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“Did Everything Have to Be Her Fault?”

Guilt and Forgiveness Through Unreliable Narration in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*

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Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* (2001) with its metafictional structure is open for various interpretations. I approach the novel and its different levels of narration from the concept of unreliable narrator, introduced by Wayne C. Booth. My aim is to investigate how the unreliable narration of the novel affects how the themes of guilt and forgiveness are explored.

I establish that both young and adult Briony fit into the category of an unreliable narrator and then move on to explore Briony's character in more detail. More specifically, her character flaws, which explain her actions in part one of the novel. I explore her character from the perspective of how she is able to overcome these flaws. Furthermore, how she deals with guilt during the course of life and how she attempts to redeem herself and atone her crime. I carry the subject of her writing throughout the thesis and connect her character development to her development as an author.

My investigation on these themes leads me to the conclusion that young Briony's actions can be attributed to her moral stupidity and inability to see other people as they are. In her job as a nurse, she is already showing signs of moral growth and an attempt to atone. However, her most significant and genuine attempt for an atonement is her writing; and hiding behind the false omniscient narrator was the only way she could establish reader's trust. The writing of her story serves as a form of self-exploration that allows her to reconcile with her past and also to an extent atone what she did to Cecilia and Robbie by offering them a happy ending. She does not allow herself to be forgiven completely but as result of her writing process the guilt no longer consumes her.

Key words: *Atonement*, Ian McEwan, unreliable narrator, implied author, guilt, responsibility, forgiveness, moral stupidity

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1 Introduction

Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* (2001) raises a question of whether some things are truly unforgivable. And if so, what chance does one have for atonement or forgiveness?
On a summer day in 1935, thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis witnesses Robbie Turner, an old family friend, forcefully order her older sister Cecilia to strip her clothes and dive into the fountain. Her misinterpretation of the interaction is the beginning of the series of events that will eternally change the lives of all of them. Later the same day, Briony is asked to deliver a letter to Cecilia on Robbie's behalf. Against her better judgement, Briony opens the letter, which reveals Robbie's lustful thoughts towards Cecilia, convincing Briony of Robbie's malevolence. Her conviction is further confirmed at the scene in the library, where Briony fatefully witnesses Robbie 'attack' Cecilia. What Briony fails to realise is that in reality, she witnessed a love affair develop between two consensual adults. Their lives take a tragic turn when Briony's cousin Lola is raped during a search party organised to find Lola's missing twin brothers who had run away. Briony's misinterpretation of the relationship between Cecilia and Robbie leads her to the conclusion that the rapist could not have been anyone else but Robbie. Based on Briony's witness account, Robbie is sentenced to prison for the crime he did not commit. The novel recounts the consequences of Briony's false accusation. It is a profound exploration about how a person can learn to live with guilt despite the loss and tragedy one's actions have caused. In Briony's case, her juvenile mistake causes the lovers a lifetime of misery and eventually results in their premature deaths.

In *Atonement*, the fictional author uses focalization to tell the story from different perspectives, most important of them Cecilia's, Robbie's and Briony's. As we learn in "London, 1999", the whole story had been written by Briony, making her perspective even more significant. In addition, there is the real author of *Atonement*, McEwan, who provides the novel "a second layer of metafiction" (Caballés 2022, 400–401), for "[w]ithout his 'last-minute' intervention in the narrative codas, the [novel] could be perceived as something else […], but the metafictional nature of the [text] […] creates a new dimension to be examined from the [text]" (ibid.). Even though the last part is not part of the novel Briony intends to publish it is still an important subject for analysis as it further explains Briony's motives for writing the novel. For the purposes of my paper my main focus will be on Briony's narrative voice in the novel itself. But because, McEwan is the one responsible for adding the last part we cannot completely ignore his role in the novel. Thus, I will briefly discuss what inspired him to write a novel with such complicated structure.

