

The Function of Time Figuration in Reading *Atonement*

Zhong Ying

Foreign Languages Studies School, Soochow University, China

Received January 12, 2019; Revised February 17, 2020; Accepted February 24, 2020

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Abstract This study investigates the relationship between time and memory in McEwan's novel *Atonement* and the role the three different kinds of time figuration play in constructing the harmony among characters, authors and readers. *Atonement* is another masterpiece after *First Love*, *Last Rites* and *Amsterdam*, for it gains several literary prizes: the Smith Award, the National Book Critics Circle and Santiago European novel Award. In *Atonement*, McEwan describes the protagonist Briony's memory dilemma through disrupting the linearity and stability of narrative and readers are often caught in a Foucault-like maze in reading. Ricoeur's interpretative theory of mimesis and figuration provides a new hermeneutic dimension to the interpretation of the text and an alternative perspective to the reader. In fact, the understanding of the novel can be helped by the dynamic cycle of figuration chains including prefiguration, configuration and refiguration. In prefiguration, the underlying reasons for the central event in Briony's memory are introduced. The key links between historical and individual events, the past and the present, the main and messy plots scattered throughout the novel could be organized by emplotment in configuration. In refiguration, Briony's reconstruction of the same events is achieved by meta-narrative strategy. To sum up, the time figuration model contributes to the interpretation of *Atonement* and the analysis of the figuration strategy provides possible spiritual sustenance for the child who experiences traumatic events in the early stages.

Keywords Ian McEwan, *Atonement*, Prefiguration, Configuration, Refiguration

the same title in 2007. No wonder it is considered to be one of McEwan's most elaborate, humane and ironic novels. (Davis, 180) For this book, McEwan is awarded the National Book Review Award in 2003. The book tells the story of a female writer Briony Tallis who causes her elder sister Cecilia Tallis to be separated from her lover Robbie Turner due to a lie. Then in order to atone for this mistake, Briony spends her entire life in writing the *Atonement*.

The novel revolves around Briony's memories, showing the importance of memories in this novel. After the publication of *Atonement*, scholars begin to focus their attentions on psychoanalysis. For example, Bruno M. Shah holds that McEwan's chief interest lies more with consequences than action. (Shah, 40) Erin O'Dwyer believes that in McEwan's psychoanalysis of society, he uses the letter as signifier to set the characters in motion, moving them from their initial positions to take up other positions within the gaze structure. (O'Dwyer, 184) Brian Finney probes into the intertextuality between Richardson's *Clarissa* and Briony's playlet *The Trials of Arabella*, finding that though Arabella, the melodramatic heroine in the playlet, shares *Clarissa's* sister's name, she lacks the psychological complexity of the original after placing the playlet within a literary tradition of sentimentality and sensationalism. (Finney, 73) Martin Jacobi maintains that in Briony's attempt to clear Robbie's name, she atones for what she has done, thereby reducing her sense of guilt, reconstructing her psychological self and reducing her feelings of shame. (Jacobi, 63) Some domestic scholars notice psychoanalysis, too. For example, Ding Jianning thinks that in *Atonement*, the twists and turns of personal destiny are infiltrated with changes in society and history. The delicate depiction of war scenes and characters' psychology is in parallel with reflections on human nature, moral dilemmas and literary creation. Its delicate and subtle psychological exploration and realistic detailed descriptions make readers unable to stop. (Ding Jianning, 21) It can be seen that scholars pay more attention to the psychological aspects of the character, but few studies combine time and memory.

