Moral Absolutism in Arthur Miller's The Crucible

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Moral Absolutism
in Arthur Miller’s The Crucible

by

Jennifer Rodgers

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York
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in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*

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This paper is dedicated to my family and friends. Thank you for all of your overwhelming support.

“We must walk consciously only part way toward our goal and then leap in the dark to our success.”

— Henry David Thoreau
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Abstract

*The Crucible*, by Arthur Miller, explores several complex and trans-historic topics, many of which relate to the playwright’s experiences during the McCarthy era. Miller asks his audience to value independent and personal truths, which he defines as more morally right and good than social truths. This is because, in the playwright’s mind, social truths are often manipulated and exploited to gain a desired personal result regardless of how they affect other’s lives. In order to illuminate this point, he repeatedly plays with the concepts of truth and lies, confession and accusation, as well as public and private knowledge. Although Miller represents each as opposites, they are not necessarily contradictory, nor are they fixed absolutes. I will argue that truth cannot be an absolute concept and that the society and its individual members must somehow reconcile the fact that they are linked, one with the other. Communal and individual definitions of concepts such as truth and lies, good and bad, public and private, and controversial acts, such as confession and accusation, are not necessarily binary opposites. To classify them as such is to underestimate the role that they play in *The Crucible*. 
Introduction and Overview

As many critics have noted, Arthur Miller’s drama, *The Crucible*, was written as a reaction to his personal experiences with the McCarthy hearings. In the 1950s Miller was accused by a United States Senator of being a communist spy. This allegation came during the era of McCarthyism, a time of great unrest not unlike that of Salem’s in 1692. In both historical instances, people were charged with committing “crimes” without any solid evidence to support the accusations. In the 1950s, the United States was involved in the Cold War, a war in which there was no physical battle on American soil. Many U.S. citizens experienced this war as a war of words: threats, accusations, and sometimes confessions, each of which added to the drama, fear, and speculation of the Cold War.

Citizens of both the settings Salem, 1692 and America, 1956 were subjected to a sort of crucible, a test or trial. In his chapter titled “The Importance of the Work,” James J. Martine identifies a crucible as more than just a test or trial when he writes:

- a container that can resist great heat and is used for melting and calcining ores;
- most commonly the end product that comes out of the crucible is a purer high-grade steel. As Danforth quite directly warns Proctor, ‘it is my duty to tell you this. We burn a hot fire here; it melts down all concealment.’ (13)

1 Sources which address Miller’s purpose behind writing this play include: Earl Latham’s “The Meaning of McCarthyism,” James J. Martine’s *The Crucible Politics, Property, and Pretense*, and E. Miller Burdick’s “History and Other Spectres in Arthur Miller’s The Crucible.” These authors argue that Miller’s play examines America from its seventeenth century beginnings to the McCarthy era of the 1950s. What allows this play to transcend time is its presentation of broader issues such as liberty and people’s rights.

2 Although many historians argue that the Cold War was fought in places like Korea and Vietnam, there was no draft or military in the United States, no gunfire or bombings on American soil.
Miller would find this definition ironic, as in his play he depicts how the court system and Salem’s theocracy serve only to convolute and blur truth, instead of strengthening and enhancing it. Those times challenged people’s moral characters and in Miller’s mind classified them as either tragic heroes or villains. This is not to say that Miller equates himself with his protagonist John Proctor in the sense that they are both right and good as society defines these terms. Rather the parallels lie in their choice to stay true to themselves. Their lack of conformity to appease authoritative figures and their ability to ultimately stick with their convictions distinguishes them from their communities.

Danforth’s dialogue in the above quote is even more blatantly ironic as throughout his work, Miller reveals that the exact opposite of what the Judge says is true. Danforth does burn a hot fire and in the end he breaks down concealment, but he does not value the truth he finds enough to cancel, much less postpone, the impending executions. The reader can assume that Miller’s sarcastic treatment of authorities like Judge Danforth stems from his opinion of Senator McCarthy and the potential for danger that the playwright sees when one individual, given the right circumstances, uses his public influence to immorally obtain power and private vengeance.

Any analysis of Miller’s purpose for writing *The Crucible* must be preceded by historical context. Earl Latham provides a detailed description of Senator McCarthy, along with an account of his actions in his essay, “The Meaning of McCarthyism.” Latham writes that in February of 1950, Senator McCarthy charged the Department of State with knowingly harboring communists. Soon after, the Senator erected a style of contention that was admired by some and condemned by others. According to the essayist, the principle elements of McCarthy’s methods included reckless accusations, an
inaccuracy of statements, and abuse of his critics. Senator McCarthy became, “an oppressive weight and pain to tens of thousands in government, politics, and the professions specifically... In America and abroad he became a symbol of mortal danger to liberal values and democratic processes” (Latham 24-26). Miller was suspected of having affiliations with possible communists and this culminated when he was accused of left-wing activities. Here is an example of the manipulation that can occur when an individual believes in something so absolutely that he will do anything to justify his actions. In a democratic country, a hunt for communist spies seems to be theoretically justifiable since it assumes the safeguarding of things such as liberty. Yet in this historical instance, the procedure for eliminating communist threats is compromised when McCarthy declares it absolutely wrong for individuals to prize their personal rights and freedoms above his methods.

In *The Crucible*, Miller relies on a binary logic to make his political critique and to differentiate the heroes, innocent victims of a corrupt society, from the villains, those who perpetuate the corruption. A deconstructive reading of the play, however, reveals that these binaries, including lies and truth, public and private knowledge, and accusation and confession, cannot fully contain the political meanings of the play’s action and dialogue. This is due in large part to the ways the play reveals personal beliefs and socially established truths as constantly and inevitably intertwined and related. Miller addresses ideological absolutes such as truth, righteousness, and goodness as both common and troubling at the same time. Every person struggles to define them at one point or another during his or her life. Thus the non-binary natures of these absolutes induce interpersonal and political conflicts which are ideal for authors to explore in their
works. Perhaps such concepts are trans-historic and not bound by nation or identity. Therefore an author is afforded the opportunity to write about that with which his or her counterpart, the reader (in this case the audience), can relate.

In his play Miller addresses the concept of truth, defining it as moral, private, and individually forged. A close reading, however, reveals that the concept of truth is in fact part of political and social ideologies and therefore truth can never function as a pure or absolute concept. The playwright asks his viewer to see Proctor’s responses to the witch hunts as resulting from his ability to access a truth beyond biased and corrupt “truths” presented by his society. What characters such as Reverend Parris, Judge Danforth, Thomas Putnam, and Abigail Williams claim as truth is revealed by Miller to represent a manipulation of shared societal values. It is relative to a society’s ideas of what is right and wrong, and good and bad. At the same time, Miller asks the audience to accept as an absolute moral truth that what these characters do is heinous and unrighteous. Miller’s antagonists represent public opinion in Salem and they manipulate the society’s values by falsely accusing others of witchcraft. The playwright suggests, through the use of his antagonists, that there is a truer, more morally correct truth beyond the interests of those characters who corrupt social values. But this is not the case, since there is not a more morally correct truth available to any of Miller’s characters. Each of his characters shares a selfishness which prompts them to act the way they do and colors their philosophies. The fact of the matter is that truth is not absolute, meaning that it cannot always maintain a status as ethical and correct. Since truth is forged differently by different individuals it is bound to be influenced by personal beliefs. Therefore truth is not a fixed concept, but one that varies based upon each person’s perceptions of his or her
experiences. Furthermore an individual’s perceptions stem from society and his or her experiences with others. Thus truth is not a morally correct concept either, since each individual’s definitions of the terms moral, correct, and truth differ.

While Miller attempts to categorize his characters as good or bad, this systematic classification is inadequate. His protagonists and antagonists are not as different as he presents them to be. This is due to the fact that even those individuals with their own interests at heart must still be influenced by something outside of themselves. They must draw on the emotions of persons (including audience members) outside of themselves. Thus the individual, who Miller presents as a good protagonist, is always dependent on the social, represented by the playwright as bad antagonists who support communal processes. In Miller’s play, those characters who represent the higher moral truths suffer because they attempt to create their own beliefs separate from society’s. These protagonists prize private values and knowledge above public ones and refuse to reinforce the antagonists’ accusations by confessing. Regardless of the playwright’s attempts to show value in personal and morally composed truths, his text nevertheless reveals that the concept of truth is forged by the individual in direct relation to his or her community.

Because of Miller’s reliance on truth and lies, confessions and accusations, public and private as binary opposites, a more complex and politically challenging reading is available in his play. Deconstructive theorist Jacques Derrida warns against the practice of fixed definitions because they are reductive since they indicate an equal match between the signified and the signifier. This philosopher emphasizes a less rigid way for a close reading, which entails that one not limit oneself by creating strict and pointed
conclusions. In his book entitled *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes, “The writer writes in a language and in a logic whose proper systems, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely... And the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language that he uses” (158). What this means is that to rely on a surface level interpretation of literature is insufficient, just as relying upon any author’s given presentations of certain concepts, metaphorically or otherwise, is insufficient. This is not to say that Miller’s definitions and presentations of these pairs can be ignored. Instead, it reminds us that the playwright does not ultimately have full control over the definitions of the binaries on which he relies. The ways that the binaries of truth and lies, public and private knowledge, and accusation and confession add meaning to this drama go beyond Miller’s moralistic and political intentions.

