

# The Tragic Story of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and the Theory of the Grotesque

JACK MITCHELL

Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* (2001) tells a story that is permeated by tragedy, but one which possesses a grotesque vision. The work's appeal and popularity can lead one to ask the long-standing question, Why does tragedy give us satisfaction? An exploration of this question will lead to the notion of irreconcilable conflict, which is a fundamental component to the theory of the grotesque. McEwan's construction of conflicting motifs within *Atonement* becomes an appropriate springboard for scrutinising its textual and meta-textual strategies through the lens of the grotesque. It will then become appropriate to compare the vision of the grotesque to that of tragedy. In doing so I hope to come to a conclusion concerning the effect of *Atonement's* grotesque nature, particularly in relation to its unexpected conclusion, and in its denial of absolute truth.

One does not have to apply a particular tragic structure or model to *Atonement* in order to consider the story's dire circumstances in a tragic light. The novel opens in 1935 on the Tallis property in rural England. Thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis interrupts her sister, Cecilia, and the maid's son, Robbie, in their first moment of sexual intimacy, and misconstrues the act as violence. When two young cousins go missing after dinner, a rape occurs during the search period, and Briony wrongly accuses Robbie of the act. The accusation leads to Robbie's imprisonment and subsequent deployment to France for World War II, and Cecilia distances herself from the family for good. As Brian Finney notes, Briony's decision is a 'judgement that brings tragedy to some of those closest to her.'<sup>1</sup> This description points to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Brian Finney, 'Briony's Stand against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's "Atonement,"' *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2004): 79, accessed 27 April 2015; available from <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3831941>>

misery which the story descends into in its subsequent sections. The second part of the narrative traces Robbie's experience as a soldier, while the third focuses on Briony's work as a nurse, and her attempt to apologise to Robbie and Cecilia for the separation she caused them. The final part is set in London in 1999, and describes Briony's final attempt to atone for her wrongdoing. That a reader would find satisfaction and enjoyment in a story such as this, and further, that a production company would feel compelled to adapt it into a film which then received popular acclaim, seems to be at odds with the way that people tend to view tragedy in life.

The popularity of tragic stories presents critics with a paradox. People are repeatedly drawn to these narratives despite their potential to elicit negative emotions. Regarding the popularity of tragedies amid other genres, Laura Estill et al. researched trends in scholarship on Shakespeare's plays between 1960 and 2010, and found that '[t]he number of scholarly publications written about tragedies in general is higher than the number of publications about comedies and histories combined'<sup>2</sup>. The study made clear that in this particular field of scholarship, publications about tragedies are favoured over other works by Shakespeare. Additionally, Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick et al. have observed that tragedies can lead to an increased appreciation for the relationships in one's life. This was concluded after 361 students answered questions that attempted to gauge 'life happiness,' during the course of watching a condensed version of the film adaptation of *Atonement* (2007).<sup>3</sup> Taking studies such as these into consideration, the popularity of tragedies and their potential for positive impact can certainly be acknowledged. However, due to the personal nature of responses to tragic works it is problematic to claim that all people are indeed drawn to tragedy in various art forms. Hence, at this point it should be kept in mind that the proposition of pleasure being drawn from tragedy in art will be considered a possibility, rather than a universal principle. And further, in the course of

---

<sup>2</sup> Laura Estill, Dominic Klyve and Kate Bridal, '“Spare your arithmetic, never count the turns”: A Statistical Analysis of Writing about Shakespeare, 1960–2010,' *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (2015): 11, accessed 7 April 2015; available from <[https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/journals/shakespeare\\_quarterly/v066/66.1.estill.html](https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/journals/shakespeare_quarterly/v066/66.1.estill.html)>

<sup>3</sup> See Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 'Tragedy Viewers Count Their Blessings: Feeling Low on Fiction Leads to Feeling High on Life,' *Communication Research*, Vol. 40, No. 6 (2013): 747–766, accessed 9 June 2015; available from <<http://crx.sagepub.com.ezproxy2.library.usyd.edu.au/content/40/6/747.full.pdf+html>>

this essay I will focus predominantly on the emotional responses that tragedy and the grotesque can elicit, rather than their technical or literary qualities in particular. This is not to diminish the significance of discussing features such as plot and character in both forms in order to consider their allure, but is a choice based primarily upon the useful similarities that exist between tragedy and the grotesque in regard to the emotional effects they can produce. This agreement will prove particularly productive when considering *Atonement* and its impact on readers. D. D. Raphael contemplates the appeal of tragic narratives: '[w]hy should one *want* to see a tragic drama? Not everyone does. But many people do, myself among them, and even rate the 'pleasure' or 'satisfaction' of Tragedy higher than that of any other *genre* of literary art.'<sup>4</sup> This pleasure has been regularly accounted for, perhaps foundationally with Aristotle's notion of 'catharsis.' However, there is one notion in particular which draws the discussion to the theory of the grotesque, and thence to a deeper appreciation for tragedy's magnetism.

