

UDC 008

DOI: 10.34670/AR.2022.84.32.029

The Narrative Effect of Unreliable Narration: Ian McEwan's “Atonement”

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Abstract

With a close relevance to rhetorical effects, «unreliable narration» is a vital narrative means employed by authors to construct different narrative branches or layers in the plot-based narrative progression. But because various forms of «unreliable narration» will create different rhetorical effects, the covert progression concealed by “unreliable narration” will convey contrastive or even opposite thematic significance, character images and aesthetic values in relation to the plot development, and thus complicate readers' responses in various ways. As a key concept of contemporary narrative theory, «unreliable narration» is considered as an indispensable element in the construction of James Phelan's postclassical rhetorical theory of narrative. This concept is seemingly simple but actually quite complex. It has given rise to a debate between the «rhetorical approach» and the «cognitive (constructive) approach» in Western world. The aim of this research is to obtain the narrative effect of «unreliable narration» from the rhetorical approach by analyzing Ian McEwan's novel «Atonement». Its scientific novelty relies on the exploration of the criterion of distance between narrator and audience based on two new concepts «estranging unreliability» and «bonding unreliability» coined by Phelan. The results showed that «unreliable narration» is a good rhetorical means to create vastly different narrative effect of «unreliable narration» on the authorial audience.

For citation

Xiangping Fan (2022) The Narrative Effect of Unreliable Narration: Ian McEwan's “Atonement”. *Kul'tura i tsivilizatsiya* [Culture and Civilization], 12 (5A), pp. 535-543. DOI: 10.34670/AR.2022.84.32.029

Keywords

Unreliable narration, estranging unreliability, bonding unreliability, narrative effect, literature.

Introduction

Relevance: With a close relevance to rhetorical effects, «unreliable narration» is a vital narrative means employed by authors to construct different narrative branches or layers in the plot-based narrative progression. But because various forms of «unreliable narration» will create different rhetorical effects, the covert progression concealed by «unreliable narration» will convey contrastive or even opposite thematic significance, character images and aesthetic values in relation to the plot development, and thus complicate readers' responses in various ways [Shen Dan, 2022, 1].

Research method: With the 2016 version of «Atonement» published by Vintage Books, London and the novel's Chinese translation version of 2011 translated by Guo Guoliang, published by Shanghai Translation Publishing House as the research materials, this paper employs textual analyses and theoretical deductions to demonstrate and investigate the two kinds of unreliability, and indicate that the formation of the implied author and its norms is both a result of the author encoding process and the reader decoding process.

Theoretical basis: Since 1961 when «unreliable narration» was first proposed by Wayne Booth in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, these narrative devices has experienced a process of continuous abundance, refinement and enrichment. Many narratologists and critics have conducted heated discussions on this topic and their results have frequently appeared in relevant research works. Among these famous scholars who devoted themselves to the study of narratology, James Phelan, as the leader of postclassical rhetorical narratology, has always attracted the attention of the academic circles for his narrative theory. He investigated the rhetorical view of reliable, unreliable, and deficient character narration in *Living to Tell about it* (2005) and elaborated the rheorical narration in his another book *Somebody Telling Somebody Else* (2017).

Objectives: In 2007, James Phelan put forward two subcategories of «unreliable narration»: «estranging unreliability» and «bonding unreliability» (James Phelan, 2007: 223). There are several objectives in the study: the first objective is to demonstrate specific manifestations of the two subcategories of unreliability in «Atonement», a novel written in 2001 by the famous British contemporary writer Ian McEwan who won Booker Prize, National Book Critics Circle Award and many other heavyweight international literary awards; the second objective is to analyze the rhetorical way how author construct the two subcategories of unreliability in one novel; the third one is to interpret such rhetorical effects of «unreliable narration» as character images and thematic significance, and to explore the readers' complicated responses and ethical judgements after double decoding.

