Robbie Turner is making his way through the French countryside towards Dunkirk accompanied by two corporals Nettle and Mace.

He is distressed to see a child’s leg stuck in a tree at the site of an air raid.

At a farmhouse, they are met by a hostile elderly woman and shelter in a barn. Her two sons later bring them good food and drink and they all talk.

Summary:
The narrative has switched to the perspective of Robbie Turner, now a soldier in war-torn France, and has moved on by five years to 1940. Robbie has been injured in the side but has not told his companions, Nettle and Mace, about his injury. Fever and pain make him absent-minded. Following a shortcut he has identified on the map, they come across a bombed house and Robbie sees a child’s severed leg in a tree. He has to go behind a wall to be sick. The soldiers continue on their way, Nettle and Mace teasing Robbie benignly about women. They pass through a swarm of bees, and Robbie’s knowledge of rural life saves them from injury.

They come across a farmhouse and ignore the protests of an elderly woman who tries to drive them away. She claims that her sons will kill the soldiers, but Robbie demands that they have food and water and shelter in the barn. She gives them a scant supply of poor food. Later in the evening, the woman’s sons come to the barn. Robbie, Nettle, and Mace assume they have come to kill them, and Robbie pulls out his gun, but the men are carrying baguettes, not weapons and have brought food and wine. All the men talk, Robbie acting as interpreter. The French brothers tell a sad tale of going to look for a cousin and her children in a bombed-out village, of finding corpses on the road, and of fearing the arrival of the German army.

Commentary:

Point of view/Style – The contrast with the first part of the novel is stark. It is not clear for two pages that we are now sharing Robbie’s point of view. His style is not instantly recognizable as he has changed in the years that have passed since the action of Part One. In this way he is introduced anew, as though a different character.

Setting/Tone – The spectacle of the child’s leg in the tree is shocking, to Robbie and to us. The flat, unemotional account of its fact lets the horror speak for itself. The description of the plane tree first, then the leg, makes it clear this is a common scene in the war-torn landscape. The fact that Robbie is embarrassed by his disgust and his subsequent need to vomit is testament to how many horrors the men have witnessed – the others are able to disregard it and Robbie fears they will see it as weakness that he cannot. This leg is the “unexpected detail” (179) referred to at the start of the chapter, and stays with Robbie as a disturbing image that he struggles to get out of his mind.
Suspense/Plot development – The hostility of the old woman is initially comic, though dangerous in that it nearly leads to her sons later being shot by Robbie. We reflect differently on her behavior on hearing that she had already lost a son in the First World War and that she has become confused by old age and grief. The brothers’ account of their journey, and their disappointment and wonder that the German army is again in France, make the real human impact of the war.

CONTEXT AND CONNECTIONS: Artistic depictions (film and literature, for example) of the Second World War have often idealized or glorified it. The opening scene of the film Saving Private Ryan (1998), about the D-Day landings in 1944, presents a stark picture of the horrors of war similar to that of Atonement. It is set in the same area of northern France.

Most French and British casualties in the First World War were in the battlefields of northern France. Opposing armies dug themselves into trenches and launched infantry assaults on the enemy, the armies moving only a few yards at a time and both sides sustaining horrific losses. Over 3 million British and 6 million French soldiers were killed or wounded. This was three-quarters of the French troops.

Pages 189-201

- Robbie cannot sleep and leaves the barn.
- He reflects on his only meeting with Cecilia after leaving prison and being sent to France.
- He reads through Cecilia’s last letter, which offers some hope that Briony may at last admit that she was wrong.

Summary:

Unable to sleep, Robbie feels the wound in his side, which is throbbing uncomfortably, confirming his suspicion that it has a piece of shrapnel in it. He reflects sadly on the boy killed in his bed, on the thoughtlessness of the bombers, and then on his own lost youth wasted in prison. He gets up and watches the flashes in the sky from distant gunfire and thinks about the possibility of being captured and spending the rest of the war in a prison camp, knowing he would not survive a second incarceration.

