over the possibilities, she did not doubt that her sister was in some way threatened and would need her help. (McEwan, 2003, pp.106-107)

Therefore, although her report of the content of the letters is reliable in terms of the “axis of events”, it is not knowing Robbie handed in the wrong letters that gives her a limited perspective, which allows her to form a misinterpretation of the character’s motivations and behaviour. This makes her “unreliable” in terms of “axis of ethics”. Merely based on the letter, she decides that Robbie is a “maniac” (McEwan, 2003, p.112). Taking it for granted, this one false assertion was even instilled in her mind when her cousin Lola was raped, which also forms an “unreliable” situation in “axis of knowledge and perception”.

If the characters need to be understood more comprehensively, the “subtle complexity of this rhetorical strategy” (Shen, 2006, p.135) should be focused on when interpreting the novel with unreliable narration. An unreliable narrator could not be “unreliable” from beginning to end and the narrator may deviate from one axis but still appear honest and trustworthy on another, and “there may be a causal relationship between the different axes” (Shen, 2006, p.135).

After witnessing her sister being “raped” in the library, Briony blames Robbie for his fault that doesn’t exist in reality, making judgments based on her grudge against him, which

indirectly leads to Robbie and Cecilia’s tragic end. The three axes are thus causally linked: Briony’s deviation from the “axis of ethics” and “axis of knowledge and perception” leads to her deviation from the “axis of events” -- maliciously guiding Lola to say that the culprit is Robbie, even if she does not see him in person, which is, misreport of the facts.

4.2. Traumatic Experience - the Reason of Unreliable Narration

In the beginning of trauma theory study, scholars have begun to apply it in interpreting literary works. In *Atonement*, the most fundamental reason why Briony becomes an unreliable narrator is her traumatic experience. Indeed, although Briony, the true narrator of the story, is then an adult instead of the 13-year-old willful girl. When she completes this autobiography, her narrative is still heavily influenced by her traumatic experiences and PTSD, an influence that is imperceptible but indelible.

Out of Briony’s love for Robbie and her desire to protect her sister, Robbie’s act of giving letters to her sister makes her instinctively felt betrayed. This, coupled with the trauma of the rejection of her declaration of love after falling into the water when she is ten, are the main factors that make her fall into mental tension and confusion. These, in a way, eventually result in the misunderstandings and deviations from the axes. Not only that, after witnessing her sister being “raped” in the library, Briony is scolded by her sister at the dinner table for screaming at the twins for wearing her socks. It is clear that her sister’s scolding left little Briony once again traumatized by the betrayal. However, she is instinctively unable to resent her sister, who acts as a “mother’s agent” (Yang, 2017, p.100) in the family, and Briony is thus trapped in a prison of mental turmoil, which can be only comforted by directing at Robbie, inferior in status and has also “betrayed” her. In this series of coincidental events, some of Briony’s seemingly unprovoked behaviours are in fact outward manifestations of her trauma. It is for this reason that her traumatic experiences are the root cause of the unreliable narration in *Atonement*.

5. U-Shaped Narrative Structure and Trauma Healing

As trauma theory became better known, society gradually began to focus on how to heal trauma. Decades later, there is a consensus that “transforming these experiences into narrative language” (Caruth, 1995, p.176) might be one of the best answers. In Briony’s memories, she puts herself in the position of the sinner, but in fact, many of her childhood behaviours as a victim are the result of her trauma, and at the age of 77, Briony writes this novel with U-shaped narrative structure, like biblical narrative structure, in the hope of atoning for her sins. As a model of Western literature, the stories told by the Bible contain the beginning, the middle and the end, and the development of the plot follows a U-shaped consistency:

This gives us a narrative structure that is roughly U-shaped, the apostasy being followed by a descent into disaster and bondage, which in turn is followed by repentance, then by a rise through deliverance to a point more or less on the level from which the descent began. (Frye, 1982, p.169)

By concocting a happy ending, the whole story forms a U-shape narrative structure. However, Briony may not realise

that she is healing her own trauma in an invisible way that she does not even know is possible.

