

Irony as a Saving Grace

The Constructive Potential of Ironic Metareference
in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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1. Constructive Irony – Saving Grace or Cop-Out?

No-one would ever accuse me of being a trendsetter, or even an early adopter. And since I have chosen irony as a topic for my thesis, I am in no great danger of changing this any time soon. It might not be the smartest move to open my thesis with such concessions, but the evidence is hard to ignore: as an artistic strategy, as a topic of study, irony is hardly cutting-edge at this point.

In fact, the ironic mindset, so fashionable since World War I, has been faced with increasing backlash for a while. It might have had its use during the heyday of postmodernism, so the general consensus, but it has overstayed its welcome - we as a culture should be ready to move on; indeed, our failure to have done so already is pretty much everything that is wrong with this age, as widespread irony and ridicule have become "agents of stasis and despair" (Foster Wallace 1993: 171), signifying "cultural numbness, resignation and defeat" (Wampole 2012, online). Initially valued as a defense against rampant commodification of all aspects of life, irony itself has been commodified by the establishment long ago (cf. Young, Vanderbilt 1994: 6-7), having "completely lost its subversive edge" (Leypoldt 2004: 26), making it even easier for the aspiring non-conformist to sell out (cf. McGowan 1986: 38) while still maintaining an affectation of non-conformism.

Irony, as employed by the best kind of postmodernist fiction, used to be "rebellious [...] downright socially useful [...] difficult and painful and productive - a grim diagnosis of a long-standing disease" (Wallace 1993: 181), but these merits no longer apply, as irony is increasingly co-opted by the powers that be, the advertising agencies, the big TV networks, the Hollywood industry, the representatives of the status quo and irony is no longer used as a weapon of criticism, but as a shield against it. This is what Wallace (1993) rails against in his essay "*E pluribus unam*", in which he discusses the increasing metareferentiality of U.S. television and demonstrates how TV uses irony as a strategy to immunize itself against any criticism of its appeal to the lowest common denominator, addictiveness and promotion of loneliness and solipsism. In interviews (cf. Wiley 1997, online), Wallace points out that his disdain for irony concerns only the newly emerging pre-emptive, criticism deflecting version of it – irony that has become "in and of itself just a mode of social discourse", that is "not

really about causing any sort of change any more”, employed in the service of a conservative rather than a progressive agenda.

We see now that the brunt of this collective ire against our ironic zeitgeist is not so much directed at those good old-fashioned, properly hostile, properly subversive forms of irony – the scathing sarcasm of righteous fury, not afraid of taking sides and laying claim to truth by pointing at its opposite, found, for instance, in Swift’s (1729) *A Modest Proposal*¹ – but at the more contemporary brand, which refuses to commit to either the surface declaration or its complete inversion. It is precisely this currently fashionable, more thoroughly ambiguous form of irony, so often perceived as a lazy cop-out or a cynical co-option of originally subversive strategies, that I would like to defend in this thesis - not because I am such a fan of cop-outs and co-option, necessarily, but because I like nuance and because I like to believe that it does not have to be the end of all meaning to allow for some polyvalence in our communication.

For this purpose I will examine how a certain form of irony (i.e. constructive/pre-emptive/protective irony) can be deployed in a manner that ends up validating its object rather than undermining it, which, while perfectly loathsome in the case of ‘ironic’ racism or ‘ironic’ sexism for instance, should at least refute accusations of substance-less neutrality. And it is not as if you could not possibly employ the same strategy in service of worthier objects after all.

The worthier object I have in mind to be protected by such irony is nothing less than the human longing for narratives. Never out of fashion with mainstream audiences, straightforward storytelling fell out of favour with the literary elites for a while, which caused much talk about the death of the novel, the literature of exhaustion and the need to put a more self-aware spin on outdated conventions such as grammar, punctuation, characterization and plot (cf. Barth 1967, Lodge 1965, Wolf 2007).

¹ The full title is *A modest proposal for preventing the children of poor people from being a burthen to their parents or the country, and for making them Beneficial to the publick*. Since I will return to this example on several occasions in the course of the following chapters, I opted for a shortened version of the title for the sake of consistency and clarity.

Marveling at the meta-referential pyrotechnics of postmodernist literature exploding fourth walls left and right can be fun for a while, but there is only so much mileage you can get out of metalepsis and its ontological disruptions and similar devices. Sooner or later, even devoted literature snobs will want their stories back – stories with characters you can relate to, set in fictional worlds you can immerse yourself in, providing a mental escape from which you might return with fresh insights about life that might actually be applicable to the world you physically inhabit to some degree or another. Hence we can observe an increasing trend towards neo-realism, a return of the narrative, a rediscovery of arts' social responsibilities, corresponding to an ethico-political turn in critical theory – all symptoms of “some type of renewed faith in the possibility of what postmodernism has repeatedly identified as impossible: meaning, truth, representational accuracy” (Toth 2010: 3).

Toth (2010: 77), however, also warns against drawing a premature conclusion that postmodernism was a dead-end and that we can proceed as before, ignoring its lessons about the illusory nature of certain teleological ideals concerning the possibility of objectivity, transparency and communication. But rather than forever harping on these impossibilities via postmodernist deconstruction, artists have the option of “[acknowledging] the impossibility of such lures while simultaneously and emphatically articulating the ways in which they remain necessary to any critical and/or aesthetic enterprise” (cf. Toth 2010: 77).

This, of course, introduces a certain spirit of “have your cake and eat it” to the artistic enterprise. As so often when confronted with a paradox, we might look for salvation in irony, a popular coping mechanism in the face of cognitive dissonance since, arguably, times immemorial (or Romanticism at the very least). Toth (2010: 80) points out how humour can serve as a vehicle to honor the ‘impossible possibility’ of finding and communicating meaning in this world. Appreciating art on this level would require readers to question aesthetic illusion and the immersion it enables while simultaneously embracing it, to keep in mind their own emotional manipulation by the narrative, while emotionally investing in its characters anyway.

The days of naïve, utter immersion in the fictional world are unlikely to return for the sophisticated reader; and yet too much detachment resulting in a purely intellectual approach to fiction yields diminishing returns. Aesthetic illusion and the direction of reader sympathies – so easily abused, so dangerous in certain hands – can bring great harm and great benefits,

shaping our perceptions, distracting us from, maybe even blinding us to certain realities and making us aware of others. Stories hold a power that needs to be both feared and enjoyed, deconstructed and celebrated. And this is where ironic metareference comes in.

Ironic metareferences are those elements of the text that do not only highlight the fictionality and/or constructedness of the proceedings, but also the paradoxical nature of our reaction to this fictionality/constructedness (eg. the incongruity of our suspension of disbelief in the face of something explicitly marked as the opposite of fact), for instance through metalepsis. In this thesis I will focus on ironic metareferences in written narratives. The chief object of ironic metareference in fiction is the pact between narrator and audience about meeting certain requirements of a genre - eg. plausibility in the case of realism, poetic justice in the case of fairy tales - in return for suspension of disbelief in the service of aesthetic illusion and empathy with the fictional characters. Through ironic metareference, we are not just reminded that people regularly make these kinds of pacts but also that there is something ever so slightly absurd about making them. The term 'absurd' however does not always have to be charged with negative connotations – there can be something quite refreshing and playful in embracing the absurdity.

Such ironic metareferences are often considered detrimental to the moral message, aesthetic illusion and emotional connection between reader, author and fictional character, for instance by Wilde (1980: 6), who sees “distance and detachment” as the “inevitable corollary of an overly exigent sense of control and the special stigmat of modernist irony [...] resulting in a total paralysis, the poised stasis of irresolution”.

Any strong argument for the *inevitably destructive* impact of ironic metareferences on aesthetic illusion and emotional connection between reader and text, however, would have to rest on three premises:

1. Aesthetic illusion and emotional connection are inextricably linked. Only the reader who is fully immersed into the narrative will be able to relate to its inhabitants.
2. Aesthetic illusion can only exist in a binary state - either maintained or destroyed. Once the fourth wall is breached, it breaks down completely.

3. The function of irony is always aggressive. In every scenario irony serves the denigration of its object.

In my thesis I would like to challenge these notions:

1. Aesthetic illusion and emotional connection are indeed closely linked for many readers in most cases – but not completely, and not for all readers. Consider sophisticated readers cursed with an eye for patterns who have encountered enough fiction in their life to observe its recurring elements and processes: They will not need any fourth-wall-breaking to spot popular tropes and narrative conventions – once you have learned to see them, you cannot unsee them - and thus are constantly reminded of the fictionality of the text whether the text itself draws attention to it or not. If this means that they can no longer emotionally connect to the heroes of our stories that would be bad news for the sophisticated reader indeed.
2. A playful, critical approach to creating an aesthetic illusion does not have to mean destroying it completely.
3. I will look at a so-far under-examined function of irony that does not mainly serve to signal the ironist's detachment from the attitude ironized, but rather allows him or her to endorse it in a context where it would otherwise be met with instant disapproval as it runs counter to the dominant discourse. This particular brand of irony is referred to as constructive irony (cf. Wolf 2007). I will argue that this constructive effect potentially applies not only to predominantly heteroreferential but also to predominantly metareferential uses of irony.

The main aim of my thesis is to demonstrate how the effect of constructive irony can be achieved in literature, as illustrated by the example of Ian *McEwan's Atonement*. As a hybrid narrative combining realist, modernist and postmodernist elements, maintaining a precarious balance between straightforward storytelling, realist ambitions towards historicity and metafictional mind-games, *Atonement* does not only provide many instances of ironic metareference in line with the postmodernist aspects of its sensibility, but also a great showcase for the more traditional appeals of narratives with regard to aesthetic illusion, immersion, and emotional connection. This makes *Atonement* a suitable case study for

examining the question whether irony directed at those old-fashioned narrative pleasures might actually end up serving a constructive rather than a destructive function with regard to its object.

To back up my argument, I will describe uses of metareferential elements in the narrative, identify irony markers by pointing out elements of the text that suggest the author's awareness of a hostile cultural climate for certain narrative traditions and then look for solidarity markers that hint at conventionally rejected notions – in this case the traditional purpose of narratives with regard to aesthetic illusion and empathy – being in line with the implied worldview after all, as the novel itself ends up both questioning and validating those traditions. Whereas the first-order implicit meaning of such ironic metareferences reminds us that conventional narrative devices are manipulative and distortive and should be therefore questioned, there are also solidarity markers that hint at a second-order implicit meaning suggesting that manipulation might sometimes be justified in the service of expanding readers' circles of empathy.

A secondary aim of this thesis consists in discussing constructive irony (with a focus on object-centered constructive irony, in particular in the case of ironic metareference) as a reaction to a postmodernist perception of the exhaustion of traditional forms of artistic expression in the context of fiction. Only if ironic metareference can indeed be employed in a manner that does not necessarily destroy the epistemological and emotional core of a narrative (the aesthetic illusion, the emotional connection to the characters), can it be used to revive traditional forms considered obsolete by postmodernist aesthetics. I view the return of the narrative as inevitable, since the human need for stories is unlikely to be overcome in the foreseeable future. Yet we should not pretend that postmodernism never happened, since the certainties demolished in its wake were very worth demolishing after all and unself-conscious realism remains problematic from an epistemological perspective. Constructive irony could be seen as a way to accomplish a revival of narrativity without sacrificing the insights of postmodernism and therefore deserves thorough examination.

2. Constructive Irony as an Underexamined Concept in Irony Studies

2.1. Definitions of Irony: In Search of a Unified Category of Irony

Originating in ancient Greece as a colloquial way to denote derision, entering written English in the sixteenth century, playing a pivotal role in the German Romantic movement and gaining popularity with American New Critics (cf. Tittler 1985: 32), the term ‘irony’ has acquired numerous, often only tangentially related connotations throughout the long history of its use in varied disciplines such as linguistics, literary studies and philosophy. Finding a definition that is met with universal acceptance therefore poses a certain challenge.

A look at the definition provided by the Oxford English Dictionary (“Irony” 2012) illustrates the difficulty of delineating a unified category of irony, which would require the identification of a lowest common denominator uniting all those various notions associated with irony:

Irony:

1. A figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used; usually taking the form of sarcasm or ridicule in which laudatory expressions are used to imply condemnation or contempt
2. fig. A condition of affairs or events of a character opposite to what was, or might naturally be, expected; a contradictory outcome of events as if in mockery of the promise and fitness of things. (In French *ironie du sort*.)
3. In an etymological sense: Dissimulation, pretence; esp. in reference to the dissimulation of ignorance practised by Socrates as a means of confuting an adversary (Socratic irony).
4. spec. in Theatr. (freq. as dramatic or tragic irony), the incongruity created when the (tragic) significance of a character's speech or actions is revealed to the audience but unknown to the character concerned; the literary device so used, orig. in Greek tragedy. (“Irony” 2012)

Hutchens (1960: 352) sees deception as the common thread running through all these definitions: a deliberate disparity between appearances and reality. Even in the case of cosmic irony, when deception seems unintentional, as the definition provided fails to specify any deceiver to hold such intentions, Hutchens (*ibid.*) argues that the common thread of deception emerges, once you consider how few people attribute the turning points in their biographies to mere chance and how so many prefer to believe in some sort of higher force guiding their lives. If such believers in destiny were to perceive themselves as victims of cosmic irony, they

would feel mocked by the higher entity of their choice: the ironist in the case of cosmic irony is Fate personified, assuming the role of the playwright in the drama of our lives (or rather we ourselves if we choose to perceive the involvement of such an entity as Fate, dramatizing our own lives, preferring to view our suffering as tragic instead of random, which makes cosmic irony just another subset of dramatic irony). Tittler makes a similar argument when he points out that the entity holding the agency in case of irony "may be not a personage but a determining force" (1985: 38) such as fate. The decisive factor seems to be that the context framed by the ironist is broader than the context initially perceived by the victim - we can observe this principle at work in the case of both cosmic and dramatic irony, when remarks and actions that seem perfectly innocuous in a given situation gain a tragic dimension in view of future or past events.

Yet, even if irony can be indeed in all cases conceived as something intentional that requires the agency of an ironist, whether this intention can be accurately described as deception remains questionable. Tracing back the etymology of the term irony, deception seems to be indeed an integral part of the concept - at least at the time when it emerged. In Greek comedy the term *ieron* referred to a stock character with a tendency to defeat his opponents by downplaying his strengths, usually contrasted with the *alazon*, another stock character characterized by his bragging. When Socrates popularized a similar strategy - downplaying his knowledge, not for the purpose of defeating but for the purpose of enlightening his interlocutors - the term lost some of its original negative charge, although the connotation of deception remained (cf. Müller 1988: 200). But that does not necessarily settle the question of the term's current meaning as the word acquired different uses over time. In fact, the only case of the definitions still in use where the audience buying into (or at least pretending to buy into) the deception seems to be somewhat necessary for accomplishing the defined purpose of the subcategory of irony in question, is Socratic Irony. In the process of answering Socrates' questions, his interlocutors are supposed to refine and if necessary discard previously unexamined notions, thus improving their understanding of a problem. For this to work, Socrates' students have to play along with Socrates feigned ignorance by actually trying to supply him with the answers he pretends to lack.

But even if deception may arguably play a role in certain forms of irony, it is important to distinguish irony from lies. While a lie is a deception designed to hide the speaker's true intention, irony is obfuscation designed to reveal it - at least to certain members of the

audience (cf. Müller 1988: 191). Ironists' target audiences know that ironists' expressions are not genuine and ironists know that their target audiences know (cf. Preisendanz 1976: 418). The possibility that other members of the audience might not see through such a potentially transparent deception however greatly adds to its appeal, establishing solidarity based on a shared sense of superiority between the ironist and her audience, thus providing a possible motivation for communicating in such a roundabout way (cf. Stempl 1976: 229).

Maybe it would be safer to describe the common bond in all these definitions of irony not as deception but merely as some sort of deliberate incongruity - between explicit and implicit meaning, expectations and actual outcomes, feigned ignorance and actual expertise, information available to a fictional character and information available to the audience (cf. Gray 1960: 220). Hutchens, however, points out the drawback of casting such a wide net to catch instances of irony: the term loses its powers, as "the assertion that irony is the reconciliation of discords confronts us with the necessity of admitting its presence in every successful arbitration of differences" (1960: 362). Irony may always involve some sort of contrast, but clearly not every contrast is ironic. Binary oppositions are often established for entirely non-ironic purposes as a basic way of organizing and defining a concept, to highlight important features (of a character, a setting, an argument) by throwing them into sharper relief. Hutchens (ibid.) therefore proposes three delineations to distinguish irony from any other kind of juxtaposition, regarding the agency involved, its function, and the playful, not entirely serious disposition of the ironist.

1) Irony is the work of an agent. (cf. Hutchens 1960: 362) Usually sufficiently obvious in the case of verbal irony (although a little bit harder to pin down in the case of more complicated communicative situations such as in literature, where expressions could be either attributed to a focalizer character or an implied author, depending on their categorization as free indirect discourse or narrative comment, cf. Fludernik 2007: 13) and dramatic irony, the ironist is more difficult to identify when it comes to cosmic irony, where the conception of agency relies on a personification of fate. I think that Hutchens makes a compelling argument for agency as one of the defining characteristics of irony however: There might indeed be such a thing as accidental/involuntary irony - it is not just fictional characters who are occasionally unaware of the tragic significance of their statements or actions due to lacking a view of the bigger picture - but in order to perceive this irony it still takes someone to conjure that bigger

picture, and whoever performs this function is the ironist (it may be the victims themselves in retrospection; or some witness who has access to superior knowledge).

2) Ironists achieve their goal by "indicating the opposite, [...] reversing the normal laws of causal connection as the observer expects them to operate" (Hutchens 1960: 362), which results in "psychological shocks and vibrations." (ibid.) This is a part of Hutchens' delineations (and also a part of the definition provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*) I find questionable: Several scholars (cf. Alleman 1973; Holdcroft 1983; Goerlandt 2006; Fludernik 2007; Attardo 2007) stress how verbal irony is not necessarily a complete inversion of literal meaning. Holdcroft (1983: 497) highlights different types of ironic readings: "This is F" meant to be read ironically could mean "This is not an F", "This is not much of an F" or "This is overdone as F", only the first reading inferring the strict opposite of the explicit message.

Furthermore, 'psychological shock' might not be the best way to describe the intended effect of irony on the audience: irony can certainly be unsettling as it disables us from taking messages at face value; it forces us to account for contextual clues as to the actual meaning of a message - understanding irony always requires additional information, also in the case of dramatic/cosmic irony. As a result, we have to pay more attention. But this additional effort required to decode irony can also make us feel superior and smug. Irony can be therefore used to establish solidarity between ironist and audience at the expense of its object and those who do not see through its transparent deception (cf. Stempel 1976: 221; Fludernik 2007: 26).

Leaving arguments about the precise nature of irony's semantic and psychological impact on literal meaning and audience respectively aside for a moment, we are left with the delineation that irony is, at any rate, a device deliberately employed to achieve such semantic and psychological effects. Irony represents a more circumspect approach to conveying meaning that apparently offers some advantages in certain situations compared to straightforward communication on a psychological level.

3) Irony is playful and not necessarily instrumentalized; "a game played for its own sake" (Hutchens 1960: 362). The ironist is characterized by a "curious detached enjoyment, even in the midst of making a serious case that seems to lie behind all that is generally agreed to be irony" (ibid.). While this thesis will be concerned with the question if and how a certain kind

of irony can be used to further a larger agenda (i.e. the revitalization of traditional forms in a postmodernist cultural climate) it seems important to keep in mind that irony is often applied for its own sake.

Another aspect of this delineation worth highlighting is the notion of detachment conventionally associated with irony. This will be particularly relevant with regard to the use of irony in fiction and its impact on the emotional connection between reader and author, reader and fictional character. I would like to question the notion (cf. Wampole 2012) that detachment on the part of the ironist is always intended to result in equal detachment on the part of the audience.

Since irony is such an abstract notion, covering such a vast range of only tenuously related phenomena, Sperber (1981: 298) suggests that rather than trying to pin down an unassailable list of sufficient and necessary characteristics on a quest for a unified category of irony, attention should be rather directed to effects produced by irony and the psychological processes that explain them.

2.2. Subcategories of Irony: Rhetorical Irony vs Structural Irony

Since it proves difficult to bring various notions of irony under the same conceptual umbrella, the order-craving mind may find some consolation in establishing slightly more straightforward conceptual sub-divisions. The most readily apparent distinction is the one between rhetoric and non-rhetoric forms of irony, with Socratic irony, sarcasm, understatement and self-irony serving as standard examples of the former, and cosmic as well as dramatic irony serving as examples for the latter.

Whereas rhetorical irony can be a feature of discrete speech acts (namely those speech acts which are characterized by some sort of tension between explicit expression and implicit meaning), other forms of irony only emerge from the contemplation of the narrative as a whole. This delineation is not entirely satisfying, since any form of irony, rhetorical irony included, will necessarily require the consideration of a wider context. Yet it can be observed that certain forms of irony are more complicated, more pervasive and harder to pin down on specific utterances.

Hamilton (2006) contrasts rhetorical irony with structural irony in this regard, defining structural irony as “an implication of alternate or reversed meaning that pervades a work” (45), listing unreliable narrators, naïve protagonists as well as filtering the same events through multiple, at times contradictory point of views as common techniques to achieve this effect (ibid.). The shared communiality of all these techniques is that readers are invited to interpret events and intentions in a different manner than the chosen focalizer character, after having been provided with hints of the focalizer’s unreliability, bias or lack of pertinent knowledge and experience.

