

Compare and contrast: the canterbury tales essay sample



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The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer is a classic piece wherein pilgrims tell tales during their journey to a holy shrine in Canterbury. A Knight and Miller are two of the pilgrims. Chaucer gives personality to each character wherein a drunken Miller can tell a tale that is full of brilliant characterization and also have nicely balanced action, and a tough soldier like the Knight can weave a romance “ with all the art of a seasoned minstrel.” (Lawrence 42)

The Knight, being the noblest amongst the pilgrims, is invited to speak first. The second tale-teller is the Miller. The Miller speaks second, not by invitation, but as a way to repay the Knight’s romantic tale. In having these two tales told back-to-back, one is able to compare the two. In many ways, The Miller’s Tale “ functions as a subversive mirror of the Knight’s story.” (Rossignol 242) This is also an opportunity to find many similarities as well as differences between the two tales.

The term “ subversive mirror” is certainly appropriate in dealing with these particular tales. Although The Miller’s Tale does mirror The Knight’s Tale by utilizing similar elements, it also corrupts those same elements it is in fact imitating. By using the term “ subversive,” it is suggested that the Miller is actually trying to pervert The Knight’s Tale by undermining the morals that are represented in it. The Miller seems determined in his tale to parody the situations and sentiments of The Knight’s Tale. This “ subversive mirror” reference is indeed on the mark.

Several similarities are easily recognizable between The Knight’s Tale and The Miller’s Tale. These similarities are the “ mirroring” which take place from The Miller’s Tale to The Knight’s Tale. “ The opening formula (of The

Miller's Tale) . . . is almost identical to the Knight's; after that, nothing is the same, but many things are instantly recognizable because they have already appeared, if in a different form, in the Knight's Tale." (Cooper 111) Both stories are romances, even though The Miller's Tale is not chivalric like the Knight's. Both tales also utilize a lover's triangle among their main characters where two young men vie for the affection of the same young woman. (Rossignol 243)

There are other similarities between these two tales. Both tales give a similar characteristic to two of the actors in the stories. Arcite and Absolon both have a character flaw wherein they confuse what it is they want and what they actually receive in the end. The Miller borrows the concept of the message that a dream holds for one of his characters. This is taken from a portion in The Knight's Tale where Arcite receives a message in a dream. Also, The Miller's Tale constructs most of the story with comedy. The Knight also applied comedy to parts of his tale.

Both of these tales are romances. " In the typical romance, such as ' The Knight's Tale,' love is an idealized, even intellectualized, emotion fraught with questions of great philosophical import like the mechanism of destinal order in the universe." (Rossignol 244) In contrast, in The Miller's Tale, love is basic and instinctual. It is shown to be a spontaneous event of physical desire and the speediest method of fulfilling it.

There are obvious similarities between the two tales. Palamon and Arcite are rivals for Emily's affections; Nicholas and Absolon for Alison's. In The Knight's Tale the lovers' aim is marriage to Emily. The tale is of courtship with a

glorified woman being the reward, and it is the form of romance that is most widely idealized. “ That Palamon, who is prepared to worship Emily in the belief that she is a goddess, eventually gets her hand in preference to Arcite, who is never in any doubt that she is flesh and blood, emphasizes how far the tale is from simply equating love and sex.” (Cooper 228)

In The Miller’s Tale the aim of the romance is very different to that of The Knight’s Tale. It is simply adultery. However, there is a similarity to that of The Knight’s Tale by the utilization of a lover’s triangle. The triangle in The Knight’s Tale is Emily, Palamon, and Arcite. In The Miller’s Tale it is Alison, Nicholas, and Absolon. The events in each tale unfold around these three pivotal characters and the stories basically pertain to them.

