

The Crucible and Year of Wonders Comparative Essay

High-scoring essay response

'Significant changes to human nature can occur in situations of great pressure. Discuss'

In times of crisis, the way a community and its members deal with the hardships in their lives can reveal a great deal about humanity in general, and can force us to turn a mirror to aspects of ourselves that we possibly do not wish to acknowledge. In such situations, as in Year of Wonders and The Crucible, often it falls to the leader of a community to attempt to maintain social cohesion, and specifically in religious communities it is usually faith that people turn to for explanations and justifications for their state. On an individual level, periods of hardship can elucidate behaviour and sentiments usually hidden or absent in the absence of crisis, and this effect can be amplified and warped by living in an isolated community. We can also observe specifically how some individuals either gain or reveal a predatory, manipulative nature when they perceive that they can profit personally from the ignorance or suffering of others, thus shining a harsh light on some of the human race's uglier features.

Humans are social creatures, and for the most part we live in communities that are structured hierarchically, with either one or multiple people at the 'top' in the position of leader. This leader may enjoy many both material and intangible benefits, as we see in Reverend Parris' ardent declaration that he is 'not used to...poverty' and who '[preaches] nothin' but golden candlesticks'. However, they are also key figures of the society that are heavily relied upon by people lower in the hierarchy to guide them through difficult times. It is this test of leadership that is explored thoroughly by both texts, as the communities of Salem and the plague village in Year of Wonders struggle to maintain a sense of unity under a cloud of suspicion and fear; in this situation the duty of a leader is to hold their community together when they cannot do it for themselves. This is poorly accomplished in The Crucible, as the various religious leaders and experts are easily led by accusations of witchcraft and overwhelmingly choose to hang rather than forgive the accused, as we see in John Proctor's observation that 'common vengeance writes the law'. As a clear illustration of how leadership that benefits the people requires solid moral foundations, the analogous crisis of plague is dealt with very differently by Michael Mompellion in Year of Wonders. An inspiring orator and figurehead of the Church, he uses his talent for speaking to confer his faith in God to the people, and even when most of his congregation is dying off, 'new faces' appear at his services. This demonstrates how leading people to see the good in one another rather than the evil can inspire greater faith in them, and instil in them

Commented [A1]: A nice conventional habit to get into – outlining the two texts you'll be comparing at the start makes it perfectly clear what you're doing.

Commented [A2]: Good introductory structure! The first sentence links to the topic of the first paragraph. The second links to the second and third paragraphs. The last links to the fourth paragraph. This tells us exactly what the essay will talk about and in what order. This useful for other areas besides Reading & Comparing, but it's particularly useful for this area.

Commented [A3]: Explores similarities between texts with minimal reliance on text-based evidence.

Commented [A4]: This tells us clearly that we're 'changing tack' and switching over to talking about differences instead of similarities. Try to explore both in your paragraphs. How are the ways Text A and Text B deal with an issue similar? How are they different?

the hope that they will survive the crisis that has befallen them instead of the fear that they will not.

Commented [A5]: The first and last sentences are totally devoid of text mentions; they're intended to focus completely on the more 'theoretical' idea of the paragraph.

In addition to the leaders of a community, faith and organised religion can also be looked upon by people as a means of keeping a community together. This works through the simple idea of common purpose; if members of a community all abide by the same religion, they are united by a common factor, and therefore are more likely to view each other in a neighbourly, friendly way. This effect depends, however, on the religion itself; the Puritan style of Christianity shown in Salem's theocracy abhors joy and uses the idea of sin to control its adherents, which theoretically allows a community to self-regulate.

Commented [A6]: Good link to the previous paragraph.

Members can call out others for breaking the Church's moral code, and therefore keep society free from sin. In practice, however, this fails completely, as flawed human beings use the Church's framework as a means of realising their hatreds and vengeance against one another, the most obvious example being Abigail Parris' quest to oust Elizabeth Proctor and take her place as John Proctor's wife. As such, faith can play the opposite role of that for which it was intended, and act to drive members of a community apart by leading them to fear and mistrust one another. Even in the situation presented in Year of Wonders, the village's idea of a Christian God is one who will send a horrifically damaging plague upon his people as a punishment, even though Mompellion describes it as an 'opportunity'. When the community's population is decimated, however, and some such as Aphra descend into utter madness and turn to charms and incantations, it is clear that in the face of dying children and neighbours, faith in God provides little real sustenance, even if it does not actively divide a community. In this way we can observe how though it may be possible for a religion to unite and uplift a society, in the case of 16th and 17th century Christianity it appears that religion can do more harm than good in the unification of people.

