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**The Redemption of Literature: the making of fiction in Ian McEwan's
*Atonement***

Belo Horizonte

Faculdade de Letras

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*Atonement***

By

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ABSTRACT

Atonement, by British author Ian McEwan, was published in 2001 and has as protagonist Briony Tallis, a talented girl who is a writer-to-be and who lives among the fantasies of her creative mind. While in the verge of adolescence she makes a serious mistake that affects the lives of those around her. Briony finds in literature a way of recreating the world and retelling the story she could not change. Because *Atonement* is a metafictional work, literature, literary composition, and the writing processes utilized by Briony and by McEwan are major interests of this thesis.

The results show that *Atonement* presents, partially, a fragmented narrative, and its metafictional basis is developed under an untraditional realism, enabling significant shifts in the story and forcing the reader to resignify the categories of meaning and interpretation built throughout the reading. The novel-within-a-novel format makes *Atonement* peculiar to scrutinize in the sense that the limits between Briony's composition and McEwan's become blurred. *Atonement* has literature as a theme and as a structuring element, creating main characters that not only are avid readers, literary enthusiasts, and scholars, but who have their relations mediated and constructed by/through literature. Furthermore, in the metafictional process triggered, the characters, already fictional devices, are fictionalized, and Briony, as being one of the "authors," goes through self-fictionalization.

It can be concluded that in the many fictional levels found in *Atonement* the novel presents itself as a postmodern piece, both thematically and structurally, and it promotes a dialogue with the British literary tradition. These intertextualities evoke different ways of looking at literature and at ways of making it in contemporaneity. In a postmodern moment when we seem to have overcome the fear of the exhaustion of

literature, *Atonement* comes not to prove literature has indeed survived, but to ask what can be made out of the vast trajectory tradition has left us.

RESUMO

Atonement, do escritor britânico Ian McEwan, foi publicado em 2001, e apresenta a protagonista Briony Tallis, uma garota talentosa, interessada em escrever e que vive em meio às suas fantasias. É na intrigante fusão da realidade com a ficção que a pequena escritora comete um grave erro que afeta a vida daqueles à sua volta. Briony encontra na literatura uma forma de recriar o mundo e recontar a história que ela não pode mudar. Na última parte do livro, décadas depois e como uma renomada escritora, Briony assume a narrativa em primeira pessoa e explica que escreveu o livro imbuída do desejo de reparação pelo erro que cometera quando ainda criança.

Dessa forma, a literatura e a composição literária são os principais focos dessa dissertação que busca entender como a literatura é representada, qual papel/função ela exerce na obra e a sua importância na construção dos personagens. *Atonement* é escrito em base metaficcional e os processos de escrita utilizados por Briony e por McEwan também são de interesse desta pesquisa.

Os resultados alcançados são que *Atonement* apresenta uma narrativa fragmentada e sua metaficcionalidade está atrelada a um realismo não-tradicional, promovendo mudanças significativas na compreensão da obra e forçando o leitor a resignificar as categorias de sentido e interpretação erigidas ao longo da leitura. O formato romance-dentro-do-romance faz da análise de *Atonement* peculiar uma vez que os limites entre as composições de Briony e McEwan tornam-se imprecisos. Sendo uma obra altamente literária, *Atonement* faz da literatura um componente estruturador de sua narrativa, apresentando personagens que, além de ávidos leitores e entusiastas da literatura, têm suas relações mediadas e construídas pela mesma e também através dela. Ademais, no processo metaficcional desencadeado, os personagens (que já são por si só

artifícios ficcionais) são ficcionalizados e Briony, como sendo um dos “autores,” passa pelo processo de auto-ficcionalização.

Pode ser concluído que nos vários níveis de ficcionalidade encontrados em *Atonement* o romance se apresenta como uma obra pós-moderna tanto temática quanto estruturalmente, e a mesma promove um diálogo com a tradição literária britânica – intertextualidades que evocam diferentes modos de olhar a literatura e o fazer literário na contemporaneidade. Num momento em que parece ter sido superado o medo da exaustão da literatura, *Atonement* surge não com o intuito de provar que a mesma de fato sobreviveu, mas para perguntar o que pode ser feito com legado que a literatura nos deixou.

“There was really no point trying to arrange wild flowers”.

McEwan, Ian. *Atonement*.

INTRODUCTION

Narratives, seen as a sort of human cognitive need, have always accompanied mankind throughout history. Theoreticians, such as Walter Fisher, affirm that human beings are “natural” storytellers. Fisher, in “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument” even proposes the term *homo narrans* to explain how the human mind works through and is dependent on narratives, be it to make sense of the world or to register and perpetuate history, for instance. The narrative need is connected, according to Fisher (2), “to the real as well as fictive worlds, to stories of living and to stories of the imagination.” *Atonement*, the novel by British author Ian McEwan, published in 2001, portrays the power of storytelling and how postmodern literature has been developing ways to play with fictional possibilities and traditional categories of reading.

This thesis, which investigates the metafictionality of *Atonement* and the presence of literature as a structuring element in the narrative, is divided into three chapters. In the first one I present some of the criticism produced on McEwan’s works and initial notions on metafiction important to this thesis, as well as analyze relevant elements of the narrative. In the second chapter I discuss postmodernism in literature and metafiction related to postmodernism, besides presenting other important criticism on McEwan’s works. Finally, in the third chapter, I provide my final considerations and other significant theoretical and critical dialogues related to my proposal.

Literature and the literary composition are the main focuses of this thesis, since my main objective is to investigate the representation of literature and the metafictional aspects of *Atonement*. Considering that literature and the literary composition are themes and structuring devices within the novel — being part of the constructions of characters such as Cecilia, Robbie and Briony — I analyze, under theories that discuss

literature and metafiction, the representation of these elements in the novel, trying to understand how literature is portrayed in *Atonement*, what role it exerts, and how it relates to and affects the main characters. Moreover, I analyze how literature is constructed within the metafictional process utilized by Briony and also by McEwan. In *Atonement*, literature and the act of composition intertwine with Briony's formation as subject and writer. How such connections occur and what relations can be established between those elements are hence important to this research.

Fiction, then, is a crucial aspect in this novel, for *Atonement* revolves around a little girl fond of stories and on the verge of the worlds of childhood and adulthood. Although she has an extremely sagacious and fanciful mind, she lacks nevertheless maturity, which is intensified by the fact that she is a fruit of a problematic family environment. Through her fanciful way to read reality she ends up condemning herself and her beloved ones to a life of suffering and misery. The novel she writes is hence also a product of her guilt. She longs to give the ones she cherishes an alternative, a chance of happiness¹.

Guilt has been a prolific theme in the history of world literature, and there are innumerable examples of how it has permeated the imaginary of mankind and found resonance in literature². In Sophocles's *Oedipus The King*, for instance, Oedipus blinds himself after knowing that he killed his father and married his mother. In William Shakespeare's *Othello*, taken by jealousy and rage, Othello murders Desdemona. After knowing the unbearable truth that she was innocent and he had been deceived by Yago, he is incapable of carrying the burden of guilt and kills himself. Raskólnikov, in Fiódor Dostoiévski's *Crime and Punishment*, wages a psychological struggle wondering what

¹ Another possible reading is that the novel would be a purely fictional enterprise even for Briony, and nothing she tells would have happened in her microcosm.

² Lurene Brown (1975).

led him to murder two women. The guilt torments him and causes his inability to go on with his life after committing the crime. These are just some noteworthy examples that illustrate guilt as a universal theme in literature.

Atonement also tackles guilt, and the way found by the protagonist to deal with and release her suffering, the burden endured, and the pursuit of forgiveness. Briony Tallis goes through a lifetime of remorse for having committed a mistake that altered irretrievably the lives of her family, especially those of Cecilia, her sister, and Robbie Turner, the childhood friend and acquaintance of the Tallis family. However, *Atonement* is not only a story about the damages guilt can create in a human being's life, but also what they can make out of their condition: how guilt serves Briony with feedstock to develop her most important novel and lifetime project, a narrative that discusses literature, reality, fiction and redemption. *Atonement* is the story of a writer in the process of edification and of how life, her own life, might have served her as material for her composition.

As far as composition is concerned, this thesis focuses on the compositional methods used by the “authors” and investigates the representation of literature and the metafictional process in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, trying to answer questions that motivate this study, such as: In *Atonement*, how do characters and the narrator understand what literature is and relate to literature? How is such understanding related to the story? Why is it important to the metafictional process? How is literature used as an instrument of atonement and reinvention of “reality”? How does the understanding of literature in *Atonement* contribute to the discussion of literature in the critical scenario? How does McEwan's use of metafiction contribute to the manifestations of a postmodern literary production? These issues will be tackled throughout this study.

As previously mentioned, *Atonement* is construed upon metafictional bases, which refer not only to the direct relation between the author and his work, but actually to the means of composition used by the protagonist Briony Tallis, the “author” of the book. Therefore, what occurs may be called the “fictionalization” of (meta)fiction. McEwan uses the protagonist to expose and justify the narrative structure of his work and also the content of the narrative, which is characterized by multiple perspectives. The reader has then the opportunity of perceiving and relating the theme approached in *Atonement* with the structuring and confection of the text itself; this structure plays with the possibilities of fiction.

Literature, Terry Eagleton argues in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, is both what people are capable of making with writing, and what writing is capable of making with people, and this idea is deeply present in *Atonement*, since it explores the literary composition and its entanglement with the subject and the writer in the process of edification. On the same path, this thesis justifies itself for understanding that literature is, *par excellence*, the ultimate linguistic expression of the human condition, and to study it implies the necessity of being attentive to the nuances of the creative and productive spaces that enable the literary production. This study is also an attempt to contribute to the field of literary theory and criticism, as well as to the study of the manifestations of postmodern literature, for *Atonement* is not only inserted in this literary moment but also adds to its own composition postmodern discussions, such as the “limits” of fact/fiction, and the overt fictionality of the novel.

The thematic and structural multiplicity that comprise *Atonement* belong to a current discussion in postmodern literature. In fact, literature has always played a crucial role in promoting a space for debate and reflection, be they on art or on humans’ condition. The gaze that privileges the plurality of perspectives and promotes a

discussion of art, “truth” and perspective is present in *Atonement* for instance when Briony comprehends, through her experience and dialogue with the literary composition, the diversity and fluidity of reality. For both its form and content, this novel presents itself as a prolific production.

As far as plurality is concerned, Ian Russell McEwan, born in Aldershot, England in 1948, has a diversified literary and artistic production, including novels, short stories and scripts for television. He is considered, by his popular and critical success, one of the most important British authors of the present time. For his works he has received several literary awards, such as the Man Booker Prize in 1998, for the novel *Amsterdam* (1998). For *Atonement*, besides being shortlisted in 2001 for the Man Booker Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the writer was awarded the WH Smith Literary Award (2002), the National Book Critics' Circle Fiction Award (2003), the Los Angeles Times Prize for Fiction (2003), and the Santiago Prize for the European Novel (2004).

Despite the transformations observed in Ian McEwan's works over the decades, his very first “label” remains. His writing of gothic fiction and his interest in the forbidden and the taboo, Brian Finney claims, originated the nickname “Ian Macabre.” According to Finney, *Atonement* “still embodies this premise, but it employs a degree of self-consciousness which far exceeds that found in any of his previous novels” (2), giving to this particular novel a unique profile among McEwan's works.

Literature, and fiction more specifically, is an instrument deeply explored in *Atonement*. The consciousness of the writing process and its capacity of creation places art in a powerful position. In this study, I concentrate on the representation of literature and its process of self-referentiality in *Atonement* — the novel's incredible faculty to build worlds within worlds. The novel is constituted by a metafictional structure and has

literature as one of the central themes. Its study in a postmodern scenario is also relevant because metafiction is a current significant literary manifestation, especially for dealing with an untraditional perspective on the relation between author, reader and the writing process. Given what has been presented so far, this thesis proposes a study of how the concept of literature is conveyed in the novel, how it relates to the metafictional narrative, and how the novel functions as a postmodern production.

In my study I am conscious that postmodernism is a complex concept to deal with, especially because critics in various fields have not yet found a consensus when it comes to theorizing it. Linda Hutcheon, in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, acknowledges that grasping postmodernism is a hard task and that contradiction is part of the very idea held by the term. She describes it as taking “the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement” (1). Postmodernism, to the critic, has a commitment to doubleness since it “ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge” (1-2). Postmodernism is a versatile and productive historical moment and its artistic and cultural productions show such versatility. *Atonement* is part of this scenario and embraces the characteristics of a postmodern piece, structurally and thematically, as it will be shown and developed throughout this thesis.

Postmodernist (meta)fiction tends to play with the possibilities of form and content. Unlike the Romantic artist who emerged as a God-like figure, nowadays, the author (specially of metafiction) is rather “the inscribed marker of a social product that has the potential to participate in social change through [the] reader” (Hutcheon xvi). What is seen then is a genre that:

Choose[s] to show power in terms of an almost erotic manipulation, to be enjoyed as Barthesian bliss... a text [that] can call attention to authority

structures in such a way to subvert the Romantic ideology of the myth of originality that once subtended them. No longer to believe in the manipulating “author” as a person is to restore the wholeness of the act of the *énonciation*: the ‘author’ becomes a position to be filled, a role to be inferred, by the reader reading the text. (Hutcheon xvi)

All this self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, as Hutcheon points out, make clear that the notion of originality no longer finds resonance in postmodern artistic productions as in previous historical and literary moments. Now, newness and authenticity would stand for recombining and recreating already existing patterns rather than just considering coming up with something never experienced before. This tendency stands again for the notion of playing with the prospect of rearranging previous structures, a feature found in *Atonement*. Moreover, control and power lie no longer in a univocal, authorial figure, but are shared with the reader in an awareness of meaning as something negotiated.

Such awareness marks postmodernism as a time of inquiries, experimentations and contradictions, characteristics that although not new, have come forefront and reached a proportion never seen before. Hutcheon states that postmodernism has the primary concern of de-naturalizing dominant aspects taken for granted in everyday life. She explains that “entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ (they might include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact ‘cultural’; made by us, not given to us” (2). This understanding can contribute directly to this thesis, which is interested in scrutinizing what is conveyed in the narrative as “fact” and “fiction” and as “truth” and “representation.” Also, this understanding reveals to what extent these notions have been “naturalized” and how they are dealt with in the novel. “Reality” thus, acquires a different specificity – one of construction, plurality and uncertainty. This is also problematized in *Atonement*, since what Briony believed was “real” was

actually her disfigured perception of events. The fragility of human relations and the consciousness that we live by fragmented pieces of “reality” are a concern of postmodern artistic productions, and also find room in *Atonement*.

Christopher Norris, a British literary critic, states that a major concern of postmodernist narratives is to challenge and subvert, in a self-conscious manner, the standard patterns of cultural and social productions. According to the critic, postmodernism shows a tendency towards metanarrative, which shakes the certainties of a first-order narration. This phenomenon takes place in *Atonement*, since readers are first led to believe in a direct relation between author and text, but are subsequently surprised by a closure that reveals the existence of an even more unreliable narrative level: Briony, a fictional character, reveals herself as the “creator” of the entire novel.

Postmodernism and metafiction are intimately related since postmodern metafictional narratives tend to treat realism in a subversive manner. The notion of reality and truth is parodically undermined, as is the credibility of an omniscient narrator in his/her ubiquitous position of connoisseur and controlling figure. *Atonement* presents all these issues within its narrative, confirming once more the relevance of its study and the importance of understanding some of the contributions this piece provides to the current critical scenario: what standards are defied and what “novelties” (if any) are brought up.

The authors who make use of metafictional techniques, as described by Patricia Waugh, “explore a *theory* of fiction through the practice of writing fiction” (2). This mutual mirroring, which is described as “narcissistic”³ by Hutcheon in her book *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, points to the condition of language

³ Hutcheon uses “Narcissistic” as “the figurative adjective chosen [in her book] to designate this textual self-awareness... not intended as derogatory but rather as descriptive and suggestive, as the ironic allegorical reading of the Narcissus myth” (1).

as the mediator of creating reality. Since the worlds of literary writing are entirely made up of language, they become a “useful model for learning about the construction of ‘reality’ itself” (Waugh 3). It is illustrative to bring to the present discussion an excerpt from *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, by John Fowles, which brings about the following questioning:

A character is either real or imaginary? If you think that hypocrite lecteur, I can only smile. You do not even think of your own past as quite real; you dress it up, you gild it or blacken it, censor it, tinker with it... fictionalise it, in a word, and put it away on a shelf – your book, your romanced autobiography. We are all in flight from the real reality. (99)

John Fowles’s novel is a milestone work. It has revolutionized literary patterns in the transition from modernism to postmodernism. His use of frames and levels of fictionality has brought new nuances to the making of fiction. *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* lends an ear to a postmodern claim, which is to question certainties, assertions, and the very structures of society we live by. By doing so, this novel opens a range of new possibilities for interpreting the world.

In a world where “narcissism” (self-awareness) has become a cultural phenomenon, self-reflexiveness is not a literary prerogative, but it is present perhaps in all artistic fields. This scenario points to the “increasing interest in *how* art is created, not just in *what* is created,” claims Hutcheon in *Narcissistic Narrative* (8), and metafiction would be then the “process made visible” (7). This logic reveals that “the process may be becoming as intriguing as the product” (Hutcheon 8). Furthermore, recapturing Fisher’s theory on narrative, it relates to what Robert Scholes contends in *Fabulation and Metafiction*: fiction for him “fills a human need in all cultures, at all times” (106), and fiction is the core of *Atonement*.

Ultimately, to propose a study of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* is to try to comprehend literary nuances and phenomena that have, in postmodernity, transformed their structure and manifestation. In addition, to discuss the understandings of literature conveyed in *Atonement* is to foment literary theory and criticism by enriching the space of dialogue and exchange in the literary studies, as well as in the field of humanities.

CHAPTER 1

Atonement: A Never-Ending Search

In this first chapter I open up my investigation by discussing some criticism on *Atonement*. I as well provide the primary notions on metafiction that interest this thesis. The *status quaestionis* that surrounds McEwan's works not only opens the chapter but is explored throughout, as I present some of the vast criticism *Atonement* has received in a little over than a decade.

1.1 Ian McEwan and *Atonement*

Concerning the overall plot of the novel, *Atonement* begins in interwar England and ends in the turn of the 20th to the 21st century. The protagonist, Briony Tallis, is an upper-middle-class talented girl who is fond of fantasies and of writing stories. As she grows up, she harnesses to her transformations the many nuances of literary composition and her understanding of literature. It is amid the intriguing fusion of "reality" and "fiction" that the little writer accuses Robbie Turner (who was the son of a servant and had grown up among the Tallises) of having raped Lola, Briony's adolescent cousin. This serious mistake affects the lives of those around her and will make Briony pursue atonement throughout her life. However, when faced with the impossibility of altering the past, she will find in literature a way of recreating the world and retelling the story she could not change.

Brian Finney's "Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*" supports the claim that *Atonement* presents a different structure from "the closed claustrophobic inner world of his early protagonists" (1). Finney considers that McEwan first managed to escape from an exclusively subjective narrative

in his third novel, *The Child in Time* (1987). Before this date, McEwan had a period of six years in which he focused mainly on drama, producing films and plays for television. During this time, McEwan:

Reveal[s] his awakened interest in the world of politics and social action, in the nuclear threat, environmental pollution, and the oppression of women... Since he returned to fiction in 1987, every subsequent novel has had not just a private and psychological component, but a public and historical one as well: the government commission on which Stephen sits in *The Child in Time* (1987), the Cold War in *The Innocent* (1990), the ongoing influence of racism and fascism in *Black Dogs* (1992), the short-sightedness of the exclusively scientific, rational mentality in *Enduring Love* (1997), and the corrupt world of political journalism and publicly commissioned art in *Amsterdam* (1998). (Finney 68-69)

In using his writing to explore politics, history, social problems and environmental matters, McEwan shows to be aware of both a diachronic and a contemporary worldwide perspective. He displays interest not only in subjective dramas and conflicts, but also in a global scenario.

When it comes to *Atonement* and some of the core aspects in it, Luisa Flora⁴ contends that McEwan's fictive story is a transfigured instrument of interpellation and quest of the human condition. She calls attention to the importance in the narrative of the Meissen porcelain vase, which is broken in a silly dispute between Cecilia and Robbie by the fountain of the Tallises' property. When it is broken, she explains, the vase enables the pretext to the recognition of Cecilia and Robbie's love, and also to the illusion Briony had by seeing the fountain scene, leading the girl to her mistake. Thus,

⁴In "A Delicada Resistência de uma Porcelana ou Desta Matéria São Feitos os Romances. *Atonement* de Ian McEwan."

Flora asserts that through the breaking of the vase several elements of the narrative are triggered, for it serves as a meaningful image to the way events unroll in the story.

Regarding Flora's major point, the breaking of the vase and its implications to and imbrications with the narrative, the critic states that the banal incident between Robbie and Cecilia provoked by who was going to fill the vase assumes a determinant meaning in the construction of the narrative. Through the incident, the lives of Briony, Cecilia, and Robbie would be changed forever, and the succession of happenings, more than affect the novel, ends up actually being the novel, says Flora. The presence of the vase and its frailty are in consonance with how the novelist erects the many possibilities of the story, and how easily everything can fall apart.

The passage that follows describes the scene of the breaking of the vase and it is very illustrative of what is developed throughout the novel — a slight metaphor McEwan finds to represent the fate of the lovers and of Briony as well:

She [Cecilia] tightened her hold and twisted her body away from him. He was not so easily shaken off. With a sound like a dry twig snapping, a section of the lip of the vase came away in his hand, and slip into two triangular pieces which dropped into the water and tumbled to the bottom in a synchronous, see-sawing motion, and lay there, several inches apart, writhing in the broken light. (McEwan 29⁵)

The vase was broken into two triangular pieces, which dropped into the fountain several inches apart. This can be read as symbolic of the indissoluble triangle formed by Cecilia, Robbie, and Briony, and how the couple (the two pieces) was held inches apart by contingencies of life and Briony's intrusion. They could never fulfill their love due to Briony's meddling, and Robbie could not let it go: "yes, she was a child at the time,

⁵ From now on, the quotes taken from *Atonement* will be marked by "A," followed by the page.

and he did not forgive her. He would never forgive her. That was the lasting damage” (A 234). Another piece of evidence that the vase is a metaphor for the couple is when we are informed that the vase, some years after the incident by the fountain, fell off and broke completely, excluding any possibility of repair. At the end of the novel, the reader is informed that, at that time, Robbie was dying in France and Cecilia would die some months later in an explosion in an underground station. The destruction of the vase comes together with the ruin of any chances the couple had to be together. In addition, the vase is also a metaphor for the narrative structure, since as Finney (77) also notes, “both the vase and the novel as whole represent a fragile aesthetic form that can easily fall apart,” and indeed *Atonement*’s skeleton is made fragile by McEwan; it operates on the edge of ruin especially after Briony’s last authorial revelations.

An addendum that could be drawn regarding the connection of Cecilia, Briony, and Robbie is the phrase “come back” uttered by Cecilia to both her sister and her beloved Robbie, a phrase that works as a motif in the novel. Cecilia used to say it to Briony to wake her up from nightmares when she was a little girl. In a later scene Briony witnesses Cecilia uttering the same words to calm Robbie down from the nervous outbreaks he developed after fighting in the war. However, this connection is revealed as a fabrication of Briony the author, for in the end the reader discovers that those moments shared by Cecilia and Robbie, as well as Briony’s meeting with them, were but Briony’s fabrication, and never really happened.

Going back to the episode by the fountain, through Briony’s viewpoint we learn that she observes unnoticed the incident through a window of the house — there is nothing more symbolic than an observer by a window, and both Briony and McEwan (as novelists) make use of this imagery. A window is a symbol of frame and representation: it may presuppose a portrait, a point of view, a perspective constrained

by margins and limits, and this idea is precisely what underlies Briony's observation — so much so that she is then proved wrong for having misjudged Robbie's attitudes.

Briony, who is an isolated and idle girl at that time, is extremely imaginative and still conceives the world and tries to make sense of it through fairy tales:

A proposal of marriage. Briony would not have been surprised. She herself had written a tale in which a humble woodcutter saved a princess from drowning and ended by marrying her. What was presented here fitted well ... What was less comprehensible, however, was how Robbie imperiously raised his hand now, as though issuing a command which Cecilia dared not disobey. It was extraordinary that she was unable to resist him ... What strange power did he have over her. Blackmail? Threats? Briony raised two hands to her face and stepped back a little way from the window. She should shut her eyes, she thought, and spare herself the sight of her sister's shame. But that was impossible, because there were further surprises. Cecilia, mercifully still in her underwear, was climbing into the pond, was standing waist deep in the water, was pinching her nose – and then she was gone ... The sequence was illogical – the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal. (A 38-9)

Briony captures the sexual tension between Cecilia and Robbie and interprets the scene she witnesses through a puerile viewpoint. However, danger lies in the fact that things almost never are what they seem, as Briony actually acknowledges later.

It is hinted, from the beginning of the novel, that she would not content in being a mere spectator, an observer; she feels the urge to investigate, to write down, to take part: “it was essential for her to know everything” (A 113). We see in this urge the

impulse of her artistic vein; to fable was a manner of entering the events. After observing the scene, she felt that “some kind of revelation occurred” (A 41):

Briony had her first, weak intimation that for her now it could no longer be fairy-tale castles and princesses, but the strangeness of the here and now, of what passed between people, the ordinary people she knew ... if she had not stood when she did, the scene would still have happened, for it was not about her at all. Only chance had brought her to the window.
(A 39-40)

At this moment Briony (who does not understand yet the adult behavior) is, as an artist to be, stepping towards another literary level, grasping a new universe of possibilities as a human being and this will be reflected in her art: “the complexity of her feelings confirmed Briony in her view that she was entering an arena of adult emotion and dissembling from which her writing was bound to benefit” (A 113).

