

The Abnegation of Responsibility in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*

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Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* became a respected text among my tenth grade American literature honors students, particularly in 2008 when I subjected them to a real-life test by deliberately and falsely accusing one of my students of plagiarizing an essay. As a result, my students forced themselves to think at a higher, more formal level, where they drew inferences based on their own evidence-supported conclusions regarding *The Crucible*. By drawing comparisons between events in the lives of twenty-first century teenagers and those of the people of Salem in 1692, my students deepened their understanding of witch hunting through rumors, false accusations, and the abnegation of responsibility. Analyzing how a series of transgressions can build into a harmful hierarchy has helped my high school students prepare for a liberal arts education at the college level.

This teachable moment presented itself after reading Act I of *The Crucible* when my American literature students declared that they would never tolerate such transgressions if they were ever faced with a similar situation in their own lives. I initially wanted to rebuke them by saying that, at the age of fifteen, they were too young to know what they would do in such a situation. Instead, I decided to pull aside Lucas, one of my students, and ask him if he would be willing to allow me to falsely accuse him of plagiarizing a paper in front of the entire class the next day. My hope was that when this confrontation unfolded in class, his classmates would recognize this situation as an opportunity either to stand against the same

transgressions they swore to fight against or to abnegate and refuse to fulfill their promise. At the beginning of the following class, I falsely accused Lucas of cheating; he played along and made a scene during which it was obvious that my accusation was not valid; despite my clearly unfounded accusation, none of his classmates stood up and came to his defense. Their promises to stand against such transgressions did not materialize.

Towards the end of class, Lucas and I told everyone about our scheme and the reason behind it. Almost immediately, my students tried to defend themselves by making claims, such as they thought it was fake all along but were not sure, or they did not want to question my authority, or most prominent of all, they did not want to get in trouble themselves. It has been over two and a half years since I introduced this lesson to my students, but many of them, with whom I still keep in touch, remember it well.

John, now a high school senior, one of the students in that class and a good friend of Lucas, wrote his college application essay about this experience, which helped him gain admission to the University of Virginia. In his essay, he acknowledged how he and others had claimed that they would stand against something so unfair, but he also explained how he had abnegated his responsibility:

As loyal a friend that I was. . . I knew that [Lucas] was not one to plagiarize. Regardless, the teacher used the time, during which I hesitated to defend Luke, to become the judge and jury...just as the Salem townspeople's hesitation resulted in the deaths of their peers. After this experience, I learned that *The Crucible*, with proper understanding, challenged [me to consider] not only my loyalty to a fellow student and best friend, but also where I would stand in a situation similar to the Salem Witch Trials.

Other students shared similar views. Jonathan, also a senior, said the following about the experience:

Loyalty is also something to look at when you compare *The Crucible* to our lives as teenagers. In the play, you watch the townsfolk slowly break down and distance themselves from their friends and neighbors, all because of rumors and false innuendos. The same thing happens in our lives as teenagers; you can watch a rumor about someone spread and watch all of their close friends distance themselves from that person.

There are several reasons why my students hesitated to stand up for Lucas. Given that this classroom event occurred at a college-preparatory military school where structure, routine, and discipline are at the forefront of academic, athletic, and residential life, it is not difficult to appreciate that my students were trained NOT to question my authority because I was their teacher who was meant to maintain ultimate authority in the classroom. John spoke specifically about this attitude in a conversation we had in December 2010. We were talking about the scene in Act III of *The Crucible* when Judge Danforth states:

This is a sharp time, now, a precise time--we live no longer in the dusky afternoon when evil mixed itself with good and befuddled the world...the shining sun is up, and them that fear not light will surely praise it.

In regard to the situation I staged before the class, John said, "I thought it was fake, and that gave me pause. I should have defended Lucas' integrity, which we all knew he had, but hesitation got me nowhere." I told him that I had used his hesitation to condemn Lucas, who had dared to "violate" my authority, just as Judge Danforth is able to judge the accused while

the townspeople of Salem hesitate as they try to assess the validity of the trials. John acknowledged the analogy, responding, "Exactly, that's what happened." With that said, it took little effort on my students' part to look at me in the same way that the people of Salem looked at Judge Danforth; he and I were the ultimate authority; little could be done to counter our actions, and any attempt to question our credibility would be considered disrespectful and contemptuous.

