# Notes on The Crucible

## Context

**E ARLY IN THE YEAR 1692, in the small Massachusetts village of Salem, a collection of girls fell ill, falling victim to hallucinations and seizures. In extremely religious Puritan New England, frightening or surprising occurrences were often attributed to the devil or his cohorts. The unfathomable sickness spurred fears of witchcraft, and it was not long before the girls, and then many other residents of Salem, began to accuse other villagers of consorting with devils and casting spells. Old grudges and jealousies spilled out into the open, fueling the atmosphere of hysteria. The Massachusetts government and judicial system, heavily influenced by religion, rolled into action. Within a few weeks, dozens of people were in jail on charges of witchcraft. By the time the fever had run its course, in late August 1692, nineteen people (and two dogs) had been convicted and hanged for witchcraft.**

**More than two centuries later, Arthur Miller was born in New York City on October 17, 1915. His career as a playwright began while he was a student at the University of Michigan. Several of his early works won prizes, and during his senior year, the Federal Theatre Project in Detroit performed one of his works. He produced his first great success, *All My Sons*, in 1947. Two years later, in 1949, Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman*, which won the Pulitzer Prize and transformed Miller into a national sensation. Many critics described *Death of a Salesman* as the first great American tragedy, and Miller gained an associated eminence as a man who understood the deep essence of the United States.**

**Drawing on research on the witch trials he had conducted while an undergraduate, Miller composed *The Crucible* in the early 1950s. Miller wrote the play during the brief ascendancy of Senator Joseph McCarthy, a demagogue whose vitriolic anti-Communism proved the spark needed to propel the United States into a dramatic and fractious anti-Communist fervor during these first tense years of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Led by McCarthy, special congressional committees conducted highly controversial investigations intended to root out Communist sympathizers in the United States. As with the alleged witches of Salem, suspected Communists were encouraged to confess and to**

**identify other Red sympathizers as means of escaping punishment. The policy resulted in a whirlwind of accusations. As people began to realize that they might be condemned as Communists regardless of their innocence, many "cooperated," attempting to save themselves through false confessions, creating the image that the United States was overrun with Communists and perpetuating the hysteria. The liberal entertainment industry, in which Miller worked, was one of the chief targets of these "witch hunts," as their opponents termed them. Some cooperated; others, like Miller, refused to give in to questioning. Those who were revealed, falsely or legitimately, as Communists, and those who refused to incriminate their friends, saw their careers suffer, as they were blacklisted from potential jobs for many years afterward.**

**At the time of its first performance, in January of 1953, critics and cast alike perceived *The Crucible* as a direct attack on McCarthyism (the policy of sniffing out Communists). Its comparatively short run, compared with those of Miller's other works, was blamed on anti-Communist fervor. When Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were accused of spying for the Soviets and executed, the cast and audience of Miller's play observed a moment of silence. Still, there are difficulties with interpreting *The Crucible* as a strict allegorical treatment of 1950s McCarthyism. For one thing, there were, as far as one can tell, no actual witches or devil-worshipers in Salem. However, there were certainly Communists in 1950s America, and many of those who were lionized as victims of McCarthyism at the time, such as the Rosenbergs and Alger Hiss (a former State Department official), were later found to have been in the pay of the Soviet Union. Miller's Communist friends, then, were often less innocent than the victims of the Salem witch trials, like the stalwart Rebecca Nurse or the tragic John Proctor.**

**If Miller took unknowing liberties with the facts of his own era, he also played fast and loose with the historical record. The general outline of events in *The Crucible* corresponds to what happened in Salem of 1692, but Miller's characters are often composites. Furthermore, his central plot device—the affair between Abigail Williams and John Proctor—has no grounding in fact (Proctor was over sixty at the time of the trials, while Abigail was only eleven). Thus, Miller's decision to set sexual jealousy at the root of the hysteria constitutes a dramatic contrivance.**

**In an odd way, then, *The Crucible* is best read outside its historical context—not as a perfect allegory for anti-Communism, or as a faithful account of the Salem trials, but as a powerful and timeless depiction of how intolerance and hysteria can intersect and tear a community apart. In John Proctor, Miller gives the reader a marvelous tragic hero for any time—a flawed figure who finds his moral center just as everything is falling to pieces around him.**