Linda Cruise, in “Getting an Angle on Truth: An Analysis of Narrative Viewpoint in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*,” states, “Briony’s personal, narrative-style development, at any and all stages, influences her perception of reality, and, thereby, impacts any of her subsequent story accounts, as told from varying angles of observation (both temporally and spatially)” (Part II). This idea put forth by Cruise is in consonance with Briony’s transgression because it is in the confusing complexity of reality and fiction⁶ that she commits her tragic mistake. The narrator, however, constantly reaffirms that Briony did not act with malice, as in an attempt to captivate the readers and make them understand her outlook: “mayhem and destruction were too chaotic for her tastes, and she did not have it in her to be cruel” (A 5). Rather, she believed she was doing the right thing in accusing Robbie.

⁶She lives a dichotomy for on the one hand she enters the fictional world through her writings and on the other hand she is starting to deal with the real (adult) world.

In this event by the fountain lies not only the seed that triggers the novel (Briony's fault and her awakening to the world of fiction as a future novelist), but through experiencing and wondering about what she sees, Briony conceives what comes to be the structure of the text, so she has this metafictional insight:

she could write a scene like the one by the fountain and ... include a hidden observer like herself. ... She could write the scene three times over, from three points of view; her excitement was in the prospect of freedom, of being delivered from the cumbrous struggle between good and bad, heroes and villains. None of these three was bad, nor were they particularly good. She need not judge. There did not have to be a moral. She need only show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive. It wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value. (A 40)

But again I may call attention to the fact that this realization is a fabrication of Briony's mature mind looking back on her childhood, especially because in "Part Three" she is depicted receiving suggestions from an editor over the structure of the narrative. She manipulates the story to serve her purposes and makes clear to the reader she does so. The narrator gives several hints of that manipulation throughout the novel: "the definition would refine itself over the years. She was to concede that she may have attributed more deliberation than was feasible to her thirteen-year-old self" (A 40). This passage shows the unreliability of the narrative. Nevertheless, we readers must not let

the revelations of the end make us disregard what the author achieved and constructed, otherwise we cannot analyze the work.

Returning to Briony's watching of the scene, although she apparently saw clearly the possibilities of fiction through what she had just observed, on the same day, just some hours later, "she trapped herself, she marched into the labyrinth of her own construction" (A 170). She proved not to hold yet the necessary malice (or did she have too much?) and prudence the adult world requires. An apparently perfect logic of events and facts convinces the young girl of the authenticity of her construct, which she piously believes to be the truth. When she doubted herself for a moment, "she did not have the courage, after all her initial certainty and two or three days of patient, kindly interviewing, to withdraw her evidence" (A 170). She, whose "wish for a harmonious, organised world denied her the reckless possibilities of wrongdoing" (A 5), wished, by denouncing Robbie, to reestablish the order that had been collapsed by the liar and dangerous maniac she suddenly believed him to be. She was still clearly unable to relativize "truth," and too immature to comprehend the nuances of human relations. Therefore, her misdeed intertwines with her obsession with stories and her binary way of conceiving the world.

Thus, Briony Tallis is, sometimes concomitantly and sometimes not, character, author, and narrator in *Atonement*. At first, the reader does not know Briony is the "author" of "Atonement" (not *Atonement*), and that the story is taken from her mind, "her" point of view on facts, a prerogative authors have. The narrative voice that leads the reader to the "Part Three" of the book is a third person omniscient narrator. Only in the last part does Briony assume the narrative in first person and make the reader aware of the whole process of creation of "Atonement" (and *Atonement* somehow, as well). Although her authorship is hinted in the first three parts, she appears as a character, and

the fourth and last part is the entry of what seems to be her diary. At this point she is the narrator in first person and reveals much privileged information, claiming the authorship of “Atonement.” Even though the last part seems sort of disconnected from the rest of the book, almost as an appendix, it is the necessary element to enable McEwan’s metafictional project. Only in the fourth part do the readers realize they have been reading Briony’s novel, the one they see her shaping before their eyes.

To this regard it is relevant to point out that I make here a distinction between “Atonement” and *Atonement*. The first refers to the novel “written” by Briony Tallis, and the second to the one written by Ian McEwan. Such differentiation is necessary to the analysis I propose in this thesis, since both authorships have to be taken into account. In the end of “Part Three,” Briony’s signature “BT London 1999” endorses: a) the (auto) biographical tone of the narrative; b) her intention that her novel would finish in “Part Three,” not including the last part, “London, 1999.” The possible readings of such literary structure will be discussed later on. The narrator finishes “Part Three” saying that Briony is ready to begin writing her new draft, her atonement, but actually, when the reader reaches this part he/she has just read her draft and atonement. It is an artful twist McEwan (and maybe Briony) plays with.

The structure of the book is then a novel within a novel, as some critics such as Linda Cruise have also acknowledged, for “Atonement” has its “authorship” assigned to Briony Tallis, and *Atonement* has as author Ian McEwan, who toys with the reader and the possibilities of fiction. Also, the entry of the fourth part leaves room for questionings, once the reader does not know if that would accompany the novel as being purposely part of it, as a whole, or if it is McEwan intervening in Briony’s work through adding a text that was not meant to be there, not intended to become public. Or maybe the last part is not an intimate diary at all and Briony wrote it with the clear purpose of

having it published within her novel, as a piece of it that would evoke significant changes in the novel's reading. Another guess would be that since Briony says in the fourth part that her novel cannot be published until the Marshalls are dead (otherwise the publisher would be sued), and that she is too ill to outlive Lola (who at eighty, had a "voracious, knowing look"⁷), a possible conclusion is that finally all the involved ones are dead by 2001, the year *Atonement* gets published (two years after she wrote the final part, "London, 1999"). Again, fiction and reality merge and the reader is compelled to be left with unsolved puzzles. Assuming novelists have a sort of "Godly" power (as Briony says in the very end), with the publication of her novel Briony finally grants Cecilia and Robbie the reconciliation that the term "atonement" also means⁸.

When it comes to McEwan's works as a whole there are many common lines between them, and although Brandon Smith⁹ does not analyze *Atonement*, his scrutiny of other works by McEwan sheds light on the object of interest of this study. He posits:

Turning to the novels of Ian McEwan ... his later novels are often praised for their realism and, in *Saturday* and *Enduring Love* in particular, the narrative is conspicuously chronological and broadly continuous ...

McEwan's 2005 novel *Saturday* is an account of a single eventful day in the life of a neurosurgeon Henry Perowne, beginning 'Some hours before dawn' (3) and ending as he slips into sleep, thinking, finally, 'this day's over'. (279)

This one-day-tragedy tone is also present in *Atonement* and this structure inevitably resembles and calls into mind the Aristotelian scheme of tragedy. The determinant

⁷ A 361.

⁸ Further on it I will explore the religious images present in the novel.

⁹"'It is written': Representations of Determinism in Contemporary Popular Science Writing and Contemporary British Fiction" (2010).

events that trigger Briony's transgression take place in one single day¹⁰ – that is, her observation of the fountain scene, her reading of Robbie's note to Cecilia, the rape, and her accusation. The rest of the novel can be basically understood as the consequences of that fateful day. This tragic resonance is symbolic of McEwan's style, which tackles the potentiality for tragedies to be embedded in everyday life; how susceptible we all are to them.

James Wood¹¹ has described McEwan as “the great contemporary stager of traumatic contingency as it strikes ordinary lives” (para. 1). Smith also pinpoints this same characteristic of McEwan's works, the “disruption to a ... life that a traumatic event can bring about” (79). The critic, expatiating on McEwan's works such as *Saturday*, *Enduring Love*, *On Chasil Beach* and *The Child in Time*, shows how contingency is a pillar element of McEwan's writing, and this is certainly extended to *Atonement*, since it is contingency that puts Briony in position of misjudging (“only chance had brought her to the window”¹²) Cecilia and Robbie in their awkward situation by the fountain. Actually, “she knew very well that if she had not stood when she did, the scene would still have happened” (A 40). It is also contingency that makes Robbie delegate to Briony the function of delivering Cecilia the note he had written, and it is contingency as well that makes Briony witness (although distortedly) the rape scene. Contingency is hence one of the most crucial and significant factors in the narrative, for it plants and grows in Briony's mind the seed that sets off the chain of disastrous events in the Tallis and Turner families.

As in *Enduring Love*, *Atonement* is narrated mostly retrospectively and the events are as well pre-determined, for the narrator is telling a story that has happened in

¹⁰On the back cover of the book the reader finds in short the core of the plot that shapes the novel and also the reference to the Aristotelian tragic scheme: “By the end of the day the lives of all three will have been changed forever.”

¹¹“James Wood Writes About the Manipulations of Ian McEwan” (2009).

¹² A 40.

the past, and over which he/she has control. Also, both narratives assume a proleptic tone from the many glances forward given by their narrators. In *Enduring Love*, Joe utters phrases such as: “By the time it happened — the event I am about to describe, the fall” (2); and “if I had been uncontested leader the tragedy would not have happened” (11). In *Atonement* the narrator also warns the readers about the tragedy that is about to happen and that causes a shift in the lives of the characters. In the following passage of *Atonement*, Robbie has just decided to go through the search of the twins alone: “this decision, as he was to acknowledge many times, transformed his life” (A 144). Here are implied the proleptic tone, the element of contingency and the subtle reference to the tragedy that is about to happen. It becomes clear that for McEwan tragedy and trauma are underlying themes, be it through an explicit use of the terms or through what they represent as consequences in the narrative. This combination is the basis of many of his novels, such as *The Child in Time*, *Enduring Love*, *The Innocent*, *On Chesil Beach* and *Atonement*.

The word “fall,” used by Joe in a quote above, is also an interesting term to be analyzed. If “fall,” in *Enduring Love*, may have as a primary meaning the physical movement of descent (and this “fall” triggers the tragedy in the story), a second meaning that arises is the biblical one, the “Fall” of man. This episode, narrated in Genesis, refers in the Bible to the moment in which Adam and Eve, for having disobeyed God and eaten from the tree of knowledge, were expelled from paradise, and began facing the agonies of being human. To the Christians, sin appears at this moment in mankind’s history, and men, who were pure, are now sinful and imperfect creatures, in search for redemption. Hence, in *Enduring Love*, there is the fall of men in the double sense, for the fall implies both the tragedy itself and the suffering experienced by the characters. Making an allusion with *Atonement*, Briony also goes through her own “fall”

at the moment she commits her “sin,” accusing Robbie of being Lola’s rapist, and enduring since then an endless agony. She, when fully aware of her deed, leaves the paradise of her innocent childhood to enter the mundane suffering of the adult world. A single act, an accusation, drags Briony from purity and joy to the complexity and sorrow of the grown-up life — one that already carries an almost unbearable burden.

Bruno M. Shah, in the article entitled “The Sin of Ian McEwan’s Fictive Atonement: Reading his Later Novels,” affirms that despite the many religious allusions that can be found in his works, McEwan does not use religion to provide any answers:

A Christian reader, therefore, can uniquely recognize and feel the problems that McEwan’s art poses. But McEwan rejects and precludes a Christian understanding of the privative reality (original sin) to which he would give novelistic voice. Consequently, his novels’ catharses are fated to frustrate, whatever delight is had along the way. Because McEwan doesn’t accept or see the causes of sin as such — formally understood as rebellion against the Creator — his diagnostic aesthetic of our postmodern malaise is necessarily incomplete and ineffectual. (39)

McEwan being openly an atheist contributes to a vision that privileges the randomness of life, its daily relations and connections as the perfect scenario for all human struggle. By avoiding an indulgent perception over mankind, “McEwan depicts a world wherein God’s significance lies in his indifferent absence,” says Shah (39).

The critic, about the general lines of McEwan’s works, states that the author “regularly omits description of moral decision-making” (42) and the character, through a pivotal act, “will have started the machinations of his own fate in unreflective, ambiguous freedom” (42). In McEwan’s cold and chaotic universe, people are suffering beings, says Shah, natural victims of actions that inevitably “initiate the chain of

consequences,” (49) and that may have tragic and painful results. However, such results are never enough to stop characters from struggling for life and redemption.

Sticking with religious images and intertextualities within *Atonement*, the novel, from its title, establishes an immediate relation with religious concepts. Laura Bloxham, in her essay “*Atonement*, by Ian McEwan,” calls attention to the religious allusions within the text, beginning with the title, which Bloxham suggests is a Christian term — “The Atonement,” a God-figure remitting sacrifice and forgiveness. Indeed, both aspects are present in the narrative, since Briony punishes and sacrifices herself throughout the story in her pursuit of forgiveness. Although religion is not actually a theme in *Atonement*, it is inevitably a latent imagery, for not only the name of the novel establishes a direct reference to the Christian doctrine, but also the story is about reconciliation, even though not in the precise religious connotation implied by the term.

According to the Christian doctrine¹³, “The Atonement” is the reconciliation with God. Jesus Christ, through his crucifixion, provided forgiveness for the sins (initiated with the “original sin”) committed — and the ones yet to-be — by mankind and thus promoted the reconciliation between God and creation. The original sin, which consists of humans’ fall through Eve and Adam’s eating from the tree of knowledge, originated the “debt” mankind has to God for having betrayed His trust. Via the Original Sin — the disobedience of Adam and Eve — all men from that moment on were made sinners and only a divine intervention could restore harmony: “The Atonement.” When it comes to *Atonement*, we perceive that Briony’s journey pervades more the realm of men than the realm of the divine. She seeks her sister’s and Robbie’s forgiveness (and her own) rather than a transcendental absolution to restore herself.

¹³ Reference taken from <<http://jesuschrist.lds.org/SonOfGod/eng/his-life-and-teachings/articles/the-atonement-of-jesus-christ>>.

In *Atonement* Briony's deed assumes much more a tone of transgression than of a sin (actually the narrator, and also Briony herself, refer to her act as crime), even having a title that *per se* dialogues immediately with religious concepts. Nevertheless, the notion of sin is embedded in the narrative, for Briony's fault is depicted as an action in need of forgiveness for the damages it has caused. In fact, her misdeed does not fit any category: it cannot be punished as a crime nor it is actually treated as a sin. But even if, in the novel, the forgiveness is not meant to be God's, the very idea that a wrongdoing needs expiation could be taken as a Christian axiom.

Morten Jensen, in his article "The Effects of Conflict in the Novels of Ian McEwan," also pinpoints religious references in *Atonement* and relates them to the power literature has within the narrative. Since "reality" does not provide any means for redemption, Briony appeals to writing. At this moment, Jensen says, she resembles God, for it is in her hands the absolute power to control and decide the characters' destinies. David Malcolm, discussing McEwan's works, asserts: "Open the wrong door, turn down the wrong street, lose attention for a moment, McEwan suggests, and you can step into a nightmare" (9). It is exactly this fragility, this contingency, and randomness that are present in *Atonement*, for Briony, Jensen observes, "simply happened to look out of the window as Robbie and Cecilia's scene by the fountain unfolded" (10). This single moment was enough to create a misunderstanding that would change their lives forever. Jensen completes stating that *Atonement* is a more character-based novel, and quotes¹⁴ McEwan's declaration that Briony Tallis is the most "complete person" he has ever brought into existence.

Atonement's epigraph, which is a quote taken from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), contains already an allusion to religion:

¹⁴ "Interview with Ian McEwan" in Ian McEwan: The Essential Guide eds. Margaret Reynolds & Jonathan Noakes (Great Britain: Vintage, 2002), p. 23

‘Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English: that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing ... what ideas have you been admitting?’

The quotation makes perceptible the author introducing some of the themes that will be explored in *Atonement*, such as humans’ propensity for misunderstanding. The ironic tone of the conclusion present in the sentence “remember that we are English: that we are Christians” points to how Christianity is (hypocritically) embedded in the formation of English people, and affects deeply their view of the world and the way they correlate.

The common notion of sin as a rebellion or offense against the creator is not what one finds in *Atonement*. Rather, the author exposes how human relations *per se* carry a destructive seed, and how susceptible we are to be led by distorted perceptions of “reality.” In Christian communities (even maybe in not very rigid ones), the principles that constitute the creed end up rooted in the very constitution of people’s morality and judgment. Thereby, the actions that injure those principles might be regarded as sins and sometimes they injure also the social morality assured by law. Once a sinner (and Christians believe they all are born sinners), the individual feels constantly in a state of vigilance, in debt, not only to those directly affected in case of a fault, but mainly to God.

Another biblical reference would be when Briony sees Robbie coming back from the search for the twins carrying the boys, and she feels outraged: “Did he believe he could conceal his crime behind an apparent kindness, behind this show of being the good shepherd? This was surely a cynical attempt to win forgiveness for what could never be forgiven” (A 183). Ironically, without realizing, Briony is talking about the afflictions she is about to endure in her life, for it was her crime after all, not his, and it was she who attempted “forgiveness for what could never be forgiven.” Furthermore, the evoked figure of the shepherd, and also kindness and forgiveness, are symbolic of the Christian doctrine.

Going back to Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, Finney claims that the epigraph that opens the novel:

Serves as both a warning and a guide to how the reader should view this narrative. Austen's protagonist, Catherine Moorland, who is reprimanded by Henry Tilney in the quoted extract for her naïve response to events around her, is the victim of reading fiction — the Gothic romances of her day and failing to make a distinction between the fictive and the real. McEwan ironically has the Tallis country house renamed Tilney's Hotel as a sly tribute to this fictional precedent. McEwan sees *Northanger Abbey* as a novel “about someone's wild imagination causing havoc to people around them” (Ali 59). Tilney's remarks to Catherine (“what ideas have you been admitting?”) can be applied equally fittingly to Briony whose equally over-active imagination leads her to tell the crucial lie. The difference is that Briony (who, we are told at the end of section 3 of Part One will become a successful novelist over the next fifty years) sets out to use fiction to attempt to make amends for the damage fiction has

induced her to cause in the first place. Fiction-making originates and does not just conclude this particular work of fiction. (70)

Finney notes several possible intertextualities and direct references between *Atonement* and *Northanger Abbey*, endorsing the importance of understanding the epigraph as corroborating the reading of McEwan's novel.

Hermione Lee, also regarding the relations of *Atonement* with *Northanger Abbey* and other literary works, concludes:

Atonement, we at last discover, is the novel Briony Tallis has been writing between 1940 and 1999. This quite familiar fictional trick allows McEwan to ask some interesting questions about writing, in what is a highly literary book ... All through, historical layers of English fiction are invoked — and rewritten. Jane Austen's decorums turn to black farce. Forster's novels of social misunderstanding — the attack on poor Leonard Bast, Adela Quested's false charge of rape — are ironically echoed. (para. 8)

She acknowledges that *Atonement* is a “highly literary book,” which raises questions about writing and also about English fiction. As previously noted, critics have seen several traces of McEwan's possible revisitings to iconic literary pieces, in what could be called (positively speaking) a pastiche of images and elements.

Returning to the lines of force of McEwan's productions and literary trajectory, Flora states that the author promotes “a serious dissection of contemporary morals” (182), and that his works achieve that through, mostly, a discrete, austere and sec register, which confront with the restlessness and violence that permeate his texts. McEwan traffics between the private and the public, relating the nightmares, the griefs, the eccentricities, the pleasures, and the perversities concealed in quotidian life. The

type of existence dissected by McEwan leads towards self-observation and interrogation, and in a story of guilt and (self)redress, although Briony seems self-indulgent, she declares at the end of the novel that she “was not so self-serving to let them [Cecilia and Robbie] forgive [her]” (A 371).

Regarding the encounter of the private and public worlds, Finney calls attention to this aspect in *Atonement*, especially when it comes to historical and social issues. The theme of war, Finney says, provides a bridge between the two worlds — private and public — in the novel, since it was a critical moment in British society, collapsing not only the State but the families and the social sphere. The war brought the death of Robbie Turner and made a fortune for Paul Marshal. When Lola and the twins come to the Tallis’s, they were “refugees from a bitter domestic civil war” (A 8). On a variety of manners then, the realms of private and public encounter.

As far as war is concerned, Flora, in “Suffering and War in Fiction: Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*,” comments on the presence of war in the novel, and calls attention to the suffering aspect represented in the narrative. According to the critic:

By creating characters such as the male protagonist Robbie Turner or the French Luc Cornet, the novelist Briony Tallis tries to retrieve these soldiers from the anonymity of death and to compensate for her awareness that ‘a person is, among all else, a material thing, easily torn, not easily mended’ [A 287]. Although war’s atrocities cannot ever be erased or redressed, by nursing Cornet’s dying moments and restoring her character Robbie to life and a conventional happy ending, Briony’s narrative is a last attempt to atone for her own private crime. However cautionary a tale against the manipulative potential of fiction(s), *Atonement* honours the human(e) talent to remember, through art’s

affective power, not only humanity's relentless ability for atrocity but its persistently renewed gift to imagine deliverance from violence and suffering. (193)

Flora believes that through the experience Briony the character had working as a nurse during the war, Briony the novelist was able to learn valuable lessons in order to tell her story:

Briony's narrative, a fictional tour de force, aims at bringing to the reader's mind the two soldiers' experiences, voicing the intensity of the suffering they endure. The novel is her opportunity for symbolic reparation. If her emotional and moral ignorance had been instrumental to the distance she had put between her immature self and the adult world, her training as a nurse will eventually enable her to recognize the absolute reality of physical suffering. By recreating what may (possibly) have been their predicament, she tries to bridge the wide gap between what she is now able to acknowledge and the unsharability of their pain. (Flora 194)

If Briony finds in her novel a symbolic opportunity for reparation, it is also a demonstration of altruism, for she, especially regarding the war episodes, lends an ear to dimensions of sufferings other than her own, and learns from them. Language functions as a possibility to shape the experience, which may seem sometimes indescribable — bigger than what words' capacity of description. Perhaps she found in the physical pain of others a chance to give shape to her own suffering, and by helping those soldiers she was also helping heal herself. Briony also punishes herself for her private crime, making then a sacrifice. She does not believe she deserves happiness after causing so much

damage: not going straight to university, not having a comfortable easy life is all a manner of self-martyrdom.

The nursing experience is thus formative for Briony, both personally and professionally. Flora, in “Suffering and War in Fiction: Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*,” affirms that “without that crucial nursing experience, the character and novelist Briony would have been incapable of imagining Robbie’s increasingly more hallucinatory state” (195). This supports the notion that:

[The nursing experience] is Briony’s decisive encounter with the absolute physicality of war destruction. The way she learns to cope with it, the compassion she is able to bestow upon the young soldier teaches her a critical lesson and humbles her both as person and as (would be) artist [...] This newly acquired knowledge, ‘a lifetime of experience’ (A 311) numbs and transforms her - Briony learns empathy. She is now prepared to initiate her process of reparation. (196)

To deal with physical pain teaches Briony the character a kind of suffering she was not familiar with. The hallucinations she as a writer makes Robbie endure display how he is overwhelmed by pain, especially when he is someone already irreversibly wounded by psychological damages. The boundaries of the inner and outer worlds get blurred by physical pain, and Robbie’s hallucinations demonstrate how he was little by little dragged into mental confusion and unconsciousness. Only after finishing *Atonement* is it possible to see that Robbie was actually walking towards death at that French coast and not towards salvation, and that he never left the battlefield alive.

In another article by Flora, “A Delicada Resistência de uma Porcelana ou Desta Matéria São Feitos os Romances. *Atonement* de Ian McEwan,” the critic discusses the importance of the object “vase” to the novel and to the constructedness of the narrative.

She cites some excerpts of McEwan interviewing in 1984 the Czech writer Milan Kundera, and the latter states:

Each of us, consciously or unconsciously, rewrites our own history. We are constantly rewriting our own biographies, constantly bringing our own sense – the sense we want – to events. We are selecting and shaping – picking out the things that reassure and flatter us, while deleting anything that might possibly detract ... People always see the political and the personal as different worlds, as if each had its own logic, its own rules. But the very horrors that take place on the big stage of politics resemble, strangely but insistently, the small horrors of our private life.”
(qtd. in Flora 183)¹⁵

This passage establishes a dialogue with what is conveyed in *Atonement*, for when Briony writes her fictional story, she also fictionalizes her own history, molding it according to her personal and artistic conveniences. By possessing the control over her writing, she also possesses control over the “biography” she is about to tell and the tale the reader can access. Kundera’s notions give room for a latent issue in *Atonement* – the autobiographical tones of the narrative, which will be explored in the next chapter.

Flora, in the article aforementioned, also refers to an essay by Kundera, “The curtain,” in which the writer revisits Rabelais and Cervantes to identify the tradition of what it is to write novels¹⁶. Kundera says, relating to the quotes of Henry Fielding, that the dazzle before what is inexplicable in men is what first incites the writing of a novel. To tackle what is hidden and unknown in human nature prompts men to write novels, to investigate, to interpellate the human condition. And the question Kundera addresses fits accordingly to *Atonement*: “[is it] not that the art of novel, with its sense of relativity

¹⁵ The referred interview: “An Interview with Milan Kundera” (1984).

