CHAPTER IV

THE CRUCIBLE

All My Sons and Death of a Salesman witnessed Miller employing the subject of guilt, which provided him with a built-in tension, a synchronization of good and evil, the fallible and infallible. This duality enabled him to explore the human image in a myriad of moods psychological, moral, archetypal and universal. Miller’s intention in The Crucible, is to move beyond the discovery and unveiling of the protagonist’s culpability, which causes the near destruction of his personality. The dramatist explains in the Introduction:

Now guilt appeared to me no longer the bedrock beneath which the probe could not penetrate. I saw it...as a betrayer, as possibly the most real of our illusions, but nevertheless a quality of mind capable of being overthrown.

In All My Sons Miller had ventured to experiment with the subject of improbity and its repercussions within the family, dealing with a class of people so close to the individual, that his perjury became extended to their conscience, and the human being was not left lonely to burn in his private hell. His wife and sons suffered along with

him. The play was a realistic exposition into the problems of the individual, who ambiguously felt, but refused to accept calumny and turpitude. *Death of a Salesman* with its complex mode of expression localised the intensity of feeling, behaviour and thought, within a single human mind. Its exploration centred on the Hopkinian concept of "inscape" of Willy Loman's mind. The other characters and the technique aided in the depiction of this multifaceted, intriguing human being concentrating upon his desires, wishes, dreams, guilt and aspirations. The analytical movement in *All My Sons* is linear, affervent and centripetal. In *Death of a Salesman* it is centrifugal, as the subsidiary characters emerge through the consciousness of the protagonist. In both the plays Miller dealt with the psychology of the individual vis-a-vis his family. Though the present play enlarges upon the issues explored in the previous dramas, the deviation from the norm established in *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* rests on the playwright's temporary respite from the intensely private drama within the family, to a probing of wider public problems. The canvas becomes larger, the characters are given greater variety, and the issues framed become universal. Miller himself states in his essay entitled *Brewed in the Crucible*:

*The Crucible* is, internally, Salesman's blood brother. It is examining the questions I was absorbed with before- the conflict between a
man’s raw deeds and his conception of himself; the question of whether conscience is in fact an organic part of the human being, and what happens when it is handed over not merely to the state or the mores of the time but to one’s friend or wife. The big difference, I think, is that The Crucible sought to include a higher degree of consciousness than the earlier plays.  

The premise which forms the focal point of The Crucible can also be traced to one of Miller’s earlier plays, The Man Who Had All the Luck. The main character of this drama is a twenty year old mechanic who, though he enjoys job satisfaction remains frustrated in his private life. However, fate intervenes removing some prominent obstacles to his happiness. The series of coincidences that follow appear remarkable and mysterious and David, the hero, becomes mortally afraid of some kind of divine retribution. The issue is settled when his wife forcibly pursuades him to make a choice, to prove that he enjoys the freedom to choose and be responsible for his deeds:

It’s not that they must die. It’s that you’ve got to kill them. I want you to know once and for all that it was you who did it.

It is done, and the play concludes with a new awareness in David for his personal responsibility. The significance of this play lies in this essential idea of choice which Miller uses in The Crucible.

The historical antecedents of *The Crucible* date back to the 1692 Salem trials, Massachusetts. These trials marked the culmination of a mass hysteria which branded a whole multitude of innocent men and women as witches and wizards, resulting in the victims’ condemnation, and death through execution. Miller was so fascinated by the novel originality of the idea that he visited Salem. Checking the available historical records and data, he gathered detailed information which he employs most effectively in *The Crucible*. Nearly all the participants and sufferers find parallels, though Miller enjoys the dramatic liberty of lessening the total number of people involved and modifying certain facts to suit his artistic convinience. Though there are many reasons behind Miller’s choice of subject, the immediate impetus to write the play in this particular mode was provided by a movement that swept America in the Nineteen Fifties under the guise of McCarthyism. In February 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy in a speech from a public platform claimed to have a list of hardened and known criminals employed in the State Department. This ‘threat from within’ became a national issue with McCarthy as the rallying point for the conservatives of the nation. By 1953 investigations of the charges were undertaken and the Senator used his Congressional privilige to examine and condemn people in public life. The situation thus created
was a repeat of the mass hysteria of Salem in which private grudges, property disputes, petty annoyances served as causes to indict friends and foes alike. Miller’s *The Crucible* has coalesced these two major events using them as extended metaphors and motifs, to investigate human weaknesses, and also as inquisitions in order to restore faith in the innate dignity, self respect, integrity of the human image, and the invincibility of the human spirit.

