Negotiating metafictional aspects of postmodern narrative in Ian McEwan's atonement

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Abstract

Atonement has been regarded as McEwan's best demonstration of his protracted reflections on the form of the English novel, and his lengthy negotiations on the traditions of modern English fiction writing and criticism passed down from their predecessors. In that order, some might assume that McEwan's Atonement could be associated both with modernism and postmodernism. Some even go further to claim that the novel along with its relation to modernism and postmodernism eventually lands with realism. Such a claim is based on the assumption that the novel resists postmodernism's moral fickleness and pits against it a tradition of English empiricism. On the other hand, the current paper intends to argue otherwise; that is, to argue in favor of postmodern metafictional narrative in Atonement. A claim that could feasibly be supported by—but yet to be consolidated in the current research—the thoughts of some writers like Wood who suggest that the novel throughout its narrative events, but more particularly with its ending, could very possibly be perceived as a proper postmodern artifact, wearing its doubts on its sleeve, on the outside, as the Pompidou does its escalators.

*Keywords***:** Postmodern Narrative; Fact and Fiction; Intertextuality; Self; Consciousness; Morality; Historical Material

1. Introduction to the Objective and Purpose of the Study

This study aims at addressing the metafictional narrative aspects of McEwan's Atonement, and examine how the novel demonstrates postmodern metafictional aspects in its narrative structure such as historiography, intertextuality, the blending of fact and fiction, morality, and self-consciousness.

2. Methodology of the Study

The current research study will opt for a critical analytical approach in tracing and analyzing the narrative structure of *Atonement*. Due to the fact that the novel has prolifically been studied from different perspectives, and is only ostensibly alluded to in terms of postmodern metafictional aspects, it is assumed that settling on such approach is considerably convincing. Therefore, the text of the novel

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as a whole is going to be looked at and examined to arrive at a concluding argument of whether or not the narrative of the novel demonstrates certain postmodern metafictional aspects.

3. Literature Review

McEwan's *Atonement* has been studied as an example of a modern narrative text. There have also been certain hesitating attempts indicating that the novel demonstrates both modern and postmodern narrative fictional characteristics. Yet, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, there has been no study that could determinately approach the novel as a postmodern text, let alone investigate its postmodern metafictional characteristics.

In that respect, a study titled "The Sin of Ian McEwan's Fictive Atonement: Reading his Later Novels," has dealt with *Atonement* along with other novels. It has investigated the philosophic as well as literary characteristics of Ian McEwan's later novels. It intended to transfigure McEwan's imaginative and creative virtuosity for otherwise disappointed Christian readers, precisely by envisioning his novels in the dark light of their redemptive deficit," (Shah, 2009, p. 38).

Another study titled "Briony's Stand against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's 'Atonement'", the narrative perspective of the novel under study has been examined, (Finney, 2004, p. 69). According to this study, *Atonement* is a novel that is mainly concerned with the making of fiction throughout its narrative structure. Finney thus reads the novel as a demonstration of a realist as well as modernist narrative text.

A further study conducted by D'Angelo has argued that *Atonement* is a novel that is concerned with the reading of fiction. This study arrives at the conclusion that though the novel shows modernist narrative elements, it also addresses its readers "through a process of interplay between traditional narrative devices and the novel's self-conscious disruption of such devices at key moments in the text; readers' responses at these moments in turn shape their interpretations," (D'Angelo, 2009, pp. 90-92).

In an essay written by Heta Pyrohnen, the writer probes the intertexts of *Atonement*, in particular the links it shares with E.A. Poe's "The Purloined Letter." By drawing on the psychoanalytical context of Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" the essay shows how the theft of a letter affects the novel's protagonist-narrator's writing, leading to a compulsive attempt to hide her shame, (Pyrhonen, 2012, p. 104).

A different study conducted by Behrman argues that McEwan imbues his work with references to the literary endeavors of his predecessors. This study further looks into how the novelist creates a literary landscape haunted by the specters of famed characters from earlier fictional realm, (Behrman, 2010, p. 454).

In a book written by Julie Ellam, the writer analyses the structure, main themes and characterization of the novel, to unravel its complexity and to explore the reasons behind its popularity. The use of metaphors and narrative devices are similarly examined so that his technical skill can be discussed in more detail. In addition, references are made to its literary quality and this includes an appreciation of the influences of realism, modernism and postmodernism, (Ellam, 2009, p. 21).

Another book edited by Sebastian Groes, was written on Ian McEwan as a British novelist. The book introduces Ian McEwan as one of the greatest British novelists of his time. Then, it highlights certain issues with relation to McEwan's novel *Atonement* such as plagiarism, and the ethics of fiction. The book also investigates the novel as a modernist text, (Groes, 2013).

A further book titled Contemporary British Novelists: Ian McEwan written by Dominic Head has addressed the journey of writing in the novel. The book, among other things, deals with the novel as

"the creative equivalent or counterpart of narrative ethics, making explicit an intellectual journey that governs McEwan's career," (Head, 2007, p. 24).

Another research paper written on Atonement has discussed the issues of guilt and shame in the novel. The study concludes that though Briony has gone through the stages of guilt, shame, repentance and penance, fictional amendments do not qualify for atonement nor is a religious absolution possible in agreement with D'Hoker's argumentation, (Stenport, 2012, p. 20).

Furthermore, *Atonement* is assumed to have been interspersed with a variety of paratexts that include title, title page and intertitles. A related study by Weilong Huang has argued that such paratexts greatly facilitate the presentation of narrative structure, narrative theme and narrative technique in the text, and can be regarded a medium for the exchange between the author and the reader (Landesman, 2007). The study concludes that paratexts of *Atonement* consist of title, title page, intertitles, which are considered only as a marginal text, and that the novel's title coincides with and deepens the text's narrative structure and narrative theme, (Huang, 2017, p. 639).

Scholars and writers have also addressed many more issues in McEwan's *Atonement* such as symbols, the making of fiction, narration and historiography, the representation of political context, (ir) rationalism, intertextuality, intertextual echoes, and the concepts of continuity and change.

