

## The New Historicist Reading of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*

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### Abstract

New Historicism is a modern literary theory that concentrates on how events, places, and culture within a society affect or influence a written work. New historicism often looks for allusions to characterize of the time period a novel was written. This paper focuses on *The Crucible*, a dramatic work by American playwright, Arthur Miller. The paper studies how *The Crucible* is a vital part of America's historical literature as well as essential to the present day discussion of New Historicism that is greatly influenced by the work of Michael Foucault and his theories about power and discourse and Stephen Greenblatt's idea of "textuality of history". Despite the obvious political criticisms contained within the play, most critics felt that *The Crucible* was a self contained play about a terrible period in American history. To put New Historicism as a mode of interpretation on this play, studies the complex networks of social discourses besides the concepts of power, subversion and resistance in this special way of reading of the play.

**Key words:** New historicism; Power; Resistance; Subversion; Miller; History; Salem

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### INTRODUCTION

*The Crucible* has long been considered one of Arthur Miller's more social—if not only political—plays.

As a result, much critical examination has focused on connection between the Salem Witch Trials and the so-called Communist with Hunts of the 1950s. However, few studies explore how the poetic language of the play supports Miller's social and political concerns.

In *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller, uses figurative language-images, symbols, metaphors-indigenous to the society of the play's characters. The language of the Salemites is steeped in the biblical and religious allusions of their theocratic society. Moreover, the poetic language of the text is distinguished by the use of opposites, which illustrate the extreme conflicts that polarize the Salem Community. In this expression of opposites, Miller effectively connects the parlous times of Salem village in the 1690s to the similar state of America in the 1950s. This is something that this article wants to explore about. This paper studies how *The Crucible* is a vital part of America's historical literature as well as essential to the present day discussion of New Historicism that is greatly influenced by the work of Michael Foucault and his theories about power and discourse and Stephen Greenblatt's idea of "textuality of history". It has always been remarked by the New Historicists that history is a complex phenomenon, incorporating interacting discourses, and that literary texts are woven through with social forces. In this interaction, the New Historicist critics often look for ways literary texts act subversively to divulge the lost or repressed discourses.

The question that is explored here is about the New Historicist's conception of power, its relation to the possibility of subversion or resistance; perhaps the most contested issue in the ongoing debate.

### 1. WHAT HAPPENS IN *THE CRUCIBLE*?

Set in the village of Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, *The Crucible* tells the story of what happens when the town's Pastor, Reverend Parris, spies his young daughter, Betty, and a group of other girls from his church, dancing in

the woods. Betty is in a coma and her cousin, Abigail, admits that they were indeed dancing and accuses Betty of faking her illness to escape punishment. A neighbor, Ann Putman arrives and says that her daughter is behaving strangely also, and that she has heard the rumor that Betty has been seen flying like a witch. She declares her suspicion that Parris's slave, Tituba has been introducing the girls to native spiritual rituals and practices. She, herself, has sent her servant girl to Tituba to find out why she has lost so many of her babies. Reverend Hale is called in for a consultation on whether this is a case of some evil invading the community. Once the charge of possible witchcraft is leveled, there is no turning back for the people of Salem. As the play progresses we learn of the disputes and jealousies that resided in this farming community whose law is the dogma of their faith and whose judges must uphold not only the law but the authority and power of the church. Abigail and the other young girls enter into a deadly game of naming as witches, the townspeople who try to reason with the court. Many prominent and successful families are destroyed, giving rise to the question of why the young girls have been given so much power. Why does the court believe adolescent girls over the stability of church members, who by all accounts, have led good and productive lives?