Robbie goes back to bed but continues recalling the past, thinking about his last meeting with Cecilia and how her letters sustained him in prison. The two had become intimate in their letters, writing in code and referring to books they knew in order to bypass the censorship of the prison wardens. Their meeting for tea in London was awkward, but they shared a long kiss before Cecilia took her bus back to the hospital. Their plans to meet before Robbie was sent to France were thwarted by the early declaration of war.

He reads a letter from Cecilia in which she tells him of Briony’s wish to meet up and Cecilia’s hope that it might mean Briony wants to set the record straight and clear Robbie’s name.
Commentary:

*Elements of Tragedy*– The combination of his earlier life and his time in prison have prepared Robbie well for the army and France, and explain the regard in which Nettle and Mace hold him, despite his inferior rank (Robbie could not apply to be an officer because of his criminal record). His accounts of the stifling oppression of prison, compared with which the routine of the army seems liberating, make the consequences of Briony’s actions painfully real. Like Cordelia and Edgar from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Robbie is a victim of the rash actions and selfish motives of another. His dreams of becoming a doctor, all his glowing potential, have been destroyed by Briony’s accusation.

*Development of Theme* – Cecilia’s final letter is given in its entirety, so that her voice can convey her love for him and her reaction to Briony’s change of mind. It gives us a chance to see how she has changed. She has grown up, and learned to deal with trauma – the daily agonies she witnesses as a nurse, as well as her years spent waiting for Robbie and her rejection of her family, have molded her adult character. It also gives the first clue of how she views Briony. In her first letter to Robbie on the subject, Cecilia makes it clear that she will never forgive the rest of her family, but Briony she just does not want to speak to, recognizing her sister was very young and given no chance to change her mind. In the final letter she admits her excitement at the news of Briony’s possible retraction and displays a lot of empathy for her sister and her choice to become a nurse. The chapter introduces Briony’s atonement, a theme which will occupy the second half of the novel as her crime occupied the first.

*Allusion* – On p. 192 Robbie gives a list of figures from literature to which he compares himself and Cecilia. All are couples for whom love does not go smoothly. Only Emma and George Knightly from Jane Austen’s *Emma* are happily united at the end of the story.

Robbie mentions A.E. Housman several times throughout the entire novel. He is a poet who wrote a collection of poems, *A Shropshire Lad*, about love and nature, painting an idealized picture of the English countryside.

**Pages 201-212**

- Mace and Nettle wake Robbie and they set off again, passing a bombed field littered with fragments of dead cattle.
- They join a long line of retreating British army vehicles, foot soldiers, and civilians. When the line is raked by gunfire from a German plane, they take cover.
- Robbie helps an ambulance man with the wounded, Mace and Nettle bury a civilian boy, and they walk on.
Summary:

After only 45 minutes of sleep, Robbie is woken by the corporals and they set off again across the fields. Robbie, using the map-reading and orienting skills that he developed in his youth, guides them. His companions’ teasing irritates him, and he wants to be rid of them.

Finally, they join a long line of vehicles, soldiers, and civilians slowly retreating. Robbie hopes to lose the corporals amongst them, but when he becomes impatient with the civilian driver Mace and Nettle come to his rescue, preventing him from hitting the man.

They pass a field in which a cavalry division is shooting their horses, a depressing sight which stalls an argument between Nettle and a couple of Scottish infantrymen. Robbie’s injury is becoming inflamed and walking is difficult.

(In retreat, the British army shot their horses and destroyed vehicles that they could not take back to Britain in order to prevent the German army from using them. Horses could not be evacuated by boat, nor left to wander the French countryside.)

A major tries to pull Robbie from the line to join a futile attempt to attack some Germans he says are hiding in the woods, but Robbie is saved by a surprise attack on the column by a German plane. After the attack, Robbie helps move the wounded, and Mace and Nettle help to bury a boy before they continue on their way to Dunkirk.

