



CONSILIUM : Journal Education and Counseling
P-ISSN :[2775-9465]
E-ISSN :[2776-1223]

THE ROLE OF STUDENTS' PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLORATION IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE: A STUDY OF IAN MCEWAN AND JULIAN BARNES

Wahyu Sudrajad¹⁾

^{1,2)} Universitas Kristen Cipta Wacana

Email: wahyusudrajad@cwcu.ac.id¹

ABSTRAK: Penelitian ini mengkaji tema-tema psikologis tentang memori, rasa bersalah, dan identitas dalam novel *Atonement* karya Ian McEwan dan *The Sense of an Ending* karya Julian Barnes. Kedua novel ini menyelami sifat memori yang dapat berubah dan tidak dapat diandalkan, dengan mengungkap bagaimana bias pribadi, pergulatan emosional, dan rasa bersalah mendistorsi ingatan para karakter terhadap masa lalu mereka, yang pada gilirannya membentuk identitas mereka. Melalui karakter Briony Tallis dan Tony Webster, novel ini menggambarkan dampak psikologis yang mendalam dari self-deception, penyesalan, dan proses yang berkelanjutan untuk mendamaikan masa lalu dengan diri mereka saat ini. Penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana memori dan rasa bersalah mempengaruhi tindakan dan hubungan para karakter, menunjukkan bahwa identitas bukanlah sesuatu yang tetap, melainkan narasi yang terus berkembang yang dipengaruhi oleh emosional dan psikologis. Dengan mengkaji tema-tema ini, penelitian ini juga menyoroti bagaimana sastra kontemporer dapat memberikan kesempatan bagi mahasiswa untuk mengeksplorasi psikologi dan refleksi diri.

Kata kunci : Eksplorasi Psikologis, Memori, Rasa Bersalah, Self-Deception, *Atonement*, *The Sense Of An Ending*

ABSTRACT: *This study explores the psychological themes of memory, guilt, and identity in Ian McEwan's Atonement and Julian Barnes' The Sense of an Ending. Both novels delve into the malleability and unreliability of memory, examining how personal biases, emotional turmoil, and guilt distort characters' recollections of the past, thus shaping their identities. Through the characters of Briony Tallis and Tony Webster, the novels illustrate the profound psychological impacts of self-deception, regret, and the ongoing process of reconciling one's past with their present self. This research analyzes how memory and guilt influence the characters' actions and relationships, revealing that identity is not fixed but is instead an evolving narrative influenced by emotional and psychological revelations. By examining these themes, the study also highlights how contemporary literature can provide students with opportunities for psychological exploration and self-reflection.*

Keywords: *Psychological Exploration, Memory, Guilt,, Self-Deception, Atonement, The Sense Of An Ending*

INTRODUCTION

The study of contemporary literature has long been an essential component of literary and psychological analysis, offering deep insights into the complexities of the

human mind (Syakur et al., 2023). Contemporary authors, particularly Ian McEwan and Julian Barnes, are widely recognized for their ability to depict intricate psychological dimensions in their characters, particularly in their explorations of memory, guilt, regret, and the construction of identity (Hejaz & Singh, 2023). Through their works, McEwan and Barnes invite readers, especially students, to confront not only the external events within the story but also the internal psychological states of the characters, which are deeply interwoven with their actions and the consequences of those actions. This study seeks to explore how these psychological aspects in their works offer students an opportunity to reflect on the complexities of human psychology and examine how such psychological exploration shapes understanding in contemporary literature (Makovcová, 2022).

The importance of psychological exploration in literature is not a new concept; it has been a focal point in many literary studies throughout the history of modern literature (Ross et al., 2021). However, what sets contemporary works apart is their deep integration of psychological realism, offering not only a compelling narrative but also a complex inner world for the characters. These works do not simply depict events or actions but focus on the psychological motivations, the mental struggles, and the emotional turmoil that characters endure, thereby enhancing the literary experience by giving students a chance to delve into the multifaceted nature of the human condition (Mukarromah et al., 2024). McEwan and Barnes are exemplary in this regard, as their works often reflect a deep engagement with psychological theory and concepts, transforming literary analysis into a psychological journey.

Ian McEwan, in his novel *Atonement*, presents a nuanced psychological portrayal of guilt, responsibility, and the consequences of misunderstandings (Makovcová, 2022). The novel centers around the character of Briony Tallis, whose mistaken accusation leads to devastating consequences for two families (Sudrajad, 2024). The psychological tension in *Atonement* is not only driven by the actions themselves but also by the way Briony processes and lives with the guilt and responsibility of her actions. This psychological exploration is rooted in the themes of memory and its unreliability, as well as the complexities of redemption. Briony's psychological struggle with her past is a powerful narrative tool that allows McEwan to discuss the broader implications of how individuals

process guilt, the complexities of forgiveness, and the quest for *Atonement* (Liu, 2023). This aspect of the novel makes it an important study for students to explore how emotional and psychological forces govern decisions and, ultimately, the development of a character's identity.

Similarly, Julian Barnes in *The Sense of an Ending* navigates the intricacies of memory, identity, and self-deception through his protagonist, Tony Webster. The novel explores how Tony revisits his past after the death of a friend, only to find that his memories of events and relationships are far from accurate (Piccolo, 2021). Barnes uses the unreliable nature of memory to expose how individuals construct their identities based on faulty recollections, and how these false memories can shape their decisions and relationships long after the events have passed. Through Tony's introspective journey, Barnes delves into the themes of regret, self-deception, and coming to terms with one's past. For students, Barnes' novel presents a thought-provoking examination of how memory functions not only as a tool for recalling events but as a psychological mechanism that helps individuals craft their own identities (Bartnik, 2021). The exploration of this theme is vital for students in understanding the complexities of human psychology and how our past experiences are reconstructed in ways that influence our perceptions of the present.

