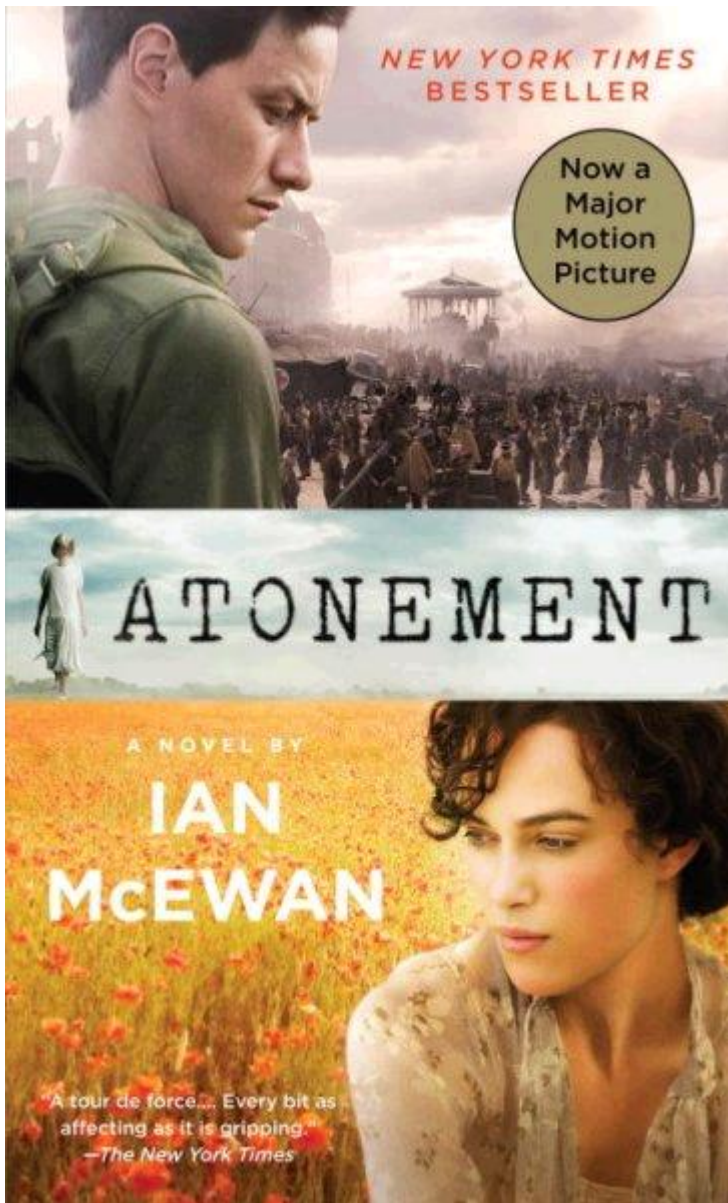


About the book...



The Booker Prize-winning author of *Amsterdam* creates a richly textured coming-of-age novel, set in 1935 England, that follows thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis, who witness an event involving her sister Cecilia and her childhood friend Robbie Turner, as she becomes the victim of her own imagination, which tears her family apart and leads her on a lifelong search of truth and absolution.

About the author... (Literature Resource Center)

Ian Russell McEwan was born on 21 June 1948 in Aldershot, England, to David McEwan and Rose Lilian Violet Moore McEwan. His mother's first husband died

during World War II; she subsequently married David McEwan, then a sergeant major in the British army. Ian's childhood was spent in the tracks of his father's assignments to empire outposts such as Singapore and Libya until he was sent to a boarding school in Suffolk.

McEwan entered the University of Sussex in Brighton in 1967 and graduated with a B.A. in English in 1970. He then enrolled in the M.A. program in English at the University of East Anglia, where he was permitted to submit some of his short fiction as part of the requirements for his degree. Under the tutelage of novelist Malcolm Bradbury, McEwan wrote more than two dozen short stories and earned his degree in 1971. Several of the stories written during that period were published in British and American periodicals, as well as in his first two books, both short-story collections: *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), which won the 1976 Somerset Maugham Award, and *In Between the Sheets, and Other Stories* (1978). The shocking nature and literary quality of these stories earned McEwan sufficient critical and popular attention to allow him to pursue writing as a full-time career, an occupation to which he has devoted himself exclusively ever since.

From the author's website (www.ianmcewan.com)

Ian McEwan was born on 21 June 1948 in Aldershot, England. He studied at the University of Sussex, where he received a BA degree in English Literature in 1970. While completing his MA degree in English Literature at

the University of East Anglia, he took a creative writing course taught by the novelists Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson.

McEwan's works have earned him worldwide critical acclaim. He won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1976 for his first collection of short stories *First Love, Last Rites*; the Whitbread Novel Award (1987) and the Prix Fémina Etranger (1993) for *The Child in Time*; and Germany's Shakespeare Prize in 1999. He has been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction numerous times, winning the award for *Amsterdam* in 1998. His novel *Atonement* received the WH Smith Literary Award (2002), National Book Critics' Circle Fiction Award (2003), Los Angeles Times Prize for Fiction (2003), and the Santiago Prize for the European Novel (2004). He was awarded a CBE in 2000. In 2006, he won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for his novel *Saturday*.

