

NARRATIVE AS MORAL ACT: GUILT, REPRESENTATION, AND INCOMPLETE ATONEMENT IN JOE WRIGHT'S ATONEMENT (2007)

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Abstract

Cinema functions as a significant cultural site for the negotiation of moral responsibility, yet the ethical dimensions of cinematic storytelling particularly how visual form actively constructs rather than merely illustrates moral meaning remain underexplored in existing scholarship on *Atonement* (2007). This study examines how *Atonement* (2007) represents writing as an ethical act through the character of Briony Tallis. The film explores the relationship between guilt, truth, and responsibility by showing how a single misunderstanding can create serious and lasting consequences. Using representation theory and narrative ethics, this study analyzes selected scenes, dialogue, and visual elements such as a framing, lighting, and character positioning. The analysis shows that Briony's writing serves two functions: it becomes a way to express guilt, but it also allows her to control and reshape the story. Although her writing reflects regret and moral awareness, it cannot fully repair the harm she has caused. Therefore, the film presents atonement as an incomplete process that cannot be fully achieved through storytelling alone.

Keywords: Atonement, Narrative Ethics, Guilt, Writing, Responsibility

INTRODUCTION

Film or movies are among the most influential forms of modern media in shaping audience perceptions of morality, truth, and human relationship. In contemporary cinema, narratives often explore complex ethical dilemmas, particularly those involving guilt, responsibility, and the consequences of personal actions. As Fortin-Tournès (2018) argues, narrative-driven works systematically examine how individual actions reverberate across both personal and social realities, positioning cinema as a significant site for the exploration of moral accountability. This ethical dimension is particularly pronounced in films that foreground storytelling itself as a moral act works in which the act of narrating becomes inseparable from questions of guilt, truth, and responsibility. Within this framework, the concept of narrative ethics, as theorized by Newton (1995), becomes indispensable: storytelling is not a neutral act but one that carries inherent moral implications, particularly with respect to how characters, events, and consequences are represented (Lee, 2022; Lothe, 2025; Saribaş, 2025; Kala & Devi, 2026).

Among such works, *Atonement* (2007), directed by Joe Wright and adapted from Ian McEwan's novel of the same title, stands as an especially compelling case for scholarly inquiry. The film follows Briony Tallis, a young writer whose false accusation against Robbie Turner sets in motion a chain of severe and irreversible consequences, the weight of which she spends a lifetime attempting to address through the act of writing. Crucially, the film does

not present writing as a straightforward path toward redemption. Instead, it exposes the profound ethical tensions that arise when narrative is deployed simultaneously as confession and as control raising the fundamental question of whether storytelling can ever constitute genuine atonement for real harm caused, or whether it functions merely as a form of narrative authority that reshapes rather than repairs the past.

Scholarly engagement with Atonement has been extensive, particularly with regard to its metafictional dimensions and its representation of guilt, narrative unreliability, and moral responsibility. Almaarroof & Khudhair (2024) note that both the novel and its cinematic adaptation deliberately expose the instability of truth by presenting events through subjective and partial interpretation, a narrative strategy that aligns with broader debates concerning the relationship between fact, fiction, and ethical accountability. Turki & Ashmawy (2024) further argue that Briony's narrative reflects ethical tension between imagination and moral responsibility through fiction raises ethical concerns about whether storytelling can function as genuine atonement. This issue reflects a broader debate about the power of narrative to both reveal and distort truth. This concern is reinforced by Warda & Karim (2024), who foreground the unreliability of Briony's narrative voice as evidence that fiction reconstructs events subjectively, functioning as interpretation rather than transparent representation of truth.

The concept of atonement in the film is thus presented not as an achieved resolution but as a complex and ultimately incomplete ethical process. Kondammal (2025) and Weston (2019) argue, the film's ending deliberately foregrounds the limitations of fiction, demonstrating that narrative cannot restore what has been irreversibly lost. Marsh (2018) similarly characterizes Briony's final narrative act as symbolic atonement rather than genuine ethical restitution, a distinction that resonates with broader cultural debates about whether artistic expression can meaningfully compensate for real-world harm. The imagined reunion of Robbie and Cecilia in Briony's novel, as Khan et al. (2022) and Gupta (2025) observe, offers emotional closure while conspicuously failing to address the irremediable reality of what occurred, illustrating a wider tendency in contemporary narrative to present moral resolution as incomplete and unresolved. Atonement is thus figured not as a completed act but as a continuous ethical struggle shaped by the interplay of memory, narrative, and responsibility.

