



Breaking the Fourth Wall: A study of Metafiction in Ian McEwan's Atonement

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Abstract

Metafiction is a postmodern style of writing that sheds light on the process of writing and the artificiality of literary works. The direct treatment of the process results in breaking the fourth wall between the fictional world and the reader. This paper explores the significance of the fourth wall in metafictional works as it provides metafictional authors a fertile ground to examine the intricate dynamic between writers, text, and readers within the sphere of postmodernism. Hence, the current study examines Ian McEwan's Atonement as an exemplary work of metafiction. In the novel, McEwan employs metafiction to question the reliability of storytelling and the subjective nature of truth

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المخلص

القصص الما ورائي هو أسلوب كتابي حديث يسلط الضوء على عملية الكتابة والاصطناعية في الأعمال الأدبية. ينتج عن المعالجة المباشرة لعملية الكتابة كسر الحائط الرابع بين العالم الخيالي والقارئ. تستكشف هذه الورقة أهمية الحائط الرابع في القصص الما ورائية حيث يوفر للكتاب مجالاً خصباً لفحص الديناميكية المعقدة بين الكتاب والنص والقراء ضمن نطاق ما بعد الحداثة. وبالتالي، يدرس البحث الحالي رواية "الكفارة" لإيان ماك إيوان كعمل ممتاز في القصص الما ورائي. في الرواية، يستخدم ماك إيوان القصص الما ورائي ليستفسر عن موضوع موثوقية السرد وطبيعة الحقيقة الذاتية.

1.1. Introduction

In the early 20th century, modernist writers like Ezra Pound called for a reinvention of literature, urging fellow authors to "Make it new" in terms of both structure and themes. This represented a departure from traditional modes of realistic, objective representation of society and characters. Instead, modernist works such as Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) exhibited an inward turn, exploring the subjective inner lives of characters through experimental narrative techniques that broke from conventional storytelling conventions. This shift away from traditional mimetic storytelling continued into the postmodern era of the mid-20th century.

In 1967, John Barth, an American novelist, published an essay entitled *The Literature of Exhaustion*. In which, he argued that some forms of literature had reached a point of being "used up," and therefore, he explained his preference for "the art that not many people can do," (Barth 64) but rather "the kind that requires expertise and artistry as well as bright aesthetic ideas and/or inspiration" (Barth 67). Barth was disappointed with writers who still follow the style of Dostoevsky or Tolstoy when the technical question seems to be how to succeed not even Joyce and Kafka, but those who have succeeded them and are now in the evening of their own careers. On the other hand, Barth celebrated Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges for their innovative narrative techniques, especially Borges' metafictional short story *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* published in 1939. Many postmodern authors began challenging and dismissing the narrative structures aligned with representing reality in conventional ways. In doing so, they questioned standard elements such as well-structured plots, linear timelines, logical connections between characters' actions and identities, as well as causal links between surface details and purported deeper scientific or philosophical principles. Postmodernism is associated with works of literature and art that emerged after World War II. It is characterized by linguistic play, new modes of narrational self-reflexivity such as metafiction, and referential frames within frames (Woods 49).

One of the forms of writing that became popular in the postmodern era is "metafiction." The term metafiction gained widespread recognition during the

postmodern era. Nevertheless, its elements can be found in earlier literary works such as Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (14th century), Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605-1615), and Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767).

In her book, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh argues that metafictional practice has become particularly prominent in the fiction of the last twenty years. However, relying solely on contemporary fiction would be misleading because while the term 'metafiction' may be recent, the practice itself has existed for as long as, if not longer than, the novel forms. In essence, while the practice of metafiction has ancient roots predating the novel form itself, the term "metafiction" is a relatively modern coinage.

