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 رویکردهای میان رشته‌ای  
 به  
 آموزش زبان، ادبیات  
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 دانشگاه فردوسی مشهد

## The World of Miller's *The Crucible*: A Cognitive-Historical Approach

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### Abstract:

Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* is one of the most controversial American plays in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although it deals with the Salem witchcraft trials in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Miller intended it as an allegory about McCarthyism and as a basis for the censure of political issues after WWII. Being aware of the readers' acquaintance with the events of Salem witchcraft trials, Miller chose the 17<sup>th</sup> century historical context in such a way that the readers understand the political circumstances of their own time through equating those religious schemata with the political ones a couple of centuries later. This paper tries to shed light on the fact that the readers' awareness of the political conditions of the time can be enhanced by their familiarity with religious conditions of the period of confrontation with witchcraft. To that end, the article addresses the historical context of *The Crucible* adopting a cognitive point of view. It subsequently distinguishes the opposing discourses (dominant and antagonist discourses) and sub-discourses concerning their embedded schemas in order to acquire a better understanding of the text and its relation with McCarthyism. Regarding the religious context of the play and the political context of McCarthy era, this study concludes that the powerful dominant discourse of the community could not persuade all the members of the society to follow its rules, consequently the antagonist discourse and sub-discourses emerge and continue their objections in the face of the dominant discourse in order to challenge its schemata and power.

*Keywords:* schemata, *The Crucible*, McCarthyism, witchcraft, opposing discourses

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## 1. Introduction

Arthur Miller (1915-2005) is one of the most well-known American playwrights in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among his most popular plays are *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible* (1953) and *A View from the Bridge* (1955). His most controversial play is *The Crucible* which concerns with social issues and thus its moral vision is broader than his other plays which center around an individual in a social dilemma (Bergeron, 1969, p. 53). *The Crucible* is a dramatized story of the Salem witch trials that took place in Massachusetts during 1692; however, it is seen by many as more of an allegory for McCarthyism than the actual Salem trials. It is stated that Miller employs one of the most awful events in the history of America to criticize the McCarthy's tyrannical government and its severe prosecutions of people who had Communist tendencies. Miller's inclination for political issues including Communism and his allegorical play nurtured the suspicion of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) toward Miller. Accordingly, Miller was questioned by HUAC and convicted of contempt of Congress for refusing to identify other people who were sympathetic to the Communist cause.

Understanding of parallelism between *The Crucible* and McCarthyism requires cognitive efforts of the readers because the play text does not refer to the political issues after WWII directly. Therefore, the affirmation of this claim that Miller's historical play is an allegory for McCarthyism entails cognitive analysis of *The Crucible*. Through cognitive analysis, the scholar is able to propose a systematic research and asserts with confidence that his claim about the relationship between *The Crucible* and McCarthyism is based on evidence and thus is accurate. However, some critics have not taken the matter of cognition into consideration and have built their studies on the basis of objective evidences or the statement of others. For instance, Popkin (1964) and Aziz (2016) have addressed the association of *The Crucible* with the political issues of the McCarthy era, but they have not alluded to the role of the readers' mind in understanding this association. It is worth mentioning here that there are other researchers who have analyzed either the historical background of *The Crucible* such as Martin (1977) and Budick (1985) or its language stylistically such as Lowe (1998) and Aziz and Al Qunayeer (2014), but none of these scholars have drawn their attention to the embedded schemata within the play for comprehending its underlying meanings.

This article attempts to fill the gaps of the previous studies by analyzing *The Crucible* through cognitive approach. The present study aims to clarify what schemata exist within the play whose readers have considered it as a political allegory for McCarthyism. For this purpose,

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the paper takes advantage of cognitive and schema theories to identify the extant schemata in the play. Thus, it focuses on the historical context of the play and enumerates its religious schemata in order to reveal this fact that how the readers' minds are able to equate those schemata with the political schemata in the McCarthy era. Furthermore, as a result of schema analysis of the play, the study also determines the opposing discourses and their conflicts within the historical context and their equivalent in the political arena after WWII. For achieving its purposes, this research will answer the following questions: 1) Concerning the schema theory, what are the social schemata in *The Crucible* and how does the readers' knowledge of those schemas help them in understanding the text?, 2) What cognitive strategies has Miller used to activate his readers' mind to equate the religious schemas with the political ones? and 3) How do the actions of the dominant discourse in both eras of America lead to the emergence of its antagonist discourse and sub-discourses?

