"Pass the Amo!": Metonymy and Class in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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In *Atonement*, Ian McEwan uses key objects as metonyms to illustrate the connections between different scenes and characters in the novel and to highlight important themes such as innocence, complicity, and social status. For example, McEwan uses the Meissen vase and the un-chauffeured Rolls Royce to explore different aspects of heroism and of wealth: the vase belonged to the Tallis children's Uncle Clem and was a gift from the mayor of a town he evacuated during the First World War, saving "perhaps fifty" people (23), and Briony Tallis associates the Rolls Royce with the Marshalls (356), whose prosperity is closely linked to her. In this essay, I focus on the Army Amo bar, whose colour, historical context, and depiction during significant passages of the novel establish patterns of association that highlight inequalities of class and age as well as their relationship to war. Although Robbie Turner, son of the Tallis family's charlady, and Paul Marshall, "[t]he chocolate millionaire" (26), engage in analogous sexual encounters in "Part One," the Amo bar and the wealth it represents distinguish them from each other by making Paul, in his position of relative power, appear to be above suspicion for raping Lola and by casting doubt on working-class Robbie. McEwan demonstrates how social standing becomes a barrier only wealth can surmount. It is ultimately Paul's money and Robbie's lack thereof, rather than the decency of their actions or the refinement of their manners, that cause the Tallises to treat the two men differently.

In "Part One," both Paul and Robbie engage in (or, in Paul's case, commit) sexual acts. McEwan connects their acts with a set of shared associations: temples—both real (such as the island temple on the Tallis property) and implied (such as the steeple-like gesture characters make with their hands)—and sibling relationships. However, McEwan uses these same images to contrast their roles by depicting Paul as dominating Lola Quincey and by representing Robbie as Cecilia's equal. McEwan

draws these parallels and distinctions in the nursery exchange when Paul first meets Lola, in the library encounter between Robbie and Cecilia, and finally in Paul's attack on Lola. In this last scene, Briony Tallis stumbles upon Lola and Paul (whom she mistakenly assumes to be Robbie) as she approaches the island temple, causing Paul to flee (164). Lola later tells Briony that her assailant "came up behind [her and] …knocked [her] to the ground" (167), implying that she, like Briony, had simply been searching for the missing twins and had not willingly submitted to the attack. Despite Briony's conviction that she had saved Cecilia from a similar assault (167), Cecilia's interaction with Robbie in the library, though also overtly sexual, contrasts sharply with the scene by the island temple. Rather than having Robbie sneak up on her, Cecilia "draw[s Robbie] with her deeper into the gloom [of the library]" (133), deliberately encouraging his advances. Similarly, rather than coincidentally being near the island temple as Lola is, Cecilia "[makes] a steeple of her hands to enclose her nose and mouth" (133), thereby choosing the location of her sexual encounter by creating it herself. In this way, McEwan presents Cecilia and Robbie acting as equals.

The library scene also focuses on the sibling-like relationship between Robbie and Cecilia, the innocence of which juxtaposes starkly with the way Paul perceives Lola, who is nine years his junior. Robbie and Cecilia grew up together, but "that they were old friends who had shared a childhood was now a barrier" (134). Before they can be comfortable together, they need "to break [their friendship] …in order to become strangers on intimate terms" (134). Paul approaches Lola in precisely the opposite way: prior to their first meeting in the nursery, Paul dreams that "his young sisters had appeared… standing around his bedside, prattling and touching and pulling at his clothes. He woke… uncomfortably aroused" (60). The dream becomes perversely significant when he tells Lola that she "remind[s him] of [his] favourite sister" (61), coupling Lola with his recent dream-fuelled arousal. Only once Paul establishes this association does he offer Lola the Amo bar and watch her eat it "over the steeple he

made with his hands in front of his face" (62). The presence of the steeple image, innocent enough on its own, adds sexual undertones to the nursery scene when considered alongside Cecilia's similar gesture and the setting of the rape in later chapters.

The green colour of the Amo bar's coating not only becomes closely associated with adult desire and sensuality but also evokes the army uniforms that fill "Part Two" of *Atonement*, subtly foreshadowing Robbie's future as its "smooth shell of drab green" parallels the "dark green serge" of a soldier's uniform (61, 242). Interestingly, Briony describes the island where Paul attacks Lola as "green and silver" (157), tying violence to sexuality and hinting at Robbie's arrest with "the glint of silver steel [handcuffs]" (184). The bar's name brings to mind "ammo" or "ammunition" and implies that the chocolate itself might be a sort of weapon, an implication furthered by McEwan's use of the word "shell" to describe the candy coating. By attacking Lola, Paul provides figurative ammunition for Briony to use against Robbie, consequently protecting himself. His name also shares in the military connotations of his product: first, "Marshall" is a homonym of "martial;" and second, amidst the chaos on the beach at Dunkirk, Robbie notices "marshalling centres" (247), subtly signaling Paul's link to Robbie's surroundings. These military connections highlight the violent ways in which Paul routinely establishes his dominance—whether directly, as with his rape of vulnerable Lola, or indirectly, as with his profiting from the brutal war or his avoidance of punishment while Robbie goes to prison.