Practical relevance: From the perspective of practical value is concerned, this research can significantly not only to account for «a fascinating and challenging set of rhetorical dynamics : the multiple relations among authors, character narrators, and audiences across fictional narratives, and the various effects these relations generate [Phelan, 2017, 89],» but always further increase the admiration for Ian McEwan's innovation, and for the narrative's thematic richness and ingenious characterization.

Results and Discussion

1. Unreliable Narration from the Perspective of Postclassical Rhetorical Narrative Theory

James Phelan inherits the mantle of the first and second generation of critics of the «New Aristotelian School», especially the second generation of the school's backbone, the ideological torch of his teacher and friend Wayne C. Booth, which substantially supplements and develops rhetorical narrative theory. Regarding the «unreliable narration», one of the important propositions, Booth

pioneered two categories of «unreliable narration»: unreliability at the level of fact and at the level of value judgment. Focusing on the interaction between the narrator and the implied author, Booth proposed: «When the narrator's words and deeds are consistent with the norms of the work (norms, i.e., the norms of the implied author), the narrator is reliable; otherwise, he is unreliable (Booth, 1961: 159)». The so-called «norms of the implied author» refer to the collection of textual ethics and values formed by the integration of events, characters, techniques, style and other elements in the work. Phelan develops these two categories into three ones which can be understood as the «unreliable narration» on the three communicative axes. Besides, he also proposes six subcategories of unreliable narration: the axis of facts and events (where we find misreporting or underreporting), the axis of understanding/perception (where we find misreading or misinterpreting / underreading or underinterpreting) and the axis of values (where we find misregarding or misevaluating / underregarding or underevaluating) [Phelan, 2007, 224]. Phelan's clear definition and distinction of these three axes has led to a more systematic and comprehensive discussion of unreliable narration by critics.

While many theorists and critics have focused on this aspect of unreliable narration, they have never been able to agree on the dynamics of unreliable narration. «We debate such things as whether unreliability is located in the reader, in the text, in the author, or in some interrelation among them; whether the concept of the implied author is more of a hindrance than a help in our understanding of unreliability; whether a naïve narrator's accurate but uncomprehending reports should be called unreliable narration, discordant narration, or something else [Cohn, Dorrit, 2000, 302].» To figure out deeper reasons, Phelan points out: «using one text to convey substantial gaps between a narrator's reports, interpretations, or evaluations, and those of the implied author is no mean feat [Phelan, 2007, 224].» This is all the more so because critics have not paid enough attention to the unreliability of the narratives of countless and diverse characters in narrative history. In response to this topic, from the perspective of descriptive poetics, Phelan introduces two concepts of «estranging unreliability» and «bonding unreliability». The «estranging unreliability» and «bonding unreliability» are based on the influence of the relationship between the narrator and the authorial audience. When there is a discrepancy between the narrator's reports, interpretations or evaluations and the inferences about these factors made by the authorial audience, it will cause the two participants to keep away from each other in the process of communication, that is, to distance themselves from each other, which is the «estranging unreliability». To put it another way, the authorial audience recognizes that adopting the narrator's perspective would mean moving far away from the implied author's, and in that sense, the adoption would be a net loss for the implied author-audience relationship [Phelan, 2007, 225]. In «bonding unreliability», the discrepancies between the narrator's reports, interpretations or evaluations and the authorial audience's inferences of these factors have the paradoxical results of reducing the interpretive, affective, or ethical distance between the narrator and the authorial audience. In other words, although the authorial audience recognizes the narrator's unreliability, that unreliability includes some communication that the implied author, and thus the authorial audience, endorses. As a result, a secret contractual relationship is formed among these three participants: the narrator, the implied author, and the authorial audience infinitely approach with each other, both emotionally and ethically.

