

Gender Dissonance and Emotional Systems in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and *The Innocent*

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Abstract- *This article examines the construction of gender dissonance and the architecture of emotional systems in Ian McEwan's Atonement (2001) and The Innocent (1990). Drawing on feminist literary theory, affect theory, and psychoanalytic criticism, the study argues that McEwan systematically deploys misaligned gender performances—situations in which characters fail to inhabit the emotional scripts culturally prescribed for their sex—as a structural engine of narrative irony, moral catastrophe, and psychological violence. In Atonement, gender dissonance is encoded in the asymmetry between Briony Tallis's hyperactive emotional literacy and Cecilia's disciplined emotional restraint, while Robbie Turner's intellectual tenderness exposes the fragility of heteronormative masculine identity under class and institutional pressure. In The Innocent, Leonard Marnham's arrested emotional development collides with Maria's continental emotional directness, producing a crisis of masculinity that culminates in corporeal horror. Taken together, the two novels reveal McEwan's sustained interest in what this article terms emotional misrecognition: the systematic failure of characters to read each other's affective states across gendered lines. The article concludes that McEwan uses gendered emotional asymmetry not merely as psychological realism but as a formal device that determines narrative outcome, moral authority, and the politics of memory.*

Keywords: *Gender Dissonance, Emotional Systems, Affect Theory, Ian McEwan, Atonement, The Innocent, Feminist Narratology, Misrecognition, Masculinity, Narrative Authority*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ian McEwan has long been identified as a chronicler of masculine crisis and emotional pathology. From the obsessive jealousy of *Enduring Love* to the domestic grief of *The Child in Time*, his fiction returns persistently to the question of how men feel—or, more precisely, how they fail to feel in ways that match the

emotional demands placed upon them by women, by society, and by the moral weight of historical circumstance. Yet the emotional architecture of McEwan's fiction is not simply a study in male inadequacy. It is, more fundamentally, a study in gender dissonance: the productive friction generated when characters inhabit emotional registers incongruent with the scripts their gender is supposed to authorize.

Atonement and *The Innocent* are the two McEwan novels most amenable to this analysis because each places gender dissonance at the structural centre of its plot. In *Atonement*, the narrative catastrophe—Briony's false accusation of Robbie—is produced not by malice but by emotional misreading: Briony interprets Cecilia's physical and erotic self-possession through the emotional grammar of a thirteen-year-old girl who has been trained to read the world as a morality play. In *The Innocent*, the catastrophe—the dismemberment of Otto and the collapse of Leonard's sense of self—is produced by Leonard's inability to metabolize emotions, particularly sexual jealousy and masculine shame, that exceed his cultural and psychological formation.

The theoretical framework of this article draws on three intersecting bodies of thought. First, it engages feminist narratology, particularly the work of Susan Lanser (1992) and Robyn Warhol (2003), to examine how gender inflects narrative authority and the distribution of emotional knowledge within the text. Second, it applies affect theory—drawing on Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) and Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual* (2002)—to theorise how emotions circulate, stick, and misfire across gendered bodies in McEwan's fiction. Third, it draws on psychoanalytic accounts of masculinity,

particularly those of Victor Seidler (1989) and Raewyn Connell (1995), to situate Leonard's and Robbie's emotional failures within the historical construction of mid-twentieth-century British manhood.

The argument proceeds in four stages. The second section establishes a theoretical vocabulary for gender dissonance and emotional systems as they operate in literary fiction. The third and fourth sections offer close readings of *Atonement* and *The Innocent* respectively, tracking the mechanisms by which gender dissonance generates narrative momentum and moral consequence. The fifth section draws the two novels into comparative dialogue, arguing that McEwan's recurring interest in emotional misrecognition constitutes a sustained formal and ethical project. The conclusion reflects on what McEwan's treatment of gendered emotion contributes to our understanding of literary representations of affect and moral failure.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: GENDER DISSONANCE AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF EMOTION

