

# *Atonement* by Ian McEwan – ANSWERS 2015

## Part One – The Tallis Estate, Summer 1935

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### Activity 1: Part One - Discussion Questions

#### 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?**

- Social, cultural setting of the Tallis Estate > wealth, upper-class status.
- It's summer and the hottest day of the year
- In Ch 12, the inhabitants of the house and Robbie meet for dinner. The men are dressed in dinner jackets. No one wants to eat the roast that is being prepared. Tension is created through Briony's rudeness to Robbie.
- Earlier in Part One, Celia and Robbie repress their desire for each other due to their difference in social status and the fact that Celia's father, Jack Tallis, is Robbie's patron.
- Series of impulsive actions
  - Celia removing her dress and diving into the fountain to recover the broken vase piece
  - Robbie mistakenly putting the wrong letter in the envelope
  - Robbie and Celia making love in the library
  - Paul Marshall attacking Lola.
- Events clearly accelerate as Part One precedes, initially McEwan gives the reader extensive details about each character and their thoughts to set up their characters, before moving into several crucial events including the vase, the letter, the twins running away, Robbie and Celia in the library and Lola's rape.

#### 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?**

- Celia comes to the fountain to put some water in Uncle Clem's vase for flowers and finds Robbie working in the garden. Robbie attempts to help Celia and inadvertently breaks the vase and drops a piece in the fountain, due to the sexual tension. Robbie and Celia argue on how to recover the piece, but then suddenly Celia removes her dress and dives into the fountain to recover the piece.
- McEwan provides the reader with significant background detail about the vase describing how it belonged to her father's brother who died during the Great War, after being presented to him "in gratitude" by the people of a "town west of Verdun". By imparting such significance to the vase, McEwan is able to show the reader why Celia is so desperate to recover the missing piece.
- The vase is also symbolically important as its breaking is the catalyst for bringing Robbie and Celia together, as it leads to a series of impulsive actions by both culminating in the affair in the library. When the vase is accidentally broken by Betty during World War 2 it becomes a physical metaphor for both Robbie and Celia, who die and are unable to fulfil the promise of a life together.

#### 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?**

- Briony sees this note from Robbie as further evidence that he is threatening Celia. McEwan's technique of highlighting through a short sentence with an exclamation mark at the end draws attention to Briony's growing desire to be a more adult writer, as no longer will her stories revolve around "princesses". Robbie's uncensored letter uses language that is both inappropriate and highly sexual and for a child like Briony would be particularly shocking and evidence that he is a "maniac". Until this day, in Briony's eyes and that of other characters, Robbie is presented as a high achieving student who has been supported through the patronage of the Tallis family.
- Celia sees in Robbie's letter an explanation for the tension between them as she realises her feelings for him. McEwan uses her inner monologue as she reads the note to portray this to the reader, especially the series of questions that she poses to herself – "How had she not seen it?...Why else take so long to choose a dress, or fight over a vase, or find everything so different, or be unable to leave? What had made her so blind, so obtuse?" (towards the end of Ch9, pg. 110)

#### 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?**

- "The closeness of a familiar face was not ludicrous, it was wondrous." (pg. 137)

- Ch 11 is mainly told from Robbie's viewpoint. The Tallises, Paul Marshall and Robbie are having dinner. McEwan creates a scene of tension and repression in the dining room by describing how "Nearly all the adults entering the airless dining room were nauseated by the prospect of a roast dinner...The effect of suffocation was heightened by the dark-stained panelling reaching from the floor and covering the ceiling."
- The Library Scene > is significant as it is the only real physical contact between Robbie and Celia, and the reader needs this knowledge later on in the text to understand how Robbie and Celia's love for each other is sustained despite their minimal contact with each other. It is this moment in the library that Robbie takes strength from as he struggles towards Dunkirk in Part 2.
- McEwan's description of Celia and Robbie is given a tone of warmth and passion with the choice of richly connotative language such as "awed", "wondrous" and "astounding". He implies this through a choice of simile that likens Robbie's expression of love for Celia as being like a signature "on an unseen contract" (pg. 137).
- For the reader it is understandable that Briony perceives this act of love as an act of violence, as the "gloom of the library" and Briony's misunderstanding of both the incident at the fountain and Robbie's note contribute to her mistaken impression. The audience is already aware of Briony's tendency to impose a narrative on events, and in this case it derives from her belief that Robbie is a "maniac".