Phelan points out that the six categories of unreliability he proposed (misreport/insufficient report; misinterpretation/insufficient interpretation; misjudgment/insufficient evaluation) are based on the analysis of the following two variables in communication among the implied author, the narrator, and the authorial audience: (a) the communicative axis along which the unreliability occurs, and (b) whether the particular communication indicates that the authorial audience needs to reject the narrator's

perspective or supplement it. And the distinction between «estranging unreliability» and «bonding unreliability», which is proposed from the perspective of emphasizing the narrative effect of unreliability, stems from the rhetorical effect of particular reliability. Since the basis for distinguishing the two categories of unreliability is different, «The distinction between estranging unreliability and bonding unreliability, therefore, spans the six categories listed above. To put it more simply, any of the six unreliable narration categories can be either estranging unreliability or bonding unreliability [Phelan, 2008, 295]».

2. «Estranging Unreliability» in “Atonement”

As the name suggests, «Atonement» focuses on the «sins» committed by the protagonist Briony Tallis and her efforts to atone for them. Ian McEwan, the implied author, sets the entire novel into four parts. The first three parts are the narrative subject of the novel, telling such a story: In 1935, thirteen-year-old Briony mistakenly believed that Robbie Turner, her older sister Cecilia's lover, was the one who raped her cousin. Robbie was arrested and jailed. Cecilia cut all ties with her family in order to defend her love with Robbie. Years later, Briony, who grew up, has realized the serious consequences of her reckless behavior: Although Robbie was released from prison early because of the outbreak of World War II and went to the front line, his reputation and future were totally ruined. Briony's older sister, Cecilia, had been reluctant to see any family members since she severed ties with them, leaving her family the psychological puzzle of kinship with a permanently missing piece. At the end of the third part of the novel, Briony directly faces her older sister and Robbie again. She deeply repented and asked for their forgiveness, promising to correct her testimony, draft a new statement, and clear Robbie's reputation. In the face of Briony's confession, the authorial audience seems to see faint hope and cannot help looking forward to a happy ending. But the fourth part, which only takes up the last 20 pages of the novel, brings readers none hope, but unexpected shock, regret, and endless thinking. The narrative process of the novel takes an unexpected turn under the deliberate planning of the implied author McEwan. The fourth part, titled "London, 1999", is a diary written by Briony on her 77th birthday, revealing that the first three parts of the novel are written by Briony to atone for her sins. In the novel, the author Briony gave herself the opportunity to repent in front of her older sister Cecilia and Robbie, so that Cecilia and Robbie could live happily ever after. But in the diary, Briony admitted that she had never seen her older sister and Robbie again, and announced that her older sister and Robbie had died in 1940 successively. It is only at this point that the authorial audience are aware of their being deceived. Briony is a novel character, a narrator, as well as a text author, and her narration is mixed with too much unreliability. During the process of reading, the authorial audience needs to re-identify the truth through the text and perform «double decoding»: the first is to interpret the narrator's words; the second is to infer what things really are or what constitutes a correct judgment separating from or beyond the narrator's words... The literary meaning, however, arises from the discrepancy between the reader's double decoding [Shen Dan, 2006, 134].

The implied author, McEwan, undoubtedly takes «unreliable narration» as an important narrative technique to promote the entire text narrative process when planning the narrative plot and designing the narrative perspective of the novel. The unreliable narration in «Atonement» is concentrated mainly by the implied author's deliberate separation of the narrator and characters. In planning the narration of the novel, McEwan puts Briony in three roles: novel character, narrator, and text author. With the triple identities, Briony freely transforms into different scenes in the novel, arbitrarily changing between different perspectives. In another word, Briony, with a mixture of truth and falsehood, uncompromisingly practices a fantastic writing experiment of the implied author McEwan that, by employing estranging unreliability and bonding unreliability, McEwan complexly codes Briony's

various types of narration so as to cause the communicative distance between the authorial audience and the narrator being close or far away sometimes. The relationship between the two participants goes from a distance from the beginning, to a secret compatibility later, and then to a complete alienation in the end. Undoubtedly, estranging unreliability dominates the novel. Even though the narrator Briony's interpretation in the third part of the novel is partly close to the author's normal paradigm and resonates partly in the heart of the authorial audience, some readers still end up building a line of defense against all of Briony's pleas without hesitation, determining that all of Briony's narrations are ultimately estranging unreliability.

