
Comparison Of Ways In Which Thomas Hardy And Ian McEwan Explore Guilt And Its Consequences In Poems 1912-1913 And Atonement

“Atonement” by Ian McEwan and “Poems 1912-1913” by Thomas Hardy are texts that allow an in-depth and stringent look into the path of guilt as a consequence of action. When his wife Emma passed away in 1912, Thomas Hardy underwent a process of mourning in order to seek the passion he once felt for her, portrayed clearly in a number of his works including “A Pair of Blue Eyes” where Emma is fictionalised as a wondrous character. Upon completing the collection, he stated that he “shall publish (the poems) as the only amends I can make”, to his deceased wife, after he left her suffering through a number of long term illnesses in solitude for an extensive period of time. Containing “some of the most moving pieces in English literature”[footnoteRef:1], it revolutionised elegiac form. Written in response to his complicated, heartfelt feelings of grief, he spent about a year attempting to wistfully capture Emma in verse. In comparison, Ian McEwan’s novel “Atonement” frames Briony Tallis as narrator of a “story about love”. A young adolescent at the beginning of the novel, Briony convicts Robbie Turner of raping her cousin Lola based on misunderstood and anecdotal evidence. Later in life, she realises the consequences of her actions, and begins a “55-year-old assignment” as a form of redemption for her guilt, ending in the creation of “Atonement”. Over the course of writing these two texts, the two authors, either subconsciously or consciously, cover a number of topics relating to guilt, including the development of a conscience, status resulting from guilt, the pointlessness of atonement and parallels between the acts of guilt and atonement which are covered in this essay. These works act as a reconciliation between the author and someone whose death they blatantly blame themselves for, making their reflections on their own behaviour and the way they manage guilt all the more poignant. [1: “Thomas Hardy’s ‘Poems of 1912-13’” – Armstrong, Tim – A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry (2001)]

In both texts, the development of a conscience is key to acknowledging guilt and the need for atonement. In Hardy’s poetry, the development of a conscience is a precursor to guilt. When Emma passed away, she left a manuscript called “Why I Hate My Husband.” The insight that Hardy gained from the notebook allowed him to gain empathy towards his wife’s situation. This is revealed by a linear progression of the stages of grief, as outlined in the Kübler-Ross model of the five stages of grief, which can be seen clearly in his poems; in “The Walk”, Hardy illustrates his ignorance of his wife’s illness, leaving her in solace as he walked away, around, anywhere but with her, often taking his later wife, Florence instead. “Without Ceremony” focuses on the antagonistic blame present in a number of the poems, describing how Emma would disappear sporadically, as if to say “good-bye is not worthwhile”, which he interprets in relation to her death as wanting to leave Hardy in misery. “Lament” illustrates melancholy for Emma as she lies dead in the graveyard. with the line “She is shut/ from friendship spell/in her jailing cell”, illustrating her loss from the world after her passing. One could say that Emma had been locked away by Hardy’s ignorance in her life. By the time “Lament” was written, we can see that Hardy’s conscience had evolved and he had accepted his guilt.

We see parallels in Part One of Atonement, when Briony is thirteen years old, she wonders whether it is possible that she may be the only person who is conscious of the world. The line,

“Was being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony?” displays her lack of empathy, even to people within her own family. The stream of consciousness narrative acts as an interior monologue that attempts to allow the reader to grasp a greater insight into her thoughts. She wonders whether she is the sole human with “the bright private inside feeling she has”, with all the other people that she knows simply being “machines”. This displays Briony's lack of a conscience, as she is unable to relate to and empathise with, other people's perspectives. McEwan covered this topic in an interview conducted in response to the tragedy of September 11th 2001, where he stated that “Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity”[footnoteRef:2], going so far as to state that empathy would have circumvented 9/11. Therefore, McEwan emphasises spending the “rest of Briony professional life seeking to acquire” a form of reconciliation for her lack of empathy, in the form of “Atonement” as she gains insight by writing the other characters, the initial need arising from her feelings of guilt. [2: “Only Love and Oblivion”, Ian McEwan - Guardian -15/09/2001 - Last visited 18/03/2019 - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/15/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety2>]

