



“Dearest Reader, It’s Up to You”: Articulating the Theory of Aesthetic Response and Metafiction in Ian McEwan’s *Sweet Tooth*

***“Querido leitor, depende de você”: uma leitura
de Sweet Tooth, de Ian McEwan, de acordo
com a teoria do efeito estético e a metaficção***

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Abstract: In this paper, we aim at discussing the figure of the reader and the reading processes in Ian McEwan’s novel *Sweet Tooth*. To do so, we propose an articulation between the theoretical discourses on metafiction and the theory of aesthetic response. Drawing from theoretical frameworks elaborated mainly by Iser (1972, 1978, 1989, 2006) – regarding the theory of aesthetic response – and by Hutcheon (1980, 2000) and Waugh (1984) – regarding metafiction – we understand parody and *mise en abyme* as two metafictional procedures that constitute the structure of the implied reader. In this sense, if these metafictional creative strategies make the reading activity more complex, they also function as guiding systems to the reader, allowing him to pursue answers to the enigmas articulated within the novel. Parody and *mise en abyme*, for McEwan, are powerful tools in what we might perceive as a project to develop more proficient readers.

Keywords: theory of aesthetic response; implied reader; metafiction; parody; *mise en abyme*; Ian McEwan; *Sweet Tooth*.

Resumo: Neste artigo, objetivamos discutir a figura do leitor e os processos de leitura no romance *Sweet Tooth*, de Ian McEwan. Para tanto, propomos uma articulação entre os discursos teóricos sobre metaficção e a teoria do efeito estético. Baseando-nos especialmente em estudos de Iser (1972, 1978, 1989, 2006) – em relação à teoria do efeito estético – e de Hutcheon (1980, 2000) e Waugh (1984) – referentes à metaficção – compreendemos paródia e *mise en abyme* como duas estratégias metaficcionais que constituem a estrutura do leitor implícito. Nesse sentido, se tais estratégias tornam a leitura do romance mais complexa, elas também funcionam como guias para o leitor, permitindo que ele persiga respostas para os enigmas instituídos na narrativa. Paródia e *mise en abyme*, para McEwan, são ferramentas robustas no que percebemos como um projeto para desenvolver leitores mais proficientes.

Palavras-chave: teoria do efeito estético; leitor implícito; metaficção; paródia; *mise en abyme*; Ian McEwan; *Sweet Tooth*.

Introduction

In *Sweet Tooth*, Ian McEwan's thirteenth novel, published in 2012, the reader follows the events surrounding the narrator Serena Frome, a young English woman who is recruited by the MI5¹ in the 1970s, after graduating from Cambridge in Mathematics. As a worker for the intelligence military branch, Serena becomes involved in *Sweet Tooth*, a secret operation which lends its name to the novel. This program consisted of an attempt to infiltrate the intellectual and academic worlds to covertly promote the ideals of capitalism, allowing the agency to influence the cultural and ideological debates during the Cold War.

Being recognized as an avid reader of contemporary fiction of the time, Serena is appointed as the agent responsible for handling the only author of literature to receive financial support from the operation. Before meeting this author, Tom Haley, Serena already feels affected by his short stories. In the course of the narrative, these two characters develop a romantic relationship, which positions Serena in a very difficult situation: she must spy and report the actions of the man with whom she fell in love.

Amidst the spy and romantic events featured in the narrative, literature itself emerges as an important object for reflection in McEwan's

¹ Military Intelligence, Section 5, is United Kingdom's domestic counter-intelligence and security agency.

novel. Considering metafiction as “fiction about fiction: novels and stories that call attention to their fictional status and their own compositional procedures”,² several metafictional creative strategies are recognizable in *Sweet Tooth*: the activation of discourses from the disciplines of literary theory and criticism; the representation of literature in its medial disposition; the insertion of micronarratives (Haley’s short stories) that create mirroring effects in relation to the novel that accommodates them; and the parody of the detective and spy literary traditions. All these metafictional procedures contribute to the composition of a novel whose structure is both hybrid and complex – a true labyrinth, comprised of different discourses and narrative levels which make the reading of *Sweet Tooth* a challenging enterprise.

The ending of *Sweet Tooth*, in the form of a metafictional twist, is paradigmatic of this kind of fiction that turns towards itself. Whereas the first 21 chapters of the novel follow Serena’s narration and point of view, the twenty-second (and final) chapter brings forward a substantial shift, for it is comprised of a letter written by Tom Haley addressed to Serena, in which he confesses to be the writer of the story being read thus far. After discovering the truth about Serena and her role in Operation Sweet Tooth, Haley decides to spy back on his lover, so he could write a novel about these events, following her point of view: “I was a novelist without a novel, and now luck had tossed my way a tasty bone, the bare outline of a useful story”.³ More than an admission of his activities of counter-espionage, the final chapter is a thorough exposition and examination of Haley’s writing process and reasons for composing the narrative – in other words, it is a reflection on fictional creation itself.

