

The Transformation of the Novel *Atonement* into a Film

Matilde Roca Telleria
(Universitat de les Illes Balears)

Abstract

Many films are adaptations from books. The main aim of this paper is to examine the transformation of the novel *Atonement* into a film, as very few original sources will be equal to a two-hour film. The adaptation is a new original. In this particular case the spirit of the original has been preserved although a new form has been created. We will see how the novel *Atonement* had to be fit into different time parameters. Adaptation demands choice. This means that much material had to be eliminated. It will be argued how condensing material has meant losing material, losing subplots, combining or cutting material or refocusing events.

After having read the novel and having watched the film thoroughly, we have checked how the first part of the film has been much more faithful to the novel. In the script some of the dialogue of the novel has been changed. The second part, when the protagonist is at war, has been greatly reduced in the film. In the novel, in this second part, we are introduced to a lot of different characters, whereas in the film we see some other soldiers on the screen, but we only get to know one.

This study will also focus specifically on the structure of the film *Atonement*; the act design, the inciting incident, the crisis, climax and resolution. We will also see how the film *Atonement* follows a classical design with a three act structure. We will check how the ending is quite unexpected in both the novel and the film, which is something that is recommended in order to make a film exciting. The present study contributes to the field of film and literature studies by pointing out pertinent similarities and differences between the novel *Atonement* and its film version.

1 Introduction

This paper shows how the novel *Atonement* has been transformed into a film. In the first part of the article we will see how the novel has been fit into different time parameters. We will also check how some material, characters and subplots have been lost. We will see how the first part of the film has been much more faithful to the novel. In the second part of the article we will concentrate on the structure of the film; the act design, the inciting incident, the crisis, climax and resolution.

2 Differences between the novel and the film

After having read the novel and having watched the film thoroughly, we have checked how the first part of the film has been much more faithful to the novel. In the script parts of the dialogue of the novel have been changed. The second part, when Robbie is at war, has been greatly reduced in the film. In the novel, in this second part, we are introduced to a lot of

different characters; the corporals, Nettle, Mace and other soldiers as well, whereas in the film we see some other soldiers on the screen, but we only get to know Nettle. What is also interesting to notice is that in the novel, in this second part, Robbie's name has been changed to his surname, Turner. In the novel there are also many more situations in this part, whereas in the film, all that has been reduced to a few scenes. In this second part, in the film, some completely new scenes related to cinema are included; we see Robbie watching a cinema screen. Then a shot of the soldiers looking at the screen, there is also a scene from an old film in which we see Paul Marshall with the queen of England.

3 Main structure of the film

The film *Atonement* has a classical design that means:

a story built around active protagonists who struggle against primarily external forces of antagonism to pursue his or her desire, through continuous time, within a consistent and causally connected fictional reality, to a closed ending of absolute, irreversible change (Mckee 1997: 45).

Briony Tallis irrevocably changes the course of several lives when she accuses Robbie, her sister's boyfriend, of a crime he did not commit.

All stories consist of a few common structural elements found universally in myths, fairy tales, dreams, and movies. They are known collectively as The Hero's Journey. (Vogler 1998: 13).

[...]

At heart, despite its infinite variety, the hero's story is always a journey. A hero leaves her comfortable, ordinary surroundings to venture into a challenging, unfamiliar world. It may be an outward journey to an actual place: a labyrinth, forest or cave, a strange city or country, a new locale that becomes the arena for her conflict with antagonistic, challenging forces (Vogler 1998: 17).

