

To “Write” a Wrong: The Unreliable Writer and The Trial of Narrative Form
in *The Good Soldier*, *The Blind Assassin*, and *Atonement*

By
Rachel Stern

A thesis presented for the B.A. degree
with Honors in
The Department of English
University of Michigan
Spring 2008

Acknowledgments

This thesis could not have existed without all of the incredible people in my life. Thank you to Scotti Parrish, for responding to our anxiousness, stress, and hunger with a calm smile, solid guidance, and Zingerman's pastries.

To my classmates, whose warmth and collective energy go unmatched, for selfless support and constant humor when it was needed most. Congratulations to all of you.

To my wonderful advisor, Jonathan Freedman, for waking up when I was going to sleep and providing hours of office therapy. You have been a force of inspiration, challenging my ideas, refining my rambling thoughts, and motivating me to "go write."

To my family, whose infinite love and support I couldn't live without. Rob, my favorite narrator, for never failing to make me laugh and being my best friend. Mom and Dad, for delving into this project wholeheartedly with me—your invaluable ideas, late-night emails, and more reading than I know how to ask—you guys are my backbone.

To my amazing and reliable friends, for nourishing me in the fishbowl, encouraging my ideas, keeping me sane, and most of all, reminding this writer to enjoy life, because I never feel happier than when I'm with you. These four years have been magical, and I feel so lucky to have spent it here. Thank you all!

Abstract

This thesis focuses on the unreliable narrator, specifically examining those narrators who write within a fictional context. As they engage in the act of writing, some writer-narrators newly explore the creative process while others expertly wield rhetorical tools. *The Good Soldier*, *The Blind Assassin*, and *Atonement* convey individuals subjecting their lives to narrative form, as each novel analyzes the writing process and the medium itself.

Chapter One concerns Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, a Modernist text in which the writer-narrator, John Dowell, seeks to clarify past experiences. As he engages in the act of writing, the resulting narrative not only unearths Dowell's past misconceptions, but also the unconscious motives driving his account.

Chapter Two introduces Iris Griffen, narrator of Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*. Iris, an aging woman, replaces physical agency with rhetorical power, chronicling the story of her sister's death and their intertwined past. Atwood weaves another novel throughout Iris's memoir, supporting the application of fiction to real-life.

Chapter Three focuses on Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, a novel-within-a-novel whose writer-narrator is not revealed until the book's epilogue. Briony Tallis chronicles the effects of her false testimony on others, but also herself, as her atonement exists as a justification of her own unreliability.

As these fictional writers delve into narrative form to relay their pasts, each novel makes a case about the fusion of life and narration. Ford illustrates the detrimental affects of blurring the line between the two while Atwood conveys the opposite, and McEwan's novel is a synthesis of both, as *Atonement* shows fiction's prowess, but also the need to distinguish it from what is real.

CONTENTS

Short Titles	i
Introduction	1
Chapter One: “A Puzzling Affair” Unreliable Narration in <i>The Good Soldier</i>	11
Chapter Two: “By My Voice I Shall Be Known” Unreliable Narration in <i>The Blind Assassin</i>	37
Chapter Three: “The Attempt was All” Unreliable Narration in <i>Atonement</i>	57
Conclusion	83
Works Consulted	89

Short Titles

Atwood: Atwood, Margaret. The Blind Assassin. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Bitterman: Bitterman, Joan. Ford Madox Ford and the Nouveau Roman : From the Unreliable Narrator to the Self-Conscious Creator. Diss. Univ. of Oregon, 1991.

Ford: Ford, Ford Madox. The Good Soldier. New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 1915.

McEwan: McEwan, Ian. Atonement. New York: Anchor Books, 2002.

NWD: Atwood, Margaret. Negotiating with the Dead: a Writer on Writing. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Introduction

“No one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel. I know there’s always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, but what really happened?”¹

–Briony Tallis, *Atonement*

After absorbing these words, I flipped back through my newly finished copy of Ian McEwan’s novel, trying to grapple with what I had just read. Any analytical reaction was, of course, preceded by sheer outrage. As an avid reader and senior AP English student, I had never felt so disoriented after setting down a novel. The epilogue in which the passage occurs reveals *Atonement* to be a novel-within-a-novel, and more shockingly, that its climactic final scene is wholly fabricated by the book’s protagonist and writer, Briony Tallis. Up until that moment I had been intrigued by Briony’s character, but strongly invested in the lovers’ story and gratified by their emotionally charged reunion. When Briony casually mentions certain events were “misrepresented,” including the lovers’ meeting, I felt betrayed. I suddenly became aware of the book in my hands, its physical form a separate entity from the scenes and characters I imagined. I threw the novel across my bedroom, and without knowing it, began my senior thesis.

Fiction, like any writing, is a tool used to make sense of human experience; reflecting upon and documenting events provides structure and meaning to them. Some writers draw from personal experience; others craft completely imagined paradigms, yet all rely on a central narrator or narrative voice to express their ideas. As I reconsidered my experience with *Atonement*, a seemingly endless string of questions emerged. How is

¹Ian McEwan, *Atonement*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2002) 350. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix, McEwan.

a fictional realm shaped by a writer's choice to give a narrator the power, within a novel, to document his or her own version of events? Does the function of narration change when a narrator exists simultaneously as a creator of and character in a story? And what happens when this double capacity—to be a figure in and writer of a narrative—is given to a patently unreliable narrator? As I have explored these issues, my analysis of writer-narrators has led me to the core concept of this thesis—and my response to the mystery McEwan's novel staged four years ago—that the very act of writing often drives unreliable narration.

The concept of fictional reality is seemingly paradoxical—can a version of truth exist within a completely imagined construct? The answer is yes, as the nature of unreliability itself depends on a comparison to that which is reliable, or “truth” in a fictional text. As Wayne Booth writes in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, “it is enough to say that a fact, when it has been given to us by the author or some unequivocal spokesman, is a very different thing from the same ‘fact’ when given to us by a fallible character in the story.”² Booth believes that a reader can designate information as fact in a fictional setting, especially given its comparison to “fact” as relayed by an unreliable narrator. This is not to say that fictional reality must coalesce with any notion of reality outside the text. Still, the story world is constructed out of familiar materials, drawing from a common reservoir of knowledge to engage the reader. Even though these “facts” are fictional constructs, texts featuring unreliable narrators must have a “referential truth” in order to show how it is distorted.

²Wayne C Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, No. 2, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1983), 175.

This imagined world is the setting in which a novel's story takes shape. Defining basic tenets of story structure is important to classifying the unreliable narrator in several ways. Separating a narrative into two distinct elements, *sjuzet* and *fabula*, has been common practice since the evocation of the terms by Russian formalists. *Fabula* is the story's sequence of events, while *sjuzet* denotes the manner in which this sequence is presented. Narratologist Mieke Bal's expansion of formalist theory to a three-layer story structure is central to the concept of the writer-narrator. Bal retains the ideas of *fabula* and *sjuzet*, substituting "story" for the latter, while adding a third element—text—to represent the tangible object containing a narrative.³ As the physical act of writing distinguishes the writer-narrator from other narrators, adding the layer of textual form to story structure is significant. This is especially true of the metafictional novel, a work of literature that draws attention to itself as a text. The degree to which the writer-narrator sees him/herself as a writer, endowed with all the tools of the craft, greatly influences his or her path towards unreliability.

As narrative form has evolved, so has the role of the narrator. The traditional purpose of a narrator has been to communicate the events of the story world, through which a reader can derive the author's intended meaning. Classical narratology organizes this dynamic in a tripartite structure in which "(1) a reader recognizes a dichotomy between (2) the personalized narrator's perceptions and expressions and (3) those of the implied author."⁴ However, as narratological theory has progressed, the role of narration

³ Mieke Bal, Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 39.

⁴ Greta Olsen, "Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators," *NARRATIVE*, Vol.11, No.1, Ohio State University Press (January 2003), 93.

has been expanded to include a speaker (the classical narrator) and lens through which events are perceived (focalizer). Mieke Bal outlines this distinction in *Narratology*, defining focalization as an aspect of narration that colors the perception of story events, but not their presentation by the implied author. Along with the narrator who speaks and the focalizer who sees, I choose to add “the writer” to this dynamic to fully explore the perspective of the writer-narrator. The writer documents—a task that dramatically affects the ways in which a story is expressed. The act of writing separates this narrator from other speakers and focalizers, given his or her additional power to digest, organize, and permanently record events after the fact. Writer-narrators are imbued with tools other narrators are not, including different aspects of narrative style and focalization. The function of the narrator inevitably changes, however, if he or she is deemed unreliable.

Wayne Booth christened the term unreliable narrator as one who “articulates values and perceptions that differ from that of the implied author.”⁵ The lens through which unreliable narrators see the story world is distorted, causing fictional events to be misrepresented. Other types of unreliable narration have emerged since Booth introduced the term. Greta Olsen builds on his definition to distinguish between narrators who *attempt* to reliably convey information from those who “deliberately withhold it,” or lie. She calls these narrators “untrustworthy,” given their ability to understand fictional facts and choice to misrepresent them, as opposed to “fallible,” narrators who convey false information through unconsciously skewed lenses.⁶ Both fallible and untrustworthy narrators can also be “self-conscious,” narrators aware of their own duty to purvey story.

⁵ Wayne C Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, No. 2, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1983).

⁶ Greta Olsen, “Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators,” *NARRATIVE*, Vol.11, No.1, Ohio State University Press (January 2003), 93.

I offer the writer-narrator as an addition to this sect, in which the narrator's motivation to write, coupled with the act of writing itself, inherently leads him or her to unreliability.

Defining the relationship of the implied author to an unreliable narrator is a slippery task. The implied author, defined by Booth as "the author inferred from the work itself,"⁷ is responsible for crafting the tenets of a fictional world. So, if as Booth says, the implied author is the "sum of his own choices," why would he *choose* to employ a narrator who perceives events differently than himself? Booth argues that the implied author can use an unreliable narrator to convey an ironic perspective. This theory is highly applicable to metafictional works: texts that ironically rely on fiction to question the medium itself. Thus, to critically examine fiction's pitfalls and laud its strengths, implied authors must reveal themselves through the writer-narrators they construct.

In the case of the writer-narrator, authors must essentially craft two narrative layers, one written by the narrator and another chronicling their act of writing. As writer-narrators transcribe past experiences, they inherently organize events in narrative form. Joan Bitterman says "narrative technique contributes to the interiorization or subjectification of reality and, consequently to the dissociation of thematic elements."⁸ By virtue of transferring their memories to paper, writer-narrators unconsciously or deliberately reshape them to fit into the shape of a coherent narrative. Ruth Ronen posits that parts of a narrative are functionally linked, and movement from one event to the next

⁷ Wayne C Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, No. 2, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1983).

⁸ Joan Bitterman, Ford Madox Ford and the Nouveau Roman : From the Unreliable Narrator to the Self-Conscious Creator, (Diss. Univ. of Oregon, 1991), 95. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix Bitterman.

results from a prior integration and understanding of them.⁹ Writer-narrators subordinate factual events to the construction of a story, subjecting these occurrences to plot twists, turning points, and other narrative techniques. While some writer-narrators are more conscious of this manipulation than others, I argue that the process of organizing and structuring a new version of these events directly leads to their misrepresentation.

This process also renders a writer-narrator's use of traditional rhetorical devices unreliable. Techniques such as third-person and omniscient narration take on new meaning when employed by a such a narrator. Are we to trust Briony's embodiment of her sister's perspective in *Atonement*, given the writer's intent to justify crimes committed against her? A writer-narrator's inability to understand events prior to documenting them also determines his ability to wield these tools. As John Dowell, the narrator of *The Good Soldier*, struggles to conceptualize basic facets of his own experience, it seems dubious he can accurately portray the complex inner-workings of another mind. Rather than supplement a narrator's representation of past experiences, these devices instead advance unreliable renditions of the narrated events.

Other tools of perspective, such as different methods of focalization, also become more problematic when employed by the writer-narrator. Two types of focalization, external and internal, are at stake in this discussion. External focalization projects the narrator's current perspective onto past events, while internal seeks to retain the view of the narrator at the time of the experience.¹⁰ These devices, commonly employed by narrators, depict memories that broaden their stories, but must be viewed

⁹ Ruth Ronen, Possible Worlds in Literary Theory, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3.

¹⁰ Wayne C Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, No. 2, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1983).

differently when used by the writer-narrator. These methods no longer serve to accurately convey events; they are instead used by the implied author to call attention to a narrator's unreliable stance. As writer-narrators selectively delve into their lives for material, authors point to the misuse of such techniques to illustrate how these writers' present circumstances shape their renditions of the past.

Character descriptions are another facet of the writer-narrator's account that become unreliable. As Mieke Bal writes, "ways in which descriptions are inserted characterize the rhetorical strategy of the narrator."¹¹ Representations of other individuals' thoughts and speech are dubious as well, given the writer-narrator's previous interaction with these figures outside the text. Such pre-existing biases inevitably manifest themselves in narrative form, as writer-narrators omit and include certain words based on their story. The application of such rhetorical strategies inherently transforms people into characters, but also leads unreliable narrators to depict skewed versions of themselves. In fact, these characterizations are often most unreliable, as a writer-narrator's motivation to undertake the writing process informs the self-image he or she seeks to convey.

This thesis focuses on novels that, through the use of a writer-narrator, demonstrate how the motives and properties attached to narrative form, including the control of plot and literary devices, cause the writer documenting past events to become unreliable. It suggests that the temptation to "write" one's wrongs, re-contextualize past experience, or even meta-cognitively organize events alters their depiction. Writing for personal reasons, a particular audience, or likely both, these characters shape a story out

¹¹ Mieke Bal, Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 37.

of their fictional reality. Some authors portray the negative ramifications of blending fiction and life, while others show the fruitful effects of writing past experiences. Either way, these metafictional novels evolve the notion of what a novel is, impelling readers to examine fiction while they absorb it.

By reconfiguring the fundamental role of narration in a text, *The Good Soldier*, *The Blind Assassin*, and *Atonement* comment on the act of writing itself. Chapter One will explore Ford Madox Ford's novel *The Good Soldier*, as central narrator John Dowell writes to grasp previously misunderstood events and relationships. Dowell's unreliability is heightened as he begins to explore facets of narrative form, and Ford shows the danger of fictionalizing real-life events. Margaret Atwood conveys the opposite in *The Blind Assassin*, as Chapter Two illustrates the beneficial aspects of integrating writing and life. Protagonist Iris Griffen's memoir distorts past events, but her unreliable perspective allows her to craft repressed memories into a positive legacy. Chapter Three considers *Atonement*, a novel that unites these two perspectives. As seasoned authoress Briony Tallis seeks to justify past crimes in narrative form, Ian McEwan shows how her "atonement" is truly for her sins as a writer. As Briony's conniving craftsmanship sparked this investigation of unreliable narrators, it's only fitting that this thesis asks "what really happened" but more so, why does it matter? By catching the unreliable narrator "in the act" of writing, these novels deconstruct works of fiction to show the medium's flaws, but also, argue for its necessity.

Chapter I: “A Puzzling Affair” Unreliable Narration in *The Good Soldier*

What motivates a person to write? Certain stories beg to be chronicled; yet bestowing any literate person with narrative authority seems precarious. What separates a “writer” from one who merely transcribes events? John Dowell, narrator of Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier*, attempts to answer this question several pages into the novel.

“You may ask well why I write. And yet my reasons are quite many. For it is not unusual in human beings who have witnessed the sack of a city or the falling to pieces of a people to desire to set down what they have witnessed for the benefit of unknown heirs or of generations infinitely remote; or, if you please, just to get the sight out of their heads.”¹²

Dowell prepares to record a series of events that, based on this quotation, appear to be of a tragic nature. He compares himself to one who documents “the sack of a city” or “the falling to pieces of a people,” and this association, as well as the word “witness,” has the effect of positioning Dowell as a bystander to historic events. Yet, although Dowell waxes poetic about “generations infinitely remote” and “unknown heirs,” the reader will soon discover that what he writes about is intensely personal. Dowell is inextricably involved in the events he’s witnessed, and the magnitude of these events is comparable to epic battles and collapsing civilizations—but only to him. Dowell then vacillates between writing for future generations and simply, “getting the sight out of [his] head.” Yet, whatever the reason Dowell writes, he does so with the intention of conveying his impressions truthfully. He is therein trapped by Ford’s central paradox: as Dowell transcribes past experiences, the act of writing inherently distorts them.

¹² Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier*, (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 1915), 10. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix Ford.

The Good Soldier comes out of a tradition of literary impressionism, one its author Ford Madox Ford helped define with fellow pioneers Joseph Conrad and Henry James. Literary impressionism does not seek, as Ford puts it, “to report, but to render events” with “indefiniteness that is characteristic of all human conversation.”¹³ Paul Armstrong characterizes works of all three writers as “metanovels,” which he defines as literary pieces that “make explicit the implicit dynamics of projecting a fictional world.” Impressionist novels do not merely strive to create a compelling portrait, to pull readers into an imagined universe and then eject them from it. Rather, authors such as Ford, Conrad, and James place readers in what theorist Joan Bitterman calls *le dimension literale*, where the novel “systematically flaunts its own necessary condition of artifice” (Bitterman, 17). Like other works of metafiction, these impressionist novels seek to comment on the nature of fiction writing itself, with its equal potential to express and distort human experience. Armstrong says, “Ford’s works both celebrate and criticize the unreflected because it is both illuminating and blinding,”¹⁴ a paradox central to his most recognized text, *The Good Soldier*, which traces an unreliable narrator piecing these “unreflected” events together in narrative form.

