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NARRATIVE AS EXPIATIVE FANTASY
IN IAN MCEWAN'S *ATONEMENT*

Abstract. The paper endeavours to analyse Ian McEwan's self-reflexive novel with the theoretical apparatus provided by the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan. McEwan designs his novel as a fictitious narrative written by Briony Tallis, an aging novelist who wishes to atone for the childhood blunder that ruined the lives of her sister, Cecilia, and her sister's beloved, Robbie. In order to gain reader's sympathy, Briony describes her thirteen-year-old self as an idealistic and innocent child, deprived of paternal guidance, governed by the unconscious structures of the Symbolic Order. The girl's compulsive craving for order and for control of the reality around her is linked to her narcissistic constitution, which, as Freud suggests, proves an important quality in the creative writing process. The paper follows Briony's efforts to devise an elaborate expiatory fantasy which allows her not only to create the appropriate *mise-en-scène* of personal atonement, but also to establish the coordinates of her desire to achieve some purpose through her writing.

Key words: Ian McEwan, *Atonement*, British contemporary novel, Jacques Lacan, psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, fantasy, desire, Symbolic Order, the unconscious.

Published in 2001, *Atonement* is the most celebrated Ian McEwan novel to date. It immediately enjoyed unparalleled acclaim among readers, which only intensified after an immensely successful 2007 film adaptation, directed by Joe Wright. The book's popularity coincides with critical approval: after many favourable reviews, *Atonement* was shortlisted for the Booker prize, and the number of academic publications on the novel exceeds that devoted to any other McEwan work. This study, recognising the value of previous criticism, attempts to employ the theoretical apparatus provided by Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in order to demonstrate that the teenage Briony is guided by the unconscious structures of the Symbolic Order, while the mature Briony constructs her narrative as an elaborate fantasy of atonement.

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Compared with other McEwan's novels, *Atonement* exhibits the most intricate narrative design and is most openly self-reflexive: the bulk of the book, save a coda amounting to a mere twenty out of almost four hundred pages, is staged as a fictitious narrative written by Briony Tallis, an aging novelist on the threshold of vascular dementia. Realising that she might not have another opportunity to do so, Briony decides to finally share with the readers the central *œuvre* of her life, the work by means of which she wishes to atone for the childhood blunder that ruined the lives of her sister, Cecilia, and her sister's beloved, Robbie. In the summer of 1935, Briony, then a self-assured thirteen-year-old with budding literary ambitions, recklessly, and falsely, accuses Robbie of raping her teenage cousin Lola, which results in his imprisonment and, consequently, his involvement in the Dunkirk evacuation, where he dies of septicaemia. In the aftermath of these incidents, Cecilia abandons her comfortable upper middle class life and takes up a nursing career, to eventually perish in a London air raid.

It is apparent that the elaborate fabric of the narrative has been woven by Briony, now an accomplished novelist, to make redress for her wrong, but also to gain readers' sympathy. Thus, although Part One of the novel—which recounts events leading to the disastrous indictment by means of a third-person Jamesian-style focalised narration, the centre of consciousness alternating in consecutive chapters—might not directly try to extenuate the girl, it certainly presents her act as an unfortunate consequence of childish naivety. Like the childish play written for the homecoming of her brother, Leon, *The Trials of Arabella*, Briony's outlook on the world and relationships is structured by the genres and plots familiar to her at the time. She may be an uncommonly perceptive and sensitive girl, with a rare gift for words, but her experience amounts to thirteen years of "a generally pleasant and well-protected life"¹ spent in the comfort of her family's country house, and she consequently remains, at the outset of *Atonement*'s diegesis, an overly sentimental and naïve prepubescent, who sees love through the lens of romance codes and depicts it in her juvenilia correspondingly: "A good wedding was an unacknowledged representation of the as yet unthinkable—sexual bliss. In the aisles of country churches and grand city cathedrals, witnessed by a whole society of approving family and friends, her heroines and heroes reached their innocent climaxes and needed to go no further" (9).

¹ Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2002), 15. All subsequent quotations refer to this edition and are identified by page numbers in parentheses.

For Briony, sexuality is still unmapped territory. She lacks the symbolic coordinates to appropriately decipher the signals of passion between Cecilia and Robbie, and thus perverts the sexual tension between the two young lovers, imposing an unfounded scenario of violence on amorous intimacy.

