

John proctor's conflict between personal identity and public image



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Society labels individuals to have certain morals, values, and ideas that most often are contradicted by what the individual's own self-image. In Arthur Miller's novel *The Crucible* the hero, John Proctor, is challenged by his desire to maintain his high social standing in the community even though he believes himself to be majorly flawed. John Proctor lives within a rigid, theocratic Puritan society which condemns miscreants. His essential conflict was the difference between the images of his own personal identity and that which society produced.

John Proctor thought himself to be a fraud and therefore, believed he should not be held in such high social regard. The community looked up to him as an honest, good, hard-working man, "... in Proctor's presence a fool felt his foolishness instantly"(Miller20). Unfortunately, Proctor's innate impulses caused he much internal turmoil, "... he is a sinner, a sinner not only against the moral fashion of the time, but against his own vision of decent conduct" (Miller20). His extramarital affair with Abigail Williams, a seventeen year old ex-servant, defiled his own moral code.

It besmirched him in the eyes of God, his wife Elizabeth, and himself. Proctor lacks the capacity to forgive his transgressions because he cannot seem to wash away his sins. Even though most of the people around him see him in a positive light, he feels a strong sense of guilt, (Elizabeth to Proctor) " I do not judge you. The magistrate sits in your heart that judges you. I never thought you but a good man, John Proctor"(Miller 55). Because of Proctor's guilt over the sordid relationship between him and Abigail he deems his public image to a be facade.

Living under this pretense causes him much anguish though out the book. Proctor is reluctant to give up his public veneration and confess to his sins. Proctor knows that he is a charlatan but does not want to cheapen his identity. His greatest possession is the respect and integrity associated with his good name. In the court room Proctor explains why he did not confess earlier that Abigail was a harlot " Oh Francis, I wish you had some evil in you that you might know me! To Danforth: A man will not cast away his good name. You surely know that"(Miller110).

Proctor dreads revealing his sin because the guilt and regret already overwhelms him. He believes that a public display of his wrongdoings will only intensify the extent of his sin, magnifying his guilt. In such a small community, if he were to proclaim his indecency, then it would perpetually disgrace his entire family. The guilt that would result from damning his family and himself would be immense. Instead of letting the town know that the girls' allegations are false, Proctor tries to down play the extent of the hysteria so that he may feel more at ease.

Proctor's response to Elizabeth when she informs him about the court and possible hangings is "... scoffing, but not without conviction: Ah, they'd never hang-" (Miller52). Proctor envisions of every possible way he can think of to save his wife without condemning himself in the process but eventually realizes that the only way she will survive is by killing his image. Proctor eventually understands that personal identity is more important than a public image. Not until the very end of the story does Proctor's conflict between his personal identity and public image becomes resolved.

John sees less significance in his public image and becomes more concerned about his personal identity. Even though John has admitted to lechery, the public still holds him with a sense of elevated admiration. A preponderance of the people did not want to see Proctor hang; even people who strongly disliked him like Reverend Paris. If Proctor signs a written confession stating he is a witch, then he would set free and able to live out the rest of his life in comfort with his family. A stipulation in signing the contract is that it will be posted in the town for all to see.

Proctor is unable to allow that to happen because it destroys any dignity left he has. The rest of his life would be based off deception and sin. Proctor: "Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave my name!" (Miller 143) Proctor was willing to spoil his public standing with the compromise that he may live among his family .

But, he found himself unwillingly to sign over his personal identity to a lie. Because of this resistance, Proctor was hanged for a crime that he did not commit. Though he was wrongfully executed , Proctor died while maintaining a sense of integrity and morality. Hale- " Woman, plead with him! Woman! It is pride, it is vanity. Be his helper! -What profit him to bleed? Shall the dust praise him? Shall the worms declare his truth? Go to him, take his shame away!" Elizabeth-" He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him!" (Miller 145) Proctor finally was able to wipe away his facade that societal pressures placed upon him. He expelled his guilt and sin and was ultimately able to gain back his virtue. John Proctor's most demanding struggle was

between who he believed himself to be and what society believed him to be. His sins caused tension surrounding his outward appearance and his inward self. Miller's book helps to illustrate how one overcomes the battle of such contention. Every human being has his or her own defects, but to develop into better people, we must learn to conquer these shortcomings.