
Beware the Loss of Conscience: *The Crucible* as Warning for Today

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From Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* students and teachers have studied the Salem witch trials as allegory for the Congressional hearings of the McCarthy era. But it is time for teachers to reexamine Miller's play within the context of the witch hunts rampant in current society. These witch hunts are spearheaded by the New Right, and their success is influencing textbook selections, curricular decisions, and the foundations of education itself.

During witch hunts in *The Crucible* Rebecca Nurse states, "There is prodigious danger in the seeking of loose spirits. I fear it. I fear it." As Rebecca Nurse fears the seeking of loose spirits, Miller fears man's loss of self—a self which is lost in conscience's conflict between justice and evil. Mass conscience which leads to mass hysteria creates a society of public terror, and Miller finds that the "sin of public terror is that it divests man of conscience, of himself" (*Plays* 41). In *The Crucible*, Miller sets out to present his audience with the truth they know, yet fail or refuse to recognize. While it is generally acknowledged that the political developments of the 1950s which culminated in the hearings of the House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities provide his audience's "truth," the play moves beyond the moment of its creation to speak to us about conflicts between justice and evil in our decade and about the ever-present dangers of coercion and mass hysteria.

When asked to incriminate other writers who attended a set of Marxist meetings, Miller said,

... I am not protecting the Communists or the Communist Party. I am trying to and I will protect my sense of self. I could not use the name of

another person and bring trouble on him. (United States 4684)

Unlike the young girls in his play who accuse respected members of the Salem community of being witches, Miller himself constantly refused to accuse his fellow writers. But his encounter with the congressional prosecutors influenced Miller's perception of the truth evident in American society, a truth he chose to portray by returning to the New England town of Salem, a town beset by mass hysteria. While he is able to "protect his sense of self," he is aware that people in groups often give way to mass hysteria and thus lose their individual consciences. The girls of Salem accused the nonconformists of witchcraft; the congressional committee accused the nonconformists of communistic activities. Miller's linking the McCarthy investigations and the Salem witch trials is obvious; it is intentional. But his plan for *The Crucible* contains more than this connection.

Salem as Symbol and Warning

It was not only the rise of "McCarthyism" that moved me [to write *The Crucible*], but something which seemed much more weird and mysterious. It was the fact that a political, objective, knowledgeable campaign from the far Right was capable of creating not only a terror, but a new subjective reality, a veritable mystique which was gradually assuming even a holy resonance. The wonder of it all struck me that so practical and picayune a cause, carried forward by such manifestly ridiculous men, should be capable of paralyzing thought itself. . . . (*Plays* 39)

The play presents a collection of "manifestly ridiculous men." These men and the girls they

manipulate do, of course, reflect upon not only the society of the United States in the middle of the twentieth century but upon all groups of people in which many are led to destruction by a few.

Miller's characters and their actions serve as a warning to his play's audience. Danforth refuses to admit his own error. He says, "While I speak God's law, I will not crack its voice with whimpering." If a group of young girls coached by a mistakenly respected adult could manipulate the entire town of Salem, Miller seems to say, then what is to stop similar manipulations in other locales in the present time? He wants us to fear

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the power of the group. He wants us to fear coercion. He wants us to question the "bandwagon effect" in society. As the girls are coached by a respected leader, so, too, were many of the people who testified before the congressional committee coached by the zeal of Senator McCarthy and his followers. So, too, are other groups today open to coercion. These groups need to be as distrustful of would-be leaders as Proctor is of Abigail's promise that "from yourself I will save you."

The Crucible's Warning for America

The Crucible's message reaches beyond Salem, beyond the congressional chambers of the McCarthy hearings. Currently various respectable leaders are acting like "manifestly ridiculous men." These leaders come from the far Right of the political spectrum; they are aligned with elements of the fundamentalist movement of Christianity. Their influence on schooling, and textbook selection in particular, is coming very close to creating mass hysteria.

The Reverend Tim LaHaye and others blame the world's evils on secular humanism. They define secular humanism as a belief in man before God, a belief which is not professed by those people who call themselves secular humanists. But it does not matter what humanists believe. What is important from the new Right's standpoint is how well narrow fundamentalists can manipulate society by blaming the humanists for the ills of society. Among these ills are those suffered by students in America's public schools.

