

Issues in
Ian McEwan's

Atonement

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Introduction

- Published: 2001
- Bestseller
- Booker Prize Finalist
- Domestic and personal crisis set against a sweeping historical backdrop
- Begins in 1935 – in the pre Second World War atmosphere
- Multiple points of view
- Illusion of multiple points of view
- Series of scenes – allowing the reader to interpret freely
- The first section is all important, the epilogue presents the possibility of multiple possibilities

Reality

- Class is a major issue
- The past is seen through the filter of the present – from the point of view of an omniscient narrator
- The presentation is firmly within the tenets of Realism
- The possibility of unreality is exposed only at the end
- The focus is on the probable and the possible, not on the actual (as within the fictional narrative)
- Misrepresentation and meta-reality – unreliable narrator
- Historical reality used to enhance the sense of authenticity even of the imagined reality

Psychological Issues

- Desires of various shades
- Obsessive response to a variety of events
- The issue of controlling life as a narrative
- Merging of fiction and fact – reference to Auden’s poem ‘In Memory of W.B. Yeats’ – “Poetry makes nothing happen”
- Imagination and perception coloured by preconceived notions
- Denial and the necessity of denial
- Landscape linked with imagination
- History and imagined historical events – as significant as Dunkirk – are compressed together in order to find closure

Moral Issues

- Morality through the eyes of childhood
- Class and the moral right to judge
- Morality and the system of justice
- War and morality
- Human morals in the face of wartime life and death
- The absence of invasive religious iconography
- Value of companionship – imagined, absent and sought
- Many lies, and fiction as a lie to find closure

Time and Space

- Narrative echoes 19th century style
- Shifts locations and times
- Not all narratives are authentic, though they seem so
- The issue of locating history within fiction pervades
- Some of the space used may be imaginative
- The idea of looking back creates a distinct impact as it was not entirely anticipated in the form seen
- The country house and the hospital have concrete presences
- The space that war occupies, along with the space in which there are reconciliations, have less reality in hindsight
- The narrative may be entirely a part of mindspace relinquishing fictional reality

The Nostalgic Life

- The country life of the rich
- Secure life of children
- Childish rationality
- Power structure of the remnants of aristocracy – perhaps a new plutocracy
- Within the narrative harking back to a life that had promise of simplicity
- Nostalgia redefined at the end of the novel
- Apart from Pre-War and Post-War life there is the wartime awareness of an entire way of life gone

History

- Larger history merged with personal history
- Historical events re-imagined
- The imagining of history has multiple layers in the narrative
- Personal viewpoints preferred over any sweeping historical narration
- Human face of history
- History not merely political, but how individuals negotiate with history and personal baggage simultaneously
- Redemption through historical moments

War

- A specific moment in the canvas of war captured
- May be imagined by a personal point of view, not recorded through experience of even the fictitious self experiencing the events
- Dunkirk becomes relevant as it is a glorious tale of retreat, not victory
- Becomes emblematic of the novel's concept of *atonement*
- Loss of lives on the smaller scale and the largest scale – but loss all the same
- Essentially signifying the failure to value life
- Some lives saved, but many lost
- War not only affecting the theatre of war, but how it affects all life and the homeland paradigm as well

Childhood

- Has an important space in McEwan's work
- The child's view of the world constructs the primary plot
- From childhood to adulthood through guilt
- The world of children given much space
- A pre-adolescence world looks into a world of young adults failing to understand it
- The issue of maturity, betrayal and control are seen in both the world of children and that of adults
- Childishness and crime – the sense of right and wrong seen from a variety of angles
- The adult world utilizing the childish to protect its won class boundaries

Crime

- One may refer to *The Comfort of Strangers*
- On the face of war all minor crimes seem irrelevant
- Minor crimes may have major impacts
- How to assess crime, as a mistake or whim or as something that has great destructive power?
- Crime demands consequences
- Imagined crime vs. true crime
- Crime unpunished in cases of Mrs. Tallis and the actual perpetrator

Guilt

- Retribution through contribution
- Sense of revenge turning into a sense of guilt
- Looking for guilt in people who are not guilty
- Projection of preconceived notions
- Failure to act properly
- Failure to atone
- Atonement through imagination
- A variety of guilt presented

Death and Loss

- Metaphorical and actual death
- Loss of a single life against the backdrop of wartime losses
- Loss of possibilities
- Loss due to guilt
- Love and loss – negotiated through fiction within the novel

Atonement

- The present firmly conditioned by the past
- Guilt creating the need to atone
- Everything not experienced by Briony may be her imagination
- The reconciled love story is a projection of her guilt and an act of atonement
- The question remains if life gives any chance of atonement

People

- Bound by class
- Defined by ambition and guilt
- Different ages using the same event with respective agendas
- Examining development through different stages of life and violence
- Facing violence and being violent
- Violence justified by either childhood or class or the theatre of war
- Denial becomes a major part in surviving
- Point of view becomes a major issue with Briony holding centre stage

Art

- The entire novel may be the book that Briony is recreating, the book that was refused by the publisher
- The novel begins with an artistic project even if juvenile
- The conflict between artistic production and life is established at the outset
- The artist's imagination finds disappointment
- Creating an imagined reality causes problems for others
- Other lives need to be understood, seeing through a personal filter is never enough
- Such creation may give the author a sense of atonement but that is through denial
- Reality remains beyond control and often unforgiving
- Acknowledging reality may not always give closure
- Art as escape

Conclusion

- Two ends reminiscent of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*
- The end that provides atonement chosen by the narrator
- Unreliable narrator trying to find personal redemption

“It wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value.”

Atonement, 40

Recommended Reading/Viewing

- Books:
 - Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1817)
 - Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (1929)
 - Ian McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981)
 - E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (1910)
 - Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair* (1951)
 - Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (1992)
 - Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945)
 - Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925)
 - John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969)
 - Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden* (1978)
 - Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (1897)
- Films:
 - Joe Wright, *Atonement* (2007)
 - Christopher Nolan, *Dunkirk* (2017)
 - Karel Reisz, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981)
 - Bruce Vigar, *Dunkirk: The Real Story* (2017)

Some useful links

- 'Narrative unreliability and metarepresentation in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*; or, why Robbie might be guilty and why nobody seems to notice' by Huw Marsh
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1276955>
- 'The Effects of Conflict in the Novels of Ian McEwan' by Morten Høi Jensen
<https://dokumen.tips/documents/morten-jensen-the-effects-of-conflict-in-the-novels-of-ian-mcewan.html>
- 'The Trick of Truth' by James Wood
<https://newrepublic.com/article/63386/atonement-ian-mcewan-fiction>
- 'Point of View' by Frank Kermode
<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v23/n19/frank-kermode/point-of-view>

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