Deprivation of Closure in McEwan’s *Atonement*

Unreliability and Metafiction as Underlying Causes

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Abstract

The aim of this bachelor’s thesis is to discuss, and attempt to confirm, that Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001) lacks closure. Since the novel has an unreliable narrator who offers her readers several credible endings to her narrative, and who also acts as the fictitious author of the story, unreliability and metafiction are claimed to be the main underlying causes of this deprivation of closure. The discussion in the first section of the analysis is based on the plot development depicted in Gustav Freytag’s Pyramid, and the second part is focused on Victoria Orlowski’s four metafictional characteristics denoting ways in which writers of metafiction transgress narrative levels. The claim is concluded to be partly fulfilled, since *Atonement* is regarded as lacking closure in terms of narrative structure but not in a philosophical and moral sense.
Keywords: McEwan, closure, unreliable narrator, metafiction

Table of Contents

1. Introduction 4

2. Analytical tools 7
   2.1. Freytag’s Pyramid 7
   2.2. Metafiction 8

3. Unreliability and metafiction in *Atonement* 10
   3.1. Freytag’s Pyramid and unreliability 10
   3.2. Victoria Orlowski and metafiction 19

4. Conclusion 27

5. Works Cited 30
1. Introduction

The overall aim of this bachelor’s thesis is to argue, and try to establish, that Ian McEwan’s novel *Atonement* (2001) lacks closure. Since the novel has an unreliable narrator who presents her readers with several versions of possible endings to her narrative, and who also functions as the story’s fictional author as she intervenes in the narrative by constructing and reflecting on it, unreliability and metafiction are claimed to be the primary underlying causes of this deprivation of closure. However, although *Atonement* is claimed to lack closure in terms of narrative structure this might still be accomplished in a more philosophical sense, as the novel could be argued to provide emotional and moral closure. In this thesis ‘closure’ is defined as “the sense of completion or resolution at the end of a literary work or part of a work; or . . . [as] the reduction of a work’s meaning to a single and complete sense that excludes the claims of other interpretations” (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*).

*Atonement* is centred on the Tallis family who lives on an estate in the British countryside. The family consists of thirteen-year-old Briony, her parents and her older sister and brother. The story begins on a hot summer’s day in 1935 as Briony is preparing to set up a play which she has written. In the midst of her preparations, she happens to see her older sister Cecilia undress in front of Robbie (Cecilia’s Cambridge classmate and the housekeeper’s son) and plunge into the fountain in the garden. Briony’s inexperience and lively imagination lead her to misunderstand and misinterpret what she has witnessed; a mistake which turns out to affect and change her own life as well as the lives of Robbie and Cecilia forever.

This plot may be analysed according to ‘Freytag’s Pyramid’; a theoretical framework for plot development which was invented by Gustav Freytag (1816-1895) (*Encyclopedia of World Biography*). As claimed by him, a novel’s storyline traditionally consists of the
following parts: ‘exposition’, ‘rising action’, ‘complication’, ‘climax’, ‘reversal’, ‘falling action’, ‘catastrophe’ and ‘moment of last suspense’ (Wheeler). The main reason for using Freytag’s Pyramid as a basis for the discussion concerning the plot development in *Atonement* is not to demonstrate how the novel conforms to this framework but rather the ways in which it does not comply with it. Thus, the fact that *Atonement* shows signs of deviating from Freytag’s Pyramid seems to result in an apparent lack of closure which, I believe, will inevitably affect the reading and interpretation of the novel.

Another field in which the issue of closure is discussed is within the domain of ‘metafiction’. In *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984), Patricia Waugh claims metafictional novels to “often end with a choice of endings [o]r . . . with a sign of the impossibility of endings” (29); an observation which appears to justify the inclusion of metafiction as a relevant point of discussion in my analysis. Waugh continues by defining metafiction as “a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). This is evident in the last chapter in *Atonement*, at which point Briony exposes herself as the fictitious author of the story and, furthermore, reveals the main part of the novel as being only one version of several drafts which she has written (McEwan 370). In this thesis, the analysis’ discussion of *Atonement* being regarded as a metafictional novel is based on the four metafictional characteristics, presented by Victoria Orlowski in “Metafiction” (1996), expressing ways in which metafictional authors transgress narrative levels.

The narrative situation in *Atonement* is also discussed in the analysis, not only for the sake of its overtly unreliable narrator, but because this narrator’s authorial presence in the narrative creates an intriguing interplay between McEwan, the non-fictional author, and Briony, simultaneously characterised as the protagonist, unreliable narrator and fictional author of the
story. Although this interaction is present throughout the novel it is not made definitely clear to the reader until in the final chapter as McEwan, through Briony, eventually decides to divulge this multifaceted situation. The term unreliable narrator refers to a narrator who, for some reason, is not trustworthy. Most often, this narrative unreliability derives from “ignorance or self-interest”, which may result in the narrator speaking subjectively, making mistakes or even lying (Wiehardt). Briony seems to embody ignorance as well as self-interest, as she finds the events taking place between Robbie and Cecilia incomprehensible (McEwan 38-39) and since her main reason for accusing Robbie appears to arise from her desire to be “centre stage” (McEwan 173).
2. Analytical tools

