

TREATMENT OF TIME IN THE NOVELS 'ATONEMENT' BY IAN MCEWAN AND 'THE REMAINS OF THE DAY' BY KAZUO ISHIGURO

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Abstract: The innocence of youth is cunning, and imagination is often mistaken for truth. 'Atonement' by Ian McEwan transcends the barriers of perspective, and makes you second guess the reliability of your narrator. It is a complex novel, as well as the chronology, the time of the narrative story, the narrative jumps in it. Kazuo Ishiguro's 'The Remains of the Day', a subtle masterpiece about the private agonies of an ageing butler is hardly unknown but sometimes you find a piece of writing so well executed, so moving and so perceptive about the lives many of us lead that you can't help praising it to anyone not quick-witted enough to look busy. The treatment of time in these two novels is interestingly dealt with and an issue to consider.

Keywords: time, complexity, postmodernism, discontinuity, turmoil

A main feature of the complex and wide-ranging cultural movement known as postmodernism resides in its scepticism towards the various assumptions made and principles taken for granted in the previous few centuries of Western thought and concentrated in the modernist perspective, including a firm belief in reason and the inevitability of evolution in all areas of human endeavour and a quest for original thoughts and forms of artistic expression.

Postmodernism shares many features, especially the rejection of the rigid distinctions between different genres and between high and low art, as well as the encouragement of intertextuality (pastiche, parody, bricolage, etc.), irony, and playfulness. Reflexivity and self-consciousness are also encouraged in postmodern art and philosophy, fragmentation and discontinuity are some of the most important features of postmodern narratives and its various artistic products are also characterised by a focus on a destructured, decentered and often even dehumanized subject.

Almost universally regarded as McEwan's most remarkable achievement, *Atonement* (2001) contains an impressive exploration of guilt and of the attempts to use the power of narration to rewrite personal history and to right past wrongs. It follows the evolution of Briony Tallis from her adolescence, when as a precocious thirteen-year old she destroys the lives of her older sister Cecilia and Robbie, the man she loves, to her nurse training during the Second World War and finally to the last days of her life as a distinguished novelist, still haunted by her old crime.

Temporal coordinates, in terms of their historical significance and as landmarks in the protagonists' evolution (1932, 1935, 1939, 1940, and 1999), the use of flashback and flash forward are some of the time issues to consider.

Atonement is a complex novel, as well as the chronology, the time of the narrative story, the narrative jumps in it. The first part of the novel begins in the summer of 1935 when 13-year-old Briony Tallis tries to guide her three cousins into a self-written play to celebrate the return of her older brother, Leon. Children's lives should be idyllic in their middle class, but real-life events soon capture Briony more than her game. She witnesses a moment of sexual tension between her older sister Cecilia and Robbie Turner, the housekeeper's son, whose education was financed by Cecilia's father. Assuming he forces Cecilia into a sexual encounter and later intercepts a letter that Robbie sends to Cecilia declaring his lust, Briony decides that Robbie is an evil creature. When her cousin Lola is mysteriously attacked, Briony misfits Robbie, who is arrested and imprisoned. Cecilia, with a broken heart at the closure of her boyfriend and does not stop believing in him and goes away to become a nurse in London and refuses to talk to Briony.

The second part of the novel follows Robbie five years later, now in the army, being exposed to the horrors and sufferings of evacuations from Dunkirk. In the third and final part, Briony becomes a war nurse in London and begins to reconcile her guilt for what she had done to Robbie and Cecilia, now together in the end.

In the epilogue, McEwan paints Briony as an aged and dying novelist who revisits his past of fact and fiction; in fact, the reader learns shockingly that Briony is in fact the author of the book, the sections of which are untrue and fictional. This novel, after all, is not just about love, trust, and war, but about the pleasures, pains, and challenges of writing, the burden of guilt, and, above all, the danger of interpretation.

The dramatic novel *Atonement* by Ian McEwan invites readers to the story of the family and the two young people separated so suddenly when they realized that they love each other. Although the younger sister will mature and have remorse, which also gives the title of the book, much will not change over the years. But in the end you will be able to interpret it as you wish. This time the narrator, a Briony turned writer, will outline a different ending than the real one for Robbie and Cecilia in one of her books. That's like atonement because she ruined their lives.

Atonement is a combination of details, actions and perspectives, managing to give the text a whole fresco: elements of love, elements of war and the beginning of the novel highlight a true portrait of the family typical of the period. a superb book because it manages to capture the role of the writer in this ephemeral, telluric world, dominated by the instinct of lies, of pride, without the possibility of 'atonement' the drama of the writer caught in his psychic and spiritual evolution, driven by the desire to see the world, every time, as it is not in fact - bad and careless.

About the novel, it can be said that it falls among the love stories from the war, however, such a quick categorization excludes what is essential and exceptional in this work: the finesse of psychological observations. In a novel so concerned with fiction's relation to the real world, this creation cannot but fail to have the successful two sided tone of the novel's first section: it has impending reality. While at the same time it raises the discussion about its awareness of the reality. The ending changes everything we know about what we just read-and it's extremely devastating. The novel is presented

elegantly as a notable aura of English life before crumbling to the aftermath of the war. It seemingly burns away the abstract, and gives us lasting memories very much alive.

'Can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her...power of deciding outcomes, she is...God?'

On the other hand the first-person narration of *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro is very simple. Stevens has been plucked perfectly from his upper-class milieu, and like the English upper-class, he rarely says what he means. It is only due to the vividness of his memories, in particular through remembered dialogue, that we manage to see what is really going on in the past and in the present. To highlight this when Stevens finds that his father has passed away, he decides to continue working instead of taking a break. In the narration there is no hint that Stevens is suffering. The recollection is explained by Stevens as the top of his career as a butler, his ultimate sign of dignity.

