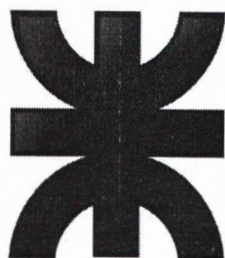


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**UNIVERSIDAD TECNOLÓGICA NACIONAL
FACULTAD REGIONAL CONCEPCIÓN DEL URUGUAY
LICENCIATURA EN LENGUA INGLESA
TESINA FINAL**

**“BOOKS ARE WHERE THINGS ARE EXPLAINED”. LITERATURE AS THE
NEW REPOSITORY OF MEANING IN *FLAUBERT'S PARROT* (JULIAN
BARNES) AND *ATONEMENT* (IAN MCEWAN)**

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INDEX

Introduction. The authors	2
Julian Barnes – a challenge addict	2
Ian McEwan – the young world acclaimed writer	4
The Postmodernist background	5
<i>FLAUBERT'S PARROT</i>	15
The mixture of genres	16
Deconstructing the distinction between fiction and reality	16
In search of the best genre	18
The artifice of language	22
Different images of reader and writer	25
<i>ATONEMENT</i>	31
Briony and her "sense of order"	32
<i>Atonement</i> : a Bildungsroman? The story of growth of the girl and the writer	40
Conclusions	44
Reference list	50

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Introduction. The authors

Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan, the two well-known writers whose novels *Flaubert's Parrot* and *Atonement* respectively I intend to base this dissertation on, are mostly widely read and internationally recognized authors of contemporary British fiction and have already joined the ranks of classic authors of British literature.

Julian Barnes - a challenge addict

Julian Barnes, born in Leicester, England in 1946 to Albert Leonard and Kaye Barnes, both teachers of French, is the author of 13 novels, two volumes of short stories, three collections of essays, and four detective novels published under a pseudonym. His books have received considerable critical acclaim worldwide, most of his work has been translated abroad, and several books have been nominated for and / or have won prestigious literary prizes, including the Somerset Maugham Award (1981), Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize (1985), E. M. Forster Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1986), Shakespeare Prize (1993) and the 2004 Austrian State Prize for European Literature. Barnes has also won the Prix Médicis and the Prix Fémina, and in 2004 became a Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France. In addition, three of his novels have been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, and in 1983 he had already been selected by the Book Marketing Council as one of the "Best twenty Young British Novelists" in a list which included Martin Amis, Pat Baker, William Boyd, Kazuo Ishiguro, Salman Rushdie, Graham Swift and Ian McEwan as well.

Despite Barnes's skepticism towards labels, which he finds "pointless and irritating" (Guignery and Roberts, 2009: 73) because they tend to imprison his novels in a constructed grid and he instead believes in the fact that "novels come out of life, not out of theories", his work has been largely classified as postmodernist since it both resorts and subverts realistic strategies and traditional conventions, is essentially self-reflexive, and is concerned over the irretrievability of the past and the blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction.

Barnes has also proved very keen on formal experimentation. Mira Stout (in Moseley, 1997:11) described him as something of a "challenge addict" and British writer Alain de Botton has described him as an innovator, as far as the form of the novel

is concerned. In addition, many critics have emphasized the hybridity of most of his books, which blur and challenge the borders that separate existing genres, texts, arts and languages. In 1989 Richard Locke paid tribute to Barnes and wrote: “with such a passion for history, art, and formal innovation, with such fulgent wit and bright discursive skill, he will most likely push on along the high path he’s beaten beside Nabokov, Calvino and Kundera” (in Moseley, 1997:170).

As regards influences, when asked about it by Michael March in an interview with Barnes himself he stated: “It’s always hard to say about influences. Most writers I know would probably deny influences. That’s a necessary denial, even though it’s often false. If you see anything which looks like an influence, you try to rub it out straight away”(Guignery and Roberts, 2009: 24). In another interview conducted by Rudolf Freiburg where he was also questioned about influences, he added “if the question were, “Which English poets do you admire?” then the first three I would come up with would be Thomas Hardy, A. E. Housman, and Philip Larkin, all of whom, in their different ways, despite being quite witty and funny writers, are deeply pessimistic and deeply melancholic. So I would say that they were people who I felt closer to than say Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, Ford Madox Ford, whom I admire very greatly as novelists” (Guignery and Roberts, 2009: 35). In addition, Barnes greatly admires Flaubert’s work. He has said that Flaubert is the writer whose words he most highly respects, and who he believes has spoken the most truth about writing. He strongly agrees with Flaubert’s belief in the powerful nature of the novel, in what the novel can do, and how it cando it, and adheres to Flaubert’s idea of the timeless interrelationship between art and society.

Furthermore, the effect of theory is evident among his contemporaries, and what he unconsciously takes from Ford, he similarly finds in McEwan. Ian McEwan, and *Atonement* in particular, provides a contemporary example of potential influence on Barnes’s work. The fact that both authors investigate similar themes suggests that the influence of theory is abundant in contemporary authors, whether or not they are aware of the fact.

In an interview with ShushaGruppy, Barnes stated that in his opinion the purpose of fiction is “to tell the truth. It’s to tell beautiful, exact, and well-constructed lies which enclose hard and shimmering truths”(Guignery and Roberts, 2009).

Ian McEwan - the young world acclaimed writer

As regards Ian McEwan, and as I have already stated it, he also ranks among the best young contemporary British authors and among the most honored of today's novelists, whose work has been greatly acclaimed worldwide.

McEwan was born in Aldershot, Hampshire, on 21st June 1948, to David McEwan, a working class Scotsman who worked his way up through the army to the rank of major, and Rose Lilian Violet. McEwan has been nominated for the Man Booker prize six times to date, winning the Prize for *Amsterdam* in 1998. McEwan also received nominations for the Man Booker International Prize in 2005 and 2007. In addition, he was awarded the Shakespeare Prize by the Alfred Toepfer Foundation, Hamburg, in 1999. In 2008, *The Times* named McEwan among their list of "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945" and in 2012 the University of Sussex presented McEwan with its 50th Anniversary Gold Medal in recognition of his contributions to literature.

What makes Ian McEwan's writing especially worthy of attention is the way in which he experiments with time and narrative techniques and in his writing, the most informed reader, applying Umberto Eco's scheme from "Reflections on the Name of the Rose" (in Morrison, 2001: 255), might usefully be thought of a "meta-reader", who reads not only through the text but also above it, who eagerly welcomes quotation, intertextuality, self-reflexivity, and epistemological insecurity.

Atonement is very highly regarded among literary critics and many of them consider it McEwan's masterpiece which surpassed the Booker Prize-winning *Amsterdam*. Geoff Dyer (Dyer, 2001) assigns it a vital role in contemporary fiction: "...it is about creatively extending and hauling a defining part of the British literary tradition up to and into the 21st century".

In September 2001, the Evening Standard published David Sexton's review of *Atonement*, in which he stated that "[McEwan] wields a prose so clear and straightforward it seems almost invisible, but it's always alive with the thoughts of the characters, as if it were a transparent medium into other minds. He makes such writing look simple but nobody else can do it so well"(in Albers and Caeners, 2009: 707).

McEwan's attitude to the subject matter of his works is connected with his treatment of any totalizing interpretations of the world. He disrupts any totalizing

concepts and existing social patterns and thus reveals their relativity and limited validity. As in most postmodernist works, truth is always relative and security is an illusion. He often deals with the distinction between subjective and objective realities and shows how subjective experience creates reality, and different interpretations of the same reality play a significant role in *Atonement*. As Jaco Morrison states (Morrison, 2001: 253) *Atonement* “draws on the thematic of dislocation and fragmentation, however, there is also an assertion of the risks or the cost implied by the epistemological breakdown and relativity with which postmodernist writing seems often to be so comfortable.”

The Postmodernist background

Now, and since both novels I will be dealing with in this dissertation have mostly been classified as and situated within the discourse of *Postmodernism*, I believe that an exploration of what that term involves is a useful point from which to begin.

Ever since the term “postmodernism” was first used in the 1930’s, and more frequently used in the 1950’s and 60’s and from them on, critics have struggled with defining it. Although contemporary critics agree that it has now become a label not just for a literary period, but for a wider cultural phenomenon, including fields such as architecture, the arts, sociology, philosophy, and literature, what they seem to have most reservations about is to give an overall definition of postmodernism.

As Terry Eagleton describes it in the preface of his book *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, postmodernity is a style of thought which questions classical notions of truth, reason, and objectivity, the idea of universal progress or emancipation, and all single explanatory frameworks or grand narratives. Eagleton emphasizes the idea of confrontation against such traditional Enlightenment norms and explains postmodernism favours a world that is not stable and determinate but contingent and diverse, where disunified cultures and interpretations rule, providing skepticism and subjectivity towards all that which had always been officially described as “the truth”.

As a result, he continues, the postmodern culture reflects this epochal change in a depthless, self-reflexive, playful and pluralistic art “which blurs the boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture, as well as between art and everyday experience” (2003:7).

Therefore, and as Eagleton (2003) also suggests if Postmodernism covers everything from changes in the music style to the death of traditional metanarratives of power in society, then it is difficult to see how any single explanatory pattern could do justice to such a bizarrely heterogeneous entity.

As regards the literary field, postmodern literature is part of a particular socio-cultural and historical development and can be seen as a specific way of depiction of the postmodern life and culture, which shows this crisis of identity of the human being and its struggle for legitimization in a hypocritical society, and postmodern works have been described as such because of their representation of this vision of the world and their use of many specific postmodern narrative techniques which will be referred to below.

In difference from modernist literature, postmodern literature does not focus on objectivity and the belief in the possibility of the mind and consciousness to perceive the outer experience objectively. Postmodern literature emphasizes, for example, radical plurality which manifests itself not only in a depiction of formerly marginalized and outcast characters such as different ethnic groups and different kind of people such as losers, prostitutes, homosexuals and deviants, depicted as rather positive characters, but also in the use of multiple, often alternative or overlapping narrative voices offering their version or reality and vision of the world which is equally important to the other voice's interpretation ; and also in the use of different genres and styles typical of other kinds of literature and genres; all of which contributes to the stylistic hybridity of the literary text, as part of building the postmodern meaning.

Postmodern authors often use this kind of collage technique for the narrative and compositional construction of their works. In difference from modernist works in which their parts, such as different characters or narrative voices, can be understood only in their relation to other parts such as chapters or characters from the book, the elements creating a postmodern collage in a literary work are mostly self-sufficient and can themselves create meaning of their own, although, of course, the full understanding of such a work requires reading of all parts, elements or segments of the text. The use of this collage technique allows for multiple and relative rather than clear and unifying perspectives; in a constant evocation of doubt and self-evaluation of characters, who are often unable to identify and offer a generalizing, truthful, and objective version of reality.

This postmodern narrative technique responds clearly to the postmodern acceptance of ineradicable plurality of the world, as Zygmunt Bauman explains: “postmodernity means a resolute emancipation from the characteristically modern urge to overcome ambivalence and promote the monosemic clarity of the sameness. Indeed, postmodernity reverses the signs of the values central to modernity, such as uniformity and universalism”(1991: 98).

