

Class Dynamics and False Consciousness in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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Abstract

Aims: This research investigates the novel *Atonement*, written by Ian McEwan. In conducting this research, the writer aims to explore the class dynamics that lead to false consciousness found in the novel. This research focuses on how Ian McEwan represents British Society in his novel in the early 20th century. **Methods:** This research is a contextual analysis; therefore, it applies the mimetic approach by Abram. Furthermore, the writer utilizes the Marxist theory of literary criticism to support the understanding of the contextual analysis. The writer uses the descriptive method to present the result of the analysis. **Result:** This research suggests that the upper-class controls society in several ways. First is creating a circle of dependency by providing scholarships and accommodation, by exploiting the outbreak of World War II, and manipulating the narrative for interests. Additionally, Ian McEwan represents Robbie as a person living in a false conscious state by portraying his romantic relationship with Cecilia, his unattainable aspirations through education, and his misinterpretation of social class. **Implication:** This research concludes that the social dynamics between classes can lead to a state of false consciousness, especially in the case of Robbie, who grew up in the same environment as the upper class.

Keywords: Atonement, Marxism, class conflict, capitalism, hegemony, false consciousness

Introduction

Due to the great impact of World War alongside with the Great Depression in 1930s, brings lot of changed in Britain (Roselli 14). These phenomena enlighten the gap between the who dominant classes in society, between the high and the lower class. Upper class consist of nobles, aristocrats, and elites while the lower class are those who are poor, labor, and those who lives under the constraints of upper class (Cannadine 98). The class hierarchy within British society results in multiple issues, including exploitation, domination, ideological indoctrination, and the propagation of false consciousness. These dynamics are typical of a capitalist system, where power is held by those with financial resources, leading to a skewed social structure and significant power disparities (Offe 102). Members of the aristocracy and upper class used various methods to expand or preserve their authority, especially during the difficult era of the Great Depression (Sach 94). Meanwhile, the working class faced lives shaped by the policies and prevailing norms imposed by those in the upper class. This disparity was further exacerbated by the conservative nature of British society, where power and influence were tightly controlled (Menon 31).

Capitalist ideology has infiltrated the notion that the upper class is destined to lead, while

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the lower class must obey, often without question (Eyerman 53). This ideological indoctrination distorts the lower class's perception of their own reality, leading them to act without fully acknowledging their circumstances. Influential Marxist thinkers like Marx, Engels, Lukacs, and Gramsci argue that this condition stems directly from capitalist ideology. When the working class adopts the values of the upper class unconsciously and without regard for their own interests, this phenomenon is described as false consciousness (Rosen 369). False consciousness arises as a consequence of entrenched class structures and the cultural hegemony upheld by the upper class, often causing the working class to internalize capitalist ideals without realizing the personal sacrifices and inequities involved.

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* is a notable literary work that explores into issues of social class within early 20th-century British society. Published in 2001, the novel vividly illustrates the intricate class dynamics of the era, beginning in 1935 and extending through the years surrounding World War II. The story follows the intertwined lives of Robbie Turner, the son of a servant, and Cecilia Tallis, the daughter of a wealthy family, with the plot pivoting on a grave misunderstanding and a false accusation made by Briony Tallis, Cecilia's younger sister. Misinterpreting a series of events, Briony accuses Robbie of a crime he did not commit, leading to his imprisonment and irrevocably altering the lives of all three characters. The novel navigates themes of love, guilt, and redemption as Briony struggles to make amends for her actions and seek atonement for her role in their tragic fate.

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* provides a vivid reflection of 1930s British society, capturing the entrenched class distinctions of the period. Through the contrasting lives of Robbie Turner and the Tallis family, the novel reveals the stark social and economic divide between the upper and working classes. Robbie's character illustrates the struggles faced by the lower class in breaking through social barriers; despite his academic successes and ambitions, he remains confined by his social status, symbolizing the limited upward mobility and persistent class prejudice of the time. As the narrative progresses, McEwan probes how these class divisions shape personal relationships and expose the hardships endured by those of lower social standing. *Atonement* is not only a powerful story about the fallout from a single misinterpretation but also a poignant examination of class structure in early 20th-century Britain, offering an incisive view of the era's social and economic disparities and establishing its importance in discussions of class issues in literature.

In addition to *Atonement*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* delves into similar issues of class and social hierarchy. Set between the interwar and postwar periods, the novel follows Stevens, a butler in service to an English lord, and examines themes of duty, class loyalty, and the shifting social order. Through Stevens' perspective, Ishiguro explores the rigid class divisions and unseen barriers separating the classes. Despite his employer's morally questionable actions, Stevens' unwavering loyalty highlights the concept of false consciousness. This analysis focuses on *Atonement* for its distinct approach to social class issues, using a mimetic approach combined with Marxist literary criticism to unpack the dynamics at play. McEwan's depiction of Robbie as a working-class individual caught in false consciousness underscores his disillusioned attempts at social mobility, reflecting the period's harsh class constraints.