4. Introducing the Novelist and his Novel: *Atonement*

Across his fictional writings, McEwan apparently exhibits a deep interest in the nature of relationship between what is real and what is fantasy, between what is historical and what is fictitious. Likewise, McEwan would demonstrate a tendency and practice of intertextuality in his fictional writings. Such inclination in writing would be assumed to be closely connected with certain metafictional writing techniques of postmodernism.

From the start of his literary career, Ian McEwan has been recognized as a new and promisingly rising literary talent as he earned the Somerset Maugham Award with the publication of his first fictional work called *First Love*, *Last Rites* (1975), which is a collection of short stories. Three years later, he has published another collection of short stories entitled *In Between the Sheets*, which has also been critically acclaimed and warmly welcomed, (Ellam, 2009, p. 1).

When McEwan published *The Child in Time* 1987, it was critically acclaimed as his most aspiring and motivational book. It was assessed as the most substantially fulfilling and flawless—in content and form—fictional work that is also his first writing that provides its readers with a confident and constructive outlook on human capabilities. However, by the publication of *Atonement*, the novel has overwhelmingly overshadowed all other fictional writings of McEwan becoming his best and most appealing fictional work to date. The novel was also warmly welcomed by reviewers, the press, and other prominent figures such as Frank Kermode who rated it as "easily his finest," (*qtd. in. Head* 156).

In view of that, it is obvious that long before the writing and publication of *Atonement* in 2001, Ian McEwan's fictional writing has been much admired and critically appraised; however, *Atonement* is singled out as McEwan's magnum opus so far. It is usually seen as an overstated living proof to the uniqueness of his literary finesse and the infrequency of his equivalent in the British literary arena.

Looking at the overall form and unity of *Atonement*, it could initially be argued that both the novel's tone as well as style get more and more momentous as its narrative resists a full reader's engagement. It is argued that the novel holds the reader back as "the writing also shares the almost stilted diction of McEwan's novel *Atonement*, a diction used with immense care to create distance and irony, without creating too much of either," (Ellam, 2009, p. 21). It neither reveals enough, nor does it hold much of its air, thus getting the reader considerably involved but significantly under control. The

novel invites the attention and heed of its readers, but simultaneously resists being too accessible or becoming conventionally mainstream.

Growing and cultivating a passion on and interest in science, in an essay McEwan wrote in 2006, he argues on the appeals and "the pleasures it is possible to take in the reading of science writing and its search for truth," (McEwan, A Parallel Tradition , 2006, p. n.p.). Such an interest in science and science writing would apparently indicate to, according to Julie Ellam, the influences of postmodernism, and possibly manifest certain reservations McEwan holds about getting categorized within any specific or individual tradition, movement, or inclination.

In that regard, it could be observed how postmodern ideas showcase the difficulty, unfeasibility, and intricacy of outright truth and knowing about it. This is so because postmodern ideas have undermined the traditional sets of beliefs, concepts, and definitions usually referred to for getting whole meanings and absolute truths of God, man, and life in its entirety. In addition, it is almost unanimous in the midst of literary figures that McEwan's *Atonement* refers to or brings to light—be it implicitly—certain truths of history, which could as well be an indication of a postmodern impact.

McEwan himself is reported to have asked his readers "to adopt a position that both accepts and refuses the absolute," (Ellam, 2009, p. 59). Thus, with a close reading of the text in *Atonement*, it could be observed that the novel's narrative provides its readers with a particularly crucial strategy to recognize truth and get to it; a strategy that both determines the need for ethics and to discover them event if they are no more absolute.

In *Atonement*, readers could trace the efforts paid to interrogate the divide and detachment between fiction and fact, and simultaneously the determination to manifest the damage a lie could generate. Almost from the beginning of the novel, more precisely in its first chapter, McEwan elaborates on the necessity of truth while at the same time doubtfully examines postmodern relativism. Through Briony and her equivocally vague attachment to her own account of reality and truth, the novel manifestly delineates the contingency of both truth and lies, fact and fiction.

In a culture where absolute meanings and outright truths are contrastingly reduced, the novelist could skillfully highlight the necessity of moral responsibility and obligation demonstrating that truth continues to be meaningfully valuable, is worth finding, and is worth abiding by, nonetheless. Although postmodern perception doubts the notion of one absolute reality and one absolute truth thus obscuring precincts between fact and fiction, McEwan still manages, according to Ellam, in *Ian McEwan's Atonement 2009*, by using "Briony's lie and her ambivalent relationship to versions of truth to demonstrate the necessity of ethics," (60).

Accordingly, *Atonement*, both in its narrative text, and in its adoption as a movie, seems to deliberately challenge the traditional perception of heroism. The novel presents Robbie as a hero; nevertheless, he is a hero who gets defeated and his audience get no solace as the scenes of defeat are gory and eventually inefficient and futile. Void of and lacking in patriotism and loyalty, McEwan has been the subject of criticism for presenting this dangerously unwarranted phase in the history of Britain as such. Yet, those who have frowned on of the novel and its movie adoption earlier have found it problematic to do so when perceiving the novel and its movie adoption as an attack on and disapproval of devastation and ruin.

5. Discussing Postmodern Rhetoric in *Atonement*

In terms of time and sequence, postmodernism would be perceived as the style of art and narrative writing that comes after modernism. Postmodern tradition is mostly assumed to denounce established convictions and absolute truths. The other modes or styles of art like Leavisite tradition, for instance, advances forward a set of principles and views about morality, absolute truths, and reality. Such

postmodern attitude is based on the assumption that it is difficult to discern reality without mediation, and to validate common universal morality. The postmodern argument carries on stating that the human need for power, discipline, and order were the stimulating factors behind presenting convictions and interpretations to the claim of absolute truths and unmediated reality.