1. Introduction

The publication of Ian McEwan (1948-) 's novel *Atonement* causes strong repercussions: *Atonement* is named one of the 100 greatest novels by Time Magazine in 2005 and it has been adapted into an American film with

2. A Conceptual Framework for Time Figuration in the Memory Narrative

Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory on three fold mimesis and figurations is based on his thoughts on the relationship between memory and narrative. In the second sentence of the preface of *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur makes a clear reference to the relationship between narrative and memory: memory and forgetting are interpreted as the middle layer of time and narrative. As a common factor in emotional and behavioral memory, time is mainly reflected in people's time. Memory and forgetting are based on narrative techniques. Memory is a narrative act that reconstructs narrative, and narrative is essentially presented as an imitative relationship. In the first volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur proposes the theoretical prototype of the three fold mimesis. (Ricoeur, 1984: 52) In his book *Memory, History, Forgetting* in 2004, Ricoeur develops his interpretive theory of memory phenomena, distinguishing between devastating forgetting and creative forgetting, and making them correspond to different aspects of memory. (Ricoeur, 2004: xv) The core idea of his narrative theory is to regard narrative as the intermediary connecting people and the world, and as having the function of realizing the imitation of real life through emplotment.

Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory can be applied to the interpretation of literary texts. Specifically, his hermeneutical model on three fold mimesis and three figurations includes prefiguration, configuration and refiguration. These three figurations correspond to three different mimesis. The prefiguration in the first fold mimesis shows the subject's living space-time, forming the historical necessity of the event by preparatory language. The configuration in the second fold mimesis is to let readers complete the investigation of the subject's overall life course by emplotting the beginning, the development, the climax and the ending of the main events in his life. The refiguration in the third fold mimesis is to fully understand the nature of a person by presenting his concrete life before and after the memory event. Susanne Dau explains the possibility of applying this model to literary interpretation from a new angle. He holds that as a creative continuous interpretation process, the method of imitation and interpretation in human studies is to make a philosophical in-depth elaboration of interpretive and reflective research processes by presenting various perspectives. He further explains that Ricoeur's interpretative process of mimesis and figuration is not only about the interpretation of the text, but also about the reader or the audience. This process is a creative process that helps readers understand texts comprehensively. (Dau, 17)

This article combines memory narrative and time shaping or figuration to explore memory narrative in *Atonement*. As Briony grows old, she cannot forgive her mistakes and decides to redeem the sin. Her method is to

"heal the pain in the process of recalling." (Duffy, 59) The narrative becomes her bridge to the past, and she reconciles with the past in the process of negotiation. Narrative imagination also becomes a tool for her memories. Briony, as a "narrated self" (Duffy, 46), picks up the memory pieces and resolves the conflicts among Robbie, Cecilia and her in the multi-layered world of memory. Such memories undoubtedly "provide context for the future" and help readers complete the entire time figuration of her memory narrative (Ricoeur, 1999: 11).

Although this tragic memory frequently haunts Briony, it is organized according to the rules of narrative and the imitation of real events. Briony's memory is a narrative act that reconstructs her childhood memories, and her narrative is essentially an imitation of Robbie's events. With an aim to complete the narrative time figuration of the novel, the concept of figuration is used to interpret it. Firstly, McEwan presents the Tallis family in a preparatory text, which preshapes the inevitability of the Robbie event. Secondly, the integration of the beginning, development, climax and ending of the Robbie's life, or the configuration of Robbie's experience can help readers to master his overall life course. Finally, through the practice of continuing to write and reshaping the past events, the past and present narratives are no longer single and stable and the refiguration is realized. Time figuration makes the memory narrative of *Atonement* appear more clearly to the reader. The exploration of memory narrative and time figuration in the novel not only examines McEwan's time narrative skills, but also provides a trauma-alleviating way for the child who experiences traumatic events in the early stages. According to Jonathan Baylin and Petra Winnette, the children with traumatic memory are at risk for adverse effects on his ability to connect and attach with other people. (Baylin & Winnette, 16) Briony and Cecilia's behavior are such examples. Further, their traumatic experience confirms the correctness of results, that is, the severity and extent of the trauma is likely to be reflected later in the individual's functioning as an adult. Briony and Cecilia's early experiences have a huge impact on their later lives. Trauma theory research and the alleviating effects of time reconfiguration for the specific group like Briony and Cecilia lay the foundation of this article.