When McEwan started the writing process, the 20th century was coming to an end. This inspired him to look back, which produced a realization "that there were errors we made – the two world wars in particular, the Holocaust – that we could never correct; that we could try to correct but the effort would be protracted" (McEwan in Penguin 2021). And this is exactly what the book is about, "a character who makes a life-altering error, and then, in old age, comes on stage, as it were, to address that error" (McEwan in Guignery 2018, 334). When he was writing the novel, he essentially became Briony Tallis. It allowed him to write in a way he had not previously done, "to take time describing the weather, the landscape, the faces, or the furniture", which he had previously loathed to write about (McEwan in Silverblatt 2002, 13:58). So, in a way, the voice in the novel is Briony's, not McEwan's. Yet, his writing becomes evident in the structure of the novel, when he reveals the truth in the end. At the heart of the novel is also the question about authorship, what are "the moral responsibilities of the imagination, if they exist at all" (McEwan in Guignery 2018, 332); ultimately the novel is "a story about storytelling itself" (McEwan in Silverblatt 2002, 2:50). By reading the novel we learn that the responsibility lies in how we depict other people; how we explore what is unknown to us. One of the most important thoughts that I draw from McEwan's interview with Guignery is that "[w]hen you write a novel, you reveal yourself" (2018, 340). This is certainly true in Briony's case, as her writing alone reveals as much about her as her actual description of the events does.

As a narrator Briony can be described as unreliable based on her untrustworthiness throughout the story as well as falsely presenting herself as an omniscient narrator. My aim is to investigate how the unreliability of the narrator both affects and forms the novel's exploration of guilt, responsibility and forgiveness. These themes are presented in various ways throughout the novel as the narratives of the writer and Briony blur together until the final reveal in the last part. Furthermore, I also explore what Briony achieves with her writing technique and the process of writing itself. The analysis of the narrative reveals not only a complex exploration of the central themes of the novel but also highlights the narrator's changing understanding of the past events and herself as a person. Briony wonders: "Did everything have to be her fault? […] Couldn't it also be the war's?" (McEwan 2001, 339). Is she able to reconcile with her past and overcome the guilt over her mistake, which had such horrible unforeseen consequences? And is there even a possibility for her to redeem her crime, when the past cannot be changed and the people who suffered are long gone?

I begin by explaining the concept of unreliable narrator and how it is used as a narrative technique in the novel. I then discuss in detail the factors that establish both young and adult

Briony as unreliable. In the third section of the paper, I consider Briony's character flaws that led her to accuse Robbie and then move on to discuss how we can see change in Briony's character already five years after the events. Finally, in section four, I draw attention to how the themes of guilt and forgiveness are present in her writing and ultimately what does she achieve by writing the novel. Lastly, I conclude my findings in the conclusion.

2 Unreliable Narrator

The term “unreliable narrator” was first introduced by Wayne C. Booth, who defined “a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not” (Booth 1983, 158–159). The implied author means a certain idea that the reader creates of the author, of who he is and what is his connection to the events, in other words “a kind of creation incorporated by the writer and reader” (Abdullah & Wan Yahya 2015, 925) together. Therefore, Briony’s account of the events she witnesses is considered unreliable because it does not comply with the narrative of the implied author of the story. Booth continues that unreliability often stems from “inconscience; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him” (1983, 159). This is certainly the case with Briony, who is depicted as a foolish young girl with delusional confidence in her own understanding of the events and her level of maturity.

The narrator can describe the events from multiple different points of view using focalization of different characters. She also has access to people’s inner thoughts and has knowledge of future events. These characteristics create an illusion of omniscience which is further reinforced by remarks such as “Briony might have written” (McEwan 2001, 10), which clearly separates Briony and the narrator as two different entities. In a case of an unreliable narrator, the implied author might “warn the reader about being misled” (Abdullah & Wan Yahya 2015, 924) by offering textual clues.