## Plot Overview

**I N THE PURITAN NEW ENGLAND TOWN of Salem, Massachusetts, a group of girls goes dancing in the forest with a black slave named Tituba. While dancing, they are caught by the local minister, Reverend Parris. One of the girls, Parris's daughter Betty, falls into a coma-like state. A crowd gathers in the Parris home while rumors of witchcraft fill the town. Having sent for Reverend Hale, an expert on witchcraft, Parris questions Abigail Williams, the girls' ringleader, about the events that took place in the forest. Abigail, who is Parris's niece and ward, admits to doing nothing beyond "dancing."**

**While Parris tries to calm the crowd that has gathered in his home, Abigail talks to some of the other girls, telling them not to admit to anything. John Proctor, a local farmer, then enters and talks to Abigail alone. Unbeknownst to anyone else in the town, while working in Proctor's home the previous year she engaged in an affair with him, which led to her being fired by his wife, Elizabeth. Abigail still desires Proctor, but he fends her off and tells her to end her foolishness with the girls.**

**Betty wakes up and begins screaming. Much of the crowd rushes upstairs and gathers in her bedroom, arguing over whether she is bewitched. A separate argument between Proctor, Parris, the argumentative Giles Corey, and the wealthy Thomas Putnam soon ensues. This dispute centers on money and land deeds, and it suggests that deep fault lines run through the Salem community. As the men argue, Reverend Hale arrives and examines Betty, while Proctor departs. Hale quizzes Abigail about the girls' activities in the forest, grows suspicious of her behavior, and demands to speak to Tituba. After Parris and Hale interrogate her for a brief time, Tituba confesses to communing with the devil, and she hysterically accuses various townsfolk of consorting with the devil. Suddenly, Abigail joins her, confessing to having seen the devil conspiring and**

**cavorting with other townspeople. Betty joins them in naming witches, and the crowd is thrown into an uproar.**

**A week later, alone in their farmhouse outside of town, John and Elizabeth Proctor discuss the ongoing trials and the escalating number of townsfolk who have been accused of being witches. Elizabeth urges her husband to denounce Abigail as a fraud; he refuses, and she becomes jealous, accusing him of still harboring feelings for her. Mary Warren, their servant and one of Abigail's circle, returns from Salem with news that Elizabeth has been accused of witchcraft but the court did not pursue the accusation. Mary is sent up to bed, and John and Elizabeth continue their argument, only to be interrupted by a visit from Reverend Hale. While they discuss matters, Giles Corey and Francis Nurse come to the Proctor home with news that their wives have been arrested. Officers of the court suddenly arrive and arrest Elizabeth. After they have taken her, Proctor browbeats Mary, insisting that she must go to Salem and expose Abigail and the other girls as frauds.**

**The next day, Proctor brings Mary to court and tells Judge Danforth that she will testify that the girls are lying. Danforth is suspicious of Proctor's motives and tells Proctor, truthfully, that Elizabeth is pregnant and will be spared for a time. Proctor persists in his charge, convincing Danforth to allow Mary to testify. Mary tells the court that the girls are lying. When the girls are brought in, they turn the tables by accusing Mary of bewitching them. Furious, Proctor confesses his affair with Abigail and accuses her of being motivated by jealousy of his wife. To test Proctor's claim, Danforth summons Elizabeth and asks her if Proctor has been unfaithful to her. Despite her natural honesty, she lies to protect Proctor's honor, and Danforth denounces Proctor as a liar. Meanwhile, Abigail and the girls again pretend that Mary is bewitching them, and Mary breaks down and accuses Proctor of being a witch. Proctor rages against her and against the court. He is arrested, and Hale quits the proceedings.**

**The summer passes and autumn arrives. The witch trials have caused unrest in neighboring towns, and Danforth grows nervous. Abigail has run away, taking all of Parris's money with her. Hale, who has lost faith in the court, begs the accused witches to confess falsely in order to save their lives, but they refuse. Danforth, however, has an idea: he asks Elizabeth to talk John into confessing, and she agrees. Conflicted, but desiring to live, John agrees to confess, and the**

