

Briony's False Perception in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*: Sexual Instinct and Family Relationship*

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Wang, Haiyi. 2021. "Briony's False Perception in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*: Sexual Instinct and Family Relationship." *The Journal of Modern British & American Language & Literature* 39.4:71-87. Ian McEwan's *Atonement* is a novel about how Briony attempts to obtain atonement for her false testimony by vividly portraying Briony's life journey. The effects of Briony's false testimony run through the novel. Ian McEwan describes the traumatic events Briony experiences before and after the testimony and the reasons that latently result in these events. The family issue and the personality distorted by sexual instincts have led to the traumatized life experience of Briony and her falling into false perception. This article integrates individual traumas during childhood and adolescence and analyzes the causes of Briony's false testimony. It fully interprets Ian McEwan's insight of false testimony, sex instincts, and family relationship, referring to Lacan's theory of mirror stage, in order to arouse more rational thinking on the root of trauma and to draw attention to traumatized people. (Sungkyunkwan University)

Key Words: trauma, false perception, testimony, sexual instinct, family relationship

주 제 어: 트라우마, 잘못된 인식, 증언, 성적 본능, 가족 관계

I . Introduction

Atonement is a well-structured novel. It is until the last chapter of the novel that the readers can realize the real author of the novel is the

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protagonist, Briony. She writes about the psychological trauma and inner struggle that an individual suffers as a witness, victimizer, and victim of a traumatic event. At the same time, Briony travels back to the place and time of the traumatic event through writing, and gives testimony of it with a different perspective, by which she liberates her mental world which is tormented by self-blame and regret. However, true atonement is impossible. In *Atonement*, the main plots are the countless traumatic episodes that Briony has experienced in childhood and adolescence, the confusion with her sexual instinct, and the miserable family relationship. Ian McEwan's works focus on the problems of childhood and adolescence, especially their growing environment, family relationship, and childhood traumatic experience. Most of the underage characters are troubled teenagers, and the protagonist of *Atonement*, Briony, is one of them. However, Ian McEwan does not condemn them but blames their parents, family, and the British society which results in the trauma and the post-traumatic effects that have lasted for years. The collapse of human nature and the cruelty of modern society are intertwined when it comes to atonement, but more is due to the individual's condition: a pitiful family and suppressed sexual instinct which exacerbates Briony to misrecognize her identity and give false testimony. The previous articles focus on the narrative mode used in *Atonement* and Briony's psychological trauma but lack the analysis of the reasons why Briony gave false testimony, especially conducting Lacan's theory of mirror stage.

Lacan's theory of mirror stage is a thorough analysis of human development. Briony's growing up is the development. The crime she commits and the loss of her identity demonstrate that she is struggling to develop into an adult. The theory of mirror stage concludes not only childhood and adolescence stages but also early years of a child and even the awareness in adulthood, which shows that as an individual,

self-consciousness forms from the time of birth. For example, a 6-month-old child feels fascinated when looking into the mirror and sees his or her image (Lacan 1977). 11-year-old Briony is no longer merely looking at herself in the mirror, but building her identity by the reflection of herself from others. Lacan (1977) also notes that “to be a particular case of the function of images, which is to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality, or as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*” (73). The cause of testimony trauma is in the realm of reality. In this paper, it is analyzed that Briony's false testimony results in her family of origin which shapes her as a girl longing for the authority of speech and she deals with her adolescent sexual instinct falsely.

II. False Perception and The Theory of Mirror Stage

Briony's growing-up environment is depicted from the beginning of the novel: the dull mansion, the distant family members, and the gloomy atmosphere are like an isolated island abandoned by the mainland. Briony writes down her experiences to express herself which represents her awakening of self-consciousness: a child named Briony tries to construct her cognition and establish autonomy by reading and writing. In reality, Briony dramatizes the truth by writing plays and in the plays, she manages to reverse her disadvantaged situation, playing a tragic heroine role. The core of Lacan's mirror stage theory states an unconscious self-deception phenomenon. Another crucial point is recognition based on image and imagination that the individual unconsciously identifies him or herself with the misrecognition (Ramin 2014). Briony is a silent and introverted girl who is ignored but longs for approves from others. In the Tallis mansion, Briony always feels nervous like a trapped animal in a cage: the gaze of male

