

‘She would rewrite the past’ – Briony as narrator-manipulator in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement**

Charmaine Falzon

charmaine.falzon@um.edu.mt

Abstract: Ian McEwan’s 2001 novel *Atonement*¹ is mainly concerned with the protagonist Briony Tallis’s efforts to atone for a crime she committed in 1935 as a young teenager. This crime was that of bearing false witness. Briony’s mendacious testimony condemns an upright young man – Robbie Turner, son of the Tallises’ charwoman – to public ignominy and a long prison sentence for rape. Briony also separates her older sister Cecilia from Robbie, whom the young woman is secretly in love with. Both the lovers die in the Second World War, leaving behind a Briony racked with guilt, hoping to find a way to atone for the harm she has done them. After much soul-searching she decides that the best way in which she can atone for her crime is through the medium of her chosen vocation – that of fiction. Like McEwan himself, in fact, Briony Tallis is a writer. Shortly after the lovers’ deaths, she determines to write a novel which will constitute her ‘atonement’ (p. 349). Briony’s ‘atonement novel’, the reader discovers in the coda (pp. 351–72) is, in effect, the novel he holds in his hands. This paper sets out to assess Briony’s success in atoning for her crime by means of the novel *Atonement*. The main point it seeks to make is that, far from representing an adequate atonement for a serious crime, *Atonement* is yet another of this devious character’s diversionary ploys.

Keywords: *Atonement* McEwan Briony Cecilia Robbie crime sin narrator narrate protagonist atone guilt manipulate fountain

1 The edition of *Atonement* the page numbers here refer to is the first paperback edition (London, 2007).

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I did not make myself the heroine of my tales. Life appeared to me too common-place an affair as regarded myself. I could not figure to myself that romantic woes or wonderful events would ever be my lot ...

Mary Shelley, Introduction to *Frankenstein*

In Michael Frayn's 1989 epistolary novel *The Trick of It*² the protagonist, RD, a professor of English in an obscure British university, marries a female novelist whose work he purports to have a great admiration for. Noted for the feminist bent of her fiction, RD's wife JL is considered by many to be one of the leading literary figures of her generation. Being married to his idol, however, does not prove easy for RD – as he reveals in the string of letters to a colleague in Australia which make up the novel.

Soon after the couple's marriage, in fact, RD discovers, to his great dismay, that each of his actions and everything he tells his wife is finding its way – often barely modified – into her books. RD has built his academic reputation on the analysis of JL's work. JL returns the favour by plundering every aspect of her husband's life for her fiction. Towards the end of the novel, while going through his wife's papers, RD even discovers that his literary spouse has had no qualms about 'using' his mother – an ordinary woman who has recently died after years of lonely widowhood – in the novel she is currently writing:

She's *naming* my mother in there [in her book]. I felt a flash of pure shame when I saw that, as if I'd opened a door and caught my mother naked. Her first name – her surname. She spares us nothing. I won't repeat them – I don't want to embarrass myself further ... When I read that, I felt as if my mother was alive again, and moving back and forth in front of me, in all her old anguish (160–1)

Everything about RD is grist for JL's mill. She 'spares' him nothing. Her appetite for the fact and detail of ordinary life is bulimic, insatiable.

2 The edition of *The Trick of It* to which page numbers refer is the Viking Adult hardback edition (New York, 1990), originally published in the UK by Picador Books in 1989.

She is the classic embodiment of the omnivorous artist for whom every aspect of human existence that comes within her sphere of experience or observation will, sooner or later, be turned into material for fiction. To her, nothing is so inconsequential as to be negligible, nothing is superfluous, nothing must be wasted. Unsurprisingly, RD proves incapable of dealing with his wife’s behaviour and their marriage soon breaks down.

In her practice of exploiting the lives of those around her for the sake of her fiction, RD’s wife is similar to Briony Tallis, the protagonist of Ian McEwan’s 2001 novel *Atonement*. Like Frayn’s female protagonist, Briony scrutinizes the lives of those who surround her for inspiration for her fiction. Whereas nowhere in *The Trick of It*, though, is there any indication that JL has any motive other than that of fiction-writing to invade her husband’s privacy, this is not entirely the case where McEwan’s Briony is concerned. The latter’s interest in her family members’ lives has, indeed, an ulterior, more sinister motive — that of gaining power over the members of her immediate circle.

Briony Tallis is but thirteen when the novel opens. In spite of her inexperience, though, she has already come to the realization that all human relationships — even love relationships — involve power. This word stands out in Briony’s reflections on the scene by the fountain (‘what power one [person] could have over the other...’ — p. 39). The relish Briony derives from feeling powerful vis-à-vis her family members is one of the most unlikeable aspects of her personality — and what makes this characteristic even more irksome to the reader is the fact that Briony does not appear to shed this thirst for power as she grows older. The Briony the reader encounters in the coda is as prone to deriving pleasure from exerting influence over her family as the Briony of Part I is.

In the course of the novel Briony is seen longing for different kinds of power — the power that comes from being recognized as a good artist; the power involved in at once writing, directing, and starring in play; the power of being privy to other people’s secrets and the power that comes from being acknowledged and looked up to by one’s family members. Seeing Lola reduced to tears after having — as she thinks — been attacked by the angry twins, Briony is cruelly exhilarated by ‘a sense of her own power’ (p. 118). When Briony reaches Lola in the moments following the girl’s rape (Lola still lies on the ground, strangely silent)

Briony is overcome with a 'strange elation' (p. 165). After handing over Robbie's note to the police in Chapter 14, Briony uses her mother as a shield against the angry Cecilia. She is aware of her sister's fury at her betrayal. In spite of this, she perversely experiences 'the onset of a sweet and inward rapture' (p. 179) at the importance which her role as principal witness of her cousin's rape gives her with the adults present.

Another similarity between JL and Briony lies in the fact that both women believe that that which is cast in language is superior to plain reality. The reality that counts is that which is 'trapped' by words and ink on a page. In her fiction, JL weaves feminist narratives which her readers consider startlingly realistic. She evidently wants her words to be seen as receptacles of valuable truths about women's lives. This attitude to language is very similar to that of McEwan's protagonist in *Atonement*. On p. 41, the reader is given a glimpse into Briony's attitude to language and the published word. For Briony, the significance of any event is determined by the medium of print. For her, in the real world as in the world of literature, the word reigns supreme. Everything, even the truth, is subservient to it: 'She ... knew that whatever actually happened drew its significance from the published work and would not have been remembered without it (p. 41).

