

ANALYZING EMOTIONAL RESPONSES OF READERS TO IAN MCEWAN'S ATONEMENT: INSIGHTS FROM A CASE STUDY ON WECHAT READING PLATFORM

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study investigates readers' emotional responses to Ian McEwan's *Atonement* to identify readers' emotional experiences and emotional states when accepting this novel in a lifelong learning context.

Theoretical perspective: Taking a perspective of reader-response criticism, the study reveals readers' emotional experiences and emotional states in reading Ian McEwan's *Atonement* by exploring their literary critical discourses.

Method: Through a qualitative approach that applies thematic analysis, the study gathers 138 book reviews from the WeChat Reading Platform and analyzed the data using Nvivo.

Results and Discussion: It is noteworthy that this novel leaves readers with strong emotional feelings of sadness, regret, heart-wrenching and anger, etc., while at the same time, it receives a high recommendation rate of 80.7%, revealing inclusive quality reading for readers of literary works.

Research Implications: This research not only provides insights into how to further reader reception and reader response in literary studies in the context of lifelong learning but also offers valuable recommendations for advancing the studies of digital humanities and trans-cultural translation.

Keywords: emotional experience, emotional responses, ian mcewan, lifelong learning, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

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1 INTRODUCTION

Hermeneutics and reception theory explore literary studies through the lens of readers' understanding and reception, which has not only clarified but

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also underscored the significance of readers and their reception in literary research (Burke, 2010). The introduction of the reader as a key dimension in literary studies is a major contribution of modern reception aesthetics and has had a profound impact on the writing of literary history (Cadera & Walsh, 2022). Within cognitive approaches to literature, there is increasing interest in the role of emotion in discourse processing, including issues such as how and why readers respond emotionally to literary texts (West, 2014). However, the "reader" concept defined by reception aesthetics remains generalized in most cases, failing to distinguish between professional literary readers and the public. Research on the reception of literary works by the general public has also been relatively insufficient (Driscoll, 2024). With the rise of digital platforms and other media channels, general readers increasingly voice their perspectives on the narratives of literary history (Kui & Yan, 2024). Although their views and critiques vary in quality, this diversity reveals the richness of literary history and highlights the potential for further development in its writing (Sun, 2023).

Ian McEwan is one of the most prominent writers in contemporary British literature (Adam, 2021). He initially gained fame for his exploration of themes related to violence, suspense, and transgression, earning him the title "Ian Macabre" (Booth, 2015). Scholarly research on McEwan's novels has developed through multiple perspectives, drawing on ethics, narratology, psychology, ecocriticism, and feminism to investigate the themes and implications of his works, leading to a substantial body of research (Bolchi, 2016; Colombino, 2022; Shang, 2019; Sistani *et al*, 2014; Taylor, 2024; Wang & Tian, 2024). McEwan's novels and translations have garnered increasing attention and acclaim from readers worldwide. His novel *Atonement*, published in 2001, was widely praised by readers and critics alike (Shang, 2019). However, current research on *Atonement* has largely focused on the narrative elements related to the protagonist Briony's growth, redemption, and trauma, with limited attention given to reader reception and reader-response criticism (Marsh, 2018; O'Dwyer, 2016; O'Hara, 2011; Pastoor & Marquette University Press, 2014; Weston, 2019). Given McEwan's standing in literary history and the novel's global reception, translation, and discussion, investigating the reception and reader

response to *Atonement* among general readers is necessary and of considerable academic value in a world that requires and prompts lifelong learning through various means including getting access to equality education.

Statistical data indicates that the number of digital reading users in China has exceeded 530 million, with the prevalence of e-reading formats among these users reaching 93.4% (Kui & Yan, 2024). Digital reading has thus become a significant mode of reading for the public (Sun, 2023). According to Zhu (2023), WeChat Reading platform has accumulated 210 million registered users, with daily active users surpassing five million. WeChat Reading has successfully attracted a large user base due to its convenient interface and extensive content resources (Yi *et al*, 2024). Given the platform's rich collection of books, vast user community, and comprehensive social features in prompting reading as a means of continuous learning, this study selects the reader reviews of *Atonement* on the WeChat Reading platform as its research subject.

