

The Unexplained Hysteria in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*

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Abstract

Young women accuse people they dislike of being evil witches. Miller introduces the play with the witch Abigail Williams, whose witchcraft hysteria is due to her carnal lust for Proctor. Abigail's desire to possess Proctor motivates her, driving her to drink blood and cast a spell on Elizabeth. The evil present in Abigail can only be understood in terms of human depravity. What is wrong with Abigail seems to be the mixture of her background and an outburst of the oppressive society that made her cause the witch-hunt. To certain extent, Abigail's actions were driven by love but the puritans disapproved her as she crossed the boundary that women were not supposed to cross. The central thrust of the play revolves round Proctor's attitude and relationship with the two women as well as their socio-moral position in the context of contemporary Puritan community.

Key words: Women, depravity, outburst, hysteria.

Introduction

The American attitude towards law and its trial is revealed in *The Crucible*. It is a triangle that deals with individual, society and judicial corruption. The Puritan New England is paralleled to McCarthy's America of 1952. *The Crucible* is a play about a terrible period of American history of Salem Witchcraft. *The Crucible* chronicles a storm that breaks over Salem. If we consider the developments of Salem Trial of 1692, we come to know that the young people in Salem performed cunning rituals, which slowly became a superstitious tradition. Slowly the game had a strange effect on a few girls between fourteen and nineteen years. In *The Crucible*, young women accuse people they dislike of being evil witches. Miller introduces the play with the witch Abigail Williams, whose witchcraft hysteria is due to her carnal lust for Proctor.

The Crucible was written during Senator Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee hearings for which Miller was called to testify in 1956. *The Crucible* presents all attributes of a naturalist drama. The Puritan New England is paralleled to McCarthy's America of 1952. *The Crucible* is a play about a terrible period of American history of Salem Witchcraft. From Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, Miller adopted *The Crucible*, which shows his respect for Ibsen's technique. "This play is not history in the sense in which the word is used by the academic historian... However, I believe that the readers will discover here the essential nature of one of the strangest and most awful chapters in human history" (*The Crucible* 224).

The American attitude towards law and its trial is revealed in *The Crucible*. It is a triangle that deals with individual, society and judicial corruption. "I had known of the Salem witch-hunt for many years before "McCarthyism" had arrived and it has always remained an inexplicable darkness to me" ("Introduction" 41). One of the themes of *The Crucible* involves the principles of dying with nobility rather than compromising one's moral convictions. John Proctor was the character Miller chose to convey the theme. "If *The Crucible* is not a contemporary political allegory, neither is it an historical narrative. It is a dramatic exploration of the condition of corporate hysteria; its validity is no more dependent upon its complete fidelity to the puritan theocracy than *Julius Caesar* and *Saint Joan* are to their historical antecedents" (Nelson 151).

The Crucible in fact failed as a commercial production but succeeded as a play. The play is more a sort of a novel than a theatre. The play thus generated a lot of criticism because of its obvious allusion of the contemporary situation. Miller became a contentious figure in the political world of America after the publication of *The Crucible*. Miller wrote *The Crucible* to expose the process by which terror was being knowingly planned and consciously engineered. He was not referring to any specific instance or individual such as Senator Joseph McCarthy, considered by many to be the most brutal of the official interrogators. Instead, he was trying to tell people that “the great ‘issues’ which the hysteria was allegedly about in colonial as well as in contemporary America were covers for petty ambitions, hardheaded political drivers, and the fantasies of very small and vengeful minds” (Moss 27).

The Crucible chronicles a storm that breaks over Salem. If we consider the developments of Salem Trial of 1692, we come to know that the young people in Salem performed cunning rituals, which slowly became a superstitious tradition. Slowly the game had a strange effect on a few girls between fourteen and nineteen years. The daughter and niece of the local Minister Samuel Paris were the first who behaved strangely. They showed disrespect to the authorities. Later, three women were accused of apparitions. They were arrested and sent to jail in Boston. The three women were Tituba, a slave woman of South-American Indian origin, Sarah Good, a homeless woman who begged food and Sarah Osborne, who was a quarrelsome woman. Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne denied their involvement but Tituba confessed of being a victim of witch conspiracy.

