# Testing the Consent of the Governed Through *The Crucible*

By Kobi Nelson

## Lesson Overview

Throughout this lesson, students will use the principle of "the consent of the governed" from the Declaration of Independence to explore the dynamics and character relationships in acts 2 and 3 of *The Crucible*. After revisiting the Declaration's principle, students will read *The Crucible* to identify character motivations and actions that illuminate characters' perspectives about their role in governance, and specifically the judicial process. Then students will be asked to identify and explain how the symbols in acts 2 and 3 contribute to their understanding of the themes of conformity and consent (or lack of consent) of the governed. Finally, students will develop a well-written essay that explores the symbolic elements of *The Crucible* and explain how the symbols Arthur Miller uses affect the audience's understanding of the play.

## Essential Questions

- How does Arthur Miller use the structure of Greek tragedy to illuminate the consequences of governmental systems that prioritize rigid social hierarchies over individual rights and equality?
- How does Miller's play serve as an allegory that reveals the conflict between the principle of unalienable rights and a community's demands for conformity?
- How do the characters' relationships illustrate the difference between the "consent of the governed" in the Declaration of Independence and pressure to conform?

## Learning Objectives

- Identify key symbols in acts 2 and 3 and explain how they are related to the themes of coercion, conformity, and the consent of the governed.

- Analyze the relationships between the characters in *The Crucible* and explain how character traits and motivations affect them.
- Develop an essay with a thesis statement and supporting evidence that clearly states an opinion about symbolic meaning in *The Crucible.*
- Collaborate with other students in pairs, small groups, or whole-group discussions about the themes of coercion, conformity, and the consent of the governed as illustrated in acts 2 and 3.

## Targeted Skills (AP Literature)

- CHA 1.A: Identify and describe what specific textual details reveal about a character, that character's perspective, and that character's motives.
- STR 3.F: Explain the function of conflict in a text.
- FIG 5.C: Identify and explain the function of a symbol.
- NAR 4.C: Identify and describe details, diction, or syntax in a text that reveal a narrator's or speaker's perspective.
- LAN 7.A: Develop a paragraph that includes 1) a claim that requires defense with evidence from the text and 2) the evidence itself.

## Materials

- Sphere Education's Principles and Argument of the American Founding
- "Consent of the Governed in Acts 2 and 3" graphic organizer – 1 per student
- Printed pictures/words, magazines, or newspapers for the symbolic collage
- Poster board, glue, and scissors for the symbolic collage
- "*The Crucible* Symbolic Collage Gallery Walk" sheet – 1 per student

## Warm-Up

Post the following writing prompt on the board. Give students time to write their thoughts on a physical or digital document.

*Prompt*:

Think about an incident in which governmental authority has broken down. It could be an event from a fictional story, a historical event, or a current event; it could be an event that takes place on a large scale (such as the world stage) or on a small scale (such as in a classroom). Describe the incident in as many details as possible. Then, in your own words, explain how the breakdown of authority occurred.

*Note: If students are struggling to come up with ideas, let them search the internet or work with a partner to brainstorm.

After everyone has had a chance to write their thoughts, ask students to share their event and their explanation with another student or in a small group. Then facilitate a whole-group discussion and allow a few students to share their thoughts with the whole class.

## Lesson Activities

#### BEFORE READING

The purpose of this section is to get students to think about what a government derived from the people means and explore the ways this idea relates to the Declaration's principle of the "consent of the governed" in *The Crucible*. At this point in the lesson it's important to remember that some characters in *The Crucible* are behaving as if they are a part of a government derived by the people that is based on a social contract (i.e., John Proctor, Elizabeth Proctor, Rebecca Nurse, etc.). At the same time, there are a few characters who hold powerful positions, aren't interested in the voices of others, and are coercing others to conform to their will (i.e., Abigail). This clash of beliefs and worldviews is what sets up the conflict in acts 2 and 3. As you prepare students to read these acts, make sure you set them up to fully understand the differences in perspective that are fueling the internal and external conflicts of characters.

#### The Consent of the Governed

##### STEP 1

Explain to students that today's lesson will focus on the principle of the consent of the governed. Have them go to Sphere Education's Principles and Argument of the American Founding. Then have them click "Consent of the Governed" under Core Principles.

Ask students to read (or reread) that explainer.

##### STEP 2

Have students talk with a partner or in a small group about this question: What does it mean for the power of the government to be derived from the people?

After students have had time to talk with others, bring the whole class back together.

STEP 3

Create 2 columns on the board that are titled as shown in the following example. Take suggestions from students about what a government derived from the people does and does not include. Write these in the appropriate column. Have students take notes so they can look back later and remember what the class came up with.