The significance of psychological exploration in McEwan and Barnes' works lies in their ability to depict characters whose inner turmoil and emotional conflicts drive the narrative. Both authors use psychological realism to create complex characters often caught in the tension between their actions and the inner psychological motivations that shape them (Mickalites, 2022). Their works engage with psychological themes such as guilt, memory, identity, and regret, offering students an opportunity to explore how these themes manifest in literature and how they relate to the characters' development. These themes are not only central to the narrative but also integral to the characters' psychological evolution, which ultimately informs the reader's understanding of human behavior.

Furthermore, contemporary literature, especially works like *Atonement* and *The Sense of an Ending*, is essential for students as it provides an avenue to reflect on their own psychological experiences (Tang, 2021). The exploration of complex emotions like

guilt, regret, and memory helps students understand not only the characters in these works but also their own psychological processes (Muttair, 2024). By analyzing the inner struggles of McEwan's and Barnes' characters, students are prompted to consider how their own memories and emotions influence their perceptions of the world around them. This process encourages deeper self-reflection and enhances the understanding of how literature can serve as a mirror to the human psyche, providing insight into both individual experiences and broader societal themes.

In addition, these novels serve as a rich source of discussion about the concept of psychological realism in literature (Yeh & Tseng, 2019). Psychological realism in literature refers to the portrayal of characters whose emotions, thoughts, and actions are grounded in the complexities of human psychology. McEwan and Barnes excel at crafting narratives that require the reader to engage with the psychological underpinnings of the story (Hejaz & Singh, 2023). These works are not just about plot or external conflict; they are about the internal battles that the characters face. This makes these novels particularly well-suited for academic study, as they offer students the opportunity to explore psychological concepts such as cognitive dissonance, self-deception, and the impact of past trauma on present behavior (Poornima, 2022). By analyzing these novels through a psychological lens, students can gain a deeper understanding of how psychological forces shape literary characters and, by extension, how these forces influence real-world behavior.

The role of psychological exploration in contemporary literature is especially important in the context of education, as it provides students with the tools to not only understand literature on a deeper level but also to apply psychological concepts to their own lives (Holm, 2022). The novels of McEwan and Barnes offer a space for students to engage with difficult and often uncomfortable emotions, encouraging them to reflect on their psychological processes and how they interact with the world (Metallinou, 2020). The study of these themes allows students to connect literature to personal experiences, making the reading process more meaningful and enriching.

Additionally, this psychological exploration is valuable for students studying psychology, literature, or any field that involves human behavior (Oishi & Westgate, 2022). Understanding the psychological dimensions of literary characters enhances

students' ability to analyze human motivations and actions in a broader context. The psychological struggles faced by McEwan's and Barnes' characters provide students with an opportunity to study the human condition through both a literary and psychological framework, reinforcing the interdisciplinary nature of both fields.

The psychological exploration found in the works of Ian McEwan and Julian Barnes offers a significant opportunity for students to engage deeply with contemporary literature. Through the intricate depiction of memory, guilt, identity, and self-deception, these novels offer profound insights into the complexities of the human psyche (Kundi et al., 2021). For students, studying these works is not only an exploration of literary technique but also a journey of self-reflection and psychological discovery. McEwan and Barnes provide readers with a lens through which they can examine their emotional landscapes, making their works invaluable for both academic and personal growth. This study of psychological themes in contemporary literature serves as a critical educational tool that enables students to better understand the dynamics of human behavior, both within literature and in the real world.

Research Method

This study employs of literature study by focusing on the exploration of psychological themes within contemporary literature has become a critical area of study, offering both students and scholars a deeper understanding of human behavior and emotional complexity (van Zyl et al., 2024). In particular, the works of Ian McEwan and Julian Barnes stand out as exemplary in their depiction of characters grappling with memory, guilt, and identity. These novels delve into the intricate nature of the human psyche, offering rich narratives that challenge readers to reflect on their psychological processes (Arslan & Allen, 2022). Through their masterful storytelling, McEwan and Barnes allow us to witness the inner struggles of characters, and in doing so, they invite us to question our perceptions of the past, present, and self

In McEwan's *Atonement*, the story unfolds through the eyes of Briony Tallis, a young girl whose hasty and mistaken actions set off a chain of events that drastically affect the lives of those around her (Wen et al., 2025). Her internal journey, particularly her overwhelming guilt over a false accusation, becomes the emotional core of the narrative. McEwan's exploration of Briony's psychological turmoil is not just about guilt it is about the distortion of memory and the complex ways in which we rewrite our past to fit our emotional needs (Arbués Caballés, 2022). Briony's attempt to seek redemption through writing becomes a symbol of her need to reconcile her actions with her inner self, but McEwan cleverly shows that redemption is elusive. Through Briony, readers are invited to explore the boundaries between truth and perception, to question how memories are shaped by emotions, and to reflect on how guilt can alter one's sense of identity and self-worth.

Similarly, Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* takes on the theme of memory with an equally intense psychological lens, but this time, the focus is on Tony Webster, a man confronting the unreliability of his recollections (Barnes, 2011). Barnes leads the reader through Tony's retrospection, exposing the dissonance between his version of events and the truth that gradually comes to light. The novel's psychological depth is rooted in the idea that memory is not a static recording of the past but a malleable and often distorted recollection that serves our emotional and psychological needs. For Tony, the process of uncovering forgotten or suppressed memories forces him to confront uncomfortable truths about himself, his relationships, and his past actions. Barnes reveals that the stories we tell ourselves stories that define who we believe we are are not always accurate, and it is this confrontation with the self that is at the heart of Tony's psychological journey.

Both *Atonement* and *The Sense of an Ending* present characters whose lives are shaped by the interplay between memory and guilt, highlighting the psychological complexity of how individuals perceive and reinterpret their pasts (Guild et al., 2019). For students engaging with these texts, the psychological struggles of Briony and Tony offer an invaluable opportunity to explore how literature can function as a mirror to the human condition. These novels provide not only an academic challenge in terms of narrative structure and thematic exploration but also a personal reflection on the emotional complexities that define human identity.