We begin to see that what the court wants is the confessions of those who stand accused. It matters not if they are guilty or innocent. It is the authority of the court that cannot be questioned. Finally, John Proctor is faced with the decision to tell the truth, plead his innocence of witchcraft and hang, or to tell a lie and live. Elizabeth Proctor, who tells the only lie of her life in an attempt to save her husband, escapes the hangman because she is pregnant. When John Proctor declares he will plead guilty, Rebecca Nurse, the town's midwife, is brought in from her prison cell to witness his declaration in hopes that she too will also plead guilty. She refuses and is shocked by Proctor's willingness to confess to a lie. When the Judges try to force Proctor to name others and post his confession in public, he refuses because he has confessed to them before God. He admits that his confession is a lie. He is taken to be hanged with the other accused.

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## 2. NEW HISTORICISM AND LITERARY STUDIES

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New Historicism is an approach to literary criticism and literary theory based on the premise that a literary work should be considered a product of the time, place, and historical circumstances of its composition rather than as an isolated work of art or text. It has its roots in a reaction to the "New Criticism" of formal analysis of works of literature, which was seen by a new generation of professional critics as ignoring the greater social and political consequences of the production of literary texts.

New Historicism developed in the 1980s, primarily through the work of the critic Stephen Greenblatt, gaining widespread influence in the 1990s and beyond.

New Historicists aim simultaneously to understand the work through its historical context and to understand cultural as well as to investigate the intellectual history and cultural history through literature. The approach owes much of its impetus to the work of Michel Foucault, who based his approach both on his theory of the limits of collective cultural knowledge and on his technique of examining a broad array of documents in order to understand the *episteme* of a particular time. Using Foucault's work as a starting point, New Historicism aims at interpreting a literary text as an expression of or reaction to the power-structures of the surrounding society.

Inspired by Foucault, New Historicism frequently addresses the idea that the lower common denominator of all human actions is power. Therefore, the new historicists seek to find examples of power and how it is dispersed within the text. Power is a means through which the marginalized are controlled, and the thing that the marginalized seek to gain. New Historicists seek to find "sites of struggle" to identify just who is the group or entity with the most power. New Historicism, being anti-establishment, always implicitly approves personal freedom and celebrates all forms of difference and deviance.

New Historicism, though celebrates personal freedom and "deviant" thinking, suggests that it is "unthinkable" because power is enabled and maintained by institutions, such as the court, the church, the colonial administration, the patriarchal family—and also diffused in ideological structures of meaning, characteristic modes of expression, recurrent narrative patterns.

New Historicists, in course of interpretation, actually situate the literary text in its context and recover as far as possible the repressed, contradictory or unknown historical meanings or historicity of the text and then examine the relationship between these historical and cultural meanings of the text and the situation of the reader in order to arouse the readers' cultural wonder at the resonance. In both the New Historicists, though they are interested in issues of history, they interpret the term history in a much broader sense. This group of scholars does not take history and historical background just as political events of a period. Rather, they attempt to locate texts within other discourses which are prevalent at the time. They want to emphasize that literature and history are inseparable. Williams and others emphasized the issue of class whereas Greenblatt emphasized social and cultural practices that surrounded the text. A textual representation or a literary text, therefore, is the product of its negotiation with history and cultural exchange which becomes an interesting site for the New Historicists. Obviously, history cannot be known except through

linguistic intervention and literature cannot be understood without having knowledge of its historical context. The “textuality of history” with “the history of text” becomes the key concept of New Historicism as defined by Louis Montrose and quoted by Stephen Greenblatt in his essay *Resonance and Wonder* (p.80).

The questioning of a text employed by the New Historicists are more among these topics: Power relations, containment and subversion of authority, historical cultural pointers, language-knowledge-power connection, models of human personality, mapping of physical body and truth-authority nexus that we will work with some of them in studying this literary work that we want to speak about.