Postmodern collage is also closely connected with another narrative and compositional technique and aesthetic principle of postmodernism, *fragmentation*. Postmodernism defines itself against the narrative linearity of the realist novel of the 19th century and the traditional linear plot is often, if not always, replaced with a more abstract form, and further, traditional elements such as a conclusive ending which satisfies the needs of both reader and character are often absent. This temporal distortion is a literary technique that uses a nonlinear timeline in which the author may jump forwards and backwards in time, or there may be cultural and historical references that do not fit.

Another common postmodernist characteristic has to do with what Jean Baudrillard (1994) calls “simulacra”, which refers to the fact that in postmodern society there are no originals, only copies. As well as we can speak of Baudrillard’s “simulacrum” in painting and sculpture, in postmodern literature this idea is clearly portrayed in the excessive use of parody and pastiche in postmodern works.

Postmodern parody, which was mainly theorized by Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Parody*(1985), defers from traditional parody in that its aim is not to mock the parodied author or style for its own sake. In her work, Hutcheon clearly explains that by referring to the older forms of art such as the traditional literary genres - detective, love stories, western, traditional myths and others - and rewriting and putting them in mostly contemporary or unexpected contexts, postmodern parody does not simply refer to these works of art, authors and styles, or simply gives a critique of them and this kind of linguistic representation, but it also creatively reconstructs them to show, often ironically, a difference between the past traditional and contemporary forms of art and sensibility. And by doing it, postmodern parody gives an alternative version of reality and history. It provides another position of different social, ethnic and other minority groups which forms a playful and creative alternative to the official version of history and reality as depicted in traditional literary works or through traditional narrative

techniques and styles. This is not aimed to be an official alternative to real history, but a playful and artistic reconsideration and relativization of it.

As I have already mentioned, postmodern parody is closely connected with pastiche, which refers to the use of combined or “pasted” elements of previous genres and styles of literature to create a new narrative voice. Although postmodernism rejects strict definitions, it is often difficult to delineate strictly parody and pastiche since they usually overlap and are rather inseparable.

As Baudrillard (1994) has already made it clear, in postmodern literary texts the idea of originality and authenticity is undermined and parodied. Postmodern work does not pretend to be new and original, but uses the old literary forms, genres and styles, quotations, allusion and other means to recontextualize their meaning in a different linguistic and cultural context to show a difference between the past and present as well as between the past and present forms of representation, though through the use of these techniques, the reality is often presented as simulacrum, as Baudrillard has described it, which is a replacement of reality by its simulation rather than its interpretation.

Another important aspect of a postmodernist literary work closely connected to these previously mentioned contemporary narrative techniques is *intertextuality*, a term coined by a Bulgarian/French theorist Julia Kristeva, and which expresses a connection between the texts through various devices and techniques such as the ones just referred to. According to Kristeva, a literary text is not only a product of a single author but of its relationship to other texts and to the structures of language itself. In her view, “[A]ny text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (1980:66). Julia Kristeva derives her theory of intertextuality from Michael Bakhtin’s idea of a “polyphonic novel” open to various voices and interpretations and understands a literary text as part of other literary texts in the history of the literary tradition. Thus, what stems from it is the undermining of the idea of authorship since now the text is not the product of an author, but exists within specific literary and cultural contexts and thus is open to various understandings and interpretations. About this, Roland Barthes wrote that the death of the author announced the birth of the reader who gives meaning to the text. Intertextual practices may be considered in the context of postmodernism and the death of the author, where the Romantic concept of originality and the exaltation of the autonomous creative imagination have become obsolete. It has been argued that contemporary writers engage in a dialogue with the literary past through pastiche, parody or rewriting, rather than

creating an autonomous and individual style. Postmodern literary works use these and other devices to emphasize depthlessness, superficiality and artificiality of experience as well as dissociation of a man from the nature, the world and language. Besides, these techniques also emphasize the textuality and semiotic nature of the perceived reality as mediated through television, video, cinema, internet or virtual reality.

In addition, many postmodern authors feature *metafiction* in their writings, which essentially, is writing about writing, fiction about fiction, or self-referential fiction concerned with the possibilities, limitations and devices of writing. The postmodern literary work often questions its own fictional status thus becoming metafictional. Metafictional means that a literary work refers to itself and the principles of its construction by using various techniques and narrative devices such as intertextual references, in an attempt to make the reader aware of its fictionality, and sometimes the presence of the author, who appears not to be usually firmly in control and never knows how the narration may develop.

Patricia Waugh's definition of metafiction is the most suitable one to understanding its working in literature. In her view metafiction is

...a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible factiousness of the world outside the literary/fictional text(1884: 2).

And she adds that

...contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality and history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures (1984: 7).

By using metafictional elements, the postmodern author points out a difference between reality and its linguistic representation and they emphasize the fact that language works on different levels than reality. At the same time, the use of metafictional elements points out the fictionality of fiction, involves the reader in the

creation of meaning in the literary artistic text, and shows a difference between the past and contemporary forms of art, between the past and present vision of the world - the past being based on rationality and a belief in objective truth, which strongly contrasts with the present based on plurality, openness, radical doubt and skepticism towards any unifying vision of reality. Metafiction can be expressed not only through a direct addressing the reader, but also through other means such as quotations, allusions, parody, pastiche, irony and intertextuality. Most postmodern characteristics I have briefly described, which refer mainly to the textual form of postmodern literary works, are present in the two novels I intend to analyze all through this dissertation.

Atonement as well as *Flaubert's Parrot* do not present a traditional linear plot and fragmentation is a common feature in both novels. The use of multiple alternative narrative voices present also in these two novels, offering different versions of reality, contributes to the ideas of plurality and relativism which undermine all certainties, which have already been described as key concepts in postmodernism too. In addition, both novels make extensive use of pastiche and parody as well, through which intertextuality is also present. Furthermore, "Braithwaite" in *Flaubert's Parrot* is certainly a typical postmodernist self-conscious narrator since he exposes the constraints upon his research and comments on his own choices as he goes along, highlighting in this way the metafictional approach of the novel as well.

We have so far described many postmodern characteristics which already allow us to position the two novels, *Atonement* as well as *Flaubert's Parrot*, within the discourse of Postmodernism. Yet, we still need to discuss another aspect of postmodernism on which this dissertation also intends to focus and which refers mainly to the thematic level of postmodern literary works and to the world view of postmodernity itself.

McEwan's version of postmodernism mirrors Barnes's; in both the representation of and journey towards truth is inherent to the story. The goal is not simply plot, but also theory. Consequently, a discussion of the novel form is just as central to the construction of meaning in the novels as a critical analysis of the themes both authors deal with. In McEwan as well as in Barnes, truth and representation, reality and fiction, are at the crux of the matter.

In postmodern literary works, a mimetic, realistic representation of reality often overlaps with non-mimetic fiction, and in difference from modernist literary works, it is difficult to distinguish between these spheres and ontological levels. In these works,

often real historical characters meet fictional characters, or characters from different historical periods meet in the fictional present, or even a real historical figure is depicted in the fictional situation. These characters and worlds often merge and express the uncertainty, relativity and confusion about the world and its perception by an individual. In postmodernism, the world is understood not as clear, identifiable as in the realistic novel, but as chaotic, entropic, paranoiac, and difficult not only to comprehend but also to respond to.

In Barnes's as well as in McEwan's novel, the separation between reality and fiction disappears to varying degrees. The balance between fiction and reality has changed significantly over the last decade and their roles are increasingly reversed. Now fiction does more than just mirror reality – it can literally be reality, not merely a representation of life but an element thereof. Fiction may be representative of reality, as Barnes's and McEwan's books reveal, but unlike reality, they can search for a deeper truth otherwise potentially unattainable. Thus, a connection between reality, fiction and truth, or simply life and art, is formed.

The fact that truth is potentially unattainable has led us into such chaotic world where the need to find new patterns of meaning which make sense of this new instable world is of great importance, and that is how we end up with fiction, which is merely an endless search for that truth.

Such sense of chaos, confusion and crisis of meaning is believed to be the result of the collapse of the old reassuring narratives, such as religion, love, moral values, politics, which used to provide the world with agency and sense.

Modernity was fundamentally about order and was therefore constantly on guard against anything labeled as “disorder” which might alter its so highly valued stability. Jean Francois Lyotard (1979) equates such stability with the idea of “totality”, or a totalized system. Totality, stability and order, Lyotard argues, are maintained in modern societies through the means of “grand narratives” or “master narratives”, which are stories a culture tells itself about its practices and beliefs. Furthermore, Lyotard explains that all aspects of modern societies, including science as the primary form of knowledge, depend on these grand narratives. Postmodernism then is the critique of grand narratives, the awareness that such narratives serve to mask the contradictions and instabilities that are inherent in any social organization or practice.

As Zygmunt Bauman explains in *Modernity and Ambivalence* in modernity the

“battle of order against chaos in worldly affairs was replicated by the war of truth against error on the plane of consciousness. The order bound to be installed and made universal was the universal (hence apodictic and obligatory) truth. Together, political order and true knowledge blended into a design for certainty. The rational-universal world of order would know of no contingency and no ambivalence”(1991: 237).

This is all very different from “the postmodern awareness of no certain exit from uncertainty” and the image of the postmodern author who rejects truths as well as any system of values, any order, which presents itself as such.

Postmodern thought also problematizes the unreliability and insufficiency of another traditional system and grand narrative: language, questioning its referential capacity and its ability to generate stable meanings. In pre-modern times, people believed that language was transparent, that words served only as representations of thoughts or things, and did not have any function beyond that. Even modern societies depend on the idea that signifiers always point to signifieds, and that reality resides in signifieds. Postmodernism drops this traditional idea that language represents the world and reflects its complexities. In postmodernism, the idea of any stable or permanent reality disappears, and with it the idea of signifieds that signifiers point to. Rather, for postmodern societies, there are only surfaces, without depth; only signifiers, with no signifieds.

The view that words create rather than reflect reality has its origins in poststructuralist theories of language, which suggest that the distinctions we make are not necessarily given by the world around us, but are instead produced by the symbolizing systems we learn.

The postmodern awareness of language’s incapability of guaranteeing stable meanings creates a sense of confusion and the feeling of being lost in the daunting chaos of empty signifiers. James Scott reads *Flaubert’s Parrot* as an illustration, or even celebration of this poststructuralist skepticism about the referential ability of language; he argues that the novel “evinces the conviction that words are empty signifiers never touching a final signified (1990: 58)”.

Barnes’s as well as McEwan’s novel portrays this reality in which the grand narratives such as religion have long been discarded but where the need for other worldliness and transcendence persists, and has lead postmodern writers to embark on a search for new systems of thought that would accommodate ethics and values and

restore order and lost meaning, and help us to comprehend one's place in the universe, one's personal tragedy, or defy the increasingly relativist and ethically hollow world, as Matthew Pateman describes it, an attempt to "re-invent legitimating formulae in an effort to arrest our fall into beguiling relativity" (2002:189).

All in all, as Eagleton (2003) concludes, "postmodernism has demystified the most stubbornly naturalized of institutions by laying bare the conventions which govern them". Yet, in rejecting grand narratives, postmodernism favours "mini-narratives", stories that explain small practices, local events, rather than large-scale universal or global concepts. Postmodern "mini-narratives" are always situational, provisional, contingent, and temporary, making no claim to universality, truth, reason, or stability.

It is in this scenario where *artis* presented as a new possible kind of metanarrative which may appear to provide, as Guignery (2006: 45) describes it, "stable hierarchies and masternarratives that would restore order and intelligibility" to life.