As the previously mentioned metafictional strategies, the concluding metafictional twist poses a challenge to the reader of the novel. Tom Haley ends his letter by making a double proposition to Serena, that she should marry him and that they should publish this story in the twenty-first century, so as not to violate the terms of the Official Secrets Act:

A few decades is time enough for you to correct my presumptions on your solitude, to tell me about the rest of your secret work and what really happened between you

² LODGE. *The Art of Fiction*, p. 206.

³ McEWAN. *Sweet Tooth*, p. 355.

and Max, and time to insert those paddings of the backward glance: in those days, back then, these were the years of. . . [...] No need to worry, I'll add nothing without your say-so. [...] If your answer is a fatal no, well, I've made no carbon, this is the only copy and you can throw it to the flames. If you still love me and your answer is yes, then our collaboration begins and this letter, with your consent, will be Sweet Tooth's final chapter. Dearest Serena, it's up to you.⁴

The novel thus concludes and the reader is left questioning: did Serena revise the manuscript for later publication, as suggested by Tom Haley, or did I read the first draft written by him in the 1970s?; did Serena accept the marriage proposal?; is there any element that may point to their subsequent happiness? As an ouroboros, the novel requests a return to its beginning: if the reader wishes to find out the answers to these metafictional enigmas, he must reread the novel, playing the role of a detective-reader in pursuit of textual clues and acting as a collaborator of the artistic creation – in Iserean vocabulary, concretizing the text being read.

In a literary text that so overtly and substantially calls attention to literature and its universe, it comes as no surprise that the answers to the metafictional enigmas may lie within the codes and traditions of fiction itself. In this paper, we defend the thesis that such solutions exist and that they are closely related to two metafictional creative strategies: the parody of detective fiction and the *mise en abyme* – the insertion of narrative(s) within a bigger narrative. Both strategies depend upon and call for the reader's active processes of reading, detecting and interpreting the literary text: whether by demanding the reader to seek differences among similarities or traces between mirrored stories, McEwan's novel makes it clear that the burden of responsibility for sense-making falls upon the reader. Paraphrasing Haley's last words, one could say quite accurately in relation to *Sweet Tooth*: "Dearest reader, it's up to you".

The focus on the reader and on the reading process in *Sweet Tooth* was confirmed by McEwan in an interview for *The Guardian*, in which he affirms that "This is a novel about reading".⁵ Since the objective of

⁴ McEWAN. *Sweet Tooth*, p. 370.

⁵ McEWAN. *The Guardian* – Interview Ian McEwan – *Sweet Tooth*.

this paper is to discuss the emphasis on the reading process and how it affects the reader of *Sweet Tooth*, we propose an articulation between the theoretical discourses on metafiction (as well as those on parody and *mise en abyme*) and Wolfgang Iser's theory of aesthetic response: if the former enables reflections on fiction (including its reception) within fictional texts, the latter provides a solid framework for thinking about the act of reading – how a reader processes and interacts with literary texts.

The theory of aesthetic response

Wolfgang Iser was a German theorist and literary scholar that founded and established the theory of aesthetic response during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Iser was part, alongside Hans Robert Jauss, Rainer Warning, and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, of a broader movement known as the Constance School of Reception Aesthetics (or Reception Theory), “which turned to the reading and reception of literary texts instead of to traditional methods that emphasize the production of texts or a close examination of texts themselves”.⁶ In common to all the theories and approaches that had their beginning in the context of the Constance School is a substantial engagement with the figure of the reader (be it individual or collective, abstract or real) and the reading process.

In *The act of reading: a theory of aesthetic response*, a seminal work for reception studies in general and specifically for the theory of aesthetic response, Iser presents the results of the interaction between reader and text as an aesthetic experience. According to the theorist,

[a]s a literary text can only produce a response when it is read, it is virtually impossible to describe this response without also analyzing the reading process. Reading is therefore the focal point of this study, for it sets in motion a whole chain of activities that depend both on the text and on the exercise of certain basic human faculties. Effects and responses are properties neither of the text nor of the reader; the text represents a potential effect that is realized in the reading process.⁷

⁶ HOLUB. Constance School of Reception Aesthetics [Reception Theory], p. 14

⁷ ISER. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, p. ix.

By analyzing the reading process through a dialectic relationship between text and reader, Iser understands the literary work as having two poles: while the artistic pole refers to the author's text, the aesthetic is "the realization accomplished by the reader".⁸ For him, the literary work happens in a virtual position between these two poles, for the work "cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader".⁹ Central to all of Iser's discussions, then, is the idea of interaction.

