

Elements of crime writing: Text overview - *Atonement*

Read our overview which shows how you can consider *Atonement* in relation to the genre of Crime writing. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead, we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.

Overview

This is a complex post-modern crime writing text, in which the reader's choices about what to believe are consciously manipulated by McEwan and the narrator draws attention to her own untrustworthiness at the end. It is therefore important to carefully consider the novel's form, and the tricks (or crimes) that it plays on the reader, before drawing conclusions about the morality of the characters that it depicts. At the most superficial level, the novel tells the story of Briony's desire for atonement for the crime of falsely accusing Robbie (her sister Cecilia's lover) of raping her cousin Lola. Lola is assaulted on the night she arrives at the Tallis home after a search party is sent out to look for her two brothers who have run away. Briony is a witness to the crime and, for motives that are never quite satisfactorily illustrated, assumes that the man whom she sees commit the assault is her family's protégé and she convinces Lola that she too had recognised Robbie. Although there are hints of Briony's doubt, by the time they emerge, it is too late: the police have arrived at her home; she is lavished in attention; and the real criminal, Paul, is busy playing the role of innocent and concerned bystander and she is locked in to the fantasy she has created. Robbie's cinematically heroic return with the two lost boys through the early morning mist gives her a 'flash of outrage' and she uses her feelings to consolidate her story. Robbie is arrested and Briony withdraws. Her power to control the legal 'truth' is contrasted with Robbie's mother's futile cries of 'Liars!'

There are two crimes that form climactic moments in the early part of the narrative: Lola's rape and Briony's lie to the police. The novel can be read as an exploration of the consequences of these two crimes. On the one hand Robbie, and consequently Cecilia, are punished unjustly by their separate banishments. Robbie suffers the indignity of being imprisoned and his reputation slurred; Cecilia has a life of sadness. On the other hand, Briony is punished by her guilt and spends her life seeking atonement, firstly by becoming a nurse instead of going to Cambridge, and then by becoming a writer and trying to right the wrongs to her sister and Robbie through fiction and through writing a love story. In the world of the text, she is ultimately unable to achieve her atonement by

publishing the 'truth' since she has to wait for the deaths of the 'real' criminal and the victim who are now married and are likely to outlive Briony who has vascular dementia. Perhaps of greater significance though is the final crime against the reader which McEwan rather shockingly reveals at the end, because only then is it made clear that the whole story is Briony's (even the long section of the novel which is set in war-torn Northern France); it is her fantasy to ease the guilt she has felt all her life, her attempt to rewrite history and create a happy conclusion for Cecilia and Robbie when there was none.

Setting and crime

The novel's story begins in the summer of 1935 and ends in 1999, so for Briony there is a life time of guilt in a number of different time periods. There are also five main settings, each with its own morality and each making its own contribution to the novel as a crime text. The country house, in which McEwan chooses to set part one, is a typical setting for crime fiction of the early twentieth century. The wealthy Tallis family and its guests see themselves as superior to the law, unwilling to call the police when the twins run away and only contacting them when they think the lower class Robbie is guilty of raping Lola. For the most part the law seems answerable to them.

The second setting is Northern France during the retreat to Dunkirk. It is a similarly lawless place, the focus for the terrible crime of war, and on a smaller scale a place where petty crime and insubordination are overlooked. Briony's hospital is the third setting, one which befits Briony's needs to try to find reparation: it is a place of both misery and comfort, wounds and healing. 'London 1999' provides the fourth setting: Briony is now seventy five and though her life has security and comfort, she is still wracked with guilt and eager to atone for her sins through her writing. In a neat final twist, McEwan chooses to make the final setting a return to the Tallis' country mansion, now Tilney's Hotel, for a family reunion. It is in this setting that Briony completes her story (at five in the morning she is still at her writing desk) where she tells us that this whole tale has been her attempt to repair the damage of her crime by changing the ending. Her fiction (in which Robbie and Cecilia live and are still in love) she sees as 'a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion'. But in this setting, the crime against the reader is most pronounced. McEwan chooses the name Tilney's Hotel deliberately - its connection to the epigraph and Austen's Northanger Abbey (the Tilney home) a reminder that stories are not to be trusted.

Paul Marshall

Paul Marshall is the novel's villain, though interestingly McEwan chooses to somewhat marginalise his criminality. He is given relatively little space in the novel and he is not pursued and punished. Briony speculates on the possibility of his feeling guilt, but in every obvious way he is a criminal who gets away with it. His crime is a dreadful one: he rapes a minor, a young girl who is outside searching for her twin brothers who have run away. Marshall is rich and privileged and even as a young man he is a successful business man making

chocolate bars. When he is given a voice or presence in the novel he is insistent, commanding and a bore (when Cecilia takes the visitors into the garden he takes control of the conversation with 'a ten minute monologue'). It seems that he wants Britain to go to war with Germany so that he can increase his business empire (the army will buy his chocolate bars for the soldiers). There is nothing attractive about him. His arrogance is evident in his disparaging of Robbie because of his working class roots and it is therefore not surprising that after his crime he uses his class privilege in his dealings with the police and the family and lets Robbie take the blame.

Although much is made of Briony's crime, little is said of Paul Marshall's. Eventually it emerges that he marries Lola, a union in which Briony feels implicated. By the end of the story, Marshall is even richer, now a lord and very well respected (he has a Foundation and does good work for medical research), but he has untold crimes and even Briony cannot publish her novel of the truth because publication could lead to litigation. So he gets away scot free. Perhaps McEwan suggests that this is like life and the privileged have more opportunity to evade detection.

