

Advanced Higher English

Dissertation

The Cement Garden and *Atonement* by Ian McEwan.

An exploration of the theme of growing up focusing on character,
setting and narrative voice.

Word count: 2995

Ian McEwan's critically acclaimed *Atonement* and *The Cement Garden* are novels which focus on the lives of young people. The main characters of the two novels Briony in *Atonement* and Jack in *The Cement Garden*, are very interesting to compare in theme of growing up. The setting, narrative voice helps the development in their growing up but it also doesn't. They both are from very different backgrounds and go through very different complications, and what is interesting is the lack of progression in the two characters towards becoming more mature. There are different key moments in the novels which test the characters maturity which show that they do not grow up by the end of the novels.

Ian McEwan shows in *The Cement Garden* that accepting death and difficult situations is part of growing up. The main character in *The Cement Garden* is Jack. One of the first key moments in the novel into the insight of Jack's growing up is the announcement of his father's death at the very start of the novel. We very quickly learn his lack of compassion towards the death of his father and it is definitely surprising. It's almost as if the death didn't effect Jack on the normal emotional spectrum. 'I am only including the little story of his death to explain how my sister's and I came to have such a large quantity of cement at our disposal'.¹ The lack of empathy for his father's death must imply that his father was not worthy of any admiration, or that Jack is too young to really understand. Death sometimes can cause moments in a young adult's life where they begin to question the meaning of life, they rebel. Yet Jack doesn't feel anything. It is shown in many researches that 'Children have a limited ability to put feelings, thoughts and memories into words and tend to "act out" with behaviours rather than express themselves verbally.'² This then leads me to notice the family instability is created at the very beginning of the novel. Jack also describes his dad as 'frail, irascible, obsessive man with yellowish hands and face.'³ The imagery created by this adverse language creates a crude father figure, however it is very hard to trust this opinion of Jack's considering his immature outlook towards his father's death implying he cannot handle even the thought of thinking about it properly. Similarly in *Atonement* when Briony turns eighty-eight she still cannot accept the bitter death of her sister Cecilia and Robbie, and thinks it's more important to write about it, than accept it. She expresses her emotions through writing. In the end of the book you find out that in fact Briony has written the book, and has been the narrator of the whole book. It is also learned that she has re-written the events as she would

¹ Page 370- *The Cement Garden*- Vintage Books

² 15-December-2015

http://www.childbereavementuk.org/files/5414/0868/5878/How_Children_and_Young_People_Grieve.pdf

³ Page 9- *The Cement Garden*

want them. This is almost like her attempt of an apology. 'I tried to persuade my reader, by direct or indirect means that, Robbie Turner Dies of septicaemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940, or that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham underground station. That I never saw them in that year. That my walk across London ended at the church of Clapham Common, and that a cowardly Briony limped back to the hospital, unable to her recently bereaved sister. That the letters the lovers wrote are in the archives of the War museum how could that constitute an ending? What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of bleakest realism?'⁴This clearly implies she still hasn't grown up because she is still making up events in which she thinks or would have liked to happen. 'Bleakest realism' is interesting language to use, this just means real life. The way Robbie and Cecilia's life ended up was because of Briony's acting resulting in a sad real ending. Briony's obsession with re-writing and creating events to make herself feel better clearly shows even after all this time she still cannot own up to what she has done, and write it down. Also another example of Briony not being able to face up to her past a key part in growing up is when she sees The 'Marshalls outside the museum, and she cannot bring herself before she dies to tell 'Lord Marshall what kind of person he is, and also to tell Lola that she should have never let 'Lord Marshall get away with this. In fact Briony hides from them, 'My concern was to see which way the Marshalls would go on so that I could avoid a head-on encounter.'⁵ Ian McEwan really shows how much of a coward Briony is here, that even after all this time she cannot for Robbie and Cecilia's pride show the Marshalls how disgusting they are. The way she describes bumping into them a 'head on encounter almost has a violent undertone, like enemies, mimicking two bulls. Just as she avoided a 'head-on encounter' with her sister she couldn't bear to see her face to face because she knew her sister wouldn't be able to forgive her. Ian McEwan here is really trying to show that an important part of growing up is to accept and face the mistakes you make and not to cowardly avoid them or to try and r-write them. The key point is to accept when you are wrong and move on from that. And nothing will ever be closed unless you face the facts and move on once you have sorted it properly.

Overall analysing that both Novels narratives voices are Jack and Briony and seeing there take on the events it is clear from the novel they are not grown up. Even after writing a whole

⁴ Page 370- Atonement- Vintage Books

⁵ Page 357- Atonement

novel based on her life and her family's life Briony cannot bring herself to accept the truth, similarly after all the mess Jack has been through with his sister and hearing the police sirens he still doesn't seem to grasp what he has done wrong. He just laughs it off. They just seem to live in the past 'We talked about the birthday party at mums bedside and Julie's handstand. We made her do it again.'⁶ It is clear to see that Ian McEwan's is saying that an important part of growing up is to learn what you have done is wrong and to move on maturely and sensibly, and not to be stuck in the past but to move on, keep going.

