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DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA

The Selfish Atoner: Exploring Briony Tallis' Narrative

Sincerity in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA Dissertation

Author: Ares Angües Merabet

Supervisor: Dr David Owen

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística

Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres

Grau d'Estudis Anglesos

June 2024

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June 12, 2024

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You just couldn't get hold of the things you had done and turn them right again. Such power might be given to the gods, but it was not given to men and women, and that was probably a good thing. Had it been otherwise, people would probably die of old age still trying to rewrite their teens.

Stephen King, *The Stand* (1978)

Abstract

Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* (2001) is constructed around an unreliable narration, as its postscript unveils an unforeseen narrative twist, revealing that Briony Tallis is in fact the authorial voice behind the entirety of the novel. Briony's role as a covert narrator, combined with the fantasised ending of Robbie Turner and Cecilia Tallis' story, prompts readers to question the validity of the narrated events, and to doubt Briony's true purpose in authoring the novel.

Within a narratological framework, and with a particular focus on the notions of narrator, voice, and distance; this project aims to dissect *Atonement*'s unreliable narration, and its subsequent effects, including the narrative structure, the key thematic notions that drive the plot, and its impact on the reader's perception of the narrated story. By conducting a close reading of McEwan's text, and examining the character of Briony along with the narrative techniques she employs, this study seeks to identify textual evidence that support this project's perspective.

With this in mind, this TFG casts doubt on Briony's declared aim in authoring the novel, claimed to be a way of atoning her mistake, thus arguing the possibility of the character's distinct motives, deriving from a selfish nature. By exploiting her authorial control, Briony presents an illusion of objectivity, asserts her interpretation of the recounted events, and effectively evokes sympathy from the reader. Supported by textual evidence and the disclosure of the exhibited narrative techniques—such as the use of a heterodiegetic narrator and the deliberate delay of her confession—this study aims to reveal and confirm Briony's deceptiveness.

Keywords: *Atonement*, Ian McEwan, narratology, narrative unreliability, selfishness, Briony Tallis.

0. Introduction

In 2001, British novelist Ian McEwan published *Atonement*, a captivating work which unfurls during the 1930s English countryside. Centred around love, betrayal, and redemption, the author's eighth novel follows the convoluted relationship between privileged Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner, the son of family's housekeeper and Cecilia's childhood friend. The lovers, however, are tragically separated by Cecilia's younger sister Briony, who falsely charges Turner with a heinous crime. This accusation triggers a series of repercussions that profoundly alter the trajectory of their lives. Praised by *The Guardian* as one of the greatest novels of the 21st century and regarded by some as McEwan's finest work, *Atonement* overall achieved a positive reception from not only the press, but also literary critics and reviewers (*The Guardian*, web; Head 156). Shortlisted for the 2001 Booker Prize for fiction, the novel reached an even wider audience through Joe Wright's 2007 film adaptation of the same name (*The Booker Prizes*, web). Both the novel and its cinematic version often spark debate and controversy due to the story's metafictional ending, where it is revealed that Briony Tallis has, in fact, authored the entirety of the novel. Under her authorial control, Briony is able to modify certain occurrences, drastically altering the story, such as the fate of Robbie and Cecilia, who instead of reuniting met a tragic and sorrowful end.

On several occasions, McEwan has highlighted the remarkable British writer Jane Austen as an influence for *Atonement*. In the author's own words: "The ghost that stalks this novel is that of Jane Austen" (Guignery 333). Drawing inspiration from Catherine Morland, the protagonist of *Northanger Abbey* (1818), Briony Tallis is an exceptionally intriguing and alluring character, largely due to her vivid imagination, a trait reminiscent of Morland's. During McEwan's final writing stages of the novel, his editor estimated *Atonement* as a future success, attributing it to possessing the "three elements that we

know will sell a novel: the Second World War, a country house and a love story” (Guignery 332). Regarding this matter, I am inclined to rather wholeheartedly agree with McEwan himself, who views these elements as less consequential, and instead believes that “[t]he centre of the book for me is the character of Briony” (Guignery 332). Indeed, the youngest Tallis is certainly the heart of the novel. It is the woman’s revelation that brings about a postmodern twist, where metafiction and narrative unreliability become the essence of the book, prompting readers to reassess the authenticity of the portrayed characters and events. Such characteristics, along with Austen’s influence, personally appeal to me. Though, I was particularly drawn to Briony’s intricate character and unreliable narrative, prompting a desire to go deeper into her story.

Within the epilogue, elderly Briony poses the following question: “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” (371). Given her involvement in the depicted events alongside her authorial control, as previously mentioned, unreliability becomes an inherent aspect of Briony’s narration. Building on the concept of unreliability, I aim to examine the novel’s narrative, exploring the factors that may render Briony’s claims and motives as dubious. This approach will also address, though not be confined to, an analysis of the notions of egocentrism, rivalry, and cowardice, particularly in how they may shape and influence the narrative of the novel. In order to examine the book’s narrative unreliability, I will extensively refer to McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001), and will conduct a close textual reading of the novel in search for textual evidence that sustain my assertions. Within the narrative theory framework, this analysis will also be reinforced by incorporating both classical and contemporary critical sources. Through this method, I endeavour to carry out a comprehensive examination of my chosen topic.

0.1. Literature Review

Owing to its postmodernist metafiction, most research on McEwan's *Atonement* concentrates on the different narrative techniques that are employed throughout the novel, including the narrator, narrative style, and intertextuality. In "Memory and Storytelling in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*", Hidalgo postulates that "[t]he presentation of Briony's nascent literary imagination allows the reader to follow her development (at times unsuspectedly) from folk tales, written when she was eleven, through melodrama to modernist and finally realist fiction [...]" (85). The author describes the novel as "rooted in the tradition of the English novel", with the first chapter being highly influenced by Jane Austen's free indirect speech, innovated by the introduction of diverse versions of the same event (ibid.). Paralleling Briony's writing development, "Part Two" departs from the former "leisurely pace and rich verbal texture" into a crude and direct narration where [l]ittle narrative space is left for ironical allusion and reimagining the literary past" (Hidalgo 87). Similarly, "Part Three" constitutes a "rare combination of precision and a compassionate lack of sentimentality that has few precedents" (88), situating Briony's writing in the "tradition of the British female novel of the 1920s and 1930s" (91), which eventually evolves into the realist fiction found in *Atonement*.

