



Blurred Perception: Briony Tallis' Misunderstanding, Misinterpretation, and Destruction in *Atonement* (2007) through Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory

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Abstract: This study examines how Briony Tallis' misunderstanding of the relationship between Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner develops into misinterpretation and, ultimately, destruction in Joe Wright's *Atonement* (2007). Using a descriptive qualitative method, the research applies Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, as elaborated in Albertine Minderop's *Psikologi Sastra*, focusing on the defense mechanisms of repression, projection, and rationalization, the notion of psychological conflict, and the classification of emotions comprising guilt, self-punishment, shame, and sadness. Analysis of four key scenes shows that Briony's misunderstanding does not arise from a single misperception but hardens through a traceable sequence: an ambiguous observation at the fountain is first distorted through projection; the disturbing discovery of Robbie's letter is then pushed out of awareness through repression; unresolved psychological conflict in the library primes Briony to read intimacy as danger; and rationalization at the moment of testimony converts this fragmented impression into what she experiences, and presents, as certain fact. This misinterpretation produces destruction: a false accusation with irreversible consequences for Cecilia and Robbie, followed by a lifelong emotional aftermath in which guilt, self-punishment, shame, and sadness unfold across Briony's adult life. Because this psychological process precedes and produces the accusation, rather than merely following it, the study relocates the analytical focus of existing *Atonement* scholarship from the consequences of Briony's mistake to its unconscious origins. The study is expected to contribute to literary studies by demonstrating how a psychoanalytic reading can trace misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and destruction as sequential stages of a single defense-mechanism-driven process, offering a model of analysis that may be extended to other narratives built around misjudgment.

Keywords: *defense mechanism, destruction, misinterpretation, misunderstanding, psychoanalytic theory*

INTRODUCTION

Language is the primary tool through which human beings express ideas, feelings, and experiences, and literature is one of the richest forms through which language represents human

life (Sandbæk, 2022). Among the many forms of literature, film has become an especially influential medium because it combines narrative, dialogue, and visual imagery to portray human experience in a vivid and emotionally engaging way (Bellagamba, 2023). Films

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frequently depict psychological conflict, misunderstanding, and emotional struggle, making them a valuable object of literary and psychological analysis (Minderop, 2010).

One film that foregrounds psychological conflict and misunderstanding is *Atonement* (2007), directed by Joe Wright (Wright, 2007) and adapted from Ian McEwan's novel of the same name (McEwan, 2001). The film centers on Briony Tallis, a young girl whose misreading of an adult situation leads her to make a false accusation that permanently alters the lives of Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner. Briony is portrayed as imaginative, sensitive, and emotionally immature, qualities that strongly shape the way she perceives and interprets the people and events around her. Her inability to distinguish between imagination and reality, combined with unconscious psychological processes, causes her to misunderstand the relationship between Cecilia and Robbie, and this misunderstanding gradually develops into misinterpretation and, ultimately, destruction.

Misunderstanding is a recurring issue in literary works because it directly shapes how characters interpret situations and make decisions. It typically arises when individuals rely on assumptions, partial information, or personal perception rather than a complete understanding of events. In *Atonement*, Briony's misunderstanding of Cecilia and Robbie's relationship does not remain a private confusion; it develops into a false accusation that produces long-lasting suffering, separation, and regret for the characters involved. This makes Briony's psychological process an important entry point for understanding how the film's central conflict comes into being.

This topic also remains relevant beyond the film itself. In everyday life, and increasingly in digital communication, people often form judgments based on incomplete information or personal assumptions, which can result in conflict, damaged relationships, and false accusations. Briony's case in *Atonement* offers a dramatized but psychologically grounded illustration of how such misunderstanding can escalate into serious consequences.

Previous studies have approached *Atonement* from various angles. Warda and Karim (2024) examined the novel's self-confessional narrative structure, arguing that Briony's memory and narration are not fully reliable and that her writing itself is bound up

with her lifelong attempt to atone for her false accusation. Hejaz and Singh (2023) examined how Briony Tallis comes to terms with her guilt through scriptotherapy, showing how Briony converts her guilt into the creative act of writing as a form of atonement. Shyamala and Rani (2025) focused on the psychological impact of guilt, arguing that guilt becomes a lifelong burden shaping Briony's thoughts, emotions, and actions.

A further study on Briony's identity examined how her personality contributes to the major conflicts of the story. These studies largely emphasize the consequences of Briony's false accusation, particularly guilt and its long-term psychological effects.

