# Ethical Ways of World-making: Re-reading Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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**Abstract:** As a rejoinder to Roman Ingarden's phenomenological ways of worldmaking, Nelson Goodman's constructive ways of worldmaking, Roger C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson's cognitive psychological ways of worldmaking, Birgit Neumann and Martin Zierold's media ways of worldmaking, and Ansgar Nünning and David Herman's narrative ways of world-making, this article, inspired by Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literary criticism, proposes ethical ways of world-making. It argues that ethics is not only a way of understanding the world but also a means of building up the world. In a storyworld created by narrative fictions, characters are endowed with certain ethical identities and ethical consciousness. To maintain the stability of the world, all characters need to abide by certain ethical orders, and placed within a particular ethical environment, characters make ethical choices proper accordingly. The paper attempts to draw on Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* to illuminate this argument. In *Atonement*, Briony, for the sake of getting things ethically appropriate, takes her responsibility of writing, rewriting and disrupting the world, while readers recreate and delve into the world of ethical conflicts, in the process of which they come to terms with Briony both as the author of her novel *Atonement* and as the character in McEwan's *Atonement*. The work goes beyond the boundary of modernism and postmodernism by penetrating into the deep moral concerns of literature. It is at the point of ethics that both the author and readers come together in making and remaking the worlds. If we examine the ways of worldmaking of McEwan by wearing ethical lenses, we can fruitfully reveal and unpack the ethical elements of his work, and thus reap much ethical knowledge, which is perhaps one of the reasons why we shall resettle him from "Ian Macabre" to "Ethical McEwan".
**Key words:** ethical literary criticism; worldmaking; Ian McEwan; *Atonement*
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**标题：**世界建构的伦理方式：重读伊恩·麦克尤恩的小说《赎罪》

**内容摘要：**作为对罗曼·英加登世界建构的现象学方式、纳尔逊·古德曼世界建构的建构主义方式、罗杰 C. 尚克与罗伯特 P. 艾贝尔森世界建构的认知心理方式、比尔伊特·纽曼和马丁·齐罗尔德世界建构的媒介方式、以及安斯加尔·纽宁和戴维·赫尔曼世界建构的叙事方式的回应，本文以聂珍钊的文学伦理学批评为基础，尝试探讨世界建构的伦理方式。文章认为，伦理不仅是理解世界的方式，同时也是建构世界的方式。在叙事虚构作品所编制的故事世界中，人物具有特定的伦理身份和伦理意识。为了维护故事世界的稳定性，人物必须遵守特定的伦理秩序。在特定的伦理环境中，人物也会做出相应的伦理选择。本文以伊恩·麦克尤恩的小说《赎罪》为例，具体展示世界建构的伦理方式及其批评运作。为了确立伦理秩序，布莱奥尼先后建构、重构和颠覆了故事世界。读者在重构和解读包含伦理冲突的故事世界的过程中，与虚构世界中《赎罪》的作者布莱奥尼和现实世界中《赎罪》的作者麦克尤恩笔下的人物布莱奥尼达成伦理共识。小说由此跨越了所谓的现代主义和后现代主义的界限，触及深邃的道德话题，而作者和读者也在伦理轴线上共同建构或重建故事世界。通过借助伦理视角来考察麦克尤恩的世界建构方式，我们可以富有成效地揭示其作品的伦理因素，获取丰厚的伦理教益。在这种意义上，我们不妨把麦克尤恩从"恐怖伊恩"正名为"伦理伊恩"。

**关键词：**文学伦理学批评；世界建构；伊恩·麦克尤恩；《赎罪》

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## Revisiting Models of Ways of Worldmaking: Phenomenological, Constructive, Cognitive Psychological, Media, and Narratological

Reading literature is also an experience of delving into the storyworld created by literature. Narratologists, as we know, examine narrative from two-fold dimensions: story and discourse, or story and storytelling. To go a step further, I would like to phrase it as world and worldmaking. At issue are the mechanisms and consequences of worldmaking. According to Ansgar Nünnning and Vera Nünnning, "the question of ways of worldmaking is of great importance not only in philosophy, but also in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and in society at large" (A. Nünnning and V. Nünnning 1). The past several decades witnessed an explosive interest in exploring ways of worldmaking, which partly accounts for why "literary worldmaking has

become a current term in recent times" (Grabes 47).

