



Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Arthur Miller's

The Crucible

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™



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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *The Crucible*

THE *CRUCIBLE* IS AN EXAMPLE of historical drama—a fiction based, at least in part, on actual events and characters. The infamous witch hysteria did indeed occur in Salem Village (now Danvers), Massachusetts from February 1692 to May 1693. Over 150 people were arrested and imprisoned. Even more were accused but not formally charged. Twenty-nine people were convicted of witchcraft—a capital offense. Nineteen of the condemned—fourteen women and five men—were hanged. One man refused to enter a plea and was crushed to death under heavy stones in an attempt to force him to confess. At least five of the accused died in prison.

While many of the events in Miller's play are obviously drawn from the abundant historical record of the accusations, hearings, trials, and executions, Miller's aim as a playwright went beyond a mere retelling of historical events. He himself included a historical note at the beginning of the play to emphasize that *The Crucible* is, ultimately, a work of fiction.

Some of the key facts Miller ignores or alters for his dramatic purposes include:

- While Abigail Williams is referred to as Rev. Parris's "niece," there is no genealogical evidence to prove that they were actually related.
- Miller admits in the introduction that he aged Abigail Williams from 12 to 17.
- John Proctor, however, was 62. Elizabeth was 41, and she was his third wife. The Proctor household included their fifteen-year-old daughter, seventeen-year-old son, and Proctor's thirty-three-year-old son from his first marriage. Eventually, everyone in the Proctor family was accused.
- Proctor was not a farmer but a tavern owner.
- Elizabeth Proctor was, indeed, found to be pregnant, and this is what ultimately saved her life. As in the play, her execution was delayed until after the birth of her (innocent) baby. By the time John Proctor, Jr., was born, the hysteria had passed over, and Elizabeth's sentence was never carried out.
- The girls' affliction took the form of violent, physical fits, not a coma-like sleep.

Feminist Theory Applied to *The Crucible*



Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The feminist movement in society found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has been accepted as the norm by both men and women. Feminist critics have even dissected many words in Western languages that they believe to be rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females need to be added and read from a feminist perspective.

Activity One

Examining the Effect of Societal Gender Roles on the Action and Outcome of the Play

1. As a class, list the characters in the play who hold the most power within the Puritan society of 1692 Salem.
 - Make certain the list of those in power includes Danforth, Hale, Hathorne, and Rev. Parris.
 - If any students name female characters (especially Elizabeth Proctor or Rebecca Nurse), ask whether these characters are strong individuals or powerful within their society. Students will hopefully come to realize the difference between personal fortitude and social, economic, or political power.
 - If any students name the accusers, especially Abigail Williams, ask whether these characters held any power within their society the *day before* the action of the play. Students should realize that the girls' accusations are an attempt to hold some power in a society that keeps them powerless.
2. Have the class list the characters in the play who hold the *least* power within their society.
 - Discuss and list the various factors (gender, politics, economics, theology) that keep these characters powerless.
3. List the accusers' names on the board: Mercy Lewis, Betty Parris, Susanna Walcott, Mary Warren, Abigail Williams.
 - List also each accuser's motive for participation.
 - Discuss with the class the social role or class of each of the accusers, especially noting how many of the girls are, or have been, servants.
 - To what extent is gender a factor in the accusers' role?
4. List the victims' names on the board: Giles Corey, Francis Nurse, John Proctor, Sarah Good, Rebecca Nurse, Elizabeth Proctor.
 - Note who of these was executed.
 - Note who was ultimately released.
 - Discuss the extent to which gender plays a role in who was accused. Executed. Released.
5. Finally, wrap up with a discussion of the role of gender in the play. How would the plot have evolved differently or how would the outcome of the play have changed if any of the key characters were of the opposite gender?

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *The Crucible*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS “PSYCHOLOGICAL,” OR “PSYCHOANALYTICAL,” or “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Examining Abigail as Id, Elizabeth Proctor as Superego, and John Proctor as Ego

1. Copy and distribute “*The Crucible* Psychoanalytic Activity One Handout.”
2. Review Freud’s concepts of the id, superego, and the ego.
3. Divide the class into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three.
4. Assign each (or allow each to choose) one character (Abigail Williams, John Proctor, or Elizabeth Proctor) and have them peruse the play, gathering specific evidence to support their character’s being interpreted as her or his assigned personality component.
5. As they examine the play, have them take notes in the appropriate spaces on the handout.
6. Reconfigure the groups so that each new group has at least one member representing each of the characters.
7. Have each student complete the full chart based on discussion in the small group.
8. Reconvene the full class and discuss.

Mythological/Archetypal Approach Applied to *The Crucible*

Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all very closely interrelated. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who read texts with the mythological/archetypal approach are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested" ("The Problem of Types in Poetry" 1923). He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology (long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe). Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.) Every culture has a creation story, a life after death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When reading a work looking for archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen's *Emma* and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

Activity One**Examining John Proctor as the Archetypal Hero**

1. Copy and distribute *The Crucible: Archetypal Activity One Worksheet*.
2. Have students, individually, in pairs, or in small groups, examine the play for evidence of each aspect of the archetypal Hero.
3. Reconvene the class and discuss.

NOTE: It is not necessary for the students to agree or even to come to consensus. The point is to examine the play, especially the character of John Proctor, from this viewpoint.