

Consider the  
significances of  
innocence in part one  
of atonement essay  
sample



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Innocence can be defined as being pure and lacking corruption, having little knowledge of something's consequences, and is also used as a euphemism for virginity. McEwan explores innocence as key theme in *Atonement* throughout Part One, showing how the main characters' innocence, or lack of, forms the narrative plot. McEwan creates the nursery setting to represent Lola's innocence, having Paul Marshall's intrusion show her vulnerability. Despite 'the adult she considered herself at heart to be' McEwan has 'Lola had come to the nursery that morning' to show the irony of her desires.

Although she is fifteen, McEwan places most of Lola's acts in the nursery, a room which has strong connotations of being cared for as a young child. This makes it clear to the reader she may not be ready for adult experiences, emphasising her innocence. McEwan creates Paul Marshall to be seemingly pure as he enters the nursery in his 'white suit', with Lola's vulnerability made clear as she thinks 'a game was being played' whilst they conversed. However, the trust surrounded with the nursery is broken as he sees 'that the girl was almost a young woman' whilst 'watching her closely'.

The reader are led to believe by McEwan that Paul Marshall is caressing Lola, and the description of her 'unblemished incisors' highlights this innocence. Through this, McEwan builds sympathy for Lola as the reader begin to question her ability to notice Paul's intentions. It could be argued that this innocence is a facade: as Lola is first assaulted, McEwan has her 'seeming to bite' down a sob, highlighting her ability to appear vulnerable as she simply wants pity from Briony. This is exacerbated when she chooses not to place blame on her attacker, simply telling Briony 'Yes'.

It was him. ' By McEwan doing this, the reader is able to question Lola's ability to understand the consequences of her actions; it is clear to the reader that Briony will blame Robbie as a ' maniac' for her assault. It could be argued that Lola has no other choice, with Briony claiming ' I saw him'; but, it is her innocence which leads her to agree, not knowing the extent of the damage her inability to act will cause. As a result, Lola's innocence is a significant element to Briony's crime, with her retraction of the truth only fuelling Briony's assertions.

McEwan uses Briony's reaction to Cecelia's loss of virginity and her relationship with Robbie to show the significance her lack of innocence plays in the turn of events in Part One. McEwan has Briony describe Robbie's letter as ' elemental, brutal' and ' some principle of darkness', yet it is made clear ' she had never heard the word spoken' or ' seen it in print'. Through this, McEwan highlights her vindictiveness - although most thirteen year olds would acknowledge their lack of understanding, the reader is made aware that Briony is ' disgusted' by something she doesn't fully understand.

McEwan has Briony describe Robbie as ' the incarnation of evil' showing her irrational hatred for him. It could be argued that although she knows the consequences of her actions, her ignorance is displayed as she tells ' no one, not even her mother, had ever referred to the existence of that part of her'. McEwan shows hints of Briony's naivety as she believes that she has now entered ' an arena of adult emotion' from ' which her writing was bound to benefit'.

Yet, McEwan makes it clear to the reader that she has little knowledge of adult emotions, casting ' herself as her sister's protector' when the reader know Cecelia is in no position of danger with Robbie. This ignorance is epitomised when she witnesses ' some trick of darkness and perspective' when catching glimpse of Lola, showing her lack of sight. By McEwan doing this, the reader knows that ' the magic of naming' and ' the victim's curse' are Briony's fabrication of events - it is clear she knows the consequences of her actions as she concocts Robbie's crime, leaving the reader no sympathy for her actions.

McEwan makes it clear she is convincing herself she is right, telling ' the truth instructed her eyes'. It could be argued that McEwan has older Briony's voice create this ignorance to pinpoint her reasoning for her lie, drawing away from the blatant lack of innocence and corruption involved. McEwan has younger Briony's lack of writing experience show her innocence. McEwan has Briony tell ' the fairy stories were behind her', yet creates a melodramatic narrative as she tells of ' interrupted brutal behaviour' and having ' witnessed mysteries'.

The irony is highlighted as she claims ' her childhood had ended' yet she still resorts to exaggerated description. This overdramatic aspect of Briony's narrative is key to Part One: the reader is left helpless and lacking a truthful account of events as Briony's narrative shies away from the severity of her lie. As a result, the reader cannot sympathise fully for Robbie and Cecelia as Briony's perspective is ' Picasso-like' - she gives numerous viewpoints of the day's events, leaving the reader to piece together the narrative.

The repetition of 'there was nothing she could not describe' highlights this irony as throughout Part One the reader isn't given an easily followed, and honest, account of events - her narrative is fragmented like 'the incorruptible shards of glass' of the island temple. McEwan has older Briony's voice seep through during Part One, offering a retrospective viewpoint as she tells 'or did she mean, her wise grasp of her own ignorance?'. Although Briony's narrative is hard to decipher, the ability of older Briony's hindsight guides the reader into realising the mistakes she makes as a child.

McEwan highlights the capacity of writing, telling 'her words summoned awful powers', yet, older Briony's view permeates as she comments if only she 'had been less innocent, less stupid' when allowing the story to write 'itself around her'. This innocence as shown through older Briony's hindsight is therefore significant in her crime - her inexperience in writing and her ability to turn visions into 'a statement of fact' are elements which contribute to her fabrication and lies.

In conclusion, McEwan highlights the significance of innocence in Part One contributing to the destruction of the Tallis family and Robbie's wellbeing. An accumulation of Lola's innocence causing her not to act, as well as Briony's innocence in regards to writing, allows her lies to escalate. As McEwan has Briony write 'There was an old lady who swallowed a fly' he manages to highlight the cause of Robbie's downfall - Briony's lies which are aggravated by her literary innocence.