The writer has reviewed several relevant studies for this research. In *Class and Social Inequality* (2020), Vasko Talevski discusses Robbie's awareness of his class status, noting that Robbie achieves upward mobility through his literary knowledge, allowing him to adopt upper-

class behaviours. In a 2013 article, Ian Fraser examines class contradictions in *Atonement* through E.P. Thompson's concepts, such as class experience, consciousness, and hegemony, concluding that class can shift based on social circumstances. Ilany Kogan's 2014 psychoanalytical analysis focuses on Briony's character, exploring her traumatic interactions and need for atonement.

In addition to studies specific to *Atonement*, Masood et al. (2020) argue that bourgeois exploitation of the proletariat, as seen in Attia Hosain's *The Old Man*, exemplifies social injustice and false consciousness. Finally, Jennifer Christy Rimun's 2013 thesis on *The Hunger Games* analyzes themes like false consciousness, hegemony, and reification, showing how fictional narratives reflect real societal issues through a Marxist lens.

While these studies provide a comprehensive understanding of class and social dynamics, a critical gap remains in the analysis of *false consciousness* within *Atonement*. Existing research, such as those by Talevski and Fraser, primarily focuses on class mobility, contradictions, and consciousness but does not investigate more deeply how false consciousness operates within the narrative. Similarly, while research like that of Masood et al. and Rimun explores false consciousness in other literary works, these frameworks have not been applied to *Atonement*.

Building on this background, this research seeks to examine the class dynamics between the upper and lower classes as portrayed in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. The analysis will also explore how McEwan demonstrates that these class dynamics contribute to Robbie's experience of false consciousness, representing the struggles of the lower class and reflecting early 20th-century British sociohistorical realities. By addressing the unexplored aspect of false consciousness in *Atonement*, this study contributes a novel perspective to Marxist literary criticism.

Method

This research analyzes the power and class dynamics in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* using a qualitative, descriptive approach (Bogdan et al., 2007). Drawing on Marxist theory from expertise like Marx, Engels and Gramsci, the analysis follows Miles' methods: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion (Miles et al., 2018). Relevant quotes from *Atonement* are examined through a Marxist lens to illustrate how hegemony leads to false consciousness in Robbie Turner. This research aims to deepen understanding in this area and contribute to future studies on similar topics.

This research employs a library method, with *Atonement* by Ian McEwan as the primary source and additional journal articles and theses as secondary sources. Data is refined through a reduction method, focusing on selected sentences, paragraphs, or quotes from the novel. The analysis begins with a deep understanding of the novel's contextual issues, followed by a Marxist critique to explore how the upper class's control fosters false consciousness in Robbie Turner, illustrated through narrative and dialogue. Using qualitative, descriptive analysis, the study provides an in-depth examination of class dynamics and their impact on the character.

Results and Discussion

Upper-Class Control and Manipulation in Ian McEwan's Atonement

In *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx frequently underscores the upper class's ambition to dominate society. Similarly, in *Atonement*, Ian McEwan portrays this pursuit of

control through the characters of Jack Tallis, Paul Marshall, and Briony Tallis, who each exemplify the upper class's attempts to assert influence over others.

Providing Scholarship and Accommodations

Ian McEwan demonstrates the upper class's influence over society by illustrating how they spread ideology, such as offering scholarships to selected individuals as a form of strategic investment. Capitalists, as Engels highlights in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, choose whom to support to secure future returns. In *Atonement*, Jack Tallis embodies this by supporting Robbie's education—providing books and uniforms when Robbie earns a grammar school scholarship (McEwan 79). This creates a dependency, with Jack exerting control over Robbie's opportunities. From a Marxist perspective, Jack's support reflects an imbalance of power, as he effectively controls Robbie's future, paralleling the capitalists' dominance over the means of production.

This manipulation cultivates a sense of gratitude and obligation within the lower class, which the upper class exploits to reinforce its dominance. The dynamic between Robbie and Jack reflects the broader power imbalance, where the upper class, controlling resources like education, dictates the life prospects of the lower class. Jack's calculated support, however, is met with skepticism by some of his peers. Paul Marshall, a businessman and associate of the Tallis family, questions Jack's choice to fund the education of someone from a lower social standing, highlighting class-based tensions even within the upper class.

