

In Search of True Identity: The Mutual Relationships of Human Beings in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and *Enduring Love*

Zohre Ramin^a, Fatemeh Masoumi^b

Department of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literature,
University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

^{a,b}E-mail address: zramin@ut.ac.ir , fmasoumi@ut.ac.ir

ABSTRACT

Critically acclaimed writer, Ian McEwan, has been recognized as a pioneer for writing unique forms of fiction. His craftsmanship has been explained as “rational”, “controlled”, and “precise”. The narrative organization in his works brings out the human nature, which is at times, introduced as misled, confused, and guilt ridden. Influenced by Freud, McEwan has written novels which probe into the psyche of the characters so deeply that they resemble psychological case studies. It is here argued that a psychological reading can be done based on the theories of Erik Erikson; namely, identity crisis and identity formation of the characters. Furthermore, to provide a richer theoretical background, narratology is incorporated. Monika Fludernik's narratological novel approach sheds light on issues of misinterpretation and unreliability to further verify the psychological aspects of the work. *Atonement* and *Enduring Love* have been analyzed as evidence on the basis of theories in narratology and psychology. Finally, drawing on both theories, a new form of character representation will be manifested on identity and self-recognition.

Keywords: Narrative; Psychology; Erik Erikson; Monika Faludernik; Narratology; Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Narratology is associated with a wide range of experiences and concepts. The very simple acts of talking or reading a newspaper are the most straightforward type of the notion. Therapy and the unconscious thought of the human beings take it a step further. The key point to narrative is its cause and effect relationship which is understood and practiced in terms of chronology and sequence. Different narratives help us understand the story from different view-points and thus provide the reader with a complete perspective. One of the essentialities of narrative is the presence of a human character in the center. This very human character is in need of a place and time to perform his actions and utterances. Fludernik (2009) analyzes the various definitions and reading of narrative and provides her readers with a more complete definition. She believes that the narrative is a representation of a fictional world in which the protagonists perform some actions. The reader via the experiences of those protagonists, plunges into their world and at some point even identifies himself with them. Narratives have different structures which include the narratee, the implied reader, the implied author and the narrator. The narratee is sometimes established as one of the important

figures. The sex of the narratee is usually not known. Next, the implied reader is situated at the opposite end of the narratee. He/she is the projection of the text and is “perceived by the reader as acting out the role of an ideal reader figure, although the real reader may not actually assume this role.” (*An Introduction to Narratology*, 2009:210) The implied author is not considered a character, but something which the reader has constructed in his mind. Figure 1, demonstrates the relationship among the mentioned divisions.

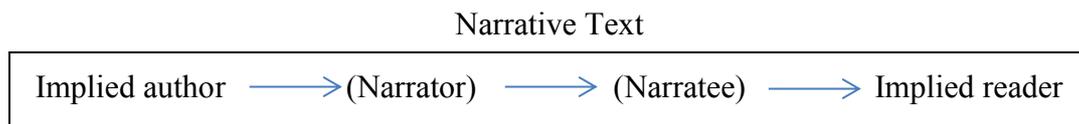


Figure 1. The narrative-communicative situation (Chatman 1978:151).

One of the most important functions of narratology is the fact that the difference between the author and the narrator becomes vivid. The author no longer need be identified with the narrator. Fludernik (1996) in her book, *Fictions of Language and the languages of fiction*, introduces the concept of “Natural” narratology and explains the fact that narrative should not be limited to reports of events only. In her view, “the communication of anthropocentric experience,” (32) is the essence of narrative. By anthropocentric experience she means that not only the human experience should be involved in narration, but also thought, emotions and feeling must be a definite part of it. She believes that a narrative should not just consist of reporting some actions chronologically, but behavioral pattern ought to be mentioned in the text. She determines to prioritize the conversational narrative and at the same time in her own words, “provide historical perspective on the development of narrative forms.” (*An Introduction to Narratology*: 108) By these concepts, she tries to prove that texts should not be read definitively. According to Fludernik, “narrativity should be detached from its dependence on plot and be redefined as the representation of experientiality. Actions, intentions and feelings are all *part* of the human experience which is reported and, at the same time, evaluated in narratives,” (52).

These sentences clearly show her tendency towards what she calls *natural narratology* where experientiality is due to consciousness and thus it is subjective. Narrativity is not just a factor present or absent in a text, but it is actually lively and even a projection of the thoughts and understanding of the reader. Experientiality is established in order to replace the traditional models of narratology. Therefore, experientiality means a mimesis or a recall of real life experiences. The human existence and concerns are vital aspects of this term. Here, terms such as personhood, identity, actionality are correlated with this type of representation. This can be a proof to the fact that no narrative can happen without a human or a speaker. Spontaneous conversational storytelling excluding oral poetry and the older traditions of storytelling is what exactly Fludernik means by *natural narrative*.