*Note: Here is an example of the table. It includes some possible student responses but is not prescriptive:

| A government derived from the people includes | A government derived from the people does not include |
|---|---|
| Consent of the governed | Forced consent |
| Voluntary association/choice to associate | An obligation to associate or compulsory association |
| Is a social contract between individuals | A few who participate in government decisions and hand down edicts to others |
| Individuals participating in government decisions | Acts for the good of the few (and not the majority) |
| Acts for the common good of everyone | Violation of rights of the many so that a few can benefit |
| Does not violate the rights of minority groups | Coerced agreement to specific laws and governance |
| An agreement by all to form a civil society and abide by certain laws | Silencing the voices of dissenters |
| Dissent and civil discourse as a way to respectfully deal with conflicting ideas | |

### Set a Purpose

Tell students that the principle of the consent of the governed is a key idea that runs beneath *The Crucible*. Yet, as we've seen, many characters in act 1 seem to be under pressure to conform. If there is time, take a moment to revisit some of those moments of coercion as a class. Then tell students that for these next 2 acts we want to explore how the relationships between the characters illuminate the difference between the consent of the governed and the pressure to conform.

Hand out the "Consent of the Governed in Acts 2 and 3" table (a blank one is included at the end of this lesson). Complete the 1st entry about Abigail from act 1 as a class. *Note: Examples of student responses including the entry about Abigail are included in the During

Reading section. Please be aware that these responses are just examples; they are not meant to be exhaustive nor prescriptive.

### During Reading

Remind students that plot, character traits, and a character's reasoning are important to this play (remind them that *The Crucible* is written as a Greek tragedy). Because of this, students should not only read and identify characters and their belief/nonbelief in the consent of the governed, but they should also be noting passages that help them better understand the plot and characters.

Have students read acts 2 and 3 and complete the "Consent of the Governed in Acts 2 and 3" graphic organizer.

| Character | Traits or motivations | Quotes or actions that show consent of the governed or pressure to conform | Function in the play |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Abigail Williams** | Manipulative and intimidating | Threatening the other girls with their lives if they say anything other than they were dancing in the forest that night shows pressure to conform. | This part of act 1 shows how coercive Abigail is and how she uses her influence to silence the other girls and keep the truth hidden. |
| **Mary Warren** | Intimidated and frightened | Gives Elizabeth a doll that she sewed in court. This act illuminates the pressure to conform because it turns out that Abigail used the doll gifted as a way to "prove" that Elizabeth is a witch. | The manipulation that occurs at this point in the story shows how conniving Abigail is and how much the other girls, such as Mary Warren, have fearfully fallen "under her spell." |
| **John Proctor** | Realistic and honest | After Reverend Hale tells Proctor that the girls have confessed to witchcraft, Proctor says the reason the girls confessed is because if they didn't, they would have been hanged. This dissent through discourse shows a belief in his own human dignity and | Proctor's reasonable responses and willingness to respond with truth and dissent shows he believes an individual has a right to speak to a governmental body (i.e., Hale and other accusers). |

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|---|---|---|---|
| | | desire to act for the common good by debunking the witchcraft myth. | |
| **Elizabeth Proctor** | Honest | When she asks John to go to the court and tell them what Abigail told him it shows a belief in the consent of the governed. | This incident shows that Elizabeth, like her husband, believes that every individual should have an equal part to play in the judicial process. Everyone's voice should matter—not just 1 voice or a few voices. |
| **Reverend Hale** | Suspicious | Asks the Proctors to recite the Ten Commandments to prove that they have a Christian household. This request is pressure for the Proctors to "prove their innocence" by conforming to the community's values, because they do not attend church regularly. | This incident shows how small the pressure to conform can be. It can be as simple as being asked to recite something from the Bible because the person does not go to church. |
| **Francis Nurse** | Honest and rational | Brings evidence to the court to show that the girls are not involved in witchcraft. This action shows Nurse's belief in the consent of the governed because, like Corey, he believes individuals such as himself should have a say in governmental/judicial decisions. | This incident shows how deceived everyone is by the governmental powers of Salem because even though Nurse believes he has a say in court proceedings, he actually doesn't. |
| **Ezekiel Cheever** | Desire to please | He tells Governor Deputy Danforth that Proctor ripped up the warrant for Elizabeth's arrest, and puts pressure on Proctor to conform. This shows Cheever's desire to conform. | By telling this tidbit of information to Danforth, Cheever is contributing to the pressure to conform by giving Danforth some information but omitting other pieces of information (like the doll was Mary's). |

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| **Judge Hathorne** | Authoritative | By removing Giles from the courtroom, Hathorne silences him and adds to the chilling effect that increases pressure on the situation. | This move contributes to the overall chilling effect that is occurring as the pressure to conform grows stronger in the courtroom. |
| **Giles Corey** | Brash and desperate | Crying out in court that he has proof that Putnam is trying to gain as much land as possible shows that Giles believes in the principle that his evidence should matter and individuals should participate in governmental (i.e., judicial) decisions. | His unwavering belief in due process and earnest desire to provide proof is sad because the audience can see that every attempt to tell the truth, be transparent, and speak up is being thwarted. |

### After Reading

#### Step 1

Divide students into pairs or small groups. Ask them to share their findings about pressure to conform and the consent of the governed in acts 2 and 3.

