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Real Life as a Play on Stage

A Study of Guilt and Shame in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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Abstract

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In the novel *Atonement* by Ian McEwan, questions of guilt, shame and redemption are in focus. The main character Briony Tallis is presented as making up for a crime by working on a novel for 59 years. In this essay the novel's proposition of atonement is discussed from three perspectives: Briony as the passive observer and the fictive author of the novel, as the actress in the drama of her life seeking atonement and as the actress in the drama of her own life as well as that of characters Cecilia, Robbie and the Marshalls. In contrast to a statement by McEwan that Briony has atoned for her sins through her efforts in writing the novel, my findings show that it is impossible to argue that fictional amendments qualify for atonement; nor is there any absolution from a religious point of view. On one hand she has matured and reached insight of her inner self, but she does not use her knowledge to make amends. She is more interested in keeping her highly appraised position as a famous writer. The novel's metafictional method complicates this interpretation. McEwan's argument, that history and autobiography are both narrated chosen memories under the same rules, is in this case not applicable since the fictive author neglects facts and transmutes reality into fiction. Briony is from a realistic point of view to be judged as morally flawed and not atoned. It appears that reconciliation with the 'self' or redemption are more suitable terms. Considering the characterization given by McEwan I find that Briony is faithful to her passion for storytelling but not taking responsibility for her crime. She rather changes the facts. As the fictive author of the novel she is not trustworthy when

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turning the full story into a mystery, not controllable, since she has decided to publish the novel after her death. Hereby she dictates the biographies of all involved.

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Real Life as a Play on Stage

1. Introduction

Ian McEwan was for a long time known as an author of psychologically claustrophobic and sensational novels, caricatured by the British Press as 'Ian Macabre' and the 'Clapham Shocker,' but in his later novel *Atonement* (2001) he focuses on the ethics of writing, morals and the making of fiction discussing questions of truth, self-knowledge and the making of fiction (Finney 68). The novel has interested a large group of scholars, who interpret the novel from various angles. Byron Williston discusses the main character's way to atonement, focusing on the process towards redemption from a modern philosophical and ethical point of view, while Brian Finney investigates McEwan's use of narrator and his metafictional technique. Peter Mathews concentrates his article on the notions of secret and mystery, especially connected to autobiographies. Elke D'Hoker writes about the ideas of confession and atonement from a religious standpoint. There are a number of academic articles, which proves that *Atonement* engages intellectuals interested in literary theory, psychology and philosophy. Moreover, the novel was on the best seller lists of the New York Times for a long time and many reviewers appraised the book as a masterpiece (Finney 69). The film adaptation was nominated for the 80th Academy Awards (www.Oscars.org).

Set in Surrey, the novel begins in 1935 with a family gathering in the Tallis family home. The novel is divided into three main parts, narrated from a third person view. Part two is a description

of the British soldiers' retreat to Dunkirk in 1940, while part three is about the main character Briony Tallis' life as a probationer nurse in London during the Blitz. The final coda is written in first person by Briony in 1999. In the coda Briony is about to celebrate her 77th birthday in Surrey together with her great grandchildren. She has finished her novel and describes her lifelong assessment writing the novel. She has been diagnosed with dementia and knows that she soon is going to lose her memory.

The novel's pivotal scene, which is crucial for the novel is witnessed by Briony from the window in her room and takes place on a hot summer day in 1935 at the fountain in the garden. Cecilia, Briony's sister, is about to fill water in a vase, a family treasure, from the fountain. Robbie, the charlady's son, working as a gardener during the summer, tries to help her. Unfortunately, the vase slips out of hands and two small pieces break loose and fall into the basin. Cecilia takes her blouse and skirt off and dives into the water to catch the vase. She puts her clothes on and leaves. Later on Cecilia and Robbie meet in the library and they kiss. They have known each other from childhood but now a love story is growing. The scene leads to a crime which eventually puts Robbie in prison. He is falsely accused by Briony. The Tallis' home is described as a smaller mansion with a park, a Greek temple, a pool and a fountain which is a replica of one of Bernini's in Rome. The reader gets the impression of an upper middle class family's aspiration of being something more than they are class wise. The house and the park seem to be in decay.

