

Life and Fiction: Imagination and Literary Creation in *Atonement*

Vida e Ficção: Imaginação e Criação Literária em *Atonement*

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Resumo: Esse ensaio pretende analisar o romance *Atonement*, de Ian McEwan, levando em consideração a criação literária e a imaginação como um dos temas mais importantes do romance. O narrador coloca em xeque o que é importante ao se escrever uma obra literária na atualidade. Mescla também técnicas como o fluxo de consciência e a mudança de ponto de vista do narrador, destacando o interior dos principais personagens do romance. O romance apresenta alusões literárias que se relacionam com fatos da vida real, como o início do século XX, a Segunda Guerra Mundial, e o fim do século XX. Através desses fatos, mostra os desenvolvimentos e mudanças psicológicas através da experiência, frustração e imaginação. O romance também deixa entrever quais são as questões mais relevantes sobre literatura hoje e qual o papel do leitor na construção do sentido da obra de arte.

Palavras-Chave: Imaginação, Criação Literária, Flutuação da Interioridade, Fluxo de Consciência.

Abstract: This essay aims at analysing the novel *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, considering literary creation and imagination as one of the main issues of the novel. The narrator puts at stake important issues when writing a novel nowadays. He also intermingled literary techniques such as the stream of consciousness and changing narrator point of view, highlighting the inner self of the main characters of the novel. The novel itself is a set of literary allusions, mixing up real fact such as the early years of the 20th century, the Second World War, and the end of 20th century. Through these facts he shows us psychological developments and changes provided by experience, frustration and imagination. Furthermore, the novel suggests which issues are more relevant today and what role the reader plays in the construction of the meaning of a work of art.

Keywords: Imagination, Literary Creation, Inner Self Floatation, Stream of Consciousness.

Submetido em 31 de março de 2019.

Aprovado em 05 de setembro de 2019.

Introduction

Ian McEwan, in *Atonement*, presents literary creation as a core issue of modern literature. Throughout the whole book we may observe comments on literary creation, fictionalising moments, changes of point of view, back and forth movements of memory and the story-telling process. There are constant point of views' changes and floatation

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which constitute this work one of the most remarkable and well written novels. **Atonement** contains modern techniques such as the stream of consciousness and changing narrator point of view. The aesthetics of modern novel creation seems to become the subject which the novel turns around. It is not just an attempt to create a novel which best analyses the inner self, but the main attempt here is to employ and develop narrative techniques which strongly achieve the reader's aesthetic perception.

Through the whole novel we can see Briony's concern on creating a fictionalised world, so that her imagination is constantly directed to the presentation and interpretation of other people's actions and attitudes according to her own view. Thus, her constantly controlling attitudes create ideas and judgements on other characters around her, which lead her to interpret and judge their actions according to her own sense of how things should be. As the narrator states in the very beginning of the novel, Briony's room, things, i. e., her world was a 'shrine to her controlling demon' and thus she desires 'to have the world just so' (McEWANN, 2001, p. 05). Here one may observe that both imagination and idealisation are very powerful over her judgement.

Her concerning is not only about literary creation itself, but also about literature. All she wishes is to create the best she can do in her writing. She starts in the novel quite worried about a play that she wants to present to Leon, her brother. The news of her cousins' coming from the North, let her very excited in writing a play. However, in a few hours she discovers that writing a story would be the best solution to impress her brother. In the same way, within the years she seeks the best way to dig deep inside her characters' minds in her literary creating, which she achieves by reading and writing constantly and eagerly. In that sense, the narrator mentions that Briony has read trice **The Waves**, by Virginia Woolf, which is one of the first innovating novels in terms of stream of consciousness. In fact, this is the main literary work in terms of stream of consciousness which she has learned almost by heart.

Furthermore, there is another issue in **Atonement** which is determining to the construction of the plot: Briony's strong imagination. Thus, literary creation, Briony's strong imaginations and facts from 'real' life presented in the novel are intermingled in order to create this novel written in the early 21st century. However, everything she imagines about Robbie and her sister Cecilia leads to the worst consequences, i. e., the destruction of the self.

In this essay we intend to analyse and discuss literary creation as an aesthetic issue and concern in the novel **Atonement**, by Ian McEwan. By referring to the literary creation we will focus on the literary domain and aesthetic discussions in the novel, which make this novel particularly concerned on the aesthetic creation, as one of the main themes in modern literary construction. Moreover, we will analyse Briony's imagination as the core issue which determines literary creation in the novel.

1

We must first refer to some features of the novel, which are important to understand the whole discussion. **Atonement** is divided in three parts, which represent the three main moments of the novel: the first part is focused on the summer's day of 1935, when the most decisive facts of the novel happened: the visit of the cousins, Leon's homecoming and his friend Paul Marshall's visit, the scene by the fountain, Robbie's letter, Lola's rape, Robbie's accusation and arrest. The second part of the novel depicts the years in the Second World War, experienced by Robbie, Cecilia and Briony. This part is supposed to go until the end of the 20th century. The last part is centred in the facts about Briony's last moments in the novel: her visit to the museum, her encounter with the Marshalls, the compliments in the old house, and the final revelations of the story.

