

The Performative Function of Literature: the Discursive Game with the Reader in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to offer a new insight into Ian McEwan's novel, *Atonement*, in relation to the phenomenon of a performative function of trauma narrative. The novel might be perceived as a discursive game between the reader, text and the implied author conducted within the novel's complex structure, narrational design, the two-fold construction of the protagonist's traumatised identity as well as the novel's intertextual and metatextual mosaic. The use of the motif of fiction highlights the performative function of literature together with the trauma narrative present within the novel's fictional realms and its generic composition. The article's methodology relies on Trauma Theory and J. L. Austin's Speech Act Theory.

Keywords: literary discourse, performative function of literature, trauma narrative, Ian McEwan

La función performativa de la literatura: el juego discursivo con el lector en *Atonement* de Ian McEwan

Resumen

Este artículo intenta ofrecer una nueva visión de la novela *Atonement*, de Ian McEwan, en relación al fenómeno de la función performativa de la narrativa del trauma. La novela puede entenderse como un juego discursivo entre el lector, el texto y el autor implícito que se lleva a cabo dentro de la compleja estructura de la novela, el diseño narrativo, la doble construcción de la identidad traumatizada de la protagonista y el mosaico intertextual y metatextual de la novela. El tema de la

ficción resalta la función performativa de la literatura junto con la narrativa del trauma presente en los mundos ficticios de la novela y su composición genérica. La metodología utilizada se basa en la teoría del trauma y en la teoría de los actos de habla de J.L. Austin.

Palabras clave: discurso literario, función performativa de la literatura, narrativa del trauma, Ian McEwan

1. INTRODUCTION

If “two voices” denote “the minimum of life, of existence,” as Bakhtin puts it (355), then Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* vibrates with textual energy emanating from the protagonist’s polyphonic record of her pre- and post-war memories. The novel invites the reader to participate in a discursive game whereby senses are deciphered through a mesh of inter- and meta-textual references. The motif of a game reverberates through the novel’s ongoing debate with the concept of truth. This adheres to fiction and story-telling, as well as to the condition of the human mind –the Lacanian “psychic reality” (Dobrogoszcz 14). What should be accentuated about the writer’s literary search is his interest in the possibilities of fiction and his continued quest for “the contemporary,” “that slippery term comprising the distinctive elements that make up the elusive *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of our time” (Groes 2).

Ian McEwan’s novel will be analysed with respect to two key functions of literature, namely the aesthetic and the performative, the latter function being linked to that of the atoning role seen in the testimony of the trauma victim. Notable too, due to its intricate mesh of textual and extra-textual relations, is the discourse of the novel submerged in the ongoing dialogue between the reader, the narrator, the text, and the cultural and social context. The novel, it might be argued, evolves into a multilayered literary discourse where interdisciplinary “practice” or “productivity” (Hall 35) is seen in a sophisticated cultural game with the reader. If literature should be perceived in terms of space, where multiple voices can be

encountered (Bennet and Royle 74), then Ian McEwan's novel serves as its perfect exemplification.

2. THE PERFORMATIVITY OF A LITERARY TEXT

The performative function of Ian McEwan's novel is discussed through the prism of Austin's Speech Act Theory and its extension of the concept of performativity suggested by Ute Berns whose definition of performativity hinges on the concept of imitation or illusion of a performance discussed in relation to narratology (2). This form of performativity highlights both the narrator's activity, "the act of presentation" alongside the pragmatic context of this act (Berns 9). The author connects the performative theory with Austin's speech act terminology emphasizing the potency of an utterance to perform a statement. Berns follows MacLean and Pfister by stating that in the act of narration, the narrator and the audience, namely the readers, recreate a performance, and by doing so they remain in the active and interactive relation to one another (Berns 10). This relation is foregrounded in the literary text by a variety of self-reflexive and meta-textual references which direct the process of reading towards the literary text itself.

The performative function of a literary text corresponds with one of the main concepts of trauma, namely scriptotherapy, which denotes "a discursive space within which all the psychological wounds one suffers are re-enacted with the purpose of making them heal" (Henke 216). Narrative methods which allow to recognize an example of scriptotherapy include "fragmentation of thought," "dissociative outlook," "decontextualized visualization," and "focalization" (Laurie 32). The analytical part of this paper will try to shed light on those aspects of *Atonement* which reveal its performativity in the process of trauma narration: its metatextuality, intertextuality, and references to the cultural context.

