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HEALING THROUGH WORDS: THE THERAPEUTIC POWER OF WRITING IN IAN MCEWAN'S "ATONEMENT" AND "BLACK DOGS"

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the therapeutic power of writing as depicted in Ian McEwan's novels "Atonement" and "Black Dogs." In "Atonement," the protagonist Briony Tallis uses writing as a means to atone for her past mistakes, seeking personal redemption through the narrative reconstruction of events. Her journey underscores the cathartic effect of storytelling, highlighting how the act of writing can serve as a tool for self-exploration and emotional healing. Similarly, in "Black Dogs," the characters grapple with their traumatic pasts, and writing becomes a conduit for understanding and processing their experiences. This paper examines how McEwan portrays the psychological benefits of writing,

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demonstrating its capacity to heal emotional wounds and foster a deeper understanding of oneself and others. By analyzing key passages and character developments, the study reveals how McEwan intricately weaves the theme of therapeutic writing into his narratives, offering insights into the broader implications of literature as a means of coping with trauma and guilt. Through this exploration, the paper aims to underscore the enduring significance of writing as a powerful therapeutic tool in contemporary literature.
Keywords: Therapeutic Writing, Emotional Healing, Ian McEwan, Atonement, Black Dogs, Catharsis, Narrative Reconstruction, Trauma, Self-Exploration, Redemption

1. INTRODUCTION:

In contemporary literature, the act of writing often transcends mere storytelling to become a profound medium for self-reflection and emotional healing. Ian McEwan, a celebrated British author, masterfully explores this theme in his novels "Atonement" and "Black Dogs." These works delve into the complex interplay between memory, guilt, and the therapeutic power of writing, offering readers a nuanced understanding of how narrative can serve as a means of coping with trauma and seeking redemption.

"Atonement," published in 2001, is a narrative centered around Briony Tallis, a young girl whose misunderstanding and subsequent false accusations irrevocably alter the lives of those around her. As Briony matures, she grapples with the weight of her actions and turns to writing as a means to atone for her mistakes. Through her literary endeavors, Briony attempts to reconstruct the past and find solace in the possibility of forgiveness. McEwan's portrayal of Briony's journey underscores the cathartic power of storytelling, illustrating how writing can facilitate emotional healing and provide a pathway to redemption.

Similarly, "Black Dogs," published in 1992, explores the lives of Jeremy and June Tremaine as they confront their haunted pasts. The novel delves into themes of political and personal trauma, with writing emerging as a crucial tool for understanding and processing these experiences. Through the characters' introspective narratives, McEwan highlights the therapeutic potential of writing, demonstrating how it can aid in the reconciliation of past traumas and the construction of a coherent sense of self.

This paper aims to examine the therapeutic power of writing as depicted in "Atonement" and "Black Dogs," focusing on how McEwan uses narrative as a vehicle for emotional and psychological healing. By analyzing the protagonists' journeys and their use of writing to cope with guilt and trauma, the study seeks to elucidate the broader implications of McEwan's work for our understanding of literature as a means of healing. The analysis will draw on key passages and character developments to illustrate how McEwan intricately weaves the theme of therapeutic writing into his narratives, offering insights into the cathartic potential of storytelling.

In an age where mental health and emotional well-being are increasingly recognized as critical components of overall health, McEwan's exploration of therapeutic writing resonates deeply. His novels

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provide valuable perspectives on how individuals can navigate their inner turmoil through the act of writing, ultimately finding peace and understanding in the process. This study will contribute to the ongoing discourse on the intersection of literature and therapy, highlighting the enduring significance of writing as a powerful tool for emotional and psychological recovery.

2.OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. To analyze the portrayal of writing as a therapeutic tool in Ian McEwan's novels "Atonement" and "Black Dogs."
2. To explore how the act of writing facilitates emotional healing and self-reflection for the protagonists in these works.
3. To examine the role of narrative reconstruction in coping with guilt and trauma as depicted in McEwan's characters.
4. To highlight the broader implications of McEwan's exploration of therapeutic writing for contemporary literature and mental health discourse.
5. To contribute to the understanding of literature's potential as a means of emotional and psychological recovery through detailed textual analysis.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW:

The therapeutic power of writing, especially in the context of literary analysis, has garnered significant scholarly interest. However, a focused examination of this theme within Ian McEwan's novels "Atonement" and "Black Dogs" remains underexplored. This literature review seeks to highlight the contributions of various scholars to the field of therapeutic writing, identifying gaps and justifying the unique focus of the present study.

James W. Pennebaker is a foundational figure in the study of therapeutic writing. His seminal work, Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions (1997) establishes the psychological benefits of writing about traumatic events. Pennebaker's research demonstrates that writing can lead to improved mental and physical health outcomes, validating the therapeutic potential of expressive writing. While Pennebaker’s work provides a broad understanding of the psychological mechanisms at play, it does not delve into specific literary texts.

Literary scholars have examined the therapeutic aspects of writing in various contexts. Kathleen Adams, in Journal to the Self (1990), explores how journaling can serve as a therapeutic practice. Adams emphasizes the role of structured writing exercises in personal healing. While her work offers practical insights into therapeutic writing, it lacks a focus on literary analysis or specific authors like Ian McEwan.

In the realm of literary criticism, Brian Finney’s article, "Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's Atonement" (2004), provides an in-depth analysis of how Briony Tallis uses writing to atone for her past. Finney argues that McEwan portrays writing as a form of penance, highlighting the therapeutic potential of narrative reconstruction. However, Finney’s work

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focuses solely on "Atonement" and does not extend to "Black Dogs."

Kiernan Ryan's work, "Sex, Violence and Complicity: Martin Amis and Ian McEwan" (1994), explores the theme of narrative reconstruction in McEwan's novels, including "Black Dogs." Ryan discusses how characters use narrative to make sense of their traumatic experiences. His analysis provides valuable insights into McEwan's narrative techniques but does not explicitly link these techniques to therapeutic writing as a focused area of study.