From the very opening of *Atonement*, McEwan takes care to present his protagonist Briony as someone obsessed with becoming a writer. As Brian Finney points out in the essay 'Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*',³ Briony is first presented to the reader of the novel as a writer, then as a young adolescent. Though she is only a girl when the novel opens, Briony is convinced that she is destined for greatness. As far as she is concerned, indeed, her destiny is already decided – she will be a writer, even if this requires that she subordinate every other aspect of her life in pursuit of this goal. McEwan also makes it clear that Briony's obsession with being a writer is dangerous, given the intensity of the girl's drive to exert control over her surroundings. The opening pages of the novel, mainly concerned as they are with Briony's composition of her insipid melodrama *The Trails of Arabella* and with her efforts to prepare the house for its staging, efficiently bring home to the reader the power of her twin obsessions – that of crowning her literary ambitions and that of imposing order.

3 *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Winter 2004), 68–78, 74.

Briony is a girl with a strong impulse to impose her own version of order on the world around her (or those aspects of it which interest her or impinge upon her life most directly). In Part I, the omniscient narrator's depiction of the young Briony's obsession with order is ruthless in its closely-observed detail. The second page of the novel presents her as 'one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so' (p. 4), 'just so' being the way Briony herself thinks things should be. This is evident throughout Part I, from the manner in which she keeps her own bedroom, in the austere tidiness of which she takes great pride, to the thoroughness with which she sifts that which happens around her so as to pick out suitable material for her writing, to the quasi-fanatical assiduity with which she applies herself to her writing every day (she even misses meals, we are told, in the 'tempest of composition' in which *The Trials of Arabella* is composed!). She is even originally attracted to experimenting with drama, the reader is told, because it seems to her (temporarily, of course) to be a remarkably 'tidy[]' genre (p. 8).

Despite all her pretensions to adulthood and maturity, Briony is naïve and frightened by the opaqueness of adult existence. Foolishly, she thinks all the complications of human existence can be made good in fiction, a medium which, unlike the messiness of everyday life, is well-ordered and clearly circumscribed:

The pages of a recently finished story seemed to vibrate in her hand with all the life they contained. Her passion for tidiness was also satisfied, for an unruly world could be made just so. A crisis in a heroine's life could be made to coincide with hailstones, gales and thunder, whereas nuptials were generally blessed with good light and soft breezes. (p. 7)

Briony's play is to be staged under her direction and to star Briony herself in the role of the protagonist. As little as possible will be left to chance. Soon, however, life's complications rear their ugly heads. The twins are reluctant to participate and candidly admit that they hate acting. Finally, Lola's usurpation of the part of Arabella deals the death-blow to the neat order of Briony's plan, making the girl disenchanted with the play and – ultimately – leading her to drop the project altogether.⁴

4 See p. 37: 'Lola had stolen Briony's rightful role'.

Briony's first impulse to write mature fiction is sparked off by her secret observation of a scene enacted by Robbie and Cecilia by the triton fountain in Chapter 3. Typically, Briony attempts to interpret this scene according to the fictional plots and archetypes she is accustomed to. However, the scene resists this kind of interpretation – the order of events, as far as Briony has been able to follow them, appears to fit none of the narrative sequences she has been exposed to so far. 'The sequence was illogical – the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal. Such was Briony's last thought before she did not understand ...' (p. 39).

Briony is deeply frustrated by her inability to interpret this scene, a scene which coincides with none of the plots she is familiar with. Briony's impulse to impose order on her world is so strong that any deviation from what she sees as order causes her deep frustration ('Voices and images were ranged around her bedside, agitated, nagging presences, jostling and merging, resisting her attempts to set them in order ...' – p. 183).

Upon observing the scene by the fountain and discovering herself incapable of interpreting it Briony, in Part I, is overwhelmed with the realisation that adult life is endlessly complicated and that it would be easy for someone like her, standing on the threshold of adult life, to 'get everything wrong, completely wrong': 'Clearly, these were the kinds of things that happened ... This was not a fairy tale, this was the real, adult world in which frogs did not address princesses, and the only messages were the ones that people sent' (pp. 39–40).

The girl therefore determines to abandon the *genres* she had formerly worked with (narratives inspired by fairy-tales and didactic melodrama) and describe the scene she has witnessed 'from three points of view' with the aim of coming to an objective interpretation of it. As James Wood shows in his penetrating 2002 review entitled 'The Trick of Truth',⁵ though, Briony soon jettisons her decision not to allow her writing to be determined by 'the cumbrous struggle between good and bad, heroes and villains' and sets about 'impos[ing] a plot' on the seemingly impenetrable sequence of events: 'What Briony saw was in truth plotless, because it could not be made to mean. Yet a plot is exactly what she imposes ...'.

5 James Wood, 'The Trick of Truth', *New Republic*, 25 March 2002.

The end-result of Briony's labours is that she shapes 'a story that fits, that makes too much sense'. At seventy-seven, Briony still hasn't changed her ways. As Wood puts it: 'She could not resist the chance to spare the young lovers, to continue their lives in fiction, to give the story a happy ending.'

Nowhere is Briony's longing to be admired by the family more evident than in the girl's reaction to Robbie and the children's return at the end of Part I. When the young man, whom Briony has cast in the role of violent sexual offender, appears at the Tallis house with the rescued Quincey twins, the girl is annoyed that he should have the temerity to defy the plot she has been developing in her mind ('... 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?' – p.183), a plot which involves the defeat of a subtle villain as hypocritical as he is dangerous (Robbie) by an intrepid young heroine (Briony herself) and the subsequent hailing of the same heroine by her family as its preserver. Briony finds Robbie's rescue of the twins, which seems calculated to set him in a good light with her family and the police, deeply frustrating. By bringing the twins safely home he has disrupted the smooth development of her plot, sabotaged her story: 'If it was brave to have identified a thoroughly bad person, then it was wrong of him to turn up with the twins like that, and she felt cheated ... All her work, all her courage and clear-headedness, all she had done to bring Lola home – for nothing ...' (pp.183–4).

'[F]or nothing' in the sense that Briony herself will receive no reward or acknowledgement for the part she has played. Lola's rescue and the finding of the twins are matters of little consequence to Briony at this time.

Briony's longing to have an important role in her immediate circle, to be looked up to by her family, is evidently not just a young girl's natural desire to enter the adult world and to have her opinions acknowledged by her elders. The part Briony longs to play in her family circle is similar to that of the didactic omniscient narrator of Victorian fiction who manipulates his characters' destinies to particular effect and ultimately rewards his good characters while punishing the evil ones. The only characteristic of the omniscient Victorian narrator that Briony doesn't crave is his invisibility, his ability to stay above things!

