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# The Theme Of Perception In The Novels The Great Gatsby And Atonement

In the novels 'The Great Gatsby' by F. Scott Fitzgerald and the 'Atonement' by Ian McEwan, the theme of perception is crucial to the unfolding tragedies that occur. The novels are based on the perspectives of Briony and Nick, both of which demonstrate a foolish sense of immaturity at the beginning of their stories. As their stories progress, so do Briony and Nick's ability to acknowledge hindsight. Hindsight is the understanding of an event, but only after it has happened – for both characters this could be considered a flaw. Briony's lack of hindsight proves catastrophic and is something she lives the rest of her life 'atoning' for. Similarly, Nick lacks hindsight initially and by the end of the novel it is clear he wishes he had done things differently; for example, inviting Daisy to tea to reunite her with Gatsby. At the time, both characters in each novel thought they were acting appropriately - however little did he know they were sowing the seed for disaster. As a result, the concept of truth is in the air in both novels as it is not until the end of each that both narrators (Nick and Briony) admit that in hindsight their perception on events has changed. Therefore, in both novels perception do change with hindsight.

## Narrator and reliability

The perception of Briony and Nick change with hindsight when we explore the narrator's reliability in each novel.

In the 'Atonement' it is apparent from the beginning, that the story is told in 3rd person giving an omniscient perspective throughout the story "Even without their attention and praise and obvious pleasure, Briony could not have been held back from her writing. In any case, she was discovering, as had many writers before her, that not all recognition is helpful". McEwan skillfully uses this line to detach Briony's emotions from any viewpoint of other characters in the rest of the novel, which demonstrates a sense of reliability in Briony as a narrator. However, this complex construction of Briony as not only a narrator but also a character; criminal; and witness, proves to be difficult for us to trust her narrative as it is clear her version of events is what pushes the story onwards. Therefore, the complexity of Briony's role throughout the novel can be confusing for us, as throughout the novel there is no clean-cut answer as to who is to blame for Robbie's false accusation. Instead we are made to ask ourselves whether Briony's guilt and crime can be 'atoned' for. This leads us to consider Briony's reliability as a truthful narrator, as Barthes suggests in 'The Death of the Author' (1967) it is the reader who creates the meaning of the text, and so we as readers are given the task of deciding for ourselves who is to blame. Therefore, considering this, can we actually take her accounts on her crime and atonement as genuine, when she herself admits "But what really happened?". The story ends with this thought, undermining the stories sense of justice as we never really know for sure what happened. Briony's guilt and desire for 'atonement' comes across in a desperate manner here as she reveals "I'm too old, too frightened, too much in love with the shred of life I have remaining". This triplet with the repetition of "too" highlights Briony's desperation for forgiveness whilst the alliteration of 't' helps to convey her dying wish as she rushes against time to share her lifelong crime. In her elderly years it is clear through Briony's want to share

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and 'atone' for her crime that she with hindsight changes her perspective on her whole view of life.

In comparison 'The Great Gatsby' is narrated in first person by Nick Carraway, who is portrayed as the perfect narrator "inclined to reserve all judgements". Nick is presented to us as a character who is tolerant to others, openminded and a good listener – the perfect person for establishing an honest perspective in the novel. His different origins to others in the novel give him an outsider's stance on the happenings in the novel, and so he brings a real sense of moral and reality to the novel. Nick acts as a mediator for us between the fantasy and reality of East and West Egg. For example, Myrtle Wilson tries to portray herself as something she is not and Nick instantly picks up on this; "spotted dress of dark blue crepe-de-chine... contained no beauty". Fitzgerald uses Nick's well-to-do background to point out Myrtle's artificial boldness both in appearance and personality. The "spotted" pattern of the dress and boldness of the "dark blue" create animal imagery as they remind us of a predatory animal that uses bright colours to attract other animals and ultimately catch them – this mirrors how Myrtle has managed to catch Tom's eye through her colours. However, it is clear Nick he does not fall into the same trap Tom did as he points out Myrtle's "costume" change into "an elaborate afternoon dress of cream-coloured chiffon, which gave out a continuous rustle". Myrtle lives in her own fantasy in which she pretends to be wealthy, this is demonstrated through her "chiffon dress" which is typically a material used in the flapper dresses of the 1920s – Myrtle tries to embody the persona of a "new woman" and to be the same status of Tom, but this is all just a big act of fakery. Her desire to be viewed as someone from a wealthier class is prominent in her attempt at glamour and social etiquette "rustle" and "high mincing shout". The image Nick paints for us is clumsy and awkward, and so we find ourselves cringing at the sight of Myrtle along with him. Myrtle's persona contrasts completely with Daisy's elegance and beauty and so Nick's narrative reflects this confusion. However, as the novel progresses, we discover that Daisy is not the innocent lady she is made out to be and so with that, Nick's perception on Daisy changes with hindsight.

