

The Experimental Techniques in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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Abstract

Ian McEwan, together with Martin Amis, is now the best-known and controversial contemporary British novelist. *Atonement* is regarded as the best of McEwan books and is shortlisted for the Booker Prize. It displays features of modernism and postmodernism, with the application of stream of consciousness, multiple voices, montage and flashbacks, becoming increasingly experimental in form.

Keywords

Ian McEwan, Experimental Techniques, *Atonement*, Montage, Narrative

1. Introduction

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. Here, the experimental techniques, such as the employment of point of view, narrative montage and flashbacks, make the novel a narrative of great power.

2. Multiple Points of View

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. Point of view "signifies the way a story gets told—the mode established by an author by means of which the reader is presented with the characters, dialogue, actions, setting, and the events which constitute the narrative in a work of fiction [1]". In fact, narrative voice and points of view are indispensable parts of story-telling. McEwan dexterously makes use of what Genettes calls variable internal focalization, homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator in the novel, with the

former referring to the presentation of an event from a different point of view, the latter related to the identity of the narrative voice. In the case of *Atonement*, the points of view change with the development of the story and so does the identity of the narrator.

In the novel, McEwan narrates from a variety of points of view, in order to create an artificial reality for the reader. But this technique is used much better than in its traditional sense. The different perspectives are closely connected with the novel's unique structure, which is a combination of three discrete parts and an epilogue. Part One is different from Part Two and Part Three in that it is narrated from different points of view instead of a focused one. To be more exact, Part One is told from different points of view, while Part Two is mainly depicted from Robbie's point of view and Part Three and the epilogue mostly from Briony's point of view.

The first part of the novel is narrated from multiple points of view, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and elusiveness. Although the novel is related by an unknown third person narrator, it is noticeable that the narrative points change from Briony to Cecilia, Lola and other characters. By doing so, the writer does not only give the reader an easy access to the character and the event itself, but also enhances the sense of ambiguity and uncertainty. The readers hear different voices describing the events from their own point of view, such as young Briony, Robbie and Cecilia. But all of the versions are finally leached through Briony's (as the writer) reconstruction.

As far as the points of view are concerned, some of the paradoxical scene must be reiterated, namely the scene at the fountain, the event in the library and so on. The most convincing evidence is the incidence that occurred at the fountain, which is interpreted and read from several eyes, making the event elusive. As a matter of fact, this event is presented from four different points of view, though some people may think it is shown from three different perspectives. Here, McEwan gives the reader four versions of the same event from four different perspectives. Briony misinterprets it as a blackmail and threat, constructing it into a melodrama. Both Cecilia and Robbie reflect on the event finally, making it remerge according to their wish.

As the story develops into its climax, the points of view are changed several times. The scene in the library is first presented from Briony's point of view, creating a further illusion for the reader. When Briony steps into the library, she encounters the scene of love-making which in her mind was that:

She had interrupted an attack, a hand-to-hand fight...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-defense. He looked so huge and wild, and Cecilia with her bare shoulders and thin arms so frail ... [2].

In fact, Briony is shocked by this scene, without saying any words. Briony follows her sister, as she moves out, firmly believing that she has saved her sister from Robbie's vicious attack. Who is saying she had interrupted an "attack"? Who is expressing that Robbie is so "huge and wild" while Cecilia is so "frail"? Remember that the whole scene is showed from Briony's perspective, and it is Briony who is the narrator.

Later, McEwan shows the reader the scene in the library again in the form of flashback, revealing the event from the perspective of Robbie who is one of the participants of the story. At the dinner table, when everyone starts to eat, Robbie recalls what has happened in the library with his lover, Cecilia. This scene is redescribed in detail, full of passion, affection and evocativeness.

their pasts were forgotten...They were beyond the present, outside time, with no memories and no future.

There was nothing but obliterating sensation, thrilling and swelling and the sound of fabric on fabric and skin on fabric as their limbs slid across each other in this restless, sensuous wrestling [2].

