Life After Life

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATE ATKINSON

Atkinson was born in York in 1951 to a shopkeeper. She studied English literature at Dundee University and graduated in 1974. She later taught at Dundee and began writing short stories in 1981. Her first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, published in 1995, won the 1995 Whitbread Book of the Year award, beating Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*. She has become most famous for a series of crime novels featuring ex-policeman Jackson Brodie. *Life After Life* and its companion novel, *A God in Ruins*, both won the Costa Novel Award in 2013 and 2015, respectively. Atkinson currently lives in Edinburgh, Scotland.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Life After Life's plot spans much of early twentieth-century history in Britain. Ursula is born in 1911 and experiences both World War I (in which Hugh and many of her neighbors fight) and World War II. World War II becomes particularly central in the latter half of the book. The rise of the Nazi Party and fascism in Germany, coupled with Adolf Hitler's charisma and nationalist ideology, led to his seizing power in Germany and the overthrow of democracy in 1933. Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, and Great Britain declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939. Europe was then locked in a six-year-long war between the Axis powers (Germany, Italy, and later Japan) and the Allied Powers (England, France, and eventually the Soviet Union and the U.S.). In the novel, Ursula experiences this conflict in-depth, as both of her younger brothers fight in the war, and Ursula herself becomes involved as a part of the rescue team that helps extricate people from the wreckage of nightly bombing in London. Additionally, one of the novel's timelines sees Ursula experience the war from the German side, as she watches firsthand the rise of the Nazi party and even interacts with Hitler and his mistress Eva Braun. In another of Ursula's lives, Ursula assassinates Hitler in 1930, just as the Nazi Party is starting to gain popularity. This prompts a thought experiment (as Atkinson does not show the fallout of this action) about how the fate of Europe might have been different if Hitler had not been alive to lead the Nazi Party.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Two years following the publication of *Life after Life*, Atkinson wrote a companion book, *A God in Ruins*, which follows Ursula's younger brother Teddy through World War II and beyond.

Another book that shares *Life After Life*'s unique structural device, and subsequent philosophical questions about the nature of fate and time, is Claire North's *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*. This book follows protagonist Harry August through fifteen versions of his life—like Ursula, he is born into the same circumstances each time he is reborn and regains some of the knowledge of his previous lives. *Life After Life* is also a unique World War II book because it examines civilian and family life during the war rather than focusing on the military experience or the experience of Jews in the Holocaust; other books that take a similar perspective on the war include Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. Additionally, *Blackout* and *All Clear* by Connie Willis explore the ramifications of small changes on history, as it deals with time-travelling historians who return to World War II to research the time period, but who end up sending time and history spiraling out of control.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Life After Life*
- **When Written:** 2010-2013
- **Where Written:** North Yorkshire, England
- **When Published:** 2013
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** England, Germany
- **Climax:** Ursula kills Adolf Hitler; Ursula is reunited with her brother Teddy after the war.
- **Antagonist:** Adolf Hitler
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

A Sequel's Structure. *Life After Life*'s companion book, *A God in Ruins*, follows the life of Ursula's younger brother Teddy during and after World War II. The structure of that book, in contrast to *Life After Life*, follows a much more straightforward line.

An Award is in Order. Atkinson was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 2011 for her services to literature.

PLOT SUMMARY

November 1930. The novel begins when Ursula Todd enters a café in Germany. She sits down next to Adolf Hitler, and has a short, polite conversation with him, until she pulls out a gun and

shoots him. Ursula is then shot by his henchmen, and **darkness** falls.

Ursula is born in the Todd house (called Fox Corner) in a London suburb in February 1910. Her mother, Sylvie, and the Todds' maid, Bridget, try to deliver the baby as best they can; both the town doctor, Dr. Fellowes, and the midwife, Mrs. Haddock, are stuck in a giant **snow** storm that has hit the town. Sylvie's husband, Hugh, is also away, retrieving his rebellious sixteen-year-old sister, Izzie, from Paris, where she had become pregnant by her lover. When Ursula is born, her umbilical cord is wrapped around her throat, strangling her. She dies.

Ursula is born again in February 1910. This time, Dr. Fellowes arrives in time, and snips Ursula's umbilical cord with surgical scissors, saving her. Ursula grows up, but experiences a variety of deaths when she is young, and is reborn in the same circumstances each time afterward. When she is four years old, she goes to the beach with her family and is led into rough waters by her older sister Pamela and drowns; in her next life, she is saved by a man painting by the water who notices the girls wade out into the ocean. When she is five, her older brother, Maurice, throws a doll of hers out of the bedroom window. She ventures out of the window, slips on ice, and flies off of the roof. In the next timeline, Bridget comes upstairs and stops her just in time.

Ursula also starts to get a sense of "déjà vu." In each subsequent timeline a wave of terror washes over her before she takes the action that led to her death in a previous timeline. This allows her to try to actively avert certain disasters. For example, at the end of World War I, Bridget goes up to London to celebrate with her fiancé, Clarence, and catches the flu. When she returns, she passes the illness on to eight-year-old Ursula, who then dies. In the next timeline, she tries to avoid Bridget, but her younger brother Teddy catches the flu from Bridget and then passes it along to her. In her second attempt, she tries to prevent Bridget from reentering the house, leaving a note for her asking her to stay at Clarence's house, but this is also thwarted. In her third attempt, Ursula pushes Bridget in the garden before she leaves, in the hopes that spraining her ankle will prevent her from going, but Bridget still decides to go. In the final attempt, she pushes Bridget down the stairs, breaking her arm and finally preventing her from catching the flu.

The narrative flashes forward from the end of World War I to the end of World War II, in February 1947. Ursula is living in London and has endured a long, hard war. Teddy is dead; the plane he was piloting went down in flames. Sylvie is also dead; her grief over Teddy led her to commit suicide. Ursula is also depressed by the loss of her younger brother. When the gas goes out in her building, she goes to sleep, knowing that if the gas comes back on, she will likely die. Darkness begins to fall on her.

Ten-year-old Ursula is introduced to a psychiatrist, Dr. Kellet, following the incident with Bridget and the stairs. When she talks about her déjà vu, he talks about reincarnation and fate, acknowledging that sometimes bad things have to happen in order to prevent worse things.

When Ursula is thirteen, she visits her aunt Izzie in London. Izzie is now an independent woman who writes a column about "modern women" in the newspaper. Izzie and Sylvie are completely at odds: Sylvie views Izzie as very irresponsible (because of her teenage pregnancy) and Izzie sees Sylvie as very traditional (because Sylvie views being a wife and mother as the most important thing a woman can be).

When Ursula turns sixteen, one of Maurice's friends, Howie, kisses her very aggressively, and Ursula submits to this kiss, thinking that it is a rite of passage to becoming a woman. A few months later, when Howie is at Fox Corner again, he rapes her on the back staircase. Ursula doesn't tell anyone, thinking that it must have been her fault. A few months later, she comes to the realization that she might be pregnant, even though she didn't realize that that's how babies are made. In a panic, thinking that she can't tell her parents, she goes to Izzie's apartment. Izzie says that they have to get rid of the baby, and takes Ursula to an abortion clinic (even though Ursula doesn't fully understand what that entails). Following the surgery, Ursula ends up in the hospital. Hugh comes to support her and holds her **hand** as she recovers, but Sylvie is cold and uncaring, believing that the entire incident is her fault. After her abortion, Ursula doesn't return to school, instead taking a typing course and moving to London. Also during this time, a neighbor of the Todds', Nancy Shawcross, is murdered walking home. While living in London, Ursula meets Derek Oliphant and they begin a courtship. Derek offers her a sense of security, and they marry soon after. Derek quickly proves to be abusive, however, until one day he breaks her jaw and nose and sprains her arm. Ursula runs away, going once again to Izzie for refuge. She starts to recover from her injuries, but Derek finds her, and beats her to death.

In her next life, Ursula punches Howie in the face instead of allowing him to kiss her, thus avoiding the rest of that traumatic timeline. Additionally, because she avoids her abortion, she is able to walk Nancy home, preventing her murder as well.

The novel jumps forward in time, to the night before Britain declares war on Germany—the beginning of World War II. Ursula is involved with a married Admiral named Crighton and is working at the Home Office (Britain's home security department). When the war begins, Crighton breaks things off with Ursula, and she starts seeing a young man named Ralph. A year into the war, Ursula is living in an apartment building on Argyll road that is directly hit by a bomb. A rescue team tries to save Ursula, but she dies from her injuries.

In the next version of her life, Crighton breaks things off with his wife instead of with Ursula, and she moves in with him during the war. But on the night of the bombing, she visits her old neighbors in Argyll Road and is caught up in the destruction

once again. In Ursula's third war experience, Ursula resolves to live out the war as a "nun." On the night of the bombing, she grows lonely and sees a dog outside her window, and she rushes out to get him. She is saved from the bomb that hits the cellar, but instead she is crushed by a wall that falls on her in the blitz.

In Ursula's next life, she takes a tour of Europe after university. Her travels take her to Germany, where she stays with a host family and witnesses the rise of the Nazi Party and Hitler. She marries a German man, Jürgen, and has a daughter named Frieda. Jürgen becomes a rising star in the Nazi party. As war looms, Ursula tries to return to England with her daughter, but Jürgen prevents her. Instead, she finds herself becoming friends with Hitler and his mistress, Eva Braun—even staying at their home in the country when Frieda falls ill. Five years later, Jürgen has died in a raid and the war is turning against Germany. Conditions are dire as Berlin is bombed and people are starving. Frieda becomes very ill, and Ursula realizes that the only way she can protect her daughter is by giving her a swift death. She gets two pills from the chemist, gives one to her daughter, and takes one herself. Ursula and Frieda die in each other's arms.

In Ursula's next life, she is back in England, except this time she has joined a rescue team that helps people during and after bombing incidents. The team has to deal with the horrible consequences of the bombs, as they see many limbless bodies, people with parts of their heads missing, and most tragically, babies who are crushed by the wreckage. Over the course of the war, Hugh dies of a heart attack, and Maurice informs Ursula that Teddy's plane has gone down in flames and he is missing in action. Both of these incidents break Ursula's heart, but Teddy's death is particularly depressing to Ursula as she loved him more than anyone else in her life. Sylvie also takes an overdose of sleeping pills following Teddy's death. By the end of the war, Ursula is emotionally and physically exhausted from her rescue missions and from the deaths of many of her friends in the squad and her family members. When the gas in Ursula's building goes out, she goes to bed, but she wakes up before the gas turns back on, preventing her death. The narrative then jumps to 1967, when Ursula discusses with her nephew Nigel how the war might have been different if Hitler had been killed prior to the start of it.

Following this discussion, the narrative returns to Ursula's birth. In this timeline, Sylvie raises the baby that Izzie had, named Roland, but he drowns in the ocean instead of Ursula. On her sixteenth birthday, Ursula is kissed by a different boy, Benjamin Cole, and they start a romance—but their romance leads inadvertently to Nancy's murder once more because Ursula does not walk her home on the day she is murdered.

One day, when Ursula is having lunch with Izzie, she is struck by bouts of dread and heads to the street. She runs through neighborhoods she been in in her previous lives, becoming more and more conscious of these versions of her past. She falls and breaks her nose, meeting Derek Oliphant on the street before running away from him in terror. She eventually ends up in a sanatorium, discussing reincarnation with Dr. Kellet once more. Following this discussion, Ursula gains a clarity of purpose. She learns to shoot and studies German; she saves money to travel abroad. She meets seventeen-year-old Eva Braun in Munich long before Eva starts her relationship with Hitler. And then, in 1930, in a German café, Ursula shoots Hitler, and then is swiftly shot to death herself.

In the penultimate chapter, Teddy is able to escape his burning plane and spends two years in Germany as a prisoner of war. When the war ends, he makes it back to England, and joyfully reunites with Ursula.

The final chapter returns once again to the date of Ursula's birth, but it focuses on Mrs. Haddock, the midwife who was unable to make it to the house. She is in a pub, stuck in the snow, and the barkeep tells her that it is unlikely she'll be going anywhere for a few days.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ursula Todd – The protagonist of the novel, Ursula is born on February 11, 1910, to Sylvie and Hugh Todd. She has a unique life, in that she lives it over and over again. In her first life, she is strangled by her umbilical cord; in the second, she survives this traumatic birth. Over the course of the novel, she experiences various deaths and in subsequent lives, gets bouts of "déjà vu," and tries to avoid the mistakes that she makes in previous ones. She is very close with her father, her older sister Pamela, and her younger brother Teddy; but her oldest brother, Maurice, is mean-spirited and indifferent towards her. She has a complicated relationship with her mother due to one version of her life in which she is raped by a boy named Howie, becomes pregnant, and subsequently gets an abortion—the ultra-conservative Sylvie blames Ursula for this incident. As a result of Sylvie's coldness, Ursula ends up marrying the abusive Derek Oliphant. Fortunately, in Ursula's next life, she avoids this fate and becomes more empowered, only dating men who see her as an equal and often avoiding marriage altogether. Other formative experiences for Ursula include multiple timelines in which she experiences the war while in Britain. In another timeline, Ursula travels to Germany, marries a man named Jürgen and has a daughter named Frieda. Jürgen gradually rises through the Nazi Party, and they become close with Adolf Hitler and his mistress Eva Braun, until the war turns against Germany, and Ursula and her daughter commit suicide. Ultimately, Ursula realizes that she can use her multiple lives to help prevent the deaths of many of her family members in the war. She uses the knowledge she has gained over time to find

and kill Adolf Hitler before the start of the war, even though it means her immediate death. Still, this is not the final life in Ursula's story: that one sees her reuniting with Teddy after the war, thus complicating the idea that Ursula's highest purpose or most meaningful life was the one in which she kills Hitler.

Sylvie Todd – Ursula's mother and Hugh's wife. Sylvie was born to Llewellyn and Lottie Beresford, both of whom were very traditional and conservative people. When Sylvie's father died when she was a teenager, she and her mother fell into poverty until she met Hugh and he married her at seventeen. Sylvie, like her parents, is also extremely traditional; she views being a wife and mother as a woman's highest calling. She has five children to prove her point: Maurice, Pamela, Ursula, Teddy, and Jimmy. But Atkinson critiques Sylvie as being hypocritical, as Sylvie is sometimes unfaithful to Hugh (whether she thinks of other men in some timelines or sneaks away to London in others) and sometimes negligent as a mother. When Ursula is raped and becomes pregnant, Sylvie blames Ursula for the incident and is exceptionally cold to Ursula throughout her life, despite the fact that Ursula's lack of knowledge about sex stems from Sylvie's inability to talk to her about it. Ursula, therefore, is distant from her mother in many timelines, because her love is fickle in times of crisis. When Teddy dies in World War II, Sylvie becomes completely distraught and decides to commit suicide by taking sleeping pills.

Hugh Todd – Ursula's father and Sylvie's husband. Hugh and Sylvie get married relatively young and have five children: Maurice, Pamela, Ursula, Teddy, and Jimmy. Hugh is a banker and the head of the household, but he also fights in World War I as a soldier. When he returns, he doesn't talk about the war much and continues to be a supportive father to his five children and a supportive husband to Sylvie. In contrast to Sylvie, he is particularly fond of Ursula, he continues to care for and encourage her no matter the circumstances. When Ursula winds up in the hospital following her abortion, he goes to the hospital and holds her **hand**, which Ursula says is what keeps her tethered to this world. Hugh dies at home during World War II of a heart attack, and Ursula is devastated by his loss, as he was always there to support her.

Edward ("Teddy") Todd – Ursula's younger brother and the second youngest of the Todd children. Teddy seems to be everyone's favorite, including Ursula's. He is adorable as a boy, in complete contrast to Maurice, and as he gets older he and Ursula grow closer and closer. Teddy studies at Oxford before he decides that he wants to be a farmer and write poetry. He also starts a romance with one of their neighbors, Nancy Shawcross. Ursula thinks that she would do anything for Teddy, and he shows himself willing to do anything for her as well. When Ursula's abusive husband, Derek Oliphant, follows her to Izzie's apartment, Teddy tries to step in and prevent Derek from beating her to death. Teddy's life is upended with the beginning of World War II; he enlists as a pilot and is eventually shot down. In some timelines, it is unclear whether he lives or dies, but the final timeline sees him reunite with Ursula and Nancy, highlighting the importance of their bond.

Isobel ("Izzie") Todd – Hugh's younger sister and Ursula's aunt. Izzie, in contrast to Sylvie, breaks the mold of a traditional wife and mother. She has an affair with a married man at sixteen years old, becoming pregnant. In most of the timelines, the child is given to a German family and never heard from again; in one of the last timelines, Hugh and Sylvie adopt the child (named Roland) and raise him until he drowns at four years old. Izzie's house often becomes a place of refuge for Ursula when she doesn't feel comfortable going to Sylvie. Ursula goes to her when she discovers she is pregnant, and Izzie takes her to get an abortion. Ursula hides away at her apartment when she runs away from an abusive husband, Derek Oliphant. Izzie always appears to have good intentions, even if she is not always the most helpful.

Pamela Todd – Ursula's older sister and the second oldest of the Todd children. Pamela is practical and confident; growing up Ursula looks up to her. Pamela and Maurice constantly get into arguments as children because he thinks that girls are stupid. Pamela seems determined to defy him: she is very intelligent and studies chemistry through school. After she marries a doctor named Harold, however, she becomes completely wrapped up in motherhood. She has several children—all boys—before finally having a girl named Sarah. After they grow and leave the house, Pamela returns to working life and becomes a chief magistrate. Throughout her life, Pamela is a close confidant of Ursula's, and Ursula always relies on Pamela to see situations clearly.

Maurice Todd – Ursula's older brother and Sylvie and Hugh's son. Maurice is the eldest of the five Todd children, and he is not very close with any of them. As a boy, he is a troublemaker and constantly gets into fights with Pamela because he believes that girls are both weaker and less intelligent than boys. He also does things like throw Ursula's toy out of the window, which ultimately leads to her trying to climb out onto the roof, resulting in her falling and dying from the roof. Maurice isn't much better when he is older: he works at the Home Office as Ursula does, but in a much higher-up position. He rarely sees his family except for events like Hugh's birthday and funeral. When Teddy dies, Maurice is the one to tell Ursula, but he is completely unsympathetic to her grief. He becomes an example of how Ursula's family members, when they do not love and support her, cause her depression and sometimes even her death.

Bridget – The maid of the Todd household. Bridget largely takes care of the household chores, and when Mrs. Glover leaves, also cooks for the family. In one set of chapters, Bridget goes to London to celebrate the armistice following World War II, and she and her fiancé, Clarence, contract the flu. Bridget then gives eight-year-old Ursula the flu, causing her death. In

subsequent lives, Ursula attempts to prevent Bridget from returning to the house, and when that fails, from going to the celebrations at all—even resorting to pushing her down the stairs.

Frieda – Ursula and Jürgen's daughter in Ursula's German life. Five years old when the war starts, Frieda is the light of Ursula's life. Ursula would do anything to protect her. When she grows sick, Eva Braun invites Ursula and Frieda to recover at Hitler's mansion, and they quickly fall in love with Frieda as well. As the war takes a turn for the worse, Frieda gets sicker and sicker, until Ursula feels that the only way to protect her is by committing suicide together. Frieda is the only child that Ursula has in any timeline, and when Ursula kills Hitler in a later life, she says before she kills him that she is doing it for "her"—presumably, for Frieda.

Derek Oliphant – Ursula's abusive husband. Ursula is driven to marry Derek following her rape, pregnancy, and abortion. Derek is very traditional and exacting when it comes to what he expects of his household and of Ursula. When Ursula is unable to meet these standards, he beats her. Eventually Ursula runs away to Izzie's, but Derek follows her. When he finds Ursula and Teddy together, he assumes that she is sleeping with another man and beats her to death.

Miss Woolf – The senior warden of the rescue squad that Ursula is a part of during World War II. She is a retired hospital matron and is exceptionally calm and cheerful when treating people and responding to incidents. Ursula admires her a great deal. She often serves as a kind of mother figure for Ursula and comforts her in times of crisis during the war, like when Ursula hears the news of Teddy's death. Miss Woolf dies in one of the raids in 1944.

Jürgen Fuchs – Ursula's husband in Germany and Frieda's father. Klara introduces Ursula and Jürgen to one another, and they quickly marry. Jürgen is a Leftist, but is forced to become a Nazi because it is the only political party allowed in Germany after Hitler takes power. As he rises through the ranks of the Party, he starts to become increasingly dominant over Ursula, preventing her from returning to England with their daughter in order to avoid whatever fate might befall them in Germany. He dies during a raid in World War II.

Nancy Shawcross – Millie's younger sister and Teddy's childhood sweetheart. Nancy's fate is inextricably linked to Ursula's because in some timelines, she is murdered by an unknown man while she walking home alone. In others, however, Ursula is able to walk Nancy home and thus prevent her murder. In the iterations in which Nancy lives, she and Teddy continue their relationship, and it is implied that they will marry after the war.

Adolf Hitler – The real-life leader of the Nazi Party in Germany who becomes the Chancellor of the Reich, starts World War II, and carries out the Holocaust. In the novel, when Ursula spends time abroad in Germany, she watches Hitler's rise to power and eventually becomes close friends with both him and his mistress, Eva Braun. In one of Ursula's last lives in the novel, she kills Hitler (and is promptly killed herself) in order to try to prevent World War II from happening.

Jimmy Todd – Ursula's younger brother and the youngest of the five Todd children. Jimmy is the baby of the family, but he is often an afterthought. Jimmy, like Teddy, fights in World War II, though he is in the army and helps to liberate one of the German concentration camps. It is also implied throughout the novel (and confirmed by Pamela towards the end) that he is gay.

Eva Braun – Adolf Hitler's real-life mistress. In the book, Eva is friends with Klara and invites Ursula and Frieda to come to Hitler's mansion, the Berghof. In a later timeline, Ursula uses her knowledge about Eva's life to get close to Hitler in the 1930s, before the start of World War II, in order to kill him and prevent the war.

Crighton – One of Ursula's lovers during World War II. Crighton is an Admiral in the Navy, having fought in World War I. He is fifteen years older than Ursula. When they begin their affair, Crighton is married with daughters. In some timelines, Crighton breaks off their relationship at the beginning of the war; in others, he separates from his wife, and he and Ursula move in together.

Ralph – One of Ursula's lovers during World War II. Ralph, like Ursula, works in the Home Office (Britain's home security department), and they meet in a German class. In the timelines in which she is with Crighton, however, she pushes back on his advances. Ralph is in love with her, and while Ursula is very fond of Ralph, she doesn't feel the need to marry him.

Howie – A friend of Maurice's who kisses Ursula aggressively on her sixteenth birthday and then rapes her on the back staircase at Fox Corner a few months later, leading to her pregnancy and abortion. In another timeline, Ursula is able to avoid this traumatic sequence by punching him in the face before he kisses her.

Benjamin Cole – A neighbor of Ursula's growing up. In some timelines, Ursula pines after him while he is relatively indifferent to her; in others, Ursula and Benjamin start a romance when they're very young. Eventually Benjamin, who is Jewish, fights in World War II and then fights for the creation of the state of Israel.

Fred Smith – Growing up, Fred works for the butcher near Fox Corner and eventually becomes a train fireman. He and Ursula reunite during the war, when he is working as a fireman with the rescue squads, and they begin a brief romance before he is crushed by a wall in one of the bombing incidents.

Roland – Izzie's son, whom Sylvie and Hugh adopt because Izzie is sixteen and unmarried when she gives birth to him. They are all fond of Roland, but they quickly realize that he is "not all there." One day when the family goes to the beach (Roland is

four years old at the time) he wades out into the water and drowns.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Renee Miller – One of Ursula's neighbors at Argyll Road. It is heavily implied that Renee is a prostitute, and that she also had sex with Crighton. She dies in the bombing of Argyll Road.

Lavinia Nesbit – One of Ursula's neighbors at Argyll Road. Lavinia is a spinster who lives with her sister Ruth. In the bombing of Argyll road, Ursula sees Lavinia's headless, legless body in her dress.

Ruth Nesbit – One of Ursula's neighbors at Argyll Road. Ruth is a spinster who lives with her sister Lavinia. It is assumed that she, like her sister, dies in the bombing of the apartment.

Mr. Emslie – One of the members of the rescue squad that Ursula works with, although in some timelines, he is rescuing her at Argyll Road. He is crushed by a wall at one of the bombing incidents.

Mr. Palmer – One of the members of the rescue squad that Ursula works with. He is killed by a delayed-action bomb while attending a bombing incident.

Herr Zimmerman – One of the members of the rescue squad that Ursula works with. He is an orchestra violinist and a refugee from Berlin. He dies in one of the raids.

Mrs. Appleyard – One of Ursula's neighbors at Argyll Road, and Emil's mother. She dies in the bombing of Argyll Road after frantically searching for her baby.

Emil – One of Ursula's neighbors at Argyll Road, and Mrs. Appleyard's son. Emil is just a baby when the bombs hit Argyll Road, and Ursula is greatly distressed when she discovers his hand in a mound of debris she is crawling over.

Dr. Fellowes – The town doctor who delivers Ursula. In some timelines, Dr. Fellowes is able to make it to Fox Corner in time to cut the umbilical cord from around her neck; in others, Ursula dies.

Klara Brenner – The daughter of the host family Ursula stays with in Germany. She is an artist and is also friends with Eva Braun, who is Hitler's mistress. Klara is also the one who introduces Ursula to her soon-to-be husband, Jürgen. Her younger sisters are Hilde and Hanne.

Millie Shawcross – Ursula's best friend growing up and Nancy's older sister. Millie grows up to be an actress, and in some of Ursula's lives, they live together during the war.

Harold – Pamela's husband. Harold is a doctor who serves in World War II. Eventually, he takes over Dr. Fellowes's practice.

Dr. Kellet – Ursula's psychiatrist. Dr. Kellet tries to help Ursula understand her feelings of déjà vu and discusses the concept of reincarnation with her.

Mrs. Glover – The cook of the Todd household and George Glover's mother. Mrs. Glover is rather severe and often tries to lay down the law in the house when Sylvie isn't harsh enough with the children.

George Glover – Mrs. Glover's son. George is a plowman at a nearby farm, and Sylvie is very attracted to him. However, after he fights in World War I, he is severely injured and essentially becomes an invalid.

Mr. Carver – The teacher at the secretarial college Ursula attends. He sexually harasses the girls he teaches; in some timelines, Ursula relents to this, and in others she leads a rebellion against him.

Llewellyn Beresford – Sylvie's father and Lottie's husband. He is a society painter until he falls down the stairs drunk and dies. In his wake, Sylvie and Lottie are left with massive debt.

Lottie Beresford – Sylvie's mother and Llewellyn's wife. She is a very conservative woman. When Llewellyn dies, she and Sylvie are left with massive debt, and Lottie quickly dies of consumption afterward.

Mr. Winton – An amateur painter who is able to rescue Pamela and Ursula from drowning in the ocean at the beach. In another timeline, he is unable to save Roland from drowning.

Major Shawcross – A neighbor of Hugh and Sylvie's, and the father of Nancy and Millie Shawcross.

Clarence Dodds – Bridget's fiancé, who had been severely injured in World War I. In many timelines, he accompanies Bridget to the armistice celebrations and dies of the flu.

Mrs. Haddock – The town midwife who is unable to reach Fox Corner to deliver Ursula because of the **snow**.

Sarah – Ursula's niece, and Pamela and Harold's youngest child and their only daughter.

Adelaide – Hugh and Izzie's mother, who is very conservative and refuses to see her daughter after she becomes pregnant at sixteen.

Hilde Brenner – One of Klara's younger sisters (the other being Hanne), who is in the girls' equivalent of the Hitler Youth.

Hanne Brenner – One of Klara's younger sisters (the other being Hilde), who is in the girls' equivalent of the Hitler Youth.

Frau Brenner – The mother of the host family Ursula stays with in Germany. Her daughters are Klara, Hilde, and Hanne.

Herr Brenner – The father of the host family Ursula stays with in Germany. His daughters are Klara, Hilde, and Hanne.

Nigel – Pamela and Harold's oldest son, and Ursula's nephew.

Edwina – Maurice's wife.

Sam Wellington – A beau of Bridget's who dies in World War I.

Mrs. Dodds – Clarence Dodds's mother.

Old Tom – The Todds' gardener.

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.

LIFE, REINCARNATION, AND ALTERNATE POSSIBILITIES

Life After Life follows protagonist Ursula Todd through a variety of lives in twentieth-century Britain. Each chapter describes an alternative path that Ursula's life could follow, ending with her (often premature) death. In some versions of Ursula's story, Atkinson provides her main character with slightly different circumstances, which adjust the trajectory of her life. In other versions, Ursula has pangs of "déjà vu," which lead her to try to avert the disaster that led to her death in a previous life. Through her wide-reaching exploration of Ursula's various reincarnations, Atkinson argues that there is no "correct" way to live, as even versions that appear "better" do not necessarily mean that Ursula lives a longer or more fulfilling life.

Throughout the novel, Atkinson repeats Ursula's mother Sylvie's mantra, "practice makes perfect," leaving room for the possibility that there are better versions of one's life that can be lived. This can be observed in the first phase of Ursula's life, in which the circumstances around her birth and her early childhood change in each version that Atkinson writes and allows her to live longer and longer. After a short prologue, Atkinson begins Ursula's story with tragedy: she chokes on her umbilical cord when being born because both Mrs. Haddock (the midwife) and Dr. Fellowes (the family doctor) are stuck in a **snow** storm. In subsequent versions, Dr. Fellowes arrives on time, providing Ursula with the ability to have a life in the first place. In another storyline, when Ursula is four years old, she follows her older sister Pamela out into the ocean when a big wave catches her and she drowns, but in a subsequent chapter, a man on the beach sees her and her sister and is able to rescue Ursula from her death. In yet another early chapter, Ursula's older brother Maurice throws a doll of hers out of her bedroom window when she is five years old. She chases after it: in one version, she falls off the roof to her death; in another, the family's maid Bridget comes up the stairs and prevents Ursula from jumping onto the roof. The clear progression of these early chapters does imply that there is a particular tragedy in a person who dies very young, and that they should be given the chance to have some kind of fulfillment.

Yet later storylines complicate the idea that what seems to be a happier or a longer life is necessarily better, arguing that sometimes, bad things are necessary to prevent worse things from happening. Ursula becomes increasingly cognizant over time of her ability to change her fate, which leads her to try to prevent her own death in some storylines. When Ursula is nine, Bridget visits London to celebrate the end of World War I and catches the flu, leading to Bridget, Ursula, and her younger brother Teddy's deaths. In later versions, Ursula tries to prevent Bridget from going, even resorting to pushing Bridget down the stairs so that she becomes injured and cannot go. When Ursula is sixteen, she has a crush on a neighbor of hers, Benjamin Cole. Their romance (which is stifled in some versions, and fully-fledged in others) alters the life of another neighbor, Nancy Shawcross. When Ursula is rebuffed by Benjamin, she ends up walking Nancy home after a birthday celebration. But in the versions in which Ursula and Benjamin's romance flourishes, they sneak away to kiss, and Nancy is murdered while walking home alone. Thus, even though Ursula is happier, her happiness leads to a far worse outcome for someone else. Perhaps the ultimate example of the idea that a longer life does not necessarily lead to the happiest life emerges in the timelines surrounding World War II. Ursula realizes that she can change the trajectory of the war by befriending a girl Eva Braun early in her life. Eva eventually becomes Hitler's mistress, allowing Ursula to get close to him and kill him in 1930, prior to the rise of the Nazi Party. Ursula knows that shooting Hitler will lead to her immediate death (which it does), but she also believes that this action will prevent global suffering, tragedy, and death (including her own and that of several of her family members). However, Ursula's final life sees her reuniting with her brother Teddy after the war, leaving it ambiguous whether Ursula believes that this ultimate sacrifice is truly worth making.

