
Review of Opposing Female Roles in "The Crucible" by Arthur Miller

"Does this dress make me look fat?" It's a common conception; women tell each other to wear black because the contrast is slimming. Politicians run attack ads on components to make themselves look better in comparison. The literary technique of contrast was evidently not unknown to American playwright Arthur Miller. In *The Crucible*, the juxtaposed characters Abigail Williams and Elizabeth Proctor are foils of each other. While the two women's roles are similar in their relation to John Proctor, Miller also contrasts them in three major ways: social position, activity or passivity of character, and morality. Presented in contrasts, these three central themes are emphasized to illustrate the many factors at play in the events of the Salem Witch Trials.

Elizabeth is a mainly passive character while Abigail is at times virtually the sole aggressor within the events of *The Crucible*. Firstly, even the background information that sets the scene -the driving friction between Elizabeth and Abigail that leads to accusations of witchcraft - wouldn't exist if it weren't for Abigail's actions with John Proctor. In Act I, Abigail gets Betty to rise "from the bed, a fever in her eyes..." and chant falsities about common names in Act I, in front of Putnam and Parris (Miller 44). From then on, she controls the village in a puppeteer's display of manipulation, rumoring, and false accusations come true. Abigail's was the pointing finger towards so many of the accused, attacking, destroying, and often taking their lives. All along, the unsuspecting Elizabeth Proctor is concerned with her domestic affair and has no involvement until her accusation. When given the chance to give her intervening word in her husband's fate, she remains passive: "I cannot judge you, John" (Miller 125).

A second significant difference is that Abigail and Elizabeth come from differing social standpoints. The details of which set the stage for the envy and vengeance that took place in *The Crucible*. Elizabeth Proctor has a homestead, a husband, and essentially, more reputation in Salem to lose. Abigail Williams is just a girl of 17, young and un-married - yet able to tempt John Proctor. Abigail attends church everyday, keeping up with her Puritan image. However, she has conveniently driven Elizabeth to seldom attend. Because Abigail was in cahoots with the other servant girls, she had a way of indirectly corrupting Proctor's home. When opportunity presented itself, the details came together, and it was all too easy for Abigail to convict Elizabeth of witchcraft, in hopes of stealing her security. "She thinks to dance with me on my wife's grave!" John exclaims in court (Miller 102). The two women maintain this division to the end, Elizabeth going among the innocent and Abigail always preserving her role as the persecutor

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Finally, in comparison to Abigail, who has become morally corrupt, Elizabeth Proctor serves to represent the social and moral standards and expectations of the setting. She is a true Christian woman. While Abigail is exploiting the fears of Christianity for her own selfish desires, Elizabeth is on a more wholesome quest to fix her marriage. In the end, she is able to overcome John's sin by allowing him to forgive himself, although Abigail sat on his other shoulder and encouraged him to sin again the whole time. That is, while she wasn't busy worshipping the devil and wishing harm on other people in the woods. "You did, you did! You drank a charm to kill Goody Proctor!", Betty violently remembers from her sickbed. It also is worth noting that Elizabeth was said to have never lied; "In her life sir...my wife cannot lie" (Miller 103). When she finally disproved that sentiment it was only with the intention of bailing out her husband (whom she actually condemned). At this point, one might look to Abigail and her long stream of lies against the people around her, and judge one's morals against another's.

A village breaks out into hysteria, twenty people end up dead at the hands of Massachusetts State, and two women caught up in the same love affair can be found at the heart of it all. The events of *The Crucible* demonstrate how a personal conflict can grow to touch a community and the impact we can choose to have on other people's lives. Overall, the actions of Abigail Williams and Elizabeth Proctor contribute to the play's themes of morality and social standing, and convey a message about those who attempt to trade one for the other. Even today, Miller's drama maintains its relevancy, like a historical allegory, as human behaviors repeat.

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