Like the setting of the rape scene, McEwan frequently uses green objects and places to explore sexuality and adult desire, which ties the green Amo bar to these same themes. The bar concretely initiates the first scene where Paul derives sexual pleasure from Lola and its colour relates it to the later encounter between Robbie and Cecilia. When she begins to eat the Amo bar that Paul gives her, Lola's "tongue turn[s] green as it curl[s] around the edges of the candy casing" (62). This colour anticipates Cecilia's clinging green dress and the green desk lamp that provides the

only light for her encounter with Robbie in the library (98, 123). Cecilia chooses the dress only after discarding a pink one that she sees as childish (98); the green dress thus reflects her maturity. Lola wears a "green gingham frock" earlier in the novel (11), but her dress appears adult only in comparison to Briony, who barely takes any care of her appearance (35). Although green gingham does reappear later as part of Robbie's fevered fantasy about finding a place to eat at Dunkirk and is therefore connected to a very basic appetite for food (257), Lola's principal interaction with the colour green is to childishly eat a piece of candy. Only from Paul's perspective does the situation become one of sexual appetite and desire; his presence makes the situation uncomfortably adult. His reaction to watching her eat the Amo bar is to instruct her "softly" to bite it (62), which instruction foreshadows Cecilia's act of repeatedly biting Robbie as part of their tryst in the library (135), thereby adding further sexual undertones to the nursery scene in retrospect.

After first giving Lola an Amo bar, Paul later distributes them to the army; the appearance of Amo bar crumbs in the hospital ward illustrates his dominance over the injured soldiers, from whose misery he profits, and also connects their suffering with Lola's subjugation. During the exchange in the nursery, Paul uses chocolate for his own gain: in this case, for sexual pleasure. Later, he capitalizes on the Amo bar in a parallel way to profit from the war. According to the *Hershey Community Archives*, which offer details about the production and distribution of the American Ration 'D' bar, "between 1940 and 1945, over three billion ration units were produced and distributed to soldiers" (par. 13). For each of the "thousands of men" at Dunkirk (and for each of the men who did not make it that far), Paul has presumably sold several Amo bars (McEwan 247). Thus the war makes Paul a very wealthy man, while it simultaneously strips the soldiers of any power and renders them helpless. As part of the description of the hospital, McEwan, through Briony, lists the "essential elements" of war that the soldiers bring with them: "blood, oil, sand, mud, sea water, bullets, shrapnel,… and damp sweaty battledress whose

pockets contained… the sodden crumbs of Amo bars" (304). The Amo bar thus becomes part of the atmosphere of death and pain and is linked to the violence on the continent. After the retreat, the soldiers require intensive care. The hospital ward becomes a sort of nursery, tying the dependency of the injured soldiers to that of children and linking their powerlessness to Lola's earlier experience in the Tallises' nursery.

McEwan demonstrates the discrepancies between Robbie's sensitivity to etiquette and Paul's vulgarity as well as between their respective positions in the social hierarchy. Robbie possesses the good manners of an upper-class person, but these attributes provide no benefits for him as a member of the working class, whereas everyone disregards Paul's inelegance, as his money makes gentility unnecessary. During the dinner party, Paul's lack of tact causes anxiety for Robbie, who immediately tries to remedy the situation: "Paul Marshall… broke more than three minutes of asphyxiating silence… to speak to Robbie… It was inappropriate… for Marshall to turn away from his hostess and begin a private conversation" (127). In response to Paul's faux pas, Robbie "flinche[s]" and attempts "to make amends for him" by introducing a more general topic of conversation (127). In her recollections of the dinner, however, Emily Tallis remembers only that "there had been something manic and glazed in [Robbie's] look" and also "how artfully Mr. Marshall had put everyone at ease" (151–52). This thought leads her to ponder Paul's fitness as a potential husband for Cecilia. Because Emily's father-in-law "made the family fortune with a series of patents on padlocks, bolts, latches and hasps" (19), it comes as no great surprise that Emily associates Paul's money with security and disregards its vulgar newness. She does not care about Paul's background or how he obtained his money; she cares only that he has it. Consequently, no amount of polish on Robbie's part can remedy his poor standing with Emily, and no amount of rudeness can make her think less of Paul, even if he behaves impolitely towards her, as he does at the dinner.

McEwan provides ample evidence of Paul's perversity in "Part

One," but the Tallises fail to notice it and accept his version of events implicitly as the truth, making him appear heroic for having saved Lola and foreshadowing the way he will be perceived as a hero after the war. Even if he tells the truth when he claims to have saved Lola from her brothers, Paul would still likely have seen her partly undressed, because the twins burst in on her as she "was getting ready for a bath" (118). That Paul neither assists Lola in treating her wounds, a task that she claims to have accomplished herself (141), nor mentions the incident to anyone afterwards throws his truthfulness about this interaction into doubt. Although Robbie wonders why Paul never mentioned her injuries (142), he does not question his honesty, and no one suspects Paul of wrongdoing even as everyone marvels that children could have inflicted Lola's bruises (141). After Briony reveals Lola's bruises to the dinner party, Lola's "eyes [fill] with tears" as she stares at Paul (142), implying that he is, at least in part, the cause of her anguish. This general acceptance that Paul helped Lola, as he says he did, anticipates his post-war reputation for philanthropy and good works. In the novel's coda, Briony mentions that the Marshalls remain well-known "in connection with their Foundation and all its good work for medical research… [and] their generous funding of agricultural projects in sub-Saharan Africa" (357). In fact, Paul can afford all his charitable projects because of the money he makes during the Second World War, providing rations for the soldiers, and because he avoids punishment for raping Lola. His good name is the skewed result of wartime profiteering and advantage-taking.

In "Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*," Brian Finney attributes the Tallises' bias against Robbie and in favour of Paul to class difference, which protects Paul and ensures that no one questions his earlier interactions with Lola. Despite Robbie's long-time acquaintance with the Tallis family, they readily believe Briony's accusations against him (with the exception of Cecilia). However, Emily thinks that Paul, a newcomer, might make a suitable husband for Cecilia simply because of the wealth resulting from his Amo bars (152). Finney describes Emily as "class conscious" and attributes

her encouragement of Briony's testimony against Robbie to her resentment that her husband financed Robbie's education (77), which she sees as "meddling" (McEwan 151). If Robbie is educated at the same level as her children, it eliminates an important marker of class distinction. Even Cecilia, who never doubts Robbie's innocence, automatically casts her suspicions upon someone of a lower class: Danny Hardman, the son of the Tallises' handyman (209). Having "imbibed [a] sense of social difference from [Emily]" (Finney 77), Cecilia never suspects Paul. As Finney notes, Cecilia's mechanical assumption that Danny must be guilty "subtly suggests the invidious nature of a class system that permeates even those seeking to reverse its effects and works to protect the upper class rapist from exposure throughout his lifetime" (77). Cecilia cannot escape the status-based logic of her mother and is, therefore, equally blind to Paul's dubious behaviour.

Even Briony, in her childhood naïveté, knows that a relationship between Robbie and her sister would be one that "leaps across boundaries" (38), and McEwan's depiction of class shows what a difficult, if not impossible, leap it is to make. Using the Amo bar as a metonym associated with violence, desire, and wealth, McEwan illustrates how a person can gain prestige regardless of personal merit or be unjustly resented for purely class-based reasons. In the novel, Paul finds sexual pleasure in watching a minor eat candy in a nursery, proceeds to rape her, and remains unpunished throughout his life because his wealth places him above suspicion. By contrast, Robbie engages in consensual sex with another adult, yet this act is used against him (181); he goes to prison because of Briony's lie, which her "class conscious mother" encourages her to tell (Finney 77). Not only does Robbie shoulder the responsibility for Paul's crime, but he becomes part of the helpless mass of soldiers for whom the Amo bar was intended and dies in the war that makes Paul so rich. Meanwhile, Paul and Lola become "Lord and Lady Marshall" (356): untouchable in their wealth and public prominence. Unlike Briony's early fiction, in which death is "set aside exclusively for the morally dubious" and marriage is "a reward" (7), her acknowledgement in the novel's coda that Paul lives a success-

ful life while Robbie and Cecilia die without reuniting illustrates a social hierarchy where justice is entirely backward. In *Atonement*, the morally dubious reap rewards so long as they can afford to appear upstanding and philanthropic, while other, worthier characters are punished unfairly due to their lower class status.

I'm in the third year of my English Honours program. My favourite literary/historical eras are the Victorian and Modernist eras, though Modernism is included mostly because I love Virginia Woolf, as anyone who knows me can attest. My favourite books are A Room of One's Own, The Bell Jar, *and* I Have a Bed Made of Buttermilk Pancakes.

As for my papers, they were both written for my English 310 class. The Atonement *paper came about because I was interested in how many green objects were featured in the novel, but there were so many that I had to pick just one, so (somewhat as a joke) I chose the chocolate bars. It was a pleasure to write about them, because they reveal a great deal about the characters' relationships which I would not really have expected. The most interesting thing that I learned for this paper does not actually appear in it at all: I read through the Hershey Chocolate archives, and, as it turns out, the Hershey Chocolate Company is a very respectable one with a fascinating history. The man who founded it, Mr. Hershey, wanted to make a factory surrounded by nice homes and parks for his workers and their families. He actually founded a sort of town called Hershey and all the street names are chocolate-related.*

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Works Cited

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