



The Weight of Wealth: A Marxist Critique of Social Injustice in Atonement

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Abstract

This study examines how class hierarchy produces social injustice in *Atonement* (2007) through a Marxist critical framework. While previous study has primarily emphasized narrative unreliability and guilt, limited research has systematically analyzed how class prejudice, institutional authority, and narrative perspective interact to structure injustice within the film. The objective of this study is to explain how Robbie Turner's working class identity shapes his fate, how social institutions legitimize injustice, and how narrative authority constructs a false truth that reinforces class hierarchy. This research employs a qualitative design using textual and film analysis. Data were collected through repeated viewing, dialogue transcription, and scene documentation from the official cinematic version, and analyzed using Marxist concepts such as ideology, false consciousness, and institutional power alongside film form analysis. The findings reveal that class based suspicion determines credibility, institutional procedures reproduce dominant ideology, and narrative perspective transforms subjective perception into socially accepted truth. The study concludes that injustice in the film operates structurally rather than individually, contributing to Marxist film criticism by foregrounding class power as the central force shaping narrative outcomes.

KEYWORDS: Marxist criticism, class hierarchy, ideology, narrative authority, social injustice

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1. INTRODUCTION

Literature and film function as cultural texts that reflect and reproduce social structures, including class hierarchy and power relations. Marxist criticism argues that literary and cinematic works are shaped by material conditions and ideological systems that sustain class domination (Marx & Engels, 1978; Tyson, 2015). From this perspective, cultural products do not merely represent reality but participate in maintaining or questioning dominant ideology. Althusser (1971) further explains that social institutions operate as ideological state apparatuses that reproduce existing class relations by shaping belief systems and social consciousness. Therefore, class prejudice in narrative texts can be understood not as an individual flaw but as a

structural mechanism embedded within ideology and institutional power. *Atonement* (2007), directed by Joe Wright and adapted from Ian McEwan's novel, presents a story of guilt, memory, and injustice set in pre World War II Britain. While the film foregrounds a tragic love story, it also depicts rigid class divisions between the Tallis family and Robbie Turner. Marxist theory emphasizes that class position influences access to power, credibility, and justice (Tyson, 2015). In the film, Robbie's working class background becomes a determining factor in how he is perceived and judged, despite his education and personal integrity. His vulnerability reflects what Marx and Engels (1978) call class within a hierarchical social order.

Previous studies on *Atonement* have largely focused on narrative unreliability, guilt, and metafiction. Finney (2004) argues that McEwan's novel foregrounds the ethical implications of storytelling and the instability of truth. Similarly, Phelan (2007) explains that unreliable narration functions as a rhetorical strategy that shapes readers' moral judgment and emotional response. Scholars have also examined memory, trauma, and the relationship between fiction and reality in the novel and its adaptation (Groes, 2011). These studies demonstrate that narrative perspective plays a central role in constructing meaning. However, although class tension is acknowledged in discussions of the novel, it is often treated as contextual background rather than as the central ideological force driving the injustice.

From a Marxist perspective, ideology functions as a system of representation that shapes how individuals perceive social reality, often masking underlying power relations. According to Althusser (1971), ideology operates most effectively when it appears natural and unquestioned, leading individuals to accept dominant social structures as given. In this sense, Marxism views ideology as a tool that sustains class domination by producing what Marx and Engels (1978) term as "false consciousness," in which individuals unknowingly internalize and reproduce the values of the ruling class. Scholars such as Tyson (2015) further emphasize that literature and film play a significant role in reinforcing or challenging these ideological structures by shaping audience perception.

In *Atonement*, the acceptance of Briony's accusation and the immediate suspicion directed at Robbie can be interpreted as manifestations of what Marxist theory identifies as false consciousness, in which individuals internalize dominant class assumptions and reproduce them as truth (Marx & Engels, 1978; Tyson, 2015). Moreover, Bordwell and Thompson (2019) argue that cinematography and narrative framing guide viewers' interpretation by positioning certain perspectives as authoritative. This insight is particularly relevant in analyzing how the film visually reinforces Briony's narrative authority while marginalizing Robbie's voice.

Despite extensive research on narrative unreliability and metafiction in *Atonement*, a number of recent studies have primarily focused on narrative techniques, ethical issues, and postmodern concerns. For instance, Dina F. Salman et

al. (2023) analyze Briony's accusation through the concept of moral stupidity and its ethical implications, while Xiangping Fan (2022) examines the rhetorical effects of unreliable narration. Similarly, Ansam Riyadh Almaarroof and Nirmeen Khudhair (2024) explore the novel's postmodern vision of truth, and Sanberk Yusuf (2022) emphasizes metafiction and narrative structure. Other studies also highlight modernist characteristics, fragmentation, and identity construction in the novel, reinforcing a strong scholarly focus on narrative form and thematic interpretation.