In the first part of the novel, the text author Briony, in a third-person narration perspective, honestly states the unreliability of the novel character Briony running through the three communicative axes: insufficient report on the fact/event axis and misinterpretation on the understanding/perception axis are intricately intertwined, and the misjudgment and value evaluation on the final value/judgment axis are manifested in the form of inaccurate perception of events. From a narrative perspective, McEwan, the implied author, not only demonstrate the character's experience from a third-person discourse, but simultaneously enter the character's consciousness with the help of text author Briony's inner monologue. Switching freely between these two narrative perspectives, McEwan lays out such unreliable narrations before readers, one by one, as the insufficient report, misinterpretation and misjudgment made by Briony about her elder sister Cecilia and her lover Robbie, the maid's son. First, at the pool, «What was less comprehensible, however, was how Robbie imperiously raised his hand now, as though issuing a command which Cecilia dared not disobey. It was extraordinary that she was unable to resist him. At his insistence she was removing her clothes, and at such speed».

Thirteen-year-old Briony, not yet fully mature in mind, but with literary dreams, habitually uses her own thinking and perspective that is good at compiling fairy tales to report everything that happens in front of her. She interprets the unspoken and slightly embarrassing love dispute between her elder sister and Robbie as her sister being «humiliated in this way» by Robbie. Then comes the letter from Robbie to Cecilia. In the letter, Robbie bluntly expressed his affection for Cecilia: «In my dream, I kissed your cunt, your sweet wet cunt. In my thoughts, I make love to you all day long.» Accidentally, this love letter revealing Robbie's affection was handed over to Briony. According to 13-year-old Briony's ethical and moral standards, the person who can write such a statement is undoubtedly a villain who does nothing but bully women for fun, using the word «maniac» given by her cousin Lola to characterize it more accurately. Later, Briony witnessed a scene that further solidified her previous misjudgment of Robbie. In the library, Briony ran across Robbie and her elder sister Cecilia making out for the first time. Briony interpreted the intimacy between lovers as Robbie's assault on her older sister, arguing that it was her break-in that «interrupted an attack, a hand-to-hand fight (Ian McEwan 2001:133)». Insufficient reporting, misinterpretation and misjudgment of Robbie were piled on top of each other, layer upon layer, leading Briony to commit a «crime» that she will regret for the rest of her life. When the victim of rape, Briony's cousin Lola cried and said, «I'm sorry, I didn't, I'm sorry...», Briony «felt a flowering of tenderness of her cousin». She said «It was Robbie, wasn't it?». «I couldn't mistake him. I've known him all my life. I saw him». When Lola said «But I couldn't see. I couldn't say for sure». Briony confirmed «Well I can. And I will (Ian McEwan 2001:180)». So far, the authorial audience and Briony, the novel character, are completely opposed to each other, and their ethical interpretation and the definition of criteria of value can be described as tit-for-tat. And the reader's alienation from the character Briony is actually the alienation from the narrator Briony. In discussing the unreliability of the same storytelling, Phelan points out that «The assumed continuity between

character and narrator is not always guaranteed... The recognition of possible discrepancies between the functions of the character and the functions of the narrator can also yield such insights, that is, the reliability of the same story narrator can sometimes fluctuate greatly throughout the course of the narration, and these fluctuations depend on the variable distance between the narrative function and the character function (Shen Dan, 2005: 83)». Because the narrator and text author Briony narrates the facts correctly and reliably, the variable distance between Briony as the narrator, the text author and the novel character is zero, namely, in this part Briony's triple identities are completely overlapping. So far, in the process of communication, the relationship between the authorial audience and the narrator, Briony, the novel character, has been constantly escaping and alienating each other.