In regard to approaching this situation from the perspective of cognitive development, it can also be assumed that as tenth graders, my students lacked the necessary critical thinking skills to dissect this experience and to examine it at a deeper level. Nevertheless, it is my opinion that despite their inability to think more deeply and to assess the legitimacy of the situation, my students should not be excused from avoiding looking at it at a deeper level altogether. In fact, as their teacher, it is part of my job to help them develop their thinking skills so that they can dissect this experience at a deeper level, mirroring the type of critical thinking that is expected of college students engaged in a liberal arts education.

In their article, entitled "Peripheral Visions: Towards a Geoethics of Citizenship," Grant Cornwell and Eve Stoddard discuss how liberal arts college students often depend on binary thinking to produce simplistic answers in response to complex questions. In addition to this binary thinking approach, David Loy, in "A New Holy War against Evil? The Response of an American Buddhist," states that when people have identified someone they believe to be evil, such as Osama bin Laden, they focus their efforts on fighting him rather than on discussing why he is evil in the first place. This approach is problematic because, as Loy explains, "understanding conflict...tends to preclude thought, because it is so simplistic. It keeps us from

looking deeper, from trying to discover causes” (124). In relation to my classroom experiment, it could be one of the reasons why my students abnegated their responsibility to stand up for Lucas. They had already identified the “evil” in the form of the atrocities committed against the people of Salem, and they did not recognize that as involving the same in principle as my classroom experiment. McCarthy, in “Comparative Philosophy and the Liberal Arts: Between and Beyond—Educating to Cultivate Geocitizens,” phrases this shortcoming in critical thinking well by stating: “...binary thinking precludes dialogue; for if one [person] is entrenched firmly in *either* side of the binary, there is no room for dialogue—each side is simply focused on conquering the other” (297). In the case of my students, they were more focused on “conquering” the transgressions committed in 1692 Salem rather than on thinking deeply about the nature of the conflict itself.

McCarthy also states that thinkers like Cornwell and Stoddard agree that for “dialogue across difference to be possible, we must give up the notion that any one description of reality is *the* ultimate description” (299). In other words, students cannot afford to accept 1692 Salem at face value; instead, students must read figuratively between the lines of Miller’s play and understand the contrast between characters like Reverend Parris, who allows fear of witchcraft to envelop the community, and John Proctor, who understands the deeper motives behind the accusations. Evidence that my students recognized this dilemma is found in their reflections on this lesson. For example, my student Jonathan wrote that *The Crucible* “taught me how lies...can go terribly wrong, but... [it] also made me aware of how those things didn’t just exist in the play, but...are happening around me in reality.” Students like Jonathan, who recognize how

The Crucible can reflect present day harmful ideologies and behavior, will not struggle with the kind of binary thinking that affects many college students.

In regard to his classmates, Lucas, the subject of the experiment, stated, "It shocked me when they didn't have my back...they wouldn't risk themselves getting in trouble. I thought at least one of them would have." Lucas' words are parallel to John Proctor's own words found in Act Two when debating with Reverend Hale over the authenticity of confessions given by Tituba, Sarah Good, and the other girls; he stated, "There are them that will swear to anything before they'll hang..." In both Lucas' and Proctor's words, one can see an abnegation of responsibility, the former being a failure of responsibility to come to the aid of a friend, and in the latter, a failure of responsibility to speak the truth.

As my former students now prepare to graduate from high school and attend college, some look back at this experience and think about what conclusions still resonate. The experiment itself left Lucas stating, "We were so in depth with *The Crucible*; it was like living in a fairy tale." He meant that the depth at which we discussed the play was one he had never experienced before. It is my hope that the students involved in this experiment will continue to reflect on this assignment and the conclusions they have drawn as they prepare to enter college.

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