However, only a limited number of studies have integrated a Marxist framework into a systematic analysis of character construction, dialogue, and cinematography in examining class prejudice. While these studies offer valuable insights into narrative and ethical dimensions, the role of social institutions such as the family, the police, and the legal system in legitimizing injustice remains insufficiently explored through the lens of ideological reproduction. Additionally, the concept of narrative authority as a form of ideological power remains underdeveloped in existing scholarship. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by a comprehensive Marxist film analysis that connects ideology, institutional power, and narrative construction.

Therefore, this study applies Marxist literary and film criticism to examine how class hierarchy, institutional authority, and narrative control interact to produce injustice in *Atonement* (2007). The objective of this study is to analyze how class prejudice structurally shapes Robbie Turner's fate, how social institutions justify injustice through ideological mechanisms, and how narrative perspective constructs a false truth that reinforces class hierarchy.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does class prejudice destroy Robbie Turner's life in *Atonement* (2007)?
2. How do social institutions and false consciousness justify the injustice against Robbie Turner?
3. How does Briony Tallis's narrative perspective construct a false truth that supports class hierarchy?

This research is significant because it contributes to Marxist film criticism by demonstrating how ideology operates not only at the thematic level but also through characterization, dialogue, and cinematic technique. By situating *Atonement* within a Marxist analytical framework, this study expands existing scholarship beyond narrative ethics and memory studies toward a structural critique of class power and institutional injustice.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using textual and film analysis as its primary approach. Qualitative research is appropriate for examining meaning, ideology, and representation because it focuses on interpretation rather than numerical measurement (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Since the objective of this study is to analyze class ideology, institutional power, and narrative construction within a cinematic text, a qualitative interpretative approach is considered the most suitable design.

More specifically, this research applies textual analysis within the framework of Marxist literary and film criticism. Textual analysis allows researchers to examine dialogue, characterization, narrative structure, and visual elements in order to uncover ideological patterns embedded in cultural texts (McKee, 2003). In film studies, interpretative analysis of cinematography, framing, and narrative positioning is commonly used to reveal how meaning is constructed visually and ideologically (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019). Therefore, this study integrates literary textual analysis and film form analysis to investigate how class hierarchy operates across narrative and cinematic elements.

2.1. Data source

The primary data source of this study is the film *Atonement* (2007), directed by Joe Wright and produced by Working Title Films. The analysis is based on the official cinematic release version with a total runtime of approximately 123 minutes. The film is adapted from Ian McEwan's 2001 novel *Atonement*; however, this research focuses exclusively on the film adaptation as the main corpus. In qualitative textual research, the text itself functions as the unit of analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Accordingly, the units of analysis in this study consist of selected dialogues, character actions, narrative sequences, and cinematographic techniques that are directly relevant to the research questions. These include scenes depicting Robbie Turner's accusation and arrest, interactions involving social institutions such as the family and police, and narrative sequences that foreground Briony Tallis's perspective.

2.2. Data type

The data analyzed in this research consist of four categories:

- Dialogues that reflect class prejudice, institutional authority, and narrative construction.
- Character actions and positioning that indicate power relations and ideological assumptions.
- Cinematographic elements such as framing, lighting, camera movement, and point of view shots.
- Narrative structures that construct or reconstruct "truth" within the story.

Film analysis scholars argue that meaning in cinema emerges from the interaction between narrative content and formal cinematic techniques (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019). Therefore, analyzing both dialogue and visual composition is necessary to ensure comprehensive interpretation.

2.3. Data collection technique

The data were collected through repeated viewing and systematic note taking. The film was watched multiple times to ensure accurate identification of relevant scenes and dialogues. Repeated viewing is a standard procedure in qualitative film analysis to enhance interpretative reliability and depth of observation (Rose, 2016). During each viewing session, relevant scenes were documented, including timestamp references, dialogue transcription, visual framing, and character positioning. The identified data were then categorized according to the three research questions: class prejudice, institutional justification, and narrative construction. This categorization process follows the principle of thematic coding commonly applied in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