From a deconstructive point of view these pairings cannot be classified simply as representing the community’s corruption and the individual’s greater truth. The problem here lies in Miller’s efforts to define these terms separately, one from the other, when in fact once they enter the play of meaning making (i.e. the text), they do not necessarily remain binary opposites. While personal truth appears to be something one can access by ignoring social bias and corruption, the play also reveals truth to be what a society or an audience agrees upon. In this sense it is a cultural product controlled in part by various organizations made up of individuals who have personal goals, motives, and aspirations which could alter the course of their participation in those institutions. Furthermore, when Miller identifies the subject as an individual who paves his or her own path separate from the community’s as his or her own values, thereby gaining access to a
higher truth, he also clearly reveals this less biased truth to be influenced by the community. As the playwright depicts in his work, no individual can completely separate themselves from their surrounding culture. In fact, society actually constructs individuals' personalities, creates their values and beliefs, and generates their views of the world. Interestingly and tragically in Miller's play, individuals inevitably grow dependent upon cultural norms. The nature of one's individuality will always rely on one's relation to society. Ultimately, society actually constructs the "personal" and punishes those people who deviate from the community's established norms. This interconnectedness between the social and the personal reinforces the concept that truth is not absolute. Therefore no one's definition of truth can be truest.

Another aspect that must be considered is the relationship between Miller as the writer of this play and the audience who views it. Essentially, the author's meaning is subject to the viewer's motives and influences. As the theorist Roland Barthes points out in his essay, "The Death of the Author," "we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (79). The conflict between the author's intended meaning and purpose for writing and the viewer's understanding of a given work continues when the audience attempts to make sense of spoken words only to find that their attempt at an objective interpretation will be thwarted because it is part of any audience's practice to inevitably derive meanings from their own individual experiences and modes of contextualization and interpretation. Even though an author's role is not irrelevant, his or her aims should not become the sole focus of any interpretation. The same is true of the viewers. They will certainly derive meaning from any work based upon their own individual
experiences, but in order for a thoughtful interpretation to develop, the audience must consider problematical elements which add to the work’s importance. Again, a purely communal interpretation is challenged by the practice of viewing the play. The audience “reads” the play as individuals, as a social group, and in response to concepts of right and wrong that Miller suggests they will agree to be “true.”

While each party plays a significant role in the life of the work, and the meanings they find in it are certainly valid, once again a problem exists which is often overlooked and which has great bearing on the presentation and internalization of Miller’s play. What is overlooked is the nature of the work itself. As a play, this piece of literature is more often seen than read. James J. Martine writes in his book, The Crucible Politics, Property, and Pretense, “A play is most often written by one person, but the theatre is by nature a communal art form… [Miller’s] plays will be subject in performance to the talents of actors, directors, light and set designers, and so forth” (23). This eliminates Miller’s ability to share with his viewer the narration, stage directions, and background he provides in a written form. With so many different people involved in each production and performance, meanings will most certainly be supplemented, transformed, and created. These two factors only serve to reinforce Barthes’ argument about the death of the author because these limitations reduce the role that the author, Arthur Miller, plays in his work after he has finished writing it.

In his play, Arthur Miller is highlighting the dependency which exists between truth and lies, public and private, accusation and confession, author and reader. People rely on their social structures to facilitate truth. But these structures are founded on ideals enforced by laws that are political, judicial, and religious in origin. Miller suggests that
truth is based upon the individual’s opinion of what is good and bad. Troublesome are
the concepts that truth is defined differently by individuals and their communities, and
also that individual truths are formed in relation to communal meanings. This is due to
the reality that while each person’s definition of morality is different, their ethics are
colored by the rules and structure of a society that was established before their inception
into it. The dependency which exists between any given society and its individuals
creates a cyclical system where ideas are born, die, and adapted, and this adds
complexity, drama, and immortality to Miller’s epic and timeless work, The Crucible.

Miller sees a problem when strict idealistic social philosophies encourage rigid
absolutism that leaves no room for the existence of independent thought and personal
beliefs. In the following chapters, I will argue that the problematical aspect of his
criticism lies in the fact that truth cannot be absolute for either party, since for both the
community and its individual members truth evolves and transforms over time and is
defined differently based upon one’s perceptions of the situation at hand. Salem’s strict
theocratic society is a representation for historical and present day injustices. The chapter
“Setting the Stage” will address how individuals are fated to fall subject to cultural norms
and processes that undermine their personal beliefs. In “Protagonist and Antagonist,” I
will prove that Miller’s characters are not absolutely good or bad. They share a similar
attitude when it comes to working for something better for themselves. This segues into
the chapter “Confession and Accusation” where I will argue that characters feel forced to
decide whether to value truth or lies and the motivating factor behind their choice boils
down to which one will fulfill their personal desires. Some value lies because falsehood
re-directs blame and justifies previous wrongdoings. Others value truth because despite
the sacrifice they must make, they can attempt to uphold what they think is a personally forged and therefore more morally correct truth. However, in the end the only way to bring truth to light, conclude the witch hunts, trials, and executions, is by lying. In “Public and Private,” I will discuss how private matters inevitably become public ones because ironically, the only way for an individual to attain any privacy is for them to bend to the will of the public. “History and Entertainment” addresses how Miller’s play, *The Crucible*, is neither a historical accounting nor is it mere entertainment. Miller challenges his audiences to be aware of repetitive social injustices like the witch hunts of 1692. He also asks them to value a personally forged truth above a communal one. I argue that the medium of the stage is an appropriate format for getting across a point, since the stage is a guise for leisure, distraction, and amusement. Furthermore, I argue that between the two, social and individual truth, one is not any more correct or moral than the other. In asking his audience to value personal truth over communal truth, he is requesting the impossible. This is due to the fact that each is interrelated, one depends upon the other, and neither is absolute or fixed.
Setting the Stage

In this chapter I will discuss how, in this play, institutionalized practices form personal attitudes. Miller uses his drama, *The Crucible*, to set the stage for publicizing his criticisms of powerful authoritative figures based upon his experiences with them. He is emphasizing the danger that exists in any society’s rigid beliefs in absolute concepts and philosophies, a danger that exists when authoritative and collective powers ignore or condemn an individual’s pursuit of truth. Robert Hogan writes in his essay, “Action and Theme in *The Crucible,*” “Miller will not...allow the individual [character] to escape from his social obligation into his private life...There is no middle ground of private commitment and public neutrality” (97). Here Hogan is identifying Miller’s point of contention that people are inevitably linked to their societies and individuals cannot separate from the obligatory role that authoritative figures demand of them. However Miller’s work actually points to a different conclusion, that there is no obvious escape from culture to a perfect place where people are not influenced by their surroundings and the constraints of pre-existing contexts.

Salem’s community is young and therefore vulnerable and fertile for growing corruption. At the same time Salem, as a community, wants to grow, expand, and influence communities that are not theocratic. This is apparent in the Salemites’ attempts to convert the nearby heathens and separate themselves from the Quakers, who did not see eye to eye with their puritanical philosophies. The conflict is only further prompted by the uptight society’s understandable fear of such things as Indian raids from the nearby forest, “the Devil’s last preserve,” and smallpox epidemics, etc (Miller 3). Jean-
Marie Bonnet points out in her essay, "Society vs. the Individual in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*":

individuals must be purged separately so that the community as a whole may be preserved... Discipline and obedience were the primary rules... Such an adamantly rigid society of course implies that any form of individuality will be considered subversive and dangerous... Thus we see how a society, because of its tight unity, may be subject to ruin as soon as a breach occurs in its defenses. (32-33)

The youthfulness of Salem’s community, forged in uncharted territory, creates a setting which focuses on the developing threat of imminent danger. In other words, this new town’s focus on religion allows its members to utilize fear as a means of keeping order. The resulting conflicts are both historical and contemporary ones, since Miller is drawing a clear parallel between seventeenth century Salem and McCarthyism in the twentieth century.

Early in his play Miller takes the time to supply his reader with background information about life in Salem, 1692 and to establish that both historically and in his fictionalized account, the Salem tragedy developed from a paradox. Essentially, the town and village created a theocracy, a combined state and religious power, with the aim in mind of keeping the community together to avoid disunity and therefore to keep the society safe and stable. According to author Leonard Moss whose work, *Arthur Miller* offers information about the playwright, as well as interpretations of *The Crucible* and the roles the characters within it play, “Not everyone who contributed to that madness, he [Miller] admits, was villainous. Some officials... committed the gravest wrongs in the name of the public welfare, as they conceived it. Salem was governed by a combination
of state and religious power whose function was to keep the community together, and to prevent any kind of disunity” (38). Miller identifies Salem’s theocracy as a troublesome system which utilizes and emphasizes the practices of exclusion and prohibition and he plays with this concept in his work by arguing that Salem’s strategy for survival relies heavily upon selectivity. This process points to a feasible reason for why Salem values communal truth over individual truth. The trick to this society’s survival lies in their unity and any dissention from the whole group is viewed as a threat. The theocracy relies upon the practice of exclusion and prohibition as a means of survival, security, and solidarity. Anyone who deviates from the church’s or court’s beliefs is prohibited from participating in the theocracy. Ironically it is this rigidity, meant to secure Salem, which brings chaos and results in the theocracy’s downfall.