The very prominent psychologist Erik Erikson (1986), introduces his theory of the life cycle rather differently. As a follower and critic of Freud’s theories, Erikson believed that some of the principles introduced by Freud were not accurately presented. He thought that Freud misinterpreted some of the important aspects of the human development. He managed to establish a ground breaking theory on identity. Many applications such as personal awareness and development were fundamentally significant. The Freudian elements are

found influential in Erikson's work. In his unique theory, he incorporated cultural and social aspects, which was considered crucial to his works. His deep compassion for the young and researches carried out in the societies, made him and his approach to psychology and psychoanalysis very much different from Freud's inward-looking and reserved beliefs. The eight stages of Erikson is a very powerful model. The contents of the model are very much relevant to modern life and convenient to use. By the help of this model, one can understand the personality and behavior development in people. This theory is useful in various perspectives; teaching, parenting, self-awareness, managing and coaching, dealing with conflict, and generally for understanding self and others. The term psychosocial presented by Erikson, is derived from two sources- psychological which is related to the mind and the brain, and social related to the environment. Each of the stages in life, according to Erikson, is related to a certain psychosocial crisis. In life, man experiences many conflicts standing in opposite poles. In order to succeed in each stage, a balance should be established between the two conflicts.

The eight stages of Erikson's theory have rather different characteristics. Each stage has its own uniqueness and significance. The first stage corresponds to the oral stage of Freud's theory and is related to the first year of the child's life. In this phase, *trust* and *mistrust* are at two ends. The second stage is under the name of *autonomy* versus *shame & doubt*. This stage spans year two and three of life. This stage parallels Freud's anal stage. The definition of autonomy being self-reliance is relative to the mental abilities of the child. Moving on to the third stage, *initiative* versus *guilt* is the main principle. Ranging from the age of four to five, the child learns to master his body and ride a tricycle, run, cut and hit. He tries to perform some new actions and is no longer the copy-cat or the imitator of other children. His imagination is strong and he plays make belief games. From the age of six to eleven, entering stage four, *industry* versus *inferiority* is what is anticipated. Children enter the elementary school and sense the feeling of love and romance around them. The child feels for the parent and their opposite sex.

The latency stage is in agreement with this stage presented by Erikson. The child learns to reason and logic and gets an understanding of rules. The two extremes, industry and inferiority are the concern and dominant theme of this period. When children enter the adolescence stage, "a reawakening of the family-romance problem of early childhood" happens. In stage five, one tries to find a partner in his own age group in order to resolve the conflicts he has with the family.

Maturation of the mind and body happens in this phase. Young adulthood is what is called the sixth stage in the life cycle. As Erikson claims, the attainment of identity and engagement in productive activity is a key dimension to the terms *intimacy* and *isolation* standing at the opposite ends. Sharing and caring about others or the fear of losing them are among the features of this phase. *Generativity* versus *self-absorption* is the seventh stage of the life cycle. The man is middle aged and tries to step into a broader aspect of life. Not only the immediate family is the concern, but also future generations and society are of importance. Stage eight is called *integrity* versus *despair*. This phase is a time of reflection and completion.

This is when one looks back at life with a sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. One may feel peace with himself and the world, or he may have regrets and doubts. Positive or negative feeling emerge and as one becomes old, this powerful stage is similar to a window to the past.

2. ENDURING LOVE: NARRATIVITY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

2. 1. Narrativization and Experientiality

It is evidently seen that in the postmodern age, concerns on the society and family are increasing. The concern with identity and role identification which many adolescents face is also on the rise. The quest with “who I really am” is a theme concurrent in our lives. Confusion causes delay in many aspects of life. Abnormal behavior is at times seen in people with emotional disturbance. Many Twentieth century experimental literature seem to be involving closure and love as destructive forces. *Enduring Love*, with three endings clearly designates this point. The balloon incident in the beginning of the novel proves an important moment in Joe and Clarissa’s life and also shedding lights on a number of questions. Here self-preservation or cooperation becomes a dilemma. The matter is, should the person involve himself in a situation where dangerous results, life-threatening consequences, may follow after or should he ignore and avoid the issue altogether.

