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Bakalářská práce

***Guilt, punishment and origin of the tragedy in
McEwan's Atonement***

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INTRODUCTION

This work will focus on detailed analysis of guilt and punishment as they are presented in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, as well as what the original cause of the whole tragedy of *Atonement* is. It will try to analyze the novel with respect to its narration. It will also address the novel's philosophical and psychological issues that will provide an analysis of individual characters and their contribution to the story.

In the theoretical part, I will present Jasper's philosophy and also Skoblik's psychological approach to the theme of guilt. Jaspers' theory of guilt will be crucial for me and I will apply his theory on individual characters.

My main aim will be to present possible points of view on the guilt of Briony and the family. Considering the fact, that there are almost no characteristics of Marshall in the book as well as no analysis of his guilt and his approach to his crime, he will not be in the centre of my attention. In the first chapter, I will focus on the personality of Briony as a child and I will write about her characteristics, development and interactions between her and her surroundings. Chapter two will analyze reasons of Briony's act in the context of her perception of the world around her and also in the context of her passion for creating stories. In the next chapter, I will try to answer the question whether Briony's book was a real endeavor for forgiveness or an easy escape. Another task will be to analyze the reasons that led firstly Briony to accuse Robbie and secondly family to sent him to prison without enough of the evidence. This theme tempts to generalize about postmodernism and its connection to the theme of guilt and relevance of truth, which I will try to avoid.

THEORETICAL PART

Psychological and philosophical concepts of guilt

Guilt and punishment are among the oldest and the most frequent themes of literature and art. These themes have also become a subject of many expert interpretations. The German philosopher and psychologist Karl Jaspers worked out a theory of guilt which is considered to be one of the most important interpretations of this concept in the history. It distinguishes four kinds of guilt. The first one is the criminal guilt that involves the crimes based on objectively verifiable actions that are illegal. Instances of the court in a formal procedure reliably detect and apply the criminal offence. It means that the criminal guilt comes from violating unequivocal laws and is capable of objective proof. Jurisdiction rests with the court.

The second one is the political guilt that involves the deeds of statesmen and implicates the citizens of a state for having to bear the consequences of the deeds of the state whose power governs them and under whose order they live. These statesmen are representatives of these countries and together with all the citizens are responsible for the actions of their country. In the context of the time period that Jaspers lived in, it is necessary to mention one fact that helps us to understand the concept of political guilt and that can also serve as the practical example of it. During the Second World War, Karl Jaspers was one of the few professors of the University of Heidelberg who gave up their teaching posts. He abandoned his teaching post not only because his wife was Jewish but also because he did not want to contribute to the Nazi regime and did not want to deepen his political guilt for the horrors of the war caused by his nation. After the Second World War, Jaspers analyzed the extent of guilt of the German nation. In his work *The Question of German Guilt* Jaspers openly examined the culpability of Germany as a whole in the horrors of Hitler's Germany. This is how he commented on the situation after the Second World War. "That which has happened is a warning. To forget it is guilt. It must be continually remembered. It was possible for this to happen, and it remains possible for it to happen again at any minute. Only in knowledge can it be prevented."¹

The third one, the moral guilt, is guilt for all the immoral actions of the individuals. According to this theory, the moral guilt does not take into account any

¹ <http://eastowers.hubpages.com/hub/Auschwitz-A-History-of-Death>

circumstances of the acts. Accidents, unintentional acts and acts that were performed under life threat are still the same crimes as if they were performed intentionally and the extent of individual moral responsibility does not depend on the situation and conditions in which they happened. Therefore the only instance is our own conscience. The following citation explains how Jaspers defines this kind of guilt. “I, who cannot act otherwise than as an individual, am morally responsible for all my deeds, including the execution of political and military orders. It is never simply true that ‘orders are orders. Jurisdiction rests with my conscience and in communication with my friends and intimates who lovingly concerned about my soul.’”²

The last one, the metaphysical guilt, is much more universal. There is solidarity among people as human beings. From this point of view every person is responsible for every unjust act that has ever happened on Earth, but especially for the crimes that happened in his presence or with his knowledge. If a person did not do everything he could to prevent a crime, he is automatically an accessory. If he did not give up his life to prevent the murder of others, but just watched, he feels guilty in a way that can not be legally and politically punishable, but still morally he is guilty. The fact that he is still alive even though he witnessed a murder rests upon him as indelible guilt. Therein lies the basis of guilt of us all. “There exists solidarity among men as humans that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world this confuses man the creature with God, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge. If I fail whatever I can do to prevent them, I too am guilty.”³ This last point deserves further consideration. It can easily lead to sanctimonious political morals that have often been used to justify for example wars, a murder of an abortionist or any kind of act that has been hiding its malicious criminal intent behind world peace or justice. It may also lead to a conception of war as a crusade that requires unconditional surrender by the enemy.

Each of these types of faults leads to certain consequences. The criminal guilt (act) results in the decision of the judge that leads to the punishment. The consequence of the political guilt is the loss or the limitation of the political power. The moral guilt and the metaphysical guilt are the worst kinds of guilt, but they might be convenient for some humans in their consequences especially because they lead to moral insight,

² Karl Jaspers - Otázka viny 1946, The question of guilt

³ Karl Jaspers - Otázka viny 1946, The question of guilt

repentance and renewal. "The metaphysical guilt implies the transformation of sense of Self before God and can lead to the beginning of a new inner life."⁴

Psychology, on the other hand, conceives this theme from another point of view that is closer to practical analysis of guilt and its influence on the individuals. Generally, guilt in the psychological literature is usually conceived as a subjective feeling of guilt that is part of human experience about world and about relationships among people. Hartl defines guilt in his psychological dictionary as "subjectively experienced conviction related to the past, which is connected with the belief of an individual, sometimes incorrectly, that he or she has caused something. Therefore he or she suffers from remorse and expects punishment."⁵ According to Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, there are two main sources of guilt. The first source is the fear of external authority. The second has its source in the fear of one's own Superego. The first forces us to forsake satisfying instincts and the second leads to the (self)-punishment. According to Freud, human behavior is motivated primarily by basic instincts – the libido (desire for sex) and the aggressive instinct. However, since a simple direct satisfaction of these instincts is socially impracticable, these instincts are restricted during the development and education of a child by an external authority represented by the parents in childhood and later by the other adults. The parents and other adults create norms and standards for the children and these norms are later internalized into Superego. Later on, Superego assumes the role of the parents.

Superego supervises the acts, warns and punishes the individual. Superego absorbs only cruelty, punishment and severity. It assumes neither favour nor affection, even if the parents were benevolent. We may identify Superego with the instance of conscience, as an observer and critic of behavior of an individual. Although unacceptable instinctive tendency shifts from consciousness to unconsciousness it does not escape from the watchful guard, Superego, so the process of trying to satisfy basic instincts does not disappear but just moves into the unconsciousness as well as the transformed authority that bans the satiation. Therefore, the essence of guilt is based on the tension between the ideal represented by Superego and imperfect instinct affected by ego, which is then condemned by Superego. From this basic feeling of guilt comes out the need for punishment. This need transforms rather indifferent feelings of guilt into

⁴ Karl Jaspers - Otázka viny 1946, The question of the guilt

⁵ Hartl, P., Hartlová, H.: Psychologický slovník. Portál, Praha, 2005, Psychological Dictionary

the real cause punish oneself. All these processes can lead to committing a crime that will create a real reason to feel guilty as well as punishment. Freud also says that when studying especially young criminals, psychology can prove a strong feeling of guilt that precedes the crime and therefore this feeling is not the consequence of the crime but the motive of it. The feeling that comes after the crime can be described as regret rather than a feeling of guilt.