The technique of alternating focalisation is an effective means of accentuating the girl's innocent ignorance and idealistic vision of relationships; it also testifies to her blindness on the issue of marital infidelity. When Briony's cousins stay in the house on account of their mother's divorce, the reader shares the girl's ignorance about the fact that her aunt is away in Paris with her lover; we find out about the circumstance no sooner than in the next chapter, when the centre of consciousness switches from Briony to Cecilia. But that adultery is present much more immediately in their own family is a mystery even to the elder sister. We discover much later, now through the narration focalised on Briony's mother, that Mr Tallis's prolonged absences are not only an effect of his time-consuming job for the government in London:

That he worked late she did not doubt, but she knew he did not sleep at his club, and he knew that she knew this. . . . They resembled each other in their dread of conflict, and the regularity of his evening calls, however much she disbelieved them, was a comfort to them both. If this *sham* was conventional *hypocrisy*, she had to concede that it had its uses. . . . Even being *lied* to constantly, though hardly like love, was sustained attention; he must care about her to *fabricate* so elaborately and over such a long stretch of time. His *deceit* was a form of tribute to the importance of their marriage. (148, emphases added)

Although the children seem at the time unaware of the situation, they clearly discern that the family is defunct, the father constantly in town on business and the mother bedridden by perpetual migraines. Even Briony, despite her immaturity, notices that “[w]hatever institutionalised strength was locked in [the parents] was about to fly apart, or had already done so” (12). When Cecilia and Leon talk about their parents, they refer to the mother as “Emily” and to the father as “the Old Man” (48), and not out of disrespect or patriarchal prejudice; this manner of speech simply acknowledges their mother's detachment and powerlessness in the symbolic parental role: “Whenever Mrs Tallis exercised authority in the absence of her husband, the children felt obliged to protect her from seeming ineffectual” (127–128). Although Emily wishes to be an affectionate and devoted mother—“Poor darling Briony, the softest little thing, doing her all to entertain her hard-

bitten wiry cousins with the play she had written from her heart. To love her was to be soothed” (65) – her weepy and self-indulgent manner make her not only mawkish, but also, in Cecilia’s eyes, “distant, even unfriendly” (20).

Because Jack Tallis’s clandestine job for the Home Office began two years before the events of summer 1935, the Tallis house, with the mother inert in “an invalid’s shadow land” (103), has remained in a withered state of interregnum, deprived of the symbolic organising power. Briony regards a sweeping difference in the short periods of her father’s presence:

When her father was home, the household settled around a fixed point. He organized nothing, he didn’t go about the house worrying on other people’s behalf, he rarely told anyone what to do – in fact, he mostly sat in the library. But his presence imposed order and allowed freedom. Burdens were lifted. When he was there, it no longer mattered that her mother retreated to her bedroom; it was enough that he was downstairs with a book on his lap. When he took his place at the dining table, calm, affable, utterly certain, a crisis in the kitchen became no more than a humorous sketch; without him, it was a drama that clutched the heart. He knew most things worth knowing, and when he didn’t know, he had a good idea which authority to consult, and would take her into the library to help him find it. (122)

Clearly, the figure the girl envisions, the father savant nestled in the *library* with a *book*, those patent signifiers of knowledge, is utterly idealised. Rather than referring to her real memories, this representation of the father indicates the shortcomings she wishes to be satisfied by an imaginary figure of authority, closely related to Jacques Lacan’s Name-of-the-Father, “the symbolic function [of] the figure of the law.”² Briony sorely lacks guidance, so she remains naïve and feels underestimated, because seeking recognition in the eyes of her mother appears highly insufficient. For Cecilia, the “Old Man” is the representation of a forbidding figure, the Lacanian ‘No’-of-the-Father (*Nom-du-Père* and *Non-du-Père* are conveniently homonymous), with his “precise ideas about where and when a woman should be seen smoking: not in the street, or any other public place, not on entering a room, not standing up, and only when offered, never from her own supply” (46). Nonetheless, his continual absence, both from the Tallis house and from the narrative, establishes him as a pitifully inadequate representation of the Symbolic. As Lacan notes, some “circumstances . . . make it easier for the father to be found undeserving, inadequate, or fraudulent with respect to the law

² Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 230.

and therefore . . . an ineffective vehicle for the Name-of-the-Father."³ Paternal presence is denied Briony even at the time of crisis precipitated by her rash, unjustified accusation: although Jack Tallis is summoned for the emergency, he never makes it home before Robbie is arrested and Part One of *Atonement* ends. Tellingly, he never appears in other parts of the novel, nor is he ever directly present in any of Briony's later recollections, and she concedes that she has "always taken his remoteness for granted and expected nothing" (285). Insofar as Briony finds Jack Tallis inapt to function as the Name-of-the-Father who might anchor her securely in the Symbolic Order, she seeks to make good this insufficiency by developing her literary imagination and following an artistic path.

