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Romance, War, and Narrative Ethics in Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

What is often included in literature but not often considered is how romance is represented in the midst of war. Two novels that are driven by romance juxtaposed with war are Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*. Although both of these novels take place during World War II, readers are fully captivated by the romance of the main characters. The chaos of war is often overlooked and overshadowed by the compelling romance between the male and female protagonists in these novels. These authors have chosen to write about romance rather than the brutal realities of a war that took countless lives and altered western politics as we know it. While these authors have chosen to emphasize romance in the midst of wartime, they are not neglecting to comment on the systems that perpetuate war. By emphasizing romance, the authors seem to direct our attention away from war but actually expose the fact that the destructive elements of patriarchy that lead to war also underlie romance.

On the surface, these two novels seem very different when first considered. *The End of the Affair* was published in 1951, while *Atonement* was published in 2001. Not only are the novels published at very different times, but the events of the novel differ temporally as well. *The End of the Affair* takes place when it is written, while much of *Atonement* is a historical novel. The locales of the novels are both set in England for the most part, but *The End of the Affair* is set in the middle of London, while *Atonement* is mainly set in the English and French countrysides. Along with differences in setting, Greene's novel is a first-person narration by a man, and McEwan's novel is narrated in the third-person by, we ultimately learn, a character who is a woman.

While the novels have quite a few differences, both *The End of the Affair* and *Atonement* have character narrators that are writers, Bendrix and Briony respectively. Bendrix's sole sense

of control comes from his identity as a writer, especially in the face of his denial of love for Henry Miles, for Sarah Miles, and for God. Bendrix writes fiction, but he values the verisimilitude of realism. The only reason Bendrix even became acquainted with Henry and Sarah was because he was writing a novel about a civil servant. Bendrix chooses to start his story after the climax of his affair and its eventual dissolution and look back on the events retrospectively. From the very beginning, we see Bendrix's desire for control at odds with the lack of control that his situation leaves him in. His identity as a writer is grounded in a stable routine that is ultimately upended once Sarah, and eventually God, enter his life. *The End of the Affair* is very much concerned with Catholicism considering Sarah's conversion to Catholicism at the expense of her affair with Bendrix. From the beginning of the novel, Bendrix is in denial of a belief in God, but it is clear that he believes by the end of the novel as made evident by the verb tense he uses on the very first page: "if I had believed then in a God" (1). As a character narrator he gives his point of view of the situation, but he does not disregard Sarah's interior thoughts about their affair and her eventual conversion to Christianity. Including Sarah's diary is indeed ethically questionable since Detective Parkis acquired it by theft and Sarah never intended for her private thoughts to be read or published. However, Bendrix's ethical viewpoints as an author deem the inclusion of Sarah's genuine interiority as more ethical than having him recreate her voice and speak for her with his own writing.

Briony's identity as a writer is made clear at the very beginning of *Atonement* when she is writing *The Trials of Arabella* at a young age. Just as Bendrix seeks a sense of control with his writing, Briony's writing gives her a sense of control and influence over her surroundings, and this gives her a sense of stability. She even thinks that her writing can influence the wife that her brother, Leon, chooses. By the end of the novel, we find out that Briony has pursued a lifelong

career as a writer, just like Bendrix has. Briony's role as a character narrator and the reader's discovery that she is indeed writing the narrative brings us to the idea of narrative ethics and whether Briony's metafictional trick is indeed ethical. The coda reveals that it is 1999, and Briony writes that the supposed ending where Robbie and Cecilia reunite is indeed false. She has done research at the Imperial War Museum in London in order to accurately depict Robbie's experiences in the retreat to Dunkirk. What seemed like a recounting of events from an uncharacterized third-person narrator is actually a quasi-first-person account of Briony's written attempt at her own atonement. Everything that the reader once thought is overturned in one fell swoop. The ethics of this narrative choice hinges on Briony's effort to atone. For Briony, her effort to atone was "always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all" (351). Ultimately, these seemingly different novels are more similar than we think considering the fact that both novels have character narrators that are professional writers whose narrative choices raise ethical questions.

In addition to similar narrators, both novels are also set in the midst of World War II. In *The End of the Affair*, the war is heavily deemphasized despite the fact that key scenes are set in London during the Blitz. None of the characters are in active combat, which is unexpected for a romance set in the middle of World War II. The central plot line involves Bendrix and Sarah's affair and its aftermath. One of the many bombings of London occurs while Sarah and Bendrix are in his apartment. Bendrix's apartment takes on some damage, so he goes to check on things. Sarah finds a seemingly deceased Bendrix under his door due to another bomb dropping. Sarah fervently prays to a God that she does not believe in:

I'll give him up for ever, only let him be alive with a chance, and I pressed and pressed and I could feel the skin break, and I said, People can love without seeing each other,

can't they, they love You all their lives without seeing You, and then he came to the door, and he was alive, and I thought now the agony of being without him starts, and I wished he was safely back dead again under the door. (76)

From then on, Sarah leaves Bendrix for another lover: God. This pivotal scene in the novel involving the bombing and Sarah's plea to God is the closest the narrative comes to any wartime action. It is surprising to have a novel published in the 1950s by Greene, a writer who lived through the war and served in intelligence, a novel that is actually set in WWII, in which we learn nothing at all of battles, losses or wins, or even any wartime casualties. Deemphasizing the war like this leads us to question the ethics of representing war.

Despite being set in the middle of World War II, *Atonement* appears to readers to be primarily focused on the romantic relationship between Robbie and Cecilia and the hope that they will be reunited rather than the actual action related to and the implications of the war. What the novel does include about war is not the kind of triumph and heroism we might assume would accompany romance but rather the infamous retreat to Dunkirk. Overall, *Atonement* includes more text about the war than *The End of the Affair*, and it is more present in the minds of the reader. Even after the section where Robbie's plight as a soldier is heavily emphasized, Briony is seen working in the gruesome realities of a hospital taking on hundreds of wounded and dying soldiers. The novel also discusses Paul Marshall's job and the economic success he has as a result of the war. His business produces the chocolate bars that go in each soldier's personal pack. He is betting on and hopeful for the war at the beginning of the novel, and the economic success he gains from it is evident at the end of the novel when he is married to Lola and attending events in high society. Even though Paul Marshall benefits from this war, there is not a triumph of war in this novel. No victory is shown and the only active combat that is depicted is a

retreat. Ultimately, both Robbie and Cecilia end up dead due to war-related violence. War is not central to the novel's plot, even though it does influence major events in the novel. War is represented unconventionally at the same time that romance is represented unconventionally. War heightens the expectations of gender roles, and Robbie fulfills them in his role in active combat, but his fulfillment of these expectations is undercut by his and Cecilia's ultimate demise. The unconventional ending of this romance that is the deaths of both the hero and heroine is in an effort to question the systems that support war and war itself.

Both novels raise ethical issues in the narration itself and in the representation of war. However, considering the novels together reveals that while both novels seem to deemphasize war and bring romance to the forefront, the romantic and problematic relationships between these novels' protagonists are a vessel for questioning literary representations of war. Literary romance is rooted in years of tradition as well as reinterpretation of its conventions. Over the centuries-long history of romance in literature, a few components have remained the same. As outlined in his book, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye describes several constant elements of romance: heroes, heroines, villains, and "wish-fulfilment" (186). Frye claims that, "the romance is nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfilment dream," and in this context, "wish-fulfilment" is portrayed within the tradition of marriage (186). Frye argues that romance plays a "curiously paradoxical role," projecting the ideas of "the ruling social or intellectual class," and this proves true in both Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. Both of these novels question the social parameters of a patriarchal system as they redefine romance for their readers. Greene and McEwan project the ideas of "the ruling social or intellectual class" that are rooted in patriarchy and begin to question how these patriarchal mores underlie the form of romance itself. Both of these novels' representations of romance involve

heroes, heroines, and endings that defy convention. The gendered expectations for both hero and heroine are heightened in the midst of wartime, especially the expectations of masculinity. Men are often depicted as heroes that save women, but in these two novels, the male heroes are unable to meet these unrealistic expectations of masculinity, which are further exacerbated by war thus, romantic conventions are defied. The exemplification of how gender roles are even further upended during wartime is indicative of how war perpetuates a patriarchal system.