2.1 Gender Dissonance as a Literary Category

The term 'gender dissonance' was introduced into clinical psychology to describe the subjective experience of mismatch between an individual's gender identity and their socially assigned gender role. In this article, the term is redeployed for literary-critical purposes to describe a textual condition: the gap between the emotional behaviour a character performs and the emotional behaviour their gender is scripted to produce within the cultural logic of the narrative world. Gender dissonance, in this sense, is not the same as gender nonconformity or queerness, though it may include both. It refers, more broadly, to any moment in which a character's emotional expression, emotional suppression, or emotional misreading is legible as a deviation from gendered norms—and in which that deviation has narrative consequences.

This use of the term is indebted to Judith Butler's account of gender as performance (1990). For Butler, gender is constituted through iterative acts rather than grounded in biological substance; it is always and only

a doing, never a being. The corollary for literary analysis is that gender in fiction is always a textual performance: it is produced through the choices a narrator makes about which emotions to attribute to which characters, whose interiority to render legible, and whose affective responses to frame as reliable, excessive, or pathological. When a male character weeps, or a female character rages, or an adolescent girl mistakes erotic tension for assault, the narrative machinery of gender is exposed.

Feminist narratologists have developed a rich vocabulary for analysing these operations. Susan Lanser's foundational work on narrative voice argues that the gender of the narrator—or, by extension, the focalized character—shapes the epistemic authority available within the text. A female focalizer is frequently positioned as emotionally acute but cognitively limited, while a male focalizer is associated with rational detachment but emotional opacity. McEwan repeatedly activates and then destabilises these conventions, producing focalizers whose gender and emotional register are systematically misaligned.

2.2 Emotional Systems in Narrative Fiction

The concept of an 'emotional system' refers, in this article, to the network of affective relations that a narrative constructs and maintains: the rules governing which emotions characters are permitted to feel, which they can express, which they must suppress, and which are available for narrative use. Every realist novel operates with an implicit emotional system—a set of assumptions about what emotions mean, how they circulate, and what moral and narrative work they are authorized to perform. Affect theory provides a useful supplement to narratological approaches because it attends to the pre-linguistic, somatic, and relational dimensions of emotion that realist fiction frequently struggles to render. Sara Ahmed's concept of 'emotional stickiness'—the way in which certain emotions adhere to certain bodies through processes of cultural repetition—is particularly productive for reading McEwan. In both *Atonement* and *The Innocent*, specific emotions become stuck to characters along gendered lines: shame adheres to Robbie and Leonard in ways that are distinctively masculine, while guilt adheres to Briony in ways that are inflected by her femininity and her narrative

ambition. Massumi's distinction between affect and emotion—affect as the body's capacity to act and be acted upon, emotion as the linguistic and social codification of affect—illuminates a recurring tension in McEwan's prose style. McEwan is celebrated as a writer of surfaces: of precisely observed physical detail, gesture, and sensation. His style registers affect—the flush of embarrassment, the tightening of the chest, the involuntary movement of a hand—with documentary precision. But his characters frequently lack the vocabulary to name what they feel, and it is this gap between somatic affect and available emotional language that generates the miscommunications, misreadings, and catastrophes that drive his plots.

III. ATONEMENT: NARRATIVE AUTHORITY, EMOTIONAL MISREADING, AND THE GENDERED GAZE

3.1 Briony Tallis and the Pathology of Emotional Legibility

Briony Tallis is one of the most sophisticated examples in British fiction of a character whose relationship to her own gender is radically dissonant. She is, at thirteen, a writer—and the figure of the woman writer in patriarchal culture is always already dissonant, positioned between the emotional fluency attributed to femininity and the cognitive authority attributed to masculinity. McEwan exploits this cultural contradiction with great precision. Briony is emotionally hyperarticulate: she is able to name and narrate emotion with a facility that far exceeds her actual capacity to understand it. Her precocious emotional vocabulary becomes, paradoxically, the instrument of catastrophic misreading.

