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VEILED TRUTH IN *ENDURING LOVE* AND *ATONEMENT*

Abstract

The article tries to demonstrate that Ian McEwan's novels, *Enduring Love* and *Atonement*, are similarly concerned with the way in which fiction writing is more apt to veil "truth" than to unveil it, also to invite partial readings of "reality" than to offer wide-ranging perspectives on it.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, fiction-writing, veiled truth, failed reading

"It isn't true, but it tells the truth."

Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

Postmodernist fiction customarily abandons the omniscient narrator apparently because of the distrust in it as an effective narrative device since reality cannot be perceived accurately from a wide-ranging perspective. In addition, one cannot "read" somebody else's mind. Yet, the omniscient viewpoint cannot be abandoned completely and this is what we see in two of McEwan's novels, *Enduring Love* and *Atonement*. There still is an omniscient narrator in both novels, yet the story it tells is undermined by other stories or other storytellers. What I want to demonstrate here is that "truth" remains hidden because the omniscient viewpoint no longer works being countermined by the multiple versions of the same story. McEwan himself talks about his sense of guilt born out of his incapacity to write a proper realist story about World War II and to lift the veil on that specific truth. As J. Hillis Miller writes,

a lie, in any case, is a piece of language that does not correspond truly to the mind that seems to have generated it. In an analogous way, a work of fiction, however much it seems to have been authored by a single mind, to be safely anchored there, may be no more than a free-floating sequence of words that creates the phantasmal illusion of some mind, that of the narrator, that of the author, that of this character or that, though none of these stands apart from language as an independent preexisting entity. This baselessness, it may be, is the mode of existence of any lie or of any work of fiction. (1998: 151-52)

Enduring Love was published in 1997 and *Atonement* in 2001, and they share this distrust in the so-called "truth" and in the human capacity to unveil it. As Nick Rennison describes it, *Enduring Love* is "one of McEwan's finest novels, a brilliantly gripping account of one man's attempt to retain

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narrative control of his life as it seems to be slipping into chaos and contingency” (2005: 88). *Enduring Love* is the story of Joe Rose and Clarissa Mellon whose love-story is shattered by a tragic balloon accident that kills an innocent man, John Logan. The accident brings together several characters who try to save a little boy and his grandfather from imminent death. During the tense moments of panic and of the ensuing salvage operation, Jed Parry, one of the rescuers, falls in love with Joe Rose and gets the idea that he is also loved by the man. There follows a story of harassment and stalking which ends in the erotomaniac’s imprisonment and a happy closure for the heterosexual couple.

Atonement is in Frank Kermode’s opinion McEwan’s finest novel as it reflects the writer’s skill, which “has here developed to the point where it gives disquiet as well as pleasure” (2001: 8-9). It tells the story of another couple, Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner, who get separated by the war and by a terrible misunderstanding. Robbie is accused of rape and is imprisoned, then sent to war, on account of the false testimony of Briony, Cecilia’s little sister. The novel is in fact an act of atonement because Briony, now old and ill, writes a love-story with a happy-ending for the two lovers who actually died because of her false testimony.

In the novels’ opening, characters of both novels experience intense crises that will change their views on themselves and others. These predicaments also affect the way in which characters perceive reality. The crisis in *Atonement* consists in the alleged rape of Lola. The incident will offer Briony the opportunity to interfere in the lives of all other characters and change them radically. In *Enduring Love* the crisis consists in a balloon accident that allows Jed Parry to interfere in Joe and Clarissa’s love story and alter their relationship as well as their views on life. When the crises are over, characters are presented in both stories as they try to reconstruct the “truth” through their story-telling. Yet, stories differ from one another because story-tellers are also different. Furthermore, stories differ because, as we have seen, the truth is always veiled.