Reviews

Booklist:

McEwan, a master of psychologically acute and elegantly gothic tales, won the Booker Prize for *Amsterdam* (1998) and now weighs in with an even more polished and entrancing novel. It's 1935, and England is experiencing a heat wave, while chaos rules at the Tallis country estate. Mr. Tallis is always at the office; his lovely wife, suffering from migraines, is

usually in her darkened bedroom. Their youngest, 13-year-old Briony, a budding writer, keeps busy composing silly romances while waiting for her visiting older siblings and displaced cousins. Brother Leon, a bank clerk, arrives with an unattractive but wealthy friend. Sister Cecilia is home after finishing up at Cambridge, as is the sharp and ambitious Robbie Turner, their cleaning lady's son. The cousins, freckly twin boys and the newly nubile and wholly untrustworthy Lola, are unhappy victims of an impending divorce. All are hoping for a soothing holiday, but things quickly turn bizarrely catastrophic thanks to the highly imaginative but utterly naive and histrionic Briony, who sees something sinister occur between Cecilia and Robbie and wildly overreacts. McEwan's instantly addictive story line is of the bad-to-worse variety as he moves on to the harrowing vicissitudes of World War II. Every lustrously rendered, commanding scene is charged with both despair and diabolical wit, and McEwan's Jamesian prose covers the emotional spectrum from searing eroticism to toxic guilt. In sum, he excels brilliantly at depicting moral dilemmas and stressed minds in action without losing a keen sense of the body's terrible fragility, the touching absurdity of desire, and time's obstinacy.

Library Journal:

The major events of Booker Prize winner McEwan's new novel occur one day in the summer of 1935. Briony Tallis, a precocious 13-year-old with an overactive

imagination, witnesses an incident between Cecilia, her older sister, and Robbie Turner, son of the Tallis family's charwoman. Already startled by the sexual overtones of what she has seen, she is completely shocked that evening when she surreptitiously reads a suggestive note Robbie has mistakenly sent Cecilia. It then becomes easy for her to believe that the shadowy figure who assaults her cousin Lola late that night is Robbie. Briony's testimony sends Robbie to prison and, through an early release, into the army on the eve of World War II. Gradually understanding what she has done, Briony seeks atonement first through a career in nursing and then through writing, with the novel itself framed as a literary confession it has taken her a lifetime to write. Moving deftly between styles, this is a compelling exploration of guilt and the struggle for forgiveness. Recommended for most public libraries.

Kirkus: /* Starred Review */

McEwan's latest, both powerful and exquisite, considers the making of a writer, the dangers and rewards of imagination, and the juncture between innocence and awareness, all set against the late afternoon of an England soon to disappear.

In the first, longest, and most compelling of four parts, McEwan (the Booker-winning *Amsterdam*, 1998) captures the inner lives of three characters in a moment in 1935: upper-class 13-year-old Briony Tallis; her 18-year-old sister, Cecilia; and Robbie Turner, son of the family's charlady, whose Cambridge education has been subsidized by their father. Briony is a

penetrating look at the nascent artist, vain and inspired, her imagination seizing on everything that comes her way to create stories, numinous but still childish. She witnesses an angry, erotic encounter between her sister and Robbie, sees an improper note, and later finds them hungrily coupling; misunderstanding all of it, when a visiting cousin is sexually assaulted, Briony falsely brings blame to bear on Robbie, setting the course for all their lives. A few years later, we see a wounded and feverish Robbie stumbling across the French countryside in retreat with the rest of the British forces at Dunkirk, while in London Briony and Cecilia, long estranged, have joined the regiment of nurses who treat broken men back from war. At 18, Briony understands and regrets.

Literary Criticism

Title: The impression of a deeper darkness: Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

Author(s): Peter Mathews

Source: ***English Studies in Canada***. 32.1 (Mar. 2006): p147. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Critical essay

Knowledge which goes so far as to accept horror in order to know

it, reveals the inner horror of knowledge, its squalor, the discrete

complicity which maintains it in a relation with the most

insupportable aspects of power. I think of that young prisoner of

Auschwitz (he had suffered the worst, led his family to the

crematorium, hanged himself; after being saved at the last

moment--how can one say that: saved?).

Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

OPENING IN 1935 AGAINST THE LOOMING BACKGROUND of World War II, Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* (2001) centres on the guilt felt by the protagonist, Briony Tallis, for the consequences of her erroneous accusation that Robbie, her sister's new boyfriend, molested their young cousin Lola. The novel is a meditation on the act of testimony, beginning with Briony's initial accusation and extending ever outwards as, over the following years, she begins to rethink the reliability of her position as a witness. Each new chapter forces the reader to revise his or her understanding of what was revealed earlier, sowing seeds of doubt that make the text blossom into a set of irreconcilable uncertainties. James Harold writes that *Atonement* "reveals that narrative imagining is not static or unified, but dynamic and multi-polar," as it skilfully manipulates the imprecision of language by playing with the complicated link between knowledge and ethics (130). While the novel demonstrates the potentially tragic results of hasty judgment, its increasing ambiguity self-reflexively turns this logic of shame back onto the

reader, so that the book's conclusion leaves us, as witnesses, to ponder our own ability to testify about the story that Briony has just described.

