

## The Sister's Gaze in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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### Abstract

*Atonement* by Ian McEwan (2001) is a novel structured around some key episodes that gradually shift the reader's attention to the more self-reflective elements of the text. The centrality of the gaze, the voyeuristic attitude of the characters, and the multiple perspectives force the reader to return to scenes already "seen", recalling, in the end, the reader's own gaze from outside the text. The last pages, in particular, because of their manipulation of the events, make the reader the final witness.

Starting from Lacan's theory on the gaze, this article analyses how the traumatic scene observed by the younger sister, unbeknownst to the elder, serves as a mythopoetic device and it is at the origin of the *mise en abîme* on which the Chinese box structure of the novel stands. The repetitions of the trauma – first with the furtive reading of an obscene letter addressed to the older sister and then with the love scene in the library – mark the gradual prevailing of the imaginary on the real, until the final discovery of the fictionality of the whole story<sup>1</sup>.

**Key words** – Trauma; gaze; *Atonement*; Ian McEwan

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1. *Atonement* by Ian McEwan is a work which gradually shifts the reader's attention to the more self-reflective elements of the text. The centrality of the gaze, the voyeuristic attitude of the characters, and the perspective proliferation that forces us to return to scenes already "seen", finally refer to the external gaze of the reader, called to express a judgment on the events of which he is the ultimate witness, driven by the work of manipulation of events and the diegetic encasing of the work.

The narrative scheme follows in some ways the conventional love triangle which involves two sisters with antithetical traits<sup>2</sup>. The character system is made up of a younger sister, Briony, who is representative of a conservative education<sup>3</sup>, and an older sister, Cecilia, whose identity, initially in a state of development, increasingly distances itself from family education and, in particular, from the maternal model. At the centre is

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<sup>1</sup> Part of the contents of this article has already been published in the book chapter "Narrazioni dell'altra: lo sguardo in *Atonement* di Ian McEwan e *Di buona famiglia* di Isabella Bossi Fedrigotti", in Claudia CAO, Marina GUGLIELMI (eds.), *Sorelle e sorellanza nella letteratura e nelle arti*, Firenze, Franco Cesati, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> On some recurring types and patterns in the representation of the relationship between the sisters see Sara Annes BROWN, *Devoted Sisters. Representations of the Sister Relationship in Nineteenth Century British and American Literature*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> The reference to common sense and respectability is already present on the paratextual level, in the quote from *Northanger Abbey* placed in the epigraph (on the use of the epigraph in *Atonement* see Pilar HIDALGO, "Memory and Storytelling in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*", «Critique», 46.2 [2005], p. 83).

a male figure, Robbie, unknowingly coveted by both sisters. The secondary characters – mainly the mother – instead perform an axiological function, reinforcing the position of each sister in terms of values, according to a typical play of symmetries and oppositions. The place held by the father, instead, is unoccupied: he is destined never to enter the scene, except as a ‘voice’ emanating from a telephone receiver<sup>4</sup>.

That he worked late she [Emily] did not doubt, but she knew he did not sleep at his club, and he knew that she knew this. But there was nothing to say. Or rather, there was too much. [...] If this sham was conventional hypocrisy, she had to concede that it had its uses. [...] And she did not miss his presence so much as his voice on the phone. Even being lied to constantly, though hardly like love, was sustained attention; he must care about her to fabricate so elaborately and over such a long stretch time. His deceit was a form of tribute to the importance of their marriage<sup>5</sup>.

The father, who has a second life outside of the conjugal one, can be considered in a parallel and levelled condition with his daughters, since all are struggling with their “secret” sentimental worlds. His characterization also undermines the mother’s possibility of acquiring a role of reference, as she is deprived of credibility. The role of the parents sharpens the sense of isolation of the two sisters in the family community. At the same time, however, even in his absence and his contradictions, the few references to their father constantly refer to his role of interdiction, of spokesman of the social norm<sup>6</sup>. The social interdiction, the respectability and the shame which pervade the narration, are only the first level in which we find the gaze of the Other, to which is added the recurrence of the motif of envy in the sisters’ relationship, evoked between the lines in Briony’s attempt to become the other.