2.1. Freytag’s Pyramid

The first term in Freytag’s plot structure is the ‘exposition’ and it is mainly concerned with “providing the theme, establishing the setting and introducing the main characters” (Wheeler). The ‘rising action’ denotes the increasing tensions and uncertainties experienced by the protagonist (Briony) as the conflicts around her develop, something that leads to the state of ‘complication’. The ‘climax’ of the plot marks the “moment of greatest tension and uncertainty”, and this culmination is followed by the ‘reversal’; the “moment in which the heroine’s fortunes change irrevocably for the worse” (Wheeler). This shift initiates the ‘falling action’, during which the protagonist must face the negative consequences of her earlier deeds. The falling action ends in the ‘catastrophe’, in which the main character not only, “suffer[s] from an earlier choice, but that choice causes suffering to those [she] loves or wants to protect” (Wheeler). According to Freytag, the catastrophe results in ‘catharsis’ (Wheeler), which is defined by The American Psychological Association as “the discharge of affects connected to traumatic events that had previously been repressed by bringing these events back into consciousness and reexperiencing them” (qtd. in Powell). In “Narrating Pain: The Power of Catharsis” (2007), Richard Kearney states that “stories become cathartic to the extent that they combine empathic imagination with a certain acknowledgement of the cause and context of the suffering”, which results in “a wider lens to review one’s own insufferable pain” (61). Thus, catharsis is accomplished in ‘the moment of last suspense’, as all former tensions are resolved and closure is achieved (Wheeler). The claim made in this thesis is that *Atonement* follows the plot structure outlined in Freytag’s Pyramid as far as to the catastrophe, at which point it begins to deviate from Freytag’s standard.
2.2. Metafiction

In “The Postmodern Novel” (2008), Agatha Taormina defines ‘meta’ as a prefix meaning ‘beyond’ or ‘transcending’ and, thus, she describes metafiction as literally meaning “beyond fiction”. Metafiction may be seen as going “beyond fiction” because its main concern is to find methods of obscuring the boundary between fact and fiction. One means of achieving this narrative complexity is by letting the author emerge from the story to comment on the ongoing plot and its characters, as well as on the actual process of fictional writing itself (Taormina), which seems to be precisely what McEwan does, through Briony. Although it is significant to distinguish between him as the author and her as the fictitious author, the fact that she is depicted both as a character in the text and as the author of the story makes it possible to view her as McEwan’s fictional representative which, in turn, gives her a strong metafictional presence. This opinion is supported in Linda Cruise’s articles, “Getting an Angle on Truth: An Analysis of Narrative Viewpoint in Ian McEwan’s Atonement” (2008) part I and II. Cruise suggests that the novel’s multiple co-existing narrative layers produce a parallel between McEwan’s and Briony’s narratives, as McEwan “integrates his protagonist-author’s fictional novel within the structure of his own” (Part I). Since this creates a complicated and ambiguous story in which it is difficult to judge who is actually narrating Atonement, I believe Cruise’s ideas to tie in with my thoughts on Briony functioning as McEwan’s literary stand-in.

Victoria Orlowski has composed a list of characteristics of metafiction, of which I have chosen to include those concerned with the ways in which metafictional authors are claimed to “violate narrative levels” (Orlowski). According to Orlowski, there are four commonly known strategies for doing this; “intruding to comment on writing”, “involving his [sic] or
herself with fictional characters”, addressing the reader in a direct manner and using a narrative technique trying to demonstrate that “no singular truths or meanings exist” (Orlowski). This thesis argues that Briony, as the fictional author of Atonement, meets all four of these.
3. Unreliability and metafiction in *Atonement*

3.1 Freytag’s Pyramid and unreliability

This thesis argues that it is doubtful whether the plot in *Atonement* follows the plot developments denoted in Freytag’s Pyramid as catastrophe and moment of last suspense. The main reason for this alleged deviation is the fact that, in the last part of the novel, Briony is revealed not only as the narrator of the story, but also as an unreliable one. This manifestation makes it very difficult, or even impossible, for the reader to determine and understand the end of the plot.

Briony’s narrative unreliability seems to stem from her conviction that Cecilia and Robbie’s lives ended unhappily because of the “crime” (370) which she committed against them when she was thirteen years old. Thus, her primary reason for writing *Atonement* appears to originate from her inability to overcome her feelings of guilt and regret about her misdeed in order to face its true consequences; Robbie and Cecilia’s permanent separation and possible premature deaths. Most likely, these grave results constitute Briony’s main cause for deciding to transform reality’s unhappy ending to a fictionally happy one.

Briony’s crime is that she falsely accuses Robbie of assaulting her cousin Lola even though the darkness of the night and the fact that neither of the girls got a clear view of the attacker’s face makes it impossible for them to confirm his identity (166). Although Briony is described as possessing a lively imagination and thirst for drama (77, 115), the most credible explanation for her rash impeachment against Robbie is that her misperceptions of that day’s earlier events involving him and Cecilia have made her prone to think the worst of him. This theory is supported by Lola’s comment that “it doesn’t make much sense. He’s such a close
friend of your family. It might not have been him” and Briony murmuring that “[y]ou wouldn’t be saying that if you’d been with me in the library” (171).