The morality behind the writing of the novel, forgiveness, ethics, and the psychological traits pertaining to the character of Briony, are further persistently examined areas within discussions of *Atonement*. On this matter, in his research "Briony's Being-For: Metafictional Narrative Ethics in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*", O'Hara argues that the main character's growth is facilitated in her writing process, by identifying and empathising with the individuals she hurt: "Briony needs to imagine those other possibilities of being and to empathize with those differing points of view in order to come to sufficient self-understanding" (90). On a similar note, in his study "Self-

Forgiveness and the Moral Perspective of Humility: Ian McEwan's *Atonement*" Lippitt reads this protagonist as maturing from her teenage self's egotistical character through the "delicate balance between self-forgiveness and self-condemnation" (122). The author declares Nurse Tallis holding an "unforgivable" and judgemental perception of herself as a consequence of her mistake, which is amended by the humility she develops (126). Lippitt concludes that Briony's "life has *not* been excessively dominated by self-focus. We have seen how her experience as a nurse takes her out of herself into acts of *agapic* love: hers has not been a life of narrow self-obsession" (134).

Drawing from the insights of these critical sources, and integrating the perspectives from the classical narratological notions and frameworks, I have endeavoured to meticulously align and reassess my selected topic with their respective criticisms and theories. Through this comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach, I seek to provide with a nuanced assessment of *Atonement*, thus now proposing the following thesis questions: Could Briony's narrative control be interpreted as a self-serving form of manipulation, rather than the alleged genuine attempt of atonement? If this assertion holds true, what narrative techniques are utilised by the covert narrator in order to assert her biased narration?

The overall structure of this study takes the form of two main chapters, followed by conclusions and consequences, and concludes outlining various areas suggested for further research. Chapter One is intentionally shorter than the subsequent chapters, as it aims to offer a concise description of the field of narratology, without extensively reviewing its complexities. This approach allows for the exploration of the foundational elements of narratology that are essential in the analysis of *Atonement*'s narrative. The illustration of the former aspects heavily draws upon Abbot's expertise, given the author's accessible and comprehensive depiction of the subject matter. The following section of

this study focuses on showcasing instances of Briony's authorial control and narrative techniques that enable narrative manipulation to her advantage. Additionally, to reinforce the assertion of manipulation, a character analysis of Briony Tallis is undertaken within the same chapter. Finally, as mentioned previously, a series of conclusions are presented, alongside recommendations for future research.

1. Chapter One: Narrative Theory

1.1. Narratology

When analysing any form of literature, it is imperative to understand the mechanics behind storytelling in order to unravel its profound meanings and implications. At the heart of every literary piece lies a narrative. Nevertheless, an essential question often arises in regard to this notion: what exactly constitutes a narrative? The multifaceted term bears a range of distinct yet related meanings. According to Genette's second definition, narrative "refer[s] to the succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse, and to their several relations of linking, opposition, repetition, etc." (25). Abbot expands upon said interpretation, asserting that the occurrence of an event is pivotal, given that "without an event or an action, you may have a 'description,' an 'exposition,' an 'argument,' a 'lyric,' some combination of these or something else altogether, but you won't have a narrative" (13). However, narrative may also refer to the "signified" or "narrative text" (Genette 27). Thereby, in simpler terms, narrative is "the representation of events, consisting of *story* and *narrative discourse*" (Abbot 19).¹

Having established the definition of narrative, we may turn our attention to one of the dominant disciplines within the realm of literary analysis: narrative theory. The study of narrative, otherwise known as narratology,² aims to "describe the constants, variables and combinations typical of narrative and to clarify how these characteristics of narrative texts connect within the framework of theoretical models (typologies)" (Fludernik 8). As highlighted by Herman et al., narratology finds its heritage within the literary current of structuralism. Particularly, it stems from the attempts of structuralists, such as Roland Barthes, to apply Saussure's dyadic semiotic system, based on the notions of signifier and

¹ To prevent confusion, Genette's terms will be adopted hereafter: *story* denoting the first definition, and *narrative* the latter (Genette 25–27).

² To prevent confusion, the terms *narrative theory* and *narratology* will be used interchangeably.

signified, into the analysis of any cultural phenomena. Narratologists figures like Gérard Genette, Algirdas Julien Greimas, and Tzvetan Todorov, extended this structuralist approach to stories, which were considered “individual ‘narrative messages’ supported by a shared semiotic system whose constituents and combinatory principles it was the task of narratological analysis to bring to light” (Herman et al. 571). Nonetheless, as noted by Fludernik, in recent times narratology has broadened its focus beyond the examination of narrative, to encompass theoretical debates ranging from feminism to post-modernism (12).

1.2. Theoretical Frameworks

Aristotle’s Poetics

Although narratology has its roots within structuralism, temporally located between the mid-1940s and the mid-1980s (Owen and Pivodori 189), certain elements of this discipline can be traced back to Ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle. While many of Aristotle’s vital writings have not survived the passage of time, his foundational insights about narrative and story are fortunately accessible through the philosopher’s surviving notes (Heath vii). *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE) is considered the first narratological work, as it “represents the first attempt at a systematic theoretical mapping of Western poetics—and remains one of the most influential” (Liveley 25).

Aristotle’s *Poetics* is particularly remarkable for its acknowledgment of the concept of the plot as the fundamental principle that structures the events of a story into a cohesive narrative (Liveley 26). Aristotle considers tragedy as “an imitation of an action” (11), wherein plot, which he describes as “the source and (as it were) the soul of tragedy” (12), concerns to the organisation of said actions (11). The ideal tragic plot revolves around a character who is neither “exceptionally virtuous” nor “wicked”, but

rather occupies a middle ground, as due to “their virtue not [being] outstanding, we do not find their downfall morally repellent; because their downfall is undeserved, we can pity them” (Heath xxxi).

In accordance with the philosopher, there are two types of plots: *simple* and *complex* (18). Both are built upon a character’s change of fortune that “corresponds to the failure in action that evokes pity” (Heath xxv). This change develops from a *hamartia*, an error deriving from a moral lapse, lack of knowledge, or a misjudgement (Heath xxxiii). However, the *complex* plot, deemed as the preferred plot, further contains a recognition, a reversal, or both (Aristotle 18). The former term, *anagnorisis*, denotes a (self) recognition “from ignorance to knowledge” (ibid.), while the latter, *peripeteia*, involves a reversal of an expected action (Heath xxx).

Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*

Transitioning to Russian formalism, particularly influential during the 1930s (Owen and Pivodori 189), Liveley highlights the evident impact of Aristotle’s contributions to narrative and story analysis on Russian scholar Vladimir Propp. Liveley contends that Propp’s work represents “a fulcrum both in the reception of Russian formalism and in the reception of Aristotle’s *Poetics*” (127). Propp stands as a renowned figure in the field of literary theory, with many scholars regarding him as “a founder of structuralism and arguably the founder of *narratology* as well” (Abbott 201), due to his seminal publication, *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928).

