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Narrative Techniques and Strategies in Ian McEwan's  
*Atonement and On Chesil Beach*

Narativní techniky a strategie v Ian McEwanově *Pokání a Na Chesilské pláži*

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## Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracoval samostatně a použil jen uvedených pramenů a literatury.

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## Abstrakt

Tato práce se zabývá narativními technikami a strategiemi použitými ve dvou Ian McEwanových románech: *Pokání* a *Na Chesilské pláži*. Pro lepší porozumění současnému kulturnímu prostředí a vlivům na vznik těchto děl se první, teoretická, část této práce pokouší o stručný rozbor postmodernismu a jeho vlivu na současnou britskou prózu a o nástin typicky postmoderních narativních technik. Druhá část analyzuje praktické využití těchto postmoderních a jiných narativních technik a strategií v obou vybraných dílech. Mezi hlavní témata v obou částech této práce patří: metafikce, intertextualita, pojem historie a času, realita versus fikce, struktura a narace.

reality, the concept of time and history, reality vs. fiction, structure and narration.

## Abstract

This thesis deals with the narrative techniques and strategies used in two Ian McEwan's contemporary novels: *Atonement* (2001) and *On Chesil Beach* (2007). For a better understanding of the contemporary cultural environment and the influences on the genesis of these works, the first part of this thesis attempts a brief analysis of postmodernism, its influences on contemporary British prose and the typically postmodernist literary techniques. The second part then concentrates on the practical use of these postmodernist and other narrative techniques and strategies in the selected novels. The main themes in both parts of this work are: metafiction, intertextuality, the concept of time and history, reality vs. fiction, structure and narration.

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## Introduction

This thesis is focused on literary techniques and strategies employed in the novels rather than on the interpretation and discussion of their themes and topics. However, it still must be interpretative to a limited extent, in order to demonstrate the effects that these techniques produce, because in order to fully understand a work of literature, we must know what impact it has on the reader. (Haman 15) This focus on the formal aspects of the novels is due to the ambition of this thesis to be not only one possible subjective interpretation of the works, which any interpretation inevitably is (Grenz 15), but to be a simply descriptive treatise.

As to the choice of Ian McEwan's novels for this thesis, they are representative enough examples of many tendencies in contemporary British fiction. It's not only that they are well appraised by literary critics, but also, perhaps a little surprisingly, because the novels are so widely read. McEwan is one of the most popular British contemporary writers because he writes for people, and consequently strives to avoid being elitist, saying that he "represents the standard author" (Lynn, "A Conversation..."). He openly states that modernist writers were wrong in trying to be elitist, that their view was nonsensical. (Lynn, "A Conversation...") McEwan is a representative of postmodernism, which aims at incorporating various discourses and affects culture by mixing the high with the popular, as it is aimed at the general audience and not only at a group of privileged intellectuals. (Grenz 38)

The objective of this thesis, as stated in the title, is the analysis of the two novels. However, in order to better understand a piece of art one should first look at the social and cultural backgrounds by which it was shaped, which means, in this case, the contemporary, post-modern literary environment. This approach determines the division of this thesis into two parts: the first attempts to outline a theoretical analysis of postmodernism and its literary devices in general, and the second part focuses on the actual use of some of these and other techniques and strategies in the two selected McEwan's works.

# 1 Postmodernism; postmodernist and contemporary narrative techniques and strategies

## 1.1 Origins and Structure

The term “post-modern” appeared first during the 1930s and gained universal attention during the seventies. (Grenz 12) Postmodernism, as the term suggests, came chronologically after modernism. However, it is not in a simple opposition to it, but rather an inevitable outcome, a second stage, a “modernisation of modernity” (Bauman, *Tekutá* 17), hence it is sometimes also called the “second modernity”. (Bauman, *Tekutá* 17) The logic of modernism somehow ceased to be valid due to new developments in the society, and melted into postmodernism by itself. (Bauman, *Úvahy* 60)

In philosophy, postmodernism had began evolving much earlier before it was named, at the beginning of the nineteenth century with Nietzsche, the opposition to the enlightenment and the emergence of the theory of deconstructionism. (Grenz 15-16) Its distinguishable characteristics are general scepticism, questioning the optimism of the enlightenment and modernity, putting emphasis on the holistic understanding of things rather than preferring only certain points of view (especially that of rational reason), existentialism, relativism, pluralism, celebration of diversity and experimentalism. (Grenz 20-27) While modernist art was trying to retire from the social and political sphere, postmodernist art is, on the contrary, “engaged” in public affairs and is used for making political, cultural and other statements. (Hutcheon 206) All these qualities of postmodernism of course affect the postmodernist literature in one way or another.

There are usually described two types of influence on postmodernist literature. The first may be tracked back to Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (Pettersson 2), which, however, even though it seemed very innovative and revolutionary when it first came out in 1759, also has its precursors, for it draws on the tradition of the “learned wit”, the Scriblerians and most openly, on Cervantes. The second influence is of course that of the innovative

and experimental literature of those who are generally called modernist writers, especially Pound, Elliot, Joyce and Beckett. (Pettersson 2)

This thesis is focused on literary techniques and strategies employed in the two novels, or, in more general terms, on their structure. The postmodernist theory openly defies and tries to break free from any kind of a set structure, but, for our purposes, we can use the understanding of the term suggested by Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. He compares the structure of post-modern society to that of liquids (Bauman, *Tekutá* 9-11) in the sense that even though they seem to lack any kind of structure, they still have some inherent characteristics proper to them, so even though their structure is variable, there is always something that allows us to identify them as liquids. In the literary world, this means that postmodernism has some narrative techniques and strategies that are typical for it and that allow us to term a work of literature postmodernist.

