

How does arthur
miller create tension
at the beginning of
act 2



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How Does Miller Create a Sense of Tension and Conflict between John and Elizabeth Proctor at the Beginning of Act 2 Arthur Miller was born on the 17th of October 1915 in New York City. Miller believed that tragedy was not confined to the rich and important but that the ordinary man's failure was just as moving and terrible. The play *The Crucible* was first produced in 1953 in the middle of the McCarthy political witch hunt in America.

Miller decided to write the play as an allegorical text and a parallel between the two events. The activities of the committee began to be linked in Miller's mind with witchcraft trials which had taken place in the town of Salem 2 centuries before, for example, the committee often had in its possessions lists of people at various meetings, and yet it still wanted the witnesses to name names. Miller saw these public confessions as parallels with the naming of names in 1962. Since 1938 an organization called the Un-American Activities Committee had been in existence in America.

This had the power to investigate any movement or person who apparently posed a threat to the safety of the state. Under the chairmanship of Senator Joseph McCarthy the committee became almost paranoid in the searching out of the communist sympathisers amongst the American people in the late 1940s and early 1950s. It is important for Miller to create tension within the play to keep the audience interested; he uses this technique in Act two with great effect. The audience is already aware of the Proctors strained relationship following John's affair with Abigail, and Miller highlights the damage that has been done by the affair perfectly in this scene to create an excruciating sense of tension.

The Proctors relationship at the beginning of Act 2 is with a great feeling of detachment and tension in the. John is trying to start a conversation with Elizabeth and she only gives him short answers, one example of this is when John talks about how the house could be brightened up with flowers, and Elizabeth replies with only a few words, and this carries out throughout the conversation. Miller using stage directions and has John on his return from the field taste the meal the Elizabeth has been preparing, he is displeased with it so seasons it. This appears at first perfectly normal and harmless to the audience, however when John hears Elizabeth coming downstairs he jumps away from the stove and proceeds to wash his hands.

It becomes obvious to the audience at this point that their relationship is so strained that John racked with guilt about his affair with Abigail avoids doing anything at all which might aggravate or offend Elizabeth. This huge effort on John's behalf to not offend Elizabeth is blatant when he tells her that the rabbit is "well seasoned" Elizabeth gratefully accepts this praise replying that she "took great care", this is an awkward scene because both are trying to be friendly to one another but it is easy to see they are uncomfortable in each others presence. It is ironic that John complimented her on the seasoning on the rabbit, since he seasoned it himself; this in particular highlights the conflict between them.

After complimenting Elizabeth on the meal John, talks about the farm and says with a grin "I mean to please you Elizabeth" And she answers, "I know it John" However, before she answers, she pauses, and "finds it hard to say" This means that she might not think he honestly wants to please her, or make their marriage work.

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Since this is quite a dramatic moment, I think that on stage at this moment the lighting should focus on Elizabeth, and if present the orchestra should be silent to emphasize her hesitation. It becomes very clear in this scene that John is desperately trying to regain Elizabeth's trust. The fact that she is cold and distant towards him creates a great sense of strain and the conflict is plain to see. Miller is able to illustrate this conflict between them by using stage directions, he has John walk over to Elizabeth and kiss her, Elizabeth receives his affection with disappointment, she is still cold and unforgiving. Miller shows us that words are not necessary to convey feelings, the expressions of the actors and their body language is enough and can sometimes be more convincing in a subtle way.

When I watched the film made about the play it struck me that in the scene between John and Elizabeth a table had been positioned between them, this acted as a physical barrier. This is actually of great significance and subtly shows the audience that there are obstacles that stand in the way of the proctors, keeping them apart, namely Abigail. Watching the film helped me to see that stage props can be used to great effect, and can often play a significant part in the enhancement of dramatic scenes such as this one. Gradually the tension between the Proctors escalates and soon they are arguing, this is brought about when Elizabeth says "You came so late I thought you'd gone to Salem this afternoon" to John. We know from the stage directions, which direct the actor's body language that John realises Elizabeth is implying that he went to see Abigail.

Miller portrays the tension between them by using exceptionally short sentences that help to show the coldness and curtness that they show

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towards each other. In this act John and Elizabeth have several blazing arguments and between each argument there is a lull, it becomes apparent that all the personal disagreements and grudges within the town are coming to a head. Like in a crucible, which is a melting pot everything is being brought to the surface and is breaking down, society is collapsing within the town and amongst the town's people. Because Miller builds up several arguments between John and Elizabeth, he prevents this scene from becoming boring and keeps the sense of tension between John and Elizabeth very much alive. Whenever the audience begin to believe that the Proctors have resolved their problems another argument breaks out, this stopping and starting prevents the audience becoming frustrated with the constant squabbling and makes sure the sense of tension and conflict is maintained. When Hale interrupts the Proctors argument and invades their privacy the sense of conflict between the Proctors eases and the tone of the play and atmosphere changes. John and Elizabeth realise that they must work together to eradicate any suspicions or accusations of them being witches, this causes great tension because it is very hard for them to join forces and act as though nothing between them had happened.

Following a huge argument they must help each other and keep up appearances. This is a very subtle and clever way of creating tension.

Throughout Act two in the crucible Miller creates a sense of conflict and tension between the Proctors using a number of different methods. Doing this I believe is a brilliant way of keeping the audience interested and making the ending of the book more dramatic. Not only however does this in particular scene help to ensure that the audience wish to watch on, but it

also ensures that they understand key events in the play, such as Elizabeth's denial of John's affair.

In act two the audience discover that Elizabeth does know about John's affair so therefore can work out the later on in the play Elizabeth says that John did not have an affair to protect him, not because she simply did not know. I think that were it not for this scene then the whole of the story would be a lot more complicated and harder to understand. So in conclusion although the tension and sense of conflict that Miller creates between the Proctors make Act two an interesting scene, it also affects the rest of the play and the audience's understanding of events to come as a whole.