3. THE FRAGMENTARY DESIGN OF THE NOVEL

The construction of the novel is markedly fragmentary and, as such, signals the novel's first metatextual quality encouraging the

readers to participate in its literary discourse while also, more importantly, reflecting the main characteristic of scriptotherapy.

The novel is divided into four main parts with Part One being devoted to the presentation of a day in the protagonist's childhood before the War when Briony's groundless accusations of rape of her cousin Lola destroy the lives of Robbie and Cecilia. The subsequent two parts of the novel contain descriptions of their wartime memories presented from three different perspectives, each belonging to a central protagonist affected by Briony's accusation. Part Two consists of Robbie's war accounts from Dunkirk. Part Three constitutes an insight into the three main characters' perspectives and presents their experiences during the war. The last part of the novel, "London 1999," confirms Briony's authorship of the entire text of the novel. It reveals the truth behind the implied author's –namely Briony's– decision to falsify facts about the fate of Robbie and Cecilia in her memoir. Instead of reporting the truth about their tragic deaths during the war, Briony ends her testimony with their reunion. Hence, the protagonist's confession in the last part of the novel reveals that Robbie's war accounts in Part Two belong to the sphere of her literary fiction. They are inspired by official post-war archives and letters rather than by the protagonist's memories. The official history, Robbie's experience at Dunkirk, is, for the sake of her literary invention, falsified by Briony in order to grant her atonement for her past misdeed. By exposing Briony's manipulation of the facts, her autobiography's truthfulness and reliability is undermined. It should be highlighted that the narrator's unreliability and unethical attitude exemplify another feature of trauma discourse, according to Laurie (34).

4. THE PROTAGONIST'S TESTIMONY

The novel constitutes an example of the protagonist's dialogue with her "shattered self" in the years following her disastrous lie. The decision to confess the truth behind her unjustly denouncing Robbie and accusing him of raping Lola, is related to her growing awareness of aging compounded by encroaching memory loss. More importantly, the will to uncover the truth about the past is connected with Briony's wish to face her childhood trauma. What matters in the protagonist's

testimony is her dual role as perpetrator and victim, author and reader, speaker and listener.

Revealing the autobiographical dimension of the text only in the last section is the most significant example of the discursiveness of the novel which foregrounds the text's performative function. Dominic Head observes the existence of the motif of dualism in the literary works of writers such as Ian McEwan:

the ethical content is often embedded in disturbing fictions, in which a narrator may take up a position that is dubious or depraved. The sense of complicity with the corrupt late twentieth century is part of the writing strategy in the work of these writers, since both seek to convey the seductive appeal of contemporary addictions and appetites, in order to make them fully understood. (*Cambridge Introduction* 258)

Head emphasizes the significance of the recurring trope of innocence found in the works of such writers as Ian McEwan, where, quoting Kiernan Ryan, "complicity is 'not innate but acquired,' thus supplying one way out of the circle of unity and discrimination" (in Head, *Cambridge Introduction* 258). The protagonist's decision to substitute the truth about the two lovers' deaths with another lie in order to immortalize them, indicates Briony's attempt to assuage her guilt and make amends for her wrongs against the couple. However, the novel does not enter the character's consciousness in order to justify her motivation but to report her vision or version of the past. Nevertheless, the protagonist is presented in a process of self-redefinition, in other words, undertaking a working-through of her trauma process by means of her novel's fictitious ending.

The trauma narrative constitutes a form of the character's internal dialogue that extends the novel's interpretative frames and adds another mask to be uncovered in the ongoing discourse between the reader, the text and the implied author. The protagonist's experiences exemplify the behavioural pattern of a childhood trauma victim. Briony witnesses an act of love making between her sister and Robbie which, due to her young age and fecund imagination, she interprets as

an act of violence. This event, shocking for a young child unable to rationalise what she sees, influences her future misjudgment of the situation and triggers her false accusations against Robbie. The image of the two lovers is repressed and returns later in Briony's haunting memories exemplifying belatedness of experience, another feature of the trauma experience indicated by Caruth.

Judith Herman uses the term "dialectics of trauma" to define the conflict between "the desire to tell and the will to deny" (49). The protagonist's period of unawareness after the critical moment is marked by dissociation (Bloom) or, "temporal displacement" from repressed memories (Kilby). Cathy Caruth explains that, "it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it [trauma] is first experienced at all" (81). She adds that, "since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time" (81). The protagonist, a child at the time of her crisis, is neither aware of her guilt, partly because of her inability to judge herself at that very moment, nor is able to differentiate between seeing and knowing, inherent in trauma theory (Letissier 216). Briony openly admits, "Less like seeing, more like knowing", when asked about the crime she witnesses (McEwan 170). Cathy Caruth claims that, "one of the signs of the presence of trauma is the absence of all signs of it" (Elsaesser 199). The moment the girl commits her crime, she might be claimed to remain under the influence of her family upbringing and her own tendency to fall prey to her imaginative inclinations.

