

# Moral Stupidity in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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**Abstract**—This paper argues that the major catalyst behind Briony Tallis' rape accusation in *Atonement* is due to the ethical issue of moral stupidity. The paper examines why Briony Tallis, the protagonist of *Atonement*, accuses Robbie Hunter for the rape of her sixteen-year-old cousin, Lola. For much of the scholarship on *Atonement*, debates on the moral implications of Briony's accusation have dominated, but none of these studies have examined why Briony indicts Robbie for Lola's rape, destroying the lives of both Robbie and Cecelia. Therefore, this paper offers a nuanced explanation of Briony's allegation and actions afterwards. Consequently, Briony is consistently described as stupid both as a child and as an adult and the word 'stupid' is repeated fourteen times in the text, while 'stupidity,' repeated five times. Briony's behavior early in the text is represented as a serious ethical shortcoming that impedes her own moral compass which is also based on class prejudice, jealousy, and irresponsibility. McEwan embeds Briony's moral shortcoming in a general atmosphere within the novel of youthful foolishness and naiveté. Unfortunately, it is because of the lack of moral direction that the rape takes place and Briony, out of her blinded ego, indicts an innocent young man.

**Index Terms**—*Atonement*, McEwan, moral stupidity, foolishness, *Middlemarch*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The long-held assumption amongst scholars when it comes to *Atonement* is that McEwan's novel is in many ways an adaptation of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*<sup>1</sup>. The most telling piece of evidence that demonstrates how McEwan is echoing Austen is depicted in the opening epigraph of *Atonement* which is borrowed from Austen's novel, *Northanger Abbey*. Wells (2008) argues in her article "Shades of Austen in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*" of the various ways that *Atonement* echoes Austen and her novels. For instance, Wells (2008) argues that Briony's writing talents as a young child are reminiscent of Austen herself when she was writing plays at Steventon (p. 104). Wells (2008) also goes on to explain extensively the link between not only *Atonement* to Austen, but also of McEwan's personal interest in Austen and her oeuvre. This paper will use this *Atonement* /Austen correlation as a launching point to examine another nineteenth-century British novel which we argue also inspired and influenced a small niche in the narrative of McEwan's *Atonement*. This paper will argue that *Atonement* shares an important and nuanced connection to another nineteenth-century novel: George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. We argue that McEwan appropriates the nuanced motif of moral stupidity that is apparent in *Middlemarch*, yet obscured in *Atonement*. In the last paragraph of chapter twenty-one of *Middlemarch*, the narrator comments on the nature of self-centeredness and its moral dilemma: "We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves" (2000, p. 135). The narrator of *Middlemarch* explains that Dorothea has come to the realization of her own "moral stupidity", but Casaubon has yet to understand where he stands. Wright (1984) argues in "*Middlemarch* as a Religious Novel, Or Life Without God" that "moral stupidity" is the worst type of egoism:

Dorothea's intuitive awareness of Casaubon's actual self, with all its self-centredness, self-distrust and self-pity, helps her to escape the worst form of egoism which is "moral stupidity," of the sort displayed by Rosamond Vincy, who is the immediate target of the second passage at the beginning of Chapter 27. This contains the famous image of the pier-glass on which the haphazard scratches are made to appear concentrically arranged around the light of any candle brought to it. The significance of Rosamond's affection for mirrors in contrast with Dorothea's penchant for views through windows has often been observed. This imagery, which recurs throughout the novel, reinforces the notion that progress in perception is marked by decreasing self-centredness (1984, p. 642).

<sup>1</sup> Peter Mathews writes in his study "The Impression of a Deeper Darkness: Ian McEwan's *Atonement*" also suggests that *Atonement* echoes other canonical texts such as *Don Quixote*. He argues that "McEwan weaves a Quixote motif into the fabric of *Atonement*. Apart from Briony's apparent need to reshape her life according to the madness of literary form, for example, the name Arabella is probably borrowed from Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, or *The Adventures of Arabella* (1752)" (2006, p. 155).