5.1. Traumatic Behaviour in U-Shaped Narrative

The U-shaped narrative consists of three parts, namely harmonious start, bottom and happy ending. In *Atonement*, the scene where Robbie gives the wrong letter is seen as a turning point in the main characters' fates. However, the first of the dominoes is in fact buried in the year when Briony turns ten. Back then, ten-year-old Briony is indulging in what she believes to be a "fairy tale world", and the rejection she receives from Robbie, the man passes her "heroic rescue" test, is not in line with this fairy tale setting and is never expected by her childish, fragile mind. Therefore, in view of the trauma caused by the discrepancy, the rejection from Robbie only exists in Briony's "realm of trauma", and in "the realm of ordinary life", she still thinks that Robbie must have a crush on her since he is willing to sacrifice his life to save her.

The disillusionment never comes until she sees Robbie interacting with her sister through the window. Until then, as she has a quiet life, a proud talent for writing, and wonderful fantasies, the destiny of this character is at the top of the U-shape. However, after the apostasy-like episode in which she falsely accuses Robbie, the brutality of war and the guilt of perjury give her a double psychological torture, causing her situation to plummet to the bottom of the U-shape. Finally, at the age of 77, she becomes a respected elder in her family and a best-selling author in the limelight, Cecilia and Robbie are finally able to live happily ever after together without any obstacles. The characters finally return to "the level from which the descent began" (Frye, 1982, P169).

5.2. Trauma Healing via U-Shaped Narrative.

No work of English or American literature can be separated from the influence of the Bible, and *Atonement* is certainly one of them. In spite of the ups and downs it comprises, the main plot follows a U-shaped narrative structure. In fact, transforming traumatic experiences into this narrative structure was also key to Briony's healing through writing.

In the epilogue of *Atonement*, Briony writes that:

I've been thinking about my last novel, the one that should have been my first. The earliest version, January 1940, the latest, March 1999, and in between, half a dozen different drafts. (McEwan, 2003, P.349)

This shows that for almost sixty years, she has been recalling the mistakes she made as a child and contemplating the path of atonement through the writing of novels. This is exactly "the process of transforming the traumatic unassimilated scraps into narrative language" (Caruth, 1995, p.176). Thus, Briony chose to write this story through decades of continuous writing, several drafts, remembering, absorbing, and healing.

Since narrative language can help heal trauma, the key to healing trauma is that how to transform traumatic memory into narrative language and make it into ordinary memory. One major difference between the two is that traumatic memory is "timeless" (Caruth, 1995, p.177). It is not "placed in time, with a beginning, a middle and an end" (Caruth, 1995, p.177). Briony chooses to use the U-shaped structure, a structure similar to that of biblical narrative, to effect this transformation. *Atonement* is based on facts mostly, except for

the happy ending, which is fabricated by Briony. Without this part, the U-shaped narrative structure is broken, and the traumatic memories cannot be converted into normal memories. In the epilogue of the novel, Briony does not justify herself by concealing her fabrication, which shows that the happy ending is not a tool for her to exonerate herself and win the readers' favour, but an effort to console herself and heal her trauma. By fabricating the bittersweet couple, a happy ending, she reintroduces a new element to her traumatic memories, using rewriting to transform the traumatic experience into a narrative language that possesses a complete U-shaped structure, diminishing the impact of the traumatic experience.

6. Conclusion

In all, *Atonement* is a novel with cliff-hanging plot and original narrative style. Affected by her upbringing and trauma, Briony, the protagonist, at the age of thirteen, commits the crime of false accusation, which indirectly leads to the tragic end of her sister and the love of her life. Tortured by guilt, she decides to spend her life writing about this experience and atone for her sins. As one of the most famous British novelists, McEwan demonstrates how an individual can be impacted by some deep-seated trauma and be at its mercy without realizing it. Yet this novel does not only just focus on the traumatic event and its effects, but also depicts how the characters heal from their traumatic pasts through self-reflection and writing. *Atonement* proves that human beings are not helpless in the face of trauma and that it is not impossible for an individual to get rid of it.

Based on the trauma theory and narratology, this paper makes a close reading of *Atonement*, analyzing the traumatic experiences of the protagonist, and providing readers with ways to help them get out of similar predicaments, and to provide a new research perspective combining trauma theory with narratology for the interpretation of novels.

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