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## THE POTRAIT OF HUMAN ANXIETY IN IAN MCEWAN'S ATONEMENT

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### Abstract

This study explores the phenomenon of anxiety in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), focusing on neurotic and moral anxiety. Using a qualitative research method, it examines the characters and their psychological dynamics through the novel's text and relevant journals. The study employs Freud's psychoanalytic theory to understand the internal conflicts faced by the characters. Data collection involved in-depth exploration of the novel and analysis of literature on anxiety. The findings reveal that the portrayal of anxiety in *Atonement* reflects the complexities of neurotic and moral anxiety, influencing the main character's actions and decisions. The character's neurotic anxiety, stemming from her inability to grasp reality, interacts with moral anxiety related to her responsibilities. This representation highlights the struggle with deep anxiety and its effects on interpersonal relationships and the search for meaning. The study aims to provide insights into how anxiety shapes individual identity and morality within a broader narrative context.

**Keyword:** *Anxiety, Neurotic anxiety and moral anxiety*

### 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of anxiety is often reflected in literary works, including poetry, drama, and novels. In novels, characters play a central role in portraying human personality and behavior. Authors create fictional characters by selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of everyday human life while minimizing others. These elements are then crafted into a fictional persona that exists solely within the literary text. Although fictional, these characters are rooted in real human experiences, making it possible to explore human nature and psychological struggles such as anxiety through literary analysis (Gill, 90).

Anxiety is the body's response to stress, marked by feelings of fear or worry about future events. It can affect anyone, regardless of age or background, and common symptoms include tension, excessive worry, overthinking, increased heart rate, muscle tension, sweating, and difficulty breathing. If untreated, anxiety can disrupt daily activities, work, social relationships, and mental health. However, with proper support and coping strategies,

anxiety symptoms can be managed and reduced (Esaunggul.ac.id, 2022).

The cause of anxiety can come from internal factors such as feelings of guilt and external factors such as disputes, misunderstandings, and others. These cannot be overcome if they do not bring satisfaction, tranquility and happiness. Then, anxiety arises as a result of these feelings. According to Zelenick (in Kuper 2000: 856) anxiety as one of the principles of psychoanalysis is part of the study of psychology. Psychoanalysis has an intellectual base, some researchers place psychology in the middle of physics, and then they correct it with hermeneutics, linguistics, and literature as a rival to biology, medicine, psychiatry, and science.

### II. Review Of Literature

#### 2.1 Neurotic Anxiety and Moral Anxiety

Neurotic anxiety, as defined by Freud, arises from unconscious instinctual drives and unresolved desires, caused by repressed sexual behaviors or conflicts affecting the ego. It occurs when the ego fails to manage these inner conflicts, leading to emotional tension. This anxiety can manifest as a general sense of dread or acute attacks with



physical symptoms like shortness of breath. Phobias, such as agoraphobia, are also forms of neurotic anxiety, which is internal and often unrelated to real external threats (Ivy, 2020).

Moral anxiety is a form of anxiety that arises due to the conflict between the ego and the superego, two parts of the structure of the mind. According to Freud (in Ivy 2020) The superego functions to regulate morality, ethics, and social norms that we accept, while the ego functions to balance the desires or urges of the id with the demands of reality. When someone feels that their behavior or desires conflict with the moral values or standards set by the superego, moral anxiety can arise.

Moral anxiety arises when individuals feel guilty or inadequate for failing to meet their own or others' moral expectations. For instance, when tempted to engage in unethical behavior like lying or cheating, the superego generates feelings of guilt or shame, triggering moral anxiety. This anxiety serves as a defense mechanism, helping individuals adhere to societal norms and moral values (Ivy, 2020).

## **2.2 Theory and Method**

This is a narrative qualitative research proposed by Creswell stating that narrative is a kind of qualitative in which the investigator illustrates the lives of characters, accumulates and tells stories about individuals lives, and writes narratives of characteristic experiences. Using this method, data is gathered through the collection of stories (2007: 54).