Herbert Grabes observes that there are currently three major theories of literary worldmaking: phenomenological (Roman Ingarden), constructive (Nelson Goodman), and cognitive psychological (Roger C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson). (Grabes 47-59) In his work *The Literary Work of Art* (1931), Roman Ingarden illuminates the interaction between two preconditional domains of literary worldmaking: the domains of the text, and the domains of the reader. The former is mainly a literary account of the special features, impact or function of the text, while the latter is mainly about the reader's knowledge of "what a world consists of, what its elements are like, how they are assembled into larger wholes, and what kind of relations between them we can expect" (Grabes 47). Working with such notions as "spots of indeterminacy" and "units of meaning", Ingarden attempts to shed light on how "structure of the sequence of parts in a work" and "temporal perspective in the concretization of the literary work of art" can help the reader to fill in the gaps and to build up a literary world.

In his *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), Nelson Goodman raises a number of questions concerning world and world-making, "In what sense are there many worlds? What distinguishes genuine from spurious worlds? What are worlds made of? How are they made? What role do symbols play in the making? And how worldmaking is related to knowing?" (Goodman 1) In Goodman's view, the basic process of making/remaking world is completed through the following steps: a) composition and decomposition, b) weighing, c) ordering, d) deletion and supplementation, e) deformation. The weakness of Goodman's model, according to Herbert Grabes, is that he fails to notice "the overall fictional status, the reduced ontological or epistemological claim to validity of what is presented in literature" (Grabes 53). Influential as it is, Goodman's model of ways of worldmaking does not pay sufficient attention to the literariness of literary works, as well as the historical, contextual, cultural and ethical values created by literature.

In *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding: An Inquiry into Human Knowledge Structures* (1977), Roger C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson resort to Conceptual Dependence Theory (CDT). Schank and Abelson's work on human understanding and memory organization is best exemplified by the concept *script*, which is defined as "a structure that describes appropriate sequence of events in a particular context. A script is made of slots and requirements about what can fill those slots" (Schank and Abelson 41). The most frequently cited example is the restaurant script. That is, we all know the process of having meals in restaurants. Namely, going into a restaurant, arriving of a waiter, ordering the menu, serving

meals, finishing meals, paying the bill.

What Grabes misses in his observation are the two other models of ways of worldmaking: media (Birgit Neumann and Martin Zierold), and narratology (Ansgar Nnning, David Herman). According to Birgit Neumann and Martin Zierold, "the production and circulation of cultural as well as individual knowledge, i.e. the making of worlds in the broadest sense, is to a large extent dependent on media use and medial externalisation…Worldmaking cannot do without media that represent or embody cultural knowledge and are capable of circulating in a social group" (Neumann and Zierold 103). In their article "Media as Ways of Worldmaking: Media-specific Structures and Intermedial Dynamics" (2010), Neumann and Zierold focus on the intermedial dynamics of processes of worldmaking with regards to specific cultural knowledge and evaluation, which is involved with such processes as adaptation, translation, reception, appropriation, and remediation.

In "Making Events — Making Stories — Making Worlds: Ways of Worldmaking from a Narratological Point of View" (2010), Ansgar Nünning considers narrative as "one of the most powerful ways of worldmaking" (Nünning, A. 191). Focusing on the building-blocks of narrative worldmaking (event, emplotment, and point of view), Nünning lists five acts of narrative worldmaking, namely: events as the result of selection, abstraction and prioritization; transforming happenings into events, stories and textual representations of narratives; configuration, emplotment and the "ideology of form" as modes of organization and construction of meaning; events, stories, and narrated worlds as perspective-dependent attributions of meaning and significance; events, stories, and storyworlds as discursively created, medially represented, culturally specific and historically mutable constructs.

In a similar vein, David Herman argues that "worldmaking is in fact the hallmark of narrative experiences, the root function of stories and storytelling that should therefore constitute the starting-point for narrative inquiry and the analytic tools developed in its service" (Herman 14). Placing much emphasis on worldmaking as a framework for exploring the mind-narrative nexus, Herman considers time, space, and character as key parameters for narrative worldbuilding. He suggests that "engaging with stories entails mapping discourse cues onto when, what, where, who, how, and why dimensions of mentally configured worlds; the interplay among these dimensions accounts for the structure as well as the representational functions and overall impact of the worlds in question" (Herman 17).