At the centre of the book's narrative is a secret, an obscured truth, which McEwan uses to lure the reader into the story. Like Briony, the reader is pushed toward a moral judgment by this act of concealment, even though the information necessary to make an ethically informed decision is withheld. Each secret contains two possible destinies, writes Maurice Blanchot, "the stratagem of the secret is either to show itself, to make itself so visible that it isn't seen (to disappear, that is, as a secret), or to hint that the secret is only secret where there is no secret, or no appearance of any secret" (137). The crucial quality of a secret, in other words, lies in its form rather than its content, making the source of its attraction entirely negative. The paradoxical result is that the positive content at the heart of the secret, the evidence that can be gathered and analyzed, is effectively sidelined by the act of obscuration that frames it.

McEwan's awareness of this paradox is evidenced by his symbolic exploration of the empty, purely formal secret. In the novel's first chapter, for instance, the reader is told that Briony's fascination with storytelling is rooted in her "passion for secrets" (McEwan 5). All of Briony's passions--her storytelling, her love of secrets, her penchant for miniaturization--stem from an obsession with order, in both a moral and a physical sense. Her

secrets are made up of things she has literally sanctified from the everyday objects of her life:

[I]n a prized varnished cabinet, a secret drawer was opened
by pushing against the grain of a cleverly turned dovetail joint,
and here she kept a diary locked by a clasp, and a notebook
written in a code of her own invention.[...] An old tin petty
cash box was hidden under a removable floorboard beneath
her bed. In the box were treasures that dated back four years,
to her ninth birthday when she began collecting: a mutant
double acorn, fool's gold, a rainmaking spell bought at a funfair,
a squirrel's skull as light as a leaf. (5)

Briony's treasures possess a symbolic value: each provides the promise of something greater, a promise that is cancelled by its own formal status. the acorn, for example, is a seed that has lost the ability to germinate; the fool's gold promises a fortune that lacks any real economic value; and the rainmaking spell is worthless in a secular world that no longer believes in magic. As Briony herself acknowledges, her secrets are not secrets unless they possess the allure of hidden knowledge: "[H]idden drawers, lockable diaries and cryptographic systems could not conceal from Briony

the simple truth: she had no secrets" (5). Her secrets, like her treasures, are transparently counterfeit and thus lack the power to draw in a sophisticated observer.

A second exploration of the purely formal secret is to be found in Mrs Tallis's meditation on why moths are drawn toward light. Standing at the entrance to the drawing-room, she watches two or three moths flying around a lamp, wondering why these creatures are drawn to the place where they are most vulnerable to predators. She recalls the explanation given by a science professor she once met:

He had told her it was the visual impression of an even deeper darkness beyond the light that drew them in. Even though they might be eaten, they had to obey the instinct that made them seek out the darkest place, on the far side of the light--and in this case it was an illusion. (140)

The moths capture the central paradox of the formal secret--they fly into the symbolic light of reason, exposing themselves to a likely annihilation, all in pursuit of a deeper but illusory darkness. The secret, in other words, is a promise of knowledge, but it is a promise the emptiness of which may forever remain a mystery. Atonement is built on this basic formal structure: if there appears to be a secret, even if it is entirely illusory, the result of an authorial fabrication,

the reader is nonetheless drawn compulsively to know, to judge, and, above all, to moralize.

McEwan thus draws a line, in ethical terms, between two manifestations of the unknown: the mystery and the secret. The mystery involves an unsolvable riddle characterized by its anonymity (no one knows who is responsible for it) and contingency (no one knows how it came about). One example of a mystery in *Atonement* is provided by Cecilia's attempts to reconstruct her family's genealogy. McEwan writes:

She had made a halfhearted start on a family tree, but on the paternal side, at least until her great-grandfather opened his humble hardware shop, the ancestors were irretrievably sunk in a bog farm of farm laboring, with suspicious and confusing changes of surnames among the men, and common-law marriages unrecorded in the parish registers. (20)

The genealogy's status as obscured knowledge makes the Tallis family tree a mystery rather than a secret. There is no identifiable act of concealment, and no one is capable of answering for its opacity. The secret, by contrast, is defined by the possibility of responsibility and accountability. The secret retains the ability to be brought to light by those who understand its status as a secret, even if they are not involved in the act of

concealment. The "smoothing hand of time" that McEwan references throughout the novel, however, eventually transforms every secret into a mystery (152). Briony's manuscript, for example, is to be published only after her death, when she can no longer be responsible for its implicit accusations against both herself and the Marshalls. As the possessors of the secret are withdrawn by the passage of time, the secret loses the possibility of responsibility and becomes a mystery, although the boundaries between the two always remain blurry.

For McEwan, therefore, knowledge is the critical factor that turns the wheel of modern ethics. Indeed, the etymology of "innocence" is based on this very idea; the Latin origin of the word is a compound of the negative prefix "in" and the verb "agnoscere," which translates as "to acknowledge, recognize." the police investigations narrow Briony's choice: "Either she saw, or she did not see" (160). But the relationship between knowledge and innocence cannot be broken down into the simple either/or of a binary relation. The Aristotelian principle of contradiction, so perfectly symmetrical in its logic, is brought into question throughout *Atonement*. As the uncertain line between secret and mystery demonstrates, the structure of knowledge is less straightforward than knowing or not knowing. In Briony's case, for example, mystery and secret are intricately interwoven: while an act of concealment (her false accusation) takes place, Briony's true motivations for her action remain murky. Her

subsequent probing of this event as she grows up leads to its transformation from mystery into secret and from there to the self-accusations that underlie the narrative. Briony's story is therefore complex in its ethical implications, for while the revelation of her secret accuses her, the mystery of her motivations simultaneously excuses her--yes, she committed a crime, but her youthful naivete meant that she acted without "full" knowledge. Like Oedipus, she is both guilty and innocent because of this asymmetry in the structure of knowledge.