**officers of the court rejoice. But he refuses to incriminate anyone else, and when the court insists that the confession must be made public, Proctor grows angry, tears it up, and retracts his admission of guilt. Despite Hale's desperate pleas, Proctor goes to the gallows with the others, and the witch trials reach their awful conclusion.**

## Analysis of Major Characters

## John Proctor

**In a sense, *The Crucible* has the structure of a classical tragedy, with John Proctor as the play's tragic hero. Honest, upright, and blunt-spoken, Proctor is a good man, but one with a secret, fatal flaw. His lust for Abigail Williams led to their affair (which occurs before the play begins), and created Abigail's jealousy of his wife, Elizabeth, which sets the entire witch hysteria in motion. Once the trials begin, Proctor realizes that he can stop Abigail's rampage through Salem but only if he confesses to his adultery. Such an admission would ruin his good name, and Proctor is, above all, a proud man who places great emphasis on his reputation. He eventually makes an attempt, through Mary Warren's testimony, to name Abigail as a fraud without revealing the crucial information. When this attempt fails, he finally bursts out with a confession, calling Abigail a "whore" and proclaiming his guilt publicly. Only then does he realize that it is too late, that matters have gone too far, and that not even the truth can break the powerful frenzy that he has allowed Abigail to whip up. Proctor's confession succeeds only in leading to *his* arrest and conviction as a witch, and though he lambastes the court and its proceedings, he is also aware of his terrible role in allowing this fervor to grow unchecked.**

**Proctor redeems himself and provides a final denunciation of the witch trials in his final act. Offered the opportunity to make a public confession of his guilt and live, he almost succumbs, even signing a written confession. His immense pride and fear of public opinion compelled him to withhold his adultery from the court, but by the end of the play he is more concerned with his personal integrity than his public reputation. He still wants to save his name, but for personal and religious, rather than public, reasons. Proctor's refusal to provide a false confession is a true religious and personal stand. Such a confession would dishonor his fellow prisoners, who are brave enough to die as testimony to the**

**truth. Perhaps more relevantly, a false admission would also dishonor him, staining not just his public reputation, but also his soul. By refusing to give up his personal integrity Proctor implicitly proclaims his conviction that such integrity will bring him to heaven. He goes to the gallows redeemed for his earlier sins. As Elizabeth says to end the play, responding to Hale's plea that she convince Proctor to publicly confess: "He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him!"**

## Abigail Williams

**Of the major characters, Abigail is the least complex. She is clearly the villain of the play, more so than Parris or Danforth: she tells lies, manipulates her friends and the entire town, and eventually sends nineteen innocent people to their deaths. Throughout the hysteria, Abigail's motivations never seem more complex than simple jealousy and a desire to have revenge on Elizabeth Proctor. The language of the play is almost biblical, and Abigail seems like a biblical character—a Jezebel figure, driven only by sexual desire and a lust for power. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out a few background details that, though they don't mitigate Abigail's guilt, make her actions more understandable.**

**Abigail is an orphan and an unmarried girl; she thus occupies a low rung on the Puritan Salem social ladder (the only people below her are the slaves, like Tituba, and social outcasts). For young girls in Salem, the minister and the other male adults are God's earthly representatives, their authority derived from on high. The trials, then, in which the girls are allowed to act as though they have a direct connection to God, empower the previously powerless Abigail. Once shunned and scorned by the respectable townsfolk who had heard rumors of her affair with John Proctor, Abigail now finds that she has clout, and she takes full advantage of it. A mere accusation from one of Abigail's troop is enough to incarcerate and convict even the most well-respected inhabitant of Salem. Whereas others once reproached her for her adultery, she now has the opportunity to accuse them of the worst sin of all: devil-worship.**

## Reverend Hale

**John Hale, the intellectual, naïve witch-hunter, enters the play in Act I when Parris summons him to examine his daughter, Betty. In an extended**