Psychological concepts of guilt distinguish two kinds of guilt. The first one is kind of guilt that is connected with internalized moral principles and laws of society. The second kind has rather personal character and is connected with the offence against oneself. The Charles University lecturer ThDr. Jiří Skoblík, is interested in the concept of guilt from psychological, theological and philosophical points of view. He has written many articles about this theme. According to his article *Man as a Moral Being*⁶, guilt is one of the fundamental existential experience. The first encounter with guilt is experiential and sometimes very intensive. Then comes the reasoning about the experience and the effort to understand it, get the distance from it and reflect it. If we want to talk about guilt as phenomenon of human life we should consider the fact that people are responsible for their acts by their nature, but it does not automatically mean that they always choose the right decision. Guilt is not based upon the decisions that are later rethought as faults. Guilt is based upon the knowingly wrong decisions. We can not cut these presumptions from guilt because we would exclude the phenomenon of guilt from human life. The experience of guilt is not something pleasant so thus people usually want to shake their guilt off them. If they do not at least partly succeed, it may lead to maladaptation and interpersonal conflicts. People who are not able to cut the guilt off usually try to get rid of guilt by reducing it to mere facticity of what happened.

Dealing with the problem of guilt we should examine the emotional, rational and moral levels of psyche to understand it. Psychology does not construe a person ailed by guilt primarily as a moral entity but as an ill person who lost out and who needs to be cured. It does not emphasize guilt itself but the experience of guilt. This fact does not imply that the psychological approach would be only an attempt to deny moral responsibility. It means that the psychological approach is aware of increasing complexity of human soul and does not accept the simplifying black and white view that reduces the problem of guilt to good and evil. Psychoanalysis is trying to reveal the

⁶ <http://www.pastorace.cz/Tematicke-texty/Clovek-jako-mravni-bytost-P-ThDr-Jiri-Skoblik.html>

connection between the experience of guilt and hidden psychological mechanisms by detecting hidden pressures, compulsions and its suppression. There are many differences among different psychological interpretations of guilt, but they usually agree in the matter of the origin of guilt. They describe it as internal blame against the background of unexplained anxiety, childhood experiences and unmet ideals. The problem in this issue is not the burden of conflict, frustration or stress from the experience of the inevitable guilt that rests on human, but a commitment. Most people do not confront themselves immediately with the inner part of their souls but with their value and target ideas and ideals. These ideas and ideals that are integrated in their moral ranking usually demand some effort from these people. They impose the claims and requirements on people and certainly can not be reduced to a mere psychological givenness of a person. Life does not rule a norm (ideas and ideals) but life is ruled by a norm and is affected by the commitment to fulfill this norm. According to Sigmund Freud, guilt escalates when a person drops in his existence behind his essence and therefore gets to the state of disaffectedness in two possible forms. In the first case the disaffectedness is connected with the part of his reality and in the second with part of his ego.

Theme of guilt in English written literature

The theme of guilt has always been in the centre of philosophical and scientific contemplations. Clinicians and behavioral scientists focus mostly on the subjective and psychological aspects of guilt, feeling guilty. Theologians and philosophers are more concerned with the objective element in guilt as culpability, being guilty. It is possible to explore many manifestations of guilt across the disciplines, religions, literature and philosophies. This theme was treated in the works of Platón, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Jaspers and many others. This fact led to the treatment of this theme also in literature. The oldest example is the Greek tragedy about Oedipus written by Sophocles. Even though Oedipus committed a lot of horrible crimes, he strongly denies being guilty. He claims that all his deeds were predetermined by gods before he was born and that he can not be guilty for something that was part of his fate.

Literature distinguishes many concepts of guilt that have been treated throughout the history. The categorization of different kinds of guilt will no doubt vary with the

background and genre of the book, and the time in which the book was written. For the purposes of organization we may list them as follows but it is important to say that the exact distinction is almost impossible because most of them overlap in many ways. The first one is the private guilt. This kind of guilt begins as private matter and often remains private. No one who has conscience can resist the feeling of moral guilt usually from the time when he is old enough to distinguish between right and wrong and between acceptable and unacceptable acts. Lurene Brown describes this kind of guilt and gives practical examples in his work *Guilt in Literature*. "One feels guilty for so-called sins of commission or omission. He glances at a neighbor's paper during an examination and later finds that his A brings him little satisfaction. He maneuvers himself into a position which someone else should rightfully have or avoids a long-time friend who no longer fits into his social group. He fails to write a long-overdue letter, pay a bill or keep a commitment. Because he is not always sure why he is uncomfortable and less happy than he would like to be, he takes refuge in self-punishment or bursts of anger or rationalization or excuses for his behavior. T. S. Eliot's *Prufrock*, for example, painfully aware that his is an ineffectual comforts himself with "And indeed there will be time. . . there will be time," knowing full well that for him time is running out. In Dickens' *Great Expectations* Pip who has been brought up in his sister's home and has known his only kindness as a child from his brother-in-law Joe, realizes he is wrong to be secretly ashamed of Joe who comes to London to see him. Edna, in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin compensates to her children with excessive bursts of affection and an extravagant gift for what she realizes is not a truly maternal feeling toward them."⁷

The second one is the shared guilt. "Sharing of guilt, whether through a need for another person's assurance or assistance or through complicity, compounds the problems involved."⁸ The person can not bear the burden of guilt alone. He may confess to a relative or a friend and tell what he has done. Sometimes the person shares his guilt because someone else already guessed that something is wrong because of the reactions and fears of his fellow. In the end two or more people are involved in what is happening, and while one may be the attacker, complicity makes anyone involved guilty as an accessory. A very good illustration of shared guilt which comes about when one person comes across another's wrongdoing is Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Biff,

⁷ <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED112428.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED112428.pdf>

the son of Willie Loman, the salesman, is looking for his father in Boston and unexpectedly finds him in his hotel room with a woman. Biff is angry with his father but on the other hand wants to be loyal to his mother. After this incident he is never the same again, nor is Willie.

Shakespeare deals with the theme of guilt especially in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. He provides compelling insight into guilt. *Macbeth* is a tragedy that deals with the theme of a murder that results in a wild sense of guilt that leads Macbeth to his fall and Lady Macbeth to her suicide. It is a premonitory story of how excessive ambition can lead to a tragedy even though the individuals are intelligent. Macbeth's guilt makes him unable to enjoy all the things he has gained. Lady Macbeth stands behind her husband and is always ready to encourage him. Macbeth would have probably never carried out all his ambitions without her. Her guilt is subconsciously expressed through her dreams. The way Shakespeare presents her guilt expresses the fact that we are not able to escape guilt of our crimes.

Shakespeare also deals with the discovery of one's crime and another's lack of faithfulness in his *Hamlet*. It might seem that the story revolves around the theme of revenge and despotism. However, if we look deeper in the story we realize that guilt is as much present in the story as the two mentioned before. Almost all the characters in *Hamlet* are guilty to some extent. "Hamlet becomes obsessed with proving his uncle's guilt before trying to act."⁹ The biggest deal of guilt lies upon Claudius. His guilt is most obvious in Act Two when Hamlet let the actors to stage the story about his father's death and about the way how he was killed. Gertrude's guilt comes from her marriage which makes Hamlet mad of her. She realizes that it was little bit soon for her to marry some another man and feels guilty for that. Later on when she realizes that Claudius killed her husband, her sorrow is even deeper. Even though Ophelia is a very kind and gentle character, she can feel some inner guilt because of Hamlet. She refuses his love and he turns mad. Polonius is also haunted by guilt. He forbids Ophelia to meet Hamlet again and thinks that it is the reason why Hamlet turns mad. It is most obvious when Ophelia informs him that Hamlet is not all right. Polonius gets upset and feels guilty for the fact that he has driven Hamlet mad. Laertes lets his father and sister fend themselves alone and leaves to France. That can make him feel guilty too. "The knowledge that

⁹ <http://writinghood.com/literature/topical/shakespeare%E2%80%99s-hamlet-and-the-theme-%E2%80%9Cguilt%E2%80%9D/>

Laertes left his father and sister to pursue his studies in France and allow them to fend for themselves could have made him feel guilty that he was not there to look after them and prevent his father's death. His advice to Ophelia to stay away from Hamlet which could have contributed to Ophelia's insanity and later on caused his beloved sister's death could have aroused some guilt feelings in him too. It was his grief compounded by guilt of leaving his family that made him leaped into Ophelia's coffin once it has been put in the grave."¹⁰

The third one is the implied guilt. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* Oedipus killed his father and married his mother and therefore fulfilled his divination. His life has been planned by gods. He tried to avoid committing these crimes but did not succeed. In *Passing of Arthur* we can not blame Bedevere for not throwing the sword into the lake. He pretended that he did it but in fact he did not obey the order of his master. However, the reader has no idea what his plans with Excalibur were.

