The ethics of literary empathy english literature essay

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What novels give us is not new information but a new capacity for compassion with beings different from ourselves; in this sense, novels are more part of the moral sphere than of science. The ultimate horizon of that experience is not truth but love.[1]

1. 1. Violence as " Failure of the Imagination" and the Redemptive Value of Empathy

In an essay written in response to 9/11 and published just a few days after the attacks, Ian McEwan expressed the need for loving compassion, imagination, and empathy,[2]attributes filled with ethical value: " Imagining what it is to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality."[3]As justification for the terrorists' violent deeds, McEwan invoked a numbing " failure of the imagination,"[4]induced by the deadening of the innately wired ability to empathise with other people, an ability that would have made cruelty impossible: If the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers, they would have been unable to proceed. It is hard to be cruel once you permit yourself to enter the mind of your victim [...] The hijackers used fanatical certainty, misplaced religious faith, and dehumanising hatred to purge themselves of the human instinct for empathy."[5]The only defence that the victims could put up against their attackers, as if to counterbalance the latter's dearth of empathy, were those " snatched and anguished assertions of love"[6]made on their cell phones. The point that McEwan misses when he invokes imagination and empathy as being " the core of our humanity" in his response to the terrorist attacks is the possibility of imagining himself into the terrorists' situation. He identifies with the victims of the terrorist attack, but fails to stretch his imagination to the other side, refraining from reflecting on the terrorists' motives (the terrorist is just " some holy fool"[7]) and thus arguing only from the perspective of his Western thinking. Yet McEwan's essay is best construed not as a theoretical account of violence and terrorism, but rather as a persistent commentary on the functions and limitations of novels, the key question in his essay–" What if it was me?"[8]−alluding not only to real-life events, but also to the problems novels raise about literary empathy and engagement. The novelist had previously elaborated on the redemptive powers of literature and on fiction as an activator of ethical awakening in an interview where he explained that[w]hat underlies morality is the imagination itself. We are innately moral beings, at the most basic, wired-in neurological level. [...] Our imagination permits us to understand what it is like to be someone else. I don't think that you could have even the beginnings of a morality unless you had the imaginative capacity to understand what it would be like to be the person you're considering beating round the head with a stick. An act of cruelty is ultimately a failure of the imagination. Fiction is a deeply moral form in that it is the perfect medium for entering the mind of another. I think it is at the level of empathy that moral questions begin in fiction.[9]McEwan's view on the role of fiction disproves of an ethical guidance that imparts incontestable or universal models of conduct to substantiate its legitimacy and cogency: " I don't think the novel is particularly good or interesting when it instructs us how to live, so I don't think of it as moral in that sense," the novelist explains in another interview.[10]Morality, as he understands it, does not reside in enforcing precepts or demands; instead, of paramount importance in his standpoint is the emotional partaking in an experience, the insistence on the novelist’s task to create opportunities for imaginative participation by shaping vivid and compelling fictional universes to which the reader can connect. Storytelling provides a vehicle for representing ethical complexity and, as Wayne Booth suggests, the process of reading fiction involves our experience of the " full ‘ otherness.’"[11]The novel is a laboratory where ethical questions are examined through the lenses of aesthetic categories, particularly by providing surrogate life experiences that can serve as material for exercises in empathy, grasped as a fundamental quality of reciprocity. Fictional truth, the novelist Brian Hall argues (referring to a passage from a short story by Tim O’Brien that features his famous statement " If a story seems moral, do not believe it"), is always moral, regardless of the morality, immorality or amorality of the lives the fiction portrays. To help you see through another’s eyes, to undermine parochial certainty−how could that not bear on morality? […] [E]nlightened transformation goes to the heart of the artistic goal of literature. […] [F]iction can teach you again and again what you think you already know.[12]Fiction expands the readers’ instinctive propensity for empathy, kindling their engagement in someone else’s situation or mental and emotional state. By taking readers into the minds of people unlike themselves, fiction elicits from them an understanding of the perspectives of people who, in different circumstances, might be perceived as less than human. This exercise in empathy, this attempt of making sense of their world, is part of what it means to be moral. Conversely, empathy becomes an effective instrument for the readers' ethical improvement, since, through empathy, they can ethically profit from literature, by making an imaginative leap and living through the (textual) other, while maintaining a distance and reflecting on complex situations. Vicarious reading refines our ethical savvy in real life, empowering us with an awareness of the singularity of restricted universes and particular situations, as Cynthia Ozick explains in her commentary on the functions of literature: In steady interpretive light we can make distinctions; we can see that one thing is not interchangeable with another thing; that not everything is the same; that Holocaust is different, God knows, from a corncob. So we arrive, at last, at the pulse and purpose of literature: to reject the blur of the " universal"; to distinguish one life from another, to illumine diversity; to light up the least grain of being, to show how it is concretely individual, particularised from any other, to tell, in all the marvel of its singularity, the separate holiness of the least grain. Literature is the recognition of the particular.