Atonement is basically a love story fated to end tragically because of two interfering agents: on the one hand, a little girl, Briony, who unknowingly (at least, this is what the reader is made to believe in the opening of the novel) destroys the couple’s happiness and, on the other hand, the horrors of World War II that put an end to the high hopes of an entire generation. The first part of the novel starts on a summer day of 1935. The lovers, Cecilia and Robbie, have hardly entered a torrid affair when the girls’ cousin, Lola, is raped. Though the readers may easily guess the rapist’s identity because they are guided judiciously to see the story from a wider perspective, the supposedly blameless Briony mistakes his identity and sends Robbie to prison thus cutting short all his expectations of a better life and a happy union with Cecilia. The second part of the story is set in 1940 when the British troops are evacuated from Dunkirk. Robbie is allowed to change prison for the war trenches and Cecilia works in a hospital after she has completely severed any connection with her own family. Meanwhile, Briony has also decided to work as a nurse out of her wish to meet Cecilia and ask for her forgiveness or, perhaps, out of her need for atonement. In Part Three the appalling reality of the war comes to England and the plot revolves now around Briony and the hospital she works in, which is invaded by Dunkirk’s injured bodies. It is only in the epilogue, set in 1999, that we find out that the text we have just read is in fact Briony’s confession and not an objective historical record written by a detached narrator. *Atonement* is therefore dialogic not only in Bakhtin’s sense of the word but also in the sense that the text is composed around various points of view, with the concluding authority given to Briony.

Enduring Love is assembled in the same manner, gravitating around fragmentariness of identity and its impact on the way in which people tell their or others’ stories. The only difference here is that Joe Rose – the authoritative voice – remains trustworthy to the end of the story because we come up to the conclusion that he is right, while in *Atonement* Briony – the authoritative voice – is wrong since Robbie is a good man whom she has wronged unpardonably.

Misreading of scenes by these authoritative voices occurs on many occasions in the two novels. *Enduring Love* begins in a spectacular way: a peaceful picnic of two lovers is suddenly interrupted by a tragic balloon accident which triggers “the convergence of six figures in a flat green space” (*EL*, 2), unexpectedly united by the “comforting geometry” (*ibid.*) of destiny. The unfortunate event brings together several men who would have remained disconnected otherwise: Joe Rose, a freelance science writer, John Logan, an Oxford family doctor, two farm workers, an advertising executive, and, last but not least, Jed Parry, a young unemployed man. The accident, which results in

the death of Logan, serves in this novel as a means of bringing characters together, but also of bringing their reports together:

[Five] men running silently towards the centre of a hundred-acre field. I approached from the south-east, with the wind at my back. About two hundred yards to my left two men ran side by side. [...] The same distance beyond them was the motorist, John Logan, whose car was banked on the grass verge with its door, or doors, wide open. Knowing what I know now, it's odd to evoke the figure of Jed Parry directly ahead of me, emerging from a line of beeches on the far side of the field... (*EL*, 2)

Logan's wife mistrusted her husband and believed that he had been cheating on her right before his death and that his courage was in fact an act of showing off in front of his supposed mistress. Joe now tries to absolve the dead man's guilt and to convince her that her husband didn't cheat on her. While doing so, Joe ignores the fact that he himself has got entangled in a strange relationship with Jed Parry immediately after the accident. On the place of the disaster, Jed gets infatuated with Joe and starts to believe that they share a secret affection. At first, Joe is not very firm in denying the erotomaniac's delirium. According to Lynn Wells,

Joe's ambivalence about Jed becomes subconsciously associated with his fear that Logan's wife, Jean, will accuse him of cowardice; he identifies his needs to face what he expects to be her accusation of murder and absolve himself in his eyes as the centre of his story, without directly acknowledging the connection between the two sources of guilt. (2010: 73)

Joe's narration will be trusted because, as Clarissa will say, "It isn't true, but it tells the truth." (*EL*, 169)

The balloon scene is viewed differently by each of those involved. Clarissa, Joe's wife, perceives the scene of Logan's death as being a sacrifice for the sake of her unborn child, as a stranger's impossible act of expiation of her own guilt:

What was revealed was Clarissa's own mourning for a phantom child, willed into half-being by frustrated love ... Now, in John Logan she saw a man prepared to die to prevent the kind of loss she felt herself to have sustained... His kind of love pierced Clarissa's defences. With that pleading note – he was a good man – she was asking her own past, her ghost child to forgive her. (*EL*, 31)

