

On Atonement: Narrative Reconfiguration and the Poetics of Tragedy in Literary Adaptation

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Abstract. Ian McEwan's *Atonement* has earned its place among contemporary literary classics through its labyrinthine narrative architecture and profound introspection into the human condition. In his cinematic adaptation, director Joe Wright breathes life into these characters and their tragic history, transmuting the text through the deliberate alchemy of camera work, musical scoring, and narrative restructuring. Taking this cross-media adaptation as a starting point, this paper analyzes how *Atonement* realizes its transformation to the screen from three dimensions: narrative structure, tragic aesthetics, and audiovisual syntax. It explores how the film preserves the original novel's core, a delicate intersection of romanticism and gritty realism that exposes the cruelties of war and critiques human frailty, while simultaneously leveraging the distinct virtues of cinema to heighten the raw, immediate color of its tragic artistry. This study examines the divergence and symbiosis between literary text and cinematic language in their shared pursuit of sculpting character and unspooling memory.

Keywords: *Atonement*, cross-media adaptation, narrative architecture, cinematic syntax, film scoring

1. Introduction

In 2001, British author *Ian McEwan* published *Atonement*, a novel that swiftly garnered numerous literary accolades and secured a place on the Booker Prize shortlist through its labyrinthine narrative architecture and profound dissection of humanity and warfare. Set against the bleak canvas of the Second World War, the narrative chronicles a tragic romance ignited by the falsehood of a thirteen-year-old girl, *Briony*, and the lifelong, ultimately unachievable quest for absolution that follows [1]. Ultimately, this study aims to illuminate a viable trajectory for visualization onto the silver screen. The cinematic adaptation of *Atonement* clinched the Academy Award for Best Original Score alongside a Best Picture nomination, cementing its status as a triumph in cross-media adaptation [2].

Current studies surrounding the adaptation of *Atonement* remain largely confined to surface plot dynamics or isolated analyses of singular audiovisual elements, rarely offering a systematic, comparative investigation into how the director deploys cinematic syntax, musical rhetoric, and spatial mise-en-scène to reshape the narrative [3-6]. Building upon this gap, this paper examines how Joe Wright leverages the unique medium of film to translate the "metafictional" techniques and tragic poetics inherent in the original text, thereby provoking deeper reflection on cinematic

storytelling. Accordingly, this study seeks to provide a viable trajectory for visualizing metafictional texts, provide a fresh analytical lens for cross-media narrative studies, and interrogate the variances and complementarities between textual and visual media, thereby deepening our understanding of the essence of filmic narrative [7].

2. Narrative structure

2.1. The metafictional narrative of the novel

The concept of "metafiction" was pioneered by American literary theorist William H. Gass and subsequently crystallized by Patricia Waugh in her seminal work, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. Waugh defines metafiction as fiction that "systematically flaunts its own condition as an artifice," wherein the author deliberately fractures the narrative illusion to remind the reader that the text is an engineered construct [8]. The narrative labyrinth of *Atonement* is born precisely from this profound deployment of metafictional technique. Spanning three distinct acts, the novel charts a chronicle running from the eve of the Second World War in 1935 to the twilight of the century in 1999. The story unfolds primarily through *Briony's* psychological gaze, yet it is intricately woven with the shifting perspectives and fragmented recollections of Cecilia and Robbie. Through interwoven flashbacks and perspective shifts, McEwan constructs a highly idiosyncratic stylistic landscape.

The novel's central narrative trick, however, lies in a devastating revelation: the bittersweet resolution of the opening acts is merely a fiction penned by *Briony*, whereas reality has already claimed the lives of both Robbie and Cecilia. In adapting this twist, the film faces a profound hurdle. Cinema cannot simply copy the overt, textual declarations of a meta-novel; instead, the director must visually execute this "subverted fiction" on screen without alienating or confounding the audience [7].

2.2. The cinematic rendering of narrative deception: the interweaving of fiction and reality

Adaptation scholar Robert Stam notes in *Literature and Film* that cross-media adaptation is not a simple replication of textual content, but rather the retention, reorganization, and reinvention of the original work's narrative perspective, temporal chronology, and narrative hierarchy [9]. The psychological monologues and metanarrative declarations unique to the textual medium must be transformed into audiovisual language to be realized. The film version of *Atonement* adopts a multi-perspective narrative approach, reproducing the novel's interwoven features of "witnessing and memory, reality and fiction" through shifts in character viewpoints. In the first half of the film, the story unfolds primarily through subjective point-of-view shots aligned with *Briony's* gaze. She peers through a window at Cecilia and Robbie's confrontation by the fountain, observes Robbie handing a letter to Cecilia, and witnesses Lola being assaulted in the darkness. The framing throughout these sequences adopts *Briony's* visual field as its primary anchor, immersing the audience in her world of doubt and anxiety, and causing them to fall into the same misunderstandings. The shifts in perspective do not merely provide supplementary information; they also progressively disorient the audience's singular cognitive alignment with *Briony*, revealing how each subsequent viewpoint retroactively complicates what was previously taken as fact.