The scene in which Briony witnesses Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain is paradigmatic in this regard. What Briony sees is, in her own interpretive framework, a scene of male dominance and female submission. Cecilia undresses and descends into the fountain; Robbie watches. Briony reads this sequence through the emotional grammar of fairy tale and melodrama: the registers, that is, which her feminine literary formation has made available to her. She cannot access the erotic logic of the scene because her emotional system has no category for female sexual

agency. The result is a misreading so profound that it will destroy three lives.

McEwan frames Briony's misreading through the language of vision and interpretation. The verbs he chooses are repeatedly epistemological—Briony 'understood,' 'saw,' 'knew,' 'recognised'—even as the narrative structure irresistibly shows us that she does not understand, does not see correctly, does not know, and mistakes the familiar for the alien. This gap between the confidence of Briony's emotional knowing and the actual opacity of the scene she witnesses constitutes the central form of gender dissonance in the novel: a girl who has been taught to read emotions, reading them wrong, in ways that are specifically determined by her gendered formation.

3.2 Cecilia Tallis and the Politics of Emotional Restraint

If Briony represents the hyperactivity of the feminine emotional system, Cecilia represents its disciplined suppression. Cecilia is a Cambridge-educated woman in the 1930s, a figure who has learned to manage and conceal her interior life as the price of intellectual credibility in a masculine institution. Her emotional restraint is not natural but cultivated: it is the product of a gendered emotional education that has taught her to regard the full expression of feeling as embarrassing, provincial, and feminine in the pejorative sense.

McEwan is careful to show that Cecilia's restraint is not emotional poverty but emotional discipline: a specific, historically conditioned form of emotional management that has its own dignity and its own costs. The cost, in *Atonement*, is that Cecilia cannot express her desire for Robbie in forms that would be legible to the surveillance of the household—and it is precisely the legibility problem that enables Briony's misreading. Cecilia's emotion is there but encoded in a language—gesture, posture, charged silence—that requires a reader capable of recognizing that encoding. Briony is not that reader.

The relationship between Cecilia and Robbie is, in this sense, a study in gendered emotional asymmetry. Robbie's desire is expressed in language—most fatally, in the letter—while Cecilia's is expressed in the body. The cultural hierarchy that values language over

body, intellect over sensation, maps directly onto the gender hierarchy that privileges masculine expression over feminine. The irony McEwan constructs is subtle and devastating: it is Robbie's attempt to achieve linguistic precision about his emotions—to do what men are not supposed to do, and put desire into words—that provides the material for his destruction.

3.3 Robbie Turner and the Vulnerability of Masculine Tenderness

Robbie Turner is one of the most carefully constructed instances of masculine gender dissonance in contemporary British fiction. He is a man of intellectual refinement, emotional sensitivity, and genuine tenderness—qualities that his class position and historical moment make simultaneously admirable and precarious. The class dynamics of *Atonement* are inseparable from its gender dynamics: Robbie's tenderness is permissible, even attractive, in the private register of his relationship with Cecilia; but in the public register of the Tallis family, his intellectual and emotional cultivation makes him a dangerous figure, an interloper whose affective refinement exceeds his social station.

The accusation that destroys Robbie is gendered in multiple ways. It activates the patriarchal fantasy of the sexually threatening working-class male—a fantasy that has nothing to do with Robbie's actual emotional and erotic life, which is characterised by tenderness, reciprocity, and genuine care. McEwan is explicit that Robbie's sexuality is not predatory; what makes the accusation stick is precisely the gendered emotional system within which the Tallis family operates, a system that cannot accommodate the possibility of a man like Robbie—tender, educated, sexually self-aware—because its categories of masculine emotion are limited to threat or servility.

