

Atonement – Ian Mcewan essay sample



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Atonement is set in Surrey, South East England in the summer of 1935, on the grounds of the Tallis family estate. McEwan has set the opening in the summer, possibly to evoke a sense of calmness and composure amongst the characters. We find out relatively early on, that the Tallis family have maids to do the cooking and household chores, as well as a young gardener, who works on the grounds, with some other men. McEwan could be allowing the reader to assume that the Tallis family are fairly wealthy, perhaps illustrating a secure and stable family.

Although there is an atmosphere of celebration, along with the arrival of Briony's cousins, McEwan does hint at signs of distraction, highlighting that not all is as it seems. First of all, the family vase that originally belonged to Cecilia's Uncle, and has been kept safe within the family's estate for years, is broken. Secondly, the meal that has been prepared is far too hot for a summer's day, and thirdly, Briony's cousins are disappointing actors, who are ruining her play.

All these subtle hints of distraction emphasise the hidden cracks within the family, which contrasts significantly to the secure and stable family (portrayed by the families wealthiness) in the opening. This also creates a tense atmosphere. The reader is already waiting for something unexpected to happen. As soon as nightfall arrives, the tension continues to build and escalate through a series of events. Not only does Briony read the incorrect letter, Cecilia and Robbie are caught in the library, where Briony misunderstands what is happening, partly due to her youth, but also her vivid imagination.

At this point in time McEwan has built the tension to such a level, the reader can't possibly imagine what more could happen. Here the reader witnesses a change in scenery, as the twins have gone missing, and the family celebration is moved into the outdoors. McEwan emphasises the darkness outside at this point, and how much room there is for something else to go wrong. Briony is keeping what she has witnessed to herself, while she wanders off alone, creating an air of uncertainty. In the opening chapters, McEwan has used the contrast between light and dark to set the mood.

When it is light, we saw the characters being themselves, remaining calm and composed, however as soon as it becomes dark, the atmosphere is tense and anxious, and the characters start to act on impulse. For example, we can see how Briony automatically assumes Lola's rapist is Robbie, as she thought he had also abused her sister earlier on that day. Ian McEwan uses setting in the novel *Atonement* to introduce characters and situations as well as supporting the moods in the novel. Characterisation is another aspect of narrative that McEwan uses to help the reader understand how the characters act, work and what their values are.

Ian McEwan creates a convincingly clever narrative—one that exploits the reader's natural inclination toward trust, in both the narrator and the author. McEwan opts for the story action to be told from the third-person perspective, writing from the fictionalised Briony's point of view. Although Briony is writing about her own viewpoint through third-person perspective, rather than first-person—McEwan successfully creates the illusion, for the reader, that Briony is not the author.

In the final part of *Atonement*, McEwan finally chooses to use Briony's viewpoint from a first-person perspective, to reveal the surprising truth on the penultimate page: the fact that Briony has been the "hidden" narrator throughout the novel. Third person narrative allows us to understand the points of views from each and every character, so we have enough knowledge about each character, whereas first person narrative allows the reader to entirely understand or acknowledge one individual's feelings and perspective on the novel's events. McEwan uses descriptive language to portray the characters to the reader.

McEwan describes Briony as having a 'passion for secrets' and a very 'vivid imagination'. This tells the reader that Briony keeps a lot of things to herself, and could possibly suggest that she exaggerates certain events or situations to suit her own imagination. This is also emphasised by the phrase Briony was 'one of those children possessed by a desire to have things just so'. These few descriptive phrases link to the future events in the novel, such as when Briony mistakes Robbie and Cecilia together, for Robbie attacking Cecilia, demonstrating Briony's creative mind.

McEwan has presented Cecilia as a fairly blunt, fearless woman, not only through descriptive language, but also dialogue. For example, during the water fountain scene, Cecilia uses short and sharp sentences, that could have an ambiguous meaning. The dialogue 'you must love the student life' might perhaps have more than one meaning in that context. Is Cecilia genuine, or is she being condescending because she is jealous of Robbie being around other girls? This phrase highlights Cecilia's personality, which is one of being rather direct and possibly insensitive.

This dialogue allows the reader to understand her bold actions later to come. Atonement is set in Surrey, South East England in the summer of 1935, on the grounds of the Tallis family estate. McEwan has set the opening in the summer, possibly to evoke a sense of calmness and composure amongst the characters. Although there is an atmosphere of celebration, along with the arrival of Briony's cousins, McEwan does hint at signs of distraction, highlighting that not all is as it seems, preparing the reader for the events to come.