Article by Virginia Lee

THE CRUCIBLE

Arthur Miller

INTRODUCTION

Arthur Miller’s allegorical play *The Crucible* (1953) draws on real historical events – the Salem witch-hunts of the 17th century – and was written in response to the disturbing contemporary phenomenon known as ‘McCarthyism’. In the early 1950s, the United States was at the height of the Cold War. This was an undeclared war of suspicion and espionage against Communism in general and the Soviet Union in particular. Communism, as an ideology, was hated and feared. In 1950, the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee was established to flush out the ‘Communist menace’ and condemn those who ‘threatened’ the American way of life. Senator Joseph McCarthy presided over the Committee for four years and hunted down his victims with ruthless, almost religious, fervour. In the Introduction to his *Collected Plays*, Miller identified a conflict between this new conservatism based on the political beliefs of the extreme Right and the ‘free-wheeling iconoclasm’ (1958, p.40) of the country’s past. He observed with alarm that ‘conscience was no longer a private matter but one of state administration’ (p.40).

This conflict between the individual and the state was paralleled in 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts, where the events of the play occur. The accusations of a group of children resulted in the jailing of hundreds of innocent people. Motivation for these accusations ranged from genuine mass hysteria to malicious self-importance. As a result, twenty people were hanged. The Puritanical theocracy that ruled the new colony took the notion of witchcraft seriously, and quite literally. Their fear of the Devil and all his works instigated a fanatical pursuit of those perceived to be in his thrall. Just as ‘Communists’ were targeted three hundred years later by the authorities, so too were ‘witches’ hunted down and coerced into confessing their association with the Devil. They were also expected to denounce others who had been similarly corrupted.
Those who resisted were assumed to be guilty. Miller’s characters in *The Crucible* are based on real individuals and his hero, John Proctor, was one of the victims of the state’s vendetta against the forces of darkness.

**Encountering Conflict in The Crucible**

What are the consequences of conflict for Salem and the individuals who live there? What lessons regarding conflict emerge from *The Crucible*? In Miller’s play, conflict occurs in an insular society obsessed with sin and damnation. The people of Salem have a propensity to judge others harshly and to feed off the shortcomings of their neighbours. The Massachusetts theocracy enforces its moral expectations on the populace with a heavy hand. The outcome is a battle between state and individual, which leads to the unwarranted victimisation of many harmless people and the ultimate destruction of the theocracy itself. Miller’s play is a condemnation of an administration that uses religious intolerance as a way to wield control and repress its citizens.

The implications of this confrontation for the individual are truly frightening. Miller argued that ‘the sin of public terror is that it divests man of conscience, of himself’ (p.41). He also noted that such ‘public terror’ requires compliance from those whom the state seeks to repress. Neither McCarthyism nor the Salem witch-hunts could have flourished in their respective communities had there not been the underlying sense that Communists and witches represented legitimate threats. The authorities, therefore, felt they were well within their rights to fight these dangerous forces. Both the citizens of Salem and Americans of the 1950s were victims of ‘a new subjective reality’, which redefined previous boundaries and expectations. Nevertheless, through characters like John Proctor and Rebecca Nurse, Miller demonstrates that it is possible for those with integrity and a strong sense of self to resist the tide. Equally, the text suggests that if individuals are unwilling to challenge a corrupt authority and oppose injustice, then genuine, lasting damage will be done to a society. Proctor’s reaction to the conflict he encounters not only establishes what he stands for, but also crystallises the true nature of the crisis that confronts Salem.
The conflict generated by the witch-hunt tears the community apart. It exposes intolerance and abuse of power in the form of characters such as Deputy-Governor Danforth and Judge Hathorne. It reveals self-interest in the forms of the greed and factionalism of Thomas Putnam and the jealousy and vindictiveness of Abigail Williams. The conflict destroys trust and the spirit of unity that is one of the strengths of a small village like Salem. Neighbour denounces neighbour. Transgressions such as vagrancy and alcoholism become hanging offences. Reasonable scepticism is condemned as contempt of court.

