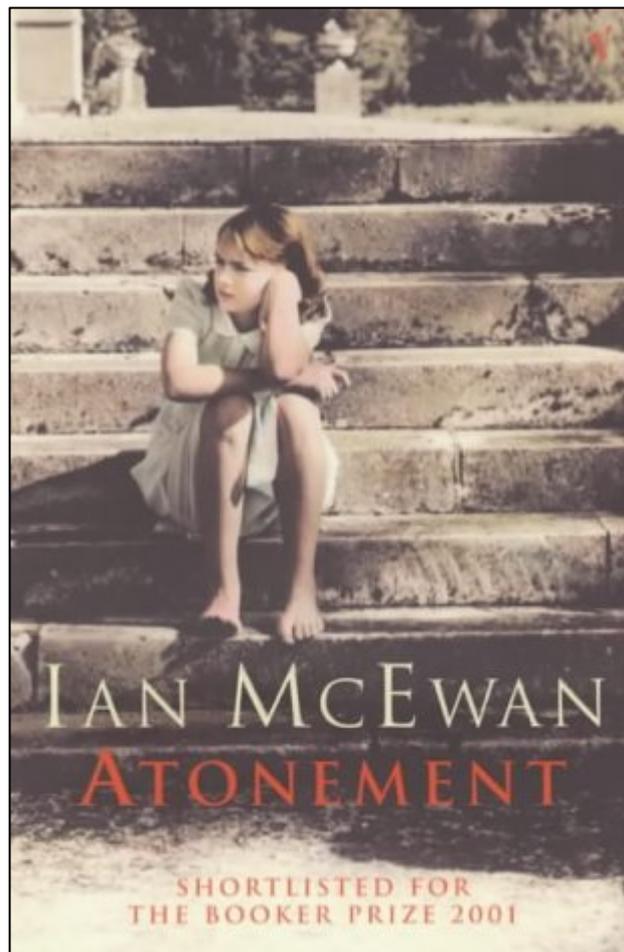


Atonement Study Guide - 12 English Studies 2013-



*“And though you think the world is at your feet,
it can rise up and tread on you.”*

— Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

Atonement by Ian McEwan

Activity 1 – Your Opinion of the Novel

Please find below four statements about *Atonement*. You need to make a decision about whether you agree or disagree with the statement and for what reason. There is no right or wrong answer, as it is a matter of opinion.

STATEMENT	AGREE	DISAGREE	REASONS
1. Briony is able to successfully atone for her crimes by writing and publishing her novel about the events in 1935.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Only Briony is responsible for her 'crime'. (Or should the responsibility also be shared with others?)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. McEwan's ending doesn't work for me as a reader. I would have preferred Robbie and Celia to have a life together.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. <i>Atonement</i> is "A slow, suffocating build-up of tension from a master of suspense; his most powerful novel to date." (<i>Sunday Times</i>)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Part One – The Tallis Estate, Summer 1935

Activity 2 – Part One Discussion Questions

(Source: <<http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides3/atonement1.asp>> accessed on 07/08/2011.)

Create a series of notes using the **Discussion Questions** for each section as a starting point. As you make these notes, consider both the ideas central to *Atonement* and the techniques McEwan employs such as imagery, symbolism, idiom and sentence structure. McEwan also makes masterful use of a technique called **prolepsis** (also known as a **flash forward**) in Part One that helps us understand the consequences of these events. Make sure to include quotations and other textual references as evidence.

Definition: A **prolepsis** (also called a **flash forward**) "...is an interjected scene that takes the narrative forward in time from the current point of the story in literature, film, television and other media. Flash forwards are often used to represent events expected, projected, or

imagined to occur in the future. They may also reveal significant parts of the story that have not yet occurred, but soon will in greater detail."

(Source: <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flashforward>> accessed on 07/08/2011.)

1. The Tallis Estate

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 CH 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. The Triton Fountain & Uncle Clem's Vase (CH 2)

What happens between Robbie and Cecilia at the fountain? What symbolic role does Uncle Clem's precious vase play in the novel? How does McEwan initially establish the vases' significance? 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?

3. Robbie's Letter (CH 8, 9 & 10)

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"*. Why is Robbie's uncensored letter so offensive within the social context in which it is read? Why is Cecilia not offended by it?

4. The Library Scene (CH 11)

The scene in the library is one of the most provocative and moving descriptions of sex in recent fiction. McEwan is deliberately detailed when describing the scene in the library from Robbie's perspective. What tone does he give this scene? How is it created? Considering the events of Part Two, why is this essential to the novel's narrative structure? Is it understandable that Briony, looking on, perceives this act of love as an act of violence?

5. The Rape (CH 12)

What does this chapter reveal about the state of the Tallis family? How does McEwan employ the technique of **prolepsis** in this chapter? What does it add to the reader's understanding? Look closely at the description of the rape from Briony's perspective – what details and elements are included? What are omitted? Why is this important? Can we be as certain from this description as Briony is of Robbie's guilt? How does McEwan draw attention to the inherent problems within Briony's accusation?