The idea that tragedy's power rests in its presentation of conflict in different forms is particularly helpful in contemplating its effect on viewers, and will prove insightful for understanding the effect of *Atonement* and its grotesque qualities. In E. M. Dadlez's discussion of David Hume's essay 'Of Tragedy,' she outlines Hume's conception of emotional responses to tragedies as a seesaw kept in balance. She argues that it is most satisfying to think of a response to tragedy as consisting of the interdependence of both pleasant and negative emotions.<sup>5</sup> In Joseph Harris's comparison of theories of tragic pleasure in early modern France, he writes about the tragedian Belloy's theory of emotional impact, which contrasts Dadlez's idea of a simultaneous balance of emotions. For him the emotional responses trace a linear development, with a positive response (pity) to the conclusion of the work counteracting the overwhelming force of the negative response (horror) experienced during the rest of the work. Regarding Belloy, he writes that '[p]ity and horror are not simultaneous, then, but are placed in a narrative structure which redeems the spectator's initial shock with compassion'<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>4</sup> D. D. Raphael, *The Paradox of Tragedy* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1960), p.13.

<sup>5</sup> See E. M. Dadlez, 'Pleased and Afflicted: Hume on the Paradox of Tragic Pleasure,' *Hume Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2004): 218, accessed 28 April 2015; available from <[https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/journals/hume\\_studies/v030/30.2.dadlez.pdf](https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/journals/hume_studies/v030/30.2.dadlez.pdf)>

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Harris, *Inventing the Spectator: Subjectivity and the Theatrical Experience in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.136.

A slightly different conception to Dadlez and Belloy is put forward by George Santayana, who argues that in isolation, the suffering presented in a tragedy cannot be all that constitutes a viewer's enjoyment of it. Instead, it must be the manner in which the tragedy is crafted which elicits intrigue and sympathy for the suffering of the characters. This artistry exists in order to balance out the horror of the tragic material. He writes, 'reduce the tragedy to a mere account of the facts and of the words spoken, ...and the tragic dignity and beauty is entirely lost.'<sup>7</sup> According to Santayana the delight felt in response to the presentation of tragic stories, which might also include a kind of yearning from the reader for 'what they might have been if they had not been tragedies'<sup>8</sup>, is said to mingle with the sorrow produced by the characters' suffering. It is because of this combination of responses that tragedy can achieve the effect that it does. Thus, the success of Shakespeare and McEwan become key examples in this regard. For Santayana too, a significant aspect of tragedy's effect lies in its engendering of a conflict of emotional responses: 'in our delight there must be a distinguishable touch of shrinking and sorrow; for it is this conflict and rending of our will, this fascination by what is intrinsically terrible or sad, that gives these turbid feelings their depth and pungency.'<sup>9</sup> Dadlez, Harris in his discussion of Belloy, and Santayana each posit that tragedy's appeal is somehow related to the contrasting emotional reactions it produces in viewers.

This understanding of the effect of tragedy as an emotional conflict is one way to comprehend its influence, and is a notion which is also fundamental to the grotesque. This is not to suggest that any work which presents some kind of conflict must be grotesque, but more to say that the grotesque's particular emphasis on conflict and contradiction is a useful step forward in comprehending the allure of tragedy, and especially *Atonement*.

The use of the term 'grotesque' has morphed over the centuries since its emergence as a description of a visual art style. Its original designation suggested the coexistence of two incompatible motifs, which clash but do not resolve their tension. In turn this has the potential to provoke the viewer into reconsidering his or her knowledge of the world. As a theory the

---

<sup>7</sup> George Santayana, *The Works of George Santayana, Volume II: The Sense of Beauty, Being the Outlines of Aesthetic Theory*, critical edition, ed. William G. Holzberger and Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr (Cambridge [MA] and London: The MIT Press, 1988), p.140.

<sup>8</sup> Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, p.143.