While Miller attempts to paint a clear picture of his protagonists’ and antagonists’ ethical relations to this communal pressure, the motives behind their actions blur their distinctions. For instance, those who arrest and condemn others, such as Ezekiel Cheever, do so in an effort secure Salem’s future survival, despite any misgivings they may have. Evidence of this is provided in act II, when Cheever comes with a warrant for Elizabeth Proctor and he is described as looking, “somewhat shamefaced at the moment” (Miller 70). Cheever follows through with the court’s prompts to exclude Elizabeth from the society and he prohibits John from interfering despite his hesitation to do so. Cheever seems to be “good” character since he is friendly with John Proctor, yet following through with the task of arresting Elizabeth makes him appear to be “bad.” No matter his classification, it is evident that he has fallen subject to the authoritative figures’ emphasis on absolute truth. Cheever feels he cannot escape the authorities’ pressures. Thus he
follows through with their demands and subsequently reinforces the theocracy’s preexisting notions about witches and *The Bible*.

Throughout the play, Miller’s authoritative figures use the method of exclusion and prohibition. Their exploitation of this selectivity is further reinforced by each individual’s drive to survive. As depicted by the group of “afflicted” girls and their successful accusations, there is safety in numbers. By sticking together they remain ambiguous and powerful. They further propagate Danforth’s selectivity when they point their accusing fingers at others who are of a lesser station than themselves. In *The Crucible*, Miller states, “social disorder in any age breeds such mystical suspicion” (4). Here the playwright is pointing out that chaos in any setting inevitably leads to mistrust and a passive desire for truth. In this historical instance, Salem’s citizens are most certainly affected by their surrounding culture’s emphasis on exclusion and prohibition over truth and justice.

Seemingly, culture impresses upon its citizens a moral and ethical good and this results in a drive to find moral truth that is so strong that it casts a shadow over an individual’s goodness. For instance, these witch-hunts were intended to drive the devil out of Salem, thus ensuring the survival of its people, as well as its strict moral code. However, the furiousness and intensity of the accusations soon gets out of hand and instead of illuminating truth and goodness, they extinguish God’s light when they take the lives of innocent citizens. Miller writes that, “They believed, in short, that they held in their hands the candle that would light the world. We have inherited this belief and it has helped and hurt us” (3). Even though the audience does not have access to this background that Miller provides, this message is evident on stage as the play draws to a
conclusion and men and women who are not witches are hanged for this crime. The only way for the innocent to escape death, and the wrath of Salem’s authorities, is to lie. Evidently they are challenged by their community and influenced by the constraints of the theocracy which values its own moral goodness above the lives of Miller’s “good” individuals.

To further complicate matters, two factions already existed in Salem even before the play opens; the town is made up of more fashionable citizens and the village is made up of farmers. Miller’s character Ann Putnam says, “There are wheels within wheels in this village, and fires within fires!” (25). This means that Salem is founded upon a set of Christian moral values, established in The Bible. Within Miller’s wheel of values are others’ interpretations and personal conditions that instigate the creation of new standards. These “wheels” are represented in part by the factions that exist in the play, Salem town and Salem village, and also in part by characters such as Reverend Parris, and his use of Sunday services to attain monetary desires, things like golden candlesticks. Similar is Abby’s use of the church to free John Proctor from his marriage to his wife through her (Elizabeth’s) death. Each faction is a “wheel” and the individual members of each faction are the “wheels within wheels.” Miller presents the Parris/Putnam faction as a group that reinforces societal laws and beliefs. Meanwhile, the Proctor/Corey/Nurse faction questions the society’s understood facts and processes. More specifically in Miller’s play, the Parris/ Putnam faction symbolizes publicly held beliefs because these characters “uphold” religious and societal decrees. Meanwhile, the Proctors, Nurses, and Coreys are individuals whose beliefs and values differ from those taught by the church and state. Miller presents these two factions (wheels) as opposites, creating a conflict
that is necessary for some characters to develop and evolve in a dynamic way. However, each faction is not a separate entity. They are alike due to the fact that members of each faction are socially influenced and taught. More to the point, individuals from each group are looking to obtain something of personal value. What differentiates the two factions is their classification as antagonists who use social philosophies for personal gain and protagonists who reject the community’s laws, rules, and justifications.

In his play, Miller also addresses how the citizens of Salem equate morality and politics. He depicts how they use their theocratic belief system to keep social order and instill rigid values. Leonard Moss addresses Salem’s focus on fire and brimstone when he writes, “the necessity of the Devil may become evident as a weapon, and a weapon designed and used time and time again in every age to whip men into surrender to particular church or church-state...political policy is equated with moral right” (38). This religious foundation is supposed to uphold righteousness and goodness, yet Miller shows a conflict within the system. The Puritans, for example, believe themselves to be Christian people. Yet, they value things like land more than their religion, as seen when the two are likened. In fact, Thomas Putnam places much emphasis on his acreage, which improves his station, setting him up as a man of influence and power. Seemingly, his moral character is improved each time he obtains more land. Therefore, the more land he collects and farms, the greater his social standing and the more Christian he believes himself to be. However, he uses witchcraft as a vehicle to gain his neighbors’ land, for if they are dead or imprisoned, he is afforded the opportunity to purchase what was their livelihood. It is because of his status in Salem that so many of his family’s accusations are considered accurate. This is ironic because he uses his weight in the town
in what Miller presents to be an immoral fashion. This example shows that when politics and morality are equated individuals like Putnam are given the opportunity to take personal advantage. Thus the socially religious moral values Salem’s officials claim are the foundation of a religious theocracy are demeaned.

Evident in Salem’s treatment of politics and morality, characters are further prompted to conform and are provided with even fewer opportunities to escape from their surrounding culture. In the introduction to his anthology, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Crucible*, John H. Ferres cites an excerpt from Arthur Miller’s *Collected Plays*:

There was a new religiosity in the air…an official piety…a kind of interior mechanism of confession and forgiveness of sins…New sins were being created monthly…I saw accepted the notion that conscience was no longer a private matter but one of state administration…men handing conscience to other men and thanking other men for the opportunity of doing so. (6)

Miller is attempting to connect morality and politics by defining them as a contradiction. Morality, according to Miller, is defined on an individual basis and is identified differently by each person/character, with a common denominator of goodness. However, the play reveals that individuals do not ultimately define morality because the community surrounding them colors their philosophies. Furthermore, by valuing its religiously theocratic foundations, Salem’s community is not illuminating goodness. As Ferres states, Salem becomes an open forum where it is acceptable for people to air their grievances and to illuminate other’s indiscretions. The notion that there may be another way to interpret truth as defined in *The Bible* has not occurred to Salem’s authorities.
Therefore morality is valued, at least by Salem’s magistrates, as a cultural and fixed product. Similarly, it is assumed that politics is structured around a given group’s common, set goals. Yet each political institution is made up of individual members who bring their own morals, values, and interpretations to the table. Thus politics is not strictly formed by organizations, but by individual people who constitute the group. Miller’s attempt to navigate moral and political issues by classifying them as contradictory is inadequate since society and its members equally influence both concepts, making them fluid and not fixed absolutes.

Historically the political task set before Arthur Miller in the 1950s, naming names, became a moral one. This is because he saw blurred distinctions between politics and morality as a problem, one that has been repeated throughout history. In writing this play, Miller sets the stage for his criticism of corrupt power, while at the same time he has created a drama which allows for his play’s viewers to emotionally attach their own meanings to what they see on stage. From Roland Barthes in his essay, “The Death of the Author,” “Readers are at least as much creators of narratives as authors are” (79). In other words, authors write with intended purposes, which are colored by their personal experiences. At the same time, readers and viewers of these works create their own meaning based upon their experiences. Important to stress here is that concept that while Miller may have been writing historically, his audiences make the play transcend this boundary. The playwright is revealing that conflicts are produced by the paradoxical relationship between an individual and his or her society. Interestingly, the author’s work is subject to the viewer, meaning they write based upon their own experiences, but must understand that the ideas and events they present are bound to be interpreted differently.
by different viewers. Roland Barthes discusses this point when he writes, “the Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it...life never does more than imitate the book...an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred” (78). At the same time the audience members, who at surface level seems to contribute a private, more individually meaningful interpretation of the play is quickly understood to be communally developed as well. This is because their interpretation of any given work, along with their knowledge about their own experiences, is learned from the pre-existing culture’s definition of things as right and wrong, moral and immoral, etc.

Readers base their understanding upon their “self,” and their “self” is ultimately influenced by their culture.