Atkinson's novel has broad implications concerning success and happiness, as Ursula's reincarnations raise the question of what constitutes a good life or a better life. In treating each possible storyline with equal validity, Atkinson argues that there is no right version, forcing readers to evaluate which of Ursula's lives they find most compelling or satisfying, and to evaluate their own idea of what makes life fulfilling.

FATE VS. CHOICE

As Ursula experiences a multitude of lives, each version of her life is slightly (or sometimes vastly) different. Arguments begin to emerge in the novel about fate and choice, as certain details or actions that Atkinson includes have large ramifications on Ursula's life while some circumstances remain relatively unchanged. The book thus argues that even as minor choices have the ability to shape the direction of one's life, it's impossible to predict exactly how or even if one's choices will affect the future.

In many of Ursula's lives, small choices that characters make can lead to vastly different outcomes. This idea is underscored early on: in the first version of Ursula's birth, she is suffocated

by her own umbilical cord and Doctor Fellowes is unable to arrive at the house in time due to a **snowstorm**. In other versions, he leaves a different crisis slightly earlier and arrives in time to save her, or Sylvie chooses to keep a set of scissors in her bedroom and is able to cut the cord herself, allowing Ursula to have a life at all. These small choices have a massive effect on the family as well as the world at large, as Ursula's absence would have drastically altered their dynamic and any interactions that she has in subsequent versions of her life. Ursula's own choices alter her life as well. When Ursula is a teenager, her older brother Maurice's friend Howie forcibly kisses her and later rapes her, causing her to become pregnant, have an abortion, become disgraced within her family, and later marry an abusive husband. But in another version, Ursula chooses to be preemptively aggressive with Howie and push off his advances, leading him to ignore her and preventing the rest of that timeline. In another iteration, Ursula chooses to take a tour of Europe after school and ends up marrying a German man named Jürgen, causing her to live in Germany during the war rather than in Britain, as she does in other timelines. Because of this decision, she becomes trapped in Germany with her young daughter, Frieda, and decides that the only way she can escape the Germans is by killing herself and her daughter. These examples prove that even seemingly minor choices that seem relatively harmless can have a butterfly effect on both hers and others' lives.

However, there are still parts of Ursula's life that prove more resistant to change, even when small details are altered—hindering Ursula's abilities to predict the consequences of her actions. The family's maid, Bridget, goes to London to celebrate the Armistice at the end of World War I with her boyfriend Clarence. She returns with the flu and causes her own death as well as the death of Ursula and her younger brother Teddy. In subsequent versions, Ursula tries to avert this disaster several times: first, she tries not to interact with Bridget when she returns but Teddy still becomes sick and gives the illness to Ursula. In another, Ursula tries to put a note on the door of their home to prevent Bridget from returning, but her cook Mrs. Glover catches her. In another, Ursula pushes Bridget in the garden and she trips, but Bridget still goes to London with a limp. It is only when Ursula pushes Bridget down the stairs, breaking her arm, that she finally prevents Bridget from going. Thus, Atkinson shows that it is difficult to change events when other characters have a strong desire to carry them out. In the timeline in which Ursula is raped, has an abortion, and is essentially ostracized by her mother, she attends a secretarial college because she wants to move away from home as quickly as possible, and she subsequently works for the Home Office (the security department of the British government). Yet even when she escapes this misfortune in another iteration, she still chooses to go to the secretarial college because she wants to be independent from her parents more quickly, demonstrating that people often have many motivations for their actions and small changes in their lives may not affect their biggest decisions.

Although Ursula's life changes drastically throughout the novel, Atkinson casts further doubt on the idea that global events can be shifted. In one iteration, Ursula lives past the war and has a conversation with her nephew, Nigel, about what might have occurred if Hitler had died prior to World War II. Ursula argues that it is likely that World War II might not have happened, that the cultural face of Europe would be different, and that a lot more people would be alive—but she also wonders if Goering or Himmler might have stepped in to take his place, and things would have happened in essentially the same way. In another timeline, Ursula attempts to carry out this possibility and shoots Hitler in 1930, causing her own death when other Nazi leaders shoot her immediately afterward. But because Atkinson does not write past Ursula's death, readers do not get to see whether her actions were in vain. Thus, the book does not argue that every choice can shape history and have massive effects on the world; instead it implies that some choices can be very affecting, while other fates are much more difficult to avoid. This implication asserts that life is extremely difficult to predict, and individual people therefore have very little power in shaping the world on a large scale.

FAMILY AND LOVE

Despite the variety of storylines, there is one aspect of Ursula's life that remains nearly unchanged throughout the book: Ursula's family. Ursula's relationships with her parents and her siblings are formative in each of her lives, yet their love is not always presented as unconditional. As Ursula experiences various traumas and the family faces collective challenges, different members of Ursula's family react in vastly different ways. These different dynamics imply that the most important part of being a family is the ability to receive love and support in times of crisis.

When Ursula receives support from different members of her family—particularly her father Hugh, her aunt Izzie, and her brother Teddy—their love allows her to survive several traumatic experiences. Hugh is a kind father figure, constantly supporting his five children and fighting in World War I when called to arms. But perhaps his greatest kindness is in his reaction to Ursula's abortion, which she receives after being raped and getting pregnant. Instead of reacting harshly, as Sylvie does, he brings her to the hospital when she becomes sick afterwards, and stays with her for days and holds her **hand** until she wakes up, saving her from what she describes as "**the black bat**" (death). Ursula's Aunt Izzie also helps to support her. In several of Ursula's lives, Izzie's apartment becomes a place of refuge—when she gets pregnant, when she is abused by her husband Derek, and when she needs a place to stay during World War II after her own apartment is bombed. Although

Izzie's help is sometimes misguided, she never judges Ursula in the way that Sylvie does and provides her with as much support as she can. Teddy serves as another support system for Ursula, particularly when she is abused by her husband. In their youth, Ursula describes Teddy as loyal and affectionate, and he lives up to this description when Derek seeks Ursula out at Izzie's apartment and finds Teddy there, too. Derek begins to beat Ursula, thinking that she is sleeping with Teddy, and Teddy fights him in order to save her. Though his attempt to save her ultimately fails and Ursula dies from her injuries, this loyalty underscores many of Teddy's actions in Ursula's other lives, as he gives her vital care and support when she faces other challenges during the war.

When Ursula does not receive support from her family, however, she is often traumatized to the point of depression and in some instances, they directly or indirectly cause her death. Ursula's older brother, Maurice, constantly mistreats her and her older sister Pamela. In one timeline, he buries her under a pile of leaves when she is a baby; in another, he throws a doll of hers off of the roof and she chases after it, causing her to fall to her death. In later timelines, Maurice is completely indifferent to her and he tells her quite dispassionately that Teddy has died, almost "bemused by [her] grief." Thus, even though she shares the same familial relationship with Maurice as she does with Teddy, his lack of love towards her distances her from him and in some cases even becomes lethal. Sylvie's love for Ursula is certainly greater than Maurice's but is also much fickler than Hugh's. Sylvie has the opposite reaction from her husband regarding Ursula's abortion. She views the rape as being entirely Ursula's fault, and once Ursula arrives home from the hospital, Sylvie is exceptionally cold to Ursula and prevents her from seeing her therapist Dr. Kellet. As a result of Sylvie's reaction, Ursula marries Derek because he is the only person on whom she feels she can rely, and because Sylvie convinces her that no man would want her now that she is not "intact." Derek is abusive and ultimately beats Ursula to death, demonstrating how Sylvie's callousness becomes incredibly harmful. Sylvie is not as cold to Ursula in other timelines, but this timeline affects how Ursula (and readers) might view the others, knowing that in times of crisis, Sylvie's love proves to be very unreliable.

Family relationships can be uniquely strong bonds, but not all relationships are equal. The Todd household generally stands as an example of a normal, warm family. But in times of crisis, the support and love (or lack thereof) that each family member bears Ursula can have direct, life-altering impacts on her health and happiness.

WAR AND DEATH

Ursula's life begins prior to the start of World War I and in later chapters, she is in her thirties throughout World War II. War is thus a near-constant presence in Ursula's life and, despite several attempts to escape its perils, becomes unavoidable. Atkinson never describes a battlefield scene, but she demonstrates how war disrupts the balance of life both in its widespread fatalities and in its disturbance of social norms on an international level.

The death and destruction that arise during World War II is set apart from any death that comes before it in the novel because of its visceral violence and because it affects the lives of all European citizens. The bombing of London forces Ursula to confront a variety of terrors. In one life in which Ursula is hiding in a bomb shelter that receives a direct hit, Ursula is knocked unconscious and sees the headless, legless body of her neighbor Lavinia Nesbit. She describes feeling something irreparably broken inside her as a result of this incident; even though she is not on the battlefield, she is certainly fighting for her life in the war. In another life, Ursula is part of a rescue team that tries to recover people from the wreckage of the bombing. In one incident she casually describes the injuries of two people she finds: "head injuries, broken femur, broken collarbone, broken ribs, what was probably a crushed pelvis." When a friend of hers from the rescue team, Mr. Palmer, becomes a victim of the bombs, moving his body causes him to come apart like a "Christmas cracker." She also shovels "unidentifiable lumps of flesh," and in another incident finds herself kneeling on the body of a small child. These images are traumatizing, and again demonstrate how even though Ursula is far from the battlefield, the war's horrors are brought right to her doorstep. Even outside of Britain, the war is inescapable. In another life, Ursula travels to Germany and ends up marrying a German man named Jürgen prior to the war. When the war begins and the country's borders close, Ursula is still in Germany, making escape impossible. As the war goes on, Ursula thinks about how all she wants is a "swift, clean death," with her daughter, Frieda, wrapped in her arms. Ursula acquires pills from a chemist and gives one to her daughter and takes one herself—committing suicide. Atkinson writes that Ursula "had never chosen death over life before and as she was leaving she knew something had cracked and broken and the order of things had changed." Thus, the war not only causes death and damage in its violence, but also in causing people to take the most desperate measures in order to avoid the pain and suffering it brings.

In addition to the mass deaths that Ursula is forced to confront during the war, it's destruction also has widespread effects on life beyond the violence. During World War I, the Todd household becomes much more pragmatic. Sylvie, who had up to this point been relatively unconcerned about money or food, boils down slivers of soap to reuse, refurbishes hats, reuses sheets, and kills a beloved hen because of food shortages. This need to be spare is even more severe during World War II, as people are forced to wait hours in line for a loaf of bread, and Ursula must smuggle eggs back from their country home to the

city because food is so scarce. The war also causes people to question some traditional values. Ursula starts affairs with several lovers in different versions of the war: a man named Crighton who is married, a man named Ralph who works for the government, and Fred Smith, a childhood neighbor of Ursula's who reappears in the wreckage of London. As she makes love with Fred in one chapter, she describes the urgency of it: the kind of love that "survivors of disasters must practice—or people who are anticipating disaster—free of all restraint." This freedom from restraint demonstrates the degree of abandonment that the war brings: because the future is so uncertain, fulfilling today's desires becomes much more acceptable. Even small social norms are disrupted. When the power goes out in London and Ursula stumbles around in the dark, a man finds her and walks her part of the way home. She explains that before the war, she would never have linked arms with a complete stranger, especially a man, but the threat of bombs seems much greater than anything that could happen as a result of this action.

In a book that has so much death in it, Atkinson sets the traumas of the war distinctly apart from what comes before it in the novel. The difference between Ursula's childhood deaths and the destruction created by the war is the fact that Ursula must deal with its ramifications: in the violent carnage that she must confront; in the inescapable repercussions that alter her social interactions; and the steps she must take in order to continue (or not continue) to live.

GENDER ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS

Ursula grows up in the country in early twentieth-century Britain, a time and place that proscribes relatively rigid gender roles to its citizens. Women are associated with domesticity, motherhood, and chastity, while men are associated with work, strength, and violence. Yet because the storylines in which Ursula and other characters strictly adhere to these gender roles lead to far more negative consequences than those in which they do not, the rigidity of these roles is proven to be more harmful than helpful.

Ursula's and Sylvie's adherence to women's traditional roles leads to harmful experiences and, in some cases, Ursula's death. Sylvie sets the example of a traditional women: she feels that a "woman's highest calling is to be a mother and wife," even though she also acknowledges that her life is extremely monotonous. She expects that her daughters follow her example in maintaining a good social standing, marrying a respectable man, and having children. In the first of Ursula's coming-of-age chapters, however, this path is disrupted by a friend of Maurice's named Howie. On Ursula's sixteenth birthday, Howie kisses her aggressively. She relents to him, reframing the kiss as a means of passing through "the triumphal arch that led to womanhood." But she describes how this arch doesn't seem so triumphant later, when Howie rapes her on the stairs of her home and she is unable to fend him off. She becomes pregnant and her aunt Izzie later takes her to get an abortion. She then nearly dies after her operation, and Sylvie blames Ursula for the entire event—a particularly unjust ruling, given the fact that women in British society are often kept completely in the dark about sex and its consequences. This incident sends Ursula spiraling, and Atkinson demonstrates how it affects the way she interacts with men in the future. When she takes a typing class, the teacher, Mr. Carver, often touches the girls and makes them type blindfolded—she implies that he masturbates while doing so—all of which Ursula accepts because she feels unable to stand up to him. Later on in this timeline, Ursula marries a man named Derek Oliphant and becomes Sylvie's ideal of a wife: taking care of the cleaning, cooking, and pleasing her husband. But despite Ursula's efforts, she grows depressed and Derek abuses her to the point where he breaks her teeth, her nose, her jaw, and she is forced to wear her right arm in a sling. When she tries to hide out at Izzie's house, he follows her and beats her again, this time killing her. This progression of events makes the argument that when harmful gender stereotypes and roles are imposed—when men are allowed to be violent and women are expected to accept this abuse for the sake of social norms—it can lead to disastrous consequences.

After this sequence, however, Ursula learns the necessity of breaking out of these social norms, leading her to have a much more empowered series of lives. Back at Ursula's sixteenth birthday, this time she stands up to Howie, punching him on the cheek in "a very unladylike way" to prevent him from kissing her. Instead of shying away from this power, however, she calls it "a small triumph for her new womanhood," in contrast with the previous version in which being kissed is a victory for womanhood. Thwarted by Ursula's actions, Howie does not attempt to rape Ursula and she subsequently does not have an abortion, nor is she ostracized by Sylvie. Her empowerment is further underscored when she goes to the typing college and leads a "revolt" against Mr. Carver, this time refusing to accept his sexual misconduct. Instead of marrying Derek, then, Ursula lives alone in London and carries on an affair with a married man named Crighton (in other, future lives she takes up with another man named Ralph as well). Upon telling Pamela about her affair, her sister is hesitant that the man is cheating on his wife with Ursula but also says she admires Ursula for "being [her] own woman." Ursula is not always as independent—there are other versions of her life in which she does become a wife and a mother, and another in which she invites a kiss from a different, less aggressive boy named Benjamin Cole. But in learning to stand up for herself, she transcends traditional gender expectations and find far more happiness in those subsequent lives.

SYMBOLS

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

DARKNESS AND THE BLACK BAT

Darkness and the black bat are both two symbols that Atkinson uses to represent Ursula's changing attitude towards death. The phrase "darkness falls" ends nearly every chapter in which Ursula dies, and she describes being taken by the black bat in several chapters as well. Whereas early in the novel, the darkness and the bat are "the enemy," or the things to fear, over time Ursula becomes less afraid of them. By the end of the novel, in the few chapters in which she chooses to commit suicide, Ursula welcomes the black bat, is wrapped in its wings, and embraces it, echoing how Ursula ultimately comes to see how death can be an important sacrifice. These two symbols are in direct contrast with the lightness of **snow**, which comes to signify life and rebirth in the novel.

SNOW

Snow represents both rebirth and the unpredictability of life. It is found most prevalently in the scene of Ursula's birth, during which there is a giant snowstorm. Dr. Fellowes and Mrs. Haddock are both prevented from reaching Fox Corner because of the snow, and Ursula dies because of the cord around her neck. In other timelines, Dr. Fellowes is able to make it and Ursula survives. Thus, the snowstorm evokes the randomness of life and the fine line between two different possible outcomes. Later in the novel, snow appears usually just before Ursula is about to be reborn again, affirming the snow's association with fresh life. The fact that the snow is white also puts it in contrast with the **darkness**, which aptly comes to signify death in the story.

HANDS

In the novel, hands symbolize support in times of crisis (particularly in the case of family members), and how that support can ultimately be life-saving. Holding hands first comes up when Hugh takes Ursula's hand when she is in the hospital following her abortion. She describes how this action saves her from **the black bat**, itself representing death. Ursula then holds her own daughter Frieda's hand in the hospital in order to achieve the same effect, trying to tether her to this world. Later in the novel (though earlier in Ursula's life), Pamela holds Ursula's hand when Roland is discovered having drowned. Additionally, when Ursula's apartment at Argyll Road is bombed, and Ursula is dying in the wreckage, Mr. Emslie also tries to comfort her and keep her alive by holding her hand. Thus, hands become not only literal physical comfort, but symbolic representations of the support between family members and a way of trying to keep someone alive.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Hachette edition of *Life After Life* published in 2013.

Snow (I), 11 Feb 1910 Quotes

❝ No breath. All the world come down to this. One breath […] Panic. The drowning girl, the falling bird.

Related Characters: Ursula Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

After a short prologue, Atkinson presents the first version of Ursula's life—one in which she does not live at all. Atkinson thus allows for the possibility that Ursula might not even exist. The chapter is inherently tragic because the death of a newborn quashes all possibilities that their life might have had, and certainly all the possibilities that Ursula's life might have—many of which Atkinson expands upon throughout the rest of the novel. Thus, it's possible to create an interpretation in which the rest of the book does not happen at all and is simply a way of expanding on the opportunities missed in Ursula's life.

It is particularly interesting to note the specific language that Atkinson uses here. The references to "the drowning girl" and "the falling bird" echo ways in which Ursula dies later in the novel (she drowns in the ocean or cannot breathe due to illness; she falls from the roof of her home). These recurring elements lend a cyclical nature to the book and also make the argument that life is very fragile. When the simplest human needs—a single breath or the ability to stand upon firm ground—are taken away, life can cease to exist.

Four Seasons... , 11 Feb 1910 Quotes

❝ "God surely wanted this baby back," Bridget said when she came in later that morning with a cup of steaming beef tea.

"We have been tested," Sylvie said, "and found not wanting."

"This time," Bridget said.

Related Characters: Bridget, Sylvie Todd (speaker), Dr. Fellowes, Ursula Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

After the first chapter in which Ursula suffocates on her umbilical cord, in the second chapter she survives her birth thanks to Dr. Fellowes arriving on time. After this relief, Sylvie and Bridget discuss the miracle of her survival and its implications on the future. Bridget's statement here plays into an idea of fate—that God, and perhaps a grander plan for the universe, did not mean for Ursula to live. Sylvie responds with a counterargument in her reference to the Old Testament—that God was simply testing them, and they have passed the test. While at first this seems to imply that Sylvie believes that God has a plan for the universe, and in fact did want Ursula to survive, it is important to remember that Sylvie has not actually believed in God since the death of her father, Llewellyn. Thus her statement becomes somewhat ironic, because she does not actually believe in a kind of divine will at all. Bridget's final warning perhaps becomes the most prescient—not only does it imply that they will be tested in the future, but also plays into the fact that in a previous version of the same events, they were found wanting and Ursula did not live. The smallest difference—Dr. Fellowes making it out before the snow or not—allowed for a completely different outcome.

War (I), Jul 1914 Quotes

❝ Motherhood was her responsibility, her destiny. It was, lacking anything else (and what else could there be?), her life.

Related Characters: Edward ("Teddy") Todd, Ursula Todd, Sylvie Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Sylvie thinks this statement when she is entertaining two old schoolfriends of hers, a few months after she has given birth to Teddy. Sylvie thinks to herself that there is no way of explaining the magnitude of motherhood to women who do not have children. This quote explains the essence of Sylvie, and her preoccupation with traditional gender roles. She has always expected to be a wife and mother, to the point where she views it as a destiny—an inescapable fate. She can't entertain any other possibilities, despite the fact that both of her friends have lives with other potentials. Later in the novel, then, she expects the same thing of her daughters, despite the fact that both of them are far more independent than she is and do not share the same traditional values. In raising her daughters to be passive girls, destined for maternity, Sylvie actually does Ursula a great deal of harm, as seen in the lifetime when she marries an abusive man named Derek and dies of his abuse.

War (II), 20 Jan 1915 Quotes

❝ Ursula had been about to plunge out of the window in Queen Solange's wake, intent on delivering her from the no man's land of the roof, when something made her hesitate. A little doubt, a faltering foot and the thought that the roof was very high and the night very wide.

Related Characters: Adolf Hitler, Ursula Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

In the first version of this episode, Ursula heads onto the roof without any hesitation, and plummets to her death. But upon encountering it a second time, Ursula experiences a wave of doubt that prevents her from making the same mistake. Thus, this episode serves as a turning point for Ursula, as she starts to become conscious of her previous lives and works to avoid previous mistakes. Up until this point, only changes in her environment have led to changes in Ursula's fate. But now, Atkinson starts to reveal Ursula's agency and her choices as she avoids previous deaths. This recognition allows for alternate possibilities in Ursula's life, as she is not merely subjected to the whims of outside circumstances. Over time, Ursula hones and adjusts this skill, as she learns what kinds of choices lead to different outcomes. Eventually, this recognition leads her to what is perhaps her most important choice: attempting to kill Adolf Hitler in order to preemptively avert World War II.

Armistice (V), 11 Nov 1918 Quotes

❝ Bridget went flying, toppling down the stairs in a great flurry of arms and legs. Ursula only just managed to stop herself from following in her wake.

Practice makes perfect.

Related Characters: Sylvie Todd, Bridget, Ursula Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

After three attempts to try to prevent Bridget from contracting the flu and subsequently passing it on to Ursula and Teddy (thereby causing all three of their deaths), Ursula makes a fourth, successful attempt—but at the cost of breaking Bridget's arm. Ursula repeats Sylvie's mantra, "practice makes perfect," implying that with more lives, Ursula can finally make a choice that will allow her to avert this flu. Yet as opposed to some of the earlier timelines in which Ursula's avoidance of death was unequivocally good, here Atkinson complicates Ursula's moral universe. Even though the ultimate outcome was better, Ursula still had to cause Bridget harm, and also had to explain her actions to Bridget and her family. Thus, Atkinson introduces the idea that just because one's life becomes "better," it doesn't necessarily mean that it has to be longer, or that it has to be more ethical. As the moral questions of the book bear more and more gravity, and the world's morals as a whole become increasingly dire, Atkinson withholds an easy solution for what constitutes the "right" kind of life, and argues that there is no one correct way to live or code to live by.

Peace, Feb 1947 Quotes

So much for progress. How quickly civilization could dissolve into its more ugly elements. Look at the Germans, the most cultured and well mannered of people, and yet... Auschwitz, Treblinka, Bergen-Belsen.

Related Characters: Ursula Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

After the timeline that sees the end of World War I, Atkinson jumps forward to the end of World War II. Having survived the war, Ursula reflects on how society still allows it, even a people that she views as relatively cultured. This idea of progress that Ursula brings up can also be viewed in the context of Ursula's own storylines. Atkinson questions the fact that societies cannot seem to avoid past mistakes, even as Ursula works to improve her life in timeline after timeline. Yet instead of moving forward, society seems to be stagnant—perhaps even moving backward, devising ways of killing people on a scale that has never before been seen in the world. World War II is so filled with death and disruption that it even moves beyond the battlefield and into every aspect of life, so much so that Ursula can barely boil an egg in her own apartment even when peace has been achieved. Thus, the book forces both readers and Ursula to try to figure out what it would take to avoid war on a large scale, and to push societies past this mass form of violence.

Like a Fox in a Hole, Sep 1923 Quotes

"There are some Buddhist philosophers (a branch referred to as Zen) who say that sometimes a bad thing happens to prevent a worse thing happening," Dr. Kellet said. "But, of course, there are some situations where it's impossible to imagine anything worse."

Related Characters: Dr. Kellet (speaker), Adolf Hitler, Sylvie Todd, Bridget, Ursula Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

After Ursula successfully prevents Bridget from contracting the flu by pushing her down the stairs and breaking her arm, Sylvie decides it might be best for Ursula to see a therapist. At Ursula's first meeting with Dr. Kellet, he tries to parse her feelings of déjà vu and meditates on the idea of good and bad events. The Buddhist philosophy that he brings up encapsulates Ursula's feelings, and highlights why she understands that it is important for her to make life-altering choices, even if they are not necessarily inherently "good." Ursula's determination that she had to push Bridget down the stairs in order to prevent her from going to the Armistice celebrations is a perfect example of this idea. Even though Ursula's actions are worse in the short-term than when she had done nothing, she ultimately leads to a better outcome. Atkinson inherently condones this idea, as Ursula feels she is progressing and learning when she makes these decisions, and it ultimately allows her to lead a longer life.

This utilitarian philosophy guides Ursula throughout the rest of the novel, particularly towards the end of the book, when Ursula tries to prevent World War II by killing Adolf Hitler. She knows that murder is inherently bad, and that it will lead to her own death. But she sees this as a necessary sacrifice, to prevent something even worse from happening—all-encompassing war, death, and genocide.

Like a Fox in a Hole, May 1926 Quotes

Ursula had seen her brothers naked, knew what they had between their legs— wrinkled cockles, a little spout—and it seemed to have little to do with this painful piston-driven thing that was now ramming inside her like a weapon of war. Her own body breached. The arch that led to womanhood did not seem so triumphal anymore, merely brutal and completely uncaring.

Related Characters: Maurice Todd, Howie, Ursula Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

Ursula's second encounter with her brother Maurice's friend Howie is very different from her first, in which Howie kisses her aggressively but Ursula generally reacts positively, considering it a rite of passage to womanhood. Before, Ursula describes "the arch of womanhood" as "triumphal"; here, she contrasts that description as she experiences a brutal rape. Atkinson demonstrates the inherent danger of being a young woman in British society during this time period, and the fine line between owning one's sexuality and being taken advantage of. What Atkinson critiques most, however, is the expectations placed on women versus men, and the danger that society places women in when they are uninformed about sex and its consequences. Howie (just like Maurice when he was younger) is allowed to be aggressive, and faces no consequences for his actions. On the other hand, Ursula is victimized, assaulted, and faces severe consequences of which she has no knowledge because of the stigma that society places on women having sex.

Ursula's next life hammers this point home even more. Only when Ursula is preemptively aggressive (and explicitly un-ladylike, punching Howie in the face when he tries to kiss her), she is able to head Howie off and escape this fate, which in turn allows her to be a more empowered woman in the rest of her life.

Like a Fox in a Hole, Aug 1926 (I) Quotes

"But he forced himself on you," she fumed, "how can you think it was your fault?"

"But the consequences..." Ursula murmured.

Sylvie blamed her entirely, of course. "You've thrown away your virtue, your character, everyone's good opinion of you."

Related Characters: Ursula Todd, Pamela Todd, Sylvie Todd (speaker), Howie, Hugh Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

After Ursula leaves the hospital, having recovered from her illness following her abortion (which she had gotten because she was raped by Howie), she is met with a variety of reactions from the family members who know what has happened. Hugh, fulfilling the role of a loving father, merely wants to make sure that Ursula is alive and healthy. The women in Ursula's family, however, have two polar opposite reactions. Pamela speaks as the voice of the modern woman; she understands the sexism that exists in society, which holds that women should be blamed for getting raped and pregnant because they must have invited it somehow.

Sylvie, ever conservative, takes the opposite view as Pamela. Failing to understand the double standard (and the lack of logic) in her argument, she believes that Ursula is entirely to blame, despite the fact that Ursula was clearly raped against her will. Sylvie holds that Ursula "threw away her virtue," despite the fact that she had absolutely no agency whatsoever in the entire incident. Moreover, Sylvie's lack of support in the wake of Ursula's rape leads Ursula to blame herself, become depressed, and ultimately marry an abusive man and die from his abuse—proving that lack of familial support in times of crisis has disastrous effects on Ursula's life.

Like a Fox in a Hole, Jun 1932 Quotes

"Intact?" Ursula echoed, staring at Sylvie in the mirror. What did that mean, that she was flawed? Or broken?

"One's maidenhood," Sylvie said. "Deflowering," she added impatiently when she saw Ursula's blank expression. "For someone who is far from innocent you seem remarkably naive."

Related Characters: Ursula Todd, Sylvie Todd (speaker), Hugh Todd, Howie, Derek Oliphant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

Six years after Ursula's rape and subsequent pregnancy, Ursula meets and shortly after marries a young man named Derek Oliphant. They choose to have a quiet wedding with

only Derek's mother, Sylvie, and Hugh present. After the ceremony Sylvie questions Ursula as to whether Derek knows she is "intact" or not, referring to her virginity. Sylvie once again reveals her insensitivity to Ursula's trauma, unkindly questioning her daughter's innocence on the subject. Yet this cruelty demonstrates some of Sylvie's hypocrisy and the injustice of British society when it comes to teaching women about sex. Sylvie blames Ursula for her rape and also ridicules Ursula for not knowing what the consequences of Howie's actions were; yet Sylvie is Ursula's mother, and it is generally the responsibility of one's mother or father to teach a child about sex and its consequences, but without that information, it is impossible to make informed decisions on the subject. Perhaps, if Ursula had understood that she might have gotten pregnant from Howie's actions, she would have been better equipped to push him off or would have told someone sooner about what had happened. Granted, this fault is not Sylvie's alone, as the entire society often leaves women in the dark and without agency when it comes to sex. However, Sylvie's statement at Ursula's wedding demonstrates her capacity for cruelty six years after the fact, rather than giving her daughter the love and support she needs from her mother.

> She no longer recognized herself, she thought. She had taken the wrong path, opened the wrong door, and was unable to find her way back.

Related Characters: Sylvie Todd, Howie, Derek Oliphant, Ursula Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

Following Ursula's rape by Howie, her subsequent pregnancy and abortion, and then her marriage and abuse by Derek, Ursula one day realizes in a hat shop how far she has diverged from her idea of who she is, and how she feels as though her fate no longer rests in her hands. But this chapter, coupled with the one just after it, presents a complicated relationship between choice and fate. For it is true, Ursula does not explicitly do anything that causes these events—mostly they seem to happen to her. But it is precisely this lack of agency that leads Ursula to this series of disasters, and once she is set on the path, it seems nearly impossible to escape its consequences. Even though she eventually escapes from Derek, he finds her and beats her to death, thinking that she is being unfaithful to him when in actuality she is simply talking with her brother.

