

TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY

Metafictional Treatment of Family Dysfunction, Guilt and Forgiveness in *Atonement*

A Thesis Submitted to the Central Department of English
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in English

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Kirtipur, Kathmandu

October 2012

TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY

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Letter of Recommendation

Mr. Birendra Kumar Yadav has completed his thesis entitled "Metafictional Treatment of Family Dysfunction, Guilt and Forgiveness in *Atonement*" under my supervision. He carried out his research from January 2012 to October 2012. I hereby recommend his thesis be submitted for viva voce.

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled "Metafictional Treatment of Family Dysfunction, Guilt and Forgiveness in *Atonement*", submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Birendra Kumar Yadav has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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Acknowledgements

First of foremost I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my respected supervisor, Dr. Birendra Pandey for his guidance and invaluable suggestions by providing valuable time and materials. I own him a debt of gratitude for what he has done. He has played a vital role for the completion of this project.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to all my family members without whose continuous encouragement and support my dream of achieving master's degree would remain unexpected. I would like to thank my friends Ram Kumar Yadav, Yogendra and Shiyaram who helped me directly or indirectly on many occasions.

October, 2012

Birendra Kumar Yadav

Abstract

Metafiction is a literary device used when the author of a work of fiction wants to call attention to the fact that what has been written has been fabricated. In McEwan's *Atonement*, metafiction is used when the author gives the impression that one of his fictional characters is the actual author of this piece of fiction. Through this device, McEwan questions the relationship between fiction and reality. McEwan wants the reader to be aware of how unreliable the fictional world is. When McEwan has Briony take over authorship of the novel and then also creates a scene in which she discusses various endings that she might have used, he emphasizes how uncertain language can be in representing the world. In other words, McEwan, through metafiction, demonstrates how easily words can change the world that is being described.

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Chapter One

Historical Background of McEwan's *Atonement*

Ian McEwan, whose novel *Atonement* is known for his stories about dysfunctional relationships. The novel has an English rustic life setting. Here wealth and camaraderie seem to prevail. Here in the novel, the author slowly introduces his readers to the darker side of a situation, one in which everything is turned upside down. Innocence is entangled with guilt and falsehood conceals truth. At the centre of this novel, a thirteen year-old girl named Briony, the youngest daughter of the Tallis family. Briony wants to impress and is eager to call attention to herself. She also uses her broad imagination to twist circumstantial evidence into charges against her perceived enemies. Before the night is over, an innocent man will be marked for life. A guilty man will not be judged. And Briony will carry the weight of her actions and their consequences in to adulthood. She will spend the rest of her life searching for atonement, a way to be forgiven for her wrongdoing.

The novel has been written against the background of Britain in the 1930s. British leaders were busy trying to keep their economy from falling apart in the 1930s, as the Great Depression put more than two million of its citizens out of work. Though, in 1938, the leaders of Great Britain were unwillingly to go to war against Germany. The belief was that if they stayed out of the mounting conflict on the European mainland a Second World War might be averted. In 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain signed an agreement with Germany called the Munich Pact that essentially gave Hitler's forces permission to take complete control of Czechoslovakia. In 1939, Great Britain announced that if Germany attacked on Poland, they would declare war. But that was in vain, in nine months later, on

September 3, 1939, when Germany troops crossed the border into Poland and refused to withdraw the war. After that, Great Britain (alone with France) declared war against Germany. In this way, World War Second had begun. After the declaration of war, all British men age of twenty or older were prepared into the military.

And in all the cities shut off their lights at night, food and supplies was rationed, and children living in large metropolitan areas of Great Britain were sent to live in the country. By the spring of 1940, Germany had swept through and gained control over France, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark, Norway and Romania. Britain was the next country on Hitler's radar.

Prime Minister Chamberlain had become unsuccessful and then new Prime Minister Winston Churchill, in 1940 was elected. He was seen more aggressive than Chamberlain. However, Churchill had been in office only a few weeks when Hitler went on a huge offensive and forced Britain to rescue its troops after a disastrous compain at Dunkirk, France. Germany was encouraged by the large scale evacuation of the troops and from July until October 1940, German planes bombed Britain on daily basis and it was continuous in to the spring of 1941. After that the United States offered support to Britain in 1941 in the form of guns and ammunition. On December 7, 1941, Japan bombed U.S. ship in Pearl Harbor and U.S. was drawn into the war. And Churchill who became an inspiring figure, called on the citizens of England to work for the cause of defeating Germany. All the people of Britain were helped anyway they could. Even the future queen Elizabeth II, volunteered as a mechanic in the British army.

In the end, the Allies won the war against Germany. However, in the process, Great Britain lost over 3,00,000 soldiers, and more than 60,000 civilians.

British troops were sent to France to help the French army hold off the Germany forces. In May 1940, the British troops were cut off from their French compatriots and were surrounded by the German army, both on land and in the air. In such condition, British troops were ordered to retreat to Dunkirk on the northern French coast. Winston Churchill, sent orders for all ships and boats (military, commercial and civilians) in the immediate were evacuated. Masses of machinery and supplies that had previously been shipped into France to equip the British soldiers were left behind for German troops to seize.

McEwan's award winning novel *Atonement* was a best seller in both the United Kingdom and the United States. According to an article by Brian Finney, writing for the *Journal of Modern Literature*, *Atonement* was "greeted by most book critics as a masterpiece that unexpectedly stayed at the top of the best seller lists of the *New York Times* for many weeks." Finney continues, "Almost all American reviewers of the book have given it the highest praise possible." The same was not true for the British critics, however, Finney writes, "The few reviewers (largely British) who have voiced major reservations about the novel invariably focus on the concluding section in which it is revealed that Briony ... has been the author of the entire novel and has taken a novelist's license to alter the facts to suit her artistic purposes." Finney explains that he read the novel "as a work of fiction that is from beginning to end concerned with the making of fiction (70)."