To pursue this metaphor, we can say that as liquids have no basic shape (they are shaped by their containers), post-modern literature also has no basic “shape” of its own, it has no required standard, such as, for example, the ancient drama had the given number of acts and the unities of space, time and action. This can be defined by another metaphor, that postmodernism is “a jungle rid of all laws, even the laws of the jungle” (Bauman, *Úvahy* 151), or, in a straightforward way, that it is chaos consisted of an infinite number of paradigms, from which the authors are free and actually have no other choice than (because there is no cultural directive) to pick and combine anything they want without any limitations other than those they themselves choose and impose upon themselves and their writings. Postmodernism is eclectic, with all the good and bad connotations that come with this term. This of course allows for a great variability and space for experiment and originality.

Postmodernism is most original in the aspect that it is a movement (more like a happening), that is very democratic and pluralistic, unlike any before. (Bauman, *Úvahy* 59) Therefore, even though it has its proper characteristics and tendencies, it does not make a claim that these are the only possible allowed. It allows other principles and paradigms to exist concurrently, even if they are “ex-centric” and peripheral. (Hutcheon 58, 61) It likes multitude of views and ideas and even

encourages them to be contradictory (Bauman, *Úvahy* 58). It welcomes them as a source of inspiration and possible imitation and parody. (Grenz 33) These two concepts are more fully discussed in the section Time, History and Narration.

## 1.2 Contradictoriness and Playfulness

The uniqueness and originality of the post-modern techniques lies not in the techniques themselves, but rather in their use, as most of the post-modern techniques are really ante-post-modern. (Bauman, *Úvahy* 56) They existed before (consider *Tristram Shandy* and the modernists), but only marginally, while in postmodernism, using them has become a standard (which shows one of the inner paradoxes of postmodernism, because it generally dislikes standardization). Before, they existed only as separate paradigms, that couldn't be combined, or it would be termed "inappropriate" and "in bad taste", or even "antisocial" and "subversive" (Jameson 4), while now, they are combined and intermingled on principle (again, so much for the postmodernist dislike of principles). This, however, raises a question if all the different ways of writing can really be combined without producing inconsistencies, and the answer is: no, they cannot, but that is actually the point, because inconsistencies are very welcome in postmodernism. (Bauman, *Úvahy* 57)

A way to explain the postmodernist craving for these inconsistencies and paradoxes is suggested by Bauman: "A post-modern body [a reader] is a consumer of experience [...] and pleasure. [...] This experience has to be 'thrilling', 'fascinating', 'captivating', 'ecstatic'". (Bauman, *Úvahy* 78-79) It is because postmodernism complies with the capitalist, materialist, bourgeois, consumer society. (Hutcheon 207, 213; Jameson 3) This would explain why the postmodernist narrative techniques and strategies are so diverse and frequently mixed in unexpected and unusual combinations – it is to produce a memorable effect, attract the readers and arouse and deliver them from their *ennui*. Yet it is for this same reason that the post-modern works are seen as upsetting by many readers. (Hutcheon 189)

However, this would justify only why the most recently created works are like this, and not the creation of the strategy itself. It is that originally, when the postmodernist "movement" was developing, it was of a deeper nature. This strategy

was a part of a more ideological stance, when the artist was trying to undermine and destroy the modernist emphasis on structure and integrity of a work of art (Grenz 34) and assign a new meaning to the concept of the novel. Thus a postmodernist novel is a mix-up of various genres and discourses, including those traditionally considered as “low-brow” or “unliterary” such as pornography, pulp literature, horror, fables, satire, romance, memoirs, essay, scientific lectures, etc.

This can also explain the postmodernist trend of the disappearance of the difference between high and low genres, the important and the trivial, the professional and the popular (Grenz 42), the tragic and the comic (Haman 159), the prosaic and the poetic. A difference that was so stressed especially in modernism, which despised the popular culture and imposed complexity, artfulness and difficulty of a work of art as an artistic norm, expressing the artist’s distance from the society, and considered anything easily readable to be a triviality. (Haman 42, 152) It is not that the objectives of the high genres (social and political analysis and critique, philosophical discourse etc.) are suddenly disappearing – they still exist in the works, only they are disguised, there is no “gap” between them (Hutcheon 44) thanks to the multi-layering, or “double-coding” of post-modern works. (Grenz 38) The double-coded post-modern works can be appealing even to readers not typically attracted by high literature – they are attracted to the works not because of some interest in their high ideals and hidden messages, but because they use these fascinating narrative techniques and strategies and are simply so fascinating to be read, or alternatively watched as movies.

These works are much appreciated because of their playfulness and experimentalism. The reader is often misguided, confused, forced to misinterpret the work and mocked using such devices as open, multiple and false endings (Hutcheon 59), and there being more parallel, interwoven worlds in the book, from which it is difficult to recognize the “real” world. (Grenz 36) The reader, together with the protagonists, struggles to distinguish the real from the fictional and the true from the imagined and dreamed-up in which they have been living up to the events described as the narrative progresses, which make them see through and recognise the (fictional) reality. This is especially typical for the spy novel, which is a genre

specific for the post-modern literature (Grenz 37) together with its later sci-fi modification, the cyberpunk literature, which both have conspiracy theories as their main focus. (Jameson 38) Besides the opposition between the real and the fictional, another type of two opposite worlds is frequently used: the rational versus the fantastic (Haman 144; Grenz 40). The paradox of this opposition is that it is usually the fantastic world full of magic, fanciful creatures (whether it be elves, goblins, dragons, zombies, vampires, werewolves, angels, daemons or the aliens) and objects with properties (either magical or scientific) beyond an average person's understanding that is supposed to be the actual "real" world.