Regrettably, current models of ways of worldmaking, including phenomenological, constructive, cognitive psychological, media, and narratological

ones, are largely concerned with the form of the text, and fail to take into consideration the content, especially the moral content of the text. In Terry Eagleton's opinion, almost all philosophers of literature fail to notice that "a work's moral outlook, if it has anything so cohesive, may be secreted as much in its form as its content — that the language and structure of a literary text may be the bearers and progenitors of so-called moral content"(Eagleton 46). Eagleton elaborates this point by commenting on the form of neoclassical poem, naturalistic drama, and novel. He argues that

> A neoclassical poem which exploits the order, symmetry and equipoise of the heroic couplet; a naturalistic drama which is forced to gesture off-stage to realities it cannot credibly bring into view; a novel which garbles its time sequence or shifts dizzyingly from one character's viewpoint to another: all these are instances of artistic form as itself the bearer of moral or ideological meaning. Even a piece of poetic nonsense, a snatch of wordplay or non-cognitive verbal *jeu*, can have an implicit moral point, delighting in a bout of creative energy for its own sake, refreshing our perception of the world, releasing unconscious associations and the like. It is remarkable how often the philosophy of literature ignores the morality of form in its high-minded pursuit of ethical content. (Eagleton 46)

Eagleton is an astute commentator, and he is precisely correct in pointing out that artistic form serves as "the bearer of moral or ideological meaning," and almost all forms and genres of literature contain "an implicit moral point" which helps us to refresh "our perception of the world." To better connect Eagleton's argument with ways of worldmaking, we need to bring in ethical dimension and add ethics to the existing list of current models.

### Towards a New Model: Ethics as Ways of Worldmaking

The basic underpinning of my paper is that ways of worldmaking can be seen as "a model for studying culture" (Nnning, A. and Nünning V. 1-25), which is closely related to "ethics." Herbert Grabes considers "literary worldmaking as a domain of concrete representations of human agency" (Grabes 1), and literature, especially literary narrative as "a field of demonstration and testing ground for responsible and rewarding human behavior that was even superior to the abstract argumentation of the ethical discourse of philosophy" (Grabes 1). Given that, a number of literary critics such as Wayne C. Booth (in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*),

Frank Palmer (in *Literary and Moral Understanding*), David Parker (in *Ethics, Theory and the Novel*), Adam Zachary Newton (in *Narrative Ethics*) and Colin McGinn (in *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*), move towards "displaying the value of literature as a means of moral guidance" (Grabes 2).

Birgit Neumann and Martin Zierold claim that "If worlds are intrinsically social, then the formation of a world does rely, fundamentally, on means of sharing and exchanging knowledge. Worldmaking cannot do without symbols that represent or embody knowledge of the past, present, and future and have the capacity to circulate in social groups" (Neumann and Zierold 103). At issue is what kind of knowledge worldmaking is exchanged and shared? In my view, the knowledge that Neumann and Zierold claim can be best interpreted as ethical knowledge.

Inspired by James Phelan's narrative ethics (*Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*, *Somebody Telling Somebody Else: A Rhetorical Poetics of Narrative*) and Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literary criticism (*An Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism"), I argue that ethics is not only what we know about the world but also a way of organizing/knowing the world. To put it bluntly, ethics is both the object and means of understanding and exploring literature. In a storyworld built up by authors and later re-created by readers, characters are situated in a culturally and historically specific ethical environment. Against that particular ethical environment, characters take on certain ethical identities which are determined/affected by their social, cultural, work and family relations. To maintain the stability of the world, all characters need to abide by certain ethical orders, which are typically exemplified by taboos. If these are the "when", "where" and "who" dimensions of worldmaking from the perspective of ethics, what remains to consider are the "what," "how," and "why" dimensions. Situated within a particular ethical environment, characters usually take relevant actions, which are the central components of ethical events, what readers need to do is make ethical evaluations of the events and characters' actions in accordance with the ethics of the time (or place) when (or where) the work is written or the events take place. Furthermore, taking affordance from narrative work, readers are suggested to consider what ethical choices characters make, how their ethical consciousness helps or fails to help them to make such choices? The larger issues for readers to tackle will be why reading literature matters and what benefits readers will reap from it?