As a consequence, postmodernism deprecates the different traditional systems and discourses of knowledge accusing them of being over simplifications that do the job of subduing dissent and blocking difference. It objects to Enlightenment, adherence to science, and the efforts to govern social life arguing that any sort of art that adopts such path ends up claiming to possess the privilege to absolute truths and unmediated realities. Rather, postmodernism offers a paradigm of questioning and doubts to such established truths and unmediated realities.

In view of that, *Atonement* could thus be possibly assumed to be a postmodern novel as well. It was published after modernism, and is said to have criticized certain celebrated modern notions as well. It is even argued by some writers and critics that *Atonement* could assumingly be stretching through both modernism and postmodernism:

In 1935 the West was suffering from a collective myopia in the face of the rise of fascism, which only a minority on the left seemed prepared to confront. Robbie is typical of the collective delusion at that time with his fantasies of a future life spent as a family doctor and casual reader. The West is about to be hurled into a war that will usher in a radically different, postmodern era to which this narrative, completed in 1999, belongs. (Finney, 2004, p. 77)

In the context of *Atonement*'s narrative, it could be observed that questioning and doubts are hovering all around "the truth of Briony's accounts" for a case in point, (Groes, 2013, p. 73). In addition, it could be noticed that Briony's initial attempts at writing have been with doubts and questioning as well: "Your most sophisticated readers might well be up on the latest Bergsonian theories of consciousness, but I'm sure they retain a childlike desire to be told a story, to be held in suspense, to know what happens," (McEwan, Atonement: A Novel, 2001, p. 314).

In view of that, *Atonement* has been regarded as McEwan's best demonstration of his protracted reflections on the form of the English novel, and his lengthy negotiations on the traditions of modern English fiction writing and criticism passed down from their predecessors. In its treatment and address of such a major theme as guilt and atonement, the novel takes in and extends the tradition of certain great predecessor English fiction writers such as Jane Austen, E. M. Forster, F. R. Leavis, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, Rosamund Lehmann, and Elizabeth Browen.

Atonement could then be noticeably argued to have shared with those fictional texts the quality of gravely thoughtful intentions and ironic handling in approaching this subject. Therefore, Dominic Head in *Contemporary British Novelists: Ian McEwan 2007*, asserts that "the theme of guilt and atonement is inextricably linked to an investigation of the writer's authority, a process of self-critique conducted through the creation of the writing persona Briony Tallis," (156).

Moreover, the theme of guilt and atonement is assumed to be relevant at both the public level and the private level. Such a connection between the public sphere and the private sphere turns out, over and over again, to be quite a common theme with considerable familiarity with the composition of fiction. It has thus been treated with relation to its historical background.

Therefore, it could be seen how McEwan follows a diverse viewpoint in depicting the withdrawal to Dunkirk in *The Ploughman's Lunch* as a tormenting tribulation despite being a historical event that is supposed to be perceived patriotically as a rescue mission for heroic magnitudes, thus adopting an unfamiliar perception. Conversely though, the novel should not be mistakably perceived to be condemning heroism, rather, it is more concerned with exposing the awfulness and revulsions of death and its dismemberment consequences. As a result, McEwan is viewed to be questioning history

through a duality of focus as he "is concerned with how national myths are inscribed, but also with the construction of a literary tradition," (Head, 2007, p. 156).

As a consequence, though some might assume that McEwan's *Atonement* could be associated both with modernism and postmodernism, and some others even go further to claim that the novel along with its relation to modernism and postmodernism eventually lands with realism. Such a claim is based on the assumption that the novel resists postmodernism's moral fickleness and "pits against it a tradition of English empiricism," (Groes, 2013, p. 70). However, writers like Wood suggest that the novel throughout its narrative events, but more particularly with its ending, could very possibly be perceived as "a proper postmodern artifact, wearing its doubts on its sleeve, on the outside, as the Pompidou does its escalators," (Wood, 2002, p. n.p.).

It will, therefore, be argued how *Atonement* provides us with further hints to postmodern metafictional narratives. In the epilogue of the novel, for instance, for the first time Briony speaks to the readers in first person constructing an argument that very feasibly appears to test what is known as independent reality, which is eventually a postmodern attitude: "When I am dead, and the Marshalls are dead, and the novel is finally published, we will only exist as my inventions' (McEwan, Atonement: A Novel, 2001, p. 371). It is apparent that this statement celebrates a sense of fragmentation and the relativism of morality. And by the conclusion of the novel not only the novel's narrator and main character, but also its readers seem to be "profoundly troubled by the uncertainties we face," (Groes, 2013, p. 76).

6. Moral Responsibility

In terms of the philosophy of self and morality, *Atonement* is argued to be associated with "the hue of postmodern relativism, especially insofar as it establishes the constructed nature of the dramatized self in the novel," (*qtd. in.* Head 14). In addition to the significance dedicated to negotiation, arbitrariness, and lived experiences, the novel is observed to attain that self and moral dimension through the exploration of its characters, predicaments, and moral activities as shown in its narratives.

In its attempts to stress on the value of understanding the self, *Atonement* in a way or another embarks with much concern on a journey of identity expedition and pursuit, which is eventually deemed "to be a democratic postmodern tendency," (Head, 2007, p. 14). The novel's discovery and creation of the self contributes, in Head's words, to a "postmodern emphasis on argument and discourse in social production, as societies are freed from the totalizing master narratives of modernity," (*ibid*).

Yet, it remains obvious that McEwan's *Atonement* in its narrative text is more dominantly concerned with posing and contending moral enquiries, unavoidably offering no resolutions or ready answers for them though. In the novel, what is more attainably perceived is the novel's aggravations for much needed considerations over accountable morality that might turn out to be twisting and convoluted, and not valuably worthwhile.