[13]Considerations about the significance of empathy as a core responsibility of fiction, nonetheless, are bound to give rise to the unavoidable question of the author's legitimacy and morality in displaying a character's most intimate life experiences, in dissecting another's feelings. Booth raises this problem when he asks: " What Are the Author's Responsibilities to Those Whose Lives Are Used as ' Material'? Are there limits to the author's freedom to expose, in the service of art or self, the most delicate secrets of those whose life provide material?"[14]These questions lead to the problem of authorial empathy, even more complex through its cultural implications. Authors who empathise with their characters are sometimes criticised for assuming an aesthetic power to which they are not entitled, since literary discourse is deemed to be the product of social identity. Nonetheless, undermining the writers’ authority presents the cultural danger of discrediting a basic supposition about the character of representation−the capacity of the literary to express empathy−a belief deeply-embedded into human consciousness. Political scientist James Q. Wilson discusses the correlation between our social selves and our ethical selves: Man is by nature a social animal. Our moral nature grows directly out of our social nature. We express sympathy for the plight of others both because we value their company (and so we wish to convince them of our companionable qualities) and because we can feel the pain of others even when not in their company.[15]This innate sensitivity to the feelings of others−a sensitivity that, to be sure, varies among individuals−is so powerful that it makes us grasp not only the feeling of friends and family members but also those of some strangers, many fictional characters, and even animals. [...] Scarcely a waking hour passes when we do not wonder how we appear in the eyes of others. [...] Our sociability generates our moral sense and then places us in countless positions where its expression is muffled or distorted. That is the human predicament.[16]People operate from an empathetic stance because they are members of a community, and the initial choice of empathising with another functions as an ethical basis for further engagement in empathetic acts. Booth constructs a similar argument around the duality of self and society and insists on the idea of altruism (" the service of alterity"[17]) as being not the result of duty towards others, but an expression of "‘ self’-preservation."[18]These opposing tendencies are also contained by language, at once a solitary and social experience: each speech act is fundamentally private being spoken and developed by a single individual; yet it becomes language only when other individuals, i. e. the reader or listener, identify it as such. The question then is no longer one of the writer's or reader's entitlement to communicate empathy, but that of reconciling the tendency to assert one's individuality with the desire to relate to another. The foremost ethical dilemma they must face occurs when deciding to what extent they are to stretch their engagement with the other in initiating an empathic process. Ideally, empathy resides in differentiated identification with the other, a paradox that is indicative of the joint bounds of which we must be aware but which we should not transgress, both in real life and in fictional worlds. Considering the currency of the notion of empathy in texts discussing ethics, we might be surprised to learn that the word ' empathy' is relatively new. It has its origin in the idea of Einfuhlung (literally, ' in-feeling' or ' feeling-into'), which dates back to the 1880s, when Robert Vischer used it in a discussion about the psychology of aesthetics to refer to " a projection of the self into the object of beauty,"[19]though psychologists attribute it to the German psychologist Theodore Lipps, who is said to have coined it to describe the emotional appreciation of someone else's feelings. Notably, the concept was established from the very beginning as an aesthetic category, which signals its importance in the creative and imaginative processes. At the beginning of the 20th century, Einfuhlung was imported into English by the British psychologist Edward Bradford Titchener, who, in 1909, coined it as ' empathy,' stemming from the Greek word empatheia, and meaning " affection or passion,"[20]and a few years later defined as an innate " tendency to feel oneself into a situation."[21]It is significant that, in his discussion about empathy in Beginner’s Psychology (1915), the British psychologist illustrates it with an account of a " reading experience": We have a natural tendency to feel ourselves into what we perceive or imagine. As we read about the forest, we may as it were, become the explorer; we feel for ourselves the gloom, the silence, the humidity, the oppression, the sense of lurking danger; everything is strange, but it is to us that strange experience has come.