The issue of trauma should be discussed together with Text World Theory, which stresses the importance of the context of both the reading and writing processes, as evinced in the textual and extra-textual realms of Ian McEwan's novel. Alison Gibbons observes that in Text World Theory the "discourse-world level encompasses writer and reader contexts including knowledge and emotions specific to the participants of the literary experience" (130). She further concludes, quoting Werth, that, "situations do not occur in a conceptual vacuum" (84). Karam Nayeypour goes even further by stating that McEwan might be considered a cognitive writer since his narratives can "anchor themselves firmly to the readers' real world knowledge, experience and mental models, or to their so-called frames and scripts" (9).

This analysis of the novel's thematic concerns relies on the theories mentioned above due to their common feature that converges with this article's main argument, namely the assumed atoning function of literature, which might be equated with the discursive process of communication between the reader, the text and the implied author. Irene Kacandes offers an interesting scheme of trauma's intricate paradigms which she calls "circuits of narrative witnessing" (95). The author observes the existence of six circuits which can be divided into two groups: the first one, including two characters' interaction with the experience of trauma, either as direct or indirect participants in a traumatizing experience; the second one, includes the co-witnessing of trauma through the act of the trauma narrative experience. The scheme of these circuits draws attention to the discursive character of the concept of trauma narrative.

Atonement might be interpreted with regard to a few levels of Kacandes' circuits of narrative witnessing. First, "intrapyschic witnessing" (Kacandes 97) confronts the reader at the beginning of Part One and continues throughout the novel to its conclusion, as the main character returns to the origin of her trauma through her narrative. Secondly, "textual witnessing," which is the fourth type of circuit according to Kacandes' theory (97), is demonstrated in the presence of the narrator (Briony) and the narratee (reader) both of whom co-witness the trauma experience in Part One of the novel, since Briony embodies both the narrator and the implied author of the text. More notably, for the foregrounding of the novel's performativity, it is the fifth type which should be considered as key, namely, "literary-historical witnessing" (97), which is where the text of the novel and the contemporary reader become co-witnesses to the trauma embedded in the text.

Part Three of the novel combines the circuits of narrative witnessing. It portrays Briony as a "ghost" (Caruth 5), a person possessed by trauma and, as a result, this part of the novel equates to the intrapsychic witnessing that overlaps textual and literary-historical witnessing levels. As such the reader observes a process of transformation whereby the protagonist/trauma victim rejects her former secure life protected, as she was, by her upper class status, and

as the reader learns from Cecilia's letter to Robbie, embarks on a nursing career, "as a sort of penance" (McEwan 212). The decision to join a profession known for the extreme demands on a practitioner becomes the girl's way of distancing herself from her former egocentric self. Through hard work and isolation from family, she manages to dissociate herself from her experience, though, as she sadly admits, "she would never undo the damage. She was unforgivable" (285). The protagonist consciously transforms from a perpetrator into a victim by means of the self-imposed punishment of her new expiatory occupation. Her nursing profession permits the transference of her past experience: she is able to repeat the past but in a new role - that of a healer of the wounded. The conversation with a dying young soldier in hospital serves as the best example of Briony's attempt to obtain atonement through the repetition of this reversed pattern of behaviour. She agrees to respond to the name, not her own, given by a dying soldier in order for this deceit to console the fatally wounded man. La Capra's terms, "the process of acting-out" and "working-through" trauma (2), find their realization in the protagonist's exploration of past moments in her emotional disintegration through her writing, and in the refuge she chooses to take in her subsequent, subservient role in the healing profession.

The second phase of trauma, according to La Capra, appears after the repetitive compulsion period and indicates the victim's attempt to face one's own memories. For the victim of trauma, the absence of the fractured experience must be completed with a testimony. Briony experiences two epiphanic moments that allow her to face her trauma. The first is her decision to meet her sister and Robbie and ask for their forgiveness. The event is portrayed by Briony as being during the war and ends with the two lovers kissing in front of her. Both the confession of truth, with its attendant agreement to confirm her deed in writing in order to repair the mistake, coupled with the kiss unifying the couple belong to the fictional reality of Briony's novel. It becomes clear in the final part of the novel that the events mentioned occur only in the sphere of Briony's imagination, and provide more evidence of her manipulation of the truth relating to the couple's deaths during the war, as confirmed by official archives.