In postmodern thinking, there is a strong suspicion toward truth claims and language that makes definitive statements about anything. Ronald Nash, for example, points out that postmodernist beliefs originate from the notion that language is confined to words. This means that "words can refer only to other words; they can never refer to things or objects" (Proctor xiv). The next step in postmodern thinking is to accept that "language is an arbitrary social structure, that is, a creation of our own culture" (Proctor xiii-xiv), which makes it difficult for meaning to be grounded in either reality or texts. In such cases, language is no longer an objective system but rather an independent, self-contained system that generates its meanings. Its relationship to the phenomenal world is highly complex, problematic, and regulated by convention. "Meta" terms are, therefore, required to explore the relationship between this arbitrary linguistic system and the world to which it refers. In fiction, they are necessary to examine the relationship between the world of the fiction and the world outside fiction (Waugh 3).

The term "metafiction" was introduced to the world of literary theory in an essay by American novelist, essayist, and critic William H. Gass, entitled *Philosophy and the Form of Fiction*, published in 1978. Gass employed the term after discussing the works of Borges, Barth, and Flann O'Brien, in which the forms of fiction serve as material upon which further forms can be imposed (4). Since then, the term "metafiction" has been popularized and is now regarded as a writing style utilized by many writers. The term has received multiple definitions. For instance, Brian Stonehill defines metafiction as "an essentially ludic art form" (Duvall 15) that includes books where narrators are engaged in the act of composition, or which point to the author behind a succession of narrators, or novels that feature an ostentatious and mimetic style, conspicuous structural architecture, flat characters often aware of their status as characters, or self-parody and skepticism concerning the satirical efficacy of

language (Duvall 15). Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as “a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact, to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh 2). Metafiction is essentially the act of writing a literary work about the writing process itself, with self-conscious awareness among readers and characters of their roles within the literary work. Unlike other genres of fiction, where readers immerse themselves in the reading process and begin to fantasize about a fictional world, imagining themselves as characters within that world, metafiction disrupts such fantasies by continually reminding readers that they are engaging with a work of fiction. As a literary technique, metafiction can be employed in both drama and fiction.

One of the elements found in both theater and metafictional novels is “self-consciousness.” The self-consciousness of the author and characters is employed by using techniques that break the “fourth wall.” The fourth wall is an imaginary barrier separating the stage from the audience (Pavis 154). The idea of the fourth wall is attributed to the French writer and philosopher Denis Diderot in his work *On Dramatic Poetry* (1758), in which he advises writers and actors: “Whether you write or act, think no more of the audience than if it had never existed. Imagine a huge wall across the front of the stage, separating you from the audience, and behave exactly as if the curtain had never risen” (qtd. In Ainsworth and Peacock 10). Accordingly, when actors acknowledge the audience’s existence, the fourth wall is broken. This act may serve multiple purposes, such as adding information, humor, irony, or other effects. For example, in his “epic theatre,” Bertolt Brecht invented the “*verfremdungseffekt* technique”, also known as the “alienation effect,” to interact directly with the audience, thereby breaking the fourth wall. The purpose of this effect was to change the perception of the work from a dramatic illusion to a construct. In this way, breaking the fourth wall directs the audience /readers’ attention to the artificiality of the literary work. In novelistic practice, this leads to works that display their conventionality, revealing explicitly their condition of artifice. This process explores the complex relation between life and fiction – both the fact that “all the world is not, of course, a stage” and “the crucial ways in which it isn’t” (Goffman 53).

The technique of breaking the fourth wall is not limited to literature but is also used in films and even video games. For example, the 2016 film *Deadpool* is loaded with many scenes where this technique is utilized for comic purposes. In one instance, Deadpool (the main character) directs his eyes toward the camera and starts talking directly to the audience about how he managed to lead a movie without engaging in sexual behavior. Additionally, Deadpool acknowledges that he is a comic book character and pokes fun at other

superheroes like Superman, Captain America, the X-Men, and many others. Hence, Deadpool's awareness of his role in the film and his direct address to the audience led many to classify the work as metafictional.

In novels, the self-awareness of metafiction makes it easy for writers and characters to break the fourth wall, blurring the line between reality and fiction. For example, in the 2008 novel *Lavinia* by American author Ursula K. Le Guin, metafiction is presented through the self-awareness of Lavinia, the novel's protagonist, who originally appears as a minor character in Virgil's epic poem, the *Aeneid*. In the novel, Lavinia is aware of her role as a character in the *Aeneid*. Within the narrative, she interacts with the author, Virgil, about her portrayal in the poem, and she even questions his ideals as well as his religion. Lavinia's self-awareness breaks the fourth wall and blurs the line between reality and fiction.

