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The Tallis House as an Extension of Emily Tallis in McEwan's *Atonement*

Homes speak volumes about their occupants. Individuals bleed their qualities into their homes through conscious or subliminal choices: architectural style and location “symbolically suggest [...] social class, personality, [...] and personal background” (Aragonés *et al*). The same osmotic process occurs in reverse, however, the house rubbing off on its inhabitants just as noticeably. In Ian McEwan's 2001 novel *Atonement*, Emily Tallis, an upper-middle class mother of three, living in rural, World War II-era England, experiences these interactions. Her home, a “bright orange brick, squat, lead-paned baronial Gothic”, is not just a reflection of Mrs. Tallis, but is also an extension of herself that she uses in her husband's absence to further her own interests and ideals (McEwan 18). McEwan uses Emily's relationship with the house to demonstrate that the histories of habitations and people regularly amalgamate to create new incarnations of each that significantly affect the outcome of events in which they are involved.

Inherited from the paternal side of the family, the Tallis property was originally purchased by Jack's grandfather, who “made the family fortune with a series of patents on padlocks, bolts, latches and hasps” (McEwan18). The wealth of the family was recently accumulated in a sudden burst of mobility not uncharacteristic in Victorian-era England, where “the newer individualism, stressing risk-taking, free choice, rewards to the enterprising and sharp, and devil take the hindmost” had risen to prominence in the wake of the industrial revolution (Johnson 148). Prior to opening “his humble hardware shop”, however, the Tallis

family had been “irretrievably sunk in a bog of farm laboring” (McEwan 20). Despite escaping his proletariat roots, the hardships and instability of farming remained too fresh with him to lower his defenses, evident in how he “imposed on the new house his taste for all things solid, secure, and functional” (McEwan 18). Jack’s grandfather fears regressing to an impoverished state. He set out to fortify his new estate against the hardships of his old life. Aside from its structural stoutness, the “relative isolation of the Tallis house” protects future generations from hazardous social interactions (McEwan 5). For those who did venture into the country to visit the Tallis family, an “artificial lake and island with its two stone bridges supporting the driveway” greeted them, evoking images of an imposing medieval fortress complete with mote and drawbridge (McEwan 18).

Like the lake, however, the Tallis family is posturing. Sarah Green, production designer for the film adaptation of *Atonement*, interprets the Tallises as:

second or third generation new money, so their home is not a [sic] historically beautiful or important house; it is mass produced, a reinterpretation of a classic form. The family had enough money but not that much style. (Bowen)

Jack’s grandfather opted for privacy and endurance to keep something at bay rather than to place status and entrepreneurial success on a pedestal. He sought to combine these qualities with the fashionable gothic revival architecture of the nineteenth century in Victorian England. Nevertheless, the fact remains that his wealth could have bought the Tallises an established, prestigious estate or at least prevented it from becoming a “tragedy of wasted chances” (McEwan 18). Victorian architectural theorists, who “believed that buildings not only embodied meanings, but also communicated them with precision” (Kaufman 30), help us to understand that this was a deliberate decision made by Jack’s grandfather: “the choice of style [...] was not the architect’s

but the patron's" (Lang 241). Its construction suggests a conflict of interests only insofar as an obligation to keep up a pretense of worldliness goes. Gothic architecture (and, therefore, Gothic revival architecture) is medieval in origin. While it appears that Jack's grandfather is paying homage to a medieval-inspired style of architecture representative of the same oppression that stifled his peasant ancestors, the choice was not self-deprecatory, insensitive, or ill-informed, but utilitarian. Realistically, a degree of conformity was more advantageous. Symbolically, the Tallis house is furnished to withstand the relentless onslaught of fortune-ruining forces; it is soundly outfitted against the elements and places distance between itself and prospective enemies of the family. To rely exclusively on static defensive measures implemented at a fixed moment in time ignores the fluidness and aggressive adaptability of society—in this case its elite, with whom the Tallises would ordinarily hobnob. Jack's grandfather's blueprint *sans* aesthetic tribute to the wealthy would have been interpreted as an attack on his wealthy contemporaries liable to ignite hostility between the involved parties: "there was a deeply entrenched middle-class mid-Victorian prejudice against the character and behavior of manual workers as a class" (Johnson 147). Failing to fully embrace the lifestyle of the wealthy, whose "latent industry and honesty" starkly contrasted the "latent fecklessness and immorality" of manual workers (both common perceptions at the time), implied a mindset more contiguous with the latter (Johnson 147). By making minor concessions to placate the status quo, the house effectively "induc[es] positive reactions in others [...] change[s] others' views or behaviors in desired directions," and enables the Tallises "to adapt to, or feel comfortable in, a wide range of social situations" (Baror 17). In spite of his efforts to implement techniques that would improve the odds that his family would not descend back into poverty, Jack's grandfather "could not conceal the ugliness of the Tallis home", the transparency that the Victorian architectural