One of the main devices used in the novel is the narrator's point of view, which is important to describe in this essay. There are in the novel at least six (!) different points of view: there is the omniscient narrator's point of view, which moves to Briony's mind, then to Cecilia's, Robbie's, Lola's, and Emily's. In some moment both the narrator's and Briony's point of view seem to be similar. In other moments, as in the last part of the book, it is Briony's own voice which conducts the whole narration. It is necessary to notice that using this kind of device and the stream of consciousness are very important to construct facts in the story, as a way of demonstrating how imagination may interfere in real life. Thus, these are Briony's main concerns in the novel: she looks for the best technique in order to dig deep into the characters' mind, ideas, thoughts, feelings, and desires. For example, the fountain scene is narrated by Briony's, Cecilia's, and Robbie's point of view. That scene is shown in a tri-dimensional perspective by the narrator. These points of view portraits the intense feelings and thoughts from different characters in that moment, which create a quite dynamic and stimulating movement and observation about that scene. Sousa (2016) also discusses the novel's literary devices and techniques.

In order to see those techniques, we must start by the main scene in the novel: the fountain scene. This scene is one of the most intense and exciting scenes in **Atonement**. Both Cecilia and Robbie quarrel because an antique vase, inherited from an elderly uncle of her own. He thinks he should help her to fill up the vase, but she stubbornly insists in doing it by herself. As he holds the handle of the vase, she pulls it so strongly that she tears it apart. One of the pieces falls into the water, and then, very angrily, she takes off her blouse, jumps in the fountain to fetch it. Soon she comes out of the water, wears her blouse again and then walks away. From that scene, a simple scene one might say, Briony starts to create a whole literary world and her imagination goes further than expected. After this scene, she starts to judge both Robbie's and Cecilia's attitude and actions, though she denies this almost all the time. Then, she starts imagining how she could write the fountain scene:

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 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. [...] And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value. That was the only moral a story need have. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 51)

It is perceived that she wishes to know every inner detail of her characters, their struggles, feelings and thoughts. By doing that, she wants to achieve perfection by writing a novel that contains every detail about the characters. Knowing all the truth about them must require the knowledge of everything inside them. She needs to know them like an alive being, showing separate minds, without judging them. Nevertheless, we perceive she constantly judges the characters in her novel.

Immanuel Kant (1727-1804), in his **Critique of Judgement** (2005), defines his philosophical system based on Aesthetics. Both *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of the Practical Reason* are based on the **Critique of Judgment**. Kant proposed a philosophical system (the rational, ethic, and aesthetic), in which the aesthetical was the touchstone of that system. This was an innovation in Western philosophical thinking. He had already considered sensibility and imagination since his first critique.³ When we

³ For a further discussion, see Eckart Foerster's argument in **Kant's Final Synthesis**, Harvard UP, 2000. Parting from Kant's *Opus Postumus*, Foerster analyses the importance to the *Third Critique* as Kant's

judge, conceptualise or define something, the imagination pervades all the philosophical and analytical categories employed in our interpretation. According to Rosenfield (2006, p. 27-36), Kant freed his Critique from any ‘historical presupposition’ or ‘cultural concepts’ which are always determining the art itself. He established the relationship between beauty and sensibility, knowledge and practical reason. He did not separate aesthetical from the reasonable. He did not determine that the imagination was just ancillary to the knowledge. Rosenfield states that ‘instead of opposing sensibility and reason in a hierarchy, Kant is interested, since the **Critique of the Pure Reason**, by the function that the imagination (which selects the sensible perceptions) fulfils in the activity of understanding.’ (ROSENFELD, 2006, p. 27-28). In that sense, there is a free and harmonious game between understanding and imagination, through which, as we analyse or define something, our imagination and sensibility is essentially interfering in the constitution of our judgment.

Therefore, when we judge someone, we are not defining exactly what the other is, but we are revealing something of our self, that is not perceived by our consciousness, even though it comes out in moments of crisis. As McGinn, states in his book **Shakespeare’s Philosophy** (2007), these are ‘mysterious forces’ which act on our self and come out indefinitely and evasively.⁴ Thus, Briony is not in fact defining the *other*, but revealing something very particular of her inner dimensions: her egotism, her fear of loss, her bitterness. Judging the other leads her to interpret the subject’s outward world and misjudge the other. McGinn states that the limitations of knowledge are incrustated in the structure of the human beings’ cognitive faculties and his location in the world. Everything that is sought to know goes beyond the means of understanding and comprehension. We always have to make *inferences* of what is going inward a person’s mind and ‘these inferences are both fallible and structurally suspect.’ (McGINN, 2007, p. 63). Moreover, making inferences are always influenced by our own feelings and conceptions. We just wonder what goes inside people’s mind, but their minds are not available for us to read in their forehead.