“I knew some grammar school types at Oxford and some of them were damned clever. However, they could be resentful, which was a bit rich, I thought.” (McEwan 48-49)

Marshall questions Jack's choice to fund the education of someone from a lower class, implying that advanced education should remain a privilege for the elite. Talevski echoes this sentiment, noting that the lower class does not require the same educational opportunities as the upper class (Talevski 155). This perspective highlights the upper class's fear of social mobility enabled by education. Marshall's stance is shared by Emily, who views Jack's support of Robbie as potentially detrimental to her own children's future. Robbie's intellectual promise and ambition could ultimately surpass those of the Tallis children, making him a perceived challenge to their established social position.

“.... She had opposed Jack when he proposed paying for the boy's education. “Nothing good will come of it” (McEwan 135)

Robbie's ambition to rise above his social class poses a perceived threat to the Tallis children—Cecilia, Briony, and Leon. Emily regards Robbie as a barrier to their success, convinced that his advancement will disrupt the established social hierarchy. Her view mirrors the broader upper-class sentiment that the working class should remain subordinate to the ruling class. Meanwhile, Jack wields his influence to shape Robbie into a formidable pawn capable of challenging other members of the elite.

Exploiting Crisis and Personal Narrative

The upper class, as society's ruling force, pursues profit relentlessly, even in times of crisis. This is evident in Paul Marshall's ambition to grow his chocolate factory during wartime. Marshall embodies his business principles and motto, seizing every opportunity to expand his commercial reach, regardless of the surrounding turmoil.

“There’ll be one of these inside the kit bag of every soldier in the land. Standard issue.”
(McEwan 58)

In this scenario, Paul Marshall’s marketing strategy extends beyond children to encompass a far broader consumer base. By positioning chocolate as a staple in military supplies, his target market expands significantly. With the outbreak of World War II, when chocolate was classified as an essential item for soldiers, Marshall aims to dominate the market by eliminating competitors, striving for a monopoly.

“... how artfully Mr. Marshall had put everyone at ease. If he really were to supply the whole of the British Army with Amo bars he could become immensely rich.” (McEwan 136)

Even from Emily’s perspective as a fellow member of the upper class, Marshall’s plan to integrate his chocolate products into the military supply chain is a remarkable innovation, reflecting his aptitude for profit-making in any situation. By promoting chocolate as a means to boost mood and stamina, Marshall leverages its perceived benefits. Juanes, cited in Stubbe, notes that chocolate has historically served as an appetite suppressant, with compounds that stimulate the brain and reduce hunger (Dillinger 2065s). Recognizing the value of this effect on the battlefield, Marshall capitalizes on it by cultivating strong government connections, enabling him to distribute his products extensively and secure substantial profits.

Beyond Marshall, McEwan illustrates the upper class's skill in manipulating narratives for personal gain through Briony Tallis. After wrongly accusing Robbie of raping Lola, which devastates Robbie and Cecilia’s lives, Briony seeks atonement through her writing. However, her novel ultimately functions more as a vehicle for self-satisfaction and redemption than true amends. By chronicling her crime and its aftermath, Briony frames her actions as historical record, masking her pursuit of self-liberation and, potentially, profit under the guise of accountability.

“There was our crime—Lola’s, Marshall’s, mine—and from the second version onward, I set out to describe it. I’ve regarded it as my duty to disguise nothing—the names, the places, the exact circumstances—I put it all there as a matter of historical record.” (McEwan 325)

Despite Briony’s claim of honesty, her act of writing is deeply manipulative. By asserting her commitment to "disguise nothing," she crafts an image of herself as a transparent and trustworthy narrator, positioning herself as someone earnestly seeking redemption. This strategy not only enables her to control the narrative but also serves to restore her reputation in the public’s eyes. Briony’s manipulation mirrors the upper class’s tendency to reshape reality to suit their

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desires and absolve themselves of guilt. By constructing this alternate reality, Briony finds personal comfort and offers readers a gratifying conclusion. This "happy ending" becomes her means of rewriting her role from a life-destroyer to a redeemer, subtly shifting her own narrative.

By crafting a conclusion that meets readers' desire for closure, Briony secures the commercial success of her novel, gaining both financial stability and public praise. This strategy exemplifies how the upper class can manipulate narratives to uphold their status and shape public opinion. Briony's act of rewriting history reveals her ability to exert power through storytelling, underscoring the complex relationship between narrative control, societal power, and personal redemption.

