

The crucible: when justice deigns to hide in lunacy

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Contrary to popular belief, lack of scientific knowledge was not the sole reason behind the Salem Witch Trials. Despite recent scientific progress, contemporary witch-hunts still exist, affirming that the injustice exemplified by the Trials continues to hold relevance today. This lasting importance is due to the Salem witch-hunts being the combined result of human psychology and authority, which still govern individuals and communities. The people of Salem depicted in *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller quash their individual desires for fear they might commit sin; this suppression ultimately erupts in witch-hunts that allow them to “ express publicly [their] . . .

sins, under the cover of accusations against [others]” (7). People of dignity such as John Proctor and his wife Elizabeth refuse to comply with the witch-hunt, and are wrongfully convicted as a result. Through their struggle, *The Crucible* reveals how religion can be misused to warp reality, the search for justice and truth within a corrupt theocracy, and the enduring nature of justice in relation to individual redemption. Religious rule plays a key role in creating the psychological distortions that allow the witch-hunts to take place. Under Salem’s religious autocracy, all citizens are forced to adhere to Christianity, which entails a demarcation between good and evil that is usually symbolized by God and the Devil. Because of this divide between good and evil, the people of Salem experience inner turmoil as they expect themselves to be good Christians, but find that their thoughts veer towards sin.

They deal with this dissonance by settling secular conflicts through “ heavenly combat” (7). By accusing their enemies of witchery, the people of Salem frame their conflicts as that of God versus the Devil and always

emerge triumphant, for no one is willing to challenge God's authority. This concept of religious authority also has profound repercussions at the institutional level. In Salem's theocracy, the accused are tried in a court predominantly influenced by religion. This fundamentally hurts justice, as any challenge to the accusations of witchery is seen as an attempt to undermine the court and therefore the Church.

Indeed, the characters in *The Crucible* support the court with a religious fervor. Mr. Parris, the minister who presides over Salem, repeatedly cries out that John Proctor has "come to overthrow the court" when Proctor tries to argue for his wife's release (82). Deputy Governor Danforth reiterates this sentiment by saying that "a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it, there be no road between," revealing the Christian dichotomy between good and evil underpinning the Salem court (87). He also delineates why the accusations are so easily accepted as truth by remarking that "witchcraft is . . .

. an invisible crime . . . who may possibly be witness .

. . . [other than] [t]he witch and the victim?" (93). Thus, the supporters of the witch-hunt easily handle objections to their logic by abusing religious power, making Proctor's battle against them exceedingly difficult. As the protagonist, John Proctor wages a war against the lunacy gripping Salem.

Morally upright, he despises hypocrites who claim to be acting on God's authority for personal gain. However, Proctor has his own shortcomings; his infidelity some months before with Abigail Williams, the central perpetrator of the witch-hunt, has led him to "regard himself as a kind of fraud" because
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his unfaithfulness goes “ against his own vision of decent conduct” (19).

Proctor’s guilt from committing adultery is intensified as a vengeful Abigail accuses Elizabeth of witchery. Nevertheless, John Proctor struggles valiantly to set things right, motivated by guilt for his own sins and his disgust for the mass hysteria propagated by the hypocrites he abhors. He persuades Mary Warren, who is formerly an accuser, to testify before Danforth that the charges of witchery are all lies.

When this fails, he even admits to his infidelity to prove that Abigail has an ulterior motive for accusing his wife, willingly “[ringing] the doom of [his] good name” for the sake of truth (103). While a significant sacrifice, this is not enough to expose the truth and free Elizabeth. The denouement of *The Crucible* displays the triumph of justice through individual sacrifice and redemption. John Proctor, incarcerated for witchcraft himself, is forced to choose between confessing to conspiring with the Devil and being hanged at sunrise. When Proctor chooses to hang rather than validate the unjust witch-hunt by admitting to the false charges raised against him, he remarks that he “ see[s] some shred of goodness in John Proctor,” acknowledging that he has been redeemed. Elizabeth also recognizes Proctor’s penance, crying out that “[h]e [has] his goodness now” (134).

Proctor’s personal redemption is also tied to the return of justice to Salem; after Proctor’s death, the theocracy in Massachusetts is broken and the victims of the witch-hunt compensated. Similarly, Christopher Bigsby mentions in the introduction that *The Crucible* “ is a drama about an entire community . . . [that] . .

. surrender[s] to the irrational; it is also . . . a play about the redemption of an individual and, through the individual, of a society” (xxii).

The reemergence of justice in Salem through John Proctor’s decision illustrates that reason can endure, even when deeply buried in collective hysteria. In the overture of *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller notes that “ a political policy is equated with moral right, and opposition to it with diabolical malevolence” (32). Although this remark ostensibly refers to Salem, the universality of this statement prompts modern-day readers to look back upon themselves—if the Salem Witch Trials are of any indication, humans are highly susceptible to demagoguery. And the next time a witch-hunt against the innocent gains fuel, there might be far more lives on the line than John Proctor’s.