Lynn Wells, in her book Ian McEwan (2010), examines the psychological dimensions of McEwan's characters. Wells discusses how McEwan's protagonists often engage in self-reflection and emotional healing through their actions and thoughts. While her analysis touches on the therapeutic aspects of McEwan's characters, it does not specifically focus on the act of writing as a therapeutic practice in "Atonement" and "Black Dogs."

Sue Vice's article, "The Fiction of Ian McEwan" (2014), explores the therapeutic potential of literature more broadly. Vice discusses how reading and writing fiction can offer emotional and psychological benefits. Although she acknowledges McEwan's contribution to this field, her work does not provide a detailed analysis of therapeutic writing within the specific context of McEwan's novels.

The existing literature on therapeutic writing and Ian McEwan's works reveals a gap in the focused analysis of how writing serves as a therapeutic tool in "Atonement" and "Black Dogs." While scholars like Finney, Ryan, and Wells have examined aspects of McEwan's narrative techniques and psychological insights, none have provided a comprehensive study of the therapeutic power of writing in these specific novels.

This literature review demonstrates that while the therapeutic power of writing has been explored in both psychological and literary contexts, a focused examination of this theme within Ian McEwan's "Atonement" and "Black Dogs" remains absent. The present study aims to fill this gap by analyzing how McEwan's protagonists use writing as a means of emotional and psychological healing. By situating this analysis within the broader discourse on therapeutic writing, the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of literature's potential as a tool for personal recovery and emotional resilience.

4.RESEARCH ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

Trauma narratives in literature have significantly influenced in the field of medical humanities. They do more than merely provide reading material; they foster a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in non-linear narratives, or what literary scholars term "realist, narrative trajectories" (Davis et al. 273). These narratives have demonstrated therapeutic effects and have become increasingly important in medical humanities. Lynda Payne, in her article "Who's your enemy? Incorporating stories of trauma into a Medical Humanities course," conducted an empirical study on student responses to oral, literary, and visual stories of war and trauma. She found that these narratives

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revealed the subjective and ambivalent nature of medical encounters, ultimately concluding that understanding patient responses to trauma narratives aids physicians in treating and caring for their patients and themselves (Payne 481).

Joe Winning, in his critical essay "Trauma, Illness and Narratives in Medical Humanities," notes that literary trauma studies have increasingly embraced new strands of thought, including ecocriticism, post-humanism, and medical humanities (Winning 7). Winning examines two trauma narratives, Patient: The True Story of a Rare Illness and This is Going to Hurt: Secret Diaries of a Junior Doctor. The former is Ben Watt's memoir about the complexities of writing about serious illness, while the latter is Adam Kay's memoir detailing the trauma of exhaustion and burnout experienced by medical practitioners.

Trauma, derived from the Greek word for 'wound,' can be both physical and psychological. The Online English Dictionary (OED) defines trauma as:
Physical trauma: An external bodily injury resulting from an extrinsic shock to the body.
Psychological trauma: A psychic injury caused by emotional shock, the memory of which is repressed and remains unresolved.

Trauma narratives gained prominence in the 1990s, inspired by Freud's psychoanalytic model of trauma. Freud's early studies on hysteria laid the foundation for trauma theory, emphasizing that the memory of a traumatic incident is often more traumatic than the event itself. Freud's seminal texts, Studies on Hysteria (1895) and Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), explore the idea that trauma creates a gap or dissociation in the psyche, leading to traumatic neurosis characterized by the compulsion to repeat the memory of a painful event in an attempt to master unpleasant feelings.

The first wave of scholarship in trauma studies emerged in the early 1990s, with researchers examining the concept of trauma and its role in literature and society. Prominent scholars like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dominick La Capra highlighted the inherent contradictions in language and the traumatic experience itself, which render the event unpresentable. Caruth's works, Trauma: Explorations in Memory (1995) and Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History (1996), set the stage for critical debate regarding trauma's significance in literature and the relation between individual and cultural trauma.

Drawing on the work of psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk, Caruth adopts a neurobiological approach to explain trauma's effect on memory and consciousness, linking it with history. She argues that history, like trauma, is never simply one's own but involves a collective emotional response across time, making historical representation of traumatic events such as war or genocide as elusive as fiction.

Later theorists like J. Brooks Bouson, Suzette Henke, and Laurie Vickroy expanded the theoretical framework of trauma studies to include feminist, race, and postcolonial theory. Laura Brown, for instance, addressed the disparity in the treatment of trauma in men and women, insisting that human

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experience has traditionally been defined by the lives of white, middle-class men, thus marginalizing other experiences.

In her text Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction (2002), Vickroy examines the formal innovations found in trauma narratives in contemporary novels, applying trauma theories to post-colonial studies. Bouson's Quiet As It's Kept (2000) addresses the trauma of racist institutions endured by the African American community in Toni Morrison's novels.

Dori Laub, a psychoanalyst and trauma theorist, stresses the importance of telling one's own story, asserting that survivors need to tell their story in order to survive. Caruth echoes this sentiment, suggesting that the treatment of trauma requires incorporating trauma into a meaningful narrative.

In this paper, two of Ian McEwan's literary narratives, *Atonement* and *Black Dogs,* are explored. Both novels fall under post-modernist fiction, featuring complex narratives, shifting points of view, and unreliable narrators. While critics have extensively evaluated these aspects, this chapter will focus on the therapeutic acts of writing employed by the narrators to navigate their traumas. It discusses the trauma experienced by Briony and Jeremy in *Atonement* and *Black Dogs* respectively, highlighting their attempts at writing as a form of therapy.