In modern cinema, visual storytelling further enhances ethical complexity. Elements such as cinematography, framing, and narrative structure contribute to how stories are interpreted. As Pebyyani & Aminudin (2025) notes, film narratives use structure and perspective to present ethical dilemmas in ways that invite multiple interpretations. In *Atonement*, the use of fragmented storytelling and shifting viewpoints emphasizes the uncertainty of truth. This ambiguity becomes central to understanding the film's ethical message. The significance of *Atonement* lies in its portrayal of writing as both a creative and ethical act. Unlike traditional narratives that offer clear resolutions, this film presents storytelling as a process that cannot undo past harm. Briony's role as a writer highlights the tension between confession and control. Maziarczyk (2024) underscores this point, arguing that unreliable narration in cinematic contexts leads viewers to question the authenticity of what is presented.

In *Atonement*, the audience's alignment with Briony's limited and partial perspective renders her misinterpretations credible, implicating the viewer in the very epistemological instability the film diagnoses. Zhou (2024) further observes that the transition from McEwan's source text to Wright's cinematic adaptation introduces visual techniques that substantively reshape how ethical themes are conveyed, emphasizing emotional and affective storytelling in ways that reinforce rather than resolve the ambiguity surrounding Briony's narrative authority. Tollance (2018) situates this ambiguity within a broader framework, arguing that *Atonement* raises fundamental questions about the ethical limits of narrative authority itself questions that remain unresolved and that constitute the film's most enduring critical provocation.

Despite the richness of this scholarly conversation, a significant gap persists in the existing literature. The majority of studies on *Atonement* privilege literary and textual modes of analysis, focusing predominantly on McEwan's source novel or on thematic content abstracted from its specific cinematic realization. Comparatively few studies engage systematically with the visual and filmic dimensions of the work that is, with the ways in which cinematographic elements such as framing, lighting, spatial composition, and narrative structure function as representational codes that actively construct ethical meaning. This critical gap is particularly consequential given that the film's most significant divergence from its literary source lies precisely in its mobilization of visual storytelling as a medium for producing and sustaining ethical ambiguity. Most existing research thus leaves underexplored the question of how the film's formal and visual properties participate in rather than merely illustrate the moral arguments it advances.

The present study addresses this gap by integrating two complementary theoretical frameworks Stuart Hall's (1997) constructionist theory of representation, which posits that meaning is produced through cultural codes and systems of signification rather than inhering naturally in objects or events and Newton's (1995) narrative ethics, which holds that moral identity is expressed not only through explicit statement but through action, decision, and narrative construction (Arasta et al., 2025; Kala & Devi, 2026). Together, these frameworks enable a systematic, scene-level analysis of *Atonement* (2007) as a cinematic text in which visual framing, perspective, silence, and narrative structure function as signs that actively construct Briony's understanding of events and her subsequent attempt to reinterpret them through writing. Rather than treating visual elements as supplementary to narrative meaning, this study foregrounds them as primary sites of ethical signification, bringing a semiotic understanding of cultural meaning-making into sustained dialogue with an ethically oriented reading of narrative positioning a combination that constitutes the novelty of this study and that neither framework could achieve in isolation.

Building on this theoretical and methodological foundation, this study pursues two interrelated aims: (1) to examine how *Atonement* (2007) constructs writing as a form of ethical engagement through the specific resources of cinematic representation, analyzing how key scenes and formal techniques position Briony's storytelling not as transparent confession but as an exercise of narrative authority laden with moral consequence; and (2) to determine whether Briony's narrative act constitutes genuine atonement that meaningfully confronts the irreversibility of harm caused, or whether it operates primarily as a form of narrative control that forecloses rather than fulfills the ethical obligations it ostensibly undertakes. In doing so, this study contributes a distinctly film-studies perspective to a conversation thus far

dominated by literary criticism, and advances a deeper understanding of how cinema actively constructs rather than merely reflects ethical meaning through its formal properties, with broader implications for the engagement of film as a site of narrative and ethical inquiry in both scholarly and educational contexts.