The secret has the same effect on modern ethics as the "deeper darkness" on Emily's Tallis's moths. Whether or not a crime has been committed, the very act of concealment inscribes one into an economy of guilt. The logic is simple: if there is nothing to hide, then why the need for concealment? The secret, therefore, forms the paradoxical heart of the economy of guilt and innocence. To imply that someone is hiding something is simultaneously to accuse them of a greater, unimagined guilt. there is a Kafkaesque logic to this notion, one that cynically places the burden of proof onto the accused. The secret, therefore, becomes a key strategy in the modern construction of authority. In a world of appearances, it is the performance of experience and authority that counts, and it is because of this logic that the teenage Briony trusts her confession to the craggy-faced detective. His impassive features form a kind of mask that conceals all emotion. Nonetheless, as with the secret, there is a paradoxical

structure to the detective's honesty. Whereas the secret's act of concealment implies guilt, this unflinching portrait of experience and sincerity denies all possibility of concealment. The detective is a character whose surface integrity serves as a guarantee to Briony that no darker secret lies beneath. McEwan writes: "the truth was in the symmetry, which was to say, it was founded in common sense. The truth instructed her eyes" (159). But Briony's--and later, the reader's--faulty interpretation of the situation is based on a misreading of the rhetorical surface of things, the falsely symmetrical assumption that concealment equates with guilt and transparency with integrity.

McEwan's novel thus possesses a complicated perspectivist structure, a tactic that requires the reader continually to revise their view of particular events and characters. As such, Brian Finney writes, "the novel's epigraph, a quotation from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, serves as both a warning and a guide to how the reader should view this narrative" (70). Like Austen, Finney argues, McEwan is playing with the presuppositions of his readers, luring them into making erroneous assumptions based on their expectations about the novel's theme and genre. There is a cultivated purpose to this technique: it epitomizes the struggle between an artfully fragmented piece of literature and the reader's implicit desire to unify it through judgment. The text further alludes to the influence of Virginia Woolf on Briony's writing style (for it is Briony, after all, who turns out to be the internal

"author" of *Atonement*). In making these gestures toward Austen and Woolf, McEwan seems chiefly concerned with the ethical implications of their fictional strategies, a point underlined in Cyril Connolly's rejection of Briony's original manuscript, which he criticizes for being too close an homage to Woolf's style. McEwan's use of perspective would more accurately be described as more Nietzschean than Woolfean, therefore, shifting from one character to the next in order to question the moral limitations of their finite points of view. The novel is thus filled with echoes and contrasts in which McEwan compares one interpretation of an event to another. The reader's perspective on the behaviour of the twins, for example, depends on whether it is Lola or Robbie speaking. In Chapter 10, after being told about Robbie's letter, Lola says that she thought Robbie was a "monster" from the moment she saw him shouting at the twins by the pool (McEwan 12). Earlier, after his mother expresses sympathy for the twins, Robbie's thoughts reveal that he only yelled at them because they tried to throw his wheelbarrow into the pool. In Chapter 13, to give a more telling example, Briony recasts her swimming lessons with Robbie as evidence of his "maniacal" behaviour. Robbie's own view of the matter is withheld until Part Two, when Briony's erratic behaviour during the swimming lessons, and her damning confession of love for him, is revealed. McEwan repeatedly uses these surface examples to alert the reader that the objectivity of the narrative voice is deeply suspect.

These warnings are essential to a sophisticated interpretation of the novel, especially because the most crucial points of comparison in the novel are regularly passed over without foregrounding of any kind. For instance, when Robbie comes to apologize for his obscene letter, Cecilia leads him into the library. As they face each other uncertainly, Cecilia makes a symbolic gesture with her hands: "She turned aside and made a steeple of her hands to enclose her nose and mouth and pressed her fingers into the corners of her eyes" (125). Her action has a forceful resonance: it foreshadows, for instance, the incident at the island temple (if we connect the temple to the synecdoche of the steeple); it symbolizes the immanent covenant between the two lovers (insofar as the gesture has religious, sacramental undertones); most importantly, the hands, arranged in this manner, provide an improvised frame that emphasizes Cecilia's limited perspective on the events that follow. But the hand motion also has a darker significance, as Cecilia unconsciously replicates Paul Marshall's own gesture at the end of Chapter 5. Paul is awoken from an incestuous, erotic dream by the noise of the Quincey children playing in the nursery. His intentions toward Lola are framed by the sinister context of this dream. "D'you know," he says to her, "you remind me of my favorite sister" (58). then, after giving her one of his chocolate bars, "Marshall sat back in the armchair, watching her [Lola] closely over the steeple he made with his hands in front of his face" (59). Whereas Cecilia's view is limited to the space between her

fingers, Paul peeps over the steeple's phallic structure to take in the object of his desire, hinting that he possesses knowledge beyond the framework constructed for the reader. Throughout the novel, McEwan shows the way in which the frame determines and limits one's judgment of events. As Finney writes of Briony, "Style, she discovers, really does have ethical implications" (72).

