Cross-class Relationships in English Country House Fiction: A Study of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

Srijani Chowdhury,
Junior Research Fellow,
Department of English,
Faculty of Arts,
Banaras Hindu University,
Uttar Pradesh, Varanasi, India.

Abstract: Cross-class relationship is a hushed up topic in the milieu of English Country Houses which are the symbols of aristocracy. However, novelists have explored the theme of illicit love affairs extensively in their Country House fiction. The present paper engages with the against-the-grain relationship portrayed in Ian McEwan’s novel *Atonement*. The cross-class relationship between Cecilia, the daughter of the Tallis and Robbie, the son of the charlady of the house is the focus of the paper. The article seeks to explore the unusual ending of the novel which provides a happy ending to the star-crossed lovers.


I. INTRODUCTION:

English Country houses are nothing but symbols of upper class hegemony and class consciousness. Cross-class Relationship—especially between the master/(s) and the maid/(s)—within the worlds of the great English houses is an extremely hushed up topic. The owner of houses never wanted to public the clandestine affairs between the 'Mr.' of the house and the maid or someone below the aristocratic class. However, great novelists took pains to pen these illicit love affairs in vivid detail. Illicit sex is a stock theme in English Country House Fiction. Blake Morrison in an online article entitled, "The Country House and English Novels" (2011) argues:

It's difficult to have sex in a flat or a small house without the other occupants noticing: hence the scene in *Sons and Lovers* when Paul Morel and Clara Dawes have to wait for her mother to go to bed before they get on with it. The country house affords more opportunities: bedrooms lie further apart and can be crept into in secrecy; gardens offer hidden bowers and trysting-spots; and if all else fails, and two people are desperate enough, there'll always be an empty room where they can risk it.
Blake Morrison regards, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as "the ultimate achievement in country house sex ... in which Connie finds fulfillment not in the bedroom at Wragby (her crippled husband Clifford is impotent and sex with a house-guest, Michaelis, fails to satisfy her), but in a cottage in its grounds, with the gamekeeper, Mellors. Connie is transformed by the experience ("she was gone, she was not, and she was born: a woman")."

From *Pamela: Virtue Rewarded* to LP Hartley's *The Go-Between*, from *Wuthering Heights* to Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger*, illicit liaison are portrayed in varied ways. Though rarely, the so-called lower class (in the case of Pamela) finds success in marriage with the master, in maximum cases, the star-crossed lovers suffer tragically (*Wuthering Heights*), as they belong to two different stratas of social class and in LP Hartley's text, the lovers commit suicide being unable to join each other in wedlock. Waters's narrative shows another picture of cross-class affair, where Dr. Faraday, the son of a nurse-maid of the country house, Hundreds Hall, tries his best to enter the aristocratic world. He proposes Caroline, the girl (read, the heir) of the house that is now in a dilapidated condition and is almost able to fulfill his desire of owning the great house. Though Caroline never fully acquiesce to his carnal desires, he keeps on thinking that one day he will be able to marry Caroline and will be the master of the house. When Caroline breaks off their secret engagement, Faraday could not withstand it. The novelist gives tacit suggestion that none other than Faraday is responsible for the tragic doom of Caroline, who was found dead one day before she wanted to leave the country-side to seek a new life in America. This cross-class affair proved to be fateful for the upper class representative and fruitful for the lower class, as he could now relish the emptied house with full liberty to visit every nook and corner that were hitherto restricted. The article seeks to study the cross-class relationship portrayed in Ian McEwan’s *Country House* fiction, *Atonement* (2001).

II. THE STORY-LINE:

Set in the Country House entitled, Tallis House, the novel captures three time frames—the summer of 1935, the Second World War England and France, and the present day England. The action of the first and longest part of the novel takes place on a hot summer day in 1935 in the Tallis House. Mrs Tallis and her three children, the teen Briony, a recent Cambridge graduate Cecilia and the son Leo, assemble along with Paul Marshall, the owner of a chocolate factory, and Robbie Turner, the son of the housekeeper. Also present are the Quincey cousins, the fourteen-year-old Lola and her twin brothers, Jackson and Pierrot. The evening turns out to be both romantic and fateful for Robbie, the family’s protégé, who is being educated at their expense at Cambridge. Whereas, earlier in the evening, he could propose his beloved Cecilia for the first time and both of them enjoyed a beautiful intimate moment with each other, the later half of the evening goes severely wrong for him. Cecilia’s younger sister Briony accuses Robbie as the culprit in the rape of Lola. It was followed by Robbie’s arrest and Cecilia’s subsequent apathy towards her own family. The focus of the article is on the cross-class relationship between Cecilia, the girl of the aristocratic family and Robbie, the housekeeper’s son.
III. THE RELATIONSHIP:

Robbie is the son of the family’s charlady, Grace Turner. When his father Ernest Turner, a gardener at Tallis House, left his mother, the Tallises took pity on her and gifted her freehold of the adjacent bungalow. She too “stayed on, returning to housework as the children grew older” (88). Robbie had spent his childhood “moving freely between the bungalow and the main house” (86). The master of the house, Mr. Jack Tallis sponsored his education at Cambridge. Robbie with his “Bolshevik cigarettes” (25), “a hangover from his Communist party time”, is a representative of meritocracy, who tried to break through the set orders of aristocracy. He was able to curve out his name at Cambridge with his excellent grades. He has dreamt of studying medicine in future so that he can pay back Cecilia’s father. He can easily go on a debate on eighteenth century literature with Cecilia. Cecilia has a love-hate relationship with him. She was jealous of his academic achievements, for, she was “mocked for her poor degree” (27) and at the same time, she is enamoured by Robbie’s pulchritude:

She liked his eyes, she thought, the unblended mix of orange and green, made even more granular in sunlight. And she liked the fact that he was so tall. It was an interesting combination in a man, intelligence and sheer bulk. *(Atonement 25)*

The scene with the porcelain vase at the Fountain is tinged with their romance. In a childish manner, both of them were trying to fill the vase with water of the fountain basin. Unfortunately, they broke the antique vase while struggling with each other. Cecilia in her ingenuous way, wanted Robbie to experience the sweet pain of punishment by refusing to take his help. She “kicked off her sandals, unbuttoned her blouse and removed it, unfastened her skirt and stepped out of it and went to the basin wall . . . Denying his help, any possibility of making amends, was his punishment. The unexpectedly freezing water that caused her to gasp was his punishment . . . Drowning herself would be his punishment” (30). Robbie too was enamoured by her beauty and innocence. Such was the impact that he finally decided to propose Cecilia and prepared many drafts of letter. He tried many ways to say sorry to his beloved. However, both of them were ignorant of the fact that their tryst at the lake island was silently witnessed by Briony, the sister of Cecilia. Briony was an over-imaginative girl and in her imagination, she misconstrued the episode at the Fountain as that of “blackmail” (38). She failed to understand the strangeness of their relationship between the lover-beloved and considered it as a “a command” of Robbie, “which Cecilia dared not disobey” (38). For the thirteen-year-old Briony, “this was not a fairy tale, this was the real, the adult world in which frogs did not address princesses” (40). When Robbie handed over the wrong draft letter to Cecilia through Briony, she could not resist her curiosity and by ripping the letter from its envelope, entered “an arena of adult emotion” (113). Her fanciful suspicion got confirmed when she discovered Robbie and Cecilia in their intimate moment at the Tallis library.
IV. DISCUSSION:

It was Briony’s baseless victimization of Robbie, the representative of the proletariat class that ruined his future prospects. When the two Quincey cousins flee away from the house, a search party ran behind them. In between, Lola was raped by someone amidst darkness. Though Briony was not present at the scene and was unable to see the face of the despoiler, she accuses Robbie as the miscreant. She confirms in front of the inspector: “Yes. I saw him. I saw him” (181) and it is from her witness that the inspector concluded: “Mr. Turner was a dangerous man” (181).

The relationship between Robbie and Cecilia is that of everlasting love and loyalty—“beyond the present, outside time, with no memories and no future” (136). The novelist’s beautiful description of their first confession of love must be mentioned here:

She whispered his name with the deliberation of a child trying out the distinct sounds. When he replied with her name, it sounded like a new word—the syllables remained the same, the meaning was different. Finally she spoke the three simple words that no amount of bad art or bad faith can ever quite cheapen. She repeated them, with exactly the same slight emphasis on the second word, as though she were the one to say them first. He had no religious belief, but it was impossible not to think of an invisible presence or witness in the room, and that these words spoken aloud were like signatures on an unseen contract. (Atonement 137)

But theirs was a cross-class relationship and had to withstand many storms to be finally reunited. Torn apart from the countryside of the Tallis House, Robbie was thrown away into the army retreat. While rambling in the French countryside amid the repeated Stuka attacks and raptor like dive-bombers, he still remembers Cecilia in the hope of possible reunion. Cecilia’s letters are his only raison d’être:

And there was hope. I’ll wait for you. Come back. There was a chance, just a chance, of getting back. He had her last letter in his pocket and her new address. This is why he had to survive. (Atonement 203)

It was unusual on the part of Cecilia that she cut off her relationship with her upper class parents and siblings for their baseless victimization of Robbie. She never spoke to them after that fateful evening. She chose nursing as her occupation so that she could earn for herself. Even after many years of separation, she used to go to that very spot of the library to re-live their intimate moments. They used to write about the “quite corner” (204) in their letters to feed on the long cherished memories of love making. However, Cecilia, like Robbie has hopes of a new beginning. She wants her parents and Briony to write a proper apology to Robbie and the inspector in charge, so
that they “may have the beginning of a new start” (212). A grown up Briony realized that it was Paul Marshall who dishonoured Lola. The only words she could spoke: “I’m very very sorry. I’ve caused you such terrible distress” (348). But no sorry could be adequate to recover the loss she has caused to Robbie and Cecilia. Even all her life-long atonement—her career of a War-nurse and the draft novel about the cross-class relationship between her sister and the son of their charlady—could not compensate the pangs of their sufferings.

The novel ends with a coda, “London, 1999” with Briony, now a seventy-seven year old novelist retelling the untold tale of Robbie and Cecilia. It is not clear if Robbie and Cecilia could reunite in their real lives, but Briony, the novelist provides them with a happy ending. In her final “act of kindness”, she let “the lovers live and reunite them at the end” (372).

REFERENCES


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