This specific motif, we argue is also portrayed in *Atonement*, particularly in the way that Briony's own moral shortcomings cause her to accuse Robbie of rape and alter the lives of many of the other characters in the novel. As Eliot suggests in her famous quote from *Middlemarch*, a person grapples with the moral stupidity of one's self, and Briony too has to grapple with that vice as she grows up to discover what her fatal mistake is and comes to terms with the guilt of destroying an innocent man's life. It is throughout the novel that Briony and many of her actions are perceived as stupid and foolish, particularly by Cecelia and Robbie. In *Middlemarch*, Causabon's moral stupidity is founded on the fact that he cannot see beyond his own nose and is self-absorbed. This is in many ways represented in the child Briony, particularly in relation to the way she sees herself as a writer and artist. The world is Briony's oyster and throughout the first section of the novel, she continues to observe the events that take place around her through the eyes of a writer, speculating about the other characters of McEwan's novel and conjecturing about their motivations as though they are characters in a novel or play written by Briony herself. Briony's failure to see others as fully human is a failure of the self unable to acknowledge the presence of the other as O'Hara (2011) argues in his article "Briony's Being-For: Metafictional Narrative Ethics in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*":

The same uncertain relationship between selves and others lies at the heart of Ian McEwan's novel, *Atonement*. Over the course of McEwan's perspective-shifting narrative, we find characters, again and again, realizing that they are bounded by otherness, by other minds with their own plans, their own interiorities, their own ways of perceiving the world (2011, p. 75).

Consequently, Briony fails to see the 'otherness' of the other characters around her. This moral failure is also we argue a *stupid* one. Time and again, Briony as a child and as an adult is either referred to as stupid by others or by herself. And this failure of acknowledging those around her in many ways echoes Eliot's famous motif of moral stupidity in *Middlemarch*.

The significance of tracing Briony's moral shortcomings as youthful stupidity and of sheer foolishness answers one major question that remains unanswered within the scholarship on *Atonement*, which is why Briony accuses Robbie when she is uncertain that he is the rapist. Much of the scholarship on *Atonement* centers on Briony's "crime," and topics like forgiveness, guilt, and penitence become focal points in much of the scholarship on the novel. Thus, much of this research focuses on the many moral dimensions of the novel. For example, Kogan's (2014) article, "Some Reflections on Ian McEwan's *Atonement*: Enactment, Guilt, and Reparation" discusses the way that the concept of enactment in psychoanalysis is applicable to *Atonement* by examining the way that humans heal and forgive oneself from the crimes they commit against others. In this study, Kogan (2014) explains how "enactment may be used as a substitute-for-atonement mechanism" (p. 50). Moreover, Kogan (2014) investigates how Briony "is propelled into all sorts of enactments that stem from her inability to empathize with the suffering of her victim, which is central to atonement (p. 51). On that same note, Lippitt (2019) in his article "Self-Forgiveness and the Moral Perspective of Humility: Ian McEwan's *Atonement*" argues how *Atonement* shows a nuanced concept of self-forgiveness and humility. Lippitt (2019) claims that Briony practices self-forgiveness with a side of self-reproach and at the same time, she also practices an element of self-condemnation for the crime that she has committed against Robbie and Cecelia. Lippitt explains further that Briony allows readers to see how one can view themselves from the outside or as an 'other' allowing for something he calls "self-reconciliation" (p. 123). Ionescu (2017) examines the novel "as a critique of complex, linguistically centered forms of social interaction (including storytelling), advocating instead a reliance on (eg., embodied, affective, collaborative) forms of intersubjectivity where language does not play such a fundamental role" (p. 3). Mathews (2006) writes in "The Impression of a Deeper Darkness: Ian McEwan's *Atonement*" that the novel focuses on a deep dark secret at the heart of the narrative and this "obscured truth" lures in the reader "toward a moral judgement" (p. 148). Mathews (2006) also writes about a nuanced depiction of a secret in the novel and how the novel is embedded with various enigmas. One such example of the various secrets of the text is examining the real motivation behind Briony's accusation. He writes that "while the revelation of her secret accuses her, the mystery of her motivations simultaneously excuses her—yes, she committed a crime, but her youthful naivete meant that she acted without "full" knowledge. Like Oedipus, she is both guilty and innocent because of this asymmetry in the structure of knowledge" (2006, p. 150). Because much of the interest on *Atonement* centers on the moral questions of the narrative particularly the question of why Briony commits her "crime," this paper will attempt to fill in a significant gap within this debate. This paper will offer an examination of the moral dilemma that lies at the heart of *Atonement*.