The narrative voice of Jack is very important to the novel, the language is almost naive in itself, it represents the youth of Jack, it emphasises that all the events he goes through at the end of the day he is only young. For example when Jack describes things he doesn't use intellectually demanding language 'The cake rested on the bedside table and its candle was already lit.'⁷ He simply just says it how it is. The simplicity of the language evokes his immaturity. In comparison *Atonement* isn't as easy to read, the language is more complex, descriptions are more detailed for example 'The unmade bed, the mess of discarded clothes, a towel on the floor, the room's equatorial warmth were disabling sensual.'⁸ This essentially represents Briony in her older years you can see the clear difference between the language of Briony and Jack. Briony really does describe everything with detail; she knows more vocabulary through experience and obviously being older. She tries to be grown up but just seems older when she narrates the story and writes it. Jack on the other hand is still a teenager. Jack throughout the novel never describes his dad by his name but only by 'father', almost representing the 'pecking order' in the family home made by his father's overbearing, dominant personality. Jack's naivety is shown through when he describes that he is reading a 'shameful' comic, willingly. However when he thinks people can see him reading the comic, he comments 'I wish I had been reading the racing page of my father's paper, or the football results'. This shows his hunger to be grown up, even though he is not ready. Jack tries to act older in front of the two delivery men, 'I hooked my thumbs into my pockets, moved my weight onto one foot and narrowed my eyes a little.'⁹ All of this behaviour expresses Jack's adolescence since he doesn't accept who he is, and also doesn't understand that the two delivery men don't actually care how he sits or what he is reading. Just as Briony should not

⁶ Page 138- *The Cement Garden*

⁷ Page 37- *The Cement Garden*

⁸ Page 80- *Atonement*

⁹ Page 9- *The Cement Garden*

care what people think of her if she tells the truth about her Sister and Robbie in her novel even though she will be dead by the time it is published? Jack's father's parenting and lack of nurturing and admiration, has definitely had a knock on effect on Jack. The first sign of his father's fanatical behaviour is shown when he regulates the delivery of his cement with a clipboard and his obsessive counting of the bags. These elements of this behaviour in Jack's nature, when he analyses every action when in front of the delivery men, likewise just as his father's goes over everything that is being delivered and done. The OCD of his dad rubs off onto Jack, his fixated attitude to act older and alike his dad is shown from the very start. 'I stood at my father's elbow while he signed the delivery note.'¹⁰ He must be there every step of the way no matter how minor the event is.

Similarly in *Atonement* we learn that Briony, who is just one year younger than Jack 13, is obsessed with being in control. Briony's room is very tidy, it is described as 'Briony's was a shrine to be her controlling demon'¹¹ She does not like compromise, something in which we learn as we mature, 'organised world denied her reckless possibilities of wrongdoing. Mayhem and destruction were too chaotic for her tastes'¹² this shows how she only likes the idea of a world which is in control of, she knows where everything is, and most importantly she does not need to compromise. Another thing which Briony does is she writes plays and stories. So she can control the minds of her characters and what they do. Briony doesn't like that everyone has altered imaginations and thoughts. Similarly with Jack's father, with his cement bags. He insisted on everything being recorded counted and analysed. Ian McEwan clearly shows that as you get older you cannot be in control of everything, and you must learn to compromise.

There are key events in both novels which show Jack's and Briony's lack of growing up later on in the novels. They both are presented with situations in which they both cannot handle and they panic.

When Robbie and Cecilia have an argument and end up damaging the family air looms vase Briony is witnessing this and peers from her window and sees Robbie and Cecilia she cannot hear what they are saying, but they seem to be in an argument. Cecilia ends up stripping into her underwear and jumps into the fountain, and from Briony's point of view this is all of

¹⁰ Page 10- *The Cement Garden*

¹¹ Page 5- *Atonement*

¹² Page 5- *Atonement*

Robbie's fault. The significance of the vase is much more than just the breakage of it 'the accidental destruction of a Tallis family heirloom leads to a major rupture in the Tallis family itself, and the token won in World War I that honours the family leads to the breaking apart of the family in World War II.'¹³ Briony creates her own conclusion of events, again when she witnesses the rape of her cousin Lola she insists that it was Robbie even though she never actually saw him, so when she is asked 'you are saying you saw him'¹⁴ she responds 'Yes. I saw him. I saw him'¹⁵ This implies that Briony thinks she's knows what going on and panics she answers in such a rush and is taking responsibility for something she did not see.