McEwan and Barnes also underscore the profound impact that guilt and memory can have on personal identity. In *Atonement*, Briony's guilt is not just an emotion that she carries; it fundamentally reshapes her identity (Savitz et al., 2022). Her pursuit of atonement is, in many ways, an attempt to reconcile the person she was with the person she wishes to be. Her journey reveals the tension between our public identities and our internal selves, how the past, with its injustices and mistakes, continues to influence who we become. This theme is echoed in Barnes' work, where Tony's self-deception and the gap between his recollection of events and the truth expose the fragility of identity. Through their respective journeys, both Briony and Tony are forced to confront how their actions, memories, and the stories they have told themselves shape who they are, and the tension between who they wish to be and who they are becomes central to their psychological explorations.

In these works, memory is not just a passive recollection of the past; it is an active force that shapes the way we understand ourselves and our place in the world (Tseng, 2023). As both McEwan and Barnes demonstrate, memory is deeply intertwined with emotion, and it is often influenced by our desires, regrets, and guilt. This manipulation of memory is a powerful psychological tool that both authors use to explore the theme of identity. Through their characters' distorted recollections and their attempts to reconcile with the past, the novels provide insight into how individuals navigate the complexities

of self-perception and self-deception. They suggest that identity is not a fixed construct but a fluid narrative that can shift as we come to terms with our past actions.

The psychological themes of guilt, memory, and identity explored in McEwan's and Barnes' novels offer rich material for academic study, particularly in the context of contemporary literature and psychology. These works challenge students to engage not just with the external events of the narrative but with the inner emotional landscapes of the characters. By examining the psychological depth of the characters, students can gain valuable insights into how literature reflects and informs our understanding of human behavior. The themes of guilt, memory, and identity are not just literary constructs; they are universal experiences that resonate with readers on a deeply personal level.

Moreover, the psychological exploration found in these novels provides a foundation for understanding the broader human experience (Hill, 2020). As students analyze the psychological struggles of McEwan's and Barnes' characters, they are encouraged to reflect on their own lives and psychological processes. Literature becomes a tool for self-exploration, offering readers the opportunity to examine their memories, guilt, and identity through the lens of fiction. This personal engagement with literature not only enriches the reading experience but also fosters a deeper understanding of the complexities of human psychology.

Through McEwan's and Barnes' works, we see that contemporary literature can serve as a means of psychological exploration, allowing readers, especially students, to reflect on the complexities of memory, guilt, and identity. These authors invite us to question the reliability of our memories and to consider how our past experiences shape who we are. By engaging with these novels, students can develop a more nuanced understanding of human psychology, both within the context of the texts and in their own lives. This kind of psychological exploration, facilitated through literature, opens up new avenues for personal reflection and intellectual growth, making the study of contemporary literature an invaluable tool for students seeking to better understand themselves and the world around them.

Findings And Discussion

The analysis of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* reveals significant psychological themes, particularly regarding the influence of memory, guilt, and identity on the characters' development. Both novels provide profound insights into the human condition by exploring the psychological processes that shape how individuals perceive themselves and their relationships with others. This section presents the key findings from the analysis of these novels and offers a discussion of how these psychological elements contribute to a deeper understanding of human behavior and identity.

1. Psychological Exploration in McEwan's *Atonement*

In *Atonement*, Ian McEwan intricately delves into the psychological complexities of memory and guilt, with a particular focus on the character of Briony Tallis. At the heart of the novel is Briony's deeply flawed recollection of an event that irrevocably alters the lives of those around her. Through Briony's actions, McEwan presents a compelling narrative about the unreliability of memory and the profound psychological impact of guilt. Briony's false accusation of Robbie Turner, which leads to his wrongful imprisonment for a crime he did not commit, serves as the central event around which the novel's psychological exploration unfolds. However, McEwan reveals that Briony's memory is not merely a passive recording of events but is instead shaped by her emotional responses, desires, and the subjective way in which she interprets the world around her.

The novel presents Briony as a young girl with an active imagination, whose perception of the world is colored by her personal emotional experiences. As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that her emotional state, particularly her feelings of jealousy, confusion, and a need for validation profoundly influences how she recalls the events that transpired on that fateful day. Her youthful misinterpretation of an encounter between Robbie and her sister, Cecilia, leads to a catastrophic misjudgment, and this misunderstanding becomes a psychological burden that she carries for the rest of her life. The emotional intensity of Briony's guilt manifests not only as an intellectual acknowledgment of her mistake but also as a powerful emotional force that drives her entire sense of self. Her guilt is not simply an emotional reaction to her actions but a pervasive psychological presence that she cannot escape.

Briony's psychological journey throughout the novel revolves around her attempts to reconcile her actions with her moral conscience. The distorted memory that she clings to becomes a tool she uses to rewrite her personal history in an attempt to provide herself with a sense of redemption. As Briony grows older, the burden of guilt she carries becomes inescapable, and her emotional journey is marked by a constant struggle to make amends for her past. The concept of redemption becomes central to her character arc, but McEwan demonstrates that this search for atonement is complicated by the distortion of her memory. The psychological complexity of Briony's character is defined by her belief that she can rewrite her past through her version of events, which she attempts to publish in the form of a novel. However, her efforts to find redemption are hampered by the realization that memory is not a fixed entity; memories are subjective and often shaped by the emotions tied to them.

One of the key psychological themes that McEwan explores through Briony's character is the idea that memory can be unreliable, even self-deceptive. Briony's recollection of events is colored by her guilt and the emotional weight of the consequences that followed her actions. In her mind, the events are often distorted, exaggerated, or misremembered in ways that suit her need for self-justification. For example, Briony's memory of the initial encounter between Robbie and Cecilia is shaped by her jealousy and her desire to make sense of a world she does not fully understand.