Especially in part one of the novel, the reader is warned of Briony’s unreliability, as the narrator emphasizes Briony’s young age and lack of judgement by describing her warped thinking. This is demonstrated as the narrator describes Briony’s thought process after reading Robbie’s risqué letter to Cecilia: “Surely it was not too childish to say there had to be a story; and this was the story of a man whom everybody liked, but about whom the heroine always had her doubts, and finally she was able to reveal that he was the incarnation of evil” (McEwan 2001, 115). The excerpt illustrates Briony’s childish tendency to regard real life similar to fantasy. She believes that much like in the fictional stories, all the events must be connected to form one singular and consistent story. Such is the case when Briony witnesses Lola’s attack, the final event that seals Robbie’s fate: “Everything connected. It was her own discovery. It was her story, the one that was writing itself around her” (McEwan 2001, 166). She disregards all the evidence that could point her to a different conclusion such as Robbie’s previous kindness towards her.

It should also be noted that the structure of the novel alone is enough to discredit Briony's fabrication of the events, as her untrustworthiness is revealed through the focalization of other characters. Without the focalizations of Robbie and Cecilia, it would be more difficult to conclude Briony's understanding of the events as wrong. Therefore, I argue that the narrator's aim is to draw attention to Briony's motive behind her accusation and not to the act itself.

When the last part reveals Briony as the author of the story, it leads the reader to re-evaluate the narrative. P. K. Hansen points out that upon observing the narrator as unreliable "[o]ur reading changes its focus from what is being told to the one who is telling" (2007, 230). The implied author of the story has lost her credibility, which adds another layer of deception to the narrative. Similarly to the character Briony's unreliability, as the author she has left clues of her own involvement that subtly imply that she is also the narrator and that the reader is being deceived. A perceptible reader might have noticed these slips in the narrative voice that point to Briony as the narrator. Jaëck points out that these signs present early in the novel, as seen in a quote from page 6: "The reader was bound to speculate that she was describing herself" (McEwan 2001, 6) and continues to explain that "Briony's intradiegetic process of selection and illusion is thus disturbingly replicated at the level of reception: we too knew, or should have known, all along" (2019, 355). The reader is therefore guilty of the same mistake as Briony, believing blindly one narrative despite the clues that would have resulted into a different conclusion.

Considering the character traits listed above we can establish that Briony is an unreliable witness and therefore should not be trusted blindly as a narrator. As a child her unreliability was credited to her "youth, naivety and simple-mindedness" (Abdullah & Wan Yahya 2015, 926–927), but the same cannot be said about now adult Briony. Her unreliability is further confirmed as she confesses "fictionalis[ing] a meeting between the lovers at the end" (ibid.) to atone her crime. The many levels of deception and lying raise the question: what is Briony's reason for hiding behind the omniscient narrator? I will approach this question in the following section that investigates Briony's character development from childhood to young adulthood, and further in section four, where I discuss the deeper meaning behind her story.

3 Briony's Character Development

In the first part of the novel Briony is thirteen and feels that she is finally starting to understand the adult world. As discussed in the section above, this delusion is essentially what makes Briony an unreliable narrator and leads her to accuse Robbie. This section explores more in depth the character flaws that can be attributed to her immaturity and lack of life experience. My aim is to illustrate Briony's character development, in how, or to what extent, she is able to overcome these flaws as she grows older. Here I focus on the second part of the novel, where we meet the eighteen-year-old Briony, five years after the events of the first part. I also draw attention to her development as a writer and how it relates to her experience with guilt.

3.1 Stupid Child

Briony explains her foolish behaviour to be an inclination of her young age. While she did not fully understand the relationship between Cecilia and Robbie, she still should have known the difference between right and wrong. The reader is told that "[i]t was not simply her eyes that told her the truth. It was too dark for that" (McEwan 2001, 168–169). Therefore, Briony knew that there was a difference between what she saw and what she claimed to have witnessed. Yet, "she felt that she could not express these nuances [between what she really saw and what she knew to be true]" (McEwan 2001, 169), so she made no attempt to explain her previous evidence that led her to "the truth". Therefore, it is clear that Briony was aware that by explaining these nuances she would risk the credibility of her testimony, which she saw as an opportunity to protect Cecilia from Robbie.