### 3. THE NEW HISTORICIST STUDY OF *THE CRUCIBLE*

In New Historicism, as said before, a literary work should be considered a product of the time, place, and historical and social circumstances of its composition rather than as an isolated work of art or text. *The Crucible* may well be called a social play, since it analyzes a public phenomenon with historical precedent and current actuality. But it focuses on the subjective reality of that phenomenon; it cannot be judged merely on the literal accuracy or political aptness of its topical allusions. Arthur Miller’s classic parable of mass hysteria draws a chilling parallel between the Salem witch-hunt of 1692—one of the strangest and most awful chapters in human history - and the American anti-communist purges led by Senator McCarthy in the 1950s. The story of how the small community of Salem is stirred into madness by superstition, paranoia and malice, culminating in a violent climax, is a savage attack on the evils of mindless persecution and the terrifying power of false accusations.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s America was overwhelmed with concerns about the threat of communism growing in Eastern Europe and China. Capitalizing on those concerns, a young Senator named Joseph McCarthy made a public accusation that more than two hundred “card-carrying” communists had infiltrated the United States government. Though eventually his accusations were proven to be untrue, and he was censured by the Senate for unbecoming conduct, his zealous campaigning ushered in one of the most repressive times in 20<sup>th</sup> century American politics.

While the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAAC) had been formed in 1938 as an anti-Communist organ, McCarthy’s accusations heightened the political tensions of the times. Known as McCarthyism, the paranoid hunt for infiltrators was notoriously difficult on writers and entertainers, many of whom were labeled communist sympathizers and were unable to continue working. Some had their passports taken away, while others were jailed for refusing to give the names of other

communists. The trials, which were well publicized, could often destroy a career with a single unsubstantiated accusation. Hollywood was hit directly by the McCarthy trials as screenwriters, playwrights, directors, musicians, and actors were brought in to testify. In all, three hundred and twenty artists were blacklisted, and for many of them this meant the end of exceptional and promising careers.

Arthur Miller realized that the lingo being thrown around by McCarthy sounded very similar to the language used in the Salem Witch Trials (some 300 years before), a historical period he researched heavily while in college. In comparing the Salem witch trials and the McCarthy era, there is a similar cocktail of fear, anxiety, passion, and jealousy pervade the country that Miller shows completely in *The Crucible*. Fear establishes its own reality, step by step, as individuals abandon their own sanity in order to be a part of the community mind, even if that community mind is stricken with terror. We see this immediately in the play, as Parris begins to elaborate on what he saw, or what he thinks he saw, in the woods:

*I cannot blink what I saw, Abigail, for my enemies will not blink it. I saw a dress lying on the grass . . . Aye, a dress. And I thought I saw—someone naked running through the trees!* (p.1)

Abigail challenges him:

*No one was naked! You mistake yourself, uncle!” Parris responds with anger: “I saw it! . . . Whatever abomination you have done, give me all of it now, for I dare not be taken unaware when I go before them down there* (p.1).

We hear echoes of McCarthyism throughout such lines—the fear of the man who must testify before the inquisitors, the willingness to accept their reality, his own gradually growing madness as he imagines something one moment, is far from certain about what he has seen, and then the next moment is defending his imagined claim with indignant passion.

Senator McCarthy saw red everywhere, much as Hale and Parris see Satan everywhere. In trying to eradicate this perceived threat, an atmosphere of fear and paranoia was created in both instances. Eventually, under extreme pressure and fear of retaliation, like witnesses before HUAC, Mary Warren provides false testimony against John Proctor. People in both cases, like Mary Warren, were damned if they provided information and even more damned if they did not.

The belief that anything not American or democratic was evil in U.S. society during the 1950s was the basis of McCarthy’s attacks. Likewise, individuals in Salem who did not abide by the prevailing morality were viewed as evil. Using such a good versus evil morality and from a position of superiority, men like McCarthy and Parris and Hale persecuted many innocent individuals on mere hearsay. Few men in the 1950s resisted HUAC as John Proctor resists Salem officials. Lillian Hellman, a famous playwright, said during the HUAC hearings, “I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year’s fashion”

(Schrecker, p.2). Such words echo those of John Proctor, who, when forced to provide false witness against others, declares:

*I never knew until tonight that the world is gone daft with this nonsense.* (p.16)

Clearly the act of naming names weighed heavily on Miller's mind while he was writing *The Crucible*. The parallels between the events of Salem and Miller's environment at the time, the McCarthy era, are easy to draw. On February 9, 1950 McCarthy, who up to this point was a rather unknown Senator, made a speech in Virginia in which he stated there were communists in the Department of State and he held in his hand a list of names.

