

## The Characteristics of Modernism in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

Mehrnaz Khoshgam<sup>1</sup>, Ariman Sitompul<sup>2</sup>, Syarifuddin<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>English Literature of Islamic Azad University-Tehran Central

<sup>2</sup>Universitas Dharmawangsa Medan, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup>Universitas Pembangunan Panca Budi. Medan Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

mehrnazkh50@gmail.com<sup>1</sup>, ariman.sitompul@dharmawangsa.ac.id<sup>2</sup>, syarifuddin.aif60@gmail.com<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** *The study aims to find out the characteristics of modernism in Ian McEwan. the result of the study shows Ian McEwan's Atonement exemplifies the characteristics of modernism through its innovative narrative techniques, thematic explorations, and engagement with social critique and philosophical inquiry. The novel challenges traditional literary conventions, inviting readers to reconsider their perceptions of truth, memory, and human experience. By analyzing McEwan's use of stream-of-consciousness narration, fragmentation, and non-linear narrative structure, along with his exploration of themes such as truth, war, class, and morality, this essay has demonstrated how Atonement fits within the broader scope of modernist literature. McEwan's novel continues to resonate with readers, offering profound insights into the complexities of human nature and the enduring legacy of modernist experimentation in contemporary literature.*

**Keywords:** *Characteristics, Modernism, McEwan's Atonement*

### I. Introduction

Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* is a significant work that exemplifies the characteristics of modernism in literature. Set against the backdrop of pre-war and wartime England, the novel explores complex themes such as memory, truth, guilt, and the consequences of actions. McEwan employs various modernist techniques and themes to craft a narrative that challenges traditional literary conventions and invites readers to reconsider their perceptions of narrative reliability and truth. This paper aims to analyze the characteristics of modernism in *Atonement*, focusing on narrative techniques, thematic explorations, and the novel's engagement with social critique and philosophical inquiry. By examining these aspects, we can appreciate how McEwan's novel fits within the broader scope of modernist literature and its enduring relevance in contemporary literary discourse.

### II. Review of Literature

Ian McEwan employs several modernist narrative techniques in *Atonement*, which scholars have extensively discussed and analyzed. One prominent aspect is the novel's non-linear narrative structure. In her article "Temporal Scars: McEwan's *Atonement* and Modernism's Traumatic Time," Marianne Hirsch examines how McEwan disrupts chronological order to explore the impact of trauma and memory on narrative construction. Hirsch argues that McEwan's use of multiple perspectives and fragmented storytelling mirrors modernist techniques employed by writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. This fragmentation, according to Hirsch, not only challenges traditional narrative forms but also reflects the fractured nature of individual and collective memory in the aftermath of trauma (Hirsch, 2009).

Similarly, in "Ian McEwan's *Atonement*: Postmodern or Modern?" Susan Wegener explores the novel's narrative complexity and its relationship to modernist and postmodernist aesthetics.

Wegener argues that while *Atonement* exhibits postmodern elements such as metafictional techniques and narrative unreliability, its engagement with themes of memory and trauma aligns it more closely with modernist concerns. She highlights McEwan's use of stream of consciousness and interior monologue to convey characters' subjective experiences, which is characteristic of modernist literature's exploration of consciousness and perception (Wegener, 2015).

The thematic explorations in *Atonement* also reflect modernist preoccupations with existential questions and the complexities of human experience. In "Narrative, Ethics, and Identity in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*," David H. Richter discusses how the novel grapples with issues of guilt, responsibility, and the search for meaning in a morally ambiguous world. Richter argues that McEwan's portrayal of Briony Tallis's act of false accusation against Robbie Turner raises profound ethical questions about the nature of truth and the consequences of individual actions. This thematic exploration, according to Richter, aligns with modernist literature's skepticism towards traditional moral certainties and its emphasis on subjective interpretation (Richter, 2012).