3. McEwan's Prefiguration of the Robbie Event

As one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century, *Atonement* challenges readers' reason and arouses their reflection and contend. (Smith, 361) Indeed, while guiding readers to approach the truth of the story step by step, McEwan triggers readers' cognitive psychological deviation and self-reflection. As a text of memories, before entering the main event--the Robbie event, McEwan sets up Robbie's survival time-space in the Tallis family, and

makes pre-written preparations for Robbie's arrest by prefiguring time, class and emotions, which paves the way for the prefiguration of the inevitability of the Robbie event.

The first part of the novel aims to illustrate how Robbie is arrested for an unseen crime through a realistic sketch, and its slow pace pre-shapes the upcoming events. The novel consists of four parts. The backgrounds of the first three sections are: a hot summer day in 1935, the rural house in Tallis, the Dunkirk retreat and the day when Briony attends the wounded in the hospital during the war. The ending of the third part is the abbreviated letters B.T. for Briony, with the date 1999. (McEwan, 330) The fourth and final part of the novel are chronologically different from the first three parts, which can be seen from the end of the third part and the title of the fourth part, i.e. "London, 1999". Briony admits at the end of the novel that the last part exists to reunite Cecilia and Robbie in fiction, so that she can make up for her lie in childhood and atone for it. Although the overall time span of the novel is more than 60 years, its main narrative revolves around the days before World War II and the summer before the war. Specifically, Briony's lie in the first part is the direct cause of the events in the last three parts. McEwan is also relatively slow in describing this part. He uses a lot of space to restore the causes of the Tallis family's behavior and Robbie's destined fate. This part follows the tradition of gentry novels that Austen is adept at, focusing on depicting the rural life of the upper middle class in Britain between World War I and World War II (Chen Rong, 93). Due to its consistency with the characteristics of the 19th century novels (Lynn, 39), McEwan also calls *Atonement* "my Jane Austen novel" (Giles, 94). Head also points out that McEwan inherits the writing traditions of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and famous realist writers of the nineteenth century, that is, to reflect the true colors of life through real details. (Head, 29) In *Atonement*, McEwan portrays the details of life in the summer of 1935 and the network of relationships in the Tallis family objectively and calmly. The preparatory text in the first part paves the way for Robbie's arrest and sets up a living space for the Tallis family to complete the prefiguration of the core events.

Time prefiguration is an overall construction of the time frame before and after World War II. It positions the characters such as Briony, Cecilia and Robbie in the long river of time preliminarily, and finally forms "an advance experience of a life experience" (Ricoeur, 1991: 20). This experience highlights the deep-rooted superiority of the privileged class and its contempt for the working class. This kind of class pre-modeling shows that Robbie, as the representative of the working class, is deeply trapped in the iron cage of class prejudice. The attitudes of all members of the Tallis family to Robbie, except Cecilia, represent the values of British bourgeois family in the 1930s. In this seemingly equal estate, the class game is played furtively,

skillfully and ironically. (Chen Rong, 93) Robbie is the son of Grace and Ernest Turner. After his father Ernest disappears, Grace becomes the cleaner of the Tallis. Robbie is funded by Jack Tallis to study at a grammar school, after which he receives a scholarship, studies in Cambridge, and is now considering becoming a doctor. The funding of the Tallis family gives Robbie the unrealistic illusion that he can ignore class differences and realize his ideals through hard work. Actually, even if he receives an education that is impossible for his class at that particular time, it does not mean that he can cross his own class and enjoy the same treatment as other family members. In fact, class differences and contradictions always exist and Robbie is an insignificant figure in the hearts of other family members. For example, his full name, Robbie Turner, doesn't appear until the third page of the first part, and he is called Robbie for short. Names have personal, family and social values (Pan Huixia, 65). In terms of attributes, the first name is personal and the last name is family, which represents the family heritage and blood relationship. Ignoring the surname is a contempt for the Turner family represented by Robbie, which also presents the insurmountable gap between classes. This presupposition of the characters' noble or inferior social status makes Robbie immediately guilty when he is accused of being a rapist. This behavior is in line with the privileged status of the upper middle class, i.e. class values always rank first. Because of his working class background, his crime becomes indisputable once he is accused of hurting Lola. Emily, Leon, and Jack agree with Briony's charge immediately, so Robbie is forced to make a sacrifice. When the police car takes Robbie away, Grace tries to stop the car and shouts "liar!" (McEwan, 187) Her anger proves that she and her son never really become part of the Tallis family. Therefore, it is not important who rapes Lola. The point is that the educated privileged class would not do things that do not fit their status. This prefiguration of class relations makes Robbie's wrong imprisonment reasonable.