1.2. Ian Russell McEwan

McEwan (born 1948) is a British novelist as well as a screenwriter. As David Malcolm describes him, he is "a professional writer who has lived by his writing for almost a quarter of a century" (Malcom 1). McEwan started his career in the mid-1970s by publishing a collection of short stories entitled *First Love, Last Rites*. This collection was followed by *In Between the Sheets* in 1978. *The Cement Garden*, published in 1978, marked the beginning of McEwan's career as a novelist. This was followed by many novels, such as *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), *Enduring Love* (1997), *Atonement* (2001), *On Chesil Beach* (2007), *Solar* (2010), *Sweet Tooth* (2012), and *Nutshell* (2016).

McEwan is regarded as a skilled observer and commentator on life because he is always conscious of the state of the world. In his early works, he earned the nickname "Ian Macabre" due to the themes he explored, such as the breaking of social conventions, codes, and taboos, as well as incest, sadomasochism, rape, pornography, and the murder of children. During the 1970s and 1980s, he was described as "the male feminist" because of his alignment with the feminist movement (Groes 1). McEwan is keenly aware of the popular culture and literature of his time and he participated as a central/influential figure within them. For example, he commented on the death of the novel in the 1970s, the dangers of nuclear weapons during the Cold War, religious fundamentalism, terrorism, as well as the state of the post-9/11 world. He has also addressed climate change and the condition of the arts at the dawn of the 21st century (Groes 3).

In the modern age, McEwan has continued his quest for exploring 'the contemporary'. Kiernan Ryan summarizes "the received wisdom" about his work, as it was perceived in 1994 stating:

McEwan started out the seventies as a writer obsessed with the perverse, the grotesque, the macabre. The secret of his appeal lay in his stylish morbidity, in the elegant detachment with which he chronicled acts of sexual abuse, sadistic torment and pure insanity. But towards the close of the decade his writing underwent a marked evolution as a result of his increasing involvement with feminism and the peace movement. His politically committed work for the cinema and television turned out to be a watershed in his career, from which his fiction emerged transformed. The claustrophobic menace of the stories and his first two novels gave way in the eighties to a more mature engagement with the wider world of history and society. The clammy feel of impending evil which fouled the atmosphere of his early fiction was dispelled by an emerging apprehension of the power of love and the possibility of redemption (Malcolm 4).

His later novels should be viewed in relation to the canon of English literature, especially that of the Western literary tradition. As he acknowledges in an interview, “I want narrative authority. I want Saul Bellow, I want John Updike, I want Chekhov, I want Nabokov and Jane Austen. I want the authorial presence taking full responsibility for everything” (Groes 4). This realignment begins with *Enduring Love* (1997) with its clear homage to the work of John Keats. It continues with the satirical novel in *Amsterdam* and *Atonement*. Since his debut collection of short stories, McEwan has been awarded the Somerset Maugham Award, along with numerous national and international literary awards the Whitbread Novel Award for *The Child in Time*, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for *Saturday* and the Booker Prize for *Amsterdam*.

1.3. Discussion

How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her (McEwan 252).

Atonement is McEwan’s eighth novel and is widely regarded as his best work. The novel is set in England before, during, and after World War II. The novel revolves around a young writer named Briony Tallis who makes a half-innocent mistake that changes the course of several lives, leading to her

adulthood in the shadow of that mistake and her attempt at redemption as an old famous writer.

After its publication, the novel received praise from readers and critics alike and it won several prizes including National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award (2002), the W. H. Smith Literary Award (2002), and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book (2002). It was also adapted into a film bearing the same name in 2007, which was nominated for Academy Awards (Oscars) and garnered two Golden Globe Awards.