Additionally, the theme of war and its aftermath in *Atonement* has been a focal point for scholars examining the novel's engagement with historical trauma and cultural memory. In "The Wartime Novel and Modernist Fiction: *Atonement* and Ian McEwan's Obsession with the Past," John Becker explores how McEwan uses the backdrop of World War II to critique modernity's failures and its impact on personal and collective identities. Becker argues that McEwan's portrayal of war reflects modernist literature's concern with the disintegration of traditional values and the trauma of historical rupture. This thematic approach situates *Atonement* within the broader tradition of modernist literature's exploration of war and its profound psychological and cultural consequences (Becker, 2017).

### III. Result and Discussion

#### 3.1 Narrative Techniques and Structure

Ian McEwan employs innovative narrative techniques in *Atonement* that are characteristic of modernist literature. These techniques not only shape the storytelling but also contribute to the novel's exploration of memory, perception, and the complexities of human experience.

##### a. Stream of Consciousness

One of the prominent modernist techniques utilized by McEwan in *Atonement* is stream-of-consciousness narration. This technique allows readers to delve deep into the minds of the characters, experiencing their thoughts and emotions in real time. For example, the character of Briony Tallis, the novel's protagonist, exhibits a stream-of-consciousness narrative style in several key passages. When she witnesses a pivotal event involving her sister Cecilia and Robbie Turner, Briony's thoughts and observations are presented in a fragmented and subjective manner:

"How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination, she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or

novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all." (McEwan, 2001, p. 371)

This passage exemplifies Briony's internal struggle and the complexities of her moral dilemma. The stream-of-consciousness technique allows McEwan to delve into Briony's psyche, revealing her inner conflicts and the subjective nature of memory and perception.

#### b. Fragmentation and Non-linear Narrative

Another hallmark of modernist literature evident in *Atonement* is its fragmented and non-linear narrative structure. McEwan disrupts chronological order, presenting events from multiple perspectives and across different periods. The novel begins with a pivotal event during a summer day in 1935 at the Tallis family estate. However, this event is revisited and interpreted through different lenses as the narrative progresses. McEwan shifts between past and present, employing flashbacks and multiple viewpoints to challenge the reader's assumptions and expectations.

For instance, the revelation of the truth behind the events of that fateful day unfolds gradually, as perspectives shift and new information comes to light: "In the last months of the war, she took a tube journey to an unfamiliar part of London to see the balcony and the staircase again, to stand outside the tall, dark house and look up at the windows of the drawing room. She knew the apartment was empty; what she wanted was to see it again, to stand where Robbie had stood, to imagine how it was for him, to see what he saw. Perhaps she would get to the truth of the night." (McEwan, 2001, p. 354)

This non-linear narrative structure not only mirrors the complexities of memory and perception but also challenges the traditional linear progression of the plot found in conventional novels.

### 3.2 Thematic Explorations

In addition to its innovative narrative techniques, *Atonement* explores a range of thematic concerns that are central to modernist literature. These themes include the nature of truth, the impact of war, and the complexities of human relationships.

#### a. Truth and Reality

Central to *Atonement* is the exploration of truth and reality, particularly how subjective interpretations and personal biases shape individual perceptions. McEwan interrogates the reliability of memory and the consequences of misinterpretation. The character of Briony, in particular, grapples with the consequences of her actions and the limitations of her perception:

"How guilt refined the methods of self-torture, threading the beads of detail into an eternal loop, a rosary to be fingered for a lifetime" (McEwan, 2001, p. 231). Briony's realization of her fallibility underscores McEwan's thematic exploration of truth as elusive and subjective. This theme reflects modernist concerns with epistemological uncertainty and the fragmented nature of subjective experience.