## 2. Background:

This section is allocated to the explanation of studies which have been done on *The Crucible* and are in line with the purpose of this article. They can be classified by subject into two categories: 1) Those studies which are mainly concerned with the correlation of *The Crucible* and McCarthyism, and 2) Those researches which concentrate merely on the historical context of Miller's play.

### 2.1 Studies On the Association of *The Crucible* with McCarthyism:

Popkin (1964) asserts that "Although *The Crucible* is set in the 17<sup>th</sup> century of America, Arthur Miller intended it as a comment on American life of his own time" (p. 139). He argues that the only distinction between Salem witch trials and McCarthyism is that the former deals with witchcraft and the latter with Communism. In his paper, he compares the historical event of Salem witch hunts with its parallel in the McCarthy era. In her article, Cerjak (1987) alludes to the allegorical essence of *The Crucible* for the congressional hearings of the McCarthy era. She maintains that although Miller's play warns its audience about the political issues of the 1950s, it moves beyond the moment of its creation and illustrates the ever-present conflicts between justice and evil and dangers of coercion and mass hysteria in any time. Morgan (2008) also confirms the parallelism between Salem witch trials and McCarthyism. He believes that Miller intends to show his audience that the passage of time does not change the human realities and the people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century also allow their authorities to treat with them as badly as the Puritan authorities did with Salem community. In his study, Aziz (2016) argues that *The Crucible* is a purposeful

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theatrical response to the operations of Joseph McCarthy. He examines the theatricality of McCarthy trials through the frame of spectacle in order to represent how Miller uses his play theatrically to reveal the machinations of McCarthyism. Aziz (2016) attempts to show how Miller’s play intervenes in the present in relation to the past and subverts the politics of its own time.

## 2.2 Studies On the Historical Background of *The Crucible*:

Martin (1977) points out that the study of the historical background of *The Crucible* can substantiate this fact that Miller illustrates the history of America and the events of Salem witchcraft trials elaborately. In his paper, Martin investigates the dramatic characters based on historical evidences to be able to prove his claim about Miller’s precision in representing historical characters. Bonnet (1982) asserts that *The Crucible* consists of two related poles of the individuals and the community and it is impossible to draw a line between these two poles. He argues that in Miller’s play, “the individuals must be purged separately so that the community as a whole may be preserved” (Bonnet, 1982, p. 32). In his study, Bonnet tries to analyze this basic duality in the play. On Budick’s view (1985), the matter of history and the events of Salem witchcraft trials are the salient and absolute issues in *The Crucible*. The use of historical materials and Miller’s emphasis on moral tyranny rather than his criticism on the authoritarian systems of Puritanism and McCarthyism are of great importance for Budick. In his research, Tien (1988) investigates the issue of witchcraft historically to address the situation of New England in three American plays. His study about Miller’s *The Crucible* unravels how Miller relies on historical facts of the Salem witchcraft trials to write his play through his own interpretation of those facts. Edward Murray (2008) examines the characters of *The Crucible* and their relationships with one another. Through his investigation, he finds out that the characters of John and Elizabeth Proctor and Reverend Hale undergo many changes and thus develop during the play, but other characters proceed their simple way and remain unchanged.

## 3. Method :

In recent years, many scholars have drawn their attentions toward cognitive theories and the crucial role of the reader’s mind in comprehending the texts in the process of reading. According to cognitive theoreticians, schemata are abstract structures of knowledge stored in memory upon which all information processing depends. Schemata refer to knowledge at different levels and are mental templates that represent a person’s prior knowledge about people, situations or objects. In this regard, schema theory is taken into account as an influential and



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main theory in cognitive approach to literature and text comprehension. Readers employ their prior knowledge or schemata to make inferences about what is going on in a text, to fill in gaps and to make it coherent (Wales, 2011, p. 376).

