Fictional and Metafictional Strategies in Ian McEwan’s Novel

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You do not even think your own past as quite real; you dress it up, you gild it or blacken it, censor it, tinker with it... fictionalize it, in a word, and put it away on a shelf – your book, your romanced autobiography. We are all in flight from the real reality. That is a basic definition of *Homo sapiens.*

- John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*

With Briony Tallis at its centre Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* explores the line between fiction and reality, as defined within the boundaries of a fictional novel, and how easily this line can be distorted.\(^1\) When Briony is first introduced she is primarily described as an author, underlining the importance imagination holds for her. The literary motifs and symbols that are present within her novel enhance the influence fiction and literature have on her, and this is also mirrored in her characters relationships with literature. She is also described to be a child with “a passion for secrets” (McEwan 5), of which she had none whatsoever. Briony has come to the conclusion that “imagination itself [is] a source of secrets” (6) so when the opportunity presents itself she seizes it. She convinces herself, and those willing to believe it, that certain events have indeed taken place before her eyes, when in fact only bits and pieces are true and the blanks in-between have been filled with a fictional reality she has created herself. In Briony’s mind “[e]verything connected. It was her discovery. It was her story, the one that was writing itself around her” (166). The stories she writes as a child thus function as to foreshadowing future events; Briony is to create a world which in its essence is entirely based on her wild imagination and her longing for a secret of her own. Her imagination, and her love for

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\(^1\) Reality is here McEwan’s fictional reality as perceived by his character Briony and thus the actuality within her novel, i.e. the actuality of events and characters as they are according to the author Briony, rather than as they are imagined to be by her younger self. Whilst fiction is defined as a result of the author Briony’s imagination and thus also her novel, i.e. the story in which actual characters and events in her life have been fictionalized in order to fit the purpose she needs them to serve.
secrets and fictionalizing, are the cause of the tragedy that follows. Although Joe Wright’s film adaptation of *Atonement*, from 2007, is generally faithful to McEwan’s novel, there are some aspects that set these two works apart. Whilst both renderings capture Briony’s story, due to the change of media, do so in different ways and in turn, this contributes to a wider view of Briony and her novel.

In “Foregrounding the Media: *Atonement* (2007) as an Adaptation” Christina Geraghty states that *Atonement* (2007) is an “adaptation which draws attention to its status as an adaptation by foregrounding the use of different media” (107). Thus meaning that references “to the cinema of the period, the so-called golden age of the 1940s,” as well as the “inclusion of documentary footage from ‘the epic of Dunkirk’” (99) along with introducing television as a medium in the adaptation’s “third section” (103), are used “as a specific means of calling attention to its status as an adaptation” (92). Furthermore, Brian Finney states that “[a]ll fiction draws attention to its fictionality by insisting on the particularity of the story it is relating” (Finney 77). This would thus not only be true for the adaptation but also for the novel. Robert Swan claims that McEwan’s novel “masquerades as a realist narration” as it “turns out to be written through [a] fictional creation”, who also appears “to be one of the characters” (Swan). In addition, Briony’s novel is not solely a novel about redemption, or a striving for atonement; it is a novel about literature and one “that insists on making references to its own fictional status as well as to the process of novel writing” (Ellam 41). Pilar Hidalgo corroborates this, stating that “Briony’s nascent literary imagination allows the reader to follow her development […] from folk tales” to “melodrama to modernist and finally realist fiction” (Hidalgo 85), a shift of genre which has been translated in the adaptation as “the use of different media” (Geraghty 107). Whilst Geraghty suggests that the status of the adaptation is highlighted by “foregrounding” (107) various types of media, Hidalgo also claims that Briony’s writing “foregrounds issues of genre and narrative technique” (Hidalgo 85).

