

TO: BRIONY TALLIS

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Somewhere in a dark corner sits a slashed-up painting of an aged, corrupt soul. It is a painting of Dorian Gray. The painting, once nothing more than an artful depiction of a young, innocent man, has grown into much more. As the story goes (in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde), Dorian Gray wanted his beauty and purity to last beyond age, so he traded his soul in order to remain eternally in the state that existed in the portrait: young and pure. But his sins and his aging had to go somewhere—and it was into the art that they went. The art gained life: it took on Dorian's sins and aged, while Dorian Gray remained exactly how he wanted, statically beautiful. Somewhere in a dark corner sit the projections of a creator, the life of art, and the power of both of those combined.

For Dorian Gray, the line between created fiction and reality was clear: it was that between life and aging, purity and sin. For the viewers of *Atonement*, the line is not so clear—it is as hazy as the dream world director Joe Wright creates for the first 50 minutes of the three-part film. But perhaps truthfully the line is never so clear.

The last minute of Wright's film is hauntingly beautiful. Now-dead lovers Robbie and Cecelia, both of whom were killed in World War II, are blissfully running on a beach together. The colors are all blues and greys as they run along the beach: calming, hazy, and beautiful. They laugh as the wind plays with them. Though a beautiful scene to watch, it is, ultimately, one that probably never happened: Robbie and Cecilia are dead, after all.

Pardon me—I just spoiled the story for you. Or did I? I don't know—that's one of the things I'm trying to figure out myself.

It is 1935 in England, a fact made clear by the harsh clack of the mechanical typewritten text that is stamped on the screen one letter at a time, and Briony Tallis is a young, blue-eyed, blonde-haired girl entirely engulfed in her writing as a form of control. Settled in the orderly room of this severe 12-

year-old, the camera slowly moves over a line of figurine animals compulsively arranged in front of a dollhouse as if lined up for Noah's own Ark. Then we see Briony herself: desolate. Dressed in white, which somehow assumes an air of harshness against the florals of her room, she is sitting with perfect posture as if she were but a doll placed precisely in a formulated scene. She is typing at her desk, which is perfectly placed beneath a painting hung on her wall of a girl kneeling at the side of a bed praying—begging. Next, the camera is up close on her clear, blue eyes. Then her fingers. Finally, the first thing we see typed on her page is "The End," and the camera then zooms to the "epilogue" page of the play she has written. Briony snatches up her papers and walks away with malicious determination, weaving through the large, maze-like family home to the lingering rhythmic sounds of the typewriter. From the film's opening rumination on the blending of the real world versus the written or created world, with its dream-like lighting paired with Briony's stern, off-putting mannerisms, the director forces us to question the relationship between writing and reality. All this so that we may consider the power of the creator: How does a writer create reality? And what will Briony do with her words?

The film, and the novel on which it is based, are broken up into three aesthetically differentiated sections dictated by Briony's age. The first section is a beautiful, dreamy summer-time until Robbie, a boy who lives on the Tallis family's property, sends a note to Briony's older sister, Cecelia, with whom he is in love. He meant to send a simple, nice note to Cecelia but instead sends one with detailed outlines of his sexual desires: details about her "c" punch "u" punch "n" punch "t" punch (likely responsible for the film's "R" rating) sharply hit, letter by letter, onto the page. As the note is sent to Cecelia by way of Briony, she, of course, reads it. Her imagination is set ablaze, and, to her, Robbie is a sex *maniac*. So when the Tallis's visiting cousin, Lola, is found sexually assaulted in the woods, Briony is quick to blame innocent Robbie, providing the letter as evidence. Part one ends with Briony staring out of a stained glass window (aptly, of Saint Matilda, the patron saint of falsely accused people) as Robbie is taken away by the police, assumed guilty of what she has blamed him for.

Then, part two is dark. Part two is war, as Robbie is sent away to fight. But it is also hopeful, about Cecelia and Robbie finding ways to reunite and

live in love. It is about how all Cecelia has to do is look into war-stricken Robbie's eyes and say "come back to me," and he does (0:56:15). And it's about how Briony must live her life realizing, knowing, the gravity of the decision she made in her youth and its implication for two lives.

And then part three: when we find out everything that didn't happen. Briony is now an old woman (with dementia), a well-known writer, being interviewed about her newest novel, titled *Atonement*. In part three comes the striking moment when you find out that most of what you just watched never really happened at all: Robbie and Cecelia never reunited. They both died during the war. And so Briony wrote the fictitious novel about them living back together in love—she "gave them their happiness"—as a form of atonement (1:54:05). She tried to play God with lives that had ended.

