

A Psychological Analysis of the Arthur Miller's Abigail Williams to Her Historical Person

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Abstract

Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* was written encompassing the events and people of the Salem Witch trials. In many analyses written by literary critics, his writing has been compared to facts from documents and letters of the trials, and have been accused by several critics as historically inaccurate, despite Miller's disclaimer in the beginning of the play stating that his piece was slightly altered in order to better interpret his point. This writing and literary criticism of *The Crucible* analyses the Abigail Williams from Miller's text to the real Abigail Williams from 1692. The piece includes the changes Miller made and shows of what effect the alteration had on the telling of the trials.

Background

The Crucible, written in 1953 by Arthur Miller, tells the complex events of the Salem Witch trials through stageplay. Notably, Arthur Miller uses records from the actual events (Bigsby, 1953/2003, p. vii-xxv), of the Salem trials that allow the reader to further delve into the situation and persons of the Trials. In his screenplay, Miller changes the age of Abigail, an unmarried orphaned girl, from 11 to 17, allowing him to add a twist of a romantic affair to the story (“SparkNote on *The Crucible*”, 2003). However, Miller did not change timeline events like Abigail Williams being the first to accuse a person, a slave by the name of Tituba, of witchcraft.

There are key differences that will be necessary to understand further in this reading, but shall be addressed here. Firstly, the change in the number of children who accuse women and men of witchery has been reduced, creating a closer group of girls to cry out. Secondly, Miller created an atmospheric effect by adding a romance between Abigail Williams and John Proctor, such reason being unknown but probably from the little known speculations that Abigail Williams left Salem later in life to become a prostitute.

Motive of Miller's Abigail Williams

Abigail Williams, who at the time was known, in Miller's text, as an outcast was most likely to have been spurred to crying witchcraft because of her desire to become higher than her known self (Lewis, 2016). However, before continuing we must look to Abigail's first reaction to the news of suspected witchcraft, shown in the first act:

Abigail: Uncle, the rumor of witchcraft is all about; I think you'd best go down and deny it yourself. The parlor's packed with people, sir. I'll sit with her.

Parris, *pressed, turns on her*: And what shall I say to them? That my daughter and my niece I discovered dancing like heathen in the forest?

Abigail: Uncle, we did dance; let you tell them I confessed it - and I'll be whipped if I must be. But they are speakin' of witchcraft. Betty's not

witched.

Abigail: We did dance, uncle, and when you leaped out of the bush so suddenly, Betty was frightened and then she fainted. And there's the whole of it. (Miller, 1953/2003, p. 9)

That indicates Abigail's first need to come and be honest with her uncle, Rev. Parris, and her community. However, her statements change drastically after:

Parris: [...] It must come out - my enemies will bring it out. Let me know what you done there. Abigail, do you understand that I have many enemies?

[...]

Parris: There is a faction that is sworn to drive me from my pulpit. Do you understand that? (Miller, 1953/2003, pp. 10-11)

And,

Parris: Your name in the town - it is en-tirely white, is it not? [...]

Abigail, *in a temper*: My name is good in the village! I will not have it said my name is soiled! Goody Proctor is a gossiping liar! (Miller, 1953/2003, p. 12)

At which point Abigail realizes that her name is further at stake and seems to decide to change her story, as seen later to a claim of witchcraft.

Abigail's age, as mentioned before, is changed from 11 to 17, taking her from a prepubescent stage of life to post pubescent age, creating a major shift in age. At 17, in the times of the Salem Witch Trials, 1692, a girl of about 17 would be in the within the range of marriage (Ruadh, 2014); Abigail who was not married would have then had the extra burden being on her own. Which in order to make herself more known may have spurred her to cry witchery and "do a favor" to the village, by ridding it of 'witches' (Miller, 1953/2003, p. 44).

