



# Atonement

Ian McEwan  
(2001)

## PLOT AND SETTING

*Atonement* starts as a classic family saga, in an **English country house in 1935**. Briony Tallis, a 13-year-old girl, decides to become a writer. Her first experiment in narrative technique involves relating an odd incident she witnesses from her bedroom window from three different points of view. It regards her sister Cecilia who takes off her dress and steps into a fountain in the presence of Robbie Turner, the son of a family servant. Robbie has been educated at Cambridge under Mr Tallis's patronage and wants to become a physician. He and Cecilia are in love but Briony suspects that Robbie Turner is forcing her sister into doing obscene things. When her young cousin Lola is harassed in the garden, Briony accuses Robbie of the act, out of revenge and perhaps jealousy. Robbie is imprisoned and expelled from the family's estate. Cecilia, who believes in his innocence, breaks with her family.

Part 2 takes place in **Normandy in May 1940**. Robbie is serving as a soldier, after his prison sentence. We follow him as he retreats, with the rest of the British Expeditionary Force, through northern France to Dunkirk. The only thing that keeps him alive is his hope to be united with Cecilia who meanwhile has become a nurse. Briony, now eighteen, has realised that she made a mistake and is tormented by remorse.

In Part 3 Briony works as a trainee nurse at a **London hospital**, where the hard labour is a form of atonement for her. **The novel ends in 1999**, when the aging Briony, now a successful novelist, becomes aware that she is developing progressive vascular dementia. Soon, her ability to remember and grasp reality will desert her. But she is in peace because she has finished writing her latest version of Robbie and Cecilia's story. Her atonement seems complete until we learn that Robbie died in France and Cecilia in a bombing, and that the happy ending we read was simply Briony's attempted atonement for what she did.

## CHARACTERS

Through the character of **Briony**, McEwan presents the figure of the child and the writer at the same time, in the sense that they both specialise in creating worlds from their own imagination. Briony's sister, **Cecilia**, is the second heroine of the novel. She is lively and restless, and studying at Cambridge learns about the separations between gender and social class. She is the only one to stand by Robbie

when he is accused, insisting on his innocence. **Robbie** is the hero. He is from a lower class background, he is handsome, clever and ambitious. His character develops especially in Part 2, where we read about his memories, thoughts and motivations, whereas in Part 3 he is driven by anger and resentment. However, his character is written by Briony and is mainly the result of her speculation.

## THEMES

The aspect that is essential to McEwan in terms of morality is the recognition of others' consciousness, which is necessary to the apprehension of an equal humanity and underlines the novelist's attempt to represent social interaction. In a world of her own creation, the novelist can know everything, but this can never be true of life. The book has also a political dimension in its concern with the Second World War. Briony's meditation on responsibility and imagination can be read as a commentary on a society shattered by the events of the mid-century.

However, the most disturbing aspect of *Atonement* is the exploration of the problem of knowing other minds, and the role of imagining, narrating and storytelling in our efforts to understand reality and escape isolation.

The novel poses several questions: how can the individual find atonement if the only touchstones are his own understanding and morality? From whom can history find atonement for the horror of the war? And how can novelists find atonement in a fictional world of their own creation?

## STYLE

*Atonement* is a complex novel in terms of form. Jane Austen's influence can be seen in the story of the relationship between the two sisters, but it places itself in a realist tradition with its deep and vivid characterisation. It displays a modernist interest in consciousness and in the use of shifting perspectives; however, it emerges as a post-modernist novel, because it questions its own fictive status, exposing itself as a construction.

The third-person narrative is attributed not to an anonymous authorial voice but to Briony, a character within the story. The descriptive richness is one of the striking features of the novel, with detailed imagery of water and vegetation, and with divergent perspectives, flashbacks, overlapping narratives and replayed scenes.

## Key idea

### Heat

The weather plays an important role especially when the author uses the heatwave to suggest high-running passions. Heat hangs over the first part of the novel and shapes its action when Robbie and Cecilia become lovers,

and are interrupted by an appalled Briony, but also when the mysterious act of violence and Briony's crime of false testimony are committed.

**COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION****1 READ the texts and answer the following questions.**

- 1 How many parts does the novel consist of and where are they set?
- 2 What message does McEwan convey through the character of Briony?
- 3 What are the main themes of the novel?
- 4 What narrative technique is used?
- 5 What are the modernist and post-modernist elements?
- 6 What is the role of the weather?

**Briony's crime**

*One evening Briony saw her sister Cecilia and Robbie Turner making love in the library and misunderstood the scene for a sexual assault by Robbie on her sister. Later that night a letter was found which had been written by Briony's twin cousins. They said they were going back home on their own. Research of the two young boys began in the garden.*

Within the half hour Briony would commit her crime. Conscious that she was sharing the night expanse with a maniac, she kept close to the shadowed walls of the house at first, and ducked low beneath the sills<sup>1</sup> whenever she passed in front of a lighted window. She knew he would be **heading off** down the main drive because that was the way her sister had gone with Leon. As soon as she thought a safe distance had opened up, Briony swung out boldly<sup>2</sup> from the house in a wide arc that took her toward the stable block<sup>3</sup> and the swimming pool. It made sense, surely, to see if the twins were there, **fooling about** with the hoses<sup>4</sup>, or floating facedown<sup>5</sup> in death, indistinguishable to the last. She thought how she might describe it, the way they bobbed<sup>6</sup> on the illuminated water's gentle swell<sup>7</sup>, and how their hair spread like tendrils<sup>8</sup> and their clothed bodies softly collided and drifted apart<sup>9</sup>. The dry night air slipped between the fabric of her dress and her skin, and she felt smooth and agile in the dark. There was nothing she could not describe: the gentle pad of a maniac's tread<sup>10</sup> moving sinuously along the drive, keeping to the verge to muffle his approach<sup>11</sup>. But her brother was with Cecilia, and that was a burden lifted. She could describe this delicious air too, the grasses **giving off** their sweet cattle smell, the hard-fired earth which still held the embers of the day's heat<sup>12</sup> and exhaled the mineral odour of clay, and the faint breeze carrying from the lake a flavour of green and silver. [...]

Wasn't writing a kind of soaring<sup>13</sup>, an achievable form of flight, of fancy, of the imagination?

But there was a maniac treading through the night with a dark, unfulfilled heart – she had frustrated him once already – and she needed to be earthbound<sup>14</sup> to describe him too. She must first protect her sister against him, and then find ways of conjuring him<sup>15</sup> safely on paper. Briony slowed to a walking pace, and thought how he must hate her for interrupting him in the library. And though it horrified her, it was another entry, a moment of coming into being, another first: to be hated by an adult. Children hated generously, capriciously. It hardly mattered. But to be the object of adult hatred was an initiation into a solemn new world. It was promotion. He might have **doubled back**, and be waiting for her with murderous thoughts behind the stable block. But she was trying not to be afraid. She had held his gaze there in the library while her sister had slipped past her, giving no outward acknowledgment of her deliverance<sup>16</sup>. It was not about thanks, she knew that, it was not about rewards. In matters of selfless<sup>17</sup> love, nothing needed to be said, and she would protect her sister, even if Cecilia failed to acknowledge her debt. And Briony could not be afraid now of Robbie; better by far

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Part 1, Chapter 13

- 1 **ducked low beneath the sills.** Abbassò la testa sotto i davanzali.
- 2 **swung out boldly.** Uscì coraggiosamente.
- 3 **stable block.** Scuderie.
- 4 **hoses.** Pompe.
- 5 **floating facedown.** Galleggiando a faccia in giù.
- 6 **they bobbed.** Dondolavano.
- 7 **swell.** Superficie.
- 8 **tendrils.** Tentacoli.
- 9 **drifted apart.** Si separavano.
- 10 **the gentle ... tread.** L'avanzare cauto di un maniaco.
- 11 **keeping ... approach.** Che si manteneva sul ciglio per attutire il rumore dei propri passi.
- 12 **which still ... heat.** In cui ardeva ancora la calura del giorno.
- 13 **soaring.** Alzarsi in volo.
- 14 **earthbound.** Con i piedi per terra.
- 15 **conjuring him.** Trasferirlo.
- 16 **had slipped ... deliverance.** Le era scivolata accanto senza rivolgerle la parola dopo che lei l'aveva salvata.
- 17 **selfless.** Disinteressato.