METHOD

The data used in this study consists of selected scenes, visual sequences, and dialogue taken from the film *Atonement* (2007). The data includes visual elements such as camera angles, framing, lighting, character positioning, facial expression, and gestures, as well as verbal elements including dialogue and tone of speech. These elements function as primary data because they act as representational signs through which ethical meaning is constructed.

This study applies textual analysis, which aligns with the idea that meaning is produced through signs and codes embedded in filmic representations (Hall, 1997, p. 15-17). Ethical conflict and narrative responsibility are expressed through scenes, character behavior, and dialogue (Newton, 1995). The data collection process involves three main steps: repeated viewing, analysis of narrative structure, examine of character relationship, and visual patterns. Key scenes that reflect misinterpretation, guilt, and attempts at atonement are identified and documented with timestamps. Screenshots and scene descriptions are used to support visual analysis. The final step involves selecting scenes that significantly contribute to understanding how writing and storytelling construct ethical meaning in the film.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the findings of the scene-level analysis of *Atonement* (2007) organized in direct correspondence with the study's two research questions: (RQ1) how the film constructs writing as a form of ethical engagement through the specific resources of cinematic representation; and (RQ2) whether Briony's narrative act constitutes genuine atonement or operates primarily as a form of narrative control. Each finding is grounded in the constructionist theory of representation (Hall, 1997) and narrative ethics (Newton, 1995), and illustrated through close reading of selected scenes.



Figure 1. Scene of misinterpretation through restricted viewpoint in *Atonement* (2007, 00:11:00–00:20:00)

In this scene, Briony observes Cecilia and Robbie from a distance. The use of framing and restricted viewpoint acts as a representational sign that limits understanding (Hall, 1997). The long shot and spatial separation reduce visual clarity, positioning Briony within a limited epistemic frame. As a result, meaning is constructed through partial visibility rather than complete information, leading to misinterpretation. This reflects Hall's constructionist view that meaning is actively produced through representation, not passively received from reality. From an ethical perspective, this limitation shapes Briony's moral judgment. According to Newton (1995), narrative position influences ethical responsibility, meaning that her misunderstanding is not only a cognitive error but also an ethically significant misreading that initiates the central conflict of the film.



Figure 2. Briony's close reading of Robbie's letter as a representational act of narrative construction (*Atonement*, 2007, 00:27:00–00:31:00)

Briony reads Robbie's letter and interprets it as evidence of wrongdoing. Representation is created through selective reading and emotional reaction, where meaning is constructed through interpretation rather than fact (Hall, 1997). The close focus on the letter emphasizes how language itself becomes a representational medium that can be reinterpreted and distorted. This scene demonstrates that narrative construction begins even before formal storytelling occurs. Briony actively transforms the written text into a personal narrative shaped by her assumptions. Ethically, this aligns with Newton's (1995) view that interpretation carries responsibility, as her reading produces consequences that extend beyond the next itself.



Figure 3. Restricted visual framing in the library scene as a representational sign of distorted moral judgment (Atonement, 2007, 00:31:00–00:38:00)

The library scene presents intimacy between Cecilia and Robbie, but Briony perceives it as violence. Visual framing, perspective, and restricted access to context function as signs that distort meaning (Hall, 1997). The scene withholds crucial narrative information, reinforcing the idea that representation is inherently partial. This misinterpretation illustrates how narrative truth is shaped by perception rather than objective reality. From an ethical standpoint, Briony's judgment demonstrates Newton's (1995) argument that moral evaluation depends on narrative positioning. Her inability to fully interpret the situation leads to a misjudgment that carries serious consequences, reinforcing the ethical risks of limited perspective.



Figure 4. Briony's accusation as a performative narrative act with irreversible ethical consequences (Atonement, 2007, 00:43:51–00:49:25)

Briony's accusation demonstrates how narrative can produce real consequences. Dialogue and authority function as representational tools that construct truth within the social context (Hall, 1997). Her statement transforms subjective interpretation into socially accepted reality, showing how language operates as a powerful signifying system. This moment highlights the ethical dimension of storytelling, where narration is not neutral but performative. According to Newton (1995), narrative acts can assign roles of guilt and

innocence, making Briony's accusation an ethically consequential act that reshapes the lives of others.