Ford experiments with conventions of representation in *Soldier*, entering the mind of amateur writer John Dowell as he attempts to tell the story of Captain Edward Ashburnham. While living abroad, Dowell and his spouse, Florence, become entangled in a complicated web of high society British relationships. Dowell reveres Ashburnham as the epitome of upper-class masculinity until the man’s death, when Edward’s wife

¹³ Paul B. Armstrong, *The Challenge of Bewilderment: Understanding and Representation in James, Conrad, and Ford*, (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1987), 485.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Leonora reveals her husband's philandering past, including his relationship with Florence. Dowell sits down shortly after this revelation to write the story of Edward Ashburnham's various infidelities, reconciling two versions of a man he thought he knew. He says, "I sit down to puzzle out what I know of this sad affair," and considers past incidents through a new lens, struggling to illustrate events he previously misunderstood, while simultaneously driven by his own underlying biases (Ford, 9). Dowell attempts to use the act of writing as a vehicle for discovery, forging a disjointed narrative path through the memories and experience he deems worthy of depiction.

The writer-narrator is aware of the daunting nature of his task, and initially has no qualms unveiling his insecurities to the reader. Dowell writes, "I don't know how it is best to put this thing down, as if it were a story or whether from a distance of time" (Ford, 17). He questions and analyzes his narrative choices as he makes them, playing with different techniques as they arise in his consciousness, "I think an anecdote is about the best way to give you an idea of what the old gentleman was like" (Ford, 22). Dowell specifically confronts the narrative process in parenthetical asides to the reader, partitions that highlight the novel's self-conscious analysis of the writing process. Digressions such as "I'm not really interested in these facts but they have a bearing on my story" allow Ford to extract Dowell "the writer" from Dowell "the character," as he directs the reader towards seeing the writer-narrator in a critical light (Ford, 41). Ford positions Dowell to undertake "not the writing of adventure but the adventure of writing," and the reader accompanies him along this exploratory path (Bitterman, 95).

To achieve this, Ford must separate the implied reader that emerges through Dowell's narrative lens, from the actual reader who judges the writer-narrator as a part of

the text. Though Dowell's supposedly writes for "unknown heirs," his reader is not wrought as such a person, or even someone who casually reads his work. Instead, Dowell sees his ideal reader as "a sympathetic soul opposite me," a figure who engages in dialogue with the author as he analyzes past interactions (Ford, 17). Dowell assumes the reader possesses more than a general understanding of high English society; in fact, he often endows the reader with a near-omniscient knowledge of the events he records. He writes early on, "I don't, you understand, blame Florence," though he has yet to identify the circumstances for which he would assign blame (Ford, 12). Dowell begs the reader to adopt his opinion of people he has barely introduced, saying of Edward and Leonora Ashburnham a few pages into the novel, "I swear to you that they were the model couple" (Ford, 13). The traditional implied reader would have no reason to disbelieve this assertion, yet Ford illustrates Dowell's insecurity as a writer with such heavy-handed declarations. Dowell also speaks directly to the reader as part of the narrative: "you ask how it feels to be deceived," responding to hypothetical questions as he moves the story along (Ford, 61). Thus, Dowell's implied reader, with his intimate knowledge of the story and its narrator's emotional state, acts as Ford's tool to convey Dowell's confusion in his authorial role.

One does not need to read more than the novel's first few sentences to discern the conflict inherent in Dowell's narrative position. The opening sentence of the novel, "this is the saddest story I've ever heard," pits Dowell—the removed storyteller—against Dowell—a participant in the story. The first part of the sentence, "the saddest story," evokes in the reader's mind an epic tale that Dowell the humanitarian writer yearns to tell. However, the latter phrase's "I" incorporates Dowell's opinion on what's transpired,

though the subsequent “heard” renders his role in the events unclear. This disparity is indicative of the tension between Dowell the writer who, by convention, claims to shape his story for a specific purpose, and Dowell as a player in these events, who is at once implicated in and disoriented by them.

The next several sentences reveal Dowell’s personal relationship to the main characters in his story, illustrating the way in which their depiction is shaped by prior interactions. However, as he introduces them into the narrative, Dowell doesn’t acknowledge the difference between his knowledge base and the reader’s. He writes “we had known the Ashburnhams with an extreme intimacy,” and the pronoun “we” informally pairs Dowell to a person the reader has yet to encounter (Ford, 9). When Dowell begins the next sentence with “my wife and I,” the reader belatedly learns who “we” is: the two sentences’ subjects are logically out of order. He then goes on to say that “we knew nothing at all about them,” meaning the Ashburnhams, completely negating his prior declaration of the couples’ “extreme intimacy.” Only on a second reading does the reader grasp Dowell’s emotionally fraught position at this juncture, but he fails as a storyteller to make clear the distinction between knowing and *knowing about* the Ashburnhams’ secret affairs. These early contradictions illustrate the urgency with which Ford points to a discord in Dowell’s semantic representation of familiar individuals.

At this juncture, Dowell cannot help intertwining his extra-textual relationships to Florence, Leonora, and Edward with his transcription of them. Referring to Ashburnham as a “poor wretch,” Dowell says, “I have the right to say it, since for years he was my wife’s lover, since he killed her, since he broke up all the pleasantness there were in my life” (Ford, 46). Dowell as a person feels the need to rationalize his representation of

Ashburnham based on their interactions outside of the text, even though Dowell as a writer has the capacity to fashion Edward's character as he sees fit. In depicting Ashburnham's wife, Dowell writes, "I want to do Leonora every justice...plain English of it," and in both instances, ascribes to an external referent that exists outside of the text, albeit one colored by his own perceptions (Ford, 70). Dowell explicitly outlines his train of thought because, at this point, he constantly examines how narrative choices correlate to his personal experiences. However, though Dowell himself draws parallels between external relationships and individual depictions, the writer-narrator only has a limited sense of the inclinations motivating his narrative strategy.

Ford exposes the complex, underlying tensions lurking in Dowell's rhetorical voice, especially those pertaining to the writer-narrator's sexual repression. Dowell describes his relationship to Florence as one devoid of any physical contact: "But, if I never so much as kissed Florence, she let me discover very easily, in the course of a fortnight, her simple wants. And I could supply those wants..." (Ford, 70). Dowell suggests his marriage was a businesslike partnership, casually justifying his and Florence's lack of intimacy with his job to fulfill "her simple wants." Yet the double negative of the prior phrase, "But if I never so much as kissed Florence," calls the writer-narrator's feigned ambivalence into question. Dowell's bumbling, messy syntax is Ford's clue to the reader that, though he claims he willingly "refrained from manifestations of affection," Dowell is evidently unnerved by the role he was forced to play (Ford, 76).

Amidst Dowell's self-depiction as a sterile, "nurse" figure to Florence, he expresses admiration of Ashburnham as the opposite; a man unable "to see a woman and not give her the comfort of his physical attractions" (Ford, 81). Within the description of

his own sexless relationship, Dowell cites Edward's "comfort" to a young girl as "why I liked him so much—so infinitely much," and this juxtaposition is Ford's way of highlighting the homoerotic undertones of Dowell's characterization. Whether or not Dowell is physically attracted to Edward Ashburnham, as textual evidence is mixed, the writer-narrator yearns to embody, at least narratively, the sexual power that Ashburnham so easily expends. These repressed desires are not as evident in Dowell's early, more self-conscious account, but once immersed in the writing process, they unreliably seep into the construction of his narrative.

Not only is Dowell unconscious of such attitudes, but Ford shows how they prevent him from understanding interactions with Ashburnham and Florence *at the time* they occur. Ford says in one of his essays, "life does not narrate, but makes impressions on our brains."¹⁵ As Dowell writes his "impressions," his tangled, disordered version of events emerges in narrative form. Separating *The Good Soldier's* sequence of events, or *fabula*, from its *sjuzet*, the manner in which they're presented by Dowell, is a taxing endeavor, as the story's "movement is determined by the associations made in the narrator's mind" and not by logical causal relationships (Bitterman, 108). Dowell's early narrative doesn't have a chronological flow, often corresponding to his own synaptic triggers, "It occurs to me I have never told you anything about my marriage" (Ford, 69). Dowell is unable to lead the reader from point A to point B because he himself is attempting to integrate his past misconceptions with new insights. Consequently, these renditions are unreliable, as Dowell's writing blends his inaccurate perspective with knowledge he's gleaned since.

¹⁵ Frank Kermode, "Introduction," *The Good Soldier*, xv

The writer-narrator's description of his response to Florence's death is a glaring example of this tendency. He attempts to render his "initial" reaction upon finding his wife's body, using internal focalization to convey his past mindset. Yet, Dowell interrupts this memorial reconstruction to insert a statement made by Leonora after the incident: "I think it was stupid of Florence to commit suicide," which completely alters his conception of her death (Ford, 92). Thus, Ford illustrates how Dowell's attempt to write from a past frame of reference is inherently flawed, given the writer-narrator's choice to juxtapose Leonora's "mind-altering" revelation within it. Dowell says of the event, "And I thought nothing; absolutely nothing. I had no ideas; I had no strength. I felt no sorrow, no desire for action, no inclination to go upstairs and fall upon the body of my wife" (Ford, 94). It's clear that his thoughts of 'nothing' at that moment, relate to the later discovery that Florence has killed herself, a fact he was unaware of at the time. Dowell writes, "I have given you the whole of my recollection" followed shortly by "I was in a state just simply cataleptic...I was the walking dead" (Ford, 95). One might ask, how does Dowell give the entirety of his recollection if he were in such a "cataleptic" state? Unaware of the driving force behind his own wife's death, Dowell conveniently "recalls" himself to be in a trance of massive proportions. Thus, his present perspective thereby influences his representation of the past, as Dowell's writing forces him to acknowledge his own ignorance in regard to these events.

Likewise, as Dowell ventures further into the writing process, Ford illustrates how he shifts from relying on his own perceptions to extrapolating from other sources. He finishes *his* account of Florence's death with the qualifying statement, "well those are my impressions," and subsequently starts anew, presenting a different version of the same

events, “what actually happened had been this” (Ford, 95). Dowell separates his conception of the event, or what he knows based on his actual experience, from a more authoritative, writer’s position, in which he narrates the impressions of others. Though he previously told the reader that conversations with Edward and Leonora informed his knowledge, Dowell says, “*I pieced it together afterwards,*” taking credit for unearthing the true story (Ford, 95). Instead of describing what he calls “Edward’s outburst” as part of his chronicle, Dowell jumps into what he’s garnered from it: a description of a moment that provokes Florence’s death, an interaction between Edward and Nancy, the Ashburnham’s surrogate niece, that she witnesses. He maintains that “he sees that thing as clearly as if it were a dream that never left,” and confidently depicts the scene, including details like Edward’s quick pulse, from an omniscient perspective (Ford, 95). As Dowell adds new angles to his story, his narrative voice subsequently, and unreliably, absorbs these views.

Unlike Dowell’s previous, “cataleptic” depiction of forces behind Florence’s death, he now renders them as a scene, infused with figurative language and symbolic references. He writes that Nancy “glimmered under the tall trees of the dark park like a phosphorescent fish in a cupboard,” and his figurative language evokes a fictional, dreamlike setting (Ford, 95). However, the strangeness of this simile, “a fish in a cupboard,” is Ford’s indication of Dowell’s amateurish attempt to use rhetorical devices. He represents Nancy in this glowing way to foreshadow her entrancing nature, saying, “You couldn’t have had a better beacon,” but has yet to set up why, or for whom, Nancy exists as such a symbol (Ford, 95). Ford exhibits Dowell’s technique, albeit flawed, to show the stylistic change induced by writing scenes from which he is entirely removed.

As Dowell crafts a new version of Florence's death with Ashburnham's and Leonora's impressions, he also experiments with narrative form. He recognizes that his depiction of Edward and Nancy has taken on a more theatrical tone, saying of his own writing, "it is melodrama, but I can't help it" (Ford, 96). Ford illustrates how this is no coincidence, as Dowell depicts events separated from his own confusion, his comfort level as a writer increases.

A critical debate exists as to the question of whether Dowell consciously assumes this authority, purposefully wielding it throughout his chronicle, or if he naturally succumbs to tenets of narrative form as part of the writing process. Joan Bitterman argues that Leonora's revelation "releases Dowell from the necessity of the fiction of his ignorance" (Bitterman, 164). She asserts that the writer-narrator consciously "casts off the constraints of first person" like an "unbearable knapsack," and knowingly steers his narration towards omniscience as he is supplemented by Leonora's narrative aid. However, Dowell's first-person shackles are not as easily removed as Bitterman claims; his so-called narrative freedom is still muddled by personal relationships to the characters he chronicles. He writes several pages after her disclosure, "And yet I am so near to all these people that I cannot think of any of them wicked;" clearly, the writer-narrator hasn't relinquished all former ties (Ford, 98). I disagree with Bitterman on this issue, and would argue that Leonora's revelation doesn't mark a specific point in which Dowell fully harnesses narrative control. Dowell's development as a writer is more fluid, and though the writing process guides him to use rhetorical tools, their application is equally revealing of Dowell's unconscious desires as any narrative agenda.

Ford showcases how Dowell's underlying motivations, namely preserving Ashburnham's worthy character, are displayed by the writer-narrator's questionable use of literary devices. In depicting the aforementioned interaction between Edward and Nancy, Dowell channels Nancy's inner-monologue, "Frankly, she adored Edward Ashburnham. He was for her...the model of humanity, the hero, the athlete, the father of his country, the law-giver" (Ford, 97). The writer-narrator "assumes" Nancy's voice, yet this list reminds of an eerily similar approbation from Dowell's point of view. Thus, as Dowell echoes his own descriptive style, Ford calls attention to the writer-narrator's unreliable stance: his viewpoint is clearly projected through Nancy's eyes. Likewise, this depiction launches Dowell into a verbal tirade about human tendency to define one's identity through relationships with others. He writes, "We are all so afraid, we are all so alone, we all so need from the outside the assurance of our own worthiness to exist" (Ford, 99). Though the writer-narrator had been depicting Nancy's outlook, the "we" subject hints that her perspective also embodies his. Furthermore, this quotation reveals Dowell's hypocrisy, as he completely invests his self-concept in Ashburnham, and though unaware of it, his narrative is strongly dictated by his relationship to the man.

Additionally, even after Leonora's pivotal disclosure, Dowell's writing is still affected by his attachment to the individuals and events he chronicles. This is made apparent by contrasting his portrayals of Florence, a woman Dowell was married to, and Nancy, a woman with whom he's had limited contact. Dowell's relationship to writing Florence is much like his relationship to her actual being, one imbued with confusion and frustration in the discovery she was a person he hardly knew. The reader's sense of Florence is distorted from the opening page of the novel, as Dowell refers to his wife as

“poor Florence,” intentionally giving the impression “she was a sufferer,” although it’s eventually revealed Florence has no heart condition at all (Ford, 9). Thus, these initial sympathies are feigned to convey irony, yet the reader, like Dowell, is unaware of Florence’s deception until later in the text, and one assumes “poor Florence” to be an apt characterization. The writer-narrator vacillates between deceived husband and loving caretaker in evoking his wife’s memory. He writes, “I hate Florence with such a hatred that I would not spare her an eternity of loneliness, but later reflects “and yet, poor thing, is it for me to condemn her?” (Ford 62, 154). Furthermore, Dowell never acknowledges his sexual rejection by her, yet it clearly emerges as part of his narrative—“the wife a cold sensualist”—as one of several manifestations of Florence’s character (Ford, 80). The inconsistency with which Dowell conveys his wife parallels their dysfunctional relationship; Florence is never fleshed out as a character because he is unable to reconcile, personally or rhetorically, his conflicting versions of her. However, although Dowell’s account is fragmented, the reader nevertheless grasps his convoluted relationship to Florence through it.

Ironically, Dowell’s more detailed, complete portrait of Nancy is even less reliable in a narrative sense, given the writer-narrator’s shift into fictional form. Unlike his disjointed, contradictory portrayal of Florence, Dowell fashions Nancy based on a pre-existing image relative to the story he seeks to tell. He depicts her as a portrait of chastity and virtue, writing “Nancy’s love for Leonora was an admiration that is awakened in Catholics by their feeling for the Virgin Mary and for various of the saints” (Ford, 171). He establishes her as the angelic object of Edward’s affection, a counterpart to the villainous Leonora, as he casts each woman in his version of Ashburnham’s story.

Bitterman writes, “Nancy is the beloved now, beloved by Edward as a man loves a woman, and by the narrator as an artist loves his creation” (Bitterman, 167). Again, Dowell’s admiration of Edward influences his construction of Nancy as an idealized figure worthy of Edward’s love.

