

## **Credibility at Stake: Seeking the Truth in Ian McEwan's Atonement**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Ian McEwan is one of the modernist writers who utilises new and uncommon ways of narrating. We find him dealing with history, wars and social themes, all knitted together in a manoeuvring way. The unreliable narrator, a technique he employs, is an innovation first seen in the modern era in Wayne C. Booth's 'The Rhetoric of Fiction' in 1961. McEwan's employment of this technique is an issue needing further analysis. In 'Atonement', his character Briony, who is still a child, narrates parts of the novel but her narration is questioned, for she might not be truthful or honest. Her being unreliable adds much to the novel and affects the fates of her sister Cecelia and the latter's lover, Robbie. It is not only a matter of telling the story, it also interferes in the discourse of the action and propels the events in a different direction. As a result, it seems dubious to give the role of talking to a character (Briony) to narrate and cope with events, and so her telling is questioned to a certain extent because the events she narrates are deceitful on the one hand, while on the other, she is too young and hard to be trusted. The present paper attempts to read 'Atonement' from a new perspective and show what is meant by an unreliable narrator and how this technique is employed. How significant is the technique in terms of recounting the events in a piece of fiction? This paper illustrates the significance of the aforementioned technique, which adds new understanding to the reading of McEwan's 'Atonement'.

*Keywords:* 'Atonement', credibility, Ian McEwan, narrative technique, unreliable narrator

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The technique of narration is a vital element that heightens the success or failure of a literary work. Consequently, it is the writer's task to target a successful outcome, and this is mainly attained via the

ways employed to convey meaning to the reader. Hence, it is a matter of both using words and how they are used, and in which ways. Since words are available to any person, communicating them to the hearer or reader is a practice that elevates a work and gives it its fame and label.

Sometimes, writers use first- or third-person narration and employ what might be called the 'unreliable narrator' technique in their fiction with certain aims in mind. The unreliable narrator is a technique first discussed in the 20th century by the American theorist Wayne Booth (1983) in his masterpiece 'The Rhetoric of Fiction', in which he presents, defines and shows the validity and significance of this newly rediscovered technique because it has roots in the 18th century. Booth discusses this issue extensively, stating: "For lack of better terms, I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not" (pp.158–159). That is, every literary work has an intended voice under the surface which represents the implied author, who in turn represents the real author. In the course of events, the writer intentionally creates this atmosphere of struggle between the implied author, who usually personifies the natural and acceptable flow of events, and the narrator, who tries to market his version. In this sense, a narrator who complies with the implied author is considered reliable and the one who does not is unreliable.

When the narrator does not comply with the rules and norms of the implied author, then he is unreliable. That is, when we find certain claims or acts that do not comply with the current of events or work against the characters, and this can be felt, then we question the narrator's credibility; the writer can communicate to us that this narrator is reliable, or not, in many ways that will be described later.

Before delving into the category of unreliable narrator, we should consider other types of narrator who share some qualities with the unreliable narrator. The 'inconscience' (unconscious) narrator, according to Booth, is one who is mistaken or believes himself to have characteristics that the author abstains from granting him (p.151). Another kind incorporated by Booth is the 'untrustworthy' narrator, who has a great effect on the work he relays, which consequently leads to its transformation. The last kind is the fallible narrator, which will be discussed later. All these variations have a degree of unreliability although each one has a distinctive characteristic that is decided by the literary text according to which it is categorised.

Because of the confusion generated over the un(reliable) narrator, the implied author and the fallible narrator, we will try to consider some pertinent definitions of these terms. Before doing so, we should credit the technique of 'unreliable narrator' not to Booth, but to his compatriot Charles Brockden Brown (1771–1820), who is considered to be one of the first American

writers to discover, but not coin or theorise, the term (Gray, 2004, p.97). Edward Quinn (2006), in 'Dictionary of the Literary and Thematic Terms', says that a reliable narrator is defined as one whose accounts do not raise the suspicions of the reader, while an unreliable one may be suspect for many reasons e.g. the lack of sophistication and/or sanity (p.279).