The idea of a community in conflict with itself is encapsulated in the play’s title. A crucible is a melting pot designed to withstand great heat that contains diverse, perhaps incompatible, elements. These may collectively ferment to create an adverse reaction. (Subliminally, a crucible also evokes the idea of witchcraft. In *Macbeth*, the witches’ cauldron was the device through which they conjured spells that created mischief and pain.) In relation to the people of Salem therefore, the ‘crucible’ becomes a metaphor for conflict, suggestive of a diabolical meltdown and representing struggle and dissension.

IDEAS & ARGUMENTS IN THE TEXT

*The Crucible* can be used to explore a number of key ideas relevant to the Context *Encountering Conflict*. These are outlined below and will be developed further in the following section.

Overview of key ideas and arguments

**Conflict between the individual and the state**

Salem’s ruling theocracy forces citizens to deny their consciences and perjure themselves in order to save their own lives. The majority comply, but a few resist.

**Conflict with the self**

John Proctor’s dilemma is compounded by his personal sense of guilt, arising out of his relationship with Abigail Williams. This affects the way in which he reacts in his public life.
**Conflict within the community**

The accusations of witchcraft provide a smokescreen behind which simmering factional interests are exploited.

**Conflict between husband and wife**

The tensions between John Proctor and his wife Elizabeth are ultimately resolved in the face of the larger threat that confronts them.

**Analysis of key ideas and arguments**

**Conflict between the individual and the state**

The conflict encountered in Salem arises from a particular set of historical and cultural circumstances. Nevertheless, although the catalyst is a strange one, the idea of the individual pitted against the state has a universal resonance. In this case, the witch-hunts force the citizens of Salem to make a terrible choice between compliance to an uncompromising authority and their own consciences. While most are too weak or too frightened to resist, heroic individuals do emerge.

The single-minded inflexibility with which the courts pursue those whom they deem to be trafficking with the Devil sets the scene for the ensuing conflict. Religious zeal gives the authorities moral as well as legal conviction: Deputy-Governor Danforth maintains that ‘While I speak God’s law, I will not crack its voice with whimpering’ (p113). Danforth and Judge Hathorne experience no evident qualms at the direction the witch-hunt is taking and deal only in stark polarities. Danforth’s response to Hale’s expression of unease, that there is a ‘prodigious fear’ of the court in the colony, is blunt: ‘there is a prodigious guilt in the country’ (p.88). Danforth argues that good Christians can only be with the court or against it, ‘there be no road between’ (p.85). He views Salem as a town under assault: ‘This is a sharp time, now, a precise time – we live no longer in the dusky afternoon when evil mixed itself with good and befuddled the world’ (p.85). His rationale identifies witchcraft as a unique offence. It is not only something that strikes at the heart of the theocracy and all it stands for. It is also an exceptional crime that calls for a particular approach, ‘an invisible crime’ (p.90), witnessed only by the witch and the so-called victim. Entire reliance on
the testimony of the victims leaves the accused little room to manoeuvre. He or she must confess or face punishment; there is no middle ground.

Such an uncompromising stance does not allow characters such as John Proctor or Rebecca Nurse the means to negotiate their innocence. However, they are different kinds of martyrs. Rebecca, ironically, exemplifies all of the Christian virtues that her society pays lip-service to. Her reputation as a woman of compassion and wisdom is known throughout the colony; she is regarded as ‘the very brick and mortar of the church’ (p.67). Interestingly, she challenges the assumption that the answer for the girls’ strange behaviour lies in the supernatural and expresses concern at Reverend Hale’s imminent arrival in Salem. Rather, she suggests ‘let us go to God for the cause of it’ (p.33), thus making a clear distinction between the temporal and spiritual authorities.