[22]Expanding the literary implications of the concept, the English novelist Vernon Lee fashioned her own aesthetics of empathy, arguing that people empathise with works of art by recalling memories and making associations that often determine involuntary changes in their breathing and posture. Describing the function of art as " the awakening, intensifying or maintaining of definite emotional states,"[23]Lee places empathy at the core of our collaborative responsiveness. She claims that empathyenters into imagination, sympathy, and also into that inference from our own inner experience which has shaped all our conceptions of an outer world, and given to the intermittent and heterogeneous sensations received from without the framework of our constant and unified inner experience, that it to say, of our own activities and aims.[24]The ethics of otherness formed the basis of the theory of one of the foremost ethical thinkers in continental philosophy, Emmanuel Lévinas, who, in his 1972 essay " Ideology and Idealism," explained why sameness prevails in our society: The contemporary world, scientific, technical, and sensual, is seen to be without issue, that is to say, without God, not because everything is permitted and is possible by means of technology, but because everything is the same. The unknown immediately becomes familiar, the new, habitual. Nothing is new under the sun. The crisis described in Ecclesiastes is not of sin, but of boredom. Everything is absorbed, sunk, buried in sameness. In the enchantment of places, the hyperbole of metaphysical concepts, the artifice of art, the exaltation of ceremony, the magic of rites–everywhere one suspects and denounces theatricality, transcendence that is purely rhetorical, games. ' Vanity of vanities': the echo of our own voices, taken as answer to the few prayers that still remain with us; everywhere landing back on our own feet, as after the ecstasy of some drug. Except for others, whom, with all this boredom, one cannot drop.[25]As the best remedy for the egocentrism of Western culture, the philosopher invoked the assumption of ethical responsibility for the other, whom he pictured in terms of distance and exteriority. Lévinas used the face as an image for the empathic acknowledgement of the other, and suggested that it is during the face-to-face encounter between people that the other is revealed to the self in his or her distinct being. The face of the other is fundamentally different form the face of the self, and if we want to be credited as ethical, any attempts by the self to approach the other must respect this infinitely unknowable and inassimilable alterity, openness to the other being a prerequisite for ethical interaction.[26]According to Lévinas, the self and other are in a non-mutual relation, and they come together only as strangers to each other, otherness being absolute:[I]n the very heart of the relationship with the other that characterises our social life, alterity appears as a nonreciprocal relationship. [...] The Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not. The Other is this, not because of the Other's character, or physiognomy, or psychology, but because of the Other’s very alterity.[27]The other remains enigmatic, beyond comprehension, radically different from the self who endeavours to contain him/her. Furthermore, the thinker makes a distinction between the face and the mask, indicating that social life consists mainly of masks. It is imagination, particularly an ethical imagination, that allows " the eye to see through the mask,"[28]and enables us to place social attributes upon the ‘ blank slate’ that the other embodies. It is our receptiveness to the other’s stories, our ability to engage into a " veritable conversation"[29]that is the aim of any ethical relation. Paul Ricœur, hailed as one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, embraced a similar perspective of morality. In Oneself as Another (1992), a collection of lectures examining the meaning of personal identity, he explored the dialectic of the self and the other. Ricœur distinguished between ethics and morality, by defining ethics as a personal undertaking, and morality as the expression of this undertaking in social conventions. The philosopher also contended that the sense of value stemming from the impulse of being ethical is more vital for the growth of individuality than that deriving from compliance with social conventions. Individual ethical aspirations are defined by obligation to respect moral norms, but respect for norms can take effect only if it is rooted in respect for others. Therefore, the self-respect attained by conformity to authoritative standards means valuing oneself as another, and this is a form of empathy and concern for others. Ricœur’s term for this concern for others as the basis of morality is " solicitude."[30]He also draws on the term " alterity" to refer to various realities,[31]his ethical theory embracing the possibility that diverse communities and traditions may enter into mutual dialogue. In particular, his ethics presents an outlook of the moral life that is rooted in practice and founded on the basic human capability of dialogue and imaginative moral mediation. Though Ricœur's theory is obviously indebted to Lévinas's ethics of otherness, it also departs from it in its insistence on reciprocity, which Lévinas fails to conceptualise. In Ricœur's opinion, individuality involves otherness to such an extent that the two cannot be conceived as separate. He claims that if we are interested in our relationships with other people, the other cannot be envisioned as totally different, as there is no relationship without a common point.[32]In a similar vein, the American philosopher and professor of literature Richard Rorty turns to the aesthetic and the literary, and emphasises the redemptive value of fiction, arguing that literature cures us of our self-sufficiency, helping us to understand the human condition better and, accordingly, lead more meaningful lives. When we read literature, novels in particular, the philosopher explains, we " are seeking redemption from insensitivity rather than from impiety or irrationality [...] [and] worry about whether [we] are sufficiently aware of the needs of others."