According to what has been suggested by Fludernik regarding the protagonist’s strength in making philosophical justifications, Joe the central character of the story makes several attempts in debating about Darwin and tries to represent a series of interrelated conflicts between scientific, literary, religious worldviews. Joe tries to portray human being with conflicting behavior and beliefs when they are in a critical situation. Joe’s perspective towards the world is through the eyes of a sociobiologist. Joe tries to be dominant and pushes his ideas to the extent that he thinks everyone else should also believe in what he believes. He tries to justify his beliefs through his narration and his own version of the story. Fludernik’s experience-based concept of narrativity is understood as the narrator’s developing sense of the importance of the events being narrated.

Tellability which is the third of three narrational operations - reviewing past events, reproducing them, and evaluating them, when conjoined, “constitute narrativity” (*Toward a Natural Narratology*, 2003:245). In this way the traditional properties of “story,” “plot,” and “narrator” in the definitions of narrative are abandoned, and thus narratives are expanded to experimental fiction in which these properties are barely perceptible. Throughout the book Joe reviews his past, tries to recall what “really” happened and attempts to justify himself or compensate for the future. He evaluates the situation and the “tellability” of the narrator is evident with regards to this matter.

2. 2. Consciousness and Search for Identity

Consciousness has always had close bonds with narrative. Therefore, thoughts of the characters and their written or spoken utterances are central to narratives. The novels of consciousness are an authentic example of internal reflection which are in turn associated with Fludernik’s narratological point of view. Here, Joe’s internal thoughts are demonstrated by free indirect discourse. Unrecognized and unacknowledged wished, desires and obsessions of Joe, Clarissa and Jed clearly prove this idea.

Psychoanalytic methods have had a great impact on narrative theory. Here, the reader responds to the text while he/she reads it and tries to comprehend it and at times identifies himself with the narrator. Psychoanalytic approaches make a precise distinction between the story and the narrative discourse. However, the psychological phenomenon is available indirectly when the unstable first person narrator weakens or disrupts the normal association between the narrators and the reader's experiencing the narrative. Since psychoanalytic theories reveal the ambiguity, confusion, unreliability, and variability of the characters it is

believed that there is a strong link between the unconscious and illusion, thus; this story is a monologue of reason about madness.

By creating male/female, good/evil and child-like aspects in this novel, McEwan tries to prove to the reader that human beings are capable of expressing a wide range of feelings in particular situations. Characters of opposite sex, nature, and temperament stand against each other. As an example, Joe believes that Jed is evil for stalking and threatening him. Joe's childish behavior is pointed out many times by Clarissa. All characters are able to place themselves in each other's shoes and think like them. Many times Clarissa tries to think and see from Joe's perspective. This feature corresponds to Erik Erikson's theory that human beings are driven by forces of sexuality and feelings hidden deep down. Readers who identify themselves with the characters feel involved with the bizarre behaviors which seemed ordinary at first. McEwan's perspective changes from objective to subjective, meaning that instead of looking at the situation from outside, he takes the readers inside and thus a rational reaction is not expected.

In *Enduring Love* the balloon basket resembles a fetus in which the child is trapped in. This clearly suggests images of the first stage where the mother protects the child from the harm of the environment. The drive Clarissa has when she runs behind Joe, shows the exclusion of the female figure.

The negative outcome of this stage being withdrawal and sensory distortion can be related to the part of the story where the men are failing to hold onto the balloon. Moving on to the second stage suggested by Erikson, feelings of doubt and shame versus certainty and autonomy can also be associated with parts of the novel. Joe is a rational man and on the opposite stands the very irrational and insane Jed. Assuming Joe's reliability in narration, the letters written by Jed break Joe's control of narration and approve of Joe's narcissism. Feelings of doubt are voiced by Clarissa, who has distanced herself from Joe because of her doubts about the story Joe gives. Here because Clarissa is doubtful, she is considered an unfaithful lover, while Jed whose love is quite disturbing, but since he is a true believer, is the only person capable of enduring love.

According to the sixth stage of Erikson's theory, issues of intimacy and isolation are necessities for one to transcend in such a way to be able to take chances in the next stage. This matter is associated with Jed's reactions and feelings towards Joe. When Joe finally confronts Jed about his strange behavior toward him, Jed shows a variety of abnormal emotions which reveal the essence of his identity and mental instability. Outside Joe's apartment, "As soon as I stepped out onto the pavement, I saw Parry." (61) Clearly Jed is excited about his encounter with Joe. However Jed "took his hands out of his pockets, folded his arms, then let them droop". (61).

Jed's passive body language shows his weakness and impotency. Here, Joe realizes that Jed is not a threat to him and says, "I felt my anxiety dropping away." (61) Also, Jed's weak personality is reinforced further when Joe says "He wouldn't meet my eye as I came up". (61) He often speaks with a "whining note" and speaks "sulkily".