## II. THE HISTORY OF STUPIDITY

The term stupidity is an adjective that the cultural vocabulary of our times uses to explain many of the deficiencies in our thoughts and behaviors. The term stupidity has been used frequently to describe major cultural events and figures in our contemporary age. For instance, in light of Covid-19, news agencies battling with misinformation circulating on the vaccine label those who refuse to take the jab foolish, misinformed, and, at times, stupid. So far there lacks a decisive theoretical framework on the concept of stupidity. *The Psychology of Stupidity* (2019), edited by Jean-Francois Marmion, is a collection of articles, essays, and interviews by psychiatrists, psychologists, and philosophers that examines the different ways of exploring stupidity in all of its dimensions. Engel (2019) in his chapter "From Stupidity to Hogwash" writes the following when defining stupidity, illustrating the difficulty one faces in trying to pinpoint the word and its demarcations:

But how can the word “stupidity” even be defined, given the blurriness of its categories and the fact that they so often can be reduced to mere insults? It’s hard to determine if all the different graduations represent actual, distinct qualities. Indeed, the vocabulary of stupidity is so ingrained in language and culture that it seems impossible to establish universal principles at all (p. 55).

Engel (2019) writes further that “[s]o great is the variety of forms of stupidity that, since antiquity, many of those who have taken in the task of attempting to define its essence have given up choosing instead to give illustrations of it” (p. 55).

Nevertheless, critics have not completely given up on trying to situate the term stupidity theoretically and critically. Avital Ronell’s 2002 watershed book *Stupidity* is a prominent study on the concept of stupidity in an array of disciplines from philosophy to literature. Ronell writes the following on stupidity in her introduction:

From Shiller’s exasperated concession that even the gods cannot combat stupidity, to Hannah Arendt’s frustrated effort, in a letter to Karl Jaspers, to determine the exact status and level of Adolf Eichmann’s Dummheit, to current psychoanalytical descriptions of the dumb interiors of the despotic mind (heir to the idiot-king of which Lacan has written), stupidity has evinced a mute resistance to political urgency, an instance of an unaccountable ethical hiatus. In fact, stupidity, purveyor of self-assured assertiveness, mutes just about everything that would seek to disturb its impervious hierarchies” (p. 3).

Ronell (2002) further explains that stupidity is “[n]either a pathology nor an index as such of moral default, stupidity is nonetheless linked to the most dangerous failures of human endeavor” (p. 3). Ronell traces the different kinds of stupidity that exist from Kant, to Musil; from Nietzsche to Gogol. Ronell demonstrates in her book that stupidity is irrepressible and borders on the peripheries of reason. Moreover, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) write in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that stupidity “is a scar. It can relate to one faculty among many or to them all, practical and mental. Every partial stupidity in a human being marks a spot where the awakening play of muscles has been inhibited instead of fostered” (p. 214). Likewise, Musil’s (1990) 1937 lecture titled “On Stupidity” examined closely the different forms of stupid thinking. Some of his most noteworthy observations discuss the way that stupidity and stupid behavior leads to wickedness and cruelty:

Stupidity usually arouses impatience, but in exceptional cases it also arouses cruelty; and the excesses of this pathological, aversion-instilling cruelty, which are ordinarily characterized as sadism, often enough show stupid people in the role of victim. This evidently comes about because they fall prey to cruel people more easily than others do, but it also seems to have some connection with an absence of resistance that is palpable in every direction, and that drives the imagination wild the way the smell of blood excites lust for the hunt: This entices the stupid person into a desert in which cruelty goes “too far” almost for the sole reason that it loses all sense of limits (1990, pp. 271-2).