## **Class and money**

Both novels are set in patriarchal periods of time when class and money was considered more important than a person's personality or abilities, thus reflecting how characters in both novels are treated. This is significant when considering how Briony and Nick's perceptions have been tainted by their status and wealth. Both authors make a conscious effort of differentiating between 'old money' and 'new money', this is emphasised through the tension that is described when people from different classes and economic backgrounds meet. Traditionally 'old money' was passed down generations, whereas 'new money' was earned by hard working, driven individuals – as a result 'old money' was considered more prestigious. In both novels this attitude is demonstrated.

In the 'Atonement' Paul Marshall makes his fortune from manufacturing confectionary, in the well to do society of the 1930s this 'new money' would have been seen as vulgar. This societal norm is demonstrated through Robbie as he mocks Paul's business by calling him "The chocolate Millionaire". McEwan uses this metaphorical language to perhaps convey Marshall in a comical manner or more importantly to hint at his artificial persona - just like his fake chocolate. Marshall having not come from the middle-upper class like the Tallises, is not taken seriously - this is ironic as Robbie is of a low class in the novel and so a hint of competition and

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jealously is conveyed between the classes. As this encounter is described through the eyes of adult Briony it is true that she too, despite being only an adolescent, conveys to us that she let her perspective fall short to the narrowminded societal views of the 1930s.

McEwan shows the affect that Cecilia's stuck up snobbery upper class behavior has on Briony's perception in the novel. Wealth is metaphorically described, "blossoming need for a cigarette" (pg 18). The cigarette acts as a metaphor for how addictive wealth is, especially for Cecilia who has returned to the safety of her family's manor and money after not doing very well at university. It is clear that since returning home Cecilia has lacked any real ambition the whole summer and the adverb "blossoming" conveys this. It is suggested that she is more than capable to 'blossom' and make herself grow as a person, just like a 'blossoming' flower, but she chooses not to. Instead, she seems to just exist by floating aimlessly around the house smoking cigarettes and contemplating life. Briony looks to Cecilia as a role model because like her sister, she too spends the summer uselessly and rather pointlessly "slashing at nettles" in which the "middle leaves turned outwards like hands protesting innocence" (pg74). The personification of the nettles creates the image of a cross which helps to foreshadow Robbie's plea of innocence later on in the novel when he is accused of raping Lola. However, it also mimics Briony's state of mind, as it is obvious that Briony is frustrated and yearns for attention just like the protesting nettle. It is this urge for attention that ends in disaster for all characters and is something adult Briony based on hindsight regrets.

This is something that with hindsight in her older years she regrets and Briony's perception on class has changed.