In metadrama, defined as “drama about drama,” occurs whenever the subject of a play becomes, in some sense, drama itself. One of the possible varieties of conscious or overt metadrama is “the play within the play” (Hornby 31-32). Since the prevalent view is that the world is in some way illusory or false, the play within the play becomes a metaphor for life itself. The obvious nature of this device (since we see other characters watching it) serves as a reminder that the play we are watching is also an illusion. (Hornby 45). Accordingly, what relates to the play within the play is the self-awareness it evokes. In metafiction, the play within the play serves a comparable purpose, yet to be regarded as a play within a novel.

Atonement opens with Briony Tallis (the novel’s protagonist and narrator) preparing to direct a play titled *The Trial of Arabella*. Briony has written the play for her brother Leon to help him on the matter of selecting a bride:

Her play was not for her cousins, it was for her brother, to celebrate his return, provoke his admiration and guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, toward the right form of wife, the one who would persuade him to return to the countryside, the one who would sweetly request Briony’s services as a bridesmaid. She was one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so (McEwan 6).

The play revolves around a young maiden who grows affectionate towards a foreign count. Despite her family’s objections, she chooses to elope with him. When Arabella falls ill, the count abandons her. Fortunately, a prince who disguises himself as a doctor saves her. Arabella’s sentiments shift towards the prince, leading to their eventual marriage.

Briony’s play brings self-awareness to the novel by shedding light on the characters’ reactions to it. For example, Mrs. Tallis (Briony’s mother) appears reading the seven pages of *The Trial of Arabella*, with Briony observing her mother’s reaction to the story. Briony, on the other hand, appears preparing to direct the play by instructing and positioning her cousins to perform.

Breaking the fourth wall is mainly related to the character of Briony. Therefore, exploring her personality is a must. In terms of Briony's character, she is described as a child "possessed by a desire to have the world just so" (McEwan 7). She also behaves and thinks in a childish, naïve way. These characteristics are quite important concerning the development of events in the novel. Briony is obsessed with order. Her room is the only tidy room in the house, to the extent that even her dolls appear to be arranged in a specific way. Another passion she has is for secrets, something she lacks. However, she realizes that "the imagination itself was a source of secrets" (McEwan 7). She enjoys the:

"Self-exposure was inevitable the moment she described a character's weakness; the reader was bound to speculate that she was describing herself. What other authority could she have? Only when a story was finished, all fates resolved and the whole matter sealed off at both ends so it resembled, at least in this one respect, every other finished story in the world, could she feel immune, and ready to punch holes in the margins, bind the chapters with pieces of string, paint or draw the cover, and take the finished work to show to her mother, or her father, when he was home (McEwan 7).

In this scenario, what breaks the line between fiction and reality is the imagined authority of Briony. As a talented writer, she uses her imagination and personal experiences to create worlds of her own and others. She controls the lines of the novel and the lives of the characters, blurring the line between reality and illusion, making readers unable to differentiate between her imaginative stories and the real events of the story. Especially since she not only uses her imagination to write stories but also to dictate what happens in reality according to her rules. *The Trial of Arabella* becomes like a rehearsal for Briony's later work, and its story displays values that she, and *Atonement*, will later discard in favor of other, less insular sentiments (Shaffer 511).

One of the events that Briony uses her imagination to rewrite is "the fountain scene" involving her sister, Cecilia, and Robbie Turner (the son of the housekeeper). Readers experience the scene twice, each time from a different perspective. Initially, according to Cecilia's perspective in the first part of chapter two and subsequently, according to Briony's perspective in the first part of chapter three.