In contrast to rhetorical irony, which can be attributed to specific utterances, this kind of irony colours the audience’s reading of the entire work. Abram (1985) also highlights the pervasive quality of structural irony. In contrast to verbal irony, it is not merely some occasional flourish adding a wrinkle here or there, but a “structural feature which serves to sustain a duplicity of meaning and evaluation throughout the work” (98).

Abrams (ibid) lists structural irony next to dramatic irony, implying a distinction the necessity of which, however, remains unclear to me, since the cognitive processes at work seem rather similar. Just as structural irony is usually achieved by using a point of view bound to distort events due to lacking (or, in the case of unreliable narrators, deliberately denying) insight into the whole picture, dramatic irony relies on a disparity of knowledge between a character and the audience and is rooted less in individual utterances but the narrative as a whole. I will therefore classify dramatic irony as a subset of structural irony.

Another subset of structural irony could be seen in as frame related irony resulting from incongruities of style and subject, as found for instance in mock-epic poetry (cf. Fludernik 2007: 11). Here the effect of irony is not achieved by asymmetric information dividing characters’ and audiences’ perspectives, but by the different emotional and intellectual weight placed on the level of plot and discourse, enounced and enunciation. As with other forms of structural irony, however, the effect is not produced by specific utterances, but pervades the work as a whole.

Subcategory of Irony		Irony achieved through tension between	Ironist
Rhetorical Irony (such as Sarcasm, Self-irony, Understatement)		Implicit and explicit meaning of specific speech acts	Can be intra- or extradiegetic
Structural Irony	Viewpoint Related Irony	Insights provided by a character and insights available to the audience	Can only be extra-diegetic.
	Dramatic Irony		
	Frame Related Irony	Form and content	

Figure 1 Subcategories of Irony

Figure 1 shows my attempt at bringing some system to the various subcategories of irony discussed above. I will use the term ‘structural irony’ as a heading for an form of irony relying on structural features pervading the entire work and the term ‘viewpoint related irony’ for structural irony in the more narrow sense, accomplished by the use of naïve, unreliable or multiple contradictory narrators, as defined by Hamilton (2006: 45). The figure also reveals another distinction between rhetoric and structural irony, as the latter is only available to extra-diegetic ironists, while the former can be employed by both.

Since I am interested in the function of irony in fiction I will focus on irony as a communicative act. (Rhetoric and dramatic irony clearly relate to a process of communication, cosmic irony maybe less so, although it could be perceived as ironic punishment and thus as a message from the universe). In this context, irony is an ingredient that can be used in the process of communication to modify the meaning of a message, just as spices are used in the process of cooking to modify the taste of a dish.

Whether this kind of irony should be classified as verbal is not always a clear-cut case. Consider for instance dramatic irony: Gray (1960) uses the term ‘unconscious irony’ for dramatic irony, referring to the result of characters in a play expressing something that gains another (usually tragic) meaning in the light of information available to the audience but not to the character on the stage. He lists it under the heading of verbal irony, which makes sense since it usually involves characters expressing themselves verbally and is created by the

dramatist in writing down the play. But the communication of this form of irony does not necessarily rely on words. You could stage *Romeo and Juliet* as a pantomime and still convey the dramatic irony of Romeo's suicide. The same applies to other forms of structural irony, such as frame related irony (cf. Fludernik 2007: 11). In novels and short stories these kinds of irony take a verbal form, but since they can also survive the transfer of the narrative to another medium, they are only technically, not intrinsically verbal. A good example for this can be found in McEwan's *Atonement*. The novel mines quite a bit of frame-related irony from its evocation and subversion of conventions of the country-house genre. The setting is verbally constructed. The film achieves the same effect with visual representations.

2.3. Functions of Irony: Irony as a Communicative Act and Irony as a Theory of Meaning

Although my approach to irony in this thesis will be mainly rooted in linguistics and literary studies, it is certainly worth considering alternative approaches: after all, the term 'irony' is not only used to describe certain communicative acts, but sometimes a whole mindset, a way of seeing, a habit of thinking, a particular epistemological approach. Irony is not just an important element in the toolbox of communication, but of philosophy in general. Philosophers such as Socrates, Kierkegaard, Hegel or Rorty for instance all share a certain affinity for irony. Doing proper justice to their contributions to a philosophical understanding of irony would be beyond the scope of this thesis.

Considering that fiction always also acts as a vehicle for implied worldviews however, it would be short-sighted to utterly ignore the epistemological implications of irony, especially since a clear line between irony as a speech act and irony as a theory of meaning is difficult to draw. Colebrook (2007: 5) argues against such a clear distinction: the mere fact that it is possible for any speech act to be ironic tells us something about the relationship between language and meaning, namely that it is ultimately arbitrary and uncertain. Consummate ironists do not only convey a certain detached attitude towards the object of their irony, but to language in general, highlighting its ultimate lack of complete transparency and inevitable failure to perfectly capture reality. This link between irony and epistemology will be particularly relevant when looking at irony in the light of postmodernist sensibilities.

For the time being, however, it seems most useful to begin by examining irony in the context of a communicative situation and to assume its typically verbal nature, applying the

frameworks of linguistics and literary studies. Such frameworks suggest a triadic model to capture the communicative situation, comprised of ironist, audience and 'victim'/object of irony, the latter not necessarily being physically present at the time of the ironic speech act. In this traditional triadic model focused on hostile irony, the main function of irony is seen in the creation of solidarity between ironist and audience at the expense of a victim of irony (cf. Stempel 1976: 229). This solidarity is usually supposed to rest on a shared sense of twofold superiority: ironists and audience do not only feel superior to those who would sincerely hold the opinion in question, but also to those who would fail to decode the irony (cf. Clark 2007: 27).

Sometimes two roles can be filled by the same person, for instance when ironists make themselves the object of their irony in the case of self deprecating humour. Warning (1976: 417) also mentions the possibility of audience and object being the same person, in the case of benevolent (constructive) irony based on pre-established solidarity. If audience and object of irony are conflated in the case of hostile irony, an important function of irony - establishing solidarity with the audience - has to be foregone.

The process of ironic interpretation is triggered by irony markers, which can be transmitted via a verbal, visual, auditory or contextual channel. Without irony markers ironic speech acts could not be distinguished from straightforward utterances or lies, since the former distinction disqualifies the ironic utterance from being taken at face value and the latter requires this to be obvious to the audience (cf. Müller 1988: 192).

Holdcroft (1983: 497-498) names subverting clauses ("You are the cleverest person I've met - this evening, that is") and patently false descriptions ("eg. John Wayne in True Grit describing a confederate who aimed at the man on a horse, but shot the horse, as a 'horse-shooter', implying that it is his profession or policy to shoot horses") as examples of verbal irony markers. Many more examples can be found in a list provided by Warning (1976: 419 - 420): all forms of exaggerated affirmation through hyperbole such as emphasis, repetition, accumulation, use of superlatives, use of clichés and euphemisms; rhetorical devices that forcibly combine incongruous elements such as oxymoron and zeugma; the marking of a statement as free indirect discourse of an unreliable character; the establishment of a chain of causality that is transparently absurd, linking facts in a way that evokes unexpected connotations. Yet Warning (ibid.) also stresses that even sentences which appear utterly

unremarkable on a surface level can be used to convey an ironic meaning, depending on the context. Sometimes the mere combination of speaker and communicative situation may be sufficient to trigger an ironic reading.

Attardo (2007: 147) highlights the unreliability of most irony markers (intonation can be misleading in case of deadpan delivery for instance) and suggests purposeful inappropriateness of an utterance in view of a given context or the known set of beliefs embraced by the ironist as the only way to spot irony. Take for instance the use of clichés in literature: sometimes it marks irony; sometimes it merely marks a bad writer. In order to determine whether any given over-used trope or phrase is intended to trigger an ironic reading, I need to make an educated guess whether the author is aware of the clichéd nature of this trope or phrase and uses it on purpose to undermine a certain meaning, or if he or she just could not think of anything else because they lack imagination. For that guess to be educated instead of merely random, I need to have some familiarity with the author's overall style and worldview (cf. Warning 1976: 421).

2.3.1. Pragmatic Accounts of Irony: Pretence vs. Mention Theory

Grice (1975: 49 - 53) regards irony as an example of conversational implicature, which results from flaunting the first maxim of quality ('Do not say what you believe to be false'). Conversational implicature occurs, when speakers are sufficiently blatant about their failure to fulfil one of the maxims of the communicative principle pertaining to quality, quantity, relevance and manner, so that they cannot be accused of an intention to mislead, justifying the assumption that the overall cooperative principle is supposed to be upheld. Grice (ibid.) illustrates his point by conjuring a scenario in which a person A has been betrayed by a former friend X and goes on to say that 'X is a fine friend'. Since it is obvious to the audience that this cannot be true in A's eyes and it is obvious to A that this is obvious to the audience, Grice suggests that "A must be trying to get across some other proposition than the one he purports to be putting forward" (53).

Sperber (1981: 296) however points out several problems with Grice's account of irony: It fails to provide a precise description of the process leading from literal meaning to conversational implicature. The sufficiently blatant violation of the maxim of quality, considered by Grice to be a defining element of irony, does not occur in the case of ironical

questions for instance. Furthermore, framing a statement with irony markers does not necessarily imply that its literal meaning is utterly untrue - sometimes irony markers might just indicate that the literal statement is exaggerated, understated or irrelevant to a particular context. Not all false or irrelevant statements are cases of irony however. Flaunting the maxims of quality or relevance is therefore neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of irony. Grice's account also lacks an explanation for the ironist's motivation. What possible reason could someone have to choose such a roundabout way to express something?

Post-Gricean accounts of irony address these deficiencies by looking for possible motivations for rational speakers to convey their message by conversational implicature instead of simply opting for a literal expression. The two most important approaches in that regard are the mention theory of irony, proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1981) and the pretence theory of irony, proposed by Clark and Gerrig (1984). Whereas Sperber and Wilson (1981) regard irony as an echoic allusion to an utterance or thought attributed to another speaker intended to convey the ironist's tacit dissociation from that statement, Clark and Gerrig (1984) describe irony as pretence with regard to the performance of a speech act. According to mention theory ironists do not actually use a certain expression to vocalize a genuine sentiment, but merely to echo a sentiment someone else might have expressed in these circumstances. They mention something someone else or a former less experienced version of themselves might have said with regard to the topic and the audience is supposed to recognize this inauthentic use of language. According to pretence theory ironists do not actually perform a particular speech act, but merely pretend to perform it, expecting the audience to recognize their performance as theatrical.

The difference may seem academical and indeed both approaches share many similarities: Both mention and pretence theory account for the fact that irony cannot always be defined as a mere inversion of literal meaning, explore possible motivations for relying on implied rather than explicit meaning to fulfil the cooperative principle and see the function of irony in highlighting a discrepancy between reality and its representation (cf. Wilson 2006: 1726). Yet both theories highlight different aspects of the process of ironic comprehension, which has sparked debates among theorists in search of an all-compassing account (cf. Clark 2007, Attardo 2007).

Take for instance the problem of identifying ironic echoes: according to mention theory, such ironic allusions are not limited to verbatim reproductions of previous utterances by another speaker (or the original speakers themselves, at a previous date), but can more generally refer to any allusion to conceptual content such as moral or cultural norms intended to indicate a discrepancy between a certain view of the world and the actual reality of circumstances (cf. Sperber/Wilson 1981). Clark (2007: 27) uses the example of Swift's (1729) *A Modest Proposal* to point out an apparent weakness of this approach in comparison to the pretence theory of irony, reminding us of the unlikelihood that any such proposal would ever have been actually uttered by a speaker with genuine intentions or that the notion of dining on babies would be sanctioned by existing cultural and moral norms. Such objections can be countered by arguing that the object of ironic mention in this case is not necessarily the specific and obviously ridiculously over-the-top notion that marketing baby meat can solve the economic crisis in Ireland, which is indeed neither a likely utterance of an individual speaker nor a likely component of conventional wisdom. Instead the irony in this example is targeted more generally at the whole structure and presumption of rational Enlightenment discourse and the utter disregard for the plight and rights of the Irish population at the heart of proposals in this vein, even if the non-fictional examples for such proposals never went quite as far.

This counter argument, however, does not change the fact that mention theory relies heavily on the notion of implicit echoes without defining any criteria for distinguishing implicit echoes from non-echoic utterances (cf. Clark 2007; Attardo 2007). Attardo (2007: 147) points out that widening the category of ironic echoes to include allusions to hypothetical speakers introduces a new difficulty: the problem of infinite regression. Considering that ironic echoes are not limited to verbatim reproductions, unique wording can no longer be seen as a guarantee of authentic expression, since every sentence ever uttered could be an ironic echo - in the absence of clear signals for mention, there is no way to ascertain if a speaker utters a genuine sentiment instead of merely mentioning someone else's (hypothetical) utterance. The same problem, however, occurs when accounting for irony based on pretence theory, since there are no universally reliable ways to signal pretence.

Adding a further argument for the superiority of the pretence theory of irony over the mention theory of irony, Clark (2007: 27) praises its ability to distinguish between two different kinds of victims of irony - people who would sincerely hold the misguided opinion that the ironist

pretends to share (people who do not realize that the professed opinion is inappropriate) and people among the recipients who fail to see through the pretence in the ironist's professed embrace of this opinion (people who realize that the professed opinion is inappropriate, but fail to realize that the ironists realizes this too). Ironists may not intend to deceive anyone - they may fully expect their audience to grasp their true meaning (in fact, one could argue that they rely on at least part of their audience to grasp their true meaning; what else after all, would distinguish them from liars?) - yet the mere possibility that some member of the audience might not get the irony certainly increases its appeal.

I agree that one of the chief functions of irony is to establish a sense of superiority in members of the audience who correctly decode it. But I disagree that the mention theory of irony cannot account for this particular function of irony, which is why I do not share Clark's opinion that that this particular function of irony necessarily supports the pretence theory of irony. The audience does not have to derive its sense of superiority from failing to fall for the pretence - why not feel superior about the ability to recognize something as an echo instead, which would be in line with the mention theory of irony? This ability after all requires knowledge of the original utterance (or the kind of general idea the ironic utterance is meant to echo). People who miss the irony of something usually fall victim to their ignorance of these contextual clues, of the history of ideas, of the shared language of a community – not necessarily to their gullibility. The kind of ignorance required to be deceived by a liar is quite different from the kind of ignorance required to miss the irony of an utterance - in fact it does not have to be ignorance at all that sometimes motivates the leap of faith exploited by the liar, but a conscious choice to prioritize open-mindedness and trust over minimizing the risk of betrayal. People who fall for liars are not necessarily intellectually inferior. But who could inspire more feelings of intellectual superiority than someone who mistakes a platitude for revolutionary insight? Of course you can deal in platitudes non-ironically - not every echo is ironic and ideas do not lose their truth value just because they are conventional - but in this case you will neither draw attention to their conventionality (because then, it does not matter where the idea comes from, whether it is old or new) nor dress them up as revolutionary insight, which is after all, just another way to draw attention to their conventionality.

Clark's (2007: 28) final argument in favour of the pretence theory is that it is better suited to show similarities between irony as a rhetorical device, dramatic irony and irony of fate, the latter two of which are difficult to frame in terms of echoic allusion. When judging arguments about the superiority of either theory over the other however, it is important to keep in mind

that irony is such a loosely defined concept covering a wide range of only tenuously related phenomena. Dramatic irony and cosmic irony may be more easily related to pretence; other forms of irony can be better explained by echoic allusion. Some of these forms of irony do not even fall within the realm of pragmatics, as they are not directly concerned with overt communication (eg. cosmic irony), which makes the application of linguistic theories questionable in the first place – there may be little use in searching for a general theory of irony accounting equally well for every single instance of it in order to dispute the validity of alternative accounts (cf. Wilson 2006: 1727).

To sum up, while Clark raises many objections with regard to the mention theory of irony in order to advocate for the superiority of the pretence theory, I remain unconvinced and conclude that mention theory is better suited for the purpose of my thesis. Pointing out the improbability that certain ironic statements have ever been uttered sincerely does not refute the mention theory of irony, because ironic echoes are not limited to likely utterances of individual speakers or likely components of conventional wisdom, but can encompass the whole structure and presumptions of certain modes of discourse. Highlighting the importance of distinguishing between different sort of victims of irony – those who fail to realize that the speaker does not make sense and those who do realize this, but fail to realize that the speaker realizes it as well - does not refute the mention theory, because it actually support this distinction just as well. Clark's final argument that the pretence theory of irony is better suited to linking irony as a rhetorical device, dramatic irony and irony of fate, is less relevant for this particular thesis, which will strongly focus on rhetorical irony.

I see the primary appeal of mention theory in its comparatively value neutral connotations more in line with a conception of irony that also allows for non-aggressive forms. The association of irony with pretence suggests, if not necessarily a complete negation, at least a hostile undermining of the literal meaning in the process of ironic interpretation, whereas a conception of irony as echoic mention seems more in line with the possibility of a peaceful coexistence of literal and ironic meaning. This aspect of irony as echoic mention is particularly relevant with regard to the discussion of the predominantly hostile or predominantly protective function of various uses of irony.

2.3.2. Destructive (Hostile) and Constructive (Protective) Irony

The terms irony and sarcasm are sometimes used almost interchangeably. Sarcasm after all involves the framing of the apparent message with a metamessage modifying the initial content (cf. Haimann 1998: 12), a process very much in line with the previously established definition of irony. Yet Haimann (1998: 21-22) insists on a distinction: considering that sarcasm is closely connected to people, while the concept of irony can also be applied to situations, it becomes clear the irony is the broader term. Haiman proposes intentionality as the distinguishing feature, citing dramatic irony as an example for unintentional and unconscious irony in contrast to sarcasm which is always intentional and conscious. Following Hutchens (1960: 352), who argues that intentionality is a defining feature of all forms of irony - even though perceiving intentionality might involve some amount of mental acrobatics in certain cases, such as the personification of fate as an ironist, - I suggest to slightly rephrase this general idea: sarcasm is usually verbal, or at least - if one can conceive of such a thing as a 'sarcastic hug' or a 'sarcastic pat on the back' - a feature of overt communication. There is no such thing as structural/situational sarcasm, but there can be structural/situational irony. Whereas the question of intentionality can be complicated in certain cases of irony – dramatic irony, after all, is only unconscious and unintentional when you consider the interaction between characters on the stage; expand the communicative model to include playwright and audience however and things will look quite more deliberate – it is a more straightforward affair in case of sarcasm: the sarcastic intention is held by the person making the utterance and it is unquestionably hostile.

Haimann (1998: 21) highlights the importance of this hostile function, when he defines sarcasm as "overt irony intentionally used by the speaker as a form of verbal aggression". One possible motivation for employing sarcasm could be the desire to circumvent conventional obstacles to express direct aggression (such as for the ironist unfavourable power relationships, standards of politeness): if attacked directly, the victim could address the insult and demand a justification. By employing sarcasm the aggressor can maintain plausible deniability, thereby decreasing the likelihood of the victim's retaliation (cf. Stempel 1976: 220).

Not every ironist is necessarily a sarcast, as Haimain (1998: 22) points out, when examining the epistemological implications of the ironic and the sarcastic frame of mind, as gentler

forms of irony may signal an entirely different approach to life, truth and the perception of reality: “The sarcastic perceives only two versions of reality” (ibid.) - reality as he or she perceives it and fake reality, staged to fool less enlightened observers. Ironists in contrast are less confident about their ultimate grasp on objective reality, acknowledging the possibility that “the stage truth is closer to ultimate reality than what he or she thinks is ‘real life’” (ibid.).

If the aggressive form of verbal irony merits its own label, it follows that there has to be another non-aggressive form of verbal irony. Irony does not necessarily have to be wounding - it can be employed in a playful and affectionate manner (cf. Holdcroft 1983: 496). The fact that no label readily presents itself for this subcategory of irony however, signals that this non-aggressive function of irony has not yet obtained as much scholarly attention.

So far, most research has seen the main function of irony in denigrating its victim (cf. Stempel 1976: 217). Verbal irony is often defined as “implying something by expressing its opposite” (Müller 1988: 189), for instance in case of criticism by ironic praise or praise by ironic criticism. The latter phenomenon, also described as negative irony or asteism (cf. Attardo 2007: 138) occurs less frequently. This asymmetry of affect manifested in the increased probability of people ironically calling a bad idea ‘clever’ rather than the other way round is sometimes seen as a characteristic feature of irony (cf. Clark 2007: 27). Thus irony is conventionally regarded as an instrument of veiled hostility.

This reduction of irony to its aggressive function can be attacked from two directions: Firstly, the conception of irony as a simple inversion of the literal meaning only applies to the crudest special cases and usually fails to capture the nuances of literary irony (cf. Allemann 1973: 41–42; Attardo 2007: 156; Holdcroft 1983: 495; Fludernik 2007: 28). Taking an ironic stance towards a subject might merely imply an ambivalent attitude, not necessarily a negative one.

Secondly, Wolf (2007: 28) raises the question, whether conveying hostility is indeed always the dominant function of irony, arguing that irony can also be used as a strategy to introduce notions that are – for whatever reason – perceived as problematic in the context of the dominant discourse. We are probably most familiar with this strategy in the context of self-depreciating humor: by taking an ironic stance towards yourself, you can anticipate and

deflect criticism. Wolf (ibid.) suggests the term ‘constructive irony’ to account for this potentially protective function of irony.