David Lodge (1993), in 'The Art of Fiction', argues that unreliable narrators are invariably invented characters who belong to the stories they tell. The unreliable narrator is a contradiction in terms and can only exist in a deviant and experimental text (p.154). Many critics have their own perspective of the unreliable narrator as a technique, but in the end they come to the same conclusion. In 'Dictionary of Narratology', Gerald Prince (1987) defines the term as a narrator "whose norms and behaviours are not in accordance with the implied author's norms" i.e. a narrator whose values, judgements, moral sense and taste diverge from those of the implied author (p.101).

Other critics, like Monika Flaudernik (2009), claim that there are some cases in which narrators do not aim to be unreliable; rather, they are put in a particular situation because of their distorted view of things. There are other cases in which the narrator is too naive or simple-minded to have the ability to describe accurately what happens (2007, p.161), like the case of Briony Tallis in Ian McEwan's 'Atonement' (2002).

The views of critics vary concerning the reasons why writers employ unreliable

narrators. What significance might this technique add to the literary canon? Lodge refers to the reasons underlying employing this technique, contending that the point of using it is to reveal a gap between what is real and what is hidden by revealing people's ability to distort or conceal the truth (1993, p.155). The reasons for unreliability may also include the narrator's short-sightedness, limited knowledge or personal involvement. Such narrators may incorporate false accounts through their unreliable reporting of facts, which is what happens in the course of 'Atonement', in that Briony reports the false facts that sent Robbie to prison and his death later. Unreliable evaluation leads to misinterpretation of what is there, like the library scene in 'Atonement', and we will look at this in more detail later.

Sometimes unreliable narration is noticed through the writer's intention and will to direct the reader and his attention towards false narration, especially in first-person narration, says Monika Flaudernik, such as seen in many short stories by Edgar Allan Poe. In these cases, narrators cast suspicion upon themselves by constantly claiming to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth (2009, p.28). That the reader should infer unreliability in a text is made clear through syntactic indications, such as "incomplete sentences, exclamations, interjections, hesitations, and motivated repetitions" (Phelan & Rabinowitz, 2005, p.104). These indications are stylistic expressions of subjectivity that clearly refer to a high level of emotional

involvement. Henceforth, they supply the reader with adequate clues and signs to process the narration as unreliable along the axis of facts, events or that of knowledge and perception.

Depending on intuitive judgement is another way to determine unreliability because of the availability of a wide range of signals that help the reader to gauge the narrator's credibility. Such expressions and sentences are adopted and thought of as something that might be considered untrue. Thus, the narrating of the text is to be questioned because it could be unreliable and narrators sometimes diverge from telling what is instructed by the implied author, which is what Seymour Chatman confirms by saying that the divergence of the values of the narrator from those of the implied author is what really constitutes unreliable narration. The reader becomes suspicious of what is said because the norms of the work conflict with the narrator's presentation, and so we doubt his/her sincerity or competence to give the "true version" (1978, p.149). Hence, we can say that the reader has to go on a journey to discover the true, though fictional, 'facts'. This journey involves

what the implied author intends to say and the reader's attempt to understand what is being said. By the same token, we find interference from the unreliable narrator, which can be traced and discovered by the reader, no one else. Fig.1 represents such a journey.

It is the reader's responsibility then to infer what is wrong and what is right, and this can easily be achieved via the techniques offered by the writer to warn the reader about being misled. From Fig.1, we can see that a mutual understanding must be achieved between the implied author and the reader. There are messages conveyed between them that reveal the narrator's unreliability and deception.

