

Atonement



Suitable for:

AS/A2 English Literature; Film Studies

Film details:

Cert. 15, Running time 123 mins

On the hottest day of the summer of 1935, thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis irrevocably changes the lives of her sister Cecilia and lover Robbie. She accuses Robbie of a crime he didn't commit, which has damaging consequences and the guilt for which colours Briony's entire life. Adapted from Ian McEwan's best-selling novel.

Establishing character

- How are the characters introduced to us at the start of the film? Think about their actions, costumes and any dialogue.
- What is suggested about social class and about family?
- What assumptions can you make about the film from the opening few minutes?

Adaptation

- In the film, what cinematic techniques does the director use to convey Briony's perspective to the audience?
- To what extent is it possible to match this to the techniques used in the novel?
- Do you feel that this key aspect 'works' in the film adaptation?

The novel hinges on a small number of major misunderstandings, with the consequences of these played out over the course of several years.

- How effectively do you think these misunderstandings are conveyed in the film version? Do you feel that the novel offers more narrative ambiguity than the film, or would you say they are closely matched?

History on Screen

Even though the war is not the main setting for the novel its impact on the lives of the characters is immense. The transition from peace to war makes possible many of the societal changes that the characters we meet undergo.

- To what extent does the trailer emphasise the historical setting of the film?
- Do you think the period aspect of this adaptation helped the box office in any way? Explain your ideas.
- Does the film follow any conventions of Second World War films? Could you make any comparisons with other films in this genre or covering this period in history?
- Thinking particularly about the importance of class, respectability and deceit within the narrative, consider what period knowledge is a prerequisite for the audience to gain a full understanding of the film.

Atonement and Box-Office Draw

British actors James McAvoy and Kiera Knightley have both appeared in period dramas in the past, so it could be argued that, to some extent at least, they are playing to type in this film.

- How key would you say these two actors are to the marketing campaign?
- What do you think is the target audience for similar period dramas?
- Do you feel this film might encourage 'breakout' audiences due to the box-office draw of Knightley and McAvoy?

Finding atonement: the ending

- Investigate the meaning of the title: what different definitions of this word can you find?

Now consider the ending of the novel as well as the final scenes of the film, focusing on the differences between the two at this point.

- To what extent do the film and the novel offer different definitions or treatments of the concept of atonement?