Ann Dobie summarizes the matter of interaction by arguing that, in such a transactional model, the text "serves as a pattern that controls what the reader can make of it. The [...] [reader] is called upon to fill in gaps to hypothesize, imagine, and, in general, be a coproducer of the text".¹⁰ As a result of literary works being realized through this interaction, "new readings of a given text are always possible, and yet a text cannot mean whatever a given reader chooses to think it means. Any reading must be true to the work and to the reader".¹¹

For the interaction between text and reader to happen, Iser argues that there must be some level of indeterminacy, which means that "what is stated must not exhaust the intention of the text".¹² Indeterminacy in literary texts create gaps or blanks that must be filled by readers in their acts of reading: "[t]hese gaps give the reader a chance to build his own bridges, relating the different aspects of the object which have thus far been revealed to him. It is quite impossible for the text itself to fill the gaps".¹³

The existence of gaps or points of indeterminacy in fiction must not be seen as a defect of the text or as an error made by the writer. Iser, actually argues that if there are no gaps to be filled, the reader might consider the text banal.¹⁴ Conversely, literary texts dense with blanks demand a more engaged act of reading, for "the reader is compelled to take a more active part by filling in these additional gaps".¹⁵ The centrality of gaps concerning the interaction between text and reader is explained by Iser in the following terms:

⁸ ISER. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, p. 21.

⁹ ISER. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, p. 21.

¹⁰ DOBIE. *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*, p. 137.

¹¹ DOBIE. *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*, p. 137.

¹² ISER. *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*, p. 14.

¹³ ISER. *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*, p. 9.

¹⁴ ISER. *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*, p. 25.

¹⁵ ISER. *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*, p. 12.

As no story can ever be told in its entirety, the text itself is punctuated by blanks and gaps that have to be negotiated in the act of reading. Whenever the reader bridges a gap, communication begins. The gaps or structured blanks [...] function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text–reader relationship revolves, because they stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text.¹⁶

If, on the one hand, the reader needs to experience a degree a freedom when completing the gaps, on the other, the text must act as a guide to the act of reading: “the guiding devices operative in the reading process have to initiate communication and to control it”.¹⁷ For this reason, Iser argues that, as literary critics, we “must search for structures that will enable us to describe basic conditions of interaction, for only then shall we be able to gain some insight into the potential effects inherent in the work”.¹⁸

All textual structures that enable interaction converge towards a bigger textual structure, which was named by Iser as the implied reader. Not to be confused with any real reader, the implied reader is

a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him: this concept prestructures the role to be assumed by each recipient, and this holds true even when texts deliberately appear to ignore their possible recipient or actively exclude him. Thus the concept of the implied reader designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text.¹⁹

In other words, the role which the text offers to be played by the real reader is what constitutes the concept of the implied reader.

In *Sweet Tooth*, the reader is not only acknowledged, but also actively challenged to pursue answers, in a second reading, to the enigmas that arise at the end of the novel. If he is to act as the implied reader, he needs to fill in the blanks, playing the role of detective-reader and

¹⁶ ISER. *How to Do Theory*, p. 64.

¹⁷ ISER. *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*, p. 33.

¹⁸ ISER. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, p. 21.

¹⁹ ISER. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, p. 34.

navigating through a set of metafictional procedures and narrative layers that make his reading a more complex and demanding activity.

In the analysis that follows, parody and *mise en abyme* are perceived as structures that (along with others) constitute the bigger structure of the implied reader. In McEwan's novel, both metafictional strategies are especially important in allowing the reader to find his own answers and to walk his own path through such a labyrinthine narrative. Acting as the implied reader in *Sweet Tooth* is challenging, but nevertheless it may offer some rewards to the readers up to the task. After all,

[i]f the reader were given the whole story, and there were nothing left for him to do, his imagination would never enter the field, the result would be boredom which inevitably arises when everything is laid out cut and dried before us. A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative.²⁰

Metafiction, readers and reading

Linda Hutcheon²¹ defines metafiction as “fiction about fiction – that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity”.²² As fiction in search of its identity, metafictional texts are composed through a myriad of different creative strategies, such as: authorial comments (or the explicit presence of a character who is the author in a text); *mise en abyme* – the existence of multiple narratives that create mirroring effects and duplicate stories, authors and readers; overt display of the techniques being used in the construction of the text; intertextuality, parody, pastiche. These creative procedures

²⁰ ISER. *The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach*, p. 280.

²¹ Linda Hutcheon and Patricia Waugh can be considered as the two most important theorists of metafiction in the anglophone context. Their books, respectively *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980) and *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984) are seminal works in the field. The term “metafiction”, however, was first used by literary writer and theorist William Gass, in 1970, in the essay “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction”.

²² HUTCHEON. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, p. 1.

are responsible for making the functions of metafiction “range from undermining aesthetic illusion to poetological self-reflection, commenting on aesthetic procedures, the celebration of the act of narrating, and the playful exploration of the possibilities and limits of fiction”.²³

According to Patricia Waugh, metafiction “is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality”.²⁴ This definition conveys two important aspects regarding metafiction: the literary text as an artifact and the relationship between fiction and empirical reality, which ultimately means an exposition and critique “of the fundamental structures of narrative fiction” and an exploration “of the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text”.²⁵ Waugh argues that a better understanding of the structural elements that constitute literary texts may allow for a better understanding of our empirical reality: “If our knowledge of this world is now seen to be mediated through language, then literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of ‘reality’ itself”.²⁶

The problematization of empirical and fictional realities brought about by metafictional texts endows these same texts with the potential to develop more critical and reflexive readers. After all, the knowledge on “how” a story is told (which goes beyond the level of just “what” is told), conveyed explicitly in many metafictional works, may certainly increase one’s ability to read critically – both literature and the world. In this sense, the pedagogical potential of metafiction – a substantial form of literary literacy – is not restricted to

a better understanding of the fundamental structures of narrative; [...] [metafiction] has also offered extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems.²⁷

²³ NEUMANN; NÜNNING. *Metanarration and Metafiction*, p. 12.

