

The chaos in part 2 of
'atonement' is
matched by the
chaos in 'the crucible'

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McEwan's 'Atonement' throws its narration into an abject state of confusion in Part Two, with Robbie facing the horrible images of war which repeatedly return in his state of consciousness as menacing flashbacks; history has once again repeated itself in the destruction of French society as he makes his way towards Dunkirk, while the citizens of Salem in 'The Crucible' experience the terrible murders and descent into chaos at the whim of Abigail and the breakdown of order within society.

Little is left to imagination in the opening of Part Two within 'Atonement', as McEwan assumes the narrative role of Robbie in the midst of confusion and the reader is immediately thrust into a situation where there 'were horrors enough', with worse to come as he examines the destruction of a household as he notes 'The scraps of cloth...may have been a child's... A boy's'.

The complete lack of respect for human life is fully realised when Robbie observes that 'it was a leg in a tree...wedged in the first forking of the trunk...severed cleanly... small enough to be a child's'; it is disturbing that the Robbie notes that the leg 'seemed to be on display, for their benefit or enlightenment: this is a leg'.

The situation of body parts strewn across the landscape can only be seen as a 'normal' situation, and Robbie describes his company as '[refusing] to be drawn in...in the past few days they had seen enough'. Miller mirrors this in 'The Crucible', especially in regards to the lack of respect for human life. The Putnams, described as 'a man with many grievances'. Disturbingly it is this very part of him that results in the ensuing chaos of which he acts as a land-grabber, making full use of the Salem witch trials to his profit.

The audience becomes fully aware of this motivation when the introduction of his character notes that 'many accusations against people are in the handwriting of Thomas Putnam', and the later accusations of Proctor are first hinted by Putnam suggesting that 'The tract is in (his) bounds'; notably after Proctor's condemnation the only person that can afford to purchase such expensive property within Salem is, in fact, Thomas Putnam. In another accusation, Giles Corey argues that 'If Jacobs hangs...there is none but Putnam with the coin to buy so great a piece'.

We see the descent into chaos as Putnam is clearly willing to trade human life for his own physical gain, with even the Reverend Paris in implied collusion, when he adamantly exclaims that Salem has not treated him in accordance to his rights as a minister, and he too decides to join the accusation bandwagon which only leads to condemnation of further innocence. Both texts refer to the destruction of humanity; it is disturbingly normalised in Robbie's war with the citizens only seeing 'mutilated bodies', 'in a way tortured by war' while the envy of the characters within 'The Crucible' is directly responsible for the deaths that ensue.

Miller also portrays a sense of hysteria within the town; Abigail acts as the initiator of the hysteria bandwagon, choosing to accuse Tituba of witchcraft, with dark intentions of having her own charges dropped: 'I never called him! Tituba, Tituba...'. The trials and chaos that ensure therefore comes as a direct consequence of a single accusation, as Abigail realises that she, and many others, stand to gain much more from false accusations and Proctor

furiously states that ' little crazy children are jangling the keys of the kingdom, and common vengeance writes the law'.

A disturbing reflection of this is portrayed in Robbie witnessing the scene where the soldiers began to turn against their own side: ' he was in the RAF and the tommies held him accountable...everyone had suffered, and now someone was going to pay'. The lack of chapter demarcations within Part Two gives first indication of the descent into chaos as order is broken down, and previous allies are instead pitted against each other as ' a hand whipped out and slapped the man's face' and disturbingly he notes that even he could '[understand] the exhilaration among the tormentors and the insidious way it could claim him'.

It is clear that the war has a chaotic effect on men, as ' McEwan... [creates] the commentary that war can destroy even the best of men'², including Robbie. It is only through the intervention of Mace that this chaos is somewhat diverted away from the RAF officer; clearly morality is still in existence but is already veering towards questionable. Miller similarly alludes to his in the accusations against Tituba, when even the lowly servant who simply works on behalf of the family is used as a scapegoat.

The following accusations are similarly targeted at Good and Osburn, solely for being of lowly sort within Salem's society and the easiest targets.

Eventually the accusations take a much more hysterical turn when Putnam stands as perhaps the most corrupt schemer within Salem; he is the only to accuse Rebecca Nurse of witchcraft, in which even the authorities including Parris and Hale find questionable.

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Society within both Salem and Atonement's scope reveals the true nature of chaos and hysteria as direct result of human nature and envy. It is thus described by some commentators that ' the witch trials offered...a release of pent-up frustrations and emotion'¹ In both cases it is notably the children that advocate and cause the chaos; Robbie explicitly refers to Briony as the sole creator of his destruction.

In his converse with Cecilia, we see the full capacity for destruction on behalf of children within the text: ' Yes, she was just a child. But not every child sends a man to prison with a lie. ' In Miller's case, this is exactly what follows Abigail's initial accusations; she opens further accusations, and in a fit of vengeance decides to openly accuse Proctor of witchcraft, and under Abigail's leadership the children clamour together and even implicate Mary Warren, one of their own, as colluding with a witch.

Hence both texts present chaos in the form of an upturned society, where the higher authorities hold little to no power. The opening of Part Two in ' Atonement' already hints towards this, as Robbie is noted for taking ' the dead captain's revolver', with later instances of insubordination as they refuse to listen to a commander who insists on a suicide operation to push the Germans back.

In Salem, it is the children that make the bulk of the evidence within the judiciary system, and even the ' weighty judges' Danforth and Hathorne are somewhat unwilling to question the evidence of the children, with Danforth only willing to ' worriedly' question Abigail's evidence, not to seek the truth,

but rather to protect his own reputation as a judge; we see Abigail directly challenge Danforth himself who can only shrink back in fear.

The failure of order within society is clear in both texts; Robbie assumes command of Mace and Nettle despite the two being a higher rank than he is himself, and repeatedly we see the two referring to him as 'Guv'nor'. Crucially, in both texts the onslaught of chaos is exacerbated by the very people who we assume to be willing and able to curb it. Cecilia angrily accuses Leon of being a 'grinning, spineless idiot' and that she now understands 'the snobbery that lay behind their (her family's) stupidity'.

Conversely, in Salem it is Danforth who crucially holds the ability to change the course of chaos, yet he too insists on furthering the accusations to save his own reputation, insisting that 'there will be no postponement', as he 'cannot pardon these when twelve are already hanged for the same crime'; he is 'loath to relinquish control to anyone...he cannot cope with the potential chaos caused by free thought'¹

Hence the two texts illustrate the full force of chaos, 'Atonement' in the sense of physical and psychological destruction, while 'The Crucible' draws links to destruction and chaos as a result of human nature. Arguably it is possible to see the physical deaths and horrific images of corpses as far greater chaos than in Miller's play; Robbie's narration is evocative in normalising the sight of corpses and breakdown of order.

However, 'The Crucible' also somewhat matches the chaos and cruelty of war, as we see the executions of numerous innocents as the result of human

treachery and envy. The chaos that ensues in Miller's descriptions are therefore far more disturbing in the driving force behind the destruction, where chaos is the result of intentions; in 'Atonement' Robbie is only swept away into chaos and imprisonment by the act of a 'silly, hysterical girl' who does not necessarily realise the full weight of her actions, while within Salem it is the deliberate acts of individuals that contribute.

Thus the chaos seen within both texts is generally matched, although with different motives - it is a different sort of chaos that is portrayed within the two, where one is avoidable and the other perhaps unavoidable in the sense of war and its inherent destructive capacity.