There is however no denying the fact that Ishiguro's international renown is to a large extent based on this novel, which won the Booker Prize and was almost immediately followed by an equally famous film version starring Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson. Stevens, the protagonist of *The Remains of the Day*, is an ageing butler who journeys through the West Country on a short holiday while simultaneously embarking on a considerably more fascinating journey through his own past. The opening section of the book, set in 1956, deals with Stevens' interaction with a new employer, the American Mr Farraday, who bought Darlington Hall after the death of Lord Darlington, the man Stevens has faithfully served for over three decades, while the rest of the novel takes the shape of a journal and represents a record of the protagonist's two-fold trip. The story told by the most memorable of Ishiguro's self-deceiving narrators provides readers with far more details than Stevens himself seems to be aware of, revealing numerous realities that the characters appears to be unable to face. Taking great pride in his professionalism as a butler and his dedication to the needs of a great man, Stevens voices no regrets about the emptiness of his own existence, his small contribution to the success of a man who has played such an important role in influencing the course of history being sufficient for his personal happiness. The painful details gradually emerging from his account suggest not only that his master was anything but a great man likely to be remembered as a hero but also that Stevens' obsessive pursuit of professional excellence (as well as his inability to acknowledge his own feelings and have any kind of informal interaction with those around him) resulted in missed opportunities among which his failure to establish a personal relationship with Miss Kenton.

During his journey, Stevens reflects on his unshakable loyalty to Lord Darlington, who had hosted lavish meetings between German sympathizers and English aristocrats in an effort to influence international affairs in the years leading up to the [Second World War](#); on the meaning of the term 'dignity' and what constitutes a great butler; and on his relationship with his late father, another "no-nonsense" man who dedicated his life to service. Ultimately, Stevens is forced to ponder Lord Darlington's character and reputation, as well as the true nature of his relationship with Miss Kenton. As the book

progresses, evidence mounts of Miss Kenton's and Stevens' past mutual attraction and affection.

While they worked together during the [1930s](#), Stevens and Miss Kenton failed to admit their true feelings toward each other. Their conversations as recollected by Stevens show a professional friendship which at times came close to blossoming into romance, but this was evidently a line that neither dared cross. Stevens in particular never yielded, even when Miss Kenton tried to draw closer to him.

When they finally meet again, Mrs. Benn, having been married now for more than twenty years, admits to wondering if she made a mistake in marrying, but says she has come to love her husband and is looking forward to the birth of their first grandchild. Stevens later muses over lost opportunities, both with Miss Kenton and regarding his decades of selfless service to Lord Darlington, who may not have been worthy of his unquestioning fealty. Stevens even expresses some of these sentiments in casual conversation with a friendly stranger of a similar age and background whom he happens upon near the end of his travels. This man suggests that it is better to enjoy the present time in one's life than to dwell on the past, as "the evening" is, after all, the best part of the day. At the end of the novel, Stevens appears to have taken this to heart as he focuses on the titular "remains of the day", referring to his future service with Mr. Farraday and what is left of his own life.

The novel does not present Stevens' situation as simply a personal one. It seems clear that Stevens' position as butler, and servant, has gradually made it impossible for him to live a fulfilling emotional life. When his father dies, Stevens is too occupied with worrying about whether his services are being carried out correctly to mourn (something that he later reflects on with great pride). Nor can Stevens bring himself to express feelings about personal matters, as to do so would compromise his dignity. Social rules at the time were a major constraint. As the book reveals, servants who wished to marry and have children would have immediately found themselves without a job, as married life is seen as incompatible with service, which requires total devotion. A truly "great butler" does not abandon his profession, and, as such, Stevens feels that such choices are foolish in regard to the life of a butler.

As with his other works, Ishiguro uses the structural devices of memory and perspective within this novel. Past events are presented from the viewpoint of the main protagonist, the ageing Stevens; elements of the past are presented as fragments, apparently subconsciously censored by Stevens to present (explicitly) a description of past occurrences as he would have the reader understand them and (implicitly) to relay the fact that the information supplied is subjective. Sometimes the narrator acknowledges the inaccuracy of his recollections and this raises the question of his reliability as a narrator.

Browsing through this book we will go through different feelings and we will dwell on the question: does love exist? It also exists here, somewhat, but it doesn't happen. Out of love traces, shadows, regrets and failures linger on. The whole writing is meant to find the way to the most hidden feelings of the reader, to wake us up and give us food for thought.

The character who takes us through this story is Stevens, a butler who does nothing but dedicate his entire life to his profession believing that this is his purpose in life. After all, what is a butler? He is absolute fidelity, discretion and almost unseen presence. Stevens is of the opinion that if he lives his life to the end in this way, he will be filled with gratitude, but he forgets how important love is. In the end, Stevens realizes the feelings he once let go, but he can't change the situation anymore.

At the end of his career, the butler takes a few days off (at the advice of his master) and makes a trip to Weymouth to meet Miss Kenton again (after almost 20 years) in the hope of convincing her to resume her job at the mansion. The meeting of the two has melancholy nuances; their romance is a kind of a *boiling* of passion with hints of dignity. In conclusion, *The Remains of the Day* highlight much more than a strong inner turmoil and the end is the one that culminates because it is not the one we would have expected. Everything calms down in the end, even love.

To conclude with, the treatment of time is complex in both of these two novels. There is a subjective time and also narrative jumps. While in *Atonement* overcoming a trauma as well as learning from the mistakes of the past is perceived along the entire storyline, in *The Remains of the Past* we notice a private and public history, a function and the limitations of memory and the chronology of the events.

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