According to Wolf’s criticism (2007: 29-31) the traditional model of irony is not suited to capture non-negative functions of irony. It is easy to see how the model fails to account for self-irony. In this case, the main function does not lie in pretended solidarity with the victim of irony, but rather in pretended detachment. People who use self-irony do not aim at denigrating themselves, but rather at making themselves appear smaller (less threatening, more agreeable) by modestly acknowledging the potentially negative expectation of her audience. Wolf therefore takes issue with the term “victim of irony” as it precludes any potential non-aggressive function of irony and suggests replacing the labels “ironist / victim / ally” by “ironist/ object of irony/ audience”. Irony always involves pretended solidarity, but whereas conventional aggressive irony is about pretending solidarity with the object of irony, constructive irony is about pretending solidarity with the audience (which is likely to be hostile to the object of irony).

While the protective function of self-irony is well documented, Wolf (2007: 28-29) also draws our attention to the object-centred variant of constructive irony, in which the protection is extended from ironists to the object of their irony. He therefore suggests a modification of the traditional triadic model of irony, adding further stages involving the identification of solidarity markers and the inference of a second-order implicit meaning to the formerly three-staged process.

Stages of Irony		Description:	Intended Effect
Aggressive Irony (Traditional Model of Irony)	I) Communication of explicit message	“X is good”	Pretension of solidarity with proponents of X
	II) Identification of irony markers	Eg. hyperbole, self-referentiality, metatextuality, oxymorons, etc.	Undermining the explicit message
	III) 1) Inference of first-order implicit message	“X is bad” / “X is not quite so good”	Dominant Detachment from the object of irony; dominant solidarity with the audience, who is in-the-know (that no person in their right mind would seriously claim X is good – at least not without reservations)
Constructive Irony	2) Identification of solidarity markers	A look at the sum total of norms implied in the text suggests that endorsement of X is actually more consistent with the ironist’s implied worldview.	Undermining the detachment from the object of irony/the solidarity with the audience
	3) Inference of second-order implicit message =>	“X is actually not that bad”/ „Of course we all know that X is problematic, but ultimately proponents of X might have a point after all”	Dominant endorsement of the object of irony while preserving some residual detachment from it, as well as residual solidarity with the prejudiced audience.

Figure 2 Adaptation of the Triadic Model of Irony to Account for Constructive Irony

Wolf's extension of the traditional model shows how not every application of irony is necessarily designed to allow ironists to distance themselves from the object of their irony. A similar sentiment can be found in Musil's (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. 1978: 1939) description of his conception of constructive irony:

Ironie ist: einen Klerikalen so darstellen, dass neben ihm auch ein Bolschewik getroffen ist. Einen Trottel so darstellen, dass der Autor plötzlich fühlt: das bin ich ja zum Teil selbst. Diese Art der Ironie die konstruktive Ironie ist im heutigen Deutschland ziemlich unbekannt. Es ist der Zusammenhang der Dinge, aus dem sie nackt hervorgeht. Man hält Ironie für Spott u Bspötteln.

(Irony is: representing a cleric in such a way that, not only he, but also a Bolshevic is captured; representing a fool in such a way that the author suddenly feels: there am I, to some extent. This kind of irony constructive irony is little known in today's Germany. It emerges naked from the interrelationship of things. Irony is mistaken for mockery.)

Musil notes that this form of irony is not well known in Germany – further evidence that this subcategory of irony has been traditionally underexplored – and already uses the term 'konstruktive Ironie' ('constructive irony') for a form of irony that does not result from any hostile intentions on part of the ironist, but is an inherent quality of the way in which things are connected to each other. Ironist who practice this form of irony are just as trapped in this web of contradictory relationship as the objects of their irony - irony in such a sense does not emerge from a position of superior insight due to a non-compromised perspective above the fray, but from the inherent incongruity of reality, which the ironist merely acknowledges. Thus the conventional association of irony with detachment is undermined in the case of constructive irony.

2.3.3. Irony as a Literary Device

One aspect that complicates the analysis of irony in the context of literature is the increased difficulty in determining the agent behind the effect. Fludernik (2007: 13) highlights the importance of distinguishing "between a narrator's or character's being ironic and an ironization of a character, where the (implied) author is assumed to be responsible for the ironic effects of the text".

A first step in examining the function of any given instance of irony is therefore determining whether the ironist operates on the extra- or the intradiegetic level. Sometimes the lines can be blurred, as in the case of free indirect discourse, which is not always unambiguously identifiable as such. In my analysis I will treat free indirect discourse as speech acts of an intradiegetic focalizer character. If such a speaker acts as ironist, this can be relevant for my thesis, in as much as the character could be considered as a mouthpiece of the author, depending on the wider context. This will be of particular interest if intradiegetic speakers remark on the value of fiction, myth, the power of storytelling in general or the merits or deficiencies of specific literary genres, as my thesis is focussed on examining potentially constructive uses of ironic metareference.

The following graphic illustrates the various forms of irony at the disposal of intra- and extradiegetic ironists.

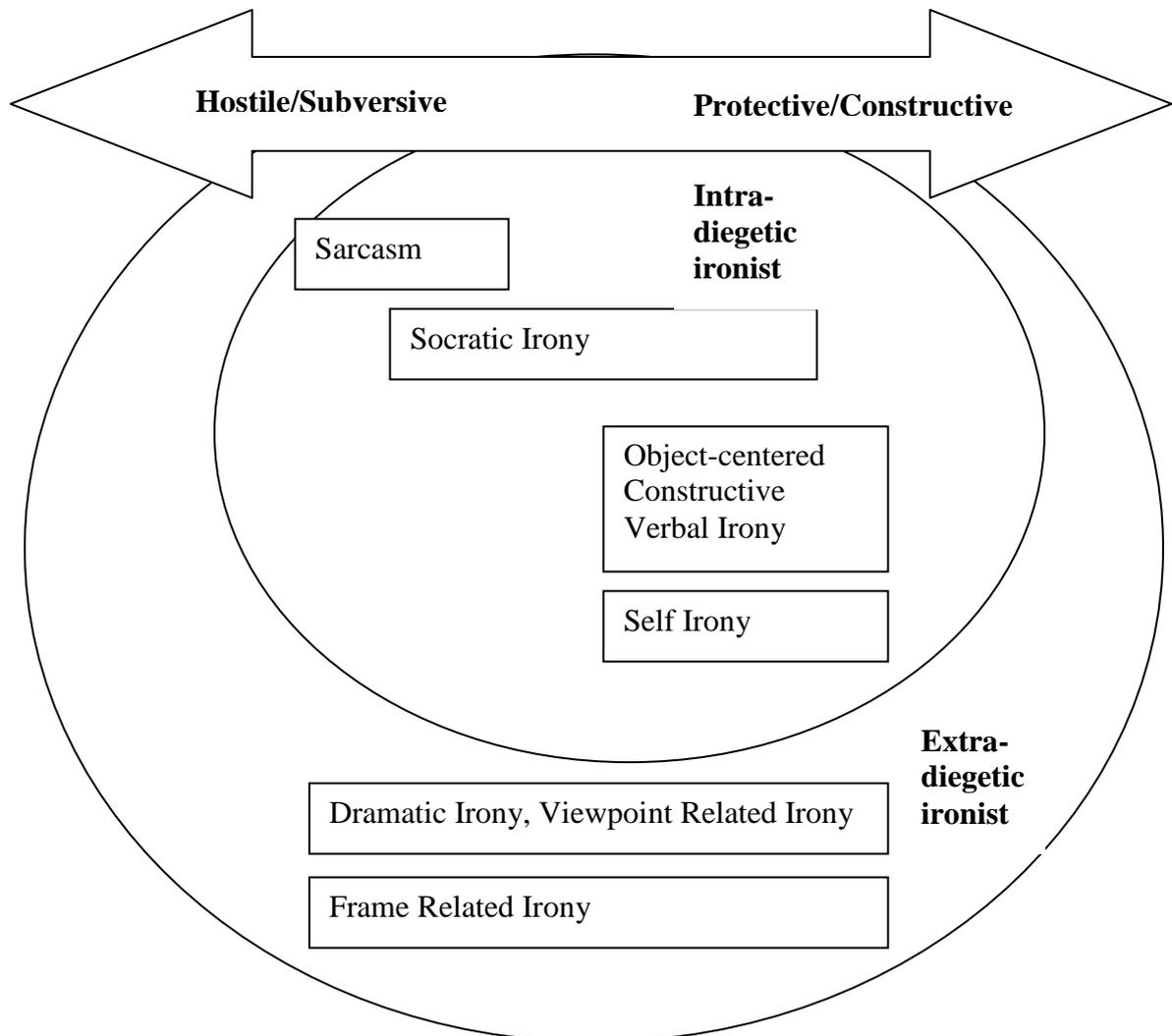


Figure 3 Use of Irony in Fiction

Whereas various forms of verbal irony are available to both extra- and intradiegetic ironists, forms of structural irony such as dramatic irony or frame-related irony can only be deliberately employed by extradiegetic ironists. On the intradiegetic level, in a communicative situation only comprising fictional characters talking to each other, dramatic irony is unconscious and accidental. The agency behind it only becomes apparent once you move on to the extradiegetic level and extend the communicative situation to include implied author and readers. The same applies to frame-related irony institutionalized in genres such as mimicry, parody and satire (cf. Haiman 1998: 21-22). This form of irony does not appear when looking at the intradiegetic level in isolation, but only emerges from an incongruity of extra- and intradiegetic elements, plot and discourse, level of enunciation and level of enounced, as for instance in the case of mock heroic poetry, where the elevated discourse

usually associated with weighty issues of life and death clashes with a mundane subject matter.

These structural forms of irony confined to extradiegetic ironists are also less easily classified as hostile or constructive. Dramatic irony for instance may well evoke a certain detachment of the audience from its victim, whose ignorance of important past or impending future plot developments it reveals and who is thereby contrasted with the audience members in possession of superior knowledge. Yet it would be wrong to say that this detachment is its only or even predominant function. When used in tragedies, dramatic irony does nothing to lessen the pathos of its victim's suffering or reduce audience members' empathy, as victims of dramatic irony can hardly be blamed for their ignorance and audience members' superior knowledge therefore does not inspire feelings of intellectual superiority. On the contrary, it could be argued that dramatic irony only heightens the pathos of tragedy as it brings to our mind the inevitable doom already looming over the protagonists and introduces a note of sadness into even those scenes preceding hamartia, serving the purpose of foreshadowing. Even in comedies, where dramatic irony is more likely to be used to actually mock its victims, it is not always necessarily reduced to this function; just as in tragedies, victims of dramatic irony cannot always be faulted for the limitations of their perspective (cf. Wolf 2007: 44–46).

Wolf (*ibid.*) therefore draws a parallel between dramatic irony and verbal forms of constructive irony, such as self-irony and object centred verbal irony, where irony is used in a protective manner. In all these instances irony is employed in a way that facilitates the audience's emotional connection to its objects in spite of conflicting cognitive premises (the disparity between self-image and public image in the case of self-irony, the hostile discursive environment in case of object-centred constructive verbal irony, the informational advantage of the audience in case of dramatic irony) and the resulting residual detachment.

At first sight, frame related irony seems to offer itself more readily for hostile usage. The mock heroic poem is designed to mock its hero: provoking a comparison with other heroes of epic poetry by using the same conventions to sing his praise, it only highlights the extent to which his heroism falls short of the ideal. Yet while the assumption of a hostile intention of frame related irony may be sufficiently well-founded in many cases, its direction is less often clear – is its target hetero-referential (for instance a specific type of personality flaw the hero of mock heroic poetry exemplifies, presumably a type of personality flaw that can also be found in the real world) or meta-referential (for instance the genre of epic poetry and its lack of realism) or both? Is hostile frame-related irony supposed to denigrate the various

unrealistic ideals promoted by different genres of fiction or our own failure to live up to them?

In many cases this is probably not a question of 'either/or'. Take for instance the frame related irony of Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729): a grotesque suggestion to solve Ireland's economic crisis by cannibalism and infanticide, which no person in their right mind could ever seriously consider, backed up with all the bells and whistles of Enlightenment discourse (the provision of statistical support with regard to projected consumption patterns, precise calculations of financial benefits of the proposed scheme, appeals to authority by quoting alleged experts in presumably relevant fields), technically designed to ensure a reasonable approach to any given problem. Of course the irony of this incongruity is primarily targeted at hetero-referential ills, namely the heartless disregard of English landlords for the plights of the Irish population and the general hubris of a certain brand of social engineering rather fashionable at the time of writing, purporting to solve all kinds of social issues with a little number-crunching without any consideration of the people affected by the problem as human beings rather than datasets and commodities. This second target, however, also points at a meta-referential criticism promoted by this form of irony, aimed at the very characteristics of the genre of discourse, in which such schemes would usually be communicated. If facts and figures, rhetorical construction and statistical logic can be marshalled in the service of such monstrous absurdity, what does this tell us about the merits of this style of argument in general, its grasp on truth and suitability for problem solving? Surely the conclusion cannot be to discount facts and figures as instruments of rationality, but some scepticism towards a certain overconfidence in their ability to ensure objectivity and efficiency (or in the merits of 'objectivity' and 'efficiency' as the sole standards for any given approach to a problem) might be well in order.

Swift's (1729) *Modest Proposal* is an example where the two potential directions of the frame-related irony's hostility amplify each other. This is, however, not always necessarily the case. In fact, it is not even clear that the function of frame-related irony is necessarily hostile in the first place. Sometimes the incongruity of framing and content is not so much designed to expose the inadequacy of either frame or content or both, but merely to foreground the fact that framing is taking place at all; something we tend to be blind to, when frame and content appear in conventional combinations. Frame-related irony is inherently meta-referential and metareference, even ironic metareference, can serve various non-hostile purposes. This aspect of frame-related irony will be examined in more depth when exploring the constructive potential of ironic metareference.

2.3.4. Philosophical Implications of Irony

Once potential non-hostile functions of irony are taken into account, irony becomes more than just a way to veil insults in order to escape retribution and signal wit and superior sophistication. Since the term ‘irony’ is not only used to characterize certain speech acts, but also a certain frame of mind, the existence of constructive irony on the level of speech acts raises the question if there could be a constructive function of irony on the philosophical level as well: could irony, by drawing attention to the conventionality of all expressions, actually help promote the experience of sincerity/authenticity in spite of inescapable conventionality (by lowering our expectations for a successful explicit expression of such sincerity/authenticity)?

At first glance, this might seem counterintuitive: irony, after all, is usually considered to destabilize meaning; it undermines the idea of semantic transparency, because its dependence on context and the impossibility of establishing a sure-fire way to identify irony markers demonstrate that meaning can never be entirely objectively determined. Irony exploits the very facet of language that erodes our hopes for objectivity: its context-sensitivity.

But is perfect objectivity really the sort of Holy Grail worth striving for? Irony not only serves to remove us from this goal but also helps us make peace with its elusiveness. It can be used as a coping mechanism, helping us deal with certain epistemological challenges such as the impossibility of a perfect representation of objective reality due to the intrinsic limitations of our means of perception and communication. The ironist approaches this problem by choosing a mode of expression that blatantly fails to represent reality (eg. the ironist’s true feelings), embracing the unreliable relationship of signifier and signified instead of being hindered by it.

2.4.3.1 Exposing the Conventionality of Language

In order to decode the irony of an expression the audience has to be able to transcend a shared context in which the expression would be used to communicate a genuine sentiment in favour of a more exclusive context questioning the premises of the presumably more conventional prior context. This more exclusive second order context may refer to a different value system

and different background assumptions or to a different approach to meaning in general, questioning not just the values targeted by the irony but the ultimate possibility of understanding. The perception of irony therefore relies on the recognition of the limitations of a given perspective (cf. Colebrook 2000: 7-10) This makes irony a useful device for writers to express an epistemological stance that acknowledges the inevitable limitations of all points of view.

By undermining the conventionality of our language and perspectives, irony exposes it, revealing the limitations of communication: drawing attention to the potentially echoic quality of a proposition undermines our hope for the authentic expression of our subjectivity; the intransparency and unreliability of irony markers undermine our hopes for any mutual understanding of intersubjective truth. We may be able to make our peace with the necessity of a trade-off between an accurate representation of individual subjectivity and a quest for objectivity or, at least, intersubjectivity, but irony rubs our noses in the fact that language fails on both counts. Stempel (1976: 24) describes the inherent irony of this dilemma:

[...] irony doesn't just show that our ways of speaking and seeing are conventional and assumed; it also shows that once they are recognized as assumed they no longer seem to be 'ours'. Once they are seen as conventional, they seem to lose their conventional force. Irony shows that there is no position outside of our ways of speaking at the same time that our ways of speaking seem to demand such a position. (Stempel 1976: 24).

Colebrook (2000: 22–23) argues in a similar vein, when she highlights the impossibility of certainty with regard to the question as to whether something is supposed to be interpreted as ironic and links this to a common feeling "that what is said is not ours". Since language is so inherently conventional, everything someone says could be an ironic echo. But while a keen eye for irony might mean acknowledging that we are doomed to a certain conventionality, it does not necessitate the conclusion that all our utterances are therefore doomed to be inauthentic, banal, meaningless. Eco (1994: 67-68) sketches the dilemma and its potential solution in the following manner:

The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her 'I love you madly', because he knows that she knows (and that she knows he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say 'As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly'. At

this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony... But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love.

Eco's example of the lover taking refuge in self-aware citation illustrates how irony can be used to counter-act the banality of well-worn expressions without invalidating the spirit in which they are made. Once conventionality is revealed as pervasive anyway through the thorough use of irony, the link between conventionality and lack of authenticity is weakened. By finding fault with language itself and not so much with the speaker, irony may even restore the belief in the possibility of authentic expression. Irony may undermine any attempt at explicit sincerity - there can be no such thing as a sincerity marker, as it could never completely guard itself against an ironic reading - but by drawing attention to the impossibility of explicit sincerity, it can teach us to be satisfied with the potential for implicit sincerity.

2.4.3.2 Irony as a Coping Mechanism in the Face of Cognitive Dissonance

Tittler (1985: 33) lists a number of preconditions usually met by people who adopt an ironical approach to life: they tend to perceive the world in terms of binary oppositions (ideal and experience, fact and fiction, mind and matter); they enjoy sufficient leisure to reflect on the perceived incongruities potentially emerging from such binary oppositions and have time to spare for more roundabout modes of communication; they are characterized by a propensity for doubt and are willing to engage these doubts instead of immediately trying to brush them aside.

In his view irony can be linked to certain forms of privilege (which might explain why irony is often seen as way to demonstrate sophistication, associated with arrogance, class consciousness and wit, cf. Fludernik 2007: 26) and a heightened awareness of cognitive dissonance. While many people are profoundly unsettled by the experience of cognitive dissonance and immediately look for a strategy to resolve or at least minimize it - either by suppressing the offending incongruent element or by adding a new one that allows for a

convenient synthesis (Tittler 1985: 33) suggests "God moves in mysterious ways" as a typical cop-out for that kind of purpose) - ironists pour salt in the wound by dwelling on these incongruities and aesthetizing them in the form of irony. The question remains whether this makes irony the opposite or just another (equally facile?) form of dissonance reduction. Is the ironist "a happy coward who realizes facile synthesis of irreconcilable propositions" or "a tormented mediator trapped in a polemical tangle of double binds"? (cf. Tittler 1985: 40).

Like Tittler, Gray (1960: 221-222) sees a potential function of irony in providing a coping mechanism when dealing with cognitive dissonance. Unlike Tittler, he does not view ironists as either intellectual cowards or tortured souls torn between forever unresolved incongruities. Without reservation, he praises the usefulness of irony to the "*civilized* [emphasis mine] author and reader" (more evidence for the popular association of irony with sophistication), as it

"guarantees their sanity and is a mark of their civilization. It allows them multiple viewpoints; it allows them to see themselves seeing themselves; it allows them to accept the unacceptable".

Gray links the sanity-preserving effect of irony to the way in which it can be used to process conflicting evidence without resorting to anti-intellectual strategies involving the suppression of ill-fitting elements for the sake of facile synthesis. When two opposing worldviews clash, irony is supposed to help create an intellectual climate

"in which both can reside *without destroying each other* - or the human being whose conflicts and contradictions they are." (ibid., emphasis mine).

Understood in this way, irony does not reduce a cognitive dissonance, but makes it more bearable. It can help people remain intellectually honest by helping them accept the permanence of unresolved tensions - whether this acceptance is a testament to tortured resignation or enlightened serenity probably has to be determined on a case-by-case basis. I would argue that feelings of torment due to a lack of tidy resolutions are optional. It should be noted however that this praise of the potentially sanity-preserving function of irony is based on the assumption that irony does not destroy its object. Both poles of the tension, both elements of the incongruity at the heart of irony have to be preserved, if irony is to serve as an alternative for more facile, less intellectually honest methods of dissonance reduction. The conception of irony as a coping mechanism in the face of cognitive dissonance therefore highlights the fact that irony can fulfill not just a hostile, but also a non-hostile function.

2.4.3.3 Irony and the Problems of Objective Representation

Irony as an intellectual strategy to deal with incongruities is mainly concerned with the problem of identifying and communicating objective truth. The notion of authenticity is based on a belief in the possibility of perfect representation, where there is no incongruity between what is represented and its representation. What you see is what you get. Perfect representation in that regard would be the natural consequence of engaging truthfully with the world around you. Irony in contrast draws our attention to the fact that representation is always something deliberate and artificial, and therefore potentially forced or misguided. By exploiting the sometimes merely echoic nature of conventional expressions, irony problematizes the belief in perfectly transparent representation.