In this influential work, Propp employed a scientific approach to literature, thereby developing a groundbreaking theoretical framework for literary analysis. By exploring hundreds of Russian folktales, the author established a structural grammar for stories, enabling the breakdown of all storytelling into the select number of 31

fundamental functions (Fludernik 10). These functions pertain to the actions of characters. The emphasis shifts from character identity to their actions alone, thus indicating that the essence of stories lies not in the “*who*” or “*how*”, but exclusively in the “*what*” (Propp 20). Furthermore, these actions are linked to their placement in the tale, underscoring the significance of plot arrangement (Propp 21). Liveley suggests that due to the focus on plot over character (Liveley 129), Propp’s theory echoes Aristotle’s perspective, claiming that in both theories, “*dramatis personae* are the products of plots, and that their narrative status is therefore essentially functional” (Liveley 128).

Barthes’ “The Death of the Author”

Chronologically advancing towards the 1960s (Owen and Pivodori 189), the emergence of post-structuralism, which sought to consolidate the ideas proposed by structuralism, led to a revaluation of the preceding movement (Aguirre 78). This literary current advocated the idea that meanings and interpretations are not fixed, but rather depend on the context and the reader. As Aguirre contends: “Poststructuralism aims at deconstructing [...] both literary and critical texts by revealing their internal inconsistencies and the instability of our traditional borderlines” (78).

This perspective is further applied to the pre-established notion of the author, traditionally believed to possess absolute authorial authority over their texts, which has now become a primary concern within the field of narratology (Fludernik 13). This concept was elaborated by literary theorist Roland Barthes in his influential work “The Death of the Author” (1967). In this essay, Barthes affirms that literature being “tyrannically centred on the author” (143), only serves to restrict interpretation: “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (147). In this way, Barthes dismantles the idea of the author as the

ultimate source of meaning, stating that “it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality [...] to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’” (Barthes 143). By removing the figure of the author, the modern text undergoes a transformation that allows for a multiplicity of interpretations, and shifts the emphasis onto the reader, as opposed the author (Barthes 145, 148). On this topic, Fludernik states that “one of the most significant achievements of narratology is the fact that nowadays we distinguish between author and narrator” (56).

1.3. Key Concepts in Narratology

After the examination of several literary frameworks, let us now assess various fundamental concepts within the discipline of narratology. All stories are expressed through an imaginary voice that conveys the events, commonly known as the narrator. As formerly discussed, the narrator is not to be directly associated with the text’s author, but is rather understood as an “instrument, a construction, or a device wielded by the author” (Abbott 68).

Each story demands a specific narrator to recount it. These distinct narrator types pertain to the notion of voice, which denotes “who it is we ‘hear’ doing the narrating” (Abbott 70). As indicated by Abbott, the simplest distinction concerns to grammatical conventions, as first-person, second-person, and third-person narrators employ their respective personal pronouns (70). Nevertheless, these classifications are insufficient in capturing the “distance” or “degree of involvement” of each narrator in their narration, which is a pivotal concept since “the extent to which the narrator plays a part in the story has an impact on our assessment of the information she gives us” (Abbott 74). Given these circumstances, Genette’s categorisation proves to be extremely useful as narrators are classified according to their narrative level—whether they exist outside the story

world (extradiegetic), or within it (intradiegetic)—and their participation in the story—whether they describe the events from an outside perspective (heterodiegetic), or recount their own experiences (homodiegetic) (Genette 244, 248).

Narrative voice is closely connected to focalisation, a term coined by Genette, which refers to the “point from which (or the eyes through which) you are given the illusion of seeing the action. It commonly, but not invariably, includes traces of the sensibility – the thought and emotion – of the chosen viewer” (Abbott 123). The author distinguishes between internal focalisation, where the point of view is aligned with a particular character. This alignment may either be fixed within one consciousness, variable among a small number of characters, or encompassing multiple. External focalisation, on the other hand, illustrates the character’s actions without bearing access to their internal thoughts or feelings. Lastly, zero focalisation occurs when the narrative perspective is omniscient and, consequently, the narrator possesses and discloses all information (Genette 189–190).

Identifying the narrator class of a text is essential, since it reveals “just how [they] inject into the narration [their] own needs and desires and limitations, and whether we should fully trust the information we are getting” (Abbott 72). It could be argued that the unreliability Abbott refers to is an inherent trait in all narrators, as, due to their selective disclosure and concealment of information, no narrator is entirely reliable. While this may seem evident in homodiegetic narrations, characterised by exceedingly limited viewpoints, this phenomenon extends to all narrators, including the seemingly objective extra-heterodiegetic narrator. One may inquire the motivations behind the usage of an unreliable narrator. Abbott effectively clarifies this by stating: “One important advantage in such narratives is that narration itself – its difficulties, its liability to be subverted by one’s own interests and prejudices and blindnesses – becomes part of the subject” (76).

2. Chapter Two: Analysis of *Atonement*

2.1. Narrative Manipulation and Authorial Control

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* features an unforeseen revelation within its final twenty pages. In the coda titled "London, 1999", narrated by a 77-year-old Briony Tallis, it is revealed that all the precedent events of the novel are, in fact, authored by the youngest member of the Tallis family, Briony. In the epilogue, the woman declares that the reasoning behind the writing of the text is to attempt to atone for the severe mistake committed by her 13-year-old self (371–372).³ The confession of this vital information, however, casts a shadow of unreliability over the recounted story, prompting the reader to re-evaluate the veracity of the novel, coupled with the credibility of Briony's assertions. Building upon this notion, this TFG posits that atonement may not be Briony's genuine objective, but rather a narrative device she employs strategically. The woman's authorial power enables her to manipulate the storyline to her advantage, a perspective that will be subsequently supported in this chapter.

Excluding the coda, the three main parts of *Atonement* are recounted by an extra-heterodiegetic narrative voice. In other words, the traditional third-person omniscient narrator which has access to the characters' actions, and their consciousness. Adhering to Genette's terminology, the chosen narrator bears variable internal focalisation (Finney 74). In "Part One", while the point of view—an element which is "crucial in a story that so dramatically foregrounds perception" (Hidalgo 84)—is predominantly aligned with Briony, it is also shared among other individuals such as Robbie Turner, or Cecilia and Emily Tallis. "Part Two" and "Part Three", however, are respectively conveyed exclusively from Turner's and Briony's perspective. According to Dieter Meindl, "third-person fiction's narrative agency is basically reliable because it does not figure as a person

³ See the Appendix for a full summary of *Atonement*.

or subject” (qtd. in Marsh 1335). Yet, how can this be so, considering that Briony, the source of the havoc that altered their lives, is the author operating this narrator? Marsh declares that *Atonement*’s “apparent objectivity of third-person narration is no such thing, and a discussion of this very fact is embedded throughout the novel, not only in the closing pages” (ibid.).