¹⁶ A tradition also revisited by Hutcheon in her book on metafiction (1984).

of the human truths, demands that the author's opinion remains hidden and whatever reflection must be reserved only to the reader?" (qtd. in Flora 185). From especially the first half of the last century on, literature (and art in general) has been reader-oriented (in the words of Ralph Cohen 297)¹⁷ and this movement remains in postmodern art, since different relations between artist and audience have been established. In *Atonement* the reader is empowered by the chance of granting or not Briony's final atonement.

Briony has valuable insights on the nature of writing through the observation of random scenes of life, and her production mentioned throughout the novel is portrayed as having gone through a great range of the literary history — from folk tales and melodramas to modernist and then realist fiction:

Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through a whole history of literature, beginning with stories derived from the European tradition of folk tales, through drama with simple moral intent, to arrive at an impartial psychological realism which she had discovered for herself, one special morning during a heat wave in 1935. (A 45)

Concerning the many nuances of artistic manifestation, Briony wonders about the differences contained in them, about the nature of writing and its effects on the reader. She questions the divergences between written stories and performed plays, and thinks:

A story was direct and simple, allowing nothing to come between herself and the reader – no intermediaries with their private ambitions or incompetence, no pressures of time, no limits on resources. In a story you only had to wish, you only had to write it down and you could have the

¹⁷ "Do Postmodern Genres Exist?" (1999).

world; in a play you had to make do with what was available ... a story was a form of telepathy. By means of inking symbols onto a page, she was able to send thoughts and feelings from her mind to her reader's. It was a magical process. (A 37)

Thus, from the very beginning, *Atonement* immerses itself in the world of art, of fiction, and also metafiction, once the narrator focalizes Briony's engagement with writing and her compositional methods. Completing the cycle of Briony's (literary) life, *Atonement* ends with the writing of her last novel, "Atonement," after a productive trajectory as a writer. The book takes her almost six decades to finish, and the story merges with her own personal story.

Nevertheless, it seems that it is by the inclusion of the last part of the novel that the metafictional project of *Atonement* is completed and disclosed. It is in "London, 1999" that Briony overtly opens the metafictionality the novel is constructed upon, revealing to the reader (intentionally or unintentionally, for readers do not know if her diary was supposed to be attached to the novel) that she is the "author" of the story. However, this consciousness is confronted with the irrefutable acknowledgement that behind all this lies McEwan, the creator of the novel who actually confers to Briony's last confessions such ultimate metafictional tone — the project is his after all. He is the one who decides to add "London, 1999," which seems in a first view disconnected from the rest of the novel, but indispensable to the metafictional project. The reader is finally able to perceive how the narrative has been discussing itself throughout. To this regard, Linda Cruise argues:

Because of *Atonement*'s metafictional component, it is not clear until the end (and maybe not even then, entirely), just who is responsible for *which* distortions: is it McEwan distorting his readers' perception of

truth? Is it the “real” Briony distorting her own self-image in a show of self-denial? Or is it Briony distorting truth as her “fictionalized self” (in her own novel version of *Atonement*)? (Part I)

Cruise is problematizing the existence of layers and levels of fictionality in the narrative. They construct intricate relations between author and character, blurring the limits of their responsibility, contribution and cooperation. In one of the subsections below I explore the first considerations on metafiction in order to begin to understand the methods and techniques employed in the novel.

In relation to McEwan’s strategies to prepare the readers of *Atonement* to an unreliable narrative structure from the very beginning, Linda Cruise says:

Perhaps the reader might accept Briony’s innocence as to her intent, but there is no mistaking her propensity to distort, from the outset. Finney insightfully points out that in *Atonement*’s opener, the reader is given fair-warning about the need to maintain a judicious—even skeptical—eye, throughout. Found in the epigraph, McEwan uses a telling Jane Austen quote, from her *Northanger Abbey*, to set up his novel’s obscured P.O.V. [point of view], as well as its metafictional premise and dilemma. (Part I)

The notion present in *Northanger Abbey* of a wild imagination that causes havoc to people around it is extended to *Atonement*, in which irreparable harm is begotten through someone’s confusion between the artificial world, where everything is mended, and the “real” world, where happy endings cannot be taken for granted and things cannot always be amended.

The unreliable narrative structure of *Atonement* is also pinpointed by Ramona Koval in an interview with Ian McEwan in 2002. The critic describes *Atonement* as

having an “unreliable witness” and an “unreliable narrator:” the first refers mainly to the fragility of miscomprehension we are all susceptible to in everyday life (in Briony’s case not only is she a child but a very fanciful one); the second one is related to the conscious manipulative fictional resources used by Briony, and also by McEwan, to construct the text. In the interview, the writer explains:

Somewhere along the way in *Atonement*, Briony makes what she thinks is a real discovery about fiction, which is that it doesn’t simply have to be regarding life as, as she thinks, a life-long hockey match between good and evil, but a lot of the problems in life occur through misunderstanding ... And for a long time I thought, there is a way into a novel or a story about someone obsessed by literature, who would get everything wrong.

Atonement deals with the complexity of the interrelations of life in its daily manifestations: we are all “reading” what is taking place around us and our interpretations are likely to be misconceived since we cannot hold a holistic comprehension of reality. The consequences of such constructs are unpredictable.

Regarding the techniques adopted in constructing *Atonement*, Flora cites Raymond Tallis’s *In Defense of Realism*, which is somehow intimately intertwined with questions elicited by Briony:

In summary, to defend realism does not necessarily imply membership of the arrièregarde ... Nor does it mean that one sees the job of the late twentieth-century novelist to be to re-write the nineteenth-century novel; to write in the 1980s as if one were Fontane or Zola or George Eliot or Galdos; to revive the Flaubertian or the Dickensian world picture. It is entirely possible that modern realism may lead to the abandonment of the narrative modes, characters and themes that nineteenth-century realists

regarded as central. The task of letting reality into fiction will always demand a questioning attitude to the language and assumptions of one's own life and of the world one knows and will require the author to be as experimental as any of the more obtrusively experimental anti-realists. (qtd in. Flora 190)

He is a British philosopher and McEwan's contemporary, and through the narrator's voice, Briony Tallis resonates ideas defended by Raymond Tallis:

The age of clear answers was over. So was the age of characters and plots ... She no longer believed in characters. They were quaint devices that belonged to the nineteenth century. The very concept of character was founded on errors that modern psychology had exposed. Plots too were like rusted machinery whose wheels would no longer turn. A modern novelist could no longer write characters and plots than a modern composer could a Mozart symphony. It was thought, perception, sensations that interest her, the conscious mind, as a river through time, and how to represent its onward roll ... The novel of the future would be unlike anything in the past ... To enter a mind and show it at work, or being worked on, and to do this within a symmetrical design — this would be an artistic triumph. (A 282)

At this point Briony is metatextually talking about devices she as a writer uses. Some are part of "Atonement," for she indeed enters the minds of her characters and of herself as a character and novelist to scrutinize her processes of creation.

Moreover, the impressionistic style of Virginia Woolf influences her, especially in the beginning of her writing life when she sends her first texts to specialized magazines. Briony reveals herself to be fond of Woolf and she makes use in

“Atonement” of the stream of consciousness technique. About this, Linda Cruise¹⁸ explains:

The differences resulting from Briony’s evolving P.O.V. can be traced over a fifty-nine-year period through *her* novel’s multiple drafts, from her earliest attempts when she perhaps, as McEwan reveals, relied too heavily on “characters and plots”—those “quaint devices that belonged to the nineteenth century”—through her modernist “Woolfian” stage, responsible for her overindulgence of “thought, perception, [and] sensations” (265), to her final, publishable version in which she, as Apstein describes, “creates a suspenseful narrative with characters who engage the reader” (12). It is during this transformation process—during Briony’s growth as a novelist—when she feels compelled to judge her own “modernistic” narrative style as being responsible for the character flaws it masks. (Part II)

The passage Cruise is referring to is the one that follows:

The interminable pages about light and stone and water, a narrative split between three different points of view, the hovering stillness of nothing much seeming to happen—none of this could conceal her cowardice. Did she really think she could hide behind some borrowed notions of modern writing, and drown her guilt in a stream—three streams!—of consciousness? The evasions of her little novel were exactly those of her life. Everything she did not wish to confront was also missing from her novella—and was necessary to it. What was she to do now? It was not the backbone of a story that she lacked. It was backbone. (A 302)

¹⁸ The quotes within the citation are from *Atonement*.

Through CC's¹⁹ letter Briony receives in "Part Three," she perceives that even her "most sophisticated readers ... retain a childlike desire to be told a story, to be held in suspense, to know what happens" (A 314). Cathrin Sernham, in "Briony Through Her Own Eyes: A Discussion of The Three Brionys in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*," comments that "the very plot that [Briony] has so demonstratively abandoned is exactly what they [from the magazine] are asking for" (10). And the young writer is encouraged by this response to develop her story into a novel.

Briony the mature writer seems to have found her literary style in between the traditional and the modernist experimentalism. Sernham believes Briony, at this point, masters the techniques of a whole life of writing and the expertise of knowing that "the most important part of a novel is plot and a narrative pull in that plot; now she writes in the same way she did in her younger days but with much more refinement and finesse" (11). Briony herself concludes: "It occurs to me that I have not travelled so very far after all, since I wrote my little play. Or rather, I've made a huge digression and doubled back to my starting place" (A 370).

Regarding the making of the novel at the end, Briony tells the reader about her alternative endings, how the story could have ended differently, and that she herself had given it various outcomes along the decades. The readers, hence, cannot access what actually "happened" (if something ever happened at all) in the fictional world to which Briony belongs. Her major doubt was whether or not to disclose to the reader the "real" fate of the couple. Their love story fuels the narrative and it is a typical "romantic love," a classic case of impossible fulfillment. Briony, after all, tries to grant the couple the idealized happy ending she believes they deserve. However, this fantasy is dismantled

¹⁹Cyril Connolly, the magazine's editor.

by her the moment she reveals, in the last part, the even more disastrous outcomes of the tragedy initiated in the past:

It is only in this last version that my lovers end well... All the preceding drafts were pitiless. But now I can no longer think what purpose would be served if, say, I tried to persuade my reader, by direct or indirect means, that Robbie Turner died of septicemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940, or that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station. (A 370)

The sensation after having finished the reading of *Atonement* is one of considering that Briony has actually not gone through what she tells; she suddenly becomes an even more unreliable narrator. She gives (purposely) many signs of her unreliability throughout the text and the readers end up distrusting everything they read, but believing in the power of fiction.

Linda Cruise, in relation to the nuances of the narration developed in *Atonement*, poses:

On careful examination one can begin to appreciate how the concealed McEwan weaves multiple points-of-view in and out, throughout *Atonement*, all the while blurring the “camera lens” of perspective, as it were, and thus challenging us to distinguish just who is the true narrator at any given point in time. For the most part, McEwan succeeds in disguising the fact that the story is being told exclusively through Briony’s P.O.V. (Part II)

I, in opposition to Cruise, claim that the story is not being told “exclusively” in Briony’s point of view. My hypothesis is that Briony constructs an omniscient narrator that is not

herself. Furthermore, the reader only comes to know the process behind the “scenes” of “Atonement” because McEwan wants it revealed, as part of his (meta)fictional project.

Cruise presents writers of fiction as “liars” who, when successful, can accomplish so well their intent that truth is the involucre of their tale: “McEwan achieves this objective by stealthily crafting what can best be described as a novel-within-a-novel; for, in the end, it becomes clear that *Atonement* is not simply *his* book, but also that of his main novelist-character, Briony” (Part II). The critic argues:

Atonement’s metafictional component further complicates McEwan’s crafting method because it can be argued that two authorial voices exist simultaneously—Briony’s and McEwan’s—throughout the story. With this being so, the multiple-layered narrative dictates *what, when,* and *how* information gets revealed to the reading audience. The result is that, in essence, both Briony and McEwan present distorted and filtered information—thus, manipulating the reader’s perception of truth to an even greater extent. (Part II)

In addition, Cruise points out, pertinently, that even though the reader is conscious of Briony’s fictionality and all that surrounds her existence as character and writer, it is fundamental, at the same time, to consider her a legitimate writer and author of “Atonement.” It is necessary to take into account her context and process of creation, as well as McEwan’s. At this point, thus, I must call attention once again to what Koval supports in her article, for she criticizes Finney (whereas Cruise endorses) for his argument that Briony uses fiction to make amends for the mistakes fiction led her to commit. Koval claims that Finney seems to disregard the fact that Briony’s reality is not the material reality, but rather a fictional one. I, on the other hand, argue that what Finney proposes is not a disregarding (or unawareness) of Briony’s immateriality, but

the acceptance and comprehension of the logic proposed by the novel. Finally, in dissecting *Atonement*, one seems to find three levels of fictionality: the whole story created by McEwan, the story created by Briony as the author of “Atonement,” and the stories created by Briony as a character.

To begin to understand the fictionalities begotten by Briony, I begin by exploring the characters and the family relations portrayed in the novel, for this investigation holds significant aspects that interest this thesis.

1.2 The characters: a crucial analysis

So far as family is concerned, it is valuable to understand the family relations and ambience portrayed in *Atonement*, pointing to the constitution of each main character. As Linda Cruise notes:

Understanding Briony’s socio-cultural-historical context is fundamental if one hopes to unlock *Atonement*’s multi-layering of truth. The book spans more than six decades of the protagonist’s life, beginning when she is thirteen years old and living on an English estate in the pre-war, genteel society of 1935; and it ends with her being an elderly, successful novelist, in the London of 1999. These contexts help shape the story’s characters, in that they factor into the formation of their idiosyncratic viewpoints. (Part I)

Atonement, as well as other novels by McEwan such as *The Cement Garden* and *The Child in Time*, portray different generations and the younger generation’s wish to diverge from their parents’ model. For instance, not only Briony, but also Cecilia and Leon, do not conform to the roles their parents play and the system in which they live. Because of that, they long to become something different. Briony, as the author of

“Atonement,” regresses to her childhood apparently not only to present the reader the origins of her fault, but maybe also because that was the period of her most sweet and innocent memories, since after accusing Robbie she no longer has peace of mind. Thus, childhood for McEwan has a strong signification and is a recurrent theme, both in his novels and short stories²⁰. More precisely, Briony’s fault coincides with her entering into adolescence, which, in McEwan’s works, is generally depicted as a problematic stage, especially because his characters generally have complicated personalities aggravated by dysfunctional parental care. McEwan’s attention to the issue of childhood and adolescence shows the importance he attributes to those formative early stages.

Some of McEwan’s novels²¹ bring up the issue of family relations: how the members adjust to traumatic events and how they seek order after a chaotic situation. Each novel explores these themes in a specific way, and in *Atonement* Briony is depicted as an “order seeker” and as quite thoughtful for a child of her age. The last feature could perhaps be a sign of an older Briony looking back in time and building a considerably twisted psyche for a little girl. Indeed, McEwan has said in an interview²²: “I didn’t want to write about a child’s mind with the limitations of a child’s vocabulary or a child’s point of view. I wanted . . . to use the full resources of an adult mentality remembering herself” (qtd. in Finney 72). Therefore, he creates a character who is a child but without the impairments of the psyche of one.

Despite the tender relationship and dialogues depicted between Briony and her mother, the latter lacks some responsibilities in their relationship. When it comes to sexual matters, Briony is naïve, and this contributes to her misinterpreting the events

²⁰ Childhood is a relevant theme since his early productions. See, for instance, the short story “In Between the Sheets” (1978), published in a book by the same name, McEwan’s second collection. This publication corroborated his nick name “Ian Macabre” for containing writings on polemic manifestations of sexuality, such as incest, pornography, zoophilia and fetishism.

²¹ *The Cement Garden* (1978), *The Child in Time* (1987), and *Atonement* (2001).

²² “A Novelist on the Edge,” interview with Dan Cryer. 2002.

that take place between Cecilia and Robbie. Of course the story's setting has to be taken into account, for such episodes take place in the first half of the 20th century, when there was not much liberty to talk over sexual matters, especially with a girl. Even considering all that, Briony lacks psychological maturity and balance, and the fact that she is much younger than her siblings makes her pampered by every member of her family, contributing to her immaturity.

Paradoxically hence, while Briony is mature and clever in some aspects (especially cognitively), she is clueless in others (sexually, for instance). For this same reason, she is completely shocked and outraged at reading the note intended for her sister, containing "the word": "No one in her presence had ever referred to the word's existence, and what was more, no one, not even her mother, had ever referred to the existence of that part of her to which Briony was certain — the word referred" (A 114). Instead of offering proper support for Briony who is growing into an adolescent, the adults watch her transformations nostalgically and inertly.

As one of the possible roots of the family's "dysfunctionaliy," Emily Tallis is depicted as an incapable mother, who, in her turn, also had an unfulfilling childhood caused especially by her younger sister Hermione calling all attention to herself. Emily sums up her position in life: "Wronged child, wronged wife. But she was not as unhappy as she should be. One role had prepared her for the other" (A 148). By such description, Emily Tallis is represented as a dysfunctional subject and somehow not properly qualified for any of her roles in life. Nevertheless, her conformity caused by her self-indulgence prevents her from being truly guilty, and rather she feels self-pity.

When it comes to Briony's relation to the world, she, at least when young, needs the safety of the traditional and organized world (actually Sernham contends Briony carries these same basic traits throughout her entire life). Her family environment,

nevertheless, is dysfunctional. Emily Tallis, although always home, does not have a motherly presence, neither to Briony nor previously to her older son and daughter. Her “dysfunctionality” as mother, wife, and housewife is mainly attributed to her constant convalescence, for she suffers from severe migraines and the house is mostly managed by the staff. However, the reader sympathizes with Emily due to her enduring of throbbing pains and her constrained life, which deprive her from enjoying moments with her family and exerting her role at home:

Emily, breathing quietly in the darkness, gauged the state of the household by straining to listen. In her condition, this was the only contribution she could make ... Habitual fretting about her children, her husband, her sister, the help, had rubbed her senses raw; migraine, mother-love and, over the years, many hours of lying still on her bed, had distilled from this sensitivity a sixth sense, a tentacular awareness that reached out from the dimness and moved through the house, unseen and all-knowing. (A 65-66)

Also, her condition influenced profoundly her relationship with her children: “Illness has stopped her giving her children all a mother should. Sensing this, they had always called her by her first name” (A 66).

The absence of Jack Tallis (Emily’s husband) at home is transposed to the narrative, for he has minor participation in the story. Nevertheless, he is described as a hard-working and generous man who has helped Grace Turner (Robbie’s mother) by giving her a place to live and a job at the Tallis’s house, in addition to sponsoring Robbie’s studies at Cambridge. Although he is generally absent, Jack’s presence resonates in the house, for he is constantly remembered by his family and staff while away, functioning as a reference to all. In the following quote, Briony’s perspective on

Jack is showed: “When her father was at home, the household settled around a fixed point ... his presence imposed order and allowed freedom” (A 122). Jack, who works for the government, is portrayed as a lively, interesting figure, and a great host. About the dinner prepared to welcome Leon and his friend Paul Marshall, the narrator tells us, “The silence that followed as they settled and unfolded their napkins would easily have been dispersed by Jack Tallis introducing some barely interesting topic” (A 126). His extramarital affairs, however, are no secret to Emily, who pretends to be unaware of them, playing the role of the wife who let herself be fooled in order to maintain appearances and preserve the family: “Even being lied to constantly, though hardly like love, was sustained attention; he must care about her to fabricate so elaborately and over such a long stretch of time. His deceit was a form of tribute to the importance of their marriage” (A 148). Jack and Emily are thus negligent parents, and as Cecilia concludes, they were “absent in their different ways” (A 109).

At first sight, the Tallis family is a seemingly smoothly functioning, patriarchal, traditional, upper class household. However, taking a closer look, the reader realizes that the Tallis family is not as solid as their imposing house in the countryside makes them seem. The family system is clearly patriarchal, as the father, although absent most of the time, is regarded as the highest authority. In tracing the profile of her family, Cecilia points out that “her parents were absent in their different ways, Briony was lost to her fantasies and Leon was in town” (A 103). Briony, who practically lives on her own, resorts to the world of fantasy as a companion, and the crime she commits is intimately connected to this obsession. In order to deal with the events that are unfolding before her, Briony believes she is “now a figure in a richer story and [she has] to prove herself worthy of it” (A 163).

There seems to be a mixture of sentiments going on in Briony's mind when she has the epiphany that her childhood days were over. The sudden and striking realization that things have changed, or rather she wants them changed, comes and provokes new reflections on the "childhood she considered closed" (A 116). While she decides to become an adult, to get rid of the silly princesses and morality tales, her infantile romantic imagination cannot catch up with her anxiety to grow up — desire stimulated by the presence of her much more physically and psychologically developed cousin Lola — causing Briony to feel the same oppression her mother did, as in a cyclical movement.

When Robbie's behavior does not match Briony's "prince" expectations, he is immediately seen by her, now the heroine, as a villain and a threat that should be shattered and punished. Briony categorizes the world as a great story: "she needed to be alone to consider Robbie afresh, and to frame the opening paragraph of a story shot through with real life. No more princesses! ... she did not doubt that her sister was in some way threatened and would need her help" (A 113-114). In this way, her misdeed is harnessed to her eccentric fascination with fictionality.

Cathrin Sernham calls attention to how storytelling is Briony's life from the beginning. Cecilia, to this regard, even says, "Briony was lost to her writing fantasies — what had seemed a passing fad was now an enveloping obsession" (A 20-21). The girl is constantly resorting to dictionaries to expand her vocabulary, and "events around her are always an inspiration for making new stories" (Sernham 1). Similarly to Briony, at first her stories are naïve, and, although simple, they hold the basic elements of any story: unstable situation, rising action, climax and stable situation (Sernham 1). Briony's first writings are basically a "tale of love, adversities overcome, reunion and a wedding" (A 229). Sernham concludes his description of Briony's early writing profile

stating, “the stories she has written so far have all been on this level; simple but thorough. The evil characters are purely evil and the good ones are genuinely good and, of course, good always conquers evil and is followed by a happy ending” (Sernham 2). This binary split of reality is a mark of her naïveté and inability of grasping humans’ complex relations.

In Briony’s innocent and puerile view of the world she idealizes a “romantic” love (which is seen in her first play, *The Trials of Arabella*, for instance), and a sticking with social traditions and patterns. Briony:

Was one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so. Whereas her big sister’s room was a stew of unclosed books, unfolded clothes, unmade bed, unemptied ashtrays, Briony’s was a shrine to her controlling demon: the model farm spread across a deep window ledge consisted of the usual animals, but all facing one way — towards their owner — as if about to break into song, and even the farmyard hens were neatly corralled. In fact, Briony’s was the only tidy upstairs room in the house. (A 4-5)

In this excerpt the protagonist is depicted as obsessed with tidiness and orderliness, and this trace in her personality is, as previously said, connected to her crime, since her perceptions of Robbie’s attitudes insulted her sense of order and what she believed to be right. Furthermore, the repetition of the prefix “un” in the many adjectives used to describe Cecilia’s room is representational of her profile — a young woman who does not conform to being just what was expected from her at that time, and this sort of misfit disturbs her conformist mother. In the quote that follows the narrator is positioned as Emily’s perspective: “When Cecilia came home in July with her finals’ results ... she had no job or skill and still had a husband to find and motherhood to

confront, and what would her bluestocking teachers ... have to tell her about that?" (A 65). Emily understands her daughter's academic enterprise as silly and a waste of time since she will not escape women's conventionalized duties and roles anyway. Briony also sees her sister as this messed-up young woman — "What squalor and disorder her sister lived in!" (A 177) — for not holding Briony's sense of order.

So much of Cecilia's logic and behavior seem different that when commanded by her mother to fill the vase (an act that triggers several images already discussed in this chapter) to serve as an ornament for the guests who were arriving, she goes to the property's fountain set on filling it in an uncommon order: she wants to first put in the flowers and then the water, achieving then a more natural look. I will explore more deeply this episode by the fountain later on due to its significance to the novel. Cecilia's taste for the untraditional is actually the reason why she and Robbie battle over the vase. She refuses his help because he would fill the vase in the habitual way, which she did not want, neither did she want to explain to him the reason for her refusal. Their quick dispute begets the breaking of the vase.

Other facts call into question the theme of dysfunctional families in the novel: a) Ernest Turner's abandonment of his wife and son (Robbie) when he was still a child; and b) Hermione's divorce from Cecil Quincey, and the sending of their three children to be looked after by the Tallis. These unstructured family depictions contribute to the complex web of human relations and the chain of consequences that link one fact to another. About the divorce and her cousins' situation:

Briony had heard her mother and sister analyse the latest twist and outrages ... and she knew her cousins' visit was an open-ended one, and might even extend into term time ... she vaguely knew that divorce was an affliction, but she did not regard it as proper subject, and gave it no

thought. It was a mundane unravelling that could not be reversed, and therefore offered no opportunities to the storyteller: it belonged to the realm of disorder. Marriage was the thing, or rather, a wedding was, with its formal neatness of virtue rewarded ... If divorce had presented itself as a dastardly antithesis of all this, it could easily have been cast onto the other pan of the scales, along with betrayal, illness, thieving, assault and mendacity. (A 8-9)

Perhaps Briony's "obsession" with a predictable and safe world is an attempt to restore the conventionality her home has in theory but not in practice. The categories in which Briony understands the world are very clear-cut, and at this stage she is not yet able to deal with the diffuse boundaries of human relations. From the sentence "In fact, Briony's was the only tidy upstairs room in the house," the reader is informed that the girl is different from her relatives regarding this urge to keep things in order in her "perfect" world. Since she is a child one might expect that she longs for secure and fixed schemes and categories, but the insistence of representing and reinforcing this trait of hers ends up revealing a certain degree of exaggeration and a sort of eccentricity. Another emphasis is given by the narrator to Briony's "in between" age: "At this stage in her life, Briony inhabited an ill-defined transitional space between the nursery and adult worlds which she crossed and recrossed unpredictably" (A 141). Such a quote highlights how Briony is going through a delicate phase in which her views of the world are being remodeled. Because of that, her attitudes are regarded, especially by Robbie in the dining scene before the whole tragedy, as potentially dangerous and reckless at this stage.