At 17, Briony is exposed to “every secret in the human body” during her nursing training. This is a literal allegory for Briony's personal development in becoming more conscientious, as she can see inside others. By seeing others' true nature, she realises her obligation to treat others fairly, leading her to expand her earlier draft of ‘Two figures by a Fountain’ into a full document, per Robbie's request, detailing the events and Robbie's innocence. She transforms Robbie from “a villain in the form of an old family friend”, as she perceived in her youth, to a tragic hero dying before she reconciled her mistakes.

Whilst Briony was forced to endure a physical display of the inner human in order to begin her transformation into an empathetic adult, Hardy opens the diaries and develops his conscience within the confines of literature before turning to the art form itself for respite.

By developing a conscience through guilt, one can also develop almost a disinterest in the self, committing oneself absolutely to the abstract image of another. In the earlier poems of Hardy's collection, he pays close attention to himself and his own feelings. ‘The Walk’ focuses on Emma's absence from his life as he walks in his garden. The meter of the poem changes suddenly from the walking pace of iambic pentameter by the use of a caesura at the final word of the penultimate line, implying his sudden return to reality. In the final line, an anapaestic tetrameter is used, which emphasises the shock as it breaks the natural rhythm. These reveal his reaction to her death, which alters later in the series. “Lament” describes Emma in her prime, long before her death. Lines such as “She would have reigned/ at a dinner tonight” speak of the jovial Emma and the attention she received at any dinner she hosted, contrasted with “she is shut under grass”, which emphasises the desolation of death, trapped in the realms of constrained darkness. Shifting focus from himself to Emma symbolises his growing realisation of his treatment of her, changing his personal reflections to injustice that she died. This contrasts with Briony's treatment of her story's end, as she fails to recognize that her judgement in “London, 1999” illustrates selfishness in placing herself as the centre of the tale, despite having ventriloquised the narrative of her characters and named the purpose, literally, “Atonement”.

Part Two of Atonement is set in Dunkirk, where McEwan's father retreated with Expeditionary Force. McEwan reflects that his father rarely spoke of the events that he dealt with during the second world war, to which McEwan spends his time trying to reflect and find in this section of

the narrative. We are introduced to Nettle and Mace who rely on Robbie to guide them to Dunkirk. Their names are both symbolically violent, 'nettles' being plants that cause sharp pain, whilst mace is a primitive mediaeval weapon. Initially, the pair are difficult characters, disinterested in and insensitive to the horrors around them. They are "dismissive (of a) leg in a tree", a scene of graphic disgust, and continually tease Robbie, a "toff in a private's uniform", implying a contradiction between his class status and military rank, though this is ironic given his working class background. These are ubiquitous forms of coping with emergent Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) - as working class men, they use humour to cast aside their guilt and emotional troubles. After the events of retreating to Dunkirk with the bombing of the Finnish woman and child and witnessing an RAF pilot nearing death, it is clear that Robbie is developing symptoms of PTSD. This could be exacerbated by his injuries, making him feverish, although his fever assisted in expressing his emotive language in the final pages of Part 2. In a cathartic scene, Robbie expresses his feelings in, "You killed no one today? How many did you leave to die?", revealing his nihilistic viewpoint of surviving when people are condemned to death by the voice of "witnesses". Robbie states "All the witnesses are guilty", mirroring Briony and Emily sending a man to prison based on previous misconceptions. Mace leaves and Robbie's consciousness falters as he becomes increasingly delirious from his shrapnel wound. However, instead of abandoning him, Nettle stays with Robbie, through his "shouting" and delirium, until his death. This portrays the role of guilt in transforming people so they become more empathetic. Briony mentions Mace in the coda as the war editor she used to verify the information in Robbie's letters, which brings into question the veracity of the characters.