In *The End of the Affair*, Sarah is an unconventional heroine, not only because she is already married, but also because she has had romantic relationships with numerous men. Bendrix is very much feminized in the final scenes of the novel when he has moved in with Henry, a continuation of Bendrix's inability to meet the expectations of masculinity that wartime can heighten. Rather than end with Bendrix and Sarah marrying, Sarah leaves Bendrix for God, and eventually dies. Cecilia is also an unconventional heroine in the sense that she asserts her power in her relationship and does not fall easily into a submissive role of a heroine that needs saving. The power dynamics of Cecilia and Robbie's relationship is more equal. Whenever Robbie is presented as some form of hero, whether it be when he finds the missing twins or is fighting in the war, his efforts are undercut. Rather than reunite after the war ends, as Briony's narrative leads us to believe, both Robbie and Cecilia die. Both of these novels prove to subvert established conventions of romance with heroes, heroines, and endings that are not compliant with romantic conventions.

CHAPTER II

War Deemphasized and Romance Redefined in Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*

Graham Greene's interest in the romantic tradition over time is evidenced by his explicit literary references. He alludes to medieval romance by having characters refer, sometimes knowledgeably and sometimes not, to Lancelot and Guinevere and Troilus and Criseyde. Parkis mistakenly names his son, Lancelot, thinking he was the one who found the Holy Grail, when Bendrix tells him that Galahad was the one who found the Holy Grail (61). Greene refers explicitly to medieval romance, and also to the variation of romance we find in the early twentieth-century novels of E.M. Forster. On the day of Sarah's funeral, Bendrix is interviewed by a literary critic who asks Bendrix if he feels he has anything in common with E.M. Forster: "What do you think of Forster?...It would be interesting as you belong to such different schools" (124). These references draw our attention to the varying interpretations of romance that make up literary history, and how these varying interpretations influence Greene's definition of romance. Jean-Michel Ganteau argues that many postmodern texts "provide their readers with internal definitions of romance" (226). McEwan, often considered a postmodernist, clearly reveals his definitions of romance in his novel, and writers as early as Greene were providing new definitions of romance to readers as well.

Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* defies conventions of romance in terms of Maurice Bendrix and Sarah Miles's compliance with the roles of hero and heroine. Neither character maintains a stable role of hero or heroine, and the expectations for a romantic hero in the midst of World War II are set at an unattainable level. Further, Sarah's conversion to Christianity and eventual death do not comply with a conventional romantic ending of "wish-

fulfilment.” Greene is directing our attention to romance instead of war in an effort to reveal the fact that romance is grounded in the same patriarchal system as war itself.

When scholars write about Graham Greene’s *The End of the Affair*, the dominant point of interest is Greene’s depiction of conversion and the idea of God in the narrative. Most critics writing in the 1970s and 1980s were writing about the religious allegory within the novel as well as Sarah Miles’ canonization. Some critics argued that Bendrix also achieved sainthood, while others argued for his descent into hell. Rita Isaacs focuses on how the novel itself is an allegory for Sarah’s, and eventually Bendrix’s, ascent into sainthood. Isaacs also considers how Greene’s diction in the novel contributes to the greater theme of conversion and sainthood. The linguistics of the work set the allegories in motion: “Greene’s deliberate use of words and phrases from St. John of the Cross’ *The Dark Night of the Soul*—particularly his ten steps to sainthood—creates within the novel a new level of allegory” (34). Isaacs uses this text to identify the steps that Sarah moves through to achieve canonization, and she argues that this is the first level of allegory. The second level of allegory is made clear when Isaacs takes her audience through St. John’s ten steps to sainthood. The final level of allegory is Isaacs’s argument that Bendrix goes through the ten steps to achieve sainthood, as well.

While Isaacs argues that Bendrix ascends into sainthood, Julia McElhattan argues the exact opposite:

Bendrix achieves ‘sainthood’ within the confines of the novel, but his sainthood is not a holy one. Because the steps he passes through are negatives or opposites of those steps which Sarah experiences, it is only logical that the steps which bring her closer to God push him farther away from God into the company of the Devil. (55)

McElhattan argues that Greene's use of animal imagery in regard to Bendrix proves that he is possessed by the Devil. If this is true, then Bendrix is descending into sainthood for the Devil. McElhattan also considers each step into sainthood that St. John writes, but instead of showing how these steps are supported by events in the novel that characterize a holy sainthood, she shows how Bendrix experiences the inversion of all of Sarah's steps into sainthood, which leads to his "refusal to assimilate with God" (66).

While Isaacs' and McElhattan's arguments are more focused on religion in the novel, Ronald Walker is focused on a formulaic consideration of its circular structure. He argues that this circular structure is necessary for the main conversion to be seen as important from the very beginning, even though it is not revealed until the final third of the novel. Walker questions Frank Kermode's theory that the interpretation of fiction is mostly based on endings and that "[b]ecause all intermediary events are viewed in terms of end-expectations, time is 'purged of simple chronicity'" (220). This article goes into the specifics of the chronological setup of the novel and considers the number of pages Greene gives to different portions of the story. The affair, which encompasses the longest amount of time, receives the fewest pages. Detective Parkis's efforts to find out where Sarah's loyalties lie following the end of her affair with Bendrix, receive the majority of the book's page count. Walker ultimately argues that the circular nature of the novel and the structural choices made by Greene are necessary for readers to recognize the importance of the conversion.

While Walker is concerned with the structure of the novel, Lucy Pake addresses the influence of medieval romance within the novel. Pake claims that the courtly love tradition has long been an influence on literature since the label was created by Gaston Paris in 1883 (36). Pake claims that "Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* is a prime example of that influence.

On the surface, the novel contains at least two direct references to the ‘courtly love’ tradition; far more importantly, however, the novel shares a common array of characteristics and thematic relationships with the medieval concept” (36). Pake draws parallels between instances where medieval literature is influenced by adultery and social triangles to Bendrix, Sarah, and Henry. She also describes much of Bendrix’s behavior as similar to the “courtly lover” whose mind and body are impacted by his all-encompassing love for a woman. Overall, Pake concludes that the medieval romance genre is referenced throughout Greene’s novel in order to develop its theme, and it should be taken note of.

As Pake’s work suggests, the love affair, and its eventual disintegration, between the protagonists, Bendrix and Sarah, is what captivates us and remains central to the novel’s plot. By making the love affair central, Greene upends expectations for a novel set in the midst of World War II. Not only are our expectations about literature written in the midst of war not met, but he also upends the conventions of romance itself. Three of these conventions are the hero who conforms to certain stereotypes of masculinity, the heroine who conforms to certain stereotypes of femininity, and the idealized ending of wish-fulfilment in the form of marriage. In the context of war, our expectations for these three conventions of romance are heightened and the requirements for fulfilling these roles are intensified. Greene offers us two protagonists that do not conform to romantic conventions as well as an ending that defies all of our expectations. Therefore, *The End of the Affair* challenges conventions of romance and as it does so, challenges representations of war in literature.

One way to better understand the representation of romance in the novel is to understand how writing drives Bendrix as an individual due to the fact that it gives him complete control

over what he creates. The methodical nature of his writing process reflects the stability and control over reality that writing offers Bendrix:

Over twenty years I have probably averaged five hundred words a day for five days a week. I can produce a novel in a year, and that allows time for revision and the correction of the typescript. I have always been very methodical and when my quota of work is done, I break off even in the middle of a scene...When I was young not even a love affair would alter my schedule. (24-25)

Bendrix's structured writing schedule gives him some sense of control over his reality, especially in the midst of war. Writing is the only way that Bendrix can make sense of his reality. By creating fiction, he exerts control and plays God by determining the thoughts, desires, and actions of his characters. Knowing the extent to which writing determines Bendrix's reality, we can understand what is at stake if Bendrix believes in God: the loss of control over his writing and thus, a loss of self. However, once he finds out that Sarah now believes in God, the idea of having to succumb to a belief in God is frightening for Bendrix. By submitting to a belief in God, Bendrix would be allowing God to make the decisions he would usually make as a writer. This is too high a cost for Bendrix.