**commentary on Hale in Act I, Miller describes him as "a tight-skinned, eager-eyed intellectual. This is a beloved errand for him; on being called here to ascertain witchcraft he has felt the pride of the specialist whose unique knowledge has at last been publicly called for." Hale enters in a flurry of activity, carrying large books and projecting an air of great knowledge. In the early going, he is the force behind the witch trials, probing for confessions and encouraging people to testify. Over the course of the play, however, he experiences a transformation, one more remarkable than that of any other character. Listening to John Proctor and Mary Warren, he becomes convinced that they, not Abigail, are telling the truth. In the climactic scene in the court in Act III, he throws his lot in with those opposing the witch trials. In tragic fashion, his about-face comes too late—the trials are no longer in his hands but rather in those of Danforth and the theocracy, which has no interest in seeing its proceedings exposed as a sham.**

**The failure of his attempts to turn the tide renders the once-confident Hale a broken man. As his belief in witchcraft falters, so does his faith in the law. In Act IV, it is he who counsels the accused witches to lie, to confess their supposed sins in order to save their own lives. In his change of heart and subsequent despair, Hale gains the audience's sympathy but not its respect, since he lacks the moral fiber of Rebecca Nurse or, as it turns out, John Proctor. Although Hale recognizes the evil of the witch trials, his response is not defiance but surrender. He insists that survival is the highest good, even if it means accommodating oneself to injustice—something that the truly heroic characters can never accept.**

## Themes, Motifs & Symbols

## Themes

***Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.***

## Intolerance

***The Crucible*** **is set in a theocratic society, in which the church and the state are one, and the religion is a strict, austere form of Protestantism known as Puritanism. Because of the theocratic nature of the society, moral laws and state laws are one and the same: sin and the status of an individual's soul are matters**

**of public concern. There is no room for deviation from social norms, since any individual whose private life doesn't conform to the established moral laws represents a threat not only to the public good but also to the rule of God and true religion. In Salem, everything and everyone belongs to either God or the devil; dissent is not merely unlawful, it is associated with satanic activity. This dichotomy functions as the underlying logic behind the witch trials. As Danforth says in Act III, "a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it." The witch trials are the ultimate expression of intolerance (and hanging witches is the ultimate means of restoring the community's purity); the trials brand all social deviants with the taint of devil-worship and thus necessitate their elimination from the community.**

## Hysteria

**Another critical theme in *The Crucible* is the role that hysteria can play in tearing apart a community. Hysteria supplants logic and enables people to believe that their neighbors, whom they have always considered upstanding people, are committing absurd and unbelievable crimes—communing with the devil, killing babies, and so on. In *The Crucible,* the townsfolk accept and become active in the hysterical climate not only out of genuine religious piety but also because it gives them a chance to express repressed sentiments and to act on long-held grudges. The most obvious case is Abigail, who uses the situation to accuse Elizabeth Proctor of witchcraft and have her sent to jail. But others thrive on the hysteria as well: Reverend Parris strengthens his position within the village, albeit temporarily, by making scapegoats of people like Proctor who question his authority. The wealthy, ambitious Thomas Putnam gains revenge on Francis Nurse by getting Rebecca, Francis's virtuous wife, convicted of the supernatural murders of Ann Putnam's babies. In the end, hysteria can thrive only because people benefit from it. It suspends the rules of daily life and allows the acting out of every dark desire and hateful urge under the cover of righteousness.**

## Reputation

**Reputation is tremendously important in theocratic Salem, where public and private moralities are one and the same. In an environment where reputation plays such an important role, the fear of guilt by association becomes**

**particularly pernicious. Focused on maintaining public reputation, the townsfolk of Salem must fear that the sins of their friends and associates will taint their names. Various characters base their actions on the desire to protect their respective reputations. As the play begins, Parris fears that Abigail's increasingly questionable actions, and the hints of witchcraft surrounding his daughter's coma, will threaten his reputation and force him from the pulpit. Meanwhile, the protagonist, John Proctor, also seeks to keep his good name from being tarnished. Early in the play, he has a chance to put a stop to the girls' accusations, but his desire to preserve his reputation keeps him from testifying against Abigail. At the end of the play, however, Proctor's desire to keep his good name leads him to make the heroic choice not to make a false confession and to go to his death without signing his name to an untrue statement. "I have given you my soul; leave me my name!" he cries to Danforth in Act IV. By refusing to relinquish his name, he redeems himself for his earlier failure and dies with integrity.**