It would be incorrect to analyse *The Crucible* merely as a historical treatise, or even a creative artist’s response to a topically burning issue of corporate unrest, because the play transcends the topical barriers, though factual authenticity is maintained by the playwright. However, Miller was neither studiously recreating all the factual particulars of the witchhunt nor was he striving to camouflage his criticism of current events under the guise of the Salem situation. The events of the trial lent Miller the perspective he required from where he could view human tragedy at length. Salemites, according to him, were morally vocal people who sought to live and die by their avowed principles. Also significant in this context is the concept of Puritan Theocracy which stressed the innate bestiality and depravity of man. The Puritans maintained that the constant source of temptation morally weakened the individual against the forces of evil symbolised by the
Devil. The rigidity of religion, psychological atmosphere of repression and guilt, bewilderment, fear, hardship, triggered the baser desires to blame Satanic stimuli for the inexplicable phenomenon, thus paralysing all reason and common sense. In The Crucible Miller moves away from his tried format to attempt an insight into the transgressions of the individual in a wider framework. On the enlarged canvas the individual guilt diffuses into a corporate feeling of terror, wretchedness and bewilderment encompassing a total body of people. The Salem trials provided Miller with a readymade infrastructure from where he could examine the issue that occupied his mind at this stage of his career. The character and image of the protagonist was made to emerge from this morass of wickedness.

The Salem of Miller’s imagination was established some decades back, and to the cultured European mind the whole province was inhabited by a sect of fanatics. Their creed forbade everything. Hence there were hardly any celebrations in the county and holiday for the Salemites meant more prayer and worship. Miller observes in his comments of the play that the tragedy of Salem developed from a paradox. Like-minded people favoured the development of a theocracy- a combination of religious and temporal authorities to keep the community together, preventing
discords through material or ideological onslaughts. Repressions and rigidity forced suspicions and this mounted to an insane fervour. The witch hunt was thus a manifestation of the panic engulfing the polity. It also provided a long overdue opportunity to express grudges, vengeance, settle old scores in a general feeling of revenge. Also, such was the situation at Salem that any right thinking person with any sense of individuality and self respect would rebel against the regimen, snobbery, persecution and autocracy of the time. This was the society in which John Proctor lived, and being a liberated individual, could be expected to react.

Proctor’s predicament is characteristically tragic as his lot is cast in a milieu which is destructively hostile to the free play of his individualism. The concept of existence he is obliged to confront is logically rational on the surface but is sustained and propelled by hidden malice. Howsoever strongly and honestly one tries, the force proves insurmountable for individualistic bullwork, though it is not as insurmountable as the forces causing disasters in the ancient Greek plays.

Miller compacted the relationship between the characters, the prominent ones being John Proctor and his wife Elizabeth, servant girl Mary Warren, Abigail Williams the prime instigator, Reverends Parris and Hale, and Deputy
Governor Danforth. Benjamin Nelson a biographer of Miller, has in his well documented monumental work dealt at length with the relationship and historical parallels. Nelson maintains that:

Miller was struck by the stubborn and adamant refusal of one of the defendants, a farmer named John Proctor, to submit to the authority he felt to be wrong; and the mysterious circumstances involving Proctor, his wife Elizabeth, and the servant girl, Mary Warren who was their principal accuser.... The second item to catch the dramatist's attention was Mary Warren's testimony, which -despite the urgent promptings of the judges- was directed almost wholly against Elizabeth Proctor and markedly away from her husband. This apparent desire on Mary's part to see Mrs. Proctor convicted, quickly crystalized Miller's conception of the play.... He tightened the relationship between John and Elizabeth Proctor by omitting the historical but undramatic fact that she was his third wife. He changed her accuser from the bewildered Mary Warren to Abigail Williams, the foremost instigator of the hysteria; and since Abigail was only eleven years old at the time of the trials, Miller increased her age to a more temperamental and provocative seventeen, thus leaving no doubt about her feelings for Proctor. Finally, the playwright centralised the authority of the prosecution into a single, dominant figure: Deputy Governor Danforth.

In addition to them there are a score of young impressionable girls near about the same age as Abigail. It

is their attitude of near hero worship that empowers Abigail to embark on this dangerous and risky voyage through the agency of ritualistic chants. They also enhanced the effect of supernatural drama by blindly repeating Abigail. The final group consists of the Putnams, the Coreys, the Nurses, and Cheever who constitute the accusers and victims of the Salem community.

The sudden illness of Betty Parris and her unusual behaviour prompt the Salemites to conclude that supernatural forces were interfering in human affairs. The very prosaic reason behind the occurrence was the discovery of a group of girls consisting of Abigail Williams, Mary Lewis, Mary Warren, Ruth Putnam and Betty Parris, in the nearby forest by Reverend Parris. The children were essaying to conjure spirits with the help of Tituba, an African servant of the Parris family. The Reverend endeavours to plead, cajole, advise, even emotionally blackmail them into a confession but Abigail their flagbearer and Parris’s niece remains undeterred, insisting on their innocence. However, the suspicion of unnatural rituals and happenings inadvertently offers an opportunity to the girls to extricate themselves from the tight situation by placing the blame on unwary local people against whom they have harboured grudges. One such victimised family is that of John Proctor.
John Proctor is a farmer in mid-thirties. He is even-tempered, steadfast, quietly confident, not easily led, and does not suffer hypocrites. Miller’s opinion of him is that "in his presence a fool felt his foolishness instantly," and a "Proctor is always marked for calumny." The entire Salem community respected and even feared him as there was an aura of unexpressed hidden force beneath the cool, collected, exterior of John Proctor. Outwardly he appears very calm and at peace but Miller clarifies this impression by professing that the unruffled facade hid a troubled soul, a consciousness of having sinned against himself, the norms of decent conduct and the moral fashion of the day. As a consequence, he regards himself as a fraud though no hint of it appeared on the surface. Liberated, ahead of his times in matters pertaining to thought, Proctor cannot resist being human and fallible. Thus it is that he falls a prey to the charm of Abigail Williams who is Parris’s niece, and has been in Proctor’s employ for sometime. Abby, with her "endless capacity for dissembling" ensares John and the two share an adulterous relationship which subsequently becomes Proctor’s guilt motif. Later she is dismissed from the job by Elizabeth.

