The Sense of an Ending

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JULIAN BARNES

Julian Barnes studied modern languages at Oxford before going on to work for the Oxford English Dictionary supplement as a lexicographer (helping to compile its entries). In 1977, he began reviewing books for the *New Statesman* and *New Review* magazines, and later became a television critic. He published his first novel, *Moreland*, in 1980, but his first major critical success was the 1984 novel *Flaubert's Parrot*, in which he explored his protagonist's obsession with certain features of the life of 19th-century French writer Gustave Flaubert. In 2000, Barnes would similarly meld history and fiction in his first bestselling work, *Arthur and George*, a work of fiction inspired by a true crime investigated by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (the creator of Sherlock Holmes). *The Sense of an Ending*, published in 2011, won the Man Booker Prize, among other literary awards. He has continued writing to the present; his most recent novel, *The Only Story*, was released in 2018.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Tony's adolescence and young adulthood takes place in the 1960s, a time of vast cultural change, including movements for sexual liberation, women's rights, and civil rights—even if, as Tony notes, the sixties only happened in some parts of his own country, whereas others remained a decade or so behind. Between that period and the late 2000s, when the retired Tony is telling his story, much has changed as well, as he notes—including the rightwing reforms of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Tony particularly lingers on the changes in gender norms, thinking at one point about how the young girls he sees in short skirts would never have been allowed to wear such outfits in the 1960s, nor would they have been permitted to spend time near a boys' school like his own.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Sense of an Ending takes its name from a 1967 book of literary criticism by Frank Kermode, which studies how fiction imposes cohesive structures and coherent narratives onto what might otherwise seem like chaos, especially in uncertain times of history. Barnes's novel is similarly concerned with how all people, not just writers, construct certain selective narratives about themselves and their lives—as well as how it's sometimes only an ending (like Adrian's untimely death) that lends a sense of meaning to everything that came before.

Barnes's novel is also full of literary allusions, apt for a narrator who strove during his school days to be as brilliant and clever as his friend Adrian: Ted Hughes is explicitly invoked, but there are also a number of unspecified allusions to poet Philip Larkin (including the lines "wrangle for a ring" and "May you be ordinary"). Another contemporary writer to grapple with the questions of memory, identity, and history that so occupy Barnes is W.G. Sebald, author of works (including *Austerlitz* and *The Rings of Saturn*) that often allude to the events of World War II.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Sense of an Ending*
- **When Written:** 2011
- **Where Written:** United Kingdom
- **When Published:** 2011
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Climax:** Tony realizes that Adrian's son is the child of Sarah Ford rather than Veronica
- **Antagonist:** Tony seems to think of Veronica as his nemesis for most of the novel, following their relationship—he takes solace in identifying her as manipulative and selfish, so as to excuse his own actions. But Tony comes to realize that he has been his own worst enemy: he struggles to overcome certain intractable character traits that he doesn't like and yet cannot seem to shed.
- **Point of View:** First person: the narrator, Tony, is telling the story of his life. The way he narrates it—what he includes and leaves out (consciously or otherwise)—suggests that he is not an altogether reliable narrator.

EXTRA CREDIT

Look it Up. During his time working at the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Julian Barnes once claimed to have been assigned to the "sports and dirty word department."

I Spy? In the 1980s, Julian Barnes indulged his grittier side by publishing a series of crime novels featuring a bisexual detective, Duffy, under the pseudonym "Dan Kavanagh."

PLOT SUMMARY

The Sense of an Ending begins with a set of disjointed images—all memories of Tony Webster, the narrator and protagonist—beginning with a "shiny inner wrist" and ending with cold bathwater behind a locked door. Tony reflects that he

still doesn't understand time very well, even though it's formed and molded him. But he notes that he should begin his story with his schooldays, since that's where it all began.

Tony describes the arrival of Adrian Finn to his all-boys London high school, where he forms a close-knit group of friends with Colin and Alex: Adrian will become the fourth, though he'll remain at a slight distance from the others. Adrian makes an impression on Tony when he makes a clever comment in history class with Old Joe Hunt: Tony compliments Adrian, but is surprised when Adrian seems to take the comment seriously rather than deflecting it ironically. Adrian is generally more serious than the others, earnestly participating in school events and seriously considering their teachers' questions, rather than seeking to be as clever as possible, as Tony, Alex, and Colin do. Adrian can be clever as well: in literature class with Phil Dixon, he says that the meaning of a poem is "Eros and Thanatos," sex and love—which he will refer back to after the students learn that Robson, another student in the school, has killed himself. The rumor is that he did so once his girlfriend became pregnant. After discussing his possible reasons, the boys conclude that his action was unphilosophical and weak.

The boys feel like they're in a "holding pen," like their lives are waiting to start. Adrian is the only one of them who seems to have a slightly more novelistic life—his parents are divorced, which is rare in their environment—but Adrian keeps much about his personal life to himself. What Tony remembers most about him is his stunning intellect. In the last history class of the term, in response to Old Joe Hunt's question about how to define history, Adrian calls history the certainty that results from inadequate documentation meeting imperfect memory—and uses Robson's suicide as his example.

The group of friends disperses after they graduate: Adrian has a scholarship to Cambridge, while Tony begins studying history at Bristol. He meets his first girlfriend, Veronica Mary Elizabeth Ford, whom he describes as "nice," but he also finds her intimidating, with her love of poetry, her sophisticated taste in records, and her bemused attitude with respect to his bumbling attempts to be clever. Tony is eager to have "full sex" with Veronica, who doesn't let him go that far. One weekend she invites him to meet her family in Kent, at Chislehurst. Tony is highly uncomfortable all weekend, especially with Veronica's father and her brother Jack, both of whom are pleasant and jocular but seem to Tony to be treating him with barely disguised contempt—especially since he feels intimidated by their privileged social and economic status. Veronica seems to be distancing herself from him as well, though he's not sure if he's being paranoid about this. On Saturday morning he has a rather strange conversation with Veronica's mother, Sarah Ford, who seems to him artistic, casual, and carefree, and warns him not to let Veronica get away with too much. As Tony leaves on Sunday, she waves at him with a strange, enigmatic gesture, and he wishes he'd spent more time with her. Soon afterward, Tony has Veronica meet his high school friends: he learns that Jack, like Adrian, is at Cambridge, and feels another pang of inferiority.

Veronica and Tony continue dating during their second year, and she lets him take more sexual liberties with her. She also asks where he thinks the relationship is going, a question that makes him uncomfortable: he says he prefers to live in the present, and is "peaceable"—which she calls cowardly. Reflecting from the present day, Tony remarks that although work and Veronica took up most of his time at Bristol, he also has a few memories—particularly one night in which he and his friends stayed up late to witness the **Severn Bore**, marveling at how time seemed to reverse itself as the river changed direction for a few moments and a wave charged upstream.

Tony's next memory is of Veronica—after the two of them broke up—sleeping with him, an event that he describes as happening essentially without him deciding or willing it. As he throws the condom out, he decides he actually doesn't want a relationship with Veronica: when he tells her this, she gets enormously upset. Tony tries to put her out of his life. He has a one-night stand with another girl, and focuses on his studies in his final year. One day, he gets a letter from Adrian, saying that he's begun to date Veronica, and says he feels he needs to check in with Tony—if Tony really isn't fine with it, Adrian will have to reevaluate things. Tony slips a jokey, casual postcard in the mail immediately, saying all's fine with him, but he's seething; after a few days, he sends a real letter, in which he writes (according to what present-day Tony can remember) that he doesn't think much of their moral scruples, and that Veronica is manipulative and probably damaged—though Tony still isn't exactly sure what he meant by that. He writes that Adrian should consult with Veronica's mother on that count.

After graduating, Tony spends a few months traveling around the United States. He dates a girl named Annie during his time there, reveling in how easy-going (and thus unlike Veronica) she is. When he returns, there's a letter from Alex: it says that Adrian has killed himself. Tony and Alex meet to talk, and Tony learns that Adrian left a letter saying that everyone has a philosophical duty to examine life—a gift bestowed without anyone asking for it—and if one decides to renounce the gift, he has a duty to act upon the consequences of that choice. Alex and Tony agree that his suicide is a waste, even as they admire Adrian's clear-thinking logic. A year after his death, they have a reunion with Colin in which they reminisce about Adrian, and vow to meet again every year, but time passes, and they lose touch.

Tony gets a job in arts administration, where he meets Margaret, marries her, and has a daughter, Susie, with her. Eventually Margaret meets a restaurant owner and leaves Tony for him, but the man ends up leaving Margaret in turn. The two of them become friends again. Once Margaret suggests they get back together, but Tony believes (or tells himself) that she

doesn't mean it. Now Tony is retired: he volunteers wheeling a library cart around at a hospital, and is a member of the local history society. He concludes that his life has been interesting to him, though perhaps not to many others: although he once told Old Joe Hunt that history was the lies of the victors, he recognizes now that it's the memories of the survivors, neither victorious nor defeated.

The second part of the novel begins with Tony reflecting on how growing old changes the way one thinks about time. Some things have remained the same with him: he still enjoys some of the same music, for instance. He gets along fine with Susie, though sometimes he thinks she seems to be patronizing him.

Somewhat abruptly, Tony shares what has really prompted all the memories related in the book's first half: he's received a long white envelope from a lawyer, Eleanor Marriott, relating to the estate of Mrs. Sarah Ford. Tony goes through his vague memories from that weekend in Chislehurst, but can't think of anything significant. Mrs. Ford has left him 500 pounds and two documents: one is a letter from her saying that she's left him **Adrian's diary**—she's not sure of her own motives, but wants him to have it, and thinks that Adrian's last months were happy. The diary, however, is missing: Eleanor Marriott says that Veronica Ford, who was taking care of her mother in the years up until her death, has it, and prefers not to hand it over. Tony gets in touch with his own lawyer, T.J. Gunnell, who advises him not to characterize Veronica's actions as a "theft." Tony also asks for Veronica and Jack Ford's contact information, though only receives the latter. Jack isn't too helpful—he writes a cheery email from Singapore (though Tony thinks he may be pulling his leg, and is in fact sitting near an English golf course, laughing at him after all these years), but does give Veronica his contact information.

Margaret advises Tony to drop the matter, but he's too stubborn to do so. Increasingly, a number of memories begin to come back to him about his time with Veronica—memories that make him newly attracted to her. Tony remembers Veronica herself being stubborn and "difficult," so he begins a dogged email campaign, persistently writing to her every few days with the goal of finally getting his hands on the diary. Finally, Eleanor Marriot sends him a single page photocopied from the diary. The page includes a formula that Adrian has written with a number of letters on them, asking how one might calculate the relationships between the people in his life, and whether it's possible to identify a chain of responsibility. The page ends with a fragment: "So, for instance, if Tony…" Tony has no idea what the page means, but he's shook by the final phrase: he wonders if it's a referendum on his entire life, the way he's settled for easy peaceableness, the way he's always been overly concerned with other people's approval.

Tony keeps emailing Veronica, and she finally agrees to meet him at what's known as the Wobbly Bridge in London. When they meet, Tony thinks she looks somewhat ragged. She says she won't hand over the diary, but does hand Tony an envelope with a letter inside. When he opens it, it's his own long-ago letter that he sent to Veronica and Adrian. It's vulgar, bitter, and cruel: in it he calls Veronica a "cockteaser" and wishes, among other things, that she can get pregnant before Adrian discovers she's a "bore." Reading it, Tony is shocked and appalled at his younger self. He recognizes that it hadn't been cruel of the two of them to tell him they were dating; he realizes that he was all too quick to make Veronica out to be manipulative and deceptive. He feels remorse, not only for the letter, but also for his whole life—drab and ordinary as contrasted to Adrian's brilliance, which stands out all the more since Adrian's own life was so short. He continues to reflect on whether character changes over time, on why his marriage with Margaret ended, and on how uncertainty about the past only increases with age. One night, he writes an email to Veronica asking if she thinks he was in love with her back then, and quickly presses send: she responds that if he had to ask, the answer was no. When Tony relates this to Margaret, she grows quiet and says that he's on his own now.

Tony decides he needs to make Veronica reevaluate her opinion of him, and realize that he's not as awful as he comes across in that letter. He writes to Veronica again, apologizing and asking for details about her life. She seems almost happy to be asked, and shares details about her parents: her father ended up drinking too much, and eventually got cancer; her mother moved to London and seemed to be doing well until her memory started failing a few years before she died. Tony looks for manipulation in the email but sees only an ordinary, sad story. He emails again to ask if they can meet—not for the diary but just to catch up. On the way to their lunch date he has an intense memory of her dancing, and reflects that although he sometimes felt sexually frustrated with her, there was also much about their relationship that he loved. When they do meet, he spends the entire time sharing details about his life, while she says nothing; she leaves before he can stop her, having barely spoken at all.

Tony emails yet again to apologize for having done so much of the talking: he wants to hear more about her life and her family. She responds telling him to meet her at an unfamiliar Tube station in north London. When he does, she asks him to get into her car and drives up a street until they see a group of five men, whom Tony assumes are mentally ill, together with a care worker. Veronica gets out and they seem happy to see her. Back in the car, Tony is mystified, and asks about her connection with the "goofy man" and the others, including why they called her "Mary." Veronica is clearly upset, and orders him out. Tony is upset himself, feeling especially humiliated that he allowed himself to imagine that he might be able to remake some kind of relationship with Veronica this late in life. He feels like a fool, and given that Margaret is also upset with him, lonelier than ever. Still, he emails Jack to ask him if he might be able to shed

any light on the subject, but Jack doesn't respond.

Alone, Tony returns to north London, and revisits the pub and shop where he and Veronica had seen the group of men entering. Without any obligations on his time, he decides to become a regular at the pub. One day, the group of men does enter, with another care worker. At one point Tony encounters one of the men at the bar: the man looks Tony straight in the face, and Tony quietly says he's a friend of Mary's. The man grows upset as a result, and Tony leaves. He's realized that the man is unmistakably Adrian's son, and realizes that it must be his son with Veronica. Tony feels shock and compassion, but also is forced to reevaluate the way he's always thought of Adrian—now, he thinks, he's recognized that Adrian's suicide wasn't grand and heroic, but was cowardly and weak in its own way.

Tony sends Veronica an email referring to what he's learned, but she only responds saying that he still doesn't get it, and never will. One day, he drives over to the pub again, when the group of men, including Adrian's son, walk in once more. At one point, a care worker, Terry, comes over to ask who Tony is, saying that he seems to be agitating Adrian's son (also named Adrian). Tony apologizes and says he'll leave: he tells Terry that he's a friend of Adrian, or rather was a friend of his father and of his mother, Mary. Terry, however, says he must be mistaken: Adrian is Mary's sister, not her son; his mother died a few months ago.

Finally, Tony "gets it": Sarah Ford had slept with Adrian and had gotten pregnant with his son. He understands the formula in Adrian's diary fragment, which was trying to understand the connections between himself, Tony, Veronica, and Sarah Ford. Tony had told Adrian to consult Veronica's mother in order to understand how "damaged" she was. Tony ends the novel knowing that he can't possibly know or understand much more about this story, and also can't understand the extent to which he really must feel responsible. He feels only great unrest.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Anthony (Tony) Webster – The protagonist of *The Sense of an Ending* is also its narrator: sixty-something years old when he is telling his story, he also appears as an adolescent and young man as Tony returns to memories of forty years earlier. Tony is eager (and self-consciously so) to tell a certain story of his life, one in which he might appear in as positive a light as possible, and this complicates the ability to understand his character in any objective way. Throughout his life, Tony does retain certain qualities: he is wry and ironic, pleasant in company, and, as he dubs himself, "peaceable"—quick to deflate any situation in order to avoid confrontation. Though awkward around women early in adulthood, he has several intense relationships with women over the course of his life. While he admires and seeks their approval, he also has a tendency to objectify these women or to take advantage of their feelings for him in order to feel better about himself, all the while playing innocent. In some ways, Tony does come to terms with his more negative characteristics—his pettiness, his avoidance of feeling deeply or compassionately for other people, and so on—by the end of the novel, but in other ways he continues to see himself quite differently than how others, including the novel's readers, might perceive him. However, the novel doesn't condemn Tony's behavior and character outright: instead, by portraying him as absolutely average, it suggests that even Tony's cruelest behavior and greatest self-delusions are entirely ordinary.

Adrian Finn – A latecomer to the all-boys school that Tony attends, Adrian joins Tony's friend group but remains at a certain distance from the others. Like them, he's fascinated by literature and philosophy—his preferred authors are Camus and Nietzsche—but unlike the others, he is outwardly earnest about his intellectual leanings, embracing seriousness and frustrated that others around him refuse to be as serious. Adrian is recognized by all the school's teachers as a brilliant young student: one of them even offers (though half in jest) to give Adrian his job when he retires in a few years. Adrian is particularly obsessed with the existentialist question of what makes a life worth living, and whether one can logically deduce such meaning from abstract theorizing. Adrian ultimately goes on to commit suicide years later, and for most of his life, Tony believes that Adrian killed himself because he reasoned his way into it. By the end of the novel, however, it seems that Adrian may have done so for more concrete reasons—he slept with his girlfriend Veronica's mother, Sarah, who became pregnant. But no airtight conclusion is ever reached about Adrian's ultimate motives (just as other elements of his life—his parents are divorced and he doesn't share much about them, for instance—remain hidden too). Instead, the ability to trace causation and responsibility to a single source—something Adrian has always wanted to be able to do—is, in the novel, revealed to be ultimately impossible.

Veronica (Mary Elizabeth) Ford – Tony's first girlfriend, Veronica is studying Spanish at Bristol when the two of them meet. She comes across to him as sophisticated and cultured in a more authentic way than he is: she likes poetry, prefers classier music than he does, and (mostly) refrains from dancing. She comes from a rather well-off family, and seems to have a closer relationship to her father and brother Jack than to her mother (Sarah Ford). Veronica doesn't want to have "full sex" with Tony, though she finally does after they break up—leading him to end things with her definitively, which deeply upsets her. That Veronica subsequently begins dating Adrian makes Tony think of her, for decades into the future, as manipulative and deceptive. While the novel explores the difficulty of ever knowing another person—and only ever portrays Veronica

through Tony's eyes—it does suggest that Veronica wanted a more serious relationship with Tony and felt devastated and betrayed by the breakup. In some ways, she's like him in her refusal to be direct—her attempts to make Tony "get it" (that is, understand what happened after she and Adrian started dating, including the fact that he slept with her mother) forty years later are oblique at best. But over the course of the novel, it becomes clear that Veronica acts out of pain far more than out of deception. In addition, she is the character in the novel who seems to have accepted responsibility for other people more than anyone else, particularly in her close relationship to her mentally ill half-brother, Adrian's son.

Mrs. Sarah Ford – Veronica's mother, Sarah Ford is a housewife in Kent where she lives with her family. Tony remembers her as a carefree, easily laughing woman, who warns him not to let her daughter take advantage of him. She turns out to be far more enigmatic than that: Sarah Ford ends up sleeping with her daughter's new boyfriend, Adrian, and has a child by him. Her motives and mental state remain hidden throughout the novel, as well as the real reasons she left Adrian's **diary** and five hundred pounds to Tony. Perhaps, it's implied, she felt trapped by her situation; perhaps she wanted Tony to know the truth and to feel responsibility; it's possible that she is also the greatest manipulator and deceiver in the novel.

Jack Ford – Veronica's brother and a Cambridge student like Adrian, Jack is casual and sardonic, treating Tony with rather unconcerned bemusement during the weekend Tony spends at the family's home. Tony feels insecure around Jack, due in part to his Cambridge education and in part to his privileged background. During that weekend, and decades later when he attempts to get back in touch with Jack, Tony continues to feel slighted by him, as though Jack is treating him with barely disguised contempt. This feeling is depicted as possibly based in some truth, though also stemming from intense insecurity on Tony's part. In fact, in many ways Jack and Tony are similar in their "unseriousness," which is something that Adrian finds frustrating about both of them.

Margaret – Tony's wife, whom he meets through his job (in arts administration) and with whom he has one child, Susie. Margaret eventually leaves him for a restaurant owner, who in turn leaves her; she and Tony subsequently become friends. Although Tony claims that their relationship is fully platonic, and that Margaret would never want to get back together with him, that claim is contradicted in both explicit and subtle ways throughout the story. Indeed, it's implied that Margaret's affair was in part a desperate act, a way to get Tony to react more strongly and perhaps fight for her in a way he proves unable to do.

Susie – Margaret and Tony's only daughter, Susie is grown up and married herself by the time Tony begins his story. She is depicted as tolerant toward her father: Tony is mildly offended that she seems to have taken her mother's side in the divorce, even though Margaret left him. By coming to understand the situation with Adrian's son, however, Tony comes to appreciate the fact that Susie has been able to live a full, independent life.

