Atonement

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF IAN MCEWAN

Ian McEwan was born in 1948 to David and Rose McEwan. Because of his father's work as a military officer, McEwan grew up living in Asia, Germany, and North Africa. McEwan returned to England to study English at Sussex University. After completing his undergraduate degree, he enrolled in a creative writing master's program. In 1975, McEwan's first collection of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites*, was released, and was given the Somerset Maugham Award. Since then, McEwan has written prolifically, in genres encompassing film, television, novels, and short stories. Additionally, he has received further honors like the Booker Prize, awarded for his 1998 novel *Amsterdam*. *Atonement*, acclaimed as one of his strongest works, was written in 2001. Following *Atonement*, McEwan has written one libretto and five novels, the most recent of which will be released in September 2014. He has two children from his first marriage to Penny Allen, which ended in an acrimonious divorce. McEwan is now married to Annalena McAfee, a British writer and literary critic.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Atonement's plot is shadowed by Western Europe's violent twentieth-century history. At the book's beginning, World War I is still a relatively recent memory, and the later plot is dominated by World War II. Briony and Cecilia both dedicate themselves to the war effort by working as nurses, and Robbie conscripts in the military to fulfill his prison sentence. Various historical battles shape the plot: Robbie fights to repel the Nazi invasion of France, and dies on June 1, 1940 at Bray-Dunes, during the Dunkirk evacuation. Cecilia dies a few months later during a bombing raid on London's Balham Underground station (though the novel actually misidentifies the date of this event as September 1940, when it in fact took place in October of that year).

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Historical fiction based on World War II has emerged as an exceedingly popular literary genre. Prominent World War II novelizations include straightforward treatments of the conflict, such as James Jones's 1962 book *The Thin Red Line*, as well as more humorous or surreal (but just as serious) works such as Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, published in 1961, and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, published in 1973. *Atonement* also has common ground with widely popular non-fiction books such as 2000's *Flags of Our Fathers*, written by James Bradley with Ron Powers. Notably, five years after *Atonement's* publication, McEwan addressed allegations that *Atonement* had failed to credit the influence of the works of Lucilla Andrews, a novelist and a trained nurse whose 1977 autobiography, *No Time for Romance*, chronicled World War II's hospital environments in detail.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Atonement*
- **When Written:** 2001
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 2001
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical fiction
- **Setting:** England and France; before, during, and after World War II
- **Climax:** Briony Tallis's false testimony, condemning Robbie Turner for the rape of Lola Quincey
- **Antagonist:** Paul Marshall
- **Point of View:** Limited 3rd person

EXTRA CREDIT

Stranger than fiction. Family drama isn't restricted to Ian McEwan's novels. As a grown man, McEwan learned that he has a living, long-lost brother: a bricklayer named David Sharp. Sharp was conceived in an affair between McEwan's parents, while McEwan's mother was married to another man, and was given up for adoption in 1942.

Success on the silver screen. McEwan's novels have been adapted to films at least seven times, including the 2007 movie version of *Atonement* that starred Keira Knightley as Cecilia Tallis and James McAvoy as Robbie Turner.

PLOT SUMMARY

Briony Tallis is a literary, self-important 13-year-old who lives in an English country estate in 1935. Her cousins, 15-year-old **Lola Quincey** and 9-year-old twins **Jackson** and **Pierrot Quincey**, are coming to stay with the Tallises because their parents are embroiled in a divorce. Meanwhile, Briony's older sister **Cecilia** holds unresolved romantic feelings for **Robbie Turner**, the Tallises' gardener (Robbie's romantic feelings for Cecilia, meanwhile, are passionately resolved). Thanks to the Tallises' funding, Robbie studies with Cecilia at Cambridge and plans to become a doctor. From a window of the estate, Briony

witnesses the two of them accidentally break a family heirloom vase in front of a fountain. When Cecilia removes her clothes in front of Robbie to retrieve the shards from the fountain, Briony starts to think Robbie is a threat to her sister. Later, Robbie gives Briony a letter of apology to give to Cecilia, but accidentally hands her a vulgar draft instead. Briony reads the letter and becomes convinced Robbie is a menace. When Robbie realizes his error, he goes to Cecilia to apologize. This apology turns to passionate lovemaking in the family library. Briony enters the room and interrupts, further cementing her resentment and suspicion of Robbie.

The family gathers for a dinner to commemorate the visit of **Leon**, the oldest Tallis child. He has brought a friend, **Paul Marshall**, with him. Paul is the heir to a chocolate fortune. The twins leave the dinner table, and leave a letter behind explaining they have run away from the house because they miss their parents. The guests assemble search parties to look for the boys on the grounds.

Briony, searching alone, finds Lola being raped in a remote part of the estate. The assailant runs away before Briony can identify him, but as she consoles Lola she convinces both Lola and herself that she saw Robbie commit the crime. Briony leads Lola back to the house and delivers her story to all the adults present. Policemen arrive and Briony testifies that she saw Robbie commit the crime. After many hours, Robbie returns to the house with the twins; he had been searching for them alone all night. When he gets back, he is taken into police custody.

Part Two resumes after Robbie has served three and a half years in prison for Lola's assault. During that time, he has been in constant correspondence with Cecilia, even though she has not been allowed to visit him in person. She has cut ties with her family and started a career as a nurse. Cecilia's latest letter informs Robbie that Briony has contacted her in the hopes of retracting the false testimony she made years earlier.

The outbreak of World War II allows Robbie to end his sentence by enlisting in the army. He goes to fight in France. When Part Two begins, he must walk to the coast with his comrades **Corporal Nettle** and **Corporal Mace** in order to evacuate with the British forces. During this walk, the men behold disturbing carnage. Despite having a painful shrapnel wound, Robbie makes it to the coast and is evacuated.

Part Three focuses on Briony, who has foregone college to work as a nurse during the war. Work is demanding, and she is intimidated by her overseer, **Nurse Drummond**. An influx of injured men from the French evacuation arrives to the hospital, and the harrowing experience of treating them causes Briony to mature. In her rare free time, Briony writes stories, which she submits to magazines unsuccessfully.

A letter from her father informs Briony that Paul and Lola are to be married. She attends their wedding and, afterwards, pays a visit to Cecilia. Unexpectedly, Robbie is present as well. The atmosphere is tense, but Briony agrees to take the steps necessary to alert her family and the relevant legal authorities of her change in testimony. Cecilia and Robbie see Briony off, and Briony understands that after she finishes the tasks she agreed to, she must begin an in-depth process of "atonement."

The book's epilogue reveals that this atonement process was to write the preceding novel itself. Briony, now 77, narrates in the first person. She has just been diagnosed with irreversible dementia. She describes going to a library to donate her correspondence with Corporal Nettle—used to write this book—and afterwards attends a birthday party thrown by her surviving relatives, including Pierrot and Leon. While Briony longs to publish her memoir, she cannot do so while Paul and Lola remain alive. They are now well-connected socialites and will doubtless sue her for libel. Briony admits that her novelization has changed some details—for example, Robbie and Cecilia both actually perished in the war, but her fiction allowed them to live—but she reflects that even though achieving atonement will be impossible for her, her attempt to do so is indispensable.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Briony Tallis – Briony is the novel's protagonist. At the novel's outset, she is a precocious girl with a gift for writing. However she is also a petulant child, both naïve and certain of her understanding, and her selfish stubbornness leads her to misinterpret a romantic encounter between her sister Cecilia and Robbie Turner. This jealous misconception leads her to wrongly implicate Robbie in the rape of her cousin, Lola Quincey, a crime for which Robbie serves three years in prison. Later in the book, Briony becomes a nurse and works to make up for the wrongs she has committed against Robbie. Towards the end of the novel, it is revealed that she has written the story o of the novel in an attempt to atone for the damages she has caused and rectify the falsehoods she spread. She narrates the book's conclusion as an elderly woman who has been diagnosed with encroaching terminal dementia.

Robbie Turner – The bright, attractive, and ambitious son of Grace Turner, who is the Tallis family's charlady. Robbie is studying at Cambridge to be a doctor, and his education is funded by the Tallises, who treat him like a son. He is also passionately in love with Cecilia Tallis. However, he is wrongly imprisoned when Briony misidentifies him as the man who raped Lola. After three years in prison, he enlists to fight in World War II in exchange for a reduced sentence. Later in the novel, Briony finds him at Cecilia's apartment and attempts to make amends, though he is clearly still furious with Briony. Though still later in the novel it is revealed that Briony invented this encounter as a kind of atonement, to give him a life with

Cecilia even though he was in fact killed in combat.

Cecilia Tallis – Briony's free-spirited sister. Early in the novel she realizes, somewhat to her surprise, that she is in love with Robbie Turner. When Briony's incrimination of Robbie alienates him from the Tallis family, Cecilia cuts off her own ties to her family and promises to wait for Robbie. She becomes a nurse, which likely inspires her younger sister to do the same. Briony and Cecilia have a limited re-connection during the war, as Briony tries unsuccessfully to legally take back her false testimony against Robbie. However, at the very end of the novel, Briony explains that Cecilia was in fact killed during a bombing raid on London, shortly after Robbie was killed in combat.

Lola Quincey – Briony's blasé cousin, two years her senior. She is raped by Paul Marshall, and is so shaken by the assault that she accepts Briony's assertion that Robbie Turner was the culprit even though it seems clear that she knows that Paul was her assailant. Lola later marries Paul, despite the fact that she raped her, in what is implied is a kind of agreement to both hide their complicity in Robbie's false indictment and because marriage to Paul will make her wealthy. She becomes a well-known London socialite.

Paul Marshall – A somewhat dull friend of Leon's who is heir to a chocolate-making fortune. His family company manufactures **Amo bars**. When he visits the Tallis family at the beginning of the book, the family initially imagines that he might be a good match for Cecilia. She is uninterested in him, however, and he notices Lola's good looks even though she is fifteen years old. Paul rapes Lola but lets the blame fall upon Robbie. Later, he marries Lola—which, it is implied, is a kind of deal that gains Lola's allegiance despite his rape of her by making her wealthy and allowing them both to hide their role's in Robbie's false indictment. He eventually becomes a philanthropist and fixture of London high society.

Emily Tallis – Briony and Cecilia's mother, and the wife of Jack Tallis. She is a relatively hands-free parent, in part because she suffers from debilitating migraines. She is something of a snob, and less enthusiastic than her husband about the Tallis family's efforts to fund Robbie's education. She also resents her sister—Lola's mother—who she sees as always stealing attention.

Jack Tallis – Briony and Cecilia's father, and the husband of Emily Tallis. Mr. Tallis is an absent parent because his work as a high-ranking government bureaucrat consumes most of his time, particularly during the tensions leading up to World War II. Mr. Tallis appears to be a kind, principled man—he funds Robbie Turner's education and supports his mother, Grace, who works as a housecleaner at the Tallis estate—but he abruptly ends his aid to Robbie when the boy is falsely blamed for raping Lola.

Pierrot and Jackson Quincey – Pierrot and Jackson are Lola's twin younger brothers. At the book's beginning, they appear as rowdy and capricious preadolescent boys, and the drama that takes place passes over their heads. Pierrot returns at the end of the book, when he leads his grandchildren in a performance of Briony's play, **The Tales of Arabella**, to honor Briony's birthday.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Corporal Nettle – One of Robbie's two comrades during his time fighting in France and Belgium. To write Robbie's portion of the story, Briony researches Robbie's wartime experience by finding and communicating with Nettle.

Corporal Mace – Another of Robbie's comrades during the war.

Fiona – One of Briony's fellow nursing novices, with whom Briony strikes up a friendship. Fiona is from a well-to-do London family.

Leon Tallis – Leon is the oldest Tallis child. He plays a small role in the book; he is visiting home with his friend Paul Marshall when Paul rapes Lola, and he reappears as a doddering old man at the Tallis family reunion that ends the novel.

Nurse Drummond – Briony's stern supervisor at the hospital where Briony is first positioned.

Danny Hardman – A Tallis family servant whom Cecilia and Robbie wrongly suspect of being Lola's true rapist.

Old Hardman – Danny Hardman's father. He is a Tallis family servant.

Betty – A Tallis family servant who helps around the kitchen.

Hermione and Cecil Quincey – The parents of Lola, Pierrot, and Jackson. Hermione is Emily Tallis's sister, and she and Cecil are embroiled in an unpleasant, public divorce. For this reason, their children are sent to live with the Tallises.

Grace Turner – Robbie Turner's mother, and the charlady (cleaning woman) for the Tallis family.

Ernest Turner – Robbie Turner's father and Grace Turner's husband, who quit his job as the Tallis gardener and abandoned his family.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

PERSPECTIVE

The most essential theme of *Atonement* is the way an individual's perspective inevitably shapes his or

her reality. At various points throughout the novel, McEwan filters the narrative through a particular character's point of view. By juxtaposing the distinct, and frequently conflicting, ways his characters understand the world, the author illustrates that each individual's reality is as much a product of their own biases, assumptions, and limited knowledge as it is a reflection of an objective, external truth.

The most powerful and consequential example of perspective influencing reality is Briony's inaccurate incrimination of Robbie. A long chain of self-centered reasoning leads the young girl to believe that Robbie is responsible for raping Lola. First, her resentment at being excluded from Robbie and Cecilia's mutual love predisposes her to view Robbie negatively. Later on, her childish imagination leads her to fabricate a sinister backstory to explain why she saw Robbie and Cecilia cavorting semi-clothed in the fountain together. These biases in turn drive her to surreptitiously read the lewd letter Robbie accidentally sends to Cecilia and conclude that the young man is a depraved maniac. Together, these hasty conclusions and unnoticed biases make Briony convince herself that she saw Robbie assault Lola, and attest this misconception to the police. At this point, Briony's flawed perspective combines with the incomplete perspectives and biases held by authority figures like the police and Mrs. Tallis, and this is all it takes to fabricate a reality in which Robbie is guilty—even though that reality has no basis in actual fact.

However, even though Briony's biased reality certainly causes the furthest-reaching repercussions, McEwan shows that no character is capable of seeing the world in a truly objective, balanced way. For example, despite being so deeply harmed by others' hasty judgments, Robbie and Cecilia themselves (snobbishly) assume that the servant Danny Hardman was Lola's true rapist, even though the facts indicate otherwise. Through this and other shifts in perspective, McEwan illustrates the crucial, yet capricious, role that narrative plays in our individual understandings of truth.

GUILT

As the book's title suggests, guilt is a primary theme of *Atonement*. After she realizes the damage that her callous testimony has wrought, Briony spends a lifetime burdened by her guilt and attempting to atone for her misdeeds. Instead of going to college, she becomes a nurse, perhaps sensing a duty to help soldiers like Robbie. She worries endlessly about whether Robbie will be harmed in the line of duty, understanding that any injuries he suffers will be in some way her fault. Moreover, she is haunted by the pain she has caused her sister by slandering her beloved and forcing the two lovers apart. What's more, as the book's conclusion reveals, Briony has written the entire novel in an attempt to exonerate Robbie and atone for her lies.

Since McEwan casts guilt as such a powerful and universal human sentiment, it is worth noting that Robbie's wartime experience often forces him to forego feelings of guilt in the interest of self-preservation. In this way, the author shows that Robbie has been somewhat dehumanized as a consequence of Briony's childish misconduct. Because Robbie's own fate has been determined largely by factors outside of his control, a portion of his capacity for guilt seems to have been transferred to the person who precipitated his misfortune: Briony. Similarly, Lola actually ends up marrying her rapist, Paul Marshall, and the implication is that in doing so these two characters are both able to hide or escape their guilt in allowing Robbie to be falsely accused, and that Paul is able to further hide his own rape of Lola in exchange for making Lola, the daughter of a divorcee, wealthy by marrying her.

