

(Un)reliable Narrative in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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Abstract

Atonement is a historiographic metafiction intertextual novel written by Ian McEwan in 2001. It is a three-part narrative of 77-year-old Briony Tallis, who is suffering from vascular dementia and recalling the life-changing events she experienced at age 13. Her self-confessional writing is her retreat and serves as narrative therapy, but it does not redeem her for the acts she has committed and lived with for almost six decades. The story of her life and those of the other characters may not be accurately narrated as events happened but as she had wanted them to. By analyzing the narrative, the researcher hopes to show that the main protagonist and narrator's narrative and memory are not entirely reliable.

Keywords: *Atonement*, confessional, memory, narrative therapy

1. Introduction

Ian McEwan is a British novelist who published *Atonement* in 2001. It is a three-part novel in which the narrator is not revealed until the end. The reader believes that McEwan is narrating the novel but discovers at the conclusion that this is a novel within a novel where the script and events are made up by Briony Tallis. The narrator is a protagonist who seems to be recollecting the first 60 years of her life, with a particular focus on the events of one hot summer day that changed the lives of her family and Robbie Turner. The novel starts with an epigraph, which is an inscription or a literary quotation placed at the beginning of a book or another work. *Atonement's* epigraph is from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, and it serves as a guide and warning to view this narrative. By using this epigraph, McEwan ironically creates the Tallis country house which is later renamed as Tilney's Hotel. McEwan views *Northanger Abbey* as a novel about a person's wild imagination causing havoc to people around them. Austen's character Tilney makes remarks to Catherine that can be applied equally fittingly to Briony, whose equally volatile imagination leads her to tell a dangerous destructive lie. At age 13, Briony commits to being a playwright and subjects everything to her personal demands—or the demands of her fantasy world. This postmodern metanarrative novel deals with a moral dilemma, betrayal, and guilt. In his incisive analysis of postmodernism, in *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard refers to thought as “metanarratives” or grand stories that structure the discourses of modern religion, politics, philosophy, and science. Metanarratives, according to him, are a form of ideology that functions violently to suppress and control the individual subject by imposing a false sense of “totality” and “universality” on a set of disparate things, actions, and events. A metanarrative is like a literary narrative in that it is essentially a means of ordering discrete elements in a particular form and thus presenting a rhetorical case about the way things work or are connected, which legitimizes political positions and courses of action (Nicol 2009).

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2. Review of Literature

Ian McEwan is a renowned author known for his thought-provoking and complex novels. One of his notable works is the novel "Atonement," published in 2001. This literature review aims to analyze Ian McEwan's novel "Atonement" based on various critical perspectives. As I mentioned earlier, Ian McEwan's work often delves into central issues of our time, and "Atonement" is no exception to this pattern. One critical perspective that has been applied to McEwan's work, including "Atonement," is Wayne Booth's theory of implied author. This theory suggests that the implied author, distinct from the actual author, is the voice and intentions behind the narrative. According to Diemert, McEwan's fiction engages with intertextuality and difficult themes, but still manages to gain popularity among readers. Another critical perspective that has been applied to "Atonement" is Alexander Nehamas's postulated author theory. Nehamas's theory focuses on the role of the author in shaping the reader's interpretation of the text. *Atonement*, as the title suggests, delves into the

concept of atonement and explores its various dimensions. One aspect that has been analyzed is the use of intertextuality in the novel. McEwan employs intertextuality by making references to biblical themes and the Christian notion of atonement (Huang, 2017). Works of Ian McEwan, especially this novel, have been researched based on Wayne Booth's theory of implied author and Alexander Nehamas's postulated author. Ian McEwan's writing especially of this novel have been researched based on Wayne Booth's theory of implied author and Alexander Nehamas postulated author.

Diemert writes that Ian McEwan's work usually deals with central issues, whether these be the collapse of communism, the Iraq War, climate change, or the problems of ethical and faithful decision-making in a technological and medically sophisticated world. He further adds that McEwan's fiction engages with intertextuality and difficult themes notwithstanding, his fiction has achieved a measure of popularity. Most of the previous research conducted on the novel takes a theological perspective. *Atonement* is studied as a novel where sin is committed, Shah comments that McEwan rebels against the Creator and does not accept the causes of sin. So much so that his aesthetic postmodern malaise is ineffectual and incomplete. Kogan has further analysed *Atonement* based on enactment, guilt and reparation. It examines the behavior and motivations of the central character Briony Tallis and the study explored relationships that incited her to her enactment and guilt and between reparation and enactment. Alwyn analyses *Atonement* based on discursive model, Lacanian and psychoanalytical concept of transference. Where the system is shattered from within because of the diabolical system and having a unique victim.