Since Salem 1692 relied heavily upon structure, rules, and authority for a sense of security, the setting that seems stable is actually one of great transition and unrest. The aspects of a theocracy, a strict structure, unbendable moral code, upright and uptight ethical code, are all evident in characters such as Parris and in events such as the trials:

It was an autocracy, for they were united from top to bottom by a commonly held ideology whose perpetuation was the reason and justification for all their sufferings. So their self-denial, their purposefulness, their suspicion of all vain pursuits, their hard-handed justice, were altogether perfect instruments for the conquest of this space so antagonistic to man. (Miller 4)

Certain words and phrases stand out in the previous quote, for instance the relationship between, “commonly held ideologies” and phrases such as, “self-denial...purposefulness...suspicion.” These terms are indicative of the conformity that is valued in a theocratic society. In a theocratic state, each person’s beliefs, morals, ethics,
and personalities are shaped from, and defined by, the society surrounding them, making them “common,” instead of varied. On the other hand, a democracy is thought to value freedom and independence. However, even in a democratic state it is expected that individuals have knowledge of their culture’s norms and that these norms be institutionalized, perpetuated, and taught. Deviance from such standards is punishable by law. Therefore, even a democratic state values commonly held ideologies, emphasizing that the private is constructed by the public and individual truth is a subset, rather than the opposite, of communal truth. Puzzlingly, two assumedly opposite philosophies, theocracy and democracy, share a belief in the importance of the community. When one attempts to distinguish individuals from their communities, and vice versa, it becomes apparent that they are linked. Therefore, one cannot escape the other and go to a perfect place because no such place exists.
Protagonists and Antagonists

Although Miller prizes his individual heroes for their tenacious dedication to private truth and justice, I will argue that all of his characters, protagonists and antagonists included, are motivated by the community to act in self involved, egotistical ways. Miller’s vehemence is evident as he criticizes the use of laws and public leaders’ positions as vehicles for personal vengeance. He has created protagonists and antagonists, classifying them as either good characters or bad ones. These groupings are reinforced by the audience’s desire to make clear cut distinctions between characters and their actions. In *The Crucible*, protagonists and antagonists are readily identifiable as those who are charged with the crime of witchcraft versus those who accuse them.

According to Moss’ *Arthur Miller*, the playwright’s antagonists:

> see bewitchment as a mental state that can be deliberately induced by unscrupulous individuals... [They] gain control over the frightened, the gullible, and the weak willed...they first demoralize their victim, and then subtly impact in him the terms of a confession that will release him from suspicion and...achieve their own devious ends. (38)

In other words, characters who try to define truth and justice on a more individual plane, and attempt to attain redemption independently from society, are distinct from those who try to use the community’s norms and customs to hide their devious plots. However, a deconstructive reading finds similarities between the protagonists and antagonists instead of identifying their distinctions. Author Henry Popkin addresses the presentation of truth and justice in his essay, “Historical Analogy and *The Crucible*.” He writes, “The purpose of the quirkish English in *The Crucible* is...to permit the simplistic confrontation of good
and evil” (84). Despite Miller’s presentation of his characters as good protagonists and bad antagonists at odds with each other they are all, on some level, individuals with desires independent from each other, working to attain something better for themselves. Each of them must decide whether to reconcile with the community around them or be punished for refusing to do so.

Those characters that the playwright describes as antagonists identify social truths and use lies to their advantage. They are motivated by vengeance for personal gain. Because they are prompted to act out of selfishness, they quickly identify the community officials’ take on witchcraft and they use this insight to their advantage. They utilize public beliefs to make themselves look like victims, safeguarding themselves against being accused. Furthermore they accept the court’s and church’s take on the crime of witchcraft and manipulate these religious and judicial systems.

Reverend Parris is, “villainous and believed he was being persecuted wherever he went” (Miller 1). Parris feels much pressure from Salem, as he is not very well liked by some of its members. Parris explains to Abigail how hard he has worked to win over Salem when he states, “Abigail, I have fought here three long years to bend these stiff necked people to me, and now, just now when some good respect is rising for me in the parish, you compromise my very character” (Miller 9). People view him negatively for several reasons. He was not elected to the office of minister by a majority vote and he wishes to obtain the title and deed to his home. This coincidentally is also the meetinghouse which he desires to own, a problem since it is understood to be God’s house, a place where the public comes to be close to and communicate with Him. Lastly, Parris openly makes demands for money and firewood. This conflict between minister
and congregation prompts him to use his job, one where he is commissioned to find
God’s will, to propagate the townspeople’s need of him and thus better his status amongst
his flock. Parris explains to John Proctor what he desires when he says, “I want a mark
of confidence, is all! I am your third preacher in seven years... You people seem not to
comprehend that a minister is the Lord’s man in the parish; a minister is not to be so
lightly crossed and contradicted—” (Miller 27). Miller describes Parris as greedy, self-
centered, and materialistic by nature. In doing so he implies that as a Reverend, Parris
should not promote, much less exemplify these qualities. Thus he is bad because he is
immoral. Yet his nature is one that all the rest of the characters share. The other
characters cannot blame him for disliking his status in Salem and attempting to better it
because, as a minister of God, society dictates that his position should be elevated. Just
because Miller offers Parris up as an antagonist and a “bad” man, does not mean that the
audience must agree. The motives behind his actions are not any more selfish than that
of Miller’s other character since Parris’ views of what a Reverend’s status should be are
taught by the community and reinforced by its individual members.

His slave Tituba is described as, “frightened because her slave sense has warned
her that, as always, trouble in this house eventually lands on her back” (Miller 6). As a
woman and a black slave, Tituba is in the minority. Therefore she feels threatened.
Reverend Parris insinuates that Tituba is no better than an animal when he says of her, “I
saw Tituba waving her arms over the fire when I came on you... She were swaying like a
dumb beast over that fire!” (Miller 9). It is this status that motivates her to use witchcraft
as a vehicle for condemning those who also do not fit the description of a model
Salemite. In essence, Tituba uses lies as a form of camouflage which disguises her own
flaws, highlights others’ indiscretions, and temporarily elevates her status in the town.

After confessing, Reverend Hale says to Tituba, “You are God’s instrument put in our hands to discover the Devil’s agent among us. You are selected, Tituba, you are chosen to help us cleanse our village” (Miller 44). Here Tituba cannot help but feel accepted for doing what the theocratic magistrates view is God’s work. In this moment, Tituba is being equated with the respectable, white Christians of Salem. Therefore, the scrutinizing eye moves off of her as quickly as possible, focusing on other characters’ individual flaws, which are subjected to mass scrutiny by the majority of Salem’s citizens. History, along with her past experiences, have shown Tituba that she is an easy scapegoat, so to spare herself further beatings, condemnation, ridicule, and to save her own life, she publicly confesses and accuses others of the crime with which she herself was charged. Despite the gravity of the situation she has helped to create through her selfish actions, her willingness to do so is nonetheless understandable. She is tired of being the community’s scapegoat so she reconciles herself to the alibi and lies that society’s officials provide for her.

Finally Thomas Putnam is characterized as “vindictive.” Miller writes that Putnam, “felt that his own name and the honor of his family had been smirched by the village” (Miller 12). The fact that his reputation allows him to rub elbows with the elite, combined with his bruised ego, is a recipe for disaster. He has the means to go after citizens whose interests conflict with is own and he does not hesitate to do so. Even more despicable is the use of his daughter Ruth to implicate innocent neighbors in order to buy up their newly available land. He, like Reverend Parris, Tituba, and Miller’s other antagonists, is acting in such a way to fulfill his personal wishes. He is intelligent
enough, and has been afforded insight into the workings of Salem’s authorities, to recognize the path that witchcraft will carve. He takes advantage of this because he suffers from an over inflated ego and an overwhelming desire that is not unlike Parris’ wish for acceptance.

These antagonists use lies and the public’s opinion of witchcraft to meet their own individual desires which the community accepts and promotes. While it is true that their deeds are despicable, at the same time their reasons for acting so ruthlessly are logical and characteristically human. They do not recognize truth as anything other than what society dictates they should. Their actions are at the same time communally dictated and self serving. This is because they are blinded by their efforts to survive the witch hunts unscathed while achieving the reputations in Salem that they otherwise could not have attained, even if they are only temporary.

Miller takes the time to set his protagonists’ descriptions apart by including contradictions. Just because these are the characters for which the audience has empathy, they are still fallible, occasionally motivated by selfishness, and a few even have fatal flaws. The playwright’s characterization of them further emphasizes the point that no one individual can be solely good or evil. This is particularly evident in John Proctor. In *The Crucible*, Proctor is described as, “A sinner not only against the moral fashion of the time, but against his own vision of decent conduct...Proctor, respected and even feared in Salem, has come to regard himself as a kind of fraud” (Miller 18). In this example both the community and the individual are represented. In Proctor’s eyes, his wicked deed is subjected to more crucial scrutiny by himself and his family, than the
church. He is presented by the author as “his own harshest critic” (Miller 18) and he is aware of his sins and more demanding of penance for them than the church is.

To begin, Proctor feels condemnation from an exterior structure, the theocratic religion’s foundation and its definition of adultery as a sin. Society’s pressure clearly weighs on his mind when he hesitates to tell the court of his affair. Miller’s stage directions set the mood for John’s confession when, “trembling, his life collapsing all about him” he states, “I have known her, sir. I have known her” (Miller 105). He has been taught by his religion that adultery is a sin and it is evident in his hesitation to confess this sin that he feels external condemnation from the church, court, and his peers. Additionally, Proctor feels an interior pressure, his own individual understanding of the fact that he has sinned in both the eyes of God and himself. John says, “My honesty is broke, Elizabeth; I am no good man” (Miller 130). John feels that he cannot repair the damage he has done; he knows that he cannot blind himself or God from his transgressions. Furthermore, he ridicules himself for the effect his actions have had on his home and family. Despite the religious lessons his culture has taught him about God’s impending judgment, John does not count anyone’s criticism as more weighty than his own. Despite Miller’s attempts to separate John from his community, Proctor’s “own criticisms” are not as detached from his society as he would like them to be. John thinks that by categorizing his home and family as a separate entity from the church, he has divided his individuality from his community. But this is not the case since his family has been forged by the church through marriage and baptisms. John recognizes himself as a sinner and his definition of what a sinner is has been learned by the church’s
teachings. Therefore, everything that Proctor attempts to identify as personal and individual is actually related in some way to the public community.