Proctor’s progressive leanings react against the allusions to the supernatural, and he is witnessed at the Reverend’s house striving to convince the sane minded that
the total episode was merely a girlish prank. This opinion is corroborated by Rebecca Nurse.

Pray calm yourselves. I have eleven children, and I am twenty-six times a grandma, and I have seen them all through their silly seasons, and when it come on them they will run the Devil bowlegged keeping up with their mischief. I think she'll wake up when she tires of it. A child's spirit is like a child, you can never catch it by running after it.

Proctor: Aye, that's the truth of it, Rebecca.  

Though John is aggravated by the presence of Mary Warren at the scene, his secret understanding, the subtle underplayed teasing of Abigail are indicative of the deeper relationship which Proctor no longer wishes to continue. "No, no, Abby, That's done with," and instructs her to "put it out of your mind." However, divining the extent of his susceptibility, Abby wishes to take the maximum advantage and begins to involve Elizabeth in her tirade calling her a "cold sniveling woman," who is deliberately blackening her name with lies. Proctor who has till this moment treated her merely as an immature girl grows uneasy

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4. Miller, Collected Plays, pp. 243-244.
and Abby’s accusations and confrontation taunt him into anger, because he was already a party to her private confession:

**Abigail:** Oh, posh! We were dancin’ in the woods last night, and my uncle leaped in on us. She took fright, is all.

**Proctor:** Ah, you’re wicked yet, aren’t ye’! You’ll be clapped in the stocks before you’re twenty.5

His relationship with Elizabeth is uncomfortable. Act II demonstrates the overt effort made by him to please her and his extreme disappointment when she does not reciprocate to the overture. Elizabeth’s coldness of demeanour towards her husband is reflected in their house, which lacks warmth, light and love, lending to it a sense of emptiness:

**Proctor:** You ought to bring some flowers in the house.

**Elizabeth:** Oh! I forgot! I will tomorrow.

**Proctor:** It’s winter in here yet. On Sunday let you come with me, and we’ll walk the farm together.6

Proctor fails to gauge and measure the sense of separation and distance between them. He is wary of her, yet


strives to be normal by asking her why she allowed Mary Warren to leave the house and even then, essays to withhold full condemnation of his wife:

Elizabeth: I couldn't stop her.

Proctor: It is a fault, it is a fault Elizabeth---you're the mistress here, not Mary Warren.

Elizabeth: She frightened all my strength away.

Proctor: How may that mouse frighten you, Elizabeth?

At this juncture John Proctor is informed that the whole town has gone berserk and fourteen people have already been jailed with death sentences awaiting them. Proctor scoffs at the episode, but eventually his conviction starts deserting him when his wife begins to persuade him to inform the concerned authorities about the fraud practised by the girl Abigail. Proctor being mortal is unwilling to implicate himself. He thus becomes involved in an inner struggle to provide the information to the court and an innate wish to remain aloof. All this is tempered by the feeling of the injustice of the whole episode, coupled with his own licentious involvement:

Proctor: I am only wondering how I may prove what she told me, Elizabeth. If the girl's a saint now, I think it is

7. Ibid., p.263.
not easy to prove she's fraud and
the town gone so silly. She told it
to me in a room alone- I have no
proof for it.8

Unwittingly John betrays himself to his already suspicious
wife whose constant arraignment placed him in a strange
predicament:

Spare me! You forget nothin' and forgive
nothin'. Learn charity, woman.9

His pent up feelings released, Proctor complains how in the
months following Abigail's dismissal he was branded a
criminal in his own house, walked on tiptoe, bent over
himself to please Elizabeth, aware of discredit and
condemnation every moment on every single utterance. John
realizes that he had misjudged his wife when he confessed to
transgression:

...I wilted, and like, a Christian,I
confessed. Confessed! Some dream I had must
have mistaken you for God that day. But
you're not, you're not, and let you remember
it! Let you look for the goodness in me and
judge me not.10

His pleading "look for goodness in me" echoes
through the pages of The Crucible and the exact implication

8. Ibid., p.264.
9. Ibid., p.265.
10. Ibid.
appears towards the conclusion. He feels guilt-smitten and remains indecisive when he learns that the court intends to summon Elizabeth also. Though ashamed, Proctor is still unsure and his wife nearly forces him into action:

Proctor: Woman, am I so base? Do you truly think me so base?