In 'The Rhetoric of Fiction', Booth alludes to an implied author even before theorising what constitutes an 'unreliable narrator'. A relationship between the two is revealed, requiring the reader to perceive and understand the hidden meaning of the unreliable narrator by reading between the lines to arrive at the implied author's intentions. According to Booth, the implied author is the real author's 'second self', who appears in the novel and is an interpretation, an implicit one, linked to the

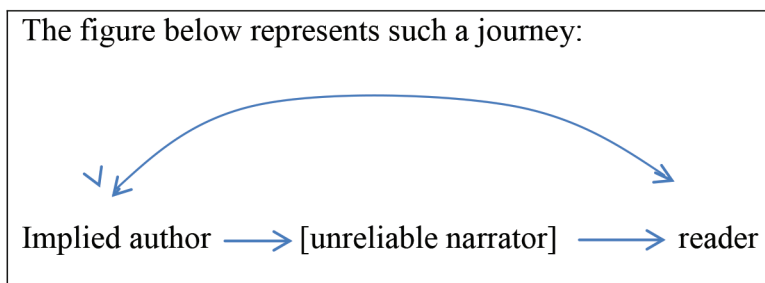


Fig.1: Discourse or medium of narration.

real author behind the scenes (p.151). The implied author is usually different from the real man/woman who writes the novel, whom Booth calls the flesh-and-blood author while he/she is different from the narrator.

Peter Rawlings (2006), in 'American Theorists of the Novel', refers to the real relationship between implied author and reader, saying that the former communicates with the latter, even though it seems like a "séance at times"; and in some novels we find the implied author leading the reader by the hand and accompanying him through the maze of the story (p.65). He is thus not neutral if siding with the reader and saving him from the plotting of the unreliable narrator. According to Phelan and Rabinowitz, the implied author is not a product or structure of the text but rather the agent who can be held responsible for generating the text and bringing it into being (2005, p.99).

In accordance with the above, we think that the implied author is a kind of a creation incorporated by the writer and reader as well. It cannot be created solely by the writer, neither can it be developed by the reader acting alone. The reader helps a lot in constructing the implied author's existence through his awareness of the tools employed by the writer to bring the implied author into being. If we encounter a simple-minded or inexperienced reader e.g. a young reader who does not read much, who perhaps normally only reads newspaper articles, this kind of reader would never be able to sense that there

is unreliable narration going on, and consequently would be blind to the presence of an implied author lurking in the text in his hands. Thus we agree with Booth that the implied author is an invention by what he terms the 'blood-and-flesh author', but we think that what the latter creates could not be activated without the awareness and consciousness of the reader.

### **UNRELIABILITY OR FALLIBILITY?**

When talking about unreliability, a new term appears, namely, fallibility. To be fallible is to make a mistake, albeit unintentionally. Fallibility appears as a result of a certain natural defect in one's character. Consequently, it means an imperfection or shortcoming, or simply a failure. Fallibility is misconceived of sometimes and considered equal to unreliability, though it is only a side-effect of unreliability in comparison with untrustworthiness or 'inconscience', to use Booth's terminology. In this regard, to be unreliable means to do harm to other characters, as in the case of Briony, while being fallible is unintentional and innocent, as in the case of Huck Finn in Twain's 'Huckleberry Finn' or Quentin Compson in 'The Sound and the Fury'. According to Booth, fallible characters are those who have a limited view of events, short-sightedness and an inability to comprehend the world of the novel in accordance with the omniscient narrator's ideals.

Often, fallible narrators do not report narrative events reliably, since they are mistaken in their judgements or perceptions,

which could be biased. According to Olsen, this kind of narrator's perception can perhaps be impaired because of their being a child, having a limited education or little experience. Consider, for example, Huck Finn or Marlow in Joseph Conrad's 'Lord Jim, whose reports seem insufficient because their source of information is biased and incomplete (p.101). Opposite to fallible 'inconscience' or untrustworthy narrators, we encounter the truly unreliable narrator as represented by the character of Briony in McEwan's 'Atonement', as will be shown in the following pages.