Musil (1990) also goes on to explain another important dimension of stupidity:

To talk a lot about oneself for instance, is also a rudeness of egoists, of the restless, and even of a certain kind of melancholy person. This applies especially to young people, in whom it is one of the symptoms of the growing process to talk a lot about themselves to be vain, to lecture others, to have quite got their lives together; demonstrating, in a word, precisely the same deviations from astuteness and propriety, without on that account being stupid, or more stupid than is determined naturally by their—just not having become clever! (p. 274-5).

Musil (1990) writes here that stupidity can also be self-centeredness. Narcissistic behavior is stupid. Talking about oneself excessively is also considered stupid as well as improper and foolish. Musil offers a solution to the problem of stupidity, which he claims is “modesty” (p. 289).

Sacha Golob in his 2019 study, “A New Theory of Stupidity,” argues for a new philosophy on stupidity, claiming that stupidity is “a distinct form of cognitive failing” (562). He goes further on to specifically define stupid behavior:

An individual or group A is stupid with respect to goal G and concept C if (i) A’s use of C in pursuit of G is self-hampering & (ii) where the reason for the use of C is that A’s conceptual inventory either does not include a none-self-hampering concept capable of playing the same explanatory role of where such a concept is present in that inventory but A has only limited cognitive access to it (p. 568).

As a paradigm, Golob uses the fatal mistake that a British General, Douglas Haig committed in 1915 during World War I. Golob’s definition of stupidity and his example of General Haig demonstrates how stupid behavior is when one is unable to distinguish whether an action is, in fact, “self hampering” and one is also unable to think in a non-hampering manner to avoid jeopardizing one’s own self (p. 568). Golob (2019) argues that this is “a certain aetiology, an improvised or limited conceptual stock” (p. 568).

A significant aspect on the scholarship that examines human stupidity is that stupidity, foolishness, idiocy is a serious moral shortcoming. Moral failure is considered to be a lack in cognitive thinking, and thus stupidity leads to immoral and wicked behavior and irresponsibility. O’Hagan (2012) writes in his article “Self-Knowledge and Moral Stupidity” that “moral failure is both more banal and ubiquitous” (p. 291). He further goes on to comment that “[m]oral stupidity, our default setting, is kind of crude self-absorption that distorts our perceptions and hence is of paramount importance to right conduct; moral self-development, broadly speaking will be its cure” (2012, p. 292). O’Hagan (2012) argues that the way to grow out of this moral stupidity is to seek self-knowledge. Thus, self-knowledge is “a fallible awareness of

one's present mental states that is non-inferential and immediate and that includes a capacity to speak of these states with some authority" (p. 292). Self-knowledge is a condition in which one is fully aware of his or her state of mind as well as his or her emotions, feelings, thoughts and motives. O'Hagan (2012) goes on to develop his argument with the aid of Kant and Richard Moran in explaining how self-knowledge should lead into a path towards moral development by "a process of self-refinement and self-regulation" (p. 293).

### III. MORAL STUPIDITY IN *ATONEMENT*

In the final pages of *Atonement*, an elderly Briony is riding a taxi to a family gathering and on the way there Briony strikes up a conversation with the driver who happens to be a West Indian man:

Once it was established that I would not tolerate the thumping music at any volume from the speakers on the ledge behind my head, and he had recovered from a little sulkiness, we got along well and talked about families. He had never known his father, and his mother was a doctor at the Middlesex Hospital. He himself graduated in law from Leicester University, and now he was going to the LSE to write a doctoral thesis on law and poverty in the third world. As we headed out of London by the dismal Westway, he gave me his condensed version: no property law, therefore no capital, therefore no wealth. "There's a lawyer talking," I said. "Drumming up business for yourself".