As well as playing with the notion of perspective, McEwan also echoes Friedrich Nietzsche's argument in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) that the Christian ideas of sin and forgiveness are modeled on the psychological interplay between creditor and debtor. Sin is not just an offense against God; it is a debt that, under the old law of Moses, must be repaid. The best translation of the Lord's Prayer, which pleads with God to "forgive us our debts," captures neatly this economics of guilt. The problem for humanity becomes one of equivalence: what can it possibly do to pay God back for the sin of the Fall? Or, in the case of the novel, what can Briony possibly do to rectify the effects of her false testimony? Nietzsche writes: "Indebtedness towards God: this thought becomes for him [the guilty person] an instrument of torture.[...] This represents a kind of madness of the will in psychic cruelty which simply knows no equal: the will of man to find himself guilty and reprehensible to a point beyond the possibility of atonement" (72-73). Briony's desire to make up for her misdeed is thus representative of a

broader economy of guilt that, for Nietzsche, characterizes the psychology of modern humanity.

The root of this "madness," as Nietzsche indicates, is inscribed in the economic structure of modernity. The history of the Turners' relationship with the Tallis family, for example, is strongly overcoded by monetary exchange. Robbie's parents start out as servants in the household, but with the departure of his father, Ernest, this arrangement takes on a different and more complicated aspect. Grace Turner's usefulness to the family transcends her role as a servant, a fact that the family acknowledges through various gifts--Jack Tallis presents her with the deeds to the bungalow, Grace is kept on in a new capacity, and Robbie's education is paid for. In this initial setup, atonement loses its usual negative tinge. the Turner and Tallis families are united, made "at one" through this mutually beneficial relationship. Robbie is elevated from being the son of a servant to the social equal of the Tallis children, a move that lays the ground for his future romance with Cecilia. But the economic tensions underlying this move quickly become visible after Briony's accusation. Mrs Tallis, the reader discovers, initially opposed her husband's decision to fund Robbie's education. McEwan writes: "'Nothing good will come of it' was the phrase she often used, to which Jack would respond smugly that plenty of good had come already" (142). However benevolent Jack's actions may be, it is impossible for him to overcome fully the fact that his liberality places Robbie in a position of obligation. While according to the letter

of the law Robbie's education is paid for freely, in good will, Jack's reframing of his protege as a "good investment" unconsciously implies that the return on his money--Robbie's first at Cambridge, his ambition to go to medical school--has paid off well. Thus the benevolence of the Tallis family evaporates once Robbie has been accused, and Emily Tallis, who doubted the value of their "investment" in the first place, is the most forceful and relentless in the prosecution of Robbie.

In considering these economic relationships, the reader must also take into account that Briony's "debt," her "crime," as McEwan calls it throughout the novel, is framed by the context of World War II. McEwan brilliantly interweaves the family drama with the movement of history, making each set of crimes reflect on the other. In terms of sheer atrocity, the war easily dwarfs Briony's misdeed, but the reader never loses sight of her shameful action. For a novel that draws from some of the key historical events of the twentieth century, however, there is surprisingly little discussion of the Nazis or the rise of fascism. McEwan implies, instead, that the fascist mindset has pervaded modern culture at a much deeper, unconscious level. the militarization of the nursing practice is one prominent example in *Atonement*. In his book *Male Fantasies* (1977), for example, Klaus Theweleit examines the culture of the Freikorps, the interwar paramilitary culture that, he argues, was crucial to the formation of Nazi Germany. Theweleit contends that the female

counterpart of the "white nurse" was an indispensable part of the proto-fascist mindset. He writes: "Mother, sister(-of-mercy, nurse), and countess all in one person. Such is the holy trinity of the 'good' woman, the nonwhore. Instead of castrating, she protects. She has no penis, but then she has no sex, either" (95). Briony's decision to enlist as a nurse during the war allows her to experience at first-hand this militarization of civilian culture. Briony's interest in writing, to provide a further example, is tied to a fascistic obsession with order. McEwan writes: "She was one of those children possessed by the desire to have the world just so" (4). The point is not that Briony simply reflects the fascist mindset, even though her childish but calculating nature would seem to fit the stereotype. Instead, the narrative of *Atonement* ends up being an account of Briony's lifelong struggle with her internal attraction to fascism--the "fascism in us all," as Michel Foucault calls it--with its external patterns of order and symmetry (xiii).

This aesthetic is gradually ruptured in Briony's consciousness as the novel unfolds. When she first conceives her play *The Trials of Arabella*, for instance, each character is dramatized in her own mind, neatly balancing the actions of the others. (1) When her cousins rehearse the play, however, she discovers, to her horror, that their representations of the characters are different from hers. This realization creates a break in Briony's personality, shattering the aesthetic symmetry she had imagined to be at the heart of life

and literature, a symmetry that constitutes the foundation of her narcissistic, totalitarian outlook. A second rupture occurs with Robbie's obscene letter. Having discovered the worm of negativity in the fruit of knowledge, Briony becomes convinced that her childish perspective was not wrong as such. The world as it was conceived is symmetrical, but it has "fallen" from this original state of purity. The evil lies in knowledge, which provides the possibility of contradiction. McEwan writes, "The very complexity of her feelings confirmed Briony in her view that she was entering an arena of adult emotion and dissembling from which her writing was bound to benefit. What fairy tale ever held so much by way of contradiction?" (106). Within this second point of view, the function of literature is to provide an artistic ideal, a glimpse of the beautiful symmetry of the world that existed before the blight of the negative and the impure intervened. This view of the world thus necessitates a scapegoat, a figure that can be blamed for the dissolution of symmetry. If that figure can be eliminated, purity will be restored to the world. For the Nazis, this ideal was encapsulated by racial and cultural purity, requiring the elimination of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, the physically and mentally disabled, and so on.