Ong (1976: 9-18) describes how this complementary relationship between irony and mimesis is reflected in the development of aesthetic sensibilities: when writers' poetics and artists' aesthetics rely less and less on mimesis, irony becomes more and more prevalent. He links the increasing popularity of irony to the abandonment of oral culture, viewing the key to this development in different approaches to gaining, disseminating and preserving knowledge: The only storage medium for knowledge available to oral cultures is people's memories; this is why oral cultures rely heavily on the repetition of fixed sayings and formulas and copying is seen as an essential task of artists and scholars. There is little distance between audience, speakers and the subject matter of their speech and people perceive no great need for such a distance. The recurring use of clichés is seen as desirable because otherwise the knowledge these clichés are supposed to encapsulate would be lost. Once however printing takes care of the preservation of received wisdom, other concerns become dominant: Increasing literacy due to the increased availability of books ushers in the age of reason; inquiring minds are no longer content with accumulating received wisdom; they want to gain new insights through scientific research, which requires abstract analysis. Analytical thought in turn requires a distancing from the subject matter. Granted, intellectual detachment not always correlate with ironic detachment, but sometimes habits acquired in one context can be successfully transferred to another. Ong (*ibid.*) therefore argues that the emotional detachment promoted by irony in the face of no longer all that valuable clichés can pave the way for intellectual habits useful in all kind of domains now so inextricably linked to dominant paradigm of western thought, concerned with overcoming personal biases and other limitations of

subjective perspectives (eg. a judgement clouded by strong emotions; the failure to consider the bigger picture due to the perceived urgency of an issue).

Mileur (1998: 203 - 204) subscribes to a similar notion, when he describes irony as an "aestheticization of reason" and compares this to the way sentiments could be construed as the more aesthetic manifestation of feelings. Like Ong (1976), Milleur (ibid.) associates irony with objectivity because conveying and perceiving irony involves the kind of detachment necessary to "remove us from our thralldom to the immediate and contingent circumstances of our normal being in the world". This association of irony with objectivity seems to contradict a claim previously made in this thesis that irony can serve to highlight the subjectivity of our perception by undermining our trust in the transparency of signs.

Linking irony to objectivity just because both require some form of detachment, however, seems premature in view of Rorty's (1989: 74) distinction between ironists and metaphysicians, the latter of which are those Rorty associates with objectivist aspirations. For Rorty, ironists are those who have relinquished any hope of objectivity. Instead of enabling them to transcend "the thralldom to their immediate and contingent circumstances", irony helps them to acknowledge and make peace with that insurmountable contingency. Irony undermines not only myth and religion - it can just as easily be directed towards the scientific method and rational discourse in general.

Ironic detachment may signal a certain ability to distance yourself from your immediate circumstances in as far as it demonstrates the ability to restrain a spontaneous genuine emotional reaction, but ultimately contingency cannot be transcended. This becomes immediately apparent once you consider that you can always add another layer of irony. There is nothing to stop the consummate ironist from viewing even her own ironic detachment through the lens of irony. Colebrook (2000: 23-24) describes how irony can operate on multiple levels: Whereas the attack of first-order irony may be directed at the person who peddles received wisdom in blissful ignorance of its conventionality, second-order irony already targets first-order ironists who believe themselves to be above all conventions. At the highest level, irony undermines the very notion that irony might contribute to understanding, enabling superior self-awareness. "What is ironized is the self-confidence of any final ironic enlightenment" (Colebrook 2000: 24). Thus the process of ironic interpretation can quickly lead you down the rabbit hole of discovering ironic reading

after ironic reading, "with no nonironic end in sight except for the ironic consciousness itself with its denial of any stopping point that might interrupt its own continuing reflection" (Lang 1996: 571). Triggering a mechanism of reinterpretation the possibility of an ironic reading does not only undermine the first-order meaning of any expression but every subsequent order of meaning one cares to come up with, thus reminding us that meaning always depends on context and that in ever-changing contexts there can be no immutable truths.

Those who mistake a lack of emotional involvement as signalled by ironic detachment for objectivity usually forget that the accuracy of our perceptions is not only restricted by emotionally biased wishful-thinking but also by the intrinsic limitations of our vocabularies and our thoughts. ("Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt. The limits of language mean the limits of my world." Wittgenstein 1998. *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* 5.61). I can be as disengaged as one could wish; the truth will still elude me if my mind has to rely on flawed instruments to grasp it.

Rorty (1989: 73) argues that every person relies on a 'final vocabulary', a special set of words used to legitimize our beliefs and choices, express our judgement of other people and narrate the story we tell about our life. A large part of such a final vocabulary may consist of terms with rather specific, yet far from uncontroversial connotations such as 'homeland', 'Christ', and 'professional standards'. Rorty (ibid.) calls these terms 'parochial', because they are less flexible than other, more ubiquitous ingredients of final vocabularies such as 'true', 'beautiful' or 'good'. The resulting vocabulary is called final, because once you are challenged on the value of any of these terms, the argument cannot continue without becoming tautological. It can no longer be resolved by applying logic, because logic can only expose flawed conclusions; it is powerless in the face of conflicting premises.

One way to subvert, if not necessarily transcend, the finality of such a final vocabulary is irony. An ironist, according to Rorty's (1989: 73–74) definition, is someone who meets the following criteria:

- 1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered.
- 2) She realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts.

3) Insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself.

The ironist's foil is the metaphysician, defined by Rorty (1989: 74) as someone who is concerned with identifying the essence of things, "the single permanent reality to be found behind the many temporary appearances". Ironists might accuse metaphysicians of wasting their energy on a futile quest for objective truth, driven by unwarranted optimism about the ability of the scientific method to transcend the language games of their historical context. Metaphysicians in turn accuse ironists of moral relativism. In this context it is, however, important to keep in mind that ironists too have their final vocabularies, those values they cannot relinquish. They acknowledge the possibility that some final vocabularies are preferable to others, that some may have room for improvement. It is the way you go about improving your final vocabulary that makes the difference: for Rorty's ironists this process is a matter of 'making' rather than 'finding', as they view final vocabularies as "poetic achievements rather than fruits of diligent inquiry according to antecedently formulated criteria." (77)

Colebrook (2000: 11) considers Rorty's notion of irony as "the immanent inhabitation of a vocabulary with a recognition of its contingency" to be a form of liberal pragmatism: being an ironist in Rorty's sense means being sceptical of your own language game without making any pretension to being able to step away from it; it means remaining open to continuously refining your own final vocabulary by exposing yourself to different perspectives and it means making peace with the notion that you can never truly transcend your own context to achieve some kind of timeless, immutable, objective truth.

2.3.5. Irony and Postmodernism

Zima (2003:14-25) suggests viewing periods as 'problematics' – a set of issues dominating the social discourse at the time. Whereas the modern discourse dealt with the crisis of the subject, torn by the conflict between nature and culture, the postmodern problematic is characterized by Cultural Relativism, the decline of the subject, particularization, pluralism and the interchangeability of viewpoints. The great Christian, rationalist, Marxist and Fascist meta-narratives have been replaced by the radical pluralism of ecological, feminist, eco-feminist, ethnic and anarchist local ideologies with their own languages. As these specific languages can no longer be united by any universally valid meta-narrative, it is no longer

possible to put the values they propagate in relation to each other as they all seem interchangeable from an outside-perspective.

Modernism reacted to the loss of certainty caused by the decline of religion and the failure of rationalist or revolutionist ideologies with an attitude characterized by ambivalence. This experience of ambivalence triggered a crisis of subjectivity, which in turn resulted in the reflection and criticism of conventional values and received wisdom and a search for the 'real thing' – truth, art, beauty, justice, utopia, and identity. The problems that used to evoke this feeling of ambivalence have not been resolved; yet the modernist sense of ambivalence was replaced by something closer to indifference, which no longer provides sufficient motivation for the typically modernist metaphysical quest. In post-modernist literature traces of this abandoned quest therefore only appear in the form of parodies and plays with traditional literary forms. The problems that occupied the modern mind have not lost their fascination, since all these tensions are still unresolved, but as they have proven so stubbornly irresolvable, the post-modern approach is to no longer take them entirely seriously. The alternative - to embark on a project that has proven time and time again doomed to fail without any acknowledgement of these past failures - could be seen as a testament to either hubris or ignorance. There is no return to past certainties, and no hope for new ones, but the questions we can no longer answer and are not even trying to answer any more - not seriously, at least - remain urgent as ever. Faced with this dilemma combined with repeated illustrations of the notion that "the best lack all conviction, while the worst/are full of passionate intensity" (Yeats 1920, *The Second Coming*), ironic detachment appeared increasingly attractive.

The dominance of irony in the post-modern age is therefore just another symptom of the reflective self-consciousness in art and philosophy (cf. Mileur 1998: 203) characteristic for a postmodernist sensibility and its metareferential turn. Tittler (1985: 34-35) sees a connection between the function of irony and the larger project of post-modern fiction when it comes to pointing out the limitations of language's potential to accurately reflect reality. Since non-hostile irony does not lead to a complete inversion of literal meaning, but rather to a partial subversion, it allows for the coexistence of both literal and figurative meaning. The intended response is not necessarily rejection of the literal meaning, but a mixture of belief and disbelief or rather residual belief in spite of obvious reasons for scepticism, comparable to the suspension of disbelief required by fiction. Tittler (ibid.) compares this effect of irony to theatre's property "of both absorbing one in its simulacrum and repelling one from it" (35).

Haimann (1998: 20-21) has a similar idea, when he uses the model of theatre to illustrate the difference between irony and sarcasm. While the sarcast (the hostile ironist) in this analogy insists on a clear hierarchy between his perception of reality and its mimesis on stage, holding the "perspective [...] of the know-it-all wise guy, who rolls his eyes while he mouths the lines of his 'role', demonstrating that he appreciates their absurdity" (ibid.), the (non-hostile) ironist takes a more nuanced approach, blurring the lines between reality and fiction so clearly drawn by the sarcast, based on the notion that 'all the world's a stage' anyway, thus acknowledging the possibility of an even "loftier perspective" from which his or her perception of the truth is "as limited and arbitrary as the stage he or she ridicules" (ibid.).

But irony is not just a viable approach to the epistemological problems highlighted by modernism; it also works on a purely aesthetic level as a solution to the problem of the exhaustion of traditional forms - a notion introduced by Barth (1967). In his essay "The Literature of Exhaustion", Barth suggests that a rediscovery of traditional (and therefore outdated?) literary artifices such as "grammar, punctuation...even characterization! Even plot!" (1977: 70) might be possible, as long as writers signal sufficient awareness of their dependence on their predecessors. One way to signal this awareness is irony: Composing something like Beethoven's Sixth today might not necessarily be embarrassing, "if done with ironic intent by a composer quite aware of where we've been and where we are" (74). Irony can be a way to add a new twist to the familiar, divest it of the banality it might have gathered like moss over the years, providing another excuse to explore well-trodden territory, which is why an increased reliance on this particular literary device is often seen as characteristic of the later works of writers, a period of decline, cultures or artists no longer at the height of their creative powers (cf. Allemann 1973: 46).

Wolf (2007: 39-42) frames this use of constructive irony to reintroduce conventional narrative devices as part of the compromise manifested by Lodge's (1965) conception of the problematic novel. By combining irony markers in the form of self-referential meta-textual elements with references to objective reality, the problematic novel presents itself as a continuation of traditional, essentially realistic narratives, recycling familiar genres such as historical fiction and science fiction, while at the same time distancing itself from these traditions, subtly undermining but not utterly destroying the aesthetic illusion. This increasing focus on self-referentiality and meta-textuality is often seen as a symptom of the increasing self-

reflexivity and self-doubt of Western civilization. Wolf argues however, that constructive irony and the urge to retreat to the meta-level expressed by the metareferential turn might be motivated by the longing to revive traditional forms, without naïveté or faux innocence. Writers can still have fun with the old toys (such as cause and effect, characterization, linearity), as long as they present them as merely that: toys - not necessarily instruments of truth. Thus, constructive irony can be used to pave the way for (at least a partial) return of the narrative. This is achieved however at the price of a reduced potential for pathos.

'Reduced potential for pathos' does not translate to 'no potential for pathos', however. Ironic detachment is not as corrosive for emotional resonance as it might appear at first sight. In fact, irony and sentiment might be even linked, as explained by Mileur (1998:206) when he points out that "the ironic accuses the sentimental of being naive in its idealizations, yet continues to depend on sentiment to affirm ironic difference". The sentiment irony relies on is the sense that awareness makes a difference. Irony results from insisting on the distinction "between using the concepts and languages of metaphysics because we have no choice, and really believing them". This explains why postmodernism attaches such a great importance to awareness: if there is no possibility of ever being objectively right, of demonstrating the incontestable superiority of your knowledge, awareness becomes the only way to distinguish yourself – like everyone else, you are very likely wrong, but at least you are aware of it. So irony is not as opposed to sentimentality as it may appear at first glance; it may even promote a revisionist agenda, smuggling naïveté in through the backdoor:

Ironism constructs the identity of the revisionist, yet the goal of revisionism, mediated by sentiment, is the (re)construction of the naive. More commonly, this naïveté is masked within the ironic critique it energizes and enables, yet it is by no means ignorant or unsophisticated and may be or become quite self-conscious. (Mileur 1998: 207)

This association of irony with sentiment (nostalgia to be precise) is also reflected in the description of the most recent iteration of hipsters, currently at the helm of youth culture and as such, of course, having ingested post-modernism with their mothers' milk:

If irony is the ethos of our age — and it is — then the hipster is our archetype of ironic living [...] Manifesting a nostalgia for times he never lived himself, this contemporary urban harlequin appropriates outmoded fashions (the mustache, the tiny shorts), mechanisms (fixed-gear bicycles, portable record players) and hobbies (home brewing, playing trombone). (Wampole 2012, online)

Such descriptions of course invite heavy scrutiny. Any attempt at a definition of the hipster will be heavily contested - unlike labels such as 'hippy' or 'punk', this label is rarely ever self-applied and those most fond of denouncing others as 'hipsters' are also most likely to be perceived as hipsters themselves. In common parlance, a hipster is just a snob by any other name. The game has grown a bit more complicated over the years however: The battle is no longer so much about what to like, but about how to like it - ironically, in full awareness of its potential absurdity in a post-modern context (and therefore necessarily insincerely and for the ulterior motive of conspicuous consumption exclusively, as the hipster hater would argue) or without reservation, out of simple, intrinsic, unquestionable preference (and therefore blindly, as a hypothetical hipster might respond, if ever one were to come forward and officially declare him- or herself as such). It is, however, not immediately apparent why something like "home brewing, playing trombone" should inevitably constitute ironic living and not just a nice hobby someone would be genuinely enjoying for other than status-marking related reasons. Could it be that irony and genuine appreciation are not as mutually exclusive as dreamed of in popular philosophy?

2.3.6. The Constructive Potential of Ironic Metareference

The prevalence of irony in contemporary discourses, regarded as one of the chief characteristics of a postmodernist sensibility is a well documented phenomenon, and has been seen as a cause for lamentation for quite a while already (cf. Wampole 2012; Foster-Wallace 1993; McGowan 1986). Ironists' detachment, their reluctance to fully embrace the objects of their irony is sometimes regarded as a form of cowardice, a lack of emotional generosity manifested in an unwillingness to invest too much of themselves in any given cause, a failure to truly engage with the world around them. There is a fear among critics that irony, the ironic metareference so typical of postmodernism in particular, might become a dead end when employed for its own sake, the vicious type of infinite regress that offers no unassailable perspective to retreat to, as any perspective can be subjected to an ironic approach, undermining our hope for any type of meaningful connection, trapping ironists in their own mind.

Allemann's (1973:46) association of irony with maturity (of an artist, a culture) in all its ambivalence (as maturity usually correlates with sophistication as well as decline) contradicts the common association of irony with the callowness of youth. Nowadays irony is often

discussed as a feature of youth culture – the hipster aesthetic in particular - and usually not in a merely ambivalent, but rather explicitly negative light:

For the relatively well educated and financially secure, irony functions as a kind of credit card you never have to pay back. In other words, the hipster can frivolously invest in sham social capital without ever paying back one sincere dime. [...] As a function of fear and pre-emptive shame, ironic living bespeaks cultural numbness, resignation and defeat. (Wampole 2012, online)

Excessive irony among the young can indeed be extra galling, as it evokes a certain sense of precociousness, of unearned jadedness not yet backed up by a wealth of actual experience, of painfully transparent over-compensation to pre-emptively guard against accusations of naiveté. Over-use of irony may well signal a fear of commitment more typical of the immature subject, employing irony as “the most self-defensive mode, as it allows a person to dodge responsibility for his or her choices, aesthetic or otherwise” (ibid.). This association of irony with a lack of accountability can also be found in McGowan’s (1986, online) criticism of the ironic zeitgeist, when he points out how

“[...] the detachment of an ironic perspective comes in handy when you're feeling uneasy about your actions. To put it more bluntly, a little irony makes it easier to sell out.”

Not having settled yet on a certain way of life, wishing to keep their options open, reluctant to let themselves be defined by their choices at this point, young people may be particularly susceptible to the appeal of irony and the ambivalence it conveys. Allowing you to engage with something without fully embracing it, irony is well suited for a more tentative approach to life attractive to those with many doubts such as young people who have not yet enjoyed sufficient opportunity to have had their worldview solidified by confirmation bias and postmodernists, primarily concerned with deconstruction.

But does irony always necessarily have to signal a lack of commitment, a culture in decline? While it cannot be denied that something that was fresh to begin with, would not be in need of refreshing, this potentially refreshing (non-hostile, protective, constructive) function of irony gets little attention in a discourse more focussed on denouncing irony as a mark of everything that is wrong with the current Zeitgeist.

The postmodernist obsession with metareference and irony is often denounced as a creative dead end nowadays. By acknowledging the debt to predecessors, ironic metareference may

guard against accusations of a lack of originality (how could you criticize me for not being original, when I am not even trying to be original?), but is often seen as sacrificing the chief pleasures of fiction in the process due to its distancing effect; this chief pleasures being the immersion in a fictional world and identification with its characters – aesthetic illusion and empathy. If this were inevitably the case, ironic metareference would be a very ill-chosen coping mechanism when faced with the exhaustion of literary forms. Failing to establish an emotional connection, the ironic strategy would be bound to lose its charms, once readers have had sufficient opportunity to appreciate its cleverness.

In my thesis I will argue that ironic metareference remains a valid strategy for bringing back the narrative after each new announcement of the death of the novel. My argument will be based on a hopefully more nuanced view of the distancing effect of irony. When looking at a model of ironical communication that accounts for constructive/protective/pre-emptive irony it becomes apparent that detachment is not the only effect triggered by irony. This notion that detachment is not the be-all and end-all of irony is further strengthened by philosophical approaches to irony less focussed on any claims to objectivity based on repressed emotion and more interested in the helpful reminder of the importance of context-sensitivity provided by any instance of irony. In view of these non-hostile functions of irony I would like to examine the possibility that ironic metareference can be used as an aesthetic strategy to heighten the aesthetic and intellectual appeal of a narrative in a discursive climate sceptical of all narratives without destroying its emotional core and other appeals.

The following juxtaposition of ironic heteroreference and ironic metareference should not only serve as a clarification of my notion of ironic metareference, but also as a summary regarding the aspects of irony examined in the previous sections of this chapter, its potential objects, its impact and its forms.

		Ironic Heteroreference	Ironic Metareference
Object of Irony		some element of the plot such as positions taken by the fictional characters, attitudes towards real-world-issues or character traits, any element that is designed to serve the mimesis of reality	some element of the discourse such as various rhetoric/narrative/poetic devices and the underlying desire to create an aesthetic illusion/a connection with the reader as well as some elements of the plot in as far as they serve to anchor a text in a certain genre; the reader who would actually be manipulated to suspend her disbelief through such devices
Impact on aesthetic illusion:		Neutral	Undermining, but not necessarily utterly destructive
Impact on readers' emotional attachment to characters:		Variable	Often undermining, but potentially neutral
Can these forms of irony be used for hetero- as well as metareference?			
Rhetorical irony (verbal, can be used by extra-diegetic as well as intra-diegetic ironists)	eg. Sarcasm, Socratic Irony, Self-Irony, Object-centred constructive verbal irony	Yes. Intra- or extradiegetic speakers make ironical statements about elements of the plot/the fictional world.	Yes. Intra- or extradiegetic speakers make ironical statements about the value of fiction in general, myth, the power of storytelling, the unreliability of their own narration, etc.

		Ironic Heteroreference	Ironic Metareference
Structural Irony (not necessarily verbal, can only be used by extra-diegetic ironists)	Viewpoint Related Irony	Yes. The irony resulting from clashing viewpoints or misinformed or unreliable focalizers may target psychological conditions such as cognitive biases or mental instability.	Necessarily. The unreliability of a narrator draws our attention to the various possibilities for distortion involved in the act of narration.
	Dramatic Irony	Depends on the intended audience. What would be perceived as dramatic irony when happening to a fictional character could be perceived as cosmic irony when happening to a real person – dramatic irony therefore does not necessarily highlight the difference between fiction and reality.	Depends on the intended audience. If you do not believe in the notion of fate, dramatic irony necessitates the involvement of a dramatist and can therefore only happen in fiction.
	Frame Related Irony	No.	Necessarily. Eg. Metalepsis, Mise en Abyme, Intertextuality in combination with more explicit forms of metareference.

Figure 4 Comparison of Ironic Hetero- and Metareference in Fiction

Distinguished by their different objects, ironic hetero- and metareference also have different impacts on aesthetic illusion and emotional connection between readers and fictional characters. Irony directed towards any element of fiction designed to mirror something in reality does not affect aesthetic illusion (surely there are enough aspects of our reality that warrant an ironical approach), while irony directed towards any element of fiction designed to highlight its own fictionality or mediality (be that some form of discourse drawing attention to itself, or any element of the plot too transparent as an element of a plot, rather than the sort of natural, typically random occurrence that happens in real life) inevitably does. Yet the extent of the damage is a less clear-cut case. The ultimate object of ironic metareference may well be the reader's willing suspension of disbelief but as I already tried to establish in the case of constructive irony protective of its object that is not necessarily a call to abandon it completely.