He laughed politely, though, he must have thought me profoundly stupid. It is quite impossible these days to assume anything about people's educational level from the way they talk or dress or from their taste in music. Safest to treat everyone you meet as a distinguished intellectual" (2001, pp. 341-342).

In the quotation above, Briony assumes that the taxi driver might have thought of her as "profoundly stupid" for her comment on how he is trying to "drum[ming] up business" (p. 342). There are two interpretations for why Briony thinks that the taxi driver perceives her as stupid. The first assumption is that she herself does not understand the correlation between property law, capital, and wealth. The taxi driver's condensed explanation is not understood by the author. The second interpretation to her assumption as being stupid is the fact that her comment of "drumming up business" comes off as insensitive and discriminatory. The comment Briony makes suggests that she thinks he sees her an opportunity and is taking advantage of her. She goes on further to explain that subconsciously she looks at the taxi driver from a stereotypical viewpoint thinking that due to the fact that he is a West Indian man, who speaks with an accent and dresses differently, he could never be a PhD candidate, let alone a lawyer. The comment of him "drumming up business" also suggests that he might be an immoral lawyer or that he might be engaged in dishonest practices (p. 342). There are slight hints of racism in her comments above, but what is more important is that fact that she fears of being accused of sheer stupidity—particularly moral stupidity. Briony's frustration and fear is that the West Indian man might sense her moral stupidity and accuse her of moral insensitivity and political incorrectness. At the end of the quotation above, she thinks to herself that in the twentieth century it is almost impossible to tell what a person's educational level might be from the way they dress, talk or from the kind of music they might be interested in. She advises that it would be best to assume that every person one meets is a "distinguished intellectual." What is also significant about Briony's miscalculation and how much she emphasizes her guilt for making a comment that might have offended or upset the West Indian man is that it is a good example of Briony's self-consciousness and her attempt to take responsibility and moral consideration towards others.

This, of course, is not the first time Briony has misread or misjudged someone who does not have her British upper-middle class background. This particular scene, we argue, is reminiscent in many ways to the beginning of the novel when Briony claims that Robbie is the man who attacks Lola on that fateful night. The narrator suggests that the motivation behind this accusation might have stemmed from Briony's own jealousy of Cecelia and that she might have been infatuated with Robbie herself. But another more telling interpretation is that Briony has the very same moral failure that we see above. It is a moral failure of thoughtlessness for the feeling of others. It is a moral failure similar to the one that George Eliot writes of in *Middlemarch*, a failure that all young people unfortunately endure just as Dorothea, Causabon among others in *Middlemarch*. Briony's accusation of Robbie stems from her own moral limitations as a child failing to think rationally and logically, but also because of her biased upper middle-class upbringing. This brings us back to George Eliot's famous *Middlemarch* quote that states that we are "all born into this moral stupidity." This is Briony's shortcoming—being young and inexperienced about knowing herself and knowing others and failing to see that those around her are individuals with private lives and identities. This lack of awareness of herself and of others is represented in many scenes from the beginning of the text and is demonstrated in her attempt to see her own unique being and obsession to control everything around her. This character flaw of Briony's is explained early on in the text when the narrator details her domineering nature as a child. The narrator writes that Briony "was one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so" (2001, p. 4) and her bedroom "was a shrine to her controlling demon" (2001, p. 5). The narrator writes that in her bedroom stuff toys were "all facing one way—toward their owner" and "[h]er straight-backed dolls in their many-roomed mansion appeared to be under strict instructions not to touch the walls" (2001, p. 5). Her other toys are also arranged meticulously according to Briony's tastes. The text's narrator explains that there are two aspects to Briony's domineering nature: the first of which is her "taste for the miniature" and the second is her "passion for secrets" (2001, p. 5). And yet, we learn that Briony "had no secrets" (2001, p. 5). We learn further that Briony's desire for an ordered world around her also meant that as a child she was also