Adrian's son (Adrian) – A forty-something man around the time Tony begins telling his story, this Adrian doesn't have his identity revealed until the very end of the novel. He is mentally ill and needs to be under constant care. Eventually Tony realizes that the man is Adrian's son, but it takes much more time to realize that he is not Adrian's son with Veronica, but rather with Veronica's mother (Sarah Ford).

Veronica's Father – A civil servant, Veronica's father picks up Tony from the train station during his visit to the family home and, like Jack, seems to Tony to treat him with a jokey demeanor that barely hides his scorn. Veronica's (unnamed) father is a heavy drinker and eventually dies of complications from alcoholism; this is one of the possible sources of distress and tension in Veronica's family that Tony doesn't spend too much time thinking about, even when he casually calls Veronica "damaged."

Annie – An American woman whom Tony meets while traveling around the United States after graduation, Annie "hooks up" with him for three months. She wears plaid shirts, has a friendly demeanor, and is easygoing, which Tony contrasts to Veronica's manner. Later in life, Tony wonders if he was too quick to assume that Annie was actually that easygoing, and if she did want something more. Annie is thus another example of a woman with whom Tony retains a certain distance, in large part out of fear of getting hurt.

Old Joe Hunt – The history teacher at Tony's school, Old Joe Hunt wears a three-piece suit and maintains a slightly wry, distanced air with his students. Although Tony describes his classes as somewhat, though not excessively, boring, the conversations held during history class—about causality and historical responsibility, as well as about the very possibility of defining history—linger in his mind for the rest of his life.

Phil Dixon – The literature teacher at Tony's school, Phil Dixon is a young, recent Cambridge grad whom the students adore. He uses the New Criticism method that involves sharing a poem with students without identifying information, and asking them to determine what it means devoid of any context. Phil Dixon becomes a model for the kind of dashing intellectual that Tony would like to be: he repeats one of Dixon's phrases about the poet Ted Hughes to Veronica once at university in order to impress her, though with little success.

Robson – A student in the "Science Sixth" at Tony's school, Robson never appears directly in the novel, but is a significant reference point for Tony and his friends after he commits suicide, having gotten his girlfriend pregnant. The boys view his suicide as less a tragic event than an opportunity for them to speculate endlessly and abstractly on his reasons and motives. For Tony, Robson's suicide is also a counterpoint to Adrian's,

since he understands the latter as admirably well-reasoned and the former as desperate and weak: much of the novel will work to complicate and challenge that view.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Colin – A school friend of Tony's, Colin shares his jokey, ironic attitude, though coupled with true intellectual interests (he's a fan of nineteenth-century European authors like Baudelaire and Dostoyevsky). Colin embraces an anarchic view of the universe according to which there's no ultimate meaning, and everything is left to chaos.

Alex – Another member of Tony's friend group at school, Alex is considered the philosopher among them before Adrian joins the group. He's also the friend that shares the details of Adrian's suicide with Tony, who was traveling around the United States when it happened.

Marshall – A student in Old Joe Hunt's history class who is depicted as slower-thinking and less clever than Tony and his friends.

Brown – A student of the Maths Sixth who spreads the rumor that Robson killed himself because his girlfriend became pregnant (a rumor that Tony and the others subsequently accept as fact).

Tony's Mother – A minor character in the novel, Tony's mother appears most notably after Adrian's suicide, when she suggests that he was too clever—that he reasoned his way out of common sense—and deeply angers Tony.

Tony's Father – Also a source of Tony's frustration after Adrian dies, when he doesn't know what to say or how to act in order to comfort his son.

Lucas – One of Susie's sons (Tony's grandson).

Eleanor Marriott – The lawyer responsible for Sarah Ford's estate, who transfers her bequest to Tony, and with whom he tries to negotiate in order to obtain Adrian's **diary**.

T.J. Gunnell – Tony's own solicitor (lawyer), who he contacts in order to try to obtain Adrian's **diary**.

The black woman – One of the care workers responsible for Adrian (junior).

Terry – Another care worker responsible for Adrian (junior).

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MEMORY, MANIPULATION, AND SELF-DECEPTION

When *The Sense of an Ending* begins, Tony Webster, a sixty-something retired Englishman, has received a legacy of 500 pounds from Sarah Ford, the mother of an old girlfriend, Veronica Ford. He also inherits the **diary** of an old school friend, Adrian Finn (another of Veronica's exes), who killed himself. For reasons that remain unclear for most of the novel, Veronica's mother has kept Adrian's diary since then. Although Veronica refuses to hand the diary over to Tony, the unexpected bequest unleashes memories of that time in Tony's life, from high school to university—memories that he admits are approximate, but which "time has deformed into certainty." Little by little, however, it becomes clear that Tony has misremembered or actively repressed certain details of his relationship with Veronica, including his deliberate cruelty to her and Adrian once they were together. The novel thus becomes a haunting examination of the ways time can deform memory, even as Tony strives to correct his view of the past. Whether consciously manipulated or unconsciously suppressed, selective memory in this novel as at once a source of pain and, frighteningly, an altogether ordinary aspect of human experience.

The fallibility of memory is something that Tony seems to acknowledge openly from the start. Simply living long enough, he muses, makes memory "a thing of shreds and patches." He contrasts the ambiguity of memory in old age with the relatively certainty that, for Tony, characterizes a short life like Adrian's—Tony imagines that Adrian did not live long enough to forget much of importance at all. Such acknowledgments signal that Tony is aware of the ways one's own memory can be deceptive (though the novel does go on to question the assumptions Tony makes about certainty in Adrian's life). One implication of this fallibility of important memories is that it undermines Tony's various pronouncements about himself, since even he acknowledges that it's impossible to fully know one's own character. In this way, he unsettles his confident first-person narration, but in another sense his willing acknowledgment of this impossibility continues to suggest a narrator in confident control of his narrative, despite all its slippages and gaps.

The two-part structure of the novel loosely divides the story into "what happened" and "what it meant," but these two categories mingle and intersect, as Tony is forced to revisit the past at multiple moments after new knowledge (and self-knowledge) arises from his conversations and emails with Veronica, Tony's ex-wife Margaret, and Veronica's brother Jack. As the novel returns again and again to events such as Adrian's suicide, Tony's visit to Veronica's family at Chislehurst, and even lessons in his high school history classroom, Barnes suggests that certain significant events can look quite different to different people, and also can carry divergent meanings even

for a single person over the arc of their life.

Indeed, as the novel continues, it becomes increasingly clear that Tony has been editing and redacting his memories beyond his own acknowledgment. There is a level of self-deception in Tony's account of his past that far exceeds the flawed nature of an aging man's failing memory. Most strikingly, Tony only briefly mentions a letter that he wrote once he learned that Adrian had started dating Veronica, but later in the novel, a 60-something Veronica hands him the letter, in which Tony is shown to have been a bitter, vulgar young man who actively tried to destroy Veronica and Adrian's relationship by writing the cruelest remarks he could think of—a far cry from the person Tony presented himself to be in his memories.

In part, the letter reveals Tony's self-deception, a product of his desire to see himself as better than he was. In this way, the narrative shows him (as an older man) coming to terms with the ways he has rewritten his own past. And yet this letter also invites the question of what other memories may have been redacted, edited, or deformed—whether by time or by self-deception. While Tony, for instance, has portrayed his relationship with Margaret as a fully easy, platonic one, allowing him to share details of his complicated feelings for Veronica with her, it slowly becomes evident that she might not see things that way; perhaps he has constructed his own narrative about their past and present together in order to avoid having to face her pain. By employing a first-person narrator, the novel both invites belief in the narration and makes it that much more difficult to determine the extent of Tony's reliability or unreliability as a narrator.

Yet Tony's status as an unreliable narrator is never presented as exceptional. Tony is, after all, perfectly ordinary: "average at university and work; average in friendship, loyalty love; average, no doubt, at sex." In that way, the novel presents Tony's distorted memory, too, as "average"—no more out of the ordinary than any other aspect of his character, or than any average person's manipulation of memory. Memories, Barnes suggests, are simultaneously a powerful source of nostalgia and a means of solidifying one's character, even as they are subject to the fallibility and forgetfulness of the human beings who bear them. The novel shows that the fallibility and even the manipulation of memory is something altogether ordinary, as is the damage and pain it can cause others.

HISTORY, NARRATIVE, AND TRUTH

Just as *The Sense of an Ending* presents memory as subject to the corrupting force of self-deception, the novel also represents history as fallible, since it's subject to rewriting, interpretation, and misinterpretation. The novel suggests that the past is only accessible via the narratives people construct about it: while history might seem far more stable and more objective than human memory, in this novel it's presented instead as unstable, uncertain, and just as subjective as memory.

In the scenes of Tony's high-school history class taught by Old Joe Hunt, various characters propose different ways of thinking about history. Colin suggests that history simply consists of endless repetition; Tony eagerly describes history as the "lies of the victors"; finally, Adrian calls history *the certainty that results from imperfect memory meeting inadequate documentation* (he cites a made-up historian named Patrick Lagrange—though perhaps even this is another instance of mis-remembering on Tony's part). These competing definitions of history suggest that, even as Tony and his friends have learned to master facts about the past, it may be impossible for people to agree what they mean by "history," as well as what historical events mean.

Tony returns at various points in the story to Adrian's definition in particular, as he has to face the question of whether it's really possible to ever know with confidence what happened in the past. In the high-school scene, Adrian uses the recent suicide of their classmate Robson to explain what he means: already, uncertainties about Robson's death abound, and the passage of time will only create more uncertainty—making it impossible for future generations to be certain what happened. In making this argument, Adrian assumes that eyewitnesses should always be trusted more than secondary sources, while Old Joe Hunt cautions that one can sometimes reach a more accurate account of the past by studying other pieces of evidence, rather than by asking those who were involved.

Throughout the novel, Tony's own searches for what he calls "corroboration," for evidence that would confirm or deny his own memory of the past, underline the novel's interest in exploring various means of writing and imagining history. The fact, for instance, that Veronica burns Adrian's **diary** (which Tony has been attempting unsuccessfully to read)—or at least tells Tony that she does—means that Tony can no longer know the "truth" about what really happened all those years ago by relying on Adrian's own words. But the novel calls into question whether reading Adrian's testimony would really give Tony the certainty he craves, because his testimony would only be one partial, subjective version of the past.

The novel thus calls into question the very possibility of ever finding out what "really" happened in the past. This is clearest in Tony's struggle to figure out why the older Veronica so wants him to understand why she's acquainting him with a mentally challenged man in a care community in North London. At first he's mystified, and then thinks it's Veronica and Adrian's son: he constructs an entire narrative around Adrian's suicide that now stems from his inability to accept a girlfriend's pregnancy. Then he realizes that, in fact, the man is the child of Adrian and Veronica's mother (Sarah Ford). The narratives that Tony constructs say more about Tony's own past, biases, and desires—the "history of the historian," as adolescent Adrian says—than about what *really* happened. Yet even Tony's final

revelation is never explicitly confirmed. By refusing to tie up loose ends, the novel implies that people cannot help but make history into a story—one with meaning, a climax, and the "sense of an ending"—even in the absence of clear answers. Part of growing up, the novel thus suggests, is learning to live instead with the ambiguities of historical narrative—to accept that what we call history is really our interpretation of it, even as that interpretation affects historical change into the future.

RESPONSIBILITY, AGENCY, AND GUILT

In the halls of their London school, Tony and his peers grapple with cause and effect, asking themselves whether historical change is caused by individual actors, vast social forces, or some combination of the two. This is also a question about responsibility: about whether it is possible to trace the cause of a certain event to a specific time, place, and person. In Tony's case, he wonders whether it is possible to trace Adrian's suicide, as well as Sarah Ford's bequest to Tony and the mystery swirling around it, to his own school days, to his visit to Veronica's house, or to the letter he sent to her and Adrian. Furthermore, he wonders whether changing one of his past decisions or actions could really change everything that followed. Although the novel implies that these questions are ultimately impossible to answer, it also shows that denying personal responsibility for one's actions is naïve and destructive to others. Assuming that webs of blame extend far and wide ultimately justifies people's denial of their own responsibility for the pain and suffering they've caused others. Living with the burden of guilt, then, is the only mature way of dealing with one's past actions and mistakes.

The novel sets up the question of responsibility through a problem that has plagued historians for a century: the cause of World War I. Encouraged by Old Joe Hunt, the characters propose different causes, arguing for "one hundred percent responsibility of historical forces," the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, and finally, mere chaos. Typically, Adrian opts for a middle ground: attributing the war to a chain of individual actions, which balances blaming a single person with blaming everyone. Like the debates about the meaning of history itself, this school lesson sets the stage for various ways the characters reflect on their own agency in later life. Adrian, for instance, struggles with these issues before his own suicide. In the excerpt of Adrian's **diary** that Tony reads, Adrian questions the very meaning of the "whole chain" of responsibility and wonders how far the chain extends. He formulates a set of mathematical equations to represent the relationship between different people in his life, using integers that represent Tony (a2), himself (a1), Veronica (v), and her mother Sarah (s)—and, Tony finally realizes, the baby born to her (b). By showing Adrian's attempt to pin down responsibility through such quantitative, logical deductions to be hopeless, the novel seems to suggest that figuring out the ultimate cause of any significant event is doomed to failure.

However, *The Sense of an Ending* also implies that living according to that idea—that causes and effects are hopelessly convoluted—allows people to avoid taking responsibility for their own actions. Tony, for instance, tries to avoid personal responsibility by floating through life without ruffling anyone's feathers—moving through a decent career in arts administration, marrying, then amicably divorcing and staying friends with his ex-wife, and trying not to alienate those around him. But one aspect of Tony's embrace of mediocrity, the novel suggests, is his blindness to his own agency: cruel toward Veronica and overly dependent on his ex-wife, Tony does affect other people, and is responsible for their pain, despite his claims to the contrary.

Over the course of the novel, Tony does begin to accept some responsibility for his past actions: but this doesn't, the novel implies, mean that he can rewrite the past. In one of his most vivid memories, he and a group of friends marvel at the **Severn Bore**—a large wave that, as a result of tidal surges, moves against the tide. The bore is so alluring because it seems to reverse the very course of history: it's an exception to the general rule that the choices people make can't be undone. Tony's and Adrian's actions have far-reaching consequences in the book, and they have to grapple both with knowing this—and knowing they can't go back in time and change things—and with *not* knowing exactly how much blame really belongs with them.

The Sense of an Ending implicitly critiques the idea that a chain of responsibility extends too far to assign the blame to only one person. Even if Tony can't isolate the reasons for his friend's suicide or Sarah Ford's pregnancy to a single cause, he is shown to bear some responsibility for both. Even so, merely accepting that fact doesn't necessarily lead to any catharsis or redemption. Tony's relationship to his past, remains, as the final page of the novel notes, "unsettled," a subject of inevitable regret because history, unlike memory, moves in only one direction.

SEX, CLASS, AND POWER

Tony heads to university in the 1960s, a decade now synonymous with movements of political protest as well as cultural change—including sexual liberation, civil rights, and women's and gay rights movements. *The Sense of an Ending* is more generally interested in examining the effects of shifting sexual mores on the lives of its characters, whether in the context of romantic relationships or among friends. Tony views his younger self as a sexual amateur—one whose early relationship with Veronica is hampered by her family's "posh," privileged background. But his sense of victimization, the novel suggests, hides the ways sexually manipulates Veronica. In general, the novel shows its characters exercising power over each other in various ways,

through sex as well as money or status. But sex in the novel is more powerful than class: it is a source of deception and manipulation (in some ways it's therefore similar to the way memory works in the novel) whose effects can be far longer-lasting than the sexual encounters themselves.

In some ways, the novel shows sexual behavior to be wrapped up in changes taking place during the period in which it's set, 1960s Britain. Tony notes that what is now thought of as "the sixties" didn't happen everywhere at once: in provincial Britain, people remained a decade or so "behind" the times, which proves confusing as he tries to navigate his first real relationship with Veronica. His striving for "full sex" (meaning penetrative sex, as distinct from various other kinds of sexual experience) with her ends unpleasantly and ambiguously, as they sleep together only after breaking up and subsequently part ways for good—though even Tony admits this may not have been exactly what occurred. His prose is oblique and hedging, undermining his claim of innocence in their breakup—his argument being that the '60s were a confusing time for young men who were simply trying to understand what women wanted and what they would "allow" sexually.

Tony is able to think of himself as innocent with respect to Veronica in part because of his own wealth-based feelings of insecurity. The contrast between Tony's middle-class family and the better-off Fords in their Chislehurst estate is, for him, reflective of the power that Veronica had over him throughout their relationship. Veronica seems to turn her nose up at the records by popular bands like the Beatles and the Stones that Tony keeps on shelf; although Veronica and Tony both attend Bristol, she seems to prefer the mystique of Cambridge (where her brother Jack attends, along with Adrian). Tony comes to associate the differences between him and Veronica's family—differences in levels of education, class, and wealth—with his own inability to achieve sexual satisfaction with Veronica.

But in the novel, sex is more dangerous and fraught than the subtleties of class difference. Tony and his friends spend much of their adolescence "sex-hungry" as well as "book-hungry," considering sex as a goal to be reached, like a book to be devoured—regardless of the feelings of the women involved. But sex becomes far more serious than that: Tony's older classmate Robson kills himself after his girlfriend gets pregnant, and Adrian kills himself after, presumably, Sarah Ford becomes pregnant with his child. At stake in both suicides is the question of freedom—both men seem to see a future in which they have to settle down with a partner and child as literally worse than death. Men in the novel have the power and the possibility to leave such situations (even, the novel suggests, by killing themselves). Meanwhile, Veronica's mother, Veronica herself, and Robson's unnamed girlfriend all have to live with the consequences of pregnancy. In the absence of Adrian (whose suicide might be considered a form of abandonment), Veronica has to both grapple with forming a relationship with his mentally challenged son—her half-brother—and come to terms with the relationship between Adrian and her own mother. Tony, meanwhile, remains for most of the novel blissfully unaware of that life, able and willing to think of Veronica as having manipulated *him*. The novel portrays such ignorance as a form of power itself, one that the women in the novel lack.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, sex is portrayed as private and intimate but also tied up with social expectations, cultural changes, and class status. While Tony and his school friends imagine sex as exciting and uncomplicated, the two suicides, as well as the webs of relationships between Adrian, Tony, Sarah, and Veronica, tell a much messier story. And while Veronica and Sarah do wield a certain power over Tony because of their privileged background, he also manages to extricate himself from the relationship and go on to live a relatively boring, uncomplicated life, while Veronica never fully recovers. Tony's "instinct for survival" may have allowed him to avoid the fate of Robson and Adrian, but at the cost of accepting how he has actually caused damage to people around him. While the novel explores the extremes of sexual danger, it also ultimately suggests that refusing to admit that sex and power are intertwined is blind in its own way too.

PHILOSOPHY VS. REALITY

In attempting to understand the chain of events leading to Sarah Ford's inclusion of Tony in her will, Tony returns again and again to his school days, in particular to his history, philosophy, and literature classes. In the classroom, Tony and his friends tried to outsmart and intellectually one-up each other, eager to be as clever as possible while also maintaining an attitude of cool detachment. But literary and philosophical ideas do have concrete effects in the novel: they lead, one could argue, to Adrian's suicide, and in less dramatic ways they help characters like Tony, Colin, and Alex decide what kind of people they want to be by deciding which philosophers they feel affiliations with. *The Sense of an Ending* explores the resonance and power of philosophy in everyday life—even in decisions about whether to live or die—but also indicates the limits of applying general, abstract theories to the messiness and complexity of individual, real-life relationships.

In school, Tony and his friends rebel against "all political and social systems," preferring instead "hedonistic chaos"—part of their embrace of the culture of the 1960s. Adrian, however, remains preoccupied with finding a philosophical system that will not just explain the world, but also tell him how to live in it. He is drawn to abstractions as a way of giving meaning to his life. For instance, he refers to "Eros and Thanatos"—sex (or love) and death, or the erotic drive and the death drive, as psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud would have it—to explain the

meaning of a poem assigned in class, but also, at another moment, to explain why the boys' classmate Robson has killed himself. The group of friends all tend make such equivalences between literary analysis and analysis of real-life situations, but the novel cautions that Adrian's reduction of life experiences to a single abstract, learned expression is a troubling, immature way of understanding other people.