This distorted recollection leads her to accuse Robbie of a crime that, in her mind, becomes an explanation for her emotional turmoil, even though it is based on a false understanding of what happened. As Briony grows older and reflects on the events of her youth, she struggles with the tension between her memory of the past and the painful reality of what occurred. McEwan's exploration of this tension illustrates the psychological impact of guilt: it can cloud one's memory, making it difficult to differentiate between truth and distortion, and prevent a person from truly reconciling with the past.

Moreover, McEwan employs a narrative structure that shifts between perspectives, allowing readers to see the same events from different characters' points of view. This narrative technique serves to emphasize the subjectivity of memory and how psychological biases influence one's perception of reality. The shift from Briony's perspective to Robbie's and Cecilia's perspectives allows the reader to witness the same events from contrasting angles, showing how each character's psychological state shapes their recollection of what occurred. Briony's narrative is marked by her emotional turmoil, and her perception of the events is colored by the guilt that she feels for her role in destroying the lives of others. Meanwhile, Robbie and Cecilia's perspectives reveal a more nuanced and, in some ways, more tragic understanding of the situation, where love, desire, and a sense of injustice dominate their perceptions. McEwan uses this technique to demonstrate how our memories of events are often shaped by our emotional and psychological states, and how these memories can be both unreliable and self-serving.

Through these shifts in perspective, McEwan also highlights the difficulty of achieving true reconciliation. For Briony, the realization that her memory of events may not be entirely accurate makes it all the more difficult to fully understand the impact of her actions and, consequently, to find genuine redemption. The novel ultimately suggests that redemption is not a simple or attainable goal for Briony. While she spends much of her life attempting to atone for her actions by writing a novel about the events, her understanding of what happened and what could have been done to prevent the tragedy remains forever intertwined with her need for forgiveness. McEwan illustrates that redemption is an elusive concept, particularly when it is entangled with guilt and the inability to fully reconcile one's past actions with their present identity.

The psychological complexity of *Atonement* is further deepened by McEwan's exploration of the way Briony's need for atonement and her guilt ultimately affect her relationships with others. As she grows older, Briony seeks to make amends, but the fractured nature of her relationships with Robbie and Cecilia, both of whom she has wronged complicates her quest for redemption. McEwan portrays how guilt and the psychological weight of past actions can create barriers between people, even when they seek forgiveness. Briony's relationship with her family, especially her sister Cecilia, is never fully healed because of the irreversible damage caused by her lie. This inability to repair the emotional rift further illustrates the complex interplay between guilt, memory,

and identity, and how these psychological forces often lead to irrevocable consequences (Dohan & Shwein, 2022).

McEwan's *Atonement* presents a compelling exploration of the psychological dimensions of memory and guilt through Briony Tallis's character. The novel demonstrates how guilt can distort memory and shape one's identity, and how the search for redemption is often complicated by the unreliability of memory and the emotional weight of past actions (Lothe, 2021). Briony's journey reveals the fragility of self-perception and the difficulty of reconciling with the past, ultimately showing that true redemption may be an unattainable goal when one is burdened by the psychological consequences of their actions. McEwan's narrative structure, which shifts perspectives between characters, emphasizes the subjectivity of memory and highlights the challenge of achieving reconciliation, both with others and with oneself. The novel ultimately underscores the complexity of the human psyche and the profound impact of guilt and memory on the formation of identity.

2. Psychological Exploration in Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*

In Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*, the psychological exploration unfolds through the unreliable nature of memory and the process of self-discovery that comes with revisiting the past. The protagonist, Tony Webster, embarks on a profound journey of reflection and confrontation with his former self after the death of his old friend, Adrian. Central to this exploration is the realization that memory is not a static, fixed reflection of the past; rather, it is a fluid, shifting narrative, shaped and influenced by personal desires, regrets, omissions, and self-deception. Barnes uses Tony's narrative to delve into the complexities of how individuals' memories are crafted not just from factual events but through emotional biases, psychological defense mechanisms, and the subjective lens through which they view their past experiences. This exploration reveals the profound influence the past has on one's sense of identity and how deeply flawed recollections can shape the trajectory of a person's life.

Tony's journey is rooted in the belief that memory is an accurate representation of the past. At the start of the novel, he holds firm to the conviction that his recollection of his youth his relationships with his girlfriend Veronica and his best friend Adrian, and the events that transpired during that time is solid and untainted by time. However, as the narrative progresses, Tony is confronted with the unraveling truth, which forces him to question the accuracy of his memories and reconsider his entire understanding of his past. Barnes reveals that Tony's version of his younger self, his relationship with Veronica, and his role in Adrian's life were all influenced by selective memory, which has been shaped by time, emotional needs, and, most importantly, his self-deception.

Tony's initial belief in the reliability of his memory is gradually challenged when he uncovers forgotten details and hidden truths about the relationships he thought he knew so well. What initially seems like a straightforward recollection of events is revealed to

be heavily distorted, an interpretation of reality that Tony has unknowingly crafted over time. For instance, his belief that he was simply a passive bystander to the tragic events surrounding Adrian's death is contradicted by new revelations that expose his more active involvement. This confrontation with the truth becomes a pivotal psychological moment, forcing Tony to reconcile the discrepancy between his perceived self-image and the reality of his actions.

The psychological confrontation in *The Sense of an Ending* is not merely about discovering factual inaccuracies; it is also about Tony's deeper struggle to accept that his memories, which have formed the foundation of his identity, are unreliable. Barnes presents this process of memory revision as a painful and humbling experience, as Tony's constructed narrative of his past unravels. What he once thought of as a solid, clear understanding of events turns out to be a tangled web of distortions and omissions, all shaped by his emotional needs, desires, and fears. This process of self-reflection forces Tony to confront the uncomfortable truth about how memory and selective recall have allowed him to live a life shaped by a skewed, self-serving narrative. The psychological implications of this are vast: Tony must not only question the veracity of his memories but also reevaluate the very essence of his identity, which has been built upon this flawed foundation.