Dowell’s depiction of Nancy as a pure, innocent character also sets the stage for her inevitable corruption, as he further describes the love triangle between her, Edward, and Leonora. Dowell freely enters Nancy’s mind to convey this impending change, a rhetorical move he had previously shied away from, saying “that was the last girlish thought she’d ever had” (Ford, 171). Nancy’s innocent image has been replaced by a more sensual, womanly one, foreshadowing her later emotional attachment to Edward. Dowell doesn’t question his capacity to access Nancy’s thoughts; she’s morphed from a “real person” to one malleable based on the impression of Edward he seeks to convey. Examining the representation of these two women side-by-side, it is evident that Nancy’s character—first depicted as girlish in a sentimentalized way, then depicted as fallen in a womanly way, is shaped by Dowell’s own attitudes towards women as well as towards Edward. On the other hand, Florence is a product of Dowell’s attempt to interpret their real-life relationship and her freshly revealed affair with Ashburnham. At this point, Dowell’s narrative still wavers between attempting to understand complex individuals and simplifying them into characters within his story.

But as Dowell further navigates the writing process, he increasingly depicts events from a removed, authorial perspective. Rather than concern himself with how his portrayals of Ashburnham or Leonora might correspond to their extra-textual selves, Dowell integrates these figures into his story. The writer-narrator no longer relishes a

connection between his personal attitudes and portrayal of character, “I don’t know that the analysis of my own psychology matters to this story” (Bitterman, 167). He goes from constantly justifying himself to a reader who is aware of a referential truth, to envisioning someone who depends entirely on his version of it. His pleas for trust that heavily populate Dowell’s early writing, “I swear” or “You understand,” almost entirely disappear as the writer-narrator relegates the implied reader to a more traditional “outsider” role. However, instead of consciously “casting off the constraints of first-person,” as Bitterman argues, I would assert that the writing process itself leads Dowell to this change. As he writes about the Ashburnhams and Nancy, Dowell is forced to expand his narrative technique to include alternate perspectives, and these events thus become inherently fictionalized. Yet, as Dowell “controls” his narrative, Ford essentially illustrates the opposite: Dowell’s reliance on rhetorical techniques betray the complex, underlying predispositions he didn’t know he had.

This shift is apparent as he resolves to depict the sequence of events leading to Nancy’s removal from the Ashburnham household. He writes, “Perhaps all these reflections are a nuisance; but they crowd on me. I will attempt to tell the story” (Ford, 170). There is a distinction between ‘these reflections,’ and ‘the story’ Dowell promises to tell, as Ford illustrates Dowell’s progression into more plotted, less reliable, narrative territory. In this particular section, Dowell doesn’t rely on his own synaptic connections to order events in “impressionistic” mode; instead, he attributes causal relationships to link them in a cohesive storyline. When Nancy first suspects the Ashburnhams are not the model couple they present themselves to be, Dowell writes, “It began with Edward’s giving an oldest horse to a young fellow...” and explains how that action subsequently

causes Leonora's "passion of tears" (Ford, 171-2). Dowell's narrative follows a more conventional story logic with "Event A" leading to "Event B," as he locates a beginning that establishes the conflict between Nancy and the couple.

Furthermore, as Dowell integrates events into his story, certain occurrences are given more weight based on their significance in the plot. He describes a seemingly trivial piece of information with melodramatic intensity—"And that night, by a merciless trick of the devil...Nancy Rufford had a letter from her mother"—because that datum becomes the catalyst for Nancy's later removal from the Ashburnham household (Ford, 173). Coincidentally, Dowell's last reference to Nancy's mother had been of her reported suicide, yet the writer-narrator doesn't interrupt the tale to acknowledge his past error. Dowell admits of the letter, "I don't know what it contained," then subsequently conveys Mrs. Rufford's message in what's assumed to be her exact words, "You ought to be on the streets with me" (Ford, 173). Nancy's letter is a prime example of Dowell, as a writer, supplementing the narrative with his own inferences. Dowell "renders superfluous an outside referent by crafting a superior one" and Ford indicates his inability to know the letter's content because it no longer matters, given Dowell's choice to re-write it nonetheless (Bitterman, 207). Dowell's confidence as a writer-narrator has an inverse relationship to his reliability: the more he falls into step with his craft and is removed from actual events, the less truthfully he conveys them.

Dowell's manipulation extends to the structure of his account. He says at a point in his narrative, "I wish I could put it in diary form," and magically the next sentence is, "Thus, On the 1st of September..." The word "wish" emphasizes Dowell's awe at the devices within a writer's grasp, yet Ford clearly indicates the writer-narrator's

willingness to use them (Ford, 182). Dowell's manipulation of "diary form" sparks the memory of its prior use in the text, as the narrator once referenced his journal to affirm the authenticity of events. Ford stresses Dowell's different application of the same technique to show how the writer-narrator's priorities shift from 'verifying' to 'plotting.' Dowell also plays with temporal associations in writing, relying on syntax to link seemingly disparate events, "And, at the same time, Leonora was lashing like a cold fiend, into the unfortunate Edward" (Ford, 174). Dowell no longer chronicles memories as they flit through his psyche, instead scenes are "recorded as a result of an aesthetic choice;" woven into the fabric of the Ashburnham story (Bitterman, 174).

Dowell's shift as a writer-narrator comes to full fruition as he delves into what critics refer to as Nancy's devastating enlightenment, when she discovers the truth about the facade of Edward and Leonora's marriage. Ford emphasizes Dowell's change at this juncture, as he stretches the boundaries of narrative perspective to infiltrate Nancy's mind with "godlike omniscience" (Bitterman, 173). The writer-narrator even allows himself access to thoughts Nancy has yet to process herself, "It had never occurred to her that Leonora's expression of agony was for anything else than physical pain" (Ford, 181). Dowell is aware he cannot logically justify the perspectives he takes: "God knows what was in Leonora's mind exactly," yet relies on them to construct his story. He continues on that page, "to follow [Leonora's] psychological development for that moment," informing the reader "she thought herself in a mood of absolute selflessness" (Ford, 174-5). Dowell acknowledges the human limitations of seeing the recesses of another mind, but not the writer's, as he assertively conveys his character's deepest thoughts. He justifies his perspective with the phrase, "Leonora told me these things," yet Dowell's

flimsy allusion to her testimony only serves Ford in demonstrating how far he's veered from it (Ford, 176).

However, as Dowell flexes his authorial muscles, Ford illustrates how his account is dictated by underlying desires, including a homoerotic relation to Ashburnham. The implied author points to Dowell's use of rhetorical tools to render Edward in a loving manner, as he writes Nancy's speech, "If I married anyone I would want him to be like Edward" (Ford, 181). Whether or not Nancy expressed those sentiments is unimportant, as Ford highlights how the writer's affection for Ashburnham manifests itself through the language he invents. As Dowell's narrative is increasingly driven to preserve Edward's integrity, Leonora's character becomes an evil foil to his: "Leonora, Leonora with her hunger, with her cruelty had driven Edward to madness" (Ford, 186). The strength of Dowell's affection for Edward steers his narrative, unbeknownst to him, as the writer-narrator's tale is fraught with veiled emotions that can only be expressed through fictional means. The following, paradoxical description of Ashburnham and Nancy's relationship can be interpreted as a narrative representation of Dowell's unconscious turmoil: a simultaneous desire to be Edward, and to be loved by him.

"He must be sheltered by his love for her and by her love—her love from a great distance and unspoken, enveloping him, surrounding him, upholding him; by her voice speaking from Glasgow, saying that she loved, that she adored, that she passed on moment without longing, loving, quivering at the thought of him" (Ford, 186).

He writes about Nancy's love for Ashburnham "from a great distance and unspoken," a phrase that seems to embody the very nature of Dowell's own affection. Yet as he continues the diction shifts, from words such as "upholding" that possibly evoke a Platonic bond, to very apparent sexual language with "longing" and "quivering." This

quotation can support both theories of Dowell's repressed sexuality; if the sentiments are directed towards Edward, illustrating the writer-narrator's homoerotic lens, if to Nancy, desiring to usurp Edward's role given his own sexless past. Either way, Ford points to the significance of Dowell's unconscious motives within his narrative, as they influence his use of devices such as free indirect discourse to "embody" the characters he portrays.

Yet, these desires reveal themselves, unbeknownst to Dowell, who continues employing fictional elements to bolster his account. He writes, "She probably said a good deal more to Edward than I have been able to report; but that is all that she has told me and I am not going to make up speeches" (Ford, 174). However, once in storytelling mode, Dowell cannot resist incorporating dialogue to draw the reader into his version of events, and later on that page Nancy says, "Oh, my sweet Savior, help me!" Dowell immediately attempts to justify her language, "That was the queer way she thought within her mind, and the words forced themselves to her lips" (Ford, 173). This last phrase, "forced themselves to her lips," is Ford's evidence of writing as a vehicle of unreliability, as Dowell literally 'forces' his saintly image of Nancy onto her speech-act.

Furthermore, the artificiality of Dowell's dialogue becomes self-evident as his wording takes on rhythmic patterns that are uncharacteristic of colloquial conversation.

An exchange between Nancy and Leonora goes as follows:

"'You must stay here,' Leonora answered fiercely. 'You must stay here. I tell you you must stay here.'

'I am going to Glasgow,' Nancy answered. 'I shall go to Glasgow tomorrow morning. My mother is in Glasgow'" (Ford, 176).

The dialogue has a melodic flow, as each woman repeats the contested place "here" or "Glasgow" three times, finishing each phrase with the word. It is no accident that Dowell's dialogue has a repetition that seems forced or created, as Ford once again

“makes explicit the implicit dynamics of projecting a fictional world,”¹⁶ through the writer-narrator’s clear manifestation of the women’s speech. Dowell reinforces the events of his fictional world by adding dialogue, yet Ford embeds it in a novel that confronts its illusory nature, and hence, emphasizes its unnatural quality.

Dowell also writes with increased artistic flair, but once again, Ford shows how the writer-narrator’s creative faculty exposes his suppressed desires. Rather than directly stating “Edward was depressed,” Dowell writes, “He appeared as a man who was burning with inward flame; drying up in the soul with thirst; withering up in the vitals” (Ford, 183). Dowell’s unusual syntax heightens the intensity of each phrase, and the sentence overflows with metaphors and poetic diction—as the words “flame” and “soul” call attention to Dowell’s obvious dramatic intent. The writer-narrator’s language contrasts his previous creative mantra, “I suppose plain English is best,” as he plays with “the power of words” to encompass Edward’s inner turmoil (Ford, 49). Furthermore, Dowell’s aim to express Edward’s hardship at the hands of Leonora informs this stylistic language. Given his prior ignorance of these events, Dowell compensates for his surface level knowledge of Ashburnham in narrative form, accessing the emotional depths of the man he idolized.

Dowell’s exploration of different facets of his craft—rhetorical devices, perceptual techniques, diction, and dialogue—shows itself in the progression of his story. Ford traces Dowell’s transformation from flustered observer to writer-narrator, as the act of writing teaches him to process events through a narrative lens, and consequently, an unreliable one. However, as Dowell falls into the trappings of narrative form, the implied

¹⁶ Paul B. Armstrong, The Challenge of Bewilderment: Understanding and Representation in James, Conrad, and Ford, (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1987), 486.

author exposes the underlying motivations propelling his chronicle. Dowell is essentially the victim of his own rhetorical strategies; the more comfortable he is as a writer, the more he reveals the inherent biases and unconscious desires in his narrative voice.

Dowell's tone drastically changes as he returns to his story eighteen months after first documenting the trials of Leonora, Edward, and Nancy. "Since writing the words, 'until my arrival' which I see end that first paragraph...I have rushed through all Provence—and all Provence no longer matters...because there is only hell" (Ford, 190). Dowell has been removed from the act of writing, but more significantly, fully intertwined in the events themselves, called upon by Leonora to retrieve Nancy from India. Up to his "arrival" in the story, Dowell was able to take an authorial stance on the ordeal he documented because he dealt with it indirectly, only through the Ashburnhams' respective accounts. Now, as he rereads what he's written, Dowell is inextricably tied to the affair, and unable to conceptualize the situation outside of the "hell" it has created for him. Thus, Dowell cannot reassume his previous narratological perspective, because to chronicle such recent, personal events "causes [his] mind to go round and round in a weary, baffled space of pain" (Ford, 190). He returns to the rambling, flustered "Dowell" of past chapters, a disjointed narrator who relies on the writing process as a means of therapy and comprehension. Dowell's "space" is no longer that of a writer whose duty it is to "tell a story," as he has become too emotionally and physically involved in the events to organize them in narrative form.

Dowell is incapable of seeing the Ashburnhams and Nancy as the same characters he once chronicled after he partakes in their tragic affairs. He writes, "those splendid and tumultuous creatures with their magnetism and their passions—those two that I really

loved—are gone from this Earth” (Ford, 195). To Dowell, the textual representations of Nancy and Edward are incomparable to the complex, passionate human beings he once loved. Thus, Dowell’s attitude shifts from exploring his craft to complete weariness of it, as he attempts to detach himself from past emotional investment. He views his story, and the roles Edward, Nancy, and Leonora play, through a bitterly ironic narrative lens.

“Well, that is the end of the story. And, when I come to look at it I see that is a very happy ending with wedding bells and all. The villains—for obviously Edward and the girl were villains—have been punished by suicide and madness. The heroine—the perfectly normal, virtuous and slightly deceitful heroine—has become the happy wife of a perfectly normal, virtuous and slightly deceitful husband” (Ford, 204).

Dowell mocks the traditional mode of storytelling—structuring events in narrative form and casting figures as heroines and villains—although he once heeded such literary tactics before he was physically wrenched back into the plot. Now, Dowell expresses a disdain for the “happy ending” and fairytales in general, as they only serve as a scornful reminder of his unhappy circumstances in reality. He describes his present state, “I don’t want to be in the least bit romantic. She is well dressed; she is quite quiet; she is very beautiful. The old nurse looks after her efficiently” (Ford, 192). Dowell’s account is markedly devoid of metaphorical and poetic language, along with any trace of a traditional romantic plot. Instead his dry, resentful tone is indicative of a new perspective on storytelling: it only serves to mask the unpleasant, unwanted truths that go untold.

Dowell becomes equally bitter about the stories that have been designed for him as the one he’s been relegated to convey. He writes, “and there is also that all those three presented to the world the spectacle of being the best of good people,” criticizing the impression of correctness the Ashburnhams’ and Nancy exhibited to distract from the dysfunction lingering underneath it (Ford, 200). Leonora currently exists as the epitome

of insincerity to Dowell; “the absolutely perfect British matron,” who lures him into the role of Nancy’s dutiful caretaker (Ford, 200). Dowell expresses his frustration with the way the Ashburnhams’ present an idyllic image to the bitter end, “It had been all quite beautifully and quite mercilessly arranged...I think that it would have been better in the eyes of God if they had all attempted to gouge out each other’s eyes with carving knives. But they were ‘good people’” (Ford, 200). With the phrase, “eyes of God” Ford evokes the literary omniscient perspective, as well as the fictional conceit of eye-gouging with its Sophoclean and Shakespearian echoes, to highlight the futility of applying storybook logic to life. Society will continue to perceive Leonora and Edward as “good people,” regardless of the private tortures they inflict on each other. The inherent irony Ford conveys is that life is made up of illusions and representations, but they will be inevitably warped when translated to literary form.

Dowell writes, “it is this part of the story that makes me saddest of all,” after he returns to his story in the aftermath of the deception he’s witnessed (Ford, 190). He laments his task, as his eyes have opened to artifice in every aspect of life, and he’s lost all conviction of his power as a writer-narrator. He says, “I don’t attach any particular importance to these generalizations of mine. They may be right, they may be wrong; I am only an aging American with very little knowledge of life” (Ford, 199). Yet amidst Dowell’s repeated professions of fatigue, “I am very tired of it all,” he still must keep up the “fiction,” as he exists as a character in an illusory framework himself (Ford, 191). “I am an absurd figure, an American millionaire, who has bought one of the ancient haunts of English peace...it is a picture without meaning” (Ford, 206). Dowell is surrounded by representations, his domestic happiness with the beautiful, mentally bereft Nancy,

Leonora as the consummate English matron, and humanity at large, “society must go on; it must breed, like rabbits” (Ford, 205). His use of the word “breed” exemplifies this point, as he casts any fulfillment of desire in a crude, animalistic light, given his own stifled sexuality in yet another “male nurse” relationship. After being made privy to the artificiality inherent in writing and in life, Dowell’s appearance is as deceptive as the characters he chronicled.

Though Dowell’s been made aware of the artifice around him, the true tragedy of the novel is that he can never perceive his own delusions, and still projects his own fictional world over the one he knows. Even after *writing* of Edward’s affair with his fraudulent wife and all of his various transgressions, Dowell still idolizes Ashburnham as the ideal gentleman, the “good soldier.” He writes, “I can’t conceal from myself the fact that I loved Edward Ashburnham—and that I love him because he was just myself. If I had the courage and virility and possibly also the physique of Edward Ashburnham I should, I fancy, have done much of what he did” (Ford, 205). Dowell can no longer “conceal from himself” the love that emerges through his narrative, yet he *chooses* to see the man and in essence, his own identity, through a fictive lens.

