

"The Trials of Briony": Gothic Desire in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

Hailed as his masterpiece, Ian McEwan's *Atonement* has been subject to several academic readings. Brian Finney's (2004) important reading examines the novel as a work of metafiction, through its heightened awareness of the process of writing. His essay examines how the writer protagonist, Briony Tallis, parallels the fictional realm with that of the real world. Several other interpretations of *Atonement* have emerged in the last ten years, such as Hidalgo's (2006) article which considers the alignment of history and fiction in the novel through the process of storytelling and cultural memory. Peter Mathews (2006) work examines the place of secrets in the narrative, focusing on Briony's guilt as a debt to be repaid. D'Angelo's 2009 piece suggests that *Atonement* is concerned with the relationship between readers and text, privileging the reader's interpretation and delivery of atonement for Briony. Similarly, Jacobi's (2011) influential article examines the dangers of misreading in his essay on the novel, with the death of Robbie and Cecilia as the main example. In his view, there is no definitive evidence in the novel of their deaths. Instead, he argues that the reader has imposed this reading on the novel through their expectation of Robbie and Cecilia as tragic lovers. Pastoor's 2014 article argues that Briony is depicted as a deity-like figure, whose writings position her as the ultimate authority in the novel.

However, no reading has yet attempted to align this novel with the genre of the Gothic, and so this piece will attempt to address this critical gap. This article focuses on specific Gothic tropes such as the uncanny and the abject through the metafictional play of the narrative and the haunted psyche of Briony Tallis. *Atonement* explores the uncanny tensions when reality is blurred with fiction, as Briony's reality is distorted by her fictional writings to such an extent that the individuals around her become characters, paralleled in her narration of reality with those in her fictional play, "The Trials of Arabella". Such a doubling permits the projection of her own desires and fears onto others, as her narrative functions as a mirror that distorts but also acts out her own conflicted psyche. Through a focus on the psychological conflict of an adolescent, *Atonement* charts the Gothic interest in the haunting of the psyche. One of the key concerns of Contemporary Gothic fiction is that of a psychological or internal haunting. As I have discussed elsewhere (*Gothic Contemporaries: the Haunted Text*, 2012, University of Wales Press), contemporary novels increasingly depict the psyche as a haunted space. Such readings have emerged through the growth of psychoanalysis as a literary theory that shifts ghosts from an external force to an internal one. Through this approach, representations of literary haunting have also become studies of psychology and characterisation. In Briony's case, she is haunted by her own

repressed sexuality, and so *Atonement* can be read as a trauma narrative, exploring the distressing effects of a convoluted sexual identity. As a narrative focused on Briony's misinterpretation of sexual intercourse for rape, *Atonement* charts her growth and desire for atonement throughout her life as she condemns an innocent man, Robbie, to prison. Through psychoanalytic and trauma theory, this article suggests a renewed reading of McEwan's novel to consider the haunted psyche of his protagonist through her abject narrative of desire, "The Trials of Arabella".

Gothic fiction has always explored the complexity of sexual identity, particularly through the figure of the Gothic heroine, "a central figure of the persecuted maiden who is [typically] entrapped by a male tyrant in a labyrinthine castle" (Milbank 2009, 120). As Ellis has pointed out, the classic Gothic novel was frequently "concerned with violence done to familial bonds that is frequently directed against women" (1989, 3). As a character immersed in literary influence, Briony assumes the role of the Gothic heroine, fearful of the potential of her own desire and the desire of others, and so her comprehension of desire becomes Gothic. In doing so, she aligns herself with characters like Isabella in *The Castle of Otranto*, and Antonia in the *The Monk*: women pursued by aggressive tyrannical males with lustful and overpowering intent. As Alison Milbank suggests, "in the female tradition, the male aggressor becomes the villain whose authoritative reach as patriarch, abbot or despot seeks to entrap the heroine, usurps the great house, and threatens death or rape" (1989, 121). Like Ann Radcliffe's heroines Emily in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Julia in *A Sicilian Romance* who must escape the tyrant figure, Briony is alert to the dangers of being pursued by men. Such an anxiety of sexuality is projected onto other characters in the novel, as her sister, Cecilia, and cousin, Lola, are cast as similar Gothic heroine figures in need of rescue, with her sister's lover, Robbie, cast as lustful villain. Cecilia's reading of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady* (1752), a novel concerned with a young woman's struggle and ultimate failure to resist patriarchal oppression and rape, is hugely significant, as the "references to the eighteenth-century, and references to specific kinds of reading, appear from the book's earliest chapters, where McEwan presents Cecilia and Robbie as readers of eighteenth-century novels" (D'Angelo 2009, 90). As a story of a young girl lured away from her home by a villain who rapes her, subsequently ruining her future, this novel is a cautionary tale that chimes with the plot of "The Trials of Arabella". "Richardson, then, does not invite his readers to participate in shaping the novel's meaning; instead, his novel about the sexual threats that face even the most virtuous women serves to warn readers" (D'Angelo 2009, p.90). Therefore, after witnessing her sexual encounter with Robbie, Cecilia