The impact of ironic metareference on the emotional connection between readers and author, or readers and fictional characters requires an equally nuanced analysis. On the one hand irony is always also a strategy to establish solidarity between audience and ironist on the basis of the shared superior awareness of contextual clues necessary to decode it, and extra- as well as intradiegetic ironists can employ verbal irony for this purpose. There is no reason to assume that this function should be completely lost, only because the object of irony is meta-referential. (Take for instance the typical slasher movie: The type of character so common for the genre who suggests splitting up to investigate the strange noises coming from the cellar might well be declared too stupid to live by the audience and not elicit too much grief once he or she meets their inevitable demise. Demonstrating the slightest whiff of genre-savviness might go a long way to remedy that problem.)

On the other hand the at least undermining, if not necessarily utterly destructive effect of ironic metareference on the aesthetic illusion discussed above is likely to affect readers' empathy with fictional characters as well – it makes them feel less real to readers, which is likely to decrease their emotional investment in them. This is the main reason why last minute ontological disruptions so popular in post-modern fiction can cause quite a bit of outrage among certain readers: When they only learn about the metafictional twist once they already made their emotional investment in the characters based on conventional suspension of disbelief they feel cheated on their investment. This reaction, however, is not necessarily

universal. As in the case of aesthetic illusion I will argue that the impact of ironic metareference on readers' empathy is undermining, but not always completely destructive.

The following graphic illustrates the process of classifying instances of metareference as ironical in a first step, and instances of ironic metareference as constructive in a second one.

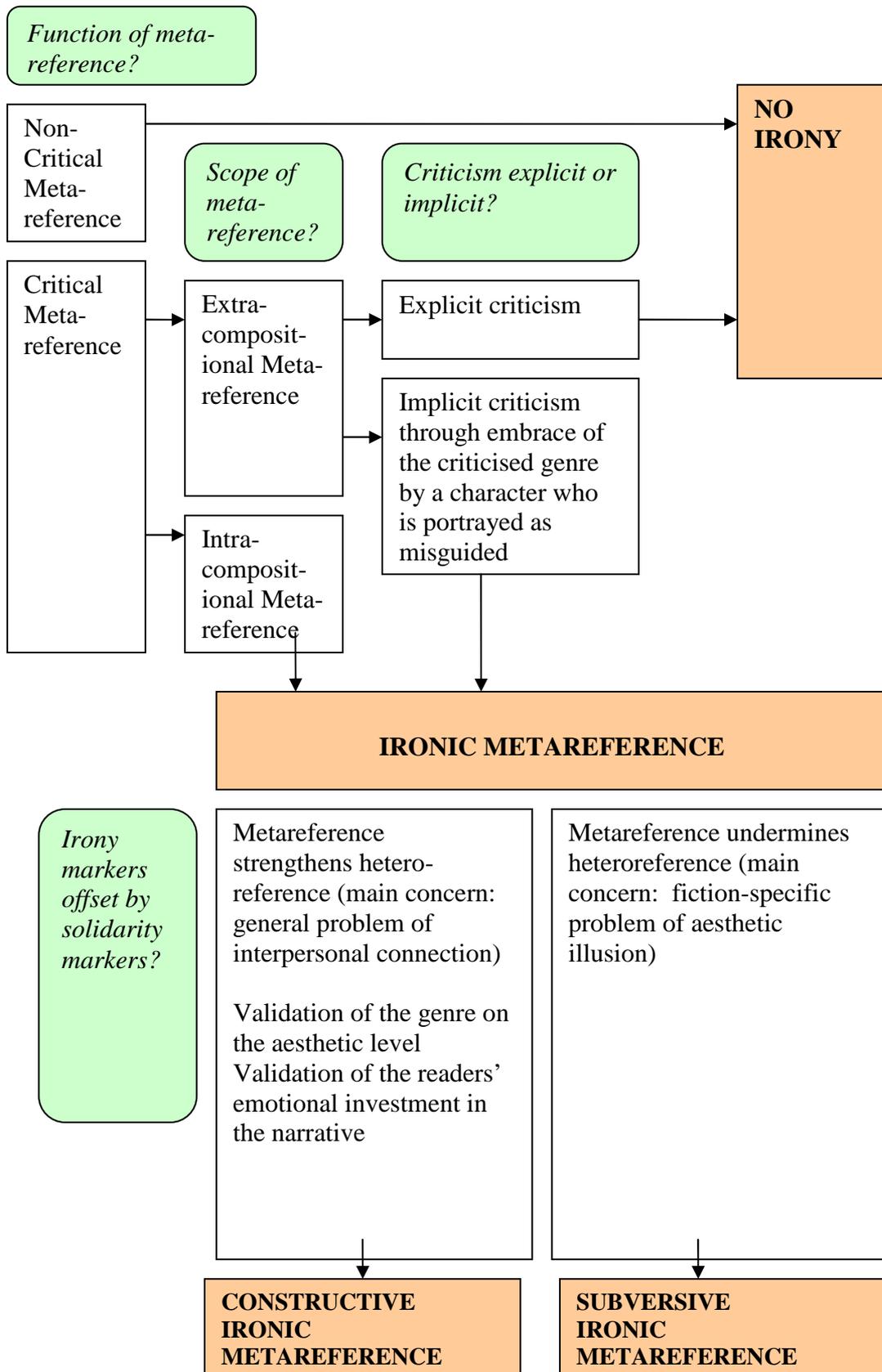


Figure 5 Constructive Potential of Ironic Metareference

Wolf (2009: 37-38) distinguishes explicit and implicit, extracompositional and intracompositional, fictio and fictum, critical and non-critical meta-referentiality. Regarding a potentially ironical function of metareference, the distinctions between extra- and intracompositional as well as critical and non-critical meta-referentiality seem particularly relevant.

Non-critical metareference (such as characters discussing the truth value of the Bible, while trying to convert heathens, in a narrative whose implied worldview endorses Christianity) is unlikely to be perceived as ironical, since irony requires some element of incongruity. This incongruity can be found in certain instances of (intracompositional or implicit extracompositional) critical meta-referentiality.

Intracompositional critical meta-referentiality (such as historical fiction reflecting on the unreliability of historiography, postmodernist metafiction lamenting the emptiness of postmodernist metafiction) is inherently ironic because of the incongruity of criticizing a strategy while in the process of implementing it. Extracompositional critical meta-referentiality (directed towards a genre other than the one the work in question itself belongs to – eg. Jane Austen's deconstruction of Gothic novels in *Northanger Abbey* (1818), itself novel of manners, Cervantes' deconstruction of courtly romance in *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote of La Mancha* (1605; 1615), itself a picaresque) only holds a potential for irony under certain conditions.

There is no incongruity and therefore no irony, when extracompositional critical meta-referentiality is made explicit, for instance when the protagonist rejects the criticized genre and does not buy into its misguided notions – take for instance Jane Eyre's rejection of the pamphlet handed to her by Mr. Brocklehurst, intended to scare her straight by providing a gruesome account of the sudden death of a naughty child (cf. Brontë 1847. *Jane Eyre*). Jane realizes the moral bankruptcy of such scare tactics and refuses to be swayed by them. Further plot developments validate her defiance – the disseminator of the pamphlet, Mr. Brocklehurst is revealed as a hypocrite, while Jane develops her own unique approach to spirituality and eventually finds emotional as well as spiritual fulfilment.

The potential for irony emerges, once the critical dimension of extracompositional meta-referentiality is only implied. No intra- or extradiegetic speaker explicitly criticizes the referenced genre, yet readers can infer from contextual clues (such as the further plot

development) that fictional characters who buy into its conventions are misguided; the plot punishes their confusion about the genre their story is set in by repeatedly subverting their expectations. This structural irony is heightened when it is the hero or heroine of the narrative him- or herself, who suffers (or causes suffering) because his or her perceptions are distorted by a framework derived from the wrong kind of fiction, and the irony lies in the fact that we are usually supposed to identify with the point of view of the protagonist, while in this case we are clearly supposed to question it. The incongruity constitutive for irony results from the clash of the conventions of the kind of story the protagonist believes herself to be the heroine of and the conventions of the kind of story that is actually told.

The mere fact that the ironic potential of meta-referentiality is linked to its critical function however does not suggest that this irony is necessarily hostile. Since postmodernist scepticism turns its deconstructive zeal against all conceivable genres of fiction, the criticism of any individual genre loses much of its sting. In the absence of any hope for perfection, nothing is invalidated just for being flawed and awareness of flaws does not preclude appreciation. In fact it could be argued that love is more profound when not blind of flaws.

So the next step is to determine whether any given instance of ironic metareference has a predominantly subversive/hostile or a predominantly constructive/protective function in the wider context of the narrative. This can be done by looking for solidarity markers subverting the ironist's detachment from the object of irony. In the case of ironical meta-referentiality, the irony could be directed, for instance, towards the conventions of a specific genre or the readers' suspension of disbelief enabling the emotional resonance of the narrative in general. Everything that validates the genre as an artistic endeavour on the aesthetic level or the readers' emotional investment in the narrative counts as a solidarity marker in the case of any ironic metareference directed at a narrative's escapist and manipulative functions.

In order to understand how irony directed at fiction can end up validating its object, it is important to consider its aesthetic function. Ong (1976: 26) celebrates irony as a literary strategy by highlighting the importance of aesthetic distance for art. By undermining the aesthetic illusion irony makes us aware of the not necessarily always clear-cut but nevertheless important distinction between art and nature. Warning (1976: 422) describes how authors can use irony to increase the aesthetic appeal of their work: irony markers keep readers on their toes, prevent them from settling for a definite interpretation and preserve

ambiguity and polyvalence. The pleasure derived from such a work does not lie in the mockery of a victim, but in the intellectual challenge provided by uncertainty and complexity.

Another potential solidarity marker for the interpretation of ironic metareference is the validation of the narrative's hetero-referential concerns, nourishing the hope that language could occasionally point beyond itself, that there might be the potential for a meaningful relationship between signifier and signified.

There are various urges that draw the human mind towards narratives – a desire for escapism, a desire for order, a desire for knowledge, a desire for connection to others – and all of them can be the object of ironic metareference. Of course, all those desires are linked, as all of them rely on the maintenance of aesthetic illusion to some degree: How could I hope to escape the drab reality of my existence if the fictional worlds I turn to are not properly immersive, obstinately insisting on reminding me at every opportunity that the alternative they offer is not real? How could I bring order into my experience when the lines between fact and fiction are blurred? How could I communicate my knowledge, if language can never capture the full truth? How could I connect to someone via narrative, if I cannot get to know them through language; if they can never fully and truly represent themselves? To attack one of these desires is to attack all of them - though maybe not always quite to the same degree.

It is quite possible to be critical of narrative's function when it comes to establishing (stabilizing, yet stifling) order and defining (and thus distorting) reality by providing a framework in which to perceive it, while at the same time acknowledging that our need for narratives is an anthropological constant, that a certain form of understanding cannot be shared in any other way, that narrative helps us exercise our capacity for empathy, that in short its powers can be used for good as well as evil. In my next chapter I will try to show how constructive/protective ironic metareference can be used to convey such a stance.

3. **The Constructive Potential of Ironic Metareference in McEwan's *Atonement***

3.1. *Atonement* as a Hybrid Narrative Combining Realist, Modernist and Postmodernist Elements

In spite of its plethora of meta-referential elements, McEwan's *Atonement* resists any easy classification as either a post-modern or realist narrative (cf. Albers & Caeners 2009: 708). Structured in three main parts titled "Part One" to "Part Three" (set at the Tallis family's country house in Surrey during the summer of 1935; at the retreat of the British army from Dunkirk and at a London hospital receiving the wounded soldiers from Dunkirk in 1940 respectively) and a fourth shorter final section titled "London, 1999", the novel provides two narratives: the tragic love story of Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner, who are torn apart by class barriers, lies and world history, presented for the most part like a traditional realist narrative via third-person narration filtered through the perspective of the parties involved (i.e. sisters Briony and Cecilia, their mother Emily Tallis and Robbie Turner, the son of their gardener, in the country-house section; Robbie, now enlisted with the British army in Dunkirk and Briony working as a probationary nurse at the hospital) and the meta-narrative of the final section, told in first person by Briony Tallis. In this final section, Briony reveals herself as the author of the preceding chapters and those preceding chapters as essentially autobiographical albeit somewhat embellished by liberal use of artistic license, explaining her motivation for writing down the story in the first place and deviating from the way events actually transpired in certain crucial aspects (cf. Albers & Caeners 2009: 711).

Without the final postmodernist metafictional twist in the last section, *Atonement* could easily qualify as essentially realist historical fiction. The first three parts, while already rich in meta-reference regarding the involvement of Briony, the aspiring writer, and the development of her poetology², are perfectly self-contained and basically³ uphold the reality principle. Only

² There is certainly no shortage of metafictional elements in the first three parts of *Atonement*: the *mise en abyme* found in the 'Trials of Arabella', a play written by a very young Briony on the occasion of her brother's visit to the family residence detailing the adventures of a young girl from a wealthy family finding love with her 'medical prince', foreshadowing the class divide-conquering romance between Briony's sister Cecilia and aspiring medicine student Robbie, as well as the pleasure Briony takes in assuming the god-like position of a creator of her own world, doling out rewards and punishment in the form of poetic justice; the novella

when the borders of different diegetic levels are breached in the metalepsis of the final section, the novel obtains a distinctly postmodernist flavour. Adding another layer to the story by introducing a metafictional twist, the final section forces us to reevaluate everything that came before. This sudden switch of the frame of reference does not only demonstrate a postmodernist disregard of generic classifications, turning what appeared to be a hybrid between family saga, romance and historical novel with reminiscences to the classical country house novel/novel of manners in the vein of Jane Austen into what is now presented as a (by and large) factual autobiography; the resulting ontological disruption also serves to shake our belief in the readability of reality. The post-script accumulates evidence upon evidence, inviting us to question Briony's commitment to truth. We find that her offences against veracity range from minor convenient distortions such the merging of several hospitals in which she worked during her training as a nurse into one (cf. McEwan. *Atonement*: 356)⁴ to substantial alterations culminating in the revelation that the final confrontation between Robbie, Cecilia and Briony at the end of the third chapter only took place in Briony's imagination, as both Robbie and Cecilia died in the war.

Thus precariously poised between straightforward traditional storytelling and postmodernist mind-games, *Atonement* is a suitable object of analysis when examining potential constructive (= renewing rather than undermining) functions of ironic metareference.

3.2. Seeming Distance – Identifying Ironic Metareference in *Atonement*

The most glaring irony to be found in *Atonement* is probably its unflinching illustration of the havoc wrought by a mind too easily seduced by narrative as there is always something inherently ironic about intracompositional critical meta-referentiality.

'Two Figures at a Fountain' Briony sends to a magazine; and the rejection slip she receives, providing an inner-fictional analysis of Briony's writing.

³ Hints at the postmodernist twist in the final section (eg. the suggestions for revision found in the rejection slip Briony receives for a short story apparently inspired by the fountain incident comes suspiciously close to the account of the event we were presented with in the preceding chapter) are already present, but subtle and therefore non-disruptive.

⁴ Briony's own comment on her alterations: "If I really cared so much about facts, I should have written a different kind of book." (*Atonement*: 360)

As already indicated by its paratext – a passage from Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818), describing the heroine’s embarrassment at realizing her mistake of confusing reality with the world of gothic novels - *Atonement* is rooted in the tradition of self-critical literature, in which metafictional elements are used to illustrate how succumbing to the seductive thrall of a narrative can result in a distorted perception of reality. Characters are shown to immerse themselves in the fictional worlds of literature, consequentially losing the ability to differentiate between fact and fiction with often disastrous results for themselves and those around them. This is exactly what happens in *Atonement*, when Briony, the youngest scion of the wealthy Tallis family, an attention-starved child with a vivid imagination and too much free time at her hands, misinterprets the first signs of a budding romance between her older sister Cecily and Robbie Turner, the gardener’s son: a sexual-tension fraught confrontation between the young people at the fountain, culminating in Cecilia removing her clothes and jumping into the water to retrieve the vase she accidentally dropped while quarreling with Robbie (henceforth referred to as ‘the fountain incident’); Robbie’s subsequent letter of apology, expressing his desire for Cecilia all too bluntly, accidentally landing in Briony’s hands; Briony walking in on the young couple consuming their passion in the library – all pieces of a puzzle that finally seem to add up when Briony’s cousin Lola is raped in the darkness of the estate’s park while everybody is searching for her runaway-brothers. Driven by her literary aspirations, eager to satisfy everyone’s hunger for a culprit, Briony succumbs to the temptation of filling the gaps left by her traumatized cousin’s unwillingness to identify her aggressor by fitting her own confusing observations of the day into a narrative framework – “the story of a man whom everybody liked, but about whom the heroine always had her doubts” (115) - placing Robbie in the role of the villain and herself in the role of the heroine.

Of course this tradition of self-critical literature dates back way farther than postmodernism - earlier examples being Cervantes’ *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote of La Mancha* (1605; 1615) and Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857) - but its most radical manifestations can be probably found in postmodernist literature. Whereas earlier examples of self-critical literature attempted to resolve the inherent paradox of their agenda (warning their readers of the dangers of reading) by limiting this warning only to the *wrong* kind of literature, postmodernism propagates a general scepticism towards all kind of narratives.

Yet there is still the question as to how far the scepticism towards narratives is supposed to reach in *Atonement* – is it confined to a certain genre or certain narrative conventions, say:

representational realism or the black and white morality of fairy tales – or does it, in the vein of true postmodernism, extend to literature as whole?

3.2.1. Briony's Aesthetic Epiphanies and their Consequences (or Lack Thereof)

Since Briony's development as a writer eventually emerges as one of the central themes of the novel, those passages of her manuscript that use young Briony as a focalizer often feature her thoughts about the merits and drawbacks of various literary genres and aesthetic approaches, thus providing ample opportunity for critical meta-reference. Critical meta-reference is not necessarily ironical, as long as it remains extra-compositional. Briony's aesthetical epiphanies however attain a distinctly ironic dimension when she keeps more or less consciously falling back into allegedly discarded patterns.

Consider for instance Briony's dismissal of her first story,

“a foolish affair, imitative of half a dozen folk tales and lacking, as she realized later, that vital knowingness about the ways of the world which compel a reader's respect.”
(6)

Briony is ready to leave the stark simplifications and fantastical subject matter of fairy tales behind, exchanging them for the more ordinary concerns and more nuanced framework of representationalist realism and eventually modernism, when witnessing Robbie's encounter with Cecilia at the fountain provides her with

"a first, weak intimidation that for her now it could no longer be fairy-tale castles and princesses, but the strangeness of the here and now, of what passed between people, the ordinary people she knew, and what power one could have over the other, and how easy it was to get everything wrong, completely wrong." (39).

The transition however proves imperfect, which becomes apparent soon enough, when Briony abandons any notion of nuance in frantic search of a suitable villain to blame for Lola's rape. It is however not just the black and white morality of fairy tales that clouds her judgment, but also the very presumption of "knowingness about the ways of the world" (6) so often integral to a realist sensibility that contributes to her distorted perception. Excited by her first glimpse of adult sexuality and driven by a realist urge for comprehensive explanations, Briony is over-eager to demonstrate her newly acquired worldliness by weaving a succession of sexually charged moments between Robbie and Cecilia she has witnessed over the course of the day

into a pattern of sexual deviance, positioning Robbie as the most logical suspect for Lola's rape.

By the time Briony processes the fountain incident in the form of the novella "Two Figures at a Fountain" which she sends to literary magazines while working as a probationary nurse in London, her commitment to a modernist aesthetics seems more pronounced:

What excited her about her achievement was its design, the pure geometry and the defining uncertainty which reflected, she thought, a modern sensibility. The age of clear answers was over. So was the age of characters and plots. [...] 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. (281)

Of course there is also a certain irony in Briony's embrace of an aesthetic less likely to invite moral judgment at the very moment she has reason to fear moral judgment from others, becoming increasingly aware of her own complicity in the destruction of an innocent man. It is rather convenient that Briony chooses a modernist aesthetic for her first account of the fountain incident, the event that laid the foundation for her crime against Robbie.

Considering the revelations of the last section however, the final test of Briony's convictions lies within the pages we just have been reading, the manuscript of her autobiography. If Briony's traumatic experience with the perception distorting effect of conventional narratives and their over-confident claims to objective truth indeed left a lasting impact, one would expect the final account of her life to reflect a modernist aesthetic to better account for the complexity and potential incomprehensibility of a world full of uncertainty.

And to a certain degree, one could argue that it does. Wolf (2001:301) lists a number of features that hint at a modernist affiliation of *Atonement*: the relative devaluation of outer action in the first chapter (the action does not really start before Robbie's mishap of accidentally sending Cecilia the wrong draft of his letter), the illustration of mental processes; the use of free indirect discourse that allows for the multiperspectivity of different focalizers instead of providing readers with a presumably objective interpretation of events presented by an overt, omniscient narrator⁵; the resulting emphasis on subjective perspectives, additionally

⁵ Careful readers however will notice occasional subtle intrusions of an overt narrator with knowledge of future events, for instance when focalizer Briony indirectly laments the fact that she has no secrets, as "her wish for a

highlighted by having characters frequently look out of windows, thus drawing attention to the way in which our perceptions are framed and the cognitive limitations this places on our perspectives. This modernist affiliation can be noticed in Briony's own poetological mission statement expressing her desire to "enter a mind and show it at work" (282), and is even referred to explicitly in the form of Briony's name-dropping of Virginia Woolf⁶ as a writer to emulate, and the reappearance of this reference to one of the most prominent proponents of modernism in the rejection slip she receives from the magazine she sends her novella to⁷.

