



Atonement is Ian McEwan's eleventh novel, first published in 2001 and shortlisted for the Booker Prize in the same year

Plot summary

The book opens in the summer of 1935, and Part One focuses on the events of two days at the country house of the wealthy Tallis family. Here, the story is mostly focalised through the youngest member of the family, Briony, a highly imaginative 13-year-old. A shocking event occurs which has serious consequences for several characters, especially Robbie Turner, the son of the Tallis family's cleaning lady, who is sent to prison. In Part Two, the action moves to Normandy in May 1940. Robbie, now a private soldier in the British Army, is trying to find his way to Dunkirk to be evacuated. Part Three takes place at the same time and focuses on Briony, who is now 18 and has given up a place at Cambridge to nurse wounded soldiers. The novel's final part moves forward to 1999. Briony is a successful novelist, celebrating her 77th birthday and reflecting on the events of the summer of 1935 and their repercussions.

Social and historical contexts

Between the wars, the Second World War and the millennium

Part One of *Atonement* evokes an idyllic English summer in a country house which at first sight seems far from any external threat. Its setting symbolises the solidity of the past: 'It was a scene that could easily have accommodated, in the distance at least, a medieval castle...' Yet there are hints of fragility and decay: the island temple, an eighteenth-century folly, has 'a mottled, diseased appearance' and its 'exposed laths, themselves rotting away, showed through like the ribs of a starving animal'. A twenty-first-century reader is likely to pick up on the subtext: war is on the horizon and this type of privileged lifestyle is under threat.

In Part Two, these glimpses become extended descriptions of horrific acts of the Second World War: a mother and child are 'vaporised' in a bomb attack; an RAF man is attacked by fellow soldiers; the 'shouts and groans of wounded men' permeate the pages. McEwan has spoken of using photographs from the war in the Balkans to 'remind [himself] how soldiers and civilians... would suffer the most appalling consequences' (Reynolds and Nokes 2002).

Writing near the millennium, when many were not only looking to the future but also taking stock of the past, McEwan addresses ideas about the nature of history and how it is recorded through the voice of Robbie Turner: 'No-one would ever know what it was like to be here. Without the details there could be no larger picture.' Perhaps, as Claire Messud argues in her introduction to *Atonement*, with the passage of time the Second World War can be 'reduced to names and dates, to some version of 'the reasonable view' and 'it falls to the novelist to bring it fully back to life' (Messud in McEwan 2014).

Cultural contexts

The role of women, crime and punishment

The character of Cecilia Tallis reminds us that changes were taking place in gender roles and expectations leading up to the Second World War. As an educated young woman graduate, we are told that her Cambridge education 'changed her fundamentally' at a time when 'there are girls getting all sorts of jobs now. Even taking the Civil Service exams.' Countering this is the depiction of both Cecilia and Briony as nurses, a stereotypically nurturing female role, albeit one which they take on as part of the war effort rather than out of any personal desire or aptitude. Indeed, Briony continues to pursue her writing career in the little time she has away from nursing.



Atonement

by Ian McEwan



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McEwan

Literary contexts

Metafiction and postmodernism

Throughout *Atonement* McEwan explores the nature of writing and being a writer through metafiction — what David Lodge defines as ‘fiction about fiction: novels and stories that call attention to their fictional status and their own compositional procedures’ (Lodge 2011). Briony’s imagination is portrayed as both gift and curse. It leads her to confuse reality and imagination with terrible consequences for which she spends her life atoning. McEwan has also spoken about the influence of the tradition of the English novel, describing *Atonement* as ‘a novel full of other writers’ (Reynolds and Nokes 2002). The novel’s epigraph quotes Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, in which Catherine Morland is ‘so full of the delights of Gothic fiction that she causes havoc around her...’ It also alludes to other novels in the English tradition, including Henry James’ *What Maisie Knew*, L. P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between* and Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*.

As well as intertextuality, other postmodern aspects of the novel that readers might reflect upon include the reliability of the narrator and the presence of clues to the fictional tricks played on us in the novel, such as the emphasis on Briony’s natural ability for storytelling from the very first page of the novel. While the traditional Victorian novel invites the reader to suspend their disbelief and believe its characters and events are real, the postmodern novel often flaunts its artificiality. The reference points in *Atonement* are often not based in reality but come from other texts.

Crime

The events of the novel revolve around crimes committed — deliberate, accidental, serious and trivial. McEwan explores the nature of punishment and guilt throughout the novel, as the title suggests. Some crimes are punished excessively or unfairly, whereas some of those committing crimes get away scot-free, bringing to our attention the nature of justice. A sexual crime is committed with a 15-year-old girl as the victim, and her subsequent marriage to her abuser raises complex moral questions for a twenty-first-century reader. Not all crimes are personal, however: the question of assigning ‘blame’ for the suffering caused by the Second World War is central to McEwan’s ideas about crime, punishment, victims and justice in the novel.

References and further reading



- Lodge, D. (2011) *The Art of Fiction*, Vintage.
- McEwan, I. (2014) *Atonement*, Everyman. (Introduction by C. Messud)
- Reynolds, M. and Nokes, J. (eds) (2002) *Ian McEwan: The Essential Guide*, Vintage.

Clare Middleton is KS5 team leader in the English faculty at Wheatley Park School, Oxford. She is a school consultant for ENGLISH REVIEW.

Romola Garai as Briony aged 18