Guilt affects public personas, as experiences in personal lives affects personality. This happens with Lola and Paul Marshall. Paul rapes Lola whilst the family searches for runaway cousins. Lola manipulates this crime to orchestrate a marriage that embeds the initial rape as a powerful tool, pushing Paul to rise in class status just as she climbed socially by blackmailing Briony so she played Arabella. This marriage protected Paul from being convicted of rape. The marriage was based on manipulation of guilt of past actions to gain supremacy, therefore status is provoked by mistreatment and guilt.

During Emma Hardy's life, her reputation became increasingly distasteful. As Millgate comments, "Emma Hardy, temperamentally restless and impulsive, lacking satisfying occupations and sympathetic friends, grew ever more deeply resentful - and publicly critical - of her husband's self-sufficiency and fame." [footnoteRef:3] This resentment possibly came from the lack of attention that she received in her life. Beyond Hardy's often neglectful, if not abusive treatment of Emma during the later days of her marriage, in which she claimed, in a letter written to Hardy's sister in February 1896, that "Your brother has been outrageously unkind to me". [3: Thomas Hardy: A Biography Revisited by Michael Millgate, published 9th November 2006 by Oxford University Press]

Alongside the guilt within their marriage, Paul's "Amo Bars" and their success are indebted to World War Two. In Part One, Paul gloats about his impending wealth, giving excessive amounts to working-class Danny Hardman. The chocolate brand, "Amo," is a homophone for Ammo Mags, ironically also Latin for (I) Love. Overall it represents 'New Money', arising from exploiting war. Lola and Paul are forever indebted to violent horror. Briony sees them exit War Museum, of which they are patrons, indicating their morbid intrigue in warfare. They later develop their philanthropy in order to atone for supporting the war that eviscerated the lives of millions.

Hardy idealises Emma from when they met and married but corrupts her in. 'The Haunter' where he envisions her as a ghost saying, "to tell him a faithful one is doing/ All that love can do". Hardy imagines Emma is "Saying that now you are not as you were" in 'The Voice'. Clearly Hardy neglect the later years of marriage, avoiding his treatment of her. Proctor summarises, "Now (Hardy) no longer had the real woman, his heart and soul could dwell forever on... the girl with streaming auburn hair on her horse against the blue of the Cornish sea. The real person could never live up to that glorious lost romantic vision." [footnoteRef:4] He seemingly loses his sympathy for her as he starts to envision Emma in her younger, idealised form. [4: "In Love With a Dream: Thomas Hardy and his wife Emma" - Proctor, Loretta – (2/08/2012) <https://booksandotherthings.blogspot.com/2012/08/in-love-with-dream-thomas-hardy-and-his.html>]

In both texts, repentance relates to how guilt occurred initially. In "Atonement", Briony opens the letter from Robbie to Cecilia breaking trust with those who care most. In the epilogue, she reveals she utilised their letters to write "Atonement". She shaped her family's voices to her own desired state, controlling her guilt and transforming her unconscious to "directing her (unrealised) libido into something that is accepted and encouraged by the society" [footnoteRef:5]. McEwan originally planned to insert a fake author's profile into the work, but by making the text a clear metafiction he completely transforms the reader's understanding of Briony's character; she cannot detach herself from seeing real life as fantasy she can manipulate, leading her to commit her crime. [5: Childhood Trauma in Atonement and The Go Between - An analysis of children's psychosexual development - Irena Björk Filimonova - (2014) - last viewed 19/03/2019 <https://skemman.is/bitstream/1946/19708/1/BA%20Essay%2C%20final.pdf>]

In contrast, Hardy concludes his poems by detaching from the material. In "Castle Boterel", he leaves Cornwall in a storm, looking back at "Myself and a girlish form benighted", acknowledging her ghost will haunted him. He ends stating "I shall never traverse old loves domain/Never again", suggesting acceptance his attempt to reconcile his guilt, accepting his "sand is sinking". A consequence of his guilt is his failure to find further means of reconciliation. With his second wife, Florence Hardy, he wrote an autobiography. Emma resented Hardy's work as it detracted from her yet he attempted atonement through poetry.