Wolf (2001:304) however also cautions to take Briony's proclamation of a modernist sensibility with a grain of salt. The first circumstance that should raise our suspicion is the fact that Briony's modernist epiphany triggered by her inability to make sense of the fountain incident does not prevent her from stepping into exactly the same trap she hoped to escape by her embrace of a modernist aesthetic: Although now in theory freed from the necessity of moral judgment, she goes on to make Robbie the victim of her need for a villain. Wolf (2001:306) sees this failed emancipation from narrative conventions on Briony's part as a first indication that the epistemological scepticism of *Atonement* is not only directed towards realist narration but towards modernist literature too. While any pretence of poetic justice might be presumptuous, so is apparently the pretence of neutrality.

The second cause for doubting the implied author's commitment to modernism (and therefore potential marker of irony) is the feedback Briony receives from the editor on her first literary treatment of the fountain incident and its (retrospectively transparent) influence on her future writing (cf. Hidalgo 2005: 86). The editor's reply contains several suggestions for improvement: In addition to the correction of minor details such as the replacement of the Ming vase, which could be considered too precious by the reader to be plausibly taken outside, by a Sèvres or Nymphenburg, these suggestions also raise questions concerning a crucial element of the story:

harmonious, organized world denied her the reckless possibilities of wrongdoing" (5), which provokes the comment of an overt narrator that "None of this was particularly an affliction; or rather, it appeared so only in retrospect, once a solution had been found" (5)

⁶ "She had read Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* three times and thought that a great transformation was being worked in human nature itself, and that only fiction, a new kind of fiction, could capture the essence of the change." (282)

⁷ "However, we wondered whether it owed a little bit too much to the techniques of Mrs. Woolf." (312)

Wouldn't it help you if the watching girl did not actually realize that the vase had been broken? It would be all the more of a mystery to her that the woman submerges herself. (313)

In Briony's first version of the story, the third party observer was apparently aware of a possible – at least partial - explanation for the couple's strange behaviour. Going back to the description of the fountain-incident as it is first presented to us in the first chapter of *Atonement*, we find that the account of events that we had assumed to predate the short-story version already incorporates the suggestions of improvement made by the editor. In this version, the object to be retrieved is not a Ming vase, but Meissen porcelain and Briony has indeed no idea why Cecilia undresses and dives into the fountain.

The recommended introduction of a mystery of course serves the more conventional demands of plot, introducing an element of suspense to be resolved eventually, thus already marking a first departure from the principles of High Modernism. While acknowledging the merits of modernist experimentation, the rejection slip ends up stirring Briony away from the stricter requirements of a modernist sensibility, reminding her of the dangers of experimentation for the sake of experimentation:

Who can doubt the value of experimentation? However, such writing can become precious when there is no sense of forward movement. Put the other way round, our attention would have been held even more effectively had there been an underlying pull of simple narrative. (312)

The rejection slip serves as gentle reminder that ultimately, the desire for some "sense of forward movement", provided by "an underlying pull of simple narrative" is just too ingrained in readers to be neglected in the long run. The version of Briony's autobiography presented in Part One to Three shows that she has taken the editor's advice to heart. In the end, the story Briony presents us with is not so different from the one she made up for "The Trials of Arabella" (and just as inauthentic): Initially divided by class barriers, the lovers overcome all obstacles thrown in their way and are rewarded with a happy ending. Albers and Caeners view Briony's insistence on conceiving such a "happy ending" for Cecilia and Robbie as evidence that

"her aesthetic notions have not really changed after all. [...] Even though Briony has certainly realised the mistakes she has made, her naïve aesthetic principles and aesthetic attitude have remained the same, and she still aims at putting life into a neat little box of art(ificiality)." (2009: 717–718)

This ultimate return to the basics could be read as a vindication of traditional storytelling, if not for the ethical context of Briony's autobiographical project. Considering that Briony views the writing of her autobiography as atonement for the crime committed against Robbie, it is hard to ignore potential ulterior motives for tacking on a happy ending: unable to face the misery she has caused, Briony might see her vision of the lover's eventual reunion as a way to lessen her crime by lessening its consequences. Her story thus provokes the criticism so often lobbied against fiction in general: that it provides a facile escape for people desperate to hide from inconvenient truths.

3.2.2. Ironic Use of the Country-House Setting

Hidalgo (2005:83) notes the irony in the choice of a country house as the setting for "Part One", evoking comparisons to Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) (also featuring an interrupted play rehearsal, landscape gardening and the corrupting influence of predatory Londoners), Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) (also featuring a pivotal scene in the vicinity of an Italian fountain) and E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910) (also featuring complications due to a note not being delivered to its rightful receiver).

But while the theme of class is hard to miss in those novels referenced above and rarely far from the mind of their protagonists, it is mostly relegated to the subtext in *Atonement*. Briony herself apparently attributes her betrayal of Robbie to a lamentable susceptibility for narrative logic, distorting her perception of reality. While appropriately critical of the obsession with order manifested in such over-reliance on a framework provided by narrative, she mainly portrays it as a matter of misguided aesthetics, never explicitly linking it to a desire to maintain social hierarchies. Even Robbie himself, generally more attuned to the possibility of class-based resentment playing a role in the Tallis family's all-too quick embrace of Briony's idea to cast him as the villain is shown to pin Briony's betrayal on jealousy rather than classism. While not entirely ignored, the role of class is comparatively down-played in Parts One to Three - suspiciously so, considering the last-section reveal of their fictional authors potentially rather self-serving motivation.

What makes these inter-textual allusions to other works of literature in this genre so ironical is the fact that the current residents of the country house in *Atonement* are, as Hildago (2005: 83) points out, not even all that posh:

"[...] the Tallis family background is anything but distinguished (the grandfather had kept an ironmonger's shop and made the family fortune with patents on padlocks and bolts), and the house itself is not ugly but something of a fake, from the derelict island temple that echoes the original Adam-style building to the portrait in the dining room that depicts an aristocratic family with no connections to the present owners of the house." (Hildago 2005: 83)

The object of such frame-related irony is hetero-referential to a certain degree - the posturing so often involved in social mobility, the absurdity of class-based feelings of superiority in general - but also meta-referential, providing a first hint that *Atonement* will not be playing by the rules of the referenced genre. In the classics of the genre the country house is more than just a setting; it is often the "ideological, aesthetic, and emotional center of the novel" (Hildago 2005: 84) - a symbol of status (quo) to be preserved, providing a sense of continuity. The question of inheritance is crucial to the novel's resolution; hearts may be broken, dreams may be dashed, but what ultimately matters is that the estate goes to a worthy heir, best suited to preserve its legacy.

The final section of *Atonement* also gestures towards continuity, when Briony fondly thinks of her nieces and nephews staging another production of the *Trials of Arabella*, but that gesture is ironically undercut not only by the fairly transparent vanity of Briony's investment in a possibly rather empty tradition, but also by the fact that the country house of Part One is no longer in possession of the family: it has been turned into a hotel. Far from being the ideological, aesthetic and emotional center of the novel, it loses any relevance after Part One, when the setting shifts to Dunkirk and later to the hospital in London. *Atonement*, we can infer, is not 'just' a country house novel, a genre vulnerable to criticism of a narrow scope focused on domestic issues, status preservation and social mobility. With the start of a World War, the narrative necessarily attains a more epic dimension. As the world and history intrude upon the private sphere, the country house novel is no longer a fit vessel for the narrative; historical upheavals of this magnitude will leave the world fundamentally changed; the home of your childhood is irrevocably lost.

3.2.3. Ironic Portrayal of Briony's Urge to Create Narratives

Another fertile ground for irony is the portrayal of Briony's literary ambitions in Parts One to Three. The link of Briony's passion for storytelling with her obsession with order has already been mentioned in the context of her failed aesthetic epiphanies. Described as “one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so” (5), Briony uses stories as an outlet, revealing a strong urge to impose her own order on her surroundings:

A world could be made in five pages, and one that was more pleasing than a model farm. (...) Her passion for tidiness was also satisfied, for an unruly world could be made just so. (...) A love of order also shaped the principles of justice, with death and marriage the main engines of housekeeping, the former being set aside exclusively for the morally dubious, the latter a reward withheld until the final page. (7)

In order to analyze Briony's love for order we have to consider order both as an ethical as well as an aesthetical category: In the first case, order means poetic justice, as described in the passage above: rewarding the heroes and punishing the villains, “with death and marriage the main engines of housekeeping” (7). In the second case it simply means symmetry. Briony does not only want “to enter a mind and show it at work” (282), she also wants “to do this within a symmetrical design” (282). This penchant for a symmetrical design becomes evident when Briony discovers the rape of Lola and arranges the glimpses of adult behaviour she has collected during the day – the fountain, the letter, the library – into a pattern of sexual aggression, incriminating Robbie Turner. Briony is immediately convinced of the truth of this interpretation of events, solely based on her impression that “the affair was too consistent, too symmetrical to be anything other than what she said it was” (168).

In addition, Briony's creative exploits are shown to be fueled by a hunger for attention and external validation. Briony might be unusually precocious, an artist in the making, possessing a heightened aesthetic sensibility well beyond her years, but she is also “the schoolgirl eager to show off and be praised” (74), painfully aware of her own “silly pride in her first stories and her reliance on her mother's good opinion” (74).

Last but not least Briony's storytelling is linked to her egocentricity. No matter how dire the circumstances – Briony is always on the look-out for an opportunity for self-dramatization. When the twins run away and everybody goes searching for them, Briony imagines them having drowned in the lake. Instead of fearing for their lives, Briony lovingly develops a mental image of their corpses, “floating face-down in death”, wondering “how she might

describe it, the way they bobbed on the illuminated water's gentle swell, and how their hair spread like tendrils and their clothed bodies softly collided and drifted apart" (156). Briony also takes pleasure in the imagination of her mother's funeral, seeing herself "standing alone in a great arena [...], watched not only by all the people she knew, but all those she would ever know, the whole cast of her life, assembled to love her in her loss" (161).

Briony's ego-centrism results in solipsistic tendencies that make it difficult for her to grasp the existence of other minds. Contemplating the mysterious connections between mind and body, basically trying to trace the 'ghost in the machine', she is so engrossed in the exploration of the secret of her real self that the realization of other people's selves potentially being no less real and mysterious comes to her as a shock:

Was everyone else really as alive as she was? For example, did her sister really matter to herself, was she as valuable to herself as Briony was? [...] If the answer was yes then the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated, with two billion voices and everyone's thoughts striving in equal importance and everyone's claim on life as intense, and everyone thinking they were unique, when no one was. One could drown in irrelevance. (36)

'Irrelevance' is the key word here. Briony cannot deal with this sudden relegation to obscurity implied by being just another unique snow-flake in a snow-storm of unique snow-flakes – unique, maybe, but in a way that is ultimately insignificant. Fiction seems to provide a remedy, as immersing herself in the creations of her own mind allows Briony to have her fictional world revolve around her, to be the god of her creation. No wonder that Briony sometimes finds it difficult to disentangle herself from her flights of fancy:

The cost of oblivious daydreaming was always this moment of return, the realignment with what had been before and now seemed a little worse. [...] Briony had lost her godly power of creation, but it was only at this moment of return that the loss became evident. (76)

Briony's inability to cope with the feeling of insignificance in a world beyond her control makes her particularly susceptible to getting lost in her own fiction. The urge to create narratives is portrayed as a symptom of delusions of grandeur.

Considering the metafictional twist of the final section which reveals the consciousness behind the third-person narration to be homo- rather than heterodiegetic, all these examples

turn out to be cases of self-irony. It is however not implausible to speculate that Briony might act as a surrogate for the implied author with regard to certain more general insights she provides into the interior workings of a writer and the human need for narratives.

3.3. Actual Closeness – Analyzing the Constructive Effect of Ironic Metareference in *Atonement*

Looking at the objects of critical, intracompositional and therefore ironic metareference in *Atonement*, it becomes apparent that the implied author's ironic metareference is directed towards specific genres/modes of discourse/artistic movements (such as fairy tales, country house novels, realist representationalism, modernism) as well as various universal features of any form of narrative (such as the epistemological, aesthetical and emotional functions of the act of storytelling, examined through the critical portrayal of Briony's creative ambitions). Those two categories are closely linked (various genres are suited for different epistemological approaches; fairy tales lend themselves more easily to escapist desires than realist narratives; realist narratives are often more immersive than modernist experiments by creating a stronger aesthetic illusion), yet a distinction is useful in the context of the question whether the implied author is only critical of certain forms of literature (not necessarily ironical; but certainly so in the case of *Atonement*, which at various stages employs all the modes and devices of the genres it criticizes) or critical of literature/storytelling as a whole (inevitably ironical).

3.3.1. Solidarity Markers for Genre-Specific Elements

With its frequent use of explicit metareference in the form of Briony's reflections on her own artistic development, its postmodernist genre mix and last chapter genre switch (from historical fiction to fictional autobiography), *Atonement* is structured in a way that simultaneously undermines and vindicates the conventions of the various genres it mixes. Anything that has been identified as a marker of irony directed at one specific genre/mode of discourse in the preceding section, serves as a marker of solidarity with regard to another. The meta-referential irony directed at the pitfalls of fairy tale moral absolutism and the realist obsession with unbroken chains of causality (manifested primarily in Briony's failure to actually implement her own respective aesthetic epiphanies and its woeful consequences for

Robbie) validates the modernist embrace of subjective consciousness replacing any pretence to objective omniscience and judgment grounded in a sufficient factual basis. In the same manner, the meta-referential irony directed at the aloofness of modernist experimentation, its divorce from common audience needs, its seeming retreat to the aesthetical level and its refusal to take sides in ethical questions (reflected in the feedback Briony receives on her first foray into modernism and her tacit subsequent integration of all recommendations into the account effectively presented to us in the form of the novel as well as Briony's potentially self-serving motivation to dabble in modernism in the first place) validates the ethical concerns and emotional accessibility of traditional storytelling, the readers' desire for poetic justice and "the underlying pull of simple narrative" (312).

3.3.2. Solidarity Markers for General Functions of Narrative

While *Atonement's* ironic metareferences directed at specific genres and modes of discourse can be shown to more or less cancel each other out, the ironic metareference directed at the project of fiction as a whole merits its own discussion. It is, after all, not just Briony's specific artistic choices that become the object of irony, but the motivation for her artistic pursuits in general. The way in which her personal foibles, her narcissism and her craving for control and attention haunt her through every stage of her development as a writer hints at something potentially shady about the whole business of storytelling. One could almost get the impression that, stripped from all pretence towards truth and moral responsibility, fiction primarily served the self-glorification of its creator; every story just another vehicle for the story-teller's need for attention and control.

And yet this is not the impression most readers are likely left with on closing the book on this particular story. Instead of seeing *Atonement* as another occasion to announce the death of the novel, critics praise the novel's thoroughly researched historical setting, general readability and emotional impact. According to the reviews, the pleasures of reading *Atonement* are not limited to purely aesthetic appreciation. Hildago (2005: 66) points out how "brilliant narrative technique" and "intelligent deployment of literary devices" alone cannot fully account for the novel's success with readers and critics. The literary pyrotechnics – in other cases often derided as a symptom of privileging style over substance – are redeemed in the critic's eyes, because here they are

[...] not self-conscious [sic⁸] but part of a story of love, death, evil and a child's incomprehension of the world of adult emotions. It is a strong story and in telling it the author creates three strong characters, Briony and the lovers. With truly Austenian irony, McEwan triumphantly does what Briony at eighteen thinks a modern novelist cannot do: write characters and plots. (Hildago 2005: 66).

Clearly, the novel was not received as just another stylistic exercise of a talented writer showing off his skills. Its ambitions are perceived as going beyond mere 'l'art pour l'art.' Hildago (2005: 88) even goes as far as to declare the section set in the military hospital as a future "classic of the literary representation of the aftermath of war." If the novel had been designed to make its readers lose all hope for fiction's potential to point beyond its own fictionality, it would have been a failure after all.

3.2.3.4 Validation of Fiction's Epistemological and Aesthetic Function in *Atonement* - Creating an Aesthetic Illusion

Ostensibly the opposite of truth, fiction is still often read in pursuit of knowledge. This apparent contradiction can be resolved if you allow for the possibility of more than one form of knowledge. If there is, as Lyotard (1979) suggests, a distinction between scientific and narrative knowledge, there also has to be a distinction between scientific and narrative truth. Whereas the first kind of truth is considered to be universal and authoritative, guaranteed by logical and empirical control-mechanism such as the falsification or verification of hypothesis by empirical findings or the replication of results by independent researchers, the second kind of truth needs no other proof than its own internal consistency and rules of procedures (cf. Sheehan 2008: 28). Coherence in this sense does not necessarily require an unbroken chain of causality. Yet the sequence of events has to add up – myths and dreams can attain a form of logic of their own. Thus, intellectual coherence can be replaced by aesthetic coherence in fiction. In other words: Stories need to gel. If there is no reason to them, there has to be at least a rhyme.

In the case of *Atonement* this internal consistency of the narrative is challenged by the metafictional twist of the last chapter, drawing out the ontological rug under the reader's feet by revealing Briony as the author of the preceding chapters and presenting an alternative, presumably more 'accurate' account of events, in which neither Robbie nor Cecilia survive

⁸ I would argue they are. It is just not all that they are.

the war and their happy reunion is reframed as a sentimental wishfulfantasy born from Briony's guilty conscience. Of course, once a narrator's reliability has been compromised like this, any notion of accuracy becomes impossible.

Yet Albers and Caeners (2009: 718 – 719) point out that not all metanarrative strategies employed in the course of the novel have such a devastating impact on the aesthetic illusion:

While the metafictionality of the last chapter leads to a disruption of the main storyline's fictionality, metanarrative elements in that storyline have the opposing function, as the latter work mainly through or in conjunction with aesthetic discourses. [...] The story constructs an alternative reality which is given coherence due to the aesthetic discourses that reciprocally amplify each other. By means of constantly alluding to the stereotypical principles of eighteenth-century literary aesthetics, the reader's construction of the fictional world is supported and guided. Only by "sealing off" the main plot in this manner, can the destructive potential of the last chapter come to its full effect. (Albers & Caeners 2009: 718–719).

In other words: the last minute postmodernist blow against the aesthetic illusion would not pack half of its punch, if the very same aesthetic illusion had not been constructed so effectively in the chapters before. Since those preceding chapters do not lack instances of ironic metareference, it stands to reason that ironic metareference does not automatically destroy the aesthetic illusion.

Granted, Albers and Caeners merely refer to "metanarrative strategies" in general and as outlined in the first chapter, not every instance of metanarration is necessarily ironic. Briony's dismissal of fairy tale conventions and realist pretensions to objectivity for instance would not be ironic per se, if Briony did not follow up on such epiphanies by falling into those discarded patterns anyway. But she does, the irony of it is readily apparent, and yet the aesthetic illusion remains strong enough to lure the reader into a sense of security that can be shaken to sufficiently dramatic effect in the last chapter.

If fiction could never have a claim to truth, the reader would not feel so betrayed by the final revelations of Briony's 'inaccuracies'. Her ultimate account of events does not necessarily feel more 'true' than her preceding one. A liar once exposed will rarely be trusted again. Mistrust seems especially warranted since the Briony of the last chapter still demonstrates a lot of the same mental habits that led her quest for truth astray before. We know that she can be quite flexible with the facts in the service of a good story. The reader cannot avoid the question which other details she might have fudged, considering her readiness to incorporate

most of the advice she receives in the reception slip for her modernist experiment (eg. changing the type of the vase, making Briony more clueless).

Yet I would not be so quick to declare the aesthetic illusion shattered completely. The last chapter may deliver a drastic blow to the reader's previous conception of events, but once this initial shock is processed, it does not necessarily (=not for every reader) result in more damage to the aesthetic illusion than a more gradual realization of the narrator's unreliability would have caused. Narrators in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) or Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) are strongly implied to be unreliable too without completely losing any ability to weave an aesthetic illusion. Of course "strongly implied to be unreliable" leaves more room for illusions than "explicitly confirmed as unreliable" and the comparative suddenness of the reveal in *Atonement* heightens its emotional impact on first reading. On second reading however, it becomes readily apparent that the reveal of the implied narrator's identity and unreliability is actually heavily foreshadowed, even in the chapters in which the implied narrator is still covert and readers are unaware of his or her identity on the level of the frame-tale. Briony's short story about the fountain incident discussed in the third chapter introduces the notion of Briony choosing a literary approach to processing this formative event; her failure to reach an audience makes it plausible to anticipate further attempts. The coincidence of the reception-slips' suggestions for improvement being reflected in the account of events presented to us so far should raise further red flags.

Let us imagine the intradiegetic implied reader on the level of the frame-tale, the reader who lives in the world where Briony Tallis is not a fictional character and has just read this book with Briony's name on the cover: such a reader might well be motivated to speculate about the point of no return, the exact moment when Briony's semi-autobiographical account veers off into pure fantasy, and would be provided with enough hints to make some educated guesses in this regard.

After attending the wedding of her cousin Lola and Paul Marshall, the man who really raped Lola on that fateful summer day, Briony has a hard time working up the courage to execute her plan of visiting Cecilia in her flat in Balham.

(...) As she walked along the Common she felt the distance widen between her and **another self, no less real**, who was walking back towards the hospital. Perhaps the Briony who was walking in the direction of Balham was the imagined or ghostly

persona. This unreal feeling was heightened when, after half an hour, she reached another High Street, more or less the same as the one she had left behind. (329, emphasis mine)

This passage gains additional significance after reading the revelation of the postscript, suggesting that the Briony actually going through with her plan was indeed only the imagined or ghostly persona. If the account of events presented by the post-script is actually true, Briony cannot have met Robbie when visiting Cecilia, as he never returned from the war. Particularly interesting is the wording “no less real”, implying the equal validity of both versions of events, thus reflecting a postmodernist attitude of indifference.