<sup>9</sup> Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, p.140.

grotesque has been defined in many different respects, and it is often insisted that as an idea it should remain essentially uncategoryed. In this essay, the above definition will be kept in mind while recognising the multifaceted nature of the grotesque generally. The term's use is commonly understood as being rooted in its aesthetic application in the late Fifteenth Century to ceiling and wall paintings which were found while excavating Nero's Golden House. The imagery showed an elegant indecorum: a beautiful patterned style which was problematised by visually jarring forms. Grotesque artworks are dominated by hybrid concepts: by a fusion of the monstrous and the human, the ethereal and the earthly, the foreign and the recognisable. The amalgamated images hence 'stand at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived'<sup>10</sup>. This disorienting blend of images, according to Geoffrey Galt Harpham, has a way of 'calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world'<sup>11</sup>. Grotesque images constitute a defiance of logical categorisation, hovering in a void of inexplicability. They occupy a transformative and liminal space, which Harpham claims has the potential to '[impale] us on the present moment, emptying the past and forestalling the future.'<sup>12</sup> The grotesque exists in opposition to structures and forms that people usually employ to interpret the world. By its fusion of forms, it confounds the viewer and supplants order.

This fusion instils a response in the viewer that is also ambivalent because the complexity of grotesque images is both intriguing and disorienting. In his analysis of the grotesque, Wolfgang Kayser alludes to Christoph Martin Wieland, whose understanding of the grotesque's impact is that 'we smile at the deformations but are appalled by the horrible monstrous elements as such.'<sup>13</sup> Grotesque decorations 'feed the eye'<sup>14</sup> in their ornamental shapeliness and symmetry, but elicit a repulsive response by the detail of the forms themselves, which in their hybridity are abnormal and horrible. Kayser explains that '[t]he grotesque world is—and is not—our own world. The ambiguous way in which we are affected by it results from our awareness that the familiar and apparently harmonious world is

---

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton [NJ]: Princeton University Press, 1982), p.3.

<sup>11</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p.3.

<sup>12</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p.16.

<sup>13</sup> Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p.31.

<sup>14</sup> R. Cotgrave in Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, xxiii.

alienated under the impact of abysmal forces'<sup>15</sup>. The hybridity of grotesque images insists that viewers reassess their own understanding of the world. In its defiance of clarity the grotesque 'instils fear of life rather than fear of death.'<sup>16</sup> It gives form to what humans fear and do not understand<sup>17</sup>, and perpetuates disorder. Kayser summarises it as 'the expression of our failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe.'<sup>18</sup> The grotesque's depiction of irreconcilable objects instils in the viewer an emotional conflict. The beauty of the image's design may be intriguing, but repulsion at the disruption of the natural order of the world occurs simultaneously. The grotesque forces a re-examination of one's own understanding of reality.

McEwan's *Atonement* resembles the grotesque's presentation of conflict and chaos on a number of significant levels, and similar to the grotesque, engenders a response that is bound up in contradictions. Initially, one might consider the artistry of McEwan's writing: the attractiveness of his sentences and the novel's vividly crafted settings feed the reader's imagination, but clash with the tragic content of the story. The effect of such a combination might be considered in relation to Wieland's postulation concerning the simultaneous intrigue and repulsion of grotesque images. McEwan's writing style is utterly intriguing but mixes uncomfortably with his characters' painful trajectories throughout the course of the novel. On a structural level, its first two parts are dramatically divergent in their design and emotional effect. The first part is situated on the grounds of the Tallis family home, and the reader does not leave except during the dreams and memories of the characters. McEwan moulds it into a contained idyll, rich with the fragrances, touches, and secluded peace of rural life. It also contains the promise of romantic bliss for the central lovers, Robbie and Cecilia, which they only momentarily grasp in the house's library, before misfortune interrupts and pulls the narrative into a downward spiral. The pleasant and vivid rural setting is supplanted in the second part by a dreary wartime landscape. This rift in the story between dimensions is indicative of the foothold which the theory of the grotesque seems to have in McEwan's novel. Initially this can be observed in its conflict between worlds, and further within the author's descriptions, structure, and the shocking closure to the story which flings the narrative and its reader into a state of irresolution.

---

<sup>15</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p.37.

<sup>16</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p.185.

<sup>17</sup> This is elucidated by Friedrich Durrenmatt in Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p.11.

<sup>18</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p.185.

