

The Verdict is: Guilty as Charged?

“True guilt is guilt at the obligation one owes to oneself to be oneself. False guilt is guilt felt at not being what other people feel one ought to be or assume that one is.”—R. D. Laing

Justice has been the center of civilization for millennia. The actions of the people in society are controlled by guilt; those who are guilty under the law must be punished. The Crucible takes place at a time when the eyes of the law were blinded by ignorance and corruption; a time when guilt was a mere irony.

The Salem Witch Trials demonstrated the flaws of the justice system where the accused are guilty until proven innocent. Even Rebecca Nurse, regarded as the very backbone of the church, was accused. When she refused to confess and stain her saintliness, Rebecca was sentenced to hang. She valued God’s judgment above all earthly judgments. “Why, it is a lie, it is a lie; how may I damn myself? I cannot, I cannot.”(130) Giles was also a victim of the court system, as he was accused and would neither deny nor confess to his charges. Giles’ refusal to speak resulted in death just the same. Without question of the accusers’ legitimacy, the accused in the Trials were always assumed to be guilty.

Because of the “guilty until proven innocent” court system, the guilt and blame had often been misplaced. The accused would hang if they would not confess. Those who did confess would live. The girls who accused the innocent were assumed to be innocent. But the accusers were not always assumed innocent. Giles, for example, accused Mr. Putnam of telling his daughter to name George Jacobs in court for possession of Jacobs’ land. The guilt turned to Giles when he would not name his witness. Hale tried to tell Danforth that the court has gone too far: “We cannot blink it more. There is a prodigious

fear of this court in the country.” In response, Danforth said, “Then there is a prodigious guilt in the country. Are *you* afraid to be questioned here?”(111)

Many characters were guilty, not of witchery, but of other sins. During the Salem Witch Trials, these characters felt their guilt weighing on their conscience. The girls, for example, were initially very fearful. Betty, in the opening act, feared Abigail’s drinking of blood. Mary Warren later acted on her conscience and attempted to turn against the other girls. John Proctor, although the protagonist of the story, felt his guilt of lechery weighing on his conscience since the beginning of the play. “Abby, I may think of you softly from time to time. But I will cut off my hand before I’ll reach for you again.”(75) Proctor’s wife, Elizabeth, never told a lie until she was asked if John was a lecher. Her lie weighed heavily, as she could have saved numerous lives. But even more did Elizabeth regret her attitude towards John about lechery. “...Suspicion kissed you when I did; I never knew how I should say my love. It were a cold house I kept!”(129)

Reverend Hale, however, possibly had the most guilt weighing on his conscience. He started the witch hunt but realized later on that it was wrong. After he realized his mistake, had no power to stop it. He could only urge people to save their own lives by confession. But martyrs such as Rebecca Nurse and John Proctor, who had chosen death, had overwhelmed Hale with guilt to a point of desperation. “Woman, plead with him!...Be his helper!—What profit him to bleed? Shall the dust praise him? Shall the worms declare his truth? Go to him, take his shame away!”(132)

The girls in The Crucible were guilty regardless of their position. They were essentially guilty of dancing and conjuring in the woods. They were also guilty of lying; bearing false witness in court and putting innocent citizens to their deaths. In Act Three,

Danforth explains the commitment of two possible sins attributing to the Salem Witch Trials: "...and the Bible, writ by Almighty God, forbid the practice of witchcraft, and describe death as the penalty thereof. But likewise, children, the law and Bible damn all bearers of false witness."(113) Mary Warren attempted to turn against the other girls, but she would be confessing her guilt in lying to the court with Abigail. She would be seen as lying for John Proctor if the judge did not believe her.

Giles, on the other hand, was never guilty. A commendable character of wit and well experienced from 33 trials in the Salem courts, he was always the plaintiff. He always accused others in front of the court, but ironically, his life ended underneath an accusation against him. "Great stones they lay upon his chest until he plead aye or nay."(128) In a sense, Giles could never have been considered guilty in front of court, as he never responded to his accusation.

The theme of guilt played repeatedly throughout The Crucible in many different forms. Taking place in the Salem Witch Trials, guilt was twisted to an utterly perverse meaning. The smallest reasons for suspecting a person for witchcraft were taken into account; reading at night or losing seven out of eight babies were considered sufficient proof. Age-old grudges, fears, and envy surfaced in a destructive manner. Guilt spread like an epidemic throughout Salem, either under the court system or in a person's conscience. Ultimately, the judgment of God would be in favor of the ones who died to protect Christianity. Those responsible for their deaths would be guilty under a superior jurisdiction—the very Lord they killed for.