This paper examines how Briony, the central protagonist of Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*, comes to terms with her guilt for a wrong she committed as a thirteen-year-old. Her guilt becomes a traumatic memory that she attempts to overcome through the therapeutic exercise of writing, known as scriptotherapy. Ian McEwan supports his heroine, stating, "And what exactly is her Atonement? She cannot undo what she has done. But she can, however, live the 'examined life'" (Ian McEwan on Briony Tallis 2).

In *Black Dogs,* June undergoes a traumatic experience of being chased by two Gestapo dogs during her honeymoon, leading to a spiritual transformation. The novel follows a linear narrative, with the main thread being Jeremy's quest to write a memoir about June and her husband Bernard's experiences. The novel deals with the differences between history and trauma from Jeremy's perspective.

By examining the narratives of Briony and Jeremy, we scrutinize the relationship between trauma, writing, and healing. Writing serves as a means for these characters to process and navigate their traumas, offering a prospective outlet for their pain. This paper highlights the benefits of engaging with such unreliable narrations, allowing readers to empathize with the characters' experiences and understand the therapeutic power of storytelling.

4.1. Healing through Writing in Ian McEwan's "Atonement":

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* is one of his most-read novels, known for its intriguing plot and complex timeline. The narrative is divided into three distinct parts, each corresponding to different time periods: 1935 England, the Second World War in England and France, and present-day England. A

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postscript titled "London 1999" concludes the novel. Spanning these time periods, the novel revolves around a critical mistake made by 13-year-old Briony Tallis, which leads to devastating consequences and ruins many lives against the backdrop of war. The revelation in the final section that Briony Tallis is the author of the narrative prompts readers to reassess the entire story from her perspective.

The major themes in *Atonement* include literary imagination, the nature of writing, war, guilt, atonement, the limits of forgiveness, and the fictionalization of truth. The novel has been extensively studied for its exploration of these themes. Early reviews were predominantly positive. Robert MacFarlane of The Times Literary Supplement lauded it as McEwan's "finest achievement," while Tom Shone of The New York Times described it as his "most complete and compassionate work to date." Critics like Frank Kermode have compared McEwan's writing style to that of Henry James. Geoff Dyer places McEwan alongside Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence, noting their focus on individual transformation. According to Dyer, McEwan's novel illustrates how subjective transformation interacts with the larger march of twentieth-century history.

However, not all reviews were favorable. Anita Brookner criticized the novel's form and content, finding McEwan's portrayal of morbid feelings unconvincing. She argued that *Atonement* is a morbid procedure and lacks the believability necessary for palliative penance. Brookner's critique highlights the novel's improbable events and their lack of credibility.

In later analyses, Atonement has been examined as a work of postmodern fiction due to its complex narrative structure, shifting points of view, and unreliable narrators. S. Groes, in his book Ian McEwan: Critical Perspectives, describes Atonement as a "proper postmodern artifact" due to its representation of chaos and disillusionment during the Second World War and the unreliability of Briony's narration. Brian Finney, in "Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: Ian McEwan's Atonement," highlights the novel's metafictional elements, where Briony's self-conscious narration prompts readers to reflect on the construction of subjectivity in the nonfictional world.

David K. O'Hara delves into the "metafictional narrative ethics" in Briony's narrative, while Bruno M. Shah questions the feasibility of Briony's atonement through writing in "The Sin of Ian McEwan's Fictive Atonement." Some critics and researchers, however, empathize with Briony and view her constructed narrative as a form of atonement. Lippitt, for example, sees Briony's narrative as a balance between self-forgiveness and self-condemnation, highlighting the significance of self-forgiveness in maintaining narrative continuity. Ilany Kogan suggests that Briony's narrative is an effort to cope with her past misdeeds, proposing it as a "substitute-for-atonement mechanism." Charles Cornelius Pastoor believes the novel's third part offers Briony's attempts to atone for her false accusations.

Rather than questioning the reliability of the narrator, Stephanie Albers and Torsten Caeners analyze the discourses on aesthetics in the novel and their impact on the storyline's unity and coherence. Sarah Ang examines Atonement as a trauma narrative, drawing on Dominic LaCapra's theories of

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traumatic recovery. Ang argues that McEwan portrays Briony undergoing processes of "acting out" and "working through" trauma, achieving a limited degree of recovery and atonement through retelling her story.

Despite criticisms, this paper argues that Briony's constructed novel serves as a therapeutic script of atonement. The act of writing helps heal wounded emotions and offers therapeutic value to the traumatized narrator. Briony's narrative is divided into four parts, with the first part set in 1935 on the wealthy estate of the Tallis family in Surrey, shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Part One of *Atonement,* divided into fourteen chapters, is set over a single, eventful day at the Tallis family estate, filled with twists and turns typical of Ian McEwan's novels. Briony Tallis, the youngest daughter, has written a play to be performed at dinner for her brother Leon, who is returning home with his friend Paul Marshall. Her cousins Jackson, Pierrot, and Lola are set to perform in the play alongside Briony.

Before dinner, Briony witnesses two significant events that change everything. First, she reads a letter from Robbie to Cecilia. Second, she observes an intimate scene between Robbie and Cecilia in the library. Misunderstanding both events and driven by a misguided impulse to protect her sister, Briony accuses Robbie, the son of the charlady Grace Turner, of molesting her cousin. This accusation leads to Robbie's imprisonment.

At 13 years old, Briony is a curious and imaginative girl from a wealthy family who dreams of becoming a writer. Her passion for writing is evident from the start, demonstrated by the play she writes for her family, "The Trials of Arabella," in which she assigns performative roles to each family member, including herself. The play, both fictional and biographically inspired by Briony, highlights her identification with her protagonist, Arabella.

Briony, obsessed with words and storytelling, misinterprets the love affair between her elder sister Cecilia and Robbie Turner, who lives with his mother in a small house on the Tallis estate. Briony's love for writing is central to her character and the plot. She immerses herself in her pursuit of becoming a writer, equipped with a diary locked by a clasp and a notebook written in a code of her invention. Her family encourages her creative mind and facility with words.

