

"... it's open slather on outcasts." (The Dressmaker)

Compare the ways in which Ham and Miller expose the destructive nature of suspicion and gossip within parochial communities.

Contention: Within parochial communities, it is evident that suspicion and gossip will breed destruction.

Where towns are isolated either by choice or natural occurrence, such small towns find themselves parochially inclined, often then greatly affected by the existence of suspicions and gossips. In both Rosalie Ham's novel, The Dressmaker and Arthur Miller's play, The Crucible, both texts reveal the dangers of distrusting behaviours within their communities. Ham and Miller expose through their texts how seeds of doubt can harm and destroy relationships. Moreover, both authors also explore how gossips of one's lifestyle in a conservatively-inclined community can often perpetuate the alienation of its victims, leading then to their persecutions. However, perhaps most critical of all, both authors warn against pervasive suspicion and gossip in such narrow-minded and arrogant communities as these behaviours can lead to societal retribution.

Both Ham and Miller expose how it is the suspicious distrusting of another that can deteriorate and destroy relationships. John and Elizabeth Proctor's tense relationship is reflected in an early interaction where John "kisses her" only for her to "receive it", compelling then "a certain disappointment" in him. Miller amplifies this strained relationship further through his stage directions here, as Elizabeth's "back is turned to him", and "a sense of separation rises". However, it is evident that suspicion will only fuel and aggravate this further as when John reveals that he was "in a room alone" with Abigail, despite only "for a moment", Elizabeth is quick to doubt and "los[e] all faith in him", prompting then an angered John, who declares that even in silence "[he is] doubted" and "every moment judged for lies". Here, unlike perhaps the 21st century readership who may empathise with Elizabeth's plights with an unfaithful husband, Miller instead inclines his audience to sympathise with John's crippling conscience at the mercy of his wife's judgements. Though also presenting the dangerous outcomes of suspicions in relationships, in contrast to Miller, Ham presents a far more dramatic and cathartic destruction. Marigold is introduced whole-heartedly trusting her abusive husband, Evan, as she "open[s] her mouth" while he "spilled her medicine onto her tongue". However, when planted a seed of doubt by Tilly, Marigold's suspicions are grounded, leading then to her climactic confrontation, "slid[ing] the razor-sharp carving knife across his calcanean tendons". Despite how both husbands betray their marriages with lechery and more, Proctor's repentance and guilt redeems him of Elizabeth's suspicions while Evan's indignance intensifies Marigold's. As such, Miller is far more forgiving towards Proctor's "regard [of] himself as a kind of fraud", reconciling the couple by the end of the play. Ham however, seeks justice for Marigold, who exacts destruction on Evan himself, killing him and exposing his deceptions in Dungatar.

Beyond intimate relationships however, as societies narrow-mindedly enforce their conservative values, gossip in town often encircles those who fail to conform, inevitably alienating or even persecuting these individuals. In both texts, Ham and Miller expose how gossip acts as judgement, almost reprimanding those who rebel or challenge the social norms. Known widely in Dungatar as the "loose woman and hag", Ham accentuates how Molly's stained reputation is cause for her alienation from society through the setting, where Molly's home is "on top of The Hill", physically separate from the heart of the town.

Molly's social judgement is further inherited by her daughter Tilly, who is threatened by Stewart - that he would "kill [her] mother the slut". Here, Ham scathingly criticises the supposed harmlessness of "stickybeaking", as gossips perpetuate through generations. The devastating consequence of gossip to alienate but further persecute can also be seen in The Crucible though more implicitly through Miller's brief descriptions of the first accused in the witch trials. Introduced as the owner of the local tavern who supplied "potent cider" to "ne'er-do-wells in Salem", Bridget Bishop is depicted by Miller to challenge the Puritan values of abstinence within the Salem community. Much like how the Dungatar community scorn at Molly's disgraced position of having a child without a husband, Bridget Bishop is recounted by Parris for having "lived three year with Bishop before she married him", as justification for guilt of witchcraft. Through this, Miller exposes the guiding principle in history where "sex, sin and the Devil were early linked", and criticises this social judgement where one's sexual relationship is cause for persecution in times of confusion. Though not hanged, Molly and Tilly are also persecuted, where the people of Dungatar speak "in hateful tones" about them after Teddy's death - a truly "open slather on outcasts". However, the painful permanence of gossip is ultimately solidified in the final comment of the townspeople's gossips. Formatted as a list and ending with "she gets it from her mother", Ham grieves how Tilly is unable to free herself from Molly's scandalous past, much like Bridget who is unable to escape Salem's judgements of assumed pre-marital sex. Still, where Ham is far more sympathetic as she focuses her narrative on Tilly and Molly's victimisation, Miller is less so, where these countercultural figures seem almost justifiably accused. Instead, Miller yields sympathy towards the upstanding members of society.

Even greater then, both authors caution societies against toxic suspicion and gossip in parochial communities which lead to retribution and justice for the victims. Abigail is initially harshly questioned by Parris about the "blush about [her] name" for no families have "called for [her] service" for over seven months. As Elizabeth is rumoured to have called her "something soiled", Miller hints how it is the rumours of Abigail's affair with Proctor spread across town which have led the Salem townspeople to avoid her employment as a servant. Therefore, Miller portrays "the vengeance of a little girl" as she ultimately accuses and implicates Elizabeth of witchcraft. Here, even though Elizabeth assumes that this is so Abigail can "take [her] place" as wife, Miller presents less of this, but rather focuses on how Elizabeth's perhaps justifiable defamation of Abigail leads ultimately to her own downfall as the latter begins to gain power in the community. Sharing the similar outcome of incessant and ruthless suspicion and gossip, Tilly's lifelong suffering in Dungatar ultimately serves as her "catalyst and [her] propeller". Swearing to Molly's casket that pain "will be [their] revenge and [their] reason", Tilly chooses to set Dungatar ablaze as the final retribution of "the sour people of Dungatar". Similar to Abigail's vengeance against Salem, where she manipulates the Puritan values for her benefit and leading to the town's destruction, Tilly's arson serves as a symbolic cleansing of sins committed against her in Dungatar. Further, as the blaze begins from their home on The Hill, once only a "dark blot" away from town, Ham seeks to symbolically condemn the residents of Dungatar for their constant rejection of the Dunnage women, as there is no doubt that Tilly is responsible for their punishment solely because of their mistreatment. Thus, both Miller and Ham are clear in their criticisms of such "parochial snobbery" adopted by their respective towns, leading to their own destruction. However, while Ham uses such destruction to vindicate the victims, Miller instead condemns such vengeance,

rumouring that Abigail "turn[s] up later as a prostitute in Boston", and further, criticises the town's foolish susceptibility to such manipulation.

Therefore, despite suspicion and gossip's seeming harmlessness believed by the perpetrators in insular communities, Ham and Miller both scathingly condemn such perspectives. Even within relationships, both author and playwright caution their readers of the power of doubt to weaken or completely destroy relationships. They further extend their warnings to a societal scale, heeding their readerships against the significant influence petty gossips can have when crises enter a small-minded community. Most of all, Ham and Miller urge their readers and audiences to recognise that should gossips and suspicions persist, victims may very well seek irreparable vengeance and vindictive justice for themselves against society.