

Atonement – Britishness, innocence and guilt in Ian McEwan's novel

Dr. Bernd Klewitz



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In dieser Unterrichtsreihe dient der Roman „Atonement“ von Ian McEwan als Grundlage für die Analyse zentraler Begriffe wie *innocence*, *guilt*, *forgiveness* und *perceptions of reality* sowie die Interpretation ihrer literarischen Gestaltung. Neben der Erarbeitung von *plot* und *characters* wird auch der Vergleich der Romanhandlung mit der filmischen Umsetzung einbezogen. Die Schülerinnen und Schüler setzen sich außerdem mit rezeptionskritischen Kategorien wie *literary devices*, *intertextuality* und *narrative perspective* auseinander.

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Competences and skills:

Working with literary sources, historic documents, video clips and other material, students particularly train their **reading** and **analytic skills**. Different viewpoints and literary devices are studied in a critical manner. **Viewing comprehension skills** are trained by working with the film version of the novel. There is also a focus on **language production** in oral and written formats.

Overview:

List of abbreviations:

D Discussion**GP** Group puzzle**T** Working with a text**W** Writing**F** Working with a film**R** Research**VI** Working with a video

Topic	Material	Methods/Skills
1: The fountain scene – Introduction	M1–M2	D, T, VI
2: The plot of the novel	M3	T, W
3: Characters and narrator(s)	M4–M5	GP
4: Literary devices	M6–M8	R, T, W
5: Themes in <i>Atonement</i>	M9–M10	D, T
6: From novel to film	M11–M12	D, F, VI, W
7: Britishness	M13–M17	D, R, T, VI

Topic 3: Characters and narrator(s)

M4 Worksheet – Constellation of characters



Group puzzle

Characterise the protagonists according to the reference pages (and/or your own findings). Work in groups, following the rules of a group puzzle. Make sure to cover the following aspects for each character as far as possible:

- physical appearance
- character traits
- personal history/background
- relationships to other characters



Group puzzle

1. Form groups of four students. This is your **home group**. Agree on who will work on which character.
2. In the next step, you will work on your respective character. You will do so in new groups. These are called **expert groups**.
3. Each expert group consists of one person from each home group. Each expert group takes care of one character.
4. Now each expert goes back to his/her home group. Each expert reports to the other group members what he/she found out in his/her expert group.
5. Write down your findings.

Characters	Pages
Briony Tallis	5, 13, 75, 111, 115, 119, 121, 123, 139, 151, 156–158, 166, 174, 181, 183, 185, 212, 231, 233, 278/279, 298, 363
Cecilia Tallis	18/19, 44, 79, 97, 98, 103, 109, 131–135, 185, 340/341
Robbie Turner	19, 79, 86, 90, 94, 131–135, 183, 185, 191–201, 203, 231, 251, 262, 264, 342
Paul Marshall	50, 54, 60, 62, 141, 164, 239, 284, 323/324, 357
Lola	58, 60/61, 171, 284, 323/324, 358
The twins (Jackson and Pierrot)	56, 117, 142, 154, 368/369

Worksheet – Ian McEwan's biography

M5

Gap text

Fill in the gaps in the text using the words from the box. Check your results with a partner.



plagiarism – memoir – adapted – third-person – atonement – accusing – World War II – autobiographical – sombre – nickname – Goethe Institute – awards – creative writing – Dunkirk – Buchenwald – *Lessons* – childhood

Ian McEwan was born in Aldershot, Hampshire/England on 21 June 1948. Part of his _____ was spent in the Far East, Germany and North Africa where his father, an army officer, was posted. This explains his recurrent references to foreign places in his novels, as recently as in his latest book _____ (2022), where the protagonists moved between the UK and the rest of Europe – even including places like the German concentration camp _____. In *Atonement*, the middle part is set in Flanders during the British army retreat to _____ in World War II.

McEwan returned to England and studied English literature at Sussex University and, after graduation, enrolled in the _____ course at East Anglia. Both the Royal Society of Arts and the Royal Society of Literature nominated him as a Fellow as well as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Among his literature _____ are the Shakespeare Prize (Alfred Toepfer Foundation, Hamburg), the 2011 Jerusalem Prize, the Booker Prize Amsterdam and the 2020 _____ Medal.

Topic 6: From novel to film

M11 Worksheet – Cumberbatch's most thrilling scene



- When Briony watches her sister Cecilia in a passionate embrace with her childhood friend Robbie and after misinterpreting their previous encounter at the family's Triton fountain, her jealousy makes her tell a lie. She falsely accuses Robbie of having raped her cousin Lola by the garden's temple. In one of his earliest roles, Benedict Cumberbatch as Paul Marshall plays the real perpetrator behind what happened to 15-year-old Lola. Briony, however, persuades herself that Robbie was the attacker although she only arrived at the scene after the attack in the dark and without clear vision. But she convinces herself and Lola of Robbie's guilt, after reading a sexually explicit letter to her sister given to her mistakenly by Robbie. As she grows older, Briony realises her "crime" and tries everything to find atonement. The audience is only able to see Marshall's face in a retake of the scene, learning that Lola married Marshall; thus, deepening Briony's shame and feeling of guilt.

Text: Dr. Bernd Klewitz

Group work



In groups, choose one of the four suggested takes in the film clip and write a review of the respective scene. Focus on the interactions and feelings exposed by the characters and their motives. Delineate the dynamics of the events involved. Present your results in plenary.



Film clip: *Benedict Cumberbatch's Most Chilling Role*

<https://raabe.click/atonement-clip>



Leading up to the attack on Lola and Marshall's disclosure, there are particular takes in the film:

1. Paul, the twins and Lola: 00:30–02:50 (p. 59 in the novel)
2. Give me the (twins') letter: 04:26–05:10 (pp. 142/143 in the novel)
3. Briony witnessing Lola: "I saw him": 06:15–07:35 (p. 165 in the novel)
4. Paul's wedding and disclosure: 09:45–10:40 (p. 346 in the novel)