#### UNRELIABILITY IN 'ATONEMENT'

'Atonement' is a highly appreciated work of fiction written by Ian McEwan. The text is a mosaic of techniques, themes, history and literary style. Historically speaking, 'Atonement' follows, in certain respects, the style of Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence, especially in its second half. We find McEwan dragging the reader, as in Woolf and Lawrence, to the past in the 1940s of the last century and the battles in England and France. He opens the novel with the Tallis family where the hero Robbie, the son of the Tallis' cleaning lady, was present as an educated person provided for by Mr. Tallis. Cecelia Tallis, who took her education with Robbie, never hid her animosity and irreconcilable attraction, which was strengthened later. Cecelia's sister, Briony, interferes in this relationship and incriminates Robbie whether deliberately or not, in an act of violence against her cousin Lola Quincey,

who has come recently to their estate. After being jailed for this alleged crime, Robbie is released conditionally to join the army and he dies there away from his beloved Cecelia, who has found her solace in a nurse vocation and dies in the blitz. Briony sends Robbie and her sister to their deaths and destroys their relationship. Trying to atone for her motiveless crime, she later scripts the whole story and fictionalises a meeting between the lovers at the end. Briony's unreliability in narration and actions are evident in this novel.

Briony Tallis is a young girl of thirteen. She has a critical eye and has proven her talent as a mature person since an early age. Now she is a writer, a *dramatist*, who can write, act and do many things. On the first page of 'Atonement', Briony is introduced as the writer of 'The Trails of Arabella', a well-written play that her mother describes as "stupendous" (p.4). She is shown to be a mature person with many abilities and a developed mentality. Her brilliance and ripe character are demonstrated not only in her having written a play, though her aim in writing it is a very mature one. The play is meant to be presented in front of her brother, to celebrate his return, "provoke his admiration and guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, towards the right form of wife" (p.4). Nevertheless, she can be considered naïve or simple-minded in certain instances because of her misinterpretation of subsequent scenes.

Briony's reliability as a narrator in this article is questionable. Some critics or readers might excuse Briony and describe

her as a fallible narrator. But, she might be considered unreliable, which is what we support, in her narration due to her youth, naivety and simple-mindedness. In addition, an element of jealousy from her sister Cecelia might be considered as well. All these elements together can easily blind a person and propel him to act in a way different from what the implied author plans or expects, which consequently produces unreliable narration. Booth equates fallible narrators to 'inconscience' ones, but this cannot be applied to Briony's character. Even though they have the same age, Twain's unreliable (fallible) narrator Huck Finn cannot be compared to Briony because, despite Huck being smart and likeable, says Olsen, his perceptions are mistaken due to his youth, his ignorance of facts, his superstitions and his literal understanding of shallow moral norms (p.102). To determine a narrator's fallibility, we as readers should enquire into the extent to which the narrator misunderstands the information he receives, and notice if the narrator makes mistakes regularly.

Briony's unreliability can be easily traced in her fictionalising the scenes and accepting what she visualises as real facts. Through her we learn how it is easy to turn the confusing actions into real facts and believe in it. Her imaginations reach the peak when she interprets the fountain scene in which Robbie and her sister Cecelia are both present. When the couple meet at the fountain, Robbie mistakenly breaks the vase Cecelia was carrying and a fragment falls into the basin of the fountain. Cecelia

strips off her clothes and goes in to bring up that broken piece. Briony's misconception of the event leads her to think of this situation in a totally different way and far from reality. She narrates "at his [Robbie's] insistence she was removing her clothes, and at such speed ... what strange power did he have over her? Blackmail? Threats?" (p.36). In fact, it is not Robbie's effect or threat that pushes Cecelia to remove her clothes, it was her own will as the implied author confirms in a different place "... well, she would show him then. She kicked off her sandals, unbuttoned her blouse and removed it, unfastened her skirt and stepped out of it and went to the basin wall" (p.28). Hence, the different versions of Briony's narration and that of the implied author reveal Briony's unreliability in this scene early in the novel.

Untrustworthy narrators often contradict themselves constantly or declare their insanity later. In this case, it is the reader's job to do more questioning in order to make sure that this narrator is untrustworthy. Briony could, in some scenes, be labelled as untrustworthy, according to Booth's definition. After declaring that Robbie is the rapist and when she is interrogated by the police officer, her untrustworthiness clearly surfaces:

"You saw him then."