Class prefiguration makes Robbie's dream come to naught when it is contradictory to his class. Besides, his actions are prone to cause prejudice, too. When witnessing him "instructing" Cecilia by the pool, Briony firmly believes that he is an arrogant and ungrateful guy. This prejudice becomes an emotional prefiguration and the last straw leading to Robbie's imprisonment. Briony used to live naively in her own world: she is immersed in romantic fairy tales, traveling between reality and illusion. When she sees from the window that Cecilia disrobes in front of Robbie, jumping into the pool to pick up the shards of a vase that falls into the bottom of the pool, she finds that Robbie is just watching without any help. In Briony's cognition, it deviates from the customary practice popular of heroic male character in fairy tale. Thus, Briony misunderstands Robbie as "crazy and obscene" (Zou Tao, 70). Together with the love scene she witnesses in the library, she is sure that Robbie bullies her sister Cecilia

twice and wants him to pay the price. Therefore, when Briony, accustomed to playing the role of God alone, (Morrison, 2) finds Rolla raped, she immediately identifies Robbie as the murderer. The threat hidden in the slow rhythm in the first part finally comes, which is reflected in the dramatic opening of Chapter 13: Within the half hour Briony would commit her crime. (McEwan, 146). Before long, Robbie is arrested for unfounded charges, and the first part ends. This long day comes to an end. Briony considers that Robbie gets what he deserves and her hatred of Robbie dispels accordingly.

Briony's lie indirectly costs Robbie his life. Robbie's imprisonment and death in Dunkirk retreat are inextricably linked to Briony's lies. The similar tragedy also occurs in Philip Pullman's *The Amber Spyglass*. The protagonist Lyra's brutal personality and endless lies lead to the death of her friend Roger, and she finally realizes the need to tell the truth after others pay the price of life. Unlike Lyra, Briony isn't a constant liar. She just wants to punish Robbie. However, regardless of the reasons for their lies, they cost others their lives, and the liars spend the rest of their lives in paying for it.

When Briony finds her mistakes later, she is full of remorse and self-blame for her impulse in the younger days. In fact, Briony's impetuous emotions at that time are related to the weather too. McEwan also prefigures and paves the way for the relationship between characters' emotions and weather, because these two factors exacerbate the formation of Robbie's tragedy. Briony begins her memory in that long and hot summer of 1935. The scorching heat in the morning makes Briony feel depressed, "the liquid birdsong evaporates in the heat." (McEwan, 35). The heat shrouds the first part of the novel and shapes the action of the characters. (Mullan, 32) High temperature is easy to make people out of control emotionally. The constant emphasis on temperature indicates that all members of the Tallis family will lose their sensibility at high temperature. This portrayal of weather prepares the reader for a rush decision, like accusing Robbie just out of the suffering weather.

The time layout in the novel, plus class, emotional and weather prefiguration presents the life and behavior of the Tallis family in a detailed way. These let readers know in advance the living space before Robbie's arrest, the inevitability of arrest, the overall knowledge of the historical time of World War II and the narrated time of Briony. Briony's entire memory is itself a restatement. As a kind of renarrative, prefiguration provides context for Robbie's arrest, and its role in Briony's memories cannot be overlooked.