The importance of detail and of the narrator’s visual field, moreover, is suggested by the first scene that outlines the distinctive traits between the two sisters. The description of Briony’s room, an immobile and orderly world, metaphorically prefigures the Apollonian-Dionysiac dichotomy represented by the dialectic between her and her sister:

She [Briony] was one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so. Whereas her big sister’s room was a stew of unclosed books, unfolded clothes, unmade bed, unemptied ashtrays, Briony’s was a shrine to her controlling demon: the model farm spread across a deep window ledge consisted of the usual animals, but all facing one way – towards their owner – as if about to break into song, and even the farmyard hens were neatly corralled. In fact Briony’s was the only tidy upstairs room in the house. Her straight-backed dolls in their many-roomed mansion appeared to be under strict instruction not to touch the walls; the various thumb-sized figures to be found standing about her dressing table – cowboys, deep-sea divers, humanoid mice – suggested by their even ranks and spacing a citizen’s army awaiting orders<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> It is significant that, in the only moment in which their father could have broken into the house due to the urgency of the rape of Lola, an accident with the car prevents his arrival. Moreover, even if implicitly, the relationship that in terms of values the father generates with his son and with Marshall has the effect of emphasizing the purity and innocence of Robbie.

<sup>5</sup> Ian MCEWAN, *Atonement* (2001), London, Vintage, 2002, p. 148.

<sup>6</sup> See MCEWAN, *Atonement*, pp. 46-47: «She [Cecilia] lit up as she descended the stairs to the hall, knowing that she would not have dared had her father been at home. He had precise ideas about where and when a woman should be seen smoking: not in the street, or any public space, not on entering a room, not standing up, and only when offered, never from her on supply – notions as self-evident to him as natural justice. [...] In fact, being at odds with her father about anything at all, even an insignificant detail, made her uncomfortable [...] none of the lessons of practical criticism, could quite deliver her from obedience».

<sup>7</sup> MCEWAN, *Atonement*, pp. 4-5.

McEwan's insistence on the semantic field of view becomes even more explicit both because of the choice to inaugurate his narration with the word «the play» and with the reading of the screenplay of a never staged Briony's show – which place the role of an ideal audience in the foreground – and because of the choice of highlighting the word «glance»<sup>8</sup> in the same comedy, definable as a *mise en abîme* which emphasizes one of the main themes of the novel, that of the fault linked to the infringement of the family law<sup>9</sup>.

The *fil rouge* of the gaze therefore allows us to follow the three steps which structure the plot, and at the same time the development of the writer and of the novel. The driving force of the novel is a “primal scene”<sup>10</sup>, the scene by the fountain: on a diegetic level, this scene marks the access of the older sister to the adult world, her becoming *the other* for the younger one. On the symbolic level, it determines the infiltration of the uncanny in the sister relationship. On a metanarrative level, it represents a moment of rupture, of deviation in the textual organization<sup>11</sup>. Following Lacan's aesthetic theory, and his anamorphic conception of the artwork, it is in this scene where the intersection of different perspectives and frames unveiled in the end of the novel originates<sup>12</sup>.

The link between uncanny, sight, and artistic creation is theorized in the *Book X* of the *Seminar*, where Lacan highlights the ambivalence of the uncanny, understood both as the moment in which the image in the mirror becomes autonomous, turning into a double – reducing the subject of perception to its object<sup>13</sup> – and at the same time becoming a tool of access to desire. It is in this doubling that the relationship with the artistic creation is observable, conceived as an ideal point from which it is possible to frame the experience of the *Unheimliche*, usually sudden and fugitive, and that in this way can instead be reproduced, fixed. The *Unheimliche* gaze can be considered inaugural of Lacan's anamorphic aesthetic, then developed in *Book XI*, as a dialectical moment in which the Real enters the Symbolic, coinciding with the anguish caused by the emergence of the Real.

My analysis will start from the primal scene at the fountain to observe its two repetitions and their effects on the sisters' relationship as well as on the plot

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<sup>8</sup> MCEWAN, *Atonement*, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> In view of the last aspect that will be analysed concerning the diegetic encasing, it should be noticed that here, as in *Hamlet*, one of the best-known literary examples of the *mise en abîme* considered by Dällenbach (*Il racconto speculare: saggio sulla mise en abyme*, translated by Bianca Concolino Mancini, Parma, Pratiche, 1994, p. 17), Briony also chooses a comedy as an implicit accusation against her brother, guilty in her view of having left the family and having dedicated himself to his passing relationships rather than lead a regular life with a wife and children, as hoped by the ending of Briony's drama.

