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 MEMORY AND FORGETFULNESS IN IAN MCEWAN'S *ATONEMENT*\*
 

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## ABSTRACT

In an attempt to atone for her false testimony accusing her sister's lover of sexual assault, 13-year-old Briony Tallis has to live with guilt and repentance. As a successful novelist, she later re-creates past events to allow the young lovers – who are both killed in the war – “to survive and flourish”. The late revelation of embedding – Briony's memoirs within McEwan's fiction – provides the frame for our analysis which focuses on memory as its process of creation. Memory as a relationship in time and the ideal possibility of attaining its antithesis – forgetfulness – offers oblivion in answer to the protagonist's desire for redemption.

KEY WORDS: Memory as a process of creation, confessional genres, redemption, Ian McEwan.

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Nobel-prize-winning author Toni Morrison argues that “memory – the deliberate act of remembering –, as connected to a writer's work, ‘is a form of willed creation’.” In fact, she adds, the process of artistic creation refers back not only to the recollection of incidents or places, but to the plethora of feelings and impressions that surround a past event or scene. It is not the writer's task to ascertain exactly what happened but to focus, instead, on his/her view of how and why things appeared in a certain way (1984, p. 385).

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* is such a type of creation, a narrative from memory, focused on the circumstances of a profoundly traumatic episode, as described from the points-of-view of the three main characters involved. Furthermore, on reaching its fourth section, entitled “London

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\* Trabalho apresentado como comunicação no II Congresso Internacional da ABRAPUI (São José do Rio Preto, SP).

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1999”, the reader is surprised by the disclosure that the preceding chapters are actually fictional memoirs written by its protagonist, Briony Tallis, who has become a successful novelist. Having misidentified her sister’s lover, Robbie Turner, as the man who has sexually assaulted her cousin Lola, 13-year-old Briony has to live with the guilt of her false testimony. In an attempt to atone for what she later calls her “crime”, she re-creates past events, in order to allow the young lovers, Robbie and Cecilia, who are both killed in the war, “to survive and flourish”.

The different aspects of Briony’s recollections in her well orchestrated memoirs, plus the direct testimony of her diary, genres which are based on the reconstruction of the past, highlight the importance of memory in the novel’s process of creation. We feel it is pertinent, therefore, to examine the different functions of memory in McEwan’s text, as an approach for its analysis and interpretation. Parallels between the Briony that writes her diary in 1999 –, “at five o’clock in the morning” (2001, p. 476), a time reference that signals the present of the narrative –, and the attitudes, impressions and ideas of the younger Briony, the character-narrator of McEwan’s novel, will furnish the necessary markers for this study.

The term “memory,” in addition to denoting a field of study, can designate a number of different concepts, as listed in *The Oxford Handbook of Memory*:

Among the more frequently occurring meanings of ‘memory’ are (1) memory as neurocognitive capacity to encode, store, and retrieve information; (2) memory as a hypothetical store in which information is held; (3) memory as the information in that store; (4) memory as some property of that information; (5) memory as a componential process of retrieval of that information, and (6) memory as an individual’s phenomenal awareness of remembering something. In addition there are other senses in which writers use ‘memory’, although such uses tend to be idiosyncratic. (TULVING; CRAIK, 2000, p. 36-37)

Ian McEwan’s novel provides concrete illustrations of these various concepts of memory, besides fitting the idiosyncratic uses of the term by some writers, to be discussed in the sequence.

Briony's story as confession implies self-accusation and puts into relief the concepts of memory in the Augustinian sense of the term. Firstly, a locus for storage of information, as well as the information itself, that is, images and scenes plus the feelings and impressions that surround them. There are "vast mansions" of memory, where are treasured innumerable images brought in there from objects of every conceivable kind perceived by the senses. "Memory is not merely the capacity to recall [...] In the immense court of my memory [...] I come to meet myself. I recall myself, what I did, when and where I acted in a certain way, and how I felt about acting" (BOOK X, 14, p. 206). Rather than the dwelling place of one's self, memory is the very essence of the self, which is above the demands of the flesh and of temporality.