Evident later in the play, Proctor’s attempt at private penance is overwhelmed and misconstrued by Salem’s need for public retribution. Despite the value Proctor finds in his own judgments and punishments, the social realm ultimately suppresses his individual interpretations of the theocracy’s beliefs. Even though Miller sets him up as a “good” protagonist, Proctor understands that part of him that is bad. He does not count himself as worthy as Rebecca or Martha and in a fit of rationalized selfishness he signs Danforth’s confession, attempting to reconcile with the church and court, negotiating in order to meet his desire to live. He is greedy for his life, his home, and his family and in this instance at the end of the play he acts just as egotistically as Miller’s antagonists do. Noteworthy is the fact that what Miller thinks is good about John is self reflective nature; Proctor’s ability to criticize himself. At the same time, these characteristics are precisely what John feels make him bad. Proctor is holding himself accountable for not meeting his own ethical demands. Evidently the definitions of good and bad, as they are presented by Miller, are inconsistent.

In juxtaposition to Reverend Parris, Reverend Hale’s temperament is described as follows: “He feels himself allied with the best minds of Europe…His goal is light, goodness and its preservation [with] books weighted with authority…he conceives the devil as a necessary part of a respectable view…a divided empire in which certain ideas and emotions are actions of God, and their opponents are of Lucifer” (Miller 33). While Miller presents him as an individual who values light and goodness, at the same time, Hale’s profession as a minister has him lumped in with Miller’s antagonists.
Paradoxically, later in the play Hale comes to value Proctor’s opinions about the existence of witchcraft and the Devil in Salem and this implies a protagonistic quality about his character. As an authority in Salem, Hale feels the weight of his power, influence, and responsibility over the people that he guides. Like Proctor, Hale eventually recognizes the error of his ways, evident when he feels motivated to “quit the court” since realizing how base the trials have become (Miller 115). His own opinion is that the methods which have brought about hysteria and madness in Salem are illogical.

Yet this concept is not necessarily an individual truth. Soon after Reverend Hale draws this conclusion, Danforth and Reverend Parris come to the same realization, evident in their conversation about Abigail Williams’ sudden and unexpected disappearance. Therefore truth does not act as a fixed concept. It changes throughout the course of the play as each character’s personal desires change and communal values are altered to protect the theocracy. The evolution of the concept of truth makes it impossible for leaders like Hale to think independently.

A similarity between these authorities is that their natures are selfish and Hale’s selfishness is derived from his guilt. His personal grief is so strong that he returns to Salem to try to save a few of the accused citizens’ lives. His reasons for doing so are self serving in nature. His guilt is so immense that he wishes to relieve himself of some of it by persuading those sentenced to hang to lie so they can live. Hale tells Elizabeth, “You know, do you not, that I have no connection with the court? I come of my own…I have sought a Christian way” (Miller 126). Hale makes it very clear that he has broken all ties with Salem’s authorities and at the same time, he insinuates that his begging for lies is a Christian act. Despite his dynamic characterization and his ability to see the truth
underneath all of the lies, Hale really returns to Salem to shrive himself just as much as he is there to save others' lives. This fact makes him just as self involved as the other characters in this play.

Lastly, Giles Corey is described as, “withal a deeply innocent and brave man...who did not give a hoot for public opinion” but, “No man has ever been blamed for so much...He was a crank and a nuisance...the most comical hero in the history” (Miller 37). Miller’s description of Giles Corey points out his innocence and at the same time, how much he was blamed for things and how he was annoying, yet comical. Giles’ private concerns become public ones and his attempts to protect other’s lives from the court leads to his own demise, as he both literally and figuratively succumbs to the court’s pressures. Giles seems unaware of the conflicting aspects between groups and individuals when he tells Hale about his wife reading strange books. This becomes apparent when he realizes that any efforts he makes to free his wife only lead to further implications. Giles says, “Say nothin’ more, John. He’s only playin’ you! He means to hang us all” (Miller 94). Pages before this he talks with Danforth like he would a friend, bringing up old memories and past stories. Giles is always looking for acceptance and he tries to reconcile with Salem’s weighty magistrates even before he realizes how dangerous the witch hunts are becoming. Now he sees the danger the court imposes and he realizes that this group of judges is not interested in hearing any individual’s rationale. Giles soon comes to understand that there is no stopping the hunt for loose spirits.

Giles Corey does not recognize, until it is too late, that he has implicated so many of the town’s citizens. If he had not been so wrapped up in conversation and the good appearance of his own character in the eyes of people like Judge Danforth, he may have
realized earlier how out of control the accusations were becoming. While Miller attempts to make Giles appear “good,” Corey’s selfishness leads to bad outcomes such as his being pressed with great stone slabs and his wife’s death. Here again, one of Miller’s characters is not strictly a protagonist or an antagonist. Giles’ characterization challenges the binary of individual versus community. This is evident first when he attempts to ingratiate himself into the social realm by gossiping about his wife which leads to her demise. Then later in the play, he tries to deviate from communal norms by remaining silent, which results in his own torturous death. If he had been less self involved, he may have been aware of the goings on in Salem in time to save many innocent lives, perhaps even the life of his own wife, who he himself implicated in the first place.

The setup of each of these characters points out the fact that each person’s selfishness has the potential to do harm and is related to communal expectations. Less important is their classification as good protagonists and bad antagonists and more important is the fact they cannot separate themselves entirely from the community. This is not to say that some individuals cannot mature to the point where they are capable of internalizing the repercussions of their actions. Nor is this to say that other characters do not grow, learn, and mature as a result of their previous actions. Each of these protagonists and antagonists eventually comes to base their statements, judgments, and actions upon their personal desires, as well as their own definitions and interpretations of the truth, facts that they themselves have forged. They are alike in that they act out of selfishness, a seemingly innate human characteristic. Miller presents them as good or bad, but they all act out a self-related interest that is defined by the community.
Confession and Accusation

In this chapter I will argue that what motivates characters to lie or be honest is the desire for self preservation in a very strict and harsh society, but in doing so these individuals lose something of value and are incapable of maintaining the authorities’ approval. Ironically, some of the characters’ lies are what bring about forgiveness and truth in Miller’s play. As far as the acts of confession and accusation are concerned, Miller is criticizing those characters that are static and sympathizes with those who evolve. Moss addresses this in his work *Arthur Miller*:

In constructing this interior mechanism of confession and forgiveness, Miller places special emphasis on the insidious role played by certain individuals. It would be an over-simplification however, to say that he conceives the conflict as one between the innocent and the wicked. The characters in *The Crucible* may better be described as either maturing or ethically fixed personalities. (40-41)

Certain of Miller’s characters confess as a means of re-identifying themselves in the community. Meanwhile others who evolve morally do not because they are not willing to make the sacrifices that other characters do. Furthermore, those who accuse do so in order to re-direct blame and justify their wrongdoings. Others who accuse in order to illuminate truth knowingly place blame on themselves as well as others. Thus these acts develop into a pattern wherein confessions are followed by accusations, sometimes in an attempt to elevate one’s status in the public eye; however these acts only afford people temporary solutions. What ultimately brings truth to light are certain characters’ lies.