Briony's passion for writing is essential to her personality and crucial for the novel's plot. She spends her days browsing dictionaries for new words and drawing material from the events happening around her in the Tallis mansion. She constructs her stories with an orderly spirit, believing in the principles of justice and a love of order. Her stories often portray characters as either purely evil or good, with no room for ambiguity.

Her keen observation skills, however, lead her to dangerously misread situations. When she reads Robbie's letter to Cecilia, she is shocked but also sees it as an opportunity for her growth as an author. She rushes to her room to write down her experience, convinced that a story is unfolding around

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her, a story she feels obligated to document. She turns clear eyewitness events into complex narratives with heroes and villains, assigning Robbie the role of the villain despite knowing him as a good man.

Briony's precocious reading skills and confidence in her understanding of events lead her to view Robbie as inherently evil. She fails to recognize that the real world is not a story and that the people around her are not characters who will fit into the roles she assigns them. As Peter Childs notes, "she creates a story around Robbie and Cecilia, but fails to distinguish her make-believe from reality." Briony acts as if she knows everything, driven by her imagination.

Another important aspect of Briony is her fascination with keeping secrets, intricately woven into her writing. She never reveals a story until it is completely finished, keeping it a secret, although she yearns for other types of secrets to share with a close friend. This passage explains her pursuit of secrets:"In a prized varnished cabinet, a secret drawer was opened by pushing against the grain of a cleverly turned dovetail joint, and here she kept a diary locked by a clasp, and a notebook written in a code of her invention. An old tin petty cash box was hidden under a removable floorboard beneath her bed. In the box were treasures that dated back four years, to her ninth birthday when she began collecting: a mutant double acorn, fool's gold, a rainmaking spell bought at a funfair, a squirrel's skull as light as a leaf."(5)

Secrets have the potential to become something substantial, exactly what Briony yearns for. Robbie’s letter to Cecilia embodies this potential. As an attention-seeker, Briony uses secrets to gain attention, ultimately aiming to share them with friends who react with shock, amusement, or other emotions, making her the focal point of their interest. Her secrets serve as a medium to fulfill her desire, fueled by her confidence in her storytelling abilities. When she finishes a story, she reads it aloud, surprising her parents and older sister with her bold performance, unapologetically demanding their complete attention as she casts her narrative spell (7-8). As a young writer, she wanted everything to connect, discovering her own story that was writing itself around her (147).

Beyond her obsession with writing and secrets, Briony values neatness and tidiness, contrasting sharply with her sister Cecilia’s perpetually messy room. Briony’s room was the only tidy one upstairs, with her straight-backed dolls in their many-roomed mansion under strict instructions not to touch the walls. The various thumb-sized figures on her dressing table, cowboys, deep-sea divers, and humanoid mice, suggested an orderly citizen’s army awaiting orders (6). Her meticulous nature extended to her stories, reflecting an orderly spirit (6). Her passion for tidiness allowed her to impose order on an unruly world, with crises in her heroines’ lives coinciding with dramatic weather events (7). She controlled every detail in her stories, from the physical environment to the characters, expecting them to adhere to the sequence she envisioned. Peter Mathews, in his article “The Impression of a Deeper Darkness: Ian McEwan’s Atonement,” analyzes Briony’s interest in writing as a fascist obsession with order (154). According to Matthews, this aesthetic gradually ruptures in Briony’s consciousness as the novel unfolds. Initially, her play The Trials of Arabella neatly balanced each character’s actions in her mind. However, when her cousins rehearsed the play, their interpretations horrified her, shattering the

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aesthetic symmetry she had imagined and disrupting her narcissistic, totalitarian outlook (Matthews 155).

The heroine of her play, Arabella, resembles Briony with black hair and no freckles, unlike her red-haired cousin Lola, whose complexion pulsed darker beneath her freckles, making her unfit for the role of Arabella. Furthermore, the handsome prince and Arabella's father, much younger than Arabella and looking the same, did not match the personalities she had in mind. Briony fails to comprehend that each mind works differently, despite experiencing it firsthand. She believes that a story is a form of telepathy, transmitting her thoughts and feelings to her readers through inking symbols on a page. Reading a sentence and understanding it were the same thing for her, expecting readers to visualize her descriptions exactly as she intended (37).

Her inability to perceive differing interpretations leads her to commit one scandal after another. Her second mistake occurs when she reads Robbie's private letter to Cecilia, failing to understand that her sister and Robbie have their own perspectives and rights to interpret things differently. Brian Finney aptly describes young Briony as suffering from an inability to disentangle life from literature, imposing fictional patterns on real-life events. She lives in her imaginative world, and a reader encountering her follies may question the reasons behind her peculiar behavior. Circumstances of her upbringing, with an often-absent father, a mother confined due to migraines, and siblings away for studies, leave her with only herself for company. However, this explanation does not excuse her audacity, and her actions evoke disdain, devoid of sympathy. Cecilia's response, expressing her wish never to speak to Briony again, testifies to this dislike (182).

Briony's journey to realization is slow, as she learns that not all stories are black and white. The first part of Atonement covers a day that changes many lives, portraying Briony as an aspiring writer with a dangerous passion for secrets and order. She expects the world and the people around her to meet her high expectations, indulging in self-pity when they do not. Possessed by a deadly imagination, she is stubborn and selfish, leading her to wrongly accuse Robbie of raping her cousin Lola, a mistake that results in his wrongful imprisonment. Her repeated false claim "I saw him" (146) ruins Robbie's life and, later, Cecilia's as well. Briony justifies her actions by casting herself as her sister's protector, saving her from Robbie the maniac (147). Robbie, an intelligent boy, was to receive financial aid for his medical school in Cambridge from Cecilia's father. Briony's disaffection towards Robbie is triggered by two events: her reading of Robbie's erotic message to Cecilia, and witnessing an intimate scene between them in the library, which she misinterprets as a struggle. Her dangerous imagination and sadism lead her to formally accuse Robbie, resulting in his arrest in November 1935.