Briony’s false testimony initially results in Robbie’s imprisonment and then in his participation in the Second World War, which hinders him and Cecilia from being together. As previously stated, according to Freytag’s Pyramid, the catastrophe occurs when it is no longer only the heroine who suffers from an earlier choice of hers, but this pain also befalls the persons whom the heroine loves (Wheeler). Thus, since it seems possible to state without doubt that Briony is partly responsible for the physical and emotional sufferings of Robbie and Cecilia, it may be confirmed that there is a catastrophe, albeit a rather prolonged one, present in Atonement.

However, in this thesis it is declared that the different choices of endings presented by the unreliable narrator in the novel cause the plot to deviate from Freytag’s Pyramid after the catastrophe. Therefore, as will be demonstrated shortly, the main issue of interest is the fact that the catastrophe does not result in catharsis and closure, but remains unsolved and open ended.

Still, before continuing with this discussion, I believe some fundamental clarifications of Atonement’s narrative construction to be necessary. As I began doing research for this thesis, I realised that available studies on Atonement use different terms when referring to its sections. For example, Cruise regards the entire novel as a frame narrative authored by McEwan and its first three parts as an embedded narrative composing “Briony’s version of Atonement” (Cruise Part II). In “The (Meta) Narrative Paratext: Coda as a Cunning Fictional Device” (2010), Monica Spiridon labels the first three chapters of Atonement ‘the Text’ and the final chapter ‘the Paratext’¹ (53). Hence, Spiridon seems to view the last part of Atonement more as an

¹ The term ‘paratext’, coined by Gerard Genette, denotes any type of supplementary information which is included in a book but not part of the main text, which means that the paratext influences how this text is read and interpreted. Examples of paratexts are titles, layouts, prefaces and notes, but also such things as paper, ink and bindings (Koenraad 199-200).
addendum to the three sections composing the main narrative, than as an inseparable part of this text. She is of the opinion that ‘the Text’ and ‘the Paratext’ of the narrative “compete over the understanding of the story”, as the “closing Paratext provides . . . alternative reading strategies to the text” (53). Instead of adopting any of these terms developed by Cruise and Spiridon, for my own discussion I have chosen to name the first three parts of the novel the ‘core text’; starting on the day of Briony’s crime and ending approximately five years later outside Balham tube station, as she is seen off by Cecilia and Robbie (348) after having visited them in their apartment, and the final part the ‘appendix’, because of the additional information it contributes to the core text.

On the one hand I agree with Spiridon that the appendix, titled “London, 1999” (352), does not appear to be an inherent component of the rest of the novel, as it seems as though the core text could constitute an independent and complete narrative by itself. One of my reasons for regarding the appendix as separate from the core text is the shift in narrative voice from third-person to first-person which occurs between them as it is only in the appendix that “McEwan finally chooses to use Briony’s viewpoint from a first-person perspective, to reveal the surprising truth … that Briony has been the . . . narrator throughout the novel” (Cruise Part 1). Furthermore, there is a significant difference in time between the core text, which ends when Briony is in her early twenties (336), and the appendix, beginning on her seventy-seventh birthday (353), and I believe this to be an additional reason why the latter does not appear to constitute a continuation of the plot presented in the first. Consequently, the final eighteen pages of the novel seem to stand out as a somewhat detached part; possibly as an appendix or an added extradiegetic level, included in order to provide background information and explanations to the plot.

On the other hand I think it may be questioned whether the appendix could be classified as a paratext, since this text as well was written by the author and not by an editor or publisher,
which means that it does not vary in content and appearance from edition to edition. A further argument against Spiridon’s view of the appendix as a paratext is the fact that the appendix seems to radically affect the overall impression of the novel.

In my view, the reason for the significance of the appendix is that it confirms the reader’s suspicions that Briony is an unreliable narrator, as the seventy-seven year old Briony discloses the narrative presented in the first part of *Atonement* as being only the last version of numerous preceding drafts which she has written (370). From her remark that “[i]t is only in this last version that [her] lovers end well, standing side by side on a South London pavement” as she walked away (370), it is obvious that she has constructed different endings to her drafts. Furthermore, she notes that her “fifty-nine-year assignment is over” (369), which indicates that this draft is her last one, and also the one which she has decided to publish, as she reveals that she has accepted that, for legal reasons, she cannot publish until Paul and Lola Marshall are dead (370).

The fact that this is not only her final version, but also the only one to which she has attached the appendix, might suggest that the ending to this draft is the accurate one. Still, as Briony never announces the story’s real ending, this theory may only be regarded as one idea among innumerable interpretations, and this highlights the problematic lack of clear and distinct textual evidence which seems to permeate the appendix.

As implied earlier, Briony’s sole revelation concerning the ending to this final version of *Atonement* is that it is the only one of her drafts to end happily (370) which further seems to weaken the probability that this account is the authentic one, as it is likely to constitute yet another narrative fabrication.