Some of Miller’s characters use confession as a way to re-identify themselves and their role in Salem’s community. Abigail Williams is a prime example. Before her affair
with John Proctor, Abby worked in the Proctors’ home. At that time her reputation in the town, the viewer assumes, was not tainted by any sinfulness especially since she is the live-in niece of Reverend Parris. Elizabeth put Abby out as soon as she learned of John’s relationship with her and rumors quickly followed. This is evident when the play begins and Parris questions why Abby was fired by Elizabeth and whether her name in the town is truly white (Miller 9). The end result of her affair is that her reputation, along with her status in Salem, has been ruined. At first glance, Abigail confesses to the crime of witchcraft to save herself from punishment, for as Mary Warren notes, witchcraft is a hanging error (Miller 16). Authors June Schlueter and James K. Flanagan, discuss Abigail Williams in their work, “The Crucible,” when they write, “Abigail acts out of self protection, as so many others in the community will do later” (116). However, other advantages are presented to her and she soon becomes a saint of sorts. Abby’s confession to dancing in the woods and casting spells becomes an opportunity for her to re-establish her reputation and gain a new identity in Salem. People now praise her for the work she does. Elizabeth tells John how Abby is now perceived in Salem when she says, “where she walks the crowd parts like the sea for Israel” (Miller 50). Her selfishness is what prompted her to confess in the first place and her egotistical nature does not change as the play progresses. Though she temporarily gains a new identity in Salem and is able to hold its members’ attention for awhile, she eventually finds out that maintaining this status is impossible. She attempts to change the way others view her as a way of ingratiating herself back into the graces of Salem’s community. Yet in doing so, she further ostracizes herself, for as time passes her lies become more evident and eventually she runs away to Boston.
In contrast to characters like Abigail Williams, there are more dynamic characters who do not condone the act of confession for pretend crimes because they value their sense of morality and ethical goodness, which is also socially derived. At the beginning of act II, Goody Proctor pressures her husband to go in to town and confess publicly by explaining that Abby told him she did not cast spells in the woods in order to provide the true motive for Abby’s lies. In contrast, Elizabeth has a valid fear of Abby’s motives for accusation and she predicts that Abigail’s finger will soon point in her direction. All but one time has Elizabeth told the truth. She tries to convert her morals for her husband, to save him embarrassment and shame. By identifying herself as something she is not, as something she thinks John wishes she would be, Elizabeth ironically implicates John when in court she refuses to accuse him of adultery. Elizabeth Proctor is an honest woman as John says of her, “That woman will never lie” (Miller 88). The one time she does lie, despite the fact that she does so for someone other than herself, she disproves the information John provided about Abby and discredits the truth about witches in Salem. Therefore, Elizabeth inadvertently reinforces Abby’s dishonesty, her accusations, and her confession. However, Elizabeth’s lie does not just reinforce a false crime. Her lie also displays, to her husband, her forgiveness of his past licentiousness. Even though her lie adds more tension and conflict to the witch hunts, it also resolves some of the marital turmoil from which she and John have been suffering. The truth about Elizabeth’s feelings for John is conveyed in this lie. She wants to forgive him and move past his affair. It is not until she lies for John that her true feelings, and her forgiveness of him, are evident.
Abby and the “afflicted” girls in Salem follow up their confessions with accusations for two different reasons. One is to justify and solidify their lies, making them seem rational. The second reason is to redirect blame. For example, Abigail, Mercy, Mary, Betty, etc. all know that to confess to witchcraft is not enough. This is because the authorities of Salem prompt them to give the names of others who they “saw” with the devil. In doing so, they satisfy the Reverends’ desires and implicate others. Confessing to a make believe crime and pretending to having grievously compacted with the devil makes the deceitful girls look more innocent. By licentious naming names, the “afflicted” girls appear to be more willing to purge themselves of evil, while the innocent women they accuse become the new targets for blame and condemnation.

What adds to Abigail Williams’ status as a static character is the fact that she confesses to a lie and then incriminates others by accusing them of a supernatural, and therefore unreal, crime. Later, when she is accused of the crime she actually did commit against the church, her affair with John Proctor, she ironically refuses to confess and uses new accusations to redirect blame once again. Whereas earlier in the play she accuses women of low status in the town, she now turns against her own accusing Mary Warren of witchcraft. This is evident when Abigail says to Mary Warren, who she identifies as the specter of a yellow bird preparing for attack, “Oh, Mary, this is a black art to change your shape...Mary, please don’t hurt me!” (Miller 110). She takes attention off of herself by implicating Mary Warren. Here again, she employs the pattern of following a confession, this time John Proctor’s, with an accusation. In this scenario Abby is not
only attempting to win the admiration of the court, but also John Proctor’s. This is her last effort to win him over and to free him of his bond to his wife, Elizabeth.

Mary Warren follows in Abby’s footsteps. She previously stated to John Proctor that she cannot tell the court about the girls’ pretense because she fears Abigail Williams. As soon as Mary Warren attempts to accuse Abby of lying, the Williams girl threatens her by pretending Mary’s spirit is loose in the courtroom. Abby re-directs blame to someone else, thereby keeping herself safe. Mary Warren also redirects blame when she calls John Proctor “the Devil’s man” (Miller 113). Her accusation makes an innocent man look guilty, reinforces the other false accusations, and turns the accusatory finger away from herself and onto John Proctor. Abby’s accusation against Mary Warren, which was meant to save herself, leads to Mary Warren’s accusation against Proctor. Ironically, Abby’s dissembling has resulted in the implication of the man whose attention she desires most. Above all things, Abigail wants John Proctor; however her use of confession and accusation has finally resulted in the loss of something she actually values. Perhaps the fact that John will now be arrested and hanged, and is no longer available to Abigail, is the reason why she stops accusing any more people. Her intent was to clear her own name, re-establish her reputation in Salem, and get Proctor to marry her. Now that these things are no longer possible for Abby, she feels resigned to give up her ruse and escape while she still can. However, Abigail’s lies and false accusations do not bring her any closer to John. Instead, they make it impossible for her to ever attain him, since as a result of her lies she has helped place him in prison. In a way, Abby’s lies in court are what finally help her acknowledge the truth about her relationship with
Proctor. For once, her lies have resulted in the realization of a truth; that any relationship she had with John in the past is now non-existent.

In her article, “Society vs. the Individual…” Jean Marie Bonnet addresses the act of confession as it is used in Miller’s play when she writes:

The necessity of confessing…means at once something entirely personal, but also something social, for it has a value in so far as it distinguishes each individual in society. Besides, it also implies fame [and] reputation…Confessing a lie is the new institutionalized type of social adjustment as well as a safeguard for life.

Those opposing it are inevitably endangering their lives…[by] rejecting a society which institutionalizes falsehood. (36)

Miller’s use of these characters establishes that often times confessions are followed by accusations and this pattern leads to interestingly paradoxical results. On one hand, the static characters redirection of blame leads to the loss of innocent lives since Rebecca Nurse, Martha Corey and John Proctor are all executed for the crime of witchcraft and less obviously for denying the perpetuation of this system of confessing and accusing.

On the other hand, this process avails an opportunity for growth and maturity amongst more dynamic characters. Perhaps Proctor would not have come to value his name had he not been stripped of everything else. Ironically, he needed others like Abigail, Parris, and Danforth to take away everything, including the dignity of his name, for John to finally recognize his self worth. Through the loss of his family, his freedom, and his reputation, John Proctor comes to value himself in a way that he could not before. Proctor has been identified as, “His own harshest critic” (Miller 18). Part of his challenge lies in finding some value in himself at a time when he seems to have nothing
left to value. Author Stephen Marino discusses this point in his essay, “Arthur Miller’s Weight of Truth,” when he writes, “Because of his affair with Abigail and its effect on his relationship with Elizabeth, his Christian character, his soul and his conscience, he does not consider himself the fearsome man like Corey or the saint like Rebecca” (184). Proctor learns that Salem’s magistrates are not to be respected and he eventually develops a less passive and more assertive attitude towards them since they have stripped him of so much. In the end the only thing left for him to value is his name and this is not something that John is willing to negotiate. He will no longer allow it to be smirched by lies and deceit.

Part of what John must reconcile is the fact that despite Reverend Parris’, Judge Danforth’s, and Judge Hathorne’s perpetuation of the false crime that is witchcraft, he must count himself to blame as well since his affair with Abby prompted her to progressively accuse. “The Crucible: This Fool and I,” written by Walter J. Meserve, discusses John Proctor as he relates to the concept of confession. Meserve writes:

John Proctor is not a difficult man to know, and yet there is a complexity in his character. The sense of authority, for example, against which he rebels in the posture of Parris is a strong part of his nature. It is, in fact, his strength as well as his weakness…Proctor believes in and respects authority. As much as he dislikes and fears the court, he appeals to its authority in the accepted fashion…Correct in his feeling that “authority” is at the root of their problems in Salem, Proctor’s ambivalent attitude toward it allows the “fever” to run its course. (129)

True is the fact that Proctor sees much of Salem’s problems as originating with the authorities. However, John never appreciated Parris as a Reverend; he hopes that Hale
will not turn out to be of the same character, and he lets the news that there are Judges in Salem roll off his back like water. Ultimately, it takes John’s confession to the crime of witchcraft for him to fully comprehend how limitless the officials’ injustices are. When prompted, John refuses to accuse others of witchcraft. In doing so, he finds a security in himself and his identity that he did not have before; one that the authorities made it hard for him to obtain. In another ironic twist, Proctor’s initial confession to the crime of witchcraft is what leads him to deny the perpetuation of this crime by incriminating others, which ultimately leads him to break Miller’s established pattern by revoking his false confession. Simply put, it takes the act of Proctor confessing for him to realize that there is no value in the act of confession because he can never confess or accuse enough to meet the demands of Salem’s magistrates. By the end of the play, he is content to bear blame and accusation while characters like Abigail misdirect it. It takes Proctor’s confession, his lie about witchcraft, for him to realize something about himself. For John, the truth is that giving the authorities’ what they want in order to save his own life does not make him feel any better about himself. He realizes that there is no absolute truth, since to lie means that Proctor, as he knows himself, is dead and that to hang brings about a similar result. It took his confession, his lie on paper, for him to realize that no decision he makes is any truer than the other.

While some characters accuse others to justify their own wrongdoings and to redirect blame, others accuse knowing that they will share in the blame and will be publicizing their own guilt. The most obvious example of this is when Proctor confesses in open court to his affair and calls Abby a whore. Proctor says;
How do you call heaven! Whore! Whore!...I have known her, sir. I have known her...I have made a bell of my honor! I have rung the doom of my good name—you will believe me, Mr. Danforth! She [Abigail] thinks to dance with me on wife's grave!...My wife is innocent, except she knew a whore when she saw one!