Touchstone of his philosophical system, since sensibility and imagination were fundamental faculties, which constitutes human ability of judgement and analysis in sciences, philosophy, and arts.

⁴ That inner world can be seen in Shakespeare’s plays and in their language. For more details, see an example in Richard III, in which the language enhances the inner world of the character. See Ludwig’s analysis on Richard III (2017).

Although it is not possible to determine someone's inner self, the narrator states that she tries to write a novel using the stream of consciousness herself: "The truth has become as ghostly as invention. She could begin now, setting it down as she had seen it, meeting the challenge by refusing to condemn her sister's shocking near-nakedness, in daylight, right by the house. Then the scene could be recast, through Cecilia's eyes, and then Robbie's." (McEWANN, 2001, p. 52). She feels as if the image she has seen starts to disappear, to vanish, and to become opaque. Writing it would be the best way of setting everything in order, to establish and determine the sequence of events and the reasons of the characters' feelings. As one can see in this scene, the narrator pretends not judging the facts. All she wants is to describe the events exactly as they happened. However, in doing that she judges them and condemns Robbie due to her strong imagination and of course bitterness, as we will see later.

After that, she writes about herself as if she were years later:

Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through as whole story 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 repeated question, she felt obliged to produce a story line, 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. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 51-52)

She imagines her trajectory in achieving her goal as a writer when she was a teenager. Her success in the literary world would start from the folktales until achieving the psychological realism techniques. Besides, creating a story enables to depicts her inner world, to acknowledge who she is and what moves her to create a story exactly as she wants it.

2

As we have seen, in the very beginning of the novel Briony is strongly concerned about rehearsing a play written by herself. Her cousins Lola, Jackson and Pierrot had come from the North in order to spend some days in Tallis' house, due to their parents'

scandalous divorce. In fact, their coming provokes in Briony such an exciting feeling of writing a play, so that she immediately decides to write a play named *The Trials of Arabella*. We perceive that Briony is constantly encouraged to write and create stories by her family, as we see when her mother Emily attentively reads the play and praises her daughter for having done it well.

In fact, the play is not for her cousins, though apparently, she states that is. But not for Briony. One can observe some other dimensions in her goal, because there some people she wants to impress and provoke emotion: Her brother's recognition, her family's praises, and her own triumph. She is writing and rehearsing her play for her brother not just to 'flatter' him, but also to teach him morally in order to lead him toward moral and decent marriage. As the narrator states,

Her play was not for her cousins, it was for her brother, to celebrate his return, provoke his admiration and guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, toward the right for of wife, the one who would persuade him to return to the countryside, the one who would sweetly request Briony's services as a bridesmaid. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 05)

In fact, she feels too much admiration for Leon and she wants him to liver near her once again. She idealises him so much, that she feels herself strongly attached to him and thus her concerning become closely connected to his presence and admiration. As we can note in the novel, 'There were moments in the summer dusk after her light was out, when she burrowed in the delicious gloom of her canopy bed, and made her heart thud with luminous, yearning fantasies, little playlets in themselves, every one of which featured Leon.' (McEwan, 2001, p. 04). Therefore, Briony idealises her brother constantly. The play shows her projections toward him, and also that she wants to flatter and persuade him all over again. However, she wants his praising and admiration. Furthermore, her imagination is highly encouraged by her family and her skills with words are perceived by them very early in life. As the narrator asserts, 'her efforts received encouragement. In fact, they were welcomed as the Tallises began to understand that the baby of the family possessed a strange mind and a facility with words.' (McEWANN, 2001, p. 07). Her longing for stories, literature, and writing is one of the essential issues of the novel. Nonetheless, her imagination and her strong feeling of controlling everything and everybody would lead her to commit her first and direst crime one day: accusing someone falsely.

She tries to rehearse her play, yet her cousins refuse to act as the actor of the play, and just go out to play outside. Just right after the failure of the rehearsals, she describes how she conceives what a story should be:

A story was direct and simple, allowing nothing to come between herself and her reader – no intermediaries with their private ambitions or incompetence, no pressures of time, no limits on resources. In a story you only had to wish, you only had to write it down and you could have the world; in a play you had to make do with what was available: no horses, no village streets, no seaside. No curtain. It seemed so obvious now that it was too late: a story was a form of telepathy. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 47)

In that sense, creating a story could be conceived as a simple act of presenting the world just as it is seen and perceived. She compares a story to a play, in which the scenery is not determined by the author, but it is mostly set out by the reader or the director of the play. In the novel's case, it is easier to determine the settings, the sceneries, the climate, the ambiance, the space, the details, the time, and so forth. Obviously, there is no need of creating mythological scenes or fantastical adventures, because what is more important for her is to portray the inner self of a character, the reasons of his/her actions, feelings, thoughts, and projections. Her wish of having everything under control and having the entire world just as she wants it, guides her desire of knowing everything, every step of a character, every thought, emotion, indecision. We must consider that her desire to control everything and have the world exactly as she wants it, reveals in fact her pursue for perfection and admiration of her family and specially her brother.