Rebecca Nurse recognises the potential divisiveness to the community in jumping to the immediate conclusion that forces of darkness are at work: ‘There is prodigious danger in the seeking of loose spirits’ (p.33). She understands that factional interests could be stirred up and advises that ‘we ought rely on the doctor now, and good prayer’ (p.33). Thus even from the outset, Rebecca is earmarked as a dissenting voice, set apart from, and in conflict with, the status quo. Her subsequent refusal to comply with the court’s directives makes her a victim of the state’s tyranny. Like Proctor, she will not compromise her sense of self and make a false confession. Unlike Proctor, at no point does she prevaricate or vacillate. She goes to the gibbet, ‘one foot in Heaven’ (p.117). Her death is a clear condemnation of the witch-hunts and her martyrdom robs the process of any moral validity. As Hale says, ‘if Rebecca Nurse be tainted, then nothing’s left to stop the whole green world from burning’ (p.67).

Reverend Hale finds himself in an impossible position. When he first arrives in Salem, his enthusiasm for the righteous task before him is tempered by moderation and a willingness to listen. He exercises early initiative outside the court’s ordinance. He visits those accused to ‘draw a clear opinion’ (p.62) and acknowledges Proctor’s reasoning that fear of hanging may be behind many of the confessions. As the witch-hunt gathers momentum, Hale’s initial misgivings give way to real alarm and ultimately a categorical rejection of the court proceedings. He looks back with horror on his contribution to the general
hysteria and takes personal responsibility for his role: ‘the very crowns of holy law I brought, and what I touched with my bright confidence, it died; and where I turned the eye of my great faith, blood flowed up’ (p.115). There is a profound irony in his final denunciation of self, as he explains, ‘I come to do the Devil’s work. I come to counsel good Christians they should belie themselves’ (p.114). Hale is particularly conscious of the fact that, as a minister, he is doubly damned for persuading men to lie. But irrespective of the consequences, he does everything in his power to save Proctor’s life. The personal crisis of faith that sets him against the very mechanism of which he was once a crucial part demonstrates, again, how corrupt and fundamentally flawed the process is.

Increasingly, the Salem judges find themselves in conflict with the community they purport to serve. Rebellion in the neighbouring town of Andover, where the court has been overthrown and the ‘crying out’ discredited, alarms the Salem hierarchy and undermines their own position. The court’s targeting of worthy citizens, as opposed to vagrants and village riffraff, carries with it a potential loss of support from god-fearing folk. Reverend Parris, for example, argues that confessions from those accused are vital if credibility is to be maintained. He adds, however, that ‘unconfessed and claiming innocence, doubts are multiplied, many honest people will weep for them, and our good purpose is lost in their tears’ (p.112).

John Proctor’s reputation in Salem as an independent, plain-speaking individual, intolerant of hypocrisy and cant, leads to ambivalence in some quarters and respect in others. His reluctance to be drawn into factional infighting alienates the more divisive elements in the village. He is not intimidated by Thomas Putnam’s wealth and status: ‘We vote by name in this society, not by acreage’ (p.33). Proctor is critical of the latter’s high-handed attempt to determine outcomes: ‘This society will not be a bag to swing around your head’ (p.33). Equally, Proctor’s contempt for Reverend Parris is obvious. He dislikes the minister’s hellfire and brimstone version of religion and his barely disguised tendency to put his own interests before those of the congregation. In fact, by Salem standards, Proctor is an indifferent Christian. Intermittent attendance at Church and an inability to reel off his commandments suggest that he has more important matters to attend to in the running of his
farm and the provision of his family. It further reveals a capacity to distance himself from the preoccupations of his neighbours. Proctor’s reluctance to commit regularly to the Sabbath highlights the increasingly unreasonable demands Salem makes of its citizens. It also sets him up for criticism and works against him when he is under scrutiny. As Hale notes, ‘there is a softness in your record, sir, a softness’ (p.64).