One of the most significant findings in Barnes' novel is how Tony's identity is directly linked to his selective recollection of the past. He has built an idealized version of himself, one that fits neatly into the moral framework he wants to maintain. However, as he unravels the truths hidden within his memories, he is forced to dismantle this version of himself. His memories of his youth, his relationship with Veronica, and his involvement in Adrian's tragic end all come under scrutiny, and the reality he uncovers is far less flattering than he had imagined. The confrontation with the truth of his past forces Tony to reckon with the consequences of his actions, the emotional scars he left on others, and the role his self-deception played in shaping the man he has become.

Barnes uses this psychological journey to explore a key theme: that identity is not a fixed, immutable essence but is instead continually shaped by how individuals remember, reinterpret, and reconstruct their past experiences. Tony's psychological struggle is emblematic of this theme, as he must face the difficult task of accepting responsibility for his actions, many of which were obscured by his flawed recollection of the past. His psychological confrontation is not simply a matter of recalling forgotten events; it is an internal reckoning that forces him to acknowledge the consequences of his behavior on those around him, particularly Veronica and Adrian. This realization highlights how memory is not just a passive recollection of facts but an active process through which individuals shape their sense of self. The discrepancy between Tony's perceived identity and the truth of his past forces him to confront the reality that his understanding of himself has been built upon selective and incomplete memories.

In addition to memory and self-deception, the novel also highlights the broader psychological implications of guilt and responsibility. As Tony discovers more about the past, he is forced to confront his role in the tragedies that unfolded. His failure to fully understand or acknowledge the impact of his actions on those around him is at the heart of his psychological struggle. As he pieces together the fragments of his past, he is confronted by the realization that he has been complicit in the suffering of others and that his inability to face the truth earlier in life has shaped the person he is today. This confrontation with guilt, along with the realization that his memories have shaped his identity in a way that serves his emotional needs, is the crux of Tony's psychological journey.

Barnes effectively uses Tony's introspection to comment on the universal human tendency to reshape the past to fit one's emotional and psychological needs (Amalaveenus, 2022). Memory is a powerful force, and through Tony's journey, Barnes shows how it can be selectively reconstructed to serve one's sense of self. This process, however, is not without consequences, as it prevents individuals from confronting the truth about their actions and their impact on others (Moseley, 2021). The novel suggests that confronting the past, no matter how painful, is necessary for personal growth and a more authentic understanding of one's identity.

As the narrative concludes, Tony's psychological journey reaches a point of partial resolution, where he comes to terms with the fragmented nature of his memories and his past actions (Callus, 2024). He acknowledges the role that memory and self-deception have played in shaping his life, but he also faces the painful reality that some truths cannot be fully reconciled. This resolution, while incomplete, suggests that coming to terms with one's past is a complex and ongoing process. Barnes leaves Tony's journey open-ended, underscoring the idea that self-discovery is an ever-evolving process, where the reconciliation of memory and identity is an ongoing challenge.

Ultimately, Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* provides a powerful psychological exploration of memory, guilt, and identity, offering a thought-provoking examination of how the past shapes the present self (Ningrum, 2022). Through Tony Webster's introspective journey, Barnes illustrates the complexities of memory and the often painful process of self-deception, suggesting that the path to self-understanding requires confronting uncomfortable truths about the past. The novel highlights how identity is not fixed but is continually shaped by our memories and how we interpret and remember our actions. By exploring the unreliability of memory and the psychological struggle for self-understanding, Barnes crafts a narrative that resonates with readers, offering deep insights into the human psyche and the complexities of human experience.

3. Memory, Guilt, and Identity

Both Ian McEwan and Julian Barnes intricately weave the themes of memory, guilt, and identity into their works, creating multifaceted psychological portraits of their protagonists. The central role of memory in shaping the characters' identities and the way

guilt distorts both memory and self-perception emerge as key findings in the analysis of McEwan's *Atonement* and Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*. These novels demonstrate that memory is not a straightforward, factual account of the past, but rather a subjective and unreliable force, often influenced by the emotional states, biases, and personal motives of the characters. This unreliability shapes their sense of self, affecting how they relate to the world and navigate their internal conflicts.

In *Atonement*, McEwan highlights the complexities of memory, particularly through the character of Briony Tallis. Memory is presented as a fluid and malleable entity, shaped by emotions such as guilt, jealousy, and confusion. Briony's recollection of the events leading up to her false accusation of Robbie Turner is deeply influenced by her emotional turmoil and her desire to justify her actions. As a young girl, Briony misinterprets a situation between Robbie and Cecilia, leading her to accuse Robbie of a crime he did not commit. However, her later attempts to rewrite this memory reflect not only her desire to atone for her mistake but also her struggle with the emotional consequences of her actions. McEwan illustrates how guilt can distort memory, forcing Briony to view the past through a lens that makes it difficult for her to reconcile her actions with her present self. This manipulation of memory underscores the tension between subjective experience and objective truth, a central theme in *Atonement*. Briony's psychological journey reveals the human difficulty of accepting the past, suggesting that our understanding of events is often shaped by emotional biases and a desire to protect our sense of identity.

McEwan's portrayal of guilt as a psychological force that alters memory and identity reveals a broader truth about the human condition: the challenge of reconciling past actions with present realities. Briony's guilt, compounded by the impossibility of undoing the harm she caused, becomes a permanent part of her psychological landscape. It prevents her from fully moving forward, shaping her decisions and her relationships with others. Through Briony's quest for redemption ultimately realized through her writing McEwan presents the idea that, while individuals may seek forgiveness, the psychological scars of guilt are often indelible. Briony's attempt to rewrite the narrative of the past, both literally and figuratively, shows how people may try to change their personal histories to make sense of their emotional pain, but that effort does not necessarily lead to healing or closure.