Regarding the family structure, Hermione Lee (para. 2) states: "The Tallis family, inheritors of a 'baronial-Gothic' late-nineteenth-century mansion in Surrey with

vestiges of a more elegant Adam-style house (a fountain, a temple) in the extensive grounds, aren't quite as solid as their house makes them look." This is true especially if one takes into account how apparently "easy" the family ties are irreparably broken after Robbie's arrest, perhaps a consequence of the already frail relations. Cecilia severs her relationship with her entire family, and Briony, a few years later, also distances from everyone and their relationships seem to be never completely restored.

Now that the main characters and the family bonds have been more closely observed, I, in an attempt to understand the levels of fictionality developed in *Atonement*, will investigate some of the diegetic apparatuses employed in the construction of the narrative.

1.3 Exploring the novel's structure

There are many shades in the layers of *Atonement's* textual structure. It presents, as previously pointed out, what could be called a novel-within-a-novel, and a lot to consider is imbricated in this complex web of fictionality. It is hard to figure out Briony's purposes with her writing, for besides her apparent desire of atonement, she is a talented novelist.

Concerning the textual structure, *Atonement* presents a fragmented narrative, which plays with and calls into question the issues of perspective, fact, fiction, reality, and truth. The omniscient third person narrator gives place, in the last part of the book, to Briony's narratorial voice in first person. At this point, decades later and as a renowned writer, she assumes the role of the narrator and explains she wrote a book to try to atone for the mistake she made when she was a child.

Fragmentation is present not only in the narrative of *Atonement* but thematically as well, for reality cannot be conceived as whole and the human relations in the novel

are deeply marked by splits and the contingencies of life. Those relations are never again completely restored. Considering fragmentation in terms of structure and taking into account the formal arrangement of the book, there is a first part, composed by fourteen chapters, followed by “Part Two,” which does not have chapters or divisions, and “Part Three,” similar in structure to “Part Two.” The final part is “London, 1999,” the shortest one, which takes place in a more recent time. Actually, “Part Three” ends with Briony’s signature “B T,” followed by “London 1999,” the same name of the following and last part. This is indicative of McEwan’s fictional “games:” how he plays with readers and with fiction itself. The first part takes a bit more than the first half of the book, and it is fragmented not only in chapters, but in narrative focus, which shifts among characters, alternating the perspectives, but remaining always beneath the sieve of the omniscient narrator. This structure is in consonance with what is conveyed in the first part of the narrative. Briony committed a serious fault and her reasons and the circumstances of her act are being exposed. The narrator acts as if collecting testimonies (although this is not the tone of the narrative) that will lead to the final verdict of this “trial:” the reader’s.

The narrative privileges the indirect free speech, different registers, and backgrounds — from idyllic settings and artistic concerns to grotesque scenes of war. As proper of the indirect free speech, through this technique the omniscient narrator enters the “heads” of the characters, explores their thoughts, desires, intents and personalities, and by having such access, allows this prerogative to be extended to the reader. However, the characters’ speeches, actions and thoughts pass through the “filters” of the narrator.

Atonement, as belonging to the novelistic genre, carries traits of this textual variety: the polyphony and heteroglossia²³ Mikhail Bakhtin theorizes about. Briony the young character and a writer-to-be is shown discovering the presence of these voices: “the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated, with two billion voices, and everyone’s thoughts striving in equal importance ... and everyone thinking they were unique, when no one was” (A 36). Briony the writer seems to use these possibilities as an element of her book, for it is multifaceted both in terms of social discourses underlying the narrative and the individual voices presented by the narrator. The multiple registers, narrative voices, and themes contained in the narrative are in consonance with the bakhtinian notion that the novel is the only literary genre capable of containing and presenting such multiplicity, problematizing the dialogic clash Bakhtin discusses.

Considering the narratorial space developed by McEwan, the narratological terms of Jahn Manfred shed light on the analysis of such structure in the novel. The first three parts of the book present a heterodiegetic narrator, once the narrator is not present as character in the story. However, in the last part, a shift takes place and a homodiegetic narrative enters the scene since Briony is the protagonist and also the narrator. Nevertheless, if we consider the last part separated from the rest of the novel, then we have two “different” texts making *Atonement*, but not perhaps “*Atonement*.” So, still considering Manfred’s terms, while there is an external focalization in the first three parts (an omniscient narrator who is not part of the story), in the last part there is a

²³ In general terms, by polyphony Bakhtin (1993; 1988) understands the collective quality of an individual utterance, which is the capacity “my” speech has to embody and encompass other utterances, still nevertheless being “mine.” Heteroglossia stands more for the ideologies and varieties contained in the languages each social group uses, working as a constituent for them. For the Russian philosopher there is no “individual” being, but a social one, constructed on and through collectivity, and language carries and produces such marks.

swap to an internal focalization, for Briony, who is a character in the first three parts, assumes the narration, and the world of the narrator and the world of the action become the same. Here lies one of the big complexities of *Atonement* because there is no way to tell to what extent the work is “Briony’s” own, and if and how the last part, “London, 1999,” actually belongs to Briony’s novel.

Some critics, such as Linda Cruise and Rebecka Sjöberg²⁴, contend that in the fourth part there is confirmation that Briony is the only narrator of the entire novel. Sjöberg, because of the fourth part’s revelation that Briony is the author of “*Atonement*,” starts to consider the narrator “subjective and limited instead of impartial and omniscient” (23). As if the whole construct of the first three parts suddenly had to lose its credit because the “author” reveals herself.

It is comprehensible that the reader’s understanding that the narrative is being told by an omniscient narrator who is not a character is shaken by the revelations of the final part of novel. The reader learns that the whole story was manipulated by Briony (but aren’t all stories manipulated by their authors?), and she was “responsible” for the whole writing process. However, in the reading I propose, her authorial disclosure in the very end and her narration in first person cannot compromise or invalidate the fact that she (or rather McEwan) constructed an omniscient narrator in the first three parts of “*Atonement*” (or *Atonement*). If one considers that this outcome puts in check her omniscient narrator, no omniscient narrators would ever exist; after all, writers are inevitably the creators of their narrators and with Briony it would not be different. My claim, thus, is that the only “subjective and limited” narrator is the one of the last part of *Atonement*, for in the first three parts the narrator is not a character. This relation gets even more intricate because *Atonement* presents a double authorial structure — Briony’s

²⁴ “Deprivation of Closure in McEwan’s *Atonement*: Unreliability and Metafiction as Underlying Causes” (2012).

and McEwan's — and their omniscient narrator cannot be invalidated due to the fictional game created by them. The discomfort and distrust that this stratification brings to the reader is perhaps caused by the deviation from the traditional and consecrated literary pattern, especially when it comes to realism.

So long as realism is concerned, critics have blamed McEwan, Finney states, for not sustaining the realistic expectations he created in the first three parts of the book, saying that *Atonement* is “an essentially realist novel that at the end inappropriately resorts to a modish self-referentiality” (69). But Finney, and I include myself in this position, “read[s] this novel as a work of fiction that is from beginning to end concerned with the making of fiction” (69). Fiction, in *Atonement*, is somehow the cause and the remedy for the troubles created and faced by Briony. Because of her naïveté in dealing with reality and the incredible possibilities of fictionality, she does not comprehend the necessary limits that should prevent its dangers. The fact is that the “consequences of her confusion are tragic and irreversible – except in the realm of fiction. She attempts to use fiction to correct the errors that fiction caused her to commit” (Finney 69).

However, no matter how elaborate her fictional attempt to reparation is, it is impossible to reverse the past. If, on the one hand, the fictional world presents itself like no other for its unique faculty to provide control over a creation, on the other hand, it cannot transpose the realm of the “unreal.” Despite the evidences and clarity of the limitations of fiction, Ian McEwan, in *Atonement*, comes to shake up some certainties: it is irrefutable that fiction is always fiction, but how to know that what is considered “reality” and “truth” is not also to some extent fiction? *Atonement* plays with such possibilities and shows that those limits are indeed tenuous.

Furthermore, Finney has pertinently argued that McEwan gives, from the very beginning, clues that his novel deviates from the traditional realistic scheme. Hence, the

frustration felt by those critics does not justify itself. Some critics²⁵ have claimed the end of *Atonement* evokes the “perception of deception,” which is the realization that Briony was maneuvering everything from the beginning. However, this seems to be precisely McEwan’s point, for he makes explicit the fictionality and the obvious control writers have upon their texts (which in my understanding cannot take away the credit of their creations) and some paths used to give birth to a literary piece. It is at the same time the dismantling of a fantasy and the rising of another; a playing with the artistic process, questioning and reaffirming it at the same time, showing and exploring possibilities. Even the multiple-point-of-view technique developed in the narrative is actually being conducted by the same omniscient narrator. The diegesis constructed in the first three parts of the novel is all the time under one specific control, even in its privileging the gaze of different characters over reality. McEwan gives signs of this structure throughout the narrative and sustains such choice.

Presenting a counter argument to Finney’s major hypothesis, Kathleen D’Angelo, in the article “‘To make a novel’: The Construction of a Critical Readership in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*,” states that Finney seems to disregard the “fact that Briony is herself a fictional construct. The ‘reality’ that she renders as fiction is not a material reality.” According to D’Angelo, “if *Atonement* is a novel concerned with the ‘making of fiction,’ it is also a novel concerned with the reading of fiction” (para. 2). However, I must add that McEwan’s point seems to lie precisely in Briony’s fictionality, and Finney acknowledges that rather than disregards it.

In a fictional work, the veracity readers are led to believe in is illusory, and McEwan plays with it, interfering in the readers’ attachment to the reality created in the novel. If it is disturbing to think that there is an author that constructs the action plane, it

²⁵ Linda Cruise, for instance.

brings perhaps even more discomfort to the reader to know that between him/her and the author's creation there is another "being," as in the case of *Atonement* and its double authorial voice. Of course the reader is aware that Briony is a fictive character and author, but at first he/she believes that what happened to her is "true," at least in fiction, in the imaginary microcosm created by McEwan. Hence, to suddenly find out that her whole story was a double lie (to an unknown extent) is somehow outrageous and uncanny (positively speaking) to the reader.

The sort of invisible contract that exists between fiction writer and reader makes both ignore that what is being told is not real, so the latter can immerse him/herself more freely into the reading experience and allow him/herself to be touched by it. If in a non-metafictional text there is an effort to make believe, in a metafictional one the opposite takes place, for it draws attention to the fact that everything is being made up. However, in *Atonement*, readers are fully conscious of such fabrication only in the very end, which perhaps is the cause of the awkwardness sensed by some critics, as mentioned previously. The fictional process initially concealed²⁶ in *Atonement* is purposely revealed in the end, creating then other patterns in the relationship between writers and readers, making the latter review their impressions of the story.

If, on the one hand, Briony's interference in the end of *Atonement*, when she tries to convince her readers that what she is ultimately revealing is the truth, brings a break of expectations, on the other hand, it sheds light, perhaps above all, on the nature of fiction. The fact that Briony is being the fictional author of *Atonement* does not make the perspectives narrated in the novel her own, but rather her narrator's. Briony pursues alterity throughout her life, trying to comprehend other people's logic, and she

²⁶An example of the restless effort to make the reader dive into the story as if it were all truth, to erase the boundaries of fiction and reality, is instanced in the gothic novel *The Scarlet Letter*, by the North American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne.

accomplishes that through her omniscient narrator (even if it is only a potential alterity). If the realization that literature is fiction brings deception, it also offers the reader a vivid notion that in the end all attempts at alterity are but attempts.

Still regarding the structure of the narrative, many elements are used by McEwan to attain the desired effects of fragmentation and multiplicity. Prolepsis and analepsis are some of them, for the text moves forward, then retreats, has flashbacks, tells the same episode in a kaleidoscopic approach, and resorts to literature as theme and medium to convey itself as text. An example of a prolepsis is when we are informed by the narrator that “within the half hour Briony would commit her crime” (A 156), but we readers still do not know what is about to happen. Another example of how the narrative moves forward is present in the following passage:

Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through a whole history of literature, beginning with stories derived from European tradition of folk tales, through drama with simple moral intent, to arrive at an impartial psychological realism which she had discovered for herself, one special morning during a heat wave in 1935. (A 41)

In this quote are portrayed Briony’s literary life and trajectory. The use of analepsis, on the other hand, enables further explanation about the characters and their personal backgrounds, as well as confers and holds suspense. Although it deviates from what would be a traditional linear structure, *Atonement* presents a regular linear experience when it comes to beginning and end and the general development of the novel, for it opens with Briony pre-adolescent and ends with her in old age.

1.4 Literature as a constituting theme in *Atonement*

Not only does *Atonement* discuss literature throughout, but literature is an underlying theme in the narrative. Besides the initial quote from Jane Austen, *Atonement* opens with a direct reference to literature, talking about the play Briony Tallis has been working on — *The Trials of Arabella*. The narrator tells us that it “was written by her in a two-day tempest of composition, causing her to miss a breakfast and a lunch” (A 3). This is a description of a writer-to-be in a furor of creation. Briony already shows her literary ambitions as she imagines her brother Leon presenting her to his friends: “Yes, my younger sister, Briony Tallis, the writer, you must surely have heard of her” (A 4). Her taste for miniature and secrets already reveals her attraction to literature; the creation of micro worlds and the investigation of the “secrets” of the human soul. Although she is fond of secrets, she has none, once “her wish for a harmonious, organised world denied her the reckless possibilities of wrongdoing” (A 5). By showing Briony as this extremely tidy and moralist little girl, the narrator hopes to call the reader’s attention to her way of seeing the world and to justify then her logic in committing her transgression. The novel opens with Briony at the age of thirteen, but her first literary adventures date from a couple of years before, when she merely wrote repetitions of the stories she had read so far:

At the age of eleven she wrote her first story – a foolish affair, imitative of half a dozen folk tales and lacking, she realised later, that vital knowingness about the ways of the world which compels a reader’s respect. But this first clumsy attempt showed her that the imagination itself was a source of secrets. Pretending in words was too tentative, too vulnerable, too embarrassing to let anyone know. Even writing out the

*she said*s, the *and thens*, made her wince, and she felt foolish, appearing to know about the emotions of an imaginary being. (A 6)

Briony received attention from her family whenever she appeared with a new production and was stimulated to keep up with her literary enterprises. However, the reader is informed that “even without [her family’s] attention and praise and obvious pleasure, Briony could not have been held back from her writing. In any case, she was discovering, as had many writers before her, that not all recognition is helpful” (A 7). Briony is awakening to the power of writing and of fiction; to the fantasy and the incredible possibilities enabled by art. It is striking for her how “a world could be made in five pages” (A 7).

In the very first pages of the novel we are told that *The Trials of Arabella* “was her first excursion into drama, and she had found the transition quite effortless. It was a relief not to be ... describing the weather or the onset of spring or her heroine’s face — beauty, she had discovered, occupied a narrow band. Ugliness, on the other hand, had infinite variations” (A 7). Through this quote is pertinent to mention that Finney, in the same article previously mentioned, calls attention to the fact that the reader is first introduced to Briony the artist and only afterward to Briony the little girl, who happens to be in the age between childhood and adulthood.

Regarding Briony’s first views of literature, she writes her first play with very clear intentions. Although she seems to be already somehow engaged with art for the sake of it, she writes the *The Trials of Arabella* envisioning a welcome to her brother Leon, who lives in the city, hoping he could internalize some things through the performance of the play. She longs to orient Leon towards finding an appropriate partner and going back to live in the countryside: “at some moments chilling, at others desperately sad, the play told a tale of the heart whose message, conveyed in a rhyming

prologue, was that love which did not build a foundation on good sense was doomed” (A 3). Briony’s initial notion of love, the love that she reads about and represents in her literature, implies an ideal, sentimental, and romantic love. Moreover, stories need to convey a moral that should be grasped by the reader/spectator. For Briony, at this moment, literature (art) must be used to teach people, and it has a function. Through the story of Arabella and her adventures, Briony believes Leon will learn the moral and assume the posture she thinks is ideal. However, at this stage Briony is not yet mature and aware of the possibilities and depth of her questionings, for she only wants to provoke Leon’s admiration and secure her organized world. She is actually tackling extremely relevant artistic issues. Nevertheless, when it is acknowledged that who constructs the psyche of the child Briony is the older and mature Briony (as an author), the reader can no longer attribute much naïveté to the girl’s remarks.

When it comes to Briony’s immersion in the world of art, Katrin Dahlbäck, in her article “Fictional and Metafictional Strategies in Ian McEwan’s Novel *Atonement* (2001) and its Screen Adaptation (2007),” notes that imagination is a key concept in Briony’s constitution as a subject. For her, it was Briony’s “imagination and her love for secrets and fictionalizing ... the cause of the tragedy that follows” (2). Finney, besides considering Briony’s misdeed an overload of imagination, believes it is also a failure of imaginative projection into the Other (empathy failure) that causes the whole mistake:

The novel that we read and that took her adult lifetime to write is her attempt to project herself into the feelings of the two characters whose lives her failure of imagination destroyed. Having mistakenly cast them in a story that totally misrepresented them, Briony seeks to retell their story with the compassion and understanding that she lacked as a thirteen-year-old girl. (Finney 81)

Hence, in Finney's understanding, it was both the excess and the lack of imagination that acted together in leading Briony to commit her crime. The critic classifies Briony as being shaped by a two-way road: "Of course Briony is the prime example of the way art shapes her life as much as she shapes that life into her art. From the start her powerful imagination works to confuse the real with the fictive. Her observation of life around her is conditioned by the fictive world that holds her in its grip" (Finney 78).

The complexity of separating the "real" from the "fictional" in *Atonement* is extended to the readers. At the end of the novel, they are perhaps unable to distinguish the blurred limits between what happened to the "real" Briony and what is fruit of her creation as writer. Dahlbäck explains that Briony "convinces herself, and those willing to believe it, that certain events have indeed taken place before her eyes, when in fact only bits and pieces are true and the blanks in between have been filled with a fictional reality she has created herself" (2). In Briony's mind "everything connected. It was her discovery. It was her story, the one that was writing itself around her" (A 166).

This idea explored by Dahlbäck evokes considerations of the Reader-Response Criticism, which is also a lens used by critics to help analyze this novel. When she says that "the blanks in-between have been filled with a fictional reality," the very idea of Reader-Response comes to mind: literary texts have "empty spaces" of indeterminacy that will be linked and signified by the reader²⁷. Reader-Response holds that the response to a text is equally important as the text itself, for any literary work presupposes a reader (actually depends on one), and readers are responsible for part of the meaning constructed from a text. Such field of study claims that literary texts carry

²⁷ Wolfgang Iser's "Interaction Between Text and Reader" (2001)

the foundation for their interpretation, but they imply and need a reader to make the process complete.

Kathleen D'Angelo argues that *Atonement* explores the “relationship of the reader to the text.” McEwan, D'Angelo posits, attributes to the readers of contemporary fiction a role of responsibility, for judging them holders of the “final power of interpretation, judgment, and atonement” (para. 2). D'Angelo discusses the construction of meaning by the text itself and by the reader, arguing that, in *Atonement*:

Readers must participate in “solving” the crime at the heart of the novel, with McEwan directing them toward particular practices that will produce “good” readers, and readers must feel the impact of Briony's transgressions. It is only through this final act, in which readers are pushed toward empathy and feeling, that they may be positioned to grant or withhold Briony's atonement. (para. 4)

By positioning the readers in such an important place, and attributing to them the ultimate power of conceiving or not Briony's so-desired atonement, McEwan would be confirming his faith in human relations rather than in any religious entity. By positioning the reader in a place of judgment, the writer seems to assume the post of a neutral, powerful expositor, who, having presented “arguments” on both sides — Briony's deed and its consequences on the one hand, and all the human justifications and struggle for redemption on the other hand — lets the reader finally take his/her side and decide.

At this point I might add Hutcheon's position on the topic, contained in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, since she claims metafiction is intensely self-conscious in regard to both the artistic production and the role of the reader. The latter occupies a position of active participation, since he/she is invited to

enter not only the literary space, but the space of creation of the literary work as well.

Readers of metafiction, Hutcheon says:

Are at the same time mindful of their active role in reading, in participating in making the text mean. They are the distant, yet involved, co-producers of the novel... What is interesting here is that is the fiction itself that is attempting to bring to readers' attention to their central and enabling role. (Hutcheon xii)

In constructing reading characters (Cecilia and Robbie) McEwan (and Briony) is definitely making a statement, for he depicts and highlights the importance of the reader in the meaning-making process, especially when it comes to a metafictional text.

McEwan seems to be asking readers to consider what and how his characters read, since everything points to intertextual dialogues in *Atonement*.

An aspect that alters the reader's impression and understanding about the novel is to know at the end that the thoughts attributed to Briony as a child were actually built by her as an adult, for "Atonement" seems to be the result of the author Briony's mature and grown-up mind looking back in time to create a story. Christopher Williams, in his article "Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden* And The Tradition Of The Child/Adolescent As 'I-Narrator,'" discusses, in a historical perspective, the presence in literature of children/adolescents thematically or/and as speaking characters. According to Williams, from the Romantics on, childhood started to be more deeply comprehended and explored in poetry and later in novels. Especially after Sigmund Freud's theoretical contributions in the early 20th century in the psychoanalytical field, infantile presence (and the issue of their sexuality) "in fiction becomes more complex and less lovable" (Williams 3).

However, to write in a child's perspective raises an intriguing problem, Williams explains, which is how "to convey with maximum authenticity the thoughts and sensations of a mind that has not yet achieved full maturity" (4). Ian McEwan has explored the infantile theme in many of his works, for example, in his first two collections of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) and *In Between the Sheets* (1978); and in the novels *The Cement Garden* (1978), *The Child in Time* (1987) and also in *Atonement*. The latter, although not narrated by Briony when she was still a girl, manages to portray her infant psyche and perspective on "reality," investigating her thoughts. Linda Cruise points to McEwan's manipulation when he makes the adult Briony look back "at her young self in an attempt to justify the motivation behind her past actions — for her having fabricated the lie which implicated Robbie with wrongdoing — even if only justifying it to herself" (Part II). Thus, McEwan uses Briony as much as Briony uses "herself" to fit both authors' purposes.

So far I have begun to explore how literature pervades the constitution of Briony as a character. However, not only Briony but also Robbie and Cecilia have in literature a key element to their constitution as characters. Both are pictured as avid readers who have studied literature in the university. Actually, the narrator ironizes Cecilia's feeling of superiority for having read and studied literature. Cecilia, "having learned modern forms of snobbery at Cambridge" (A 152), believes these subjects make a human being complete: "She had lolled about for three years at Girton with the kind of books she could equally have read at home – Jane Austen, Dickens, Conrad, all in the library downstairs, in complete sets. How had that pursuit, reading the novels that others took as their leisure, let her think she was superior to anyone else?" (A 152). On the other hand, Leon, Cecilia's older brother, is portrayed as apart from the universe of literature, as well as politics, science, or religion, because those matters "simply had no place in

his world” (A 108). When the reader is first presented to Cecilia she is reading Richardson’s *Clarissa*, which dialogues with Briony’s play *The Trials of Arabella* and with *Atonement*’s love story between Cecilia and Robbie²⁸. Innumerable allusions (direct and indirect) to other literary works are present throughout *Atonement*, and critics are constantly claiming more possible intertextualities. Also because of this feature, *Atonement* reinforces its status as a work about literature, in several senses.

In *Clarissa*, the heroine confronts her family in the pursuit of love and ends up facing misfortunes. Through this mirroring lies an example of the *mise en abyme* employed in *Atonement*, a technique which actually is acknowledged by Hutcheon to be highly related to metafictional texts: “often the *mise en abyme* contains a critique of the text itself” (55). The *regressus in infinitum* mentioned by the Canadian literary critic, a concept she gleans from one of Borges’ metafictional books, refers to the story about a writer who is also writing a story, as in *Atonement*. The image of a story within a story evokes an image of *infinitum*, and to the concept of *mise en abyme* the mirroring movement is central. *Atonement* has levels of *mise en abyme*, for not only is it a story of a writer writing a story, but the “tales” inside of it also reflect one another, as in the case of *Clarissa*, *The Trials of Arabella*, and *Atonement*, and other several intertextualities present in the articles of Brian Finney, Hermione Lee and Linda Cruise, for instance. Briony, in the end of the book, wonders: “Lovers and their happy ends have been on my mind all night long. As into the sunset we sail. An unhappy inversion. It occurs to me that I have not travelled so very far after all, since I wrote my little play. Or rather, I’ve made a huge digression and doubled back to my starting place” (A 370). In this quote underlies the image of the endless digression, the story that is always resorting to and reflecting itself.

²⁸ Also the rape is a common issue between *Atonement* and *Clarissa*.