2. Thesis

It is tempting to read the novel as realistic but when Ian McEwan reveals that the whole novel is written by the main character questions arise. Who is to be trusted in the novel? Is there a true story? How does Briony overcome her guilt? Ian McEwan presents a case study on ethics and writing in the sense that the author's responsibility is discussed. The autobiography shows that it is a story, rewritten and revised, at least twice. This raises questions about consciousness, truth and trustworthiness. I claim that Briony's atonement is fictional. During the process towards atonement she gains an insight into the 'self' and the crime, but she does not learn from her experience and act accordingly. By characterization and structure McEwan shows that her world view is based on the idea of her being capable to control and direct her own life as well as others'. For Briony, the world appears as a theatre, in which she is both to be the observer and also the observed. The thesis will be discussed from three perspectives; Briony as the passive observer and the fictive author of the novel, as the actress in the drama of her life seeking atonement and as the director of her own life as well as Cecilia's, Robbie's and the Marshalls'. I will investigate this novel by using a narrative method which concentrates on the metafictional effects on Briony's atonement in opposition to Ian McEwan's historiographical view on autobiography and history. Historiographic metafiction refuses common-sense methods distinguishing historical facts from fiction (Hutcheon 93).

3. Briony the observing author

3.1. Seeing is knowing

At first the three parts are generally read as written in the tradition of realism. The second reading brings up questions about the moral implications of Briony's autobiography, created by many foreboding comments. Since she was thirteen years old she has dreamt of being a famous writer and her decision to write about the scene at the fountain was made the very same day and that is exactly what she does fifty-nine years later. "She could see the simple sentences, the accumulating telepathic symbols...She could write the scene three times over, from three points of view" (McEwan 40). The scene is a "tableau mounted for her alone, a special moral for her wrapped in mystery" (McEwan 39). Another scene that triggers her imagination occurs when she has told Lola about Robbie's behavior and the scandalous letter (McEwan 119). A third example of the dramatizing of reality is when she is imagining the twins drowned: "She thought of how she might describe it, the way they bobbed on the illuminated swell and how their hair spread like tendrils and their clothed bodies softly collided and drifted apart" (McEwan 156). The quotes indicate childishness and passion for storytelling. She does not understand the difference between reality and interpretation. Her observations and her imaginations are immediately thought of as an author's descriptions. It leads to something else than the fairytales she up to then has written and been so appraised for by her family. However, she does not understand what she has seen nor does she confide in anyone. A lonesome admired and pampered child without sincere bonding with her parents, her judgments are not questioned and she sticks to her versions convinced that she is right about Robbie as a threatening blackmailer. Briony is the fictive author and as such responsible for the ethics of her writings and her creation. Yet it is hard to judge her for not being able to know the difference between fiction and reality at the age of thirteen. Her

obsession with storytelling leads her to consider the story as the most important thing, convinced that what she sees she has fully understood.

3.2. Imagination and truth

Brian Finney, specialized in the field of narration techniques and its influences on interpretation, emphasizes in his article "Briony's Stand against Oblivion," the attempts "to project herself into thoughts and feelings of her characters, an act which we will see crucial for her search for forgiveness" (75). He connects the statement to the metafictional method: "What McEwan's foregrounding of the metafictional elements does, is to compel the reader to face the extent to which narration determines human life" (Finney 79). Consequently, McEwan challenges the reader to take into consideration what truth is, while letting Briony continue as the fictive author of the second part. McEwan transfers the question from private to public, questioning the British version of the 'heroes' from Dunkirk. The bombing, the extraordinary circumstances, the lack of food, the Germans attacking, the corpses and especially the feelings of uncertainty about who can be trusted are presented in all imaginable details. Robbie's story becomes all the more tragic. Not only is he falsely accused of rape, but he also has to suffer the ghastly everyday life at war. Briony's version shows that she is capable of imagining Robbie's life. In this case the imagination is a sign of her understanding Robbie's life as a catastrophe. The description of his sufferings is a token of imagination paired with empathy. The narration functions as the fictive author's, way of interpreting reality. McEwan thereby implicitly states that history and autobiography are products of chosen memories and also that historical events in the real world are turned into fiction. McEwan supports the historiographical standpoint and claims that metafictional stories of war are important for the understanding of the horrors.