According to Weston *Atonement* re-traces the development of twentieth-century fiction from modernist amorality to postmodern relativism, where the writer figure Briony fails to record history, which doesn't serve as a consolation. Readers were to be responsible for sharing the experience of the damages of war, and sexual violence and to understand the historical memory overcoming Briony's shortcomings. Finney concentrates on the self-conscious use of narrative in *Atonement*, saying that the novel makes fiction. The thirteen-year-old protagonist ruthlessly subordinates all the people in her world to adapt to her fictional world making herself self-referential. D'Angelo further suggests that McEwan tries to bring about transparency in the narrative by showing that Briony was the narrator who was making fiction. Further according to Stern- 'The act of writing separates this narrator from other speakers and focalizers, giving his or her additional power to digest, organize, and permanently record events after the fact. Writer-narrators are imbued with tools other narrators are not, including different aspects of narrative style and focalization. The function of the narrator inevitably changes, however, if he or she is deemed unreliable'. (2008). Jamalpour and Derabi (2022) studied *Atonement* for the cultural discourse and social communication in groups based on which they describe the contexts, functions and effects of cultural identity which in turn forms cultural memory which makes one understand social and cultural contexts and complexities. The novel presents itself as a realistic narrative, but also incorporates modern experimental techniques such as stream of consciousness and montage. According to one source, *Atonement* exhibits postmodern deconstruction techniques, which adds to its overall narrative complexity (Han & Wang, 2015).

Marsh discusses the potential schema of unreliability of narration in *Atonement*, especially in Part One where limited-scope narration is marked by third-person pronouns. However, this schema fails to account for the unreliability present in the seemingly objective and reliable parts two and three of the novel. A persuasive reading of *Atonement* suggests that it tests the relationship between narrative form and historical accuracy. Additionally, *Atonement* raises questions about the link between narrative creativity and confabulation, inviting readers to contemplate the extent to which storytelling and creating alternate worlds and selves can be beneficial or problematic (Green, 2010). Furthermore, *Atonement* reveals a meta-fictional dimension as the identity of the narrator, Briony, who is writing the story as an act of atonement in old age, is revealed towards the end of the novel (Straub, 2014). This further twist in *Atonement*, where Briony admits to favoring narratively satisfying over historically true, raises important questions about the complex relationship between fiction and history, and the ethical implications of storytelling (Marsh, 2017).

According to Duffus (2017) Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, focuses much attention on the final section, "London, 1999," which unveils the true focus of the story. This section reveals that Briony's development as a writer and her storytelling have significant implications for truth and history. The deeper exploration of narrative form and historical "actuality" sheds light on the true significance of Briony's act of atonement. McEwan delves into the complex relationship between fiction and history, which gains depth as the narrative unveils Briony's true identity as a successful novelist. This meta-fictional aspect emphasizes storytelling's influence in blurring reality and fiction, prompting profound questions about its ethical implications. The concept of 'tales-within-tales' further highlights the multi-layered nature of storytelling and its power to shape perceptions.

Dobrogoszcz (2015) analyses Ian McEwan's self-reflexive novel *Atonement* as a rich ground for analysis through the theoretical lens of psychoanalytic theory, particularly Jacques Lacan's framework. The narrative, presented as a fictitious work by Briony Tallis, meticulously delves into the complexities of atonement, guilt, and the craving for control. Briony, portrayed as an idealistic and innocent child, grapples with unconscious structures and compulsive desires, resonating with Lacan's notions of the symbolic order and the influence of the ego. Her endeavour to create an expiatory fantasy to atone for past mistakes also aligns with Freud's ideas about creativity and the narcissistic constitution. Briony's portrayal of her perspective through the narrative emphasizes the unreliable and subjective nature of third-person narration, questioning the supposed objectivity of the storyline. This self-reflective element in "Atonement" adds a further level to the intricacies already entwined in the narrative, highlighting Lacanian theory's importance in uncovering the complexities of the characters' motivations and behaviours.

