

On Atonement

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While Ian McEwan (b.1948) does not believe in God¹, he like Thomas Hardy before him, believes in using themes from the Bible to foreground his novel. *Atonement*

¹ In *Saturday* (2003), for instance, McEwan writes this; a neurosurgeon meditates on the absurdity of the existence of anything numinous:

And if there are to be deaths, the very god who ordained them will soon be funereally petitioned for comfort. [Dr.] Perowne regards this as a matter for wonder, a human complication beyond the reach of morals. From it there spring, alongside the unreason and slaughter, decent people and good deeds, beautiful cathedrals, mosques, cantatas, poetry. Even the denial of God, he was once amazed and indignant to hear a priest argue, is a spiritual exercise, a form of prayer: it's not easy to escape from the clutches of the believers. (*Saturday* 18, quoted from the 2005 Vintage reprint edition)

Earlier in *Saturday*, Dr. Perowne views the human person as just a machine walking around, devoid of any soul, or *pneuma*:

In the lifeless cold, they [us humans] pass through the night, hot little biological engines with bipedal skills suited to any terrain, endowed with innumerable branching neural networks sunk deep in a knob of bone casing, buried fibres, warm filaments with their invisible glow of consciousness - these engines devise their own tracks. (*Saturday* 13)

functions at three distinct levels: it echoes Yom Kippur, the Atonement of Christ for our sins and finally Briony's atonement through her imagination. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) too used Biblical themes in his novels to critique Christianity in favour of Darwinism. One example will suffice. In *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), Hardy names his main character, or proto-agonist, as Gabriel Oak. Gabriel, as we all know, is an archangel within the Christian cosmos. Yet, in the same novel, Hardy compares Oak to Satan². This ambiguity too marks *Atonement*. Thus, it is only right that we do not categorise *Atonement* as a postmodern novel just because it has postmodern elements within it. The genius of Ian McEwan lies in his using the genre of the novel to create an illusion of chronicity while at the same time, incorporating flashback techniques. This is the same narrative strategy used by Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) in her *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). Also, this contextualisation of *Atonement* is important since it shows how this novel, like all other great novels, is not ex nihilo.

Yom Kippur is about catharsis. In McEwan's fictional universe, Briony purges

²The place contained two women and two cows. By the side of the latter a steaming bran-mash stood in a bucket. One of the women was past middle age. Her companion [Bathsheba Everdene, again, Bathsheba is from the Hebrew Scriptures] was apparently young and graceful; he [Gabriel Oak] could form no decided opinion upon her looks, her position being almost beneath his eye, so that he saw her in a bird's-eye view, as Milton's Satan first saw Paradise. She wore no bonnet or hat, but had enveloped herself in a large cloak, which was carelessly flung over her head as a covering. (*Far from the Madding Crowd*, free public domain edition, accessed on an electronic device)

from her being the scourge of her perceived lies. But we are never sure whether she lies in the first place. As Elizabeth Loftus (b.1944) shows in her clinical work with children³, we all tend to invent the past. So Briony being an unreliable narrator, might be telling the truth as she understands her world. McEwan consciously blurs our ability to attribute guilt and shame to any character in *Atonement*. In this he follows Fyodor Dostoevsky's (1821-1881) *Crime and Punishment* (1866) which elides all damning judgements when it comes to the murderer Raskolnikov. Thus the catharsis enacted by Briony in echoing Yom Kippur, may be, just may be, a negation of memory⁴. Yom Kippur is all about memory and the remembrance of sins past; Briony to begin with, never sinned. On the other hand, those who are indeed wrong-doers, in a Kantian sense; Lola and her husband, Paul Marshall, never repent for their absolute wrong-doing in framing Robbie Turner. Thus, McEwan attacks and negates the Yom Kippur of Judaism in *Atonement*.

It is a given within Christianity, that Jesus, the Christ, sacrificed Himself for the sins of mankind. It is a different issue that René Girard (1923-2015) [sees this sacrifice](#) as a metaphoric rite derived from Northrop Frye's (1912-1991) understanding of the Bible as the greatest code on earth⁵. McEwan, being a nihilist does not agree with any transcendence at all. He, unlike even Girard, does not believe in any redemption for, within the Darwinian

³ See Loftus's *Witness for the Defense; The Accused, the Eyewitness, and the Expert Who Puts Memory on Trial* (1991).

⁴ Freud would call this repression and through Briony, McEwan sublimates the libido to construct something rich and strange (Shakespeare). Best editions of Freud's works are now the ones edited by Maud Ellmann. The interested student is advised to study Ellmann's editions over James Strachey's editions.

⁵ See Frye's [The Great Code: The Bible and Literature](#)

world of McEwan, sins do not occur. Everything is seen through a haze. In this, McEwan is most near Joseph Conrad (1896-1924) and before Conrad, Charles Dickens(1812-1870). In Conrad's novels, there is a moral ambiguity which we find in McEwan. For instance, in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1889), Marlow, postures as the Buddha, while being far from Gautama, the Buddha. In Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853), we have a noxious smoke rising out of the Thames and engulfing all of London⁶. It is this ambiguity generated by the chiaroscuro of sin being a hermeneutical error, that we have McEwan representing the libido. The longings of the flesh, the Pauline *sarx*, is not only ratified by McEwan but also ironically shown, as being proper to the state of being human. Thus, no atonement for sin is really necessary.

This novel is a novel about narration. Briony's narration, by her own account is false. We get to know this at the end of *Atonement*. Thus, even the *dasein* which within high art is constructed by the imagination, so well mapped by Coleridge⁷ (1795-1808), does not

⁶ Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon and hanging in the misty clouds. (*Bleak House* quoted from an open access edition read on an e-reader)

⁷ See his *Biographia Literaria* (1817) which is available in the public domain.

admit of any atonement. In McEwan's universe there is a very ambiguous approach to phenomenology. We are left wondering whether the external world is only too real or, it simply does not exist anywhere other than in Briony's mind.

This is the key to studying *Atonement*. We never know which reading tactic works and, which does not.

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