

What do these texts suggest about human behaviour in a crisis?

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Historical forces shape behaviour in ways that differ greatly from the present. In the play *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller and the novel *Year of Wonders* by Geraldine Brooks, both texts examine the roles of leadership, faith, conformity and individuality in adversity in the seventeenth century. While Miller depicts how the society responds superstitiously by blaming the “devil” when supernatural events cannot be explained, Brooks shows how some individuals question the society’s punitive religious beliefs and seeks for a more ethical solution to cure the Plague rather than simply concluding the explanation as God’s punishment or witchcraft. Miller constructs an allegory between the historical events and the ‘witch hunt’ being conducted by Senator MaCarthy against communist to explore how history repeats itself and hence the dilemma between survival and one’s inner morals always puts to question. In a similar manner, Brooks portrays the importance of obeying one’s own moral conscience in the highly repressive society of Eyam and thus those who seek outward conformity are sacrificed in a feudalistic world.

The mixed impact of self-preserved leaders on communities in crisis is depicted through the agonies they suffered as well as the benefits of challenges to the prevailing ideologies. In both Salem and Eyam, the legitimate authorities’ preoccupation with self-preservation is the catalyst that corrupts the communities. In *The Crucible*, the conviction of God’s guidance prevents Judge Danforth from recognising injustice and he subsequently allows considerations of preservation of his position to dictate his merciless executions of innocent people, as he rigidly believes that he should “hang thousand that dared to rise against the law”. This egocentrism is analogous in the isolated narrow world of Eyam where the authority sees themselves as being more superior to other villagers. The flaw of this perceived superiority is demonstrated when Colonel Bradfords sees himself as “having a chance” to escape the plague and thus he abrogates his moral and physical responsibility to the community in his priority to preserve his power and authority as the first family in the village. While Miller explores how the society suffers when no good leadership is shown in the oppressive Salem community, Brooks accentuates that depending on one’s behaviour to act for the welfare of people, leadership opportunity can bring both corruption and benefits to the community. Unlike Reverend Paris who believes “he was being persecuted everywhere” and fears the power of shared confidential discussions among individuals, Reverend Mompellion is competent in developing strategies, such as urging the villagers to burn flea-infested possession that carries the “Plague seeds”. While *The Crucible* ultimately leads to a tragedy, Mompellion’s immense compassion and generosity of spirit is substantial for the village to persist during the Plague era. Thus Miller conveys that leaders who lack real spirituality would disrupt the social fabric of society, Brooks elucidates that depending on one’s moral and “strength of will”, leadership can bring both flaw and beneficiary.

Both novels explore that it is through one’s faith and their strong belief in justice which enables them to challenge the pre-existing religious ideologies in times of crisis. While both communities have strict religious views, there are other individuals who are able to realise the theocratic fallacy of this punitive society and step out from the narrow world view. In *Year of Wonders*, Anna undergoes a transformation to find her own autonomy. She begins as a vulnerable servant with no more than “a pair of hands” but later frees herself from much of her father’s torment and the spiritual guidance, thus becoming progressively confident to step into more prominent roles in society. Conversely, while in *the Crucible* the role of women has no tangible shift, the courage to question the stereotypical ideals and the strength to withhold its inner morals in the theocratic society are common in both texts. Although Miller first introduces Proctor as a flawed character who “regards himself as a kind of fraud”, he is able to redeem himself through his confession and his refusal to

accuse anyone in the witchcraft, which condemns him to hang. Hence Miller's emphasis that Proctor "has his goodness" at the play's end is a dark criticism of the hypocrisy of theocracy and warning against history repeating itself through McCarthyism. In a different manner, Brooks reveals that the notion of faith is present among people who are willing to seek new opportunities for the benefit of the community, regardless of their gender and power.

While Miller employs a third person omniscient perspective to show the reader that conformity is essential when people experience life and death decisions, Brooks adopts a first person narration to depict different human behaviours can lead to various outcomes. Miller uses an omniscient narrative voice to explore the conscience of different characters, allowing reader to see how individuals such as Abigail and Tituba are driven to fuel the conflict by their personal interests, often resulted from the oppression of authority. Conversely, Brooks uses a more attached tone in her narration, positioning the reader to focus on the personal thoughts and emotions of the resilient people who resists the pressures that are put upon her by the rest of the community. Any Gowdie's cutting "confession" that she has "slept with the devil" shows her continued defiance and resistance of the condemnation others would place upon her, thus highlighting that the failure to conform to the society often results in death and accusation. The consequence of outward conformity is further exposed in The Crucible when Giles Corey, a well-respected man "willing to give [Danforth] no name", holds onto his own values and does not testify falsely. Hence both authors chose to include these characters as they act as outliers, allowing the audience to get a contrasting perspective of how the differences in human behaviours can result in different outcomes.

Both The Crucible and Year of Wonders demonstrate that in times of turmoil, individuals who challenge the social and religious norms of their lives are mostly punished for their rebellious behaviour. While Miller explores only the flaws of leadership in Salem, Brooks accentuates that depending on one's action, leadership can also be a beneficiary for a repressive society in crisis. Hence although conformity is mandatory when a society is led by self-preserved, punitive leaders, there are others who are willing to sacrifice their lives to advocate for the ultimate justice and fight to change the feudalistic perspective of the theocratic society.