These works emphasise the pointlessness of atonement. McEwan highlights "Atonement" as the book title defining it as a path of redemption, yet as an atheist, he is unable to pursue religious redemption. Briony's difficulty in developing a morally empathetic viewpoint reflects this inability whereas Hardy's seemingly agnostic viewpoint to life turned towards belief in God after Emma's passing. It is hard to see why they desire to atone. 'The Haunter' doubles this resolution as, "What a good haunter I am, O tell him" shows her as an adoring ghost, forgiving Hardy saying, 'a faithful one is doing /All that love can do'. This epitomises Hardy's pointless endeavour to find forgiveness. Atonement is rooted purely in guilt. Atonement is the consequence of guilt but here seems pointless as they are dead and cannot forgive.

Briony attempts to atone as a consequence of her guilt for fabrication. Her attitude to "vascular dementia" is joyous as she may be released with the thoughts of Robbie and Cecilia, believing she can finish with Atonement. Hardy worries he has little time to atone, referring to "sinking sands", his diminishing time on earth. Both seem relieved at the prospect of guilt being removed from their shoulders as a consequence of dementia or death.

Hardy is guilty over abandoning his wife but transfers his guilt by ignoring Florence by focusing on a dead lady, stating that the “loss has only grown bigger as time passes[footnoteRef:6]” in a letter to his friend. In ‘The Hunter’ Emma, ghost, watches him, knowing he cannot see her. Not learning from having abandoned his wife, he repeats his mistake, writing about Emma beyond the Collection, well into his second marriage, wishing to be buried beside Emma in his will. This suggests Florence to be a temporary companion, still adoring Emma. He does not recognise his treatment of Florence, seemingly learning nothing from his guilt over Emma. [6: The Collected letters of Thomas Hardy: Volume 8 – Written by Thomas Hardy - Edited by Michael Millgate and Keith Wilson – Published 04/10/2004]

Both writers bring guilt upon themselves, through neglect or overzealousness. Hardy’s publication of “Jude the Obscure” was opposed by Emma, as it contradicted her Christian beliefs. His guilt is eternalised in, “Rain on a Grave” as he states he sent “so coldly, so straight/ such arrows” suggesting he caused her depression, being indifferent to her gallbladder as she “shivered in pain”. The use of “cold” implies his passivity leading to his wife death. In Briony’s case, she commits a crime in insisting that Robbie, an innocent man, raped Lola, after pretending to have witnessed how Robbie “attacked” Cecilia, due to the contents of a letter she read. She calls herself “Cecilia’s protector” despite being a 13-year-old. Drawing from a “childhood of imaginative literature”[footnoteRef:7], as Brian Finney states, alongside constant storytelling, inspires creating her own complex and insightful tale which she has spun in her adolescent mind. Being a child, she doesn’t comprehend what love is, and she has become ensnared in her own fictional reality, whilst Hardy seems to indulge heavily in his novels and his poems, which question what attention was ever paid to her, therefore, they both bring the guilt upon themselves. [7: “Briony’s Stand Against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan’s Atonement”, Journal of Modern Literature, Volume 27, Number 3, Winter 2004 - Finney, Brian - <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/174843/pdf>]

Writing poetry was cathartic for Hardy and he returned to reality at Max Gate, except with Florence as his Wendy, not his antagonistic Puella Aeterna. Reflecting on his treatment of Emma had consequences, as it allowed him to repent but did not help his relationship with Florence. Conversely, Briony’s death leaves us unsatisfied, and wondering whether she repented unselfishly. Guilt and its consequences are explored through multiple perspectives in these two texts, but my conclusion is that guilt is motivated by complicated and intricate reasoning that is entirely personal, constructed to satisfy the conscience.

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