Elizabeth: I never called you base.

Proctor: Then how you do charge me with such promise?...

Elizabeth: Then why do you anger with me when I bid you break it?

Proctor: Because it speaks deceit, and I am honest! But I'll plead no more! I see now your spirit twists around the single error of my life, and I will never tear it free!

Proctor's relationship with Abigail and Elizabeth form the private aspect of his personality. As a public man he disapproves of the Reverend's acquisitive temperament. The very beginning of The Crucible is marked by a vociferous dispute between them:

Proctor: Mr. Parris, you are the first minister ever did demand the deed to this house-

Parris: Man! Don't a minister deserve a house to live in?

Proctor: To live in, yes. But to ask ownership is like you shall own the

11. Ibid., p.270.
meeting house itself; The last meeting I were at you spoke so long on deeds and mortgages I thought it were an auction.

......

Parris:  There is either obedience or the church will burn like Hell is burning!

Proctor: Can you speak one minute without we land in Hell again? I am sick of Hell!12

Proctor is very forthright against the minister’s demand because "I like not the smell of this authority." Though not irreligious, for he has nailed the roof upon the church and hung its door he elects not to go to the Church on account of his personal dislike of Parris. Instead, on the Sabbath Day, John prefers cultivating his lands which he considers a more profitable and fruitful labour. Only two of the couple’s three children are baptized, and it is extremely significant that in answer to Hale’s catechism Proctor flounders on the commandment on adultery. He flails uneasily and takes Elizabeth’s support to delicately remind him of the commandment.

Hale’s visit to their house marks the beginning of the most important chapter of their existence. His timely warning, "I know not if you’re aware, but your wife’s name is mentioned in the court," echoes Elizabeth’s fears of the

12. Ibid., p.246.
self same possibility, knowing Abigail's jealous and possessive nature. With despair she entreats Hale who questions Proctor with,

Hale: Would you testify to this in court?
Proctor: I had not reckoned with goin' into court. But if I must I will.
Hale: Do you falter here?
Proctor: I falter nothing, but I may wonder if my story will be credited in such a court. I do wonder on it, when such a steady-minded minister as you will suspicion such a woman that never lied, and cannot, and the world knows she cannot! I may falter somewhat, Mister; I am no fool.13

It is extremely mystifying to reason why Proctor does 'falter' unless he is accepted as a very natural human being, with his typical predilections, nebulous fears, small resistances, obstinacies and a desire to live life and preserve his good name. Critics like Allen A. Stambusky disagree with this argument stating that,

Proctor can hardly be considered the ideal protagonist of high tragedy. Although he is apparently a "good" man, renowned and prosperous among his fellow Salemites,...he is "too good" to be a prototype of the classical tragic hero. Proctor is closer to "pure innocence" than anything else. He has weaknesses, but no faults: he has not committed the crime of which he is accused. Proctor is an unsophisticated farmer with a

13. Ibid., p.275.
sound sense of right and wrong, a man of integrity who dies rather than sacrifice that integrity. He does not particularly change or grow in stature within the play."

Nearly all of Miller's protagonists, from *All My Sons* through *After the Fall*, to the *Misfits* and *The Price*, are noted for their humanness. The desire to live and cherish life is strong in most of them. The worth and value of existence starkly contrasts with their circumstances and demise. Judging Proctor from the viewpoint of being and remaining human, it becomes difficult to accept that there is no growth in his characterization. His 'faltering stance' in the previously quoted utterance itself lends credibility to the argument of depth, profoundity, and humanness converting him into a round figure. Being a practical man of the world Proctor has to debate upon various angles before arriving at a decision. In addition to this Miller has from the very outset been subtly alluding to the suggestive nature of the relationship between Abigail and Proctor. Nowhere in the play is it defined clearly, but Elizabeth's suspicions and Proctor's own extra cautiousness transform it into an equivocal hold that Abby enjoys over John. Thus when

Hale questions him about his belief in witches the rejoinder is a noncommittal, "The Bible speaks of witches and I will not deny them." The warrant for Elizabeth's arrest enables Proctor to attain the essential perspective, dispensing with the indecisive bewilderment that was stifling his will to act. He tears the warrant in disgust and declares:

If she is innocent! Why do you never wonder if Parris be innocent, or Abigail? Is the accuser always holy now?...I'll tell you what's walking Salem- vengeance is walking Salem. We are what we always were in Salem, but now the little crazy children are jangling the keys of the kingdom, and common vengeance writes the law! This warrant's vengeance! I'll not give my wife to vengeance!15

Rushing to the door at the sound of the clanking chains Proctor pleads to Herrick and Hale to spare his wife. His guilty conscience upbraids him for cowardice and John gives vent to his anger on Hale:

You are a coward! Though you be ordained in God's tears, you are a coward now!16

By stating the fact of moral cowardice even though it is a stricture on Hale, John Proctor manages to accept his own

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lack of courage. The issue thus decided, he forcibly pursuades Mary Warren to speak the truth:

Mary: She’ll kill me for sayin’ that. Abby’ll charge lechery on you Mr. Proctor!