CLASS

The tension that drives the book's early plot is the scandalous love affair between the wealthy, well-bred Cecilia Tallis and the low-class Robbie Turner, the son of one of her family's servants. Although Robbie has been largely incorporated into the Tallis family, both by growing up alongside the Tallis children and by enjoying a stellar education sponsored by the family, he is nevertheless an outsider. Robbie's future depends on the charity of the Tallises. His outsider status undeniably contributes to the swift and uncompromising isolation he experiences after Briony accuses him of raping Lola.

McEwan emphasizes that an individual's social status has little correlation with his or her moral and intellectual worth. The chocolate heir Paul Marshall's high social status likely allows him to escape suspicion for the crime he committed, and he never acknowledges his misdeed, and in fact even "buys" his way out of trouble by marrying, and thereby making rich, the girl he raped. Meanwhile, low-born Robbie is one of the brightest and kindest characters in the novel. However, while he may be morally and intellectually exceptional, Robbie's low class does inhibit him from exercising the power to choose his own fate that other, higher-status characters do throughout the novel. Instead, he is left at the mercy of a biased system while other, more morally reprehensible characters go unpunished largely because of their greater social clout. And, further, Robbie is also not immune to class prejudice, as he assumes the even lower class Danny Hardman raped Lola, never imagining that it might have been Paul Marshall who did it.

LOST INNOCENCE

As *Atonement's* characters develop over the course of the novel and are inured to the sufferings of the adult world, they grow progressively less innocent. This universal loss of innocence is largely catalyzed by Lola's rape and Briony's false testimony. As a 13-year-old, Briony

naively believes that she understands love and virtue and can flawlessly interpret her surroundings—and her incorrect interpretations have disastrous consequences. Briony's false testimony against Robbie is innocent in the sense that she cannot fully comprehend the harm it will cause, but after she maligns him, she is fundamentally changed. She will never be able to retrieve the naïve perspective she held at the beginning of the book. As her innocence is shaken by further exposure to an unforgiving world, particularly her experience nursing injured soldiers back to health, Briony grows less and less confident in her own perspective and more open to understanding the perceptions of others.

Lola, of course, also loses innocence when Paul rapes her. Not only is she traumatically introduced to a violent, unsafe world, in the aftermath she allows herself to become complicit in Briony's lie. This complicity compounds itself further when Lola marries her rapist, Paul. From then on, she must consider her victimization from a coldly pragmatic perspective—to allow the truth to surface would undermine her husband, and her own high social station which she gained through the marriage. In this way, Lola's rape precipitates far-reaching psychological changes that make it impossible for her to regain the youthful perspective she held previously.

Robbie and Cecilia, the two people most directly harmed by Briony's lie, also lose a great deal of innocence as a result. Once a promising medical student, Robbie is instead forced by jail time and wartime to focus his attention on his own survival. Instead of cultivating his intellect and learning to treat suffering, he must overlook others' suffering to ensure that he escapes France alive. In a matter of hours, Briony's testimony turns Cecilia's naïve infatuation with Robbie into bitter resentment of her own family. Of course, most importantly of all, when this innocence is lost, it cannot be replaced. Briony cannot amend her misdeeds with her writing, nor can she legally exonerate Robbie by revising her testimony.

THE UNCHANGEABLE PAST

The most important plot developments in the work stem from actions or experiences that can never be erased or counteracted. Once Briony testifies against Robbie, she takes on a responsibility for Robbie's fate that she will never be able to shed, and she loses an innocence that she will never be able to regain. No matter what she does to atone for her misdeed, she will not be able to replace the future—love with Cecilia, being a doctor—that she has stolen from Robbie's life.

Not surprisingly, Briony's accusation leaves an indelible mark on Robbie, too. As a consequence of his imprisonment, he is unable to continue his prestigious education and must instead enlist in the military. The violence and suffering that Robbie witnesses in the war traumatize him and permanently alter his temperament. Similarly, after Briony works her first shift in the hospital caring for seriously wounded soldiers, she feels as though she has crossed into a new stage of maturity and worldliness from which she can never return.

This theme of irretrievability meshes interestingly with the novel's theme of individual perspective. In many ways, the most irrevocable changes in the novel come when characters lose the ability to perceive their realities in a certain way. For example, as an aging Briony reflects on her past, she no longer sees the world with the tragically narcissistic perspective she held as a child—and in this way, her new perspective irretrievably reshapes the reality of her life.

STORIES AND LITERATURE

The end of the book reveals that all of *Atonement* is a semi-autobiographical novel that Briony has written decades after her youthful mistakes took place. This framing device gives new signifying power to the self-conscious storytelling and narration that appear throughout the plot. As Briony grows up, her approach to storytelling evolves to reflect her maturity as a human being. When she is a petulant teenager, Briony obsesses about mastering her surroundings and peers: she wants **The Trials of Arabella** to turn out exactly how she envisioned it, and the wants Robbie and Cecilia's interactions to fit nicely into a storyline of her own devising. Her self-centered musings—"was everyone else really as alive as she was?"—indicate that she is largely insensitive to others' perspectives, and instead is quick to impose her own narrative on what she perceives. To her, everyone else is just a character in he story.

Briony's narrow-minded and automatic judgment of others has disastrous consequences. Briony, in response to witnessing events she does not properly understand, constructs a story in which Robbie is a thoroughgoing villain. This story soon spirals out of her control—much like the **Trials of Arabella** did—and leads to Robbie's years of imprisonment.

Later on, Briony again crafts stories—only this time, she relies on her writing to come to terms with the hurt she has caused. Her first attempts are too simplistic: she submits to a magazine a piece about witnessing Cecilia and Robbie's encounter at the fountain, and the magazine's rejection letter encourages her to delve deeper into the harms the naïve witness might bring to the older lovers. However, at the end of the novel, Briony is more prepared to reconcile with her past through writing. The entire book is an illustration of the deep power of writing and storytelling: Briony can use her writing to reframe her past misdeeds, empathize with the consciousness of others, and even bring Robbie and Cecilia back to life. Nevertheless, Briony's adult writings remain as unable to affect reality as her childish flights of fancy. Though she seeks to attain "atonement" through her semi-autobiographical reflections, she does not have to power to remake the past and remedy her harmful actions. One of Briony's final reflections captures this tension

between the novelist's absolute control of narrative and simultaneous powerlessness over history: "how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal top or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her." She ultimately comes to believe that literature both can and can't offer atonement, that it will not change the world but that the doomed effort to do so through literature is what matters.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

UNCLE CLEM'S VASE

This Tallis family heirloom was given to Jack Tallis's brother Clem to commemorate Clem's liberation of a village near Verdun in World War I. Early in the book, while Cecilia and Robbie flirt, they accidentally damage the vase. Cecilia disrobes and goes into a fountain to retrieve the broken piece, and Briony witnesses this event and understands it to signify that Robbie has mistreated her sister. This misunderstanding, along with others, forms the basis for Briony's notion that Robbie is guilty of raping Lola. In this way, the accidental destruction of a Tallis family heirloom leads to a major rupture in the Tallis family itself, and the token won in World War I that honors the family leads to the breaking apart of the family in World War II.

THE TRIALS OF ARABELLA

The Trials of Arabella is the title of the play that Briony composes at the beginning of the novel and imperiously directs Lola, Jackson, and Pierrot to perform with her. At the end of the book, a new generation of Briony's family performs the play to commemorate Briony's 70th birthday. Because Briony authors and appears in *The Trials of Arabella* in much the same way that she authors and appears in the book as a whole, *The Trials of Arabella* serves as a synecdoche—a part of a thing that represents that thing as a whole—for the larger book that contains it. The play's reappearance within different contexts of the narrative illustrates the way that Briony's role is beyond her control, even when she herself has authored the part she plays. It is also worth noting that the *Trials of Arabella* also mimics the actual story of *Atonement*, as it tells the story of a heroine and her doctor, which matches up with the story of Cecilia and Robbie. And just as in the *Trials of Arabella*, in writing the story of Cecilia and Robbie the author, Briony, insists on giving her protagonists a happy ending. And yet the ways that Briony's play don't match up with reality—in the play it is Briony as Arabella who ends up with the doctor, Robbie in actuality *doesn't* end up actually a doctor, the happy ending does not resolve all their misfortune or anger at Briony herself—create a kind of resonance that illustrates both how people both grow while staying in some ways the same, and how literature both can and can't capture and affect the real world.

AMO BARS

Amo Bars are the candy manufactured by Paul Marshall's family company, distributed to soldiers in World War II. Their presence on the battlefield acts as a reminder of Marshall's power and influence, and demonstrates that even wartime cannot separate Robbie from the misfortunes he suffered because of Paul's misconduct, and the way that class protects the rich while throwing the poor into the face of death.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Anchor Books edition of *Atonement* published in 2003.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

[Briony] was not playing Arabella because she wrote the play, she was taking the part because no other possibility had crossed her mind, because that was how Leon was to see her, because she *was* Arabella.

Related Characters: Briony Tallis, Leon Tallis

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Having written a play, *The Trials of Arabella,* Briony now contemplates how she should best cast the work. By opening the novel with this series of events, McEwan emphasizes right from the start possible correspondences between this fictional realm and the messier, real-life events that will lack the comforting cohesion of a child's play. In addition, the casting helps us to see Briony's self-absorption (even if this is relatively normal for a young teenager).

Briony doesn't consider writing stories as a way to empathetically inhabit different lives or to imaginatively construct different possibilities. Instead, her writing reinforces her own perspective - she has created the

character of Arabella to correspond with, rather than reimagine, how she sees herself. Briony's stubborn insistence on this limited perspective is portrayed as largely harmless and innocent here, even if it will lose this innocence later on.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ No one was holding Cecilia back, no one would care particularly if she left. It wasn't torpor that kept her – she was often restless to the point of irritability. She simply liked to feel that she was prevented from leaving, that she was needed.

Related Characters: Cecilia Tallis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

As Cecilia wanders around the ground of the family home, she reflects on the boredom she's been feeling all summer. As the daughter of a wealthy family, Cecilia has nothing she must do during the summer holidays. Here, her problems might seem frivolous when viewed from the outside: after all, she is incredibly privileged, and feeling "restless" because of a lack of obligations is hardly a severe problem. However, this passage suggests that wealth and opportunity can cause problems of their own as well. Cecilia's desire to feel urgent and needed will affect a number of her decisions later on, just as her class background will set a contrast to Robbie's own socioeconomic status.

Part 1, Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ ...was everyone else really as alive as she was? For example, did her sister really matter to herself, was she as valuable to herself as Briony was? Was being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony? Did her sister also have a real self concealed behind a breaking wave, and did she spend time thinking about it...if the answer was yes, then the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated...but if the answer was no, then Briony was surrounded by machines, intelligent and pleasant enough on the outside, but lacking the bright and private inside feeling she had.

Related Characters: Briony Tallis, Cecilia Tallis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Briony is frustrated by Lola's condescension as they rehearse the play - in general, the practicing is not going the way she hoped or expected. This frustration prompts Briony to reflect on feelings and lived reality in general. It's difficult for Briony to imagine that other people have as rich an inner life as she does, because while she feels her own frustration acutely, for instance, the feelings of someone like her sister Cecilia remain abstract and distanced to her.

For Briony, the possibility that others do have complex inner lives is unappealing, since it makes things "unbearably complicated." She is absolutely bound to her own perspective on things, unable to see that others might be as human as she - and she is even unwilling to see that there might be something problematic about refusing to see that others are real people with their own complex emotions as well. Even the idea that Briony is surrounded by machines is unpleasant to her because of what it means for *her* life. In general, this passage is meant to show Briony as a thoughtful and, in some ways, mature girl, given that she is asking herself such deep questions at all. But it also shows her attitude as profoundly limited and self-absorbed: ironically, despite her eagerness to write and share stories, she remains uninterested in other narratives unless they are directly related to her own.

❝ It wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value. That was the only moral a story need have.

Related Characters: Briony Tallis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

As Briony watches the scene by the fountain between Robbie and Cecilia unfold, she initially feels distanced from the event, alienated by the realization that the scene doesn't have anything to do with her. However, Briony soon massages this understanding into a perspective that is more

aligned with the way she already sees the world. Briony's perspective is limited in several ways here: she cannot hear or see everything that is going on, and she lacks a more mature conceptual understanding of what the relationship between Robbie and Cecilia might be like - and, in addition, she doesn't even realize that her perspective might be limited at all.

This scene is not exactly dramatic, and yet the older Briony characterizes it as a turning point in her life. In some ways, the "truth" that Briony seems to grasp here is, indeed, something that will become a crucial lesson for her, one that the book itself hopes to convey. And yet Briony's apparent realization, ironically, doesn't actually touch her - she is, at this moment, still unable to "enter these different minds" and instead continues to fix her own narrative on the experiences of others. Part of the tragedy of the past, then, is this gap between theoretical ideas and true understanding.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ It would have suited [Cecilia] better had Briony wept and allowed herself to be comforted on the silk chaise longue in the drawing room. Such stroking and soothing murmurs would have been a release for Cecilia…addressing Briony's problems with kind words and caresses would have restored a sense of control. However, there was an element of the younger girl's unhappiness.

Related Characters: Cecilia Tallis, Briony Tallis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Here we are introduced to Cecilia's own inner thoughts, after having remained in Briony's mind for awhile. Briony is clearly upset, and Cecilia, though she wants to comfort her younger sister, is confused as much as she is sympathetic. The book's emphasis on the existence of multiple perspectives comes into sharp relief here, as both Cecilia and Briony hold different expectations about the other, even while they remain unable to understand each other's different experiences. Although Briony's mistakes will prove most tragic and irrevocable in the novel, here we see that Cecilia too is hampered by her lack of perspective, and by her desire for Briony's sadness - her gradual loss of childhood innocence - to conform to a framework that would make more sense to her.

Part 1, Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ [The twins] watched [Lola's] tongue turn green as it curled around the edges of the candy casing. Paul Marshall sat back in the armchair, watching her closely over the steeple he made with his hands in front of his face. He crossed and uncrossed his legs. Then he took a deep breath. 'Bite it,' he said softly. 'You've got to bite it.' It cracked loudly as it yielded to her unblemished incisors, and there was revealed the white edge of the sugar shell, and the dark chocolate beneath it.

Related Characters: Paul Marshall (speaker), Lola Quincey, Pierrot and Jackson Quincey

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

Paul Marshall has given Lola an Amo bar, the candy bars that are the source of his family's fortune. Here, we are meant to be struck by the attraction that Paul evidently feels towards Lola. This attraction has undeniably sexual overtones, rather than being an innocent friendship or flirtation (although Lola's innocence - "her unblemished incisors" - is contrasted to the lustful, domineering Paul). But what makes his attitude especially uncomfortable is the position of power that he holds over both Lola and the Quincey boys. Paul is confident and self-assured: he comes from money and power and handles both with ease. These attributes have given him a sense that he can do what he'd like and doesn't need to monitor his own behavior towards other people - particularly women or those from a lower social class.

Part 1, Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Poor darling Briony, the softest little thing, doing her all to entertain her hard-bitten wiry cousins with the play she had written from her heart. To love her was to be soothed. But how to protect her against failure, against that Lola, the incarnation of Emily's youngest sister who had been just as precocious and scheming at that age, and who had recently plotted her way out of a marriage, into what she wanted everyone to call a nervous breakdown.

Related Characters: Briony Tallis, Lola Quincey, Emily Tallis

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

The book shifts in perspective once again to the viewpoint of Briony and Cecilia's mother, Emily, who suffers from severe migraines and retreats periodically to her room to rest and to think. In this passage, the narration takes on the stream of Emily's consciousness as she considers Briony and what she sees as the potentially damaging power that Lola holds over her (just as, presumably, Lola's mother held power over Emily herself when they were children).

Although Emily is one of the few adults whose perspective is described, at least at this point in the novel, her limited view on what is really going on between Briony, Lola, and the others only further underlines how little any one person can claim to be all-knowing. Emily does think of Briony as naive, but not in the harmful way that we have seen - rather, for her Briony's innocence is something to be cherished and protected against the evil that only exists beyond her.