Notwithstanding Proctor’s impartiality and leadership qualities, there is little in his background to prepare him for the confrontation with the state that will eventually rob him of his life. He is a reluctant martyr. His heroic status emerges gradually and, like many individuals, he is drawn into conflict despite himself. He is initially reluctant to intervene with the court proceedings, even though he knows of Abigail’s duplicity, and is only really galvanised into dissent by Elizabeth’s arrest. The confession that he is a lecher is a desperate attempt to save his wife. In despair he cries to Danforth, ‘I have made a bell of my honour! I have rung the doom of my good name’ (p.98). The escalating drama of Act Three culminates in Proctor’s wild assertion that ‘God is dead’ (p.105). With this, he damns himself utterly in the eyes of Danforth and Hathorne.

Proctor’s obligation to family and keen sense of his own unworthiness subsequently tempt him to profess his ‘guilt’. However, the interests of individual and state cannot be reconciled, in spite of his readiness to acquiesce. He is right to question Danforth’s motives: ‘Is there no good penitence but it be public? God does not need my name nailed upon the church!’ (pp.123–4). God may not, but the Salem judges do require a public admission of guilt and the high price that the state demands becomes apparent. John Proctor’s confession, complete with signature, will be used to vindicate the court and incriminate others. He realises that he is being used and that his good name will be destroyed in the interests of expediency. As he says, ‘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!’ (p.124). His fundamental integrity will not allow him to be complicit in the clear abuse of authority being championed by the government.
Discussion questions

- The Salem theocracy has been established by mutual consent for the material and ideological protection of the society. Why does this form of government, by its nature, provoke such conflict?
- Does the sacrifice of those who die ultimately achieve anything? Are principles, ‘however glorious’ they may be, always worth dying for?
- To what extent does the conflict in *The Crucible* create heroes and villains?

**Conflict with the self**

*The Crucible* also explores the conflict that can arise in the hearts and minds of individuals, the personal crisis of conscience which can be exacerbated by guilt or self-doubt. Miller explains that he wished to explore the interior psychology of the witch-hunt, the question of the underlying guilt that resided, and indeed flourished, in Salem ‘which the hysteria merely unleashed, but did not create’ (1958, p.42). John Proctor exemplifies the way in which private guilt or a personal crisis relates to the wider public conflict. Miller suggests that Proctor views himself a ‘sinner’, not merely by the rigorous standards of the community in which he lives, but according to his own ethical code. The relationship with Abigail Williams has revealed weakness, as well as poor judgement, and he hates himself for it. As his wife Elizabeth says, ‘The magistrate sits in your heart that judges you’ (p.55). Consequently, he has come to regard himself as ‘a kind of fraud’ (p.27), not the man that Salem assumes him to be.

Proctor’s conversation with Abigail in Act One reveals his determination to distance himself from the girl, while highlighting his ambivalence. Though he is sympathetic to the youth that makes her vulnerable, Proctor is adamant that ‘I never give you hope to wait for me’ (p.28). He acknowledges reluctantly that ‘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’ (p.29). Abigail has convinced herself of Proctor’s continued affection and, faced with her concentrated desire and hostility towards Elizabeth, he realises the futility of trying to reason with her. Accordingly, the last word is left to Abigail; ‘You loved me, John Proctor, and whatever sin it is, you love me yet!’ (p. 30).
The residual tension between Proctor and Elizabeth is an ongoing reminder of his guilt. Act Two reveals just how strained relations between the couple have become and the way in which Abigail’s ghost still lingers. John says, ‘You forget nothin’ and forgive nothin’ … I have gone tiptoe in this house all seven month since she is gone … an everlasting funeral marches round your heart’ (p.55). Elizabeth’s inability to forgive is linked to her own insecurities. Proctor’s infidelity has reinforced the fear that ‘no honest love’ (p.119) can come to her and she is ill-equipped to rationalise the suspicion and mistrust that follows. The sustained conflict between husband and wife does nothing to alleviate Proctor’s conscience. He tells Elizabeth that her ‘justice’ would ‘freeze beer’ (p.55).