This study aims to examine the reading experiences of *Atonement*'s readers, with particular emphasis on their emotional responses during the reading process. By providing a fresh perspective on reader-response criticism of McEwan's works, this research seeks to enrich further the fields of literary studies, reader-response criticism, digital humanities, and cross-cultural translation under the background of lifelong learning. In line with this purpose, this research seeks to answer the following question: What types of emotional responses could be revealed from the book reviews on *Atonement* on the WeChat Reading platform?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 UNDERSTANDING READER RECEPTION AND READERS' EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

The study of literature should focus on the reader's reception, response, and reading process of the work, as well as the role of the reader's aesthetic experience and reception effect in the social function of literature (Hill, 1980). Reader reception studies emphasizes the role of the reader in the understanding of a text rather than the text itself, and literature is the process

of how the reader and the text interact with each other (Holub, 2013).

Fish (1998) suggests that the reader's reading does not lead to the production of meaning in a literary text but that the reading itself has meaning. Therefore, reading is not about discovering “what meaning the literary text contains” or even “what role the literary text plays”, but “how the reader generates meaning”, that is to experience what kind of meaning the literary text imposes on the reader (Soosaar, 2020). That is to say, it is about experiencing what kind of influence the literary text exerts on the reader and how the reader reacts to the literary text, and the reaction to these facts is the meaning of literature (Fish, 1998).

Emotional responses constitute a fundamental aspect of readers' narrative experiences (Hamby *et al*, 2023). Research often centres on instances where readers align with characters' goals and experience analogous emotional reactions to the events within the story, while readers may interpret or evaluate story events in ways that diverge from the main character's perspective, leading to distinct emotional responses (Yuan & Tu, 2022). Emotional states are a particular combination of changes in somatic and/or neuronal activity and are, to a large extent, specific, transient, but patterned alterations in the ongoing level of physiological activity (Lewis, 2011). According to Lewis (2011), emotional experiences are individuals' perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations of their emotional states and performance. Cognitive attribution processes influence these cognitive processes, essentially learned during socialisation. As Goffin and Viera (2024) points out, that bodily feelings, action tendencies, and an appraisal are the components of emotional experience. Happiness, boredom, fear, excitement, depression, and a range of other emotional states have all been shown to influence our perception of things (Innes-Ker & Niedenthal, 2002).

2.2 READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM OF *ATONEMENT*

The concept of “reader” serves as a central tenet of reception theory, positioning the reader at the heart of this research (Barton, 2002). Throughout the historical development of literary studies, the reader's status has undergone

a protracted evolution, ultimately establishing its centrality by the second half of the 20th century (D'Egidio, 2015). Heidegger (1987) affirmed the role of the reader's prior experience in interpretation, noting that the situatedness within time entails that all interpretation possesses its pre-existing, pre-seen, and pre-understood elements. In other words, the reader's prior experience is a prerequisite for understanding. Subsequently, Gadamer (1999) further articulated Heidegger's perspective, positing that both the reader and the text exist within a historical context. He (1999) advocated for a more open-minded approach toward readers' individual prejudices, suggesting that understanding arises from the "fusion of horizons" between the reader's present and past perspectives, ultimately generating a new horizon of comprehension.

In the 1960s and 70s, with the emergence of hermeneutic theory, readers began to enter the field of literary studies as interpreters (Jiang, 2016). Within the framework of reception aesthetics, the reader's central position among the author, text, and reader has been established (Thiselton, 2012). The two founders of reception aesthetics, Wolfgang Iser (1978) and Hans Robert Jauss (1990), both highlighted the significance of the reader's active participation in the functioning of a literary work. Iser (1978) argued that in the triangular relationship among the author, the work, and the reader, the reader is an active constituent of history. A literary work's historical life is unimaginable without its recipients' active involvement. Similarly, Stanley Fish (1998), a prominent representative of reader-response criticism in the United States, asserted that all poetry (including novels and plays) cannot, in some sense, exclude the reader's participation. The reader's own experience is crucial to the effectiveness of the reading process, as the generation of textual meaning is contingent upon the reader's cognition (Fish, 1970). He (1970) argues that a text's meaning results from the reader's engagement with it, thereby positioning the entire reading process as the focal point of study.