But there are as many stories that take the hero on an inward journey, one of the mind, the heart, the spirit. In any good story the hero grows and changes, making a journey from one way of being to the next: from despair to hope, weakness to strength, folly to wisdom, love to hate, and back again. It's these emotional journeys that hook an audience and make a story worth watching. The protagonist of every story is the hero of a journey, even if the path leads only into his own mind or into the realm of relationships. (Vogler 1998: 17)

The Hero is usually the most active person in the script. His will and desire is what drives most stories forward. In *Atonement* the hero and protagonist is Robbie, the son of a servant of the house, who falls in love with Cecilia, the owner's daughter. "A special type of Enemy is the

rival, the hero's competition in love, sports, business, or some other enterprise. The rival is usually not out to kill the hero, but is just trying to defeat him in the competition" (Vogler 1998: 74). There is no clear rival in *Atonement* unless we consider it to be Briony, although in fact Briony is in competition with Cecil for the love of Robbie.

"The opening image can be a powerful tool to create mood and suggest where the story will go. It can be a visual metaphor that, in a single shot or scene, conjures up the Special World of Act Two and the conflicts and dualities that will be confronted there" (Vogler 1998: 50).

In *Atonement* in the first scene we see Briony running in the corridors of the big manor house but what creates the restless atmosphere is the loud sound of a typing machine.

The catalyst scene that establishes the main problem in *Atonement* or the inciting incident, "the first major event of the telling" occurs ten minutes into the film. "The inciting incident radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist's life" (Mckee 1997: 189) and, that is that, while Robbie trying to help Cecilia water some flowers, they break a vase and pieces fall into the fountain. Cecilia strips to her underwear and jumps into the fountain to retrieve the fragments in front of a startled Robbie. Briony Tallis also witnesses this event from an upstairs bedroom. This is the first major event for two reasons: first, when Robbie sees a wet Cecilia and he can have a good look at her body, he falls in love, because although they had known each other since childhood, this is the first time he sees her as a real woman; secondly, Briony witnesses this event from an upstairs window and seeing Cecilia in her underwear, thinks that some kind of sexual relationship is going on between them. "What is the hero doing the first time we see him, when he makes his entrance? The character's first action is a wonderful opportunity to speak volumes about his attitude, emotional state, background, strengths, and problems" (Vogler 1998: 52). In this scene we see a timid Robbie that feels very much attracted to Cecil but feels insecure because he is only the servant's daughter whereas Cecil is the owner's daughter: "Act one in a film refers to the material that sets up the story. It introduces the characters. It establishes the problem, issue, need, or goal. It gives you the information you need to know before you start developing the story" (Seger 1992: 6). In *Atonement*, in this first act, we have a good view of the house. We are introduced to Robbie and to Cecilia's family, her mother, her sister Briony, her brother Leon, his friend Marshall, and the cousins from the North, also to all the servants in the household. "Act two develops the story. It develops relationships. It shows the actions that the character is willing to do to resolve the problem or reach the goal. It sets up the obstacles that create problems for the character" (Seger 1992: 6). In *Atonement* act two could start when the second major event

occurs, that is, when after having written two different letters to Cecilia, Robbie gives Briony the wrong version to give it to Cecilia, the one with the lewd suggestions. This action results in the lovemaking scene at the library between Robbie and Cecilia, since the fact that she got the wrong letter makes her realize how much does Robbie desires her and that provokes the same feeling in her.

The hero is presented with a problem, challenge, or adventure to undertake. Once presented with a **Call to Adventure**, He can no longer remain indefinitely in the comfort of the Ordinary World. The Call to Adventure establishes the stakes of the game, and makes clear the hero's goal: to win the treasure or the lover, to get revenge or right a wrong, to achieve a dream, confront a challenge, or change a life. Although sometimes there is a refusal of the call, the hero can balk at the threshold of adventure, **Refusing the call** or expressing reluctance (Vogler 1998: 19)

In *Atonement* Robbie clearly responds to the call to adventure by taking action and kissing Cecilia.

So now the hero finally commits to the adventure and fully enters the Special World of the story for the first time by **Crossing the first Threshold**. He agrees to face the consequences of dealing with the problem or challenge posed in the Call to Adventure. This is the moment when the story takes off and the adventure really gets going. The balloon goes up, the ship sails, the romance begins, the lane or the spaceship soars off, and the wagon train gets rolling. By this time many stories will have introduced a Merlin-like character who is the hero's **Mentor**. The relationship between hero and Mentor is one of the most common themes in mythology, and one of the richest in its symbolic value (Vogler 1998: 19).

