

Voices of the Common Man: Moral Courage and Social Pressure in the Crucible

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Abstract

Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953) is one of the most powerful plays in American literature. Written during the McCarthy era, it uses the Salem witch trials of 1692 as a mirror to reflect the political hysteria of mid-twentieth-century America. But beyond its historical and political dimensions, the play speaks directly about something very human. The struggle of ordinary people caught between personal conscience and social pressure. This paper explores the theme of the common man in *The Crucible*, focusing on how Miller portrays ordinary individuals who are pushed to their limits by fear, power, and public opinion. It examines how characters like John Proctor, Elizabeth Proctor, and Giles Corey either rise with moral courage or collapse under social pressure. Through close reading of key scenes and quotations, the paper argues that Miller's common man is not a hero in the traditional sense. He is flawed, afraid, and real. Yet it is precisely because of this reality that his choices carry such weight. *The Crucible* teaches that moral courage is not the absence of fear. It is the decision to act rightly in spite of it.

Keywords: common man, moral courage, social pressure, Salem witch trials, individual vs. society, tragic hero,

1. Introduction

When we think about great literature, we often think about kings, warriors, and extraordinary heroes. But Arthur Miller believed that the most powerful stories are not about great men, it is about ordinary ones. In his famous essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" (1949), Miller argued that the common man is just as capable of tragedy as any king or nobleman. His plays, especially *The Crucible*, are built on this idea. *The Crucible* was first performed in 1953, at a time when America was gripped by the Red Scare. A period of intense fear and suspicion about communist influence. Senator Joseph McCarthy led investigations that destroyed the lives of many innocent people. Miller saw a frightening similarity between this modern witch-hunt and the Salem witch trials of 1692, and he used the historical events to comment on the present. The result was *The Crucible*, a play about how ordinary people behave when fear and power collide.

The play is set in Salem, Massachusetts. A group of young girls, led by Abigail Williams, begins accusing people of witchcraft. What starts as a small lie grows into a massive social panic.

The courts, the church, and the community all become instruments of injustice. In the middle of all this stands John Proctor, a farmer, a husband, a man with secrets who must decide whether to save his life by telling a lie or lose it by speaking the truth. This paper focuses on the theme of the common man in *The Crucible*. It explores how Miller presents ordinary people and their fears, their weaknesses, their moments of courage and what this reveals about human nature. The paper also considers how social pressure can corrupt justice and silence conscience, and how Miller uses his characters to show that moral courage, however small, is the only real defense against tyranny.

2. Miller's Vision of the Common Man

Before looking at the play. It is important to understand what Miller meant by the "common man." In traditional tragedy, think of Sophocles or Shakespeare. The tragic hero is usually a person of high rank: a king, a prince, or a general. His fall is dramatic because he falls from a great height. But Miller challenged this idea. He believed that ordinary people like farmers, workers with no special title or power. They are just as capable of experiencing deep tragedy. In his essay, Miller wrote that the common man's fear of losing his sense of personal dignity is just as powerful as any king's fear of losing his throne. This is the emotional core of *The Crucible*. John Proctor is not a nobleman. He is a farmer with a troubled marriage and a guilty conscience. But his struggle is no less serious, and his fall is no less tragic.

Miller also believed that literature should speak to everyone. Not just to educated audiences in expensive theatres. By making his tragic hero a common man, he made tragedy accessible and real. When we watch John Proctor suffer, we feel it because we recognize something of ourselves in him. His fears, his mistakes, and his final decision to protect his name, all of these feel human and familiar.

3. John Proctor: A Flawed Man with a Moral Core

John Proctor is the central figure of the play, and he is a deeply human character. He is not perfect. At the beginning of the play, we learn that he had an affair with Abigail Williams, the young servant who later leads the witch-hunt. This sin weighs heavily on him throughout the play. He has hurt his wife, Elizabeth, and he has damaged his own self-respect. Miller introduces Proctor as a man who values honesty and independence. He does not attend church regularly, he speaks his mind, and he refuses to pretend that everything is fine when it is not. When the accusations start spreading through Salem, Proctor sees them for what they are, a lie. He knows Abigail is lying because she told him so. But speaking up means exposing his own sin.

