Reader-Response Theory: *Atonement* by Ian McEwan

Reader-response theory is a type of criticism which gained significance in the late 1960s. Contrary to theories like New Criticism, reader-response theory focuses on the reader’s reaction and connection to a particular text. Reader-response criticism argues that until a reader experiences a work for themselves, that text is meaningless. Wolfgang Iser says that “the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic; the artistic pole is the author’s text, and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader” (1524). The author’s text is meant to be interpreted by many different readers who will all experience different reactions.

Iser considers the relationship of readers’ reactions and the author’s text to be the most important thing when criticizing a work. Focusing solely on the text, as in New Criticism, is not a sufficient way to fully grasp the meaning and worth of that work. Since all people are different, and have their own experiences, readers will have different reactions to texts. For example, in Ian McEwan’s novel *Atonement*, the turning point of the story occurs when Lola, the cousin of the primary female characters, Briony and Cecilia, is raped. A reader who has had a firsthand experience with sexual abuse will certainly have a strong reaction, while someone who has never had any experience with rape may not react as severely.

There are three principal characters in *Atonement*, but Briony Tallis could be considered the main character because her actions drive the plot. We learn that Briony is a fanciful, imaginative thirteen-year-old writer who is quick to judge in any situation, even when she does not know all the facts. When she opens a letter for her sister Cecilia, sent by longtime family friend Robbie Turner, she discovers a sexually explicit message. Not knowing that Robbie never intended Cecilia to read that letter, and sent it by mistake, Briony panics. Her proper upbringing
and immaturity have led her to believe that such things are inappropriate and bad. So she automatically begins to consider Robbie a dangerous figure. Later she catches Cecilia and Robbie in library in the midst of a tryst. Briony again assumes the worst and thinks Robbie is attacking her sister.

Later that evening, during a search party, Briony witnesses her cousin’s rape. She does not clearly see who the attacker is, but she decides to blame Robbie based on her previous assumptions. Lola’s eyes were covered during the attack, so it is easy for Briony to persuade her to agree that it was Robbie. Briony tells the police that Robbie Turner attacked her cousin. The police ask her if she actually saw him, to which she merely replies, “I know it was him” (231). As the interrogation progresses, the reader can tell that Briony is not only trying to convince the others, but herself. She gives them the letter as evidence, and he is arrested. Cecilia, who knows the truth, is the only one to protest and fight for her lover’s innocence. The others have all been swayed by Briony’s false interpretation of the letter and the events of the evening.

As a reader, we receive viewpoints from Cecilia, Robbie and Briony. We know that Robbie was not the assaulter of Lola because we receive his point of view when writing the letter, and Cecilia’s point of view during their romantic moment in the library. As readers, we know that Cecilia and Robbie are in love and nothing Robbie did that evening was violent or dangerous. When I read this novel, I am always furious with Briony’s cruelty. I cannot condone the fact that she blindly accuses her sister’s lover of such a crime, causing them to be parted forever. As someone in a long-distance relationship, I understand the pain of being separated from the one you love. My reaction to Cecilia and Robbie being parted is much different than someone who has never been far away from their beloved. Another reader might sympathize with Briony, and see what she did as something out of genuine, childish naivety and fear.
I personally think that the reader-response form of criticism is much more effective and satisfying than a theory like New Criticism. I prefer the idea of paying attention to personal feelings about the text and relating it to your own circumstances. The objective breadth of New Criticism does not persuade me to read a text. I am much more likely to read a text based on someone’s personal recommendation and what they emotionally experienced by reading it. There can be many answers and interpretations with reader-response theory. Hearing others’ reactions to literature is what makes it meaningful, because all people are unique, therefore, all reactions to a work should be unique.

Works Cited