3. Narrative

Briony's narrative of a hot summer day in 1935, at the family mansion in Surrey the English countryside, starts with her play 'Trials of Arabella' written in honor of her older brother Leon's visit. The day she reconsiders becoming a novelist instead of a playwright coincides with the day that would change forever the lives of three people, the first was Robbie Turner, who would have been a doctor, the only son of their charlady whose college study was funded by Jack Tallis, the second was Briony's Oxford returned older sister Cecilia Tallis and the third was her own. Shoshana Felman's *Explorations in Memory* (1995) explains how storytelling then "illuminates understandings of 'testaments,' allowing for the reader to identify intersections between literature, autobiography, and history, each tied up with the act of bearing witness." Wayne C. Booth defines the "unreliable narrator" in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* as follows: I have called 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. According to M. H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms*: The fallible or unreliable narrator is one whose perception, interpretation, and evaluation of the matters he or she narrates do not coincide with the implicit opinions and norms manifested by the author, which the author expects the alert reader to share. Additionally, David Lodge says in *The Art of Fiction*: Unreliable Narrators are invariably invented characters who are part of the stories they tell... Even a character-narrator cannot be a hundred percent unreliable. If everything he or she says is palpably false, that only tells us what we know already, namely that a novel is a work of fiction. There must be some possibility of discriminating between truth and falsehood within the imagined world of the novel, as there is in the real world, for the story to engage our interest. The point of using an unreliable narrator is indeed to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter. Based on Booth, Abrams, and Lodge the unreliable narrator is one whose sense of values does not agree with that of the author be it implicitly or explicitly. Works of Ian McEwan, especially this novel, have been researched based on Wayne Booth's theory of implied author and Alexander Nehamas's postulated author. However, the present paper researches the narrative as an unreliable narrative where the flesh and blood author is not the author, but the narrator is a fictional author spinning stories within stories which categorizes this work as a post-modern metafictional historiographic work. This paper is of particular significance as it analyses the metanarrative and validates why the narrative is unreliable. This study addresses the attempt to integrate existing research to form the background of a storytelling narrative. The one central event that occurred in the life of the protagonist is ironic and not nostalgic. The underlying fact in this choice of the novel is the author's claim to confess may not be entirely the truth, where the title *Atonement* was not an act of penance, repentance, or seeking forgiveness. The oath 'I confess to tell the truth, nothing but the complete truth' is conveniently altered to 'I confess to the truth nothing but the complete truth as I see right.' The title suggests that the focus would be on penance because of a sin.

D'Angelo further suggests that McEwan tries to bring about transparency in the narrative by showing that Briony was the narrator who was making fiction from her imaginative mind, but possessed poor powers of comprehension. Which she realizes as an adult, and tries to construct the narrative with an adult perspective. Whereby the role of responsibility is not only of the narrator but also of the reader. The imagined world is the setting in which a novel's story takes shape. Based on the Russian formalists the unreliable narrator can be classed based on two distinct elements the *sjuzet* and *fabula*- the *sjuzet* being the sequence of the narrative while *fabula* is the sequence of events. Adding a further tenet is Mieke Bal's narratology which is the text which contains the object of the narrative. The traditional purpose of a narrator has been to communicate the events of the story world, through which a reader can derive the author's intended meaning. Classical narratology organizes this dynamic in a tripartite structure in which "a reader recognizes a dichotomy between the personalized narrator's perceptions and expressions and those of the implied author." However, as narratological theory has progressed, the role of narration has been expanded to include a speaker (the classical narrator) and the lens through which events are perceived (focalizer). Mieke Bal outlines this distinction in *Narratology*, defining focalization as an aspect of narration that colors the perception of story events, but not their presentation by the implied author. Along with the narrator who speaks and the focalizer who sees, I choose to add "the writer" to this dynamic to fully explore the perspective of the writer-narrator. The writer documents—a task that dramatically affects the ways in which a story is expressed. The act of writing separates this narrator from other speakers and focalizers, giving his or her additional power to digest, organize, and permanently record events after the fact. Writer-narrators are imbued with tools other narrators are not, including different aspects of narrative style and focalization. The function of the narrator inevitably changes, however, if he or she is deemed unreliable. (Stern, 2008)

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The novel *Atonement* explores the complexities of storytelling and the challenges of unreliable narration. The central character, Briony

Tallis, takes on the role of the narrator as well as the focalizer, presenting a story that is deeply colored by her own perceptions and misunderstandings. The act of writing and the role of the writer-narrator are key elements in shaping the narrative, as it grants the narrator the power to dictate the events through their own lens. However, it also raises questions about reliability and the potential for misunderstandings and misinterpretations on the part of both the narrator and the reader.

