‘By the water’s edge, a crumbling stuccoed temple’: Water and the Criminal Development of Briony Tallis in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001)

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Introduction

Atonement is the eighth novel by English author Ian McEwan and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2001. Its film adaptation in 2007, directed by Joe Wright, was nominated for several BAFTAs and Academy awards, cementing the novel as his *tour de force* and establishing him as a household name. In this article I will explore the symbolism of water in relation to the protagonist, the thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis. I will argue that water serves as an overarching motif for Briony’s crime. During the summer of 1935, her cousin Lola is raped by an unknown assailant. Briony lies and tells the police it was the gardener’s son, Robbie. Water symbolism follows aspects of her criminal journey, such as motive, crime, punishment, and atonement.

Irena Księżopolska claims that ‘the critical writing on *Atonement* is voluminous and varied, approaching it from multiple angles’.[1] While criticism on McEwan will feed into this study, like those from Księżopolska, Julie Ellam, and Brian Finney, it will primarily situate its argument within a crime fiction critical frame, as Briony’s crime marks her childhood and informs the rest of her life. To clarify, McEwan refers to her lies as a crime, as he begins Chapter Thirteen with the statement ‘within the half hour Briony would commit her crime’, and later Briony refers to her storytelling as a crime.[2] Turning to essays within *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction* (2020) will shed light on the genre’s conventions and determine how Briony conforms to archetypes of criminality and punishment. Crime fiction is often looked down upon in academic circles, acknowledged by Jesper Gulddal and Stewart King as ‘a product of the cultural industry and therefore lacking textual complexity as well as broader critical agendas’.[3] However, they also reflect that crime fiction has become increasingly hybrid, or intertwined with other genres, which ‘enables authors with literary ambitions to draw on crime fiction plot models while nevertheless avoiding the stigma of writing genre fiction’.[4] Thus, while *Atonement* is not typically viewed as crime fiction, the novel shares multiple themes with the genre that can help examine Briony’s criminal journey.

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[1] Irena Księżopolska, *Ian McEwan: Subversive Readings, Informed Misreadings* (New York: Routledge, 2024), p. 178.
[2] Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2016), p. 288.
[3] Jesper Gulddal and Stewart King, ‘Genre’, in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, edited by Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper (London: Routledge, 2020), 13-21 (p. 13).
[4] Gulddal and King, ‘Genre’, in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, p. 16.

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The elision between Briony's criminal development and water emerges from the preponderance of water imagery during the scene of the crime and with Briony's criminal psyche. King clarifies the importance of setting within the genre: 'place is arguably the most important feature in crime fiction [...] place gives the crime meaning'.[5] The setting where Lola is raped, which triggers Briony's crime of lying, is located near the island temple on the Tallis estate, a water-based architectural structure. Briony's criminal attributes, like her motive and attempts at atonement, are also evoked through water imagery. As a result, research on the element is beneficial for this analysis. Water is an important religious symbol, featuring heavily in Greek and Biblical mythology. It has contradictory meanings, from an instrument of God's punishment (such as Noah's Flood) to a symbol of purity (as in baptisms). This suggests that water is a rich and complex metaphor that can apply to both Briony's crime and its violent consequences, as well as her attempts at atonement. Water is also constantly shifting and changing, just like Briony's versions of the truth, which she metamorphoses into different stories. Hetta Elizabeth Howes' *Transformative Waters in Late-Medieval Literature: From Aelred of Rievaulx to The Book of Margery Kempe* (2021) will be valuable in understanding the diverse historic and literary connotations behind the element.

With these critical frameworks of genre and symbolism in mind, this article will briefly focus on the following scene where, 'by the water's edge, a crumbling stuccoed temple' lies. The temple illustrates this article's argument as it functions as a microcosm for Briony's criminal development.[6]