What, then, is to be made of this massive act of betrayal? That she tried to redeem herself through an act of narration that, ultimately, betrays both the reader and the very lives it narrates? I find myself wondering how possible it is for a lie to be beautiful. I so enjoyed watching Robbie trek through the incredibly tough conditions of the war with letters to and from Cecelia pushing him through—I loved watching Cecelia's character in all her strength as she independently rejected her family to fully indulge in her love for Robbie. I enjoyed all the hazy colors in the first part of the film that turned dark when reality turned harsh and they were torn apart. So I essentially loved watching a lie. It makes me wonder if something can still be beautiful and tap into your emotions and strike you even if you find out in the end that it never really happened the way your heart thought it did. There are very few rules in the world of creating: piece together what you may. Lie as you wish. Project as you will. Make it beautiful, make it lovely; if you made it wrong, make it right. It becomes confusing, though, when you mix such license with reality. The notion of what makes any story work at all must be interrogated, the parameters questioned.

The act and reception of storytelling requires a profound amount of empathy; the reason that fiction can act as a force upon emotions is because readers put themselves into the story and imagine it happening to them. Jeanette Winterson, in her essay "The Semiotics of Sex," explains this empathetic connection when she says:

Learning to read is more than learning to group the letters on a page. Learning to read is a skill that marshals the entire resources of the body and mind . . . I mean the ability to engage with a text as you would another human being . . . To find its relationship to you that is not its relationship to anyone else . . . the love between you offers an alternative paradigm; a complete and fully realized vision in a chaotic unrealised world. (111)

So in order for the “chaotic, unrealised world” of fiction to work, it must be kept within paradigms of integrity. And when Winterson says that “[a]rt is not Capitalism, what I find in it, I may keep. The title takes my name,” she is referring to that empathy that allows you to find anything in it at all (112). The beauty of fiction really rests in the fact that you as a reader *can be* there—fiction transports you, if done with the proper amount of engagement and commitment. But it is just that: a commitment. And to what? With what parameters?

A sort of sacred contract exists. Author: you create the story with as much truth, integrity, passion, and creativity as you can muster up and spit out through a pen. Reader: you put yourself into it and feel it. Fiction is stepped into with a frame of expectation and must be contingent upon trust; when a reader knows the basis of a story is artifice, there is a trust that the story will be told with integrity so as to make its impact real.

But when storytelling is hinged upon an act of empathy and rests upon carefully placed parameters, it means there is the devastating possibility of a promise being broken—a real vulnerability. You throw yourself into parameters that you expect to be upheld—like entering a monument you are watching someone build around you. If those parameters are broken, as they were with Briony, you are left lying in the middle, watching while the very monument the author built crumbles. You can't *do* that to me; I trusted you to hold this up, you might protest. As the real creator of the film's narrative, Briony breaks this promise; she voids this contract. By falling in love with Robbie and Cecelia's fabricated story, I say to you, Briony, that I gave myself up and over to the story and the characters you told me about—I did my part, I held up my end of the deal. You did not—you led me up a staircase built upon a framework set in place by a genre you engulfed yourself in for your own reasons, then you threw me over the balcony—the contract broken. I had expectations of you, Briony. If you are trying to do something so powerful as

atoning, you had better tell that story with integrity—otherwise, the act of my slipping into the story with all my empathy simply doesn't make sense. I surrendered to your world, and if you break the promises you made, you are irresponsible. Playing God is hardly an act with any of the humility necessary to atone.

The implications of a broken contract can be examined further through other forms of art; for example, there is a photograph titled "The Valley of the Shadow of Death" taken in 1855 during the Crimean War by Roger Fenton. It is known as one of the first battlefield photos ever taken. A black and white photo with not a man in sight, it is a solemn wartime depiction of a path strewn with cannonballs, representing the heavy fire of a deadly battlefield. However, consider this: "in 2007, the American documentary filmmaker Errol Morris unearthed another Fenton picture taken on the very same spot in which the rounds appear only in the ditches—not on the road itself. Morris asserts that the photographer scattered nearly two-dozen of the projectiles into the roadway himself for dramatic effect" ("Famous Fakes"). I am tempted to say that the most amazing thing about this photo is that it was staged, but, in fact, how true is that? *Is* the most amazing aspect of the picture the fact that it was staged, or is it that the image is just as striking and memorable even if it was staged and created? It was simply, in this case, an act of rearranging.

Atonement does its own fair share of rearranging: it frequently plays around with time, featuring flashbacks and scenes happening once through one set of eyes and then another with more context. For example, the first time we watch Cecelia and Robbie interact is through a window, from Briony's point of view. She watches them at the fountain in their yard, and it is nothing more than an interaction that involves a dripping wet, scantily dressed older sister and an interested man. The intimacy, without the context, is gone. We then see the scene as it really happened—mischievously personal, clearly showing the beginning of a relationship with all its undertones of budding interest between two people. With the camera shots that take us underwater with Cecelia as she picks up a broken piece of a vase, the details are there the second time around. A similar thing happens when Robbie and Cecelia, at a pivotal point in their relationship, are caught in a breath-taking sex scene in the library. It is first shown through Briony's distanced,

frightened, accusatory point of view—all gasps and danger. However, it is shown soon after in all its rich, sexual realness and beauty; the intimacy of Robbie's grasp, the way Cecelia clings to him, the rich deep color of the green dress slipping off her shoulder and the way her foot slides out of her shoe as they desperately slip together.