## 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?**

- In this chapter, McEwan particularly draws attention to the dysfunctional nature of the Tallis family by highlighting how Emily decides not ring for the local constable despite the twins running away; and also revealing her thoughts about Jack's affair.
- Prolepsis – start of Chapter 13 (pg. 156) "Within a half an hour, Briony would commit her crime". McEwan uses this technique throughout Part One to increase the tension and create a sense of foreboding for the reader.
- When McEwan describes the rape from Briony's point of view in Ch 13, his emphasis is on details such as the "darkness" and the tricks of "perspective" it causes. There is very little detail given about the "figure" Briony sees, and in fact she initially thinks Lola and her attacker are a "bush". When the attacker leaves Lola becomes a "darker patch on the ground" that was "changing shape". McEwan highlights how that despite Briony's inability to see clearly who Lola's attacker was she thinks that "she could describe him" implying that she has already imposed her own version of events on the rape scene.
- McEwan's description of the rape scene from Briony's perspective highlights how it is impossible for her to tell who perpetrated the attack, and hence there is little basis for her accusation except her own imagination against Robbie.

## 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?**

- Briony sticks to her story with unwavering commitment, because by believing in Robbie's guilt so vehemently she makes it so. Briony acts out of self-importance as she is "centre stage" when often due to being the youngest child she is not treated sympathetically. Eg. "Her vital role filled her certainty". Briony believes she is avenging her sister Celia, who she saw being 'attacked' by Robbie in the library. This mistaken assumption is supported by her observation of the fountain scene and horror at Robbie's letter.
- It is only in Part 3 when Briony becomes a nurse that it is revealed that she now realizes the mistake she made in accusing Robbie, and hence desires atonement.

## 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?**

- Omniscient narrator – that is a narrator who observes all events and characters closely. In the different chapters of Part One, a particular character is focussed upon and access given to their innermost thoughts through third person narration. McEwan's choice of employing an omniscient narrator allows the reader to see Briony as an unreliable narrator, as well as develop sympathy for Celia and Robbie due to their in-depth characterization.

## 8. Characterisation: See KINDLE NOTES

**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".

- Use of omniscient narrator, however, often gives the character being focussed on like Briony turns of phrase that could be their own as though the reader really is getting an insight into their thoughts eg. "mayhem", "destruction", these are the kind of phrases drawn from a dictionary. She also refers to the cousins being "from the North", reflecting her own literary aspirations.