[33]He gives narrative a pivotal place in the content of morality and considers the ascendancy of ethical fiction over ethical modern philosophy, arguing that the novel as a genre is " a safer medium than theory for expressing one's recognition of the relativity and contingency of authority figures."[34]To him, the novel is the privileged form of moral discourse as it best articulates particular moral practices, which carry the weight in ethics, rather than universal principles: For novels are usually about people−things which are, unlike general ideas and final vocabularies, quite evidently time-bound, embedded in a web of contingencies. Since the characters in novels age and die−since they obviously share the finitude of the books in which they occur−we are not tempted to think that by adopting an attitude toward them we have adopted an attitude toward every possible sort of person. By contrast, books which are about ideas, even when written by historicists like Hegel and Nietzsche, look like descriptions of eternal relations between eternal objects.[35]The novel has taken over the ethical tasks previously performed by philosophy, being better suited to represent the essence of our being. It is an essentially open and pluralist literary form because it makes no claim to universality, truth or stability, favouring stories that explain small practices, which are always situational, contingent. Its ethos is one of complexity, encompassing and pooling all intellectual resources to give the finest insight into the human nature. If we admit that the subject is provisional and contingent, then ethics can be assumed to share these characteristics. Nevertheless, Rorty argues, to establish fresh concepts that capture the meaningfulness of life, literary criticism needs the unambiguous " vocabulary of moral and political reflection,"[36]its experience in investigating human nature. The complex world of possible courses of action, at odds with one another, becomes more comprehensible when it is couched in terms that attempt to frame the unknown. Yet there is no ‘ metavocabulary’ that takes into account " all possible ways of judging and feeling,"[37]that wholly and forever shields us against the contingency of a world replete with confusing concepts. The plurality of the literary discourse comes closest to evoking the complexity and singularity of human life and of the contingency of all frameworks of meaning, laying open what the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum refers to as " the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer difficulty of actual human deliberation."[38]If we are to find further concepts to capture a complete and complex human life, we should resort to " such texts as novels, texts engaged in the shaping of the language of particularity."[39]In a volume of essays entitled Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature, Nussbaum, like Rorty, shows an interest in the capacity of literature to address and examine the ethical, and claims that the novel is the only adequate literary genre for expressing moral views. To support her preference for the novel as the foremost form of moral enquiry, she first calls attention to the length and complexity of novels, to their appropriateness to represent the consequences of our moral choices, which make them a great deal more effective than moral philosophers’ concise narratives. In her opinion, all philosophical examples expanding " the particularity, the emotive appeal, the absorbing plottedness, the variety and indeterminacy of good fiction" would, as a result, become works of literature.[40]These attributes endow literary texts with the capability of mediating certain ethical aspects that philosophy fails to appreciate fully. In her words, literary forms call forth certain specific sorts of practical activity in the reader that can be evoked in no other way [...] We need a story of a certain kind, with characters of a certain type in it, if our sense of life and of value is to be called forth in the way most appropriate for practical reflection [...] This practical conception is most adequately expressed [...] in texts that have a complex narrative structure [...] Those narratives are also the texts best suited to evoke in the reader the moral activities associated with this conception [which Nussbaum defines as] the human importance of a fine-tuned responsiveness to complex particular cases and of a willingness to see them as particular and irreducible to general rules.[41]Nussbaum emphasises the emotional response to literature, and praises the enormous potential of novels to render the richness of our emotional lives. Moreover, the philosopher argues, it is only when we experience certain feelings, such as love, that we gain access to some forms of knowledge. Love and knowledge are in a mutual relationship: we love people by virtue of what we know about them, but we also improve our knowledge about them because we love them.[42]She goes on by making a distinction between an ethics based on general principles, which are applied more or less automatically, and an ethics that takes into account the specificity of situations. She associates the first approach to ethics with Plato, and the second with Aristotle, and points to the contrasting aesthetic views that the two perspectives have produced. The Platonist emphasis on the objective and general character of moral principles entails the rejection of feelings in ethical decisions, as emotion is bound to affect only particular situations and individuals and bring about unethical decisions. Nussbaum argues that literature’s main reason for existence is to represent particular situations, this representation enabling readers to refine their own emotional and ethical responsiveness to the particularity of these specific situations.