adults is everywhere, but the attention she wishes to get from others is always out of reach. Her fear and agitation are driven by the adults around her and the disappointing absence of her father and elder brother stimulate her imitation and pursuit of the male authority. She does not feel secure. Therefore, Briony fails to seek her identity, instead, constructs a false perception which is a God's eye view, and can peek at the nature of each character in the novel (La Capra 2004). Watching others in the corner is the only way for Briony, who has no authority to speak, to establish her autonomy. The false perception forms the self-deception and occupies Briony's mental world unconsciously. She no longer lives herself but relies on her false perception. It is seen by Lacan that the false perception is out of control and once formed, difficult to erase: "no matter how successful the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve, as I, his discordance with his own reality" (Lacan 1977). The plays that Briony writes reflect the real-life scenes she has experienced, forming two opposing discourses, and superimposing the traumatic scenes. "How can a novelist achieve atonement when with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?" (McEwan 2002, 34). In the imaginary world of Briony's play, Briony is the supreme master of every speech. She can decide the destinies and personas of all characters at her own will, which comforts her traumatized mental world. "Self-exposure was inevitable the moment she described a character's weakness; the reader was bound to speculate that she was describing herself. What other authority could she have?" (6). She writes as a means to build a pseudo world that she exclusively and completely can control at will. She also combines her pseudo world with the real world to achieve social cognition and self-identity. Briony in real-life is nobody and in a state of aphasia. According to Lacan's theory of mirror stage, the Briony in the play is a pseudo self that has become the master over the real identity (Vickroy 2006). "This gestalt is also replete with the correspondences that

unite the *I* with the statue onto which man projects himself, the phantoms that dominate him, and the automaton with which the world of his own making tends to achieve fruition in an ambiguous relation" (Lacan 1977). The false perception is in an integrated pattern. It is a formidable hallucination to eliminate the real identity. In another word, Briony's false testimony gives a testimony to prove her authority of speech while the development of her real identity should not be an image of trying the best to be the center of a crowd to speak. If she grew up in a healthy psychological state, her false perception should have not occurred.

The arrival of her cousin Lola has aggravated Briony's feeling of frustration. Compared with Briony, Lola is coquettish, hypocritical, and sophisticated. They are in marked contrast: one is in the light showing off herself and the other is holding back in the dark. What Briony has experienced in the summer when she is eleven years old: the love affair between her sister and Robbie, her cousin Lola's arrogance, all aggravate her agony and push her to have a false perception, which breaks her cognition as a child, transforming from the image of a weak princess waiting for rescue to a brave heroine saving Lola and Cecilia. She eventually gives false testimony of Robbie's case and changes the destiny of her sister, Robbie, and herself. "Let the guilty bury the innocent, and let no one change the evidence" (McEwan 2002, 248). Lacan believes that imagination is formed based on the individual's background. Individual past includes family background, stories of ancestors that are heard from others, and the various events experienced in childhood (Herman 1992). Briony identifies herself possessing as power, wisdom, and courage, but her instincts that have been suppressed for a long time are eventually taken away by the imagination and false perception.

"... to designate the mechanisms of obsessive neurosis: inversion, isolation, reduplication, undoing what has been done, and displacement"

(Lacan 1977). The “mirror” in Lacan’s theory of mirror stage can also be explicated as the image of others, or an individual’s imagination or fantasy of others. This image of others comprises primary identification which is the awareness of the difference between self and others, and secondary identification which forms identity with the help of the other. The two stages of identification ultimately build an identity. In other words, both the image in the mirror and the people around us structure our identities and form an imaginary illusion of ourselves. When we watch others, we are not merely looking at them, but also reconstructing ourselves (La Capra 2004). The absence of her father and brother results in the lack of the patriarchal image in *Atonement*. Briony’s elder brother Leon is out all year round. His personality is mild and lacks personal opinions, and obviously does not possess authority in the family.

In Briony’s play, the male image is either a trembling father or a coward earl, which reflects her dissatisfaction with her absent and irresponsible father and brother. In sharp contrast, with these two weak male images, the capable doctor prince saves the princess from distress. The doctor prince in the play is a disguise, while in reality, Briony has a crush on Robbie who is studying medicine. The plots and character settings in the play demonstrate that Briony needs a strong father image to help her build her self-image. Subconsciously Robbie is the substitute for her father’s image and her sister naturally is regarded as the image of her mother. Therefore, when Briony witnesses the intimacy between her sister and Robbie, her ambivalence towards Robbie is unabated and her cognition disables her to tell whether Robbie is a lover or a friend, a father or a brother. If she is confused about what she has seen by the fountain, she must have started to imagine Robbie as an enemy. Then after witnessing what happens in the library, Briony decides to completely expel this imaginary enemy from her pseudo world. The desire to protect and control bursts out and her image of