Mentor figures, whether encountered in dreams, fairy tales, myths, or screenplays, stand for the hero's highest aspirations. They are what the hero may become if he persists on the Road of Heroes. Mentors are often former heroes who have survived life's early trials and are now passing on the gift of their knowledge and wisdom. Just as learning is an important function of the hero, teaching or training is a key function of the Mentor (Vogler 1998: 33).

Another important function of the Mentor archetype is to motivate the hero, and help her overcome fear (Vogler 1998: 34).

In *Atonement* there isn't a clear Mentor figure, unless we consider it to be Robbie's mother, that gives Robbie some piece of advice, and who Robbie remembers fondly.

Movies are often built in three acts, which can be regarded as presenting 1) the hero's decision to act, 2) the action itself, and 3) the consequences of the action. The First Threshold marks the turning point between Acts One and Two. The hero, having overcome fear, has decided to confront the problem and take action. He is now committed to the journey and there's no turning back (Vogler 1998: 20).

The next major event or turning point is when the twins disappear in the woods and they start searching for them. In the dark, Briony comes across Lola being raped by an unknown attacker. Briony convinces herself that the rapist is Robbie, and Lola acquiesces.

The Shapeshifter serves the dramatic function of bringing doubt and suspense into a story. A common type of Shapeshifter is called the *femme fatale*, the woman as temptress or destroyer. The idea is as old as the Bible, with its stories of Eve in the Garden of Eden, the scheming Jezebel, and Delilah cutting off Samson's hair to rob him of his strength. (Vogler 1998: 45)

The archetype known as the Shadow represents the energy of the dark side, the unexpressed, unrealized, or rejected aspects of something. Shadows can be all the things we don't like about ourselves, all the dark secrets we can't admit, even to ourselves. The negative face of the Shadow in stories is projected onto characters called villains, antagonists, or enemies. Villains and enemies are usually dedicated to the death, destruction, or defeat of the hero (Vogler 1998: 46).

Briony acts like a kind of *femme fatale or shadow*;

the function of the Shadow in drama is to challenge the hero and give her a worthy opponent in the struggle. Shadows create conflict and bring out the best in a hero by putting her in a life threatening situation. It's often been said that a story is only as good as its villain, because a strong enemy forces a hero to rise to the challenge (Vogler 1998: 46)

Briony represents the energy of the dark side because she has been secretly in love with Robbie, and very envious of Cecil, and that is why she accuses him of rape. Then the fact that Briony after having being examined by the doctor, accuses Robbie of rapping her to the police results in the scene of the police car taking Robbie inside.

The hero comes at last to the edge of a dangerous place, sometimes deep underground, where the object of the quest is hidden. Often it's the headquarters of the hero's greatest enemy, the most dangerous spot in the Special World, the Inmost Cave (Vogler 1998: 21).

Fairy tale heroes have a common denominator, or a quality that unites them across boundaries of culture, geography, and time. They are **lacking** something. These missing elements help to create sympathy for the hero, and draw the audience into desiring his eventual wholeness (Vogler 1998: 55).

The fact that Robbie comes from a humble family makes us sympathetic with him. The next scene in the film starts the second clearly different part in the film, that is, when Robbie is at war, we see how the British soldiers meet French soldiers and how they make a toast to the French and British armies and the crushing of Germany. Later we see Robbie exhausted, lying on the floor of a cave but not sleepy. His wound throbbled uncomfortably, each beat

precise and tight. He felt asleep, but only for seconds. He knew there was a chance of getting back. He had Cecil last letter in his pocket and her new address. This was why he had to survive, and use his cunning to stay off the main roads where the circling dive-bombers waited like raptors.