This tone of voice is often associated with adolescence. However, when speaking to Joe, Jed uses an "interrogative style". The sudden changes in moods and feelings express Jed's delusional personality confirm emotional instability.

3. *ATONEMENT*: IMAGINATION VS. REALITY

Starting with the title of the book, it seems to suggest that someone, later identified as Briony, will do something with an atonement approach. Of course as we move toward the end of the novel, we realize that the title is not an apt description for what actually happens,

The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: 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. (350-351)

The important features that have been identified for Briony, which later will lead to the interpretations of the author are as follows: Briony is on the one hand a naive thirteen-year old, she is on the other an ambitious novelist, and her act of betrayal, or of disastrous misinterpretation, is in essence a story she constructs from the events around her. *Atonement* is philosophically interesting and it reveals important notions regarding the nature of understanding and appreciation of narrative. McEwan shows the reader that the audiences' participation in narrative is very complicated and at the same time delicate. As Fludernik's theories on natural narratology have been presented earlier in the previous chapter, in this chapter some interesting and novel associations will be made regarding the novel. Firstly, the subject of implied author; is it necessary that an implied author is imagined when one engages with a narrative? How is the implied author figure incorporated into the reading experience? And from what perspective (first person or third person) should the writing be narrativized? Secondly, on the subject of the audience or implied reader; how is the audience affected by the narrative? Why does a narrative of such type provoke emotional responses? The author aims to answer all questions with regards to the novel.

In *Atonement* some distinctive features are explicit in this manner. The story takes place in the 1930s. The book is not "written" by the protagonist Briony, until 1999, when she is old and suffers from a contracted fatal illness. The primary conflict of the novel is a triangle between Briony, her sister who are from an aristocrat family and Robbie from a working class family. The book asks the reader to imagine that it has not been written by the actual author, but by the protagonist. This is a rather unusual method, since at the end of the book, it is revealed that the protagonist is also the author and this is a surprise for many people. Now the reader has to reconsider everything. He will have to think of each character especially the protagonist from a new perspective. The novel has a frame story and an inner story which is not revealed until the end. The reader is forced to recognize that this is not simply the story of one pre-Second World War family in southern England, but a cross section of British society at that critical moment of time before the War changed everything. Cecilia presents the house with the view, "giving an impression of timeless, unchanging calm which made her more certain than ever that she must soon be moving on" (18). As the story unfolds, the paradox makes apparent cover every aspect of the Tallis family's existence. Briony staggers and is confused at adolescence, just as Lola "longed to throw off the last restraints of childhood" (306). In this book, these two girls are suggestive of the state of Britain and the West at this period of history. Lola and her twin brothers are "refugees from a bitter domestic civil war" (8), which makes them avoid the word "divorce," "[l]ike rearmament and the Abyssinia Question" (9). In *Atonement* life imitates fiction implying that

narrative plays in all our lives. This notion is closely related to Fludernik's experientiality. Experientiality means a mimesis or a recall of real life experiences. The human existence and concerns are vital aspects of this term. Here, terms such as personhood, identity, and actionality are correlated with this type of representation. Here we realize that Briony and Robbie both shape and are shaped by narratives.

3. 1. Confusion and Late Perspective

Considering Briony's character through the lens of Erikson's theory, we come across two stages. First, it is when Briony is at an age of physical and mental development. When children enter the adolescence stage, "a reawakening of the family-romance problem of early childhood" happens. In Eriksonian's terms, Briony tries to find a partner in his own age group but she finds her cousins foolish and immature. Briony believes that her perspective of seeing the world is apt to change. At this stage, interpersonal dimensions appear as *ego identity* and at the other end stands the aspect of *role confusion*. Briony is certainly unclear about her thoughts and personality and this is why she faces a dilemma. Briony at the age of thirteen is locked in fantasies regarding her future life and the people surrounding her. Her viewpoint is immature and she sees everything through the world of children's books. The play that she has written at the beginning evidently reflects her naïve point of view. At this stage, she is seeking for attention from her parents by writing several short stories for them. She has not received enough attention from them, as her mother is always in the room with severe migraines and her father is away at duty. Her siblings are also away from her and only Cecilia tries to be there for her sister and feels for her.