As one can perceive in the novel, the narrator suggests her inability as one of the sources of weakness, clumsiness, and self-exposure. According to him, her first story was

a foolish affair, imitative of half a dozen folktales and lacking, she realized later, that vital knowingness about the ways of the world which compels a reader's respect. But this first clumsy attempt showed her that the imagination itself was a source of secrets [...]. Self-exposure was inevitable the moment she described a character's weakness; the reader was bound to speculate that she was describing herself. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 06-07)

As it is pointed out here, literary creation starts by imitating a set of folktales and, in this case, self-exposure and the self's revelation turned out to be features that determine the first steps of a novelist. Fictionally, Ian McEwan is drawing the lines of the story of a new-born novelist, once the beginning of her writing is just a self-disclosure of

characteristics dominant in a writer. What one can figure out is that Briony is supposed to become a novelist who has ‘no secrets’ (McEWANN, 2001, p. 06). Her main feature is trying to set and reveal everything exactly as it happened. It is a kind of mania that she will develop in a way that it will become too much strict and moralist. She will discover step by step maturity, but as long as she discovers that she can change nothing, even though she does her best, the only possibility might be atonement in her novel.

In another moment the narrator continues focusing on the possibility that the play could not be a great success and points out the risks by trying to present it:

The play she had written for Leon’s homecoming was her first excursion into drama [...]. The piece was intended to inspire not laughter, but terror, relief and instruction, in that order, and the innocent intensity with which Briony set about the project – the posters, tickets, sales booth – made her particularly vulnerable to failure. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 09).

Her intense feeling of obligation towards her brother seems to convey something more than just idealisation, control over the world, and desire for literary creation. Her ambition is such determining of what she wants that it shows us her deep egotism. One can note this as Pierrot says that plays are just ‘showing off’ (McEWANN, 2001, p. 14), and Briony feels outraged due to his rude remark, but, in the end, she agrees with his idea: ‘Briony knew he had a point. This was precisely why she loved plays, or hers at least; everyone would adore her. [...] She knew they could never understand her ambition.’ (McEWANN, 2001, p. 14). Here the new-born author’s ambition is very strong and she is very concerned about what an author could feel and why she could write for. One can also perceive that, besides being egotistic, she is in fact a foolish girl spoiled by the whole family, which increases her ambition and egotism very much.

As we stated above, the fountain scene is the most important real-life fact which leads Briony toward misjudgement and distortive imagination of this fact. Because of her having too much imagination and her being too much creative and touched by any reaction around her, she misjudges things and facts. The core scene of the novel, the fountain scene, is fundamental for the misrepresentation and misjudgement of Robbie’s and Cecilia’s attitude. What Briony sees is not exactly what happens. She judges from her point of view and from her restricted view of the world and things she has lived, letting her imagination pervade her interpretation. She does not understand the adult motives and attitudes. She judges what both Cecilia and Robbie do according to her own moralism.

In this sense, Briony confuses the differences between life and fiction. She fictionalises what she perceives, as she sees Robbie and Cecilia by the fountain:

There was something rather formal about the way he stood, feet apart, head held back. A proposal of marriage. Briony would not have been surprised. She herself had written a tale in which a humble woodcutter saved a princess from drowning and ended by marrying her. What was presented here fitted well. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 48)

As we can note, that is the first moment when Briony starts fictionalising Cecilia and Robbie's love story. Her imagination goes further the scene experienced by the couple. In fact, what she is doing here is projecting her feelings, i. e., the dreams of a princess marrying a humble woodcutter or the son of a servant who saved her from drowning years ago. As we will see further, Briony's crush for Robbie leads her to maintain love and marriage expectations towards him. However, she might have become deeply disappointed with Robbie's rejection, which makes her feel bitterness and anger.

Later she analyses Robbie's behaviour as being very aggressive and demanding towards her sister:

What was less comprehensible, however, was how imperiously Robbie raised his hand now, as though issuing a command which Cecilia dared not disobey. It was extraordinary that she was unable to resist him. At his insistence she was moving her clothes, and at such a speed. She was out of her blouse, now she had let her skirt drop to the ground and was stepping out of it, while he looked on impatiently, hands on hips. What strange power did he have over her? Blackmail? Threats? (McEWANN, 2001, p. 48)

In this part, we see how far Briony's imagination can go, that she builds up an image of the scene based on sensual and even erotic suggestions. Nevertheless, that is not true, since she is not near them, she cannot hear their words and cannot understand the scene, because she is observing them from her window bedroom. Thus, she imagines Cecilia cannot resist Robbie's command, because he is blackmailing and threatening her. All the time her imagination is judging and evaluating things around her, as Kant and McGinn pointed out proposed in their discussions.

