The Triumph of Temptation

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Thesis statement: In *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller effectively utilizes the historical information and background surrounding the Massachusetts town of Salem Village in 1692, whether it be of the role of God in Puritan society or the effects of being indicted in court, as well as the characterization and development of John Proctor and Giles Corey to convey the play’s theme of choosing and acting upon what is morally correct.

I. Historical context
   A. The role of God
      1. Hale’s questioning of the Proctors and the sentence of Goody Osburn to hang by use of the Ten Commandments (Miller 1172, 1166)
      2. Execution for anyone opposed to state-sponsored Christianity (Robinson Web)
      3. Court leaders’ claims of divine sanction (Robinson Web)
      4. Tituba’s confession to avoid hanging and accusations against others (Miller 1154, Robinson Web)
      5. Strict system of discipline with good of group over individual rights (Moss and Wilson Web)
   B. The effects of being indicted
      1. Incentives for accusing others (Miller 1129)
      2. Putnams’ jealousy (Moss and Wilson Web)
      3. Proctor loses soul but not name (Miller 1232)
      4. Lasting impact of admitting to a crime (Hill Web)

II. Characterization
   A. John Proctor
      1. Proctor tears the sheet of his confession (Miller 1232)
      2. Gains dramatic force since Proctor in prime of his life (McGill, Jr. and Bloom Web)
      3. Miller’s empathy to Proctor for sacrificing instead of lying (“Introduction” Web)
      4. The effect of Proctor on Arthur Miller (Miller Web)
   B. Giles Corey
      1. Description of Corey’s death (Miller 1227)
      2. Gives his own life to protect another man (Galens Web)
      3. The significance of Corey’s final words (Galens Web)
      4. The development of Corey’s thoughts and character (Moss and Wilson Web)
III. Theme – Morality
A. The girls and the townspeople
   1. Mary Warren’s refusal to tell the truth in fear of the other girls (Miller 1181)
   2. Effect of peer pressure on those who know their actions are wrong (Galens Web)
   3. Moral weakness of the girls (“Introduction” Web)
   4. The lack of questioning of the trials by the townspeople (Galens Web)
B. Rebecca Nurse
   1. Lack of belief in the theory of witchcraft in Salem (Miller 1143)
   2. Sensible and practical view of the situation (Robinson Web)
   3. Rebecca Nurse’s arrest (Miller 1174)
   4. The importance and significance of her arrest on Salem and John Proctor (Galens Web, Miller 1232)
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Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* encompasses several themes that can still be applied to individuals’ lives in today’s age, despite his play being written over fifty years ago. The way in which Miller conveys and emphasizes these themes becomes evident through his utilization of literary elements. One of the most stressed themes in the play is that of morality — doing what is consciously correct. The manner in which Miller highlights this central theme can be noticed particularly through his use of the historical background surrounding his play and the characterization of those he chose to write about. The play explores what the highly religious western world was like during the late 1600s, as well as the differing attitudes of individuals during that time period. In *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller effectively utilizes the historical information and background surrounding the Massachusetts town of Salem Village in 1692, whether it be of the role of God in Puritan society or the effects of being indicted in court, as well as the characterization and development of John Proctor and Giles Corey to convey the play’s theme of choosing and acting upon what is morally correct.

Salem Village, Massachusetts offers historians and readers an interesting insight into one of the most controversial and dark times of human history. The background surrounding the Salem Witch Trials is not only an important moment in American history, but also a relevant and critical component of Miller’s theme of morality. When talking about morality, many turn to the topic of religion, which was extremely relevant in the Puritan society of Salem. The role and power of God in Salem, in 1692, can be clearly identified through Reverend John Hale’s questioning of the Proctors on the Ten Commandments, in addition to the court’s sentence of
Goody Osburn to hang as a result of her being unable to recite any of Christianity’s guidelines (Miller 1172, 1166). At the time, anyone could be executed for going against the state-sponsored religion of Christianity, as it was believed that anyone who was supposedly opposed to God was a threat to society (Robinson Web). In addition to this, court leaders claimed to rule with divine sanction, claiming that they were simply God’s messengers. Therefore, anyone who openly denounced any part of the government in Salem, including the court leaders, was said to oppose God as well and, instead, worship and support the devil (Robinson Web). The effect of religion on Puritan society is displayed further through Tituba’s dramatic confession to compacting with Satan and bewitching the girls of Salem (Miller 1154). Despite being innocent of the crime, Tituba openly admits to witchcraft because she will be hanged if she does not. Ironically, when Tituba lies, which was also a crime punishable by death in Salem in 1692, and accuses others of witchcraft, she is praised and blessed (Robinson Web). The reason behind Tituba’s confession becomes clear when it is understood that the Puritans felt it was necessary to establish a strict system of discipline, which held the good of the group over individual rights, in order to prosper without faltering to sin or the evil Massachusetts wilderness (Moss and Wilson Web).

