



The Mise-en-scène of Deception: A Dramaturgical Analysis of the Fountain Scene as the Stage for Briony Tallis's Fatal Misunderstanding in Atonement

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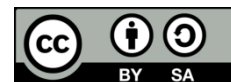
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ABSTRACT

This paper conducts a dramaturgical analysis of the pivotal fountain scene in Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*, treating it as a theatrical performance that stages Briony Tallis's fatal misunderstanding. Using Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory and principles of theatrical mise-en-scène, this research examines how the constituent elements of the scene the setting (the fountain), the props (the porcelain vase), the actors (Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner), and their performance are perceived and fundamentally misinterpreted by its primary audience, the thirteen-year-old Briony. The analysis argues that Briony is not a passive observer but an active, albeit flawed, director and playwright who imposes her own melodramatic narrative onto the events she witnesses. The setting of the fountain acts as a liminal stage where a private, ambiguous interaction is transformed into a public spectacle of perceived villainy and victimhood. This paper demonstrates that the "lie" is not born from malice alone, but from a catastrophic dramaturgical misreading, where the mise-en-scène provides the raw material for a story that ultimately leads to tragedy and a lifelong quest for atonement. The conclusion posits that the scene's power lies in its function as a mise-en-scène of deception, a stage upon which the objective reality is irrevocably replaced by a subjectively authored fiction.

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini menyajikan analisis dramaturgis terhadap adegan kunci di air mancur dalam novel *Atonement* karya Ian McEwan, dengan memperlakukannya sebagai sebuah pertunjukan teatrikal yang menjadi panggung bagi kesalahpahaman fatal Briony Tallis. Menggunakan teori dramaturgi Erving Goffman dan prinsip-prinsip mise-en-scène teatrikal, penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana elemen-elemen konstituen adegan-latar (air mancur), properti (vas porselen), aktor (Cecilia Tallis dan Robbie Turner), dan penampilan mereka dipersepsikan dan secara fundamental disalahartikan oleh audiens utamanya, Briony yang berusia tiga belas tahun. Analisis ini berargumen bahwa Briony bukanlah pengamat pasif, melainkan seorang sutradara dan dramawan yang aktif, meskipun keliru, yang memaksakan narasi melodramatisnya sendiri pada peristiwa yang disaksikannya. Latar air mancur berfungsi sebagai panggung liminal di mana interaksi pribadi yang ambigu diubah menjadi tontonan publik tentang kejahatan dan korban yang dipersepsikan. Artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa "kebohongan" tidak lahir dari niat jahat semata, tetapi dari pembacaan dramaturgis yang salah secara katastrofis, di mana mise-en-scène menyediakan bahan mentah



untuk sebuah cerita yang pada akhirnya mengarah pada tragedi dan pencarian penebusan seumur hidup. Kesimpulannya, kekuatan adegan tersebut terletak pada fungsinya sebagai mise-en-scène kebohongan, sebuah panggung di mana realitas objektif digantikan secara permanen oleh fiksi yang ditulis secara subjektif.

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Introduction

In the vast landscape of literature and drama, a single moment can act as a fulcrum, a pivotal point upon which entire destinies turn. Such moments are often not grand battles or loud confessions, but quiet, intimate scenes charged with an ambiguity that allows for catastrophic misinterpretation. Ian McEwan's critically acclaimed novel, *Atonement* (2001), hinges on such a moment: the seemingly innocuous, yet profoundly consequential, interaction between Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner at the fountain on a sweltering summer day in 1935. This scene, witnessed from a distance by the thirteen-year-old aspiring writer Briony Tallis, becomes the genesis of a lie that shatters multiple lives and sets the novel's protagonist on a lifelong path of penance.

While *Atonement* has been extensively analyzed through various literary lenses, including modernism, narrative theory, and psychoanalysis, this paper proposes a dramaturgical approach. The central argument is that the fountain scene can be most fruitfully understood not merely as a narrative event, but as a theatrical performance. This paper will analyze the fountain scene as a *mise-en-scène* of deception, a meticulously constructed stage where Briony, as both audience and self-appointed playwright, misreads the performance and authors a fatal narrative. By applying the principles of theatrical *mise-en-scène* and Erving Goffman's sociological framework of dramaturgy, we can dissect how the physical and performative elements of the scene contribute to Briony's misunderstanding.