### **1.3 Time, History and Narration**

Another attractive characteristic of a post-modern narrative is its frequent fragmentation and non-linearity. The story does not follow the traditional development of a narrative from the beginning to the end, but there are often time shifts using flashbacks, flash-aheads, time overlaps, repetitions, some parts may even be completely missing, or the story is entirely narrated backwards.

What influences contemporary literature probably the most is the post-modern understanding of history and its objectivity. It substantially differs from how modernity understood this concept – as an evolution of humankind leading towards an ideal, perfectly organised, technocratic, rationality-based society, as it was perceived in the enlightened and modernist concept (Grenz 72-75), which devaluated things from the past as nothing but surpassed evolutionary steps and valued only "modern" things. (Haman 72) Not only does postmodernism not believe in the supremacy of reason and in the evolution towards one greater good, it actually stresses temporality, evanescence and haphazardness. (Grenz 36) It further holds the view that objective history, and objectivity in general, is unreachable due to the plurality of possible views and interpretations, saying that history is merely a kind of fiction and a subjective construct of the historian (Haman 104, 141) and that all we may know about the past is gained only from textual relics (Hutcheon 119). It thus makes no difference between "real historical" texts and "fictional" texts, because there is practically no difference between historiography and a historical novel other

than that the historical novel is oriented, not *only*, but *also*, on the aesthetical elements in the work. (Haman 138-139)

The post-modernist revisiting of the past is usually either that of “pop-history”, which means that some of today’s historical novels are set not in the real past, but in our stereotypical conception of the past (Jameson, 25), or it is that of “present-ification”, which means that the works are not at all interested in how the past really was, but how it relates to the present state of things. (Hutcheon 19-20) The abundance of these two types clearly points to the postmodernist devaluation of the traditional scholarly approach to history.

Even though postmodernism holds this (pessimistic) view towards history, it sees it as a valuable resource for further development and holds the literary canon as an important source of possible inspiration (Haman 72), or even of all the inspiration – a more radical view says that “that, what is new, is only a secondary processing of what has already been here, and that, what is old, patiently awaits to be dusted, woken from slumber and changed into a novelty”. (Bauman, *Úvahy* 149) It turns to the past works quite frequently, which is why one of the four styles of writing typical for postmodernism, according to Peter Zima, is the “neo-realistic, neo-romantic or neo-modernist text with conventional narrative patterns (which, however, ironically denounces the pseudo-referentiality of its fictional world)”. (Haman 148) The other, equally prominent, three styles are: “text as a radical speech experiment offered to the reader as a contingent and particular construct with a playfully critical intention”, “ideologically utopian text of new (feminist, ecological) movements” and the “text of the deconstructive, subversive revolt”. More than one of these four types can often be ascribed to one work. (Haman 148)

Postmodernism questions not only the past but also the way that fiction was written in the past (Hutcheon 174), so not only contemporary historical fiction, but no literature at all is or can be original and is only a product of the influence of previous works on the author, who does nothing but (possibly unknowingly) rearrange the parts of already existing works, for short put into the motto “literature is born of literature” (Haman 49). All this explains why putting references to, or even whole extracts of, one work into another and parodying older works, or in one word,

intertextuality, is a technique so widely used in postmodernist literature. It is a technique so productive, that by itself it is the basis for three separate genres, which are: collage (juxtaposition of different materials from mutually incompatible sources), bricolage (juxtaposition of old, traditional materials in order to reach some new, contemporary meaning) and pastiche (a flood of so many non-homogenous images, that it seems to deny all meaning). (Grenz 29, 33)

A specific type of intertextuality, which is widely used in postmodernist literature, is intertextual parody. It means using traditional, usually well-known works, which are typical for a certain period or ideological movement, and altering them in a way so that the new version would critically and often ironically question the original meaning and would express a new understanding of certain extra-literary issues. However, this re-using of older materials does not want to discard the original historically given meaning, but it rather draws on the past and takes it as a kind of tradition, on which it elaborates its new ideas. (Hutcheon 34) Parody is frequently used by the “ex-centric” minorities to produce a creative, critical response, which would reinterpret and subvert the dominant ideology. (Hutcheon 35) This means that the postmodernist parody is not only a depthless, trivial, ridiculing imitation, as the term parody is sometimes understood (Hutcheon 24, 34), but serves a higher purpose same as the other postmodernist techniques and strategies.

With the idea that objective truth is unreachable due to the diversity of opinions and interpretations and because “subjectivity is a fundamental property of language” (Hutcheon 168) comes a problem of the credibility of the author and narrator. This projects in the fact that the post-modern narrator is often a biased and unreliable one, such as an animal, a child, a criminal or a fanatical extremist, or that there are more narrators with conflicting views and ideals. The subjectivity is often emphasized by the use of the technique of the stream of consciousness, when all that we are presented is given to us only through the mind – the perceptions and thoughts – of one character, with all his/her/its defects and limitations. However, as there often are more characters’ stream of consciousness present in one work, it creates a comforting but misleading illusion of objectivity, because it is naturally assumed that probably the only way to come near what could be called “objectivity” is through

many subjective perspectives. These opposing perspectives further cause conflict between the reader's point of view and those of the characters, forces the readers to think about it and possibly broaden their horizons and, as an effect, it gently spreads the post-modern ideal of plurality and multiculturalism. The inclination towards subjectivity of course requires the abandonment of the traditional omniscient god-narrator.