**Ethical Ways of Worldmaking in Ian McEwan's *Atonement***

With reference to Daisy Perowne's reading of Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover*

*Beach* in *Saturday*, Emily Holman claims that "McEwan is posing a vital question: What good are the arts," which is also "the enquiry animating *Atonement*, and a crucial theme in McEwan's work" (Holman 316). At issue is how to account for readers' affections for reading McEwan? In *Actual Minds, Possible World* (1986), Jerome Bruner asks one of the most basic but most important questions concerning readers' affection for literature:

> [W]e wish to discover how and in what ways the text affects the reader and, indeed, what produces such effects on the reader as do occur. What makes great stories reverberate with such liveliness on our ordinarily mundane minds? What gives great fiction its power: what in the text and what in the reader? (Bruner 4)

Bruner tries to answer the question from cognitive psychology and examine the mental mechanism of the reader. I agree with Wolfgang Hallet, who argues that the answer to these questions "lies in the power that literary figures obviously exert on readers in attracting their interest, personal involvement and sympathy, and that their actions as much as the values on which these actions rest indicate a close ethical relation between the fictional text and the reader" (Hallet 195). To illuminate ethical ways of worldmaking in McEwan's works, I will, in the rest of the paper, analyze the ethical environment, ethical identity, and ethical choices in McEwan's best-known novel *Atonement*. In doing so, I attempt to reveal the ethical dimensions of "when," "where," "who," "what," "how," and "why" of McEwan's worldmaking, while the larger purpose is to continue and consolidate my work on reading McEwan across ethical literary criticism (Shang, "The Unbearable Lightness of Growth"; "Ethical Dilemma and Ethical Epiphany in McEwan's *The Children Act*"; "Ethical Literary Criticism and Ian McEwan's *Nutshell*").

I agree with Peter Matthews, who observes that in *Atonement*, "Each new chapter forces the reader to revise his or her understanding of what was revealed earlier, sowing seeds of doubt that make the text blossom into a set of irreconcilable uncertainties" (Matthews 147). The uncertainties, to a large degree, refer to the constant making and re-making of the worlds. In the first chapter of the work, the reader is informed that Briony is fascinated with storytelling, which is rooted in her "passion for secrets" (McEwan 5). In Peter Matthews's view, "All of Briony's passions — her storytelling, her love of secrets, her penchant for miniaturization — stem from an obsession with order, in both a moral and a physical sense" (Matthew 148). As a matter of fact, *Atonement* is mainly about Briony's secrets

and her sharing of those secrets, which are closely connected with her making and re-making of the worlds. In the beginning part of the novel, Briony dreams of becoming a writer and secretly finishes her play *The Trials of Arabella*, which is intended to be played upon the arrival of her cousin Leon. However, her plan and even her life, to a large extent, are interrupted by an unhappy event in her family. She makes an erroneous accusation of Robbie Turner, her sister Cecilia's boyfriend, for molesting their cousin Lola. She fictionalizes Robbie as a criminal by resorting to her imaginative power as a writer, assuming that he is a sex manic and he commits this crime, which leads to Robbie's imprisonment. If wearing ethical lenses and looking at this matter by considering Briony's identity as a girl in her teens, who is just developing her ethical consciousness, we can claim that she is right in making a choice of identifying Robbie according to her secret sense of judgment instead of covering Robbie and letting her secret sense of judgment go.

As a teenage writer, Briony holds her ideals highly and romanticizes her stories. All of a sudden, she encounters such a harsh reality of having her cousin Lola sexually attacked, which forces her to realize that the world in which she lives is not as beautiful as she expects. Thus, she feels ethically responsible for correcting all the wrongs to resume the ethical order of the world. Regrettably, she blurs the line between the fictional world she imagines and the real world in which she lives. When called upon by the police, Briony makes her accusation not in accordance with the fact or what she has really witnessed but what she has imagined and fictionalized. That said, Briony fictionalizes what she fails to witness, and thus leads to her tragedy of committing the error. Paradoxically, Briony feels that she has done the right thing of identifying the criminal by making use of her power of imagination, while in reality she has committed an error of misusing her imagination.

For the purpose of atonement, Briony resorts to her advantageous position of a writer. If she did not use her position of a writer right in the beginning of her career, she might succeed in using it right in the later stage of her career. In *Atonement*, she manages to find and meet Robbie and Cecilia, from whom she asks for forgiveness. There are such lines about Briony's apology in the novel: "She spoke slowly. I'm very very sorry. I've caused you such terrible distress.' They continued to stare at her, and she repeated herself. 'I'm very sorry' (McEwan 348). Compared with her sense of relief, what makes her soothed is the strong love between Robbie and Cecilia. As Briony puts it, "It was her sister she missed — or more precisely, it was her sister with Robbie. Their love. Neither Briony nor the war had destroyed it" (McEwan 349). Reading and delving into a storyworld such as this one, the reader

might achieve a sense of satisfaction and feel happy not only for Briony, who has completed her mission of atonement, but also for Cecilia and Robbie, who remain together despite all the hardships they have experienced.