others has been revised. Her false perception brainwashes her that she is no longer a little girl who knows nothing but is eager to possess the right and authority to judge. For the eleven-year-old Briony, giving testimony against an adult male helps her to gain attention, praise, and identity that she has been yearning for. Briony even thinks that she is doing good with virtue. The false self-appreciation has triggered excitement and happiness. Compared to her traumatic experiences, such a glorious moment has been given an essential meaning. Lacan notes that, “overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the constraints of his prop in order to adopt a slightly learning-forward position and take in an instantaneous view of the image in order to fix it in his mind” (1977, 76). Briony rejoices when giving the testimony. However, the sense of accomplishment does not help Briony to go through trauma and make progress of getting mature psychologically. After she gives false testimony, Briony still fears that no one would come to see her and talk to her anymore. The revealing of this inner emotion is of great significance: instead of the broken self-image, Briony cares more about the affection and support from her family. She is in another unbearable trauma: loss of trust from her sister. “The cost of oblivious daydreaming was always this moment of return, the realignment with what had been before and now seemed a little worse” (McEwan 2002, 72). The moment of giving a testimony passes quickly. She immediately goes back to the previous condition that no one listens to and cares about her. After the testimony, she even loses her sister. Lacan notes that the moment that Briony's satisfaction culminates is “. . . a freedom that is never so authentically affirmed as when it is within the walls of prison . . .”(1977, 72). Her testimony is never a real release of her false perception.

III. False Perception and Sexual Instinct

Lacan suggests that human beings should never overlook their desires (Erin 2016). But Briony does. “At that moment, the urge to be writing was stronger than any notion she had of what she might write” (McEwan 2002, 29). Her desires are not only sexual but also the desire to express, participate, possess, control, and destroy, which was firstly expressed in her writing. The frustration of being isolated by the adults and the unwillingness to be innocent inflate Briony’s body with all kinds of desires. Whether these desires can be satisfied is directly related to the sexual experiences of Briony. In the process of gaining self-affirmation and sex awareness, Briony, a little girl who doubts herself, is destined to experience confusion and fear. Her uncertainty about her own desires intertwine and aggravate. According to Lacan (1977), “. . . but what limits it is the ‘scant reality’ surrealistic unsatisfaction denounces there in.” The misrecognition of identity easily occurs when the reality does not meet the desire (73).

In the summer when she is eleven-year-old, her father is absent as usual. Her brother invites the chocolate tycoon Marshall and cousins to their home. Her sister Cecilia naturally acts as the hostess of the family. The life of the mother and daughter in the mansion of the Talis family is calm and closed before the arrival of the relatives, similar to a matrilineal clan. The male members of the family are either absent for a long time or do not possess masculine authority. When this calm is broken by the chocolate merchant Marshall and the servant’s son Robbie, the image of two invaders has since been established. Both Marshall and Robbie are outsiders, representing male authority invading the harmonious female paradise. The image of this intruder in Briony’s mind is the male’s sexual invasion of the female’s body in her imagination. If this is a result of Briony’s family environment and adolescent desires, how people act around her arouses her

sexual consciousness. The overly precocious cousin Lola is an alienated child, who is good at showing coquettishness, using female charm to seduce men, and being good at playing tricks to control others to get what she wants. Lola, who is older than Briony and manages to become the center of attention, and brings another kind of invasion to Briony's build of sex awareness and false perception.

Sexual attraction and restraint have been plaguing Briony, the girl's sexual perception is initially related to her elder brother. Everything is developed referring to Leon and transformed into "be found by a bearded woodsman one winter's dawn, curled up at the base of a giant oak", and she is "beautiful and dead" (McEwan 2002, 14). Thick beard is obviously a metaphor for sexual charm, which shows that although Briony hates sex-related thoughts, her heart is full of longings for it. However, there is neither a trustworthy female family member around her to give her a reasonable explanation, nor a mature and male family member to teach her that the sexual instinct is normal. Therefore, Briony trusts sense rather than sensibility and equates the sexual perception with guilt. "She vaguely knew that divorce was an affliction, but she did not regard it as a proper subject, and gave it no thought" (10).

Sexual relationship and sex awareness have once again become a problem to Briony in recognizing her identity at the arrival of Lola. Lola is a threat to her and a challenge to Briony's femininity. Lola clearly shows Briony her sexual charm, making the latter think about the value of her physical body to self-identity. "If she could only find herself at the crest, she thought, she might find the secret of herself, that part of her that was really in charge" (33). Moreover, what Lola brings to Briony is the subversion of Briony's right to arrange things at her own will, which is the mere way to outlet her oppressed instincts. ". . . every instinctual pressure constitutes a danger, even if it corresponds to a natural maturation process" (Lacan

1977). Obscured by Lola, she has no place to express herself and release her sexual instinct. Briony is forced to become a bystander. Her family's focus also shifts to Lola and others, all of which point to the marginal position of Briony's identity.