Paternal absence is also responsible for fixating the girl on her father, as she is unable to fully resolve her Oedipus complex. Letissier notices in Briony some grievance against her father for acting as Robbie's benefactor, linking this to both her Oedipus complex and her sibling rivalry. He observes in her further psychoanalytical symptoms:

A Freudian family romance comes into play through Briony's psychic vagaries, so that the nightly ramble in search of the guilty maniac is, in many respects, the traumatic enactment of repressed drives. . . . The craving to intrude upon a scene of intimacy [i.e. Lola's rape] is a reminder of the phantasmal primal scene, in which the parents' lovemaking becomes a subject of anguish for the excluded child.⁴

Her father distant and inaccessible, Briony displaces her Oedipal attraction on to older men, the first obvious target being her brother Leon, who features in many "luminous, yearning fantasies" (4), lavishly admired and jealously celebrated. The second object of this fascination is, perhaps paradoxically, Robbie himself.

But no traces of the juvenile attraction to Robbie are discernible in Part One of *Atonement*, in which Briony the novelist endeavours to reconstruct the points of view of the *dramatis personae* on the day of her 'crime'. The romantic affection comes to light only in Part Two, when the focalisation follows Robbie in his dramatic escape to Dunkirk in May 1940. When he is turning over in his mind the circumstances of the miserable incident, trying to determine the origins of his calamity, he recollects an occurrence pre-

³ Russell Grigg, *Lacan, Language and Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 18.

⁴ Georges Letissier, "'The Eternal Loop of Self-Torture': Ethics and Trauma in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*." *DQR Studies in Literature* 48 (2011): 220–21.

ceding the disaster by three years. On a summer excursion, Briony executes a romantic scenario of her own making: she pretends to be drowning, so that Robbie can ‘save’ her, which would provide the appropriate setting to confess her love. Robbie surmises that “For three years she must have nurtured a feeling for him, kept it hidden, nourished it with fantasy or embellished it in her stories” (233), and accepts this, for lack of a better motive, as an explanation of the girl’s false accusation. However, in Part Three of the novel, focalised on Briony, now a nurse in a London hospital, the girl experiences a sudden “memory of a passion” she had for Robbie as a child, but she recalls that it lasted only days, and that after “she confessed it to him one morning in the garden [she] immediately forgot about it” (342). The reader might sense an apparent incongruence, since both Part Two and Part Three, despite the difference in focalisation, belong ultimately to the novel written by Briony Tallis in 1999. Dominic Head discerns in this incoherence a rather overworked self-justifying narrative ruse on Briony’s part, pointing out that if she indeed so quickly wiped the yearning from her memory, “then Robbie is unjustified in assigning a vengeful motive to her on account of it”⁵; it seems, however, that this explanation underestimates the impact of the unconscious on human motivations. It appears more valid to favour Bentley’s reading, in which the contradiction is merely ostensible: “Briony’s repressed fantasy of a relationship with Robbie returns unconsciously when she sees Lola attacked several years later. The older Briony seems to understand that what was motivating the thirteen-year-old girl was the unconscious reaction to the rejection by Robbie of her adolescent romantic attraction to him.”⁶ Freud himself indicates that rancour towards a former object of affection is a frequently observed behaviour, calling it a “change of the *content* of [a drive],”⁷ and noting that it is “observed in a single instance only—the transformation of *love into hate*.”⁸ Apparently, “love is with

⁵ Dominic Head, *Ian McEwan (Contemporary British Novelists)* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 170.

⁶ Nick Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 155.

⁷ In the Standard Edition of Freud’s works, James Strachey consistently translates “Trieb” as “instinct”. Many commentators have pointed out that the more adequate equivalent is “drive”, a word generally used in later discussions of Freud and also in English translations of Lacan. Lacan himself gives a humorous comment on the unsuitability of this translation in Seminar XI: “*Trieb* gives you a kick in the arse, my friends—quite different from so-called *instinct*” (49).