Secondly, the protagonist's preferred approach is to work through

her trauma through her decision to write a novel to reveal the truth about this disastrous incident in her childhood and to prevent the past being obliterated as her memory vanishes. The novel constitutes an artistic testimony of a trauma victim, so highlighting the atoning role of the novel. Stating that story-telling is the only method to heal her wound might be considered one of the most obvious interpretations for the novel's use of the prism cast by the theory of trauma. Thus, the protagonist embarks on a journey from her imposed physical and emotional isolation towards her inner self, *the other* so as to be heard. With this regard, the novel pertains to Bakhtin's philosophy of a dialogic world and Kristeva's other. Firstly, the protagonist conducts a dialogue within herself while struggling against her inability to distinguish between truth and a lie. In this dialogue, the lie often wins. Secondly, the internal dialogue offered in her novel betrays her passage from the acting-out phase to the working-through trauma stage. The dialogue refers to the clash of her present consciousness with her past wounds within emotional and mental spheres. The action of the novel within the novel constitutes the protagonist's expression of internal dialogue, embodying her constant struggle between opposites, such as her personal desires, and social expectations, as well as a tendency towards escapism or even "wounded narcissism" (Root 244); a form of literary creativity opposed to the ethical obligation to provide truthful and credible accounts of the past. From the distance of the third-person narration, Briony admits, "She was under no obligation to the truth, she has promised no one a chronicle" (McEwan 280). What needs to be emphasized with regard to Briony's writing cure is the capability of trauma fiction to engage readers in its process. According to Laurie, readers become interlocutors and interpreters of a series of multiple viewpoints which trauma narrative may offer (3). Moreover, the relationship between a trauma narrative and its readers may be compared to the relation between a therapy and a therapist since readers can "join a meditative process for understanding human responses to shock" (Henke 28). Thus, a performative function of a traumatic script is also embedded in a fictional trauma narrative. The repercussions of the effect of a trauma testimony on its listeners/readers might also be claimed to be transferred on the relationship trauma fiction - readers. As fiction can give rise to sympathy for victims and lead to the effect of "failed empathy," or "a delusion that casual readers can understand the

suffering of others” (Keen in Laurie 30), Briony, in McEwan’s fictional reality, might be suspected of manipulating readers’ feelings evoking sympathy towards herself through engaging the readers in a “therapeutic reenactment” (Henke 28) of her performative testimony. Quoting Letissier, “testimony has become the discursive mode par excellence” (212).

5. THE PERFORMATIVITY OF THE NOVEL AND ITS METATEXTUAL DIMENSIONS

Metafictional concerns in McEwan’s fiction can be regarded as one of the key continuities in the author’s work to date next to “feminist issues, an interplay of moral relativism and moral judgement, and an enduring love of psychological fiction” (Malcolm, 2002: 19). In his analysis of contemporary writers, which encompasses McEwan’s fiction, Malcolm indicates three ways of foregrounding the text in their literary work: by means of various devices which produce a sense of narrational detachment; through shifts in point of view; through the particular configuration of the narrative” (75). *Atonement* draws attention to its own textuality on all of the levels mentioned. What is more, the novel’s self-referentiality is also thematically signalled by means of the leitmotif of literature, heralded by the first word of the novel: “play” and refers directly to the protagonist’s first literary attempt. The novel’s self-referentiality demands that the reader be an active reader participant in the reading process by engaging him/her in the game of searching for hidden senses conveyed by literary and cultural intertexts.

The novel reveals its intertextual potency by means of its paratexts. Genette defines a paratext as any information concerning the literary work in question that stands as if on “the threshold” of the text and of its external reality (xviii). *Atonement* includes a number of paratexts in Genette’s sense, and these encompass the title, title page, and intertitles, “which all appear to be marginal but assume an important role in the presentation of the narrative structure, narrative theme and narrative technique” (Huang 636). The novel’s title serves as the most significant paratext, as it indicates immediately the novel’s main thematic concern, which is the protagonist’s urge to be forgiven and

the text's intertextual reference to the theory of trauma. It must be stressed that the word "atonement" is a key expression applied in trauma studies as are wound and the healing process, which encompass the phase of atonement and the witnessing procedure, employing either the written or oral confession of a witness.