- “But hidden drawers, lockable diaries and cryptographic systems could not conceal from Briony the simple truth: she had no secrets....Nothing in her life was sufficiently interesting or shameful to merit hiding.”
  - Foreshadows events later in the novel, also ironic when read in retrospect. Implies that something will happen in the future, based on coming events, and helps develop tension in the novel. (We know that later Briony will fashion a narrative out of events and characters around her, with dire consequences.)
  - Introduces the theme of writing and its importance to Briony. Language suggests both the insights of an experienced writer as in “At the age of eleven she wrote her first story – a foolish affair, imitative of half a dozen folk tales and lacking...the vital knowingness about the ways of the world.”
  - Sad irony – “she did not have it in her to be cruel”, Briony’s thoughtless and inconsiderate actions have a detrimental effect on Robbie.
  - Emphasis is on Briony’s desire for a “harmonised, organised world” where a story is only finished when “all fates resolved” “and the whole matter sealed off at both ends” will lead to disaster, as it is this impulse that will lead Briony to accuse Robbie of raping Celia on flimsy evidence.
- b) Celia Tallis (Ch 2) pgs. 19-21) from “*She went indoors...*” to “*...frenetic vision*”.**
- Focus of narratorial voice, switches from Briony to Celia in this chapter.
  - Through-out this scene and the rest of the chapter everything is described in very precise detail, making it easy for the reader to visualise. However, this also has the effect of slowing down the narrative making this chapter move very slowly.
  - Her breathing slowed and her desire for a cigarette deepened, but still she hesitated by the door, momentarily held by the perfection of the scene – by the three faded Chesterfields grouped around the almost new Gothic fireplace in which stood a display of wintry sedge”, by the unplayed, untuned harpsichord and the unused rosewood music stand, by the heavy velvet curtains, loosely restrained by an orange and blue tasselled rope, framing a partial view of a cloudless sky and the yellow grey and mottled terrace where camomile and feverfew grew between the paving cracks. (pg. 20)
  - Extended sentence - prolonged by the many details that Celia includes in her description such as the “untuned harpsichord” and the “heavy velvet curtains, loosely restrained by an orange and blue tasselled rope”, that effectively slow down the narrative and remind the reader of the languid, uncomfortable pace of a hot summer’s day. At times, Celia tries to break free out of this sense of languidness by running, by dipping the flowers in the water, but nothing seems to work as despite being “pleased” by this “delicious strangeness...she also felt reproved for her homebound boredom.”
  - Celia is disappointed about being home after university, and there is a sense of dissatisfaction and uncertainty that pervades her thoughts such as “...how familiar her echoing steps, how annoying...”. She has returned out of a sense of filial duty, but her father is away, her mother unwell and unfriendly and Briony “lost to her writing fantasies”. She is sympathetic to her cousins, but “it was too hot” to help them.
- c) Emily Tallis (Ch 6 pgs 64-66) from “*She thought of the vast heat...*” to “*...been taken over*”.**
- Chapter 6 is told from Emily Tallis’s point of view. This is structurally important as despite being the effective head of the household, she doesn’t appear in the story until this point, highlight how ineffectual she really is.
  - Emily is lying in a darkened upstairs bedroom due to a migraine (“the black furred creature”), fretting and worrying about the household without getting up to anything about it. Her ineffectiveness is highlighted in the fact that “She had ordered a roast for this evening and it would be too stifling to eat.
  - The Tallis house acts as metaphoric extension of Emily’s thoughts:
  - “She heard the house creak as it expanded. Or were the rafters and posts drying out and contracting against the masonry? Shrinking, everything was shrinking. Leon’s prospects, for example, diminishing by the year...” (pg. 64)
  - McEwan describes how the “posts” and “rafters” according to Emily were “shrinking” like her eldest son, Leon’s prospects.
  - Emily is highly critical of Celia, who worries that her daughter’s “three years at Girton” had made marriage an “impossible prospect” for her. She is highly traditional in what she assumes a woman’s role in society should be, as she expects Celia to marry and “to confront” motherhood, and is not sympathetic with Celia’s disappointment at her finals result from Cambridge.
  - Emily is sentimental about Briony and her role as a mother, as evidenced in “Poor darling Briony, the softest little thing...To love her was to be soothed.”
  - She resents her sister, Hermione, describing her niece, Lola, as an “incarnation” of her mother.
  - Emily wants to go and help Briony and the cousins prepare The Trials of Arabella, “[B]ut though she sometimes longed to rise up and intervene, especially if she thought Briony was in need of her, the fear of pain kept her in place.” (pg. 66)
- d) Robbie Turner (Ch 8 pgs. 90-1) from “*In the years to come...*” to “*...and begin*”.**
- Chapter 8 is told from Robbie’s perspective. He is the second most important character in the book after Briony.
  - The reader is reminded of his outstanding academic talents as he was the top Literature student in his year at Cambridge. However, despite the suggestions of his university teachers, Robbie has decided to study medicine which is the first real decision he has made about his life.
  - Admits that he is in love with Celia, despite being “horribly inconvenient”, it gave him a sense of “elation”.
  - Imagery – “Other tributaries swelled his happiness”. “Tributaries” is a noun usually employed to describe the coming together of river systems, but in this case, McEwan is using it as metaphor to describe how many different things such as being in love with Celia, his outstanding academic results, and plans for the future, swell Robbie’s “happiness”.
  - This passage is an example of prolepsis – “an interjected scene that takes the narrative forward from the current point of the story”, as here the reader sees the incredibly promising future that potentially awaits Robbie.
  - “In the years to come, he would often think back to this time...” hints at the significance of this day for Robbie.