It is notable that though this timeline ends with Ursula's murder by Derek, the decisions she makes to avoid this fate do not have anything to do with Derek at all. Instead, Atkinson returns to the scene in which Howie first tries to kiss Ursula. In the first version of this scene, Ursula allows herself to be aggressively kissed by Howie, which later encourages him to rape her, thinking that he can easily take advantage of her. In the second, Ursula punches him, preventing the kiss *and* the rape (and presumably the rest of the events that follow). Thus Ursula's choice prevent her from the tragedies of the first timeline; this way of structuring the chapters also proves how certain incidents can inevitably lead to others, ultimately arguing that some fates are inescapable once one is set on a certain path.

> Derek's whole life was a fabrication. [...] What had he wanted from her? Someone weaker than himself? Or a wife, a mother of his children, someone running his house, all the trappings of the *vie quotidienne* but without any of its underlying chaos.

Related Characters: Derek Oliphant, Ursula Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis

After Ursula endures months of abuse from her new husband Derek, she one day discovers that the textbook he has purportedly been working on is nothing more than a series of sentences edited and re-edited, with no underlying substance. This causes an epiphany: that everything she thought she knew prior to marrying him had turned out to be a lie, and that Derek's primary concern in their marriage has been in controlling her every action.

Ursula's thoughts are a pretty accurate indictment of British societal norms at the time, as she demonstrates how they became dangerous for her. Derek had an idea of what a "normal" British marriage and household should look like: the husband dominant, the worker, in charge of the finances and the head of the household; the wife submissive, in charge of the domestic sphere and catering to her husband's every need. But these expectations are mere sexist ideals, and it is impossible for Ursula to live up to them. Subsequently, every time Ursula does not meet Derek's standards, he only becomes more domineering and

abusive, sending them both into a spiral of abuse and turmoil. Thus, these gender expectations actually turn into loaded weapons that Derek uses as an excuse to be violent towards Ursula.

A Lovely Day Tomorrow (I), Nov 1940 Quotes

"Could you do that? Could you kill a baby? With a gun? Or what if you had no gun, how about with your bare hands? In cold blood."

If I thought it would save Teddy, Ursula thought. Not just Teddy, of course, the rest of the world, too.

Related Characters: Ursula Todd, Ralph (speaker), Adolf Hitler, Edward ("Teddy") Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 277

Explanation and Analysis

A year after Britain declares war on Germany, Ursula and her boyfriend, Ralph, discuss how the course of history might have been different if Hitler's life had been just slightly altered, until Ralph asks her point blank if she could kill a baby to prevent the war. Ursula's response exhibits the deep love that she bears for her younger brother, and the fact that she would do nearly anything to ensure his safety. Compared to him, the well-being of the rest of the world is almost an afterthought.

Of course, this discussion becomes more than theoretical to Ursula, as in the final chapters of the novel, in a much later timeline, she contemplates when and how to kill Hitler to prevent World War II and Teddy's death. Notably, however, Ursula does not try to kill him as a baby, instead waiting until Hitler is a rising star in the Nazi Party.

The Land of Begin Again, Aug 1939 Quotes

Most people muddled through events and only in retrospect realized their significance. The Führer was different, he was consciously *making* history for the future.

Related Characters: Jürgen Fuchs, Adolf Hitler, Ursula Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 351

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Ursula's life deviates greatly from her previous lives. Whereas in most timelines, Ursula spends the war in London, in this timeline, she spends it in Germany, having stayed in Munich after college and marrying a German man named Jürgen. Through Jürgen, she watches Hitler's meteoric rise as he becomes the Chancellor of Germany.

Atkinson's description of Hitler's tactics evokes the novel's theme of fate and choice, as Ursula describes how most people only realize the importance of events in hindsight. This fact of human life allows for the idea of fate because it gives events a sense of inevitability, like Hitler's rise to power. Ursula's multiple lives give her a unique perspective on this issue, however. She makes many mistakes in her lives and tries to correct them future ones. But this allows Ursula realizes that they *are* correctable, and therefore choice is imperative in the shaping of life's path. In Ursula's evaluation of Hitler, then, she understands how he makes it seem like he is merely bringing about the inevitable—that he is simply enabling the history that he feels entitled to. Ultimately, though, Atkinson argues that choice and agency can avert certain outcomes, and that the war and the Holocaust should have been preventable.

"Hindsight's a wonderful thing," Klara said. "If we all had it there would be no history to write about."

Related Characters: Klara Brenner (speaker), Jürgen Fuchs, Adolf Hitler, Ursula Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 354

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Ursula is living out the war in Germany. She had been touring Europe for a year when she met Jürgen, the man who would become her husband. Throughout the 30s she watches Hitler's meteoric rise in German politics, as he becomes the Chancellor of the Reich and essentially overthrows democracy in the country. Ursula had then taken Germany citizenship, which she quickly realized is a mistake. This prompts the quote from her friend Klara, arguing essentially that if people always knew what was going to happen, then history would be irrelevant. Yet because of Ursula's multiple lives, this statement can be seen as ironic. Ursula does know what's going to happen in

history; however, she can only change it so much. She eventually does try to kill Hitler and change the course of history, but she has no idea whether her actions ultimately become fruitful because she is killed immediately after. Thus, Atkinson argues that just because people might be aware of events as they are happening doesn't mean that they necessarily have the power to start stop them. Rather, the book shows life to be relatively unpredictable: even when Ursula thinks that she might know what is going to happen, her actions alternate between having unintended consequences or relatively little effect.

❝ Powerful men needed their women to be unchallenging, the home should not be an arena for intellectual debate. "My own husband told me this so it must be true!" she wrote to Pamela.

Related Characters: Ursula Todd (speaker), Derek Oliphant, Adolf Hitler, Eva Braun, Pamela Todd, Jürgen Fuchs

Related Themes:

Page Number: 359

Explanation and Analysis

When Ursula is living in Germany, she gets close to Eva Braun, who is Hitler's mistress. She notes that Eva isn't terribly intellectual; she talks mostly about inconsequential things. This prompts a statement from Ursula's own husband, Jürgen, who notes that men like their women not to challenge them. These sentiments—even though Jürgen claims that he doesn't necessarily believe them—start to echo some of the dynamics between Ursula and her previous husband, Derek. Derek had also wanted Ursula to be "unchallenging" and relegated to the domestic sphere. He expected her to be the weaker person between them, which is why he started to abuse her to prove his dominance. Although Jürgen doesn't abuse Ursula, as he starts to rise through the Nazi Party, he starts to become affected by these opinions. He makes himself stronger (having one-sided conversations with Ursula rather than actually listening to her input) and tries to fit in with the hyper-masculine strength that the other party officials have. This is why Ursula starts to get nervous around Jürgen, and wants to escape Germany without him (even though he underhandedly prevents this escape attempt). Ursula sees how these rigid expectations of gender dynamics are extensions of an oppressive regime.

❝ What had the Fuhrer's apprenticeship for greatness been? Eva shrugged, she didn't know. "He's always been a politician. He was born a politician." No, Ursula thought, he was born a baby, like everyone else. And this is what he has chosen to become.

Related Characters: Eva Braun (speaker), Adolf Hitler, Ursula Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 360

Explanation and Analysis

When Ursula is staying with Eva Braun at Hitler's country mansion, she asks Eva how Hitler had come to be the leader that he is. Eva's simple response seems to rely on an idea of fate: that he was always meant to be a politician, the leader of Germany, the man who would start World War II. But Ursula, armed with the knowledge of her various lives, understands that this is not how the world works. She recognizes that Hitler could, at any point, have chosen to become something else. Ursula knows this very well herself, as she is only in Germany because she had chosen to take a tour of Europe following her college graduation. And so, she understands—and explicitly states here—that Hitler's life is entirely of his own making. Perhaps this is why, when Ursula tries to kill Hitler in a future timeline, she does not try to kill him until he has already started to become a rising star in the Nazi Party—and when he has already aligned himself with a bigoted and anti-democratic ideology.

The Land of Begin Again, Apr 1945 Quotes

❝ She held tightly on to Frieda and soon they were both wrapped in the velvet wings of the black bat and this life was already unreal and gone.

She had never chosen death over life before and as she was leaving she knew something had cracked and broken and the order of things had changed.

Related Characters: Frieda, Ursula Todd

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 379

Explanation and Analysis

Ursula ends her life in Germany in a particularly tragic way:

both she and her eleven-year-old daughter Frieda (who is very ill) take pills and commit suicide. Ursula chooses this death because she knows it is better than the alternative, which will most likely see them starving, being bombed, or being raped by the Russian soldiers that are in Berlin. The decision that Ursula makes proves how death in this instance (as represented by the black bat) actually becomes something she welcomes—a far cry from her previous lives, in which she changes her actions in order to avoid death at all costs. This act demonstrates the deep, unforgiving suffering that war inflicts on everyone involved in it, to the point where they must take drastic actions in order to avoid the inevitable pain, suffering, and likely death that war brings. Ursula had tried to escape it in Britain by going to Germany instead, but this life shows it to be completely ubiquitous.

Additionally, Ursula's actions show her extreme devotion to her daughter, as she makes an unthinkable decision in order to try to protect her. But Ursula also knows that her life would be meaningless without her daughter in it, and so she decides that rather than continuing without her, she prefers to die. And more than that, Ursula works in the next life to avoid any suffering on her daughter's behalf, electing to stay in Britain rather than trying to recreate her previous timeline with Frieda.

A Long Hard War, Sep 1940 Quotes

❝ Of course, even Miss Woolf had not imagined how distressing these sights would be when they involved civilians rather than battlefield soldiers, when they involved shoveling up unidentifiable lumps of flesh or picking out the heartbreakingly small limbs of a child from the rubble.

Related Characters: Emil, Miss Woolf, Ursula Todd

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 390

Explanation and Analysis

After Ursula's life in Germany, her next life returns to Britain during the war. Except this time, Ursula chooses to take an active part in the war, joining a rescue squad to help civilians involved in bombing incidents. The squad is headed by Miss Woolf, who is a retired hospital matron. However, both she and Ursula are unprepared by the damage the war is going to do. Atkinson never describes a battlefield, but the scenes that she describes at the bombing sites in London are shown to be nearly as shocking. The descriptions of the gruesome scenes that they encounter demonstrate that no aspect of civilian life is unaffected by war, and in some cases those scenes can be even more shocking than a battlefield. Atkinson here foreshadows a later scene in which Ursula steps on a mound, under which she finds the hand of a baby named Emil—an incident that greatly affects her because it represents the senseless violence and death that cuts short the lives of so many innocent people.

A Long Hard War, Oct 1940 (I) Quotes

❝ "Yet we must hold fast to what is good and true. But it all seems so random. One wonders about the divine plan and so on."

"More of a shambles than a plan," Ursula agreed.

Related Characters: Ursula Todd, Miss Woolf (speaker), Adolf Hitler, Dr. Kellet

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 413

Explanation and Analysis

As the war continues and Ursula and Miss Woolf experience more and more of its violence, they start to question what any "divine plan" or fate might mean when it entails so much death and destruction. It recalls Dr. Kellet's statement earlier in the novel when he tells Ursula that sometimes bad things have to happen in order to prevent worse things from happening, but that in some cases, it's hard to imagine anything worse. Yet over the course of the novel, Ursula comes to realize that the war is the "worse thing" that needs to be prevented. And so, while the war appears to be a fated occurrence (as each of Ursula's lives is affected by it), this exchange causes Ursula to realize that the war is preventable, and that her choices could potentially have an impact on a global level. Thus, her ultimate choice—to attempt to kill Hitler—is prompted by this realization, so that she might be able to avert it.

A Long Hard War, Nov 1940 Quotes

❝ Some hours later they had both woken up at the same time and made love. It was the kind of love (lust, to be honest about it) that survivors of disasters must practice—or people who are anticipating disaster—free of all restraint, savage at times and yet strangely tender and affectionate.

Related Characters: Crighton, Ralph, Fred Smith, Ursula Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 441

Explanation and Analysis

When Ursula survives the bombing at Argyll road, she reconnects with Fred Smith, a neighbor growing up. She and Fred immediately find a hotel, fall asleep, and then wake up and have sex together. This episode demonstrates the way in which the war is disruptive on a social level; in addition to the violence and destruction that it causes, it also changes certain social norms. In describing their love as "free of all restraint," Atkinson shows how people prioritize their current desires, rather than worrying about future ramifications, because the future is so uncertain. The war brings with it a certain degree of abandonment that is simply not as acceptable under normal circumstances. Fred isn't the only instance of this for Ursula, as she also variously dates (and cheats on) a man named Ralph who also works for the government, and Crighton, a married Admiral who is much older than she is. In this way, Ursula also throws of normal gender expectations, because she initiates these relationships and pursues her own desires.

A Long Hard War, May 1941 Quotes

"We only have one after all, we should try and do our best. We can never get it *right*, but we must *try*." (The transformation was complete.)

"What if we had a chance to do it again and again," Teddy said, "until we finally did get it right? Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"I think it would be exhausting."

Related Characters: Edward ("Teddy") Todd, Ursula Todd (speaker), Jürgen Fuchs, Adolf Hitler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 446

Explanation and Analysis

During World War II, after Teddy has finished his pilot training, he and Ursula visit a World War I memorial and discuss the destruction of war and how to take advantage of life. Ursula's statement gets at one of the major arguments of the book as a whole—that there is no one correct way to live life. As Ursula acknowledges here, there are ways to live a better life than others, avoiding costly mistakes that can send a person down a wrong path. However, there's no one way to live a fulfilling life. This statement is essentially what makes the two endings of the book so compelling. In one, Ursula sacrifices herself for the greater good by killing Hitler. In another, she wants to see her younger brother after the war. In this way, readers are forced to confront a variety of criteria for what constitutes a meaningful life—whether it's life that does the most overall good, or the life that is the longest, or the life that provides the most happiness, allowing the protagonist to spend more time with the person she loves most in the world. In the end, the answer is ambiguous.

A Long Hard War, Jun 1967 Quotes

"An awful lot of people would still be alive."

"Well, yes, obviously. And the whole cultural face of Europe would be different because of the Jews. […] But perhaps Goering or Himmler would have stepped in. And everything would have happened in just the same way."

Related Characters: Ursula Todd, Nigel (speaker), Pamela Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 473

Explanation and Analysis

Twenty years after the end of the war, Ursula is having lunch with her nephew Nigel (Pamela's son). They are discussing the progression of World War II into the Six-Day War, which is ongoing, and wondering what might have happened if Hitler had died before he became Chancellor of Germany. This conversation echoes the one that she and Ralph have years earlier, in which he asks whether Ursula could kill Hitler when he was a baby. But there is a key difference between that conversation and this one: here, Ursula allows for the possibility that even if Hitler had died, everything would have happened in exactly the same way anyway. And when Ursula does eventually kill Hitler two chapters later, Atkinson doesn't write the ramifications of this action; therefore, readers have no way of knowing what might have happened (at least in the author's eyes). Hitler's plan, though he certainly set the wheels in motion, could have been carried out by someone else, as Ursula says. Thus, Atkinson ultimately argues that life is unpredictable, and it is possible that no single person can completely change the course of history.

The End of the Beginning Quotes

Become such as you are, having learned what that is. She knew what that was now. She was Ursula Beresford Todd and she was a witness.

She opened her arms to the black bat and they flew to each other, embracing in the air like long-lost souls. This is love, Ursula thought. And the practice of it makes it perfect.

Related Characters: Adolf Hitler, Ursula Todd

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 473

Explanation and Analysis

In one of Ursula's final timelines in the novel, she begins to realize the utility of her reincarnations. Having seen the war from multiple perspectives, and having felt the pain of losing many friends and family members to the war, she sets out with a plan to try and preemptively avert it by killing Adolf Hitler. This is possibly the most important choice that Ursula makes in her life, as it attempts to avoid a fate that she had been unable to escape up to that point. Yet she knows that this will come at the cost of her own life, and she will not be able to see her family members again—but is comforted by the fact that they will live on after her. This is Ursula's primary motivation: the love that she bears for the people closest to her, particularly her brother Teddy.

This plotline takes an extremely utilitarian view of life, and perhaps provides the most compelling evidence for the argument that a lengthier life doesn't necessarily mean the "best" life or the most "correct" life. Whereas before, "practice makes perfect" was a mantra Ursula used to avoid previous mistakes and deaths, here she uses it to mean that her past lives have prepared her for what might be her most important death. In taking this action, Ursula will help prevent pain, suffering, and death for millions of people, and so this timeline certainly makes the argument that a meaningful life doesn't necessarily mean a long life.

The Broad Sunlit Uplands, May 1945 Quotes

Ursula stayed where she was, worried suddenly that if she moved it would all disappear, the whole happy scene break into pieces before her eyes. But then she thought, no, this was real, this was true, and she laughed with uncomplicated joy as Teddy let go of Nancy long enough to stand to attention and give Ursula a smart salute.

Related Characters: Adolf Hitler, Nancy Shawcross, Edward ("Teddy") Todd, Ursula Todd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 525

Explanation and Analysis

This is the last chapter in which Ursula appears, and she is reunited with her brother after the war. It comes directly after the chapter in which Ursula sacrifices herself in order to kill Hitler in an effort to save the world from World War II. The fact that Atkinson places this chapter after the previous one, then, sets up Ursula's final dilemma. She has two contrasting endings: save the world, or be reunited with her brother. Objectively, as Atkinson demonstrates here, the life in which Ursula is reunited with her brother boasts of a much happier ending. And so, both Ursula (and the reader) have to decide which of these two lives, and which of these two endings, makes for a more meaningful, important, or satisfying life. Particularly after the earlier chapter, in which Ursula seems to have such a clarity of purpose in killing Hitler, this chapter leaves the answer in a much more ambiguous place. But this scene once again affirms the importance of family, and particularly the importance of Teddy, to Ursula, because the choice between saving the world and getting a full life with her family is so difficult for her.

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.

BE YE MEN OF VALOR (I), NOVEMBER 1930

A woman (later revealed to be Ursula Todd) enters a café. At a table at the far end of the room sits a man (who is later revealed to be Hitler) surrounded by a group of henchmen with pastries on the table. He greets Ursula and indicates that she should sit next to him. She does so, placing her handbag next to the table on the floor.

Atkinson chooses to begin her novel with what ultimately becomes Ursula's most important choice, despite the fact that readers do not yet grasp the significance of the event (as Hitler is not explicitly named in the chapter). This plays into Ursula's (and Atkinson's) assertion throughout the novel that the significance of events is often only understood in hindsight.

Ursula eats a pastry as she and Hitler make minimal, polite conversation. She wipes her mouth with her handkerchief, and then bends down to retrieve her father Hugh's old revolver from her handbag with the handkerchief. She pulls it out and levels it at Hitler's chest, a move described as being "rehearsed a hundred times." Around the table, several guns are pulled out and aimed at her. She says, "For her" in German before pulling the trigger. **Darkness** falls.

Ursula's choice here highlights her faith in the consequences of small actions: in attempting to murder Hitler prior to the rise of the Nazi Party, she hopes that she can avert World War II and the pain and suffering of an entire continent of people, including Ursula, her daughter (the "her" she refers to) and many of her other family members. Atkinson returns to this version of events towards the end of the novel, posing it as one of Ursula's most important timelines and one that she ultimately chooses for herself.

SNOW (I), 11 FEBRUARY 1910

The chapter begins with Ursula's birth, describing her as being outside a familiar wet, tropical world and exposed to the elements. She tries to take a breath, but cannot.

The proper beginning of the novel sets up the idea of reincarnations. Ursula's story truly begins with her birth, but her immediate death allows the reader to understand that later versions of her birth are simply alternate possibilities that Atkinson provides.

Sylvie, Ursula's mother, moans that Dr. Fellowes should have been with her for the birth. Bridget, Sylvie's maid, tells her that Dr. Fellowes is likely stuck in the **snow**; Sylvie and Bridget are alone in the ordeal. Their other maid, Alice, is visiting her mother, Sylvie's husband Hugh is chasing down his sister Izzie in Paris, and Sylvie does not want to wake their cook, Mrs. Glover, whom she fears would conduct proceedings like a "parade-ground sergeant major."

Dr. Fellowes's appearance or absence from the scene is the main factor which allows or disallows Ursula to live. In killing her main character before she even truly has the chance to live, Atkinson forces readers to acknowledge the possibility that the other lives that they are about to see might never have happened, and that the Todd family (and everyone with whom Ursula interacted) could have led very different lives without her.

Bridget informs Sylvie that the baby is blue, strangled by her own umbilical cord. Sylvie asks what they can do, but Bridget tells her that Ursula is already dead. Ursula's heart has stopped. **Darkness** falls.

Atkinson uses the refrain, "Darkness falls," as a metaphor for death—each time it appears at the end of the chapter, it signals both death, and the possibility of rebirth in the next chapter.

SNOW (II), 11 FEBRUARY 1910

Dr. Fellowes orders Bridget to fetch hot water and towels before handing Ursula over to Sylvie. He tells Sylvie that it was lucky he arrived just in time, as he was able to use his surgical scissors to cut the cord around the baby's neck. Sylvie makes a mental note to buy a pair like his in the future for similar emergencies.

In this chapter, the adjustment of a small chance detail—that Dr. Fellowes is able to make it out before the roads close—leads to a vastly different outcome and allows Ursula to have the possibility of life.

Dr. Fellowes got there just before the roads were closed. He had called for Mrs. Haddock, the midwife, but she got stuck in the **snow**. Sylvie invites Dr. Fellowes to stay the night, somewhat reluctantly. He delivered all three of her children and she does not like him—she believes that only a woman's husband should see what he saw.

Mrs. Haddock becomes the central figure in the final chapter, and Atkinson's inclusion of her character reinforces the idea that life has many random twists and turns (the snow is a representation of the unpredictability of life) that affect not only the story's central figure—Ursula—but so many other characters within the network of the book.

Bridget, only fourteen, swaddles Ursula. Sylvie thinks about her own life at fourteen, ten years prior. She had been in love only with her pony, Tiffin, and had no idea where babies came from. Her mother, Lottie, had been very reserved, and her father, Llewellyn Beresford, had also been conservative. He was a famous society portrait artist who disliked nudity and "louche behavior." Bridget hands Ursula to Sylvie, and Dr. Fellowes goes in search of Mrs. Glover for a light meal before bed.

Sylvie's reserved mother and conservative father provides some explanation for her own tendency toward conservatism and her adherence to traditional gender roles. Her acknowledgement that she didn't know where babies came from at the time makes it particularly hypocritical when she blames Ursula for being raped and getting pregnant in a later chapter, because Sylvie could easily have been in that situation herself.

FOUR SEASONS FILL THE MEASURE OF THE YEAR, 11 FEBRUARY 1910

Sylvie wakes and Mrs. Glover brings her a breakfast tray with a single, half-frozen snowdrop. Sylvie is delighted by the flower, commenting on how brave it is because it is "the first flower to raise its poor head above the ground." She thanks Mrs. Glover, who opens the curtains. The light reflecting off of the **snow** is extraordinary; "**the black bat**" has been deterred, she thinks.

The snowdrop, taken in conjunction with the symbol of the snow, appears in every timeline in which Ursula survives her birth. Thus, it comes to represent Ursula's life—both the flower and Ursula are able to withstand the severity and unpredictability of the snow that nearly proved to be their doom.

Mrs. Glover tells Sylvie that Dr. Fellowes had been called to another emergency early that morning—a farmer trampled by a bull—but had checked in on Sylvie and Ursula before he left. Mrs. Glover says she heard the baby almost died. Sylvie thinks that there is a fine line between living and dying. Her own father, Llewellyn, had slipped on a rug after drinking cognac one evening and was discovered dead at the foot of the stairs the next morning. No one had heard him fall.

Sylvie's note that there is a "fine line between living and dying" plays into Ursula's (and many other characters') lives. Often the difference between Ursula being able to live and being able to die is as small as a simple change in circumstances or a simple choice that Ursula makes.

After Llewellyn's death, the family learned that he was a gambler who had unpaid debts all over town. Sylvie and Lottie sank into poverty and depression. Sylvie's home and horse had to be sold, and her mother then got consumption. Seventeen-year-old Sylvie was saved by Hugh, a rising star in the world of banking.

Sylvie highlights another injustice of the gender dynamics of this time period: that women often had to rely on men for their money and well-being. As a result, they had very little agency of their own and were subject to harm based on the bad decision making of men.

Lottie had died the next year and Hugh and Sylvie married on her eighteenth birthday. They honeymooned in France before settling in "semirural bliss" near Beaconsfield. The house had everything she could ask for: a large kitchen, a drawing room, and several bedrooms for children. Hugh and Sylvie tried to name the house, and when she saw a fox, she suggested that they call it Fox Corner. Hugh said the name sounded like a children's story, and he wondered if a house can even be a corner. Sylvie thought to herself, *So this is marriage*.

Atkinson continues to show how Sylvie reinforces the dynamic of gender roles, as Sylvie wonders whether marriage is simply a negotiation in which the woman is expected to relent. Yet Atkinson also implies that Sylvie has more independence than she might think, as they do eventually call the house Fox Corner.

Back in Sylvie's bedroom, Sylvie invites five-year-old Maurice and three-year-old Pamela in to meet their new sister. Maurice pokes Ursula, who wakes up and squawks in alarm. Mrs. Glover pinches Maurice's ear and asks what Sylvie is going to name the baby. She says Ursula, which means she-bear. Mrs. Glover then goes to fix lunch, shooing the children from the room so that Sylvie can feed Ursula.

Maurice shows his feelings about Ursula immediately, foreshadowing his eventual mistreatment of her and of most of his siblings.

Later, Bridget brings in a cup of tea and says that God wanted Ursula back. Sylvie comments that they "have been tested [...] and found not wanting." "This time," Bridget responds.

Bridget's words imply that she believes, in contrast with Sylvie and likely with many readers, that it is unnatural for Ursula to have lived—that instead, she was fated to die. Bridget's words also foreshadow that, in fact, God will take Ursula back many times in the future when Sylvie and others are remiss in caring for her.

FOUR SEASONS FILL THE MEASURE OF THE YEAR, MAY 1910

Hugh brings a telegram into the nursery when Sylvie is feeding Ursula a few months later, announcing that Izzie has had her baby. Hugh laments that if the man hadn't been married, he could have made Izzie an honest woman. Sylvie wonders aloud if there is such a thing as an honest woman.

Sylvie barely disguises her dislike of Izzie throughout the novel, because she views Izzie as treading outside what is socially acceptable for women. Here, Sylvie criticizes Izzie for her lack of chastity and for having a child with a married man.

Izzie had already been noticeably pregnant when Hugh tracked her down in Paris a few months prior. Adelaide, their mother, had barred the door at the sight of Izzie's pregnant belly and forced her daughter to wait out her shame in France. The baby boy would now be adopted as swiftly as possible by a German couple, while Izzie would be shipped off to a finishing school in Switzerland.

Hugh and Izzie's mother Adelaide shares Sylvie's beliefs—a dynamic that is echoed later when Ursula is raped and becomes pregnant at sixteen, turns to her mother for help but finds that Sylvie is completely uncaring about her situation.

Ursula's first seasons pass in a swirl of leaves. She observes the turning of the seasons for the first time from her stroller, which is often placed outside, regardless of the weather. One November day, Maurice prods Ursula with a stick. He then calls her a "stupid baby" and buries her underneath a pile of leaves. She starts to fall asleep before Hugh finds her and rescues her.

Once again, Maurice's attitude toward Ursula is evident, and this sets the stage for his later dislike of his sisters and his indifference towards their feelings. Additionally, Atkinson provides other possibilities for Ursula's death to demonstrate how fate constantly intervenes (or doesn't intervene) in her life.

FOUR SEASONS FILL THE MEASURE OF THE YEAR, JUNE 1914

Ursula turns four without further mishap, much to Sylvie's relief. In June, Sylvie and the four children (they have a new addition named Teddy) rent a house in Cornwall for the month to vacation by the beach. Hugh stays with them for the first week; Bridget remains with them for the remaining three.

Again, the distinctions in gender roles become clear: Hugh leaves vacation early to return to work, while Sylvie and Bridget are left to take care of the children.

One day at the beach, the children return from fishing while Sylvie and Bridget lay on the beach, reading. Maurice comes sprinting back and throws himself down into the sand holding a small crab, spraying Sylvie and Bridget. Sylvie admonishes Maurice for his manners. He is going to boarding school after the summer, which makes her feel rather relieved.

Even though Sylvie is aghast at Maurice's violence and rudeness and tries to admonish him, throughout his childhood she still allows him to run wild and free, reinforcing the idea that boys have a lot more leeway in their activities and their behavior than girls do.

Meanwhile, Pamela and Ursula stop by the water. Pamela jumps over the waves and tells Ursula to do so as well. Ursula thinks that Pamela is bossy in a nice way, and she is nearly always happy to do as Pamela says. Pamela and Ursula wade further and further into the water until a huge wave crashes over their heads. Ursula feels herself pulled deeper and deeper and cannot find purchase on the sand. She starts to choke, drowning in the water. **Darkness** falls.

Ursula is Pamela's constant companion, and this episode highlights the trust and confidence that Ursula places in her older sister, which carries on throughout the rest of the novel (even though, in this particular instance, a fated wave leads to Ursula's death).

SNOW (III), 11 FEBRUARY 1910

Bridget takes away Sylvie's breakfast tray, but Sylvie asks her to leave the snowdrop. Sylvie cradles Ursula, thinking what kind of message she will send to Hugh: "Baby has arrived stop all well stop." But she wonders if they are "all well," as the baby had nearly died. She thinks that they have triumphed over death, but wonders when death will seek his revenge. In the calm of the morning, she meditates on how one could lose everything in the blink of an eye or "the slip of a foot."

Flashing back to the scene of Ursula's birth over and over again serves as a shorthand that allows Atkinson to signal to readers that she is "resetting" Ursula's life, so to speak, and also provides opportunities for various characters to contemplate how life is both fragile and unpredictable. The reference to "the slip of a foot" is particularly relevant to Ursula's previous death, in which her foot slips from the sand and she cannot find a foothold as she drowns in the ocean.

WAR (I), JUNE 1914

Mr. Archibald Winton, a senior clerk at a factory in Birmingham, sets up his amateur easel on the sand and starts to paint, thinking that the two little girls down by the water would make good subjects. Ursula and Pamela tread out into the water and Ursula starts to panic. She tries to think of something that will make Pamela want to return to the beach, but a huge wave crashes over their heads.

Atkinson begins to set up the idea that Ursula can learn from previous mistakes through these pangs of panic and the eventual "déjà vu" that she has. This implies that there is a "correct" or "better" life that Ursula can lead as she tries to avoid a premature death.

Mr. Winton carries a sopping wet Pamela and Ursula back up the beach, explaining to Sylvie that they went out a bit too far. Sylvie offers to treat Mr. Winton to tea and cakes, thanking him for their rescue.