Finney suggests that Briony aims to recount the events with the “compassion and understanding” that eluded her teenage self, thereby adopting a newfound “empathetic projection into the feelings of others” (81). According to Finney, this narrative is driven by the woman’s unconscious longing to restore the affection of her late sister Cecilia (ibid.). Nevertheless, I hold an opposing perspective on this matter. It is imperative to remember that the authorial voice of the novel does not belong to the naïve teenager of “Part One” or the anxious nurse of “Part Three”, but rather to an accomplished and proficient novelist (McEwan 366), who is likely knowledgeable in narrative techniques, and therefore, adept in narrative manipulation. As Ellam posits, although variable focalisation grants depth to the story, these perspectives are depicted through “the cipher of Briony” (41). This focalisation provides the story with a distance that attributes a seemingly objective tone to the narration, while simultaneously granting Briony complete power to manoeuvre characters and “interpret the opinions of others in her version of her atonement” (Ellam 57). In the words of Wells, “McEwan’s text does not convey selfless contrition; rather, it betrays an investigation of authorial manipulation apparent through the intricate imbrication of the different levels of the narrative” (38).

Briony’s wrongful accusation is the trigger that completely disrupts the lives of those present in the Tallis household on that particularly hot day in 1935. In recounting the events that led her younger self to falsely charge Turner, one may wonder how the mature Briony might portray her teenage version, 64 years later. While Briony never

exonerates herself of her wrongdoing, I argue that she attempts to justify it and render her character in a more forgiving and sympathetic light. With respect to this notion, Ellam claims that Briony's "depiction of her(self) as a young girl swings between noting her innocence and guilt", which is "undercut immediately by self-justification" (42). The author exemplifies this notion with Chapter 13,⁴ although it can be contended to be a constant element throughout the novel. This phenomenon can be further demonstrated, for instance, by Briony's intrusion into the lovers' sexually explicit correspondence: "It was wrong to open people's letters, but it was right, it was essential, for her to know everything" (McEwan 113). This interference is even further justified with her belief that "[...] her sister was in some way threatened and would need her help" (114).

On the topic of narrative, Bentley asserts that the usage of an extra-heterodiegetic narrator generates "an ironic distance [...] towards Briony's over-romanticized emotional and aesthetic responses to the events she observes" (149), enabling readers "to see what she cannot" (156). Indeed, the elder Briony is conscious of her former "self-mythologising" (Wells 38 quoting McEwan 41), and, in her own words, the narrative carries a "self-mocking, or mock-heroic tone" (41). Nonetheless, it could be argued that this only promotes a more empathetic view of the child. From the onset of the novel, Briony is depicted as bearing an "over-anxious imagination" (123), consistently "grappling with some unspoken, self-imposed problem" (68), and having a profound "desire to have the world just so" (4). This intense passion is satisfied in her literature, wherein "an unruly world could be made just so" (7).⁵ Although tinted with a touch of irony from her mature perspective, an innocent image of the adolescent is crafted. Briony's naivety is upheld by the persistent reminder of her inability to discern reality

⁴ See Wells (42) for full insight of her example.

⁵ See Chapter Two, section 2.2. A Character Analysis of Briony Tallis, for a thorough exploration of Briony's psychological characteristics.

from fiction, and her self-imposed role as Cecilia's protector (123). Thereby rationalising her actions, and absolving her of any suspicion or blame for her misdeed: "Her wish for a harmonious, organized world denied her the reckless possibilities of wrongdoing. Mayhem and destruction were too chaotic for her tastes, and she did not have in her to be cruel" (6). In addition, it is feasible to suggest that Briony's self-blame further evokes a compassionate feeling, as illustrated by the statement: "She trapped herself, she marched into the labyrinth of her own construction, and was too young, too awestruck, too keen to please, to insist on making her own way back" (170).

This rendition is not restricted to the first part but is instead sustained throughout the subsequent sections of the novel. In "Part Three", 18-year-old Nurse Tallis is illustrated as being "prone to errors of deportment" (270), a "barrier to friendship" (274), and having her identity completely stripped away (275). Arguably, her decision to become a nurse instead of attending Cambridge (211)—likely an act of self-punishment that "begins to assuage her guilt over her wrongful accusation" (Wells 151)—perpetuates a sense of compassion. This sentiment is culminated by Briony comforting a wounded soldier in his final moments (305–310), an event where "a fiction imposed upon reality is seen to have positive effects" (Wells 152). Additionally, while confronting Robbie and Cecilia, Briony is described as feeling "like a child anticipating a beating" (341). It is crucial to note that this representation of Briony extends into the diary-like epilogue, a non-fictional text, which adds the "last dramatic touch" (Ellam 43). Ellam highlights that "[t]he news of her impending loss of memory [...] gives the novel yet another ironic manipulation and allows for some pathos to be added to this ambivalent construction" (42). Consequently, the mockery tone or "ironic distance" (Bentley 149) towards younger Briony seems ineffective, as she continues to engage in the same behaviour in the representation of her present self.

Empathy towards the protagonist is further attributed through the perspectives of other characters—constructs of Briony’s imagination—particularly of Emily Tallis: “Poor darling Briony, the softest little thing, doing her all to entertain her hard-bitten wiry cousins with the play she had written from her heart. To love her was to be soothed” (65), a sentiment echoed by Cecilia’s concern for the youngest Tallis (106). Furthermore, Robbie and Cecilia’s reluctance to pardon the teenager serve, again, to incite empathy. This is apparent in both “Part Two” through Turner’s stream of consciousness: “Yes, she was a child at the time, and he did not forgive her. He would never forgive her. That was the lasting damage” (234), and “Part Three” during the girl’s meeting with the lovers as she decides to withdraw her evidence (330–349).

While author Briony uses the narrator to voice the *dramatis personae* to her benefit, it can be debated that she employs the exact opposite approach to her cousin Lola Quincey, thereby attributing antipathy towards her character. Briony’s negative perception of Lola, who “had stolen Briony’s rightful role” could be credited to common teenage rivalry and jealousy,⁶ as the younger declares that “behind her older cousin’s perfect manners was a destructive intent” (34). Yet, aside from Emily’s inner monologue, which coincidentally continually aligns with the protagonist’s, the evidence supporting Briony’s claims can be deemed as insufficient: “But how to protect her [Briony] against failure, against that Lola, the incarnation of Emily’s youngest sister who had been just as precocious and scheming at that age [...]” (65). This, alongside Briony’s deliberate omission of Lola’s perspective, and her childish depiction of the woman as “Cruella de Vil” (358) at later age, further suggests significant manipulation in the portrayal of the actual victim of the story.

