Explore the consequences of Hanna and Briony's pivitol actions on a range of other characters in 'The Reader' and 'Atonement'

'The Reader' and 'Atonement' are novels written retrospectively with World War Two being a motif in both, despite both authors existing during the 21st Century. This allows us to consider the actions and consequences of the protagonists, and the ways in which they would have been perceived in the 1940's in comparison to the contemporary. 'The Reader' is a German novel written by Bernhard Schlink translated into English. It follows a generally linear, sequential narrative, enabling us to follow the omniscient narrator on a journey through his life, however, flashbacks and after thoughts is often used as a form of rising action allowing us to consider the changing perceptions towards an action.

Dissimilarly, McEwan initiates modernism in 'Atonement' by challenging the typical linear context by using more than one narrative voice, skewing the viewpoint. The structure is deceptive as it includes a meta-narrative in the form of the epilogue and our discovery of Briony as the ultimate narrator causes us to re-evaluate what we have read.

There are two pivotal actions at the centre of 'Atonement'; the attack on Lola, and Briony's act of bearing false witness; accusing Robbie of the crime. Only the second is of interest as the rape is a shadowy event, deliberately never clearly investigated, as to not expose the true assailant. This provides the ambiguity needed to read the novel with a profound sense of doubt. In 'The Reader', the pivotal action is Hanna's decision to become an SS guard in order to conceal her illiteracy. This is discovered by Michael many years later during her trial.

The imprisonment of Hanna and Robbie is one of the most significant consequences of the pivotal actions outlined above. However the major difference in both novels occurs in accountability. In 'The Reader', Hanna is imprisoned for having seized command and allowing 300 Jewish women under ostensible 'protection' to die in a fire locked in a church. Despite her involvement which Hanna admits to, she is unfairly accused of writing the report of the fire, and in her refusal to admit her illiteracy, she does not only let the bulk of the crime be pinned on her, but lets those with a greater share of responsibility escape full accountability; raising the question of if she has become a convenient scapegoat. Because of her association, she is still somewhat culpable and therefore, the extent of injustice cannot be compared to that of Robbie's.

Undeniably, imprisonment is still a significant loss of her freedom. The setting of the prison is symbolic as the level of detail omitted is significantly less evocative than previous descriptions, as in part one. In doing so, Schlink is able to demonstrate the desolate living conditions Hanna endured, and the fact she 'didn't pack' any of her items away before her death is intentional as the very few items occupying her cell can be highlighted. Another interpretation of this however may be that Michael has tried to block out the painful memory of visiting her cell which is why the depiction remains fragmentary. Schlink may also be trying to create a sense of pathos as we recognise the cell is where Hanna unjustly spent the majority of her life, and the poems and pictures of nature she created; indicative of happiness and freedom are harshly distinguished with the heart-rending, blunt reality of the setting where 'glass bricks replaced window glass.'

In 'Atonement', Robbie is imprisoned for a crime he did not commit, and in Part two, we follow his stream of consciousness narrative, now a soldier in war-torn France 5 years after the accusation. McEwan limits Robbie's account of jail, as war is a key motif in Atonement, and is therefore focused on more heavily. Ironically, Robbie has managed to escape an extended time in prison by joining the war effort. However even while Robbie is a soldier, there are flashbacks of his time spent inside, which is a clear demonstration of the long lasting, damaging effects it has had on his life. Robbie's accounts of the stifling oppression of prison, compared with which the routine in the army seem liberating; make the consequences of Briony's actions painfully real.

McEwan's depiction of Robbie in Part one is of a confident young man in love who is fervent in his studies and his desire to study medicine. The range of opportunity and ecstasy he feels when with Cecilia is drastically contrasted with his treatment in part two. The high regard in which

Nettle and Mace hold Robbie despite his inferior ranking is testament to how much has been lost, as Robbie is unable to apply to be an officer because of his criminal record, despite his continuous displays of initiative, which sardonically demonstrates the social veneer of an upper-middle class man. Unlike Hanna however, there is however little to suggest Robbie could have saved himself from his length in prison, as during the 19th century, social convention dictated, and his fate rests in his status as a member of the working-class. McEwan deliberately constructed the characters of Briony and Emily as caricatures; reflecting the classic attitudes of the English society during the 19th Century.