Furthermore, there are a number of references to other literary works and authors, some of them largely unobtrusive. For example, Peter Mathews has noticed, what he calls, “[u]nderhand references to Dante […] scattered throughout the novel” (Mathews 156). When Briony meets Robbie, during her meeting with him and her sister, she is described to “imagine prison” (156) in the same way that “people imagined the different torments of hell” (McEwan 341), which appears to be a
reference to the different stages of hell in “Dante’s *Divine Comedy*” (Mathews 156). In addition to this, Mathews also states that the “most important dimension” of the references to Dante “comes from recalling that the deepest and most sinister punishment is reserved, famously, for the traitors (Judas, Brutus), and it is here, at the centre of the web, that Briony installs herself” (157), along with characters belonging to other literary works, such as the Bible. Moreover, literary works, and their characters, are in part used by Briony’s characters as a means of communication. Briony, the character, strives to become Briony the author, thus emphasizing the importance that literature holds to her, both as a character and as the creator of the novel. In writing the novel she has achieved what she has been striving for during the greater part of her life: Briony, the author, can atone for the terrible ordeals that she caused decades previously.

In *Atonement* McEwan explores the line between fiction and imagination, as well as authors’ reliability and narrative levels. He states that he, in *Atonement*, “examine[s] the relationship between what is imagined and what is true”, and whilst McEwan states that “no one will be much interested in whether [Briony] is real or not [as] she will only exist within the frame of the novel” (Reynolds and Noakes 19) he poses the reader to question authorship all together as he makes Briony a character in her own novel. Also, by introducing Briony as a writer, first and foremost, instead of introducing her as a personality, the importance of her as an author is acknowledged. This is also emphasized in Wright’s adaptation, and whilst it could be claimed that “what we see in a normal fiction film has stronger narrational force than what we hear” (Bordwell 20) the inaccuracy of this statement could be indicated by the enhancement of Briony’s “dangerous literary imagination” (Ellam 73) in the adaptation since it “opens with two acts of writing which are rendered inseparable” (Geraghty 96). The sound of a typewriter is heard on several occasions throughout the film, indicating that these moments are particularly significant to the unfolding of the plot. In the novel, however, the reader is introduced to Briony’s imagination, or at least a glimpse of what her imagination can accomplish, due to the fact that Briony has written a play. Ironically, Briony’s play, *The Trials of Arabella*, has some similarities to the story that later unfolds; the fact that they never get to act out the play she has written seems to be in the back of Briony’s head when witnessing the events that take place before her naïve eyes later that same day. In the novel Briony does, however, state that the reason for her play’s failure is that “halfway through” the
At thirteen Briony Tallis is a child who is “possessed by a desire to have the world just so” (4), a desire which serves as more than just a “controlling demon” (5). Her obsessive need to control the world around her is partly demonstrated by the immaculate way in which all the toy animals belonging to her “model farm” are “all facing one way – towards their owner – as if about to break into song” (5), suggesting that Briony sees herself as a god; she is the creator and controller of a fantasy world. This belief is also suggested, in the adaptation of the novel, by “the purposeful way” she types ‘THE END’” (McFarlane 12), thus emphasizing that “the play is her creation and she alone knows when she wants it to stop” (12). Briony clearly wants to be in control and for nothing is to happen without her permission, both in world she is in and the world she uses her imagination to create; “writing stories not only involved secrecy, it also gave her all the pleasures of miniaturisation” (McEwan 7). It is partly this combination: Briony’s love for imagination and her need to “have everything just so” (4) that McEwan uses in order to demonstrate the “power of the written word” (McFarlane 10), this both as “a means of giving shape to experience” as well as “a means of control” (10). Briony’s love for imagination and her need for control are thus vital to her being a writer.

Both Briony’s “passion for tidiness” around her, as well as her love for fiction are satisfied temporarily by writing. She sees herself as being able to make “an unruly world [to be] made just so” (McEwan 7) and that is exactly what she yearns for. However, this is not the only thing that keeps Briony’s thoughts occupied, Robbie describes her as “the sort of girl who lived in her thoughts” (233), imagination is her oxygen; she breathes fiction and without it she can feel herself “shrinking” (76). When Briony translocates from a world she has created to “the world” that, instead, “had made her” (76), she is no longer the person who is in control of everything that happens. As she loses that power of control and transforms into a regular person, a character whose fate she is does not control, Briony ends up feeling helpless. When this happens her first instinct is to regain a position of control and she is immediately filled with a desire, a need and a sense that “she could write a scene” (40) like the one before her – not hesitating for a second to take the present and the reality into her own
hands; writing what she has witnessed in an attempt to, once again, be the person, the
god, who is in control of what happens next.

