The Pleasure and Pathology of Narrative

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Abstract

Literary texts, in particular novels, provide unique ways of representing and exploring the workings of the human mind. Our capacity and willingness to be immersed in an alternative world through the power of narrative suggests our peculiar sensitivity to this form of communication and its capacity to structure our experience. But our hunger for narrative suggests a desire for knowledge as well as a desire for the ‘right’ story: when this desiring in the imagination motivates behaviour and affects decisions, narrative can become dangerous. This paper investigates the power of narrative in Ian McEwan’s novel Atonement (2001). It explores narrative imagination as an asset as well as an affliction; the role of confabulation; and the destructive power of narrative in terms of what these phenomena, when represented in fiction, can tell us about the human mind.

Keywords: Narrative; Confabulation; Literary Fiction; Consciousness

Ian McEwan, now considered to be “England’s national author” (Zalewski, 2009), thinks that the plastic, malleable form of the novel is the “best machine” (Smith, 2005) for exploring human nature, possessing a language for complex experiences such as consciousness that science lacks (Cook, Sage & Groes, 2007). The primary aim of the novel is to reveal thought and affect us. Novels provide pleasure because they allow us to enter other minds, and they can be subversive because they possess the power to recreate reality. Novels ask us to imagine and they enable us to see the self better than any literary form has yet allowed (Wood, 2008).

Mark Turner claims that narrative is the “root of human thought” (1996), the greatest feat of natural selection. I suggest that cognition is the critical feature of the human condition, represented in and explored through literature, making the analysis of literature a crucial site for exploring the powers of the mind. Literature, unlike science, does not try to explain cognition and emotions; rather, it transmits them. Merlin Donald believes that literature “is perhaps the most articulate source we have on the phenomenology of human experience” (2001), and Francis Steen maintains that the study of “mental capacities at work in literary texts...[is] one of the most direct and illuminating methodologies available to cognitive science” (2002).

McEwan’s novel Atonement (2001) is a metafictive investigation of the power of narrative and, as such, it is fertile territory to explore the representation of consciousness and, in particular, the pleasurable, seductive powers of narrative. A psychological study, similar but superior to his recent novels Enduring Love (1997) and

Saturday (2005), Atonement focuses on the power of literary fiction and the role confabulation plays in satisfying our narrative desires, as well as the elements that might contribute to confabulation, such as our potent imagination, our desire for knowledge and our innate pleasure in narrative.

Narrative Pleasure

Narrative, the term for a story as narrated comes from the Latin root gnārus, for knowing (Onions, 1996), and is linked to both knowledge and pleasure – the pleasure of knowing. The evocation of possible worlds is pleasurable for both the writer and the reader. A story is always a question of desire says Teresa de Lauretis (2000), and Atonement reflects this through the construction of thirteen-year-old Briony, the main character, as possessing a narrative compulsion, an insatiable longing to narrate, as well as through the reader’s pleasurable engagement with the world of the text made explicit through reader reaction to the startling, disturbing ending. Freud viewed the mind as tending towards the “pleasure principle” (1961), and literary texts themselves can be viewed as “sites of bliss” (Barthes, 1975), with our innate desire for them evidence of “epistemic dignity” (Barthes, 1975): we find pleasure in narratives in order to foster our own ability to express, understand and shape ourselves.

In terms of narrative pleasure it is important to consider the function of form: Atonement is a novel. At the start of Atonement Briony, a budding writer, bemoans the fact that the narrative she is writing – in the form of a play – cannot communicate consciousness, the “vital knowingness...which compels a reader’s respect” (6) because it is the “wrong genre” (45). The novel, she comes to realise, is the only vehicle that can capture the density and truth of individual experience. Briony is interested in “thought, perception, sensations... the conscious mind as a river through time... [and how she might] represent its onward roll, as well as the tributaries that would swell it, and the obstacles that would divert it” (282). This long metaphor, echoing the metaphor traditionally used for consciousness – that of the river or stream first coined by William James – self-reflexively draws attention to the unique capacity of the novel to represent lived experience or qualia. If, as Jane Austen writes, novels display “the greatest powers of mind [and]... the most thorough knowledge of human nature... in the best chosen language” (1818) and as Joseph Conrad writes, the novel, “by the power of the written word [should] make you hear... make you feel and... make you see” (1945), then a total understanding of the phenomenon of confabulation and its connections with
narrative as a form of pleasure should include an investigation of its representation in literary fiction.

