

The crucible critique essay

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Belonging- Crucible essay It is instinctively assumed that belonging to the group can better protect the individual against external threats; however Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* shows that such instinctive assumptions are flawed. The group can destroy itself without the voice of the individual, capable of thinking rationally, because the herd simply acts instinctively and its members conform out of fear of alienation or the very natural human desire to belong. The importance of the individual who stands against society is celebrated as they possess true moral decency and offer salvation to the group.

These belonging insights are further explored in Shakespeare's eponymous play *Othello* and Arthur Boyd's power painting *Persecuted Lovers* 1957-1958. Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* explores belonging as a protective force against externalised fears. The setting and imagery emphasise Salem's many anxieties. The "virgin forest" is ironically, for the Salemites, "the Devil's last preserve" where "abominations are done" and girls whose sexuality should be invisible are found "dancing" like "heathen[s]".

Into this "wilderness" come "maraud[ing] Indian tribes", whose apparent barbarism and pagan beliefs threaten the villagers' insular Protestant social order. Miller imitates this cultural hostility in the very weather: "a few small-windowed, dark houses snuggling against the raw Massachusetts winter". Paradoxically, it is the Salem tragedy that theocracy was developed "for good purposes" to protect the villagers, but ironically it is the authorised institutions which inflict the most destruction. Salem is a frontier society on the "edge of wilderness" and its civilisation is threatened by a vast and dark "endless continent".

They believe, in contrast, that their unbending consistency, “ all their sufferings” and their denial of “ vain enjoyment” is “ that they held in their steady hands the candle that would light the world”. They believe that their unity in spite of the sacrifices it requires of them individually rather protects them. The main protagonist of the play is a flawed man even to himself. Proctor has come “ to regard himself as a kind of fraud” as he demonstrates his outward disgust at the hypocrisy around him yet his inward fear that his own sin of lechery makes him one also.

However, Proctor stands against the hypocrisy as he rejects the rules for social conformity creating dramatic tension as he challenges the authority of Danforth and Hale in the final two acts. Giles Corey also defies the pressure to conform, symbolically represented by the physical weights laid on him until he expires still defiantly calling for “ more weight”. Abigail, however, understands the power of belonging and the fear of isolation using it as a potent destructive weapon. Directly confronting Danforth as she threatens “ Let you beware”.

Her victory over Mary Warren demonstrates her acting talents but also her manipulation of the mass hysteria and paranoia that spreads rapidly among the Salemites. Ironically, the more fear that is induced in the community the less truth is extracted from its members and the greater destruction of its social fabric. Savagery and superstition in the forest invert law and social order supposedly found in the village. The extent of the mass killing, “ seventy-two... to hang” is further compelling evidence of the dangers of mass hysteria.

Proctor exclaims “ the crazy little children jangle the keys of the kingdom”, pointing out the madness that has gripped society. This commentary relates to Miller’s observation of the careers ruined and suicides of people accused during the McCarthy persecutions in the United States during the 1950s. The belligerence of Danforth as he addresses young girls, “ confess yourself or you will hang” a travesty of any legal procedure is reminiscent also of the House of Un-American Activities Committee.

Paradoxically, it is the morality of an individual who stands against society; who doesn’t belong, that offers salvation. Proctor is “ respected and even feared in Salem”; Danforth hopes that the confession of “ a weighty name” publically displayed on the church will bend more to the autocracy he is enforcing. In the final moments of the play and on stage Proctor, finding the courage to be true reflected in a dramatic act on stage, tears his confession and the falsehood it represents. Danforth has no choice but to retreat crying out in desperation, “ Hang them high over the town! The tragic hero of Shakespeare’s eponymous play Othello resists the insecurities that the outsider normally suffers. Othello has overcome the significant barrier that his colour poses to walk as an equal among white Venetian society through his strong moral stature, shown as he is referred to as the “ noble Moor” and “ valiant Othello”. “ Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them”, he conceitedly cautions the party that challenges him.

Othello is described as a man “ whom passion could not shake” in the military sphere but in the domestic sphere and in civil society Othello is less practiced. His marriage to Desdemona exposes him to all the unfamiliarity of that terrain. Iago, his nemesis exploits this unfamiliarity, until he can no

longer quell the doubts that plague every waking moment. Othello begins to refer to Desdemona as the “ fair devil”- the powerful black/white imagery in this oxymoron captures the good/bad qualities which they are associated. As his jealousy grows Othello begins to see his colour as representative of shame and disgrace, “ her name... s now begrim'd and black as mine own face”. In his final speech, Othello attempts to redeem himself and restore his previous moral stature by taking the savage “ turbaned Turk” (the outsider) he feels he has become “ by the throat” and killing him, restoring his place in Venetian society. So here the individual is sacrificed to the social mores of the group. Arthur Boyd's *Persecuted Lovers* 1957-58 represents the societal racism within Australia over the 20th century. Boyd depicts the strained relationships between Indigenous Australians and white Australians.

The two lovers (a black man and white woman) attempt to belong to each other through their love, ignoring the social stature of racism and ignorance which forbids inter-marriages. Similar to Proctor in *The Crucible*, the white woman acts against society to gain her own moral sense of belonging with her lover. Defying the group results to her death as the rifleman takes aim on the two lovers with silent murderous anticipation. Death is foreshadowed with the flower protruding from the man's ear symbolic of a funeral posy.

The warm colours and the predatory bird further enhance the overall mood of death and destruction. Boyd uses symbolism to explore the human emotions of love and hatred. The man's blue skin and his lover's blue hand symbolise their love and sense of belonging with each other. The rifle-man wears the conventional ‘ uniform’ of a modern day (European) businessman holding an early 19th century rifle; referencing modern-day racism having its

roots in the colonial era. The prosecutors dominating stance reflects the man's control over the situation which parallels the state's control over the Indigenous population.

Her innocence instantly identifiable by her white bridal gown and further enhanced by her white skin and red hair reflects society's destruction and flaws as it murders one of its own. It can be concluded that it is society's desperate desire to protect itself inferred by the strict social rules of conformity it enforces on its members and the vast hysteria and paranoia it spreads; is in fact the cause of the destruction. The importance of the individual is celebrated as they uphold the moral decencies of a true character. The Crucible, Othello and Persecuted Lovers are texts which represent these belonging insights.