Due to Briony’s evident need to reside over the world around her, combined
with her being the author of the ensuing novel, the choice of narrator is of utmost
importance. In the film adaptation, the above mentioned “model animals” are not only
“facing in the same direction” but they are almost placed “two by two, as if queuing
for the Ark” (Hampton 1). The combined transference and adaptation of these toy
animals, as well as the biblical reference, adds to the importance that these hold to the
way in which Briony perceives herself. She is the god of the worlds she creates, and
thus her choice of narrator is rather significant. Finney states that life in Atonement
“often imitates fiction, giving recognition to the central role that narrative plays in”
(Finney 78) life. In the first three parts of the novel it appears as though the narrator is
an omniscient one, which could be defined as a narrator who “has the godlike power
of knowing and seeing all actions” (Reynolds and Noakes 189). In having an
omniscient narrator as the narrator of her atonement Briony satisfies her need of
control and the idea of herself as a “godlike” (189) figure.

Briony had lost her godly power of creation, but it was only at this
moment of return that the loss became evident; part of a daydream’s
enticement was the illusion that she was helpless before its logic:
forced by international rivalry to compete at the highest level among
the world’s finest and to accept the challenges that came with pre-
eminence in her field – her field of nettle slashing - driven to push
beyond her limits to assuage the roaring crowd, and to be the best, and,
most importantly, unique. (McEwan 76)

Here the act of “nettle slashing” could be used as a symbol for whatever occupation
Briony feels the need to excel at. She is, first and foremost, a writer and thus her need
to be the best “in her field” (76) would therefore mean the occupation as a writer. This
would give her a true sense of being in control; which as far as Briony is concerned
can only be reached when she feels that she has the all-knowing and ever-changing
power of a god in charge of the world it alone has created. In allowing the narrator to
be a “godlike” (Reynolds and Noakes 189) one Briony makes sure that her last novel,
and thus the last message she leaves behind to the world, is as true to herself as it can
possibly be. It is her first and her last novel and her choice of narrator is thus true to
the way in which she sees herself, both in relation to fiction, as well as in relation to
her evident need to be in control. Although she feels the need to satisfy the “roaring
crowd” Briony does give herself the “godly power of creation” (McEwan 76) that she
desperately needs and strives for in her attempt to control both the real and the fictional. In addition to this, the omniscient narrator combined with the general plot of her novel might indicate that Briony’s actions, her testimony, could be stated to have changed the lives of her characters, thus making her power status that of a writer controlling her fictional world or even that of a “unique” (76) god in charge of its creation. Briony is thus in charge of her characters and the events that unfold within her novel, all according to the purpose Briony feels that they should serve.

In the last part of the novel, and the adaptation, it is revealed that *Atonement*, in fact, is Briony’s “twenty-first novel”. Due to this revelation everything that the reader has read up to that point has to be questioned; all the events in the novel, Briony’s novel rather than McEwan’s, are told by Briony; she has thus “taken a novelist’s license to alter the facts to suit her artistic purposes” (Finney 69). It is, therefore, not the real Robbie and Cecilia who are present within the pages of Briony’s *Atonement* but character versions of the two, drawn from Briony’s memory. Thus, the events and the characters including Briony herself, both as a character and as the revealed author of the novel, have been altered by surrounding factors to suit the plot of the author Briony’s attempt to achieve atonement. Whilst Briony, in the adaptation, states that her novel is “entirely” autobiographical it is not objectively written. Although the author Briony indicates that has read “the letters the lovers wrote” (McEwan 371) to each other, in combination with getting “first-hand accounts of all the events [she] didn’t personally witness” (*Atonement*), it is not possible for Briony to obtain a complete picture of any event, not even of those she witnessed herself. Briony is far too subjective for any of the events to be viewed objectively. It could thus be claimed that she has drawn conclusions, summarized and concluded what must have happened, based on her memory as well as what she has been informed of later on. Briony has attempted to “project herself into the thoughts and feelings of her characters, an act that is crucial to her search for forgiveness” (Finney 75). Due to her novel being her atonement, for what she did to her “sister and her medical prince” (McEwan 371), Briony has tried to do them justice. Robbie and Cecilia’s love as central theme in her novel is part in Briony’s attempt to give them in fiction “what they lost out on in life”; a way for her to give “them their happiness” (*Atonement*).