More localised conflicts exist in McEwan's character descriptions, their thought processes, and the way in which the novel's visual settings are examined in contrasting manners. Early on, the reader understands the polarity between Briony and her sister Cecilia by McEwan's description of their bedrooms: '[w]hereas her big sister's room was a stew of unclosed books, unfolded clothes, unmade bed, unemptied ashtrays, Briony's was a shrine to her controlling demon'<sup>19</sup>. Such a contrast is echoed in the clash between local elements of Briony's own world: the order of her room hides her 'passion for secrets'<sup>20</sup> even if the girl has no secrets to keep. McEwan describes the various contraptions and containers she possesses to aid this passion, and begins the novel with a snapshot of Briony's most recent play (exhibiting another passion of hers: writing), which embodies the thirteen-year-old's consistent desire to enter worlds which are distinct from her immediate, tangible one.

Two passages in particular highlight the experience of contradictory feelings by the characters, reflecting the grotesque's ability to evoke a dichotomised response. One is Briony's decision to open a letter which Robbie has asked her to deliver to Cecilia. McEwan writes,

[t]he very complexity of her feelings confirmed Briony in her view that she was entering an arena of adult emotion and dissembling from which her writing was bound to benefit. What fairy tale ever held so much by way of contradiction? ... It was wrong to open people's letters, but it was right, it was essential, for her to know everything.<sup>21</sup>

Briony's feelings clash as she moralises the decision. Furthermore, her suggestion that fairy tales are not so concerned with contradiction also points toward the grotesque. Arthur Clayborough suggests that '[a] merely alien world, one which is completely strange to us from the outset, as in the fairy-tale, is not grotesque; it is not a transformation of our own world.'<sup>22</sup> The grotesque's contradictory essence is dependent upon both that which is recognisable and that which is alien for its effect. Clayborough suggests that a world which is already distinguishable from our own, and not a product of

---

<sup>19</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, pp.4–5.

<sup>20</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.5.

<sup>21</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.113.

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.64.

the fusion between the unknown and the recognisable, is not grotesque. Briony's distinction between the fairy tale and a world of contradictions resembles this differentiation of the grotesque from other alienated worlds. Another moment in the novel that focuses on conflicting feelings is during the romantic scene between Robbie and Cecilia in the house's library. The narrative at this point is focalised upon Robbie's perspective, and his feelings are explained like this:

[h]is excitement was close to pain and sharpened by the pressure of contradictions: she was familiar like a sister, she was exotic like a lover; he had always known her, he knew nothing about her; she was plain, she was beautiful; she was capable ... and twenty minutes ago she had wept[.]<sup>23</sup>

One thinks not only of the grotesque's insistence upon contradiction, but with the initial 'excitement' being close to 'pain,' of Dadlez, Harris, and Santayana's postulations about the combination of distinct emotions as a response to tragedy.

Another aspect of the grotesque which pervades McEwan's novel is the effect of making strange, or alienation. McElroy explains that the grotesque 'distorts or exaggerates the surface of reality in order to tell a qualitative truth about it.'<sup>24</sup> In a similar fashion, Kayser claims that its nature can be summarised in the phrase 'the estranged world',<sup>25</sup> which is different to a world which is already foreign (like a fairy tale). The grotesque occurs with the transformation of the familiar by its fusion with the unfamiliar. Thomson describes this effect as 'alienation': '[s]omething which is familiar and trusted is suddenly made strange and disturbing.'<sup>26</sup> The terminology employed by these theorists supposes that the grotesque takes what is known and recognisable, and distorts it. In *Atonement* there are two notable segments which suggest a distortion of reality. This is achieved by two descriptions of the same scene at different times which, by their contrasted nature, jar with each other. Firstly, on the grounds of the Tallis home there is a fountain containing a sculpture of a triton (a creature which Hugo identifies as 'grotesque'<sup>27</sup>) which is referred to contrarily by McEwan at a

---

<sup>23</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.130.

<sup>24</sup> Bernard McElroy, *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque* (Basingstoke [Hampshire] and London: Macmillan, 1989), p.5.

<sup>25</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p.184.

<sup>26</sup> Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1972), p.59.

<sup>27</sup> Victor Hugo in Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, p.45.

number of points in the text. One example is an early observation of Cecilia's, which reads, 'he was beautiful in morning sunlight, and so were the four dolphins that supported the wavy-edged shell on which he sat.'<sup>28</sup> At a later stage, the same object 'rose before them, an inky mass whose complicated outline was honed against a sky turning greener as the light fell. They could hear the trickle of water, and Cecilia thought she could smell it too, silvery and sharp.'<sup>29</sup> The figure's pleasantness is contrasted in the second instance with dark and unusual colours and smells. The narrator's change in perception estranges the world, and perhaps pre-emptly Briony's unpermitted reading of Robbie's explicit letter in the following chapter, which is a springboard for the despair to come. Furthermore, the contrast between the fountain's auras at these two moments is representative of the idea of conflict, which is a fundamental aspect of the effect of both tragedy and the grotesque.