After the climactic crisis they experience in both novels, it is understandable that characters attempt to take control over their lives by means of narrow authoritarian narrative viewpoints. They even hope that "a particular narrative or way of ordering and shaping experience will help them to endure, and, subsequently, ideally, understand the world" (Childs, 2007: 57). Joe, for example, attributes the failure of saving that child to selfishness, which, he argues, was written in their hearts:

So can we accept that it was right, every man for himself (...) We never had that comfort, for there was a deeper covenant, ancient and automatic, written in our nature. Co-operation – the basis of our earliest hunting successes, the force behind our evolving capacity for language, the glue of our social cohesion [...] But letting go was in our nature too. Selfishness is also written on our hearts. This is our mammalian conflict – what to give to the others, and what to keep for yourself. Treading that line, keeping the others in check, and being kept in check by them, is what we call morality. (*EL* 14)

Briony writes a whole novel from her adult perspective and puts all the details of her vicious deeds as a matter of historical record in order to help her endure an acute sense of guilt. "There was our crime – Lola's, Marshall's, mine – and from the second version onward I set out to describe it. I've regarded it as my duty to disguise nothing – the names, the places, the exact circumstances – I put it all there as a matter of historical record" (A, 349). But she fabricates simultaneously a concocted story told from three dissimilar points of view because "she need only show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive [...] it was the failure to grasp

the simple truth that other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value” (A, 38).

The same feeling of remorse is to be grasped in Joe’s assertion: “I had helped kill John Logan. But even as I felt the nausea of guilt return, I was trying to convince myself I was right to let go. If I hadn’t, Logan and I might have dropped together” (EL, 32). What Jed Parry understands from the whole story is that Joe is actually the one who needs help and that Logan’s death was a sign from above proving the reality of their love from the beginning: “This man is in shock. He wants me to help him” (EL 20). He truly believes that he is a messenger sent by God in order to fulfil his mission, that he has been endowed with a sacred gift: “I don’t think you understand. You shouldn’t, you know, think of this as some kind of duty? It’s like, your own needs are being answered? It’s got nothing to do with me, really, I’m just the messenger. It’s a gift” (EL, 25).

In both novels characters fall from some state of grace and start reading the story erroneously. It happens as such with Briony in *Atonement* and with Joe, Jed, and Clarissa in *Enduring Love*. All those involved in the accidents or incidents that trigger a dramatic change in their lives are readers who try to make sense of their experience. In the library scene, when Briony sees her sister making love to Robbie, we witness the scene first through the eyes of the highly imaginative, yet innocent, little sister and then, when the Tallises and their guests gather for dinner, Robbie rewinds the erotic scene in his mind once again, overwhelmed with desire and incapable to understand the consequences of their act:

The narrative order is reversed here: we see first the abrupt end of the scene by Briony’s coming into the library, and in the next chapter, while all the characters are having dinner, Robbie remembers what had happened a half hour before in the library and thus contradicts Briony’s interpretation. (Hidalgo, 2005: 86)

Another scene in which the two versions of the same event are to be seen at work is the fountain incident, in Chapter 2, when Briony looks from the nursery’s window and sees what she believes to be a sort of confrontation between Cecilia and Robbie. Briony herself accepts the fact that she does not understand what is going on under her own eyes, yet she continues to interpret what remains incomprehensible to her: “[She] accepted that she did not understand, and that she must simply watch. Unseen, from two stories up, with the benefit of unambiguous sunlight, she had privileged access across the years to adult behaviour, to rites and conventions she knew nothing about, as yet” (A 37).