Fiction is the tool Briony turns to when she needs to be the one in charge; she has come to the realization that fiction is more than written words on pages in a novel;
“a story [is] a form of telepathy”, it is not only a tool used to be in charge, in control, but it is also used “to send thoughts and feelings from her mind to her reader’s”. To Briony, at the age of thirteen, it is more than just a tool; in her mind the ability to transfer her thoughts and ideas to a piece of paper is “a magical process, so commonplace that no one stop[s] to wonder at it” (37). Later, once she realizes the consequences of “her crime” (156), this is, however, the tool she chooses to use in her attempt to re-write history. It is then, not up to her, to say when the story comes to an end; reality has written it for her and her only chance for redemption is to replace this ending with a fictional one. It is, according to Brian Finney, Briony’s need to position herself as “a narrator in her fictionalized scenario of events” (Finney 75) that is the reason for the creation of her lie, and it is due to this that the older Briony tries to re-write the events following those taking place before her thirteen-year-old naïve self. She uses the same tool to re-write what she wrote in the first place; the narration is her only savior and she is to be the omniscient narrator in the story that destroyed the lives of two people she loved, as well as her own. It is due to this “inability to disentangle life from the literature” (Finney 79) that shapes her life, starting at the young age of thirteen, if not sooner. Literature thus has a profound influence over Briony, which causes her to “[impose] the patterns of fiction on the facts of life” (79). It is when she later “acts out” this “confusion between life and the life of fiction” (69) that she entangles life and fiction in a way that makes it impossible for her to separate the two for the rest of the life. Briony will be forever trapped in a world in which the differences between fiction and reality are hardly noticeable. She manages to blur the line between fiction and reality, in her mind, almost completely.

In Briony’s mind, however, that line is very thin, and during the hot summer of 1935 she crosses it both consciously and accidentally; first in her own mind and later actually. As she witnesses the interactions between Cecilia and Robbie, taking place by the fountain, she becomes aware of the fact that her life is no longer, if it ever even was, “a fairy tale”. Her life has changed, she is a part of the “real” world, “the adult world”, a world “in which frogs did not address princesses, and the only messages were the ones that people sent” (McEwan 40). The realization of this sudden change, a change she was not in charge of, makes her feel smaller; more insignificant, and so she again sets herself the challenge to retake control. Briony needs a world she can control, a world in which frogs “address princesses” (40), a world in which fiction is the only reality. She does, however, realize that somewhere
between talking frogs and castles she has to grow up, and so she waits on the line between fiction and reality, “calm and obstinate, until events, real events, not her own fantasies,” causes her to rise to her “challenge, and” to dispel “her insignificance” (77).

It is when she stands on the line that separates her imagination from the reality she lives in that Briony is caught in a moment of time during which her interpretation of everything that happens in her presence is colored by her inventive imagination. Finney explains her interpretation of “Robbie’s shocking love letter” as one “literary genre” being exchanged “for another”. Fairy tales are no longer an option, there will be no “more princesses” due to the “darkness” (McEwan 113) and fear that Robbie’s letter has introduced her to. This realization combined with the scene she witnesses in the library colors her every thought during the rest of the evening, and the weeks and months that follows. Finney explains this incessant need to dramatize by Briony having been shaped “by a melodramatic imagination that originates in the books she has read” (Finney 79), and so fiction and imagination is to be blamed for the truth that Briony creates for herself. Whilst she can be seen as a victim, of her own overactive imagination, Briony is also a “purposeful and malign[ant]” child who “sends a man to prison with a lie” (228). Although it is not, according to Briony herself, her intention to send Robbie to prison it is the result of her lie, which in turn originates in her obsession with the fictional and the imagined. This obsession, caused by books she has read, is clearly visible within the pages of her own novel.

