

## COMPARE THE WAYS THAT STOPPARD AND MCEWAN EXPLORE THE UNRELIABLE NATURE OF THE PAST THROUGH THE CRAFT OF WRITING

'Atonement' and 'Arcadia' are allied in the sense that they both explore the unreliable nature of the past. 'Atonement' principally does this through a variety of narrative techniques, whereas Stoppard deploys dramatic juxtaposition. In many respects the two authors present similar views that humans constantly misconstrue (whether deliberately or not) the past, however it could be argued that the final message of two writers is somewhat different. It could be said that Stoppard communicates a certain and assured view that literature has the power to uplift by emphasising affectionate comedic moments and by ending on a final message of unity and shared social history. McEwan on the other hand offers a more uncertain idea that truth is relative, and as part three's resolved moral conclusion is undermined in the exposition of part four. McEwan questions the degree to which art has the capability to uplift through his 'reflection on truth and memory'.

McEwan manipulates the structure of the novel of 'Atonement' to present the different characters' perspectives of one event. The fountain scene is described from both Cecilia's eyewitness account and later in Briony's flawed interpretation. The reader initially gathers Cecilia's frustration to de-cloth herself in order to humiliate Robbie as a form of 'punishment'. There is a sense of sexual tension that underpins the movement between Cecilia and Robbie in the scene. Cecilia 'twisted her body away from him' and 'unbuttoned her blouse' to retrieve the broken pieces of the vase from the fountain, a rational response in order to salvage a family antique. McEwan uses the symbolism of the vase to suggest further disorder as the 'glazed surface' of Briony's accusation against Robbie develops 'blemishes and hairline cracks'<sup>1</sup>. The adjective 'glazed' suggests that the surface has been smoothed and could indicate that deception and the manipulation of form has taken place. The 'blemishes' and 'cracks' may represent the flaws and inaccuracies in Briony's interpretation of the past, demonstrating that the past is unreliable. McEwan highlights Briony's misinterpretation of this event by ordering the factual account before the inaccurate account, despite them occurring simultaneously. This suggests that Briony's account is unreliable, discrediting her accountability as an observer of the true nature of the event that has already been revealed to the reader. Briony describes the 'ugly air of threat', a metaphor which shows she cannot refrain from describing the scene through a literary lens. Briony's choice of the adjective 'ugly' villainises Robbie's disposition. It is suggested that their relationship will be complicated by this sexual desire in the future. The description of Cecilia twisting her body and her 'struggle' equally foreshadows the turmoil and commotion that is to come with the sexual driving force between Robbie and Cecilia. McEwan also explores the unreliable nature of the past through Briony's emotive language as she fails to 'distinguish between what is reality and fantasy' due to her 'powerful imagination'<sup>2</sup>. This highlights her misinterpretation of the events and presents observations of the past as unreliable.

The library scene later serves as a structural contrast to the previous scenes where the true account is offered before Briony's interpretation, however, here McEwan interestingly feeds the reader Briony's false interpretation before Robbie's accurate account. This improves the reader's trust in Briony and restores her credibility despite the exposition that follows revealing her misguided understanding of the scene. The use of numbered chapters indicates each shift of narrative, 'but also, more elaborately and unsettlingly, to allow for chronological shifts'<sup>3</sup>. These

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<sup>1</sup> Theo Tait, *The Connell Short Guide to Ian McEwan's Atonement*, 2015

<sup>2</sup> John Flemming, *Modern theatre guides Tom Stoppard's Arcadia*, 2008

<sup>3</sup> John Mullan, *Slips and Shifts – Time and Viewpoint in Atonement*, English & Media Centre, 2021

divisions in the narrative disorientate the reader's sense of truth and what was fact or fiction, fitting with McEwan's postmodernist foundation of the novel (he seeks to escape what he calls the 'dead hand of modernism'<sup>4</sup>). McEwan's postmodernist stance rejects the concept of stable meaning and solid truth similarly to 'Arcadia' which also contemplates a postmodern 'deliberation on the strange dance between chaos and disorder'<sup>5</sup>. McEwan's post-modernist approach underlines the fragility, relativity and flexibility of the truth, as he establishes that the truth is difficult to uncover due to the lack of existence of any certain knowledge and solidarity. Though similar ideas are explored in 'Arcadia', it could be suggested that 'the non-linear bouncing between time periods suggests disorder, yet lurking underneath is a tightly ordered dramatic structure'<sup>6</sup>. Stoppard deliberately uses his non-linear structure to contrast the past with the present and to highlight the ability to misconstrue the past (though this juxtaposition could be said to add structure or familiarity). Nonetheless, McEwan and Stoppard both manipulate the concept of time and structure to present the past as difficult to determine.