In *The Crucible*, young women accuse people they dislike of being evil witches. Miller introduces the play with the witch Abigail Williams, whose witchcraft hysteria is due to her carnal lust for Proctor. John Proctor, a respected farmer and husband, has committed adultery with a seventeen-year-old girl. Yet, although he hides this fact from the rest of the community, he still values truth. He knows that the allegations of witchcraft are vengeful lies. Abigail seems to be a biblical character driven by the lust for power and sexual desire. Being an orphan and an unmarried girl, she tries to climb up the puritan social ladder. She was once a maid in Proctor’s house, had an affair with him. Abigail’s conversation with John reveals her past affair with him. “I look for John Proctor that took me from my sleep and put knowledge in my heart! I never knew what pretence Salem was. I never knew the lying lesson I was taught by all these Christian women and their covenanted men. And now you bid me tear the light out of my eyes? I will not I cannot! You love me, John Proctor and whatever sin it is, you love me yet! John, pity me, pity me” (241).

It was Elizabeth, who fires her after discovering the affair. Abigail begs John to come back to her. Her jealousy towards Elizabeth prompts her to do such evil so that in the process, she would get back John and dispose Elizabeth. Abigail’s fierce distrust, hatred and disgust of the entire town are exposed. “I never knew what pretence Salem was; I never knew the lying lesson...” (241). Abigail thus hates Salem and makes Salem pay in the course of *The Crucible*. Abigail realizes that the Puritanical society will never permit Proctor to leave his wife for her, and that he does not want to leave his wife anyway. The only way that Abigail can legitimately obtain Proctor within the bounds of society is for Elizabeth to die, giving Proctor the opportunity to marry again. Thus, from the very beginning, Abigail’s desire to possess Proctor motivates her, driving her to drink blood and cast a spell on Elizabeth.

John Proctor’s affair with his beautiful teen-age servant is the source of his undoing. Sexuality is dangerous, an alienating trap and the male protagonist, “John Proctor makes his desperate decision, trapped between a wife and a whore. Elizabeth maintaining a magisterial distance from her husband’s guilt and Abigail leading the girls into the woods and then the court to fan the spark of suspicion into a raging fire of accusation” (Mason 109-110). John Proctor’s adultery with Abigail is the cause of

estrangement between him and his wife Elizabeth. The barrier between them is never fully removed despite Proctor's attempt to please his wife in various ways. Both Elizabeth and Proctor do not feel free to communicate with each other. His wife's suspicion makes him guilty and alienated. "Abigail, the girl who gives the witch hunt its strongest momentum, is even more damagingly misconceived. More than any other character, Abigail reflects the sexual element in the hysteria that overtakes Salem. Abigail is the spurned lover of Proctor, with whom she had an affair while working as a servant in his house. And there is frustrated lust in her condemnation of her fellow townspeople that turns self-serving duplicity into self-deluding mania" (*Theater Review* 8.3.2002). Abigail develops an intense feeling of lust for Proctor. "I have a sense for heat, John, and yours has drawn me to my window, and I have seen you looking up, burning in your loneliness. Do you tell me you've never looked up at my window... You are no wintry man. I know you John, I know you (She is weeping) I cannot sleep for dreamin'; I cannot dream but I wake and walk about the house as though I'd find you comin' through some door. (240)

