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Dysfunctional Family vis-à-vis Personal Trauma: A Study of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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Abstract

Since Freud's early concept of trauma, more specifically hysteria, has given rise to numerous, albeit diverse, theories. The common factor, however, in most of these is the hypothesis that trauma in any form disrupts, at least temporarily, the growth of the individual. Through an analysis of Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* this paper aims to explore how trauma within this text is represented, viewed and engaged as a result of dysfunctional families. In its broadest terms, trauma as explored within this will encompass personal trauma. By introducing the novel *Atonement* as a specimen this thesis focuses on the way the family dysfunctionality model is employed in it. The main aim of this paper is to find how the distorted family background often influences the character's further development negatively and predestines them to fail in their own relationships.

Keywords- Dysfunctional family, Trauma, Misjudgment, Psychological development

It is a common thing with many writers that their works, no matter which period of their writing they come from, usually bear signs of more or less similar attitudes, themes and ideas. Ian McEwan, winner and multiple nominee of the Man Booker Prize, is of course no exception to that. While the primary focus and plots of his literary works naturally change with time, one could, at the same time, find some similar patterns that keep recurring in many of them. The nature of these patterns is often a rather underlying one, insignificant at first, yet tightly connected with the main plot, and in many cases even influencing and forming it. Such a pattern also conceives the presence of a dysfunctional family background and the resulting personal trauma and its intense and negative impact upon the mental and physical development of the characters. Moreover, it is the main purpose of this thesis to show that Ian McEwan uses the destructive and inescapable nature of this distorted family background to indirectly and sometimes almost invisibly form the characters and predestine them to end up in rather unsuccessful relationships, or even worse, result in their personal failures.

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Ian McEwan is one of the finest writers of his generation, and amongst the most controversial. He has achieved unbroken popular and critical success since, he won the Somerset Maugham Award for his collection of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites*. Shortlisted four times for Britain's most prestigious literary award, the Booker Prize for Fiction, he secured the honour with *Amsterdam*, confirming his position with Graham Swift, Julian Barnes and Martin Amis, at the forefront of contemporary British writing. Although primarily a novelist and short story writer, McEwan has also written three television plays published as *The Imitation Game* (1981), a children's book, a libretto *Or Shall We Die?*. A film script *The Ploughman's Lunch*, and a successful film adaptation of Timothy Mo's novel *Sour Sweet*. Across these many forms, his writing nonetheless retains a distinctive character, perhaps best summed up in Kiernan Ryan's phrase, 'the art of unease'.

Looking at Ian McEwan's, the British bestselling author, writing from a general perspective, one simply has to notice that his novels are anything but optimistic and romantic. But in reality, it is then not surprising at all that many of them end up tragically for the characters, leaving them emotionally ruined and convulsing in misery, or even worse, dead without the chance of resolving their personal issues. While one of the possible reasons for these personal tragedies is some sort of outer influence beyond the character's reach, mostly the "wrong time – wrong place" pattern, another cause could be found in the characters' family background, or rather its dysfunctionality and incompleteness. Roger Boylan in his essay "Ian McEwan's Family Values" suggests that: "To Ian McEwan, only the universal values represented in the family unit ,love, loyalty, trust stability , stand between us and barbarism" (3). Three of McEwan's novels, *Atonement*, *On Chesil Beach*, and *Saturday*, all share characteristics of McEwan's unique style, and despite their differences in storylines, themes, and symbols, all three novels share elements of McEwan's brilliant literary voice. It is then the aim of this thesis, to show that in *Atonement*, Ian McEwan experiments with breaking these values, bringing a little bit of this "barbarism" to the lives of his characters and thus challenging the borders of morality and the thin line between good and evil, normal and abnormal.

While both *The Cement Garden* and *On Chesil Beach* deal mostly with small-scale intimate tragedies that appear to happen in only a tiny microcosm of their own, the *Atonement*, in contrast, works with much higher ambitions for it places a tragic relationship of two young people to the forefront of a global conflict, a thing not very common in McEwan's earlier works. As Brian Finney in his paper

Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*" aptly summarizes: "Instead of the closed claustrophobic inner world of his early protagonists, *Atonement* ranges from an upper-class household in pre-War

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southern England, to the retreat of the British army to Dunkirk, to a wartime London hospital, ending with a coda in 1999 (68).