However, Briony is not the sole character in her novel to have a weakness for the fictional. Judging by Robbie’s reflections concerning literature, as well as the impact that literary works seem to have on him, it is clear that he has “a deep relationship with writing and storytelling” (Reynolds and Noakes 19). Robbie surrounds himself with “copies of Auden’s *Poems* and Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad*,” but the book that appears to be of most significance is not a work of fiction but a work of science; “[c]losest to where Robbie sat were the books of his new interest. *Gray’s Anatomy* was open by a folio pad of his own drawing” (McEwan 82). Under the influence of fiction, and the importance that it appears to hold to him, Robbie is convinced that he will “be a better doctor for having read literature” (93). Although not fictional this medical book appears to be of great importance to Robbie’s future as it clearly, as shown in the adaptation of the novel, affects his judgment when writing his letter to Cecilia. Robbie leaves his “handwritten letter” in his copy of *Gray’s*
Anatomy as the ‘wrong’ note makes its way to both Briony and Cecilia, with dire consequences. As the letter is described to be resting on “page 1546, the vagina” (94) combined with the influence that this page appears to have had on the ‘wrong’ note (85-86) it would appear probable that these events highlight the importance of this particular book, as well as the importance of the written word. Furthermore, a copy of this book is present in Briony’s imagined meeting with Robbie and Cecilia; in Briony’s fictional version of the apartment she never entered “a pile of books” is visible, and at “the bottom were *Gray’s Anatomy* and a collected Shakespeare” (335). The occurrence of this book in Briony’s imagined version could suggest that Briony, the author, finds this book to be of great significance to Robbie and Cecilia’s relationship in relation to literature.

Robbie and Cecilia share a profound relationship with literature, which thus plays a leading role in their relationship. Not only does the most profound moment in their relationship take place inside a library, they also turn to literature, as well as imagination, in order to build a foundation for the possibility of a future together. Due to Robbie and Cecilia writing “about literature and us[ing] characters as codes” (204) literature manages to enter “deeply into the fabric of [their] lives” (Finney 78). They do not, however, simply use characters as codes; “a quiet corner in a library” is used as a “code for sexual ecstasy” (McEwan 204). However, even before being the location for a deeply signifying moment between Robbie and Cecilia, the library holds a certain importance to their relationship, as it is Robbie’s sole excuse for entering the Tallis’ household. McEwan uses this location as a trigger for different stages in their relationship, it is when borrowing a book “from the Tallis library” that Robbie first notices “his awkwardness in her presence” (84). This suggests that it is during this short moment in the library when he starts to realize that there has been a radical change in their relationship; he “had spent three years dryly studying the symptoms, which had seemed no more than literary conventions, and now […] he was worshipping her traces” (84). They are no longer simply acquaintances or even just friends, there is an obvious attraction between the two, and Robbie relives the memory of that shared, but fleeting, moment of realization that they shared in the library, by reading the book that “she had handed” him “from the library steps”. He treats the book; inhaling the scent of it, as though the “leather surface” not only holds “her fingerprints” (84) but an imprint of that moment in itself. Cecilia, on the other hand, later tells him, as she writes to him in prison, that she “went to the library […]
to get the anatomy book [she] told [him] about” before finding “a quiet corner” where she “pretended to read”. Literature is thus a tool used, by both Robbie and Cecilia, in attempts to “[feed] on the same memories” (205) of the past they shared together. Whilst the memories of their past appear to be the main focus of their choice of literature, there is also a mutual longing for a future together, which they will never share due to Briony’s wild and obsessive imagination. As a result, certain words and objects feature more prominently than others in order for Briony to highlight the importance that they hold.