Due to the oppression and conviction of Hanna and Robbie, guilt is a continuous theme and consequence in both novels. In 'The Reader', Michael is initially consumed by the guilt of having 'loved a criminal.' However, as the trial progresses, he realises he is alone in the knowledge that Hanna is illiterate and therefore the extent of punishment Hanna receives is subject to his disposition- another consequence of Hanna being put on trial. Whilst trying to come to a plausible decision, Michael cannot help but to think about his past relationship with Hanna, and in doing so, Schlink creates a palimpsest of memories. The horrific images of war and suffering of those inside the Church are distinctly contrasted with intimate recollections of Hanna 'riding her bicycle' and 'dancing in front of the mirror.' This juxtaposition used by Schlink demonstrate the guilt Michael feels in having a personal relationship with a war criminal and the difficulty this creates as he tries to condemn her. Michael chooses not to speak up, allowing Hanna to be imprisoned, and by not 'meddling' with her, initially believes he will be free to return to his everyday life and move on. We soon recognise that this is not the case as the effects of the trial become apparent. He secludes himself from his peers and brushes off the 'few' acquaintances he has. As well as this, he begins lashing out on himself physically. By risking falls and describing illness as 'pleasure' Schlink suggests that Michael is trying to forget about the trial and punish himself for the 'guilt' he feels for remaining a passive bystander. Michael's changed outlook on his career is also affected greatly by the trial as he chooses to work in an inaccessible position of law, one in which he 'needed no one and disturbed no one.' The thought of changing the course of someone's life fills him with dread as he is haunted by the lingering thought or whether or not he made the correct decision in remaining a spectator during the trial. Michael chooses to blame himself for Hanna's imprisonment, and is comparable to Robbie's own delirious ramblings about guilt in 'Atonement'. 'We'll sleep it off Briony', indicates he holds himself as guilty as he believes her to be, and both Robbie and Michael demonstrate the realistic evocation of how people in traumatic situations often feel responsible for the actions of others.

Just as Michael suffers from guilt in remaining silent, in 'Atonement', both Paul and Lola are guilty of allowing innocent Robbie to be imprisoned. Although McEwan never directly reflects on any guilt felt by them, their charitable donations (all relating to interests of Robbie) and robust defence of themselves suggest they feel guilty for their treachery, and are attempting to make amends for their mistake. Though it can be argued that the marriage between Paul and Lola is one of tradition and love, it is notable that there are no positive depictions of marriage throughout the novel, and McEwan insinuates the matrimony is almost a certain way of keeping Paul's crime a secret. The ceremony is uncharacteristically discreet and although this can be argued to be due to of wartime shortages, it suggests the marriage is more an exercise in damage limitation and guilt rather than an expression of true love. In old age, Lola has a formidable energy and 'terrible agility' that is perhaps born of decades guilt from denying the secret at the heart of her marriage. Ironically, though Paul is morally undeserving of the social advantage he enjoys, he is ennobled, becoming Lord Marshall by the end of his life. McEwan is again making a wry comment on the class system- despite the guilt Paul may feel, Briony accusation of Robbie appear to have had no damaging consequence on him.

In 'The Reader', Hanna's appears not to suffer from guilt during the trial, but rather confusion. When she breaks German practice to ask the judge "What would you have done?" she really

needs an answer and is not just exasperated or asking rhetorically as it could appear. It is only later in prison that Hanna suffers from guilt. 'Here in prison they were with me a lot. They came every night, whether I wanted them or not. Before the trial I could still chase them away when they wanted to come.' Those killed at the expense of Hanna's submission haunt her conscious as her time in prison have caused her to reflect on her actions and the consequences of them. Michael learns from the warden that before Hanna's death, she read many books by prominent Holocaust survivors, and Schlink's intention here is to demonstrate Hanna's ardent need to understand the suffering that occurred during the war, and by this discovery, she endured a tremendous amount of guilt; her suicide the final consummation of this. Although Hanna would have been released back into society and re gained her freedom, the guilt she would undergo would remain as the consequences of her actions are forever embedded in history. Because of this, Hanna had to 'retreat even further' than prison, where the accusations and voices would finally be silenced.
In 'The Reader', Schlink is suggesting that the Holocaust's nature is a web of guilt that encompasses as many people as possible, including the post-war generation to which he and Michael belong. However, Hanna embodies much of the theme of guilt, as she is representative of the Germans and others who were not active agents of the Holocaust, but rather the foot-soldiers. After the war's end, many claimed to be innocent because they were not on the same level of Hitler or Goebbels, and therefore comparisons can be drawn to the women on trial who may feel remorse, but dismiss this feeling to avoid accountability. Hanna who admits to her failings may be seen as foolish to accept her punishment in both the 19th century, and even in our day, however those who have lived through the war may argue that everybody in Germany could and should have known about Hitler's intentions towards the Jews. Hanna knew what she as signing up for when she joined the SS and is therefore accountable for the death of those in the fire and consequently the guilt she feels is justified. The reality that is suggested and demonstrated in the novel is that any individual of the time who chose a path of convenience instead of resistance bears some level of guilt and is similarly shown in 'Atonement' with the characters of Paul and Lola.