Naturally, a lot that has been discussed about *Atonement* focuses on the complexity of the novel and the way McEwan twists the narrative by having Briony take ownership of its authorship. Peter Mathews, in his article for *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, describes the construction of the novel in this way: "Each new chapter forces the reader to revise his or her understanding of what was revealed

earlier, sowing seeds of doubt that make the text blossom into a set of irreconcilable uncertainties." Mathews continues: "While the novel demonstrates the potentially tragic results of hasty judgment, its increasing ambiguity self-reflexively turns this logic of shame back onto the reader, so that the book's conclusion leaves us, as witnesses, to ponder our own ability to testify about the story that Briony has just described." Later, Mathews writes: "McEwan's novel thus possesses a complicated perspectivist structure, a tactic that requires the reader continually to revise their view of particular events and characters (152)."

Also highlighting the complex structure of McEwan's work, James Harold, writing for *Philosophy and Literature*, concludes that McEwan's style and technique as demonstrated in this novel "show us that an audience's participation in narrative is much more subtle and complex." Harold's concluding remarks are that McEwan's novel is remarkable because it takes "advantage of readers' enormous flexibility in taking up different kinds of viewpoints and deploying attention in creative and sometimes conflicting ways (140)."

An anonymous *Kirkus Reviews* critic finds that McEwan owes a lot of his writing technique to the famous British author Virginia Woolf, as demonstrated by McEwan's combination of "insight, penetrating historical understanding, and sure-handed storytelling despite a conclusion that borrows from early postmodern narrative trickery." Despite what this reviewer calls trickery, the concluding remark is that *Atonement* is "masterful." Lawrence Rungren, writing for *Library Journal*, finds the novel to be "a compelling exploration of guilt and the struggle for forgiveness." And finally, Barbara Beckerman Davis, for *Antioch Review*, states: "This is McEwan's most intricate book, but certainly his most ironic, deeply humane offering thus far (1637)." Irony obtains in the novel also because of its metafictional character.

Chapter Two

Metafictional Textuality

Since metafiction is a postmodern form of literary writing, this chapter tries to trace the interrelationship between postmodernism and metafiction. Postmodernism refers to any of wide ranging set of development in critical theory, philosophy, architecture, art, literature, history and culture which are generally characterized as either emerging from, in reaction to, or superseding modernism. M.H. Abrams, in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, defines the term postmodernism with its historical and political relevance in the following manner:

The term postmodernism is often applied to the literature and art after World War II when the effects on Western morale of the first World War were greatly exacerbated by the experience of Nazi totalitarianism and mass extermination, the threat of total destruction by the atomic bomb, the progressive devastation of the natural environment, and the ominous fact of over population. (168)

The term postmodernism derives from postmodernity, which Lyotard understood to represent the culmination of the process of modernity towards and accelerating pace of cultural change, to a point where constant change has in fact become the status quo, leaving the notion of progress obsolete. There is a great indeterminacy about the boundaries between modernism and postmodernism. We can find many critics who see postmodernism just as continuation of modernism rather than a break from modernism. Andreas Huyssen, for example, points out his indeterminacy when he writes:

Amorphous and politically volatile nature of postmodernism makes the phenomenon itself remarkably elusive, and the definition of its

boundaries exceedingly difficult, it not per se impossible. Furthermore, one critic's postmodernism is another critics modernism (or variant there of), while certain vigorously new forms of contemporary culture (such as the emergence into a broader public's view of distinct minority cultures and of a side variety of feminist work in literature and the arts) have so far rarely been discussed a postmoder. (58-9)

Indeed, as a prominent postmodernist critic Ihab Hassan points out this indeterminacy can draw in other terms such as avant-grade. He writes:

Like other categorical terms - say post structuralism, or modernism, or romanticism for that matter - postmodernism suffers from a certain semantic instability. That is, no clear consensus about its meaning exists among scholars... Thus some critics mean by postmodernism what others call avant-gardism or even neo-avant-gardism, while still other would call the same phenomenon simply modernism. (121)

Thus, some critics assert postmodernism in a relation of continuity of modernism on the basis of its retention of modernism's initial oppositional impulses, both ideological and aesthetic, and its equally strong rejection of its founding notion of formalist autonomy. But there are many critics who see postmodernism in a model of rupture rather than continuity. Linda Hutchon points out in her book *The Politics of Postmodernism* a clear break in that "Postmodernism has called into question the messianic faith of modernism, the faith that technical innovation and purity of form can assure social order; even if that faith disregards the social and aesthetic values of those who must inhabit those modernist buildings" (11-2). Postmodernism is viewed as a departure from modernism whose elitism it avoids, breaking away the standardized forms also. M.H. Abrams writes:

Postmodernism involves ... attempts to break away from modernist forms which had, inheritably, become in their turn conventional, as well as to overthrow the elitism of modernist "high art" by recourse to the models of "mass culture" in film, television, newspaper cartoons, and popular music. (168)

Hence, those committed to a model of rupture rather than continuity between the modernist and the postmodernist come with the arguments based on any number of fundamental differences in socio-economic organization; in the aesthetic and moral position of the arts; in the concept of knowledge and its relation to power; in philosophical orientation; in the notion of where meaning inheres in art; in the relation of message to addressee/addresser. M.H. Abrams further posits the semantic correlevance of postmodernism with another movement of linguistic theory:

Postmodernism in literature and the arts has parallels with the movement known as post structuralism in linguistic and literary theory; post structuralists undertake to subvert the foundations of language in order to show that its seeming meaningfulness dissipates, for a rigorous inquirer, into a play of conflicting indeterminacies, or else to show that all forms of cultural discourse are manifestations of the ideology, or of the relation and constructions of power, in contemporary society. (169)

In architecture, art, music and literature, postmodernism is a name for many stylistic reactions to, and developments from, modernism. Postmodern style is often characterized by eclecticism, digression, collage, pastiche and irony. Some artistic movements commonly called postmodern are pop art, architectural deconstructive and magical realism in literature. Postmodern theorists see postmodern art as a conflation

or reversal of well-established modernist systems, such as the roles of artist versus audience, seriousness versus play or high culture versus kitsch. Postmodern literature argues for expansion, the return of reference and the role of reference itself in literature. While drawing on the experimental tendencies of authors such as Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner in English, and Borges in Spanish, who were taken as influences by American postmodern authors such as Thomas Pinchon, Don DeLillo, John Barth, William Gaddis, David Foster Wallace and Paul Auster, the advocates of postmodern literature argue that the present is fundamentally different from the modern period; therefore requires a new literary sensibility. Most of postmodernist writing questions the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, history and mythology or other kinds of writing. In this context, Terry Eagleton says:

There is perhaps a degree of consensus that the typical postmodernist artifact is playful, self-ironizing, and even schizoid; and that it reacts to the austere autonomy of high modernism by impudently embracing the language of commerce and the commodity. Its stance toward cultural tradition is one of irreverent pastiche, and its contrived depthlessness undermines all metaphysical solemnities, sometimes by a brutal aesthetics of squalor and shock. (113)

John Mepham in *Narratives of Postmodernism* says there are four kinds of postmodernist fiction. They are *historical*: a development from or away from modernism; *philosophical*: arises from a site cleared by poststructuralist, by the realization that 'meaning is undecidable' and that 'reality is constructed in and through language; *ideological* (or *pedagogic*): postmodernist fiction is defined in terms of its intended effects, which are that it should problematize reality' or lays bare 'the process of world-construction'; and finally *textual*: its strategies that foreground the textuality

of fiction, force constant reinterpretation by 'reframing', and generate 'a plurality of words'.

Metafiction appears to be a postmodern form of literary textuality. Most definitions of "metafiction" vary only slightly. In coining the term, William Gas explains, "There are metatheorems in mathematics and logic, ethics has its linguistic over soul, everywhere lingos to converse about lingos are being contrived, and the case is no different in the novel" (13). In metafiction, the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed. In Scholes's definition it is the writer's awareness of critical methods that provides the added perspective that joins the 'meta' to the 'fiction'. Metafiction assimilates all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself. It may emphasize structural, formal, or philosophic qualities, but most writers of metafiction are aware of all these possibilities and are likely to have experimented with all of them. Tracing the close boundary between metafiction and metanarrative Jeremy Hawthorn, in *A Glossary of Literary Theory*, writes:

Metafiction is, literally, fiction about fiction. To a certain content the term overlaps with metanarrative because any work of fiction which contains a metanarrative will contain a metafictional element. It is generally used to indicate fiction which includes any self-referential element (not necessarily resulting from a metanarrative: thematic patternings can also contribute to the formation of a metafictional effect in a work.)." (208)

Although implicit in many other types of fictional works, self-reflexivity often becomes the dominant subject of metafiction. Critics of post-modern metafiction claim that it marks the death or exhaustion of the novel as a genre, while advocates

argue that it signals the novel's rebirth. Devotees claim that other genres have undergone the same critical self-reflexivity and that the definition of the novel itself notoriously defies definition. Waugh comments that "contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thorough going sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of external verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures" (7). Explicit use of metafictional Technique stems from modernist questioning of consciousness and 'reality'. Several common epithets used to describe contemporary metafiction are self-conscious, introspective, introverted, narcissistic or auto-representational. In their introduction to an extract from Linda Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, Onega and Landa suggest that "Hutcheon's narcissistic narrative is more or less equivalent to such terms as Robert Scholes's 'fabulation', William H. Gass's 'Metafiction', Raymond Federman's 'Surfiction' and Ronald Binn's 'anti-novel', all of which were coined to account for the wide spread tendency to introversion and self-referentiality of much postmodernist fiction" (203).

Metafiction typically involves a narrative in which levels of narrative reality (and the reader's perception of them) are confused or in which traditional realist conventions governing the separation of mimetic and diegetic elements are flouted and thwarted. The term is generally used with reference to relatively recent postmodern writing, but it can have wider applications to far older work in which the elements of self-observation and self-commentary can be found. Some critics trace reflexivity as far back as Miguel.

Cervantes' fifteenth century novel, *Don Quixote*. The 'play within play' in *Hamlet* (c. 1600) for example, inevitably introduces a metafictional element into the work, for even though there is no overt introduction of a metacommentary the audience is

encourage by Hamlet's comments on the players' performance to think about the process of dramatic illusion. Jane Austen's mention of writing the novel by her narrator in *Northanger Abbey* is also often cited as an instance in which classic work display metafictional tendency. Waugh goes so far as to claim that "by studying metafiction, one is, in effect, studying that which gives the novel its identity" (5).

Disclaiming the validity of the single objective history in metafictional writing, Linda Hutcheon says that historiographic metafiction attempts to demarginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical, and it does so both thematically and formally. "To accomplish this representation of past, historiographic metafiction plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record. Certain known historical details are deliberately falsified in order to foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent error" (294).

Metafiction is thus an elastic term which covers a wide range of fictions. There are those novels at one end of the spectrum which take fictionality as a theme to be explored whose formal self consciousness is limited. At the center of this spectrum are those texts that manifest the symptoms of formal and ontological insecurity but allow their deconstructions to be finally recontextualized or naturalized and given a total interpretation. Finally, at the furthest extreme, in rejecting realism more thoroughly, it posits the world as a fabrication of competing semiotic systems which never correspond to material conditions.

Metafiction lays bare conventional devices such as the omniscient narrator, plot, character etc., breaking the contract between author and reader. It makes use of tension between the reality-making language of fiction, and a laying bare of that reality-making language two competing discourses or voice in both creative and

critical form. Through self-conscious exploration of authorship as artifice and mystification, it refuses to distinguish between material reality and textual reality.

Frederic Jameson views that some characteristics which both modern literature and modern philosophy have in common are also descriptive of metafiction. They share a renunciation of content, a tendency toward formalism, a lack of supposition about human nature and a preference of method to metaphysics. Such writing necessitates a new, non interpretive criticism. Jameson uses the late sonnets of Mallarmé as examples of works that contain no tangible substances which can be substituted for the work itself: "All the apparent symbols dissolve back into sheer process, which lasts only as long as the reading lasts" (108). Jameson feels that Mallarmé takes the critical reluctance to interpret and channels it back into his work as a poetic aesthetic. The non interpretive criticism Jameson calls "meta commentary" is geared to deal with metapoetry and metafiction.

What is wanted is a kind of mental procedure which suddenly shifts gears, which throws everything in an inextricable tangle one floor higher, and turns the very problem itself... into its own solution... by widening its frame in such a way that it now takes in its own mental processes as well as the object of those processes. In the earlier, native state, we struggle with the object in question: in this heightened and self-conscious one, we observe our own struggles and patiently set about characterizing about them. (59)

The shifting of gears, the widening of frames, the expanding of consciousness, this is what metafiction does to reader and writer alike: this is where its values lie. It paints a landscape for the reader and encourages him to include himself in the painting and stand back to view himself. It affirms Beckett's notion that at the core of the

individual is only the self perceiving the self. Such self-conscious moments can be cause for both despair and exhilaration. Metafiction's principal tool for the expanding of vistas is irony. Irony permits a speaker to separate a phenomenon from its essence - that is, to tell an untruth without betraying his subjective authenticity. An individual can profitably put on many guises as long as he avoids living completely hypothetically and subjectively. There is little to worry about retaining subjective authenticity and much hypothetical and subjunctive living. An obvious example of this is the Barthelme's story.

Metafiction encourages the individual to undergo self-consciousness by cutting himself off from the popular culture which surrounds him, from the folk tales and motifs which have been handed down through the centuries, from the myths and archetypes which supposedly reside in the collective unconscious. The crippling effects of popular culture are demonstrated in many of Donald Barthelme's stories, but particularly well in "Brain Damage". "Brain Damage" presents a landscape littered with Chock Full O'nuts restaurants, Chevrolets, candy bars, hamburges, Kodak Instamatics, and Bonnie and Clyde. The narrator and a girl walk down the street singing "Me and My Winstons" to protect themselves from some nameless terrible thing, which is no doubt the fearful possibility of self-reflection. The story's ending underscores the epidemic proportions of the numbing disease: "And there is brain damage in Arizona, and brain damage in Maine, and little towns in Idaho are in the grip of it, and my blue heaven is black with it, brain damage covering everything like an unbreakable lease-skiing along on he soft surface of brain damage, never to sink, because we don't understand the danger" (146).

One of the basic characteristics of metafiction is playfulness. Humor has always followed closely on the heels of irony and satire. However, the humor of the

contemporary satirist in question is softer than the bitter sort employed by Swift. They are not outraged at the breach of some common order or ideal. Scholes, in his *The Fabulators*, speaks of "the modern fabulator's tendency to be more playful and artful in construction than his predecessors...Fabulative satire is less certain ethically but more certain esthetically than traditional satire" (41). 'Fabuletor' is Scholes's term for a writer of reflexive fiction. Metafiction transforms the material of traditional satire and protest into comedy. Obviously, writers of metafiction can have no faith in satire as a reforming instrument. They tell their reader how to take life (as a joke) rather than tell them what to do about it.

The playful mood of this writing sets it apart from existentialist fiction. Scholes describes it as the difference between seeing the universe as laughably ridiculous and seeing it as dismally absurd. He cites Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* in which the author offers 'scorn' as the proper response to the human condition. The response of the metafictionist is laughter.

One best example of the preoccupation with humor and with form to the exclusion of content is clearly manifested in Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan*. At the end of the novel the reader learns that all of human history has been manipulated by extraterrestrial beings for the purpose of speeding a rocket ship which is on its way to the outer realm of the universe to deliver the following ridiculously inconsequential message: "Greetings!" Vonnegut carefully builds up his readers' expectations so that the effect of this deflation will be all the stronger. The process is very much like the careful construction of a joke in which the events and characters are manipulated only to lead up to and enhance the punch line. In addition to Vonnegut's, many of the works of Borges, Nabokov, Barth and Barthelme are extended shaggy dog stories and outlandish gags-all carefully crafted jokes and all metaphors for life.

Thus, using parody, irony, digression and playfulness as tools metafictional textuality moves in the direction to demystify the illusionary aspect of the representation. Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism* says: "Postmodern historiographic metafiction simply does ... asking us to question how we represent - how we construct our view of reality and of our selves" (40). Although characteristics of metafiction vary as widely as the spectrum of technique used within them, a pattern of several common traits can be traced. These techniques often appear in combination, but also can appear singularly. Metafiction often employs intertextual references and allusions by examining fictional systems, incorporating aspects both theory and criticism, creating biographies of imaginary writers and even by presenting and discussing fictional work of an imaginary character. Authors of metafiction often violate narrative levels by intruding to comment on writing, by involving his or herself with fictional characters, by directly addressing the reader and by openly questioning how narrative assumptions and conventions transform and filter reality trying to ultimately prove that no singular truths or meanings exist. Lastly, it is also better to note that metafiction also uses unconventional and experimental techniques by rejecting conventional plot, refusing to attempt to become real life, subverting conventions to transform reality into a highly suspect concept, flaunting and exaggerating foundations of their instability and even by displaying reflexivity.

Metafiction is a parodic, playful, excessive or deceptively native style of postmodern writing with implied spirit of celebration of the power of the creative imagination together with uncertainty about the validity of its representation. The forms of 19th century realist fiction emerged from a firm belief in a commonly experienced objectively existing world or history and modernist fiction of the early 20th century responded to the initial loss of belief in such a world by representing

reality through limited and selective perspectives. But postmodern metafiction responds to a more uncertain, insecure and self-questioning world in which history and reality are always provisional: "There are no more metanarratives; this is no longer a world of absolute truths but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures, The materialist, positivist and empiricist worldview on which realistic fiction is premised no longer exists" (Waugh 7).

Modernism announces itself as a break with the past similar to the assault on traditional values associated with romanticism. One of the qualities which distinguishes modernist writing from realist writing is a generally more pessimistic, even tragic view of the world. The work of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence, Franz Kafka, Knut Hamsun are typically characterized by a pessimistic view of the modern world. The world in modernist writing is seen as fragmented and decayed, in which communication between human beings is difficult or impossible, and in which commercial and cheapening forces present an inseparable barrier to human or cultural betterment. In general, modernists are hostile towards, or at least suspicious of, developments in contemporary science and technology. This suspicion of science and technology is one distinguishing quality of modernism which is directly attributable to revulsion from the use of technology to slaughter millions in the First World War and it is also associated with a disgust at commercialism.

Both a new empirical discovery and a new philosophical belief lie behind the modernist pessimism. The empirical discovery is that full communication between human beings is difficult in the modern age and the philosophical belief is that although the world may be single and knowable it is knowable only in small pieces at once. David Harvey has argued that "modernism took on multiple perspectivism and relativism as its epistemology for revealing what is still taken to be the true nature of a

unified though complex, underlying reality" (30). For the modernists, human beings are doomed to exist in a state of social and even existential fragmentation while yearning to escape from this situation. Here, the influence of Freud is important because Freud turned the attention of many writers inward, towards subjective experience rather than the objective world. On the other hand this led to the development of refinement of important new techniques: Joyce's and Woolf's development of internal monologue and stream of consciousness, Eliot's refinement with a pessimistic belief in the unbridgeability of the gap between subjective experience and an objective world. It is like the belief that "It is impossible to say what I mean!" alienation becomes close to a cliché in modernist literature, and it is typically associated with urban landscapes. We can see T.S. Eliot's *the Waste Land* or James Joyce's *Ulysses* as the best representation of modernist sentiments.

Postmodernism is characterized by a welcoming and celebrative attitude towards the modern world. Postmodern art does not dispute that this world is one of increasing fragmentation, of the dominance of commercial pressure, in which human beings are powerless in the face of a blind technology. But whereas the major modernist reacted with horror or despair to their perception of these facts, postmodernism reacts in a far more accepting manner. Instead of trying to escape from uncertainty, fragments it affirms and attempts to celebrate every fragment. The world has changed since the early years of the twentieth century. In the developed countries the advances of the communications and electronic industries have revolutionized human society. Instead of reacting to these changes, the postmodernist counsels celebration of the present. It is like the celebration of the loss of artistic aura that follows what Benjamin calls 'mechanical reproduction'. Thus the paintings of an

Andy Warhol or a Roy Lichtenstein force us to look more carefully and less dismissively at aspects of the commercial culture of our age.

Metafiction includes the rejection of representation in favour of self-reference which is especially of a playful and non-serious, non-constructive sort; the willing, even relieved, rejection of artistic aura and of the sense of the work of art as organic whole. The self-reference in the postmodern text is the substitution of confirmation and teasing of the reader for collaboration for him or her and it is also the rejection of meaning itself as a hopeless delusion, a general belief that it is not worth trying to understand the world or to believe that there is such a thing as 'the world' to be understood. Postmodernism takes the subjective idealism of modernism to the point of solipsism but rejects the tragic and pessimistic elements in modernism. The fictions of Franz Kafka, Knut Hamsun and Laurence Sterne are some examples of this trend.

Linda Hutcheon, regarding fragmentary aspects of postmodernism, says:

Like much contemporary literary theory, the postmodernist novel puts into question that entire series of interconnected concepts that have come to be associated with what we can conveniently label as liberal humanism: autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, centre, continuity, teleology, closure hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin. (57)

The historiographic metafiction problematizes the question of objective fact of historical knowledge. Through overplotting to show mysteries in history or its multiple interpretations, metafictional writing explores that history is just fiction or construction. In this context, Linda Hutcheon, in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, says: "In historiographic metafiction the very process of turning events into facts through the interpretation of archival evidence is shown to be a process of turning the traces of

past into historical representation" (82). Some famous authors of historiographic metafiction are Salman Rushdie, John Fowles, B.S. Johnson, Raymond Federman and John Barth.