⁶ See Chapter Two, section 2.2. A Character Analysis of Briony Tallis, for a comprehensive examination of Briony’s relationship with Lola.

Up to this point, this section has mainly focussed on the narrative techniques concerning the narrator's distance and voice, and their potential influence on the rendering of the story. Nonetheless, Briony's metafictional revelation also discloses the alteration of events, since Robbie tragically perished in France in 1940, and Cecilia met the same fate due to a bombing that same year. So, Nurse Tallis never faced the lovers nor endeavoured to revoke her testimony (370–371). Let us now revisit the concept of atonement. The alleged motive for the creation of the novel is Briony's attempt to repent for her misdeed (371), to give the couple a "final act of kindness" (372) by assigning a fictitious fairytale-like resolution to their story. However, Briony's claims can be contested due to the author's systematic inclination and desire to illustrate the interactions between Robbie and Cecilia within her literary works. This is specifically demonstrated by the scene Briony witnesses, involving the lovers by the house's fountain (38–39), and to which she expresses the wish to "enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value" (40). Briony continues to explore this event even five years later in the manuscript *Two Figures by a Fountain* (311), which ultimately evolves into "Part One" of *Atonement*.

The existence of the aforementioned novella, *Two Figures by a Fountain*, is revealed through a letter Briony receives by Cyril Connolly (311–315), the real historical editor of the *Horizon* (Bentley 150). Connolly's annotations regarding the nurse's writing represent a significant revelation, as they have been applied to the novel's "Part One". Although only perceivable through a "careful" rereading of *Atonement* (Hidalgo 87), it becomes evident that, for instance, the manuscript's "Ming vase" (313) evolves into "Meissen porcelain" (23), Cecilia transitions from submerging herself into the water fully clothed (313) to her undergarments (38), and Briony's awareness of the vase (313) is unnoticed until the conclusion of the scene (39). Considering these adjustments, it is

reasonable to assert that the episode develops into being significantly more shocking and puzzling to the teenager. Still, elder Briony incorporates further suggestions that constitute the first chapter of the novel, such as the protagonist interposing between the adults in a “disastrous fashion”, becoming their messenger, and “*innocently* expose[ing] them somehow” (313, emphasis added). In regard to the development of Briony’s novella into a “fully-developed novel” (D’Angelo 99), D’Angelo argues that Briony overcomes her childhood struggle with empathy and “revise[s] her understanding of the function of narrative: Rather than promote an extreme individual perspective, narrative must help readers understand human experience” (99). Yet, I argue an opposite standpoint, as while giving voice to those who have passed (D’Angelo 100), she exploits individuals and events to both the benefit of her character and her conscious. This strategic manipulation is apparent in the formerly discussed overly innocent and empathetic characterisation of Briony, suggested by Connolly in his letter (313).

The editor criticises Briony’s novella for needing “to create tension, some light and shade within the narrative” (314), and for a lack of “development” (312) and of the “backbone of a story” (314). Recalling Abbot’s argument,⁷ the absence of an event in Briony’s manuscript would result in an “description” or an “exposition” of Robbie and Cecilia’s encounter, but would not constitute a true story (13). Following the “modernist obsession with consciousness at the expense of plot” (Finney 71), Briony portrays the couple while omitting her mistake, which ironically would serve as the story’s backbone. As D’Angelo highlights, the author “used these narrative techniques to bury her crime within the text” (99), which she later repents: “The evasions of her little novel were exactly those of her life. Everything she did not wish to confront was also missing from her novella—and was necessary to it” (McEwan 320). Therefore, Briony ultimately

⁷ See Chapter One, page 6 for the full quotation.

writes *Atonement*, the foundation of which is her accusation of Robbie, a deed that Propp would classify as a “villainous act” (59). Considering Briony’s tendency to write about the lovers, the pre-existence of the manuscript, and the need for a backbone, I assert that Briony’s aim in creating the novel is not the claimed atonement, but that this sentiment is rather used as an excuse. By exploiting her error and the couple’s lives, Briony is able to create an alluring and complete story, which now somewhat adheres to Aristotle’s structure for a *complex* plot: *hamartia* (conflict) in “Part One”, *anagnorisis* (self-recognition) in “Part Two”, and *peripeteia* (resolution) in “Part Three”.⁸

Referring extensively to Briony’s role as the author appears contradictory within the established framework of “The Death of the Author” by Barthes,⁹ which claims that the death of the author marks the birth of the reader (148). Still, I argue that Briony seeks to play with this metaphorical notion, albeit with her physical death. The woman declares that the novel will only be published posthumously, stating that “we will only exist as my inventions. Briony will be as much of a fantasy as the lovers [...]. No one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel” (371). Consequently, instead of allowing for a multiplicity of interpretations, Briony establishes her version of the events as the definitive one, unchallenged by any other perspective, while attempting, and arguably failing, to avoid the inevitable consequence:

Self-exposure was inevitable the moment she described a character’s weakness; the reader was bound to speculate that she was describing herself. What other authority could she have? Only when a story was finished, all fates resolved and the whole matter sealed off at both ends so it resembled, at least in this one respect, every other finished story in the world, could she feel immune [...]. (McEwan 6)

⁸ See Chapter One, section 1.2. Theoretical Frameworks, for a full explanation.

⁹ See Chapter One, section 1.2. Theoretical Frameworks, for a full explanation.

2.2. A Character Analysis of Briony Tallis

In the preceding section of this study, the narrative techniques employed by Briony, together with the authorial control that allows her to shape the story, have been extensively dissected. The depiction of Briony as a strategic author might appear as unfair to some, especially considering her declared aim to make amends for her “crime” (McEwan 156) through the writing of her novel, as well as her attempt to rectify the unfixable past (371). However, the character traits and behaviours exhibited by Briony, both in her teenage and young-adult years and in her later life, sustain this interpretation of the woman as a manipulative author, which will be subsequently explored in depth.¹⁰ While it is plausible to establish a distinction between Briony’s role as a character and as the author, thereby constituting her version of the “Death of the Author”¹¹ at the conclusion of “Part Three”, the metafictional revelation of the coda determines the text as an autobiographical rendition, causing a fusion of character and author. Moreover, Briony’s behavioural patterns remain consistent from the three-part novel to the non-fictional epilogue, which provides further evidence to support this assertion.