An arguably important piece of information relevant for this discussion is Briony’s confession, in the appendix, that she suffers from a disease named “vascular dementia” (354), which results in loss of memory, language, balance, motor control and, ultimately, the
autonomous nervous system (McEwan 355). As it is established that the disease develops quickly, this medical diagnosis might be the only reason why Briony decided to make this version of her literary narrative her final draft. Furthermore, since it is unclear whether she already has lost control over some of her mental faculties, her illness could be regarded as a contributing factor to her narrative unreliability. Should this theory be true, it might be a mere coincidence that the happy-ending reading became her last one, which would deprive it of any unique significance that may initially have been ascribed to it. Although this does not necessarily exclude the possibility of the novel obtaining a sense of closure, it would signify that this fictitious closure might not represent an accurate illustration.

However, the title may be argued to contradict this as the novel’s ending could be interpreted as increasing the sense of ‘atonement’ it suggests. One reason why Atonement might be claimed to lack closure is that atonement could be regarded as an open ended concept by nature; a bad deed cannot be undone but only compensated for or replaced with something else at a later point in time, which means that atonement cannot be completely realised. Accordingly, if atonement is considered to be an open ended term, it seems logical to assume that the purpose of Atonement is to reinforce this notion and, therefore, the novel should be understood as open ended too. Nevertheless, this open ending may then be argued to provide a satisfactory and realistic finish in the sense that the reader is familiar with the fact that atonement is something which, in reality, only can be continuously sought for and attempted but never totally achieved. The fact that atonement might be viewed as successfully accomplished when only the fictional core text of Atonement is taken into account, but not when the arguably more realistic appendix is included, may signify that although fiction has the ability to function as a comforter, eventually a return to the real world is inevitable and in that reality atonement is an infinite concept.
Consequently, I am of the opinion that rather than providing closure, the appendix evokes numerous crucial questions to which no replies seem available; how did the story really end? Is the genuine ending to be found among Briony’s different drafts, or has she never written it down? Did she include fragments of the genuine conclusion in her drafts, so that each account is partly true and a reader who had access to all the existing versions of the story would be able to piece together the real ending?

From my point of view as a reader, I would argue that *Atonement* lacks closure as regards narrative structure but possibly not in a more philosophical sense, as it could be argued that philosophical and moral closure is accomplished in the novel. With respect to closure as far as narrative structure is concerned, I claim that a return to Freytag’s Pyramid suggests that *Atonement* achieves closure when only the core text is taken into account, but not when the appendix is included. The core text provides closure as it ends with Briony visiting Robbie and Cecilia and agreeing to the three demands which they place on her, telling her parents the truth about her crime, going to a solicitor to retract her evidence, and writing a long and detailed letter to Robbie about everything which led up to her saying that she saw him by the lake on the night of the alleged assault of Lola, and why she held on to her testimony during the months awaiting his trial, even though she was uncertain of its accuracy (345).

However, if the appendix is taken into account, which seems necessary as it is part of the novel, I do not think that closure in terms of narrative structure is realised, since the appendix ends with Briony’s declaration that the core text at hand only is one out of numerous drafts - an acknowledgement which does not seem to present the reader with a satisfactory ending and, therefore, fails to provide closure. Therefore, I would say that Briony seems to originally have created a draft which fits well with the plot developments in Freytag’s Pyramid, but as soon as she, in the appendix, emerges from her fictional story and decides to be truthful about her writing, she disrupts her once coherent narrative and, as a result, Freytag’s Pyramid must
be abandoned. Thus, rather than giving the reader an adequate and reliable ending, it appears as though Briony’s adding of new elements only serves to draw attention to an infinity of choices which she never made.

Analysing closure from a philosophical and moral perspective would, however, entail a somewhat different discussion. Provided that the central theme in the novel is atonement, the chief argument in favour of closure being achieved would be the fact that the main part of the appendix is devoted to Briony’s reflections on means of atoning for past events. Considering that she consistently refers to her false accusation against Robbie as a “crime” (370), the core text could be regarded as her confession. It seems to be an indisputable fact that Briony spent most of her adulthood searching for atonement and living with an immense and constant burden of guilt of which she could not rid herself. However, I am of the opinion that whether or not *Atonement* may be seen as providing philosophical and moral closure largely depends on to what extent Briony’s narration is regarded as truthful. Thus, the more unreliable she is believed to be, the less credibility and recognition is attributed to her alleged wish and attempt to atone for her crime. As this narrative deception is not revealed until in the appendix, suddenly the reader becomes uncertain and doubtful about what, and how much, of the information presented in the core text was invented by Briony in order to portray herself in a favourable light and, thereby, mislead the reader. In the appendix, Briony alludes to Robbie dying “of septicaemia . . . on 1 June 1940” (370) and Cecilia being “killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station” (370). Provided that this is true, Briony never came to visit them in their apartment, which would also mean that she could not agree to their three demands since those, in that case, never were articulated. Certainly, there is a possibility that Briony confessed her crime to her parents and a solicitor on her own initiative. Still, considering that she does not appear to have done so during the five years which passed between her crime and her alleged visit to her sister, it seems likely to
assume that if Robbie and Cecilia were killed in the war, and no visit to their apartment took place, there was never a confession either. Ultimately this might call into question the entire idea of Briony’s atonement and the importance assigned to it, unless the thematic focus of the text is to depict the intricate aspects of atonement as, in that case, the emphasis should be on Briony struggling to atone for her crime rather than on the ending of the plot. Hence, provided that the novel was written with the intention of addressing the problematic nature of atonement as a concept, it does appear to achieve a sense of closure.