Although there are many theoreticians in the field of cognitive approach, this paper draws upon the perspectives of some prominent figures whose theories are appropriate for the scope of this paper. With regard to schema theory, Tulving (1972) distinguishes between episodic memory and semantic memory and argues that they are different from each other based on their knowledge types. On the one hand, episodic memory is related to a personal experience and on the other hand, semantic memory is associated with more general, abstract knowledge. According to Tulving (1972), sometimes some experiences which hold in personal episodes in memory can lead to generalization and semantic memory. Knowledge of semantic memory is of great importance for social cognitive theoreticians due to its relation with prior knowledge (long term memory) which enables the reader to retrieve textual cues and make inferences (Culpeper, 2001, pp. 59-60).

van Dijk (1987, 1990) allocates the term of ‘social memory’ to the general and shared knowledge of semantic memory because information in semantic memory is shared with other people within a society (Culpeper, 2001, p. 73). The present paper takes advantage of van Dijk’s social cognition theory to be able to illustrate the social and collective essence of underlying schemata within Miller’s *The Crucible*. van Dijk (1988) argues that social memory is socially embedded and thus it is different from the personal memories of episodic memory. One of the most significant concepts within van Dijk’s social cognition theory is the notion of attitudes which are regarded to be “evaluative beliefs” toward social categories (van Dijk, 1987, pp. 188-189). These evaluative beliefs can be divided into positive and negative attitudes toward social groups. van Dijk (1987) asserts that these attitude schemata are located in social memory and thus they differ from the personal views represented in episodic memory (pp. 189-193). According to van Dijk (1987), shared attitudes within a society can yield to the notion of ideology. Furthermore, he maintains that different groups in a community might have had different attitude schemata (Culpeper, 2001, p. 77).

With regard to social cognition, it is important to note that stereotypical insights among the people of a community crystallize their social schemata (Culpeper, 2001, p. 78). In relation to cognitive stereotype, Hamilton and Sherman (1994) define stereotype “as a set of beliefs which is stored in memory as a cognitive structure and can then influence subsequent perceptions of, and behaviors toward, groups and their members” (p. 15). Stereotypes are in the form of schemas and

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this characteristic causes them to be durable within a society. It is necessary that the stereotypical views or generalized social schemata are not exclusively involved in perceiving people of a society. On van Dijk's view, in addition to semantic memory, episodic memory should also be taken into account for comprehension (Culpeper, 2001, p. 79). Based on Tulving's episodic memory, one may have particular experiences of individuals or groups of people which stored as episodes. Therefore, it is not always possible to generalize a set of fixed features (stereotypes) or social schemata to individuals or groups of people within a community. It should be noted that there are great variations in interpreting and understanding a community and its members (Culpeper, 2001, p. 79).

Perceiving a phenomenon entails activating its relevant schemata in the perceiver's mind. Regarding which schemata are activated when someone confronts with a phenomenon, some researchers in social cognition including Fiske and Taylor (1991) argue that those schemata which have been recently activated or frequently activated are more likely to spring to mind (pp. 145-146). Fiske and Taylor (1984) maintain that observational purpose and the situational context play key roles in determining which schemata are activated (p. 176). The perceivers' schematic knowledge specifies how they view, remember and make inferences about new information. Regarding schemata and information processing, Neisser (1976) states that "schemata are anticipations, they are the medium by which the past affects the future" (p. 22). Rumelhart (1984) also asserts that "conceptually-driven processing is expectation-driven processing" (p. 170). Neisser (1976) and Rumelhart (1984) believe that schemata form expectations and such expectations help the perceiver to interpret and comprehend the complexities of the world.

#### 4. Results and Discussion:

This section is divided into two sub-sections: 4.1. Results, and 4.2. Discussion. The sub-section of Results introduces two main schemas extracted from the historical context of *The Crucible* and the sub-section of Discussion will apply the social cognition and schema theories to the play and analyze the association of *The Crucible* with the issue of McCarthyism based on those theories.

##### 4.1. Results:

The first and foremost schema in *The Crucible* is the witchcraft schema and the readers' awareness of it is of great importance in understanding the process of events in Salem. The origin of witchcraft schema refers back to the ancient times when people believed that all forms of magic such as witchcraft and their harmful effects were led by Satan. Thus, the fear of witchcraft

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became a significant issue in religion thereafter and on Puritans' view, witchcraft was equal to evil and wicked and signified Satan's presence and power (Weisman, 1984, p. 25). According to the doctrines of Puritans, witchcraft was regarded as the most heinous crimes and everyone who performed that diabolical act was accused of being guilty (Weisman, 1984, pp. 8-9). Puritans maintained that Satan exerted his mischief and malignancy on human beings through witches. The witches were considered as Satan's power on earth and on this basis, the accused people to witchery were under control and prosecution of the court (Weisman, 1984, p. 32).