It is thus worth noting in terms of the motivating association between literature and history to discern an existing disparity not only between McEwan and Murdoch, but also between McEwan and some others such as Connolly in this regard. Pledging more philosophical makings to Murdoch's conventions, this disproportionate distinction is further consolidated, surprisingly though:

Within his talent it is the duty of a writer to devote his energy to the search for truth, the truth that is always being clouded over by romantic word and ideas or obscured by actions and motives dictated by interest and fear. In the love of truth which leads to a knowledge of it lies not only the hope of humanity but its safety. (Connolly, 2002, p. 141)

Therefore, the novel could be seen as an illustration of why the pursuit for truth, although persists to be admirable and essential, is destined to eventually be fruitless. As mentioned earlier, the novel does not offer resolutions for the moral questions it poses, and that is why it is deeply undecided and uncertain in forming any conclusions about what could be deemed as appropriately responsible morality and moral conduct. In his efforts to pursuit truth and establish it in his text, *Atonement* is assumingly perceived to be more concerned with questioning the morality of the author figure of its novelist.

7. Duality of Consciousness

Excluding action along with a focus on the representation of consciousness would apparently be assumed, in Groes' words, as a postmodern technique. However, it is also assumed that observing "passively the flow of a mind at work," does not satisfy readers because they "desperately want to know what has happened," (Groes, 2013, p. 75). Besides, it becomes apparent that Briony "was wrong when she argued that there need not be a moral," (*ibid*).

However, there are some reviewers who have appreciated the disconcerting suggestions of the novel's beginning, but got disenchanted by its ending calling it tricky. For those and others like them doubting the novel's postmodern metafictional narrative Finney indicates that postmodern narrative aspects could be discerned in the novel through Briony's self-conscious narration and "the novel's obtrusive intertextuality," (*qtd. in. Groes* 77). The argument goes further stating that self-consciousness as a literary element is a key concern in *Atonement*. The novel obviously denies its readers the luxuries of classic realist story:

To draw attention to the narrative process is not an act of self-indulgence on the part of the metafictional novelist . . . It is central to the book's concerns … [and when] novelists force us to understand the constructed nature of their characters, they invite us simultaneously to reflect on the way subjectivity is similarly constructed in the non-fictional world we inhabit . . . The use of metafiction in the book serves to undermine the naturalization of social and economic inequalities that especially characterized British society in the 1930s. (*Emphasis added*. Finney 76)

The argument above attempts to inform us that it is through the different narrative processes exposed by Briony to be deceptive and ambiguous that we eventually come to understand ourselves and the world around us. In addition, it follows—implicitly though—that the presentation of tradition as a definitely conclusive ploy shows it to be a means of suppressing people as well.

In a different order and in contrast to his later works, McEwan in *Atonement* is perceived to be producing himself and promoting his writing style—debatably and challengingly though—into a literary tradition of fictional writing. This unusual and astonishing fictional writing skill invites the attention of some other writers and wins their approval and admiration. They comment on that literary quality as an "extraordinary . . . distance between *First Love, Last Rites* and *Atonement*, in which the closed claustrophobic inner world of the early protagonists has been replaced by a complex narrative form and a new degree of self-consciousness" (Finney, 2004, p. 68). The argument goes further to assert that a work of fiction is basically "from beginning to end concerned with the making of fiction," in which certain esthetic constructions are generated by such narrative metafictionality that in due process reproduces "the complexity and horror of life in the second half of the twentieth century, after the Holocaust, the development of nuclear weapons, and the Cold War," (*ibid* 81).

Though seemingly unpleasant, such writing robustness has brought about a fascinating change in the manner of this writing style. McEwan himself assertively proposes in an interview in 1983, that the "unsettling nature of his work is not conscious: 'it is all after the event. It turns out that what I've

written is unsettling, but I don't sit down to think about what will unsettle people next," (McEwan, Novelists in Interview, 1985, p. 169).

In terms of this self-consciousness revoked in his writing, McEwan continues to produce a sort of consciousness tinged with a tint of mysticism that combines knowledge with experience inspiring links to an ideological frame. *In Edinburg Love* for a case of illustration, McEwan presents the accident of balloons in a way that intensely and brilliantly encourages readers to fashion themselves in the dilemma. In accordance with Joe Rose's self-conscious understanding of biological and moral limits, the novel as well tends to push forward an altruist attitude, but one that seems to be overpowered by self-protection and survival. Yet, such principle appears to yield to a more baffling cognition of the different and dependent powers that work on the human self. Nonetheless, this proposed ideological proposition seems to eventually be insufficient and lacking to serve as a monitoring model over morality and ethics, (Head, 2007, p. 207).

As a consequence, this duality of McEwan's consciousness linking knowledge to experience could account for the uniqueness of his main effects in his literary writing. The finesse in merging complexity and disconcert of literary effects in all his fictional works with their ranging difficulty and ease might as well be said to be generated by such sort of consciousness. At the level of complexity and simplicity in McEwan's fictional works, both *Atonement* and *Amsterdam* could demonstrate the novelist's duality of consciousness, respectively.

In *Atonement* as a complex fictional work, for instance, a duality of self-consciousness could be detected in the text concerning McEwan's commitment as a writer. In *Amsterdam* as a simpler fictional work, however, a duality of self-consciousness could be identified in the form of unfaithfulness of skill and thus getting lampooned. This hesitation and uncertainty in the responsibility of writing is, according to Head, triggered because:

The wild and inward journey of writing orders the novel's structure, which must be recognized and interpreted by the reader. The double movement of *Atonement* brings the moral function of the novel to crisis point, even while the author writes himself into an inherited tradition of English fiction and criticism. (207)

With his influence on and involvement in what is called 'third culture', McEwan's duality of consciousness could therefore be presumed to bear empathies with its modernism corresponding quality. The pursuit of knowledge that might lead to or require experience is seen as an exciting impulse in McEwan's fictional writing. Yet, McEwan does not seek to establish a compromising settlement between knowledge and experience in his writing as experience is persistently refashioned into a desire for knowledge and a thirst to be saturated.