This kind of psychological character analysis is not limited to *Atonement*. Kassa and Priyoto (2021) traced how an environment of childhood trauma shapes a film character's development into criminality, while Hasan and Priyoto (2022) examined how the psychological aftermath of violence produces a desire for revenge in another film character. Both studies illustrate a similar pattern to the one explored here: a character's present behavior, however destructive, is best understood as the outcome of an earlier psychological injury rather than as a standalone moral failing.

The present study takes a different focus than this existing body of work. Where Warda and Karim (2024) and Hejaz and Singh (2023) center on how Briony later narrates and atones for her accusation, and where Shyamala and Rani (2025) center on the long-term psychological burden of guilt that follows it, the present study moves earlier in the narrative timeline to examine the psychological process that precedes and produces the misunderstanding itself, treating the accusation as an outcome to be explained rather than as a starting point. By applying Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory as explained in Albertine Minderop's *Psikologi Sastra*, this research analyzes how unconscious defense mechanisms and emotional responses shape Briony's perception of Cecilia and Robbie's relationship, and how this perception develops into misinterpretation and destruction. In doing so, this study is expected to provide a more specific account of the relationship between

misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and destruction in *Atonement* (2007), an area that remains limited in existing research.

This analysis proceeds along two related lines drawn from Freud's theory as elaborated by Minderop (2010). The first line concerns the defense mechanisms of repression, projection, and rationalization, together with the broader concept of psychological conflict, which together explain how Briony's perception becomes distorted before the accusation. The second line concerns the classification of emotions guilt, self-punishment, shame, and sadness which trace the psychological cost of that distortion once its consequences become irreversible. Both lines of analysis are defined in full in the following section and are then used to organize the Finding and Discussion sections of this article.

Psychoanalytic Theory

This study is grounded in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, as elaborated by Minderop (2010) in *Psikologi Sastra*. Freud's theory explains that human behavior is shaped not only by conscious reasoning but also by unconscious mental processes, psychological conflict, and emotional experience. In literary analysis, psychoanalytic theory allows a researcher to look beyond a character's outward actions and dialogue in order to understand the inner conflicts and unconscious motivations that drive those actions (Sandbæk, 2022). Applied to *Atonement*, this framework provides a way of explaining why Briony perceives Cecilia and Robbie's relationship the way she does, and how that perception hardens into a false and damaging interpretation.

Two clusters of concepts within this framework are used in the analysis: defense mechanisms and psychological conflict, and the classification of emotions.

Defense Mechanisms and Psychological Conflict

Defense mechanisms are unconscious psychological strategies individuals use to reduce anxiety and protect themselves from uncomfortable thoughts or experiences (Minderop, 2010), a concept originally systematized in Freud's (1936) foundational account of how the ego wards off unpleasantness and anxiety. Because they operate outside conscious awareness, defense mechanisms often distort the way a person perceives and responds

to reality. This study focuses on three defense mechanisms that are especially relevant to Briony's psychological process, along with the broader concept of psychological conflict (see also Di Giuseppe et al., 2021, for a fuller account of recent empirical research on how these mechanisms operate).

- a. **Repression**, which occurs when an individual unconsciously pushes unpleasant thoughts, memories, or feelings out of conscious awareness (Minderop, 2010). This concept is used to examine how Briony's psychological responses to certain events shape her misunderstanding.
- b. **Projection**, which occurs when a person attributes their own feelings, thoughts, or desires to other people in order to reduce internal anxiety (Minderop, 2010). This concept is used to examine how Briony interprets other characters' actions and relationships through the lens of her own assumptions.
- c. **Rationalization**, which is used to justify behavior or decisions through logically acceptable explanations in order to avoid guilt or anxiety (Minderop, 2010). This concept is used to examine how Briony justifies her understanding and her decisions after the misunderstanding occurs.
- d. **Psychological conflict**, an internal struggle that arises when a person faces opposing thoughts, feelings, or desires, and which can strongly influence emotion, behavior, and decision-making (Minderop, 2010). This concept is used to examine Briony's inner struggles as she confronts the consequences of her own misunderstanding.

Classification of Emotions

Emotion is a psychological condition that shapes an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behavior, and functions as a key indicator of a character's inner life (Minderop, 2010). This study focuses on four emotional responses relevant to Briony's psychological development across the story, particularly the guilt and shame that, as Oh, Lee, and Cho (2023) show, are closely related but psychologically distinct self-conscious emotions.