## Motifs

***Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.***

## Empowerment

**The witch trials empower several characters in the play who are previously marginalized in Salem society. In general, women occupy the lowest rung of male-dominated Salem and have few options in life. They work as servants for townsmen until they are old enough to be married off and have children of their own. In addition to being thus restricted, Abigail is also slave to John Proctor's sexual whims—he strips away her innocence when he commits adultery with her, and he arouses her spiteful jealousy when he terminates their affair. Because the Puritans' greatest fear is the defiance of God, Abigail's accusations of witchcraft and devil-worship immediately command the attention of the court. By aligning herself, in the eyes of others, with God's will, she gains power over society, as do the other girls in her pack, and her word becomes virtually unassailable, as do theirs. Tituba, whose status is lower than that of anyone else in the play by virtue of the fact that she is black, manages similarly to deflect blame from herself by accusing others.**

## Accusations, Confessions, and Legal Proceedings

**The witch trials are central to the action of *The Crucible,* and dramatic accusations and confessions fill the play even beyond the confines of the courtroom. In the first act, even before the hysteria begins, we see Parris accuse Abigail of dishonoring him, and he then makes a series of accusations against his parishioners. Giles Corey and Proctor respond in kind, and Putnam soon joins in, creating a chorus of indictments even before Hale arrives. The entire witch trial system thrives on accusations, the only way that witches can be identified, and confessions, which provide the proof of the justice of the court proceedings. Proctor attempts to break this cycle with a confession of his own, when he admits to the affair with Abigail, but this confession is trumped by the accusation of witchcraft against him, which in turn demands a confession. Proctor's courageous decision, at the close of the play, to die rather than confess to a sin that he did not commit, finally breaks the cycle. The court collapses shortly afterward, undone by the refusal of its victims to propagate lies.**

## Symbols

***Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.***

## The Witch Trials and McCarthyism

**There is little symbolism within *The Crucible,* but, in its entirety, the play can be seen as symbolic of the paranoia about communism that pervaded America in the 1950s. Several parallels exist between the House Un-American Activities Committee's rooting out of suspected communists during this time and the seventeenth-century witch-hunt that Miller depicts in *The Crucible,* including the narrow-mindedness, excessive zeal, and disregard for the individuals that characterize the government's effort to stamp out a perceived social ill. Further, as with the alleged witches of Salem, suspected Communists were encouraged to confess their crimes and to "name names," identifying others sympathetic to their radical cause. Some have criticized Miller for oversimplifying matters, in that while there were (as far as we know) no actual witches in Salem, there were certainly Communists in 1950s America. However, one can argue that Miller's concern in *The Crucible* is not with whether the accused actually are witches, but**

**rather with the unwillingness of the court officials to believe that they are not. In light of McCarthyist excesses, which wronged many innocents, this parallel was felt strongly in Miller's own time.**

## Act I: Opening scene to the entrance of John Proctor

## Summary

**The play is set in Salem, Massachusetts, 1692; the government is a theocracy—rule by God through religious officials. Hard work and church consume the majority of a Salem resident's time. Within the community, there are simmering disputes over land. Matters of boundaries and deeds are a source of constant, bitter disagreements.**

**As the play opens, Reverend Parris kneels in prayer in front of his daughter's bed. Ten-year-old Betty Parris lies in an unmoving, unresponsive state. Parris is a grim, stern man suffering from paranoia. He believes that the members of his congregation should not lift a finger during religious services without his permission. The rumor that Betty is the victim of witchcraft is running rampant in Salem, and a crowd has gathered in Parris's parlor. Parris has sent for Reverend John Hale of Beverly, an expert on witchcraft, to determine whether Betty is indeed bewitched. Parris berates his niece, Abigail Williams, because he discovered her, Betty, and several other girls dancing in the forest in the middle of the night with his slave, Tituba. Tituba was intoning unintelligible words and waving her arms over a fire, and Parris thought he spotted someone running naked through the trees.**