"I know it was him."

"Let's forget what you know. You're saying you saw him."

"Yes, I saw him." (p.169).

This contradiction or hesitation proves her to be untrustworthy. Her being

uncertain over seeing Robbie, or not, as the rapist rings a bell in the mind of the reader and only adds to the suspicion urging the reader to stop, re-evaluate and judge again if this is really what happened, or if there might be another version of the story.

However, Olsen thinks that it is possible for narrators to move from being untrustworthy to fallible in the course of the narration, as this transition applies to all narrators traditionally labelled unreliable (p.104), although this shift does not occur in Briony's case as she moves from being untrustworthy to unreliable in the course of the novel.

Lola Quincy is Briony's cousin, whose rape proves Briony to be an unreliable narrator who changes the course of events in the novel by inventing new destinies for the lovers Robbie and Briony's sister, Cecelia. The implied author is strongly present in Lola's rape scene, trying to offer the reader the correct version of the story rather than Briony's attempt to criminalise Robbie with her false account. In this scene she is neither fallible nor untrustworthy, because she has no certainty that the rapist is Robbie. After the act of rape, Briony is the first person on the scene, with Lola saying, "now the *figure* reappeared [my italics]" (p.154). What she saw is just a "figure", as yet undefined. And she "heard his footsteps" (p.155), assuring herself that these footsteps were Robbie's and no one else. Her blurred vision and disturbed state lead her consequently to the misconception of considering Robbie as the rapist even though she has no real evidence. These

contextual signs are deliberately employed by the implied author to help the assumed reader get a clear version of the story.

Briony tries hard to promote her belief that Robbie is the attacker by depending on previous events that she has misinterpreted. Due to her naivety or jealousy, she builds her account on false evidences she visualises as in the rape scene, which is defined by Eva Mauter (2004), a critic, as "Briony's crime" (p.34). She starts interrogating Lola with questions she has already prepared answers for: "who was it" (p.155); and at the same time she answers, "I saw him" (156), and confirms this twice. Syntactic indications, as mentioned earlier, refer to unreliability, like "motivated repetitions" (Phelan & Rabinowitz 2005, p.104), and this is clearly present in Briony's expressions. In this scene, Briony assumes, though it is not confirmed, by asking Lola "it was him, wasn't it?" (p.155); then she makes her final judgement, "it was Robbie" (p.156). She convinces herself gradually, first with the figure, then with his steps; after that she confirms her having seen him until, in the end, she confirms the name. She is sure about this fact and the complexity of the situation; and the impossibility of disproving her makes it worse because there is no other witness to the rape, only her foggy misinterpretation.

Briony's unreliability is debateable to a certain extent, it would be unjust to incriminate her as a deliberate falsifier of events with cruel intentions. The implied author portrays her as old enough to act as a mother figure to Lola in her distress. She



addresses Lola, who has been hurt by her two brothers on a previous occasion, saying “[T]hey just don’t understand ... They’re just little kids” (p.111). Her rationality and mature behaviour reveal her as an adult who can discern what is wrong and right very clearly. But we should emphasise that her misreading of the scenes, and her deliberate scripting of Robbie as the rapist without being conscious of the catastrophic consequences of her claims can also suggest naïveté rather than planned malice.

Briony’s unreliability begins early, at the very beginning of the blossoming relationship between Robbie and Cecelia. Robbie, feeling affection for Cecelia, is motivated to write a love letter, which he sends through Briony; unfortunately, a draft letter is sent, in which Robbie has written vulgar words. Booth talks about unreliability when narrating falsehoods, and we would add that unreliability can be in the form of acts, not just words. Briony is considered unreliable when opening the letter she is supposed to deliver faithfully to her sister; but the reverse happens when she opens the letter, reads it and develops a view of Robbie as a “maniac”.

