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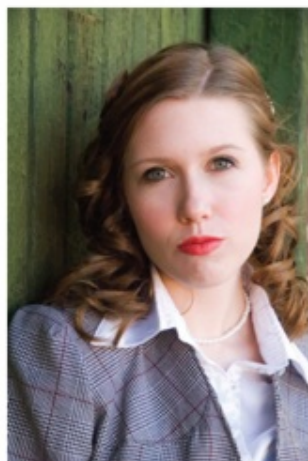
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## Briony Tallis

### Who is Briony Tallis?

- Briony is the central character of the novel and the main **narrator**.
- She appears at three stages of her life: as a thirteen-year-old girl, as a young woman of eighteen and as an elderly woman of seventy-seven.
- Briony is finally revealed to be the writer of *Atonement*.

### A life of privilege

The young Briony has been largely neglected by her parents but has otherwise had a privileged early life. She likes to see herself as a writer, and is desperate for drama. Her family has indulged her literary attempts. Everything she sees or does becomes potential material for her stories, making her somewhat callous in relation to other people and their experiences. She wants to be the centre of attention, and has little concern for the feelings or desires of others. Briony's own verdict on her younger self (and so presumably what she is aiming to convey in her portrayal of herself) is that she was a '**busy, priggish, conceited little girl**' (p. 367), though this is certainly not the whole picture.

### The end of childhood

In Part One, Briony is poised on the brink of adolescence, and is beginning to shun overly childish activities and demonstrations of affection. The dangerous mixture of a child's view of the world and the desire to be respected by adults and thought worthy of participating in their realm leads to disaster: '**At this stage in her life Briony inhabited an ill-defined transitional space between the nursery and adult worlds which she crossed and recrossed unpredictably**' (p. 141). The young Briony may seem precocious and educated, but she can also behave as '**an indignant little girl**' (p. 141). She judges herself as being '**childish**' (p. 35) for not bothering to change her dirty dress, comparing herself unfavourably to the sophistication of the young Lola.

Briony's obsession with writing goes hand in hand with her thoughtlessness. She marshals her cousins into rehearsing with no consideration of how they might feel. She is equally inconsiderate in abandoning the play when she decides to give up drama, believing that her writing '**had been defaced with the scribble of other minds**' (p. 36), and concentrate on the new direction she has identified for her fiction – fictional prose.

### A devastating accusation

Briony's imagination rapidly convinces her that Robbie is Lola's attacker. Briony labels him as a '**maniac**' (p. 119) – a word which the young Briony clearly has little understanding of – and her need to be the centre of attention is satisfied by being the only witness to the crime. She pushes her doubts aside, certain that she 'knows' Robbie did it because it fulfils her wish for a satisfying, tidy **narrative** in which events are played out as they should be. She finds a villain who acts true to form and can be discovered and punished, just as he would have been in one of her own moral tales, and so '**the terrible present fulfilled the recent past**' (p. 168). Any suggestion that she might withdraw her statement or change her position is met with hostility from the adults, and her need for approval and attention is then enough to make her adhere to her story and quash any doubts in her own mind.

## Study focus: Briony the writer

From the very start of the novel, Briony's passion for writing is key to her personality, and to the development of the plot. McEwan withholds the information that Briony is the writer of the book, forcing the reader to re-evaluate the narrative once this has been revealed.

Briony is childishly callous in ransacking experience for her fictions. In imagining she might find the twins floating face down in the swimming pool, '**She thought how she might describe it**' (p. 156). Most importantly, she sacrifices Robbie to her desire for a fulfilling narrative, making him the protagonist in the rape with no consideration for the impact it will have on him and others when she has doubts about his guilt. Her lack of empathy at this point limits her writing as well as making her unthinking in her treatment of other people. When she matures, she is able to imagine being someone else – she is quite right to say it was growing up that changed her mind (p. 342). The change to being able to empathise with others brings guilt as well as creative success. As a nurse, her writing becomes '**the only place she could be free**' (p. 280), with writing being presented as a kind of therapeutic and healing act.