Past research on Ian McEwan's *Atonement* explores the novel's narrative structure, character development, and its impact on readers' emotions and understanding from a variety of perspectives, demonstrating a rich array of reader-response phenomena (Chen, 2021; Fu, 2021; Li, 2017; Lippitt, 2019; Rich, 2016; Zeng, 2013). Many scholars have explored the narrative effect of

the multi-perspective narrative in *Atonement*, arguing that this narrative style allows the reader to create a unique dialectical relationship between fiction and reality (Fu, 2021; Marsh, 2018; O'Dwyer, 2016; Weston, 2019). Noticeably, researchers reflect on McEwan's insights into human nature, appeal to traditional ethics, and condemnation of the mechanisms of modern power discourse by analysing the main character's development, confession, and trauma experience (Geng, 2014; Li, 2014; Yang, 2017).

In the meantime, researchers take readers' reception, identification and reflection as perspectives when looking into the novel, investigating readers' trust, emotional involvement and compassion for the main character (Zeng, 2013; Li, 2017; Jaëck & Schmitt, 2019; Lippitt, 2019). As Rich (2016) pointed out, the protagonist Briony's narrative reflects not only her own crimes but also a challenge to the reader's moral compass. The complex narrative structure prompts readers to reflect on their own ethical stance and social responsibility while understanding the characters' psychology (Jaëck & Schmitt, 2019). Studies have also explored the role of sensory memory in characterisation, such as the Proust effect in *Atonement*, highlighting the link between sensory experience and emotional memory (Zhong & Song, 2020). From what has been studied, current research on *Atonement* mainly focused on the narrative elements related to the protagonist Briony, the ethical reflections and psychological perspectives, while limited attention was given to general readers' reception and readers' responses to the novel.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH MODEL

This study used the case study method as the qualitative research design and the thematic analysis method for data analysis. Qualitative research forms themes based on data obtained in a natural setting, using deductive and inductive analyses to assign meaning to issues to individuals or groups (Creswell, 2013). In addition, case study research derives situation descriptions or themes by obtaining information from multiple sources about real life, a limited

number of current situations, or multiple limited situations at a given time (Creswell, 2013). During a case study, the researcher has less control over the phenomenon and can focus on real-life phenomena. Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic approach guided the data analysis process in this study. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, organising and gaining insights into the thematic attitudes and meanings of data, and reflexive thematic analysis emphasises how an individual's lived experience is understood and constructed (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

The case considered in this study is the Chinese translation of McEwan's novel *Atonement*, published by Shanghai Translation Publishing House in 2018 on the WeChat Reading platform, and the data obtained are 941 book reviews posted by readers on the platform in response to the novel. All book reviews on the WeChat Reading platform are open and accessible to the public, and none of the data obtained for this study involves the personal information of WeChat Reading users.

3.2 SAMPLE OF THE RESEARCH AND DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

The object of this study is the book reviews shared by reading groups on the WeChat reading platform in response to the novel *Atonement*. This version of *Atonement* was published by Shanghai Translation Publishing House in 2018 and translated by Guo Guoliang. By 31 August 2024, more than 21,000 people had read this novel on WeChat Reading, and 941 people had participated in the novel's review, of which 757 thought it was worth recommending, 172 thought it was average, and 12 thought it was not worth recommending, with an overall recommendation rating of 80.7% for this book.

The researcher used purposive sampling to filter out valid book reviews that answered the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Selection was made from the most recent reviews up to 31 August 2024. The inclusion criteria of the book reviews included: a) book reviews posted by readers in response to *Atonement*, b) readers' textual evaluations, and c) reviews that reveal readers' emotional responses. The exclusion criteria of the book reviews included a) readers' evaluations of reading platforms, b) readers' evaluations of other

novels, c) readers' excerpts of the novel's content, and d) readers' text-free evaluations.

After screening, the final valid sample size was determined to be 138, although the case study approach was adopted using the qualitative research methodology. Considering that one of the purposes of this study is to conduct cross-cultural research, the study sample included reviews published in Chinese (the official language of the researcher) and reviews published in English (which the researcher was able to understand and analyse).

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS

Thematic analysis was driven by the research questions and was conducted in the following order as described by Braun and Clarke: familiarising with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally, producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Guided by the inclusion criteria and exclusion criteria, the researcher screened the initial 941 data, centrally deleted from the data those that did not answer the research question, and finally gained 138 book reviews as research data to carry out thematic analyses. Before data interpretation, the Chinese reviews were translated into English and then proofread through the back-translation method to achieve translation equivalence (Lane, 2020).