Victims of crime

Lola, the victim of Marshall's crime is also somewhat sidelined in terms of her victim status. This is perhaps because the story is told through Briony and Briony is concerned with her own position as criminal and her own need to repair the damage done to Robbie. As a result Lola, like Marshall, is rather on the edge of the text. Yet she is a victim. Even before the assault: her parents' bitter divorce has left her fragile, a refugee 'from a bitter domestic civil war' and after the rape she is traumatised. The account of Briony's finding her contains some harrowing details. There is no doubt that rape is terrible. But after the event, little attention is given to her as a victim. Instead she becomes a party to the crime of falsely accusing Robbie. She is distanced further from the role as victim when, rather strangely, she later marries the villain, to whom, according to Briony, she is faithful seeming to know 'the side on which her bread was buttered'. She is ultimately seen by Briony as a kind of Cruella de Vil.

Robbie is of course a victim in that he is accused of a crime he does not commit and then sent to jail. But he is also a victim of his social class (Cecilia's mother never 'forgave' him for getting a first at Cambridge given his working class origins). In the 1935 world McEwan recreates, Robbie has little chance to protest against his higher class accusers. Criminal and social laws come down hard on the man who has the audacity to 'violate' one (or rather two if his letter to Cecilia is taken into account) of his social superiors. Cecilia later understands 'the snobbery that lay behind [the family's] stupidity'. Briony, who reads Robbie's letter believes that he is a 'maniac' from whom her sister needs protection. In one sense then this is a class issue and part of the reason for her accusation when Lola is raped.

In the war section of the novel, Robbie is a victim of the brutality of war; he is disabled by his injuries and his aching wounds. He himself wonders about the crimes committed by one set of human beings on another. McEwan carefully reveals the crimes against humanity that result from war and the particular image of a child's leg in a tree is haunting both for Robbie and the reader. Robbie's life is finally taken by the war when he dies of septicemia at Dunkirk.

Briony, though guilty of a crime, can also be seen as a victim. She is a victim of her biology and emerging sexuality, her parent's inadequate parenting and her febrile imagination. When she wrongly accuses Robbie she is still a child and while the child does wrong, the novel raises the question of how much the child is responsible and how much it is a product of its environment and its conditioning.

Cecilia, Briony's older sister, is another victim, a victim of social laws that indicate who she should or should not love and a victim of her sister's malice. Although her social background enables her to enjoy a university education, she becomes slightly outcast because of it. Her mother thinks that no-one will want to marry an educated woman. But Cecilia mainly suffers because her love affair with Robbie is tragic. At the moment she realises she is in love with him he is taken away and put in jail for Paul Marshall's crime. This leads to her isolation; she disowns her family because of their treatment of Robbie and goes to train to be a nurse. Tragically her life is cut short by the war.

Briony's narration and the crime against the reader

McEwan creates a narrative voice for this novel that indicates, for the most part, a conventional third-person, omniscient narrator. On first reading, responses to the subscription at the end of part three ('BT London 1999') are likely to be powerful. The feeling that Briony, and McEwan, have tricked the reader, principally by Briony's writing about herself in the third person and by writing about Robbie's wartime experiences without first-hand knowledge of them, might lead that reader to feel robbed or cheated. In this sense, the narrative structure might be considered to be a crime against the reader's expectations. We realise that Briony has been the moral arbiter of the story and that, just as she was an 'unreliable witness', she has also been an unreliable narrator. Her concern with 'verisimilitude' seems exaggerated given her admission that she neglected to include the facts of Robbie and Cecilia's deaths in her story.

The author

Of course, Briony is not the author, McEwan is. His control over the novel allows us to perceive the ironies in Briony's account and call into question her own judgements about the events that she describes. We are invited in this way to challenge the various claims to veracity in the novel, and the validity of the accusations and confessions of the characters is called into doubt. In this way, perhaps, the reader is placed into the position of the detective solving a mystery.

Punishment and Reward

Since crime writing is essentially a moral genre, this novel raises key questions when it is looked at through the lens of writing about crime: 'Who is punished?' and 'For what crime or transgression are they punished?' As a post-modern novel, *Atonement* might be expected to challenge conventional morality, and indeed it does. The only two characters to have their lives curtailed are the principal innocents Robbie and Cecilia, the victims of Briony's crime; and rewards go to the profiteering rapist who becomes ennobled and the liar who becomes a fêted novelist. Briony might also seem to be rewarded by McEwan's narrative in that she lives long, has a happy marriage and has her work studied in schools. Significantly, too, in the novel's coda she is surrounded by her extended family, in her ancestral home, and given what she always wanted: a performance of *The Trials of Arabella*. In this respect morality is turned upside down as it often is in a different genre, that of tragedy.

But Briony is punished. Within the limits of her narration, the reader can see that she punishes herself by refusing to go to Cambridge and by working as a nurse during the war. Her experiences at the hospitals, where she nurses broken men, are horrific. Her inner life is also tortured as she seeks atonement for what she does as a child. She desperately wants forgiveness. Hence her writing a number of versions of the story to try to ease her burden. She says at the end that now she must sleep, but whether this is a peaceful conclusion or not is unclear. She wanted to impose a moral order on the story by letting her lovers live, but the final telling of the 'truth' undercuts the pleasure the reader might have had at Robbie and Cecilia's romantic ending in the 'untrue' version. This throws doubt also on whether her sleep is peaceful.