⁸ Sigmund Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes.” In: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works by Sigmund Freud. 24 volumes*, trans. James Strachey, vol. XIV (London: Vintage, 2001), 133.

unexpected regularity accompanied by hate” and “the transformation is effected by means of a reactive displacement of cathexis, energy being withdrawn from the erotic impulse and added to the hostile one.”⁹

Apart from being an effect of her immature and limited understanding of the nature of the relationship between Cecilia and Robbie, and a consequence of yielding to a hostile impulse directed at Robbie, Briony's false accusation also originates from her compulsive craving for order and for control of the reality around her. Briony the seventy-seven-year-old renowned novelist realises that this feature of Briony the thirteen-year-old writer apprentice might be an extenuating circumstance for her readers, and she opens the narrative with references to the “controlling demon” pervading her mind and regulating her “orderly spirit” (5). The young Briony is “one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so”, she abhors chaos and destruction, because her “wish for a harmonious, organised world denied her the reckless possibilities of wrongdoing” (4, 5). Critics consistently emphasise “her immature inability to accept contingency and the randomness of experience”¹⁰ and “passion for excessive pattern-building”, a consequence of being “unable to concede that reality does not always fit in with her desire for a consistent, logically structured, symmetrical universe.”¹¹ Moreover, as a would-be writer, Briony seems to ignore the individuality of other people and treats them just like the toys, methodically arranged in her bedroom, “a citizen's army awaiting orders” (5); no wonder, then, that the happiness of Cecilia and Robbie is sacrificed on the altar of the consistency of the girl's world view. Schemberg points out that Briony “ruthlessly and egoistically subordinated the world and other people to schemes and patterns gleaned from an uncritical reading of telic narratives such as fairy-tales”, therefore, once she categorises Robbie, on erroneous evidence, as a sexual maniac, “a stock character of gothic literature,”¹² she irrefutably *believes* that it was him who assaulted her cousin Lola in the garden at night:

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

⁹ Sigmund Freud, “The Ego and the Id,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works by Sigmund Freud. 24 volumes*, trans. James Strachey, vol. XIX, 43–4.

¹⁰ Head, *Ian McEwan (Contemporary British Novelists)*, 168.

¹¹ Claudia Schemberg, *Achieving 'At-one-ment.' Storytelling and the Concept of the Self in Ian McEwan's The Child in Time, Black Dogs, Enduring Love and Atonement* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004), 47.

¹² *Ibid.*, 85. Similar interpretations can be found in other critical sources, *inter alia* in Letissier (217) or Albers and Caeners (716).

truth was in the symmetry, which was to say, it was founded in common sense.
The truth instructed her eyes. (169)

The sense of this reasoning, despite its seeming irrationality, can be elucidated by what Freud calls a ‘fetishist disavowal’, evoked by Lacan in one of his most familiar adages, *Les non-dupes errent* (‘Those who know are mistaken’). The mechanism is effectively illustrated by Slavoj Žižek:

In one of the Marx brothers’ films, Groucho, when caught in a lie, answers angrily: ‘Who are you going to believe, your eyes or my words?’ This apparently absurd logic renders perfectly the functioning of the symbolic order in which the social mask matters more than the direct reality of the individual who wears it.¹³

Similarly, the misjudgement of the thirteen-year-old Briony clearly demonstrates the overwhelming dominance of the Symbolic Order: the fiction (that Robbie is a sexual maniac) which she has eagerly concocted in order to achieve a consistent and orderly picture of the world structures the reality she experiences, influencing the way she interprets her cognition (she truly believes she *sees* him at the scene of the rape).

Briony’s domination over the reality around her naturally expands onto the narrative of her creation: the reader can discern that the whole first three parts of the novel, despite being focalised on different characters, are centred on herself and revolve around her own ‘atonement’. In fact, Briony’s childish love declaration to Robbie epitomises the narcissistic character of her affection, and the girl proves to be, as Bradley asserts, “a devastating study of the writer-as-narcissist.”¹⁴ In his discussions on narcissism, Lacan concurs with Freud’s assertion that a “human being remains to some extent narcissistic even after he has found external objects for his libido,”¹⁵ and stresses himself that “To love is, essentially, to wish to be loved,”¹⁶ because “It’s one’s own ego that one loves in love.”¹⁷ Freud elaborates on the

¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta Books, 2006), 33.