Robbie is also surrounded by literature. His shelves are filled with books from Austen, Conrad, Auden, and Lawrence, and although he wishes to embark on the medical career, he believes:

He would be a better doctor for having read literature. What deep readings his modified sensibility might make of human suffering, or the self-destructive folly or sheer bad luck that drive men towards ill-health! Birth, death, and frailty in between. Rise and fall — this was the doctor's business, and it was literature's too. (A 93)

As Dahlbäck and Finney both acknowledge, literature “plays a leading role in [Cecilia's and Robbie's] relationship” (Dahlbäck 10). More than a mutual pleasure and a determinant influence in shaping their view towards the world, “literature has here entered deeply into the fabric of Robbie's and Cecilia's lives” (Finney 78). The first evidence that literature permeates their relationship is in the scene by the fountain, in which Robbie asks Cecilia how her reading of *Clarissa* is going. This assumes tones of dramatic irony later (when the events are unfold) if the reader knows what connects *Atonement* to *Clarissa*. Further on and throughout, literature assures the sustention and maintenance of their love. Because readers learn in the end that all the other encounters were fruit of Briony the author's imagination, the very idea that the couple's unique physical moment takes place in the library of the Tallises house shows how the presence of literature in their relationship is definitely not random. Since Robbie was accused of sexual abuse, the letters he exchanged with Cecilia while in jail were monitored. For this reason, “they wrote about literature, and used characters as codes ... ‘a quiet corner in a library’ was a code for sexual ecstasy” (A 204). Therefore, literature marks their relationship in all stages, especially if one recalls the fact that both studied literature in

the same university. Although they did not even talk to each other anymore at that time (the childhood ties had been broken), literature already connected them.

Dahlbäck explores deeply in her analysis the significance of literature in Robbie's and Cecilia's relationship. The critic calls attention to how literature, as discussed above, is a tool used by the couple to keep alive the memories of the past they once shared, and feed the hope of a future together. Dahlbäck recalls the moment in which Robbie first feels awkward before Cecilia, and it is when he enters the Tallises' library to borrow a book. He takes off his dirty boots and suddenly realizes his socks are odorous and quickly removes them too. However, he feels stupid to be entering the Tallises' house barefoot, especially because he notices Cecilia is thinking the same. She does not know his reasons and thinks that, by acting this way, he simply wants to establish a distance from the Tallises because of his being the son of a maid. It is as if the playful and intimate childhood bonds are no longer appropriate. Indeed, they are not friends anymore, and things have changed a lot since their infancy spent together. Now there is a different vibration between them, an obvious attraction that she soon also realizes and admits. Robbie, who after this meeting caught himself "worshipping her traces," was feeling delighted to read the book "she had handed ... him ... and somewhere on its leather surface were her fingerprints. Willing himself not to, he raised the book to his nostrils and inhaled ... but nothing of her. How had it crept up on him, this advantage stage of fetishising the love object?" (A84). The recently discovered attraction between them makes them both awkward before each other.

Literature is hence, for various reasons, a constituting element to the couple and to the whole narrative itself. Sigrid Renaux acknowledges such and defines *Atonement* as a novel about art and literature, for it discusses authorship and why authors write. At the same time, it remains a novel about the human being and the frailties that permeate

our existence. *Atonement* ponders the nature of guilt and the necessity of redress. In her article, Renaux establishes a dialogue with Sartre's ideas pointing to how writing is an appeal to the reader, a request for him/her to collaborate in the production of the work of the author, resonating the reader-response notions discussed in this chapter.

Moreover, as I already pointed out, contemporary metafictional works seem to have taken the relations of writer and reader to another baseline — a result of a postmodern scenario that will be presented in the next chapter.

Literature is also what triggers Harold Bloom's *How to read and Why*. The critic holds that reading conducts us towards alterity, and that fictional writing is alterity. This struggle is perceptible in *Atonement*, for Briony is, more than telling a story (which seems to be also part of her own personal story), searching for other peoples' feelings and their way of seeing the world. In other words, she is searching for alterity: "you had to measure yourself by other people — there really was nothing else. Every now and then, quite unintentionally, someone taught you something about yourself" (A 118). In the path of alterity, while Briony constructs others, she as well constructs herself.

Nora Foster Stovel, in her review "*Atonement*," calls attention to the novel being not only a *bildungsroman* (for it explores the psyche of a young girl entering the adult world, presenting flashes of her entire life), but also a *kunstlerroman*, which is a narrative on an artist's growth to maturity. Although the readers only discover in the very end that they have been reading Briony's masterpiece ("Atonement"), the narrative explores her first trials and her initiation in the artistic world until her mastery of literary writing. Stovel (para. 9) affirms that "*Atonement* is a metafictional work in the best sense; a study of the mystery of creativity and the morality of literature, it plumbs the psyche of the artist. It poses the question, 'how can a novelist achieve atonement when,

with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?²⁹” *Atonement* is then about the very nature of literary creation, the development of a human being and the rising of an artist.

Where alterity is concerned, McEwan, in an interview with Kate Kellaway about *Atonement*, declared: “[novels are not] about teaching people how to live but about showing the possibility of what it is like to be someone else. It is the basis of all sympathy, empathy and compassion. Other people are as alive as you are. Cruelty is a failure of imagination” (para. 11). Briony’s struggle to grasp what McEwan declares is part of her construction as character. Such is noticeable, for instance, when she observes the scene by the fountain and wonders: “was everyone else really as alive as she was? For example, did her sister really matter to herself, was she as valuable to herself as Briony was? Was being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony?” (A 36). McEwan has stated, “It is hard to be cruel once you permit yourself to enter the mind of your victim. Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity”³⁰. These two statements by McEwan — “Imagining what it is like to be someone else other than yourself is at the core of our humanity” and “[novels are] about showing what it is like to be someone else” – symbolize the spirit contained in *Atonement*, and tells about Briony’s pursuit of alterity.

Briony’s personal and artistic sagas are intertwined. She evolves and comprehends the historical changes in the manners of making literature along with her personal history. This sheds light on how literature and other forms of expression and knowledge are understood in the contemporary world as fragmented: “reality” is comprehended and represented as pieces of a whole that may not, and cannot, be completed or fully comprehended. *Atonement* has fragmentation not only as a theme, for

²⁹ Stovel is citing *Atonement*, page 371.

³⁰ An article written by McEwan in September 2001 in which the author comments on the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers.

it is concerned with plurality throughout³¹, but also as the structure of the narrative, and the narration of the fountain scene is an example of the attempt to represent multiple voices in the novel.

When it comes to manners of making literature, the increasing manifestation of metafiction as an artistic phenomenon tells about some of the contemporary artistic productions. Primary notions on metafiction will be provided below, in an attempt to begin to grasp the nuances of this type of text that is conscious of the mechanisms of literary creation.

1.5. The making of fiction: discussing first notions on metafiction

Metafiction is not a postmodern phenomenon but has definitely gained strength in contemporaneity. Even before all this current trendy moment, some writers, such as Edgar Allan Poe, in “The Philosophy of Composition,” began the discussion on metafiction *avant la lettre*. Poe, in what can be considered a prescriptive manner, brings about the *modus operandi* of making literature, or rather how “good literature” is composed:

I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be written by any author who would — that is to say who could — detail, step by step, the process by which any of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion. Why such a paper has never been given to the world, I am much at loss to say — but, perhaps, the autorial vanity has had more to do with the omission than any other cause. Most writers — poets in especial — prefer having it understood that they compose by a

³¹ Although the narrative also presents linearity as previously mentioned.

species of fine frenzy — an ecstatic intuition — and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes [...]. (para. 5)

The critic, without naming the phenomenon, is somehow discussing and problematizing metafiction, and suggesting for writers the challenge of producing a piece of writing detailing the fictional steps that would unveil the process of creating their works. What Poe could not foresee back in 1846 is that to include notes about the production in the work itself would become a prolific literary resource, such as McEwan does in *Atonement*.

In postmodern times metafiction has been largely theorized about. In *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, Hutcheon develops ideas on the poetics of postmodernism, in which metafiction seems to have assumed an important place. According to her, metafiction is a “form of fiction which is itself acutely self-reflexive” (xi) and textually self-conscious, being capable of revealing aspects of not only fiction *per se*, but also about the nature of writing. The theoretician defines, on the first page of her book, some elements of her title, and metafiction would be “fiction about fiction – that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity” (1). In Hutcheon’s understanding, metafiction is then narcissistic because it prescribes self-consciousness as it is turned on itself.

Patricia Waugh, in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, defines metafiction as:

A term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore

the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.”

(2)

In *Atonement*, the problematization Waugh tackles can be noticed in the sense that, through metafiction, the material reality and the literary reality merge, casting questions on the status of what comes to be real.

Waugh argues that “contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures” (7). The critic affirms that more or less from the sixties on, “novelists have tended to become much more aware of the theoretical issues involved in constructing fictions. In consequence, their novels have tended to embody dimensions of self-reflexivity and formal uncertainty ... they all explore a *theory* of fiction though the *practice* of writing fiction” (2). This mutual mirroring, which is described as narcissistic by Hutcheon, points to the condition of language as the mediator of reality creation, and since the worlds of literary writing are entirely made up of language, they become a “useful model for learning about the construction of ‘reality’ itself”, claims Waugh (3). Hutcheon, in *Narcissistic Narrative*, regarding the origins of metafiction, explains that the genre is definitely not new (actually it is part of a long novelistic tradition, not to mention that drama and poetry had already presented it), nor is it aesthetically better than the others, but that it is precisely its self-conscious literacy that makes it different and “perhaps especially” (Hutcheon xvii) worthy of attention.

The metafiction of *Atonement*, as already mentioned, possesses layers that are gradually disclosed. In “Part Three” there is important information released, for at this stage Briony is moving towards being a professional writer and she tries her hand in the first attempts of what comes to be, almost sixty years later, “*Atonement*.” After

submitting her story to a magazine, Briony gets the following answer: “we found *Two Figures by a Fountain* arresting enough to read with dedicated attention... However ... our attention would have been held even more effectively had there been an underlying pull of simple narrative. Development is required” (A 312). Self-referentiality is present at this remark — the novel turning to itself — although it is still not yet totally clear to the reader, who is perhaps only capable of perceiving those nuances after finishing the story and grasping the final revelations of the last part. Through the words of the editor who replies Briony, the fabrication of “Atonement” is evidenced, for many of the aspects he highlights are actually incorporated in the final version, the one the readers has in their hands. The editor makes several suggestions, such as to include in the text excerpts of one of the main character’s plays, and Briony does that through *The Trials of Arabella*. He also suggests the change in the type of vase broken by the fountain, and Briony actually alters Ming to Meissen. Furthermore, the editor mentions the possibility of making the “watching girl” unaware of the breaking of the vase as the reason why her sister sinks into the fountain (attempting to rescue the pieces). It is through the response Briony receives from this editor that she seems to begin the development of the story until it assumes the final shape readers can access³². He tries to incite Briony to rethink her story by teasing:

If this girl is so fully misunderstood or been so wholly baffled by the strange little scene that has unfolded before her, how might it affect the lives of the two adults? Might she come between them in some disastrous fashion? Or bring them closer, either by design or accident? Might she innocently expose them somehow, to the young woman’s parents

³² Or maybe it is the other way around: perhaps Briony writes a story that never happened and creates this editor as part of her metafictional project.

perhaps? ... Might the young couple come to use her as a messenger? (A 313)

Through such collocations, how fictionality is handled in the narrative becomes clear, leading the reader to wonder about how much Briony altered from the “true” story (if it ever existed). Although readers know the whole account is fictional, a fabulation, there is a sort of expectation that, at least within Briony’s world, something she narrates is real. However, such an idea cannot be confirmed or even measured.

Another outlook on metafiction is presented by Robert E. Scholes in *Fabulation and Metafiction*. He was one of the first critics to theorize about metafiction and it is relevant to pinpoint some of his ideas. Scholes dedicates the studies in the book mentioned to modern fabulation, in which the experimental fabulation or metafiction, as he has called it, is a significant feature of the “fabulative movement.” Metafiction, for Scholes, is within a broader category, in this case the fabulative one. The critic posits that modern fabulation, “like the ancient fabling of Aesop, tends away from direct representation of the surface of reality but returns toward actual human life by way of ethically controlled fantasy” (3). This definition points to a complex relation between fabulation and the representation of reality, finding convergence with Waugh’s ideas on metafiction and its mediation of the actual experience.

According to Scholes, there is a natural impossibility of attaining the real, and consequently the truth. This makes us all detainers of mere notions of “reality.” Fabulation, rather than being a turning away from reality, is an attempt to capture correspondences between a reality that is fiction, and a fiction that is our attempt to capture reality, explains the theoretician. And although there is an inability to reach the real, we keep “looking towards reality” (Scholes 8). For the North American critic, metafiction:

Assimilates all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself. It may emphasize structural, formal, behavioral or philosophical qualities... [but it] tends towards brevity because it attempts, among other things, to assault or transcend the laws of fiction – an undertaking that can only be achieved from within fictional form. (Scholes 114)

Metafiction may assault the laws of fiction because it opens a complex space for the intervention of what we believe reality is, creating a peculiar relation with both universes — fictional and real. Thus, one sees, especially in Scholes and Waugh, a concern with the impossibility of grasping the real, and how the metafictional writing deals with this impossibility in its roots.

Scholes would reformulate his ideas of earlier works. Initially he collected only short literary pieces to analyze, suggesting that the metafictional genre could not be successfully expanded. The first criticism of metafiction, acknowledged by the theoreticians presented here, seems to have been based on metafiction purportedly being “the end of the novel,” or the “literature of exhaustion,” a term by John Barth, or even the “dehumanization of art,” by Ortega and Gasset³³. Nevertheless, Hutcheon, in *Narcissistic Narrative*, does not see these classifications as necessarily negative. In her view they are more related to the notion of metafiction being a parody and an attempt to exhaust literary possibilities, even though it obviously does not succeed. Hutcheon contends that, in metafictional writing, “it is the human imaginative *process* that is explicitly called into action, in both author and reader” (20). *Atonement* explores this “human imaginative process” Hutcheon discusses, both thematically or structurally.

To analyze McEwan’s metafictional project in *Atonement* the ending of the book is key, for it holds strategic twists in the narrative. Waugh points to metafictional texts’

³³ Review found in Hutcheon (1984).

tendency to have more than one possible ending, and *Atonement*'s ending indeed deserves attention. The critic explains that the endings in metafictional works may disrupt the archetypal happy ending. *Atonement* gives the reader the illusion of a happy ending only for a brief while, as if to fulfill the script of the great romantic novels it dialogues with, or to fulfill what Briony wished had happened. But in a twist, Briony's change in the narrative's path reveals to the reader the fatalities that have apparently unrolled, consequently configuring a disturbing ending. Waugh notes that untraditional beginnings and endings that turn into creating and then breaking illusions are strongly present as metafictional features. Briony's confessed novelist power to alter the fate of "people" copes with the embedded narratological basis that also seems to compose the material reality.

Linda Cruise, regarding the happy ending Briony concedes to Robbie and Cecilia, believes that "her only justification for having created such an imaginary world, in which Cecilia and Robbie share a harmonic life of love, is her compulsion to be freed from her life-long burden of guilt. Briony comprehends her effort as "a final act of kindness [toward Cecilia and Robbie], a stand against oblivion and despair" (A 351). In the passage below, uttered by Briony in the last pages of the novel, Cruise points to the virtual-dual voice that echoes, a teaser by McEwan: "I know there's always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, But what really happened? The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish. As long as a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love" (A 371). And it is by making their love immortal that Briony hopes to have found her atonement, believes Cruise. Problematizing what the critic states, to have the chance to ask Briony the author what really happened would indeed make sense, since she belongs to the fictional world where the story takes place. However, to ask McEwan

this same question perhaps would not be reasonable because what he writes belongs to the real of fiction. The passage above, taken from *Atonement*, resonates Briony's play *The Trials of Arabella* ("my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince"), which functions as another example of how the story is constantly self-referring in a *mise en abyme*. Furthermore, the title of Briony's play, *The Trials of Arabella*, also offers more possible interpretations. As Finney observes, Arabella is the name of Clarissa's sister in Richardson's novel, and "[this] places *The Trials of Arabella* within a literary tradition of sentimentality and sensationalism, while inevitably lacking the psychological complexity of the original" (73).

While Cruise holds that Briony's decision not to publish her novel until Lola and Paul Marshal are dead is a sign of her lifelong enduring cowardice, I, on the other hand, claim that it serves rather as another punishment to her. Briony will not live or be conscious enough (she is irremediably sick in her old age) to see her attempt of reparation achieve its goal: Cecilia and Robbie finally fulfilling their love. However, she was indeed a coward in not confronting her sister, and Cruise notes that Briony "never in fact had the strength of will to visit Cecilia at her apartment, in 1940, as she claimed in the last section of Part Three" (Part II). Actually, Briony's "walk across London ended at the church on Clapham Common, and ... a cowardly Briony limped back to the hospital [due to blistered feet], unable to confront her recently bereaved sister" (A 370-371). Dahlbäck believes that, "in making the character Briony do what she herself did not, the author Briony is able to do in fiction what she never did in real life ... Briony is thus not attempting to reverse the past, or to change it altogether, her attempt is simply to re-write a part of it" (13). She is aware that her fiction will not alter the past, but it will offer a sense of hope, an alternative to the indifference of the universe towards people's sentiments and personal dramas.

We readers cannot access what “happened,” nor can we access what comes to be “true” within the novel. But the question to ask is: does it matter? In my reading the answer is no. McEwan makes a point by choosing the structure of his novel, by building the character Briony, and by making her the “author” of the story. The fact that Briony claims the authorship of “Atonement” forces the reader to redefine the entire novel and come across resignifications. After all, this seems to be the very point of the book, since, as Briony acknowledges, the time of clear answers has come to an end.

CHAPTER 2

Recreating (Ongoing) Stories

To understand the theoretical basis that underlies *Atonement*'s literary moment, a study of postmodernism and the nuances that compound it is *sine qua non*. Furthermore, this investigation aims to answer some of the questions and issues raised in this study, which is concerned with *Atonement*'s composition and relations with postmodernism. Some of the questions are: How does the understanding of literature in *Atonement* contribute to the discussion about literature in the critical scenario? How does McEwan's use of metafiction contribute to discussions of postmodern literary productions? In this chapter I will investigate postmodernism and some of the peculiarities that have been characterizing this cultural moment that is in constant transformation. Also, I will go over common structures that permeate contemporary British novels to try to understand the literary group into which *Atonement* is inserted.

2.1 Postmodernism in Literature

To seek an understanding of postmodernism is essential to this research not only because *Atonement* belongs to postmodernity, but because it is a postmodern work *par excellence* and a critical revisiting of tradition. On the one hand, the book's breaking with the past (which is only partial) can be illustrated by *Atonement*'s incorporation of elements of the great traditional English novels (the unfulfilled love and the romantic heroine, for instance). These elements, on the other hand, are present under a different perspective from the conventional shape, and other paradigms are brought to light. Through appropriation of prestigious names from English literary history, *Atonement* plays with the construction of a postmodern gaze towards literature — a gaze which

does not disregard what has been achieved so far and that recognizes its importance, but at the same time elicits new categories of understanding contemporary ways of making fiction. What McEwan does is rather show that the old schema used to explain fiction and the process of making literature may no longer be capable of answering our current inquiries, or fit our contemporary gaze. Thus, structures should be rethought and McEwan makes his point through *Atonement*.

To understand a little of how the world gets to the word “postmodern,” it is enlightening to take a brief look at it diachronically and understand a little bit of the first use of the word “modern.” Jurgen Habermas resorts to Robert Jaus’s research on the word “modern” to explain that it was first used in the 5th century, signifying simply opposition between tradition and the present. Postmodernism, however, “cannot simply be used as a synonym for the contemporary,” notes Hutcheon (244)³⁴. What she suggests be called postmodernism is essentially “contradictory, resolutely historical and inescapably political... [it] is not a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society” (Hutcheon 250). For the critic, irony is a key word in postmodernism and possesses a governing role since postmodern aesthetics is problematized by critical reflection. Andreas Huyssen claims that there came with postmodernity the prerogative to desacralize art, which could now be participative and not only contemplative. In Hutcheon’s (246) words, postmodernism challenges, but does not deny.

The notion of humanism held by modernists such as Eliot and Joyce — that there are stable aesthetics and moral values, universal structures and narratives in art and myth — ceases to be consolatory in postmodernism (Hutcheon 247). If on the one hand “such systems are indeed attractive, perhaps even necessary,” on the other hand

³⁴ *A Postmodern Reader* (1993).

“this does not make them any the less illusory” (Hutcheon 247). However, for some who believe we are in a time of “loss of meaning,” Hutcheon responds that knowledge has not disappeared, but its production is being now understood under different optics and under other possible narratives instead of meta-narratives.

In a moment when contradictions and incoherencies are more exposed than ever, there is the urge to interpellate, demystify and resignify the very structures we live upon. Hence, postmodern art:

Might be able to dramatize and even provoke change from within...

Postmodernism works to show that all repairs are human constructs, but that from that very fact they derive their value as well as their limitations.

All repairs are both comforting and illusory. Postmodernist interrogations of humanist certainties live within this kind of contradiction. (Hutcheon 248)

Postmodern art is especially parodic, notes Hutcheon, for at the same time it incorporates elements it also challenges and evokes change. The eternal and immutable seem not to belong to contemporaneity, although they persist in many instances (perhaps not with the same strength of the past). Of course a postmodern view is full of limitations, but these too raise awareness of the postmodern provisionality. Far from being ultimately enlightening, postmodernism seems more plausibly understood as an “ongoing cultural process or activity” (Hutcheon 254). Hutcheon struggles to find a poetics of postmodernism, a poetics she admits is only a model, an interim hypothesis to deal with the embedded contradictions of the theory and practice of postmodernism.

In an era of fluidity and more loose categories, Hutcheon (250) contends that the new arts are now much more closely related, dialoguing in broader ways. The boundaries of literary genres, for instance, have been encountering and merging, as have

the limits of fiction and non-fiction, a paradox which could be extended to art and life. This and other themes are to be found in postmodern literature, and are problematized by McEwan in *Atonement*.

Postmodernism is definitely not a consensus. This moment, or phenomenon, as some critics prefer to say, is still shaping itself. For some, the movement that began in the 1960's has, since the early 2000's, become post-post-modernism, or even late postmodernism. And even though postmodernism seems to rule current artistic and cultural productions, Patrik Miša, in "Postmodern Elements In Selected Novels By Ian Mcewan," asserts that, as happened in other literary moments (symbolism, realism, modernism, etc), postmodernism dominates only a part of the current scenario, and not the whole picture of cultural and artistic productions. Just as the postmodern "wave" does not dominate the entire artistic and cultural scenario, it also does not appear simultaneously worldwide: while North American postmodernism seems to have developed earlier, British postmodern texts did not occur before the 1970's, explains Miša.

Postmodern texts tend to present a range of features that constitute them as a group. Among the characteristics that constitute postmodern texts are loose association of ideas, temporal disorder, pastiche, corrupted sense of time, and others, explains Miša. These features cannot be taken as exclusively postmodern, for they have been present in previous literary moments. However, the combination of such characteristics and the fashion in which they are used seems to indeed set this group apart. Nevertheless, my point here is not to justify the existence (or not) of postmodernism in literature, but to understand its configuration in relation to *Atonement*.

McEwan creates a character/writer who has a literary trajectory, and *Atonement* itself depicts a historical literary trajectory. Briony, as a young lady, experiments and is

deeply influenced by modernism, a period known by its literary extravaganzas and novelties. However, she seems to have later found in postmodernism the balance she needed in her writing. Considering modernism, Virginia Woolf plays an important role in Briony's narrative and structural style, especially when she begins to try her hand professionally. Finney suggests that Woolf happens to be both a positive and negative influence on Briony in her search for a literary identity. The critic quotes an interview³⁵ with McEwan in which the latter states that he “was wanting to enter into a conversation with modernism and its dereliction of duty in relation to what [he has] Cyril Connolly³⁶ call the backbone of the plot” (Finney 72). During the modernist and Woolfian stage of Briony's early productions, her work lacks basic elements of a story, those which would be the backbone, as mentioned by the editor character McEwan creates.

Before the modernist stage of Briony's writing, she is largely influenced by previous melodramatic literary phases. While the little Briony seems to wander through romanticism and prior literary movements more strongly in her childhood, Kathleen D'Angelo observes that Cecilia and Robbie, already adults, are presented “as readers of eighteenth-century novels who each favor a particular reading aesthetic” (para. 5): Cecilia is bored with reading Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, and “[she]’d rather read Fielding any day” (A 25). Hence, *Atonement* depicts and explores a great range of literary moments, contributing to the discussion of literature in a variety of senses.

2.2 The contemporary British novel

When it comes to what has been produced in terms of British novels in more recent postmodernism, postmodern realism has arisen as an important phenomenon, and

³⁵ Interview with Michael Silverblatt. 11 Jul. 2002. Radio.

³⁶The editor of *Horizon*, the literary magazine Briony submitted “Two Figures by a Fountain.”

Atonement shows evidence of belonging to this group. Amy Elias, in “Meta-Mimesis? The Problem of British Postmodern Realism,” depicts the postmodern realism as obsessively focusing “on the conflict between Self and Art — two categories intact in traditional Realism, but increasingly under attack in a postmodern culture” (14). The critic posits that “in postmodern Realism, the world has become textualized” (12). Elias, although analyzing specific novels, makes comments that appropriately suit *Atonement*. He points out that:

British novels seem to attempt to work within the Realist paradigm while accommodating the postmodern argument that ‘there is nothing natural about the ‘real’ and there never was’ (Hutcheon 33)³⁷. Postmodern Realism in British fiction often centralizes such a claim by depicting a protagonist facing a personal catastrophe that is so cataclysmic or psychologically shocking that the protagonist’s essentialist world view is shattered and replaced by a postmodern conception of reality.” (14)

In *Atonement*, a fight is waged between what is real and what is fictional. As in the quote above, Briony has this initial “romantic” and puerile concept of reality which, after a psychological shock, is altered abruptly and is replaced by a more contemporary “conception of reality.” Briony’s perception of the “real” unfolds a personal and private catastrophe is extended to the core of her family and has public and social consequences through Robbie’s going to war.