This is the first great conflict of the play: Proctor's personal shame versus his social responsibility. Should he come forward with the truth and risk his reputation? Or should he stay silent and let innocent people suffer? This tension is at the heart of what it means to be the common man in Miller's world. As the crisis deepens, Proctor eventually chooses to act. He goes to court and challenges the accusations. When asked why he did not come forward sooner, he says: "I have known her, sir. I have known her." (Miller 110) These words are so simple, so devastating and cost him everything. By confessing his affair, he hopes to expose Abigail's motives. But the court, unwilling to admit its own errors, turns against him instead. Proctor is arrested.

In the final act, Proctor is given a choice: confess to witchcraft and live, or refuse and hang. This is the ultimate test of the common man. He is not being asked to lead an army or save a kingdom. He is being asked to decide what his own name and conscience are worth.

At first, Proctor almost gives in. He signs a confession. But when he is asked to let it be

displayed publicly, he tears it up. His words are among the most memorable in American drama:

"Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!" (Miller 143)

This outburst tells us everything about John Proctor. He is not dying for a great cause or a political ideology. He is dying for something personal and deeply human for his name, his identity, his sense of who he is. This is the tragedy of the common man: not the fall of a great hero, but the destruction of an ordinary person who chose integrity over survival.

4. Elizabeth Proctor: Quiet Strength Under Pressure

If John Proctor represents the man who struggles with his own guilt, Elizabeth Proctor represents the ordinary person who struggles with forgiveness and truth. She is not a dramatic character. She does not make speeches or confront the court. But her quiet moral strength is one of the most moving elements of the play. Elizabeth is a woman who has been deeply hurt. She knows about her husband's affair, and she has not fully forgiven him. She is described as cold, distant, and hard to please. Even Proctor feels this pressure from her: "I have not moved from there to there without I think to please you, and still an everlasting funeral marches round your heart." (Miller, 54) This frustration is real and understandable. But Miller does not let us dismiss Elizabeth as simply bitter. As the play progresses, we see her dignity and her love for her husband grow clearer.

The most critical moment for Elizabeth comes during the court scene. She is asked whether her husband is a lecher, whether he committed adultery. She does not know that Proctor has already confessed. To protect him, she lies. She says he is a good man and denies the affair. It is the only lie Elizabeth ever tells and it costs both of them dearly. Miller uses this moment brilliantly. Elizabeth, who values truth above all things, lies out of love. It is a deeply human moment, not heroic, not simple, but real. The irony is painful: the one time she chooses deception, it destroys the one chance to expose Abigail.

In the final scene, when Proctor is preparing to die, Elizabeth speaks words that are both heartbreaking and affirming: "He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him!" (Miller 145) These words show a complete transformation. Elizabeth accepts her husband's choice. She does not beg him to live at the cost of his soul. She understands that for John Proctor, dying with his name intact is the only way he can truly live. This is the wisdom of the common woman, humble, loving, and devastating in its simplicity.

5. Giles Corey: The Old Man Who Would Not Break

Among the secondary characters in *The Crucible*, Giles Corey stands out as a remarkable portrait of the common man's defiance. He is old, stubborn, and not particularly wise. He accidentally contributes to his wife's arrest by innocently mentioning that she reads strange books. Yet when the crisis comes, Giles becomes one of the most heroic figures in the play.

Giles refuses to give the court the name of the person who told him that Thomas Putnam was using the witch trials for financial gain. He knows that naming this person would put them in danger. So he refuses not with grand speeches, but with simple, stubborn silence. The court orders him to be pressed with stones until he either speaks or dies. Giles Corey's response, recorded in history and repeated in the play, is famous for its bluntness. "More weight." (Miller 135) Two words. No drama, no eloquence. Just the will of an old man who refused to be broken. Giles Corey dies without confessing, and in doing so, he preserves both his land and his dignity. He is an ordinary man with no great power or wisdom, but he has something the powerful men of Salem do

not: an unbreakable sense of what is right.

Miller uses Giles Corey to show that the common man does not need to be perfect or educated or even fully aware of what he is doing to act with moral courage. Sometimes, courage is simply the refusal to give in.