The small change in circumstances—that a man is watching Ursula and Pamela on the beach—has enormous ramifications when he saves her from drowning.

When Sylvie and the children return from their holiday, Hugh asks if they are glad to be back. Sylvie returns, "Are you glad to have us back?" to which Hugh does not respond. Instead, he has a surprise for the family: he has installed an engine in the cellar, enabling electric light in the house. They marvel at it, but it will be a long time before any of them are able to turn on a light switch without expecting to be blown up.

In this and the subsequent chapters, as the family endures World War I, Atkinson makes sly comparisons and contrasts between domestic life and the war. Her reference here to the fear of being blown up by a light switch echoes the eventual fear of being bombed that comes with wartime.

WAR (I), JULY 1914

Sylvie watches Maurice erect a makeshift tennis net, which seems to involve him whacking everything in sight with a mallet. He is a mystery to Sylvie: a far cry from the man he is supposed to become.

Again, Sylvie's attitude towards her son seems to reinforce traditional gender dynamics, as she allows him to be violent.

Friends of Sylvie's from school named Margaret and Lily arrive and the three women go out into the garden to have tea and to admire the new baby. Ursula and the family dog Bosun sit close by, while Maurice tries to teach Pamela how to play tennis—though he quickly throws his racquet onto the grass and yells that he can't teach Pamela because she's a girl. Pamela calls Maurice a pig as he storms into the bushes.

Pamela's and Maurice's antagonism continues throughout their lives, particularly as Pamela tries to defy traditional gender roles and constantly comes up against obstacles, while Maurice treats her like she is unequal to him because he does not face those same obstacles and biases.

Margaret remarks how pretty Ursula is, saying that children are quite droll. Margaret and Lily don't have children, and Sylvie doesn't know how to explain the magnitude of motherhood to them. When they try to get her to come to London for a few days, Sylvie says that she has to look after the children: she feels that taking care of them is "her responsibility, [and] her destiny."

Sylvie's feelings about her responsibility and destiny capture the traditional feelings about what it means to be a woman. Her expectations, and society's expectations, are that women are meant to be wives and mothers and solely in charge of the domestic sphere.

Hugh returns from work and rescues Sylvie from the conversation, offering the women some gin slings. They chat as the children take tea; Hugh comments that Austria has declared war on Serbia, to which Margaret replies, "How silly."

Again, Atkinson highlights the gender divide when it comes to the outside world. While Hugh's life will soon be greatly affected by the war, to Margaret and the other women, world affairs remain completely distant.


Later that evening, Sylvie ushers her children to bed and then feeds Teddy. She thinks how she likes her children best as babies, and that Teddy is particularly special. From the window, she hears Hugh escort Margaret and Lily indoors, offering to show them the electric engine.

Sylvie's thoughts reveal that her love is not exactly unconditional (in this and other chapters, Atkinson implies that both Sylvie and Hugh have favorite children). Particularly when it comes to Ursula, Sylvie's love will be tested in a variety of crises.

Later, as Sylvie and Hugh read in bed, they concur that Teddy is their best baby yet, joking and agreeing that they should keep him. They laugh, and Hugh kisses Sylvie goodnight—though Sylvie continues to read after he goes to sleep.

Sylvie's and Hugh's relationship is mutually respectful throughout the story, but, as the next chapter proves, there is a distance between them and Sylvie's mind often strays, demonstrating that their love for each other also has its hitches.

A few days later, Sylvie, Bridget, and the children go to watch the harvest being brought in, though Maurice had disappeared after breakfast to go play with other nine-year-old boys, collecting things like frogs, worms, or a dead bird. Hugh stays behind to read on the terrace at the back of the house and enjoy time away from the bank.

Again, the divide between the men and the women of the house grows, as Maurice is again associated with violence, while Hugh is simply left behind so that he can relax instead of doing activities with his wife and children.

As Sylvie and Bridget walk, they see a field of horses belonging to George Glover—Mrs. Glover's son. Sylvie feeds the horses and George—a ploughman who is helping with the harvest—comes over to greet them. George is tanned, strong, and handsome and he makes Sylvie blush when he looks at her.

George's description puts him in contrast with Hugh, who is slim and does clerical work. Atkinson thus implies that Sylvie is attracted to George because he is strong and does physical labor—traits that are traditionally masculine.

The Todd family stops to have their lunch, and Sylvie goes to find a discreet spot to feed Teddy. Just as he settles at her breast, George Glover comes out of the trees at the far end of the field. He notices her, stops like a startled deer, and leaps away. Later, the group watches the enormous harvester eat the wheat, until Sylvie says that it's time to go home. As they are about to leave, George gives Pamela and Ursula two baby rabbits to take home.

Atkinson again depicts the tyranny of gender dynamics for women. Even though Sylvie believes that being a wife and mother are the most important things that a woman can do, there is still shame in the role as she is forced to hide while she feeds her son and is embarrassed by George's appearance.

Hugh greets Sylvie and the children when they walk home, saying they look kissed by the sun. The previous day the children had also been playing outside with the son of neighbors of theirs, the Coles. (Sylvie had noted that the Coles are Jews, though Hugh had added that they do not *practice*.) Benjamin Cole, Ursula, and Pamela had found a blackbird's nest with blue eggs in them, when Maurice had come upon them and cracked the eggs on a stone. Pamela had responded by throwing a stone at Maurice's head.

In this short episode, Atkinson hints at a few events to come: the continued conflict between Pamela and Ursula and Maurice; Pamela's ultimate defiance of traditional gender roles; Ursula's romance with Benjamin Cole, which is placed in contrast with her romance with a more aggressive boy named Howie; and the prejudice that eventually serves to underlie World War II.

Old Tom, the Todds' gardener, is digging a trench for asparagus when Mrs. Glover comes out to ask him to dig up some potatoes. She huffs at the sight of the girls' rabbits, commenting that they are not enough for a stew, which causes Pamela to scream. After Pamela is calmed down, she and Sylvie make a nest for the rabbits. Then the Todds sit on the lawn, eating raspberries with cream and sugar. Sylvie thinks about George Glover eating an apple from her hand.

The rabbits, which are eaten by foxes the next morning, serve as representations of the children, while the foxes serve as another representation of life's dangers and unpredictability. Though Pamela has the best intentions, she discovers that the rabbits need a bit more supervision in order to survive—just as Ursula often dies because the people who are supposed to be taking of her neglect to watch her.

In bed that night, Sylvie abandons her book for "less cerebral pursuits," but finds that as she and Hugh have sex she thinks only of George Glover. Hugh comments on how lively she is, and the two turn out the light to go to bed. Hugh and Sylvie are woken early the next morning by Pamela and Ursula, who have discovered that the baby rabbits have been eaten by foxes.

Even though Sylvie puts major value on being a good wife and mother, she still has her moments in which she is less than perfect, especially when it is implied in many different chapters that she did not marry for love, but rather because Hugh had rescued her from her family's debts.

WAR (I), JANUARY 1915

Sylvie reads a letter from Hugh, who is now a captain in the army after leaving for the Front a few months prior. His letters are cheerful and guarded, never mentioning death or dying. She had shouted at him when he enlisted, telling him to think of his wife and children. He had said that he wanted to defend them and could not have watched others enlist while he did nothing.

Again, Atkinson highlights the divisions between genders: Sylvie argues on behalf of herself and her children, while Hugh is interested in more traditionally male pursuits like honor and defending the nation.

Despite Sylvie's objections, she had been part of the "enormous flag-waving throng" of people to see him and the other soldiers off. She was surprised at the cheering and rabid patriotism of the women, as if they had already won a great victory. Sylvie, Mrs. Glover, and Bridget spend a good deal of their time knitting for their men—Sylvie for Hugh, Mrs. Glover for George, and Bridget for her new love, Sam Wellington—a groom from Ettringham hall to whom Bridget had given her heart.

The division between men and women during World War I is expanded upon in this chapter. While men are off fighting, the women of the Todd household contribute to the war in a traditionally domestic way: knitting.

The household routine is affected in other ways: they no longer eat in their dining room, as Sylvie deemed it too extravagant. Pamela helped to set the table in the morning room instead, and she has also taken up the sewing project, mass-producing mufflers. This pleasantly surprises Sylvie, who thinks that Pamela's capacity for monotony will "stand her in good stead for her life to come."

Atkinson critiques this kind of domestic "participation" in the war effort, as the family abstaining from eating in the dining room will have no effect on the outcome of the war. Additionally, Sylvie's thoughts concerning Pamela's capacity for monotony again exhibit her unwillingness or lack of desire to change the status quo regarding gender roles, even though she clearly acknowledges negative aspects of her life.

Bridget interrupts Sylvie's knitting to announce that bombs have been dropped on Norfolk, before shouting to Maurice and Ursula upstairs that their tea is on the table. As she sits down at the table, Pamela tells Sylvie that she misses Hugh. Christmas had come and gone without him, though Izzie had visited and announced that she had joined the Voluntary Aid Detachment. Then, at New Year, all of the children had gotten chicken pox.

Sylvie's dislike for Izzie is not lessened by Izzie's participation on the front lines, but Atkinson portrays Izzie more kindly. Even though her actions do not always have the best outcomes, her willingness to step outside of the societal mold proves beneficial for Ursula, as well as for the war effort here.

Ursula, despite her clumsy fingers, has also joined the household knitting frenzy. She received a knitting doll for Christmas named La Reine Solange (Queen Solange). Ursula spends all of her time knitting long lengths of wool that are only useful as mats and lopsided tea cozies. Sylvie encourages her, telling her "Practice makes perfect."

Sylvie's "practice makes perfect" mantra is not only relevant to Ursula's knitting, but also relevant to her reincarnations, as she starts to avoid or try to preemptively avert the circumstances that ended a previous life.

Ursula hears Bridget's call to tea but ignores her, since she is in the middle of knitting with her doll. Maurice is pacing around the room like a caged lion, still sick with the chicken pox. Maurice snatches up a figurine of Pamela's and throws it into the air violently. Then he grabs Ursula's doll and runs around with it like an airplane before opening the window and sending it out into the night.

The conflict between Maurice and Ursula continues, as his animosity towards her is detrimental to her well-being. By throwing her doll out the window, Maurice indirectly leads to Ursula's death.

Ursula pulls a chair over to the window and sees Queen Solange stuck between two of the attic roofs. Continuing to ignore Bridget's calls, she climbs out onto the roof and immediately slips on the ice covering the roof. She races down the roof, nothing stopping her from being propelled into the "black wings of night." **Darkness** falls.

Ursula's death is, like the incident in the ocean, a product of bad circumstances. In the next life, Ursula has a small moment of doubt and Bridget prevents her from stepping out onto the window, demonstrating how the smallest feeling or change in circumstance can rescue a person from disastrous events.

SNOW (IV), 11 FEBRUARY 1910

Dr. Fellowes eats Mrs. Glover's piccalilli, thinking of the baby that he rescued with his surgical scissors. He is disappointed that he has to spend the night at Fox Corner, and wonders why they would name the house after such a "wily beast." Bridget leads him upstairs to a guest room and says goodnight. He wishes he were at home, next to the warm body of his wife.

Once again, Atkinson uses the scene of Ursula's birth to set up another reincarnation. In this piece of the episode, Dr. Fellowes himself remarks on the fine line between life and death and the luck that he was able to arrive at the house on time.

WAR (II), 20 JANUARY 1915

Bridget comes into the nursery with Teddy, telling Ursula to get down from the window. Ursula had been about to jump onto the roof when a small doubt "made her hesitate." Bridget scolds Maurice for throwing Queen Solange out of the window, while Pamela uses a lacrosse net tied to a walking cane to retrieve Queen Solange from the roof.

Like the episode with the ocean, Ursula starts to have these pangs of dread which help her learn from mistakes made in previous lives—allowing her to have a longer (and theoretically better) life.

The meal accompanying tea includes a boiled chicken. Many of their meals involve chickens now because the war necessitates that they keep their own birds. Mrs. Glover's cooking hasn't been the same since George was injured in a gas attack. He is still in a field hospital in France, and Mrs. Glover doesn't know how injured he is.

The second description of the Todd life in World War I is much bleaker than the first, demonstrating how, as people live longer, they become more exposed to tragedy and death around them, as Ursula is.

Maurice asks if they're eating Henrietta, a chicken of theirs that was very old. This question disconcerts Ursula and Pamela. Sylvie warns Maurice about his manners before assuring the girls that the chicken they are eating is not Henrietta—even though she knows that it is. An urgent knocking occurs at the back door. Sylvie hopes it isn't bad news, but it is: Sam Wellington is dead. Bridget screams in horror from the kitchen. That night, Ursula and Pamela place Queen Solange and the figurine side by side on the cabinet, "valiant survivors of an encounter with the enemy."

The perils of war slowly start to creep into the story as Atkinson introduces its first casualty. But in contrast with World War II later, which invades every aspect of Ursula's domestic life, a stark line is still drawn here between the battlefield and the household. This is evidenced by the descriptions of the figurines and dolls as "survivors of an encounter with the enemy"—a phrase which demonstrates just how far removed Ursula and her sister are from any real encounters with the enemy.

ARMISTICE (I), JUNE 1918

Three years later, it is Teddy's fourth birthday, and Sylvie has prepared a surprise party. Bridget, Pamela, Ursula, and Teddy go to deliver jam to Mrs. Dodds while Sylvie gets the party ready. Sylvie has been gardening ever since Old Tom left, and has been cultivating fruit with the help of Clarence Dodds—an old pal of Sam Wellington's who left the army after an injury and now wears a tin mask on half of his face. Clarence had barely started working for the Todds when he and Bridget started a romance, and soon after they were engaged.

The war continues to seep into every aspect of their lives, as they must grow their own crops (in addition to keeping chickens), and more and more of the people around them have been irrevocably affected by the war, like Clarence's grave injury. And yet, even the sacrifices of the war do not alter society's gender roles: while the men do the fighting on the battlefield, the women do the gardening and care for the children in the meantime.

The group sets off for Mrs. Dodds' house with the jam. Maurice has gone off on his bicycle to spend the day with friends, completely uninterested in Pamela's and Ursula's lives. Teddy, on the other hand, is loyal and affectionate like a dog. Clarence meets them at the entrance gate to Mrs. Dodd's home. Mrs. Dodds gives them milk and cake, commenting on how nice it is to see children, although Ursula suspects that she only means Teddy, as everyone likes Teddy.

Ursula's description of Teddy as being affectionate like a dog foreshadows his later intense support for Ursula, which proves to be vital to her well-being. In turn, the statement highlights her deep love for her brother which will motivate many of Ursula's decisions in the second half of the novel.

Clarence then brings them to the Hall, an estate on which he and Mrs. Dodds used to work. He shows them what used to be a massive kitchen garden, but since the war it has become completely overgrown with brambles and thistles. The Daunts, who owned the Hall, lost three sons in the war. Clarence remarks that he misses working in the garden.

The Hall's garden not only shows how death from the war has continued to affect and seep into civilian life, but also how it prevents men from doing more domestically-oriented jobs, demonstrating how it reinforces traditional gender roles.

The Todds return home, and Ursula is nearly as surprised as Teddy by the party, having forgotten all about it. The hallway is decorated with flags and bunting and Sylvie bearing a gift-wrapped present that is unmistakably a toy airplane.

The toy airplane Sylvie buys also foreshadows Teddy's own participation in the Second World War, again illuminating the contrast between the innocence and joy of domesticity and childhood and the death and destruction of war.

ARMISTICE (I), 11 NOVEMBER 1918

The Armistice seems to make Sylvie even more despondent than the war, as she says that the peace won't bring back all of the poor boys that have been lost. The kids are more cheerful: they have the day off of school and are eager to play with the daughters of their new neighbors, Major Shawcross and Mrs. Shawcross. They have five daughters, which excites Pamela, Ursula, and Teddy, as there are no other girls their age in the neighborhood.

Sylvie's reaction to the war is the first acknowledgement by the family of the scale of its destruction, and her depression foreshadows her later decision to commit suicide following the end of World War II, unable to cope with her son's death.

The kids return that day as Mrs. Glover, Bridget, and Sylvie are toasting the peace—though none of them are in a particularly jubilant mood. Hugh and Izzie are still at the Front, and Sylvie won't believe that Hugh is safe until he walks through the door. George Glover is being "rehabilitated" in a home in the Cotswolds; Mrs. Glover won't say anything about him other than that he is no longer really George.

The crisis of war does highlight the value of family and the strength of the love that family members bear each other during these times: Sylvie thinks singularly of Hugh (in contrast to her straying thoughts prior to the war), while Mrs. Glover's love for her son allows him to remain alive.

Bridget and Clarence leave to go to London to take part in the victory celebrations. They invite Mrs. Glover, who declines due to the influenza epidemic. Later that night, Ursula is woken by Bridget's return, and she wakes Pamela. Downstairs, Bridget and Clarence regale them with tales of the festivities, including an appearance of the King and all of the bells of London ringing out. Sylvie appears in the kitchen and makes cocoa for all of them, listening late into the night until they all turn in for bed.

What begins as a scene of jubilation at the armistice quickly turns into tragedy when Bridget and Ursula fall ill. Ursula tries in several other lives to avert her interactions with Bridget—first by avoiding Bridget upon her return, and, when that fails, by attempting to preemptively divert Bridget from attending the celebrations at all.

The next morning, Ursula is burning hot and aching all over; Bridget is also sick. Ursula's breathing is harsh and raspy, and she spits out the beef tea that Sylvie tries to feed her. Pamela stays with Ursula and reads to her. Dr. Fellowes is called, but Ursula's condition only worsens, until she cannot open her eyes or breathe. **Darkness** falls.

Ursula's deaths, particularly in these early chapters, demonstrate the power of fate and chance. Before Ursula learns any better, she is subject to a series of accidental deaths. It is only after she has experienced her mistakes once that she attempts to make choices that will avert her death a second time.

SNOW (V), 11 FEBRUARY 1910

Mrs. Glover wakes Dr. Fellowes and opens the curtains even though it is still dark outside. She tells him that there's been an accident, and he is needed elsewhere: a farmer has been trampled by a bull.

Again, Atkinson returns to the scene of Ursula's birth in order to indicate a reincarnation. The fact that each of the pieces of the scene moves forward in time also indicates a similar kind of moving for Ursula as she learns more each time she is reincarnated.

ARMISTICE (II), 12 NOVEMBER 1918

Ursula is woken by Bridget and Clarence's noisy return from London. Ursula's first instinct is to wake Pamela and to interrogate Bridget about the events, but a "great dread" washes over her—the same feeling she'd had when she followed Pamela into the sea on Holiday in Cornwall. Ursula doesn't know why, but she knows that they mustn't wake up and go downstairs.

Ursula's pang of dread, like the ones she has during the incident with the ocean or the incident with Maurice throwing the doll, allow her to try to avoid previous mistakes, which Atkinson demonstrates allows her to live a longer life—once again demonstrating her own agency.

In the morning, Bridget is very sick. Sylvie goes to call Dr. Fellowes and tells Mrs. Glover to watch the children, as she doesn't want them to go to school. Mrs. Glover makes them do schoolwork at the table until the butcher's boy, Fred Smith, arrives with a hare. The children all like Fred—Pamela had once declared that Maurice had a crush on Fred, and Mrs. Glover had slapped her with a whisk.

Mrs. Glover slapping Pamela for implying that Maurice is gay (despite the fact that this implication was unintentional) demonstrates the rigidity of gender expectations, as this society associated being gay with being less masculine.

It is only after the hare is stripped when anyone notices Teddy's absence. Teddy doesn't respond to his name being called, and Ursula looks in his favorite hiding spaces. She is unable to find him anywhere, and tries to bribe him with the promise of cake. Ursula grows more and more panicked searching for him, until only Bridget's room is unexplored.

Ursula's knowledge of her brother's hiding spots, and her panic when she cannot find him, shows how deeply she reciprocates the love that she receives from Teddy—a love that continues to grow and motivate Ursula throughout the novel.

Ursula, despite all instinct, enters Bridget's room and finds Teddy on Bridget's bed. He says that he thought his airplane might make Bridget feel better—he had great faith in the healing power of toy trains and airplanes (and he wanted to be a pilot growing up). Ursula recognizes immediately that Bridget is dead, her skin the color of lilacs and her eyes wide open.

Ursula's love for Teddy proves so strong that she willingly puts herself in danger (knowing that she would likely contract influenza again) in order to try to rescue her brother from Bridget's room.

At that moment, Sylvie and Dr. Fellowes come into Bridget's room and pull the children into the hall. She frantically tells them to go to her room. Teddy dies by nightfall. Ursula feels the world fade around her, custard clogging her lungs. She takes one last breath, and **the black bat** approaches and enfolds her in its wings. Darkness falls.

Even with Ursula's attempts to avoid her previous mistakes, she is unable to correct her fate. She realizes in the next life that she must preemptively avoid the cause of her death.

SNOW (VI), 11 FEBRUARY 1910

Sylvie lights a candle; Ursula is asleep in her cradle. Sylvie thinks to herself that childbirth is a brutal affair. Sylvie goes to the window; the **snow** has "obliterated everything familiar." She sees George Glover riding one of his horses through the snow, but convinces herself that it was a hallucination. Sylvie feeds Ursula, who seems confused by the process, and wonders about her own breakfast.

Atkinson continues to expand upon and move forward with the events of the morning of Ursula's birth, once again resetting the timeline. The snow, a symbol of randomness, demonstrates how the unpredictability of the world can render people feeling lost or in constantly unfamiliar territory, despite the fact that the book overall argues for a general sense of fate.

ARMISTICE (III), 11 NOVEMBER 1918

Ursula (pretending to be Sylvie) writes a note to Bridget telling her that a gang of robbers is in the village, and that she has locked and bolted the doors, and asking her to stay with Mrs. Dodds for the night after she returns from London. She pins the note to the back door and heads to bed.

Instead of continuing her attempts to avoid Bridget (and death) when she returns to the house, Ursula tries instead to preempt Bridget's return in the hope that she (and Teddy) can evade the illness.

The next morning, Sylvie asks Ursula about the note, but Ursula denies having written it. Sylvie tells her that Pamela has gone to fetch Bridget back from Mrs. Dodds's house. Ursula runs out in a panic until she comes along Pamela and Bridget on the road. Ursula throws her arms around Pamela, telling her she was so worried about her. They return to the house. **Darkness** soon falls again.

Despite Ursula's attempts, and her panic, Bridget's return continues to be difficult to prevent, arguing that sometimes, fate can be very difficult to avoid—or certain fates can only be avoided in a specific way.

SNOW (VII), 11 FEBRUARY 1910

Bridget and Mrs. Glover discuss Ursula's birth and wonder whether Sylvie will stop at three children. After giving Dr. Fellowes breakfast, Mrs. Glover prepares Sylvie's breakfast. The doctor, unable to start his car, had then gotten a ride from George Glover on one of his horses so that he could attend to a farmer that had been trampled by a bull—but was still alive. Mrs. Glover asks Bridget to find a flower for Sylvie's breakfast tray. Bridget is confused by this request, looking out at the fresh coat of **snow**.

As Atkinson continues to expand on the scene, she starts to weave in a major idea of the novel: life's events often don't make sense at the time, and that it is only in hindsight that they make sense. This makes events seem random, chaotic, and sometimes nonsensical as they happen (like Sylvie's vision of George in the previous Snow chapter), but in actuality have a certain degree of order and fate to them.

ARMISTICE (IV), 11 NOVEMBER 1918

Sylvie greets Clarence at the back door and tells him that Bridget has had a bit of an accident. Bridget says that she felt "little hands" shoving her while she was working in the kitchen, leading her to trip and fall over the step and sprain her ankle. Bridget takes Clarence's arm and insists that she will not miss the celebrations in London. "**Darkness**, and so on."

This time, Ursula tries to prevent Bridget from going to the armistice celebrations at all, trying to bring about a scenario in which Bridget does not fall ill or get the children sick. Yet Bridget's will wins out, implying that the more that people have a desire to see something happen, the harder it is to avoid or counteract.

SNOW (VIII), 11 FEBRUARY 1910

Mrs. Glover tells Maurice and Pamela that their younger sister's name is "Ursula" as she gives them breakfast. Bridget asks if Sylvie liked the snowdrop flower.

The shortness of this chapter mirrors the shortness of the previous chapter, and the quick succession of failed attempts that Ursula has to try to prevent her fateful contraction of the flu.

ARMISTICE (V), 11 NOVEMBER 1918

Sylvie explains to Ursula what "déjà vu" means, and that it is a trick of the mind. Ursula increasingly feels confused between what's really happening and what's not. She finds that she knows what someone is about to say before they say it or that a mundane incident will occur just before it happens. Bridget tells her that she has "the sixth sense."

The fact that Ursula has retained some knowledge of her previous lives allows a new kind of story to take shape: one in which Ursula must try to judge which choices will help her avoid previous mistakes and lead her to a better life.

Pamela and Ursula spend the morning in the garden, surrounded by the rabbits (Ursula had convinced her to keep the rabbits George Glover gave them inside, and when the two had grown, they had escaped and multiplied). Pamela hears voices in the Shawcrosses' garden next door, and wonders what the girls' names might be. Ursula knows, but stays quiet—she is getting good at keeping secrets.

The survival of the rabbits is another, smaller example of Ursula using the knowledge from her previous life for good, and their lives parallel Ursula's trajectory. Whereas before, the rabbits had been eaten by foxes, Ursula's knowledge helps them to survive into adulthood.

Bridget puts on her hat for the victory celebrations and stands at the top of the stairs, thinking of Clarence and how they will be married in the spring. Ursula creeps towards Bridget, and pushes her down the stairs. "Practice makes perfect," she thinks.

"Practice makes perfect" had previously been Sylvie's mantra, and it is very fitting to Ursula's situation. After trying several different possibilities and failing each time, she finally finds a solution that will prevent Bridget from going to London and contracting the flu.

Dr. Fellowes declares Bridget's arm broken. Bridget says that someone pushed her, and Sylvie interrogates the children. Ursula says nothing when Sylvie asks if she did it. She knows Bridget might have died, but she had been filled with the great sense of dread, and knew she had to do it. Ursula admits to Teddy that she did it, and Teddy assures her that he still loves her.

Bridget's injury complicates the idea that bad incidents must be avoided in their entirety. As Dr. Kellet says in a later chapter, sometimes bad things must happen in order to prevent worse things from happening—supporting the notion that events, even bad ones, sometimes happen for a reason.

At that moment, there is a great commotion at the front door. Teddy runs to see, reporting back to Ursula that Sylvie is kissing a man, and they're both crying. Ursula looks out and says that she thinks the man might be Hugh.

Sylvie's and Hugh's emotions at his return highlight the importance of family in the story. Even when Sylvie's thoughts have strayed from Hugh, in times of war and crisis, their mutual support becomes essential to each other.

PEACE, FEBRUARY 1947

Ursula returns home to her flat, exhausted from the war and freezing from the cold of the city. She lives on her own now—Millie Shawcross had married an American officer and moved to New York. The building is dingy, but then again, she thinks, all of London now looks wretched. It was "a long, hard war," as Churchill had promised.

After Ursula finally achieves success in making it through World War I, Atkinson jumps forward in the narrative to the end of World War II, providing readers with the sense that war is ubiquitous in Ursula's life and nearly inescapable, a point Atkinson will confirm in later chapters.

Ursula's flat is one room, and Ursula misses the old apartment she and Millie had shared in Kensington, which had been bombed in May 1941. She had actually moved back in for a few weeks, living without a roof. Ursula finds a gift from Pamela waiting for her: fresh vegetables, eggs, and a bottle of whiskey. She is cheered immensely, but then thinks back to the incident at Argyll Road, which plunges her back into gloom. She chides herself for being so "up and down."

The incident in Argyll road, which Atkinson reveals later as an incident filled with gruesome civilian deaths of some of Ursula's neighbors, demonstrates the way in which war can affect all aspects of life. Even in moments of happiness, Ursula is caught up in severe survivor's guilt and depression, as it is inescapable even after it is officially over.

Sylvie had committed suicide on VE Day (Victory in Europe Day), swallowing a bottle of sleeping pills and laying down on Teddy's childhood bed. She had not left a note, but to her family, her intentions had been quite clear. Pamela had told Ursula at the funeral that she used to argue with Sylvie because Sylvie said that science was only about inventing new ways to kill people, and Pamela wondered whether she was right.

Sylvie chooses to kill herself following the death of her husband and her son, which also serves as a way of showing how the war reaches far beyond the battlefield as well as demonstrating how critical her family was to her in these times of crisis.

Ursula lights the gas fire to boil an egg, though there is very little gas pressure. There have been warnings to be vigilant about the gas pressure—in case the gas came back on when the pilot light had gone out. Ursula wonders if it would be so bad to be gassed. Ursula thinks of her younger brother Jimmy, who had helped liberate Bergen-Belsen. Working as a secretary during the war, Ursula had recorded the "endless stream of figures that represented the blitzed and the bombed."

As the war's largest atrocities were unveiled in the concentration camps, this war's violence and the death that it caused are set apart from anything that came before it—particularly because those that had been "blitzed" and "bombed" were so often civilians.

Ursula puts a record on her gramophone: "I'd Rather Be Dead and Buried in My Grave." She eats the egg she boiled and reads. **Snow** falls outside the window, gray and ashy. Ursula thinks of Auschwitz. Ursula writes a thank-you postcard to Pamela and puts it on the mantlepiece next a clock that belonged to Sylvie, and Teddy's photo and his Distinguished Flying Cross medal. Teddy and his crew sat in chairs with their dog, Lucky, in the photo.

Ursula is overwhelmed both by the large-scale deaths of the Jews and others in the concentration camps during the war, as well as the more intimate deaths of her mother and brother, as the war serves to redefine life for millions of people across the world.

Ursula brings her plate to the sink, and the electricity goes out. She takes the bottle of whiskey to bed, still in her coat. The flame on the stove flickers out, and the pilot light dies. She wonders when the gas might come back on. If the smell would wake her, she would relight it. She feels extremely tired. **Darkness** begins to fall.

The war's tragedies ultimately lead Ursula to kill herself (or, rather, to not care whether she lives or dies), but her despair seems particularly instigated by the loss of her brother, whose support had always been critical to her.

SNOW (IX), 11 FEBRUARY 1910

Mrs. Glover's cat, Queenie, sneaks into Sylvie's bedroom, attracted by a new smell. She settles into the "perfect little cat-sized bed, already warmed by a perfect little cat-sized cushion." Ursula begins to suffocate, unable to breathe under Queenie's body, until Sylvie grabs the cat and throws her across the room, and then gives Ursula mouth-to-mouth until she returns to life.

Atkinson's timelines become increasingly muddled, as different timelines no longer take on a linear path (for example, it is unclear whether the previous chapter was a continuation of the chapter just before it or not). Thus, Ursula's reincarnations sometimes serve as stand-alone episodes.

Elsewhere, Mrs. Haddock, the midwife, is sipping a third glass of rum. She had been on her way to deliver Ursula when the **snow** had forced her to take refuge in a pub. The barkeep tells her that they could be stuck there for days, and she may as well have another drink.