In the war sequences, McEwan traces what the institutional violence of masculine culture does to a man who has been formed for tenderness. Robbie's letters to Cecilia during his imprisonment and his march to Dunkirk chart the progressive erosion of his emotional interiority under the pressure of masculine institutional life—prison, army, war. He holds onto his tenderness by holding onto his love for Cecilia; but the narrative ironises this tenacity by making it the sole content of an emotional life that has been

systematically stripped of everything else. The emotional system of war cannot accommodate Robbie's kind of masculinity; it can only produce male bodies for expenditure.

IV. THE INNOCENT: MASCULINE EMOTIONAL ARREST AND THE VIOLENCE OF MISRECOGNITION

4.1 Leonard Marnham and the Limits of English Masculinity

The *Innocent* is set in Cold War Berlin in 1955-56, and its Cold War geography is also an emotional geography: the divided city figures the divided masculine psyche of Leonard Marnham, an English Post Office engineer who has been seconded to a joint Anglo-American intelligence operation. Leonard is, from the novel's opening pages, a man whose emotional formation has left him radically unprepared for the emotional demands that Berlin—and specifically Maria—will make of him. His Englishness, his class, his professional formation, and his sexual inexperience combine to produce a character who is, in the terminology of this article, a paradigm case of masculine emotional arrest.

McEwan diagnoses Leonard's condition with clinical precision. Leonard is not unintelligent; he is emotionally underdeveloped in ways that are specifically gendered and specifically English. His emotional vocabulary is impoverished not because he lacks the cognitive capacity for emotional nuance, but because his formation—male, lower-middle-class, post-war English—has provided him with almost no legitimate channel for the expression of vulnerability, desire, uncertainty, or shame. The emotional system he inhabits is one in which men do not discuss feelings; they manage situations.

This emotional underdevelopment is established in the novel's early sequences through Leonard's relationship to his own body. He is acutely aware of his physical inadequacy in comparison with the American officers around him—their height, their confidence, their sexual ease—and this physical self-consciousness is the somatic expression of a deeper emotional insecurity. McEwan uses the contrast between English and American masculinity, and later between English and German emotional directness, to illuminate the

specific pathology of Leonard's formation. *The Innocent* is, among other things, a novel about the emotional costs of the English post-war masculine habitus.

4.2 Maria and the Dissonance of Emotional Directness

Maria is one of the few female characters in McEwan's fiction who is given a fully realised emotional system of her own—one that is neither a function of male desire nor a mirror of male anxiety. Maria's emotional directness—her willingness to name her feelings, her history, her desires, and her wounds—is coded in the novel as distinctively German and post-war: the expression of a culture that has been stripped of its pieties and forced into a kind of emotional honesty that England, the victor, has not needed to perform.

Maria's emotional directness constitutes the central form of gender dissonance in *The Innocent*. She does not perform the emotional restraint and sexual passivity that Leonard's English masculine formation has taught him to expect from women. When she initiates sexual contact, discusses her previous marriage with unsentimental clarity, and refuses to manage her anger at Leonard's jealousy, she violates the emotional script Leonard has been given for women, and the dissonance generates a crisis that Leonard can neither name nor resolve.

The scene in which Leonard reads Maria's letters from her ex-husband Otto is a masterly study in masculine emotional misrecognition. Leonard's jealousy is not produced by any actual threat from Otto—Otto is a pathetic figure, emotionally damaged by his own war experiences—but by Leonard's inability to process Maria's emotional past. He cannot accommodate the fact that Maria has loved before, experienced sexual pleasure before, been wounded before: that she has, in short, an emotional history that precedes him and does not require his retroactive authorisation. His jealousy is, fundamentally, a failure of emotional imagination: an inability to extend empathy across the gendered boundary that separates his experience from hers.

