Rape and Redemption

Of the books we've discussed in our class, *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee and *Atonement* by Ian McEwan share a number of similarities: both novels involve violent instances of rape and a lack of clarifying communication between the protagonist and other characters (Lurie and Melanie/Lucy) (Briony and Robbie/Cecilia). Of course, the most important connection these two books share is the theme of redemption. For David Lurie, this means trying to make up for his mistreatment of Melanie by—though at first rejecting his punishment from the sexual harassment allegation—trying to help Lucy after she too is raped. For Briony Tallis, this means using her gift of writing to create a new story in which Robbie and Cecilia live and reunite. By examining the acts of rape present in these stories, a reader can discover the true meaning regarding the protagonists' attempts at redemption and subsequently the books' titles.

A brief summary of both books is in order. *Disgrace* centers around a 52-year-old English professor named David Lurie. He spends his days seeking pleasure, whether it be from his prostitute lover, Soraya, or his Romantic poetry course. Soon, he meets one of his students, Melanie Isaacs, outside of class and falls in love with her. He becomes infatuated with her and over dinner and drinks, he asks her to stay the night with him, unsuccessfully of course. Later, he brings her to his apartment where they end up having sex. She does not participate actively, though that doesn't stop Lurie from continuing to pursue her. He does not view his actions as rape, but sex without consent is an act of violence— it is rape. As Melanie starts to miss classes, Lurie continues to chase her. Soon, their relationship ends as Melanie makes a sexual harassment complaint, which results in a trial. Lurie decides to resign as a professor and leaves to stay with his daughter, Lucy. During their time there, they are attacked by a group of men. Lurie is set on fire and beaten, while Lucy is violently raped in another room of the house. Coetzee's novel ends

with Lurie trying to repair his broken relationship with his daughter and his mistreatment of Melanie.

Meanwhile, *Atonement* centers around a 13-year-old girl named Briony Tallis. She creates a play called “The Trials of Arabella” in which she tries to involve her three cousins in performing for the family. Ultimately, her attempts to practice end in failure and she soon gives up on the idea. However, she is struck with inspiration for a new story after witnessing (what she believes to be) an intimate scene between Robbie and her sister Cecilia by the fountain. From that point on, she is suspicious of Robbie and protective of Cecilia. When Robbie hands Briony a letter to give to Cecilia, she opens it and reads it, which ends up causing further distrust of Robbie on Briony’s part. She eventually catches the pair having sex in the library. By now, Briony harbors a strong resentment of Robbie. Later that evening, her twin cousins disappear. Briony goes out searching for them and discovers a mysterious figure raping her 15-year-old cousin Lola. Briony immediately blames Robbie, who is arrested and sent off to prison. Years later, Robbie has spent time in prison and in the war. Cecilia meanwhile has cut off her family and become a nurse. After both of them have died, Briony writes a new story: *Atonement*, as a means of redeeming herself and honoring the memory of Robbie and Cecilia’s love.

Starting with *Disgrace*, readers learn early on in the story that Lurie has,“to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” (Coetzee 1). He believes he knows everything there is to know about the intimate details of strong sexual relationships. Within the first few pages, he is described as being insatiable and intense, maybe even blind to his desires. As he learns that Soraya, the prostitute he’d been seeing, is married, he experiences great jealousy of her husband. Once he meets Melanie, however, he forgets about Soraya. He is quite forward with his attempts to win her over. At first, he merely offers her the chance to have dinner with him, which she

reluctantly agrees to. Around the point where they have sex for the first time is when the story becomes distorted. Since this novel is presented in the third person with Lurie as the reflector, readers experience Lurie's unwanted sexual advances through his eyes instead of Melanie's. He does not view his actions negatively, saying that what he did to Melanie was "not rape, not quite that but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core" (25). At one moment, he truly regrets his actions, saying to himself that she is merely a child compared to him. However, in Kossew's article, she writes that "David, paradoxically, falls from grace because of his inability to question the authority of desire itself and in this he is slave to his bodily instincts. All mind, he falls prey to the body" (Kossew 5).