> Closer to, the temple had a sorrier look: moisture rising through a damaged damp course had caused chunks of stucco to fall away. Sometime in the late nineteenth century clumsy repairs were made with unpainted cement which had turned brown and gave the building a mottled, diseased appearance. Elsewhere, the exposed laths, themselves rotting away, showed through like the ribs of a starving animal […] All the panes were gone from the pretty, Georgian windows, smashed by Leon and his friends in the late twenties […] Just as the swimming pool pavilion behind the stable block imitated features of the temple, so the temple was supposed to embody references to the original Adam house, though nobody in the Tallis family knew what they were […] More than the dilapidation, it was this connection, this lost memory of the temple's grander relation, which gave the useless little building its sorry air. The temple was the orphan of a grand society lady, and now with no one to care for it, no one to look up to, the child had grown old before its time, and let itself go. There was a tapering soot stain as high as a man on an outside wall where two tramps had once, outrageously, lit a bonfire to roast a carp that was not theirs. For a long time there had been a shrivelled boot lying exposed on grass kept trim by rabbits. But when Briony looked today, the boot had vanished, as everything would

[5] Stewart King, 'Place', in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, edited by Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper (London: Routledge, 2020), 211-218 (p. 211).
[6] McEwan, p. 19.

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> in the end. The idea that the temple, wearing its own black band, grieved for the burned-down mansion, that it yearned for a grand and invisible presence, bestowed a faintly religious ambience.[7]

The island temple represents Briony, or 'the orphan of a grand society lady'. While she is not literally an orphan, her parents are absent from her life. Her mother suffers from an illness and her father prefers the company of his office. In fact, her father is only referred to, and never makes an appearance in the novel. As her older siblings, Leon and Cecilia, are adults and live away from home, she is effectively an only child on the wealthy estate. Christiana Gregoriou suggests that 'crime narratives often examine the extent to which criminals are the result of bad families (a question of nurture)'.[8] Likewise, without proper instruction and guidance, it is suggested that just as the island temple gains a 'diseased appearance', Briony's soul becomes eroded and sinful, culminating in her committing a crime. This is inherently connected to class – Leon casually destroys the windows of the temple because he knows there will be no repercussions, just like how there are none for Briony, as her family is too well-connected for Robbie to contest the accusation. However, just as water can be a cleansing force, Briony attempts to atone or achieve that 'faintly religious ambience' a temple should have by writing versions of the events where Robbie and Cecilia 'survive and flourish'.[9] In the story she writes, the couple live happily in a cottage in Wiltshire by the sea. But in reality, Robbie dies of septicaemia by the sea at Dunkirk and Cecilia drowns during an air raid at Balham Underground station. This implies that water also represents punishment for Briony, like Noah's Flood, as she can never truly atone with her victims dead. Besides, she never clears Robbie's name, and the novel cannot be published until after her death for legal reasons. The couple's deaths convey the violence that Briony causes, as evoked from violent imagery like the 'ribs of a starving animal'. And with the loss of her sister, Briony is left alone, like the island temple grieving 'for the burned-down mansion', or the original Tallis home that was destroyed by a fire in the late 1880s. What is left are the water-based structures: the artificial lake, island temple, and connected bridges, all associated with Briony.

Section I: Motives

There are several motives, embodied by the motif of water, that lead Briony to accuse Robbie. Firstly, Briony lies to feel more mature. She feels she is on the precipice of becoming an adult and is depicted pondering her new-found maturity by bodies of water, like at the swimming pool where she decides that 'her childhood had ended'.[10] This desperation to be more grown up is exacerbated when her cousin Lola visits and is proven

[7] McEwan, pp. 72-73.
[8] Christiana Gregoriou, 'Criminals', in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, edited by Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper (London: Routledge, 2020), 168-176 (p. 170).
[9] McEwan, p. 371.
[10] McEwan, p. 160.