Like the Victorian third-person narrator, who exerts strict and exclusive control over his characters' lives, Briony feels it incumbent upon her to impose her authority over those who surround her. So strong is Briony's tendency to judge others that, in Part I, McEwan not only shows us Briony being morally judgemental about Cecilia but also about the very characters she creates – Arabella is punished for running away with the wicked count, to be later redeemed by her love for the doctor-*cum*-prince:

The reckless passion of the heroine, Arabella, for a wicked foreign count is punished by ill fortune... Fortune presents her a second chance in the form of an impoverished doctor – in fact, a prince in disguise who has elected to work among the needy... Arabella chooses judiciously this time, and is rewarded by a reconciliation with her family... (p. 3).

After dropping her theatrical project, Briony runs outside and vents her frustration on a nettle growing behind the dilapidated temple on the lake. She imagines this nettle to be her cousin Lola and slashes at it wildly with a hazel branch, punishing it for Lola's 'various sins – pride, gluttony, avarice, unco-operativeness ...'. For each of these, the reader is told, the Lola-nettle 'paid with a life' (p. 74). When she sees the handcuffed Robbie being led towards the police car at the end of Chapter 14 of the novel, she reflects: 'It had the look of eternal damnation' (p. 184). Though, when deciding to change her attitude to writing in Chapter 3, Briony decides that 'She need not judge' (p. 40), in real life she reserves for herself the right to judge others – and even to chastise them for their faults!

Briony also longs to be admired as a contriver of desirable endings. In Chapter 10, shortly after reading Robbie's note, Briony conceives a story in which she plays the part of the heroine, a heroine insightful enough to see through the hypocrisy of a man everybody likes. This heroine will ultimately succeed in protecting a sister too infatuated to perceive the danger which threatens her:

Something irreducibly human, or male, threatened the order of the household, and Briony knew that, unless she helped her sister, they would all suffer ... this was the story of a man whom everybody liked, but about whom the heroine always had her doubts, and finally she was able to reveal that he was the incarnation of evil' (p. 115).

McEwan’s use of the word ‘order’, here, gives us an interesting insight into the girl’s subconscious attitude to sexuality. Incapable or unwilling to comprehend Robbie’s and her sister’s relationship, she sees Robbie’s behaviour as monstrous (‘he was the incarnation of evil’) and as a disruption of the ‘order’ of the household.

By the time the family sits down to dinner in Chapter 12, Briony has designated Robbie the ‘monster’ (p. 119), the ‘maniac’ (pp. 119, 157), the ‘villain[...]’ (p. 158) of the drama which is unfolding. In Chapter 14 free indirect speech enables McEwan to express the girl Briony’s frustration at Robbie Turner’s return in the heroic garb of saviour of lost children – of ‘the good shepherd’, as Briony contemptuously reflects (p. 183). In this chapter, after Briony has given witness against him to her family and the police as the perpetrator of a crime he is not even aware of, Robbie makes his way back to the Tallis house with the lost boys. The ‘giant seven or eight feet high’ (p. 182) who, it at first seems, is approaching the house turns out to be the charwoman’s son carrying one twin on his back and leading the other by the hand. In swapping his role of villain for that of brave rescuer of lost children, Robbie disrupts Briony’s carefully-laid plot, ironically leading her to make a reflection on evil which is probably far more applicable to her own behaviour than to that of the young man:

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 (p. 183).

The cook Betty (‘who [i]s known to be a Catholic’ – p. 182) crosses herself upon seeing the strange creature approach the house at the end of the eventful night. In a chapter from *The Seven Basic Plots*⁶ entitled ‘Overcoming the Monster’, Christopher Booker explains how the monster can never look exactly like a normal human being – that wouldn’t work. Indeed, it is the difference in appearance between the monster and a normal person that alerts the reader to the creature’s monstrous nature: ‘... the point about the ‘monster’ in storytelling is

6 Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots – Why We Tell Stories* (London, 2004), 21–9.

that it can be portrayed as anything but a whole, ideal human being ...' (p. 461).⁷

When the members of the Tallis household first see Robbie approaching the house in the hazy dawn, what they see is: '... an indefinable shape, no more than a greyish smudge against the white ...'. In this scene, the mysterious approaching figure is referred to through such words as 'shape', 'apparition', and 'thing'.⁸ From a distance, Robbie and the sleeping Pierrot, who sits on his shoulders, look like a 'giant [...] seven to eight feet high...' (p. 182). The Tallises and their servants' perception of the approaching creature is obviously influenced by Briony's revelation of Robbie's evil and her production of the young man's note to Cecilia. The figure of 'Robbie the rescuer of children' has no place in the scenario Briony has devised, where Robbie has been assigned the role of Frankenstein's creature, the eternal outcast prowling outside honest citizens' homes with evil intent. If Robbie, upon his arrival, resembles the merciful Christ-figure of the New Testament, the role claimed by Briony is that of the jealous, judgemental god of the Old Testament.⁹

Briony's reaction to Robbie's note reveals an important contradiction in her – she wants to be part of the adult world, but is not yet ready to accept certain aspects of it, notably that notoriously disruptive force which is human sexuality. In this, she is not unlike other child

7 All this is vividly reminiscent of Othello's predicament in William Shakespeare's early-17th-century tragedy. At the heart of the Moor's tragedy is the fact that he doesn't feel he belongs in Venice – a fact visually expressed by the colour of his skin – and that the envious hypocrite Iago keeps reminding him of the differences which separate him from native-born Venetians. It also reminds us of the Creature's unhappy situation in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). The Creature is forced into the role of outcast from the moment he is brought to life, mainly as a consequence of his hideous physical appearance. Victor Frankenstein himself sees the Creature as a 'catastrophe' and a 'wretch' (p. 69); he confesses himself unable 'to endure the aspect of the being I had created' (p. 70). The Creature himself soon comes to see himself as an untouchable, an object of fear and disgust to humans: '... the children shrieked, and one of the women fainted. The whole village was roused ... until, grievously wounded by stones and other kinds of missile weapons, I escaped' (p. 132).

8 These words recall the vague, plastic appearance of Lola's retreating assailant as seen by Briony in Chapter 13. Upon Briony's irruption upon the scene, this withdrawing figure is described as 'changing its shape in a complicated way' (p. 164). It is then first referred to as a 'vertical mass' and only afterwards as 'a person'. McEwan's use of the word 'person' here is important – Briony comes to the conclusion that the 'person' she has just glimpsed moving away is a man only after '[t]he remaining darker patch on the ground' calls 'helplessly' to her and its voice turns out to be that of her cousin Lola, who Briony concludes has just been attacked.