LaHaye says in *The Battle for the Public Schools* that "our public schools have become conduits to the minds of youth, training them to be anti-God, anti-moral, anti-family, anti-free enterprise, and anti-American" (9). These accusations are similar to those voiced in *The Crucible*: livestock die because of witchcraft, family members turn against each other because of witchcraft, servants defy masters because of witchcraft. For every ill in Salem, witchcraft is the scapegoat. For every ill in today's society, secular humanism is the scapegoat. Just as Thomas Putnam uses the witchcraft hysteria to claim land, these fundamentalists are using the hysteria over secular humanism to control the curricula and the textbooks of today's public schools.

In March of 1987 a group of parents in Mobile, Alabama, succeeded in controlling the curriculum of their children's schools when they had forty-four textbooks removed from the schools because the books purportedly promote secular humanism. The case, *Douglas T. Smith et al. v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County et al.*, has opened teachers and curricula throughout the country to attacks from the Right. One parent testified that his children were faced with conflicts between their family's value system and the school's system; this dichotomy exists because the family's values are based on Christianity while the school's are based, according to the parent, on secular humanism. Judge Brevard Hand agreed with the plaintiffs' contention that the exclusion of religion—what they claim to be secular humanism—is itself a religion and as such must be removed from the schools because of the Constitution's religion clauses. He found that

For purposes of the First Amendment, secular humanism is a religious belief system, entitled to the protections of, and subject to the prohibitions of, the religious clauses.

Judge Hand goes on to state that the omission of Judeo-Christian religion and inclusion of secular humanism in the history books in question deny religious freedom as granted by the Constitution. This case has increased concern among educators that their books and curricula will be challenged. Such attacks have been on the increase across the country in recent years. In October 1986 in *Bob Mozert et al. v. Hawkins County Public Schools et al.*, a district court in Tennessee found that parents can replace the school's mandated

reading instruction with home schooling for their children whose religious beliefs are not addressed or are challenged by the schools' mandated textbooks. Educators must be aware that decisions such as *Mozert* and *Smith* do not apply to every school and every textbook but only to the particular schools and texts included in the cases. For a teacher to allow such decisions, both of which may be overturned on appeal, to control all school programs is for that teacher, in Miller's words, to "passively sit back and watch his world being destroyed under him" (Brandon 66).

Taken in this sense, *The Crucible* can be seen as a politically current play because it, like recent events, makes us question the sources of power controlling us. When certain narrow fundamentalists are successful in controlling the schools, they remove the rights of the individuals involved in schooling. The students and teachers, the administrators and public, are then in the position of Miller's character John Proctor. We are faced with what Miller sees as "the question of whether conscience is in fact an organic part of the human being, and what happens when it is handed over . . ." ("Brewed in *The Crucible*" 3). When we lose ownership of our conscience, we are no longer complete. We are but a member of a mob ready to follow whichever leader shouts the loudest and pushes the hardest.

Currently, some fundamentalist leaders are the shouters and the pushers. They throw accusations as quickly and as vehemently as Abigail. Why does Abigail accuse the local women of witchcraft? It is because she herself fears being accused of witchcraft, and rather than be accused she chooses to accuse others. She feels guilt because her friends saw her drink blood as a "charm to kill John Proctor's wife." She is not sorry she drank the charm, but she is sorry she was caught drinking it. Abigail controls the other girls; she forces them to promise not to tell her secret, and she coerces them into joining her in accusing the innocent people of Salem. Similarly, some of those who shout out accusations against the secular humanists are reacting to events in their world they wish to control. Similar reactions were displayed by Senator McCarthy and his adherents. Miller warns his audience to beware of such reactions. He warns us to hold onto our

individuality and not to let our guilt or the guilt of someone else force us to lose our consciences. Several years after the first production of *The Crucible*, Miller continues to warn that guilt is connected with injustice: "I cannot conceive of guilt as having an existence without the existence of injustice" ("Our Guilt . . ." 11).

Miller himself had to speak out against injustice during the congressional hearings. At that time he realized that the greatest horror of all was "the notion that conscience was no longer a private matter but one of state administration" (*Plays* 40). To combat this horror, he wrote *The Crucible* so that all audience members could be aware of and, therefore, take action against the loss of conscience he saw all around him. Unfortunately for American society, his warning has gone unheeded. He warns us again about injustice in his play *Incident at Vichy* which deals with "what is dark if not unknown . . . the relationship between those who side with justice and their implication in the evils they oppose" ("Our Guilt . . ." 10). When we are continually faced with the reactions of these fundamentalists, when we are constantly threatened with a loss of conscience, when we see the injustice advocated by one vocal, manipulative group of "manifestly ridiculous men," we must realize it is time to heed Miller's warning.

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