If Tony is drawn to writers of dystopian fiction like George Orwell, Adrian embraces existentialists like Albert Camus, who considered suicide the "only true philosophical question." Existentialism seems to equip him and his friends with theories and language to describe the excitement and despair that they feel. But when they use such language to interpret Robson's suicide, analyzing it coldly and matter-of-factly as indulgent and irresponsible rather than based in true philosophical logic, their lack of grief or concern for Robson, his family, or his girlfriend shows a startling lack of sympathetic imagination. Their conversations underscore the limitations of applying theory to life—especially when philosophy is divorced from context or from the human beings that such theories seek to explain and describe.

If Tony and some of his friends come up short in their attempts to explain Robson's suicide through philosophy, Adrian flips the logic, using philosophy to justify his own suicide. Adrian is shown to have grappled extensively with the idea that suicide might give meaning to a life that (as the existentialists would say) has no *inherent* meaning. He ultimately philosophizes his way to suicide, in an extreme example of the ways that philosophy can have very real power, even if abstract theories and ideas might seem far removed from everyday life. Despite this, the novel portrays Adrian's suicide not as a sophisticated philosophical act, but as the desperate, tragic act of someone whose yearning for meaning—something he can only find *outside* reality, in the abstractions of philosophy—has led him to destroy his life.

Later in life, Tony's various "theories" about Adrian's character, his family, and his decision to kill himself are shown to be equally limited in their ability to do justice to the messy and complex realities of people's lives and relationships. As Tony gets back in touch with Veronica and begins to learn more about the circumstances leading to Adrian's suicide, he replaces one "theory" with another, deciding at one point, for instance, that Adrian must have gotten Veronica pregnant and killed himself as a result. Suddenly Adrian seems weak rather than brave, immature rather than sophisticated; but when Tony learns more and has to reevaluate his theories once again, the limitation of the very attempt to reduce Adrian (or other characters) to abstractions becomes more evident.

By lingering over the abstract philosophical discussions of Tony's adolescence, the novel suggests that what one learns in the classroom can have unexpected and far-reaching consequences. While discussing vast questions like the meaning of life can seem strangely detached from the realities of everyday life, it's impossible to predict what people will do with such ideas or how they'll interpret the theories into action. The novel shows that abstractions can become concrete in powerful and chilling ways, and difficult philosophical questions can become a matter of life and death.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

SEVERN BORE

One night during university, Tony and a few of his friends gather to see the famous Severn Bore at Minsterworth, not far from Bristol. A bore is a large wave resulting from changes in tidal surges: for a few moments, the course of the River Severn seems to change direction as the wave barrels upstream. Although subtler than a natural phenomenon like a tsunami or earthquake, the Severn Bore seems to Tony to be just as stunning and earth-shattering. For a few moments, time itself seems to reverse course—the laws of history, which is supposed to move in only one direction, seem no longer to apply. As *The Sense of an Ending* implies, however, the Bore is so alluring precisely because it is an exception to such laws. Time does only move in one direction: as much as Tony would like to go back and change the past, deciding not to send the cruel letter he mailed to Veronica and Adrian, or deciding not to end things with Veronica so callously, or even in a more general sense choosing to live life with less fear and caution, he cannot, like the Bore, move against the tide.

In addition, though, the Severn Bore represents another problem introduced by the novel at the start: the difference between remembering and witnessing. At one point Tony recalls the conversation he had with Veronica while watching the Bore pass: they talked about how it's possible to see things one would never believe if one hadn't witnessed them directly. The Bore is one of those you-had-to-see-it-to-believe-it moments, of course. Yet strikingly, when this memory returns to the 60-something Tony later in the novel, for the first time he recalls that Veronica had been with him that night—when he mentioned the night earlier in the novel, she wasn't present in the memory. The Severn Bore is powerful in part because it's a remarkable, surprising event that he *has* witnessed, and thus can believe—but even witnessing it directly doesn't mean he can entirely seize his memory of what happened that night (nor other moments during his time with Veronica). The Severn Bore thus proves a somber reminder of the deceptions and self-deceptions of memory, and of the limitations of claiming to witness something first-hand.

ADRIAN'S DIARY

After her death, Veronica Ford's mother, Mrs. Sarah Ford, leaves Tony two documents—a letter and Adrian's diary—as well as five hundred pounds. Tony had only met Sarah Ford once before, at a rather uncomfortable weekend he spent with Veronica at her parents' home, and is mystified by this bequest—especially once it turns out that Veronica is refusing to hand over the diary.

The novel is to a certain extent structured around Tony's attempt to gain access to this diary. Tony believes that reading the diary will allow him to understand why Mrs. Ford left it to him, and what he doesn't remember or didn't understand about his long-ago relationship to Veronica: in addition, he imagines it might serve as "corroboration" for his own innocence, allowing him to undo vague feelings of guilt or responsibility for the way he treated Veronica in the past.

The diary is just the kind of physical evidence that Adrian himself cites in history class at school, as a straightforward means of understanding history. By reading the diaries of historical figures, historians can understand motivations, causes, and effects of long-ago events. His own diary thus represents this ideal of historical evidence—but it also symbolizes the complexities and even impossibility, according to Barnes, of ever seizing the past as it actually was. In part this is because Veronica burns the diary—or at least that's what she tells Tony—thus underlining how such pieces of evidence are fragile and potentially ephemeral. But even the fragment of the diary that Tony *does* read, a single page, is a mystery itself: it will take the rest of the novel for Tony to have any idea what it meant. Things are complicated even further by the fact that the diary is one person's account of what happened—and it's an account that's necessarily biased, both because it's one person's view, and because Adrian, at least, carefully planned his suicide and thus knew that his diary would be read *as* evidence. Diaries may well give some kind of glimpse into the past, but that glimpse, the novel suggests, will always be a partial, biased, and even deceptive one.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Sense of an Ending* published in 2012.

One Quotes

❝ But school is where it all began, so I need to return briefly to a few incidents that have grown into anecdotes, to some approximate memories which time has deformed into certainty.

Related Characters: Anthony (Tony) Webster (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

As he begins his tale, Tony struggles to determine where to begin. One of the novel's major themes, indeed, is how to identify beginnings and endings, a process intimately related to the question of how to assign responsibility for what happened in the past. Although it isn't clear at the beginning of the book, Tony is telling this story from the vantage point of forty years later, when he's received a letter that has forced him to relive his memories from many years before, and attempt to draw those lines of responsibility and construct or reconstruct the narratives with which he's grown familiar.

In fact, this passage is also concerned with just how "incidents" become "anecdotes"—with how the raw data of experience gets molded into a coherent set of stories we tell ourselves, in order to give our lives meaning. In the passage, time is the agent that propels this process. As time goes on, and Tony forgets many of the details of his younger life, it becomes paradoxically easier to be certain about what did happen, since he can refer back to a few strong images and stories about his past. However, Tony's insistence here that time alone turns incident into anecdote also denies his own active process of selection, editing, and willful forgetting.

❝ "That's one of the central problems of history, isn't it, sir? The question of subjective versus objective interpretation, the fact that we need to know the history of the historian in order to understand the version that is being put in front of us?"

Related Characters: Adrian Finn (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In history class, Adrian—the class star—has just proposed a view of historical responsibility in which it would be possible, all difficulties to the contrary, to isolate a chain of causality and fix the cause of certain events in individual people and discrete actions. Here, however, he acknowledges that his own view of historical responsibility

is inevitably biased and partial. In high school, history is often considered to be the compilation of facts and figures, events and social forces, that make up the past: but Adrian exposes one major problem of knowledge at the heart of historical research even when it purports to be objective.

Adrian, as the novel will later show, will grapple with these questions on an intensely personal level. He later leaves a clear, straightforward record of his reasons for killing himself, along with a diary that he presumably knows will be read. These are all pieces of evidence, the kinds of evidence that historians can and do use to understand what happened in the past. But Adrian, a "historian" himself, is eager to promote a certain version of why he killed himself—one having to do with philosophical choices and abstract theory—that hides other possible reasons, including the pregnancy he caused by having a relationship with his girlfriend's mother. Tony will have to take into account this "history of the historian" as he attempts to understand the importance of what happened many years ago.

> This was another of our fears: that Life wouldn't turn out to be like Literature.

Related Characters: Anthony (Tony) Webster (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Tony is describing his and his friends' characters and behaviors in their London boys' school, where they're getting an excellent education, though they prefer to keep an ironic distance from their teachers and texts. Their sarcasm and unwillingness to be serious conceal, however, how fervently they do desire their lives to live up to the excitement that they find in "Literature." What they mean by this is in part the high stakes of literature—they'd like their lives to be full of difficult choices, adventures, profound love affairs, and so on. When they do encounter something that seems novelistic to them, like Robson's suicide or Adrian's parents' divorce, they seize on it, analyzing it to shreds as if these real-life events were themselves elements of a novel.

The Sense of an Ending suggests that this desire for the novelistic is understandable but troubling. By analyzing life as literature, the boys fail to treat those around them like real people. By looking for their own version of literature in life, they fail to perceive how their own lives do contain high stakes and difficult decisions, even if these seem more banal and less certain than they do when reading a book.

> "History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation."

Related Characters: Adrian Finn (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

This is another of Adrian's resounding intellectual statements, uttered during one of the high school history classes with Old Joe Hunt—and one that ends up deeply impacting Tony's view of history, agency, and his own past. The occasion is the final history class of the semester, when Old Joe Hunt has asked the boys to think about the very definition of history. While the others respond glibly and ironically, Adrian characteristically takes the question seriously, even if he distances himself from this quotation by claiming that he got it from a French historian named Patrick Lagrange (who doesn't exist). Once again, Adrian emphasizes the fallibility of historians, and the uncertainty at the heart of the historical enterprise: since the memories of those involved in history are weak and subject to forgetfulness, and since there may never exist documentation that could serve as full evidence, it's impossible to know what *really* happened in the past. His point, too, is that people nonetheless join those two inadequate features together and—as if overcompensating for them—claim to have an airtight understanding of history as a result.

Adrian will go on to cite Robson's suicide as an example of his theory. It's difficult to know what happened or why Robson killed himself even now, much less for future generations, and Robson didn't leave any documents behind explaining himself. Adrian's own well-documented suicide might therefore be understood as a way to counter such weaknesses of the historical record. And yet the novel also shows the understanding of history described here as relevant for Adrian and the other characters as well—even Adrian can't get outside the problems he identifies.

"I *hate* the way the English have of not being serious about being serious. I *really hate* it."

Related Characters: Adrian Finn (speaker), Anthony (Tony) Webster, Jack Ford

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

Tony has just introduced Veronica to Adrian and his other friends, and is eager to know what they think of her. He's also just learned that Veronica's brother Jack attends Cambridge with Adrian, and Tony is feeling both curious about him and insecure because of the rarefied environment to which they belong and from which he (Tony) feels excluded. Adrian, however, doesn't want to share many details about Jack or his crowd—this is the only remark he makes about them. In a way, Adrian's frustration with the "unserious" nature of English people goes back to high school, when he participated earnestly in events and took school much more seriously than his friends did. Indeed, although Tony feels inferior socially, intellectually, and economically to Jack, he's in many ways similar to Jack in their sardonic, flippant attitudes. Later in life, Tony will begin to acknowledge that this inability to be serious stemmed from a fear of fully engaging with life, of jumping headlong into ideas and experiences rather than maintaining an ironic distance from them. But Adrian's seriousness is not necessarily presented as the correct attitude either: in some ways, after all, it contributes to his decision to kill himself, and thus is shown to be tragically limited in its own way.

It was more unsettling because it looked and felt quietly wrong, as if some small lever of the universe had been pressed, and here, just for these minutes, nature was reversed, and time with it.

Related Characters: Anthony (Tony) Webster (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Although many of Tony's recollections of his time at Bristol have included memories of Veronica, here he also notes that one of the strongest memories he retains from his university years was the night he and a few friends stayed up late in order to watch the Severn Bore, a famous tidal bore near Bristol, in which the flow of the current reverses direction for a moment, culminating in a wave moving upstream seemingly against the tide. Watching the Bore is both a chilling and a marvelous experience for Tony, even though, as he notes, it's a subtler natural phenomenon than, say, a tornado or earthquake. Indeed, in part it's so notable precisely because it's quiet and subtle, because nature seems to reverse course without trumpeting the fact that it's doing so.

Tony will refer back to this moment and this memory many times over the course of the novel. The Severn Bore becomes an alluring symbol of the desire to go back in time, to reverse course, as if time and history could perhaps move in multiple directions. However, as the novel goes on to show, such reversals only happen *within* memory, which doesn't work in a linear manner—and not in an individual life, which cannot be undone or refashioned.

But I think I have an instinct for survival, for self-preservation. Perhaps this is what Veronica called cowardice and I called being peaceable.

Related Characters: Anthony (Tony) Webster (speaker), Veronica (Mary Elizabeth) Ford

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Tony has just learned, through a letter from Adrian, that Adrian and Veronica are now dating. Tony ended things with Veronica himself, and has been attempting to put her out of his mind and out of his life entirely, but he is angered and offended by the letter, which he immediately thinks stems from Veronica's desire to manipulate and hurt him, and constitutes a total betrayal on Adrian's part. Yet Tony's instinct for "self-preservation" leads him not to share these feelings with the two of them but to send, first, a jokey, ironic postcard that claims he's fine with everything—and then a bitter, cruel letter that ensures he'll no longer have a relationship with either of them. It might seem that such actions are the opposite of "peaceable," as Tony calls himself. But in this context, avoiding outright confrontation means avoiding having to come to terms with his own pain, his

feelings of insecurity with respect to Adrian and Veronica, and his guilt for the way he treated Veronica. Later in life, Tony will be forced to return to and question such an instinct, even as he recognizes that he may not be able to change this aspect of his character.

> I did, eventually, find myself thinking straight. That's to say, understanding Adrian's reasons, respecting them, and admiring him. He had a better mind and a more rigorous temperament than me; he thought logically, and then acted on the conclusion of logical thought. Whereas most of us, I suspect, do the opposite: we make an instinctive decision, then build up an infrastructure of reason to justify it. And call the result common sense.

Related Characters: Anthony (Tony) Webster (speaker), Adrian Finn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Tony has returned from his trip to the United States to learn that Adrian has killed himself, and has left a full record of his reasons for doing so. At first, Tony is shocked, upset, and confused: he and Alex agree that the suicide is a "terrible waste," as they call it. But here he reflects that there are reasons to admire Adrian's decision, which ostensibly stemmed from his own theory about the necessity to philosophically judge whether life was worth living or not, and to act on the results of that decision.

However, the novel will go on to challenge the idea that Tony is really "thinking straight" here. He has, after all, accepted Adrian's claims for why he killed himself without reckoning with Adrian's own view of history, one in which it's necessary to take into account the bias of the person giving the account. It will become clear that the reasons for Adrian's suicide were more complicated than a noble, philosophical choice—reasons having to do with his relationship with Veronica's mother, her pregnancy, and his betrayal of Veronica, though the novel also suggests that it will never be possible to fully understand Adrian's motives. (And it also implies that suicide based on purely philosophical reasons isn't all that noble either.) Tony's admiration of Adrian will nonetheless impact the way he views his own character and his own past, regardless of how partial and incomplete that version of Adrian remains.

> History isn't the lies of the victors, as I once glibly assured Old Joe Hunt; I know that now. It's more the memories of the survivors, most of whom are neither victorious nor defeated.

Related Characters: Anthony (Tony) Webster (speaker), Old Joe Hunt

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

In concluding the first part of his tale—in which he has focused on his school days and then sped through decades of his later life—Tony reflects on the arc of his life (which has as much to do with the way he's chosen to narrate it as it does with the actual experiences he's had). In doing so, Tony recalls his final history lesson with Old Joe Hunt in school, when the teacher had asked the students to think about the very meaning of history. At the time, Tony had been eager to be clever: he'd quickly responded with a definition suggesting that, throughout history, the victors are the ones who are able to say what really happened. In ordinary life, however, as he realizes, it's not so easy to identify winners and losers. There are people who survive longer than others—Tony has lived far longer than Adrian, for instance—and yet he wouldn't call surviving being "victorious." Some of what Tony has learned in life, in other words, has to do with how the black-and-white view of history he'd held as a schoolboy has become more nuanced, though perhaps also more somber.

Two Quotes

> We live in time, it bounds us and defines us, and time is supposed to measure history, isn't it? But if we can't understand time, can't grasp its mysteries of pace and progress, what chance do we have with history—even our own small, personal, largely undocumented piece of it?

Related Characters: Anthony (Tony) Webster (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

As Tony begins the second half of his story, he reflects on the difficulties of even telling such a story. This passage returns to some of the questions with which Tony had

begun his narrative: he's perplexed by how to define and understand time, which seems so straightforward and yet eludes precise definition. But, as the first half of the novel shows, time can seem to speed up or slow down based on the meaning that people assign to certain moments, events, and relationships. Tony spent many pages lingering over a few history classes in high school and a few conversations with Veronica, while dispensing with his entire career and his marriage in mere sentences.

Here, Tony suggests that the same problems of individual time also plague history. Although in high school he was confident that he could give a clever, glib definition of history, now he's not so sure that he understands it at all. In addition, he also reflects on the relationship between individual experience and "History" in terms of important people and great events. One is the part of the other, he implies—although that only makes it more complicated to understand the meaning of both individual memories and history on a broader level.

> Why did I imagine Brother Jack had seen me coming and was having a bit of fun? Perhaps because in this country shadings of class resist time longer than differentials in age. The Fords had been posher than the Websters back then, and they were jolly well going to stay that way. Or was this mere paranoia on my part?

Related Characters: Anthony (Tony) Webster (speaker), Jack Ford

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

Tony has emailed Jack Ford, asking for his help in getting Adrian's diary, which Veronica is refusing to hand over. Jack responds in a chipper, cheerful tone, making out as if he is dispatching his response from an internet café in Singapore, before he has to dash off to catch the next rickshaw. Tony is immediately suspicious, wondering if Jack is pulling his leg and thus implicitly making fun of him. Many years earlier, Tony had had a similar sense that Jack's bemusement toward him barely disguised his contempt for his sister's boyfriend. It's difficult to tell altogether the extent to which Tony's suspicions are based in reality. At the very least, Adrian had also implied that Jack had an inability to be serious (which, of course, is similar to Tony's own character). But it's also possible that Tony has always over-interpreted Jack's behavior because of his own insecurities, ones based on the "shadings of class" that he mentions here—the contrast between the "posher" Fords and the less well-off Websters. Tony had felt the sting of such class differences forty years earlier, and strikingly, he still feels it now, even as he is also self-conscious about such feelings of insecurity and inferiority.

> And for a moment, she almost looked enigmatic. But Margaret can't do enigma, that first step to Woman of Mystery. If she'd wanted me to spend the money on a holiday for two, she'd have said so. Yes, I realise that's exactly what she *did* say, but…

Related Characters: Anthony (Tony) Webster (speaker), Margaret

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

At one of their regular lunches, Tony and Margaret have been bantering, and the topic turns to the holiday that they've been meaning to book together for years, but which—according to Tony—has just never "happened." In general, Tony insists that his relationship to Margaret is easy and uncomplicated, in part because Margaret herself is easy and uncomplicated. He tells himself that Margaret would never want to get back together with him, which justifies him sharing details about his renewed interest in Veronica.

However, the novel implies that these claims on Tony's part are self-delusions: on some level he knows quite well that Margaret would happily get back together with him, but by feigning ignorance he can also claim innocence, and therefore have a relationship with her on precisely the terms that he's comfortable with. His hedging and arguing with himself as depicted here only underline the ways he's managed to do this, even as the passage also reflects the increasing difficulty that he has in maintaining such an attitude. Even as Tony is forced to come to terms with his own past, he never fully faces the potentially hurtful ways he's treated Margaret, thus suggesting that there's a limit to any one person's ability to face certain aspects of their character head-on.

> It strikes me that this may be one of the differences between youth and age: when we are young, we invent different futures for ourselves; when we are old, we invent different pasts for others.

Related Characters: Anthony (Tony) Webster (speaker), Jack Ford

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

After receiving another email from Jack (in the interest of pursuing Adrian's diary), Tony begins to wonder if he really needs to feel as inferior to Veronica's brother, and insecure around him, as he always has. He begins to wonder if perhaps life has dealt Jack just as many difficulties and disappointments as anyone else has had to face—perhaps Jack joined a multinational company after university graduation, but proved not quite dynamic and clever enough to face changing times; perhaps his life is rather quiet and depressing. After constructing a full-throated imaginary life narrative for Jack, however, Tony recognizes that this is precisely what he's done.