Figure 5. Briony's unaccepted apology illustrating that acknowledgment alone is insufficient for genuine atonement (Atonement, 2007, 01:39:00–01:45:00)

Briony attempts to apologize to Cecilia and Robbie, but her effort is rejected. Silence and emotional distance function as representational signs of unresolved guilt (Hall, 1997). The absence of reconciliation emphasizes the limits of verbal expression in conveying ethical responsibility. From a narrative ethics perspective, this scene shows that acknowledgment alone is insufficient. Newton (1995) suggests that ethical responsibility requires more than confession it involves accountability that cannot always be fulfilled through language. This reinforces the idea that atonement cannot be easily achieved.



Figure 6. Older Briony's narrative confession admitting she altered the story's ending, exposing the intersection of truth and fictional control (Atonement, 2007, 01:52:40–01:53:30)

Older Briony reveals that she altered the ending of her story. Representation is constructed through confession, where truth and fiction intersect (Hall, 1997). The scene exposes how narrative can simultaneously reveal and manipulate reality. This moment reflects an ethical tension between honesty and control. While Briony admits her past wrongdoing,

she also reshapes the narrative outcome. According to Newton (1995), this dual function illustrates how storytelling can blur ethical boundaries, functioning as both an admission of guilt and a continuation of narrative authority.



Figure 7. The imagined reunion of Robbie and Cecilia at the seaside, representing symbolic closure that exists only within fiction rather than reality (*Atonement*, 2007, 01:53:30–end)

The final imagined reunion represents emotional closure rather than factual truth. Visual imagery and narrative structure function as representational signs that construct meaning through fiction (Hall, 1997). The idealized setting contrast with reality of loss, emphasizing the artificial nature of the ending. This scene demonstrates that storytelling can provide symbolic resolution but cannot alter reality. From an ethical perspective, it reinforces Newton's (1995) argument that narrative cannot fully repair moral damage. *Atonement* is therefore presented as incomplete, existing only within the realm of representation rather than lived experience.

Discussion

Guilt as Cinematic Construction: Representation, Framing, and Ethical Act

Addressing RQ1 about how *Atonement* (2007) constructs writing as a form of ethical engagement through cinematic representation, the findings collectively demonstrate that guilt in *Atonement* is not a static psychological condition but a dynamic representational construct, one that is sustained and deepened across the film's formal architecture rather than resolved by it. What emerges from the scene-level analysis is a pattern that neither Hall's (1997) nor Newton's (1995) framework, applied independently, could fully account for the representational codes through which guilt is inscribed, restricted framing, withheld context, performative language are structurally identical to those through which Briony later attempts to discharge it. Her writing does not escape the logic of misrepresentation; it reproduces it under the sign of confession. This convergence between the original act of narrative harm and the subsequent act of narrative repair constitutes the film's most ethically searching insight, and one that existing scholarship has addressed only partially. While Almaarof & Khudhair (2024) identify the film's systematic exposure of truth's instability, and Marsh (2018) argues that its formal strategies implicate the audience in analogous epistemological errors, neither account sufficiently addresses how these same strategies operate within Briony's authorial

practice itself, rendering her act of atonement structurally continuous with, rather than a departure from, the representational logic of her original offense.

This finding is reinforced by recent scholarship on cinematic representation and ethical meaning-making. Zhou (2024) demonstrates that the visual transition from McEwan's source text to Wright's cinematic adaptation introduces formal techniques that substantively reshape how ethical themes are conveyed, privileging affective and perspectival storytelling in ways that reinforce rather than resolve moral ambiguity. Maziarczyk (2024) similarly argues that unreliable narration in cinematic contexts functions through formally specific codes that lead viewers to question the authenticity of what is presented, an operation that, in *Atonement*, is inseparable from the construction of guilt itself. Lothe (2025) writing on narrative ethics in Holocaust film, further argues that the ethical weight of cinematic storytelling resides not in thematic content alone but in the formal positioning of the viewer relative to acts of harm and their representation, a framework that applies with particular precision to Wright's deployment of restricted viewpoint and selective framing as primary instruments of ethical signification. Taken together, these studies confirm that the representational logic of guilt in *Atonement* is not a by-product of its narrative but its central and most rigorously constructed argument.