Salman (2023, 1931) argues that moral stupidity answers the question of why Briony accuses Robbie and why she despite her doubts clings to her narrative of the events. Salman explains that "[m]oral failure is considered to be a lack in cognitive thinking, and thus stupidity leads to immoral and wicked behavior and irresponsibility" (2023, 1933). Briony's actions can be attributed to her inability to understand the events enveloping her. And when this happens, her imagination comes to aid as "[a]rt, she believes, will act as a corrective to the untidiness of life" (O'Hara 2011, 76). In other words, if something does not make sense in Briony's mind, she fabricates a story that explains it.

From young age, Briony identified herself as a writer, and as such she sees stories and new writing material everywhere. Her world view is deeply inspired by the stories she has read and so the people around her are like characters in her life's story. This also serves as a

mechanism to cope with "untidiness of life", because "[b]y reducing others to the status of artificial things, […] she can accommodate chaotic reality with the tidy narrative of her own design [and] dismiss anything unknown by carefully obscuring the otherness" (O'Hara 2011, 77-78). An example of this is her inability to see other people as as unique as she herself is. She is aware that there is a possibility that other people have minds that are "equally alive" (McEwan 2001, 40) as hers, but she struggles to come to terms with this new revelation. She expresses her desire to approach the concept through writing:

> She need only show separate minds, as alive as her own. Struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive. It wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value. That was the only moral a story need have! (McEwan 2001, 40)

Through writing her observations into a story, she wishes to make sense of what she witnessed. Yet, because of her fundamental lack of understanding how the minds of other people work, she is unable to see her own limitations as "by virtue of being a self, each of us remains at the center of our own experiential reality; we are irrevocably restricted by that which is not our self, by otherness" (O'Hara 2011, 75). She acts solely based on her own limited point of view and her conviction of other people's intentions. Salman argues that Briony's moral failure is the "thoughtlessness for the feeling of others" (2023, 1934) and continues to explain that "Briony's accusation of Robbie appears not to stem from any sort of wickedness, but rather from her moral failure to see others for who they are" (1935).

In addition to Briony's attempt to make sense of things through writing, her stories also aim to teach a lesson. In this way, she sets herself morally above others and views herself as the heroine or "a creature apart, something special because she is a writer" (Lippitt 2019, 126). This can be seen in her first play *Trials of Arabella*, which she wrote to guide her older brother, Leon, "away from his careless succession of girlfriends, towards the right form of wife" (McEwan 2001, 4). However, she relies heavily on concepts from fantasy world, where people are often characterised into good or evil, heroes or villains. However, such a divide is rare in the real world. Briony judges Robbie's character based on a few separate observations, while at the same time she disregards all the signs that would point her to a different conclusion. She presents this thought process as she sees Robbie arrive back to the house after finding her younger twin-cousins:

> Did he really believe he could conceal his crime behind an apparent kindness, behind this show of being the good shepherd? This was surely a cynical attempt to win forgiveness for what could never be forgiven. She was again confirmed in her view that evil was complicated and misleading. (McEwan 2001, 183)

The excerpt shows that even good deeds are interpreted to fit to the existing characterisation of Robbie as the villain of Briony's story. It also illustrates forgiveness "as something Briony offers or withholds from the moral high ground she takes herself to occupy" (Lippitt 2019, 124). However, the knowledge of Briony as the narrator also provides another interpretation. By claiming that "evil [is] complicated and misleading", she reverses the roles of herself as the heroine and Robbie as the villain. This role reversal is even more prominent in parts two and three of the novel, when Briony's "ruthless youthful forgetting [and] wilful erasing, [that had] protected her well into her teens" (McEwan 2001, 171) is replaced by rising feeling of guilt.