The 138 reviews were carefully analysed through thematic analysis. The research examined readers' emotional responses to *Atonement* on the WeChat reading platform. The researchers reviewed the book reviews to determine whether the data content met the research objective. After the researchers had coded and compared through thematic analysis using NVivo, the main themes and codes were finalised with the support of a researcher in a related field.

4 RESULTS

This section presents an overview of the results found on the major themes regarding the readers' emotional responses to Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

on WeChat Reading. It is followed by discussions on two respective aspects: readers' emotional experiences and emotional states reflected in the book reviews.

4.1 OVERVIEW OF THE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

Table 1 lists the main emotional themes and codes identified from thematic analysis of 138 book reviews posted by readers on WeChat book platform concerning McEwan's *Atonement*. The findings showed that the reviews could be categorised into nine major themes (three of which were classified as emotional experiences and the other six as emotional states) through 22 emotional responses.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics on overall emotional response categories (n = 138)

Theme	Codes	Σi	In-Group $\Sigma i\%$	Σi Freq.	(138) Total $\Sigma i\%$	Dimension %
Resonance	Character resonance	3	21.43%	14	2.17%	10.14%
	Emotional resonance	2	14.29%		1.45%	
	Moved	9	64.29%		6.52%	
Shock	Deep shock	7	58.33%	12	5.07%	8.70%
	Terrifying	5	41.67%		3.62%	
Captivating	Unforgettable	2	22.22%	9	1.45%	6.52%
	Astonishing	7	77.78%		5.07%	
Sadness	Sad	1	55.17%	29	11.59%	21.01%
	Sorrow	6	17.24%		3.62%	
	Melancholy	8	27.59%		5.80%	
Regret	Unbearable regret	2	8.70%	23	1.45%	16.67%
	Lingering regret	4	17.39%		2.90%	
	Regretful	1	73.91%		12.32%	
Heart-wrenching	Heartache	5	26.32%	19	3.62%	13.77%
	Heart-striking	1	57.89%		7.97%	
	Heavy blow	1	15.79%		2.17%	
Anger	Hatred	3	41.18%	17	5.07%	12.32%
	Irritated	7	58.82%		7.25%	
Depression	Depressed	1	50.00%	8	2.90%	5.80%
	Oppressed	0	50.00%		2.90%	
Helplessness	Helpless	4	71.43%	7	3.62%	5.07%
	Powerless	4	28.57%		1.45%	

The data showed that the predominant theme was sadness (21.01%). Under the theme of sadness, sad (55.17%) and melancholy (27.59%) were the most common codes. This was followed by regret (16.67%), with regretful feelings dominating this theme (73.91%). Thus, regardless of the reader, Table 1 shows that the two most dominant emotions were sadness and regret, which accounted for 37.68% of all emotion themes. Although the remaining seven emotion themes had similarly lower frequencies, depression, helpfulness, and captivating had the lowest frequencies.

According to the book review of *Atonement* on WeChat Reading, some of the comments in the thematic analysis are as follows:

“(10) It took a week or how long to finish the book, originally because of a friend's recommendation to see this British film made by the same name, for the love of the man and woman in it touched” (Moved).

“(14) There is a kind of regret or pain, it is deeply pressed in the bottom of your heart, ordinary days will not be easily revealed.” (Regretful).

“(15) It reads slowly because every few dozen pages you cannot help but stop and ease the depressing emotions, even more depressing than the end of the film, where the cowardly criminal is still making excuses for herself” (Depressed).

“(28) This is written with more shocking power, a truly deplorable and unforgettable work of tragedy, so please read with caution” (Unforgettable).

“(41) In reality, however, they died on opposite sides of the country because of the war, and only the library's collection of letters still holds evidence that they were once in love. The two opposite endings gave me that soul-stirring beauty” (Deep shock).

“(56) As McEwan unflinchingly rips the misery of the war's soldiers and civilians bloody open before your eyes, it is still hard to resist shuddering and is immediately overwhelmed by even stronger feelings of pity and anger” (Irritated).

“(62) Cecilia's wait, long and hopeless, was, alas, heart-breaking. What also struck me was the line about how they were fine with whatever as long as it did not bother them. No one cares what the truth is as long as it doesn't bother them; that's about as human as it gets, cold and numb. It is so sad to

read” (Heartache).

“(68) Originally, I thought I was crying for the lovers of the misadventure, but then I understood that I was weeping for this sad and powerless fate, for the irreparable guilt” (Sad).

