

# Society in the crucible and death of a salesman

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Two plays by Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*, both contend that society is the indifferent, sometimes brutal, force that crushes an individual. Although the plays take place in different time periods, they each convey the force of society through setting and conflict. They particularly show this theme through the formation of masses or of opposing sides, as with the girls and townsfolk of *The Crucible* and the company values in *Death of a Salesman*. The use of scapegoats like Tituba and Willy further develop the theme. Finally, the sacrifices of Proctor and Willy show the pressure that society places on men to be honorable. Society contributes a great amount to the plight of a protagonist, and Miller portrays this theme through his characters and their interaction with one another. The two plays exhibit the theme of society's power by showing a development of opposing sides, or enemies. For example, in *The Crucible*, the townspeople and the young girls take sides against the older women of the town. The Putnams are the primary adult offenders in the town. They fear what they do not understand, so they fear the supernatural connection between witchcraft and the deaths of their newborn children. Their position in society causes them to fear, so they oppose the sages of the group who do not have fear. Likewise, the children form sides against the older women of the group, but for different reasons. The children are completely restricted in their actions, particularly by the elderly, who represent their authorities. Thus, they react by unleashing their imaginations on the older townspeople. Similarly, *Death of a Salesman* is plagued with the formation of sides. This time, however, the conflict arises between Willy and the ethics of the new salesman. According to Richard J. Foster, "The values that seem to be represented in Willy, the "

good' values that function in the play as implicit criticisms of society's ' bad' values, are the familiar romantic ones: nature, freedom, and the body; free self-expression and self-realization; individualism and the simple life..." (Foster 3). Willy's nostalgic, almost quixotic ethics contrast with those of society, Howard, and modern business. It is evident in Willy's scene with Howard, in which he is fired, that the sides are clearly defined, and Willy's morals are no longer valuable to the company. As Miller writes, WILLY. In those days there was personality in it, Howard. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today, it's all cut and dried, and there's no chance of bringing friendship to bear—or personality. You see what I mean? They don't know me anymore. HOWARD. That's just the thing, Willy. Thus, the forces of society crush Willy as an individual by making everything he has ever known obsolete. Furthermore, both *The Crucible* and *Death of a Salesman* portray the enormous power of society through the use of scapegoats. The difference, however, is that *Death of a Salesman* has a single person as a scapegoat, whereas the people of Salem blame an idea before individuals. The people of Salem blame witchcraft for all of their problems, whether Sarah Good and the death of a neighbor's pig, or Rebecca Nurse and the Putnam babies. Because the people fear what they do not understand, anything out of the ordinary is automatically supernatural in their eyes. Thus, Tituba, the slave from Barbados, is blamed for her " conjuring" and is hanged, along with many others. The people of Salem blame their problems on the " witches". Scapegoats are used quite differently in *Death of a Salesman*. Biff blames his father, Willy, for not leading him correctly and trying to shield him from the real world. Willy's

overprotectiveness only puts off Biff's coming of age, which occurs during his discovery of his father's licentiousness with the anonymous woman.

According to P. P. Sharma, " In the traumatic experience in the hotel room, however, [Biff] achieves an insight. With the realization that his father is a fraud comes his deliverance...By trying to make a hero out of [Willy] Biff realizes Willy was only obscuring his identity and to that extent not exactly helping. He lays the blame squarely on Willy for filling his mind with exaggerated self-conceit..." (Sharma 370). Thus, through the masses and their use of scapegoats, society has the brutal power to crush the individual. Finally, the societal pressure placed on honor is strong enough to break a man, as shown by John Proctor and Willy Loman. Using the definition of tragedy of Richard J. Foster, both men were tragic heroes, because both were willing to give their life up for their honor. John Proctor, the hero of *The Crucible*, is forced to sacrifice his honor by admitting to lechery in order to save his wife, who, ironically, lies to save him, destroying them both. His puritan beliefs hold honor to oneself in very high esteem, and this causes the his death. He chooses death over the stain of the family name by not signing the document, as portrayed in the following lines: PROCTOR. I have three children- how may I teach them to walk like men in the world, and I sold my friends?... Beguile me not! I blacken all of them when this is nailed to the church the very day they hang for silence. DANFORTH. Then explain to me, Mr. Proctor, why you will not let [allow me to post your confession]- PROCTOR. ...How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name! Thus, Proctor rejects the societal pressure and does not give in. Willy, however, succumbs to honor and hides his cowardice behind

suicide, which gives his family insurance money. He commits suicide, but by Foster's definition, which states that the tragic hero must be willing to give up his life, he is still a tragic hero. Thus, the plays *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*, by Arthur Miller, each exhibit the theme of society as the indifferent, sometimes brutal, force that crushes an individual through the formation of sides, the assignment of scapegoats, and the value of honor. In each case the individuals were crushed, either physically or mentally. Society contributes a great amount to the plight of a protagonist, and Miller portrays this theme through his characters and their interaction with one another.