In this particular literary finesse of extending the modern to the postmodern, McEwan is usually viewed as a writer who has contributed to the understanding that postmodern literature is an amplification of modernist literary qualities such as self-consciousness. That is why it is generally thought that McEwan's "unsettling art upsets the equilibrium of knowledge and experience that modernism held out as a fleeting possibility," (Head, 2007, p. 207).

By the conclusion of *Atonement*, readers could reach to the most intense rejection of comfort. The novel divulges that lovers are brought back together due to certain plans by Briony whose misdeeds have separated them in the first place. This scene of lovers' reunion is also presented in a way that dedicates the whole credit to Briony and her peculiar designs, and not to the novelist or his narrative construction. According to Dominic Head while commenting on this instant, he states that the "narrative ethics emerges on the far side of this debate to establish a position that occupies a mid-ground between the privileging of the autonomous speaking subject and the dissolution of the self into larger social and linguistic codes," (13).

This mid-ground position established by McEwan is viewed to bear resemblance to that of Charles Taylor's. Taylor is reported to have recognized our standing as moral agents to be reliant on the linguistic communal in which we play a part. Therefore, he argues, our 'moral intuitions' are necessarily supported both by language and by culture as well. Yet, Taylor's argument does not intend to suggest that diminishing our moral intuitions to language effects would be the same thing, for, he further contends, our moral being "is produced by the 'best account' we can give of 'the human domain', and that this account may well be given 'in anthropocentric terms', those terms, that is, 'which relate to the meanings things have for us," (Taylor, 2002, p. 72). This moral stance could be supposed to correspond greatly to that of a moral subject whose "own terms are rooted in thick lived experience, and whose intuitions about what is morally moving can be taken seriously," (Head, 2007, p. 13).

8. Blending Fact with Fiction

In the process of his writing career, McEwan has always been fascinated by the association between fact and fiction. This area of interest is commonly deemed as a major aspect of postmodern metafiction narrative aspect. As a major fictional element, imagination with its productive potentials occupies a central space in McEwan's fictional writing in general. He dedicates attracting time and effort to the reflection over fact and fiction, imagination and reality. In this regard, certain writers perceive the connection between art (fiction) and reality in a way that differs from the perception of the common man.

Reality is, according to them, not "the only quarters of the world's literature. It minimizes the role of imagination, personality 'making," and art "is illusion," and is thus different from real life; they assert that there exists an "ontological gap between a product of the mind, a linguistic structure and the events in real life which it reflects," (Wellek, 1963, p. n.p.). However, they further argue that art carries a value affirming that such a position of art "does not and can't mean that the work of art is mere empty play of forms, cut off from reality," because "the relation of art to reality is not as simple as older naturalistic theories of copying or 'imitation' or Marxist 'mirroring' assumes," (ibid).

Due to the constant developments and revival in the theory and practices of fictional writing, fact and fiction, and in due course art and reality do maintain a complex rapport though. This is so because reality itself could be difficult to define and understand as it may be perceived as fictitious and illusory. Reality can also be said to be distorted and fake, as it were, as it is most often directed by the surrounding institutions of authority, constructed with their influence, and thus accumulated with less founded legitimacy.

Therefore, it is only through literary writers and their fictional writing some or most times that reality could be more appropriately translated and conveyed. Literary writing, in general, and fictional writing, in particular, would thus present the different machinations of the real world in a way that makes the familiar seem unfamiliar, hence demonstrating that our reality would arguably not be that distant from the fictional world of a novel, for instance.

Atonement is therefore assumed to be a story about the art of telling stories and its elements such as imagination, truth and its nature, and even the concern over and strategy of writing itself. In that order, imagination and other elements mentioned above appear to seize the writer's attention as they turn to be vitally important constructing the events of the novel from the beginning all the way through to its conclusion. In the progression of events, we could observe how most events are directed by a teen girl of thirteen named Briony, but a girl who enjoys extraordinarily astonishing imagination faculties and is the protagonist of the novel.

The novel from the start shows that Briony's "powerful imagination works to confuse the real with the fictive. The young Briony suffers from the inability to disentangle life from the literature that has

shaped her life," (Finney, 2004, p. 78). Therefore, Briony resorts to enforcing "the patterns of fiction on the facts of life," and thus to complain about the metafictional element in the book is, in Finney's words, "to fail to understand that we are all narrated, entering at birth into a pre-existing narrative which provides the palimpsest on which we inscribe our own narratives/lives," (*ibid* 79).

Such assumption corresponds to the novelist's statement that 'we are all narrated.' However, McEwan is reported to have assumed that what we call 'the real' is a predominant entity, which is, situated above all narratives that we might make about ourselves and the world around us. Accordingly, it could be argued that confusing fact with fiction by Briony may account for the crime she has committed. We are to be bound by, according to McEwan, a moral obligation to recognize the real so that we could differentiate between it and our illusions, between fact and fiction.

Nevertheless, it is obvious how the novel's narrative blends fact with fiction—which is eventually a postmodern insight—though some suppose that Briony's crime is the result of "an imagination that can't quite see the boundaries of what is real and what is unreal," (Reynolds, 2002, p. 19). Yet, it is argued that the novel's metafictional narrative of blending fact with fiction intends to account for the working processes of imagination, and not to challenge our certainty and confidence on the real. Therefore, the novel affiliates itself to the age of postmodern indeterminacy.

Moreover, it becomes clear that like Briony, Robbie, too, is associated with writing stories and imagination, and thus could provide us with examples of blending fact with fiction. One worth-noting passage about Robbie in the novel shows him considering the choice of becoming a doctor in the future:

Despite his first, the study of English literature seemed in retrospect an absorbing parlor game, and reading books and having opinions about them, the desirable adjunct to a civilized existence. But it was not the core, whatever Dr. Leavis said in his lectures. His practical nature and his frustrated scientific aspirations would find an outlet, he would have skill far more elaborate than the ones he had acquired in practical criticism, and above all he would have made his own decision. (McEwan, Atonement: A Novel, 2001, p. 91)

In a further example of fact-fiction blend, Briony while atoning is shown in the novel to be murmuring Robbie's views, though those views and thoughts are indeed taken from a story he was writing. Hence, this narrative aspect of examining the nature of narrative functioning at both levels of life (thus reality) and literature (thus fiction) could be associated with postmodernism metafiction and its critical essence.

