

Robbie's resentment



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Though Robbie Turner knows he is innocent of his purported crime, this knowledge hardly relieves his inner turmoil. Much of his time spent fighting in the war is also spent fighting with himself; he is unable to escape the constant fantasies of his potential life at home and the "what ifs" of his relationship with Cecilia. Though Robbie's daydreams of a normal life are what keep him going, their unattainability drives him into a pit of despair. Eventually, to seek solace, he resorts to blaming everyone else for his problems. Throughout Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, Robbie exhibits feelings of bitterness towards others while trying to reject the past, developing the theme of resentment.

Robbie channels his anger towards Briony as a way to cope with his situation and reject the events engendered by her actions. His hatred for her is born immediately after her false accusation, and it builds throughout his years in prison and the war. "Now he might be cleared, and that gave him joy . . . But he did not think his resentment of her could ever be erased" (McEwan 220). Even while cheering himself up by entertaining the thought of clearing his name upon his arrival back home, Briony's name still brings him feelings of resentment. "Yes, she was a child at the time, and he did not forgive her. He would never forgive her. That was the lasting damage (McEwan 220). Robbie also recognizes that Briony's mistake was made at a young age, but chooses to hate her regardless. This statement is ironic, because while trying to reject the past's events, Robbie is actually prolonging their damage by refusing to forgive and move on. He is determined to get back home and move forward with his life, but his obsessive detestation of Briony holds him back. This hatred is the foundation of *Atonement's* overarching theme of

resentment; Briony's inability to confess and Robbie's inability to forgive make it impossible for many of the book's characters to extinguish their resentment for each other. Cecilia and Briony are a prime example of this. Regarding Briony's false accusation, Cecilia's resentment for Briony is so strong that it cracks their bonds of sisterhood.

Robbie strives to reject the past by imagining what his life with Cecilia could have been had they experienced a normal courtship. He initially clings to Cecilia's words of farewell as his way to endure the horrors of prison and war, but over time, the words diminish in meaning and Robbie begins to resent Cecilia for her lack of action. "The words were not meaningless, but they didn't touch him now . . . One person waiting for another was like an arithmetical sum, and just as empty of emotion . . . She was waiting, yes, but then what?" (McEwan 246). Bitterness arises out of Robbie's ultimate realization that there will be no future for him and Cecilia, and he resents her for not trying harder to clear his name. Robbie's accumulated resentment for Cecilia epitomizes the book's message about the frailty of the love and family ties; over time, even the strongest bonds of love can be broken.

Robbie grows up as an honorary member of the Tallis household, and Jack Tallis is well aware of Robbie's integrity, but Jack's failure to stand up for him is a cold reminder of Robbie's lower status. "Robbie grew up with the run of the nursery and those other parts of the house the children were permitted, as well as the grounds . . . Jack Tallis took the first step in an enduring patronage by paying for the uniform and textbooks" (McEwan 82). Robbie resents Jack Tallis on a different level than he does Briony or Cecilia, because he knows that Jack could have used his affluence and high status to get him

out of jail. ““ They turned on you, all of them, even my father . . . They chose to believe the evidence of a silly, hysterical little girl . . . Now that I've broken away, I'm beginning to understand the snobbery that lay behind their stupidity”” (McEwan 196). Cecilia witnesses the dire effects on Robbie of Jack's classism and elitism, and thusly breaks ties with her father. In addition to the theme of classism, Jack and Robbie's relationship also connects to the theme of shame. Jack's absence at Lola and Paul's wedding suggests that he knows the real culprit is Paul Marshall, and feels too shameful about his lack of action to attend. Jack is trying his hand at rejecting the past here; instead of attending the wedding of a rapist and his victim, he represses any feelings of guilt toward Robbie by staying away.

As *Atonement* progresses, Robbie gradually becomes a shell of the bright, generous, and curious man he once was. The horrors of prison and war contribute to this loss of self, but above all, resentment is what eats away at Robbie's identity. His attempt to reject the past is counterproductive, instead leading to a fixation on unchangeable events, fostering resentment towards the Tallises, and hindering his ability to move on. Though none of Robbie's problems would be present without the actions of Paul Marshall, his bitterness is seemingly more intense towards the Tallises than it is towards (mistakenly) Danny Hardman, and then towards Marshall. This ties back to the theme of the restorative and destructive powers of family ties. He is more hurt by the Tallis' actions because he expected love from them, and got nothing in return.