Similarly, in *The Sense of an Ending*, Julian Barnes explores how the passage of time and the act of retrospection lead to a revision of memory. The protagonist, Tony Webster, initially believes that his recollections of past events particularly his relationship with Adrian and his interactions with Veronica are accurate and stable. However, as the novel progresses and Tony uncovers truths about his past that he had long suppressed or misunderstood, he is forced to confront the fact that his memories are not as reliable as he had assumed. The slow unraveling of Tony's recollections forces him to reassess his sense of self and the narrative he has constructed around his life. Barnes' exploration of

memory reveals its fluidity and the way it can be influenced by personal biases and desires, particularly the need to maintain a coherent, self-serving narrative. This theme of memory's malleability is central to *The Sense of an Ending*, as Tony's psychological journey involves confronting the realization that his understanding of the past is flawed.

Barnes suggests that memory is not a passive act of recollection but an active process of reconstruction, one that is often shaped by the emotional and psychological needs of the individual. Tony's revision of his memories reflects his internal struggle to come to terms with the consequences of his actions and the relationships he failed to nurture. The discovery that his memories were incomplete or distorted challenges Tony's identity, revealing how his past has been shaped by self-deception and omission. This process of revisiting the past forces Tony to confront the reality that his identity, which has been built upon these faulty memories, is not as stable or fixed as he once believed. In doing so, Barnes reveals that identity is not a static construct but one that is continuously shaped by the way individuals remember and reinterpret their pasts.

The exploration of memory in both novels leads to an important psychological insight: memory is not just a recording of the past, but a process that influences one's sense of identity. Both Briony and Tony must confront the fact that their memories are shaped by emotional states, personal desires, and unconscious biases. In *Atonement*, Briony's guilt colors her recollections of events, creating a distorted version of reality that she must continually reshape in an attempt to atone for her mistake. Similarly, in *The Sense of an Ending*, Tony's selective memory prevents him from fully understanding the consequences of his past actions, forcing him to confront uncomfortable truths about himself. Both novels suggest that our identities are not fixed but are instead fluid, shaped by the ways we remember and reinterpret our past experiences. These revisions of memory are not just about recalling facts they are about constructing a narrative of the self that aligns with our emotional and psychological needs.

Furthermore, the theme of guilt in both novels highlights the profound psychological burden that past actions can impose on an individual's sense of self. Briony's guilt in *Atonement* is not just an emotional response to her actions; it becomes an all-encompassing force that shapes her identity and drives her actions throughout her life. She seeks redemption through writing, attempting to rewrite the past in a way that allows her to atone for her mistakes. However, McEwan shows that guilt, especially when tied to irreversible actions, is not easily resolved. Briony's guilt becomes part of her psychological identity, preventing her from finding peace or closure, even as she seeks to make amends.

Similarly, in *The Sense of an Ending*, Tony's guilt and self-deception prevent him from fully accepting the consequences of his actions. As Tony unearths long-buried memories and confronts the reality of his past, he is forced to reckon with the psychological consequences of his inaction and emotional detachment. Barnes suggests that guilt is not just an emotion; it is a powerful psychological force that can shape one's

identity and behavior over time. Tony's guilt, combined with his tendency to distort and selectively recall his memories, creates a psychological barrier that prevents him from truly understanding his past and coming to terms with his role in the events that transpired. The novels of McEwan and Barnes demonstrate that guilt is not a transient emotion but a profound psychological force that can shape one's identity and alter the course of one's life.

Both Briony and Tony are psychologically burdened by their past actions, and their guilt becomes an integral part of who they are. However, McEwan and Barnes also show that guilt is not the only force at play in shaping identity (Poornima, 2022). Memory, too, plays a crucial role in how individuals understand themselves and their past actions. Through their exploration of memory, guilt, and identity, both *Atonement* and *The Sense of an Ending* offer valuable insights into the complexities of human psychology, revealing how our memories shape our identities and how guilt can profoundly influence the way we see ourselves and others.

Ultimately, the protagonists of McEwan's *Atonement* and Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* illustrate the complex relationship between memory, guilt, and identity. These novels reveal that identity is not a static construct but a narrative that is continually rewritten in response to emotional and psychological conflicts (Holm, 2022). Both Briony and Tony must confront the distortions of their memories and the impact these distortions have on their sense of self. The exploration of guilt in these novels emphasizes the psychological burden that the past can impose on an individual, shaping their present identity and relationships. In the end, both *Atonement* and *The Sense of an Ending* highlight the profound influence that memory and guilt have on identity, offering a nuanced and deeply psychological portrayal of the human experience (Yusuf, 2022).

4. Students' Psychological Exploration

Both Ian McEwan and Julian Barnes skillfully explore psychological themes in their works, particularly focusing on memory, guilt, and identity (Muttair, 2024). Through their characters, the authors present how these elements shape personal identity and can influence how individuals relate to themselves and others. The key findings from analyzing *Atonement* and *The Sense of an Ending* highlight the role of memory as a fluid and unreliable force, shaped by emotions, biases, and personal desires. The subjective nature of memory leads to distortions that affect the characters' perceptions of their past and their current identities.

In McEwan's *Atonement*, Briony Tallis' memory of events is portrayed as highly subjective, influenced by her emotions such as guilt and a desire to justify her actions. The novel shows how Briony's recollections, distorted by her feelings, shape her identity and her journey toward redemption. McEwan's narrative suggests that memory is not a straightforward reflection of reality but is often filtered through personal emotions and biases, creating a gap between subjective experience and objective truth. Briony's psychological journey highlights the tension between trying to reconcile past actions with

the present and the emotional burden of guilt. Her effort to rewrite her history in an attempt to atone for her mistake demonstrates the complex interplay between memory and self-perception.