However, what happened lets Briony very surprised and even shocked, due to the unexpected sequence of events, to the realism of the scene:

The sequence was illogical – the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal. Such was Briony's last thought before she accepted

that she did not understand, and that she must simply watch. Unseen, from two stories up, with the benefit of unambiguous sunlight, she had access across the years to adult behaviour, to rites and conventions she knew nothing about, as yet. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 49)

Although she does not understand what is exactly happening, she becomes step by step strongly convinced that what she is seeing is real. The fact of seeing both by the fountain introduced her to the adult world, a world full of mystery and misunderstandings. However, she just interprets what she perceives, based on her child limited point of view. The adults' reasons for their acts are not taken into account. More than that, she just judges them with an absolute reliance, as the narrator states 'with the benefit of unambiguous sunlight' (McEWANN, 2001, p. 49). That suggests that she thinks she perceives reality as just as she sees things, but in a very malicious way: 'This was not a fairy tale, this was the real, the adult world, in which frogs did not address princesses, and the only messages were the ones that people sent. It was also a temptation to run to Cecilia's room and demand an explanation.' (McEWANN, 2001, p. 50). Thus, she is introduced to the adult world, to the adult reasons, which will not be interpreted by her, as it really is, but as she really thinks it is, based on her bitterness and anger of Robbie's refusal of marrying her.

It is also important to notice that she directs her imagination to the fountain scene. Maybe because just before seeing this scene, she has become deeply disappointed due to her failure to rehearse her play:

The rehearsals also offended her sense of order. The self-contained world she had drawn with clear and perfect lines had been defaced with the scribble of other minds, other needs; and time itself, so easily sectioned on paper into acts and scenes, was even now dribbling uncontrollably away. Perhaps she wouldn't get Jackson back until after lunch. [...] The simplest way to have impressed Leon would have been to write him a story and put it in his hands herself, and watch as he read it. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 46)

She fictionalises Robie and Cecilia's dating just after being disenchanted by the possibility of rehearsing her play. She judges their cousins are responsible for the failure of her play, because the boys were clumsily acting in the rehearsals and they were much more interested in playing in the pool. Thus, she discovers it would have been easier just to write a story and give it to Leon to read it. She projects her strong imagination and

bitterness towards the facts by the fountain scene, which becomes one of her newest possibility of writing a novel in which she can achieve her most perfect deed.

After that scene, she starts fictionalising Robbie as a maniac. Robbie asks her to hand in a letter to Cecilia, before he meets her at the dinner at her house. Once she reads the letter, she convinces Lola that he is indeed a maniac: 'But she had seen Robbie's letter, she had cast herself as her sister's protector, and she had been instructed by her cousin: what she saw must have been shaped in part by what she already knew, or believed she knew.' (McEWANN, 2001, p. 157). When Robbie arrives at the Tallises' house, both Cecilia and Robbie go to the library and have their first kiss and sexual intercourse. Unfortunately, Briony meets both at the library in their first love moment. Since Briony's considers him as a maniac, she has the seeming proof that he is attacking and raping her sister in the library, but in fact they are having a love affair.

In the library scene, she finds out both Robbie and Cecilia in their only love moment in the story. As she sees both Robbie and Cecilia in the library, she imagines that Robbie is attacking her sister:

And then, from behind the library door, a scraping noise followed by a thump and a murmur that could have been a man's or a woman's. In memory – and Briony later gave this matter some thought – she had no particular expectations as she placed her hand on the brass handle and turned it. But she had seen Robbie's letter, she had cast herself as her sister's protector, and she had been instructed by her cousin: what she saw must have been shaped in part by what she already knew, or believed she knew. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 157).

What she sees is already pre-determined in her ideas about the letter Robbie wrote to Cecilia and her imagination. In her imagination and judgement, there is no possibility of changing things and ideas. She even casts herself as her sister's protector due to the events she has seen that day. Therefore, her imagination is so strong that she uses it to determine the truth and reinvent facts. She is too much concerned with her fantasies and stories that, one might say, all she wishes is to transform real life around her into a fairy tale. Her imagination is a key element for building up a new story, a new world, even though she accuses an innocent young man.

The library scene is shown by Briony's point of view and by both Cecilia's and Robbie's point of view in two moments of the novel. For them, it was their most intimate moment. For Briony, it was the realisation of her worst fears:

Though they were immobile, her immediate understanding was that she had interrupted an attack, a hand-to-hand fight. The scene was so entirely a realization of her worst fears that she sensed that her overanxious imagination had projected the figures onto the packed spines of books. This illusion, or hope of one, was dispelled as her eyes adjusted to the gloom. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 157).