Here the fortunes of the hero hit bottom in a direct confrontation with his greatest fear. He faces the possibility of death and is brought to the brink in a battle with a hostile force. **The Ordeal** is a “black moment” for the audience, as we are held in suspense and tension, not knowing if he will live or die. The experiences of the preceding stages have led us, the audience, to identify with the hero and his fate. What happens to the hero happens to us (Vogler 1998: 21).

Later, he got up from under his greatcoat, pulled on his boots and groped his way through the barn to relieve himself outside. He was dizzy with fatigue, but he was still not ready for sleep. He found his way along a track to a grassy rise to watch the flashes in the southern sky. This was the approaching storm of German armour. He touched his top pocket where the poem Cecilia sent was enfolded in her letter. The rest of her letters were buttoned into the inside pocket of his greatcoat. He thought perhaps it would make sense to leave now before it was too late, and keep going all night, all day until he reached the Channel. Slip away; leave the corporals to their fate. He turned and began to make his way back down the slope and thought better of it. He could barely see the ground in front of him. Guided by their snores, he shuffled back to his bed. But still sleep would not come. He thought about his only meeting with her, the six days out of prison. When they arranged to meet at Joe Lyons tea house in the Strand in 1939, they had not seen each other for three and a half years.

As I have already mentioned at the introduction this second part has been greatly reduced. Mainly what we see in the film is the soldiers approaching the coast in order to return home. Next we have another important turning point in which we see Robbie and Cecil meeting during her lunch break at the hospital; in the film six months earlier, Cecilia tells him that she has cut herself off from her family. He tells her that prison has made him despise himself. They make plans to see each other again.

Having survived death, beaten the dragon, or slain the Minotaur, hero and audience have cause to celebrate. The hero now takes possession of the treasure she has come seeking, **his Reward**. It might be a special weapon like a magic sword, or a token like the Grail or some elixir which can heal the wounded land. Sometimes the “sword” is knowledge and experience that leads to greater understanding and reconciliation with hostile forces. The hero may also be reconciled with the opposite sex, as in romantic comedies. In many stories the loved one is the treasure the hero has come to win or rescue, and there is often a love scene at this point to celebrate the victory. The hero who has been to the realm of

the dead must be reborn and cleansed in one last Ordeal of death and **Resurrection** before returning to the Ordinary World of the living. The hero is transformed by these moments of death-and-rebirth, and is able to return to ordinary life reborn as a new being with new insights (Vogler 1998: 22).

Heroes should have universal qualities, emotions, and motivations that everyone has experienced at one time or another: revenge, anger, lust, competition, territoriality, patriotism, idealism, cynicism, or despair. A real character, like a real person, is not just a single trait but a unique combination of many qualities and drives, some of them conflicting (Vogler 1998: 28).

Interesting flaws humanize a character. We can recognize bits of ourselves in a Hero who is challenged to overcome inner doubts, errors in thinking, guilt or trauma from the past, or fear of the future. Weaknesses, imperfections, quirks, and vices immediately make a Hero or any character more real and appealing. It seems the more neurotic characters are, the more the audience likes them and identifies with them (Vogler 1998: 30).

In *Atonement* Cecilia is the treasure that Robbie has dreamt of meeting while he was at war. The following scenes start the third act:

this act pays off the story, it resolves it hopefully there's a dramatic build leading to a climax or "big finish" that makes the ending exciting, intense, and/or emotionally satisfying. This act intensifies the conflict. Raises the stakes. Leads to an inevitable conclusion. Which is crucial in order to reach the resolution of the film? (Seger 1992: 6).