The last one is called the public guilt. The public guilt is the most misleading type of guilt and it is very hard to understand it. The explanation of Lurene Brown will help us to understand better. "For what constitutes guilt in the eyes of many may be the result of the kind of vindictive madness generated by a crowd or mob."¹¹ It means that what seems to be guilt in one generation may be glorified in the next one. Someone may be a villain in one era and later on becomes a hero. The best example of crowd hysteria is the story of crucifixion of Christ that can be found in the *Bible*. Lurene further says that "for the shift in emphasis over the generations one can read the biography of such characters in history as Martin Luther or World War I spy Edith Cavell. As for the third category, we have only to look at two American writers, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, both regarded somewhat at questionable literary figures during their lifetimes and now included on every list of eminent American authors."¹²

¹⁰ <http://writinghood.com/literature/topical/shakespeare%E2%80%99s-hamlet-and-the-theme-%E2%80%9Cguilt%E2%80%9D/>

¹¹ <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED112428.pdf>

¹² <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED112428.pdf>

PRACTICAL PART

Briony's personality as a child and her later development

We are not given a very detailed description of Briony and her personality in the beginning. We get only a few words in the first half of the opening sentence, which shows how passionately and almost obsessively orderly Briony is when getting everything ready for the performance of her play. The way she is preparing everything for the play shows her strong need for details, order and the desire to have the world just so. What we know is that even though she is growing up in an upper-middle-class, slightly prudish and sometimes cold environment, and her mother Emily is ill in bed for most of the time, suffering from severe migraines and her father spends all his time in the town, Briony is an active and sophisticated child. At first sight it might seem that Briony is satisfied with herself and with her rich fantasy world, but it is obvious that she is not given much attention from her parents and that they partly passed the burden of her upbringing to their second daughter Cecilia. This causes that little Briony is very frustrated and she does not know where to turn for endearment and attention. Therefore, she starts to create fictional friends, imaginary worlds and invents her own reality. Every single event that happens around her becomes a source of secrets and potential stories which melt into reality and break the borders between her real and imaginary life. Kory French describes her imaginative character in his study guide. "Briony Tallis has the imagination to make herself anything. When the story opens she is Briony the serious child, Briony the famous writer, and Arabella, the star of a play she has just written. Whenever Briony is upset, she wanders by herself to water, where she can daydream into any persona she wishes--a murderer, fencing champion, successful author (notice the water motif for this--a formless element). This power of imagination makes her an acclaimed novelist."¹³

Briony's behavior is sometimes very strange and she is inscrutable in what she does or what she deduces from the events happening around her. She can be described as a child with a somehow dynamic and appealing character, but, on the other hand, who is sometimes very confused and even annoying for some people. She constantly demands attention and would like the people and the things around her to be and behave in the way she wants. She feels upset when something is out of her control, not being

¹³ Kory French, *Atonement*: 2010, p. 89

able to accept life and its natural flow. During her early childhood Briony found out how easy it was to create some other realities and that she did not need to be satisfied only with the attention and stimuli of people around her. She discovered the beauty and enjoyment of daydreaming and imagining different worlds, and that has been the beginning of her passion for creating stories and writing. Cecilia comments on this in the first part of the book: “what had seemed a passing fad was now an enveloping obsession?”¹⁴ In her essay on *Atonement* that Cathrine Sernham says “storytelling is Briony’s life, she spends her days browsing dictionaries to increase her vocabulary and events around her are always an inspiration for making new stories. However, Briony is young and naïve and the stories she has written up until now have, in turn, also been simple and naïve but they have the basic elements of any story; unstable situation, rising action, climax and stable situation.”¹⁵

Even though Briony does not have any secrets at all, she desires to have some because she wants to know something no one else does, something that would give her a power to play with other people around and make them interested in those secrets of her. She may be found irritating and after her wrong accusation some may start hating her, but there is something very deep, lifelike and naturally passionate in her. Her extended and vivid imagination, passion for stories and sympathy for suffering heroes sometimes throw her into a different world and make it hard for her to distinguish between reality and imagination, between the real and the literary world and between right and wrong. When thinking and reflecting, Briony always “works more with the products of opinion than observation”¹⁶ She is trapped in the fictitious reality of her stories and books ruled by brave characters and their enemies. This fact is quite evident in the scene by the fountain. In *Journal of Modern Literature* Finney comments on this theme in the part called Briony’s Stand Against Oblivion. “From the start, powerful imagination works to confuse the real with the fictive. The young Briony suffers from inability to disentangle life from literature that has shaped her life.”¹⁷ Briony changes reality into her imaginings and absurdly creates completely different stories from simple, though emotional, interactions between people.

¹⁴ McEwan *Atonement*, p.21

¹⁵ Cathrin Sernham, *Briony through her own eyes*, 2009

¹⁶ Childs, Peter: *The fiction of Ian McEwan , A readers guide to Essentials criticism*, p. 141

¹⁷ Finney, *Briony’s Stand Against Oblivion*, 2002: 78-79

Briony also puts differences among social classes above love as she learnt it from her family. The fact that her family is strongly affected by class-prejudice is not visible from the beginning because we learn that Robbie's education is paid by Mr. Tallis, but later on and especially after the accusation we realize that it is true.

The false accusation was not anything unexpected. It is somehow in the line with Briony's personality. It is possible to guess how she views the world according to the imaginary world she creates in *Trials of Arabella*, or at least how she wants the world to be. She creates for herself the central role in the play about a romantic world which is rather childlike and pathetic. Due to her frustration that was caused by the absence of the parents and other close friends of similar age, she has wished to share these imaginary worlds with anyone who has been at least slightly interested in it. However, it usually did not work and her frustration deepened. Her mother reads her novels and praises her for them, but she is not present most of the time. Every time she tries to draw one of her imaginary worlds to someone else, it disappoints her again and again because they do not understand it. She tries to show her world to the cousins when she wants them to act in the play, to Robbie when she jumps into the lake and wants him to save her and, finally, to the whole family when she falsely accuses Robbie of raping Lola. Her disappointment culminates when she realizes that Robbie is in love with Cecilia. Although after the scene by the lake Briony did nothing else to demonstrate her "love" for Robbie, even Robbie, as Kory French mentions in his study guide, finally realizes "that her vindictiveness towards him was a result of assumed betrayal. Briony loved Robbie and he fell in love with her older sister. Briony's love transformed to "disappointment, then despair, and eventual bitterness" (*Atonement* 220), which explains her motives for carrying on with her accusations and statements against him all the way through the trial. "¹⁸

There is one more thing that is important to say about Briony. The fact that she searches for and creates fantasies and stories everywhere is closely connected with what she becomes in the future. She imposes fiction on reality and confuses life and literature and therefore is becoming a real writer. John Irving describes this phenomenon in his autobiographical novel *Imaginary Girlfriend*. During his puberty he used to create fictional girlfriends together with their characterizations and stories connected with their relationships with him for his class-mates. After years the author realizes that the fact

¹⁸ Kory French, *Atonement*: 2010, p. 126

that he did this helped him to improve his creative and narrative skills and stimulated his fantasy. By this process of imposing daydreaming and his wishes on reality he, as well as Briony who started this process in her early childhood, was becoming a writer. In Briony's case this process unfortunately also partly caused the false accusation of Robbie.