This forsaking of the author's credibility and of the omniscient narration however is not in opposition to another widely used technique, that of meta-fiction, which is perhaps the most playful post-modern technique. It is when the process of writing itself is the main theme of writing, for example a novel about writing a novel. (Peterka 52) As such, it has more variants: it can be that the narrator describes the process of writing of someone else, or it can be directly the narrator (or even the author) who interrupts, enters the narration and comments on the plot, the themes, the narrator and the characters and their creation and existence, by which the illusion of the narrative being real gets broken. This technique points at the artificiality of all writing, that it is nothing but someone's invention, (Grenz 36) and that fiction is, in fact, only fiction. It may moreover serve as self-reflection or a good device for self-critique or inconspicuous self-praise and self-promotion of the author and/or the work. It is also exceptional in the aspect that it is a narrative technique that comments on all the other narrative techniques and even on itself. (Grenz 36)

#### **1.4 Consistency**

Of course, not all examples of contemporary literature necessarily make use of all the above described postmodernist narrative techniques and strategies, because, although today postmodernism is the prevailing movement in literature, other, more traditional, paradigms are still obeyed and enjoyed. Furthermore, postmodernism's most important characteristic is that it is fundamentally contradictory and paradoxical (Hutcheon 23, 44), and that it openly proclaims its own contingency and insufficiency (Hutcheon 60), and as such it is never really absolute and completely coherent. And because the post-modern paradoxes are inherent to the novel as a

genre (Hutcheon 179), the use of postmodernist techniques and strategies in contemporary novels is also never fully consistent.

## 2.1 Structure

Contrary to the fact that the structure of post-modern society is often referred to as ultimately unstable and liquid, McEwan's novels *Atomium* and *On Chesil Beach* could be compared to crystals. It is not only that they are structured very systematically, but their form is also carefully planned in order to be more attractive to the reader. The form of *On Chesil Beach* is a short novel, which is a form favoured by McEwan, because it can be read in three hours, at a sitting, like a movie or an opera." (Tonkin, "Ian McEwan...") This of course makes the work available even to people who do not have a time or patience to read long novels. But even the length of individual parts was decided upon from the beginning of the writing process: "One of the first things [...] was a simple direction: five times eight - five chapters of about 8,000 words" (Tonkin, "Ian McEwan..."). It suggests that in this case, structure came first, and was only later filled with meaning.

The form of *Atomium* is, however, much more complex, and is also different in the creation of the final structure. McEwan says that he planned a novel within a novel from the beginning, but that he had to alter the initial composition of the novel, because finally, the structure "just grew out of what had to happen." (Weich, "Ian McEwan...") The final formal structure is, again in the words of McEwan himself: "really a novel followed by two novellas followed by a sort of coda." (Weich, "Ian McEwan...") That a novel should be composed of four separate though still intertwined parts is a rather untypical structure, which makes the novel all the more interesting.

## 2.2 Narration

Throughout both novels we see the use of different types of narrative voice. The prevalent type in both novels is limited omniscience combined with editorial omniscience. Most of the action we see is presented to us through the minds of selected characters in the first person. Yet, at the same time, most descriptions are

## 2 Narrative techniques and strategies in *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach*

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not purely subjective and there are occasional comments on the characters by the narrator. These comments in *On Chesil Beach* concern prevailing the influence of contemporary society on the characters: "This was an age when..." (16), and in *Atonement* they are the comments Briony, the narrator from part four, makes on the psychological development of her younger self and other characters: "In the years to come, [Robbie] would often think back to this time, when..." (90).

The limited omniscient narration sometimes comes near to the stream of consciousness technique, when we follow the free associations the characters make in their minds, though still narrated in the third person. This happens especially in *Atonement* in part two, where we are in the mind of hallucinating Robbie (260-265), partly in part three, where we follow Briony on her first tough shift in the hospital (290-303) and on her walk through London (315-324), but also in chapters six and twelve of part one, when we enter Emily's mind as she suffers from migraines and contemplates the events of the day (63-71, 145-153). Another deviation from the prevalent kind of narration is in part four of *Atonement*, which is completely written in the first person. This is most probably done to clearly separate it from the three preceding parts, make it sound more authentic and show that *this* is "real", while *that* was "only fiction".

### 2.3 Reality and Hypotheses

Both novels widely use temporal non-linearity, but in such a manner that sometimes, especially when it is combined with the hypothetical or imaginary, it may become stressful to the reader when real time shifts and hypothetical segments of the narrative become indistinguishable from each other. In this aspect, the past is less troublesome than the future. The past may be revisited in two ways, which both abound in each of the discussed novels: either indirectly, that is when a character is thinking about the past, or directly, which means that a passage, which happened chronologically before the "present" time, is inserted into the stream of the narration.