9 A God Briony is not averse to comparing herself with in the novel – see pp. 158 and 371.

characters in earlier fiction: ‘Like Leo in *The Go-Between* and Maisie in *What Maisie Knew*, Briony is a child who becomes involved in an adult sexual relationship that she is ill equipped to understand.’¹⁰

Writing about the treatment of sexuality in Western narratives in *The Seven Basic Plots – Why We Tell Stories*, Christopher Booker¹¹ expounds on the Freudian distinction between the ‘self’ (the part of the brain concerned with habitual, repetitive behaviour, and which is therefore highly influenced by the past) and the ‘ego’, the seat of sexual fantasy. Since the eighteenth century, Booker explains, narratives in the West have come ‘increasingly to be spun out of the fantasy level of the mind’ (p. 456).¹² In her insistence on fitting Robbie and Cecilia into the roles of assailant and victim, and in her assigning Robbie the roles of ‘monster’ and ‘maniac’, Briony reveals that she has given in to the natural human urge to construct fantastical sexual narratives out of the tools available – the members of the fantasist’s immediate circle. The fact that her fantasies are based on a partial knowledge of the facts is also significant in the light of Freud’s arguments. As Booker goes on to assert, ‘It is indeed the essence of ego-based fantasies that they feed on images which are unresolved and incomplete’ (p. 461).

What precipitates the tragedy which lies at the heart of the novel is the fact that it is not only *her own* life that Briony is willing to subordinate to her literary ambitions but the lives of those around her to. At the opening of the novel, thus, we see Briony huffing at the inconvenience posed by drama - a play simply can’t act itself out but needs people to bring it to life! Some ‘cousins from the North’, though, are about to descend on the Tallis house as a consequence of a family tragedy. Why not rope them in, Briony wonders, to act the minor parts in the play? They cannot but be thrilled at the chance to participate – though not, of course, to star – in one of their gifted cousin’s productions! Briony’s selfishness and her scant capacity for empathy are ironic in the light of the belief the girl conceives early on in the novel that she will only be able to discard the fairy-tale archetypes of her childhood and begin to write mature fiction if she exposes herself to scenes of real life – of ‘the strangeness of the here and now’ – and strives to make sense of them. In the course of the novel, however, her self-centredness and

10 Finney, 72.

11 Booker, 456, 461.

12 *Ibid.* 456.

‘self-mythologising’ (p. 4) are seen repeatedly getting in the way of her efforts to penetrate other people’s experience both emotionally and psychologically.

In an interesting episode in Chapter 3 of the novel the reader is given access to a deep speculation unfolding in Briony’s mind – a speculation on the ‘mystery’ of whether other people’s consciousness of themselves is as strong as her own:

... 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, with a finger held up to her face? Did everybody, including her father, Betty, Hardman? (p. 36)

Briony’s immature suspicion that other people are not as alive to themselves as she is to herself may go a long way towards accounting for the condescending, often proprietorial, attitude she manifests towards others. Though her aspiration is that of becoming an artist, her behaviour towards her family members often resembles that of a none-too-ethical scientist performing experiments on captive animals. In light of this, it is fitting that the toy animals in her room are arranged rigidly in parallel rows, seemingly ready ‘to break into song’ at an order from their owner. The meticulous tidiness of her room and the stern stances of her ‘straight-laced’ (p. 115), ‘hard-faced’ (p. 116) dolls reflect her idea of life and her image of herself as a superior, blameless being. The girl’s attitude to life is prescriptive and unyielding. She observes the actions of the adults at the Tallis home keenly in the belief that her observations will help her make sense of adult life and open up new paths for her writing. She is convinced that Cecilia, Robbie and Leon’s actions represent the reality which she should learn about and come to terms with if she is to become a good novelist. Her mother she barely deigns with a thought. Whereas she utterly fails to understand the other three, Briony’s estimation of her mother is correct. She sees Emily Tallis, a woman still in her mid-forties, as a person whose job in life is done. When Briony *does* spare her mother a thought, indeed, it is to think of the very proper figure she herself will cut at the woman’s funeral: ‘Her mother was forty-six, dispiritingly old. One day she would

die. There would be a funeral in the village at which Briony's dignified reticence would hint at the vastness of her sorrow...' (p. 161)

However, (mainly due to her tendency to *misunderstand* adults' actions and to her not being blessed with much emotional insight), adult people's reality is often impenetrable to her. In Chapter 3 McEwan, masterful in his use of free indirect speech, reveals what goes on in the girl's mind after witnessing the scene at the triton fountain:

Clearly, these were the kinds of things that happened ... now it could no longer be fairy tales and castles and princesses, but the strangeness of the here and now, of what passed between people, the ordinary people that she knew ... (p. 39)

'[T]he kinds of things that happened' are scenes such as the ones the girl has just witnessed, opaque scenes which seem to bear no relation to any of the fairy tale and fictional plots she is familiar with. The scene by the triton fountain is 'real' because it is possible, it has happened. Unbeknownst to Briony, however, it was by no means a *probable* scene in the context of the times. In the inter-war period the codes that governed women's behaviour were far more stringent than those of today. For an upper-class girl to behave the way Cecilia Tallis does at the fountain would have been all but inconceivable in the 1930s.

Briony's determination, in the opening pages of *Atonement*, to exploit *The Trials of Arabella* to draw as much attention to herself as possible will later be reflected in her 'atonement novel', a text in which she plays numerous parts. Just as, in the case of her melodramatic play, Briony is the writer, promoter, director, and would-be star performer of the piece, in the 'atonement novel' Briony is not only the writer but also the protagonist and one of the principal narrators. Briony's being the writer of the 'atonement novel' ultimately means that, even though the other characters in the work are accorded a certain amount of autonomy (an autonomy, though, that not all the characters can lay claim to, notably Lola), it is ultimately Briony herself who determines the manner in which her characters and their stories develop in the text. As the 77-year-old Briony admits in the final part of the book (the coda), which is narrated in the first person, she has also taken it upon herself to trim inconvenient truths and uncomfortable facts out of her narrative – she refrains from acquainting her readers with the lovers'

deaths, for example, assuming that her audience will want to have nothing to do with such tragedy – ‘Who would want to believe that?’, she asks, ‘except in the service of the bleakest realism?’ (p. 371). Here Briony reverts to the role of ‘imposer of plots’, a role she incarnates to perfection in Part I.

