EXPLORING
ATONEMENT
EMC APPROACHES

Acknowledgements

Contents

Using this Resource

The activities in before and during reading assume that the novel has not yet been read.

Before Reading activities such as 'Cooking Up a New McEwan' (page 9) ask students to engage creatively with possible ways the novel might develop while others such as 'Ian McEwan – What Sort of Novelist Is He?' (page 4) encourage critical engagement.

There are light-touch activities to support the reading of *Atonement*. Reading Part 1 is divided into five chunks, with activities on key aspects of the chapters they've just read. You might decide to hold over some of these chapter specific activities until students have read the whole novel. With Parts 2 and 3 of the novel, students are asked to explore the opening sections together before going away to read the rest of the section.

The activities in After Reading explore *Atonement* both in terms of its different narrative aspects and in relation to different literary types, genres and contexts.

A wide range of criticism is integrated throughout the material and includes extracts from reviews and academic articles and a selection of articles originally published in *emagazine*.

Eight beginnings from 1978 to 2016

The eight extracts on pages 6-8 are all opening paragraphs of novels by Ian McEwan. They have each been printed alongside one of the book's covers. Share these out so that, working in pairs, you are each responsible for four of them.

▌ Read your four beginnings and share your first response to them. Do you notice any similarities between them in terms of their content, style, tone (for example, a tension between the ordinary and the strange)? Is there anything that strikes you about the cover and the expectations it creates of the novel? What do you think of them as openings to novels? Would you read on?

▌ Join up with another pair and take it in turns to share what you have noticed about your beginnings and any questions you have.

▌ As a class, take it in turns to feedback what you have noticed. Work together to highlight:

    ► Ideas, subjects or themes that keep cropping up

    ► Anything that seems characteristic of McEwan's style of writing

    ► Anything that makes a particular opening a bit different from the others.

▌ Early in his career, a number of reviewers dubbed McEwan 'Ian Macabre'. On the basis of what you have discovered about his work so far, what do you think of this as a nickname?

Exploring further

▌ If you are able to, in your own time, explore the ways in which McEwan begins his other novels and short story collections published between 1975 and 2019, using online tools such as Google Books and Amazon's 'Look inside':

– *Machines Like Me* (2019)

– *The Children Act* (2014)

– *Solar* (2010)

– *Amsterdam* (1998)

– *The Innocent* (1990)

– *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981)

– *In Between the Sheets* (1978) – a collection of short stories

– *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) – a collection of short stories

---

READING PART 1

Exploring the opening

▌ After reading Chapter 1 work in pairs to share your first impressions. Then go on to explore it more critically, thinking about how it works as the opening chapter of a long novel, for example:

- ► The type of opening it is

- ► The ways in which the fictional world is created

- ► Your impressions of the setting and atmosphere and how this is created

- ► Story and plot: what is the story?
  - What do you think might happen? What hints or clues does the narrator give the reader about what is to unfold?

- ► Narrative voice and point of view
  - How would you describe the narrative voice?
  - The points of view from which we see the action changes during this chapter. Can you identify these shifts? How are they signalled to the reader?

- ► Themes:
  - What big ideas (themes) seem to you important in this chapter (for example, the hopes and frustrations of childhood, ambition, innocence, family)?

- ► Style
  - How would you describe the style of this chapter – the way it is written? Try to capture your thoughts in 4 or 5 adjectives.

- ► Anything else?

After Reading Chapters 5 to 8

Acting, seeing, interpreting

In Chapters 5-8, the following aspects of the text are all important:

- ► Seeing and being seen
- ► Interpretation and misinterpretation
- ► Acting
- ► Distorted vision
- ► Different and shifting perspectives.

❚ In pairs, talk briefly about the significance of these ideas in the narrative so far.

❚ Look back into Chapters 5 to 8 and find a quotation that illustrates each of these aspects of the text. Share your findings in class discussion, looking for connections and patterns across the quotations.

After Reading Chapters 9 to 12

A building storm?

Throughout these chapters, McEwan develops a sense of unease and foreboding.

❚ Working in twos or threes, challenge each other to find an examples of the different ways he does this, chosen at random from the list below.