Part 1, Chapter 8 Quotes

[Cecilia] always seemed to find it awkward – that's our cleaning lady's son, she might have been whispering to her friends as she walked on. He liked people to know he didn't care – there goes my mother's employer's daughter, he once said to a friend. He had his politics to protect him, and his scientifically based theories of class, and his own rather forced self-certainty. I am what I am.

Related Characters: Robbie Turner, Cecilia Tallis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrative shifts to Robbie Turner, the unusual relationship between Robbie and Cecilia is explored in a more explicit way. Here, Robbie tries to imagine what Cecilia might think about this relationship, wondering if she would consider it "awkward." He contrasts this discomfort with his own openness about their differences in class. In one way, he is firmly below Cecilia in the social hierarchy, but in another way they are both students at a prestigious university. It is this merit-based system of distinctions that Robbie embraces in order to remain serene and confident about his own place. At the same time, of course, given that this passage is firmly within Robbie's perspective, it's impossible to tell whether this is an objective account, or whether he is merely claiming an assurance that he might not entirely hold.

One word contained everything [Robbie] felt, and explained why he was to dwell on this moment later. Freedom.

Related Characters: Robbie Turner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

Robbie is confident in the love he feels for Cecilia, and he is optimistic about his future prospects in university and in his career. The freedom he feels is part of a sense that soon he'll no longer have to rely on the charity of others, but will be able to make his own choices based on his own desires and goals. However, even as the book describes these sentiments of Robbie's, a later, distanced perspective is folded into this depiction.

This moment, like several others in the book, is a turning point, even if its status as such only becomes evident later on. Only with the hindsight of experience, is it suggested, can one fully understand the implications of experience, and come to terms with the complex knots of a life's narrative.

Part 1, Chapter 9 Quotes

Initially, a simple phrase chased round and round in Cecilia's thoughts: *Of course, of course*. How had she not seen it? Everything was explained. The whole day, the weeks before, her childhood. A lifetime. It was clear to her now.

Related Characters: Cecilia Tallis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

Briony has passed Robbie's note to Cecilia, and although - or, perhaps, because - it is so graphic and even vulgar, she begins to realize that she too has feelings for Robbie. In this passage, she returns to images and events from her past,

reliving them in the light of this new knowledge: both Robbie's feelings for her and hers for him, as well as the way their relationship has developed over time. Her renewed understanding suggests that limited perspective is not just a quality of a certain character with respect to another - someone can also fail to truly see the full implications of his or her *own* experience, only gaining a broader perspective with the passage of time and with greater knowledge.

Part 1, Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ The very complexity of her feelings confirmed Briony in her view that she was entering an arena of adult emotion and dissembling from which her writing was bound to benefit.

Related Characters: Briony Tallis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

Briony is convinced that she has participated in something momentous, now that she has read Robbie's letter to Cecilia. Notably, she frames this experience in terms of participation, even though the letter was not meant for her, and she shouldn't have read it at all. But here as elsewhere, Briony considers other people's experiences and other people's relationships as relevant insofar as they affect her - relevant, in particular, as fodder for the narratives she constructs herself.

Briony does in fact recognize that the world she has spied upon through this letter is more complex than she realized earlier. But she holds an instrumental view of this complexity: that is, once again, she considers it interesting and important in terms of what it can provide for *her.* Briony's relationship to these events remains distanced in the sense that she *isn't,* in fact, a full participant in such complexity - and yet what she considers as aesthetically, artistically intriguing will turn out to have irrevocable effects in real life as well, as a result of her own actions.

❝ The scene by the fountain, its air of ugly threat, and at the end, when both had gone their separate ways, the luminous absence shimmering above the wetness on the gravel – all this would have to be reconsidered. With the letter, something elemental, brutal, perhaps even criminal had been introduced, some principle of darkness, and even in [Briony's] excitement over the possibilities, she did not doubt that her sister was in some way threatened and would need her help.

Related Characters: Briony Tallis, Robbie Turner, Cecilia Tallis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

As Briony goes over the events of the day in her mind, she acknowledges that they are ominous and complex, and yet she believes that she herself holds the key to determining what they mean. As readers, we recognize that what Briony interprets as ugly, brutal, or threatening could easily have a quite different meaning for Cecilia and Robbie. But Briony suffers from a limited perspective not only because she sexually immature, but also because she is already inclined to be suspicious of those different from herself - and Robbie, of course, comes from a lower class background than her family.

At the same time, Briony seems almost eager to see what will happen next, as if the events were unfolding in a story she was reading. Of course, this notion allows her to forget that she may well influence the story herself, becoming involved in ways that change the narrative (and thus the shape of real people's lives) for good.

Part 1, Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ "Something has happened, hasn't it? And you knew before me. It's like being close up to something so large you don't even see it. Even now, I'm not sure I can. But I know it's there."

Related Characters: Cecilia Tallis (speaker), Robbie Turner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

Although this passage is a direct quotation from Cecilia, it is actually taking place in Robbie's mental recollection of the scene - returning us to the moments before Briony burst in on Robbie and Cecilia together in the library. Cecilia's difficulty in putting her feelings into words does suggest that there is something complex about her relationship to Robbie, but not at all in the way Briony has expected: instead, Cecilia's own perspective has been suddenly widened, such that she looks at Robbie in a way she never did, or never thought she did, before.

Part of Cecilia's belated realization has to do with the fact

that she and Robbie occupy separate social spheres, making the idea of a romantic interest between them unlikely given the clear boundaries between classes at this time and place. But it also has to do with her process of growing up, of having to grapple with sentiments that are complex for both social and psychological reasons.

> In that shrinking moment [Robbie] discovered that he had never hated anyone until now. It was a feeling as pure as love, but dispassionate and icily rational. There was nothing personal about it, for he would have hated anyone who came in.

Related Characters: Robbie Turner, Briony Tallis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

Robbie is still recollecting the prior moments culminating in his moment of privacy and intimacy with Cecilia in the library, until Briony walked in on them. Robbie's feelings at this moment are described as acute and extreme. Briony has unwittingly interrupted both the act of love between Robbie and Cecilia, and the narrative that he has constructed regarding how their relationship will unfold. The intensity of these emotions underlines even further how much of a turning point this moment in the library will turn out to be, even if - or rather precisely because - it means such different things to the different characters experiencing it.

> If he could not be with Cecilia, if he could not have her to himself, then he too, like Briony, would go out searching alone. This decision, as he was to acknowledge many times, transformed his life.

Related Characters: Robbie Turner, Briony Tallis, Cecilia Tallis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

The twins have disappeared, and the group at dinner is about to fan out to look for them. But here as elsewhere, the novel is focused through the minds of the characters in a way that moves around in time. We are experiencing these events with Robbie, but Robbie is also present here later in time, looking back on earlier events and picking out what was particularly important. This distanced perspective is, however, tragic: regardless of how much Robbie will learn later on, regardless of how well he will be able to trace the series of causes and consequences and understand how and why certain things happened, he won't be able to turn back in time and change them.

Part 1, Chapter 12 Quotes

> She liked [Robbie] well enough, and was pleased for Grace Turner that he had turned out to be bright. But really, he was a hobby of Jack's, living proof of some leveling principle he had pursued through the years. When he spoke about Robbie, which wasn't often, it was with a touch of self-righteous vindication.

Related Characters: Emily Tallis, Jack Tallis, Robbie Turner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

Emily is in her room musing on various things as usual, rather than going out and helping to look for the twins. Her thoughts turn here to Robbie, whom Emily considers in a distanced, even cold way, even though he is such a part of the fabric of the family household. Emily contrasts her own views to that of her husband's, but neither position ends up seeming very generous. Of course, Jack's "principle" of equality is seen through Emily's eyes, so he may be more earnest than she gives him credit for, but if Robbie is no more than a "hobby" for him, that suggests that Jack still thinks of him as lesser than other people of his own class, able to be molded and tinkered with like an object.

Emily, in turn, is frank about failing to care for or about Robbie - for her, class relations should remain as they are. But she also thinks about Robbie instrumentally, using him largely as a means by which to critique her husband and find more things to complain about him.

Part 1, Chapter 13 Quotes

[Briony] would never be able to console herself that she was pressured or bullied. She never was. She trapped herself, she marched into the labyrinth of her own construction, and was too young, too awestruck, too keen to please, to insist on making her own way back…by clinging tightly to what she believed she knew, narrowing her thoughts, reiterating her testimony, she was able to keep from mind the damage she only dimly sensed she was doing.

Related Characters: Briony Tallis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

Briony has wholeheartedly embraced her version of what happened to Lola in the woods: she has claimed that Robbie assaulted Lola, and she clings to this story even as she begins to doubt it herself. As the story spreads, it becomes increasingly difficult for Briony to retract it. This passage, though, is focused not through Briony's confused thoughts at the time but through a later, more clear-eyed Briony, who situates this as the first moment of her wrenching guilt and acknowledges just how wrong she was.

Here, the narration is quite clear about Briony's blame and responsibility for falsely accusing Robbie, for letting the narrative running in her own head color not only how she saw things, but also how everyone around her could then interpret these events. Such events are certainly quite complex, as this passage makes clear, but Briony is the one who has constructed the "labyrinth" where she now finds herself irrevocably trapped.

Part 1, Chapter 14 Quotes

Briony's immediate feeling was one of relief that the boys were safe. But as she looked at Robbie waiting calmly, she experienced a flash of outrage. Did he believe he could conceal his crime behind an apparent kindness, behind this show of being the good shepherd? This was surely a cynical attempt to win forgiveness for what could never be forgiven. She was confirmed again in her view that evil was complicated and misleading.

Related Characters: Briony Tallis, Robbie Turner, Pierrot and Jackson Quincey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

Finally, after hours, Robbie returns home, and he is carrying the twins with him. As Briony watches him, it becomes clear just how much her own narrative construction of the night influences how she perceives reality - and influences reality itself. No longer is Briony hesitating internally, patching over her mental doubts by reiterating her testimony again and again. Now she appears to really believe the story she has told, so much so that she is the one who is angry at the guilt that she has assigned to Robbie.

Briony believes that her conclusions are part of her process of growing up and maturing, gaining a more complete perspective of the adult world with all the evil it entails. Of course, we as readers recognize that Briony's presumed maturity is no more than another kind of innocence, though one that is powerful and threatening in nature.

Robbie and Cecilia had been making love for years – by post. In their coded exchanges they had drawn close, but how artificial that closeness seemed now as they embarked on their small-talk, their helpless catechism of polite query and response. As the distance opened up between them, they understood how far they had run ahead of themselves in their letters.

Related Characters: Robbie Turner, Cecilia Tallis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

After years of intense, passionate correspondence, Robbie and Cecilia are able to see each other in person for barely a few hours. Their reunion is nothing like either of them had hoped - they are awkward and uncomfortable, unaware of how to move beyond what is expected in polite conversation in order to get at what is real between them. They, too, have constructed a literary fantasy about their relationship, and now they are realizing that that fantasy is devoid of physical reality. Both Robbie and Cecilia have experienced a great deal as a nurse and a soldier, respectively, and yet this loss of adolescent innocence has in some ways forced them apart rather than drawing them closer.

To be cleared would be a pure state. He dreamed of it like a lover, with a simple longing. He dreamed of it in the way other soldiers dreamed of their hearths or allotments or old civilian jobs. If innocence seemed elemental here, there was no reason why it should not be so back in England. Let his name be cleared, then let everyone else adjust their thinking.

Related Characters: Robbie Turner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

As Robbie struggles with his day-to-day existence in war, what keeps him going is the thought of a new life - not the life he left, since that had been irrevocably ruined by Briony's accusation and by his conviction - but by the possibility that people might realize they were wrong and grant him another chance. Robbie's "simple longing" belies just how complex the process of guilt and condemnation is. He certainly recognizes how slim the possibility of having his name cleared will be, and yet this constructed narrative is powerful enough to serve as the dream that he and his fellow soldiers need in a horrendous situation.

Reading these letters at the end of an exhausting day, Briony felt a dreamy nostalgia, a vague yearning for a long-lost life. She could hardly feel sorry for herself. She was the one who had cut herself off from home.

Related Characters: Briony Tallis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

As Briony reads the letters she receives from home, she thinks about her family and life at home almost as if it belonged to someone else. The nostalgia she feels underlines just how much Briony has cut herself off from home - and not only from the physical place, but also from the past and what it represents for her. Briony's past choices have changed the future for good, but by leaving home and becoming a nurse she hopes not only to atone for what she did, but also distance herself from who she was then as much as possible.

Briony's refusal to feel sorry for herself suggests, too, that she has finally lost some of the "innocent" childhood self-absorption that led to so much suffering for others. Still, the way in which she considers the letters from home as relics of another world and life implies that she still secretly hopes that these narratives are firmly separate from her. If, instead, they still have something to do with her own life, that would suggest that she hasn't succeeded in atoning for or escaping her sins.

Growing up...godamnit! You're eighteen. How much growing up do you need to do? There are soldiers dying in the field at eighteen. Old enough to be left to die on the roads. Did you know that?

Related Characters: Robbie Turner (speaker), Briony Tallis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 323

Explanation and Analysis

Briony's meeting with Cecilia and Robbie is dramatic and painful. Here, Robbie unleashes much of his pent-up anger, frustration, and pain onto Briony. To him, it is unbelievably selfish and childish for Briony to consider the events of the past at all in terms of her own trajectory, her own process of growing up. Her actions, of course, have had an enormous impact on his and Cecilia's lives. In particular, it is because of Briony that Robbie has suffered as a prisoner and then soldier at all.

Robbie's time at war has provided him with an extreme contrast between Briony's privileged upbringing and the suffering experienced by people who should have had time to cherish their own innocence and youth. Robbie's outburst not only gives Briony an example of another perspective on suffering and maturing, but shows her first-hand just how irrevocably she has changed Robbie's own life for the worse.

[Briony] knew what was required of her. Not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement, and she was ready to begin.

Related Characters: Briony Tallis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 330

Explanation and Analysis

In the final lines of the main section of the novel, Briony finally sees a way forward, a means by which she can potentially undo some of the damage she caused. She is going to revoke her testimony against Robbie, a small action but one, she hopes, that will begin the process of clearing his name. This is one of the few places in the book where the past doesn't seem so unchangeable after all. There are second chances, Briony's plan suggests: a "new draft" of the narrative whose power she has only slowly, over the years, come to understand.

And yet, of course, at the end of the book, it becomes clear that this small hope will be erased by the deaths of Cecilia and Robbie. Their deaths are a final, extreme reminder that, after all, the past cannot be undone and a new draft cannot always be rewritten. Atonement, then, takes on a slightly different meaning upon rereading. No longer, for Briony, does it suggest *erasure* of guilt or past faults, but rather an unending process of coming to terms with the past and its irrevocability, one that can never be satisfactorily completed.

The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all.

Related Characters: Briony Tallis (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 350

Explanation and Analysis

The question that begins this passage can be understood as a motivating force for Briony's writing of her novel, a writing that has taken up years of her life. We see here just how all-consuming the process of atonement has been for her, and how Briony has attempted to complete it through her writing. And yet she also is faced with the paradox at the heart of using a narrative in order to atone for her sins. Atonement has deeply religious overtones: it suggests completing a set of actions so that a higher being, like God, will forgive you. And yet when Briony writes a novel, *she* decides what happens to her characters - she is a kind of god - which means that she can never be forgiven.

This paradox is lucidly and powerfully stated, but while Briony accepts the tragic reality of the failure of stories and imagination to atone for the past, she doesn't deny the power of the "attempt." Instead, she embraces a notion of atonement as an unceasing process, one that can never be fulfilled but one that she is committed to enacting again and again.

I like to think that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet. If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration...Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, sitting side by side in the library...

Related Characters: Briony Tallis (speaker), Robbie Turner, Cecilia Tallis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 351

Explanation and Analysis

Here, we as readers are given a privileged glimpse into the mind of Briony as writer, having completed the draft of the novel that takes up the main portion of *Atonement.* Briony wants to make clear that she hasn't allowed Robbie and Cecilia to remain alive at the end of this novel in order to make herself feel better, in order to indulge in fantasies that would allow her to somehow atone for her sins. Instead, the definition of atonement as partial and unceasing attempt, to which she has committed herself, gives her the possibility of allowing the couple to live on in fiction as they could not do in life.