As Stern suggests, the function of the narrator can be fundamentally altered if they are perceived as unreliable. This notion ties back to the discussion of unreliable narration and the postcolonial politics in the novel. Understanding the reasons for the narrator's unreliability is crucial in unraveling the layers of storytelling and in gaining a deeper insight into the themes and interpretations presented in the narrative. It is through these layers that the novel challenges classical narratology and introduces new narrative patterns that depart from conventional perspectives, ultimately defamiliarizing and denaturalizing cultural constructions of gender, authority, and power within storytelling. By delving into the complexities of narration, the novel prompts readers to question not only what is being narrated, but also how it is being narrated, and by whom. This self-conscious approach to storytelling reflects a departure from traditional modes of narration and opens up avenues for exploring the nuanced relationships between the storyteller, the story, and the reader.

4. Narrative within a Narrative

Briony's narrative begins and ends sixty years later with the 'Trials of Arabella'. The Trials are a story that Briony composed in a whirlwind in one day where Arabella is cheated by a wealthy count only to be rescued by a doctor who is a prince in disguise and ends happily with them getting married on 'a windy sunlit day in spring' (McEwan 2001, 5). This strange intertextuality- this story within the story is almost the outcome of the characters they play and serves as a foreshadowing element, Bennet and Royle state in their book *Literature, Criticism and Theory* (2009), "The simplest way to define narrative is a series of events in a specific order – with a beginning, middle and an end...[It], however, is characterized by its foregrounding of a series of events or actions which are connected in time... [and]...The logical or causal connections between one event and another constitute fundamental aspects of every narrative" (Bennet 2009). Therefore, the basic framework of a narrative is to have sequential causal connectivity among the events narrated in it. However, the distortions in the linear time sequence such as "flashbacks" (Bennet 2009). The story is very similar to her real-life Robbie the doctor and herself as the Prince who would rescue her. Briony who had been infatuated with Robbie for his exceptional good looks, had saved her from drowning, her imaginative mind made her believe that she was like the typical fairy tale damsel in distress rescued by her prince charming, and this behavior was rejected immediately by Robbie.

On that same day, their brother Leon Tallis was returning accompanied by his extremely rich chocolate manufacturer friend Paul Marshall, a would-be suitor for Cecelia. All this coincides with the arrival of her refugee cousins, fifteen-year-old Lola Quince, and her twin brothers. With the wide array of live characters at her disposal, she had an open canvas with new stories in her mind. Another event in the series Briony witnessed from an upper-story window a scene by the fountain between her sister Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner, this was an encounter between two adults something her young mind maybe couldn't fully comprehend. Later Briony was inspired by this incident to write the story 'Two Figures by the Fountain' where she recollected the full scene with vivid details. According to Narrative Therapy, the first aspect is to understand one's life by means of a story and the second is the narrate stories as a therapy. Briony presents both these aspects throughout her stories within the story. Whether it was her composition of 'The Trials of Arabella' or 'Two Figures by the Fountain' and later the rejected story she wrote as a novelist. Through her narrative, she fully comprehends the realities of her childhood. Ian McEwan describes the situation of his family as follows:

In my 20s I was often defending, or trying to defend, Rose against David, or promote her cause somehow. The effect on my writing was fairly direct; though I think at the time I had no clear sense of the connection. I read *The Female Eunuch* (written by Germaine Greer and published in London in 1970) in 1971 and thought it was revelation. The feminism of the 1970s spoke directly to a knot of problems at the heart of our family's life. I created a romantic vision that if the spirit of women was set free, it would heal the world. My stories female characters represented all the good traits that men were lacking. In other words, pen in hand, I was going to set my mother free (*The Guardian*, 2001).

Be it her mother's migraine living room bound owing to her father's affairs, the absent father forever away 'working', Cecilia and Robbie who were young and in love, Lola who had tried to confess about who was giving her Chinese burns and herself. Cecilia and Robbie were in love and that was not short of the fairy tales the difference in class, is the princess marrying a pauper who would rise up in a society based on his intellect. The envious rejected child realized she had no part at all just like she sabotaged 'Trials of Arabella' because the main lead was someone else. Briony's agitation was further compounded that evening, having read Robbie's note meant for Cecilia and seeing their encounter in the library, Briony imagined that her sister needed to be rescued based purely on her assumption that Cecilia was being abused by Robbie who was using his masculine control. Nicolopoulou deconstructs child narrative in two ways (a) where a child tends to equate narrative coherence with causal linkages between events and (b) and the primary (or exclusive) strategy used by children to achieve coherence is to embed causally connected event sequences in the goal-directed actions of a single major protagonist. Briony cherished her writing, transforming into the creator where she could twist and revamp details to her choice.