Bendrix divulges what he would lose if he decided to believe in God in the way Sarah does:

It's all very well for you to love God. You are dead. You have him. But I'm sick with life, I'm rotten with health. If I begin to love God, I can't just die. I've got to do something about it. I had to touch you with my hands, I had to taste you with my tongue: one can't love and do nothing. It's no use your telling me not to worry as you did once in a dream. If I ever loved like that, it would be the end of everything. Loving you I had no

appetite for food, I felt no lust for any other woman, but loving him there'd be no pleasure in anything at all with him away. I'd even lose my work, I'd cease to be Bendrix. Sarah, I'm afraid. (152)

This soliloquy is pivotal to understanding Bendrix and his beliefs about God. The only way Bendrix fights his insecurity is by asserting control. This is evidenced by his efforts to end his relationship with Sarah prematurely by constantly accusing her of being unfaithful and being jealous. When God proves to be the adversary that separates him and Sarah forever, Bendrix fights to assert control by trying to compete with God even though he knows it's a fruitless effort. Bendrix fights God and fights a belief in him, because he already knows that love results in a complete loss of control. He already lost control once with Sarah, so loving God is not an option for him. He fears that he would lose his writing, the one thing that gives him control in his life. Bendrix is unwilling to give up the freedom of choice he has when he is a writer that does not believe in God. From the first page, we see what would happen to Bendrix's writing if he allows God to be in control:

A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one [*chooses*] that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead...It is convenient, it is correct according to the rules of my craft to begin just there, but if I had believed then in a God, I could also have believed in a hand, plucking at my elbow, a suggestion. (1)

If writing is the one thing he feels he can control in his life, giving it up for God is not an option for him.

The one thing that Bendrix has left after the end of his affair with Sarah that can potentially give him an advantage over God is his writing, and that is what brought Sarah into Bendrix's life in the first place. Writing is what Bendrix bases most, if not all, of his decisions

on. Research for a novel he is working on begins his relationship with Sarah: “I doubt whether I should have ever troubled to know Henry or Sarah well if I had not begun in 1939 to write a story with a senior civil servant as the main character” (4). Bendrix’s decision to sleep with Sarah is made based on his intention to write a story that is as accurate as possible. For him, sleeping with Sarah is necessary for fostering the believability of the character he is creating. He even compares the way he anticipates sleeping with Sarah to the writing process: “I had looked forward to it as a writer looks forward to the last word of his book” (4). Bendrix looks forward to sex like he looks forward to completing his novels. As we see Bendrix and Sarah’s relationship develop into something that is more than just sex, Bendrix’s writing comes to the forefront once again when he and Sarah view and discuss a film adaptation of one of his novels. When Bendrix’s work is not represented in the way he intended when he wrote it, it is “acutely painful” for him (32). However, the scene with the onions is the scene that Sarah recognizes that he did indeed write. They both can agree on the quality of that scene in the film. When they begin to recreate it, Bendrix is drawn to his writing once again: “For a few seconds I was happy—this was writing: I wasn’t interested in anything else in the world. I wanted to go home and read the scene over: I wanted to work at something new: I wished, how I wished, that I hadn’t invited Sarah Miles to dinner” (33). Bendrix finds ultimate comfort in the control that writing allows him.

In recounting the story of his and Sarah’s affair, Bendrix chooses not to make war a dominant aspect of the plot in the novel even though most would assume characters living in London in the midst of the bombing of London would be very much concerned with it. The war is not in the background of the characters’ lives, but it is in the background of Bendrix’s narrative. On several occasions, the war proves to be a dominant factor in the characters’ lives,

especially in the pivotal scene of the novel when a bomb is dropped on Bendrix's apartment while he and Sarah are in it. Even then, though, the reader is still encouraged to be more concerned with the romantic affair of Sarah and Bendrix than they are with the war and its repercussions. This is ultimately due to Bendrix's narrative choices.

The war leads to Henry's long hours at work, which allows Sarah and Bendrix's affair to continue mostly unhindered. Henry Miles is directly tied to the war in his position at the Ministry of Home Security which leads him to work long hours. While Henry is directly involved in the war effort, Bendrix is more detached from it. Bendrix soon saw the war as "a rather disreputable and unreliable accomplice in [his] affair" (45). Even though Bendrix cannot enter active combat due to a childhood accident that left one leg a little shorter than the other, he joins the war effort as a warden. His experiences as a warden lead to instances of trauma for Bendrix that he does not narrate. Sarah ponders Bendrix in her journal and writes that "I thought of certain lines life had put on his face as personal as a line of writing: I thought of a new scar on his shoulder that wouldn't have been there if he hadn't tried to protect another man's body from a falling wall. He didn't tell me why he was in hospital those three days" (87-88). Just as he does not tell Sarah, he also does not tell the reader. Bendrix has chosen to leave out the vast detail of his position in the war effort, further distancing the reader from the reality of the war that is going on at the same time as the narrative.

Even though the narrative deemphasizes the war, it continues to come up in Bendrix's writing. Bendrix's identity is grounded in his writing profession, which leads to his resistance to relinquish control. However, the trauma he may have experienced as a warden, which could easily be overlooked, comes through in his writing. From the beginning, Bendrix claims that much of the writing process

takes place in the unconscious: in those depths the last word is written before the first word appears on paper. We remember the details of our story, but we do not invent them. War didn't trouble those deep sea-caves, but now there was something of infinitely greater importance to me than war, than my novel—the end of love. (25-26)

Bendrix's unconscious is responsible for what he writes, but his claim that war didn't trouble his psyche is not convincing. We see images of war come up in the novel when he's describing the people around him. After Sarah has died and Father Crompton meets with Bendrix and Henry, Bendrix says of Father Crompton's movement that it "was like watching a strong wall shift and lean after a bomb had fallen" (127). Bendrix seems to have suppressed his trauma from the episode of the falling wall because this is the one and only time he mentions what must have been a painful and memorable experience. Whether Bendrix chooses to admit it or not, war is ever-present in the back of his mind and even influences the figurative language he uses as a writer.

If writing is a tool for Bendrix's effort to regain and maintain control in his reality, using this method in an effort to make sense of or feel some sense of control in the face of war is a lofty and seemingly unattainable task. Bendrix's power as a writer in the face of a war that encompasses multiple countries around the globe is nominal. His writing cannot actively influence or change the reoccurrence of bombings that kill thousands of civilians or even begin to combat the Nazi extermination of Jews and other minorities. Bendrix rejects the inclusion of the war in his narrative because efforts to find control in that mode of writing would be futile. However, Bendrix can and does find some inkling of stability within his writing of romance, a genre that is heavily grounded in convention.

Romance is foregrounded in the novel by its focus on the affair, by the references to medieval romance that Pake analyzes in the novel, and by his reference to Forster. One way that Greene subverts convention in the novel is the fact that Bendrix hires a detective to track Sarah after their affair has ended, behavior we might have expected of her own husband, Henry Miles, who expresses his concerns to Bendrix. A husband that is suspicious of his wife's unfaithfulness might hire the detective to investigate, particularly if he is seeking evidence for a divorce, but in this case, the jealous ex-lover pursues the investigation. Henry is oblivious to the fact that Bendrix and Sarah even had an affair, so Bendrix is able to hire a detective to find out if Sarah has taken another lover after him. Bendrix claims that it is more acceptable for him to pursue this hunt since "jealous lovers are more respectable than, less ridiculous, than jealous husbands. They are supported by the weight of literature. Betrayed lovers are tragic, never comic. Think of Troilus. I shan't lose my *amour propre* when I interview Mr. Savage" (10). This reference to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* foregrounds the idea of romance and its conventions as found in literature. While jealous lovers are integral to romantic conventions, the idea of a jealous lover instigating an investigation of the married woman they have had an affair with is not expected.