The first, indirect kind, is actually inseparable from the type of narration that is used in these novels, for in order to realistically portray the mind and thoughts of a character, the narrator must naturally refer to the character's memories, as it is most

often associations to past experiences and memories which an event or an object raises in a person's mind. A random example from *Atonement* could be when Robbie sees his typewriter and he remembers the day when he received it for his birthday, which again prompts him to reflect on his current situation. (82) These memories of course sometimes refer to textual material, which is discussed in more detail in the section on intertextuality.

The second kind, directly inserting chronologically preceding passages, is, on the other hand, optional, because not necessary: the narration could be aligned chronologically. So it is only a type of a narrative device, which is supposed to make the work more interesting to read. It is usually used to present some facts, which are important for the development of the story only at the point that the narration has reached, and which would seem unimportant or would even be confusing if mentioned earlier. This technique is more widely used in *On Chesil Beach*, where these flashbacks are a narrative device so prominent, that they determine the structure of the whole work: for example, the whole of part two and a major portion of part four of the novel are two long flashbacks. But it is also present in *Atonement* where, for example, a scene in which Robbie teaches Briony to swim and which would chronologically precede even part one is inserted into part two. (229-233)

The problem with the future is that until the readers have read the whole novel (and sometimes even then, but that is not the case of the here discussed novels), they can never be absolutely certain if what is alluded to is a glimpse of reality or of imagination. To complicate the matter, the imaginary glimpses can further be that of one of the characters or of the narrator, since these are sometimes rather hard, if not impossible, to distinguish. If it is an example of the imagination of the character, it is again almost inevitable that this be a part of the narration, similarly as it is with the characters' memories, because a characters' stream of thought and the fullness of their description is formed necessarily by their hopes and expectations towards their future existence. An example from *Atonement* of Robbie thinking about his future: "He thought of himself in 1962, at fifty, when he would..." (92)

If the imaginary future comes from the narrator, it is usually a part of the "playfulness of narration", because these instances are there mostly to intentionally

confuse the reader, and may take the form of alternative multiple endings. One example of this from *Atonement* can be Briony standing, coming forward and speaking up during Lola's and Marshal's wedding, which she of course doesn't do. (324) The best example of this technique, however, is that virtually the whole of *Atonement* is fictional and that Cecilia and Robbie never met again and died during the war, a fact that the narrator (Briony) points out to us only at the end of the novel.

There are some instances in the narrative, which are sometimes practically indistinguishable from those previously described, when the reader is told some facts, which in the end actually do come true. Especially *Atonement* is full of such instances: "This decision, as [Robbie] was to acknowledge many times, transformed his life." (144), "Within the half hour, Briony would commit her crime." (156), "If she had [gone to her mother], she would not have committed her crime." (162) These are there to build up the atmosphere of expectation and create suspense, because they mostly foreshadow that something bad is about to happen, or would not happen if the events took a different course, or they simply point at an interesting fact: "In later years she regretted not being more factual." (280) An interesting thing about these pre-dictions, as we realize only after we have read the whole novel, is that they are actually post-dictions – it is Briony, the narrator, who of course knows what will happen all the time, who inserts these remarks into the story.

However, the problem of time concerns not only the past and the future, but also the present, which means, simultaneousness of events. Writing as a medium, and language generally, doesn't allow for expressing more than one parallel string of action at the same time due to its linear quality. Therefore, even though two actions take place at the same time or when we are to have two or more alternative renderings of one single event, which happens a lot in both *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach*, these must be written down one after the other. In *Atonement*, this is dealt with by the division of the work into parts and chapters presented from the point of view of different characters and the action of which overlaps with the preceding and/or the following chapters. In *On Chesil Beach*, the solution of this problematic is similar, but the alternation of the points of view is not organised in such an orderly manner as in *Atonement*.

The line-up of these alternative versions needs to be a conscious decision of the author. It is because the fact that readers generally tend to identify better and side with the first of a number of alternative versions with which they are familiarised needs to be taken into consideration. This occurs especially if the author's goal is that the reader sides with neither: in an interview about the characters in *On Chesil Beach* McEwan said that "the narrative really tries to be compassionate toward them both and ascribe no blame to either." (Baker, "10 questions...")

One more type of dealing with simultaneousness is present in *Atonement*. It is when a portion of the parallel action is inserted, sometimes rather crudely, into the stream of the narration. An example of this approach may be the scene at the pool, where during Marshal's saying of one sentence – the same portion of this sentence is repeated (though there is a change between indirect and direct speech) both before and after the inserted segment: "...where one could, as it were, catch one's breath. [...] '...where one can, as it were, catch one's breath.'" (50-51) – there is a description, on almost two pages, of what Cecilia and Leon were doing during his monologue. This same technique of interpolating may of course be used for inserting some extracts other than those describing a simultaneous action: when Briony finds Lola and has decided that she is certain that it was Robbie she saw, she says "Well I can [say it for sure]. And I will." (167-171). This statement is followed by more than a three page long analysis by Briony, the narrator, of how this decision will affect Briony, the child, in the future, which is again closed up by the repetition of the same sentence.

## 2.4 History

Both *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach* are set in the past, however, as they are in this aspect typical postmodernist novels, they rarely refer to great historically important events or historically relevant people. They rather focus on the "common" people and on what these events meant to them at those times. Sometimes, they don't even refer to these events, but only describe the society in a particular region in general and how the people lived their lives at the chosen historical period. In *Atonement*, a large part of the story – the whole of part two and three – takes part

during the Second World War, yet there are no or only rare comments on the politics behind the war and the situation in the rest of the world. The focus in part two is on how a British soldier of a lower rank in the war-battered northern France perceives the war effort and on a trainee nurse working in wartime London in part three. These two lives are interspersed with descriptions of how French civilians and the inhabitants of London were affected by the war.