When Tony was younger, he projected imaginary futures for himself—assuming, as he'd noted, that his own life would be exciting and adventurous. Now, though, there no longer remains much of a future for him to project himself into. Instead, he now takes solace in inventing an imaginary past for Jack, one that will contain the potential pain that Jack's status has always caused Tony, regardless of whether or not the narrative is based in fact.

> But time…how time first grounds us and then confounds us. We thought we were being mature when we were only being safe. We imagined we were being responsible but were only being cowardly. What we called realism turned out to be a way of avoiding things rather than facing them. Time…give us enough time and our best-supported decisions will seem wobbly, our certainties whimsical.

Related Characters: Anthony (Tony) Webster (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

Following his meeting with Veronica—the first time he's seen her in forty years—Tony reflects on the contrast between the expectations for his own future life that he'd had at that age, and the way his life has actually unfolded since then. Those reflections lead, characteristically, to the kind of general ruminations on the nature of time that Tony has a tendency to indulge himself in. Here, by "time" he seems to mean the way in which things can look very differently even if nothing else happens than the passage of time. A realistic view of life, for instance—which, in Tony's case, has led him to a humdrum career in arts administration, an unwillingness to leap headlong into his marriage or to fight for his wife when she decided to leave him—can seem reasonable at thirty and silly, even wasteful, at sixty.

With the benefit of hindsight, Tony recognizes that much of what he always believed is far more uncertain than he'd like to admit. He's no longer sure why he acted the way he did, why he made the decisions he made. The tragedy of this realization, however, is that it's now too late: Tony can't go back in time and live another life—and, indeed, he needed to live his entire life in order to realize that he's lived it wrong.

> I had wanted life not to bother me too much, and I had succeeded—and how pitiful that was.

Related Characters: Anthony (Tony) Webster (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

After reading his own angry letter that he'd written to Veronica and Adrian many years ago, Tony begins to feel remorse—both in specific ways, for the words he'd written and for the way he'd acted so many years ago, but also in more general terms for the way he's lived his life. Confronting his own pettiness on the page, Tony contrasts that attitude to what he continues to see as Adrian's high stakes and grand theories, the ways in which Adrian risked everything in pursuit of an idea. In contrast, Tony has always tried to avoid getting hurt, and now is faced with the fact that such avoidance has meant that his own life feels small and pitiful as a result.

While the novel goes on to explore the implications of Tony's avoidance of pain (and therefore responsibility), it also suggests that such a realization takes place as a result of misinterpretation. Tony views his own life in contrast not

so much to Adrian's real life as to the narrative he's constructed about Adrian's life. The reality is much messier, as he will go on to learn. Yet *The Sense of an Ending* therefore implies that people's real understanding of themselves and their lives can easily be based on such misunderstandings of other people, whose lives often seem clearer and more straightforward.

> "The question of accumulation," Adrian had written. [...] Life isn't just addition and subtraction. There's also the accumulation, the multiplication, of loss, of failure.

Related Characters: Adrian Finn (speaker), Anthony (Tony) Webster

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

Tony thinks back to the single-page fragment that is the only part of Adrian's diary he'll ever get the chance to read. Adrian had written a number of letters down in the shape of formulae, with multiplication, addition, and subtraction symbols. This was Adrian's abstract, theoretical way of attempting to understand and isolate the relationships between people in his life—and therefore, perhaps, to assign some kind of responsibility for their actions. Tony takes up this idea in a more metaphorical register: at one point he quotes a poet, Philip Larkin, on the difference between mere increase and accumulation. The idea is that the meaning of a life doesn't simply come from all the events that one has experienced, added together. Some events mean more than others; some experiences transform everything that has gone before, thus exponentially increasing the value (or, as Tony notes, the pain and suffering) of the experience. In this case, Tony recognizes that the failure of his relationship to Veronica was not just one integer in his life: it cast its shadow on the ways he would go on to interact with women for the rest of his life.

> I know this much: that there is objective time, but also subjective time, the kind you wear on the inside of your wrist, next to where the pulse lies. And this personal time, which is the true time, is measured in your relationship to memory. So when this strange thing happened—when these new memories suddenly came upon me—it was as if, for that moment, time had been placed in reverse. As if, for that moment, the river ran upstream.

Related Characters: Anthony (Tony) Webster (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 133-134

Explanation and Analysis

As Tony has begun to communicate with Veronica for the first time in forty years, a number of the memories that he had related in the first half of the story reemerge, though often in a changed form. Characteristically, such memories lead Tony to rethink, once again, the meaning of time—here, the difference between clock time and "subjective time" (something that he and his school friends had seemed to acknowledge the importance of, in their penchant for wearing their watches with the face on the inside of their wrists).

As Tony indulges in these long-buried memories, he refers implicitly to the Severn Bore, the tidal surge that he had witnessed during his time at Bristol, and which struck him for the way it seemed to reverse the flow time and history itself. Now, Tony feels that memories can do the same kind of work. They make him feel that he doesn't need to regret his past as much as he's been doing lately, because in some ways he can return back in time. Memory is thus presented as one exception to the laws of history, even though it can also be a delusion of its own kind, allowing Tony to pretend that he could go back and change things about his past.

> What had begun as a determination to obtain property bequeathed to me had morphed into something much larger, something which bore on the whole of my life, on time and memory. And desire. I thought—at some level of my being, I actually thought—that I could go back to the beginning and change things. That I could make the blood flow backwards.

Related Characters: Anthony (Tony) Webster (speaker), Veronica (Mary Elizabeth) Ford

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

After an enigmatic encounter with Veronica in the north of London, Tony is forced to face the fact that he still doesn't understand what she wants him to realize about herself and her family, nor does he seem to have succeeded in making her change her opinion about him. Here he also recognizes how much larger the affair of Adrian's diary has become: he began by wanting to gain access to what Veronica's mother left him in her will, but at this point he has come to engage in a reckoning with his entire life. Once again, Tony implicitly refers to the Severn Bore and the desire that it represents of moving backwards in time—but, unlike earlier, he now recognizes that desire to be a futile one. Frustrated and upset both at his failed encounter with Veronica and at his own self-delusions, Tony is nonetheless increasingly able to reckon with his past by understanding it as unchangeable.

> Remorse, etymologically, is the action of biting again: that's what the feeling does to you. Imagine the strength of the bite when I reread my words. They seemed like some ancient curse I had forgotten even uttering. Of course I don't—I didn't—believe in curses. That's to say, in words producing events. But the very action of naming something that subsequently happens—of wishing specific evil, and that evil coming to pass—this still has a shiver of the otherworldly about it.

Related Characters: Anthony (Tony) Webster (speaker), Adrian Finn , Veronica (Mary Elizabeth) Ford

Related Themes:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

Having encountered Adrian's son in the flesh, and having recognized him, Tony has realized what he thinks is the truth: that Veronica became pregnant with Adrian's son so many years ago, and that this was the reason Adrian killed himself. Here he thinks back to the angry, bitter letter he'd written to Veronica and Adrian. In it, he'd written that he hoped Veronica could get pregnant before Adrian got sick of her; he'd mentioned how cursed any child of theirs would be at having the two of them for parents. Although Tony realizes that simply writing the letter didn't make it happen, he is struck and saddened by the fact that, in fact, the two of them did have a child, and that the child had a mental disability that prevented him from living an independent life.

In returning to the notion of remorse—which Tony has identified as a stronger feeling even than regret—Tony continues his process of grappling with the unchangeable nature of the past. Remorse is so powerful precisely because of the knowledge that it's impossible to turn back time and change things. However, remorse is also shown to be an important and necessary feeling for Tony, precisely because it's so painful—as Tony has so often avoided taking responsibility for anything in his life.

> No, nothing to do with cleverness; and even less with moral courage. He didn't grandly refuse an existential gift; he was afraid of the pram in the hall.

Related Characters: Anthony (Tony) Webster (speaker), Adrian Finn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

In continuing to reflect on his epiphany about Adrian's son, Tony is forced to reevaluate the way he's understood Adrian and his actions for the past forty years. Adrian has always been a counter-example to Tony's own life: Adrian was the brilliant student, the one who was happy with Veronica, and the one who carefully considered the philosophical meaning of life and, finding it unsatisfying, was courageous enough to follow through with the consequences of his conclusion. His suicide was, Tony had concluded, certainly unlike that of Robson, who killed himself once his girlfriend became pregnant. Now, however, Adrian looks weak and immature (in Tony's mind), just like Robson had. Tony thus has to come to terms with the ways he's assigned a certain reality, based on a certain narrative, to his friend—and that the ways he's done so say more about Tony's own insecurities than about Adrian's reality.

Things are complicated even more, however, by the fact that Tony hasn't even fully grasped the situation: he still doesn't realize that the child is Sarah Ford's, not Veronica's. The fact that Tony is immediately willing to rewrite Adrian's narrative—rather than question the very possibility of

knowing another person's situation or of truly understanding the past—is portrayed as limited in its own right. Adrian may well have feared the consequences of having a child, especially with his girlfriend's mother, but Barnes wants to stress that it's impossible to know all the complexities of any person's motivations for such an act.

❝ I looked at the chain of responsibility. I saw my initial in there. I remembered that in my ugly letter I had urged Adrian to consult Veronica's mother. I replayed the words that would forever haunt me. As would Adrian's unfinished sentence, "So, for instance, if Tony…"

Related Characters: Anthony (Tony) Webster (speaker), Mrs. Sarah Ford , Adrian Finn , Veronica (Mary Elizabeth) Ford

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 162-163

Explanation and Analysis

Only at the very end of the novel does Tony fully comprehend the relationships indicated by the one fragment of Adrian's diary that Veronica allowed him to read. Adrian had had an affair with Veronica's mother, and it had resulted in a child, born mentally disabled—a child whom Veronica nonetheless spent her life helping to care for. Of course, Tony recognizes that even though his initial is on the page—even though he was the one to tell Adrian to "consult" with Veronica's mother about Veronica's "damage"—he doesn't bear all the blame for this set of events. But the fact that he doesn't and can't possibly know just how much responsibility he *does* bear is in many ways even worse. Because it's impossible to go back in time, it's impossible to know how changing one event or decision would have changed everything else. Regardless of how Adrian's counterfactual proposition ends, then, the facts can't be changed.

This inability to pin down exact responsibility accounts for Tony's feelings of being "haunted." The novel suggests that he does need to take some responsibility for the decisions that he's made and the actions he's taken; but because the extent of responsibility remains unknowable, there's no real solace to be taken from such acceptance of responsibility. Instead, Tony must be condemned to unrest, the word on which the novel ends—despite the yearning for a "sense of an ending."

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ONE

Tony Webster, the protagonist and narrator, begins his story by listing certain images he remembers: they include steam rising from a sink with a hot frying pan within it; sperm circling a basin before being flushed down the length of a house; a river rushing upstream; and cold bathwater behind a locked door. He admits that he didn't see the last one, but remembering and witnessing, he thinks, are two separate things.

Over the course of the rest of the novel, the context and significance of these images will become clearer. The final (and most sinister) image, however, sets the stage for the book's exploration of the weaknesses and possible manipulations of memory. The novel will also go on to question the objectivity of testimony.

Tony muses on his difficulty in understanding how malleable time is, how easily it can be slowed down, speed up, or go missing as a result of pleasure or pain.

Time, in Tony's account, is experienced subjectively. In this way it's similar to memory.

Tony decides he must return to his school days as the place "it all began," even if he's not too interested in that time. Though he can't be sure of what actually happened, he can be sure of the impressions left on him after many years.

Already, Tony potentially undermines the validity and objectivity of the story he's about to tell—even as his acknowledgment seems to make him more honest, and therefore trustworthy.

Adrian Finn, tall and shy, arrived at school long after friend groups were decided and formed, though he would become the fourth member of Tony's group of friends. Tony recalls his presence in the first day's history class taught by Old Joe Hunt, who always looked cordial and formal in a three-piece suit.

Adrian is immediately alluring to Tony and his group of friends in part because he seems a bit different from them: they'll incorporate him into their group, but he'll remain slightly aloof all the same.

Old Joe Hunt asked if anyone could characterize the age of Henry the Eighth: Tony, Colin, and Alex all hoped they wouldn't be called on. He chose a cautious dud named Marshall, to their relief, who replied vaguely that there was unrest. Old Joe Hunt turned to Adrian, who replied that according to one line of historical thought, all one can say about any event, no matter how extreme, is that "something happened." Old Joe Hunt said that if that were so, he'd be out of a job.

From Adrian's first comment in class (at least insofar as Tony can remember it), it's clear that he is familiar with and interested in the philosophical dimensions of history. His response to Old Joe Hunt might seem flippant, but in fact it signals his sincere concern with how to make meaning out of history.

At the break, Tony introduced himself and said he was impressed by his line; Adrian said he was disappointed the teacher didn't explore his idea in depth. Tony thought that this wasn't how he was *supposed* to reply. The elder Tony remembers how the three friends used to wear their watches with their face on the inside of their wrists, making time personal or secret: Adrian never follows suit.

Tony and his friends are accustomed to performing a jokey, flippant manner. Even while they do care about abstract ideas (the way they wear watches suggests a view of time as intimate and subjective, for instance), they, unlike Adrian, are insecure about exhibiting too much sincerity.

That day, or perhaps another day, the boys all attended English class taught by a young Cambridge grad, Phil Dixon, whom they adored. He used contemporary texts, addressed the students as "Gentlemen," and once in discussing Ted Hughes, asked wryly what would happen when the poet "runs out of animals."

Ted Hughes was a poet particularly known for his poems about animals. Phil Dixon's remark about him is just the kind of glib but clever statement, implying intellectual mastery worn lightly, to which Tony and his friends aspire.

Phil Dixon handed out a poem with no identifying information and asked Adrian what the poem was about. He immediately replied, "Eros and Thanatos," clarifying, "Sex and Death," or what ensues from the conflict between the erotic and the death principle. Dixon turned to Tony, who said he just thought the poem was about a barn owl. Tony reflects now that while he and his friends spent most of their time "taking the piss" or joking around, with brief bouts of seriousness, Adrian was almost always serious.

Phil Dixon introduces an exercise typical for mid-century English boarding schools, popularized by a literary critic named I.A. Richards: the implication is that a poem's meaning has nothing to do with its context. The anecdote also highlights aspects of Adrian's character while introducing a philosophical theme to which Tony will return.

Adrian was slowly absorbed into Tony's group, but without adopting their attitudes. He joined the responses in morning prayer while Alex and Tony mimed the words; he joined fencing and track, while they considered sports a "crypto-fascist" means of repressing their sex drive; he played clarinet, while they took pride in being tone-deaf. He seemed to believe in things, while they remained resolutely skeptical.

All these details serve to underline how Adrian's relationship to ideas and beliefs is different from Tony, Colin, and Alex's performative, distanced, and ironic relationship to them. Adrian's earnestness is nonetheless fascinating and appealing to the friends.

Tony reflects now that things were simpler in their central London school, without electronic devices or girlfriends: they only had to study, pass exams, find a job, and start a life reasonably more successful than that of their parents, who would approve while also considering their own simpler times superior.

At several points in the narrative, the current-day (60-something) Tony steps back from his memories and reflects on the distance between the past and present, both individually and for society at large.

Tony now recalls Colin complaining about his parents being "bastards": Adrian ironically asked if they were like Henry the Eighth. The cause of Colin's anger was that his parents made him spend the weekend gardening. Adrian was the only person they knew to come from what was known, Tony now recalls, as a "broken home," but he rarely joined in the griping about parents. Separately, the three others developed a "theory" that the key to a happy family is not to have one.

This memory suggests that Tony, Colin, and Alex are naïve and immature: they complain about minor quibbles with their family while glamorizing Adrian's "broken" family. The novel will go on to show how "theories" like this one can be intensely and even tragically detached from the real complexities of human experience.

Tony remembers feeling like he was in a holding pen, waiting to be released into life, at which point time itself would speed up. He couldn't have known that his life had already begun, that some damage had already been inflicted, and that his release would only be into a larger holding pen.

The older Tony paints a rather somber portrait of life as an endless waiting room—even as he also suggests that what happened to him long ago was not preparation for his real life, but significant in its own right.

At school, Tony and his friends were "book-hungry" and "sex-hungry," convinced that all systems were corrupt and that there was no better alternative than "hedonistic chaos." But Adrian pushed them to consider how philosophy might be applied to life. They all had their preferred philosophers: for Tony, George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, for Colin, Baudelaire and Dostoevsky, and for Adrian, Camus and Nietzsche. They were pretentious and unbearable; their parents were anxious about their corrupting influence on each other.

Tony and his friends are drawn to certain theories and philosophies: Tony prefers dystopian fiction, while Colin likes 19th-century literature of angst and despair. Adrian's embrace of existentialist philosophers—who sought to construct a meaning for life even while accepting that life has no inherent *meaning—will prove important for his own life choices.*

Tony returns to another memory: Old Joe Hunt asked the class to debate the origins of the First World War. Most preferred an all-or-nothing game: either the Serbian gunman who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand was fully responsible, or historical forces set Europe on an inevitable course. Colin declared everything up to chance, saying that a desire for meaning was quasi-religious and naïve.

Colin's remark is typical of the clique's desire to be intellectually impressive while never entirely serious. In the novel's account, the various interpretations about historical causation that one might propose say as much about the people doing the interpreting as about the historical events themselves.

Old Joe Hunt asked Adrian what he thought. He said that assigning responsibility was always a cop-out: by blaming one person, or giving historical forces or chaos responsibility, we remove the blame from everyone else. He thought there might be a middle ground, a chain of individual responsibilities that could be identified. But he added that his desire to assign responsibility might be a reflection of his own state of mind: you have to know the "history of the historian" to understand the version of history being presented. After a silence, Old Joe Hunt said that he'd be happy to give Adrian his job upon retiring.

The first part of Adrian's answer works as a reflection on the causes of something like the First World War, but the novel will also return to this question of responsibility again and again in its relevance for much more intimate, personal matters. Adrian's reflection on history as biased and uncertain is intellectually sophisticated, but the novel will also go on to show how this can be a source of great personal anxiety.

One morning at assembly, the headmaster announced that Robson of the Science Sixth had died over the weekend. Adrian repeated, "Eros and Thanatos," to the others, saying that Thanatos had won again. The boys were almost offended: Robson was unimaginative, uninterested in the arts, un-offensive, but now he'd made a name for himself.

The boys' response to Robson's suicide is depicted as notably self-absorbed, even callous: rather than trying to imagine or empathize with Robson, they use his suicide as fodder for their own abstract and even competitive theories.

A few days later, Brown of the Maths Sixth told the boys that Robson had gotten his girlfriend pregnant and hanged himself in the attic. They debated how he knew how to do it, and wondered what his girlfriend was like. Adrian then said that according to Camus, suicide was the only true, fundamental philosophical question. Ultimately, they decided that Robson had been unphilosophical, self-indulgent, and that his suicide note, rumored to have said merely "Sorry, Mum," was a missed opportunity.

Adrian's citation of Camus reflects the existentialist concern with whether it makes sense to keep living at all if life, in the absence of God, doesn't have meaning outside the meanings people create. In Adrian and the other boys' conclusion, suicide is thus a potentially powerful theoretical act, rather than—as they flippantly decide about Robson—an expression of pain and despair.

Tony wonders if it was the revelation that Robson was having sex, more than anything, that really bothered him and his friends. From their reading, they knew that Love sometimes involved Suffering, but they'd happily accept the latter if the former was on its way. They feared that life wouldn't be like literature—their parents' lives seemed to confirm this. Real literature, for them, was about guilt and innocence, love and sex, betrayal, good and evil—about emotional and social truth developed through characters' experience over time (or at least that was what they gleaned from Phil Dixon).

Tony and his friends do care deeply about what they're reading and learning, even if they (apart from Adrian) refuse to show it. The problem with their reading here is that they are impatient with what they take to be life's banalities as opposed to the drama of literature. The note that Phil Dixon is the one to have taught them what literature "means" only underlines how the boys are eager to find meaning elsewhere, rather than develop their own sense of it through experience.

Tony remembers grilling Adrian about his parents' divorce, the only remotely novelistic-seeming event in their lives. He deflected their questions, refusing to share details. In a novel, Tony thinks, Adrian wouldn't have just accepted his new reality, as he seemed to be doing.

The boys' impatience with Adrian and their naïve desire to construct a novelistic narrative makes them unable to accept Adrian's real-life pain or desire for privacy. As with Robson, they again view another's pain with theoretical detachment.

Tony remembers the year's final history lesson: Old Joe Hunt invited the students to draw some conclusions over the centuries they'd covered. "What is History?" he asked Tony, who, a bit quickly, replied that it's the lies of the victors: Hunt responded that it's also the self-delusions of the defeated. Colin offered the notion that history is a raw onion sandwich: it just repeats, or "burps," oscillating between tyranny and rebellion, war and peace.