Robbie has just broken a precious vase and Cecilia dives in the water of the garden fountain to fetch it. The first version belongs to the omniscient narrator:

Cecilia and Robbie froze in the attitude of their struggle. Their eyes met, and what she saw in the bilious mélange of green and orange was not shock, or guilt, but a form of challenge, or even triumph. [...] She kicked off her sandals, unbuttoned her blouse and removed it, unfastened her skirt and stepped out of it and went to the basin wall. He stood with hands on his hips and stared as she climbed into the water in her underwear. Denying his help, any possibility of making amends, was his punishment. She held her breath, and sank, leaving her hair fanned out across the surface. Drowning herself would be his punishment. When she emerged a few seconds later with a piece of pottery in each hand, he knew better than to offer to help her out of the water. (A, 28-9)

The second version of the same episode is depicted through Briony’s eyes:

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? [...] Cecilia, mercifully 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. (A, 36-7)

She first interprets the scene as one of a fairy tale: a man of humble origin is aspiring to the hand of the princess. “She immediately begins to make mistakes when she interprets Robbie’s gesture as a command that Cecilia dared not disobey. The transition in Briony’s imagination from romance to realism is marked at this moment by a terrible irony whose full impact the reader will discover much later” (Hidalgo, 86). It all seems very clear. The only problem is that this apparently objective comment belongs to Briony herself as we will find out in the last section of the novel. As we are to learn later, there is only one narrator and one story only: Briony and her own story.

In the beginning of *Enduring Love*, Clarissa and Joe reflect on the death of John Logan, and they both deny the existence of God, considering that “Logan’s death was pointless – that was the part of the reason we were in shock. Good people sometimes suffered and died, not because their goodness was being tested, but precisely because there was nothing, no one to test it. No one but us” (*EL*, 32).

Yet, Clarissa and Joe are cast from the beginning in the classical roles of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden just before the fall and there are critics, such as Timothy Bewes, who consider the novel to be “concerned with a fundamental philosophical theme—the conflict between rationalism and religion” (2000: 429). Indeed, the picnic scene is a reiteration of the Biblical heavenly garden before the fatal temptation occurs. They enter a sentimental and identity crisis immediately after the accident and they are “cast out of their innocence and separated from one another” (Childs, 55). In their case, the capital sin eventually proves to be a Miltonic *felix culpa* as the conclusion of the novel describes the two reunited in a more profound relationship: “I caught Clarissa’s eye and we exchanged a half smile, and it was as if we were pitching in our own request for mutual forgiveness, or at least tolerance...” (*EL*, 230)

In *Atonement*, the fall is not just a punishment for one’s sins; it is *lex talionis*, the law of the talion, which requires that a person who has sinned be penalized in strict accordance to her sin: “Sin is not just an offence against God; it is a debt that, under the old law of Moses, must be repaid” (Mathews, 2006: 153). Briony destroys her sister’s love story and will have to give it back to her. Since such a thing is not possible in reality, as she cannot undo what she has done, she will give her sister an imaginary story instead. The fact that Briony is not forgiven by her sister and brother-in-law leads the protagonist to torture herself and to fictionalize a better destiny for her own victims. She pays her “debt” to her victims – Cecilia and Robbie – by writing a story, actually a love story, with a happy ending. As Childs comments, “Briony Tallis carries a childhood mistake all her life and, having atoned in the only way she feels she can, looks forward to escaping through illness and senility the albatross of an unalterable past to which she can only bear witness” (130).

In the other novel, the connection between sin and retribution is more explicit. An interesting detail that Peter Childs remarks in *Enduring Love* is that the surnames of the lovers – Rose and Mellon – also hint at the biblical story of the fall: “The surnames ‘Rose’ and ‘Mellon’, with their associations of love and fruit (bringing Adam and Eve to mind), are thus used in the essay alongside that of the character with whom Joe fights: ‘Parry’” (92). After the actual fall of John Logan and the symbolical fall of Joe and Clarissa there follows a sense of a straightforward distinction of good from bad. That is because fall here, exactly like in the Bible, stands for knowledge. As Harold Bloom explains, “the Genesis text does support that view, since the serpent promises Eve ‘that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God knowing good and evil’” (165). And indeed, Joe understands gradually the danger that Jed represents for him as a source of forbidden (sexual) knowledge, a tormentor of his soul, but above all, an agent of destruction for the couple’s happiness. In his effort to retrace the path of sin and to go back to Eden, Joe “as though walking through a police reconstruction, picked up the path Clarissa and [he] had taken” (*EL*, 127). He reiterates what he calls his “stations of the cross”:

