Arthur Miller’s Moral Views Reflected in The Crucible

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Abstract. Arthur Miller is honored as” the American Consciousness” because he has strong social responsibility and hold that playwriting can be an effective way of presenting social problems and perusing countermeasures. His moral views are deeply presented in The Crucible. Through the study of plots and characters of the play, we can experience the deep concern of social problems and moral views of the great playwright from two perspectives: the views on man and self, and the views on man and the society.

Introduction to The Crucible

The Crucible is a play written by American playwright Arthur Miller in 1953. It is a dramatized and partially fictionalized story of the Salem witch trials that took place in the Massachusetts Bay Colony during 1692-1693. Miller wrote the play as an allegory of McCarthyism, when the US government ostracized people for being communists. Miller himself was questioned by the House of Representatives' Committee on Un-American Activities in 1956 and convicted of contempt of Congress for refusing to identify others present at meetings he had attended. The play was first performed at the Martin Beck Theatre on Broadway on January 22, 1953, starring E. G. Marshall, Beatrice Straight and Madeleine Sherwood. Miller felt that this production was too stylized and cold and the reviews for it were largely hostile. Nonetheless, the production won the 1953 Tony Award for Best Play. A year later a new production succeeded and the play became a classic. It is a central work in the canon of American drama.

The play's main narrative line tells the story of the Salem witch hunts which took place in Massachusetts, 1692. At a deeper level, Miller raises several powerful and important questions about human life and morality. But the play's most amazing quality is that it is not "deep" or "philosophical" by traditional standards. Miller has, in a short and easy-to-read manuscript, opened the door to modern political life. The play is essentially a critique of McCarthyism and the communist scare of the 1950s. Miller found the similarities between the witch hunts and the McCarthy trials, and found the witch trials to be a compelling vehicle for discussing modern events. Key themes include 1) people gaining absolution from the powers-that-be by confessing the sins of others; 2) The power of community rituals, such as confession;3) The role of political opposition and the consequences of compliance (passive or active); 4) the consequences of a polarized world views and mass hysteria. These are just a few of the themes. The play is quite clearly a great tragedy, but remains a tragedy for our times. Miller convincingly shows us his deep concerning for social problems and moral views from the witch hunts.

Miller’s Moral Views Reflected in The Crucible

The Crucible may generally be called a “social play” since it analyzes a public phenomenon with historical precedent and current actuality. Miller’s subject in this play was mass hysteria; he wished to show how it could be fomented by self-appointed (and self-seeking) saviors; what its social and psychological consequences might be; and how it must be averted. So, in The Crucible, he explores two contrary processes in the context of a given social order—the generation of hysteria and the achievement of moral honesty.
The relationship between man and self is one of the most basic propositions of human society. Loss of self is typical characteristic of Abigail. She is the main antagonist of the play, and who previously worked as a maid for Elizabeth Proctor. After Elizabeth suspected Abigail of having an illicit relationship with John Proctor, Williams was fired and disgraced. Using her status as Parris's niece to her advantage, she accuses countless citizens of witchcraft, becoming one of the most powerful people in Salem. Eventually, she flees Salem with her uncle's fortune rather than face the consequences of her actions. In real life, after fleeing Salem, Williams reportedly became a prostitute in Boston.

Some egoistic motives are illustrated by minor details in the play: the quarrel between Putnam and Proctor over lumber, Reverend Parris's preoccupation with firewood and candleholders, and Giles's propensities for litigation. Selfish motives are also illustrated in the major incidents that magnify excitement prior to the explosion of hysteria; Miller sees bewitchment as a mental state that can be deliberately induced by unscrupulous individuals. For example, the method used by malicious figures like Abigail and the Putnams to gain control over the frightened, the gullible, and the weak-willed is indeed diabolical.

The moral growth of Reverend Hale and the Proctors contrasts on one hand with the rigidity of Abigail, Hathorne, and Danforth, and on the other with the instability of Tituba, Parris, and the girls. Reverend Hale: Reverend Hale seems unpromising as a candidate for change. A note introduces him as a stock figure—a smug intellectual with "the pride of the specialist whose unique knowledge has at last been publicly called for." (Arthur Miller, 1976) His words bear out this description: "here is all the invisible world, caught, defined, and calculated," he lectures: "in these books the Devil stands stripped of all his brute disguises." (Arthur Miller, 1976) But the "deeply honest" minister, sickened at last by the gross injustice he has abetted, later denounces the judges. Elizabeth Proctor: Elizabeth too arrives at greater understanding. Initially adamant in her condemnation of her husband's single adulterous act ("you forget nothin' and forgive nothin','" Proctor complains; "learn charity, woman"(Arthur Miller, 1976), she acquires a tolerance for human fallibility and an appreciation for human goodness during her trial and imprisonment. John Proctor: John Proctor does not advance, like Elizabeth and Hale, from vanity to charity. He progresses in a different direction—from shame to renewed assurance. For a time his humility as an adulterer disposes him to accept the greater humiliation of confessing to witchcraft; since he has already blackened his "good name" by succumbing to and then publicly admitting lechery, he is tempted to save at least his life. Indignation, however, compels him to salvage self-respect: “how may I live without my name? (Arthur Miller, 1976) “Show honor now, show a stony heart and sink them with it."With exalted victory-in-defeat rhetoric he proclaims his rediscovery of what he thought had been lost—a “sense of personal inviolability". That's what Proctor means near the end of the play when he talks of his "name". He is really speaking about his identity, which he cannot surrender. Integration of the two processes The first three acts are very well structured. Through an expository method Miller favored in earlier plays--delayed revelation of past sins--he reveals, in retrospect, that the central psycho-social issue of witchcraft arose from the private issue involving Abigail, John and Elizabeth Proctor--a Puritanical variant of the eternal triangle. Among the few covert early allusions to the seduction are Parris's remark that Elizabeth "comes so rarely to the church this year for she will not sit so close to something soiled Abigail," (Arthur Miller, 1976)and Betty's comment to Abigail, "you drank a charm to kill Goody Proctor!" Abigail's passion for Proctor, which moves her to attack Elizabeth through the witch hunt, provides the chief causal link between the private and public issues even though it remains of secondary dramatic importance. The second act, a transitional interlude bridging the introductory and climactic episodes, builds suspense and develops the two subjects preparatory to their simultaneous resolution in the trial scene. In the third act, Proctor and Hale cannot turn aside the forces maneuvered by Abigail, and the action ascends to its shrill emotional peak. If Abigail's desire to supplant Elizabeth was the prime excitant of the madness, Proctor's desire to preserve his "name" becomes the prime depressant. When the protagonist realizes he cannot betray...
himself and his friends with a false confession, he at once completes his progression toward integrity and diverts Salem from its movement toward chaos. (Bigsby, 2001)

The View on Man and the Society

McCarthyism is the practice of making accusations of subversion or treason without proper regard for evidence. It also means "the practice of making unfair allegations or using unfair investigative techniques, especially in order to restrict dissent or political criticism." The term has its origins in the period in the United States known as the Second Red Scare, lasting roughly from 1950 to 1956 and characterized by heightened political repression against supposed communists, as well as a campaign spreading fear of their influence on American institutions and of espionage by Soviet agents. During the McCarthy era, thousands of Americans were accused of being communists or communist sympathizers and became the subject of aggressive investigations and questioning before government or private-industry panels, committees and agencies.

Arthur Miller had camouflaged his condemnation of Senator Joseph McCarthy's investigations of Communist subversion in the United States with the tale of an equally notorious witch hunt conducted at Salem in 1692. Salem was governed by "a combine of state and religious power whose function was to keep the community together, and to prevent any kind of disunity that might open it to destruction by material or ideological enemies. (Arthur Miller, 1976)" Any impatience with this power was curbed by harsh restrictive measures. "Long-held hatreds of neighbors could now be openly expressed, and vengeance taken. ... Land-lust ... could now be elevated to the arena of morality. "(Arthur Miller, 1976)

Miller considers evil as being at large in the world, and he holds that everyone, even the apparently virtuous, has the potential to be evil given the right circumstances, even though most people would deny this. Miller offers Proctor as a good man, but one who carries with him the guilt of adultery. However, men like Danforth also fit this category, because they do evil deeds under the pretense of being right. Miller sees The Crucible as a companion piece to Death of a Salesman in the way both explore the realm of conscience. Therefore, Miller divides people in The Crucible into three levels: the wretch, the normal and the noble.

The wretches are those who go against their conscience and pretend to be right to circumvent others. Abigail is a typical example. She is the most complex of the girls who cry out against their elders. Abigail was once the maid for the Proctor house, but Elizabeth Proctor fired her after she discovered that Abigail was having an affair with her husband, John Proctor. An orphan who has been dependent on her churlish uncle Parris, Abigail sees in Proctor someone who treated her as a woman rather than a childish nuisance. Her desire for him seems to transcend the physical, and she has magnified the importance he holds in her life beyond reasonable expectation. Abigail and her uncle’s slave, Tituba, lead the local girls in love-spell rituals in the Salem forest over a fire. Rumors of witchcraft fly, and Abigail tries to use the town’s fear to her advantage. Abigail thinks that if Elizabeth is out of the way, she and John can marry. John says in the play that Abigail “hopes to dance with me upon my wife’s grave.” In contrast to the other judges, “by honestly considering the evidence before him, Hale shows himself to be more rational and conscientious. (Bronin, 1973)"

Nobles are those who cannot go against their conscience but with some flaws in their life. Although the original John Proctor was not a major figure in the Salem trials, Miller’s Proctor is the central protagonist in his play. “Proctor represents the voice of common sense in the play, being rightly skeptical of the whole court.” (O Yuanchun, 2011)

Enlightenments

Arthur Miller is worthy of the title “the American consciousness”. His heart is full of strong moral sense and his moral views are reflected in his works. He emphasized that moral responsibility is a very important part in human being’s life. Although we often suffer some trouble or difficulties unexpectedly, we should keep the righteousness in our mind. As the people who are living in modern society, Miller’s moral views also leave us some enlightenment. We should learn to adapt the society
and accept its “unreasonable” aspect, and a mutual trust between man and other people should be built. Only in this way, our society and our inner world could be more harmonious and beautiful.

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References