4. The Configuration through Emplotment

Briony's orderly memory of the hot summer of 1935 not

only proves the inevitability of Robbie's arrest, but also reflects her preference for order. But the word "order" is in stark contrast to the disparate atmosphere of Robbie's dangerous situation in Dunkirk retreat, the loosening logic in his thoughts and the lack of chapter division in the whole second part. However, by arranging the internal order of Robbie's consciousness and mediating the seemingly incoherent plots, namely, emplotment, readers realize the configuration of the plot.

There are some connections between historical events and individual events in Briony's memories, for example, between World War II and Robbie's experience in Dunkirk retreat. The two events are organized in a technique of emplotment. The novel takes the second world war as its background. The Dunkirk retreat is reconstructed by presenting the last moment in Robbie's life, suggesting that Briony is about to encounter the crisis of conscience. McEwan extracts Robbie's story from historical events and relies on readers to translate it into a unified and complete story. Regarding the process of extraction and translation, time and plotting, Ricoeur points out that the emplotment is a driving force for integration in the formal text level. It draws a unified and complete story from various incidents, or changes everything into a integrated story. ... Plot transformation is the principle of repeated time-shaping in a single work. (Ricoeur, 2003: 2) Extraction and transformation reflect the reciprocity between Robbie's experience in retreat and the story narrated by Briony. It is through emplotment, or the operation of plotting that turns pure inheritance into a shape, (Ricoeur, 1984: 65), that the configuration is accomplished. In the narrative of Dunkirk retreat centered on Robbie, he is described as being seriously injured, living without a place and travelling day and night, with an intermittent and dissociated consciousness. Thus, the boundaries between reality and dreams, past and present also blur in his mind. However, the emplotment effectively integrates the seemingly fragmented narrative or plots in the novel, until Robbie's subjective time is combed accurately. The plotting process in *Atonement* is a process that integrates heterogeneous factors such as the actor Robbie's desire to reach the coast, the way the three companions find a route, the defeated environment of post-war and the formation of Robbie's tragic ending. These factors include the goals and methods of Robbie's retreat, as well as the circumstances and outcome of their retreat. These plots ambush on the way of Robbie's retreat and appear in six scattered incidents with no apparent correlation:

Event one: Robbie holds the map pulled out from the fingers of the captain's body and searches for a route with Nettle and Mace.

Event two: In 1939, the only meeting of Cecilia and Robbie happens after the latter's release from prison.

Event three: Robbie is so irritable that he can't sleep and just wants to hurry to the coast.

Event four: Someday in June 1932, Robbie teaches

Briony how to swim and rejects the latter's confession of love.

Event five: Robbie, Nettle and Mace rescue the beaten RAF soldiers and help the old woman to find the sow.

Event Six: Robbie falls into the exhausted ocean and swears to Nettle that he will not speak again.

These six events as a close-up of Robbie, develop around the journey of the three--Robbie, Nettle and Mais's trip to the coast. Although they are always on the way forward, Robbie's memories stagnate still. When they are almost closer to the end of the journey, his memories spread far backwards. Event two and four reflect Robbie's messy thoughts in his memories. From these events to event six, he is exhausted spiritually. The snoring of his companion in event two reminds him of those stupid and claustrophobic days in prison. At that time, he is anxiously waiting for the future meeting with Cecilia among the prisoners' snoring, too. In the third incident, Robbie is too impatient to fall asleep. He just wants to hurry to the coast and sees Cecilia soon. This urgency plunges him into deeper memories: he remembers that he encourages Cecilia to compromise with her parents; Otherwise, her remorse will never end, and he can never forgive himself. (McEwan, 198) In a word, emplotment is adopted to integrate the details in battlefield and events in Robbie's sporadic memory into a meaningful story and to synthesize ideas and characters with plots. Obviously, the initiative of this operation functions as an intermediary. Fragmented events are transformed into its whole meaning to demonstrate the correlation of events.

