

# John proctor's in the arthur miller's play

Literature, American Literature



A play ending in tragedy can seem like a pessimistic choice, but a character's noble sacrifice can actually provide a hopeful outlook on the state of humanity. This is certainly the case with John Proctor's death at the end of Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*. Where others would shy away and save themselves, Proctor gives it all in service of a greater cause.

The lead-up to Proctor's self-sacrifice is first developed early on in the play, with his internal conflict. In the first two acts, the audience is informed of how this conflict affects his relationships and self-image. He is introduced as "a sinner... against his own vision of decent conduct," showing even before his first line that he is a moral man haunted by some past impropriety (Miller 21). He projects his guilt onto others, such as when he tells his wife, Elizabeth, that he'll "not have [her] suspicion any more," seeing her harmless comments as disparaging him (57). However, she was not casting judgement on him, "the magistrate [that] sits in [his] heart" was (57).

As the story progresses, Proctor continues to struggle with his guilt, and is unable to see himself as a good person. He laments his moral failure, seeing his false confession as yet another expression of his inherently evil nature. To him, only the good are worthy enough to sacrifice their lives for some cause greater than themselves, and he is not among them. He tells Elizabeth that "nothing's spoiled by giving them this lie that were not rotten long before," his previous transgressions preventing him from doing what he sees as right (143). He sees himself giving a false confession as "evil," and that it is "good... that [he does] it," due to his own fraught self-image (147).

Proctor stumbles along this path of self-debasement, and continues to do so until he forgives himself of his improprieties. This allows him to do what is

right in his mind, and sacrifice himself for something greater, as is the privilege of the morally righteous.

Proctor's conflict is resolved at the end of Act Four by him forgiving himself, allowing him to follow his moral ideals once more. Here, he has an epiphany of sorts and realizes he must forgive himself in order to move on and do what he believes is right. This is a crucial part of his inner conflict, the turning point where he finally "see[s] some shred of goodness" in himself and therefore allow him to sacrifice himself for the truth (151).

If one reads at a surface level, it might seem like Proctor's decision was ill-conceived. Reverend Hale believes that death is the wrong choice, one that Proctor is making to protect his pride. Hale says that life is " God's most precious gift," and that throwing it away is " vanity" (138, 152). However, Hale's objections are misguided and faulty, and are out of step with Proctor's own moral framework. To Hale, good people are meant to obey God's most important commandment and respect all life. But to Proctor, the good have the privilege of giving up their lives for others, in service of a cause greater than themselves. Hale's call for Proctor to save his life would require him to give up his newly found goodness, and go back to a life of self-loathing and lamentations. That would be an impossible choice. Hale asks " what profit [Proctor] to bleed," the answer being that " he have his goodness now [and] God forbid" it be taken from him, for a life without his goodness would be an unlivable one (152).