However, we readers are not the readers of Briony's novel, because we do know that the lovers didn't survive - we have learned that the end of her draft is only a fictional conceit. As a result, *Atonement* has its readers bear Briony's guilt and responsibility with her. We can have no illusions about a long, happy life between Cecilia and Robbie: instead we, with Briony, must continually grapple with how unchangeable the past remains.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1, CHAPTER 1

13-year-old Briony Tallis self-importantly prepares for the debut performance of **The Trials of Arabella**, a short play she has written about a young woman who overcomes various trials to elope with a penniless doctor. Her older brother, Leon, will be visiting home soon, and she hopes to impress him with the performance. Briony's young cousins are scheduled to visit soon as well, and they will be cast in the play.

By opening with Briony's play, the novel emphasizes its own status as literature and draws attention to the process of writing in general. Further, note that the subject of the play resembles the subject of Atonement, *in which Cecilia seeks to be with the lower-class doctor-in-training, Robbie.*

Briony is described as an orderly, if a bit fastidious, girl with a gift for writing and a tendency to misuse lofty words. She is eager to impress her family with her work, and sees **The Trials of Arabella** as having a particular potential to end in public failure.

At this moment, Briony's storytelling is utterly self-serving: she has few aims other than to impress her family, and seeks control to ward off failure.

Briony's cousins, the Quinceys—15-year-old Lola, and her nine-year-old twin brothers, Jackson and Pierrot—will be staying with her family to escape a feud between their separating parents. When the Quincey children arrive, Briony does not consider their state of mind and begins to harangue them about rehearsing her play, but her older sister, Cecilia, and mother, Emily, try to make the other children feel at home.

Briony cannot understand the feelings of anyone but herself. Instead of empathetically working to ensure her cousins' comfort who must be hurting from their parent's impending and acrimonious divorce, she tries to rope them into the activity that is most important to her: filling out the cast of her play.

Briony returns to her room and wonders how she will cast her play. She rationalizes that Lola's colorful, freckled complexion makes her ineligible to star as Arabella, and considers herself better suited to the role—after all, Arabella is really based on Briony, and resembles her completely. However, when Briony assembles the Quinceys to talk about casting, she is intimidated by Lola's painted nails and perfume. Lola manipulates Briony into letting her play the role of Arabella, and Briony reluctantly assents. The group begins to rehearse, and as the disappointing reality of her play takes shape, Briony begins to "understand the chasm that lay between an idea and its execution."

Briony's vision of Arabella further reinforces that her writing exists only to gratify herself. Instead of using writing to explore new perspectives, Briony simply inserts herself into the center of her literary universe. However, the narrow-mindedness of this approach becomes obvious when other free-thinking humans enter the picture: outside of her literary world, Briony cannot control every detail of her circumstances. It's worth noting here, as Briony ponders the difference between an idea and its execution, the difference between her story of a girl and a doctor – girl overcomes trials and ends up with her true love, and the much messier real world story of Atonement, in which the girl and the boy both die, and boy never even succeeds in becoming a doctor.

PART 1, CHAPTER 2

Cecilia Tallis, Briony's college-aged older sister, walks the grounds of the family estate and muses about the boredom she feels while stuck at home. Her daily routine is smoking, reading, and lazing about her untidy room. She is eager to leave home, but likes to imagine that she is being prevented from leaving. She also feels like she cannot leave before she clears up awkward feelings she feels towards her longtime friend and peer at Cambridge University, Robbie Turner. Robbie works as a gardener on the estate, and the Tallis family funds his education.

Cecilia's thoughts of Robbie foreshadow the love affair at the center of the novel. Her somewhat lazy habits, and the way she indulges in them, in contrast to Robbie's job performing manual labor for her family, underscore the class differences that separate the two characters.

Cecilia places flowers into a priceless family heirloom **vase** that was given to her late Uncle Clem after he helped save a village in World War I. She goes outside to fill the vase in the fountain, and begins to flirt with Robbie. He tells her about his ambition to study medicine and she wonders why he has been acting distant lately.

Both Cecilia and Robbie have feelings for one another, but they are not yet comfortable enough to display them openly. Robbie's boldness in speaking to Cecilia shows how the way he was included by the Tallis's and the education they have given him has made him comfortable interacting with people of much higher social class than he is.

Robbie insists on helping Cecilia fill the vase in the fountain, but Cecilia resists his help. However, Robbie continues to grasp the vase, and part of its lip breaks off. Robbie begins to disrobe to get the piece out of the fountain, but Cecilia pre-empts him. She takes off most of her clothes and retries the ceramic shard from the fountain while pointedly ignoring him.

The vase-breaking miscue suggests both Robbie and Cecilia's inability to really communicate at this point, and the sexual tension beneath that inability. At the same time, the destruction of Uncle Clem's vase foreshadows the ominous rift in the Tallis family that will come as a result of Cecilia's relationship to Robbie.

PART 1, CHAPTER 3

Briony's attempts to direct her play have been held up: Jackson wet his bed and was forced to wash the sheets as punishment, which has wasted valuable rehearsal time. Meanwhile, Briony attempts to direct her cousins, and finds that Lola treats her with deep condescension. Later, Briony sits by herself and wonders if anyone else has thoughts and feelings like her, or if she is the only person in a world of "machines" who has inner feelings. She is frustrated that she cannot absolutely control the order and scheduling of her rehearsals.

Once again, the neat and tidy universe Briony has constructed herself is disrupted by others' actions, which lie outside of her control. This prompts Briony to reflect whether people can really be as complex as she is—an indication that she has a great deal of maturing to do before she can understand that the world is not like one of her stories, where she is both the main character and the omnipotent author.

Briony moves to a window and glances out across the grounds. She sees Robbie and Cecilia standing before the fountain. Robbie raises his hand, as if commanding Cecilia to remove her clothes and enter the water. Briony is unable to understand the adult scenario she beholds and grapples with the realization that it is an encounter between two independent individuals that has nothing to do with her. She recognizes that the power of writing is its ability to show different perspectives and prevent misunderstandings by helping readers understand that others are as real as they are.

Briony's limited perspective—both in not being nearby enough to hear and in being a child—prevents her from understanding what the encounter truly means to Robbie and Cecilia. She begins to grasp that she in fact has no control over how others act, and that their feelings are just as autonomous and powerful as her own. Still, Briony conceptualizes this moment in terms of her own writing work: she treats Robbie and Cecilia more like characters than like real, live human beings. Just as she assumed she would be the hero of the Trials of Arabella, she makes herself the center of the action here.

Sixty years in the future, Briony will describe how this moment represents a crucial realization in her life—but that at thirteen, she was too fixated on "self-mythologising" to fully comprehend it. After the interaction between Robbie and Cecilia finishes, Briony ponders what it could have meant, vowing not to be reflexively judgmental of her sister, and begins to consider what it could have meant through both Cecilia's and Robbie's perspectives as well. She decides that she will write about this encounter when she has more time to do so.

Witnessing this encounter gives Briony a powerful introduction to the independent inner lives of others. However, her "self-mythologising" instinct prompts her to treat it as a writing exercise rather than as an intimate, significant event in the lives of Robbie and Cecilia. Their individual perspectives merely represent a challenge for Briony to master through writing.

PART 1, CHAPTER 4

Cecilia spends the afternoon repairing the **vase**. Briony passes by in tears, and Cecilia endeavors to comfort her. Cecilia hopes to calm her younger sister and feel as though she is in control, but is bothered that Briony's sadness seems to have "an element of autonomy." Briony says, cryptically, that "the whole thing's…the wrong genre" and runs away, leaving Cecilia confused.

In this scene, both Briony and Cecilia are upset by their lack of control over other people. Briony is distressed that the real relationship between Robbie and Cecilia doesn't conform to her childish, idealized vision of it; while Cecilia is upset that Briony has feelings of her own—feelings too complex for Cecilia to comfort absolutely.

Cecilia putters around the house, indignant at the way Robbie has treated her, and sees from a window that two visitors have arrived to the estate—Leon and his friend Paul Marshall, the son of the millionaire manufacturer of the chocolate **Amo bar**. She goes down to greet the men herself, since her mother is lying down with a headache and her father is out of town. She instructs an awkward adolescent servant, Danny Hardman, to bring the guests' bags to the second floor.

Cecilia must take over roles as a hostess and a mother, because her absentee parents are not up to the job. As a woman, she can't escape this role.

The visitors converse with Cecilia by the swimming pool. Paul talks at length about his work in the chocolate factory, and the plans to make the **Amo bar** a standard issue confection for every soldier in the event that England decides to fight against Hitler's agitations. As Paul speaks, Cecilia contemplates how ugly and boneheaded he seems.

This scene illustrates not only that Paul is self-absorbed and tedious, but also that Cecilia is equally self-centered. Neither seem to have any empathy for one another; Paul is interested in the enlargement of his fortune and not at all about Cecilia or the harm that will be done to soldiers in the war, while Cecilia is reflexively judgmental of Paul's mannerisms.

Once Paul finishes his monologue, Leon reveals that he has asked Robbie to join them for dinner that night. Cecilia is annoyed and asks Leon to disinvite him, but soon resigns herself to dining with Robbie. An awkward silence ensues, which Paul breaks by offering to fix everyone a drink inside.

Just as the Quinceys ruined Briony's conception of how her play was supposed to turn out, Leon has ruined Cecilia's image of the dinner party. The sisters evidently share the desire to control their surroundings—and the resentment of others' unexpected exercises of free will.

PART 1, CHAPTER 5

To Lola's and the twins' puzzlement, Briony cancels the rehearsals for **The Trials of Arabella**. Lola walks around the house. She finds her brothers, and they confess tearfully that they are unhappy away from their parents. She comforts them, and Jackson speaks explicitly about their parents' divorce. Lola reprimands him sharply.

A shift to Lola's perspective is all it takes to depict her not as the meddling diva that Briony perceives, but rather as a young woman who must fill the role that her absentee parents vacated. Lola's demand that her brothers not mention the divorce highlights its emotional impact on her, but also perhaps its social impact. A child of divorce—perhaps especially a woman—at the time was likely doomed to a troublesome future.

Paul Marshall appears in the doorway and introduces himself to the Quincey children. He mentions that he has read about their parents in the paper, but Lola tersely discourages him from mentioning any of the drama in front of her young siblings.

This exchange shows Lola to be more mature and considerate than Paul, who, despite being much older, is tactless in front of the twins. Again, that her parents were in the paper suggests the great social stigma of divorce at the time.

Paul takes a nap on his bed and awakes to see Lola and the twins in the room across from his. He notices that Lola is an attractive young woman and begins to speak with her. The twins join the conversation and Paul shows them an **Amo bar**. When Paul explains that it will be standard issue in each soldier's equipment, the twins say that their father thinks the country will not go to war. Paul responds that their father is mistaken. He gives Lola an Amo bar but does not give any to her brothers. Paul watches Lola while she eats the candy.

Paul's desire to speak with Lola and subsequent ogling of her eating the candy bar suggests an uncomfortable sexual attraction, while his bickering with the nine-year-olds reinforces his status as a childish, immature character.

PART 1, CHAPTER 6

After eating lunch and ensuring that the children will behave, Emily Tallis retreats to her bedroom. She is tormented by a weight that sits on her brain like an indifferent animal. She thinks about Leon's blithe life as a banker and Cecilia's as a college student. Emily then begins to worry about Briony, whom she believes is being mistreated by Lola. Lola's free-spiritedness reminds Emily of her much-resented sister Hermione, who is Lola's mother.

With yet another shift in perspective, the relationships between the characters are complicated still further. Even fully-grown Emily is not above the petty judgments and grudges that her younger relatives also feel.

Emily dozes off, and when she wakes she continues to think about Briony's self-consciousness and talent. She reflects indignantly on Hermione's self-indulgent abandonment of her children, and vows that she will take care of Jackson and Pierrot "only out of duty." Emily continues to plan the rest of her errands, committed to maintaining control over the day.

Every detail in Atonement *can be construed differently depending on the perspective from which it is viewed: to Emily, her youngest daughter's bossiness is a mark of talent, rather than a character flaw, while she sees her sister's children as mere burdens because of her resentment toward their mother.*

PART 1, CHAPTER 7

In the Tallis family's lake sits an island temple. From afar, it seems charming and serene, but it is actually in disrepair. Briony looks at the temple as she hits the lakeside nettles in frustration. She imagines some of nettles are Lola and the twins and strikes them down with a tree branch. Briony moves on and pretends that other nettles are her past selves, and strikes them down as well in a rejection of her "sickly dependency of infancy and early childhood" and her conceited pride in her writing.

Briony's wrathful destruction of the nettles is a helpful symbol for her juvenile approach to writing. She uses prose to create a world that she can dominate absolutely, and exerts this control to elevate and gratify herself, and to grapple with various feelings of unfulfillment.

Leon passes behind Briony, but she does not turn to acknowledge him. Instead, she continues swatting at the nettles, which sting her legs, and pretends that she is a world champion at the sport of nettle slashing. Once she has finished swatting the plants, she walks back towards the bridge, and vows to stay in the driveway and wait until something happens to her that will "dispel her insignificance."

Once again, readers are given a glimpse of what Briony retrospectively refers to as her "self-mythologising." The danger with her desire for greatness is that it will lead her to craft a personal narrative that puts her at the center of it, that makes her a hero, without regard to how it affects others (or, in face, even using that narrative to avenge her resentments much as her mother Emily does regarding the twins in the previous chapter).

PART 1, CHAPTER 8

Robbie Turner sits in his bath and watches the dusky sky from the small bungalow on the Tallis grounds that is his home. He daydreams lustfully about Cecilia's wet body emerging from the fountain. At Cambridge University, his interactions with her have felt awkward. Robbie imagines that Cecilia is unsettled by the fact that Robbie is her cleaning lady's son, but Robbie is unbothered by his low social station.

Robbie is the spitting image of unbridled, youthful virility. His natural vigor is not dampened at all by his low social rank, and he seems—both to the reader and himself—to be utterly in control of his life. This moment of boyish daydreaming will stand in contrast to later parts of the work, when Robbie is wrongfully deprived of freedom by authority outside his control.

Robbie rises from his bath and thinks more about his encounter with Cecilia by the fountain. He worries about the anger she must feel towards him, but fantasizes that she will let her fury yield to romantic desire. He reconsiders; perhaps Cecilia's goal was to humiliate him, or even to seduce him.

Robbie's indecision shows that even from an insider's perspective, the encounter at the fountain was hard to interpret. This suggests that Briony's attempts to decipher it—based on even less knowledge of the event and of the world—will be seriously off-base.

Robbie sits before his typewriter, a gift from Jack Tallis, and surveys the schoolbooks scattered across his desk. He gazes at a photo of his parents, Grace and Ernest, as newlyweds. Ernest's distance from his wife in the photo foreshadows an incident seven years later, when he quit his job as the Tallises' gardener and abandoned his family without warning. Robbie's eyes then shift to his admission packets for medical school, and Jack Tallis's written promise to help pay his tuition.

The contrast this scene sets up illustrates just how much of a father figure Jack Tallis is to Robbie. At the same time, it establishes that no matter what Robbie's individual capabilities may be, as a lower class man who wants to be a doctor he is completely dependent on the Tallises for their patronage.

After some more contemplation, Robbie begins to type an apology letter to Cecilia, but is unsure of what tone to use. He revises for some time, and suddenly writes a graphic description of his sexual fantasies. His anatomy book sits beside him, open to a diagram of the vulva. Robbie has ruined this draft of the letter, so he rewrites it in longhand, this time with the sexual language eliminated.

Like Briony's stories, Robbie's writing lets him create a universe in which he can manifest his desires, can make them real—though rather than accessing the consciousness of others, Robbie simply wants access to Cecilia's body.