Briony’s belief in the strength of the written word, her conceit, and her propensity to manipulate others are nowhere made more clear than in her attitude to the two letters received by the Tallises in Part I. Briony’s anxiety to come into possession of these letters, to control their destinies and to be their main interpreter are very strong. Evidently she sees the letter as a tool of power in that it gives the reader access to the writer’s thoughts and situation – and, hence, power over that person. At no point in Joe Wright’s 2007 film adaptation of *Atonement* is the gifted actress Saoirse Ronan’s performance as Briony more intense than in the scenes in which she is seen handling Robbie and the twins’ letters. She snatches and grabs at the pieces of paper while her eyes express a manic hunger. The savage recklessness with which Ronan’s Briony tears open the envelope which encloses Robbie’s note, the way she pounces on the twins’ letter and, later, her energetic, frenzied rummaging through Cecilia’s dressing-table drawers in search of Robbie’s note are truly memorable.

Briony’s situation in the early chapters of the novel is sublimely ironic. The girl is convinced that she can only mature as a writer if she observes and experiences adult life. Blissfully unaware of the fact that her present immaturity will not *allow* her to understand adult life, no matter how closely she observes it, she sets about scrutinizing Ah, yes..., judging, and meddling in the lives of the adults who surround her. Another of her qualities which limits her emotional insight is her quasi-solipsistic preoccupation with her writing, which makes her very detached in her attitude to other people. Observing Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain sets her creativity on fire, filling her with a strong urge ‘to begin writing again’ (p. 40). ‘She could’, she goes on to reflect, ‘write the scene three times over, from different points of view’ (p. 40). Her obsession with becoming a writer blinds her to the absurdity of her ambitions – she wishes to ‘write’ a scene she is aware she may not have fully understood! Significantly she also plans to include a hidden observer (who would play the part Briony herself had played in

the scene) in her narrative: '... she sensed she could write a scene like the one by the fountain and she could include a hidden observer like herself' (p. 40). Her narcissism would hardly allow her to leave herself out of the story! Later on in the novel, when Briony, out searching for the missing twins, approaches the swimming pool in the Tallis grounds, she imagines herself finding the corpses of the two boys bobbing on the surface of the pool and writing about it!: She thought how she might describe it, the way they bobbed on the illuminated water's gentle swell, and how their hair spread like tendrils and their clothed bodies softly collided and drifted apart ... (p. 156)

Briony evidently experiences no anxiety or sorrow at the prospect that the twins may have had a fatal accident. She is ready to make use of their destiny – however ghastly or tragic it may turn out to be – for her writing. In Chapter 10, Lola's revelation of her distress (the girl had just been molested by Marshall) had filled Briony with cruel pleasure. Lola's narration of the 'torture' she has undergone, we are told, fills Briony with 'an agitation that is close to joy'. '[W]hat lay behind this near-joyful feeling', the reader is told, is pleasure in her (Briony's) position of power vis-à-vis her cousin, 'That a girl so brittle and domineering should be brought this low by a couple of nine-year-old boys seemed wondrous to Briony, and it gave her a sense of her own power' (p. 118).

What Briony doesn't know, of course – and doesn't have the empathy to imagine – is that her cousin has just been groped by an adult and not pestered by a couple of puny boys. Another episode in which we see Briony revelling in her sense of power comes later in the evening when she feels she has succeeded in convincing Leon and her mother of Robbie's evil propensities. On this occasion too she is, we are told, overcome with an exhilarating sense of power, something she childishly confuses with an acknowledgement, on the part of those around her, of her adulthood, '... the way she was listened to, deferred to and gently prompted seemed at one with her new maturity ... Briony was their only source ...' (p. 173)

In Chapter 14 of Part I Briony's reaction to her sister's sorrow on seeing Robbie accused of rape and arrested is pathetic in that it at once reveals that the girl has understood nothing of what has been going on between her sister and Robbie and that she is incapable of seeing that her relationship with her sister will never recover from her actions of

that night. Briony's reaction to her sister's behaviour on this fateful night is a paramount example of the girl's lack of empathy with others. That night, Cecilia appears 'hopeless and helpless' (p. 177) to Briony. Briony wants to be 'there for her', 'thinking clearly on her behalf' (p. 177). When, in Chapter 14, Cecilia runs out to bid farewell to Robbie, Briony naïvely assumes that she is forgiving him for what he has done to Lola and marvels at Cecilia's goodness. Childishly, Briony assumes that Robbie's arrest will reinforce the relationship between the sisters and accord Briony a protective role over her sister ('this tragedy was bound to bring them closer' – p. 185). Having defeated the monster, she illudes herself that the clock hands can be pushed back to the prelapsarian world of the girls' childhood, but with one vital alteration – it is now the newly-grown-up and mature Briony who will provide consolation and guidance and who will help her sister overcome her nightmares, not vice versa. Unlike Cecilia and the others, Briony sees her actions of that night in the light of her new role as adult writer. Her opening of Robbie's note she justifies as a symptom of the artist's need to understand the world around her, 'Difficult to describe the impulsive moment, when she had not permitted herself to think of the consequences before acting, or how the writer she had only that day become needed to know, to understand everything that came her way (p. 180).

Briony's willingness to describe the twins' floating corpses, the detachment with which she views Lola's sorrow and her attitude to her sister's sorrow in Part I may be a forewarning of the 'amorality' which the prose she would later write would be 'known for' (p. 41).

From the opening of the novel it is made clear that Briony's personality is characterized by a key contradiction – that between her manic love for order and her lively imagination, an imagination which, ironically, feeds her childish fantasies, making the prospect of her acquisition of emotional and intellectual maturity in the short term unlikely. The girl is a keen reader in whose life the world of the imagination plays an important part. As we discover over the course of the novel, she not only absorbs the content of works of fiction but also strives to imitate the styles of texts she has read.

A passage of authorial intrusion on p. 41 informs the reader that, before she arrived at the 'informal psychological realism' which characterizes the style of the final version of *Atonement*, she had 'written her way

through the whole history of literature, beginning with stories derived from the European tradition of folk tales, through drama with simple moral intent’. The style of the final version of Briony’s ‘atonement novel’ consists of a blend of the classic realism of the nineteenth-century novel and the psychological depth of twentieth-century literary fiction. Briony’s play *The Trials of Arabella*, with its archetypal themes of *parent-child conflict*, *virtue under stress*, and *virtue rewarded* and its use of devices such as that of hidden identity, bears witness to the influence of fairy tales as well as nineteenth-century sentimental and improving literature. The dark, mysterious count who persuades Arabella to elope is reminiscent of the archetype of the Byronic hero, of which Lord Byron’s protagonists The Corsair and Mazeppa as well as male fictional heroes such as the Brontës’ Heathchiff and Mr Rochester, and Dickens’s James Steerforth, are examples Briony may have been familiar with at the time of writing her play.

