

Jealousy and the
destructive nature of
love in shakespeare's
'othello', arthur mi...



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Compare and contrast the representation of jealousy and the destructive nature of love in Shakespeare's 'Othello', Arthur Miller's 'The Crucible', and Ian McEwen's 'Atonement'.

When comparing themes of jealousy and the destructive nature of love within literature, the canonical works of Shakespeare's Othello, Miller's The Crucible, and McEwen's Atonement must be considered. The texts offer differing representations based on numerous key factors. Primarily, recognition that the texts were written almost four hundred years apart and as such are evidently influenced by the differing social cultures of their times, is important. Furthermore, they're influenced by diverse literary trends of different ages; Othello was written during the renaissance and therefore uses conventions of renaissance literature, The Crucible was written during a politically turbulent period and consequently utilises standards of political pieces, and Atonement, written in 2001, reflects the precepts of post-modernism. Despite these conflicting literary styles, the same base ideas regarding the representation of jealousy and the destructive nature of love exist within all three writings, providing numerous areas in which the pieces can be compared with one another. One interesting reading proposed by literary academics such as Arogundade (2012) is that the motivation behind Iago's destructive actions is a homosexual love for Othello. This is often substantiated through Shakespeare's suggestive word choices. For example, Iago's declaration of "I am your own forever" in Act 3, scene 3, does not just exhibit the (false) friendship that Iago displays throughout the text, but also carries a homoerotic undertone. Furthermore, Arogundade notes that the language is

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similar to that of marital vows, further evidencing this suggestion of homosexual love. In addition to this, it's worth considering the coldness that Iago shows not just towards his wife Emilia, whom he kills without thought, but towards women generally. He displays these misogynistic attitudes within the piece through his deduction "you are pictures out of door", (Act 2, Scene 1). Not only does he make a sweeping generalisation of all women, as demonstrated by his plural use of 'pictures', but 'pictures' also implies that women are outwardly false. Conclusively, when considering this interpretation of the text, the destructive nature of love can be considered a product of not just jealousy, but repressed love and sexuality. In Elizabethan England gay sex was a hanging offense, and as such any gay feelings would have to be inhibited. Certainly, numerous actors - Laurence Olivier in 1938, David Suchet in 1985, and Ian McKellan in 1989 - have all played the character of Iago as if he were gay, as pointed out by Dickson (2009). Throughout Othello, Shakespeare demonstrates that the main reason the antagonist of the piece, Iago, is so easily and destructively able to incite jealousy within love is through his omniscient, almost God-like ability to manipulate people into situations where these are inevitable outcomes. An example of this omniscience is given during one of Iago's many soliloquies, in which he states 'Trifles light as air/ Are to the jealous confirmations strong/As proofs of holy writ', (Act 3, scene 3, lines 332 - 334). Within this quote, Shakespeare uses two similes, ('light as air', 'strong as proofs of holy writ'), in order to juxtapose the trivial reality of situations with what 'the jealous' perceive to be the very serious reality. In the case of Othello, the trivial reality is that Cassio and Desdemona are friends, yet jealous Othello

perceives a much more serious 'reality'; that they are secretly lovers. Shakespeare's use of 'proofs of holy writ' is also relevant, implying that Iago is so adept in his insight into other characters that he is able to work them to a state of jealousy where his sly words are not just those of 'honest Iago', but are as infallible as the bible itself. What's more, Iago's exclamation of 'By Janus!' in act 1 scene 2, (Janus being a two-faced Roman God who presided over the start and finish of conflicts), is also pertinent here. It not only reinforces this 'holy writ' concept, but also foreshadows the conflict that Iago will cause through his 'two-faced' nature. Comparatively, Miller's characterisation of Abigail Williams develops a more opportunistic antagonist. Iago's manipulative nature means he can create situations with outcomes which suit his desires, (for example, through getting Cassio dismissed, and getting Desdemona to plead his case to Othello, he is able to further Othello's suspicions regarding the two). However Williams is more adept in controlling situations presented to her to suit her best interests. This ability is demonstrated in act one when Abigail decides she will admit to 'making compact with the devil' – when she cries out that she wants to 'open herself' to reverend Hale, Miller's stage directions state 'they turn to her, startled. She is enraptured, as though in a pearly light'. Through this, Miller demonstrates how expertly Abigail is able to control situations for her own ends. Not only does she 'startle' those around her – intensifying the effect of her outburst – but through doing so ensures that she has their full and exclusive attention, distinguishing herself from everyone else 'as though in pearly light'. Obviously, 'pearly light' provides connotations of God, and consequently there's an implication of Williams receiving not just attention,