2.3. The cinematic rendering of narrative deception: the final revelation and tragic unmasking

Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* posits that narrative deception arises when the narrator deliberately withholds information and misleads the reader, only to overturn established perceptions with a late plot twist. This serves as the theoretical foundation for the strategy of "withholding perspective, disrupting chronology, and engineering cognitive bias" [10]. While the novel version of *Atonement* unmask this deception at its conclusion through an overt explanation by an elderly *Briony*, revealing that the preceding "happy ending" was merely a fiction she authored, the film ingeniously visualizes this narrative trick. In the final sequence, an aging *Briony* finally confesses the truth during an interview: Robbie died of septicemia during the Dunkirk evacuation, and Cecilia perished in a London air raid when a subway tunnel collapsed. They never reunited, let alone lived out their lives together. The film then relies on on flashbacks to visually execute the metafictional structure of the original text. This method of interweaving fiction and reality transmutes the power of the printed word into visual impact, plunging the audience into a deeper despair following a fleeting glimpse of hope, thereby intensifying the tragic sense of fatalism [2, 7].

3. Audiovisual expression of literary atmosphere

3.1. Cinematic syntax

3.1.1. The deployment of long takes

The most iconic sequence in the film is the five-minute long take on the beach at Dunkirk. This single shot utilizes fluid spatial choreography to capture the chaotic, absurd, and desperate panorama of the evacuation: beginning with a sweeping master shot dominated by non-commissioned officers, the camera presses inward alongside the dialogue to reveal the granular details of an era defined by the cruelties of war and class injustice. A sound montage of birds, gunshots, and mechanical noise implies that soldiers are destroying supplies to keep them out of enemy hands, indirectly conveying the brutality of combat.

As the camera follows Robbie's wandering figure, Robbie halts alone to watch fellow soldiers burn *Bibles*, a moment that reflects his longing for liberation and his enduring faith in love. The framing then expands from a medium close-up of a single individual back into a wide master shot; as Robbie exits the frame, he leaves behind a chaotic shoreline, expanding his individual plight into a collective tragedy. Compared to the internal monologues of the novel, this sequence deepens audience immersion, drawing on the visual perspective filtered through Robbie's gaze to lay bare the brutal realities of class division and warfare, thereby elevating a private heartbreak into an epochal tragedy [5].

3.1.2. The deployment of close-up shots

Close-up shots are extensively adopted throughout the film to visualize characters' inner worlds. For instance, in the library scene where Robbie and Cecilia finally confess their feelings, the camera focuses tightly on their eyes and hand movements. Cecilia's eyes brim with tears, conveying her deep affection and sorrow, while Robbie's gaze is charged with longing and apprehension. These close-ups magnify subtle micro-expressions, enabling the audience to perceive the profound weight of their long-repressed emotions.

Conversely, during *Briony's* interrogation scene, the camera anchors to her face, utilizing stark chiaroscuro lighting to reveal the dreamy, detached quality in her eyes. The close-up externalizes her inner state, revealing the psychological struggle and contradiction as she delivers her false testimony.

Furthermore, the close-ups of hands are equally meticulous. Following the fountain dispute, for example, Robbie gently runs his hand across the edge of the basin where Cecilia stood moments before. This single gesture instantly fleshes out his character: it translates Robbie's unspoken, unattainable desire into an indirect, deeply restrained physical act. His love is embedded in hesitant, unspoken gestures, the brushing fingertips on the fountain and the later misdelivered letter. It is precisely this profound restraint that renders the subsequent misunderstandings and ultimate destruction so deeply tragic [5].

3.1.3. The deployment of high-angle and low-angle shots

High-angle and low-angle framing also serve a vital narrative function. At the film's opening, high-angle shots frame young *Briony* to visualize the absolute powerlessness of the individual against the machinery of war. Conversely, low-angle shots are deployed to project authority and stature; for instance, when capturing the expansive facade of the estate, the low angle subtly signals the elevated class status of *Briony's* family. When *Briony* confronts Robbie, the camera again adopts a low angle, implying that Robbie's impending fate is entirely dominated by her volition [5].

3.2. Musical aesthetics: intensifying tragic resonance through sound

3.2.1. The typewriter motif

The musical score for *Atonement*, composed by Dario Marianelli, features one of the most recognizable sound designs in modern cinema: the integration of the typewriter rhythm [3]. This percussive element does more than merely bridge narrative time and space; it actively externalizes the internal world of the characters. At the film's opening, as a young *Briony* furiously types her play, the keystrokes are rapid and brisk, mirroring her creative excitement and her desire to dominate the written word. In contrast, when Robbie composes his letter to Cecilia, the mechanical cadence becomes halting and heavy, exposing his inner hesitation and vulnerability. Finally, as the elderly *Briony* reflects upon the past, the typewriter returns as a slow, oppressive thud, as if tracking the heavy heartbeat of her lifelong remorse. Perfectly synchronized with the film's dramatic rhythm, this percussive motif transcends ordinary sound effects to form a core narrative strand.