In further reflections on the combination of fact and fiction, the novel's narrative hints to the assumption that sensibility would be perceived as ideal. Yet, it is a sort of idealism, "which Elinor counters with her skeptical or pessimistic view of man's nature," (Butler, 1997, p. 194). In another passage about Briony's reflection over death—which could be deemed as a very real thing—she also deliberates over publishing and the tradition of fiction writing as well:

They could ruin a publishing house with ease from their current accounts. One might almost think they had something to hide. Think, yes, but not write. The obvious suggestions have been made – displace, transmute, dissemble. Bring down the fogs of the imagination! What are novelists for? (McEwan, Atonement: A Novel, 2001, p. 370)

In his belief that we are all 'narrated', McEwan exhibits a profound interest in the moral perspective of the fiction processes of writing and reading. This belief is, additionally, assumed to be tinged with the postmodern aspect of moral indeterminacy.

Fictional writing, according to McEwan, is mostly concerned with displaying the prospect that the writer in writing fiction could be a different person. He argues further that writing is "the basis of all

sympathy, empathy and compassion," as "cruelty is a failure of imagination," (McEwan, On Atonement, 2007, p. n.p.). *Atonement* is hence commenced and concluded with Briony Tallis—the younger daughter of the Tallis family and the protagonist of the novel—who is shown to be "possessed by a desire to have the world just so," and someone who at eleven years of age "wrote her first play, and could not have been held back from her writing," (*ibid*).

Briony appears to be activating her imaginative potentials from the beginning. She misconstrues the fictional representation of the fountain paving the way for the ensuing illusory misapprehensions. She gets more delusional and blurry about truth by submitting to her imagination and interest in writing as she perceives Robbie and Cecilia and deals with them as fabulously mythical characters and not real ones. Accordingly, when she spots Robbie and Cecilia standing in the proximity of the fountain, an unintentional occurrence that is misread and processed through her imaginative delusions absolutely mistakenly into an example of extortion.

In line with the episode of the woodcutter in her imaginary romance, Briony fallaciously projects the scene of Robbie and Cecilia stance by the fountain as a marriage offer. By moving his hands domineeringly, Briony translates Robbie's movements as coercive actions against Cecilia to take her clothes off speculating why Cecilia is so obedient and "what strange power did he have over her? Blackmail? Threats?," (McEwan, Atonement: A Novel, 2001, p. 48). Then, she comes back to her senses and conceives it for what it really is; a normal and spontaneous standing of a man and a woman by a fountain exchanging usual chats.

In that respect, Briony's misconception of this scene assumingly appears to stand for the development of her thinking from childhood to adulthood. She initially views this close contact between her sister and Robbie as a possibility for risk and vulnerability against her sister. Briony thinks that any occurrence is pregnant with meaning. Yet, getting an event's complete meaning and hence reaching absolute truth should, according to her, originate from two dissimilar people.

As a result, Briony decides to translate the event from Robbie's view, Cecilia's outlook, and her own. She, nevertheless, seems to be unable to demarcate between her juvenile perceptions and reality's different manifestations, ultimately realizing that her diminutive experience and knowledge of the world of reality has made her interpretation for the occurrence treacherously incomplete. Although Briony is innocently blameless and young, she appears to be not fitting to be a writer as she eventually proves to be awfully inconsiderate and unkind.

Eventually, it is out of the mere productions of her own imagination that the fortune of Briony herself, Robbie, and Cecilia take a dreadful twist; making Briony lead a repentant life for the rest of her time. She has been shown throughout the novel's narrative to have been reading events and occurrences in consistency with her own imaginative perception of things and what she desires to see and believe. In order to live in total equilibrium and stability, Briony has even attempted to interfere in directing the course of events adapting reality and true life events to take the same course outlined by her imagination and illusory delusions. She may not have foreseen the dire outcomes her delusions would generate, yet she continued to write about and perceived the incidents of the fountain as well as the library in accordance with those misunderstandings regardless.

Consequently, *Atonement* through narratively presenting the sequence of miscalculated mistakes produced by Briony's delusional misconceptions investigates the complex association between fact and fiction, between art, imagination, and reality. It is through imagination that Briony misreads, misconstrues, and misapprehends her life and the life of other people around her, hence obscuring the boundaries between fact and fiction, and between art, imagination, and reality.

9. Historical Material (History and Fiction)

By bringing together history and fiction in its fictional narrative, *Atonement* associates itself with the postmodern tradition of removing differences and boundaries between history and fiction. In addition to somehow adopting his father's view of events in the first section of *Atonement*'s narrative, McEwan also models in style after certain fiction writers such as Rosamond Lehmann and Virginia Woolf. In the second half, however, he "weaves into the narrative details about the retreat to Dunkirk from histories, letters and diaries by eyewitnesses (including his father)," (Groes, 2013, p. 61). In the third section of the novel, more particularly its first parts, McEwan constructs them with close reference to chronicles: "the first [is] Lucilla Andrew's *No Time for Romance* (1977), … and the second is *The Memoir of Mrs. A. Radloff*," (*ibid* 62).

It is generally assumed that most present-day British fiction writers have revived an interest in the presentation of history in their fictional works. The argument goes even further to state that the fictional works of such writers as "A. S. Byatt, John Fowles, and Ian McEwan," could more be considered as "new historical novels," (Hidalgo, 2005, p. n.p.). It is even suggested by the same sources that "the questions of how the past is represented in language have become the central obsession of British fiction over the past three decades," (*ibid*).

In view of that and given the novel's setting, it could be assumed that *Atonement* belongs to such historical fiction writings as it covers a long span of history extending from 1935, to World War II, and into the present time, thus depicting the events of around seven decades in recent history. Fusing history, fact, and fiction together along with amalgamating them the lives of the characters in the text, the truths and realities of society, life, and of history seem, according to the novel's narrative, to greatly influence the course of events, the lives of characters, and eventually decide their destinies and lots in life.