This scene is also the one that ends the novel. Here it seems mundane and simply expands upon the perspectives surrounding Ursula's birth. Yet at the end, the scene gains a profound gravity, implying that sometimes mundane incidents can be the difference between one version of events and an entirely different version—even the difference between life and death.

Sylvie urgently knocks on Bridget's door, announcing that the baby is coming early. Bridget scrambles to help as Sylvie says there's no point in calling Dr. Fellowes—he'll never get through the **snow**. Bridget informs Sylvie that the baby is blue, strangled by her own umbilical cord. Sylvie asks what they can do, but Bridget tells her that Ursula is already dead. Sylvie refuses to accept this and grabs a pair of surgical scissors that she keeps in a drawer by her bed. She snips the umbilical cord. "Practice makes perfect."

Ursula is not the only one who appears to learn from her mistakes. While it is never implied that Sylvie experiences the same reincarnations that Ursula does, the fact that she now keeps a pair of surgical scissors (which she had made a note to do after a previous version of Ursula's birth) implies that she is somehow also gaining knowledge from previous lives, and does not want to rely on fate to save her daughter.

LIKE A FOX IN A HOLE, SEPTEMBER 1923

Thirteen-year-old Ursula has lunch with Izzie and catches her up on her life. Ursula tells her that she is no longer seeing Dr. Kellet, her therapist, as she is considered "cured." Izzie, for her own part, has just begun writing a weekly column for a newspaper called *Adventures of a Modern Spinster*, in which she writes (under the name Delphie Fox) about how to be a modern, single woman, because there aren't enough men left to marry.

Izzie continues to be the picture of an independent woman. Even though Sylvie and Hugh critique Izzie, Ursula finds herself drawn to her aunt, and eventually realizes that she wants to become a "modern" woman herself, moving past the idea of traditional gender roles and expectations.

When Izzie had told Hugh and Sylvie of her new job, Sylvie had called her a fool and critiqued her makeup. Hugh was more concerned about her bobbed hair, as he had forbidden the women in his family to cut their hair, and in response Pamela had gone immediately to shear it off. To Ursula, Izzie's column seems to be nothing more than a diary of Izzie's personal life with a little social commentary thrown in.

Hugh and especially Sylvie, by contrast, serve as the idea of a traditional marriage with traditional gender dynamics, and also try to instill in their daughters these same ideals. Yet Pamela (like Ursula) tries to rebel against these antiquated ways of thinking.

Meanwhile, the family has a new addition: Jimmy. His arrival had made Ursula feel as though she was being pushed further and further away from the heart of the family—she had even heard Sylvie call her an "awkward cuckoo." Ursula had told Dr. Kellet that she felt like the odd one out of the family.

As Ursula feels increasingly pushed to the edges of the family life, she begins to see who her major allies are. Sylvie's comments here foreshadow how easily she turns on her daughter later in the chapter.

The novel flashes backward three years. Ten-year-old Ursula had been introduced to Dr. Kellet after she pushed Bridget down the stairs. At their first meeting, Dr. Kellet asks Ursula if she's heard about reincarnation; she has not, but she explains that certain events often feel like they happen in a world that feels simultaneously like this world, and like another world.

Atkinson structures this chapter in a new way: with flashbacks, flash-forwards, and scenes interspersed with each other, mimicking Ursula's own experience of feeling like she is constantly experiencing time and her various lives as a jumble rather than as something linear.

The novel briefly returns to when Ursula is thirteen: at the restaurant, Izzie pays for lunch and takes Ursula on a tour of London in her new car, chatting somewhat thoughtlessly about Marie Antoinette as a maligned figure, reading Dante, and how she had taken a lover in Italy after the war.

Izzie treats Ursula like a peer in conversation, deepening their camaraderie, and also continues to be a figure of independence that Ursula aspires to.

Dr. Kellet explains to ten-year-old Ursula that reincarnation means beginning a new life—though he points out that Buddhists don't believe that people come back as the same person in the same circumstance, like Ursula does. He explains that most religions have an idea of life being cyclical—a snake with its tail in its mouth, for example.

Dr. Kellet veers into a more philosophical assessment of Ursula's reincarnation, while Ursula simply understands that she is experiencing a variety of lives, each of which tries to improve upon the last.

Dr. Kellet specializes in helping men when they have returned from the war. Dr. Kellet himself had had a son, Guy, who died in the war. One day Ursula saw a man in the waiting room sob on the shoulder of the receptionist. Ursula thought then that when Teddy cried when he was younger, she couldn't bear it. All she wanted to do was make sure he never felt like crying again.

Ursula's protectiveness over Teddy shows the deep love that they have for each other—a love that will motivate Ursula's actions during the war in certain lifetimes, and will motivate her to try and avert World War II in its entirety in other lives.

Dr. Kellet theorizes that Ursula's brain is perhaps a little stuck, leading her to think that she is repeating experiences. He tells her that he doesn't want this problem to result in her killing servants, however. Ursula tells him she was saving Bridget—or at least sacrificing her. Dr. Kellet responds that fate isn't in her hands; that that would be a heavy burden for a young girl. He acknowledges that "sometimes a bad thing happens to prevent a worse thing happening," but sometimes "there are situations where it's impossible to imagine anything worse."

The idea that bad things sometimes have to happen in order to avoid worse things becomes a central moral tenet of the book. This notion motivated Ursula's decision to push Bridget, and it eventually will motivate her biggest decision: to seek out Hitler and kill him prior to the rise of the Nazi Party, in order to avert World War II.

Ursula is thirteen again: in London, Izzie and Ursula arrive in Izzie's apartment, where everything is new and shiny. Izzie puts on a jazz record of Ida Cox. Ursula thinks that her voice is extraordinary. Izzie gets a call, after which she tells Ursula that she has to leave. Ursula takes the Tube to the train.

Even though Ursula increasingly looks up to Izzie, the love between them is somewhat incomplete (shown when Izzie leaves Ursula to essentially find her own way home from London). Much of Ursula's struggle in dealing with both Izzie and Sylvie throughout the novel is that each one is an imperfect mother figure in her own way.

Dr. Kellet asks ten-year-old Ursula if she has heard of "*amor fati*," which means acceptance of fate, not thinking of things as either bad or good. He goes on to ask her if she knows what "*Werde, der du bist*" means. Ursula has not (and wonders if Dr. Kellet knows many ten-year-old girls). Dr. Kellet explains that it means "become such as you are, having learned what that is."

*Ultimately Ursula proves herself to be incapable of "*amor fati*"; she does not accept that certain things have to happen (or that she has to live a certain kind of life), as she constantly tries to take action to change her circumstances.*

In bed that night, Pamela and Ursula discuss Ursula's trip to London. Ursula does not mention, however, that she had witnessed a peculiar scene (unseen by Izzie) while she was there). She had seen Sylvie arm in arm with an elegantly dressed man, who guided her way up the Strand.

This revelation becomes a scathing critique of Sylvie (and traditional models). If she feels that her calling in life is to be an ideal wife and mother—and forces that vision upon her daughters—then lying about where she is and spending time with other men reveals a flaw in her system.

The novel flashes forward again. Izzie's next column explains the freedom that a single woman could obtain from a car—particularly that she can avoid being followed down a dark street by a stranger. Ursula does not see Izzie again until Christmas, when she comes to the house "in a bit of a jam" having overspent her income. Hugh lends her money, but she is forced to sell her car and move to a less extravagant apartment.

Yet as soon as Atkinson critiques Sylvie's hypocrisy, she also critiques Izzie's, as she purports to be a modern and independent woman, and yet she still requires help from her brother to bail her out, and must also give up her car, a symbol of female independence. But perhaps in Izzie's case Atkinson does not critique Izzie's view of gender roles, but how she enacts the idea of what an independent woman means.

LIKE A FOX IN A HOLE, DECEMBER 1923

The children are decorating the house for Christmas, and Ursula and Teddy go outside in search of holly. Their dog Trixie (Bosun had died a few years prior) finds the body of a dead girl, eight or nine years old, with her front teeth knocked out, and they run back to the house to inform the adults. Neither her identity nor that of her murderer is ever discovered. Ursula and Pamela eavesdrop to learn that no one in the village is a suspect, and that "terrible things" had been done to the child, including being strangled to death. She is buried as "Angela." Teddy has nightmares for weeks afterward, creeping into bed beside Ursula in the middle of the night.

This incident with the young girl reinforces the idea that danger lurks on every corner, and while sometimes it seems like certain events are fated to happen (looking, for example, at some of Ursula's earlier deaths), simple choices could have avoided this tragedy. Thus, when Nancy falls victim to the same murderer later, Ursula realizes that she can make choices in order to prevent that from happening.

LIKE A FOX IN A HOLE, 11 FEBRUARY 1926 (I)

Hugh wishes Ursula happy sixteenth birthday, saying that her future is all ahead of her (even though Ursula thinks that some of her future is also behind her). They were supposed to have gone to tea in London, but Pamela has recently twisted her ankle, and so they decided to stay home. Millie Shawcross, Ursula's best friend, comes over to have tea with them as well.

The contrasts between fate and choice consequently highlights small incidents that have large effects on the narrative. For example, if Pamela had not twisted her ankle, this chapter might have turned out differently. These small details then start to make readers realize that even the most fateful and horrific of circumstances can perhaps be prevented by a number of small choices.

Maurice is also home from school for the weekend, though he has forgotten Ursula's birthday. He has brought two friends for the weekend: Gilbert and Howie. Gilbert has movie star looks and Howie is American, which gives him a kind of glamour. Girls also find Maurice attractive, a fact that surprises the women in his family. The boys decide to go outside to play a game with Teddy's ball.

Just as Maurice had been an emblem of boyhood in the earlier chapters, he and his friends become quintessential pictures of young men. Atkinson ultimately critiques their characteristic rowdiness and their aggressiveness.

Izzie arrives and brings gifts for Ursula. Ursula hasn't really seen Izzie since she spent a weekend in Fox Corner when she had essentially ignored everyone except for Teddy, whom she had quizzed relentlessly on his life, his school, his hobbies, and his friends. Izzie brings a record of the St. Louis Blues for Ursula, and a red-leather addition of Dante. This is followed by a satin-and-lace bed jacket and a bottle of perfume, which Sylvie pronounces to be far too grown-up for Ursula. Hugh glares at Izzie, wondering how she affords all of it.

Again, Ursula is torn between these two ideas of a mother figure: one who is very traditional and conservative, and one who is forward-thinking and independent. In this chapter, both of them are shown to fail Ursula in their own ways, as they are so bent on their ideas of what girls should be that they fail to actually care for Ursula.

Izzie has one final gift, but for Teddy: a book called *The Adventures of Augustus*, by Delphie Fox. Izzie reveals that she has based Augustus on Teddy (though Teddy is somewhat mortified by it). The book has become very successful, giving Izzie a new income. After the gifts are done, Ursula walks Millie home.

Izzie's writing again confirms her willpower to be an independent woman, and to sustain herself financially. She works to avoid having to rely on Hugh to get her out of financial trouble.

On the way back, Ursula trips over Howie, digging through the bushes trying to find Teddy's ball. Howie offers to warm her up in the cold and pushes his lips against hers, prodding his tongue into her mouth. Ursula is debating what to do when Maurice calls for Howie, and he leaves without a word. Ursula is exhilarated, thinking that she is passing beneath the "triumphal arch that led to womanhood." She wishes it had been Benjamin Cole who had kissed her.

Ursula at first views this loss of innocence as a triumph, because in this society it signals the fact that she is becoming a woman. It is only later that she realizes that this is an assault—not only from Howie but from a society that expects men to be sexually aggressive and women to be passive.

Ursula returns to the house and finds Teddy, gloomy because the boys lost his ball. He opens Izzie's book and scowls. Ursula picks up a glass of rum that Izzie had been drinking, splits it between two glasses, and Teddy toasts her happy birthday.

Through all of the antics of adolescence, and often in spite of adult figures that do not seem to fully understand them, Teddy and Ursula's bond is the strongest she has with another family member, and makes her feel understood and loved.

LIKE A FOX IN A HOLE, MAY 1926

In May, Pamela learns that she failed her entrance exam to Cambridge, and she admits that she panicked when she found a few questions that she couldn't answer. She is particularly upset to learn that Maurice is going to get the highest honors, even though she thinks he's an idiot. Sylvie thinks that "academia [is] pointless for girls," believing that a "woman's highest calling is to be a mother and a wife." She argues that science only invents "better ways of killing people."

Sylvie's thoughts again confirm her traditional view of womanhood—that they only belong in the domestic sphere, as wives and mothers. Pamela's exam shows, in turn, how difficult it can be for girls as compared to boys—she fails not because she lacks the intelligence, but because she lacks the confidence and the support that her brother gets in his education.

Maurice turns up again with Howie in tow, stopping at the house on their way to London. Ursula has thought of Howie frequently, though upon seeing him she realizes he does not know her name. As she climbs the back stairs to fetch something from her room, she encounters Howie on his way down. He pins her to the wall, covering her mouth and "fiddling with her clothes" as "she squeal[s] in protest." He rams his penis inside her, and Ursula thinks that "the arch that led to womanhood did not seem so triumphal anymore, merely brutal and uncaring."

While Howie's previous pursuit of Ursula had been (to her) relatively harmless and fun, now Ursula faces a disastrous escalation of that action. Her recognition that the arch of womanhood is not "triumphal" at all stems from the fact that in this time and place, to be a woman often means to be taken advantage of, or to be subjected to unwanted desires or male expectations.

Howie finishes and bounds down the stairs, completely unphased by what has just happened. Ursula is left to stare at the floral wallpaper—wisteria. She descends a half hour later, once the boys have left. Howie asks if she's all right, and Ursula can only say yes. Ursula goes over the incident again and again, trying to understand what she did wrong.

In addition to the trauma of being raped, Ursula is also burdened by the flawed logic that the society places on women—that to have been assaulted means that women are the ones who have done something wrong, as opposed to the men who commit the violence.

The summer continues. Pamela is accepted at Leeds University to study chemistry. There are dances in the village hall on Friday evenings, and Fred Smith is waltzing with Ursula when the memory of the back stairs overwhelms her. She steps outside for air, feeling queasy.

Ursula's rape not only affects her view of womanhood, but also her mental health, as she is deeply troubled by the incident, demonstrating the danger of society's expectations on girls, particularly as she feels she cannot tell anyone about what happened for fear of being judged.

Maurice had gained his expected first and returns home for a few weeks before going off to train as a barrister. He comments that Ursula looks like a heifer, and a realization dawns on Ursula. She hunts down Sylvie's copy of *The Teaching of Young Children and Girls as to Reproduction*, but the book only advises distracting girls from the topic of sex by giving them bread and cake.

The ramifications of Ursula's rape continue to spiral. The book that Ursula finds in Sylvie's apartment shows how ill-equipped Ursula was in understanding what sex meant, and its consequences—a lack of knowledge that is instigated both by society and by Sylvie's attitudes.

Ursula finds a medical encyclopedia, which explains the mechanics of sex and its consequences. Ursula realizes she is pregnant but doesn't know where to turn. She walks to the train station and finds Fred Smith, who offers her a free ride. She gets on and spends the afternoon walking through London's parks. She has no money—a mistake, she realizes—but she knows where she is inevitably going. Ursula arrives at Izzie's apartment and explains her condition, sobbing.

Again, Atkinson shows the societal issues with even discussing sex. Because of the stigma that is placed on Ursula (despite the fact that she is the victim in the situation), she feels unable to go to her parents, and instead turns to the one person she feels will not judge her for what has happened—Izzie.

Izzie phones Hugh, explaining that Ursula had shown up at her door and would be staying with her for a few days, but not telling him anything else. Izzie gently scolds Ursula, telling her "prevention [is] better than a cure," though Ursula doesn't know what she means. Izzie says that they must get rid of the baby, and Ursula agrees.

Ursula's true innocence is confirmed yet again. Though she is sixteen years old, society makes sex a completely undiscussable topic, particularly for young women—so much so that Ursula doesn't even understand what "prevention" means.

Izzie takes Ursula to a large house in Belgravia, dropping her off and promising that she would return later. Ursula has no idea what is about to happen. Ursula enters the room and a doctor orders her onto the operating table. She is confused that she's having an operation. The nurse places a mask over her face, and the next thing she knows, Izzie is driving her home, telling her that she'll feel strange for a while. Ursula wonders how Izzie "know[s] so much about this appalling process." At Izzie's apartment, Ursula asks "what happened to the baby" and if "they [gave] it to someone nice."

While Izzie attempts to help Ursula and to be supportive, she too is susceptible to some of the societal stigmas surrounding rape and abortions, as she cannot bring herself to explain to what having an abortion actually means. Thus not only does Ursula not consent to having a child, she cannot truly consent to having an abortion, either, as she doesn't understand the consequences of the operation and thinks instead that she put her baby up for adoption.

That night, Ursula vomits and develops a fever. The world blurs until Hugh appears, smiling at her and saying he will get her to a hospital (though Izzie protests that she'll be prosecuted, to which Hugh says that he hopes that she is thrown in jail). The next thing Ursula knows, she's in a hospital with Sylvie watching over her. Sylvie says, "How could you?" Ursula falls asleep again, feeling **the black bat** approaching her, but when she reaches out her **hand** to the darkness, her hand is rejected, and she wakes up. Hugh smiles at her, saying, "Welcome back."

The stark contrast between Hugh and Sylvie in this scenario demonstrates how the love that family members bear each other is most critical in moments of crisis. Despite the fact that both parents are concerned with Ursula's actions, Sylvie is exceedingly cold (sending Ursula to the arms of the "black bat," or death), while Hugh is warm and supportive, essentially recalling her from death.

LIKE A FOX IN A HOLE, AUGUST 1926 (I)

Ursula becomes extremely depressed, and she decides to do a typing and short-hand course rather than return to school. She only reveals the truth to Pamela, who is shocked that Ursula thinks what happened is her own fault. Sylvie, by contrast, blames Ursula completely for what happened. Ursula feels as though her life was saved for no purpose. She asks her mother to see Dr. Kellet again; Sylvie says uncaringly that he has since retired.

In this time of crisis, Ursula's family members continue to show their true colors. While Pamela understands the hypocrisy of blaming women for being the victims of an assault, Sylvie does not seem to understand this hypocrisy. Not only is she cold to her daughter, but she actively exacerbates the situation by not helping her find a doctor who can improve her mental health.

Ursula cuts her hair one day as penance. That night at the dinner table, Major Shawcross knocks on the door, asking if they've seen Nancy—they haven't. He looks sick, saying she's missed her dinner. Teddy offers to help look for her; of the Shawcross girls, he is closest to Nancy. Hugh also offers to go. They find Nancy strangled in a cattle trough, just like the other little girl years before. Teddy is heartbroken.

The ramifications of Ursula's assault go beyond the traumas of her own life. In future timelines, when she does not cut her hair in penance, she is able to walk Nancy home and prevent her murder, allowing Atkinson to emphasize even more the immense repercussions of Howie's actions.

Pamela leaves for Leeds, hugging Ursula tightly before she goes. Ursula does not return to school in the fall, and no one questions her. "Millie [is] too grief-stricken over Nancy" to worry about Ursula. Instead, Ursula attends a secretarial college run by a man named Mr. Carver. She wonders whether it might have been better to throw herself under a train after "Belgravia"—"her shorthand for what had happened." She wonders whether she could actually start her life over, or if this "reincarnation" is "all in her head."

Ursula's thoughts here raise the question of whether she is in fact living out many different lives, or whether these possibilities are simply in her head. In some ways, Ursula's different lives shed light on the experience of an author, who controls the fates of characters. Atkinson also places some power on her readers, who then choose which of Ursula's storylines are most compelling.

Mr. Carver likes touching "his girls" (the female students) "lightly on their shoulders," and sometimes he makes them practice typing blindfolded. On these occasions, Ursula hears him making "wheezes and grunts" but is too afraid to see what he is doing. One afternoon, he touches Ursula's neck. She wonders if there is something bad in her that invites this kind of unsolicited attention.

Ursula's assault continues to affect her negatively, as the attitudes she gains about men follow her for the rest of her life. Made to feel weak, inferior, and again like she is the one to blame for the negative attention, Ursula is unable to stand up to the sexual harassment perpetrated by Mr. Carver.

LIKE A FOX IN A HOLE, JUNE 1932

Six years later, Pamela happily marries a man named Harold. Ursula lives on her own, though no one knows this. Her roommate, Hilda, has moved out and lives with a man whose wife will not grant him a divorce, so Hilda has to keep up appearances that she still lives with Ursula for the benefit of her family. Ursula doesn't mind living alone, though Hugh and Sylvie would have been scandalized.

Pamela's happy marriage is contrasted here with Ursula's solitude, which is framed as both negative and scandalous. But in future timelines, when Ursula undergoes less hardship at the hands of men, she feels more empowered at the idea of living alone.

Living alone, Ursula realizes how few friends she has—her friendship with Millie didn't survive Nancy's death. Ursula works for an importing company but isn't friends with any of the girls in the office. They invite her out, but only out of "charity," she thinks, and she never takes them up on their offers. Ursula life outside of the office consists mostly of drinking.

Ursula's friendships, like her relationships with her family, are tested in moments of crisis, and neither she nor Millie have truly been able to support one another in their individual moments of crisis; thus, their relationship has become distant.

The drinking started when Pamela came to stay for a weekend prior to her wedding. Ursula planned to make a boeuf bourguignon for her, which required burgundy. A wine merchant picked out a bottle for Ursula, and that evening she tried a glass. She had never drunk alcohol alone before, but her "despondency" had disappeared, and so she had another. The next day she finished the bottle. Soon, Ursula began going around to different restaurants and pubs, buying a variety of liquors and offering a different excuse to each one about it being a gift for a family member. She had become a secret drinker very quickly, and found herself drowning in alcohol in a matter of weeks.

Ursula's spiral continues, particularly now that she is isolated from the people who love her (or the people who were supposed to love her most have turned on her). Instead of supporters, they become ways in which Ursula can acquire more alcohol. Alcohol becomes a poor substitute for the love of her family which has been so vital to her up to this point, and one that she eventually tries to remedy with the relationship she gains in this chapter.

A few months after Pamela's wedding, Ursula trips (sober) on her way home from work, slamming her nose into the pavement. The pain stuns her and she kneels on the ground, holding herself. A man stops, noticing the blood, and helps her to her feet, asking if she's okay. He introduces himself as Derek Oliphant. Three months later, they are married.

Ursula's haste in marrying Derek stems from her relief that someone cares about her, and also that he represents the traditional image of a strong man who wants to protect her and make her feel safe.

Derek is a history teacher, and their courtship consists of long bike rides and visiting pleasant pubs—though Ursula stops drinking as suddenly as she started. Mostly, she is relieved that someone wants to look after her. She learns that Derek's mother lives in Barnet but his father is dead, and his younger sister had died when she accidentally fell into a fire at four years old. Ursula tells Derek that she had almost drowned as a girl, and he says that he too nearly drowned when he was a boy.

Ursula's thoughts reveal that her feelings for Derek stem primarily from the fact that he replaces the familial love that she had been cut off from following her abortion. He turns up at a crucial juncture in her life when she is facing years of depression as well as a new crisis—drinking—and his support during that time makes her extremely grateful and loyal to him.

Ursula and Derek marry in a registrar's office, witnessed only by Hugh, Sylvie, and Derek's mother. Pamela and Teddy are both upset not to have been invited, but Ursula is just happy to belong to someone. Hugh is supportive of Ursula. Sylvie, in the powder room, asks whether Derek knows Ursula is not "intact." Ursula doesn't understand what she means; Sylvie comments that "for someone who is far from innocent," Ursula is still "remarkably naïve."

Sylvie's hypocrisy concerning feminine purity again reveals itself here. She criticizes Ursula not only for being the victim of an assault, but also not knowing the assault changed her body. Yet this lack of knowledge is due to Sylvie's (and society's) belief that women should remain so pure that they should not even be informed about sex, despite the fact that knowledge of its consequences might have empowered Ursula to try to prevent it in the first place.

Ursula and Derek move into a house close to his school, which Derek had bought and furnished without Ursula having seen it. Ursula is slightly disappointed, as it is a bit drab. Their honeymoon consists of a wet week in Worthing, and Ursula finds that Derek changes from "solicitous suitor to disenchanted spouse." They spend days sheltering in cafés and museums, or playing cards poorly with other guests at their boardinghouse.

Derek and Ursula's first week of marriage already sets the stage for it to turn sour very quickly, as their marriage proves how ideas of a traditionally picturesque marriage (a breadwinning husband taking care of the household, a wife responsible for the cooking and cleaning) becomes harmful to both spouses.

On the first night of their honeymoon, Derek seems not to notice that Ursula is not "intact." He brags rather pompously that he is "not inexperienced" when it comes to sex, arguing that it is the duty of a husband to know something of the world so that he can protect the purity of his wife. When they make love, Ursula finds, he is rather indifferent to her. She wonders about other couples, like Pamela and Harold, noting the affection between them. Ursula senses that she and Derek may not share the same affection.

Atkinson again highlights the double standards of the society when it comes to sex and gender. While women are expected to be pure and sexually inexperienced, men have very little consequences for having sex before marriage. Derek even implies here that men should *have sex before marriage. The discrepancy between these gender expectations, however, set the parameters for assaults like the one Ursula experienced.*

Ursula's job becomes one of keeping house, making sure everything is washed, scrubbed, dusted, folded, ironed, swept. Derek is very particular, and banishes Ursula from his company most evenings so that he can work on a textbook he is writing—the income of which he says that they very much need. He tells Ursula that they are barely able to pay their bills because of her "lack of domestic economy."

Ursula is put in a very rigid position in the household. Her tasks seems to stem more from Derek's expectations of what a wife should be, than what he actually seems to want from her—expectations that stem from a society that traditionally sees men in the workplace, and women keeping house.

Ursula is expected to have breakfast on the table at exactly the right time, in exactly the right way. Tea is a different kind of nightmare because Ursula is forced to think of new things to cook all the time, and yet she is always chastised for overspending her housekeeping allowance. Before, if she was really in need of extra money she could always ask Izzie or Hugh, but Derek would be mortified if she did this while they were married because it would be a "slur on his manhood."

Ursula's explanation expands to include yet another traditionally female role: that of cook. The harm of traditional gender roles is emphasized when Ursula is not allowed to ask for help because doing so would be an insult to Derek's masculinity, even though equating masculinity with not asking for help, or with needing money, is an arbitrary construct that society has instilled in him.

After several months, Ursula feels as though she might go mad if she doesn't get a pastime, and so she takes up tennis. When she tells Derek over breakfast, he is angry that she didn't ask for permission before doing so, and throws his plate across the room before walking out of the house. He returns as Ursula is getting ready for bed and chokes out a brief "goodnight," but in the middle of the night he climbs on top of her and thrusts himself inside her.

It is in this episode in which Derek's ideas of masculinity cross over into truly toxic, abusive actions. He views his role as husband to be completely controlling over Ursula's every action, and any attempts on Ursula's part to defy this control and retain a shred of power lead him to unleash vicious and sexually aggressive behavior.

One afternoon, Ursula and Derek go to his mother's house. Derek is dispatched on several jobs around the house, and so Ursula and Mrs. Oliphant are left to chat. Ursula asks if she has any photographs of Derek when he was young—or any of his late sister. Mrs. Oliphant is confused, concluding that she only had Derek. Soon Ursula discovers that Derek had also lied about his father's death, and about having nearly drowned as a child.

Derek's desire for control also leads him to be mentally manipulative as well. It is unclear why he had lied about his past, but a possible explanation is to make Ursula feel connected to him or close to him, so that she might marry him before she realizes how dangerous he is.

Another afternoon, Pamela visits Ursula at home. She is the first in Ursula's family to visit, as Ursula has been trying to keep everyone away from the house. But she is relieved to see Pamela. Pamela asks if anything is the matter, but Ursula lies and says that it's only her time of the month. Pamela then announces that she's going to have a baby.

Not only is Pamela's marital bliss in complete contrast with Ursula's misery, but Pamela's visit also reminds her of the love and support she once received from her family, and which she no longer receives (and perhaps never truly did) from Derek.

The next day, Derek scolds Ursula for the breakfast she makes, saying sarcastically that she does nothing all day (except play tennis) and can't manage to cook him an egg. He slaps her, sending her reeling into the oven and onto the floor. He then slides the egg onto her head and stalks out of the house. After this incident, everything Ursula does seems to make Derek angry, sending him into enormous rants. She gives up tennis to appease him, but violence seems always to simmer beneath his surface.

Derek's actions escalate from aggression and manipulation to outright physical and emotional abuse. Atkinson demonstrates the danger in Derek's belief that the only way to keep control of his house and retain his manhood is by asserting physical dominance over his wife.

Derek gives Ursula money to buy a hat for "sports day"—an event at his school. When she goes to buy one, she hardly recognizes herself, and wails in horror. The owner of the shop tries to calm her down, asking if it's her time of the month. Ursula goes to sports day and overhears two teachers talking about how Derek is in trouble for hitting students, how he is an awful teacher, how he is in massive debt, how his book is a joke, and how they hear his wife is very unstable.

The other teachers confirm Derek's need to assert dominance not only over his wife but over other potentially weaker targets, like his students. Their revelation of Derek's financial troubles and his ineffectuality as a teacher likely fuels this insecurity, pushing him to be more and more assertive towards others.

Derek walks up to Ursula, saying "hello, dear," and kissing her on the cheek. Ursula can't help but burst out laughing—it is the nicest thing he has said to her in weeks. He smiles at her, but she can tell he is seething underneath. She thinks that perhaps she is, in fact, unstable.

Even when Derek acts with some degree of kindness toward Ursula, it is not out of love but rather out of a desire to fulfill societal expectations of traditional marital relationships. His words and actions are clearly for the benefit of the people around them, to make them look like a happy couple, and like he is providing her with a happy life.

That evening, Derek stays at school for dinner. Ursula goes into his "study" (what had once been the dining room) to see his work, but she only finds scraps of disconnected sentences, thoughts, and paragraphs written over and over. She realizes that "Derek's whole life [is] a fabrication," and wonders if he only wanted her to be a part of it so that he could have "someone weaker than himself," or someone who represented an idea of what normal, married life meant.

Derek's vision of what normal married life looks like, and his expectations of the roles a husband and wife should play, become extremely harmful not only to Ursula (who is subjected to his rigid and sexist standards), but also to Derek himself as he tries to achieve a societal ideal rather than something truly attainable.

At that moment, Derek returns home, asking Ursula what she's doing. She calls him a liar, and asks him why he married her. He punches her in the face. She wakes up the next morning, trying to make as little sound as possible. She steals a ten-shilling note from Derek's wallet and walks to the train, her heart pounding, worrying that he will follow her. As she waits for the train, she washes some of the dried blood from her face in the bathroom.

Ursula's theory that Derek only wanted her in order to have someone weaker than himself is proven correct, as any attempt on her part to make herself seem stronger is met with violence, as Derek continues to try to prove his dominance over her. Yet Ursula is not so subjugated or proud that she does not try to escape this abuse.