3. "Bonding" Unreliability and Its Subcategories in «Atonement»

Phelan breaks down the «bonding unreliability» into six subcategories: the narrator's communication literally unreliable but metaphorically reliable; playful comparison between implied author and narrator; naïve defamiliarization; sincere but misguided self-deprecation; partial progress toward the norm; bonding through optimistic comparison. In «Atonement», the implied author McEwan narrows the perceptual, ethical and emotional distance between the narrator Briony and the authorial audience mainly through the second and fifth subcategories of bonding unreliability. At the end of the third part of the novel, the grown-up Briony met her elder sister Cecilia and Robbie in a shabby flat in London in order to talk about «that terrible thing» she did. For «Atonement», Briony always adopted an evasive attitude, describing her mindset with Cecilia's sarcasm, «The unpleasure is over. The past is irreversible. Why bring it up again [McEwan, 2001, 176]?» To console herself, Briony gave a farfetched reason for her fault, «I'm growing up » She even hoped that Robbie had been killed in battle, because she dared not face the person whose life had been ruined by her again. But finally, she mustered up the courage and came to her older sister and Robbie, «waiting for her due disposal». She told them «I'm very, very sorry that I made you suffer [ibid., 180]». And she also promised to see a lawyer the next day in order to correct her testimony, draft a new statement, and tell their parents the truth next Sunday. All these narratives are implicitly in line with the implied author's point of view. In this novel, one of the positions of the implied author McEwan is that the selfish, dark side of human nature will always exist, and that what makes this cruel, indifferent and unfair world worthwhile is the persistent desire for goodness and fairness in people's hearts and the attempt to do something positive to fight against it. Briony's progress towards the author's statute, the normal statute, also shortens the distance between her and the author's readers, creating a secret pact between the three.

The so-called «gameplay comparison» in the second category of bonding unreliability refers to the implied author's use of unreliable narration to draw the reader's attention to the differences and similarities between the speaker as the narrator and the speaker as the author. It relies on the way in which the implied author constructs a special relationship between himself and the narrator, so that the gameplay comparison between them has both estranging and bonding effects. In the fourth part of «Atonement», the implied author McEwan suddenly reveals that the first three parts of the novel are actually a «novel of self-awareness and self-reflection natures» written by Briony, the main character in the novel. Briony is a novelist herself. Through her own pen, she knits together the fictitious narration, i.e., the unreliable narration, of her mistakes and her «Atonement», to form the first three parts of the novel «Atonement». In the fourth part of the novel, Briony justifies, judges, and critiques the unreliable narration of her fictional novel:

«When I die, when the Marshalls die, and when the novel is finally published, we're only going to exist as works... No one cares what things in the novel are false or which people have been

misrepresented [ibid., 425]». «In the past 59 years, a question has always been haunting me: How can a god-like female novelist with absolute power who can have anything she wants and tell the world what needs to be done obtain «Atonement»? ... Outside of her, nothing exists. In her imagination, she has drawn the boundaries and set the conditions. ...Hard work is everything [ibid., 426]».

