

The Concept of Hysteria

Hysteria is a state of complete mental and social break-down. Hysteria is chaos and exaggerated fear based on group delusion and brain-washing. There is very little logic or evidence present during incidents of hysteria. In hysterical situations, people often panic, act irrationally and think like “packs” in almost “animalistic” ways. We see hysteria-driven incidents of looting, vandalism, violence and mass-hypnosis in the world constantly. Usually, war or natural disasters cause this sort of hysterical behaviour. After 9/11, many citizens of Australia were “hysterical” about the possibility of terrorists in suburbia, and thousands of false reports about terrorist activity were logged by fearful people.

Under this sort of pressure, people often show their “true colours” or “metal”. As said above, the metaphor of the Crucible itself points to this interpretation: when subjected to intense heat and pressure, what “pure” elements will emerge? The true nature of a person is revealed when all superficial layers are burnt away.

Miller **positions** us to see that amidst the religious hysteria of witchcraft accusations (Salem 1690s) and Communism accusations (McCarthy 1950s) the “true” values and beliefs of the characters (good or bad) shine through due to the *Crucible Effect*.

One of the key questions in the play is **what motivates people when the pressure is on**. This question is asked directly in witch-fearing 1690s Salem and symbolically in communist-fearing paranoia of 1950s America.

How do characters behave when faced with an atmosphere of panic and hysteria?

How do the **personal beliefs and values** of the characters operate within the **hysterical atmosphere of Salem**?

Binary Opposition: Integrity vs Vanity

Important responses within the hysterical theocracy of Salem are **Vanity** and **Integrity**. These oppose one another as motivating factors for the characters under the *Crucible Effect*, forming a **binary opposition** (**personal integrity** vs **vanity**).

The readers are **positioned** to see characters that show **vanity** (Abigail, Danforth, Parris) are **privileged** in the **hysterical** chaos of Salem: they have power and status in the town because they seem to have power over the witch-chaos (Parris as minister, Danforth as Christian judge, Abigail in communication with the invisible world) and they are alive at the end of the play. Abigail famously gets away with everything- no guilt for 19 deaths and all of her uncle's cash.

By contrast, those who show **personal integrity** in the chaos, while admirable, are severely **marginalised**: they are powerless and are mostly executed (Nurse, Corey, Orburn, John Proctor). Even Hale and Elizabeth are marginalised by their **integrity** (Hale loses his career and reputation by opposing the **theocratic** authorities and fails to save John or stop the executions. Elizabeth is now a poor single mother of three, in grief from losing her husband, in a community that hates her).

In the binary opposition of **integrity** versus **vanity**, those who demonstrate **vanity** are **privileged** and those who show **integrity** are **marginalised** in Salem.

Miller positions us to **HATE the fact that the good guys lose** in the end. We are supposed to be **angry and upset** that Abigail gets away, that Parris and Danforth go on with their lives, while Elizabeth is alone, and Nurse and Proctor are dead.

Miller wants us to take this warning from history VERY SERIOUSLY.

He was writing about Salem in the 1690s, but his target audience was American citizens in the 1950s experiencing similar chaos about possible Communist spies. The author feared being jailed if he spoke out directly against Senator McCarthy and his anti-Communist agenda, so he wrote a play about witchcraft which showed all the same features. The play is symbolic of McCarthy's America. It also relates to modern **hysteria** about terrorism, drugs, Islam, asylum seekers etc.