Ursula arrives at Izzie's apartment. Izzie is horrified to see Ursula's beaten face and invites her in. Izzie's dentist fixes Ursula's teeth, and Ursula wears her right arm in a sling for a while. Her nose has been broken and her cheekbones and jaw cracked, but she feels "scourged clean." Izzie tells her to stay as long as she would like.

Even though Ursula had a horrendous experience the last time she went to Izzie for help, she understands that Izzie is still the only person who can give her refuge, who will understand her situation but will not blame her for it, and will give her the love she desperately lacks.

Ursula tells her family that she'd gone away for the summer, but Teddy is able to find her at Izzie's. His presence cheers Ursula up immediately. He asks what happened to her face, and then if she's left Derek. He's happy to hear that she has. Teddy had recently announced that he wants to be a farmer, and has been working on the land and writing poetry. He had been heartbroken by Nancy's death, and describes his pain like walking into a room and feeling his life has ended, but he keeps on living. Ursula says she understands.

Even more than the support from Izzie, the bond between Ursula and her younger brother proves to be the strongest. Not only does he bring her emotional relief, he provides her with unconditional love that gives her a new sense of life. Additionally, his pain over Nancy gives them a further sense of communion, as he understands to a degree Ursula's pain in having been essentially disowned by her mother, depressed, and drawn into an abusive marriage—but still, they both keep on living.

Ursula dozes off with her head on Teddy's shoulder, still tremendously tired, until the doorbell rings. She answers it, presuming that it is Izzie—but it is Derek. She is so shocked she can't speak. He twists her arm back and marches her into the living room. When he sees Teddy, he asks if he's the man Ursula has been "whoring around London with" and smashes her head into the coffee table.

Derek reveals his insecurities, his sexism, and his desire for power again when he arrives at Ursula's door. He thinks that the only reason she could have for leaving him is because she is cheating on him—because she is a "whore"—and again tries to dominate her through violence.

Ursula cannot see because of the blood in her eyes, but she can hear Teddy and Derek fighting. She thinks that she doesn't mind dying, as long as Teddy is safe. She is cold and tired, and she remembers feeling this way in the hospital after Belgravia, when Hugh's **hand** in hers had been the only thing to keep her in this life. **The black bat** comes for Ursula. She holds out her hand for Teddy but nothing can stop the darkness this time.

Ursula's willingness to die for her brother recurs in later timelines, when she sacrifices herself to ensure that Teddy will not die in World War II,. She draws a connection between the support Teddy bears for her and the love her father had provided when she had ended up in the hospital, holding out a hand to each one of them in her time of need.

LIKE A FOX IN A HOLE, 11 FEBRUARY 1926 (II)

Ursula punches Howie in the face. He protests that he only wanted a kiss, saying he wasn't trying to "*rape* her or anything." Maurice calls Howie and he runs off. Ursula thinks that this is "a small triumph for her new womanhood." She finds Teddy's ball and returns it to him.

Atkinson demonstrates how Ursula evades her fate with Derek not by avoiding him, but by preempting Howie's aggressive kiss instead, therefore preventing her rape as well. Thus, Atkinson draws a connection from the way in which young women are subjugated with violence when they are young, to how this behavior becomes normalized and expected when they grow up.

LIKE A FOX IN A HOLE, AUGUST 1926 (II)

Ursula is reading *Chéri* beneath the apple trees, when Sylvie happens upon her. Sylvie says she should do more with her French. Ursula says she wants to live in Paris, and wonders whether she should apply to university when she finishes school. Sylvie tells her that it won't teach her to be a wife and mother. Ursula questions whether she wants to be a wife and mother.

Sylvie is not cold to Ursula in this timeline, but the damage has already been done. Ursula realizes that she does not receive the support she needs to from her mother, and she also realizes that she does not want to follow in her mother's footsteps and adhere to society's gender expectations.

Izzie arrives, commenting on how grown up Ursula looks now that she's sixteen. Izzie reveals that she eloped when she was sixteen, which Sylvie denies as nonsense. Ursula, for her own part, is in love with Benjamin Cole. Izzie then says that she has become quite successful following her book series, but she has no husband or child to share her fortune with. She asks Sylvie, then, if she might adopt Jimmy. Sylvie is flabbergasted and reveals her shock to Hugh.

Sylvie's enormous distaste for Izzie can now be re-contextualized, after readers have seen how Sylvie treats her own daughter following a traumatic rape and abortion. But it is clear that, like Ursula, Izzie simply needed (and continues to need) love and support from family, even while she puts on a veneer of being an independent and modern woman.

Ursula steals an apple from the kitchen and then gets a pang of terror. Instinctively, she runs to the train station, wondering if there is a train disaster she might have to stop. But the trains seem fine. On the way home, Ursula is still drenched in fear when she comes across Nancy Shawcross. Ursula offers to walk her home. As they approach a dairy field, a man with a limp climbs over the gate. He tips his hat to them and keeps walking.

Ursula's pushing off Howie not only improves her life, but also prevents the death of her friend—once again proving how the smallest changes in a person's life can lead to incredibly different outcomes.

A LOVELY DAY TOMORROW (I), 2 SEPTEMBER 1939

Ursula is visiting Pamela at her home in Finchley, London. Pamela is pregnant again, this time hoping for a girl. She and Ursula chat about Pamela and Harold's most recent visit to Maurice's house, when Maurice had said that the war would only last a few months. Ursula remarks that he has a job in the Home Office, in the new Home Security department, so he ought to know.

This and the following chapters begin to explore the massive ramifications of World War II throughout England and Europe. Pamela and Ursula (and Maurice, for that matter), don't seem to grasp the gravity of this conflict, and how all-encompassing it will be for years to come.

Ursula also has a job in the Home Office. After school she had not gone to a traditional university; instead, she had gone to a small secretarial college because she had been rather eager to earn her independence. The college was run by a man named Mr. Carver, who tried to make "his girls" wear blindfolds when they typed. Ursula led a revolt of the girls, suspecting something sinister beneath the practice. The other girls admired her rebelliousness, but Ursula thought that she was merely being sensible.

While many of the adjustments in Ursula's timelines lead to different outcomes (for example, here, Ursula's newfound empowerment allows her to stand up to creepy Mr. Carver), there are other aspects of her life that are somewhat unchanged. The fact that Ursula doesn't manage to avoid that particular secretarial school altogether in this lifetime implies that some fates are harder to avoid than others, because Ursula can have many different reasons for wanting to attend the college.


Ursula had then gotten a job in the Home Office, rising through the ranks in various clerical jobs over the years. Since 1936 she's been working in the Air Raid Precautions department. Back at Pamela's house in Finchley, Ursula thinks that they're very merry for people who are on the brink of war.

Ursula understands the gravity of the war, perhaps because to some degree she has already lived it, and subconsciously understands the toll it will take on her, her family, and the war at large.

Pamela has spent the morning organizing evacuees from London. Ursula wonders whether Pamela will stay in the city, and tells her she should go to Fox Corner. Pamela says she'd rather not stay with Sylvie; instead, she has a friend from her university with a cottage in Yorkshire and can take her sons (Nigel, Andrew, and Christopher) there.

The vast reach of the war becomes apparent almost immediately, as Pamela and many others choose to uproot their lives in order to preemptively avoid the bombing that they know is imminent.

Pamela asks how "The Man from the Admiralty" is. Ursula has been involved with Crighton for a year. He is fifteen years older than Ursula, married, and has three daughters. The first time they made love (in an apartment provided for him in London), he told Ursula he would never leave his family, and she didn't expect him to. Pamela asks if she loves him; Ursula responds that she *likes* him. Pamela is skeptical of their adulterous relationship, arguing that marriage is a part of the nuts and bolts that hold society together. But she admits that she admires Ursula for being her own woman, and not following the herd.

Pamela's view of marriage feels less rigid than Sylvie's, and seems to come more from a place of contentedness in her own marriage (and thus wanting Ursula to experience that same happiness) than from wanting to impose societal norms on her sister for the sake of propriety. This is particularly evident when she admits that she admires Ursula for her independence and for finding fulfillment in her own way, demonstrating that Pamela (unlike Sylvie) prioritizes Ursula's happiness over societal conventions.


Crighton had been at the Battle of Jutland and had "seen much," but his life had become rather boring following World War I; he told Ursula that she brought excitement to his life. He had also become remorseful over the secretive nature of their relationship, but Ursula knew that if her colleagues got wind of their affair, there would have been a scandal. She has become good at keeping secrets.

Crighton and Ursula's relationship establishes a societal pattern that continues throughout the war: people who are taking more advantage of their present moment, because the future is so uncertain.

Pamela worries that Harold will have to remain in London—that he'll probably be called up to serve if the city is bombed and gassed. Pamela grows depressed, thinking that this is probably their last day of normal life for a while. Ursula herself was supposed to go on holiday, but instead she had stocked up on supplies, food and warm clothing (and had refrained from buying a yellow dress). Harold appears and informs them that the hospital is already evacuating patients. He says that it seems likely that war will be declared the following day.

Even before the toll of the dead starts streaming in, society already starts to be unsettled by the mere idea of war. Lives are not merely ended and disrupted by the war, but even the lives of the people who survive are put on pause, awaiting the potential damage that might occur.

A LOVELY DAY TOMORROW (I), NOVEMBER 1940

Ursula is on her back in a pool of water. She smells sewage, plaster, brick dust, gas, and explosives around her. She looks up and sees the frame of the window to her apartment; the curtains are now charred rags. She thinks about how Millie had suggested she move in with her in Phillimore gardens. She tries to take her mind off of her current predicament. She remembers looking out the window in her apartment and turning on the radio to a German station (she had been taking German lessons), but unable to understand anything had put a Ma Rainey record on the gramophone—a gift from Izzie, who had left her house in Holland Park and had decamped to California with her new husband.

Even one year into the war, Ursula's life has drastically changed, as bombs have become a near constant presence. Millie's offer for Ursula to move in with her becomes ironic. It represents an alternative possibility that is unexplored in this life and which tantalizes her, as Ursula thinks that she might have escaped her current predicament if she had only been somewhere else—even though the bombs are ubiquitous.


Ursula has gotten to know her neighbors over the previous year: Lavinia and Ruth Nesbit, two old, retired spinsters, live on the top floor. The Millers, a large family, live on the bottom floor. Next door to Ursula lives Mrs. Appleyard, a single mother with a baby named Emil, who screams all day and night. They have minimal, polite interaction.

The brutal and pervasive destruction of the war can be seen in the fact that by the end of this chapter, all of the people in the building will have died, displaying the broad scale of the war's devastation.

Recently Ursula had visited Pamela, who gave birth to another boy, Gerald. Pamela had been terribly bored to be shut up with so many little boys in Finchley, had returned to London briefly before the nightly raids started, but since then had retreated to Fox Corner to avoid the bombs. Harold is now working the front line, and says that every night is hell at the bombsites.

Harold's short description of the bombsites is later borne out in graphic description by Atkinson, both when Ursula experiences the bombs herself, and when she is the one dealing with its aftermath in a later life. The horrors are thus shown to be "hell" no matter what kind of interaction one has with them.

Ursula is no longer seeing Crighton—the declaration of war had made him guilty, and they had parted ways, even though he was very distraught about it. Ursula had been upset, but she had never been in love with Crighton. She thinks it is a shame, though, that they broke it off—the war made indiscretions easier, as the blackout is the perfect screen for "illicit liaisons."

Ursula's thoughts demonstrate how the war disrupts society not only with its violence and poverty, but also how it changes social norms and would allow Ursula to carry on her affair.

Instead, Ursula had begun a relationship with a fellow student from her German class—Ralph. Ralph had fought at Dunkirk (and was shot in the leg, resulting in a permanent limp) and now works in the same building as Ursula. Ralph is sardonic, leftwing, utopian, and nothing like Crighton.

Ursula remains on the path of being a more empowered woman (in contrast with her previous lives), continuing her string of relatively casual relationships men who treat her as equals.

One day when Ursula ran into Maurice at her job, he told her with distaste that it might not look good for her to be courted by a "Red." He also criticized her for taking German, as though she was getting ready to welcome the enemy. She retorted that he can't accuse her of being both a communist and a fascist.

Maurice is just as he is when he was younger, completely uninvolved in Ursula's life except to criticize. While here Ursula brushes off Maurice's insensitivity, later on in the war his callousness takes its toll on her.

In the present, Ursula looks around the wreckage, and can see that most of the wall between her apartment and Mrs. Appleyard's has disappeared. She can see a dress of Lavinia Nesbit's hanging through the shattered beams above her. She wonders if she might end up an old maid—if she could be considered an old maid after she had carried on an affair.

Each time Ursula returns to the present, Atkinson lets on more and more clues into Ursula's dire situation, as each bomb does an exceptional amount of damage.

The previous day Crighton had sent Ursula a note, asking if she had seen a gold engraved cigarette case that belonged to him. She had found it beneath her bed a few days after he left her. That evening she had done the crossword with Ralph stretched across her lap in the sofa. There was an easy camaraderie and respect between them.

Both of Ursula's beaus serve as a contrast to Derek: secure in their masculinity, and yet treating her with respect and dignity. While the rigid gender expectations leave Ursula without any joy, being able to control her own life and her own desire allows Ursula to be a lot happier.

Ursula is very fond of Ralph—not in love with him, but finds him very dependable. Sitting on the couch with him, Ursula had commented aloud that if one small thing could have changed in the past—if Hitler had died at birth—things might be completely different. Ralph wonders if Ursula would have killed Hitler as a baby to prevent it from happening. She thinks that she would, if it would save Teddy.

While Ursula's and Ralph's discussion is metaphorical here, it gains a lot more weight in subsequent chapters when Ursula does attempt to kill Hitler prior to the start of the war. Perhaps notably, however, Ursula does not kill him as a baby or child, but instead when he has already become a star of the Nazi Party. Perhaps this is Ursula's own way of seeing whether Hitler himself might be able to avoid his immorality in another version of life.

Teddy had been working on a small farm and wrote poetry, but had applied to the RAF the day after war was declared. He is now in Canada, learning how to fly. Ursula wishes he could stay over there forever.

Ursula's love for Teddy becomes the motivation to try to kill Hitler in another version of her life, sacrificing herself in the process but hopefully allowing him to live.

Ursula had told Ralph abruptly that the raids would be starting soon, and that he'd better leave. She pushed him out the door with a kiss. She hears the planes whine overhead and then the *swish* and *thump* of the bombs falling and exploding. She descends the stairs to the cellar, which the residents used as an air-raid shelter. On the way, she passes Lavinia and Ruth, who say Lavinia has forgotten her knitting and are heading upstairs.

The war has become so expansive for civilians that the raids have essentially become normalized. She, Ralph, and the other residents have a routine they follow. Lavinia has even become so undisturbed by its disasters that she prioritizes her knitting over her safety.

The rest of the residents gather in the Millers' cellar. A tremendous explosion rocks the cellar and everyone goes quiet. Ursula's heart thumps, and she thinks of Jimmy, who had recently had a few days' leave from the army and they had gone drinking in the risqué part of town. She asked him to promise not to die as they groped their way home in the darkness, listening to some other part of London being bombed. He had said he would do his best.

Even when Ursula's family isn't physically present, she still depends on them in times of crisis, using them as a means of distraction to take her mind off of the war going on around her.

In the present, Ursula doesn't know how long she's been lying in the pool. Mrs. Appleyard, covered in dirt, dust, and blood, claws over to Ursula, asking if she's seen Emil. Ursula says she hasn't, and Mrs. Appleyard disappears. Then Ursula notices Lavinia's dress once again. Except it's not just her dress. It's her body, only without her head and her legs. Ursula starts to panic. She thinks about the explosion—how it had felt like the door to "hell suddenly split open" and her insides were being sucked from her body.

For the first time, Ursula starts to experience the visceral violence and damage of the war. In later timelines, she will understand the scale of the death and destruction, but here she sees and experiences the personal, individual toll that the war has—the tragedy of losing a friend, and of a child dying far too young.

A man's voice (later revealed to be Mr. Emslie) breaks the silence, as he tells Ursula that there are people trying to get her out. She tries to speak but her words are slurred. The man holds her **hand**, and she is extremely grateful. **Snow** falls, and she starts to fall asleep. The man tries to hold her hand tighter and keep her awake, but Ursula imagines herself flying off a roof, floating into the blackout. **Darkness** falls.

Ursula herself experiences death due to war several times. The snow once again conveys the randomness of fate—bombs are dropped all over London every day, and Ursula just happens to be hit this time. She spends many other lives trying to avoid this fate, but the war proves itself to be difficult to escape because it is so all-encompassing.

A LOVELY DAY TOMORROW (II), 2 SEPTEMBER 1939

Ursula leaves Pamela and Harold's house, and when she returns home she tries on the yellow dress that she'd bought earlier that day. She can hear Mrs. Appleyard having an argument with her husband, whom Ursula had only encountered once. She enjoys looking at her figure in the dress, and thinks it unlikely that she would ever have children. Sylvie had asked her recently if she would never marry, and Ursula in turn had wondered if that would be such a bad thing.

Ursula's second life experiencing the war has a few small but crucial adjustments, demonstrating how the war is changing people's philosophies about what makes a meaningful life. Whereas before she'd found the yellow dress too extravagant for wartime, now she chooses to indulge, wanting to bring herself some joy during a time of such destruction.

That evening Ursula meets Crighton (summoned by a coy note) for dinner at the Savoy. She wears one of her best evening dresses, but instead of escorting her to the bar Crighton takes her upstairs to a suite. After sex, Crighton pours her champagne and tells her that he's left his wife and daughters, saying that life is too precious to be unhappy. She says she doesn't want to marry him; he agrees, instead asking her to move into an apartment with him in Egerton Gardens. She agrees.

Crighton is also inspired by this new guiding philosophy, viewing his life in a new light and choosing to be happy with Ursula instead of unhappy with his wife in these times. The war also provides a reason for them to defy current social norms, choosing to live together but not to marry. Perhaps this is because, in the face of a society under duress, it is easier not to avoid those social norms.

A LOVELY DAY TOMORROW (II), APRIL 1940

Maurice picks up Ursula at Egerton Gardens to take her to Fox Corner for Hugh's birthday—though she knows he is only doing this because it would have been awkward to drive home without having given her a lift. Before she leaves, Ursula takes off the wedding ring she wears for appearances' sake when she's not at work. Crighton kisses her goodbye and tells her to have a nice time.

Even though Crighton and Ursula are defying social expectations, Ursula still has a hard time owning that defiance. Ursula, even more than Crighton would cause a scandal if people knew she was living with a man without being married to him, and so she chooses to play into this societal norm.

At dinner, Izzie asks Ursula if she's met any nice men. Maurice makes fun of Ursula saying she's been "left on the shelf," until Maurice's wife Edwina scolds him for his manners. Edwina is also angry with Maurice because he had just hired a driver, who turned out to be an attractive young woman.

Maurice continues to be his less-than-charming self and also reveals his double-standard concerning marriage: he criticizes Ursula for not being able to catch a man, but it is implied that he is also cruelly cheating on his wife.

Ursula interrupts Maurice to say that she doesn't feel "on the shelf," and wishes that Crighton were there at the table. Teddy supports her, saying she does all right on her own. Izzie defends her as well, saying that Ursula is only thirty—Izzie married at forty.

In contrast to Maurice, Izzie and Teddy continue to be Ursula's ardent supporters. Izzie in particular lauds Ursula for her choices because she, like Izzie herself, is choosing to carve her own path in opposition to traditional gender expectations.

The whole family has gathered for Hugh's birthday except for Pamela, for whom the journey was too challenging. Jimmy has a few days' leave and Teddy has brought Nancy along as well. Hugh asks Teddy when he's going to pop the question; Nancy blushes and says there will be plenty of time for that after the war. Teddy has recently graduated from Training School and is about to head to Canada to train as a pilot.

It is notable that in addition to Ursula being much happier in the timelines after her abuse, Teddy is also much happier due to Nancy's survival (which came about only when Ursula rebuffed Howie's advances). This reinforces the connection between Ursula's and Teddy's lives, and their happiness.

Izzie quotes, "Courtship to marriage, as a very witty prologue to a very dull play." Sylvie is baffled by this comment, pointing out that Izzie is married. Izzie says that for her, marriage is about freedom, while for Sylvie, it's about confinement. Sylvie says that Izzie is talking nonsense. Izzie goes on, wondering what life Sylvie might have led without it, as the daughter of a late bankrupt artist. The tension is broken with Bridget bringing in a roast duck for dinner.

Izzie and Sylvie's ongoing quarrel over the idea of marriage never shifts. Izzie's idea of marriage is one of a woman maintaining her stature, going against the traditional idea (held by Sylvie) that women should be subservient to their husbands, and then to their children as well.

Sylvie and Izzie spend the rest of the dinner irritated with each other, while Ursula and Jimmy pointedly try to wish Hugh a happy birthday with the wishbone. Amnesty is brought about by the cake, but just as Hugh is about to blow out the candles, a commotion erupts outside—it is Pamela, who has brought her four boys with her.

Although the war takes its toll, and although various members of the family have their quarrels, the love and support of the Todd family lies at the heart of the book, as represented by all of them coming together for Hugh's 60th birthday (the last time that Ursula will see some of them in this lifetime).

Ursula returns to Crighton and tells him tales of the day as they lie in bed drinking hot chocolate. As she lays there, it strikes her that she might actually be happy. In the morning, however, Crighton brings her a tray of tea and toast, and announces that Norway has fallen. Ursula is simply relieved that she knows Teddy and Jimmy are safe in Fox Corner for the morning.

Ursula's independence from marriage allows her these happy moments with Crighton, but her happiness is often juxtaposed with the misery of war, and her worry over her family's safety. This sets up the primary conflict at the end of the book: whether losing her life and her happiness is worth sacrificing to potentially avert the war.


A LOVELY DAY TOMORROW (II), NOVEMBER 1940

Ursula and Jimmy spend a few days together in London while he is on leave. When they're on the town, accompanied by his friend Nicky, she sees Renee Miller, one of her old neighbors in Argyll Road. Renee announces that Mrs. Appleyard has had a baby. Renee invites her to come back to see everyone, and Ursula promises that she will—particularly as she has just received a parcel of baby clothes from Pamela and can donate them.

Even when Ursula is no longer living at Argyll Road, there is a slight implication that fate pulls her back there to experience the bombing of the previous chapter. Yet this sense of fate is perhaps false, as even when Ursula gets out of London altogether, the war's atrocities remain inescapable.


Ursula is exceptionally busy at work, logging all of the bomb incidents, their damage, and how many were killed or injured. Sometimes she sees bomb-damaged maps drawn by a friend, Ralph—who had made it clear that he wanted them to mean more to each other. Crighton calls Ralph her "other man."

While many of Ursula's alternate possibilities see her trying to avert a bad option or choose a better one, she appears genuinely happy with both Ralph and Crighton—perhaps because she is not constrained to societal expectations of how she should act in relationships with them, and because they treat her as equals.

Ursula arrives at Argyll road with the baby clothes, and Mrs. Appleyard introduces her to Emil. Ursula then goes to visit Ruth and Lavinia, who are very excited to see that Ursula has a wedding ring. Ursula goes along with their assumption, thinking that it is easier than explaining the truth.

Again Ursula, has a difficult time defying societal expectations publicly, even though it is easier for her to do so privately. And so rather than explaining the truth, she continues with her fabrication.

At that moment, a siren begins, and Ursula, Ruth, and Lavinia start to make their way to the cellar. Lavinia announces she must go back for her knitting. Ursula offers to do it instead, but Lavinia insists. In the basement, Ursula realizes that if she died, her family would be very confused by the presence of her wedding ring. She is prevented from slipping it off, however, when Renee thrusts Emil into her arms.

Ursula tries to change Lavinia's trajectory, but Lavinia's willpower overpowers Ursula's own. Thus, even though Ursula tries to choose a different fate for herself, this fate proves to be sturdy and harder to avoid (just like Bridget's earlier desire to go to London to celebrate the armistice).

In the darkness, a man (Mr. Emslie) calls her "Susie." Ursula chokes on ash and dust, sensing that something inside her was "torn beyond repair." She is very cold. The man holds her **hand**, imploring her to stay awake. But the **snow** begins to fall until she feels entirely shrouded and everything is **darkness**.

Like Bridget's choice in the Armistice chapters, Lavinia's choice to go upstairs leads Ursula the same tragic fate, demonstrating the large effect that even a small detail—like forgetting one's knitting—can have on the lives of others.

A LOVELY DAY TOMORROW (III), SEPTEMBER 1940

Ursula misses Crighton. He had invited her to dinner the night before the war was declared only to announce that they should end things—though they had still gone to bed together. The next day, a siren sounded, and when they left the hotel and got the all-clear, they said goodbye. Ursula now resolves to "live out the war as a nun."

Atkinson writes different timelines for Ursula based on three different configurations of her potential love life—with Ralph, with Crighton, and alone. It is notable, however, that none of these three options leads to any change in Ursula's death, thus demonstrating how the war is not easily escapable.

A LOVELY DAY TOMORROW (III), NOVEMBER 1940

Ursula can hear Mrs. Appleyard trying to soothe Emil. Ursula feels alone, wishing for a warm body for comfort—or a dog. Ursula knows when the sirens will start, as though she can hear an echo that comes before the siren. She is about to run for the cellar when she notices a dog the opposite doorway. She races down the stairs, passing Lavinia and Ruth.

Ursula's lack of romance does affect how she experiences the bomb in Argyll Road. Feeling lonely, the dog becomes a way to get her out of the house instead of leading her to the cellar.

Ursula runs outside and grabs the dog. She then hears the loudest bang she's ever heard. She takes a blow to the forehead and feels a horrendous pain in her ears. Something else hits her head and she loses consciousness. She is woken by the dog licking her face. She struggles to sit, her head feeling thick and stupid. She calls the dog "Lucky," but when she speaks she nearly chokes on the dust in the air. She wonders if everyone in the apartment is dead.

Ursula experiences Argyll Road from a different perspective, but one that is no less horrific as she realizes that the war has taken many people whom she called her friends, demonstrating its mercilessness and its indiscriminate destruction.

Ursula stumbles into the street. Two firemen—one of whom looks like (and is later revealed to be) Fred Smith—are attaching a hose to a hydrant when one of them yells, "the wall's coming down!" The whole wall in front of Ursula tilts forward, falling in one piece and bringing **darkness** down with it.

Even though Ursula escapes the bombs in the cellar, she is still unable to escape death on Argyll Road, as war is so deadly that it yields innumerable chances for death.

A LOVELY DAY TOMORROW (III), AUGUST 1926

Ursula is once again reading under an apple tree, this time reading *Die Marquise von O.* She notices a rabbit next to her and is surprised that Maurice hasn't shot it by now. Maurice has been teaching her to shoot, though she refuses to shoot animals.

In contrast to the previous chapter, in which Ursula was reading French, here she is reading German. This, combined with Maurice teaching her to shoot, foreshadows Ursula's eventual fate in Germany, where she tries to preemptively kill Hitler before the war.

Sylvie comes over asks if Ursula really wants to pursue a degree Modern Languages. Ursula says she intends to live in Paris for a year, where her French will be very useful, but only after university. Sylvie tells her that university won't teach her to be a wife and mother. Ursula questions whether she wants to be a wife and mother.

It is interesting to note that even though Ursula seems increasingly certain that she wants to pursue an education and not be a wife and mother, this is the only timeline in which she actually becomes a wife and mother—perhaps proving that even Ursula's conscious choices sometimes lead her to a fate she may not have intended.

Ursula takes a walk before dinner, and feels very hopeful about the future. She is sixteen, on the "brink of everything." She had even been kissed by Howie on her birthday, when she'd told him that she'd give him just one kiss and then batted him away when he got too "fresh."

As Ursula's lives go on, Atkinson reveals more and more nuance in her relationships with men. Allowing Howie to kiss her, but then still controlling her own fate when he became too aggressive, still gives her a sense of empowerment and prevents him from raping her later on.

Ursula walks to the train station and encounters Nancy on the way back. They are then overtaken by Benjamin Cole on his bike, who escorts them to the Shawcrosses' gate before cycling away. Ursula is a bit disappointed, as she had hoped he might walk her home alone. Ursula walks a bit of the way before Benjamin returns and invites her and Millie to a party on Saturday afternoon for his brother's birthday. Ursula agrees, and Benjamin zooms away again.

In a later timeline, Benjamin and Ursula do have a romance—but even though this makes Ursula happier, the relationship inadvertently leads to Nancy's death because Ursula does not walk her home. Thus, just because certain aspects of life are more satisfactory for Ursula does not always lead to a better overall outcome.

Ursula is elated, but her thoughts are interrupted by a rough-looking man who asks her the way to the station. She points down the lane, and as she tries to step away from him he grabs her arm. She manages to tug her arm away and sets off running, not stopping until she reaches her door. She decides not to tell Hugh, as she thinks he'll only worry.

Although Ursula was certainly in danger, she is able to escape the man because she is older and presumably faster than Nancy, who was unable to. As Dr. Kellet put it in earlier chapters, a bad thing happened in order to prevent a worse thing from happening.

On Saturday, the party is a disappointment. Ursula feels invisible most of the time, and Benjamin barely pays her any attention. She eats an assortment of desserts and returns home, dejected, bringing a large piece of cake home for her and Teddy to share.

Through all of Ursula's ups and downs with her various love interests, the person whom she can always depend on for love and support is Teddy—and he is always there at critical junctures.

THE LAND OF BEGIN AGAIN, AUGUST 1933

Ursula and her friend Klara have been waiting on the side of the road for hours, hoping to get a glimpse of Hitler, when suddenly series of big black cars pass by and the group of girls that have been waiting jump to their feet, cheering. The new Chancellor of the Reich salutes them.

In this timeline, Ursula experiences the war in a completely different environment. But even in Germany she is unable to escape the death that plagued her in England.

The girls form into a squad and march back to the youth hostel, singing as they go. Klara and her two younger sisters, Hilde and Hanne, are all part of the Bund Deutscher Mädel (the girl's equivalent of the Hitler Youth). Their mother, Frau Brenner, calls it a healthy hobby to promote peace between young people—and to keep them away from boys.

In both England and Germany, there are distinctions and norms between the two genders that keep them separate, which allows for a reinforcement of given stereotypes. Whereas the boys participate in activities to make them better soldiers, the girls participate in activities that will make them better wives and mothers.

Ursula has recently graduated with a degree in Modern Languages, and Germany is part of an adventurous year Ursula planned to spend in Europe before she settled down to teach: Bologna, Italy; Munich, Germany; and Nancy, France. Her true hope is that something will happen in her time abroad that might prevent her from returning to England.

Ursula continues to become more independent and break out of stereotypes, as she gains her higher education and does her own version of a "grand tour" of Europe. It is also implied that her desire to stay out of England is in an attempt to avoid her fate at Argyll Road.

Ursula and Millie had talked about her plans, with Millie expressing surprise that Ursula wanted to teach. Millie had done a course at a drama academy and had become an actress. Ursula had wondered what she might do, arguing that work in the civil service was pretty dismal too. Now she wonders what women do if they don't want to go from "the parental to the marital home with nothing in between."

