The Edinburgh Student Literary Journal

Shattering Illusions: A Comparison of Belonging in Phillip Larkin's Collected Poems and Ian McEwan's Atonement

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A/W 2025-26

'What will survive of us is love.' (Larkin)

Both Phillip Larkin's *Collected Poems* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* examine the theme of belonging; developing and dismantling connections and affinities not only to physical environments, but to familiar emotions, communities and relationships. McEwan's novel features the progression and tragic ruination of Cecilia Tallis' relationship with the housekeeper's son: Robbie Turner, uprooting an idealised 1930's England as they are torn apart by a crucially misguided accusation, and the inevitable forces of the first world war. Larkin's works propose similar losses, through the woeful meditation and unremarkable observation of his speakers and their experiences, epitomising a characteristic cynicism in his poetry. In the delicate balance between connection and alienation, the ramifications of isolation from community, as well as the often transitory nature of the comfort it delivers, both writers expose the forces that ultimately destabilise belonging, revealing an inherently fragile construct continually fractured by desperation, class, and temporality.

These affinities can be initially examined in the tensions that McEwan portrays between belonging and alienation, particularly through the character of Briony Tallis, Cecilia's precocious younger sister. Despite her secure position in the privileged and orderly Tallis household, she is fundamentally restricted by her age and inexperience, failing to command the order and control she craves. Her construction of an alternative narrative in her play, "The Trials of Arabella" (McEwan, 4), in which she demands to play the protagonist, reflects her longing for a more pivotal role, driving her to embellish her own reality in a microcosm of her desperation to insert herself into the adult world. Her idealisation of Arabella as a romantic heroine also reinforces the pre-war conventions that tie a woman's narrative to her fortunes in love and marriage, which Briony emulates in her desire for such simplicity in romance. Ironically, it is this that alienates her further in her misunderstanding of Robbie and Cecilia, perceiving their physical intimacy as a predatory attack, and seizing an opportunity to elevate her authority in making the ultimate decision to condemn Robbie to

exclusion and imprisonment, falsely accused of assaulting Lola Quincy. The adamant declaration: 'I saw him,' (181) reinforces the immaturity in her stubbornness, committed to such decisive actions without the proper understanding. She not only plunges Cecilia and Robbie's relationship into ruin, but severs her own connection with her sister in doing so, a bond she is unable to mend by the time she is killed in the bombing of Balham Underground station. As an adult, ostracised by her guilt, her rewriting of history to 'let my lovers live and to unite them at the end,' (372), as she claims, serves as a final attempt to restore her belonging, reiterating her obsession with storytelling as a means of control. This is mirrored in the structure of the novel itself, creating a facade of reunion and resolution, only revealed by Briony's testimony in 1999 to be another deception. Contemporary criticisms assert that this is sufficient comfort in reinserting Briony into her desired reality, Brian Finney's commentary on Briony's act of 'corrective fiction' (Finney, 82) lends itself to a more sympathetic reading of her plight, suggesting this is the 'one corrective we can make.' However, this is undercut in the crucial limitation that it remains a mere fabrication of her own mind; a tragically cyclical confirmation of her alienation in her disjunction from reality. Thus, Briony is driven to destroy her own belonging in her desperate craving of it.

Conversely, Larkin's 'I Remember, I Remember' (Larkin, 2003) conveys a critique of the overemphasis on the significance of belonging to a 'home', with reference to his own birthplace in Coventry. He highlights his speaker's loosening grip on the comfort and belonging of their childhood home, with their memories instead eroding over time into a mundane and unremarkable recollection, as they 'squinnied for a sign' (line 6) of familiarity. Larkin's use of the possessive 'mine' (line 7) is suggestive of ownership of such belonging, a notion that fades with time and experience, ultimately disputing the security that Briony seeks to claim. This almost resentful rejection of an idyllic past is typical of Larkin's reputation as 'a doggedly anti-Romantic poet,' (Finch, 53) often shattering overly idealised illusions, such

as the notion of blissful childhood memories. The title itself is a mockery of such fantasy, alluding to Thomas Hood's Romantic poem 'I Remember, I Remember' (Hood) that instead recalls childhood as a time of joy and wonder, thus generating an irony in likening such decidedly opposing themes. Such rejection exemplifies Larkin's advocacy for realism, in alignment with his identification as an anti-intellectual, as exemplified in his works prioritising the mundane and everyday experience, creating a stark contrast between disillusionment and nostalgia. While Briony seeks comfort and belonging in the recreation of the past, Larkin's speaker accepts the pointlessness in magnifying these experiences and restricting them to a specific time and place: 'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.' (line 36). Rather than reconstructing reality, Larkin reduces it to its simplest form; a 'rare honesty' (Motion, 100), as Andrew Motion explores in his biography, suggestive that the seemingly ordinary is in fact a vessel for resonating with such complex themes as belonging and acceptance. Therefore, Larkin's poetry seems to suggest that one cannot forcefully insert themselves into the narrative they seek to belong to, exactly as Briony does on her destructive path of juvenile desperation.