Tony depicts his own younger self as precocious and a bit too eager to be clever. Colin, too, performs a mix of intellectual sophistication (a view of history as endless repetition) and adolescent immaturity in the metaphors he uses to describe it. Again, he and Tony are cavalier and jokey, unable to be as serious as they might actually want—but are too insecure—to be.

Adrian characteristically said that history is the certainty that results from imperfect memory, joined to inadequate documentation: he said he got that quotation from the French Patrick Lagrange. Asked to give an example, he said Robson's suicide—and everyone was shocked, but Adrian tended to get away with more than anyone else. He continued that this was a historical event, with a single piece of (rumored) documentation: he asked how we could know if Robson had other motives, what his state of mind was, if the child was even his, and so on. So, he concludes, how could anyone write Robson's history many years from now, if so much is uncertain now?

The novel will return again and again to Adrian's view of what history is, as Tony reflects on the biases and imperfections of history and as the novel makes a case for the frightening uncertainty of both history and memory. The fact that Patrick Lagrange is a made-up historian—whether invented by Adrian or misremembered by Tony—is yet another way the novel interrogates objectivity and reliability in narrative on various levels. It is a subtly humorous irony that the definition of history—usually seen as a subject dealing with facts—comes from a fictional source.

Hunt, after a while, replied that Adrian might underestimate historians, who have always had to deal with lack of direct evidence. There might be a coroner's report, a diary, or his parents' responses to condolence letters. Adrian replied that nothing could make up for the lack of Robson's testimony, but Hunt said that a participant's own explanation always needs to be treated with a certain level of skepticism. Tony reflects that this exchange almost certainly went differently from the way he remembers it.

Hunt's listing of the various pieces of evidence one might use to determine what really happened in the past is resonant for the later parts of the novel, when Tony will strive to use just such evidence to understand his own past. While Adrian emphasizes the importance of personal testimony, the novel itself will (like Hunt) question the reliability of that mode too.

Tony and his friends dispersed: Adrian won a scholarship to Cambridge, while Tony headed to Bristol to "read" (study) history. They swore to meet during breaks, but this sometimes didn't happen. They wrote letters, though mostly Tony, Colin, and Alex wrote to Adrian, seeking his attention and approval.

Even while Adrian is different from the other boys, who have never been comfortable being as earnest as he is, they are drawn to his seriousness, seeing in it a model that they are nonetheless still too scared to follow.

Tony's life did "speed up": after struggling to win girls without a "technique," he met Veronica Mary Elizabeth Ford, a student of Spanish who liked poetry, and whose father was a civil servant. Tony found her "nice," even if only because she was willing to bear his advances.

These specific details are an implicit reminder of how random and selective memory can be. The description of Veronica as merely "nice" signals Tony's unwillingness or inability to allow himself to feel something deeper or stronger, or even to see her as a complex human being.

Veronica owned a Black Box record player (Tony had a Dansette); she owned choral and lieder LPs and hated Tchaikovsky, whom Tony loved. Looking through his record albums once, he was embarrassed at his extensive pop collection: she asked neutrally if he liked such music, and when he responded that it was good to dance to, she said she didn't dance.

These details imply certain class differences. Veronica's record player is fancier than Tony's more popular, mass-market edition, and her sophisticated musical tastes are also a sign of a more upper-class upbringing.

Tony explains that "going out" is different now: he's recently heard about a daughter of a friend who had been sleeping with a boy at university who was simultaneously sleeping with other girls. She wasn't upset at that as much as at the fact that he ultimately chose one of the others. Tony feels like a survivor from some ancient culture: in his day, he says, you would meet a girl, invite her to social events, then on her own, then, after a good-night kiss, you were "going out." Only then did you learn what her "sexual policy" was.

Once again, the current-day Tony intrudes on his recollections in order to make a reflection about the differences in sexual expectations between the 1960s and the present (that is, the 2000s, or forty years later). While sex may seem private and intimate, the novel portrays it as always wrapped up in quite public social norms and expectations.

Like other girls, Veronica was fine with kissing and touching over the clothes; other girls would accept mutual masturbation, still others "full sex." Tony notes that this wasn't religious prudery, since women like Veronica were at ease with their bodies; besides, he liked what he might call "infra-sex," even if Colin and Alex had girlfriends with more liberal policies (though Tony knew he might not be getting the full story). Tony himself lost his virginity between school and university: it was all the more frustrating, then, that it seemed more difficult to sleep with girls he actually liked.

Tony is ambivalent, sometimes even contradictory, about his attitude toward Veronica's "sexual policy." It's a source of frustration, but also leaves room for different kinds of sexual experiences. His recollections also serve as a reflection about the ways sex is both intimate and social, an experience that many share, but something that is often difficult or improper to talk about frankly and honestly.

Tony remembers heated moments, a woman's hand restraining his wrist and saying "It doesn't feel right." This was the sixties, he admits, but only for certain people, in certain places.

Another instance of the power of images in memory. It also suggests, though, that Tony might have been more aggressive and unpleasant in sex than he recalls.

Tony recalls that his bookshelves were more successful than his records: he had more blue Pelicans (nonfiction) than orange Penguins (fiction), a sign of seriousness. Veronica had more poetry: Eliot, Auden, Thom Gunn, Ted Hughes, as well as Left Book Club editions of Orwell, expensive nineteenth-century novels, and so on. They seemed to all be of a piece with her personality, while Tony's book collection was his attempt to describe the character he wanted to become. He once fell back on Phil Dixon's line about everyone wondering what Ted Hughes will do when he runs out of animals, but the line sounded silly, not witty, in his mouth. Veronica responded archly, and when he admitted this was just something his old English master said, she replied that he should think for himself now: but she seemed to be bantering more than dismissing him.

The Sense of an Ending is interested in how literature and art are sources of real meaning and pleasure for people, but also wrapped up in socioeconomic status, signaling different kinds of cultural capital. Tony, for instance, wants to perform his intellectual aspirations (even as he thinks Veronica is exempt from such jockeying for position—which the novel implicitly calls into question). He is impressed with her in some of the same ways and for some of the same reasons he was drawn to Adrian—their desire to think for themselves, their embrace of the "serious," and so on.

Veronica asked why Tony wore his watch inside out: since he couldn't justify it, he stopped doing so. He settled into a routine of working, being with Veronica, and then masturbating alone back in his room to fantasies of her. He started to feel privileged to have access to feminine details like makeup and periods. At the same time, he remembers thinking that he never needed to broach where the relationship was going. She wouldn't let them have sex: therefore she must have implicitly agreed that he didn't have to discuss their future. Tony realizes now that he was wrong about this and most things. He wonders why, for instance, he assumed she was a virgin, only because she wouldn't sleep with him.

Although Tony's tendency to wear his watch inside out was meant as a sign of his own intellectual freethinking, as well as performing a devil-may-care attitude to time and obligations, the fact that he quickly sheds this habit shows that he's eager to live up to Veronica's own, different ideas of what to do and how to be. The current-day Tony also acknowledges his younger self's callousness, his self-justifying attitude in assuming Veronica had made a kind of bargain with him.

Tony recalls being invited to spend a weekend with Veronica's family in Chislehurst, Kent. He brought a huge bag and Veronica's father, a large, red-faced man smelling of beer, made fun of him for it. On the drive, her father pointed out St. Michael's, the Café Royal, and other sights, and Tony wasn't sure if he was meant to respond. At the house he noticed the heavy shine on the furniture and an extravagant potted plant. Veronica's father led him to an attic room and told him he could pee in the small basin (connected to the plumbing) in the night; Tony couldn't tell if he was being jocular and male, or treating him like lower-class "scum."

As Tony arrives at Veronica's home in Kent, he notices particular details that have to do with the Ford family's privileged background. Tony is self-conscious and uncomfortable, acutely sensitive to any implication that the family thinks less of him. It's difficult to tell, given the first-person narration, to what extent such feelings are based in reality or are instead over-sensitive worries by a young college student who is anxious and insecure.

Veronica's brother Jack was healthy, prone to laughter, and teasing with Veronica: to him Tony was the object of mild curiosity. Veronica's mother was quieter and calmer, often disappearing into the kitchen. She seemed fully middle-aged to Tony (though he reflects that she must have been in her early forties), and he remembers her having a vaguely artistic air.

Veronica's mother will, it turns out, be central to this story. It's all the more significant, given the novel's focus on the selectivity of memory, that Tony cannot recall much about her—except, tellingly, how old she seemed and a sense that she might be something of a free thinker.

Tony's most vivid memory of the weekend is being so uneasy that he was constipated the whole time. He vaguely recalls Veronica withdrawing, at first, into her family and judging him along with the others; he remembers awkwardly discussing current affairs in front of the TV news after dinner. In a novel, he thought, Veronica might have snuck up to his floor at night, but she didn't.

The college-aged Tony is still occupied with the gap between life and literature—disappointed when life seems to be more banal or ordinary than the books he's read. This disappointment is coupled with Tony's continued insecurity about his background compared to the Fords'.

On Saturday, Tony descended for breakfast to find that everyone but Mrs. Ford had gone for a walk. Ill at ease, Tony eventually asked if they'd lived here long. As she cooked eggs in a frying pan, unconcerned when one broke, she told him not to let Veronica get away with too much. He wasn't sure what to respond: finally she smiled and said they'd lived here for ten years. She slipped eggs onto Tony's plate and threw the hot frying pan into the wet sink, laughing at the fizzing water and steam.

This memory should be a reminder of one image with which the book began—a sizzling frying pan in a wet sink—thus implying both that Tony's conversation with Mrs. Ford will prove significant later on, and that what will remain in his memory are evocative images far more than a straightforward, trustworthy narrative about what happened during this weekend.

When the others returned, the air of interrogation seemed to dissipate, though Tony was paranoid that they'd just become tired of him. Still, Veronica became more affectionate with him, and even kissed him goodnight that evening. They ate roast lamb for Sunday lunch, and Tony remembered to say how delicious it was, though Jack winked at his father as if privately dismissing Tony's attempt at manners.

Even as the weekend improves somewhat for Tony, he continues to feel awkward and out of place, particularly with the Ford men—imagining that they are making fun of him or simply tolerating him, that he isn't good enough for their daughter or isn't from the right background.

Jack didn't show up to say goodbye when Tony left. He remembers Mrs. Ford leaning against the porch, waving not with a raised palm but a horizontal, waist-level gesture. He wished he'd spoken more to her.

It's extremely ambiguous what Mrs. Ford's gesture is, but the general enigma of her character will only become more significant as the novel goes on.

A week later, Tony recalls, Veronica came to London so she could meet his friends. They wandered around the tourist neighborhoods and then met the boys. She asked Alex what his father did, and his answer (marine insurance) surprised Tony. She asked if Adrian knew anyone she did at Cambridge, and her talk of dons and colleges made Tony feel left out: only then did he learn that Jack attended Cambridge, studying moral sciences like Adrian.

Tony's surprise is evidence of the fact that, though he considers Alex a close friend, there's much he doesn't know about him—including things that he might easily learn, were he to show the kind of interest in others that Veronica does. In general the narrative gives the impression that the young Tony is extremely self-absorbed and somewhat oblivious, and the older Tony doesn't seem to recognize this either. Jack's Cambridge connection is further fodder for Tony's feelings of insecurity.

Veronica asked for a picture to be taken with Tony's friends in Trafalgar Square. Forty years on, Tony examines this photo again to look for answers. He wonders why Veronica never wore heels, and if it was a way of commanding attention in the opposite way one might think: yet he always thought of her actions as instinctive, not manipulative, when they were dating. He's not sure that it would help him now to know or decide that she'd always been calculating.

Returning to the picture, and to his memory of this evening, Tony is grappling with the fact that there's much about it he cannot grasp or remember—and, in addition, that he may never have understood Veronica in the first place. At this point in the narrative, it's still unclear why Veronica might be seen as "calculating," or why that might be important.

After Veronica left, Tony asked his friends what they thought. Adrian said he'd heard of Jack and knew of the people he went around with. When Tony asked what he thought of them, Adrian said with feeling that he hated how the English had a way of not being serious about being serious. Tony should have felt offended, perhaps, but instead felt vindicated.

Adrian may well be thinking of people like Tony and the other school boys, who always avoided being too earnest about anything. But because Adrian is most directly referring to Jack, Tony can feel satisfied and "vindicated."

Veronica and Tony dated through their second year. Little by little she allowed him more sexual privileges, though not "full sex," and he began to feel slightly resentful. One day, out of the blue, she asked if he ever thought about where their relationship was heading. He wondered immediately if this was why she was letting him go further with her. He asked if the relationship had to "go" somewhere, and she replied that she didn't want to stagnate. He asked if they could just enjoy their time together. She responded that he was cowardly, and he replied that it was more that he was peaceable.

Tony does not appear very flattering in this depiction: he's eager to have sex with Veronica, but unwilling to think seriously about their relationship—perhaps another sign of the difficulty he has being "serious" about anything. Were Tony to dive into this relationship, he might have to be more earnest, and he also might get hurt: his avoidance of both is what he seems to mean by calling himself "peaceable."

Today, Tony considers this the beginning of the end of their relationship, but wonders if he remembers it that way in order to apportion blame and responsibility a certain way. He'd never thought of himself as either peaceable or the opposite until that conversation.

Even the scene just described only reaches the readers through the imperfect memory and biased point of view of Tony today, only complicating any interpretation even more.

Tony reflects that he has few other memories from Bristol other than work and Veronica. One that does stand out is the night he saw the **Severn Bore**, staying up until after midnight with some friends at Minsterworth. Suddenly, after flowing slowly for hours, the river seemed to "change its mind" and a wave headed the opposite direction, moving towards the group, then surging into the distance. Tony remembers feeling dumbstruck: it wasn't violent or earth-shattering, but felt quietly wrong, as if nature and time were both for an instant reversed.

A bore is a tidal surge in which the tide suddenly comes in in a single wave, going against the previous tide or current. In the novel, the Severn Bore will become a powerful symbol for the characters' yearning for history to be reversed and time to go backward—for things not to be as irrevocable as they usually are. Only in memories (like in this one, for Tony) do events return out of order, such that history does seem able to be reshuffled.

Tony shifts topics suddenly: after Veronica and he broke up, he shares, she slept with him. He didn't see it coming at all, even after Veronica and he bumped into each other at the pub (which she didn't like), or when they kissed after she asked him to walk her home. All the while he still thought she was a virgin, even as she clearly knew what she was doing. As he threw out the condom afterwards, he concluded that this wasn't what he wanted.

The abrupt juxtaposition of the Severn Bore memory and this memory underlines the stark contrast between the desire for things to have been different, and the reality that Tony did make certain choices, that certain irrevocable events did happen—even if he portrays himself as almost entirely lacking agency in this scene.

The next time they met, Veronica called Tony a "selfish bastard." First, she said his flippant decision practically made the sex rape, then asked why he didn't tell her beforehand that it was definitively over: he said he didn't know then, but he'd finally thought about their relationship, like she'd wanted him to.

While Tony has depicted sleeping with Veronica as an accident, one without blame on either side, she obviously feels hurt and betrayed: Tony responds unfeelingly, continuing to avoid responsibility and merely be "peaceable."

Veronica responded sarcastically, until Tony asked if she slept with him to get him back. When she didn't answer, he asked why she wouldn't sleep with him while they were dating. Perhaps she didn't want to, she said; he asked if she didn't want to because she didn't need to.

In this scene, Tony paints a chilling, even misogynistic portrait of Veronica as manipulative and deceptive, as dangling the possibility of sex before him in order to lure him into a relationship.

Bristol was large enough that they didn't run into each other too much: each time, Tony became apprehensive that Veronica would make him feel guilty, but she never spoke to him. He told himself he didn't need to feel guilty: they were both responsible for their own actions, and no one had gotten pregnant, no one had died.

Tony implicitly suggests that he did feel guilty—or could have felt guilty, if he hadn't done as much as he could to avoid thinking about Veronica. Instead he assigns responsibility equally to both parties.

During summer vacation, a letter arrived from Chislehurst. It was Veronica's mother, who said she was sorry to hear they'd broken up and hoped Tony would find someone more suitable. The letter didn't imply that Tony was a jerk: indeed, there was a suggestion that he might be better off. Now Tony wishes he'd kept the letter as proof or corroboration: instead he only has the memory of a dashing, carefree woman who told him not to let Veronica get the better of him.

This is one of the first of many times that Tony uses the term "corroboration," often without specifying exactly what he means. Veronica's mother has seemed to be on Tony's side rather than on Veronica's the entire time. Now he seems to want her to confirm the narrative that Veronica was conniving, and that he was innocent.

Back at Bristol for his final year, Tony focused on his schoolwork, determined to get a 2:1, if not a first. He recalls a one-night stand with a girl from the pub, something he thinks about more often now than he used to. Most people, he notes, didn't experience the sixties until the seventies: where he was, bits of the sixties were coexisting with bits of the fifties.

The "2:1" and "first" refer to the grading system for degrees in the UK. Tony returns to the idea that sexual changes happened not just gradually but unevenly, at different times and in different places. Here, he uses such explanation to try to justify his own frustration and confusion regarding sex in his relationship with Veronica.

Tony asks himself what his logic should be, how his story should continue. Six months later, he received a letter from Adrian—rare, since Adrian was working hard for finals. Tony assumed he'd do postgraduate work, then academia or the civil service: he didn't think Adrian was the kind of person to get his name in the newspapers. Tony admits now that he's putting off telling the reader the next part: he goes on to say that Adrian was writing to ask permission to date Veronica. Or, as far as Tony remembers, he actually wrote to say that they were already going out, and that he hoped Tony could accept it; if he couldn't, Adrian owed it to their friendship to reconsider his actions. It had been partly at Veronica's suggestion, in fact, that he'd written.

At various points in the narration, Tony will pause, take a step back, and comment on the very process of telling a story—reminding readers that the novel is unfolding as a story told by a narrator who is also the protagonist, and who also has some interest in protecting and justifying his own character. Here, the meta-commentary on the storytelling process is also a delay tactic. Thus it's also one that signals the importance of the information that follows, both for Tony's response and for the events that this information unleashes.

Tony felt angry and bitter at this ethical posturing, the idea that Adrian would stop having sex with Veronica if Tony objected (unless, he thought, she was "stringing him along" too), as well as at Veronica's hypocrisy: she really just wanted to tell him that she had "traded up" to a Cambridge student like Jack. Tony stresses that this is how he interprets what happened, or rather how he now remembers having interpreted, at the time, what was happening.

In a string of angry thoughts, Tony—or, the reader is reminded, the younger Tony invoked by memory—immediately assumes bad faith on the part of Adrian and Veronica. He also feels even more insecure about Jack's Cambridge education now that he shares it with Veronica's new boyfriend.

Tony notes that he has an instinct for survival and self-preservation, perhaps what Veronica had meant by calling him cowardly. He chose a postcard at random and wrote, in the jokey way he and Colin and Alex maintained in school, that everything was fine by him. He convinced himself that he didn't mind, that he'd study hard and get his degree (he did get a 2:1). He did spend some time imagining how Veronica would complain about him to Adrian.

Tony's instinct for "self-preservation" can be construed as cowardly because it means he refuses to face what upsets or angers him head-on, instead dealing with things obliquely and ironically. It's clear that Tony's jaunty, casual letter betrays real feelings of hurt.

Finally Tony followed up with an actual letter and, as far as he can now remember, said what he thought of their "moral scruples." He advised Adrian to be prudent, since Veronica seemed to him to have suffered "damage" a long time ago. He burned Adrian's letter and decided the two of them were forever out of his life.

Although Tony's second letter does sound more serious than the jokey postcard he'd initially sent, in this letter he still doesn't share his feelings openly or honestly, instead preferring to insult the two of them and hurt them as much as he'd been hurt.

Wondering what he had meant by "damaged," Tony now thinks back on his weekend in Chislehurst: he knew there'd been more at stake than a young man uneasy among a posh family. In addition to that, he had sensed a complicity between Veronica and Veronica's father, who was so casually disdainful of Tony, and between her and Jack—though a certain distance between Veronica and her mother Sarah, who obviously saw Veronica for what she really was. Veronica had gone on a walk with her father and brother that first morning after telling everyone that Tony would sleep late, a blatant lie—he never slept late, as she knew.

Here and later in the novel, Tony reflects on the brief period of time he'd spent with Veronica's brother and parents—so brief that it would seem impossible for the weekend to hold any clues to how Tony might interpret his or Veronica's own past actions. In returning to the memory, though, he does resuscitate another detail, the fact that Veronica had lied in order to escape with her father and brother for an hour.