Atonement begins in 1935 with the main character, thirteen year-old Briony Tallis, frantically trying to finish writing a play called *The Trials of Arabella*, which she hopes to present to her family later that evening when her twin cousins, Jackson and Pierrot, and their older sister, Lola, and Briony's older brother, Leon, and his friend, Paul Marshall, are set to arrive at the Tallis family's country estate. While Briony struggles to finish her script and cajole her cousins into taking part in the performance, Briony's older sister Cecilia begins a budding romance with the housekeeper's son, Robbie Turner.

Briony accidentally witnesses Robbie and Cecilia's back and forth flirtations and misinterprets what is actually going on. In the young girl's eyes, even though Robbie aspires to become a doctor, he still is considered to belong to the lower class, and therefore is unsuitable for anyone who has reached the status of a Tallis. Things get worse when Briony stumbles onto a sexually explicit letter that Robbie has written but throws away, never intending to mail it. Convinced that her sister's health and reputation are at risk, Briony makes up her mind to break up their relationship before it's too late.

At the Party that evening, Briony's mother, Emily, decides that Briony's play will not be performed. This causes the young twins to run away from the estate house. A search party is organized and everyone ventures out onto the grounds to look for the boys. During the search, Lola is attacked and raped. Briony is the only witness to the crime, and even though she could not make out the rapist's face, she is convinced that it must have been Robbie Turner. Being the only witness, Briony's word alone is enough for the police to arrest Robbie, and he is tried and convicted for the crime.

Part Two of the book takes place in France during WWII, as Robbie and two other British soldiers are trying to make their way to Dunkirk, where they hope to be evacuated. (After serving several years in prison, Robbie was given an opportunity to commute his sentence in return for service to his country during the war.) Now, badly wounded and separated from his unit, Robbie comes face to face with the horrors of war. This part ends with Robbie and his companions reaching the coast of Dunkirk just as Robbie passes out from his wounds.

In Part Three, we return to Briony Tallis. The war is still raging and Briony is now working as a nurse. We learn that several years ago, after seeing certain telltale scratches on Paul Marshall, Briony realized that it was Paul, her brother's friend, and not Robbie who raped Lola. Paul and Lola have since married, and Briony decides to punish herself by giving up her life of money and entitlement to work for the war effort.

While going about her duties, Briony happens across one of the men that travelled to Dunkirk with Robbie and learns he has made it back alive. She goes at once to see her sister

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Cecilia to tell her the news. Upon arriving, she finds Cecilia and Robbie have already found one another. Briony tells them that she will go immediately to the authorities and sign any documents necessary to clear his name, but they tell her not to bother, as they want nothing more to do with her. They send her away, but she vows she will do it anyway, then realizes it is too late.

And this is where the story ends, except it doesn't end here for there is one more chapter. Up to this point, the story is told in third person omniscient, but in the last chapter it switches to Briony's first person point of view. It is Briony's seventy-seventh birthday, and she has just been informed that she has vascular dementia and will die within a year or two. It is at this point that Briony confesses she is actually the author of the book *Atonement*, which she has spent the last sixty years writing in an effort to right the wrong she did to Robbie and Cecilia. But As it is explained in the last part of *Atonement*, it is not possible for Briony to publish her book with the characters of Paul and Lola while they are still alive. And since Briony herself is slowly dying, with not much time left, McEwan then concludes his novel with at least letting Briony have her own private atonement , reached through the pages of her book:

I like to think that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet (372).

It has been generally accepted by society that in a functional family unit a child should have two parents. Of course in the modern world, with all its liberations and developments, this consensus is going through many challenges and changes in thinking and new adjusted views are being pushed through. The model of a mother and father is often replaced by either single parenting or homosexual couples, yet even though these structures are common, even normal to say, they are still perceived as rather incomplete. And incomplete, though in a little bit different way, is the family in *Atonement* .

Though compared to other works of McEwan , in which the parents are simply dead, the Tallis children in the *Atonement* have both parents alive and physically-well, their absence from the family life is still striking. Mr Tallis spends much time at work and is usually referred to only indirectly, mostly as speaking on the phone or in connection with Robbie's education. His wife, Emily Tallis, is given much more space on the pages of the novel, for a whole chapter is devoted to her voice. Yet, the purpose of this chapter actually only strengthens the overall picture of her as not engaging much in her children's lives, though in her inner thoughts she does think about them, as well as about her husband and the whole household:

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She could not afford to let Hermione into her thoughts. Instead, Emily, breathing quietly in the darkness, gauged the state of the household by straining to listen. In her condition, this was the only contribution she could make (65).