If violence is simply there to excite, then it's merely pornographic. I think treating it seriously – which means – doing it without sentimentality – you're always going to bring to it a certain quality of investigation, so it's not only the violence you show, you're writing *about* violence. You're showing something that's certainly common in human nature. (Reynolds and Noakes 22)

McEwan hereby questions the definition of truth in relation to reality. What is the difference between writing history books and autobiographies? Both genres have a background of reality but where is the borderline surpassed when a life's story is to be treated as a documentary?

McEwan does not really solve the question; he indicates that there are many possible truths, for example controllable facts, emotional truths or legal truths and that Briony's will become one, if truth is dependent on verified facts. Here, McEwan refers to truth as a definition dependent on context and time and the phenomenon that memories, recalled at different times often are different. This is a pragmatic solution. Briony's version will strengthen her position as the well-known writer she is at 77 if adopting McEwan's idea about multiple truths. Briony as the fictive author however makes clear that she is aware of the fact that she has accused Robby falsely not taking responsibility for her action which once again shows that her fabricated memories are myths, psychologically essential for her self-esteem.

4. Briony the actress in the drama of her life, seeking atonement

4.1. Guilt and shame

Atonement is defined in dictionaries as satisfaction or reparation for a wrong or injury, where the deed for making up for the sin is crucial. In Christian theology, atonement falls under the doctrine concerning the reconciliation of God and humankind. A person can be absolved through

the life, suffering and death of Jesus. Another interpretation would be reconciliation, in the sense that acceptance, insight and knowledge about the wrongdoing are processed in order to be at ease with the fact if it cannot be forgiven by the victim, in other words self-forgiveness. Penance is a prerequisite of reconciliation (Merriam Webster).

Briony's feelings of guilt and shame of her crime are growing and at eighteen she expresses those and that it is time for her remorse to be processed. This is her first step on the road toward atonement. Byron Williston, known for his writing on ethics in different fields and from a philosophical point of view claims in his article "The importance of self-forgiveness," that this is a complicated process; the wrongdoer has to go through several stages until forgiveness or self-forgiveness is possible from a non-religious moral point of view (67). Williston suggests six stages: that the wrongdoer feels guilt, is ashamed of what she has done and takes responsibility for what she has done, is repentant, does her penance and tries to apologize or make amends (68). Williston argues that a person, morally ashamed, often leaves the communities where the crime is known, in order to stay away from negative reactions from friends and family. Trustworthiness is crucial and for a restoration of the self it is common that the wrongdoer tries to find another community in the process of building up the self-anew (Williston 69). "She was the one who has cut herself off from home. [...] For now it was necessary to stay away" (McEwan 279). During these years Briony subordinates herself to a hierarchy, which means denial of one's own will, blind obedience and hard work. (McEwan276). Like an actress Nurse Tallis diminishes herself and dedicates her life in order to follow the script that is her course books and the hospital rules. She acts her part of the drama about the good nurse independent of her parents' approval. The situation is metaphorically reminiscent of Briony's thumb-sized

figures in the nursery room (McEwan 5). To be one of all the anonymous nurses is an example of her desire to be one of a team, working for the good in spite of her feelings of being a person not very socially skilled. One of her mates with red hair and freckles reminds her of Lola and she makes her uncomfortable and at times Briony thinks that Sister Drummond is her only friend (McEwan 273-74). Besides, she is thinking of giving up her writing, her passion, to show her strong will to be an accepted member of her new community (McEwan 305). Obedience, adaptation and “[p]hysical discomfort helped close down Briony’s mental horizon” (McEwan 275). Sister Drummond has a power over her more than any mother over her child (McEwan 275). “There were no tutorials here, no one losing sleep over the precise course of her intellectual development” (McEwan 276). Briony’s identity is minimized to a name on a badge.