becomes Clarissa in Briony’s eyes: raped and with a ruined future, hence why neither Robbie nor Cecilia have a future in the narrative. Similarly, the genre of Gothic fiction is clearly gestured towards by McEwan’s epigraph from *Northanger Abbey*. As many critics such as Mathews have pointed out, this extract directs the reader towards a parodic take on the classic Gothic fictions of the 1790s. Read as a satire of the Gothic genre, Austen’s narrative presents the reader with classic Gothic tropes, such as the vulnerable heroine, Catherine Morland, and a patriarchal figure that she fears, General Tilney. However, these familiar elements are held up for mockery, and rather than incite suspense and atmosphere, the text alerts both the reader and Catherine to the dangers of aligning fictional plots with reality. “Like Austen [...] McEwan is playing with the presuppositions of his readers, luring them into making erroneous assumptions based on their expectations about the novel’s theme and genre” (Mathews 2006, 151). By drawing parallels with *Northanger Abbey*, McEwan alerts the reader to the conventions of the Gothic genre from the start.

Briony’s written narrative that is *Atonement* can be read as a parallel to her own Gothic narrative, her play, “The Trials of Arabella”. Briony is described by her sister, Cecilia, as being “lost to her writing fantasies - what had seemed a passing fad was now an enveloping obsession” (McEwan 2001, 21). Her reality becomes fiction as she cannot distinguish between narrative and the real, a key characteristic of the Freudian experience of the Uncanny. As Freud suggests in his essay of the same name:

the writer can intensify and multiply th[e] effect [of the uncanny] far beyond what is feasible in normal experience; in h[er] stories [s]he can make things happen that one would never, or only rarely, experience in real life [...] [s]he tricks us by promising us everyday reality and then going beyond it. (1919, 157)

Briony’s uncanny narrative is caught between reality and fantasy, which allows her coded, repressed desires to become manifest. As with Catherine Morland’s misinterpretation of General Tilney, Briony’s misreading of Robbie’s character results in a Gothic narrative that warns of the dangers of misplacing villainy and heroism. As Jacobi points out, ‘both Catherine and Briony look at the world as if it is a literary text, and of a particular type, they expect to see certain conventions of plot and character development’ (Jacobi 2011, p.66). Her repressed desires are mapped out onto the characters in her narrative, who function as representatives of herself, or Arabella, her fictional self. Freud writes that, “*the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious*” (1915, 147: his italics). For Briony, her repressed desires, in particular her love for her sister’s lover, Robbie, emerges through her representation of others. Her desire is repressed not only