Personal microcosm and social macrocosm are commonly analogous in Realist fiction (Elias 15), and as pointed out, this parallelism is found in *Atonement*. Briony shows at an early stage her obsessive taste for miniature. The reproduction of her tidy organized world in a much smaller scale through her toys and plays exhibits what

³⁷ *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989).

Graham Swift poses in *Waterland* (30): “So, there’s no escaping it ... even if we miss the grand repertoire of history, we yet imitate it in miniature and endorse, in miniature, its longing for presence, for feature, for purpose, for content” (qtd. in Elias 15). Indeed, macro and microcosms are in constant merging in *Atonement*, be it through Briony’s obsession with miniatures or through her family’s ills, which serves as a metaphor for the social ills that end up culminating in the war — the perversities that pervade the private also pervade the public sphere. McEwan depicts thus an omnibus and integrated web of human relations.

In postmodernity, the idea held by Elias of the real as being a representation has the role of reinforcing the constructedness and the discursive component of how reality is understood in contemporaneity. As an open reality, the mimetic nature of Postmodern Realism is called into attention. Elias argues that “Postmodern Realism attempts to *record* the real, but ... the real itself has become a strange new world: mediated reality” (26). It is in this mutual mirroring and influence that the personal and social, the private and the public, merge in McEwan’s microcosm — through a blurring of the boundaries between factual and fictive acts in a metafictional process. *Atonement* is a novel that constructs itself to then almost destroy itself by crudely unveiling the fictionality of fiction. The final result, however, is more the praising of the possibilities of fictionality than diminishing its power.

The process of fictionalization of the world that occurs in *Atonement* makes the readers encounter at the end a deeper level of “make believe” than they were expecting, promoting the fictionalization of fiction: a character who writes about characters, which, in Briony’s world, are both real people and fictional creations the moment she puts them on paper. The characters, thus, are doubly fictional, for in our real world they are already creations. This fictional status copes with and calls attention to the illusory

nature of the material world. Metafictional texts tend to highlight this delusive condition of “reality” by problematizing the status of what comes to be real or not. We would have, then, “increasing degrees of simulation of the real” (Garbero 98), and the construction of authorship within *Atonement* contributes to the levels of fictionality developed.

Authorship is an issue that deserves attention in *Atonement*, and undoubtedly corroborates the play with reality and fictionality that takes place in the novel. It is productive here to present about Roland Barthes’s notion of the death of the author, for in *Atonement*, the final impression left to the reader is paradoxical in this regard. If, on the one hand, Briony’s revelation unmasks the fictionality of the text, on the other hand, it simultaneously makes fictional the concept of authorship since the author that is exposed is a fictional one.

In short, Barthes’s theory on the death of the author³⁸ affirms that language knows only the subjects that enunciate, not persons. Thereby, when the writing begins the author enters his/her death. Because of this, and other theoretical and critical contributions, Barthes is one of the names that inaugurated post-structuralism and even postmodernism. However, Michel Foucault reviewed some of the considerations of his compatriot and argued that the notion of the death of the author is delusive³⁹. Foucault claims rather that the author is neither a God-like figure of the 19th century nor the textual object/subject of Barthes. The “author is back, or rather ... s/he never died” (Cazzato 34). The vast body of contemporary metafictional productions make us rethink the concept of authorship, and *Atonement* is one of those works.

³⁸ “The Death of the Author” (1968).

³⁹ “What Is an Author?” (1969).

Even though in *Atonement* the real author does not expose himself as being the author, a demonstration of what could be called soft metafiction in opposition to hard metafiction in Luigi Cazzato's terms⁴⁰, the issue of authorship is problematized on perhaps an even deeper layer. The authors who intrude into their texts seem to have in mind the postmodern tendency that questions the impersonality of discourses, and exposes the functioning and the positioning of the speaker. This procedure frames the process and shows awareness of the authors as ideological subjects, who end up being, to some extent, fictionalized for entering the fictional realm. *Atonement* dialogues with these concepts, and, when it comes to authorship, the discussion achieves a different level of fictional perspective, since its author "is" fictional.

If *Atonement* shows concern with the issue of authorship, this concern is also extended to criticism, since moments are portrayed in which critics respond to Briony's story. In the end, she, as the narrator, indeed demonstrates concern with the reception of her novel. Cazzato discusses the anxiety metafictional texts seem to contain regarding the destiny of their messages. He explains that metafictional novels tend to present involvement with history and criticism, which is true in *Atonement*'s case (although Cazzato is specifically directing his article toward hard metafiction rather than soft).

The complex architectonics of metafictional texts seems to have found resonance in an also complex critical outline. This current phase of metafictionality represents a different momentum when compared to its early phase⁴¹. In the current scenario, "Postmodernist novels are multifold constructs in which the architectonic

⁴⁰ Cazzato defines hard metafiction as the kind of text that "overtly expose[s] their fictionality," and soft metafiction would "covertly hint at its fictionality and constructedness." In this classification, *Atonement* would be considered soft metafiction in most of the text, except mainly in its end. (Cazzato 28)

⁴¹ Many critics, including Hutcheon (1984), agree that Cervantes's *Dom Quixote* (1615) is not only the first novel, but it also carries strong traits of metafictionality. Thus, metafiction is not a postmodern phenomenon, but the contemporary manifestation of metafiction has a particular fashion and aesthetic, and has been taking place more systematically.

features together with complex endings form an intricate dynamics” (Lange 145). The architectonics of postmodern novels points to “postmodernism’s refusal to abide by the limits of conventional ‘reality’ [and] presses the reader to look anew at what his society and period call ‘reality’,” says D’haen (148 qtd. in Lange 146). Adriaan Lange holds that all this postmodern logic “implies that the reader’s interpretational strategies are constantly thwarted and rebuffed, and that the reader is forced to constantly re-examine the metanarrative that he has constructed in an unceasing adjustment of perspectives offered by the architectonic dynamics of the text” (146). In *Atonement* the reader has to “thwart and rebuff” his/her interpretational strategies due to the shift in the architectonic dynamics of the novel.

So long as endings are concerned, *Atonement* has an impactful one, and “endings are the one element of postmodern fiction that perhaps best exemplifies the notion of undermining and obstructing the reading process, constantly confusing, misleading and thwarting the reader in his desire to impose a sense of causality and teleology of the narrative” (Lange 146). If “to discuss the novel’s ending is to discuss the novel” (Lange 147), then *Atonement* points to the discussion of fictionality and literary writing. We indeed find coherence between the development of the novel and its ending, for both portray self-conscious concern with the art of writing.

When it comes to writing, parody, intertextuality, reality, and fiction are some of the recurrent elements, themes and strategies present in postmodern texts, especially metafictional ones. In *Atonement*, the many intertextualities echo throughout, and the love story, which is at first what seems to move the engine of the novel, becomes at the end more of a background, a medium that enables other discussions to take place. The reader (but not perhaps all readers) finally realizes that the story is first and foremost

about literature, but as the editor Cyril Connolly mentions, all stories need a backbone: that is what makes readers want to read them.

And as part of such backbone, the reader comes across elements that establish a connection between the worlds explored in *Atonement*. The reader is presented with the idea that perversity has entered (or rather has ever been part of) all fields of human existence — private and public. There does not seem to exist much difference between what Briony does to Robbie, and what Paul Marshal does to Lola, and what people do to each other in the social field, or in a state of war. As in a continuum, Briony's deed sends Robbie to the war, a war somehow supported by Paul Marshal's industries, and later on she herself goes to work in the war treating the injured, the same war which took away Cecilia and Robbie's lives. In a chained and apocalyptic movement, the actions lead to one another, and reflect one another; the story that repeats itself, corroborating the *mise en abyme* developed in the novel. The havoc that began in the past cannot be controlled and its consequences are inevitably disastrous in McEwan's skeptical and chaotic universe.

Although Briony the writer gives the reader an "ideal" ending (Robbie and Cecilia together), right after in her diary entry she narrates what would have been the "real" outcome of the couple's fate. This makes the reader actually *reconstruct* an ending from the new framework provided, since the expectations built up throughout the reading fall apart. It seems that the ending that will be conceived by the reader is likely to be neither the "happy ending" provided at first, nor the "realistic" one of which Briony tries to convince readers. A consequence of this can be perhaps the readers' skepticism regarding what would be the "true" ending, especially because such pursuit seems aimless when it comes to *Atonement's* structure as a novel. Furthermore, another piece of evidence that such pursuit is causeless is that Briony's story seems to be not

reliable and does not satisfy readers as being the “truth,” leaving gaps behind. What remains is the certainty of the unimportance of clear answers when it comes to fiction and fabulation (as long as internal logic is respected), and that the idea is to surrender to the pleasure of the text regardless of the clear-cut information it provides — *Atonement* is precisely playing with those traditional categories.

While some metafictional texts begin overtly exposing their fictionality through a strategy called “author-in-the-text,” in which the author talks directly to the reader, *Atonement* has perhaps an unconventional way of exploring this strategy, for in the very end we come across not the real author, but rather the character/author Briony Tallis. In *Atonement* the authorial voice merges with the narrator’s, in a complex, ambivalent, and provoking form. If anyone has the power of regulating the fictional discourse this entity is the author, who also has the power of destroying the fictional illusion. In *Atonement* this logic works a bit differently since the one who emerges to interfere in the fictionality is Briony, the character/author. The real author, McEwan, abstains from appearing, but the reader inevitably feels his presence, since Briony’s claim of authorship, although an attempt to be real, unveils, as a side effect, her unavoidable fictionality and the presence of a figure behind all who controls the outcomes.

Briony exerts the role of an author-narrator, even though not in a traditional way (for she is not the real author of *Atonement* and not even the narrator of most of it).

Cazzato (31) defines the author-narrator as a:

Narrator who, at his will, drops his/her narratorial mask letting the reader see the person of the author with a pen in his/her hand. The author acknowledges to the reader his/her presence and his power of manipulation. S/he obtrudes into his story, manifesting his/her will to be

outside and inside fiction and, thus, challenging the separateness of fiction and reality, hence, the autonomy of the text.

Briony's narratorial intrusion at the end of the novel provokes ambivalence as a result. Paradoxical as it may seem, if on the one hand this fact calls attention to McEwan's presence as a background figure responsible for the whole picture, on the other hand Briony's intrusion is a form of self-effacement for McEwan. His absence from the writing scene brings him to light, and provokes the opposite effect at the same time.

As the novel deals with literature and the universe of books, crucial are also the notions of interpretation and misinterpretation. Not only does Briony misinterpret the scenes by the fountain and the rape she partially witnesses, but the whole Tallis family commits the same mistake. For having put Paul Marshall beyond any suspicion, they fail to interpret correctly the signs that point to Lola's possible rapist: "every person seated at the dinner party ... fails to read Lola's scratches appropriately — as well as Paul Marshall's reactions to them during the ensuing discussion" (D'Angelo para. 14). The Tallis family is depicted as prejudiced and retaining a fool sense of needing to preserve their equals, so the only possibility they accept is that of the rapist being one of their male servants. This hypocrisy prevents them from properly judging the evidence. But as Briony, when still a young girl, was beginning to understand, "nothing was ever as one imagined it" (A 101).

In contemporary realism, "reality" may as well be delusive. Hiie Saumaa, citing Malcolm Bradbury, explains that many scholars comment on the British novel's "inclination towards realism and its tendencies to focus on form, fictionality, and reflexive self-examination, and draws attention to the fact that contemporary novels seem to be fascinated with displaying fictional processes, the relationship between the writer, character, plot, and reader" (qtd. in Saumaa 20). Saumaa (2005) reinforces that

British literature, from the 1960's on, has shown an alternation between tradition and innovation. The critic concludes by saying that "the combinations of the realist framework and the self-reflexive approach allow for novels with highly realist tendencies mixed with investigations of writing, reading, illusion, and artifice" (Saumma 20). This entire phenomenon that configures British contemporary literature indeed suits *Atonement* and I will explore further this paradoxical relation of realism and over-fictionalization.

Realism is a very complex term, but a common point conveyed by scholars is that, as a literary convention, it began in the nineteenth century, trying to capture "reality" and transpose it to art. Another view would be a more open one, such as Andrzej Gasiorek's. He understands realism "not in terms of more or less fixed formal techniques but as a family of writings that share a certain cognitive attitude to the world, which manifests itself in a variety of forms in different historical periods" (24). The critic states that it seems to be a current tendency of novels to create an illusion of being primarily realist and then subvert this status through the use of several techniques, blurring the boundaries of what comes to be fictional and real.

Saumaa posits that realist and reflexive works "foreground a mimetical rendering of 'reality' in art and highlight the status of a work of fiction as a constructed artifact, emphasizing the role of language in building and mediating texts and reality" (21). I proposed the novel *Atonement* is realist and reflexive at the same time, and both notions turn to the consciousness of "reality" in art as being a constructed artifact. *Atonement* portrays the handicraft of writing, the labour of bringing into existence a literary piece: "It is only the last version that my lovers end well ... All the preceding drafts were pitiless" (A 370). From this excerpt the reader realizes how laborious the

writing activity is, and that Briony has written several drafts searching for an appropriate mimetic construction of her artifact.

Returning to realist works, Gasiorek suggests, “Janus-faced, these texts look both outward to an external world that they attempt to depict in all its complexity and inward to the very processes by which such depiction is brought into being” (14-15). The critic points to the contemporary fiction characteristic of being composed by “interanimation of forms, styles, and techniques ... cross breed narrative modes, taking what suits them from a variety of genres, and creating new forms that cannot be easily classified” (19). This fluidity contained in contemporary works marks an era in which the arts seem to be in broader dialogue with one another.

For contemporary texts that incorporate new shapes of realism and self-conscious techniques, Gasiorek has created the term “experimental realism,” while Elias (9) suggests that those texts that “seem different from ‘straight’ Realism — harder, more metafictional, postmodern,” belong to what she calls “Postmodern Realism.” In other words, a new form of realism has arisen when compared to the traditional and initial one of the nineteenth century. This mixing experiment, Elias says, may be in “a long line of Realist re-visionings in British fiction” (28) — an “experimental mimesis,” as he also puts it.

Still regarding what would be contemporary realism, Saumma, who studies the novels of A. S. Byatt, cites the following phrase by the author: “what Proust taught me, in the early 1960s, was that it was possible for a text to be supremely mimetic, ‘true to life’ in the Balzacian sense, and at the same time to think about form, its own form, its own formation, about perceiving and inventing the world” (qtd. in Saumma 23). Byatt ends up defining such kind of texts as “self-conscious realism,” explains Saumma. Thus, as one may notice, critics and theorists have given different names to a similar

phenomenon. *Atonement* is part of this contemporary trend, since its mimetic realism is imbricated with its construction as a text: in a self-conscious way it shows concern with form and its own formation.

2.3 Metafiction in Postmodernism

As earlier explored in this thesis, metafiction is part of *Atonement*'s diegesis, not perhaps in an overtly exposed way at first, but rather through subtle hints until the novel reaches its metafictional climax in the last part. Saumma presents a historical approach on the use of the word metafiction and posits that self-consciousness in writing and artificiality of representation are seen to be intimately intertwined with metafictional compositions. Along with metafiction, other terms have been used to designate this kind of fiction, argues Saumma, such as "introspected," "introverted," "narcissistic," "auto-representational," "self-conscious," "self-reflexive," "antifiction," and "fabulation." The critic advocates the idea that the terms are not perfect synonymous⁴², but they all take into consideration similar features that delineate "metafiction." The word "metafiction" begins to be more systematically used in the 1970's, and there is disagreement among critics on who coined the term: the North-American critic and novelist William H. Gass, or Robert Scholes. There are many definitions and theorizations of what comes to be metafiction and what its characteristics are. In this thesis I use mainly Hutcheon and Waugh's theoretical studies because of their dense and recognized books on the topic. Several other critics are also quoted in a complementary basis and with the intent to raise more recent considerations on metafiction, since Hutcheon and Waugh published their works in the mid 80's (although they indeed remain current). In this chapter I

⁴²As a matter of fact, linguistics defend that there are not perfect synonyms. Each word has a unique meaning of its own.

return to the discussion on metafiction, this time turning more to the postmodern literary scenario.

When it comes to metafictional texts, the concern of examining its own construction seems to be one of the major features that constitute them. Saumma calls attention to a key point in this regard which is “their awareness of themselves as fiction, as fictional constructs” (26). Both Waugh and Hutcheon highlight this aspect and the former suggests that the metafictional text “self-consciously reflects upon its own structure and language” (14), whereas the second asserts that it “self-consciously presents its own creative process” (25). Hutcheon, in *Narcissistic Narrative*, explains that metafictional texts not only create fiction, but also comment on that creation. This assertion represents *Atonement* which, throughout its narrative, not only shows a story being created within the main story, but also has its creational process somehow dissected through Briony’s connection with the art of writing. We readers witness her process of writing the very story that is being woven before our eyes.

Wenche Ommundsen holds that “metafiction presents its readers with allegories of the fictional experience, calling our attention to the functioning of the fictional artifact, its creation and reception, its participation in the meaning-making systems” (12). Metafictional texts are concerned with, among other things, form and fiction-reality relationship, remarks Saumma (26). Such fictional consciousness has been transforming throughout decades. Patricia Waugh, in the mid-1980’s, said:

The paranoia that permeates the metafictional writing of the sixties and seventies is therefore slowly giving way to celebration, to the discovery of new forms of the fantastic, fabulatory extravaganzas, magic realism (Salman Rushdie, Gabriel García Márquez, Clive Sinclair, Graham Swift, D. M. Thomas, John Irving) ... a moment of crisis can also be seen as a

moment of recognition: recognition that, although the assumptions about the novel based on an extension of a nineteenth-century realist view of the world may no longer be viable, the novel itself is positively flourishing. (9)

In 2001, the year of *Atonement*'s publication, metafiction no longer seems to threaten the future of the novel. McEwan, rather than trying to reaffirm and establish metafiction as his fellows had done a few decades ago, seems to be in a moment of posing other questions regarding instead the status of fictionality. His novel is said to have brought the British novel into the 21st century⁴³ not only in being well written by a capable and skillful fictionist, but in containing issues that represent a shift from the earlier quests (such as whether or not fiction is facing exhaustion, for instance). Rather than looking nostalgically to the past, *Atonement* focuses on a daring reading of tradition, of fiction in general, and of metafiction.

Atonement does not problematize issues that are “new,” but the fashion in which and how they are worked seem to point to another moment in the literary panorama. It dialogizes other ways of making fiction through human relations to fictionality and to reality itself. The manner by which human beings make sense of reality evokes a different gaze towards the “role” and possibilities of fictionality today. In an era of extreme technology, McEwan travels decades back in time and picks up an apparent ordinary and simple way of misunderstanding, completely independent of modern devices, and intertwines it with the world of stories: he uses the ever existing gaps and failures in human communication to discuss how fiction is imbricated in our imaginary and relationships — he debates literature from beginning to end.

⁴³ Geoff Dyer in his article “Who’s afraid of influence?,” published in *The Guardian* in 2001.

Patricia Waugh explains that metafictional texts, because they focus on characters that are involved with reading, writing, written words and worlds, pinpoint how fictional systems are created. In narratives in which characters are avid writers (Briony) and readers (Cecilia and Robbie), the fictional world dialogues with the real world intensely and intertextually. In *Atonement*'s microcosm, characters access works that exist in the material reality and provide their own reading of them. Briony lives immersed in fantasy and writing, while Cecilia and Robbie, who consume literature, also have their imaginary somehow shaped by it, as well as their constitution as individuals, especially in relation to them as a couple.

Intertextuality is definitely a crucial word in *Atonement*, as demonstrated in the previous chapter. Susana Onega and Jose Angel Garcia Landa contend that metafiction is essentially connected to intertextuality, and “no text exists as an autonomous and self-sufficient whole: the writers and the reader’s experience of other texts conditions, its form and interpretation” (2) are part of intertextuality. Elizabeth Dipple claims the intertextual allusions from other texts inserted into the metafictional text bring the idea of “texts infinitely talking to and illuminating each other” (119). *Atonement* promotes this consciousness since there are weaved in its meshes dialogues and references to a variety of exponential literary works, corroborating the idea that artistic creation owes credit to its predecessors, and inserts itself in a tradition⁴⁴, even if to question it.

Atonement comments on its own process of creation, although not directly on McEwan’s but rather on Briony’s. This indirectly puts McEwan on the spot even though not on the “center of the stage.” Briony’s intervention at the very end, as an intrusive first-person narrator, frames a new narrative level and “thus breaks the reader’s illusion

⁴⁴ In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T. S. Eliot (a modernist) claims that it is essential for artists to hold a sense of history. To know the past is to be aware of one’s place in the tradition and consequently be capable of producing a respectful work in the present, for past and present are in constant dialogue and mutual resignification.

that he or she is reading about ‘true’ or ‘real’ events and people” (Saumma 28). This diegetic layer created by Briony’s incursion destabilizes the diegesis and almost “ruins” the story and the “pact” existent between author and reader. Briony, who is first presented as a character and then as a writer, breaks the expectations raised throughout the story that what is being told is real at least in the fictional world. What readers find, however, is a double “lie” (fiction, at last) that unsettles the plot, making its diegesis perhaps more complex than in novels with traditional structures. Readers are asked to resignify the story they have just read, rearrange categories and come up with other responses.

Regarding these fictional layers, Brian McHale theorizes on the creation of levels within the fictional work. He distinguishes the primary world of fiction — diegetic — from the world created within this primary one — the hypodiegetic. *Atonement* presents a multilayered narratorial space and almost the whole story is told on one diegetic plane. However, with Briony’s final intrusion, another level is thereby created and evokes an inversion in the narration of actions: the first presented fictional plane that corresponds to practically the whole narrative becomes the fictional world within Briony’s reality. According to this logic, most of the narrative would be the hypodiegetic plane and the last part of the book would thus be the diegetic plane. Each narrative “degree,” as Manfred Jahn calls it, may have its own narrator, as indeed happens in *Atonement*: parts One, Two, and Three have a heterodiegetic third person omniscient narrator, whereas in the last part, “London, 1999,” Briony emerges as this first person narrator, in an extradiegetic plane. Although she tries to convey truth and reliability, she ends up destabilizing the narrative and presenting herself as unreliable both because her account contradicts her previous story and she is now a mentally ill old woman. As I have previously argued, Briony is constructed as unreliable from the very

beginning of the narrative. In spite of the fact that the use of narratological terms may contribute to understanding the diegetic structure of the narrative, this apparatus cannot easily explain the complexity of the narrative developed in *Atonement*. It is worth noting that these narratological terms become fluid in a postmodern work that rereads traditional literary categories.

As far as the shifts in the story are concerned, I have shown in the previous chapter that some reviews⁴⁵ have considered *Atonement* to be “an essentially realist novel that at the end inappropriately resorts to a modish self-referentiality” (Finney 69). I have as well explained why I oppose such a reading. But the point now is to explore why *Atonement* would be realist and then turn to what some critics assert as “inappropriately” self-referential. It is worth noting that from the second half of the 20th century on, many novels start to present a different style of realism that does not fit in the traditional categories of realism because they violate, in a variety of ways, standard novelistic expectations. *Atonement* violates the standard novelistic expectations for bringing to its end an “overturn” that makes the novel, indeed, overtly self-referential. However, such self-referentiality is not “out of the blue,” random or without a purpose, since from the very beginning the narrative gives hints that it is constructed upon a metafictional basis, and it keeps turning to itself. Moreover, the making of fiction is openly a major theme in the story. All these considerations seem to present a counterargument for what some critics have fostered.

Returning to Briony’s entering into the narrative, her act has both artistic and personal natures since her writing life and her personal life are trajectories that, in her case, overlap. Similarly, Ommundsen claims that metafictional texts tend to call attention both to the role of the author in the writing process as to the role of the reader

⁴⁵ Brian Finney comments on the position of some of those critics and why he disagrees with them.

in the reading process. Those texts self-consciously bring about the importance of readers and writers in the act of constructing meaning. I have already explored in the first chapter how in *Atonement* there is concern with the role of readers and their response to the story. In the last part of the book, Briony clearly speaks about the importance of writing stories that readers may want to read, from where they get hope, satisfaction, and will perhaps reflect upon the human condition. That could be a reason for not finishing her novel with the “truth”: “How could that constitute an ending? What sense of hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account?” (A 371). Paradoxically and ironically, she actually ends up revealing the “truth” anyway, although the reader does not know if she really intended that revelation to reach the audience. Seemingly, readers cannot know if her revelation is trustworthy or just another fabulation or trick of her provocative writing, especially because at this point she has given substantial proof of her unreliability.

Nevertheless, the diary notes seem to provide credibility. The intimate and private tone of her outflow makes readers elicit at least three relevant explanations for the outcomes: a) the diary was not supposed to be part of the novel “*Atonement*” and someone with privileged access put the parts together (this makes even more sense if we consider that, according to Briony’s revelations, she is probably dead when her book finally gets published); b) she is using this as a literary strategy to corroborate her choice for having written fiction and hence reinforcing her lack of obligation with the truth; c) it was McEwan’s decision for his own purpose in order to create the effect of destabilizing the patterns of fiction he creates throughout the novel, raising questions in his readers and exploring possibilities of the novelistic writing. The diary, which is traditionally an instrument to write intimately about the self, serves Briony to explore also her writer’s side, showing how her identity as a writer is fundamentally entwined

with her personal self, as if there is no separation for her, calling attention to her visceral connection to the written world.