<sup>10</sup> See Sigmund FREUD, *The Wolfman and Other Cases*, translated by Louise Adey Huish, New York, Penguin, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Only in the end does the reader discover the nature of *Atonement* as a self-begetting novel, a work with the dual status of a fictional and material object (see Steven G. KELLMAN, *The Self-Begetting Novel*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1980).

<sup>12</sup> Lacan's reflection develops in particular in the *Books X* (especially in the first section, “Introduction to the Structure of Anxiety”, in Jacques LACAN, *Anxiety. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book X*, ed. Jacques-Alain MILLER, translated by Adrian R. Price, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2014, pp. 3-82) and *Book XI* of the *Seminar*, especially in the section “Of the Gaze as *Object petit a*”, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (1977), translated by Alan Sheridan, New York-London, W. W. Norton and Company, 1998, pp. 67-119). Among the works that deepen the Lacanian theory of the gaze, I refer to Henry KRIPS, “The Politics of the Gaze: Foucault, Lacan and Žižek”, «Culture Unbound. Journal of Current Cultural Research», 2 (2010), pp. 91-102.

<sup>13</sup> See LACAN, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, pp. 91-100.

development: it will be considered the beginning of the infraction, a deviation from the original order, which the regressive force represented by Briony will try to rebuild.

The aim of this study is to demonstrate how the gaze is fundamental to the narrative structure of the work and the origin of the *mise en abîme* on which the Chinese box structure is based. The episode by the fountain, witnessed by the younger sister by the window, unbeknownst to the elder, is the moment in which Briony starts to insinuate herself into the plot of a story which does not belong to her. From this moment, her gaze and her control manipulate the love story, from continuing thwarting it. Subsequently, her manipulation of the same events on paper fulfils, at least on the fictional level, the sentimental relationship which she had interrupted.

The first level in which the gaze is present, however, is the thematic one, within the relationship between the sisters: spying, the fear of being discovered, the increase of the scopical desire, are transformed – in the same day when the few ‘real’ events of the novel take place – in the appropriation of the older sister’s story.

2. This examination of Briony’s *Bildung* (both as a writer and as a woman) starts from the idea that the subject can be acknowledged exclusively by the effect of something, as a result of the Other, which can be found in her case in the mother and sister figures. The novel begins with the image of the younger sister seeking recognition through the parental gaze:

Mrs Tallis read the seven pages of *The Trials of Arabella* in her bedroom, at the dressing table, with the author’s arm around her shoulder the whole while. Briony studied her mother’s face for every trace of shifting emotion, and Emily Tallis obliged with looks of alarm, snickers of glee and, at the end, grateful smiles and wise, affirming nods. She took her daughter in her arms, onto her lap [...] and said that the play was ‘stupendous’, and agreed instantly [...] that this word could be quoted on the poster which was to be an easel in the entrance hall by the ticket booth<sup>14</sup>.

The search for recognition by Briony is constant and insistent, from the desire to dedicate a theatrical performance to her brother who has just returned home, to the exasperated attempt to make up for that failure with the staging of a false testimony. In the symmetries between the male characters and in the search for attention from the older brother we can find that same intent of access to the adult world, which is the cause of her sense of competitiveness towards Cecilia, especially considering what the reader learns later about Briony’s love declaration to Robbie. It is, however, Briony’s voyeuristic spying on Cecilia that introduces an alteration in the intersubjective dynamics between the two sisters<sup>15</sup>:

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<sup>14</sup> MCEWAN, *Atonement*, p. 4. And then: «Her effort received encouragement. In fact, they were welcomed as the Tallises began to understand that the baby of the family possessed a strange mind and a facility with words. [...] Briony was encouraged to read her stories aloud in the library and it surprised her parents and older sister to hear their quiet girl perform so boldly [...] and looking up from the page for seconds at a time as she read in order to gaze into one face after the other, unapologetically demanding her family’s total attention as she cast her narrative spell» (MCEWAN, *Atonement*, pp. 6-7).