Because Briony is trapped within the boundaries of her own imagination she has, in writing her novel, managed to hold Robbie and Cecilia captive in her imaginative world. As Briony finds the two in the library she “sense[s] that her over-anxious imagination ha[s] projected the figures onto the packed spines of books” (McEwan 123), she is thus caught between the realization of how powerful her imagination is. This description also suggests that Briony, the author, foreshadows the later revelation that the novel is her creation. Furthermore, during her imagined scene Briony watches as Cecilia “draw[s] [Robbie] into her gaze, until their faces me[e]t and she kisse[s] him lightly, lingeringly on the lips” before telling him to “come back” with “a tenderness that Briony remember[s]” (McEwan 343) from when she was younger. Since Briony is the author, and thus the creator of the fictionalized reality of which they are part of, Cecilia’s choice of words when addressing Robbie during his arrest are evidently of great significance. Judging from the letters that Robbie has received from Cecilia the phrase “[c]ome back” (McEwan 210) could be stated to “signify the bond between them and emphasize her faith in him despite his arrest” (Ellam 29). Finney argues that the phrase is used as “a recurring psychological motif based on Briony’s two compelling characteristics – her passion for order and her powerful imagination” (Finney 75). Due to being, in part, the same phrase uttered by Cecilia in her attempts to “rescue” Briony from “nightmare[s]”, as she told Briony to “[c]ome back” while insisting that she “was only [having] a bad dream” (McEwan 349). These words could thus indicate that Cecilia is hereby suggesting to Robbie that they have entered a nightmare, caused by Briony’s powerful imagination. The phrase gathers further significance when used by Cecilia as a means of calming Robbie down in a scenario imagined by Briony, during which she also apologizes to the couple. Briony having Cecilia use it during a meeting that she has imagined highlights the importance and meaning that this phrase holds for Briony, as well as for her
characters. As a result, the words not only signify a never-ending nightmare in which all three of them are trapped, but they “also epitomize [Robbie and Cecilia’s] romantic love for each other as formulated by Briony” (Ellam 29).

At the same time, whilst the repeated phrase “come back” (McEwan 343) could be seen as a metaphor for the terrible circumstances, caused by Briony's powerful imagination, the vase “which Cecilia and Robbie struggle over at the fountain” could be seen as a symbol for their future together. As the vase breaks, during the scene by the fountain, their future is compromised as “Briony’s imaginative misunderstanding of this scene feeds into her castigation of him later” (Ellam 50). Influenced by literature, imagination and her love and longing for a secret causes her to interpret the scene taking place before Briony’s naïve eyes serve to confirm her perception of Robbie as having a wild and sexual nature and indeed for being a “sex-maniac” (*Atonement*). In turn, the breaking of the vase appears to be juxtaposed with the terrible circumstances that play a part in the events that later sends Robbie to prison, and in turn to Dunkirk and his death. In the third part of Briony’s novel Emily Tallis informs Briony, the character, that the vase has been dropped and “shattered” (McEwan 279), and thus broken beyond repair. As author, Briony has, by this point in the novel, already started to alter the events to fit her purpose. This would suggest that all possibility for Robbie and Cecilia to share a future together has been ruined along with the vase. During her imagined meeting with Cecilia the vase is mentioned in passing as Briony tells her sister that it has been “properly broken, in lots of pieces”, after which Cecilia asks if they “keep the pieces” (333). The pieces of the vase are here the broken fragments of Robbie and Cecilia’s future together, and Cecilia’s inquiry suggests that she wants to make sure that these fragments are kept, in order for Briony to do her best to repair the damage that has been done. Briony’s imagined meeting with the couple could, therefore, be her attempt to repair the vase; she gives Robbie and Cecilia the only future she can at that point. Since the vase features so prominently throughout the novel it could be claimed that Briony, the author, views this real vase to be of great significance to what happened, and has thus fictionalized it in order to turn it into a metaphor.

In Briony’s mind the act of changing reality into fiction does, however, not always occur on purpose. In the mind of the character Briony, as opposed to Briony the author, it is suggested that this change takes place as a result of her inability to
Briony is in fact convincing herself that her fictionalization of the events is the true account of what happened. Due to her convincing herself of the previous events playing out just as she imagined them to she is able to use the knowledge of that being her truth in convincing herself that the man she sees with Lola is in fact Robbie, when in reality it “was too dark for that” (169). Furthermore, the location of Lola’s rape stands to add further to Briony’s “confusion between life and the life of fiction” (Finney 69). In the film adaptation the symbolic meaning of the location is enhanced as Briony is visualized to be sitting in the ruins, her writing exposed to the viewer in a rapid voice-over. The location in question is thus suggested to be symbolically linked to both imagination and fiction, and as Briony enters the area, in search for the twins, she is translocated into an imaginary world in which events unfold according to her will, and where the characters are her creations. It is thus improbable that Briony will be able to separate reality from fiction, because the location is too closely connected to what she has imagined. Moreover, the consequences that are caused by Briony’s inability to separate fact from fiction “are tragic and irreversible – except in the realm of fiction” (69), consequences which she evidently feels guilty for.