but adoration – through ‘opening herself’ she will be helping cast out those under Satan’s influence within Salem, and therefore is almost seen as a saviour. This notion is reinforced through ‘enraptured’, with its connotations with ‘the rapture’ Christ’s resurrection, and can certainly be linked to Iago’s God-like insight within Othello; Iago’s omniscient, but within this situation, Abigail has become omnipotent. ‘Enraptured’ also indicates to the audience the satisfaction that Abigail gains from this powerful status. It’s possible that this desire for notice stems from the lack of interest shown to her by Proctor since their affair, especially given the way he rejected her advances at the start of the act. As such, Miller is suggesting that one of the truly destructive aspects of love is simply the loss of a loved one – though Abigail’s motive for later falsely accusing Elizabeth Proctor of witchcraft is jealousy over her relationship with John, the numerous accusations that follow these stage directions are simply a result of the neglect that she feels now that her and John’s relationship is over. Contrastingly, the ‘antagonist’ within Atonement, thirteen year old Briony Tallis, is somebody whom the readers are intended to be more sympathetic towards, and is generally regarded as a protagonist instead. Throughout Atonement she only has any serious power is when she’s the sole witness of Lola’s rape, and even here she blames Robbie not through malice, but through perceived protection of Lola and Cecilia. Furthermore, a convention of post-modern pieces such as Atonement – the notion that you cannot impartially represent reality – is demonstrated well through Briony’s characterisation. Though she believes that she understands ‘maniac’ Robbie, her whole perception of him is based on events she was indirectly involved in, and as such is biased. Essentially, Briony is not only

different to *The Crucible's* Williams through the way Williams takes advantage of situations, or with Othello's Iago in that he really does understand people, but also to both through the lack of malice behind her destructiveness. Both of the other antagonists are motivated by jealousy yet the only reasoning Briony has for her accusation is because 'everything fitted'. In McEwan's descriptions of Briony's bedroom; 'a shrine to her controlling demon: the model farm spread across a deep window ledge consisted of the usual animals, but all facing one way - towards their owner - as if about to break into song', ideas of spirituality are conveyed to the readers. This is done through use of 'shrine', 'demon', and the idea of all the animals 'facing... towards their owner', which demonstrates that although Briony doesn't have the omniscience of Iago, or the omnipotence of Williams, she does covet the 'God-like' abilities to manipulate that come through these. 'As if about to break into song' reinforces this idea, given its connotations of hymns and praise. Overall the quote demonstrates that it's Briony's desire for order - her 'controlling demon' - that leads her to mistakenly piece together the information she has about Robbie and accuse him. If Briony's compulsions are what lead to her destructiveness, it's relevant to consider Othello's hamartia - a 'fatal flaw' concept common in renaissance literature which for Othello comes in the form of trust; he is dangerously over-trusting of Iago yet wrongfully suspects Desdemona. Essentially, the quote demonstrates to the reader that it is through his skilled understanding of human nature that Iago is able to orchestrate the sequence of events that lead to the play's tragic conclusion. Oliver Parker (Othello, 1995) noted this in his film adaptation of the piece, with repeated scenes

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throughout the production in which Iago is seen moving pieces around a chess board, illustrative of the way he 'plays' other characters off of one another. The Crucible is a political text, so the prevalence of 'coldness' within the piece is contextually germane. Use of 'cold' generates suggestions of the cold war, the ideological fight between American Capitalism and Russian Communism, and Senator Joseph McCartney. An especially significant example of this implication is given when Abigail comments of Elizabeth; 'She is blackening my name in the village... She is a cold, snivelling woman', (Act 1, Scene 1). Through this, the audience are given not only the link to the cold war through 'cold', but there is also relevance in 'blackening my name'. Aside from evident connotations of racism - 'blackening' having undertones of dirtying, soiling, etc. - there's also a link to 'blacklisting', the process in which someone became ostracised through links to Communism, again representative of McCarthyism. This theory is reinforced when Parris demands of Tituba 'Their names! Their names!', (Act 1, Scene 1), which has strong parallels to 'naming names' - notoriously associated with McCarthyism. Though The Crucible is often seen as a commentary on McCarthyism, it could also be considered a commentary on theocracy. In 17th century, theocratic Salem, the Fundamentalist Christian church and the state are not separate. Consequently, Karren (2007) asserts that Miller's characters 'rely on faith rather than reason'. Certainly, the quote 'the Devil is precise; the marks of his presence are definite as stone', which seems to blur the lines between science and faith, would support this. This emphasis on faith enables Abigail's envy-fuelled accusations of witchcraft, and also allows them to be so destructive; spiritual