The reasons of Briony's act

Briony is a sensitive child and watches every move and change in the house very carefully. She wants to be and behave as an adult or at least to understand things as adult people do. Watching things happening around, she thinks she is observing adult behavior and that she knows what all these things mean and that she understands them. However, she is entirely wrong about the fact that she understands what she sees and hears. What is more, she is not able to evaluate whether these acts and situations are good or bad, or rather positive or negative aspects of human life and behavior. There are two levels of Briony's misperception and misunderstanding. The first one is connected with the wrong behavior patterns that she sees in her family, like class prejudice and putting differences among social classes above other values. The other level is connected with misperception of the situations and scenes happening around her. The dialogues were often indefinite and had a hidden background. Sometimes, she only watched the interaction from a long distance but was not able to hear the conversation. No one talks with her about the particular situations even though they know she must have seen or heard something. Especially the library scene and the letter must have left a lot of unanswered questions in Briony's mind. Another important aspect of this problem is also the fact that a lot of scenes take place where some senses or cognitive abilities are obstructed. Briony can "see" what happened between Robbie and Cecilia at the fountain, but she cannot hear it. She "reads" the letter, but she does not know what it means. Letter on, she "sees" the sexual scene in the library, but nobody says anything about it. And finally, Lola is raped, but cannot completely "see" who it is because it is dark. The first two hundred pages mostly concern with perception and misperception through the doorway, windows and dark places. The moral danger McEwan presents here is seeing what you choose to see. Even though the attack happens at night, so it is hard to make out the faces, Briony sees the real attacker, but at that moment what she "thinks" becomes what she "has seen" and that is how the tragedy begins.

The first level is reflected in the fact that the family does not instruct her and does not help her to develop her own morality. They only let her watch and copy their behavior which she is not old enough to cope with and understand its character. The second level of the problem is also connected with her family. People from her family were always close to her and she observed them in their everyday lives, but their

problems, behavior and dialogues were incomprehensible for her and were somehow mysterious. The dialogues had been too intricate, emotions had been too strong or on the other hand too restrained, and comparing to her childlike nature they had been too complicated for her to understand. Now, she thought she somehow came to the breakpoint and that even though she did not understand them fully yet, they were clearer for her and she began to understand their character. “This was not a fairy-tale, this was real, the adult world in which frogs did not address princesses and the only message were the ones the people sent.”¹⁹ These misleading thoughts and awareness of the alleged changes made Briony self-confident, assured her about the rightness of her own comprehension and made her brave enough to start manipulating with the facts and interpretations of the scenes as she wanted. Later on, these biased thoughts lead to the accusation of Robbie.

From a psychological point of view Briony’s accusation was not a simple mistake or a slip. It originated from a mixture of causes. It was her desire for a fictitious story, drama and intrigue together with misunderstanding of the scenes she accidentally participated in that made her to construct the story of Robbie’s assault on her cousin Lola for the police. She must have been aware of the fact that she was manipulating the truth or at least that she was not telling the whole truth. If she really thought that Robbie was “a sex maniac”, that he was dangerous and that the police should know about it, which could be understandable at her age, she could have only said what she really saw. If she had been only afraid of and confused by the things happening around her, she could have solved this situation in many different ways. There was no reason to accuse Robbie instead of Marshall unless she wanted to do it intentionally. She is guilty of imposing fiction on reality. What she partly did not realize and probably could not anticipate considering her age were the consequences of her confusions and lies. “For a long time, conventional child development knowledge held that young children are not cognitively capable of lying. Recent research, however, has found that most children learn to lie between the ages of two and four.” (...) “The lies of the four-year-old and ten-year-old are markedly different, however, and the difference illustrates the child’s developing cognitive mastery. Children become better at lying as they come to understand the difference between what you believe and what they believe.” (..) “By age four, children know it’s wrong to lie.” (..) “By age four or five, children understand the

¹⁹ *Atonement*, McEwan, p.40

effects of a false message on a listener's mind. They recognize that the listener will interpret and evaluate a statement in the light of his existing knowledge. Thus children's emerging ability to understand false beliefs assists them in their lying efforts and with understanding the implications of lying."²⁰ The fact that Briony was not able to anticipate the consequences of her lies is also obvious from how she perceives the situation at the end of part one. "It should have ended there, this seamless day that had wrapped itself around a summer's night, it should have concluded then with the Humber disappearing down the drive."²¹ She is watching Robbie being arrested from her window and thinks that the whole terrible event is over and that nothing else is going to happen. She thinks she did what she had to do and that is the end.

By examining the text itself it is possible to find a lot of hints that lead us to the conclusion that there might be something strictly intentional in what Briony did and that it was not only a combination of fantasies, bad interpretation and fear of what was written in the letter and what she saw by the fountain and in the library. She knew that she will always come to the moment when it will be up to her to decide what to do next. Either she can fall into her fantasies or resist the temptation and suppress it by her own will. Briony learned that individual events and situations happening around her did not necessarily have to refer only to her own life, that they are interconnected with other people's lives and that even though all the people participated in one situation and experienced the same event, it does not mean that they all understood it in the same way and that she plays some role in the interactions. She mostly did not search for the true and real interpretation but rather fell into fantasies. The last sentence also indicates that the novel will be rather concerning with inventing the truth than with the truth itself.

Another aspect of Briony's reasons for the false accusation of Robbie is the fact that she had been in love with Robbie as a child. She felt that Robbie was more attracted and attached to Cecilia than to her. She was jealous of Cecilia and she thought Robbie was taking Cecilia away from her at the same time. She intentionally opened the letter, later stole it from her sister's room and showed to her mother. She accused him not only by mistake. She might only have been persuaded that Robbie did it and might have been for example afraid of him having seen that he had already attacked her sister Cecilia in the library. Yet it was not true. She saw Marshall's face as she later admitted. So there is

²⁰ <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED112428.pdf>

²¹ *Atonement*, McEwan, p. 186

no reason to believe that she thought of it in this way. She started creating fictional, excessive and somehow mysterious stories about his behavior and about what really happened in the scenes she had seen much earlier before the attack.

There was some kind of excitement and rush in Briony's behavior before the dinner. She was in her element, full of new impulses, far away from reality, in the temptation to change the developments of the evening. Having read Robbie's letter and having reflected on the fountain scene, Briony was ready to misread the sexual scene she accidentally had seen before as an attack on her sister and was ready to indict Robbie when given the opportunity. She was teasing and taunting Robbie saying: "I have done nothing wrong"²² while giving him the black looks. She invented her own story about Robbie, who was not always acting in the way she wanted him to act in her games, who wrote naughty letters, attacked her sister and finally raped her cousin. It all fitted together as if it was part of a play. She created a perfect new character for some drama like she did in her play, creating a story in the story. However, this drama was only taking place in her head and she seemed to have no idea what it can cause in reality.