Modelled after heroine Catherine Morland from Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818), Briony exhibits a parallel propensity of being unable to distinguish reality from fiction, stemming from a vivid imagination that has been nurtured by literature. The character of Briony, however, is intended to go beyond Morland’s wrongdoing and “extend the notion of the crime of deluded perception producing damaging consequences for others” (Head 163). Just as Catherine believes herself to be a Gothic novel heroine, Briony demonstrates a distinctly self-centred personality, likely a result of her “enveloping obsession” with fiction (21). O’Hara clarifies self-absorbance as being a

¹⁰ Due to the parameters to which this project is confined, constructing a psychoanalysis of Briony was not possible. Nonetheless, this would be a fruitful area for further work. See Further Research for further comment.

¹¹ See Chapter One, section 1.2. Theoretical Frameworks, for a full explanation.

fundamental aspect of humankind, noting that “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”, a notion Briony copes with by “conflating life and art” (75, 77). It may be contended that this egocentric view, fuelled by literature, persists all throughout Briony’s life, though being considerably more subdued. Nurse Tallis claims that “she might look and behave like and live the life of a trainee nurse, but she was really an *important writer* in disguise” (280, emphasis added). It must be considered that, up to this point, Briony’s literary work has not been published, but has instead been rejected by the *Horizon*, though with some praise. These features are further showcased in her elder years, as she rejoices in being the centre of attention: “How delightful to be at the heart of such a good-willed reunion” and “[e]very second person wanted to tell me something kind about my books” (366).

The protagonist’s self-centred tendencies are predominantly evident in her interactions with her 15-year-old cousin. The rivalry between the adolescents may be attributed to Briony’s jealousy as she compares herself to Lola, who possesses the “tokens of maturity” that the former lacks and desperately seeks (34). This sentiment worsens when Lola is cast as Arabella in Briony’s play (37), leading the protagonist to take out her frustration on some nettles: “[...] this was Lola, and though she whimpered for mercy, the singing arc of a three-foot switch cut her down at the knees and sent her worthless torso flying. This was too satisfying to let go, and the next several nettles were Lola too [...]” (74). Briony’s ambivalent feelings towards the elder teenager are made apparent when Lola confides in her about being harmed. Although Briony declares to feel “tenderness towards her” (118), she also recognises that “[h]er cousin’s distress produced in her a state of restlessness, an agitation that was close to joy” (117). However, Briony is able to take centre-stage in her relationship with Lola when she discovers the latter only

just assaulted. Ironically highlighted by author Briony, the girl is eager to name her cousin's aggressor, appropriating the victim's story and truth as her own by imposing her imagined version:

Perhaps she [Lola] had already drawn breath and parted her lips. But it did not matter because Briony was about to cut her off and the opportunity would be lost. So many seconds had passed – thirty? forty-five? – and the younger girl could no longer hold herself back. Everything connected. It was her own discovery. It was *her* story, the one that was writing itself *around her*. [...] Her cousin's removal left Briony centre stage—there was no sign yet of Robbie—and the way she was listened to, deferred to and gently prompted seemed at one with her new maturity. (McEwan 166, 173 emphasis added)

In regard to the relationship between the adolescents, Kogan posits Briony mimicking the rivalry of Emily and Hermione—her mother and aunt—with Lola, an antagonism that is “reinforced by her mother’s hostility toward Hermione” (60). As noted in the former section of this study, Briony’s perspective often aligns with her mother’s, particularly concerning Lola. Nevertheless, these portrayals are the creation of 77-year-old Briony, thus it can be suggested that the author might justify her younger self’s actions through Emily’s inner monologue. This is further reinforced by elder Briony’s persistent negative and “villain[ous]” perception of Lola (358), as she is “haunted” by the latter’s superior health, status, and femininity (361). As Kogan puts it, “Briony is the loser in her lifelong competition with Lola” (62). One might wonder if the lack of Lola’s viewpoint within the narrative derives from Briony’s dislike of her cousin. The author fails to recognise that Lola, like Robbie, is a victim of her actions, as they lead her to marry her rapist—a union which Briony acknowledges she “had made it possible” (285). Elderly Briony remains fixed in her past relationship with her cousin, maintaining that Lola “was always the superior older girl, one step ahead of me. But in that *final important matter*, I will be *ahead of her*, while she’ll live on to be a hundred. I will not be able to publish in my lifetime” (361, emphasis added). This passage casts doubt on Briony’s quest for atonement, as it implies Briony seeking to exert, once and for all, control and agency over

Lola by identifying her aggressor, and by confessing their silence. While the novel is allegedly Briony's endeavour to seek redemption for her misconducts to Cecilia and Robbie, it is imperative to acknowledge the possibility of Briony yearning to wield authority and triumphing over Lola, as it is implied by the author's confession.

As mentioned in the former section of this project, as well as her egocentric disposition, the youngest Tallis also demonstrates an intense need for order. Her "orderly spirit" (5) is thus appeased by the governable nature of literature, particularly by "the neat, limited and controllable form" of stories, where the author has full dominance (37). The absence of order—or rather Briony's lack of understanding—of the fountain scene, coupled with her unauthorised reading of Robbie's explicit letter, leads the young girl to cast Turner as a "maniac" (119). As a result, when faced with the opportunity to become Lola's saviour and, therefore, the focus of attention, Briony is quick to blame Robbie as the attacker, despite her failure to clearly discern the figure she saw, claiming that it was "[l]ess like seeing, more like knowing" (170). Briony's eagerness to be highlighted, paired with her literature-infused imagination, results in her concluding that "[t]he truth was in the symmetry, which was to say, it was founded in common sense. The truth instructed her eyes" (169), and therefore imposing her chronicle as fact. In examining Briony's mature depiction, Lippitt points out that "Briony acknowledges that for all that she has grown, *the person she is now* still contains an element of *the person she was then*" (132). While this author claims a growth in the protagonist, her desire for order and control persists even in the coda with her declaration: "I've always liked to make a tidy finish" (353).

In light of this, it can be contended that the fictionalised version of the events that Briony illustrates in the novel is her "tidy finish" (353). As previously noted, teenage Briony struggles to cope with elements and events that do not align with her orderly

demeanour. On this subject, O'Hara puts forward that "[b]y reducing others to the status of artificial things, she can take the mystery out of alterity, she can accommodate chaotic reality with a tidy narrative of her own design" (77). It is my conviction that this notion can be, once more, extrapolated to Briony's senior years. When addressing Robbie and Cecilia's real outcome—both tragically dying in 1940—the author articulates the following: "How could that constitute an ending? What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account?" (371). As opposed to depicting the true events, Briony imposes an aestheticized rendition. This manipulative action is excused by her statement: "I couldn't do it to them. I'm too old, too frightened, too much in love with the shred of life I have remaining" (371), reminiscent of the self-justification Ellam highlights.¹² Echoing her past demeanour, where she "fixe[d] the main actors in simplified roles: Cecilia as the victim in need of protection and Robbie as the villain" (Bentley 153), Briony reduces the couple to mere characters whose destiny she can shape to suit her story. Despite presenting them in different characterisations, Briony labels the individuals as "my *spontaneous*, fortuitous sister and her medical *prince*",¹³ instead of recognising their humanity (371, emphasis added). Yet again, the author prioritises herself and her literary work over the people she wronged. Briony's implied journey of maturing and her departure from her adolescent worldview, which was "shaped by aesthetic expectations" (O'Hara 76), appears as non-existent.