<sup>15</sup> It is emblematic that Briony watches the fountain scene from the window of the house, both for the implications which her estranged position with respect to real events will acquire in metatextual terms – as a fallacious interpreter of the episode – and for the set of intertextual references to one of the key images in the reflection on the uncanny (see Laura MARCUS, “Ian McEwan’s Modernist Time: *Atonement* and *Saturday*”,

She [Briony] had arrived at one of the nursery's wide-open windows and must have seen what lay before her some seconds before she registered it. It was a scene that could easily have accommodated, in the distance at least, a medieval castle. [...] 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, and at such speed. She was out of her blouse, now she had let her skirt drop to the ground and was stepping out of it, while he looked on impatiently, hands on hips. What strange power did he have over her. Blackmail? Threats? Briony raised two hands to her face and stepped back a little way from the window. She should shut her eyes, she thought, and spare herself the sight of her sister's shame. But that was impossible, because there were further surprises. Cecilia still in her underwear, was climbing into the pond, was standing waist deep in the water, was pinching her nose – and then she was gone. There was only Robbie, and the clothes on the gravel, and beyond, the silent park and the distant, blue hills<sup>16</sup>.

The scene, even if symbolically and from the perspective of the younger sister, represents at the beginning only a violation of the paternal law, but then acquires additional values for the new dynamics activated in the dialectic between the sisters, in terms of loss of complicity and for the insinuation of the Uncanny between the two. In macrostructural terms – of plot organization and development – the scene witnessed by Briony acquires a trauma function, 'trauma' being defined as the narrative device activating the circular chain of repetition of the plot<sup>17</sup>.

The primal scene, the moment of recognition for Briony of her exclusion from the adult world, modifies the relationship with her sister: the insinuation of the Uncanny soon turns for Briony into envy of a secret and forbidden pleasure, from which originates her scopical desire, the desire to see, only partially justifiable by the fear for her sister's safety<sup>18</sup>. Briony's desires to know and to see keep pace with each other and they are at the origin of further repetitions of the scene with variations<sup>19</sup>.

The scene of the fountain is therefore readable as a moment of recognition and transition, where the weight of Briony's exclusion from the adult world is marked by the reference to what she had done in front of Robbie at the river a year before, waiting for that rescue recalled during the sister's plunge:

When he [Robbie] returned she [Briony] was standing exactly he had left her, on the bank, looking into the water, with her towel around her shoulders. She said, 'If I fell in the river, would you save me?'

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in Sebastian GROES (ed.), *Ian McEwan. Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, London-New York, Bloomsbury, 2013 [2011], p. 88).

<sup>16</sup> MCEWAN, *Atonement*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>17</sup> See Peter BROOKS, *Reading for the Plot. Design and Intention in Narrative*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1992 [1984], in particular chapter 5. The centrality of repetition is marked on the lexical level by the presence of the refrain initially linked to the nightmares of Briony - «Come back» - typographically emphasized by the italics (see MCEWAN, *Atonement*, pp. 44; 76; 264).

<sup>18</sup> These references allude to the Freudian definition of the primal scene. Most critics in the analysis of *Atonement* focus on Briony's young age and her misinterpretation of the scene, while little mention has been given to Briony's love declaration to Robbie (on *Atonement* see Dominic HEAD, *Ian McEwan*, Manchester-New York, Manchester University Press, 2007, pp. 156-176; Roberta FERRARI, *Ian McEwan*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 2012, pp. 172-200; Laura MARCUS, "Ian McEwan's Modernist Time", pp. 83-98; Eluned SUMMERS-BREMNER, *Ian McEwan. Sex, Death, and History*, Amherst, Cambria, 2014, pp. 145-180).

<sup>19</sup> Briony reads Robbie's letter and opens the door of the library because of her desire to know and to unmask Robbie.

‘Of course.’

He was bending over the basket as he said this and he heard, but did not see, her jump in. Her towel lay on the bank. [...] there was no sign of her [...] the water was an opaque muddy green. [...] He pushed her onto the bank with great difficulty in his sodden clothes, struggled out himself. [...]