Commentary:

Style/Tone – The chapter evokes the weary, slow progress that the men make across the French landscape, the pace of the narrative echoing their trudging. They are stalled by the assault from the air, delayed by the major’s attempt to recruit them to his ludicrous plan and help up further by their acts of kindness – helping the wounded, giving their last sips of water to an elderly woman, and burying the boy. We applaud their compassion and generosity, surprising and humbling after all they have suffered. The nobility of their selfless actions is underlined by Robbie’s determination to continue and the narrowing of his focus to just “walk across the land until he came to the sea” (206). The beat of the words echoes his footfall, and we feel every step of the terrible, long journey.

Setting/Mood – McEwan is careful to evoke the full horror of the war, here and later in the novel. The young boy they bury had a real life, demonstrated by the row of fountains pens in his pocket. He had a family and social context, represented by the distraught grandparents. Robbie’s suppressed distress at seeing the bodies of women and children in a ditch makes us aware of the relentless barrage of horror he must face, and how he must still focus on his own survival.

Black humor – There is a touch of humor, even among the terrible sights of war. When Robbie glimpses Mace’s head on the grass we, like him, fear it is no longer attached to Mace’s body. There is a macabre comic relief in realizing he is only hidden, digging a grave. But the relief is brief, as attention turns to the dead boy who will occupy the grave.

NOTE: The terrible experience of war in northern France was captured by the war poets of WWI. Go to the official website: www.warpoets.org.
Robbie keeps marching, passing more devastation.

He reflects on why Briony might have said he raped Lola. He recalls an incident when, at ten years old, she made him save her from drowning, then declared her love for him.

Summary:

As Robbie marches on, he revisits the sensual memories that have sustained him and thinks again of Cecilia’s last letter with the promise it holds that Briony may retract her statement and enable him to clear his name. He falls to thinking why she maintained so fervently that it was he who assaulted Lola, and reveals that he, too, is mistaken in his interpretation of events. He is convinced that Briony pursued the case with malice, having taken against him for some perceived slight. The only reason he can think of is that when she was ten she had played a dangerous trick, making him save her from drowning after a swimming lesson, in order to see a demonstration of how much he cared for her. She then told him she loved him, and he wonders if his rejection of her childish affections led her to harbor a grudge and plan a revenge against him. Briony later recalls this episode too, and reveals that she had immediately forgotten about it after it happened.

Commentary:

Development of Theme – As Robbie recreates a summer day in England in his memory, it is a welcome relief from the marching and despair of the present, for us as well as for him. The idyllic picture of the pool in the woodland in summer, thought rendered realistic by its danger currents and Briony’s foolish act, is worlds away from the harsh realities of war-torn Normandy. There is a strange connection between the two, though, in the danger of death – then by drowning, now from war, and a few pages earlier from a swarm of bees – that is ever-present. The fragility of human existence is always close to the surface in this novel.

Irony – Just as Briony misinterpreted Robbie’s letter and embrace with Cecilia and found malice in them, so Robbie in his turn misinterprets Briony’s testifying against him as malicious and vengeful. As he believes she deliberately lied in order to spite him, it is hardly surprising that he finds it impossible to forgive her. It is yet another facet of the novel’s continuing exploration of how little a person can know another’s mind, how difficult it is to untangle actions and understand the motivation behind them or the connections between them. Robbie considers, and we must agree, that the real, irreversible harm that has come to him as a result of the false conviction is that he cannot forgive and has passionately hated Briony, even fantasizing about killing her with his bayonet. This hatred is born of his wrong belief that she deliberately lied. He recognizes that it is an ugly change in his character and, like the lost years of his life, cannot be undone.
• The march continues.
• In another air attack, Robbie tries to protect a woman and her son, but finally has to abandon them. They are killed, but Robbie escapes to take cover in a wood.
• The three men carry on. They finally cross the bridge over the Bergues-Furnes canal but still have seven miles to go.