The objective is to move beyond a simple character analysis of Briony as a liar and instead explore the mechanics of how her lie is constructed. This involves treating the scene's components the setting, lighting, props, costumes, and the 'actors' movements and expressions as dramaturgical evidence. The methodology will, therefore, be a qualitative textual analysis. It will deconstruct the scene as described in McEwan's prose, identifying and interpreting the function of each element within a theatrical framework. The theoretical construct draws primarily from Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), which posits that social interactions are akin to theatrical performances, and from established principles of *mise-en-scène* analysis in film and theatre studies. This approach allows us to see Briony not simply as a child who misunderstands, but as a burgeoning director who forces a complex reality into the simplistic, melodramatic structure of the plays she writes, with devastating consequences. This paper will thus illuminate how a space becomes a stage, an action becomes a performance, and a witness becomes the author of a tragedy.



Theoretical Framework: Dramaturgy and the Power of Mise-en-scène

To analyze the fountain scene as a theatrical event, it is essential to establish a clear theoretical framework grounded in the concepts of mise-en-scène and dramaturgical analysis. These two fields, one rooted in visual and performance studies and the other in sociology, offer a powerful combined lens through which to understand the construction and interpretation of meaning in a narrative.

1. Mise-en-scène: The World on Stage

Mise-en-scène, a French term meaning “placing on stage,” refers to everything that appears before the camera or on the stage. It is the art of composing the visual world of a story. In theatre and film, its primary components include:

- **Setting and Décor:** The physical environment where the action unfolds. This includes the location, furniture, and overall architecture. The setting is not merely a backdrop; it actively informs the mood, reflects the characters' psychology, and can shape the events that occur within it (Corrigan, 2015).
- **Lighting:** The illumination of the scene. Lighting directs the audience's attention, creates mood (e.g., high-key for optimism, low-key for mystery), and can reveal or conceal aspects of the characters or setting (Gibbs, 2002).
- **Props:** Objects within the setting that are handled by the actors. Props can have functional or symbolic importance, often serving as catalysts for action or as objective correlatives for a character's internal state.
- **Costume and Makeup:** The clothing and appearance of the characters. These elements provide immediate information about a character's social status, personality, state of mind, and the historical period.
- **Figure Expression and Movement (Blocking):** This refers to how the actors are positioned, how they move, and their gestures and facial expressions. The blocking of actors in relation to each other and the setting can reveal power dynamics, relationships, and unspoken intentions (Bordwell & Thompson, 2017).

While originating in visual media, the concept of mise-en-scène is profoundly useful for literary analysis. A novelist like Ian McEwan uses descriptive language to “place on stage” these very elements, guiding the reader's inner eye to construct a mental image of the scene. The writer directs the reader's attention just as a film director directs the camera, making specific choices about what is shown, what is emphasized, and how it is framed.

2. Goffman's Dramaturgy: The Performance of Social Life

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1956) proposed a revolutionary way of understanding social interaction. In his dramaturgical model, he argues that individuals in everyday life are like actors on a stage, performing social roles and managing the impressions they give to others. Key concepts from his work are directly applicable to our analysis:

- **Front Stage and Back Stage:** The “front stage” is where the performance is given, where the individual adheres to social norms and conventions to present an idealized version of themselves to an audience. The “back stage” is a private region where the performer can relax, drop the persona, and prepare for front-stage appearances. A crucial source of tension and drama arises when the back stage is inadvertently exposed to a front-stage audience.



- Performance: The activity of an individual before a particular set of observers (the "audience") that serves to influence them in some way.
- Impression Management: The process by which individuals attempt to control the perceptions others have of them. This involves carefully curating one's appearance, manner, and setting.
- The Audience: The observers of the performance who, through their interpretation, give meaning to the actor's actions. However, an audience can also misinterpret a performance, leading to social breakdown.

3. Synthesizing the Framework for Atonement

By combining *mise-en-scène* analysis with Goffman's dramaturgical theory, we can approach the fountain scene in *Atonement* with unique insight. The *mise-en-scène*, as described by McEwan, constitutes the physical "stage" with its setting, props, and lighting. Upon this stage, Cecilia and Robbie are the "actors," engaged in what they perceive as a private, "back stage" moment of tension and resolution. However, Briony's window transforms this space into a "front stage." She becomes the "audience."

Crucially, Briony is not a neutral audience member. As a young playwright obsessed with order, clear motives, and dramatic structure, she is predisposed to interpret ambiguity as conflict. She applies her own "script"-a melodrama of a virtuous maiden and a menacing villain-to the performance she witnesses. The tragedy of *Atonement* is born in this gap: the chasm between the actors' authentic (if awkward) "back stage" interaction and the audience's (Briony's) dramaturgically flawed interpretation of it as a sinister "front stage" performance. The *mise-en-scène* does not lie, but it provides the perfect stage for a lie to be constructed.