Another physical location whose nature is altered during the course of events is the library. First its darkness and seclusion attracts Robbie and Cecilia into romantic bliss,<sup>30</sup> and later Briony is questioned about what she saw in the same room by the constable.<sup>31</sup> By way of this, the location has been transformed into a crime scene. The rich shroud of darkness in the first scene has become the gloomy threat of punishment in the second. These are just two moments in McEwan's novel which indicate one reality for the reader being made strange at a later time. The warping of perception in these cases is relatable to the grotesque's essential transformative power over the world as it is regularly perceived.

Grotesque artworks are frequently peripheral, and exist as decorative complements (often as borders) to the rest of an artwork. On one level this affirms the grotesque's place just beyond the comprehension of reality as a fusion of real and unreal realms. But conversely, having understood the compelling nature of grotesque imagery, it seems odd that as a style it has been commonly regarded as subordinate to other images. Harpham explains that this aspect of the grotesque throws the idea of a fixed 'centre' into flux: '[a]ll grotesque art threatens the notion of a center by implying coherencies just out of reach, metaphors or analogies just beyond our grasp.'<sup>32</sup> The artist Signorelli drew attention to this in parts of his decoration of the chapel of the

---

<sup>28</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, pp.18–19.

<sup>29</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.107.

<sup>30</sup> See McEwan, *Atonement*, p.132–139.

<sup>31</sup> See McEwan, *Atonement*, p.179–181.

<sup>32</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p.43.

cathedral at Orvieto. He depicts a figure, the philosopher Empedocles, who has emerged from a hole in the middle of four grotesque panels that contain hybrid forms (humans, creatures, vegetation), and is 'gazing at one of the walls of the chapel'<sup>33</sup>. By shifting the focus of the artwork away from its centre through the figure's gaze, Signorelli brings the peripheral grotesque patterns around the philosopher into the viewer's consciousness. Harpham articulates that this decision is endowing Empedocles with transformative power: he is 'emancipating the grotesque and becoming his borders' border.<sup>34</sup> By the shift in focus Signorelli does for the grotesque images what Harpham claims the grotesque does to one's viewing of such images: he 'threatens the notion of a center.'

This peripherality can be linked to Naomi Booth's understanding of Briony's position in *Atonement*. She posits that Briony's desire for control of the narrative, and her wielding of authorial power in order to adjust the story, is a result of her witnessing the 'primal scene' in the library between Cecilia and Robbie, from which point she herself exists only in a peripheral capacity compared with the other characters. Booth writes,

[t]he primal scene, as violent wound to the ego, as site of perspectival triangulation and peripheralisation, might make of the narrator a wounded and peripheral figure in relation even, and perhaps especially, to her own work. And the primal scene might make omniscience a delusion founded in hurt.<sup>35</sup>

It is as though Briony's construction of the story is a manifestation of her desire to have been a part of that scene, and the recipient of Robbie's love in place of her sister. If this is the case for Briony, it should be read as a subliminal goal because her explanation in the book's fourth part outlines otherwise: that in altering the fates of Robbie and Cecilia she is attempting both to allow them to live on and to atone for her own foolishness as a child. Perhaps this could be argued for in relation to McEwan's emphasis on Briony's obsession with secrets near the book's opening, but an egotistical longing to be at the centre of the relationship she observes jars with the apparent sincerity of her confession in the final section of the novel (even if truth in all senses is thrown into question by her confession). Booth's reading

---

<sup>33</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p.39.

<sup>34</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p.40.

<sup>35</sup> Naomi Booth, 'Restricted View: the Problem of Perspective in the Novels of Ian McEwan,' *Textual Practice*, Vol. 29, No. 5 (2015): 859–860, accessed 12 June 2015; available from <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2014.987687>>

of Briony's position can be related to the grotesque's location in artworks: one which stays on the outskirts of the central narrative or image. In Signorelli's decoration the grotesque's potency is drawn to attention by the gaze of the central figure, and in McEwan's novel, Briony's decision to craft the story in the way she does can be viewed as a product of her exclusion from the story's centre. In opposition to the grotesque patterns in Signorelli's work, Briony cannot be '[I]berated from marginality'<sup>36</sup>. Like the philosopher she remains an observer, but cannot shed her peripherality in order to adopt a salient position.