I would say that whether *Atonement* supplies closure or not depends both on whose perspective is adopted and on the interpretation of the term closure. Thus, focusing on the characters, Robbie and Cecilia may be regarded as provided with closure either in terms of narrative structure, by means of the happy ending narrated for them in the core text of the novel, or in the philosophical and emotional sense that they both died in the war and so their life-stories came to an end. When only the core text is considered, Briony seems to experience closure in relation to narrative structure as she has the authorial sovereignty of seeing to it that Robbie and Cecilia are reunited, and of presenting herself with an opportunity to atone for her crime by practical and concrete means. Similarly, if the appendix is taken into account Briony still appears to attain closure, although in a more philosophical and abstract sense, as she seems to feel as though she has atoned for her crime by writing the core text, and then explained her literary life project by including the appendix. At the end of the appendix the old Briony seems satisfied, as if she is at last able to discharge her feelings of guilt about her crime (371) which, I would argue, makes it possible to view the appendix as constituting personal closure for Briony. Support for this theory is offered by Cruise, as she interprets Briony’s statement that “[a]s long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of [her] final draft, then [her] . . . sister and her . . . prince survive to love” (371) as meaning that Briony believes her narrative creation to somehow have immortalised Cecilia and Robbie’s once
“mortal love” (Cruise Part II). Cruise also views Briony’s remark that “[n]o one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel” (McEwan 371), as her endeavour to persuade herself, as well as her readers, that her crime was less serious than she initially described it to be and, moreover, that her literary achievement mitigated its consequences, which would make her feel that “she has found her atonement” (Part II). These two quotes of Briony’s also appear to tie in with my previously debated ideas about the impossibility of complete non-fictional atonement and fictional atonement, with closure, therefore functioning as consolation for the reader. Therefore, Atonement may be seen as reaching closure in the metafictional and philosophical sense that it focuses on the permanent, and atoning, quality of fiction.

The last perspective to be taken into account when discussing the issue of closure in Atonement is that of the reader. As I expressed earlier, I believe it to be up to each individual reader to form an opinion of whether or not closure is reached in the novel, as this seems to be a question of interpretation. I argue that closure in terms of narrative structure is realised without the appendix but not with it and that, as a textual analysis demands the inclusion of all available text in a book, Atonement fails to provide closure with respect to narrative structure. I do, however, believe closure in a more philosophical and moral sense to be accomplished in the novel but only on condition that the appendix is included since it is the only part of the novel in which Briony appears to achieve a sense of literary satisfaction and, thus, personal closure. Consequently, my claim that the novel deviates from the traditional plot developments in Freytag’s Pyramid is fulfilled as regards closure in terms of narrative structure but not with respect to philosophical and moral closure.
3.2 Victoria Orlowski and metafiction

This section of the analysis is centred on whether, and in that case how, *Atonement* complies with Victoria Orlowski’s four metafictional traits previously introduced in this thesis, and how the novel’s alleged metafictional status prevents it from reaching closure.

Orlowski’s first metafictional feature asserts that an author of metafiction interferes in the narrative to comment on it. I would say that whether or not this characteristic is relevant to *Atonement* depends on if Orlowski’s term, ‘author of metafiction’, should be exclusively understood in its literal sense as the person who wrote the book or if the position referred to could also be filled by the ‘narrator’; the storyteller who describes and explains the plot without being seen. Given that Orlowski’s term applies only to the author, *Atonement* does not seem to conform to this metafictional quality, since McEwan never appears to be personally present in the novel. However, assuming that the term might also embody the narrator, it might be argued that *Atonement* clearly satisfies this metafictional condition, as the entire appendix is devoted to Briony’s comments and explanations concerning the narrative which she is supposed to have written. The fact that she is not only depicted as the character who narrates McEwan’s story, but also portrayed by this author as the author of *Atonement*, the distinction between McEwan’s and Briony’s contributions is blurred in a way which is typical of metafiction (Orlowski). This is the main reason why I, in this situation, believe that Orlowski’s phrase, ‘author of metafiction’, might refer to both McEwan and Briony. Cruise’s thoughts on how to approach these two roles seem to be similar to my own, as she argues that McEwan’s *Atonement* should be regarded as a “novel-within-a-novel” (Part II). Her main reason for this claim is precisely that, “in the end, it becomes clear that *Atonement* is not simply his book, but also that of his main novelist-character, Briony” (Part II). Thus, as it might be established that Briony acts as a fictitious author who intervenes in the narrative
with the purpose of composing and commenting on it, I claim that *Atonement* meets the first one of Orlowski’s metafictional features.