because of Robbie’s working class background and her mother’s disapproval, but also due to Briony’s abject relationship towards her adolescent sexuality. Across Briony’s text, sexuality is repeatedly aligned with fear and criminality, and so, her anxiety manifests itself in her paranoid interpretations of the relationships she witnesses around her. Like Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, Briony is absorbed in literature “using [texts] as a lens onto the everyday world around her” (Heiland 2004, p.92). As Kristeva examines in her book *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*, the perversion of criminality is aligned with the abject. Therefore, for Briony, sexual intercourse is perceived as an abject, Gothic act. As Cathy Caruth suggests in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative & History*, “what causes trauma is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time” (1996, 61). Her shock at witnessing two sexual acts in the novel is traumatic for twelve-year-old Briony, to such an extent that she represses her own desires as criminal, which, as Caruth suggests, disrupts her development into an adult and her mind’s “experience of time”. This is supported by Mathews’ view that Briony experiences a break in her psyche. As Kristeva points out, what results in abjection is that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (2006, 4). For Briony, her negotiation of her own sexuality results in an alignment of desire with the abject criminal, as stressed by her repeated focus on the importance of order: “her wish for a harmonious, organised world denied her the reckless possibilities of wrongdoing” (McEwan 2001, 5). Among Kristeva’s list of embodiments of the abject are “the traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist” (1982, 4), all of which could be aligned with Briony’s characterisation of Robbie. Therefore, Robbie is symbolic of her own abject desire, and must be sentenced, like a Gothic villain, to a term of punishment.

A child at the start of the narrative, Briony is depicted as a naïve individual whose actions implicate her sister’s boyfriend, Robbie, in a crime he did not commit. From Briony’s account of events, Robbie violates her sister Cecilia, after sending her an obscene letter, and then rapes her cousin, Lola, for which he is punished and sent to prison on Briony’s testimony alone. However, readers later learn that it was Paul Marshall, a friend of Briony’s brother Leon, and not Robbie, who attacked Lola. As witness, Briony is placed in the authoritative position of judging Robbie’s innocence, as Lola claims she cannot recall her assailant: “though she lacks visual certainty regarding Lola’s attacker, in a good story the attack would be the work of a maniac, like the Robbie Turner she has now constructed in her mind” (Jacobi 2011, 60). Briony’s interpretation then, is a reflection of her own desires, as her condemning of Robbie is due to her repressed desire for him. In marking him as a criminal,

it is however, Briony’s own desire she perceives as criminal. As Kristeva notes, “any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject” (1982, 4). Hence, her inappropriate desire is aligned with the illegal, the transgressive and the Gothic.

Briony’s perception of abject desire is further suggested by her father’s absence from the household, and the suggestion that he is having an affair, which her mother is only partly conscious of: “he did not sleep at the club, and he knew that she knew this” (McEwan 2001, 148–9). As children receive their initiation to desire through their parents, the Tallis’ relationship “does not respect [the] borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 1982, 4) of marriage. As Ellis has suggested, “the frequent presence of bad parents as Gothic villains gives authors ample opportunity to hold up for criticism overindulgent or negligent mothers and indifferent or authoritarian fathers” (1989, 82). Similarly, her brother, Leon, is judged by Briony to be debasing himself to lustful desires in his “careless succession of girlfriends” (McEwan 2001, 4). Through her writing, Briony creates her own romance narrative, which, through its autobiographical content, might also be called “The Trials of Briony.” As Caruth suggests, trauma “simultaneously defies and demand our witness” (1996, 5), and therefore, Briony’s play can be interpreted as a desire for her traumatic relationship with her own sexuality to be witnessed. Once the reader is aware that *Atonement* has been written by Briony, as is evident in the Postscript, it becomes clear that the narrative charts her attempt to process her repressed desire by the displacement of her desire onto others. Her play that is to be performed on her brother’s arrival, “The Trials of Arabella”, functions as a cathartic rendering of her repressed emotions. The lead role in her play, Arabella, whose “reckless passion for a wicked foreign count is punished by ill fortune when she contracts cholera” (McEwan 2001, 3), is a projection of Briony’s own self-punishment for her inappropriate desire of Robbie. As Boag points out, psychoanalytical displacement suggests that the “object of a desire might shift to another” (2012, 24). For Briony, her desires have shifted not only in terms of her own desired object, but also her own position as desiring subject. “She was not playing Arabella because she wrote the play, she was taking the part because no other possibility had crossed her mind, because that was how Leon was to see her, because she *was* Arabella” (McEwan 2001, 13). Significantly, Briony intended to perform the play to her brother Leon, an authoritative substitute for her father figure who remains absent throughout the narrative. As a moral tale, the play was “intended to inspire not laughter, but terror, relief and instruction” (McEwan 2001, 8), and so, Briony has composed her own Gothic narrative with a conservative message to reflect her own anxieties regarding desire.

