

## Issue 12: Film Reviews

### Atonement

Dir: Joe Wright, UK, 2007

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Two characters have been brought to life with passion in director Joe Wright's *Atonement* (2007), adapted from Ian McEwan's novel, and come to their end with such deep and vivid poetry and meaning as to demand captivation. This film, for me, shows the nature of a happy ending portrayal, and the art of manipulating, through brilliant storytelling, the emotional reactions of a viewer through a radiance of both "brightness" and "rightness."

The film is constructed with both powerfully passionate performances by McAvoy, Knightly, and three different actresses portraying Briony Tallis's character, and beautiful symbolic imagery that is weaved into each scene. Almost every scene or shot in the film is a painting filled with details that resonate with a palate of brilliant color reflecting the film's themes.

The rhythm of a typewriter opens the film. This will be Briony's theme for the entire movie (played first by young Saoirse Ronan), and her behavior reflects her upbringing. Her steps are also calculated and rhythmic, as if marching to the cadence of her superiors. She knows her place, and who does not "move in the same circle," as her sister Cecilia (Keira Knightley) brings up in a later conversation. She is a writer, and sits up perfectly straight as she types away.

One of the major themes explored in this movie is the suggestion of an obligatory and almost arbitrary life-path that is set before the characters. From the start of the film, it seems that each character is set firmly in their social place, some more aware of it than others. Many details in the movie reflect this idea; lamps going on in succession behind Briony as she walks stiffly down a hallway, three planes flying overhead with their reflections in a very narrow stream, several shots of eyes glaring straight ahead, and many more throughout the movie. Each character carries with them the social standing and expectations from their superiors and the society in which they live, but soon discovers the unpredictable and unforgiving surprises that life always throws at those whose convictions are most rigidly set.

The image of time and future being swayed by the things out of sight is displayed in many ways. In three instances, a character circles another during conversation, showing that this person is in the center of their thoughts and care, but it also places a kind of cage around them; it is hard to ignore a person whose sole concern is yourself, and hard to see past his body, which obstructs everything else from view. The element of being caught off guard or by surprise is shown through many shots

of a character first facing away from the camera, and then turning around to face what was not visible before.

Both Briony and Cecilia display their status through their behavior, speech, and clothing, however there were details to Briony's appearance that were particularly interesting to see. Her dress is oversized, and I instantly saw the young girl who has been brought up in a sterile, protected environment which contributes to her sense of adulthood and maturity, when she is still so young. Her hair too, remains styled and cut the same throughout her life; her childhood choices dictate her life through a never-ending guilt and desperate quest for atonement.

The relationship between Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner (James McAvoy), is something that happens very quickly, but richly. A few events are enough to stir up an extraordinary capacity for feeling, and this feeling of progression towards the zenith of a powerful love scene forces the viewer to dive immediately into the deep end, drawn by the strong current of tension and then action.

Briony misinterprets an argument she spies on through her window. Later she reads the letter given to her by Robbie to deliver to Cecilia, which contains a message he did not mean to give; a shockingly crude and sexually explicit message in the eyes of a young girl with such strict upbringing. The letter he thought he'd given to deliver is sitting on his desk, the realization of which leads up to an extremely awkward scene between Robbie and Cecilia. However thoughtless and unintended the mistake, this incident proves to be a catalyst that fuels the passion between the two.

Briony believes she is protecting her sister Cecilia by pinning a hideous crime committed by Paul Marshal (Benedict Cumberbatch) toward the young and impressionable Lola Quincy (Juno Temple), on Robbie. Later in her life, she confesses to her hidden "crush" on Robbie, which had an inevitable effect on her actions at the time. Briony watches, again through a window, at Robbie being taken away from Cecilia and his home. Seeming to peer at her with a very similar expression on her face is the image of the Virgin Mary in stained glass. Briony is held rigidly in her conviction of doing what was justified by her feelings. Her emotionally drained face suggests that she does not yet feel anything of the guilt that she will later learn to acknowledge.

This leads to another strong use of imagery in smoke; Cecilia is surrounded in smoke within Robbie's flashback to that fateful night. Just about every character smokes in the movie, but particularly Cecilia and Robbie. What is at first a mode of relaxation and stress-relief becomes symbolic of the hidden, driving emotions within these socially suppressed characters.

One outstanding example of this, and also the 'set path' view that I offered above, is captured by Robbie trying to write his letter while listening to opera for inspiration, and Cecilia mumbling to herself as she looks in the mirror through a curtain of smoke. She must, just like those she has been brought up around all her life, portray what is expected of her. Robbie must find the appropriate words to express what he wants to say to Cecilia. Appearance and impression is everything. Both feel the pressure and confinement of society in their own ways. His confession of love should be brought about in as elegant and humble a way as possible, but instead is brought about rashly and crudely; a kind of expedient that, as I said before, serves to fuel their growing love into top speed.

Robbie chooses to join the army instead of staying in prison. They've been torn apart, and we meet Briony again, (played by Romola Gara), marching along to her cadence and obeying as she has always obeyed, as a nurse. Overwhelmed by the endless torn and shattered bodies of soldiers around her, she is asked to hold the hand of one soldier while he dies. She has grown and is realizing the full scope of what she has done to the lives of two people very close to her, never having yet experienced love herself. As she sits with the dying soldier, she offers herself in the most supportive way possible; with her love. Love, for Briony, is something she has only discovered in its full light through the love of those around her, and it will leave a scar in her own heart for the rest of her life.