theorists pointed to in architecture prevailing (McEwan 18). While the house succeeds in communicating that the Tallises are of high-rank to their McEwan-created potential critics, its lack of traditional, dignified elegance indicates to the reader, armed with more intimate knowledge of the family's dynamics, that the family's concern is not status, but holding off history.

Emily's upbringing appears to be one generated by more privileged pedigree than the Tallises, though likely not graced with exorbitant wealth or status: "she had been educated at home until the age of sixteen, and was sent to Switzerland for two years which were shortened to one for economy" (McEwan 61). Her parents' frugality functions not only to suggest a shortage of resources, but, implicitly, that they also imparted on Emily traditional assumptions about gender and societal roles. These are most evident in her attitudes regarding Cecilia, her eldest daughter. Educated at Girton, a constituent college of Cambridge University, Cecilia's degree is unsatisfactory to her mother, who argues that "[Cecilia] had no job or skill and still had a husband to find and motherhood to confront" (McEwan 62). Emily disregards her daughter's intellectual pursuit as "at best an innocent lark" (McEwan 61), one that violates women's traditional role even in the wake of an era when "the boundaries between public and private were continually being tested and renegotiated" (Morgan). While this 19th century expansion of women's freedom enabled Cecilia to explore affairs outside of the home, Emily's assumptions are not replaced or forgotten upon marrying Jack and being assimilated into the Tallis family culture. Instead, she cherishes them as personal tenets that amicably collide with the values of Jack's grandfather to yield a mutually beneficial relationship. Rooted in stability and manifested in the Tallis house, his peasant-inspired sensibilities and the social order endorsed by Emily are staunchly opposed to change and, thus, complementary. "A sixth sense, a tentacular awareness

that reached out from the dimness [of Emily's bedroom] and moved through the house, unseen and all-knowing", is the product of their compatibility (McEwan 63).

The deterioration of Emily and Jack's marriage produces an imbalance in the relationship between them and the house that benefits her radical agenda. Jack's extended absence from the family is work-related and extramarital in nature: "that he worked late she did not doubt, but she knew he did not sleep at his club, and he knew that she knew this" (McEwan 139). In either case, his clout in family affairs as a crucial moderating component diminishes. Jack has departed from the core values endorsed by his father and with which the house was built, taking a less cautionary approach to preserving the family's wealth and reputation. His rapport with and support of Robbie Turner, the son of the family's charwoman, is exemplary of this rift. Robbie is the intellectual progeny of Jack, the "living proof of some leveling principle he had pursued throughout the years" (142) whose college tuition at Cambridge he had financed. Jack's intent to provide Robbie with an escape clause from poverty is diametrically opposed to the house's "ambience of solidity and family tradition" (136). Robbie shows promising prospects for upward mobility and other successes that threaten to undermine the Tallises and their established status. Yet, Emily, whose ideals are intertwined with the house, is powerless to act out defensively against him in Jack's presence. Before their marriage became dysfunctional, she assumed the traditional domestic role of mother. The "late and unexpected appearance" of her youngest daughter Briony "had kept [childhood sacraments] alive in the household well into Emily's forties", in turn enabling Emily to cooperate and avoid confrontation with Jack after their *de facto* separation and Briony had outgrown the attentions of her mother (McEwan 64). Eventually, however, the "sources of contentment in her life—the house, the park, and, above all, the children"—overcome her commitment to her husband (McEwan 139). Emily concludes that

“it was her own peace of mind she strove for; self-interest and kindness were best not separated” (McEwan 67). Only after assuming the role of head of household can she repurpose her “tentacular awareness” into a weapon suitable for indirectly solving the problem of Robbie (McEwan 63). Prior to her uncontested coup, Emily’s wifely obligations prevent her from taking action using that awareness: the house functions as a mental appendage through which Emily channels and enhances her maternal instincts. “Like the cat’s whiskers of an old wireless”, it collects on Emily’s behalf information regarding the family’s goings-on that she ordinarily would not have the sensitivity or capacity to collect (McEwan 63). Her awareness is innate, becoming tentacular only when coupled with an external actor. While its mechanics are unchanging, Emily applies them not to maternal betterment after ousting Jack, but to the preservation of common ideals that she and the house jointly embody.