²⁴ WAUGH. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, p. 2.

²⁵ WAUGH. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, p. 2.

²⁶ WAUGH. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, p. 3.

²⁷ WAUGH. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, p. 9.

The question of readers and reading is especially central to Hutcheon's theory of metafiction. She states, for instance, that two methodologies were fundamental to her theory: structuralism and Iserian hermeneutics. On the latter, Hutcheon comments:

The work in reader aesthetics by hermeneutic critics such as Wolfgang Iser and Roman Ingarden provides a vocabulary in which to discuss the functions of the reader who "concretizes" the text and whose role is also "thematized" and often "actualized" within the text itself.²⁸

If one may understand the reader as responsible for the concretization of any literary text, in metafictional works this notion is made even more evident, for "the reader and the act of reading often become thematized parts of the narrative situation, acknowledged as having a co-producing function".²⁹ This process of co-creation is described in similar terms to Iser's discussion on interaction and the two poles of a work of art:

The reader is explicitly or implicitly forced to face his responsibility toward the text, that is, toward the novelistic world he is creating through the accumulated fictive referents of literary language. As the novelist actualizes the world of his imagination through words, so the reader – from those same words – manufactures in reverse a literary universe that is as much his creation as it is the novelist's.³⁰

Consequently, in metafictional texts such as *Sweet Tooth*, "the reader is made aware of the fact that literature is less a verbal object carrying some meaning, than it is his own experience of building, from the language, a coherent autonomous whole of form and content".³¹ Regarding McEwan's novel, this experience is met with many obstacles/gaps in the form of metafictional enigmas. However, if the narrative is set in a way to pose a challenging reading activity, it also points towards possibilities of resolution by overtly displaying the mechanisms behind

²⁸ HUTCHEON. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, p. 6.

²⁹ HUTCHEON. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, p. 37.

³⁰ HUTCHEON. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, p. 27.

³¹ HUTCHEON. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, p. 42.

two very fundamental structures of its construction, namely the parody of detective fiction and *mise en abyme*.

The reader as a detective

Considering the etymology of the word “parody” may help illuminate how McEwan parodied the tradition of detective fiction in *Sweet Tooth*. Parody, which comes from the Greek *parodia*, is a combination of *para* and *odos*:

The textual or discursive nature of parody [...] is clear from the *odos* part of the word, meaning song. The prefix *para* has two meanings, [...] that of “counter” or “against”. Thus parody becomes an opposition or contrast between texts. This is presumably the formal starting point for the definition’s customary pragmatic component of ridicule [...]. However, *para* in Greek can also mean “beside”, and therefore there is a suggestion of an accord or intimacy instead of a contrast.³²

For a long time, parodying a text, author, or literary genre was associated with the ridiculing of its “target”, in the form of a “counter song”. However, Hutcheon argues that the notion of “beside”, of a “parallel song”, is especially relevant regarding contemporary literary and artistic practices, in which parody does not intend (only) to ridicule its target. In fact, in order to understand the different workings of parody, both meanings of “counter” and “beside” must be taken into consideration: this creative strategy seems to feed on the tension caused by differences among similarities. In addition, one cannot anticipate the relationship between the parodic text and the parodied text/author/style, for “[p]arody’s attitude towards its target is often ambivalent and may range from degradation and mockery to respectful admiration”.³³

As in metafiction, the reader plays a very important role in parody. Hutcheon argues, for instance, that “parody is indeed in the eye of the beholder”.³⁴ The beholder, nevertheless, “need[s] something to behold; we need signals from the text to guide our interpretation, and the degree

³² HUTCHEON. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century art forms*, p. 32.

³³ KORKUT. *Kinds of Parody: From the Medieval to the Postmodern*, p. 1.

³⁴ HUTCHEON. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century art forms*, p. xvi.

of visibility of these signals determines their potential for assisting us”.³⁵ Parodic texts, in this sense, invite the reader to play a game of detection and interpretation, looking for differences among similarities – something which is overtly thematized in *Sweet Tooth*, since the reader must actively perform the role of a detective.

The importance of readers for parody can be further explained through the double composition of this creative strategy: the existence of two texts or discourses, which constitutes the formal dimension of parody, is not enough to explain its functioning. The pragmatic dimension of parody cannot be ignored, for there lie “the author’s (or text’s) intent, the effect upon the reader, the competence involved in the encoding and the decoding of parody, [and] the contextual elements that mediate or determine the comprehension of parodic modes”.³⁶

In *Sweet Tooth*, the parody of detective fiction results from an ironic reconfiguration of the codes and conventions of this literary genre. If parodies are in themselves metafictional, in McEwan’s narrative, this creative strategy is even more reflexive, because there is an approximation between the figures of the detective and the reader: Serena is both the most important detective and (dramatized) reader within the novel.