In 'Arcadia' the structural technique of 'free indirect style'<sup>7</sup>, the shifting between narratives, is not deployed as the dramatic form means the varied narrative perspectives would not be possible in the same way. Stoppard does however manage to demonstrate a shifting of perspective through the scattering of events between the past and present scenes. Some critics see the alternative structure as key to the message of the play. The 'deterministic chaos is grounded in non-linear mathematics and appropriately Stoppard constructs Arcadia in a non-linear manner with the scenes alternating between the early 1800s and the present'<sup>8</sup>. This enables the audience to compare the modern interpretation of events with the 'truthful' event that happened in the past. In toying with past and present, this often creates a comical aspect to Stoppard's play. Stoppard draws on dramatic irony to install a sense of comical ignorance in his characters, this is perhaps primarily embodied in Bernard. Bernard is an overtly proud and pretentious character. He undermines his intellectual credentials by choosing to discount most scientific evidence to achieve becoming academically acclaimed. Bernard 'might dream of himself as a romantic'<sup>9</sup> for he refuses to accept logical explanations that challenge his claims. Bernard tries to rediscover previous ideas from the past based on his own individual assumptions. Stoppard doesn't implore a sense of unreliability in the past, as McEwan does, but more explores the unreliability of human nature. Stoppard extends this idea by reflecting on man's knowledge about the nature of the universe. Stoppard uses Hannah's role to interject rationality amongst Bernard's recklessness, reminding Bernard to consider his lack of evidence as she questions: "'is it his handwriting?'". Her coherent and critical approach heightens Bernard's inaccuracy as he rejects her analytical approach in his assumption; "'Proof? You'd have to be there, you silly bitch'". Bernard uses derogatory language to discount her criticism, a juvenile response to belittle her presence and the value of her judgment. Bernard's self-deception encourages the audience to recognize his comical role when exploring the inaccurate attempts to retrieve history. Briony in 'Atonement' similarly declares childish accusations, and she later becomes aware that she created her own 'monster'. This is implied in her admission that she was not 'pressured or bullied', indicating that it was her own choice. Instead, 'she trapped herself, she marched into the labyrinth of her own construction.' The Greek myth image perhaps suggests that she views herself as the monster lurking within the labyrinth, aligning her own 'construction' of a recollection with a mythological account. This furthermore demonstrates the difficulty of understanding the true intentions of people from the past.

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<sup>4</sup> Theo Tait, *The Connell Short Guide to Ian McEwan's Atonement*, 2015

<sup>5</sup> Kelly, Katherine E., *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard*, Cambridge University Press, 2001

<sup>6</sup> John Fleming, 'Tom Stoppard's Arcadia', 2009

<sup>7</sup> Theo Tait, *The Connell Short Guide to Ian McEwan's Atonement*, 2015

<sup>8</sup> John Fleming, 'Tom Stoppard's Arcadia', 2009

<sup>9</sup> Faber Critical Guides, *Tom Stoppard* 2014 p.187

McEwan presents a more serious tone to the futile feuding which Stoppard shows between Bernard and Hannah: McEwan using the theme of crime and the tragic experience of world war II. McEwan contemplates the long-lasting impacts of a crime that was born from Briony's misinterpretation from the past. The genre of crime in 'Atonement' is ultimately 'more about the difficulty of uncovering, rather than determining the truth'<sup>10</sup>. McEwan also explores the recoverability of the truth exploiting the technique of historiography to challenge the national myth of Dunkirk. McEwan 'concentrates on the mayhem of an army in retreat'<sup>11</sup> opposed to the traditional sentimental propaganda. McEwan may potentially use Robbie's experience in France in an attempt to debunk the Dunkirk myth and establish the true impact of war. In England the productions of 'Mrs Miniver' (1942) and 'Dunkirk' (1958) both contributed the idea of Dunkirk being a part of the 'people's war', celebrating the event as a success despite the true devastation and loss. The tragic reality of Dunkirk is expressed through McEwan's blunt and emotionless observations that even 'Mother and child had been vaporised'. The adjective 'vaporised' underlines the inhumane nature of the war. This is supported by the numerous 'mutilated bodies', with the dehumanization of people as they are returned to corpses used in part to repulse the reader. These 'mutilated bodies', and the way they question the unreliable nature of the past, are in direct tonal contrast to the light hearted reflections of Bernard and Hannah's disagreement, where he refers to Hannah as "silly".

As well as history and historical events, 'Arcadia' discusses scientific theories such as entropy and chaos theory. Stoppard uses these theories to explore the unreliable nature of the past and by applying the concept of time: facts can be the truth until proven incorrect. Septimus believes that Newton's theory encompasses all theories in the universe, however Thomasina proves this idea wrong as she demonstrates the possibility of the truth changing and evolving with time. Thomasina suggests to her professor that "when you stir your rice pudding, the spoonful of jam spreads itself round making red trails like the picture of a meteor in my astronomical atlas. But if you stir backwards, the jam will not come together again". Thomasina discovers the irreversibility of the reaction and disproves the universality of Newtonian laws. The chaos theory is perhaps the 'framework'<sup>12</sup> of the play and the theorem can be interpreted to question whether 'history, discoveries, and art, once lost can be recovered in the future'<sup>13</sup>. Stoppard suggests that human understanding and knowledge is constantly developing, and the evolution of knowledge, despite its mutability, unites the characters and ties the play's events together

In 'Atonement', Briony's reconstruction of events fail to fulfil the connections between the characters and leave the reader uncertain of the truth. The reader is subjected to a 'novel full of writers'<sup>14</sup> with their sense of certainty in the author being constantly eroded. Briony is revealed as the writer at the end of the novel (despite McEwan, obviously, being the fundamental author of the novel). As Briony's constructed truths are in the 'context of McEwan's novel rather than her own, we are deliberately allowed to see the process of fabrication and to see that her story is artful in its reconstruction of 'fact'.<sup>15</sup> 'Atonement' lacks a solid foundation of what events are factual or fiction with the idea of 'fact' being constantly undermined. The most obvious presentation of this is when Briony reveals that she never visited Robbie and Cecilia: 'lacking

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<sup>10</sup> Laura Burden, 'Playing with Genre in Atonement' p.23 English Review December, 2019

<sup>11</sup> Theo Tait, 'The Connell Short Guide to Ian McEwan's Atonement', 2015

<sup>12</sup> Paul Edwards, Katherine Kelly, 'The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard' p.176 Cambridge University Press, 2001

<sup>13</sup> Torre Puckett, 'There is no proof: Fermat's Last Theorem and historical reconstruction in Tom Stoppard's Arcadia', Journal of Contemporary Drama in English, 2019

<sup>14</sup> Theo Tait, 'The Connell Short Guide to Ian McEwan's Atonement', 2015

<sup>15</sup> Robert Kidd, 'Atonement Robert Kidd' English & Media centre, 2007

courage for confrontation'. Briony's account does not document the truth but allows the lovers to 'survive to love' through her literature, despite 'what really happened'. She declares this is in order to avoid the 'bleakest realism'. McEwan suggests that Briony's compulsion to uplift the reader can undermine the certainty of the truth, presenting the nature of the past as unreliable and deceptive.

Stoppard equally uses literature in an attempt to uplift in his final scene and more convincingly, John Flemming suggests that 'metaphorically, Stoppard is more interested in looking at, or looking for, similarities beneath external differences'<sup>16</sup>. In his final scene, Stoppard chooses to repair the truth by utilising the power of art to congregate the characters from both history and the present day in one scene. In act 2 scene 1 the tragic death of the young prodigy Thomasina, who 'burned', is revealed; however, Stoppard chooses to discount the tragedy as the play finishes before the inconvenience of the truth can play out. Stoppard also presents the loving relationship between Thomasina and Septimus to strengthen the positive mood of the scene, despite the tragedy the audience understands is to come. The non-linear structure allows him to immortalise Thomasina despite its scientific inaccuracy. This also proposes the idea of entropy as Thomasina's dancing still inspires the audience, despite our knowledge that she 'died in the fire'. The idea of entropy is a pessimistic prediction that humanity and the world is ultimately doomed as we are mortal beings; "When we have found all the meanings and lost all the mysteries, we will be alone, on an empty shore". The adjective describing the 'empty shore' conveys an unfulfillment that one might receive at the end of life. However, Thomasina's final dance suggests that the power of the arts can fulfil this predicament, however the concept of time limits her academic potential. "The staging of the play creates a number of subtle and powerful visual images that blur the line between the periods further and, ultimately, join the two"<sup>17</sup> creating a positive and elated ending. Stoppard suggests that false accounts can have the power to inspire if constructed in a particular order. Although Stoppard is using the craft of writing to exploit the unreliability of the past, the audience may feel less misled than in 'Atonement'. Despite the true tragedy in 'Arcadia' failing to console, the ending message is positive and perhaps satisfies the audience as 'nothing is irretrievable as long as intellectual curiosity persists'<sup>18</sup>. Instead, 'Atonement's' ending may feel more unsettling to a reader as the 'recursive structure complicates' the 'perspectives'<sup>19</sup>.