Atonement as Performance: Narrative Control and Its Structural Limits

Turning to RQ2 whether Briony's narrative act constitutes genuine atonement or operates primarily as a form of narrative control the analysis reveals that atonement in the film is performed rather than achieved, and that the medium of its performance, narrative, is precisely the medium that forecloses its completion. The contrast between young and older Briony is not, as Warda & Karim (2024) suggest, simply a trajectory of developing moral awareness, it is a demonstration that reflexivity the capacity to recognize the partiality of one's own narrative does not in itself constitute ethical accountability. Briony can acknowledge that she has written fiction where truth was owed, but this acknowledgment, as the film's final sequence makes structurally explicit, is itself a narrative act performed within and through the same authorial authority that enabled the original harm. The imagined reunion is not a failure of moral imagination, it is the clearest possible articulation of moral imagination's limits. As Newton (1995) insists, ethical responsibility requires more than narrative acknowledgment it requires a reckoning with real consequences that cannot be absorbed into the formal closure of art. *Atonement* does not offer that reckoning. It offers instead a sustained, formally rigorous demonstration of why narrative cannot provide it, and in doing so makes a contribution to the ethics of storytelling that exceeds anything its individual scenes, read in isolation, could achieve. Overall, the film presents atonement as complex and unresolved. It is constructed through narrative practices and performed through emotional and creative expression, emphasizing that storytelling can reveal guilt but cannot fully repair it.

This argument is substantiated and extended by recent scholarship on narrative ethics and metafictional cinema. Turki & Ashmawy (2024) contend that Briony's storytelling enacts an ethical tension between imagination and moral responsibility that fiction cannot itself resolve, a position that the present analysis confirms at the level of formal structure rather than thematic content alone. Saribaş (2025) argues that metafictional strategies in narrative

film expose the constructed nature of storytelling by drawing attention to the gap between what fiction provides and what ethical accountability demands, precisely the gap that *Atonement's* closing confession renders explicit. Kondammal (2025) in his study of psychological trauma and post-war memory in McEwan's work, similarly argues that the film's ending foregrounds the impossibility of narrative restoration, demonstrating that the aesthetic resolution offered by Briony's novel cannot substitute for the real accountability it displaces. Furthermore, Kala and Devi (2026), examining narrative ethics in contemporary fiction, contend that genuine ethical responsibility requires a sustained commitment to accountability that extends beyond the act of storytelling itself a standard that Briony's narrative conspicuously fails to meet, not because of moral inadequacy but because of the structural limits of narrative as a mode of ethical reparation. Lee (2022), in his analysis of narrative ethics and cinematic testimony, reinforces this point by arguing that cinematic narratives carry an irreducible ethical surplus that cannot be contained within formal closure; what is represented always exceeds the capacity of the narrative to repair it. Together, these perspectives confirm the study's central finding that atonement in *Atonement* is not incomplete by accident but by structural necessity, and that this necessity constitutes the film's most enduring and ethically significant contribution.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study concludes that *Atonement* presents storytelling as a powerful but limited way to deal with guilt and responsibility. Briony's false accusation causes deep damage to the lives of Cecilia and Robbie, and her later writing becomes an attempt to face that mistake. However, her final confession and imagined ending do not change the reality of what happened. For this reason, her atonement remains symbolic rather than complete. The film shows that writing can express remorse and preserve memory, but it cannot fully undo the past. In the end, *Atonement* emphasizes that guilt is not easily resolved, and true responsibility requires more than words or fiction.

These findings contribute to broader scholarly understanding of narrative ethics in cinema, demonstrating that visual and filmic elements are themselves active sites through which ethical meaning is produced and sustained. Nevertheless, this study acknowledges that its analysis is confined to a single filmic text and does not engage comparatively with McEwan's source novel. Future research would therefore benefit from extending this framework comparatively across both textual and cinematic versions of *Atonement*, as well as to other morally reflexive film narratives. Practically, films such as *Atonement* hold significant pedagogical potential for cultivating critical awareness of narrative reliability and ethical responsibility within humanities and English literature education.

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