The focus of Briony's search for purity is Robbie: the obscene letter, coupled with her ontological rupture, becomes the ammunition she needs to take aim at this destroyer of the aesthetically perfect worlds of her childhood. He is to be the sacrifice, the scapegoat that

restores her world to its pre-lapsarian state. But the asymmetry of knowledge intervenes at every point in Briony's project. The cornerstone of ethics is knowledge, so that to know is to be responsible, to be answerable for one's actions. Yet there remains the possibility of action without knowledge, especially because "full knowledge" is inevitably a relative term. But the asymmetrical peculiarity of innocence is that it is self-reflexive: true innocence, as William Blake famously demonstrates, does not even know that it is innocent. The reader sees Briony emerging from this state at the very beginning of the novel, when her innocence is ruptured by the realization that each person possesses a complex individual consciousness just like her own.

Such was Briony's last thought before she accepted that she
did not understand, and that she must simply watch. Unseen,
from two stories up, with the benefit of unambiguous sunlight,
she had privileged access across the years to adult behavior, to
rites and conventions she knew nothing about, as yet.[...] She
need not judge. There did not have to be a moral. She need only
show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the
idea that other minds were equally alive. (37-38)

The crossing of this line from innocence to experience is so difficult to trace that McEwan qualifies this intense psychological transformation in her character by suggesting that, sixty years later, Briony remains unsure whether or not the melding of the advent of experience and the scene by the fountain could be just a convenient fictional reconstruction of her memory. The third and final step in this process, therefore, is Briony's understanding of the asymmetry of knowledge, in which she comes to understand the infinite ambivalence of her "crime."

It is her torturous longing for atonement that places Briony in a kind of psychological "hell." McEwan symbolizes this agony in a subtle but consistent foregrounding of the symbolic number three. The most obvious point of reference for this motif is the Christian notion of the trinity, the "three in one" of the Godhead, which recurs throughout the text: the three broken pieces of the vase, the three participants in the fountain scene, the three soldiers marching to Dunkirk, the wedding at the Church of the Holy Trinity, the three aspirins that Briony takes in the epilogue, the three main sections of the novel. Apart from its religious connotations, however, McEwan uses this motif to create a repeated, subliminal allusion to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The number three pattern is also employed by Dante--the three parts of the *Divine Comedy*, which are each divided into thirty-three cantos (with the exception of the *Inferno*, which has one extra canto, making a total of one hundred cantos overall, a function

paralleled by the epilogue in *Atonement*)--and employing the poetic schema of *terza rima*. Underhand references to Dante are scattered throughout the novel: when Briony sees Robbie toward the end of the novel, she imagines prison "the way people imagined the different torments of hell" (322); when working as a nurse, Briony is commanded to "lead fifteen men up to Beatrice [the name of Dante's lover] ward" (276); and in the epilogue, Briony's taxi takes a shortcut through "the Inner Circle of Regent's Park" (335). Hell is not a place for Briony but a mental state of torment that is shaped and conditioned by her crime. The most important dimension of these references to Dante, however, comes from recalling that the deepest and most sinister punishment is reserved, famously, for the traitors (Judas, Brutus), and it is here, at the centre of the web, that Briony installs herself, as both accuser and accused.

The novel's most famous shift of perspective is the revelation that Briony is the author of the account in its entirety. Earl G. Ingersoll writes: "McEwan's epilogue radically subverts the reader's knowledge of not merely the 'content' of the preceding narrative but its provenance as well" (248). The reality of the characters as the reader has seen them--in both a psychological and a concrete sense--is tainted by this newly gained knowledge of Briony's authorship. How are we, as readers, to believe in the validity of the innermost thoughts and motivations of these characters when, as it turns out, they are told from the perspective of

someone who has a clear interest in how we judge the story? Whereas Briony's narrative draws the reader into the lives of the characters through the omniscient perspective of a third-person narrator, the revelation of the story's partiality upsets this relation of intimacy. McEwan thus explores the paradoxes of human judgment for two purposes. Internal to the text, the experienced Briony, the distinguished writer, is able to explore her failings, in particular the quickness to judge that characterized her youthful self. The teenage Briony is, as it were, "sacrificed" in the novel. She replaces Robbie as the novel's scapegoat: captured in the pages of her lifelong work, her effigy in the form of a novel is sent out into the world as a final act of atonement after her death. But lest we judge her too hastily, the novel's structural twist is meant to engage the reader in a reversal of perspective. The reader's judgment of Briony suddenly becomes pre-emptive, insofar as we have shown ourselves to be hasty in our morality and our willingness to judge.

