
The Idea of Conscience in "The Crucible" by Arthur Miller

In Arthur Miller's powerful stage play *The Crucible*, written in 1953 as a metaphor for the McCarthy hearings on communism in America, the idea of conscience is greatly emphasized in many of the main characters. Miller himself once said that *The Crucible* focuses on "the conflict between man's raw deeds and whether conscience is in fact an organic part of the human being or merely an adjunct of the state or mores of the time" (Bloom 146).

In this play, conscience appears to be based on Christian concepts, especially the ideas of morality, the confession of one's sins and the guilt and penance for these sins. At the beginning of the play, conscience, as an issue of morality, is defined very clearly, for Reverend Parris, "gullible, uncaring, and villainous who cares more about his reputation than truth" (Paton 67), states "a minister is the Lord's man in the parish. . . not to be so lightly crossed and contradicted" (Act 1, Scene 1). Thus, this establishes that theologically, a minister is the ultimate decider of morality in the parish of Salem, Massachusetts, where all of the action of *The Crucible* takes place. The church, in such a theocratic community, defines conscience; right and wrong is decided by this authority in conjunction with specific religious doctrines.

As a supportive note, Michelle Pearson tells us that "For higher purposes, the people of Salem developed a theocracy, a combination of state and religious power whose function was to keep the community together and prevent any kind of disunity. . . grounded on the idea of exclusion and prohibition" (184), which evidently shows that the time came during the Salem witch trials when the repression of order was heavier than seemed warranted by the dangers against which the order was organized.

With Salem being a place where the conscience of the people was strictly governed by this theocracy, the social atmosphere of the parish was truly repressive. But at the start of *The Crucible*, it is obvious that the people had already begun to feel the strains of this repression. Abigail Williams, a very beautiful, orphaned girl who lives with her uncle, the Reverend Parris, says to John Proctor, a farmer who serves as "a prime example of a sinner who is able to accept and confess of his sins in order to do good" (Pearson 192), "I never knew what pretense Salem was, I never knew the lying lessons I was taught by all these Christian women" (Act 1, Scene 2). Like so many others in Salem, Abigail is quite aware of the hypocrisy arising from the strict repression of theocracy, and has begun to rebel against it. When the girls dance naked in the woods and cast spells, an act strictly forbidden by theocratic law, Abigail immediately uses this as a means to "work herself around the conscience of the church and all its restrictions and establish her own idea of what is right and what is wrong" (Decter 204). But Abigail is not the only character in *The Crucible* that is guilty of using the witch hunt as a means to foster

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individual interests, for Putnam uses the trials as a way to obtain land, thus manipulating the usual restrictive mores of Salem to create his own conception of conscience.

With all this, a new conscience has evolved in *The Crucible*, stemming from the trials in which "the societal balance was turned towards greater individual freedom" (Paton 146). Ideally, the community of Salem has turned from a strict, repressive conscience to one where personal gain and "common vengeance writes the laws" (Bloom 170). The church has lost its mighty power and as Mr. Hale so eloquently points out "The crazy children" are now "jangling the keys of the kingdom."

As Arthur Miller declares, the character of John Proctor was greatly reassuring, for as a sinner "he might overturn his paralyzing personal guilt and become the most forthright voice against the madness around him" and demonstrate that "a clear moral outcry could still spring even from an ambiguously unblemished soul" (160). This "personal guilt" is associated with Proctor's affair with Abigail Williams which greatly affects his own conscience, for he is "a sinner, not only against the moral fashion but also his own inner vision of decent conduct" (Decter 168) as manifested in the theology of Salem. Proctor's conscience troubles him throughout the play and rises in his relationships with other characters, for he conceives of himself as a sinner, due to his deeds associated with his adultery.

But the courts in Salem are intent on ridding the parish of evil by inflicting its morality upon the citizens. As Judge Danforth exclaims, "No uncorrupted man may fear this court" (Act 3, Scene 2), which emphasizes the fact that the court is the epitome of morality in Salem. And it is here that the question of whether conscience is organic to the human being as posed by Miller comes to the forefront, for the courts exist, in part, to provide conscience and morality, based on the assumption that conscience is not part of man but ordained by God and that the laws of the church are required to provide this conscience in order to distinguish between good and evil for the mindless human being.

Therefore, the courts require that all those accused and found guilty of practicing witchcraft must confess or be hung at the gallows. With this, conscience has been handed over to the state which takes the place of God and decides on matters of right and wrong. As an act of compliance, confession establishes the courts and those who maintain them as the ultimate symbols of authority and power on earth. As a result, when conscience is handed over to the state, repression occurs and sometimes leads to personal and societal tragedies.

The Salem witch trials, as conceived by Paton, thus became "an opportunity for everyone to publicly express their guilt or sins under the cover of accusations against the victims" (256). In support of this, Arthur Miller states "the people of Salem had no ritual for the washing away of sin" (162); confession, then, in the case of the courts, serves the purpose of doing away with

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guilt while under the umbrella of hypocrisy. John Proctor, the "point of moral reference against which all the action in *The Crucible* is gauged" (Pearson 210), faces his own morality when he confesses his adulterous affair to his wife Elizabeth. At first, Proctor believes it is Elizabeth who is judging him, and his confession places her in a state of power, replacing God and the courts as the figures of morality and conscience which has been handed over to her.

Perhaps this is the reason why Proctor later refuses, along with Rebecca Nurse, the old, devoted lady, kind, strong-willed and wise, to falsely admit being in league with the Devil. Yet both of these characters understand that their conscience will never allow them to live a normal life, and Proctor ends up serving his own conscience rather than that of the courts and pays the ultimate price, being death. In conclusion, Arthur Miller established that conscience is indeed an organic part of the human being, and that for all intents and purposes, the organic conscience is the truest form as compared to the courts and the church, repressive, superficial and full of hypocrisy.

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