

# The crucible and year of wonders: comparing the dichotomy of appearance and reali...

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



Arthur Miller's allegorical play, *The Crucible*, illustrates the parallels between the Salem Witch Trials and the HUAC communist crisis, highlighting the injustice of McCarthyism. Alternatively, Geraldine Brooks intertextually takes a cue from the John Dryden poem which inspired its title, *Year of Wonders* charts its protagonist's growth as she endures a litany of horrors. The villages of Salem and Eyam are portrayed as similarly insular societies that suffer devastating upheaval. Whilst these crises differ in character, there are similarities in terms of the profound social distress induced, and the long-term consequences for those concerned. These crises create a conflict between appearance and reality, with individuals being blinded by false truths.

In the devout communities of Salem and Eyam, there is a willingness to look for metaphysical, rather than rational, explanations. When confronted with situations they don't understand, they fall back on superstition. In *The Crucible*, Mrs Putnam cannot rationalize the loss of seven infant children, with each "wither(ing) in (her) arms the very night of their birth". She can't fathom their deaths and doesn't believe that God could've forsaken her like that. Thus, when the witchcraft hysteria emerged it gave her an opportunity to lay blame on something other than her own body, claiming "they were murdered". In these societies, elderly women can easily be perceived as witches, especially elderly midwives. Birthing "seven babies unbaptized in the earth" with Rebecca Nurse as her midwife lead her to believe that Nurse precipitated their deaths with witchcraft. Her intransigence towards the demise of her babies conveys Miller's view that individuals in these deeply pious societies much rather blame a satanic power than themselves.

Similarly, in Year of Wonders the first explanation for the plague is witchcraft. To Eyam “ there are two natures: Godly and right or satanic and evil”, thus the plague couldn’t have been “ a thing of nature”. Living on the fringe of convention as they do, the Gowdies were first accused. Herbs represent the world outside of societal constraints, thus herbalists like the Gowdies were obvious scapegoats. With their executions, the village is profoundly compromised in both a physical and moral sense, thus Brooks suggests that the greatest threat to a community can come from within, the threat being the villagers desire to blame a dark power rather than accepting it as “ a thing of nature”.

In these homogeneous communities, ignorance provokes fear, making it hard to identify what’s real. Those who are malicious can manipulate this fear to create panic for their own gain. In The Crucible, Abigail manipulates people’s fear of witches with the crying-out. Her false accusations hold substantial weight, “ jangling the keys of the kingdom” with her power. Few can see the reality that the girls are just “ marvellous pretenders” as they allow fear to dictate their responses. Their fear in witches, their fear in the court and especially their fear of being accused, are mighty factors allowing Abigail to obtain her powerful status, with the court “ pulling Heaven down and raising up a whore (Abigail)”. With this Miller suggests that God’s want isn’t being properly interpreted, thus weakening his power, and raising Abigail up towards his level. The irony in this is though Abigail is viewed as a “ saint” whilst in reality she is a precocious liar, and true saints such as Rebecca Nurse are condemned as witches. Furthering this conflict, a poppet

in Salem is viewed as a tool for witchcraft, while realistically it's just a doll which in any other society would represent childhood innocence. This displays the uneasiness of the community and how their fear blurs the line between appearance and reality. Similarly, in Year of Wonders, Aphra Bont deceives Eyam by disguising herself as Anys Gowdie's "ghost" and selling charms to vulnerable villagers, exploiting their fear and desperation. Before the plague, all of them would have instantly rejected this blasphemous offering, however, their fear of death causes clear thoughts and vision to become untenable. Furthermore, they had executed the Gowdies for witchcraft, but they end up resorting to dark magic. With this, Brook displays how fear can easily change how someone thinks, as depicted by the villager's hypocrisy.

With the barrier between appearance and reality blurring, the texts show the importance of moderate, rational voices in promoting the truth. Miller illustrates the effect of the absence of such voices, especially in positions of power. In Salem, the pervasive belief that witches represent a legitimate threat justifies the state's repressive approach. The voices claiming that the witch accusations are just acts of "vengeance" are ignored. John Proctor is "respected and feared in Salem", yet his voice is disregarded. Similarly, Reverend Hale attempts to reason with the court are ineffective as the appearance of witchcraft and the supernatural is viewed as more compelling. Thus, Miller highlights that the conflict between appearance and reality also affects the validity of rational voices. In contrast Brooks displays the value of the presence of such voices. Michael Mompellion attempts to diffuse

extremism which he views as dangerous and divisive such as self-flagellation, viewing these individuals as pitiable. This self-harming was seen as a way for people to repent for their sins, aiming to have God lift the punishment on Eyam. Mompellion understood that “despair (was) a cavern beneath (their) feet” and that most “teeter on its very brink”, with many falling into this “cavern”. He used his position as a leader to condemn these actions, thus saving many lives whilst uniting the community. Therefore, these moderate, rational voices are portrayed as vital by Brooks, as without them the community will tear itself apart as in Salem.

In both texts, the similarly insular societies of Salem and Eyam are confronted with threats that present villagers with tragedy and dislocation on an unprecedented scale. This dislocation caused the line between appearance and reality to waiver, thus individuals looked for metaphysical, rather than rational answers. This ignorance promoted fear, which was manipulated by malicious people for their own gain. This required rational, powerful voices to guide people, differentiating between appearance and reality. In *The Crucible*, the mass hysteria prevented rational answers from being heard, whilst in *Year of Wonders*, the voices were strong enough to aid people in distinguishing between appearance and reality.