The presence of a quotation on the front page constitutes another significant paratext observable in the construction of *Atonement*. The lines opening Part One of the novel are embedded in quotes and end with the source information, namely Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. The quotation at the beginning of the novel is an obligatory intertextual reference to the novel's fictional realms and to its protagonist. It might be added here that the paratext of the first page functions as the "threshold" to the novel's reality and informs the reader of the novel's thematic and perhaps ideological concerns which might be encountered in the reading process. Huang argues about the quotes guaranteeing the "favourable interconnection between the paratext and the reader and that between the paratext and the text" (638). When confronted with the quotation in the paratext, the reader immediately creates a link between the novels' protagonists, their personalities and inclinations. What might be assumed with regard to the two novels, and two main characters' equation, is Briony's tendency to dwell in the world of fiction, and in her own imagination which lead to her misjudgment of reality so triggering the disastrous consequences. Even after the protagonist's lie, her sister addresses her as "a fantasist, as we know to our cost," and, later, "Remember what a dreamer she is" (McEwan 212).

The motif of literature is present in the fictional realms of the novel in form of direct references to English writers, with especial reference to Virginia Woolf, Samuel Richardson, Jane Austen, William Shakespeare amongst many others mentioned by the protagonists, Robbie and Cecilia. More importantly, literature is presented as an important constituent in the characters' lives revealing its various functions. To begin with, the three central characters, Briony, Cecilia and Robbie, share an insatiable appetite for books: all are highly interested and engaged in the world of fiction in a variety of ways. Robbie obtains a university degree in literary studies. Cecilia studies literature, spending her free time reading and discussing books with

Robbie. Briony, after her childhood experience in writing a theatrical play, becomes a professional writer, a chronicler of the past and the author of her own memoir. It might be argued that the motif of literature gains symbolic status within the novel's fictional realms, partly due to its frequent occurrence in the text, as well as on its thresholds, in the form of paratexts, thus inviting the reader into a polemic with the motif's cultural and literary connotations confronted in Ian McEwan's novel. Moreover, Briony, in the fictional realms of *Atonement*, firstly embodies the role of a writer, secondly, the trauma victim. Literature has been her passion since childhood, her chosen way of living but it also represents the main theme within her narrative. The leitmotif of fiction in Briony's memoir might be claimed to represent "decontextualised visualizations" (Henke 32) of her past traumatic experience, the shock of witnessing the erotic scene in the library. The past haunts her present by frequent references to literary texts side by side with images of physicality.

The intersection of the two symbolic levels might be illustrated with a number of events and motifs discovered in the novel's fictional realms. Primarily, the phenomenon is visualized in the passionate act between the two lovers in the home library, yet it is also present in the form of the infamous letter written by Robbie to Cecilia. The library becomes the setting for the couple's passionate love making creating a tangible link between: books and passion, literature and body, the intellectual and physical. With regard to the other motif, the love letter sent by Robbie to Cecilia by mistake expresses his sexual attraction to the woman and is written alongside another romantic letter that, however, reveals the man's true feelings. Interestingly enough, the two letters are written next to the protagonist's copy of *Gray's Anatomy*, on which the innocent and romantic version of the letter is left by mistake.

It might be further claimed that the sexual act in the library between the upper class woman and the lower class man embodies their break with social conventions and, what follows, might be perceived as their rejection of the class divisions that stand in the way of their fulfillment. The erotic letter becomes Robbie's expression of passion for the girl, and, at the same time, his rejection of the conventional and passionless perception of a relationship between a

woman and a man found in the classical works of literature which both of them read during their studies.

Furthermore, the events mentioned above draw attention to the active role of literature in the sphere of communication. The performative function of literature, following J. L. Austin's definition (6) is conveyed within the fictional realms of *Atonement* with regard to its capability to transform reality through utterances. The trope of literature in Ian McEwan's novel might be claimed to disclose the ability of generating changes in the lives of all the protagonists, as well as of provoking their internal transformation. The novel's generic construction might serve as the immediate example for this statement as it incorporates the genre variant of *Bildungsroman* with reference to a maturing young girl, as well as the developing creative potential in the writer's consciousness, thus adhering to the transforming capacity of the text. The performative role of literature is communicated through a variety of events within the fictional realms of the novel. Literature is embodied in the form of Robbie's love letter and, as such, it might be claimed to "do" things rather than "tell" about them. The letter should be perceived as the justification behind the accusations of sexual assault thrown at Robbie and the direct cause of his imprisonment: Robbie's direct reference to a woman's intimate body part clearly written out, in his own hand, is officially acknowledged as a symptom of his disease.