As a result, many postmodern authors uphold the idea that works of art can provide the unity, coherence, and meaning which has been lost; art will do what other human institutions fail to do. Robert William in *Art and Thought* (2004: 3-4) conceives of art as a repository of meaning and a source of identity and argues that any sense of coherence and order and "significant agency" that we may experience now is the effect of art. Even Barnes himself states (Guignery, 2006) that fiction ends up telling a greater truth than any other system we have, and makes it clear in his work that each novel is an attempt to find some sort of truth – to comprehend human nature, the interpretation of reality, and why people act the way they do.

And it is precisely on this new idea of art as a new kind of metanarrative or explanatory pattern that orders that whole of one's experience into a meaningful and coherent narrative, derived from the demise of and no longer trust in the traditional grand narratives, that I intend to focus my dissertation. As a result I wonder, is Art capable of providing a stable context of interpretation, a framework through which one can understand one's own experience and make sense of the world, as for example grand narratives such as religion, used to in modern times? Is it able to stand firm in confrontation with the relativity, skepticism and moral chaos of this postmodern world and therefore provide the new kind of explanatory pattern this postmodern world highly longs for?

To examine Barnes's and McEwan's works is to examine their negotiations of art and life and the ways we look towards fiction for truth and meaning in our own

inexplicable lives. The aim of this dissertation is to discuss the ideas about art that are played with by these two authors in their works *Flaubert's Parrot* and *Atonement*, and to question about art's capacity to generate meaning and provide stable contexts of understanding and interpretation.

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FLAUBERT'S PARROT

Flaubert's Parrot tells the story of Geoffrey Braithwaite, a retired English doctor in his sixties and widowed from a wife he never understood, who becomes obsessed with Gustave Flaubert's life and work. Gustave Flaubert (1821 – 1880) was a French novelist, story writer and a playwright, regarded as the leading exponent of 19th century literary realism. He is the much celebrated author of the scandalous *Madame Bovary* (1857) and one of the most influential novelists of his time who wrote fiction in a naturally realistic manner. Flaubert was a man of style and aesthetics, be it his love for art, his writing or attire.

As the story unfolds, Geoffrey states that he has three stories to tell: Flaubert's, his own, and his wife Ellen's. Through Flaubert's life and work, Geoffrey tries to provide meaning and restore order into his own life. Geoffrey's obsession with Flaubert covers his own hurt, confusion, and pain over his wife's death and his relationship with her. Ellen, his wife, had a number of affairs during their marriage and Geoffrey has conflicted feelings about her. The novel, narrated by Braithwaite himself, is comprised partly of fiction and partly of literary criticism, as the book traces Geoffrey's search for the "facts" about Flaubert and his work, mainly his master piece, *Madame Bovary*, in order to make sense of his own life. *Madame Bovary* is Flaubert's debut novel. Set in the nineteenth-century France, the story focuses on the romantic daughter of a country squire (Emma Rouault) who marries a dull country doctor (Charles Bovary). To escape boredom and the banalities and emptiness of provincial life, she throws herself into adulterous love affairs, and lives beyond her means till she runs up ruinous debts. In the end, hopeless Emma takes a dramatic ultimate decision. The parallelism between *Madame Bovary's* story and Braithwaite's wife's is quite clear and I believe it is precisely this the main reason why Braithwaite becomes obsessed with understanding Gustave Flaubert's life and work in his desperate need to make sense of his own life. All throughout the novel, Braithwaite explores different aspects of Flaubert's life and virtually every chapter offers an alternate way of approaching the "facts" of history or a person, illustrating how our vision changes with the format and perspective.

Having already classified Barnes' book, *Flaubert's Parrot*, as a postmodernist work since it complies with most of the characteristics applied to such kind of literature, I will now concentrate on a very important specific feature which is the focus of this dissertation: the underlying tension between art and life which characterizes the whole novel. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Barnes is very playful about the relationship between art

and life, and I will base my analysis in the main ways this relationship is illustrated all throughout the book. This will be discussed at different levels as the mixture of genres, the artifice of language and the different images of reader and writer.

The mixture of genres

Deconstructing the distinction between fiction and reality

Far from feeling constrained by conventions or strict rules, a truly postmodern writer himself, Barnes seems to endorse innovation and attempts to renew the outmoded, exhausted forms and genres of the past by mixing them since as he himself has claimed “form has to be decided afresh with each book because there is no form without an idea and no idea without a form” (in Guignery, 2013). He insists that in each novel he aims to explore a new area of experience and to experiment with form and narrative modes.

As a result, *Flaubert's Parrot* exhibits such a proclivity for hybridity which is portrayed in the mixture mainly of genres, multiplicity in the use of diverse elements to help convey some ideas, and decompartmentalisation which involves deconstructing traditional classifications, all of which enable the narrator to attempt a biography of Flaubert in original and varied ways and to avoid the pitfalls of each individual genre.

Flaubert's Parrot is indeed an ungraspable book as regards form in that it includes two macro genres as Flaubert's biography and Braithwaite's autobiography, and many other micro genres such as chronology, literary criticism, the epistolary mode, essays, a manifesto, examination papers, a charge, a trainspotter's guide, a dictionary, a recipe, a bestiary, an appendix and chronicles as useful resources which lead the way to the macro ones, and complement the idea. As a result, the book resembles the piglet smeared with grease and released into the dance which Braithwaite refers to in the first chapter (Barnes, 2009: 14)¹.

However, this generic compendium in *Flaubert's Parrot* serves another more meaningful purpose as well – this medley of prose genres deconstructs the conventional distinctions between fiction and non-fiction. As James B. Scott explains by means of this deconstruction of prose genre taxonomies, “the reader is at all times caught between

¹Barnes, Julian. *Flaubert's Parrot*, Vintage, London, 2009. Further references to this novel will be quoted by parenthetical citation of page.

the poles of true and not true, so that even the conventional signification patterns (biography presents fact; fiction presents fancy) no longer function" (in Guignery, 2006: 42). While Plato insisted on the necessary separation between these two heterogeneous types of writing, Braithwaite intertwines the two, as suggested by his enumeration "Three stories contend within me..." (85). Such a quote highlights the blurring of fiction and reality, with the realhistorical couple Flaubert and Colet, placed side by side with the fictitious couple Geoffrey and Ellen Braithwaite, whose literary models, Charles and Emma Bovary, are also invented. As a result, once such distinction is blurred and life may equal art and vice versa, we can perfectly make use of art to understand life which is what Braithwaite aims at. Now fiction can establish facts, and that is the main point here – understanding Flaubert, and his great work, *Madamme Bovary*, can help Braithwaite understand his own wife and make sense of his own life. The medley of genres has perfectly served the purpose – Art proves a useful pattern of meaning from which to make sense and understand Life.

This trans-generic structure of the book has also left reviewers and critics at a loss as regards its classification and many have even objected to its classification as a novel. Although Barnes claims to be wary of labels and often even finds them meaningless, as a response to such criticism he has stated that in his opinion "the novel is a very broad and generous enclosing form" and doesn't see why it shouldn't be inventive and playful as regards form and structure, and break what supposed rules there are. Barnes has often exclaimed that he believes the novel starts with life and not out of an intellectual or theory grid which you then impose on things (Guignery and Roberts, 2009), which again emphasizes this dependent relationship between art and life Barnes constantly refers to and Braithwaite's constant search in Art for answers to his life.

Mikhail Bakhtin argued that "the novel takes part in what he calls "the carnivalisation of literature" meaning that it mixes genres, styles and languages in a heterogeneous whole" (in Guignery, 2006: 40), and this is precisely what happens in *Flaubert's Parrot*, which, not surprisingly, is one of the most recurrent features of postmodernism. To conclude, classifying *Flaubert's Parrot* as a novel should be appropriate since the form is flexible and changing as the term 'novel' itself suggests.

In search of the best genre

Furthermore, the fact that *Flaubert's Parrot* includes different genres perfectly serves another meaningful purpose as well: it illustrates the search for the most reliable gender, the one which may best be able to grasp and represent reality. Actually, as the main idea underlying the novel is the possibility to get to know and understand Flaubert, the author of *Madamme Bovary*, in order to understand his wife and make sense of his own life, the biographical gender should be the most suitable for such purpose. Alexander Herzen probably had a point in saying "Man likes to enter into another existence, he likes to touch the subtlest fibers of another's heart, and to listen to its beating...he compares, he checks it by his own, he seeks for himself confirmation, sympathy, justification"(in Kholikov, 2009: 49). In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Braithwaite is afraid of confronting the pain of his personal tragic story and therefore defers it until he can work up courage to share it with the reader. Meanwhile, he writes about Flaubert because he hopes to find consolation in telling his story and believes Flaubert and his art may provide it. The crucial reason why Braithwaite chooses Gustave Flaubert, and the one that explains why he intertwines Flaubert's story with the highly confessional story about Ellen, is the French writer's masterpiece, *Madame Bovary*, the main character of which is a counterpart to Ellen. The plot of *Madame Bovary* becomes for Braithwaite a context of interpretation which enables him to identify with Charles Bovary, and to understand Ellen better through the figure of Madame Bovary. The parallels that the narrator finds between his sad story and the life and works of Flaubert become sources of meaning for Braithwaite's life, and illustrate how he seeks in art an ideological structure through which to understand his personal tragedy and even himself. And therefore Braithwaite embarks on this project, which he makes clear from the beginning, in the epigraph, where he writes "When you write the biography of a friend, you must do it as if you were taking revenge for him" (epigraph, 7).

The term biography comes from the Greek language and refers to the writing of a life ("bios" means life and "graphein" means writing.). Traditionally, a biography is a narrative text which uses the third person singular in its objective and sequenced account of somebody's meaningful life events, starting with his birth and ending with his death. Yet, is it possible to make a mirror that will reflect somebody's life objectively and without distortion? The idea of biography and the role of the biographer are metaphorically described many times all throughout the novel.

First, the narrator draws a parallel between a biography and one possible definition of a *net* as being “a collection of holes tied together with string.” (38) And, consequently, on page 38, he describes the biographer as a sort of a *fisherman* and writes “The trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets and sells. Yet consider what he doesn’t catch” (38). In the same way, the novel itself appears to be such a patchwork of threads with holes which would once again seem to emphasize the idea of the impossibility of fully grasping reality.

Barnes himself has stated that “the human mind can’t exist without the illusion of a full story, so it fabulates and it convinces itself that the fabrication is as true and as concrete as what it “really” knows.” (Guignery et al, 2009: 54) Braithwaite needs to understand his wife’s life, and therefore a biography is the one genre for that, yet, when evidence and facts run out, fiction fills in the gap, and the result is the perfect combination of both, fact and fiction, which is portrayed in *Flaubert’s Parrot*. However, such combination may be said to be not fairly balanced since as facts are described through language, which has proved some other kind of fiction and which will be dealt with later in this dissertation, we appear to be left with a very small percentage that is to stand for reality.