After a few unwanted exchanges like this, Melanie files a complaint against him and drops his class, much to her parents' confusion, which then results in the trial. Lurie refuses to defend himself or even read the complaint made against him. He is too self-centered to express regret over what he has done, and so he is removed from his teaching position. As this point, "just as the text is reluctant to assign easy ethical labels to David's sexual behavior (it is always shown to be more morally complex than rape, than pedophilia), so the text problematizes notions of repentance and forgiveness" (Kossew 6). He does not believe he has done anything wrong, which either shows just how ignorant he becomes in the heat of passion, or that he is much too prideful to admit to his atrocities.

Soon, David Lurie leaves to stay with his daughter Lucy on her farm. Her lifestyle is completely different from the life David used to lead, but now that he has lost his job and faced rejection from just about everyone he knows, he prepares himself for a fresh start. He helps Bev at the animal shelter, putting down unwanted dogs and burning their remains in a furnace. For a while, he becomes used to his new life. Once the attack happens, however, Lurie— "who was

ironically a perpetrator in relation to the first sexual offense but a victim in the context of the second—now harbors a diametrically opposed view about the importance of legal and financial restitution as a response to his daughter's rape" (Mardorossian 4). One could make the connection that Lucy's rape is more punishment for David Lurie's transgressions. He encourages her to do everything she can to protect herself: stay away from Petrus and the men who committed the deed, tell her story to law enforcement, and even leave the farm. However, she refuses to do all of this because she soon finds out she is pregnant with her rapist's child. She and her father fight over these implications, which eventually ends in lingering questions: "Is Lucy's admittedly mediated final word also his? Are readers encouraged to let her rape rest and naturalize the state of affairs it both bemoans and reinforces" (Mardorossian 4)?

All this having happened, Lurie attempts to redeem himself by protecting his daughter. He stays at the farm with her and works with Bev to stay near her as much as he can. Nearing the end of the novel, Coetzee seems to suggest that "a form of self-acceptance might indicate a possible way out of the confessional labyrinth" ("Confession and Atonement" 6). He eventually comes to accept that this is his new life; working on the farm alongside Bev and taking care of his daughter. Having read the whole novel, readers finally understand the meaning behind the title: Disgrace is not only what David Lurie experiences after the scandal and trial, but also Lucy's rape and the repercussions of the act.

Moving on to *Atonement*, which takes a much different path, readers learn more about Briony's experience with rape and her desire to redeem herself for her misdeeds. She begins the novel as an adolescent writer, immature but passionate. Her idea of romance is idealized and fantastical, with her play "The Trials of Arabella" featuring a beautiful princess falling in love with a doctor. Of course, Briony doesn't realize it until much later, but her play mimics the

romance between her sister, Cecilia, and Robbie, the Tallis family's gardner who is studying to become a doctor himself. After several hours of unsuccessful practicing of her play, Briony abandons the project and goes downstairs. She soon notices Cecilia, stripped down to her undergarments, soaking wet from the fountain, and Robbie. She does not immediately notice the pieces of the broken vase that Cecilia collected from the water. She comes to believe that Robbie forced her sister to take off her clothes and views the blooming romance between the pair as being one-sided (Robbie coming on to her). Her incorrect beliefs are solidified more after she reads the vulgar letter Robbie writes for Cecilia, which is unintentional on his part. When she witnesses the two having sex in the library, she is adamant that Robbie has sexually assaulted her sister, causing her hatred for him to explode. Of course, "the reader is made aware of the perils of perception and, at the same time, of the narrative devices through which literature encodes experience" (Hidalgo 8).