²² *Atonement*, McEwan, p. 141

Briony's book – endeavor for forgiveness or an easy escape

In the beginning the narration of *Atonement* will be characterized because it is quite important for understanding the story in general. “Modernist novels are characterized by the absence of omniscience in their narration and its replacement with variety of fragmentary subjective perspectives. The first section of *Atonement*, set in 1935, seems to embody just such a modernist poetics.”²³ Although there is a third-person narrator by a neutral observer, each chapter is narrated through the consciousness of one or more characters. For example, chapter six follows the thoughts of Emily, Leon and Cecilia. McEwan uses a “hidden narrator” to “speak” for all the characters and to create suspicion of some deception in the story from the beginning. He gives us many significant clues that the narration and the narrators will be of unusual kind and strongly hints at his narrators’ reliability. These clues show that the text is narrated by a very young person or from the perspective of a very young person. We also find passages which advert to the fact that her thoughts, understanding of the scenes and interpretations are not very rational and that this may lead to some catastrophe or something bad that might happen in the plot. For example the first scene which Briony misinterprets at the beginning of the story reflects this issue. “Briony had her first, weak intimation that for her anow it could no longer be fairy tail castles and princess, but the strangeness of here and now, of what passed between people, the ordinary people that she new, and what power one could have over the other, and how easy it was to get everything wrong, completely wrong.”²⁴ The narration is even more complicated when we realize that the book is composed of more than one point of view. If the narrator was one person, for example Briony, she would not be able to describe events as they happened in such a wide perspective and details.

The book could have ended with a grand happy ending. The young couple chased by misfortune is finally brought back together and lives happily. However, that would be rather a conventional ending of a traditional realistic novel. In the end Briony says: “but what sense of hope or satisfaction could a reader derive from an ending like that? So in the book, I wanted to give Robbie and Cecilia what they lost out on in life. I'd like to think this isn't weakness or... evasion... but a final act of kindness. I gave them

²³ *The ethics of fiction in Atonement*, Alistair Cormack, p. 73

²⁴ *Atonement*, McEwan, p. 39

their happiness”²⁵. We can only conjecture whether it was evasion or not and whether it was a final act of kindness for the couple or for Briony’s own conscience, but we can be sure that Briony’s ending of the book was not unconsciously written to please the reader or to fulfill the author’s weakness for romantic stories. It was an intention that was supposed to fulfill many different psychological needs. When she talks about “weakness” and “evasion” she does not try to evade the truth. The sentence is ambiguous because she is also talking about the weakness and evasion in her preceding acts and behavior, about what she could have done but did not do many years ago.

Briony has always wanted to reflect her wrongdoing in a book and as she said she had already tried to write this story for many times during her life but had not published it for different reasons. The need for reflection of these events remained in her mind until the end of her life. We may say that it was her first and also her last story because the novel tells us about the event that happened long time ago. She was trying to write her story during the war as well as many times during her career, but finally published as her last novel when she was dying. She could have chosen many different ways in which to atone for what she had done. She chose what was closest to her heart and nature and what she had talent for – writing. Writing is a life necessity for her even during the war when she works as a nurse, being cut off from the family and home. “And at that time when she was cut off from everything she knew – family, home, friends – writing was the thread of continuity. It was what she had always done”²⁶

Thus, at the end of the book, the reader realizes that the motivation of Briony’s writing is not only to create a story and to earn money. We discover that it is a personal necessity for her to make her work and life somehow complete or at least to try to do it. The book is an intentional attempt to find relief, some measure of deliverance and in the end maybe also to distance from the guilt that has been haunting her for more than sixty years. The atonement itself plays a key role in the story and the book as whole serves as an apology, memoir and atonement in one.

On the other hand, the story serves not only as the author’s personal atonement but also as a study of the author’s own psychological and literary development. The progression of the story allows the reader to follow Briony’s development as a person and as a writer. For example, it shows how she uses writing to fulfill her psychological

²⁵ *Atonement*, McEwan, p. 371-372

²⁶ *Atonement*, Ian McEwan, p. 280

needs to reflect what was happening in different periods of her life. She has always used writing to create and control her world, but sometimes the stories and fantasies were controlling and affecting her life and reality. As a child, she started with folk tales and melodramas and at the end of her life she was able to compose a book that was the final confession and contemplation on her life. As the years have passed and she has grown up, her writing skills and intellect have developed and thus her understanding of life and perception of reality have changed fundamentally. Therefore, she is able to reflect what she has done, realize what she has wrongly interpreted and also to understand what was really happening in the scenes she had witnessed, especially those with sexual and psychologically complicated undertone. This progress and change allowed her to create a psychologically elaborated book that is written from many points of view and therefore to satisfy, to certain extent, her need for personal apology and “reconciliation with herself”²⁷. Presented like this, Briony’s story may “constitute some semblance of completion”²⁸, and therefore it seems that Briony achieved some measure of atonement and completed her last task of her life by writing the book. However, the decision whether it was satisfactory enough for her or not is left to the reader’s opinion.

Nevertheless, looking more deeply into the moral level of the whole story we realize that even though writing a book is a meritorious act, Briony cannot hide her cowardice and guilt behind any of these attempts for apology. It is obvious that atonement and excuses are now practically useless and that revealing the truth should have been done much earlier. Robbie and Cecilia both died in 1940 when Briony was already eighteen years old and must have been aware of the fact that in that time she could have changed what she had done by coming to the appropriate institutions and to her family and telling the truth. She knows that when Robbie and Cecilia were (still) alive she could have done much more for his vindication and therefore maybe to save the lives of both characters. Kory French comments on this very fittingly. He thinks that “[w]hat Briony needs, in her own words, is ‘backbone’. She seeks this courage in real

²⁷ This term was used in the work of Linda Cruise in *Getting an Angle on Truth: An Analysis of Narrative Viewpoint in Ian McEwan’s Atonement, Part II*
<http://www.public-republic.net/getting-an-angle-on-truth-an-analysis-of-narrative-viewpoint-in-ian-mcewan%E2%80%99s-atonement-part-ii.php/>

²⁸ This collocation was used in the work of Linda Cruise in *Getting an Angle on Truth: An Analysis of Narrative Viewpoint in Ian McEwan’s Atonement, Part II*
<http://www.public-republic.net/getting-an-angle-on-truth-an-analysis-of-narrative-viewpoint-in-ian-mcewan%E2%80%99s-atonement-part-ii.php/>

life and not just writing, but is unable to find it. She misses her opportunity to annul the marriage because of a 'lacking courage for confrontation.'“(...) “Briony understands that what may not transpire in real life, can always be recreated in fiction. It was not the backbone of a story she lacked. It was her backbone.”²⁹

When Briony grows up, she becomes aware of the power of words but only in one way; she learns about the power of her words used in literature but not in the real life. For her whole life, she has been learning how to use words in their proper meanings and how to use their real power, both as a writer and as a human in real life.

Briony would like to find atonement, forgiveness and relief, but she does not look for repentance. The only part when she talks about God is at the end of the book but in a completely different context. The major problem of her life is the question whether an artist can achieve atonement through his art. Her life is a quest for answering this question. Her own life gradually answers this question for her and as we can judge from what she says, the answer for this question is he/she can not. Briony says “[n]o atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all”³⁰. By this sentence Briony has showed that she is aware of certain impracticableness and pointlessness of her atonement, which as she says is impossible in this case, when everything is somehow over. However this does not necessarily have to be true and that is why Briony at least tried to do that and wrote the book about “a young girl, a young and foolish girl, who sees something from her bedroom window which she does not understand, but she thinks she does”³¹.

In a sense she can reach atonement in its proper meaning. The meaning of the word “atonement” is close to the word “expiation” as opposed to (connection with) the word “repentance” that is rather passive praying for forgiveness than active effort to repair what someone did. Maybe Briony can not find forgiveness and relief for herself but she can partly try to atone for what she did. She could have done much more when Robbie and Cecilia were alive, no doubt. However there is a chance to reach at least partly what she wanted even after Robbie’s and Cecilia’s death. Briony said that she wanted to “give Robbie and Cecilia what they lost out on in life”³² by writing the book.

²⁹ Kory French, *Atonement*: 2010, p. 129

³⁰ *Atonement*, Ian McEwan, p. 351

³¹ *Atonement*, Ian McEwan, p.