belief suffices as 'proof' of the alleged crime. In Bringing's (2014) theatrical performance of *The Crucible*, this emphasis on the piece being a criticism of theocracy and not specifically 1600s Salem was highlighted through the use of modern props and costumes, illustrating that the events of the text could depict the consequences of a theocracy in any time period. Similarly, the influence of Christianity is also demonstrated within *Othello*. When Iago refers to Othello as 'barbary', (Act 1, scene 1, line 113), he indicates to the audience that Othello is from North Africa. As such, a plausible assumption about Othello's religious beliefs would be that he was raised Muslim. Yet, Othello makes Christian references throughout the piece, ('For Christian shame', 'I would not kill thy unprepared spirit', etc.), and this would suggest a conversion to Christianity - probably upon marrying Desdemona, who almost certainly would have been Roman Catholic. However, as Othello's trust and faith in Desdemona's fidelity decreases, so too does his relationship with Christianity. Reflecting on her murder, Othello likens himself to the 'the base Judean, threw away a pearl richer than all his tribe', and Hamlin (2011), offers a reading in which Othello is here comparing himself to Judas within the bible; in the Geneva bible in 1560 it is taught that Judas was 'Judean', a member of the Judah tribe. Consequently, this reading would equate Desdemona, 'a pearl richer than all his tribe', to Jesus - Othello's saviour. By 'throwing her away', he has also thrown away his chance of spiritual redemption and protection. With this reading, it's important to consider that if Desdemona saved Othello, Iago corrupted him. In the same way the devil debauches individuals within the bible, leading them away from God, Iago debauches Othello, leading him away from

Desdemona and consequently, the Christian faith. As Othello gradually loses more and more faith in Desdemona, his trust in Iago increases, effectively finding assurance in the evil that Iago represents. Even at his most basic level, Iago is an immoral character and with “Virtue? A fig! ... bodies are our gardens to which our / wills are gardeners”, (Act 1, scene 3, lines 361-63), Iago demonstrates the low value he places on morals and godliness, (‘Virtue? A Fig!’), and the comparatively high value he places on individual wills, (‘our wills are gardeners’). What’s more, ‘Our wills are gardeners’ has further biblical implications, carrying connotations of the ‘garden of Eden’, and the way that ultimately Adam and Eve’s ‘wills’ caused them to eat the forbidden fruit, ‘A fig!’, betraying God. This elucidation is particularly logical when comparing both the Bible’s assertion that a snake urged this original sin and the serpentine links to Iago throughout the text. Emilia speaks of Othello’s jealousy – incited by Iago – as ‘the serpent’s curse’, (Act 4, Scene 2), Othello likens his hatred of Cassio – also incited by Iago – to ‘aspic’s tongues’, meaning snake venom, (Act 3, Scene 3), and when Iago’s wrongdoings are finally revealed, Lodovico refers to him as a ‘viper’ (Act 5, Scene 2). Essentially, throughout Othello, Shakespeare demonstrates not just the destruction of love through jealousy, but also the destruction of faith. At the beginning of the piece, having married Desdemona and converted to Catholicism, Othello is confident and religiously ‘protected’ – this is even potentially hinted at in the destruction of the almost definitely Muslim Turks on the way to Cyprus – yet as he is demoralised by Iago, losing faith in both Desdemona and God, he becomes a crazed, unstable murderer. Regarding the form of the texts, it’s worth noting that all three texts have

recurring ideas - motifs - designed to be representative of jealousy and the destructive nature of love. Throughout Othello, Shakespeare uses a motif of disease which is reflective of jealousy. An example of this is given in the quote from Iago ' I'll pour this pestilence into his ear' (act 2, scene 3, line 323), regarding his manipulation of Othello. Of course, ' pestilence' has connotations of infection - the most obvious of which indicates the way in which jealousy will ' infect' Othello's thoughts, and gradually spread throughout the rest of his body, influencing his thoughts and actions. The quote also reflects jealousy and its effects through use of plosive alliteration, (' pour', ' pestilence'), which jars and breaks up the sentence, echoing the way in which jealousy ' breaks' Othello. Another motif used by Shakespeare within Othello is that of water. This motif first becomes evident in Shakespeare's choice of settings; it begins in Venice, famous for its waterways. This storm is referenced in one of the continuous speech references to water. In Act two, Othello says, " if after every tempest come such calms/ may the winds blow ' til they have wakened death/and let the labouring bark climb hills of seas/Olympus-high, and duck again as low/ As Hell's from heaven. If it were now to die/'twere now to be most happy", (act 2, scene 1, lines 176-82). Within this quote, Shakespeare uses the idea of ' tempests' and ' calms' as a metaphor for his love for Desdemona; he feels so ' calm' in Desdemona's company following the ' tempest' whilst travelling to Cyprus that he wills ' winds to blow' on himself to further instigate that feeling. This could be considered as foreshadowing - though no literal storms are wrecked on Othello, Iago's actions are as emotionally destructive as a storm would be physically. In this sense, Shakespeare also uses dramatic