- “Many immediate and less proximal pleasures mingled in the richness of these minutes.” - Choice of the words, “pleasures” and “richness” highlight Robbie’s pleasant and happy mood about his life and the stage it is at.
  - “One word contained everything he felt, and explained why he was to dwell on this moment later. Freedom.” - Again hints at what is come for Robbie, as he is later jailed for Lola’s rape. McEwan’s use of a single word sentence “Freedom.” emphasizes this idea to the reader.
  - “He thought of himself in 1962, at fifty, when he would be old, but not quite old enough to be useless, and of the weathered, knowing doctor he would be by then, with secret stories, the tragedies and successes behind him.” (pg. 92) – This description of Robbie’s potential highlights to reader again, what he loses, when he is accused of rape.
- e) **Paul Marshall (Ch 5 pgs. 60-2) from “*Jackson and Pierrot...*” to “*Run along.*”**
- Earlier on in Part One, McEwan starts to hint at Marshall’s unpleasant nature when Celia describes him as “so nearly handsome, so hugely rich, so unfathomably stupid” (pg. 50).
  - After drinks on the terrace, Marshall falls into a “light sleep” where he is “uncomfortably aroused” after a dream about his “young sisters.” This dream is used by McEwan to imply what kind of sexual fantasises that Marshall has, and prepares the reader for his later rape of Lola.
  - When he meets Lola and the twins in the nursery, his thoughts reveal his desire for Lola as “the girl was almost a young woman, poised and imperious, quite the little Pre-Raphaelite princess with her bangles and tresses, her painted nails and velvet choker”. Marshall comments on her resemblance to his “favourite sister”, which again reminds the reader of his earlier erotic dream.
  - Marshall is portrayed as a capitalist, insensitive to the human toll of war, and more interested that there will be an “Army Amo” bar in every soldier’s kit.
  - The description of Lola eating the chocolate bar from Paul Marshall’s perspective is highly sexualised, as he emphasizes how “her tongue turn[s] green as it curled around the edges of the candy casing” and he tells her to “Bite it” in a soft voice, while crossing and uncrossing his legs.
  - These descriptive details and narrative elements like the dream, help the reader understand why Marshall rapes Lola later that night.

## Part Two – Dunkirk 1940

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### Activity 2: Part Two - Sections for Close Reading

9. **Pgs. 191-194 from “*There were horrors enough...*” to “*Always a hopeful act.*”**
- a. **How has Robbie’s narrative style in these pages changed from Part One? What is different about McEwan’s choice of tone?**
- Robbie’s narrative style has significantly changed from Chapter 8, as the positive and warm adjectives that featured in his description walking towards the Tallis house and his hope for the future has disappeared. Instead, the tone is flat and unemotional, and lacks the enthusiasm and warmth of his earlier thoughts. For instance:
  - “He also took the dead captain’s revolver. He wasn’t trying to impersonate an officer. He had lost his rifle and simply intended to survive.” (pg. 191)
  - In these three short sentences, McEwan draws attention to the change in Robbie’s thinking. He has gone from thinking about potential to intending to “survive”, even taking a “dead captain’s revolver”. The sentences are deliberately short and succinct, simply describing Robbie’s desire to survive with no adjectival adornment.
- b. **How does McEwan show the reader the full horror of war through his choice of literary techniques? (Consider his use of vivid imagery)**
- McEwan in Part 2 communicates the full horror of war through his choice of descriptive detail, rather than focussing on Robbie’s inner psychological torment, he emphasizes elements like “a bombed house, fairly new, perhaps a railwayman’s cottage” and most importantly leg wedged in a tree, “ a perfect leg, pale, smooth, small enough to be a child’s.” The reader sees how much this sight affects Robbie, as McEwan juxtaposes Robbie’s need to throw up at this sight in contrast to the two corporals who only made “a dismissive sound of disgust” because “In the past few days they had seen enough”. This image of the leg frequently returns to Robbie as thinks of the “scraps of cloth...[that] may have been a child’s pyjamas...A French boy asleep in his bed.” (pg. 194)
10. **Pgs. 202-213 from “*For a time he lay on his back...*” to “*Come back. Cee.*”**
- a. **What has happened to Robbie since the end of Part One? How has this prepared him for life in the army?**
- Since the end of Part One, Robbie has been in prison for the rape, with his mother the only person allowed to visit him. He took the option of joining the army in exchange for an early release, and has found the routines of military life a liberation compared to life in prison. “Being inside” has also given Robbie status amongst the enlisted men.
- b. **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.)**
- When Robbie lies trying to sleep in the barn, his thoughts turn to Celia and her letters which represent “hope” for him.**
- “I’ll wait for you. Come back. There was a chance, just a chance, of getting back. He had her last letter in his pocket and her new address. This was why he had to survive...” (pg. 202).
  - In this short passage, McEwan uses a direct quotation from Celia to emphasize to the reader how much Robbie is using her words as motivation to survive the horror of the English retreat. McEwan chooses to emphasize the word “chance” through

repetition to show how difficult it will be for Robbie to return to Celia, but that because “he had her last letter in his pocket and her new address...he had to survive”. The repetition of “he had” in the last two sentences also emphasizes the connection between Celia’s letters and Robbie’s desire to survive.