2.4. Data analysis technique

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by Marxist theory. Thematic analysis enables researchers to identify recurring patterns and ideological themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, themes such as class hierarchy, ideological reproduction, false consciousness, and institutional authority were used as analytical categories derived from Marxist criticism (Tyson, 2015). The analysis was conducted in three stages. First, data related to Robbie Turner's social positioning and treatment were examined to answer Research Question 1 concerning class prejudice. Second, scenes involving family authority, police action, and legal response were analyzed to answer Research Question 2 regarding social institutions and false consciousness. Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses was used to interpret how institutions reproduce dominant ideology (Althusser, 1971). Third, scenes emphasizing Briony Tallis's perspective, including point of view shots and close ups, were analyzed to answer Research Question 3 concerning narrative authority and the construction of false truth. Bordwell and Thompson's framework of film form and narration was used to explain how cinematic techniques guide audience interpretation (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Class prejudice and the destruction of Robbie Turner's life The findings demonstrate that Robbie Turner is consistently positioned as socially inferior despite his academic achievement and moral integrity. Throughout the film, his working-class background

repeatedly overrides his individual merit and shapes how others perceive his character. Robbie explicitly states, “You just assumed that for all my education, I was still little better than a servant” (1:42:22) revealing his awareness that education cannot fully erase inherited class identity. Earlier in the narrative, Emily Tallis refers to Robbie as “the charlady’s son,” reducing his identity to his mother’s labor position despite his Cambridge education. This labeling reflects what Marx (1978) describes as the persistence of class hierarchy within social relations, where material background determines social value more strongly than personal achievement.

Class prejudice also appears through the immediate suspicion directed toward Robbie after Lola’s assault. Briony repeatedly insists, “I saw him” (42:43–44:20), while Lola ambiguously states, “He’s a sex maniac” (30:10). Although neither statement provides objective evidence, the adults rapidly accept Robbie as guilty. Cecilia’s attempt to question Briony’s reliability is ignored, while Robbie is socially isolated during the accusation scene. In contrast, Paul Marshall, a wealthy businessman with strong institutional connections, is never seriously investigated despite his presence near the crime scene. This unequal distribution of suspicion demonstrates how credibility in the film is shaped by class position rather than factual truth. As Althusser (1971) argues, ideological structures reproduce dominant social relations by legitimizing assumptions that benefit the upper class.

The film’s cinematography further reinforces this hierarchy. During the accusation scene, Robbie is visually separated from the Tallis family through group positioning, while close-up shots repeatedly frame Briony as emotionally convincing and trustworthy. The extreme close-up of the explicit word in Robbie’s letter also isolates him as morally deviant. Bordwell (1985) explains that cinematic framing directs audience interpretation by emphasizing selected details and limiting alternative perspectives. In *Atonement* (2007), visual narration participates in the ideological construction of Robbie as socially dangerous.

The letter scene intensifies this pattern. The camera isolates a single explicit word through extreme close up, removing it from emotional context and foregrounding sexual suspicion. The selective magnification shapes interpretation by privileging fragment over intention. Shortly after the accusation, the narrative progresses directly to Robbie’s arrest, which occurs under dark lighting and unstable camera movement. The visual instability contrasts with the later stable framing of institutional figures, highlighting his vulnerability at the moment of punishment. The structural consequences extend beyond imprisonment. Robbie is compelled to join the army and ultimately dies during wartime evacuation. The Dunkirk tracking shot frames him as visually diminished within a vast and chaotic landscape, reducing individual presence within overwhelming historical forces.

These elements collectively form a causal progression in which class based suspicion produces accusation, accusation produces institutional punishment,

punishment produces social exclusion and forced military service, and military service culminates in death. Marxist theory explains that class hierarchy determines access to credibility and protection within ideological systems (Marx & Engels, 1848/1978; Tyson, 2015). Robbie's educational attainment does not neutralize his working class origin because class identity operates structurally rather than individually. His fate emerges from a system that already associates lower class status with moral danger and distrust.

Social institutions and the justification of injustice

The findings indicate that institutional structures accept Briony's accusation with immediate legitimacy. In the accusation scene, close up shots privilege Briony's face while adult authority figures stand beside her, visually aligning her testimony with institutional approval. Robbie remains spatially separated from the group and visually excluded from collective authority. No extended on screen interrogation of Paul Marshall is depicted. The narrative omits investigative procedures directed toward upper class suspects, while Robbie is arrested swiftly. This asymmetry of scrutiny is narratively evident. Cecilia later remarks, "They'll never reopen the case" (1:39:53), and the event is described as "tidied away in the past" (1:40:04), suggesting institutional closure rather than pursuit of evidentiary reconsideration.