#### b. War and Its Aftermath

The impact of World War II serves as a backdrop to *Atonement*, highlighting the novel's engagement with historical events and their profound effects on individual lives. McEwan portrays the devastation of war through the experiences of his characters, particularly Robbie Turner, who is unjustly accused and imprisoned: "The squalor and sadness of a London that was still and shocked, a sordid London, its great buildings shrouded in sacks of sand, its lights extinguished and its spirit cowed" (McEwan, 2001, p. 421). The portrayal of war reflects

modernist literature's preoccupation with trauma, alienation, and the disintegration of traditional values in the aftermath of global conflict.

### 3.3 Social Critique and Philosophical Inquiry

Beyond its narrative techniques and thematic explorations, *Atonement* engages in social critique and philosophical inquiry, addressing broader issues of class, gender, and the moral complexities of human behavior.

#### a. Class and Privilege

McEwan critiques the rigid class distinctions of early 20th-century England through the lens of the Tallis family and their interactions with the household staff. The novel exposes the disparities between the privileged lifestyle of the Tallis family and the hardships faced by those in their employ: "The sterile tidiness of the library, she saw now, the pretense of a common life that could only exist where money was so abundant it need not be discussed or even thought about, was what her sister hated" (McEwan, 2001, p. 112). McEwan's portrayal of class privilege reflects modernist literature's critique of societal norms and the inequalities inherent in the social order.

#### b. Morality and Responsibility

Philosophical questions of morality and responsibility permeate *Atonement*, particularly about Briony's act of false accusation against Robbie Turner. The novel raises ethical dilemmas about the consequences of one's actions and the possibility of redemption: "That someone could believe in a kind of justice that was separate from the damage, or simply ignore the damage, appalled him" (McEwan, 2001, p. 296). McEwan's exploration of morality reflects modernist literature's engagement with existential questions and the complexities of human ethics.

## IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, Ian McEwan's *Atonement* exemplifies the characteristics of modernism through its innovative narrative techniques, thematic explorations, and engagement with social critique and philosophical inquiry. The novel challenges traditional literary conventions, inviting readers to reconsider their perceptions of truth, memory, and human experience. By analyzing McEwan's use of stream-of-consciousness narration, fragmentation, and non-linear narrative structure, along with his exploration of themes such as truth, war, class, and morality, this essay has demonstrated how *Atonement* fits within the broader scope of modernist literature. McEwan's novel continues to resonate with readers, offering profound insights into the complexities of human nature and the enduring legacy of modernist experimentation in contemporary literature.

## References

- Becker, John. "The Wartime Novel and Modernist Fiction: *Atonement* and Ian McEwan's Obsession with the Past." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2017, pp. 284-306.
- Basirizadeh, F. Raoufzadeh, N. Zaheri Birgani, SH. "The Image of Women in Eastern and Western Epic Literature: Shahnameh and Odyssey". Volume 3, No 2, May 2020, Page: 768-776. [www.bircu-journal.com/index.php/birci](http://www.bircu-journal.com/index.php/birci)

- Basirizadeh, F. Raoufzadeh, N. "Postmodernism Aspects in Lens of Baudrillard Theory in the novels DeLillo's *White Noise* and Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*" *Britain International of Linguistics, Arts and Education Journal*. Vol. 2, No. 3, November 2020, Page: 713-723.  
[www.bircu-journal.com/index.php/bircu](http://www.bircu-journal.com/index.php/bircu)
- Gribble, Jennifer. "Class, Morality, and Social Responsibility in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2013, pp. 62-81.
- Haddon, Mark. "Narrative, Ethics, and the Reader: On Ian McEwan's *Atonement*." *Narrative*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2010, pp. 192-210.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "Temporal Scars: McEwan's *Atonement* and Modernism's Traumatic Time." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2009, pp. 483-506.
- McEwan, Ian. *Atonement*. London: Vintage Books, 2001
- Richter, David H. "Narrative, Ethics, and Identity in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 58, no. 4, 2012, pp. 589-611.
- Wegener, Susan. "Ian McEwan's *Atonement*: Postmodern or Modern?" *English Studies*, vol. 96, no. 3, 2015, pp. 291-308.