It is imperative to note here that the court in *The Crucible* is the second main schema which plays a significant role in the play and the readers' prior knowledge or schema about the nature of the court enables them to understand the process of Salem witchcraft trials. The Puritan church authorities who constituted the court put pressure on the accused to confess and name other witches in order to be released from execution and those defendants who denied their compliance with the Devil were set on the scaffold. The court authorities justified their murders by referring to the Bible: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" and "A man or a woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard shall surely be put to death" (Sogliuzzo, 2012, pp. 367-368). The Puritan authorities believed that their responsibility is to force the will of God among people and if they overlook the evil practices and signs of corruption, God would punish the whole community (Morgan, 2008, p. 51).

#### 4.2. Discussion:


With regard to the schema-based information explained at the above, Christian people's stereotypical beliefs in witchcraft and their negative attitudes toward it permeated to the public minds throughout the history and eventually yielded to their social schema. Meanwhile, it should be noted that the Puritan officials and the church teachings played a great role in expanding the social schema or shared knowledge of Puritans about diabolical act of witchcraft. Therefore, the Puritan authorities were in a great position so that they were able to shape the semantic or social memory of the people and divided the community into two opposing poles. The Puritan officials constituted the positive pole of the society and the witches were considered as the negative pole.

Thus, two major opposing discourses can be distinguished as a result of investigation on the extant schemata within *The Crucible*: the church discourse and the witchcraft discourse. The church discourse is the dominant discourse in the Puritan society of Salem which attempts to overthrow its antagonist discourse and all people who follow it at all costs. The negative attitude schema of the dominant church discourse about the witchery and the witches turns to a strict ideology and the religious authorities compel people to conform with that ideology. They attempt

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to convince people that the Puritans are the chosen people by God and the Devil would do his best to annihilate them. In this way, the church discourse postulates that its actions are absolutely good and any attempt which threatens its godly deeds and thoughts must be eradicated. Hence, such schema-like structure of stereotypical insights into the church discourse explains its durability over the centuries. On this basis, it can be interpreted that the church discourse fueled by such strict and absolute ideological convictions would turn into a corrupted and tyrannical discourse unconsciously.

The fanatical view of the church discourse towards its antagonist discourse (the witchcraft discourse) impels it to penalize everyone who is accused to witchcraft based on unreliable evidence. Consequently, the dominant discourse kindles the people's enmity against the religious authorities and their extremist ideology. The frequent and excessive prosecutions and persecutions of the church discourse proceed on the division of people into sub-discourses. On the one hand, some accused people, such as Tituba and Sarah Good, follow the precepts of the church discourse and reinforce the social schema of the church authorities' superiority and power by their false confessions and naming innocent people as the Devil's companions. On the other hand, some accused people, such as John Proctor and Rebecca Nurse, rise against the tyranny and iniquity of the church discourse by their refusing to confess and accusing innocent people falsely in order to save their lives. Thus, these rightful people turn to the antagonist sub-discourse for the dominant discourse of the church.

It is worth mentioning that the church discourse's hostile behaviors against the innocent people of Salem community bring antagonism among the church authorities and divide them into sub-discourses as well. The opposing sub-discourse within the church discourse is symbolized through Reverend Hale who stands against the injustice and tyranny of the representatives of the church discourse including Deputy Governor Danforth and Judge Hathorne. On this basis, it can be interpreted that the positive attitude schema of the people toward the Puritan church is nullified by the negative actions of the dominant discourse. In other words, the social memory of the antagonist sub-discourses about the Puritan church and its principles is refreshed and they use their episodic memory to comprehend the church discourse's actions. The character of Reverend Hale represents a variation in the system of church discourse and this variation indicates that it is not appropriate to generalize certain negative attitude schema to all church authorities.