The final interaction between himself and Edward is Dowell’s version of a happy ending, in which the narrator releases his beloved “character” from a painful existence. He paints Ashburnham as a wronged figure, a martyr “looking to Heaven,” and falls once again into the trappings of an unreliable narrator, sustaining the illusion of the man he models himself after. Dowell resolves not to stop Edward as he makes clear his choice to end his life, writing, “When he saw that I did not intend to interfere with him his eyes became soft and affectionate” and Edward’s final line of dialogue is another invented

manifestation of their intimacy, as Dowell writes “So long, old man, I must have a bit of a rest, you know” (Ford, 207). Dowell writes, earlier in the novel, “surely, surely these delusions are necessary to keep us going,” and ironically, the implied author places Dowell in Edward’s empty house, caring for his traumatized love—acting out a hollow, farcical version of the man he still idolizes (Ford, 44). With *The Good Soldier*, Ford deftly argues that, in writing our lives, we all become unreliable narrators, because we can’t help but project the illusions that sustain us.

Chapter II: “By My Voice I Shall Be Known” Unreliable Narration in *The Blind Assassin*

“Writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it, and with luck, illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light.”¹⁷
– Margaret Atwood

A writer navigates daunting and unfamiliar paths, carving through the confusion of human experience to emerge with something original and unexpected. According to Canadian author Margaret Atwood, the inexplicable pull that guides a writer towards the unknown should culminate in a work that surprises its creator. Born in 1939 and writing since the age of sixteen, Atwood has tried her hand at nearly every medium, amassing a collection of novels, poetry, essays, and screenplays. She has spoken and published extensively on writing, and continues to explore the process of fusing life and fiction in her own works. Protagonists in several of Atwood’s novels engage in the act of writing, including Iris Chase Griffen, narrator of *The Blind Assassin*. Iris, similar to John Dowell, relies on narrative form to provide order to a tangled past.

In her non-fiction work, *Negotiating With the Dead*, Atwood outlines three central issues that motivate a writer to confront the blank page—mortality, permanence, and order—and *The Blind Assassin*’s Iris Griffen plays out this claim. In her memoir, Iris is compelled to examine deaths of those close to her, because as Atwood notes, “dead people persist in the minds of the living,” but also her own failing health and imminent mortality (NWD, 159). Atwood’s novel captures eighty-three year-old Iris as she documents her final thoughts, relying on narrative form as a vehicle to organize and value her existence. Iris writes, “Guide my shaking arthritic fingers, my tacky black ballpoint

¹⁷ Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: a Writer on Writing*, (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), xxiv, Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix NWD.

pen; keep my leaking heart afloat for just a few more days, until I can set things to order.”¹⁸ Given her limited time, Iris’s writing is also propelled by what Atwood defines as the desire for permanence, or the specific way in which writing survives other art forms “as *voice*” (NWD, 158). Iris wonders, “Why is it we want so badly to memorialize ourselves” and Atwood’s novel explores the concept of writing as a personal legacy (Atwood, 95). This generates a fundamental issue of *The Blind Assassin*—can narrative form be a place to synthesize and reinterpret one’s existence?

Atwood, like Ford, deals with this question by writing metafiction; her text, akin to *The Good Soldier*, lays bare the formal elements of fiction to analyze its creative process. As we have seen, Ford asserts with his novel, “life does not narrate, it makes impressions on our brain,” and John Dowell’s attempt to render past events leads not only to narrative unreliability, but also, personal tragedy. Atwood doesn’t deny writing’s potential to distort individual experience, stating, “Most writers share this distrust of language...But [it’s] one of the few tools we *do* have. So we have to use it. We even have to trust it, though it’s untrustworthy.”¹⁹ Atwood also points to the capacity of a fictional construct to clarify real-life events. Iris’s memoir, albeit an unreliable narrative, not only endows her with agency in life and writing, but becomes her vehicle of expression as she unravels a conflicted past. Whereas Dowell’s narrative endeavor leads him to a bitter, unhappy existence, Iris’s allows her to translate past misfortunes into newfound independence.

¹⁸ Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 497. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix Atwood.

¹⁹ Geoff Hancock, "Tightrope-Walking Over Niagara Falls," *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, Ed. Earl G. Ingersoll. (Ontario: Ontario Review Press, 1990), 209

As Atwood illustrates the capacity of narrative form to shape individual existences, she shows the reverse as well, tracing how a writer's life inevitably permeates his or her fictional creations. She intertwines Iris's memoir with another embedded novel, also entitled *The Blind Assassin*, (referred to henceforth as *BA*), which follows two lovers jointly constructing a science fiction tale. The man and woman impulsively invent another world, imagining mystical creatures in a futuristic alien society, but aspects of their real-life affair emerge within the story. Thus Atwood's embedded novel presents another counterpoint to Ford, blurring the line between life and narration, and supporting the notion that Iris's unreliable lens can be a fruitful one. Atwood writes, "Hope comes from the fact that people create, that they find it worthwhile to create. Not just from the nature of what is created."²⁰ Atwood juxtaposes these texts to prove that life and narration are inextricably linked, creating in Iris an unreliable narrator who nevertheless gains from fictionalizing her past.

Iris's memoir allows her to exert agency in narrative form as control over her physical being diminishes. Atwood shows how Iris's writing becomes a vehicle of self-expression, as she describes her body's deterioration, "I suspect myself of having an odor I myself can no longer detect- a stink of stale flesh and clouded, ageing pee" (Atwood, 37). She resents the constant supervision of friend Myra, whose protective instincts undermine Iris's self-sufficiency, "I said I'd be taking the bus. Myra wouldn't hear of it" (Atwood, 289). As Iris senses her independence ebbing away, coupled with the corrosion of her physical self, she feels as though she's "a letter—deposited here, collected there. But a letter addressed to no one" (Atwood, 169). Iris's memoir becomes a way to express

²⁰ Geoff Hancock, "Tightrope-Walking Over Niagara Falls," Margaret Atwood: Conversations, Ed. Earl G. Ingersoll. (Ontario: Ontario Review Press, 1990), 220

her innermost thoughts; although physically weak, she can vigorously wield narrative tools. She writes of this phenomenon, “on this page, a fresh, clean page, I will cause the war to end – I alone, with a stroke of my black plastic pen” (Atwood, 75). Iris embraces her newfound authority, and she is continuously taken aback by the power emerging from her fingertips. She doesn’t know why she writes, or for whom, “For myself? I think not...For some stranger, in the future, after I’m dead?” yet Iris is compelled to document her past nonetheless (Atwood, 43). Atwood illustrates, through Iris’s revealing voice, the aging woman’s attempt to replace one kind of agency for another: her physical struggles lead to mental inspiration.

Furthermore, as the reader absorbs Iris’s chronological narrative, it becomes clear that the writer-narrator has been plagued by a lack of agency before. Her memoir chronicles a time in which her present capabilities were reversed; she was physically able, but mentally stifled. Thus, as Iris gleans power from her writing, it not only affects her current outlook, but her hindsight lens as well. Her memoir becomes both a means of expressing and detaching from her past, given that Iris sees no resemblance between her present and former selves. She makes this assertion upon analyzing a photograph from her wedding day:

“I and the girl in the picture have ceased to be the same person. I am her outcome, the result of the life she once lived headlong; whereas she, if she can be said to exist at all, is composed only of what I remember. I have the better view – I can see her clearly, most of the time. But even if she knew enough to look, she can’t see me at all” (Atwood, 239).

Iris’s voice is fraught with tension as she takes pains to distinguish her present persona from “the girl in the picture.” She relies on rhetorical tools to convey this separation, including external focalization, self-consciously framing events through a

retrospective lens. Iris interrupts her own memorial reconstructions to question details, “Soon – after two days in New York or was it three?” reminding the reader of her distance, temporally and otherwise, from her former self as the dutiful, oblivious wife of politician Richard Griffen (Atwood, 243). Likewise, Iris’s present narrative authority contrasts her shaded lens of the past: “Every once in a while he’d scan the room, checking over the other men in it to see who was envying him. (Retrospect of course, on my part: at the time I recognized none of this)” (Atwood, 242). Iris’s parentheses inform this memory, yet also serve to extract her voice from it, removing herself as a narrator from the “character” she portrays. She includes two vantage points in writing about a single event, “what I pictured when she said this was...” and “Now I think...” and continues to show the difference between her past and present outlooks (Atwood, 325). Iris’s rhetorical agency allows her to deal with physical hardship, but shapes her memoir in the process, as she seeks to make apparent her current writer’s perspective.

Iris’s narrative shifts into more unreliable territory as she depicts this separation stylistically rather than overtly informing the reader of her retrospective lens. Atwood shows how Iris uses rhetorical devices to heighten her submissive existence: “The week after the engagement had taken place I was packed off to have lunch with Richard’s sister;” the passive construction “I was packed off” both literally and figuratively showing Iris’s vulnerability at an earlier time (Atwood, 227). Furthermore, Iris employs free indirect discourse to illustrate how she was influenced by the strong opinions of Richard and sister-in-law, Winifred Prior. Even though she’s initially appalled at the thought of her sister Laura in a mental institution, Iris narrates Winifred’s viewpoint without quotation marks: “Most likely [Laura] hardly knew what she was doing or

saying. Once we got her back, she must be given a strong sedative and carted off to the doctor” (Atwood, 325). At that moment Iris embraces Winifred’s rationale, and this literary device foreshadows her childlike malleability. Atwood demonstrates Iris’s stylistic control, but also her narrative unreliability, given the writer-narrator’s underlying aim to segregate her powerless past.

Iris’s retrospective lens clouds other facets of her narrative, as her present and past perspectives invariably overlap. Laura’s depiction is a prime example of this, as Iris cannot help conflate past memories of her sister with Laura’s current iconic status. Laura’s public perception as the “martyred writer” behind *The Blind Assassin* evokes a bitter jealousy in her older sister, given that Iris is the sole person who knows Laura’s literary reputation is a façade, including the reader. This is evident through Iris’s soured interpretation of the sisters’ past, as her narrative directly challenges Laura’s idealized, saintly image: “In the course of her daily life she was frequently irritating, like anyone. Or dull” (Atwood, 417). She even mocks this “angelic” notion of her sister in describing past actions, “Laura carried the food scraps up the attic stairs as if they were a temple offering” (Atwood, 216). Marta Dvorak refers to this temporal confusion as a “superimposition of memory and experience;”²¹ Iris’s envy of Laura’s literary fame is projected onto memories before the book exists. Thus, Atwood shows how Iris’s agency as a writer pervades her narrative in unreliable ways, as she seeks to apply her current viewpoint to every facet of her memoir.

As Iris explores this rhetorical power, it also impels to explore unresolved issues of her past. She laments writing’s tendency to unearth such conflicts, “Why stir

²¹ Marta Dvorak, “The Right Hand Writing and the Left Hand Erasing in Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*,” Commonwealth Essays and Studies, (2002), 59.

everything up again after that many years, with all concerned tucked, like tired children, so neatly into their graves?" (Atwood, 286). Yet, her memoir significantly begins, "ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge" (Atwood, 1). She says of her own hand "certainly it's been writing down a number of things it wouldn't be allowed to if subject to my better judgment" (Atwood, 373). Writing allows Iris access to painful, suppressed memories, but also forces her to examine her role in them. This is especially true of Laura's death, as Iris's narrative reveals a latent inner conflict: she sees herself as a "blind assassin," both powerless and culpable in the tragic incident. Iris claims she was "blinded" to certain signs; immobilized in an identity without free will. But she also paints herself as an "assassin figure," tracing her role in precursors to Laura's demise. Thus Iris's voice vacillates between "self-reproach and vindication,"²² and her narrative exemplifies this contradictory perspective. Iris cannot exist as the "blind assassin" any more than she can sever her present and past selves; however, this fictional construct allows Iris to explore her and Laura's complex, knotted past.

Closely examining a passage of her memoir shows how Iris's self-perception informs the construction of her narrative. In this quotation, Iris crosses the street upon seeing Alex Thomas, an individual who plays a pivotal role in the sisters' relationship. This exemplifies the unreliability of Iris's perspective, as she depicts the event as both a fated occurrence and one directly precipitated by her own actions.

"I could have paid no attention. I could have turned away. That would have been wise. But such wisdom was not available to me then.

²² Alan Robinson, "Alias Laura: Representations of the Past in Margaret Atwood's the Blind Assassin," *Modern Language Review* 101 (2006), 378.

I stepped down off the curb and began to cross towards him. The light changed again: I was stranded in the middle of the street. Cars honked their horns; there were shouts; the traffic surged. I didn't know whether to go back or forward.

He turned then and at first I was not sure he could see me. I stretched out my hand, like a drowning person beseeching rescue. In that moment I had already committed treachery in my heart...Was this a betrayal, or was it an act of courage? Perhaps both" (Atwood, 321).

Iris's portrayal of her former self, stranded in the middle of the street, is analogous to the opposing forces in her narrative voice. Iris's conflicted lens as the "blind assassin" dictates her rhetorical choices, as the writer-narrator shifts between conveying herself as deliberate and helpless. Yet, as Iris wonders whether "to go back or forward" towards Alex, she subsequently "steps down off the curb" and exhibits considerable will in this action. However, her previous statements, "I could have paid no attention. I could have turned away," seduce the reader into thinking the opposite; that forces beyond Iris's control pull her in Thomas's direction. This contradiction is also exemplified by the language in this passage, as it syntactically displays Iris's directness, "I stepped off the curb and began to cross towards him," but also her weakness, gesturing "like a drowning person beseeching rescue." Atwood depicts Iris at a literal and figurative intersection, mirroring the tension between agency and powerlessness in her perspective as the "blind assassin." The author illustrates this paradoxical lens as it renders Iris's narrative unreliable, but also empowers her, providing the writer-narrator with a framework to convey her inner conflict.

Atwood intertwines the novel, *BA*, with Iris's memoir to further demonstrate the cohesion of life and narration. The embedded work itself contains another layer of fiction, as its two protagonists concoct their science fiction tale. As the lovers' collaborate creatively, the resulting narrative provides a neutral territory for each to

confront issues within their relationship. The nameless man, whom the reader infers is Alex, often expresses resentment for the institutions to which the woman, presumably Iris, is inextricably tied: “Thus, tongueless, and swollen with words she could never again pronounce, each girl would be led in procession...Nowadays you might say she looked like a pampered society bride. That’s really uncalled for, she says. You want to get at me” (Atwood, 29). Although the fictional universe of the “tongueless girl” is purportedly worlds away, the woman recognizes a thinly veiled criticism of her social position. Furthermore, the “tongueless” conceit acts as a symbol of lovers’ stifled communication, as troubling issues are only addressed through their joint narrative. Thus, Atwood demonstrates the futility of dividing life and fiction, as both Iris and the lovers rely on fictional constructs to deal with real-life.

Atwood shows how Iris’s perspective as the “blind assassin” affects the way in which main players of her story are depicted. From the beginning of her memoir, Iris casts herself in the role of Laura’s reluctant caretaker, as it chronicles her daily activities as both an older sibling and later, dutiful mourner. She writes of constant reminders to look after Laura, “Why was it me who was supposed to be a good sister instead of the other way around,” setting up her accountability for Laura’s demise (Atwood, 95). However, as Iris casts herself as the protective “older sister,” she also writes about her lack of agency at the hands of others, namely Richard and Winifred. Iris says, “I was sand, I was snow – written on, rewritten, smoothed over,” an image of blankness echoing the silenced, controlled nature of her existence (Atwood, 371). Iris’s narrative unearths her inner conflict in regards to Laura’s death, as she renders herself both a powerless figure and one responsible for preserving her sister’s welfare.

Laura's characterization is also distorted by Iris's conflicting roles. The writer-narrator's version of Laura is riddled with contradictions, as the sisters' tumultuous relationship is made apparent in her memoir. Molly Hite says of Laura, "it is impossible to interpret her. Her subjectivity is as inaccessible as that of a saint or god or an infant or a visitor from another planet. She could be retarded, a genius, divinely inspired or psychotic."²³ Essentially, Laura becomes a hologram that shifts with Iris's self-concept. From one angle, she is a spiritual eccentric whose language is repeatedly infused with references to God, words like "sacrifice" or "eternity" foreshadowing the inevitability of her suicide. But turn the page and Laura is, despite her strangeness, a typical younger sister to Iris. Protectively, Iris writes, "I didn't like it when other people criticized Laura – her vagueness, her simplicity, her fecklessness. Criticism of Laura was reserved for me" (Atwood, 212). Atwood draws attention to the inconsistency with which Iris depicts Laura, as both a harmless little sister and a self-destructive personality.

Iris similarly construes the characters of Richard and Winifred through this unreliable lens, as both emerge as one-dimensional figures responsible for blinding Iris to her and Laura's oppression. The siblings Richard and Winifred represent the villains to whom Laura and Iris were "sold" to save their financial futures, exploiting Iris's naïve and repressed outlook to their political advantage. She says, "I was learning which lies, as a wife, I was automatically expected to tell," and writes of being conditioned to conceal problems behind a polished façade (Atwood, 305). The two characters' constantly strive to keep up appearances, as Iris depicts her and Richard's interaction, "Not much would

²³ Molly Hite, "Tongueless in Toronto," Rev. of *The Blind Assassin*, by Margaret Atwood, *The Women's Review of Books* Mar. 2001.

be said, apart from the obligatory ‘Sleep well, darling?’” (Atwood, 301). Iris cites Richard and Winifred’s manipulative tactics as she chronicles her own behavior in regard to Laura. She rationalizes to her sister why she allowed them to keep her in a mental institution, stating “[Richard] told me a story.” Iris even acknowledges their pervasive influence on herself, “I didn’t even know they were tigers. Worse: I didn’t know I might become a tiger myself” (Atwood, 328). Thus, Richard and Winifred are conveyed as power-hungry, appearance-obsessed individuals, who not only prevent Iris from seeing Laura’s warning signs, but sway her to turn away from them.