Being a mere observer and listener, she herself is well aware of her incapability of being there for her children: “But though she sometimes longed to rise up and intervene, especially if she thought Briony was in need of her, the fear of pain kept her in place” (67). By doing so, she then leaves space for Cecilia, who, at least in Briony’s point of view, partly replaces her. This is relevant not only in the case of the Tallis family, but also in the lives of their niece and nephews, as well as in the life of Robbie. The former significantly suffer from their parent’s disputes and are even fully separated from them, finding shelter in the Tallis house. The latter, Robbie, is then said to have lived only with his mother since childhood, which results in his tight, yet dangerous, bonds to the Tallis family members, Mr. Tallis provides money for his education, Mrs. Tallis is rather distant and not fond of her husband’s decision, Cecilia falls in love with him and Briony, through her childish impetuosity and imagination, basically destroys his life. And so, what on the surface looks like a decent family setting, reveals as a complex chain of communication flaws, strange relationships and contradictory feelings, all leading to an unfortunate tangle of actions, with the already known tragic consequences.

The picture that arises from *Atonement* is one of the families that are deceptively complete, yet after looking under the surface, one easily reveals their true blemished face. While the most affected by these disturbances are of course the children, often accept their conditions with either a certain degree of aloofness or even with a slight joy of the “freedom” to come.

The characters of the novel *Atonement* find themselves struggling in life, dealing with a number of personal failures and misfortunes. Consequently, McEwan provides these characters with rather distorted and troubled family background, i.e., circumstances to blame for the protagonists’ distress. In the novel *Atonement* McEwan does not put the disrupted family features on display as openly and expressively as he does in *The Cement Garden*. The novel, considered by many critics and readers to be McEwan’s masterpiece, opens with a calm description of an upper-middle class household in a hot summer break. The narrative shifts to various figures, Briony, her sister Cecilia, Mrs. Tallis and Robbie, providing their individual accounts of the sunny day, with the difference of their accounts being so crucial in considering the plot development and the unfortunate misunderstandings and misjudgments from which it derives. The motionlessness and heaviness of the hot day reflects itself also in the narrative, everything goes on lazily, evoking a certain degree of stiffness and almost a menacing feeling of something to come and break the suffocating silence. However, apart from the well-known “crime” soon to be committed by Briony, one more thing also impairs

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the pseudo idealistic picture of the family, it is the reader's revelation of the hidden dysfunctionality. Petr Chalupský in his paper promptly summarizes this dysfunctionality in the following way:

The Tallis family from *Atonement* also represents a variant of a seemingly smoothly functioning traditional male-dominated patriarchal middle-class household, but as soon as the reader takes a closer look, he or she recognizes that underneath the polished surface there is sufficient amount of tension to cause an explosion. All the members of the family are far from the happy ideal, the absent and unfaithful father, his submissive wife, Cecilia who, despite her university education and free spirit, is expected to take up her mother's role in a conventional marriage, and Leon, a hollow man without independent judgement, whose 'agreeable nullity' reminds Cecilia of 'a polished artefact'(9)

Despite using exaggeratedly the word "tension," for the family members seem to be placating putting up with the not ideal circumstances rather than feeling some deep suspense, Chalupský makes an accurate point which confirms the hidden dysfunctionality of the Tallis family. And looking from a distance at the events to come later on that hot summer day, we can clearly observe that the dysfunctionality has its place among the causes of the unfortunate plot development.

As discussed thoroughly in the previous chapter, dealing with the issue of parental incompleteness, Briony, the narrator and an alleged author of the novel is a young girl, living in a world of her own fantasies and literary preoccupations. One of the reasons for her obsession with writing is of course the practical absence of her mother and father. Though being the head of the family, Mr. Tallis spends his days at work, not dedicating much time to his children. His wife, Mrs. Tallis, is said to suffer from severe headaches and thus frequently retires to her bedroom. Growing up without the care of her parents, Briony not only develops and extensive imagination, but also a certain attention-seeking attitude – both of which she then unfortunately employs in her account of the relationship between Cecilia and Robbie, as well as of Lola's rape. As a substitution for her mother she partly comes to Cecilia, in whose arms she finds some comfort, yet Cecilia's own insecurities and discontents do not make her able to perform a sufficient substitution. Taking into consideration her family background, it is no wonder that in the most crucial moment Briony's mind and feelings betray her, allowing her to create a false picture of Robbie as a villain and to determinedly assert its veracity. Her mother also plays a part in this, for in her aversion to Robbie and guilt feeling for not being a good mother, she supports her daughter's version and, despite his innocence, helps send Robbie to prison.