Perhaps the most visually impressive scene in the film occurs on the beach crawling with soldiers. The one long shot follows Robbie through the nightmare of war and along the way captures many meaningful details from fear and hopelessness in the face of a soldier to a chorus of men emitting their voices across the water and through the surreal, misshapen scene of a Ferris wheel and soldiers on merry-go-rounds; this is reminiscent, to me, of the scene in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) that is haunted with eerie circus music as Martin Sheen walks through hell on earth. Through his time serving in the war he is constantly haunted by Cecilia's parting words and pleas to "come back to me." This torture is expressed visually by Robbie's figure in front of a screen where the showing of two characters in love is projected, the characters' faces overwhelming and overbearing. He often tries to escape into his dreams to think of Cecilia, and in one scene he walks through the grass, dirty and torn. He lifts his helmet off his head and tilts his head back. For a brief moment, the shot brightens and the sounds of birds are heard above everything else, but soon he comes back and is met abruptly with the discovery of rows of people with gun shots to the head, including many children. With this, the 'set path' of life is interrupted by the unexpected.

Just as the characters in the movie are then confronted with the hard fact of life's unpredictability and surprise, the audience is treated to many sudden surprises in the line of the story. For the latter part of the film, the story becomes less linear, and it is through the voice of an aged Briony (played by Vanessa Redgrave), that we are finally shown the full picture. Briony sits in a chair, perfectly straight with her hair short and pulled back by a barrette, and gives an interview, talking of her life's work. When it comes time to talk of her latest, and 'last' novel as she tells the interviewer, she must take a minute to collect herself before beginning. She has written and re-written her true life story many times in the forms of previous novels, but in her last novel she believes that she has offered a work that represents an entire life of striving for some kind of atonement for the lives she destroyed. The audience has been fooled into thinking she had gone to Robbie and Cecilia and apologized some time after Robbie had gone to war, but this is revealed to be an imagined incident, and in fact, she never got the chance to say anything to them. Robbie dies of a disease while away from Cecilia in the war, and Cecilia dies around the same time when her shelter is flooded. The weight of this on Briony's shoulders has essentially frozen her into place, brought into stunning visual demonstration by the sterile, white room to which she retreats, and the identical haircut she keeps through her life, which looks very out of place on a woman of her age.

The final and most powerful part of the story, and the subject I'd like to focus on for the remainder of this essay, is the closing twist. In these scenes, we are asked to engage with complex themes of life, love, regret and tragedy. Many brilliant and symbolically rich films have the structure and

presentation to speak for themselves. The ending of recently released film *3:10 to Yuma* (2007) comes to mind. Others, like *Atonement*, are filled to the brim and cascading over the side with artistic touch and awe-inspiring symbolism that is irresistible to transfer into words, because the emotional responses they evoke relate to the kind of epiphanies that many people aspire to realize their whole lives.

Brought back in to finish her interview, Briony begins to reveal to us her process of atonement. In her writing, she dives deep into the events and details of her life, vividly recreated with her skill for writing. The happiness that Robbie and Cecilia could have had haunts her constantly, and it is from this retrospective world that she re-writes their story in her final novel.

Life is made up of decisions, some larger than others. What the later part of this film demonstrates is that the timeline of a person's life never becomes fixed on a certain path, no matter how much we struggle to set it that way. Briony is brought up and prepared for a life in which she must constantly follow and obey. Therefore, as she grows older, she views her discipline as certain strength. At the same time, she struggles with the fact that the one small, emotionally driven decision she made when she was a child has caused a larger and more determinant outcome than all of the discipline and submission she was cultivated with in her childhood. It seems that larger decisions are often easier to alter than the smaller ones. The things we say or do to another we cannot take back; even if an apology is accepted, the memory and scar that was created will always be there. For a decision to go to a certain college, there is always the possibility of transfer or quitting, marriage has the option of divorce, and careers can be brought to ruin by any number of smaller coincidences.

Life is unfair, and an entire world mourning for the wrongful death of a great person will not bring her or him back. No matter what kind of emotional investment we put into another person, it may be absolutely powerless in the face of the seemingly insignificant incident that does not come to full light until the effect it has caused has fully bloomed. A countless number of stories have this premise; that the small incident or factor which ultimately leads to success or defeat, happiness or unhappiness, life or death, is something which is overlooked completely at the crucial point of its influence. The catalyst for the demise or rise of the character's life is often something that she or he does not notice until it has taken effect.

What I love about this film is that it offers a paradox of the phrase, 'love conquers all.' In one sense, as McAvoy is out fighting a war in the world and Knightley fights one of her own within her heart, love is eventually 'conquered' through both of these characters' deaths. But in this way we get to escape the incredible grief of one lover accepting the loss of her or his other. At the same time, the idea of love conquering all is reinforced by the created immortality by Briony of that love in her writing.

Through the visual representation of happiness given to us after the visual representation of death, viewers are able to come away with a lightened sense of tragedy. The work of fiction set within a larger work of fiction offers the last images we see. In this way, Briony's novel becomes larger than life, and restores our joy and satisfaction with the outcome of the film. This ending is what sets the film apart, for me as a viewer, and distinguishes it as evoking a wider scope of emotional responses

in its audience than that of more conventional films - satisfying the audience's desire for romantic closure along with the tragedy of the story. Both characters are freed from suffering on this earth, and also live forever in happiness through immortal representation in immortal prose. For my final thought, I'm reminded of the words of Bob Dylan: "We live and we die, we know not why, but I'll be with you when the deal goes down..." (Dylan, 2006).

#### References

Dylan, Bob. (2006) "When The Deal Goes Down." Bobdylan.com

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