Despite access to an endless flow of accurate, intimate information about the conflicts and happenings within the house—“only the truth came back to her, for what she knew, she knew” (63)—Emily rarely serves as an arbiter. Although conscious of the multiple, escalating plots whose development she is surrounded by, Emily assumes a policy of inaction, taking no initiative to intervene and perhaps defuse the novel’s mounting tension. Doing so is crucial to succeeding in her campaign to de-liberalize the Tallis household and substantiates her deliberate use of the house as an extension of herself to eliminate Robbie. This is no more evident than in the family’s nursery, the proverbial powder keg of the novel’s inciting incident in which Briony misinterprets a sexually-charged scene between Cecilia and Robbie from her onlooker’s vantage point. Drawing the conclusion that Robbie is a predator “issuing a command which Cecilia dared not disobey” as she denudes to underwear to retrieve a broken vase from the fountain, Briony’s suspicions consequently evolve so virulently that she falsely accuses him of rape

(McEwan 36). Briony is unexpectedly plucked from her waning, but still incomplete, childhood and granted “privileged access across the years to adult behavior, to rites and conventions she knew nothing about, as yet” (McEwan 37). Her imagination is stimulated by the incident without adult restraint, prompting not only her costly exaggeration but also a redirection of her literary mind from fairy tales to “the adult world in which frogs did not address princesses” (McEwan 37). In doing so, Briony is denied “access to deeper meaning and that which is meaningful to her at [her] stage of development” that “the child finds [...] through fairy tales” (Bettelheim 4-5). The rapid succession of life-and plot-altering events in the nursery scene spawns a climate of instability and manifold potentially disastrous outcomes. While “she could not send [her tendrils] into the future” , Emily can see the plots gradually converge (McEwan 67). At the expense of Briony’s healthy transition into adulthood, she withholds her guidance to protect her own interests, two of which she gambles will be addressed by unleashing her daughter: the realignment of Briony’s values, which led her to accept that “leaps across [socioeconomic] boundaries were the stuff of daily romance” , with her own, and the elimination of Robbie Turner’s threat to the family (McEwan 36). Arguably, Emily has no say in the matter. McEwan emphasizes that “though she sometimes longed to rise up and intervene [,]” the fear of pain from debilitating migraines “kept her in place” (63). Her medical condition, however, has little bearing on how she deals with each situation. Emily is only intermittently bedridden, her migraines being triggered by stimuli such as “the white glare of the afternoon’s heat” (McEwan 60). “Emily stood at the head of the table placing diners as they came in”, for instance, completely lucid and without difficulty during the dinner preceding Robbie’s arrest (McEwan 118). Thus, her ailment is more of a convincing alibi than a retardant hampering the performance of her essential motherly duties.

Briony herself, albeit as the elderly narrator of *Atonement* that she is revealed to be at the novel's conclusion, "London, 1999," is aware of her mother's iniquities and the symbiotic relationship with the house from which her present-confined omniscience sprang. Returning to her former home twenty-five years after her mother's death, she "turn[s] into the drive of Tilney's Hotel", not of the Tallis house (McEwan 342). The Tallis house, like all others, is subject to its occupants, constantly undergoing transformations in the push and pull of human life; births, deaths, marriages, and moving on all affect the personality of habitations, if only fractionally. Without Emily, the bond between her and the house was broken. Even so, the legacy of that bond plunged blindly into the future, the actions, or lack thereof, taken under its influence resulting in "the moment when [Briony] became recognizably herself" (McEwan 39). Ironic though it may be that Emily sets the atrocities of *Atonement* into motion in the nursery, it is also appropriate. What should have served as a sanctuary for Briony in conjunction with the nurturing affections of her mother and father declines into a theatre for "wickedness and scheming [...] confusion and misunderstanding;" and "above all, [...] the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you" (McEwan 38). The impetus for the ultimate destruction of the Tallis estate, either by financial ruin or the estrangement of the remaining children, is issued forth from the room most affected by the broken marriage of Emily and Jack. Overlooked by Emily in her conniving, the ultimate outcome of *Atonement*, beyond her control and foresight, is the product of the same force that facilitated her appropriation of the Tallis house for selfish means. Tilney's Hotel, though "stark and unprotected" by Jack's grandfather's standards, persistently outlives its past inhabitants, nonetheless immortalizing them and their deeds in its aura (McEwan 343).

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