4.3 Violence, Dismemberment, and the Collapse of the Emotional System

The killing of Otto and the subsequent dismemberment of his body are the most discussed

passages in McEwan's early fiction, and they have typically been read in terms of horror, psychopathology, or the gothic tradition. This article proposes a complementary reading: the dismemberment scene is the culmination of a sustained narrative logic in which masculine emotional arrest produces corporeal catastrophe. Leonard cannot process his emotions—his jealousy, his shame, his panic—through any available emotional or social channel. The violence against Otto's body is the explosion of an emotional system that has reached the limit of its containment capacity.

McEwan is scrupulously precise about the sequence of Leonard's emotional states in the confrontation with Otto. There is panic, then a strange calm, then action—and then, crucially, a kind of affectless dissociation that settles over Leonard as he and Maria begin the dismemberment. This affective sequence—from overwhelming emotion to the shutting down of emotion—is recognisably the structure of masculine emotional crisis in McEwan's fiction: the emotional system overloads, and the result is not cathartic release but the suspension of the emotional system altogether. The body becomes meat; the man becomes a function.

The dismemberment also enacts a kind of gendered displacement. It is Maria who takes practical charge of the situation—who devises the plan, who performs much of the physical labour, who manages the emotional aftermath with a pragmatism that is, in the economy of the novel, specifically feminine in its refusal of masculine paralysis. Leonard's masculinity has produced the crisis; Maria's emotional pragmatism manages its consequences. This distribution of agency inverts the conventional gendered hierarchy of action and emotion: the man is emotionally paralysed, the woman acts. But McEwan does not romanticise this inversion; Maria's pragmatism is itself the product of a wartime formation that has demanded too much of her emotional system.

V. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: EMOTIONAL MISRECOGNITION AS MCEWAN'S FORMAL DEVICE

5.1 The Structure of Misrecognition

Across both novels, McEwan constructs what this article has called emotional misrecognition: the

systematic failure of characters to accurately read each other's affective states across gendered lines. In *Atonement*, this misrecognition is primarily epistemic—it concerns the interpretation of emotional meaning—and its vehicle is narrative itself, specifically Briony's narrativisation of Cecilia and Robbie's relationship. In *The Innocent*, misrecognition is primarily relational—it concerns the affective transaction between Leonard and Maria—and its vehicle is the logic of sexual jealousy and masculine shame.

Despite these differences of mode, the structure of misrecognition in the two novels is strikingly similar. In both cases, a male character (Robbie, Leonard) possesses an emotional life that is richer, more vulnerable, and more genuinely relational than the masculine norms of his cultural context permit; in both cases, this emotional richness makes him legible to others only in distorted form—as a threat (Robbie) or as a burden (Leonard). And in both cases, a female character is positioned as both the site of the male character's emotional desire and the agent of his emotional exposure: Cecilia, who receives Robbie's desire and cannot protect him from its misreading; Maria, who receives Leonard's desire and cannot absorb his jealousy without cost.

5.2 Narrative Authority and the Gendering of Moral Judgment

Both novels also raise the question of narrative authority in explicitly gendered terms. In *Atonement*, the question is foregrounded by the metafictional frame: the novel is, at least in part, Briony's novel, and the reader is asked to reckon with the fact that the narrative authority we have granted Briony—the authority of the realist novelist to render interior life—has been constituted through an act of violence. Briony's feminine emotional legibility, her ability to access and render the inner lives of others, is both the gift and the curse of the novelist; and McEwan's metafictional conceit makes visible the degree to which narrative authority is always already a form of power over others.

In *The Innocent*, the question of narrative authority is less explicitly thematised but no less present. The novel is told primarily through Leonard's focalization, and the reader's access to Maria's emotional life is

always filtered through Leonard's limited and often distorting perspective. McEwan does not, however, simply reproduce Leonard's distortions: the prose style repeatedly opens gaps between Leonard's interpretation of Maria's behaviour and the emotional logic that the narrative makes visible to the attentive reader. Maria's emotional directness, her refusal to perform the scripts Leonard expects, is available to the reader as a form of emotional intelligence that Leonard cannot fully receive. This structural irony—the reader knows more about Maria than Leonard does—is itself a form of narrative commentary on the limits of masculine emotional legibility.