‘I wanted you to save me.’ [...]

‘Do you know why I wanted you to save me?’

‘No.’ [...]

‘Because I love you.’ [...]

He restrained an impulse to laugh. He was the object of a schoolgirl crush<sup>20</sup>.

However, the desire to enter into the adult world becomes increasingly insistent in the pages following the episode<sup>21</sup> and is significantly linked to the moment of Briony’s poetic conversion, when she definitively shifts from the fairy tale and drama towards the novel<sup>22</sup>.

These elements allow us to find the starting point of the plot in the traumatic scene, understood as a moment of «deviance»<sup>23</sup> with the double meaning of both a necessary condition for life to be «narratable» and «a state of abnormality and error»<sup>24</sup>, in the most common sense of misinterpretation.

**3.** The link between the gaze and the metanarrative aspects is reinforced in the second stage of the symbolic chain originated by the traumatic moment. The repetition in this case takes place after the “theft” of a writing by Briony, it is generated by the scopical impulse provoked by the scene of the fountain, and it culminates in the reading of Robbie’s letter to Cecilia.

The very complexity of her feelings confirmed Briony in her view that she was entering an arena of adult emotion and dissembling from which her writing was bound to benefit. What fairy tale ever held so much by way of contradiction? A savage and thoughtless curiosity prompted her to rip the letter from its envelope [...] and though the shock of the message vindicated her completely, this did not prevent her from feeling guilty. It was wrong to open people’s letters, but it was right, it was essential, for her to know everything. [...] She needed to be alone to consider Robbie afresh, and to frame the opening paragraph of a story

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<sup>20</sup> MCEWAN, *Atonement*, pp. 231-232.

<sup>21</sup> See MCEWAN, *Atonement*, pp. 39-40: «It was a temptation for her to be magical and dramatic, and to regard what she had witnessed as a tableau mounted for her alone, a special moral for her wrapped in a mystery. But she knew very well that if she had not stood when she did, the scene would still have happened, for it was not about her at all. Only chance had brought her to the window. This was not a fairy tale. This was the real, the adult world in which frogs did not address princesses, and the only messages were the ones that people sent». And more, at p. 74: «Planting her feet firmly in the grass, she disposed of her old self year by year in thirteen strokes. She severed the sickly dependency of infancy of early childhood, and the schoolgirl eager to show off and be praised. And the eleven-year-old’s silly pride in her first stories and her reliance on her mother’s good opinion».

<sup>22</sup> The first movement which Briony approaches is modernism, which of the gaze, of the challenge to the limits of representability has made the core of its experimentation (on this aspect see Peter MATTHEWS, “The Impression of a Deeper Darkness: Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*”, «ESC», 32.1 [2006], pp. 147-160). Referring to those pages, it should be noticed how the intrusion of a gaze from above becomes insistent in this phase of transition also for the great number of prolepsis, the references to the meaning which these events would have taken sixty years later.

<sup>23</sup> BROOKS, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 85.

<sup>24</sup> BROOKS, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 85.

shot through with real life. No more princesses! The scene by the fountain [...] the luminous absence shimmering above the wetness on the gravel – all this would have to be reconsidered. [...] With the letter, something elemental, brutal, perhaps even criminal had been introduced [...]<sup>25</sup>.

Beyond the content of the writing, the objects of attention in this analysis are the intersubjective relations and the symbolic circuit created by its arrival into the scene, and the dominant role played by the gaze as a tool of control. As Lacan observed in his examination of Poe's story, the pleasure for the reader – who knows the central element of the enigma from the beginning – is to be a witness from above and to observe how all characters are played. They are unknowingly trapped in a network within which their role is from time to time defined by another authority, up to the final climax: in the end the reader witnesses the total dominance of the letter understood, in metanarrative terms, as a moment in which the narrator turns his gaze to the reader, reaffirming the fictional nature of the story, and, in figurative terms, as the dominance of the unconscious, which is expressed in the repetitions which trap the characters<sup>26</sup>.