(Miller 105)

Not only is Proctor illuminating a truth about himself and Abigail, and attempting to discredit her reputation by showing the court her true motives for accusing innocent citizens, but he is implicating himself and publicly taking responsibility for his sins. Ironically, the only way to discredit Abby, and save his wife Elizabeth, is by discrediting himself. By accusing Abigail Williams in the meeting house in front of his family, friends, and neighbors, John Proctor accepts his role in the affair and blames himself, as much as he does Abby, for their indiscretions.

A less obvious instance when a character accuses others, and therefore implicates himself, occurs when Danforth questions Proctor’s confession at the end of the play. The resolution of the play depicts how desperate Salem’s officials are to end the witch hunts and trials. Judge Danforth demands that Proctor sign his confession so that he has some tangible evidence in hand to justify his actions as one of Salem’s magistrates. When Proctor falters, Danforth accuses him of signing a false confession. In the play the Judge says, “Is that document a lie? If it is a lie I will not accept it! What say you? I will not deal in lies, Mister! You will give your honest confession in my hand, or I cannot keep you from the rope. Which way do you go, Mister?” (Miller 138). Whereas Proctor’s accusation of Abigail Williams was also harmful to himself, Danforth’s accusation against Proctor is meant solely to implicate John. Ironically, Danforth calls Proctor’s
confession a lie when, at this late stage in the trials, it is becoming readily apparent that, up to this point, all of the confessions have been false and that he is the one making demands for them. John Proctor willingly, although apprehensively, confesses to his own sin, thereby accusing himself. On the other hand, Danforth is committed to protecting himself and his reputation and the only way to achieve this is by forcing others to confess and accuse in an effort to cover up his own growing guiltiness and reproachable behavior. Not long before, Danforth refused to postpone the day’s executions because it would speak a floundering on his part. Whereas Proctor displays his guilt for all to see, Danforth does not intend to do so. His status as a judge makes it difficult for anyone, except the audience viewing the play, to mention his obvious guilt. Even though Danforth is inadvertently saying that he knows Abby’s confessions and accusations are a farce he is willing to sacrifice others’ lives before he sacrifices his own reputation. Even though Danforth knows the truth about witchcraft, he still demands lies from the accused. If he had not been so adamant, emphasizing lies over truth and confessions over silence, then characters like the Proctors would not have been able to realize certain truths.
Public and Private

In this chapter, I will argue that the only way any characters can even attempt to maintain some sense of privacy is by bending to the will of the public. In his drama, Miller treats public opinion critically and portrays private knowledge as more valuable. He addresses these topics incessantly throughout his work. As a result, a pattern is evident wherein private matters repetitively become public ones, requiring certain individuals to sacrifice something they value.

According to author Robert Scholes, authors are not in positions that facilitate interpretation. In his book, *Semiotics and Interpretation* Robert Scholes writes:

> Through them [authors] speak other voices—some cultural and public, some emerging distorted from those aspects of private need repressed as the price for attaining a public subjectivity in language. An author is not a perfect ego but a mix of public and private, conscious and unconscious elements, insufficiently unified for use as an interpretative base. (14)

The topics of public and private are overt in Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible*, allowing for the community that is the playwright’s audience, and the individual members of this group, to find meaning in this work.

To begin with, there are instances throughout the play where characters reinforce public opinion because their society condones and rewards such acts. This is particularly evident in Abigail Williams’ actions. Abby learns to use a public forum in order to get what she wants when she quickly realizes that publicizing her grievances gains her the respect of the men in town. Her private desire for John Proctor was revealed early on in the play when it is noted that Abby, “drank a charm to kill Goody Proctor...you drank
blood, Abby” (Miller 17). Instead of explaining this, she gives the officials names and is soon welcomed into the world of men. Her accusations have landed her a place amongst the most powerful male figures in the community, including a judge, a deputy governor, and reverends. Many people would be thrilled to be equated with such worthy men, especially a young girl seeking attention and affection from the opposite sex. Abigail’s male counterparts inspire her and her newfound eminence lends a hand to her cruel and malevolent schemes. This acceptance allows her to re-identify herself in the community. Her past indiscretions have been forgotten and her reputation has been elevated. This causes Abby to feel safe enough to use her position in the public as a way of eliminating Elizabeth Proctor and making John Proctor available. Part of what fuels her vindictiveness towards Elizabeth is the fact she has become accepted and empowered by a society that shunned her for her previous illicitness.

Interestingly, Abby’s experience in the men’s realm offers her insight and opportunity she would not have had otherwise. Her status allows for newfound observations of men and women. Author James J. Martine writes of Abby, “‘I never knew what pretense Salem was, I never knew the lying lessons I was taught by all these Christian women and their covenanted men.’ This revelation to Abby of man’s natural depravity [emphasizes] that Abby is a will-o-the-wisp, and as such she is deceptive, illusive, and misleading” (56). Abigail is toying with the roles that women held in Salem, 1692. Instead of spending her days at home cooking and cleaning, she has acquired newfound fame and the attention is too much to resist. She begins to question the public and private binary when she realizes and is angered by what it does to women. Women’s jobs were completed behind the scenes; one might even say that because their tasks were
predominantly completed in the home, they were done privately. Yet, Abigail paves her own path, one separate from other women of the times. She attempts to use public opinions to her personal advantage because as a woman she is angered by her exemption from this sphere. At the same time, she ironically shuns the teachings of the church and state when she has her affair with Proctor. In this instance she does not value public beliefs; however, she comes to love the public’s attention. She has become a martyr of sorts, who uses the public’s teaching to her own advantages. It is because of Abigail’s selfish desires for men’s attention that she tries to make a space for herself in the public. Meanwhile, it is because of her gender that she is denied access to the public realm of men.

Through her use of Salem’s emphasis on public opinion and knowledge she thinks she has gained a sort of social redemption and that she has broken down the gender binary that exists between men and women. Abby has been accepted, temporarily so, into the public world of men. It is their job to man the front lines and take care of public business. On the other hand, a woman’s role entails housework and raising a family. As a woman Abigail transcends these gender roles when she, who is supposed to be a docile and private female, publicly flaunts her newfound rank amongst men. She feels she has won a sort of liberation from her gender when in fact her acceptance into the public world of men is really just a ruse. It is not long before she is flung back into the privacy of female life and this coincidentally occurs as soon as the male officials in charge of public life in Salem have seized all of the information they need to fuel the witch trials and executions. What Abigail thought was a move up in the public ranks of society was merely a power play by masculine figures who quickly redirect her back to her private
feminine role once they have acquired the information they desire. Ironically, Abby’s attempts to use the public are reversed since the public ends up using her instead.

Elizabeth Proctor’s handling of public and private is also complex. At times in the play she seems to value public knowledge, while at other times she finds private knowledge to be more important. This is because Elizabeth’s philosophy throughout much of the play is that each citizen has the right to internalize and interpret society’s teachings differently. Evidence of this is found when she denies the existence of witches despite Reverend Hale’s statement that The Bible does speak of them. Elizabeth Proctor states, “If you think that I am one, then I say there are none” (Miller 67). Goody Proctor is one who judges based upon facts that she concludes are true and not necessarily upon the town’s theories and ideas. The irony here lies in the fact that Elizabeth thinks she is speaking based upon her own personal moral code, when in fact her opinion of witches originates in the church’s teachings. Not only was the concept of witchcraft originally defined for her by The Bible, but it is not until the public’s opinion of them infringes upon her personal life that she decides to publicize her recently developed personal belief that they are not real. Here she attempts to manipulate public teachings by personalizing them at a time that is most convenient for her.

Despite the theory that John Proctor is an authoritative figure in Salem, he emphasizes private over public knowledge. While Elizabeth tries to reconcile the two, John values privacy in all matters from penance to punishment, to redemption, etc. From the beginning of the play he attempts to deal with Abigail Williams privately. In act I he sees her alone and tells her, “But I will cut off my hand before I ever reach for you again” (Miller 21). In act II John hesitates to go into town and publicly incriminate Abby. In
fact, John often falters under public scrutiny. This is apparent when Reverend Hale, a public official of the court, questions the Proctors in their own home. John inadvertently forgets the one commandment that he has broken. Here again, Proctor’s fallibility is further accentuated when Elizabeth ironically points out the commandment he has forgotten and John attempts to regain his credibility, “‘adultery John.’ ‘You see sir, between the two of us we do know them all’” (Miller 65). It is probable that he knows the Ten Commandments, but according to Reverend Hale, his forgetfulness is inexcusable. Reverend Hale reinforces this when he comments to John Proctor that knowing nine out of the ten is not enough because, “Theology, sir, is a fortress; no crack in a fortress may be accounted small” (Miller 65). The church’s society has deemed it necessary for citizens to know their commandments. Here again, it seems that the public dictates over private truth and knowledge, foreshadowing that anyone who values private over public will surely suffer for it. However the two are more fluid than this as seen in Proctor’s attempts to convince Hale of his personal knowledge of the Ten Commandments, despite his inability to publicly portray it.