Robbie begins to get dressed in his suit for dinner, and starts to speak with his mother, Grace. Grace was taken on as the Tallises' cleaning lady after Ernest abandoned her, because Jack Tallis could not bear to turn her and six-year-old Robbie away. Grace curried favor with the Tallises, and Robbie was soon socialized with the other young children. A few years later, Grace's help with Briony's birth earned her ownership of the bungalow.

The Turners' story illustrates their tenacity and merit, as well as the extraordinary generosity of Jack Tallis. It is doubtless this upbringing—and his confidence in Jack Tallis's care for him and his status with the family—that has made him confident in his own abilities, rather than feeling limited by his social station.

After some small talk with his mother, Robbie places his letter to Cecilia in an envelope and bounds out the door, headed to the main house for dinner. He is fearful and excited to see Cecilia, but is convinced he is in love with her, and his bright academic future makes him feel optimistic. He enjoys the freedom that he feels, and longs to begin the next chapters of his life.

This moment, in which Robbie is full of unbounded promise and free to do as he pleases, is meant to stand in sharp contrast to later moments in the work. Later on, Robbie will find his liberties infringed by the judiciary and the military, as well as by the fact that the upper class naturally suspects the lower class, and this moment will be impossible to recreate.

On his way to the house, Robbie spots Briony standing alone in the driveway. He decides that it may be a good idea to send Briony ahead with his letter to Cecilia, lest Emily see him passing Cecilia a note and disapprove, or Cecilia reject his contact entirely. He asks Briony to deliver the letter to Cecilia and she runs away with the envelope in hand. Suddenly, Robbie realizes that he has placed the wrong letter in the envelope—instead of sending the non-sexual second draft, he has enclosed the vulgar typed letter. He tries to pursue Briony, but cannot catch up with her. She has already entered the house and closed the door.

Robbie's writings, when introduced to the world, begin to shift and shape the narrative in a way that is beyond his control. This is very much akin to the way Briony finds herself unable to control the performance and reception of first her play, and then more destructively how the narrative she creates in her mind regarding Cecilia and Robbie's relationship—and her own position as hero in that story—begins to assume power and influence beyond what she anticipates.

PART 1, CHAPTER 9

Cecilia spends a long time trying on different outfits before coming down to dinner. After deciding on an ensemble and finishing her hair and makeup, she exits her room to find Jackson and Pierrot in tears over being unable to find their socks. She comforts the boys and helps clean their room.

Though Briony has matured too fully for Cecilia to be able to mother her, Cecilia is able to manifest her nurturing tendencies towards the twins, whose behavior is still fairly infantile.

As she descends to the dinner, Cecilia imagines how the evening will play out. Her father will stay in town because of another late night at work. Her mother will anxiously tend to the guests, out of guilt at spending time away to deal with her headaches. Leon will avoid assuming his father's role. These arrangements are familiar to her, and she longs to move on.

While Briony's focus is on dictating and controlling what others do, Cecilia's is simply predicting those behaviors. However, much like Briony's self-absorbed literary musings, Cecilia's efforts to imagine what will happen end up dreadfully different than the actuality. Cecilia will move on after this dinner, and not at all how she expects to.

Cecilia enters the kitchen and sees the cantankerous cook, Betty, snapping at other servants. After a terse discussion, Betty, Cecilia, and Emily decide on what menu best suits the summer heat. Cecilia goes for a stroll outside with Leon, and he tells her stories about his life in the city. When it is her turn to explain what she has been up to, Cecilia feels embarrassed to tell of her abortive projects, like reading Samuel Richardson's book *Clarissa*.

Richardson's Clarissa *provides a notable symbol here: the classic novel's plot revolves around the titular heroine's struggle against sexual depravity and a cruelly unhelpful family. In a few chapters, Cecilia herself will find her life profoundly altered by these very factors. Using another novel as a foreshadowing of the plot also self-consciously highlights* Atonement's *status as a novel.*

As Leon and Cecilia walk back towards the house, they hear Emily reprimanding Briony and telling her to get ready for dinner. When Briony walks past Cecilia, she passes her Robbie's note, unsealed. Cecilia reads the note, and begins to realize her infatuation with Robbie. However, it dawns on her that Robbie would not have sent the note unsealed, and asks Briony if she has read the note. Briony avoids her questions, and before Cecilia can pressure her more, Paul Marshall shows up, entreating the guests to try a cocktail he has prepared.

Robbie's note highlights the pitfalls of literary invention: one message can mean two very different things to two different people. While the vulgar missive prompts Cecilia to realize her love for Robbie, it will likely elicit a vastly different response in Briony, who lacks the perspective and maturity necessary to understand the letter as Robbie intended it, as one expressing love through desire rather than bestial lust. Paul Marshall continues to appear as a rather dull non-entity to most of the other characters.

PART 1, CHAPTER 10

Briony has trouble deciding how she should feel after reading Robbie's letter to Cecilia. She is convinced that the contradictions she sees in the scenario have ushered her into adult emotion—a consciousness that would improve her writing. Robbie's letter has introduced an element of threat, and Briony is confident that Cecilia will need her protection and help combatting Robbie's dark, male impulses.

Yet again, Briony sees the interaction between Cecilia and Robbie in terms centered on herself—as an experience that both will make her mature, improve her writing, and demands that she become a hero. Briony crafts a narrative in which Robbie is a one-dimensional villain, simply because this narrative aligns with her limited, immature view of the world.

As she prepares for dinner, Briony tries to write about the interaction she witnessed between Cecilia and Robbie. Though her aim is to not be judgmental, Briony finds that "she could never forgive Robbie his disgusting mind." She is torn about whether she should write an ordinary diary entry or a more creative piece.

Here, Briony treats Robbie like a character in one of her stories. In so doing, she makes a classic literary blunder: she does not allow characters the capacity for emotion that is different from her own. Robbie's mind is "disgusting" because Briony's perspective is too narrow for her to imagine that his letter could be anything but disgusting.

Lola comes by Briony's room and sits on Briony's bed. She is covered in scratches and chafing, and explains that her younger brothers have been torturing her all evening. Lola begins to cry, and Briony starts to feel more sympathy towards her. Lola's moment of weakness makes Briony feel more powerful, and Briony comforts her older cousin happily, trying to take on an air of wisdom.

Briony uses this situation to treat Lola like the flimsy nettles that she thrashed a few chapters before. She gains satisfaction, and confidence in her own power, from seeing Lola's weakness and vulnerability. Later, it will come to be unclear whether Lola is even being honest here—whether the scratching and chafing comes from her brothers or from Paul's sexual aggression. It is ironic that Briony has set herself up to be a hero by protecting her sister, when Lola really does need protection and no one—not Briony, not Emily—even notices.

As Lola cleans up, Briony tells her of her interaction with Robbie, and the salacious contents of the letter that she has intercepted. Lola calls Robbie a "maniac," and the two girls decide that Robbie has deceived them for years with a façade of friendliness. They decide that the police should be notified.

Lola's input pushes Briony's narrative to a new level, to one that could have serious real-world consequences. It is not clear how serious Briony really is about contact the police at this point. It is possible that Lola's rather strong response to Robbie's letter stems from having already been sexually molested by Paul Marshall.

As Lola continues to get ready, Briony descends to dinner and considers what strategy will be best to protect Cecilia from Robbie. As she moves through the house, she passes the library door and is surprised to find it closed. She hears a muffled noise coming from within. For a reason she doesn't quite understand, she opens the door. In the dark, she sees Robbie and Cecilia hunched in the corner over a pile of books. She sees that Robbie is grasping Cecilia and interprets their positioning to mean that Robbie is restraining Cecilia against her will. Cecilia, startled, paces out past Briony, and Briony is surprised that her older sister shows no sign of "gratitude or relief." Robbie adjusts his clothing sheepishly in the corner, and Briony runs off to find Cecilia.

Once again, Briony notices something out of line with her conception of the world and decides to intervene. Though this sexual encounter is certainly consensual, Briony's preconceived notions about Robbie and total naivety about sex lead her to believe that this is yet another manifestation of his violent, disgusting nature. Even when Cecilia seems deeply disturbed by Briony's intrusion, rather than relieved, Briony does not doubt her own convictions about Robbie's villainy.

PART 1, CHAPTER 11

The dining atmosphere is suffocating. Dinner begins with an awkward silence. Robbie's heart pounds, nervous to be so close to Cecilia. Paul awkwardly tries to start conversation, and Robbie notices that Paul has a scratch on his face. Robbie continues the exchange by asking about the weather, and Pierrot, who is seated next to him, thinks he is expected to respond but is too petrified to speak.

The superficial awkwardness of the dinner obscures the more threatening developments looming beneath. Paul's scratch further suggests that Lola's scratches came not from her brothers but from Paul. But nobody questions the mark on Paul, likely because nobody believes the dull, high-class Paul to be in any way suspicious.

Briony tells Robbie to leave Pierrot alone. Mrs. Tallis asks her daughter to apologize, as Robbie's remark was perfectly harmless. Briony apologizes reluctantly. The conversation turns to the heat, and Leon innocently begins to pester Cecilia about whether it has caused her to misbehave. Cecilia handles herself calmly, but Briony speaks threateningly, and Robbie worries that she will give away what she has seen.

Briony's demonization of Robbie is so out of hand that she pounces on him for making innocent small talk. She has so fully imposed her interpretation of the facts onto reality that she cannot distinguish the most harmless of gestures from the most threatening.

As the inane conversation moves along, Robbie fantasizes about finding himself alone with Cecilia again. He remembers what happened after he chased Briony to retrieve the letter: Briony disappears into the house, and Robbie resolves to follow her and confront Cecilia. He rings the doorbell and Cecilia answers with the note in her hand. The two go to the library to talk privately. Robbie apologizes for the letter, calling it a "mistake," and Cecilia reveals that Briony has read it. They continue talking, and Cecilia tells him that she has feelings for him that she cannot put to words. Robbie tells her he feels the same way. Robbie comforts her, and the two start to kiss.

Robbie's memory of his encounter with Cecilia fully dispels the veracity of Briony's suspicions. Interestingly, while circumstances do spiral out of Robbie's control as a result of his mix-up with the letters, this lack of control actually leads to a positive outcome—at least in the short term. Robbie's indulgence in fantasy—and that fantasy's intersection with reality—is what allows the lovers to finally realize, communicate, and consummate their long-held feelings for one another.

Robbie and Cecilia begin to touch one another passionately, and soon after begin having sex. They are both in awe of the intimacy they experience. Suddenly, Cecilia breaks Robbie's ecstasy by telling him that someone has entered the library. He looks behind him and sees Briony. He feels a pure, cold hate for the trespassing girl. The lovers put on their clothes; their moment of intimacy is over.

From Robbie's perspective, the library encounter is vastly different that what Briony observed. Briony has intruded upon a monumental manifestation of love, rather than the sinister assault she believes she has witnessed. Now Robbie, too, feels frustration when other individuals ruin his romantic visions; this is not unlike Briony's frustration at the Quinceys for usurping her control over her play.

The narration fast-forwards back to the dinner. Jackson and Pierrot whisper to one another and then leave to go to the bathroom. As they leave, Briony notices that the two are wearing her socks, and screeches at them. Cecilia calls Briony a "tiresome little prima donna," and explains that she took some of Briony's socks when she noticed the boys didn't have enough clean pairs. Briony feels "betrayed, by the one she only longed to protect."

Again, Briony's carefully-crafted perception of reality is broken when Cecilia shows that she is fed up with Briony's nosiness, rather than grateful for her protection. Yet the jilted feelings Briony has here only cause her to withdraw further into her wrongheaded convictions and displace the blame onto Robbie.

Briony says something that suggests she may give away what she saw in the library, and Robbie quickly changes the subject to how well-behaved the twins are. Briony tells him this view is mistaken, and points out the scratches that Lola suffered at their hands. Emily seems shocked by her niece's wounds. Paul volunteers that he saw the twins attacking Lola and had to break up the fight himself. Robbie wonders why Marshall had not brought this up earlier, given the extent of Lola's injuries.

Paul's eagerness to blame the twins for Lola's scratches again suggests that he may have played a role in causing Lola's injuries. Still, this far more suspicious behavior receives less scrutiny than Robbie's innocent missteps, simply because nobody at the table's preconceived notions—notions further influenced by their relative class—depict Paul as a threatening character.

As the family tends to Lola's wounds, Briony finds an envelope left on Jackson's seat. Emily demands that she not open the letter. Once her daughter has handed it over, Emily opens it and reads it aloud. It is a note from the twins explaining that they have decided to run away because they miss their home. The group decides to break up into search parties. Robbie is one of the last to mobilize, and he feels "cheated"—he wanted to cavort with Cecilia on the grounds that night. As the others move out to search, Robbie decides to go looking for the twins alone, and "this decision, as he was to acknowledge many times, transformed his life."

It turns out that even the twins are too autonomous to be controlled by any of the other characters. Their choice to run away is unexpected to everyone, even the reader—this serves as a reminder that the narrative of the book itself is incomplete, and leaves readers open to surprises that subvert their expectations.

PART 1, CHAPTER 12

Emily prepares to telephone PC Vockins, the village constable. She thinks more about Lola's injuries and feels little sympathy, because Lola reminds her of her scene-stealing sister Hermione. She wonders if she should hold off calling the constable, since Jack will call soon to apologize for his absence. She appears to suspect that his nights away from home indicate an extramarital affair, but both she and her husband are too averse to conflict to discuss the topic with one another. Emily thinks more on her husband's career, and remembers catching a glimpse of some of his paperwork, which showed calculations predicting the casualties from the impending warfare.

Every character's distinct perspective causes them to construe the same events in different ways. Because Emily carries the baggage of her rocky relationship with Hermione, she is unsympathetic to the harms Lola has suffered—even though Lola's injuries are genuine and Briony is the one who indulges in scene-stealing antics. Jack Tallis's efforts to calculate the impact of war also mirror other characters' attempts to encapsulate immense, unpredictable scenarios "cleanly" in writing. His work also foreshadows the coming war.

Emily stays seated inside and muses that her refusal to "join in" the searching seems like a holdover from her ten-year-old self. She reflects on the dinner and notices that Robbie looked somewhat "manic;" and wonders if perhaps he is smoking marijuana. Emily sees Robbie as "a hobby of Jack's," cultivated to validate Jack's notions of equality. She was not in favor of funding Robbie's education, and has often remarked that "nothing good will come of it."

Emily recognizes her own childishness, but does nothing to change her behavior. Meanwhile,, like Briony, she lets her classist biases against Robbie craft an image of him as a drug-addled maniac. This view into her perspective also shows that Robbie's position in the household isn't as secure as he seems to believe.

Nevertheless, Emily thinks, Briony was out of line in her treatment of Robbie at the dinner. Paul Marshall eased the tension "artfully," thinks Emily, and she wonders if he would make a good suitor for Cecilia. His chocolate business will make him enormously rich. After Emily muses for another half hour, Jack calls. Emily tells him of Robbie's manic look at the table and asks if they really need to be funding medical school for him. Jack responds that they do.

Just as Emily is overly suspicious of Robbie because she resents him, she is overly accommodating of Paul, who is rapacious and boorish, simply because Paul is heir to a substantial fortune.

Suddenly, Leon, Cecilia, and Briony enter, comforting a ghostly pale Lola. Leon reaches for the phone and tells his father to come home. He seems furious, but tries to calm himself. He tells his mother that she should sit down, and Emily is terrified that Leon's news is so bad that he wants her to be seated before he delivers it.

The tension of the dinner, and of the characters' varied and repeated misconceptions, has finally come to a head—and life will never return to the way it was previously. Leon, surprisingly, has adopted an unusual role of authority to handle this crisis.

PART 1, CHAPTER 13

Briony searches for the twins in the night. "Within the half hour [she] would commit her crime." As she walks the grounds, she thinks about the maniac who is also on the prowl. She thinks of her obligation to protect her sister from Robbie, and wonders if Robbie's hatred for her is such that he will ambush her murderously in the darkness. Briony tells herself that she must not fear him, and longs to expose the way Robbie has wronged her sister, in spite of all the help that the Tallises have given him.