Robbie's False Consciousness in Ian McEwan's Atonement

In *Atonement*, Ian McEwan presents Robbie Turner as a manifestation of false consciousness, a concept rooted in Marxist theory. Through Robbie's life, McEwan intricately explores this theme, focusing on Robbie's romantic involvement with Cecilia, his misunderstandings of class boundaries, and his educational ambitions, all of which reflect the struggles of a lower-class individual navigating a rigid social hierarchy.

Robbie's Romantic Relationship with Cecilia

In early 20th-century Britain, the upper class was typically reluctant to welcome outsiders into their social ranks. This exclusivity is particularly evident in the marriage practices of aristocratic women, who overwhelmingly chose partners from within their own class. Schutte (69) observes that both established and rising aristocratic families favored marrying their daughters to other noble families, thus preserving political influence and wealth across generations (Marcassa et al. 1).

Ian McEwan illustrates this social phenomenon in *Atonement* through the relationship between Robbie Turner and Cecilia Tallis. McEwan shows that, despite their love, a relationship between them is ultimately impossible, mirroring early 20th-century English societal norms. In 1930s Britain, society was conservative, especially regarding relationships that crossed class boundaries. As discussed in various studies, the upper class often chose to marry within their own ranks to maintain economic and social benefits. McEwan presents Cecilia as an upper-class character, while Robbie is part of the lower class, described as "Robbie Turner, only son of a humble cleaning lady and of no known father" (37). This portrayal highlights Robbie's lower social standing.

Despite these social disparities, McEwan portrays Robbie and Cecilia's relationship as less of a formal bond between noble and working-class individuals and more as a relaxed, intimate connection. He recalls Robbie's childhood adventures with Leon, where Cecilia, the younger sister, would "trustingly hold Robbie's hand," evoking a sense of wisdom and protectiveness in him (79). These shared childhood moments blur the rigid societal lines between them, creating an illusion of social mobility and mutual understanding. McEwan then illustrates the progression of Robbie's feelings for Cecilia in the following passages.

“She was like a sister, almost invisible. That long, narrow face, the small mouth... Now he saw it was a strange beauty—” (McEwan 72)

Robbie’s growing affection for Cecilia convinces him that a romantic relationship between them is attainable. Acting on these feelings, he takes steps to express his love for her. His belief that their shared childhood bond and mutual affection could overcome social divides reveals a delusion, rooted in his limited awareness of the strength of those class barriers. Growing up within the Tallis household, where he is treated nearly as part of the family, fosters a sense of familiarity and equality with Cecilia, further fueling his belief in the possibility of their union.

Yet, this perceived equality is misleading, concealing the social realities that ultimately shape their futures. Robbie’s affection for Cecilia is laced with false consciousness, blinding him to the fact that, despite their closeness, the era’s societal norms and rigid class distinctions will inevitably stand in their way.

McEwan emphasizes the tragedy of Robbie’s false consciousness by separating him and Cecilia through the outbreak of World War II, blatantly highlighting the vainness of his ambitions. Robbie’s belief that he could sustain a romantic relationship with Cecilia despite his lower-class status is brutally undermined by the harsh realities of societal divisions. McEwan’s narrative effectively criticizes the rigid British social structure, underscoring how cross-class romantic relationships are nearly impossible to sustain within its confines. It can be concluded that Robbie’s failure to recognize the vainness of his dreams, despite his personal connection with Cecilia, underscores the powerful influence of social structures on individual lives.

Robbie’s Misinterpretation of Class

Ian McEwan vividly illustrates false consciousness through Robbie’s naïve assumptions about his social position. As a lower-class individual immersed in the upper-class world of the Tallis family, Robbie begins to blur the distinctions between his status and that of the aristocracy. This misperception fuels his belief that he can navigate the upper-class world without consequence. Growing up in the Tallis household, Robbie unconsciously adopts the thoughts and behaviors of the elite. This is evident in the novel when, after accidentally breaking a vase—a trivial object to the Tallises—he bypasses a conventional apology and instead expresses his unfiltered sexual desire for Cecilia in a letter, revealing his misreading of class boundaries and norms.

In my dreams I kiss your cunt, your sweet wet cunt. In my thoughts I make love to you all day long.” There it was—ruined. The draft was ruined.” (McEwan 77)

Initially realizing his mistake, Robbie intends to discard the letter but inadvertently gives it to Briony to deliver to Cecilia. Driven by curiosity and innocence, Briony reads the letter and forms a negative view of Robbie. Rather than fully grasping the severity of his error, Robbie dismisses it as minor, assuming his actions will be overlooked—a privilege often associated with the upper class. McEwan delves into the consequences of Robbie’s misjudgment; Briony, already harboring a skewed perception of Robbie because of the letter, naively accuses him of raping her cousin Lola, based on her initial misgivings (McEwan 148). In a tragic twist, it is revealed at the novel’s end that Paul Marshall was the true perpetrator of the crime.