4.2 Restoration of the self

When in the process of building up a new sense of self-respect, Briony goes through an identity crisis, doubting her ability to act as a trustworthy and a morally reliable person. She is ashamed, full of self-denial and very dependent of others’ opinions. Her will to please is conspicuous and she denies herself independent opinions and is very close to self-loathing. However, she is helped by the rules and the strictness to keep her inner chaotic emotions of guilt in check and this is her way to get confirmation and be accepted in the new community. According to Williston she “goes into temporary moral isolation in order to recompose herself” (69). Gabriele Taylor, cited in Williston’s article argues that shame is “an emotion of self-protection... a feature that can propel the shamed wrongdoer to engage in actions that attempt to meet community’s challenge” (69). Briony takes interest in the wounded soldiers, and eventually she becomes aware of life as precarious and death as definite. “She learned a simple and obvious thing which she had always

known, and everyone knew: that a person is, among else, a material thing, easily torn, not easily mended” (McEwan 304). She comes to think of Robbie: “her secret torment and the public upheaval of war had always seemed separate worlds, but now she understood how the war might compound her crime.[...] If he didn’t come back...She longed to have someone else’s past, to be someone else...”(McEwan 288). These citations suggest that Briony’s thoughts of the victim are appearing clearly, that she is repentant and realizes that she has to take responsibility for what she has done. She has to work on her trustworthiness which can only be obtained through other people. Williston states: “The result is that our practical deliberations, and hence our actions, will interlock relatively smoothly with those of other members of the relevant moral community” (69). By denying her independent thinking and acting, she makes herself vulnerable and therefore she passively has to stick to the routines of the collective, like an actress the script.

4.3. Autonomy

A decisive step forward towards autonomy is taken when she is ordered to talk to the young French soldier, severely wounded and in a delirious state of mind. She comforts him and tells him her real name in spite of not being allowed to do it. She is at risk getting remarks from Sister Drummond but Briony understands the suffering of the young dying soldier and responds to him (McEwan 310). This is one of few moments in the novel when Briony as the fictive author, is shown, both to herself and the reader, to be compassionate meeting the needs of ‘the other’. This time, caring and love are expressed from a deep and reassuring feeling internalized in her own personality, compared to the feeling of love she expressed for Cecilia when Robbie was brought away (McEwan 185-186). Moreover, she has broken one of the crucial rules as a nurse. In

Williston's words a person "must retain enough autonomy to judge whether this regimen is working and when, if ever, it is complete. The idea, then, is that mature moral shame is justified if and only it strikes this sort of balances"(70).

4.4. Responsibility

The next stage in the process towards self-forgiveness and atonement is amends-making, the efforts to make up for the damage. The very personal and detailed letter from the publisher to whom Briony has sent her draft, leads her in that direction. The story, *Two Figures by a Fountain*, has been analyzed and reviewed and she gets advice on how to refine and develop her story. She is advised to write about how the scene might affect the lives of the figures, using a method grounded in a theory of consciousness to establish an intriguing plot. (McEwan 313-314). Briony's reaction to the letter shows that she is self-reflecting "*Might she come between them in some disastrous fashion? Yes, indeed. And having done so, might she obscure the fact concocting a slight, barely clever fiction and satisfy her vanity by sending it off to a magazine? [...]Everything she did not wish to confront was also missing in her novella*" (McEwan 320). In this moment of epiphany the old Briony understands her responsibility of writing as well as her responsibility in reality. The borderline between fiction and reality is clear to her. She now has got insight and in this respect she has matured but she will still be following a manuscript, which is recommendations in the letter, although more independently.

