
Breaking Down the Value of 'Subtext' in the Crucible by A. Miller and Much Ado About Nothing by W. Shakespeare

Subtext is the underlying idea or meaning, conveyed by a playwright without being explicitly stated in order to achieve a more thorough understanding of the themes of the play and the characters' motivations. In Arthur Miller's dramatic play *The Crucible* and William Shakespeare's comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*, subtext aids the audience in understanding the characters' motifs and the social quo of the fictionalized Puritan society and the idyllic setting of the Italian port Messina in the 16th century respectively. Despite both Miller and Shakespeare being explicit about their characters' motivation in their dialogues, the consideration of underlying meaning is of dramatic importance, as it helps the audience enjoy a profound understanding of the plays.

In *The Crucible*, the characters are not always explicit about their true motivations in their dialogue, as at times the perceived surface motivation goes against their genuine incentive. Miller's utilization of subtext is important in understanding the interlocked relationships between the characters, generating the impetus in the play. The subtext is specifically relevant during the witch trial episodes, as it conveys the underlying problems within the Puritan Salem community, also employed by Miller to criticize the process of trials and accusations during the 1950s Red Scare trials in the United States and McCarthyism.

The character of Judge Danforth, is portrayed as following the court's procedure and imposing God's commandments upon the Puritans. He appears to believe in the righteousness of the court, declaring that "no uncorrupted man may fear this court" (Act 3). "Uncorrupted" denotes honest and innocent; explicitly, Danforth suggests that the court is functioning under God's conduct and only those who are guilty should fear. However, there is verbal irony present in Danforth's statement, since through subtext it can be inferred that Miller suggests that according to Danforth, any person who questions the court's verdict or accuses the judge of false conviction is possessed by the devil. Furthermore, Danforth is trying to appear credible and through making such an assertion he establishes his absolute authority as a judge and attempts to preserve his reputation. Thus, the explicit meaning and the subtext are ironically contrasting; the implicit meaning foreshadows the unwarranted outcome of the trials, as by the end of the court's session 19 innocent individuals, including Giles and Martha Corey, Rebecca Nurse and John Proctor, were accused of witchcraft and sentenced to death. Danforth was selective in believing Abigail Williams and her followers' testimony, which came with a corrupted motif of vengeance towards John Proctor for not continuing his affair with her and towards Elizabeth Proctor who was supposedly in the way of their relationship, while ignoring warnings from Proctor about her motifs. He also ignored warnings about Thomas Putnam's greed for land. Danforth's

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moral corruption is also evident through subtext when he states that he “cannot pardon these when twelve are already hanged for the same crime” (Act 4) after Reverend Hale asks him to pardon the convicted, including John Proctor and Rebecca Nurse, who are about to be hanged, knowing that they are innocent. Explicitly, Danforth is stating that it cannot be just to pardon people for a crime that others have been punished for. However, sub-textually, he is most likely less concerned with justice than with his own safety and reputation. Ironically, he is suspected his own guiltiness in putting innocent people to death. Therefore, Miller’s subtext conveys that the “uncorrupted” men may fear the court and that reputation takes a priority above justice in the judge’s motivation.

Though Shakespeare is typically explicit in his characters’ dialogue, acting on the lines to make his production more entertaining, language as subtext is a driving force in his comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*. The playwright stresses the importance of taking subtext into an account in the title of his play. In Shakespearean times, “nothing” was often pronounced as noting, meaning to take notice of. Misinterpretation, which becomes revealed through the comprehension of subtext, works as an impetus in the play, as eavesdropping, mishearing and misreports are common, and at times intentional, throughout the course of the play.

Subtext having the dramatic importance of being a driving force in *Much Ado About Nothing* is especially evident upon viewing the relationship between Benedick and Beatrice. The two engage in a battle of wits through their use of puns, jokes and sarcasm. Both characters are adamant; even though through their dialogue one can imply that the two cannot coexist and each one of them is destined to be alone in life, implicitly Shakespeare suggests that they are destined to be together. In their first dialogue, Benedick and Beatrice’s insulting language, ironically, foreshadows their love. The animal imagery employed by both furthers their eventual romance through suggesting the wildness of their love. Beatrice says that she would “rather hear [her] dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves [her]” (Act 1, Scene 1). Her preference of hearing barking over words of love is a hyperbole, through which the playwright emphasizes her negative opinion about love and marriage at this point in the play. Benedick retaliates Beatrice’s insults and her derogatory view on love by calling her a “parrot teacher” (Act 1, Scene 1), thus metaphorically implying that she is pointlessly chattering to the extent where she could be teaching a parrot, a bird known for blathering pointless words. Though Benedick and Beatrice are initially ceaselessly insulting each other, their ability to maintain such clever and interconnected dialogue illustrates the existence of a strong bond between them. The subtext creates the connection between them, foreshadowing their love, while ironically, explicitly it is evident that they cannot coexist due to constantly attempting to insult and discredit one another.

The subtext in Shakespeare’s comedy displays the dramatic characteristics of tragedy in it, addressing the concept of death, while treating it in a facetious manner. The subtext also aids in understanding the Shakespearean society’s gender expectation, as when Claudio publically

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shames Hero at the altar, falsely believing she has already lost her purity because of Don John's manipulations, her father Leonato asserts that "death is the fairest cover for her shame" (Act 4, Scene 1). Dramatic irony is present in the scene, as the audience is aware that Don John made Borachio woo lady Margaret, while Claudio believed that she was Hero. Leonato suggests that Hero dying would be the best way to cover up her perceived shame, as it is better for her to die than to live after being shamed and after having supposedly committed disloyalty. This kind of conflict and the morbid events in this scene are not commonplace in a comedy.

In conclusion, subtext plays an important role in drama by helping the audience have a more thorough understanding of the themes and the characters' motivations, which each playwright conveys in his own manner. Both Miller and Shakespeare use subtext to depict their characters' personalities and generate an extensive understanding of the genre and of the setting for each of their respective plays.

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