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Robbie's prolonged association with the Tallis family fosters the illusion that he can navigate their social sphere without recognizing the inherent class divisions. This misconception is abruptly dismantled when Briony reads the explicit letter. Despite Robbie's intentions, Briony reacts with shock and moral condemnation. His inability to grasp the seriousness of his mistake and his assumption that it could be easily overlooked reveal his lack of awareness regarding his true social standing. McEwan uses this scenario to critique the wider societal impacts of false consciousness, highlighting the consequences of blurred class awareness and misguided perceptions of social mobility.

Robbie's misinterpretation is reinforced by his educational journey, funded by the Tallis family. His Cambridge scholarship, meant to enhance his future, ironically intensifies his illusion of social mobility. This financial support fosters a misleading sense of equality, obscuring the fact that, despite his academic success, his social status remains fundamentally unchanged. The novel illustrates that, while education and personal connections may temporarily suggest class mobility, they ultimately fall short of breaking down the entrenched structural barriers that preserve the status quo.

Robbie's Unattainable Aspirations through Education

Robbie's pursuit of a degree at Cambridge, a prestigious institution largely reserved for the upper class, fills him with aspirations of upward mobility. He envisions a successful future, dreaming of the opportunities his medical degree from Cambridge might bring.

“He thought of himself in 1962, at fifty, when he would be old, but not quite old, knowing doctor he would be by then, with the secret stories, the tragedies and successes stacked behind him.” (McEwan 83)

The quotation reflects Robbie's transition from modest aspirations of being a landscape gardener to the more ambitious goal of becoming a doctor. This shift in ambition illustrates how the financial support he received instilled in him a belief that he could transcend his lower-class origins and achieve a higher social status. Robbie's acceptance of this scholarship and his subsequent dreams highlight another form of false consciousness. Believing that education can elevate his social status, Robbie embodies the hope that intellectual value alone can bridge the vast gap between social classes.

Robbie's pursuit of a medical degree at Cambridge symbolizes his desire to integrate into the upper class, yet this ambition exemplifies false consciousness. According to Eyerman, false consciousness arises when individuals from lower classes adopt ruling-class ideologies, mistakenly believing they can attain similar status and success (Bentley 24). Surrounded by upper-class peers at Cambridge, Robbie begins to view himself as their potential equal. His access to higher education creates a deceptive sense of social mobility, leading him to believe that adopting upper-class behaviors might secure him a place within their ranks. McEwan portrays Robbie as ensnared in this illusion, with the scholarship fueling his mistaken belief that academic achievement alone can facilitate true social advancement.

Robbie's funding is abruptly withdrawn following Briony's false accusation, underscoring the precariousness of his position and the vulnerability of his social advancement. This event

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illustrates that, despite personal effort and merit, class distinctions ultimately govern one's societal standing. Robbie's pursuit of higher education and a promising career reveals his entanglement in false consciousness; he adopts the aspirations of the upper class, aspiring to surpass them, yet remains unaware of the inherent limits imposed by his social status. In the novel, this phenomenon of false consciousness manifests as an adoption of the ruling class's worldview, often at the cost of one's true class identity and circumstances.

Conclusion

In *Atonement*, Ian McEwan depicts various strategies employed by the upper class to preserve their control over society, such as offering scholarships and accommodations that foster dependency, effectively establishing a future support network. Through Marshall's character, McEwan also illustrates how the upper class exploits the crisis of World War II, and through Briony, how they manipulate narratives for personal gain.

False consciousness, driven by the dynamics between the upper and lower classes, is central to the novel. McEwan portrays Robbie as someone entangled in this condition, with several aspects of his life reflecting his pursuit of social elevation. One aspect is Robbie's belief that a romantic relationship with Cecilia could elevate his status, despite the strict class conventions of British society that limit cross-class unions. His misconception about social class is also evident in his personal relationships within the Tallis family, which blur his awareness of his actual social standing. Additionally, Robbie's false consciousness manifests in his academic aspirations—he believes that a medical degree from Cambridge will help him transcend his class limitations. However, McEwan counters this belief by situating Robbie in situations that underscore the upper class's persistent influence over the lives of lower-class individuals. Robbie's ambition to adopt the upper class's ways, thinking it will allow him entry into their ranks, ultimately reveals the limitations imposed by class structures.

Originality Statement

The author declares that this article is their own work and to the best of their knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, or substantial proportions of material which have been accepted for publication in any other published materials, except where due acknowledgement is made in the article. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom the author has worked, is explicitly acknowledged in the article.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that this article was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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