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The Voyage Of WitchCraft: From The Crucible To Harry Potter

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Abstract

In this paper, I have attempted to draw a line of comparison between two iconic works of literature namely, *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Composed in 1692 and conceived in 1997 respectively, witchcraft is the fulcrum upon which both of these masterpieces rest. The texts reiterate references of the historical event of witch hunt in New England and colonial America, which ranged from 14th century to 17th century. However, the journey of witchcraft from the 17th to the 20th century, and its reception, has not been without alterations. From being a taboo, to an art which is difficult to master but highly desirable, the general perception towards witchcraft, has acquired a sea-change.

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Since the comparison here, is between a representative text of the western canon and a milestone achieved in popular culture, it is imperative that the difference between both is drawn out with clarity. The term 'western canon' implies a body of books, music or art which have been traditionally accepted by western scholars as the primary contributors in shaping western culture. The canon, thus, is an amalgamation of "the greatest work of artistic merit", and plays an important part in the development of "high culture".

Popular culture, on the other hand, caters to the need of the 'mass' and not of the 'class'. Designed primarily to entertain, popular literature is not necessarily the spelling out of subtle motifs in order to glorify the higher aspects of beauty.

However, the aforementioned does not really stand valid when we deal with Miller and Rowling, for they have successfully swapped roles at regular intervals. Though she is one of the flag bearers of the western canon, Miller has often entertained her readers with a perfect balance of fact and fiction. On the other hand, though Rowling's Hogwarts is an illusionary world of magic and dark arts, she keeps addressing several social causes, raising her voice against discriminations on the basis of social strata in an alternate world which is more or less a mirror image of the reality, no matter how magical and elusive it appears on the surface. She successfully brings about an effective change in the outlook towards the practice of

witchcraft. 'Witch' is no more a derogatory remark made to deliberately trample upon the marginalised through a rigorous process of witch-hunt, for Rowling seems to have rendered voice to these 'subalterns', who, rather than getting persecuted and burnt mercilessly, are capable souls who valorously fight against 'One who must not be named' (evil), in order to secure peace, prosperity and justice for the society. Rather than looking down upon them, today, our contemporary society, glorifies the brave hearts such as Hermione Granger or Luna Lovegood. The letter from Hogwarts remains the most anticipated dream of childhood while the wizards and the witches are held with high regard in contrast to the fellow 'muggles'.

Regardless the genre that Harry Potter series is placed under (fantasy or children's literature), Rowling brought forth before her readers some of the pertinent information related to witch hunting in the 14th century. In Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Professor Binns assigned his upcoming third year students, a composition titled, 'Witch burning in the 14th century was completely pointless.' The essay was supposed to cover witch burning in the 14th century by Muggles, and why these burnings were ineffective in decreasing the wizarding population. Harry Potter consulted Bathilda Bagshot's *A History of Magic*, which read,

Non magic people (more commonly known as Muggles) were particularly afraid of magic in medieval times, but not very good at recognizing it. On the rare occasion that they did catch a real witch or wizard, burning had no effect whatsoever. The witch or wizard would perform a basic Flame Freezing Charm and then pretend to shriek with pain while enjoying a gentle, tickling sensation. Indeed, Wendelin the Weird enjoyed being burnt so much that she allowed herself to be caught no less than forty seven times in various disguises. (J.K. Rowling, 1999)

In addition to Bagshot's hilarious account of Wendelin the Weird, and Flame Freezing Charms, we also have the following information from Albus Dumbledore's notes on *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*.

As the witch hunts grew ever fiercer, wizarding families began to live double lives, using charms of concealment to protect themselves and their families. By the 17th century, any witch or wizard who chose to fraternize with Muggles became a suspect, even an outcast in his or her own community. (J.K. Rowling, 1999)

The book also iterates how from the beginning of the 15th century, the persecution of the witches and wizards had reached its peak in the 17th century. This had the effect of making many in the wizarding community feel that offering to aid their Muggle neighbours with their magic was “tantamount to volunteering to fetch the firewood for one's own funeral pyre”. It was easy enough for the witches and wizards to escape their captivity and death sentences, if retaining possession of their wands (and skills such as Animagus skills).

“However, a number of deaths did occur. Sir Nicholas de Mimsy Porpington (a wizard at the royal court in his lifetime, and in his death time, ghost of Gryffindor Tower), was stripped of his wand before being locked in a dungeon, and was unable to magic himself out of his execution; and wizarding families were particularly prone to losing younger members, whose inability to control their own magic, made them noticeable, and vulnerable to Muggle witch-hunters.

Thus, it seems that the period did indeed have negative significance to the Wizards, in particular, it was considered a period bad enough to lead to an international agreement to complete secrecy, an agreement that still governs almost every facet of their existence even almost four hundred years after the burnings.”

In the whole series of *Harry Potter*, the wizards and the witches have been given a superior position to the non-magic fellows called Muggles. Discriminations have been made between the ‘pure-bloods’ who are the descendants of pure witches and wizards (like Harry Potter), ‘mud-bloods’, who are witches born into muggle families (like Hermione Granger) and ‘blood traitors’ like the Weasley family, who have associations with the Muggle families.

“The Death Eaters can’t all be pure-blood, there aren’t enough pure-blood wizards left.”
,said Hermione stubbornly. “ I expect most of them are half-bloods pretending to be pure. Its only Muggle-borns they hate, they’d be happy to let you and Ron join up.”