Similarly, in *The Sense of an Ending*, Barnes examines how memory can be reconstructed over time and how personal biases shape our understanding of the past. Tony Webster, the protagonist, initially believes his memories are accurate, but as the story progresses, he discovers that his recollections have been influenced by self-deception and emotional avoidance. As Tony revisits the past and uncovers painful truths, he faces the unsettling realization that his identity has been built on a foundation of distorted memories. Barnes emphasizes that memory is not a static, factual account of events but an active process influenced by the individual's emotional and psychological needs. This theme of memory's malleability is central to the novel, suggesting that our understanding of ourselves is constantly shaped and reshaped by the way we remember and reinterpret our pasts.

The exploration of memory in both novels reveals a critical psychological insight: identities are not fixed but continuously evolve based on how individuals remember and interpret their past experiences. The protagonists' struggles with distorted memories and the impact these memories have on their identities reflect a universal truth about the human condition: self-identity is fluid and shaped by the ongoing process of memory revision. This idea invites students to reflect on their own experiences and how their personal memories might influence their self-perception. Memory, in both *Atonement* and *The Sense of an Ending*, serves as a psychological tool that individuals use to understand and reconstruct their identities, sometimes leading to self-deception.

Another important theme explored in both novels is the psychological burden of guilt. Briony's guilt in *Atonement* drives her to seek atonement through her writing, but her efforts to find redemption are complicated by the reality that some actions cannot be undone. Her guilt is portrayed as a permanent fixture in her psychological landscape, shaping her actions and relationships throughout her life. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Tony's guilt is similarly inescapable, and his inability to fully acknowledge his past actions creates a psychological barrier. Both novels show that guilt is not merely an emotional response but a powerful force that can shape one's identity and influence behavior over time. For both Briony and Tony, the psychological struggle to accept responsibility for their actions is at the heart of their journey, reflecting the complexity of dealing with past mistakes.

The novels by McEwan and Barnes underscore how memory, guilt, and identity are intertwined in shaping the psychological development of their protagonists. These themes offer valuable insights for students as they engage with the texts, encouraging them to reflect on how their memories and guilt might shape their perceptions of self (Tseng, 2023). The psychological struggles depicted in these novels emphasize that identity is not a static concept but a narrative constantly revised based on internal conflicts

and emotional revelations. The fluidity of memory and the pervasive nature of guilt in shaping identity invite students to examine the complexities of their psychological processes, leading to a deeper understanding of human behavior (Salman et al., 2023).

Through the psychological exploration in *Atonement* and *The Sense of an Ending*, students are encouraged to consider how distorted memories and the burden of guilt influence the way individuals view themselves and interact with the world (Vlad, 2022). The novels suggest that confronting the past, regardless of how painful it may be, is essential for personal growth and self-understanding (Wei, 2023). This process of confronting uncomfortable truths about oneself is central to the psychological development of the characters in both novels, making them powerful tools for introspection (Filimonova & Mazhitayeva, 2023). Through these texts, students can gain a deeper understanding of how memory and guilt function as psychological forces that shape identity, offering a space for personal reflection and growth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the psychological explorations presented in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* offer profound insights into the complexities of memory, guilt, and identity. Both novels illustrate how these psychological forces shape the characters' perceptions of themselves and their relationships with others. Through the characters of Briony Tallis and Tony Webster, McEwan and Barnes demonstrate that memory is not a fixed or objective reflection of the past, but a subjective and malleable narrative shaped by emotions, desires, and personal biases. This unreliability of memory challenges the characters' sense of identity, as they must confront the distortions of their pasts and the lasting impact of their actions.

The theme of guilt in both novels plays a crucial role in the characters' psychological development. Briony's relentless search for atonement in *Atonement* and Tony's struggle with self-deception in *The Sense of an Ending* highlight the enduring psychological burden that guilt imposes on the characters, influencing their identities and actions. Both novels reveal that guilt is not just an emotional reaction, but a powerful force that shapes the characters' understanding of themselves and their place in the world.

Ultimately, McEwan and Barnes underscore the fluidity of identity, suggesting that it is not a fixed entity but an evolving narrative that is continuously shaped by memory, emotional conflicts, and psychological revelations. These novels invite readers, particularly students, to reflect on how their own memories and emotional experiences influence their self-perception and identity. The psychological struggles of the protagonists serve as a mirror, encouraging self-exploration and introspection. Through these works, students gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of human psychology, particularly how guilt, memory, and identity are interwoven in the construction of the self.

The novels provide valuable lessons about the human condition, demonstrating that the path to self-understanding requires confronting uncomfortable truths, accepting the limitations of memory, and acknowledging the emotional complexities that shape personal identity. Both *Atonement* and *The Sense of an Ending* offer a rich framework for students to explore these psychological themes, leading to a more nuanced understanding of how literature can reflect and inform the psychological processes that shape human behavior.