According to the Lacanian reading of the three registers called into question in the relationships between the characters, the register of the Real is represented by a character who is unable to see what is happening before his eyes, that is, the interception of the letter; the register of the Imaginary is represented by a character who holds the letter – in this register, the subject uses his strategies to hold the letter but fails because he does not understand that he is seen; and the third register, that of the Symbolic, is that of the thief who is about to enter into action. It is he who holds the authority, the control, and acts accordingly<sup>27</sup>. Therefore, the characters' role slips correspond from time to time to processes of assimilation to the register of the other. It is interesting to observe how in this work the device of the "deviated" letter is multiplied and reflected in more forms, intensifying the focal value of this script. It is certainly not possible to fully adopt the Lacanian scheme on *The Purloined Letter to Atonement*<sup>28</sup>, but it is important to observe that with the 'deviation' of the letter, Briony begins to access the sphere of the other, Cecilia, the true holder of the writing. At the same time, this moment also confirms her access to the register of the Imaginary, in which Briony will be trapped, conditioning her entire interpretation of subsequent events with her fixation on the traumatic content of the letter.

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<sup>25</sup> MCEWAN, *Atonement*, p. 113.

<sup>26</sup> The close link between the letter-reading and the repetition of the traumatic scene of the fountain is reiterated by Briony when, having returned to her room after reading the script, she understands that she has to rethink those scenes in a new light (see MCEWAN, *Atonement*, p. 113). The echo of Robbie's obscene word in Briony's thoughts, its fixation under various forms even typographically, as she says, are all the signs of that moment of fixation of every traumatic scene. McEwan remarks on these effects with the allusions to psychoanalysis in the chapter dedicated to the drafting of the letter by Robbie.

<sup>27</sup> See Jacques LACAN, "Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*", in Jacques LACAN, *Écrits. The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink, in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russel Grigg, New York-London, W. W. Norton and Company, 2006, pp. 6-48; Giovanni BOTTIROLI, "Strutturalismo e strategia in Jacques Lacan. Un'interpretazione della *Lettera rubata*", «Aut Aut», 177 (1980), pp. 95-116; John P. MULLER, William J. RICHARDSON, "Lacan's Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter': Overview", in John P. MULLER, William J. RICHARDSON (eds.), *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading*, Baltimore-London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, pp. 55-76.

<sup>28</sup> For the proposal of an analysis of *Atonement* in its intertextual links with the *Purloined Letter* see Heta PYRHÖNEN, "Purloined Letters in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*", «Mosaic», 45.4 (2012), pp. 103-118.

Briony reaches the climax of the symbolic chain of repetitions during the same evening on which the first part of the novel focuses: from the moment when she sees her sister undressing in front of Robbie, to the reading of the obscene word in Robbie's letter until she enters the library, the reader witnesses a process of approximation of the girl to the pleasure of the other. Briony's misunderstanding of each of these scenes is once again legible within that fixation in the register of the Imaginary in which every hermeneutical capacity is suspended: «Though they were immobile, her immediate understanding was she had interrupted an attack, a hand-to-hand fight. The scene was so entirely a realisation of her worst fears that she sensed that her over-anxious imagination had projected the figures onto the packed spines of books. This illusion, or hope of one, was dispelled as her eyes adjusted to the gloom»<sup>29</sup>.

There is a reversal of roles, where Briony's initial role of the representative of the order is soon upended. She is responsible for the punishment of the honest and unaware protector of the criminal, bringing to extreme consequences the fusion between real and imaginary that began with the fountain scene.

The clearest confirmation of the convergence between fixation in the register of the imaginary and assimilation of the role of the sister, however, can be found in the second part, in which Briony is the only one to assume an entirely fictitious part to insert herself between the links of the plot, acquiring the role of a nurse in the same hospital where Cecilia worked before losing her life.

4. During the scene of the rape of Lola it is possible to notice the total alteration of the function of sight, which becomes a real hallucination, representing the full supremacy of the imaginary over the real: what it is known – or is believed to be known – definitively prevails over what is actually happening. To fully understand the dialectic between the imaginary and the real that culminates with the sexual assault on Lola, which only anticipates what the reader will later learn in the last section of the novel – to have read not the actual course of events but the version imagined by Briony, the established writer – it is necessary, however, to start from the fountain scene as the moment of the genesis of the metanarrative:

The sequence was illogical – the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal. Such was Briony's last thought before she accepted that she did not understand, and that she must simply watch. Unseen, from two storeys up, with the benefit of unambiguous sunlight, she had privileged access across the years to adult behaviour [...] Suddenly the scene was empty; the wet patch on the ground where Cecilia had got out of the pond was the only evidence that anything had happened at all [...] Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through a whole history of literature, [...] one special morning during a heat wave in 1935 [...] When the young girl went back to the window and looked down, the damp patch on the gravel had evaporated<sup>30</sup>.

