

English

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1 Definitions

1.1 Narration

The story is told by the narrator, who is not identical with the author. The narrator answers the question *Who speaks?*

There are essentially two types of narrators:

- **first-person narrator:** a character in the story speaking as “I” or “we” is called a first-person narrator;
- **third-person narrator:** he/she is not a character in the story.

The third-person narrator knows the thoughts and emotions of all the characters; he is an **omniscient narrator**. An omniscient narrator can move freely in time and space. He can shift from character to character; reporting what he/she chooses of their speech, actions, thoughts, feelings and emotions. He may give comments or decide to “show” the action without judgement.

If the narrator chooses to describe the thoughts and emotions of only one character, he is a **selective narrator**: he presents the story through one character’s eyes.

A first-person narrator is naturally **limited** in his perspective.

1.2 Focalization

Choosing a perspective or point of view is separate from determining whether the narrator is a character in the story. The focalizer answers the question *Who sees or perceives?*

There are three kinds of focalizers:

- **zero focalization** corresponds to the omniscient narrator. Here the narrator knows more than the characters;
- **an internal focalizer’s** perception belongs to a character within the story. Internal focalizers are also called character-focalizers. Here the narrator knows and says only what a given character knows;
- **an external focalizer** is a POV character external to the story. An external focalizer is called a narrator-focalizer because perception belongs to the narrator. Here the character knows more than the narrator.

2 Romanticism

Definizione Romanticism

Romanticism is an artistic and intellectual movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the 18th century. The movement emphasized intense emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience. It granted a new importance to experiences of sympathy, awe, wonder, and terror, in part by naturalizing such emotions as responses to the "beautiful" and the "sublime".

The word *sublime* embeds the idea of romanticism:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature [...], is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. [...]

3 Atonement, Ian McEwan

3.1 Chapter 1

3.1.1 Summary

Summary Atonement, Ian McEwan - Chapter 1

In the upper-class Tallis family house in England in 1935, Briony Tallis writes a play to perform with her visiting cousins in honor of her adored brother Leon's return home. Her mother, Emily Tallis, indulges Briony by complimenting her work, but her cousins Lola and twins Jackson and Pierrot Quincey, are really not interested in it. The cousins are staying with the Tallis family because their parents are divorcing, and Lola ruins Briony's plan to take the role of the play's main character, Arabella, by claiming the part for herself.

3.1.2 Quotes

- Quote:** *THE PLAY [...] was written by her in a two-day tempest of composition, causing her to miss a breakfast and a lunch. (p. 3)*
- ① **Meaning:** Briony is very creative and likes to write stories. At times she is so focused on writing that she forgets about everything else, including her basic needs, such as eating.
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- Quote:** *Mrs. Tallis read the seven pages of The Trials of Arabella in her bedroom, at her dressing table, with the author's arm around her shoulder the whole while. Briony studied her mother's face for every trace of shifting emotion, and Emily Tallis obliged [...]. (p. 4)*
- ② **Meaning:** Briony is seeking her mother's approval.
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- Quote:** *Briony was hardly to know it then, but this was the project's highest point of fulfillment. (p. 4)*
- ③ **Meaning:** She will not be able to achieve her goal because this is the highest point, and everything can only go down from here. She puts much emphasis on what she wants, needing lots of attention and being very self-centered.
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- Quote:** *Her play was [...] for her brother, to celebrate his return, provoke his admiration and guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, toward the right form of wife, the one who would persuade him to return to the countryside, the one who would sweetly request Briony's services as a bridesmaid. (p. 4)*
- ④ **Meaning:** She is selfish and a little bit self-centered but at the same time naïve. She thinks she knows better than her brother, even is she is only thirteen years old.
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- Quote:** *Nothing in her life was sufficiently interesting or shameful to merit hiding [...]. (p. 5)*
- ⑤ **Meaning:** We can see the difference between what she writes in her stories and her life. By writing, she's projecting the fact that she would like have a more interesting life, and have something to hide, which she currently hasn't.
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- Quote:** *[...] she was discovering, as had many writers before her, that not all recognition is helpful. (p. 7)*
- ⑥ **Meaning:** She compares herself to other accomplishments (real) writers, even though she is young and does it as a hobby. She would like to be older and an actual writer. On the contrary of her mother, which gives her compliments, her sister is too extreme in this behavior, making it blatantly fake. This shows that the family tends to overprotect her.
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- Quote:** *Her sandals revealed an ankle bracelet and toenails painted vermillion. The sight of these nails gave Briony a constricting sensation around her sternum, and she knew at once that she could not ask Lola to play the prince. (p. 11)*
- ⑦ **Meaning:** She has shown a sign of being a mature and caring about being aesthetically pleasing.