The traditional gender expectations of women in British society also make it difficult for them to find a job if they want one. Ursula can only imagine two options for herself: working in the civil service, or teaching. While there are other jobs (like acting), there are very few opportunities for an educated woman to rise as high as an educated man.

On the train to Germany, Ursula shares a compartment with a man who alternates between smoking and eating salami, who then follows her to the bathroom. He tries to push into the lavatory compartment with her, but she is saved by a pair of officers who give him a stern talking to and who lead her to a compartment of only women. She wonders why she continues to attract this kind of attention.

Strange men continue to prey on Ursula. Even though she is the victim of this harassment (like the earlier attempted assault with the man in the street), she continues to think that there is something that she *has done wrong—a sexist double standard that is ingrained in the society.*

Ursula arrives in Germany, where she is staying with Herr Brenner, Frau Brenner, and their daughters Klara, Hilde, and Hanne. The girls are very excited by Ursula's arrival and have a large dinner to welcome her. The Brenners don't have much money, but Klara is determined to make the most of the rest of the summer and takes Ursula around Munich.

Ursula's stay in Germany opens her eyes to a different culture. Readers, who know that the war is imminent, can see that the Brenners would have been considered "the enemy" in another timeline, proving how the war causes hardship for innocent people on both sides of the conflict.

Klara shows Ursula a school that Hitler had founded, explaining that he's very keen on "the Party"—the only political party they're allowed to have. Pamela writes in a letter to Ursula that Germany had passed a law that essentially represents the overthrow of democracy in the country. Ursula writes back that "democracy will right itself." "Not without help," Pamela replies.

The seeds of the war can be found in the rise of this Party—the Nazi Party. Pamela's statement also serves as a criticism of inaction: democracy cannot "right itself" without people helping to restore it. Ursula takes this to heart later when she tries to prevent democracy's overthrow before it happens.


Ursula spends time alternately sunbathing with boys wearing small swim trunks on hot afternoons and drinking and smoking with Klara's friends from art school. Klara has recently graduated from art school is in love with a married professor of hers. Ursula is still a virgin, simply because she hadn't met anyone she liked enough. Klara argues that she doesn't have to like them.

It is notable that even though society generally treats women and men differently and contains the same general expectations, German society (or at least Klara and her circle of friends) seem much less uptight about sexuality, which provides them with a sense of freedom that Ursula had not previously enjoyed in Britain.

Hilde and Hanne convince Ursula and Klara to come with them to a rally of the Hitler-Jugend (Hitler Youth). There is a lot of marching and singing, and at the end everyone shouts "Sieg Heil!" and salutes. Ursula and Klara join in even though Klara does not support the Party. Klara explains on the way home that she didn't want to be "set upon" for not saluting.

Again, Atkinson hints at the underlying causes of the war: even someone who disagrees with its principles, like Klara, joins in on supporting it for fear that she would be criticized or perhaps even physically attacked if she did not.

Ursula and Klara chaperone the BDM (the girls' version of the Hitler Youth) on another trip to a village on the Austrian border. The group visits a harvest festival there, where flags with swastikas decorate the field. Klara introduces Ursula to a distant cousin of hers, Jürgen Fuchs. Jürgen kisses her hand. He is very handsome, and Ursula notes the coincidence between their names (both Todd and Fuchs mean "fox"). She wonders if fate is intervening. After the introduction, Ursula writes to Millie, Pamela, and Sylvie that she's in love with Jürgen.

Ursula attributes her meeting Jürgen to a sense of fate. But it is interesting that she thinks this way (and perhaps speaks to her deep romantic interest overpowering her sense of logic), as she knows that her own choices can have such a radical impact on her life—like choosing to take a tour of Europe in this version of her life, leading her to live in Germany in the first place.

THE LAND OF BEGIN AGAIN, AUGUST 1939

Six years later, Ursula is at the grand Berghof, and Eva Braun (Hitler's mistress) is playing with Ursula's five-year-old daughter, Frieda. Frieda has blond hair, blue eyes, and is very pale, and both Hitler and Eva love Frieda. Watching Eva play with her daughter, Ursula wonders what she is doing at their house, and when she might be able leave. They had arrived two weeks prior.

Only six years later, Ursula's life has diverged wildly from her other timelines, proving how even a small change in desires (in Ursula's case, to take a trip to Europe) can lead to large ramifications later on in one's life.

Ursula describes Frieda as the center of her heart, and Ursula knows that she would be willing to "walk on knives" for the rest of her life to protect Frieda; that she would burn in flames or drown if it would save her daughter. She had had no idea that maternal love could be so physical.

For the first time, Ursula understands the depth of the love that a mother can bear for her daughter, knowing that she would always be there for her daughter in times of crisis, even if that wasn't equally true of her own mother.

"The Berg"—Hitler's mansion—is bustling with other women, many of whom are senior party officials who hate Eva for managing to marry the leader of the Reich. Eva had been a shop girl when she had first met him, and the other people at the Berg constantly remind her of her "courtesan" status.

Even though Ursula is fraternizing with the enemy, the information she learns becomes vital to her in her future lives, when she uses the information she gains here to find a way to kill Hitler earlier in his life.

Eva takes lots of pictures of Ursula and Frieda, and Ursula imagines a future time in which someone leafs through Eva's albums and wonders who Ursula might be, this day becoming history. She thinks about history more broadly—how most people only realize the significance of certain events in hindsight. But Hitler is "consciously making history for the future."

Ursula's thoughts become another argument against the idea that fate is set in stone because she attributes a lot of agency to Hitler. In her mind, history is borne of the choices that people make.

In private, Jürgen claims to find Hitler and his henchmen tremendously flawed, but in public he behaves like a good servant of the Reich. Jürgen is a lawyer, and in order to practice law he had to join the Party, even though he had really been a staunch Leftist. He had subsequently risen through the Party rather quickly—even getting tickets to Hitler's fiftieth birthday parade.

In Germany, the war breaks social norms in different ways, causing people to behave as they never have before, as in Jürgen's case, when he supports a party whose ideals wildly diverge from his own.

At Hitler's birthday parade, Ursula had been amazed by the theatrics, the precision, and the weaponry. Jürgen commented that the military had helped to rescue the German psyche—returning patriotism to the country. As if to prove his point, the crowd had gone wild at the parade's finale.

In some ways, it was Hitler's ability to completely upend society's way of thinking and throw their full support behind both the country and the military that allowed Hitler to take so much power and give him license to begin World War II.

Frieda had grown very ill several weeks prior, quickly become feverish and delirious, and Ursula and Jürgen had rushed her to the nearest hospital. Ursula stayed by her side for two days and nights, holding on to her **hand**. They willed Frieda to live, and she did. When Ursula returned home from the hospital, she had received a letter from Eva, inviting them to the Berg to help Frieda recover.

This scene can be compared to Hugh's own vigil in the hospital following Ursula's abortion. Ursula, like her father before her, provides the love and support that her daughter needs in order to live. In another parallel, Ursula holds her daughter's hand in the hopes of tethering her to this world.

Ursula had never met Eva. Eva knew of her through Klara, as they used to work together and went to kindergarten together. Jürgen wondered if Eva knew that Klara is married to a Jew. Ursula was surprised to hear the disdain in Jürgen's voice when he said this word, and also noted that their conversations had become more and more one-sided lately.

Jürgen serves as a kind of bellwether of the Nazi Party's dissemination of ideology. As Jürgen rises through the party, and the country draws closer to war, he has more and more disdain for the Jewish people, and he also becomes more controlling over Ursula's life.

When Hitler is not at the Berg, Ursula notes that Eva doesn't really know what to do with herself. Ursula sees Eva as amiable, chatting about inconsequential things and making no attempt to be brainy or astute. Jürgen had told her that "powerful men needed their women to be unchallenging," and Ursula had wondered whether that was true of him, too.

In this chapter, men are not only associated with the violence of the war, but here Ursula also notes the sexism of not wanting to be challenged by a woman as she watches her own husband become increasingly domineering over her.

Ursula asks Eva one day how Hitler became the great leader he is. Eva says that "he was born a politician," but Ursula thinks that "he was born a baby, like everyone else. And this is what he has chosen to become." Ursula knows she could easily get ahold of a gun, but if she were to shoot him, she doesn't know what might happen to her, or to Frieda.

Ursula in her multiple lives, understands the agency that people (and Hitler) have in choosing their own destinies—that no one is truly fated to do anything if they will themselves to change.

When Ursula and Frieda had arrived at the Berghof, Hitler himself had greeted them and invited them to stay until Frieda felt better. Pamela noted in a letter that he likes women, children, and dogs—he just has no respect for the law or common humanity. Ursula knows that Pamela would not be able to stay silent if she were in Ursula's place, and Ursula feels guilty for being so passive.

Having just concluded that Hitler's agency had led him to become this way, Ursula begins to understand the ways in which she is completely relinquishing her own agency in the situation—and how tempting it is to think of history as being fated, when in actuality the war might have been prevented if the Jürgens and the Ursulas of the world had not been so passive.

Ursula thinks of Klara, whom she had not seen for many years. When Frieda was born five years prior, Klara's Jewish husband had already been barred from teaching. He and Klara had wanted to leave in 1935 and 1936, but inertia had kept them in Germany until he had been part of a roundup and had been transported east.

Again, Atkinson critiques the idea of passivity and people's tendency to wait out crises until it becomes too late—just as Ursula does in this chapter.

At the Berg, Ursula is forced to listen to concerts and watch films of Hitler's choosing, after which he would talk for hours. Ursula wishes in these moments she could escape to Fox Corner. Once, when Sylvie had visited to get to know Jürgen better, Ursula had taken Sylvie to a parade, to show her the adoration showered upon Hitler. Despite viewing the proceedings as "mass hysteria," she had reluctantly raised her arm to give the Nazi salute as well.

It is notable that this chapter, despite the fact that it sees Ursula literally interacting with Hitler, focuses mostly on the past, as Ursula retraces the shifts in society that allowed Hitler to come to this seat of power, and all of the people and incidents that allowed him to wreak such havoc on the country and the continent.

Ursula tells Eva one day at lunch that she thinks Frieda is well enough to go home. Ursula wants desperately to return to England. She had planned to go in May—had even packed suitcases for herself and Frieda without Jürgen knowing—but the day before they were supposed to leave, she found their passports were missing. She searched the house, but could only find Jürgen's.

Atkinson demonstrates how Ursula tries several times to determine her own fate and get out of Germany, but both in the present and during her attempt in May, she is too late. In some circumstances (like the timelines in which Bridget returns from London with the flu), fate is unavoidable after a certain point. And Ursula has no desire to repeat this timeline to find out if she can avert this fate somehow.

That night at supper, Ursula could barely swallow. Jürgen told her that he wanted to take a holiday to Sylt—where they won't need a passport. Ursula had been terrified, thinking he must have figured out about her plan. But then Frieda had become ill, and the plan became irrelevant anyway. Ursula thinks of this episode as she leaves the Berg with Frieda, driven by the chauffeur who had brought them. The next day, Germany invades Poland.

In this episode, Jürgen becomes a direct parallel with the German government as a whole. He is controlling and actively malicious, preventing Ursula and Frieda from escaping imminent danger—just as Germany does once it invades Poland and the war is officially underway.

THE LAND OF BEGIN AGAIN, APRIL 1945

Ursula lives in a cellar in Berlin with Frieda, sheltered from the British and American bombs. They had almost been killed earlier that day and took shelter in the Zoo Station, but thousands of other people were crammed into that bunker. Ursula thinks often about death, and hopes for a swift, clean one with Frieda in her arms.

This chapter demonstrates how, despite the fact that Ursula had tried to avoid her death in England, the grim conditions of war have proved inescapable no matter which side of the conflict she is on.

Ursula wonders if it is Teddy bombing her. She hopes it is—it would mean that he is alive. Two years earlier she had received a letter from Pamela informing her that Hugh had died in 1940 of a heart attack. Ursula had been exceptionally guilty for not coming home when she had the chance. She had tried once again: the day after Germany declared war on Poland, she had hastily packed a suitcase and hurried with Frieda to the train station, but all the borders were closed.

Ursula once again shows her willingness to prioritize her family's safety over her own, hoping that Teddy is alive even if his actions might lead to her death. Additionally, Atkinson shows how the war has become literally inescapable, as Ursula is no longer been able to cross the German border in order to get back home to England.

Jürgen had died in a raid in 1944. Ursula had been relived, but was ashamed of this reaction given how Frieda was so upset. Frieda is now ill, with terrible bouts of coughing. Sometimes they venture out of the cellar, to a bombed apartment building, to forage for anything useful. There is no food to be found, however; the day before they had stood in line for three hours for a loaf of bread that seemed to be made entirely of cement and plaster.

Ursula views Jürgen's death in much the same was as she viewed her escape from Derek, with utter relief at having escaped his control. Her reaction demonstrates how quickly Jürgen's ties to the Nazi Party and its violent ideology had bled into their marriage.

Ursula gives all she can to her daughter, but knows that Frieda would not survive without her. Ursula tries to scavenge for useful things in their own apartment—which had been bombed so that it now looked open like a dollhouse—so that she could buy some medicine for Frieda.

The war prompts an unimaginable dilemma for Ursula: wanting to sacrifice herself for her daughter, but understanding that if she were to do so, it is unlikely that Frieda would even survive after that.

Ursula decides to move back in to the apartment, despite the fact that it is completely open. She worries about the Russians headed for Germany. Frieda is only eleven, but Ursula thinks that if even a tenth of the rumors are true about the Russians, Frieda's age would not save her from them. They seem to move nearer every day, guns constantly roaring.

Ursula implies that the Russian soldiers would rape them if they are found, demonstrating how the violence of war continues to normalize sexual violence and predatory behavior of women who are also victims of World War II.

There is a rumor going around that Hitler has committed suicide. Ursula thinks about him "strutting and fretting his hour upon the stage," and wonders to what avail he had lived. She thinks that once, life had mattered so much, and now, it is "the cheapest thing on offer."

Ursula quotes Macbeth in order to compare Hitler to the Scottish king whose ambition proved to be his downfall. She thinks of the vanity it takes to begin a conflict that leads to the death and degradation of so many people.

Frieda has a fever and chills. Ursula sees that there is no way she could survive an exodus west, as other people are attempting. Frieda says she's had enough. Ursula hurries to the chemist, but he has no medicine, and she returns completely defeated. She misses Hugh, wishing that she could die in his arms.

As Ursula grows defeated by her situation, she misses her father, who had loved her through all of her crises. Instead of demonstrating how family love can help rescue someone from death, Ursula shows just how broken she is by wishing for him to be present and love her as she dies.

When Ursula returns from the chemist, she finds Frieda slipping in and out of consciousness. Ursula soothes her with details from the scenery and life at Fox Corner—the flowers, the animals, the apples in the orchard, her family and siblings when they were young. She then gives Frieda a pill that she says she got from the chemist, telling her that it will help her sleep. She tells Frieda that she would do anything to protect her.

Ursula comes to realize how futile her situation is, and how unlikely it is that she and her daughter will come out of the war alive. She once again calls on her family for support, using details from her childhood in order to help provide support and calm for her own daughter.

When Ursula is sure that Frieda is asleep, she places a little glass capsule in Frieda's mouth and presses her jaws together. Ursula takes her own glass capsule and bites on it. She holds onto Frieda and welcomes **the black bat**. She thinks that "she [has] never chosen death over life before," and she knows that "something had cracked and broken and the order of things had changed."

Ursula makes the ultimate sacrifice, choosing death for herself and her daughter rather than protracting their misery. This timeline ultimately demonstrates how the war not only leads to death and violence, but breaks people down so much that they are forced to take the most desperate measures in order to avoid its pain and suffering.

A LONG HARD WAR, SEPTEMBER 1940

Ursula is in Hyde Park, working with a rescue team from the Air Raid Precautions (ARP) department to help recover people from the wreckage of bombings. As bombs and fires explode around her, Ursula can smell death and decay in the air—scents which had also mixed with her hair, her skin, and her lungs.

Ursula has returned to England, perhaps understanding now that trying to escape the war is truly impossible, and her new mission to improve people's lives within it.

Ursula looks around; the street is unrecognizable. She and others form a human chain to climb to the top of the piles of rubble and excavate the debris from them. The men at the top listen and look for signs of life within. It often seems hopeless, but Ursula knows that people often live and die in the most unlikely of circumstances.

Ursula constantly puts herself in the line of fire and must deal with devastating conditions as a result of the war. No longer trying to hide away at all costs, Ursula sees the effects of the war in full view, on neighborhood-wide scales.

Ursula's fellow ARP wardens are "a mixed bunch": the senior warden, Miss Woolf, is a retired hospital matron. Her deputy, Mr. Durkin, is a retired English teacher. Mr. Simms had worked for the Ministry of Supply; Mr. Palmer is a bank manager. Mr. Armitage had been an opera singer. Mr. Bullock is a competitive wrestler and a denizen of several nightclubs; Herr Zimmerman is an orchestra violinist and a refugee from Berlin.

The wide-ranging fields of Ursula's fellow wardens show the ways in which society has become completely broken. People are no longer able to carry on their normal jobs in the face of large-scale crisis, and so instead they confront the war in the only way that they can—rescuing other civilians from the bombings.

The group had commandeered a Methodist hall to use as their post, furnished with a few camp beds, a small stove, and an assortment of chairs. They are all part-time volunteers except for Miss Woolf. They have to know the occupants of every building in their sector and where they shelter. They also patrol the streets and do first-aid exercises together.

Even places that have been untouched by the war damage slowly become repurposed by the war anyway, as it becomes necessary to put up temporary emergency camps.

The first serious incident the squad attended had been at a large house that had received a direct hit. The two families in the house had all survived the blast, but the main water pipe and a sewage pipe fractured, and everyone in the cellar drowned. They had almost recovered a woman who had clung to the walls of the cellar, but unable to grasp Ursula's **hand**, she had disappeared beneath the water. When they finally pumped out the place, fifteen bodies (including seven children) were recovered. Ursula had vomited long before then.

The first incident Ursula encounters becomes a brutal initiation into the devastation of war. Ursula is greatly affected by the woman whose hand she is unable to grasp, viewing once again how the line between living and dying can be exceptionally fine. But gradually, Ursula's horror in the face of these kinds of casualties becomes almost completely numb, because she sees so much of it.

In the present, Miss Woolf calls Ursula over to a hole in another mound of rubble, where someone small can wriggle through. Ursula goes in, looking around to try to see if anyone is there. She catches sight of a man, but can see that part of his head is missing. Ursula crawls out of the hole, reporting no one alive.

In contrast to Ursula's description of the cellar incident, she is almost completely unphased by this man's gruesome injury, implying the amount of human damage that Ursula has already seen in a short time period.

In the course of a few hours, Ursula splints a broken arm, bandages a head wound, and patches an eye. She labels two unconscious survivors and their injuries, and several dead, making sure to send the correct bodies to the hospital and the mortuary, respectively.

Death and injury are so commonplace for Ursula that she has to double check to make sure that she has not misidentified anyone as having died, or having survived.

As daylight breaks, Ursula sees that the whole street is more or less gone. At a large pile of debris, she can see a woman being extricated by a rope. She is alive, but only just. Ursula also sees the man with part of his head missing from the previous night, recognizing him as a neighbor. She has lost her pen and paper so instead she uses the lipstick she has, writing his name and address on his arm in blood red lipstick.

As Ursula pointed out in the previous chapter, the war has made death commonplace and also made lives cheap. Ursula labels the man from the previous night as though he is a set of goods or a lost package to be returned home.

Ursula starts to walk home and discovers Miss Woolf giving commands to people, still cheerful—even though Ursula has no idea when she last slept. She respects Miss Woolf immensely. Ursula returns to the apartment she shares with Millie in Phillimore Gardens, but realizes almost immediately that she has to go to work, where she logs the Incident Reports from the previous night.

Ursula is forced to confront the war not only at night in its visceral horrors, but also during the day in its sanitized statistics, as it infiltrates every aspect of her life and the lives of those around her.

That Saturday, Ursula goes to Fox Corner and shares a nice dinner with Pamela and Sylvie. For most of the dinner, Hugh is investigating an unexploded bomb in a neighboring field. Ursula finds Pamela drained by taking care of her four boys, as well as two evacuees. Sylvie, on the other hand, is animated by the war—growing more food than ever in the garden and even joining in a black market for different fresh goods.

Ursula gets a small break from the war when she returns home and spends time with her family, but the war's consequences have also reached Fox Corner, as Pamela and Sylvie have had to vastly alter their lives during the war as well.

Hugh returns, and he and Sylvie start to quarrel, as Sylvie asks whether Hugh still lives there because she never sees him. Ursula changes the subject by blurting out that she is dating a young man named Ralph. Ursula tells them about Ralph, and when Sylvie and Hugh leave the table to do other activities, Ursula confesses to Pamela that she likes him a great deal—though they haven't had sex.

Hugh and Sylvie's squabble becomes particularly upsetting to Ursula after Hugh has passed away, as Ursula views Sylvie as needlessly cold to Hugh. Thus, even though in this timeline, Ursula and Sylvie are on good terms, Sylvie's coldness towards most of her family still comes through.

Later, Hugh and Ursula share a drink as they talk about the worsening conditions in London and all across Europe. He then walks her to the train station, flashlight in hand, and Ursula tells him that the rescue squads are superstitious about lights. Hugh confesses that he had a friend in the trenches who lit a match and got his head shot off by a German sniper. He tells her to "keep her head below the parapet and her light under a bushel"; he would rather she were a coward than dead.

Hugh's advice is meant to help keep Ursula safe, but Ursula, following her life in Germany, understands the value of being an active agent and not passively allowing atrocities to continue—something that motivates her a great deal in the final chapters of the novel when she kills Hitler.

At the station, Ursula says goodbye to Hugh, promising to take care of herself. Fred Smith offers Ursula a ride, though he only has an engine without carriages, and so she must ride on the footplate of the train. It doesn't cross her mind that she would never see her father again. The ride back is terrifying, hot, and sooty, but Ursula makes it back in one piece.

Ultimately, Hugh's brief interaction with Ursula again highlights his deep affection for her, as he merely wants her to be safe in the war. This is the last interaction that Ursula has with her father, and it sums up their relationship well.

Fred walks Ursula to the front gates of King's Cross, and she remembers having a crush on Fred in her youth. He tells her that he's about to start serving in the fire department in London. When he leaves her at the gates, Ursula walks home in the blackout. She bumps into a woman, and they walk together for about half a mile or so. After the woman leaves, Ursula bumps into a man, locking arms with him and walking together until Hyde Park—something she would never have done prior to the war.

Ursula's interactions with the man walking home in the blackout demonstrates how the war has not only brought the battlefield to civilian cities, but also how these trying times of crisis can fundamentally change social norms. Ursula would never lock arms with a strange man, but she seems to understand that any possible outcome of this interaction would pale in comparison to the horrors of war.


A LONG HARD WAR, OCTOBER 1940 (I)

A full-scale raid is in progress, bombers droning overhead and shells whistling by. Ursula, Miss Woolf, and Mr. Simms are sitting on the roof of a house, watching green, blue, and orange flames shoot up along the Thames as Holborn is bombed. Mr. Simms comment on the show: "savage and yet strangely magnificent."

Ursula and the rest of the rescue squad have become so inured to war that they are no longer horrified watching bombings far away. While on an intellectual level they acknowledge how the bombings are horrific, they can't help but see them as magnificent, like fireworks.

Ralph lives in Holborn, but Ursula knows he is on the night watch at St. Paul's cathedral. He had given her a tour one evening a few weeks after Ursula's visit to Fox Corner, and the following afternoon Ursula suggested they return to his apartment and go to bed together. They had then had sex (though Ursula had thought of Crighton the whole time).

After her experience with Jürgen, Ursula again reasserts her agency in her relationships. Whereas norm dictates that she and Ralph would not have sex prior to marriage, Ursula takes her desires into her own hands.

The rescue squad returns to their own sector, and Ursula keeps watch with Miss Woolf in Ursula's apartment. Miss Woolf believes in the war, but her religious faith and her faith in "God's plan" have started to crumble. She also believes that many of the Germans themselves are not in favor of the war—merely supporting it because their economy had collapsed after World War I.

Miss Woolf's religious questioning recalls Dr. Kellet's earlier statement, in which he says sometimes a bad thing must occur to prevent a worse thing, but that in some circumstances, it is difficult to imagine anything worse. World War II is exemplary of the latter case, and does call into question the goodness of any "fate" or "plan" that has been created.

Miss Woolf and Ursula are both terribly depressed, as Mr. Palmer has recently been killed by a delayed-action bomb at an incident they had attended. When they tried to move him, his body had come apart like a "Christmas cracker."

Once again, Atkinson gives a vivid example of the toll that the war takes on the people who died as well as the people who survive and have to deal with the aftermath of so much death.

Ursula had seen Jimmy a few weeks prior, and they had spent a night on the town with Millie. At a coffee lounge, Ursula had gone to the bathroom, where she found a girl crying noisily. The girl tried to fix her makeup and "mop up her tears." She introduced herself as Renee, and offered Ursula a cigarette; Ursula realized the cigarette case belonged to Crighton. Ursula returned to the lounge, and she, Jimmy and Millie then went drinking all evening. Ursula asked Jimmy to promise not to die in the war.

In this timeline, Ursula does not know Renee as she does when she lives at Argyll Road, and Crighton has also broken things off with Ursula. Thus, this small encounter eventually allows her to reconnect with Crighton later in the war, as she knows that Renee has his cigarette case—the latest example of how small changes in circumstance can have larger ramifications later in the story.

A LONG HARD WAR, OCTOBER 1940 (II)

Ursula, Pamela, and Sylvie stand over the open grave, Sylvie so consumed by grief that she can hardly stand. Ursula thinks that this is somewhat disingenuous, as Sylvie had been needlessly unkind to Hugh in the few months prior. Jimmy couldn't get leave, but Teddy had shown up at the last minute. He and Nancy hold each other. Izzie had also arrived from California just a few days before Hugh's death, not wanting to "sit out" the war.

Even with the various quarrels between the Todd family members, ultimately they demonstrate their deep love for each other and for Hugh at his funeral. They not only give him their love, but they also try to help each other grieve over the death of their beloved father figure.

Izzie is the one who found Hugh, who had died of a heart attack while sitting in a deckchair on the lawn. Izzie tells Ursula that he looked peaceful. After the funeral, Ursula and Izzie have little conversation with Sylvie, who can't seem to sit down. Ursula and Bridget clear out Hugh's closet, and Ursula hugs one of his suits close to her, trying to hold on to her father.

There still are, however, some family members who retain slight grudges against each other. While Izzie and Sylvie have always disliked each other, Ursula is upset at her mother for being cold to Hugh, a conflict that echoed Sylvie's needless cruelty towards Ursula following her abortion.

Later, Ursula is collecting eggs from the henhouse when Izzie interrupts her, confessing rather abruptly that she had had a baby when she was sixteen; Hugh had seen to it that he was adopted by a good family. Izzie says she had hoped to one day ask him about the baby, to try to find him. But now, she realizes, it's too late, not only because Hugh is dead, but because her son may have died in the war.

Izzie realizes fully the possibility she had lost in ever seeing her son again. In one of the final chapters, Atkinson writes a timeline in which Sylvie raised Izzie's child as her own, but he dies very young. These contrasting outcomes bring up the central question of whether there is a "correct" version of life—that perhaps it is better for Izzie never to have known her son and for him to live, than for her to have known him and for her to die.

A LONG HARD WAR, NOVEMBER 1940

The rescue squad now has two additional members: Mr. Emslie, a grocer who had been bombed out of his house, and Stella, a striptease artist. One evening, Miss Woolf treats the squad to a piano recital. Mr. Armitage sings along with her accompaniment, and then Herr Zimmerman plays Bach for them on his violin. The performance is beautiful, and Ursula finds herself thinking about Hugh's death. She is gripped by melancholy, and Miss Woolf takes her **hand**, almost vibrating with emotion.

Even though war seeps into every aspect of life in Britain, the squad still manages to find moments of beauty and love. Even though Miss Woolf isn't Ursula's family, she in some ways takes on the role of a mother figure. Holding Ursula's hand becomes a particularly symbolic show of support for Ursula, as Hugh had done the same thing in Ursula's time of need.

At the end of the concert there is "a moment of pure, profound, silence," and then the "peace [is] broken" by a warning—"bombers within twenty minutes." The barrage begins; by the time Ursula and the team arrive at Argyll Road, all the various rescue squads have assembled. All around them fires are blazing, and the presence of the Bomb Disposal Squad indicates that a bomb might go off at any moment. Ursula has a premonition that things are not going to go well.

Ursula's premonition is due to the fact that she has experienced this disaster several times, though always from the other side of it. This time, luckily, Ursula is saved from the cellar because she is responding to the bombs, not hiding from them.

They are greeted by a "grisly tableau": many limbless torsos. Ursula sees a dress before she realizes there is a woman wearing it, her head and legs blown off (Lavinia Nesbit). Ursula spots a woman (Mrs. Appleyard) covered in dust. When she tries to comfort the woman, she asks where her baby Emil is. Ursula looks around; when she returns to Mrs. Appleyard, her head is lolling limply and Ursula is unable to find her pulse.

Although Ursula is fortunate enough to avoid the fate that had befallen her in previous timelines, this timeline brings with it a different sort of tragedy. Unlike the other instances of this bombing at Argyll Road, Ursula must deal with the aftermath of it and help to care for the people who are dying.

Mr. Emslie is in the cellar of a house, and Miss Woolf instructs Ursula to bring him a morphia tablet for a girl who is screaming. When the girl pulls out a gold cigarette case, Ursula realizes she knows the girl—it is Renee Miller. As the morphia starts to kick in, Renee convulses. Mr. Emslie tries to coax her back to consciousness, but Renee shudders a final time and dies. Ursula picks up the gold cigarette case, which had fallen from Renee's purse.

Renee's situation bears an eerie similarity to Ursula's had been in previous timelines: hiding in the cellar, getting hit by the bomb, having a relationship with Crighton—which again reminds readers that only small changes in Ursula's circumstances (primarily, Ursula's decision to live with Millie and not on her own or with Crighton) enabled her to escape this fate.

They discover more dead: men, women, and even a dog. Ursula is reminded of Pompeii, which she had visited on a tour of Europe she had taken, and she begins to think about that period in her life. On her return, she realized how little she wanted to teach and instead took a typing course with a man named Mr. Carver, who had later been arrested for exposing himself in public. Ursula had gone to Europe a virgin, but didn't return that way. The man, Gianni, had been studying at Bologna and made the rite of passage less embarrassing and awkward than she feared.

It is notable that in this timeline (theoretically a continuation of the one in which she allows Howie a kiss rather than punching him out) had again led to a slightly different outcome. Rather than Ursula rebelling against Mr. Carver, she simply takes the typing course, once again tying her ability to stand up to Howie to her ability to stand up to Mr. Carver.

Mr. Emslie shakes Ursula from her reverie. As they move forward on their knees, Ursula realizes that she is kneeling on top of a mound, under which she finds a tiny **hand** belonging to Emil. She thinks it is better for Mrs. Appleyard to have died rather than know about this.