This was the beginning of a brief but damaging period of hysteria in which Americans were interviewed about their involvement in the Communist Party, pressured to admit they were members and to name the names of other members. Whether or not the accused were communists, or whether or not the names of those brought forward did anything seemed to be a moot point. Many were accused and many were named, with little proof. Being critical of the government, for example, was enough proof to convict an individual as a communist.

Like those who answered "yes" to the McCarthy question, Mary Warren, in *The Crucible*, is forced to name names through fear and threats. When he is told that various individuals have confessed to being witches or admitting others are, John Proctor responds by saying:

*And why not, if they must hang for denying it?* (p.36)

Proctor would rather face death by being honest with himself than falsely accuse others to save his own skin, a choice not elected by many who faced HUAC in the 1950s. The problem was when people named names merely to deflect attention away from themselves. In the play, this is certainly what Abigail and the girls do to deflect attention away from their dancing in the woods:

*I saw Sarah Good with the Devil! I saw Goody Osburn with the Devil! I saw Bridget Bishop with the Devil!* (p.10)

When characters refuse to name names they get into trouble. In Act Three, Corey refuses to give the name of his source that proves Putnam is falsely accusing his neighbors as witches:

*I will give you no name. I mentioned my wife's name once and I'll burn in hell long enough for that. I stand mute.* (p.23)

For this refusal, he is arrested for contempt of court and eventually killed. When John attempts to confess in Act two, he also refuses to name names

*They think to go like saints. I like not to spoil their names.* (p.36)

The judge's response is that John's confession is a lie and invalid if he does not name names:

*Proctor, you mistake me. I am not empowered to trade your life for a lie.* (p.36)

The madness of many of the people in the play corresponds with the madness of many Americans in the throes of the McCarthy era. Nobody wanted to be branded as a witch or as a communist, for to do so would mean ostracism, at the very least, and a life lived as a marked person. Many people did whatever they had to do, said whatever they had to say, to avoid such a branding, such a stark alienation from the community.

By defining New Historicism, it is also said that the New Historicists seek to find examples of power and the way that it is dispersed within the text. As Foucault believes power is a means through which the marginalized are controlled, and the thing that the marginalized seek to gain. New Historicists seek to find sites of struggle to identify just who is the group or entity with the most power. Possessing Power when an individual has the ability to possess control or authority over others, they've achieved power. Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* implies the concept of how certain characters abuse their given power to protect themselves or hurt others. Throughout the progression of the play, Parris's high status allows him to dismiss the truth of witchery in order to keep his standing. Unlike Parris, in order to escape her punishment Abigail uses her power as a guard. Danforth's position allows him to abuse his power for the keeping of the court's good reputation. Thus, as the plot progressed each of the character's power would betray the town therefore, creating the crucibles. This brought to light an adaptation of the Salem witch hunts which paralleled Miller's, and many others' traumatic experiences of being a communist during the 'communist hunt' that took place around the 1950's. As said before, this was the time of McCarthyism; the practice of making accusations towards treason, disloyalty while turning a blind eye to the evidence. In this playwright, as well as during the communist hunts, one individual would accuse one another of what was looked upon as a serious crime.

Those in a position of power, like Governor Danforth and the Reverend Parris, appear to be merely interested in perpetuating the power of the court and the church and refuse to listen to dissenting views. They identify themselves as part of the system and any dissent becomes a personal affront. Miller also suggests that they place their faith in the girls because it is expedient to do so as a means of reclaiming their eroding authority. As the "keeper" of justice, Danforth believes that people must be sentenced to death if they do not confess. He follows procedures and refuses to admit Proctor's deposition. He maintains that:

*A person is either with this court or he must be counted against it.* (p.30)

He maintains that 4,000 are already set to hang in jails upon his signature and 72 are ready to be hanging in Salem here as well. There is "no road in between." This is the system of governing and judging in America in 1950s



that Miller shows in the frame of a fiction in *The Crucible*. McCarthy and his companions had identified themselves as part of the system that condemned many people without any logical and correct reason. This issue oppressed the sentenced people and the others a lot but nobody could defend himself like the same we see in *The Crucible*.

