

Unseen extract 5: *Atonement*

Atonement by Ian McEwan was published in 2001. Set initially in the summer of 1935, it tells the story of Cecilia, the eldest daughter of the wealthy Tallis family, and Robbie Turner, the son of the Tallis family housekeeper, who had been childhood friends. In this extract, set early in the novel in the grounds of the Tallis country estate, Cecilia and Robbie are reunited during a break from Cambridge University.

Sample question

Examine the view that McEwan presents social class as a barrier to love in this extract.

Make close reference to the writer's methods in your response.

Extract

She felt she had said something stupid. Robbie was looking away across the park and the cows towards the oak wood that lined the river valley, the wood she had run through that morning. He might be thinking she was talking to him in code, suggestively conveying her taste for the full-blooded and sensual. That was a mistake, of course, and she was discomfited and had no idea how to put him right. She liked his eyes, she thought, the unblended mix of orange and green, made even more granular in sunlight. And she liked the fact that he was so tall. It was an interesting combination in a man, intelligence and sheer bulk. Cecilia had taken the cigarette and he was lighting it for her.

'I know what you mean,' he said as they walked the remaining few yards to the fountain. 'There's more life in Fielding, but he can be psychologically crude compared to Richardson.'

She set down the vase by the uneven steps that rose to the fountain's stone basin. The last thing she wanted was an undergraduate debate on eighteenth-century literature. She didn't think Fielding was crude at all, or that Richardson was a fine psychologist, but she wasn't going to be drawn in, defending, defining, attacking. She was tired of that, and Robbie was tenacious in argument.

Instead she said, 'Leon's coming today, did you know?'

'I heard a rumour. That's marvellous.'

'He's bringing a friend, this man Paul Marshall.'

'The chocolate millionaire. Oh no! And you're giving him flowers!'

She smiled. Was he pretending to be jealous to conceal the fact that he was? She no longer understood him. They had fallen out of touch at Cambridge. It had been too difficult to do anything else. She changed the subject.

'The Old Man says you're going to be a doctor.'

'I'm thinking about it.'

'You must love the student life.'

He looked away again, but this time for only a second or less, and when he turned to her she thought she saw a touch of irritation. Had she sounded condescending? She saw his eyes again, green and orange flecks, like a boy's marble. When he spoke he was perfectly pleasant.

'I know you never liked that sort of thing, Cee. But how else do you become a doctor?'

'That's my point. Another six years. Why do it?'

He wasn't offended. She was the one who was over-interpreting, and jittery in his presence, and she was annoyed with herself.

He was taking her question seriously. 'No one's really going to give me work as a landscape gardener. I don't want to teach, or go in for the civil service. And medicine interests me...' He broke off as a thought occurred to him. 'Look, I've agreed to pay your father back. That's the arrangement.'

'That's not what I meant at all.'

She was surprised that he should think she was raising the question of money. That was ungenerous of him. Her father had subsidised Robbie's education all his life. Had anyone ever objected? She had thought she was imagining it, but in fact she was right – there was something trying in Robbie's manner lately. He had a way of wrong-footing her whenever he could. Two days before he had rung the front doorbell – in itself odd, for he had always had the freedom of the house. When she was called down, he was standing outside asking in a loud, impersonal voice if he could borrow a book. As it happened, Polly was on all fours, washing the tiles in the entrance hall. Robbie made a great show of removing his boots which weren't dirty at all, and then, as an afterthought, took his socks off as well, and tiptoed with comic exaggeration across the wet floor.

Everything he did was designed to distance her. He was play-acting the cleaning lady's son come to the big house on an errand. They went into the library together, and when he found his book, she asked him to stay for a coffee. It was a pretence, his dithering refusal – he was one of the most confident people she had ever met. She was being mocked, she knew. Rebuffed, she left the room and went upstairs and lay on the bed with Clarissa, and read without taking in a word, feeling her irritation and confusion grow. She was being mocked, or she was being punished – she did not know which was worse. Punished for being in a different circle at Cambridge, for not having a charlady for a mother; mocked for her poor degree – not that they actually awarded degrees to women anyway.

Awkwardly, for she still had her cigarette, she picked up the vase and balanced it on the rim of the basin. It would have made better sense to take the flowers out first, but she was too irritable. Her hands were hot and dry and she had to grip the porcelain all the tighter.

Robbie was silent, but she could tell from his expression – a forced, stretched smile that did not part his lips – that he regretted what he had said. That was no comfort either. This was what happened when they talked these days; one or the other was always in the wrong, trying to call back the last remark. There was no ease, no stability in the course of their conversations, no chance to relax. Instead, it was spikes, traps, and awkward turns that caused her to dislike herself almost as much as she disliked him, though she did not doubt that he was mostly to blame. She hadn't changed, but there was no question that he had. He was putting distance between himself and the family that had been completely open to him and given him everything. For this reason alone – expectation of his refusal, and her own displeasure in advance – she had not invited him to dinner that night. If he wanted distance, then let him have it.

Acknowledgement of copyright-holders and publishers

© From *Atonement* by Ian McEwan. Published by Jonathan Cape. Reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Limited.