Another characteristic present in *The Crucible* is that Abigail Williams both is pushed by and pushed the accusation of witchery through group polarization (Grinnell, 2016) and group thinking (Jandis, 1982, p. 9). Group thinking, which is clearly one of the keys in *The Crucible* and is signified in lines like;

Abigail: Now look you. All of you. We danced. And Tituba conjured Ruth Putnam's dead sisters. And that

is all. And mark this. Let either of you breathe a word, or the edge of a word, about the other things, and I will come to you in the black of some terrible night and I will bring a pointy reckoning that will shudder you. [...] I can make you wish you had never seen the sun go down. [...] (Miller, 2003, p. 29)

Which in turn places one person or idea in power over a group; one of Jandis's key components to defining group thinking;

• Direct pressure on dissenters (Jandis, 1982, p. 9)

Another aspect of Miller's tale was the use of suggestive interrogation tactics (Lyon, 1995/2016, pp. 429-437), detailed in act one where the interrogators, in this case Reverend Hale and Reverend Parris, suggest responses and accusations;

Parris [Parris], with resolution now: Betty! Answer Mr. Hale! Betty!

Hale: Does someone afflict you, child? It need not be a woman, mind you, or a man. Perhaps some bird invisible to others comes to you - perhaps a pig, a mouse, or any beast at all. Is there some figure bids you fly? [...] Abigail, what sort of dancing were you doing with her in the forest? [...]

Hale: What sort of soup were in this kettle, Abigail? [...]

Hale: Mr. Parris, you did not notice, did you, any living thing in the kettle? A mouse, perhaps, a spider, a frog -? [...]

Abigail: That jumped in, we never put it

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in! [...]

Abigail: Why, a very little frog jumped - [...]

Hale, grasping Abigail: Abigail, it may be your cousin is dying. Did you call the Devil last night? [...]

Abigail: I never called him! Tituba, Tituba... [...]

Hale: How did she call him?

Abigail: I know not - she spoke Barbados. (Miller, 1953/2003, pp. 39-40)

At this point, it is necessary to speak on Tituba, a Barbados slave who is property of Rev. Parris. Tituba, who was brought from her home country to work, is yet another outcast and seemingly lower in the social hierarchy than Abigail Williams, thus an easy, disposable, target. When accused of witchery, a capital crime punishable by death, by Abigail Williams and her fellow group of girls Tituba breaks down and confesses to a crime that she did not commit and to escape death accuse two other women in the colony, a beggar and another woman, seen again in act one;

Hale: You most certainly do, and you will free her from it now! When did you compact with the Devil?

Tituba: I don't compact with no Devil!

Parris: You will confess yourself or I will take you out and whip you to your death, Tituba!

Putnam: This woman must be hanged! She must be taken and hanged!

Tituba, *terrified, falls to her knees*: No, no, don't hang Tituba! I tell him I don't desire to work for him [the devil], sir. [...]

Putnam: Sarah Good? Did you ever see Sarah Good with him? Or Osburn?

Parris: Was it man or woman came with him?

TTTUBA: Man or woman. Was - was woman.

Parris: What woman? A woman, you said. What woman? [...]

Tituba, *in a fury*: [...] And then he come one stormy night to me, and he say, "Look! I have white people belong to me." And I look - and there was Goody Good. [...]

Tituba, *rocking and weeping*: Aye, sir, and Goody Osburn. (Miller, 1953/2003, p. 41-44)

Further showing the power of suggestion to alter a person's testimony, or first statements. This use of suggestive interrogations shows up multiple times during the trials in *The Crucible* (Miller, 1953/2003, pp. 7, 55, 59, 84, 94, 109, 115, 119, 136).

Inherently through Abigail Williams is met with many backlashes from numerous people, including John Proctor and Rev. Hale. Abigail Williams at these points does have a choice, which she makes, of continuing on her story and continuing to accuse people, to stop accusing people, or to stop all together and admit that she did lie to the people and court. The latter which could have been the best to save lives. When confronted by Rev. Hale and John Proctor in open court Abigail denies any wrongdoing, and further accuses more

people. After questioning, Abigail Williams, John Proctor's wife, Elizabeth Proctor, is immediately imprisoned on Abigail's say so (Miller, 1953/2003, p. 74) further proving Abigail's need for vengeance. Whether this is because Abigail wanted to avenge her name originally being spoiled in the village, or because of her misguided love for John Proctor the reason is not clear, however it is clear her motives for accusing Rev. Hale's wife. Rev. Hale is the most outspoken against the cases of witchery and their accusers, after realizing that the accusations are falsely based, confronts Abigail in court, and denounces the court proceedings. Seen in act three;

Abigail: I have been hurt, Mr. Danforth; I have seen my blood runnin' out! I have been near to murdered every day because I done my duty pointing out the Devil's people - and this is my reward? To be mistrusted, denied, questioned like a - (Miller, 1953/2003, p. 108)

This, in turn, puts question to Abigail's name which she is not comfortable with, naturally, and furthers her to turn her methodology of accusing 'witches' into an even further rampage of accusations; which occurs almost instantly with her accusation of a child being a witch seen here,

Hale: I believe him! *Pointing at Abigail:* This girl has always struck me false! She has -

Abigail, with a weird, wild, chilling cry, screams up to the ceiling.