Even in the midst of an effort to rescue her young cousins, Briony hijacks the narrative to make it all about her. Her fantasies of being attacked by Robbie simply indicate a desire to be the center of a story that fits her sensibilities, and exemplify the scene-stealing behavior Emily detests in Hermione.

Briony continues searching for the twins. She moves towards the pool and admires the water's calm glow; it is nice to be outside late at night, with parental permission. She continues to walk the grounds, thinking more about the "brutal" acts she has witnessed Robbie commit. Through the window, she sees her aging mother, and imagines how dignified she will get to seem at her mother's funeral.

Briony is so eager to transform herself into the center of attention that she gleefully anticipates her own mother's funeral, simply because the occasion will give her a dignified position.

At this point, Briony could have gone inside to spend time with her mother. If she had, she would not have committed her crime, and a great deal of things would not have happened. However, she decides to stay outside. Briony moves towards the temple in the lake. In her path, she sees a bush in her path start to move. It breaks up and turns into two figures, one of whom runs into the darkness, the other of whom stays seated and calls for Briony. It is Lola, who sounds helpless.

This moment is an unparalleled example of the theme of the Unchangeable Past. Had Briony made a seemingly insignificant different choice at the time—returning inside instead of staying outside, everything would have been different. But she chose what she chose, and could never go back after encountering Lola post-rape.

Briony now feels that she completely understands what has happened. She rushes to comfort Lola, and tells her that she saw Lola being assaulted. She asks Lola who did it, but Lola doesn't respond. "It was Robbie, wasn't it?" Briony asks, and still, Lola does not answer. "It was Robbie," Briony tells her cousin. Lola asks if she saw him do it, but Briony is already bemoaning Robbie's maniacal nature. Lola asks again if Briony saw Robbie commit the crime, and Briony responds "of course I did. Plain as day. It was him."

Briony imposes her own story on what she has witnessed, in order for it to make sense alongside her other biased ideas of Robbie the maniac. McEwan's writing here emphasizes the process by which Briony alone convinces herself that she saw Robbie—with no input from Lola, she evolves from suggesting Robbie's guilt to asserting it. Vulnerable Lola, meanwhile, seems to be looking for a way to hide, and Briony's confidence that it was Robbie provides that.

Lola then explains how her assault transpired. Briony emphasizes her conviction that she saw Robbie do it, though Lola tells her that she could not say for sure who her assailant was. In this way, the two girls' roles are determined: Lola the confused victim, and Briony the definitive witness. Seeing Robbie commit this crime solidifies the terrible suspicions Briony has held towards him, and she sees the novelistic qualities of his villainy.

Briony's story puts her in a position she loves, giving her a well-defined role of novelistic heroism. By maintaining that Robbie is the culprit and ignoring Lola's complicating testimony, Briony validates the self-centered stories she has imagined, without even realizing it.

The narration fast-forwards to describe what happens when Briony spreads her story of seeing Robbie. As more people hear and believe Briony's story, she loses the ability to control how they respond, and its repercussions grow. Whenever she qualifies the story or makes it seem less ironclad, people seem confused and disapproving. In her anxiety to please, she glosses over her hesitations. As the affair spirals out of her control, Briony knows she lacks the courage to withdraw her testimony. She tries to equivocate, but is afraid to seem like a silly, self-indulgent girl who wanted to be the center of attention. Still, she cannot take comfort in thinking she was bullied into confessing that she saw Robbie commit the crime—this testimony was entirely her own doing. She tries to counteract her doubts by repeating them with more and more conviction.

This marks the beginnings of Briony's guilt for incriminating Robbie. Her story has taken on a life of its own, so much so that it even restricts her own capability to act. She is too cowardly to retract or revise her testimony and sacrifice her clear-cut role as the key witness against a clear-cut villain. She tries to correct this by sticking to her story more aggressively, but if past examples are any guide, it is unlikely that she will be able to get the complicated reality of the situation to align with the orderly vision she has concocted.

Briony leads Lola back to the house. She hears Leon's voice, and her brother comes heroically to pick up Lola. On their way towards the house, Briony starts to tell Leon about what has taken place, "exactly as she had seen it."

McEwan's phrasing reflects the way stories and writing can modify reality. Because Briony has decided *she has seen Robbie red-handed, the book can make the claim as well—even though it is not true.*

PART 1, CHAPTER 14

Briony's memories of interrogations and sworn testimony in court will trouble her less than her patchy memory of the fateful night itself. Once Lola has been taken away to be examined, Briony is left at "centre stage," and she feels a newfound maturity. She is caught up in the somber gravity of the event, with the doctor and the investigators and the secrecy surrounding Lola's violation. Paul Marshall comes in from searching and converses briefly with the policemen. Meanwhile, Cecilia moves anxiously around the edge of the room, and looks at Briony furiously whenever the younger girl recounts what she has seen.

This is the performance Briony wanted to make through The Trials of Arabella. Her acting and storytelling have earned her attention and, she believes, impressed the adults. Paul Marshall returns alone, meanwhile, but nobody even thinks to suspect him.

The gathered people receive word that Lola has been sedated and is now able to sleep. Everyone waits in the drawing room for Robbie. Briony decides to retrieve Robbie's letter from Cecilia's room. She finds it and brings it to a policeman, who reads it impassively. Another policeman reads it, as does Leon, and Emily demands to read it. Finally, Cecilia sees what they are doing and indignantly tells them to stop reading her letter. Emily responds that Cecilia could have prevented this tragedy if she had shown someone the letter sooner. Briony feels "vindicated" by the way the adults are accusing Cecilia of negligence.

Briony seriously invades her sister's privacy to produce an irrelevant detail: Robbie's letter. This letter is so important to Briony because it was the key piece that moved her to craft the narrative of Robbie as a predatory evildoer. By showing it to the gathered adults, she allows them to do the same. Cecilia is the only one to protest because her different perspective on Robbie and his letter allows her to understand what the message truly signifies.

Briony stays up all night and shows the policemen the spot in the library where she saw Robbie committing his "attack" on Cecilia. Later on, news arrives that Jack's car has broken down and he will not make it home in time. As everyone else is interviewed, the opinion that Robbie is a dangerous maniac solidifies. Cecilia insists that Danny Hardman is the man they should be interested in, but everyone understands that she is simply impugning an innocent young man to assist her friend.

Briony continues to impose her perspective on the authorities, to ensure they comprehend the scenario in exactly the same way she does. It is interesting that Cecilia pins the blame on the servant Danny Hardman, as she is engaging in the same kind of class-based prejudice that is being leveled against Robbie.

Finally, at around five in the morning, Robbie returns with the twins in tow. Briony is relieved to see the twins safe, but feels outraged that Robbie could try to hide his transgression with a good deed. The policemen approach Robbie. Briony is led back inside, and she lies in bed thinking about what she has done. After some time, she hears a police car starting up, and looks through her window to see Robbie being led away in handcuffs. Cecilia approaches Robbie and speaks to him as he is taken into the car. Then, an inspector separates the two. Robbie is placed in the backseat and the car begins to drive off. Suddenly, Robbie's mother, Grace Turner, appears, and begins to hit the car with her umbrella, screaming "Liars! Liars! Liars!" The constables restrain her, and she watches from a distance as the car moves over the bridge and disappears from the grounds.

Briony's self-delusion is so complete that even the twins' safe return, an unequivocally good thing, causes her outrage because it mars the perfect story she has devised. She has made herself believe her narrative, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that her narrative has overcome her, so that she can only see Robbie doing a good thing as him hiding what Briony is certain is his true depraved self. The speed with which Robbie is determined to be the sole suspect likely has to do with his lower social class and the biases held against him for it. He felt a part of the Tallis family, but he and his mother were always actually outsiders granted contingent access.

PART 2

Robbie, now referred to as "Turner," is a soldier in the British armed forces, walks through France with two comrades. He looks for a map that he has taken from the fingers of a captain lying dead in a ditch a ways back, and to his surprise, finds it clutched in one of his own hands. Their path is littered with debris, and they walk past a severed human leg suspended in a tree. Turner walks ahead of his companions to consult the map. He is pained by a shrapnel wound in his side.

Part 2's abrupt shift to this bleak scene of war highlights the suffering and desolation that Turner has endured as a result of Briony's false testimony. By jumping straight to this jarring scene, McEwan shows just how far-reaching the consequences of Briony's words have been. That the novel now refers to Robbie as "Turner" illustrates that he is now a fundamentally different man, and that he is now molded by how society sees him—the class and legal status of his last name—as opposed to who he is as an individual, signified by his first name.

Turner's two companions, Corporal Nettle and Corporal Mace, are above him in rank—Turner is a mere private. However, the corporals must rely on him to navigate towards the coast. Turner leads them westward. After crossing a stream and running past a swarm of bees, the men come upon a French woman in her farmhouse.

As he did in university, Robbie uses his wits to transcend class boundaries in the military. Though he is of the lowest rank, private, he is an indispensable member of the escape party.

The woman tells them that they may not stay with her, but they inform her that they will be sleeping in her barn, and request any food and drink she can spare. The woman insists that the men cannot stay; her sons, she explains, are "animals," and will return soon. The three soldiers ignore her and take water from the house pump. The woman tells Turner that her sons will kill her and the Englishmen, but the men set up camp in the woman's barn anyway. Mace, a cook, crafts impromptu mattresses. Turner warns his friends of the woman's threats and tells them to keep their weapons handy.

The soldiers are focused entirely on their own basic survival needs, and this causes them to ignore the woman's warnings. Turner's military service has evidently forced him to devote all of his energies to merely staying alive.

A girl from the farm brings a basket of food and runs away. The men eat ravenously. After a while, two men appear at the door. They appear to be armed, and they announce that they have something for the soldiers. After a tense exchange, the Frenchmen reveal that they have brought a baguette, wine, and other foodstuffs. All of the men eat together and make toasts wishing for the defeat of Germany. The men relay traumatic news of a skirmish nearby, but have no idea which side has prevailed. Turner then tells the men the story of being separated from his unit, and explains that he and the corporals are walking towards Dunkirk.

The camaraderie the soldiers experience seems like a rarity in their situation. This exchange is designed to contextualize Turner's trek across France, and explain why he has found himself part of an unlikely trio with Mace and Nettle.

The Frenchmen explain how their aging mother—the woman in the farmhouse—hates soldiers indiscriminately. She lost one of her sons in World War I. The Frenchmen lament the way that history is repeating itself, just 25 years after World War I. Turner, ashamed to be retreating from France, vows that the British will return to expel the Germans. With this promise, the two groups part ways for the night.

The war has trapped these men within a story that is far larger than them. Turner once again finds himself unable to control his circumstances, and his promise to return shows that his spirit has not been entirely broken by what he has endured.

Turner lies awake while the corporals snore. He manages some fitful sleep, but his thoughts keep wandering to the three and a half years he spent in prison. He thinks of Cecilia's promise that she will wait for him, and realizes that he has some hope. His means of survival is the letter she has sent him. If he is overtaken by the Germans, his best hope is a prison camp, and he knows that without an end in sight, or letters from Cecilia, he has no hope of surviving. Trying to get back to sleep, he thinks about his most recent meeting with Cecilia, in a café in 1939. He had been out of prison for six days, and had one day left until he had to report for duty as a soldier.

Though his focus on survival may seem somewhat selfish, Turner's devotion to Cecilia shows that she is more important to him than life itself. Without a chance to see Cecilia, Turner understands that he will not be able to continue living. In contrast to Briony's fantastical ideas of reality, which had such negative consequences in earlier chapters, Turner uses an idealized vision of Cecilia for the noble purpose of motivating his own survival.

In prison, Turner was not allowed any female visitors other than his mother, for fear that a woman's presence would "inflame" him. Cecilia wrote him weekly letters; sometimes, these letters—and his responses—were confiscated because they seemed to be too affectionate. The lovers developed a literary code to discreetly convey their sexual feelings.

The lovers' literary shorthand illustrates the liberating power of literature. While the fantasies that literature brings to life can be harmful, like Briony's, they need not always be.

At their first meeting in years, Cecilia entered the café in her nurse's outfit. The moment of their reuniting is awkward—it cannot match up to the intimacy they have crafted in their years of written correspondence. They talk about mundane issues, and it is soon time for Cecilia to return to work. Turner wonders if Cecilia pities him for the way prison has diminished his appearance. After some small-talk, Cecilia must leave for work. Turner gives her his new address. Before she boards her bus, the two share a kiss, and Cecilia begins to cry. Afterwards, she gets on her bus, and Robbie immediately regrets not accompanying her all the way to work. He runs alongside the bus but is unable to catch up.

Once again, reality fails to live up to a literary fantasy that has been crafted in anticipation. The gulf between the two lovers illustrates the indelible damage Briony's false testimony has inflicted upon them both. Further, the outside world continues to affect and constrain their relationship. Cecilia can no longer lounge about—having cut herself off from her family in devotion to Robbie and his innocence, she now must work.

The two exchange letters during Robbie's training and share details of their lives—Cecilia's as a nurse in the maternity ward, Robbie's as a trainee private. The threat of war unnerves them both, and Robbie is certain that it will happen. Another troubling issue is Cecilia's estrangement from her family: since Robbie's sentencing in 1935, she has not spoken to Emily, Jack, Leon, or Briony. She corresponds with Robbie through Grace, who has moved off the Tallises' grounds. Cecilia writes him indignant letters about the way her family abandoned him, and how the police failed to investigate Danny Hardman duly. She writes that she had to choose Robbie over her own family, because he is her "reason for life."

Briony's story has profoundly disrupted the lives of every single character in the book. (Robbie has joined the army as a way to reduce his prison sentence.) Note again that Cecilia's blind condemnation of Danny Hardman suggests that she, too, has devised a fanciful narrative to explain the tragic events in a way that aligns with her perspective and bias. Having been cut off from everything else because of the events of that night, Cecilia and Turner live only for each other, for some ideal vision of what their love is.

Although Robbie was scheduled to spend time with Cecilia after his training was completed, the outbreak of war forces his leave to be cancelled. He is assigned a four-day break on very short notice, and Cecilia is unable to rearrange her nursing schedule to see him. Robbie tries to take trains to see her, but is forced to turn back, lest he end up reporting late for duty.

Yet again, the lovers' chance to be together is foiled by factors outside their control. Turner's futile, time-wasting attempts to seek Cecilia out illustrate how powerless he is in his current position.

The winter is full of dull work for Robbie. He writes a letter encouraging Cecilia to reconcile with her parents, simply because he would feel too guilty if one of them died without Cecilia making amends with them. Her reply, the last to arrive before the mail stops being delivered, reveals that Briony has contacted her. Briony's letter reveals that she has started training as a nurse instead of attending Cambridge University. She has begun to feel remorse for testifying against Robbie, and wants to meet with her older sister and with Robbie, in order to try and remedy her misdeeds legally. Cecilia is interested to learn more about Briony's evolution, but her letter to Robbie says that she will not contact her sister until she hears Robbie's response.

As Briony has grown up, has become more mature and knowledgeable about the world, she can now understood more pieces of the puzzle that she put together so incorrectly as a child, and can see past her original narrative. Briony's decision to become a nurse rather than go to university seems to be a kind of penance for what she's done, a choice to serve others (and soldiers like Robbie, at that) rather than herself. But whether a person can legally recant testimony given years earlier is another matter—some stories may not be able to be taken back.

Turner is woken up in the barn by his comrades. They divide the provisions amongst themselves and get on their way. German bombers fly overhead, and the men must stay off the roads in order to avoid airstrikes. The men continue walking and arrive at a small village. There is a traffic jam of military and civilian vehicles, as the villagers try to evacuate. Turner is indifferent to the suffering around him, and "his thoughts had shrunk to the small hard point of his own survival." He tries to ditch the corporals and walks quickly up the road. As he passes in front of a car, its driver honks at him. Turner opens the car door and prepares to hit the driver in rage, but Mace catches up and stops him.