The doctor-prince, on the other hand, exemplifies another archetypal character in Western literature – that of the lover in disguise.¹³ Briony later experiments with the stream-of-consciousness technique, an *avant-garde* mode of narration introduced in the 1920s by writers such as Virginia Woolf (whose 1931 novel *The Waves*, Briony reads in between nursing shifts in Part III). This difficult, deeply psychological technique proves hard for Briony to handle. In the letter he writes Briony commenting on her novella *Two Figures by a Fountain*, a piece inspired by her observation of Cecilia and Robbie’s behaviour in Chapter 3 of Part I, Cyril Connolly, editor of the prestigious literary magazine *Horizon*, advises the young woman not to allow herself to be too influenced by the contemporary love for internal monologue,

- 13 Briony may actually have encountered the figure of the lover-disguised-as-doctor in Molière’s 1665 comedy *L’Amour Médecin* (*Love’s a Doctor*). The young Clitandre disguises himself as a doctor to gain access to his beloved Lucinde, whose cruel father is determined she will never marry. In the penultimate page of *Atonement* Briony’s thoughts, under the influence of the performance of *The Trials of Arabella* she has just attended, hark back to the archetypal figure of the doctor-cum-lover. With reference to her determination that the lovers should be remembered in the ‘happy-ever-after’ scenario she has given them rather than as the tragic couple they actually were, she says: ‘As long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love’ (p. 371). At the time of his arrest, in fact, Robbie, who has just come up from Cambridge with a first in English, is about to return to university with a view to pursuing a further degree – a medical one, this time. It is in the guise of the romantic medical lover that the old Briony would like him to be remembered and not as a convicted rapist.

a technique which, according to him, may be deleterious to the development of an aspect of fiction every reader at once craves and requires – the story. The technique, besides, as Briony acknowledges later in Part III, can in no way help her assuage her guilt about what she has done to Robbie: ‘Did she really think she could hide behind some borrowed notions of modern writing, and drown her guilt in a stream – three streams! – of consciousness? The evasions of her little novel were exactly those of her life’ (p. 320).

It is only after fifty-nine years and after she has discarded several draft versions of her atonement narrative, however, that Briony succeeds in acquiring sufficient emotional sympathy with Robbie and Cecilia to write a truly insightful narrative about them, a narrative which foregrounds the lovers’ passion and Briony’s criminal meddling.

The perennial struggle between Briony’s love for order and the liveliness of her imagination is the principal source of complexity and creative tension in her character. Briony’s imagination stimulates and feeds her creativity, while her love for order leads her (mainly in the opening parts of the novel) to try and impose archetypal patterns on her plots, to fit herself and her characters into roles she has encountered in the course of her reading or to imitate the literary styles which influence her. Indeed one would probably be justified in asserting that the tragedy of *Atonement* emanates from the child Briony’s subordination of truth to fiction on the fateful night of the rape.

Briony sees and judges her world in terms of the books she reads. Looking upon the scene between Robbie and Cecilia in Chapter 3, Briony at first assumes that what is going on is that stock scene from melodrama – *poor but deserving boy asks rich girl for her hand in marriage*:

A proposal of marriage. Briony would not have been surprised. She herself had written a tale in which a humble woodcutter saved a princess from drowning and ended by marrying her. What was presented here fitted well. Robbie Turner, only son of a humble cleaning lady and of no known father, Robbie who had been subsidised by Briony’s father through school and university, had wanted to be a landscape gardener, and now wanted to take up medicine, had the boldness of ambition to ask for Cecilia’s hand. It made perfect sense. Such leaps across boundaries were the stuff of daily romance ... (p. 38).

As we learn in Part II, Briony has not only *written* a tale about a princess’s being saved from drowning, but *enacted* it too – with poor Robbie in the role of the ‘humble woodcutter’! In the second part of the novel we read how a ten-year-old Briony had orchestrated a scene in which she got to play the romantic heroine opposite Robbie who is compelled to save the day by rescuing the damsel in distress. The scene involves water, just as that between Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain does. The rescue episode, though, as set out and enacted by Briony, follows a strictly traditional pattern – the girl first gets Robbie to save her from drowning and then, to his bemusement, declares her love for him!

When events at the fountain take an unexpected turn, this leaves Briony frustrated and baffled. She has lost the plot and is therefore clueless: ‘The sequence was illogical – the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal ...’ (p. 39).

The final pages of Part I contain several allusions to Catholicism – Robbie depicted as the Good Shepherd; Betty crossing herself; Robbie, as he is taken away by the police, having ‘the look of eternal damnation’ (p. 184); Briony’s guilt and moral torment being compared to ‘a rosary to be fingered for a lifetime’ (p. 173). Catholicism teaches that one can gain access to eternal life only if one is in a state of grace. This can only be achieved if one gains absolution for one’s sins and makes fitting atonement for them. Atonement is what Briony seeks to achieve by writing the novel – not because she hopes to gain access to the Catholic or some other heaven (she is an atheist) but because she hopes to be able to make up for the terrible wrongs she has done her sister and Robbie Turner.

In an unfavourable review of the novel entitled ‘A Morbid Procedure’, novelist Anita Brookner probes Briony’s decision to use fiction so as to cleanse herself of her crime. Briony’s ‘atonement novel’, Brookner explains, is the story of a crime she herself commits at thirteen, a mistake which condemns her sister and the man she loved to dreadful misery and precipitates their deaths. This story, however, is intended to be published – and to be read by Briony’s readers – as fiction not autobiography. Brookner finds it preposterous that, of all the options open to Briony, she should have hit upon *this* means of making up for her crime. Though it is often assumed that

works of fiction are inspired by true events, Brookner continues, novel readers do not approach fiction in the same way they would a newspaper report or autobiography. By telling her story as fiction, Briony is making no admission of guilt. Her writing of her ‘atonement novel’, Brookner concludes, is at best a form of reparation. Nobody could possibly consider it an act of ‘atonement’! Brookner’s moral summing-up of Briony as she appears in the novel’s coda would be hard to challenge: ‘Elderly and celebrated, Briony expunges the guilt from which she has always suffered, whereas she might have fared better to have told the truth in the first instance.’¹⁴ In his review of McEwan’s novel in the *Christian Science Monitor*, Ron Charles makes a similar point from a practising Christian’s point of view: ‘The role of author entices us with the chance for endless revision, but assuming that role precludes the possibility of atonement with an Author outside ourselves.’¹⁵