Of course one could also build a case that this point of no return in terms of staying true to actual events occurs much earlier. Briony’s first treatment of the material, the novella “Two Figures at the Fountain” does not contain any indication of guilt and tragedy. When Briony decides to change this in her next drafts, she claims to do so because of having realized her own cowardice in leaving out the incriminating elements of her story in an attempt to “hide behind some borrowed notions of modern writing, and drown her guilt in a stream – three streams! – of consciousness” (320) after reading the rejection slip from the magazine, suggesting to introduce some sort of forward movement and heat things up for the depicted couple by having the Briony-stand-in “come between them in some disastrous fashion” (313). But what if Briony has decided to tell the whole story, not so much because she has discovered her moral obligation to face her own guilty involvement in its continuation, but simply because she wants to heed the advice she got from the magazine to add “the simple pull of a narrative” (312) to her material in order to satisfy her readers “childlike desire to be told a story”? (314). Every proper story needs a proper villain after all. The impersonal forces of classism and war might have been enough to pull Robbie and Cecilia apart in a less narratively convenient reality, but any story benefits from a personalized antagonist.

The mere fact that the implied reader might feel inspired to engage in such speculations, trying to sort out fact and fiction in Briony's account of events, proves that the aesthetic illusion still holds some sway even after Briony's confessions in the last section - at least on the level of the frame-tale. The narrative itself (or rather Ian Mc Ewan as its actual author) apparently anticipates such a hypothetical reader's desire to hunt for the glimmer of truth in Briony's fabrications, providing clues for the points of departure on the level of discourse (the road-note taken passage, the evocation of an alternate Briony returning to the hospital instead of calling

on Cecilia and Robert) and on the level of plot through Briony's characterization, alerting readers to potential ulterior motives for presenting certain events in the way she does.

Pathological liars may lie randomly for the thrill of getting away with it, but average people only misrepresent the truth accidentally (since even memories recollected in good faith are extremely likely to be unreliable and a perfect representation of truth may be beyond the grasp of human language anyway) or when it benefits them in some manner. Their lies are therefore easier to identify for anyone with some insight into the workings of their minds. Once we know what they are after, we can make educated guesses as to what they might feel motivated to lie about.

Briony admits that she has deviated from the truth, but her deviations are not arbitrary. In the final chapter she presents us with explicit justifications for some of her deviations:

I worked in three hospitals in the duration – Alder Hey and the Royal East Sussex as well as St. Thomas's – and I merged them in my description to concentrate all my experiences into one place. A convenient distortion, and the least of my offences against veracity. (356)

Even the reasons for those deviations that are not explicitly discussed can often be easily inferred from other clues in the narrative - a potential reason for changing the brand of the vase that gets broken in the fountain incident for instance is provided in the rejection slip.

To the degree that they are highlighted on the level of discourse, most of Briony's deviations are framed in the service of storytelling. The merging of the hospitals is a matter of narrative economy. The Ming vase is exchanged for Meissen porcelain for the sake of increased plausibility (to work around the inconvenience of truth sometimes being stranger than fiction). Assuming that Briony's first treatment of the incident in the form of her short story was actually closer to the truth we are reminded that we often place higher demands on coherence in fiction than could be met by real life. This demand for coherence and symmetry in a story is also how the narrative frames Briony's deviations from the truth in her account of Robbie Turner's behaviour at the night of Lola's rape. Other potential motivations for her perjury against Robbie (such as romantic jealousy or class-based resentment) are mentioned as well, but comparatively down-played. They are certainly not present on a conscious level for Briony, judging from the insights into her mind we get via free indirect discourse in her point-

of-view chapters, whereas the "obsession with symmetry"-hypothesis is supported on numerous occasions.

Even Briony's most substantial deviation - the lovers' survival and reunion - could be explained by the demands of conventional storytelling (i. e. for poetic justice). Here Briony herself however foregrounds another motivation: her own quest for atonement. In order to make up for her earlier sabotage of the relationship, she wants to provide the couple with the happy ending denied to them during their life. How exactly this is supposed to actually benefit anyone remains fairly vague; from her victims' perspective such a purely symbolic gesture might seem rather hollow, considering how it mainly results in Briony herself feeling somewhat better about the affair. The misery you caused others is not a pleasant thing to contemplate after all. It is not hard to see why Briony might have some interest in softening the blow of her misdeed in her own account of events. The best non-self-serving spin on this particular deviation may still be concerned with the functions of narrative: you could argue that the more uplifting ending offers some consolation to Briony's readers at least.

Of course Briony Tallis did not actually write this novel. Briony is a fictional character, created by Ian McEwan. Even though she may have earned her readers' mistrust, there is no immediate reason to extend it to Ian McEwan himself. Briony Tallis did not play fair with her readers, but Ian McEwan does. The reveals of the last chapter may shake all our certainties about the preceding story, but at least Briony herself continues to feel real. She lied, but she lied for plausible reasons, perfectly in line with her characterization up to this point. At the end of her life, on the verge of oblivion, slowly losing her memories and control of her narrative, she is still easily recognizable as the precocious child of the first chapter, hungry for attention and in love with her own powers as a story-teller, always on the brink of self-awareness, yet ultimately too self-indulgent to truly escape her solipsism. We have accompanied her on her artistic journey from childhood plays to published novels and judging from everything we learned about her on the way - her ephemeral epiphanies, her quest for order, her hunger for attention, her eagerness to please the audience - it makes perfect sense that she ends up where she does: back at the fairy tale, where the intrepid heroine, after many trials and tribulations, gets rewarded with her medical prince, and the storyteller remains firmly enthroned as the god of her creation, doling out rewards and punishment.

All you need to preserve the aesthetic illusion is some sort of coherence. The story Briony tells about her crime against Cecilia and Robbie may invite our scrutiny in view of her own unreliability as a narrator⁹, but the story Ian McEwan tells about Briony's development as a writer still adds up.

While the various incongruities between Briony's evolving poetology and its implementation invite us to question the deeper urges behind storytelling, other sections of *Atonement* seem deliberately and competently designed to provide the conventional pleasures of narrative, upholding its ambitions towards realist representation. This especially applies to the account of the British retreat to Dunkirk and Briony's experiences as a nurse, two sections of the novel that demonstrate that Ian McEwan obviously carefully researched the historical background for this novel. Hildago (2005: 87) points out that the Dunkirk section in particular is comparatively devoid of "ironical allusion and reimagining the literary past", focussing instead on "objects, bodies, and the physical sensation of hunger, thirst, and fear". At first sight, this seems to reinforce the notion that ironic metareference and the simpler, good old-fashioned narrative pleasures are conflicting aims. The moment heteroreferential concerns (doing justice to weighty issues such as war and loss, aiming for historical accuracy) take over, the irony is toned down. So these episodes of straightforward storytelling stand out like islands in a sea of ironic metareference; yet their emotional impact is not diminished by this framing. On closer inspection, the mere fact that such a compromise is possible is remarkable. While ironic metareference has a certain corrosive effect on the aesthetic illusion, this effect does not necessarily have to pervade every single part of the narrative. *Atonement* illustrates how the illusion shattering effect of ironic metareference can be contained, as long as the narrative provides a sufficient amount of aesthetical and psychological coherence.

3.2.3.5 Validation of Fiction's Emotional and Ethical Function in *Atonement* – Poetic Justice And Empathy

The frequent ironic metareferences in *Atonement* invite us to critically reflect on the power of narratives (to shape our perception of reality; to affirm the narrator's conception of the order) and certain narrators' tendencies to abuse them. One of the narrative powers not discussed so far is the power to emotionally engage the audience, to create empathy for fictional

⁹ The realization that Briony took poetic freedom does not make the story she narrates any less coherent or compelling, however.

characters. This function too relies on the maintenance of an aesthetic illusion - we need to forget that characters are not real in order to be motivated to emotionally invest in their fate and we need to be able to trust that any given point of view is rendered at least in good faith in order to connect with the focalizer's perspective. The question of truth and the possibility of its representation through language can be approached with some academical detachment; the question of honesty is a matter we tend to take more personally. We may tolerate distorted representation due to the vagaries of memory, but blatant lies, especially with a transparently self-serving motivation, tend to make narrators less relatable.

It is not hard to see how Briony as the fictional author of the first three chapters uses the power of narratives for the purpose of emotional manipulation. The novel is her attempt at atonement; of course she would be looking for someone to grant her absolution. And since the only people who could legitimately do so are already dead (at least according to the version of events presented in the last chapters), Briony turns towards her second best option: us, the (implied) readers.

The emotional function of fiction is strongly connected to its ethical function. Briony wants to use her novel to finally show compassion for her victims; she wants to win the reader's forgiveness because she can no longer win theirs. To create an impression of poetic justice in the crudest, most visceral sense, characters need to take on the roles of heroes and villains; it is not enough to dole out good and bad outcomes according to a character's moral integrity - it is also important to make readers feel the appropriate emotion about the final state of affairs. To satisfy a demand for poetic justice, villains must not get away with their crimes, and, maybe even more importantly, audiences should not want them to.

As already described in the previous section on Briony's failed artistic epiphanies, the evolution of her stance towards (the necessity, the desirability, the possibility, the precise nature of) poetic justice is presented with much ambivalence. Briony's development as a writer takes her from the black and white morality of "stories derived from the European tradition of folk tales, through drama with simple moral intent, to [...] an impartial psychological realism" (42). Her modernist turn is initiated by her observation of the encounter between Robbie and Cecilia, encouraging her to accept her own inability to understand everything and defer moral judgment. Wolf (2001: 306), however, points out how Briony's poetological embrace of subjective realities, allowing for incomprehensibility and

promoting a relativist stance towards events, might actually serve her need to lift the weight of the blame put upon her. So when young Briony contemplates the exciting possibility of showing an event from different perspectives without evaluating them against each other and concludes “She need not judge. There did not have to be moral” (40), this might be just an attempt of the older narrating Briony to persuade her readers to adopt the same attitude towards her own story in order to escape their judgment.

Briony’s own inability to withhold judgment when reading Robbie’s straight-forward letter to Cecilia, her occasional recurs to traditional narrative conventions – reflected for instance in her use of physical characteristics in order to indicate something about someone’s personality (cf. Wolf 2001:304) and most importantly in her need for a villain – as well as her ultimate return to the poetic justice of fairy tales declared in the post-script¹⁰ in order to defend the invention of a happy ending for her lovers cast further doubt on her modernist turn. Briony justifies her return to poetic justice by claiming to be concerned for the well-being of her readers, asking:

What sense of hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? (371)

Although Briony at least partly acknowledges the convenience of her departure from reality (reducing the intensity of Robbie’s and Cecilia’s tragedy and thus also the dimension of her crime), admitting that she no longer “posses[s] the courage of pessimism” (371) she portrays her change of the ending as a “final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair” (372). Briony might be aware that her ability to determine the ultimate outcome of events in her story actually disqualifies writing as a way to achieve atonement, as it effectively places her in the position of God¹¹; and yet she seems to see her book and its happy ending as a way to right her wrongs and redeem herself, compensating Robbie and Cecilia with happiness and quasi-eternal life¹² in her novel for the misery they suffered because of her in real life. We are asked to consider that at least, she was not “so self-serving as to let them forgive” (Atonement:

¹⁰ “It occurs to me that I have not travelled so very far after all, since I wrote my little play. Or rather, I’ve made a huge digression and doubled back to my starting place.” (370)

¹¹ “(...) how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her.” (371)

¹² “As long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love.” (371)

372) her, but even this rare example of Briony refraining from using fiction for her own convenience might be just of a temporary nature. After all, this is how Briony goes on:

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. (372)

In her autobiography, Briony ostensibly succeeds in implementing poetic justice by rewarding her lovers with a happy ending. But poetic justice does not only call for rewarding the hero, it also requires the punishment of the villain. In the postscript, Briony informs us that she suffers from vascular dementia, an illness that will result in the gradual loss of her memory, her language competence and finally her motor control – a fitting punishment considering Briony's life-long preoccupation with her precious self and language. What might be even worse for Briony is her inability to publish her autobiography during her life-time, as Lola and Paul Marshall are likely to outlive her and would probably prevent the publication. At the one hand, this spares her from facing the reactions of her family and friends to her crime (and it also allows for further revisions of the narrative in her mind, maybe one day culminating in that longed-for forgiveness), but on the other hand it also robs her of the enjoyment of the artistic recognition which the publication of this book – the story of her life, the crowning moment of her literary career – would have most likely earned her. The question of poetic justice remains unresolved.

Another way for Ian McEwan to remain ambiguous on the subject of poetic justice is having Briony try out various stances towards poetic justice at various points in the narrative (initially embracing it uncritically, coming to view it as immature and presumptive and finally as life-affirming and merciful again), always with potentially ulterior motives, always in a manner undercut by the specific circumstances of her respective change of mind and its aftermath. Once again readers find themselves in a scenario where irony markers pointed in all possible directions essentially cancel each other out.

And yet I will argue that Mc Ewan is more than merely neutral on the subject of fiction's emotional and ethical potential. This may become clearer once we shift our focus from the notion of justice to the notion of compassion.

Granted, fiction's powers of emotional manipulation can be put to nefarious purposes - stories can be used to inspire hate as well as empathy - but this just places narrative in the same ethical category as any other tool we use with noble or less noble intentions. Considering the importance of empathy for human interaction it would be hasty to classify emotional manipulation in the service of sowing the seeds of compassion as ethically questionable *per se*.

In terms of evoking a strong emotional response in readers, *Atonement's* success is hard to deny. When Hildalgo (2005:66) praises the novel's heteroreferential ambitions in addition to its metareferential playfulness - the opportunity it provides for its readers to witness "history in the making, before it becomes part of the national mythology" - he stresses the importance of including "an individual for whom the reader feels strongly". Whose heart would not break for Robbie Turner, the innocent victim of Briony's flexible approach to the truth? Framed as the villain in Briony's account of Lola's rape, he becomes a hero in her autobiography, a fundamentally decent fellow who manages to preserve his integrity even in the midst of unjust persecution, classist prejudice and the horrors of war.

Robbie's actions and intentions are consistently virtuous: he rescues Briony from drowning, he brings back the twins, he tries to help a woman and a child escape from a Stuka-Attac and is haunted by guilt when he has to leave them behind in order to save his own life. He probably also saves fellow soldier Nettle's life by preventing him from throwing away his boots on the way to the beach of Dunkirk and helps Nettle and Mace rescue a RAF man from being lynched by the mob. He cannot forgive Briony, yet he encourages Cecilia to seek reconciliation with her family, because her happiness is more important to him than his own resentments¹³. In spite of occasional dark moments spent dreaming of revenge on Briony¹⁴ (which is however only human in Robbie's position, considering what Briony has done), Robbie remains an essentially positive figure even after becoming the victim of a kind of outrageous injustice that might have turned a lesser man into a bitter cynic. This maintaining

¹³ "Robbie knew better than anyone how she loved her brother, how close she was to her family, and how much the house and the park meant to her. He could never return, but it troubled him to think that she was destroying a part of herself for his sake." (209)

¹⁴ "In France once, in the bitterest week of winter, raging drunk on cognac, he had even conjured her onto the end of his bayonet." (229)

of basic human decency is particularly remarkable considering the cruelty and senseless suffering Robbie experiences as a soldier in France.

The chapter devoted to his war experience loses no time when introducing readers to the horrors of war by confronting them with the haunting image of child's leg in a tree¹⁵ on the second page. In a place, "where you could hardly be bothered to lift your feet to step over a dead woman's arm" (228) it is almost impossible not to get numbed by the omnipresent evidence of death and misery. Yet Robbie struggles against this numbness.

The detailed account of the terrors of war puts Cecilia and Robbie's suffering into perspective. The fact that they themselves are not so caught up in their own tragedy to lose their sense of proportion serves to direct the readers' sympathies towards them as it suggests a remarkable capacity for empathy. There is however another, more dubious effect to this confrontation of private woe and large scale tragedy: By relativising the lovers' tragedy, the war also relativises Briony's guilt, as the search for culprits suddenly seems irrelevant in the face of anonymous slaughter. The implied author has Robbie reflect on this problem on several occasions. When he passes a bombed village, he asks himself,

Who would care? Who could ever describe this confusion, and come up with the village names and the dates for history books? And take the reasonable view and begin to assign blame? (227)

In the end, not even Cecilia's news that Briony intends to withdraw her testimony and set things straight, can cheer up Robbie. Considering the impossibility to document the exact circumstances of all the crimes committed routinely in a war, the reasonability of our human need to assign blame suddenly seems questionable. In his final hours, exhausted by the hardships of the retreat, suffering from fever, Robbie reflects on the nature of guilt:

But what was guilt these days? It was cheap. Everyone was guilty, and no one was. No one would be redeemed by a change of evidence, for there weren't enough people, enough paper and pens, enough patience and peace, to take down the statement of all the witnesses and gather in the facts. The witnesses were guilty too. All day we've witnessed each other's crimes. You killed no one today? But how many did you leave to die? Down here in the cellar we'll keep quiet about it. We'll sleep it off, Briony. (262)

¹⁵ "(...) as he straightened from picking up the coat and was slinging it around his shoulders, he saw it. (...) It was a leg in a tree.(...) It was a perfect leg, pale, smooth, small enough to be a child's." (192)

This display of understanding for Briony, effectively placing her and Robbie on the same level, attributed to Robbie himself by the implied author's use of Robbie as focalizer in combination with free indirect discourse, becomes rather dubious as soon as we realize that the implied author is actually Briony herself. Relativism is one of the more problematic implications of postmodernism. Here, Briony uses it for her own purposes.

As to the intended effect on readers, the implications of Robbie's musings on guilt are therefore ambiguous. Yes, Briony's guilt is relativised. But in retrospection we actually know that it is Briony herself who does the relativising. And even, if it were really Robbie's own thoughts presented to us in this way, they might as well end up to contributing towards a critical judgment of Briony's character, as the extent of Robbie's almost excessive self blame born out of his deep concern for the universal suffering that surrounds him just foregrounds Briony's own evasiveness and egocentricity.

This maybe, more so than the tacked-on happy ending, is Briony's true atonement. Once upon a time, she made Robbie the villain of a story and ruined his life. Now she makes him the hero of another and brings him back to life in her readers' minds. First made him the target of resentments; now she directs our sympathies at him.

Another illustration of the life-affirming, connecting power of narrative is encapsulated in Briony's encounter with a dying soldier. Working as a probationary nurse at a London hospital taking in the wounded soldiers returning from Durnkirk, Briony, who has been taught a bit of French in school, is sent to tend to a young French soldier named Luc. Drifting in and out of consciousness, the young man mistakes her for a girl he used to know while still working in his father's bakery in France. At first, Briony tries to correct his misconceptions, reminding him that he is in London now, not in France and that she has never visited his village – "She thought it wasn't right to lead him on." (307) – but when she loosens his bandages and realizes how severe his wounds and how slim his chances of survival are, she decides to play along.

'Do you love me?' She hesitated. 'Yes'. No other reply was possible. Besides, for that moment, she did. He was a lovely boy who was a long way from his family and he was about to die. (309)

Briony's interaction with the dying soldier illustrates the positive aspects of the power of narratives, demonstrating how fiction can become a last source of solace when reality

becomes too harsh to bear. In his fever dream, the young man escapes from his dire circumstance by weaving a narrative in which he is back home in his French village, reunited with his girlfriend, making plans for a summer wedding. Briony, cast in the role of the girlfriend, feels an ethical obligation to maintain the aesthetic illusion. "She knew why she had been sent. [...] No other reply was possible" (309) – Briony does not want to rob Luc of his only source of relief in his last hours.

Participating in Luc's delusion also allows Briony to feel a stronger bond with the dying soldier. One of the first things Briony learns in her new job is that hospital etiquette requires nurses to maintain a certain professional distance towards their patients. "[I]n no circumstances should a nurse communicate to a patient her Christian name" (272). But after becoming a part of Luc's story, Briony breaks this commandment. It becomes important to her that Luc knows her Christian name: "'It's not Tallis. You shall call me Briony,' she whispered" (310). Participating in Luc's narrative fuels Briony's desire to form a deeper connection.

She imagined the unavailable future - the boulangerie in a narrow shady street swarming with skinny cats, piano music from an upstairs window, her giggling sisters-in-law teasing her about her accent, and Luc Cornet loving her in his eager way. She would have liked to cry for him, and for his family in Milau who would be waiting to hear news from him. (311)

Thus *Atonement* illustrates how narrative can help us cope with hopeless circumstances and promotes empathy.

3.4. *Atonement* as Indictment and Celebration of the Powers of Narrative

Aspects of fictionality (specific narrative conventions such as the need for heroes and villains and poetic justice as well as the human desire for narratives in general) are frequent objects of irony in *Atonement*. Most irony markers directed towards any given aspect however are offset by corresponding solidarity markers, which results in constructive general impression.