James Olney argues that Saint Augustine conceptualizes and theorizes openly about narrative, and he has much to say about narrative of the self and memory: "The entire justification, validation, necessity, and indeed exemplary instance of writing one's life, of finding the words that signify the self and its history, are offered to us for the first time in the *Confessions*" (OLNEY, 1998, p. 2). Conscious that God in his infinite wisdom is aware of every man's actions and thoughts, Saint Augustine (1997) asks himself at the outset of Book 11 of the *Confessions*: "Why then do I put before you in order the stories of so many things?" The answer may be found in the question itself "put [...] in order the stories", which reveals the author's need to give the impulse to narrate rational analysis and logical explanation. And narrative itself is a product of memory.

The notion of memory as the source of narrative is equally relevant in the construction of McEwan's *Atonement*. As the title suggests the novel focuses on its protagonist's effort at making amends for the tragic consequences of her false testimony that sends Robbie Turner to prison. Briony is moved to write a story which is both a confession of her guilt, that is, a factual account of her transgression, and a fictional love story with a happy-ending, in which as an all-powerful creator she brings Cecily and Robbie back from the dead.

The late revelation of embedding – Briony's memoirs within McEwan's fiction – gives the reader quite a jolt and twists one's reception of the story. The realization that Parts One, Two, and Three of *Atonement*. A Novel by Ian McEwan – the title displayed on the cover –

are actually Briony's novel, written as "atonement," requires readers to make a series of adjustments. Instead of an apparently detached omniscient narrator, the reader must adjust to a character-narrator who is herself a novelist, and functions as a Jamesenian central intelligence in the plot

It is important for our analysis to examine the structure of the novel as perceived by the reader on a first contact with the text:

Part One is the careful reconstruction of the remarkable convergence of characters and events that sets the stage for Briony's false testimony, on a hot June day in 1935. Cecilia Tallis and Robert Turner, the charwoman's son, are back from Cambridge. The Quincey children – Lola, a blossoming youth of 15, and the twins Jack and Pierot – have been sent to the Tallises for a short stay while their parents settle their divorce. Leon, the eldest Tallis son, has brought his friend Paul Marshall for the weekend.

Part Two relays Robbie's memories of his war experiences.

Part Three recounts Briony's recollections of her training as a nurse, after she chooses to follow her sister's steps and join the war effort, rather than going to college. The narrative reaches its highest point of tension in Briony's (fictional) visit to Cecilia and Robbie, who is about to return to the battlefield.

London, 1999. The final thirty pages of the novel make up Briony's diary entrance, written in the small hours of the morning following her 77<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration. A first-person narrative, the passage furnishes the key to the numerous intricacies of plot, as well as to instances of foreshadowing in the preceding sections.

Deeply moved by McEwan's gripping text, the reader is invaded by a feeling of relief at the happy-ending of Robbie's and Cecilia's love story, and at Briony's hope of being forgiven, at the close of Part Three:

She was surprised at how serene she felt, and just a little sad. Was it disappointment? She hardly expected to be forgiven. What she felt was more like homesickness, though there was no source for it, no home. But she was sad to leave her sister. It was her sister she missed – or more precisely, it was her sister with Robbie. Their love. Neither Briony nor the war had destroyed it. This was what soothed her as she sank deeper under the city. (MCEWAN, 2001, p. 450)

The closing lines of the chapter about Briony's need to write "not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement," however, raise questions about the nature of the text and the identity of its author, if we consider, moreover, the initials and the date that round off the third part of the novel: BT – London, 1999 (McEWAN, 2001, p. 450-51).

Once we learn that Part One is part of Briony's novel, we realize that there are judgments and interpretations of characters' actions and motives that could only have been made by adult Briony, in her narrative from memory. Thus, our attention is particularly drawn to the importance of memory in the construction of McEwan's *Atonement*.