6. Social Pressure and the Collapse of Justice

One of the most disturbing aspects of *The Crucible* is how easily ordinary people participate in injustice when they are afraid. The witch trials could not have happened without the cooperation, active or passive, of the community. Miller shows us how social pressure works: it uses fear, conformity, and self-interest to silence conscience.

Characters like Thomas Putnam use the hysteria for personal gain to acquire land and settle old scores. Characters like Reverend Parris are more concerned with their reputation and authority than with justice. Even Reverend Hale, who comes to Salem as an expert on witchcraft, eventually realizes the horror of what he has helped create. He tells the condemned prisoners: "I come to do the Devil's work. I come to counsel Christians they should belie themselves. There is blood on my head! Can you not see the blood on my head?" (Miller, 131) Hale is one of the most complex characters in the play because he is neither villain nor hero. He is an educated man who believed he was doing the right thing and discovered too late that he was wrong. His anguish is a warning about the danger of placing authority above individual conscience.

The character of Mary Warren also illustrates how social pressure can overwhelm the individual. Mary is a timid, fearful girl who works in the Proctor household. She knows that the accusations are false. When Proctor convinces her to testify in court, she initially tries to tell the truth. But the moment Abigail and the other girls turn against her, pretending to be possessed, screaming that her spirit is attacking them. Mary breaks down completely. She turns on Proctor, calls him the Devil's man, and rejoins the accusers. Her words are a chilling example of group hysteria: "You're the Devil's man!" (Miller 118)

Mary Warren is not a bad person. She is a weak one and Miller asks us to understand the difference. Under intense social pressure, with the weight of community conformity, religious authority, and personal fear pressing down on her, she chooses survival over truth. This is not admirable, but it is deeply human. It is what the common person does when the cost of honesty becomes too high.

7. The Crucible as an Allegory: Then and Now

Miller wrote *The Crucible* in response to the McCarthyism of the 1950s, but the play's message extends far beyond that specific moment in history. The dynamics describe mob psychology, the abuse of institutional power, the silencing of individual voices which appear in every era and every society. What makes the play universal is precisely its focus on ordinary people. The victims of Salem were farmers, servants, wives, and old men, not politicians or generals. Their suffering was real, their choices were limited, and their courage was remarkable precisely because it was unexpected.

Miller himself described his intentions clearly. He wanted to show how a group of people, acting in the name of morality and religion, could become instruments of cruelty. The judges in Salem genuinely believed they were protecting their community from evil. This makes them more frightening, not less because it means that injustice does not always come from obviously evil people. It often comes from ordinary people who stop thinking for themselves. The common man in *The Crucible* is not a symbol or an abstraction. He is a person we recognize as someone who works,

worries, makes mistakes, and sometimes, when pushed to the edge, discovers a capacity for courage that surprises even himself.

8. Conclusion

The *Crucible* is a play about many things like history, politics, religion, and justice. But at its deepest level, it is a play about what it means to be an ordinary person facing extraordinary pressure. Arthur Miller's common men and women are John Proctor, Elizabeth Proctor, Giles Corey, Mary Warren. They are not heroes in the classical sense. They are flawed, frightened, and struggling. But it is precisely this humanity that makes their stories so powerful. Miller shows us that moral courage is not a gift given to a few exceptional people. It is a choice, difficult, costly, and available to everyone. John Proctor could have confessed and lived. Giles Corey could have spoken a name and survived. Elizabeth Proctor could have told the truth in court and perhaps changed everything. Each of them made a different choice, and each choice cost them something real. What Miller ultimately argues through *The Crucible* is the dignity of the individual. The ordinary, imperfect, common person is sacred. When society tries to crush that dignity through fear, manipulation, and false authority, the greatest act of resistance is simply to remain true to oneself. In a world full of Abigail Williamses and Deputy Governor Danforths, the most radical thing a common man can do is refuse to lie. As John Proctor says in his final moments, he cannot have another name. That name, that sense of self is worth everything. And in making that argument, Miller does something extraordinary: he takes the simplest, most overlooked kind of person in the world, the common man and places him at the very center of tragedy, history, and hope.

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