Here she thinks he is attacking Cecilia, but everything is just her imagination effect. Her imaginings go so further, that she embodies here the role of a character, a hero. Life starts to become a literary world for her. From now on almost everything she lives will be intermingled and mixed up by her stories, readings, dreams, projections, imagination, and creation. Her life will be fulfilled with literary creation and projection. Even the atonement she seeks in the novel *is* a way of transforming her crime and guilt into a kind of repair by trying to fix things. One might consider her attempt of atonement a kind of imagination and creation of something fictional: the desire to set things in order and repair the past, which she might know that it is impossible.

After dinner, the twins run away and all the family start to look for the boys in the deep dark of the night. Then, Lola, the elder cousins raped by someone she cannot see his face due to the darkness in the garden. Based on those facts, she accuses Robbie of raping Lola, instead of telling the truth, telling the name of the man who raped Lola. Her imagination is stronger than her action: she does not tell anyone the truth about the crime, but accuses Robbie of raping her. Briony intermingles and confuses the literary world and her fantasies with life facts.

Just right after the rape scene Briony begins to insist in the ‘invented truth of the crime. She insists on the sentence ‘I saw him’ (from page 210-220) and in the word *truth*. It also becomes very convenient for Lola to lie, because she did not want to be involved in another family moral scandal, since their parents were getting divorced:

Lola did not need to lie, to look her supposed attacker in the eye and summon the courage to accuse him, because all that work was done for her, innocently, and without guile by the younger girl. Lola was required only to remain silent about the truth, banish it and forget it entirely, and persuade herself not of some contrary tale, but simply of her own uncertainty. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 214-215).

Here the narrator slightly suggests that Robbie is not her rapist, since he uses the word *supposed attacker* to name him. Lola just needed to be quiet and convince herself of the truth imagined and invented by Briony, which blinds her and everyone around, as Costa (2015) discusses in *Blindness*. Probably she is uncertain of what really happened,

because ‘she couldn’t see, his hand was over her eyes, she was terrified, she couldn’t say for sure’. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 215). Briony thinks that ‘if her poor cousin was not able to command the truth, then she would do it for her. *I can. And I will.*’ (McEWANN, 2001, p. 215). Briony’s heroism is not only directed towards her sister, but also her cousin and maybe she would do it for her whole family. However, she does it, one can say, because she wants to fulfil her deep desire of achieving acts of triumph, heroism, and kindness towards everybody around her, acts deserving admiration and recognition. Her strong need of praise makes her imagination works for that wish.

Ironically Ian McEwan suggests that the truth about the crime is not certain and sure. Briony’s imagination and feelings are mostly responsible for it, instead of being an act based on a confident testimony:

She was driven back, with a little swooping sensation in her stomach, to the understanding that what she knew was not literally, or not only, based on the visible. It was not simply her eyes that told her the truth. It was too dark for that. [...] Her eyes confirmed the sum of all she knew and had recently experienced. The truth was in the symmetry, which was to say, it was founded in common sense. The truth instructed her eyes. So when she said, over and again, I saw him, she meant it, and was perfectly honest, as well as passionate. What she meant was rather more complex than what everyone else so eagerly understood, and her moments of unease come when she felt that she could not express these nuances. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 215-215)

One can see that if ‘it was not simply her eyes that told her the truth’, thus her imagination and the connection of slight suggestions that make the whole truth. What the narrator enhances here is that what Briony sees is not sure even for her and what she thinks she saw is just the result of a scenario build up by her, based on her imagination and resentment. She cannot control her feelings anymore, but she just moves on adding new ideas to old ones. What happens is embellished by her imaginative and creative feelings and thoughts. Even Lola makes an effort to believe in what her cousin states so surely: ‘Lola sighed and shook her head slowly, as though trying to reconcile herself to the *unacceptable truth*’. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 219, our own highlights). Briony convinces Lola to believe that Robbie was her rapist and requires her to remain in silence. By doing that, she accuses Robbie, which destroys completely his dreams, carrier, and life. Here Ian MacEwan gives us a slight hint that Briony is lying about Lola’s rapist. Probably the reader, in the first reading, becomes so excited and thrilled that he cannot perceive these very little details about what is happening indeed. Therefore, the reader’s

impression must be much stronger due to the shock of the confusions, lies and mistakes in the novel.