William Hawkins called Abigail "an evil child," (30) Leonard Moss called her "a malicious figure" (60) and "unstable," (63) Schleuter and Flanagan proclaimed her as "a whore" echoing Proctor's "How do you call Heaven! Whore! Whore!" (304) "This character can be interpreted in many ways. Some actresses have played her as a childish brat, while others have portrayed her as a sinister harlot. The actress who takes on this role should decide, how does Abigail truly feel about John Proctor? Was her innocence stolen from her? Is she a victim? Or a sociopath? Does she love him in some twisted way? Or has she been using him all along?" (Bradford, *Theater Review* 8.3.2002) At the end of Act III, Abigail fights public condemnation of her as a whore and stages a new illness of demonic possession. "Abby knows that her prophetic fit is self-induced, that the witchcraft she denounces is non-existent; but once the fit is on her, she can produce a convincing performance and induce the same kind of hysteria in children. Her real diabolism is her misuse of the sacrosanct office of witness, to gain her own ends" (Porter 188). Abigail's unacceptable description of Elizabeth as "a bitter woman, a lying, cold, sniveling woman" (232) is perhaps the demanding side of John.

Abigail is determined to secure the condemnation and hanging of Elizabeth by inflaming the superstitious alarm of the Massachusetts judges. In the last act, Elizabeth pardons Proctor's sins of adultery, giving him back the name he lost in court. Proctor at the end sacrifices his life for Elizabeth. The most important aspect of the play is the relationship between John and Elizabeth. Suffering has led to a deeper understanding between husband and wife. Elizabeth "who has been a cold and frigid woman, when faced with supreme sacrifice discards her puritan inheritance and kisses him passionately and freely, finding freedom in unexpressed emotional fullness" (Lewis 48).

There seems to be a great contrast between Abigail and Elizabeth as individuals. Both are determined. Abigail feels herself superior to other beings as a young girl. On the other hand, Elizabeth, despite Abigail's accusation of her witchcraft, has courage throughout the play. Both the women claim John as their rightful spouse. While Elizabeth says, "I will be your only wife or no wife at all", Abigail on the other hand says, "I will make you such a wife when the world is white again!" (271). Nelson views both the women as product of the "constricting atmosphere of Salem"- the former a "Zealous adherent to the Puritan ideal of duty" and later "a rebellious abuser of this code" (Nelson 160).

Elizabeth is aware that her coldness is responsible for Proctor's commitment of adultery. Elizabeth is highly virtuous outside, but cold inside. Abigail blames Elizabeth, "She is blackening my name in the village! She is telling lies about me! She is a cold, sniveling woman" (241). Abigail accuses her until she is finally charged of witchcraft. "Oh, the noose, the noose is up...she wants me dead...She will cry me out until they take me! ...She wants me dead" (269). Further, she says, "She thinks to take my place John" (270). When John and Elizabeth are asked by Hale if they knew the Ten

Commandments, Proctor forgets one and Elizabeth reminds him that adultery is the one he forgot. Thus, John Proctor's affair with Abigail shows that even the most honored man has flaws.

Abigail certainly believes that she will get back her love. Proctor turns to Abigail, and confesses that he has hardly any love for her. "Abby, I may think of you softly from time to time. But I will cut off my hand before I'll ever reach for you again. Wipe it out of mind. We never touched. Abby"(241). This shows John is truly ashamed of his deeds. Elizabeth's capacity for compassion grows in the course of the play. Far from being contemptuous, she persuades Proctor to forgive her for being cold and to forgive himself for whatever sin he committed.

After months in jail, Elizabeth Proctor was called into the courtroom to answer a series of questions that could determine the fate of her husband, herself, and Abigail Williams. Elizabeth Proctor was asked to accuse her husband of lechery. The hesitation in Elizabeth's response to this question was not a surprise. She was fighting a battle inside of herself that only she knew the depth of. It was up to her to make a decision that she knew would change her life and the lives of others. To the question of lechery put before her, Elizabeth Proctor chose to answer "no." Elizabeth answered "no" for a number of reasons. The biggest was the respect she had for her husband. She wanted John to reveal his sin on his own. She felt it was not her responsibility to reveal the wrong in his life. Elizabeth also believed that she was part of the reason John chose to have an affair with Abigail. Before John was to sign his confession, Elizabeth asked him to forgive her for being a cold wife. Elizabeth truly believed she was the reason behind John's affair with Abigail. This proves that Elizabeth really did love John although there were times when it wasn't evident in her words and actions. She respected and trusted him to such an extent that she allowed him to decide when he would let the community know of his sin. "John Proctor himself at first accepts moral guilt for his adultery, then angrily challenges the court at his wife's arrest, insincerely confesses to save himself, and finally tears up his confession to retain his "goodness." Miller invests the play with the theatrical energy of the reversals of melodrama without succumbing to the form's simplistic morality. This is a classic play which does not demand ingenious directorial intervention to command contemporary interest" (Rabkin, *The New York Times*. 13.3.2002).

