



## Easily torn, not easily mended

*Through her experience as a nurse, Briony learns a new humility and takes care of the terrible injuries of soldiers who, like Robbie, are suffering the war in France.*

Ian McEwan  
**Atonement**  
(2001)

Part 3

Private<sup>1</sup> Latimer had become a monster, and he must have guessed this was so. Did a girl love him before? Could she continue to?

'We'll soon have you **fixed**,' she lied again. She began repacking his face with clean gauze soaked in **eusol**<sup>2</sup>. As she was securing the pins<sup>3</sup> he made his sad sound.

5 'Shall I bring you the bottle?'

He shook his head and made the sound again.

'You're uncomfortable?'

No.

'Water?'

10 A **nod**. Only a small corner of his lips remained. She inserted the little teapot spout and poured<sup>4</sup>. With each swallow he winced<sup>5</sup>, which in turn caused him agony around the missing muscles of his face. He could stand no more, but as she withdrew the water pot, he raised a hand towards her wrist. He had to have more. Rather pain than thirst. And so it went on for minutes – he couldn't bear the pain, he had to have the water.

15 [...] She was by the linen store tying her apron<sup>6</sup> when Sister Drummond came up. It was hard to say what had changed – the manner was still quietly remote, the orders **unchallengeable**. Perhaps beneath the self-discipline, a touch of rapport in adversity.

'Nurse, you'll go and help apply the Bunyan bags to Corporal<sup>7</sup> MacIntyre's arms and legs. You'll treat the rest of his body with tannic acid. If there are difficulties, you'll come straight to me.'

20 She turned away to give instructions to another nurse. Briony had seen them bring the corporal in. He was one of a number of men **overwhelmed** by burning oil on a sinking ferry off Dunkirk<sup>8</sup>. He was picked out of the water by a destroyer<sup>9</sup>. The viscous oil clung to the skin and seared through the tissue<sup>10</sup>. It was the burned-out remains of a human they lifted onto the bed. She thought he could never survive. It was not easy to find a vein to give him morphine. Some time in the past two hours she had helped two other nurses lift him onto a bedpan<sup>11</sup> and he had screamed at the first touch of their hands.

25 The Bunyan bags were big cellophane containers. The damaged **limb** floated inside, cushioned by saline solution that had to be at exactly the right temperature. A variation of one degree was not tolerated. As Briony came up, a **probationer** with a Primus stove on a trolley<sup>12</sup> was already preparing the fresh solution. The bags had to be changed frequently. Corporal MacIntyre lay on his back under a bed cradle<sup>13</sup> because he could not bear the touch of a sheet on his skin. He was **whimpering** pathetically for water. Burn cases were always badly dehydrated. His lips were too ruined, too swollen, and his tongue too blistered<sup>14</sup> for him to be given fluid by mouth. His saline drip<sup>15</sup> had come away. The needle<sup>16</sup> would not hold in place in the damaged vein. A qualified nurse she had never seen before was attaching a new bag to the stand. Briony prepared the tannic acid in a bowl and took the roll of cotton-wool. She thought she would start with the corporal's legs in order to be out of the way of the nurse who was beginning to search his blackened arm, looking for a vein.

40 But the nurse said, 'Who sent you over here?'

'Sister Drummond.'

The nurse spoke **tersely**, and did not look up from her **probing**. 'He's suffering too much. I don't want him treated until I get him hydrated. Go and find something else to do.'

45 Briony did as she was told. She did not know how much later it was – perhaps it was in the small hours when she was sent to get fresh towels. She saw the nurse standing near the entrance to the duty room, **unobtrusively** crying. Corporal MacIntyre was dead. His bed was already taken by another case.

- 1 Private. Il soldato semplice.
- 2 clean ... eusol. Garza pulita imbevuta di disinfettante.
- 3 pins. Spille.
- 4 teapot spout and poured. Il beccuccio e versò.
- 5 With each swallow he winced. Ad ogni sorso serrava gli occhi.
- 6 by ... apron. Nel magazzino della biancheria legandosi il grembiule.
- 7 Bunyan bags to Corporal. Medicazioni impermeabili al Caporale.
- 8 Dunkirk. Dunkerque, porto francese sul mare del Nord, famoso per la battaglia di maggio-giugno 1940 tra le forze anglo-francesi e quelle tedesche. Pur con perdite gravissime, gli alleati riuscirono a reimbarcare il corpo di spedizione inglese e 112.000 soldati francesi, vanificando i piani tedeschi per l'invasione dell'Inghilterra.
- 9 destroyer. Cacciatorpediniere.
- 10 clung ... tissue. Aderì alla pelle e ustionò i tessuti.
- 11 bedpan. Padella.
- 12 a Primus ... trolley. Un fornello a petrolio su un carrello.
- 13 bed cradle. Struttura alzacoperte.
- 14 swollen ... blistered. Gonfie, e la lingua troppo coperta di vesciche.
- 15 saline drip. Flebo di soluzione salina.
- 16 needle. Ago.