A lifetime later, though, Tony still isn't positive what he meant by "damaged." He recalls that his mother-in-law once observed, in response to another case of child abuse in the papers, that everyone has in some way been abused. He wonders if there was "inappropriate behavior" with Veronica's father or her brother Jack, some "primal" moment of loss. He remembers Old Joe Hunt saying that mental states can be inferred from actions, and thinks that in private life, it's more that you can infer past actions from current mental states. Tony does think we all suffer damage, though much depends on how we respond to such damage.

Tony now seems to speculate wildly in wondering what he meant by "damaged" then, and if he still thinks Veronica was damaged now. In either case, he's presuming that Veronica's actions, including her decision to date Adrian, are so absurd as to need that kind of explanation. It's not clear that he's right about that, even if the novel will go on to explore other kinds of real psychological and emotional damage.

Tony admits that this is self-justifying prattle, that he was probably just a typical callow man, that the Fords were a normal family subject to his "theories" about damage, and that Mrs. Ford was strangely jealous of her daughter rather than concerned on Tony's behalf. His reader might even ask that Tony apply his "theory" of damage to himself, he admits, and ask how that might affect his reliability. Tony isn't sure he could adequately respond.

By admitting that his entire interpretation is potentially biased, Tony one-ups his potentially skeptical reader by suggesting that he's well aware of the problems entailed in telling a highly personal story from his own perspective—even if he offers no solutions to that problem.

Tony never heard back from Adrian, and began to lose touch with Colin and Alex too. After graduating, he left for the United States for six months, where he did odd jobs and traveled around. Unlike today, there was no way for his parents to reach him instantly.

In this transitional part of the narrative, Tony's life does move on, and the people who were the most central to his life in high school and college begin to recede from importance.

In the U.S., Tony met an American girl named Annie, who wore plaid shirts and was friendly. They were lovers for three months: drinking, smoking, and traveling together, before separating easily ("easy come, easy go," Annie said—though now Tony wonders if there was a question in that response).

Tony treasures his memories of his time with Annie, who is depicted as far more easy-going than Annie. Even so, there's a brief suggestion that Tony may have merely assumed *that she never wanted something serious—once again he sees his girlfriends in terms of what they offer or deny him, rather than as complex individuals on their own terms.*

When Tony got home, his mother cooked him dinner, then gave him his mail. At the top of the pile was a letter from Alex, saying that Adrian had killed himself. Alex had called Tony's mother, who'd said she didn't know where he was. Tony's father said "Sorry, lad," which seemed utterly wrong to Tony; after a pause, his mother asked if it was because Adrian was too clever. Unwilling to respond, Tony opened Alex's second letter, which said that Adrian had done it efficiently and had left a record of his reasons. Alex asked if they could meet and talk.

After the brief interlude of Tony's time in the United States, there's an abrupt return to reality of the most sobering kind. Tony's parents, who are never fully fleshed out in the narrative, seem especially out of touch to him now, unable to help him grasp how Adrian could have killed himself. One immediate effect of his suicide is to bring Alex back into Tony's life, however.

Tony returned in his mind to the innocent discussions after Robson's suicide, when it was evident to the friends that suicide was a free right, a logical act when faced with terminal illness, heroic in the face of torture or glamorous as a response to disappointed love. None of these criteria applied either to Robson or to Adrian. Adrian's letter to the coroner said that life was a gift given without anyone asking for it; everyone had a philosophical duty to examine the nature of life, and even to give it back depending on his or her conclusions. He had asked the coroner to make his argument public, which the official had.

Tony returns to the conversations around Robson's death that he had as an adolescent—but not in order to realize how offensive or thoughtless they were, and how unconcerned with Robson as a person. Instead, he thinks back to them in the same callous mindset as before, but now to determine whether Adrian had philosophically rigorous-enough reasons to kill himself. Adrian's letter seems to suggest that he, at least, thought he did.

Alex and Tony discussed how Adrian killed himself: he cut his wrists in the bath during a weekend when his flatmates were gone. The *Cambridge Evening News* wrote that the coroner's verdict was that Adrian Finn had killed himself while "the balance of his mind was disturbed." Tony found this unjust and untrue—but according to the law, you were by definition mad if you killed yourself, making it unlikely that anyone would listen to Adrian's argument.

For Tony and his friends, mainstream society can't possibly understand suicide as an open philosophical question, one that intense thinking might lead one to resolve. The novel, however, implies that Tony's disgust may be more self-righteous and cold than noble.

Adrian had asked to be cremated and his ashes to be scattered: he considered it a philosophical choice for his body to be quickly destroyed. Alex said that he couldn't decide whether the suicide was impressive or a terrible waste. Tony wondered if there was an implicit criticism of everyone else in it, including the two of them. He wondered, too, if Adrian's philosophy tutors felt at all responsible for his act.

Tony and Alex are clearly shocked and upset, and yet they still find it easier to think about how they *are affected—how the suicide might have been meant as a message to them, for instance—than to really consider or imagine Adrian's own feelings and motives.*

Alex said that the last time he saw Adrian, he'd said he was in love. Silently calling Veronica a bitch, Tony decided that Veronica was the one woman a man could fall in love with and still think life worth refusing.

Even after six months away, and in the midst of tragedy, Tony is still bitter enough about Veronica to think as insultingly about her as he can.

Back home, Tony conveyed some of the conversation to his mother. Tony's mother said that Adrian *was* too clever—that someone like that could argue himself into anything, leaving common sense behind. Tony almost couldn't respond, he was so angry. The next few days, he tried to imagine how Adrian could have loved Veronica and still killed himself. He wondered if something terrible had happened in the months he was gone, but decided Adrian would have been honest about it, as the philosopher he was.

Tony thinks that his mother can't possibly understand the high stakes of suicide or grasp the complex philosophical debates in which he engaged with Adrian, Alex, and Colin. Briefly wondering if there was more to the story than he knew, Tony quickly throws out that possibility, and in doing so he remains self-centered, assuming that he *can decide what Adrian meant and why he acted the way he did.*

Finally, Tony came around to understanding and admiring Adrian's reasons, his logical reasoning—so different than the knee-jerk way most people make decisions. He decided there was no implicit criticism of himself or his friends in the act. Still, he agreed with Alex that it was all a terrible waste.

Tony's admiration of Adrian speaks to his acceptance of the idea that suicide can be a meaningful philosophical act, even if he and Alex also agree that Adrian's very intelligence and promise made his early death a waste.

One year later, Colin, Alex, and Tony met up for a reunion, going over old memories—turning past into anecdote already. They recalled, though, that they had never been to Adrian's home, though he'd been to all of theirs. They swore to repeat the reunion annually. Yet their lives were moving in different directions: even Adrian retreated in importance over time.

Tony reflects on how easy and natural it feels to make the messy, painful past into a set of digestible and repeatable stories and anecdotes. At the same time, the group also recognizes that there was much about Adrian that they never knew.

Tony began work in arts administration; he met a coworker, Margaret, married her, and had a daughter, Susie. His first job turned into a long career. He liked his marriage, but was perhaps too peaceable—after twelve years Margaret had an affair with a restaurateur, and they rather amicably split up, sharing custody with Susie, who never seemed too damaged (though he now realizes he never applied his theory of damage to his own daughter).

While nearly half the book has been taken up with a few short years in Tony's life, here he speeds up, skating over large swaths of his later life, including his career, marriage, and daughter. Tony had theorized earlier that everyone is somehow damaged—it's just their responses to that damage that differ—but at the time he was thinking of Veronica, not of his own family.

Tony had a few subsequent affairs: it always felt right to tell Margaret about them, though now he wonders if that stemmed from jealousy or self-protection. Susie grew up and married a doctor named Ken: they have two children. Margaret's second husband took up with a younger woman, and now Tony and Margaret remain on good terms, meeting sometimes for lunch. Once, after some wine, she suggested they might get back together, but Tony is now used to his solitude and routines, and perhaps, he reflects, just not odd enough to do something like that.

Tony describes his break-up with Margaret as almost inevitable, and certainly not as a cause for heartbreak. Here, however, his blasé tone and insistence that he and Margaret have an easy, jocular relationship seems to hide real pain: not just that Margaret left Tony, but that she perhaps has always loved him and has wanted to get him to feel more deeply and strongly about her.

Now Tony is retired. He has a few drinking friends, some platonic female friends; he volunteers running the library at the local hospital and is a member of the local history society. His life has been interesting to him, though he admits it probably wouldn't seem so to others. He "survived to tell the tale," as people say. He's learned that history isn't, as he once said, the lies of the victors, but rather the memories of the survivors, most of whom are neither victorious nor defeated.

Tony seems to conclude the story of his life here, even though the book is barely halfway over. He also reflects back on a conversation he'd had with Old Joe Hunt about possible definitions of history. Here he modifies both his and the teacher's suggestions, changing the protagonists from "victors" to "survivors."

TWO

Tony reflects that when you're young, you expect certain difficulties of old age: being lonely and widowed, your friends dying and your own death approaching. But you never look ahead and then imagine yourself looking back to the past, having to deal with less certainty as friends die and leave you to revisit your former self. He thinks back to Adrian's line about the imperfections of history. Lots of official history has happened in Tony's life, including the fall of Communism, 9/11, and global warming, but he's never quite trusted it like he does events in Greece and Rome or the British Empire. He feels safer with agreed-upon history; perhaps, too, it's that the history that should seem clearest is the most treacherous. If we can't understand time, which bounds and defines us, he wonders how we can understand even our personal portion of history.

As the book's second section begins, Tony reflects upon the specific difficulties of old age and how it affects the way one interprets the past. That is, he thinks, it's increasingly complicated to try to remember one's own life the older one gets. Adrian's definition of history, as inadequate documentation meeting imperfect memory—and resulting nonetheless in a feeling of certainty—seems to hold true, in Tony's case, for official and long-ago history, though less so both for recent history and for the events of his own life, which are of course embedded within the events of the recent past.

Tony thinks about how for young people, everyone older than a certain age looks older, eventually belonging to the category of the "non-young." Tony also notes that he still plays a good deal of Dvorak, though not Tchaikovsky. Sometimes he smiles to think that Ted Hughes never did run out of animals.

In these musings, Tony compares and contrasts his assumptions as a young man to the person he's become today, balancing what has changed with what has remained constant.

Tony gets along well with Susie, though he reflects that younger people no longer feel the need to keep in touch. He imagines her thinking condescendingly of her doddering retired father, though then thinks he's just being self-pitying.

Tony's relationship to Susie is rendered all the more obscure by the fact that he is obviously biased, both as her father and as the narrator-protagonist, in telling of it.

Tony thinks of a friend who has a son in a punk rock band: she'd mentioned one title, "Every day is Sunday," in which that phrase is simply repeated over and over for the entire song. It made him laugh and remember feeling like his own life hadn't yet begun.

If every day is Sunday, the work week never begins: this anecdote can be related to Tony's memory of feeling like he was in a "holding pen" in high school.

Tony now describes a letter he received in a long white envelope, from a legal firm: they are writing "in the matter of the estate of Mrs. Sarah Ford (deceased)." He has been left 500 pounds and two documents. After responding with the necessary legal details, he sits down and tries to recall that weekend in Chislehurst from forty years before. Hard as he might, he can't recall anything substantial other than being manipulated by Mrs. Ford's daughter (and patronized by her husband and son): why would that require such an expensive apology?

For the first few pages of Part Two of the novel, Tony simply lingers over seemingly unessential details. Now, though, it becomes clear that this may have been yet another delay tactic, before he launches into the event that, it turns out, first triggered him to return to the years of his past described in Part I. His frustration remains regarding the importance of that Chislehurst weekend.

Tony, besides, has successfully put the pain Veronica caused him out of his mind: he never wondered if things would have been better with Veronica, and never regretted his years with Margaret. Perhaps he lacks the imagination to have fantasized about a wildly different life than his own.

What Tony has elsewhere called his "peaceable" nature seems to have prevented him, until now, from revisiting the past fully—he's preferred to leave it behind him in order not to feel hurt or guilty.

Tony opens the first document to read a letter from Mrs. Ford. She says she thinks he should have what is attached, since Adrian always spoke warmly of him. She isn't quite sure of her motives, but is sorry for the way her family treated him many years ago, and wishes him well. In a P.S., she says she believes the last months of Adrian's life were happy. The second document is missing: the solicitor (lawyer) says it is still in the possession of Mrs. Ford's daughter.

Mrs. Ford's letter seems to confirm all the discomfort, bitterness, and class envy Tony had felt during that weekend many years ago. However, her motives for sending the other document, as well as why she'd say that Adrian's final months were happy, both remain a mystery.

Tony reflects that Margaret used to say men were attracted to one type of woman or the other: those who were clear-edged and those who implied mystery. Sometimes she seemed to wish she was the latter, though Tony always said he'd hate for her to be a woman of mystery: for him that was either a façade or, worse, a sign that she was a mystery to herself.

This reflection is another hint that Tony's relationship with Margaret may be more troubled, at least on her side, than he believes or admits. She seems to have felt that if she were more mysterious, perhaps Tony would not have treated her so complacently.

Tony has been influenced by Margaret's clear edges over the years: rather than patiently beginning a correspondence with Mrs. Eleanor Marriott, the lawyer, he calls her to ask what else he's been left. She replies that it's a **diary** belonging to Adrian Finn. Veronica Ford apparently has said she isn't yet ready to part with it. Tony asks her for Veronica's address.

Although Tony portrays his relationship with Margaret as a simple friendship, it's obviously deeper than that: this and other anecdotes show how much she's affected and changed him over the years. Tony's own stubbornness, though, is also in evidence.

Tony reflects that the less time remains in one's life, the less one wants to waste it. But he also realizes that he spends much of his time tidying and cleaning things, both in concrete ways (recycling) and less concrete, settling his affairs with his daughter, grandchildren, and ex-wife, and achieving a general state of what he continues to call "peaceableness." He doesn't like mess, he reflects. So he makes a series of phone calls: to Mrs. Marriott to ask for Jack Ford's contact details; to Margaret to arrange a lunch date; and to his own lawyer, T.J. Gunnell.

What Tony long ago learned to think of as his "peaceableness" continues to be a major aspect of his character. Here, though, his attempt to "tidy" his own affairs involves inserting himself into messy, long-buried memories and relationships that he'd thought were definitively part of his past. It seems that he's peaceable more to himself than to others.

Tony admits that when he first met Margaret, he'd pretended Annie was his first real girlfriend: he had been telling himself that his relationship with Veronica was a failure, anyway, so he wrote it out of his past. But after a year or so married to Margaret, he told her the truth. She understood, asking questions and looking closely at the one photo Tony kept with Veronica and his school friends. As he expected, she didn't make a fuss: she easily forgave him.

The way Tony tells this story, it seems to confirm his view of Margaret as reasonable, uncomplicated, and easily accepting of him. Of course, it's possible to draw other interpretations from her behavior, and to infer that she may have been more upset by this revelation than she let on.

On the phone with T.J. Gunnell, the lawyer advises Tony not to doggedly pursue Veronica's "theft" of the **diary**—the police wouldn't be eager to pursue charges against a woman who just lost her mother. He also tells Tony that if the Fords are paying the bills, it's not a great idea to badger Mrs. Marriott either, as she could slow things down further. It might take 18 months to two years for things to be sorted out. Finally, Gunnell asks if there's anything in the past between Tony and Miss Ford that might become relevant, were they to pursue civil (or criminal) proceedings. A certain image suddenly comes into Tony's mind: he thanks Mr. Gunnell and hangs up.

Although Tony still has no idea why Mrs. Ford left Adrian's diary to him, or what it might contain, he now has come to think of it as properly his. Even though it's a stretch to think that Veronica's withholding of the diary constitutes a crime, Tony will increasingly come to use such language (including evidence, corroboration, clues, and so on) to make sense of what follows. The image that comes to mind, most likely a memory of Veronica (or of Tony himself doing something he's too ashamed to say), isn't specified.

Mrs. Marriott takes two weeks to give Tony Jack Ford's email; Veronica has declined to have her contact details passed along. Tony sends a formal email, offering his condolences and asking if Jack might use his influence to persuade Veronica to hand over the "document" left to Tony. Ten days later Jack replies with a long, rambling email: he's semi-retired, traveling in Singapore, and makes an excuse about unreliable Wi-fi. He then says he's never been his sister's keeper: in fact, putting in a good word for Tony might have the opposite effect. He ends with a jovial phrase about having to dash off for his rickshaw. Tony is suspicious: for all he knows, Jack is in some mansion by a golf course in Surrey, laughing at him. Perhaps class differences resist time longer than other kinds of difference, he thinks. He emails back politely, asking for Veronica's email address.

In the brief period that Jack and Tony knew each other, Tony had always felt that Jack treated him with bemused skepticism—as if Tony was so unimportant that full-throated scorn would be too strong an attitude to take towards him. Now it seems like little has changed, that Jack is just as subtly and yet gleefully condescending as he'd always been. The fact that Tony still feels the bite of such possible teasing speaks to the persistent strength of his feelings of inferiority even forty years later; he continues to feel this way even as he admits class difference is the primary reason.

Tony meets Margaret for lunch. He thinks how nice she looks, and how he notices what's remained the same about her looks rather than what's changed with age. Barely having sat down, she asks him what this is all about, and he laughs: such directness is typical for her. He immediately says it's about Veronica Ford, (he and Margaret, he notes, aren't insecure about each other's previous lovers). She responds, "the Fruitcake?" Tony is uncomfortable, but knows that when he'd told Margaret the story, he'd made Veronica out to be far more unstable, and him more innocent, than was the case, so it's his fault if Margaret has a rather negative view of her.

Tony's relationship to Margaret is, again, not necessarily as easy or simple as he makes it out to be—nor as direct as her personality. It's possible, for instance, not to take Tony at his word when he insists that they easily talk about each other's previous lovers. The "Fruitcake" anecdote is also another example of the novel's interest in the way people revise and rewrite their pasts, making others—who are conveniently not around—appear in a different light.

After a series of questions, Margaret asks wryly what the "long-divorced" Tony would do if the presumably unmarried Veronica were to walk into the café at that moment. Tony blushes, but says he wouldn't be particularly excited to see her. Margaret tells him to forget about it and cash the check, taking them both on that budget holiday they've often thought of doing. She says it's nice they're still fond of each other, even if she knows he'll never book the holiday. She looks almost enigmatic as she says this, though Tony knows there's no enigma to Margaret.

More seems to be going on in this passage than Tony is acknowledging. His blush, for instance, suggests that Tony is intrigued by the sudden return of his long-ago girlfriend. Margaret is performing an easygoing, platonic interest in Tony's feelings, but her holiday suggestion may well be more serious than she admits (and more earnest than Tony, too, is willing to admit).

Tony realizes that he wants the **diary** so badly because it might be evidence, or "corroboration": it might jump-start some aspect of his memory. Margaret again suggests he let it go, but finds it touching that he's so stubborn. Then she tells him a story about her friend Caroline, who had a husband, children, and an au pair she wasn't sure about. She asked another friend for advice, who told her to go through the au pair's things. Caroline found the girl's diary, and read it: it was full of cruel judgments about Caroline and speculations that the husband had feelings for her. Tony asks if she fired the au pair: Margaret says that's not the point. As they leave, he recalls another thing she once said: some women aren't mysterious, but are only made so by men who can't understand them.

Once again, the term "corroboration" suggests more than simple confirmation of what Tony remembers—it's a word with more legal, even investigative overtones, although it's not clear if this is because Tony feels like an innocent victim, guilty himself, or some mixture of the two. Margaret's advice, meanwhile, has to do with the pain and suffering that can come from knowing too much—Tony's curiosity about what happened next suggests that he's precisely the kind of person who might fall into such a situation.

After a week, Jack sends Veronica's email along with a cheery note about blue skies in Sydney. Tony is surprised and grateful: he tries to return to the few things he remembers about Jack, including Adrian's harsh judgment about the way English people have a way of not being serious about being serious. He wonders if time has punished Jack for his lack of seriousness. He begins to imagine another kind of life for him: perhaps Jack stumbled into a multinational company job, competent at first but increasingly inept in a changing world. Perhaps he's a kind of emissary for a big company, sent to various cities to back up the local bigshot, taking his laptop to cafés with Wi-Fi, since hotels are too depressing. Having invented a past for him, Tony can now think about Jack in a way that allows him little to no discomfort.

