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Unit 3: American Drama Project

The Crucible, written by Arthur Miller in 1953, is a play set in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. During this time, the theocratic community of Salem was in the aftermath of a witch hunt, in which people were targeted based on false witchcraft accusations. Tainted by the shameful era of McCarthyism during the 1950s, Miller sought to express the damage that mass hysteria can cause society through his play.

In the drama, there are numerous conflicts which contribute to the main dispute between the accused and the accusers. For example, the protagonist, John Proctor, experiences both internal and external conflicts, and these represent Proctor's journey to morality. Over the course of the play, Proctor strengthens his values and moral principles, which lead him to make an important choice at the end of the play between life and honor. In addition to showing character development, Proctor's conflicts also help establish one of the work's main themes: mass hysteria stems from a clash of values and the abandonment of moral principles. The protagonist's most notable conflicts are his external conflicts with Elizabeth Proctor and Reverend Parris, and his internal conflict at the end of the play.

The main underlying cause of the Salem witch trials in *The Crucible* is Proctor's affair with Abigail, which occurs before Act I. After committing this blasphemous crime, he realizes his mistake and repents his previous actions: "Proctor. Abby, I may think of you softly from time to time. But I will cut off my hand before I'll ever reach for you again. Wipe it out of mind" (Miller, Act I, lines 450-452). Due to his relationship with Abigail, Proctor experiences tension between himself and Elizabeth, his wife. Elizabeth, unwilling to forgive him, acts cold towards him, making Proctor furious: "Proctor. Spare me! You forget nothin' and forgive nothin'. Learn charity, woman. I have gone tiptoe in this house all seven month since she is gone. I have not moved from there to there without I think to please you, and still an everlasting funeral marches round your heart" (Miller, Act II, lines 157-164). Furthermore, due to her vengeful nature, Abigail develops feelings of hatred towards Elizabeth and accuses her of witchcraft in order to be with Proctor. This conflict demonstrates how feelings of revenge and paranoia can lead to mass hysteria and, eventually, a witch hunt to assign blame. Thus, the external conflict between Proctor, Elizabeth, and Abigail ties into the core theme of the play. Moreover, this dilemma is also linked to Proctor's future conflicts as it is the beginning of his journey towards virtue, which he achieves at the end of the play.

Additionally, Proctor is involved in an interpersonal conflict with Reverend Parris, a Puritan minister in Salem. This conflict arises because the two characters have different goals and values, which leads them to dislike one another. Parris, on one hand, is greedy, power-hungry, and authoritative. He takes his social status extremely seriously and constantly strives to protect his high position. In contrast, Proctor is a truthful, honorable man. He values his personal pride and disdains hypocrisy. Due to their conflicting characters, Proctor develops a hatred towards Parris and convinces himself that he is not as devout as he claims to be. Because of this

deeply held belief, Proctor often refuses to go to court or have his sons baptized by Parris. In Act I, Proctor shows his disapproval of Parris as a church official: “I have trouble enough without I come five mile to hear him preach only hellfire and bloody damnation. Take it to heart, Mr. Parris. There are many others who stay away from church these days because you hardly ever mention God any more” (Miller, Act I, lines 580-584). Furthermore, in Act II, Proctor reveals his loathing for Parris to Reverend Hale: “I like it not that Mr. Parris should lay his hand upon my baby. I see no light of God in that man. I’ll not conceal it” (Miller, Act II, lines 517-520). This external conflict again helps develop one of the main themes of the piece as it illustrates how false accusations and witch hunts can originate from a clash of values. In terms of Proctor’s personal development, this conflict is an example of the adversity he encounters and the way in which it challenges his ability to stay true to his core values of pride and honor.

Finally, at the end of the drama, Proctor encounters an internal conflict as he is forced to choose between preserving his life or his honor. After being accused of witchcraft, he is set to hang on a specific date. If he confesses, the court will not take his life; however, he will have to live without his pride and honorable name. In Act IV of the play, he is forced to make the decision between his life or his honor, and he delivers a powerful speech expressing his thoughts: “I’d have you see some honesty in it. Let them that never lied die now to keep their souls. It is pretense for me, a vanity that will not blind God nor keep my children out of the wind” (Miller, Act IV, lines 492-495). In this quote, it can be seen that the protagonist is pivoting toward the notion of good. He believes that a pretense, a feigning, will not truly save himself as he will live stripped of his pride, and in addition, his children will suffer because of it. After contemplating this dilemma, Proctor finally chooses to save his honor and give up his life, as this is one of his core values: “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 me my name!” (Miller, Act IV, lines 725-730). This conflict is especially significant because it represents the emergence of Proctor’s true self as he embraces his moral principles. The decision he makes shows his potent sense of integrity and represents the resolution of his overall conflict throughout the entire play.

The timelessness of *The Crucible* makes it a noteworthy dramatic work as it can be applied to society at any point in history. Part of the reason for its relevance is that the conflicts represented work together to create meaning in the play. Proctor’s predicaments, which were discussed in this analysis, include his conflicts with Abigail and Parris, as well as his internal conflict in which he is forced to make a pivotal decision about his life.

All of the conflicts analyzed are connected in various ways. First, these conflicts help Proctor develop as an individual over the course of the play. His disagreements with other characters, as well as his internal confrontation at the end of the drama, lead him to become a moral and virtuous individual, despite his choice to give up his own life. On the other hand, they contribute to one of the main messages conveyed by Miller: mass hysteria stems from a clash of values and the abandonment of moral principles. Proctor’s disputes with Abigail and Parris, which evolved from differing interests, led to ruthless accusations in Salem because people were solely focused on identifying and eradicating their enemies. This level of paranoia blinded them to the truth and led to the Salem witch trials of 1692.

Works Cited

Miller, Arthur. *The Crucible: A Play in Four Acts*. New York: Viking Press, 1953. Print.

****Changes made:****

- Added the author's name in the in-text citations for the direct quotes (e.g., "Miller, Act I, lines 450-452").
- Corrected and clarified the MLA citation format.