50 The probationers and the second-year students worked twelve hours without rest. The other trainees and the qualified nurses worked on, and no one could remember how long they were in the wards<sup>17</sup>. All the training she had received, Briony felt later, had been useful preparation, especially in obedience, but everything she understood about nursing she learned that night. She had never seen men crying before. It shocked her at first, and within the hour she was used to it. On the other hand, the stoicism of some of the soldiers amazed and even appalled her. Men coming round from amputations seemed compelled<sup>18</sup> to make terrible jokes. What am I going to kick the missus with<sup>19</sup> now? Every secret of the body was rendered up<sup>20</sup> – bone risen through flesh, sacrilegious glimpses of an intestine or an optic nerve. From this new and intimate perspective, she learned a simple, obvious thing she had always known, and everyone knew: that a person is, among all else, a material thing, easily torn, not easily mended<sup>21</sup>. She came the closest she would ever be to the battlefield, for every case she helped with had some of its essential elements – blood, oil, sand, mud, sea water, bullets, shrapnel, engine grease<sup>22</sup>, or the smell of cordite, or damp sweaty battledress<sup>23</sup> whose pockets contained rancid food along with the sodden crumbs of Amo bars<sup>24</sup>.

- 17 wards. Corsie.  
18 compelled. Obbligati.  
19 What am I going to kick the missus with. Come farò a prendere a calci mia moglie (missus sta per missis).  
20 rendered up. Svelato.  
21 easily torn, not easily mended. Facile da rompere e difficile da riparare.  
22 shrapnel, engine grease. Schegge di granate, olio per motore.  
23 damp sweaty battledress. Uniforme umida e sudata.  
24 sodden crumbs of Amo bars. Pezzetti fradici di cioccolata Amo.

## READING COMPETENCE

### 1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- 1 sharply, rudely .....
- 2 not to be questioned .....
- 3 part of the body like arm or leg .....
- 4 cured .....
- 5 research .....
- 6 without attracting attention .....
- 7 overcome, injured .....
- 8 movement of the head as in agreement .....
- 9 crying in low sounds .....
- 10 person undergoing a trial before being employed .....

### 2 READ the text again and do the following activities.

- 1 Write down what had happened to Private Latimer.
- 2 How did Briony try to help him?
- 3 What other duty was she given by Sister Drummond?
  - A She had to treat all Corporal MacIntyre's body with tannic acid.
  - B She was told to go to the linen room.
  - C She was ordered to apply the Bunyan bags to Corporal MacIntyre's arms and legs.
- 4 Corporal MacIntyre
  - A was wounded in the trenches.
  - B got seriously burnt at Dunkirk.
  - C had been fighting on a destroyer.
- 5 What did Briony think when she saw him and why?
- 6 List the difficulties the nurses found in curing him.  
.....  
.....
- 7 To what purpose were Bunyan bags used?
  - A To contain treatment and bandages.
  - B To provide water to drink.
  - C To keep the wounded parts of the body at the right temperature.



- 8 Why did Corporal MacIntyre cry for water?
- 9 How did the qualified nurse treat Briony?
- A She did not want any interference in what she was doing.
  - B She instructed Briony about how to treat the patient.
  - C She addressed her politely.
- 10 What happened to Corporal MacIntyre?
- 11 The nursing staff had been working
- A 24 hours.
  - B without rest.
  - C 12 hours.
- 12 Write down
- what shocked Briony at first;
  - what appalled her.
- 13 What did she learn through that experience?
- 14 Tick as appropriate. The scene is narrated
- ☐ in the first person.
  - ☐ in the third person.
- 15 The reader shares ..... point of view.
- A Sister Drummond's
  - B Corporal MacIntyre's
  - C Briony's
- 16 What themes does the text deal with?

---

➤ **COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS BETWEEN TEXT AND CONTEXT**

**3 EXPLAIN** how the text is linked to the title of the novel.

**4 DISCUSS.** Trace the multiple responses to war that you have studied so far. What questions do the texts and images arouse? Do you think that literature can have a crucial role, that poetry can act as social document, that manifestos play a useful part in political activism?