There is an evident guilt in Briony, due to the “terrible distress” (McEwan 348) that she has caused Robbie and Cecilia. This is acknowledged in the adaptation by her “frantic hand scrubbing”, and although it “is motivated on a realistic level by the need for sterile cleanliness in the wards; on another, it is as if she is trying to cleanse herself from her sense of guilt” (McFarlane 14). Whilst her incessant hand scrubbing is an apparent indicator of her evident guilt Briony must turn to fiction in order to cleanse herself from her guilt, thus “the only conceivable solution would be for the past never to have happened” (McEwan 288) in the first place. According to Briony the only thing that can change the consequences that has been brought on by her overactive imagination, thus also fiction, is to use fiction against itself. Finney states that Briony
In creating a fictionalized replica of her life and the people in it the author Briony is able to, once again, retake the position of command; Briony is thus the creator and controller of the fictionalized world and thus she is the one in charge of what is to happen. Her choice of re-write is, however, crucial to the unfolding of the plot, the “scenes of [Robbie and Cecilia] together in the book are Briony’s atonement. She has given them in fiction the happiness which, thanks to Briony’s [the character’s] crime, they never had in fact” (Cohen 43). In the adaptation, the author Briony states that she “for a very long time [had] decided to tell the absolute truth: no rhymes, no embellishments” (Atonement), and even though she “regarded it as [her] duty to disguise nothing” (McEwan 369) she ends up doing just that. With the power that comes along with being an author, Briony tries to change her reality in giving Robbie and Cecilia fictional “happiness” (372), instead of the factual tragedy they both endured, and in addition, she tries change the actions of her fictionalized self. It is revealed that she “was too much of a coward to go see [her] sister in June 1940”, and thus her confession to Robbie and Cecilia “is imagined, invented” (Atonement). Therefore, in making the character Briony do what she herself did not, the author Briony is able to do in fiction what she never did in real life. Although the reality might be different Briony states that as “long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of [her] final draft, then [her] spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love” (McEwan 371). Thus, Briony appears to claim that the power of the written word is strong enough to change certain elements of the past, or how it is remembered. Although Finney states that Briony’s novel is simply “an attempt at atoning for a past that she cannot reverse” (Finney 69) she is aware that they are all “fixed in the unchangeable past” (McEwan 348). Briony is thus not attempting to reverse the past, or to change it altogether, her attempt is simply to re-write a part of it. Here, the concept of re-writing has a distinct double meaning: Briony keeps re-writing her novel in an attempt to re-write her past. As Briony realizes that no “sense or hope or satisfaction” could be “draw[n]” (371) from her reality, she creates an alternative universe in which the story ends differently. Due to the power of the
written word it is, however, the version in print that will be remembered rather than
the true reality.

The most significant difference between Briony’s reality and her novel appears to be her imagined meeting with Robbie and Cecilia, during which she confesses and apologizes to them. Due to the scene being completely “imagined” and “invented” (Atonement), by the author Briony, it shows how she uses this power to give herself an opportunity to set things right, and “by claiming this particular story – in which the lovers end happily – as her truth [Briony] achieves a measure of self-acceptance, if not self-forgiveness” (D’Hoker 41). It is here that Briony “for a moment” even “thought of defending herself” (McEwan 336). However, the narrator only comments on this in passing. Briony is “not so self-serving as to let them forgive” (372) her, which indicates that the main purpose of her imagined meeting with the couple is not to defend herself, but simply to seek a forgiveness that neither her sister nor Robbie provide her with, in addition to giving her characters their lives back. The character Briony is described to be “in a part of the conversation she had rehearsed” (337), partly indicating that the author Briony indeed has imagined this meeting taking place a number of times. It also enhances the fictionality of the story: the meeting has been rehearsed almost as if part of a play.