Commented [A7]: While this paragraph discusses one text first, and then the other, we have a lot of freedom in what we choose to discuss where. The main focus, as always, is the comparison, so as long as that's central, we can talk about whichever text whenever we like. This way is good, though, if we're not quite sure where to start; begin with one, then finish with the other.

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Commented [A9]: This uses the texts as 'viewpoints' that we use to examine history. This is a really good example of what way this area of study is meant to focus on; the LINK between the texts, not the texts themselves.

While salient on their own, the consequences that can result from human leadership and religious influence in times of crisis can be amplified and distorted when the community exists in an isolated, pressurised environment. Salem and the Derbyshire plague village were both cut off from greater civilisation, and both had to battle with nature to survive; the 'dark and threatening' wilderness of the American continent in Salem's case and the 'bleak country' dominated by mines surrounding Anna's secluded village. When, in such situations, the basic human need to survive is not easily or comfortably achieved, this can very rapidly heighten tensions between people and sometimes reveal the frightening capacity of the human race to prioritise their own survival above everything else, including morality, family and love. Furthermore, when people cannot leave the place of a crisis, a kind of implosion can occur as these survival pressures are concentrated. In both Year of Wonders and The Crucible, we may observe that these burdens cause people to look within their community at their neighbours for the source of their problems, and in doing

Commented [A10]: We're free to make this claim because we've just spent two paragraphs supporting it. We always need to check if our points/claims will stand up to scrutiny, or else we'll run into the one situation where it is actually possible to be 'wrong' in English – ignoring evidence that goes against our point!

Commented [A11]: This establishes that the situation in both texts was almost the same, so after this we can just discuss the 'general' situation instead of having to keep referring to either text.

so cause them to break charity with one another. The murders of Mem and Anys Gowdie and the vindictive accusations by Abigail and the Putnams against the other Salem-dwellers display this clearly; when we feel, whether justly or not, that there is some kind of evil within our communities, we tend to display a shocking propensity to do whatever it takes to root it out, even if this means breaking acceptable moral codes. Living in isolation therefore forces people to look at the harm brought upon them by crisis as something living in the closed community, and in such an environment it is nearly impossible to view a neighbour with anything other than suspicion and doubt.

The total social breakdown that can be caused by these crises has an overwhelmingly harmful effect on the community; however, it is entirely possible for individual members of that community to use such times of difficulty as a means of advancing themselves. In *Year of Wonders*, Aphra and Joss Bont are prime examples of this, as both of them use the grief-driven desperations of others to profit materially from others' losses, Aphra through her impersonations of the deceased Anys Gowdie and Joss through the extortionist prices he places on digging graves. In the case of this pair, it is clear that their greed and selfishness were always present in them, shown by Aphra's focus on 'our bread' when being implored to join together as a community. It seems then that times of strife do not create new facets of human character, they merely provide a place for these hidden aspects of humanity to take root and flourish. This idea is furthered by the actions of the girls in *The Crucible*, who appear to mindlessly conform to the mass hysteria sparked by Abigail in the court, echoing the words of Mary Warren until in a state of panic and madness she condemns John Proctor to die. This illustrates how given certain characteristics, namely cunning and ruthlessness, a person may profit enormously from times of difficulty; while this is certainly a depressing aspect of humanity, it does at least show that suffering in times of crisis is not always universal.

The distress and pain that inevitably spring up in times of difficulty act to undermine and destroy communities, and naturally in these circumstances people will turn to something to ease their sorrows, whether their leaders or faith. The success of these instruments in alleviating grief is heavily limited, however, by the personal flaws of the leaders and the tendency of the religion to favour accusations and fear over forgiveness and kindness. These limitations are exaggerated by the inability of people to escape crisis, as this gives people more cause to see their fellow community members as the source of their troubles, and therefore lay the blame at the door of their neighbours. For some, however, crises are ripe opportunities as those calculating and heartless enough use them to further their own interests at the expense of their society.

Commented [A12]: This sums up the conclusions we've drawn from looking at the similarities between the two texts, it corresponds to the first sentence (we haven't gone off track), and to the sentence about this paragraph in the introduction – 3 really good things to aim for!

Commented [A13]: This is a long and detailed example, but we need it in order to make the following point. Even so, it could potentially be made more concise, perhaps by removing the specifics of how Aphra and Joss profited from the plague.

Commented [A14]: Given that the Reading and Comparing section revolves around using several perspectives to look at one point, it's a good idea to use statements like this to look at our points/topics in different ways.

Always consider the 'other side' of your argument!

Commented [A15]: These sentences all correspond to the introduction, but it's not exactly the same; everything has been summed up and reiterated, but we haven't repeated ourselves and we've stayed on topic.