As soon as the scene is over, Briony has in fact the first thought to represent a «hidden observer like herself»<sup>31</sup>, to insert herself into the story in the role of writer, but above all to stage the very limits of her ability to represent the scene, by rewriting it «three times

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<sup>29</sup> MCEWAN, *Atonement*, p. 123.

<sup>30</sup> MCEWAN, *Atonement*, pp. 39-41.

<sup>31</sup> MCEWAN, *Atonement*, p. 40.



over, from three points of view»<sup>32</sup>. This is the moment in which the subject of the narration becomes the object. The «patch» on the ground, on which Briony's glance insists, acquires metonymic value referring to the role of the *stain* in Lacan's aesthetic theory<sup>33</sup>. It is in this moment that she starts to reflect on the possibility of a new story to write, originated from the (deformed) interpretation of the episode: it is the genesis of *Two Figures by the Fountain*, the first version of her novel. On the metatextual level, the parenthesis between the first departure from the window and her return to it, when the patch has disappeared, is in fact the moment of the gap, of the anamorphosis: Briony has insinuated herself once and for all into the plot of a story which did not belong to her to become the director, fusing real and imaginary<sup>34</sup>. It is starting from this scene that we come to the widest interpretation of the role of the gaze in the work, in which the person who looks ceases to be the subject, but is delivered unto the experience of the Other's gaze, in this case both the real and fictional reader.

Briony's desire to represent the impossibility of depicting the real through the word leads us to the core of McEwan's experimentation. As the scene of the window recalls, the novel originated in that moment becomes the frame of reality, assuming the function of organizing and framing the experience, but it necessarily presents a gap with respect to those events, showing to the readers the very limits of its representation: it is for this reason that the ending is necessarily open, marking the break between itself and the extradiegetic reality which it tried to include in its plot<sup>35</sup>.

Another fundamental point is the close link suggested by Žižek between traumatic scene, interpretation, and creation. The three moments are in fact closely interrelated because the fixation on the traumatic scene of the *jouissance* of the Other<sup>36</sup> freezes the scene, tears it away from its context, distorts it: the interpretation becomes a necessary mediator, which first creates a distance from the moment of the scene. In this regard, it is significant that the novel is narrated at the end of the life of the writer, Briony, and that the writing is repetition at a distance of the fixed events from which their lives have never been freed.

The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms<sup>37</sup>.

The work uses a series of mechanisms of negation and substitution in an attempt to reconstruct the original shattered fullness: Cecilia's story is entirely told by Briony, who tries to put together the pieces of her sister's life and fill in the missing parts through the

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<sup>32</sup> MCEWAN, *Atonement* p. 40.

<sup>33</sup> LACAN, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI*, pp. 97-99.

<sup>34</sup> Briony's words in chapter 7 suggest this fusion: «The cost of oblivious daydreaming was always this moment of return, the realignment with what had been before and now seemed a little worse. Her reverie, once rich in plausible details, had become a passing silliness before the hard mass of the actual. It was difficult to come back. *Come back*, her sister used to whisper when she woke her from a bad dream» (MCEWAN, *Atonement*, p. 76).

<sup>35</sup> See Brian FINNEY, "Briony's Stand against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's 'Atonement'", «Journal of Modern Literature», 27.3 (2004), p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> Slavoj ŽIŽEK, *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997), London-New York, Verso, 2009, p. 115.

<sup>37</sup> MCEWAN, *Atonement*, p. 371.

writings received after death, in an attempt to confess and to atone for her guilt. The last repetition occurs in the end of *Atonement*, where the discovery of the fictionality of the story narrated by Briony leads the reader back to the opening word of the work («the play») to find in the screenplay of the show the first *mise en abîme* of what the reader has witnessed: the drafting of a show never staged.

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