One should ask why Briony has done that so proudly. Actually, year later Robbie asks that question. While he is in the war, the narrator digs deep into Robbie's mind as he remembers an event some years before the night that the twins ran away. In a day in June 1932 Briony and Robbie were by the river, he was teaching her how to swim. After some hours by the water, she suddenly asked him 'If I fell in the river, would you save?' (McEWANN, 2001, p. 295). As Robbie answered her positively, she jumped in the water. By doing that, he also jumps into the river, all dressed up, and saved her. He reacted with anger and disappointment, once she could have killed them both. He risked his life for hers. She merely answered: "I want to thank you for saving my life. I'll be eternally grateful to you." Lines, surely, from one of her books, one she had read lately, or one she had written.' (McEWANN, 2001, p. 297). Then she simply declared that she loves him, that is why she jumped in the river. After analysing those facts, Robbie thinks of what could have happened during those three years that he did not notice:

But there must have been signs which he had not noticed. For three years she must have nurtured a feeling for him, kept it hidden, nourished it with fantasy or embellished it in her stories. She was the sort of girl who lived in her thoughts. The drama by the river might have been enough to sustain her all that time. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 298).

Ironically the narrator has stated in the beginning of the novel that Briony 'had no secrets' (McEWANN, 2001, p. 06), yet she kept all her secrets in her mind, and the lie she told to accuse Robbie three years later. In this moment, Robbie suspects that her secret was to love him. Might she have kept for three years in her dreams any sort of bitterness? Probably yes. Thus, he concludes that since he has given her the letter, and she read it, she was deeply disappointed and wanted to get her revenge:

She was shocked, and not only by a word. In her mind he had betrayed her love by favoring her sister. Then, in the library, confirmation of the worst, at which point, the whole fantasy crashed. First, disappointment and despair, then a rising bitterness. Finally, an extraordinary opportunity in the dark, during the search for the twins, to avenge herself. She named him – and no one but her sister and her mother doubted her. The impulse, the flash of malice, the infantile destructiveness he could understand. The wonder was the depth of the girl's rancor, her persistence with a story that saw him all the way to Wandsworth Prison. Now he might be cleared, and that gave him joy. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 299).

Finally, the narrator makes clear why Briony accused him so resentfully. Once she was always daydreaming about love stories, princes' tales, and fantasizing her life, Robbie could find an explanation to what she has done to him. He could not fix things now, but he was able to figure out her imaginative mind, full of stories and fantasies. Therefore, his careless letter to Cecilia and Briony's prodigious imagination sent him to prison. Her imagination destroyed all their dreams, projections, plans, and love. It led them all to the destruction of the self in the war and to the rupture of the family. From that moment on, Briony could only try an atonement through literary writing and Robbie and Cecilia would live connected forever just through words and letters.

3

Until the Dunkirk scene, Robbie is still alive. However, after that, everything is Briony's creation in order to achieve atonement for both Cecilia and Robby. There are two levels in the narration here: on the one hand, the level of the 'real' world presented in the novel, which of course is a literary creation as well; and, on the other hand, the things invented by Briony to create her novel. In fact, the narrator gives us some hints about this. There are two facts that suggest that Robbie and Cecilia were dead before the reader learns that they died, that the facts she tells the reader are all invented in her mind.

The first one occurs after the Marshalls' marriage, as Briony walks away towards her sister's house in London. Just right after she leaves the café, the narrator states: "Perhaps the Briony who was walking in the direction of Balham was the *imagined or ghostly persona*. This *unreal feeling* was heightened when, after half an hour, she reached *another High Street, more or less the same as the one she had left behind.*" (McEWANN, 2001, p. 425, our own highlights). Any reader would not perceive this detail, since s/he is very eager to know the end of the story. The narrator is suggesting here that she is a mere character or a *persona* in the novel, who is living a literary life in this literary world, rather than a real person in all moments. Moreover, she is walking as if she was walking around the same place, as she reaches another High Street similar to the one she left half an hour. This event happens near the end of the novel. We must remember that Robbie died in Dunkirk. His last words and thoughts are described on page 341. He says to Nettle: "I won't say a word," he said, though Nettle's head had long disappeared from his view. "Wake me before seven. I promise, you won't hear another word from me."

(McEWANN, 2001, p. 341). However, everyone knows that he has an argument with Briony in his lodgings in London, but at the end of the novel, Briony confesses that she has never met her sister and Robbie again. As she confirms: ‘That I never saw them in that year. That my walk across London ended at the church on Clapham Common, and that a cowardly Briony limped back to the hospital, unable to confront her recently bereaved sister.’ (McEWANN, 2001, p. 478).

The second hint about their death is the letters that suggest that Robbie might be dead, which happens on page 463. As she goes to the War Museum, she hands in some letters to the Keeper of the Documents: ‘I spent a while chatting with the Keeper of Documents. I handed over the bundle of letters Mr. *Nettle* wrote me about Dunkirk – *most gratefully* received.’ (McEWANN, 2001, p. 463, our own highlights). What she suggests here is that getting details about Robbie in Dunkirk during the war would only be possible through *Nettle*’s letters. The emphatic words *most gratefully* suggests that it was hard to get information about the war and specifically about Robbie in the war, since he was dead and she could not meet him anymore. The only soldier who survived and knew Robbie was *Nettle*. Again, the reader might have read this episode not paying close attention to it, but eager to reach the end of the story. Thus, the impact may be very strong and moving.