When Bendrix finally meets with Detective Parkis, the man assigned to his case, he meets his son that trains under him when he works. In another reference to medieval romance, Bendrix finds out that Parkis's son is named after Lancelot from Chretien de Troyes *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*. Bendrix discovered that Parkis has mistaken Lancelot's role in medieval literature for the knight who found the Holy Grail. Bendrix enlightens him: "That was Galahad. Lancelot was found in bed with Guinevere" (61). Parkis had no idea of this error and is dumbfounded. It is no coincidence that Greene has brought up identifiable references from medieval romance. Both draw us to characters' flaws, whether it be to Bendrix's unchecked jealousy or Parkis'

innocence. Marriage and fidelity do not seem to be the most important things in medieval romance, and they prove to be less important in Greene's work as well. The only example of marriage that we see is that of Henry and Sarah, and this marriage is sexless, platonic, and ultimately a façade for Sarah. She is committed to Henry in the sense that she won't leave him for Bendrix, but she has had multiple affairs throughout her marriage with Henry. The protagonists of Greene's novel are not those in an honest relationship, but one riddled with deceit, even if it is ultimately rooted in genuine love. These references to medieval romance force us to consider how these conventions have influenced Greene's definitions of romance in this novel as well as how he has subverted these conventions when he defines romance in terms of Sarah and Bendrix's relationship.

In addition to the unconventional circumstances of romance in Greene's novel, his protagonist's compliance with the conventional characteristics of a romantic hero is unstable. When considering Bendrix as romantic hero, the fact that World War II is raging on in the background of the narrative cannot be disregarded. Heroism in this time is generally enacted in active combat to protect civilians and the welfare of their home country. A conventional romance set in the midst of World War II would feature a male savior in active combat, while the female protagonist was on the home front. Bendrix's slight disability prevents him from entering active combat, so he tries to get involved in the war effort as a warden. This position can be held by both men and women, so having this position does not boost Bendrix's masculinity in any way that you might expect from a conventional male hero.

Bendrix's role as a hero is also destabilized by how he represents himself in the narrative as both hero and villain at the same time. These conflicting roles jeopardize Bendrix's full compliance with a hero's role. From the very first page, Bendrix places himself in an unflattering

light when he first sees Henry across the common: “I hated Henry—I hated his wife Sarah too” (1). Bendrix even writes about how he immediately begins to manipulate Henry when they decide to go get drinks together and Henry voices his concerns about Sarah’s unfaithfulness. Henry has considered hiring a detective to investigate and feels foolish about it. He asks Bendrix if he thinks he’s a fool for thinking Sarah is unfaithful, and Bendrix ponders: “His question reminded me of how easy he had been to deceive: so easy that he seemed to me almost a conniver at his wife’s unfaithfulness, like the man who leaves loose notes in a hotel bedroom connives at theft, and I hated him for the very quality which had once helped my love” (9). Bendrix chooses to take advantage of Henry’s naiveté and chooses to encourage him to hire a detective when he knows full well that Sarah is an unfaithful wife, Bendrix being the other party in one of her most involved affairs. Bendrix chooses to begin the novel showing how he manipulates Henry rather than place himself in the role of hero. It is continually unclear whether Bendrix can be a hero when he acts despicably in his manipulation of Henry and even Sarah when his jealousy goes unchecked. One also considers whether Sarah even needs saving at all. Henry proves to be a minimal threat to Bendrix due to the fact that he’s inattentive and passionless in his relationship with Sarah. Henry works all of the time and never has sex with Sarah anymore, so Sarah feels little to no romantic connection with him in their marriage. Henry’s absence and neglect give Sarah a reason and a desire to be unfaithful. Bendrix is clearly not falling easily into the conventional role of hero that the romance genre often requires.

While Henry proves not to be a threat, the fact that Bendrix and Henry end up living together after Sarah’s death is highly unconventional in its feminization of Bendrix when most would expect a dominant and masculine persona in a romantic hero. Bendrix refers to Henry James’ idea that “a young woman with sufficient talent need only pass the mess-room windows

of a Guards' barracks and look inside in order to write a novel about the Brigade," but Bendrix thinks "she would have found it necessary to go to bed with a Guardsman if only in order to check on the details" (4). Bendrix claims that when he started his novel about a civil servant that he "didn't exactly go to bed with Henry, but I did the next best thing" which was go to bed with his wife (4). Bendrix is feminizing himself in this instance by entertaining the idea of going to bed with Henry literally as well as when he does end up in Henry's bed figuratively. He is literally cohabiting with Henry by the end of the novel and their dialogue begins to mirror the dialogue of husband and wife. Bendrix works during the day and claims that he "would go back and wait for Henry" much like a wife waits for a husband's return. When Henry is out late one night Bendrix peppers Henry with questions: "'Where have you been Henry?' ... 'Oh, just down the road,' he said vaguely. 'Been out all night?'" (144). The idea of Bendrix ending up in a feminized, homosocial role with his living with Henry defies all romantic conventions about a lover and his lover's husband.

Bendrix does fulfill the role of Sarah's hero by saving her from her lackluster and sexless marriage with Henry as well as by complying with conventional forms of male jealousy in romantic relationships. Bendrix offers Sarah not only the sexual love she desires, but genuine romantic love, as well. Sarah is fiercely loyal to Henry and worries about him, but, as she tells Bendrix "he's never really noticed me. Not for years" (23). Henry cannot satisfy Sarah's needs with his limited desire, but Bendrix can fulfill Sarah's needs in a relationship that far exceeds the platonic. Bendrix writes that Henry "was just as jealous I was. His desire was simply for companionship" (31). This companionship is what Sarah is both loyal to and seeks saving from. Bendrix is the man who saves her, but within his savior role the romantic convention of a lover's jealousy ultimately upends Bendrix's success as a hero. Even Mr. Savage the owner of the

detective agency that Bendrix uses, claims that jealousy is commonplace in romance: “There’s nothing discreditable about jealousy, Mr. Bendrix, I always salute it as the mark of true love” (14). Bendrix may indeed be a savior figure for Sarah, but his jealousy and insecurity hinder the advancement of their relationship and destabilize his role as romantic hero.

Just as Bendrix’s fit into the role of hero is unstable, Sarah’s fit into the role of heroine is not fully compliant with convention either. Sarah exemplifies a need for a male hero by her cultivation of many male lovers over the years in order to feel an inkling of fulfillment. However, most heroines are not as open with engaging with their sexuality as Sarah is, especially not with multiple partners, making her an unconventional heroine. Female heroines are most often depicted as loyal and chaste beings that are not pushing against conventions that limit women’s full embrace of their sexuality. In another sense, many female heroines are protected economically by their choice of spouse, but ultimately readers sympathize with characters that choose love over financial considerations. For Sarah, her choice is not limited to love or financial considerations because she technically already has those from Henry. However, the love she has for Henry is not much more than familial. Sarah is already married, but we sympathize with the fact that Bendrix is a source of genuine love for her since Henry is unable to fulfill Sarah’s needs.

Sarah seems to be Bendrix’s equal, and their relationship does not involve a power imbalance. One way that Sarah is placed on an equal level of power within the narrative is with Bendrix’s choice to include her voice and point of view with an entire section of her diary entries. Bendrix is wielding the power he has as an author to influence the perspectives of readers as he chooses. However, he allows Sarah’s own interiority to dominate an entire section of the novel. From Sarah’s diary we can further understand their relationship and one of the main

ways Sarah's role as a heroine is overturned: she ultimately leaves Bendrix, not for another lover, but for God. After the bomb has dropped on Bendrix's home while he is downstairs, Sarah finds his body and believes he is dead. From her diary we see her pleading to God to save him:

Let him be alive and I *will* believe. Give him a chance. Let him have his happiness. Do this and I'll believe. But that wasn't enough. It doesn't hurt to believe. So I said, I love him and I'll do anything if you'll make him alive, I said very slowly, I'll give him up forever, only let him be alive with a chance, and I pressed and pressed and I could feel the skin break, and I said, People can love without seeing each other, can't they, they love You all their lives without seeing You. (76)

We soon discover that Sarah's prayer has been answered and Bendrix is alive, so she decides to leave Bendrix and believe in God. When he finds out that "his rival" is God, he is dumbfounded. Ultimately, by hearing Sarah's voice we see the power and agency that Sarah has in the story. She fulfills her promise to God and this commitment influences the rest of the novel as well as the future lives of Bendrix and Henry.