Another aspect is that the diary entry serves as an instrument for the reader to interpellate reality. Briony uses it to transpose herself from the fictional realm to a sort of “reality,” which, although not the material one, cannot be considered the primary fictional level first developed in the narrative. When Briony, a fictional character and writer, is “put” among real-life authors and books, as belonging to the material world, an intriguing merge of realities takes place, and this fusion is also a trait of metafictionality. In this way, a sort of “lamination” seems to occur in *Atonement* due to the layers in its narrative: a hypodiegetic world within the diegesis.

Jean-François Lyotard has said that “the narratives allow the society in which they are told, on the one hand, to define its criteria of competence and, on the other, to evaluate according to those criteria what is performed or can be performed within it” (76). Thus, in a textual world, and in a world that can be read as text, metafictional narratives pave the way for the notion of the world as consisting of fictions and problematize the fictionality of reality. Saumaa explains that this can be done: “by tackling the concepts of fictionality or reality of fictional characters and by discussing the importance of stories and language in fictions and in the world, as well as by looking at the reading of fictions and reality as texts” (32). Through these strategies metafictional texts are able to tackle their constructed nature.

The fact that Briony writes stories and creates fictional characters as well as fictionalizes “real” ones (for she apparently makes “*Atonement*” out of her reality) makes apparent how her fabulation (or rather McEwan’s) connects essentially the diegetic and hypodiegetic worlds. Furthermore, the material reality is also represented through references to existing authors and books. Another strategy used to

interpenetrate the real world and the fictional one is McEwan's insertion in *Atonement* of literary authors and works that belong to real life. He creates characters that are readers of the books written by authors who are significant parts of the English (and the world's) literary history. This resource approximates both contexts — real and fictional — by making them mirror themselves in an infinite cascade of reality in fiction and fiction in reality (Hutcheon in *Narcissistic Narrative*).

To corroborate this idea, Larry McCaffery's assumption is opportune: “we inhabit a world of fictions and are constantly forced to develop a variety of metaphors and subjective systems to help us organize our experience so that we can deal with the world” (8). In this train of thought, Waugh pinpoints how the contexts of reality and fiction shift and interpenetrate metafictional productions, which problematize, for instance, fictional constructs through characters. These texts are likely to highlight these ideas stressing characters as fictional devices. In *Atonement* this sensation is highlighted more strongly in the end when readers are confronted with the fictionality of the story, even though it is not necessary to get to the end to perceive the metafictional tone of the narrative and the fictionalization of the fiction that takes place.

Briony the writer is depicted in the process of putting together her work and the reader is allowed to accompany this process. Instead of a smooth *praxis*, writing is represented as a troublesome activity, permeated by problems, revisions, doubts, hard work, and anxieties — a laborious manufacturing. By unfolding the mysterious author/creator experience, McEwan somehow demystifies part of the writing activity and approximates it to the reader.

The self-reflexivity present in texts such as *Atonement* is not something new, either in literature or in other fields of knowledge, as I have already mentioned. Cazzato (27) explains:

After centuries of self-consciousness, the contemporary and wide-spread obsession with self-reflection in every field of contemporary studies, far from being new, is but the last predictable stage. What is new, however, is the unprecedented proportion of this trend, whose cause is to be seen in the fact that what is strongly brought into focus is the means of reflection itself, *language*.

Language is an element around which the story develops, meaning language in a broad sense, and not only written and spoken words — human communication whether through the written or the spoken word, language makes human beings what they are.

Regarding self-reflexivity, *Atonement* discusses itself through intertextualities and through the stories that are confectioned along with the main story, such as Briony's play *The Trials of Arabella* and her tale "Two Figures by a Fountain," her first attempt to write about the traumatic event of her childhood. This endless *mise en abyme* and chain of referentiality make *Atonement* a gathering of many narratives. As mentioned in the first chapter, the main plot is composed of elements picked up from other stories (critics have found innumerable possible intertextualities), in what seems to be McEwan's acknowledgement that originality may lay on how one groups the information he/she has, and not whether one comes up with something "new." After all, all stories, even if covertly, owe credit to others, and what McEwan does is to let this dialogue be purposely explicit.

The depiction of the world of literature in *Atonement* functions as a metafictional device, and this kind of text tends to present a microcosm of characters involved with writing and reading, characters who nourish a passion and an enchantment for stories; together with characters, readers dive in this space of fabulation. Robbie and Cecilia share an enthusiasm for literature and, further on, find in it a way to keep their love

alive. Even after their deaths it is also literature that makes their love survive through Briony's publication of "Atonement," in which she gives back (or rather tries to give back) what life, and she herself, took away from the couple. And Briony, above all other characters, has this connection with fictionality and an organic call to write:

At that moment, the urge to be writing was stronger than any notion she had of what she might write. What she wanted was to be lost to the unfolding of an irresistible idea, to see the black thread spooling out from the end of her scratchy silver nib and coiling into words. (A 115)

The voracity with which she longs to put things on paper and the fact that she as a child categorizes the world as a big great story is symptomatic of her visceral (and perhaps even eccentric) obsession with the world of writing and of fantasy.

McEwan makes Briony an avid writer and Saumma poses that "creating characters who are writers and depicting them in acts of writing point to the metafictional feature of thematizing writing activities and taking writing as a subject to be examined" (64). The metafictionists may be therefore suggesting the analogous process they go through in real life or how the aesthetic of fiction dialogues with the generation of our real meaning systems. To present the fictional works of a fictional character as well as the comments on those works (from editors and collaborators) is to highlight metafictional strategies. The readers are able to follow Briony's ambitions and trajectory towards becoming a writer. It is no surprise to discover at the end that she has actually become a writer, and a respected one, who has had a productive career. The way in which writing is presented as part of her life seems to have left her not much of a choice but to take this seriously as a career. Writing seems to have become for her even a clamant requirement especially due to her "crime," for she takes on the duty of telling the whole episode and trying to make amends: she finds in the realm of fiction her

unique chance of retelling the story and repairing the damage she has caused. This entire configuration makes readers aware of the process of edification of the author and of the subject — *Künstlerroman* and *Bildungsroman*.

Still concerning metafiction, Waugh highlights how the perception of reality has changed throughout history, and how in postmodernity this shift has reached a new baseline:

The historical period we are living through has been singularly uncertain, insecure, self-questioning and culturally pluralistic. Contemporary fiction clearly reflects this dissatisfaction with, and breakdown of, traditional values. Previously, as in the case of nineteenth-century realism, the forms of fiction derived from a firm belief in a commonly experienced, objective existing world of history. Modernist fiction, written in the early part of this century, responded to the initial loss of belief in such a world.

(6-7)

Contemporary metafiction, in the critic's understanding, is an even more emphatic response to the frailty of human constructs, and to how our daily reality is, like fiction, manufactured. Waugh ultimately posits that the world is a fabrication of multiple semiotic systems that can impossibly correspond to material reality.

The shifts of gaze in the present moment and in our ways of understanding reality take us inevitably to the notion of tradition, which is a theme of this study. McEwan brings up the issue of tradition through citing and appropriating from authors and books that have made England's literary history. He writes a novel that dialogues in many senses with tradition, containing essential themes of some of the great English novels — a love story that could not be fulfilled, class issues, the struggles of a heroine, among others. However, he, as a man of his time, does not revisit the past innocently or

purposelessly, but rather in what seems to be a journey through important names of English literature, authors of emblematic novels (beginning with Jane Austen's quote in the opening). McEwan appropriates from elements of those texts to compose his own novel, in a series of intertextualities and references. The proof that McEwan does not revisit the past naively is his use of bits and pieces of other novels to give them a new shape and meaning. This is consistent with postmodern inquiries, which lend an ear to the theoretical and critical scenarios postmodernity represents.

This new shape makes *Atonement* postmodern perhaps above all due to its explicit awareness of a constructed text and its longing to discuss fiction, which differs from the chain of tradition McEwan cites and uses in his story. The books dialogue with each other and *Atonement* ends up resignifying some shared structures and elements. Although *Atonement* is metafictional from the beginning, discussing writing and literature, it presents a considerable "traditional" structure until the end, when a shift takes place. It is as if McEwan is telling his readers that today's novel is a continuum of the old and traditional novels, but the themes, questionings, structures, representations and perceptions might transform throughout time, as our gaze also transforms.

Ultimately, metafictional works tend to play with possibilities and many critics have noted the "playful" character of those texts. Susana Onega and Garcia Landa define them as "a way of writing, or more precisely as a way of consciously manipulating fictional structures, of playing games with fiction" (31). The concern with form is definitely a feature pointed out by scholars when it comes to metafictional texts. The so-called structural incoherence discussed by critics such as Hutcheon, in *A poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, is known to be typical of those texts. Metafictional texts challenge the boundaries of genres and frequently cross them, especially the genres that commonly surround metafiction: the historical and

biographical. In the section below I will discuss autofiction, a mode of writing derived from the autobiography which is relevant to understanding Briony's self-characterization in *Atonement*.

2.4 The Fictionalization of the Self: Autofiction

The concept of autofiction, minted by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 to respond to Philippe Lejeune's studies on autobiography⁴⁶, comes from the notion that when talking about ourselves we necessarily resort to fictionalization. Viewed from this perspective, autofiction would be a "postmodern" variation of autobiography, since it no longer supports literal truths, totally coherent discourses, indubitable sources, or even the reliability of the memory (Figueiredo 2007; McDonough 2011). But although autofiction has been popularized and transformed to cover a broad range of productions, the initial notion created by Doubrovsky determines that in an autofictional work the names of the author, narrator, and character have to coincide. Also, the text has to be read as a novel, and not as a historical recapitulation.

To begin with, *Atonement*, if taken at face value, has a characteristic that automatically impedes it from being considered autofiction in Doubrovsky's term: its complete fictionality. The French critic has set some clear limits for a literary piece to be considered autofiction – the combination of entirely real content in an entirely fictional form:

Autobiography? No, that is a privilege reserved for the important people of this world, at the end of their lives, in a refined style. Fiction, of events and facts strictly real; autofiction, if you will, to have entrusted

⁴⁶ Lejeune defines autobiography in "The Autobiographical Pact" as "a retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of his own existence stressing his individual life and especially the history of his personality" (6).

the language of an adventure to the adventure of language, outside of the wisdom and the syntax of the novel, traditional or new. Interactions, threads of words, alliterations, assonances, dissonances, writing before or after literature, concrete, as we say, music. (qtd. in McDonough 7)

Atonement cannot fulfill the premise established by Doubrovsky. However, if we consider the possibility of a variation in the original concept of autofiction and include a more open and contemporary idea of it, the understanding of literary genres and texts could (and perhaps should) be more provocative and unquiet, after all the current historical and critical moments endorse plasticity rather than plastered definitions. As far as we know, *Atonement* does not deal with real events, but in Briony the author's world she is making autofiction, for she combines "real" facts (or what the reader is led to believe is real) with fictional ones, and the result is this hybrid structure, a concoction of forms in which events are not simply told, but also deformed and reformed through literary artifices.

Critics have attacked Doubrovsky's concept of autofiction for many reasons, explains Sarah McDonough, and one of them is for his claim that autobiography is a genre for important people. Autofiction, on the contrary, seems to provide the freedom to write about anyone's experience, since fictionality is openly a part of the production. Furthermore, critics have entered into a debate as to whether or not autofiction is really a new way of writing. McDonough nevertheless concludes, "Works of autofiction aim to unsettle the autobiographical pact⁴⁷, encouraging readers to notice common structures rather than blindly accept them." She completes by positing that "the whole point here is to question the givens — so, to what extent do you believe in my narrator? Has she constructed this story to justify a weird order of her chapters? Does it matter?" (11-12).

⁴⁷ A reference to Lejeune's work on autobiography.

McDonough raises important questions that fit accordingly to the role played both by the omniscient narrator and by Briony in *Atonement*.

The novel as a genre is known for its plastic textual and structural possibilities (Bakhtin)⁴⁸. *Atonement* is in dialogue with other textual genres and their variations, as Hutcheon (*Narcissistic Narrative*) explains to be typical of metafictional texts.

Autofiction, although not in a traditional way, is part of *Atonement*'s composition. These mergings and experimentations have been shown to be part of a postmodern literary panorama and to boost other ways of making literature. By combining autobiography and fiction, an apparently contradictory combination at first, autofiction arises. When it comes to *Atonement*, the fictionalization of real facts goes beyond the traditional categories, and what readers have are events which are “real” (or not) only in the layers of its narrative.

While Doubrovsky defines autofiction through traits such as veracity of facts and coincidence of names between author and protagonist, Vincent Colonna, explains Eurídice Figueiredo, prefers to attribute the name autofiction to those cases in which authors create a personality and a literary existence. So here the notion of “veracity” is shaken and taken differently from what Doubrovsky first proposed, approximating what takes place in *Atonement*. In Colonna's notion of autofiction, the fictionalization of the author is worked more openly. Furthermore, according to Doubrovsky, autofiction differs from the autobiography, which focuses somehow on the whole trajectory of an individual, by collecting snippets and diverse phases of one's life and applying to them narrative intensity and literary style.

⁴⁸ *Questões de Literatura e de Estética: A Teoria do Romance and The Dialogic Imagination.*

When it comes to veracity, Figueiredo (60) seems to be fond of the idea that in literature there cannot exist confession, for sincerity is literature's first artifice. Briony, in the last part of the novel, admits the use of such artifices:

I can no longer think what purpose would be served if, say, I tried to persuade my reader, by direct and indirect means, that Robbie Turner died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940, or that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station. (A 370)

She acknowledges her manipulation of facts to suit the purposes of her novel. Even when she claims, "If I really cared so much about facts, I should have written a different kind of book" (A 360), she is again saying that the moment an author appropriates from real events to write fiction, he/she is fictionalizing those events and it no longer matters if they actually happened — this is how literature works from Briony's vantage point.

On the one hand, Briony is, in the first quote (A 370), resorting to a confessional tone to try to pass sincerity and "truth," whereas on the other hand, in the second quote (A 360), Briony reveals she is not concerned with telling actual facts (especially because it would not be effective or productive to try to convince her readers of something). Her major interest seems to have become more literary (what could be made of her story) than factual. However, she affirms she "regarded as [her] duty to disguise nothing — the names, the places, the exact circumstances — [she] put it all there as a matter of historical record" (A 369). Even if Briony is telling the "truth", it really does not matter, for in novels authors tell stories:

I've been thinking about my last novel, the one that should have been my first. The earliest version, January 1940, the latest, March 1999, and in between, half a dozen different drafts. The second draft, June 1947, the

third... who cares to know? My fifty-nine-year assignment is over” (A 369)

Briony has the sense of duty to retell the story she prevented from flourishing in the past. The end of her obligation was finally the publishing of her novel (although her guilt never actually expiated and most probably she died before “Atonement” could be published). Her speech over the unimportance of sticking with the facts in her case resembles the idea found in Figueiredo’s article that in literature the real is inconceivable, and this seems to be why she chooses to write in the genre novel.

In light of the ongoing debate on postmodern and metafictional literary features, McEwan has said in an interview⁴⁹ about *Atonement*, “I sometimes feel that every sentence contains a ghostly commentary on its own processes.” In this matter McEwan shows himself to be a writer of his time, one whose fictions necessarily leave a trace of their own production. Finney observes:

The book proper opens with an ironic description, not of Briony, but of the play she has written at the age of thirteen. It is a crude melodrama with which Briony quickly becomes disenchanted. The point is that we meet an instance of Briony's literary imagination before we get to know her as a personality. She is an author first, and a girl on the verge of entering adolescence secondly. The literary self consciousness about which these British reviewers complain is present from the opening page of the novel and serves throughout the book to undermine the classic realist mode of narration. (70)

This observation remarks on how *Atonement* is unquestionably a work *about* literature, from beginning to end. Linda Cruise notes that “McEwan’s innovative approach to

⁴⁹ Interviewed by Adam Begley, 2002.

crafting P.O.V. throughout this particular story is nothing less than brilliant. He meshes the narrative viewpoint so tightly with the story's structure that to unravel either would cause the novel to lose all integrity" (para. 19). Indeed the impression after reading *Atonement* is precisely that, of a novel that is interlaced and could only be understood integrally.

And it is precisely by questioning the making of fiction and the power of literature that Briony concludes that there is "No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists" (A 371), because as creators, they hold a prerogative no one else holds: "How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?" (A 371). At the moment Briony realizes there is no salvation for her, then her writing assumes an even more important and cathartic role: the only (im)possible redemption.

CHAPTER 3

The Redemption of Literature

3.1 Final Considerations and Conclusions

In this final chapter I conclude this investigation, and for that I will: a) present the objectives and results achieved; b) revisit the problem of this research, trying to close it assertively but not definitely; c) present the deductions taken from previous discussions and add relevant final information; and d) suggest and indicate how the problem unfolds in other questions that can be worked in future studies.

In order to discuss the results achieved, it is worthy to refresh my reader regarding the main objective in this thesis. *Atonement* is constructed upon metafictional bases and literature is a structuring theme within its narrative. My objective was to analyze how the characters, narrator, and author(s) represent and understand literature and how the metafictional process takes place in the novel and relates to the representation of literature.

Regarding this general objective, throughout this thesis I have developed and presented consistent arguments to support my point and my results. I showed that metafiction in *Atonement* is intimately imbricated with the composition of the narrative, as well as with the discussions of literature as a theme and a medium at the same time. For Cecilia and Robbie, literature possesses an appeal as it pervades their imaginary and their relationship, constituting them as subjects (and characters). Literature is not only a passive object in *Atonement*, it seems to be alive, to have a will of its own. It molds imaginaries, it inserts characters in the fictional world to which they not only belong (as being fictional artifacts) but admire and read. These fictional artifacts, through literature, access both the fictional and real worlds by interacting with existing literary

works. For Briony especially, literature has a leading role and her visceral connection to fantasy and fiction prompts the novel and shapes the story. The girl who is always lost in her thoughts learns the hard way that things may not be what they seem and imagination can be both a gift and a curse. Also she realizes that fiction allows anything but that things, at the same time, cannot be thoroughly represented.

Moreover, I investigated in my thesis how *Atonement* inserts itself into the contemporary panorama of British literature. In addition, I pinpointed some of the traits that characterize this literary group. The postmodernism of McEwan's novel points to a work that revisits the literary tradition and asks what literature can still do and give to readers. By creating a narratorial space that plays with standard categories of meaning and expectation, McEwan provokes a destabilization (that almost ruins the novel and costs its integrity) by rupturing with the traditional realism. He can be accused of doing so without providing clear evidence that this shift will take place. As to how *Atonement* fits into a postmodern scenario and how its metafictional basis is related to that literary moment, I showed that metafiction, although not a postmodern phenomenon, gained strength and consistency as a feature of contemporary literature, corroborating discussions in the critical field and reflecting current issues. Waugh affirms, "Contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history is provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures" (7). *Atonement* dialogues substantially with the inquiries of postmodernity because it understands fiction as an open space for experimentation and for defying the *status quo*. There is definitely no formula in postmodern literature; there are nevertheless, tendencies, discourses and ideologies conveyed, as in any other period of history — perspectives that change throughout time. McEwan achieves this result by transcending

traditional literary structures and expectations, especially through the use of a different shape of realism and modes of writing that dialogue with each other and with postmodernism.

Also, this thesis investigated how postmodern metafictional texts question the status of classic realist fiction because the latter attempts to make events narrate themselves, erasing the nuances of the literary work as a product that has a process, a speaker, a place and a time from where it is spoken. While 19th century realism believed it could be a mirror of society and put reality on the paper, postmodern realism is definitely less naïve. *Atonement* casts light on the partiality classic realist fiction tries to veil. McEwan makes a parody of traditional literary genres (Finney 2004) and plays with fixed categories established throughout literary history.

McEwan makes clear how texts are embedded in other texts, how influential they are on one another, how writers consciously or unconsciously revisit and produce from various texts, and how meaning is negotiated. For an inexperienced reader, someone who does not have literary background, *Atonement* might prevail as a book about love and how the excessively creative mind of a little girl ruined the lives of a young couple and her own; or how we live in a chaotic universe full of tragedies ready to take place in the lives of ordinary people. For more experienced readers, the intertextualities may make the reading enriching and make them see the book also as a discussion of fiction and the craft of writing.

The research I present here is in no way definitive, for one of my purposes is precisely to leave room for future studies, propitiating and inciting other approaches and considerations that may be relevant to the literary field. Still, many more analyses could be developed in order to explore *Atonement* both in the same aspects that I did and through other possible approaches. For instance, one aspect that could be further (and

more directly) explored is the dialogue between *Atonement* and: a) other contemporary (or not) works of literature that have metafiction as basis; b) Realist or Postmodern Realist works; or c) works that present nuances of autofiction in their narrative. Another possibility is a study that investigates the *künstlerroman* and *Bildungsroman* elements developed in the narrative, as well as the *écriture féminine*, among others.

Throughout the thesis, *Atonement* has shown to be an intricate literary piece. Its nuances are various, and they point to a complex postmodern architectonics that displays interweaved levels of fictionality. Through the mix of traditional and untraditional textual structures, *Atonement* is clearly a work that plays with (artistic) paradigms and destabilizes categories by problematizing the concepts of reality and fiction. *Atonement* plays with those concepts's productivity in literature and the implications of their misunderstandings in ordinary life. At the same time, *Atonement* explores the world of literature, its tradition and possibilities: the fascination of taking a peek behind the scenes without ceasing to be part of the audience.

McEwan shows that, in the world of literature, authors seek to represent reality with veracity, but without commitment to the facts; after all, it is fiction, and fiction plays with veracity and with readers. In this regard, McDonough affirms: "I concluded that because autofiction does not abide by the autobiographical pact, it needs a new pact that articulates to the reader that the author is not honest, but is sincere; he will lie, but will attempt to reflect the world with justice" (10). McEwan, and Briony as well, represents the world with coherence, and creates, I would contend, stories with verisimilitude and internal logic.

The final part of the novel, considered by some critics as a breaking of the internal logic⁵⁰, is part of the instability present in the narrative from the very beginning.

⁵⁰See Finney.

This unsteadiness is attenuated by Briony's revelation at the end, which is the ultimate evidence of her (purposeful) untrustworthiness. Since McEwan seems to aim at disrupting traditional predicaments of narrative structure, it sounds reasonable that he builds an unstable narratorial space. Readers may thus finally realize that *Atonement*, like all fictional texts, should have been understood as a creation, a made-up story. As a novelist, Briony's concern is no longer with the accuracy of facts: "no one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel" (A 371). She acknowledges that, when she is "dead, and the Marshalls are dead, and the novel is finally published, [they] will only exist as [her] inventions. Briony will be as much of a fantasy as the lovers who shared a bed in Balham and enraged their landlady" (A 371). This passage holds a sort of a trump card, an "ace in the hole" McEwan holds to support consistently the "lies" Briony tells.

In early moments of the story the narrator already hints at the diffuse and unstable nature of Briony and how the text intends to play with the status of certainty: "It was possible that the contemplation of a crooked finger, the unbearable idea of other minds and the superiority of stories over plays were thoughts she had had on other days" (A 41). The narrative Briony creates as a writer is not objective, and it seems that she has never wanted it to be — there is no stable ground in *Atonement*, nothing the reader can grasp or hold on to with assurance. Actually, everything seems prompted to change or fall apart through the insertion of a new element.

This style of McEwan's dialogues with Waugh's incredulity on the possibility of representing the world as it is. The critic asserts that "any attempt to represent reality could only produce selective perspectives, fiction, that is" (6). The only possible representation would be the discourses of the world, explains Waugh. In the beginning of the story the narrator reveals how Briony's way of understanding the facts she has

lived would transform through the decades (corroborating her changeableness and restraining the confidence readers should put on her): “[her] definition would refine itself over the years,” and she would finally understand that “she may have attributed more deliberation than was feasible to her thirteen-year-old self” (A 40). Such observation calls attention as well to the unreliability of memory. If Briony is resorting to her memories to write the novel, or even if her omniscient narrator is entering the psyche of the adult Briony remembering her childhood, the point is that, in either way, accounts based on memories display the frailty of such constructs, disclosing their susceptibility to gaps, failures and distortions — impressions (or illusions) that assume a tone of truth, of being real, or that become blurred with and by time.

The narrative styles selected for the story play a crucial role on the creation of such unstable ground in *Atonement*. By using a classic third-person omniscient narrative point of view that works as a sort of powerful “entity,” McEwan achieves by the end of the novel an accentuated effect of irony. This happens because by the closure of the story there is a sort of removal of the credibility the traditional narrator imposes throughout most part of the narrative in the sense that Briony’s intrusion endorses the idea that there is no measurable realness or accuracy in the account from the beginning⁵¹.

I claimed in the first chapter of this thesis that the narrator of *Atonement* is not Briony, and it is possible to reinforce my argument with the premise that authors are not narrators. The “physical” person cannot merge with the fictional one — they are different “beings,” even if the narrator is a representation of the author, even if their names coincide, or if the events in fiction and in “reality” are said to be the same. This prevents her from being the only narrator as some critics contend. Since Briony is a

⁵¹ However, I have also shown that this narrator hints, from the book’s initial moments, at the unstable ground of the narrative.

fictional author there might be the claim that she can consequently play the role of the narrator. To this regard, I would say that in *Atonement*'s parameters she has to be, to some extent, considered the author of "Atonement," and be granted (at least partially) the same prerogatives as a real author. Furthermore, there is actually no textual evidence of her being the narrator of the first three parts of the novel. Nonetheless, there are evidences that she, as a writer, creates a narrator as legitimate as any other narrator created by real writers.

