

LITERATURE

Atonement Passage Essay

Through the characters and relationships both created and destroyed in *Atonement*, Ian McEwan explores human nature itself, and how our individual thoughts and actions can impact upon others. He also discusses the power of storytelling, through which he analyses the concepts of honesty, other minds and the blurring boundaries between imagination and reality. The merging of these is partially what leads Briony to commit her 'crime', which she spends the rest of her life trying to atone.

As is illustrated in the passage, Briony is not yet the adult she so ardently believes she has become. She believes she has 'entered the arena of adult emotion', yet her actions contradict this statement. She contemplates the concept of 'other minds', yet cannot accept that Cee would view both the 'letter' and the world in a different way to herself, nor can she comprehend why she would feel this way. In her 'imaginary' world, based on fairytales with basic morals in them, the use of such a 'vulgar' word as 'cunt' would instantly brand the writer as the 'villain'. Her limited knowledge of both love and sexual relationships do not permit her to understand that Cecilia, who truly is an 'adult', could want such a thing. Her desire to 'protect her sister' when she does not actually want or need it proves her lack of empathy, thus ensuring that she is indeed a 'child'.

This callousness and misinterpretation of other's feelings comes, partially, as a result of Briony being 'a writer' and a child, as instead of single people or events she merely sees stories everywhere. This is exemplified when the 'boys run away' during the dinner party – when searching, she imagines the boys 'floating face-down in death' in the swimming pool. Instead of worrying about their welfare, she instead is preoccupied by creating the scene in her head, as she would write it. Her feelings towards people are diluted by the need to write. She is indifferent to the Quincey's 'domestic war', as divorce has no place in her ordered, controlled world, and as a result is cold and callous to them, failing to absorb what they must be experiencing. The need to find stories also causes the boundaries between her imagination and actual reality to merge – she gradually loses grip on what is actually happening, instead basing it upon her romanticised 'fairytale' version. Hence, she is quick to label Robbie as a 'maniac', as that is what he would be in one of her children's tales. Despite her declaration of 'no more princesses', she continues to categorise people into such groups.

It is her belief that Cecilia is indeed a 'princess' that leads her to commit her crime. Not only is Robbie socially inferior to her, but Briony believes that he is now also morally corrupt. Her need to maintain the ethical order of the world is already illustrated before the passage through the *Trials of Arabella*, in which the 'wicked count' loses his wife, who instead chooses the 'medical prince'. She does not take true emotion into account in writing this, instead basing it purely upon reason. She does this, too, with Robbie and Cecilia. Having found them in the library, she is determined to bring him to 'justice' somehow, and the opportunity arrives with Lola's rape. While she declares that 'she saw him' and possesses no doubt as to his identity, it is important to remember that, apart from the fact it clearly was not him, a short few hours ago she thought she saw Robbie proposing to Cee by the fountain. In that situation he was the 'prince', hard-working and noble. He quickly changed into 'the maniac' though, making it difficult to trust Briony's judgement when she clearly changes her mind so easily.

The power of such seemingly small events to do this helps convey one of McEwan's central concerns, that of the power of language. As characters, Robbie and Briony are extraordinarily aware of the capacity they have to change, destroy and create emotions. Robbie's contemplation of the 'exclamation point' and its meaning illustrate just how understanding he is of it, which makes his use of the word 'cunt' in the next paragraph even more shocking. He is clearly educated – his 'first' from Cambridge is evidence of that – so he would undoubtedly know an array of other words or

phrases that could have been used in its place. The power and surprise over his choice, however, reflects the instinct and passion behind his craving. While this has desired effect on Cecelia, the impact on Briony is disastrous. Her reading of the letter and analysis of the word in the passage – she thinks that ‘the word was at one with its meaning, and was almost onomatopoeic – shows just how closely she examines writing, as she has even considered the shape of the letters. This deep awareness of language is reflected in the vividness of the writing from both Robbie and Briony’s perspectives – it is very literary and descriptive. It is also what, combined with her sexual ignorance, allows Briony to judge Robbie so quickly as a ‘villain’, and accuse him of rape in an attempt to restore the moral ‘order’ of her world.

Through this ‘crime’ and the lie Briony told, McEwan explores the notions of truth and honesty. Despite failing to act in a way that respects it, Briony realises ‘how easy it is to get everything wrong, completely wrong’ after seeing the ‘two figures at the fountain’. This gives ‘ordinary people...power over each other’, and it is this power she abuses so thoroughly in accusing Robbie. The impact of this one lie has enormous ramifications on the lives of all involved, and in this McEwan is prompting the reader to question whether a lie is ever acceptable. The effect of one slight dishonest act in the passage, namely Briony opening the letter even though she knew ‘it was wrong’, has such a huge impact on her opinion of Robbie and her subsequent actions that even small lies seem immoral. Honesty, too, is discussed through the older Briony’s ‘vascular dementia’. As we learn that her ‘memory is gradually disappearing’, her recount of the novel loses some of its reliability. It continues to do this as the reader realises that her personal bias towards the characters must be taken into account – in her ‘atonement’ for her sins towards Robbie, for example, it is natural she is going to depict him in a good light – therefore discrediting some of her opinions.

The novel is, ultimately, Briony’s atonement. She cannot bring back Robbie and Cecilia – she suggests they are ‘dead’ so explicitly that the reader is forced to believe it – so instead she gives them the chance to ‘survive and flourish’ that they missed out on in life. It is also her expiation in that, not only is she giving her ‘spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince the chance to love’, but she is also depicting herself as a slightly self-absorbed and dishonest character. Through her understanding of the power of books, she realises that after she is gone she will exist only as she does in the novel. It is her penance then, to exist as a person who, without ‘adjectives or embellishments’ undisputedly did a very bad thing that she was unable to make up for in true life. While the true Briony lived a long life and wrote many successful stories, the only interpretation the reader gets of her from the manuscript is as a controlling, self-obsessed girl and later redeeming nurse. Briony sentences herself to existing only as this person in people’s minds, hence, finally, atoning. It is ironic, also, that a part of this ‘atonement’ was giving the ‘lovers’ the ‘happy ending’ she would have given them had she written it as a child. She believes that she has ‘come the full circle’; going from child, to the adult she so aspired to be in the passage, and back to innocence.