As we can see, Barnes is highly suspicious of the so-called objectivity of biographical procedures and suggests that it is no longer possible to follow the old patterns. Barnes himself has claimed to feel uncomfortable and disapproving of the certainties with which biographers describe lives. Although the biographer relies on numerous authoritative sources such as articles, diaries, and reminiscences from the writer’s contemporaries, the epistolary legacy and archival documents, and since his task does not amount to a simple hunt for sources, any biographer encounters an array of universal challenges which include not only the search for material but also its selection and later interpretation and composition. As a result, the biographer’s job is also compared to that of a *judge*, who must reach a verdict based not only on a complete and comprehensive examination of the material he counts on but also on internal conviction. And this kind of work the biographer engages in also resembles that of a *detective*, a role Braithwaite plays all throughout the novel in his exhaustive search for and interpretation of all kind of information relating to Flaubert and his life. However, documentary literature does not just relocate a character ready-made but, like any other literature, builds and shapes that character, and as a result this artistic creativity is imprecise to the extent to which it compels the reader to become its co-creator. And in

the end, which is the use of so much information and interpretation? Again...why can't we leave the writer alone?

Gustave Flaubert himself has often been regarded as the "Father of Realism", being Balzac "the Grandfather". 19th century literary Realism was dependent on detailed information which was, wrongly, assumed to provide a reliable sense of reality. The idea was that accurate details stood for accurate reality and that is why realistic novels were exhaustively highly descriptive. However, reality was supposed to be represented through the writer who communicated reality through language, which is ironic since, as I have already claimed, language cannot fully express and represent reality, but helps construct it. As a result, reality ends up being no more than a discourse construction.

In addition, Barnes has exclaimed "...the other reason I feel suspicious of biography is because, too frequently, it is reductive and fails to account for the active imagination that makes a work of fiction. A biography...often likes to reduce art to the life which was present when the art was produced, and somehow minimize and diminish it" (in Guignery, 20013: 15). Yet, every work of an author needs to be situated in its framework and studied in the light of all the circumstances that attended its birth in order to take on its full meaning – historical and literary. As Antoine Compagnon, a student of Roland Barthes, concluded: "To interpret a work assumes that this work corresponds to an intention, that is the product of human agency. It does not follow that we are limited to studying the intentions of the work, but that the meaning of the text is linked to the author's intention...To remove a work from its literary and historical context is to give it another intention (another author – the reader), making it another work altogether, and it is no longer the same work that we are interpreting"(in Kholikov, 2009: 55). I believe this is precisely why Braithwaite needs so desperately to study Flaubert's life, historical context and personal world, since as Compagnon has claimed, it is essential to understand somebody's literary work, and we must remember Braithwaite's main aim is to draw a parallel between his life story and Madame Bovary's to be able to understand his own reality.

Yet, Braithwaite approaches his biographical project in a very original way and all throughout the novel Barnes simultaneously uses and abuses biographical conventions, asserting and crossing boundaries, and as a result, the biographical genre is thus both included and subverted.

Some of its originality consists mainly in juxtaposing three chronologies, the first insisting on Flaubert's success, the second highlighting his failures and the third

entirely composed of quotations from Flaubert in the form of metaphors and comparisons. This leads to contradictory information which derives in a sense of arbitrariness, neither of which are features of the traditional biography genre, but which reveal the active role of the biographer in the presentation of facts. This coexistence of different versions is another way in which Barnes crosses boundaries as regards genres, clearly with the aim of undermining the supposed objectivity of conventional biography. As Barnes himself explains you can read anybody's life as a triumph or you can just as well read most of these lives as failures, but perhaps this does not actually tell us half as much as just seeing their lives in terms of metaphors (in Guignery, 2009: 106 - 107). He does not believe that giving three chronologies is confusing, but actually illuminating since all the facts and statements in the three versions may not be incompatible with one another in terms of human life and human psychology. As a result, and again subverting conventions, while traditional biography offers a single interpretation of events, in "Chronology", Barnes offers us multiple interpretations of a single life, as there should be of any life. Again the idea here is that somebody's life, and in this particular case Braithwaite's wife's life, can be read and understood in many different ways, not only as a success or failure, which in the end kind of frees Braithwaite from the full responsibility of her suicide and the desperate thought of believing he never realized how miserable her life was.

Barnes explains

I had one image when I was writing it, which I didn't use at all in the book, but it was the idea that a great novelist lies in a sort of unofficial burial mound – something Anglo-Saxon or Egyptian – and there is always an entrance to it, through which he was taken in, and then he was buried and the entrance sealed up. What biography tends to do, understandably, is to unseal the entrance: it goes in, finds the body, it finds all the artifacts that the great writer has been buried with, and it is re-creating him backwards from that moment of burial. And I thought...what happens if you sink at tunnels in lots of different unexpected angles into the burial chamber? Perhaps this will result in some insights that you don't get by using the official entrance (in Guignery, 2009: 105).

Braithwaite desperately needs to find a new entrance to understand what happened to his wife and believes Art can provide this new door. And as Art has nothing to do with a rigid taxonomy chart but it is all more flexible and messy, "more

real”, he consequently crosses another boundary inventing when the evidence runs out, as in the chapter “Finders Keepers”, where Braithwaite uses fiction to compensate for the disappearance of Flaubert’s correspondence with the English governess Julia Herbert.

The unconventional approach to the life of the author – and its moving back and forth between fiction and biography – makes it something altogether different, original. “Flaubert died a little more than a hundred years ago”, says Braithwaite (12), “and all that remains of him is paper. Paper, ideas, phrases, metaphors, structured prose which turns him into sound” – Art in general. “This, as it happens, is precisely what he would have wanted; it’s only his admirers who sentimentally complain” (12). The fictional approach of the novel then becomes essential to the revenge, which Barnes aimed for, if he is to do justice to his reluctant author. “If Flaubert is text – paper, ideas, phrases – then a text is the only proper representation of him. Barnes’s revenge on other biographers is therefore to mock the attempt to get around or beyond fiction – even as Braithwaite tries to do so” (Dalton, 2008).

The artifice of language

I have already illustrated how Barnes portrays in the novel the underlying idea - the tension between art and reality – by means of an original mixing and subverting of traditional genres. I will now analyze how he also takes advantage of the playful nature of language to emphasize the same idea.

As I have already stated in the theoretical framework, in the case of language, *Flaubert’s Parrot*’s indebtedness to poststructuralist theories appears evident since it problematizes the unreliability and insufficiency of language, questioning its referential capacity and its ability to generate stable meanings. The novel drops the traditional idea that language represents the world and reflects its complexities and as James Scott (in Guignery, 2006: 43) suggests it evinces the conviction that words are empty signifiers which open onto a plurality of signifieds instead of ever touching a final signified, which again highlights the imprecision of language, the indeterminacy of meaning and consequently the elusiveness of truth.

The novel illustrates this sense of shiftiness and slipperiness of language, for example when Braithwaite is confused about the stark discrepancy between all the

accounts reporting that Flaubert was a “giant” and that he “towered everybody like a strapping Gallic chieftain” (90) and the fact that he was only six feet tall. Braithwaite concludes that this divergence results from the simple fact that in the nineteenth century people were on the whole shorter than nowadays. In the same way, he has no basis to believe that the term “redcurrant jam” corresponds to the same retinal encoding in him as it did in Flaubert. The realization of it, however, produces in him a strange anxiety that if words cannot be relied on, then history and all the knowledge accumulated over the centuries are susceptible to misunderstanding. If words are signifiers that, over time, can dance with a plurality of signifieds, then history becomes a fictional discourse whose signification perpetually reshapes itself like a cloud in the wind: “the past is autobiographical fiction pretending to be a parliamentary report” (90). Braithwaite realizes that all we have long believed to be truth is nothing but constructed discourse “sold” to us as the truth, and that is why he turns to literature for sense, for some other kind of “truth”.

Towards the end of the novel, Braithwaite also complains about the “foolish inadequacy of the language of bereavement. The choice of expressions is limited and unsatisfying (“I loved her; we were happy; I miss her...”). Worse still, they all sound untrue and artificial – as descriptions of other people’s grief. Braithwaite sadly concludes, “the right words don’t exist” (161).

The traditional view that words refer to things, or to be more accurate, that words stand for mental concepts, which in turn answer to things in the world, has been rejected by postmodern thinkers who have denied that language has this referential function or ability. How can language refer to the world? How can books refer to the world? Can one ever know the truth? Is there a truth? Instead, poststructuralist theories conceive of language as an instrument that constructs rather than reflects our reality.

Jorge Luis Borges, another well-known writer and possibly a precursor of some of the ideas of postmodernism himself, often expressed his concern as regards this question of language. In his popular story, “El espejo y la máscara”, he clearly illustrates the disadvantages and limitations of language in its attempt to represent reality. After the victory in the battle of Contarf, the King of Ireland asks his court poet to write the perfect poem which most truly describes the battle. After several attempts which are highly praised and rewarded, the poet finally discovers “Beauty”, which is a gift forbidden to men, and as a result, he must be punished.

Traditionally, art was supposed to be a truthful representation of reality and even the word “mirror” was used by the Greeks to refer to this main role of art – to imitate reality. However, as a result of the arbitrary nature of language, it is merely an attempt of mimesis, which can only aim to build some appearance of reality. Again, this idea is beautifully illustrated in Borges ‘s “El espejo y la mascara” where the author explains how our impossibility to grasp reality limits our possibility of a genuine representation of it, reducing the role of language, and even art, to a simple attempt of mimesis.

On the other hand, and possibly as a result of this impossibility to truly grasp reality, language constructs its own. Borges himself stated “Los sustantivos se los inventamos a la realidad. Palpamos una realidad, vemos un montoncito de luz color de madrugada, un cosquilleo nos alegra la boca, y mentimos que esas tres cosas heterogéneas son una sola y que se llama naranja... Todo sustantivo es abreviatura” (1926: 45 – 46).

Previously in the novel, Braithwaite had already voiced his skepticism about language’s ability to represent the world, “In our pragmatic and knowing century... We no longer believe that language and reality ‘match up’ so congruently – indeed we probably think that words give birth to things as much as things give birth to words” (88). This notion of the tragic insufficiency and inadequacy of language that underlies the whole novel is also brilliantly illustrated in Flaubert’s thrice-cited sad definition of language as “a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, while all the time we long to move the stars to pity” (19).

As a result, this postmodern awareness of language’s incapability of guaranteeing stable meanings creates a sense of confusion and the feeling of being lost in the daunting chaos of empty signifiers. “Lost, disordered, fearful, we follow what signs there remain; we read the street names, but we cannot be confident where we are.” (Barnes, 2009: 60)

As Borges clearly stated

no hay clasificación del universo que no sea arbitraria y conjetural. El hombre sabe que hay en el alma tintes más desconcertantes, más innumerables y más anónimos que los colores de una selva otoñal... cree, sin embargo, que esos tintes en todas sus fusiones y conversiones, son representables con precisión por un mecanismo arbitrario de gruñidos y de chillidos (...) la imposibilidad de penetrar el esquema divino del universo, no puede, sin embargo, disuadirnos de planear esquemas humanos, aunque nos conste que estos son provisorios (1952).

Borges was a popular skeptical who believed we are unable to understand the infinite complexity of the universe. However, in spite of his belief that all our knowledge is relative and questionable, he admired man in his constant, though hopeless, search for knowledge.

In the end, the two parrots in the museum were, in fact, arbitrarily chosen from fifty parrots, just as words have been arbitrarily derived from a system of differences and endowed, through convention, with meaning. As Allison Lee (in Guignery, 2006: 43) points out 'there is no single truth any more than there is a single parrot', taking as an example not only the end of the book but also the plurality of meanings of the word "parrot".