From Briony's final confession just before she lost her memory due to illness, the authorial audience can make a rational judgment: As far as the confession itself is concerned, Briony's narration is solid, allowing the reader to finally learn the truth. However, at the same time, the reader also realizes the unreliability of Briony at this moment: For her own «Atonement», she fabricated the finally happy and endless love between her older sister Cecilia and Robbie. So, how should we view Briony, who has three identities in one, as reliable or unreliable? In fact, this interesting problem is not difficult to solve: both Briony's unreliable narration and her judgments and evaluations of her own behaviors stem from a game played by the implied author McEwan on the relationship between the fictional and imitative components of Briony as a character. To the authorial audience, Briony, like everything in «Atonement», is fictional. Therefore, Briony lies in the fictional novel and then defends and evaluates her own lies because the implied author McEwan authorizes her to do so. In other words, the gameplay comparison involves McEwan's use of meta-narratives, where McEwan puts himself and Briony in the same level of narration: The first three parts of «Atonement» are both fictional novel by Briony and by the implied author, McEwan, which also rely on the authorial audience' knowledge of the following two aspects: (1) It is an indisputable fact that McEwan has always been the creator of this narration, and (2) As the creator of the narration, McEwan has given Briony the power to judge and evaluate her own narration. By both permitting Briony to make fictional narration and allowing her to justify her own unreliability, a type of the authorial audience can clearly experience the ethical and emotional identity of the implied author McEwan with Briony. At the moment, however, there is also another type of readers, who should have stood closely with the implied author and the narrator, but because of their particular incline to the complex coding technique of estranging unreliability, easily draw such a conclusion once they find any form of unreliable narration: readers see through the narrator's tricks and will never be deceived by them, thereby giving this bonding unreliability an estranging effect.

Conclusion

As Ian McEwan has compiled a foggy and complex story by encoding deliberately two kinds of narrative unreliability in «Atonement», the unreliable narration emphasized by postclassical rhetorical narrative theory is a dynamic narrative process that encompasses cyclic interactions between the implicit author, the narrator, and the authorial audience. This research is a common critical practice to dig out the two kinds of unreliability in «Atonement» and demonstrate «estranging unreliability» and «bonding unreliability» in order to explain the dynamic narrative process of the novel and the concomitant readers' complicated reading correspondences.

By double decoding the way how the two kinds of unreliability are weaved, this research found that the unreliable narration not only relies on the implied author's plot design of unreliability, but also on the interpretation and ethical judgment of the reader, and the narrative effect is an indispensable key factor. In «Atonement», the implied author McEwan sets up numerous traps of interpretation and ethical judgment for readers through experiments on unreliable narration, completes the shaping of the character Briony in both true and false narrations, and arouses readers' thinking and inquiry about the truth of the narrations.

The vastly different interpretations and ethical judgments produced by different readers through the double decoding of unreliable narration can only further reaffirm the fact that the unreliable narration is an important narrative strategy, because it is in this so-called "specious" narration that the thematic meaning of the text is expanded and the aesthetic effect of reading is broadened. Narrative effect is usually connected with the study of narrative ethics. Therefore, we look forward to further research in other subcategories of unreliable narration as well as the narrative ethics.

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Повествовательный эффект приема ненадежного рассказчика: роман Иэна Макьюэна «Искупление»

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Аннотация

В качестве ключевого понятия современной теории повествования «ненадежное повествование» рассматривается как незаменимый элемент в построении постклассической риторической теории повествования Джеймса Фелана. Эта концепция кажется простой, но на самом деле она довольно сложная. Это породило дискуссию между «риторическим подходом» и «когнитивным (конструктивным) подходом» в западном мире. Цель данного исследования состоит в том, чтобы получить повествовательный эффект «ненадежного повествования» с помощью риторического подхода, проанализировав роман Иэна Макьюэна «Искупление». Его научная новизна основана на исследовании критерия дистанции между рассказчиком и аудиторией, который базируется на двух новых концепциях «отчуждающая ненадежность» и «связующая ненадежность», введенных Феланом. Результаты показали, что «ненадежное повествование» является хорошим риторическим инструментом для создания совершенно иного повествовательного эффекта «ненадежного повествования» на авторскую аудиторию.

Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

Xiangping Fan. The Narrative Effect of Unreliable Narration: Ian McEwan's "Atonement" // Культура и цивилизация. 2022. Том 12. № 5А. С. 535-543. DOI: 10.34670/AR.2022.84.32.029

Ключевые слова

Ненадежное повествование, отчуждающая ненадежность, связывающая ненадежность, нарративный эффект, литература.

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