Besides her love for order, her spirited imagination and her ambition, another important characteristic in Briony is her conceit. This trait manifests itself principally in the way the girl behaves towards her sister in Part I, but which stubbornly insists on emerging even in the later parts of the novel. Briony’s love for order makes her despise the untidiness of her elder sister who, we are told in a snippet of eloquent free indirect speech, lives in ‘a stew of unclosed books, unmade bed, unemptied ashtrays’ (pp. 4–5). Briony does not have the imagination or the empathy to reflect that the disorder of her sister’s room may actually be a *creative* disorder, reflective of Cecilia’s love for life and many interests and of the unsettled phase of her life she is going through at present. Unbeknownst to Briony, Robbie – another character in the novel who has not made up his mind about his future and who (like Briony herself) sees himself as an intrepid hero about to make his entrance on the world’s stage¹⁶ – also occupies a very disorderly room.¹⁷

14 Anita Brookner, ‘A Morbid Procedure – Review of Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*’, *The Spectator*, 15 September 2001.

15 Ron Charles, ‘A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Terror’, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 14 March 2002.

16 ‘Now, finally, with the exercise of will, his adult life had begun. There was a story he was plotting with himself as the hero, and already its opening had caused a little shock among his friends’ (p. 91).

17 Robbie’s room features an ‘unmade bed, [a] mess of discarded clothes, a towel on the floor

It is symptomatic of Briony’s conceit that it never enters her mind that the disorder which reigns in Cecilia’s room may be as indicative of an artistic nature as her own love of order. Cecilia loves nature as it is – something we see in the way she simply slides the cut flowers for Marshall’s room into the Meissen vase, allowing them to arrange themselves as they will in it. Briony, on the other hand, thinks nature should be reduced to order and sees literature as a means whereby this can be achieved. The difference between the two girl’s attitude to the external world could be described as that between the Augustan and the Romantic attitudes to nature, the one focussing on nature’s susceptibility to being dominated by man,¹⁸ the other on nature’s power and its ability to elevate man’s thoughts and his soul while reminding him of his littleness.¹⁹

Briony doesn’t think highly of Cecilia’s ability to protect herself from danger. Like other young people her age who yearn for other people’s approval and admiration, Briony longs for someone to protect. Soon, she hits upon her older sister – a girl whose room is a mess and who is so weak as to allow herself to be bullied into stripping out of doors by the charwoman’s son – as the target of her concern. Though willing to take on an adult supervisory role towards her sister, Briony conspicuously fails to involve herself in situations where her help

...’ (p. 80) and a table on which numerous opened books are piled as well as the typewriter on which Robbie’s note to Cecilia is typed.

- 18 Best embodied, perhaps, in the 18th-century obsession with landscape gardening, an art which was then often discussed in terms of the care and wisdom shown by God the Father Himself in his Creation of the world. Martin Battestin, in *The Providence of Wit: Aspects of Augustan Literature and the Arts* (London, 1974), provides a relevant quotation from John Donne (one of many similar assertions made by 18th-century experts on agriculture) in which this lecturer on agriculture compares noblemen and rich persons who improve their agricultural land to God the Creator: ‘And it is one good sign in these bad days ... to see our Princes, our Nobles and the Rich among us, conversant therein, and employing their thoughts and wealth in designing and making gardens and orchards, in planting them with all kinds of fruit, in laying out walks, cutting avenues, and opening vistas, and fertilizing their lands, till the country around them, that was barren and desolate, becomes like the Garden of Eden, yielding whatever is pleasant to the sight, and good for food’ (p. 43).
- 19 Referred to in Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) as ‘the sublime’, those aspects of nature which, in their extreme wildness and power, take us back to our primitive selves, enabling us to experience fear and awe to a degree which would otherwise remain unknown to us: ‘Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling’ (London, 2008, 36).

is required. When the twins' room has to be tidied up and the twins dressed and looked after, it is Cecilia, *pace* Briony, who makes herself responsible for these tasks: 'She began restoring order, making the beds, kicking off her high heels to mount a chair to fix the curtain, and setting the twins small achievable tasks' (p. 100).

Briony, on the other hand, makes it a point to ignore the emotionally needy twins Pierrot and Jackson. There is no cachet to be earned from being liked by two needy and bewildered boys.

Briony first dons the 'protector' cloak when she reads Robbie's note to her sister, a note the writer himself hands Briony in Chapter 8. She finds the letter deeply offensive and immediately begins to fear the influence Robbie may acquire over Cecilia: 'she did not doubt that her sister was in some way threatened and would need her help' (p. 114).

Briony's conviction that Cecilia is in need of her protection precludes her from feeling gratitude for her older sister's care, even though the novel makes it clear that Cecilia has played an important part in the girl's life, such as when she would wake her up from nightmares with the words '*Come back*' (words Cecilia would later use in her letters to Robbie in France). In Chapter 4 we see Cecilia stopping Briony, frustrated by her cousins' lack of enthusiasm over the play, from trampling on the promotional poster for the play which the girl had painted herself. The narrator's comment on this action of Cecilia's is pregnant with suggestion: 'This would not be the first time she [Cecilia] had rescued Briony from self-destruction' (p. 44).

From the moment Briony reads the note Robbie hands her in Chapter 8, she becomes convinced that the Tallis house is threatened by a monster in disguise. The judgement she passes on Robbie is as sudden as it is absolute. The Tallis estate must be rid of him. 'Order must be imposed' (p. 115). At thirteen, Briony knows little of adult relationships and sexuality. Upon reading Robbie's note to Cecilia, hence, she immediately turns against the young man. As we are told on p.115, 'she couldn't forgive Robbie his disgusting mind'.

When, later, Briony comes upon Robbie and Cecilia in the library she is struck by the contrast between Cecilia's fragility and Robbie's strength and is fired with a desperate impulse to protect her sister from this wild young man who appears to have her in his grasp:

He [Robbie] looked so huge and wild, and Cecilia with her bare shoulders and thin arms so frail that Briony had no idea what she could achieve as she started to go towards them. She wanted to shout, but she could not catch her breath, and her tongue was slow and heavy (p. 123).