3.2 Young Adulthood

As time passes, Briony comes to realise the consequences of her accusations. Without intending to, she had caused terrible suffering for her sister and Robbie. Years later, Briony recounts her adamance during the police interviews: "She would never be able to console herself that she was pressured or bullied. She never was" (McEwan 2001, 170). She also explains that even then she had her doubts about her testimony but because she was too keen to please others she "[clung] tightly to what she believed she knew" and was therefore "able to keep from mind the damage she only dimly sensed she was doing" (McEwan 2001, 170). She accepts that her false accusation against Robbie had been wrong. Yet she feels that explaining her good intentions would not be enough to make Cecilia and Robbie forgive her; the damage was too great. It is easier for Briony to do nothing; she could wait until she was ready to confront the victims of her crime. Meanwhile, Briony utilizes other means of coping with her guilt.

In part three, the focalization is on Briony herself. She too has left home and, following in the footsteps of Cecilia, has joined the war effort as a nurse. Briony explains in a letter to Cecilia that her main reason for choosing nurse's training over student life was to be "useful in a practical way" (McEwan 2001, 212). This shows that Briony has overcome the egoism that shaped her worldview when she was younger and is now able to "resist the temptation to have an orientation toward the world in which self, its needs and concerns are what matters most" (Lippitt 2019, 127).

However, her work also serves many other purposes for her. As a nurse "she had no identity beyond her badge" and "was delivered from introspection", which made her happy as she had "little time to think of anything else" (McEwan 2001, 276–277). The job allowed her to forget her crime and momentarily escape from her guilt. She voluntarily gave up her freedom and identity as a form of punishment and her job "could be seen as a self-incriminating reversal of the very limits she once imposed upon others: it is now her identity that is inculcated by a stock role" (O'Hara 2011, 82). In addition, Pastoor points out that "there is a clear connection between her desire to care for wounded soldiers and her desire to atone for what she did to Robbie" (2014, 208). Briony was taking care of soldiers who returned from France and one of them could have been Robbie. In her daydreams she would take care of him and in return "he would turn to her in gratitude […] and take her hand, and in silently squeezing it, forgive her" (McEwan 2001, 298). According to Kogan "Briony's enactments of self-punishment emanated also from her inability to work through her mourning for having hurt another. Mourning includes confession, repentance, and restitution, and is part of the reparative process" (2014, 67). Only after she faces the people she hurt could she start the process of mourning and self-forgiveness, and Briony knew this: "But it was all useless, she knew. Whatever skivvying or humble nursing she did […] she would never undo the damage. She was unforgivable" (McEwan 2001, 285). At work she was also a witness to the horrors of war, and she realized that soon it might be too late to act as "the war might compound her crime" (McEwan 2001, 288).

Even though working as a nurse was not enough to atone Briony's crime, it should not be dismissed as simply an act of evasion on her part, but considered "the most obvious aspect of Briony's moral growth in the years immediately after her 'crime'" (Lippitt 2019, 129). It is also a start of Briony's reconciliation with herself and shows serious attempt to redeem herself. And "[b]y focusing on others – the war injured and dying – and absorbing herself in the ethical demands of this essentially other-focused role, she achieves something beyond what introspection alone could achieve" (Lippitt 2019, 129).

However, introspection is still important method in how Briony analyzes her past actions. Once again, she approaches the unknown by writing. Briony's first attempt to retell the events of that fateful summer day proved unsuccessful. The short story, *Two Figures by the Fountain*, despite its attempt to show three equal minds, still relied heavily on Briony's own perspective. The story, sent to be published in the *Horizon* magazine, was rejected but came back with valuable suggestions for alterations: she should give more voice to Cecilia and Robbie, and through them reveal something that was fresh and new to her own

perspective. The conclusion was that her story lacked a backbone (McEwan 2001, 313–314). It was eye-opening and provoked a realisation in Briony: “The evasions of her little novel were exactly those of her own life. Everything she did not wish to confront was also missing from her novella – and was necessary to it” (McEwan 2001, 320). These new realisations are implemented in the subsequent drafts of the story and are prominent in the final draft, where we see Briony finally give the voice to Cecilia and Robbie. The next section focuses on how Briony uses her narrative voice in the novel to atone her crime.