This incident is truly disturbing to Ursula, more than anything else she encounters. Perhaps it is the most tragic because, as is true of Ursula's deaths as a child, it represents a destruction of all of the possibilities this child could become.

When Ursula emerges from the cellar, she spots a dog cowering in a doorway. When she approaches it, however, it runs off. Eventually she catches up with it, holding its trembling body to her chest and trying to calm it. She starts to sob for all of the innocent people who had died. At that moment, there is a tremendous noise, and when she turns she sees the wall behind her had fallen. She discovers that Mr. Emslie has been crushed by the wall. Miss Woolf starts to cry, and Ursula comforts her.

Ursula's circumstances very luckily improve in this timeline versus the last time in which she saw the dog. Whereas before, she catches the dog, here it runs off—earning its eventual name, "Lucky." With moments like this, Atkinson demonstrates how sometimes choices can alter one's fate, but sometimes simple luck and randomness can alter one's circumstances as well.

Just then, Ursula runs into Fred Smith, who is enraged rather than grieving over the needless deaths of the rescuers crushed by the wall. The sun starts to come up, and Ursula says that she should to go home. She lives just around the corner, and she remarks that she's lucky her building wasn't hit—and that she ran after the dog, which she has named Lucky.

Ursula calling the dog "Lucky" is less of an acknowledgment of the idea that things are fated to happen, and more that her changing circumstances can take fortuitous turns into better outcomes. For example, she had seen the dog in a previous timeline, but this time the dog luckily ran away, saving her from being crushed by the wall.

Fred offers to walk Ursula home. They set out, hand in hand, the dog walking behind them, but instead of walking to Ursula's apartment, she walks Fred to Izzie's apartment (Izzie has gone to Cornwall). Fred kisses her and wraps his arm around her; they then fall asleep together on Izzie's bed, dead tired. Hours later they wake and make love—"the kind of love" that "people who are anticipating disaster" practice, "free of all restraint."

Ursula's description of the sex she shares with Fred demonstrates another way in which the war affects everyday life: it affords people a degree of abandonment because the future is so unsure. Thus, fulfilling today's desires becomes much more socially acceptable.

Ursula returns home, telling Millie about her time with Fred. She says she is a bit disappointed, though; she wanted something "transcendent," but instead she and Fred had an unpleasant conversation and simply parted ways. Millie then runs Ursula (and the dog) a bath, as she's still covered in dust and dirt.

Even though Ursula is somewhat disappointed in her experience with Fred, it is notable that the relatively casual sex between them—as compared to the traditional norm of sex only when one is married—is available to them only because of the disruption of the war.

A LONG HARD WAR, MAY 1941

The war goes on and on. The winter is freezing; there is a terrible raid on London at the end of 1940; Ralph helps save St. Paul's from a fire. The rest of the time, Ursula and Ralph continue with their lives; going to the movies, dancing, concerts, eating, drinking, making love.

Perhaps what is most striking about the war is, due to its length and prolonged hardship, it starts not to feel like a disruption at all, but rather a new social norm that people are shaping their lives around.

Ursula meets up with Crighton and returns his cigarette case. When Ursula tells him where she found it, he says Renee's name means nothing to him. He is incredibly appreciative, and Ursula asks to "go somewhere." They resume their affair—Crighton is so different from Ralph that it doesn't seem like cheating to Ursula. Besides, Ursula thinks, she hardly sees Ralph and it seems to be a mutual separation.

Ursula's transformation from her innocence as a girl to her experience as a woman represents an escape from traditional gender expectations. Whereas, in her first foray into adolescence, Ursula had become an ideal wife, in subsequent lives Ursula finds that she is happier and freer avoiding that stereotype.

Teddy returns from training, and he and Ursula visit a World War I war memorial together. Teddy thinks that he will probably die for England, and so will Ursula. Ursula thinks that she would rather die for Fox Corner than for England. In a week Teddy would join a unit to start his first tour of duty.

Ursula's assertion that she would rather die for Fox Corner over England is emblematic of the love that she bears for her family, and for Teddy specifically.

Teddy gazes at the monument, looking at all of the names (and all of the lives lost). He wonders what's wrong with the human race. Ursula says that there's no use thinking about it; people can only "get on with life." After all, she says, people only have one life and they "should try and do [their] best." "We can never get it right, but we must try," she says.

Ursula's statement represents one of Atkinson's overarching arguments: while Ursula is afforded the opportunity to "get it right," ultimately she finds that there is no "right" answer. There are better and worse versions of her life, certainly, but ultimately the "correct" version remains very opaque.

Teddy takes Ursula for a drink. He doesn't want to talk about flying, about the war, or even about Nancy (who is apparently doing some job in the government that she can't talk about). They instead talk about Hugh, and Ursula feels like they finally give their father the wake he deserved.

Because Ursula relies so heavily on the love of her family and tries to return that love (particularly to Teddy and Hugh), it makes sense that she would want to give him the honor that she feels he deserves.

Teddy is going up to Fox Corner the next morning, and Ursula insists that he take Lucky with him. Even though the raids are more sporadic, London is still no place for a dog. Teddy agrees, and when he leaves on the train, he gives her a salute.

While Ursula doesn't know the consequences of giving Lucky to Teddy, perhaps she hopes that the dog will afford him some luck, just as the dog led her to a better fate.


In May, there is a terrible raid, and Ursula and Millie's apartment is hit (though neither of them are in it at the time). Ursula simply moves back in and camps there for a while, despite the fact that there is no roof. When Millie returns from a show tour, she insists they find somewhere else to live, so they move to a shabby place in Lexham Gardens.

Ursula's willingness to camp out in her apartment without a roof proves both the war's capacity for destruction and its ability to disrupt what people deem as acceptable living conditions. This also harkens back to Ursula's life in Germany, where she was living in a home without a fourth wall.

In the same raid, Herr Zimmerman and Mr. Simms are killed. At the funeral, Ursula finds Fred Smith and they rent a room at a nearby hotel and have sex. When they wake in the morning, he apologizes for being an "arse" the last time they were together. They smoke and drink tea together, and Ursula wonders what would happen if the hotel were hit and no one knew who they were or what they were doing there.

It is worth noting that Ursula's more adventurous behavior comes out of events in which she is almost killed, and some of her friends have been killed, reinforcing the link between the destruction of war and the need to take advantage of any opportunity she might have for pleasure.

Ursula realizes that she has become very morbid since Argyll Road; it has affected her in a different way than other incidents. Then the siren goes off, and Fred hastily flies out of the room, as he is supposed to be on duty. A few days later, Ursula discovers that Fred died attending a fire.

Just as the war infiltrates all aspects of life in Britain, it also starts to infiltrate Ursula's mental health, as over the war she becomes more and more depressed by the death that she encounters.

A LONG HARD WAR, NOVEMBER 1943

Maurice visits Ursula at her office. She has no idea what he could possibly be there for, until he tells her that Teddy's plane had gone down in Berlin a few nights ago. He is officially "missing in action," but a fellow pilot saw that the plane went down in flames, and no one bailed out. Ursula protests the entire time Maurice is telling her this, refusing to believe that Teddy could be dead.

The news of Teddy's disappearance and death in the war hits Ursula like a ton of bricks because she had been so close to Teddy, and he had always shown ardent support for her in ways that many of her other family members—including Maurice—had not.

Ursula feels like she's going to faint, and her assistant promptly brings her a glass of water and a chair. Maurice says that Sylvie took the news very hard as well. She is shocked that he almost sounds "bemused by [her] grief. He had never cared for Teddy the way they all did." On his way out, he pats her on the shoulder and says he'll see her at Fox Corner.

Maurice's flippant attitude becomes one of the reasons that Ursula gets so depressed; unlike Teddy, he does not give her the support and comfort that she needs in the moment of being informed of Teddy's death. It is clear that this is true of Sylvie, too, as Sylvie is led to suicide (and it is implied that it is because of Teddy's death).

The family gathers at Fox Corner, but there is no body for a funeral. Teddy's status has since changed from "missing in action" to "missing, presumed dead." Nancy is there as well, and she tells Ursula that she will always love Teddy. She also says that she cannot cry because her tears wouldn't do justice to his loss. Ursula, by contrast, has wept continuously for days, and had to be comforted like a child by Crighton and Miss Woolf. Now she feels nothing.

Ursula's despair mirrors the depth of her love for Teddy, and Atkinson again reveals the disaster that war can wreak on families, marriages, and futures, in a way that echoes Ursula's own early deaths. War is a senseless way of taking away the future possibilities that these lost soldiers might have had.

Nancy asks Ursula to find out if there's even a chance Teddy could still be alive, so Izzie and Ursula seek out the pilot who saw Teddy's plane go down, Roy Holt. Roy confirms that the whole crew died—that the plane was completely ablaze in the air, and that Teddy turned and looked at him. Roy then returns Lucky to Ursula—he says that the boys can't bear to see him hanging around, waiting for Teddy to come back.

This scene is as close as Atkinson comes to describing a battlefield in World War II, reminding readers that for all of the violence that Ursula has seen, there is much, much more to be found on the actual frontlines that soldiers like her brother are experiencing.

On the car ride home, Ursula thinks that she might kill herself, but that she can't bring herself to leave the dog. On VE day, Sylvie takes an overdose of sleeping pills and lays down on Teddy's childhood bed. In the will she left, Sylvie had divided the remainder of her and Hugh's money amongst her children equally, but had left Fox Corner to Pamela.

Sylvie proves another war casualty, prompted by the heart-wrenching loss of her son. In her will, she again proves her relative coldness towards (most of) her children, including Ursula, as she has no problem demonstrating her favoritism toward Pamela.

Maurice is livid at Sylvie's will. Jimmy is indifferent, and Ursula is somewhat upset but is glad that Pamela is the one keeping the house. The contents of the house are to be divided, but Jimmy wants nothing and Maurice basically loots the house. Ursula only wants Sylvie's little carriage clock and to be welcome at the house. Pamela assures her that she always is.

Ursula confirms her need for the love and support of her family by ensuring that she always has a place in her childhood home—and, in effect, in her older sister's life.

A LONG HARD WAR, FEBRUARY 1947

Ursula writes a postcard to Pamela, thanking her for the food from Fox Corner. She sets it next to Sylvie's clock and Teddy's photograph. Ursula clears her plate to the sink, and the electricity goes out. She takes the bottle of whiskey to bed, still in her coat. The flame on the stove flickers out, and the pilot light dies. She wonders when the gas might come back on. If the smell would wake her, she would relight it. She feels extremely tired. **Darkness** begins to fall, but she wakes with a start—the power has come back on. The stove pops back to life too. She hasn't gassed herself after all.

It is unclear whether this episode is the exact scene from the chapter entitled "Peace," or if it is simply another timeline in which the same events happen. In this chapter, even though Ursula is filled with the same despair that plagued her earlier—due to the death of her favorite brother and the sheer scale of war trauma that she has had to deal with on a daily basis—this time fate intervenes, and she wakes up before she dies.

A LONG HARD WAR, JUNE 1967

Ursula is watching the BBC. The Jordanians opened fire on Tel Aviv that morning, the reporter says, and now they are bombing Jerusalem. Benjamin Cole is a member of the Israeli parliament now; he had fought in the Jewish Brigade at the end of World War II and then had joined the Stern Gang to fight for the formation of Israel.

In moving directly from World War II to another major global conflict (the Six-Day War), Atkinson again emphasizes how humans have a difficult time learning from previous mistakes in continuing to wage violent conflict on each other.

Ursula and Benjamin had met up briefly for a drink during the war, but it had been awkward. She was relatively indifferent to him, but he was extremely interested in her and suggested they "go somewhere." She had told him to "catch her around next time." When she had recounted this tale to Millie later, Millie said she should have "seized the day," though Ursula said that that seemed to be everyone's excuse for bad behavior.

Although Atkinson doesn't give the exact point in the war in which Ursula and Benjamin met for a drink, it seems to represent a change in Ursula, who no longer feels pressed to "seize the day," unlike her feelings during her affair with Fred Smith. Ursula's last comment to Benjamin also proves to be ironic, as he does in fact pursue her directly in Ursula's next life.

Ursula has just returned from her retirement party, which consisted of drinks at a pub. Her secretary had thanked her for paving the way for women in senior positions in the civil service. Ursula had thought that she wasn't *that* senior—she still wasn't in charge, like the Maurices of the world. Maurice had recently been knighted.

The difference between Ursula and Maurice's career path revives Atkinson's commentary on gender roles and expectations. Because women have been thought of as wives and mothers for so long, it is difficult for them to rise up to the same positions as men. Ursula is no less intelligent or dedicated than Maurice, but he is the one in the leadership position.

Ursula's colleagues had gifted her with a set of tickets to a performance of Beethoven's Choral. She thinks that Miss Woolf would have loved attending it, but she was killed in 1944. At Miss Woolf's funeral, Ursula had wondered who would remember the names of the dead—Miss Woolf, Emil, Renee, Fred Smith. Ursula had already forgotten so many names, so many young lives lost. Ursula had also thought of Teddy.

Again, Ursula dwells on not only the violent deaths of so many people that have been brought about by the war, but also the fact that those deaths mean that so many people are cruelly deprived of the possibilities that life might have afforded them in the future.

Ursula feels old, though Pamela insists that she's not old yet—she's not even sixty. Once Pamela's children had grown, Pamela had become a woman who did good works, eventually becoming a chief magistrate. Harold had taken over Dr. Fellowes's old practice. Ursula thinks that she would take Sarah to the concert with her—the daughter that Pamela had always wanted, born in 1949. For Ursula, Sarah fills a hole in her heart left by Teddy's loss.

The life that Pamela achieves perhaps best represents a compromise between Sylvie's traditional tastes and Izzie's tendency towards being a "modern woman." Pamela finds a way to be both a mother and wife, as well as a working woman, representing the degree of progress that has allowed women to do both of these things.

Ursula realizes now that she wishes she had a child of her own. She had never been a mother or wife, and it is only now that she cannot be, that she realizes what she has missed out on. Pamela's life would live on in her descendants, but Ursula's life would simply end.

Even though Ursula has lives that repeat again and again, the difference between this experience and having children is that children represent a legacy that extends into the future.

A few weeks later, Ursula is having lunch with Pamela's first-born son, Nigel, who is a history tutor. Ursula argues that if Hitler had died before he became Chancellor, the Holocaust would not have happened, and the Jews might not have tried to form Israel, "and the whole cultural face of Europe would be different." Additionally, the Iron Curtain would not have fallen, Russia would not have taken over Eastern Europe and America might not have recovered so quickly from the Depression. But, she says, "perhaps Goering or Himmler would have stepped in. And everything would have happened in just the same way."

Ursula's conversation with Nigel echoes the earlier conversation she has with Ralph, when he asks her if she would kill Hitler as a baby. When Ursula eventually tries to carry out this scenario (killing Hitler before he becomes Chancellor), Atkinson does not write the ramifications of her action because Ursula dies immediately afterward. Thus, the course of history without Hitler remains ambiguous, and therefore Atkinson's argument about fate is left open-ended as well.

Ursula walks back from lunch through a park, remarking at how young people these days have so much enthusiasm and hope for the future. She sits down on a bench and falls asleep. She is transported—to a meadow, to a garden, to a field covered in **snow**. Snow begins to fall around her, until light pierces through a curtain and she is lifted up. Sylvie says, "I shall call her Ursula." Hugh remarks that he likes the name, and responds, "Welcome, little bear."

This is the first time in which Ursula is "reborn" without explicitly dying, leaving open the possibility that the different variations of her life may in fact simply be in her head, rather than something that happens in reality (something that Dr. Kellet had theorized). Like her discussion with Nigel, these variations become thought experiments of what might have happened in her life if certain circumstances had changed.

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

"Welcome, little bear," Hugh says. He had been pacing around the hall, waiting to be invited into the room where Sylvie was giving birth, having managed to get back to Fox Corner just before the **snow** closed the roads. He had literally dragged Izzie back to England from France, where she had spent a week with her lover.

This long chapter explores some of the final loose ends of the novel, as Atkinson also demonstrates a writer's own process of thinking through the consequences of alternative possibilities in various characters' lives.

On the boat ride back, their fellow guests assumed Hugh and Izzie were married. He had sent a telegram to his mother, Adelaide, informing her of Izzie's pregnancy, and Adelaide had responded that he should not bring Izzie to her house under any circumstances. And so, he had brought her back to Fox Corner.

Hugh's mother holds traditional values to the point where those expectations on her daughter overruled her love for her daughter in times of crisis, in the same way that Ursula's rape and ensuing pregnancy overrules Sylvie's love for her.

Sylvie wonders what to do with Izzie and her child; Hugh insists that they should keep the baby and say the child is adopted. The child is born at Fox Corner, and when Sylvie sees him she finds that she cannot give him away. Izzie, on the other hand, immediately hands him over and leaves Fox Corner. No one questions the sudden appearance of this child; Bridget and Mrs. Glover are sworn to secrecy. Sylvie and Hugh name him Roland.

Even the hint of a young unmarried woman getting pregnant makes Sylvie and Hugh nervous, demonstrating the social conservatism, particularly at this time in the early nineteenth century. Yet Sylvie's mothering instinct overrules her desire to avert scandal—a courtesy that does not extend to Ursula later.

Roland is a sweet child, and it takes some time for Sylvie to realize that Roland is "not all there." He does not progress in the same way that the other children had. Hugh is fond of him, though: Roland is calm, not like Maurice and Pamela. Ursula is completely different, watching everything around her.

Hugh's summaries of his children exhibit the intricate dynamics within any family, and the different gradations of love that parents can have for their children.

Time jumps forward. Mr. Winton's easel is set up to face the sea. He watches Pamela and Ursula making a sand castle on the beach. Roland is sent to scour the beach for decorative pebbles, and Sylvie and Bridget are further along the beach. As Ursula builds the castles, she feels a slight fear, and she returns to Sylvie to have them soothed. When Sylvie sees Ursula, she asks her where Roland is.

Mr. Winton's failed rescue in this version events, in contrast to the earlier version in which his rescue is successful, counters the idea of a set "fate"; what had been a lucky circumstance (his watching the girls) is now an unlucky circumstance because he doesn't watch Roland wade into the water.

They later conclude that Roland must have spotted a piece of wood in the ocean and waded out to collect it. Mr. Winton had tried to swim out to pull Roland from the water, but his body was already limp. As a variety of strangers try to revive Roland, Pamela comes over and holds Ursula's **hand**.

Pamela provides that familial gesture of comfort for Ursula, holding her hand, just as Hugh and other family members do over the course of the novel, emphasizing both their tight bonds and the heartbreak that they are facing together over Roland's death.

At the funeral, everyone seems to want to try to claim Roland. Sylvie and Izzie both call him "my boy," and Hugh is also greatly affected by his loss. Adelaide, on the other hand, had declared his death a blessing.

Roland's death once again investigates the idea of a "correct" version of events. Initially it seems like a better circumstance, because Roland is able to grow up with his biological family, but after his death it calls into question whether he may actually have had a better life in Germany.

Time jumps forward again. Ursula addresses Bridget, chopping onions in the kitchen. She tells her that she was just in the sweet shop, and Clarence was kissing Molly Lester, who works in the shop. When Molly protested, knowing that Bridget was engaged to him, he had said that Bridget meant nothing to her. Bridget calls Clarence a "bugger" and breaks things off with him, despite his protestations of innocence. Clarence then goes to London alone and dies of the flu afterward. Ursula tells Sylvie that "at least no one was pushed down the stairs," though she has no idea what she means by it.

Just as Atkinson questions a truly "correct" version of life, she shows how Ursula still continues to improve her decisions, even the ones she makes when she is a child. Instead of pushing Bridget down the stairs, Ursula tries to break up Clarence and Bridget in order to protect Bridget (and the rest of the family) from the flu.

Ursula constantly gets premonitions of events. Once, years earlier, when she had heard Maurice approaching her bedroom, she had placed her doll beneath her pillow. Maurice had then taken Pamela's figurine and thrown it out the window, smashing it to pieces. The next day, Sylvie had gotten a kitten for Pamela to try to appease her, but it had only lasted a week, as Maurice had then stepped on it by accident, killing it.

This incident serves as another (if slightly more innocent) example in which Ursula takes a step backwards, even though she is trying to prevent something bad from happening. Pamela's figurine breaks, unlike Ursula's, which ultimately leads to the death of a kitten. In other words, sometimes a bad thing must happen (Pamela's figurine being thrown out the window and a kitten dying) in order to prevent something worse (Ursula falling out the window and dying).

Sylvie takes Ursula to a psychiatrist, Dr. Kellet, on account of her constant headaches and sense of "déjà vu." When Ursula walks into the room, she says that she's been here before. When Dr. Kellet asks if Ursula's heard of reincarnation, Sylvie is sure that she hasn't, but Ursula enthusiastically says she has. Dr. Kellet asks her to draw something; she draws a snake with a tail in its mouth.

Dr. Kellet's reappearance is another thread that argues that some fates are harder to escape than others. Despite the fact that Ursula does not push Bridget down the stairs (the circumstance that had led to her seeing Dr. Kellet in a previous life), she still ends up seeking his counsel.

Dr. Kellet explains to Sylvie that the picture is a symbol representing the circularity of the universe, that time is a construct, and that there is only now, no past or present. Ursula then asks Dr. Kellet where the picture is of Guy (his son) but Dr. Kellet asks, "Who is Guy?"

Dr. Kellet's philosophy emphasizes perhaps the ultimate message of the book: that there is no right or wrong way to live, because the only reality people will ever truly know is the one happening in front of them. The instability of alternate realities is proven by the fact that Dr. Kellet doesn't have a son in this version, but virtually everything is about him is the same.

At Ursula's sixteenth birthday, she walks Millie back to her house. On the return home, Benjamin Cole cycles past, then stops and walks her back to her house. He tells her that he likes her, and then kisses her. Ursula thinks this is the most fulfilling moment of her life.

Ursula has a much better experience with Benjamin than she did with Howie. However, even though Ursula is happier in this moment, it does not necessarily mean that this timeline is better overall, as their relationship indirectly leads to Nancy's death once again.

Six months later, Ursula is reading under the apple tree again—this time English poetry. Sylvie tells her she doesn't see the point in Ursula studying English literature. Ursula tells her that she may want to study Modern Languages. Ursula and Sylvie then fall silent; a fox has appeared next to them, which Maurice is always trying to shoot and which Sylvie has a great fondness for.

For all of the changes in Ursula's life, there are two things that remain unchanged: Sylvie's desire for her daughter to marry rather than to get a better education, and Maurice's antagonistic relationship with pretty much all of his family members. This demonstrates how families settle into an almost inevitable dynamic with each other, simply based on their personalities and beliefs.

Maurice appears, completely bored. Ursula asks him to teach her to shoot, to which he replies that girls can't shoot. Ursula agrees, sarcastically, that girls are absolutely useless. Ursula and Maurice practice shooting for a bit, and he reluctantly admits that she's a good shot. They continue to practice until Maurice turns and shoots the fox. Ursula tells her mother that Maurice shot the fox, and Sylvie starts to cry. She says that she will disinherit Maurice one day.

Perhaps the one thing that Maurice and Sylvie have in common, in addition to the fact that they both can be exceptionally cold to Ursula, is the fact that they both devalue women in general. Maurice believes that girls are inferior to boys in pretty much all ways, and while Sylvie does not explicitly think this, her adamancy that boys and girls should occupy different spheres essentially leads to their being devalued (as in Ursula's timeline with Derek).

Ursula then says she is going to meet Hugh at the train station, but really she is going to meet Benjamin Cole in secret. She knows Sylvie would not approve, as "things had started to get very 'hot' between them, [with] a lot of fumbling fingers." Ursula and Benjamin make their way to a meadow and lay down in each other's arms. Soon he is on top of her, but he quickly goes into a kind of spasm. He then apologizes, though Ursula doesn't really know what for.

Ursula is no less naïve in this timeline than she had been in others, thanks to Sylvie, but her coming-of-age with Benjamin is a far cry from her coming-of-age with Howie because it is clear that, even though Benjamin is more aware of sex than Ursula is, he still respects her boundaries.

Ursula tells Benjamin she should probably be getting back for dinner. On their return, they see a man hobbling as fast as he can across the field. When Ursula returns home, Major Shawcross arrives, wondering if anyone has seen Nancy. After they discover her body, Ursula and Benjamin realize that if they had crossed the field five minutes earlier they might have saved her. After this, they stop meeting in the meadow.

This timeline in particular questions the idea that a "happier" life is necessarily better overall. For while Ursula and Benjamin are clearly happier, Ursula is unable to walk Nancy home, leading to her tragic death. And so Atkinson forces Ursula (and the reader) to evaluate which events are actually for the better.

In October on a break from university, Ursula stays with Izzie for a few days. She and Izzie are having tea in South Kensington when Ursula is struck by an enormous wave of anticipatory dread. She runs, not knowing where she is going, then trips on something, falling straight on her nose. A man comes over and tries to help her—he introduces himself as Derek Oliphant. Ursula knows him, but she also doesn't know him. She gets to her feet and runs on and on. She is in Belgravia when she stops: she knows that she's been here before, too. She sinks to her knees and blacks out.

Ursula's alternate timelines start to congeal as she thinks that she both has and has not met Derek, or been to Belgravia (where she got her abortion). The fact that she still encounters these people and places adds to a sense of fate: even small changes in one's life sometimes cannot prevent certain encounters; some events are harder to escape than others.

When Ursula wakes, she's in a white room with Dr. Kellet. He says that they thought she'd been attacked: a vicar found her and took her to St. Georges, and she'd been screaming the whole time. Dr. Kellet tells her that she's in a private clinic now. Ursula tells him that time isn't circular, it's like a "palimpsest"—a manuscript where traces of earlier drafts remain.

Ursula's palimpsest theory is particularly interesting when viewing the different versions of her life as the alternate fates an author could (and which Atkinson does) give to her, sometimes keeping entire storylines and changing a few small details; in others, rewriting entire sections of the manuscript to provide Ursula with a completely different story.

Ursula enjoys her brief time at the sanitorium. A few days later, she and Dr. Kellet have a rather terse conversation in which he quotes Corinthians, saying even if one has the gift of prophecy, without charity or love, one is nothing. Ursula doesn't fully understand what he means. When Ursula is ready to go, Hugh picks her up and says he's glad she's feeling better—the house isn't the same without her.

Dr. Kellet and Ursula's conversation eventually leads her to understand what the purpose of her life might be, and what kind of outcome would hold the most meaning. Dr. Kellet implies that love is what makes life meaningful, which Ursula translates as trying to save her family members from the disaster that war wreaks on them.


Ursula lies awake in her bed and formulates a plan. She will study German, take a class in shorthand and typing, join a local shooting club, get an office job somewhere and save money. And then she would go to Germany, go to the photo shop in Munich, tell the girl working there that she's having trouble with her camera, and then seventeen-year-old Eva Braun would offer to help her. She thinks that she is fulfilling her destiny: "*Become such as you are, having learned what that is.*" She thinks of Teddy and Miss Woolf and others who have died. "This is love," she thinks. "And the practice of it makes it perfect."

As a result of Ursula's and Dr. Kellet's conversation, she decides to take an entirely utilitarian view of her life. She uses the information that she amassed in previous lives in order to devise a way to get close to Hitler, kill him, and ultimately avert the seemingly fated World War II. But it is not the world that Ursula thinks of, but rather the love that she bears the family members who had died as a result of the conflict.

BE YE MEN OF VALOR (II), DECEMBER 1930

Ursula knows that Eva likes fashion and makeup and gossip. She goes to the skating rink with Eva and her sister. She is invited to dinner at the Brauns' house. Ursula takes many photographs of her, and they spend evenings making albums together. Ursula also knows of Eva's infatuation for her "older man." All Eva wants is to be close to Hitler, and that's all Ursula wants too. And so, as the men get used to having Eva around, they get used to having Ursula around as well.

Ursula uses the knowledge of her past lives in order to get close to Eva and eventually Hitler, in the hope that by choosing to kill Hitler rather than allowing history to take the course that it had, she can avert the global conflict. However, because Atkinson does not write past Ursula's death, it is left ambiguous whether Ursula actually achieves her goal.

Ursula enters a café in Munich in December of 1930. Sitting at a table at the far end of the room is Hitler, surrounded by his henchmen, with pastries on the table. He motions for her to sit with him. She does so, and comments that it's raining. She eats a piece of cake and quietly retrieves Hugh's old revolver from her handbag. She levels it at Hitler's chest, a move described as being "rehearsed a hundred times." Around the table, several guns are pulled out and aimed at her. She says "For her" in German before pulling the trigger. **Darkness** falls.

Ursula makes the ultimate sacrifice in choosing to kill Hitler, knowing that she will be killed immediately by his henchmen. But her motivations remain perfectly clear: not only in trying to save the world, but also in protecting her family from the war. It is implied that the "her" to which she refers is Frieda, and that she is trying to save the daughter that she had in a previous life. While in this timeline it is a symbolic statement, as she doesn't have a child in this timeline, it makes the point that she is trying to save her family and the little girls throughout the globe (like Pamela's daughter, Sarah) who would have died as a result of the war.

THE BROAD SUNLIT UPLANDS, MAY 1945

Teddy and a friend, Vic, are at a pub in London, having hitchhiked with an American ship from Le Havre to England. Teddy had been shot down in November 1943 in Berlin, escaping and releasing his parachute just in time. He had fractured an ankle and was taken to Stalag Luft VI in the east. It could have been worse, but he and the other prisoners were taken in February and made to march west, away from the advancing Russians, for days on end on starvation rations. He wondered for two years if anyone from home knew he was alive. He was on the road outside Hamburg when the war ended.

Atkinson ties up an alternate loose ending, which complicates the finality and gravity of Ursula's previous life (killing Hitler). Teddy's surviving the war necessitates that the war happened at all, and the fact that Ursula is still alive in this chapter means that in this timeline, she did not try to kill Hitler. Thus, it is left ambiguous whether Ursula feels that her sacrifice is one worth making, particularly when she doesn't know the consequences of her actions.

Teddy phones Nancy from the pub. A half hour later, Nancy arrives with Ursula. Nancy runs and throws her arms around him, and then Teddy gives Ursula a salute. He shouts something across the pub to her, but she has a hard time hearing. She thinks he has said, "Thank you."

Ursula meeting Teddy at the pub signifies perhaps the most idealistic version of events, because she is able to see him alive once more. This forces readers to evaluate what they believe is Ursula's most satisfying or fulfilling life: like her, they have to determine whether it is more meaningful to try to prevent World War II or to reunite with the person she loves the most.

SNOW (X), 11 FEBRUARY 1910

Mrs. Haddock, the midwife, is sipping a third glass of rum. She had been on her way to deliver Ursula when the **snow** had forced her to take refuge in a pub. The barkeep tells her that they could be stuck there for days, and she may as well have another drink.

Atkinson reiterates word-for-word the scene in the ninth "Snow" chapter, demonstrating the cyclical nature of time, confirming the way in which random events (like the snow) can radically change lives, and once again allowing for the possibility that Ursula did not live at all, leaving an open question of what might have happened if Mrs. Haddock had made it to the birth in the first place.

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