In a similar respect, the inclination of British novelists to revoke the past and history in their fictional writings has, according to Hidalgo, been far more marked in the 1990s and the early 2000s, when British novelists have engaged with the past in ways that have little to do with the traditional forms of historical novel or with the self-conscious parody of the historicographic metafiction. The manifestation of realist and metafictional elements in *Atonement* would consequently make it a historical fiction with a tint of postmodernist influence.

It could even be assumed that appreciating the recent British fiction, and hence McEwan's fiction, more particularly *Atonement*, would require a certain familiarity with the postmodern metafiction of historiography. Furthermore, *Atonement* in its narrative composition is mostly perceived as a fiction of experiment that basically reproduces and illustrates McEwan's perception of and deliberation on the historical and metafictional elements of contemporary fictional writing, especially British fiction. The amalgamation, or rather association, of fiction and history, is, Linda Hutcheon argues, a recent narrative development that brings together the most appealing of each part, eventually presenting a unique blend of both.

As a historical fictional text, *Atonement* is thus assumed to possess, hold, and present a particularly appealing significance in terms of history. For a case of demonstration, an interested reader of *Atonement* could discern how the events of World War II are closely associated with Robbie and Cecilia's love story, which is the main love episode in the novel. Composed and presented in three fragments and a conclusion, the love story of Robbie and Cecilia highly corresponds with and demonstrates the historical circumstances of pre, during, and post-war Britain, eventually coming to us as a modern epic. In its first fragment, this love story is presented at the residence of the Tallis family in England showing the rural aspects of life in pre-war England.

The second segment of the love story is narratively constructed and presented during the times of war. It offers a vivid description of the Dunkirk withdrawal along with the graphic and appalling aftermaths of death and fighting in combat. The third part, however, dedicates more attention to the impact of war in general, as it mostly takes place in London Hospital, reflecting on and depicting the maiming and awful repercussions of violence and war.

Unlike many other contemporary novelists who have either completely overlooked or implicitly touched upon the theme of war, McEwan addresses this subject with artistic acuteness connecting the destinies of his characters to the varying circumstances of war not only in *Atonement* but also in some of his other novels like *Black Dogs*. Though mostly referred to with glory and a mystic touch, and held in high regard, the historical events of Dunkirk during World War II, have occupied a central position in the novel, and been presented in an uncommon manner. Through narratively presenting such events in the novel, McEwan skilfully blends the facts of history with fictional elements thus disguising the confines between history, fact, and fiction. Through introducing the past to his readers in this uncommon way, he not only refashions the past into an exclusively new value, but also establishes his own narrative lines of communication with certain other fictional texts such as Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Women*, (Wang, 2014, p. 137).

Therefore, in *Atonement* it could be noticed how McEwan provides a comprehensive portrayal of the atrocious realities of war and fighting, while simultaneously encouraging readers to deliberate on the facts and particulars of history in a way that would make his readers more informed. In the scene of the Dunkirk withdrawal, it is usually proposed that McEwan's invokes much of his father's familiarities with the war in his narrative presentation of the details of this episode, thus blending fact, history, and fiction and obscuring the demarcation lines between them.

10. Intertextuality

Atonement is perceived, in Bakhtin's words in his concepts of dialogism and unfinalizability, to have established its own lines of communication with past fictional texts, (Dobie, 2012, p. 38). McEwan's *Atonement* is said to be forming references to *Lord of the Flies* 1954, by William Golding. Yet, McEwan's novel still distinguishes itself from that of Golding's in that it does not in any way present or encourage any sorts of norms or expressions of traditional morality in its narrative. In *Understanding Ian McEwan* 2002, David Malcolm further elaborates on this distinction between the two fictional texts stating that "the everyday, domestic setting of [McEwan's *Atonement*] also distances it [self] from the earlier one with its exotic, desert island location, perhaps making McEwan's text all the more frightening in its depiction of the collapse of traditional rules and order," (*emphasis added* 52).

Atonement is also observed to have echoed Harold Pinter's plays, especially "*The Homecoming* 1965," in which "the desolate, modern London setting, the brutal and incestuous family tensions, the world of the snooker hall, and Derek's prying, menacing questions, all echo Pinter," (Malcolm, 2002, p. 53). In addition, it is broached by some others that McEwan's *Atonement* echoes the fictional writing style of Hemingway in certain simple sentences in its second part, and the fictional writing style of Lehmann in its first part, suggesting that "McEwan is conducting experiments in competing styles," (Finney, 2004, p. 74).

Nevertheless, *Atonement* just like McEwan's other fictional texts, would be perceived to be more concerned with and closer to denoting a fusion of further and added complexity to these and other contending fictional writing styles. McEwan's fictional writing style could thus be generally demarcated as a writing style that encloses "the interior style with complex methods of focalization,

embedded within well-wrought plots, skilfully and periphrastically narrated through flashback and anticipation analepsis and prolepsis," (Head, 2007, p. 158).

Yet, this case of fictional writing rarity could possibly be viewed as a circumstance of redeveloping the interior narrative form, though not recognizing the necessity to amalgamate certain literary essentials that are seemingly unglued in this writing contrast. Not only with regards to *Atonement*, but also concerning all his fictional writing, does McEwan recognize his fictional writing peculiarity and always attempts to get it induced.

As a recent novel, *Atonement* would thus be discerned to stand out as one of those fictional works that alludes or refers to other literary works in its text. McEwan in his fiction is recognized to make use of this practice of referring to or lampooning other literary works, a practice that eventually invites more consideration and care on the part of the reader to the existence of a narrator's self-consciousness.

Atonement is thus obviously detected by many to have established literary allusions and references to many English fictional works such as those of Samuel Richardson's, and Jane Austen's, to name only some. Therefore, it is considered to be "distinct from the rest of Ian McEwan's work in the sheer literariness of its self-fashioning," (Head, 2007, p. 173).