However, her memoir reveals Iris’s “assassin” viewpoint as well, as the writer-narrator highlights her own shallow depictions within the narrative. On one hand, Richard and Winifred’s characterizations extenuate Iris, yet her nagging culpability causes her to draw attention to the “fictional” aspects of their portrayals. Iris writes, “Richard and Winifred had been cast as the monsters then, and I’d been excused” (Atwood, 448). Iris uses the words “cast” and “monsters” to point out the inherent fiction of her representations. Her ironic tone is evident in the phrase, “I’d been excused,” suggesting she is somewhat responsible for Laura’s death along with “the monsters” of her narrative. The writer-narrator struggles with her own cartoon-like depictions, saying, “I’ve failed to convey Richard, in any rounded sense. He remains a cardboard cutout” (Atwood, 479). Iris lets herself off the hook for Laura’s death by crafting villains in her narrative, yet she also assumes responsibility by overtly deconstructing them. Iris recognizes storybook elements in her account, yet ironically, Atwood shows how Iris’s real-life narrative is still shaped by a fictional lens: her role as the “blind assassin.”

Atwood continues to intertwine Iris's memoir with the lovers' complex science fiction story, a fictional enterprise driven by concrete obstacles in their affair. The man and woman's clashing viewpoints transcend their narrative, as the two debate over plot, imagery, and tone. She disapproves of his tendency towards images of a grisly variety, saying, "This is too gruesome, she says. You have a twisted mind" (Atwood, 119). In turn, he admonishes her partiality to the fairytale form, "She wants a love story out of him because girls do, or girls of her type who still expect something from life" (Atwood, 276). The lovers' personal differences pervade their imagined world; she is a woman who has the luxury to indulge in the happiness of a fictional setting, and he is forced to live to live by the skin of his teeth, pointing out: "As a rule I do this for money" (Atwood, 119). Real-life circumstances subsequently dictate each writer's needs from the story. For her it represents a diversion, as she yearns for a tale that provides a contrast to her own, warped fairytale existence. However, he depends on narrative form not only as a livelihood, but as a vehicle to express issues with society at large, given his position as an exile from it. He doesn't want to sugar-coat the problems in their relationship or surrounding environment, saying, "Thick plots are my specialty. If you want a thinner kind, look elsewhere" (Atwood, 119). Though the lovers write in isolation, their positions in a broader context affect their relationship, and in turn, the fictional creation that emerges from it. As both Iris's memoir and the lovers' tale progress, Atwood reiterates the impossibility of severing life from narrative form.

As Iris depicts personal tragedy, her fictional "blind assassin" perspective manifests itself in the plot of her narrative. Alan Robinson writes, Iris is "a storyteller

with strong motives to narrate but also strong motives to withhold,”²⁴ and Atwood shows the shaping power of Iris’s internal struggle on her memorial reconstructions. As we have seen, the writer-narrator begins her memoir with the blunt declaration, “Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge,” setting up Laura’s death as the story’s eschatological endpoint. She writes, “In life, tragedy is not one long scream. It includes everything that led up to it,” and views Laura’s suicide through a teleological lens, one that transforms monumental events into a series of turning-points, “Love, then marriage, then catastrophe...it seemed inevitable” (Atwood, 417, 70). A dual plotline emerges in her narrative; one that depicts Laura’s death as a fated disaster, yet also showcases Iris’s protective intervention.

Pivotal events in the sister’s relationship are thus dubiously rendered, as they encompass both facets of Iris’s paradoxical lens. Laura’s near-drowning is an example of such an incident. Iris writes how immediately following their mother’s death, Laura jumps into a river and Iris pulls her out: “how her wet face had gleamed silvery, how she had glared at me when I’d grabbed her by the coat. How hard it had been to hold on to her. How close I had come to letting go,” and thereby demonstrating Iris saving her sister from a first attempted suicide (Atwood, 151). Laura’s rationale for this act of self-sacrifice is “so God would let Mother be alive again,” and the writer-narrator’s rendering foreshadows her watery demise but also, Iris’s ability to counter her sister’s dangerous notions (Atwood, 151). She explains to Laura that God didn’t want her dead, “Because look—he let me save you,” and Iris interrupts the symbolic undertones of her sister’s act to highlight how she steps in (Atwood, 151). Her conflicted role as the “blind assassin” is

²⁴ Alan Robinson, "Alias Laura: Representations of the Past in Margaret Atwood's the Blind Assassin," *Modern Language Review* 101 (2006), 348.

exemplified in the reconstruction of this memory—a plot device foreshadowing Laura’s death, but also showing Iris’s accountability for her.

Iris continues to envision her narrative through this dual lens; depicting the sisters’ pasts as part of a larger, preordained tale, “Was that the beginning, that evening – on the dock at Avilion?” *and* showing her choice to interfere in Laura’s misguided plans (Atwood, 190). Iris writes about helping Laura hide Alex Thomas in the attic, “Was it my belief that I was doing this only to spare her – to help her, to take care of her, as I had always done? Yes. That is what I did believe” (Atwood, 212). Iris rationalizes this precarious act, but her decision to aid Laura is immensely significant, given the aftermath of their shared relationship with Thomas. As Iris’s memoir spirals towards the sisters’ final interaction, she continues to plot the course towards Laura’s death, yet also remind the reader of her filial responsibility, saying to a teenage Laura, “I promised Father I’d take care of you” (Atwood, 378). Her unreliable lens thus continues to embody these two disparaging viewpoints—the belief that Laura’s death was a predetermined entity, coupled with her pattern of involvement in the tragic events.

The tension between these opposing forces explodes at the memoir’s climax: a conversation between the sisters that immediately precedes Laura’s suicide. In this passage, Iris and Laura meet to discuss what really happened at the Bella Vista Clinic, and Laura tells Iris her plan to wait for a message from Alex Thomas, who has since left to fight in World War II. Atwood frames this moment as the crux of Iris’s narrative unreliability, as conflicts between present and past, agency and blindness, converge in the sister’s last interaction. Iris carries out her role as “the blind assassin” in the narrative:

“Now I’m coming to the part that still haunts me. Now I should have bitten my tongue, now I should have kept my mouth shut. Out of love, I should have lied, or said anything else: anything but the truth.

‘I got the telegram,’ I said. “They sent it to me. He listed me as next of kin.’ Even then I could have changed course; I could have said *There must have been a mistake, it must have been meant for you*. But I didn’t say that. Instead I said, ‘...we’d been lovers you see—in secret, for quite a long time—and who else did he have?’

Laura said nothing. She only looked at me. She looked right through me. Lord knows what she saw. A sinking ship, a city in flames, a knife in the back. I recognized the look, however: it was the look she’d had that day she’d almost drowned in the Louveteau River, just as she was going under – terrified, cold, rapturous. Gleaming like steel” (Atwood, 488).

Several features of this passage indicate the unreliable nature of Iris’s self-perception as a woman divided, past and present. Although the writer-narrator says she and her former self have “ceased to be the same person,” Atwood’s use and repetition of “now” signifies otherwise. In this paragraph, the word encompasses Iris’s current reproachful mindset *and* that of her former self, an Iris who should “have kept her mouth shut.” Although she claims to be completely removed from this figure, Iris’s past actions evidently persist in her mind, as she admits to being “still haunted” by them. This is indicated by her use of present tense, “I *am* coming to the part,” as both “writer” and “character” Iris are apprehensively reaching the same narrative juncture. Iris’s detached narrative style allows her to thoroughly examine a suppressed past; yet ironically, Atwood shows how the writer-narrator ultimately takes ownership of the “Iris” her narrative strived to separate from.

Furthermore, as this interaction comes just before Laura’s suicide, Atwood also brings the primary tension in Iris’s perspective as the “blind assassin” to the fore. Iris writes, “I should have lied, or said anything else: anything but the truth.” Repeating the phrase “I should have” reveals Iris’s carelessness at this juncture. She knew that the secret she wielded would shatter her sister’s convictions, given both Laura’s sacrificial

notions and her attachment to Alex Thomas. Here, the writer-narrator doesn't attempt to assert her blindness, only the fact that she should have known to lie. Furthermore, in the next sentence, Iris uses the word "could," in the phrase "I could have changed course," indicating that, given this knowledge, she had the ability say something else, even suggesting an alternate statement, "*There must have been a mistake, it must have been meant for you.*" Yet Iris simply states, "But I didn't say that" and in essence, charges herself with the crime of her sister's death, tipping the scales of blame towards her own, harmful words.

However, Iris wrenches her narrative back to its fated suicide plot with the evocation of her sister's near drowning. Iris writes that how she "recognized that look" in Laura's eyes as the same determined gaze she had when she attempted to take her own life, "terrified, cold, rapturous." Atwood shows how this narrative insertion is evidence of Iris resisting full responsibility for Laura's death. Just when it seems she confesses, the writer-narrator returns her memoir to a cyclical, literary endpoint. She relinquishes the fatal weapon to her sister, and the image of Laura "gleaming like steel," symbolizes her, not Iris, as the ultimate instrument of death. She says, "Laura looked right through me," and this description reduces the Iris who *could* have said "anything but the truth," to the blind Iris, who can only watch, devoid and powerless, as her sister carries out her fate.

Here, Iris's voice embodies the dual perspective that has driven her narrative from the start—being both responsible for and incapable of preventing Laura's suicide. Though this renders Iris's narrative inherently unreliable, it also adheres to a fictional construct that represents her version of the truth, one that, Atwood argues, couldn't have been conveyed through a traditional "reliable" narrative lens. Iris represents her final

moments as the “blind assassin” through fictional conceits, “a sinking ship, a city in flames, a knife in the back,” acknowledging the invented nature of her self-perception. But, Atwood shows how this framework allows Iris to meaningfully address difficult, suppressed memories. If Iris’s memoir had merely listed off the events leading up to Laura’s suicide, neither she nor the reader could have gleaned the complexity of this tragedy. She writes, “Two and two doesn’t necessarily get you the truth. Two and two equals a voice outside the window. Two and two equals the wind. The living bird is not its labeled bones” (Atwood, 371). Atwood shows through this quotation, and Iris’s memoir itself, that concepts like the “blind assassin” sometimes are closer to the truth, than “truth” itself.

In a sense, Iris depicts both herself and Laura as assassins in the final scene: her sister, the “gleaming knife” and she, the one stabbing it in her back. Iris also applies this logic to the creation of *BA*, revealing that she physically wrote it, but arguing that both sisters collaborated in its creation. She writes, “Laura was my left hand, and I was hers. We wrote the book together. It’s a left-handed book. That’s why one of us is always out of sight, whichever way you look at it” (Atwood, 508). This impossible truth not only allows Iris to take ownership of her story, but also, a vehicle to explain why she didn’t in the first place. She writes: “Officially, Laura had been papered over. A few years more and it would be almost as if she’d never existed. What did I want? Nothing much. Just a memorial of some kind” (Atwood, 508). Iris sheathed her guilt in a fictional offering, giving Laura authorship of *BA* and with it, Alex Thomas, a concession she couldn’t make in reality: “Alex belonged, for Laura, in another dimension of space” (Atwood, 500).

Yet, Atwood illustrates, through both the conclusion of Iris's memoir as well as the final chapters of *BA*, that this "other dimension" can intersect with life in remarkably worthwhile ways. In *BA*, Atwood presents the lovers as living examples of her maxim, "hope comes from the fact that people create," and the role of storytelling in their affair supports this point. Although the man and woman are forced to closet their affection in secret, grimy locations, they share a fictional universe in which they escape dubious reality, together. Atwood traces the development of their relationship through the narrative they construct, and though they disagree on the concept of a "happy ending," she shows how the act of invention, not its outcome, unites them. She writes in *BA*, "The picture is of happiness, the story not...It's loss and regret and misery and yearning that drive the story forward, along its twisted road" (Atwood, 518). The lovers, like the figures of their story, are tragically separated by war but their imaginations sustain them, both literally and figuratively, in each others' absence. The man earns money by mass-producing their narrative, and the woman holds on to the belief that he continues writing it for her: "the message that will surely be concealed somewhere within the print. It will be a message meant only for her" (Atwood, 400). They never reunite, as the reader later learns that the man or fictional "Alex Thomas" was killed, but Atwood illustrates, through *BA*'s overlapping narratives, the capacity of fictional form to enhance the bleakest of circumstances.

The structure of *The Blind Assassin* as a cohesive entity, with a memoir, novel, and science fiction story all in one text, further asserts the futility of drawing a line between life and narration. Atwood collages memoir, stories, and newspaper articles to show how purportedly factual forms are often fictional too. In one intertextual article,

called, "Society Schoolgirl Found Safe," Richard claims Laura's disappearance was, "caused by a letter which was delayed in the post," and Atwood illustrates how the article's content is spun to salvage Richard's political motivations, yet seen as truth given the medium's apparent authenticity (Atwood, 258). Furthermore, a letter from Bella Vista Clinic echoes this notion, as Laura's "delusional" diagnosis is entirely predicated on Winifred's self-serving opinion, yet this testimony is given power and authenticity in writing. Atwood argues that many forms of writing can yield unreliable narrators, given human nature to concoct stories to cover unpleasant truths. Iris cites this practice in regard to her failing health, "We conspire in the fiction – or what is rapidly becoming the fiction – that I can fend for myself" (Atwood, 366). However, Atwood's collage doesn't criticize the "fiction;" especially its role for Iris Griffen, a once powerless woman for whom the medium provides agency.

Iris's unreliable lens supports Atwood's overarching argument, that a fictional construct can be applied to life in a positive way, even one that distorts the events it chronicles. Although Iris's disjointed self-perception as the "blind assassin" muddles aspects of her narrative, it provides the aging woman a way to express her internal strife. Iris realizes that burying past, painful memories in another version of herself hardly prevented emotional hardship; instead, it contributed to much of her bitterness in later life. She says of the time between Laura's death and transcribing it, "unshed tears can turn you rancid. So can memory. So can biting your tongue. My bad nights were beginning" (Atwood, 508). Iris's voice, however unreliable, allowed her to craft her suppressed memories into something constructive. She writes, "What did I want? Nothing much. Just a memorial of some kind. But what is a memorial, when you come

right down to it, but a commemoration of wounds endured?” (Atwood, 508). Iris’s mortality impelled her to organize her past in narrative form and her voice, infused with conflict but singularly her own, is finally cast into a literary and enlightened memorial.

But this memorial is still not enough for Iris, as the writing process has opened her eyes to a motivation propelling her narrative from the start: leaving a legacy for her granddaughter Sabrina. She writes, “When I began this account of Laura’s life – of my own life – I had no idea why I was writing it, or who I expected might read it once I’d done. But it’s clear to me now. I was writing it for you, dearest Sabrina, because you’re the one – the only one – who needs it now” (Atwood, 513). Iris’s memoir endows her with not only a rhetorical agency, but an actual concrete one, as she sees her writing as a tool that can actually change her granddaughter’s life. She reveals that Sabrina’s grandfather is Alex Thomas and not Richard Griffen, and expresses hope that this knowledge will liberate her, saying to an imagined Sabrina, “You’re free to reinvent yourself at will” (Atwood, 513). Ironically, Iris’s conflicted self-perception allows her to disclose information that will, if Sabrina reads her memoir, greatly inform someone else’s. Whether or not Sabrina fulfills any of Iris’s aspirations remains unknown, although Atwood does mention in an article that she returns to “see to her grandmother’s affairs” (Atwood, 519). One can even go as far as surmise that the mélange of written materials—newspaper articles, the original *Blind Assassin*, Iris’s memoir—are a construction of Sabrina’s hand.

However, because she never gets to meet her granddaughter, Sabrina is still a figment of Iris’s imagination at the end of her memoir, an ideal image comprised of snippets of knowledge and imagined traits, “You’ll stand on the porch, in a haze of damp

light; your glossy dark hair will be sodden, your black outfit will be soaked, the drops of rain will glitter on your face and clothes like sequins” (Atwood, 521). *The Blind Assassin*’s final pages are a daydream of Iris’s, one in which she meets Sabrina and tells the story of her past, explains her absence, and bequeaths her granddaughter a new identity. Although Atwood hints that *The Blind Assassin* itself represents the intersection of Iris’s fictional and Sabrina’s real-life agency, that the two never meet is both indicative of the power and limitations of the medium. Iris’s memoir traverses dimensions of time and space, passing information from beyond the grave to enrich Sabrina’s life; however, the writing still cannot bring the two women physically together. Even so, at the conclusion of Atwood’s expansive novel, Iris’s fantasy affirms the medium’s power to invigorate the lives of those who create, and the writing that emerges, however unreliable, allows a dying woman’s voice to reach its intended audience. Atwood ends her later work, *Negotiating with the Dead*, with a quote from poet Ovid. “But still, the fates will leave me my voice, and by my voice I shall be known” (NWD, 180). Iris embodies this attitude on narration’s purpose, not to convey life as it happened, but to infuse it with insights gleaned from a fictional realm.