disciplined and well-behaved: “Her wish for a harmonious, organized world denied her the reckless possibilities of wrongdoing. Mayhem and destruction were too chaotic for her tastes, and she did not have it in her to be cruel. Her effective status as an only child, as well as the relative isolation of the Tallis house, kept her, at least during the long summer holidays, from girlish intrigues with friends” (2001, p. 5). The narrator emphasizes that Briony was not in any way a mischievous child and that she appears from the quotation above well-natured, polite, and certainly well-behaved. Moreover, Briony’s accusation of Robbie appears not to stem from any sort of wickedness, but rather from her moral failure to see others for who they are. This is an issue that Briony in fact thinks of early on in the text when she compares herself to Cecelia as well as to others:

Was everyone else really as alive as she was? For example, did her sister really matter to herself, was she as valuable to herself as Briony was? Was being Cecelia just as vivid an affair as Briony? Did her sister also have a real self concealed behind a breaking wave, and did she spend time thinking about it, with a finger held up to her face? Did everybody, including her father, Betty, Hardman? If the answer was yes, then the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated, with two billion voices, and everyone’s claim on life as intense, and everyone thinking they were unique, when no one was. One could drown in irrelevance. But if the answer was no, then Briony was surrounded by machines, intelligent and pleasant enough on the outside, but lacking the bright and private *inside* feeling she had. This was sinister and lonely, as well as unlikely. For, though it offended her sense of order, she knew it was overwhelmingly probable that everyone else had thoughts like hers. She knew this, but only in a rather arid way; she didn’t really feel it (p. 34).

Briony has spent a great amount of time sitting in her room pondering whether or not the people around her are as real or alive as she is. The fact that she is thinking of those around her and considering whether they may also be whole selves just as she is telling evidence that Briony is capable of thinking of the other. Thus, the quotation above indicates that Briony has the moral intelligence to ponder over the significance and interiority of others around her, but as a child she still has that immaturity incapable of truly understanding that people have personal identities and impenetrable private lives. Thus, Briony does think of others but is not able to convince herself that those people around her do have interiorities just as she does. Towards the end of her long meditation she thinks that people are unlike her and that she might be surrounded by “machines” who appear pleasant on the outside but are empty on the inside. Briony describes this as “sinister and lonely,” but also unlikely to be so. Thus, this long contemplation of people’s interiority and private lives represents Briony’s struggle of not only finding herself among the two billion people who exist in the world, but it also shows us the disappointment she might feel in realizing that she is not as unique as others around her, and this begins to “offend[ed] her sense of order” (p. 34).

Once Briony accuses Robbie of rape, she also takes charge of pursuing the conviction, making sure that she steps up to the expectations the adults have of her. The narrator explains that “Briony was there to help her at every stage. As far as she was concerned, everything fitted; the terrible present fulfilled the recent past. Events she herself witnessed foretold her cousin’s calamity. If only she, Briony, had been less innocent, less stupid” (2001, p. 158). Briony feels guilt for not being able to catch onto Robbie before he attacks Lola, believing that it is her fault since she knew “[h]e was a maniac after all” (2001, p. 58). However, Briony has her doubts and feels that she may not actually be able to go through with the accusation after all, but she believes that she must tell the “truth” as the quotation below suggests:

Her eyes confirmed the sum of all she knew and had recently experienced. The truth was in the symmetry, which was to say, it was founded in common sense. The truth instructed her eyes. So when she said, over and again, I saw him, she meant it, and was perfectly honest, as well as passionate. What she meant was rather more complex than what everyone else so eagerly understood, and her moments of unease when she felt that she could not express these nuances (2001, p. 159).

