

Mary warren: an
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The Salem Witch Trials represent an embarrassing time in the history of American when suspicion and fear was allowed to override sense and rationality. However, an imbalance of power, both real and perceived, contributed to this fear. For example, Salem subjugated women and the young in favor of the elder men. Arthur Miller, in *The Crucible*, exposes how the witch trials give power to those who had been without it before. Mary Warren is a character that represents this power shift and embodies the negative aspects of human nature that makes its abuse so tragic.

Mary, though one of the oldest at eighteen, is one of the weakest of the girls as the play opens. Her first lines of the play, as the girls huddle at Betty's bedside, exemplify her fear. She cries, "What'll we do? The village is out! I just come from the farm; the whole country's talkin' witchcraft! They'll be callin' us witches, Abby!" (Miller, 17). She immediately wants to tell the truth to avoid trouble, but is stopped by the icy Abby.

Abby isn't the only one who controls Mary. The Proctors have hired Mary as their serving girl, and John orders her around roughly. "I forbid you to leave the house," he says, and "I'll show you a great doin' on your arse one of these days" (Miller, 20). It is clear that Mary's position throughout Act I of the play is that of the weakling.

However, things take a turn as the questioning begins in Act II. Her presence in court has given Mary a small sense of power. According to Christopher Bixby, *The Crucible* is a play about the seductive nature of power...a study in power and the mechanisms by which power is sustained, challenged and lost" (xvii-xviii). Mary's power derives from her willingness to offer information

at court. This information is, in part, a public condemnation against Goody Osburn, which Mary only remembers after being situated in the mayhem of accusations at court that day. She later offers that her testimony was the result of the frenzy invoked by the accusations of Abby and the other girls. She says to the judge, "...I heard the other girls screaming, and you, Your honor, you seemed to believe them...." (100). The thought of being believed by a respected elder seems to fuel Mary's desire to embellish the truth.

Once offered, her testimony elevates her to a higher power, one of near respect of the men that would never have given her words any credence before. She transforms from a cowering girl to a defiant one, telling John, "I'll not be ordered to bed no more, Mr. Proctor, I am eighteen and a woman, however, single" (Miller 57). However, once in court, her resolve buckles. She attempts to make right her earlier false testimony, but finds Abby a more formidable opponent than John. Mary slowly loses the power to stand up in the face of Abby; her fear weakens her, as it did in the beginning of the play. As the girls repeat her every word in an attempt to simultaneously prove her a witch and to wear her down, she responds to Danforth when he asks, "Where did you find this power?" She responds, ironically, "I—have no power" (Miller 108). She is speaking the truth. Emotionally she has no power to stand up for the accusations of Abby and the other girls even though she is trying to save the innocent women, including her mistress Elizabeth Proctor.

The good vs. evil battle for Mary does not end on the side of good. Realizing that the power of Abby and the girls to seal her doom was too strong, she

relinquishes her thin grip on the truth and joins them, targeting the only person left – John.

Miller himself revealed in an interview in the *New Yorker* magazine that, “ Naturally, the best proof of the sincerity of your confession was your naming others whom you had seen in the Devil’s company—an invitation to private vengeance, but made official by the seal of the theocratic state” (Miller, *Why I Wrote The Crucible*). The religious fervor and desire to hunt down the devil himself made the girls’ testimony so much more believable, that Mary had to join them to regain the power to save herself.

Mary, then, accuses John of being “ the Devil’s man” and forcing her to testify with him or else he would murder her (Miller 110). Abby’s acceptance of Mary at this point seals John’s fate and disappears from the focus of the play.

Arthur Miller himself recognized that the Salem Witch trials of the late 1600s were the perfect impetus for creating a chaos large enough to sustain his drama, which, of course, mirrored the hysteria of the Red Scare in the 1950s when Miller wrote. Miller says, “ When I walked at night along the empty, wet streets of Salem in the week that I spent there, I could easily work myself into imagining my terror before a gaggle of young girls flying down the road screaming that somebody’s ‘ familiar spirit’ was chasing them” (Miller, *Why I Wrote The Crucible*).

Mary Warren is a character who, for once in her life, experiences a small amount of power. Unable to do the right thing with it, she succumbs to the stronger power of Abby. Bixby comments that “ It is the essence of power <https://assignbuster.com/mary-warren-an-examination-of-the-powerful-and-the-powerless-in-the-crucible-essay-sample/>

that it accrues to those with the ability to determine the nature of the real” (Bixby xx). This is the difference between Mary and Abby. Abby knows the truth, or what is real, throughout the entire episode; Mary does not and wavers between the truth and self doubt, to finally settle on the safety of conformity. Thus Abby’s power, albeit evil, is able to consume Mary’s feeble attempt at exerting the power of the truth.

Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* is a classic study on the power of groups and the power of madness to substantially alter the truth even to tragic ends. Mary is an example of a girl caught up in the mayhem whose only recourse for survival is to defer power to others.

Works Cited

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