In fact, the blending of the “real” world and the created one are so sensory in this film that they can even be heard, primarily through a film-long pattern of blending diegetic and non-diegetic sounds. Briony's typing is at first diegetic, coming from her actual typewriter, but then it blends and becomes non-diegetic when it turns rhythmic and eventually melds with the soundtracked music (this happens in the beginning as well as the end). It all comes together to brilliantly play with reality, just as Briony had done through her writing.

Perhaps the most strikingly real scene of the movie comes when, for five-and-a-half minutes straight, we watch and follow Robbie as he experiences Dunkirk. The scene is a passage into a world different from the one that existed in the beginning of the film. For a quarter of a mile, Robbie walks along the World War II beach where hundreds of thousands of men gathered, an event which Winston Churchill himself called “a colossal military disaster”; “[t]he whole root and core and brain of the British Army . . . seemed about to perish upon the field’ or to be captured” (“Dunkirk: Background Information”). As Robbie walks along the beach, there is constant movement. It is a legendary single-shot scene, described as “a grim circus” (Brevet). Think: a broken-down but still-spinning steel ferris wheel against a grey backdrop. The macabre journey along the beach stretches along the water past a series of horses being shot and killed, soldiers standing around a fire burning books or letters, and drunken men running around, ending at a stunning moment in which a chorus sings in a gazebo.

It is here that a pattern of sound carried throughout the film is exemplified: the blending of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds. Here, the soldiers' singing blends perfectly with the instrumental soundtrack that they don't even know exists. It speaks, quite perfectly, to the blurry lines between an inside story and an outside one. Who is on the outside and who is on the inside? And ultimately when everything else—even down to the camera angles—is so quickly changing and transient throughout the film, it is

beautiful that this scene is one shot. This is the horrifying reality that Robbie gets, and for once it is translated to us exactly as it exists. No flashbacks. No story change. This is dark, this is grey, this is a nightmare, and this is real. For five-and-a-half minutes, along the beach of Dunkirk, Robbie gets reality and we get truth.

It is real for Robbie, but that reality is projected onto the viewer as well; we are, once and for all, wrenched out of the fantasy world of fiction. The film becomes a sort of shuttle out of the dream of fiction, and it hits the viewer hardest at this point: this is war, and the people you love are dying. We are shuttled out of the dream world of a secluded summer estate; we were drawn in and have now been spit out. Art seems to become an intensification of reality, and we must ask: what is the promise of art?

Winterson asks, “[what if] we could imagine ourselves out of despair?” (116). And we watch Briony try. Her attempt is through narrative. But all she does is rearrange the truth, attempting to play God as a sickeningly ironic and hopelessly empty way of making up for life-altering mistakes. Margaret Atwood once wrote that “a word after a word after a word is power”; all Briony’s fiction amounted to was a wordy attempt at power (Atwood 29-30). Each harsh, mechanical, creative jab at the typewriter was an attempt at sheer power by the means of her words and repeat offenses of breaking the truth.

For Dorian Gray, art came to depict his fictive reality—an interesting play between reality and art. *Atonement* does something with a similar undertone but feels different. In *Atonement*, a fictitious representation was created in order to fix and make up for a mistake created in reality. But in *Dorian Gray*, the art became the sins and became the badness, so it was as if art and reality had been directly switched. In *Atonement*, the artwork doesn’t become reality, but it does become the only real representation that we have—in that, it almost *does* become real. It’s the only story we get, so it’s what we believe to be true—right up until the end. And that contrast between the limited knowledge so often presented as a result of watching the film through one character’s lens at a time shows the deceptive power of blending art and reality. As viewers and consumers, we see and are told what is true: Robbie and Cecelia being in love is true (until Briony, the creator of the art, tells us it isn’t), and Dorian Gray is young and pure (until we see the art, which holds in it the truth that he isn’t).

At the end of his story, Dorian goes so far as to kill the artist who painted his portrait. So in an interesting way, Dorian ends lives while his own life goes on unchanged. And one evening, he looks at the portrait that more accurately represents himself than he does and he destroys it. Soon after, Dorian's servants and a police officer find an old, ugly man lying dead on the ground in front of a portrait of a young and innocent Dorian. Dorian stays frozen until he dies—his death is his movement, finally. But for Cecilia and Robbie, death is a trap; it prompts Briony to set a new story in motion. Cecilia and Robbie are stuck in someone else's art the way that Dorian was in his.

Art is a way to avoid reality—even to have a sense of power over it. Artists can be like a God to the lives of their subjects. So, when the lines between representation and reality become tainted through the divine power that rests in the artist, I say: grow, Dorian—live. And, Briony—there are no mistakes here, no false accusations. *This* letter is meant for you. But you have not atoned. Your art goes on, but Cecilia and Robbie's reality has stopped. There is no one left to forgive you.

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