As Boag reminds us, “the unpleasure leading to repression is typically also related to parental injunctions and the fear of punishment” (2012, 32). Briony’s characterisation of Robbie is clearly informed by her mother, who “thought of Robbie at dinner when there had been something manic and glazed in his look” (McEwan 2001, 151). After his arrest, Emily’s relief that Robbie will be removed from the house is directed towards her daughters: “Suddenly her mother’s hands were pressing firmly on her shoulders and turning her towards the house, delivering her into Betty’s care. Emily wanted her daughter well away from Robbie Turner” (ibid: 183). The reader also learns that Emily pursues “his prosecution with a strange ferocity” (ibid: 227). Her mother’s disapproval of Robbie fuels Briony’s need for atonement for her desires. That her mother disapproves of Robbie as a suitor for her daughters guides Briony’s interpretation of the sexual encounter between Cecilia and Robbie as a Gothic one of violation rather than consensual intercourse. However, for the Gothic heroine, “too much innocence is hazardous, Radcliffe concludes, to a heroine’s health. She needs knowledge, not protection from the truth” (Ellis 1989, xiii). In shielding her daughter, Emily enables Briony to witness villainy instead of love.

Like Briony, Arabella’s “skin was pale and her hair was black and her thoughts were Briony’s thoughts” (McEwan 2001, 14). However, subject to the force of Lola’s persuasion, Briony is pressured into allowing her cousin to play the part, even though “Arabella, whose hair was as dark as Briony’s, was unlikely to be descended from freckled parents” (ibid: 10). As Lola becomes Arabella, the meaning of the play changes as a new actress forces Briony to project her repressions and desires onto Lola. Briony acknowledges that: “it was slipping away from her, she knew, but there was nothing that she could think of to say that would bring it back” (ibid: 13–14). As Arabella, Lola is now the subject of Briony’s repression, as she projects her own fears onto her cousin. After her reluctant agreement achieved through a nod of the head, Briony notes “how the tilt of a skull can change a life!” (ibid: 15). Such a dramatic statement suggests a radical shift of identity, as now it is Lola who becomes the Gothic heroine. Lola’s attraction to Leon’s friend, Paul, is also punished by Briony, whose representation of their first meeting is reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, with Paul tempting Lola into sexual transgression. The chocolate that Paul offers Lola has a green casing like the green apple that tempted Adam and Eve. Paul’s insistence that ““You’ve got to bite it”” (ibid: 62), has clear sexual connotations. As Lola commits the sin of lust, Briony’s representation of this moment aligns Lola further with the fallen figure of Arabella.

Across the text, Briony witnesses two sexual encounters in 24 hours; both are misunderstood and rendered as spectacle, with only her judgement to account for them. In

the library scene with Robbie and Cecilia, Briony assumes she witnesses the villain attack the Gothic heroine, Arabella, this time cast as her sister: "her immediate understanding was that she had interrupted an attack, a hand-to-hand fight" (ibid: 123). As Cecilia and Robbie become doubled with her representation of Lola and Paul, Briony interprets Cecilia and Robbie's lovemaking as rape, yet she does not report this incident to an authority figure. In contrast to Lola and Paul's sexual encounter, Briony does not declare she has witnessed anything in the library to anybody. By repressing the criminality of this event as that which she simply does not understand, Briony's judgement is heavily influenced by her own desires. Witnessing her sister with the man she loves forces Briony to interpret their love as a violation. Such an event is experienced as a trauma by Briony, hence her depiction of rape rather than love. As Caruth's definition of trauma suggests: "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event [is] often delayed" (1996, 11). If she accepts their love as such, she must acknowledge that not only does Robbie not love her and loves her sister, her sister has betrayed her also. Therefore, Cecilia must maintain a passive position of victim, with Robbie as the dominant force. That they are in love is beyond her comprehension, and so Briony represses the significance of this event until it is repeated, when she witnesses Lola and Paul's doubled representation of sexual intercourse. As with any trauma, the experience "repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly" (ibid: 2). As Lola is only fifteen, whereas Cecilia is an adult, Briony can lay claim to Robbie's villainy of intercourse with a minor, and have him removed from the household. Robbie's "obscene" letter to Cecilia that Briony intercepts becomes evidence of his villainy, fitting the role of her play perfectly. Such criminality is aligned with the abject as the "immoral, sinister, scheming, and [the] shady" (Kristeva 1982, 4).