[43]Ethics does not rely solely on general principles, but should rather be judged for each specific situation, and the transforming power of literature expresses itself primarily through the reading and defamiliarising process it implies. In this respect, all literary works are committed to responding to an ethical concern which is inseparable from human experience. The capacity of fiction to contribute to our understanding of morality did not go unnoticed in the British literary and philosophical landscape either. In 1961, Iris Murdoch remarked: "[W]e require [...] a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons. We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being. [...] Through literature we can re-discover a sense of the density of our lives."[44]Referring to the functions of the novel, Professor Dominic Head, University of Nottingham, explains that the new advocates of ethical criticism " reclaim the novel as a key site for the exploration of the human domain and moral being."[45]In his view, the novel is a genre which has " the capacity to achieve a unique form of moral philosophy, particularly through its investigation of character, dilemma and moral agency."[46]Narrative ethics, as understood by these critics, steers clear of an abstract and unworldly intellectual isolation and looks for a sensible philosophy that furnishes a conceptual basis, while leaving room for the diversity of postmodern alternatives that cannot claim their universal validity and keeping its distance from metaphysical misconceptions. To them, literature offers only provisional conclusions, inevitably involving the persistence of the moral investigation and evaluation, prerequisites of a meaningful and ethical life. In line with the proponents of the new narrative ethics, Ian McEwan believes that the novel is able to express important matters, especially matters at the heart of morality, much better than other forms: At least since the early ‘ 80s, it’s begun to fill out for me as an idea in fiction, that there’s something very entwined about imagination and morals. That one of the great values of fiction was exactly this process of being able to enter other people’s minds. […] And with the novel we have happened to devise this form, this very elastic, mutable form that can allow us moments of real human investigation. […] It's an open-ended way of looking at our image, in ways that science can't do, religion's not credible, metaphysics is too intellectually repellent on its surface−this is our best machine, as it were.[47]Likewise, he states in another interview thatThe novel is supreme in giving us the possibility of inhabiting other minds. I think it does it better than drama, better than cinema. It's developed these elaborate conventions over three or four hundred years of representing not only mental states, but change, over time. So in that sense, yes, I think that ' other minds' is partly what the novel is about. If you saw the novel as I do in terms of being an exploration of human nature−an investigation of the human condition−then the main tool of that investigation has to be to demonstrate, to somehow give you, on the page, the sensual ' felt' feeling of what it is to be someone else.[48]The novel acts as a repository of ethical awareness by evoking the experience of alterity, the moral investment being the assumption of empathic engagement through imaginative projection, without running the risk of explicit moralising. A self-confessed atheist, McEwan does not ground moral sense on religion, which he regards as " a morally neutral force,"[49]but, as his numerous assertions prove, on humanist values like empathy. And what makes the novel, more than any other literary form, a moral space is precisely " that quality of penetration into other consciousnesses," of " revealing, through various literary conventions, a train of thought, or a state of mind" so that " you can live inside somebody else's head," or even " inside many different people's heads, in a way that you […] cannot do in normal life,"[50]as we illustrate below, while engaging in the analysis of two of McEwan's novels of the new millennium, Atonement (2001) and Saturday (2005).

1. 2. The Destructive and Healing Powers of Storytelling in Atonement

Atonement was reviewed extensively upon its release and received a few of the most appreciative appraisals of McEwan's career, evoking a novelist in his heyday. It was hailed as " a beautiful and majestic fictional panorama,"[51]and " as easily [McEwan's] finest" novel.[52]Geoff Dyer lauded its " scope, ambition and complexity,"[53]comparing it to the great novels of the mid-twentieth century (especially the works of Virginia Woolf, whose literary influence on the writing of the heroine of Atonement is overtly mentioned in the novel, and of D. H. Laurence), whereas Robert Mcfarlane drew attention to " its richness of detail, its gravitas and its length."[54]Martyn Bedford remarked that Atonement revived his appreciation of McEwan, who regained his intellectual vigour through the portrayal of Briony Tallis,[55]the novel's writerly (anti-)heroine. Many critics were perceptive in noting the novel's treatment of the theme of writing and storytelling. David Sexton, for instance, who, like Kermode, regarded the book as " McEwan's best novel, so far, his masterpiece, […] the product of many years of steady development of his craft," a narrative " always alive with the thoughts of the characters, as if it were a transparent medium into other minds,"[56]read it as " a meditation on the impulse of storytelling itself, on the wish to give shape to experience which deceives no less than it illuminates."[57]Claire Messud commented that the novelist, " a vivisectionist of the human psyche […] is painfully aware to the dangers of