4

The final revelations can let the reader completely astonished. Briony meets the Marshalls by chance, she visits the war museum, and she receives the compliments for her powerful work. In the end, the only way Briony finds to achieve her atonement is through literary creation. At this moment, she thinks that, in the novel, she could give Cecilia and Robbie the happiness they were deprived from. Moreover, she regrets for not having done what she most wanted to achieve: to repair the crimes and mistakes done against them. As she confesses, ‘but there were also the lovers. Lovers and their happy ends have been on my mind all night long. As into the sunset we sail. An unhappy inversion. [...]. It is only in this last version that my lovers end well, standing side by side on a South London pavement as I walk away.’ (McEWANN, 2001, p. 478). Until the homage ceremony starts, the reader might think that even Cecilia and Robbie were in the ceremony together. However, she regrets for not having done something better than writing a novel with a happy ending for the dead couple:

All the preceding drafts were pitiless. But now I can no longer think what purpose would be served if, say, I tried to persuade my reader, by direct or indirect means, that Robbie Turner died of septicemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 190, or that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground Station. That I never saw them in that year. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 478)

Here she puts at stake what literary creation is. Is it just creating new fact out of the blue? Or, is it more than fictionalising and transfiguring reality? The narrator put at stake issues such as literary creation and literature and their meaning for us nowadays. What is the role of literature and literary creation and what would be the best style, the best techniques employed by an author? In that sense, people still need some sort of catharsis in order to flee from the burden of their lives, to have some fun, to become touched and impressed with something. As she argues:

How could that constitute an ending? What sense of hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? I couldn't do it to them. 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? (McEWANN, 2001, p. 478-479)

She also questions what the reader's role is in literature nowadays. Is it a mere passive role that just read lines and words without interacting intensively? Or, is his/her role being active and a key agent in the construction of literary meaning? Ian McEwan leaves for all the readers a question which is supposed to provoke debates about what is the meaning of literature nowadays, what literary creation means for us today, what would be the best devices which an author can use. According to Aristotle's **Poetics** (1980), the artist writes not what really happened, but what could have happened. He also aims at achieving the reader's aesthetic impression, Kant's aesthetic pleasure (2005).

What McEwan wants to show us is that literary creation and literature have transposed any boundary, possible of being delimited and demarked. Literature nowadays is being a source of experiment, and imagination may be its main concern. In the end, Briony places the literary issues at the core of our world, it means, she gives literature the same importance as someone else would give to God or other kind of religion or belief:

How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher from that she can

appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all. (McEWANN, 2001, p. 479)

Literature in its deepest meaning transcends any conceivable reality, any conceivable dimension. Thus, if language can represent the world, as she states ‘there is nothing outside her’, literary creation goes beyond any real and concrete dimension, and it is beyond the limits of rationality. Its only limit is imagination.

Therefore, McEwan portrays in the novel how much literary creation, imagination and life events are highly intermingled. Briony’s imagination leads to the destruction of the self, of the main character’s dreams, projections, idealisations, plans, and love, in this case, Robbie’s, Cecilia’s and hers as well. The falling of the family, the destruction of Cecilia and Robbie’s love relationship, and their involvement in the Second World War are the destructive results of Briony’s imagination, misinterpretation, and judgement.

Final Remarks

Atonement is a novel whose main concern is the search for writing the best novel. Briony embodies the author’s role and works hard in order to find out and achieve the best techniques used to write a novel which can reveal any inner detail of the characters. In that sense, the novel employs techniques such as the stream of consciousness, back and forth movements in the narrative, changes of the narrators’ point of view. All those devices are used to discover and analyse the inner-self of the characters of the novel. As we have seen, Briony is constantly seeking for the truth, but one might say that the truth sought by the narrator and Briony is the truth about the characters, what they think, feel, and desire. Therefore, McEwan presents in **Atonement** the main issues about literary creation and the meaning of literature nowadays.

Moreover, Briony’s imagination is very strong and determining in the novel. It is so influential that it rebuilds the world according to her wishes, desires, and projections. She is always imagining scenes, scenarios, plots, as well as her characters’ feelings and thoughts. Thus, life and fiction are mixed up in such a way that literary creation controls and determines the course of life, although it leads to the destruction of the self, family and love. Literary creation, imagination and real life are close interwoven that the result is the construction of a verisimilar new world, in Aristotle’s sense.

Furthermore, the author subtly proposes a discussion about the role of the reader and literature nowadays. The reader's role might be active, interacting all the time with the events in the novel, in order to feel emotion and to have some fun. And what is the importance of literature nowadays? The novel suggests that it is still fundamental for us to have works of art which can help us to flee from the burden of our lives, to have some fun, and to feel touched and impressed with art and literature.

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