6. Briony's Story (CH 14)

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? How does McEwan's description of Grace Turner contribute to our sympathy for Robbie and his mother?

7. The Role of the Narrator

What kind of narrator is adopted in Part One? How do we know this? Why do you think McEwan chooses this narrative style? How does it contribute to our understanding of the characters?

8. Characterisation:

Critically read the following passages from Part One and analyse the techniques McEwan employs to create a particular impression of these characters. What elements of their personality are foregrounded? Why? How? Make sure to consider the sentence structure, idiom, vocabulary and imagery associated with each character. When looking at the characters of Briony and Robbie Turner consider McEwan's use of **prolepsis** and what this adds to your understanding of their characters.

a) **Briony Tallis** (Ch 1pgs. 5-6) from *"But hidden drawers..."* to *"...when he was home"*.

- b) **Celia Tallis** (Ch 2) pgs. 19-21) from “*She went indoors...*” to “*...frenetic vision*”.
- c) **Emily Tallis** (Ch 3) pgs 64-66) from “*She thought of the vast heat...*” to “*...been taken over*”.
- d) **Robbie Turner** (Ch 8 pgs. 90-1) from “*In the years to come...*” to “*...and begin*”.
- e) **Paul Marshall** (Ch 5 pgs. 60-2) from “*Jackson and Pierrot...*” to “*Run along.*”

Part Two – Dunkirk 1940

Background Information

On the night of May 9/10, 1940, German forces attacked the Low Countries. Moving to their aid, French troops and the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) were unable to prevent their fall. On May 14, German panzers tore through the Ardennes and began driving to the English Channel. Despite their best efforts, the BEF, Belgian, and French forces were unable to halt the German advance. Six days later, German forces reached the coast, effectively cutting off the BEF as well as a large number of Allied troops. Turning north, German forces sought to capture the Channel ports before the Allies could evacuate.

Traveling to Army Group A's headquarters at Charleville on May 24, Hitler urged its commander, General Gerd von Rundstedt, to press the attack. Assessing the situation, von Rundstedt advocated holding his armor west and south of Dunkirk, while utilizing the infantry of Army Group B to finish off the BEF. This approach was agreed upon and it was decided that Army Group B would attack with strong aerial support from the Luftwaffe. The following day, the commander of the BEF, General Lord Gort, with the situation continuing to deteriorate, made the decision to evacuate from northern France.

Withdrawing, the BEF, with support from French and Belgian troops, established a perimeter around the port of Dunkirk. In England, Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Vice Admiral Bertram Ramsay met at Dover Castle to begin planning the evacuation. Designated Operation Dynamo, the evacuation was to be carried out by a fleet of destroyers and merchant ships. Supplementing these ships, were over 700 "little ships" which largely consisted of fishing boats, pleasure craft, and smaller commercial vessels.

In planning, it was hoped that 45,000 men could be rescued over two days, as it was expected that German interference would force the end of the operation after forty-eight hours. As the fleet began to arrive at Dunkirk, the soldiers began preparing for the voyage. Due to time and space concerns, almost all heavy equipment had to be abandoned. While many were able to board ships directly from the harbor's mole, others were forced to wade out to waiting boats. Commencing on May 27, Operation Dynamo rescued 7,669 men on the first day and 17,804 on the second.

The operation continued as the perimeter around the port began to shrink and the Royal Air Force battled to keep German aircraft away from the embarkation areas. Hitting its stride, the evacuation effort began to peak as 47,310 men were rescued on May 29, followed by 120,927 over the next two days. This occurred despite a heavy Luftwaffe attack on the evening of the 29th and the reduction of the Dunkirk pocket to a five kilometer strip on the 31st. On June 1, 64,229 were taken off, with the British rearguard departing the next day.

With German air attacks intensifying, daylight operations were ended and the evacuation ships were limited to running at night. Between June 3 and 4, an additional 52,921 Allied troops were rescued from the beaches. With the Germans only three miles from the harbor, the final Allied ship, the destroyer HMS Shikari, departed at 3:40 AM on June 4. The two French divisions left defending the perimeter were ultimately forced to surrender.

Aftermath

All told, 332,226 men were rescued from Dunkirk. Deemed a stunning success, Churchill cautiously advised "We must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory. Wars are not won by evacuations." During the operation, the British losses included 68,111 killed, wounded, and captured, as well as 243 ships (including 6 destroyers), 106 aircraft, 2,472 field guns, 63,879 vehicles, and 500,000 tons of supplies. Despite the heavy losses, the evacuation preserved the core of the British Army and made it available for the immediate defense of Britain. In addition, significant numbers of French, Dutch, Belgian, and Polish troops were rescued.