Moreover, the importance of literature, and the power of the written word, as according to the author Briony, is enhanced by Robbie’s demand that Briony “write [him] a detailed letter” (Atonement). The significance is, however, handled differently in the novel and the adaptation. In the novel Robbie states that it “needs to be a long letter”, and that Briony is to put “absolutely everything [she] think[s] is relevant” (McEwan 345) in it while in the film adaptation he demands that she “write it all down, no rhymes, no embellishments, no adjectives” (Atonement), Geraghty claims that Robbie’s words “suggests that writing can tell the truth in a way that cinema cannot” (Geraghty 103). His words could, however, also indicate that it is not the words that are of great importance but the story itself. In addition, it could, however, be a reference to the fictionality of the meeting: the author Briony states that whilst she had intended to “tell the absolute truth, no rhymes, no embellishments”, when writing her novel she could no longer “imagine what purpose would be served by it” (Atonement). The importance of the fictionality of the scene is here highlighted in the adaptation rather than in the novel; in the novel Briony refers to the same act by stating that she “can no longer think what purpose would be served” by it (McEwan
370). In replacing the word “think” (370), with the word “imagine” (*Atonement*), the
importance of Briony’s imagination is acknowledged. Thus indicating that her
imagination not only caused her to ruin Robbie and Cecilia’s lives, but that it also
allowed her to write “a new draft, an atonement”, in order to preserve “[t]heir love” as
if “[n]either Briony nor the war had destroyed it” (McEwan 349).

The truth concerning Briony’s final draft is revealed in the final part of both
the novel and in the adaptation. In the novel, there is a change of narrator in the last
part; Briony turns into a first-person narrator and thus the author version and the
character version of her blend together: **reality** and **fiction** merges. In the adaptation
this shift from third-person to first-person narration has been translated into a shift
from film to interview, a shift which Geraghty suggests is used in order to show that
“television is the medium through which the truth will be told” (Geraghty 103). This
could, however, be a translation of the merging of the fictionalized Briony and the
author version of her; as the shift from film to interview takes place the fictional film
is merged with the documentary-like interview, thus merging **reality** with **fiction**. The
first-person narrative in the novel, along with the change of medium in the adaptation,
both indicate that something is to be revealed. In the adaptation Briony’s confession
is, however, given a lot more focus than in the novel. Although revealing that “Robbie
Turner died of septicaemia” and that “Cecilia was killed” (McEwan 370) by the
“bomb that destroyed the gas and water mains above Balham tube station” (*Atonement*)
the confession appears to be more significant in the adaptation. Close-ups of the old Briony,
focusing on her face and her eyes, make her confession more personal. Furthermore, the adaptation reveals the **reality** of what happened as Briony
tells it; with a voice-over, the first-person narration is translated to the adaptation.
Briony’s confession is, however, in its essence the same in both the novel and the
adaptation; her “sister and Robbie never had the time together they both so longed for
and deserved” thus she simply “wanted to give [them] what they lost out on in life”: she
“gave them their happiness” (*Atonement*). In the novel Briony leaves the two
“standing side by side on a South London pavement” (McEwan 370), in comparison
to the adaptation, in which they are seen “below the towering white cliffs on their way
back to their white clipboard cottage” (Hampton 92) as seen on Cecilia’s photograph.
They are forever “safely inside” (Geraghty 105) their “happy ending” (106).

In conclusion, Briony manages to blur the line between fiction and reality
without first intending to do so; her over-active imagination causes her to falsely
accuse Robbie Turner for a crime he did not commit. Her love for fiction, in combination with her wild imagination, has made it nearly impossible for her to separate fiction from reality. In an attempt to atone for her crime, a crime that made a future for her sister Cecilia and Robbie unreachable, she turns to what induced her to cause this tragedy in the first place: fiction. In fictionalizing not only people and objects, but also the events that take place, Briony is able to use the past as she remembers it in order to create a *fictional* future. Briony’s novel is thus her atonement, a way in which she can give her sister and her medical prince what she deprived them of in reality, as perceived by her. By blurring the line between fiction and reality, as defined by the boundaries of her novel, Briony gives Robbie and Cecilia a future, if not in real life than at least within the pages of her book. The power of the written word thus ensures that Briony’s fictionalized reality, the fictionalized replica of her life that she has accepted to be her own truth, provides her character versions of her sister and Robbie with a never-ending future together. Thus, Briony has managed to give her sister and Robbie a future in fiction, whilst they lost out of one together in reality.
Works Cited