To complicate the matter further, the readers' perceptions of events within *The Crucible* form through their schemata about Puritanism and the American historical events in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Miller's awareness of his American readers' shared knowledge or social memory about



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the disastrous events of the Salem witch trials in 1692 leads him to choose purposefully “one of the strangers and most awful chapters in human history” (Miller, 2003, p. 47) for the context of his play in order to warn his readers about the similar events in their own time. In other words, Miller employs the historical context of the Salem witchcraft trials strategically to activate the relevant schemata in his readers’ minds in order to perceive the political events of the McCarthy era. As a matter of fact, the understanding of political events in the McCarthy era may be difficult for people; therefore, Miller helps his readers to understand the situation of their own time by taking them into the historical context of America which they are familiar with.

With regard to Fiske and Taylor’s perspective (1984), the readers’ presence in the situational context of the McCarthy era makes them equate the witchcraft and the court schemata of *The Crucible* with the Communist schema and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) of the 1950s. Through reading *The Crucible*, the readers recognize that the church discourse’s prosecutions of the witches are the same as the McCarthy discourse’s prosecutions of the Communists. Indeed, through activation of the relevant schemata, the readers’ awareness of the political conditions of the time is expected to be enhanced. Thus, the readers’ schematic knowledge determines how they make inferences about *The Crucible* and consider it as an allegory for McCarthyism. Based on Neisser (1976) and Rumelhart’s perspectives (1984), the extant schemata within Miller’s play constitute the readers’ expectations which can help them to interpret and understand the complexities of the American society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Regarding Fiske and Taylor’s remarks (1991), the readers’ schemata related to the political issues of their own time are more tangible for them and thus are more likely to spring to their minds when reading *The Crucible*. In this way, Miller succeeds to achieve his goal by triggering appropriate schemata in his readers’ minds.

The relationship between *The Crucible* and the issue of McCarthyism can be substantiated by Miller’s interpretative statements scattered through the play text (Popkin, 1964, p. 140): “The analogy, however, seems to falter when one considers that, while there were no witches then, there are Communists and capitalists now, and in each camp there is certain proof that spies of each side are at work undermining the other” (Miller, 2003, p. 99). According to Miller’s statement, it can be proved that *The Crucible* goes beyond its historical events and exploited as a basis for the censure of political issues after WWII (Martin, 1977, p. 290). By using the correlate schemata with those in the McCarthy era, Miller intends to illustrate that the confinements and prosecutions of McCarthy’s government would give rise to the birth of conflicts and antagonisms among the opposing discourses and sub-discourses in political system of America.

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## 5. Conclusion :

Assigning *The Crucible* as a political allegory for McCarthyism provokes this paper to investigate its reason through studying the play based on cognitive approach. Forasmuch as the political issue is not propounded explicitly within Miller's play, comprehension of this underlying meaning requires much inferential work and thereby taking advantage of cognitive theory can generate a coherent interpretation. Thus, social cognition and schema theories pave the way to unearth the major socio-historical schemata available in *The Crucible* which Miller employs strategically to activate the relevant social schemata of the McCarthy era in his readers' minds.

With the help of cognitive theory, this paper indicates that how Miller takes advantage of historical context of America and its schemata familiar to the readers in order to illustrate the political conditions of the McCarthy era. On this basis, the readers' minds are able to equate the religious schemata (witchcraft and Puritan court) with the political ones (Communism and HUAC) through cognitive processes. Furthermore, by bringing two opposing discourses (the accused people to witchery and dominant Puritan church) into the scene, Miller attempts to show their equivalent (the accused people to Communist tendencies and the McCarthy discourse) in his own time.

Examination of the opposing discourses both in the religious context of the play and in the political context of the McCarthy era has yielded significant consequences. Although the dominant church discourse exerted its power to the people through prosecutions and executions, it was not able to persuade all the members of the society to follow its rules. The upshot of those exertions was the emergence of antagonist discourse and sub-discourses which continued their objections to the dominant discourse in order to challenge its power. The same trend can be seen in the political system of America after WWII. Although the McCarthy discourse was the dominant discourse in the 1950s of America and suppressed its Communist opponents, its antagonist discourse and sub-discourses, such as socialist writers, asserted their presence through persistent and strong criticisms.

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## سومین همایش

رویکردهای میان رشته‌ای  
به  
آموزش زبان، ادبیات  
و مطالعات ترجمه

۳ و ۲ آبان ماه ۱۳۹۶  
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