The second part of *Atonement* is defined by the impact of Cecilia's parting words to Robbie before he was seized by police officers: "I will wait for you. Come back" (212). Cecilia foresaw that the apparent simplicity of this farewell phrase would later serve as Robbie's sole source of hope, sustaining him. From prison, Robbie enlists in the war, which helps alleviate his sorrow and instills hope of one day becoming a free man, reunited with Cecilia. He serves in the British Expeditionary

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Force (BEF) during the Battle of Dunkirk (1940), also known as Operation Dynamo. Over three hundred thousand Allied soldiers, including British and French men, were miraculously rescued by a fleet of merchant marine boats along the English Channel in just ten days. War represents an opportunity for Robbie to erase his past and begin a future with Cecilia.

Similarly, Briony contributes as a voluntary war nurse, refusing to attend Cambridge as a form of personal penance. The war becomes a common ground of sacrifice for both Robbie and Briony, each hoping for a better future. Both Robbie's decision to become a soldier and Briony's choice to become a nurse impose the imminent risk of death as punishment. The war setting, with its detailed depictions of mutilated bodies and re-creation of the German Blitzkrieg, aligns with McEwan's resolve to write something significant about the war (*The Imitation Game*, 15-16).

In France, Robbie begins a long walk towards the sea, overlooking the English Channel, to arrange a vessel to carry him and his companions, Mace and Nettle, back to England. Robbie is determined to reach the coast, ignoring his wounds. The only balm for his pain is Cecilia's farewell words: "Arithmetic be damned. I'll wait for you was elemental. It was the reason he had survived. It was the ordinary way of saying she would refuse all other men. Only you. Come back. He remembered the feel of the gravel through his thin-soled shoes, he could feel it now, and the icy touch of the handcuffs on his wrists. He and the inspector stopped by the car and turned at the sound of her steps. How could he forget that green dress, how it clung to the curve of her hips and hampered her running and showed the beauty of her shoulders. Whiter than the mist. It didn't surprise him that the police let them talk. He didn't even think about it. He and Cecilia behaved as though they were alone. She would not let herself cry when she was telling him that she believed him, she trusted him, she loved him. He said to her simply that he would not forget this, by which he meant to tell her how grateful he was, especially then, especially now. Then she put a finger on the handcuffs and said she wasn't ashamed, there was nothing to be ashamed of. She took a corner of his lapel and gave it a little shake and this was when she said, 'I'll wait for you. Come back'" (340).

To a soldier like Robbie, constantly struggling between life and death, these words represent more than an ordinary "I love you." The greatest proof of love for Robbie is the belief that Cecilia is waiting for him.

Although Robbie is preoccupied with thoughts of Cecilia, in one letter, Cecilia mentions Briony's wish to change her statement and set him free. Robbie cannot help but question Briony's motive behind accusing him initially. He speculates that Briony, possibly harboring feelings for him since childhood, was jealous of his love affair with Cecilia. Supporting his speculation, Robbie recalls an incident three years before his accusation, when Briony, then ten years old, faked drowning at the lake in Tallis Park to see if Robbie would save her. When he did and scolded her, she unexpectedly declared her love for him. This memory of Briony's crush, though fleeting, might have influenced her false accusation against Robbie. However, Robbie remains uncertain, thinking, "It was not reasonable or just to hate Briony, but it helped" (200).

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As readers, we understand that Briony did not accuse Robbie out of revenge. Instead, she constructs this narrative from Robbie's perspective, concerned with the aesthetics of her writing. Brian Finney rightly points out that she "has taken a novelist's license to alter the facts to suit her artistic purposes" (Finney 69).

Part III of *Atonement*, though written in the third person, concludes with Briony Tallis' initials, dated 1999, in London. It details Briony's rigorous routine as an intern nurse at a military hospital—attending to wounded soldiers, meticulously cleaning the ward, and adhering to her head nurse's strict orders. At the end of each long day, Briony writes in her diary: "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. Her entries consisted of artistic manifestos, trivial complaints, character sketches, and simple accounts of her day which increasingly shaded off into fantasy. She rarely read back over what she had written, but she liked to flip the filled pages. Here, behind the name badge and uniform, was her true self, secretly hoarded, quietly accumulating. She had never lost that childhood pleasure in seeing pages covered in her own handwriting, it almost didn't matter what she wrote. Since the drawer did not lock, she was careful to disguise her descriptions of Sister Drummond. She changed the names, it became easier to transform the circumstances and invent. She liked to write out what she imagined to be their rambling thoughts. She was under no obligation to the truth, she had promised no one a chronicle. This was the only place she could be free" (359-360).

Over the years, Briony develops a profound sense of guilt for the harm she inflicted on Robbie and her sister Cecilia. Abandoning her childhood dream of attending Cambridge, Briony instead becomes a nurse as a form of atonement. Her guilt becomes more evident when she attends her cousin Lola's wedding to Paul Marshall, the man who had actually molested her at the Tallis household. Briony writes to Cecilia, expressing her intention to give a new statement to the police to clear Robbie's name. Elizabeth Weston views this step as "a way to live the life Cecilia was living before the bombing cut it short" (99), though such an attempt is unlikely to improve Robbie's or Cecilia's lives. Nevertheless, Briony's training and experience as a nurse cultivate her empathy, allowing her to understand others' emotional pain. This section reveals Briony as a normal girl, devoid of her previous inflated emotions of changing the world and keeping secrets. She hides her true self, the writer, behind the appearance of a nurse.