According to Williston's arguments, Briony does not dive into self-loathing nor does she completely consider herself unable to be a better person. Confronted with Robbie, she is accused of being a liar and "she even thought of defending herself" (73). This is another, stronger sign of

autonomy. On the other hand she expresses that her writing of the novel has been a fifty-nine year-assignment which can be seen as her penance together with the hard work in the ward, when young. Briony expresses her apologies at the meeting with Cecilia and Robbie (McEwan 348). Up to this point Williston's arguments are reasonable; however he obviously is grounding his reasoning on a reading of the novel as a real story about a real person. So far, it is easy to believe that it is a true confession until McEwan reveals that Briony is a metafictional narrator, which makes the apology completely fictitious. Is there any possibility for her to reach atonement? The question is put by the old Briony herself: "The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she also is God?" (McEwan 371).

4.5. Forgiveness and making amends

In the end Briony seems to be at ease with herself and her claim that she is rendering both herself as well as Robbie and Cecilia eternal life as characters in a novel seems to be her ultimate effort to make up for the crime and give the novel a happy ending. The crucial question remains to be answered: what does moral psychology says about atonement in this case and how does McEwan reason? Briony can be judged as a coward, slipping away from her responsibility to make up for her crime, but on the other hand, Cecilia and Robbie are both dead and the possibility to be forgiven is out of the question. In a foreboding note it is mentioned that "[s]he would be well aware of the extent of her self-mythologizing, and she gave her account of self-mocking, or mock-heroic tone" (McEwan 41).

Robin Dillon, quoted in Williston's article, argues that "[o]ne can both value oneself enough to carry on with one's life and yet rightly carry a burden of guilt and shame to one's grave.[...]

Self-forgiveness does not require extinguishing self-reproach, for it is not really about the presence or absence of negative feeling and judgments; it's about their power" (Williston 73). In an interview Ian McEwan declared his idea about the impossibility of self-knowledge referring to Briony as redeemed: "She will not let herself forget-and this is her atonement" (Groes ed.129). McEwan's statement points to an understanding of atonement as an act of penance, but he actually neglects the implicit demands of making amends to be atoned. On one hand the fictive author, Briony, has gained a lot of knowledge about herself and has considered herself unforgivable. As the fictive author, she is entitled to make a fictional apology, while McEwan as the real author seems to refer to human behavior in general and judge her atonement pragmatically.

Considering the novel as a confession of a crime, it is questionable if Briony's confession is trustworthy. The interpretation of the novel thereby depends on an assumption that there is a reality, against which to correlate ideas of trustworthiness. Opposed to McEwan, Elke D'Hoker characterizes literary confessions as desires for truth and that readers of autobiographies want to witness the revelation of the inner self (32). D'Hoker, professor at a Catholic university, argues that a literary confession is not equivalent to being absolved. She suggests the term reconciliation as a proper term for Briony's process:

This secular sense of atonement, a combination of authority and acceptance, might provide an answer besetting literary confessions. Being created in the slow process of writing, the truth of

confession seems to involve an authoritative acknowledgement of this truth as *mine* after which, in the words of Foe, the confessant should “forever after be content to hold [his/her] peace”. (42) In some way Briony has revealed her inner self leaving the manuscript for a moment acting more autonomously. She admits her fictionalized reality with the intention to make up for the crime she has committed, but she is also aware of the confession or the amends as constructions. Her attempt seems to satisfy her emotionally for having tried to atone for her sins and according to my interpretation she has forgiven herself. Nonetheless she continues and resumes her acting. The committed crime can be considered as understandable and forgivable because she was immature and very young. She was at that time convinced that her judgment of Robbie’s personality was correct. None of the adults spoke their minds during the interrogation, which can be seen and understood as support. To her seeing was equivalent to knowing which made the character at that time even more lonely and forlorn; a pawn in the game for her obsession with storytelling. Here, McEwan shows himself indirectly sympathizing with his character, the fictive author, when depicting her as a human being with understandable shortcomings.