**Abigail denies that she and the girls engaged in witchcraft. She states that Betty merely fainted from shock when her father caught them dancing. Parris fears that his enemies will use the scandal to drive him out of his ministerial office. He asks Abigail if her name and reputation are truly unimpeachable. Elizabeth Proctor, a local woman who once employed Abigail at her home but subsequently fired her, has stopped attending church regularly. There are rumors that Elizabeth does not want to sit so close to a soiled woman. Abigail denies any wrongdoing and asserts that Elizabeth hates her because she would not work like a slave. Parris asks why no other family has hired Abigail if**

**Elizabeth is a liar. Abigail insinuates that Parris is only worried about her employment status because he begrudges her upkeep.**

**Thomas Putnam and his wife enter the room. Putnam holds one of the play's many simmering grudges. His brother-in-law was a candidate for the Salem ministry, but a small faction thwarted his relative's aspirations. Mrs. Putnam reports that their own daughter, Ruth, is as listless as Betty, and she claims that someone saw Betty flying over a neighbor's barn.**

**Mrs. Putnam had seven babies that each died within a day of its birth. Convinced that someone used witchcraft to murder them, she sent Ruth to Tituba to contact the spirits of her dead children in order to discover the identity of the murderer. Parris berates Abigail anew and asserts that she and the girls were indeed practicing witchcraft. Putnam urges Parris to head off his enemies and promptly announce that he has discovered witchcraft. Mercy Lewis, the Putnams' servant, drops in and reports that Ruth seems better. Parris agrees to meet the crowd and lead them in a prayer, but he refuses to mention witchcraft until he gets Reverend Hale's opinion.**

**Once they are alone, Abigail updates Mercy on the current situation. Mary Warren, the servant for the Proctor household, enters the room in a breathless, nervous state. She frets that they will all be labeled witches before long. Betty sits up suddenly and cries for her mother, but her mother is dead and buried. Abigail tells the girls that she has told Parris everything about their activities in the woods, but Betty cries that Abigail did not tell Parris about drinking blood as a charm to kill Elizabeth Proctor, John Proctor's wife. Abigail strikes Betty across the face and warns the other girls to confess *only* that they danced and that Tituba conjured Ruth's dead sisters. She threatens to kill them if they breathe a word about the other things that they did. She shakes Betty, but Betty has returned to her unmoving, unresponsive state.**

## Analysis

***The Crucible*** **is a play about the intersection of private sins with paranoia, hysteria, and religious intolerance. The citizens of Arthur Miller's Salem of 1692 would consider the very concept of a private life heretical. The government of Salem, and of Massachusetts as a whole, is a theocracy, with the legal system based on the Christian Bible. Moral laws and state laws are one and the same;**

**sin and the status of an individual's soul are public concerns. An individual's private life must conform to the moral laws, or the individual represents a threat to the public good.**

**Regulating the morality of citizens requires surveillance. For every inhabitant of Salem, there is a potential witness to the individual's private crimes. State officials patrol the township, requiring citizens to give an account of their activities. Free speech is not a protected right, and saying the wrong thing can easily land a citizen in jail. Most of the punishments, such as the stocks, whipping, and hangings, are public, with the punishment serving to shame the lawbreaker and remind the public that to disagree with the state's decisions is to disagree with God's will.**

***The Crucible*** **introduces a community full of underlying personal grudges. Religion pervades every aspect of life, but it is a religion that lacks a ritual outlet to manage emotions such as anger, jealousy, or resentment. By 1692, Salem has become a fairly established community, removed from its days as an outpost on a hostile frontier. Many of the former dangers that united the community in its early years have lessened, while interpersonal feuds and grudges over property, religious offices, and sexual behavior have begun to simmer beneath the theocratic surface. These tensions, combined with the paranoia about supernatural forces, pervade the town's religious sensibility and provide the raw materials for the hysteria of the witch trials.**