Subsequently, literature functions as a form of a secret code between the two characters during Robbie's imprisonment. Since any form of intimacy is forbidden Robbie while serving his sentence, the protagonists use literary characters and events as symbols of their emotional states. Thus, literature operates as the lovers' source of coded messaging, while the intertextual references offer a channel for exchanging secret messages encoded in literary intertexts and transformed by their clash with new social and cultural contexts. Moreover, the letters the characters exchange during the war replace the physical intimacy they had experienced in the Tallis library. It might be stated that the performative function of literature is visualized in the protagonists' method of communication with each other. In their secret code, the literary language betrays the ability to change reality: the protagonists can experience a form of emotional intimacy as lovers

contrary to others' expectations and, at the same time, exclude intruders from their communicative acts. Their encrypted language becomes their method of transforming their unbearable reality.

Next, the performative function of literature is partly hinted in Briony's recollections of her war experiences during her nursing career. It is Briony's story telling which attenuates the pain of a dying soldier. Briony agrees to participate in the dying soldier's game of appearances: she is asked to pretend to be his beloved and to accept the girl's first name in their conversations. This invented method of communication between the two protagonists has a significant impact on the soldier's condition: it alleviates his emotional distress and brings him consolation before his death.

Briony's literary career serves as another event that might be said to hint at the dual function of literature suggested in the novel. Her memoir's initial function is to fill the memory gaps due to her deteriorating condition, progressing dementia and expected complete memory oblivion. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the central function of Briony's memoir is to obtain atonement. Her novel is supposed to heal her own wounds as a means of granting her the forgiveness she craves for. Thus, the performative function of literature seems to be of prior concern in the novel, bridging the gap between these various textual and extra-textual levels. The novel's main theme, which is writing a confession to gain atonement, may be understood as a performative utterance that is aimed at transforming the protagonist's reality. The act of testimony in trauma theory requires the presence of a trauma victim as a storyteller, and of a listener or reader, in order to work through trauma towards its acceptance. This fulfillment highlights the main concept of trauma theory, gaining atonement through the act of empathic listening to the trauma narrative. In this manner, trauma becomes transformed, rather than forgotten, just as the speaker's perception of the traumatized past and his/her position towards the rejected traumatic experience. In the speech act, one participant utters a statement which changes reality by means of words, and as a result, the utterance works through the experience, positive or not, and leads to the transformation of this reality. Consequently, the performative role of literature might be hinted at in the novel's fictional reality. By referencing the theory, the novel might be claimed to suggest at least a partial correspondence between trauma theory and

the performative role of fiction. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether the presentation of literature in the above mentioned manner is prescriptive or rather ironic, an idea discussed later in this text.

The novel's literariness is further emphasized using various literary forms mentioned, or even embedded within the text. Briony becomes the implied author of her own memoir, and of the other characters' reminiscences within her war memories. Robbie and Cecilia become the authors of their love letters, and thus, partly, co-authors of Briony's memoir, as their perspectives build the novel's complex narrative design. Another aspect of the novel's literary form is Briony's reliance on historical archives rather than on her own memories. This fact might indicate the novel's generic affinity, namely to the historical archive or *lieux de memoire* (Nora 12). Thus, the motif of literature should be perceived in the novel with a view to its dichotomy, its main aesthetic and escapist functions as well as its ability to reveal the performative function at the same time. The dual function of literature, as presented here, might be suggested through the novel's dialogue with the symbolic values of the motif of literature encoded in the universal culture.

6. THE PERFORMATIVITY OF THE NOVEL AND CULTURAL INTERTEXTS

The novel encourages the reader to participate in a discursive game by means of foregrounding a number of suggestive motifs which function in the universal culture as symbols. If it is possible to conceive of the whole narrative as a speech act, then one can emphasize "the narrative's performativity in a larger pragmatic and cultural context possibly taking account of the empirical author or of a paratextual matter" (Berns 5). Thus, the narrative act can be viewed as "a mode of cultural agency that engages with cultural conventions and shapes collective identities" (Berns 5). In Ian McEwan's novel, it is the contradiction between the incorporated symbolic values in literary motifs, and their cultural counterparts, that shapes human identities. The motif of literature serves as the most powerful example of this narrational technique, but not an exhaustive one. The leitmotif of shoes prevails among the novel's intertextual references to cultural conventions and exemplifies the interactive practice between

literary and extra-literary modes. Moreover, the foregrounding of single cultural signs in the narrative might be regarded as a reflection of recurrent images that haunt the protagonist later as a consequence of the traumatic events that accumulate in the girl's consciousness. Single images emerge from her shattered mind so as to be remembered and finally converted to memory.