Danforth is convinced that “the voice of Heaven is speaking through the children” (p.81) and that any hesitation would be to admit that he has already erred in the sentencing of prior convictions. He does not brook any exceptions and will not stay the proceedings because this will cast aspersions on his honor and reputation, which he confuses with the courts. When John Proctor and the Reverend Hale plead for the innocence of their loved ones and seek more time, Danforth dismisses their concerns by stating that “it is not just” for those already found guilty.

As said before, New Historicists visualized literary works as cultural products and agents of ideology. They see literature mediating rather than imitating human action. New Historicists see history not as blind scholarship but a process, an ideology that completes itself upon the completion of a work of art. In *The Crucible*, the power of false accusations, the judicial system, and consequences of abusive authority had a severe impact on these people’s lives, especially during the time of the Salem witch trials. False accusations, often for personal benefit, were the major basis of the Salem witch trials. The young girls accused of being witches began accusing others in the village in order to save themselves from punishment. This only escalated into more dramatic events as the witch hunt progressed. More and more people began turning on each other in order to save themselves and in some cases to increase personal wealth. These accusations cause the needless deaths of many innocent people and similar events still occur in modern times. An example of this is during the early 1950 in America where people were paranoid about communism when the people were brought before the committee and were asked to expose any communists that they knew or be labeled a communist themselves.

In New Historicism, the concept of power and its relation to the possibility of subversion or resistance is an important issue that Foucault points to them in this approach. Miller wrote in his biography, *Timebends*, that *The Crucible*’s theme of resistance to tyranny was its more important one. Relevant not only to the Salem witch trials and to the McCarthy hearings, this theme continues to be relevant; it is a part of humanity that will be wrestled with through the ages. We have Miller’s thoughts while standing at Gallows Hill in Salem in 1953:

*Here hung Rebecca, John Proctor, George Jacobs- people more real to me than the living can ever be. The sense of a terrible Marvel again; that people could have such a belief in themselves and in the rightness of their consciousness as to give their lives rather than say what they thought was false.*

Other timeless issues provoked by *The Crucible* are the individuals social responsibility, integrity and compromise; the power of guilt, love, conscious, fear, and hysteria; and adherence to supposedly religious principles.

*The Crucible* engages its audience with its treatment of the subversive and the potentially transgressive; in short, evil. Through the play, Miller clearly suggests that history never really dies; rather, to use a cliché, it repeats itself. Not only the play is about history, but also it has made history. Witchcraft may have been ruined in history, but that does not mean it has been silenced. Indeed, Miller uses witchcraft and the Salem witch trials simply as a metaphor for situations wherein those who are in power accuse those who challenge them of suspect behavior in order to destroy them. Salem is an early example of what Miller saw around him in the 1950s—the communist witch hunts and McCarthyism.

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## CONCLUSION

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To read *The Crucible* is to hold a mirror to America in 1950s and its current predicament. It is a unique piece of literature that transcends the boundaries of the historical community in which it was written. Arthur Miller’s presentation of operation of power at various levels is an interesting site for the New Historicist critics. He has textualized the history and historicized the text as Greenblatt says that this issue produces both *resonance* and *wonder* those are essential qualifications for a great work of art. It was written in response to Senator McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee’s crusade against supposed communist sympathizers. Despite the obvious political criticisms contained within the play, most critics felt that *The Crucible* was a self-contained play about a terrible period in American history. Miller has reproduced a model of historical culture, in which dissent is already suppressed, subversion contained oppositionally strategically, controlled and defeated. He has tried to study social and cultural issues in its historical and political contexts.

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