Picture 1. Fountain Scene

Result and Discussion

The Fountain Scene as a Stage of Deception

The fountain scene is presented to the reader almost entirely through Briony's consciousness. McEwan masterfully constructs the scene's *mise-en-scène*, not as objective fact, but as a series of sensory inputs that Briony processes and organizes into a narrative. This section will deconstruct the scene element by element to demonstrate how each piece contributes to her fatal dramaturgical misreading.

1. The Setting: A Liminal Stage



The fountain itself is the central piece of the set. It is not a natural feature but a man-made structure, a symbol of the Tallis family's attempt to impose order and civilization upon the landscape. It exists in a liminal space: between the cultivated, formal gardens and the untamed woods beyond; between the public grounds and the private interior of the house. This transitional quality makes it the perfect stage for an event that blurs the line between private and public, innocence and experience.

From her vantage point at the nursery window, Briony sees the scene as if it were a proscenium stage, framed by the window's arch. The distance flattens the perspective, removes auditory context (she cannot hear their words), and transforms the actors into figures in a tableau. This physical and sensory distance is critical. It denies Briony the nuances of tone of voice and close observation of expression that might have clarified the situation. Instead, she is left with only the stark, silent-film-like visuals of the performance, which she must then score with her own internal monologue and interpretation. The oppressive heat of the day, described by McEwan, adds to the tense atmosphere, making the cool water of the fountain a focal point of desire and conflict, further heightening the drama in Briony's perception.

2. The Props: A Shattered Symbol

The key prop in this scene is the heavy, ornate porcelain vase, a family heirloom made in the Meissen factory for a Tallis uncle. Its symbolic weight is immense. It represents heritage, value, fragility, and the very history of the family. When Robbie and Cecilia argue over it and its pieces fall into the fountain, the act is loaded with meaning. Objectively, it is an accident born of a clumsy, tense negotiation of space and property.

For Briony, however, this act is the inciting incident of her play. The breaking of the vase is not an accident but a symbolic act of violation. She interprets Robbie's insistence on holding it and Cecilia's attempt to retrieve it not as a complex social dance, but as a struggle for dominance. The vase becomes a stand-in for Cecilia herself a precious, fragile object that Robbie, in his perceived crudeness, mishandles and damages. The fragments sinking into the water are, for Briony, the irrefutable evidence of a transgression. The prop has fulfilled its dramatic purpose: it has initiated the conflict and established the villain.

3. The Actors and Their Performance: A Back Stage Moment Invaded

Cecilia and Robbie are the unwilling actors in Briony's drama. Their interaction is a quintessential "back stage" moment a raw, unpolished, and emotionally honest negotiation of their long-simmering and confusing attraction. Cecilia's act of stripping to her underwear and diving into the fountain is, for her, a radical act of reclaiming agency. It is an impulsive, frustrated, and ultimately private gesture meant to end an awkward standoff. It is her way of saying, "I will not be managed; I am in control."

Briony, the audience, reads this performance in the exact opposite way. From her distant, high-angle perspective, Cecilia's act of undressing is not one of power but of submission. It is a debasement, a humiliation forced upon her by Robbie's "menacing" presence. McEwan writes from Briony's view: "This was not a proposal of marriage. This was a command." She sees Robbie not as a flustered young man but as a figure of authority, a "maniac" or a "lord" whose will is being imposed. His stillness is not confusion but cold, calculating observation.

Their movements the "blocking" are interpreted through this melodramatic filter. Every step towards the fountain, every gesture, is seen as an act of aggression or



retreat. The performance is stripped of its ambiguity and emotional complexity and flattened into a simple, legible narrative of male power and female subjugation. This is the core of the dramaturgical error: a back-stage reality, full of contradiction and authentic emotion, is witnessed and rewritten as a sinister front-stage performance.

4. The Director and Her Script: Briony's Authorial Gaze

More than just an audience, Briony acts as the scene's director and playwright. She is not merely watching; she is actively composing. Her mind, already primed by the romantic and moralistic tales she writes, seeks a clear narrative with heroes and villains. The world, for her, must be "tidy." When faced with the messy, ambiguous reality of adult emotions at the fountain, her instinct is to impose order upon it.

She casts the actors into roles that fit her pre-written script. Cecilia is the "maiden," her sister, who must be protected. Robbie, the son of their charlady and a beneficiary of her father's kindness, is cast as the outsider, the social inferior whose ambition becomes, in Briony's eyes, a form of threat. His presence is a disruption to the established order of the Tallis world. Therefore, his actions must be sinister.