I went down the hill, into the field and towards the next place. The sheep were gone, and the minor road beyond the hedge was closer than I remembered. I looked for an indentation in the ground, but there was only the beginning of a nettle patch that extended almost to the gate the policemen had climbed. This was where Parry had wanted to pray, and it was from here that I had walked away... (*ibid.*)

The result of this re-enactment of guilt is that it clarifies his own fault in falling as well as his sinful nature that he perceives as marked by a kind of lack: “a deficiency, a failed extension into

mental space as difficult to describe as one's first encounter with the calculus" (*EL*, 128). Joe is aware of his loss of innocence, which he has now to hide from Clarissa: "Now I really did have something to conceal from her. I had crossed and recrossed the line of my own innocence." (*EL*, 106)

As for Briony, she is not exactly a rebellious child; yet she is not innocent either. Even though she is very young, she appears to have her own sins to hide and secrets to cover up:

Her effective status as an only child, as well as the relative isolation of the Tallis house, kept her, at least during the long summer holidays, from girlish intrigues with friends. Nothing in her life was sufficiently interesting or shameful to merit hiding; no one knew about the squirrel's skull beneath her bed, but no one wanted to know. (*A*, 5)

As she grows up she realizes her mistakes and searches for atonement. The sin in Briony's case is not only access to forbidden knowledge; it is absence of sympathy for her sister and brother-in-law as well as a constant denial of truth. In *Atonement* childhood is not the prelapsarian Eden, the ideal state of mind before one falls into adulthood. Childhood is likened here with sin as it stands for jealousy and refusal to accept "the real, the adult world in which frogs did not address princesses" (*A*, 37). While eyeing the confusing scene at the fountain, Briony is shocked to discover that it is not her love story that she contemplates, but her sister's:

Briony had her first, weak intimation that for her now it could no longer be fairy-tale castles and princesses, but the strangeness of the here and now, of what passed between people, the ordinary people that she knew, and what power one could have over the other, and how easy it was to get everything wrong, completely wrong. (*A*, 37)

Briony has already showed her love to Robbie by throwing herself in the river and challenging him to save her. The young man does save her life, risking his own, and she takes it as evidence of love:

'Do you know why I wanted you to save me?'
'No.'
'Isn't it obvious?'
'No, it isn't.'
'Because I love you.' (*A*, 218)

The child is here the temptress, the Biblical snake, offering a kind of forbidden knowledge. The discussion is strikingly similar to some dialogues between Jed and Joe in *Enduring Love*. For instance, at one point in the story Jed tells Joe: "You've set this in motion. You can't turn your back on it now..." (*A*, 73)

Both novels deal with the same delusion, the same irrepressible desire to be loved, and the terrifying discovery of the other's irresponsibility and, what is worse, of the other's absence of love. Both novels under discussion present two couples who, under extreme pressure and exceptional circumstances, lose their balance and are exiled from their personal Eden. In *Atonement* Cecilia and Robbie's love is cut in the bud by what happens in one night only: the rape, the unjust charge against Robbie, Briony's false testimony, and Robbie's arrest by the police. In *Enduring Love* Clarissa and Joe's happy reunion is suddenly interrupted by the balloon accident. Five men run to save a boy's life and one is killed in the process. These are unusual events and it is the men in these two couples who are made to suffer and pay for some incomprehensible sin. In Robbie's case, his unnatural connection with Briony, though underestimated and disavowed by the young man, will cause a series of irreversible disasters: his imprisonment and enrolment, eventually his death in the war, Cecilia's estrangement from her parents, eventually her death away from friends and family.