³² *Atonement*, McEwan, p. 371-372

From the literary point of view, this can be a very important aspect of Briony's atonement. Apart from the fact that she is a novelist and that she can reach some forgiveness and satisfaction for her by writing the novel, there is one more aspect that should be mentioned. She is a famous and established writer who has already written twenty novels that have been published with great success. It means that it is possible for her to make Robbie's and Cecilia's story famous, successful and therefore eternal for the readers and literary world. She created not only a fictitious continuation of some life story, but a book that is supposed to become a bestseller, so there is a big chance that thousands of people will read the story of Robbie and Cecilia and relive it again and again. And this is the point she wants to achieve after her death. People will talk about the book, read it, think of it and therefore the happy ending that Briony invented in the book will somehow come into existence and will not be forgotten. "When I am dead, and the Marshalls are dead, and the novel is finally published, we will only exist as my inventions."³³ After her death there will be no one who witnessed the events that happened in the book, no one who would be able to tell what really happened and if they ever happened, and so the characters and the whole story will become "the inventions" of her novel. However, even though she cannot bring Robbie and Cecilia back to life and repair what she did, making those "inventions" grand and famous can bring them immortality and some sense of fulfillment in the end.

Considering the fact that it took her almost sixty years to write the story, we may ask whose story it is. That is exactly the point McEwan is trying to highlight for example by narrating from more than one point of view and by flash-forward. The question is who is precisely able to tell what really happened and to complete the story? The author has absolute power of deciding what is going to happen in his novel and therefore he is in a sense also God. He is the one who is setting the limits even though it is only in his imagination. Unsuspecting readers let Briony tell them what really happened. However, she is a subject of her own interpretation of the events and she can easily lie about the end of the story or project her wishes into it, which is exactly what happens. Realizing this fact, Briony discovers another level of her guilt. She knows what a power as a writer she has, not only over the reader but over the whole history and she feels guilty for that. She knows that she can easily write whatever story she wants. Just like she could have sent Robbie to jail, she could have let him survive the

³³ *Atonement*, Ian McEwan, p. 351

war. As Kory French says in his study guide on *Atonement*: “The reliance readers put in Briony to tell them ‘what really happened’ leaves her feeling guilty about her life's work, and she projects that guilt onto the history of the English literature canon.”³⁴

McEwan uses Briony, “the fictional writer”, to explore the role of the novelist as a person and individual agent in “the world where there appears to be no higher authority”³⁵. By doing so, he playfully avoids constructing dogmatic answers or expressing some absolute truths. These questions show the difficulty and guile of the main themes and ideas of the book which are very intangible and reflect some of the features of postmodernism like plurality of attitudes, exploring subjectivity and the opinion that there is no absolute truth. “Whereas the Leavisite tradition of English fiction presents us with a set of convictions about reality and morality, postmodernism brings a rejection of certainties. Since there is no unmediated reality there can be no certain truth, since there is not truth, there is no ground on which to base universal moral principles. We are moving towards the second approach to postmodernism. The doubts that arise in postmodernism about absolute claims to truth reflect a sense that the accounts of human activity that have offered complete explanations are fatally tainted by a desire for order and power.”³⁶ Briony cannot be sure that she will reach atonement and forgiveness from herself and not even for herself. The attempt to atone for what she did through her book is all she can try to do.

³⁴ Kory French, *Atonement*: 2010, p. 98

³⁵ *The fiction of Ian McEwan*, A readers guide to Essentials criticism, p. 136

³⁶ *The ethics of fiction in Atonement*, Alistair Cormack, p. 72

The guilt of the family and its aspects

The house is described as an isolated and calm place in a world of chaos, disorder and fear of the incoming war and most of the characters, except for Cecilia, seem to feel comfortable in this countryside place, separated from the society. The motif of stillness is very important here. It is a hot summer, the air is very still, hot and stuffy, everything is very slow. However, we know that it will not stay like this for a long time. In this atmosphere we somehow expect that some catastrophe is going to happen and that it is only lull before the storm.

Robbie is a son of a charwoman. They live on the grounds of the Tallis home. He has been well-treated, grew up and played with the Tallis children and had a first class school and university education paid for by Mr. Tallis. Even though he has been a brilliant, kind, hard-working and educated man, the family never forgot that he is a son of a charwoman. The novel shows how dangerous it is to become a protégé of someone important. When Briony accused him of raping her cousin, they were not suspecting Briony of lying. In the crucial moment, everyone rather trusted a small girl with a great imagination, tendency to create stories and lies and the girl who loved to be in the center of attention at any cost. They were sure that she was telling the truth and no one, except for Cecilia, stood up for him, insisting on his innocence. When Cecilia realized that she was unfair towards Robbie when there were at school together, she found the courage to tell Robbie that she was in love with him and also defended the letter that was passed around the living room as evidence of the fact that Robbie is a “sex-maniac”. After he was arrested, she stood by him and later on left her family to become a nurse and to live in not a very comfortable flat in London. That makes her the only true heroine of the novel.

Concerning the question what led the family to send Robbie to prison, we may list the main arguments as follow. The first one is definitely Robbie’s working-class social status connected with the Tallis’ class prejudice. Even though they treated him very well and he was always welcomed in their house as he would have been the part of the family, in the end he was not trusted at all and was somehow used to replace the real attacker because of his lower status in the society. Robbie points this out in the final confrontation scene saying “/f/ive years ago you didn't care about telling the truth. You

and all your family, you just assumed that for all my education, I was still little better than a servant, still not to be trusted. Thanks to you, they were able to close ranks and throw me to the fucking wolves!”³⁷ Even Briony who is a child and does not understand the world and social rules fully yet, puts social distinction above love as she has learnt it from her family. “There was something rather formal about the way he stood, feet apart, head held back. A proposal of marriage. Briony would not have been surprised. She herself had written a tale in which a humble woodcutter saved a princess from drowning and ended by marrying her. What was presented here fitted well. Robbie Turner, only son of a humble cleaning lady and of no known father, Robbie who had been subsidized by Briony’s father through school and university, had wanted to be a landscape gardener, and now wanted to take up medicine, had the boldness of ambition to ask for Cecilia’s hand.”³⁸ Chris Jones comments on this in his review on *Atonement* saying that “/t/he power structures of wealth and class soon close ranks with Briony. She spends the rest of her life not only spoiled by Victorian values, but by her own over-arching sense of guilt for what she has done. The real victim of the crime - and real perpetrator - are tidied up as mere plot loose ends.”³⁹ Even though Briony liked romantic stories in which “woodcutters propose princesses” she assumed that her older sister is in great danger to fall into a lower class and she was ready to save her and prevent this to happen. Robbie was not worth enough to marry Cecilia or trying to be saved because of his status. Raping a small girl was an act that could only have been done by lower-class people, like Robbie or Danny Hardman. Briony picked one of those two men who could have been considered. Danny is the only other person suspected of raping Lola. Again, he is not blamed because there would be some credible evidence, but because of his lower social class.

These facts lead us to the second main reason why the family sent Robbie to prison instead of someone else. It was their indolence. It was very convenient for all the people present in the house. They were all rich, distinguished and came from upper-middle-class. If one of them was blamed and sent to prison it would be a great scandal. The Tallises or the family of some of their visitors might have been ruined and that was unacceptable. Even though Danny Hardman’s father has a perfectly suitable alibi for his son, there are still a lot of questions and doubts. For example, Cecilia is persuaded that

³⁷ *Atonement*, McEwan, p.341

³⁸ *Atonement*, McEwan, p. 38

³⁹ <http://www.eyeforfilm.co.uk/writer/Chris>

it was Danny who did it. On the other hand, Paul Marshall, a rich guest who actually committed the crime, is not even considered to be the attacker. Generally, he is blamed as a rich industrialist and war profiteer but not as the rapist.