1. Secrets and lies

2. Threat of revelation

3. Clash between a character's perception and reality

4. Conflicts between characters

5. The impact of the past

6. The use of the weather to create an atmosphere of oppression

7. Tension between appearance and reality

8. Tension between a character's imagined world and the real world of the novel

9. Narrative shifts and use of cliffhangers, to leave the reader suspended

10. Shifting points of view, revealing conflicting values, views and so on

11. The intrusion of powerful emotions – jealousy, resentment, desire

12. Wider references to the developing political tensions

13. Imagery associated with imprisonment

14. Imagery associated with oppression

15. Narrative foreshadowing

The end of Chapter 12

Chapter 12 ends with Emily's point of view:

'all her terror concentrated on the simple fact that he wanted her seated before he broke the news'

❚ In pairs, discuss what you think has happened, finding evidence from the novel to back up your ideas. Do you think this is the point to which McEwan has been leading the reader?

Getting the Big Picture

Aboutness…

Atonement is an absorbing page-turner – but it is also complex and often destabilising. Before going on to explore it in more detail, use the following strategy to capture a big picture of what you think the novel is about.

▌ On your own, spend ten minutes writing freely about the novel and your response to it.

▌ Now try to crystallise your overarching view of *Atonement* into a single sentence. Keep hold of this sentence – it will form a useful context for your more detailed explorations of the novel. You might find it helpful to use the following structure, but shouldn't feel restricted by it:

  ► '*Atonement* is about …'

  ► Now continue your sentence by adding 'and …' (something which adds to the first point)

  ► Finally continue your sentence with 'but/although/even though' (something which qualifies, complicates or nuances your first two points).

▌ Take it in turn to read your 'aboutness' sentences', listening out for the similarities and differences in what you have each chosen to emphasise. Display these sentences as a context for your further explorations.

The significance of the title

Briony's first draft novel (the one she sent to 'CC') was called 'Two characters by the fountain'. '*Atonement*' seems to be both Briony's title of her final draft (Parts 1-3) and the 'real' author Ian McEwan's title for his whole novel (Parts 1-3 plus the appendix).

Here is a reminder of the dictionary definition of 'atonement'.

  1. The action of making amends for a wrong or injury.
  2. (In religious contexts) reparation or expiation for sin.

▌ In pairs, share your thoughts on how suitable 'atonement' is as a title for the novel. What aspects does it foreground? What does it marginalise?

▌ What title do you imagine Robbie might have given to this novel? What about Cecilia? What title would you give it? Share your ideas in small groups, then as a class.

Ten snippet reviews

Included below are some of the different ways in which critics and readers have summed up the novel.

▌ In pairs or threes, discuss each snippet, exploring how far it:

► Reflects your view of the novel

► Offers you a new angle on it that you find convincing

► Presents a view which sits uneasily with your interpretation or which you would like to challenge.

McEwan expertly weaves together a taut, compelling narrative that is as much concerned with the making of fiction as it is with the nature of love, guilt and forgiveness. *Flyleaf, Everyman edition* (2014)

Utterly enthralling in its depiction of childhood, love and war, England and class, the novel is at its centre a profound – and profoundly moving – exploration of shame and forgiveness and the difficulty of absolution. *Blurb, Penguin Random House edition (2001)*

Among other things a novel about the nature of storytelling. *Charles McGrath, New York Times review of the film* (2007)

Atonement straddles periods and genres to stage what McEwan has called his conscious 'attempt' on behalf of post-millennial fiction 'to discuss where we stand'. *David James,* 'Narrative Artifice' in *The Cambridge Companion to Ian McEwan* (2019)

An exploration of what novels do, and of the question it poses about whether fiction can get close to 'the truth' […] *Maria Margaronis,* 'The Age of Authenticity: Writing Historical Fiction at the End of the Twentieth Century' in *History Workshop Journal* (2008)

A profoundly moving exploration of shame and forgiveness and the difficulty of absolution. *Penguin Random House Reading Guide*

The novel, supposedly a narrative constructed by one of the characters, stands as a sophisticated rumination on the hazards of fantasy and the chasm between reality and art. *Michiko Kakutani, The New York Times* (2002)

A tale of concealed passions and resentments. *John Mullan, Guardian* (2003)

Atonement is the story of a single, tragic error: an error on the part of someone who is almost, but not quite, too young to know what she is doing. *Peter Bradshaw reviewing the film, directed by Joe Wright, Guardian* (2007)

The novel combines a complex narrative structure – in which the interior revelations are minutely detailed – with a compelling storyline. *Dominic Head: Contemporary British Novelists – Ian McEwan* (2008)