

Parallel experiences shape atonement



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In a very meta fashion, *Atonement* repeatedly places emphasis and raises questions about the significance and the role of the writer in literature. By eventually revealing that Briony has been the one penning the story all along, readers are left doubting nearly everything they have read before. Briony/McEwan's comparisons of Robbie and Briony simultaneously paint Briony as a manipulative character influenced by class differences and a character that was truly trying to atone. While there is constantly an underlying importance in the role of the writer, the paramount issue is class differences. This overarching theme is largely seen through the parallel experiences of Robbie and Briony and the symbols that are shared between the two of them.

Robbie Turner is a character that is never granted freedom. He is always pent up in many ways: He has to serve a family during his youth, he is strangled by his love for Cecilia, he is imprisoned because of his love for Cecilia, and released on the grounds that he potentially – and later, literally – give his life for his country. This damnation is entirely caused by the grave that Briony digs for him. Eventually, during his time as a soldier, a piece of the war gets lodged inside of him in the form of shrapnel. Later on, during Briony's section, she removes pieces of shrapnel from many soldiers, who are frequently in worse shape than Robbie was. This is symbolic of Briony trying to redeem herself, especially as she briefly mentions how she was hoping Robbie would be one of the soldiers she would be taking care of. Even though she indirectly put Robbie in the line of fire, by saving the men in front of her, she is indirectly still trying to save Robbie. She is removing the pieces of shrapnel from every body she wishes was Robbie's – knowing that

these are pieces of war that she essentially lodged in his body, therefore trying to atone for her sins. While this could speak to the theme of the role of the writer, it ultimately speaks to the role of class differences in England, especially between Briony and Robbie. Briony's eternal inability to see past class differences is something that makes her character unredeemable. In this instance, the fact that she is placing Robbie in the warzone while simultaneously saving men from war's consequences is symbolic of the ubiquitous control that the upper class has over the lives of the lower class. This is also epitomized through the role of Paul Marshall, who uses Robbie as a pawn to escape his own consequences and guilt. Because Paul and Briony are members of the upper class, it is infinitely easier for them to be able to manipulate the role that people like Robbie will take. Robbie never had a say in whether or not he would be sent to prison or war (the absence of a trial made that abundantly clear). Instead, it was Paul and Briony who decided his fate for him. The fact that it is Briony who is saving people like him and Paul who is feeding people like him reinforce the idea that the soldiers and other lowly people's lives are completely handled by the elite. They have the choices: To feed, to starve; To save, to kill; To blame, to listen to. The value of a life is no longer an abstract, inspiring thing, but a unit that is assigned a dollar sign or a prison sentence. Try as she might to save the likes of Robbie, it was the likes of Briony that put him there in the first place.

Whether or not Briony learned anything significant or developed throughout the novel in a substantial way, caring for the Frenchman especially changed her view of the war. His death is significant and seemingly symbolic of Robbie, as well. By this point, Robbie had already died. However, throughout

the entirety of the war – and probably as soon as Briony convicted him – Robbie was forever stamped as a man who would not be able to fully be helped. Briony knew this even in the fabricated story she wrote “for him and Cee.” Coming clean about her lies would not impart justice upon a man married to his victim. Robbie would never receive proper reparations. Similarly, when she approaches the Frenchman, she is unable to help him and even “could not help feeling offended” because it would be a waste of her services elsewhere (287). While it would be easy for Briony to leave his side, find other patients who could be salvaged, and singlehandedly create a better world, she is ordered to stay by a man who would soon die. Spending time with him did nothing to tangibly create her legacy or perfect idealizations of herself. It was – by all means – a waste of time that could have been better-spent saving soldiers who had a chance, however immoral that is. That she spends his last moments with him; however, mirror the harsh realities of her life and interactions in relation to Robbie. For all intents and purposes, Robbie cannot be helped. Still she agonizes over the thought of him and what she has done. She sits and listens to the Frenchman who might not be deserving of her time when he needed her most. If she had sat and listened to Robbie (who she thought was not deserving of her time) when he needed her most, she might not have damned him. She creates a peaceful ending for the Frenchman’s life, and while she attempts to do that by penning their story, she never could truly reverse time and do that with Robbie.

The parallel experiences that Briony and Robbie both experience are meant to further mimic the major motif of class differences. The two characters are

so universally different, and yet, we see both of them completing their journeys in similar ways with similar symbols. Reiterating the importance and role of the author, pairing Briony and Robbie as dealing with similar hardships draws a level of understanding between the two of them. While we learn about Cecilia, Robbie and Briony are the only two minds we get to fully enter. In this way, the two become a pair and it creates a space to compare and contrast the two characters and their experiences. When they are both suffering from thirst and blisters, we see Robbie struggling with the idea of how much destruction and harm humans can inflict upon one another. He deals with the harshness and casualness with which war is approached. Briony gets glimpses of this through her experiences as a nurse, as well. Both of them come to the realization that nobody can be unaffected by war. They are also compared by their enduring pain. Robbie constantly, but silently, comments on the pain from his bullet wound. Meanwhile, when the drove of wounded soldiers arrive at Briony's hospital, she describes the pain of carrying in one of the stretchers. While the two instances are significantly shorter in the time they occupy – both for the characters and the readers – it contrasts the endurance of the two characters. While Briony almost immediately feels that “ her left wrist could not hold up...her fingers were loosening...[and her] fingers went slack,” (274-275). While she paints herself as a person put in great effort to get the soldier to safety, it is still clear that at the “ moment the war touched her life, at the first moment of pressure, she had failed,” (275). Robbie, on the other hand, does not stand for defeat. Throughout his strife, he knows that “ you walked across the land until you came to the sea,” (206). At this point, he is too thirsty to eat and too blistered to walk properly. His “ wound throbbed uncomfortably, each beat

precise and tight,” which continues throughout his journey (189). These two parallels between their sufferings ironically expose both of their inner strengths. Briony is clearly much weaker than Robbie. Her journey through saving all of the wounded soldiers causes her nothing but thirst and exhaustion – which she doesn’t particularly notice throughout the event’s duration. Still, at the very beginning, she finds herself almost unable to continue her task after a mere few minutes. Oppositely, Robbie is able to last days traversing lands with a shrapnel wound throbbing at his stomach. He is physically stronger and still finds himself putting the lives of the rest of his compatriots in front of his own.

The difference in Briony and Robbie’s worth to the world is astronomical; a well-educated man who is able to save soldiers, put on a brave face and persist through a healthy stretch of the war compared to an immature girl who is hardly able to help the first soldier she comes in contact with. The irony in all of this lies in the fact that, still, it is Briony who survives. The worth of Robbie’s life is entirely diminished and devalued because of his social standing, an idea that is reinforced throughout the beginning of the novel surrounding his education and imprisonment. If he was given the opportunity, he could’ve been greatly beneficial to the nation, or even just his family or community. Briony is given the chance to demonstrate her worth repeatedly and the only thing she proves is that she can choose the right keys to press on a typewriter to make a good sentence. Still, the fact that she was born into a better family than Robbie dictates that her life will always be of higher value than his. No matter what he can do, their

interactions prove that it was quantity of dollars, not quality of personhood, which counted to be deemed important.