Coming back to the theme of the social distinction we may see that inequalities and injustices of social class appear also in other levels throughout the novel. The accusation is not the only example. Another aspect of social distinction can be sensed in the relationship between Robbie and Cecilia. At the beginning of the novel it seems almost impossible for Robbie to get the girl from the big house. At the time of *Atonement* it would be very hard for Robbie and Cecilia to be together and if it were up to Cecilia's parents they would never be united. Emily thinks that Cecilia is losing her time at the university and that it is time for her to find some appropriate husband. Robbie is a servant's son and he has no father. However, *Atonement* is not an ordinary story of frustrated love across the classes especially because Robbie is smart, intelligent, aspiring and appears to have almost escaped his working-class background.

If we were to apply Jaspers' theory of guilt on the family and their guests, they would be surely found guilty from moral, metaphysical and criminal point of view. The moral guilt is the guilt for all the immoral actions of the individuals. Therefore the family, except for Cecilia, would be guilty for blaming someone without reliable proof of his acts. Briony was a reliable witness for them probably because the family thought that a child is not smart or crafty enough to create a fabricated lie and not able to think ahead about what this accusation can cause to an innocent person. Probably, they were not able to think of any other reason why she could do such a thing than simply a need to tell the truth about what she really saw and to help to convict the attacker. The mother knows Briony's character but she somehow stands aside of all the events happening in the house, and so she is not the right person to say whether Briony lies or not. This is how she comments on Briony's character in chapter six. "She had vanished into an intact inner world of which the writing was no more than the visible surface, the protective crust which even, or especially, a loving mother could not penetrate. Her daughter was always off and away in her mind, grappling with some unspoken, self-imposed problem, as though the weary, self-evident world could be re-invented by a child."⁴⁰ She is her mother which makes her biased and because of her permanent migraines she does not spent much time with her daughter to realize what Briony is able

⁴⁰ *Atonement*, McEwan, p.68

to do and what she is not. During the interrogation only Cecilia mentions that Briony is very fanciful and that she would not necessarily believe in what Briony tells them, but no one listens to her. Another aspect of their moral guilt lies in the fact that they were covering their own backs. Jaspers says that we are guilty from moral point of view even though our crime was performed under the life threat. In the case of the Tallises and their visitors, the crime was performed under the threat of family humiliation, the loss of dignity, status and family cohesion. However, this fact does not make them less guilty.

They are also guilty from the metaphysical point of view. The metaphysical point of view is much more universal. It mainly examines solidarity among people as human beings. From this point of view every person is responsible for every unjust act that has ever happened on Earth, but especially for the crimes that happened in his presence or with his knowledge. The whole Tallis's family and their visitors were present when Robbie was arrested and no one did not do anything to prove his innocence or at least to question Briony's testimony. Everybody knew that he did not necessarily have to be the real attacker and that one unreliable witness was not enough to automatically blame Robbie. In his reviews of *Atonement* David Wiegant says that "we generally think of accidents as events we cannot control, but is an event accidental if it occurs because we fail to control it? That question is a fundamental principle of ethics"⁴¹ Most of the events in our lives that are later called "accidents" are consequences of our own acts and thoughts. The problem is that we are not able to "read" them and realize that these events are not real "accidents", but that they sooner or later had to happen and that we can affect whether they will happen or not.

A typical example of this problem is Briony's false accusation. A major share of the blame lies with Briony, there is no doubt about it. However, there is a big deal of guilt that lies on the family, especially because the fact that something bad is going to happen is very predictable from the beginning of the story. They all at least partly know Briony's character and therefore it was their obligation to predict and oversee her behavior and acts. As I already said before, Briony is a frustrated child who desperately desires attention. It is obvious that she loses her innocence during the first part of the book. We do not know when exactly but she goes through the process of transformation from the protected and naive world of a child to the open and unprotected world of adults. She feels desperate and impatient for something exciting to happen to her. She

⁴¹ <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2002/03/10/RV109370.DTL>

needs something tragic or fantastic to come into her life to fulfill what she perceives as emptiness of her life. She not only misses her parents, but also other friends of her age and some contact with other people outside the Tallis's house. The reality compared to her demanding and almost perfect vision of her life is nothing but "dreams and frustrations". She is very sorrowful and self-pitying when she does not get what she wants and expects too much from the people and the world around her. This kind of character is very dangerous. Therefore Briony is a time-bomb and it is obvious that one day "it" is inevitably going to explode. The whole fabricated image of Robbie that Briony created in her mind is not just a result of one quick event or impression. She put together many individual scenes and impressions, which did not have to be necessarily true and appropriate for creating a reliable image of a person. Considering these facts, we realize that the deal of the guilt that lies on the family is firstly based on inability bring up and attend to their youngest daughter and to get to know her character. Secondly, it is based on inability or on the lack of will to correctly assess the situation during the fateful day, because if they would have thought about Briony's accusation the outcomes might have been completely different. The question is whether it was the inability or the lack of will that caused their inaction. This leads us back to the second aspect of their guilt again, the indolence.

The criminal guilt lies mainly on Paul Marshall and Briony. He committed a rape and his crime is objectively verifiable. Briony could have been possibly judged for perjury. Briony is also guilty from the moral point of view and later on also from the metaphysical point of view. The problem of Briony's guilt consists in the question she is asked during her interrogation by the policeman. The etymology of the word "innocence" is based on this idea; the Latin origin of the word is a compound of the negative prefix "in" and the verb "agnoscere," which is translated as "to acknowledge, recognize." The police investigations narrow Briony's choice: Either she saw, or she did not see. But the relationship between knowledge and innocence cannot be broken down into the simple either/or of a binary relation and the structure of knowledge is less straightforward than knowing or not knowing. Her crime therefore does not lie in lying itself but in the form of her lying and in her inability to distinguish among the levels of acknowledgement. Peter Mathews in his *Impression of a Deeper Darkness* adds that "Briony's story is therefore complex in its ethical implications, for while the revelation of her secret accuses her, the mystery of her motivations simultaneously excuses her.

She committed a crime, but her youthful naivety meant that she acted without 'full' knowledge."⁴²

⁴²http://hanyang.academia.edu/PeterMathews/Papers/111759/The_Impression_of_a_Deeper_Darkness_Ian_McEwans_Atonement

How does Briony perceive her guilt in the adult age?

We can see Briony in different parts of her life which gives us a chance to see how she is changing, moving forward, finally realizing what she has done and trying to make it right. Even though Briony did a horrible thing and this act is worth of contempt, she has also a lot of positive character traits. Therefore it is very disappointing when we realize that she was a coward to go to see her sister Cecilia in 1940 and to reveal the whole truth. It is not in the line with her personality. For very long time she was the one who was creating romantic and almost pathetic stories with heroes struggling for happiness, love and truth. She manipulates with people and affects so many lives and suddenly she is too much a coward to use her own life story to create the 'play' of her own life and bring this unhappy story to a romantic and happy end by telling the truth, as she always did in her previous plays and imaginations. She is not able to do that because she feels that her imaginary and fantastic world which she used to play with in her mind and with which she indiscriminately and without a penalty affected other people's lives suddenly crosses her own reality, intersects with real life and lets her see the possible consequences of her acts. That is something she does not know how to cope with.

Suddenly, Briony is old enough to know the difference between right and wrong and her fantasies cannot be the only environment where things are taking place and events changing as she wants them to change. She discovers that in the real world acts are followed by their consequences and utterances are followed by responses. In her childhood, she was partly not responsible for interpreting things as she did and she was not able to realize the power of words. She used them with ease as they came to her, helping her to create her stories.