Chapter Three

Atonement as Metafiction: Themes of Family Dysfunction, Guilt and Forgiveness

Though part one of McEwan's novel *Atonement* takes place on only one day in the middle of a hot summer, this first section makes up more than half of the novel. Part One is also divided into fourteen short chapters, whereas the rest of the novel has no chapter subdivisions. The setting is an English manor house in Surrey in the south-eastern part of the England. It is 1935, and talk of England's becoming involved in a possible war in Europe has begun. The country estate belongs to the Tallis family. In the Tallis family, the mother and father might as well be living separate lives. Their marriage is held together by a very fragile string. Mrs Tallis suspects infidelity but will not mention it. She would rather have a partial marriage than no marriage at all. Her unhappiness makes her so sick, she can barely attend to her children. The children hardly know her and go about their lives without much adult intervention. When emotions become tangled and misunderstanding brew, the children have no one to help them untangle the knots. Briony and Cecilia's communication completely breaks down. Their older brother, Leon, like his father, is almost always gone. The only way that Briony and Cecilia are able to define themselves is to completely cut themselves off from the other members of their family and put themselves together on their own. Briony, the thirteen-year-old, has created a play. *The Trails of Arabella*, which she is rehearsing with her cousins, Lola, Jackson, and Pierrot Quincey. The Quincey children have come to stay with the Tallises while their parents go through a divorce, the twins turn to their sister, Lola, who is too young to explain their parents absence. She is too young to ease their pain. Lola is preoccupied with her own issues, which

not only consume her but confuse her. The consequences are torturous. In her bewilderment, she sends a man to jail.

Meanwhile, Cecilia Tallis, who is twenty-three, has returned home from Cambridge University for the summer. Through she does not fully understand her feelings, she is emotionally irritable. Her edginess has something to do with Robbie Turner, the son of the Tallises' housekeeper whose father has abandoned his wife and son. The father simply disappears without offering a reason. This leaves his son wondering who his father is and why his father left him - questions that will remain unanswered but his mother is supportive and nurturing. Robbie, who is also twenty-three and returned from Cambridge, has grown up with the Tallis children and has always been a close friend. But in the past few years, Cecilia and Robbie have become uncomfortable in one another's company. A sexual tension has grown between them.

Briony witnesses a strange encounter between Cecilia and Robbie. Briony has taken a break from the frustrating play rehearsals. The young boys are not good actors, and Lola, who is sixteen and a bit more sophisticated than Briony, has assumed the lead role, one that Briony had coveted for herself. While standing at an upstairs window, Briony sees her sister talking to Robbie. She cannot hear their conversation, so she tries, in her inexperienced way, to interpret their body language. To her, it looks as if Robbie might be proposing marriage. If this is true, he is doing it in a very strange way. He looks as if he is commanding Cecilia to do something. In response, Cecilia takes off all her clothes but her underwear and jumps into a fountain and dives under the water. Briony, who writes overly dramatic romance, thinks what she is watching is the total opposite of what should be happening. The hero should save the drowning maiden rather than demand that the maiden drown herself. After

witnessing this strange scene, Briony swears she is done with writing romantic fantasy. She decides that watching real people and interpreting what they are doing is much more fascinating. She calls off the play.

In truth, what Briony witnesses is an argument between Cecilia and Robbie. In the course of trying to help Cecilia fill an antique vase with water, Robbie breaks off a piece. This ceramic piece drops into the fountain, and in a curious demonstration of self-reliance, Cecilia takes off her clothes and jumps into the fountain to retrieve it. Both Robbie and Cecilia later reflect on this confrontation and do not understand why they have both been acting so strangely. Here McEwan offers several versions of truth, such as the different versions of what happened at the fountain. Briony believes one truth about the situation but this does not match what her sister believes. And even her sister, Cecilia, is not sure why she acted the way, she did in front of the fountain. Was she really angry at Robbie? or was something else going on. They admit they feel awkward around one another. Later, alone in his room, Robbie tries to comprehend what is behind this awkwardness and realizes that he is in love with Cecilia. He wants to explain his new feelings to Cecilia, but he fears he will be unable to speak the right words. So, he attempts to write her a letter, he throws the first drafts away. Then he decides to just write what he is feeling. However, in one of his failed attempts, Robbie is a little too frank. He uses words expressing sexual desire. This note was fun to write for his own sake, but he would never use that kind of language with Cecilia.

After dressing to attend the celebratory dinner in Leon's honor, Robbie slips the note into an envelope and puts it in his pocket. On the way to the Tallises' house, he happens to meet Briony; he gives her the note and asks her to deliver it to Cecilia. After Briony runs into the house, Robbie realizes his mistake. He has given Briony

the wrong note, the sexually explicit one. He runs to find Briony, but it is too late. Briony cannot resist reading the note. She justifies her actions because she thinks a writer must know what goes on in the adult world. She is horrified by what she reads, believing that Robbie must be a monster who is about to attack her sister. As she wonders what she can do to protect Cecilia, she finds her cousin Lola crying. Lola has scratches on her arms, which she blames on her brothers. She says they jumped her. Since Lola has confided in her, Briony decides to tell her cousin about the note from Robbie.