The shoe motif is present and foregrounded in Part One and Two of the novel suggesting its ambiguity. It might be claimed that it conveys a number of semantic values in the universal cultural context. Among the most prominent ones for this discussion are protection, love, fertility, pleasure, disgrace, subjugation, possessing, dignity, masculinity (Kopalinski 258), all phenomena present in the fictional realms surrounding the main characters of *Atonement*. The motif appears in the novel with high frequency. What is more, it is weaved into the text so as to function as an expressive and powerful symbolic image. Primarily, the motif should be analysed on two levels: its function in the presentation of the relationship between Robbie and Cecilia as well as, and more importantly, between Robbie and upper-class society.

In Part One, the motif of shoes is linked to Robbie's visits to the Tallis family home and presented from two shifting perspectives, Robbie's and Cecilia's, both belonging to Briony's "qualia," namely "the first-person feelings of phenomenal experience" and their "integration within a (third-person) materialist, neuroscientific account of the mind" (Gaedtke 185). Robbie is presented in the act of removing his shoes before entering their house. On the first occasion, the protagonist kneels before removing his boots and socks prompted into the act by their poor condition, as he himself observes. The scene is later commented on by the protagonist who becomes aware of his awkwardness and feeling like "an idiot ... padding behind her [Cecilia] across the hall and entering the library barefoot" (McEwan 84). The incident is subsequently analysed in the first version of his letter to Cecilia where the man admits to his feeling "light-headed" and "foolish" in her presence (84). The incident might be treated as a symptom of the protagonist's growing fascination with the girl, his sense of insecurity and apprehension in her presence. Nevertheless, the scene in which a central protagonist, Robbie, kneels before the act

of removing his shoes in front of the mansion belonging to his mother's employers, contradictory to the other guests' behaviour, is a suggestive image reconstructing the social relations in the Tallis's surroundings. The act of shoe removal represents the protagonist's sense of respect towards the Tallis family but it also suggests his low self-esteem related to his inferior social position in the Tallis home. Thus, the motif might be claimed to allude to the second symbolic level within the motif's internal construction, namely servitude and humility. As the event belongs to Briony's memoir, it must be highlighted that the recurrence of the motif reflects her haunting memories emerging from the subconscious.

The letter expressing the man's behaviour in the Tallis house further connects the connotations of the shoe symbol with his state of mind and with his emotions. Various literary motifs responding in the literary practice of the novel including literature and shoes might be claimed to pertain to two distinct spheres, to the properties of physicality and spirituality, namely, the body and the soul, both lying at the root of Briony's shattered self.

The descriptions of war provide additional examples of extending the symbolic values of the leitmotifs found this time in Part Two of the novel, recreated by Briony's focalization out of historical archives and letters. By adding the motif of dead bodies, i.e. a human leg on a tree within Robbie's war accounts in his letters to Cecilia, the motif of literature becomes connected with the concept of the body and mind opposition and foregrounds the issue of physicality. It should be remembered that Robbie's war letters include his observations of his surroundings and the omnipresence of shoes or mutilated legs. The image of a leg in a tree is depicted in detail so as to draw attention to its symbolic value in the war accounts. The narrator observes:

It was a leg in the tree. A mature plane tree, only just in leaf. The leg was twenty feet up (...) bare, severed cleanly above the knee. (...) It was a perfect leg, pale, smooth, small enough to be a child's. The way it was angled in the fork, it seemed to be on display, for their benefit or enlightenment: this is a leg (McEwan 192)

The choice of this human body part as an object for this detailed description together with all its accompanying observations, create the effect of irony hidden behind the image where the defining words such as “perfect,” “smooth,” and “a child’s” should give rise to positive connotations with beauty and youth. Moreover, irony concomitant with the image of a tree with a human limb as one of its branches, seems to mock human inability to recreate a new body part in stark contrast to nature’s cyclical revival. Nevertheless, the contrast inscribed in the symbol reverberates with Briony’s suppressed memories from her childhood experience of becoming a witness of the physical and emotional union of the two lovers in the library.

The shoe motif permeates the war account offered by Robbie within Briony’s memoir. It exists in the text either in the form of a prominent image, such as the one mentioned before, or as a seemingly insignificant detail in the setting. In one of his letters to Cecilia, the protagonist remembers the story about a recruit who goes to a parade with one shoe missing (McEwan 208). In another part of his war reminiscences, the protagonist draws another link between the shoe motif and literature. His depiction of his journey and the regular movement of his feet is equated to poetic hexameter and marked graphically by a forward slash symbol within the narration of the novel:

other men were pursuing him, but he had comfort
 in a pretence, and a rhythm at least for his feet. He
 walked / across / the land / until / he came / to the sea.
 A hexameter. Five iambs and an anapaest was the beat
 he tramped to now. (McEwan 219)

The lines connect the motif of literature with the motif of feet and shoes by equating their feature of regular rhythm and, as such, indicating the physicality of the two acts, walking and reading. This intertwining of motifs might be also perceived as a symptom of Briony’s acting out the trauma memories that occur in her mind involuntarily.