[…] the pernicious power of fine storytelling."[58]Discussing the novel’s concern with literary history, Hermione Lee states in her review that Atonement poses " interesting questions about writing," asking " what the English novel of the twenty-first century has inherited, and what it can do now."[59]Lee gives an original answer that alludes to the role of feminist concerns in contemporary fiction, suggesting that "[o]ne of the things it can do […] is to be androgynous," in McEwan’s case, in a book " written by a man acting the part of a woman writing a ‘ male’ subject."[60]The novel’s main theme is concisely and pertinently stated by Dominic Head in his survey of Ian McEwan’s works, as being that of " guilt and atonement […] inextricably linked to an investigation of the writer’s authority, a process of self-critique conducted through the creation of the writing persona Briony Tallis."[61]An extended study of its own composition, the book follows Briony (held by McEwan to be " the most complete person [he]’d ever conjured"[62]), from adolescence till old age as she reconsiders the terrible crime she committed at the age of thirteen with disastrous consequences on the lives of the people around her, misrepresenting it, accounting for it, and eventually attempting to atone for it, looking for comfort in the act of storytelling. The coda written in first person reveals old Briony to be the narrator of the first three parts, and the readers must alter their belief that the narrator is omniscient in the previous parts of the novel, a complete understanding of the narrative technique being thus retrospective. Briony, whose descriptive powers (as a young teenager, she congratulates herself on her ability to shape the world in words, reflecting that " there was nothing she could not describe"[63]) turn out to be, as the critic Peter Childs points out, " both

[her] gift and her curse,"[64]has spent her entire life writing drafts of this book as atonement (or " at-one-ment," " a reconciliation with self," as McEwan told The Observer[65]) for her crime. The epigraph, the dialogue between Henry Tilney and Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey in which the young man reprimands Catherine for entertaining unfounded suspicions about General Tilney, signals a concern that will resonate throughout the novel−the tendency to overdramatise and fictionalise real events, while it also encourages us to apply more general parallels between the two novels. In an interview with Jeff Giles, McEwan describes Atonement as his " Jane Austen novel,"[66]and in another interview, he explicitly comments on the analogy suggested by the epigraph: What are the distances between what is real and what is imagined? Catherine Morland, the heroine of Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey, was a girl so full of the delights of Gothic fiction that she causes havoc around her when she imagines a perfectly innocent man to be capable of the most terrible things. For many, many years, I’ve been thinking how I might devise a hero or heroine who could echo that process in Catherine Morland, but then go a step further and look at, not the crime, but the process of atonement, and do it through writing—do it through storytelling, I would say.[67]As Brian Finney points out, the epigraph acts as both " a warning and a guide" to how the reader is to approach Atonement.[68]Indirectly, the reader is invited to compare Catherine Moorland to Briony with her excessive imagination. Like Catherine Morland’s, Briony Tallis’s judgment is warped by literature and by a flawed knowledge of the world, a weakness that will lead the heroine to push her convictions beyond acceptable limits. At the same time, the epigraph shows how aged Briony as

narrator distances herself from the naive thirteen-year-old Briony (there are three Brionys in the novel corresponding to three stages in her life: thirteen-year-old Briony, eighteen-year-old Briony, and seventy-seven-year-old Briony). The first thing that we learn about young Briony is that she is an ambitious writer, who spends her time browsing dictionaries to increase her word stock and who channels her entire spirit into writing a play (The Trials of Arabella, a melodrama intended to " inspire […] terror, relief and instruction, in that order"[69]−an allusion to Aristotle's Poetics), " in a two-day tempest of composition" that caused her to miss two meals, for which she has also " designed the posters, programs, and tickets, constructed the sales booth out of a folding screen tipped on its side, and lined the collection box in red crêpe paper."[70]These early details, presented from Briony's self-absorbed and pretentiously literary perspective, establish the extent of her dedication to (and even obsession with) not only her writing, but also its reception, betraying her concern with how she is perceived by other people. Considering the novel's conflation of the image of the child with that of the writer, Peter Childs notes that " the child and the novelist both specialise in fashioning worlds of their own imagining, are both ‘ daydreamers' in the novel's terms."[71]For young Briony, writing is a form of extrasensory perception, of conjuring, a sleight of hand that grants her access to the marvels of the world, even " a kind of soaring, an achievable form of flight, of fancy, of the imagination,"[72]and a vehicle for projecting herself into the minds of her readers, her programmatic convictions about fiction being remarkably (and ironically) similar to those claimed by McEwan in his interviews: In a story you only had to wish, you only had to write it down and you could have the world […]. It seemed so obvious now that it was too late: a story was a form of telepathy. By means of inking symbols onto a page, she was able to send thoughts and feelings from her mind to her reader’s. It was a magical process, so commonplace that no one stopped to wonder at it.[73]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 you could enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value. That was the only moral a story need have.[74]Yet for young Briony, the idea that other people’s inner lives are as " vivid" as hers is worrying, endangering her uniqueness with " irrelevance" and making the social world seem " unbearably complicated."