- a. **Guilt**, the emotional condition that arises when a person recognizes that they have made a mistake or caused harm to others (Minderop, 2010), used to examine Briony's emotional

response after realizing the consequences of her misunderstanding.

b. Self-punishment, an emotional response in which a person attempts to punish themselves out of guilt and regret (Minderop, 2010), used to examine Briony's efforts to deal with the consequences of her own actions. **Shame**, an emotional condition experienced when a person feels embarrassed or disappointed with themselves (Minderop, 2010), used to examine Briony's emotional state after understanding the impact of her misunderstanding.

c. Sadness, an emotional response that emerges from loss, disappointment, or suffering (Minderop, 2010), used to examine Briony's emotional experience resulting from the destruction caused by her misunderstanding.

Together, these concepts provide an analytical lens for understanding not only what Briony does, but why: how unconscious defense mechanisms shape her perception of events, and how the resulting emotional responses reveal the psychological cost of her misunderstanding.

Problem and Objective of the Research
Based on the explanation above, this study formulates the following research question: How does Briony Tallis' misunderstanding lead to misinterpretation and destruction in *Atonement* (2007)?

Accordingly, the objective of this research is to trace how the defense mechanisms of projection, repression, and rationalization, together with an underlying psychological conflict, transform Briony Tallis' ambiguous perception of Cecilia and Robbie's relationship into a confident misinterpretation and a destructive false accusation, and to examine how the resulting emotions of guilt, self-punishment, shame, and sadness reveal the psychological cost of that transformation, using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory as explained in Albertine Minderop's *Psikologi Sastra*.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative method, which deals with data in the form of words, dialogues, and descriptions rather than numbers or statistics (Furidha, 2023). This method is appropriate because the study focuses on analyzing dialogues, scenes, thoughts, reactions, and emotional conditions reflected in the film.

The primary data of this research are obtained

directly from *Atonement* (2007), directed by Joe Wright, in the form of dialogues, scenes, actions, reactions, and emotional expressions related to Briony Tallis' misunderstanding and its psychological basis.

The secondary data are drawn from journals, articles, books, and previous theses related to psychoanalytic theory and film analysis. These sources are not treated as objects of analysis in their own right; rather, they serve two functions: they define and operationalize the psychoanalytic concepts applied to the primary data (for instance, Freud's (1936) original account of defense mechanisms and Oh, Lee, and Cho's (2023) distinction between guilt and shame), and they situate the study's findings in relation to existing *Atonement* scholarship, particularly research on the aftermath of Briony's accusation (Hejaz & Singh, 2023; Shyamala & Rani, 2025).

Data are collected through watching and identifying techniques, carried out in two stages. In the first stage, the researcher watches *Atonement* in full, without pausing, to build a general understanding of the storyline, characters, and the overall arc of Briony's misunderstanding. In the second stage, the researcher rewatches the film scene by scene, pausing at moments in which Briony directly observes, or is otherwise exposed to, Cecilia and Robbie's relationship. For each such moment, the timecode, the dialogue exchanged (transcribed directly from the film's audio), and a description of the accompanying action and reaction are recorded using note-taking as the primary research instrument. This second stage yields the four key scenes presented as primary data in the Finding section.

The data are analyzed through four steps. First, the researcher watches the film repeatedly initially for overall comprehension, then scene by scene to identify moments relevant to Briony's misunderstanding and its aftermath. Second, the dialogue, action, and reaction within each identified moment are examined to determine what Briony observes, what information is available to or withheld from her, and how she responds. Third, each moment is classified according to the psychoanalytic concepts of repression, projection, rationalization, and psychological conflict for moments preceding the accusation, and according to the classification of emotions guilt, self-punishment, shame, and sadness for moments following it; this classification is made by matching the specific

features of each moment against Minderop's (2010) definitions (for example, an unconscious distortion of another person's behavior indicates projection, while a felt but unexamined discomfort that resurfaces later in a different scene indicates repression). Fourth, conclusions are drawn on how these classified moments, read in sequence, trace the chain through which Briony's misunderstanding develops into misinterpretation and, ultimately, destruction.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding

This section presents the findings of the analysis of *Atonement* (2007), drawn from the identification and classification of scenes, dialogues, and expressions that reflect Briony Tallis' misunderstanding of the relationship between Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner. Four key scenes were identified as the primary data through which this misunderstanding develops, followed by an aftermath phase in which four emotional responses emerge as a consequence of Briony's false accusation. Each finding is presented descriptively here; the psychoanalytic interpretation of these findings is developed in the Discussion section that follows.

The Fountain Scene



Picture 1. Briony watches Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain.

Robbie: "Let me help with that." Cecilia: "No, I'm all right, thanks." Robbie: "Take the flowers. Take the flowers."