While Cecilia is trying to fill the vase with water, Robbie tries to help her and as a result, the lip of the vase breaks and falls to the floor of the fountain. Cecilia strips down to her underwear and dives into the fountain herself. When Briony encounters the scene from a window in "chapter three", she thinks that

Robbie is proposing to Cecilia so she immediately recalls a tale she has written “in which a humble woodcutter saved a princess from drowning and ended by marrying her” (McEwan 28). Surprisingly, what appears later as if Robbie is raising his hand to order Cecilia to remove her clothes, Briony wonders, “What strange power did he have over her? Blackmail? Threats?” (ibid). The sequence of events is incomprehensible for her because “the drowning scene, followed by a rescue” should precede “the marriage proposal” and not vice versa. Hence, when the events do not fit in Briony’s imaginary world of princesses, she not only misinterprets Robbie's actions as aggressive but rather decides to write about it:

This was not a fairy tale, this was the real, the adult world in which frogs did not address princesses, and the only messages were the ones that people sent. It was also a temptation to run to Cecilia’s room and demand an explanation. Briony resisted because she wanted to chase in solitude the faint thrill of possibility she had felt before, the elusive excitement at a prospect she was coming close to defining, at least emotionally (McEwan 30).

Through the process of writing, Briony has the total authority to reorder what she has witnessed and alter the outcomes according to her mentality and level of understanding. Briony’s misunderstanding leads to dire consequences, including her future false accusation against Robbie for a crime he has not committed.

After the incident at the fountain, Robbie writes two letters to Cecilia to express his love, using words expressing sexual desire in one of them. Mistakenly, he gives the wrong letter to Briony to hand to Cecilia. When Briony reads the letter, she is shocked by its content. She feels “she is entering an arena of adult emotion” (McEwan 78) and feels obliged to be alone “to frame the opening paragraph of a story shot through with real life. No more princesses!” (ibid).The situation becomes more complicated when Briony witnesses her sister and Robbie in the library and mistakenly believes that he is raping her. This leads Briony to think that she should protect her sister from Robbie.

In an interview, McEwan states that part of the intent of writing *Atonement* is "to examine the relationship between what is imagined and what is true," (qtd. in Noakes and Reynolds 19), in addition to “the danger of an imagination that can't quite see the boundaries of what is real and what is unreal” (ibid.). The examination of the relation between what is imagined and what is real requires an exploration of the perceptions, beliefs, and subjective intents that shape one's version of the truth. In Briony’s case, she dramatizes

reality, being influenced by the melodramatic imagination that originates in the books she has read.

The novel ends with a revelation when readers are informed that the story they have been following is actually a novel written by Briony herself, who is now an accomplished author. In the present time, Briony is an elderly, sick woman because she has vascular dementia. Still, she feels haunted by her past fault, for which she tries to seek atonement.

The search for atonement forms the main theme upon which the whole novel is based. However, the researcher does not view it as a real quest for atonement but rather in the realm of imagination. Despite her search for atonement, Briony still unable to shed her role as an author, persistently modifying and recounting different events in the novel affecting people perception of reality. For example, Briony admits her cowardice by avoiding confrontation with Cecilia and Robbie as well as not attending Lola's wedding. Briony's declaration of what is mentioned above not only result in breaking the fourth wall but also sheds light on the process of writing and reliability of writers.

Moreover, Briony's decision to give Robbie and Cecilia the happy ending is nothing but literary illusion. Hence, Briony puts her readers' preferences in the first place and she makes decisions on their behalf. She believes readers would prefer a happy ending over realizing that both Robbie and Cecilia died during World War II for different reasons and never had the chance to be together.

When the novel will finally be published, which might occur after her death. Briony will "become a character, and no one will be much interested in whether she is real or not, she will only exist within the frame of the novel" (McEwan 250). Briony will appear as a mere character controlled by the author, which is ironically herself! The impact of Briony's authority transcends the older generation and extends to the new generation. The novel ends mirrors its beginning with the new generation of Briony's family performing *The Trials of Arabella* to commemorate Briony's 70th birthday.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Atonement* highlights Briony's act of breaking the fourth wall comes with her self-awareness and admission of the consequences of her actions years ago. Being the author of the story, Briony has the power to judge/misjudge others from her limited subjective perspective. The fact that Briony is going to be a character in her own literary work raises questions about the nature of reality and the reliability of writers. Through the unique style of metafiction, readers are offered an experience to be indulged in the process of writing and insight to the limitations of subject point of view in both literary

works and real life. Such experience directs people avoid subjectivity over objectivity in their judgment about what they hear, see, or read because it can be changed according to the narrator.

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