Chapter III: “The Attempt was All” Unreliable Narration in *Atonement*

The final chapter of this thesis is devoted to Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, a novel that has garnered fervent popular and critical response since its publication in 2002. McEwan, known for crafting both suspenseful plots and rich, artistic prose, has given many interviews about the writing process. Similar to Ford and Atwood, McEwan’s thoughts on the medium are central to the unreliable narrator he creates. The author lauds the spontaneity of fiction in *The Kenyon Review*, describing the magical moment when a creative solution comes forth “as the writing unfolded it.”²⁵ But McEwan also characterizes the medium as an “act of the imagination,”²⁶ alluding to the high wire act of constructing a complex, layered narrative.

The article addresses the tenuous relationship between reality and fiction, and McEwan, like Ford, believes certain distinctions should be made: “we care about these lines, and I think they ought to be drawn actually...Something happened to you or it didn’t.”²⁷ However, in respect to Ford’s assertion that “life doesn’t narrate,” McEwan falls more in line with Atwood, insisting that fiction inevitably penetrates everyday reality. He recognizes the medium’s redeeming qualities, but also implicates the reader in a manner similar to Ford, forcing one to be aware of the illusions we digest. McEwan stresses a need to question tenets of narrative form, “we can’t simply take a point of view and omniscience for granted” while still allowing for “complete immersion in a fictional

²⁵ David Lynn, *The Kenyon Review*, p. 12.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

world.”²⁸ McEwan’s attitude boils down to a single, thorny paradox: it’s impossible to divide life from fiction and fiction from life, but we must still attempt to separate them.

The construction of *Atonement* exemplifies both positive and negative aspects of fiction’s illusory power. Like John Dowell and Iris Griffen, McEwan’s 77-year-old protagonist and narrator Briony Tallis is another “prime example of the way art shapes her life as much as she shapes that life into art.”²⁹ On the surface, Briony shares many similarities with Iris Griffin; both women are elderly writers examining personal contributions to their sisters’ tragic fates. But she is also comparable to Dowell, as their respective novels end with each writer-narrator clinging to the illusions they’ve created. However, a fundamental difference separates the two preceding characters from Briony: Dowell and Iris self-consciously explore the process of writing life, while Briony’s “story as a writer” is embedded in her narrative. One doesn’t even know that Briony, a professional novelist, writes the book until the epilogue reveals it is a novel-within-a-novel. She muses at *Atonement*’s conclusion, “how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?”³⁰ Briony’s novel is McEwan’s answer to this question—she can only achieve atonement in the realm of fiction itself.

Atonement ultimately produces two readers: one who assumes McEwan is the implied author and another who knows Briony to be the mastermind behind the enclosed work. Briony writes of the crime she commits, “she trapped herself, marched into the

²⁸ David Lynn, *The Kenyon Review*, p. 12.

²⁹ Brian Finney, “Briony’s Stand Against Oblivion: the Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* (2004), 78.

³⁰ Ian McEwan, *Atonement*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), 350. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix McEwan.

labyrinth of her own construction, and she was too young, too awestruck, too keen to please, to insist on making her way back” (McEwan, 160). This description is a reference to Briony’s younger self, as she describes her path to delivering false testimony.

However, her metaphor can also be applied to her novel as a whole, as Briony “sets out to use fiction to make amends for the damage fiction induced her to cause.”³¹ McEwan shows how Briony’s novel is another “labyrinth of her own construction,” as its three parts are shaped to justify fiction as a medium through which she can atone. Part One shows fiction’s role in Briony’s devastating misinterpretation, while Parts Two and Three display the medium’s constructive use in tragic circumstances. *Atonement* eventually draws the curtains of a puppet-master at work—Briony plays God to craft a tale of love, war, and redemption, while McEwan reveals her fundamental humanity—Briony’s story essentially atones for the crimes she commits to write it.

As Briony chronicles the events leading to her false testimony, McEwan shows how her narrative is constructed to intertwine her development as a writer with the tale she tells. Appropriately, Briony’s novel begins with her piece of writing, “The Trials of Arabella;” a play that adheres to classic fairytale structure and its teenage playwright’s “passion for tidiness” (McEwan, 7). Briony’s active imagination entertains her in the Tallis’ countryside estate, as she recognizes the power of her words to “cast a narrative spell” and gain the affection of her audience, namely, her immediate family (McEwan, 7). Brian Finney writes, “The point is that we meet an instance of Briony’s literary imagination before we get to know her as a personality. She is an author first and a girl

³¹ Brian Finney, “Briony’s Stand Against Oblivion: the Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*,” Journal of Modern Literature (2004), 70.

on the verge of adolescence second.”³² Briony’s fairytale beginnings are imperative, as the failure of her play sparks pivotal events, but more significantly, shapes the young girl’s dramatic outlook. Briony deliberately infuses her narrative with such childish, theatrical notions to convey this effect. When her cousin Lola decides she wants to play Arabella, Briony’s world “falls to pieces” and her inner-monologue is likewise melodramatic, “the misery of the inevitable clouding her thoughts” as “she *was* Arabella” (McEwan, 13). McEwan shows how Briony’s application of her playwright’s perspective is unreliable, as it serves to foreshadow the danger of her fictional lens.

Briony’s narrative continues to link events relevant to her crime with the advent of her writer’s perception. The young girl witnesses an interaction between the two lovers of the text, her sister Cecilia, and the housekeeper’s son Robbie, that doesn’t fit into her fairytale framework: “The sequence was illogical—the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal” (McEwan, 37). Briony expresses excitement about the “fountain” scene, not its romantic implications, but rather, its literary ones. She writes of her eyes opening to a new, “adult world in which frogs did not address princesses,” which inspires her as an author to “write the scene three times over, from three different points of view” (McEwan, 37-8). McEwan emphasizes Briony’s changed perspective, viewing life not only as a source of material, but one that can be reinterpreted to serve a narrative purpose. As Cecilia’s wet spot on the ground or “evidence” of the scene disappears, to Briony, “the truth becomes as ghostly as invention” (McEwan, 39). Instead of focusing on Robbie and Cecilia’s bizarre behavior,

³² Brian Finney, "Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: the Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*," Journal of Modern Literature (2004), 70.

Briony highlights the “fictional” nature of evidence, setting up the medium’s role in her forthcoming perjury.

The novelist shows how adolescent Briony’s turning point as a writer influences her interaction with the outside world. She is no longer content to rely on her imagination to assuage her isolation in the Tallis’ home; instead, Briony wants to be part of the drama all around her. The young writer expresses this frustration physically, tearing down her “Arabella” poster and slashing nettles at the “shallowness” of her play and “the hopelessness of pretending” (McEwan, 70). Briony writes, “She would simply wait on the bridge, calm and obstinate, until events, real events, not her own fantasies, rose to her challenge and, dispelled her insignificance” (McEwan, 72). McEwan draws attention to the writer’s agenda with her syntax: the repetition of “real events, not her own fantasies” paradoxically emphasizes their artificiality, not their reality, and provides the foundation for Briony’s distorted and insidious fantasy. Thus as Briony depicts herself ready to enter the story, low and behold, real life “dispels her insignificance,” fueling her flawed literary journey, impelled by Robbie’s handing her a private letter to deliver to Cecilia. As Briony’s narrative supports her youthful imagination with “real” events, McEwan demonstrates the unreliability of this structure.

Furthermore, McEwan illustrates how Briony’s overemphasis of this moment is based on prior knowledge of the letter’s dramatic quality. She quickly integrates it into the story that’s coming together in her mind: “with the letter something elemental, brutal, perhaps even criminal had been introduced” (McEwan, 107). Again McEwan draws attention to Briony’s heavy-handed repetition, as she seeks to convey the letter’s symbolic significance—the act of her story *handed* to her. Briony thinks, actually

“writing a story was hopeless when such chaotic forces were happening all around her” and McEwan shows how her narrative is constructed to this end—life seems to fall into line with her imagined story. The novelist depicts her younger self framing each subsequent event as part of Robbie’s villainous turn. After Briony reads his vulgar letter, Lola describes him as a “maniac,” and shortly thereafter, she walks into the library to see Robbie pressing Cecilia against the wall, a “scene so entirely a realization of her worst fears” (McEwan, 142). As Briony integrates these events into the story she crafts, McEwan shows the novelist’s intent to highlight her fictional framework, foreshadowing its disastrous effects.

Briony culminates this dangerous perspective at the climax of Part One with her misidentification of Robbie as Lola’s rapist. The first sentence of the chapter reads, “within the half-hour Briony would commit her crime,” and Briony’s resulting narrative exemplifies her writer’s outlook with every step (McEwan, 146). She conveys her younger self meandering through the forest, but instead of looking for her missing cousins, Briony thinks about “how she might describe” them floating in the pool (McEwan, 146). Her idle mind crafts people into characters: Robbie, “a villain in the form of an old family friend,” Cecilia, the intended victim; and Briony, “her protector” (McEwan, 148). Every sentence is littered with fictional jargon—“describe,” “conjure” “soliloquy”—as the medium is implicated in Briony’s chronicle of her transgression. She writes, “Precisely because the day had proved to her that she was not a child, and that she was now a figure in a richer story and had to prove herself worthy of it, she forced herself to walk on and cross the bridge” (McEwan, 153). At this instant, McEwan shows her

narrative agenda in full force: Briony motivates a seemingly innocuous action, crossing the bridge, with her participation in the larger story she writes.

Briony's narrative demonstrates her relationship to fiction progressed to the point where her writing and life are fused beyond recognition. This is fully realized at the precise moment Briony commits her crime, saying of Robbie after Lola's assault, "She had no doubt. She could describe him. There was nothing she could not describe" (McEwan, 156). Again, Briony's word choice vividly testifies to the writer's perspective she's fostered throughout the day's events. Likewise, her corresponding fictitious plot justifies Robbie's presence at the crime scene, "Everything connected. It was her own discovery. It was her story" (McEwan, 156). She says of her testimony, "within this sensitively created space she was able to build and shape her narrative in her own words and establish the key facts" (McEwan, 169). Briony's phrase "build and shape her narrative" applies rhetorical terms to her false evidence, explicitly linking the two. The novelist frames events through a writer's mentality that spirals out of control, beginning as innocent child's play and ending as life-altering testimony.

McEwan shows how this notion is supplemented by Briony's liberties with omniscient perspective, as she depicts other characters projecting illusory frameworks on their own realities. As Briony writes from her mother's point of view, Emily Tallis rationalizes the "fiction" of her marriage, given her husband's absence from the household. She thinks, "Even being lied to constantly, though hardly like love, was sustained attention; he must care about her to fabricate so elaborately and over such a long stretch of time" (McEwan, 139). When Cecilia sees Robbie rolling a cigarette outside, Briony portrays her sister's made-up reason to venture towards him, "The place

to go for water was the kitchen, but...it surely made more sense to go outside and fill the vase at the fountain.”³³ Furthermore, she uses familiar “story” jargon in characters’ fantasies to echo her own fictional constructs. She writes as Robbie confidently strides to the Tallis’ dinner party, “There was a story he was plotting with himself as the hero;” a narrative shaped by his newly discovered desire for Cecilia (McEwan, 80). Juxtaposing these leaps of logic as she writes about her own relationship to fiction, McEwan illustrates Briony’s aim to associate the medium with her family’s delusions as well.

McEwan mirrors Briony’s narrative agenda by displaying fiction’s pervasiveness in the world of the English countryside. *Atonement*’s beginning, “The Trials of Arabella,” also sets up the Tallis’ estate as a larger “theatrical” setting, one where each person plays a part. At the family’s dinner party, Briony’s brother Leon jokes, “On a cooler day we’d be in the library watching the theatricals;” McEwan plays with this ironic notion by making it true, as Robbie and Cecilia had, minutes before, engaged in sexual intercourse against the bookshelves. McEwan also infuses this section with references to literature and theatre; Robbie quotes a line from *Twelfth Night*, Cecilia reads *Clarissa*. As Brian Finney writes, “McEwan’s enduring concern with the act of narration in *Atonement* surfaces equally in his frequent use of intertextuality.”³⁴ Briony’s Part One is crafted to intertwine her perjury and relationship to fictions of all sorts, and McEwan’s literary allusions highlight this strategy, as well as foreshadow his later metafictional analysis.

Part Two continues Briony’s atonement several years into the future, as she writes from the perspective of the man she wronged: Robbie as a soldier retreating to Dunkirk.

³⁴ Brian Finney, “Briony’s Stand Against Oblivion: the Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* (2004), 72.

If Briony's previous section was organized to show the problematic aspects of a writer's mind, the following one redeems its creative faculty. McEwan draws attention to Briony's choice to reconstruct, in narrative form, aspects of the man she ruined by another narrative, her false testimony. The writer wields her rhetorical power to capture the full weight of life as a soldier, conveying Robbie's perception in gritty detail: "The leg was twenty feet up, wedged in the first forking of the trunk, bare, severed cleanly above the knee" depicting the soldier's harsh, physical reality (McEwan, 210). Once marred by Briony's adolescent imagination, this rendering of Robbie demonstrates the strength of his character. She illustrates his leadership role through other soldiers' perspectives, "They wouldn't go without him—he was their lucky ticket" (McEwan 222). She also conveys Robbie's compassion and mental agility as the soldier risks his life to save a mother and son during a Stuka bombing: "He had the boy under his arm and was trying to pull the woman to her feet" (McEwan 222). As Briony ascribes the characteristics to Robbie as a soldier she denied him as a witness, McEwan shows how this section represents a second chance for fiction as well.

Briony's chronicle of Robbie stylistically reflects this agenda: little is romanticized as her narrative seeks to convey the tumultuous world of warfare. The writer's syntax has a rhythm that evokes the march of a soldier, "His mouth and nose and ears were filled with dirt," and her diction illustrates the physical effects of battle, "Scabs of dried blood molded to his upper lip came away satisfyingly whole" (McEwan, 223, 241). Briony's Dunkirk narrative presents a deliberate foil to the artificial English countryside, as her depictions of the war zone starkly contrast the theatrical, colorful prose of Part One.

“There was more confusion ahead, more shouting. An armored column was forcing its way into against the forward press of traffic, soldiers and refugees, The crowd parted reluctantly. People squeezed into the gaps between abandoned vehicles or against shattered walls and doorways” (McEwan, 210).

McEwan points the reader to Briony’s action-packed language, with verbs like “shouting,” “forcing,” and “squeezed” indicative of warfare’s inherent disarray. As Briony portrays Robbie skirting explosives and shuddering at severed limbs, McEwan hints at her aim to counter the destructive nature of fiction—here, fiction vividly encompasses the destructive nature of war.

Likewise, Briony uses rhetorical devices to convey Robbie’s mental debilitation as a consequence of life in prison and on the western front. However, McEwan shows the logic underlying Briony’s narrative: her writer’s mindset subject Robbie to these places, therefore she must aptly depict their devastating effects. She writes of Robbie’s fraught psychological state, “Periodically, something slipped. Some everyday principle of continuity, the humdrum element that told him where he was in his own story, faded from his use, abandoning him to a waking dream in which there were thoughts, but no sense of who was having them” (McEwan, 232). Yet, Briony doesn’t just inform the reader of Robbie’s confusion, his mental slips are conveyed through her literary devices. Briony relies on internal focalization to capture Robbie’s logical distortion: “he was certain now that if they did not capture the pig they would never get home” and conveys his fellow soldier’s confused reaction, “There’s something not right with you, guv’nor” (McEwan, 240). She depicts Robbie’s stream of consciousness stemming from his wrongful conviction, “You tried to help us. You couldn’t carry us across the field. You carried the twins, but not us, no. No you are not guilty. No” (McEwan, 243). The reader learns he speaks, and Briony uses free indirect discourse to convey Robbie’s psychological chaos,

betraying the temporal and spatial breakdown in his reasoning. Briony communicates more than Robbie's story to the reader, using her creative ability to show the forces of destruction on his mind.

As Briony portrays Robbie's traumatic war experience, McEwan exposes another latent purpose of her narrative, exhibiting the medium's capacity to sustain him and other soldiers. She depicts the necessity to see light at the end of the tunnel, characterizing thoughts of the collective group, "When the wounded were screaming, you dreamed of sharing a little house somewhere, of an ordinary life, a family line, connections" (McEwan, 227). Briony illustrates the soldiers' "writing" their post-war lives, demonstrating how fiction allows them to put one foot in front of the other. Even though their dreams of "ordinary life" are imaginative constructs, Briony lauds the role of fantasy in keeping the men sane. Furthermore, she echoes the soldiers' thirst for possibility and hope with her own metaphorical imagery: "the sky was beginning to clear a little and glowed like a promise" (McEwan, 181). Briony relies on literary devices to underline fiction's role in buoying the soldiers, while McEwan directs the reader's attention to her use of them.

Briony weaves her sister's letters to Robbie throughout Part Two, and the arrangement of her narrative mirrors Cecilia's presence in Robbie's mind. This structure allows Briony to cast fiction in an optimistic light, as she exemplifies the role of writing in their relationship, "Robbie and Cecilia had been making love for years—by post" (McEwan, 193). The soldier relies on Cecilia's language to stay sane, "He knew these last lines by heart and mouthed them now in the darkness. My reason for life" (McEwan, 197). Memories of Cecilia flit through Robbie's consciousness, "They pursued him, the

old themes. Here it was again, his only meeting with her,” and Briony’s flexes her rhetorical muscle, immediately conveying this “meeting” (McEwan, 191). Robbie’s attachment to Cecilia’s letters is also conveyed syntactically, as his thoughts are punctuated by her phrases, “Here there were wooded valleys, streams, sunlight on the poplars which they could not take away unless they killed him. And there was hope. *I’ll wait for you. Come back*” (McEwan, 190). Robbie’s postcard of Wiltshire, their planned vacation home, coupled with Cecilia’s written promises, provide a concrete foundation for the fantasies of his future life. Perhaps most significantly, Briony illustrates how Cecilia’s letters allow Robbie to preserve a version of himself—the man he imagines her waiting for.