There is a final trick up McEwan's sleeve, however, a twist that is only hinted at in the epilogue, which suggests that the novel in its entirety may be a formal and empty secret. The revelation that the account is Briony's problematizes the characterization of key figures in the novel, and she concedes this fact by offering her readers alternative, fictional endings for the two lovers, although her choice of an auspicious conclusion is now rendered as specious as her original crime. The impossibility of deciding on a single, easily

defined destiny has been the lesson of her lifelong project:

The problem with these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point.
The attempt was all. (350-51)

But to the wary reader Briony's comments should remain unsatisfactory, a narrative ruse designed to project once again, perhaps, the impression of a deeper darkness. The key piece of evidence is contained in Cyril Connolly's rejection letter to Briony for, as Pilar Hidalgo points out, it takes "a careful second reading of the novel to perceive that Connolly's corrections [...] have been silently incorporated into the body of *Atonement*" (87). Having just read the first draft of the novel that is to become *Atonement*, Connolly congratulates Briony for her stylistic innovations but suggests that her story needs some deeper set of

implications for its characters: "If this girl has so fully misunderstood or been so wholly baffled by the strange little scene that has unfolded before her, how might it affect the lives of the two adults? Might she come between them in some disastrous fashion?" (295). Connolly's battery of suggestions forces the reader to ask some crucial questions of their own about McEwan's text: Did Briony really commit the crime on which the entire narrative hinges? Is the novel perhaps nothing more than a complex but empty secret, designed to play on the reader's compulsion to head, like one of Emily's moths, toward the impression of a deeper darkness? There is no final answer to these questions, for McEwan hints that the novel may be nothing more than an act of concealment that the modern reader, armed with the pessimism of the modern age, is destined to interpret, without further proof, as a sign of guilt.

There is, however, another way of interpreting this uncertainty, one that connects to the larger historical backdrop of *Atonement*. In *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999), Giorgio Agamben examines the testimonies of those who survived the Nazi death camps. He argues that there is an inherent ambivalence in the structure of testimony that places the witness both inside and outside the events they describe. Refuting the argument that those who survived the death camps were motivated by an inner heroic quality, Agamben contends that survival in the camps was entirely a matter of contingency, independent of will or personal

strength. In spite of this lack of control, Agamben observes, the common sentiment amongst the survivors of Auschwitz is shame. He writes:

To be ashamed means to be consigned to something that cannot
be assumed.[...] Here the "I" is thus overcome by its
own
passivity, its ownmost sensibility [...]. In shame, the
subject
thus has not other content than its own
desubjectification;
it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own
oblivion as a
subject. This double movement, which is both
subjectification
and desubjectification, is shame. (105-06)

In the context of Agamben's philosophical project, Auschwitz is the historical culmination of the inherent contradictions of the political logic of sovereignty, and while McEwan's novel rarely addresses the Nazi atrocities directly, his concerns intersect implicitly with Agamben's through Briony's guilt. Her ambivalent participation in the process of testimony is a reflection of her shame at being thrown into a world over which she has no control and yet to which she must bear witness as if it were of her own making. It is this dual movement of becoming and annihilation in Briony's character that Agamben identifies as the entry point into a world of guilt and forgiveness.

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Discussion Questions (ReadingGroupGuides)

- 1.** What sort of social and cultural setting does the Tallis house create for the novel? What is the mood of the house, as described in chapter 12? What emotions and impulses are being acted upon or repressed by its inhabitants? How does the careful attention to detail affect the pace of Part One, and what is the effect of the acceleration of plot events as it nears its end?
- 2.** A passion for order, a lively imagination, and a desire for attention seem to be Briony's strongest traits. In what ways is she still a child? Is her narcissism—her inability to see things from any point of view but her own—unusual in a thirteen-year-old? Why does the

scene she witnesses at the fountain change her whole perspective on writing? What is the significance of the passage in which she realizes she needs to work from the idea that "other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value" [p. 38]? Do her actions bear this out?

3. What kind of a person is Emily Tallis? Why does McEwan decide not to have Jack Tallis make an appearance in the story? Who, if anyone, is the moral authority in this family? What is the parents' relationship to Robbie Turner, and why does Emily pursue his conviction with such single-mindedness?

4. What happens between Robbie and Cecilia at the fountain? What symbolic role does Uncle Clem's precious vase play in the novel? Is it significant that the vase is glued together by Cecilia, and broken finally during the war by Betty as she readies the house to accept evacuees?

5. Having read Robbie's note to Cecilia, Briony thinks about its implications for her new idea of herself as a writer: "No more princesses! . . . With the letter, something elemental, brutal, perhaps even criminal had been introduced, some principle of darkness, and even in her excitement over the possibilities, she did not doubt that her sister was in some way threatened and would need her help" [pp. 106–7]. Why is Robbie's uncensored letter so offensive within the social context

in which it is read? Why is Cecilia not offended by it?

6. The scene in the library is one of the most provocative and moving descriptions of sex in recent fiction. How does the fact that it is narrated from Robbie's point of view affect how the reader feels about what happens to him shortly afterwards? Is it understandable that Briony, looking on, perceives this act of love as an act of violence?

7. Why does Briony stick to her story with such unwavering commitment? Does she act entirely in error in a situation she is not old enough to understand, or does she act, in part, on an impulse of malice, revenge, or self-importance? At what point does she develop the empathy to realize what she has done to Cecilia and Robbie?

8. How does Leon, with his life of "agreeable nullity" [p. 103], compare with Robbie in terms of honor, intelligence, and ambition? What are the qualities that make Robbie such an effective romantic hero? What are the ironies inherent in the comparative situations of the three young men present—Leon, Paul Marshall, and Robbie?