Soon, Briony's mother calls the family to dinner, which is a relatively ordinary affair. However, once the twins run away, the whole family goes out searching for them. Briony in her search discovers a mysterious figure raping her 15-year-old cousin, Lola. Compared to everything she has witnessed before, she believes beyond a shadow of a doubt that Robbie is the culprit. She condemns him immediately, and that is the last she sees of him. Many years later, Briony is serving as a nurse and attending to soldiers who have been injured in the war. By this point, she has matured greatly, now believing she knows who actually raped Lola. She goes to see Robbie and Cecilia, who have reunited at last and she tries to explain what happened. At last, "with a certain authority, Briony has finally completed her story. She has set down her story, her truth and is prepared to defend it" ("Confession and Atonement" 12). It is only at the very end of the novel, in the section labeled "London 1999" that the readers understand what has happened:

Robbie and Cecilia both died during the war and never received their happy ending. *Atonement* is the book she wrote to try to redeem herself for her terrible mistakes.

Some questions still remain in readers' minds after the book has ended: "How to end confession? How to achieve atonement when there is no higher authority entitled to offer forgiveness" ("Confession and Atonement" 12)? Briony's novel reveals the answer: it's impossible. All she can do is accept what she has done, do her best to forgive herself for her transgressions, and learn from her mistakes, which she has already done. By writing this happy, yet bittersweet ending, she is trying to show that she regrets everything that occurred because of her childish beliefs and that she has matured since she last saw the pair. At least, that's what she thinks. Robbie and Cecilia still hold anger against her, and Briony still harbors unresolved guilt, but she has made an effort to change, which is all anyone can ask of her.

All of the above taken into consideration, one must examine how Briony's writing style changes over the course of the novel. *Atonement* is divided into three sections and an epilogue titled "London 1999." Section 1 covers Briony's childhood. Hidalgo writes that "the story the novel tells is far more complex and nuanced than a mere fictional account of one of the great military disasters in British history" (Hidalgo 4). It is a tribute to the perseverance of love amidst the horrors of the war. Section 1 takes a relaxed pace, starting with life in the Tallis household and the problems of the everyday. Section 2 of the novel is written from Robbie's perspective and details his experiences in the war. Here, we see more of McEwan's writing as an author bleed through the pages, as Briony could not have known what it was really like to fight in the war. It is likely that she gathered stories from the soldiers she treated in her hospital. Much of this section details the conditions the soldiers fought and lived in, whether it is the injuries they sustain, the living conditions, or the battles or bombardments themselves. All in all, it's quite

brutal and hard to read emotionally. Section 3 explores Briony's time as a nurse and rewrites the ending of Cecilia and Robbie's love story. She writes as though they are still alive, and, while not forgiving like her idealistic, younger self would have painted them to be, they give her a second chance, so long as she does not interfere with them any further after she has done what they have asked of her. Finally, "London, 1999" features an elderly Briony Tallis, having recently learned she has dementia and will soon forget everything she has written up to this point in her life. She finally watches a performance of her play, "The Trials of Arabella" and she reflects on her life up until this point. Here, the novel shifts into the first person to really explore Briony's inner thoughts firsthand. By the end of the novel, we have learned what the title, Atonement, really means: it is Briony's chosen word to represent what the novel she has created means not only for herself, but for her sister, for Robbie, for her cousins, for her parents, and many more.

While *Disgrace* and *Atonement* are two vastly different novels, both share key themes of redemption after a traumatic rape has occurred. In David Lurie's case, he seeks redemption through his daughter Lucy after she is violently raped at the hands of three men. Seemingly as a punishment for his own rape of Melanie before he came to the farm, he tries to help Lucy by convincing her to leave the farm for her own safety and to avoid marrying Petrus. In Briony's case, she uses her talent at writing to create a heart-wrenching story that details everything she did from the day she started rehearsing for her play to the day she finally watched it performed on a stage near the end of her life. She pours her heart into her work and tries to make amends with her dead sister and her dead lover, Robbie. She also works as a nurse to try and redeem herself by helping in the war effort. All in all, redemption for terrible acts comes at a cost, one that both Briony and David find themselves willing to pay, and leads them on the path to righteousness.

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