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to bear 'the tokens of maturity' that Briony feels she lacks.[11] Resolving to be more like Lola, she runs to the island temple, and the sentence 'Briony had crossed the bridge to the island' is symbolic of her growing up, as she has crossed the boundary into adulthood, represented by an aqueous environment.[12] She then intercepts a lewd letter that Robbie accidentally sends Cecilia. It is notable that when Robbie accidentally hands the letter to Briony, he catches her near the island temple, where she appears 'to be part of the pale stone of the parapet', clarifying that the temple is Briony's bailiwick.[13] Horrified at its contents, she runs into Lola, who is upset that her twin brothers have attacked her while she was getting ready for a bath. Briony comforts her by washing her face in the basin. As she does so, she has 'the desire to share a secret and show the older girl that she too had worldly experiences' and tells her about the letter.[14] She is rewarded with a shocked expression from Lola, who 'raised her dripping face from the basin and let her mouth fall open'.[15] Here deceit manifests alongside scenes of water, as Briony lies to herself and Lola, claiming Robbie has 'always pretended to be rather nice' and agrees that he is a 'maniac'.[16] Secondly, unlike most children her age, Briony is of an 'orderly spirit' and imposes this order onto her fiction.[17] She is obsessed with creating her own worlds on pages where 'her passion for tidiness was also satisfied, for an unruly world could be made just so'.[18] Księżopolska suggests that 'Briony's obsessive need to stage-manage reality is hard to miss', like her tantrums when she does not have her way.[19] For instance, when her cousins visit, she attempts to put on a play. But the twins are inferior actors, while Lola bulldozes the production and takes the lead role Briony coveted. At the first (and last) rehearsal, this is illustrated when the twins arrive after an excursion in the swimming pool. After three hours in the water, they physically ruin Briony's rehearsal space. She had arranged the nursery accordingly but the twins are still shivering and their dripping trunks tread water everywhere, like 'under [...] chairs [where] water was pooling before spilling between the floorboard cracks'.[20] Howes observes that water is often associated with disorder, as the 'biblical episodes such as Noah's Flood (Genesis 5:32–10:1) and the Red Sea (Exodus 13:17–14:29) made the destruction that water could cause frighteningly clear'.[21] Comparing the destruction of a child's play to a Biblical flood may seem hyperbolic, but these allusions are already at hand, as the play is described by Briony as 'Briony's creation', like humans are God's creation, and she later believes 'a novelist [....] is also God', or that

[11] McEwan, p. 34.
[12] McEwan, p. 46.
[13] McEwan, p. 93.
[14] McEwan, p. 119.
[15] *Ibid*.
[16] McEwan, pp. 119-120.
[17] McEwan, p. 5.
[18] McEwan, p. 7.
[19] Księżopolska, p. 182.
[20] McEwan, p. 11.
[21] Hetta Elizabeth Howes, *Transformative Waters in Late-Medieval Literature: From Aelred of Rievaulx to The Book of Margery Kempe* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2023), p. 7.

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she has ultimate power over her characters.[22] Appalled that she is not the bellwether of her cousins and cannot maintain control of them like she can with her writing; Briony cries, storms off, and tears down the poster she made.

Brian Finney claims Briony's powerful imagination 'imposes the patterns of fiction on the facts of life'.[23] This is observed when Briony's mind wanders elsewhere after being unable to put on the play. When spying out the window, she misinterprets an altercation between Cecilia and Robbie by the fountain. A vase breaks, and Cecilia gets into the fountain to rescue the pieces. But Briony mistakenly assumes Robbie has forced Cecilia to undress and get in the fountain. Water represents the double function of storytelling, as it serves as imagery and symbolism for her characters; but is also deceptive, as she is not telling the truth. Additionally, the fountain is a reproduction of Bernini's Triton in the Piazza Barberini in Rome. Shrouded in myth, the fountain depicts Triton from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 CE), who controls the waters through his conch shell that he blows into like a trumpet. When Cecilia gets in the water she is described as a 'frail white nymph, from whom water cascaded far more successfully than it did the beefy Triton'.[24] In Greek mythology nymphs are often subject to sexual violence, like Arethusa who flees the amorous river god Alpheus, and with Artemis' help is transformed into an underground spring on the island of Sicily. Howes observes how 'in Ovid's poetry, the catalyst for such change is frequently the element of water'.[25] This literary precedent can apply to *Atonement*, as every character emerges from the fountain changed. Cecilia and Robbie realise they are attracted to one another, while Briony alters the event completely in her head. She crafts an Ovidian tale in which her sister, as a nymph, is subject to sexual violence from sea god Robbie. Briony effectively casts herself as Artemis, saving Cecilia from this fate when she later accuses Robbie of rape.