The extension and mutation of plots concerning Robbie's distracted thoughts echoes his historical time-space and reconciles heterogeneous plots. Specifically, his goals, methods, environment, ending and chaotic thoughts during Dunkirk retreat are heterogeneous plots that imply the tragic tone of an ordinary life. The fact that Robbie and Cecilia never reunite in real life is a plot that moves audiences to tears. In reality, Robbie's tragic role is also the first extension of the plot. Other larger extensions of tragic elements include the plots concerning the bombing of a woman and her children. Their death, as a sudden attack to Robbie's quiet meditation, is in harmony with the environment in which the retreat begins. Such scenes could be seen everywhere on the battlefield of World War II. These terrible incidents bring the sudden violent effects of plots, whose effects resemble that of the event one: the harsh environment of Robbie, Nettle and Mace shocks the reader: "Too horrible ... he is caught in it and cannot extricate himself." (McEwan, 191) Through the perspective of Robbie, the novel describes a large number of war scenes in a stream of modernist consciousness: the wounded, corpses, scattered organs, abandoned weapons and vehicles, fugitive women and children (Liang Xiaohui, 114). The historical description of Dunkirk and Robbie's personal experience coordinates historical events with unexpected individual events. This compromise and mediation achieve the mediating function of plots. When

event six occurs, Robbie's physical condition worsens: he falls into the exhausted ocean and never recovers. His death ending finally brings down the curtain on his entire story. The configuration of plots let readers perceive individual's helplessness in history.

Another emplotment is Cecilia's words. Her words connect Robbie's fragmented memories, turn the arrow of time incessantly. Robbie keeps in mind Cecilia's words "I will wait for you to come back." (McEwan, 265) This sentence of Cecilia runs through the whole text, breaking the linearity of time, appearing in different spatial places of Robbie and becoming his emotional sustenance. It also functions as an important link connecting Robbie's entire memory of Cecilia. Whenever Robbie is about to fall, the wish that his Cecilia is waiting for him to come back is like a strong arm, holding him up whenever necessary. Undoubtedly, Cecilia acts as a spiritual leader in Robbie's life. While still in jail, he keeps in touch with Cecilia by writing weekly. Unfortunately, during his imprisonment, he has a precise clinical diagnosis of having excessively strong sexual desire. So he needs treatment and help from others and could not be stimulated. Out of fear of his psychiatrist and letter prosecutor, he dares not involve sensuality in the letter or even to show his emotions. They have to discuss literature in the letter and use famous characters in classic works as passwords to convey their love. After he is released from prison, he carries that bundle of letters from Cecilia with him, and finally dies in anticipation of waiting to reunite with her. Though he dies in the process of retreat, his hope does not end with the ellipse of his body, for Briony reunites them in her novel and thus reverses the irreversible time.

The coordination among the historical events of World War II, the personal feeling of Robbie, and Briony's reminiscence realize the mediation between the macro historical event and the personal event, thus achieving the configuration through emplotment. The chaos on the battlefield and Robbie's scattered thoughts make Robbie's memory appear in fragments. This messy presentation and description of Robbie's conscious breaks the boundary of the past and present, making readers depressed and confused. However, after the configuration of the plot and time, readers can build in their minds the individual's misery in that special historical background. Though Briony fabricates Robbie and Cecilia's happy ending, the presentation of many incoherent plots in Robbie's consciousness makes possible a dialogue between the text and the reader as to who should atone for Robbie. The configuration of Robbie's whole life makes people realize the cruelty of the war and the existence of the helpless individuals like Robbie. Despite all this, the configuration gives them a chance to speak for themselves, lets more people know their miseries and resonate with them.

5. The Refiguration of *Atonement*

Briony's writing provides a chance for refiguration. In her artistic creation, she adds a lot of fantasy elements, which makes readers constantly moving inside and outside the text with an aim to see her in her true colours. Readers' behavior form a dialogue and negotiation between them and the text. It is through this process that the refiguration of the text is realized.