Later, Briony sees Robbie and Cecelia in an intimate situation in the library, and here she accuses Robbie of raping her sister. This is described from her belief in its being a real act of rape: “she [Briony] saw them, dark shapes in the furthest corner ... his left hand was behind her neck gripping her hair, and with his right he held her forearm which was raised in protest, or self-defence” (p.116). This is how events

are portrayed in Briony’s view, as an attack on Cecelia. Whereas, according to the implied author’s description in another scene, we witness them consummating their love affair, which really is a true event.

Based on her wrong impression, she starts to see Robbie as “a villain in the form of an old family friend” (p.148), whom she confirms to be a “maniac” in her speech to Lola. She declares to Lola that it was Robbie “attacking my sister” (pp.156–157), and this is why she insists that it is Robbie who raped Lola and not any other person, like Marshal or Danny Herdsman, as Cecelia interprets later. She invents the lie and believes it, and according to her thinking, determines reality. In comparison with William Faulkner’s unreliable narrator Quentin Compson, Briony takes the lead. Quentin declares to his father, “I have committed incest, father” (*Sound and Fury*, 1981, p.74), and keeps repeating this; later he says, “I have committed incest ... it was not Dalton Ames” (p.76). Quentin, we are sure, has not committed the act, but because of his love for his sister, Caddy, and his obsession with her virginity, he claims this in order to shoulder the responsibility on one side, and to save the family honour on another. Quentin is very different from Briony, who is only being described as a ‘fallible’ narrator because of his disturbed state.

Briony’s blurred vision and misreading of the scene, is emphasised when she is interrogated by the police officer who comes to arrest the rapist. In reply to his questions, she answers falsely:

“You saw him.”  
“I know it was him.”  
“Let’s forget what you know. You’re saying you saw him?”  
“Yes I saw him.”  
“Just as you see me?”  
“Yes.”  
“You saw him with your own eyes?”  
“Yes. I saw him. I saw him.” (p.169)

Even though she is not sure of the attacker’s identity, Briony fakes the story to convince the policemen of Robbie’s guilt and send him to jail, based on her misinterpretation of the event.

The implied author works hard to indicate the correct version of the story to the reader, especially after the rape scene and the two children’s escape from home. The binary image created here is of positive/negative, whereby Robbie is portrayed as a good individual who sets out looking for the children at night and brings them back clinging onto him while the negative image is associated with Briony, who erroneously accuses the Christ figure, a saviour, of rape while he was nowhere near the rape scene. It is easy then to decide that Briony is a true unreliable narrator.

Later, the novel reveals Robbie’s conditional release from prison to join the war and fight in France, where he gets sick and dies. Cecelia is a nurse treating wounded soldiers and she too dies in a raid during the blitz. In the last part of the novel, entitled ‘London, 1999’, we come to understand that we have read a story within a story in which Briony plays the role of a trickster. Briony is now seventy-three years

old, sick, and about to die; she fictionalises a meeting between Robbie and Cecelia, who are already dead, simply to atone for her misdeeds; and thus she proves herself unreliable yet again. Confirming this, at the very end of the novel, the narrator writes, “That Paul Marshal, Lola Quincey, and she, Briony Tallis, had conspired with silence and falsehood to send an innocent man to jail? But the words that had convicted him had been her very own” (p.306).

## CONCLUSION

In McEwan’s ‘Atonement’, the reader can easily notice that the discourse is divided into two strands. There is Briony, who recounts misleading events through the lies she tells. Then there is the implied author and his attempt to clarify things whenever the narration goes wrong by providing clues that indicate Briony’s unreliability. Describing Briony’s role as an unreliable narrator is somehow debatable, because the narrative is not written in the first person, but it is confirmed that almost all of the narration is told from her perspective whereby she proves herself unreliable within an internal frame. Meanwhile the external frame appears in the last part, ‘London, 1999’, when she declares herself to be the aged version of young Briony and thus unreliable within the external frame of the story too. Besides, her fluctuations and supposedly rounded character, that changes over time from being ‘untrustworthy’ to acting as a totally unreliable narrator, are clearly revealed through her narration.

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