Briony also ponders the scene through a fairy tale narrative structure. Gregoriou suggests that a criminal may have an unhealthy relationship with fantasy, as a 'correlation the genre tends to make is between reading/watching fictional violence (in books/films/TV), writing about fictional violence (say, in a creative writing class) [...] and actually being criminally violent'.[26] Briony loves reading and writing, and when observing Robbie and Cecilia, is reminded of the story she wrote about a 'humble woodcutter [who] saved a princess from drowning and ended by marrying her', particularly as the way Robbie was standing prior to Cecilia's immersion seems to be 'formal [...] a proposal of marriage'. [27] Briony becomes irritated when the sequence does not follow narrative logic: 'the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal'.[28] Confused by

[22] McEwan, p. 17, 371.
[23] Brian Finney, 'Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: Ian McEwan's *Atonement*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 27.3 (2002), 68-82 (pp.78-9).
[24] McEwan, p. 30.
[25] Howes, p. 116.
[26] Gregoriou, 'Criminals', in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, p. 170.
[27] McEwan, p. 38.
[28] McEwan, p. 39.

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the lack of romance, she reconstructs the scene as one of violence, considering that 'this was not a fairy tale, this was the real, the adult world in which frogs did not address princesses'.[29]

Ironically, Briony's first interpretation of the events was correct, as the scene could be read as romantic for it triggers Robbie and Cecilia's relationship. But Briony continues to create fairy tales, implying she remains childish and immature despite her belief in her new-found adulthood. Jean Anderson fortifies this connection between crime and fairytales, suggesting that 'in many fairy tales, a character's true nature is concealed by appearance and, as in crime fiction, the stories often contain explicit reversals, unmaskings of the hidden Other'.[30] Robbie is effectively cast as that 'Other', intensified by his working-class roots. It is also ironic that, as Michael Levy and Farah Mendlesohn suggest, 'fairy tales increased in popularity as a choice for children, precisely because they came to embrace the didactic', or were used to teach children moral lessons.[31] Yet Briony has not emerged educated, for she still has not learned to tell the truth.

Finally, Briony harbours ill feelings towards Robbie, as he once rejected her romantic advances. Gregoriou suggests that crime 'narratives tend to suggest that sexual needs or issues may well relate to, if not cause, criminal violence'.[32] While this reading can be aligned with the rape of Lola, it can also inform Briony's motives to accuse Robbie. Perhaps seeing him with Cecilia ignites her jealousy to accuse him. To reiterate, in one of her stories, a woodcutter saved a princess from drowning, and they fall in love. Briony does not clarify when she wrote this story, but Robbie later reflects that when Briony was ten, she asked him if he would save her from drowning and jumps in when he is not looking. After saving her, Robbie reprimands the young girl: 'my clothes were weighing me down. We could have drowned, both of us. Is it your idea of a joke?'.[33] Instead of apologising, Briony confesses her love for him. Robbie assumes that his rejection of her may have led her to accuse him, and deducts that 'for three years she must have nurtured a feeling for him, kept it hidden, nourished it with fantasy or embellished it in her stories'.[34] Perhaps Briony had written the fairy tale prior to the incident and intended fiction to become reality, or perhaps it inspired her to fictionalise her account to make the ending more amenable. Regardless, water serves as imagery and plot devices in her writing and fuels her storytelling. Robbie's use of the verb 'nourished' may put the reader in the mind of water, as the element sustains life so can be considered a nourishing property, intensifying this elision between water and writing.

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[29] McEwan, p. 40.
[30] Jean Anderson, 'Alterity and the Other', in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, edited by Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper (London: Routledge, 2020), 252-260 (pp. 253-254).
[31] Michael Levy and Farah Mendlesohn, *Children's Fantasy Literature: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 34.
[32] Gregoriou, 'Criminals', in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, p. 170.
[33] McEwan, p. 231.
[34] McEwan, p. 233.

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Section II: Crime and Punishment

So far, this article has communicated three key motives for Briony's accusation of Robbie: her wish to appear more mature and worldly, her obsessive need to control people through fiction, and her jealousy over Robbie's love for Cecilia. Water can change and shift, like Briony's literary proclivity to manipulate the truth, suggesting water to be a metaphor for her childish lies and fancies. This has dangerous consequences, as she misreads the scene between Robbie and Cecilia as one of coercion and violence, not lust or mutual attraction.