All studies of the functions of memory agree on one point: complete reconstruction of the past is impossible, so whatever memory we may have of a past event depends on the conservation of some aspects of that event, on the one hand, and on forgetting other aspects on the other, that is, recollection depends upon a process of selection. This process emphasizes the double edge of all memories: recollection and forgetfulness, or even oblivion. Briony, the author, has the power to choose what to include in or leave out of her narrative.

It is, therefore, a paradox – or should it be called poetic retribution? – that 77-year-old Briony Tallis has been diagnosed for vascular dementia, and in spite of the "slowness of the undoing", in her doctor's soothing words, the disease entails loss of memory, short- and long-term, the disappearance of single words, then language itself [...] "I might not be unhappy – just a dim old biddy in a chair, knowing nothing, expecting nothing" (McEWAN, 2001, p. 457).

At present, however, Briony is still bright and alert, in spite of occasional headaches and tiredness, perfectly aware of her actions, and feeling "the same as ever", and who makes pertinent comments on her process of literary creation: "I worked in three hospitals in the duration and I merged them in my description to concentrate all my experiences into one place. A convenient distortion, and the least of my offenses against veracity" (McEWAN, 2001, p. 457).

Like every writer of autobiographical texts, McEwan's narrator must face the question about the accuracy of her information. The admission of her "offenses against veracity" puts the seal on what the reader has already realized at this point in the narrative: Briony Tallis,

the novelist, has complete control of her characters' thoughts, memories, and feelings.

Forgetfulness is looked upon as desirable, and she admits she has always beengood at discarding unpleasant memories, at not thinking about what is really troubling her. But the inescapable need to face "an oncoming tide of forgetting, and then oblivion" discourages her: "Which portion of my mind, my memory, had I lost to a minuscule stroke while I was asleep?" (MCEWAN, 2001, p. 467).

It is common knowledge that personal recollections have a tendency to change, to say nothing of our responses to them. The analysis of the three capital scenes that lead to Briony's misidentification of Robbie evidences the divergent impressions and feelings that Briony-as-writer attributes to the three main characters –, her own younger self, plus Cecilia and Robbie. Referring back to Toni Morrison, it is not the writer's task to ascertain exactly what happened but to focus, instead, on the galaxy of feelings that accompany images from the past. The first scene is set in the momentous day in June, 1935, and takes place near the garden fountain. Deeply irritated by Robbie's insistence in helping her fill up a large glass vase, Cecilia tightens her grip on the vase, and twists her body so violently away from him that a section of the lip of the vase came away in his hand and fell into the water (MCEWAN, 2001, p. 36-37).

The voice is that of a third-person narrator, but the perspective is obviously Cecilia's, whose irritation is an attempt at disguising her unfamiliar feelings for Robbie, her childhood companion and fellow student at Cambridge.

"You idiot! Look what you've done."

He looked into the water, then he looked back at her, and simply shook his head as he raised a hand to cover his mouth. By this gesture he assumed full responsibility, but at that moment she hated him for the inadequacy of the response. [...] he began to unbutton his shirt. Immediately she knew what he was about. Intolerable. [...] she would show him then. She kicked off her sandals, unbuttoned her blouse and removed it, unfastened her skirt and got out of it [and] climbed into the water in her underwear. [...] Denying his help, any possibility of making amends, was his punishment. [...] The unexpectedly freezing water that caused her to gasp was his

punishment. She held her breath, and sank, leaving her hair fanned out across the surface. Drowning herself would be his punishment. (McEWAN, 2001, p. 37-38)

Briony's narrative enters so sympathetically the consciousness of the other characters, that the reader is bound to admire her reconstruction of past events by giving voice to other characters and showing, in consequence, the deficiency of her own judgments.