Summary:
A column of French soldiers passes against the flow of the retreating British. Immediately after, another air attack starts. Robbie sees a woman with her six-year-old son and tries to help her. At first she follows his lead but eventually will only sit on the ground and hug her child. Robbie has to abandon her and run, but is throw off his feet by the blast. Parched and half-suffocated by the mud in his mouth, he makes his way to a wood. He sits there in a daze until Mace appears, bringing him water. Passing back through the field, Robbie sees a hole where the woman and child had been sitting and realizes they have been completely vaporized by the blast.

The soldiers continue to trudge onward, through banks of injured men, learning like everyone else to pay no heed to the cries for help. When they reach the bridge over the Bergues-Furnes canal they find that a sergeant is plucking soldiers from the rabble to work on holding the perimeter against the advancing German army. Robbie limps, supported on either side by Mace and Nettle, to avoid being picked out by the sergeant. They can see planes attacking the troops waiting on the beaches for evacuation, and the number of wounded and dead by the roadside increases. Nettle throws away his boots, but Robbie persuades him to take them back and carry them. He has already prevented the two corporals from throwing away their greatcoats – he knows they will be needed.

Commentary:

Characterization/Dynamic character – As the relentless marching and stream of horrors continues, Robbie, like everyone else, walks on past the injured. He asks, “What were they expected to do? Carry a dozen men on their backs when they could barely walk themselves? (p.231). It is true that he can do nothing to help, and there is so much suffering that any possible gesture would be lost in the enormity of the disaster. His own fatigue and his injury now make that gesture impossible. It is clear from his question that he feels guilty that he cannot help – he is defensive in proclaiming his impotence in the face of it all, and later he reflects on the extent of his own guilt.

Development of Theme – The terrible scene witnessed are thrown into relief and rendered yet more horrific by the fragments of everyday life glimpsed among them – the man plowing and sheltering from the gunfire beneath a tree as though sheltering from the rain (p. 221), the man and boys on the barge (p. 230), and, earlier, the woman and girl buying shoes. Robbie is right
that one day normal life will resume, that not everyone will be dead, but it is hard to believe in the midst of the chaos.

LITERARY CONNECTION: W.H. Auden’s poem “Musee des Beaux Arts” comments on the details of everyday life continuing through and around the horror of war, and includes the examples of a farmer plowing his fields and a ship sailing on. Robbie owns a copy of Auden’s poems.

The true horror, too, is revealed in the details. Like the severed leg in the tree, the fly-blown corpse is a focus of horror. Yet Robbie has become more resilient. He is still affected, but holds his breath as he goes past the corpse to retrieve Nettle’s boot. For Nettle, he can still do something; but to feel for the corpse would be useless and would be to squander the dwindling resources of his remaining strength.

Pages 233-242

- Robbie’s mind is wandering as they finally make it into Dunkirk.
- Seeing the huge, disorganized mass of soldiers on the beach, Robbie, Mace, and Nettle head for a bar. They rescue a RAF man who is about to be beaten up.
- An old woman gives them food and drink in exchange for catching her escaped pig.
- Robbie and Nettle find a crowded cellar when they bed down and enjoy their meal in secret.
- Robbie’s health worsens. Nettle wakes him as he is shouting in his sleep and annoying the other men. They are to rise at 7am for the evacuation.

Summary:
Robbie drifts in and out of lucidity as exhaustion and the fever induced by his infected wound take their toll. When a neat-looking corporal forces Nettle to tie his boots and calls him a disgrace, Robbie reaches for his gun to shoot him, but luckily he has thrown it away.