5.3 The Historical Embedding of Emotional Systems

A crucial dimension of both novels, often underemphasised in criticism, is their precise historical embedding of emotional systems. Both *Atonement* and *The Innocent* are period novels—*Atonement* is set largely in 1935 and 1940, *The Innocent* in 1955-56—and McEwan is meticulous about situating his characters' emotional formations within specific historical moments in the construction of British and European gender norms.

In *Atonement*, the emotional systems of the Tallis household are those of the English upper-middle class in the 1930s: a world in which emotional restraint is a class virtue, sexual feeling is managed through elaborate codes of avoidance and indirection, and women's emotional legibility is simultaneously celebrated (in the drawing room) and punished (in the court). The war sections of the novel trace what happens to this emotional system under the pressure of historical catastrophe: the Dunkirk sequences are a study in the systematic dismantling of the emotional codes that have made Robbie's situation possible, as the machinery of masculine institutional violence strips away everything that makes him the person Cecilia loves.

In *The Innocent*, the emotional system is that of post-war English masculinity in the Cold War: a world in which the trauma of the Second World War has been processed, on the English side, through a kind of emotional repression—the stiff upper lip as collective coping mechanism—while on the German side, the same trauma has produced, in Maria, a different kind of emotional economy: more direct, more wounded,

more honest about its own damage. The Cold War setting is not merely backdrop; it is the structural condition of the novel's gender dynamics, because the divided Berlin of 1955 is also a divided emotional world in which different national formations of masculinity and femininity are brought into collision.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that gender dissonance and emotional misrecognition are not incidental features of *Atonement* and *The Innocent* but structural principles that determine the narrative logic, moral architecture, and formal organisation of both texts. McEwan's male characters—Robbie Turner and Leonard Marnham—are men whose emotional formations misalign with the masculine norms their historical and cultural contexts have made available; their tenderness, their vulnerability, and their relational desire are at once the most attractive and the most dangerous things about them, precisely because the emotional systems within which they operate have no adequate category for such forms of masculinity. McEwan's female characters—Cecilia, Briony, Maria—are positioned at the intersection of emotional legibility and narrative authority: they are both the readers of male emotion and the agents of its distortion. The application of affect theory to these texts has illuminated the degree to which McEwan's realism operates through a careful attention to the pre-linguistic dimensions of emotional life: the somatic traces, the gestures, the charged silences that carry affective meaning in excess of what language can articulate. It is in the gap between affect and emotion—between what bodies register and what language can name—that gender dissonance is produced and where emotional misrecognition becomes catastrophic. McEwan's prose style, with its forensic precision and its deep investment in physical surface, is ideally suited to the rendering of this gap. Taken together, the two novels suggest that McEwan's sustained interest in emotion is also, and always, an interest in narrative form. The emotional system of a novel is not separable from its narrative structure; the distribution of emotional knowledge across characters, the attribution of legibility and opacity, the positioning of whose interiority matters—all of these are formal decisions that carry ideological weight. By making gender dissonance and emotional misrecognition the engines of his plots, McEwan does not merely reflect

the gendered emotional cultures of his historical settings; he makes visible, through the very structure of his narratives, the mechanisms by which those cultures produce their casualties. Future scholarship might extend this analysis in several directions: a consideration of McEwan's later fiction (*Saturday*, *Solar*, *Machines Like Me*) in relation to the gendered emotional systems established in his early and middle work; a more sustained engagement with postcolonial feminist critiques of the English emotional habitus that McEwan's fiction so precisely anatomises; and an examination of the relationship between McEwan's own position as a male author writing female interiority and the politics of emotional representation that this article has traced. What this study has sought to establish is the critical purchase of a combined affect-theoretical and feminist narratological approach to McEwan's fiction—an approach that takes seriously both the precision of his prose and the ideological weight of the emotional worlds he constructs.

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