This study applies psychoanalysis. The relationship between psychoanalysis and literature can be explained in several more detailed ways. Psychoanalysis is a branch of psychology that studies the subconscious, emotions, and inner conflicts of humans. In literature, psychoanalysis is used to understand the process of creating

works, characters in stories, and the impact of literature on readers (Mahroof 2017).

Psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud is applied as a theory in this study (Mustofa 2002) and offers a comprehensive framework for understanding human behavior, focusing on the intricate relationships between the id, ego, and superego. In his theory, Freud emphasizes the importance of unconscious processes, arguing that much of human behavior is shaped by desires and memories that are not immediately accessible to the conscious mind. These unconscious elements, often rooted in early childhood experiences, can influence our thoughts, actions, and relationships in profound ways.

## **III. The Analysis**

*Atonement*, a novel of 371 pages written by Ian McEwans, is a story of a girl named Briony Tallis who likes writing stories and dramas. Briony Tallis, is a young girl with a very vivid imagination and aspires to be a writer. However, her excessive imagination brings about a fatal accident that changes the lives of those around her. In a moment of anxiety and confusion, she falsely accuses Robbie Turner, her sister Cecilia's lover, of raping their teenage cousin Lola. Despite not seeing the incident clearly due to the darkness of the scene, Briony is convinced of Robbie's guilt, driven by her anxiety to make sense of the chaotic world around her. This anxiety intensifies as she struggles with feelings of jealousy and fear of losing Robbie to Cecilia. These overwhelming emotions cloud her judgment, making her act impulsively. She feels threatened by Robbie's attention to Cecilia and worries that their relationship will end if she doesn't do something.

As a result of his false accusations, Robbie is arrested and sent to fight in World War II, separating him from Cecilia, who is heartbroken but still hopes to see him again.



As she waits for him to return home, Briony feels directionless and pressured by her own responsibilities. She feels that her decision has ruined her life and the lives of those she loves. While waiting to hear from Robbie, Briony also had to deal with the trauma of the incident. She felt guilty and couldn't sleep at night because she thought about what she had done. After years of waiting to hear from Robbie, Briony finally realizes her fatal mistake. As an adult, she understands that her overactive imagination has led to catastrophic consequences and that the real culprit is not Robbie, but Paul Marshall, her brother's friend Leon. Devastated by guilt and anxiety over past mistakes, Briony seeks redemption through writing. However, she realizes that it may be too late for true redemption. Her journey illustrates how anxiety can distort perceptions and lead to irreparable actions, ultimately shaping her life in profound ways.

### **3.1 Neurotic Anxiety**

Ian McEwan presents the character Briony as a representation of individuals experiencing anxiety, particularly neurotic anxiety. As a young writer with a vivid imagination, Briony often struggles to separate reality from fantasy. She is raised in a family environment with high expectations, especially from her mother, who holds rigid views about how a young girl should behave. This pressure fosters a sense of inadequacy in Briony, which contributes significantly to her anxiety and emotional conflict.

Briony's growing suspicion and inability to process what she saw contribute to her deepening emotional disturbance.

"At his insistence she was removing her clothes, and at such speed. She was out of her blouse, now she had let her skirt drop to the ground and was stepping out of it, while he looked on impatiently, hands on hips. What

strange power did he have over her? Blackmail? Threats? Briony raised two hands to her face and stepped back a little way from the window. She should shut her eyes, she thought, and spare herself the sight of her sister's shame." (38).

Briony's inability to comprehend the situation leads to an internal conflict between her emotional urge to protect her family and the guilt from misunderstanding Robbie and Cecilia's relationship. Her neurotic anxiety compels her to make a life-altering decision that impacts everyone involved. When she steps back from the window and covers her face, it symbolizes her attempt to shield herself from the shame and confusion she feels. This sense of alienation heightens her anxiety and triggers feelings of panic, as she loses a sense of control over her surroundings and reality.

Briony becomes troubled and begins to question what happened between Robbie and Cecilia. To clear her mind, she walks in the nearby forest, where Robbie unexpectedly calls her and gives her a letter to deliver to Cecilia. Overcome by curiosity, Briony opens and reads the letter before delivering it, and is shocked by its explicit and adult content.