Though Turner suffers the horrors of war alongside many others, necessity has forced his perspective to turn inward. He can focus only on his own survival, not on empathizing with others. The need to survive has in some ways made Turner similar to Briony as a child, who only really believed in her own existence or importance.

The three men continue on the road, passing debris and abandoned equipment as they go. Mace and Nettle favor getting a ride on a truck, but Turner has witnessed a truckload of men getting obliterated by a bomb and insists on walking instead. The men pass the French cavalry methodically shooting their horses in defeat, and the bodies of a family lying in a ditch.

The carnage the men witness seems absolutely apocalyptic. These overt symbols of defeat contrast with the freedom and power Turner felt when he was a young man in 1935, prior to Briony's testimony against him. The powers of class, law, and war have completely surrounded Turner.

Later on, the men pass a major, who tries to enlist Turner and his cohort in a last-ditch effort to fight an advance party of German soldiers. The men are skeptical of the mission, and Nettle tells the major that he has orders from GHQ to advance directly to Dunkirk without delay. The major begins to reprimand the men, but Turner tunes out the officer's words. He can only focus on a German bomber flying towards them in the distance. He runs for cover under a truck and just misses being strafed by the fighter. After the attack, the men find the major again. To the major's disbelief, the fighter's machine gun shot him through the hand. The major orders the men to assemble, and Turner tells the officer that they would prefer not to. The officer dazedly lets them continue along their way.

Once again, obligations of rank and class seem secondary to Turner. The fighter attack illustrates how dangerous it would have been for Turner to obey his commanding officer rather than focus on his own survival. This cynical self-preservation illustrates the way Turner has been permanently altered by his wartime experience. In the shambles of their retreat, even the rank order of the army loses meaning. All the men are for themselves.

After Turner helps take care of the wounded, he finds the corporals digging a grave for an adolescent boy. The men continue trudging onward, and Turner again notices that the inflammation around his wound is growing, and it is causing him more pain. As Turner continues along the exposed road, he dreamily imagines being exonerated, as Cecilia's latest letter implies he might be. He walks through bombed-out areas strewn with corpses and imagines that he might be able to enroll in medical school and settle into a life with Cecilia.

Turner's only motivation to keep going is the life that seemed within reach before he was sent to prison. In this way, his fantasy narrative gives him the power to persist in a situation that would otherwise be unbearable.

Turner is still deeply uncomfortable with Briony, and does not know how he would deal with her if he were able to return to normal life. In jail, he longed for revenge against her. He tries to understand her perspective, and recalls a moment in the summer of 1932 when he was teaching her to swim in a river. After they had finished swimming and changed back into their clothes, Briony asked him if he would save her if she fell in. Robbie tells her that he would, and she proceeds to jump into the river. Robbie manages to rescue her, and is enraged that she would risk both of their lives in order to be saved by him. After he reprimands her, Briony indignantly explains that she wanted him to save her because she loves him. Robbie imagines that in the three years after this event took place, Briony held feelings for him. Then, when she read his letter to Cecilia and saw the two having sex, she was so wrathful and jealous that she decided to condemn Robbie. He acknowledges that she was a child when she testified against him, but recognizes that he will never forgive her for what she has done.

Unlike young Briony, Turner makes some effort to understand the perspectives of others to develop his understanding of a situation. The swimming story encapsulates Briony's selfish impulses and storybook sensibilities perfectly. Because she childishly believes that "love" entails saving someone from harm, she recklessly contrives a storyline in which Robbie will save her from harm. Robbie is in the conflicted position of understanding Briony's motivations, sympathizing with her foolishness, and yet being completely unable to forgive her, because of the far-reaching repercussions of her lie. And, at the same time, there is never any indication in the first section of the novel that Briony loves Robbie and feels jealous of him, so Robbie's sensible theory may also be totally wrong.

** Turner and the corporals pass through a village. Above them, a group of German bombers begins to circle. Turner runs through a field to take cover. An indecisive woman holding a small child runs past him, and he pushes her towards cover. The fighter drops its bomb nearby, and Turner again tries to get the civilians to take cover and avoid the fighter's return strafe. The mother and child refuse to move, and Turner is left with no choice but to take cover on his own.

Turner's justifiable self-interest also leaves him with some culpability: by striving to save himself, he does not protect others to the utmost of his abilities.

Turner stands under trees with a group of other civilians. Once they hear the all-clear signal, they continue to stand dazedly in the forest. Mace and Nettle find Turner, and the three get moving once again. They come upon a crater where the mother and child had stood—the two have been annihilated.

In some ways, Turner is responsible for these civilians' deaths, because he did not make every possible effort to rescue them. This disturbing sight undeniably compounds his sense of guilt.

As the men continue towards their destination for evacuation, the beach at Bray Dunes, they pass more carnage. Turner wonders whether his absent father served in World War I. Finally, they reach Dunkirk. They see soldiers destroying uniforms and equipment. As they cross a bridge into town, the men notice that able-bodied soldiers are being mustered for defense duties. The men decide that Turner should fake an injury to get them off the hook. Feeling dishonest, Turner feigns a limp, and Mace and Nettle support him. They continue past the checkpoint, and Turner limps until he is well out of sight. After a good distance, Nettle is overcome with frustration and decides to throw away his boots, which he maintains hurt his feet. Turner retrieves them and convinces Nettle to carry them.

The soldiers' desperation to survive once again compels them to make morally ambiguous decisions. Turner's feigned injury makes him guilty in much the same way as his failure to rescue the mother and child from the air raid: he has forgone opportunities to help others in the interest of his own survival.

** Turner continues walking, and feels as though he is in an illogical dream state. The men reach the periphery of a resort at Bray Dunes, and an officious lieutenant reprimands them for their bedraggled appearance. Turner feels as though he could shoot the man with no consequences, but is too dazed to locate his gun. At long last, the men reach the beach, which is a chaotic scene. Turner surveys the ocean and realizes that there are no boats that could reach the area for hours.

As basic survival becomes more and more of a struggle, the order of Turner's universe continues to erode bit by bit, to the point that he seems prepared to subvert military hierarchy and assault a commanding officer.

The men duck into a bar. Nettle looks for alcohol, but the place has already been raided. A commotion starts up in the doorway: a puny Royal Air Force clerk is being hassled by soldiers, because the RAF did nothing to protect against German bombers. The soldiers begin roughing up the clerk, and Turner worries that everyone will set upon the clerk at once. Seeing that the situation threatens to escalate, Mace sways the mob by yelling to drown the man in the sea. Turner and Nettle understand that this is a ruse to get the clerk out safely. Mace takes the clerk and runs through the door, while Nettle and Turner block the doorway behind him. Once the angry crowd breaks through, Mace and the RAF clerk have disappeared.

Fortunately, despite his immense preoccupation with surviving, Turner has not lost touch with his altruistic impulses. He and the corporals risk bodily harm to protect the RAF clerk, and this offers confirmation that Robbie's traumatic experiences of injustice have not completely eradicated his internal sense of justice.

In town, Turner and Nettle find an old woman and demand water. She tells them that she will give it to them if they can find her pig. After a struggle, the two men manage to bring the pig back to its owner, and she provides them with water to drink and soap for washing up. After thanking the woman, the two men acknowledge that they must do everything they can to get on an England-bound boat the next morning. They take cover in a cellar full of other sleeping soldiers. Inside, the two eat hidden under their blankets to prevent others from noticing that they have food.

While rescuing the pig may seem altruistic and hiding food from their comrades may seem selfish, the two men's actions have largely progressed past morality—they are doing both not out of goodwill or malice, but simply to survive.

As he drifts off to sleep, Turner fantasizes about being acknowledged as innocent by Briony's new testimony. He then understands that guilt is not clear-cut: he himself has left others to die that very day. He then replays his memories of the night of his arrest, and the traumatic images he has witnessed during the war. Corporal Nettle pokes him and tells him" that he has been shouting "no" and waking up the other soldiers. Nettle tells him to go back to sleep, because the navy is coming and will march the men to the boats at seven in the morning.

Turner, like Briony, is coming to learn that life does not conform to a clear, logical order. Turner's misfortune has turned him into both a victim and a guilty party, just as Briony's lies have harmed herself as well as Turner.

Turner falls asleep. Cecilia's remark, "I'll wait for you," echoes in his thoughts. He is determined to return to her. He remembers being escorted to the police car in handcuffs and hearing Cecilia tell him to come back. Turner promises Nettle that he won't say another word—but Nettle is no longer nearby.

Turner has lost touch with the real world in favor of his fantasy of returning to Cecilia.

PART 3

Briony notices a growing unease at the hospital where she works, as people prepare for an influx of injured soldiers. On top of this nervousness is Briony's anxiety about displeasing her supervising nurse, Sister Drummond. Briony, a trainee nurse or probationer, has made several mistakes that she fears will attract the sister's ire. Another probationer was disciplined for revealing her name to an inquisitive patient in violation of a fundamental rule of nursing.

Briony's false testimony has altered not only Robbie's life, but hers as well. The constant stress she experiences as a nurse—a job she has likely taken as a way of making amends for wronging Robbie—is not unlike the harrowing pressure Robbie experiences in battle.

The nurses clean constantly, but they have little opportunity to conjecture about the reasons for their preparations. They are under constant supervision: when a friend and dorm-mate of Briony's, Fiona, complains about the food, she is made to finish her vegetables while a nurse watches. Fiona is from a well-to-do London neighborhood and has a father who works a high position in government. She and Briony have in common their lack of prior medical experience.

Becoming a nurse seems an unusual step for upper-class young women like Fiona and Briony, and the trying circumstances highlight the sacrifice that Briony has made. Both of these high-class girls are neophytes when it comes to living in the "real" world of bad food and deadly injury.

However, relationships are difficult to develop. Briony feels as though her only relationship is with the stern disciplinarian Sister Drummond, who imposes uncomfortable routines on the trainee nurses. These practices are based on the military-style nursing system of Florence Nightingale. This authoritarian nursing job, Briony reflects, has replaced her life as a student at Cambridge. Though there is some comfort in the abilities she is developing, she is fearful of the uncertainty that the future holds.

Just as Robbie has been isolated and forced to focus on his own survival, Briony, too, has been consumed by her work and unable to cultivate interpersonal relationships. The inaccessibility of the college-student life she could have had illustrates the cost of her inalterable testimony against Robbie, just as Robbie's own lost medical career does.

** Before bedtime in the dorms, the nurses cry to one another about homesickness. Briony is repulsed by this behavior and writes curt letters home. The letters she receives from Emily in return describe the evacuees the Tallises have taken into their home. Emily also relays that Betty dropped and shattered **Clem's vase** after, as she claims, it broke apart in her hands. These letters make Briony feel nostalgic, but she has decided that it is important for her to stay away from home and write infrequently.

Briony's sporadic contact with her family, and nostalgic reflections about her home life, show that this aspect of her past is now a fundamentally inaccessible one. Her departure from home is the beginning of a permanent shift in her persona. The shattering of Clem's vase connects to the shattering of the Tallis family, and that the vase "broke apart" in the servant Betty's hands seems to indicate that whatever Cecilia did to fix it didn't hold—and so the shattering is linked to the encounter Briony secretly watched between Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain.

Briony keeps a notebook next to her bed, which she uses to describe her life in the hospital and sketch out stories. However, she has little time to think on her own, as her days are so filled with nursing obligations. Still, during some time off, she wrote constantly, and completed a 103-page story that she submitted to a magazine. She is no longer interested in clear, orderly characters—now, she prefers to emphasize perception and thought. After months, Briony has received no response from the magazine, neither for the first piece she submitted nor for a second.

Briony's new direction as a writer reflects her growing maturity. Trying to control and constrain her characters with neat roles was the immature and two-dimensional attitude that fostered her disastrous condemnation of Robbie. By focusing instead on individual perception, she shows that she has come to understand just how devastatingly incomplete her own point of view was when she testified against Robbie. Though the lack of response may suggest that in her writing she has overcompensated for her earlier weaknesses.

** Preparations at Briony's hospital intensify, and Briony begins new coursework on nursing. Her primary task is sanitizing bedpans and other implements in the sluice room. As she straightens a bed, she catches a glimpse of a newspaper, which euphemistically reports of a British retreat from France. This, she realizes, is the reason behind the dread she senses around her.

The grim difficulties Briony faces in London parallel the worsening circumstances that Robbie must endure in France. The retreat in France seems likely to be the very retreat Turner is enduring in the second section of the novel.

A letter from Briony's father reveals that Paul and Lola are to be married the following week. Briony processes this news, and realizes that she is the one who made this marriage possible. Her guilt follows her as she performs her nursing duties that day. On a break, she tries to call her father from a phone booth, but cannot get a connection. As she walks back to work, she passes two young army medics and notices them smiling at her. She looks away from them and feels guilty for not meeting their eyes.

Jack Tallis continues to be a missing presence, while Briony realizes further consequences of her actions. How Paul and Lola go from rapist/victim to husband/wife is never explained, but it seems likely that there is some deep pragmatism involved: the marriage allows both to hide their guilt about what happened to Robbie, and for Paul to ensure Lola never speaks while Lola ensures her financial security as a wife of a rich man. Briony's inability to meet the men's eyes suggests her own inner shame connected to sex.

** The hospital is eerily calm. To Briony's surprise, the nurses receive a half-day break. She and Fiona spend it listening to a band playing in St. James's Park. The atmosphere is carefree, but as Fiona speaks about her family, Briony thinks about Robbie. If he is killed in combat, her false testimony will have contributed to the permanent separation of Robbie and Cecilia. Compared to Fiona's guiltless life, Briony's feels confined and tainted.

Briony is obsessed with retracing the far-reaching consequences of her false testimony. The way her misdeed plagues her illustrates how her actions have placed her into a world of adult obligations and guilt, rather than the relatively carefree life a young woman might be expected to enjoy.

As the band plays, the girls joke about hospital life. They begin to laugh, realizing that their nurse uniforms make them invulnerable to others' disapproval. The girls have a fun time, but as they return to the hospital they see a dismal array of wounded men assembled outside. A doctor commands Briony to take the other end of a stretcher he is carrying, which holds a wounded sergeant. Briony's left hand threatens to fail under the heavy load. Just as she is about to deposit the stretcher on a bed, her hand gives out. She manages to catch the stretcher on her knee, but not without jostling the injured sergeant. This earns her a reprimand from the doctor. She waits by the bed to see if she can be of more assistance, and a more experienced nurse tells her to stop standing idle and get to work.

Just as Briony's actions as a 13-year-old ushered her into a grim new world of adult responsibility, the juxtaposition of her day in the park and the hospital's emergent crisis underscores how much maturation she still has yet to undergo. Her clueless behavior in the face of this crisis reminds readers that she is in some ways still the insecure, eager-to-please girl she was at 13. Now, however, her motivations and ambitions are far nobler. At the same time, Briony still wants to save people, to be a hero of sorts, when what the experienced nurses want from her is to keep on working on not focus on one injured soldier.

Ashamed, Briony goes to attend to more wounded men. She passes Fiona holding a mangled man on a stretcher, and the two exchange a shocked look. Briony is asked to take some men up to a ward, and is shocked when they violate protocol by climbing, still dirty, into their hospital beds. She tries to stop the men, but they are undeterred, and Briony is again reprimanded by a more experienced nurse for interfering with the men's sleep.

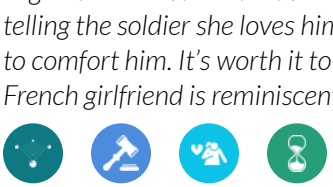
Briony's impractical dedication to hospital protocol shows that she has not yet fully abandoned her adolescent interest in order and control that does not match up with the facts or needs of the real world. Fiona's shock at the influx of hurt soldiers is an indication of how sheltered her upper-class life was.