In the other passages of the war memoir, Robbie comments on the sight of soldiers walking barefoot (McEwan 240), and notices a heap of wellington boots on the way (243). The ending of Part Two of

the novel provides another significant image related to the shoe motif, shedding light on the application of the motif with its contradictory symbolic values. His war companion, Corporal Nettle, takes off his shoes and discards them with anger refusing to wear them despite seriously damaged feet. The shoe lands on a rotting human corpse (245). The scene gains significance through Robbie's commentary on the Corporal's agitated behaviour: "It's a long way to England in your socks" (245). The seemingly light-hearted statement discloses the possible interpretation of the leitmotif that evokes the issue of respect for one's nation and its culture. In contrast, the act of removing one's shoes might be read as a sign of respect, humility and servitude. By discarding his boots with anger and refusing to wear them, the soldier rejects his servitude towards the state and the country. The symbolic value of the motif is thus repeated and transformed at the same time. The value of servitude preserved in the act of shoe removal should be read as a sign of rebellion against subjugation, inequality and dominion of one social class over the other. This association is created by Robby's memory of his arrest in the Tallis' mansion and the feel of the gravel underneath his thin-soled shoes as well as "the icy touch of the handcuffs on his wrists," all belonging to the central consciousness of the implied author of the memoir, Briony (264).

The other motifs employed in the practice of the social discourse of the novel include the vase and the temple. The motifs might be claimed to share a common function: the symbolic embodiment of social relations exemplified by the Tallis family and their fragility of their status. The vase and the temple constitute reminders of the Tallis family's prominent history, their high social status and past prosperity. Nevertheless, their present damaged states, the vase's lost ear and the temple's dilapidation, represent the family's crisis, both within the Tallis family circle, and in the upper-class society they represent. It should be stressed that it is Robby who is placed at the centre of the objects' destruction while still within Briony's focalized narrative. He is the one who, though by accident, breaks the ear of the ancient vase in a struggle with Cecilia. He is also the one who is connected with the infamous attempted rape by the temple, a romantic but derelict part of the Tallis' property, and by association, family history. The motifs infer the Tallis's superiority towards Robbie, who despite his intelligence and acquired education, represents a working class man with high

aspirations. It might be further assumed that the false accusations against Robbie are partly attributable to the family's prejudice towards the lower-class in general and to the young daughter's upbringing in the spirit of upper-class superiority and the romantic legends which accompany them in literature.

7. CONCLUSIONS

All of the motifs foregrounded in the text of the novel together with the paratexts and intertexts contribute to the overall understanding of the novel as a discussion about literature as a discursive practice. The literary text seems to reveal its performative function by participating in the protagonist's testimony, the purpose of which is to gain forgiveness, work through trauma to obliterate the traumatic past, and, at the same time, to forestall memory loss. In this vein, the novel relies on the traumatic opposition between remembering and forgetting, and on "transcending the limitations of the self" (Groes 1).

Nevertheless, the events revealing the performative function of various forms of literature present in *Atonement* indicate its illusoriness. The protagonist's concern with receiving forgiveness for her past lie through literature proves futile as it is also based on a lie: the events which Briony presents constitute another version of the past which she admits to have altered. Thus, the reliability of any form of storytelling, including the trauma narrative, is undermined. As a consequence, the validity of the trauma narrative as an example of the performative text as a means of asking for forgiveness is questioned and its fictionality disclosed. The novel's title, foregrounding one of the key concepts of trauma theory, might hint of skepticism towards the performativity evinced in trauma narrative. Judith Seaboyer acknowledges the issue of the performative function in *Atonement*; however, she highlights the problematic dualism embedded in the protagonist's desire to atone and "her desire to arouse in us a desire for her narrative" (32). Thus, the novel's double narrative allows us "to experience the ethics of writing and reading reality" (32). *Atonement* should be read as "the constructive equivalent or counterpart of narrative ethics" (Head, *Contemporary British*

Novelists 24), and an attempt to break the boundaries of fiction creating a literary work which is a performative practice between the reader, the text, the author, and the cultural and social context.

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