(Source: <<http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/worldwarII/p/dunkirk.htm>> accessed on 14/08/2011.)

Activity 3: Part Two - Sections for Close Reading

9. Pgs. 191-194 from "*There were horrors enough...*" to "*Always a hopeful act.*"

- How has Robbie's narrative style in these pages changed from Part One? What is different about McEwan's choice of tone?
- How does McEwan show the reader the full horror of war through his choice of literary techniques? (Consider his use of vivid imagery)

10. Pgs. 202-213 from "*For a time he lay on his back...*" to "*Come back. Cee.*"

- What has happened to Robbie since the end of Part One? How has this prepared him for life in the army?
- How does McEwan quickly establish the importance of Celia's letters for Robbie as he struggles towards Dunkirk? (Consider the use of punctuation, sentence structure and other writing techniques.)
- Why at this stage of the novel does McEwan give the reader so much detail about Robbie and Celia's relationship? How does it contribute to our understanding of Robbie's actions in Part Two?
- Through-out *Atonement*, letters are used as significant plot devices. How does Celia's letter contribute to our understanding of how her character has changed since Part One?

11. Pgs. 214-226 from "*He was woken by the boot...*" to "*...into silent head-down trudging*".

- How does McEwan evoke the pace at which Robbie, Nettle and Mace walk through his writing style? (Consider his use of sentence structure, descriptive detail and other writing techniques.)
- What is McEwan saying about war in the figure of the Major who attempts to recruit Robbie, Nettle and Mace for an attack?
- In what ways does McEwan's choice of descriptive detail reveal to the reader the full horror and consequences of war?
- Why is it significant that McEwan draws attention to the acts of kindness by Robbie, Nettle and Mace at this stage in their march? What is he trying to say about their characters?

12. Pgs. 234-246 from "*There was more confusion...*" to "*...a favour to Turner*".

- How does McEwan use juxtaposition between the ordinary and every day compared against the full horror of war to great effect in this section.

Part Three – London during the Blitz 1940



St Paul's Cathedral in London, surrounded by the smoke of burning buildings

Some Useful Definitions:

1. “Atonement” – Dictionary Definition

“satisfaction or reparation for a wrong or injury; amends.”
(Source: <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/atonement>> accessed on 17/08/2011.)

2. “Atonement” in Christianity

“**Atonement** is a doctrine that describes how human beings can be reconciled to God. In Christian theology the atonement refers to the forgiving or pardoning of sin through the death of Jesus Christ by crucifixion, which made possible the reconciliation between God and creation.”

Source: (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atonement_in_Christianity> accessed on 17/08/2011.)

Activity 4: Part Three - Sections for Close Reading

13. Pgs. 269-271 from “*The unease was not...*” to “*for two days at a time.*”

- What imagery and symbols does McEwan employ to create a sense of unease in the reader about what lies ahead for St. Thomas Hospital and the trainee nurses, including Briony?

14. Pgs. 287-311 from “*Now a languorous waiting...*” to “*behind the other girls.*”

- Explain the way in which McEwan employs juxtaposition and imagery to effectively highlight the horrible injuries Briony deals with throughout this section.
- The injuries that Briony deals with become progressively worse through-out the day, what is the effect of this narrative structure and descriptive detail on the reader?

15. Pgs. 311-315 Rejection Letter from Cyril Connolly.

Context: The initials “CC” stand for Cyril Connolly (1903-74) an influential English critic and writer. He founded and edited the important literary journal, Horizon.

(Source: *Atonement* - Ian McEwan. York Notes Advanced, 2006. pg. 72)

- What are Connolly’s criticisms of Briony’s story?
- Why include this letter from Cyril Connolly at this stage of the narrative? What effect does it have on the reader?
- What might McEwan be hinting about the novel of *Atonement* by including this letter? What traits of Briony does it remind us of?

Epilogue - London, 1999

Activity 6: Epilogue – Close Reading Questions

16. Pgs. 353 to 72 – London, 1999

- 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?*”. 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?"

- b) How is war present in this section of the novel? What symbols are associated with it?
- c) What is the effect of seeing so many key characters ravaged by age and infirmity in the Epilogue on the reader, except Lola? What is McEwan attempting to communicate to his audience by including such detail?
- d) 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?

In Summary

Activity 7 – Summary Questions

- 17. 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?
- 18. How does Leon, with his life of "agreeable nullity", compare with Robbie in terms of honour, 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?
- 19. 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?
- 20. 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?

(Source: <<http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides3/atonement1.asp>> accessed on 07/08/2011.)

Key Ideas and Techniques

1. Create a list of ideas that you see as central to *Atonement*? Explain why? Use quotations as evidence.

Key Ideas	Why this idea is central to understanding the novel?	Textual Evidence (incl. quotations)
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

2. Now using your notes create a mindmap in which you **link** key ideas to specific techniques with quotations as evidence.