Mysteries and the search for solutions are very important elements of detective fiction. According to Waugh:

Detective fiction is a form in which tension is wholly generated by the presentation of a mystery and heightened by retardation of the correct solution. [...] The reader is kept in suspense about the identity of the criminal until the end, when the rational operations of the detective triumph completely over disorder.³⁷

The rigid conventions that mark the literary genre are commonly obeyed, “because the reader expects them and needs them in order to read the work, in order to participate in the case”.³⁸ In *Sweet Tooth*, the choice to parody detective fiction may be explained by the proximity between the performances of a detective during an investigation and of

³⁵ HUTCHEON. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century art forms*, p. xvi

³⁶ HUTCHEON. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century art forms*, p. 22.

³⁷ WAUGH. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, p. 82.

³⁸ HUTCHEON. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, p. 72.

a reader while reading: both reading and investigating involve looking for clues, physical or textual signs, in order to compose an interpretation.

If the process of looking for textual traces or clues is made explicit in detective fiction, the existence of gaps that must be filled in by the reader is true to literature in general, as argued by Iser. Thus, detective narratives, by being “dedicated to their own constructive principles, and openly displaying the similarities between the detection and the reading processes, become representative of literature in general”.³⁹

In the traditional form of the genre, detectives perform a tireless pursuit of solutions to the mysteries by using a variety of methods. In *Sweet Tooth*, Serena’s performance as a detective is thoroughly ineffective – in most cases, she is content with just mentioning the existence of a mystery. For instance, after a failed attempt to solve a “significant mystery”,⁴⁰ in relation to which she articulates a series of false presumptions, Serena argues: “I had solved nothing, but I felt clever in making progress. And feeling clever, I’ve always thought, is just a sigh away from being cheerful”.⁴¹ And it is important to highlight that Serena’s performance as a detective prevents the reader of *Sweet Tooth* from following through with the investigations, for their clues are the same as Serena’s, the character and narrator whose point of view we follow through the narrative.

Parody, in *Sweet Tooth*, is also established by a great discrepancy between the nature of some of the mysteries and those commonly associated with the world of crime. We might mention, for instance, Jeremy’s (Serena’s first boyfriend) elusive orgasms, Shirley’s (Serena’s best friend in MI5) discharge and subsequent disappearance and the way Tony (the university professor who recruited Serena) broke their romantic relationship. None of these cases is solved by Serena through an investigative practice, even though she was affected by them. These mysteries were later clarified by Jeremy, Shirley, and Tony themselves through letters or oral conversations with Serena.

Some specific situations in the novel bring together Serena’s performance as a detective and her representation as a reader. It concerns MI5 watchers and their search in Serena’s bedroom, when the agency

³⁹ MARCUS. *Detection and Literary Fiction*, p. 245.

⁴⁰ McEWAN. *Sweet Tooth*, p. 97.

⁴¹ McEWAN. *Sweet Tooth*, p. 98.

still had concerns regarding her relationship with Tony Canning. Arriving late one night at home, Serena realized her bookmark was not inside the novel she had been reading the night before; it was lying on top of her armchair. Such a flagrant departure of her fixed reading routine instigated the following reaction:

I went about the room looking for other signs of disturbance. [...] All was in order. I went through the chest of drawers, through my wash bag, I looked at the bed and under it – nothing had been moved or stolen. I came back to the chair and stared down a good while, as if that would solve the mystery. I knew I should go downstairs and look for signs of a break-in, but I didn't want to.⁴²

On the one hand, this situation confirms how close Serena and literature are, for this invasion was noticed because of an interference in her reading routine, which highlights how reading is a crucial element in the constitution of her subjectivity. On the other, this event also accentuates her inadequate performance as a detective, a mark of the parody of detective fiction in *Sweet Tooth*.

In narratives of detection, the use of reason is one of the detective's most powerful tools. D'Onofrio, in this sense, argues that "there are basically two qualities inherent to a good detective: analytical capacity and a good spirit of observation".⁴³ Reason and intellect, in the detective genre, are closely related to a history of light, reflection and celebration of human reason.⁴⁴ It is in this sense that Serena's reaction constitutes a clear subversion of the detective genre. In this specific situation, an attempt of self-convincing by Serena characterizes one of the most ironical points in the parody of the genre:

At first light, I was persuaded that tiredness had fogged my memory, that I was confusing the intention with the act, that I had put the book down without the bookmark. I'd

⁴² McEWAN. *Sweet Tooth*, p.79-80.

⁴³ "as qualidades que se exigem para ser um bom detetive são basicamente duas: a capacidade de análise e o espírito de observação" (D'ONOFRIO. *Teoria do texto I*, p. 170, our translation).