3.2.2. Diegetic and incidental music

The musical arrangements within specific scenes also carry a profound semiotic weight. For instance, during the sequence where Robbie and Cecilia briefly reunite, a gentle yet melancholic piano melody underscores the acute friction between their shared ecstasy and ultimate helplessness. Conversely, on the beaches of Dunkirk, a low, despairing orchestral arrangement amplifies the sweeping cruelty of the landscape and Robbie's own deep sense of desolation. During the London Blitz sequences, the score directly intertwines with the percussive thuds of detonations and human cries, forging a terrifying, chaotic atmosphere that forces the audience to confront both the horrors of total war and the internal struggles of those caught within it. Furthermore, the film deliberately quotes excerpts from Puccini's *La Bohème*, the aria in which the leads confess their love, to embody

Robbie's surging romantic awakening. As the music swells to a close, Robbie snaps back from his romantic reverie into reality, a transition that masterfully sets the stage for his subsequent encounter with Cecilia [6].

4. The manifestation of the tragic theme

4.1. The construction of beauty

Tragedy is not simply the presentation of destruction. The director uses cinematic syntax to construct both tragic scenarios and scenes of beauty, and this contrast deepens the tragic effect. Both the novel and the film adaptation of *Atonement* place considerable structural emphasis on establishing a radiant, "beautiful" atmosphere in the opening movements. In the sequence where Cecilia and Robbie argue by the fountain and she plunges into the water to retrieve the broken vase, the original text fosters a warm, intimate ambiance through detailed environmental descriptions and nuanced dialogue [1, 2]. The film translates this by deploying a series of soft tracking push-ins and wide-aperture framing with deep foreground, effectively visualising the dappled summer light, the shimmering pool, and the tantalising proximity between the protagonists that remains perpetually out of reach.

Following this fountain dispute, Robbie's subsequent recollections of Cecilia are developed in the novel primarily through granular physical portraiture and internal monologues. The text shapes a vivid portrait of Cecilia's grace, making Robbie's instant infatuation entirely believable. In the cinematic medium, the director instead uses cross-cutting to superimpose multiple fragments of Cecilia across different spaces in Robbie's mind, capturing his longing and his unguarded desire.

In the scene of Robbie and Cecilia's eventual reunion, the original text advances the plot and measures their emotional distance through physical behavioural cues, such as "their eyes locking" and then "turning away simultaneously" [1]. The film director, however, employs shifts in composition to trace the complex emotional arc of their relationship, moving from initial estrangement to sudden closeness and finally to a devastating farewell. At the start of their reunion, the camera relies strictly on isolated single-character framing; the two are deliberately kept apart, denied a shared frame or mutual eye contact. These disconnected close-ups lay bare the alienation imposed by time and war. Yet as the dialogue develops, the leading lines of the composition gradually draw them together, eventually placing them within the same frame. This shared space signals an approaching intimacy, as if they have momentarily returned to the unspoiled closeness of their past [5].

4.2. The completion of tragedy

The tragic core of *Atonement* lies primarily in the devastating consequences of *Briony's* actions on the lives of others. Yet the true origin of this tragedy resides in the unavoidable collision of individual subjectivity, class hierarchy, and the machinery of war. Both the novel and the film trace *Briony's* psychological development and remorse through her shifting perspectives across different stages of her life. The narrative presents a hypersensitive, imaginative adolescent girl; a sobered young wartime nurse confronted by relentless brutality; and an elderly author who attempts to repair her transgressions through writing, only to finally accept that genuine absolution remains forever beyond her grasp [7]. While the novel relies on extensive internal monologues to map *Briony's* journey from naive delusion to a painful awareness of her guilt, the film externalises this psychological trajectory through changes in light, shadow, and camera work.

In the hospital sequences, the lighting is dim and clinical. The camera frequently adopts high-angle and profile framing, trapping *Briony* within a suffocating visual environment that emphasises the crushing burden of her remorse. In the elderly *Briony's* closing interview, by contrast, the camera holds a tight close-up on her deeply lined face and the tears welling in her eyes, exposing a lifetime of sorrow and helplessness. The beach scenes of soldiers drinking, shouting, fighting, and scavenging, with no certainty of surviving the night, create a sharp and painful contrast with Robbie's unwavering fixation on Cecilia. The individual's desperate hope for love and return is set against the broader chaos of total war. It is precisely within this stark juxtaposition that the narrative achieves its most piercing tragic irony [5].

5. Conclusion

As a definitive paradigm of successful cross-media adaptation, the cinematic rendition of *Atonement* faithfully preserves the core themes and narrative logic of the original novel while simultaneously infuses the original text with renewed artistic vitality, musical aesthetics, and narrative restructuring. By masterfully deploying long takes, close-ups, spatial choreography, and deliberate sound design, the film visualizes and auditorily embodies the implicit emotions and thematic undertones embedded in the written text. Consequently, romance, misunderstanding, warfare, and remorse converge to synthesize a more visceral and impactful tragic aesthetic. Most notably, the film's meticulous construction of "beauty" juxtaposed against its relentless orchestration of "destruction" creates a powerful, devastating contrast.

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