The narrator explains how Briony bases her accusation on common sense, explaining that Briony believes she has the good judgement to know what the “truth” really is. Later on the narrator comments on Briony’s sheer naiveté. Those around her depend on her testimony, but it is quite obvious from the narrator’s description that Briony’s indictment of Robbie is her own conviction:

She would never be able to console herself that she was pressured or bullied. She never was. She trapped herself, she marched into the labyrinth of her construction, and was too young, too awestruck, too keen to please, to insist on making her own way back. She was not endowed with, or old enough to possess, such independence of spirit. An imposing congregation had massed itself around her first certainties, and now it was waiting and she could not disappoint it at the altar. Her doubts could be neutralized only by plunging in deeper. By clinging tightly to what she believed she knew, narrowing her thoughts, reiterating her testimony, she was able to keep from mind the damage she only dimly sensed she was doing. When the matter was closed, when the sentence was passed and the congregation dispersed, a ruthless youthful forgetting, a willful erasing, protected her well into her teens (2001, p. 160).

The narrator explains that Briony is never coerced into a testimony. Instead, she willingly pursues the accusation and follows through with charade that takes place afterwards. What the narrator also points out is that Briony was young but also “awestruck” giving the reader the sense that she was captivated with the attention given to her. There is also the suggestion that Briony’s youth and desire to please would not allow her to go back on her initial accusation because she lacked the “independence of spirit” an adult might embody. Because of her failure to know herself, Briony fails to go

back on her testimony and tell the truth. This failure of speaking up comes from her lack of self as well as a serious failure in her moral judgement. Because of her lack of any good judgement, the narrator writes that she was “clinging tightly to what she believed” and “narrowing her thoughts” trying to focus on the original testimony (2001, p. 160). There is a slight sense that she could understand the kind of “damage” she was doing to Robbie among others but that is “dimly sensed” (p. 160). The use of the word “dimly” here suggests an image of Briony’s own lack of intelligence. It is a particularly interesting image suggesting the obscurity of Briony’s cognitive abilities.

Moreover, the interaction between Briony and the West Indian man is not the only scene in *Atonement* that represents how the novel is commenting on facets of moral stupidity and cognitive failure. There are also instances where certain situations, people, or actions are seen as stupid, foolish and idiotic. The first of these stupid/foolish moments is in chapter one of the novel where Briony is preparing for the cousins to perform in the play that she has written and her frustration begins to build up because of the lack of enthusiasm on part of the cousins: “Avoiding Lola’s gaze the whole while, she proceeded to outline the plot, even as its stupidity began to overwhelm her. She no longer had the heart to invent for her cousins the thrill of the first night” (2001, pp. 12-13). Once Briony loses faith in the play that she so meticulously wrote for the arrival of her brother, she begins to sense a moment of foolishness in the play and in its plot. The self-deprecating comments begin much in the same way that she does years afterwards when she rides in the cab with the West Indian driver. Thus, Briony’s interaction with the West Indian driver is not the first instance of how and why Briony considers herself stupid or is seen as stupid by others. Nor is it the first time that a situation, person, or action is perceived as stupid, foolish, or/and idiotic.

