

# American cultural puritanism and the crucible

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



In Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, the playwright creates a scene based upon the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, yet the themes that the play conveys are still embedded in modern-day society. John Proctor, the lead character, is condemned for speaking up against the Puritan leaders, indicating a style of specific versus society. However, the play as an entire portrays a time of political adjustment, when the society's leaders expected all of the townspeople to follow the majority's beliefs, condemning those who believed otherwise.

These styles can be applied to both events taking place in contemporary society and the actions at the time the play was written, 1953.

Prior to these styles can be used, one must understand the general plot of *The Crucible* along with the way it is brought out as a drama. The moral battles of John Proctor exist throughout the play, with the biggest one concerning his decision to either speak up versus the majority and face the danger of being eliminated, or keep quiet and enjoy other innocent individuals be condemned.

Proctor eventually informs the reverend and the judge, to name a few officials, what he believes the ladies, such as Abigail Williams, are doing. He provides them with truths and proof, describing a plan the women are carrying out against him, yet the leaders do not listen to him. Rather, they sentence him to death for rebelling versus the society, calling him a witch.

While the main theme of Miller's play interprets this time of political unrest, several smaller themes are also emphasized. The author implies that society cannot settle for just arresting and punishing criminals when they call

attention to themselves. Instead, there is an occasional “witch hunt” where people are sought out and punished when they are, in reality, completely innocent (Goldstone, “Introduction,” 19). This becomes evident in *The Crucible* when one realizes that the officials could have stopped listening to the girls after they found out the first few names of people who were “witches.”

Nevertheless, the girls were given the authority to give the names of anybody that they wanted, with the judge having no way of telling whether or not they were lying. Another major theme in the play describes how people in every society have been forced to compromise their intellect and integrity in order to follow society’s popular beliefs. Miller’s feelings that innocent people could have been saved if more people had the courage to speak out against what was occurring are expressed in this universal account of the inhumane and senseless acts that have occurred throughout history.

In the play, the audience has the opportunity to consider the viewpoints of John Proctor, an innocent person, rather than just the side of the government leaders, making the themes universal in that more members of modern society can relate to them. Miller explains in his essay, “Why I Wrote *The Crucible*,” that he intended for the play to depict a common reaction of people in a situation such as the Salem Witch Trials, or the anti-Semitism era around 1952. He says that many people turn their backs on friends, as well as others who have been condemned for some reason, to keep from being seen and then further identified with them. Much like the play’s protagonist,

Miller was fearful of being identified as a communist when he wanted to write the play as a social criticism in the 1950s. Therefore, he used the events of the Witch Trials to draw a parallel rather than directly discussing anti-Semitism (2).

In this same fashion, parallels can be drawn between *The Crucible* and contemporary society. Many members of society still fight a moral conflict when protesting the government, mainly because the belief that society must somehow make sense is common. Even though Puritanism and the beliefs associated with it do not effect society in the same way that they did in 1662, similarities can be seen in the lessons that the Salem Witch Trials teach and happenings in the modern-day world. While Miller used the Salem Witch Trials and his play to criticize the government in 1952, events similar to this occur every day in the world and many people can relate *The Crucible's* themes of contradicting the majority to their modern lives.