Different images of reader and writer

As we have already briefly mentioned it, in his attempt to write a biography of the French writer Flaubert which he intertwines with his own life, the narrator reflects upon the status of fiction and its influence on the real world. In order to do this, he explores different levels of inquiry as the use of different genres, language and its limits and the different roles of writer and reader in the construction of meaning. As regards this third and last point, Braithwaite poses different questions on Flaubert and describes the different roles he assigns to the French writer.

At the very beginning in the novel Braithwaite speaks about the "Ambulance Flaubert" (15) and wonders if a writer could ever be described as a healer. He immediately remembers George Sand's words addressing Flaubert "You produce desolation" "I produce consolation," which again illustrates how a work of art relates to life. Braithwaite concludes about Flaubert "He has proved not a tamer of wild beasts but a tamer of wild lives" (125). Yet, just one page later, Braithwaite describes the writer as a "butcher", as "sensitive brute". Furthermore, having referred to the parrot as Pure Word, since it represents clever vocalization without much brain power, he wonders if the writer is much more than a sophisticated parrot (18). How can somebody be first described as a tamer of wild lives and suddenly be turned into a butcher, such a brute who can merely parrot words without much sense, deprived of all kind of intelligence? And the idea is even more confusingly absurd if we know that such description is used to refer to such an important writer as Flaubert. I strongly believe Barnes is laughing at

the idea we may have of the "Author". He is strongly trying to demystify such category and depriving it of any such importance we used to apply to it. The focus should be on the words themselves, not the "person" behind them.

And the absurd imagery continues. In chapter 4, "The Flaubert Bestiary", Braithwaite refers to different animals which he metaphorically uses to represent the image of the writer as well. Here he speaks about Flaubert "the bear", "The camel", "The sheep", "The parrot", and "The dog". How can the image of a writer range from such a strong animal who can always impose his will as a bear to a mere parrot who has no voice of its own but can only imitate others' words? How can the image of the writer be represented by such different animals as these? Braithwaite is definitely mocking the status of "Author" and he would seem to agree with Foucault in that Author is a function, not a physical person behind the text that we need to know.

Finally, Braithwaite describes Flaubert as a teacher and he writes "Flaubert teaches you to gaze upon the truth and not blink from its consequences...And if you study his private life, he teaches courage, stoicism, friendship; the importance of intelligence, skepticism and wit; the folly of cheap patriotism; the virtue of being able to remain by yourself in your own room; the hatred of hypocrisy; distrust of the doctrinaire; the need for plain speaking" (134). Was the writer closer to the tamer than to any other kind of animal in the end? Can he finally be considered a teacher, some kind of moral model to follow? What is the writer's function? What is his offering to life?

As we can see when exploring the presence of the "Author" in the novel, there is a constant oscillation between a modernist and postmodernist approach. At the beginning the narrator questions the modernist approach and wonders "Why aren't the books enough?", which is highly ironic since it is something he the narrator himself can't do – Braithwaite constantly subordinates the work of Flaubert and his life to his reality. In theory, he takes a postmodernist approach but in practice he can't get along with it.

But it is not only Flaubert who seems to play different roles in life, as the writer of the biography he is attempting Braithwaite also plays different roles. At times he seems to play the role of a detective who is trying to solve the case of Flaubert's mysterious life: "I imagined myself presenting.... Julia Herbert: a mystery solved, by Geoffrey Braithwaite" (41).

Booker reminds us that detective fiction has often been a source of inspiration for postmodernist writers. The detective novel relies on an epistemological view that postmodern fiction challenges. The genre “relies upon a perception of the world as an orderly place in which events can be explained”. (Booker, 1994: 141) There are twists and turns in the plot of any good detective story, but in the end confusions are cleared rather than complicated. The innocent are vindicated; the guilty are whisked off to jail. The desire for closure fuels the genre. In addition, detective fiction also clearly highlights the search for truth - there is always some kind of mystery hidden that must be revealed. As such, detective fiction is particularly an inviting target for postmodern irony. In his constant search for truth, Braithwaite tries to solve Flaubert’s case in order to solve the case of his own life, like a good detective, in the most logical way possible. Unfortunately for him, life itself is not as logical and orderly as one might hope and then his case proves impossible to provide any kind of answer which restores sense to his life. “And the parrot? Well, it took me almost two years to solve the Case of the Stuffed Parrot” (180). He concludes “Perhaps it was one of them” (190).

However, in the way, he also looks into the French writer’s life in his constant search for “consolation.” “I was also thrilled that the material might help me imagine even more exactly what Flaubert was like” (41). This leads us back to the question of the author and the belief that we can turn to art and artists for any true sense of life. “Why does the writing make us chase the writer?... Why aren’t the books enough?” (12). We can’t leave the writer aside.

In addition, the narrator Geoffrey Braithwaite himself plays a diversity of literary roles as well in his attempt of a biography of Flaubert— biographer, scholarly essayist and existential philosopher. Yet, what kind of narrator is he? Most critics have described Braithwaite as a typical postmodernist self- conscious narrator since he exposes the constraints upon his research and comments on his own choices. The choice of such an intrusive narrator is highly ironic in a book devoted to Flaubert, who specifically called for an impersonal type of narration. In realistic fiction, the narrator is often a stable, reliable and omniscient figure, whom Lee (in Guignery, 2006: 47) defines as “an unproblematic constituted, individual subject who is the prime mover of events, and from whom essential meaning emanates”. Braithwaite is clearly not such a narrator but what David Leon Higdon calls “the reluctant narrator”, a new kind of narrator used by Barnes and Graham Swift among others, who is “reliable in strict terms, indeed often quite learned and perceptive, but who has seen, experienced or

caused something so traumatic that he must approach the telling of it through indirections, masks and substitutions".Such "a contemporary narrator hesitates, claims uncertainty, misunderstands, plays games..." (inGuignery, 2006: 47). "As for the hesitating narrator – look, I'm afraid you've run into one right now" says Braithwaite himself (89).

Braithwaite sums up the characteristics of such a narrator, since he has just lived such a terrible tragedy as his wife's adultery and suicide; and "the main rhetorical figure he uses all throughout the novel is aposiopesis, i.e. a sudden break in writing which suggests unwillingness or inability to proceed, and which appears whenever Braithwaite starts talking about his private life: "I remember...But I'll keep that for another time"(76). "My wife...Not now, not now"(105). Such hesitations and frequent pauses reflect his difficulties in facing his own reality, and his literary investigation into Flaubert's life and work is a way of postponing telling the story of his marital life, which parrots that of Charles and Emma Bovary.

What is more, Braithwaite's voice sometimes tends to disappear beneath or behind that of Flaubert. Chapters such as "the Flaubert Bestiary" and "Examination Paper" seem merely a collage of quotations from Flaubert's correspondence so that Braithwaite's role appears limited to that of a compiler, or a parrot, Flaubert's parrot. It is important to highlight here how voices are constantly mixed and confused, in the same way genres are all throughout the novel to emphasize the fact that there is no one single real voice, gender or truth. There is not one voice that can speak the truth as there is not one gender which can really describe it. This deliberate confusion of voices also suggests that the notion of paternity or author-ity has disappeared and that the words themselves are more important than the identity of the writer. As Barthes stated, "it is language which speaks, not the author" (1967). According to Barthes, to write can no longer be described as the act by which writers record or represent something, but rather as a performative act itself: language itself acts now, not oneself.

As a result, Foucault adds, the work no longer provides their writers that immortality they used to enjoy but, quite the opposite, it cancels out all signs of individuality. Writers must assume their new place and face the idea of the death of the author (Foucault, 1969). Consequently, literary criticism began some time ago to analyze and classify work according to their genre and type, as proper variations around an invariant which is no longer the individual creator. However, even when it is not concerned with questions of authentication, modern literary criticism still defines the

author in much the same way, as the one who can explain the occurrence of certain events in the work and their modifications or changes (Foucault, 1969).

In addition, Foucault believed the author allows a limitation of the dangerous proliferation of meanings in a text and as a result he didn't agree with the common belief that authors provide a work with an inexhaustible world of significations which we make sense of according to our discourses and other resources. He insisted it was quite the contrary: "the author is not an indefinite source of significations that fill a work: the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses" (1969). I believe this is precisely the kind of "writer" Braithwaite hopes to find in Flaubert, and the aim of his thorough inquiry into the French writer. Braithwaite himself, and also as a reader of Flaubert, may apply different explanations and meanings to his life tragedy. Yet, none of these would seem accurate to help him make sense and he desperately needs somebody who can provide him with some new pattern of meaning.

However, Foucault strongly claimed that the author function would disappear but in such a manner that fiction and its polysemous texts would function according to another mode, but still with a system of constraint – one that would have to be determined. He suggested a return to this question, not in order to reestablish the theme of an originating subject but to understand the subject's points of insertion and functioning. "It is a matter of depriving the subject of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse" (1969).

In response to Foucault's claim about the importance of the author function to limit the proliferation of meanings, Barthes explained that it is clear a text is not merely a group of words providing a single 'theological' meaning but a text consists of multiple, culturally different, writings which enter into dialogue with each other. However, he added, there is one place where all such multiplicity is collected and united – in the reader, and not the author as it used to be believed. Barthes stated "the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination. The birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author" (1967).

As Balzac wrote: "no one (that is, no "person") utters it: its sources, its voice is not to be located; and yet it is perfectly read; this is because the true locus of writing is reading" (in Barthes, 1967). This new category – the reader – provides a new level of analysis which adds a different perspective. In addition to all the different roles Braithwaite assigns to the French writer Flaubert, and to the ones he himself plays as a

writer, Braithwaite now also stands on the side on the reader himself, both as a literary critic and as a common reader. Although he severely criticizes academic critics who have studied and written about Flaubert and his work all throughout the novel, Braithwaite does exactly the same as them – poking into Flaubert’s life, searching into his privacy and trying to fill with meaning every single aspect of his existence. I believe this incoherence in this behavior of his is closely related to his desperate need of understanding, his desperate need to make sense.

However, as an ordinary reader, rather than as an academic, Braithwaite can be closer to Flaubert than any critic, there is a connection between him as the reader and Flaubert as the writer which, he argues, supersedes that of the critics: “Look, writers aren’t perfect...any more than husbands and wives are perfect” (76), and which again highlights his need to defend the very person he feels he can identify with in order to restore meaning and sense into his life – the artist.

However, as regards Barthes’s idea on the role assigned to readers, Barnes believes that readers have always made their own interpretations and understood books with different emphasis. He concludes “I know they are read differently by different people at different times and places – not according to Barthesian theory, but according to the awkward, incoherent, messy way in which real life is inevitably lived” (Guignery, 2013: 24). In his search for meaning Braithwaite decides on his own reading of Flaubert’s work and life.

ATONEMENT

As I have already stated, Ian McEwan is one of the most widely read and internationally recognized authors of contemporary British fiction, who owing to his distinguished work, has joined the ranks of classic authors of British literature. Martin Hilský in 1991 placed McEwan among the most significant representatives of the youngest generation of British prose writers, and time has confirmed his prominence.

McEwan's *Atonement* has been considered his masterpiece, which surpassed the Booker Prize-winning *Amsterdam*. Geoff Dyer defines its significant role in contemporary fiction as "it is about creatively extending and hauling a defining part of the British literary tradition up to and into the 21st century" (Dyer, 2001:8-9). Chalupský also underlines its originality in the context of contemporary British fiction, and emphasizes the complexity of the novel and the author's ability to combine a variety of themes and narrative techniques.