Perhaps the most useful correlation between *Atonement* and the theory of the grotesque comes with the novel's ending, which distorts the reader's understanding of the entire book, and throws the believability of the narrative into question. Its fourth part, 'London, 1999,' reveals that the previous three parts have in fact been written by Briony. Furthermore, she reveals here that the reunion of Robbie and Cecilia after the war, Briony's visit to them in Balham to apologise, and her subsequent promise to change her testimony which convicted Robbie of rape, had all been fabricated. The lovers in fact never saw each other after their brief meeting in central London before Robbie's deployment: 'Robbie Turner died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940' and 'Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station.'<sup>37</sup> The Briony of 1999 explains that her alteration of the story was an attempt to atone for the separation of Robbie and Cecilia, which her misjudgement and perpetuation of a lie earlier in life had caused. Even so, she understands actual atonement as 'an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all.'<sup>38</sup>

Beyond the crumbling of her memory and her body, this fictional inscription of the characters' lives will be all that remains of them. Instead of presenting the 'truth,' marked by grief and death, and which would deny readers any sense of hope, Briony decided to fake the lovers' survival so that her 'spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love.'<sup>39</sup> Along with revealing Robbie and Cecilia's tragic fates, and probably magnifying the reader's sorrow, this moment unveils that the narrator had manipulated the story in a manner previously unbeknownst to the reader. In turn, the reliability of Briony's narration throughout the entire novel can then

---

<sup>36</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p.40

<sup>37</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.370.

<sup>38</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.371.

<sup>39</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.371.

be questioned, and the reader is left with a conflict of interest, both wanting to honour Briony's attempt to atone for her act, and unable to trust the teller of the story. Her status as a conjurer by the end of the novel brings the reader's attention to the potential that McEwan is also a conjurer. It foregrounds the authorial process as well as the author's capacity to conceal the truth. One wonders if this kind of problem should matter because it is a work of fiction. If it was a fictional story in the first place, what does it matter if another fiction is layered on top? Regardless, McEwan's technique has bound up the reader in a fictional story which is subsequently revealed to be deliberately falsified, and so draws attention to levels of authorship, blurring his own voice with Briony's.

McEwan passes suggestions to the reader early in the novel which hint that the truth is a bendable concept, and that Briony has manipulative power. From the beginning, the reader understands that she is a writer: a constructor of fictional worlds. Descriptions related to her control such as 'godly power of creation,'<sup>40</sup> her belittling opinion of her cousin Lola as 'unable to command the truth' when she herself can, and prophetic declarations such as 'it was about the get worse'<sup>41</sup> all clue the reader in to the concept that the truth might be malleable, and somehow in Briony's control. These phrases are exposed under new light with the revelation about Briony's authorship at the end of the novel. Kathleen D'Angelo even suggests that with the ending's revelation, McEwan shifts the onus onto the reader. Briony's confession is said to place the reader in a position where he or she can choose how to judge the narrator.<sup>42</sup> In the same way that the confession distorts one's understanding of the entire narrative, it also deflects Briony's godlike status, leaving the reader to decide what her standing is in his or her own mind.

The confusion experienced at the novel's close brings the discussion back to tragedy and the grotesque. One way in which these two forms can be understood together is by analysing what they propose about closure. Both Kayser and Jan Kott distinguish the grotesque from tragedy in that the former defies and mocks the structural and thematic goals of the latter. For Kayser, where both tragedies and grotesque artworks might portray similar events and themes, the grotesque distances itself in its ultimate embrace of

---

<sup>40</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.76.

<sup>41</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.121.

<sup>42</sup> See Kathleen D'Angelo, " "To Make a Novel": The Construction of a Critical Readership in Ian McEwan's "Atonement," " *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2009): 101, accessed 27 April 2015; available from <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/29533916>>

'incomprehensibility.'<sup>43</sup> He elucidates that tragedy brings from disorder and meaninglessness the 'possibility of a deeper meaning—in fate, which is ordained by the gods, and in the greatness of the tragic hero'<sup>44</sup>. Conversely, the grotesque 'must not and cannot suggest a meaning.'<sup>45</sup> This echoes the above discussion of the grotesque's delight in irreconcilable notions; it refuses to bring accord out of strife and absurdity, but is content only to remain in such a contradictory state.