Enduring Love makes the connection between Joe and Jed a peculiar liaison that is perplexing to the reader. Joe himself is puzzled by his own "fall": "It was as if I had fallen through a crack in my own existence, down into another life, another set of sexual preferences, another past history and future." (*A*, 67)

In Milton's *Paradise Lost* both Adam and Eve succumb to temptation and they both eat the fruit. In McEwan's stories, Adam commits the sin, tempted by the devilish serpent, while Eve is an

innocent witness as well as a victim. It is only one of the lovers who errs or is drawn into improbity while the other stays innocent, thus becoming the collateral victim of someone outside the couple (of Briony in *Atonement* and of Jed in *Enduring Love*). From now on, the couple is haplessly condemned to dissolution. As Clarissa reminds Joe in the conclusion of *Enduring Love*, “A stranger invaded our lives, and the first thing that happened was that you became a stranger to me” (218). Neither Robbie nor Joe loves the intruder, or at least this is what they declare, and are made to suffer for this.

On the contrary, in the Bible, “after Adam eats the fruit, both fall into lust, then anger and finally despair” (Bloom, 173). In *Atonement*, Robbie is the one who falls because of Briony’s lie told in retaliation for what she considers to be his “infidelity”. There is a subtle connection to more serious sins and lies, such as those that finally led to the World War II. As Finney comments:

Robbie’s fall is caused by another’s lie, reminding readers that Europe’s fall into war followed lies of a far more serious order made by Hitler. Robbie’s old life is brought to a sudden and traumatic end. As he reflects during the fallback to Dunkirk, ‘A dead civilization. First his own life ruined, then everybody else’s.’ (p. 204) (2004: 78)

Robbie accuses Briony that she has ruined his life exactly as Adam accuses Eve for having ruined his blissful existence in the Garden of Eden. Similarly, in Milton’s poem, “after the Fall and Judgement, Adam has spent an anguished, sleepless night alone wrestling with his new condition, alternately blaming Eve, God and himself. When Eve finds him and tries to make up, he attacks her with a vicious, misogynistic tirade: ‘Out of my sight, thou serpent, that name best/ Befits thee with him leagued, thyself as false/ And hateful’ (10.867- 868)” (q. in Bloom, 174).

A second effect of the fall is the empowerment of secondary characters who, though left out of the love-story proper, gain the right to tell the story from their own point of view. Briony tells the love story as she desires, Jed writes his own parallel love story in the letters he writes to Joe. Even though they are empowered in this way, they both have to pay for this privilege. Briony is punished for her transgression by loneliness, later by falling ill with Alzheimer’s disease, and thus, by forgetting the whole misdeed, including the love story (hers or anyone else’s). Jed also loses his story in the end because he himself falls ill and madness engulfs his mind and his imagined love story, too. In *Enduring Love*, the balloon is a key motif as all male characters pull its strings in a dramatic attempt to bring it down to earth, that is, *to make it real*. Logan proves to be the closest in perceiving the complete meaning of the story but the price he pays is death.

In *Atonement*, the accident that changes everybody’s life is Lola’s rape. Everyone tries to find out what happened that night when Lola was raped, the twins disappeared for a while, and Robbie was denounced and arrested. It seems that Lola and Marshall are better-informed readers of the whole story since Lola was raped by Marshall. As James Phelan remarks, Robbie’s letter weighs a lot in the way in which Briony reads the whole story because

Briony is certain that the figure she saw retreating from the scene had to be Robbie not because she has ocular proof but because that interpretation fits the narrative she is scripting on the basis of her earlier encounters with Robbie. And that narrative fit is a consequence of her ethical judgments: anyone who could write that sentence in the letter to Cecilia must be a “maniac” and, hence, Lola’s rapist. (328)

As for Lola and Marshall, they later decided to conceal the crime through marriage. Briony finds out only later that her version of the story was erroneous exactly as Logan’s wife discovers after her husband’s death that he was a family man and not a womanizer as she has assumed.

In *Atonement*, Briony, the narrator of the novel, seems to misread the whole reality because she can’t separate fact from fiction: “The young Briony suffers from an inability to disentangle life from the literature that has shaped her life. She imposes the pattern of fiction on the facts of life” (Finney, 2004: 12). Once the mistake is made, the protagonist starts to think a lot about the consequences of her misdeed. She even feels that the story she is writing lacks the confrontation part, the part in which she should assume her guilt and fight for her cause. The fact that she was a little girl who couldn’t understand the whole truth but only some pieces of it makes her not guilty in her opinion.