As I have also already explained it, the themes and techniques used in *Atonement* fit in what is called postmodernist writing. The strong metanarrative element, the complicated narrative structure with its heavy fragmentariness, and the presence of both external and internal narrator clearly place it within the era designated as postmodernism. However, it is none of these postmodernist characteristics of the novel I will be dealing with. My analysis will focus on another such important feature of postmodernist literature which is highly present in *Atonement*: the extent to which fiction and reality merge and the use of one to make sense of the other.

McEwan's attitude to the subject matter of his work is connected with his treatment of any totalizing interpretations of the world and its general skepticism towards grand narratives. He strongly rejects totalitarian concepts and his work does not make claims on a meaningful representation of reality. As in most postmodernist works, truth is always relative and security is an illusion, and McEwan shows how subjective experience creates reality. He strongly highlights the extent to which reality and fiction may be interrelated. This interrelation of fiction and reality is clearly portrayed in the main character of the novel, Briony, who constantly turns to fiction to make sense of reality, which, as expected, ends up in tragedy.

Set in three time periods, 1935 England, World War II in England and France, and the present day England, *Atonement* tells the story of an upper-class girl's half-innocent mistake that ruins lives and her adulthood in the shadow of that mistake. When

Briony Tallis, a 13 year old, fairytales addict and an aspiring writer, sees her older sister Cecilia and Robbie Turner, the son of a family servant, at the fountain in front of the family estate she misinterprets what is happening thus setting into motion a series of misunderstandings and a childish pique that will have lasting repercussions for all of them. After the fountain incident, Briony reads a letter intended for Cecilia and concludes that Robbie is a deviant. As a result, when her cousin Lola is raped, she tells the police that it was Robbie she saw committing the deed. She irrevocably changes the course of several lives when she accuses her older sister's lover of a crime he did not commit, and, parallelly, war breaks out in Britain.

Fantasy, daydreaming, self-dramatizations, all the powerful work of the imagination battle with facts. Can the imagined and the real ever be “at one”?

Briony and her “sense of order”

Briony is a ferociously orderly child “possessed by a desire to have the world just so” (McEwan, 2007:4)², a desire that takes the form of writing. At the very beginning in the novel, we are introduced to a young Briony obsessed with ordering and controlling the world around her, which is first demonstrated by the perfect way in which her room is described in contrast to the rooms of the other family members described as extremely untidy “Whereas her big sister’s room was a stew of unclosed books, unfolded clothes, unmade bed, unemptied ashtrays, Briony’s was a shrine to her controlling demon: ...” and the immaculate way in which all the toys animals belonging to her “model farm” are arranged, “all facing one way – towards their owner – as if about to break into song” resembling “ a citizen’s army awaiting orders”(McEwan, 2007: 5), which may also suggest how Briony sees herself - as a god, the creator and controller of her fantasy world.

This may be associated to an overall lack of order in the family household, characterized by her father’s frequent absences and her mother’s incapability to fulfill her role and provide a safe family background. Briony clearly feels neglected in this careless family mood and therefore looks for a way to establish the sense of order and security she needs. Chalupský (2008) claims that certain order is a natural and necessary source of comfort for every child. However, Briony’s obsession exceeds the borders of

²McEwan, Ian. *Atonement*, Vintage, London, 2007. Further references to this novel will be quoted by parenthetical citation of page.

naturalness, as it is caused predominantly by her parents' neglect and failure to provide such.

In addition, Briony's passion for neatness is where her love for writing and creation comes from. Actually, her writing is an expression of her need to have everything in order and under control. "A world could be made in five pages, and one that was more pleasing than a model farm" (7), a world of her own, some kind of reality she understands and feels at ease with, and which only fiction can provide. For Briony, fiction is clearly no escapism but her means of grasping control, a way to decide on and to arrange the disarranged. Briony has the imperative need to create a perfect, harmonious and symmetrically organized world where she can live according to her aesthetic view of reality and where those who dare to infringe it are to be punished.

And it is in stories where she can control everything and everything fits. In Briony's words "a universe reduced to what was said in [plays] was tidiness indeed." Both Briony's "passion for tidiness" as well as her love for fiction are satisfied by writing, which can make "an unruly world [to be] made just so" (7) and that is exactly what she yearns for.

Briony's taste for fairytales is also motivated by the sense of order they offer – the stories are usually easily predictable and there is a clear boundary between good and evil. Young Briony is caught up in a reality ruled by fairytales heroes who are rewarded by marriage and villains who are to be punished by death. For Briony, fiction is therefore a tool, a way of ordering and making sense of reality.

Consequently, though unfortunately, and due also to the lack of other real role models in her family household, Briony tries to interpret the world around her according to the structures from the fictional world she is highly familiar with. Described by Chalupský (2008:62) as "the greatest order seeker, the one who longs to live in an orderly, seamless world", Briony wants the real world to be just as orderly and lucid as fairytales. As Chalupský (2008:61-62) states "[b]eing used to living in her childishly structured, dreamy world and reading predictable fairytale like stories, Briony believes the whole world resembles what she has been experiencing so far." Brought up on diet of imaginative literature, she is too young and too innocent to understand the dangers involved in modeling one's life on such an artificial world (Finney, 2004: 68-82).

To emphasize this idea of the dangers of transferring fiction to real life, the book actually opens with a striking epigraph, a quote from Jane Austen's *Northanger*

Abbey,³ which, in addition, serves as both a warning and a guide to how this narrative should be approached. The heroine of Austen's tale, Catherine Moorland, is a girl so much in love with gothic fiction that fails to make a distinction between the fictive and the real, and is therefore reprimanded by Henry Tilney for her naïve response to events around her. Catherine is a victim of reading too much fiction and so is Briony. Catherine basically creates a (gothic) tale to suit her own life and so will Briony. And Austen's accusation against Catherine, as to "what ideas have you been admitting?" (epigraph), could also be perfectly aimed at Briony, since it is her unbridled writer's imagination that will compel her to commit that fateful lie. The aim is always to make reality fit into fiction, not to reproduce fiction in reality or live as if it was fiction. Fiction *is* reality.

It is important here to highlight again the lack of real role models around Briony, which deepens her dependence on fairytales and make her fictional literary world the prime and only source of reference she counts on to make sense of the real world. This emphasizes the idea that not only social institutions, such as family, church and government, play an important role in people's perception of reality and making sense of it, but also education, literature, art in general. And even more when such traditional institutions seem to fail in their role to provide life with meaning. It is in such scenario of chaos and crisis of meaning where literature is presented as a new possible kind of metanarrative. As many postmodern authors believe, art will do what other human institutions have failed to.

This question of the collapse of the traditional metanarratives which helped people make sense of the world is clearly portrayed in the novel. Family values are strongly questioned in the way Briony's household and her aunt's divorce are described. "She vaguely knew that divorce was an affliction but she did not regard it as a proper subject, ... it belonged to the realm of disorder" (8). Briony refuses to acknowledge the existence of such things, which might threaten the established order.

³This is the epigraph quoting Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*: "Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English: that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing, where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Moorland, what ideas have you been admitting? They had reached the end of the gallery; and with tears of shame she ran off to her own room".

Cecilia's Uncle Clem's vase, given to him during World War I by the grateful inhabitants of a French town he had helped to evacuate, may also stand in the novel as another symbol of traditional institutions which are beginning to crumble. At the very beginning of the novel, Cecilia comes to the fountain to put some water in Uncle Clem's vase for flowers and finds Robbie working in the garden. Robbie attempts to help Cecilia and inadvertently breaks the vase and drops a piece in the fountain, due to the sexual tension between them. Robbie and Cecilia argue on how to recover the piece, and Cecilia finally removes her dress and dives into the fountain. The vase had survived all the horrors of the war without damage and seemed to be a fixed element in the stability of the family, so Robbie accidentally breaking it may be interpreted as a presage of the family's disintegration.

The theme of the war, which also plays an important part in the novel, is another clear example of how the traditional institutions and society values are falling apart, and, consequently, there is the need for a new pattern to help us make sense of reality. The depiction of the war in Part Two and Three really points out its horrors and the injuries suffered by both soldiers and civilians. It highlights the terrible violence of war and committed atrocities, and the fragility of human life. It helps show that during war even the most moral of people can commit crimes or acts of violence which transgress all human decency. Paul Marshall's plan to profit from it looks particularly repellant when we see the suffering that has formed the foundation of his wealth. The novel also emphasizes the injustices of any armed conflict. There is an irony that Robbie Turner must fight in the front to exonerate himself from a crime he did not commit. In addition, Briony's experiences are symbolic of all nurses dealt with in those dreadful times. She shows the agony of being a war time nurse and the emotional cost is has on them. Their innocence, optimism and youth are lost. Briony's character changes considerably during this time to the point where there is little left of the young intense 13 year old introduced to us in Part 1. All in all, no part of society is left untouched, and no character in the novel remains unaffected by the traumatic experience. The whole of society is guilty of allowing the war to happen, allowing the type of suffering we witness in Northern France and the London hospital and *Atonement* draws focus on the lasting and wide-ranging effects these events had on the British psyche.

Briony clearly finds such new pattern in literature so "she imposes the patterns of fiction on the facts of life" (Albers et al, 2009: 714). In *Atonement*, life imitates

fiction. In this way art strongly influences Briony's perception of reality, and not the opposite. Briony, as well as Robbie, both clearly shape and are shaped by narratives. As Finney says, Briony is the leading example of the way art shapes her life as much as she shapes that life into her art. "She lives in fiction or, to be more specific, in an idealized world of her own imagination and translates her aestheticized thinking onto reality, thereby ultimately confusing the two"(2004: 68-82). For Briony, certain rules in life are closely connected to her idealized vision of art, "art becomes an idealized objective that needs to be achieved in life" (Finney in Albers et al, 2009: 714). And how could it be better achieved than by being a writer?

When Briony is first introduced in the novel she is primarily described as an author, first and foremost, a writer, which clearly shows the importance literature holds for her. She is a writer-to-be who enjoys the god-like power of ordering fantasy worlds and the real world according to her fantasy, and therefore accommodates the real world around her to make it fit the demands of her own world of fiction.

Actually, the book proper opens with a description, not of Briony, but of one of her first literary works, a play she wrote when she was 13. This is highly ironic since we get an instance of Briony's literary imagination first, even before we get to know her as a personality, which again clearly points to the question of fiction and its importance in the novel. She is an author first, and a girl about to enter adolescence secondly.

To celebrate her brother's return, Briony plans to put on "The trials of Arabella", a self-composed play which highlights such moral as "love which did not build a foundation on good sense was doomed"(3). Again Briony - via literature - tries to cater to what she considers to be a perfect life for her and the people around her. She desires "to guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, towards the right form of wife" (4). Therefore, from the very beginning in the novel "The Trials of Arabella" serves as way of showing Briony's vision of life and her need for moral order.

There are other literary motifs and symbols present in the novel which enhance the influence fiction have on her life, and this is also mirrored in the different characters' relationships with literature. Robbie's reflections about literature, as well as the influence that literary works seem to have on him, make it clear that he has an intimate relationship with writing and fiction (Reynolds et al in Dahlback, 2009: 8).