Similarly, Kott emphasises the possibility for situational similarities between tragic and grotesque works, but suggests that their differentiation is to be found in their depictions of closure. He writes that '[i]n the final instance tragedy is an appraisal of human fate, a measure of the absolute. The grotesque is a criticism of the absolute in the name of frail human experience. ...[The] grotesque offers no consolation whatsoever.'<sup>46</sup> This fundamental repudiation of an absolute narrative and resolution finds accordance with George Steiner's theory of tragedy. He claims that '[t]ragedy is irreparable. It cannot lead to just and material compensation for past suffering'<sup>47</sup> and 'there is in the final moments of great tragedy... a fusion of grief and joy, of lament over the fall of man and of rejoicing in the resurrection of his spirit'<sup>48</sup>. These suggest that, along with an ending which leaves characters uncompensated and empty, tragedy in this sense will lead to a 'fusion' of positive and negative feelings. The description of the 'irreparable' nature of tragedy leads Steiner to suggest that Shakespeare's vision is actually 'tragi-comic'<sup>49</sup>, not tragic, because even in celebrated tragedies such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, order and hope are restored after the destructive force of death wields its power. In Shakespeare's oeuvre only *King Lear* and *Timon of Athens* bear resemblance to the true tragic model for Steiner because they deny any sense of hope or futurity. His understanding of tragedy is relatable to both Kayser and Kott's understanding of the grotesque, as a form which denies reconciliation and elicits conflicting emotional responses. Even so, Steiner's theory of tragedy remains particularly focused on Ancient Greek drama with its universal scale and end

---

<sup>43</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p.185.

<sup>44</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p.186.

<sup>45</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p.186.

<sup>46</sup> Jan Kott, *Shakespeare our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski, second edition (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1967), p.104.

<sup>47</sup> George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, second edition (New Haven [CT] and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p.8.

<sup>48</sup> Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, p.10.

<sup>49</sup> Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, xiii.

goal of utter ruin. This is different to what the grotesque proposes because it suggests a conclusion (orchestrated by the fates) which is beyond repair, as opposed to a liminal position of conflict and irresolution that must remain so. Hence, Steiner's word 'irreparable' should be kept in mind in relation to this. What remains useful about his tragic theory is the discussion of conflicting emotional responses which tragedy can elicit, as this bears resemblance to the conflicting emotional response of the grotesque.

*Atonement's* troubling end resists potential hope for the future, or reconciliation between the emergent conflict between reality and fiction. What the reader thought to be true in the novel is undermined by Briony's ultimate revelation, consequently unsteady his or her emotional engagement with the story. The reliability of the entire narrative becomes questionable, and the reader must consider what has just been read in new light. Even if one believes what Briony claims her writing to be, it does not resolve what is complicated by the ending. It is not only up to the reader to decide whether to absolve Briony of her mistake (as suggested by D'Angelo), but one must also decide whether or not to believe her account, which is not a straightforward decision, having been made aware of her manipulative ways. Any absolute governing structure which might have brought the strands of the story into accord is problematised by McEwan. It seems that *Atonement* accomplishes what Kott and Kayser ascribe to a grotesque conclusion, in its 'criticism of the absolute' and lack of 'consolation.' This is a further point of agreement between the grotesque and the novel. Like the real and imaginary worlds which the youthful Briony is said to inhabit, at the end whatever the true narrative might consist of is thrown into conflict with her fictional construction. Meaning or satisfaction which might otherwise be gleaned from the novel is obfuscated, and McEwan leaves the reader unable to reconcile the various versions of the story which he or she has been presented with. The end of the novel seems irreconcilable.

*Atonement's* effect in this regard brings to the fore critical assertions about the ability of both tragedy and the grotesque to access the truth, and the consequent impact of this on the reader. A. D. Nuttall and Santayana both refute the claim that tragic art forms are enjoyable because they are kept distinct from the viewer's own experience. Nuttall writes that the mind is pleased by the truth, despite the possibility that it will be uncomfortable: '[e]ven in time of war one can prefer true bad news to manifestly false good news. For me there is pleasure, therefore, in the... very refusal to pretend

that the good end happily<sup>50</sup>. *Atonement* immediately complicates this notion because the truth remains obscure. If there is satisfaction or pleasure to be experienced as a result of reading the novel, it is unlikely that this would result from its resemblance or adherence to the truth. Even if the reader believes that the reality of Robbie and Cecilia's end was indeed that they died prematurely, Briony's revelation defies Nuttall's suggestion that this would be more satisfying than a falsely contrived happy story. There is no way the reader can claim that there is one truth in the novel, because he or she has been denied consistency in this regard. Santayana suggests that tragedy's relationship to and conveyance of the truth is its very reason for existing, reasoning that truth is 'the excuse which ugliness has for being.'<sup>51</sup> He observes that people are 'deeply interested in truth' and that