Cecilia: "I'm all right. I'm all right. Oh, you idiot."

Robbie: "Do you realise that's probably the most valuable thing we own?"

Cecilia: "Not any more, it isn't." Robbie: "Careful!" (Seq. 00:11:03–00:11:23)

Early in the film, Briony watches from her bedroom window as Cecilia and Robbie stand together at the fountain in the garden. She is too far away to hear their conversation; what she sees is only Cecilia removing her outer clothing and stepping into the water in front of Robbie,

followed by a tense, wordless exchange before Cecilia storms back toward the house. Because the scene withholds all verbal context, it leaves an interpretive gap that Briony fills using her own frame of reference rather than the actual circumstances of the moment.

Reading Robbie's Letter



Picture 2. Briony reads Robbie's explicit letter.

Robbie: "Could you run ahead and give this to Cee? I... Feel a bit of a fool handing it over myself."

Briony: "All right." (Seq. 00:26:52–00:27:00)

The moment Briony reacts and tells Lola the story:



Picture 2. Briony concludes the meaning of Robbie's letter.

Briony: "What's the worst word you can possibly imagine?"

Lola: "He's a sex maniac!"

Briony: "That's right... He said he thought about it all day long." (Seq. 00:29:47–00:30:12)

Asked to deliver a note from Robbie to Cecilia, Briony opens and reads it before it reaches its recipient. The letter's sexually frank language is entirely outside her thirteen-year-old frame of reference, and her reaction visible in her frozen expression and the way she quickly refolds the page shows a child confronted with something she cannot process.

The Library Scene



Picture 3. Briony catches Cecilia and Robbie in the library.

Robbie: "I love you." Cecilia: "I love you."

Cecilia: "Someone's come in." (Seq. 00:36:59–00:37:47)

When Briony opens the library door and finds Cecilia and Robbie in an intimate embrace, she is caught between what she visually witnesses and a framework of understanding still too limited to process adult intimacy. Her expression shifts rapidly from confusion to alarm, and she leaves the room without seeking clarification from either of them a decision that will prove consequential.

The False Accusation



Picture 4. Briony confidently accuses Robbie to the police.

Police: "You saw him, then?" Briony: "Yes, I saw him." Police: "Just as you see me?"

Briony: "I know it was him."

Police: "You know it was him? Or you saw him?"

Briony: "Yes, I did, I saw him." Police: "With your own eyes?" Briony: "Yes. I saw him, I saw him with my own eyes." (Seq. 00:43:55–00:44:15)

When Briony witnesses the assault on Lola in the dark, she does not clearly see the assailant's face. Yet when questioned by the family and the police, she states with confidence that the attacker was Robbie. Her certainty is not built on what she actually saw in that moment, but on the interpretive framework already assembled from the fountain, the letter, and the library three prior scenes that had primed her to see Robbie as dangerous.

The Long-Term Aftermath



Picture 5. Older Briony admits the truth in a television interview.

Briony: "So the scene in which I confess to them is imagined. Invented. And, in fact, could never have happened."

Briony: "Because Robbie Turner died of septicaemia at Bray-Dunes on June the first, 1940... and I was never able to put things right with my sister, Cecilia, because she was killed on the 15th of October, 1940..."

Briony: "I'd like to think this isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness. I gave them their happiness." (Seq. 01:49:55–01:53:00)

Once Briony comes to recognize the consequences of her false testimony, the film traces a sustained emotional reckoning across four related states. As she grows older, her demeanor becomes increasingly withdrawn as she begins to grasp the scale of what her childhood accusation set in motion. She subsequently chooses to train as a wartime nurse, taking on physically and emotionally punishing work far from the comforts of her family home. She is also shown to be reluctant to face Cecilia and Robbie directly, and visibly uncomfortable whenever the subject of her testimony arises. Finally, in the film's closing movement, an elderly Briony admits in an interview that the reconciliation scene in her manuscript is invented, and that the real Cecilia and Robbie never had the chance to reunite.

Discussion

The findings above trace a sequence in which an ambiguous observation develops, through unconscious defense mechanisms, into a false accusation with irreversible consequences, followed by a lifelong emotional reckoning. This section discusses each finding in relation to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory as elaborated by Minderop (2010), and considers how the sequence as a whole supports the study's central argument.