⁴⁴ PIGLIA. *O último leitor*, p. 76.

been frightening myself with my own shadow. Daylight seemed then to be the physical manifestation of common sense.⁴⁵

McEwan's parody of detective fiction differs from other parodic incursions towards this genre. For instance, Patricia Merivale argues that in the subgenre of postmodern and metaphysical detection there is also a reconfiguration of the classic conventions of detective fiction, so these conventions can be questioned and subverted.⁴⁶ However, in this subgenre of detective fiction, the multitude of both enigmas and clues are left unanswered, without the possibility of a solution.

In *Sweet Tooth*, there are solutions to the mysteries that surround Serena's life. Such mysteries, however, do not represent all the enigmas in McEwan's novel. At the end of the narrative, two enigmas of a metafictional order arise: who wrote *Sweet Tooth*, Serena and/or Haley?; when was the version being read concluded, in the 1970s or in the 2010s? To these metafictional enigmas, the reader is not presented with answers. On the contrary, the novel ends with unanswered questions, regarding two proposals: that of marriage and that of an artistic collaboration.

As a structure within the guiding system that constitutes the implied reader, the parody of detective fiction presents two important points to the reader. First, if there were solutions to the previous mysteries, the reader may be optimistic, in the sense that the metafictional enigmas may also be solved. Second, if the reader wishes to unveil the answers for such enigmas, his performance as a detective and reader must differ greatly from Serena's.

And it is with this resolution that we shall investigate the first set of textual clues.

When was the story written?

Before we begin investigating the clues left throughout *Sweet Tooth*, an important observation must be made. When searching for an answer to the enigma of who wrote the novel, we face the tension between fiction and reality, which finds fertile terrain within metafiction to grow. By overtly displaying their compositional procedures (even presenting

⁴⁵ McEWAN. *Sweet Tooth*, p. 80.

⁴⁶ MERIVALE. *Postmodern and Metaphysical Detection*, p. 308.

one or more characters as authors of the story within which they are inserted), metafictional texts end up establishing their own reality. And this is the reality to which we refer in this discussion – a fictional reality, a conventional construction. It cannot be confused with the empiric reality, the one in which we live, where we know *Sweet Tooth* was written by Ian McEwan.

As previously presented, in his letter (also the last chapter of the novel), Tom Haley invites Serena to collaborate on the story, aiming to publish it some decades later. If they were to keep this letter unchanged as he proposes, we may infer that Haley's suggestion to Serena, in which she would add the "paddings of the backward glance", was made in the 1970s. So, although we might not have a flagrant confirmation of Serena's collaboration in the writing of the story, such a collaboration might be pursued through later insertions of information regarding time, which Haley admits to be lacking in his first draft.

Through the narrative, the reader finds several occasions in which there seems to be a tension between two distinct times. In the beginning of their relationship, for instance, Serena thus reflects about Tony Canning's physical appearance:

How strange, that in my surprise, quickly suppressed, it didn't occur to me that I was looking at my own future. I was twenty-one. What I took to be the norm – taut, smooth, supple – was the transient special case of my youth. To me, the old were a separate species, like sparrows or foxes. And now, what I would give to be fifty-four again!⁴⁷

The difference between the time in which the action happened (relationship and surprise) and the time in which the narration takes place is clearly marked in this passage. If Serena was 21 years old in the early 1970s, in this comment, she admits to be older than 54 years. Such a remark, within the reality instituted by the novel, could not have been made before the 2010s.

Similar comments, made by Serena in her narration, also oppose two or more temporalities, such as: "When, in later years, it became permissible to tell everyone that you once worked for MI5, I was often

⁴⁷ McEWAN. *Sweet Tooth*, p. 22.

asked this question”,⁴⁸ “(London is so much cleaner now)”,⁴⁹ “Or so I thought”.⁵⁰

One may argue that such time differences could very likely be projections of a writer in 1974 (the year in which Haley wrote the letter and his first draft of the story), using the voice of a fictional narrator. There are occasions, however, in which historical events that took place after 1974 are mentioned, such as: “Years later, when the [Berlin] Wall came down and the books were opened, it turned out to be nonsense”.⁵¹ The Berlin Wall, built in 1961, would only come to fall in 1989. The narrator also indicates situations that would only take place in the 1990s, as in: “Not until the United States had its own terrorist attacks would it even begin to understand”.⁵²

If these temporal clues attest to the fact that the story could not have been completely written in 1974, they cannot be taken as an evidence that Serena acted as co-creator of the narrative. Even the detailed descriptions of Serena’s work in the MI5 do not constitute undeniable proofs: one can argue that Tom Haley retrieved information from other sources (as did McEwan in the empirical reality). Therefore, it is not clear if the descriptions of MI5’s immense database, the activities performed by agents Helium and Spade, and the many meetings with the officials responsible for Operation Sweet Tooth are Serena’s late additions or Haley’s imaginative creations.

Thus, a metafictional enigma remains. In a novel which poses substantial reflections on storytelling, it is no surprise that the answer to this possible artistic collaboration comes in the form of a story (*en abyme*).