irony; we know from Iago and Roderigo's plotting prior to this that Othello's life is going to go downhill from this point. As such he's unknowingly ironic in talking about how this 'tempest' will 'waken death', and how this is the happiest he will ever be. What's more, the structure of the sentence of the quote is also relevant. Because there are no linguistic features that break up or jar the sentence, and the lines each have a similar number of syllables, (ranging from 7-11), the rhythm flows well, to the extent of featuring some use of iambic pentameter - potentially mirroring the rhythmic motion of a wave. Generally, it can be argued that the continued referencing to water - particularly oceanic - creates a comparison in the audiences' minds between love and the ocean. Consequently, through this comparison, Shakespeare demonstrates the potential destruction of love; in the same way that the nature of the ocean is constantly changing - alternating between peaceful and tempestuous - love also goes through periods of both calm and destruction. Additionally, the extended metaphor within the quote also conveys an essence of inevitability regarding this; destruction through love is as natural as the ocean itself. Within *The Crucible*, Miller also uses motifs. As aforementioned, there are repeated references to cold throughout. However, there is also a motif of heat. A primary example of this can be found in the text's title; within science, a crucible is a piece of equipment used in heating chemicals at high temperatures. The significance of this becomes apparent when through the course of the play, Salem itself becomes a crucible - with continually more pressure and 'heat' added to the town as the witch hunt hysteria rises. This finally reaches its 'melting point' with the hanging of Proctor - a respected man. Of course, many characters

also reach their individual 'melting points' when under duress they (falsely) admit to witchcraft. Undeniably, Abigail's accusations - fuelled by her jealousy of Elizabeth Proctor - provide the ignition for this crucible. McEwan also deploys motifs to explore love's destructive nature. The theme of triangles is reinforced throughout the novel, and these triangles often represent destruction; the Tallis' vase 'splits into two triangular pieces', 'Pierrot was missing a triangle of flesh from his left earlobe on account of a dog he had tormented', a soldier described has 'obliquely triangular' injuries, etc. By linking the two ideas - triangles and destruction - McEwan demonstrates the inevitable destruction of 'love triangles'. Nelson (2013) suggests this motif represents 'the triangular relationship among the three main characters in the novel - with Briony present at the top of the triangle', (see figure 1). Nelson then proposes that this exemplifies Briony's controlling nature; from the top she oversees Cecelia and Robbie's relationship and lives. However, another argument is that Briony 'heading' the triangle - whilst Robbie and Cecelia are placed alongside each other - signifies the isolation she receives following her accusation of Robbie. This idea of triangles, trios, etc. is also present in *Atonement's* form, with the novel being split into three sections, demonstrating that love triangles divide individuals in the same way *Atonement* is divided. Retrospectively, it's important to recognise the differing fates of the texts' antagonists/protagonists, giving consideration to their contexts. Illustratively, the influence of heavily religious Elizabethan England on Othello necessitated Iago's 'punishment' for his crimes; the piece concludes with his death and presumed damnation. Contrastingly, the effect of Miller's disenchanting post-war American culture

is demonstrated in Abigail escaping Salem and effectively 'getting away with' her crimes. In *Atonement*, the post-modern movement has had an obvious influence in generating sympathy for Briony, who in an outcome somewhere between *Othello* and *The Crucible*, isn't physically affected, (like Iago), through her accusations, but nonetheless doesn't escape their impact, (like Abigail), instead enduring immense guilt, forcing her to 'atone'.

Conclusively, the texts are on many levels similar in their representation of jealousy and the destructive nature of love. All three texts utilize semiotic motifs, for example. Shakespeare used motifs of disease and water to symbolise the way jealousy spreads and to demonstrate love's 'natural' but potentially dangerous nature. Miller used hot and cold motifs to illustrate characters reaching their 'melting point' through jealous actions, and to generate ideas of theocracies. McEwan used a triangle motif to represent 'love triangles', and linked this with damage to indicate how damaging they can be. Furthermore, two of the texts exploit structure to demonstrate how destructive love can be; *Atonement* is broken into three sections in the same way love can split people, *Othello* features plosive alliteration, separating sentences for the same effect. Additionally, both *Othello* and *The Crucible* refer to religion whilst exploring jealousy and the destructive nature of love. The texts' contrasts emerge through characterisation. In *Othello*, the antagonist, Iago, is demonstrated to deliberately create situations with outcomes to suit his desires; he is proactively malicious, and recognises human nature enough to manipulate emotions such as jealousy, and provoke destruction in love. In *The Crucible*, Williams is a much more adaptable antagonist, manipulating existent situations to suit her best interests, using

threats to grasp at power which she then uses to satisfy her jealous intentions. McEwan's characterisation of Briony is entirely different to both of the latter, and displays her as a more sympathetic protagonist who destroys love not through jealousy, but misjudgement. Succinctly, a comparison of the representation of jealousy and the destructive nature of love within the three texts reveals that in form and structure the texts represent jealousy and destructiveness of love similarly, but in content and characterisation, they differ.