Quote: *In a generally pleasant and well-protected life, she had never really confronted anyone before. (p. 15)*

- ⑧ **Meaning:** Now, for the first time, she has a confrontation with somebody who is a little bit outside of her circle. He understands that this is outside of her comfort zone given that she has never had to be confronted with anyone and had a really easy life. This is basically her first time noticing what the real life is: not everybody gives you what you want.

3.2 Chapter 2-3

3.2.1 Exercises

Esercizio What do we learn about Cecilia Tallis in chapter 2? Focus on her character and her relationship with Robbie.

She's the oldest of the sisters, she's educated and went to Cambridge. She was able to afford to go to college because she is rich, even though many women did not get an education back then, and thus is unconventional. Cecilia is shown to have a strange dynamic with Robbie, she wants to go against convention by doing what is not expected of her (jumping into the fountain). She doesn't behave like a woman from the upper-class in the 1930s should behave. She prefers to stay home instead of going out with her college friends. We can infer that Cecilia and Robbie have a lingering attraction, even though she pretends to be annoyed by it because her emotions are forbidden since Robbie is from a lower-class.

Esercizio Reread the incident at the fountain from Cecilia (ch. 2) and Briony's (ch. 3) point of view.

- *How should the reader interpret the scene from Cecilia's point of view?* The reader should interpret sexual tension, that they are attracted but cannot oblige their feelings. She is enjoying the fact that this incident might make Robbie feel at fault. She wants to punish him, not in a negative way, but rather in a way to make him closer to her.
- *How does Briony's perspective during this scene influence her interpretation of events?* She does not perceive any sexual attraction between them, but rather perceives it as if Robbie is attacking her in some sort of way. Briony is too young and inexperienced to actually understand this kind of interactions. Briony is left confused by the event and uses her imagination to describe it using surreal adjectives, but is surprised when she realizes that the pieces of her made up story do not have a logical sequence.

Esercizio What is hinted at in the following lines at the end of chapter 3?

Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through a whole history of literature, beginning with stories derived from the European tradition of folktales, through drama with simple moral intent, to arrive at an impartial psychological realism which she had discovered for herself, one special morning during a heat wave in 1935. (p. 38)

This is a flashforward sixty years into the future where Briony talks about what she learned six decades prior.

3.3 Chapter 4-7

3.3.1 Quotes

- ① **Quote:** *IT WAS not until the late afternoon that Cecilia judged the vase repaired. It had baked all afternoon on a table by a south-facing window in the library, and now three fine meandering lines [...] were all that showed. No one would ever know. (p. 40)*

Who speaks / Who sees?: The narrator is third person but we see through Cecilia's eyes. Thus, she is the focalizer.

- ② **Quote:** *[S]he didn't wish to dirty her cashmere by lying on the floor, and instead slumped in a chair, and the director could hardly object to that. The older girl entered so fully into the spirit of her own aloof compliance that she felt beyond reproach. (p. 52)*

Who speaks / Who sees?: The action is being perceived and judged by Lola (internal focalizer), but the narrator is third person.