Did she really think she could hide behind some borrowed notions of modern writing and drown her guilt in a stream – three streams! – of consciousness? The evasions of her little novel were exactly those of her life. Everything she did not wish to confront was also missing from her novella – and was necessary to it. What was she to do now? It was not the backbone of a story that she lacked. It was backbone. (A, 302)

In my opinion, Briony simulates her guilt. She indeed seems to be aware of the fact that she has passed the limits between reality and fiction, but doesn't have any remorse about it:

She 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 cannot reverse. *Atonement*, then, is concerned with the dangers of entering a fictional world and the compensations and limitations which that world can offer its readers and writers. (Finney, 2004: 2)

Thus, she invents this excuse: that she is immature and cannot make the distinction between the real and fairytales: “This was not a fairytale, this was the real, the adult world in which frogs did not address princesses, and the only messages were the ones that people sent.” (A, 37)

Paradoxically, the fact that Joe experiences a feeling of guilt in *Enduring Love* shows that he is not guilty. He asks himself whether he is responsible or not for Jed's stalking and tries to remember when it all began:

But what had I done, or not done? If it was guilt, where exactly did it begin? At the ropes under the balloon, letting go, afterwards by the body, on the phone last night. The unease was on my skin and beyond. It was like the sensation of not having washed. But when I paused from my typing and thought the events through, guilt wasn't it at all. (EL 39)

It seems that Jed, exactly like Briony, has a story to tell, an erroneous one in which Joe is the “bad guy”. Joe's refusal of Jed's version of the story is the equivalent of Robbie's refusal of Briony's love story. An illustrative example of rejection is the dialogue between the two men, in which Joe tells Jed that he doesn't accept the lunatic's story:

‘That's quite a story Joe? I went to the –’
 ‘I don't want your story. I don't want you phoning me.’ [...]
 ‘We need to talk.’
 ‘I don't.’
 I heard Parry's intake of breath. ‘I think you do. At least, I think you need to listen’
 ‘I'm going to hang up. If I hear from you again I'm calling the police.’ (EL 59)

Jed's story is an example of failed reading. He is the victim of his invented story, a story which he considers to have been encouraged by Joe. Of course, in his delirium, he blames it all on Joe Rose. Jed, the erotomaniac, might be wrong when he assumes that Joe has been the initiator of their “love story.” Yet, Clarissa's perspective is surprisingly closer to Jed's. She has seen a change in Joe since the balloon accident. And that change consists also in delirious episodes:

When she steps into the hall, he is waiting for her by the door of his study. He has a wild look about him that she has not seen in some time. She associates this look with over-ambitious schemes, excited and usually stupid plans that very occasionally afflict the calm, organised man she loves. He's coming towards her, talking before she's even through the door. Without a kiss or any form of greeting, he's off on a tale of harassment and idiocy behind which there appears to be some kind of accusation, perhaps even anger against her, for she was quite wrong, he says, but now he is vindicated. Before she can ask him what he's talking about, in fact before she has even put down her bag, he is on another tack, telling her about a conversation he's just had with an old friend ...” (EL, 80-1)

Clarissa appears to observe Joe's altered conduct but reads erroneously Jed's behaviour and draws the conclusion that the intruder is an innocent man. At some point in the novel, Joe takes

Clarissa's view into account and tries to convince himself that Jed is indeed blameless. He thus "reads" the events differently, through the eyes of a woman:

Clarissa was right, he was a harmless fellow with a strange notion, a nuisance at most, hardly the threat I had made him out to be. He looked a sorry sight now, cringing under the fresh plane leaves. It was the accident, and the afterwaves of shock that had distorted my understanding. I had translated farce into indefinable menace. His hand, when it shook mine, exerted no pressure. I spoke to him firmly, but with a little kindness too. He was just about young enough to be my son. (*EL*, 61-2)