Proctor: She’s told you!

Mary: I have known it, Sir. She’ll ruin you...

Proctor: Good. Then her saintliness is done with. We will slide together into our pit; you will tell the court what you know.

Mary: I cannot, they’ll turn on me.

Proctor: My wife will never die for me! I will bring your guts into your mouth but that goodness will not die for me!

Proctor’s repeated references to Elizabeth’s goodness are in direct contraposition to his own self awareness and his wife’s reservations about his goodness. Like Joe Keller and Willy Loman, John Proctor commits himself to the dictates of an impersonal fate by making the first wrong choice of his life. But the mistake has now attained frightening dimensions. He is blamed for overthrowing the court as the decision to take Mary Warren for testimony brings him in direct confrontation with the Puritan theocracy. Despite the servant girl’s confession and evidence against the instigators of the hysteria,

17. Ibid., p.283.
Mary: It were pretense, sir.

Danforth: I can not hear you.

Proctor: It were pretense, she says.

Danforth: Ah? And the other girls? Susanna Walcott, and the others? They are also pretending?

Mary: Aye, sir.¹⁸

no concession for human behaviour is allowed to Proctor, who had torn Elizabeth’s arrest warrant. Instead, he is catechised for absence from church. His wife’s pregnancy is skeptically registered and the written testimony of the Salemites in favour of Rebecca, Martha and Elizabeth is also disallowed. Mary Warren courageously reiterates the truth but Abigail’s ritualistic chanting frighten her into revoking her statement. The hysteria and near mass hypnotism practised by Abby infuriates Proctor into the final admission of his ignominy before the public:

Danforth: You are charging Abigail Williams with a marvelous cool plot to murder, do you understand that?

Proctor: I do, sir. I believe she means to murder.

Danforth: (pointing at Abigail incredulously) This child would murder your wife?

Proctor: It is not a child.¹⁹

¹⁸. Ibid., p.289.

¹⁹. Ibid., p.300.
and later,

Proctor:  *(trembling,  his  life  collapsing about  him)*  I  have  known  her,  sir.  I have  known  her.

Danforth:  You-  you  are  a  lecher?

Francis:  *(horrified)*  John,  you  cannot  say such  a_

Proctor:  Oh,  Francis,  I  wish  you  had  some evil  in  you  that  you  might  know  me! *(To  Danforth)*  A  man  will  not  cast away  his  good  name.  You  surely  know that.\(^20\)

Proctor  absolves  Elizabeth  from  all  charges  of  mendacity  as his  faith  in  her  goodness  is  as  resolute  as  his  belief  in divinity.  He  feels  belittled  in  his  own  opinion  and  his conviction  rocks  on  its  foundation  on  hearing  Elizabeth’s refusal  to  divulge  the  truth  about  him:

Danforth:  Is  your  husband  a  lecher!

Elizabeth:  *(faintly)*  No,  sir.

......

Proctor:  Elizabeth,  tell  the  truth!

Danforth:  She  has  spoken...

Proctor:  Elizabeth,  I  have  confessed  it!

Elizabeth:  Oh,  God!

Proctor:  She  only  thought  to  save  my  name!\(^21\)


Elizabeth's brave efforts to compromise on her principles for the love of her husband are thus negated. Her retributive gesture though meaningless serves to seal Proctor's fate even further, because he now becomes a captive of this "kind duplicity." Unaware of the explosiveness of the situation and its imminent implications, Elizabeth's sole desire is to support her husband. Having been moved by his own sense of integral guilt, and an acute exasperation at Abigail's antics, Proctor had taken recourse to condemning both himself and Abby by an honest confession, depending on his estimate of Elizabeth to uphold his truth. The decision, though prompted by emotional and psychological reasons, becomes the consequence of a conscious and deliberate choice. In contrast to Elizabeth's goodness John feels humbled and his misdemeanor becomes pronouncedly magnified in his own mind, as he gauges it against the absolute injustice of his wife's arrest and trial. His tortured conscience forces on him the extent of his culpability. The burden of the guilt that Proctor has been shouldering up till now has been purely private, but the issues at stake in the court were public. With the disclosure of his improbity John converts his private lapse into a public offence. His public confession is as much of an atonement as an acceptance of Elizabeth's long held opinion of himself. The announcement is also one
of the several important choices Proctor makes during the course of the play. It unleashes a chain reaction, and the image of Proctor in the final act is that of a caged chained creature, and the only sign of emotion is the silent communication shared between him and Elizabeth. The mood characterizing him is ill defined because he is numbed beyond sorrow- a strange half sound, half laughter, half amazement, escapes him at the sight of his wife. With wrists chained, eyes misty, and beard overgrown, Proctor’s dishevelled image is representative of all Miller heroes. Enmeshed inside a prison of their own deeds, cemented by the cogent external reality, the protagonist’s mistakes and follies attain such daemonic dimensions that there is no option left to retract to safety. The transgressions attain the stature of a metaphysical, impersonal, and multidimensional reality circumscribing the individual.