References

- Amalaveenus, J. (2022). RELIGIOUS FAITH DESTROYED BY ADVANCEMENTS IN SCIENCE: REPRESENTATION OF THE SCIENCES IN JULIAN BARNES' FICTION. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(3).
- Arbués Caballés, C. (2022). *The Rebirth of the Author: The Use and Abuse of Authorship in Ian McEwan's Atonement (2001) and Sweet Tooth (2012)*.
- Arslan, G., & Allen, K.-A. (2022). Exploring the association between coronavirus stress, meaning in life, psychological flexibility, and subjective well-being. *Psychology, Health & Medicine*, 27(4), 803–814.
- Barnes, J. (2011). *The sense of an ending*. Vintage.
- Bartnik, R. (2021). From Unparalleled “Greatness” to Predictable Insularity. A Composite Sketch of “Warped Britishness” as Drawn in Selected Works of Contemporary English Fiction. *Porównania*, 30(3), 55–76.
- Callus, I. (2024). *Variations of decadence: reflections on Julian Barnes' The man in the red coat*.
- Dohan, A. M., & Shwein, H. N. (2022). Negotiating metafictional aspects of postmodern narrative in Ian McEwan's *atone ment*. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 18.
- Filimonova, A. P., & Mazhitayeva, S. M. (2023). *Staged history: Concept of theatricality in the modern utopia (England, England by Julian Barnes)*.
- Guild, E., Basaran, T., & Allinson, K. (2019). From Zero to Hero? An analysis of the human rights protections within the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM). *International Migration*, 57(6), 43–59.
- Hejaz, N., & Singh, R. (2023). The therapeutic power of poetry in Ian McEwan's *Saturday* and *The Children Act*. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 36(1), 65–84.
- Hill, C. E. (2020). *Helping skills: Facilitating exploration, insight, and action*. American Psychological Association.
- Holm, L. (2022). Limits to Empathy: On the Motif of Failed Empathy in Julian Barnes. *Rereading Empathy*, 83.
- Kundi, Y. M., Aboramadan, M., Elhamalawi, E. M. I., & Shahid, S. (2021). Employee psychological well-being and job performance: exploring mediating and moderating mechanisms. *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, 29(3), 736–754.
- Liu, Y. (2023). A Study on the Psychological Trauma in the Novel *The Sense of an Ending*. *Academic Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*, 6(19), 121–126.
- Lothe, J. (2021). Dan Shen's Theory of Dual Narrative Dynamics Linked to Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. *Style*, 55(1), 100–105.
- Makovcová, M. (2022). *Violence, guilt and war in Ian McEwan's selected novels*.
- Metallinou, M.-M. (2020). Emergence of and learning processes in a civic group

- resuming prescribed burning in Norway. *Sustainability*, 12(14), 5668. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.3390/su12145668>
- Mickalites, C. (2022). *Contemporary Fiction, Celebrity Culture, and the Market for Modernism: Fictions of Celebrity*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Moseley, M. (2021). *Julian Barnes from the Margins: Exploring the Writer's Archives*. Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Mukarromah, W. R. U., Wibowo, S., Sudrajad, W., & Handayani, T. (2024). The Evolution of Colonial Legal Regulations in 19th Century Dutch East Indies Classical Literary Texts. *International Journal of Sustainable Law*, 1(2), 59–65.
- Muttair, B. S. (2024). Memory and History in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*: A Postmodern Perspective. *Journal of the College of Education for Women*, 35(3), 1–23.
- Ningrum, F. N. A. W. (2022). *The main characethers ego development in Julian Barnes' The Sense of an Ending*. Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim.
- Oishi, S., & Westgate, E. C. (2022). A psychologically rich life: Beyond happiness and meaning. *Psychological Review*, 129(4), 790.
- Piccolo, S. (2021). Petites Histoires, Meta-perspective: Meaning and Narrative in Julian Barnes. *Papers on Language and Literature*, 57(3), 275–323.
- Poornima, M. (2022). EXPLORING GENDER DYNAMICS IN JULIAN BARNES' *THE SENSE OF AN ENDING*. A *One Day National Conference on A Research from Text to Tech: Bridging Digital Tools and Literary Insights*, 214.
- Ross, S., Bratton, F., Keese, A., Binnie, G., Phillips, J., West, M., Cooper, S., Stringfellow, S., Rodríguez Martín, G. A., & Saunders, G. (2021). XIV Modern Literature. *The Year's Work in English Studies*, 100(1), 933–1064.
- Salman, D. F., Alhasan, G., & Al-Shara'h, M. (2023). Moral Stupidity in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. *Theory & Practice in Language Studies (TPLS)*, 13(8).
- Savitz, R. S., Roberts, L., & Stockwell, D. (2022). The impact of analyzing young adult literature for racial identity/social justice orientation with interdisciplinary students. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 52(4), 264–289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10790195.2022.2044933>
- Sudrajad, W. (2024). The Influence of Themes on Character Decisions in *Pride and Prejudice* Novel by Jane Austen. *Musamus Journal of Language and Literature*, 7(2), 319–325.
- Syakur, A., Sudrajad, W., & Masrurroh, M. (2023). POLITENESS STRATEGIES USED BY MAJOR CHARACTERS IN JANE AUSTEN'S NOVEL, *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*. *Language Literacy: Journal of Linguistics, Literature, and Language Teaching*, 7(2), 550–564. <https://doi.org/10.30743/ll.v7i2.8199>
- Tang, Y. (2021). Brain Text and Sphinx Factor: An Ethical Interpretation of Adultery in Julian Barnes's Fiction. *Kritika Kultura*, 1(37), 25.
- Tseng, C.-C. M. (2023). Memory Hacking: Remembering, Storytelling, and Unreliable Narrators in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* and *The Only Story*. In *Memory Made, Hacked, and Outsourced: How the 21st Century Anglophone Novels Remember and Forget* (pp. 69–92). Springer.
- van Zyl, L. E., Gaffaney, J., van der Vaart, L., Dik, B. J., & Donaldson, S. I. (2024). The critiques and criticisms of positive psychology: A systematic review. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 19(2), 206–235.

- Vlad, D. (2022). Literature and Journalism in Julian Barnes' "Letters from London." *Social Sciences and Education Research Review*, 9(1), 184–188.
- Wei, T.-A. (2023). Julian Barnes and the Subversion of the Sense of an Ending. *Narrative*, 31(1), 89–101.
- Wen, N., Abai, D. S. A., Chan, S. L., & Isa, N. A. M. (2025). Analyzing Emotional Responses of Readers to Ian McEwan's Atonement: Insights from a Case Study on Wechat Reading Platform. *Journal of Lifestyle and SDGs Review*, 5(2), e03654–e03654.
- Yeh, H.-C., & Tseng, S.-S. (2019). Using the ADDIE model to nurture the development of teachers' CALL professional knowledge. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society*, 22(3), 88–100.
- Yusuf, S. (2022). Metafiction and Narration in Ian McEwan's Atonement. *Context/Контекст*, 26, 97–104.