She could see the simple sentences, the accumulating telepathic symbols, unfurling at the nib's end. She could write the scene three times over, from three points of view; her excitement was in the prospect of freedom, of being delivered from the cumbrous struggle between good and bad, heroes and villains. None of these three was bad, nor were they particularly good. She need not judge. There did not have to be a moral. She need only show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with

the idea that other minds were equally alive. It wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had equal value. That was the only moral a story need have. (McEwan 2001, 6)

Later in the night the twins decided to run away, and while out searching in the dark Lola Quince was assaulted, and Briony the only witness falsely accuses Robbie of assaulting Lola and testifies that she knew it was him and that she 'saw' him. She doesn't waver from her statement which results in Robbie's being imprisoned. "Her memories of the interrogation and signed statements and testimony, or of her awe outside the courtroom from which her youth excluded her" Freud in *The Forgetting of Impressions and Intentions* describes that assessing testimony in courts of law, where the process of putting a witness on oath is clearly expected to have much too great a purifying influence on the play of his psychical forces. "They would not trouble her so much in the years to come as her fragmented recollection of that late night and summer dawn. How guilt refined the methods of self-torture, threading the beads of detail into an eternal loop, a rosary to be fingered for a lifetime." (McEwan 2001,127). Sigmund Freud in *Childhood Memories and Screen Memories* describes childhood memories as-

Memories that have been retained a few strike us as perfectly understandable, while others seem odd or unintelligible. It is not difficult to correct certain errors regarding both sorts. If the memories that a person has retained are subjected to an analytic inquiry, it is easy to establish that there is no guarantee of their accuracy. Some of the mnemonic images are certainly falsified, incomplete, or displaced in time and place. Any such statement by the subjects of the inquiry as that their first recollection comes from about their second year is clearly not to be trusted. Moreover, motives can soon be discovered which make the distortion and displacement of the experience intelligible, but which show at the same time that these mistakes in recollection cannot be caused simply by a treacherous memory. Strong forces from later life have been at work on the capacity of childhood experiences for being remembered- probably the same forces which are responsible for our having become so far removed in general from understanding our years of childhood. (Freud 2003)

McEwan's novel occupies a relationship with other novels like E.M. Forester's 'A Passage to India' and Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey, Atonement's epigraph has been borrowed from it. In his fascination with the past, he shifts between the past and the present, in fact, and in fiction, between traditional Victorian realism and modernism. The novel was discussed as a post-modern historiographic metafiction intertextual novel and was analyzed based on the theories of narrative, psychology, and memory. Linda Hutcheon calls 'historiographic metafiction' which transforms writer's narratives that focus on both social, cultural, and historical legacies. Ian McEwan writes on insights about family perversion, female thoughts, male violence, and wars. The relationship between history and fiction is a very important aspect of Atonement 'fictions were perceived to encroach on all aspects of culture, and much critical theory of the period is interested in the way in which many aspects of life relied heavily on fictional forms' (Head 2002). Robbie who was in prison for six years until he enlists for the Second World War. McEwan sets the story during the Second World War, where the events of Dunkirk are elaborated in great detail, the businessman Paul Marshall benefits from the war was highlighted too "the purpose and process of writing historical fiction, so that questions of authority, responsibility and authenticity are absorbed and expressed in their form" (Anxiety of Authenticity). He employs historiographic metafiction trying to connect historical memory to that of fiction, where memory is connected with national identity and evokes nostalgia, and highlights personal conflict- he uses national memory to highlight personal conflict. Dominic Head suggests "claim for the novel's participation in the making of cultural history is more justifiable". At the age of eighteen, Briony was training as a nurse and witnessed the horrors of the war, through the eyes of the traumatized soldiers. At times she contemplated if she would ever see Robbie again. She wrote in order to expiate and dispel her dreadful feelings, she writes of a fictional account of having visited Cecelia and met Robbie in her apartment, and promised to make amends and submit written testimony. She does this with the false hope to absolve herself. Rashkin (1992) explains in *Character Analysis, Unspeakable Secrets, and the Formation of Narrative* this method of analyzing certain literary characters unearths silenced or repressed family dramas "cryptically inscribed" in stories with a result that warrants "a reconsideration of extant conceptions of narrative limits and textual boundaries and a rethinking of the notion of textual origins."

