An Introduction to Postmodernism & Atonement

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English IV Honors
After the Second World War, global culture ushered in a new era of change.

Many social changes took place, including the sexual revolution and women’s liberation.

A new generation of liberal thinking emerged and helped usher in a period of great innovation and political/social/cultural dissonance.

Postmodernism
The term Postmodern literature is used to describe certain characteristics of post–World War II literature, relying heavily, for example, on fragmentation, paradox, questionable narrators.

For example, instead of the modernist quest for meaning in a chaotic world, the postmodern author diverts, often playfully, the possibility of meaning, and the postmodern novel is often a parody of this quest.

Postmodern questions:

- Why are we in this world?
- Is there a presiding figure to make sense of all this, a god who in the end, despite making people suffer, wishes them well?

**POSTMODERNISTS DISTRUST THE NOTION THAT THERE IS ONLY ONE TRUTH.**
Atonement employs several characteristics of postmodernism in its narrative techniques that focus the conflict between differing perceptions of truth and the elusiveness of memory.

Atonement by Ian McEwan
Atonement questions not only authorial authority but also the consciousness of the mind, which distorts truth and history.

It eagerly illustrates "how easy it was to get everything wrong, completely wrong."

The structure of the narrative centers the conflict around the different perceptions of truth, facts and beliefs, and truth and illusion.

It reflects, on a smaller scale, the similarly-written, similarly-constructed history of the Second World War.

Atonement & Postmodernism
At its core, *Atonement* is a novel about writing:

- Letter, stories, plays, biography, journals, perspective, truth, lies, and the power of words.

When writers do this, it is called **metafiction** (looking down from above on the act of writing).

*Atonement & Postmodernism*
As we get further and further into this novel, you will wonder whose story this really is.

It is told from Briony’s perspective, but why is hers trustworthy in the first place?

Briony is our narrator, but is it her story to tell?

Who else could it belong to?

- Cecilia and Robbie?
- Lola, Paul, Mrs. and Mrs. Tallis, Nettle and Mace, etc.?
- The unnamed victims/soldiers of WWII, prisoners with stories?
- Modern society, modern people who mess up?

Just whose story is *Atonement*?
By giving us multiple perspectives of a narrative
By complicating the moral complexity of the plot
With the level of detail
By using non-fiction sources of writing to build trust in “characters”

So, how does McEwan play with truth and lies through writing?
…But mostly, it serves as a reminder that “All fiction is a beautiful lie that tells the truth.”

As you read:

☞ Watch the power of a single word
☞ Watch the power of single person’s word to commit evil
☞ Watch the power of the military’s word
☞ Watch the power of Briony’s words to make “atonement”