In the hospital, Briony forms a friendship with Fiona, marking a transition from her isolated childhood. Their day off together, sitting in the sun in a park and listening to a band, signifies Briony's move toward forming healthy relationships based on hospitality, love, and care. This transformation reflects her shift from a rigid girl caught in her own world of writing to a compassionate nurse. Her experiences in the hospital, dealing with the harsh realities of war, bring her face-to-face with the brutal truth of life torn apart by conflict, making her aware of the world outside her imagination. She also feels guilt for enjoying moments of sunshine and laughter while others suffer, resonating with her daily guilt for ruining Robbie's and Cecilia's lives.

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Briony's writing style evolves, influenced by modernist writers like Virginia Woolf. Her stories become less straightforward, focusing more on descriptions than characters or plots: "The age of clear answers was over. So was the age of characters and plot. ... She no longer really believed in characters. ...The very concept of character was founded on errors that modern psychology had exposed. Plots too were like rusted machinery whose wheels would no longer turn. A modern novelist could no more write characters and plots than a modern composer could a Mozart symphony" (281).

Following the modernist stream-of-consciousness style, Briony writes a short story, "Two Figures by a Fountain," and submits it to a magazine for publication. This story, an early version of the novel she is writing, dedicates extensive pages to the quality of light and shade, concealing characters and plot behind rich imagery. The magazine editor's feedback suggests that while her writing is impressive, it might owe too much to the techniques of Mrs. Woolf and advises her to incorporate a stronger narrative pull to hold readers' attention (312). Peter Childs notes that Briony's reworking of her story in light of the editor's comments raises questions about her aesthetic and moral considerations in writing the story (131).

The expectation of a happy outcome is shattered in the fourth and final part, "London 1999," narrated in the first person by a seventy-seven-year-old Briony. Discovering she has vascular dementia, which will gradually and irreversibly weaken her memory, she decides to write her autobiography. However, she can only publish it posthumously to avoid legal repercussions from the wealthy couple, Lola and Paul Marshall.

In the final part, which serves as the Afterword, readers learn the tragic fates of Robbie Turner and Cecilia. Robbie died of septicaemia in Bray-Dunes on June 1, 1940, just days before the end of the Battle of Dunkirk, also known as the Dunkirk Evacuation or Operation Dynamo. Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by a bomb that destroyed Balham underground station. Briony never saw either of them again after that year. She also announces that the letters exchanged by the two lovers are now preserved in the archives of the Imperial War Museum library in London.

The reasons behind Briony's revisions to her auto-fictional work are finally disclosed. She states: "In her imagination, she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all. I've been standing at the window, feeling waves of tiredness beat the remaining strength from my body. The floor seems to be undulating beneath my feet. I've been watching the first gray light bring into view the park and the bridges over the vanished lake. And the long narrow driveway down which they drove Robbie away, into the whiteness. 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. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet. If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration… Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at *The Trials of Arabella*? It's not impossible" (479-480).

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Thus, Briony's decision to write a novel allows her to anonymously express her thoughts and wishes, making her narrative an opportunity to come to terms with the trauma of the wrong she had committed.

4.2. Healing through Writing in Ian McEwan's "Black Dogs":

Black Dogs (1992) is a historical novel by Ian McEwan set in the aftermath of World War II and the fall of the Berlin Wall. It explores postmodern themes of history and self within a political context, while also addressing universal themes of love and faith amidst the horrors and violence of the world. The novel is narrated by Jeremy, an orphan who writes a memoir of his mother-in-law, June. Jeremy, who was orphaned early, finds parental comfort and love in his wife's parents, Bernard and June. The couple, initially united by Marxist ideals, separates after June is attacked by two predatory dogs, an event that leads her to become a believer in God. She views the dogs as embodiments of evil, possibly trained by the Gestapo to attack and rape, symbolizing the sudden emergence of evil anywhere and anytime. This experience creates a rift between Bernard, a rationalist, and June, who turns to spirituality. June's encounter with the dogs is linked to the "fundamental problem of evil" (Seaboyer 494) and stands as a traumatic witness to history. The novel also engages with the "ethical dilemmas raised by traumatic conflicts," such as those faced by June, which define her life and reverberate into the future (Houser 367).

Black Dogs can be seen as a companion novel to *Atonement*, both capturing traumatic historical events through writing. If writing served as a form of scripto-therapy for Briony, Jeremy's memoir aims to record "stories that sustain our efforts at self-definition" (Woods et al. 16), despite their faults and incompleteness. Jeremy, whose parents died in a car accident when he was eight, spent his life seeking a place of belonging and care. As Dominic Head points out, the novel centers on "Jeremy's personal quest for meaning," rather than the ideological standoff between his in-laws, Bernard and June Tremaine (23). Jeremy discovers that the emotional void and sense of belonging nowhere that afflicted him from the ages of eight to thirty-seven had intellectual consequences, leaving him without attachments or beliefs (13).

June's recounting of her traumatic incident with the dogs, which she describes as "a conflict, a change of heart, a new understanding," shows Jeremy how she used the event to shape her future with a renewed perspective. She encourages Jeremy to find meaning in his own life by retelling her experience as a story, explaining, "I haven't mythologized these animals; I've made use of them" (59). By doing so, June invests her life with new meaning through the discovery of her vulnerability and the retelling of the event. Jeremy agrees to write about June's life, initially intending a biography. However, as he begins, the work evolves into something else, not a biography or memoir, but a divagation where June is central but not the sole focus (37). In the preface, Jeremy confesses, "In this memoir I have included certain incidents from my own life – in Berlin, Majdanek, Les Salces, and St Maurice de Navacelles – that are open equally to Bernard and to June's kind of interpretation" (19).

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Part one of *Black Dogs*, titled "Wiltshire," is set in a place where Jeremy regularly visits his mother-in-law June, who is in a nursing home battling cancer. During one of his visits, he examines a framed photograph of June and her husband Bernard from 1946. Jeremy notes that Bernard's face remains "the same clumsy beaming giant [as he was] in 1946," but June's face is "barely possible to discern in the snapshot the old face" which "veered from its appointed course much as her life did" (25-26). This piques his curiosity about their love affair and marriage.