In *On Chesil Beach*, there are more direct references to historical events but it is again not really about the events themselves as about how common people interpret them. For example, when we hear an excerpt from a news broadcast, we are shown that the young people of the time had different opinions on some issues than older people, (24) or how the opinions of common people differed considerably from the official ideals of politicians (31-32). It is nevertheless not only about how the people of the time perceived those things, but also how they are perceived from today's perspective: these comments sometimes take the shape of historical criticism and comparison to today's view of the matters (3, 16). This is part of the postmodernist re-using of history and applying it to the present.

There is, however, a certain paradox: even though both novels are set in exact geographical locations and in a certain historical period, which is even specified to precise days, they are written in such a way and about such themes that the essence of the stories is not temporarily or regionally limited, but is universal. (Tonkin, "Ian McEwan...") This allows us to enjoy these novels and identify with the characters even though we live in sometimes completely different circumstances than they do. This is why *On Chesil Beach* (and we may apply this to *Atonement* as well) is by the author, McEwan, not thought of as a "historical novel". (Tonkin, "Ian McEwan...") This of course makes it hard to classify these novels under one clear-cut genre.

Another problematic which is hinted at in both novels is questioning how we can really know history. We of course know the answer to this question from various theoretical philosophical works, and it is also summarised in the theoretical part of this work, but in these novels we have a practical example, which renders this issue even to the "lay" readers. One part of this is demonstrated when in *Atonement* Briony contemplates on what she has just seen happen by the fountain: "there was nothing

left [...] beyond what survived in memory, in three separate and overlapping memories.” (41) This suggests the impossibility to know the past objectively. Another instance can be found in *On Chesil Beach*, where Edward doesn't remember much of the day he and Florence visited his home: “he had only snatches of memories of the afternoon” (132), which together with the fact that Briony has vascular dementia that will gradually make her lose her memory, shows that even the individual memory is evanescent and unreliable. Part four of *Atonement* exemplifies through metafiction that even if the memory works well, the textual remains which are supposed to be the only way that later generations may get to know the past are often deliberately altered in order to serve some obscure personal interest of the author. These instances again indicate that both *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach* are postmodernist works, because they combine various discourses, in this case, entertainment and a theoretical contemplation about the possibilities of knowing history.

## 2.5 Fact and Fiction

A technique which is widely used in both *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach* is the mingling of the factual and the fictional. While the novels are mostly about fictional characters and incidents, they get a feel of credibility because they are set in real existing places and refer to real, in this case, historical, events, as compared to being set in an environment which would be completely fictional as well as the storyline. In *On Chesil Beach*, for example, the location – Chesil beach with its variously sized shingles – does exist in England, but the hotel in which the events take place is fictional. This discrepancy is even emphasized (or perhaps mocked) by the disclaimer at the end of the book, which gives the precise geographical location of the hotel and then says that it is fictional: “Edward and Florence’s hotel – just over a mile south of Abbotsbury, Dorset, occupying an elevated position in a field behind the beach car park – does not exist.” (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach*)

However, not all the characters are fictional, or at least not entirely. One thing is that the fictional characters interact, though perhaps not directly, with real historical personalities. For example, Violet in *On Chesil Beach* is supposedly a

friend with Iris Murdoch (120), or, in *Atonement*, Robbie's poems were rejected "by Mr Eliot himself." (82) Also, even though all the characters are supposedly "inventions and bear no resemblance to people living or dead" (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach*), as it is stated in the already mentioned disclaimer, they are most probably amalgamates of different real (and sometimes fictitious) people the author knows. The same applies, for example, to the description of the hospital in part three of *Atonement* in which Briony has worked which is merged together from the experience that the "real" Briony from part four has gathered in three different hospitals (356) (which, again, is inspired by the book *No Time For Romance*, which McEwan used as resource material – see the following part on intertextuality). Briony metafictionally comments on this that it is nothing but a "convenient distortion" (356), same as would be, for example, putting all her growing-up experience into one day. (41) This shows that metafiction is also widely used here to blot out the distinction between fact and fiction.

The fact that the novels are often inspired by real-life experience of the author is further demonstrated in another instance in *Atonement*. It is the duplication of the acknowledgement of the support by the Imperial War Museum. It is firstly mentioned in the novel when Briony promises to acknowledge their help (360) and secondly in McEwan's Acknowledgements at the end of the book. (McEwan, *Atonement*) This shows that the reader may never be sure to what extent a novel is based on real events and what is a result of complete fabrication.

In *Atonement*, intertextuality, together with metafiction, blurs the difference so well that it starts a possibly never-ending cycle. Same as Briony, the "author" of the novel (meaning parts one, two and three of *Atonement*), comments on her work in part four, Ian McEwan comments on his work (the whole of *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach*) in his interviews. And similarly I, the author of this thesis, will comment on his interviews, and the reviewer of this thesis will eventually comment on my work in his/her evaluation of it.

## 2.6 Intertextuality

Intertextuality in these novels is also employed in more variants. Either the work that is referred to is a work of literature, music or visual art existing in the real world and is written by a different or even the same author, or it can be that the work that is being referred to is fictional, which in this thesis will be called as “false intertextuality”, though it is actually a certain kind of metafiction. An example of such false intertextuality in *Atonement* may be considered *The Trials of Arabella* and the tale about the woodcutter who saves a princess from drowning (38) along with other stories which Briony has written and to which she refers. And an example on a larger scale might be that parts one through three of *Atonement* are written by a character from part four.