[h]owever unpleasant truth may prove, we long to know it, partly perhaps because experience has shown us the prudence of this kind of intellectual courage, and chiefly because the consciousness of ignorance and the dread of the unknown is more tormenting than any possible discovery.<sup>52</sup>

This dread of the unknown is inverted by Clayborough, who in his discussion of G. K. Chesterton's theory of the grotesque, claims that the grotesque's revelling in the realm of the bizarre is in fact the key to seeing the world as one ought to. He writes that the grotesque 'does not so much draw our attention from the natural world as to make us see the world with new eyes in a way which is not less but more truthful than the usual attitude of casual acceptance.'<sup>53</sup> In this instance the grotesque does not remain peripheral and perverse, but by paradox allows for a deeper knowledge and appreciation of the world in its very subversion of what one understands it to be. He also summons John Keats's concept of 'negative capability,' which is a state described as 'being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'<sup>54</sup>. Being comfortable with nescience may be the only way to cope with the jarring and open-ended conclusion to *Atonement*. Perhaps the intrigue of the story is that in its restriction of one's access to knowledge, and its encouragement to remain without it, the novel

---

<sup>50</sup> A. D. Nuttall, *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.102.

<sup>51</sup> Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, p.144.

<sup>52</sup> Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, p.143.

<sup>53</sup> Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, p.59.

<sup>54</sup> John Keats in Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, p.73.

accords with a proper appreciation of lived experience, which remains full of ambiguities and absences of meaning.

Even with *Atonement's* disorienting and dismal conclusion, its popularity must be accounted for. It seems strange that a story would frustrate the truth, refusing to grant readers the satisfaction of closure, and yet remain intriguing. Here Clayborough's suggestion of the grotesque's communication of an underlying truth which is embodied in ambiguity, and Keats's understanding of satisfaction with nescience, seem appropriate concepts to apply. A final moment in the novel is worth considering in relation to this, and though it cannot be conclusive in what it communicates about the story's positive effect, it is indicative of the McEwan's contentment with a lack of clarity. The mother of Briony, Cecilia and Leon is Emily. There is one chapter that focuses on her perspective, and in it she observes the magnetic quality that light has upon insects. It reads,

[t]hat night creatures were drawn to lights where they could be most easily eaten by other creatures was one of those mysteries that gave her modest pleasure. She preferred not to have it explained away. At a formal dinner once a professor...had pointed out a few insects gyrating above a candelabra. He had told her that it was the visual impression of an even deeper darkness beyond the light that drew them in. Even though they might be eaten, they had to obey the instinct that made them seek out the darkest place, on the far side of the light—and in this case it was an illusion.<sup>55</sup>

Though, as Emily recollects, she is not satisfied with the explanation of why insects are drawn to the light, the intrigue of 'deeper darkness' and 'illusion' are pertinent. The insects, in a similar way to the novel at large, are not content to relate only to that which they can see, but are drawn to what lies beyond the surface of the visible world. As has been discussed, the novel, like the grotesque, defies logical explanations, an absolute narrative, and clarity of resolution. Like the insects, and Emily it seems, McEwan is more interested in the 'deeper truths' which are beyond what light can bring into vision. By the presentation of grotesque elements in the novel, McEwan seems to prefer nescience to knowledge, and darkness to clarity, perhaps nudging the reader toward such a perspective as well.

---

<sup>55</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, p.149.

The popularity of tragic stories such as *Atonement* forces one to contemplate the nature of the enjoyment of such works. One way to account for the phenomenon is by understanding the emotional conflicts which are central to the effect of tragedy on viewers. Conflict is also fundamental to the grotesque's critique and sabotage of the world as it is commonly perceived, and to the viewer's response to such a work as well. *Atonement's* grotesque features, embodied in its characters, its objects, and its problematic ending, combine to disorient the reader and challenge his or her understanding of the world, and particularly of truth. The baffling contradictory elements in the story and the consequent clash of responses challenges the reader with an inability to mend the fractures, but instead encourages him or her to seek that which exists beyond common perception. Like the insects drawn to the light, this might involve not understanding the visible realm or knowing what lies behind it, but being invited to explore the darkness.

Jack Mitchell is currently enrolled in the Master of English Studies at the University of Sydney. He has a keen interest in the theatre and has been involved in the Sydney University Dramatic Society for some years as both performer and director.