Proctor’s plight in the beginning of Act IV graphically delineates, this figurative and literal trapping of the individual by the forces which he himself has courted to alleviate the degree of his guilt. Proctor’s next opportunity for deliberate choice is provided, when he indicates to Elizabeth his decision to publicly confess to being in league with the Devil. Though John values life his reasons are yet inexplicable. Death by execution would canonize him and being aware of his sinful existence,
Proctor does not want to dissemble to God in death:

Elizabeth: I cannot judge you, John.
Proctor: What would you have me do?
Elizabeth: As you will, I would have it. I want you living, John. That's sure.

......
Proctor: It is a pretense, Elizabeth.
Elizabeth: What is?
Proctor: I cannot mount the gibbet like a saint. It is a fraud. I am not that man. My honesty is broke, Elizabeth; I am no good man. Nothing's spoiled by giving them this lie that were not rotten long before.  

In mortal, agonising anguish he turns to her. "It is a pretense for me, a vanity" to hear,

John, it come to naught that I should forgive you, if you'll not forgive yourself. It is not my soul, John, it is yours. Only be sure of this, for I know it now: Whatever you will do, it is a good man.... let none be your judge. There be no higher judge under Heaven than Proctor is!  

Proctor is emotionally churned up by his wife's affirmation, as this was the one single moment in his strife-torn existence, when Elizabeth exonerates him from the blame that

22. Ibid., p.322.
23. Ibid., p.323.
had been gnawing their happiness. The reason for the confession subtly changes. Previously it was a rejection of sainthood, now it is because, "I want my life, I’ll have my life." The first submission though morally sound serves to enhance the totally private motive prompting the second pronouncement. John Proctor vacillates between options seeking to perpetuate the image of the good man, he had momentarily witnessed in his wife’s eyes. Realizing that another wrong choice would further demean him and fully wipe out the already threatened image he enquires, "It is evil, is it not? It is evil?" Frightened by the immensity of his responsibility he begs Elizabeth for support:

Elizabeth: (in terror) I cannot judge you, John, I cannot!

Proctor: Then who will judge me? God in Heaven, what is John Proctor? what is John Proctor? I think it is honest, I think so; I am no saint. Let Rebecca go like a saint; for me it is a fraud!24

Moving like a chained animal with fury riding him, Proctor searches in despair for some meaning in his life. His stark image is reminiscent of Yank in O’Neill’s The Hairy Ape, where the protagonist dies interrogating all available sentient and nonsentient beings about his

24. Ibid., p.324.
identity. The question significantly is not "Who John Proctor is" but "What is John Proctor," the former implying an identity but the latter negating it to a cipher. He knows that his identity would be decimated if weakness forces him to succumb to evil. Hence Proctor is torn between the desire to live, and the desire to live for the right reasons. He seeks clarification from Elizabeth:

Would you give them such a lie? Say it. Would you ever give them this? You would not; if tongs of fire were singeing you you would not! It is evil. Good, then - it is evil, and I do it!

Proctor, for a while, strives to emulate Elizabeth's goodness. He reckons judging himself against her standards and discovers that he is deficient. For him the court headed by Danforth has no significance, because his jury has always been his wife before whom he repeatedly appeals. Reconciled to his mortality John prizes life for its own sake, and is willing to make a final compromise for the sake of his family. At this vital moment Elizabeth's acceptance of her own folly enables John to perceive her on equal terms as a mortal with feet of clay. He had lived a life of self condemnation, tortured by his sense of private guilt. Like Loman, Proctor also gains an awareness. However,

25. Ibid.
Willy accepted his death as resurrection, but Proctor still faces hurdles between his total release from trespass and the final affirmation. The obstruction is his own desire to live, but so tenuous is his hold on the newly acquired awareness that any threat from existential reality makes him unsure of its validity. The court officials who are keen to capitalize on the weight of his name surround him like vultures to record his confession and signature. John shies off asking bewilderedly, "Why must it be written." Carried by the momentum of his own choice and the pressure from external agents, Proctor proceeds with the public confessional, only to stop at the entrance of Rebecca Nurse. He feels ashamed, grits his teeth, turns his face, unwilling to withstand the unspoken query in Rebecca's glance. His fake testimony terminates with Danforth's questions which make him cognisant with the extent of his betrayal:

Danforth: When the Devil came to you did you see Rebecca Nurse in his company?...

Proctor: (almost inaudibly) No.\(^{26}\)

The awareness injects a positive affirmative confidence in John Proctor for he asserts,

They think to go like saints. I like not to spoil their names.
and,
I speak my own sins; I cannot judge another.
I have no tongue for it.\(^{27}\)

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26. Ibid., p.325.
27. Ibid., p.326.
Though his indignant protest saves him from becoming a false witness against his friends, Proctor still suffers the indignity of signing his confession. The attachment of his name in black and white to perjury shocks him to a complete perception of the nature of compromise that he was on the verge of making. With boundless terror rising in him John snatches the paper and tears it:

Proctor: ...I have signed it. You have seen me. It is done! You have no need for this.

