

“Atonement” by Ian McEwan [B2]

Questo romanzo riunisce temi sostanziali come le classi sociali, la colpa e la fragilità umana. Il prestigioso autore inglese cattura il lettore con la storia di un amore sfortunato alla ricerca di una meta impossibile: siamo nelle mani del destino o di semplici coincidenze?

“Atonement” is a contemporary classic about class, unrealised love and **guilt**. The novel is **regarded** as one of author Ian McEwan’s best, and considered by Time magazine as one of the finest of the last century. It focuses on a single day in the summer of 1935. On this day, Briony Tallis, a wealthy, creative teenage girl, witnesses a series of interactions between her older sister Cecilia and the family’s cleaning lady’s son, Robbie Turner. Briony interprets these interactions as abuse on the part of the young man, but the reality is that Robbie and Cecilia are just realising they have romantic feelings for each other, which they have been **harbouring unknowingly** for years. **“Initially, a simple phrase chased round and round in Cecilia’s thoughts: Of course, of course. How had she not seen it? Everything was explained. The whole day, the weeks before, her childhood. A lifetime. It was clear to her now. Why else take so long to choose a dress, or fight over a vase, or find everything so different, or be unable to leave? What had made her so blind, so obtuse?”** “In un primo tempo, un’unica frase girò a vuoto nei pensieri di Cecilia. Certo, ma certo. Come aveva fatto a non accorgersene? Adesso era tutto chiaro. L’intera giornata, le settimane che l’avevano preceduta, la sua infanzia. Una vita. Ora capiva. Perché mai, altrimenti, metterci tanto a scegliere un vestito, o litigare per un vaso, o vedere ogni cosa in modo tanto diverso, o non riuscire a trovare la forza di andarsene? Come aveva potuto essere tanto cieca, tanto ottusa?”

MISPLACED GUILT

On that same night, Briony finds her cousin Lola in the arms of an older man and assumes she is being **raped**. By completely misunderstanding the interactions she had seen between Robbie and her older sister, Briony

reaches the conclusion that the one raping Lola was Robbie. Years later, Briony finds out that the man she saw with Lola was not Robbie, but a family friend of a much higher social class. The events of that day ultimately lead to the demise of the three main characters: Cecilia and Robbie's love story never materialises, and Briony lives a life of regret. **"Briony learned a simple, obvious thing she had always known, and everyone knew: that a person is, among all else, a material thing, easily torn, not easily mended."** "Briony imparò una cosa ovvia e semplicissima che aveva sempre saputo, come tutti: ogni persona è, tra le altre cose, un oggetto facile da rompere e difficile da riparare."

CLASS AND LOVE

As the book focuses greatly on the most minute intricacies of one day, the reader might initially be led to believe that this is because there is no metaphysical destiny and everything that happens is solely accidental. **"That love which does not build a foundation on good sense is doomed."** "Un amore non costruito su fondamenta di grande buon senso ha il destino segnato." However, as the class of the lovers — Cecilia, the rich girl, and Robbie, the cleaning lady's son — is made a central theme, the text leads us to a different conclusion: class is not something we can just get over, it is a man-made destiny to be reckoned with. **"Whatever happened in the future, however superficially strange or shocking, would also have an unsurprising, familiar quality, inviting her to say, but only to herself, Oh yes, of course. That. I should have known."** "Qualunque cosa fosse successa in futuro, per quanto superficialmente insolita o sconvolgente, avrebbe contenuto anche un che di noto e di familiare che le avrebbe fatto bisbigliare, ma solo tra se e sé: Ah già. Ma certo. Avrei dovuto saperlo."