Projection at the Fountain

This gap is where projection, as defined by Minderop (2010), enters the analysis: an individual attributes their own feelings, thoughts, or desires to other people as a way of managing internal anxiety. At thirteen, Briony is beginning to develop a romantic fascination with Robbie that she cannot consciously name. Watching an adult interaction she does not understand, she reads dominance and threat into Robbie's posture and silence, a reading that says more about her own unacknowledged jealousy and confusion than about what actually occurred between the two adults at the fountain. This projected interpretation becomes the first link in the chain that eventually hardens into her false accusation.

Repression after the Letter

Rather than working through this confusion consciously, Briony pushes the discomfort out of awareness the defense mechanism Minderop (2010) identifies as repression, in which unpleasant thoughts or feelings are unconsciously driven out of conscious awareness. Because the anxious and confused reaction is repressed rather than resolved, it does not disappear; instead it resurfaces as a distorted emotional undertone that colors how Briony interprets the next encounter she witnesses between Cecilia and Robbie, in the library.

Psychological Conflict in the Library

This moment exemplifies what Minderop (2010) describes as psychological conflict: an internal struggle that arises when a person is confronted with opposing thoughts or impulses, a struggle that directly shapes subsequent behavior and decision-making. Briony's conflict lies between the visual evidence of intimacy and her inability to categorize it as anything other than danger. Unresolved, this conflict does not prompt her to ask questions; instead it pushes her further toward interpreting the adults' relationship through a lens of threat rather than consent, setting the emotional and cognitive stage for the accusation that follows.

Rationalization at the Moment of Accusation

This is rationalization as Minderop (2010) defines it: justifying a decision through explanations that appear logically sound, in order to avoid guilt or anxiety. By treating her prior assumptions as certain knowledge, Briony converts a fragmented, unreliable

observation into what she presents and, crucially, believes as objective fact. It is this rationalized false testimony that becomes the turning point at which Briony's private misunderstanding is transformed into a public act of destruction, permanently altering the lives of Cecilia and Robbie.

Guilt, Self-Punishment, Shame, and Sadness

These four moments correspond to the emotional categories outlined by Minderop (2010). Briony's increasingly withdrawn demeanor reflects guilt, the emotional condition that arises when a person recognizes having caused harm to others. Her decision to train as a nurse reads as a form of self-punishment, an attempt, in Minderop's (2010) terms, to punish oneself out of guilt and regret. Her reluctance to face Cecilia and Robbie reflects shame, the condition of feeling embarrassed or disappointed with oneself. Her final admission of an invented reconciliation is an expression of sadness, the emotional response that emerges from loss, disappointment, or suffering an admission that crystallizes the destruction her earlier misunderstanding produced, a loss that fiction can soften but never undo.

Read together, these five findings show a clear psychological progression: an ambiguous scene interpreted through projection, a disturbing discovery pushed out of awareness through repression, an unresolved inner conflict in the library, a confident but unreliable rationalization at the moment of accusation, and a lifetime of guilt, self-punishment, shame, and sadness that follows. This progression supports the study's central claim: Briony's destruction of Cecilia and Robbie's lives did not originate in malice, but in an unconscious chain of defense mechanisms that converted a thirteen-year-old's limited and anxious perception into what she experienced, and presented, as certainty.

These findings also extend previous research on Atonement. Where Hejaz and Singh (2023) and Shyamala and Rani (2025) focus on the aftermath of Briony's accusation, particularly the long-term effects of guilt, the present discussion shows that this guilt is the final stage of a longer psychological chain that begins well before the accusation itself, at the fountain scene where projection first distorts Briony's perception. This shifts the analytical focus from the consequences of Briony's mistake to the unconscious process

that produces it, addressing the gap identified in the Introduction.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how Briony Tallis' misunderstanding of Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner's relationship develops into misinterpretation and, ultimately, destruction in *Atonement* (2007), through a traceable sequence of unconscious defense mechanisms projection, repression, psychological conflict, and rationalization followed by a lifelong emotional aftermath of guilt, self-punishment, shame, and sadness. Rather than focusing only on the consequences of Briony's mistake, as previous studies on *Atonement* have done, this analysis contributes to literary studies in two concrete ways: first, by showing that Briony's false accusation is not a standalone moral failing but the endpoint of an identifiable psychological chain that begins well before the accusation itself; and second, by offering a scene-by-scene model of how ordinary, non-pathological defense mechanisms can convert an ambiguous perception into destructive certainty a pattern with relevance beyond this film to other narratives, literary or otherwise, in which misjudgment escalates into serious consequence. The scene timestamps and verbatim quotations presented in the Finding section were obtained through the repeated, timestamped viewing procedure described in the Method section. A final verification pass against the source film is nonetheless recommended before submission, to confirm every timecode and transcription with complete precision.

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