Abigail: You will not! Begone! Begone, I say!

Danforth: What is it, child? *But Abigail, pointing with fear, is now raising up her frightened eyes, her awed face, toward the ceiling -*

the girls are doing the same - and now Hathorne, Hale, Putnam, Cheever, Herrick, and Danforth do the same. What's there? He lowers his eyes from the ceiling, and now he is fright-ened; there is real tension in his voice. Child! She is transfixed - with all the girls, she is whimpering open-mouthed, agape at the ceiling. Girls! Why do you -?

[...]

Abigail: Why -? She gulps. Why do you come, yellow bird?

Proctor: Where's a bird? I see no bird!

Abigail, *to the ceiling:* My face? My face?
Proctor: Mr. Hale -

[...]

Abigail, *to the ceiling,* in a genuine conversation with the "bird," *as though trying to talk it out of attacking her:* But God made my face; you cannot want to tear my face. Envy is a deadly sin, Mary.

Mary Warren, *on her feet with a spring, and horrified, plead-ing:* Abby!

Abigail, *unperturbed, continuing to the "bird":* Oh, Mary, this is a black art to change your shape. No, I cannot, I cannot stop my mouth; it's God's work I do. (Miller, 2003, pp.

Though Abigail Williams is challenged during the trials and during her testimony, Abigail stays to her story, and for the first time managed control over events and her life. The draw to have control or power seems to have intoxicated Abigail Williams, as expected for someone of her past.

In conclusion, of Miller's Abigail Williams, it is clear from her statements in the text that

she is drawn to calling witchcraft by the | power of suggestion and group thinking.

Motive of the Historical Abigail Williams

The motive for the real Abigail Williams is inherently harder to understand as our information comes from the restored Salem Witch trial's documents. Many of the documents are not verbatim and or do not contain life of their people outside of the court.

After the first accusation of Tituba Indian, the Court of Oyer and Terminer was created to hold special proceedings; in which the Salem Witch trials were held. The Court of Oyer and Terminer also recorded transcripts of the court proceedings that the University of Virginia has compiled.

From the cases that were documented

- Hutchinson, Joseph v. Williams, Abigail
- Williams, Abigail; Easty, Mary Jr. v. Putnam, Ann; Willard, John; Witheridge, Mary
- Williams, Abigail v. Corey, Martha
- Williams, Abigail v. Jacobs, George Sr.
- Williams, Abigail v. Jacobs, George Sr.
- Williams, Abigail v. Martin, Susannah
- Williams, Abigail v. Nurse, Rebecca
- Williams, Abigail v. Osborne, Sarah
- Williams, Abigail v. Proctor, Elizabeth
- Williams, Abigail v. Proctor, John

- Williams, Abigail v. Willard, John

Many of the accusations fell from claims of witchcraft experienced in pains and pressure to the side of the abdomen, near the groin, and genitalia (Examination of Mary, 1692, p. 31). These pains are common with many illnesses and injuries, however from the pool that all accusers were young girls approaching or at puberty the pains may have been common with menstrual cramps, which produce similar symptoms (Mayo Clinic, 2014).

Why the children went to calling witchcraft may have been that the pains did not relieve themselves and continued on regular basis. Similarly, the causes seem to have arisen from the power of suggestion and circumstantial evidence.

It is important to note that there are no indications whatsoever that there was any relation between Abigail Williams and John Proctor, as Miller had described, removing the aspect of a sexually based motivator.

Further, the documents of the Salem Witch trials have proved unsubstantial to pointing exact cause, so claims herein are similarly circumstantial.

Effects of Miller's Changes

Miller's change to the events and characters, primarily Abigail Williams, allows the text to expand without removing the underlying morals and aspects of the Salem Witch trials. These changes, of Abigail's age and her accusations have added extra twists and allowed Miller to create a book similar in plot to Shakespearian play.

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