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Atonement

Jon Snodgrass

California State University, Los Angeles, jsnodgr@calstatela.edu

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Atonement

Abstract

This is a review of *Atonement* (2007).

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Atonement (2007) is the title of an American film based on an English novel by Ian McEwan (2001). “Atonement” is also a doctrine in Christianity and Judaism that has similar meanings but different methods of achievement. In both religions, God forgives humanity its sinful (unfaithful) nature. A “reconciliation” occurs through the sacred ritual of Yom Kippur in Judaism. God’s forgiveness comes about through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in Christianity.

In both theologies, God forgives errant human beings. Because we have never been condemned, *A Course in Miracles* (Glen Ellen, CA: Foundation for Inner Peace, 1967) a work in spiritual psychology, emphasizes the opposite: people forgive God (plus each other and oneself) to find peace and redemption. In secular terms, atonement is understood as compensation for damages. There is a deeper meaning involving restoration of a relationship to pre-existing conditions by making apologies, doing penance and accepting punishment to absolve wrongdoing.

Briony Tallis (Saoirse Ronan) is a thirteen year old girl on the brink of adolescence in *Atonement*, the motion picture. Gifted and precocious, she writes and directs dramatic plays as a childhood pastime on her father’s country manor during the mid-1930s. Briony is infatuated with Robbie Turner (James McAvoy) who is a servant’s son. Her father pays for his education at Oxford and supports his

plan to become a medical doctor. Robbie's own father is absent, but his mother, the housekeeper, also adores her son.

Briony tests whether Robbie loves her by leaping into a pond. He saves her, but is infuriated by the stunt and her schoolgirl crush. Robbie asks her to hand-deliver a sealed note, containing an explicit sexual proposition, to her older sister, Cecilia Tallis. Before handing it over, feeling spurned, Briony opens and reads the message. Later that night, she discovers her sister and Robbie making love in the library. Witnessing yet another sex scene, Briony retaliates claiming Robbie raped her cousin. Leaving childhood make-believe behind, she hereby comes of age, joining the adult world that believes in lies and practices hypocrisy.

Robbie's servant-class origins are confirmed; he is arrested and sent to prison. Four years later, he is given the choice to enlist as a private in the war with Germany and sent to fight with the British Expeditionary Force in France. Both Briony and Cecilia have become nurses in the war effort, but remain estranged. Briony (played now by Romola Garai) never has the courage to retract her sworn testimony. For rejecting her, the jealous young director apparently believes Robbie deserves punishment. Cecilia becomes a head nurse, but Briony tries to expiate her guilt by doing menial tasks.

Eventually, Briony goes to her sister's apartment in London and finds Robbie staying there. Like a scarlet letter, the harness of her nurse's cape forms a big red X across her chest. She asks for forgiveness and though furious, Robbie and Celia tell her how to set the record straight. Before this can happen, however, a surprising flash-forward reveals that Briony is now a celebrated novelist who is dying (played by Vanessa Redgrave). In a media interview, she explains that Robbie and Cecelia both were killed during the war, and that the reconciliation never actually took place. Thus, Briony did not make amends for her hasty decision that perhaps now is taking its toll on her life.

The audience must wonder, however, whether the whole story, not just the ending, including her passing away, is concocted. Is this the spin of thespian art, or has Briony really borne the guilt of betraying Cecilia and Robbie all these years? The movie begins and ends with Briony's written work in the background. The "click-clack-ping" of a manual typewriter reminds us that she constantly practices her craft. Even during the war, in the wee hours of the morning, Briony taps out a novel in a hospital storage closet. "Writing plays gives you an opportunity to show off," a cousin tells her early on.

Melodramatically, Briony lets us know that this is her "twenty-first and final novel." The British grandeur, the great tragedy, the sweeping epic, the chaos of war, the heart-breaking love story, the beautiful scenery, the brilliant acting and the

reckless youth, conceal Briony's wrathful intention. True to the novel, however, the film itself promotes the idea that life is fundamentally dishonest. This is not the story of a single tragic error, one false accusation that wrecks many lives. It is the systematic adoption of the role of deception as a way of life as the human condition.

Executing revenge for not getting the love we think we deserve from others is disguised here as "atonement." The second half of *Atonement* shows that revenge is writ large in the relations between nation states. *Atonement* was nominated for seven Golden Globe Awards in 2008, including best picture, before the event was cancelled due to the Writers Guild of America strike.