This blurring between fiction and reality intensifies when the twins go missing. Using Richard Bradford's assessment of golden-age crime fiction, this event harks back to the 'settings of Christie and her peers where complacent middle-class worlds are disturbed by something disagreeable and fatal'.[35] Worried, the family sets out to search the estate. In contrast, the unbothered Briony searches for story, echoing Księżopolska's suggestion that 'Briony is always on the scent of yet another narrative possibility, yet another story to tell'.[36] As an example, she searches near the swimming pool, imagines the boys dead there, and considers how she would write it down: 'she thought how she might describe it, the way they bobbed on the illuminated water's gentle well, and how their hair spread like tendrils and their clothed bodies softly collided and drifted apart'.[37] This suggests an almost casual instinct on Briony's part to use violence to craft a narrative.

A better story emerges when Briony witnesses Lola's rape near the water bank. Briony evokes pathetic fallacy to illustrate her cousin's suffering. When Briony finds her, Lola's 'voice was faint and distorted, as though impeded by something like a bubble, some mucus in her throat', as if she has just been rescued from drowning and is struggling to speak as water is still in her lungs.[38] Lola is lying near water but was never immersed in it, yet Briony is still linking her to the tale of the drowning princess, like she did earlier with herself and Cecilia. Briony also views Lola's body as a sea creature, as it was 'bony and unyielding, wrapped tightly about itself like a seashell. A winkle. Lola hugged herself and rocked'.[39] Lola is trying to hide herself away but as she is 'rocked', there is the impression that she is being tossed about at sea, still drowning and suffering.

Lola did not see her attacker and Briony only saw a silhouette, yet she goes on to accuse Robbie, more in the spirit of the detective figure than a criminal. Bradford clarifies that the detective in crime fiction must perspicaciously search 'a sequence of questions, mysteries, clues' to find the culprit.[40] Like a detective, Briony has ostensibly put all the clues together. She has already read Robbie's lascivious letter and supposedly observed him being forceful with Cecilia. After the scene by the fountain, she sees them together in

[35] Bradford, p. 81.
[36] Księżopolska, p. 188.
[37] McEwan, p. 156.
[38] McEwan, p. 165.
[39] *Ibid*.
[40] Bradford, p. 20.

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the library, and again assumes sexual coercion. In her story, Robbie has been established as the villain, so it follows a narrative logic for him to also be Lola's assailant. Briony observes that, 'her doubts could be neutralised only by plunging in deeper', aligning her lies, or storytelling, with an ocean that she has immersed herself in.[41] Alistair Cormack argues that 'fiction is presented as a lie – a lie that, if believed, comforts, distorts and finally produces unethical action', illustrated by Briony's conflation of 'I know it was him' with 'I saw him' that ultimately indicts Robbie.[42] [43]

Typically, the criminal is punished in crime fiction. Susanna Lee reflects that 'theories of punishment include such traditional justifications as retribution, deterrence, incapacitation, rehabilitation and restoration', but Briony does not endure these experiences.[44] There are no legal ramifications for her, or her family that enable their daughter's lies. However, there are external factors that do negatively impact the family, although they do not stem from their lies and do not cause Briony any long-term upset. For instance, Briony's home is marred by disorder during WWII. Her teenage years will be impacted by political instability that will culminate in a war that will begin when she is seventeen. While McEwan never shows the reader these years, instead choosing to jump to when Briony is eighteen, he does relay the effects that reach Briony's once tranquil childhood home. The country estate is forced to take in evacuees, and when a thirteen-year-old boy gets into the fountain, he 'climbed onto the statue and snapped off the Triton's horn and his arm, right down to the elbow'.[45] This fountain was already decaying, as Briony recalls when she was young that 'the [water] pressure was so feeble [...] [and] a glistening dark green stain' tarnished Triton's body.[46] Regardless, without the conch shell which Triton uses to control the waves, this once powerful figure is stripped of his godlike powers. Steve Mentz suggested that 'to the ancient world the sea was the terrifying face of an angry God, as it appeared to Noah and Odysseus and Jonah'.[47] While the sea remains powerful, it no longer divides countries as significantly and humans no longer fear crossing it. The Tallises, like Triton, are not as powerful as they were prior to WWII, and this working-class boy does not cower in the face of them and is even figuratively capable of dismantling them.