Sin weighs heavily on the people of Salem. Miller is interested in the way in which good people can be manipulated into doubting themselves. Guilt is presented as corrosive and ultimately destructive of the individual spirit. Proctor’s sense of shame does not permit him to initially demonstrate principled conviction like Rebecca Nurse in the face of a self-anointed, morally superior authority. He declares, ‘Let them that never lied die now to keep their souls’ (p.119). Proctor wants to live, and is willing to draw on the fact of his past transgressions in order to justify recanting. He is ready to be swayed by Hale’s compelling argument that ‘life is God’s most precious gift; no principle, however glorious, may justify the taking of it’ (p.115). In trying to convince himself as well as Elizabeth that he is not the stuff of which martyrs are made, he contends that ‘I cannot mount the gibbet like a saint … I am not that man’ (p.118).

Nevertheless, while a strong character like John Proctor can fall victim to his own doubts (and it is suggested that these personal conflicts may be more damaging than any external threat), The Crucible demonstrates that it is possible to overcome them and follow through on individual conscience. The climax of the play sees Proctor draw on his essential honesty to resolve the conflict with himself. He confronts the implications of his relationship with Abigail and reconciles the guilt that has threatened to undermine everything he stands for. He realises that he does have a choice and that this choice will reflect who he truly is, stripped of society’s hypocrisy. His refusal to relinquish his name to the court is significant, for his name symbolises this sense of self. In choosing to hang, Proctor understands that he is not defined by a single past
mistake and is, in fact, more than worthy to die with ‘saints’ like Rebecca. He concludes: ‘You have made your magic now, for now I do think I see some shred of goodness in John Proctor’ (p.125). In maintaining his integrity in the face of the public terror and refusing to allow himself to be manipulated by a corrupt authority, he achieves personal redemption. The final word goes to Elizabeth who has mounted her own silent revolt against the witch-hunts and who best recognises the struggle of conscience that her husband has fought: ‘He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him!’ (p. 126).

Discussion questions

- Why does Elizabeth refuse to influence her husband’s decision?
- How important is it that individuals have faith in themselves if they are to resist oppression?

**Conflict within the community**

The impact of the witch-hunt on the community of Salem is catastrophic as it ignites conflicts between neighbours and parishioners that have fermented beneath the god-fearing surface for a long time. Salem celebrates such Christian values as charity and love for one’s neighbour and one might expect that in such a community, cohesion and unanimity would prevail. In reality, relations in the village are often acrimonious and tolerance is in short supply. Disputes over land are common; boundaries are constantly challenged and entitlements debated. It is worth noting Rebecca’s apprehension in relation to Reverend Hale’s presence in Salem: ‘This will set us all to arguin’ again in the society, and we thought to have peace this year’ (p.33).

Rebecca’s objections reveal an undercurrent of tension and factionalism that has compromised the Christian character of the town and highlights the weakness which will be its undoing. Many of the prominent citizens in Salem are quick to take issue or identify possible disadvantage. Thomas Putnam, for example, is a bitter and vindictive individual with a strong sense of grievance. He pricks up his ears at Proctor’s mention of moving lumber and insists that the forest is on his property. Proctor’s retort that ‘Your grandfather had a habit of willing land that never belonged to him’ (p.36) suggests that much of this friction is deep-rooted and goes back generations. Similarly, Giles Corey, while a brave and sympathetic character, is also a contentious individual, often involved in
litigation with neighbours over land borders or perceived defamation. As he unhesitatingly recounts to Danforth, he has been thirty-three times in court, ‘And always plaintiff, too’ (p.86).

In his commentary, Miller asserts that the witch-hunts provided those in Salem who harboured resentments with a superb opportunity to act on them under the cloak of righteousness. ‘Long-held hatred of neighbours could now be openly expressed and vengeance taken, despite the Bible’s charitable injunctions’ (p.17). Salem is, in fact, no more saintly than any other community and has a commensurate proportion of malicious and self-interested parties in its midst. Arguably the inflexible and suspicious nature of the society encourages conflict, as it denies individuals the opportunity for legitimate self-expression. Even innocent pleasures such as dancing are viewed as potentially corrupting. Certainly, the town is swift to abrogate rationality in favour of fear and hysteria. As the accusations gather momentum, personal misery escalates, and turmoil and anarchy result.