It is apparent that the love-making between Robbie and Cecilia is the spontaneous overflow of their affection and love, without any element of evil. It is the depiction of the scene from Briony's eye that foregrounds later misconception. By shifting the points of view from one character to another, McEwan skillfully alters the reader's anticipation, leading the story to develop into a higher level with reasonable plot.

Furthermore, there are changes of the perspective in Part Two, where the narrative shifted from Briony to Robbie. This is partly because Robbie is the center of War-time France. In the eye of Robbie, the cruelty of war, the loyalty to love and the pain of separation are revealed with much reliability. Much of the same point applied to Part Three, in which Briony's perspective becomes the dominate angle. Similarly, in Part Three, McEwan presents the scene in the London hospital from Briony's point of view, exhibiting the guilt in Briony's mind, showing the way of atonement.

McEwan employs the third-person narrative form to describe the story of atonement from the first part to the

third part, making the narrative seems real and authentic. It is surprising to notice that in the final part McEwan tries out the first-person narrative to subvert the story narrated earlier. The whole story turns out to be based on old Briony's memory, which is not reliable simply because she is losing her memory. Thus, by abandoning the traditional third-person point of view, McEwan adopts the post-modern self-conscious narrator, that is, to narrate the story from the first-person perspective, making the reader question the narrative, question the relationship between fiction and real life.

McEwan does not confine himself to a certain form of narrative, but instead he makes use of different perspective and narrative voice in accordance with the development of the plot. The employment of third-person narrative facilitates achieving an objective description in which some illusions are embedded. The shifts of point of view enable the reader to see the event from different aspects and get ready for the trick. The first-person narrative gives the reader an easy access to the character's inner world and reveals the nature of fiction. Thus, through the eyes of different characters, the victims and the guilty, the novel's theme of imagination and the metafictionality are demonstrated.

3. Narrative Montage and Flashback

Montage is originally a term used in French architecture. Later it is widely used in motion pictures, becoming an indispensable part of modern art. Simply speaking, montage is a kind of technique that assembles separate pieces of scene and puts them together according to the theme and certain order. In other words, it is a method of connecting different film in a specific manner to achieve dramatic effects. Due to its flexibility, accuracy and spatial tension, Montage is applied to various literary genres, particularly in fiction writing.

Generally, there are three types of montage. They are narrative, graphic and ideational, among which this paper will focus on the narrative montage. Essentially, film itself is a kind of narrative, which is mostly based on the employment of pictures and sound effects. Thus, the film and the novel share a common character, that is, narrative. Different from the traditional narrative, *Atonement* renders the reader a series of pictures, scenes, and illusions, by altering the character, perspective, time and space. Sometimes, there is hardly any connection between the adjacent paragraphs or parts. The readers have to keep reading, memorizing and seeking, so as to be clear with what is going on.

Narrative montage is primitively used in this novel to break the restriction of time and space. Furthermore, it is an effective way of expressing life and truth. The novel is noted for its long time span, from the wake of the Second World War to the modern 1999, with multiple descriptions of the war, the guilt and the atonement, the reflection on life and writing. In depicting the grand war and love story, McEwan creatively links the past with present, the memory to the truth, with the employment of montage and flashbacks.

The novel's structure is in accordance with its plot. McEwan divides the text into three relatively independent parts, with a surprising coda, each of which can be regarded as an individual episode just like the episodes in the movie. Besides, there are pieces of scenes which are put together in a particular order in the novel to respond to its theme. The division of the structure enables the writer to break the limitation of time and space and focus on a specific period of time or place, with the utilization of parallel montage, cross montage and other forms of montage.