Most critics focus on the second part of the novel "London, 1999", which is generally considered a metafictional narrative. For instance, David K. O'Hara examines self-conscious narrative of the novel in the conceptual system of Richard Kearney and Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic philosophies, claiming that "*Atonement* not only dramatizes in its plot, but self-consciously illustrates at the level of its metafiction" (O'Hara 75). What makes readers perplexed and uneasy is that Briony disrupts the world she has created in the first part of the novel. The truth is that "Robbie Turner died of septicemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940," and "Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station" (McEwan 370). In other words, Robbie and Cecilia are dead instead of surviving Briony's accusation and the Second World War. About the meafictional nature of the novel, Alistair Cormack writes that "*Atonement*'s metafiction is not there to present the reader with the inevitable penetration of the real with the fictive. Instead the novel serves to show that the two worlds are entirely distinct: there is the world of the real and the world of literature, and woe betide those who confuse the two" (Cormack 82). The lovers only survive and live together as characters in the fictional world created by the writer Briony, while in the fictional world of the writer Briony as character created by the author Ian McEwan, they are dead and have never given her opportunity to make atonement. Given the change of Briony's ethical identity from the writer to character, what interests me most is not the metafictional narrative strategy employed by McEwan but the ethical factors that account for Briony's choice.

To understand Briony's decision, we need to situate her in that particular circumstance. Though knowing that Robbie is innocent and Lola's husband Paul Marshall is the very person who has committed the sexual attack, Briony could hardly accuse them of the crime owing to their overwhelming political influence and power. As a novelist, Briony has always wanted to tell the truth and to reveal her secret. She confesses, "I've been thinking about my last novel, the one that should have been my first. The earliest version, January 1940, the latest, March 1999, and in between, half a dozen different drafts. The second draft, June 1947, the third... who cares to know? My fifty-nine-year assignment is over. There was our crime — Lola's, Marshall's, mine — and form the second version onwards, I set out to describe it" (McEwan 369). What underwrites these lines is the message that Briony has always wanted to identify Paul Marshall as the criminal and to

make him guilty of the crime, but she is unable to make it happen in reality. If she did so, she would not only fail to find Paul Marshal guilty but also be involved with endless law suits herself. The only possible solution for her seems to be putting things right in the realm of her fiction: identifying Marshall's crime, and making Robbie and Cecilia alive.

At the end of the novel, Briony is rather modest in claiming that "it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me" (McEwan 372). If it were not possible for Robbie and Cecilia to forgive Briony as a character for making a wrong accusation, it would be very likely for readers to forgive her as a writer for both betraying them and sharing her secret and thus applaud for her action of making a proper ethical choice.

## Conclusion

Alistair Cormack claims that "McEwan has a profound interest in the ethical dimension of the processes of reading and writing fiction" (Cormack 82), which accounts for why "his work consciously rejects moral indeterminacy" (Cormack 82). In *Atonement*, Briony, for the sake of getting things ethically appropriate, takes her responsibility of writing, rewriting and disrupting the world, while readers recreate and delve into the world of ethical conflicts, in the process of which they come to terms with Briony both as the author of her novel *Atonement* and as the character in McEwan's *Atonement*. In this way, the work goes beyond the boundary of modernism and postmodernism and penetrates into the deep moral concerns of literature. It is at the point of ethics that both the author and the reader come together in making and remaking the worlds.

To extend this argument, I would like to reiterate that McEwan, through his fictional works, intends to explore such questions as why we need literature, or why we need novel in particular? what role should a novelist play? (Shang, "The Unbearable Lightness of Growth" 117) These questions relate to a larger issue about the function of literature, which, in the words of Nie Zhenzhao, attributes to "moral enlightenment and education" (Nie, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism" 83). If we examine the ways of worldmaking of McEwan by wearing the ethical lenses, we can fruitfully reveal and unpack the ethical elements of his works, and thus reap much ethical knowledge, which is perhaps one of the reasons why we shall resettle him from "Ian Macabre" to "Ethical McEwan."

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