“(77) As a film that is more than ten years old, we can still see ourselves now in it. Helplessly grieving, loving each other but only missing out. Childish ignorance, cruel and heart-breaking” (Helpless).

Figure 2 shows the sub-themes of emotional responses that were most repeated by readers on WeChat reading. The most popular emotional responses were regretful, sad, heart-striking, and irritated.

In the ensuing discussion for the readers’ book reviews, this study looked at both emotional experiences and emotional states.

Figure 1

Word cloud for all emotional response sub-themes



4.2 READERS’ EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES

Table 2 shows the findings based on the emotional responses in the readers’ book reviews. After thematically analysing the 138 reviews, it was found that 35 of them reflected the readers’ emotional experiences, including Resonance, Shock, and Captivating, which the readers generated during reading, and these emotions reflected the readers’ multidimensional experiences and profound responses to the novel.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics on readers' emotional experiences (n=35)

Themes	Frequency	In total %
Resonance	14	40.00%
Shock	12	34.29%
Captivating	9	25.71%

First, resonance was the most prominent emotional experience, accounting for 40.00% of the total responses in this section, suggesting that a significant number of readers were deeply emotionally connected to the characters or plots in the novel. The subcategories of this theme include character resonance, which suggests that some readers felt a strong sense of identification with the characters in the novel, especially because the bumpy ride of love of the novel's protagonist resonated with them. In addition, emotional resonance reflects readers' empathy with the overall emotional climate of the novel, not just their identification with individual characters. Most notably, moved, readers reported being moved by the novel's emotional depth, especially as the novel triggered a deep emotional response through the complexity of emotions and relationships. This phenomenon suggests that *Atonement* succeeds in mobilising readers' empathy and emotional engagement in exploring guilt, redemption and human complexity, making it an emotionally profound work. Examples are as follows.

“(8) Everyone put themselves in the shoes of the innocent and beautiful sister Cecilia, unable to forgive the malice of a thirteen-year-old girl, and I can better understand her need to create something that takes everything into her own hands.”

“(97) Excellent works always resonate with readers. There are scenes and emotions that are described in a way that really expresses exactly how I feel, and there are these feelings that you always want to open your mouth but have trouble articulating, but these great writers can, and they can express them accurately, describe them meticulously, and portray them in a simple language that is just right. You cannot help but feel a tightening of the heart during the reading process; that is what it feels like.”

“(132) The most moving is still the correspondence between Robbie and Cecilia in prison, the secrets, the taboos, the sexuality, the memories, the

promises, the encouragement, the fact that she is saving him, waiting for him.”

Shock is the second most emotional experience, accounting for 34.29% of the themes. The love between the novel's protagonists, the author's writing style, and the scenes of the war in the novel cause a strong psychological shock to the reader. The deep shock suggests that many readers were deeply disturbed by the novel's central plot, especially Briony's false accusations and the chain of events they brought about, which triggered moral confusion and emotional shock. In addition, terrifying suggests that some readers felt fearful of the novel's more intense and painful scenes, particularly the depictions of war and the trauma experienced by the characters. Examples are as follows.

“(35) I read the ending on a cold winter's day, under the warm covers of my lunch break, and I had the shock of being shocked by the words in the ending, and although I had internal clues prior to these shocks, I still ached internally when I read that brief passage about the end of life and love.”

“(110) Although the storyline progresses slowly, the environment and psychological descriptions make the characters become three-dimensional. When I watched the film, I just felt sad, but when I read the text again, I felt that apart from sadness, there was even more fear of the war and uncontrollable tears, so maybe the dark side of human nature is more than we can imagine.”

The third major theme of emotional experience is captivating, accounting for 25.71%, reflecting the readers' strong interest in and appreciation of the novel's story structure, narrative technique and artistic expression. In this theme, astonishing shows that the heroine's green dress in the novel becomes a landscape that amazes the readers, and the author's descriptions of the scenes and characters with her superb writing bring readers a profound reading experience. In addition, unforgettable suggests that certain readers are deeply impressed by specific scenes or the overall reading experience in the novel and consider it a reading experience with long-term impact. This appeal reflects the novel's ability to capture readers' attention at the moment and remain in their memories long after the reading is over. Examples are as follows.

“(28) As the reader revels in the happy ending, they suddenly realise at

the end that ‘I never saw them that year’, that they are long gone, that Robbie died of illness at Dunkirk, and that Cecilia died in the London Underground bombing three months later. The writing style is even more powerful and is a truly unforgettable tragedy, so please read with caution.”

“(70) Ian McEwan has sketched out three exquisite stories with an exquisite, yet poetic and brutal writing style, with an astonishing regal ending.”

As Figure 2 illustrates, moved, astonished, and deep shock are the most prominent elements of readers’ emotional experiences. This study reveals the profound impact this novel has on readers’ emotional experience. Empathy demonstrates the novel's ability to connect closely with readers on an emotional level; shock represents the emotional shock the novel inspires through its unexpected plot and moral conflict, and attraction shows the novel's powerful appeal to readers regarding narrative construction and artistic expression. The interweaving of these three emotional responses proves that *Atonement*, as a literary work, possesses a gripping storyline and leaves readers with a profound reading experience through diverse emotional touches.

Figure 2

Word cloud for all emotional experience sub-themes



4.3 READERS’ EMOTIONAL STATES

Based on a statistical analysis of the emotional states of 103 readers, Ian

McEwan's novel *Atonement* triggers a variety of strong and complex emotional states, focusing on six major emotional themes of sadness, regret, heart-wrenching, anger, depression, and helplessness, as is shown in table 3.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics on readers' emotional states (n=103)

Themes	Frequency	In total
Sadness	29	28.16%
Regret	23	22.33%
Heart-wrenching	19	18.45%
Anger	17	16.50%
Depression	8	7.77%
Helplessness	7	6.80%

These affective responses suggest that the novel has a profound effect on readers' emotional states and that its exploration of guilt, loss, and the consequences of human behaviour provokes strong feelings in readers.

First, sadness was the most frequently felt state by readers, accounting for approximately 28.16 % of the total emotional states. This indicates that many readers found the overall tone of the novel sad and heavy. In this category, sad was the most common sub-theme, and readers were deeply struck by the tragic love in the novel. In addition, the sub-themes of sorrow and melancholy further emphasised the fate of the novel's protagonist and the subtle portrayal of parting, missed opportunities and guilt, which triggered an enduring sense of sadness in the readers' minds. Examples are as follows.

“(36) Like the film *Atonement*, which I saw for the first time in my senior year of high school, it is hard to hide my sadness and tears every time I reread it. But it is such a ravishing envy over those lovers who give their hearts and souls, and use their feelings to withstand time, the world, and other kinds of objective.”

“(68) Originally, I thought I was weeping for the lovers who don't end up together, but later I understood that I was weeping for the sad and powerless destiny and for the irreparable guilt.”

Secondly, regret was the second most important emotional state theme, accounting for 22.33% of the total, and many readers felt deep regret for the irreversible mistakes and the unchangeable fate of the characters. In this

emotional category, regretful is the most significant sub-theme, reflecting readers' strong reaction to the idea that “lovers cannot be together”. In addition, lingering and unbearable regret further suggests that for many readers, this sense of regret leaves a lasting emotional imprint on the reader's mind. Examples are as follows.

“(22) After reading about their separation, I have been expecting the lovers to be reunited and to end on a happy note, but now that they have passed away, regret lingers in the reader's heart for a long time. Why regret? Maybe it's because two people's feelings ended abruptly when they were most passionate but only just honest!”

“(57) Too many unbearable regrets. There is no rehearsal for life!”

“(138) Anger, tears, and lingering regret. These are the words that describe me now. Robbie was so kind and wise, Cecilia was so brave and passionate, their love was so beautiful, faithful and wonderful, but a girl's conjecture ruined it.”

The emotional states of heart-wrenching and anger accounted for 18.45% and 16.5%, respectively, with heart striking and anger being the most notable sub-themes, as readers were heartbroken over Robbie and Cecilia's love, angry over ‘self-righteous Briony’ for the consequences. Examples are as follows.

“(33) There is a mixture of waves of anger, hatred, injustice, and even a bit of forgiveness for young Briony's hopeless crush.”

“(136) After seeing the film I came back to read the original again, and it really is the most intentional couple! The plot is so heart-breaking, but the more I read, the more I feel, and it's true that the more tragic it is, the more heart-breaking it can be.”

Finally, depression and helplessness accounted for 7.77% and 6.8% respectively, reflecting the hopelessness and helplessness readers feel towards the fate of the protagonist in the novel. The sub-themes of depression and helplessness show that the novel's plots about war, trauma, and irreversible mistakes make readers feel heavy emotional burdens. Examples are as follows.

“(12) Having finally finished the original novel, I'm surprised to feel like I've accomplished something. Truly, I cried my eyes out and was depressed for a few days after reading it.”

“(43) read to the end to find that this is a hopeless *atonement*, the truth can never be made public, the case can never be overturned, suffered the injustice of Robbie has long since passed away, but the originator of the glory and wealth of the people to be admired, very realistic, very powerless.”

As shown in Figure 3, the reader's emotions after reading the book mainly focus on strong emotional states such as regret, sadness, heart-striking and irritation. After reading *Atonement*, readers not only felt the author's delicate writing but also experienced an unforgettable reading experience in terms of emotional states. These emotional responses reveal the novel's unique appeal in literature as a thought-provoking and impactful work by triggering multiple levels of emotional engagement in the reader.

Figure 3

Word cloud for all emotional state sub-themes



The high recommendation rate of readers for *Atonement* on the WeChat reading platform (80.7%) suggests that although the novel mainly triggered emotional responses of sadness and regret, these emotions did not hinder readers' acceptance, but may have deepened their emotional resonance with the work. While readers experienced profoundly low emotions when interacting with the text, these emotions may have motivated them to recommend the work even more. This phenomenon can be interpreted as the ability of literary works to inspire empathy and reflection in readers when conveying complex emotions, thus enhancing their willingness to recommend them. Thus, there is

a strong link between readers' emotional responses and the acceptance of a work, and emotional depth not only reflects the literary value of a text but may also enhance its impact on digital reading platforms.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY

This study reveals readers' different emotional experiences and states during the reading process by analysing their emotional responses to *Atonement* on the WeChat reading platform. It provides crucial insights for several academic fields and practical applications, including literary studies, philosophy studies, civilisation studies, reader-response criticism, digital humanities, and cross-cultural translation.

Firstly, in literary studies, philosophy studies, and reader response criticism research, this study provides valuable empirical evidence by systematically examining the emotional responses of ordinary readers to the complex moral themes and narrative structure of *Atonement*. The study demonstrates how emotional themes such as sadness, regret and helplessness resonate with readers, broadening our understanding of reader response theory and empirically verifying how readers interpret, internalise, and emotionally resonate with literary works (West, 2014). These findings help literary scholars to explore further how specific narrative techniques or thematic elements (e.g., guilt, *atonement*, and irreversible acts) evoke specific emotional responses (Hamby *et al*, 2023), thereby deepening research on the mechanisms by which literary works affect readers at the psychological and moral levels.

Secondly, this research has important implications for the digital humanities, demonstrating the potential of using natural language processing and sentiment analysis techniques to extract and quantify emotional responses from user-generated content on digital platforms (Zhu, 2023). This approach combines traditional literary analytics and computational tools to provide a scalable and systematic method for analysing large volumes of reader feedback. The findings of this study encourage further applications of digital humanities

methods, allowing us to broaden the scope of computational literary analyses by exploring emotional and thematic trends in reader responses across genres, cultures, and literary works more broadly (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Finally, in the field of cross-cultural translation, this study provides a cultural perspective on the reception of *Atonement*, revealing how readers interpreted and responded to themes of guilt, redemption, and social injustice in specific cultural and digital contexts (Geng, 2021). Understanding these affective responses on Chinese platforms (e.g., WeChat Reading) provides a unique perspective on cross-cultural translation, especially in terms of examining how cultural factors influence readers' interpretations and receptions of universal themes in the novel's Chinese translation (Venuti, 2022).

In conclusion, this study reveals how readers connect emotionally with literary works in digital environments, providing a new perspective on integrating reader response studies and affective analyses. By examining the reception of literary works through the lens of readers' emotional responses, this study contributes to several academic fields. It provides practical insights for digital reading platforms, publishers, and translators to promote reader engagement and understanding.

5.2 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has some limitations in terms of sample size, research platform, geographic scope, case selection, and analytical perspectives, and it also provides directions for future research.

First, this study analysed the emotional responses of 138 readers screened from 328 WeChat book reviews, and this relatively small sample may limit the generalisability of the findings. Future research could expand the sample size to cover more sample sources, such as other reading platforms or social media, to improve the statistical representativeness and robustness of the data.