As a result of these conflicts, Salem self-destructs. The picture Hale paints to Danforth at the conclusion of the play is of a community in complete disarray:

   Excellency, there are orphans wandering from house to house; abandoned cattle bellow on the highroads, the stink of rotting crops hangs everywhere, and no man knows when the harlots’ cry will end his life (p.114).

John Proctor recognises the true character of the village, with its mix of goodness and fallibility, when he cries to Hale, ‘We are what we always were in Salem, but now the little crazy children are jangling the keys of the kingdom, and common vengeance writes the law!’ (p.72). The extraordinary thing is that this has been allowed to happen.

Discussion questions
- What does The Crucible tell us about the way in which people react to conflict?
- Are the people of Salem particularly vulnerable to conflict?
Points of view on the Context

These discussion topics, writing topics and activities are designed to encourage you to consider some of the questions raised by the Context Encountering Conflict in The Crucible and to develop your own points of view on the key ideas.

Discussion/writing topics

- *The Crucible* was written in response to a particular conflict from the 1950s and drew on an even earlier conflict from the 17th century. Today the play seems dated and has little to offer a modern audience. Do you agree?
- Balancing the interests of society and the individual is often difficult. Miller suggests that the witch-hunt was ‘a perverse manifestation of the panic which set in among all classes when the balance began to turn toward greater individual freedom’ (p.16). Discuss the idea that Deputy-Governor Danforth is misguided, rather than truly evil. In his way, he is as much motivated by conscience as John Proctor or Rebecca Nurse and is simply looking to protect the citizens of Massachusetts against what he perceives to be a terrible danger. What do you think?
- ‘The best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity’ wrote W.B.Yeats in his poem ‘The Second Coming’ (1920). Do you think this is a fair appraisal of the conflict presented in *The Crucible*?
- In a conflict between rationality and fanaticism, fanaticism will always win. Do you agree?

Activities

- Salem is indeed a community possessed, not by witchcraft, but by suspicion, fear and irrationality. Devise a flow chart, detailing the progress of the mounting conflict in the town. Identify the crisis points in the ‘rising action’ of each act.
- Explore the roles of Tituba, the Putnams, Reverend Parris and Abigail Williams in terms of how they trigger and/or fuel the conflict in Salem. Support your comments with quotations.
- Debate the topic, ‘It’s not the way a person lives their life, but the manner of their death that defines their true worth’.
Can you think of any more recent ‘witch-hunts’ that parallel the conflicts that arose in Salem in the 17th century and the America of the 1950s? Similarities? Differences?

Writing in Context: Sample topics

Students will be assessed in Units 3 and 4 and in the end of year examination on writing stimulated by the ideas and arguments found in texts studied in the Context Encountering Conflict. The following topics provide an opportunity for students to draw on ideas arising from their reading of The Crucible in order to develop their own writing pieces. Written responses may be expository, persuasive or imaginative.

1 ‘Conflicts from history can teach us many things about ourselves and the times in which we live.’
2 ‘Conflict can reveal unexpected qualities in an individual.’
3 ‘The prime instigator of conflict is fear.’
4 ‘Social order can deteriorate into conflict and anarchy with disturbing ease.’
5 ‘An individual’s ability to deal with conflict is determined by their self-knowledge.’
6 ‘Why conflict occurs is less important than how it affects people.’
7 ‘It is through conflict that we grow.’

THE TEXT

OTHER RESOURCES

This would make a worthwhile contrast to the plays cited.

The historical conflict between Sir Thomas More and his king, Henry VIII,
delineated in this play, raises very similar issues to *The Crucible*.

This is another play that explores the conflict between the individual and the state.

This most recent film of *The Crucible* is a faithful interpretation of the original text and was scripted by Arthur Miller himself.

Miller's introduction to his *Collected Plays* has been referenced several times and makes interesting reading.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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