McEwan himself has been reported to have stated that most of his early fictional writings, more particularly short stories, have imitated one style or the other. Some of his novels, likewise, have been observed by him and others to be establishing references to certain other fictional works:

The Cement Garden is an urban *Lord of the Flies*, *The Innocent* added to and subverted the spy genre, *The Comfort of Strangers* draws on the sinister setting of Venice established by Thomas Mann in *Death in Venice*; his play for television, *The Imitation Game*, was indebted to Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*, and *Amsterdam* is an Evelyn Waugh tribute novel. (*Qtd. in.* Wang 137)

It could, therefore, be obviously and clearly argued that Ian McEwan in most of his novels establishes allusions and references to certain other literary works. With regard to *Atonement*, it, too, establishes its own allusions and references to other literary works. It is widely perceived to be making references and allusions to L. P. Hartley's *The Go Between*, Henry James' *What Maisie Knew*, *Possession* by A. S. Byatt, and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles, to name only some, (ibid). Though alluding to each of the works mentioned earlier in a different perspective, such allusions and references enhance the novel's significance and bestow it with a sort of reader-oriented efficiency.

From the very start of the novel, more particularly in its introductory sentences, readers get introduced to Northanger Abbey by Jane Austen through those references made by the novel's opening sentences. What the objective or intention of the novelist could be, the readers have to exert certain effort to find out. Hence, readers' background, impulsiveness, and prospects of the text might get tested by such references and allusions, eventually arriving at erroneous conclusions. Yet, to the thoughtful reader such references would apparently offer guidance and useful clues to better understanding of the novel.

The association between *Atonement* and Jane Austen's fiction is affirmatively stated by McEwan himself in his interview saying that he considers it as his Jane Austen novel. Such a statement would not be as much surprising as it is revealing as the novel gets closely read and the degree of correspondence gets obviously detected and discerned. *Atonement*'s heroine Briony, for example, is greatly remodeled after Jane Austen's type of heroines. Besides, the setting and subject matter of both *Atonement* and Austen's fiction is mostly presented in a realistically traditional rural surroundings. The world of both fiction writings is relatively and comparatively small, inconspicuous, and revolves mainly around domestic and local middle class people.

In a way of comparison, the presentation of the scenes of the Tallis house is remarkably structured and traditionally embedded in the realistic and conventional world of fiction writing, more particularly to Austen's *Mansfield Park* and *Sense and Sensibility*. The rudimentary features of traditional fictional literature and of *Atonement* such as plot, characters, and motif of the countryside setting are closely preserved and maintained. In a similar strategy but with a different reference, *Atonement* also establishes a further allusion to *Northanger Abbey* by transforming the house of the Tallis family into the Tilney Hotel.

Furthermore, *The Trials of Arabella*, which is a farce play written by Briony in *Atonement* is apparently an established reference to *Clarissa* by Samuel Richardson. Arabella, the heroine in Briony's play, takes her name after Clarissa's sister; a dramatically significant reference that creatively invites the attention of the audience and refreshes their memory to the dealing and exploration of the topic of sentimentality in both works.

In addition, Richardson's novel, *Clarissa*, has also been referred to in *Atonement* in the narrative episode that presents Cecilia's life after she graduates from Cambridge. In the novels' narrative presentation of events readers get acquainted with Cecilia's habit of reading Richardson's *Clarissa* at her leisure time. However, Robbie is the one shown to have a real interest reading *Clarissa*, whereas Cecilia turns out to be more interested in reading Fielding's fiction and not Richardson's. According to her, Richardson's fiction is 'boring', so she favors Fielding's fiction that is, for Robbie though, unpolished and unsophisticated in terms of psychological narrative.

In a similar respect, *Atonement* establishes certain allusions to E. M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India*. In *Atonement*, there is a rape scene that bears great resemblance to that in Fielding's novel in which Adela Quested misleadingly charges Dr. Aziz of a rape attempt against her. Additionally, the narrative presentation of the rape episodes and their consequences are vividly depicted in both novels. Both women in both novels have been shown to have committed evil deeds, which in turn have inflicted the victims with lasting impacts. Also, Robbie in *Atonement* seems a lot like Dr. Aziz in Fielding's novel as both are sadly perceived and treated with little or no credibility and trust, and thus both fall victims of race discrimination, class prejudice, and misjudgment.

Other fictional works such as *The Blind Assassin* by Margaret Atwood and *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro are suggested to have been alluded to by McEwan in *Atonement*, too. The former, according to James Harold, is associated with Atonement in terms of plot, character, settings, and narrative techniques, and narrator; both novels make use of the sort of an undependable narrator, and both play certain narrative tricks on innocent readers. Whereas it communicates with the latter through their type of narrator known also as unreliable in terms of implausibility and impartiality.

11. Conclusion

Through surveying the postmodern narrative and metafictional aspects, it could be concluded that McEwan's *Atonement* demonstrates certain postmodern narrative techniques in its text. The interest of McEwan in the subject of self-consciousness and morality, for instance, undoubtedly manifests his concern with and interest in those postmodern areas and subjects. As main concerns of postmodernism metafiction, such topics as sex, morality, violence, self-consciousness and the like seemed to have been assigned primacy and correspondence in McEwan's *Atonement* as argued above.

Similarly, the novelist has dedicated considerable attention to and dealt in an uncommonly skilful care with the challenging association between fact and fiction, reality and art, history and fictional narrative. Though perceived at certain times as a realistic novel, *Atonement* has been discerned through solid argument and supporting statements to have reflected and reproduced those postmodern metafictional aspects in its narrative text. In the way McEwan has composed his fiction, *Atonement* in

particular, he has effectively and uniquely shown and communicated his perception of and familiarity with the art of fiction writing by giving prominence to revelation, which is eventually a proper manifestation of postmodern metafictional narrative.

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