Robbie's recollection of the fountain scene is all feeling and sensation: he sees Cecilia in a new way, no longer as an almost invisible sister. If he had ever thought about her at all in their distant Cambridge relationship, it was as the supercilious daughter of his benefactor. The scene at the fountain is a revelation and he keeps going back to it: "When she climbed out of the pond, a glimpse of the triangular darkness her knickers were supposed to conceal. Wet. He saw it, he made himself see it again" (McEWAN, 2001, p. 100). He had found out for himself the thrill of falling in love. He was perfectly aware that a great change was coming over him. Even her features – he might have said she was a little horsey in appearance, a long narrow face, the small mouth – now seem perfect:

Now he saw it was a strange beauty – something carved and still about the face, especially around the inclined planes of her cheekbones, with a wild flare to the nostrils, and a full, glistening rosebud mouth. Her eyes were dark and contemplative. It was a statuesque look, but her movements were quick and impatient – that vase would still be in one piece if she had not jerked it so suddenly from his hands. (McEWAN, 2001, p. 101)

For Briony, however, memories of the incident bring profound disturbance to her ingrained sense of order and propriety, and are in keeping with her personality and her background. Her romantic mind interprets Robbie's "rather formal attitude," standing by the fountain behind Cecilia as a marriage proposal. In the sequence, her obsession with tidiness and order is shocked by what she judges to be a reversal of narrative order. In fairy tales, the humble hero (Robbie Turner is the only son of a humble cleaning lady and of no known father) is worthy of marrying the princess as a reward for saving her from some

predicament. Briony is unable to understand why the marriage proposal comes before the scene of the rescue.

What was less comprehensible, however, was how Robbie imperiously raised his hand now, as though issuing a command which Cecilia dared not disobey. It was extraordinary that she was unable to resist him. At his insistence she was removing her clothes. [...] What strange power did he have over her? Blackmail? Threats? She should shut her eyes, she thought, and spare herself the sight of her sister's shame. Cecilia, mercifully still in her underwear, was climbing into the pond, [...] was pinching her nose – and then she was gone. (MCEWAN, 2001, p. 48-49)

Furthermore, Briony's memories owe much to her familial and cultural background. In spite of his education, Robbie is still a member of the lower classes. His presence in such strange circumstances means either a fairy-tale romantic attachment, or an attempt at assaulting Cecilia. In his studies of collective memory, Maurice Halbwachs argues that even in situations where there are no other witnesses, individual recollections are influenced by the collective memory of the social group (1992).

The young girl resists both the temptation to regard the scene as “a special moral for her wrapped in a mystery”, and to run to Cecilia's bedroom to ask for an explanation. Sixty decades later, adult Briony, the renowned writer, allows that she “may have attributed more deliberation than feasible to her thirteen-year-old self” (MCEWAN, 2001, p. 50-51).

It is evident that Briony treats her *fac simile* character with kindness and comprehension, possibly an attempt at exempting herself from blame. But as an artist who is concerned with the integrity of her creation she allows her characters to pass judgment on one another. Thus, Robbie can see through Briony's motives and misinterpretations, when the girl interrupts his passionate love scene with Cecilia:

She stood there stupidly, staring at them, her arms hanging loose at her sides, [...] There was no good reason why she should be in the library, except to find him and deny him what was his. He saw it clearly, how it had happened: she had opened a sealed envelope to read his note and been disgusted, and in her obscure way felt



betrayed. She had come looking for her sister – no doubt with the exhilarated notion of protecting her, or admonishing her, and had heard a noise from behind the closed library door. Propelled from the depths of her ignorance, silly imagining and girlish rectitude she had come to call a halt. (MCEWAN, 2001, p. 177)

It a good appraisal of Briony's character and of her exalted notion of her power, and her duty. But it is only in the last five pages of McEwan's *Atonement*, concurrently the conclusion of Briony's journal, that readers are brought to the present of the narrative, and finally, to the comprehension of the novel's complex structure and of Briony's essential role in its composition:

Now it is five in the morning and I am still at the writing desk, thinking over my strange two days. I still have so much to consider, and soon, within the year perhaps, I'll have far less of a mind to do it with. I've been thinking about my last novel, the one that should have been my first. The earliest version, January 1940, the latest, March 1999, and in between, half a dozen different drafts. The second draft, June 1947, the third ... who cares to know? My fifty-nine-year, assignment is over. There was our crime – Lola's, Marshal's, mine – and from the second version onward, I set out to describe it. (MCEWAN, 2001, p. 476)

The solution to the mystery – Lola had actually been assaulted by Peter Marshall, the Tallises's young, rich, and highly respectable houseguest, whom she later comes to marry – is withheld until the end, and then only relayed to the reader by means of another confessional text, the character-narrator's diary.