- c. **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?**
- By including Celia’s letters and Robbie’s thoughts in response, McEwan is able to explain to the reader what has happened since the events in Part One. This includes: Robbie’s jailing; his hate of prison with only his mother allowed to visit; Celia’s weekly letters to Robbie; her deliberate split from her family in protest at what has happened to Robbie; even her much loved brother, Leon; Celia’s training as a nurse; Robbie securing an early release by joining the army; their reliance of “codes” to bypass the prison censor; their first shy meeting; their shared love of literature in the poems they quote to each other; and finally, Briony’s letter to Celia in which expresses her desire to retract her evidence.
  - By giving the reader so much background about Robbie and Celia, it helps them to understand why Robbie is so committed to surviving the war and returning to her, despite only meeting her once since his imprisonment. If he makes it back to England, Robbie has both a chance at love and redemption.
- d. **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?**
- McEwan includes Celia’s letters to Robbie in Part Two to demonstrate to the reader how much she has changed since Part One. In Part One, Celia lacks focus and direction after Cambridge, and has returned to the Tallis Estate to be with her family. She is yet to make any plans about her future. In contrast in Part Two, Celia appears much more driven in her desire to split from her family, train as a nurse, gain independence and support Robbie who she believes has been unjustly accused of rape.
11. **Pgs. 214-226 from “*He was woken by the boot...*” to “*...into silent head-down trudging*”.**
- a. ~~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.)~~
- b. **What is McEwan saying about war in the figure of the Major who attempts to recruit Robbie, Nettle and Mace for an attack?**
- McEwan is critical of war and particularly pointless heroism in the figure of the Major, who despite the obvious defeat and retreat of the Allied forces is still attempting to launch an attack against the Germans. He holds him up as a figure of ridicule, who is “a pink-faced fellow of the old school” with a “little toothbrush moustache”, and seems barely aware of the retreat going on around him.
- c. **In what ways does McEwan’s choice of descriptive detail reveal to the reader the full horror and consequences of war?**
- “They passed an ambulance, half in the ditch with one wheel removed. A brass plaque on the door said, “This ambulance is a gift from the British residents of Brazil.”
  - “Minutes later they passed five bodies in a ditch, three women, two children. Their suitcases lay around them. One of the women wore carpet slippers, like the man in the lawn suit.”
  - “Clipped to his shirt was a row of fountain pens.” (description of the boy that Nettle and Mace bury)
  - Each of these descriptions by McEwan, help to create a cumulative picture of the horrors of war. Rather than rely on emotive language, McEwan instead utilises tiny details like the “row of fountain pens” in the boy’s shirt pocket, implying that this child has a life which has been brutally cut short.
- d. **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?**
- McEwan mentions several acts of kindness by Robbie, Nettle and Mace to highlight how despite the retreat and their quest to survive they still retain their basic humanity. Robbie had given the last of his water, to “An elderly Belgian lady shot in the knee”, while Nettle and Mace bury a boy for his distraught grandparents despite the risks of German aerial bombardment. These details increase the reader’s understanding of both Robbie, but Nettle and Mace as well, who despite Robbie’s dislike, are both kind and caring.
12. **Pgs. 234-246 from “*There was more confusion...*” to “*...a favour to Turner*”.**
- a. **How does McEwan use juxtaposition between the ordinary and every day compared against the full horror of war to great effect in this section.**
- McEwan highlights through juxtaposition the true horror of war by contrasting how the French peasantry attempt to go on with their lives while the retreat to Dunkirk continues around him. He particularly emphasizes the farmer and “collie dog walking behind a horse-drawn plough” (pg. 234), who later stood under a tree “as though sheltering from a shower of rain” (pg. 235) when the German bombers attacked. At the same time, a Flemish woman and her son that Robbie had tried to help are killed – “There were no human signs, not a shred of clothing or shoe leather. Mother and child had been vaporised” (pg 239).