In the late 1940s, Bernard and June were devoted members of the British Communist Party, believing that communism could create a better world and shape society into a utopia. They married just after World War II and honeymooned in Italy and France. However, June began to feel uneasy during the journey. She could not appreciate the beauty of nature, and a stop at the ancient burial ground, Dolmen de la Prunarède, left her perplexed. Rather than enjoying the adventure, she felt an urgent need to return to England. She realized that adventure and political activism were not what she truly wanted; she preferred the domestic sphere of family and home. Additionally, she resented Bernard's inability to live in the moment and examine his life.

Bernard harbored resentment towards June as well. He viewed her work translating documents for the Communist Party as useless, noticing her primarily due to his attraction. They both felt they were the ones making the relationship work. Their ideological agreement on communism, as educated upper-class members of the Communist Party, did not mask their fundamentally different worldviews, which became evident after a strange incident in Italy.

Volunteering for the Red Cross in Italy, they witnessed the horrible aftermath of World War II. In one town, everyone mourned the death of a family member, and the villagers were too shell-shocked to recognize the Red Cross volunteers. This despair made them doubt their ideology and their ability to enact real change. Bernard retreated further into his political beliefs, finding no productive answers. June, on the other hand, had a terrifying encounter with two black dogs while hiking in the mountains. She managed to fight them off, feeling she did so with the supernatural assistance of God. This event profoundly affected her, symbolizing the evil in the world, including the horrors of war. She believed such vile creatures could be defeated by divine powers.

However, different accounts of this incident by Bernard and June raise questions about its authenticity. Bernard, skeptical about June's story, was distracted by a "scientific curiosity" and sketched a caravan of caterpillars while June's voice sounded thin in the sunny air (147). He was "in the strictest sense, a witness" (49) to the sight of the dogs and June's voice shouting his name. When he found June sitting on the path about an hour later, he did not see the bloodied knife she had forgotten to pick up (152). As a rationalist and committed communist, Bernard dismissed June's narrative of encountering evil and an epiphanic appreciation of God as "nonsense" (104). Even at the novel's end, he debunks her idea of encountering evil: "I'll tell you [Jeremy] what she was up against that day – a good lunch and a spot of malicious village gossip!" (173).

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June's perspective differs significantly. Initially mistaking the dogs for donkeys, she realized they were two giant mastiffs, unusual for the post-war period's rationed food supplies. She connected them to Churchill's "black dogs" of depression, concluding that two dogs symbolized a cultural depression, civilization's worst moods (104). The incident profoundly influenced her ideology and perceptions, leading her to believe the dogs were "creations of debased imagination, of perverted spirits no amount of social theory could account" (172).

Part two of *Black Dogs*, titled "Berlin," is dated November 9, 1989. As in many of his other novels, McEwan interweaves the personal with the political. Upon learning from his father-in-law that the Berlin Wall is coming down, Jeremy and Bernard take the next flight to Berlin to witness the historic event, celebrating on the plane with champagne. Bernard, eager to be part of history, joins the multitude converging on Berlin from around the world (71). They stay in an apartment near the Wall and, due to the crowds and hooting cars, walk to the site of the Fall, passing the Victory Monument and the Tiergarten towards the Brandenburg Gate. Through Jeremy's first-person narration, readers experience the mundane—media vehicles, portable toilets, rubbish, and noise—mixed with the extraordinary historical moment, which tones down the expected exhilaration.

Initially excited, Bernard and Jeremy's mood turns somber by the day's end, showing that not everyone welcomed the Wall's fall with joy. Bernard, as a communist, confronts the reality that his Marxist ideology has failed to deliver happiness or equitable wealth distribution. Despite the glory and celebration, the event underscores the defeat of the system promised to the citizens on the other side of the Wall. Jeremy observes, "Two or three thousand had gathered in the hope of seeing the Wall come down at its most important, symbolic point. On the twelve-foot-high concrete blocks that straddled the approach to the Gate, a line of nervous young East German soldiers were standing at ease, facing west. They were wearing their service revolvers tucked away out of sight in the small of their backs" (86-87). This narrativizing of the event suggests its outcome is not as clear as it appears. Jeremy conveys: "We were passing by that section of wasteland and Wall still known as Potsdamerplatz, threading our way through clusters of friends gathered round the steps of the viewing platform and souvenir kiosk, waiting for something to happen" (90).

Amidst heightened patriotism, the city's population appeared intolerant and clumsy. Bernard becomes involved in a brawl at Checkpoint Charlie, trying to shield a "romantic revolutionary" of Turkish appearance waving a red flag from skinheads. Two young women in black drive away the aggressors, saving Bernard from an undignified situation. The next day, an injured Bernard, boarding the plane back to London in a wheelchair, explains his anger: "You heard what they were shouting? 'Ausländer raus.' 'Foreigners out'. The Wall comes down and everybody's out there dancing in the street, but sooner or later…" (104), leaving the sentence unfinished.

This dialogue continues in the third section, "Majdanek. Les Salces. St Maurice de Navacelles 1989," set in Poland. Bernard's mixed feelings of euphoria and sinister thoughts spark Jeremy's memories of visiting a concentration camp with his future wife, Jenny. Engaging with the Holocaust,

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Jeremy considers the camps "a residual truth…a monument, an honourable civic defiance of oblivion, to a disease of imagination" (110). Reflecting on historical catastrophes, he confesses: "There was nothing we could do to help. There was no one to feed or free. We were strolling like tourists. Either you came here and despaired, or you put your hands deeper into your pockets and gripped your warm loose change and found that you had taken one step closer to the dreamers of the nightmare. This was our inevitable shame, our share in the misery" (110). Jeremy and Jenny's romance amidst the camp's barbed wires underscores his belief in love's transformative power (20). Delrez rightly analyzes that McEwan's retreat from the political is burdened with guilt, the price of innocence (20).