For Briony, witnessing Cecilia and Robbie's sexual encounter is traumatic as it is experienced both unexpectedly and at too young an age for her to understand the significance of the event. The fear Briony describes is the realisation that the scene is a display of her repressed desires, a revelation, as her secret, abject desire has come to light. As she reveals, "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" (McEwan 2001, 123). Her admission of imaginative projection onto the books in her father's library defines the moment as a fictional one from her play, acted out through her sister and Robbie. Such a scene is symbolic of her own future if she persists in her inappropriate desires, and like "The Trials of Arabella", functions in her mind as a warning. The suppression of her sexuality demonstrates that repression "involves a cognitive appraisal

and anticipation of future punishing consequences” (Boag 2012, 33). This is further evident through her own performance of this scene with the police officers after Robbie has been arrested, where she is able “to show them the precise location of Robbie’s attack on Cecilia [...] Briony wedged herself in, with her back to the books to show them how her sister was positioned” (McEwan 2001, 180). In this moment, Briony places herself into the role of Arabella, the fallen heroine who acts on her desires and subsequently must seek forgiveness for them. This is the source of Briony’s atonement: not her crime of condemning Robbie, but her inappropriate desire for him. That she can “demonstrate the attacker’s stance” (ibid: 180) to show where Robbie stood indicates that the scene is of her own construction, signalling stage directions like a director on set, pointing out the transgression of sexual desire.

Briony’s Gothicisation of desire is evident through the frenzied nature of the assistance she offers to the police on Robbie’s arrest. Her interception of the letter between Robbie and Cecilia provides her with evidence of his villainy. Although she acknowledges that “it was wrong to open people’s letters” (ibid: 113), she justifies the act as “it was essential for her to know everything” (ibid: 113). As a third party, she renders a secret communication a public one as she converts the letter into public property: “[she] put the folded sheet of paper into the hands of the policeman with the face of granite” (ibid: 177). The letter is so monstrous to Briony because it is an expression of explicit desire: “with the letter, something elemental, brutal, perhaps even criminal had been introduced” (ibid: 113). The letter provides Briony with a villain for her narrative who embodies her fears and abjection of desire. What she is horrified by specifically, is Robbie’s reference to Cecilia’s vagina and his desire to perform cunnilingus. Her immediate response to the letter is that of a trauma: “the word: she tried to prevent it sounding in her thoughts, and yet it danced there obscenely” (ibid: 114). Again, she attempts to repress sexuality by halting the entry of the word into her consciousness. As Laurie Vickroy suggests, “trauma often involves a radical sense of disconnection and isolation as bonds are broken and relationships and personal safety are put into question” (2012, 23). Her naivety is revealed as she remarks how “no one in her presence had ever referred to the word’s existence, and what was more, no one, not even her mother, had ever referred to the existence of that part of her to which – Briony was certain – the word referred” (McEwan 2001, 114). Her sheltered upbringing is clearly a contributing factor to Briony’s abject fear of sexuality and: “the danger contained by such crudity” (ibid: 114), as she “could never forgive Robbie his disgusting mind” (ibid: 115). After giving the letter to Cecilia, Briony is uncannily elated: “never had she appeared so animated, so weirdly excited” (ibid: 111). As a Gothic villain, Briony must remove Robbie from her fictionalised

future, and hence, he does not survive as a character, even beyond his prison sentence. Towards the end of the narrative we are told that Robbie was sent to war, and "died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940" (ibid: 370). He functions as "the sacrifice, the scapegoat that restores her world to its pre-lapsarian state" (Mathews 2006, 155). In her fictional reality, Robbie embodies the Gothic tyrant, and so, like Ambrosio in *The Monk* who is punished for his transgressive behaviour by a violent death, she condemns him to an early demise.

