

Compare the circumstances of women in *A Year of Wonders* and *Crucible* and the hope writers have for them being able to get beyond the limitations placed upon them.

Arthur Miller's 1953 play- the *Crucible* - explores the consequences of a dogmatic and paranoid community, highlighting the restrictions placed on women through the witch-hunt accusations. Similarly, Geraldine Brooks in her novel, *A Year of Wonders*, demonstrates the strength of women cooperation through her protagonist, Anna Frith, and other women attempting to hold a grief-ridden community together. Both texts portray women gaining personal autonomy despite the patriarchal zeitgeist of the seventeenth century, simultaneously reminding us that there are those who are debilitated and unable to overcome these shackles. Miller and Brooks appear to convey that though women can break through certain limitations in society there will always be others present.

Both texts are set in male dominated villages with double standards existing in their principles. In theocratic Salem, the rigid hierarchy divides society: respected men at the pinnacle, whilst women and children occupy the lower regions. Villagers 'never conceive that children were anything, but grateful to be able to walk straight...mouths shut until bidden to speak.' The children, especially the teenage girls in Salem are not regarded by others, not even allowed to speak unless addressed to. Male chauvinism is apparent as Danforth regards Abigail in a different light once Proctors reveals her as a 'whore.' Abigail asks him, 'what look do you give me?' The extent of mass hysteria in Salem described by Millers' interpolations is a 'perverse manifestation of the panic...to turn towards greater freedoms.' The girls scapegoating innocents is a by-product of an austere community that 'forbids anything resembling...vain enjoyment' such as dancing in the woods. Through the destruction that ensues in Salem from an oppressed group of girls, Miller suggests that society should analyse itself for the cause.

In conjunction to Millers' portrayal of a misogynistic society, Brook's depiction of Eyam is arguably no different. When the plague strikes, the non-conventional herbalists of the town, the Gowdies, are the first scapegoats for the lamentations and cries of injustice of the drunken mob much like how women are first dubbed witches in the *Crucible* for the unexplainable comatose children. Anna, a widow, is aware of the dangers of a 'woman meddling in medicinals,' as seen by the violence of the mob towards Anys and Mem Gowdie. In addition, double standards are apparent as taking a feminist perspective, Mompellion calls Jane Martin a 'sinner' for taking 'the pure vessel of her body and fill[ing] it with corruption,' but allows Albion to leave without chastisement. Albion's actions are excused, but Jane Martin's are not as she is a woman unable to allow her body to be tainted, whilst men are less accountable for their lusts. His misogyny is comparable to Danforth's loss of respect for Abigail as the affair is revealed. Mompellions' perverted punishment of Elinor shows him taking on a pseudo-god role 'deem[ing] that she should atone [for her abortion] by living some of her life with her lusts unrequited.' The unreasonable expectation for women to be sexually restrained and untouched until marriage is displayed by Mompellion's condemning of Elinor. As both women of lower status- Anys and Mem- and the noble Elinor are equally judged under the same expectations by men, Brooks seems to indicate that male prejudice takes precedence over class divisions.

Miller and Brooks demonstrate that these fettered women can free themselves from male dominated society, although full autonomy does not appear to be attainable. Miller demonstrates that female triumph is often short-lived and insubstantial. The girls gain authority for ridding Salem of witches, Mary Warren boasting of how she is amazed that Proctor does not see 'the weighty work' she does for the town. Her excitement in participating in the witch-trials is a consequence of this being the only opportunity for the girls to hold the 'keys to the kingdom.' Abigail's rises to reverence as the 'crowd all part like the sea of Israel' 'where she walks.' The biblical reference in the

simile said by Elizabeth Proctor is an exaggeration, but largely emphasizes the influence the girls, especially Abigail, has on a community that had suppressed their voices thus far. Another instance of overcoming limitations is Tituba, a Barbados slave. She is able to voice her thoughts through the guise of accusations, revealing her inner thoughts about Mr Parris – ‘oh how many times had he bid me kill you.’ Despite women gaining autonomy, Miller pessimistically portrays these victories as transient. Abigail ends up as a prostitute in Boston, relying on breaking into Parris’ ‘strongbox’ for funds – a metaphor for his masculinity, which has been fractured through his naivety. Tituba falls into drunken oblivion believing in the salvation of the devil. Through the demise of these women, Miller demonstrates that though women can gain independence, 17th Century America will not allow it to be permanent.

In parallel to the power women are able to gain in Salem, Brooks shows that society also prevents full autonomy. Any is a paradigm of a modern feminist through her open sexuality much like Abigail’s and her independence to the extent that she seems anachronistic in the conventional town of Eyam. She ‘cared not for the conventions’ of the town, opting to ‘cultivate a garden’ with more than one plant. She demonstrates a power reversal in male-centric Eyam as she is a widow, but able to thrive in Eyam. She views women ‘shackled to their men folk as surely as the plough-horse to the share’ – an added load to their husband’s name; without their own identity. The motif of gardens in Brooks’ text symbolises the cultivation of women independence. The garden is inherited by Elinor and Anna after the Gowdies’ death as if the torch of women independence is passed onto Anna. Throughout the novel Anna transgresses from a vulnerable widow to a literate midwife, ‘preferring an ungraceful scramble to the touch of his [Mompellion’s] hand.’ Any’s non-dependency on men is reflected in Anna as she would rather rely on her own ability to escape Eyam than Mompellion as she flees on Anteros a symbol for female autonomy and liberty. Though much like Miller’s view that full individualism is out of grasp, Brooks shows Any lynched by the masses for her unconventional views and Anna needing to enter Ahmed’s harem as it was ‘the only way’ for her ‘to win acceptance’ in Algeria. Her ability to carry out her dream to study medicine highlights that Brooks has a more hopeful view for women as Anna is able to accomplish a form of freedom even if it is imperfect.

Alternatively, Miller and Brooks show that there are those who are victims of a patriarchy. Elizabeth Proctor, in the ‘Crucible’ is unable to break free of her role as Proctor’s wife. She blames herself for his straying from her as ‘it takes a cold wife to prompt lechery.’ Her almost self-flagellation is a reflection of the expectations society places on women as Elizabeth sees herself unreasonably accountable for Proctor succumbing to his lusts. In the play’s denouement, regardless of her wanting Proctor ‘living’, she has to come to terms with his martyr-like decision to hang. Hale asks her to plead to him, but she refuses, saying ‘he has his goodness now, god forbid I take it from him.’ Likewise, Brooks shows the repercussions of insufficient power for women through Aphra.

Though Aphra holds a ‘wealthy of suspicions’ in her mind and is ultimately responsible for Elinor’s death and the disillusionment of Mompellion, she cannot be completely condemned. Aphra is a repercussion lack of education and oppression by a husband whom is willing to use a barbaric scold’s bridle- a metallic cage, holding their tongue down- to discipline his wife. Through in contrast to Elizabeth’s resigned acceptance of her husband’s decision, Aphra resents the injustice laid out to her by the world. Her jealousy of Anna and Any is due to her lack of autonomy as they embody her shortcomings. In the end of the novel, like Elizabeth’s unanswered wishes for Proctor’s life, Aphra loses everything- her children fall victim to the plague and her husband nailed to the mine’s entrance. Through Brooks’ presentation of a polar opposite to successful women, it appears that circumstance can often entirely restrict women.

'A year of Wonders' and the 'Crucible' portray women able to free themselves in patriarchal societies, but only partially as reliance on some form of male authority is still needed, whilst some are unable to change their situation at all.