Apart from the Tallis family, the power of a disruptive family background could be also traced in the other characters' lives. The quarreling parents of Lola, Pierott and Jackson

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make their children go away and seek shelter in the Tallis household where the unhappy twins by their escape attempt basically pave the way for their sister's rape. Further, Robbie's childhood without a father makes him stick close to the Tallis children, establish a relationship to Mr. Tallis himself and get himself into a position which Fraser describes as "class and social dislocation" (466). Despite his lower social class, Robbie, using Fraser's words, "through his contact with the Tallis family as a child, becomes absorbed into the bourgeois mores of upper-middle-class life, and with the patronage of the father Jack Tallis, he goes to grammar school and then on to Cambridge" (466). All this, unfortunately, causes Mrs. Tallis' resentment, which tragically results in supporting her younger daughter's false accusations, thus practically helping send the innocent Robbie to prison and indirectly sentencing him and Cecilia to unhappiness and later tragic death. All these instances of disrupted family backgrounds then have similar, if not the same, consequences – that is, the members of these families are often inevitably marked by the dysfunctionalities, either internally or from the outside, leading them to some unfortunate situations, wrong decisions and personal failures. The forming power of the distorted family background is thus quite obvious, and so is its destructive impact upon the characters. The topic of family dysfunctionality, its forming power and consequences, is of course not restricted only to the novel *Atonement* though its analysis does serve as the cornerstone for tracing this topic and demonstrating its presence, many of McEwan's other works could be also read as dealing with the same patterns.

Analyzing the generality of difficulties in the dysfunctionality of families in the novel *Atonement*, the main aim of this paper is to present, the fictional paths which employs the topic of family dysfunctionality and its influence on the family members' further development. Through the means of a close reading and thorough analysis of *Atonement*, the ground was set for a following critical discussion, including also some of McEwan's other prose. The purpose of these steps was not only to trace the topic of family dysfunctionality and the following personal dilemma in *Atonement*, but also to prove the significance of this issue in connection to the development of his characters, and show how it constitutes a characteristic feature of his writing.

As McEwan is well known for his interest in the hidden parts of human desires, fears and sexuality, he often lets these aspects of the soul come to the surface right in these very critical moments, letting his characters reveal their true self and, in a way, thus partly admitting our general human self. In an interview, he speaks about the concept of evil:

I don't really believe in evil at all . . . I think there are only people behaving, and sometimes behaving monstrously. Sometimes their monstrous behaviour is so beyond our abilities to explain it, we have to reach for this numinous notion of evil. But I think it's often better to try and understand it in real terms, in ... either political or

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psychological terms . . . But it's quite clear, as a species ... in our nature, we are capable of acts of extraordinary love and kindness, inventiveness and mutual aid. On the other side, we are capable of acts of extraordinary destruction. I think it's inherent. I think one of the great tasks of art is really to explore that. ... I personally think the novel, above all forms in literature, is able to investigate human nature and try and understand those two sides, all those many, many sides of human nature. (1)

By sticking on this concept and being an investigator of humanity and at the same time a certain defender of its most hidden dark sides, his novels provide unembellished insights into the most peculiar corners of human experience with sexuality, trauma and emotions. It is then mostly for this certain "universality of perverse desires in all humans" (156) skillfully transmitted into the generally gloomy and dreary atmosphere of his novels that gained him the nickname Ian MaCabre.

In his article about McEwan's family values, Roger Boylan states that: "To Ian McEwan, only the universal values represented in the family unit—love, loyalty, trust, stability—stand between us and barbarism" (13). Subsequently, in *Atonement*, McEwan often challenges these values and, interested in the developments, provides his readers with a certain "release" of this restricted barbarism, caused by the family's various disruptions. The characters, either children or adults, are influenced by the distorted circumstances of their childhood and growing up and carry on these distortions with them, into their future lives and further relationships. Naturally then, with their emotional development being so seriously scarred, they are unable to deal with their circumstances successfully and usually do not find a way of escaping the family background for good. Subsequently, they end up emotionally ruined, socially misunderstood or with unfulfilled love relationships. McEwan then skillfully works with the inevitability of the influence his characters' family background have upon them and uses it as the primary forming element of their development and fate. Unfortunately, in most cases, this element is not only forming, but almost devastating.

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