“There is no way they’d let me be a Death Eater!” said Ron indignantly...”My whole family are blood traitors! That’s as bad as Muggle-borns to Death Eaters!”

“And they’d love to have me,” said Harry sarcastically. “We’d be best pals if they didn’t keep trying to do me in.” (J.K. Rowling, 2005).

Thus, the more the witches were involved in one’s family lineage, the higher was one’s prestige in the world of Hogwarts. But when we excavate the world of Miller’s *The Crucible*, the picture stands strikingly contrasting.

Placing this ill fate of the witches historiographical at Miller's times, we get to see more reality. Witch hunting here, is not a merry-time activity for the victims anymore. Rather, it is an event of mass murder, often on wrong allegations over the so-called witches. In 17th century New England, most people shared a strong belief in witchcraft. The origin of the belief went back to Europe, where, by some estimates, five hundred thousand people were executed for witchcraft between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. Prior to the Salem outbreak of 1692, almost three hundred people had been accused of witchcraft in New England; more than thirty had been hanged. This flair up of accusations spread to many other communities in Essex County, Massachusetts and was the worst and the most dramatic episode of witch hunting in colonial America. When it was over, twenty people had been executed. More than a hundred people had been jailed and several died during imprisonment. And sometimes, even the people who were not guilty of the act, used to confess guilt, so as to avoid a stricter punishment.

Another factor which inspired Arthur Miller to compose his play was the release of the book, *Malleus Malificarum*. Written by Dominicans, Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kraemer, *Malleus Malificarum* or *Witches' Hammer* made one of the most contemptuous attacks on women in history. After its release in 1486 (with an official endorsement by Pope Innocent VIII), the book became a manifesto of the witch hunters who fed upon its sexist contents. As historian Selma Williams points out, the handbook endorsed statements such as, "A greater number of witches is found in the fragile feminine sex than among men... There are more women than men found infected with the heresy of witchcraft. blessed be the highest who has preserved the male sex from so great a crime". It also contained opinions like, "A

woman is by her nature more quicker to waver in her faith and consequently quicker to abjure the faith, which is the root of witchcraft.”

The witch purgation in New England became an attempt to suppress women empowerment for they mostly women who were religious reformers as well. The ongoing process of colonisation assisted in a quick propagation of the witch lore in the Puritan culture. Accused of religious dissent, political anarchy and heresy of antinomianism, Anne Hutchinson was condemned as a witch and was considered to be an “instrument of Satan”.

Another factor that contributed to the contemporary outlook was Quakerism, a religious phenomenon that endorsed the concept of gender equality. One of such Quakers was Mary Dyer, a religious collaborator of Anne Hutchinson. She, being a Quaker, was hanged on June 1, 1660.

The political upheavals and the spread of communalism had reached so far and wide that all the political implications made in the play, *The Crucible*, make it seem to be a rewriting of history. But is *The Crucible* merely a re-working of the societal imbalances? Is it merely a pseudo-fictional artwork, or is it rather a shrewd concealing of history in between the lines of fiction?

Arthur Miller wrote,

This play is not history in the sense in which the word is used by the academic historian. Dramatic purposes have sometimes required many characters to be fused into one; the number of girls involved in the ‘crying out’ has been reduced; Abigail’s age has been raised; while there were several judges of almost equal authority, I have symbolised them all in

Hathorne and Danforth. However, I believe that the reader will discover here the essential nature of one of the strangest and most awful chapters in human history. The fate of each character is exactly that of his historical model, and there is no one in the drama that did not play a similar- and in some cases exactly the same- role in history. (Arthur Miller, 1953)

The Crucible takes place at Salem, Massachusetts in 1692. Miller, sure, dramatizes the content of the play in order to make it more palatable for her audience; however, she draws a grim portrait of the social tapestry which was muddled with the evils of women subjugation in the seventeenth century. The circumstances under which Abigail elopes and Proctor has to face the gallows, elucidates the murkiness of Puritanism in the era where any dissent was considered as a Satanic act. The autonomy of the church was established thus and a woman bearing a characteristic feature or habit that was not anticipated, would make her exposed to religious manipulations. As Danforth says in Act III, “a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it.” The hysteria, which is an underlying motif of the play, is perhaps a release of the piled up grudges caused due to unjust activities, because this is a society which thrives on victimizing innocent characters such as the Proctor so that the revered characters such as Reverend Parris can strengthen his position at the cost of it. This is an exposition of a theocratic society where public and private moralities are the indistinguishable.

Therefore, it becomes evident that, what Arthur Miller deals with, is an amalgamation of fact and fiction. In fact, controversies arise on which part of his play is fact and which is fiction. Moreover, he sticks to the canon while writing his play: a canon that explores the ravages of the so-called practice of witchcraft in the 17th century. J.K. Rowling, on the other hand, creates a popular fiction: a world that is completely different from the humane world of ennu

and decadence. It's a world in which a single spell accomplishes a Herculean task. However, Rowling not only makes possible a suspension of disbelief, but she also delves deep into the serious facts of witch-hunting in her own humorous and fictional ways. In the words of Amanda Cockrell, "Rowling has abandoned the realm of high fantasy and laid her story in contemporary England, rather than in the imaginary and medievally flavoured otherworld of Tolkien's Middle Earth, or in a place like Baum's Oz, which can only be reached by tornado and that proves in any case to be all a dream."

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