Briony declares the novel as being a sort of crime confession (her own, as well as that of Lola and Marshall¹⁴): "I've regarded it as my duty to disguise nothing—the names, the places, the exact circumstances—I put it all there as a matter of historical record"

¹² See Chapter Two, section 2.1. Narrative Manipulation and Authorial Control, for the full quotation and explanation.

¹³ There is a notable similarity between the portrayal of Cecilia and the protagonist from Briony's earlier play: "This is the tale of *spontaneous* Arabella/Who ran off with an extrinsic fellow" (16, emphasis added).

¹⁴ Paul Marshall, Leon Tallis' friend, is Lola's reported aggressor, whom she marries (324).

(369). Nonetheless, it is through Cyril Connolly's letter that Briony's former assertion is exposed as a blatant falsehood. Not only has the woman altered the formerly discussed ending of the lovers, but also seemingly trivial elements.¹⁵ The modification of the material of the vase, Cecilia's clothing, or Briony's knowledge of the object does not contribute to the author's expiation, but does indeed elevate the storyline, hence creating an "underlying pull of simple narrative" (312). Accordingly, these slight modifications are further indicators of Briony's prioritisation of her storytelling over her alleged endeavour to make amends by admitting the truth. This interpretation may also be applied to the voicing of the *dramatis personae*.¹⁶ Diverging from O'Hara's suggestion of an empathic process (92), and Kogan notion of "self-punishment" (51), Briony's portrayal of other individuals can be interpreted as her fulfilling a literary purpose, crafting a compelling and cohesive novel. An empathetic perspective towards the victims would require the inclusion of Lola, a viewpoint that, as previously discussed, Briony fails to provide. Moreover, Briony voicing other characters mirrors her behaviour when identifying Lola's aggressor, eclipsing their account with her own words. Consequently, I assert that the correlation between Briony's understanding of effective storytelling and the alterations within the story, is not coincidental.

Cowardice can be regarded as one of Briony's inherent psychological traits. As Kogan underscores, during the initial years following the incident, the girl "lived a more or less normal life in her parents' mansion, and did not feel compelled to tell her parents her doubts about her accusation" (65), reinforced by her assertion: "I've always been good at not thinking about the things that are really troubling me" (361). In addition, she refrained from declaring the truth during Lola and Marshall's wedding, and neglected to approach her sister even after Robbie's death (Kogan 65). Briony discloses her inability

¹⁵ See Chapter Two, section 2.1. Narrative Manipulation and Authorial Control, for a full insight.

¹⁶ See Chapter Two, section 2.1. Narrative Manipulation and Authorial Control, for a full insight.

to publish this novel as a consequence of the great influence and power of the Marshall family, where “publication equals litigation” (359). While this assertion may hold validity, it can also be argued that, by publishing the novel posthumously, the author ensures the lack of any confrontation with any of the individuals implicated in the illustrated events. Therefore, the delay of confession is present not only within the novel itself, but also in its publication, since it is released following Briony’s death. Furthermore, in doing so, Briony guarantees, one last time, the establishment of her aestheticized version as the definitive one: “But what *really* happened? The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish. As long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft [...]” (371). As a result, in 13-year-old Briony’s own terms: “The truth had become as ghostly as invention” (41).

3. Conclusions and Consequences

This study set out to explore the notion of narrative unreliability within Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, particularly in relation to the protagonist's assertion to seek redemption through this novel. Hence, this project aimed to answer its two foundational inquiries. The first one, on whether Briony Tallis' narrative control stemmed from her authorial power, could be regarded as self-interested manipulation instead of her declared attempt of atonement. Subsequently, the second query was concerned in identifying the narrative techniques Briony employs in order to impose her version of the events. Operating within the field of narrative theory, by conducting a process of close reading of McEwan's text, along with the examination of numerous critical sources, convincing findings have been uncovered to address the former questions.

As for the narrative techniques employed by the true author of *Atonement*—Briony Tallis—numerous methods have been identified. It can be stated that Briony's predominant manipulation technique is the usage of an extra-heterodiegetic narrator. The narrative distance of this narrator allows to establish an apparently objective tone to the narration, which leads the reader to not doubt the reliability of the illustrated events and characters. In addition, the usage of an extra-heterodiegetic narrator enables Briony to voice the perspectives of all the *dramatis personae*. This control grants her the ability to attribute sympathy and antipathy to whichever individual she desires, resulting in Briony's character being presented in a more empathetic and compassionate light. The girl's actions are justified by her naivety and innocence, a depiction induced and justified both by the narrator, and by other characters' viewpoint. On the other hand, Lola Quincey is portrayed rather unfavourably, and is not provided with a voice.

The manipulation of perspectives, together with the delay of confession, present both within the book and also in its posthumous publication, bring about the establishment

and consolidation of the youngest Tallis' biased version of events. It must be considered, however, that this account is an aestheticized rendering of the story. Evidenced by the letter from Cyril Connolly, the *Horizon's* editor, a multitude of alterations to the occurrences has taken place. Apart from modifying Robbie and Cecilia's ending—from dying in 1940 to reuniting—and therefore Briony's encounter with the couple, the author also changes apparently inconsequential elements. Adhering to the editor's suggestions, the fountain scene becomes significantly scandalous and complex, while the teenager appears considerably more innocent and further intertwined in the couple's story. These adjustments do not serve Briony's asserted search for redemption, but rather create an improved, more cohesive, and compelling book.

Having addressed the main narrative techniques employed by Briony, I now proceed to address the first question, the possibility of Briony having self-serving intentions with the writing of the novel. Throughout this study it has become apparent that an affirmative answer can be provided to this inquiry. Across the entirety of the novel, spanning from 1935 to 1999, the character showcases a systematic desire and need for order, which is only satisfied by her writing. Accordingly, Briony's terrible error of falsely condemning Robbie, which disrupts the girl's orderly spirit, is "mended" by assigning a fairytale-like ending to the lovers. Similarly, Briony's prominent traits of cowardice and rivalry also highly influence the narrative. Also, the woman exhibits an egotistical personality, which accounts for the formerly mentioned preference of depicting untrue events over admitting the full truth. Cowardice and rivalry are, likewise, elements which impact the novel's narrative and story. The book's posthumous release also functions as Briony's means of avoiding confrontation with the Marshalls, delivering her final blow to her disliked cousin Lola.