Both Bendrix and Sarah defy romantic conventions for the hero and heroine, and the ending of their romance defies convention, as well. Most would assume that romance ends with wish-fulfilment in the form of the continuity of the central romantic relationship; however, that is not the case in this narrative. Sarah dies, and Bendrix ends up with a begrudging and resistant belief in the one who ended his affair: God. Not only does Sarah die, but it can also be assumed that she ascends into some form of sainthood with the miracles that surround her death. While most wouldn't expect the death of Sarah, what is least expected is Bendrix believing in God, Sarah's other "lover". Sarah's ascent into sainthood rather than being married to Bendrix or having an earthly happy ending is representative of a form of marriage to God. Greene's

depiction of God as a jealous lover that Sarah ends up being saved by as well as Bendrix defies romantic convention. This seemingly sacrilegious comparison is even taken to a sexual level when Bendrix has found out that God is the lover he is competing with for Sarah's affections. When he sits with Sarah in the church after they've reunited two and a half years after they ended their relationship, Bendrix sees God as a competitor that he can have the upper hand over in a sexual and physical sense: "She loves us both, I thought, but if there is to be a conflict between an image and a man, I know who will win. I could put my hand on her thigh or my mouth on her breast: he was imprisoned behind the altar and couldn't move to plead *his* cause" (104). Bendrix claims superiority over God based on the fact that He cannot please Sarah's bodily desires. Seeing God as a competitor for a woman's affections, especially in a sexual sense, could be seen as taboo. What further upends convention is the fact that Bendrix is saved by Sarah's lover, too. At the end of the novel, Bendrix says, "I believe you live and that He exists, but it will take more than your prayers to turn this hatred of Him into love" (159). Whether Bendrix loves God or not, he has no choice but to believe in Him.

Greene challenges the conventions of romance, and this also constitutes a challenge to war, because war is an arm of the patriarchal system that insists upon masculine and feminine roles that are near impossible to enact. By challenging the conventions of romance that are underlain by the tenets of war, Greene also questions the patriarchal systems that instigate wars. Ultimately Greene reveals that the patriarchal systems that instigate wars also exist within the inner workings of romance.

CHAPTER III

Romantic Heroism Destabilized and Metafictionalized in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

While most readers consider *Atonement* a tragic love story that takes place in the chaos of World War II, it is also a form of romance that questions the roles of hero, heroine, and the ending in wish-fulfilment that we usually expect from romance. The representation of romance and of war are complicated by the novel's narration. The novel at first seems to have a third-person omniscient narrator that is removed from the story. However, the coda at the end of the novel reveals that the writing talents we see in young Briony Tallis from the beginning of the novel have evolved into a lifelong career as a writer, and this novel is an effort of her own atonement for her false rape accusation against Robbie Turner, the love of her sister Cecilia's life. After extensive research at the imperial war Museum in London, Briony has delved into how she imagines war to be for Robbie when he serves in combat as an alternative to serving his prison sentence. What we ultimately find within Briony's metafictional narrative is a romance that defies conventions surrounding the roles of hero, heroine, and endings as well as questions the patriarchal system underlies war. The unconventional and at first, deceiving, romance that Briony creates leaves readers questioning the ethics of her narrative as well as the ethics of a patriarchal system that feeds off the chaos of war.

Commentators on Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) tend to focus on ethics in the novel especially in terms of Briony's narrative choices. One early example of this is Brian Finney's consideration of the many ways that McEwan reminds the reader that the novel is a "literary artifact" (74). Finney responds to the reviewers that criticize the coda of the novel, where it is revealed that Briony has been the author of the story all along. Finney claims that readers should not be surprised by this revelation because this novel is "a work of fiction that is from beginning

to end concerned with the making of fiction” (69). Finney claims that intertextuality, varying prose styles between the three sections, prolepsis, and “variable internal focalization” are the key stylistic choices McEwan makes in the creation of this metafiction. For Finney, it is this metafictional form that calls attention to Briony’s “attempt to project herself into the feelings of the two characters whose lives her failure of imagination destroyed” (80). This form ultimately highlights the novel’s charge to empathize with others, as seen by Briony’s attempts to do so in her 50-year-long writing process. The metafictional novel also draws attention to the narrative process and “invite[s] us simultaneously to reflect on the way subjectivity is similarly constructed in the non-fictional world we inhabit.” Also, “the use of metafiction in the book serves to undermine the naturalization of social and economic inequalities that especially characterized British society in the 1930s” (76). Metafiction not only allows us to see the true subjectivities of those around us, but it also forces us to see that the inequality that exists in the social and political systems of the world around us is not essential. It exists because we have made it.

Like Finney, James Phelan is also interested in the narrative ethics of *Atonement*. As he explains, “it is a novel in which the interrelations of interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic judgments—by and of its protagonist, Briony Tallis, and of the implied McEwan’s performance—are central to its effects” (109). Phelan analyzes the readers’ ethical judgments as they progress through the narrative. He considers Briony’s choices to alter history in her efforts to atone and the extent to which she will go to atone:

A key question is whether the ethical/aesthetic credo Briony espouses and practices in her novel—entering other minds and offering nuanced judgments of them—is sufficient to warrant the liberties that she takes with history, especially since those liberties mean that

she atones by allowing the fictional version of herself an atonement that she never actually achieves. (123)

The lengths to which Briony goes to achieve atonement are exemplified by her narrative choice to create an ending in which Cecilia and Robbie end up together, even though they both die in wartime violence. Phelan claims that the diary entry at the end of the novel “identi[fies] a line between history and invention and it shows why Briony crossed that line” (124). Phelan does not believe that Briony has acted wholly unethically, and his thoughts on McEwan are similar. McEwan’s narrative choice of metafiction could be perceived as an unethical trick, but Phelan claims that McEwan himself atones for this potentially unethical narrative choice by giving his readers clues throughout his work: “he includes in Briony’s representation of the details that, when seen retrospectively, function as clues to her introduction of fictionalizing elements” (128). Ultimately, Phelan concludes that the novel leads readers to judge both Briony and McEwan’s narrative choices as indeed ethical.

David O’Hara also considers ethics in the novel but chooses to discuss it within a Levinasian framework. O’Hara argues that it is the Levinasian recognition of the “Other” that is integral to one’s negotiation and creation of self. The “facing of the Other” is necessary for the empathy that is required for a successful negotiation of “self-Other” dynamics. It is Briony’s efforts as an author that allow her to “face the Other.” When Briony undertakes the telling of Robbie’s experiences in the war in the second part of the novel, she is making a conscious attempt to empathize with an Other. In order for this address of the other, “she needs (as we all do) narrative to help close the gap between self and Other...Storytelling, in other words, is ultimately shown in *Atonement* answering the call of the forsaken, forgotten Other, be they (like Robbie) victims of injustice, class systems, or the brutality of war” (93). O’Hara also disagrees

with critics who claim that the form of metafiction within the novel discredits the ethical quest that Briony is on for atonement. O'Hara claims that "it is at the metafictional level that *Atonement*, rather than retracting the trustworthiness of its narrative, both endorses and illustrates, explores and reinforces, the ethical sense of narrativity" (88). The metafictional method that McEwan uses is necessary for the power of fictional or "imaginative" narrative to foster empathy for the Other that a conventional retelling of history cannot do. This fictionalizing of history, just as Briony retells Robbie's wartime experiences, makes empathy for those actors in history more accessible.