### Briony the nurse

Five years later, the Briony of Part Three has grown up enough to realise what a terrible thing she has done. She is admirably brave in her **resolution** to do something about it, but as a young adult she is still unsure and immature in many of her actions. During the course of Part Three, Briony is forced to grow up more. She knows it is '**necessary to stay away**' (p. 279) from her family while she undergoes her self-inflicted punishment and gains her '**independence**' (p. 278). The arrival of the horribly injured men at the hospital brings her face to face with real suffering and death. Not all her childishness is stripped away, though: she is naive in her hope that Cecilia and Robbie can forgive her – '**she had never thought of herself as a liar**' (p. 336) – and that she can make everything all right in some way. She also has childish fantasies about being thought a spy as she makes her way across London, running '**nursery rhymes**' (p. 319) through her mind.

### Dementia approaches

We know little of Briony's life in the period between Part Three and the **epilogue**, 'London, 1999', increasing the sense that her crime has been her life's key event, and her atonement its main focus and driving force. She has been a successful novelist, she has married a French man (reminding us of Luc Cornet and his mistaken declaration of love). She is wealthy, living in central London, taking expensive taxi rides and wearing '**cashmere**' dresses (p. 361). Her extended family shows affection and makes an effort to celebrate her birthday and her life, so she is clearly popular amongst them. In the face of dementia, she is not yet panicking, commenting '**it might turn out to be somewhat benign**' (p. 354) as she imagines a peaceful, unaware death.

At the very end of the novel, Briony is passing out of the other side of adulthood. We see her always on the boundaries – of adolescence, of adulthood and now of death. These are times for reflection and re-evaluation, and times when past actions are seen in a new light, although she still feels '**something heavy**' (p. 358) on her heart when she catches sight of the Marshalls. She knows there can be no going back over her work again and so has completed her final draft of the book and atoned as far as she is able, saying '**My fifty-nine-year assignment is over**' (p. 369).

#### KEY CONTEXT

A03

'When I got to the end of *Atonement* I felt that Briony was the most complete person I'd ever conjured' (Ian McEwan, interview with Jonathan Noakes, in Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes, *Ian McEwan: The Child in Time, Enduring Love, Atonement* (Vintage, 2002), p. 23).

A02

#### A04 KEY CONNECTION

Michael Frayn's novel *Spies* (2002), also set during the Second World War, tells how two young boys, inspired by the atmosphere of suspicion at the time, allow their imaginations to run wild, with dire consequences for the adults involved. Like *Atonement*, it reflects on the problems faced by children in negotiating adult worlds.

#### A02 KEY QUOTATION

'How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?' (p. 371).

Has Briony achieved atonement? McEwan invites the reader to consider the role of the **omniscient narrator** in constructing character and event; Briony admits that she is able to tell this story in any way she chooses. The assignment of the female gender to God is also an interesting **postmodern** choice, in which the old certainties of beliefs, traditions and structures are constantly questioned.



## HOW TO WRITE HIGH-QUALITY RESPONSES

The quality of your writing – how you express your ideas – is vital for getting a higher grade, and **AO1** and **AO2** are specifically about **how** you respond.

### Five key areas

The quality of your responses can be broken down into **five** key areas.

#### 1. The structure of your answer/essay

- First, get **straight to the point in your opening paragraph**. Use a sharp, direct first sentence that deals with a key aspect and then follow up with evidence or detailed reference.
- **Put forward an argument or point of view** (you won't **always** be able to challenge or take issue with the essay question, but generally, where you can, you are more likely to write in an interesting way).
- **Signpost your ideas** with connectives and references which help the essay flow. Aim to present an overall argument or conceptual response to the task, not a series of unconnected points.
- **Don't repeat points already made**, not even in the conclusion, unless you have something new to add.