Furthermore, the Tallises eventually lose the estate, and it is turned into the Tilney Hotel. When Briony visits as an elderly woman, it is noteworthy that the multiple water sources have disappeared. Under new management the lake has been replaced with grass, and the island temple that stood nearby is replaced with 'a large mound of smooth grass,

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[41] McEwan, p. 170.
[42] Alistair Cormack, 'Postmodernism and the Ethics of Fiction in Atonement', in *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Sebastian Groes (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), pp. 70-82 (p. 81).
[43] McEwan, p. 181.
[44] Susanna Lee, 'Crime Fiction and Theories of Justice', in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, edited by Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper (London: Routledge, 2020), 282-290 (p. 284).
[45] McEwan, p. 278.
[46] McEwan, p. 18.
[47] Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 3.

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like an immense ancient barrow, where rhododendrons and other shrubbery were growing'.[48] A barrow is an old burial site, indicative of Briony's waning powers of the sea. She no longer has a godlike control over people, and therefore, no longer causes violence. A barrow was also one of the oldest funeral traditions in Britain, but like the family, it is no longer relevant, as the war has led to the decline of the Tallis' control over the estate. The absence may also point to Briony's death, as she reveals at the end of the novel that she has vascular dementia and will likely die soon. But to reiterate, this is hardly a punishment: Briony has lived a full life and will even forget the crime she committed when she dies.

Section III: Atonement

In an interview with Jonathan Nokes, McEwan claims he was more interested in looking at 'not the crime, but the process of atonement'.[49] In other words, while there is no satisfactory punishment, as observed in the previous section, there are attempts made by the guilt-ridden Briony to make amends, even if she cannot do so legally. While this may not seem typical of crime fiction, Lee does note that 'contemporary crime fiction increasingly acknowledges that ethical responsibility starts with individual accountability and that in order to dispense justice, one must first be acting, or endeavouring to act, in a just manner'.[50] Briony knows that she has done wrong and she is sorry for it, and through atonement she tries to take culpability and help her victims. While she tries to do penance at a hospital, her ultimate version of atonement is to write a novel where Cecilia and Robbie can live happily, to assuage the bitter reality of their deaths. While Briony is not a child when she does this, her immature belief that she can alter events points to a perpetual state of childhood. Therefore, it is worth investigating if Briony has developed beyond her childish mistakes and finally crossed that bridge to the 'island' of adulthood.[51]
When Briony turns eighteen, she becomes a nurse assisting the war effort (instead of reading English Literature at Cambridge), perhaps as a self-inflicted punishment or penance for her crimes. Briony equates the hospital to a prison, or a punishment she must endure in her hopes for atonement. Her identity is stripped, as nurses must all wear identical uniforms and 'in no circumstances should a nurse communicate to a patient her Christian name', similar to how prisoners are referred to by numbers.[52] The nurses' lives are also heavily controlled, as 'their meals and bedtimes were supervised', with Sister Drummond functioning as a prison warden, constantly 'murmuring in her ear that she had failed to pay attention during preliminary training'.[53] As part of this supposed prison sentence, Briony is forced to regularly clean:

[48] McEwan, p. 363.
[49] Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes, *Ian McEwan: The Child in Time, Enduring Love, Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 20.
[50] Lee, 'Crime Fiction and Theories of Justice', in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, p. 289.
[51] McEwan, p. 46.
[52] McEwan, p. 272.
[53] McEwan, p. 273, 274.

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> Between tasks, perhaps a dozen times a day, the students scrubbed their cracked and bleeding chilblained hands under freezing water. The war against germs never ceased. The probationers were initiated into the cult of hygiene. They learned that there was nothing so loathsome as a wisp of blanket fluff hiding under a bed, concealing within its form a battalion, a whole division, of bacteria. The everyday practice of boiling, scrubbing, buffing and wiping became the badge of the students' professional pride.[54]

Briony's employment mirrors Robbie's experience, as it is part of his prison sentence to serve as a soldier during WWII. Likewise, Briony has been incarcerated in the hospital, and now must engage in a 'war' against dirt. This is illustrated through a semantic field of warfare, such as 'war', 'battalion', and 'division', as well as the depiction of germs as the hidden enemy, 'concealing' themselves amongst hidden terrain in the hospital. Dirt is a manifestation of Briony's sins, with bloodied hands evocative of Robbie's death, and consequently, she must subject herself to water. Howes observes that in medieval tradition, 'everyday labour with water, is often presented as a means for access to the soul's transformation'.[55] This atavism is present in Briony's journey, as she hopes that with not only cleaning, but aiding other soldiers who function as surrogates for Robbie, will help cleanse her soul of the crime she has committed, and transform herself into an innocent person.