Just before dinner. Briony hears noises in the library and opens the door to the darkened room. In the far corner she sees Cecilia and Robbie. Cecilia looks distressed and disheveled. After straightening her clothes and hair, Cecilia walks past Briony without saying anything. A few seconds later, Robbie does the same. Briony believes that Robbie has attacked Cecilia. What Briony does not know is that Robbie has explained his note to Cecilia. And Cecilia has confessed that she is in love with Robbie.

Emily, Briony's mother, joins everyone at the table for dinner. She is impressed by Paul Marshall, a friend of Leon's, who has made a lot of money from his candy-making company. Paul talks about his next professional move, which is to make a candy bar called Amo. It will be sold to the British military, and will make Paul even richer. Robbie notices fresh scratches on Paul's face and becomes suspicious when Lola's scratches are discussed at the table. But he does not say anything. Emily, however, believes that Paul is a perfect gentleman and regards him as a possible suitor for Cecilia. Emily does not like Robbie. This attitude is based more on Robbie's lack of money (he had been sent to Cambridge by Emily's husband)

than on anything personal, though Emily is aware of a strange look on Robbie's face that she cannot interpret.

Throughout the dinner, Robbie and Cecilia think about their planned meeting somewhere private. Their passions are aroused, which is distracting them both from the meal and the table conversations. In a twist of events, just as dinner is completed, Pierrot and Jackson ask to be excused. Instead of going to the bathroom as they had suggested, they run away. The adults find the note the twins have left behind and go out to search for them.

Robbie is disappointed. He has hoped to be with Cecilia rather than hunting in the dark for the mischievous boys. Cecilia has taken off with her brother to search, while Robbie is left alone. Briony is also alone. As she searches the areas near the house, she happens upon Lola, who implies that she has been raped. Briony saw a dark figure slip away right before encountering Lola, but she has no real view of him. Briony is confussed about a lot of things that happened on the night of the welcome home dinner. Was Robbie truly a crazed monster? or Was he in love? Was Lola really raped? or was she complicit in the act but too embarrassed to admit it? McEwan continues to push the boundary between fiction and truth when he makes Briony the author of his own story. McEwan pushes so hard that he appears to be saying that nothing is true. Everyone can come to their own conclusion about what is truth. Despite this, she is convinced that it is Robbie. She bases her conclusion on Robbie's impassioned note to Cecilia. Briony appears to lead Lola into believing the attacker is Robbie. Lola was grabbed from behind, she tells Briony, and did not see the man's face.

Cecilia and Leon happen along and help Lola into the house. Briony runs upstairs to Cecilia's room and finds Robbie's note. Once Emily reads the note, she is

sure that Robbie is the rapist. The police are called in. Shortly afterward, Robbie comes back with the two boys. He is caught totally off guard when he is arrested. Cecilia runs to him and says something that no one else hears. Robbie is put into the police car, and when the police try to leave, Robbie's mother, Grace, stands in the middle of the road. Finally, the police get Grace under control and drive away. Part one ends with Robbie's mother yelling at the Tallis family, telling them they are liars.

This section of the novel follows Robbie, who has been released from prison early on the condition that he volunteer for the British army. It is now 1939, and World War II has begun. Robbie has been in jail for four years. He did not see Cecilia while imprisoned, though they did write to one another. They plan a meeting before he is sent to France. But the timing is bad. Cecilia is working as a nurse and is having trouble getting time off. Meanwhile, emergency orders come in, and all military leave is cancelled. So, Robbie and Cecilia can only meet briefly before he is sent to France.

The setting switches to France in 1940; the British troops have been defeated and are retreating. Robbie and two fellow soldiers, Corporal Nettle and Corporal Mace, have recently survived a bomb attack. Although the corporals outrank him, Robbie's education helps him to read maps and understand the country's geography. Although he is wounded, he does not tell anyone. The men have a long way to go with little or no food or water. Some farmers along the way provide what nourishment they can afford to share. As Robbie and the soldiers draw closer to Dunkirk, they join the masses of people - a mix of civilians and soldiers - who are following a main route to the northern French town. The British troops are making their way to the English Channel, where they hope to find boats ready to take them back home. From time to time, German airplanes fly over and drop bombs on the people or scatter a barrage of bullets through the crowds.

Throughout this section, Robbie reads letters he has received from Cecilia. She tells him that she no longer speaks to her family, that she wants nothing to do with them, especially with her sister, Briony. She does not believe she can ever forgive Briony. In her latest letter, Cecilia tells him that Briony has suggested that she is willing to recant her story against Robbie. There are many characters who might or should feel guilt and seek atonement; however, there is only one character who does. That is Briony. Briony's accusation that Robbie has raped Lola, sends Robbie to jail and alters not only the course of his relationship with Cecilia but his entire life. Instead of going to medical school, Robbie spends years in prison for a crime that he did not commit. Briony is hoping that the court will listen to her plea asking that all charges against Robbie be dismissed. She is willing to admit she made a mistake. This and Robbie's memory of Cecilia telling him, on the night of his arrest, that she will always love him and will wait for him, inspires Robbie to keep moving toward the beach so he can return to her. His wound is festering and he is becoming delirious owing to the infection as well as hunger, thirst, and exhaustion.

McEwan uses the British soldiers' long journey to the north of France to give an up-close view of World War II and its casualties. Body parts litter the landscape. Wounded citizens and soldiers sit along the roadside begging for assistance. Children and women die as they try to find shelter. Everyone knows that the German army is marching toward them. Belgium and the Netherlands have fallen under German control.

By the time Robbie and his fellow soldiers arrive at the beach at the English Channel, Robbie is in a semiconscious state. The two soldiers whom Robbie led safely through the war zone are now focused on saving him. Most of the men at the beach are equally desperate. There is no supply of food or water readily available.