Anne-Laure Fortin-Tournes and O'Hara agree on the Levinasian need for the "facing of the Other" and the idea that Briony's identity as an author allows her to do this, but Fortin-Tournes' address of Levinasian ethics within *Atonement* extends into the importance of deconstructive reading and the deconstruction of gender categories within Levinas' conception of ethics. Fortin-Tournes reviews and is not convinced by the applications of Leavis or Aristotle to the novel: "Briony brings the question of the other into textual narrativity itself, suggesting a going beyond Leavisism and Aristotelian philosophy alike, through the opening up of the text to otherness" (3). Fortin-Tournes leaves these philosophies behind for a Levinasian reading as interpreted by Andrew Gibson: "it is in the event of the face-to-face encounter with the other that the self can experience and perform the ethical gesture. The ethical dimension of facing the other as such does not depend on a narrative, however. It comes forth precisely when narrativity fails, because the actual encounter with the other takes place prior to any narrative" (4). The only time that Briony can have a genuine face-to-face interaction with others is when she lets her pre-existing childish narratives pass away. It is this Levinasian tenet that *Atonement* centers on throughout the narrative, but McEwan takes it further into a deconstruction of gender categories.

Blurring gender lines between the narrative of Briony and McEwan “deconstructs the illusion of mastery of the male author over the female narrative he/she has just read. Thus, the coda reveals that, in addition to being an exploration of Levinasian ethics, the book also proposes to open Levinas’s gender-biased conception of ethics to a form of narrativity that cuts across gender distinctions” (5). Fortin-Tournes argues that the novel calls for a deconstructive reading and it is the metafictional narrative that does this: “It teaches the reader that the ethical way of reading, in keeping with the postmodernist frame within which it is presented, consists in an opening up of the various layers of meaning of the text instead of bringing semantic closure to it” (6). Fortin-Tournes has no objection to considering a metafictional framework as a postmodernist mode in this novel because it is within the postmodernist framework that we are asked to not accept one truth but explore multiple truths. In *Atonement*, the postmodernist metafiction does not threaten ethicality as O’Hara claims; rather, it forces us to be suspicious of false truths.

While scholars have discussed the narrative ethics of *Atonement*, none have addressed the ethics of representing war and the novel’s critique of both war and romance as extensions of the tenets of a patriarchal system. These tenets are exposed within the relationship dynamics of the novel’s central couples: Robbie Turner and Cecilia Tallis and Paul Marshall and Lola Quincey. The novel continually emphasizes normalized conventions of romance, and McEwan’s critique of romance provides context for his critique of war, both of which perpetuate this system.

McEwan invokes the conventions of romance explicitly from the beginning of *Atonement*. Like Greene, McEwan also explicitly refers to multiple forms of romance. The novel begins with an epigraph to Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, an early nineteenth-century manifestation of the romance that is actually satirizing the late-eighteenth-century form of Gothic romance of Anne Radcliffe. McEwan clearly gives the internal definitions of romance that

Ganteau refers to when he references Austen as well as when he begins the novel with Briony's play, *The Trials of Arabella*. From the very first page of the novel, we are introduced to an example of romance because Briony has written a play that involves a princess, Arabella, who falls ill with cholera and is deserted by a wicked "foreign count." She is presented with a second chance, a savior, in the form of a prince who is disguised as a lowly doctor. While Arabella's first choice in male suitor ruins her and leaves her isolated from her family, this second chance leads to her reunion with her family and a happy ending in the form of a wedding. The conventions that drive this interpretation of romance are a heroine that requires saving by a man, in particular, a man who is of similar class status, which ensures the wish-fulfilment of a happy ending in marriage. Conventional romances require a female character to be saved by a male character, echoing the patriarchal mores that require a female to be reliant on a man economically. Gendered power dynamics put women at a disadvantage within conventional romance tropes in fiction.

With Briony's play in mind, we then encounter the relationship between Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner, which allows us to witness how McEwan turns the conventions of romance on their heads in order to critique the patriarchal mores that underlie these conventions. When Briony first witnesses an exchange between Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain, she attempts to make sense of it in terms of conventional romance. When she sees Robbie and Cecilia through the window of her house, she assumes their exchange could be "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" (36). However, what is actually happening is quite the opposite. Cecilia and Robbie are arguing over her father's cherished vase, which represents Cecilia's uncle's valiant efforts in

World War I. Robbie tries to “confer urgent masculine authority” and take over Cecilia’s refilling of the vase, but their scuffle over the vase ends with it being broken (28). In Cecilia’s mind, “denying his help, any possibility of making amends, was his punishment” (28-29). In this instance, Cecilia is refusing the conventional romantic role of a heroine that needs saving. The romantic tension between them that neither has addressed is beginning to come to the surface. Briony describes Robbie as a man of humble heritage. He is the son of the Tallis family’s cleaning lady and a missing father. While Mr. Tallis has funded Robbie’s Cambridge education and is supportive of his plan to attend medical school, his lower class is not erased by this. Briony claims that “such leaps across boundaries were the stuff of daily romance,” but Robbie’s attempts to be with Cecilia are doomed to fail when Briony accuses him of rape (36). Robbie’s role within the conventions of romance is unclear, especially for Briony. When we are told the story of when Briony pretends to drown so Robbie can save her, Robbie’s role is reminiscent of the savior that romance requires. However, Briony misinterprets the sexual attraction Robbie has for Cecilia when she reads the note he mistakenly sends Cecilia and that Briony was never meant to read. Briony reads the explicit note and deems Robbie a threat and a sexual maniac. Briony’s assumptions about Robbie clearly destabilize Robbie being deemed a romantic hero. This sexual mania as perceived by Briony is what allows her to assume Robbie’s culpability in the rape of Lola and ultimately convince Lola that that is who she saw. Realistically, there is no way either of them saw the perpetrator considering the crime was committed in the dark of the night.

While Robbie seems to parallel the apparently impoverished doctor who saves Arabella in Briony’s play, he cannot be depicted as the savior in this story for more reasons than those coinciding with Briony’s assumptions. He is prevented from being the savior by his class, which allows him to be accused of the rape of Lola, while Paul Marshall’s upper-class status leaves him

beyond suspicion. Even when Cecilia insists that Robbie could not be the perpetrator, her very next assumption about who could have been the perpetrator is Danny Hardman, the son of the groundskeeper. What seems to underlie the depictions of romantic conventions between Cecilia and Robbie is the fact that his lower class makes him more susceptible to the false accusation of raping Lola, and this accusation is what leads to him being a soldier in the war as penance for this crime. What physically inhibits the success of Cecilia and Robbie's relationship is the war. They are physically distanced from each other and eventually both die due to the war.

Robbie's role as a savior is ambiguous throughout the novel, and we must consider the ways in which he fulfills and the ways he does not fulfill the requirements of a conventional romantic hero. When Robbie and Cecilia find themselves in the Tallis household for a summer, they reconnect after not having spoken to each other at Cambridge and eventually have sex together in the Tallis family's library. For Cecilia, being at her family's home in the summer is in no way stimulating for her. Robbie saves her from her boredom. He offers her relief from her lack of purpose at home and an outlet for her sexual desire. Robbie does fulfill the romantic conventions of a male savior simply because both Cecilia and Briony have been in love with him. Briony herself even wanted Robbie as her savior in the past when she was younger and pretended to drown, so Robbie would jump in and rescue her. Even though Cecilia wants to believe Robbie is innocent when Briony accuses him of the rape of Lola, she is hesitant. The rest of her family and law enforcement seem to already be convinced that Briony's accusation of Robbie is accurate and have all read the private note that Robbie sent. The investigation moves much faster than Cecilia's mind can keep up with and Robbie seems to already be the suspect before he even returns from the search for the missing twins. We immediately see what would be perceived as an image of Robbie as savior when he is returning to the Tallis house after he finds

the missing twins. The image that would be deemed as the savior returning from his quest to find the runaway twins, Jackson and Pierrot, is cast within an ominous ambiguity since everyone has already been convinced by Briony that Robbie is responsible for the rape of Lola. McEwan describes those at the house watching Robbie's return from the search:

But here it was, an apparition as inhuman as it was purposeful. The thing was impossible and undeniable, and heading their way...The clue was a second, tiny shape that bobbed alongside the first. Then it was obvious—this was Robbie, with one boy sitting up on his shoulders and the other holding his hand and trailing a little behind...The boy on his shoulders appeared to be asleep. The other boy let his head loll against Robbie's waist and drew the man's hand across his chest for protection or warmth. (171)

Robbie has succeeded in saving the day and finding the missing twins. What should be perceived as a heroic moment is cast in an ominous light when his figure is described as a threatening apparition. Robbie's heroic moment is evident but is overshadowed by the crime he has been accused of in his absence. Robbie's potential to be a romantic hero is at risk and immediately called into question with Briony's accusation.

