

ENGLISH: *THE CRUCIBLE*

Encountering conflict is unavoidable. Discuss.

Arthur Miller's 'The Crucible' is based on a time in history of great intrigue and much regret; the 1692 Salem witch trials. This powerful four-act play depicts not only one of the strangest and most horrendous chapters of human history, but also voices the connotation of the inevitability of conflict. In 1692, the village of Salem embodied a Puritan theocracy; in which the power of religion and the state were unified. Under such ideology, the court was believed to do God's work, and hence an enemy of the state was deemed a servant of the devil. Fed by superstition and paranoia, when Abigail Williams – a vindictive seventeen year old orphan – recognises an opportunity to manipulate the animosity in Salem and deflect attention from her affair with the married John Proctor, she inflames the trials by accusing seemingly upstanding women of conspiring with the devil. When such "...a perverse manifestation of the panic which set in among all classes" emerges, conflicts of empowerment, moral integrity and hypocrisy are expressed in the actions of Abigail Williams, John and Elizabeth Proctor, and Reverend Hale, respectively. Essentially, 'The Crucible' reasons that while – under human fault and fear – encountering conflict is unavoidable, fostering it is not.

A central conflict depicted in 'The Crucible' is Abigail Williams' struggle with empowerment. Being an unmarried and redundant orphan, Abigail is initially marginalised in the male-dominated Salem. She lives in a society that "...never conceived that the children were anything but thankful for being permitted to walk straight, eyes slightly lowered, arms at the sides, and mouths shut until bidden to speak"; accenting the hierarchical conflict of the era. In addition to being restricted by her social hindrances, Abigail is also a slave to the corrupt nature of John Proctor's desires; he strips her of childhood innocence and incites jealousy when he terminates their affair. From the first act, it is clear that the girl who "... look[s] for John Proctor that took [her] from [her] sleep and put knowledge in [her] heart" is not a child, but rather, a spiteful young adult that detests the community to which she belongs. This animosity and evil desire to have revenge on John's wife, Elizabeth, initiates her grave conflict with empowerment – one which she voluntarily fosters. After the negro-slave, Tituba, 'confesses' to conspiring with the devil, Abigail recognises an opportunity and seizes it. In a prodigious outburst, she cries: "I want the light of God, I want the sweet love of Jesus! I danced with the Devil; I saw him; I wrote in his book". Although originally a ploy to deflect attention from her sins, Abigail is contested by her vindictive nature to condemn Elizabeth. As defiance of God is a great fear of the Puritans, when Abigail accuses her and other seemingly upstanding women of consorting with the devil, she promptly demands the attention of the court. By aligning herself – in the eyes of society – with God's will, Abigail gains power; and hence a series of hysterical, vengeful accusations commence the witch trials. While her social inhibitions present an unavoidable conflict, Abigail's choice to manipulate others so as to scheme her way to supremacy fosters a conflict of empowerment.

Another conflict featured in 'The Crucible' is that of moral integrity; explored through the relationship of John and Elizabeth Proctor. John Proctor, a prosperous farmer who is "respected and even feared in Salem", is far from flawless – he is burdened by shame for his affair with Abigail, and initially acts so as to preserve what eminence he has retained. For the majority of townsfolk, the witch trials and consequent airing of guilt prove to be a relief to those who enjoyed "... no ritual for the washing away of sins". Proctor, however, is haunted by remorse over his infidelity and – for the sake of both his marriage and his good name – falters when given the opportunity to testify against Abigail. In this way, he faces a conflict of moral integrity. Elizabeth, a loyal, strong-willed Puritan woman, is known for her honesty. Although, as a result of John's unfaithfulness, "...an everlasting funeral marches around [her] heart". This array of obstacles strains John and Elizabeth's marriage, and forces them to question their ethics. Prominently, when his concern for justice outstrips that for his reputation, Proctor admits to "...pulling Heaven down and raising up a whore" – so as to save his wife's life – and accusations of witchcraft against his own name follow. This gives Elizabeth, who "...never lied", reason to question her own morality in propagating so as to save her husband's good

name. Jailed and ostracised, Proctor is internally conflicted once again – he is convinced to provide a false confession to conspiring with the devil, in order to preserve his life. However, striving for redemption, Proctor exhibits his true integrity by choosing to die as a testimony to the truth and solidarity; “Beguike me not! I blacken all of them with this is nailed to the church the very day they hang for silence”. John Proctor is able to find “...his goodness”, in choosing to die rather than cultivate his struggle with morality; a decision supported by his wife, whose dedication is reignited by their martial struggles. John and Elizabeth’s relationship demonstrates the fact that human fault inevitably eventuates in conflict; fostered by contradictions of moral integrity.

Additionally, a final conflict explored in ‘The Crucible’ is Reverend John Hale’s encounter with hypocrisy. Hale is a distinguished reverend from Beverly, called to ascertain witchcraft when the children of Salem succumb to questionable behaviour. He enters the play with a notion of certainty and absolutism; seeking to uphold cohesion in the community of Salem by casting out undesirable individuals through a “... goal [of] light, goodness and its preservation.” Hale adamantly believes that his counsel is required to eradicate the dark spirits that plague the townsfolk, and is convinced of his own credibility, saying: “You must have no fear to tell us who they are... The Devil can never overcome a minister.” Corrupt by the weight of power, Hale is willing to commit vicious deeds so as to cement his authority, being convinced that if there “be proof so immaculate”, it is acceptable to take a life. This intolerance generates the atmosphere necessary for the hysteria that is to follow. However, witnessing Elizabeth being shackled for merely keeping poppets, Hale realises that what the courts are accepting as truth and fact may not meet this standard, and is forced to contradict his own authority. While Hale recognises that he was being used to target individuals and marginalise innocent people, this requires him to tear down the very kingdom he worked to create; pleading that the people “...cleave to no faith when faith brings blood”. In order to attain redemption for the blood on his hands, Hale wishes to force a confession out of John Proctor so that he may live; although, this approval of offering a lie in order to save oneself is simply further manifestation of his exploitation and the lack of justice that gripped Salem. Despite admitting his role in the devastation, Hale is unable to assuage his own guilt, as “...life is God’s most precious gift; no principle, however glorious, may justify the taking of it”. In undermining the court as penance for his sins, Hale voluntarily fosters a conflict of hypocrisy.

In conclusion, while Arthur Miller’s ‘The Crucible’ accentuates the unavoidability of encountering conflict, the trajectories of the play’s main characters explicitly imply that fostering conflict is a matter of choice. When faced with conflicts of empowerment, moral integrity and hypocrisy, it is errors of judgement and fault on behalf of Abigail Williams, John and Elizabeth Proctor, and Reverend Hale that eventuate in the destruction of the community of Salem. Hysteria and intolerance prevail as individuals are able to benefit when “...common vengeance writes the law”. Essentially, instead of opting for logic and rationality, when murmurs of witchcraft and religious disagreements arise, pride incites these characters to foster the confessions – thus choosing to embrace conflict rather than search for resolutions.