John is unsuccessful when he tries to remain loyal to his beliefs in private knowledge. Despite Proctor’s earlier misgivings to bring what he believes is the truth about Abby to light, he must do so even though this may mean that John is forced to publicly confess to adultery. Edward Murray discusses Proctor’s decision in his article, “Dramatic technique in The Crucible” when he writes, “The question of whether the court will believe him would seem of secondary importance. The cardinal point is that John must struggle against his own fear. Miller attempts to integrate the ‘personal’ and the ‘social’ in a number of ways” (46). John Proctor must resolve himself,
acknowledging that his private truths are dependent upon public beliefs. At this moment, Proctor comes to realize that public and private are not two opposing subjects, but that they are linked. It is not so much that Proctor fears publicly admitting his sins to the court, or that he is afraid of the public’s repercussions. What makes the task at hand so daunting is taking something private between Elizabeth and him, and publicizing it. They are having enough trouble moving forward as a family without the gossip, slander, and accusation that will surely follow once all of Salem knows about John’s indiscretions. He is set on getting the court’s attention even if this means that he must utilize the connection between public and private, despite his desire for them to exist separately. Therefore he takes it upon himself to stop the, “vengeance that is walking Salem” (Miller 74). Proctor believes that when he illuminates truth, “all our old pretense is ripped away— make your peace… Peace. It is providence, and no great change; we are only what we always were, but naked now… Aye naked! And the wind, God’s icy wind will blow! (Miller 78). His hope is that by publicizing his sins and humility, pretense will disappear, the lives of many innocent people will be saved, and he will be able to maintain his private values. Proctor finally realizes that he needs the public in order to retain private truth.

Many of Miller’s protagonists must make sacrifices for refusing to appease public demands. Rebecca Nurse and Martha Corey are hanged because they will not give the public the lies that they require. Giles Corey is pressed to death for not publicizing the name of the man who overheard Thomas Putnam say that he was accusing his neighbors so that he could buy up their land. Corey says, “Why, I— I cannot give you his name… You know well why not! He’ll lay in jail if I give you his name” (Miller 92).
Like these characters John feels forced to choose between giving in to public demands or maintain the value he places in private truth. To reiterate, characters who refuse to meet public demands must give something up. Rebecca, Martha, and Giles sacrifice their lives. John’s position at the end of act IV illuminates a problem with the pattern established by the playwright wherein characters must choose between public and private. In reality, characters must realize that to have private truth they must bend to the public’s will. Miller’s antagonists could care less about the fact that to sign his confession, which will be publicly displayed, means that Proctor is making a private sacrifice. He is offering up his name to the public which entails giving up his reputation in the town and his personal moral goodness. However, Proctor’s name is not distinctly a personal possession. It acts as a public record marking the events of his life in Salem’s community. Thus his name on this document also discredits the public, since the church and state are institutions that color Proctor’s perceptions of right and wrong, good and bad, moral and immoral. This demeans the church’s ability to raise religiously sound individuals. Therefore the act of signing his confession is equally a sacrifice of his private character, as well as a stain on the public’s reputation. Yet even when Proctor reconciles public and private truths about witchcraft and his name he remains unsatisfied, just as Danforth is unsatisfied with Proctor’s signed confession. John is hanged and Danforth is left bewildered because public demands on private individuals are never ceasing. Therefore public and private are linked because there is no end to their reliance upon each other.

Earlier in the play, Elizabeth is chastised by her husband for dwelling on an affair that ended seven months ago. John says to her, “Learn charity, woman!...Let you
sometime look for the goodness in me, and judge me not” (Miller 52-53). He is tired of
her ridicule and her lack of forgiveness. At the end of the play, she is called upon by
public officials to coerce John into confessing. Before Proctor even enters this scene, it is
obvious that she has forgiven John when she replies by saying that she will talk with him
but not necessarily try to convince him. Goody Proctor states, “Let me speak with him,
Excellency… I promise nothing. Let me speak with him” (Miller 127). Here, Elizabeth
inadvertently reveals that her private relationship cannot be severed from public
judgments. Despite her words to John, it seems Elizabeth wants him to live just as the
public officials do. Yet she repeatedly answers his queries about confessing by stating
that she cannot judge him: “There be no higher judge under heaven than Proctor is!...I
never knew such goodness in all the world” (Miller 132). It would be seemingly easy for
Goody Proctor to request that John save his life the way that Salem’s public
representatives have. But that act would be one more instance where Elizabeth tells John
what she would have him do. She thinks she ignores public pressure, as well as her own
private desires, by allowing John to make his own decision about his goodness. But in a
way, she is perpetuating the public process of forgiveness as an act that will satisfy
personal desires. At the same time she is performing her socially taught role as a
supportive wife. She believes John is capable of finding a peace that will allow him to
live. Furthermore, Elizabeth thinks that his decision is something no one should take
away from him, not the highest of Salem’s public authorities or the closest of his private
family. What Elizabeth fails to realize is that her best efforts to eliminate public and
private demands on John are impossible and this is why no matter what choice he makes,
John must sacrifice something he values by choosing between his name and his life.
History and Entertainment

When people put their faith in moral absolutisms they do so in an attempt to secure their own positions within their culture and any attempt to make the absolutes fixed undermines the potential they have to change over time. Therefore, a problematic aspect arises when truth and lies, good and bad, confession and accusation, and public and private are treated as absolutes with fixed and opposing definitions. The same is true of the classifications of Miller’s play, *The Crucible*, as either historical or entertaining.

As E. Miller Burdick states in his essay, “History and Other Spectres in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible,*” “Miller is making a statement about the relationship between objective fact and subjective fiction, or rather, about the existence of subjective fact in objective fiction and vice versa…the lesson is what can happen when individuals forget the limits of their own optical and moral senses…the subjectivity which ever colours our knowledge of the objective world” (111). *The Crucible* presents what can happen when a person firmly believes in fixed morality, not only because nothing ever is absolute, but also because to believe in absolutes is harmful. This is due to the fact that absolutes are restrictive and do not allow for changes and shifts in ideology. What adds to the tragic nature of this play are the many murders of innocent people, which are the results of beliefs in moral absolutism more than they are the results of authoritarian corruption.

Interestingly, the problematical aspect of absolutes also applies to the characteristics of Miller’s work as a dramatic play to be performed on stage. This is because neither the author’s intentions nor the audience’s perceptions can be fixed absolutes, since they are inextricably bound up in one another. Burdick continues by discussing the nature of the genre of this work as a play when he writes, “Miller’s play,
as a play, enforces our awareness of the fiction. It insists that life (i.e. history) and literature are both specters of consciousness, ours or someone else’s, projection of the imagination” (112). In other words, Miller gives his play life and meaning for the audience to absorb. Meanwhile his viewers shed their own light on his work by interpreting his meaning based upon their own perceptions and experiences.

An important factor to keep in mind is that Miller’s play is not a history. He clearly states in his “A Note On The Historical Accuracy Of This Play,” “This play is not history in the sense in which the word is used by the academic historian...However, I believe that the reader will discover here the essential nature of one of the strangest and most awful chapters in human history” (Miller iv). The playwright is emphasizing that the importance of his play lies neither in what is accurate, nor in what he took literary license to change; Miller’s desire is for his viewer to appreciate that, despite the changes he has made, the events of Salem in the seventeenth century were tragic in nature.
Hathorne, and reducing the number of afflicted girls. Conversely, some changes he is less forthcoming with, such as the change he has made to John Proctor’s age (Martine 60). By lowering John Proctor’s age and raising Abigail Williams’, he has actually lost some of the lurid aspects that may have drawn the audience’s attention. As an author, Miller has one main task to accomplish and that is to present a moral and impart his intended lesson. His alterations detract from the historical nature of Salem’s witch hunts as actual crimes committed against humanity, therefore undermining the genuine political nature of his work. At the same time, he tries to catch the audience’s attention by adding scandal that already existed in Salem. Therefore his focus on adding drama actually takes away from the historical relevance and intrigue that his play attempts to reveal.

Of equal importance is the fact that Miller’s play is not merely entertainment. In fact, the entertainment value embedded within Miller’s drama is merely a ploy, a baited hook of sorts. By nature, plays are seemingly recreational, for enjoyment, and an amusing pastime. In this case though, the play is denser, as evident in Miller’s attempts to gain his audience’s attention through the use of such a medium. Why does Miller create such a sultry affair between Williams and Proctor? Perhaps the answer is more obvious than the audience may think. The best way to accomplish his objective is by including somewhat taboo topics and events, such as sex, puritanical capital punishment, and torture in his work. This is a twofold attractiveness, first between one character and another, and second between the audience and the stage. Once the viewer, who is mesmerized by the dramatic elements, takes the bait they are soon exposed to the author’s message. Essayist Burdick discusses that history lends itself to the stage for several reasons. One of the reasons he offers is, “History is not simply a device which Miller employs in order to
escape the unmediated closeness of contemporary issues. Rather it is a fully developed subject within the play itself. For history is for Miller precisely what enables us to resist the demon of moral absolutism” (96). In other words, Miller presents history in his play because it allows room for the analysis of seemingly past and historical issues. The guise of the play is that it is a form of entertainment; the guise of its setting, Salem 1692, is that the issues presented are not contemporary ones. In fact though, the play is illusively keeping the audience’s attention as a movie would, while at the same time, addressing an issue that spans the past and exists even today.

The connection between history and entertainment, and between the audience and the play, allows the audience to form independent thoughts about social injustices. Arthur Miller has created relatable human characters, developed a dramatic plot with a tragic ending, and enhanced the setting of his historical model in an effort to connect his work with his audience. The fluidity which exists between author, work, and audience further undermines the false belief in, and perpetuation of, fixed absolutes.
Works Cited