Metareferences	Markes of Detachment	Markers of Solidarity
The country house as a symbol of continuity/order/restoration	Allusions to classics of the genre (<i>Mansfield Park</i> , <i>Howards' End</i> , <i>Brideshead Revisited</i>) - compare <i>Atonement</i> : Tallis family not that sophisticated; country house somewhat fake; no longer the setting in part two and part three; gets sold and turned into a hotel.	Return to the country house in the final section; gesture toward continuity in the restaging of the 'Trials of Arabella'
Black and white morality of fairy tales (need for heroes and villains, poetic justice)	Propels Briony to frame Robbie for a crime he did not commit; desire to restore a sense of poetic justice and give the lovers a happy ending indicated to be a self-serving form of atonement, glossing over the severe consequences of Briony's crime	Return to "The Trials of Arabella" No good stories without proper villains. Rejection slip: "Might she come between them?" – Did Briony invent her own crime in order to make the romance of Cecilia and Robbie a better story? Restoration of Robbie as a heroic figure in the final manuscript
Realist representation (realist hunger for comprehensive explanations; optimism about the possibility of finding/representing truth)	Briony's newly acquired 'worldliness' with regard to sex as one of the driving forces behind her misjudgement of Robbie; propensity to construct patterns where there are none for the sake of coherence and symmetry in a quest for comprehensive explanation	Part 2 and Part 3 set in Dunkirk and in the London hospital as illustrations how the quest for realism can heighten the emotional impact of a narrative; truthful portrayal of the horrors of war as worthwhile endeavour from an ethical perspective

<p>High Modernism (focus on discourse at the expense of plot; aesthetics at the expense of moral judgements)</p>	<p>Embraced by Briony at a time in the narrative, when she has motivation to deflect moral judgement from herself.</p> <p>Explicit criticism in the rejection slip (danger of experimentation for the sake of experimentation; disregard for the human hunger for “the pull of a narrative”.)</p> <p>Departure from the stricter requirements of High Modernism in the finished manuscript</p>	<p>See ironic metareferences directed at the pitfalls of other modes of discourse which can be avoided by a modernist sensibility.</p> <p>Remaining traces of a modernist sensibility in the finished manuscript (inclusion of multiple perspectives, strong concern with mental processes, etc.)</p>
<p>Epistemological and aesthetic function of narratives (making sense of experiences by bringing order into our perceptions), creation of an aesthetic illusion</p>	<p>See irony markers regarding realist representation. 'Symmetry' of artificial patterns as a misleading criterion for truth</p>	<p>See solidarity markers regarding realist representation. Validation of heteroreferential concerns of fiction - relative lack of metareference and irony in the Dunkirk chapter in support of fiction's ambitions to point to a truth beyond itself</p>
<p>Emotional function of narratives (emotional manipulation of the audience; creation of empathy, escapism)</p>	<p>Self-serving motive of Briony's account of events - manuscript as questionable atonement to win forgiveness for her crimes; too little, too late?</p> <p>The invention of a happy-ending as a way to avoid facing the extent of damage caused</p>	<p>Briony as the author of the Part One to Three does not only create empathy for herself, but chiefly for her victims (at her own expense). Briony's participation in the fantasy of the dying soldier allows her to connect with him on a deeper level; presented as an act of mercy</p>

Figure 6 Balance of Markers of Detachment and Solidarity in McEwan's *Atonement*

To conclude, we should be careful not to dismiss any of the modes of discourse and narrative conventions ironized in *Atonement*, just because Briony often embraces them for questionable

reasons. Briony's self-absorption and her obsession with order may prevent her from consistently acting upon her poetological insights; this however does not mean that they are necessarily wrong. *Atonement* shows that any kind of fiction can be a powerful weapon, easily abused. But this does not imply that fiction is necessarily a force of evil – it is just dangerous when in the wrong hands.

4. On the Merits of Having Your Cake and Eating It - Conclusion

The introduction to this thesis raised the question whether the use of constructive (protective, pre-emptive) irony to engage with concepts and conventions that might be considered problematic if presented without reservation should be considered a valid strategy in the face of traditions worth reviving (a saving grace) or a facile and craven way to skirt the issue (a cop out). My hope for this thesis was to back up the former assertion, by demonstrating that irony can be used in a manner that does not invalidate its object, even if this object is some element of fictionality, such as the immersion in an aesthetic illusion or emotional investment in a fictional character.

For this purpose, the thesis was divided into a theoretical and a practical part. The former was dedicated to defining and contextualizing the concept of constructive irony, developing a process for identifying instances of constructive ironic metareference and analyzing their impact on aesthetic illusion and readers' emotional investment, whereas the latter was concerned with applying this process to the case study of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*.

My efforts to establish the theoretical framework for this thesis were kicked off by a clarification of terms. This was difficult in the case of irony, since the term is used with different connotations in various disciplines such as literary studies, linguistics and philosophy for only tangentially related phenomena such as irony as a figure of speech, Socratic irony, cosmic irony and dramatic irony. These various forms of irony are merely united by the deliberate creation of some sort of incongruity at the hands of an ironist (usually for the purpose of highlighting the limitations of certain perspectives). Whereas a unified definition of irony capturing all nuances and different concepts associated with the term proved elusive, an attempt at delineating subcategories yielded a distinction between rhetorical and structural irony, the former resulting from incongruities of implicit meaning and explicit utterance, the latter emerging from tensions between structural features pervading an entire work, comprising dramatic, viewpoint related and frame related irony. These terms would later be used to analyze the meta-referential impact of various uses of irony within a narrative.

The next section dealt with analyzing the functions of irony on the communicative as well as on the philosophical level, which are not always easily separated from each other. On the epistemological level, irony serves to undermine our belief in the transparency of signs; its

function on the level of communication is best captured by the triadic model comprised of ironist - audience- victim/object of irony (cf. Stempel 1976), illustrating the creation of solidarity between ironist and audience at the expense of the victim. This model was developed for hostile forms of irony and will later be expanded to account for constructive forms of irony as well. An ironic reading is triggered by the presence of irony markers, which can be of a verbal, visual, auditory or contextual nature (cf. Müller 1988) and alert the audience to the fact that any given statement is not supposed to be taken at face value, but rather examined for another layer of meaning. The correct identification of irony markers often relies on the knowledge of the wider context of an utterance and the speakers' general attitude towards the subject in question.

Linguistic accounts of the cognitive processes involved in communicating irony can be found in the works of Grice (1975), Clark and Gerrig (1984) as well as Sperber and Wilson (1981). Grice (1975) introduces the notion of conversational implicature resulting from any failure to uphold the communicative maxims of quantity, quality, relevance or manner, which is sufficiently blatant to invalidate all accusations of misdirection. Grice's account explains how ironists can be seen as upholding the cooperative principle as a whole while blatantly violating individual maxims, but it does not provide many insights into cognitive processes involved, especially with regard to potential motivations for choosing such an indirect form of communication. Post-Gricean accounts, such as the mention theory of irony, proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1981) and the pretence theory of irony, proposed by Clark and Gerrig (1984) paint a more elaborate picture. Mention theory views ironists as merely echoing something someone else (who is presumably less well informed) might have uttered under comparable circumstances, expecting audiences to recognize the lack of genuine sentiment backing up the utterance, whereas pretence theory views ironists as merely pretending to perform the speech act in question, expecting the audience to be aware of the theatrical nature of the performance. For the purpose of this thesis, mention theory seems more suitable, as the term 'pretence' is charged with negative connotations and suggests a rather too thorough negation of the literal meaning of an ironical utterance. Conceiving of irony as ironic echo in contrast leaves more room for granting some amount of validity to both literal as well as ironic meaning.

Acknowledging the possibility of a more or less peaceful co-existence of literal and ironic meaning, without the second necessarily completely invalidating the former, is particularly

important for the discussion of constructive (pre-emptive, protective) irony. Not every use of irony is full of hostile intention towards its object. Hostile forms of irony such as sarcasm may come more readily to mind when people are asked to reflect on the concept of irony, but they are by no means the only game in town. Building on the example of self-depreciating irony, Wolf (2007) develops the concept of constructive irony, employed to protect its object in the face of a likely hostile audience reaction rather than denigrate it, when the pretended solidarity geared towards the audience likely to be critical of the object of irony rather than the object of irony itself. This comparatively underresearched form of irony calls for an adaptation of the traditional triadic model of communicating irony. Wolf (ibid.) argues in favour of replacing the term 'victim of irony' with the term 'object of irony' and adds further stages to the process of reading irony, involving the identification of solidarity markers and the inference of a second-order implicit meaning.

The first challenge in analyzing irony as a literary device lies in determining the agency behind the effect. It is not always immediately obvious whether the ironist responsible for any given ironic speech act can be located on the intra- or the extradiegetic level, for instance in the case of free indirect discourses (which I decided to frame as speech acts by an intradiegetic focalizer character). Various forms of verbal irony can be employed by both extra- and intradiegetic ironists; forms of structural irony such as dramatic irony or frame related irony, however, are only at the conscious disposal of extradiegetic ironists.

Just as verbal irony, those forms of structural irony too can be used for constructive purposes. This may seem counterintuitive at first, as dramatic irony for instance relies on asymmetrical information between character and audience, potentially inspiring a sense of superiority and detachment in the audience. And yet dramatic irony is often perceived as even heightening the pathos of a scene, adding a sense of inescapable doom and increasing our emotional investment in a tragic hero or heroine. Even in case of comedies dramatic irony can sometimes be used in this manner, not merely to make us laugh about its victims, but also to make us empathize with them. Wolf (2007) therefore views dramatic irony in a line with subject-centred constructive irony (self-irony) and object-centred constructive irony, strengthening the audience's emotional connection its objects in spite of conflicting cognitive premises (the disparity between self-image and public image in the case of self-irony, the hostile discursive environment in case of object-centred constructive verbal irony, the

informational advantage of the audience in case of dramatic irony) and the resulting residual detachment.

Frame related irony too might be placed in this line under certain circumstances, even though its hostile uses are probably more readily apparent (see for instance the genre of the mock-epic). And yet it is possible to make framing clash with content in a manner that diminishes neither, merely in order to draw our attention to the fact that framing is done in the first place.

The potentially constructive function of ironical speech acts also reverberates on the philosophical level. By highlighting a certain inescapable conventionality of all expressions, irony may help lower our expectations of originality as the only acceptable proof of authenticity and make peace with impossibility of perfect objectivity. Eco's (1994) much cited example of the lover who self-consciously quotes Barbara Cartland to confess his feeling to his beloved demonstrates how irony can be used as some sort of antidote against banality, a form of escaping by charging ahead. Eco's lover sacrifices any claim to originality, but in doing so, manages to preserve the original spirit of the message.

Irony can also serve as a coping mechanism in the face of cognitive dissonance. The inherent mental health benefits can be linked to its potentially constructive function. If irony inevitably and entirely negated its object, we could not use it to negotiate a truce in our internal conflicts.

Irony is sometimes associated with objectivity (cf. Ong 1976; Mileur 1994), because it requires a certain degree of intellectual detachment. In my thesis, this association is rejected in favour of Rorty's (1989) juxtaposition of ironists and metaphysicians, the latter of which are those who would lay claim to objectivist ambitions. Appreciation for irony may demonstrate a certain ability to restrain a kneejerk emotional reaction, but it is rather short-sighted to confuse emotional detachment with objectivity. Emotional involvement, after all, is hardly the only obstacle on our path to accurate perceptions. Sometimes we miss important details, not because we are emotionally compromised, but simply because we lack the necessary experience to properly contextualize certain observations. In contrast to metaphysicians, Rorty's ironists acknowledge their inability to ever completely transcend their own contexts. We cannot always accurately capture all aspects of reality, because we sometimes just lack the vocabulary, and we lack the vocabulary because we sometimes just lack the context.

Highlighting the limitations of language when it comes to representing reality could be seen as one of the major projects of post-modernism, which makes the Zeitgeist's zest for irony just another symptom of the metareferential turn. Wolf (2007) views constructive irony as an answer to the exhaustion of traditional forms diagnosed by Barth (1967) and part of the compromise culminating in the problematic novel suggested by Lodge (1965), as it allows writers to return to allegedly out-dated traditions without having to feign ignorance of later intellectual developments.

Of course this strategy is not always met with universal praise. One of the main criticisms frequently directed at irony is that it constitutes a creative dead end, sacrificing readers' opportunities for escapist immersion and emotional investment for a shield against accusations of derivativeness and a sense of intellectual superiority. In order to confirm the validity of constructive irony as a creative strategy, my thesis set out to show that constructive ironical metareferentiality does not necessarily destroy the aesthetic illusion and the reader's emotional connection to fictional characters.

The theoretical chapter concluded with an outline of various steps to be taken in the analysis of constructive ironic metareference and its impact on a narrative's various core appeals. The first step consists in classifying instances of metareference as ironical. Every instance of irony has some element of meta-referentiality (pointing at the unreliability of signs), but not every instance of meta-referentiality is necessarily ironical. There is no irony in fictional characters unreservedly praising certain genres or aspects of fictionality and never being disproven by the narrative, and there is no irony in fictional characters condemning genres their story is no part of, for instance. Once an instance of meta-referentiality has been classified as ironical (for instance in case of critical intracompositional metareference), the next step is to search the wider context for signs of the ironist's appreciation for the object of his or her irony (so-called solidarity markers) and determine whether the message about the object of irony is supposed to be predominantly hostile or predominantly constructive.

The second part of my thesis was dedicated to using the instruments developed in the first chapter in order to analyze constructive ironic metareference in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. Since a secondary aim of this thesis lies in examining the suitability of constructive irony as a reaction to the exhaustion of traditional forms, it was important to choose a work that would

be no stranger to a post-modernist sensibility, while still mostly upholding the reality principle, thus exemplifying the compromise discussed by Lodge (1965) in his writing on the problematic novels. *Atonement* qualifies, mostly due to the hybridity of its various genre affiliations. Until the last section, *Atonement* reads like realist historical fiction. The first three parts already contain a lot of metareferential elements, especially with regard to one of its central focalizer characters, Briony Tallis, whose development as a writer is one of the novel's main thematic concerns. Yet the aesthetic illusion remains intact until the metalepsis of the final section makes short shrift of the previously established generic classification and turns what started out as a hybrid between country house novel, family saga, romance and historical novel into Briony Tallis' (allegedly more or less factual) autobiography. *Atonement* thus emerges as a hybrid narrative, combining realist, modernist, post-modernist elements.

As already established in the theoretical part of this thesis, there is always something inherently ironic about critical intra-compositional meta-referentiality. With its paratextual homage to Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), *Atonement* evokes the tradition of self-critical literature, using metafictional elements to demonstrate the pitfalls of an overly excitable imagination too easily seduced by the lure of narrative, by documenting the trials and tribulation of its artistic heroine Briony, who is rather too quick to sacrifice the truth (and an innocent man's freedom; and her sister's happiness) for the sake of the better story.

Long sections of the novel are dedicated to the development of Briony's poetology, detailing Briony's musings on the pros and cons of various literary genres and aesthetic approaches, providing fertile ground for critical metareference, which becomes increasingly ironic, as it remains stubbornly intra-compositional, due to Briony consistently failing to actually implement her artistic epiphanies in crucial moments of the narrative. She keeps falling back into discarded patterns, succumbing to a need for a fairy-tale villain after having decried the black-and-white morality of fairy tales, indulging a realist obsession with comprehensive explanations while paying lip service to a modernist sensitivity for the complexity and potential incomprehensibility of other minds in a world full of uncertainty. Briony may name-drop Virginia Woolf and dabble in modernist stream-of-consciousness experimentation when she writes down her first literary treatment of the fountain incident, but when looking at her ultimate account, the manuscript later revealed as her autobiography, it seems that very little of this modernist sensibility made it into the final version. Traces of a modernist affiliation can still be observed in the finished product, most notably in its fascination with mental

processes resulting in a devaluation of outer events over long passages in the country-house section, but the last chapter, with its return to the country house setting and its restaging of *The Trials of Arabella*, suggests a return to the roots, to melodrama and fairy tales, more than anything else. Briony's ultimate account shows that she has taken to heart the suggestions of the editor who gave her feedback on her first short story attempt, toning down the modernist experimentation in favour of more conventional narrative pleasures.

The irony of Briony's failed epiphanies is heightened by hints at all those potentially ulterior, often transparently self-serving motives Briony might have for repeatedly changing her poetological approach. She embraces the neutrality of modernism, praising its freedom from judgment at a moment in her life when she is the one who would invite most of it, and returns to fairy tale demands for poetic justice at the end of her life when she is looking for closure and a way to atone, justifying her distortion of facts, minimizing the consequences of her crime, with her readers' need for a happy ending.

In a true post-modernist fashion, however, the scepticism towards narrative evoked by *Atonement's* ironical meta-references is not just confined to certain genres or narrative conventions, but, by scrutinizing Briony's often rather narcissistic motivations for her creative endeavors, suggests something potentially shady at the root of storytelling in general. Throughout the novel, Briony's creative ambitions are consistently linked with a narcissist need for attention and downright totalitarian obsession with order. Briony is portrayed as egocentric and susceptible to solipsism, having great difficulty to grasp the reality of other minds. Her escapist flights of fancy allow her to become the master of her own universe, the god of her own creation. There is a marked lack of humility, until right to the end, when grown-up Briony plays fast and loose with the facts of her life in order to keep playing God, doling out rewards and punishment to the cast of her narrative, even though some of those punishments are incurred by herself.

And yet, *Atonement* can be read not just as an indictment, but also as an affirmation of the human need for narrative, once we look at the various solidarity markers rendering all those ironic metareferences listed above constructive rather than hostile. This is partly due to the way various markers of irony directed at all kinds of narrative conventions and aesthetical approaches tend to cancel each other out, each marker of irony for one element serving as a marker of solidarity for another. Any indictment of the black-and-white morality of fairy tales

validates the modernist focus on subjectivity forgoing the need for judgment, while criticism of modernist relativism and inaccessibility in turn validates the ethical concerns and more easily accessible pleasures of conventional storytelling.

And those pleasures of conventional storytelling, provided by the novel *Atonement* itself, are considerable after all. McEwan might have written a story about the dangers and temptations of stories, warning us how seductive narrative appeal can be, how easily those powers can be abused, but in doing so, he also show-cased all the pleasures and potential benefits of storytelling. While some readers were upset about the last-chapter twist, most critics lauded the novel for its impression of historical accuracy based on thorough research and emotional impact, that was clearly not lessened by last-minute post-modernist shenanigans. In spite of its strongly pronounced poetological concerns, the novel largely escapes accusations of favouring style over substances, so frequently hurled against this particular sort of exercise. Somehow McEwan succeeds in having his cake and eating it - talking about the pitfalls of storytelling while spinning a gripping yarn. And he does so with “truly Austenian irony” (cf. Hildago 2005: 66) – directed at the very feat he himself is trying to pull off, a tightrope act accomplished by balancing each irony marker with corresponding markers of solidarity.

In this context it is important to keep in mind that the last minute postmodernist blow against the aesthetic illusion would not be perceived as half as upsetting, if the novel had not succeeded in weaving such a compelling aesthetic illusion right up to this point. It can be concluded that all those instances of ironic metareference found in preceding chapters were obviously not detrimental to this objective, which affirms my hypothesis that constructive ironic metareference is not necessarily destructive when it comes to maintaining an aesthetic illusion.

In the case of *Atonement* the success of this tightrope walk might be explained by the fact that in some sense, Ian McEwan manages to keep playing fair with his readers even when his creation Briony does not. Not matter how dramatically the last chapter reveal may change our impression of events, the resulting disorientation can be contained, as Briony herself still makes sense as a characters. Her actions remain psychologically plausible and consistent with her previous characterisation (downright depressingly so, to be honest, considering the lack of personal growth that implies). She may distort the truth, but there is a method to her distortions. She distorts, but not randomly - only when it suits her. Briony's psychological

consistence provides a sufficient sense of coherence to preserve the aesthetic illusion. Briony's story about her own crime and punishment may fall apart in the face of her self-serving distortions, but McEwan's story about Briony's development as a writer continues to feel true.

Ultimately, *Atonement* succeeds in conveying a message about the power of narratives in a manner that feels honest. There are two forms of power available to the skilled narrator: the power over the fictional world and its characters (the power to decide their fates, dole out poetic justice, assign the hero and the villain role, impose order on chaos) and the power over the audience (the power to inspire emotions in the audience; the power to make people care about fictional characters and then break their hearts)

Interestingly, ironic metareference in *Atonement* mainly seems to address the first aspect (namely that narratives are used to bring order to experience) on the intradiegetic level. The novel shows how Briony's passion for storytelling reflects an obsession with order that makes her misconstrue events, so we see the negative effects of abusing the power to reduce the complexity of reality in order to fit it in a narrative framework – less obvious are the negative effects of abusing your power to emotionally manipulate your audience. The one time, Briony uses her craft for emotional purposes - to console the dying soldier - it is portrayed in fairly positive light. Of course, if we consider the last-chapter-reveal – the fact that everything that has come before has been a story told by the older Briony as some form of atonement, the topic of emotional manipulation of readers becomes virulent. Has she used the story to create sympathy for herself, to make us, her readers, understand her and maybe even absolve her from her crimes? But she also uses the story to create sympathy for her victims – very effectively! – would not this make her crimes appear worse?

Whether art has any obligation to ethics is a topic beyond the scope of this thesis. But if fiction can fulfill an ethical function, surely the inspiration of compassion should be one of its best uses in this regard. In this respect too, *Atonement* succeeds, especially in the Dunkirk chapter, which provides a harrowing but very moving account of the horrors of war.

Thus *Atonement* insist on telling a story while demonstrating a keen awareness that storytelling has come under attack under postmodernism. This feat is accomplished thanks to constructive metareferential irony, used as a strategy to get away with reviving traditional

literary forms, invoking the intrinsic powers of narratives with regard to creating empathy and aesthetic illusion, while countering accusations of abuse by pre-emptive self-criticism. By keeping both irony and solidarity markers in a precarious balance, *Atonement* can have its cake and eat it, encouraging both the intellectual detachment necessary to question a narrative as well as the emotional immersion necessary to be moved by it.

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