Police officers are framed in stable compositions with balanced lighting, conveying authority and procedural legitimacy (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019). The visual stability contrasts with the unstable camera during Robbie's arrest, creating a distinction between institutional order and individual chaos. The Tallis family's acceptance of the accusation reflects ideological assumptions embedded within social hierarchy. Althusser (1971) explains that institutions such as family and law function as ideological state apparatuses that reproduce dominant ideology by shaping belief systems. The family members do not explicitly articulate class prejudice, yet their reaction assumes Robbie's guilt without conscious recognition of bias. This dynamic reflects false consciousness, in which dominant class ideology is internalized as objective truth rather than recognized as class based assumption (Marx & Engels, 1848/1978; Tyson, 2015).

Institutional procedures appear neutral and lawful, yet their outcomes disproportionately affect the working class character. The absence of equivalent scrutiny toward Paul Marshall demonstrates how dominant class figures remain structurally protected within hierarchical systems. Injustice is therefore legitimized through processes that present themselves as orderly and rational while reproducing ideological inequality.

Narrative perspective and the construction of false truth

The findings show that key events are filtered through Briony's limited perspective. The fountain scene is presented from a distant observational angle corresponding to her position, restricting contextual clarity. The library scene is partially obscured when viewed from her viewpoint, allowing interpretation to replace full comprehension. Her repeated statement "I saw him" is accompanied by close up shots that intensify certainty and emotional conviction. The camera frequently privileges Briony's facial expressions during the accusation, guiding audience alignment toward her perspective. Visual emphasis combined with repetition transforms subjective perception into apparent authority. Narrative theory explains that point of view structures audience alignment and shapes judgments about reliability (Phelan, 2007). Cinematic framing directs interpretative focus by privileging specific perspectives within the visual field (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019).

In the final interview sequence, older Briony appears in bright and orderly surroundings. She admits that the confession scene is "imagined" and that the reunion between Robbie and Cecilia exists only within her written narrative. This revelation confirms that the earlier resolution was fictional within the story world. Narrative authority remains centralized in her authorship. From a Marxist perspective, narrative authority can operate ideologically when it aligns with dominant social assumptions (Tyson, 2015). Briony's interpretation develops within a class structure that already positions Robbie as suspicious due to social difference. Her storytelling does not dismantle that hierarchy; instead, it preserves the original accusation within cultural memory. Even her later attempt at narrative compensation produces symbolic reconciliation rather than material justice, illustrating how representation can reshape perception without altering structural inequality.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined how class prejudice, institutional authority, and narrative perspective interact in *Atonement* (2007) through a Marxist analytical framework. The findings demonstrate that Robbie Turner's tragic fate is structurally produced through interconnected mechanisms of class suspicion, institutional validation, and narrative construction. His working class identity shapes how he is perceived, how institutions respond to accusations against him, and how his story is ultimately remembered. The analysis shows that injustice in the film does not emerge from isolated misunderstanding but from ideological systems that privilege dominant class assumptions and marginalize subordinate identities.

By integrating dialogue analysis, character positioning, and cinematographic techniques, this study contributes to Marxist film criticism by demonstrating how ideology operates simultaneously at thematic, institutional, and visual levels. The

research extends previous scholarship that primarily focused on guilt and unreliable narration by foregrounding structural class dynamics as the central force shaping narrative outcomes. It highlights how cinematic form itself participates in reproducing ideological hierarchy through framing, alignment, and selective emphasis.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis focuses exclusively on the film adaptation and does not conduct a comparative examination with Ian McEwan's novel. A comparative approach might reveal additional nuances regarding class representation across different media forms. Second, the study relies on qualitative textual analysis, which is interpretative in nature and does not incorporate audience reception data. Including viewer response studies could provide insight into how contemporary audiences interpret class prejudice and narrative authority. Third, the analysis centers on Marxist theory as the primary framework, which may limit engagement with alternative perspectives such as feminist criticism, trauma theory, or poststructuralist narrative theory.

Future research may address these limitations by conducting comparative analyses between the novel and film adaptation to explore shifts in ideological emphasis. Scholars may also integrate interdisciplinary approaches, combining Marxist criticism with audience reception studies to examine how viewers internalize or resist the film's class representations. Additionally, further studies could explore how narrative authority functions in other literary or cinematic texts that depict social inequality, thereby expanding the theoretical implications of ideology and storytelling within cultural production. Overall, this study underscores the significance of examining film not only as a medium of personal emotion and aesthetic expression but also as a site where social hierarchy and ideological power are constructed and reproduced. By revealing the structural dimensions of injustice in *Atonement*, this research contributes to broader discussions in literature and cultural studies regarding the relationship between class, narrative authority, and institutional power.

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