The mirroring of The Miller’s Tale to The Knight’s Tale continues as the events of the romance unfold. Palamon and Arcite decide to battle one another as an option to settle the argument of who will be awarded to Emily. The “ battle” is portrayed somewhat differently in The Miller’s Tale. Absolon lusts after Alison. Alison, however, is too wound up in her premarital affair with Nicholas to take Absolon’s advances seriously. She considers him nothing more than a joke and proves this by her response to his request for a kiss. In both instances, one of the challenging lovers ends up getting hurt — Arcite by losing his life for the love of Emily, and Absolon by losing his pride in being made the fool by both Alison and Nicholas..

Two of the men have a similar character flaw. Both Palamon and Absolon seem to confuse the ends and means of their desires. In The Knight’s Tale, Palamon yearns to be free from prison. When he finally is released, he only

finds that he is exiled. He also prays to Venus for victory in his battle, yet in the end, the death of his dear friend Arcite occurs. Absolon, like Palamon, confuses what he wants and what he gets. He does get the kiss he so doggedly pursued, yet it was not quite what he had in mind or wanted. Also, even though he did get his revenge, he did not deliver the “branding” to the one he had intended. All in all, both characters pursued a goal, but neither of them reached it the way they had planned. (Cooper 215)

Both the Knight and the Miller utilize dreams and what they mean to two of their characters. In The Knight’s Tale, Arcite prays to Mars asking him to bring an end to his woe. He prays that he might be victorious in his battle so that he may win the hand of the fair Emily. Mars does deliver an end to his worries, but it is in the form of his death. He received what he asked for and not what he wanted. (Burrow 121) Absolon also has a dream. He dreams of being at a feast. However, in reality he gets a mouthful of something he does not expect. Even though both men had dreams of how they wished the events to unfold, their dreams did not play out as they had expected.

Although comedy is heavily relied upon in The Miller’s Tale, it is also utilized in The Knight’s Tale. Even though the struggle between Palamon and Arcite for the affection of Emily is highly serious, it “descends to the level of comedy when Theseus reminds us that Emily has not even been aware of their devotion for some time . . .” (Rossignol 202) The comedy is such that these two men are willing to fight each other until death and the woman they are fighting over does not even know of their intentions.

The Miller's use of subversion to The Knight's Tale is prominent in his entire tale. He has no qualms in regard to paying back the Knight's epic tale of love and tragedy with his own style. One is under the impression when reading The Miller's Tale that he is up for the task of trying to let the noble Knight be made to look like a fool by telling such a romantic, epic tale. However, from the beginning of the journey, all of the other pilgrims knew that he was a gruff drunk and cared very little for the feelings of his traveling companions.

The differences are much more apparent when comparing these two tales. There are contrasts in styles, idealism, the poetic tone, themes, and settings of the two tales. While The Knight's Tale tries to find deeper meaning in the world, The Miller's Tale is simply a story with no underlying meaning. Although the characters resemble each other in many instances, there are numerous differences amongst them. Also the styles of the writings are different. The Knight's Tale is a tragedy/romance; The Miller's Tale is a fabliau.

An obvious contrast between the two tales is the style of the stories. Although The Knight's Tale is a romance, it is also a tragedy. The two friends, Palamon and Arcite find themselves in a battle to the death over the love of the honorable Emily. Arcite finds death in the end. Herein the tragedy lies. Even after all of the hurdles he has passed over, Arcite receives no prize, only death. The Miller's Tale is a fabliau. It is no more than an elaborate dirty joke. The adversaries in The Miller's Tale are Nicholas and Absolon. Instead of the lovers' rivalry being fought out with all the fanfare of chivalry, it is resolved in the crudest way possible. (Cooper 114)

Even though The Miller's Tale is nothing more than a grandiose dirty joke, it is still a very powerful tale. Both of the tales are complex. While the Miller is quick to "quite" The Knight's Tale, he does so compellingly. He is able to present issues of seriousness and comedy, question destiny versus the role of free will, and present tensions between the respectable and the common. Throughout his tale, the Miller uses the issues presented previously in The Knight's Tale and transforms them to be entirely his own. (Rossignol 203)

Idealism is a major factor in The Knight's Tale. However, the idealism issue drops off dramatically in The Miller's Tale. Idealism is found throughout The Knight's Tale. Knights "exhibited an idealized code of behavior that combined loyalty, honor and service to ladies." (Rossignol 201) These codes are scattered throughout the tale. In contrast, the Miller's ideals are not even close to those of the Knight. His tale is about crudeness, promiscuity, deceit, and making a fool of a player in a scheme. Nowhere in The Miller's Tale are high morals expressed or exercised. The tale deals primarily with sex and when, where, and how it will occur. Obviously the differences in the ideals of the Miller and Knight are extensive.

