

The trials of robbie
and cecilia:
intertextuality in
'atonement,' from
shakespeare...



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Woven throughout Ian McEwan's 'Atonement' are intertextual references, used to not only enrich the reader's experience but to present the love affair between Robbie and Cecilia as indeed, all too familiar, classic and timeless in its predictability. McEwan utilises characters and themes from texts such as 'Twelfth Night' (William Shakespeare) and 'Clarissa' (Samuel Richardson) to draw parallels between their respective love stories, but additionally to portray Cecilia and Robbie's as another classic case of two forlornly hopeful lovers. Moreover, McEwan incorporates the notion of a 'book within a book,' with the "Trials of Arabella," (as written by Briony Tallis) to illustrate the gleaming idea of possibility and fate, in reference to romance.

Through the metafictional reference to Malvolio from 'Twelfth Night,' McEwan is demonstrating the remarkable similarities between these two tortured lovers who both forget their ways and act foolishly in love. During the scene where Robbie's desk is described in minute detail, McEwan implores the reader to see Robbie as Malvolio; and foreshadows the tragic events to come. In fact, McEwan writes that there was a photo of "the cast of Twelfth night on the college lawn, [Robbie] as Malvolio, cross gartered." The characterisation of Robbie as Malvolio implies that he is to carry out a regrettable action that will place the relationship he has with Cecilia in precarious balance. Malvolio exclaims in 'Twelfth Night,' that "nothing can come between me and the full prospect of my hopes," a line that Robbie himself says. This not only draws the two texts closer, but heightens the tragedy of this novel; that Briony will inevitably come between Robbie and his aspirational love with Cecilia. Malvolio is a key symbol of not only fate, but how love can be disrupted. It also reflects the notion of the tragic novel,

the play in which failure is imminent and inevitable. Furthermore, the Trials of Arabella present what this love could have looked like; if fate had not been distorted.

The Trials of Arabella is a rather melancholic reading of Briony's desired fate; that Robbie is Briony's "medical prince," a "prince" who will love her wholly and passionately, ending in a fairytale marriage. However, this scene can be contrasted with the fictional ending our author gives her sister Cecilia towards the denouement of the novel, demonstrating not only a lack of change; but that Cecilia's love affair truly is pure and true. A stark similarity between the two novels; *Atonement* and 'The Trials of Arabella,' is the "impetuous dash toward a seaside town," a dash that Robbie himself undertakes in Part 2, with the horrifying events at Dunkirk. However, the most salient feature of the two novels are their respective endings. In 'The Trials of Arabella,' the conclusion marks a happy voyage with the protagonists announcing; "Here's the beginning of our love at the end of our travail. / So farewell, kind friends, as into the sunset we sail!" Similarly, an older Briony marks the end of her novel with a fantasy, a happy ending so to satisfy her readers. Here, the audience can see that the tragic nature of their love; that it can only exist in literature and fantasy, a chief concept that is carried throughout the novel.

Linked with the Trials of Arabella is Samuel Richardson's 'Clarissa,' whose story can be contrasted with the love triangle between Cecilia, Briony and Robbie. Richard Lovelace is alike to Robbie in that he courts Clarissa (or Cecilia). However, Briony's imagination likens Richard to Robbie in that

Richard in fact falls for the sister, Arabella, personified by Briony herself.
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Evidence to support this can be seen through not only the use of the name Arabella, but Briony's unchained desire to play her. She claims that " she was not playing Arabella because she wrote the play.." she wanted to play Arabella " because she was Arabella." It is clear that Briony loves Robbie, after all, she confesses her love to him during a swimming lesson, but a later Briony when seeing the play performed live; sees the female protagonist as no longer herself but her sister, Cecilia. This change of mindset demonstrates a maturity never before seen in Briony, an acknowledgement of the true love between Robbie and Cecilia. The prologue of the piece exclaims that " the Arabella almost learned too late, that before we love, we must cogitate" a highly ironic line symbolising Briony's rash accusation; and the latter consequences of this.

The commanding concerns of tragedy and love are explored and heightened through the plethora of intertextual references that McEwan employs throughout *Atonement*. By comparing respective love stories, one can analyse the affliction of affection.