Furthermore, readers must also understand the reasons behind many of the accusations of others during the Salem Witch Trials. Being indicted in state court had severe consequences on the possessions of individuals and simply on the individual. Neighbors with social differences or those who had previously been fighting over land and boundary disputes now had a relatively straightforward way to harm the other’s status or acquire one another’s precious land (Miller 1129). In the play, Mr. and Mrs. Putnam have their daughter accuse others, particularly those that live next to them or, unlike the Putnams, have numerous amounts of healthy and living children (Moss and Wilson Web). The effects of being indicted in court, however, go far beyond the
material possessions of individuals. During his court examination and confession, John Proctor proclaims to the court leaders, “I have given you my soul; leave me my name” (Miller 1232). Proctor’s refusal to openly admit his sin to the public highlights the lasting impact of admitting to a crime — the blemish that will always appear next to one’s name, even in future generations (Hill Web). While most abuse the religious and governmental aspects of society, some affirm their values and morals openly and pay the consequences that come with their opinions.

In his play, Miller masterfully employs real individuals from the Salem Witch Trials and shapes them into his own unique characters in an attempt to contribute to his theme of morality. The character that most shakes the Puritan society through his words and actions is that of John Proctor. When faced with the decision of signing his highly controversial confession or being executed as a criminal unwilling to admit to his sin, Proctor “tears the paper and crumples it” in order to display the message that he holds his values and beliefs over his own life (Miller 1232). Proctor’s willingness to die for what he believes in gains even more dramatic force when readers consider the fact that Miller’s tragic hero is practically in the prime of his life (McGill, Jr. and Bloom Web). Similarly, Miller — who had also been accused of a significant crime — repeatedly conveys his empathy for Proctor, a man so honorable that he would sacrifice his own life instead of lying to the court and poisoning his name (“Introduction” Web). This empathy and passion for Proctor is seen through Miller’s words “[t]hat John Proctor the sinner might overturn his paralyzing guilt and become the most forthright voice against the madness around him was a reassurance to me, and, I suppose, an inspiration: it demonstrated that a clear moral outcry could still spring even from an ambiguously unblemished soul” (Miller Web). Like Proctor, Giles Corey also stands as a prime example of a voice of reason and a man of utmost dignity during a difficult time. When discussing the fate of Giles Corey, Elizabeth Proctor remarks, “Great
stones they lay upon his chest until [Giles] plead aye or nay…They say he give them but two words. ‘More weight,’ he says. And died”’ (Miller 1227). Corey, an innocent and brave man at heart, is crushed to death under the weight of heavy stones because he refuses to inform the court who had accused Thomas Putnam of making false accusations against others (Galens Web). Corey’s final words of “[m]ore weight” explicitly portray his lack of cooperation, his disapproval of the witch trials as a whole, and his courageous attitude (Galens Web). The most important note about Corey, however, remains in the way that he develops throughout the story. In the beginning of the play, Corey becomes greatly caught up in the hysteria, so much so that he even appears suspicious of his own wife, but it later becomes evident through his sacrifice that his thoughts and ideas have transformed dramatically. Corey’s development provides insight into how others’ thoughts changed during the Salem Witch Trials, but Giles is one of the few who actually spoke out on the topic (Moss and Wilson Web). Proctor and Corey, in addition to a few other individuals like Rebecca Nurse, pose as individuals with strong moral values who go against the rest of society.

Miller’s theme of morality can best be seen in terms of comparison and contrast between the townspeople, particularly the girls, and Rebecca Nurse. For example, Mary Warren refuses to admit that the girls have been lying the whole time in fear of the other girls turning on her (Miller 1181). Through Mary Warren’s refusal, along with the chaos that the girls’ accusations bring with them, Miller exhibits the effects of peer pressure on individuals who know their actions are morally wrong (Galens Web). *The Crucible*, like many of Miller’s other works, demonstrates the moral weakness that is present in every human being, particularly through the girls of Salem (“Introduction” Web). Furthermore, the townspeople serve as subjects of morality as they simply look on as chaos envelops Salem. The Salem Witch Trials did not occur as a
result of deliberate hatred or cruelty; instead, a lack of personal responsibility allowed this event to occur (Galens Web). On the opposite end of the spectrum, Rebecca Nurse serves as a voice of reasoning and morality. After being told of the situation in Salem Village, Nurse suggests the townspeople “go to God for the cause of it. There is prodigious danger in the seeking of loose spirits. I fear it, I fear it. Let us rather blame ourselves and—” (Miller 1143). Instead of getting caught up in the hysteria and taking advantage of the situation for her own benefit, Nurse takes a more sensible and practical view (Robinson Web). Most important, however, is the event of Nurse’s arrest (Miller 1174). The hysteria in Salem reaches an all-time high following her arrest because Nurse stands alone as a woman of great moral strength and character. In fact, Nurse’s presence alone influences Proctor’s decision to stand for what he believes is right and not sign his confession (Galens Web, Miller 1232). During a time when temptation is everywhere, Rebecca Nurse never falters and remains faithful to what she values.

In *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller exhibits the difficulty in staying true to one’s values and morals during challenging times through his utilization of the historical context of the Puritan town of Salem Village, Massachusetts and his characters of John Proctor and Giles Corey. Miller’s writing causes readers to feel as if they are part of the events during the Salem Witch Trials. The play also does a wonderful job relating events that took place hundreds of years ago to situations that occur in society today. One effect of this timeless play is that it makes readers aware of the moral weakness that is deeply rooted in every human soul. However, *The Crucible* also makes readers aware of the fact that there are people who do not fall into temptation and attempt to better society by learning from their mistakes. Through the actions and ideas of these individuals, human history and mankind are able to progress and, put in simple terms, make the
world a better place. The ill-hearted will always be in this world, but the good of humankind will always triumph and prevail.
Works Cited