The Miller, in his tale, attempts to prove that the purpose of poetry is anything but the expression of an ideal reality by constructing his own poetic artifact in burlesque analogy to that of the Knight's ideal. "He does so most effectively by retaining the analogy to the ideal and then dismantling it in a riotously comic farce in which the illusionary world of his narrative comes crashing down, dragging with it the world of ideals of the Knight, against which it is poised." (Williams 54-55)

The poetic tone of each tale is considerably different. The Knight's Tale has a very even, slow pace. The events all follow a specified order. Nothing in the tale happens abruptly. All of the events unfold methodically before the reader's eye. The tale moves slowly and descriptively. There are really no surprises in The Knight's Tale. However, in The Miller's Tale, the tone is much quicker. This is particularly true at the end of the tale. All of the culminating events take place one right after the other at a very rapid pace. Nicholas gets branded in the buttocks, he then yells for water, John the Carpenter believes that the foretold flood has come upon them and cuts his rope causing his "boat" to crash to the ground, the village people come out to see what the commotion is, characters are running every which way and all of these events happen almost simultaneously.

The Knight tells a story wherein the world of which he is speaking is orderly and everything has its place. The main theme of his tale is that of nobility, love, suffering, valor, and courtesy. These same themes were also a code of behavior for the Knight himself. (Rossignol 201) However, the Miller, in his tale, tries to denounce these allegations which are incorporated in The Knight's Tale. He does not believe that reality, in its familiarity, is orderly and meaningful. He also does not believe that there is a spiritual reality that is perfect and unchanging and shows this in his tale of John the Carpenter and Allison.

The spirituality issue is another area where the Miller makes a jab at the Knight. In The Knight's Tale, the nobler and more spiritual of the two knights gain Emily. Palamon is courtly, romantic, and deeply idealistic. However, the only character in The Miller's Tale who is even remotely spiritual is John the
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Carpenter. He is the only character who seems to have any sense of values in regard to the other characters in the tale. Instead of John being rewarded, like Palamon with Emily, the reverse occurs. Even for all of his trust in humanity, he is made out to be a fool. Once again, the Miller takes a noble theme from The Knight's Tale and places a perverse spin onto it.

The worlds in which the stories take place are also contrary to one another. The Knight's Tale takes place in ancient Greece. In contrast, The Miller's Tale takes place in contemporary Oxford. The Knight's world is a place of chivalry and honor; the Miller's is of carnal conquest. "The Miller's Tale portrays a world of frenzied activity and comic situation where deeper meanings are irrelevant." (Cooper 243)

The setting of The Knight's Tale is grandiose and regal. Ancient Greece is very appropriate in dealing with a tale which has so many ideals. Beauty and majesty are prevalent throughout the tale. In The Miller's Tale, the contrary is true. The story takes place in a rural village. A barnyard is the backdrop for this tale. On the spectrum of where the stories could take place, the Miller chose to go as far away as he possibly could from the setting of the Knight. This is another example of his perverse eye view in answer to The Knight's Tale.