“He could become again the man who had once crossed a Surrey park at dusk in his best suit, swaggering on the promise of life, who had entered the house and with the clarity of passion made love to Cecilia—no, let him rescue the word from the corporals, they had fucked while others sipped their cocktails on the terrace. The story could resume, the one he that had been planning on that evening walk” (McEwan, 213).

However, in this quotation, McEwan draws attention to glaring fictional aspects of Robbie’s self-perception as imagined by Briony. Robbie’s image of himself is proven impossible within the context of this passage, as he interrupts his fantasy of “the man he was” with an interjection from the man he’s already become, borrowing expletives from army corporals. Furthermore, the word “story” echoes the illusory nature of Robbie’s past fantasies, given his immediate arrest after “that evening walk.” Finally, sadly, his dream life with Cecilia will remain exactly that—he never returns home from war.

Yet, Briony constructs her narrative to prove the necessity for Robbie to sustain these illusions, even as they are made apparent. She shows how such frameworks give soldiers hope for the future, but also, a vehicle to survive the present. Robbie is able to

detach from his current circumstances by viewing them through a writer's lens: "He would lose himself in thoughts of her and plan his next letter, refining the phrases, trying to find comedy in the dullness" (198). This echoes Briony's similar mentality, a once destructive thought-process now offering Robbie mental reprieve. Furthermore, Briony applies this concept to other forms of writing, as Robbie recites a poem on a tiring march, "He had comfort in a pretense, and a rhythm at least for his feet. He walked/across/the land/until/he came/to the sea. A hexameter. Five iambs and an anapest was the beat he tramped to now" (McEwan, 206). McEwan shows how Briony literally exhibits the poetry of survival, as Robbie's footsteps correspond to the poem's feet. Thus, Part Two conveys Robbie's story, as well as the productive role of "story" within it.

Soldiers rely on fiction as a matter of survival on several occasions, and McEwan draws attention to Briony's hand behind these constructions. Robbie travels with two other corporals, Mace and Nettle, and the three men concoct narratives to evade potentially harmful situations. When a lone general tries to include them in a perilous mission, Mace invents a fictional order to dodge certain death: "Proceed at haste and speed and celerity, without delay, diversion or divagation to Dunkirk." (McEwan, 207). The soldiers' subsequently mock each other's diction, "Divigation was nice," "He swallowed a fucking dictionary," and the breakdown of their invented tale mirrors the similarly constructed Briony's, as McEwan shows how fiction is cast in a positive light throughout this section.

The author exposes the motives behind Briony's narrative technique and thus, the fiction of her account; however, his authorial choices emphasize the surrealistic nature of warfare itself. Robbie's repeated sighting of a boy's leg in a tree is one example of this,

as the pajama-wearing limb is disturbingly surreal. However, the unreal atmosphere of war is more patently illustrated by McEwan's choice to place Dunkirk as Robbie's final destination. Dunkirk exists as a utopia to the soldiers en route; Robbie describes it as, "a carnival or sports event on which they were all converging" (McEwan, 227). This illusion drives the men to reach the place, but ironically, its reality is not far from the fiction, as the abandoned town is filled with men playacting everyday life: "Off to the east was a football game, and from the same direction came the feeble sound of a hymn being sung in unison" (McEwan, 234). A merry-go-round painted red, white, and blue, epitomizes the dreamlike scene, as McEwan's Dunkirk echoes the unimaginable sights that redefine reality in war.

Part Three concerns itself with war's casualties, as the novel's perspective returns to Briony, now a nurse in World War II London. Five years have passed since Briony's perjured testimony, and she has chosen to forgo her Oxford education and provide service to the war relief effort instead. In contrast to Part Two, Briony's regimented world leaves little room for imagination. She writes of the strict, physical routine she was subject to as a nurse-in-training, "The everyday practice of boiling, scrubbing, buffing and wiping became the badge of the students' professional pride, to which all personal comfort must be sacrificed" (McEwan, 256). As Briony narrates her daily life as a nurse, she emphasizes her visceral, physical attempt at atonement, preparing the reader for her eventual return to fiction when it fails her.

Briony's story revolves around the minutiae of hospital life, yet McEwan highlights the rhetorical separation of "nurse" Briony from her childhood self. Part One's introduction of Briony as a character, relishing her mother's artistic praise, is contrasted

by the opening of Part Three, as she's admonished by a second "mother" figure. This section introduces Sister Marjorie Drummond, a harsh authority to whom Briony "lived in fear" of making mistakes (McEwan, 252). She writes, "Praise was unheard of. The best one could hope for was indifference," and Briony parallels these women to convey her own change, from self-indulgent to self-loathing (McEwan, 252). This shift is also conveyed by Briony's characterization of her past persona; she reads an etiquette handbook instead of literature, chooses to clean soiled linens instead of immersing herself in collegiate life. McEwan shows how Briony's depiction of herself as a nurse, down to what she wore, diverges from the dramatic, attention-starved personality of her youth: "The uniform, like all uniforms, eroded identity" (McEwan, 259). Even Briony's first name is stripped from her, as Sister Drummond insists the nurses refer to themselves by last name, and "Nurse Tallis" is the nominal representation of her new identity.

Furthermore, Briony stylistically conveys her psychological conversion along with her physical penance. Her unemotional, routine-oriented self is mirrored by the novel's syntax, as Briony lists her daily duties as a nurse: "unpacked, inventoried, stowed—dressings, kidneys bowls, hypodermics" (McEwan, 256). The lack of adjectives is intentional, as the writer seeks to eliminate imaginative flair from her perspective, even mocking emotion itself; "It seemed theatrical to Briony, and ridiculous, grown young women tearful for their mothers" (McEwan, 261). The negative connotation of the word "theatrical" emphasizes the contrast between Parts One and Three, where "villains" and "scenes" are notably absent from Briony's rhetoric. Although Briony's life as a nurse has vast potential for melodrama, McEwan draws the reader's attention to the novelist's matter-of-fact descriptions: "She was at the feet end. The soldier had sergeant's stripes.

He was without his boots and his bluish toes stank” (McEwan, 274). This inner-monologue exhibits Nurse Tallis’s maturation as she confronts unsavory tasks; but even here, Briony is at the authorial helm, employing rhetorical devices to achieve this effect.

Briony’s identity as a writer is influenced by her role as a nurse, and this change is conveyed by formal elements within the narrative. Nurse Tallis’ writing is now subject to strict rules: “It was not permitted to use pen and ink in bed. She began her journal at the end of the first day of preliminary training, and managed at least ten minutes most nights before lights out” (McEwan, 263). Briony is at the mercy of her routine, and McEwan highlights how she conveys this stylistically with passive voice: “It was not permitted.” Furthermore, this quotation is dominated by regulatory language such as “preliminary training” and “lights out,” emphasizing the restrictions on her imagination along with her activity. Nurse Tallis preserves her identity as a writer, “her true self, secretly hoarded, quietly accumulating,” yet it’s subjugated to her responsibilities in the ward (McEwan, 264). Briony uses rhetorical devices to convey her controlled mentality, but McEwan points out that her “attempt” to close herself to fiction, is in itself, fictional.

Briony hammers home the demands of nursing for another purpose, to illustrate its futility in satisfying her atonement. Descriptions of Briony’s daily chores are constantly tied to her unresolved emotions, “She emptied and sluiced the bedpans, swept and polished floors, fetched and carried---and was delivered from introspection” (McEwan, 260). The novelist even transparently addresses this dynamic, “Physical discomfort helped close down Briony’s mental horizons” (McEwan, 259). However, these overwritten, recurring statements serve Briony’s agenda, as she justifies her fictional atonement by amplifying her attempt at a labor-intensive one. Nurse Tallis

subsequently “discovers” the hopelessness of projecting past sins, “All she wanted to do was work, then bathe and sleep until it was time to work again. But it was all useless, she knew” (McEwan, 269). Thus, as Briony takes pains to show her tactile immersion, McEwan reveals her ulterior motive: paradoxically illustrating her active atonement to show the necessity of her fictional one.

Thus, Briony admits to writing’s pervasiveness in her mind, as well as the damage it caused her to inflict. The novelist reflects in hindsight: “at a time when she was cut off from everything she new—family, home, friends—writing was the thread of continuity. It was what she had always done” (McEwan, 254). Likewise, Briony cannot truly escape the mistakes of her younger self, as fellow nurse, “Fiona talked of her adored little brother and the clever thing he had said at dinner, while Briony pretended to listen and thought about Robbie” (McEwan, 271). McEwan highlights the imaginary nature of Briony’s escape from her writerly self, infusing her narrative with literary allusions of his own, as like Lady Macbeth, Briony is depicted “washing her hands a dozen times a day” (McEwan, 259). McEwan reminds us that “Nurse Tallis” is merely a character, as Briony is both unable and unwilling to part with fictional constructs that have, for better or worse, always shaped her life.

The rest of this section is thereby constructed to show Briony’s reintegration of fiction and life, but also, to justify the novelist’s own “fiction” within her novel. This dynamic is illustrated by Briony’s interaction with a dying patient, Luc Cornet. McEwan shows how the structure of this mini-narrative is framed to show the advantageous role imagination can play, even in a tragedy laden setting. The scene begins with Briony tending to an injured man who believes he knows her, and she indulges him: “There was

such friendliness and charm in his eyes, such boyish eagerness to engage her, that she could only go along” (McEwan, 288). But when the conversation progresses from answering questions to corroborating a false tale, Briony resists, “She thought it wasn’t right to lead him on. ‘I’ve never been to Millau,’” Briony insists on correcting Luc’s story, I want to tell you where you are. You’re not in Paris,” until he asks her to loosen his bandages and she complies (McEwan, 289). Upon seeing that Luc is on the verge of death, Briony feels ashamed, and when he asks if she likes his croissants she joins in the fiction, replying “The best in Millau” (McEwan, 291). The structure of this interaction, as well as its placement in the narrative, lauds the virtues of storytelling as it brings happiness to a dying man. Furthermore, McEwan highlights this narrative’s familiar pattern, as it parallels Briony’s relationship to fiction and sets up the novelist’s forthcoming application of it to her own work.

Immediately after this experience, Briony’s opens a rejection letter from *Horizon* magazine that shapes her concept of fiction and herself as a writer. Briony’s piece, *Two Figures at a Fountain*, was turned down by the literary magazine for its lack of “forward movement,” as the editor says, “Your most sophisticated readers...retain a childlike desire to be told a story” (McEwan, 296). This furnishes Briony with a new outlook on writing, as she considers the advantages of fusing stylized prose and gripping action. The editor even offers a suggestion to how Briony might move the plot along, “Might she come between them in some disastrous fashion? Or bring them closer, either by design or by accident?” (McEwan, 296). Given its real-life implications, this criticism directly impacts Briony’s self-perception, and the thick line Nurse Tallis had drawn between fiction and life is irreconcilably blurred. She thinks, “The evasions of her little novel were

exactly those of her life. Everything she did not wish to confront was also missing from her novella—and was necessary to it. What was she to do now? It was not the backbone of the story she lacked. It was backbone” (McEwan, 302). As Briony’s new ideas about writing seep into her perception, McEwan exposes the novelist’s choice to project this mentality on the grievances she’s caused. She thinks, “the renewed contact with all the irreparable damage did not dim this heightened perception...it gave an urgency to her plans” (McEwan, 298). The novelist purposefully juxtaposes *Horizon’s* letter and Briony’s “renewed contact” with her crime, as Briony’s adherence to this literary criticism validates her atonement’s fabricated plot.

Briony’s attendance at Lola and Marshall’s wedding is the final precursor to, and likewise rationalization of, the novelist’s choice to “write” her wrongs and fictionalize Robbie and Cecilia’s reunion. The return of Briony’s dramatic mindset is exemplified as she describes the wedding: “She had been imagining the scene of a crime, a gothic cathedral, whose flamboyant vaulting would be flooded with brazen light of scarlet indigo from a stained-glass backdrop of lurid suffering” (McEwan, 304). McEwan illustrates the novelist’s ironic parallel of the two “crime scenes,” as Briony once again witnesses a turning point in Lola’s life. However, Briony’s narrative construction highlights an important distinction between the two episodes. She weaves wedding vows throughout the scene, contrasting the public contract of Lola’s marriage with the secret of her rape, as Briony reveals Marshall to be both Lola’s betrothed *and* her rapist. However, as Briony goes to state this publicly, she realizes amidst Lola and Marshall’s vows that her once powerful “testimony,” is at this juncture, insignificant:

“Was 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 center of the aisle, and setting out her reasons, her just causes, in a defiant untrembling voice...The sentence had already been served. The debt was paid. The verdict stood. She remained in her seat with her accelerating heart and sweaty palms, and humbly inclined her head” (McEwan, 307).

Briony stands to speak, but the reality of her situation slaps her in the face, and only then does the novelist reveal her rise is an illusion. With this scene, Briony conveys the futility of verbal action, as the sentence of her original crime has “already been served.” The novelist adds a final point to her underlying argument: expressing “real-life” is not a viable option for her atonement. Likewise, this passage mirrors the novelist own “trick of truth,” as she subsequently conveys an interaction that doesn’t exist. Briony veers away from the novel’s referent truth to create a more promising one, as fiction is the sole means through which she can repair the damage she’s caused. Briony figuratively conveys this shift in her narrative, “Perhaps the Briony who was walking in the direction of Balham was the imagined or ghostly persona,” evoking Part One’s “ghostly” evidence, as the novelist herself moves towards the imagined with the following scene of the two lovers. (McEwan, 309).

Briony’s illusory confrontation with Robbie and Cecilia is the driving force behind her entire novel. She’s conveyed the devastating merger of fiction and life, redeemed the medium’s capacity to sustain individuals, and finally, shown her attempt to atone for her crime outside of fictional form—only to reiterate its impossibility. Briony’s novel depicts the perjury of her younger self, but seeks to justify her later one as an aging writer, manipulating the medium to serve her self-interest. She defends herself in the epilogue, “Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love?” and her atonement endows them with this fate (McEwan, 350). As one reexamines

the lovers' "meeting" upon knowing its falsity, Briony's narrative agenda and authorial control become patently evident. Ironically, she commits the same crime her novel supposedly atones for: "re-writing" the truth with her own version of events.

Briony leaves Lola and Marshall's wedding "lacking the courage of a confrontation" yet suddenly appears on Cecilia's doorstep. The discrepancy between Briony's "lack of courage" and her subsequent action supports the novelist's agenda—this confrontation can only take place on paper (McEwan, 309). Cecilia resentfully lets her sister in and Briony conveys her own apprehension: "She thought about this conversation many times, like a child anticipating a beating" (McEwan, 322). With the word "thought," McEwan reminds the reader of Briony's deliberate, intellectual designs. He shows how Briony can never feel the full impact of this narrative "beating," by constantly alluding to its hollow, illusory nature. This point is emphasized by Briony's reaction to Robbie's anger, "Now it was happening at last, and it was as if she wasn't quite here. She was watching from far away and she was numb. But she knew his words would hurt her later" (McEwan, 322). McEwan links Briony's "mental" detachment with her physical one, as she figuratively drifts off into space, he reminds the reader that she is literally not there.

The author draws attention to other illusions in the fictional space Briony's created, as she describes the décor of Cecilia's house, "the walls were papered with a design of pale vertical stripes, like a boy's pajamas" (McEwan, 316). Briony's metaphor evokes a similar image in Part Two—a boy's severed leg in a tree—also wearing striped pajamas. Ironically, its prior reference conveyed the surreal nature of warfare, while in Cecilia's house, the same vertical stripes illustrate domesticity. The recycling of this

image is no accident; it shows Briony's creativity but also the limits of her craft, as she can only construct this scene out of "recycled" materials. She relies on a similar tactic in representing her sister's speech: "With a tenderness that Briony remembered from years ago, waking in the night, Cecilia said, 'Come back...Robbie, come back.'" (McEwan, 324). Again, McEwan foreshadows Briony's fiction-within-a-fiction, as he infuses her rendering with recurring images and words.

In a similar vein, McEwan calls attention to the novelist's fastidious arrangement of the scene. Briony walks through her sister's house, absorbing the contents of the kitchen table, "On it was a jam jar of blue flowers...and a full ashtray, and a pile of books. At the bottom were *Gray's Anatomy* and a collected Shakespeare" (McEwan, 316). Briony literally decorates Robbie and Cecilia's apartment with their love story, as each of these artifacts plays an important role in bringing them together. Likewise, a reprimand by Cecilia also reveals Briony's rhetorical control: "Her sister's confirmation of her crime was terrible to hear. But the perspective was unfamiliar. Weak, stupid, confused, cowardly, evasive—she had hated herself for everything she had been, but she never thought of herself as a liar" (McEwan, 308). Briony syntactically constructs Cecilia's insult to pit flaws she recognizes against those she doesn't, namely "herself as a liar." However, given her construction of the scene, McEwan illustrates the accusation's inherent flaw, as Cecilia's "shocking" insult is Briony's brainchild, and positioned "just so" to argue her lack of destructive intent throughout the crime.