35 to let him become the object of her detestation and disgust. They had provided for all manner of pleasant things for him, the Tallis family: the very home he had grown up in, countless trips to France, and his grammar school uniform and books, and then Cambridge – and in return he had used a terrible word against her sister and, in a fantastic abuse of hospitality, used his strength against her too, and sat insolently at their dining table pretending that nothing was different. The pretence, and how she  
40 ached to expose it<sup>18</sup>! Real life, her life now beginning, had sent her a villain in the form of an old family friend with strong, awkward limbs<sup>19</sup> and a rugged<sup>20</sup> friendly face who used to carry her on his back, and swim with her in the river, holding her against the current. That seemed about right – truth was strange and deceptive<sup>21</sup>, it had to be  
45 struggled for, against the flow of the everyday. This was exactly what no one would have expected, and of course villains were not announced with hisses<sup>22</sup> or soliloquies, they did not come cloaked in black, with ugly expressions. Across the other side of the house, walking away from her, were Leon and Cecilia. She might be telling him about the assault. If she was, he would have his arm around her shoulders. Together, the Tallis children would **see** this brute **off**, see him safely out of their lives. [...]

She walked directly toward the temple, and had gone seven or eight steps, and was about to call out the names of the twins, when the bush that lay directly in her path – the one she thought should be closer to the shore – began to break up in front of her, or double itself, or waver, and then fork<sup>23</sup>. It was changing its shape in a complicated way,  
55 thinning at the base as a vertical column rose five or six feet. She would have stopped immediately had she not still been so completely bound to the notion that this was a bush, and that she was witnessing some trick of darkness and perspective. Another second or two, another couple of steps, and she saw that this was not so. Then she stopped. The vertical mass was a figure, a person who was now backing away from her and beginning to **fade into** the darker background of the trees. The remaining darker patch on the ground was also a person, changing shape again as it sat up and called her name.

‘Briony?’

She heard the helplessness in Lola’s voice – it was the sound she had thought  
65 belonged to a duck – and in an instant, Briony understood completely. She was nauseous with disgust and fear. Now the larger figure reappeared, circling right round the edge of the clearing<sup>24</sup> and heading for the bank down which she had just come. She knew she should **attend to** Lola, but she could not help watching as he mounted the slope quickly and without effort, and disappeared onto the roadway. She heard his  
70 footsteps as he strode<sup>25</sup> toward the house. She had no doubt. She could describe him. There was nothing she could not describe. She knelt down beside her cousin.

‘Lola. Are you all right?’

Briony touched her shoulder, and was **groping for** her hand without success. Lola was sitting forward, with her arms crossed around her chest, hugging herself and  
75 rocking slightly<sup>26</sup>. The voice was faint and distorted, as though impeded by something like a bubble, some mucus in her throat. She needed to clear her throat. She said, vaguely, ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t, I’m sorry...’

Briony whispered, ‘Who was it?’ and before that could be answered, she added, with all the calm she was capable of, ‘I saw him. I *saw* him.’

80 Meekly<sup>27</sup>, Lola said, ‘Yes.’

For the second time that evening, Briony felt a flowering of tenderness for her cousin. Together they faced real terrors. She and her cousin were close. Briony was on her knees, trying to put her arms round Lola and gather her to her, but the body was bony and unyielding<sup>28</sup>, wrapped tight about itself<sup>29</sup> like a seashell. A wrinkle<sup>30</sup>. Lola  
85 hugged herself and rocked.

Briony said, ‘It was him, wasn’t it?’

She felt against her chest, rather than saw, her cousin nod<sup>31</sup>, slowly, reflectively. Perhaps it was exhaustion.

- 18 The pretence ... to expose it. La falsità, oh, come non vedeva l'ora di smascherarla.  
19 strong, awkward limbs. Corpo forte e impacciato.  
20 rugged. Irsuto.  
21 deceptive. Ingannevole.  
22 hisses. Sibili.  
23 waver, and then fork. Vacillare e poi biforcarsi.  
24 clearing. Radura.  
25 as he strode. Mentre camminava a lunghi passi.  
26 rocking slightly. Dondolava lentamente.  
27 Meekly. Docilmente.  
28 unyielding. Rigido.  
29 wrapped tight about itself. Chiuso in se stesso.  
30 wrinkle. Chiocciola di mare.  
31 nod. Annuire.



