

The Narrative Techniques in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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Abstract: Ian McEwan is one of the leading contemporary novelists whose works are received well by readers as well as critics. He has been controversial sometimes but his works always put forward something new which attracts, often shocks, the readers and engage critics and scholars. His novel *Atonement* (2001), along with *Saturday* (2005), is considered a seminal work of the first decade of twenty first century. The novel was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2001 and the film made on the novel, with the same title, won the Academy Awards. The novel *Atonement* beautifully blends the traditional as well as contemporary tendencies, techniques and themes and thus fosters hybridity in its nature. The novel is written in the form of metafiction and employs narrative techniques such as stream of consciousness, flashbacks, foreshadowing, unreliable narratology and multiple points of view. The use of these techniques gives the novel its unique nature and form which will be discussed in the paper in detail. The paper intends to analyze these narrative techniques which establish the reputation of the novel and gives it a hybrid identity.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, *Atonement*, stream of consciousness, flashbacks, foreshadowing, unreliable narrator and multiple points of view.

1. INTRODUCTION

The novel *Atonement* (2001) showcases a great amalgamation of both traditional and contemporary narrative techniques. The novel is written in the form of a metafiction, which despite of being in practice earlier, is associated with postmodernism and contemporary literary trends in fiction. Other techniques such as stream of consciousness and flashbacks are associated with the modern period, which ended in late 1920s, of English literature. Other narrative techniques such as flashbacks, foreshadowing, unreliable narrator and multiple points of view give a rich and complex structure to the novel. The techniques also help in binding readers to the text and engage critics for a long time.

2. STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS TECHNIQUE

Ian McEwan explores the literary technique of stream of consciousness technique in his many novels and it is also employed in *Atonement* and this constructs an immersive and rich reading experience. Stream of consciousness is a narrative device that gives a written description of a character's thoughts and emotions in the reader's mind. This technique has been used rigorously and was famous during modernist period of English literature. In *Atonement*, a novel based on the World War Second, McEwan has used this technique to provide a sneak peek into the inner conflicts and wars of the central characters like Briony, Robbie and Cecilia. Their fragmented nature of thoughts and emotions experienced by the major characters has been described into the novel by the use of this technique. Briony, a writer herself, is compared with Virginia Woolf, who is credited for establishing stream of consciousness technique, by her editor who thinks the writings of Briony are imitations of the Woolf's technique.

McEwan is an expert in presenting an incident from different perspectives of different characters and this provides reader more options of meanings drawn from the text. One such incident is the love affair of Robbie and Cecilia who love each other from the very beginning but this is misunderstood by Briony who thinks Robbie is harassing her sister and it is her duty to save her. The whole thought process of Briony which lead to the false accusation of Robbie is reflected through the use of stream of consciousness technique. As the novel develops after the misunderstood fountain scene and love making in library, the influence of Jane Austen and Elizabeth Bowen can be seen. In another incident where thoughts of Briony are reflected is when Lola requests her to give her the lead role in her play, Yes. Unable to push her tongue against the word, Briony could only nod, and felt as she did so a sulky

thrill of self-annihilating compliance spreading across her skin and ballooning outward from it, darkening the room in throbs. She wanted to leave, she wanted to lie alone, face down on her bed and savor the vile piquancy of the moment and go back down the lines of branching consequences to the point before the destruction began. She needed to contemplate with eyes closed the full richness of what she had lost, what she had given away, and to anticipate the new regime.” (p. 10)

The use of stream of consciousness technique in the novel *Atonement* magnifies the emotional journey of the characters and allows the readers to cherish an intimate understanding of the experiences of the characters.

3. FLASHBACKS

In addition to stream of consciousness technique, Ian McEwan also uses the narrative technique of flashbacks which helps him in creating a complex and layered structure for his novels. As its name signifies, the flashback technique is used to achieve a shift in action from present time to a time period which has passed. The technique of flashback plays a significant role in the novel *Atonement* as the story is divided into three time periods; first before the World War Second, second during the war and third long after the war. This division needs frequent movements or shifts to previous time and incidents to establish a strong narrative. The technique is employed from the very beginning of the story when the reader is introduced with the childhood of Briony Tallis and the nature of her relationship with her siblings. Another such example of the flashback is that the reader is given information about the past of Robbie and Cecilia which makes it easy for the readers to digest the love affair of the son of a cleaning lady and daughter of the landlord. The main purpose of this technique is to provide the reader the necessary information about the characters, their behavior and their relationships and help the reader to enjoy a better understanding of their actions.

4. FORESHADOWING

Foreshadowing is a popular literary device in which the writer gives a hint or clue of the events which are yet to come in the story. So it is a passage to the future incidents which plays a crucial role in shaking the belief of the audience that things may not be as they

appear. Foreshadowing, thus, is instrumental for creating suspense in the narrative, heighten the feeling of curiosity and unease among the audience. However, it does not mean that all the details of every future incident is revealed by the writer but it is used to bind the interest of the audience till the end of the story as they continue reading in order to know what will happen next. Therefore foreshadowing works as a tool in the hands of writers which enable them to write more engaging piece of works. Foreshadowing can be achieved through various means such as dialogue, setting, plot, character's traits, by the use of metaphor and simile and even through the title. The title of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), for instance, foreshadows the coming events of the demise of the whole family. Ian McEwan uses this technique in many of his fiction such as *Black Dogs* (1992), *Saturday* (2005), *On Chesil Beach* (2007), *Nutshell* (2016), etc. McEwan has used the technique in *Atonement* (2001) also as a tool to create a curiosity among readers. Even the title of the novel ignites the thought inside the readers mind that there must a crime or injustice in order to have atonement. Further McEwan incorporates the theme of humiliation in the story, as Cecilia humiliates Robby, Robby humiliates Briony, Briony humiliates the twins and Lola so on. The humiliation confirms that some character may resort to some kind of crime for revenge and this speculation of the reader becomes reality when Briony falsely accuses Robbie of raping Lola and shatters any possibility of the union of the lovers Cecilia and Robbie. Another incident of foreshadowing is when there is a detailed description of literary interests and potential of Briony in the beginning of the novel which is a hint that Briony may be the writer and this becomes true. The huge discussion over the Amo bars foreshadow the possibility of war in the novel. Therefore, the *Atonement* is full of the incidents used as foreshadowing in the story.

5. MULTIPLE POINTS OF VIEW

McEwan is known as a writer who allows his novels to evolve naturally and for this he incorporates different point of views. The understanding of the readers about the story and events is based on several viewpoints of the characters and not on the authorial voice. McEwan, through the use of various viewpoints, successfully depicts that how a single

event is capable of distilling totally different interpretations and have different impacts on the lives of characters. This, sometimes, makes McEwan's fiction complicated for the readers. In addition to this, the technique gives writer access to the thought process of his characters and permits him to depict their thought process and how they reach to the conclusion. Examples of this technique are scattered throughout the novel. One is when Briony sees Cecilia and Robbie making love in the library and misinterprets the incident as an act of sexual perversion by Robbie.

The novel *Atonement* is divided into three parts and all are three different time periods and all are told from different point of view with its unique richness. The first part of the novel is told from the point of view of 13 years old Briony, the second part is told largely from Robbie's point of view who is a soldier in the World War Second and the third part is again told from the old Briony's point of view. So the different point of views helps the reader to understand the fabric of emotion in the novel and reach to a better understanding of the story and characters and contests the concepts of atonement, guilt and truth.

6. UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

Apart from above mentioned narrative techniques, Ian McEwan also employs unreliable narrator in *Atonement*, who cannot be trusted for certain reasons, to add a different level of complexity to the plots of his novels. The technique also enhances interest of the reader as it creates suspense and thrill and highlights the issue of lack of trust. In McEwan's novel *Atonement*, Briony is an unreliable narrator who cannot be trusted by the reader and the reason behind this unreliability is Briony's narcissist attitude, immaturity and tendency to change reality by using her imagination.

Briony is very young when the novel begins and she develops a tendency to distort incidents through her imagination. She wants to be the center of attention of everybody and she is ready to do anything for it. Her false accusation of Robbie of Lola's rape is also inspired by the fact that she misunderstands because she wants to see the things the way she wants them to be. All this contributes to the heightened unreliability of Briony as a narrator. Moreover, Briony does not reveal that she is the narrator of the novel till end and this also adds to the distrust about her story of happy

reunion of Robbie and Cecilia in the end. The unreliable nature of narrator in the novel *Atonement* leaves reader to speculate at several points.

7. INTERTEXTUALITY

Ian McEwan's novels such as *Enduring Love* (1997), *Atonement* (2001), *Saturday* (2005), *On Chesil Beach* (2007), etc. are known for their intertextual nature as they allude to different writers and texts. One of the most famous examples of intertextuality in McEwan's writings is that when Daizy in *Saturday* recites Mathew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" and there are many such examples. In *Atonement* also, the intertextual nature is highlighted to establish a connection between present, historical events and cultural specifications. Even the title "Atonement" itself is a reference to the Greek mythology of guilt, truth and atonement. McEwan also mentions various works of literature as a reference in *Atonement* such as Virginia Woolf's *To the Light House*, James Joyce's *Ulysses* which connects his novel to the larger tradition in literature.

8. CONCLUSION

Throughout his literary oeuvre Ian McEwan has employed various narrative techniques such as stream of consciousness, flashbacks, foreshadowing, unreliable narrator and multiple points of view and so on. The purpose of using these techniques is to make his novels more interesting and establish a strong bond between the reader and his text. There is no doubt that McEwan is a well received writer by readers as well as critics and this highlights the fact that he has been successful in using these narrative techniques in his novels. The utilization of these techniques has rendered excellence and artistic beauty to McEwan's novels.

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