Even as Briony becomes a better nurse, healing soldiers and rigorous cleaning does not assuage her guilt. As an example, when she hears that Lola and her rapist are to be married, 'Briony felt her familiar guilt pursue her', suggesting that she is regularly plagued by these feelings of malaise.[56] Moreover, her guilt only flourishes with the ensuing war, as demonstrated when Briony 'looked across the river [Thames] at the unlit city, she remembered the unease that was out there in the streets as well as in the wards, and was like the darkness itself'.[57] Briony begins to realise that war has compounded her crime, and healing soldiers that resemble Robbie (who at this point in the novel, is in France where the war is worsening), will not help her atone. Like the war, her guilt is escalating, reflected in pathetic fallacy like the Thames where 'the turbulent brown river [was] swollen by the April rains'.[58] Besides, working as a nurse during WWII, while an arduous and traumatic vocation, is hardly akin to Robbie's experience. Robbie has no choice in his situation, but Briony can leave and resume her wealthy lifestyle at any time.

It is possible Briony could have atoned, or cleansed her dirtied soul, after she apologises to Robbie and Cecilia. She then leaves via Balham Underground Station's elevator; a descent described as if she is being slowly immersed in underwater depths: 'she sank deeper under the city [...] she was gliding down now, through the soupy brown light,

[54] McEwan, p. 272.
[55] Howes, p. 2.
[56] McEwan, p. 285.
[57] McEwan, p. 227.
[58] McEwan, p. 269.

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almost to the bottom. There were no other passengers in sight, and the air was suddenly still. She was calm as she considered what she had to do'.[59] In classical mythology, a descent into the underworld is known as katabasis, or as defined by Haewon Hwang, a 'meta-narrative of descent that dominated images of heroic journeys [and] embraced eschatological themes of death, redemption and renewal'.[60] Perhaps Briony's descent into this pseudo Greek underworld suggests that she has been cleansed of her sins and will be reborn as an innocent. The water imagery, like 'sank' and 'gliding', strengthens this claim, as historian Mircea Eliade viewed water as revivifying, or 'breaking up all forms, doing away with the past, water possesses this power of purifying, of regenerating, of giving new birth'.[61] However, this water is 'soupy brown' or heavy and dark, not light and clean. But this does not necessarily mean the water is tainted, as subterranean London can still allude to the Greek underworld. A traveller cited by historian Peter Ackroyd described the tube line in 1960 'like crossing the Styx [...] The fog had followed us down from the streets and swirled above the discoloured and strongly smelling river like the stream of Hades'.[62] Perhaps Briony is still being cleansed in a quasi-Greek underworld, but in a distinctly unique, modern, and technological way.

However, it could also be argued the water in Balham Underground Station is not pure because the scene is fiction, as Briony never plucked up the courage to visit Cecilia that day. Unable to develop, Briony writes her atonement, implying she is trapped in a stasis of childhood and sin. During her time at the hospital, she writes about Robbie and Cecilia, titling the story 'Two Figures by a Fountain'. This clarifies the importance of the water-based setting in her work, as well as the auspicious aspects of element, like that 'water also symbolizes union, as it is at the fountain where Cecilia and Robbie are first seen to come together', as observed by Julie Ellam.[63] Water also conveys Briony's attempts at purifying her dirtied soul, as in the film adaptation, she is seen writing the novel at night beside the bath. Howes also suggests that in the Bible, water 'can represent both the polluting and the cleansing of the soul, the casting out of the sinful and the drawing close of the holy'.[64] Perhaps the bathwater, like holy water, symbolises Briony's attempts at making amends by confessing her sins.

An elderly Briony decides that a reworked version of 'Two Figures by a Fountain' is to be published after her death. The readers do not realise they are reading a story written by Briony until the coda reveals that the novel is metafiction, or a novel-within-a-novel, and that in reality, Robbie and Cecilia died. Coined by William H. Gass in 1970, 'metafiction' refers to self-reflexivity in literature, or as defined by J.C. Bernthal, 'acknowledge[s] its own

[59] McEwan, p. 349.
[60] Haewon Hwang, *London's Underground Spaces: Representing the Victorian City, 1840-1915* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 1.
[61] Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. from *Traité d'Histoire des Religions* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1958), p. 194.
[62] Peter Ackroyd, *London Under* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2011), pp. 80-81.
[63] Julie Ellam, *Ian McEwan's Atonement* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 53.
[64] Howes, p. 3.

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artificiality […] [it] constantly reminds the reader of its status, and highlights the mechanics of creative writing by mixing, overwriting or combining in unexpected ways elements of competing literary traditions'.[65] It should be acknowledged that metafiction can be an element of crime fiction, as in Agatha Christie's *The Body in the Library* (1942), the investigators are interrupted by an annoying child, who boasts that he has an autograph from Agatha Christie. While this example is dissimilar from *Atonement*, as Christie is writing herself into a fictional world and McEwan does not, it does clarify that metafiction has ties to the crime genre.

Briony turns to writing because she cannot ask the deceased Robbie and Cecilia for forgiveness, nor a God she does not believe in. Her novel is a form of 'atonement' because it demonstrates Robbie's innocence, indicates the real criminals, and gives Robbie and Cecilia the happy ending they were denied in real life. However, Briony arrives at the conclusion at the end of the novel that there is 'no atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all'.[66] In other words, a novel cannot bring back the dead, and nothing can change that crushing reality. Cecilia's death in particular points to the futility of fiction, specifically with Briony's fairy tales. Cecilia drowns during an air-raid attack, as a bomb hits water mains and sewers above which flood the station she was sheltering in. But unlike in Briony's childish stories, there is no hero to save the damsel. Worse, Briony is responsible for the absence of the heroic 'humble woodcutter', or Robbie, who died months before at Dunkirk. Briony's strength in writing, depicted through the symbolism of water, ultimately fails her.

Conclusion

Water is the fulcrum in Briony's criminal development. As the perpetrator, Briony is represented by water-based architecture on her family estate. Like the island temple, she embodies upper-class superficiality and privilege that leads to her crime and her escape of punishment. Specifically, water functions as a metaphor for Briony's crime of storytelling. Just like her versions of the truth, Howes observed that in medieval tradition, 'water is changeable and slippery [...] it can mean different, sometimes contradictory things at once'.[67] Briony 'reads' scenes how she wants to, tweaking and manipulating the truth, whether it is crafting the scene of Robbie and Cecilia in an amorous embrace into something non-consensual and violent, or morphing the assailant of a crime into a completely different person. McEwan states that his novel is about 'the danger of an imagination that can't quite see the boundaries of what is real and what is unreal', and because of her storytelling, Robbie and Cecilia are separated.[68] The violent aspects of water

[65] J.C. Bernthal, 'Self-referentiality and Metafiction', in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, edited by Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper (London: Routledge, 2020), 227-235 (p. 228).
[66] McEwan, p. 371.
[67] Howes, p. 2.
[68] Reynolds and Noakes, p. 19.

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are also evoked with her crime and its repercussions, like with Lola's rape by the water bank and the resulting water-based deaths of Robbie and Cecilia.

There is no punishment for Briony, eschewing Anderson's observation that eventually in crime fiction 'the killer is identified as Other and order is restored'.[69] As a result, Briony turns to storytelling to restore order and bring Robbie and Cecilia back together. However, she cannot atone for her crimes despite her efforts. Her novel's identification of the real rapist will only emerge once all conflicting parties are dead and do not have to deal with the repercussions. Besides, she never develops beyond her childish desire to twist her life trajectory to conform to her story of the princess being saved by an unlikely hero. She grows up and believes she has changed, as the fiction she writes about Robbie and Cecilia is not one of fairytale romance but harsh realism, not realising that ultimately, her recall of events is still that: fiction. Briony does not think outside narrative structure, and still feels the need to fantasise and create stories. Thus, her novel is not a panacea for her dangerous literary imagination, suggesting her values have not been refashioned and that she does not develop beyond her childish inclinations.

[69] Anderson, 'Alterity and the Other', in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, p. 256.

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