Although the events of the play are based on the events that took place in Salem, Massachusetts, Miller was liberal in his fictionalization of those events. Abigail in real life was eleven at the time of accusation and Proctor was over sixty, which makes it most unlikely that there was ever any such relationship. Elizabeth was Proctor's third wife and stepmother to their children. Miller omitted this historical fact. Miller also raises the age of Abigail from 11 to 17 and lowers the age of Mary Warren from 20 to 17. Tituba's husband is not mentioned in the play. In the real trials, 19 women were hung as well as John Proctor. *The Crucible* ends with Proctor and Rebecca Nurse being led to the gallows. Thus, we may call *The Crucible* a "self contained play."

Abigail only after being rejected by John turns her love and lust into hate and revenge. John feels no obligation towards Abigail. The evil present in Abigail can only be understood in terms of human depravity. Miller describes Abigail in the play as "Abigail Williams, seventeen...a strikingly beautiful girl, an orphan with an endless capacity of dissembling" (230). Abigail is shown as totally wicked and disgusting. It is she who seduces Proctor and accuses his wife of witchcraft. She tells Proctor "Put knowledge in my heart" but John continues to protect her love to Abigail. Her depravity leads her to become a prostitute of Salem. Miller, in order to show the main issue of the play, gives close attention to Proctor, totally losing his sight on Abigail, as a participant in a human relationship. What is wrong with Abigail seems to be the mixture of her background and an outburst of the oppressive society that made her cause the witch-hunt. Miller makes us believe that Abigail is insane, as Proctor does, when she shows her self-inflicted injuries. "I'm holes all over from the damned needles and pins" (230). While Miller may have intended the madness to be a metaphor for the inherent evil, sociologists

suggest that “madness replaced witchcraft as a pathology to be treated not by burning or hanging but by physicians” (Conrad and Scheider 43).

It is evident throughout the play that displays of affection are not very common in the Proctor household. It is common that it is not until something drastic happens that those who love each other find out how much they really mean to each other. This is what happened in the Proctor's situation. John and Elizabeth did not realize what they meant to each other until they were thrown into jail and John was on the verge of losing his life. John and Elizabeth Proctor realize their love for each other at the end of the play. Although they both realize they will not be able to share it, they are overjoyed with this new discovery. Elizabeth realizes that John loves her and John realizes that Elizabeth loves him and that he does indeed have her forgiveness. This gives him the push he needs to make the right decision.

Conclusion

Elizabeth and Abigail are two extreme characters for which the Puritan society has no place. Both the characters are opposite to each other. While Elizabeth represents the virtuous puritan woman, Abigail represents the evil and the corruption of the society. These two females have drastic roles in the play: good versus evil. Ironically, the witches seem to be the good people, while the accusers are bad. To certain extent, Abigail's actions were driven by love but the puritans disapproved her as she crossed the boundary that women were not supposed to cross. Miller had John choose Elizabeth, instead of Abigail, to make John an admirable puritan role model because Elizabeth symbolizes goodness in society quite contrasted to Abigail who represents the corruption of women. In *The Crucible*, the two women play crucial roles, for the central thrust of the play revolves round Proctor's attitude and relationship with the two women as well as their socio-moral position in the context of contemporary Puritan community.

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