Self Reflection vs. Social Status

Atonement by Ian McEwan

Social status is defined as “a person's standing or importance in relation to other people within a society.” McEwan makes a statement in this novel by turning the traditional idea of social status upside down. The idea of each character can be symbolic for Britain and the war at the time. Britain held a lot of power and was on their high horse, but you can be bucked off fairly quick. On page 6, McEwan writes, “Self exposure was inevitable the moment she described a character’s weaknesses; the reader was bound to speculate that she was describing herself.” McEwan proves that the war is symbolic for conflict, and during conflict some people assume the roles of fight or flight. Each and every character in this novel had to self reflect and decide whether to take responsibility or cover the issue up because at the end of the day, self reflection is more important than social status.

Robbie spent his whole life on a journey of social status when he was really looking for self justice. On page 193, McEwan writes, “Ahead of them the sky was beginning to clear a little and flowed like a promise. Everywhere else was grey.” This quote is symbolic for Robbie’s journey for self worth and justice. The sun and sky were used as a metaphor for Robbie’s point in his journey. He was at the rock bottom and everyone in his life felt he was unworthy due to false accusations and the war gave him an opportunity to redeem himself. When presented with conflict, Robbie uses the war to mend the damages. He chose to fight when presented with a conflict.

Cecilia, on the other hand, was brought into this world with the idea of being high statured. She was one to fix things when they were broken and keep the family together. She displays this devotion to doing what is right by fixing the broken vase when it fell into the water. The broken vase was strongly symbolic for the war, wealth and social status. The vase made it home fine from other wars in other countries, but when it came time for Britain to fight their own war, they were crumbling. Cecilia can be symbolic for Eleanor Roosevelt. A women in power, but when presented with conflict she does not fight or flee, but fix the issue at the root of the problem.

Briony was a member of high social status and needed that power or else she did not know how to handle issues. On page 4, McEwan writes, “Nothing came near it for satisfaction, all else was dreams and frustration,” and “Briony’s was a shrine to her controlling demon: the model farm spread across a deep window ledge consisted of the usual animals, but all facing one way-towards their owner.” These quotes show that Briony held great power, but did not know what to do when she was not in complete control of the scenario. This can also be symbolic for Britain during the war because as soon as things went bad, Britain and all the wealthy families became to crumble, just like the vase. Briony, differing from both Robbie and Cecila, flees the scene of conflict. This gets her into lots of trouble near the end of the novel due to false accusations and grasping at trying to control her world even though things like war and crime will happen unexpectedly.

In society, we seem to think we only have two choices, fight or flight. Cecilia shows us that fixing the issue at the root of the problem is where the real issues stem. Most of the time, those stems of conflict are off of your own family tree. Robbie uses fighting to redeem himself, Cecilia tries to fix the issue and patch it up, and Briony flees the conflict to live in her own reality. It all comes back to page 6, where McEwan writes, “Self exposure was inevitable the moment she described a character’s weaknesses; the reader was bound to speculate that she was describing herself.” Each and every character in this novel had to self reflect and decide whether to take responsibility or cover the issue up because at the end of the day, self reflection is more important than social status.