**Storied Perception in Atonement**

To what extent do we control the narratives that are such an essential feature of our minds? Do we control them or can they control us? What happens if what we believe becomes confused with what we imagine? If false beliefs are on a continuum with normal beliefs, if imaginings are “hard to distinguish from beliefs at the level of inference” (Currie, 2000), and we are all prone at times to confabulation (Dennett, 2000), which is the production of false stories, this suggests that our ability to decouple or cognitively separate the real from the imagined might not be that easy in practice. Some psychologists contend that people must engage in active, deliberate processing to disbelieve narratives, or otherwise they will have an impact on the real world (Gerrig and Rapp, 2004). Narrative, especially the human capacity to confabulate, as explored in *Atonement*, can become a matter of life and death.

Through a combination of characterisation and what narratologists call free indirect discourse, where the voices of the narrator and the character merge, a dual perspective is established in *Atonement*; the reader can look at Briony from a critical distance and also understand her cognitive processes from within, from her point of view. Free indirect discourse functions to simultaneously both tell and show the workings of a character’s mind. *Atonement* invites the reader, through the overt presentation of Briony as a burgeoning writer, to reflect upon the power of narrative and the novel as “a magical process”, a “form of telepathy” (37). At one point Briony thinks, “only in fiction can you enter a mind and show it at work” (282), and this is McEwan’s abiding concern. The unique capacity of the literary novel is its ability to communicate what Virginia Woolf famously described as “moments of being” (1939), the subjective, qualitative “hard problems” (Chalmers, 1995) of consciousness. McEwan’s recent novels such as *Enduring Love*, *Atonement* and *Saturday*, with their explicit focus on mental processing, and their attempts to “take the mould of that queer conglomeration of incongruous things, the modern mind” (Woolf, 1927), can be viewed as part of the new momentum between the sciences and the humanities.

Crossing the border from fact into fantasy is not necessarily pathological, but if the desire for narrative is so strong as to motivate behaviour, narrative becomes dangerous. McEwan’s epigraph from Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* alerts us to the danger of the imagination from the outset: “Dearest Miss Morland, consider the nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from?... Dearest Miss Morland what ideas have you been admitting?” In the first chapter Briony is presented as “lost to her writing fantasies” (21), urgently desiring to construct a possible and preferable world through narrative. The word “story” is foregrounded semantically as well as thematically, appearing fifty-three times in *Atonement*, signifying the novel’s concern with the role story plays in our lives, its role as a form of self-knowledge, and the extent to which Briony interprets her life as a story. For Briony, a narrative is a way of creating a “more pleasing world” (7), giving her a sense of autonomy and agency. *Atonement* metafictively explores the way we understand – in terms of what a novel can do regarding the representation of a thinking mind – and the human tendency to automatically leap into narrative mode when attempting to understand the world. What we perceive affects our beliefs: when Briony sees her sister Cecelia and Robbie standing by the fountain on a beautiful summer’s morning, the scene is so perfect and formal that at first she thinks it must be a proposal of marriage; then when she watches as her sister removes her clothes and steps into the fountain, she thinks it must be at Robbie’s command. Briony is the mind observing: she is the artist, the “watcher” of Henry James’s metaphor of the novel as a house of windows (1881), looking out of her window at the world. The window operates as a trope for her separation from the reality of the events she observes, and also of the boundary she will cross in terms of blurring the imagined with the real. Briony does not understand what she has just witnessed, it makes no sense and she determines to make sense of it through narrative.

Briony’s active response to what she perceives is in the form of writing a story. Her perception is ‘strored’. Writing a narrative is a form of thinking for Briony, and a heightened state of arousal: “what she wanted was to be lost to the unfolding of an irresistible idea, to see the black thread spooling out from the end of the scratchy sliver nib and coiling into words” (115). Porter-Abbott explains that narrative templates in our minds are activated immediately through the act of perception itself (2002). Briony’s pleasurable narrative imaginings merge in her mind with her perceptions – “wasn’t writing an achievable form of flight, of fancy, of the imagination?” (157) – making the “realignment” (76) or decoupling difficult for her, and culminating in her catastrophic confabulation.