4 The Many Aspects of Briony's Atonement

Added by McEwan the last part, "London, 1999", is separated from the rest of the novel. Jaëck argues that, "McEwan reaches what we could call narrative atonement: he does create a narrative process that enables the delivery of the truth. Hence the crucial role of 'London, 1999', which dissociates from Briony and treats her as the object of the narration" (2019, 363). Had it depended on Briony's responsibility to tell the truth, the reader would have been left with the belief that the lovers lived to re-unite and have their happy ending. But "[a]fter offering Briony's ending for the novel, which gives shape and meaning to suffering and holds out the possibility of atonement, McEwan takes it away - - constructing a novel in which suffering is not redeemed [and] attempts at atonement end in failure" (Pastoor 2019, 303).

From the narrative perspective, the false omniscient narrative allows Briony to use focalization in a way that would not have been possible had she announced her involvement in the events. Jaëck claims that Briony's use of focalization instead of first-person narrative reveals that "the truth is too much for her, that it cannot be apprehended directly, that she cannot stabilize a reliable narrative 'I'" (2019, 363). Hiding behind the omniscient narrative voice was therefore the only way for Briony to tell her story without readers' bias or reservations towards the credibility of her narrative. It is for this reason that we should not simply read the novel as another lie, as "Briony's authorial bowdlerizing of the past for the purposes of her own moral well-being" (O'Hara 2011, 94) as this "would not only be stubbornly cynical, but it would also dismiss the self-incrimination implicit in Briony's narrating Robbie's war-time experience as well as the title of the novel itself" (ibid.). This section explores further the self-incrimination present in Briony's narration and continues to analyze the themes of guilt, morality and forgiveness discussed in the section above. Finally, I will conclude what Briony achieves by writing her story.

4.1 "Final Act of Kindness": Atonement by Writing

The very last sentence of Briony's novel reads: "She knew what was required of her. Not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement, and she was ready to begin" (McEwan 2001, 349). Her goal was always to atone her crime, which by then she could only do by writing. She tells the story in which she gives testimony to the experiences of those she had hurt and by changing the ending allows herself to confess her crime to Cecilia and Robbie. I will next explore how Briony's guilt and attempt to atone are expressed in part two of the novel as well as by her changing the ending.

The whole part two, is dedicated to Robbie's thoughts and experiences during his dangerous and excruciatingly long journey towards Dunkirk in retreat. When Great Britain had joined the war, he had been given a choice: he could stay in prison or join the army for a possibility of early release. In hopes of re-uniting with Cecilia, he had chosen to risk his life in war. However, he suffered an injury during a Stuka attack and "caught the shrapnel in his side" (McEwan 2001, 218). In "London, 1999" we learn that the injury was in fact fatal as he died of "septicaemia at Bray Dunes" (McEwan 2001, 370), never to see her beloved Cecilia again. Robbie's point of view is interesting, because it is almost entirely Briony's own creation and therefore must be analysed based on this knowledge. My belief is that Briony has two reasons for dedicating such a long portion of the novel to Robbie's experiences: to illustrate the suffering she caused for him and to correct her previous wrongful characterisation of him.

Part two exemplifies how Briony's narrative voice has developed from *Two Figures by the Fountain.* The narrative is completely devoid of her own perspective and is no longer solely relying on imagination to fill the caps of the unknown but is based on her thorough research on the subject (McEwan 2001, 359–360). It is clear "how much she is empathetically attempting to imagine the reality of an Other's experience. She is, in effect, paying testimony to Robbie, something she immaturely failed to do as a character in the first part of the novel" (O'Hara 2011, 93). Though her narration is not completely reliable, it delivers an authentic depiction of the horrors, from child's severed leg (McEwan 2001, 202) to the bombings, that Robbie experienced in France and the suffering Briony feels she had caused.

