“Pass the Amo!": Metonymy and Class in Ian McEwan’s Atonement
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Abstract
In Atonement, McEwan uses objects as metonyms to draw parallels between characters and events. I focus on the Army Amo ration bar, whose colour, historical context, and depiction during significant passages of the novel highlight the inequalities of class and age and their relationship to war. These inequalities are most evident in the characters Paul Marshall, who rapes a young girl, and Robbie Turner, who is convicted of the crime. Paul has wealth, provided by chocolate manufacturing, whereas Robbie is poor. Their positions in the social hierarchy—rather than their innocence or guilt—determine how the other characters treat them.

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Atonement literally means at-one-ment – making two things which were formerly separated, at one with each other. It’s a rare, formal word, of ecclesiastical resonance – and a big, solid word, which rhymes with stone, as though turning the novel into a lasting monument of Robbie’s innocence. Yet the novel isn’t an atonement of Briony’s guilt, as she herself confesses. For the duration of writing the novel McEwan’s working title was An Atonement, but a friend convinced him to drop the article. ‘An’, despite being the indefinite article, nonetheless refers to a particular case, whereas the absenc