5. Briony as director

5.1. Responsibility and control

The novel opens with Briony planning the performance of her play *The Trials of Arabella* in honor of Leon’s homecoming. The play is didactic in the sense that she declares her intention to keep Leon away from girlfriends not worthy of him, leading him to the right wife by Arabella’s example. (McEwan 4). It is a romantic fairytale with a happy ending and in her view her words are magic, immediately transferable into the minds of the viewer (McEwan 37). In this respect

she is not yet aware of the communication process as complex. When Lola manipulates her to get the chance to play the leading part, Briony reacts by running away, punishing the nettles in the garden, utterly disturbed by Lola's confidence and ladylike apparition (McEwan 74). Briony had imagined herself as queen of the play as well as its director and author. Another example of her need for control is her idea of herself as a responsible and caring person and as such obligated to take care of Cecilia and Lola by protecting them from Robbie. The other side of the coin is told in other chapters from the others' views of events. The reader knows and understands more about Briony than she does herself. She is precocious and romantic and judges from what she has learned from fiction. Moreover, she has not yet encountered the realm of sexuality, other than understanding the signs as violence which directs the lives of Cecilia and Robbie into a disaster (McEwan 138). The raped Lola recovers and does not speak her mind. She is flattered by Marshall and when she is a grown-up they marry, which is a subtle indication of their attraction to each other (McEwan 60-62).

5.2. Harmony at risk

Later in the novel the old Briony is looking out of another window, a cab's, on her way to The War Memorial Museum to bring all her research material back since the novel now is completed on her 77th birthday. She happens to see Lola and Marshall. Also this time Lola's appearance is stunning. She notices a good-looking woman with too much make-up, high-heeled shoes and dressed in an expensive fur. "This...was the side on which her side was buttered.[...] But there was also something comic about her – or was I clutching a straw?" (McEwan 58). Briony has not let her negative feelings about Lola go and her remarks are done in a sour tone. Considering that

it is the fictive author saying this in first person one can ponder if she is revealing her inner thoughts. She has not overcome her antagonism towards Lola. Nor has she done so with Marshall, inviting to an interpretation of him as the rapist. "Perhaps he's spent a lifetime making amends. Or perhaps he just swept onwards without a thought to live the life that was always his" (McEwan 357-358). It is possible to argue that Briony is not entirely the only one guilty; has she cowardly let the knowledge remain in the shadows? In that case, what are her reasons? It may have to do with her decision to publish her novel when she and the Marshalls are dead. She acts as a director of her and the Marshalls' lives because "[t]hey [Marshalls] could ruin a publishing house with ease from their current accounts" (McEwan 370). Her own career might be destroyed and she is more concerned with her own well-being and shows that she has obeyed unwritten conventional rules indicating that she still has a romantic view of the world as harmonious and organized, if not disturbed.

5.3. Secrets and mystery

Briony accused Robbie of rape, but her comments on Marshall suggests that she knows that he is the guilty one. The fellow criminals keep their secrets which eventually become *the real truth* that is to say the fact. Another interpretation suggests that Lola was too young to dare to admit that she liked the secret meeting with Marshall in the dark garden and that there was no rape at all. In that case the crime becomes even more complicated. In the article "The impression of a deeper darkness" Peter Mathews, a scholar who has researched the writing of autobiographies especially, discusses the meanings of secret and mystery in *Atonement*, arguing for its importance to understand the interpretation of Briony's way of solving the problematic question

of her guilt and her possibility to reach redemption. A secret is something no one knows about except for the one holding the secret. Secrets are metaphorically hidden like the charms under the floorboard. Consequently, there are no secrets since there are no signs of them. Mathews' opinion is that this paradox creates ambiguity and is challenging for those who want to know all about Briony to be able to decide if she has atoned for the crime or not (152). McEwan refers to real life, where people can cast the first stone without really knowing all about a person.

