**Atonement study guide**

Atonement (2001), is an altogether more challenging and ambitious work. Hugely acclaimed, this is writing on a new scale, recognisably McEwan in the well-wrought prose and fine articulation of character, the cool precision of moral nuance, the adept and surprising effects of plot, but also a revelation in the new and powerful sense of history, of the pattern of individual lives and actions within the sweep of great events – in this case, the 1939-45 War. The narrative voice itself is an astonishing achievement: we read the words of an elderly novelist, in 1990, writing the perspective of her own younger self in first 1935, then 1940. Her story hinges on a crucial error of perception, which may have been an act of malice, with which she effectively destroys the harmony of her childhood home. The atonement to which the title refers becomes the goal of her life, and her text, as she struggles somehow to make amends for the irrevocable damage she has caused. The dark, closing ambiguities of the book call into question the very possibility of achieving such grace, and express a troubled awareness of the complexities of responsibility and agency – in writing as in life. Few British novelists have matched the seriousness and sustained force of Atonement: it is the work of a unique imaginative voice demanding our attention and respect. (literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/ian-mcewan)

**Chapter 1:**

1. Pay attention to the epigraph- what sort of anticipation does it creat3?
2. Notice the characterization of Briony and how other characters are indirectly characterized only in relation to her.
3. What is Briony writing? Why? What is the complexity of the task for her and what is the effect on her characterization?
4. Why are the cousins coming? How are they characterized?

**Chapter 2:**

1. Notice how in chapter 2, Cecilia’s characterization is similar to Briony’s in chapter 1. What is McEwan doing here?
2. Pay attention to the setting- the description of the house and grounds.
3. Why is Uncle Clem’s vase important to the family?
4. What is the effect of all of the description of arranging the wildflowers? We know authors are setting us up when they provide so much description of something insignificant. Consider the description of the flowers and what is going on with Cecilia.
5. What are Cecilia’s feelings about her family?
6. What are the complexities of Cecilia’s feelings for Robbie?
7. What happens to the vase? Do Cecilia and Robbie’s actions clarify or add ambiguity to their relationship? Explain

**Chapter 3:**

1. Characterize Lola and Briony’s response to her.
2. What are the problems with the *Arabella* rehearsals?
3. How does Briony’s version of Robbie and Cecilia’s encounter at the fountain differ from the truth? What aspects of Briony’s personality fuel her version of events?
4. Look up the literary technique of prolepsis. Notice the prolepsis on page 38. What is the effect?

**Chapter 4:**

1. What is the nature of the relationship between Cecilia and Briony?
2. Notice…..attention and details about the flowers in the vase.
3. What does Cecilia see out the window while arranging the guest room? What does she imagine is happening? What is her reaction? What is McEwan doing here….someone else looked out a window earlier.
4. Who is Paul Marshall? How is he characterized?
5. How is Leon characterized?
6. What does Leon think of Robbie? How does Cecilia feel about Leon having asked Robbie to dinner?

**Chapter 5:**

1. What is the relationship between Lola and her brothers?
2. What is the tone and effect of the encounter between Paul Marshall and the cousins, particulary Lola? How does this add to the characterization of these two characters?

**Chapter 6:**

1. Chapter 6 is about Emily Tallis, again others are characterized in relation to herself. What is wrong with Emily? What are the various thoughts/concerns she has about her family? How do you think McEwan wants us to feel about Emily, as a woman? As a mother?
2. Why do you think McEwan adopts this narrative style? How does it contribute to our understanding of the characters?