Part two also allows Briony to show the reader the kind of person Robbie truly was. We also see the aforementioned reversal of the roles of Briony and Robbie. Briony is now the villain, while Robbie is transformed into a selfless hero. His strong morality is reoccurring theme and O'Hara (2011, 81) points out an occurrence, where Robbie not only proves to be a better man than his fellow soldiers but also as having better morale than Briony: when at Dunkirk crowd of soldiers had crowded an RAF pilot, blaming him for the lack of protection by RAF, Robbie has a chance to "do something outrageous with his bowie knife and earn the love of a hundred men" (McEwan 2001, 252), yet he resists the urge to do so. O'Hara identifies this as "echoing, perhaps, a type of love Briony could not herself resist earlier in the novel" (81), when she accused Robbie. Here Briony also distinguishes Robbie from other soldiers who had completely lost their sense of individual responsibility. The part two then successfully proves that young Briony's characterisation of Robbie as an evil villain could not have been further from the truth.

The last part jumps sixty years into the future, and Briony is now celebrating her seventy-seventh birthday. She describes the process of writing the book and confesses that a few changes were necessary to make the story flow naturally; however, she "regarded it as [her] duty to disguise nothing – the names, the places, the exact circumstances – [she] put it all there as a matter of historical record" (McEwan 2001, 369). Thus, it is interesting that she chose to fabricate a meeting between her, Cecilia and Robbie. She explains her reason for this:

> I like to think that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. (McEwan 2001, 371–372)

She no longer occupies the moral high ground, instead she is now the one who is judged. Robbie and Cecilia were the only two people who held the power to forgive her, and neither of them had survived the war. The imagined meeting between them only serves as an exploration in otherness, it allows Briony to view herself from the perspectives of Cecilia and Robbie. In real life it was too late to atone her crime, but in fiction she was able to rewrite the past. Her sister and Robbie had their happy ending and Briony was able to correct her crime. In the end they would only exist as Briony's invention and "[a]s long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love" (McEwan 2001, 371). With her book Briony immortalized the love story of Cecilia and Robbie and gave them the ending they deserved to have.

Yet, "how can a novelist achieve atonement when with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? […] It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all" (McEwan 2001, 371). She is only able to atone her crime as a character in her novel, where there are no variables that could prevent her from doing so because she is in charge of what happens. If Briony is not able to reach the atonement, what was the point of the novel?

4.2 "The Attempt Was All": The Result of Briony's Novel

As we have established above, Briony writes to understand herself and the world around her. She has been diagnosed with vascular dementia and will eventually lose all her memories of the events that lead to the deaths of her sister and Robbie. One way the novel serves as a way for Briony to cope with her feelings of guilt, as she never got to make things right with her older sister or to prove Robbie innocent.

In part one we saw Briony reinforce the idea that because of her age, she did not understand the damage she was doing. The reader might see this as unwillingness to take the full responsibility for her actions. However, I believe it more accurately illustrates Briony's effort to understand herself. She explains why she believed Robbie to be the attacker while at the same time re-evaluates and judges the actions of her younger self. This Lippitt concludes "is what an improvement-oriented self-assessment that includes judgment-oriented self-assessment would look like. Me now's continuing to blame me then is an important dimension of responsible self-forgiveness" (2019, 136). By the act of writing, she is coming into terms with the consequences of her accusations. Jaëck argues that

> Briony's narration can be reread as her necessary recourse to imaginary interlocution, in order for the self to come to terms with what is inassimilable, to explore and finally re-stabilize split selfhood. Interlocution disguised as omniscience thus reads as a necessary detour through fantasized others' perspectives in order for Briony to voice out what she cannot directly come to terms with. (2019, 355)

Briony has continued to use writing as a form of self-exploration throughout her life. By exploring the circumstances and different perspectives on the events she recognizes her previous failures in understanding the truth of what happened and "the many detours [in the narrative] were actually needed to finally speak in the first-person with some extent of self-reconciliation" (Jaëck 2019, 363). Briony is able to forgive herself to some extent and sees that "[t]here can still be room for me now to continue to see me then as blameworthy, and to continue to experience (at least to some degree) the appropriate emotions about this" (Lippitt 2019, 135). However, the guilt no longer consumes her.