In terms of time, it takes almost half a century to finish the whole story. The narrative leaps with the time. The first part of *Atonement* which occupies nearly half of the book takes place and ends on a sweltering summer day in the Tallis family house. It is safe to say that the first part of the novel is a story that happened in one day, which itself can be read as a complete novel. The second part of the novel leaps five years forward to 1940 in France during the evacuation of British troops to Dunkirk. At the same time but on different soil, that is, in England, the third part of the novel takes place. Though different in place, the two parts share a similar theme of war, forming a parallel structure.

Parallel montage is a kind of cinematic device which allows two story lines running at the same time or different time and space zone to serve one common theme. In the novel, the theme of war is presented by this kind of parallel montage, including two sub-plots, namely, the description of the retreat from the perspective of Robbie in the second part, the depiction of the London hospital from the perspective of Briony in the third part. The final epilogue is written in 1999, fifty years after the main plot. In fact, the novel adopts two story lines, which respectively are Briony's sin and her journey of atonement for the sin she committed, and the tragic love story between Robbie and Cecilia. The former line brings about the tragedy in the latter one. Meanwhile, the tragedy forces Briony to fulfill her journey of redemption.

The employment of montage is sometimes realized through the technique of flashback and flash-forward, and

psychological free association [3]. Sometimes it is hard to figure out what the writer is talking about. But, this is actually a reflection of the writer's inner world, which can be considered as guidance to the reading. The power of montage lies in that it forces the reader to meditate and imagine in the same way with the writer for the effects of empathy. McEwan breaks the linear development of time, sometimes he tells the reader about future events, sometimes he looks back to reveal things that happened in the past. For instance, Chapter six ends with Emily's meditation in bed while chapter seven turns the picture to the island temple where Briony enjoys her attack on the nettle. In fact, this happens long before the arrival of Leon and Paul, not to mention the bed scene. Here, McEwan reverses the lapse of time. Later, the flow of time is confusing, with the mention of future at the very beginning: "WITHIN THE half hour Briony would commit her crime". Then the story moves back to Briony's search for the lost twins. The moving of time, either backwards or forwards, controls the reader's anticipation and understanding of the event, deepening the theme of the novel.

Though closely related to film, montage is important in fiction writing. It is the use of montage that renders great freedom of time and space to the narrative. Sergei Eisenstein argues that the power of montage brings the readers' emotion and sense into the process of creation, enabling the reader to share the writer's experience during the course of fabrication. The application of montage also allows the leap of space from France to England, the step of time from past to the future. Moreover, the parallel and cross movement of time and space may produce various tension and suspension. It also can be used to display the relationship or emotional state between people in different areas, such as the longing for each other between Robbie and Cecilia. Thus, McEwan, by using montage to penetrate into the character's inner world, realizes the combination of subjective and objective narrative, exerting critical influences on the reader.

4. The Hybrid Nature of the Narrative

It is notable that the narrative of *Atonement* possesses a characteristic of hybridity in that it combines different genres and styles of writing into the framework of metafiction. "For Updike, McEwan overlays his plot from Jane Austen with modernist writing, such as detailed imagery of water and vegetation, and with divergent perspectives, flashbacks, overlapping narratives, replayed scenes" [4]. Since McEwan is quite aware of the development of the literary history, theory and criticism, it will be not at all surprising for the reader to encounter the mixing feature of *Atonement*. As far as the form is concerned, *Atonement* presents itself as a realistic novel, with its fidelity to life, rich characterization, and seemingly conventional plot, but also exhibits some modern experimental techniques such as stream of consciousness, points of view, and montage. Moreover, the influence of postmodernism is without doubt obvious, as the story is deconstructed in a postmodern manner [5].

5. Conclusion

The disconcerting hybridization of *Atonement*, its ingenious juxtaposition of nineteenth-century discourse with the modern, and its combination of romance with thriller, multiple point of view with narrative montage, makes it an outstanding novel and literary creation, a perfect demonstration of McEwan's art as a new realistic writer in the new era. It is safe to say that all of these techniques and features in *Atonement* reinforce the artistic beauty of the novel, rendering excellence to its narrative.

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