Furthermore, in Atonement, Robbie Turner's experience of the illusion of social mobility illustrates the isolation found on the edge of belonging. He is provided with the facade of privilege, despite his working class background, with Jack Tallis funding his education at Cambridge with a 'touch of self-righteous vindication' (McEwan, 151). His acceptance into the upper classes is therefore precarious and conditional. Emily Tallis, for example, opposes her husband's 'hobby' (151), concerned instead with Robbie's success at Cambridge undermining the achievements of her own children, suggestive of a feeling of disdain towards his subordinance. Such bias is exemplified by Robbie's immediate rejection following Briony's accusation, reflecting his insecure and disposable role among the elite. His lack of belonging thus provides no reasoning for his protection, unable to find shelter in

the formation of a secure identity within the Tallis household. Marked only as inferior, he becomes a victim to the underlying prejudices of the Tallis's, vilified as the only logical perpetrator of the crime against Lola, and effortlessly facilitating the 'general view that had formed: Mr. Turner was a dangerous man.' Paul Marshall, on the other hand, having actually committed the assault, fails to even be considered, serving as the antithesis of Robbie, instead exploiting his upper class standing to evade blame. Modern interpretations of the novel including the 2007 film adaptation intensify this division with Paul Marshall cast as the archetypical villain and obvious threat to the innocent Lola, in contrast to Robbie's gentle compassion and quiet tragedy . This lends itself to a Marxist critical reading, as an obvious reflection of the oppression of the proletariat classes under the bourgeoisie elite, rendering any attempt at social mobility obsolete under the rigidity of class hierarchy. From this perspective, Robbie's expulsion from the protection of belonging, and its contrast with the security of Marshall's status, can be characterised plainly as the result of 'Paul's money and Robbie's lack thereof, rather than the decency of their actions.' (Halford, 25). Robbie must therefore remain at the boundary of belonging, reduced only to a delinquent and denied the development of a meaningful identity beyond this label.

This is mirrored in Larkin's speakers, in 'Mr Bleaney' (Larkin, 81) in particular, portraying the emptiness of the human experience outside of belonging. The 'thin and frayed' (line 3) curtains and 'no room for books or bags' (line 9) immediately establish the lack of comfort in 'Mr Bleaney's room' (line 1) both physically and sentimentally, devoid of any sense of home or connection in the same careless neglect the Tallises give to Robbie Turner. 'I don't know' (line 36) offers an ambiguous resolution in the final line, prompting a questioning of the emphasis placed on material privileges in defining personal fulfillment, and thus critiquing the notion that their lack of belonging may be attributed to their limited social standing, deemed undeserving of more than the bare minimum (or in Robbie's case an

unjust accusation). Moreover, Larkin's speakers often appear locked out of the very experiences they observe. 'Here' (Larkin, 79-80), for example, explores a similar dilemma in the perpetual search for identity. The form of the poem itself, as one long stanza, mimics the flow of a constantly moving journey, failing to pause to engage with its surroundings, reflective of Robbie's inability to find comfort throughout the motions of his life; rejection by the Tallises, imprisonment, and the war-torn beaches of Dunkirk. This sequence may therefore reject more modern criticisms of Larkin's writing, in particular the notion of his 'narrow, self absorbed worldview' (Greer). His speaker's longing for identity depicts a more expansive view of belonging, dissimilar to his reputation as an insular 'little Englander' (Whiteman), and instead demonstrating a profound understanding of the dynamic longing for home, extending beyond the confines of such closed-mindedness. An alternative commentary may interpret the final line 'facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach,' (line 32) as a peaceful acceptance of solitude, and an appreciation of the traditionally English landscapes praised throughout Larkin's poetry. However, it is more pervasively evident that his speaker faces Robbie's same longing for the unattainable: familiarity and acceptance, forever on the precipice of belonging.