Her second characteristic is that writers of metafiction frequently involve themselves “with fictional characters” (Orlowski), and I am of the opinion that if *Atonement* is declared to meet the first metafictional trait discussed, the novel fulfills this second one as well. The reason for this is, once again, that it is Briony instead of McEwan who is present in the narrative. In the appendix, Briony emerges as the fictional author of *Atonement* and throughout the entire novel, with the exception of the part depicting Robbie’s war experiences, she is also the central character in the story.

Orlowski’s third metafictional quality is that writers of metafiction tend to transgress narrative levels by directly addressing their readers. Proceeding along the lines of the present discussion, I believe that the only reason why Briony decided to write and publish the appendix is because she regarded it as her only opportunity to reach out to her readers. Despite the fact that her story does not seem to be dedicated to any particular person, and that no linguistic terms spoken to the reader in a direct manner appear to be detectable in her writing, the entire appendix seems to be turned towards her intended, albeit unspecified, reader. Without the presupposition that this reader exists, it appears as though the appendix no longer could be regarded as an appendix, but only as the delusional thoughts of an old lady on the verge of dementia. While the hint inherent in Briony’s developing disease is a sly one, such a theory would severely underestimate both McEwan’s and Briony’s creativity and intellect as the novel does not in the least show signs of narrative incoherence or confusion but rather comes across as being carefully prepared and cleverly designed. Consequently, I argue that the appendix was created for the sole purpose of addressing the reader and that *Atonement*, therefore, complies with this third metafictional feature too.
The last metafictional characteristic discussed in this thesis is whether *Atonement* is objectively or subjectively narrated since, as stated by Orlowski, writers of metafiction often employ narrative techniques which enable them to suggest that objective truths and meanings do not exist (Orlowski). Patricia Waugh seems to voice similar ideas, as she does not believe that it is possible to illustrate the world objectively, since “the observer always changes the observed” (3). Thus, all gathered information is inescapably subjective; a problematic recognition which metafictionists address as they begin to depict reality but presently learn that “the world, as such, cannot be ‘represented’” (3). According to metafictional writers, the only phenomena in literary fiction which may be truthfully portrayed are the various “discourses of that world” (3), such as discussions between characters and studies on which type of linguistic usage is adopted in different situations in the plot. Hence, fictional writers seem capable of successfully describing only the literary circumstances which they themselves have created.

When applying these ideas to *Atonement*, the discussion continues to focus on Briony, as the fictional author of the novel. Orlowski’s claim that metafictional writers attempt to demonstrate that there are no objective truths and meanings seems to be met with in the appendix, for example as Briony says that “[i]f I really cared … about facts, I should have written a different kind of book. But my work [is] done. There [will] be no further drafts” (360). In addition to revealing Briony’s awareness that her narrative is not objective, this remark also seems to indicate that struggling for objectivity never was her concern. Cruise appears to share this view since she, as well, includes this quote in her article in support of her idea that by the time McEwan “discloses through Briony” (Part II) that this is only one out of numerous drafts, “Briony has little regard for whether or not she has been a trustworthy narrator” (Part II). Cruise also says that “[t]his particular quote [of Briony’s] unmistakably confirms the fact that [she] should not have been trusted as the story’s narrator” (Part II).
One reason for Briony’s obvious narrative subjectivity could simply be that she found this more interesting than objectivity. This theory may be endorsed by her comment, after having witnessed Robbie and Cecilia by the fountain, that “[s]he 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 . . . struggle between good and bad . . . She need not judge . . . [but] only show separate minds” (40); ideas which seem to substantiate her fascination for subjectivity in preference to objectivity.

However, another possible explanation for Briony’s subjectivity might be that McEwan intended to portray her as a metafictional writer, in which case her narrative may be seen as reflecting the metafictional realisation that subjective writing really is the only option open to a writer of fiction. On the one hand this would seem to argue against closure being achieved, since the inclusion of numerous individual perspectives most probably would obstruct all prospects of reaching a collective feeling of completion. On the other hand, provided that Briony is viewed as a writer of metafiction, closure in a metafictional sense may be seen as fulfilled since the novel appears to enhance the metafictional claim that objectivity is unobtainable. This lack of objectivity seems to be most noticeable in the part of the appendix in which Briony reveals that she has spent the previous fifty-nine years composing different versions of her story. She says that “[t]here was our crime – Lola’s, Marshall’s, mine – and from the second version onwards, I set out to describe it” (369); a remark which seems to confirm the fact that her narrative is based on subjective sources rather than on objective information, as she clearly attempted to approach the matter from different perspectives.