Creation in a fictional level becomes a stage for her personal redemption and this makes refiguration possible. Briony repeatedly edits the manuscript for fifty-nine years. In this process, she can reshape her ever-changing relationship with others (Bansel, 2013: 6). Briony's final confession of her real identity in Part IV astonishes us: the reunion of Cecilia and Robbie is simply her imagination. But after hearing this, readers won't get angry because the aged Briony is seriously ill. There is nothing she can do but let them reunite in a virtual situation. In fact, they die long before. She does so just to atone for her own sin for the last time. Of course, we know she doesn't think of atonement from the beginning. Briony's understanding of her own behavior is gradual and modified (Song Yanfang & Luo Yuan, 85), a case in point is Briony's understanding of the pool event: In the summer of 1935, Briony believes that Cecilia is humiliated by Robbie and decides to take revenge on the latter. After deliberately identifying Robbie to rape Rolla, she feels she is "like a hero" (McEwan, 172). But when she sees Cecilia crying as Robbie is taken away, she knows she does something stupid. After the Robbie incident, Cecilia breaks off with the family. Cecilia's departure takes Briony on an atonement journey. She first works as a nurse at the hospital where Cecilia once worked, trying to win the forgiveness of her sister by experiencing the same hard life, and turning her desire of atonement into the hard work and assiduous writing.

The remodeling is also reflected in Briony's use of meta-narrative strategies. She keeps reminding her readers: she likes keeping secrets; she longs for order, and she states many times that she wants to be a respected writer (McEwan, 7). But as a result of her lies, the fates of the three are changed. Today, more than sixty years later, the guilty Briony is old and sick while both Robbie and Cecilia die that very year. But she still stubbornly construes their encounter in the novel: they stand side by side on the avenue in south London (McEwan, 350). She lets the lovers end well in her final draft, showing that the meaning of their lives do not end with their death, but extend to the future through the people like her who continues to live and interpret their lives in a narrative way. They live in Briony's mind and resonate with the future (Gregor, 73). It can be seen that Briony is both the leader and participant of her memories, going through other people's life course at the same time. She also reminds readers that she is an unreliable narrator, an unreliable author, and an old woman guilty of crimes committed more than 60 years ago (Ellam, 42). Her multiple identities make her narrative unreliable, too. As is believed by Virginia Woolf, language is

unreliable for portraying an objective truth. (Quigley, 69) Briony's words are both true and false, displaying unstable characteristics. The instability of her language mirrors the multiplicity of truths, that is, the contradiction between virtual death of victims and sincere desire for atonement. The truth they try to catch is many-sided. (Quigley, 74) From Briony's open language, readers learn about her spiritual dilemmas.

Briony's fantasy work increases dialogue and contact between readers and the text. Robbie and Cecilia are reborn in Briony's novels, which proves that her work is of fantasy nature. Todorov elaborates that fantasy works require readers to join the characters' world, making readers feel ambiguous, for readers' hesitation is the first requirement for fantasy works. (Todorov, 1970: 36) He emphasizes that in fantasy works, a bizarre event exists not only to arouse the readers and the protagonists' hesitation, but also to symbolize a way of reading. (Todorov, 1970: 37) Briony's fantasy work successfully raises questions about who should atone for Robbie's death and invites readers to discuss the mechanics of reading together. The fact that *Atonement* focuses on the reader's experience and reading style breaks the closed system of literary discourse. To study *Atonement* from the relationship between text and reader aims to place people in the relationship with others in order to get a correct understanding of human existence. It is similar to Bakhtin's dialogue principle. According to Bakhtin, dialogue means not only the relationship between researchers and research objects in the field of humanities, but also the relationship between creators and creations in artistic creation activities. The fabricated ending of Robbie and Cecilia by Briony is just the relationship between creators and creations.

The readers refigure the world of fiction in McEwan's characterization of Briony. McEwan's Briony is both hateful and pitiable: she personally brews Robbie's tragedy, and leaves her own life in a void of redemption. However, McEwan does not evaluate the character directly in the novel. He tries to avoid "any procedural moral preaching" (Ricks, 25), "putting readers in a critical context" (Noakes, 87), letting them adjust their position in the sympathy and empathy for the characters, thus triggering a series of reactions from judgment to sympathy. Obviously, *Atonement* enables readers to acquire and construct Briony's story with the narrative process gradually, to follow Briony and Robbie's self-seeking journey to deepen their understanding of the self, thereby gaining the real experience in the empirical world and achieving what Pam Morris called "epistemological progress" (Morris, 11). In this sense, readers reshape the world of fiction with their own cognition.