Parris: Proctor, the village must have proof that_

Proctor: Damn the village! I confess to God, and God has seen my name on this! It is enough!28

In the final moments of his life Proctor realizes that the most lasting relationship is not between man and man, but God and man, and the human being in all his sin, guilt, misery, humiliation and happiness, must submit himself to God rather than sell his soul in the human court:

Proctor: I have confessed myself! Is there no good penitence but it be public? God does not need my name nailed upon the church! God sees my name; God knows how black my sins are! It is enough!

Danforth: Mr. Proctor_

28. Ibid., p.327.
The cry is poignantly reminiscent of another utterance earlier in Miller’s pages. "I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman." John acknowledges his guilt before witnesses and considers it sufficient purgation. He deems it the last nail in the coffin to suffer the guilt by betraying his friends and being a party to their baseless murders. John does not desire to leave behind a legacy of self-condemnation and perfidy for his progeny:

I have three children- how may I teach them to walk like men in the world, and I sold my friends?  

The cry of anguish emanates from the pit of his soul:

...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?

In the above speech Proctor comprehends two essential truths that seem apparently paradoxical. One is the realization of the value of the individual’s name which

29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., p.328.
amalgamates his worth, respect, dignity and integrity. Proctor is insistent because after a lifetime of abysmal darkness of ignorance he has gained cognizance of the human being’s actual potential and true worth. John has finally envisioned the light of knowledge and awareness. The second pertains to the negating of the individual ego by submitting to a superior consciousness, thus humbling one self in one’s self esteem. After tearing the paper he manages to liberate himself from the web of lies, guilt, deceit, hypocrisy, finally asserting, restoring his self dignity as a human being:

...now I do think I see some shred of goodness in John Proctor. Not enough to weave a banner with, but white enough to keep it from such dogs.  

Goodness has been John’s obsession from the very beginning. He believed that good corresponded with people’s good opinion, specially of those affiliated closely to him. The trial educates him by teaching him the basic tenets of human responsibility and making John aware that goodness is of deeper origin, and its roots are embedded inside the human being himself, because in the final analysis the individual is a merger of the court of law, the judge, the betrayer and the victim. Proctor now shares a perfect understanding with his wife and in parting leaves behind

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32. Ibid.
some part of cogent knowledge in his last message:

Give them no tear! Tears please them! Show honor now, show a stony heart and sink them with it!33

Proctor’s self discovery is ably aided by the two women who figure prominently in his life. Elizabeth, his legally wedded wife, supports the morally sound facet of his personality, and Abigail Williams gives companionship to his baser instincts. The relationship between Proctor and Elizabeth is significant because its ambivalence becomes the root cause behind John’s dangerous liaison with Abigail. It also provided Miller with the central motif of individual guilt which he had been exploring in his previous plays. Like them the actual deed belongs to the past. Unlike her predecessors, Linda and Kate, Elizabeth is reserved, hard to please, slightly critical of her husband, and makes too many demands upon herself. Like them she is honest, loyal, obedient and trustworthy. Her implied and overt criticism constantly infuriates John. Though fearful of his anger she repeatedly corners him in divulging the truth. Elizabeth’s intentions are extremely ambiguous. On the one hand, she reacts against the injustice of the indictments and false accusations, and on the other, she is jealous of Abigail

33. Ibid.
demanding full confession from John. So intense is her mission that she becomes his conscience. John’s dithering and vacillation convince her of his duplicity and emotional leanings towards Abigail. Tired of her role as his keeper she indicates her loss of faith in him:

Elizabeth: Do as you wish, then.
Proctor: Woman, I’ll not have your suspicion any more.
Elizabeth: I have no-
Proctor: I’ll not have it!
Elizabeth: Then let you not earn it.
Proctor: You doubt me yet!
Elizabeth: John, if it were not Abigail that you must go to hurt, would you falter now? I think not.34

Elizabeth is a product of the Puritan society. Though she adheres to her sense of duty she cannot prevent herself from passing strictures on John. She can also not comprehend that the cause of John’s indiscretion lay with her. Her coldness had converted a warm house into a chilly empty, soulless structure. Obligation enables her to accept John again but she performs the deed without understanding or comprehending its implications. Their life together was a hollow charade covered by a dignified facade:

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34. Ibid., p.264.
I do not judge you. The magistrate sits in your heart that judges you. I never thought you but a good man, John—only somewhat bewildered.35

Unlike Linda and Kate, Elizabeth develops through the course of the play, and as an aftermath of the traumatic experience discovers herself. In the last moments of John’s life the Proctors are closer to each other than they had ever been before. When Elizabeth is brought to the court room to persuade her husband into a confession to save his own life, she maintains a studied silence and agrees only after great non-verbal inner deliberations. The long months in the prison have left her pale and gaunt, but enabled her to do a lot of soul searching and analysis. Elizabeth realizes that it was her coldness that forced John to lechery:

I have read my heart this three month, John. I have sins of my own to count. It needs a cold wife to prompt lechery.36

Emotions overflow after a lifetime of repression:

Elizabeth: Better you should know me!
Proctor: I will not hear it! I know you!
Elizabeth: You take my sins upon you, John—
Proctor: No, I take my own, my own!