When Briony reaches the last years of her life, she reaches a stage which is associated with the eighth stage in Eriksonian terms. At this stage one looks back at life with a sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. One may feel peace with herself and the world, or she may have regrets and doubts. Positive or negative feelings emerge and as one becomes old, this powerful stage is similar to a window to the past. Briony had failed to tell the truth to Cecilia and Robbie. She holds herself responsible for their separation and even their death. Of course she uses her wisdom by writing a happy ending for the two. However, her true feelings are presumption and disdain. By writing the happy ending, she attempts to fill her psychological needs,

Her sister's confirmation of her crime was terrible to hear. *But the perspective was unfamiliar*. Weak, stupid, confused, cowardly, evasive - she had hated herself for everything she had been, but *she had never thought of herself as a liar*. How strange, and how clear it must seem to Cecilia. It was obvious, and irrefutable. And yet, for a moment she even thought of defending herself. *She hadn't intended to mislead, she hadn't acted out of malice.* (318)

The minor character Lola, has actually a very unique character and trend of maturing and development. She believes that she belongs to the adult world and is trying to look like an adult. Lola has acquired the adult world through her mother's behaviour. When the topic of divorce regarding her parents is raised with Paul Marshal, her reaction is to some extent mature,

"What have you read about them? [about Lola's parents]
[...] "Oh, I don't know. Nothing at all. Silly things."

“Then I’ll thank you not to talk about them in front of the children.”

It was a construct she must have once overheard, and she had uttered it in blind faith, like an apprentice mouthing the incantation of a magus. (59)

When she says she doesn’t want the children to know, meaning her brothers, she shows her maturity, though she is probably now aware of it. Of course, she seems to have two sides; a childish side and a grown up one. At moments, she acts childish and tries to be like Briony. Her circumstance can be aptly associated with Erikson’s sixth stage, where the young adult faces role confusion and love becomes an issue. The fact that she marries her rapist after some years, evidently shows her unstable and awkward personality. “Lola was required only to remain silent about truth, banish it and forget it entirely, and persuade herself not of some contrary tale, but simply of her own uncertainty.” (324) By marrying Paul, Lola “saved herself from humiliation by falling in love, or persuading herself she had”. (324) Lola never lived her childhood, so she never matured properly. Here she faces exclusivity in terms of psychology. Sharing and caring about others or the fear of losing them are among the features of this stage. The whole event, her being raped and marrying the rapist seems to a desperate but ultimately rational response to her parents' divorce. Psychologically speaking, she knowingly allowed Briony to lie to everyone about the one who raped her. And at some point she convinced herself it was right to marry him. One of devastating effects of divorce on Lola must have been promiscuity, further associated with Erikson’s sixth stage of life cycle.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has been written in an attempt to analyze McEwan’s two works, *Atonement* and *Enduring Love* in association with the theories suggested by Monika Fludernik and Erik Erikson. The work examines the complicated relationships among the characters at times of unease and trauma. It also focuses on the nature of self and its response in different stages of life. The development of characters clearly shows the broad dimension of ‘the-self’ and the outcome of their decisions. It also brings out new aspects of narrative within the text. Many parts of the book which have been chosen, confirm the author’s view.

One of the most important themes identified in the novel is known as conflict and the shocking and bizarre consequences of it. This theme also involves, among others, distortion of the human mind, violence, crime, obsessive behavior and mental disorder. In these two novels, McEwan tries to distinguish between subjective and objective realities and shows how subjective experience creates reality. *Atonement* evidently demonstrates an interpretation of reality and history. It shows the unreliability of the narrative and the narrator. Since not only until the last few pages the reader figures out the real truth, the reader is left confused and disappointed.

Chance has a vital role in the character’s lives as it turns everything around. An unexpected event has a devastating impact on the hopeful ending of Cecilia and Robbie’s relationship. In *Enduring Love* the balloon incident brings many people together by chance. Chance arouses Jed’s obsessive feelings towards Joe and this causes a separation between Joe and Clarissa. The relationship between Joe and Clarissa seem to be fragile since chance can destroy it so easily. Feelings of uncertainty and confusion prevail in the characters frequently.

References

- [1] Childs Peter. Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*: Routledge Guide to Literature, 2007.
- [2] Erikson Erik. *Identity Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton.1968.
- [3] Finney Brian. Briony's Stand against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. *Journal of Modern Literature* 27(3 (2004) 68-82.
- [4] Fludernik Monika. *An Introduction to Narratology*. London/New York: Routledge, 2009.
- [5] Fludernik Monika. *Towards a Natural Narratology*. London/New York: Routledge, 1996.
- [6] McEwan Ian. *Atonement*. New York: Doubleday, 2001.
- [7] McEwan Ian. *Enduring Love*. New York: Anchor Books, (1997) 1999.
- [8] Ramin Zohreh, Seyyed Mohammad Marandi. Unraveling Identity in Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*. *Studies in Literature and Language* 4(1) (2012) 78-85.

(Received 18 June 2014; accepted 27 June 2014)