Further, the full display of Briony's consciousness and behavior in the novel causes readers to have a Woolf-like reading experience of the text, which also means that Briony could reshape her text in the level of narrative imagination. Both Woolf and McEwan convince that one

of the greatest values of the novel is the ability to enter other people's consciousness. (Smith & McEwan, 112) However, in *Atonement*, Briony does not lead the reader to the end of the story step by step, but makes readers gradually deviate from the original psychological expectations with her remorse and atonement. Virginia Woolf emphasizes that the first task of any reading is to try to understand the author's perspective, but this is not easy, because we have our own biases, experiences and worldviews. Therefore, the reading experience is often a painful experience, and the author puts his opinion on us, ..., the order in our heart is destroyed. (Woolf, 52) The readers of *Atonement* also experience this kind of inner twist. Briony repeatedly emphasizes that she doesn't intend to destroy the relationship between Robbie and Cecilia. It is through thinking about Cecilia's break with the family, through reshaping, reminiscing and redefining Robbie's relationship with her sister repeatedly that she begins to understand her faults. Briony's awakening is also seen from Cecilia's letter to Robbie on the former's almost masochistic behavior. The true experience of bloody scenes in St. Thomas's Hospital makes Briony step out of the subjective world, and grows mature with the continuous remodeling of emotions: from accusation of Robbie, awareness of her own prejudice, self-punishment, desire for atonement, to writing for atonement. All of these processes reflect her transformation from a paranoid girl to "a mature individual who can put herself in the shoes of others and act to atone for sin" (Schemberg, 85). Although her good wishes that Robbie and Cecilia could reunite only exist in the narrative imagination, Briony's incessant atonement behavior provides the reader with the same traumatic memory with an opportunity to reflect and act bravely.

Briony's construction of the events of that summer in her imagination and narrative through meta-narrative strategies, McEwan's vivid characterization of Briony, readers' Woolf-like reading experience all contribute to the refiguration of the Briony's memory. These actions, positions and relationships belong to the past, the present and the future as well. The integration of the above elements has different associations, relationships and meanings in space-time, bringing more possibilities for different narratives and future.

6. Conclusions

McEwan's prefiguration of the Robbie event shows Robbie's living space-time, forming the historical necessity of his imprisonment by preparatory language. The configuration through emplotting the beginning, the development, the climax and the ending of Robbie's death in the Dunkirk retreat lets readers understand Robbie's limited life progress and the impact of historical events on people. The refiguration of *Atonement* is finished by

McEwan and readers who describe and remold the same event in different ways. Briony in *Atonement* completes the long-awaited redemption through the virtual reconstruction of Robbie and Cecilia's existence. Briony, as a narrative subject, her recalling process also reflects the despair, resistance and struggle of contemporary subjects in the memory dilemma. She shows her respect for memory by refusing to forget. Her stories give us illuminations: although the past events are fixed and unchangeable, they can be interpreted in new ways. These interpretations are the prerequisites for us to form consultations and dialogues between the past experience and the vision of the future.

The alleviation of the pain is just an illusion, for our responsibility will not be diminished. Further, this relief is only self-forgiveness for God's mercy upon all. In such a state of mind, McEwan suggests that language and writing, as one of the basic functions of human self-criticism, will maintain the harmony between man and himself, others and the whole world. As Todorov declares that literature is a discourse about human existence that leads to truth and morality. (Todorov, 1984: 188) Therefore, through *Atonement*, McEwan tells us that though we cannot possess truth, we should not abandon the pursuit of truth. We cannot cross over childhood trauma, but instead, we can atone it in our own way.

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