Adrian, more earnest and serious than any of his school-age friends, had also been frustrated with Jack and other Cambridge students' flippant attitudes—something that seemed to join Jack and Tony, even if Tony always felt socially inferior to Jack. Now, however, Tony imagines another narrative for Jack—one that, crucially, has value not because it's true or probable, but because it's a comforting one for Tony. The novel suggests that people do this kind of thing all the time, constructing comforting stories about other people in order to ease their own pain.

Tony recalls that Veronica's father drove a Humber Super Snipe—a strange name, it strikes him. He's wondering if he does in fact suffer from nostalgia, if that means the "powerful recollection of strong emotions" and a regret at the absence of such feelings now. In that case he *is* nostalgic: for his early years with Margaret, for Susie's childhood, for the road trip with Annie. He wonders if it's possible to be nostalgic about remembered pain, too.

Tony is dredging up old memories in an attempt to get what he wants out of Jack: here he remembers the upper-middle-class car (one that was discontinued after the 1960s), but as he does so he begins to reflect more generally about nostalgia and regret, about the inability to relive happy (and perhaps also less happy) times outside of memory.

Tony writes to Veronica and receives a one-line reply: "Blood money?" He can't understand it, other than the idea that Sarah Ford has offered money in exchange for the pain her daughter caused him. At least this is consistent with his understanding of her as a "woman of mystery," though at this point he has no interest in "solving" her.

Tony has been assuming all along that the process of guilt, corroboration, and forgiveness will happen in one direction: that he's the one who's been wronged. It's this assumption that the rest of the novel will go on to reveal as tragically narrow-minded.

Tony notes that Veronica seems confused by his dogged but tranquil approach. His precedent is the strategy he took when the villa he and Margaret used to live in together began to show signs of wear, cracks and crumbling bits of wall. The insurance company blamed the lime tree in the garden. Although Tony was never a fan of the tree, he objected to the principle of obeying invisible bureaucrats. He prepared a long, stubborn campaign of letters, site inspections, et cetera, until finally the company gave up, to his immense satisfaction.

This anecdote, seemingly out of place in the story, does a few things: it fills in another detail of Tony's life with Margaret, which he may not have fully appreciated while he had it; and it underlines his own stubbornness, his insistence on not giving up until getting what he wants. This determination isn't quite depicted as admirable, however.

Finally, Tony receives a letter from Mrs. Marriott containing what she calls a "fragment" of Adrian's **diary**, from what seems like a page at random. The text is written in numbered paragraphs, and it begins by asking (as note "5.4") if life might be considered a wager, and if human relationships might be expressed in a formula. There follow a few formulas with the integers *b*, *a1*, *a2*, *s*, and *v*. Then Adrian asks if logic can and should be applied to the human condition. If a link between the integers breaks, he writes, who on the chain is responsible—how far might the limits of responsibility extend? The final phrase is "So, for instance if Tony" before the page ends.

This diary fragment is crucial, both as a key to the relationships between Tony, Adrian, Veronica, and Mrs. Ford, and to the rest of the novel's plot, which will unfold in large part as the result of Tony's attempt to understand what Adrian means here. It's already clear, however, that Adrian continued to be obsessed by questions of responsibility as discussed in school—though here he is trying to apply such abstract questions to his own life.

Tony is first struck by how admirable Adrian still seems, how intense his rational argumentation still remains. He suggests that if psychologists were to plot a graph of pure intelligence measured by age, most people would peak between sixteen and twenty-five. At that age, he remembers now, Adrian had seemed like he was designed to reason and reflect: it was a treat to accompany his intellectual process.

Tony and his other friends were always in awe of Adrian's intellect. It was in part this intellectual respect that allowed Tony to eventually accept Adrian's suicide as a rational, even admirable philosophical act.

Tony finds himself comparing his life to Adrian's: he wonders, thinking of a certain poet, if his life had "increased" in richness and value or if he'd simply accumulated years. Looking at Adrian's formulas, he wonders if there's been multiplication, not just addition and subtraction, in his life: he feels uneasy. He realizes that the "If Tony…" refers to something specific that he's forgetting, but now he reads it as a general hypothetical: if only he hadn't been so fearful, if only he'd refused to settle into "peaceableness."

Although Tony doesn't mention who he's thinking about, Philip Larkin's poem "Dockery and Son" has a line, "Why did he think adding meant increase?" to which he might be referring. Tony is also returning to the terms of Adrian's logical formulae in order to reassess his own life, which now looks pale, boring, and wasteful compared to the high stakes of Adrian's.

Tony recognizes that he does find comfort in his own stubbornness, however. He keeps sending jovial, jokey emails to Veronica every other day, though also includes "half-sincere" questions about her life. He is pursuing what is rightfully his, not harassing her, he reasons. Finally, one morning he gets a reply: Veronica is coming into town (that is, into London), and says she'll meet him at 3 in the middle of the Wobbly Bridge—the new footbridge over the Thames, which used to shake a bit when it opened.

Although Tony has just expressed frustration with his own character as contrasted to that of Adrian, the fact that he quickly reverts to his habit of stubbornness underlines the difficulties of changing one's character and personality, especially so late in life. Indeed, Tony is still incapable of being serious even about what he cares about.

Tony instantly recognizes Veronica by her posture as he approaches the middle of the bridge the next day. She seems tense, as if unhappy to be there. She notes that he's lost his hair; he replies at least it shows he's not an alcoholic. She directs him to a nearby bench, then asks why people think he's an alcoholic. He says it's just that heavy drinkers never lose their hair: she probably can't think of a bald alcoholic. She replies that she has better things to do with her time. Tony thinks that he's changed, but she (and her conversational tactics) haven't.

Tony's thought that he has changed substantially seems rather obviously false. Even though Veronica always seemed enigmatic to Tony, she is actually more direct than he is, expressing impatience with his jocular attempt at small talk and witty banter, just as years before she had asked him straight out why it was that he wore his watch inside-out.

Veronica looks somewhat shabby, in Tony's eyes. Her hair is the same length it was 40 years earlier, though gray now, and he thinks it doesn't become her. She asks him to get to why he asked her to meet. He protests that he never asked for a meeting, then finally asks her if she'll let him have Adrian's **diary**. Veronica replies that she's burnt it. First theft, then arson, Tony thinks angrily. But he remembers his strategy to treat her like an insurance company, and merely asks neutrally why she did so. People shouldn't read each other's diaries, she responds. When he protests that she and her mother must have read it, she tells him he can read something else if he'd like, and hands him an envelope before turning and walking off. At home, Tony looks through his emails and confirms that he never directly asked for a meeting. He also thinks that Margaret's theory of women should be modified: he was attracted both to her and to Veronica.

Tony's immediate judgment of Veronica's visual appearance seems to underline the fact that certain things about him haven't changed over the years—the ways he objectified Veronica, for instance. Yet Tony continues to consider himself the victim, responding with anger and bitterness to the revelation that Veronica did away with Adrian's diary. Tony seeks and does find what he'd call "corroboration" that he was right about not having asked for a meeting—it's implied that this may be beside the point, however. His final reflection in this scene returns to Margaret's theory about women being either mysterious or straightforward, but also underlines the way he's playing with both women, all while assuming himself to be innocent.

Tony remembers thinking, when he was young, about all the adventures that would await him, how he would live as people in novels did. At some point in his late twenties, he realized he'd never live out those dreams: instead he'd mow his lawn, take holidays, and simply live. With time, though, he's realized that he tried to be mature and was only safe—it was his way of avoiding life rather than facing its difficulties.

Tony increasingly feels as though these events are a kind of adventure—which only emphasizes how much his life has lacked any kind of adventure before this. Thinking life should be like an adventure novel may be naïve, but here Tony realizes that he's veered too far in the opposite direction.

Tony waits a day and a half before opening Veronica's envelope, knowing she'd expect him to rip it open immediately. He wonders why she had suggested a meeting, eventually coming up with a theory: she needed to say something in person, which was that she'd burnt Adrian's **diary**—something that she wouldn't have wanted in writing.

Tony has a penchant for coming up with theories to explain and categorize other people's behavior. As plausible as these theories might be, the novel suggests that Tony may be unable at times to see the difference between theory and reality.

Tony sits down with a glass of wine to read what's in the envelope. It's a photocopy of a letter in his own handwriting. He reads it, quickly pours his wine back into the bottle, and pours himself a whisky instead. He thinks about how in telling our life story, we shift things around or make cuts—and the longer we live, the fewer people are left to challenge the account.

Before sharing the contents of the letter, Tony shares his immediate reactions: the letter is meaningful enough to unleash a set of reflections on certain chilling aspects of self-editing one's memories (and shocking enough to require a stronger drink).

The letter, reproduced in the text, is addressed to Adrian but also to Veronica, whom he calls the "Bitch." Tony says he hopes that the two of them will end up mutually damaging each other, and will be left with a lifetime of bitterness. Part of him hopes she gets pregnant so that time can make its own revenge, but then Tony writes that it would be unjust to give an innocent fetus the burden of knowing it came from the two of them. Addressing Adrian, he writes that Veronica is a cockteaser who pretends she's struggling with her principles: if she hasn't yet had sex with him, he advises that he break up with her, and then she'll be ready and willing. He tells him to ask Veronica's mother about "damage" that's probably been done to her in the past. Addressing Veronica, he says she can't outsmart Adrian, despite her tactics of isolating him, making him dependent on her, etc., and suggests it's only a question of whether she can get pregnant before he finds out she's a bore. The letter continues in this vein.

In Part One of the novel, Tony had mentioned this very letter—it was the one that he briefly described as more serious than the jokey postcard he'd initially sent, but nothing too memorable. At that time, and really until this moment, Tony has been considering himself to be a victim far more than Veronica. Here, however, Tony reveals himself to be strikingly callous, bitter, cruel, and misogynistic. He alludes once again to the "damage" theory, which he'd mentioned in his earlier memory of this letter: but the theory comes across as far darker when yoked to his insults about Veronica's character and sexual "policies," as he'd described them.

Tony keeps drinking whisky and rereading the letter. Unable to refute its authenticity, he can only plead that he no longer recognizes that version of himself. He thinks about how cruel and jealous he'd been. But then he wonders why Veronica would give the letter to him: he imagines it's a tactical move, meant to warn him that he'll be his own character witness should he try to make any fuss about Adrian's **diary**. He thinks, then, about how this was the last piece of communication Adrian received from him before he died. He'd written that time would tell: he recognizes now that time is telling against him. Finally, Tony remembers the first, fake-cool postcard he'd sent Adrian: it was of the Clifton Suspension Bridge, a place where people commit suicide every year.

Here, Tony is faced with just the kind of "corroboration" he's been looking for in various contexts—the only problem is that the evidence is not at all what he wishes to see or hear. Strikingly, however, Tony almost immediately moves to questioning Veronica's motives, continuing to assume a level of manipulation and deceit on her part that increasingly seems unwarranted. Still, the diary unleashes memories of his final piece of communication with his old friend that are newly, and painfully, meaningful to him now.

The next day, Tony keeps thinking about himself, Adrian, and Veronica, and about how much more hurtful people can be when young. He thinks that it wasn't cruel of the two of them to tell him they were an item. Rather than shame or guilt, he feels something stronger and rarer: remorse. He describes this as a primeval feeling, characterized by the fact that nothing can be done, no amends can be made. All the same, he sends Veronica an email apologizing.

Tony spends the next day reacting in a number of different ways to the letter: here he first reflects in a general way about the hurtfulness of young people, but then seems to take some personal responsibility for his own past actions, both through the apology he sends Veronica and through his feeling of true remorse.

Tony then thinks about Adrian again, about how compared to Adrian he'd always been a "muddler," settling for life's banal realities. He feels remorse more generally about his whole life: about the loss of his friends from adolescence, of the love of his wife, of his early ambitions. He hadn't wanted life to bother him too much, and he'd succeeded—succeeded at being average at life. Veronica replies to the email, simply saying that he doesn't get it, and that he never did. He knows he can't justifiably complain.

In causing Tony to reevaluate his own cruelty, the letter also provokes him to regret what might be considered something quite different—his mediocrity. He compares himself to Adrian even more now that he knows how hurtful he was to his friend, and how little his own life lived up to the allure and courage of Adrian's own (at least in Tony's eyes).

Tony keeps wondering: why Veronica had his letter, why she'd bothered to answer his email if she hated him so much, if he'd been awkward or pushy or selfish during their relationship. On another lunch date, Margaret listens to the story. Tony knows she likes being a sympathetic ear, even if he ignored her advice: he also thinks she likes being reminded, by stories like this, of why she's glad she's no longer married to him. He asks if she left because of him; she replies that she left because of "us."

At this point, Tony finds himself needing to return to many other aspects of his past, struck by the fact that if he so dramatically revised one memory, he may well have done the same with others. At the same time, he seems to both want a certain level of closeness to Margaret and to remain willfully naïve about her feelings for him.

Tony reflects again on his relationship with Susie, with whom he gets on "fine." He remembers thinking, after her wedding where he served as witness, that he'd done his duty: all he had to do now was not get Alzheimer's and remember to leave her some money. Margaret has been a better grandparent than he has, he admits; Susie once told him he could take Lucas to see football when he's older—failing to notice that Tony doesn't like football. At some level she blames him for the divorce, even though Margaret left him.

Tony's reflections on Susie lead from Margaret's prior comment: he seems to want to justify his own competence at fatherhood, even while acknowledging his weaknesses in that field. He begins to seem even defensive about the fact that Susie blames him for the divorce; it's hard to know to what extent either of them is right.

Tony wonders if character develops over time: perhaps it's like intelligence, but peaks a little later, between 20 or 30. That might explain many lives, he thinks: it might explain what he calls "our tragedy."

This passage is enigmatic, but has to do in part with Tony's frustration at how people's characters often have only a limited capacity to change.

Tony thinks back to Adrian's **diary** and what he had written about "accumulation": life is not just the addition or subtraction of what is gained or lost, but the accumulation (or multiplication) of loss and failure. He also reflects on what Adrian wrote about responsibility: Tony is all for drawing the limits narrowly, and he thinks that he and Adrian came to more or less the same conclusion on that front.

To accumulate implies that everything builds on, changes, and develops from what has come before—there's a process of exponential growth rather than mere addition. However, Tony also reflects that in questions of personal responsibility, the accumulation of guilt can become excruciating.

Tony envies the clarity of Adrian's life: in your twenties, he reflects, you have much greater certainty of what life is, and what you are and might become. You can remember everything about your short life. Later, memory becomes "shreds and patches." Like a black box in an airplane, the tape erases itself if nothing goes wrong—so it's obvious what happened if you do crash, but much less clear if you don't.

Once again, Tony shows a certain level of thoughtlessness in his envy of Adrian's short life—cut short, of course, by suicide. But Adrian's life seems more meaningful precisely because it has ended: Tony can try to make meaning out of it by perceiving it as a whole, which he can't do for his own life.

Tony reflects that there's lot to be said for the spontaneity and immediacy of email: he might have written a letter to Veronica and then have second thoughts before posting it in the morning, but instead he writes an email asking only if she thinks he was in love with her back then. He presses send before thinking too much. In the morning, she replies that if he has to ask, the answer is no. Tony calls Margaret to tell her about this exchange: after a silence, she quietly says that he's on his own now.

Tony may think that it's a good thing that he was spontaneous enough to simply send the email, but it's not at all clear that this was a good idea—indeed, it seems even more troubling for Tony to ask such a question having received the letter from Veronica. Margaret is well aware of this level of thoughtlessness, even cruelty, as she extricates herself from further participation.

Tony thinks about how Jack's contempt is still biting to him, forty years on. He wonders if his own cruel letter was trying to get back at Veronica for what Tony imagined was her contempt for him. He's been profoundly, intimately shocked by the aggression in the letter, and imagines that Veronica might have carried resentment for it over many years: this would perhaps justify her destruction of Adrian's **diary**.

Returning to the thought of Jack's emails, which were after all not obviously contemptuous, Tony realizes that fear of others' contempt and scorn has been a motivating factor for him for a long time—and now one that he projects onto Veronica too.

Tony wonders if there might be a cure for the pain of remorse after all—if it can be made to "flow backwards" and be forgiven: that is, if he might prove that he wasn't such a bad guy to Veronica after all. He has the tendency to call Susie before a five-day holiday, just so that her last memory of him is a pleasant one. Now, toward the end of his life, he feels a similar desire for people to think fondly of him, to tell others, after his death, that he wasn't a bad guy.

By using the term "flow backwards," Tony seems to implicitly be referring to the Severn Bore and the alluring possibility of returning to the past, here so that he can fix things. Tony is portrayed as intensely occupied with what other people think of him, but the novel also suggests that this desire is all too ordinary.

Tony looks back at the Trafalgar Square photo and wonders if he should track down Alex and Colin, asking them for their memories and evidence. But he knows their memories won't be any better than his, and imagines the painful things about him, Adrian, and Veronica they might say. Mrs. Ford is dead, and Jack abroad: Veronica is the only one remaining.

Though still eager for other kinds of corroboration that he wasn't a horrible person, Tony is realizing that, as he's now getting older, there are few such people left. This means that he can largely write his own account of the past, but here he wants something truer—something that will convince himself, not just others.

Tony notes that he doesn't want to blame Margaret, but that she'd left him with no one else to turn to. He writes another email to Veronica, asking about her parents and saying he has good memories of them. To his surprise and relief, she responds almost as if pleased to be asked. Veronica's father has been dead for decades, she says, as a result of heavy drinking and eventually esophageal cancer. Tony pauses, remembering his flippant remarks about alcoholics on the Wobbly Bridge. After his death, Sarah Ford moved to London. About a year ago her memory had begun to fail, and the last month had particularly been a struggle: her death was a mercy. Tony rereads the email looking for traps or hidden insults, but it's just an ordinary, sad story.

The remark about not wanting to blame Margaret comes across as tongue-in-cheek, but it's quite possible that Tony relies so much on her good sense that he now feels unmoored without her. Both she and Veronica seem simultaneously drawn to and incredibly frustrated by Tony. His flippancy and casual manner, for instance, probably did prove hurtful to Veronica with respect to her father's sickness and death. This is one of the first times that Tony is able to let go of his assumption that Veronica is manipulating or making fun of him, and simply have compassion for her.

There are various ways to deal with the regular failings of memory that come with age, Tony thinks. Once in a while, though, his brain surprises him. Suddenly, long-buried details from the weekend with the Fords begin to resurface: the view from his attic room to a wood; Jack referring to Mrs. Ford as "the Mother"; Veronica's sultry good-night kiss to him, after which he masturbated into the little washbin. He googles Chislehurst and discovers that there was never a St. Michael's church there (it must have been Veronica's father's private joke or else another way he was belittling Tony).

Here one more of the images with which The Sense of an Ending *began is repeated: sperm circling a basin and being flushed down the length of a home. Tony had emphasized how Veronica seemed to distance herself from him that weekend, but this new memory seems to undercut that view. The St. Michael's church question, meanwhile, could be a similar instance of mis-remembering.*

A few nights later, Tony calls Veronica and suggests they meet again, promising he doesn't want to talk about her mother's will. She asks if this is about closing the circle: he says he doesn't know but can't imagine it will do any harm. She suggests the restaurant on the third floor of John Lewis (a clothing store) on Oxford Street. On the train, as Tony looks at a girl sitting across from him listening to music with headphones, eyes closed, a memory comes to Tony of Veronica dancing. She didn't dance, and yet one night she mischievously pulled out his pop records and said she wanted to see him dance. He complied: after a bit he opened his eyes to see her leaping around elegantly. He moved closer and caught her, saying she must have realized it's not that difficult: she never thought it was, she said.

Even as Tony has been forced to face the reality of how cruel he acted toward Veronica and Adrian, the letter has also unleashed a swath of long-buried memories—many of them positive—such that he does seem to think he can make Veronica choose to believe in a more generous version of himself, one that he'd like to present to her. Meanwhile, after decades of choosing to view Veronica as manipulative, deceptive, and "damaged," Tony begins to recall another version of her younger self, one both more playful and more complicated than he remembers.

Tony arrives to find Veronica there already, reading a Stefan Zweig novel: he cracks a joke about her making it to the end of the alphabet. He's suddenly nervous, as he's never read Stefan Zweig. He shares the memory he just had of her dancing, and she wonders why he remembered that: with this "corroboration," he feels somewhat more confident.

Stefan Zweig is an Austrian novelist who was extremely popular before World War II but then largely forgotten. Tony's joking manner is, after all these years, a way of covering for inferiority (here, for Veronica's sophisticated intellectual tastes).

