Title: A discussion of The Crucible
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[Woolway is an educator affiliated with Oriel College in Oxford, England. In this essay she proposes that while Miller's play was aimed at criticizing a specific period in American history—the McCarthy trials of the 1950s—the work has relevance to modern society on a number of levels, particularly the topic of child abuse.]

The theater critic Robert A. Martin wrote in Modern Drama that The Crucible “has endured beyond the immediate events of its own time. If it was originally seen as a political allegory, it is presently seen by contemporary audiences almost entirely as a distinguished American play by an equally distinguished American playwright.” His comments are misleading because they imply that a play cannot be “distinguished” if it is also political. What Martin seems to be assuming is firstly that a play must, in some sense, be “timeless” in order to be “distinguished,” and secondly, that a political play is, by its nature, only relevant within a limited historical and social context. I would argue that Miller's play is highly political, but that while it draws much of its impetus from a given historical situation—Joseph McCarthy's war against communist Americans—it also raises political questions which are valid in a range of social, cultural, and historical contexts.

The relevance of Miller's themes to modern audiences has been emphasized by the 1996 film production of The Crucible, directed by Nicholas Hytner (The Madness of King George) and adapted by Miller himself. In his introduction to the published edition of that screenplay, Miller commented, “as we prepared to shoot the movie, we were struck time and again by its alarming topicality: it spoke directly about the bigotry of religious fundamentalists across the globe, about communities torn apart by accusations of child abuse, about the rigid intellectual orthodoxies of college campuses—there is no shortage of contemporary Salems ready to cry witchcraft. But the film's political agenda is not specific. The Crucible has outlived Joe McCarthy, and has acquired a universal urgency shared only by stories that tap primal truths.” One of these areas—the topic of child abuse—particularly shows that Miller is keen to both root his writing in contemporary issues and at the same time challenge audiences by raising general questions about society, religion, and law.

Miller made many changes, mainly structural, to his play text when he adapted it for film. But the changes he made to one scene in particular also suggest his concern to make the screenplay topical. In an episode which is not in the original play, Ruth Putnam accuses Jacobs of having sent his spirit into her room and says that it laid on top of her and pressed down on her: “He come through my window.... And then he lay down upon me ... I could not take breath—his body crush heavy upon me. And he say in my ear, `Ruth Putnam, I will have your life if you testify against me in court.'” Jacobs, taking her accusation more literally than it is intended, replies bemusedly, “Why, Your Honor, I must have these sticks to walk with, how may I come through a window.”

The episode has undertones of child abuse—the accusation recalls recent cases in the U.S. and Britain where allegations of abuse have been made against members of a community which have later seemed to have been untrue. The play contains other elements which parallel these cases, particularly the scenes of collective hysteria, the speed with which gossip and rumors spread, and the inability of people to stop accusations once they have started. Miller's concern in supplying these topical references is not to suggest that such child abuse does not occur, but rather to point to the circumstances in a society from which these false claims might arise.

The society which is portrayed in The Crucible is one in which there is almost no outlet for creativity or imagination. Given this deficit, it is hardly surprising that the young women who gather in the woods to dance have strong imaginations which, when given any kind of outlet, take their imaginative stories to extremes and begin to believe—in one scene, for instance—that a large bird is indeed hovering in the roof of the courtroom. We know that their stories are fabrications, yet we can also appreciate that, to some extent, they believe what they are saying. The boundaries between fact and fiction are easily blurred when there are so few opportunities for expression. It is unclear at the beginning of the play as to the extent to
which Betty Parris's illness is feigned. So too in the scene of Ruth's accusation in the film, the viewer's perception of Ruth's words lies within a grey area between an overactive imagination and a reality in which actual physical abuse may have occurred. This situation is similar to instances of mass delusion which are commonly identified in the behavior of religious cult members.

Director Hytner pointed to one possible cause of this collective delusion in his introduction: female adolescent hysteria. As he explained, "we worked from the premise that the source of the girls' destructive energy is their emergent sexuality, so the entire opening [with the girls ritually dancing around a fire] is designed to uncork the bottle of desire."

If we connect this emergent (and repressed) desire both to the excessively strict behavioral codes of Puritan religion in the seventeenth century and to the excessive demands of communities with extreme religious views, then the power of Miller's topical references to raise issues beyond their immediate setting becomes clearer. The Crucible is an indictment of society's attitudes towards religion and sexuality, I would argue, rather than an attempt to make a point about specific events in recent history.

In Miller's treatment of the character of Abigail, the distinction between individual malice and community disease is explained. The girl's behavior indicates her mischievous enjoyment of the power that accusations against others bring. But the events her allegations set into motion go beyond mere mischief, suggesting that the community of Salem has embedded in its fabric elements of social corruption, moral disease, or unresolved and repressed feelings of anger and hostility. Abigail's actions should be seen as a sign rather than a cause of these feelings. Because of her parents' brutal murder, she is without adults to whom she is close: Reverend Parris cares for her material needs but there is no evidence that they are emotionally close. Her adulterous relationship with John Proctor and her alleged fate as a prostitute in Boston might be seen as a craving for affection which, in the absence of family love, manifests itself in physical desire. Her apparent belief in witchcraft may have similar roots—in a need to find an alternative to the strict and, it seems, loveless Puritanism of her uncle, which attracts her to precisely the things—black magic, physical expression, and sexual conjuring—which the religion of her community forbids.

This commentary on collective guilt and responsibility adds further weight to Miller's critique of societies which do not maintain a balance between individual liberty and social organization. In his prose insert before the beginning of Act One in the original play text, Miller notes that the aim of a theocracy such as that found in Salem is to "keep the community together, and to prevent any kind of disunity that might open it to destruction by material or ideological enemies. It was forged for a necessary purpose and accomplished that purpose. But all organization is and must be grounded on the idea of exclusion and prohibition.... Evidently the time came in New England when the repressions of order were heavier than seemed warranted by the dangers against which the order was organized. The witch-hunt was a perverse manifestation of the panic which set in among classes when the balance began to turn toward greater individual freedom."

What Miller seems to be suggesting in both his play and screenplay is that examples of collective hysteria which lead to false accusations by a body of people who know those accusations to be untrue are not just examples of malicious slander but may also reveal deep-seated neuroses about sexual boundaries and individual freedoms caused by an excessive focus on prohibition and social acceptance. Where these fears cannot be expressed, and must instead be repressed, a perversion of normal social relations may occur. In the case of the Salem Witch Trials, Miller depicts this perversion in the form of extreme, and seemingly random, accusations against the ordinary people of a community. John Proctor sums up the suddenness and ease with which this corruption could be exposed when he cries out, "I'll tell you what's walking Salem—vengeance is walking Salem. We are what we always were in Salem, but now the little crazy children are jangling the keys of the kingdom, and common vengeance writes the law!"

But this is a criticism which could be made of any society; Miller's point is a timeless one, moving beyond the details of the Salem witch-hunts, and also beyond the topical allusions to cases of collective child abuse with which communities in the later twentieth century have become so involved. Whatever the historical context, both the play and film ask audiences to look inwards to the perversions, fears, and guilt which dominate their social and political life. In this sense, The Crucible is both timeless and deeply political.