In *Atonement*, there is an example of what could be called “double reverse intertextuality”, which means that in the novel there are references to some other distinct textual material, which in itself contains references back to the novel. The double reverse intertextuality is necessarily also in the form of false intertextuality, because otherwise it would most probably be inconceivable. In the case of *Atonement*, this textual material is the letter which Briony receives from the editor who has reviewed her story *Two Figures by a Fountain*. (311-315) This letter is also metafictional, because it talks about what is described as a rough draft of parts one through three of *Atonement*, and because it pseudo-justifies why *Atonement* is written the way it is.

One mode of inserting intertextual material into a literary work is making it a part of a character’s life – same as we, real people, are often affected by the books we read or we think about them and use them to evaluate our own lives, the fictional characters, to seem realistic, must do the same thing. That is why in *On Chesil Beach* the handbook for young brides, which Florence has read, has such an effect on her (7-8), why Robbie in *Atonement* uses Freud’s *Three Essays on Sexuality* for self-analysis on several occasions (81, 84, 94) and why when he is alone with Cecilia in the library the memory that comes to his mind is how he read the at the time illicit *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. (132) And for the same reason we are told which books a certain character possesses, reads or likes at a certain time: in *Atonement*, Robbie’s

present and hypothetical future collection of books is enumerated (82, 92-93), Cecilia's personality is illustrated to us by her preferring to read Fielding over Richardson's *Clarissa* (25), and Florence's in *On Chesil Beach* by which composers she likes.

A typically postmodernist type of intertextuality is when parts of older works are reused and given new meaning. This type is overtly used on two instances in *Atonement* when lines from "a poem by Auden on the death of Yates" (213) are taken out of the original context and used to refer to the war (203) and to Robbie's making plans for the future. (242) Similarly, an extract from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is put before the beginning of *Atonement* to make us aware that there might be some similarity between the two works and to hint to us what we should concentrate on when reading it.

Another type of intertextuality is using previously written works as inspiration for newly written works. However, the problem is that this may be (mis-) interpreted as plagiarism. *Atonement* is sometimes accused of plagiarism, because it uses other books as sources "too much", even though they are acknowledged at the end of the book. The controversy has been caused especially by part three, where Briony works in the hospital and where there are supposedly some "close similarities" between *Atonement* and Lucilla Andrews's *No Time For Romance*. (Cowell, "Eyebrows...")

## 2.7 Metafiction

Metafiction is a technique so widely used in *Atonement* that it is also discussed and referred to on many occasions throughout this thesis, because it is intertwined with other techniques. The ends to which metafiction is used in *Atonement* are, besides a simple playfulness of narration, to show the reader how the process of writing works, what are the difficulties a writer must deal with on regular basis, and it is also used as a device to portray and expand on the psychological processes in the minds of the characters. However, there is not much metafiction in *On Chesil Beach*.

In *Atonement*, metafiction is used to its fullest potential, because part four claims that the rest of the novel (understand parts one, two and three) is written by a fictional character and that it not just does not represent reality, but that it does not represent even fictional reality. This makes us doubt not only this novel, but also all other novels and it subverts the novel as a genre.

## 2.8 One Word

Words, of course, and even every single one of them, are very important for a novel, because they are the primary medium through which it is presented to us, as opposed to, say, music or visual images. However, in *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach*, the importance of single words is highly accentuated. They are what moves the story forward and sometimes it is one word only which is the focal point around which an entire scene is built, or which becomes a step in the progress of the action. This is further emphasized in *Atonement* through the use of meta-fiction.

These single words are striking as much for the characters in the novels as for the reader. It is, as Edward puts it, “the power of words to make the unseen visible” (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 72), which is often the central notion in the viewing of a given situation by the characters, but it is also a useful device to supply the reader with insight into the character’s mind. In *On Chesil Beach*, such words are for example “brain damaged” (69, 72), which for Edward becomes a turning point in his perception of his mother, or “penetration” (8), along with other terms from the handbook for young brides, which seem horrifying to Florence and which accentuate and help explain to the reader her dread of physical intimacy. These single words are often more effective than a long description might be, because they are more abstract and, at the same time, more precisely meaningful and moving. As a result of that, it is easier for the readers to assimilate these words, apply them to their own experience and thus better understand and identify with the character.

Another use of these words is that the action is based on them. The first part of chapter five of *On Chesil Beach* – the scene of the argument on the beach – resolves mostly around such single words, which are: “abominable” (140), “bitch” (149), “loved”, “mess” (150), “frigid” (156-157) and perhaps some others. These

words function like milestones in the narration, around which the main action is clustered.

In *Atonement*, there are several instances where this technique is used or referred to metafictionally. Some words such as the unspeakable word “divorce” (57) or Robbie being diagnosed as a “maniac” (119), which are again used as certain marks in the psychological development of the characters, are reflected upon by Briony. As for the word “cunt” (86), the importance of which is greatly emphasized in the movie, it works here as an example of how we can understand words we have never seen before and of which we do not know the referent. (114) Some other words are meta-fictionally used as examples of the power that certain words have in description: “falling in love could be achieved in a single word – *a glance*” (7), a method which is also used directly when Robbie’s state of mind is classified in the following manner: “One word contained everything he felt, [...] Freedom.” (91) The ways in which these words work is also described here, in that it is dependent on associated words and ideas that the used words bring with themselves: “[...] maniac! Lola’s words stirred the dust of other words around it – man, mad, axe, attack, accuse – and confirmed the diagnosis”. (158) This is exactly the manner in which this technique, or we may call it a style of writing, based on the accentuating of certain words, works in the mind of the reader.