#### Step 2

After all students have had a chance to share, facilitate a whole-group discussion about the characters of *The Crucible*. Use the following questions to guide the conversation:

- How do individual characters in The Crucible illuminate the tension between the consent of the governed and pressure to conform?
- Who gets to decide what and who are credible in The Crucible? Why? Is this fair? What might Arthur Miller be illustrating with this?
- How do individual characters' moral dilemmas affect the play? What role does fear play in these dilemmas?
- What is the role of dissent in acts 2 and 3 of The Crucible? How do different characters react to dissent? How do their reactions further the conflict?
- Now that you have read more of the story, why do you think Miller wrote this play in the style of a tragedy? Do you believe this is a tragic story? For whom?
- What symbols stand out to you in these acts? How do they reflect the struggles of characters to attain justice?

### Symbolic Collage

The goal of this activity is to help students think through some of the key symbols in *The Crucible*. This focus on symbols will prepare them for the next lesson about the play as an allegory. The collages can be created in groups or individually, depending on the makeup of your classroom and the time you have.

#### Step 1

Have physical or digital resources prepared in advance. You may want to have a collection of printed images, magazines, or newspapers that you allow students to cut and paste onto a poster board. Or you may want students to use online tools such as Canva or Google Slides to create digital versions.

#### Step 2

Tell students that they are going to choose 3–5 symbols from *The Crucible* and create a collage of images that show the following:

- Symbolic meaning
- How the symbol relates to the power dynamics among the characters
- How the symbol relates to themes of coercion, conformity, and consent (or lack of consent) of the governed

After students have created their collage, they will be expected to write and include a short explanation of their visual, detailing how their creation successfully meets the criteria above.

#### Step 3

Give students time to work, and prepare them to share their visuals with the entire class. If students are completing digital collages, print out their work so that students have a physical copy. Be sure to print (or have students print) their written explanations as these will be showcased alongside their visuals.

#### Step 4

Conduct a gallery walk where students view each other's work and read each other's explanations. While students are walking around the room, have them complete "*The Crucible* Symbolic Collage Gallery Walk" sheet and turn it in at the end of class.

| Reflection question | My thoughts |
| --- | --- |

| | |
|---|---|
| What symbolic collage did you find the most compelling? What elements did it include? | |
| What symbolic collage was the most thought-provoking? Why? | |
| What was a new perspective you encountered as you observed other interpretations of the symbols in *The Crucible*? How does this perspective affect your understanding of the play? | |
| Now that you have seen other visual interpretations of the play's symbols, what would you add to your own collage? Why? | |

### Write

Give students the following essay prompts. Ask students to choose a prompt and write a well-written essay that includes a clear thesis statement that guides their argument and is supported with evidence from the text. Have students write their response on a physical or digital document.

*Essay Prompt 1*:

Choose a symbol that represents the conflict between individual integrity and pressure to conform. How does this symbol demonstrate this tension? Discuss how this symbol operates in the text and among the characters and their relationships with each other.

*Essay Prompt 2*:

Choose a symbol that represents dissent in the play. How does this symbol show dissent and a belief in the consent of the governed throughout the text? Explain how this symbol enhances the audience's understanding of the internal or external conflicts the characters face in a community that values conformity over individual rights and expression.

*Essay Prompt 3*:

Explore a symbol that embodies the idea of government. How does this symbol relate to the principle of the consent of the governed? What does it reveal about the tensions between the ideals of democracy and the pressure to conform?

Considerations:

- How do symbols enhance the meaning that Arthur Miller intended?
- How does understanding *The Crucible* through symbols change or shine a new light on the tensions and conflicts between characters?
- How do character traits and motivations shape the narrative of the play? What emotions do characters exhibit during specific scenes and what do these emotions reveal about them and their relationships with others?
- How do symbols in *The Crucible* further Miller's intention to write this play in the form of a Greek tragedy? In what ways do the symbols add to the tragic sense of the play?

## Closing

- In closing, ask students to reflect individually or as a whole group on the following questions:
- Why do you think Arthur Miller is writing this play? What does he want his audience to take away from seeing and experiencing *The Crucible*?
- What is the most important symbol in the play thus far? Why?
- What do you think will happen in act 4? How will individual integrity and the pressure to conform affect the characters in act 4?

# Consent of the Governed in Acts 2 and 3

Instructions: Complete the table while reading acts 2 and 3 of *The Crucible*. Be as detailed as possible in your explanation of the function of the quote or action in the play.

| Character | Traits or motivations | Quotes or actions that show "consent of the governed" or "pressure to conform" | Function in the play |
|---|---|---|---|
| Abigail | | | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mary Warren | | | |
| John Proctor | | | |
| Elizabeth Proctor | | | |
| Reverend Hale | | | |
| Francis Nurse | | | |
| Ezekiel Cheever | | | |
| Judge Hathorne | | | |
| Giles Corey | | | |

# *The Crucible* Symbolic Collage Gallery Walk

Instructions: Complete this table while viewing your classmates' symbolic collages.

| Reflection question | My thoughts |
|---|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| What symbolic collage did you find the most compelling? What elements did it include? | |
| What symbolic collage was the most thought-provoking? Why? | |
| What was a new perspective you encountered as you observed other interpretations of the symbols in *The Crucible*? How does this affect your understanding of the play? | |
| Now that you have seen other visual interpretations of the play's symbols, what would you add to your own collage? Why? | |