In the film we see Cecilia walking and throwing a letter to the post where she talks about Briony. She tells Robbie that Briony was doing nurse's training at her hospital and that she wants to meet Cecilia and says that she's beginning to get the full grasp of what she did. Then we see Briony going to an office to find Cecilia's address and then we see her writing a letter to Cecilia telling her that she decided not to go to Cambridge. Afterwards we see her washing her hands very strongly and she asks Cecilia if they can meet. The following scene could be the beginning of the resolution: we see Briony walking towards a church, and a flashback of Lola being raped. Then we see Paul and Lola going down the church, a priest is marrying Paul Marshall and Lola. Then we see Paul and Lola going down the aisle and nobody notices Briony remains alone in the church. At the following scene we see Briony walking through a street and then she stops at a door and asks if Cecilia is there, then the neighbour calls for her. Cecilia opens the door. At the house Robbie asks Briony if she has any idea of what is like to be in jail. Robbie asks her why has she changed her evidence, also asks her to go to her parents and to tell them everything they need to know to be convinced that the evidence she gave was false and then to meet with a solicitor and have a statement signed, witnessed, and sent copies to them. Cecilia and Robbie think that it was Danny Hardman but Briony tells them that it wasn't that it was Leon's friend Marshall. Briony tells them that he has just married Lola that she has just come from their wedding. Cecilia says that

Lola won't be able to testify now because she is immune. So the previous scene we could think as viewers that is was the climax. And that Robbie and Cecil ended together and went to the cottage. But then we are surprised by a different ending.

Stanislavsky wrote that the last ninety seconds are the most important in the play. Hollywood wisdom casts it thus turn the thing around in the last two minutes and you can live quite nicely. Turn it around again in the last ten seconds and you can buy a house in Bel Air. (Mamet 2007: 202).

In the film this part is completely different from the novel. The film suddenly shifts forward to 1999, when an elderly Briony, interviewed on television about her latest novel *Atonement*, is overcome with emotion and memory. She reveals that she is dying of vascular dementia, and that this novel will be her last one. Briony admits that the story is autobiographical and expresses great remorse at her actions. She says that in her novel the lovers Cecilia and Robbie end together, but in fact she never made that journey to see her sister; Robbie Turner died of septicaemia, the last day of the evacuation, at Bray Dunes on 1st June 1940 while Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station. So the ending is quite unexpected, some reviews were critical to this last scene.

The novel bears the name of its primary theme. Throughout the work, the reader can see the characters search for atonement. Briony says at the end of the novel "I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving, as to let them forgive me." Briony recognizes her sin (i.e. wrongfully accusing Robbie and ruining his and Cecilia's chance at a life together), and attempts to atone for it through writing her novel. She does not grant herself forgiveness; rather, she attempts to earn atonement through giving Robbie and Cecilia a life together in her writing. Romance is the genre Joe Wright has chosen to present *Atonement*, and by making that choice he opens the story invitingly to women. He could have chosen other genres. The primary theme and design principle is romantic love, and the structure is that of a romance. For that choice he gains a clear-cut formula with a high degree of audience identification – a triangular relationship in *Atonement* the triangle will be formed by Robbie, Cecil and Briony.

This triangulated relationship is a familiar pattern in romance novels and in the country of film noir and hard-boiled fiction. It provides the three-cornered stage for conflict, jealousy, rivalry, betrayal, revenge, and rescue (Vogler 1998: 127).

4 Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown how to adapt the novel into a film has meant introducing many changes. We have seen how the nature of condensing involves losing material. Some events in the novel had to be refocused. Changes have been essential in order to make the transition to another medium. Adaptation demands choice. This means that much material had to be eliminated. We have also seen how the film *Atonement* follows a classical design with a three act structure. The ending is quite unexpected which is something that is recommended in order to make a film exciting. We have seen how a very good novel has been transformed into a good film. As in many cases the novel, perhaps, is better than the film.

References

- MAMET, D. 2007. *On the Nature, Purpose, and Practice of the Movie Business*. Pantheon Books. New York.
- MCEWAN, I. 2001. *Atonement*. Anchor. London
- MCKEE, R. 1997. *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*. Regan Books. London.
- SEGER, L. 1992. *The Art of Adaptation*. Henry Holt and Company, LLC. New York.
- VOGLER, C. 1998. *The Writer's Journey, Mythic Structure for Writers*. Michael Wiese Productions. Studio City.