While Briony is presented as a thirteen-year-old child, Robbie ruefully reflects “not every child sends a man to prison with a lie” (228). *Atonement’s* concern is with narrative as a fundamental form of knowledge, pleasure and potential pathology. Briony is seduced by her own false narrative and it functions to seduce her listeners. Jacques Lacan writes that the “first object of desire is to be recognised by the other” (McQuillan, 2000), and this is an essential aspect of narrative exchange evident in *Atonement*. It is through narrative alone that Briony makes sense of the social world around her, receiving “total attention” (7), and recognition by others as “Briony Tallis the writer” (4).

**Confabulation and Narrative Fiction**

Hélène Cixous see writing as a kind of “production of desire” (Sellers, 1994), and Briony’s act of confabulation, when she narrates her story to the policeman about Robbie attacking Lola in the dark, is described as “like love” (174): she experiences the “onset of a sweet and inward rapture” (179) as she shapes her narrative of Robbie as a “real life... villain” (158). She “felt a strange weight lifting
from her and a warm submissive feeling spread from her stomach to her limbs” (174). These physical sensations are the embodied pleasures she has repeatedly felt when writing and constructing a narrative and reflect the well-known psychological benefits – the sense of peace and well-being the disclosing of a narrative creates (Fivush et al., 2007). Briony’s confabulation is the peak of her joy. Her beliefs about Robbie have combined with what Greg Currie and Ian Ravenscroft call her “desire-like imaginings” (2002).

Briony desperately wants Robbie to be the villain. She readily encodes his strange behaviour with her sister by the fountain and in the library, and his “brutal” (113) letter as evidence of Robbie’s trait-based behaviour that confirms and justifies her beliefs. She has formed a narrative about him in her attempt to interpret his behaviour. He is the “only son of a humble cleaning lady... it made perfect sense” (38) and there was “truth in the symmetry” (169) of the strange events. Briony exhibits the “distinctive kind of narrative practice” (2008) that Daniel Hutto believes is the core way in which we understand others. He claims that the way human beings come to understand one another is through a knowledge of the person’s story and when others’ actions are unusual or deviant, the only way we can make sense of them is by acquiring a narrative that “has as its subject matter the reasons why a person acted;” he calls these “folk psychological narratives” (2008). Because Briony engages in an active process to believe rather than disbelieve that tales of simple good and evil exist in the real world, her early narrative encounters and current narrative desires have an impact – a destructive impact – in the real world.

Belief and Desire

While we ordinarily allow that beliefs may be produced by wishful thinking (Davies & Coltheart, 2000), Briony’s imaginings become so strong as to overcome any resistance to the terrible real world consequences, exposing narrative as pathology. Briony’s confabulation is presented as an extreme form of narrative pleasure. Adamant that there is “nothing she could not describe” (156), she is determined to “find ways of conjuring [Robbie] safely on paper” (157) and that “through desire alone” (157) she could construct the right story. Shaun Nichols explains how motivation affects both interpretation and recall, that “what we care about” structures both the inferences and the memories that ensue (2006). Briony’s all-consuming desire is to construct the narrative that she believed was “writing itself around her” (166), her spontaneous belief that “everything connected” (166). Nichols explains that “want we want” affects our understanding because desires are like beliefs, and desiring in the imagination and believing possess a common code, a shared pathway to the brain (2006). Briony wants to understand the strange events from her day as a narrative, desiring that this narrative will turn out the way she wishes.

Briony’s tendentious reasoning is a function of her beliefs. Her beliefs have been formed by her perceptions and not only can perceptions cause beliefs, they can justify them: “perceptions and beliefs have the same content” (Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002). Briony’s perplexing perceptual experiences on this hot summer’s day form cumulative background beliefs in her mind, functioning to disturb and inflame her desire for narrative which is her means of understanding her world.

Briony’s desire to shape her world to fit her narrative demonstrates her passion for order, her belief that the events she has witnessed must be causally connected: “everything fitted” (168). Narrative as a source of knowledge for Briony is also a clear source of pleasure. Her desire for narrative is depicted through her “delicious” (29) obsessive “yearning” (4) to “cast her narrative spell” (7).