STAR-CROSSED LOVERS

As the reader is presented with an image of Robbie striving to reach Cecilia with glorious optimism, it might seem that it is pure chance that ultimately keeps him from her, while actually their class differences are what undermines their love the most. It is class, a class Briony somewhat

embodies, that makes their love star-crossed. “Cecilia always seemed to find it awkward – ‘that’s our cleaning lady’s son’, she might have been whispering to her friends as she walked on. He liked people to know he didn’t care – ‘there goes my mother’s employer’s daughter’, he once said to a friend. He had his politics to protect him, and his scientifically-based theories of class, and his own rather forced self-certainty. ‘I am what I am.’” “Lei pareva sempre impacciata: «Quello è il figlio della nostra donna delle pulizie», bisbigliava magari alle amiche, mentre si allontanavano. A lui piaceva far sapere alla gente che non gliene importava: ecco la figlia della padrona di mia madre, disse una volta a un compagno. A proteggerlo aveva il suo credo politico, e la teoria scientifica sul sistema di classe, oltre alla personale sicurezza di sé che aveva deciso di imporsi. Sono quello che sono.”

THE BRITISH STIFF UPPER LIP

Briony feels guilty for having put her class bias — and frustrated crush — on Robbie in the way of her older sister’s romantic fulfilment. She operates as an enforcer of the British stiff upper lip that so deeply dominates the society portrayed by McEwan, and pays for it with a life of regret. “How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all.” “Come può una scrittrice espiare le proprie colpe quando il suo potere assoluto di decidere dei destini altrui la rende simile a Dio? Non esiste nessuno, nessuna entità superiore a cui possa fare appello, per riconciliarsi, per ottenere il perdono. Non c’è nulla al di fuori di lei. È la sua fantasia a sancire i limiti e i termini della storia. Non c’è espiazione per Dio, né per il romanziere, nemmeno se fossero atei. È sempre stato un compito impossibile, ed è proprio questo il punto. Si risolve tutto nel tentativo.”

FREE WILL VERSUS FATE

Briony remains somewhat frozen in that day, and feels personally guilty of causing Cecilia and Robbie's romantic frustrations. The theme of destiny, or lack thereof, returns as Briony, now a successful writer, crafts a text with an alternative storyline of her sister's love with Robbie: one in which the lovers triumph and manage to live without shame. In doing so, she tries to give them the life she feels she took from them. The novel, which was made into an Oscar-winning film in 2007, leaves the reader with the question: is it up to Briony to atone, or was she just a vessel of insurmountable class conditions, prejudices and British social customs? It is possible that if she had said nothing, someone or something else would have inevitably separated Robbie and Cecilia. **"Now she was back in the world, not one she could make, but the one that had made her, and she felt herself shrinking under the early evening sky."** "Adesso tornava nel mondo, in un mondo che non poteva fare con le sue mani, che però in compenso aveva fatto di lei quella che era, e si sentiva diventare piccola sotto il gran cielo di quella sera in arrivo". Traduzione di Susanna Basso. Editoriale Giulio Einaudi, Torino, 2002

Glossary

- **striving** = dirigersi
- **chance** = caso
- **somewhat** = piuttosto
- **lack thereof** = mancanza
- **customs** = abitudini
- **regarded** = considerare
- **regret** = rimpianto
- **get over** = superare
- **man-made** = artificiale, creato dall'uomo
- **fulfilment** = appagamento
- **remains** = rimanere
- **took from** = privare
- **undermines** = minare
- **star-crossed** = sfortunato
- **glorious** = glorioso, beato
- **"Atonement"** = espiazione
- **guilt** = colpa
- **to reach** = raggiungere
- **keeps him from** = allontanare, separare
- **crush** = cotta
- **enforcer** = esecutrice
- **stiff upper lip** = freddezza britannica
- **unknowingly** = inconsapevolmente
- **raped** = violentare
- **demise** = fine
- **minute** = minute
- **reckoned with** = fare i conti con
- **crafts** = preparare
- **harbouring** = nutrire
- **insurmountable** = insormontabile
- **intricacies** = complessità
- **embodies** = incarnare
- **bias** = pregiudizio

- **vessel** = recipiente