Briony decided not to go to university but to do the nurse training. She says "I wanted to make myself useful". However, it is not clear for what and for who did she want to make herself useful in the view of her false accusation. She could have done much more without sacrificing her life to being a nurse. No one wanted her to become a nurse or to show how much sorry she is for what she did. They wanted her to tell the truth. So her acts rather resemble some kind of self-punishment. She can either forget what she did or escape it somehow, but Briony is unable to do either of the two possibilities and she becomes the prisoner of her own mind. Sylvia Drake comments on

this in her review saying “Briony is the female undergoing live burial or imprisonment because she cannot rid herself of her obsession. She thinks she prevented Robbie and Cecilia from getting together because that was indeed a semi-conscious motivation: she loved Robbie as a rival.”⁴³

Briony never mentions some repentance but she rather uses words like “atonement”, “forgiveness” and “relief”. Even though she is not able to find the courage to tell the truth, she is truly broken and her guilt is torturing her. “On this first really fine day of May she sweated under her starchy uniform. All she wanted to do was work, then bathe and sleep until it was work time again. But it was all useless she knew. Whatever skivvying or humble nursing she did, and however well or hard she did it, whatever illumination in tutorial she had relinquished, or a lifetime moment on a collage lawn, she would never undo the damage. She was unforgivable.”⁴⁴ She is not able to go to her sister and family rather because of her incapability for some action in this matter and lack of courage, not because she would be afraid of the consequences of her confession.

However, there is one thing that she is afraid of and that is her fear of breaking the order of her days that she established for herself as a hard working nurse and that helped her to forget about what she did. She has always been obsessed with order, it helped her to cope with the difficult situations in her life and to accept its natural flow. Therefore the hospital was a perfect environment for her. She replaced the time she could spend at university and that would allow her to ruminate over her guilt with hard work that prevented her from thinking over anything. The strong need for order is also visible from the fact that she was mimsy she was in the matter of the nurses’ etiquette. She read her handbook again and again hoping that the retinue to order will help her to forget. This is very typical for people who feel guilty or suffer from some kind of anxiety. They usually try to replace their torment with some kind of normative order that keeps them hanging on and helps them to except life. She also cut herself off from many natural aspects and pleasures of life which made her attempt to atone very self-punishing. She thought that physical discomfort would help her to close mental horizons. “As she came away, two young army officers, medics from the military hospital on Millbank gave her a friendly smile as they brushed past her. Automatically, she glanced down, then immediately regretted that she had not at least met their look.

⁴³ <http://misssylviadrake.livejournal.com/31728.html>

⁴⁴ *Atonement*, McEwan, p.285

They walked away from her across the bridge, obviously to everything but their conversation. One of them mimed reaching up high, as though to grope for something of a shelf, and his companion laughed. She thought how lively and free the RAMC doctors looked, and wished she had returned their smiles. There were parts of herself she had completely forgotten. She was late and she had every reason to run, despite the shoes that pinched her toes.”⁴⁵ Briony thought that by cutting herself off from the worldly pleasures, entertainment and joy of any kind her suffering will deepen and that she may deserve and get all the things she longed for like forgiveness and relief.

Later on, she made her last attempt to change something by coming to Lola and Marshall’s wedding. She was encouraging herself to tell the truth when the vicar says ”therefore if any man can show any just cause, why they may not be lawfully joined together, let him now speak or else hereafter for ever hold his peace”⁴⁶; but in the end she remained seated with accelerating heart while sweating and humbly inclined her head. Again, there is some kind of playing with reality and dreamt visions about herself in her last attempt to persuade herself to find courage for change. We can sense this fact from what she was thinking. She was sitting there, in the church thinking “/w/as it really happening? Was she really rising now, with weak legs and empty contracting stomach and stuttering heart, and moving along the pew to take her position in the centre of the aisle, and setting out her reasons, her just causes, in a defiant untrembling voice as she advanced in her cape and headdress, like a bride of Christ, towards the altar.”⁴⁷ (...) “She had not planned it but the question, which she had quite forgotten, from the Book of Common Prayer, was a provocation.”⁴⁸ (..) “Now was her chance to proclaim in public all the private anguish and purge herself of all that she had done wrong. But the scratches and bruises were long healed, and all her own statements at the time were to the contrary.”⁴⁹ (...) “The sentence had already been served, the debt was paid. The verdict was stood.”⁵⁰

Moving to the year 1999, when Briony is old and she knows that is going to die soon, we may highlight one moment that is probably one of the worst and most difficult moment of her life. She realizes that when she was healthy the story of the wrong

⁴⁵ *Atonement*, McEwan, p.286

⁴⁶ *Atonement*, McEwan, p.324

⁴⁷ *Atonement*, McEwan, p.324

⁴⁸ *Atonement*, McEwan, p.324

⁴⁹ *Atonement*, McEwan, p.325

⁵⁰ *Atonement*, McEwan, p.325

accusation was present in her memory and it was fresh. Yet she says, she was too much a coward to visit her sister in June 1940 and now she can not remedy anything because “all the Marshalls are dead”⁵¹. The story is still there in her head but she slowly loses those small fragments of the tragedy she caused, trying to keep it in her memory by writing a book about it. However, that will not help anymore and she is aware of that fact. She begins to suffer with her illness and learns that the memory is not the only connection to reality. Soon, she will not be able to perceive the world around her anymore - yet it still exists.

⁵¹ *Atonement*, Ian McEwan, p. 351

CONCLUSION

This bachelor thesis was trying to provide a comprehensive view of the theme of guilt in *Atonement*. Creating a detailed analysis of Briony, I realized how important it is to perceive her character with respect to her development because she has gone through a lot of important changes. Therefore my analysis provided a detailed description of Briony's character during different parts of her life and reflected how she was changing and moving forward. I stressed especially her passion for stories, strong need for details, order and the desire to have the world just so.

Another task of my thesis was to find out the reasons why Briony wrote her book. I realized that Briony did not write her book only to create a story and to earn money. The main reason was a personal necessity to make her work and life somehow complete or at least to try to do it. The book was an intentional attempt to find relief, some measure of deliverance and in the end maybe also to distance from the guilt that has been haunting her for more than sixty years.

One of the most important questions which I tried to answer was the question what the main quest of Briony's life was. I discovered that the major problem of her life was the question whether an artist can achieve atonement through his art. Her own life gradually answered this question for her and as we can judge from what she said, the answer for this question was he/she can not.

I also presented possible points of view on the guilt of Briony and her family. Applying Jasper's theory of guilt on all the people who were present in the house during the fateful day, I came to the conclusion that the family and their guests were guilty from moral, metaphysical and criminal point of view. The criminal guilt lay mainly on Paul Marshall and Briony since they had committed objectively verifiable acts. Through my analysis I came to the conclusion that in the case of the family it is possible to state several intentional aspects of the reasons of their behavior. They were especially class-prejudice and indolence. Examining the narration of the story I focused mainly on the analysis of the narrator's reliability and on the means which McEwan used to explore the role of the novelist like the fictional writer and the hidden narrator.

CZECH SUMMARY

Moje bakalářská práce se věnovala tématu viny a trestu v díle *Pokání* britského spisovatele Iana McEwana. V úvodu praktické části jsem se zaměřila především na charakteristiku jednotlivých postav, jejich psychologii a to jakou úlohu v příběhu sehrály. Hlavním cílem bylo provést analýzu viny jednotlivých postav vzhledem k teoriím rozpracovaným v teoretické části. V další kapitole jsem řešila otázku, jaké důvody vedly rodinu k tomu, že poslala Robbieho do vězení pouze na základě Brioniny svědectví. Jako hlavní příčinu jejich činu jsem uvedla například předsudek vůči nižším společenským třídám. Dalšími úkoly bylo analyzovat to, co vedlo Briony k napsání knihy a jaké byly zásadní otázky, které si ve svém životě pokládala. Mé úvahy dospěly k závěru, že hlavním důvodem sepsání Brioniny knihy byla psychická potřeba dosáhnout odpuštění, úlevy a možnosti odčinění svého činu. V návaznosti na Jaspersovu teorii viny jsem dále došla k závěru, že Briony a její rodina jsou vinni zejména z metafyzického, morálního a kriminálního hlediska. Jedinou opravdovou hrdinkou celého románu je podle mého názoru Cecilia, která není vina ani v jednom z hledisek.

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