On the beach they find a disorganized rabble of thousands, lolling about and standing in the sea waiting; there are no boats. Robbie and his two companions head for a bar, but there is nothing to drink. A group of soldiers begin intimidating a lone RAF (Royal Air Force) man, blaming him for the failure of the RAF to support the army. Violence erupts and Robbie realizes there is little time before the assault on the man becomes unstoppable. As he weights up the possibilities, Mace rushes forward and grabs the man. As Nettle and Robbie clear out a path to the door, he carries the man out, saying he will drown him in the sea but intending to release him. The mob follows, but too late to find its rescued prey.

In a backstreet Robbie and Nettle ask an old woman for water. She demands that they first catch her pig, and, though Nettle is reluctant, Robbie, in his delirium, is afraid she has power over his fate and agrees. In exchange she gives them good food and drink.
The soldiers look for somewhere to eat and sleep. In a bombed hotel, men are dragging out mattresses, but a squabble starts and several fall down a flight of stairs. One man is left screaming with a broken back, while others step over him. Robbie and Nettle find a place in a crowded cellar and enjoy their meal in secret.

As Robbie’s fever worsens, his mind drifts between past and present. He wonders about the guilt and innocence of everyone involved in the war, and he plays to go back to the cottage where he saw the leg and bury the boy. His mind is confused and rambling. Nettle wakes him because he is shouting, and tells him that the evacuation is in preparation. Robbie goes back to sleep.

Commentary:

Development of theme – The assault on the RAF man is horrific in its casual violence, its inevitability, and its orchestration. The soldiers want to impress each other, to be applauded for their creativity in what they can think of doing to him. The man’s helplessness goads them on and the attack develops a deadly momentum. Robbie is aware of the pattern it will take, having seen similar events in prison. He knows that he cannot simply step forward to speak out for the man as he will himself fall victim to the mob. He is too confused to formulate a plan, and even he is caught by the thrill of the moment, feeling “unpleasantly excited” (p. 238). The episode is the more horrific and menacing because of the element of fun that is introduced into the account – the parallel with the men enjoying a game of village cricket, the desire to maintain an elegant choreography with no discordant note. The heartlessness of the soldiers is repellent, but the RAF man does not defend himself by denying responsibility. Robbie suspects that if he spoke up the soldiers might be reminded of his humanity and brought to their senses. This seems a vain hope – the attack has its own dynamic and the people involved feel absolved of any individual responsibility.

Point of View/Unreliable Narrator – Because Robbie’s delirium is presented from his own point of view, the rationality of his actions and beliefs goes unquestioned. Only their strangeness, and Nettle’s distrust of them, tells us that he is fevered. This will be more significant to us as the novel ends. Even so, his apparently mad decision to look for and trap the pig ends well, and Nettle’s faith is restored.

Mood/Plot Development – The episode in the hotel is shocking. All the men have become so used to violence and death that the man with the broken back is ignored. As soon as it is established that he can’t be helped, everyone simply steps over him and continues as before. Even Nettle and Robbie, who still have some compassion left, don’t give him a second thought. Only we, as readers, will ever think of him again. How long will he lie there? Will anyone eventually move or kill him, or will he last for days, unhelped? He is a haunting reminder of the many senseless deaths of war, and a foretaste of the plight of the wounded that will be mercilessly scrutinized in Part Three.

Further Theme Development – Robbie’s delirious ramblings about guilt and innocence, and his confusion of past events are not without their own wisdom and contain important reflections on the theme of guilt. His sad questioning of whether anyone is guiltless any more culminates in his aligning himself with Briony, whom he considers most guilty in his own life. “We’ll
“sleep it off, Briony” (p. 239), he says, indicating that he holds himself as guilty as he believes her to be. Robbie has demonstrated considerable heroism and compassion in the course of Part Two, yet as he sinks further into illness and confusion he blames himself even for the death of the Flemish woman and her son who would not run from the air attack. It is a realistic evocation of how people in traumatic situations often feel responsible for things beyond their control, and contrasts with Briony’s refusal of responsibility for her actions in Part One.