Cruise believes that McEwan, by means of his subjective way of writing, successfully demonstrates how different points of view merge together to create the “continuum of perspectives” (Part I) defined as ‘reality’. There is no objective truth and no sense of closure, but only numerous subjective viewpoints, or perceptions, which constitute “skewed and
limiting perspective[s] within the realm of omniscience” (Part I). Therefore, Cruise claims that the only person with the ability to see and know everything about a situation is the omniscient narrator, but in spite of the fact that McEwan initially invents the illusion that multiple perspectives are included in his narrative, it is disclosed in the appendix that Briony actually is the only narrator in the novel (Part I). Thus, since the narrator in *Atonement* is subjective and limited instead of impartial and omniscient, the novel does not seem to convey any objective truths or meanings and, as a result, Cruise’s theories appear to support this fourth metafictional quality of Orlowski’s. Furthermore, Cruise argues that

because of *Atonement*’s metafictional component, it is not clear until the end (and maybe not even then, entirely), just who is responsible for which distortions: is it McEwan distorting his readers’ perception of truth? Is it the “real” Briony distorting her own self-image in a show of self-denial? Or is it Briony distorting truth as her “fictionalized self” (in her own novel version of *Atonement*)? (Part I)

Similar ideas and speculations on closure, and the seemingly confusing and unclear complications in *Atonement*, are identified by Martin Jacobi in his article “Who Killed Robbie and Cecilia? Reading and Misreading Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*” (2011). In fact, not only does Jacobi pose such questions, but he also formulates theories by means of which he attempts to take his discussion forward. For example, he argues that McEwan’s narrative technique “dramatizes misreading and implicitly warns readers against misreading, but also induces his readers into misreading” (Jacobi paragraph 2), with the purpose of conjuring up their feelings of uncertainty and doubt. According to Jacobi, the majority of critics are of the opinion that Robbie and Cecilia die in World War II, but he disagrees with them because he does not believe the narrative to contain satisfactory evidence for this (paragraph 2). On the contrary, Jacobi regards readers who are persuaded by the deaths of Robbie and Cecilia to be
guilty of the same kind of misreading as Briony, and he presents the parallel that “[Briony’s] misreading causes [Robbie] Turner and [Cecilia] Tallis great suffering, and the misreading by readers of *Atonement* “causes” these characters’ deaths” (Jacobi). Possibly, this view of Jacobi’s might be supported in the appendix by Briony’s concluding reflection that, “I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet. If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration… Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at *The Trials of Arabella*? It’s not impossible” (372). This may be an indication that Robbie and Cecilia still are alive but not present where Briony is, or in touch with her.

Briony appears to dismiss objectivity as a thoroughly unconvincing and, accordingly, undesirable concept as she discloses in the appendix that for the fifty-nine years during which she struggled with the writing of *Atonement*, she encountered one main problem:

> [H]ow can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all. (371)

Although this statement reflects Briony’s continuous conviction that writers hold positions of outermost power and subjectivity, as an old lady she finally seems to understand that this fictitious authority only applies to invented characters in literary narratives and not to people in the real world. Thus, with her crime numerous drafts and nearly sixty years into her past, Briony at last appears to concede that there are some disadvantages with the authorial sovereignty which she, in her childhood, regarded only as a benefit (113). Towards the final years of her life, she realises that since she, as a novelist, occupies the highest position in the
hierarchical system, she will not be offered any support or consolation. While this conclusion of Briony’s may be new to the reader, the last two sentences in the quote above indicate that she, for the fifty-nine years during which she attempted to make atonement for her crime, was conscious of the fact that she would be unsuccessful.

The text of *Atonement* seems to impart that it is impossible to make amends for a non-fictional crime, set in the material world where it involves real people and ends unhappily, by relocating it to a fictional world in which it only affects invented characters and, moreover, ends happily. In one of her articles, Cruise has included a quotation from Finney, who seems to endorse this view, as he claims Briony’s metafictional dilemma to be that “[s]he attempts to use fiction to correct the errors that fiction caused her to commit. But the chasm that separates the world of the living from that of fictional invention ensures that at best her fictional reparation will act as an attempt at atoning for a past that she cannot reverse” (qtd. in Cruise, Part II). Thus, with regard to Briony’s crime, the real scenario and the fictional one appear to be too unlike each other to grant Briony the atonement, which she has been seeking for such a long time. This would explain her deduction that the different versions of *Atonement* only were feeble efforts at accomplishing her own atonement and, thereby, experiencing a feeling of closure. Judging by the last pages in the appendix, Briony seems to learn that subjectivity, which she once held in high esteem, is not entirely unproblematic. It appears as though Waugh’s remark that “any attempt to represent reality could only produce selective perspectives, fiction, that is” (6), articulates the difficulty with subjective writing which, ultimately, prevents Briony from achieving atonement and closure. According to Waugh, Briony cannot represent reality, but only her own perspective on it, which suggests that she is incapable of accomplishing atonement outside her fiction. However, as this fiction of hers, in addition, is nothing but a misrepresentation of reality, I would argue that atonement, at least in terms of narrative structure, is not reached.
In summary, I contend that *Atonement* fulfills all four of Orlowski’s metafictional characteristics when the appendix is included but not without it, since it is not until in this last part of the novel that Briony is revealed as the fictional author of the story. Furthermore, when the appendix is taken into account, philosophical and moral closure seem to be accomplished as Briony, by the end of the novel, finally appears to realise that absolute atonement is unattainable and instead begins to regard her various literary attempts at it as being enough. If only the core text is considered, however, Orlowski’s metafictional traits do not apply to the novel, which means that philosophical and moral closure cannot be achieved without the inclusion of the appendix. Still, closure in terms of narrative structure might be seen as accomplished when looking only at the core text, since the plot outlined in that part of the novel portrays a complete story by itself.