Comparing this with Jack when he comes home from school the day his mother dies and meets his sister in front of his mother bedroom door 'she's dead Julie said evenly' and all he wants to do is see her dead, and when he is denied he 'turned and lightheaded, close to blasphemous laughter'.¹⁶ This shows again his lack of understanding of what is really going on, he is just creating the situations into little games, instead of grasping his mother is dead he just wants to get the key off his sister. Ian McEwan is clearly implying that evidence of growing up is to grasp serious situations and to take them as they are and not to make them up or to turn them into games. Briony and Jack both do this in the novels showing they are adolescent.

The fantasy of the childhood in *Atonement* is also represented through language and setting. Briony's 'Trials of Arabella' describes what Briony thinks adulthood is like and later on in the novel you get to read the realities of adulthood and it doesn't always end with a happy ending. First of all the play she writes finishes with a happy ending, even though the odds of her play finishing with a happy ending is very unlikely she still thinks that life will end with a happy ending. Briony seems to point out that she was 'distorted by a child's sense of time'¹⁷ but she doesn't actually grasp that the ending of the play is completely unrealistic, but it ends 'and is rewarded by reconciliation with her family and a wedding with the medical prince on a windy sunlit day in spring'¹⁸ the start of the play that is very similar to what happened with her sisters life, yet Cecilia's real adulthood life doesn't end in a happy ending. Briony's childhood ignorant fantasies blind her from the truth and damage in which she brought upon her sisters life, which ended without the prince charming ending. This is contrast with the

¹³ 7- February- 2016 <http://www.litcharts.com/lit/atonement/symbols>

¹⁴ Page 181- *Atonement*

¹⁵ Page 181- *Atonement*

¹⁶ Page 52- *The Cement Garden*

¹⁷ Page 368- *Atonement*

¹⁸ Page 3- *Atonement*

harsh gritty language of the war scenes is quiet considerable. For example when two French men are explaining their experience to Robbie and other soldiers that they 'they came across a dozen or so dead English soldiers in the road. They had to get out and drag men aside to avoid running over them. But a couple of the bodies were almost cut in half.'¹⁹ The difference between the adolescent views of adulthood compared with the realities of childhood is clearly shown through language throughout the novel. And clearly shows the difference between being grown up and the illusions of it.

One of the differences between Briony and Jack is their backgrounds. Briony comes from a wealthy family with a stable foundation. Briony sees herself above others. The difference between *The Cement Garden* and *Atonement* is the two places are on the opposite side of the social class ladder. In *Atonement* the reader gets a rather negative description of a grand house in the middle of the countryside. Jack's family are very poor; they live on an almost abandoned street with hardly any civilisation. Briony's family are isolated by choice. They have the means to move anywhere but with the beautiful surroundings it seems to be the perfect place for growing up. Jack's family have little money. However Briony comes from a family with dignity, status. This changes the dynamic within the family home and the childhood of the two different children. The same behaviour which runs through all of the children in the two novels is the thought that they can comprehend situations which are far from reach at their age. Like with Briony her sense of entertainment from a very young age was to write and create plays, an enjoyment of an educated young person, someone who has been introduced to books and plays. However Jack's form of entertainment was to read comics and partake in foolish undergoing's with his sister. There is a clear divide in Jack's and Briony's aspirations, Jack was not academic but to read the newspaper like his dad. Briony however is to become a wonderful writer. And even through these differences in their bringing up them both show adolescence, and a lack of growing up throughout the whole of the novel. Even comparing their different childhood backgrounds.

In conclusion it is clear by the evidence that Briony and Jack do not grow up. Jack by the end of the novel still doesn't take responsibility for his actions, and when the police turn up at the house he still doesn't grasp what he has done wrong and thinks that it will all be okay because he doesn't understand and doesn't care what the consequences are. Briony by the end of the novel has re-written the ending to her sister's life to make herself feel better and thinks

¹⁹ Page 199- *Atonement*

that this will make up for not fixing the mess she created. This weak apology attempt shows that she hasn't grown up from when she was very young because she wrote happy endings in her childhood bliss not knowing of what real childhood holds and still does this when she is eighty eight. As such, Ian McEwan created two character which do not develop in growing up even after really demanding experiences.

Bibliography**Primary Sources:**

The Cement Garden by Ian McEwan, Vintage Books Print

Atonement by Ian McEwan, Vintage Books Print

Secondary Sources:

Lit Charts- Symbols, Trials of Arabella 7- February- 2016

<http://www.litcharts.com/lit/atonement/symbols>

Child bereavement UK- Information Sheet, How Children and young people grieve.

15- December-2015

http://www.childbereavementuk.org/files/5414/0868/5878/How_Children_and_Young_People_Grieve.pdf