## Part Three – London during the Blitz 1940

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### Activity 4: Part Three - Sections for Close Reading

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

- “The unease was not confined to the hospital. It seemed to rise with the turbulent brown river swollen by the April rains, and in the evenings lay across the blacked-out city like a mental dusk which the whole country cold, a quiet and malign thickening, inseparable from the cool late spring, well concealed within its spreading beneficence. Something was coming to an end.” (pg 269)
- McEwan creates a sense of increasing tension for the reader by his likening the pervading sense of “unease” to a “turbulent river swollen” and a “mental dusk” with a “quiet malign thickening”. Other signs include the “more aggressive” stride of the young doctors, and the “depressed” porters. McEwan also describes how “Empty beds spread across the ward...like deaths in the night”. The choice of “death” in this simile conveys to the reader that the beds are being cleared for many new patients who probably won’t survive.

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

**a. Explain the way in which McEwan employs juxtaposition and imagery to effectively highlight the horrible injuries Briony deals with throughout this section.**

- Effect of juxtaposition – increase the horror by contrasting homely comforting images against the suffering of the wounded soldiers, remind the reader of Briony’s previous life and experience.
  - “The leg was black and soft like an overripe banana.” Pg. 296
  - “The yellow flasks of plasma that hung like exotic fruits from their tall mobile stands.” Pg. 295
  - “She took the edge she had freed....and pulled the dressing back in a sudden stroke. A memory to her from childhood, of seeing at an afternoon birthday party the famous table cloth trick.” Pg. 296
  - “The ruptured skin rose over the other, revealing its fatty layers and little obstructions like miniature bunches of red grapes.” Pg. 296

**b. 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?**

- Briony deals with progressively worse injuries through-out the day, helps show the development in her character, and increase narrative suspense. The effect of the death of the final soldier is devastating on Briony and the reader. By gradually building towards this event, McEwan makes it all the more horrifying, as this is the only soldier who knows her name and forces her to think back to her previous mistakes and errors.
  - (i) Cleans the dressing of a soldier with a minor shrapnel wound.
  - (ii) Helps treat a man who has lost part of his nose
  - (iii) A man with many shrapnel wounds
  - (iv) The French soldier who has lost part of his skull.

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

**a. What are Connolly’s criticisms of Briony’s story?**

- Cyril Connolly is critical of Briony’s story, “Two Figures at a fountain”, because he believes it needs more narrative direction rather than being purely a descriptive piece. Connolly argues that some parts of Briony’s story are too unrealistic such as describing the vase as a Ming vase. He is also critical of Briony being too heavily influenced by other writers such as Virginia Woolf.

**b. Why include this letter from Cyril Connolly at this stage of the narrative? What effect does it have on the reader?**

- McEwan includes this letter in the narrative to remind the reader of the larger story in *Atonement*, that of Briony’s crime and Robbie and Celia’s love story. It highlights Briony’s desire to be a writer, but also because it is a retelling of an earlier event from the novel hinting to the revelation later on that the novel is really Briony’s attempts to atone for her crime in 1935. The letter foreshadows the revelation to come in the final section.

**c. What might McEwan be hinting about the novel of *Atonement* by including this letter? What traits of Briony does it remind us of?**

- The letter reminds the reader that Briony can fictionalize the truth and be an unreliable narrator. (see b for more detail).

**ATONEMENT Extra Questions – PART 3**

**1. Pgs. 323-246 from “*The sweet smell of waxy wood...*” to “*...among the trees*”.**

**a. How does McEwan employ imagery to reinforce the fact that Paul and Lola’s marriage is based on a secret?**

- McEwan describes how Paul and Lola’s marriage is based on a secret crime, that of Robbie’s wrongful imprisonment. He describes how their marriage will bury the secret in a “mausoleum” and “that it would lie secure in the darkness, long after anyone who cared was dead. Every word in the ceremony was another brick in place.” (pg. 325) He is deliberately juxtaposing Paul and Lola’s marriage with a tomb to highlight the fact that it is based on a crime, the wrongful accusation and imprisonment of Robbie Turner.

**2. Pgs. 328-349 from “*She knew from her map*” to “*London 1999*”.**

**a. In what ways does McEwan communicate to the reader the changes in Celia and Robbie since Part One?**

- Robbie in this section, is much more embittered and angry. He is almost on the verge of harming Briony, but Celia is the one who calms him. Celia is more independent as she is a Ward Sister, but is clearly not well off and is fighting with her landlady. McEwan again uses detailed description of Celia and Robbie’s room to highlight how their living circumstances and characters have changed since Part One, as theirs is now “a simple and lonely life” compared to the opulent surrounding of the Tallis Estate.