Taking into account the narratological and psychological factors mentioned above, alongside the support provided by both classical and contemporary critical sources used, in relation to the posed research questions, I believe my thesis to be proven. That is, Briony Tallis uses the stories of Robbie, Cecilia, and Lola to her benefit. Accordingly, the author's stated purpose of pursuing atonement through the creation of this novel can be deemed false, serving solely as a justification for the mere existence of the text. Whether it is a means to be victorious in her lifelong rivalry with Lola, or simply as a way to exploit her family's tragic demise to create an appealing publication, it can be stated that Briony's novel is anything but a search for atonement.

4. Further Research

During the writing of this project, several compelling and relevant issues became apparent. Nonetheless, due to the limitations of this study, many of these aspects could not be further explored, while others did not align with the focal point of this TFG. As a result, these topics are given below as potential issues for further discussion within the discussion of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*.

A Psychoanalytical Approach to Briony Tallis

As mentioned in Chapter Two, subsection 2.2, examining the character of Briony through the lenses of psychoanalysis was not possible due to this project's limitations. However, this would be a fruitful area of research, as it would provide additional insight into the youngest Tallis' character and motives. For instance, Kogan posits Briony having an Oedipus complex towards Cecilia (59), which could further explain the girl's actions concerning her sister and Robbie.

Class Conflict

With the exception of Cecilia, the Tallises swiftly accept Briony's declaration of Robbie as Lola's attacker, despite a lifelong relationship with the man. The lovers, however, believe Danny Hardman, the son of the family's servant, to be the true rapist. Noticeably, no one accuses the chocolate manufacturing magnate, Paul Marshall. Hence, the class conflict that influences the character's assumptions, even Turner's, would be a fascinating area of research.

Reader-Response Analysis

As discussed in this project, the text is presented as being objectively narrated up until the epilogue's metafictional revelation. Consequently, a reader-response analysis in regard to the interpretation of the text and the character of Briony, both before and after the unveiling of the true author of the novel, would be particularly engaging. This approach would unveil any alterations in the reception of both the story and the character. Should the response be significantly more positive prior to the unveiling of the truth, this would serve as further evidence of author Briony's narrative manipulation.

The Second World War

Undoubtedly, World War II plays an essential role within McEwan's novel. Interestingly, as noted by Alicia Muro in her study "(Re)experiencing Dunkirk: War and Defeat in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*", the novel takes a very different approach to the Dunkirk retreat, commonly regarded as an "emblematic event" (Muro 183). *Atonement*'s portrayal of the event is instead that of "abandonment", "shame", and "defeat" (Muro 187–188). This could be a fruitful topic for further research, particularly in relation to Finney's claims of the Tallises standing as a representative of "Britain's deluded feeling of in vulnerability under Chamberlain in the face of Hitler's escalating aggression across the Channel" (78).

Intertextuality

From Richardson's *Clarissa* through Jane Austen's *Emma* to Woolf's *The Waves*, a multitude of literary works are referenced throughout the text in various contexts. Analysing each of these in relation to the characters, but especially in relation to the narrative, would make for an interesting research area. Hidalgo highlights the development within Briony's narrative style (85); bearing in mind that this woman, an enthusiast of modernism, authors the text, it would be intriguing to investigate the

alterations and evolution of her narrative within the novel, in relation to the referenced literary works.

A Character Analysis of Lola Quincey

All the events depicted in *Atonement* are, of course, built upon the assault of 15-year-old Lola Quincey. Yet, the victim of this event is rarely discussed within the literature of this novel, the majority of which centres around her 13-year-old cousin Briony. Exploring the character of Lola, particularly within a psychoanalytical framework, could be an intriguing topic for understanding her decision not to deny Briony's claims, as well as to marry Marshall. This examination could be closely related to the class dynamics mentioned above.

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Appendix: A summary of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

Atonement recounts the story of the Tallises, a well-established family residing on an English country estate. "Part One" of the novel is set in an exceptionally sweltering day amid the summer of 1935. Jack and Emily Tallis' eldest daughter, Cecilia, has recently graduated from Cambridge University, alongside Robbie Turner, the housekeeper's son. Briony and Cecilia's maternal cousins, 15-year-old Lola Quincey and 9-year-old twins Jackson and Pierrot Quincey, come to stay with the Tallises. Furthermore, the family receives a visit from the eldest sibling, Leon, accompanied by his friend, Paul Marshall. While awaiting their guests, Briony witnesses a peculiar interaction between Cecilia and Robbie, during which a vase is accidentally broken and falls into the fountain. In her undergarments, Cecilia submerges herself to retrieve the pieces. The childhood friends begin to understand their attraction towards each other; thus, Robbie gives Briony a love letter to deliver to Cecilia, accidentally giving her a sexually explicit draft. Reading the note, the teenager becomes convinced of Turner being a threat to her older sister. Nonetheless, Robbie and Cecilia end up in a consensual sexual encounter, overseen and misinterpreted by Briony. During dinner, the twins disappear, leading the family to organise a search party. Alone, Briony encounters her assaulted cousin Lola. While the girl is unable to identify her aggressor, Briony is certain of having seen Robbie, and testifies against him.

"Part Two" of the novel, set five years later, follows Robbie. After several years in prison, the man concludes his sentence by enlisting in the army. Throughout his time in prison and at war, he maintains correspondence with Cecilia, who learns of Briony's intention to withdraw her testimony. While injured and delirious, Turner retreats to Dunkirk. "Part Three" focusses on eighteen-year-old Briony, who foregoes Cambridge to become a trainee nurse, a demanding and intimidating experience. To cope, Briony

authors stories, submitting *Two Figures in a Fountain* to a magazine. The girl attends Lola and Paul Marshall's wedding, where she realises that Marshall, and not Robbie, was the attacker. Thus, Briony visits Cecilia and unexpectedly discovers that Turner is alive and living with her sister. Despite their anger towards her, Briony promises to change her evidence, initiating her process of atonement.

The concluding section of the book "London, 1999" resembles a non-fictional diary entry, narrated by a 77-year-old Briony, now a renowned novelist. The reader discovers that the woman has been diagnosed with vascular dementia. In light of her deteriorating mental state, Briony finishes the last details of her last novel, *Atonement*. The woman claims that publication is impossible while Paul Marshall and Lola Quincey are still alive, thereby ensuring that it becomes a posthumous novel. Briony also admits to having altered the story, revealing that both Robbie and Cecilia passed away in 1940. Therefore, the lovers never reunited, and Briony never attempted to revoke her testimony. Consequently, the author asserts that this book serves as her attempt to atone for the mistake made by her 13-year-old self.