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35. Ibid., p.265.
36. Ibid., p.323.
Elizabeth: John, I counted myself so plain, so poorly made....I never knew how I should say my love. It were a cold house I kept!  

With her own sense of insufficiency, Elizabeth refuses to judge John. There is a final perception of the real goodness in her husband which she had overlooked in her pursuit of perfection, prompting her to plead:

Forgive me, forgive me, John- I never knew such goodness in the world!

Previously Elizabeth had judged him at every juncture but now she realizes her own fallibility. Her comprehension of weakness is very similar to Biff’s in Death of a Salesman. At the time of Proctor’s execution their marriage gains a warmth and tangibility till now absent and when the others plead, pray and petition she cries out, "He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him."

There is absolutely nothing to commend in Abigail Williams as a person, for she is a spiteful equivocator with a passion for dissembling. Her hatred of Elizabeth for which she drank blood and summoned spirits, forms the corpus of the play and the crux of the story of John’s destruction.

The initial motive inducing her argument with Reverend

37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
Parris is self preservation. Fortunately the trump card of witchcraft is supplied to her by the Salemites themselves. Her importance lies in being the prime instigator, but the relationship she shared with Proctor provides Miller with the opportunity of exploring his innate weakness. Contrary to the stiffness that marks his bond with Elizabeth, John enjoys a covert empathy with Abigail. Her nervous, expectant laughter, winning manner, wicked air, feverish look and finally the honest admission to the fraud she was practising in the hope of personal gain, point to a deeper understanding between them. She also knows that the mounting fever of witchcraft would conveniently shift her blame. Abigail is fully confident of Proctor’s affection and taunts him with, "You come five mile to see a silly girl fly. I know you better."

The justification of Abigail’s claim becomes evident when Proctor himself is witnessed dithering over disclosing her involvement. Though John is unaware, Elizabeth and Abby are not blind to his weakness. Both persuade and confront him in their respective manners and he unwittingly complies with their suspicions. Though Abigail’s motives are purely selfish, Proctor’s stance could be interpreted as a subtle desire to preserve some memories of love shared, which is virtually absent in his own relationship with Elizabeth. This probably is the hold and
influence, that Abigail enjoys over John from which he cannot break himself free. The utter injustice of Elizabeth's implication reminds him of his duty to her as wife and his basic goodness and sincerity prevent him from furthering the destruction of the already crumbling edifice of their marriage. Abigail Williams is employed by Miller as an instrument to expose Proctor's vulnerability, lending perspective and depth to his image.

The final touches to the human image in The Crucible are provided by the eighty three years old, canny, inquisitive, cranky, but a deeply honest and brave man by the name of Giles Corey. Basically a simple and straightforward individual, he inquires from the learned, some equally innocent questions regarding his wife Martha, who is deeply religious, and very fond of books. Unfortunately Martha becomes one of the indicted on the basis of Giles' innocent queries. Torn by the baselessness of arguments against her he tries his utmost to stop the injustice. An upright man who refuses to divulge the name of his informant he continues to maintain his dignity in his death by not succumbing to any pressure. His death and its circumstances recall to mind the invincible spirit of Hardy's heroes and the indestructibility of the spirit of Hemingway's protagonists:

Elizabeth: He were not hanged. He would not answer aye or nay to his
indictment; for if he denied the charge they’d hang him surely, and auction out his property. So he stand mute and died Christian under the law....It is the law, for he could not be condemned a wizard without he answer the indictment, aye or nay.

Proctor: Then how does he die?

Elizabeth: They press him, John.

Proctor: Press?

Elizabeth: Great stones they lay upon his chest until he plead aye or nay. They say he give them but two words, "More weight," he says. And died.39

One cannot help agreeing with Elizabeth Proctor ‘It were a fearsome man, Giles Corey’.

Miller’s presentation of the image of man in The Crucible, as our analysis of the play in the foregoing paragraphs has established, is as topical, historical and contemporary as it is mythical, archetypal and universal. The selected and cleverly modified factual details subtly mingle with the contemporary American commercial ethos, and are endowed with universal relevance by fusing them with the mythical undercurrents. Salem is, in a sense, contemporary America with the sustaining value of commercialism, seeking excuses in natural and supernatural elements for selfish

39. Ibid., p.322.
material gains. It is also the macrocosm where the microcosmic John Proctor acts as a representative of humanity caught in a man-made web which has been given a supernatural dimension. John cannot extricate himself from this complex web. Combined with this external factor is his own indiscretion. The destructive dimension which the past acquires in the play has the mythical potential of Sophoclean proportions. John’s attainment of self-perception leading to the strengthening of his essentially human and ethical integrity, as well as his destruction by the external and internal forces establish his image of man who, like a typical tragic protagonist, is paradoxically both great and small.