Robbie helps a local woman catch her pig, and she rewards him with food and drink. But the men have to be cautious about where they eat their food. Others might kill for the food Robbie and his friends have. This section closes with a rumor that a British boat is scheduled to arrive the next day. At the end of part two, Robbie is completely delirious.

Part three also takes place in 1940, four years after that summer night when Robbie was arrested. The story turns its attention to Briony, who has become a student nurse, just as Cecilia had several years before. McEwan does not go into why or how Briony admits her mistake in identifying Robbie as the criminal, but he does show evidence of the guilt she suffers and her attempts to atone for her mistake novel and enlists in nurse's training, for example. She wants to help others because she is responsible for causing her sister and Robbie pain. When she encounters wounded soldiers, her guilt runs even deeper. She realizes that one of these soldiers could have been Robbie. He might even have died in the war without ever seeing Cecilia again. All this might have happened because she sent him to jail. The hospital where Briony works is preparing for the wounded soldiers. One day, lines of army ambulances arrive and terribly wounded soldiers are brought in. Briony must come to terms with the war. She attends to young boys with parts of their heads blown off. She smells the gangrene of infected wounds. She feeds soldiers who no longer have mouths. She thinks that one of these soldiers could have been Robbie. The thought of him being wounded, or dead, makes the guilt of what she has done even greater.

In the middle of this activity, Briony receives a response from a publisher to whom she has sent a short novel. Her story has been rejected, but the publisher writes a long explanation full of encouragement. He is impressed with her story's depth and style, but he notes several flaws and makes suggestions as to how Briony can change

the story to make it publishable. Among other things, he suggests that she supply more details. One of his questions is "If this girl has not fully understood or been so wholly baffled by the strange little scene that has unfolded before her, how might it affect the lives of the two adults?" This makes it clear that Briony's novel is based on what happened in Part One.

When Briony learns that her cousin Lola and Paul Marshall are to be married, she sneaks into the back of the church to watch the ceremony. She wants to make sure that both Paul and Lola see her. She wants them to know that she knows their secret and will never forget it. Briony believes it was Paul who had sex with Lola. Whether or not it was rape is never made clear. What readers do know is that neither Paul nor Lola forward to give evidence of Robbie's innocence and confess that Robbie was not a rapist. None of the Tallises other than Cecilia, stand up for Robbie. But McEwan marginalizes these characters, keeping them in the background of the story.

Taking care of the wounded soldiers and seeing Lola and Paul's wedding ceremony bring Briony's guilt to the forefront. She is now conscious of the pain she has caused her sister and Robbie and is determined to meet with Cecilia, who has not wanted anything to do with her.

Briony arrives at Cecilia's apartment and is surprised to find Robbie there. Robbie tells Briony that if she wants to help them, then Briony's attempts at atonement are the writing of her novel about what happened that night on the Tallis estate. She also offers to explain Robbie's innocence to her parents and to the courts in hopes that Robbie's name will be cleared. None of this, however, will give Robbie and Cecilia the opportunities they have already lost. Robbie is on his way to return to his army unit, so he and Cecilia leave Briony on her own.

McEwan ends Part Three with a signature that reads: BT, London, 1999. Then he begins the last section of the novel with the heading, London, 1999. The "BT" in the signature, readers can assume, stands for Briony Tallis. Readers learn in this last section that what they read prior to this is the novel that Briony had sent to her publisher. Only this last section is set outside the boundaries of Briony's novel.

Briony has been diagnosed with vascular dementia, a mental condition that will eventually strip her of all memory and kill her. She is seventy-seven and is on her way to the Tallis estate for a family birthday celebration in her honor. Before she leaves London, Briony puts all her affairs in order, including the notes on her novel. Her editors have said that, owing to the possibility of lawsuits, she cannot publish it until Lola and Paul Marshall have died. Fearing she might die before the Marshalls do, Briony has left instructions with her publisher on how to deal with her manuscript.

As Briony sits with her family and watches her great-grandchildren put on the play that she wrote when she was thirteen, she has an inner monologue with her readers. At the end of McEwan's novel, it is not clear if the story prior to this last section is a statement of fact, a fictionalized version of fact, or a complete fabrication. Since, Briony is concerned about a lawsuit, readers might conclude that the story was based on fact. But Briony's inner monologue clouds this issue. She wonders if she ended her novel properly. She had different options. She could have had both Robbie and Cecilia die. Or she could have ended it happily. So, readers do not know which parts of her novel were based on truth and which were not.

Metafiction is a literary device used when the author of a work of fiction wants to call attention to the fact that what has been written has been fabricated. In McEwan's *Atonement*, metafiction is used when the author gives the impression that one of his fictional characters is the actual author of this piece of fiction. Through this

device, McEwan questions the relationship between fiction and reality. McEwan waits until almost the end of the novel before he informs his readers that the most of the novel was (supposedly) written by one of his invented characters.

One of the purposes of metafiction is to make readers consciously aware that fiction is not the same reality. Metafiction is used to demonstrate the difficulties in attempting to reconstruct reality through language. Up to the point of Briony's disclosure that she is the author of the first three parts of the novel, the story being told might feel real to readers. Because of this, readers become lost in the world that McEwan has created. Most novelists attempt to create fictional worlds that appear to be real. McEwan, however, wants the reader to be aware of how unreliable the fictional world is. When McEwan has Briony take over authorship of the novel and then also creates a scene in which she discusses various endings that she might have used, he emphasizes how uncertain language can be in representing the world. In other words, McEwan, through metafiction, demonstrates how easily words can change the world that is being described.

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