Gray's Anatomy is an English-language textbook of human anatomy originally written by Henry Gray which Robbie is reading since he is studying to become a doctor. It is lying open on his desk in the section about the vagina and it clearly affects his

judgment when writing his letter to Cecilia. From the very beginning, literature is Robbie's sole excuse for entering the Tallis' household -the library is his favorite place- and the main topic of conversation with Cecilia. Furthermore, both Robbie and Cecilia write "about literature and us[ing] characters as codes"(204) when he is in prison and communication needs to be disguised. All in all, literature manages to enter "deeply into the fabric of their lives" (Finney in Dahlback, 2009:9). However, their use of literature is more rational. Robbie and Cecilia know the difference, they "use" it, while Briony "lives" it.

Back to Briony, her perception of the world is clearly influenced by her ambition to become a writer and as Frank Kermode (2001) describes her she is "a very young writer enchanted by the idea that she could in a few pages create a world complete with terrors and climaxes, and a necessary sort of knowingness." However, it is precisely this knowingness of the adult world with its complicated relationships which she lacks, and which she will therefore wrongly substitute with familiar patterns of fairytales, the result of which could be no other than misinterpretation and tragedy.

As the story unfolds, Briony is gradually forced to face the harsh realities of life and finds out how difficult it is to cope with them. Certain disturbing events, such as her unintentional observing of the fountain scene, the reading of Robbie's letter to Cecilia, Robbie and Cecilia's lovemaking in the library and the crime of rape, make her suddenly aware of a different world – an adult world – whose rules are much more complicated than those of fairy tales. Actually, after witnessing the fountain scene, she tries to interpret it according to the familiar structures of the fairytale stories, yet "the sequence was illogical – the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal" (39).

When Briony translocates from a world she has created to the real world, things don't match and she feels helpless since she is no longer in control of events around her. Terrified, her first instinct is to regain a position of control again and she is immediately filled with a desire, a need and a sense that she could write a scene like the one before her. Later on, when Briony secretly opens Robbie's letter to her sister her aestheticized world definitely begins to crumble. Reality turns out to go completely diametrical to all of Briony's concepts and it irrevocably destroys her idealized view of life. As Chalupský explains, when Robbie's behaviour does not comply with the notion of what she expects of a prince, he immediately becomes a villain and as such a threat to order, which, naturally, needs to be destroyed (2008: 61).

Stephan-Cole (2002) has argued that Briony now “senses something new...” and as an aspiring writer she is, she is thrilled with what this newly-discovered world can provide to her writing. She is determined to abandon melodrama and start writing more impartially, more truthfully. However, Briony is not ready yet to abandon her fictional world of heroes and villains, and she again sets herself the challenge to retake control. She needs a world she can control, a world in which frogs “address princesses” (40), a world in which fiction is the only reality.

For Briony, “Order must be imposed” (115), and order requires the elimination of “the confusion of feeling contradictory things” (116), it requires the aspiring writer in her to turn Robbie into “a villain in the form of an old family friend” (158). It is clearly the writer in her that leads her to identify Robbie as Lola’s attacker. “All she had to do now was to discover the stories, not just the subjects, but a way of unfolding them, that would do justice to her new knowledge” (160). Yet, forcing life to adjust to the aesthetic orderliness of art can have actual dreadful consequences, especially with such a codified form of fiction as fairy tales.

And this inability of hers to disentangle life from the literature that has shaped her life blurs the line between fiction and reality and makes it impossible for her to understand what is really happening around her. And this inability to separate fact from fiction is what makes her commit her fatal crime. Yet, again, her lie is less a lie than a misconstruction of the adult world she has been observing with the predatory eye of an aspiring novelist (Finney, 2004).

What she believes to be fact is actually fiction and the events witnessed are altered by Briony’s imagination to suit her writer’s spirit, “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”(169). Fiction determines fact.

Briony has come to the conclusion that “imagination itself [is] a source of secrets” (6) “so when the opportunity presents itself she seizes it. She convinces herself, and those willing to believe it, that certain events have indeed taken place before her eyes, when in fact only bits and pieces are true and the blanks in-between have been filled with a fictional reality she has created herself” (Dahlback, 2009). What Brionysaw was in truth plotless, because it could not be made to mean. Yet a plot is exactly what she imposes. Her determination to accuse Robbie is bound up with her literary impulses.

She needs to make a story of it. In Briony's mind "[e]verything connected. It was her discovery. It was her story, the one that was writing itself around her" (166).

Of course, the paradox is that it is only through fiction itself that we can learn about Briony's mistake. She finally turns to what motivated this tragedy in the first place: fiction. "[...] attempts to use fiction to correct the errors that fiction caused her to commit. But the chasm that separates the world of the living from that of fictional invention ensures that at best her fictional reparation will act as an attempt at atoning for a past that she cannot reverse" (Finney, 2004). The consequences that are caused by Briony's inability to separate fact from fiction are "tragic and irreversible – except in the realm of fiction" (Finney, 2004). Thanks to her novel, we discover how terribly Briony misjudged the moment in front of the fountain and everything that led to. What is more, the novel becomes the means by which the whole mess back in Briony's head is finally ordered and in place. She has fictionalized the messier components to resolve the tale neatly. In creating a fictionalized replica of her life and the people in it, the author Briony is, once again, in command; "the creator and controller of the fictionalized world" (Dahlback, 2009: 13). Order has been restored.

It is important to highlight that Briony's idea of authorship refloats the rigid category that has been discussed by Barthes and Foucault, as we have already seen in previous chapters. Therefore, the modern conception of the author as god is problematized all throughout the novel. With the god-like power of an author, and by blurring the line between fiction and reality, as defined by the boundaries of her novel, Briony changes reality and gives Robbie and Cecilia fictional happiness instead of the factual tragedy they both suffered, at least within the pages of her book. The power of the written word thus ensures that Briony's fictionalized reality successfully manages to give her sister and Robbie the future they have lost in reality. Since, although reality may be different, Briony knows that "as long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of [her] final draft, then [her] spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love" (371), highlighting again the power of the written word, of art in general, to manipulate reality.

Although Briony had intended first to "tell the absolute truth, no rhymes, no embellishments", she soon wonders "...what purpose would be served by it" (370). Briony realizes that no "sense or hope or satisfaction" could be drawn from reality, and builds an alternative universe in which the story has a different ending. "If I really cared so much about facts, I should have written a different kind of book" Briony herself

states (360). And, as she clearly knows, due to the power of the written word, it is the version in print that will be remembered. As author, she has the power to do anything and recognizing this power, Briony concludes that there can be “no atonement for God or novelists” (371), and only the attempt matters.

Finally, the fact that she provides a “happy ending” for Cecilia and Robbie demonstrates that her aesthetic notions have not really changed after all, and as old Briony herself admits it seems as if she has not travelled far since her first literary work (370). Even though Briony has certainly realized the mistakes she has made, her naïve aesthetic principles and attitude have not changed much, and she still needs a neat box of “art(ificiality)” where her life fits in. “Now the drafts are in order and dated, the photocopied sources labeled, the borrowed books ready for return, and everything is in the right box file. I’ve always liked to make a tidy finish” (353).

Thus *Atonement* is both a criticism of fiction and a defense of it. A criticism of fiction’s abuse and misuse; and a defense of an ideal. And this ambiguity could not be otherwise, for art seems always healthier than its own sickness.

***Atonement*: a Bildungsroman? The story of growth of the girl and the writer**

In McEwan’s novel, the question of the relationship between life and art is so important that it is also portrayed in the main character’s growing up, both as a person and a writer at the same time. In this sense, since readers go through Briony’s process of the girl’s growing up and the writer’s development, the novel could also be labeled as a *Bildungsroman*. The *Bildungsroman* (etymology: “formation novel”) is a genre of the novel which focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood.

Although the term *Bildungsroman* was not commonly brought up in literature studies until 1870 by German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, the birth of the *Bildungsroman* is said to date back to the publication of Goethe’s *The Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister* in 1795-96. Thomas Carlyle translated Goethe’s novel into English, and after its publication in 1824, many British authors have written novels inspired by it. In the 20th century, the genre was also particularly popular among women and minority writers, and it has now spread to numerous countries around the globe.

As from the twenty first century, the bildungsroman genre has not significantly changed, and the literary aspects that characterize it as such have remained the same, except for setting and circumstances being slightly adapted to the referred culture within a story. Actually, the bildungsroman becomes a popular form that appears again in the fiction of many authors of the 90s, and McEwan is cited among those who have paid considerable attention to it.

A Bildungsroman tells about the growing up or coming of age of a sensitive person who is looking for answers and experience. The goal is maturity but the process is long and arduous, usually involving repeated clashes between the protagonist's needs and desires and the views and judgments enforced by a strict social order, and the protagonist achieves it gradually and with difficulty. After some particular conflict between the protagonist and society, the protagonist finally accepts the values of society and he or she is ultimately integrated into it.

Coming of age novels focus not only on the protagonists and the events around them but mainly on the emotional effects such events have on them, as stages in the gradual formation of their inner selves. The stress is heavily put upon the protagonist's mental growth, and constant search for psychological elaboration, self-questioning, and self-consciousness.

Atonement could be said to perfectly fit this description of the bildungsroman genre, since the whole novel revolves around the main character's development both as a person and as a writer. *Atonement* is the story of a writer's development and an exploration of the ways in which writing meets certain psychological needs. As Pilar Hidalgo adds "Briony's nascent literary imagination allows the reader to follow her development [...] from folk tales to melodrama to modernist and finally realist fiction" (2005, 85). All this is important to the extent that Briony's personal, narrative-style development, at any and all stages, influences her perception of reality, and, thereby, how she behaves. Briony's development goes from an initial excess of imagination, moral puritanism and childish ignorance, through the war horror, family tragedy, doubts, and loneliness, until she finally learns about empathy, compassion, solidarity and atonement. As a writer, she grows to understand the power of literature and her duties and rights as writer. And both, the adult Briony and the promising writer, finally grasp the frailty of concepts such as "truth" or "reality" and question the ideas of absolute and stability in writing. According to this, the novel could also be classified within the tradition of the *Kunstlerroman*, as in the classic example of James Joyce's

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916), in which the evolution of Briony as a writer also questions a particular conception of literature.

Very near the beginning, the novel goes: “Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through a whole history of literature...to arrive at an impartial psychological realism which she had discovered for herself, one special morning...in 1935” (41), referring to Briony’s multiple attempts at getting her story, her life, just right.

In *Atonement*, the theme of innocence and experience seems to be the main thread of the whole book. At the beginning of the novel, Briony is a naïve romantic yearning for order. Her obsession with order, her fantasizing about playwriting, and the seriousness with which she takes her play all represent her at a point where she is too young to see the world beyond her own existence, which is just an initial stage of the psychological maturing process. Gradually, as I have already explained, she is forced to face the harsh realities of life and starts to find her child world very restrictive: “Pen in hand, she stared across her room towards her hard-faced dolls, the estranged companions of a childhood she considered closed. It was a chilly sensation, growing up”(116). The age of clear answers was over. Growing up, in other words, is to accept messiness.

Following the description of the characteristics of the bildungsroman genre, when Briony is slowly entering adolescence, some disturbing events occur which make her suddenly aware of her own childlikeness. Due to them, she discovers that there is another world, the adult world, whose rules are much more complicated than those of the fairy tales, and realizes that her previous viewing of the world was childish. The moment Briony’s thoughts get to existential issues such as whether everyone else is really alive as she is, or whether other people are equally valuable to themselves as she is to herself, can be interpreted as the initial signals of the change she is to go through, her journey through adolescence.