"The greatest contrast with the Knight's Tale is that the Miller's remains a story." (Cooper 115) It is simply a medieval tale that has no further meaning and is simply told to be heard. Instead of the story ending with a moral such as the lovers trying to understand the mysteries of humanity and love, John the Carpenter condones ignorance. "There is no sense of any order beyond

the everyday world, and the carpenter is a gullible fool for thinking that there might be, that God might intervene in earthly affairs.” (Cooper 116) In The Knight’s Tale Palamon was bothered by the fact that the innocent suffered while the guilty were free. However, in The Miller’s Tale, the worst is had by the fool, not the villain. This can be seen with John the Carpenter suffering a broken arm and humiliation while Alison receives no punishment or reprimand for all of her discolored actions. “ In ‘ quitting’ the preceding tale it (The Miller’s Tale) offers a rival reading of the world — a world of cheerfully amoral disorder, with no metaphysical depth whatsoever.” (Cooper 116)

Emily and Alison can also be compared to each other. In The Knight’s Tale Emily is compared again and again to beautiful things. She is associated with a lily to emphasize her purity. The descriptiveness of her beauty elevates her to a plane that makes her seem almost unaccessible. However, in The Miller’s Tale, Alison’s shape is compared to a weasel and barnyard animals are often used as references for her. The Miller does not mean for her to seem unattractive. The contrary is true. She is very attractive and all men who come across her instantly lust after her. While Emily is an elusive and out-of-reach beauty, Alison is an earthly, tangible one. Emily’s portrayal is righteous and innocent while Alison is all about animal sex.

(Cooper 229)

Here again we are able to see the Miller’s ability to mirror yet another aspect of The Knight’s Tale. The female character in his story has beauty like that of The Knight’s Tale, but that is where the comparison must end. Almost everything of Alison is opposite to that of Emily. Alison’s values and actions are totally reversed of Emily’s. Alison has no regard for right and wrong and <https://assignbuster.com/compare-and-contrast-the-canterbury-tales-essay-sample/>

only wants what she craves. She does not take into consideration that she is a married woman and should remain faithful to her husband. Emily is a virgin and desires to stay that way. She has never even been with a man. Alison, on the other hand, is promiscuous and is up for the challenge of forbidden sex. In the end, because of her philandering, her husband is deemed the town fool. Instead of her rushing to his aid, she joins in with the villagers and leads them to believe he has lost his mind. Again, even though the Miller is mirroring the Knight by portraying a female character, she is such the total opposite of the woman in The Knight's Tale that it is almost obscene.

At the conclusion of The Knight's Tale, even though Arcite is dead, Palamon and Emily are encouraged to marry. They must go on with their lives and end the mourning period of Arcite. This is a direct relationship to how life actually is. When something terrible happens to a close friend, peoples lives are intertwined and the misfortune of a friend effects all of those involved with that individual. Palamon and Emily had to be directed by Theseus to go on with their lives. They had to be told that they had a right to be happy and to take advantage of their opportunity.

The Miller continues his perverse payback to The Knight's Tale at the conclusion of his own tale. A dreadful experience befalls John the Carpenter. However, instead of his so-called friends, Nicholas and Alison, coming to his aid, they are the ones to encourage the idea that he has gone mad. They do not help John. On the contrary, they squash any attempt he makes at communicating the truth. The Miller is successful in his attempt to challenging the Knight's ideal that humanity is just. No characters in The Miller's Tale are just, and therefore, righteousness does not prevail.
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In The Miller's Tale there is a sense of poetic justice in the way the plot works out. John the Carpenter may not be a knave, like Absolon, but he is the figure equally the butt of comedy, the fool. He placed his trust in his mate and neighbors, only to have his good heartedness taken advantage of. (Cooper 163) The poetic justice is also present in The Knight's Tale. Even though both Palamon and Arcite had high morals and strong ideals, only the best could be awarded with Emily. Both knights prayed to the Gods for deliverance, but only the one whom the Gods believed to be the better of the two could be victorious. Herein, the justice is seen as out of the control of the mere mortals and placed in hands of superior beings.

The Miller's Tale does function as a subversive mirror of The Knight's Tale. The similarities and differences take on a different meaning in The Miller's Tale to that previously delivered by the Knight. Even though they may be compared and contrasted in many different ways, they each hold the capacity to stand on their own.

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