"In my dreams I kiss your cunt, your sweet wet cunt. In my thoughts I make love to you all day long." (59).

Briony reads Robbie's explicit letter to Cecilia without permission, which heightens her neurotic anxiety and confuses her about their relationship. Misinterpreting the letter and recalling an intimate moment, she mistakenly suspects Robbie of harming Cecilia. At thirteen, she views the letter as evidence of a crime and perceives Robbie as a threat. Driven by anxiety, she delivers the letter without an envelope, escalating the conflict. Cecilia senses the tension, and Briony's fear of losing control leads to impulsive actions with tragic consequences.



Freud explains that such fear stems from instincts threatening to go awry, potentially leading to punishment (Corey, 1996).

“With the letter, something elemental, brutal, perhaps even criminal had been introduced, some principle of darkness, and even in her excitement over the possibilities, she did not doubt that her sister was in some way threatened and would need her help” (78).

Briony becomes trapped in a cycle of anxiety fueled by fear and confusion. After witnessing distressing events, she fixates on Robbie and aims to protect her family, especially Cecilia. During a dinner for Leon, Lola's twin brothers go missing, and while searching for them, Briony discovers Lola being assaulted, deepening her emotional turmoil and the ensuing tragedy. Bookmark message Copy message Export.

“How could he,” Briony moaned. “How dare he.” Lola placed her hand on her bare forearm and gripped. Her mild words were widely spaced. “You saw him.” Briony drew nearer to her and covered Lola's hand with her own. “You don't even know yet what happened in the library, before dinner, just after we were talking. He was attacking my sister. If I hadn't come in, I don't know what he would have done ...” (115).

### **3.2 Moral Anxiety**

Briony follows in Cecilia's footsteps by becoming a nurse, seeking to distance herself from her family and forge a new identity. She hopes that this choice will help alleviate the guilt that burdens her, but her efforts prove insufficient. The memories of her past mistakes linger, refusing to leave her mind. When she unexpectedly hallucinates seeing Robbie while treating wounded soldiers from Dunkirk, she realizes that despite her attempts to move on, the

shadows of her past and her guilt continue to haunt her, creating a persistent discomfort in her life.

“The first surprise is that Briony isn't at Cambridge. She didn't go up last autumn, she didn't take her place. I was amazed because I'd heard from Dr. Hall that she was expected. The other surprise is that she's doing nurse's training at my old hospital.” (143).

Briony tried to write her novel about her experiences with Cecilia and Robbie. However, she could not finish it easily and quickly and it took many years later.

“In the drawer of her bedside locker, she kept a foolscap notebook with marbled cardboard covers. Taped to the spine was a length of string on the end of which was a pencil. It was not permitted to use pen and ink in bed. She began her journal at the end of the first day of preliminary training, and managed at least ten minutes most nights before lights-out” (189).

### **IV. Conclusion**

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* explores the emotional journey of Briony Tallis, who is ensnared in moral and neurotic anxiety due to her impulsive actions. Her moral anxiety stems from the guilt of accusing Robbie Turner of rape, a misunderstanding that devastates his life and separates him from Cecilia, the woman he loves. Briony believes her actions are protective, yet she fails to recognize the tragic consequences they will bring. In an attempt to escape her past, she becomes a nurse, hoping to find new meaning and alleviate her emotional burden. However, memories of her mistakes persist, creating discomfort as she grapples with the desire to forget and the reality of her guilt. Briony's experiences illustrate the complexity of human emotions and the lasting impact of mistakes made in



ignorance. Her moral anxiety manifests as guilt and internal conflict, while her neurotic anxiety arises from her inability to move on from her trauma, highlighted by hallucinations during her work with wounded soldiers from Dunkirk. McEwan invites readers to reflect on themes of regret, justice, and the quest for truth within complex relationships. Ultimately, *Atonement* is a narrative about love and loss, as well as the challenging journey toward identity and self-understanding amid the haunting shadows of the past.

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