O'Hagan writes that "[m]oral stupidity, our default setting, is kind of crude self-absorption that distorts our perceptions and hence is of paramount importance to right conduct; moral self-development, broadly speaking will be its cure" (2012, 292). Signs of Briony's moral growth can already be seen in the part three, where her job as a nurse shows that she has overcome her self-centeredness. It is, however, the writing of the novel, and its many drafts, that makes her "aware of both a poetic and an ethical responsibility to difference and to otherness" (O'Hara 2011, 91). In McEwan's words "imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality" (McEwan in O'Hara 2011, 84). Writing the book is a form of self-exploration that allows Briony to reconcile with her past, realize her ethical responsibilities as a writer as well as overcome moral stupidity, which had caused her to misjudge her observations and blame Robbie for raping Lola.

The reader might feel betrayed by the revelation of truth that confirms that "Robbie Turner died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940 [and] Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station" (McEwan 2001, 370). Yet, we must remember that by this point Briony has spent over sixty years suffering from immense guilt over a mistake with terrible unforeseen consequences. And now she is faced with an illness that will eventually take away her memories, ability to write and identity. Because of this, the novel is also her final opportunity to forgive herself, and the changed ending plays a pivotal part in that attempt. "See, if they [Cecilia and Robbie] don't live, who will forgive her?" (McEwan in Silverblatt 2002, 9:54). By ending the novel as she does, the reader is more likely to do so and so is Briony herself. For there was a crime but no irreversible damage so Cecilia and Robbie's "story could resume" (McEwan 2001, 227), Briony had just paused it. "Briony's unfulfilled reparative longings, her guilt and remorse for having hurt Robbie, will be forgotten" (Kogan 2014, 68) and the only thing reminding of them will be the novel she wrote. When her mind slowly slips away from her, she can find comfort in the fact that her "spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive[d] to love" (McEwan 2001, 371).

5 Conclusion

Atonement offers a complex exploration of guilt, responsibility and forgiveness which could only be achieved by the multiple layers of the narration that the author employs. Briony's reason for concealing her role as the narrator is to convince the reader of her story. If she had told the story in first person, the truthfulness of the story would have been a subject for speculation directly because of her involvement in the events and based on her character within the story. Briony, though an unreliable narrator, does not evade from responsibility for her crime, but sets out to tell the truth based on her new extensive knowledge of other perspectives. By using focalisation, she is able to create a multidimensional story in which each point of view has equal value.

I have established that Briony's accusation was not an act of an evil child nor was it motivated by any malevolence towards her sister or Robbie but is attributed to her inability to see other people as as real as she is, in other words, to her moral stupidity. Consequently, she is also unable to imagine the consequences her accusation could have for other people. As she grows older, we see a change in her worldview, from self-centredness to moral humility, yet she is effectively paralysed by her guilt. She has become a better person, yet she is afraid to face the people she had hurt. In the end, the fate decides for her, as both Cecilia and Robbie die before she gathers the courage to face them.

The only way left for her to seek atonement, is to write the novel; to confess her crime and recount the events as they truly happened. Guilt and self-incrimination are prominent in Briony's writing; in the way she approaches Robbie's character and his suffering during the war and how she fabricates the meeting between three of them. Even in her own story she does not allow herself to be forgiven for the only ones who have the authority to do so are Cecilia and Robbie. However, by writing the novel Briony reaches a level of self-forgiveness that allows her let go of her past and the guilt that has haunted her since that fateful summer day in 1935.

In conclusion, for Briony the book serves as one final self-exploration before she loses her memory and sense of self to dementia. Considering the restrictions that her involvement sets, she attempts to recount the events as truthfully as she can. However, she changes the ending of story, because decades later, no one will benefit from the ending in which the lovers perish never to meet again. The ending brings comfort to her and is ultimately her gift to her sister; the love story of Cecilia and Robbie will live forever on the pages of the book.

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