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Auszug aus:

Atonement - Britishness, innocence and guilt in Ian McEwan's novel

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Atonement – Britishness, innocence and guilt in Ian McEwan's novel

Dr. Bernd Kowitz



In dieser Unterrichtsstunde dient der Roman „Atonement“ von Ian McEwan als Grundlage für die Analyse zentraler Begriffe wie *innocence*, *guilt*, *forgiveness* und *perceptions of reality* sowie die Interpretation ihrer literarischen Gestaltung. Neben der Erarbeitung von *plot* und *characters* wird auch der Vergleich der Romanhandlung mit der filmischen Umsetzung einbezogen. Die Schülerinnen und Schüler setzen sich außerdem mit exemplarischen Kategorien wie *literary devices*, *intertextuality* und *narative perspective* auseinander.

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Atonement – Britishness, innocence and guilt in Ian McEwan’s novel

Dr. Bernd Klewitz



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Penguin Random House Vintage, Cover photograph © Chris Fraser Smith

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Competences and skills:

Working with literary sources, historic documents, video clips and other material, students particularly train their **reading** and **analytic skills**. Different viewpoints and literary devices are studied in a critical manner. **Viewing comprehension skills** are trained by working with the film version of the novel. There is also a focus on **language production** in oral and written formats.

Overview:

List of abbreviations:

D Discussion**F** Working with a film**GP** Group puzzle**R** Research**T** Working with a text**VI** Working with a video**W** Writing

Topic	Material	Methods/Skills
1: The fountain scene – Introduction	M1–M2	D, T, VI
2: The plot of the novel	M3	T, W
3: Characters and narrator(s)	M4–M5	GP
4: Literary devices	M6–M8	R, T, W
5: Themes in <i>Atonement</i>	M9–M10	D, T
6: From novel to film	M11–M12	D, F, VI, W
7: Britishness	M13–M17	D, R, T, VI

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Facts

Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, the novel that started his international acclaim as one of the top contemporary British writers, is as complex as any of the more recent post-modern narratives. At first sight, it is even difficult to say who wrote the novel, because it starts in a quite traditional (some have pointed out) Virginia Woolf style – keen on detail, slow in pace and with frequent stream-of-consciousness sequences. Was it the third-person narrator, as the omniscient perspective would make us believe, or was the whole story told by Briony, one of the main protagonists who discloses at the novel’s ending that it was herself who wrote down the events that led to her own desire for atonement after committing “the crime” – falsely accusing her sister’s lover of raping her cousin and eventually destroying their lives? And then, near the novel’s ending, all three of them reappear to make amends – or do they? The result of changing perspectives is that the reader will question everything he/she has learned about a middleclass mansion in pre-war England, the British retreat to Dunkirk during World War II and the final Coda that reports the couple’s death in 1940. Initially, the facts seem clear: a crime was committed, the wrong person punished, and the perpetrator even marries his former victim – facts also established by the very successful film released after the novel’s publication in 2007.

This is why it is important in dealing with *Atonement*, its characters and the literary devices used by the author – who incidentally refrained from writing the screenplay – to carefully examine the novel’s form and the tricks it plays on the reader, and the film six years later with the audience. And before drawing premature conclusions about the morals of the protagonists and the truth of the stories over time, it is as important to include an analysis of the history behind, the attitudes towards class and the essence of Britishness in some detail. Finally, one could also refer to the successful serial *Downton Abbey*, screened world-wide on TV and in cinemas and probably not even having reached its end by pointing beyond the timespan between 1935 and 1999 in *Atonement*.

Notes on the material

The individual modules usually cover one double period each (90 minutes) and can be used independently from each other. Task-based learning is encouraged, and study results will be evaluated in a concluding essay with integrating excerpts into the novel's chapters and literary interpretation. All assignments in the worksheets are based on verbs in accordance with *Operatoren* and *Anforderungsbereiche I–III*, suitable for years 10–13. Prior reading of the novel by the students is recommended.

As an introduction, students watch one of the novel's key scenes, the fountain episode and compare perspectives (**topic 1**). After that, the plot of the novel is processed. Due to its complex character, the focus is on selected scenes that build up the different layers of meaning and a plot diagram visualises the sequence of events (**topic 2**). The ensuing character analysis is based upon the interactions of the main protagonists, among them Briony, Cecilia and Robbie. Students are free to choose from suggested pages in the novel to study the characters' beliefs and attitudes, using the format of a group puzzle, followed by a short biography depicting important stages in the life and work of Ian McEwan (**topic 3**). Intertextuality and other literary devices are at the core of **topic 4**, where also further research into literary examples and exploring symbolism in *Atonement* are encouraged. The overarching themes are explored by discussing the concept of "innocence and guilt" and, in a fishbowl discussion, the issue of victims versus perpetrators is dealt with and concluded with versions of a freeze (**topic 5**). Novel and film lend themselves to analytic comparisons and the role of the story's real culprit, played by Benedict Cumberbatch in his first major film role, is highlighted (**topic 6**). Finally, aspects of Britishness from Brexit to *Downton Abbey* are discussed in **topic 7**. The unit concludes with an evaluation of the learning process by suggesting the format essay writing, based on the integration of a late key scene – the culminating confrontation between Robbie and Briony – and the interpretation of prior and final developments (**exam**).

Edition of the novel used for this unit: Ian McEwan: *Atonement*. Penguin Random House Vintage. London 2001. ISBN: 978-0-09-942979-1.

The references in this unit refer to this edition.

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