On the one hand, McEwan establishes Briony as an untrustworthy character and narrator — "an extremely imaginative child, prone to bouts of daydreaming, brought about by 'her godly power of creation'⁵²" as defines Cruise (Part II). On the other hand, she is constructed as a trustworthy writer (the reader accompanies her development as an artist) and this construction grants her credibility and makes the reader believe in her "authorship" of "Atonement." Additionally, Briony's characterization as a "liar" (which seems a defining feature of writers) is confirmed by Cecilia on the very hypodiegetic level: "If you were lying then, why should a court believe you now? There are no new facts, and you're an unreliable witness" (A 317). What comes next is Briony's internal turmoil:

Her sister's confirmation of her crime was terrible to hear. But the perspective was unfamiliar. Weak, stupid, confused, cowardly, evasive— she had hated herself for everything she had been, but she had never thought of herself as a liar. How strange, and how clear it must seem to Cecilia. It was obvious, and irrefutable. And yet, for a moment she even thought of defending herself. She hadn't intended to mislead, she hadn't acted out of malice." (A 318)

⁵² (A 72)

The narrator, throughout the novel, describes Briony as this puerile girl who, intending to protect her beloved ones and to fuel her taste for stories, ends up causing an incalculable harm. The narrator seems to side with her, which could induce some critics to contend that Briony is the only narrator throughout and only in the last part she shows her face. Even though the story does not take away her responsibility or the gravity of her deeds, it constantly reinforces that she has not acted with meanness.

Rebecka Sjöberg, in “Deprivation of Closure in McEwan’s *Atonement*: Unreliability and Metafiction as Underlying Causes” (2012), holds that *Atonement* lacks “closure in terms of narrative structure but not in a philosophical and moral sense” (2). The critic claims that “unreliability and metafiction are ... the primary underlying causes of this deprivation of closure” (4). Reinforcing this, Waugh argues that metafictional novels “often end with a choice of endings [or] . . . with a sign of the impossibility of endings” (29). This signals a consonance between the theories of metafiction and its practice, which would support Sjöberg’s hypothesis. She, resorting to other readings, posits:

In “The Postmodern Novel” (2008), Agatha Taormina defines ‘meta’ as a prefix meaning ‘beyond’ or ‘transcending’ and, thus, she describes metafiction as literally meaning “beyond fiction.” Metafiction may be seen as going “beyond fiction” because its main concern is to find methods of obscuring the boundary between fact and fiction. One mean of achieving this narrative complexity is by letting the author emerge from the story to comment on the ongoing plot and its characters, as well as on the actual process of fictional writing itself (Taormina), which seems to be precisely what McEwan does, through Briony. (8)

This feature gives Briony a strong metafictional presence. Similarly, Linda Cruise believes that Briony plays the role of McEwan's fictional representative, for she integrates her novel "within the structure of his own" (Part I).

Regarding metafiction meaning "beyond fiction," Cazzato states that "our culture is the culture of *meta*, the culture of metapolitics, metalanguage, metarhetoric, metaliterature, metacriticism, metadrama, metapoetry, metafilm, metatelevision, metafiction. *Metaculture* is the product of our civilization, the ultimate product of the Western historical-cultural process" (27). And such context points to the "predominance and the importance of self-consciousness in postmodern culture. Thus, the prefix *meta* encounters the prefix *post*" (27). But Cazzato is very suspicious towards some claims of postmodernists who believe "this age has overcome the cultural and social contradictions of modernity and has entered, or is entering, a new time, the time that comes after." This train of thought could explain the proliferation of the prefix *post*. However, Cazzato reasonably posits that the adjective "postmodern" refers:

To the historical period that has been conventionally, if inadequately and ambiguously, defined as postmodernity by the current debate, and which is generally referred to as late capitalist society by Marxist critics. The term 'postmodernism,' on the contrary, merely designates the dominant ideology and aesthetics of postmodernity, which provides the apologia of the existing reality. (Cazzato 28)

The self-conscious ways of making fiction in this new postmodern scenario of a mixed realism indicate a style of writing composed by an aesthetic that both incorporates and rejects classic Realism. It "attempts to *record* the real, but ... the real itself has become a strange new world: mediated reality" (Cazzato 26). Postmodern realism is a

phenomenon of British contemporary fiction, and *Atonement*, as already explained, is as example of this category.

Still concerning the study of metafiction, Sjöberg refers to a model developed by Victoria Orłowski containing a list of characteristics that would comprise metafiction. Sjöberg selects four strategies that she believes are all present in *Atonement*: “intruding to comment on writing,” “involving his [*sic*] or herself with fictional characters,” addressing the reader in a direct manner, and using a narrative technique that tries to demonstrate that “no singular truths or meanings exist” (8). All these characteristics contribute to the blurring in the distinction between McEwan and Briony’s presence in the novel, a technique typically considered metafictional.

Through Briony’s (and McEwan’s) metafictional techniques, the reader can also realize her pursuit for atonement and her obsession with the world of fantasy, reaching disastrous consequences. The desire to be “centre stage” (A 173) definitely is one of the traits that conducts the girl to her crime. After “witnessing” the rape, she narrates with enthusiasm to the policemen the details of everything she believes she has seen. The sensation of playing such an important role among adults confirms to her that childhood is coming to the so desired end. Her enchantment with stories makes incredibly interesting the fact that an old family friend now turned out to be evil and has fooled everyone for years; this renders an exciting plot in Briony’s head. Lola, however, doubts Briony’s certainty: “it doesn’t make much sense. He’s such a close friend of your family. It might not have been him,” and Briony replies with unbreakable conviction: “You wouldn’t be saying that if you’d been with me in the library” (A 171). Briony’s crime is, hence, a blending of several elements; a result of an immature, fanciful and inconsequent mind interpreting adult behavior and being taken too seriously by a hypocritical and elitist society.

Briony spends her whole life trying to redeem herself for her crime. Perhaps ironically her suffering from vascular dementia in old age will finally grant her the unique chance to, in life, forget the damage she has caused. Not to remember anything is maybe her late forgiveness. She explains to the reader the ills of her infirmity that will soon reach her: “I will have lost the ability to comprehend anything at all. The days of the week, the events of the morning, or even ten minutes ago, will be beyond my reach. My phone number, my address, my name and what I did with my life will be gone” (A 354). Other consequences of her incurable impairment will also be “loss of memory, short — and long — term, the disappearance of single words — simple nouns would be the first to go — then language itself” (A 354-355). By losing language she will be losing perhaps the most special human ability, extremely cherished by her, for through language she has made herself a writer and been able to create the worlds and fantasies that have been perhaps a blessing and a curse for her. She could only forget what she did if she also lost what made her commit her crime in the first place — language. Her fantasy and her misinterpretation (actually everyone’s) lie within the realm of language, where actually all the complexity of human beings’ relations and communication lie.

Briony’s fanciful mind lives in the boundaries of reality and fantasy and the transgression she commits is essentially linked to this obsession, for she starts to conceive the events as bits of a tale in her head: “this was the story of a man whom everybody liked, but about whom the heroine always had her doubts, and finally she is able to reveal that he was the incarnation of evil” (A 116). She is a heroine who needs to stop the villain: “Briony knew that unless she helped her sister, they would all suffer. It was also clear that [Cecilia] would have to be helped in a delicate tactful manner. Otherwise, as Briony knew from experience, Cecilia would turn on her” (A 114). Cecilia refers to Briony as a “fantasist” and a “dreamer” (A 212), a kid eccentrically lost

in her imagination. When Briony accuses Robbie of sexual assault, Lola and the police accept this as a final proof (along with the letter Robbie wrote to Cecilia). They disregard how unreliable that testimony probably was and took it as the ultimate evidence. Cecilia, in a letter written to Robbie, reveals:

‘[The Tallis family] turned on you, all of them, even my father. When they wrecked your life they wrecked mine. They chose to believe the evidence of a silly, hysterical little girl. In fact, they encouraged her by giving her no room to turn back. She was a young thirteen, I know, but I never want to speak to her again. As for the rest of them, I can never forgive what they did. Now that I’ve broken away I am beginning to understand the snobbery that lay behind their stupidity. My mother never forgave you your first. My father preferred to lose himself in his work. Leon turned out to be a grinning, spineless idiot who went along with everyone else. When Hardman decided to cover for Danny, no one in my family wanted the police to ask him the obvious questions. The police had you to prosecute. They didn’t want their case messed up.’ (A 209)

What Cecilia does not realize is that she suffers from the same mentality that kept her family and the others around her from grasping the truth. She displays the same hypocrisy and snobbery that do not allow Paul Marshal to be regarded as a suspected of the crime; this mistake is also made by Robbie, the most injured one.

Briony’s transgression leads her into a lifetime pursuit for atonement, which brings into the reader’s mind the idea of reconciliation. Although the theme of reconciliation does not have an openly biblical reference in *Atonement*, the term inevitably implies this embedded meaning. In the novel there is, nevertheless, the notion of an individual and personal journey for self-reconciliation. The first appearance of the

word “reconciliation” is right at the beginning, in the description of *The Trials of Arabella*. The narrator tells us that Arabella’s reckless passion for a “wicked foreign count is punished by ill fortune when she contracts cholera during an impetuous dash towards a seaside town with her intended [...] Deserted by him and nearly everybody else [...] Fortune presents her a second chance in the form of an impoverished doctor” (A 3). He is actually a prince in disguise, and Arabella “chooses judiciously this time, and is rewarded by reconciliation with her family and a wedding with the medical prince on ‘a windy sunlit day of spring’” (A 3). The idea of reconciliation regards the reunion with the family and the completeness in love, everything Cecilia could not have because of the succession of tragedies in hers and Robbie’s lives. The play *The Trials of Arabella* dialogues with the story of Cecilia and Robbie, and in the very end Briony admits that she was talking about them: “my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love” (A 371). Marian Hobson, in a book in which she studies some of Jacques Derrida’s critical and theoretical contributions, including his theories on *mise en abyme*, says that *mise en abyme* is “a series of reflections or internally contained scaled-models of the literary work ... doubles [that] might give consistency and coherence to the literary and pictural work by encapsulating images which reflect the whole, by reinforcing and repeating it” (75). She completes by saying *mise en abyme* is a reflexive work that reflects itself and contains that reflexion.

However, Hobson posits that Derrida denies the idea of a story closed in itself. Rather, he accepts that works have to be both closed and open, for there is no system closed in itself. *Atonement* carries this doubleness, a *mise en abyme* that is critical with its own construction, and although its encapsulated images mirror the whole picture repeatedly, there is also room for openness, such as that which is presented in the form of a twisted end, for instance.

In the superposition of images that are layered upon one another, an overlapping game takes place in *Atonement*: a male writer (McEwan) creates a female writer (Briony) who makes a third person omniscient “asexual” (or even bisexual, if you will) narrator. In addition, this writer created by McEwan disguises her authorship until the very end. All these elements work in subtle nuances of hiding and displaying. This multiple layering reminds me of Marjorie Garber’s⁵³ discussions of old performances of *Othello*, by Shakespeare, in which a white actor played a black character who believed he was white. Contrary to what happens to Othello’s dramatization with relation to race, the fact that Briony is a female character does not make any difference, be it for her as a subject or in her trajectory as an artist. There is no female or male writing or theme McEwan seems to assert, there is only art. The same is noticed by Hermione Lee who, thinking about the position and contributions *Atonement* can offer to literature and criticism, prompts some suggestions:

Atonement asks what the English novel of the twenty-first century has inherited, and what it can do now. One of the things it can do, very subtly in McEwan's case, is to be androgynous. This is a novel written by a man acting the part of a woman writing a ‘male’ subject, and there’s nothing to distinguish between them. (para. 11)

By “male” subject I understand Lee might be referring to Briony writing about the war, or even perhaps about the literary tradition, historically dominated composed by men. If *Atonement* is “androgynous” in its writing, it has as well tones of hybridity in its structure, a blending of genres and textual styles. In the face of current discussion of postmodern literature, what could be said about British (or even the world’s) contemporary literature? What is it becoming? Perhaps a space in which daring

⁵³ “Othello: the persistence of difference.”

experiments have been taking place, but where at the same time tradition did not lose its spot.

As far as tradition and “blendings” are concerned, Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author”⁵⁴ poses other issues that dialogue with McEwan’s *Atonement*:

A text [...] is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture [...] the writer can only imitate a gesture forever anterior, never original; his only power is to combine the different kinds of writing, to oppose some by others, so as never to sustain himself by just one of them. (4)

McEwan seems to develop in *Atonement* what Barthes defends, for his novel is indeed a space in which different kinds of writings and sources encounter and generate a new combination — an arrangement that does not intend to be original, but perhaps unique. As Finney acknowledges, *Atonement* suggests numerous works of literature to its reviewers, intertextualities and resemblances that instigate dialogues and hint on the themes and structures McEwan may have wanted to work upon, or even on relations he had not even imagined in the first place.

Considering the implications of representing the “real” in the fictional, Hutcheon, in *Narcissistic Narrative*, calls attention to the idea that if fiction is a parody of life, and a traditional view of realism claims fiction has to crudely and realistically resemble life, perhaps the most honest and authentic fiction is that which more freely recognizes its fictionality. Indeed, stories are just ways to talk about life and human beings: stories come out of life and life comes out of stories. *Atonement* offers insights both on the nature of writing and on the nature of human beings. By highlighting the

⁵⁴First published in 1967.

constructedness of texts, metafictional works advocate the idea that the extradiegetic world, as also composed by language, narratives, and discourses, is, in essence, constructed as well.

It is worth noting that regarding the constructedness of texts, perhaps one characteristic of postmodern literature that critics agree on is reflexivity, and both metafiction and autofiction contain it: the first is turned to its own fabrication as fiction, and the second is turned to the representation of the self in fictional molds. *Atonement's* postmodernity lies in the very basis of its construction, the way in which the elements relate to one another, generating a piece that dialogues with contemporary literature and with the critical scenario by reflecting and mirroring the anxieties, inquiries, and issues of a moment.

Atonement shows concern with both the real and the imaginary. In the process of making diegetic characters into hypodiegetic ones at the same time, *Atonement* creates deeper levels of fictionality and trespasses boundaries. In the world created by McEwan, a character (an imaginary construct), fancies him/herself and the other characters (also imaginary constructs) both as real and as imaginary. Such complex and intricate relation sheds light on the tissue of the never-ending horizon of fictionality and interpretative possibilities.

Atonement's universe is impacted by real-life, since the story appropriates from it and created upon it. Existent books and characters are part of the life of the characters in the novel. As a consequence, the real world entangles with the fictional ones — the diegetic and hypodiegetic dimensions. In the end, Briony's literary creations are positioned as being as "real" as the ones of the material reality, approximating even more the two spaces. "Atonement" carries a commentary on its own writing as well as on writers Briony considers to be iconic. She explicitly uses the style, the imageries, and

themes of famous authors, establishing, purposely, a dialogue with other texts.

Atonement leaves room for the challenge of the reading experience, and its multilayered form sets up a dialogue with the multiple realities reproduced in the narrative.

A decisive metafictional trait in *Atonement* is the presence of a character who is a writer — the “writer” of the novel, actually. She makes the story carry commentaries on its own production and on the nature of writing itself, placing the making of literature as a central theme. Since literature is a core element, the reader is consequently put on the spot and the existence of an audience who reads literature and responds to it is highlighted in the novel — people who have their perceptions of life changed by contact with books. This kind of reader seems to make authors still want to write. Ultimately, McEwan puts emphasis on this message and conveys literature as endowed with the power of, if not teaching (what would sound presumptuous), at least touching people on the matters of life and human relations.

Does literature have a healing power, an ability to concede redemption? Fiction has the power to create other stories and realities, to offer a way out, an escape, an alternative route that differs from the apparently unchangeable path. Perhaps literature is “The road not taken,”⁵⁵ that story that could have happened but did not. The outcomes of this inexistent reality can be conceived only in and by imagination and gain form through words spoken or on a sheet of paper. Aristotle, in *Poetics*, points out that literature is not about what happened, but about what could have happened, and this is what Briony does, for she creates the story she wishes had happened.

McEwan’s standpoint is perhaps that literature’s role or function (if it possesses any) has not “changed” throughout the centuries. In other words, people still read books to get involved with stories and reflect on the human condition. By the same token,

⁵⁵Poem by Robert Frost, published in 1916.

writers still create stories to share their minds, their art. Narratives and fictionality have always been part of humans' imaginations and life experiences. What has changed perhaps (and probably will continue to change) is how people make sense of their existence and how literature responds to that; how literature is made in a world that is in constant transformation, even though human beings seem to carry similar inquiries throughout time.

In a world in which fiction had to become strange in order to attract attention (Cazzato 28), metafiction is used as a manner of problematizing the new relations between reality and fictionality — the possible fictionality of the real. Cazzato resorts to the following explanation by Brooke-Rose regarding the obsession of understanding how things work:

We have become irritated clowns, drunk or drugged, perpetually bereft of love, artists and philosophers of the meaningless. Hence our voluble and frenzied attempt to find meaning, to build new systems. Hence the emergence of semantics, semiology, and later semiotics, which study meaning and how it functions. (qtd. in Cazzato 27)

Regarding the urge to comprehend the *modus operandi* of things, metafiction arises as a possibility of playing with fiction and categories of human creation.

In *Atonement's* metafiction (as generally occurs in metafictional works), the reader is made conscious of the manipulation Briony the author exerts over her production, a manipulation which she is also aware of, even though she acknowledges that readers' interests should be taken into account. She knows that even by possessing the ultimate control over her story, there is "no atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all" (A 351). McEwan is a declared atheist himself and this quote is

perhaps another moment in which Briony plays his fictive representative, for he appropriates the character's speech to resonate his condition.

In her search for atonement, Briony appeals to the sympathy of the readers, hoping they will be capable of understanding under what circumstances she committed her crime. At the same time, she does not hope to be forgiven, for she believes there is no acquittal for what she did. As she witnesses the incident by the fountain that initiates the tragedies, she wonders about the complexity of human relations: “what power one could have over the other, and how easy it was to get everything wrong, completely wrong” (A 39). This prolepsis hints on the amplified effects of the everyday gaps that are part of human interaction, gaps which conduct Briony to her misdeed.

Atonement is a narrative that discusses, perhaps, above all, the human being and his/her “nature” — frailties, doubts, mistakes, guilt, and the struggle for reparation. Art is in the core of *Atonement*, and this novel is capable of uniting what seems to be the two major concerns of art: to talk about itself and about human beings. Maybe, as Linda Cruise contends, “the concept of atonement plays a key role [in the novel] when considering McEwan's crafting of P.O.V. [point of view], because so much of his narrator's experience is tainted by her obsession to find self-forgiveness” (Part II). However, Briony knows that her pursuit is “causeless” for she can never attain either external or internal forgiveness. As she acknowledges, “it was always an impossible task ... [thus] The attempt was all” (A 351).

The pursuit of atonement, the apparently central theme in this novel, would be faced differently if we consider the making of fiction as the nucleus of the novel. From this perspective, the theme “atonement” would be just a means, a metaphor to discuss fictionality — this never-ending process. In the same way that atonement cannot be achieved, fiction cannot accomplish a full representation of reality since reality itself

cannot be fully grasped, only (mis)represented. In this sense, Sjöberg states that the “open ending may then be argued to provide a satisfactory and realistic finish in the sense that the reader is familiar with the fact that atonement is something which, in reality, only can be continuously sought for and attempted but never totally achieved” (14). Briony’s unreliability shakes the credibility of her pursuit for atonement, and perhaps, more than struggling for redemption, she is a writer in the pursuit of refinement, excellence, seeking exploratory means of making fiction. Evidence for this would be her declaration that if she cared so much about facts, she would have chosen a different genre to write in and not a novel.

McEwan has declared he “look[s] on novels as exploratory, forms of investigation, at its broadest and best, into human nature.”⁵⁶ And regarding writing, Cruise calls attention to the possibility of “Atonement” being to Briony a way for her to “try her hand at recreating the same story from different viewpoints” (Part II). She is a budding writer by the time she begins “Atonement” and she finishes her journey somehow “mastering” the art of writing. The novel presents some passages that support this reading: “she could write the scene three times over, from three points of view” (A 38); or “then the scene could be recast, through Cecilia’s eyes, and then Robbie’s” (A 39). This revelation would cast “Atonement” as part of Briony’s craft, and as a writing of experimentation, practice and technique. However, even if she is making everything up, this does not mean that she is not emotionally attached to her story, for there is for sure a time and emotional investment. Moreover, Briony finishes her book with a potential for a next production, or even a new draft of “Atonement:”

I like to think that it isn’t weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness,
a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite

⁵⁶Dan Cryer’s interview with McEwan (qtd. in Finney 76).

them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet. If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration... Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at *The Trials of Arabella*? It's not impossible... But now I have to sleep. (A 372)

No “veracity” could be taken from her writing, even in the realm of fictionality. In this perspective, Cruise claims that McEwan somehow pulls off the deception. He lies with mastery and stealth, explains the critic, and it “becomes clear that *Atonement* is not simply his book, but also that of his main novelist-character, Briony” (Part II). Thus, what readers have very clearly is the novel-within-a-novel structure.

Whether, and to what extent, the narrative is compromised by Briony’s authorship, by her handcraft and personal “intentions,” cannot be affirmed or measured. Nonetheless, these aspects actually do not seem to matter since McEwan seems to adopt a perspective that downplays any personal points, as if they are irrelevant in the moment they are turned into fiction.

Atonement is also Briony’s journey for forgiveness, and we learn that the crime she commits is failing to having doubts. The popular maxim that all certainty is unwise proved right for her, but she was just a girl, and perhaps not to be blamed with so much severity. However, she cannot forgive herself; she was inevitably guilty:

Yes, of course, she was a child in nineteen thirty-five. He had told himself, he and Cecilia had told each other, over and again. Yes, she was just a child. But not every child sends a man to prison with a lie. Not every child is so purposeful and malign, so consistent over time, never wavering, never doubted. (A 229)

Her novel may be a tribute to the couple in love she deprived of the right to happiness. Empathy has to be learned, and she learns it the hardest way. The Marshalls, on the other hand, do not feel guilty for what they did, nor do they need atonement. Despite the horrors of the war they live a life of luxury and ostentation, profiting from the public disgrace and condemning a young man to a life of misery, making him pay for a crime he has not perpetrated, and wrecking an entire family forever. The Marshalls live seemingly unaffected and untouched by their crime — remorseless.

In the same way that everyone was clueless of what the Marshalls had done, McEwan makes clear in *Atonement* that whether or not the story is real, what remains after all is only the published work, the printed words (and worlds) created by him and in some ways by Briony as well. In this context, it does not matter what “truly” happened. Apparently, both real life and “truth” have an expiration date for living beings: “due to the power of the written word it is, however, the version in print that will be remembered rather than the true reality” (Dahlbäck 13-14). Briony affirms that after the death of all those involved the truth will be as much of a story as her book. What really happened will be lost forever. In fact, what happened was already dissipated in the memories of all the participants of the story, as when Briony witnessed the incident by the fountain: the “damp patch on the gravel had evaporated ... there was nothing left of the dumb show ... beyond what survived in memory” (A 41). Her story, however, or rather her version of the facts, is what is going to be “immortalized” through words.

When Briony confesses that she changes the ending to please not only herself but also her reader, she is revealing the importance of the latter to the story and to literature in general. She wanted to grant Robbie and Cecilia what they could not have in life, but she also wanted to satisfy her reader, and her own thirst for fiction. By

highlighting the value of readers McEwan states how they play a crucial role. After all, stories are written for them somehow, and even the “most sophisticated reader holds the childlike desire to be told a story” (A 314). No matter how untraditional or innovative the narrative might be, it always carries the seed of the “good” and “old” way of making literature.

Atonement's end is provocative and destabilizing, forcing the reader to reconsider and resignify his/her strategies of interpretation used throughout the narrative, a narrative which gives the reader the power of simultaneity and chance. Simultaneity is derived from the events being narrated from different points of view, calling attention to the notion of perspectives — not only will each person have (literally) a different angle on viewing things, but also on how life is constructed from a series of possibilities and on actions taking place simultaneously. The novel also deals with chance and the randomness of life: if Briony hadn't seen the scene by the fountain, hadn't read the letter, hadn't witnessed the rape, she probably would not have committed her crime. McEwan offers insights into the complexities of human relations, exploiting the nuances of the underlying and latent dangers that pervade social life and the ills that inhabit every human being.

Briony is responsible for Robbie and Cecilia's permanent separation (and consequently their premature deaths) for Robbie went to war as a way of serving his sentence and Cecilia endured a hard life she would probably not have had to because of the severance with her family and her separation from Robbie. Does Briony finally achieve atonement? Is it possible to conquer atonement through fiction, or even in the realm of fiction? Even having the impression that she does not believe in her redemption, McEwan leaves such inquiries and their answers to the readers. They hold the ultimate (and personal) power to judge whether or not Briony accomplishes her life

duty. Perhaps even more intriguing than knowing the answers to these questions is to have had the chance to take part in Briony's journey through the world of fiction, where there is always room for the (im)possible.

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