Finally, Atonement reflects the transient nature of belonging, and the vulnerability of connection to both people and places over time. An obvious example of this is Cecilia and Robbie, their relationship torn apart by Briony's accusation. The war amplifies this sense of disconnection, uprooting the Tallises sense of rural serenity in pre-war England, casting both Robbie and Cecilia adrift from both the comfort of their relationship, and the familiarity of the setting of Part One. McEwan adopts certain Romantic conventions, notably pastoral imagery, in the initial setting of the Tallis estate in Chapter Two, which sees Cecilia diving into the fountain to recover the fragment of the vase Robbie had broken. Against the backdrop of heat and the peaceful natural imagery of the 'oak woods' and 'rhododendrons'

(McEwan, 25) creating the illusion of an almost dreamlike haze, the breaking of the vase foreshadows the shattering of their relationship by Robbie's arrest, developing a sense of disruption that perhaps illustrates the fragility of belonging, not only under pressure from the impact of Briony's fantasy, but from the ever present external forces that drive us away from affinities with past connections; thus presenting love as an unstable refuge. This therefore raises questions concerning the validity of belonging, offering nothing more than temporary comfort. While critics may highlight McEwan's conformity with the contemporary portrayal of pre-war England as a place of order and belonging, it could instead be noted that its vulnerability and sudden disruption exposes this belonging to be merely an illusion. This is also notable in its cinematic adaptation, offering an interpretive insight into the novel that further exposes this fragmentation through a graphic lens. Creating a sharp visual contrast with the earlier tranquility of the Tallis estate's idyllic pastoral gardens and the later brutality of a landscape devastated by war (Atonement), it lends itself to firm agreement overall in the impossibility of permanence in finding true belonging.

This vulnerability of belonging as a construct can also be examined in 'Home is so Sad' (Larkin, 88), personifying a family home in a melancholy lament at the loss of its residents. Much like the tragedy of Robbie and Cecilia's love, Larkin demonstrates a painful acceptance of the impossibility of reclaiming the belonging that has long passed and its inability to 'turn again to what it started as' (line 6). Powerless to the forces of time and the endless fluidity of the human experience, he portrays a characteristically pessimistic outlook, an exploration of the disappointment and futility of life often expressed in his poetry. 'The music in the piano stool, that vase,' (line 10) imitates a moment of reflection through the use of caesura; deploying sensory imagery in a woeful meditation on the distant past. The material object of the vase therefore holds meaning both in Larkin and McEwan's writing, as an anchor to that which can never be returned to. With consideration of the controversies

surrounding Larkin's unpublished letters, this may be perceived as a resentful resistance to the forces of change in modern England, uprooting his archaically conservative and nationalist views. John Osborne labels him a 'man deeply at odds with the modern world' (Osborne, 2), in agreement therefore that the bitter racism and anti-foreigner sentiment expressed in his personal letters must be translated into his writing that 'clings to an outdated vision of England' (Osborne, 3), much like the outdated pre-war perfection of Robbie and Cecilia's love. Conversely, 'An Arundel Tomb' (Larkin, 116-117) demonstrates the immovable force that is eternal love, instead advocating for Robbie and Cecilia's love to transcend the boundaries of time, and ultimately death. The 'stone fidelity' (line 38) with which Larkin describes romantic connection symbolises its everlasting resilience, connoting stability and durable strength. This may serve more balanced critiques of Larkin, instead concluding that his personal shortcomings cannot be utilised to undermine the value of his work and such powerful commentaries on timeless devotion. From this perspective, it is not physical proximity or location that defines belonging, but the personal and sentimental connection that remains timeless. This is exemplified in the final line of the poem: 'What will survive of us is love.' (line 42), offering a final reassurance of the unshakeable force that binds them together. Despite this, from a more modern criticism, it becomes obvious to separate notions of romantic love from true belonging, acknowledging that tragically, it falls insufficient in preventing Robbie's arrest nor their untimely deaths. While Larkin's painful nostalgia may not necessarily be translated from an advocacy for an archaic and insular England, it nonetheless resonates with Robbie and Cecilia's loss, and the fleeting nature of true belonging.

To conclude, both Larkin's poetry and McEwan's Atonement interrogate the true stability that belonging holds, demonstrating the loss of connection to physical comforts, personal relationships, and imaginative realities. They highlight the consequences of

desperation for familiarity, portraying the human experience both on the inside and outside of the privilege of home, and expressing the loss of identity on the precipice of comfort. They question the permanence of these affinities, engaging with the fragility and transient nature of belonging. Ultimately, they reveal belonging as a precarious construct, easily disrupted by time, circumstance, and disillusionment.

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