#### EXAMINER'S TIP

AO1 and AO2 are equally important in AS and A Level responses.

### Aiming high: Effective opening paragraphs

Let's imagine you have been asked about the role of **narrators** in crime-writing. Here's an example of a successful opening paragraph:

Gets straight to the point

Considering the role of Briony as a narrator in a piece of crime-writing takes the reader to many of the central concerns of the novel; the significance of the term 'atonement' is paramount as the process of atoning for Briony's crime of false accusation has an impact on the reliability of the narrative. This is complicated further by the multiple narratives within the text, in which Emily Tallis, Cecilia and Robbie himself all appear to take a part in the description and account of the 'crime'. The novel also encourages the reader to question the nature of the crime itself, with the true criminal – Paul Marshall – and victim – Lola Quincey, who, as Briony comments, 'was required only to remain silent about the truth' (p. 168) – largely absent from the text.

Sets up some interesting ideas that will be tackled in subsequent paragraphs

#### 2. Use of titles, names, etc.

This is a simple, but important, tip to stay on the right side of the examiners.

- Make sure that you spell correctly the titles of the texts, chapters, authors and so on. Present them correctly too, with inverted commas and capitals as appropriate. For example, 'Atonement'.
- Use the **full title**, unless there is a good reason not to (e.g. it's very long).
- Use the term 'text' rather than 'book' or 'story'. If you use the word 'story', the examiner may think you mean the plot/action rather than the 'text' as a whole.

#### 3. Effective quotations

Do not 'bolt on' quotations to the points you make. You will get some marks for including them, but examiners will not find your writing very fluent.

The best quotations are:

- Relevant and not too long (you are going to have to memorise them, so that will help you select shorter ones!)
- Integrated into your argument/sentence
- Linked to effect and implications

### Aiming high: Effective use of quotations

Here is an example of an effective use of a quotation about perception in the novel:

Explicit meaning

When Briony says 'The truth instructed her eyes', it is not just Briony stating that she believed that she saw Robbie Turner attacking Lola Quincey. The inversion of logical order, that the eyes should show you the truth, conveys the catastrophic nature of Briony's continued misrepresentation of Robbie as the 'maniac' who has committed such a terrible crime.

Short, relevant quotation, embedded in sentence

Inferred meaning

Remember – quotations can also be one or two single words or phrases embedded in a sentence to build a picture or explanation, or they can be longer ones that are explored and picked apart.

#### 4. Techniques and terminology

By all means mention literary terms, techniques, conventions, critical theories or people (for example, 'paradox', 'archetype', 'feminism' or 'Plato') **but** make sure that you:

- Understand what they mean
- Are able to link them to what you're saying
- Spell them correctly

#### 5. General writing skills

Try to write in a way that sounds professional and uses standard English. This does not mean that your writing will lack personality – just that it will be authoritative.

- Avoid colloquial or everyday expressions such as 'got', 'alright', 'ok' and so on.
- Use terms such as 'convey', 'suggest', 'imply', 'infer' to explain the writer's methods.
- Refer to 'we' when discussing the audience/reader.
- Avoid assertions and generalisations; don't just state a general point of view ('Briony's narration is unreliable because it changes throughout the book'), but analyse closely with clear evidence and textual detail.

Note the professional approach here in the choice of vocabulary and awareness of the effect on the reader:

McEwan's use of multiple voices throughout Part One **conveys** a sense of opaque haziness. The 'vast heat' and the shifting, restless narratives seem to make it increasingly difficult to locate factual event and clear social boundaries; instead, **we** find ourselves, like Emily Tallis, looking metaphorically through 'the worn fabric of the visible world' (p. 63).

#### EXAMINER'S TIP

Something examiners pick up is that students confuse 'narrator' and 'author'. Remember that Briony is a character as well as the narrator, and don't confuse her with the novel's author, Ian McEwan.