Fitzgerald using class and wealth also highlights how perception changes with hindsight, with Nick's view on Daisy Buchamann. Daisy is a character obsessed with wealth; she is dressed "in white" with her clothes "rippling and fluttering". Through use of wealth Fitzgerald seems to elevate Daisy as someone of elegance and beauty in the mind of Nick. Despite Nick claiming to not judge people, he immediately makes a judgment before he even interacts with Daisy – that she is delicate and beautiful. The colour imagery used helps to portray Daisy as pure and innocent, along with the decorative adverbs, "rippling" and "fluttering" she comes across as enchanting – exactly how Nick initially views her. But we soon learn this is condescending, and that Nick has been tricked by the façade of wealth and social class as Daisy turns out to be extremely self-centered. Fitzgerald cleverly hints at this artificial element to Daisy through her name "Daisy Fay". At first, we make an instant association with the white flower of a Daisy which conventionally holds connotations of purity and innocence, just like how Nick and we first perceive her. But the imagery of a daisy presents her to appear like a dainty, pretty daisy (like the petals), however inside is rooted in money and security (just like the gold center of a daisy). Looking more carefully into her name, her middle name 'Fay' originates from Irish roots meaning 'fairy' this symbolically represents her magical voice, enchanting personality, and Gatsby's faith in her. But also highlights her fake façade as like a fairy, the persona she displays to others is fantastical – her perfect 'American dream' is non-existent. We soon discover that Daisy, despite having material wealth does not possess spiritual wealth. Therefore, Nick's perception of Daisy has changed by the end of chapter one, proving that perception does change with hindsight.

## Concept of truth

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In both novels perception also changes with hindsight with the concept of truth for our narrators. In 'The Great Gatsby' the concept of truth is warped by the corruptness of other characters in the novel. Firstly, we see Nick's perception of the American dream altered when he first arrives at the Buchamann's mansion. He quickly jumps to the conclusion that they have achieved their American Dream; wealth; a perfect little girl; an enormous home and a high status in society. But once again this is just another façade. In reality Tom and Daisy's marriage is not one of mutual love. Tom's affair with Myrtle makes us clear of this "Tom's got some woman in New York". Nick's shock at this dire truth is expressed through the adverb "blankly" - for the first time Nick gets an insight into what the American Dream is actually like - Cyril Ghosh states "the American Dream is a contested concept that does not lend itself easy to definitions". This couldn't be clearer with the corruption in the Buchamann's high society lifestyle. This is furthered when Daisy flaunts her daughter like an object to visitors "that's because your mother wanted to show you off". Daisy treats Palmy like she is just another materialistic possession that she can show off to others, this is emphasised through her dismissive nature towards Palmy, ignoring her daughter all together "Where's Daddy?". This instance in the novel shows Daisy and her American Dream lifestyle off to be a negative one, it is clear that Daisy lacks the maternal qualities to be a sufficient mother. As a result, it is obvious her perception of reality differs vastly to Nick's, showing that with the American dream comes warped perceptions on how life should be lived. With this, Nick's perception that the American dream exists starts to slowly diminish as the novel progresses.

The cyclical structure of Gatsby helps to convey how much Nick's perception of truth has changed since the beginning of the novel when he is reminded by his father that "not everyone has had the start in life that you have had". Nick enters the novel with a fair approach to how people should be viewed, however as the book continues it is evident that in the real world, people lack this sensitivity and understanding that Nick possesses. Nick admits that "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us" in which Fitzgerald makes reference to Gatsby's yearning for achieving his dream and building a future with Daisy. With this use of light symbolism Fitzgerald presents the idea that humanity struggles to move towards the future due to our attachment with the past. The green light symbolising hope and independence also draws to mind the image of the green land of America representing Daisy's dock and Gatsby's dream. When America was founded it tried to distance itself from the class system, just like Gatsby tries to make a life out of 'new money' - but the novel shows that the class structure still exists and is the failing or making of a person in the 1920s. Nick suggests that Gatsby had failed to realise that his dream was already unattainable because of the unfair class barrier that stood in his way. Fitzgerald also refers to Gatsby's green light representing sexual climax 'orgastic future' that all Americans are yearning for is their optimum dream of fulfillment, but this is unachievable. Nick's perception on the truth of the American Dream therefore changes with hindsight by the end of the novel.

In the Atonement the concept of truth also changes Briony's perception with hindsight. The subjective nature of truth is conveyed in the novel through the shifting narrative perspectives. For example, there are three narrative viewpoints of the fountain scene which establish truth to be multi-faced and complicated, as the truths of three characters differ immensely. Cecilia's angry, frustrated exclamatory language "You idiot!" juxtaposes entirely to the innocent, pleasant "proposal of marriage" that Briony believes she is witnessing from the window.