
Ambiguous Political Agendas: Historical Figures in Miller and Atwood

Political agendas remain dubious and uncertain, but control is the eventual aim, almost by definition, of political activity. *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller and Margaret Atwood's free-verse poem "Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing" expose innate connection between ambiguous motives and control. Both texts illustrate that an individual's political motivations may be invisible to themselves or to greater society, but control is needed in order to manipulate or survive under oppressive political and social structures.

As demonstrated in *The Crucible*, obscuring one's political motivations from society is an essential method to gaining control and power. By hiding her real agenda and pretending to do God's work, Abigail is able to control the theocracy of Salem. Betty reveals Abigail's true agenda to the audience - "You drank a charm to kill John Proctor's wife!" However, the stage direction of "smashes her across the face" allows her to hide her motivations through threats, violence and fear. She presents a fabricated agenda for the theocracy, claiming "I want to open myself! I want the love of God, I want the sweet love of Jesus." The anaphora juxtaposes her violent and terrifying manipulation of the rest of the girls - she accepts the court's agenda in order to further her own. This is dramatic irony, which alters the audience's perception of Abigail - an ambiguous bully. She also represents the politicians of Miller's context, such as Senator McCarthy, who used threats to create a political climate of fear, allowing them to gain control over society. Ultimately, Abigail's power allows her to divert any accusation against her, evident in the stage direction "stepping up to Danforth" displaying that she now controls the theocracy and can challenge their power. This also creates a status shift - Abigail has been suppressed due to her age and gender, but now she has control. Ultimately, Abigail is able to manipulate the system through the ambiguity of her undisclosed motivations. Therefore, hiding one's political agendas and motives from society is an instrument used to gain control.

Furthermore, one's political agendas may change over time as the detrimental impacts of control are felt in a society, exposing the end goal of the abolishment of control. Hale is represented as an "eager-eyed intellectual", whose original motivation was to uphold the control of the theocracy. Ironically, he holds the most control in the first act, evident in the personification of his books - "they are weighted with authority." The books symbolise his agenda of maintaining the power of the theocracy. However, his faith in control and the theocracy diminishes. Hale's changing political motivations is apparent through the stages direction of "his misgivings are clear". This exposes his doubt in his previous agenda, actions and his faith in the Church itself. After Hale denounces the court's proceedings, the stage

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directions indicate “he slams the door to the outside behind him”, which symbolises the corruption of the court’s control over society. Hale had previously been represented as logos, revealing that reason and logic has been removed from the court and that Hale is now aware of his change in political motivation. The quote “what I touched with my bright confidence, it died,” reveals how the corruption of the Church’s control corrupted Hale’s original agenda. The word choice of died emphasises Hale’s loss of faith and his changed, ambiguous political agenda. Furthermore, he claims he “sought a Christian way, for damnation’s doubled on a minister who counsels men to lie.” The religious allusion denotes that Hale reconciled his political agendas to undermining the control that the theocracy has over society, contrasting his blind idealism at the opening of the play. Therefore, the adverse impacts of control forces one to alter and change their political motivations in order to challenge the status quo.

Dissimilarly, “Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing” argues that when one is unsure of their own ambiguous political motivations, the quest for control becomes considerably more difficult. Traditionally in literature and fiction, Helen of Troy has resembled the damsel in distress trope, and represented in such a way that positions her as voiceless and powerless, whose beauty was the catalyst for the Trojan war. However, Atwood chooses to represent Helen of Troy multi-dimensionally - she feels empowered yet confused, exploited and fearsome. She is motivated both by her objectification and autonomy, whilst being controlling and controlled by men. At first glance, Helen of Troy feels emancipated through her job as an exotic dancer - “Selling gloves, or something. / Instead of what I do sell’. The caesura underscores her initial empowerment and that she finds her job much more rewarding than a typical day job, motivating her to continue her work. It also suggest that her main goal is control through economic security. Helen resembles Abigail - both women manipulate the social systems that exploit them for their own control. However, she becomes disillusioned, stating “Exploited, they’d say. Yes, any way / you cut it, but I’ve a choice / of how, and I’ll take the money.” The internal rhyme conveys a tone of reluctance, transforming the audience’s perception of her motivations from genuine enjoyment and interest to despondent survival and the need for an income. The statement, “...it’s the smiling / that tires me out the most,” highlights that her pretence of an agenda weakens her quest for control. Through this quote, Atwood, as a prolific feminist writer, challenges traditional notions of resisting the ‘male gaze’ in society and its impacts on women in society.

Helen’s ambiguous agenda results in a subsequent battle for control between herself and the patriarchy. On one hand, she can manipulate men through her appearance and their desire - “Like preachers, I sell vision / like perfume ads, desire / or its facsimile.” Religious allusion is employed to highlight that her control of men is all-encompassing and obsessive, much like religion that dominates society, as in “The Crucible”. The word choice of facsimile, meaning copy or replica, denotes that Helen is controlling men through a falsified illusion of herself in which she keeps her political motivations secretive and ambiguous. However, the contrast

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between desire and facsimile suggests that Helen is faking her happiness and political motivations, to protect herself and heighten her control. The extended sale metaphor also highlights that even Helen objectifies herself, treating her body as a luxury commodity and revealing that she has no control under a male-dominated society. This multi-faceted representation of the 'male gaze' challenges audiences to question if women asserting control through femininity is empowering, or a result of sexist, social indoctrination under the patriarchy. Her dancing allows her to feel in control - "I understand floods and earthquakes, and the urge / to step on ants." The nature metaphors convey her natural power as a woman, elucidating her dominance and supremacy. However, the quote "Reduce me to components / as in a clock factory or abattoir" contrasts this, conveying a tone of anger, revealing the duality of Helen's political motivations, the smile contrasting her previous attitudes. Ultimately, her confusion due to her various agendas undermines her attempts at seizing control and power. Thus, the ambiguity of political motivations renders gaining control increasingly difficult under oppressive social structures.

Despite the ambiguous political motivations, control is the universal, eventual aim. *The Crucible* and "Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing" demonstrate that seeking control allows people to hide, manipulate, or change their agendas over time. Motivations may not be evident to society or the individual but, ultimately, control is needed under oppressive social structures.

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