Humankind often stands in front of a mystery. This is the case if the novel is read and interpreted from a realistic point of view. But Briony is the author of fiction and cannot be judged as if she were a real person. Briony's passion for mystery is what makes the novel anything but simply realistic. A mystery is defined by Mathews as something we know something about but the truth is obscured (149). The publication of the novel when she and her assumed fellow criminals are dead will turn her confession and Lola's silence into a mystery. McEwan is playing with his readers and the challenge, according to Mathews, is to understand the ambiguity, challenging the conventional thinking of guilt, shame and atonement, make us understand that the readers are captured in conventions eager to find the full truth to be able to moralize (Mathews 157). Mathews has a point explaining the mechanisms of mystery in the novel but according to my analysis he runs the fictive author's way, only explaining how the deeper secrets work. He does not really take a stand in the question if Briony's atonement is possible or not. He actually argues along the same lines as do the fictive author. McEwan confuses his readers who doubt the trustworthiness of Briony's ability to take responsibility for what really happened. She has, on some occasions, showed empathy and acted autonomously

from a moral point of view. On the other hand, by postponing the publishing of the novel until she and the Marshalls are dead, she has not made the amends necessary to reach atonement. Another interesting passage in the coda occurs when Briony explains the happy ending. She assumes that a tragic ending would bereave the reader of satisfaction. Once again, she acts as a didactic director admitting that she has transformed reality but she also becomes a victim of her own needs of confirmation and applauses (McEwan 371). The purpose is the same as with *The Trials of Arabella*. At this point the old Briony is fully aware of her transmutation of reality in the novel, giving the following reason “I no longer possess the courage of my pessimism. When I’m dead, and the Marshalls are dead, and the novel is finally published, we will only exist as inventions. No one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel” (McEwan 371). With this said it is obvious that McEwan suggests that an autobiography and a novel are forms obeying the same prerequisites, but they do not. An autobiographer and a memoirist always have a contract with the reader based on honesty: they are supposed to retell a real memory, even if that memory can shift by time. The old Briony tells a lie because at this point she knows the difference between reality and fiction.

6. Trustworthiness

Ian McEwan has with this fascinating and intriguing novel challenged his readers with the question about Briony’s atonement as believable. According to Byron Williston, Briony has fulfilled the different steps towards self-forgiveness and redemption. His arguments are based on a reading of the novel in the realistic tradition which means that he has actually neglected the

impact of the metafictional structure of the novel. Brian Finney, on the other hand, argues that a fictional confession and apology do not qualify for atonement but is a token of Briony making a literary attempt to amend and apologize for the damage she caused by her misinterpretation of the two most important scenes; at the fountain and when she is finding Lola raped. Finney emphasizes the importance of the metafictional narrative and that history as well as autobiographies consists of narrated chosen memories. Consequently, Finney states that there are many truths and by making Briony the fictive narrator it is impossible to interpret the novel entirely as realistic and judged from a realistic point of view. Furthermore, he claims that Briony, the fictive narrator, invites the reader to question her as a morally decent character. Peter Mathews is seeking a 'deeper darkness' arguing that the passion for secrets and mysteries is a theme which in some parts explain and make Briony's autobiography trustworthy because the crime will turn from being a secret into mystery and there is no one left to verify the truth, a very pragmatic standpoint. Elke D'Hoker does not affirm the interpretation of Briony's confession as a means to reach atonement, since it is lacking the religious aspect, but she states that Briony's reconciliation with herself is to be trusted.

The atonement is without doubt fictional in spite of her fulfilling the different stages in the process towards redemption but Ian McEwan as the real author argues that the attempt is all. I reject the idea since it is shown that Briony is fully aware of her guilt, her responsibility as an author and her transmutation of reality into fiction. This knowledge is not used to make amends or to restore her by honest writing about the truth of what really happened. In that case it had been a reliable confession according to Elke D'Hoker's statement.