The statement by Briony "No one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel. I know there's always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, but what really happened?" (McEwan, 2001) speaks volumes about how she feels like when wielding her power to narrate what she wanted to. Briony is described as someone who is orderly and has a passion for secrets and writing. She enjoyed the authority, living in an enchanted world, God-like, to alter, change, and then exercise complete control of the fates of the characters and above all tell a good story Patricia Waugh "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality". She couldn't have a story without her playing an indispensable part where inevitably she would bring about all the twists and turns to her liking. Both Robbie and Cecelia had been looking forward to life, rearing for it to start when it was wrongfully and vindictively brought to a hold. They had truly loved Briony when Robbie taught her to swim and heard her patiently when she sulked, he was her hero who rescued her but the irony was that Robbie was born in the wrong year, where his social class and financial dependence were responsible for Briony to do what she did. Though Robbie was more intelligent compared to the Tallis' he was self-respecting to the extent that he planned on returning the money his master planned to pay for his studies, considering it a loan rather than a favor. Yet the mere fact that he was the char woman's son, who ran errands in their homemade his beyond their social class. Robbie was born at the wrong time of the

century, if he were born two decades earlier he would not have received the education he did, and if he had been born two decades later, he would have been considered almost an equal in all respects. Her sister Cecelia understood her better than their mother Emily Tallis as Hourieh and Sadjadi remark ‘fields of interest in the characters including Briony and Cecilia in *Atonement*. The central objective is to indicate why the subjects after the satisfaction of their needs still feel dissatisfied, empty and unfulfilled. The subjects, realizing what the Other offers is not what they actually aspire to, create for themselves what Lacan called object petit a, a reminiscent of the original lost object.’ Yet neither Robbie nor Cecilia never made sense as to why she had turned their lives terribly off course.

Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through a whole history of literature, beginning with stories derived from the European tradition of folktales, through drama with simple moral intent, to arrive at an impartial psychological realism which she had discovered for herself, one special morning during a heat wave in 1935. She would be well aware of the extent of her self-mythologizing, and she gave her account a self-mocking or mock-heroic tone. Her fiction was known for its amorality, and like all authors pressed by a repeated question, she felt obliged to produce a storyline, a plot of her development that contained the moment when she became recognizably herself. She knew that it was not correct to refer to her dramas in the plural, that her mockery distanced her from the earnest, reflective child, and that it was not the long-ago morning she was recalling so much as her subsequent accounts of it.” (McEwan 2001,32).

The dependence upon the stories of Briony the writer is not surprising as her autobiographical memory is essential to her narrative. Briony escapes from the reality and strongly arrested by fantasy where she can structure a narrative (beginning with *The Trials of Arabella*) to establish order and control to her discovered fantasy world. Her memory vitalizes it, supplements and replaces her actual memory, adapting it to suit her purpose. Additionally, David Lodge says in *The Art of Fiction*:

Unreliable Narrators are invariably invented characters who are part of the stories they tell...Even a character-narrator cannot be a hundred per cent unreliable. If everything he or she says is palpably false, that only tells us what we know already, namely that a novel is a work of fiction. There must be some possibility of discriminating between truth and falsehood within the imagined world of the novel, as there is in the real world, for the story to engage our interest. The point of using an unreliable narrator is indeed to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter. (Lodge 1992)

In Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*, the themes of confessional, memory, and narrative therapy are central to the story. The characters in *Atonement* attempt to find redemption through confession and storytelling, as they grapple with the consequences of their actions and the fallibility of human memory. For example, several interventions for trauma introduce a trauma account or narrative component, in which the individual writes their memory of the trauma experience (Jeffers et al., 2020). This narrative component helps individuals process and make sense of their traumatic experiences, ultimately leading to reduced symptomatology. Additionally, the novel explores the concept of atonement and the desire for redemption. McEwan's structurally undermines the authority of omniscient narration by foregrounding Briony's construction of this perspective, thus highlighting the unreliability of memory and the subjective nature of storytelling (Marsh, 2017). This raises questions about the link between narrative creativity and confabulation, as well as the functional benefits of narrative (Green, 2010). Furthermore, the novel explores the notion of narrative therapy and its potential for healing. Narrative therapy is a form of therapeutic intervention that focuses on rewriting the narratives we tell ourselves about our past, present, and future. Through the use of narrative therapy, Briony was able to reframe her experiences and find healing and redemption. She was able to construct new narratives that challenge and transform the negative or harmful stories she had internalized, allowing for personal growth and reconciliation. McEwan employs a meta-fictional approach by making Briony, the main character and narrator, a successful novelist who uses the act of writing as a form of atonement (Straub, 2014). She endeavors to reshape the narrative of her own life and seek redemption through storytelling. In conclusion, *Atonement* explores the complex interplay between narrative, memory, and therapy. It delves into the power of narrative to shape our understanding of reality and the ways in which storytelling can be both a means of healing and a source of potential unreliability.

5. Conclusion

The story is a self-confessional narrative, by Briony, who intentionally/ unintentionally changes the course of Robbie Turner and Cecilia Tallis's lives and she remains almost unaffected happily getting married writing and having a family Malcolm in ‘Understanding McEwan’ says “the narrator’s extremely formal language draws attention to the manner of telling rather than what is being described or recounted”.

Only when she saw the elderly Lola and Paul Marshall who were respected and active as ever and her being diagnosed with dementia it dawns upon her the person, she had seen in the dark was actually Paul and not Robbie She felt envious of Lola for being active and wearing high heels even at the advanced age of eighty. According to Tulving (2002), episodic memory supports our ability to recollect specific personal experiences – events that happened to us at particular times and places in the past. Episodic memory allows the remembering self to engage in “mental time travel” and to consciously re-experience a past happening. At the age of eighteen when she attends the wedding of Lola Quincey and Paul Marshall, but she continued without reverting her testimony and lived with it relatively unaffected. Before really losing everything to her fallible memory then and only then does she truly confess that the culprit was Paul and not Robbie. Though both Robbie and Cecilia had died during the war, she continued to keep them young and alive in her memory, trying to make various imaginary encounters and situations where both Robbie and Cecilia forgave her. In an interview to Adam Begley, McEwan states forgiveness never happens “not in realistic terms anyway”. Her fabricated scenes got beyond the mere event, there was no atonement she lived her entire life with her realities arrested in fantasy, she made all the rules, there was no other supervening authority.

She meticulously toils to edit and rephrase the details as she wanted them to be, balancing the real events that led to her dilemma with those of her psychological satisfaction. She adjusts and invents the action to ease her guilt. She made an attempt which was in a very strange process, the deed remained and could never be called back, no confession was made, it was lifelong and she had to live with it, in a way her atonement was her dementia as with her active mind and imagination she had devastated so many lives that were closely involved with her it appears to be redemptive. The epilogue explores the metanarrative and Briony tries to atone herself by using the imaginary reconciliation of both lovers:

I like to think that it is not 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. Not quite, not yet. If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration.... Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, sitting side by side in the library.....(AT Epilogue 249)

Briony tries to justify her guilt and misunderstanding in order to invent a 'happy ending' and also she proclaims the happy ending as a gift to the departed. McEwan's novel, *Atonement* emphasizes the ideology of uncertainty and unreliability of the narrative techniques and thematic ideas. Greta Olsen builds on Booth's definition that differentiates narrators one those who convey information and the second who 'deliberately withhold it' or deceive the readers. Olsen labels such narrators 'untrustworthy' and 'fallible' because they deliberately withhold facts and convey false information through unconsciously twisting versions. The clarity of presentation swiftly enhances the moral and ethical ambiguity and raises the ambiguity of doubt. The whole story happens because of the delivery of the wrongly drafted love letter falling into the hands of a hyper-imaginative thirteen-year-old, who wasn't a child to understand the complexities of the adult world nor grown-up enough to comprehend the genuine love between two consenting adults. The best way to end it would be in the screams of Robbie's mother at the house, its inmates, and the police motor cars which were carrying her precious son 'Liars!'.

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Authors contributions

Dr. Wahaj Unnisa Warda is the corresponding author responsible for the study design, revisions, drafting the manuscript. Dr. Mohammad Rezaul Karim contributed to the drafting and revisions in the manuscript. Both the authors read and approved the final manuscript. The authors have contributed to the study.

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