

Multiple perspectives in atonement essay



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McEwan's novel (and subsequently Wright's film), manages to grip the audience and hold its attention simply by retelling a story from different viewpoints. It is this use of multiple perspectives that allows *Atonement* to be more than a merely average book or film, and turns it into a moving, modern day classic. ' The novel's epigraph, taken from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, serves as both a warning and as a guide to how the reader should view this narrative. ¹ It urges them to consult their own understanding of events. Yet, even in spite of the novel's epigraph, we still place our trust in what we see and hear.

This is particularly evident from watching the film. In the opening sequence, we see a dolls house, yet we do not realise it is a dolls house until the camera zooms out. Similarly, in the second scene, we see the exchange between Robbie and Cecilia from Briony's viewpoint. If this was a viewer's first experience of *Atonement*, they would be forgiven for sharing Briony's misunderstanding that Robbie was the villain of the story, commanding Cecilia to jump into the fountain, especially with the ominous music playing in the background, and while Briony's mistake is shown clearly in the novel, with McEwan writing ' The sequence was illogical'² would only realise otherwise after seeing the scene from Cecilia's perspective. In the novel, we see this scene from Cecilia's perspective first, before seeing it from Briony's viewpoint, showing us both what happened and how Briony misunderstood the situation. However, the fact that the scene is shown from Briony's perspective first in the film is more potent, as it allows the audience to share in the young girl's confusion, along with highlighting how we accept what we see as fact, irrespective of how biased or unreliable the viewpoint may be.

McEwan also uses this technique of multiple characters insights in the scene in the library, and again, it highlights for the reader Briony's confusion. Up until this point, we have seen how Briony misunderstands the relationship between Robbie and her sister. She feels that Cecilia is in danger and that it is her duty to protect her. So, when she comes across Cecilia and Robbie in the library having sex, from her point of view it seems as if her sister is being pinned to the wall in some sort of attack.

We then see the scene from Cecilia's point of view. While it seems obvious what has happened to the audience, it is easy to see how the young Briony got confused. This confusion is pivotal to the plot, and yet, it is only later in the novel and film that we realise what grave consequences it has. While McEwan uses six different viewpoints throughout the film, when it comes to the attack, we only see Briony's perspective, which shows that not only was she the only one to see the attack, but also serves to highlight the fact that her opinion, which has been formed from her clouded perspective, will be the only one which matters. This could be due to the fact that throughout the text, and indeed the film to a certain extent, two authorial figures are seen; McEwan and Briony.

Although Briony is a fictional character, and although we get other characters viewpoints in certain scenes, we are very much aware that she is set apart from the others, that this is her story to tell. We see this manipulation of perspective as Briony accepts the fact that she is too young to understand certain things, and the use of language like ' she wasn't to know it then'3 emphasises to the reader that this is an older Briony looking back on her young self, trying to justify her wrongdoings. Wright emphasises

this well throughout the film, as we hear a typewriter tapping in the background for most of the production. This technique shows us how greatly we involve ourselves in the world of fiction.

When the events following that fateful night are seen truthfully from Briony's perspective (who is now aged and dying), it is revealed that Cecilia and Robbie died in 1940. Even though they still wrote to each other while Robbie was in prison, they have no time together, and when they finally meet years later they realise that their written relationship has run ahead of their physical one. The older Briony tries to atone for her wrongdoings by writing the novel to try to fictionally give the couple the time together that they missed, as a 'final act of kindness'⁴ When we realise that Briony never saw her sister or Robbie, that she never apologised or agreed to write a letter detailing the truth and clearing Robbie's name, there is a strange sense of disappointment and injustice felt on behalf of the couple. These feelings take considerable time to disperse, and only do so as it is realised that these events did not actually happen, it is simply a fictitious story. Wright's film also manages to evoke these emotions in the viewer through use of multiple perspectives, something which is not easily done through the art of filmmaking.

As McEwan says himself, 'The novel is supreme in giving us the possibility of inhabiting other minds'⁵. This is true to some extent, as we are told certain facts in the novel which we have to distinguish for ourselves in the film. For example, in the novel, the reader is told of the fact that Briony feels bound to protect her older sister from the advances of the housekeeper's son, yet in the film, all that there is to establish this fact is Saoirse Ronan's acting.

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Wright uses cinematic effects to demonstrate McEwan's idea of multiple perspectives, for example, his use of lighting in the library scene and the scene with the attack on Lola, as well as his use of focus in the scene in which Robbie gives the letter to Briony. However, having said all that, due to excellent casting and high standard of acting, the use of different perspectives on certain scenes still manages to achieve its aim of dragging us into the world of the Tallis', making us feel what the characters feel and forget that this is a fictitious story. After reading McEwan's novel, the urge is there to go back and read it from the beginning, with the new knowledge of Cecilia's and Robbie's relationship.

Atonement makes great use of multiple perspectives, showing us how events can look completely different from the eyes of another person, and what disastrous consequences these different perspectives can have on peoples lives.