Briony's characterization of herself supports the idea that her world views are almost the same at thirteen as they are at seventy-seven. In some respect she has matured and developed empathy and compassion, shown for instance in the meeting with the French soldier and in the passage where she is concerned about Robbie at war. On the other hand, she has not questioned her interpretations of the events she witnessed at the age of thirteen. A crucial example is the rape: it might not even have happened. She overcomes her guilt by showing empathy, using her imagination to give Cecilia and Robbie a future. Her arguments are selfish and she manipulates reality with the intention to remain a highly respected and appraised author but she still does not challenge the reputation of Lola's risking her own future. Her obsession with storytelling is persistent and her legacy, the autobiography, consists of fictionalized memories. Her fear of not living in a harmonious and organized world is lasting and that makes her decide the publication date of the novel. Secrets and mysteries are conspicuous features and she assumes that she, through the decision mentioned, will reach trustworthiness when presenting the novel as the one and only real truth after her death.

Briony, as the fictive author, depicts herself in the coda as a partly restored person. She has given Cecilia and Robbie eternal life, which she as a goddess and director is entitled to do since she is the fictive author and thus almighty. In that sense she becomes trustworthy, if regarding literature in general as trustworthy as such. The reader can understand her decisions which appear logic to the fictive character as characterized by McEwan, even if it is tempting to judge her as morally flawed.

7. Conclusions

In the process toward atonement Briony has gone through the stages of guilt, shame, repentance and penance but it is only possible to agree with Williston's statement that Briony is atoned, if it is based on the novel read from an entirely realistic view point. Opposed to McEwan, I argue that fictional amendments do not qualify for atonement nor is a religious absolution possible in agreement with D'Hoker's argumentation. From one perspective Peter Mathews has a point when interpreting Briony as redeemed in the future when she has lost her memory, caused by dementia but I suggest redemption as a better term, meaning that a person is freed from consequences of sins when not remembering them. Actually, Mathews' arguments fall into the same category as do McEwan's because they are arguing from a perspective based on a historiographical view.

The portrait of the fictive author's character, Briony, is trustworthy in the sense that she is living her life according to the traits McEwan has given her. From start to end the goals are to write a good story and be acknowledged as an author. These ideas are so important that facts are abused and fiction becomes her reality. Although Briony reaches a matured insight into her inner self, she does not use the knowledge to make amends or to restore herself by honest writing about the truth of what really happened. The storytelling takes over and for her the novel becomes an emotional truth and a token of self-forgiveness. She has suffered and tried to do her best from a very selfish perspective. Afraid of challenging the conventions, she prefers reality in transmuted form, fiction. Briony does not change in that respect. Her arguments are based on what she has seen and still believes is right, and she has not questioned her memories of the events she is writing about. Her arguments are based on unconscious assumptions and she acts accordingly,

sparing herself and her assumed fellow criminals the shame. Briony is the fictive author and as such not reliable since she is the one most interested in presenting the story to her advantage. Reading the novel from a realistic point of view, Briony is interpreted as an unreliable character, but reading the novel knowing that it is a fictional confession, Briony seems to be faithful to her most important mainspring, the storytelling, although deceitful. In this case I fully agree with Brian Finney's interpretation of the importance of the different layers in the novel. By letting Briony transform reality into fiction, McEwan has pointed out the difficulties to decide what truth and reality means. The second part about Robbie is probably more likely to be believed trustworthy because it has the form of a documentary story with a historical background. Briony is however, the fictive author to that part as well. By contrasting these two parts McEwan states that historical writing and autobiographies play in the same division. All stories are narrated from a chosen perspective but in this case McEwan presupposes a background of reality which is impossible since Briony is the fictive author. Her legacy, the novel, becomes her testimony and since she turns all her secrets into a not controllable mystery, she has acted as a director and decided how her own as well as Cecilia's, Robbie's and the Marshalls' lives will be remembered. Driven by her ambition to stay on top as a highly appreciated author, selfishness directs her compass making her unable to atone for her sins. The touchstones in Briony's life were possible to overcome, using the same technique as she used in *The Trials of Arabella*, fiction. The novel closes with two sentimental characters finding their way from happiness to despair and through penance to reconciliation.

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