[75]While she realises that it is improbable that she might be " surrounded by machines, intelligent and pleasant enough on the outside, but lacking the bright and private inside feelings she had," she does so " only in a rather arid way: she didn’t really feel it."[76]Apparently, Briony’s character experiences a literary evolution, as she shifts from fairy tales to romance, in an attempt to produce her story: while witnessing a scene between her elder sister Cecilia and her father’s protégé Robbie Turner at the Tallises’ fountain and misinterpreting what she has seen, she envisages the prospect of more complex writing than her moralistic tales and begins imagining herself as a mature writer, in " her first, weak intimation that for her now it could no longer be fairy-tale castles and princesses, but the strangeness of the here and now, of what passed between people, the ordinary people that she knew."[77]This appears to be a rite of passage, marking her progress from childhood and romance to adulthood and realism. Misinterpreting yet again the content of a letter that

Robbie, in a Freudian slip, mistakes for another letter and then gives the young girl to take to her sister, Briony realises that, for the first time, she has a secret to share, her false certainty that she is growing up prompting her to reveal " the secret" to her cousin Lola, a fifteen-year-old girl who likes to appear more mature than she is (hence the allusion in her name to that of the female protagonist of Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita, another novel that raises ethical questions), partly to " show the older girl that she too had worldly experiences."[78]Her emerging " adulthood" also causes her to feel " responsible [...] for everything that was about to happen."[79]Nevertheless, as Briony wonders " whether having final responsibility for someone, even a creature like a horse or a dog, was fundamentally opposed to the wild and inward journey of writing" and concludes that "[p]rotective worrying, engaging with another’s mind as one entered it, taking the dominant role as one guided another’s fate, was hardly mental freedom,"[80]it becomes clear that she is not yet ready to assume responsibility. Moreover, by the end of the novel, as we learn that she is a successful novelist (whose fiction is " known for its amorality"[81]−another indication that she might still be not much unlike her young self), we also discover that there is one story to which she keeps returning and that she has drafted and redrafted throughout her life, the only one that counts for her, the one that she must make sense of in order to come to terms with her life. It is the early portrayal of Briony as a committed and somewhat precocious writer, rounded off by her characterisation as a girl " possessed by a desire to have the world just so,"[82]with a " passion for secrets,"[83]a liking for harmony, a rigid tendency for control and order, a fascination with words (of which she often makes clumsy use), and a " taste for the miniature"[84](stories enable this " busy, priggish, conceited little girl,"[85]as older Briony labels her adolescent self in the novel’s coda, to turn reality into a miniature representation of the world that she can arrange, discard and stage-manage at will), which offers the first clues that her self-conscious fictionalising may prompt self-delusion and the denial of truth, carefully laying the basis for the spiral of events leading to the inevitable crisis of the novel. Coupled with these inclinations, with her immaturity and with her lack in the ability to empathise with the others, " the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you"[86](for instance, she has no sympathy for her distressed cousins, victims of their parents’ broken marriage, and will not mind the suffering of Robbie’s mother when her son is taken away by the police), her overindulgent imagination will create the misunderstandings that not only wreak havoc on the lives of those around her, but also force her to understand, though not fully, as it is revealed at the end of the novel, the irreversible and adverse effects of inventing stories and modelling her behaviour on a constructed world. A great deal of the first part of the novel is concerned with outlining the context for Briony’s misconstructions, through the painstaking account of the convergence of characters and of the events that occurred on a very hot day of the year of 1935. McEwan includes several crucial scenes where external influences generate misunderstandings, such as those where Briony interprets a few adult gestures through the distorted lens of her adolescent feelings and confusion, lies becoming tools to block the harsh reality setting in. Many of the events are glimpsed through different framing devices (window frames, skylights, mirrors), through the haze caused by the heat wave, or through the darkness, and often appear to be staged from above as if from a director’s perspective. The aim of this narrative strategy is to heighten the sense of elusiveness and visual confusion as well as of dramatic exaggeration. Briony runs into Lola and her attacker in the darkness and sees only his receding figure, yet she infers that the figure is Robbie’s and concludes that "[h]e was a maniac after all,"[87]allowing her interpretive judgment to prevail over her moral one: she is convinced that the silhouette she saw withdrawing from the scene is Robbie’s only because her interpretation matches the story that she is piecing together following her previous encounters with Robbie (McEwan exposes her judgements as false through several scenes that present Robbie as a worthy young fellow who nurtures a passionate love for Cecilia.). Once she has voiced her story, it becomes impossible for Briony to back it up or soften it, as the passage below reveals: As early as the week that followed, the glazed surface of conviction was not without its blemishes and hairline cracks. Whenever she was conscious of them, which was not often, 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 over 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 came when she felt that she could not express these nuances. She did not even seriously try. There were no opportunities, no time, no permission. Within a couple of days, no, within a matter of hours, a process was moving fast and well beyond her control.