McEwan's depictions of Robbie's continued attempts to be heroic are undercut while he is at war, further destabilizing Robbie's fulfillment of the role of romantic savior. Robbie seems to be the leader and hero of his group of soldiers as they flee the German bombings in France. Robbie leads the way, and the other corporals depend on his French to speak to families who can offer them food and shelter. While he may be a kind of hero for the two soldiers he is with, he begins to act in an aggressive way to the family they ask to help them: "Turner pushed past the woman and went to the pump which was in the corner of the yard, near the kitchen...he said, 'Please bring us what I asked for or we'll come in and get it for ourselves'" (184). Robbie's role as a hero is undercut

by the forceful actions he has to take in order to survive. When Robbie is given an opportunity to be heroic and save a woman and her child, his effort cannot succeed. He runs with the woman and her child and tries to get them to escape the bombing, but they end up dead: “Where the woman and her son had been was a crater. Even as he saw it, he thought he had always known. That was why he had to leave them. His business was to survive, though he had forgotten why” (224). Robbie cannot be the hero in this instance because he has to stay alive to be with Cecilia. Survival is inconsistent with heroism here. However, we know that these efforts are all for naught in the end when both characters end up dead. Another instance in which Robbie cannot fulfill the role of hero is when a soldier is brutally attacked in an abandoned bar on the beach in Dunkirk. The soldier is brutally attacked because he is in the Royal Air Force and the other soldiers blame him for not preventing the deaths of their friends at the hands of the Luftwaffe. When Robbie realizes that “now was his last chance to act” to save the soldier from the others rearing up to obliterate him, Robbie and Corporal Nettle block the other soldiers from ganging up on him, but ultimately allow the main perpetrator, Mace, to leave the scene and have his way with the RAF soldier. Robbie’s attempt at being a hero in this instance is only partially successful. For McEwan, heroism is something that is not as easily attainable for Robbie and other soldiers since the chaos of war heightens the standards for heroism.

While Robbie’s role as hero is not stable, Cecilia also exemplifies a redefinition of a romantic heroine. The power dynamics within Cecilia and Robbie’s relationship are shifting and ambiguous, but ultimately suggest a level of equality. Cecilia wields an upper hand over Robbie based on the sheer fact that Robbie’s mother is her maid, and she has a higher level of power as a result of her class status. Cecilia outranks Robbie in terms of social standing and class, but when it comes to women and their access to education within the patriarchal system of the 20th century,

Cecilia is not Robbie's equal. Robbie and Cecilia have both attended Cambridge for university study, but only Robbie returns with a degree. When she and Robbie come in contact in the Tallis house, Cecilia feels mocked by Robbie and claims he is one of the most confident people she's ever met: "She was being mocked, or she was being punished—she did not know which was worse. Punished for being in a different circle at Cambridge, for not having a charlady for a mother; mocked for her poor degree—not that they actually awarded degrees to women anyway" (26). Cecilia outranks Robbie in class and wealth, but the patriarchal system that Cambridge perpetuates does not allow the awarding of degrees to women. Robbie has the upper hand due to the fact that he has a legitimate education and plans to continue his education in medical school. Robbie plans on becoming a doctor, while Cecilia ends up being a nurse. There are clear distinctions between what men and women can accomplish within a patriarchal system here.

While the power dynamics between Robbie and Cecilia seem to move on a pendulum from unequal to equal in an economic and educational context, the power in their personal interactions is more equal. Robbie does not feel the need to exercise masculine superiority over women that a patriarchal system often calls for. Robbie's lack of patriarchal influence in his life can be attributed to his position as a character that is more sympathetic to women since he really had no father figure to display overtly masculine behaviors. Robbie seems to be an honorable character that does not objectify women, and, although he is the one accused, does not demonstrate the capacity for sexual violence that Paul Marshall does. Cecilia also proves to assert her power in her relationship. What Briony perceives as a threatening note that expresses some sort of sexual mania of Robbie towards Cecilia, Cecilia perceives as a sign of her own allure and sexual power. She pursues Robbie because of her identification and addressing of her own sexual desires. She ultimately chooses to be with Robbie and has full independence in that decision.

Cecilia and Robbie's relationship does not enact the conventional ending of romance that calls for marriage, although Briony's narrative leads us to believe it does. Briony writes an ending that garners hope for Robbie's absolution from the crime he never committed when Briony shows up to Cecilia's apartment to find Cecilia and Robbie together. Briony promises to confess to her parents that her accusations against Robbie were false and to make statements to the police as well. However, this seemingly happy ending for Robbie and Cecilia ends up being completely fictional. In the coda that ends the novel, Briony reveals that both have actually died. While other scholars say that Briony's writing of the happy ending and her dismantling of it in the coda is necessary for her own authorial atonement, my analysis reveals that McEwan is also questioning the patriarchal tenets that underscore the conventions of romance. Robbie and Cecilia, who have questioned the patriarchal system that conventional romance calls for by refusing the roles of hero and heroine, are denied a happy ending. Briony writes that:

lovers and their happy ends have been on my mind all night long...It is only in this last version that my lovers end well, standing side by side on a South London pavement as I walk away...But now I can no longer think what purpose would be served if, say, I tried to persuade my reader, by direct or indirect means, that Robbie Turner died of septicemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940, or that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station. (350)

Cecilia and Robbie, the two characters that question the patriarchal tenets of romance with a relationship that is more compliant with equal gender dynamics, end up dead. However, Briony chooses to end her novel with the ending of her "spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince surviv[ing] to love" (350). While this ending may be more pleasant for readers, the harsh reality is that romance, like war, is a product of the patriarchal system.

While Robbie and Cecilia's relationship challenges the patriarchal system they exist in, Paul and Lola's relationship works to perpetuate it with a relationship that is severely unequal. While Robbie's compliance with the tenets of a conventional romantic hero is not stable, Paul's compliance with the aspects of a conventional romantic hero is ambiguous as well. In many ways he does fulfill the role of a romantic hero based on the established conventions. Paul's economic wealth not only fulfills the economic status requirement of romantic heroes, but he also maintains a pristine image by never even being considered as a suspect for Lola's rape. The patriarchal system has led to his economic success and in the end, complete immunity for his crime against Lola. Paul Marshall, the true rapist, is never once accused and is deemed the hero in Lola's own romance. In *The Trials of Arabella*, the parallels between Lola and Arabella are brought to the surface when Lola plays the role of Arabella. When reading Briony's summary of the play, it seems as if Paul Marshall would be a parallel to the evil foreign count and Robbie would parallel the doctor who saves Arabella. However, the striking difference between Robbie and Paul Marshall is their social class and economic power. Another indicator that Paul is fulfilling the conventions of his role in a romance is that he is being set up as a suitor for Cecilia. Upon his arrival, "Cecilia wondered, as she sometimes did when she met a man for the first time, if this was the one she was going to marry, and whether it was this particular moment she would remember for the rest of her life—with gratitude, or profound and particular regret" (44). Upon first meeting Paul, a friend of Cecilia's brother, Leon, we are meant to expect that Paul and Cecilia could end up together. His insertion into Cecilia's social circle is indicative of a potential romance between them. Paul shows some interest in Cecilia, but he also shows tendencies of being some sort of romantic hero when he comforts the Quincey children in the nursery. Having discovered that their parents' divorce is public knowledge now, the twins and Lola get upset, and

Paul attempts to comfort them: “Now you two listen carefully to me. It’s clear to everybody that your parents are absolutely wonderful people who love you very much and think about you all the time” (56). We see a kindness in Paul in this instance that might distract us from his true character at first.