The phrase "Now it is five in the morning and I am still at the writing desk, thinking over my strange two days" is the equivalent of common openings used by diarists: "now I will write in this journal," or forms of addressing the journal as a friend, "my dear journal." Journal writing, as described in critical commentaries, is an activity requiring time, thought, and meditation, characteristics that reflect traditional uses of the diary as a spiritual exercise, personal therapy tool, and literary production. In this way the genre allows its practitioners to adopt self-reflexive, and even self-deprecatory perspectives.

As an appendix to her confessional memoirs, Parts One, Two and Three of McEwan's *Atonement* – Briony's journal casts her reader in the role of reader/confessor, who must be in place in order to absolve the teller. She allows she has an obsessive love of order. "I've always liked to make a tidy finish", she says as she prepares to organize the material of the research she developed at the Imperial War Museum, in order to write her novel: "In the same mood, I was busy in my study yesterday afternoon; 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" (McEwan, 2001, p. 456).

Consistently, McEwan's novel opens with a report of Briony's activity as an author, a creator of characters – such as Arabella, the reckless heroine of her first attempt at playwrighting, *The Trials of Arabella* – and of plots that convey edifying messages: "Love which did not build a foundation on good sense was doomed". As discussed above, it closes on another instance of writing, Briony's diary entrance which dispels doubts and answers questions about "what really happened". The discourse of memory – the focus of our study – is built throughout the book driven by Briony's search for atonement.

Briony's pleasure at the surprise performance of *The Trials of Arabella*, by the children at the family gathering in 1999, is a reminder of how as a child-author she used to relish in the praise and approval of others. The opening lines of the play, liberally dotted with difficult words taken from the dictionary, had "the ring of the supernatural"

This is the tale of spontaneous Arabella  
Who ran off with an extrinsic fellow.  
It grieved her parents to see their firstborn  
Evanescence from her home to go to Eastbourne  
Without permission, to get ill and find indigence  
Until she was down to her last sixpence  
(McEwan, 2001, p. 473)

The barely remembered words conjure Briony's old self "that busy, priggish, conceited little girl, and she was not dead either, for when people tittered appreciatively at 'evanescence' my feeble heart – ridiculous vanity – made a little leap (McEwan, 2001, p. 473).

In the same manner that St. Augustine seeks God's mercy and forgiveness in his *Confessions*, McEwan's protagonist writes her novel in the hope of being forgiven for acts that have haunted her whole life. The novel itself is her atonement. Furthermore, like St. Augustine, she theorizes about narrative. Both in her childish way or later, as a mature writer. About writers' activities, she asks herself, "What do writers do/?" Like policemen in a search team, we go hands and knees and crawl our way toward the truth (MCEWAN, 2001, p. 463).

For a bright child who lived in a world of her own creation, the inability to deal with her newly awakened vision of reality is shocking. Putting things on paper is her way of restoring order.

The truth had become as ghostly as invention. She could begin now, setting it down as she had seen it, meeting the challenge by refusing to condemn her sister's shocking near-nakedness, in daylight right by the house. Then the scene could be recast, through Cecilia's eyes, and then Robbie's. But now was not the time to begin. Briony's sense of obligation, as well as her instinct for order, was powerful; she must complete what she had initiated....The writing could wait until she was free. (MCEWAN, 2001, p. 52)

The recurrent idea of freedom establishes links among characters' memories. For McEwan's character-narrator freedom is closely associated with freedom of creation:

She sensed she could write a scene like the one by the fountain and she could include a hidden observer like herself [...] She could write the scene three times over, from three points of view; her excitement was in the prospect of freedom, of being delivered from the cumbrous struggle between good and bad, heroes and villains. None of these three was bad, nor were they particularly good. She need not judge. There did not have to be a moral. (MCEWAN, 2001, p. 51)

Robbie's memories of the elation he felt when he walked along the footpath leading to the Tallis mansion, hopeful of conquering Cecilia's love, have one explanation: "One word contained everything he felt, and explained why he was to dwell on this moment later. Freedom. In his life as in his limbs" (MCEWAN, 2001, p. 115-116). In the years to

come he would often think back to this time when he walked along the footpath. Freedom means Cecilia, and the memory of her words, *I'll wait for you*, which has become a sacred site.

The reconstruction of the third capital scene is done entirely from Briony's perspective, as she is the main piece in the accusation against Robbie, to the point of searching Cecilia's room for the sensuously erotic letter he had written, and which supposedly furnishes evidence of his "oversexuality". The reader is not allowed a single glimpse of Robbie's feelings or reactions as he is handcuffed and taken away. Briony's conviction of Robbie's guilt, after witnessing what she judged to be his attacks against her sister, remained unshaken throughout her several formal interviews with the police. It is the adult Briony Tallis, the novelist, that Ian McEwan entrusts with the task of relaying to the reader the feelings and impressions attached to the girl Briony's memories of that fateful night:

Her memories of the interrogation and signed statements and testimony, or of her awe outside the courtroom from which her youth excluded her, would not trouble hers so much in the years to come as her fragmented recollection of that late night and summer dawn. How guilt refined the methods of self-torture, threading the beads of detail into an eternal loop, a rosary to be fingered for a lifetime. (MCEWAN, 2001, p. 221)

But it is to her diary that McEwan's writer-protagonist confides that Robbie Turner died of septicemia on 1 June 1940, and that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year when a bomb destroyed an underground station. That means she was never able to ask for Robbie's and Cecilia's forgiveness. She reflects on the failure of her fifty-nine year project.

There was our crime – Lola's, Marshall's, mine – and from the second version [of my novel] I set out to describe it. I've regarded as my duty to disguise nothing – the names, the places, the exact circumstances – I put it all there as a matter of historical record. But as a matter of legal reality, so various editors have told me over the years, my forensic memoir would never be published while my fellow criminals were alive. You may only libel yourself and the dead. The Marshalls have been active in the courts since the

late forties, defending their good names with a most expensive ferocity... To be safe, one would have to be bland and obscure. I know I cannot publish until they are dead. As of this morning I accept that will not be until I am. (McEWAN, 2001, p. 477)

In spite of her strong common sense, McEwan's character has a romantic mind. She feels it would be an act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let her lovers live. She does not feel nostalgic or bitter, however, when she returns to her former home, and to the scene of the events that transformed so many lives, as she has the artist's capacity to create beauty out of her memories.

Whether McEwan's protagonist has achieved the desired forgiveness and redemption or not, or if she has forgiven herself, it is up to the reader to judge the author's ability in the use of memory as the structuring principle of *Atonement*, and as a means to reach the innermost feelings of his characters.

#### MEMÓRIA E ESQUECIMENTO EM *REPARAÇÃO* DE IAN MCEWAN

##### RESUMO

Na tentativa de reparar seu falso testemunho ao acusar o amante de sua irmã de violência sexual, Briony Tallis, de 13 anos, precisa viver com a culpa e o arrependimento. Como uma romancista de sucesso, ela mais tarde recria os eventos do passado para permitir aos jovens amantes – ambos mortos na guerra – “que sobrevivam e floresçam”. A tardia revelação do remorso – as memórias de Briony dentro da ficção de McEwan – fornece o arcabouço para nossa análise, que se concentra na memória como seu processo de criação. A memória como uma relação no tempo e a possibilidade ideal de alcançar sua antítese – o esquecimento – oferecem o olvido em resposta ao desejo de redenção da protagonista.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Memória como processo de criação, gêneros confessionais, redenção, Ian McEwan.

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