“. . . falling in love could be achieved in a single word—a glance” (7). Anyone can tell that Briony is in love with Robbie and longs for possessing him by watching Briony taking a glance at Robbie. When she witnesses the intimacy between her sister and Robbie, her jealousy, sexual desire, and anger instantly gather. At such a moment, after seeing what happens by the fountain and in the library, Robbie enters Briony's cognitive world as a criminal. These two scenes cause Briony's subconscious anxiety at her sexual instinct. Briony is dependent on her sister and has a crush on Robbie so that witnessing what happens by the fountain has no less impact on her than the shock of witnessing the intimacy between her parents. On one hand, Briony is eager to deny her identity as a child, on the other hand, she still cannot deeply understand and truly enter the adult world. She feels aggrieved, curious, shocked, mad, and confused. The existence of the couple causes her to be neglected. She fears sexual attractiveness and is confused about her sexual instinct. As a result, Briony believes that Robbie rapes her sister and sexually assaults Lola, which is revenge on the intimate couple. She endures the anxiety of establishing her identity and the inexplicable sexual awareness independently. Lola takes the initiative and Briony is excluded from the close relationship between her sister and Robbie. The images of others over her identity cause severe psychological trauma in Briony's heart. The absence of her father makes Briony feel curious about the males around her such as Robbie.

However, this childish empathy ends when Briony discovers that Robbie is in love with her sister, and she feels betrayed. According to Lacan (1977), the sexual instinct of a child remain irreducible at an early year. “.

. . . and reveals both a libidinal dynamism that has hitherto remained problematic and an ontological structure of the human world that fits in with my reflections on paranoiac knowledge" (76). The sexual instinct constitutes an identity that the human being's behavior is rendered by the female and male features.

In Lacan's view, identity is not a conscious entity organized by "principles of reality" that Freud claims but a fantasy beyond reality (Freud 1989). ". . . the *I* formation is symbolized in dreams by a fortified camp, or even a stadium, disturbing, between the arena within its walls and its outer border of gravel . . ." (Lacan 1977). Sinking in the depression of adolescence, Briony compulsively forms her identity by observation and imagination all day long. In addition, the demonization of Robbie in Briony's imagination is a result of the lack of sexual awareness and the inability to control the erotic desires between men and women. The absent father is split into two projections: Robbie who represents pure love and emotion, and Marshall who represents sensuality and materiality. Briony thinks her elder sister is the combination of mother and a mature female body, while Robbie's image is a fusion of multiple identities such as father, brother and lover. Therefore, when Briony reads eroticism in Robbie's letter, which gleams with the desires of human beings and completely different from the dignity that she reads in classics. Robbie's words shatter Briony's imagination of spiritual love. In a patriarchal society, Briony does not know how to face her own body, thinking it in a false way that the female body is a coveted target of men. The meaning of the body is negated and replaced by a sense of mental disgust. The sexual instinct of men and women is a trauma to her and leads to the false testimony.

IV. Miserable Family Relationship

It is said by Lee (2016) that the family relationship contains three sub-relationships, namely the husband-wife relationship, the parent relationship, and the brother-sister relationship. Each relationship should not interfere with the other to ensure the mental health and harmony of a family (11). In *Atonement*, Ian McEwan describes a family in which all three relationships are abnormal. Although family members constitute a blood relation, they are alienated to each other. Briony's mother is a severe migraine patient. Seemingly, she often regrets not being able to participate in the daily events of the family. In fact, she knows every secret and conflict in the family (David 2010). The sick mother and absent father shape Cecilia with maturity that is not commensurate with her age, acting as the backbone of the family and the support of Briony. Lacan (1977) notes that "an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase, at witnessed by the use in analytic theory of antiquity's term, *imago*" (76). In psychology, "*imago*" is a term of an image that is formed unconsciously with the impression on parents during childhood and has an effect on the individual even in adulthood period. There is no doubt that the "*imago*" of her parents is irresponsible and absent. Therefore, the effects of her parents render Briony staying in a misrecognition. She imagines Robbie does hurt and damage her sister severely, and she spends her entire life going through the atonement. The purpose of atonement is not only to make up for Robbie and Cecilia but also to go back to her traumatic history and find the truth to the traumatic event so that she can live over the trauma, regain autonomy and acquire healing. As to how Ian McEwan says at the end of the novel: "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" (McEwan 2002, 351). At