Back in her own ward, Briony is ordered to clean a corporal's leg wound. She peels away the bandage to reveal a grisly gash, which she cleans gingerly. Fortunately, what appeared to be gangrenous skin is simply dirt, and she is relieved. As she works, Nurse Drummond appears and tells her that her work is good, but needs to be faster. She continues working, and her responsibilities increase. She is tasked with removing shrapnel from an airman's leg. When Briony removes the first piece, the soldier screams a profanity. Nurse Drummond promptly reprimands him for his misbehavior. Briony finishes the task and vomits in the sluice afterward.

Briony has now crossed a further threshold of adulthood. Her testimony as a 13-year-old taught her that actions can have far-reaching, sinister consequences, but only now is she beginning to understand how severe these consequences can be. Her knowledge that Robbie is in the same situation as these men can only compound the revulsion she feels.

As Briony tends to more and more injuries, including men who die shortly thereafter, she begins to realize that the human body is a fragile, material thing. Because she speaks French, she is sent to tend to a young French soldier who, in his deliriousness, is convinced that she is his lover. He tells her about his family in Millau, and when he asks her to adjust his bandage, she sees that half of his skull is gone. They talk more, and the soldier asks if she loves him. "Yes," she replies. Just before the soldier dies, Briony tells him her first name, in violation of a rule of nursing.

Briony's willingness to bend the rules of nursing to comfort a dying soldier demonstrates how much the past hours of work have matured her. Instead of sticking to order and protocol, she has begun to understand that soldiers' well-being is paramount. In telling the soldier she loves him, she is creating a story, using fiction, to comfort him. It's worth it to note that the soldier's devotion to his French girlfriend is reminiscent of Robbie's love for Cecilia.



At 4:30am, the probationers are permitted to sleep. Briony reads a letter she has received. It is a rejection letter from the magazine, but it contains supportive input on her story. Briony's story, *Two Figures by a Fountain*, details the encounter between Cecilia and Robbie that she witnessed as a thirteen-year-old. The editor's advice is strangely prescient, and the letter asks whether the young girl's misunderstanding of the encounter might have disastrous consequences for the two lovers.

The magazine's encouraging rejection letter is a symbol that Briony has matured significantly, but still has a long way to go before she is fully ready to confront the significance of her actions as a 13-year-old. Her literary reflections are growing closer to representations of the reality of the situation, but, as the perceptive editors note, while she focuses on perception or its lack, she still has yet to fully face the consequences of her actions.

** Briony spends the following days in a rigorous whorl of hospital labor. She fears a German invasion. Everything around her looks different; her perspective has been altered by a sense of an impending conclusion of some portion of her life. The wounded and dying men begin to blend together in Briony's recollections.

Briony's perspective has been irreversibly changed by the suffering she has seen in the past days. She will never be able to return to the naïve perspective she held mere days before, when she laughed in the park with Fiona.

That Saturday, Briony leaves the hospital and begins a long walk towards Clapham Common. She feels out of place in her nurse's uniform, isolated from her peers. She walks past citizens preparing to be evacuated to the countryside, and assumes they too are preoccupied about the threat of German invasion. Briony reaches the Common and finds a stately brick barn with a Rolls-Royce parked outside. She enters; it is Paul and Lola's small, private wedding ceremony. Briony feels that she does not belong there.

This marriage is the only traditional "happy ending" in the novel, and Briony knows it is far from happy. She is no longer comfortable in the situations that would have seemed normal to her when she wrote the Trials of Arabella with its tribulations leading to marriage. Now she knows the messier, often terrible losses and mistakes that make up life. She has left behind the negative characteristics of her youth, but also lost an innocent past that she will never be able to recreate.

Briony sees Paul and Lola at the altar and remembers seeing young, vulnerable Lola with the injuries she suffered at Paul's hands. By casting blame on Robbie, Briony has allowed Lola to marry the man who raped her. The officiating vicar asks if anyone objects to the union, and Briony considers speaking out in opposition, but she remains seated. The ceremony continues and the couple is married; on her way out, Lola makes eye contact with Briony, and Briony thinks that her cousin frowns in recognition.

When Briony was 13, she feared speaking out to retract her story because of the social stigma it would provoke. Her unwillingness to speak up at the wedding is very similar. She cannot challenge the marriage because she is too constrained by the narrative of Robbie's villainy that has been unchallenged for years, a narrative that she created. It is interesting that Lola's frown is just something Briony thinks she sees—is it real or a product of Briony's particular perspective?

After the ceremony, Briony walks towards Balham. She remembers the day off she spent with Fiona, and muses that it feels like a "far-off, innocent time," despite being less than two weeks ago. She continues through the periphery of London until she reaches her destination, a boarding house. She knocks on the door and asks for Cecilia Tallis. The curt landlady who answers summons Cecilia, who is shocked to see her sister without warning.

Briony's work in nursing has stripped her of still more innocence and naiveté, and she is increasingly aware of how her life has changed after spending a week face-to-face with the casualties of war. Briony did not speak at the wedding, but her surprise visit to Cecilia indicates she wants to try to fix what she has broken.

The sisters talk tersely about their work in nursing, and about mundane developments from back home. Briony admires Cecilia's beauty. After the landlady barks at them for standing in the hallway, Briony follows Cecilia into her room upstairs. The room is tidy, and to Briony it suggests loneliness. After some silence, Cecilia tells Briony that she took her letter to a lawyer. The lawyer told her that Briony's change of heart means very little unless new evidence surfaces. Cecilia says that their last hope was Old Hardman, who has since died of cancer. Briony is confused; Cecilia's tone grows more aggravated. Cecilia tells Briony that she will never forgive her, and Cecilia's derision makes Briony fearful.

Briony, for the first time, is able to see the loneliness that her testimony imposed upon Cecilia's life. Worse yet, Cecilia's response destroys Briony's hopes of truly being able to remedy her false testimony: the lawyer's opinion emphasizes that her past testimony, and its effects, are largely unchangeable. She can't take her story back. It is bigger than her, now.

After more back-and-forth between the sisters, Robbie appears from the bedroom. He is haggard and dressed in military fatigues. Though he ignores Briony completely, Briony is reassured to see that he has not been killed. Robbie goes to the bathroom, and Briony and Cecilia exchange a few words while he is gone. When he returns, he sees Briony and recognizes her. Cecilia tells Robbie that Briony plans to disavow her false testimony, but Robbie is furious. He tells Briony that he wants to hurt her. They tensely talk about why Briony chose to incriminate him five years earlier.

Robbie's appearance suggests that he made it back from the retreat in France, and he and Cecilia have reunited. Yet his response to Briony illustrates the trauma he has suffered as a result of her misconduct. His anger is perhaps the strongest indication that no matter what Briony does to atone for her false testimony, she will not be able to fully remedy the damage she has caused.

Briony recognizes Robbie's fury and anguish, and does her best to withstand them. Her experience dealing with raging soldiers in the hospital proves useful. Cecilia inserts herself between Briony and Robbie and begins to comfort her lover. Briony turns her back and allows the two to talk between themselves. After some time, Cecilia outlines to Briony what she must do: Briony will go to her parents and retract her testimony as soon as possible, and sign a sworn statement to that effect. Afterwards, she will give them Cecilia's address and tell them that she is expecting correspondence.

Briony's growing maturity and understanding of others is on display here. Although Briony may not be able to correct the far-reaching consequences of her testimony, it does seem as though Cecilia's plan will bring some benefit to the family and to Robbie. Briony's story has developed past her control, but there is a chance she can rein it in to some degree.

The last thing Cecilia and Robbie ask Briony to do is try and remember what Danny Hardman was doing that night. Briony responds that Old Hardman was likely telling the truth—Paul Marshall was in fact the one who raped Lola. After Robbie and Cecilia express some doubt, Briony reveals that she has just come from their wedding. Robbie remarks that he wants to find and kill Paul. Cecilia and Robbie seem completely drained after this news, and Briony prepares to leave. On her way out, she hears Robbie saying that he owes an apology to "Able Seaman Hardman."

The unfounded suspicions Cecilia and Robbie held towards Danny Hardman illustrate just how easy it is for anyone to craft a biased narrative of their own that disregards fact. Briony blamed Robbie because it fit with her preconceived notions; Cecilia and Robbie did the same to Danny Hardman. Paul's high social class likely shielded him from suspicion. Robbie feels a guilt toward Hardman that is not so different (though certainly not as great) as Briony's guilt toward Robbie.

Cecilia and Robbie walk Briony to the Balham Tube station, which will soon be destroyed in a bombing raid on London. As they are about to part ways, Briony apologizes for what she has done. Robbie tells her simply to do what she has been asked to do. Briony heads into the subway, and feels comforted that Cecilia's love for Robbie has not been destroyed. After taking care of the letter to her parents and her formal statement, she understands that she will need to begin an "atonement." The chapter ends with the signature "BT/London 1999."

After confronting firsthand the harms that she has caused, Briony now has a better understanding of what she must do to begin her "atonement," and at least she has a path toward that atonement because her actions did not put a permanent end to the love of Cecilia and Robbie. The signature at the end of the book reveals that the entire narrative was written by Briony herself, many years in the future—this illustrates the impressive degree to which her ability to empathize with others' perspectives has improved. Moreover, it reminds the reader that the entire preceding narrative, which depicted the pitfalls of constructing incomplete narratives from personal biases, was itself a narrative constructed by an individual.

EPILOGUE

Now speaking in first person in 1999, Briony tells of her decision to visit the Imperial War Museum library on her 77th birthday. Her family has sent a car to pick her up after lunch, and she has decided to pay her respects to the people who work at the archives, whom she has gotten to know over the years. She will be donating her extended written correspondence with "old Mr. Nettle."

And yet that moderately hopeful end of the third section does not end the novel. Briony appears to have dedicated a lifetime to atoning for the wrongs wrought by her adolescent mistake by providing a true narrative of what happened. Yet there is unease hidden in this discovery, as why would she have had to talk with these third-party sources to get the details of what happened?

Briony has just received dismal medical news. She has vascular dementia, and will slowly and inevitably sink into incoherence over the next few years. Briony is surprisingly upbeat about the news. As her taxicab arrives at the museum, she sees a black Rolls-Royce parked outside, which evokes memories of the Marshalls. Paul and Lola are now high-ranking socialites, actively involved in charity. As Briony walks up the steps, the Marshalls descend past her, surrounded by a gaggle of handlers and officials. Paul, she sees, is physically diminished but dignified. Lola is in impressive shape.

The source of Briony's acceptance of her irreversible mental decay is unclear. Is she content with the work she has done to atone for her wrongdoing? Has she come to terms with what happened? Or is she looking forward to escape her feelings of guilt? Regardless, Briony's impending loss of faculties means the last person to know what happened no longer will know. The only way to preserve what happened is through writing.

As she ascends in the elevator to the archives, Briony reflects that while she may outlive Paul, Lola will very likely outlive her. This means that Briony will not be able to publish a book without being litigated. At the archives, Briony hands over Nettle's letters from Dunkirk, and receives in return a list of historical corrections to her manuscript, made by a fastidious old colonel.

Despite Briony's impressive efforts to amend the historical record, she is still faced with the same inability to speak out that she experienced as a 13-year-old and as a young nurse at Lola's wedding. As a writer, Briony may control her narrative itself, but she is still unable to control the way it is released into the world.

Back in her flat, Briony packs her belongings for an overnight trip. She glances at a photograph on her desk of her deceased husband Thierry, and realizes that she will someday be unable to recognize him. She calms her nerves by choosing an outfit for the birthday dinner that her family is throwing for her.

The brief mention of Briony's late husband implies that she has undergone her fair share of personal joy and suffering as well. She has continued her maturation. She has lived life, and knows better than she did as a young girl or nurse the things she misinterpreted back then.

A car comes to pick Briony up. She makes small talk with the driver and then falls asleep. When she awakes, she is in the countryside, approaching a place called Tilney's Hotel, which used to be the Tallis estate. She was last here for her mother's funeral, 25 years earlier. Briony gets her room keys and finds it uncanny to walk through her old home and see numbers and locks on all the bedroom doors.

Briony's return to her family estate highlights the dramatic changes that have taken place since her childhood. Not only is her perspective irreversibly different, the estate itself is also fundamentally altered, and will never be restored to what it was when she was younger. Her family has broken apart, just as the house has been divided up into separate suites.

Briony gets dressed in her hotel room and descends to the dining room. She is greeted by a large group of applauding relatives, very few of whom she recognizes. She sees Leon, who is doddering and wheelchair-bound, and greets Pierrot. She meets many generations of offspring, including the scions of Jackson, who died 15 years ago.

This family reunion recalls the dinner at the beginning of the novel, and suggests a cyclical quality to the narrative of Briony's life. The applause she gets indicates how she is loved by her family, and the woman she has become, but also likely illustrates that few members of the family know of what she did as a young girl to tear the family apart.

An announcement is made: there will be entertainment before dinner. Briony is guided to a front-row seat. Much to her surprise, the youngest Quincey children stand up and perform **The Trials of Arabella**. Briony is quickly reminded of herself as a "busy, priggish, conceited little girl."

Importantly, the meaning of The Trials of Arabella *is fundamentally changed by the different perspective with which Briony now approaches it. Moreover, it should be noted that this performance of the play finally resolves the tension introduced at the beginning of the novel: for the first time, Briony's work is actually performed, after it was long-ago waylaid by tragedy. She has come full circle on her youth, this time with a much wiser perspective. And yet this play which is now being innocently celebrated has a dark, unknown past.*

After dinner and drinks, Briony returns to her room and stays up into the morning at her writing desk. Her many drafts of a memoir have never resulted in a publication, because it would be considered libelous to the Marshalls, who are known to be very litigious. Until the subjects of the book are dead, she may not publish it.

Unfortunately, Briony will never be able to truly atone for her wrongs in this lifetime. Just as she was unable to alter Robbie's conviction, she will also be unable to publicize her revised perspective until Paul and Lola are dead.

Briony reflects on her previous drafts. She acknowledges that this most recent version gives a happier ending to the lovers Cecilia and Robbie. In reality, Robbie died of septicemia at Bray Dunes in June 1940, and Cecilia perished in the bombing of Balham Underground shortly thereafter. The visit to Cecilia's after Lola's wedding was a fabrication. This sad ending seems, to Briony, to be a disservice.

Until this moment, the reader likely believes that Robbie and Cecilia survived the war. Now suddenly it is clear that Briony invented their survival. Briony's choice to let Robbie and Cecilia live on in writing illustrates the opposition between her literary fantasies and material reality. Her power as a novelist is to try to redeem herself by undoing the sweeping, tragic consequences she inadvertently caused. Just as created a happy ending for Arabella, she created one for Cecilia and Robbie.

The problem Briony has pondered for her lifetime is how she may achieve atonement when she, the novelist, cannot appeal to a power higher than her own creative abilities. Her imagination is the only deity. This attempt for atonement, then, was impossible—but it is the attempt that matters. Briony sees her choice to let the lovers live in her novel as a "final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair…I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forget me." Briony muses that it isn't impossible to imagine Robbie and Cecilia alive and together, enjoying the recent performance of **The Trials of Arabella**. "But," Briony remarks that instead of trying to conjure this image, "now I must sleep."

This final message offers an ultimate clarification of the role that literature can play in life. Briony's work has allowed her to gain perspective on her actions, and to redeem herself in a limited way for her misdeeds. However, the absolute power she possesses within her own literary universe does not extend to the real world. Just as her neat-and-tidy imaginings of Robbie as a villain grew far more complicated, and far more dangerous, when they were introduced into the world, Briony's literary attempts at atonement will never succeed as elegantly in real life as they do in fiction. Robbie and Cecilia didn't actually live on, after all. Still, as Briony recognizes, this does not invalidate literary pursuits. Reflecting and reshaping her narrative in writing seem to have given Briony the closest thing to atonement that she will be able to achieve in life, and the happiness she gave her Robbie and Cecilia was a more mature happiness, one marked by the true sorrows and complexities of the world, and the happy ending Briony gave to her lovers did not spare Briony herself for her actions. Her story offers a limited atonement, but what other kind is there?

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