- After many seconds Lola said in the same weak, submissive voice, 'Yes. It was him.'
- 90 Suddenly, Briony wanted her to say his name. To seal<sup>32</sup> the crime, frame it with the victim's curse, close his fate with the magic of naming.
- 'Lola,' she whispered, and could not deny the strange elation<sup>33</sup> she felt. 'Lola. Who was it?'
- The rocking stopped. The island became very still. Without quite shifting her
- 95 position, Lola seemed to move away, or to move her shoulders, half shrug, half sway<sup>34</sup>, to free herself of Briony's sympathetic touch. She turned her head away and looked out across the emptiness where the lake was. She may have been about to speak, she may have been about to embark upon a long confession in which she would find her feelings as she spoke them and lead herself out of her numbness<sup>35</sup> toward something that
- 100 resembled both terror and joy. **Turning away** may well have been not a distancing, but an act of intimacy, a way of gathering herself to begin to speak her feelings to the only person she thought, so far from home, she could trust herself to talk to. Perhaps she had already drawn breath<sup>36</sup> and parted her lips. But it did not matter because Briony was about to **cut her off** and the opportunity would be lost. So many seconds had passed –
- 105 thirty? forty-five? – and the younger girl could no longer hold herself back. Everything connected. It was her own discovery. It was her story, the one that was writing itself around her.
- 'It was Robbie, wasn't it?'
- The maniac. She wanted to say the word.
- 110 Lola said nothing and did not move.
- Briony said it again, this time without the trace of a question. It was a statement of fact<sup>37</sup>. 'It was Robbie.'

- 32 To seal. Sigillare.  
 33 elation. Esaltazione.  
 34 half shrug, half sway. Un po' alzando le spalle, un po' oscillando.  
 35 numbness. Intontimento.  
 36 drawn breath. Preso fiato.  
 37 statement of fact. Affermazione.

## LITERARY COMPETENCE

### > VOCABULARY

#### 1 READ the text and match the highlighted phrasal verbs with their meaning.

- 1 take care of .....
- 2 returned .....
- 3 interrupt .....
- 4 trying to reach .....
- 5 going .....
- 6 emitting .....
- 7 moving the eyes away .....
- 8 disappear into .....
- 9 accompany to the place of departure .....
- 10 acting in a stupid way .....

### > COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

#### 2 READ lines 1-20 again and find out

- what Briony was conscious of;
- who she was looking for;
- what she was thinking about;
- how she felt;
- what she could describe.



**3 READ** lines 21-50 again and do the following activities.

- 1 Describe Briony's mixed feelings towards the maniac.
- 2 Identify who the maniac was according to Briony.
- 3 Find out what linked him to the Tallis family and to Briony.
- 4 Say what Briony's final resolution was.

**4 READ** the text to the end again and answer the following questions.

- 1 What did Briony realise about the bush near the temple?
- 2 Who did she find there?
- 3 How did she attend to her?
- 4 How did the girl behave?
- 5 What did Briony want to do?
- 6 Did she give the girl the time to explain?
- 7 At the beginning of the text you are told that 'Briony would commit her crime'. What do you think her crime was?

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➤ **COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**

**5 EXPLAIN** how McEwan presents the image of the child and the writer together.

**6 FOCUS** on the description of the setting in the first paragraph. How is it connoted? Find the lines with reference to the season and discuss their symbolical meaning.

**7 CONSIDER** the theme of the transition from childhood to adulthood. How did that happen to Briony?

**8 FOCUS** on Lola. What is she compared to? Does her behaviour suggest that she is hiding something? What do you think really happened on the island?

**9 ANALYSE** lines 90-91. What do they suggest about the power of words?

**10 FIND** the lines that refer to writing and describe the relationship between experience and fiction in the text.

**11 SAY** what McEwan's message in the text is.

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➤ **COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS**

**12 DISCUSS.** Read the plot of the novel. The way events really turned out defies a belief in any order and shows that atonement is not possible. This view is typical of the contemporary novel; how does it compare with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel?