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Critical Analysis

Relationships in Pieces: The Symbol of the Vase in *Atonement*

Lifetime bonds with people can be broken when rash decisions are made. Family is often times considered the rock that keeps everyone stable, but in some cases, this rock dislodges and is lost forever, creating chaos and regret. In *Atonement*, instead of the family's stability being viewed as a rock, an expensive vase maintains peace but initiates their downfall when it is destroyed. When the vase, a family heirloom, begins to fall apart, so does the family, until the pieces are so tiny that repair becomes impossible. Throughout Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, the Meissen vase symbolizes the destruction of several seemingly breakable relationships.

The vase plays an important role in the Tallis' family heritage. A profound emotional connection to the vase is very prominent, especially for Mr. Tallis. The unique piece of artwork was given to Uncle Clem while "he was on liaison duties in the French sector and initiated a last-minute evacuation of a small town west of Verdun before it was shelled" (McEwan 21). He was a war hero for risking his life for others and receives the vase as a sign of gratitude. Naturally, Jack Tallis is proud of Clem and "wanted the vase in use, in honor of his brother's memory" (23). In Jack's eyes having wild flowers alive in the vase means that there is still life associated with his deceased brother. Emily, Jack's wife, does not particularly like the vase because it has Chinese figures on it and "seemed fussy and oppressive" (23), but she allows it to be in plain sight around the house because

she knows how important it is in preserving Clem's legacy. In the beginning of the novel, the vase is in mint condition and contains wild flowers, probably foreshadowing the craziness that happens a little bit later. The appearance of the vase is very regal and put together, similar to the Tallis family. On the outside, they seem collected and stable, but in actuality they have issues, symbolized by the wildflowers. Unrecognized problems within the family begin to come out and all mount up to the chaos the night of the dinner. One strange problem is that Jack Tallis, the father, is not home very often. The family clearly is not as close as they want people to believe. But as of that moment, Cecilia is arranging the flowers around in the vase; "she spent some minutes making adjustments in order to achieve a natural chaotic look" (22). Like the vase, the family appears to be stable, but the wildflowers show that they really are not put together. They are attempting to hide their true nature. Cecilia is fixated on trying to make the wildflowers symmetric and structured, but they naturally grow in all different directions. Sometimes wildflowers are a burden in gardens because they grow everywhere and cause overcrowding. Now that the wildflowers are in the house, this signals the start of all of the craziness. The events that follow the scene at the fountain alter the atmosphere in the house and the relationships of the people living inside.

The unquestionable tension between Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain leads to new understandings of what their relationship really is. Robbie has always been close to the family, but lately "he was putting distance between himself and the family" (27). Even before the fountain incident, Robbie begins to stray from his relationships with the Tallis family. What was not clear before comes to a realization when they partake in a slight argument over how to put water into the vase. The way the vase breaks during the

ordeal depicts the beginning to an end for them, “a section of the lip of the vase came away in his hand, and split into two triangular pieces which dropped in the water...”(28). The two pieces that break off can symbolize Cecilia and Robbie breaking away from the family which happens as a result of Briony’s false accusations. The family as a whole is the vase and the two pieces depict Cecilia and Robbie beginning to stray from their relationships with everyone. The fact that they are triangular in shape could show who the three main people involved in the series of events are: Cecilia, Robbie, and Briony. Cecilia’s bold choice of undressing in front of Robbie to retrieve the pieces in the water could mean that although at the moment she is not aware of any feelings she has for him, she unconsciously does. Also, Robbie seeing every feature of Cecilia’s body is imprinted in his mind and he then comes to the realization that he loves her and has for a while. The breaking of the vase is what starts up their minds and makes them come to understand that it is not just awkward tension between them, but a sexual tension that they have not thought about till that event. Surprised by what she has done, Cecilia “put the fragments in the pocket of her skirt and took up the vase. Her movements were savage, and she would not meet his eye”(29). She begins to contemplate the reason for her rash decisions, ““I’ve been seeing strangely, as if for the first time”” (125). Robbie’s provocative letter to Cecilia opens her eyes and makes her realize that she has feelings for him that have not come to the surface till now. Cecilia later attaches the pieces that broke off of the vase and “judged the vase repaired”(40), but the vase still has cracks and is very fragile. So if anything else happens to it, it will shatter and can never be repaired to the wholeness it once was. When Briony witnessed the intimacy between Cecilia and Robbie in the library, her thoughts of Robbie, from the letter, as being some kind of monster pile up because she does not understand

what is going on. Briony's claim of seeing Robbie raping Lola is another blow to the vase that ends up with it becoming shattered beyond repair. Robbie and Cecilia's passion for each other based on the one moment in the library endures for the rest of their lives. They both know that Robbie was falsely accused, and Cecilia risks her relationship with Briony and her parents by standing up for the truth and the man she so desperately loves.

Briony feels guilty for the rest of her life and is determined to redue the past and make up for her mistake. She is only a child when she witnesses the mysterious event that takes place on the hot summer day by the fountain and Lola being raped. The place of Lola's rape is in a garden surrounding the temple by the lake. Surprisingly, the vase has "figures gathered formally in a garden...with ornate plants and implausible birds"(23). The picture on the vase directly correlates with the night of the rape. Everyone is dressed formally for dinner and Lola is raped in a garden area. Briony also hears a bird sound, which is made by Lola. The vase foreshadows the night of the rape which signifies the furthering of the vase becoming even more fragile and further destruction of the family. Several things could account for why she falsely accused Robbie of raping Lola and sentencing him to a life that he was not meant to live. Briony is a very imaginative girl and spends the majority of her time writing stories. She often exaggerates circumstances to make them more exciting and appealing to herself and others. The playwright loves to have all the attention on her, probably the reason why she unveils Robbie's letter to the police. Instead of all the attention being on her it is on Lola and she wants it back. Briony also may have been infatuated with Robbie and was jealous that he likes Cecilia instead of her. The whole false accusations could have come out of anger during the hear of the moment. Her naivety is also a part of her mistake because she did not fully

understand the situation and was very confused during the chaos. When Briony is 18, five years after Robbie was imprisoned and then sent into the army, she becomes a nurse in hopes of helping people instead of hurting them. She desperately wants her guilt to go away and feels that this may help her to feel better about herself. Briony also thinks that being in the same career as her sister, Cecilia, could bring them close again, a hope that would never be fulfilled. Even though Cecilia and Robbie die before being with each other again, Briony feels that the only way to make everything right is to use her writing talents to write a novel telling the truth about that fateful night and give Robbie and Cecilia the ending they deserve.

Through a brisk decision influenced by naivety, imagination, and jealousy by a young girl, a couples' lives are changed forever. The vase starts out as being whole and complete, reflecting the family's relationship but in an unexpected moment the vase gets damaged but is repairable although it is now fragile. The relationships and trust of one another are tested making tension high in the house. The false accusations of Robbie are the final blow to the relationships of everyone. Cecilia and Robbie never see the rest of the Tallis family again and Briony strays from her parents in an effort to gain Cecilia's trust back. The vase is shattered and so are everyone's relationships. In the beginning everything is fine but through a series of unfortunate events relationships are strained and then destroyed. The vase will never be able to be repaired.

Works Cited

McEwan, Ian. *Atonement*. New York: N.A. Talese/Doubleday, 2002. Print.