Briony's agency, building a scene she claims merely to describe, is also evident through its highly idealized elements. The couple is described with a glowing hue; Cecilia "more beautiful than Briony had remembered her," and Robbie, "chin raised like

an old fashioned boxer,” a broken man who’s spirit was salvaged by love (McEwan, 313, 322). Likewise, Robbie’s assignment to Briony clearly emerges out of this dreamlike stance, “In this letter you’ll put in absolutely everything that you think is relevant. Everything that led up to you saying you saw me by the lake. And why, even though you were uncertain, you stuck to your story in the months leading up to my trial. It needs to be a long letter” (McEwan, 326). This, not coincidentally, is exactly the shape Briony’s atonement takes, and McEwan denotes the unrealistic form of Robbie’s “assignment,” as it puts equal precedence on the motivation behind Briony’s crime as her ability to correct it. Incidentally, she fulfills this invented task, as her novel is “everything she thinks is relevant,” which, to Briony, has always included both fiction and reality. She ends her story with the promise of Robbie and Cecilia’s love, “Neither Briony or the war had destroyed it” (McEwan, 330). However, this airy phrase is truly as weightless as the paper it’s written on, as Briony’s “happy ending” only exists in narrative form.

In the epilogue that follows, the lovers’ real-life fates are revealed: Robbie and Cecilia died before they could ever rekindle their affair. With this section, McEwan takes the authorial reins from Briony’s hands, and the text shifts from her third-person narrative to a revealing, first-person epilogue. In it, McEwan introduces *Atonement’s* last version of Briony, narrating the inner-monologue of the 77-year-old novelist. However, this Briony may strike readers as familiar, given it’s her narrative voice that has shaped the novel’s previous three sections. Unlike the other writer-narrators, Briony’s unreliable lens is only visible through the fiction she creates, at least, until McEwan’s final chapter. One is then privy to Briony’s private thoughts as she reflects on her life as a novelist. She admits to her own shortcomings as a writer, “I’ve always liked to make a tidy finish,”

including her propensity to falsify events, “A convenient distortion, and the least of my offenses against veracity” (McEwan, 334-336). As Briony dryly considers her authorial weaknesses, it seems as though a life of writing has provided her with an awareness of the medium’s pitfalls.

However, McEwan illustrates that although Briony recognizes her fallibility—“I count myself an unreliable witness”—she still cannot abandon the fictional constructs that have always shaped her perception (McEwan, 338). Writing doesn’t cause Briony to suffer like Dowell or provide her with the optimism of Iris, but instead, traps her in an authorial mindset she can’t help but apply to real life. Briony reveals her recent diagnosis of vascular dementia, a disease that will cause her to “face an incoming tide of forgetting, and then oblivion” (McEwan, 350). This impels her choice to fictionalize the lovers’ reunion in her final draft, although she claims it’s for her readers’ sake as well, “I couldn’t do it to them” (McEwan, 350). However, similar to Iris and Sabrina, Briony’s narrative will not reach its intended reader until after she’s dead, yet unlike Iris, the truth of her story depends upon its absorption by others, “When I am dead, and the Marshalls are dead, and the novel is finally published, we will only exist as my inventions” (McEwan, 350).

Given her atonement’s inability to have any tangible effect on those involved, and her readers’ ignorance to its real-life implications, Briony writes, fundamentally, for herself. She preserves the fairytale version of her story because it’s in her power to do so: “I like to think that it isn’t weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end” (McEwan, 351). Thus, in contrast to both Iris and Dowell, Briony’s narrative “stand” cannot make

an impact outside of the fictional universe in which it's contained. She describes a novelist's "godlike" power, but this agency is inherently fictional, because ultimately, McEwan shows how Briony's fiction governs her. She yields once again to the temptation to craft life in narrative form, re-imagining her birthday party with Robbie and Cecilia present, saying, "It's not impossible" (McEwan, 350). These powerful final pages convey the tragedy of Briony's perspective, as the writer faces a mentality beyond her control, but McEwan shows how she's already lost it, reverting to fiction once again to grant herself a "happy ending." The final words of the novel, "But now I must sleep," remind us that even an imagination as vivid as Briony's cannot manipulate the most elemental facet of life: her own death.

But is McEwan's novel so different from Briony's own? His metafiction relies on the same level of immersion as her novel: just as Briony's readers must be completely absorbed by the lovers' tale, so must we be with her story as a writer. McEwan intends for the reader to be so fully engrossed in *Atonement* that, only when he or she sets down the finished book (or throws it across a room) do the weighty implications of Briony's authorship sink in. Then, frantically flipping through the pages, lavishly constructed images and scenes, the reader retraces the clues pointing to her conscious construction of events we have taken to be "real." If McEwan merely wanted to expose Briony as the conniving puppet-master, he would have written a different *Atonement*, figuratively shouting from the rooftops, "look, she's making it up!" The novel is thus a hologram: turn it one way and Briony's construction is patently evident, but twist it again, and every facet pulls the reader into Robbie and Cecilia's near-tragic tale. Because he too is a

puppet-master with an agenda, one that involves walking the tightrope between preserving Briony's fantasy and deconstructing it, the punch of his ending involves keeping his reader in the dark.

However, just as McEwan instigates a rash of anger with this final blow, he similarly rewards those who have traced Briony's construction throughout the narrative. By embedding nearly the entirety of Briony's story within the work, he ultimately forces the reader to embrace the power of its craftsmanship, whichever way the novel is turned. As the author begins and ends *Atonement* with "The Trials of Arabella," McEwan calls attention to his own well-rounded text, his inclination towards "a tidy finish." He too has a "controlling demon" and like Briony, an agenda with which he writes. However, McEwan proves these underlying goals are essential to the essence of a novel, as he enchants the reader with his artistic prose, but truly makes an impact with the force of his message. On the one hand, he completely shatters the fictional enterprise, calling every facet of narrative form into question. But on the other, he reminds the reader of its tremendous power: crafting imagined worlds, engendering complex dialogue, and frequently, inspiring real-life change. As Briony's revelation shakes the integrity of fiction, McEwan argues the medium needs to be actively questioned, but more so, infinitely preserved.

Conclusion

Since the inception of the term, analysis of the unreliable narrator has often been driven by a fundamental paradox: why would an author communicate any story through an untrustworthy lens? As I explored possible motives behind this rhetorical choice, I found a pattern emerging in both modernist and contemporary texts. The stories told by unreliable narrators only skim the surface of the *story* they tell—their narratives are part of a larger work of metafiction that critically examines the act of writing itself. Like most novelists, these authors seek to capture the human condition, but specifically, the condition of those humans immersed in the creative process. This thesis focuses on the implications of writing to synthesize past experiences, as each novel traces a writer-narrator engaged in the task.

How does an author direct the reader's attention to an unreliable narrator in the first place? Aren't we conditioned to assume that the voice imparting a fictional world is one to be believed; that such trust is imperative to the story's success? In these texts, elements of plot, imagery, and language are not merely engineered to bring an imagined universe to life. Instead, authors like McEwan, Atwood, and Ford deliberately show the human being at work, exposing each writer's underlying aims. The narrators themselves are aware of their own motivations to varying degrees, while the implied authors direct the reader to their manifestation in narrative form. Dowell's idolization of Ashburnham, Iris's role as the "blind assassin," and Briony's choice to reunite the lovers are all examples of innate desires that drive each chronicle.

These metafictional authors are not merely concerned with why writer-narrators choose to write, but also how their current self-perception influences the stories they tell. As Dowell, Iris, and Briony delve into personal histories, issues of their present inform

their rhetorical choices. These works highlight the specious task of documenting past experiences from a retrospective lens, especially when this lens informs one's narrative technique. Briony finishes the "atonement" she started fifty-nine years ago, yet she knows before writing that facets of her account will be false. Thus, McEwan shows how her narrative is a product of her present circumstances: she apologizes for the sins of her art as well as herself. Dowell sits down to puzzle out his circumstances, and the writer-narrator's jumbled account holds a mirror to his confused mind. Iris Griffen is tormented by the attention Laura receives for *her* book, and Iris's present jealousy shapes reconstructions of the past. The authors depict writer-narrators' current mindsets as part of their accounts or shortly thereafter, to how these issues are brought to the point of crisis by the act of writing.

Distinguishing between an implied author's craftsmanship and the "work" of an unreliable narrator is a tenuous task: how do authors reveal their hand when they are writing with someone else's? However, closely examining the rhetorical and stylistic choices of each text brings the latent motivations of its writer-narrator to the fore. *The Good Soldier* and *The Blind Assassin* convey their protagonist's self-conscious struggle with the writing process, yet ironically, each narrator's unreliability is heightened as they embrace the agency and power of their authorial role. Dowell's reverence of Ashburnham is evidenced by a deliberate reframing of certain events, and Iris relies on passive voice to show her formerly suffocated identity. Briony has so fully embraced her "godlike omniscience" at the helm of *Atonement* that McEwan need only present her story as evidence of her unreliability, as the novel itself is a manifestation of her narrative agenda.

The authors' attitudes towards blending life and narration are exemplified by the position of the writer-narrator at the conclusion of each text. Dowell's fictional foray turns into a life sentence, as Ford renders him a farcical version of the "character" his narrative sought to preserve. Iris dies believing her memoir will fall into the hands of her granddaughter, and her optimistic outlook echoes Atwood's mantra, that "hope comes from the fact that people create." McEwan recognizes the need to declare something fictional or fact, but also the medium's power to render the argument futile. *Atonement* brilliantly captures both perspectives, showing fiction's prowess as well as its imperative distinction from life. Briony's novel remains as her memory fades into oblivion, yet her words cannot achieve their desired effect until those involved "only exist as her inventions." Her final thoughts of sleep metaphorically carry out her illness, as McEwan shows Briony unable to evade the consequences of real-life with her fiction.

Ultimately, each novel ends with its unreliable narrator cradling a necessary illusion, an invention that emerges out of his or her act of writing. Although Dowell's circumstances force him to face the undeniable artifice of fiction and life, he still ends his account with an interaction that preserves Ashburnham's illusory status as a "true gentleman." Iris will never know if her memoir had its desired effect, yet her daydream at the end of *The Blind Assassin* is a rhetorical self-fulfillment, as she believes she's left an important legacy to her future progeny. Some illusions prove necessary to be sustained; fictional notions can be beneficial and even essential to survival. McEwan repeatedly supports this conclusion with his novel—Robbie and Cecilia's vacation cottage, Briony's lie to a fatally wounded patient—yet he argues that even though fiction inevitably bleeds into life and vice versa, one must attempt to distinguish between the two. *Atonement's*

ending proves the tragic consequences of failing to do so with the illusions its writer-narrator knowingly fosters. As Briony considers the possibility of “willing” Robbie and Cecilia to her birthday party, McEwan depicts Briony’s final attempt to “play god,” ironically, to show she’s at the mercy of her own illusions.

In fact, all three texts illustrate how writers must walk the tightrope between manipulating and being manipulated by narrative form. Iris says, “sometimes it seems to me that it’s only my hand writing, not the rest of me; that my hand has taken on a life of its own” (Atwood, 373). Arguably, the act of writing itself is unreliable; as one imagines their words flitting across the page, a mental image is thereby shaped, plotted, and revamped. Consequently, this is the paradox at the core of metafiction: the writing process is at once our best and worst means of communication. This applies to the authors of these texts as well; Ford, Atwood, and McEwan rely on the very medium they question to make their argument. Each text analyzes the path of an unreliable narrator, yet are Dowell, Iris and Briony so different from their creators? They too rely on innately fictional constructs to access their material, Iris’s self-perception as the “blind assassin” propels her memoir, just as Atwood defends fiction by crafting a literary collage around it. *Atonement* supplements this notion as well; Briony believes she can only atone for her crime in narrative form, and McEwan shows the problem with this—in a fictional text. In laying bare the tenets of narrative form, these metafictional authors’ underlying agendas, like their writer-narrator’s, are too exposed.

This practice allows authors like Ford, Atwood, and McEwan to implicate the reader as part of the text, as we experience the power and limitations of the medium firsthand. As one navigates the temporal discontinuity of *The Good Soldier*, he or she

must piece together Dowell's disjointed narrative to make sense of the plot. However, this frustrating act is essential to Ford's novel, as Dowell supplements "fact" with his own invention the reader's struggle parallels the chaotic, disordered nature of his mind. Atwood weaves a cryptic love affair into Iris's memoir, diverting the reader's attention from her stifled past, and consequently, mirroring Iris's own escape of her suffocated life. *Atonement* traces a compelling crime from the English countryside into the chaos of war, inevitably immersing readers in the dense, provocative tale. But when Briony's hand is revealed, McEwan's reader is forcefully wrenched from lush images and artful prose to consider their emotional response to a fictional text that is...lying? This apparent paradox propelled my analysis from the start: how does one justify intense shock when an imaginary narrator proves to be unreliable?

This, inherently, is the phenomenon of fiction. I once tossed *Atonement* aside with inexplicable anger, and now, the thesis you hold is my personal fusion of life and narration. As the unreliable writer has ultimately been at the core of my analysis, it's only fitting that my writing process would mirror those I've intensely studied. I've channeled Dowell's confusion at analytical dead-ends, Iris's agency at "aha" moments, and Briony's desire to meticulously control every semantic detail. But I've also surprised myself in the process, and writing's capacity to unearth unexpected insights is, according to McEwan, the key to its creative power. Thus, if a thesis about unreliable narration can argue for fiction's greatest strengths, then perhaps this difficult, rewarding process has done the same for imagination's role in all types of writing.

Works Consulted

Primary sources:

Atwood, Margaret. The Blind Assassin. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Ford, Ford Madox. The Good Soldier. New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 1915.

McEwan, Ian. Atonement. New York: Anchor Books, 2002.

Secondary sources:

Armstrong, Paul B. The Challenge of Bewilderment: Understanding and Representation in James, Conrad, and Ford. Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1987.

Atwood, Margaret. Negotiating with the Dead: a Writer on Writing. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Bal, Mieke. Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984.

Bitterman, Joan. Ford Madox Ford and the Nouveau Roman : From the Unreliable Narrator to the Self-Conscious Creator. Diss. Univ. of Oregon, 1991.

Booth, Wayne C. The Rhetoric of Fiction. No. 2. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1983).

Childs, Peter, ed. The Fiction of Ian McEwan: a Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006.

Currie, Gregory. "Unreliability Refigured: Narrative in Literature and Film. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Vol.53, No.1. (1995) pp.19-29

Dvorak, Marta. "The Right Hand Writing and the Left Hand Erasing in Margaret Atwood's the Blind Assassin." Commonwealth Essays and Studies 25 (2002)

Finney, Brian. "Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: the Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's

- Atonement." Journal of Modern Literature (2004): 68-82.
- Ganzel, Dewey. "What the Letter Said: Fact and Inference in the Good Soldier." Journal of Modern Literature 11 (1984): 277-290.
- Hancock, Geoff. "Tightrope-Walking Over Niagra Falls." Margaret Atwood: Conversations. Ed. Earl G. Ingersoll. Ontario: Ontario Review Press, 1990. 191-220.
- Herman, David. "Story Logic in Conversational and Literary Narratives." Narrative (2001). Galegroup. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. 18 Oct. 2007.
- Hite, Molly. "Tongueless in Toronto." Rev. of The Blind Assassin, by Margaret Atwood. The Women's Review of Books Mar. 2001.
- Iser, Wolfgang. The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press (1978).
- James, Harold. "Narrative Engagement with Atonement and the Blind Assassin." Philosophy and Literature 29 (2005): 130-145.
- Kermode, Frank. "Introduction." Introduction. The Good Soldier. By Ford Madox Ford. New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2005.
- King, Loren. "Spate of Recent Films Take Scribes At Their Words on Writing Process." The Chicago Tribune 20 Jan. 2008, sec. 7: 10.
- McEwan, Ian. Interview with David Lynn. The Kenyon Review Summer 2007: 38.
- Mendez-Egle, Beatrice, and James M. Haule, eds. "Margaret Atwood: Reflection and Reality." Living Author Series. Edinburg, Texas: Pan American University, 1987.
- Nelles, William. Frameworks : Narrative Levels and Embedded Narrative. New York: P. Lang, 1997.

- Olsen, Greta. "Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators." *NARRATIVE*. Vol.11, No.1. Ohio State University Press (January 2003)
- Prince, Gerald, and Arlene Noble. "Narratology, Narrative, and Meaning." *Poetics Today* 12 (1991): 543-552.
- Robinson, Alan. "Alias Laura: Representations of the Past in Margaret Atwood's the Blind Assassin." *Modern Language Review* 101 (2006): 347-359.
- Ronen, Ruth. *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Stein, Karen F. "A Left Handed Story: the Blind Assassin." *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction*. Ed. Sharon R. Wilson. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2003. 135-153.
- Strehle, Susan. "Margaret Atwood: Bringing Back the Treasure." Rev. of *Negotiating with the Dead: a Writer on Writing*, by Margaret Atwood, *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction*, by Sharon Rose Wilson, *Contemporary Literature* Winter 2003: 737-742.