Confabulation may be more common than we think. A psychological process, it is different from lying because there is no intention to deceive, but rather, it involves self-deception. In Briony’s mind she had “cast herself as her sister’s protector” (123). William Hirstein believes there is a “clear connection [between confabulation] and the human gift for storytelling” (2005), suggesting the potency of what Aristotle described as a convincing impossibility; of the artistic value of what might happen over what actually happens. When Briony says she saw Robbie attacking Lola, she believes that she did. The truth-value of her proposition is critical; she had no intention to deceive, she was “without guile” (168). In Part Three of the novel she says she was “weak, stupid, confused... but she never thought of herself as a liar” (336). Confabulators do not have access to reasons (Bortolotti, 2008), and by providing an answer to her own question, “Lola. Who was it?” (165), “It was Robbie, wasn’t it?” (166), her narrative functions as a form of power and authority. Her confabulation also serves a defensive role, protecting herself from any awareness that she does not understand herself or what is happening in her world. “Confabulation involves the absence of doubt about something one should doubt” says Hirstein (2005), and an interesting issue in Atonement is the eagerness of Briony’s listeners to believe her story, appealing as it did to their class prejudice.

The context in which Briony finds herself – as the sole witness to the rape of her fifteen-year-old cousin – requires her to confabulate, as any qualification of her “I saw him” (181), such as “I know it was him” (181), would imply she did not know for sure, and the “I don’t know” is not an option (Bortolotti, 2008) for Briony the writer and confabulator. The paradox of this situation is, as James Wood points out, that “only through fiction itself can we see how mistaken Briony is” (2002). The western philosophical tradition linking seeing with knowing is reflected in Briony’s confabulation – when she said “I saw him” (181) she actually meant she “knew” (181) it was him. Her perceptions, desires and beliefs had become inseparable.

Briony’s “zeal” (168) to understand the “consistent... symmetrical” (168) events suggests the epistemic benefits of confabulation and the link between confabulation and the human need and desire for narrative. Briony’s confabulation is filling a gap, not in her memory, but in
her understanding – which is her narrative. This reflects the brain’s tendency to produce complete coherent representations of the world (Hirstein, 2005), just as a narrative does. Desiring in the imagination may render an individual more likely to desire in reality (Currie, 1999), and *Atonement*’s conclusion, its resistance to closure, self-reflexively explores this. Narrative immersion such as Briony’s, and indeed the reader’s, “can change the time course in which information becomes available” explains Richard Gerrig (1993), so that real world decisions can be affected by fictional narratives as they become part of our self-perception.

Through the characterisation of Briony, *Atonement* explores the human instinct and desire to seek both pleasure and knowledge from narrative. The jarring effect of the novel’s ending, a coda, bridging a narrative gap of fifty-nine years, denies the reader the narrative satisfaction they expect and the outcomes they would prefer. We learn that the lovers – Robbie and Cecelia – did not survive the war, and that the novel is entirely Briony’s construction. The coda frustrates reader alignment and interaction by creating a competing text, inviting us to reflect on the way narrative operates in terms of facilitating our entry into other minds, as well as the way we make sense of our world. Our willing immersion, our pleasurable absorption in a possible world, as anticipated by the epigraph, is demonstrated through the effect of the coda as it punishes the reader for their willing suspension of disbelief. The ending cleverly plays with the effects of reality and truth. The reader is invited to reflect upon the implications for meaning of narrative structure and style; to consider the extent to which Briony and the reader possess a narrative desire and need for narrative while exposing its pathological potential.

**Conclusion**

*Atonement* is explicitly about the capacity of the novel to represent life and the workings of separate minds. It raises questions about the link between narrative creativity and confabulation, inviting the reader to speculate on the degree to which narrative, as an essential feature of consciousness – the “quintessential form of customary knowledge” (Lytard, 1984) – is functionally beneficial. The pleasure of narrative, it seems, involves desire, a certain “wishfullness,” as does confabulation (Hirstein, 2005), and our capacity to create other worlds and selves is something *Atonement* both celebrates and cautions.

Confabulation, as presented in *Atonement*, is the satisfying manifestation of Briony’s narrative desires; an extreme form of narrative pleasure; an extreme form of what is an essential feature of the mind. Confabulation and narrative are linked to creativity, self-deception, knowledge and desire. My aim has been to explore the connections between narrative and the phenomenon of confabulation, focusing on what literature, as a non-empirical form of truth, and literary analysis, can contribute to the quest of cognitive science to understand the human mind. *Atonement* invites the reader to reflect upon the function of narrative in the way our mind operates, and its twin role as a source of knowledge and illusion. *Atonement* celebrates the pleasure we derive from narrative while exposing its pathological potential.

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**References**


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