Briony judges both sexual encounters she witnesses in the novel as inappropriate. As for Lola's encounter with Paul Marshall, Briony interprets this as rape, as Lola has cast herself as Arabella. In another example of doubling, Briony projects her own desire for an older man onto Lola, who also, the novel suggests, desires an older man. Since the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, sexual relations between adults over the age of twenty-one and individuals under the age of sixteen are illegal. Therefore, as Lola is only fifteen, Paul clearly commits a crime in his relations with a minor. After the realisation that Lola and Paul were engaging in sexual activity, Briony is "nauseous with fear and disgust" (McEwan 2001, 164). Again, her comprehension of desire is depicted as abject, inciting a bodily response such as sickness, usually aligned with a turning away from horror. As a witness to the act of sex, Briony is confronted with her fears of sexuality, and because the act takes place with a girl of a similar age, those fears are intensified. Like Arabella, who contracts cholera as punishment for her inappropriate desire, Lola is rendered bed-bound after her alleged sexual attack, rushed upstairs and "sedated by the doctor" (ibid: 176). This is an uncanny parallel to Lola's performance as Arabella in her sickbed earlier on in the narrative: "they were doing the sickbed scene, the one in which the bed-bound Arabella first receives into her garret the prince" (ibid: 55). As Meyers explores in *Femicidal Fears*, in the female-centred Gothic romance tradition, 'the "power of darkness" lies not, or not solely, in the figure of the Gothic villain-hero (who is not always combined into one figure), but rather in the heroine's relation to him/them as well as in her connection to another, victimized woman' (2001, p.18). Rendered immobile and absent from the ensuing discussion, Lola is passive to Briony's judgements: "her cousin's removal left Briony centre-stage" (ibid: 173). Without Lola present, Briony speaks for her cousin and determines the event as her imagination desires.

In the epilogue, Briony is 77 and suffering from vascular dementia as she witnesses a performance of her play by the younger generations of the Tallis family. This time, Arabella is played by "Leon's great granddaughter, Chloe" (ibid: 368). Due to the uncanny repetition of her play, "Briony experiences a haunting retrieval of the past" (Hidalgo 2005, 89), as the

play is a reminder of the trauma experienced as a child, indicative of how trauma “returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 1996, 4). The performance allows Briony’s trauma narrative to finally be heard, as “for healing to take place, survivors must find ways to tell their stories and to receive some social acknowledgement if not acceptance” (Vickroy 2002, 19). Significantly, the end of *Atonement* is also the end of “The Trials of Arabella”, or in my view, “The Trials of Briony”.

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Abstract

This article focuses on specific Gothic tropes such as the uncanny and the abject through metafiction and the haunted psyche of Briony Tallis. As a text that engages with the doubling of fiction and reality, *Atonement* offers a Gothic experience of reading through the conflicted psyche of the protagonist. This article charts the haunted self through repression, abjection and trauma that are evident through Briony’s projection of her emotions onto other characters in the novel. Through such metafictional play, Briony is evidently haunted by her own desire, which manifests itself as abject in her traumatic witnessing of two sexual encounters in 24 hours. Through her fears of becoming the pursued Gothic heroine, Briony is subject to extreme self-policing of her sexuality, which results in the emergence of those desires in a coded, uncanny form. Through psychoanalytic and trauma theory, this article suggests a renewed reading of McEwan’s novel to consider the haunted psyche of his protagonist through her abject narrative of desire, “The Trials of Arabella”.

Key words: Gothic, Desire, Repression, Abjection, Trauma.