## 2.9 The Ending

Both *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach* have a similar, non-traditional ending, though in *Atonement* it has other, more complex features, as is discussed in the section on meta-fiction. The action of the ending is situated a long time (decades) after the main events of the novels took place, when one of the characters (Edward in *On Chesil Beach* and Briony in *Atonement*) contemplates on the events they have lived through and reflects on what it meant to them. Also, it shows how it has shaped their and other characters’ further lives and what has happened, how they have lived, between those times and the “present time”. In confrontation with the embedded happily-ending play *The Trials of Arabella*, but also with most other traditional novels which usually end with the main action and this kind of retrospective

contemplation would not be present in them, it is a technique which hints that the action described in a work of literature is not a closed set of events, but that the action may continue even if there is a seemingly final ending, such as a marriage. On the other hand, it also gets rid of any ambiguities, which a traditional ending might have, because if this final part were missing in *On Chesil Beach*, the reader could not be sure that Edward did not go see one of Florence's performances, and the same goes for *Atonement*. In this aspect, this ending is comparable to that of a typical ancient tragedy, where the ending was also supposed to make a complete resolution. The difference would be that in a tragedy, a new hopeful beginning had to be hinted at, while here, and especially in *Atonement*, it is the opposite – the finality of the ending – that is emphasized. This stresses temporality and evanescence, in the same way as postmodernist philosophy does.

### 2.10 The Little Things

There are some techniques in these novels that are rather surprising and a little unusual, which in other words means, original. One such instance is in *Atonement*, where there is an overt use of a rhythmical pattern accompanied by its analysis and integration into the story: "He walked / across / the land / until / he came / to the sea. A hexameter. Five iambs and an anapaest was the beat he tramped to now." (219) This extract would of course be nothing unusual, if, for example, it was the character that thought or said it. Here, however, this is not the case as it is obviously the narrator who uses it as a method to describe the monotonous march of the character.

Another interesting segment of the text is also based on description, though here the technique is rather only pointed at than actually used. It is when Briony is on the search of the run-away twins, when a part of the description of the night's ambiance is presented to us as an attempt of describing it by the character: "She could describe this delicious air too, the grasses giving of their sweet cattle smell..." (156).

A notable fact is that the dialogues in French that take place in *Atonement* are not written in French but in English. This happens on several occasions, first when

Robbie with his companions meet the French farmers and their mother (195-198), and later the gypsy (255-256) and when Briony in the hospital is sent to talk to the dying French soldier. (305-310) The first few sentences of the dialogues are in French to mark the transition (not so with the gypsy, who says only two separate sentences and both are presented to us only in English) and the rest of the conversation is written down in English even though it is obvious that it is actually being spoken in French, because Robbie later always has to translate to his companions and both he and Briony struggle with the language. This is most probably done so that the reader could understand easily and because writing out the dialogues first in French and then in English would be too tedious and would probably serve no purpose really, considering the type of novel this is. On the one hand, this shows that *Atonement* is a postmodernist novel, because it is quite easy to imagine that the modernist writers would disagree with these arguments and would cling to the suggested alternative. On the other hand, it does defy the “interference of codes” which often appears in the form of multilingualism and which is typical for postmodernism. (Peterka 49)

## Conclusion

Through the discussion of the typically postmodernist narrative techniques and strategies in the first part of this thesis and the narrative techniques and strategies that are actually used in *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach* in the second part, we may conclude that these novels do in most aspects resemble what would be a prototypical postmodernist novel, if, of course, such a thing existed. Though each novel achieves this in a different way: *On Chesil Beach* mainly in its approach to history and *Atonement* in its use of metafiction and both novels equally in their handling of intertextuality, narrative voice, their treatment of time, playfulness of narration, experimentalism and originality, and other less prominent aspects. Nonetheless, even though these novels unquestionably are in this regard “children of their time”, they are, of course, most marked by that they are the “children” of Ian McEwan, who made use of the postmodernist and contemporary literary tendencies in his own distinctive way to create these unique works of literature.

The effects that the postmodernist narrative techniques and strategies used in these novels have on the reader is that besides making the reading of them more interesting and engaging, it also acquaints the reader with, and inconspicuously promotes, some of the postmodernist ideals. This is achieved by the authors’ putting the theoretical postmodernist concepts into practical use in their works: in their approach to historical material, use of intertextuality and treatment of subjectivity, but also by directly commenting on the problems through metafiction or by making their characters reflect on the issues. And as we have seen, *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach* together use these techniques widely.

This work of course is not, nor attempts to be, an exhaustive analysis of the two novels in question. The reason for this is that the novels may be analysed from many other points of view other than that of the narrative techniques and strategies used in them. For example, from the standpoint of the themes and topics present in the novels, the psychology and development of the characters, historical accuracy, or how these two novels relate to other earlier works by McEwan and how his style develops with time. Another possibility for further study might be to investigate how

the techniques and strategies used in *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach*, which are discussed in this thesis, are transformed, adapted and executed when the novels themselves change media from a written novel into a motion picture and also why do (or must) these changes take place.

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