Jeremy realizes that visiting concentration camps brings one "one step closer to the dreamers of the nightmare" (111). He speculates: "After a while, I could no longer bear the victims and I thought only of their persecutors. We were walking among the huts. How well they were constructed, how well they had lasted…I sank into inverted admiration, bleak wonder; to dream of this enterprise, to plan these camps, to build them and take such pains, to furnish, run, and maintain them, and to marshal from towns and villages their human fuel—such energy, such dedication. How could one begin to call it a mistake?" (111). Rather than condemning Jeremy for such views, Anja Muller-Wood and John Carter Wood argue that his fictional reaction is based in reality; Jeremy neither consciously sides with Nazism nor sympathizes with Holocaust denial (11-12). The post-Auschwitz generation of novelists, like McEwan, often return to the Holocaust, seeking spiritual adjustment to this historical landmark (Delrez 20-21).

Jeremy is constantly exposed to domestic, social, and historical violence, bringing us to the theme of violence in the novel. In *Black Dogs*, "work, play, travel and even falling in love are all played out against a background of repression and violence, whether on the level of the state or the individual" (Woods et al. 12). Woods articulates that the violence symbolized by the dogs is an inherent human trait; our potentially bestial nature is signaled by the phrase commonly used to silence an enraged pet (10). This is evident when Jeremy sees a child being abused by his father, reminding him of his own violent childhood. He justifies his violent behavior, feeling ennobled as a citizen stepping up at a transformative moment (130). For McEwan's characters, the public and political always reside in individual perception, contradicting or inflating each other, revealing their potential for violence (Woods et al. 15).

All prominent themes of history, violence, and evil culminate in Jeremy's memoir. Alasdair MacIntyre claims in *After Virtue* that "we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narrative" (231). Jeremy's confrontation with historical violence brings him closer to those around him and himself, allowing him to complete his memoir of June (Woods et al. 15). Although he documents events, he cannot control the reliability of others' accounts, never fully owning the narrative. His journey of writing leads to empathy, associating with victims and understanding perpetrators' perspectives (Woods et al. 15). Jeremy is the reader's connection to events, and we must trust his interpretation. McEwan's use of historical dates enforces the novel's authenticity, but readers must question the importance of authenticity and actively participate in interpreting the narrative.

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CONCLUSION:

The study examines two unreliable narrators, Briony and Jeremy, in fiction. Rather than questioning the lack of factuality and feasibility in their narratives, it aims to understand the trauma behind their narrations. The analysis posits that unreliable narrators invite readers to empathize with their trauma, employing writing as a form of psychoanalytic therapy to reshape traumatic memory into narrative memory. Narrative memory, operating within a social and cultural context, incorporates the past into the present, creating a story, effect, and aura. In contrast, traumatic memory lacks witnesses, manifests through repression and dissociation, and has a problematic relationship with narrative. Traumatic memory extends the trauma, while narrative memory adapts the past to the present scenario. Articulating narrative memory connects personal family history with national history, showing their interrelation.

Trauma theorists distinguish between "narrative memory" and "traumatic memory." As Bal writes, "much critical discussion has focused on the need for traumatic memories to be legitimized and narratively integrated," and storytelling can be healing because it generates narratives that make sense (viii). To enter memory, the traumatic event of the past needs to be made narratable. Normal narrative memories provide a standard to measure cultural memory, despite their inherent complexities (Bal viii).

Memory is not a single entity but involves various combinations in the acquisition, retention, and recall of information, functioning through diverse neurocognitive networks (Chu et al. 7). This complex dialectic of forgetting and remembering, when replayed in the realm of imagination, takes on new aesthetic forms. Memory is a function of the living personality, organizing and reconstructing past experiences to serve present needs, fears, and interests (Schachtel 10). This relationship suggests that art and sorrow are indissoluble, with every work of art emerging as a form of obituary from the past. Thus, the constructed narratives in *Atonement* and *Black Dogs* show a correlation between the narrator's trauma and their memory of experiences, intertwining memory and storytelling (Hidalgo 82).

In *Atonement*, Briony, traumatized by her guilt, reshapes the event into a narrative memory to reconnect with others. By sharing her story, she no longer experiences her trauma alone; readers share and understand her feelings, helping them comprehend the combination of unreliability and fallibility (Olson 96). She uses scriptotherapy to articulate her feelings of hurt, guilt, and regret, revisiting dreary circumstances to gain new meaning and understanding. This process helps Briony heal from her unpleasant memories through creative writing, aiding her recovery and mental well-being. Sharing one's narrative holds therapeutic value, allowing the narrator to feel less isolated in their trauma.

Similarly, in *Black Dogs*, Jeremy gains a holistic understanding of events by sharing his trauma through memoir-writing. His search for the truth about June's experience reveals his own orphaned childhood, darker periods of youth, and relationships with his sister and Sally. Despite the unreliability of his narration, Jeremy's memoir engages readers intuitively with the power of the story, giving it a mythic status (Head 117). Jeremy's representation of June's trauma through unreliability conveys the feeling of trauma more appropriately than chronological facts. By forming unreliability and employing techniques such as a disrupted timeline and inaccurate facts, readers can better understand the narrator's

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feelings during the trauma and their fallibility (Olson 96).

Ultimately, Jeremy is neither a liar nor a fraud; he craves truth and aims to uncover it through his reading-writing task (Badulescu 584). This study demonstrates that unreliable narrators use narrative to process and convey their trauma, inviting readers to empathize and engage with their experiences.

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ETHICS DECLARATIONS:

Competing interests:

The authors affirm that there are no competing interests to disclose.

Ethical approval:

This research has been conducted in accordance with ethical standards. However, it is important to note that formal ethical approval was not deemed necessary for this study.

Informed consent:

The content of this article does not involve any studies with human participants that would necessitate obtaining informed consent from the subjects.