9. Lola has a critical role in the story's plot. What are her motivations? Why does she tell Briony that her brothers caused the marks on her wrists and arms [see pp. 109–13]? Why does she allow Briony to take over her story when she is attacked later in the evening [see

pp. 153–60]? Why does Briony decide not to confront Lola and Paul Marshall at their wedding five years later?

10. The novel's epigraph is taken from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, in which a naïve young woman, caught up in fantasies from the Gothic fiction she loves to read, imagines that her host in an English country house is a villain. In Austen's novel Catherine Norland's mistakes are comical and have no serious outcome, while in *Atonement*, Briony's fantasies have tragic effects upon those around her. What is McEwan implying about the power of the imagination, and its potential for harm when unleashed into the social world? Is he suggesting, by extension, that Hitler's pathological imagination was a driving force behind World War II?

11. In McEwan's earlier novel *Black Dogs*, one of the main characters comes to a realization about World War II. He thinks about "the recently concluded war not as a historical, geopolitical fact but as a multiplicity, a near-infinity of private sorrows, as a boundless grief minutely subdivided without diminishment among individuals who covered the continent like dust, like spores whose separate identities would remain unknown, and whose totality showed more sadness than anyone could ever begin to comprehend" [*Black Dogs*, p. 140]. Does McEwan intend his readers to experience the war similarly in *Atonement*? What aspects of *Atonement* make it so powerful as a war novel? What details heighten the emotional impact in the scenes of the

Dunkirk retreat and Briony's experience at the military hospital?

12. When Robbie, Mace, and Nettle reach the beach at Dunkirk, they intervene in an attack on an RAF man who has become a scapegoat for the soldiers' sense of betrayal and rage. As in many of his previous novels, McEwan is interested in aggressive human impulses that spin out of control. How does this act of group violence relate to the moral problems that war creates for soldiers, and the events Robbie feels guilty about as he falls asleep at Bray Dunes?

13. About changing the fates of Robbie and Cecilia in her final version of the book, Briony says, "Who would want to believe that the young lovers never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism?" [p. 350] McEwan's *Atonement* has two endings—one in which the fantasy of love is fulfilled, and one in which that fantasy is stripped away. What is the emotional effect of this double ending? Is Briony right in thinking that "it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end" [p. 351]?

14. Why does McEwan return to the novel's opening with the long-delayed performance of *The Trials of Arabella*, Briony's youthful contribution to the optimistic genre of Shakespearean comedy? What sort of closure is this in the context of Briony's career? What is the

significance of the fact that Briony is suffering from vascular dementia, which will result in the loss of her memory, and the loss of her identity?

15. In her letters to Robbie, Cecilia quotes from W. H. Auden's 1939 poem, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," which includes the line, "Poetry makes nothing happen." In part, the novel explores the question of whether the writing of fiction is not much more than the construction of elaborate entertainments—an indulgence in imaginative play—or whether fiction can bear witness to life and to history, telling its own serious truths. Is Briony's novel effective, in her own conscience, as an act of atonement? Does the completed novel compel the reader to forgive her?

Multimedia

A discussion of the book's transformation into the movie screenplay is available through National Public Radio "Taking 'Atonement' from the Page to the Screen"
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16818489>

"Atonement" released on film in 2007 is available at the AADL: <http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1308215>

The movie won several awards:

[80th Academy Awards: *Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures – Original Score* \(Dario Marianelli\)](#)

61st British Academy Film Awards: *Best Film* (Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner, Paul Webster), *Best Production Design* (Sarah Greenwood, Katie Spencer)

Empire Film Awards: *Best British Film* (Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner, Paul Webster), *Best Actor* (James McAvoy), *Best Actress* (Keira Knightley)

Golden Tomato Awards: *Best Romance*

Houston Film Critics Society Awards: *Top 10 Films*, *Best Original Score* (Dario Marianelli)

65th Golden Globe Awards: *Best Motion Picture Drama*, *Best Original Score – Motion Picture* (Dario Marianelli)

International Film Music Critics Association Awards: *Film Score of the Year* (Dario Marianelli), *Best Original Score – Drama* (Dario Marianelli), *Film Music Composition of the Year* (Elegy for Dunkirk, Dario Marianelli)

Irish Film and Television Awards: *Actress in a Supporting Role Film* (Saoirse Ronan), *Director of Photography* (Seamus McGarvey).

Las Vegas Film Critics Society Awards: *Best Youth Performance – Female* (Saoirse Ronan)

London Film Critics Circle Awards: *British Actor of the Year* (James McAvoy), *British Actress in a Supporting Role* (Vanessa Redgrave)

Nilsson Awards for Film: *Best Film, Best Original Score, Best Set Decoration, Young Artist Award* (Saoirse Ronan)

[Phoenix Film Critics Society Awards](#): *Top 10 Films, Best Cinematography* (Seamus McGarvey), *Best Original Score* (Dario Marianelli), *Best Performance by a Youth in a Lead or Supporting Role* (Saoirse Ronan)

[San Diego Film Critics Society Awards](#): *Top 7 Films, Best Editing* (Paul Tothill)

[Satellite Awards](#): *Best Adapted Screenplay* (Christopher Hampton)

11th Pyongyang International Film Festival: *Shooting and Fine Arts Award*

Read Alike

Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (1996)

Barry Unsworth, *The Rage of the Vulture* (1982)

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925)



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