Guilt leads on to the inevitable consequence of atonement in both novels, and appears to be the positive consequence of Hanna and Briony's actions. In 'Atonement', the Briony of Part Three has grown up to realise what a terrible mistake she has made in blaming Robbie for the rape of Lola, and is admirably brave in her resolution to make amends and retract her statement. Just as Michael's career choice is dictated by Hanna's actions, Briony's literary ambition in Part One is starkly contrasted with her decision in becoming a nurse in Part Two. This suggests Cecilia presumption is accurate; in becoming a nurse, Briony is attempting to atone for the mistake she made. Expressing no resentment at the rigours of her work nor glorifying the hardship to elevate her status as a penitent, Briony suggests she became a nurse to prevent herself from thinking about what she had done. She reveals she was 'delivered from introspection'; the hard work and lack of time is saving her from feeling guilty. McEwan may be making a greater point however; the gruelling hospital routine does not inevitably mean Briony will be able to make amends for her mistake and her atonement won't take the form of anything as mundane, or simple as physical labour. The novel rather, is a greater product of Briony's atonement as she has spent much of her life writing and re-writing the account of what happened. McEwan has said that the ability to imagine what it is like to be someone else is the root of compassion and morality: *'It is hard to be cruel once you permit yourself to enter the mind of your victim. Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of humanity.'* Briony's experience as a nurse have given her insight to the horrors of the war, and therefore the environment she has forced Robbie in, however she will never be able to feel what Robbie felt and witness the revulsion. Yet, unlike part one where Briony shows the inability to sympathise, by writing her novel, she has given Robbie introspection; allowing us to identify and empathise strongly with him. This demonstrates

Briony's considerable growth and as she has completes the final draft of her book, she can finally be 'at one' with herself.
Schlink presents atonement in a similar way in 'The Reader. Michael writes the story of his relationship with Hanna, to be 'free of it' However unlike Briony whose memories will soon fade due to her dementia, there is an underlying feeling of trepidation as Michael admits whenever he feels a strong emotion such as hurt, 'the hurt I suffered back then come back to me.' Michael has accepted the situation, but will never truly be free of it, as the consequences of Hanna's actions remain with him forever. Hanna's attempt to atone for her involvement in the war are established by her donation to the last surviving relative of the fire, and Michael enables her to do so by visiting the Jewish woman in New York. She however is unable to provide the absolution Hanna seeks as she refuses the money, but instead suggests donation to a fitting charity. Michael chooses a Jewish charity which combats illiteracy, and in doing so has granted Hanna atonement, in hope that the setback which once forced her to join the SS will not impede on other lives.

In both novels, guilt is shown to be the greatest consequence of Hanna and Briony's actions, and McEwan and Schlink use the subject of war to demonstrate this.
Just as all of the characters in 'Atonement' suffer due to Briony's accusation in part one, the whole of society lost out from the war- from the civilians killed in air raids, to the young women such as Briony who lost their youth and optimism to the gruesome task of nursing the wounded. Despite Schlink focusing on the consequences of conflict on the post-war generation, the message conveyed in both novels are similar: the effects of war are not limited to it's direct participants, but rather the whole society is guilty of allowing the war to happen, and it is only when the country confronts their past, atonement, a 'positive consequence' can be obtained. 'The Reader' and 'Atonement' force us to delve into our own consciences and consider the consequences our actions have not only on us, but also those around us.