the end of the novel, Briony, who possesses reputation and fame, is once again transformed into a child who was severely damaged in childhood but unable to return to the past and repair the rift. She hopes to resurrect Robbie and Cecilia in the work and the two would still be in love, sitting side by side in the library, and reading a book together. The scene switches instantly into childhood trauma memories, which fully illustrates that Briony is both the victimizer and victim of the trauma. This is why in the imagination and hope of adult Briony, Robbie and Cecilia, who are resurrected, are arranged to look like they are in love, watching Briony's childhood testimony with approving eyes. It can be seen that Briony is unable to let go of not only ruining the happiness of Robbie and her sister. She is more concerned about the collapse of her family relationship. Her father is indifferent and her mother is out of reach. Robbie and her sister, whom she regards as a substitute for her parents, pass away one after another. The family of origin is supposed to be an important influence for children to build themselves. The lack of family affection is the wound that cannot be healed, which has also become the fatal source of Briony's no-mercy acts to others. Some people interpret *Atonement* as "everyone's original sin", referring directly to the classic doctrine of the Bible. Moreover, the second half of the novel depicts the war scenes and merciless killings. Prudently studying the actions and destinies of each character in the novel, Briony does commit a "crime", but are the adults around her truly innocent and not responsible? The indulgent Lola who loses her virginity and the brutal Marshall, the policeman who personally sends Robbie to jail, and Briony's parents and brother . . . When they were pushing innocent and young Briony to a trap, did they realize that they were committing a crime? In sharp contrast to Robbie's tragic death, Cecilia's despair, and Briony's frustration, Lola and Marshall, achieve money and fame, acting as philanthropists in the fashion and culture

acquaintance. It is them who should undergo atonement but they have been swaggering on the street with no conscience.

Briony eventually realizes that her “crime” is to a certain extent, a collective crime, and her parents are responsible as well. After rebuilding the sense of autonomy, reviewing the traumatic events, and reestablishing the connection with others, in the end, she gradually gets over the psychological and physical trauma. From the summer of age eleven, Briony’s life has become an endless cycle of traumatic experiences. The testimony has become an inextricable shadow of her, and the agony from the lack of family affection has never been healed. The letter of her father telling the marriage of Lola and Marshall brings Briony back to the trauma of that year. This time, she finds that there has always been a pseudo male image looming in her childhood memories. She has been imitating their way of thinking and speaking and finally gives false perceptions. In other words, Briony’s identity is a shadow attached to other male entities of which the construction has never been completed (Paul 2007).

Behind such a crippled identity is the father’s indifferent attitude in the letter, she receives a greeting of merely asking about her homework and physical condition. For a long time, she is used to this indifference, and never expects anything from her father. In *Atonement*, this is the first time Briony expresses dissatisfaction with her father or realizes the trauma of lacking her father’s love for many years but does not ever receive a response. Her desire to revenge on Robbie, destroy the surrounding environment, and speak with authority are a result of her long-term failed attempt of getting attention from her father (Mathews 2007). She eventually falls into deep self-inferiority and self-blame. When Briony finally realizes that her father has been knowing what really happened on that night, her false perception is broken entirely: she has never possessed real view of God, it only belongs to males like her father who “lay in the dark and knows

everything” (McEwan 2002: 63).

V. Conclusion

The coda of *Atonement* is a happy ending in Briony's imagination that her sister Cecilia and Robbie go back to the peaceful day, reading a book together in the library. She receives consolation rather than atonement because her testimony eventually leads to the collapse and death of Robbie. What is done cannot be undone and she is the sinner. Her trauma of the family relationship is inflated in her mind and drives her to give false testimony. As an adolescence, she is not able to cope with her sexual instinct. The suppression from family and loss in between real identity and wrong perception burst out at that moment when she claims Robbie sexually assaults Lola. In the process of facing the past and healing the wound, Briony writes to soothe her soul, and at the same time gain a deeper understanding of identity, humanity, and society. She conciliates herself and washes off most of the traumatic memories. Finally, she can face the future life calmly. In accordance with Lacan (1977). “Thus, the shattering of the *Innenwelt* to *Umwelt* circle gives rise to an inexhaustible squaring of the ego' saudits” (78). The veritable identity of Briony is shattered to the wrong perception which manipulates her to give testimony and go through the trauma.

In *Atonement*, Ian McEwan shows us the misrecognition of identity that happens to a child and calls on society to pay attention to children and adolescence. Only by being aware of the existence of trauma and speaking about the traumatic experience can people be freed and learn a post-traumatic lesson. Only tolerance and love can eliminate evilness and help to overcome fear.

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