In Chapter 14, when she is separated from the others while out looking for the twins, she imagines – in yet another instance of self-mythologizing – being stalked and attacked by Robbie: ‘He might have doubled back, and be waiting for her with murderous thoughts behind the stable block ...’ (p. 157).

It is quite likely that the man Briony has designated a sexual predator may reveal himself a bloodthirsty murderer too!

Next in line is Lola Quincey – who lies to Briony both about how she acquires the scratches on her arms and, later, about her rapist’s identity. Annoyed with Lola’s sabotage of her play and, perhaps, subconsciously jealous of the older girl’s sexual attractiveness, Briony is delighted by the sense of power which seeing Lola suffer gives her. After interrupting the rape, Briony takes it upon herself to bear witness against Lola’s assailant (who, she assumes, is Robbie as well): ‘She had no doubt. She could describe him. There was nothing she could not describe ...’ (p. 165).

In spite of her willingness to judge others and to castigate villains, however, Briony doesn’t show too great a willingness to analyse her *own* behaviour. In her immaturity she assumes that her own actions and motivations must be blameless – also, she makes no effort to predict their consequences. On p. 174 the reader is told that she sees herself as ‘guiltless’, and her role in identifying the rapist as ‘vital’. Considering her distraught sister after Robbie’s arrest, she reflects that Cecilia would now need to be consoled by her and that ‘this tragedy was bound to bring them [the two sisters] closer’ (p. 186). Similarly, as she approaches the supine figure of her cousin in Chapter 13, she is overcome by a ‘flowering of tenderness’ for her. ‘Together’, Briony tells herself, Lola and her ‘faced real terrors. She and her cousin were close’ (p. 165). In the light of the distance and calculated coldness which will characterize the two girls’ relationship in the future, this statement is nothing short of pathetic. Briony’s self-delusion really knows no bounds.

In Part I Briony's arrogant judgement of Robbie and her inability to understand what is going on between him and Cecilia leads her to tell the crucial lie which will fill her with remorse for the rest of her life. It is only when she sheds her childhood self-righteousness that the psychological insight which characterises the final draft of her 'atonement novel' can be achieved. This said, though, the coda makes it evident that Briony, even at age 77, cannot resist the temptation of interfering in 'the lovers' lives. Her audience, she believes, will not accept a narrative in which Cecilia and Robbie die young after years of suffering and separation. What, therefore, does she do? She alters the real plot to provide her readers with a happy ending, one in which the deserving lovers, cruelly separated by fate, are rewarded with a peaceful 'happy ever after' – perhaps in the cottage in Wiltshire Cecilia mentions in Part III (p.347). What is pathetic about Briony's interference here is that she actually appears to think her audience will see these 'convenient distortions' (p. 356) as her way of showing affection towards Robbie and Cecilia. Can she be serious? Is it possible that, at age 77, she is no less manipulative than she was as a child? Has she, as she had intended as a 13-year-old, succeeded in shedding traditional romantic plots and archetypes for a more mature outlook on the world? It seems not, given the fact that the literary conventions she had based her writing on as a child are still allowed to hold sway over her work in old age!

In Part I, McEwan's Briony Tallis has no qualms about pillaging Cecilia and Robbie's lives for material for her fiction. The 77-year-old Briony the reader encounters in the novel's coda, however, evidently believes her attitude to the couple has changed radically from what it was on the fateful night in 1935 when she accused Robbie of rape. This, however, is obviously not the case. The older Briony, for example, sees nothing wrong in donating the couple's private correspondence – conveyed to her by Robbie's companion-in-arms Nettle – to the War Museum²⁰ in London. Though this act is presented as being motivated by the generous intention of keeping the couple's love, embodied in their letters, alive, it never seems to have entered Briony's head that Robbie and Cecilia might *not* have wanted their private correspondence to be read by strangers in a museum library. In the novel's coda, the

20 The Museum McEwan probably has in mind here is the Imperial War Museum in Lambeth Road, London, which houses an extensive archive of books, prints, photographs and original documents (including hundreds of letters) relating to the two World Wars.

written word is just as much a target of avid quests and a sphere for power struggles as it is in the body of Briony's 'atonement novel'. In Briony's world the written word takes precedence over people's lives. For her who succeeds in acquiring power over it, that power is absolute.

In light of Briony's willingness to employ truth in the service of fiction in her 'atonement novel' it is perhaps fitting that her desire to have her most demanding work published should be thwarted by the very person with whom she shares the secret of what really happened on the night of Robbie's arrest: her cousin Lola. Married to Paul Marshall, whom the war which killed Cecilia and Robbie has vastly enriched, Lola is as pleased with the position she has secured for herself in society as Briony is with her own literary success. The fact that Briony's desire to publish a work it has taken her close on sixty years to write should be thwarted by a woman as ambitious as herself who, unlike her, does *not* want the events of that fateful night to be divulged is one of the many ironies which centre around McEwan's protagonist in *Atonement*.

In the coda, Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner are referred to as 'the lovers'. Is this, the reader of *Atonement* cannot but wonder, an indication of the fact that, over the years, Briony has persisted in seeing them primarily as latter-day embodiments of old romantic archetypes rather than as real people? Like another well-known creation of McEwan's, the vain and ambitious journalist Vernon Halliday of *Amsterdam*, Briony is prepared to sacrifice the private lives of her human subjects and the integrity of their experiences, on the altar of personal vanity. Ultimately, Briony's great failure is the one attributed by McEwan to the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks – a failure of empathy.²¹ 'Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself', McEwan wrote in *The Guardian* the week after the attacks, 'is at the heart of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality.'²² McEwan's argument is that, had the terrorists had the empathy to imagine the suffering they would cause, they would not have done what they did.

The ending of *Atonement* sees Briony still engaged in the task of trying to make the 'unruly world' of other people's lives 'just so' (p. 7). To the very end, she is incapable of seeing Robbie and Cecilia's role

21 A quality McEwan defines as the ability 'to think yourself into the minds of others'.

22 See Ian McEwan, 'Only Love and Then Oblivion. Love Was All They Had To Set Against Their Murderers', *The Guardian*, 15 September 2001.

in the fiction she has spun around them for what it is. For her they are ‘the lovers’, for the reader, ‘the victims’. Like the victims of the 9/11 massacre, the only weapon Briony’s victims can brandish in the face of her bigoted antagonism is their love. As McEwan famously asserted with reference to *Al Qaeda*’s victims: ‘As for their victims ...those snatched and anguished assertions of love²³ were their defiance.’

23 i.e. The calls made by people in the burning World Trade Centre to their loved ones in the moments before they died.