But things get clearer when Jed hires somebody to kill Joe in a restaurant. From now on, Joe is sure that his reading is correct and not Clarissa's, that Jed is indeed ill and that the poor fellow needs medical aid. It seems that Jed imagines having secret conversations with God. His delirium has a religious dimension whereas Joe appears as an atheist, a non-believer. The erotomaniac accuses his lover of blindness and cruelty, of satanic arrogance and ambition:

I wanted to hurt you. Perhaps even more than that. Something more and God will forgive me, I thought. On the way over in the taxi I imagined you telling me in your cold way that God and His Only Son were just characters, like James Bond or Hamlet. Or that you yourself could make life in a laboratory flask, given a handful of chemicals and a few million years. It's not only that you deny there's God – you want to take His place. Pride like this can destroy you. There are mysteries we should not touch, and there's humility too we all must learn, and I hated you Joe, for your arrogance. You want the final word on everything. After reading thirty-five of your articles I should know. (*EL*, 137)

Jed sends Joe three or four letters a week in which he accuses him of starting the whole relationship while playing with him only to turn suddenly away from him. His accusations are false because he reads Joe's behaviour inaccurately. In *Atonement*, Briony is the one who reads the story mistakenly. She fails reading Lola's behaviour. The only ones who know the truth about Lola and Marshall's intercourse are the omniscient narrator and, of course, the reader. On their first encounter Lola compares him to Desperate Dan, a character from the British comics, *The Dandy*, and admires his brogues and he is aware of the fact that she likes him. Yet, Briony is unable to perceive the sexual attraction between the two:

Paul Marshall lowered himself the armchair lately used by the stricken Arabella. It really was a curious face, with the features scrunched up around the eyebrows, and a big empty chin like Desperate Dan's. It was a cruel face, but his manner was pleasant, and this was an attractive combination, Lola thought. He settled his trousers creases as he looked from Quincey to Quincey. Lola's attention was drawn to the black and white leather of his brogues, and he was aware of her admiring them and waggled one foot to a rhythm in his head. (*A*, 55)

On the other hand, Marshall sees in Lola a Pre-Raphaelite princess. He observes that the girl is a woman and not a child: "Now he saw that the girl was almost a young woman, poised and imperious, quite the little Pre-Raphaelite princess with her bangles and tresses, her painted nails and velvet choker" (*A*, 57). There is a passage in which Lola eats a candy while Paul Marshall, the chocolate magnate, urges her to eat it. This fragment foretells the upcoming rape:

They watched her tongue turn green as it curled around the edges of the candy casing. Paul Marshall sat back in the armchair, watching her closely over the steeple he made with his hands in front of his face.

He crossed and uncrossed his legs. Then he took a deep breath. 'Bite it,' he said softly. 'You've got to bite it.' (*A* 59)

When Lola comes to Briony, she is, without a doubt, acting like a woman in love, feverish and sobbing, with "flared nostrils" and a kind of aura around her body which makes Briony change her mind concerning their relationship: "Briony took her hand and thought she could see how one might begin to love Lola" (*A*, 110). Lola may be really suffering because she has probably fallen in love with

her rapist. Marshall seems to be a sadistic rapist, an “offender [who] eroticizes aggression, and is turned on and excited by the rape and torture of another person” (Ramsland and McGrain, 2010: 48). Like any other rapist, Paul Marshall has misogynistic beliefs, considering that “women exist to please men sexually” (*ibid.*). He is aggressive because he leaves scratches on Lola’s arms – marks of his hypermasculinity and hypersexuality.

All characters have their own version of the fatal incidents (of the rape in *Atonement* and of the balloon accident in *Enduring Love*), they all try to grasp meaning, and they all pull its strings. The struggle with the story is equally symbolic in the two novels suggesting that it may result in a dramatic loss or that it may have the same outcome as the balloon incident in *Enduring Love*, where the one who clings to the text, trying to overpower and control it, perishes in the process. We are to get only glimpses of meaning, parts of the truth, not all of it. Characters see little of the truth and they veil what they can see. Blinded by their passion, indifference or fear, they speak about our common incapacity to read texts but also about the inability of texts to render truth as it is.

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