Second, the study was based only on the WeChat reading platform data. Although WeChat is widely used in China, the platform's user interface, community culture, and recommendation algorithms may have had a specific

impact on readers' emotional responses. Future research could incorporate data from multiple platforms (e.g., Douban, Amazon, and Goodreads) and conduct comparative analyses between platforms to reveal the potential impact of different platforms on reader understanding and feedback.

Moreover, the geographic scope of this study is limited by the fact that it is based on Chinese platforms and Chinese readers, and thus, the findings may reflect specific cultural contexts and regional characteristics. Cultural factors influence readers' interpretations of themes such as sin, redemption and love. In the future, a cross-cultural research approach can be adapted to analyse readers in different cultural contexts or compare data from international platforms in order to reveal cross-cultural differences and explore the different ways in which literary themes are received by readers globally.

In addition, the study chose a single text, *Atonement*, as a case study, and while this approach facilitates in-depth exploration, it may limit the generalisability of the findings. *Atonement*'s unique narrative structure and moral themes tend to elicit strong emotional responses from readers. Future research could extend the case study to cover literature with different themes, genres, and narrative styles to compare emotional patterns across texts and explore whether there are familiar reader emotional responses.

Finally, the present study focused on readers' emotional responses, providing one dimension of literary reception, but may have failed to fully reveal the cognitive or interpretive elements of the reading experience. Future research could adopt a multidimensional analysis approach that combines cognitive and interpretive perspectives to gain a more comprehensive understanding of readers' interactions with literary works, thereby enriching readers' multilevel responses in terms of emotion, thinking, and interpretation.

In conclusion, although this study reveals readers' emotional responses to *Atonement* on Chinese digital reading platforms, its limitations also point the way for future research. By expanding the sample size, covering multiple platforms, conducting cross-cultural comparisons, increasing the diversity of cases, and introducing a multi-dimensional analytical perspective, future research can further expand the framework of reader response theory and provide broader theoretical support and practical insights for digital

humanities, literary studies, and cross-cultural translation.

6 CONCLUSION

As new media and digital platforms provide greater access for general readers' critiques to be incorporated into the work of literary historians, the influence of contemporary readers on the writing of literary history will become increasingly significant. The involvement of general readers in historical narratives not only reflects the realisation of cultural democracy but also expands the task of criticism beyond a select group of professional critics, making it a shared responsibility of all readers while at the same time enabling all readers proceed learning through reading world literature.

This study delves into the emotional responses of general readers and their emotional responses by analysing reader book reviews of the novel *Atonement* on the WeChat reading platform. The study sifted through the feedback of 138 readers from 328 reviews. It systematically extracted and analysed the emotional data, revealing readers' complex emotional experiences and states when confronted with the text. This perspective provides new ideas for understanding reader acceptance of novels and highlights the important role of emotions in the literary experience.

Despite the limitations of this study in terms of sample size and geographic scope, focusing on WeChat reading platforms in China, its findings point the way for future research. The representativeness of the results can be improved in the future by expanding the sample size to cover data from more social media and reading platforms. Meanwhile, cross-cultural research will help reveal the differences in readers' emotional responses to the same texts in different cultures, and deepen the understanding of how literary works are received and understood globally. In addition, increasing the diversity of cases will allow for a more comprehensive exploration of the commonalities and characteristics of readers' emotional responses by comparing texts of different themes, genres, and narrative styles.

Overall, this study provides an in-depth analysis of the emotional responses to *Atonement* and offers essential theoretical support and practical

insights for the future development of digital humanities and cross-cultural translation. By exploring the relationship between readers' emotions and the reception of works, the study advances the understanding of the impact of literary works in the digital age. It lays the foundation for cross-cultural comparative studies. It enriches the literary reception theory framework, provides new perspectives for understanding readers' emotional experiences in the digital age, and provides a solid foundation for further exploration in related fields.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

NW collected, analyzed, and wrote the data. DS checked the soundness of the writing. CSL reviewed the data analysis and overall writing. NA checked the rigour of the writing.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All the book review data is retrieved from the WeChat Reading Platform, an online book-reading platform in China. The data is publicly available, while users need a WeChat account to log in and access all data. To be mentioned, all the data is originally written in Chinese, and the English translations are done and double-checked by the researcher and Computer aided translation platforms.

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