Mirrored stories: duplicated readers and writers

In *Sweet Tooth*, the metafictional creative strategy *mise en abyme* is established through the insertion of micronarratives within the frame of the novel. These micronarratives are stories written by Tom Haley, both short stories and a novel, which are read and retold by Serena in her

⁴⁸ McEWAN. *Sweet Tooth*, p. 45.

⁴⁹ McEWAN. *Sweet Tooth*, p. 49.

⁵⁰ McEWAN. *Sweet Tooth*, p. 79.

⁵¹ McEWAN. *Sweet Tooth*, p. 93.

⁵² McEWAN. *Sweet Tooth*, p. 82.

narration. Curiously, such stories have clear intertextual affiliations with other works by McEwan: “This is Love”, “Lovers”, “Pawnography”, “Her second novel” and *From the Somerset Levels*, by Tom Haley, are parodies, respectively, of *Enduring Love*, “Dead as they come”, “Pornography”, “Reflections of a kept ape” and “Two fragments: March 199-”.

Since French author and essayist André Gide created the term *mise en abyme* in 1893, observing a common practice in heraldry, several studies (especially in France) have been formulated to discuss the characteristics of this creative procedure, the different ways it can be articulated and the diverse effects it may have on readers. Here, we are aligned with theorist Moshe Ron, who proposes the following definition:

Any diegetic segment which resembles the work where it occurs, is said to be placed *en abyme*. [...] “The work” (as that which is resembled) denotes any continuous aspect of the text, the narration or the story judged to be pertinent. “Diegetic segment” means any bit of the narrated story or represented world isolated for the sake of description. [...] Proviso no. 1: The resembling diegetic segment must be considerably smaller (in textual extension) than the work it resembles. Proviso no. 2: The resembling diegetic segment may not be located at a higher diegetic level than the pertinent and continuous aspect of the work it resembles.⁵³

Tom Haley’s narratives are diegetic segments that have the necessary characteristics described by Ron. Further to this, they can be important starting points to reflect on the metafictional mirroring effects that reverberate both at level of stories being narrated and at the level of the instances of production and reception of these stories – narrator and readers.

In a seminal study on *mise en abyme*, Lucien Dällenbach indicates two basic facets of this creative strategy.⁵⁴ First, as a modality of reflection, the text may self-reflexively turn upon itself. Second, it has the potential to bring out the intelligibility or the formal structure of the work. In *Sweet Tooth*, there is a duplication in terms of events between the novel and the short stories it comprises. Tom Haley explicitly calls

⁵³ RON. The Restricted Abyss: Nine Problems in the Theory of *mise en abyme*, p. 437-438.

⁵⁴ DÄLLENBACH. *El relato especulado*, p. 15.

attention to this first aspect in his letter – thus “theoretically” instructing the reader of McEwan’s novel on this possibility of *mise en abyme*. For instance, Haley discusses common points between his and Serena’s story (meaning the events that compose *Sweet Tooth*) and “Lovers” and “Her second novel”. “Lovers” is a story about a millionaire who falls in love with a dummy doll from a department store, a “fool who believes his lover is real when in fact he’s dreamed her up and she’s only a counterfeit, a copy, a fake”.⁵⁵ Here, Haley and the millionaire share the fate of loving a woman who somehow deceives them – Serena by spying for the MI5 and the doll for being a plastic representation of a woman.

In “Her second novel”, the narrator, a monkey, relates the daily occurrences of life shared with a woman – his owner and lover. She is an author of literature, who was very praised by her first novel, yet cannot succeed in writing a second one. By the end of “Her second novel”, we come to understand that this narrative is precisely this author’s subsequent work, for she was “driven to her second novel by the spectre of her apish lover”.⁵⁶ Serena, in this case, is a representation of the monkey lover, since she guided Tom Haley towards writing *Sweet Tooth*, which is precisely his second novel.

Such mirroring effects in the level of plot lead the reader of *Sweet Tooth* towards important elements that will occur in the narrative – offering textual clues that might help in the filling in of gaps. This relates to what Rita refers as the simplest modality of *mise en abyme*, when a narrative is synthetically represented in a point of its course.⁵⁷

More important to solving the metafictional enigmas, however, is the fact that the functions of producer and receptor of narratives (the functions of narrator and reader) are duplicated as a result of the mirroring effects. This is a more complex modality of *mise en abyme*, in which “the level of enunciation is projected in the interior of the representation: the enunciator instance is articulated in the text during the enunciating act”⁵⁸. And regarding this modality of *mise en abyme*, a closer examination

⁵⁵ McEWAN. *Sweet Tooth*, p. 360.

⁵⁶ McEWAN. *Sweet Tooth*, p. 360.

⁵⁷ RITA. *Mise en abyme*, para. 2.

⁵⁸ “nível de enunciação seria projectado no interior dessa representação: a instância enunciadora configura-se, então, no texto em pleno acto enunciatório” (RITA. *Mise en abyme*, para. 2, our translation).

of the short story “Probable adultery” may shed light upon the second metafictional enigma established at the end of *Sweet Tooth*: who wrote the novel? Serena and/or Tom?

