

ENGLISH: ENCOUNTERING CONFLICT

“The clash between reason and emotion lies behind many conflicts”

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Too hard to choose?**

Fifty years ago America experienced its second ‘Red Scare’. This period in history, come to be known as ‘McCarthyism’ was one in which motives and underlying values of individuals were tested. The concept of reason versus emotion instigated conflict, as people were forced to decide between law and morality. Essayist and playwright Arthur Miller was subpoenaed by the House of Un-American Activities committee (HUAC) and consequently wrote “The Crucible”, a play to juxtapose the Salem witch trials in 1600s to McCarthyism. It offers a detailed exploration of conflicts being caused by clashes between motives. Today we can learn from this example and apply these methods of resolving conflict by firstly reassessing values influenced by emotions and logic.

Patronization and threat in 1950s America forced individual to choose between clashing values. When Arthur Miller was interrogated to ‘name names’ to the Huck, he endured an inner conflict. The motivation to give in names of friends and relatives would have been to save his career and reputation. Unlike individuals like Elia Kazan, Miller chose to uphold his moral integrity but at the same time, endangered his Hollywood career. Initially, the conflicting reasoning presented Miller with an internal discord, contributing to his detachment and eventual divorce of his wife. However, as he became driven more by reason than emotion, his conflict subsided. He maintained that it was of more importance to remain moral despite the fact his heart was set on playwriting in Hollywood. Through this, he is known today for his bravery and loyalty. Even now, we are presented with similar situations in which resolution is required because of our own conflicting emotive reasoning.

In Arthur Miller’s case, he was able to resolve the inner conflict by decisively choosing to reason his response to HUAC with morality. However, conflicts are often left unresolved because of the factor which lies behind the conflict which prevents progress. Take the Australian abortion laws as an example. If it were to be legal to abort an unborn child, individuals would be faced with a complex decision involving emotions, logic and the law. The moral dilemma as to whether this child is being robbed of a chance to live may override the fact that it is legally allowed in the country. The emotions of the individuals involved in the situation are tested alongside religious motives and personal views on ethics. The fundamental clash however, is one between reason and emotion.

Through Miller’s play “The Crucible”, we see characters’ respond differently to the same conflict but the reason behind decisions varies. Miller draws parallels between the mass hysteria during the Salem witch trials and the similar irrational behaviour of people in 1950s America. This repetition of history proves to us how often and easily such situations can occur, simply because of conflicting motives within an individual. Protagonist John Proctor finds himself both religiously and morally confounded. The patriarchal society condemns as he condemns himself for being “rarely in the church on the Sabbath day”. Proctor reasons that he does not need the church and it’s authority of which he ‘does not like the smell of’. However his guilt, in particular for his affair with notorious Abigail Williams, leads to his active participation in the trials despite his former will to remain secluded from the town. It is ironic that the one of the Ten Commandments Proctor cannot remember when interrogated by Hale is adultery. It is evident that he understands the extent of his betrayal of his wife, yet he cannot face his guilt and openly admit his affair. Proctor hence results in disregarding reasoning and his reputation and instead is swayed by his own emotions to falsely plead guilty of “seeing the devil” and doing “the devil’s work”. His death signifies the ultimate decision to uphold moral values and defy the Salem authorities’ idealistic view of religion and ethics. Through Miller’s implied portrayal of his own situation, he emphasizes the way in which people suffer because of clashing fundamental views within an individual.

In a similar way, we see through “eager-eyed intellectual” Mr Hale that one can even become corrupt if the clash between reason and emotion becomes unbearable for the individual. Miller suggests that “when diabolism rises...actions are the least important manifests of the true nature of a man.” In our society, it is difficult to depict those who are in such distressful situations like Hale, because we have become skilled at concealing our emotions. Hale however, who “carries his books weighted with authority” once seems to be a self-assured man with pride in himself and his philosophy. As he begins to realise that the town encompassed by fear is become corrupt because of false teachings and unjust laws, he too suffers in the way his moral probity becomes destroyed. Initially, Hale reasons he has come to Salem to achieve justice. This comes into conflict with his later established knowledge that he is actually worsening the situation by holding the devil responsible. He is overcome by guilt and shame. This prevents his reasoning from having any significant meaning, leading to his own inner conflict and moral downfall. As melodramatic as it may seem, it is not uncommon for similar corruption to take place today.

International help seemed to be necessary during the political and social situation in Afghanistan in early 2000s, but emotion played an insignificant role in the political decisions. When the US government invaded Afghanistan, instead of achieving the aim of settling the social dispute, they exacerbated the situation. The American government reasoned that it was essential to intervene through force to settle the disruption. In this attempt, innocent civilians were killed, enemies created and tension was built. Unlike McCarthyism and Miller’s “The Crucible”, this involved little emotional motivation. Perhaps you and I may have expressed our opinion on the ‘terror’ and ‘tragic deaths’ in Afghanistan but that had no effect on political decisions. What did lie behind the conflict was clashing traditional values perspectives on right and wrong. Thus it is not only discordance between emotion and reason which create conflict, but also other factors such as culture and religion.

In many instances, individuals who experience inner inconsistencies between reasoning and emotion, find them selves encountering conflict. Miller, through his own experience during ‘McCarthyism’ and his verbalised response “The Crucible”, it is clear that one must be decisive and ultimately choose between one or the other in order to resolve conflict both create and worsen conflict. Although it is common for the clash between reason and emotion to lead to conflict, it is not the only instigator.