- ③ **Quote:** *NOT LONG after lunch, once she was assured that her sister's children and Briony had eaten sensibly and would keep their promise to stay away from the pool for at least two hours, Emily Tallis had withdrawn from the white glare of the afternoon's heat to a cool and darkened bedroom. (p. 60)*

Who speaks / Who sees?: There is a third person narrator but the internal focalizer is internal (Emily).

- ④ **Quote:** *In a spirit of mutinous resistance, she climbed the steep grassy slope to the bridge, and when she stood on the driveway, she decided she would stay there and wait until something significant happened to her. (p. 72)*

Who speaks / Who sees?: There is a third person narrator but the internal focalizer is Briony.

All of these are third person narrator, but the internal focalizer changes constantly between characters.

3.3.2 Exercises

Esercizio For each item taken from this section of the novel, describe what it is and why it's relevant to the story

- **"the look"** It's about Cecilia and Leon, that can communicate by looking at each other without others understanding them. They share a strong bond and in this case Leon wishes Cecilia and Paul to marry, but she's not really interested.
- **cigarettes** Cecilia smokes even though it is not very lady-like. Cigarettes are sometimes related to feminism, indicating a rebellion against society's standards.
- **divorce** The parents of the twins and Lola are divorcing. Divorce was very rare and taboo and talking about it is quite forbidden. The children are sent to the Tallis family to spend time there for a while.
- **Hamlet** Hamlet is mentioned by Paul Marshall when talking to Lola. Both of them pretend to have seen it even though they really haven't.
- **Army Amo** This is a pun because *amo* is the Latin word for love, but *amo* is also similar to *ammo* - this double meaning between ammunitions and love is the surname given to Paul's chocolate, as a slang for loving your country and fueling the soldier. Lola is told about this flirtatiously.
- **curtains** Emily goes in her room and closes the curtains - this is a sign to tell the world that she doesn't want to be disturbed.
- **nettle branch** Nettle branch is a simple branch that Briony uses when she sees that the rehearsals are not doing well, destroying the branch to show her frustration.

3.4 Chapter 8-10

3.4.1 Adjectives

- ① **Adjective:** *awkward*
Who / What?: This is referring to Cecilia and her relationship with Robbie.

- ② **Adjective:** *restless*
Who / What?: Cecilia is trying off the dress and she keeps moving around. She cannot stay still at home.

- ③ **Adjective:** *angry*
Who / What?: This is also referring to Cecilia, which was angry because she did not want Robbie to accept the invitation from Paul.

- ④ **Adjective:** *clumsy and inconsiderate*
Who / What?: This is Robbie describing his own behavior at the fountain episode.

- ⑤ **Adjective:** *horrified*
Who / What?: Robbie feels horrified when he realized he had given the wrong letter to Briony.

Esercizio What is the relevance of the scene where Cecilia reflects on what outfit to wear for dinner?

Cecilia doesn't want to show off too much, so she overthinks about the kind of dress, but she also wants to show that she didn't give too much thought into it. She would like to show a certain side of her to Robbie and the outside world.

Esercizio Why is the passage below significant? What does the letter represent to Briony?

With the letter, something elemental, brutal, perhaps even criminal had been introduced, some principle of darkness, and even in her excitement over the possibilities, she did not doubt that her sister was in some way threatened and would need her help.

Briony is too young to understand the contents of the letters and misinterprets it as a threat and wants to protect her sister. Briony assumes that she has now become the protector of her sister.

Esercizio Why does she react so strongly to reading "the word" on the letter.

Briony never read that word, no one in her presence had ever referred to it. She cannot even directly refer to the word as it disgusted her profoundly, she cannot handle what the word means as she is too young. Lola also adds to the crazy fantasy that Briony has created in her head as she also infers a threat from the word, since she is also not mature enough.

Esercizio How does chapter 10 end?

The scene ends through the eyes of Briony as she watches Robbie and Cecilia having sex in the library. Briony misinterprets the acts and thinking Robbie is assaulting her.