As a structure within the guiding system that constitutes the implied reader, the *mise en abyme* presents two important points to the reader. First, he must look for mirroring effects between narratives – between the inserted short stories and the novel that contains them. Second, he must consider the duplication of the figures of writer and reader, as well as the roles they play in both mirrored narratives.

Serena and/or Tom?

It has already been established that the version of *Sweet Tooth* we read has undergone future revisions in relation to Haley’s first draft, written in 1974. What is left to be answered is whether Serena accepted the proposal of a collaborative writing. To answer this question, we shall consider the story *en abyme* “Probable adultery”, meaningfully, the only one of Haley’s short stories that does not have a counterpart in McEwan’s *oeuvre*.

Tom Haley’s inspiration for writing “Probable adultery” is deserving of attention: during a dinner at their favorite restaurant, Tom asked Serena to tell him a story from the universe of Mathematics. She proceeds to tell him the story regarding the Monty Hall problem, which involves notions of probability taken to be quite counterintuitive. The writer found it particularly difficult to understand – he even refused to believe Serena’s explanation of the problem. The fact he was not able to grasp the logic behind the Monty Hall problem became evident when he decided to write “Probable adultery”, fictionalizing the matter through the representation of an extramarital relationship. Having finished the short story, Haley mails it to Serena, asking: “Have I got this right?”.⁵⁹

After reading “Probable adultery”, Serena reflects: “It was a good story. [...] But when I read it that morning, I knew at a stroke that it was flawed, built on specious assumptions, unworkable parallels, hopeless mathematics”.⁶⁰ Faced with this situation, Serena decides to rewrite the narrative, correcting mathematical notions and altering some parts of the plot (especially the situation that led to the Monty Hall problem). After

⁵⁹ McEWAN. *Sweet Tooth*, p. 240.

⁶⁰ McEWAN. *Sweet Tooth*, p. 242-243.

40 minutes in front of a typing machine, she had three pages of notes and a letter, which explained, “in the simplest terms”,⁶¹ the misconceptions in “Probable adultery”.

This case of *mise en abyme* informs a lot about the metafictional enigma we are trying to solve. After all, who wrote *Sweet Tooth*: Serena and/or Tom Haley? In the fictional reality inscribed in the narrative, the answer is: both, Serena and Tom, acting as cocreators of the story, via a process of creative collaboration. This solution can be inferred by Serena’s performance regarding “Probable adultery”: her reading, revising, and cowriting of this narrative is the final confirmation necessary (along with the several “padding of the backward glance”, discussed above) to argue that these actions reflect her activities in the composition of *Sweet Tooth*, a novel of which she is also a reader, reviser, and coauthor.

Concluding remarks

As a novel that celebrates literature and its inventive potential, *Sweet Tooth* is especially effective in calling the reader’s attention to the importance of his act of reading, to the significance of his performance towards the concretization of the work of fiction being read. Indeed, confronted with a complex structure which comprises several narrative layers, the reader realizes that a careful and thorough reading process is necessary. This same reader, however, is not left helpless, for the parody of detective fiction and *mise en abyme* are important components of the guiding system that structure the implied reader, allowing him to select and to reflect upon the major metafictional procedures in McEwan’s novel.

The parody of detective fiction, by ironically reconfiguring the codes and conventions of the genre it parodies, makes the reader aware that he must act as a detective in order to solve the metafictional enigmas brought about at the end of the novel. Searching for differences among similarities and for time discrepancies, the reader acknowledges the fact that the filling in of gaps – or the solution of mysteries, if we consider this phenomenon within the genre of detection narratives – is a precondition for reading itself. Accordingly, when placed in the middle of the house of mirrors that is erected in *Sweet Tooth* via narratives *en abyme*, the

⁶¹ McEWAN. *Sweet Tooth*, p. 246.

reader is allowed to see, from a privileged point of view, the hinges and mechanisms that made possible such a complex literary artifact.

Both strategies ultimately allow the reader to find his own answers to the metafictional enigmas in the novel, through an interactive process that also instructs this reader on some procedures of literary creation and on some of the limits and possibilities of literary fiction. Parody and *mise en abyme*, in McEwan's novel, were powerful tools regarding what we might perceive as a project to develop more proficient readers. In this sense, McEwan follows a line of novelists that have been very interested in molding and "perfecting" their reading audiences. And this is very understandable when one considers the complexity of *Sweet Tooth* and other metafictional texts. These works, after all, make it clear that

it is no longer a matter of the reader's having to identify with a character in order to be involved in the work; the act of reading itself is the real, dynamic function to which the text draws his attention. Like writing, reading is bound by a consciousness of generic tradition: one has to learn what stories are [...] in order to enjoy them. Similarly one has to learn to read – actively, imaginatively – in order to enjoy the demanding fiction of today.⁶²

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⁶² HUTCHEON. *Narcissistic narrative: the metafictional paradox*, p. 149.

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