[88]The other protagonists of the novel are not free from misapprehensions either: duped by class prejudice, Cecilia is convinced that Danny Hardman, a worker on the Tallis estate, is her cousin's rapist, with no more proof than Briony had when she held Robbie responsible for the sexual assault on Lola (no one considers voicing any suspicions against Paul Marshall, the unpleasant and arrogant chocolate manufacturer who marries his victim to keep his crime secret, ironically ennobled as Lord Marshall by the end of his life). Cee's discernment difficulties, suggesting her family resemblance to Briony, are also alluded to when she sees her appearance distorted and " Picasso-like"[89]in a mirror. Emily Tallis, Briony and Cecilia's mother, views herself as all-knowing and clear-sighted, as a controlling presence in the house who senses all that is happening, but her actions (and their absence, for that matter) suggest the opposite and expose her as being complacent, socially myopic, and just as bound by prejudice and prone to fabricating truth as the other characters. Even Briony's victim, Robbie Turner, portrayed as a selfless and genuinely likeable person throughout the novel (his compassion and generosity are apparent especially in Part Two, in the evocation of the retreat of the British army to Dunkirk), ponders for years about Briony's motives of her accusation which secured him the imprisonment and separated him from the women he loved, misinterpreting her childish thoughtlessness and confusion (an understanding of which she ironically appeared to have reached just a few hours before committing her crime in her remark about literary genres: " It wasn’t only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding"[90]) as deliberate cruelty and revenge for his preference for her sister. Even though he is aware that she is at a " stage in her life [when she] inhabited an ill-defined transitional space between the nursery and adult worlds which she crossed and re-crossed unpredictably,"[91]it never occurs to him that an imaginative thirteen-year-old girl might have a view of the world very different from that of a young adult, and reinvents the past by reinterpreting the events that led to his imprisonment in the light of his conviction that Briony fostered unrequited love for him. These misinterpretations offer a plethora of evidence of the novel’s concern with the difficulty of clarifying the motivation behind another’s actions, with the recognition of another’s consciousness and the dangers of misreading, aspects that are central to McEwan’s fiction and its preoccupation with morality. McEwan inserts into Briony’s account proleptic details that, with the benefit of hindsight, signal the outcome of the novel. For instance, at the end of the novel’s second section, Robbie’s last words are " I promise, you won’t hear another word from me."[92]In other words, at this stage of the novel, the readers do not find out whether Robbie gets evacuated or dies. Although the novel’s third section seems to clarify that dilemma by showing Robbie reunited with Cecilia, in retrospect, the flash-forward at the end of the second section of Atonement seems to prepare the readers for the realisation that Robbie did not stay alive until the retreat. Another key fragment in the third section, describing the real Briony going back to the hospital, while her other self, " no les real," her " imagined or ghostly persona,"[93]continues her wander towards Cecilia and Robbie’s place, traces the fine distinction between what is real and what is unreal, between what is true and what is false, but cannot be fully understood until the last chapter. The beginning of the coda, where Briony states that she has " always liked to make a tidy finish,"[94]anticipates the end by putting the readers on their guard that what they are reading may not be compliant with the truth and that the self Briony is trying to atone through an entire life of writings and re-writings is the self whose need for order causes her crime. In the economy of the novel, the theme of atonement is inextricably linked to that of guilt. The sense of guilt extends through the novel, in the war, to the entire society, Briony’s personal guilt being juxtaposed with ubiquitous, collective guilt that imbues her war writing in the second part of the novel. Everyday guilt−Cecilia feeling culpable for not looking after the twins and Briony being remorseful for opening the letter addressed to her sister−foreshadows Briony’s tremendous guilt that " refined the methods of self-torture, threading the beads of detail into an eternal loop, a rosary to be fingered for a lifetime."[95]Even Robbie, the most guiltless of the characters, depersonalised as " Turner" in Part II, feels guilty for the people he has not saved, the dead he has not buried, as he reflects during his march to Dunkirk where he was to be evacuated with the rest of the British Expeditionary Force: " What was guilt these days? It was cheap. Everyone was guilty, and no one was […] there weren’t enough people, enough paper and pens, enough patience and peace, to take down the statements of all the witnesses and gather in the facts. The witnesses were guilty too."[96]The effects of the war are not limited to its direct participants, the whole society being guilty of allowing war to happen. Guilt causes Briony to break off all contact with her family, to engage into wartime nursing in a London hospital instead of pursuing university education, and to keep experiencing and writing over again that disastrous day in the summer of 1935 when her imaginative error became lie and crime, bringing about dramatic consequences.