¹⁴ Arthur Bradley, “The New Atheist Novel: Literature, Religion, and Terror in Amis and McEwan,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 39, 1/2 (2009): 27.

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, “Totem and Taboo,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works by Sigmund Freud. 24 volumes*, trans. James Strachey, vol. XIII, 89.

¹⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis [The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI]*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), 253.

¹⁷ Jacques Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book I. Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953–1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 142.

narcissistic aspects of literary fiction in his essay on “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming”, where he says that “His Majesty the Ego [is] the hero alike of every day-dream and of every story”¹⁸ and that the author makes his/her work digestible for the reader only because he/she “softens the character of his egoistic day-dreams by altering and disguising it, and he bribes [the reader] by the purely formal—that is, aesthetic—yield of pleasure.”¹⁹

The main premise of Freud’s essay is that a literary artist resembles a child “in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, re-arranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him . . . [and] he takes his play very seriously and he expends large amounts of emotion on it.”²⁰ Even though the child positively distinguishes the imagined objects and events from the real world, he/she invests it with a generous measure of emotion and ardently connects the world of play to palpable reality. Later, when the child outgrows the phase of playing, he/she merely abandons this link with the real world, and “instead of *playing*, he now *phantasies*. He builds castles in the air and creates what are called *day-dreams*”²¹. This delineation correlates with the thirteen-year-old Briony’s perception of her own juvenile creative writing; in fact, the girl even uses a very similar metaphor (which seems a conscious McEwan’s allusion to Freud, given the number of other direct or veiled references to psychoanalysis):

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. Reading a sentence and understanding it were the same thing; as with the crooking of a finger, nothing lay between them. There was no gap during which the symbols were unravelled. You saw the word *castle*, and it was there, seen from some distance, with woods in high summer spread before it, the air bluish and soft with smoke rising from the blacksmith’s forge, and a cobbled road twisting away into the green shade. (37, emphasis original)

Briony seems to encompass both dimensions of daydreaming: as a child-writer figure, she playfully generates imaginary pictures and scenarios in her mind, employing some of them in her literary texts, but also, as a mature novelist,

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works by Sigmund Freud. 24 volumes*, trans. James Strachey, vol. IX, 150.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 143–144.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

she is in full control of the imagined world of her ‘atonement’ novel. Part One shows her engrossed in daydreams several times, while Part Two is narrated in a distinctly oneiric, sometimes even hallucinatory manner.²² In fact, the whole of *Atonement* by Briony Tallis, despite her framing it as a ‘true-to-life’ story, resembles a wish-fulfilment fantasy: as Part One tries to produce some extenuating circumstances, Part Three depicts her penance through hard utilitarian work and finally introduces the fantasy of the lovers’ reunion. In this way, Briony follows the model devised by Freud, who claims that an artist “like any other unsatisfied man, . . . turns away from reality and transfers all his interest, and his libido too, to the wishful constructions of his life of phantasy”²³, emphasising that the “motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality”²⁴.

Yet Jacques Lacan develops Freud’s conception of fantasy in a new direction: for him, fantasy does not liberate us from our harrowing, unbearable existence, it does not release us from disillusionment with a disappointing social reality; instead, it fills the gaps and completes our fragmentary experience, providing “the support that gives consistency to what we call ‘reality’”²⁵ and thus builds a graspable, routine living environment for us. Furthermore,

what the fantasy stages is not a scene in which our desire is fulfilled, fully satisfied, but on the contrary, a scene that realizes, stages, the desire as such. The fundamental point of psychoanalysis is that desire is not something given in advance, but something that has to be constructed—and it is precisely the role of fantasy to give the coordinates of the subject’s desire, to specify its object, to locate the position the subject assumes in it. It is only through fantasy that the subject is constituted as desiring: *through fantasy, we learn how to desire*.²⁶

The ultimate aim of fantasy is not to grant us access to the object of our desire, but to set the specific *mise-en-scène* for this desire, i.e., to “construct the frame enabling us to desire something”²⁷. Throughout the three main

²² For a detailed analysis of Part Two of *Atonement* as a dream-text, see Lynn Wells, *Ian McEwan (New British Fictions)* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 104–106.