While Paul shows some signs of romantic heroism, his sexual deviance and warmongering attitudes exemplify the tenets of patriarchy that both romance and Paul’s success are rooted in. We soon find out after hearing Paul’s attempts to get to know the Quincey children and offer them kind words in light of their parents’ recent divorce that right before this episode, Paul had engaged in a sexual reverie about his own younger sisters. Not only does the patriarchal system allow him immunity from his crime against Lola based on his economic status and class, but it also allows him to even entertain the disturbing idea of sexual subjugation of his own sisters. Right before Paul even meets Lola, he is engaging in a sexual reverie about his sisters in his bedroom as he “dropped away into a light sleep in which his young sisters had appeared, all four of them, standing around his bedside, prattling and touching and pulling at his clothes. He woke, hot across his chest and throat, uncomfortably aroused, and briefly confused by his surroundings” (57). His subconscious allows him to entertain the idea of incest without any serious qualms. The dream seems to spur Paul on and even influence his consideration of Lola when he walks into the nursery immediately following his sexual dream: “It was while he was sitting on the edge of his bed, drinking water, that he heard the voices that must have prompted his dream...Now he saw that the girl [Lola] was almost a young woman, poised and imperious, quite the little Pre-Raphaelite princess” (57). Lola becomes Paul’s next conquest, and he feels it is his right to resort to violence to get what he wants. Briony recalls later in the novel the lengths to which Paul goes to take advantage of Lola:

Lola coming to her room in tears, her chafed and bruised wrists, and the scratches on Lola's shoulder and down Marshall's face; Lola's silence in the darkness at the lakeside as she let her earnest, ridiculous, oh so prim younger cousin, who couldn't tell real life from the stories in her head, deliver the attacker into safety. (306)

Any inkling of empathy for Paul should disappear when one knows the extent to which he abused Lola. He lets another man be arrested for his own crime and never comes forward. Paul's economic power, which could be perceived as a conventional aspect of a romantic hero, is perpetuated by the war, and it is the context of the war that further instills the tenet of romance that requires a male savior. Marshall's business, Army Amo, consists of the mass production of chocolate bars for soldiers' ration packs. Marshall's economic success hinges on World War II occurring, and it is common knowledge that he wants the war: "one member was even accusing Marshall of being a warmonger; but, exhausted as he was, and maligned, he would not be turned away from his purpose, his vision" (47). Marshall has no problem actively desiring a war to occur along with the destruction of millions of human lives for his own economic prosperity.

In spite of Paul's heinous crime against Lola, the two marry, and the power dynamics of their relationship are far less equal than Cecilia and Robbie's relationship. The most glaring way in which Lola lacks power in their relationship is evidenced by how their relationship even begins: Paul takes complete sexual advantage of Lola's body, and the patriarchal system he lives in has empowered him to do so with full immunity. When Lola and Paul first come in contact with each other, Lola is 15 years old. Her parents have just been divorced amidst public scandal, and she has been uprooted from her home to live in an unfamiliar place. She is vulnerable in that she is young and sexually inexperienced and is lacking any sort of direction now that her parents' marriage has dissolved. Lola is an impressionable young girl who cannot say no to the initial

advances of a man who is much older and more powerful than she is. What we don't know about the period of time beginning with Paul's rape of Lola until we see Briony's depiction of their wedding could shed some light on the power dynamics of the couple's relationship. Some possible explanations for how the two ended up married to one other could be based on Lola's threatening of Paul. She and her parents may have threatened to go to the authorities unless he married her and took care of her economically. We even see Briony describe Lola's mother's reaction to the marriage as one that could be attributed to getting some sort of revenge: "But the scratches and bruises were long healed, and all her own statements at the time were to the contrary. Nor did the bride appear to be a victim, and she had her parents' consent. More than that surely; a chocolate magnate, the creator of Amo. Aunt Hermione would be rubbing her hands" (306). The resulting marriage of Paul and Lola may have been a result of Lola and her family's power over Paul, which they may have wielded for Lola's economic security and even to avenge her honor. Paul also may have been haunted by the incident and married her to keep her close and ensure his immunity. While Lola could have had some power over Paul in forcing him to marry her and take care of her financially, this element of Paul and Lola's story goes conspicuously unnarrated. Lola still seems to lack empowerment in their relationship simply due to the fact that she never seeks justice for her rapist. Ultimately, any power she has from her wealth and social status are all because of Paul. Lola is powerless to come by any of it on her own, especially since she has no education that we know of. Their marriage does offer a symbol of Lola's power in some way: either Lola forced Paul to marry her or the memory of her overpowered Paul completely.

What Lola and Paul achieve in terms of wish-fulfilment, Robbie and Cecilia never can, and that is the end goal of marriage. However, the convention of marriage in this novel is

distorted by the fact that the victim has married her rapist. The conventions of marriage that are usually cloaked in good-will and happiness in most romances are cloaked in deceit and sexual violence in this novel. This marriage even further grants Paul immunity for his crime against Lola. Briony ponders as she sits in the back of the church at Paul and Lola's wedding that "by any estimate, it was a very long time until judgment day, and until then the truth that only Marshall and his bride knew at first hand was steadily being walled up within the mausoleum of their marriage. There it would lie secure in the darkness, long after anyone who cared was dead" (307). This marriage is a mausoleum for the death of Lola's justice and the death of Paul's responsibility for his crime. The war and its tenets that underlie their marriage is what empowers Paul and disempowers Lola even further. This marriage is the extension of a patriarchal system that requires a power imbalance between the sexes that McEwan is questioning via the striking marriage of rapist and victim.

The novel seems to deemphasize war and emphasize the romance of Cecilia and Robbie even though World War II was a series of events that would forever change the world as humanity knew it. Considering the ways in which the characters in *Atonement* do and do not fulfill the conventional roles of romance forces us to consider how McEwan is redefining romance here. McEwan's novel appears to foreground romance instead of war, but by challenging the conventions of romance in a time of war, he critiques the patriarchal foundations of both.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

When writing about something as harrowing and momentous as World War II, the stakes of creating a narrative are much higher. When telling a story involving the lives lived and lost as a result of World War II, one must wonder why or how a writer chooses to tackle the lofty issue of war. War is bigger than just one person and choosing how to write a novel, specifically novels dealing with romance, has ethical repercussions. We can't help but notice that the atrocities of concentration and work camps are absent from both novels and that Greene chooses to write a novel that barely mentions active combat. Both Greene and McEwan have made the conscious decision to have character narrators who are writers, even further emphasizing the questions that are raised when writers make narrative choices in their representations of war. Both Greene and McEwan have decided to use the genre of romance in their narrative representations of war. This choice is in an effort to critique the patriarchal systems that war depends on.

Both novels invoke the conventions of romance involving heroes, heroines, and endings in order to destabilize and redefine them. These novels both include male protagonists who are not clearly heroes and are not able to comply with the requirements of a romantic hero to be an honorable savior at the expense of one's own self. The heroines in both novels also champion a form of female agency and gender equality that romantic tropes do not always foster. This challenge to romance and how it is enacted emphasizes how romantic conventions have perpetuated patriarchal systems throughout the English literary canon. When first considering these novels, their differences and initial emphasis on the captivating romances of their protagonists can easily overshadow the narrative work that is being done to question the patriarchal systems that perpetuate war and the gendered expectations that war heightens.

These novels invite us to reconsider how war is represented in other works of literature and other contexts. By writing novels with narratives that surprise us and defy convention, Greene and McEwan are asking us to question the patriarchal system that underlies both war and romance. By giving us their own interpretive definitions of romance within the romantic conventions of heroes, heroines, and endings, their subversion of these conventions allows us to see the dangers of an unchecked patriarchal system that calls for unattainable gender roles and gender inequality.

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