The discomfiting truth in the ending of Stoppard's play is perhaps similar to McEwan's disheartening presentation of positive connections. McEwan explores the unremitting force of language to convey the uncertainty of past truths in the relationship between Robbie and Cecilia. After Cecilia receives Robbie's candid confession of his affection, she experiences a relieving sense of clarity in their relationship as 'everything was explained' and 'a lifetime it was clear to her now'. McEwan uses these letters to underline literature's ability to evoke emotion. Robbie's hyperbolic and passionate statement 'I love you, and you saved my life' presents the craft of writing as a form of emotional liberation. Their positive connection is later undermined by the confession that 'they had run ahead of themselves in their letters', which suggests that in truth, their expressions were driven more by pain and distance than by love.

Both authors explore a close analysis of physical literature to complicate the nature of the past with literary context. In 'Arcadia', the historic documents found in '*The couch of Eros*' mislead the present-day characters allowing the past to be misconstrued. Bernard elaborates on the finding

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<sup>16</sup> John Flemming, '*Tom Stoppard's Arcadia – modern theatre guides*', 2008

<sup>17</sup> Chris Standford, '*In defiance of science, or: how I learned to stop worrying and conquer Arcadia*' English & Media centre, 2008

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Lowden, '*Doubled by time- iteration in Arcadia*', 2010

<sup>19</sup> Theo Tait, '*The Connell Short Guide to Ian McEwan's Atonement*', 2015

and exclaims that Septimus 'fought in a duel with Byron' (a genuine Romantic poet). His short and assertive statement conveys his confidence, however Stoppard indicates that despite his certitude, his assumption is flawed as Hannah reminds Bernard that "you haven't established it was fought. You haven't established it was Byron". Hannah's bold and punctuated sentences underline the gravity of his fault. Stoppard alludes to the unreliable nature of the past, one that is easily misunderstood through their disagreement and the involvement of Byron, a real-life figure. McEwan similarly uses a literary context, choosing a quotation from Jane Austen's 'Northanger Abbey' in his epigraph. Austen's 'naïve heroine'<sup>20</sup>, Catherine Morland, complicates her reality using her own fantasies inspired by her reading, misconstruing the truth. 'Both Catherine and Briony fail to distinguish between the fictional and the real, and Austen could, like McEwan, have decided to portray serious harm done as a result of Catherine's imaginative interpretation of events.'<sup>21</sup> Evidently both McEwan and Stoppard deploy literary context and physical literature to demonstrate the ease of misunderstanding reality, and the past.

McEwan also refers to the reader's contextual knowledge to present the past as unreliable. In Samuel Richardson's 1748 novel 'Clarissa', Robert Lovelace courts Clarissa, a name which seems reminiscent of Cecilia, however it is her sister, Arabella, who he falls in love with. The intertextuality of the novel potentially indicates that Briony may have underlying romantic feelings towards Robbie as she considers 'how deliciously self-destructive it would be...to be married to a man'. The oxymoronic combination of the adverb 'deliciously' and 'self destructive' suggests that Briony experiences emotions that are contradictive and unfitting, evidence of an unreliable emotional persona. Briony, the author of 'The trials of Arabella' seems similar to Richardson's character Arabella, similarly, Robbie is alike in name to Robert Lovelace. However, unlike in 'Clarissa', Robbie does not return Briony's affection. The intertextual illusion of Briony using the novel to impose her fantastical desires emphasises how Briony lives her life through her literary imagination, rather than through truth and evidence. The ironic references to other literary texts are a 'continuous reminder that the entire book is the final literary artifact of Briony, a professional author.'<sup>22</sup> McEwan highlights the dangers of confusing fiction with reality in Briony's ability to impose her fantasies onto reality through literature.

Both 'Atonement' and 'Arcadia' explore how humans can shape unreliable accounts and underline literature's ability to falsify past events. 'Atonement' explores whether trying to achieve a reliable account in literature is possible, whereas 'Arcadia' explores the importance of validity in storytelling. Stoppard and McEwan use the structure, context and the concept of certainty to demonstrate the unreliability of the past and the unattainability of certain truth. 'Atonement' and 'Arcadia' propose that 'while the truth of the past is unrecoverable, attempting to access the facts of the past is not useless', their characters engage in this process to perform individual efforts to 'atone' or to complement their academic ambitions. The texts, however, both differ in the tone of their ending, with 'Arcadia' presenting an elating final scene and 'Atonement' finishing with Briony's diagnosis of 'dementia' and the confirmed deaths of Robbie and Cecilia.

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<sup>20</sup> Neil King, 'Atonement – questioning the imagination', English & Media Centre, 2021

<sup>21</sup> Neil King, 'Atonement – questioning the imagination', English & Media Centre, 2021

<sup>22</sup> Brian Finney, 'California state university', 2002

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