The Crucible, Act IV

Literary Analysis: Theme

The havoc that fear and suspicion can wreak if not countered by reason is the most obvious theme of The Crucible. A theme is a central idea of insight that a writer tries to convey in a literary work. Miller's depiction of paranoia in Salem and his references to America in the 1950's make clear his ideas on the topic.

A work of literature may have more than one theme. Miller carefully intertwines other topics and themes as well. The personal motivations of the characters, for example, contribute to their fates along with the religious issue of witchcraft. John withholds critical information about Abigail, for example, because of his past relationship with her. Hale's academic pride blinds him to hysteria's momentum for too long. How does Miller spin these threads into themes about people and how they behave? What themes does he express?

Directions: Use the following chart to help you identify themes in *The Crucible*. In the first column are topics or thematic ideas that Miller addresses in the play. In the second column, write a sentence that states a theme about each topic that the events in the play express. In the third, list the evidence in the play that points to the theme you have identified. The last column should explain how the evidence supports the theme statement.

Topic	Theme	Evidence	Explanation
Fear	Fear and suspicion are infectious and can produce a mass hysteria that destroys public order and rationality.		
Guilt	Accepting responsibility and letting go of one's guilt can be empowering.		

Topic	Theme	Evidence	Explanation
Revenge	Personal vengeance is a hidden motive for public actions.		
Authority	Authority offers no guarantee of goodness.	*Consider how Hale's reactions to events compare to other ministers and court officers. What do these differences suggest about the ideas of integrity, pride, and vanity?*	
Intolerance			
Student Choice: Integrity	It is more noble to die with integrity than it is to live with compromised values or principles that harms others.		