In conclusion, there is a parallel between the first and second part of this analysis since, with regard to both Freytag’s Pyramid and Orlowski’s metafictional characteristics, closure in terms of narrative structure is believed to be achieved when nothing but the core text is taken into account, whereas closure in a philosophical and moral sense is regarded as accomplished only when the appendix is included as well. Thus, my claim that *Atonement* lacks closure, and that unreliability and metafiction are the main underlying causes of this, is fulfilled in terms of closure with respect to narrative structure but not as regards philosophical and moral closure.
4. Conclusion

The analysis conducted in this thesis discusses the ending of Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, with particular focus on whether or not the novel may be considered to provide a sense of closure. *Atonement* has an unreliable narrator who offers her readers several credible endings to her narrative and also acts as an author, albeit a fictitious one, who intervenes in the narrative by designing and contemplating it. Therefore, this thesis claims unreliability and metafiction to be the underlying causes of the novel’s lack of closure.

The first part of the analysis debates the issue of closure on the basis of the plot development outlined in Freytag’s Pyramid, and it is argued that whether *Atonement* obtains closure or not depends on the way in which the novel is read and interpreted. I named the first three chapters in the novel the ‘core text’ and the last section the ‘appendix’, since this final part provides the core text with added information, particularly concerning Briony’s narrative unreliability. As the plot in *Atonement* is applied to Freytag’s Pyramid, it is resolved that closure in terms of narrative structure seems to be accomplished when only the core text is taken into account, but not when the appendix is included. The reason for this line of argument is that I am of the opinion that the appendix discloses some astonishing narrative revelations which evoke numerous crucial, but seemingly unanswerable, questions concerning the core text. Consequently, since a textual analysis signifies that all text available in a piece of literature must be taken into consideration, *Atonement*’s narrative structure is regarded as failing to provide closure. Still, closure in a more philosophical and moral sense is considered to be achieved in the novel, but only on condition that the appendix is included since it is the only part of *Atonement* in which Briony appears to reach a state of literary satisfaction and, thereby, personal closure. As a result, the thesis’s claim that the novel diverges from the traditional plot developments in Freytag’s Pyramid is deemed to be fulfilled as regards closure in terms of narrative structure but not with respect to philosophical and moral closure.
The second half of the analysis examines whether, and in that case how, *Atonement* agrees with Victoria Orlowski’s four metafictional characteristics expressing ways in which metafictional writers “violate narrative levels” (Orlowski), and if the novel’s alleged metafictional status deprives it of closure. The first metafictional trait debated is that authors of metafiction “intrude to comment on writing” (Orlowski). It is argued that the term ‘author’, in this case, should refer to both McEwan and Briony, as it is revealed towards the end of the novel that *Atonement* is not only McEwan’s book, but Briony’s as well (Cruise Part II). Hence, as the appendix is devoted to Briony’s exposition of the core text, *Atonement* fulfills this metafictional characteristic. This realisation also entails the successful implementation of Orlowski’s second trait of metafiction, which states that metafictional writers typically involve themselves “with fictional characters” (Orlowski). Her third metafictional attribute asserts that these novelists tend to address their readers in a direct manner. Similar to the two previous traits discussed, I believe this third one to be fulfilled in the appendix, as I am of the opinion that the only reason why the appendix exists is because Briony regarded it as her opportunity to reach out to her intended, albeit unspecified, readers. The last characteristic of metafiction considered in the analysis is the idea that writers of metafiction often employ a special narrative technique for attempting to demonstrate that “no singular truths or meanings exist” (Orlowski). This metafictional quality as well seems to be depicted most clearly in the appendix, as Briony reveals that she has spent the previous fifty-nine years composing different versions of the core text. It is contended that *Atonement* meets all four of Orlowski’s metafictional characteristics when the appendix is included but not without it, since it is not until in this last part of the novel that Briony is exposed as the story’s fictitious author. When the appendix is taken into account, philosophical and moral closure seem to be accomplished as Briony, towards the end of the novel, at last appears to realise that absolute atonement is unobtainable and instead begins to view her different literary attempts at it as sufficient. If
only the core text is considered, however, Orlowski’s metafictional characteristics are not relevant to the novel and, therefore, philosophical and moral closure cannot be provided without the appendix being included. Nonetheless, closure in terms of narrative structure is regarded as achieved in the core text, as the plot depicted in it describes a full story by itself.

To conclude, a parallel is detectable between the first and second section of the analysis since, with reference to Freytag’s Pyramid as well as to Orlowski’s metafictional qualities, closure as far as narrative structure is concerned is believed to be accomplished when just the core text is considered, while philosophical and moral closure is seen as achieved only when the appendix as well is taken into account. Hence, my claim that *Atonement* lacks closure, and that unreliability and metafiction are the main underlying causes of this, is realised with respect to closure in terms of narrative structure but not as regards philosophical and moral closure.
5. Works Cited


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