Yet, Briony is not the only one who struggles with the moral dilemma of stupidity, foolish and reckless behavior. *Atonement*’s opening chapters depict the Tallis children running around in a country house with barely any adult supervision. Thus, other than Briony and the three cousins who spend most of their time playing in the nursery, there are also Cecelia, Robbie, Leon, Paul Marshall, Robbie Turner, as well as Hardman who also lack any adult supervision. Emily Tallis is bed-ridden for most of the narrative and rarely intervenes in any of the action that takes place, while Jack Tallis is away at London preparing for the inevitable war. Thus, many of the events that take place at the Tallis home before the rape of Lola show readers the foolishness of the young characters who are also self-conscious about failing not appearing grown-up. For instance, in chapter two of the novel, Cecelia and Robbie are having a conversation about eighteenth-century novelists: Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson. Cecelia tells Robbie that she is not enjoying Richardson’s epistolary novel *Charissa* and would “rather read Fielding any day” (p. 24). She immediately regrets the remark: “She felt she had said something stupid. Robbie was looking away across the park and the cows toward the oak wood that lined the river valley, the wood she had run through that morning. He might be thinking she was talking to him in code, suggestively conveying her taste for the full-blooded and sensual” (2001, p. 24). Hence, as the quotation suggests above, Cecelia fears that Robbie might see her comment as too forward in her preference for Fielding over Richardson. The conversation between the two characters represents the inexperience and naivety of young adults discussing literature as though they were seasoned scholars<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, in chapter fifteen, the narrator refers to the stupidity of three states or situations: War, the prison system, and the British middle class. The narrator spends a good amount of time in chapter fifteen narrating the thoughts of Robbie. Robbie is thinking of the war and the moral implications of fighting in it:

Three and half years of nights like these, unable to sleep, thinking of another vanished boy, another vanished life that was once his own, and waiting for dawn and slop-out and another wasted day. He did not know how he survived the daily stupidity of it. The stupidity and claustrophobia. The hand squeezing on his throat. Being here, sheltering in a barn, with an army tout, where a child’s limb in a tree was something that ordinary men could ignore, where a whole country, a whole civilization was about to fall, was better than being there, on a narrow bed under a dim electric light, waiting for nothing (2001, p. 190).

Robbie’s last thought in the quotation above is a comparison that he makes between the state of war and prison. After four years in prison, Robbie is released on the condition that he enroll in the army to fight in the British forces during World War II. Both Briony and Cecelia are nurses working in war-time England. Robbie thinks about the moral implications of the war and compares how stupid the motive and behavior of soldiers can be while they fight a war that they do not understand. Robbie thinks of how the war has taken the lives of innocent young men, probably in the same way that Briony takes his. Robbie compares the stupidity of the war with that of life in prison in the quotation above, but he also refers to it another scene in the same chapter: “They charted the daily round too, in boring, loving detail. He described the prison routine in every aspect, but he never told her of its stupidity. That was plain enough” (2001, p. 192). And in the very same chapter, Cecelia writes a letter referring to the stupidity of the British middle class:

They turned on you, all of them, even my father. When they wrecked your life they wrecked mine. They chose to believe the evidence of a silly, hysterical little girl. In fact, they encouraged her by giving her no room to turn back. She was a young thirteen, I know, I never want to speak to her again. As for the rest of them, I can never forgive what they did. Now that I’ve broken way, I’ve beginning to understand the snobbery that lay behind their stupidity (p. 196).

<sup>2</sup> Later in the same scene, Robbie states that Fielding is psychologically crude to Richardson. It appears that he fails to understand that Fielding was known for his humor and satire. This only goes to show that both characters fail to understand the differences between Richardson and Fielding, or they might not have read either novelist.

## IV. CONCLUSION

At the heart of *Atonement*, there lies an important thematic concern centered on sin, contrition, and moral failure. McEwan's focus of the novel is to represent to readers how Briony's misjudgment which is rooted in self-indulgence causes a train of damage and destruction for other major characters in the novel. This misstep on Briony's part requires a lifetime of reparation. At the core of her mistake is why she is unable to do the right thing when it is required of her. The above discussion offers a nuanced examination of Briony's motivations behind her accusation, examining closely her moral shortcomings as a matter of moral foolishness, imprudence and weakmindedness. Returning once again to O'Hagan when he writes that "moral stupidity" is one's "default setting" and is described as "a crude self-absorption that distorts our perception" is portrayed in Briony's inability to think and behave reasonably (2012, p. 292). It is only after her self-centeredness vanishes as she grows up to become a young adult does her discernment change as well.

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