**b. Why is it significant that Celia and Robbie mistakenly believe that Danny Hardman is guilty of Lola’s rape? What does it reveal about the nature of truth and memory in the novel?**

- McEwan by pointing that Celia and Robbie believe that Lola's attacker was Danny Hardman, highlights to the reader how easy it was to be mistaken in this case. It is only through circumstance that Briony's mistaken accusation is so damaging to Robbie. In Part One, when events are told from Celia's viewpoint she often makes mention that Danny Hardman is hovering in the background around Lola. McEwan argues that truth and memory is dependent really on who is telling the story and how these people can often be mistaken.
- c. **What is the effect of the signature at the end of this chapter on the reader? Who is writing this story? When? What is McEwan saying about the nature of writing and imagination?**
- The signature at the end of this section "BT, London 1999" draws attention to the fact that the previous three sections have actually been a fictionalized version of the story by the real Briony Tallis, who explicitly reveals in the Epilogue. It again reminds us that McEwan is interested in the nature of truth and memory and how history can be fictionalized to promote a certain point of view.

## Epilogue - London, 1999

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### Activity 6: Epilogue – Close Reading Questions

#### 16. Pgs. 353 to 72 – London, 1999

- a) 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?*"
- **Double ending:**
    - Fantasy ending - Robbie and Celia both survive the war and are able to live together and find happiness.
    - Real ending – Robbie dies at Dunkirk due to an infected wound, and Celia is killed during the bombing of London.
  - **Effect on the reader:**
    - By contrasting the idealised fantasy of Robbie and Celia surviving the war and living together as implied in Part Three, versus the reality that Briony reveals in Part Four that they both effectively highlights the full tragedy of the story to the reader.
    - By Briony using her talents as a fiction writer to give Robbie and Celia the possibility of a future together, she is attempting to find atonement for herself, even if what she describes is not the truth.
- b) **How is war present in this section of the novel? What symbols are associated with it?**
- The war is embodied in the Imperial War Museum, the hospitals that she worked in during that period, her correspondence with Mr Nettle (one of the corporals from Part 2), and the help she receives from the old colonel from the "Bufs".
- 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?**
- By showing us how old age has ravaged the characters in the final section of *Atonement*, McEwan is highlighting how despite great tragedies such as the war and what happened to Robbie and Celia life will go on. Briony describes how their story is but one of many that could be told, and McEwan typifies this in his short descriptions of how Leon nursed his wife, Briony's dead husband Thierry, and the fact that Pierrot no longer has a relationship with his sister. It is somewhat ironic considering how important memory has become for the elderly Briony that she will eventually lose her mind to vascular dementia unlike her cousin Lola who is surprisingly fit and vigorous at age 80.
- 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?**
- McEwan deliberately includes the performance of *The Trials of Arabella* at the very end to take the narrative full circle. By returning to this play which is at the very beginning of the story, we are reminded of its initial failure and how this sets in motion so many of the other events in the novel including what tragically happens to Robbie and Celia.

## In Summary

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### 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 with a 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. **The Presence of the War:**
- *Part One: The Tallis Estate, Summer 1935*
    - Paul Marshall and the Amo Bar
    - Jack Tallis works for the war office, calculating potential casualties
    - Uncle Clem's vase – memento of Uncle Clem's courage during WW1. He later lost his life.
  - *Part Two: Dunkirk 1940*
    - Takes us directly into the war, through Robbie's experiences on the way to Dunkirk
    - McEwan helps the reader to see not only the effect of war on the British soldiers, but also the detrimental consequences it has for the civilian population in the figures of the three dead boys that Robbie witnesses. I.e. The child's leg in the tree, the boy with the row of fountain pens, the six year old boy being held by his mother. McEwan deliberately draws attention to the everyday actions of a farmer who is still ploughing his field, while around him people are killed and the soldiers retreat.
  - *Part Three: London during the Blitz 1940*
    - Bombed out buildings
    - Hospital preparing for war
    - Injured soldiers that Briony and the other nurses treat
  - *Part Four: Epilogue*
    - Imperial War Museum
    - Correspondence with Mr Nettle (one of the corporals from Part 2)
    - The hospital where Briony worked during the war
    - Reconstructed buildings, replacing those that were destroyed during the Blitz
    - Technical advice from the old Colonel from the "Buffs"
21. 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 her novel compel the reader to forgive?

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