Tony asks how her last forty years have gone, but Veronica tells him to go first. He relates the account that he tells himself: Margaret and Susie and his grandchildren, his work and retirement and winter breaks. As he's describing his grandchildren, she looks up, downs her coffee, puts money on the table, and stands up. He protests that it's her turn, but she leaves before he can do anything. She's managed to spend a full hour in his company with divulging anything about herself, yet he feels like he's been on a moderately successful first date, though with someone who's suddenly prompting long-forgotten details about their shared sex life together, 40 years before. He remembers how part of him hadn't minded not going all the way with Veronica. Some of that, though, had to do with his fears: of pregnancy, of an overwhelming closeness he might not be able to handle.

The way the "date" unfolds and the way Tony interprets it are rather at odds: one could easily see Veronica's decision to leave as a sign of failure rather than success. Tony's self-delusions here only underline the fact that he's not exactly a reliable narrator even for events that are currently unfolding, much less ones that he's remembering from many decades before. However, this meeting also allows him to continue to come to terms with the fact that what he's long considered to be calculating sexual withholding on Veronica's part was not quite that—that in fact sex was frightening and complicated for him too.

The next week is a quiet one. Tony knows Margaret won't call if he doesn't. He's been feeling somewhat bad about her. He remembers a work party from early in their marriage: Margaret didn't want to go, and he flirted—he modifies this to a "bit more" than flirting—with a girl, though he quickly cut it off. Now he feels similarly guilty as then, though he struggles to imagine why.

The comparison underlines what seems to be clear despite Tony's (willful or unconscious) blindness: that in some ways he's been stringing Margaret along all the while he's been trying, if not to get Veronica back, then at least to get her to revise her opinion of him.

Tony doesn't want to press Veronica, but he hopes for a polite message saying it was nice to see him. Even if part of him rolls his eyes at stories of love late in life, another part of him is always touched. He suddenly remembers going to see the **Severn Bore** with Veronica alongside him—he'd forgotten that she'd been there. They'd shared hot chocolate from a flask, and the two of them had spoken about how impossible things sometimes happened, which you'd only believe if you saw them. In a court of law today, of course, he's not sure this memory could stand up to cross-examination. Perhaps he's revising such memories now for new purposes.

Here Tony returns to a memory that he's described and mentioned a number of times—indeed, it appears to be such a clear and significant memory to him that it seems remarkable that, until now, he's entirely erased Veronica from it. This perhaps has to do with the particular way he's tried to remember Veronica, and the fact that their thoughtful, speculative conversation didn't fit into the version of her that he came to adopt.

Tony's new theory, though, is that memory survives on the same loops, drawing on the same facts and emotions, for years: but if something new happens at a late stage—such that emotions regarding those long-ago facts change—old memories might resurface. He's not sure if this is how the brain works, but this is what seems to be happening to him.

Tony once again shows his penchant for "theories" that would reassuringly explain events of his life and those around him. Still, it does seem like the letter—as shocking and unpleasant as it was—has unleashed such a set of new memories.

Tony emails Veronica again, apologizing for monopolizing the conversation and asking to meet again. After a few days, she replies, asking him to meet her at a Tube station he doesn't know in north London. He thinks this is thrilling, contrasting it to Margaret's penchant for plans and dislike of surprises. He tries to reactivate other old memories of Veronica, and reexamines his old self: he recognizes that he'd been "crass and naïve," but also that he needed to maintain his own version of his relationship with Veronica. He thinks back to Old Joe Hunt's addition to his own definition of history: the "self-delusions of the defeated."

Tony's stubbornness and refusal to back down are in full evidence here. He also continues to compare and contrast Veronica and Margaret, the two women in his life, without fully coming to terms with the way he's failing to respect them by considering them both as "options." As the scene also shows, Tony is attempting to come to terms with his own "self-delusions," but much about his own character, past and present, remains hidden to him.

There is objective time, but also subjective—the kind worn on the inside of your wrist—Tony thinks, and the latter is measured with regard to memory. With the appearance of these new memories, it's as if time is placed in reversed, as if the river runs upstream.

Tony implicitly refers to the Severn Bore as well as to the watches he and his friends wore on the inside of their wrists: both of these images emblematic of the desire to reverse time and history.

When Tony reaches the Tube station, he sees a familiar posture: Veronica turns and walks off, leaving him to follow her to her car. He tries to make small talk, including sharing his memory about the **Severn Bore**, but she says, "Driving." So he looks out the window: first they pass a normal London street, packed with all kinds of people, but then reach a nicer ("posher") neighborhood. Tony has no idea what's going on, so he cheerily asks how Jack is doing. She responds that Jack is Jack, and when he launches into another memory, she interrupts him to say, "Waiting." Suddenly Tony realizes that Veronica is nervous, though clearly not about him.

Veronica's thoughts and actions were, even many years ago, often confusing and opaque to Tony, and here things seem to continue in such a vein. He attempts to regain a level of closeness to Veronica by sharing the Severn Bore memory—her "corroboration" of his memory of her dancing had felt like a kind of vindication for him—but she refuses to play along, clearly preoccupied with something else.

Finally, Veronica asks him to look along the pavement, where five people are coming towards them. In the front is a man wearing various layers of tweed despite the heat: his jacket is covered with metal badges, and he wears a jolly expression, like someone at a circus. One man with a black moustache, and another smaller, malformed man follow behind them: they all speak in loud voices and seem timid and somehow ageless. They're accompanied by a young man in a uniform.

The group of men is described exactly how Tony sees them, which accounts for the defamiliarized (that is, purposely confusing and unfamiliar) way they're depicted. Veronica clearly wants Tony to pay close attention to the group and to understand how they're related to her, to Tony, and to their past.

After a long silence, Tony asks Veronica what's wrong with them, and then asks if they're care-in-the-community. Veronica suddenly lets out the clutch of her car, and, terrifying Tony, she swerves around the block—he thinks about how Margaret was always a nice, safe driver. Veronica tells him that he never got it, and never will.

"Care in the community" refers to a British policy, begun in the 1980s, of caring for physically and mentally disabled people, often outside of institutions. Tony refers to them in a casual, uncompassionate way; hence Veronica's reaction.

Veronica's maneuvers have allowed them to get ahead of the group again. The presumed care worker is telling one of them, Ken, that Friday is pub night, not tonight, and he's protesting. The man in tweed suddenly notices Veronica, and the care worker smiles and holds out his hand. All four ambush her, and she smiles for the first time that day. Tony can't hear what's being said, until she says, "Soon," which they all repeat. The "lopsided" man waves goodbye to her, calling her "Mary."

Veronica obviously knows this group of people, which is one of the only things Tony is able to grasp from their conversation. Referring to one of the men as "lopsided" further underlines Tony's lack of compassion with respect to disability. Finally, the reference to "Mary" recalls one of the first things Tony ever mentioned about Veronica—her middle names.

Back in the car, Tony says that they all seemed very pleased to see Veronica. He continues to ask questions, to which he's met with silence. After trying out a number of conversation topics, he asks why the "goofy chap" called her Mary. Veronica slams on the brakes, then tells him, "out." Tony complies, though he says she'll ruin her tires if she keeps driving that way.

Tony's questions show that he's obviously curious and wants to know more about the group, but he continues to display a striking callousness by calling people who Veronica seemingly knows and loves "lopsided" or "goofy."

Tony feels foolish and humiliated, especially after the hopefulness he's recently felt, especially about the possibility of overcoming Veronica's contempt. He'd really thought he could turn back time: he'd taken what she'd said about closing the circle as an invitation, not as biting irony. In fact, her attitude toward him has been consistent over the past few months as well as so long ago. He'd wanted to prove to her that she was wrong to judge him, or rather that her initial liking of him had been right. He'd left common sense behind in imagining he could rewrite the past.

Although Tony wants to change Veronica's opinion of him and "turn back time," he hasn't exactly acted in a way that might invite such reevaluation—indeed, he's been just as jokey, casual, and unserious as he was as a young man. It's not surprising, therefore, that Veronica has acted this way toward him (even though her attitude also raises the question of why she continues to feel invested in him in the first place).

Tony's next week is one of the loneliest in his life: he replays to himself Margaret's statement that he's on his own now, and Veronica's that he just doesn't get it. Knowing that Margaret wouldn't yell at him if he called, and would happily agree to another lunch date, makes him feel even lonelier.

Tony knows on some level that Margaret loves him and would happily get back together with him, even if he won't admit it to himself. Rather than thinking of her, though, he focuses on his own loneliness.

However, Tony repeats that he has an instinct for self-preservation. He rallies, deciding to return to his desire to put his affairs in order—which requires getting his hands on that **diary**. He writes to Jack, saying Veronica has been just as mystifying to him as she's always been. He asks for any other advice, and for any way he might illuminate why Veronica wanted to show him care-in-the-community people on the Northern line. Tony writes to Mr. Gunnell, saying that his recent dealings with Miss Ford suggest a certain instability in her, and he now thinks it best that a professional like Mr. Gunnell settle the affairs with Mrs. Marriott. Gunnell responds, but Jack never replies.

Tony's "instinct for self-preservation" has previously not seemed like such a good thing—indeed, Tony has reflected already that such an instinct has led him to avoid feeling too deeply or taking major chances. Still, he's also reflected that it might be impossible to change one's character later in life. Tony's decision to call Veronica "unstable" in order to get what he wants seems, indeed, chillingly similar to how he called her "damaged" in his letter to her and Adrian.

Not long afterward, Tony is driving to North London, eventually finding himself in the street where he and Veronica had parked. He watches bands of schoolchildren, many on their phones, a few smoking. The girls have very short skirts, and he thinks neutrally about how much things have changed. He waits for hours, then gives up; he continues for a few days.

Some of what the novel has been exploring is how personal changes in one's own life map onto broader changes in society—here, the schoolgirls' outfits would never have been allowed in the 1960s, although Tony seems to want to avoid judgment either way.

Eventually, Tony remembers overhearing that Friday is pub night. The following Friday he drives to the pub along the second street where he and Veronica had stopped. No one shows up, so he comes back a second Friday and orders dinner. The week after that, the "lopsided" man and the man with the moustache arrive at the bar, and the bartender immediately brings them what Tony presumes is their regular drink. A black woman who seems motherly comes in after about twenty minutes, pays at the bar, and leads the two men away.

Tony's behavior reflects an earnest desire to understand the significance of the group of men Veronica had pointed out to him, but also an unwillingness to really engage with them as people, as opposed to figures identifiable through their visual characteristics alone—characteristics that he refers to in ways that many people might find offensive.

Tony becomes a regular at the pub, working his way through the menu: he's patient. One evening, all five of the men show up at the pub, though three of them enter the shop next door instead. Tony follows them and purchases something before returning to the bar: the three men enter too. Without a real plan, Tony walks up to the bar to order food, and says good evening to the gangly man, who seems about forty. The man takes off his glasses and looks Tony in the face, and Tony says quietly that he's a friend of Mary's. The man begins to smile, then panics, whining and shuffling away.

As an older retiree, Tony has a certain freedom to spend time where he chooses: he's both persistent in trying to figure out the connections Veronica has been wanting him to draw, and unhurried in doing so. It's significant that the "gangly man" is about forty, the span of years that makes up the novel's own time—and that Tony has the opportunity to take in the man's appearance, glasses off.

Tony sits at the bar and looks at the menu; the black woman soon approaches him, and when he says he hopes he didn't do anything wrong, she replies that it's not good to startle the man, especially now. Tony says that he's a friend of Mary's, to which she replies that, in that case, he'll understand—and he does.

Tony's epiphany (which is not yet described) takes place at the cost of upsetting the man, as the care worker warns Tony—another example of how Tony often unwittingly hurts those around him.

Tony had seen the truth in the man's face, their eyes, color, and expression, "corroborated" by his height and bone structure. This had to be Adrian's son. Tony's first reaction is to think about what he wrote in his letter to Veronica and Adrian, about whether Veronica could get pregnant before Adrian discovered she was a "bore." He had never found her boring; he was just trying to hurt her. Then he remembers the part of the letter about the "innocent fetus." The very word remorse, Tony knows, comes from the Latin meeting "to bite again": the strength of the bite this time is immense. He doesn't believe in curses, and yet feels that there's something evil and otherworldly about what he did.

The term "corroboration" significantly recalls Tony's desire to find some kind of evidence that would remove him from guilt or responsibility. Here, though, the corroboration is of a different nature, revealing to him the nature of the mystery that Veronica was attempting to explain to him. With this clarity, the same facts of the past, his own actions and words, once again look entirely different to him in the harm that they must have done.

Tony thinks of how he'd so recently been indulging in vague fantasies about Veronica even while admitting he knew nothing about her life. Now he has some answers: she had gotten pregnant, and perhaps the trauma of Adrian's suicide had affected her unborn child. Her son can't function independently and needs constant support. Tony wonders when the diagnosis had been made, and to what extent Veronica had sacrificed her own ambitions and desires for her son—he imagines the guilt and sense of failure she must have felt when deciding ultimately to have him taken into care. He reflects how ungenerous he'd been to think of her as looking unkempt and shabby on the Wobbly Bridge: he was lucky she'd given him any time at all, and it makes sense that she'd burn Adrian's **diary**.

Tony has to come to terms with the ways he's projected imagined pasts onto other people (Jack as well as Veronica)—but since he only has some of the answers, he can't help but keep imagining other ones, even as he knows that there's no assurance that his new "theory" will be right. Here, however, Tony's imagination is engaged not in order to make himself feel better, but in order to really try to put himself in Veronica's shoes and think about how his own actions have affected and harmed her.

Tony has no one to tell this to: as Margaret said, he's on his own, and now must return to his own past to reevaluate it. He thinks of Adrian, his philosopher friend whose intellectual acumen and noble gesture of suicide has reemphasized, as time went on, the comparative littleness of Tony's own life. Now he sees Adrian as he really was: a young man who got his girlfriend pregnant and couldn't face the consequences. Tony has to entirely reevaluate the way he always saw Adrian: in fact, he was just another version of Robson. For the first time, Tony realizes he and his friends never thought about Robson's girlfriend or their child. He imagines the child being adopted, then attempting to trace his or her birth mother. He wants to apologize to Robson's girlfriend for the way they'd discussed her and for the little attention they gave to her pain and shame. Adrian, in turn, had been an actual adult, unlike Robson; yet he couldn't even face marrying his girlfriend. Rather than grandly refusing the gift of existence, Tony concludes, Adrian was just afraid of being trapped into marriage and family life.

For many decades, Tony has unquestioningly accepted his own preferred version of Adrian's character, one in which Adrian was an intellectual genius far more clever and mature than anyone else, and one whose mental acumen even, perhaps, justified his own suicide. In some ways, Tony's realization leads him to reevaluate his own past immaturity, particularly regarding the ways he and his friends paid little attention to imagining the pain of Robson's girlfriend—comparing her to Veronica, Tony now recognizes that there was much more to the story than he accepted. However, it's striking that Tony is quick to replace the reigning version of Adrian that he'd always accepted with a new, and newly airtight, version—merely creating a new "theory" about Adrian.

Tony wonders what he possibly knows of life: he's lived so carefully, avoiding being hurt, paying his bills on time, staying on good terms with everyone. He now has a special kind of remorse, for hurting someone—Adrian—who thought he knew how to avoid being hurt.

This is a slightly different conclusion Tony draws from his epiphany—one that has to do both with his own desire to avoid hurt and being hurt (one that's nonetheless failed) and with the difficulty of ever being certain about the past.

Tony writes an email to Veronica with the subject "Apology." He doesn't expect her to respond or to think better of him, but he ends by wishing her and her son the best. He's not sure if he feels better or worse after sending it. He begins to think more often of Susie, of his luck in simply having a child that can lead an independent life.

Tony has previously thought about Susie in rather humdrum terms, not exactly fondly or warmly. By comparing Veronica's parenting situation to his own, however, he's able to be more grateful for his own years of parenthood.

Tony's life continues. He recommends books to the sick and dying, volunteering at the hospital. He asks Mr. Gunnell not to pursue the **diary** affair. He thinks of how little has happened to him over the years.

Despite Tony's epiphany, little has changed in his own life, at least outwardly—memory's deformations, it's implied, are not always externally evident.

Then, Tony receives an email from Veronica, which is almost the same as an earlier one: it says he still doesn't get it, and never will, and tells him to stop trying. He imagines an epitaph reading "Tony Webster—He Never Got It," though reflects that this is melodramatic. He returns with some regularity to the pub and shop where he'd become a regular. He'd never felt like he was wasting his time when he'd waited there—he might as well spend his time there as anywhere else, at this point in his life.

After a painful but illuminating epiphany, with all the realizations that it unleashed, Tony now has to come to terms with the fact that this may not have been a real epiphany at all—that Veronica's frustration with him might not be resolved by his attempt to apologize and to set things right with her.

One evening, after a conversation with the barman where Tony tries and fails to order thinner "hand-cut chips" (which turn out not to be hand-cut at all), he returns to his table to see the five men from the care home return, together with the young care worker Tony had initially seen with them. The care worker goes over to Tony and, introducing himself as Terry, says that "Adrian" (Jr.) is upset by Tony's presence. Tony apologizes, saying he doesn't want to upset anyone ever again. Terry looks at him as if he's being ironic, but Tony says he'll just finish his food and leave.

The conversation between Tony and Terry underlines the fact that Tony has come to accept the problems he's always had with being ironic and unserious—and the ways those character tendencies have harmed other people. Even in his attempt to be serious now, realizing that he is upsetting Adrian by his mere presence, Tony still comes across as ironic.

Terry asks if Tony minds him asking who he is: Tony replies that he was a friend of Adrian (Jr.)'s father many years ago, and used to know Adrian's mother Veronica quite well too: in fact they've seen each other recently, in the last weeks and months, though probably won't be seeing each other again.

Tony's attempt at explanation rests on the epiphany he'd had the last time he had seen Adrian Jr.—and yet, as Veronica had implied, this realization itself only showed how he still didn't "get it."

Terry replies that what Tony is saying doesn't make sense. First, Tony clarifies: he knows Adrian's mother as Veronica, but Mary is her second name, which is what Adrian calls her by. But Terry says that Tony must not understand: Mary is Adrian's sister, not his mother: his mother died six months ago, and he took it quite badly. Tony automatically eats one chip, then another, thinking about how thin chips are so much more satisfying than these fatter ones. He offers Terry his hand and says that Adrian (Jr.) seems to get very good care. Terry stands up and says they try, though budget cuts happen almost every year. Tony wishes them all good luck.

"Six months ago" corresponds, of course, to the date that Sarah Ford died, leaving the documents and 500 pounds in her will to Tony and prompting the events of the novel, as well as the memories that those events unleashed. Tony's response underlines the shock of this new revelation with his immediate inability to react with anything other than stupefaction. Still, Tony can bid farewell to Terry and leave the situation behind—in ways that Veronica, for instance, cannot.

Later, at home, Tony "gets it all": why Mrs. Ford had Adrian's **diary**, why she said his last months were happy, what Veronica meant by blood money, and what Adrian's strange formulae in his diary meant. One *a* was Adrian, the other was himself, *Anthony*, or what Adrian called him when trying to be serious. The *b* was a baby born to a mother dangerously late, damaged as a result. Tony thinks of the chain of responsibility: he'd urged Adrian to talk to Veronica's mother about her daughter being "damaged." Tony knows he can't change or solve anything now.

Only at the very end of the novel do all the various strands come together. The fragment of Adrian's diary had been an attempt to assign responsibility for the child—and, ultimately, for his own planned suicide. The novel doesn't suggest that Tony (or Adrian) bears absolute blame or responsibility for this, but at the very least he's forced to grapple with not knowing just how responsible he should *feel.*

Toward the end of life, Tony realizes, one gets the chance to ask what else one might have done wrong. He thinks of everything he could never know or understand. He thinks of Adrian's definition of history, of a carefree woman frying eggs, unconcerned when one breaks, then later making a secret, horizontal gesture beneath the wisteria while waving farewell. He thinks of the **Severn Bore**, rushing past upstream, pursued by students. He ends by saying that, beyond accumulation and responsibility, there remains great unrest.

The novel ends as it began, with strong images that reflect both the power and the deceptiveness of memory. Sarah Ford remains perhaps the most enigmatic character in the novel, her actions (from this gesture up to and including her relationship with Adrian) tragically difficult to understand. Tony ends by reflecting on the ultimate inability ever to know what really happened in the past, to understand other people, and to reach any kind of relief from such unrest.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Baena, Victoria. "*The Sense of an Ending*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 15 Jun 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Baena, Victoria. "*The Sense of an Ending*." LitCharts LLC, June 15, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-sense-of-an-ending.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Sense of an Ending* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Barnes, Julian. The Sense of an Ending. Vintage. 2012.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Barnes, Julian. The Sense of an Ending. New York: Vintage. 2012.