This process is detailed in the following table, which breaks down the dramaturgical misreading:

Dramaturgical Element	Objective Reality (The "Back Stage")	Briony's Dramaturgical Interpretation(The "Front Stage" Script)
Setting (Fountain)	A liminal, public space on a hot day.	A theatrical stage for a private, secret drama; a site of conflict.
Prop (Vase)	A valuable but clumsy object; its breaking is an accident born of tension.	A symbol of Cecilia's (and the family's) fragile purity; its breaking is a deliberate act of violation by Robbie.
Actor (Cecilia)	Acts out of frustration and a desire to reclaim agency and control.	A helpless victim, forced to debase and humiliate herself. Her agency is erased.
Actor (Robbie)	Awkward, confused by Cecilia's actions, and trying to navigate a tense social/romantic moment.	A menacing, controlling villain; a "maniac" deliberately asserting power over a social superior.
Performance/Action	An ambiguous, emotionally complex interaction between two people with a shared history.	A clear, linear narrative of aggression, submission, and threat. A melodrama.

This table illustrates the systematic way in which Briony transforms each element of the *mise-en-scène* from an ambiguous piece of reality into a concrete piece of evidence for the story she is writing in her head. This story, once scripted, becomes her unshakeable truth, a truth she will later perform as a witness, cementing the tragedy.



The Consequence: From Flawed Play to Fatal Testimony

The dramaturgical misreading at the fountain is not merely a childish fantasy; it is the rehearsal for a much more public and devastating performance. When Briony later witnesses the sexual assault in the library, her mind does not seek a new explanation. Instead, it slots this new event into the narrative she has already scripted. The *mise-en-scène* of the library scene the darkness, the shadowy figures provides even more ambiguity, which Briony fills with the certainties she established at the fountain. Robbie has already been cast as the villain; therefore, he must be the perpetrator.

Her testimony to the police is her "play" made public. She is no longer just the audience or director; she becomes the lead actor, delivering her lines with the conviction of an eyewitness. The confidence in her voice comes from the "fact" that she has seen the "evidence" before, at the fountain. The earlier scene served as the "rising action" that established character and motive, making the "climax" in the library seem inevitable to her.

This demonstrates the terrifying power of a narrative. Once a story is constructed, it develops an internal logic that can feel more real and compelling than objective truth. Briony's lie is powerful not because it is malicious, but because, in her own dramaturgical framework, it is entirely consistent. She has observed the actors, interpreted their performance through her script, and now presents her findings to a new audience (the police, her family), who, lacking other clear narratives, accept her version of events.

The tragedy of *Atonement* is therefore a tragedy of authorship. Briony's sin is not just bearing false witness; it is the sin of a writer who loves her story more than the people in it. She prioritizes the neatness of her plot with its clear villain and victim over the messy, complicated, and ultimately innocent truth. The fountain's *mise-en-scène* was the stage for her first, and most disastrous, act of authorial creation, a play whose consequences she spends the rest of her life trying to atone for by writing another: the very novel we are reading.

Conclusion

By applying a dramaturgical lens to the fountain scene in *Atonement*, we see it not as a simple prelude to a lie, but as the very stage upon which that lie is conceived, scripted, and rehearsed. The analysis of the *mise-en-scène* the setting, props, and performance reveals that Briony Tallis is far from a passive witness. She is an active, interpretative force, a young playwright who imposes a melodramatic order onto an ambiguous adult reality. The fountain, a liminal space, becomes her proscenium stage; the broken vase, her symbolic proof of transgression; and Cecilia and Robbie, the actors she casts in roles of her own design.

This approach, combining theatrical analysis with Goffman's sociological insights, highlights the catastrophic gap between a private, "back stage" interaction and its perception as a public, "front stage" performance of villainy. Briony's fatal misunderstanding is, in essence, a catastrophic failure of dramaturgy. She misreads the script, the actors' motives, and the subtext, and in doing so, authors a fiction that she then presents as fact.

Ultimately, this dramaturgical reading underscores a central theme in McEwan's work: the immense and often dangerous power of storytelling. It reveals how the human need for narrative coherence can lead us to distort reality, to create villains where there are none, and to sacrifice truth for the sake of a "good story." The fountain scene is the perfect *mise-en-*



scène for this act of deceptive creation. It is a quiet, sun-drenched stage for a performance of misunderstanding, one that would echo through decades, costing love, freedom, and lives, leaving only a lifelong, written atonement in its wake.

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