²³ Sigmund Freud, “Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works by Sigmund Freud. 24 volumes*, trans. James Strachey, vol. XV-XVI, 376.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” 146.

²⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 44.

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry. An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Ms: The MIT Press, 1992), 6.

²⁷ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 132.

sections of *Atonement*, Briony assiduously constructs her world of fantasy through writing, endeavouring to ascertain the “coordinates” of her desire. In Part One she tries to render the fragmentariness and perplexity of human experience by means of disjointed, modernist-like narration, accentuating the incompleteness of the image built from disparate points of view. Subsequently, Parts Two and Three, focalised on *single* minds, Robbie’s and Briony’s respectively, are fantasies meant to usher in cohesion and uniformity, and thus generate a more stable ‘reality’. In Part Two she seeks to supply the answer to what Lacan names “the unbearable enigma of the desire of the Other, of the lack in the Other”²⁸, envisaging Robbie’s war ordeal in France. Part Three ultimately enables her to set the scene for her atonement: she sacrifices a possible university career and takes up a utilitarian nursing job in a hospital, which allows her to do penance for her past misdeed. Caring for soldiers wounded in Dunkirk functions as a surrogate form of redressing the harm inflicted on Robbie. In this section Briony’s fantasy also envisages her encounter with Cecilia and Robbie, which assumes that the two lovers are spared in the war (contrary to what she suggests in the novel’s coda) and that their affection can thus be fulfilled. Even if such circumstances do not guarantee their forgiveness, then at least they suggest some possibility of reparation. So the elaborate fantasy that Briony concocts in her narrative stages the conditions establishing her desire for atonement; she understands that the ultimate path for her atonement is through writing. Briony wants her writing to be meaningful, and the final fantasy, in the novel’s coda, presents her as an experienced and accomplished novelist. Just like the thirteen-year-old apprentice wordsmith, who sees the entire world “unfurling at the nib’s end” (40), the mature novelist covets to achieve some purpose through her writing.

But in the last part of the novel, the seventy-seven-year old Briony, who, in point of fact, is not only the author of the first three sections of *Atonement*, but also, on a higher diegetic level, a character in Ian McEwan’s novel of the same title, becomes vexed by a primary question: “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 form 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” (371). This perplexity allows the reader to discern that *Atonement* is also a novel which

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

examines the ethical consequences of metafictionality: given the limitless authority of the writer over the textual world of his/her creation, how can the reader relate to the moral dilemmas faced by the characters therein? In this context, perhaps the issue of the ethics of the postmodern self-reflexive novel is the ultimate question McEwan is posing in his book.

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OPOWIADANIE JAKO FANTAZJA EKSPIACYJNA
W POWIEŚCI IANA McEWANA *ATONEMENT* [POKUTA]

Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje analizę autotematycznej powieści Iana McEwana *Atonement* [Pokuta] z wykorzystaniem aparatu pojęciowego zapożyczonego z teorii psychoanalitycznej Jacques'a Lacana. McEwan nadaje swojej książce formę „powieści w powieści” napisanej przez Briony Tallis, starzejącą się pisarkę, chcącą odpokutować za popełniony w dzieciństwie błąd, który zmarnował życie jej siostry Cecylii oraz ukochanego siostry – Robbiego. Z myślą o pozyskaniu współczucia czytelnika, Briony przedstawia swoją własną postać w wieku 13 lat jako idealistyczne i niewinne dziecko, pozbawione ojcowskiego autorytetu i sterowane przez nieświadome struktury Porządku Symbolicznego. Cechujący dziewczynkę upór w dążeniu do porządku i sprawowania kontroli nad otaczającą ją rzeczywistością jest przejawem jej narcystycznej osobowości, która, jak twierdzi Freud, jest przymiotem każdego pisarza. Artykuł analizuje proces budowania przez Briony misternej fantazji ekspiacyjnej, która pozwala jej stworzyć nie tylko odpowiednią scenę spektaklu pokuty, ale umożliwia również wyznaczenie współrzędnych własnego pragnienia jako artysty-pisarza.

Streścił Tomasz Dobrogoszcz

Słowa kluczowe : Ian McEwan, *Pokuta*, brytyjska powieść współczesna, Jacques Lacan, psychoanaliza, Sigmund Freud, fantazja, pragnienie, Porządek Symboliczny, nieświadomość.