Although such journey is generally said to be one of the most difficult one has to go through in life, Briony’s is even harder since her parents, who obviously notice the girl is beginning adolescence, don’t seem to know how to deal with it. They passively and nostalgically watch how the baby of the family is changing, instead of offering her any help or guidance in this sensitive period. Again, she has to trust her only and most loyal source of reference so far – fiction.

Later on, another important incident is confronting Lola, Briony's cousin, who is only two years older than Briony, yet considers herself adult. However, the most crucial event in the girl's realizing the adult world is her unintentional witnessing of the fountain scene, which she tries to interpret according to the structures of the familiar fairytales but is finally unable to comprehend. This is a turning point for Briony, who realizes the childlikeness of her previous perception of the world. Stefan-Cole (2002) comments on this scene: "It is an epiphany for Briony who suddenly sees her past efforts as child's play: her silly morality tales, her little play. She senses something new, a psychological world opening, and, more, the development of real characters". As an aspirant writer, she feels thrilled by the new odds which this view offers to her writing, and is eager to learn everything about this newly-discovered world.

Indeed, after her witnessing, she decides to abandon melodrama and fairy tales (which has been her habitual literary genre) and begin the more difficult task of writing truthfully and impartially. "She could write the scene ... from three points of view, ... she need not judge.... She needs only show separate minds, as alive as her own" (40). "The fairy stories were behind her, and in the space of a few hours she had witnessed mysteries, seen an unspeakable world, interrupted brutal behaviour, and by incurring the hatred of an adult whom everyone had trusted, she had become a participant in the drama of life beyond the nursery" (160). Briony ceases to exist as a protected child and enters the exposed world of adulthood.

As we can see all throughout the novel, Briony's process of growing up goes hand in hand with her development as a writer, emphasizing again the strong life-art relation which underlies the whole novel and which we have been dealing with all throughout this dissertation. Consequently, the novel ends with an old tired Briony in what is supposedly her last birthday and the news of the coming publication of her novel. Her "fifty-nine year assignment is over" (369). The old lady and the renowned author together in the end.

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Conclusions

This work was written with the intention to respond to the hypothesis about a new status of fiction and the postmodern ideas played with it by two well-known novels, *Flaubert's Parrot* by Julian Barnes and *Atonement* by Ian McEwan. It shows how reality and fiction may be strongly interrelated, suggests the possibility of art as a new source of meaning and examines the extent to which Art (and particularly literature) is capable of accounting for or explaining events or situations that people cannot reconcile themselves to. The lack of any firm foundations in this postmodern era breeds disappointment, anxiety and frustration and, most importantly, it creates the need to embark on some new search. Therefore, the idea was to analyze the potential of a particular narrative or domain of human existence, as religion used to be, which could act as a firm foundation and a stable context of interpretation, to understand one's experience and make sense of it in a world marked by the disillusioned realm of postmodernity.

After a thoroughly profound analysis of the two novels, *Flaubert's Parrot* and *Atonement*, both in terms of theme and form, I can readily affirm that in both of them the relationship Literature– Reality is the main subject matter. Their main characters, Braithwaite and Briony, turn to Art to try to understand and make sense of their chaotic lives and the world around them. By clinging to the belief that art has the capacity to teach, explain and guarantee meaning, they both endorse the concept of art as a new kind of metanarrative. Art should provide them with some pattern of meaning which helps them comprehend what is going on and allow them to move on. However, such relationship between art and reality is illustrated in different ways in the two novels.

In *Flaubert's Parrot*, I have described how the relationship between fiction and the real is portrayed through the mixing of different genres, the emphasis on the playful nature of language and the different images of reader and writer described throughout the novel. As regards "The mixture of genres", in *Flaubert's Parrot* Julian Barnes is constantly subverting conventions, deconstructing traditional genres and questioning the traditional distinction Fiction – Non-Fiction, in search of the best genre to represent reality, that genre which can best describe and even explain reality. In such quest, the main character, Braithwaite, attempts a biography of Flaubert as he believes such genre will provide him with some real knowledge. However, he ends up with different kind of information, most of which proves useless, and concludes that even a biography

is fictionally constructed – there is absolutely no genre that can grab reality and reflect it objectively.

All this leads us to my second point of analysis – “The artifice of language”. In his novel, and again to focus on this idea of the impossibility to represent reality, Barnes plays with poststructuralist theories of language which emphasize the insufficiency of language to represent the world and generate stable meanings. Therefore, language becomes another traditional metanarrative that collapses and is no longer trustworthy. If words are empty signifiers which can dance with a plurality of signifieds, then everything is discursively constructed and objective truth doesn’t exist. This consequent indeterminacy of meaning, which drives Braithwaite crazy, adds to the sense of chaos and confusion, and a need to turn to Art for answers. Yet, using language as its main tool, literature ends up being, as we have previously said, also just an attempt of mimesis which constructs rather than represents reality. This would all seem to lead to the failure of his project. Yet, quite in the end, Braithwaite seems to welcome this indeterminacy which is so often associated with the postmodernist view. He even admits he “prefer{s} to feel that things are chaotic, free willing, permanently as well as temporarily crazy – to feel the certainty of human ignorance...” (70). Even the quest of the parrot results in multiple possibilities. Yet, the failure to find the object of his quest, or to be more precise, the impossibility of closure does not undermine the purposefulness of the quest for knowledge. Even if the pursuit of knowledge falls short of achieving its original aim, the search for the consolations of art ensures him the joy of indeterminacy and frees him from the emptiness of final confirmation. The search is all and what makes the search worthwhile is not its closure but the fact that it keeps Braithwaite in motion. In a world in which ultimate meaning is not accessible, what guarantees survival is movement.

Finally, in “Different images of reader and writer”, I focus on the different roles Barnes assigns to the idea of the “writer” and “reader” in the novel. First, I describe how Braithwaite mockingly laughs at different images of Flaubert who stands as a healer, a tamer, different beasts, and even the parrot itself, among others; and later describe how Braithwaite, the author himself, also plays different roles, such as detective and biographer, questioning the kind of narrator he is.

The idea is definitely to show how Barnes laughs at the idea of Author and even questions the traditional idea of Authorship. Why do we readers chase the author? Why aren’t the books enough? What is the role of the author? Does he have the truth we look

for? And what happens with the author if, as we have just said, there is no true to tell? At the end of this section, I briefly describe the idea of the role of the Reader, summarizing Barthes's main points, to conclude that the answer may be precisely on this new figure and not on the Author. We, as readers interpret and construct our own truth. We readers give meaning to our stories. I strongly believe Braithwaite sees all this clearly in the end. He understands there is no genre and no objective language which can describe reality and the subjective nature of life and realizes that it is we, readers, with our own interpretations of life who can become writers and creators of our own life stories and construct our own reality.

In *Atonement*, McEwan also plays with the relationship between reality and its representation, even in a more straightforward way, I would say. First of all, in "Briony and her sense of order", I clearly show how Briony's need of order and control in her life is clearly reflected in her need of reading and writing. Mostly as a result of her lack of real life models, Briony constantly turns to Art as her sole and most reliable source of meaning from which to make sense of such confusing world around her. As a result, she is forever trapped in a world in which the differences between fiction and reality are hardly noticeable, and she constantly manages to blur the line between both. She imposes the patterns of fiction on the facts of life and her fairy tales provide the basis from which she hopes to make sense of reality and therefore her interpretation of the real world can't be the most realistic one. For her fiction is reality, but when these two such things don't match, which is usually the case, confusion rules. Forcing life to conform to the aesthetic orderliness of art can have actual tragic consequences.

In the second part of my analysis of *Atonement*, "Atonement: a Bildungsroman?", I claim *Atonement* can be clearly labeled as a Bildungsroman since it deals with the development of both Brionys, the person and the writer. This again clearly emphasizes the important interrelation between art and reality, which always go hand in hand in McEwan's novel. Writing meets Briony's certain psychological needs all throughout the novel. First, her world of fairy tales brings order, comfort and control to her chaotic life and later her novel becomes her means of reparation, her life engine, the reason to live, her atonement. In the end, as it should have been expected, it seems justified she attempts to use fiction to make amends for the damage that fiction itself caused her to commit, and thereby to a certain extent restore the world that she once believed to be her aesthetic ideal.

Consequently, after reading the end of the novel we can still wonder whether her fiction – reality confusion is finally clarified since in her very end Briony, the old woman and world acclaimed writer, ironically once more turns back to Art to describe Reality. Her dependence on the written word and her belief in the almighty, godlike power of the novelist, whose imagination is entitled to set the limits and the terms, allow her happy ending. Yet, when she says that “atonement was always an impossible task” (371), she would seem to be accepting some kind of defeat. Thus, is McEwan also suggesting that, in spite of the happy ending in her novel, Briony does not truly actually achieve her goal, that in the end the attempt is all we can ask for? Is it a question of Briony’s misconception of the idea of author? As a result, it may be inferred that the novel is questioning different approaches to literary writing. Briony’s is confined within the limits of fixed rules and codes which traditional and stereotyped genres as fairytales or melodrama offer. On the other hand, the novel as a whole discusses a different conception of writing. When it comes to represent reality, the structured and rigid frames are not enough. Following a postmodern approach, I see McEwan proposes a different alternative to represent the messiness of the world.

I insist it is clear how both novels constantly emphasize the relationship Fiction – Reality and how this plays the most important part in the stories. We can easily see how in both novels the main characters make use of art to understand life. However, they do it in different ways. In *Flaubert’s Parrot*, Braithwaite goes from life to literature. He goes through some events and things in life which he cannot fully comprehend and consequently turns to art to try to make sense of it. According to his view, a biography should objectively reflect and clearly make sense of somebody’s life and work. And, in the same way, his tragic life story should be perfectly explained in Flaubert’s work, mainly *Madame Bovary*. In *Atonement* however, Briony goes from literature to life. Her fairytales and her whole literary world are her only and most reliable sources of meaning from which to understand the world. Clearly in both cases, Art and Reality need of each other to make sense.

Finally, and going back to the original question I set at the beginning of this dissertation as regards fiction’s capability to provide new patterns of meaning from which to make sense of this chaotic postmodern world, I wonder, “books are where things are explained to you” (2009, 168)? In this regard, I definitely believe both stories have made a point. I personally believe that although neither Braithwaite found the answers he was looking for in Flaubert’s work, nor Briony found atonement in her

novel, both did find in literature a life engine, a reason to live. And if they did not find life truth in Art it is because there is not some kind of truth in life to be found. Following the postmodern approach, life is a matter of chance and there are no patterns. Reality is that – chaos, confusion, lack of control, and the search for patterns, which for some may be in art or, in this case, literature, to help you construct and make sense of your own story, your own reality is all. Concluding, although absolute meaning is impossible to attain, I strongly believe that the longing for it is naturally inscribed in the experience of being human. Both novels conclude that meaning is not out there to be discovered, it is not inherent in religion, love or even art. It can only be generated by the individual – thus the necessity to pursue. Meaning is not to be discovered but created, for it is a human performance: “we are all constructed, but how those constructions are represented and interpreted are what make the ultimate difference” (Dalton, 2008).

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