**On the surface, Parris appears to be an anxious, worried father. However, if we pay close attention to his language, we find indications that he is mainly worried about his reputation, not the welfare of his daughter and their friends. He fears that Abigail, Betty, and the other girls were engaging in witchcraft when he caught them dancing, and his first concern is not the endangerment of their souls but the trouble that the scandal will cause him. It is possible—and likely, from his point of view—that members in the community would make use of a moral transgression to ruin him. Parris's anxiety about the insecurity of his office reveals the extent to which conflicts divide the Salem community. Not even those individuals who society believes are invested with God's will can control the whim of the populace.**

**The idea of guilt by association is central to the events in *The Crucible*, as it is one of the many ways in which the private, moral behavior of citizens can be regulated. An individual must fear that the sins of his or her friends and associates will taint his or her own name. Therefore, the individual is pressured to govern his or her private relationships according to public opinion and public law. To solidify one's good name, it is necessary to publicly condemn the wrongdoing of others. In this way, guilt by association also reinforces the publicization of private sins. Even before the play begins, Abigail's increasingly questionable reputation, in light of her unexplained firing by the upright Elizabeth Proctor, threatens her uncle Parris's tenuous hold on power and authority in the community. The allegations of witchcraft only render her an even greater threat to him.**

**Putnam, meanwhile, has his own set of grudges against his fellow Salemites. A rich man from an influential Salem family, he believes that his status grants him the right to worldly success. Yet he has been thwarted, both in his efforts to make his brother-in-law minister, and in his family life, where his children have all died in infancy. Putnam is well positioned to use the witch trials to express his feelings of persecution and undeserved failure, and to satisfy his need for revenge. His wife feels similarly wronged—like many Puritans, she is all too willing to blame the tragic deaths of her children on supernatural causes—and seeks similar retribution for what she perceives as the malevolent doings of others.**

## Act I: The entrance of John Proctor to the entrance of Reverend Hale

## Summary

***I never knew what pretense Salem was, I never knew the lying lessons. . . .***

***(See Important Quotations Explained)***

**John Proctor, a local farmer, enters Parris's house to join the girls. Proctor disdains hypocrisy, and many people resent him for exposing their foolishness. However, Proctor is uneasy with himself because he had conducted an extramarital affair with Abigail. His wife, Elizabeth, discovered the affair and promptly dismissed Abigail from her work at the Proctor home.**

**Proctor caustically reminds Mary Warren, who now works for him, that he forbade her to leave his house, and he threatens to whip her if she does not obey his rules. Mercy Lewis and Mary depart. Abigail declares that she waits for Proctor at night. Proctor angers her by replying that he made no promises to her during their affair. She retorts that he cannot claim that he has no feelings for her because she has seen him looking up at her window. He admits that he still harbors kind feelings for her but asserts that their relationship is over. Abigail mocks Proctor for bending to the will of his "cold, sniveling" wife. Proctor threatens to give Abigail a whipping for insulting his wife. Abigail cries that Proctor put knowledge in her heart, and she declares that he cannot ask her to forget what she has learned—namely, that all of Salem operates on pretense and lies.**

**The crowd in the parlor sings a psalm. At the phrase "going up to Jesus," Betty covers her ears and collapses into hysterics. Parris, Mercy, and the Putnams rush into the room. Mrs. Putnam concludes that Betty is bewitched and cannot hear the Lord's name without pain. Rebecca Nurse, an elderly woman, joins them. Her husband, Francis Nurse, is highly respected in Salem, and many people ask him to arbitrate their disputes. Over the years, he gradually bought up the 300 acres that he once rented, and some people resent his success. He and Thomas Putnam bitterly disputed a matter of land boundaries. Moreover, Francis belonged to the faction that prevented Putnam's brother-in-law from winning the Salem ministry. Giles Corey, a muscular, wiry eighty-three-year-old farmer, joins the crowd in the room as Rebecca stands over Betty. Betty gradually quiets in Rebecca's gentle presence. Rebecca assures everyone that Ruth and Betty are probably only suffering from a childish fit, derived from overstimulation.**

**Proctor asks if Parris consulted the legal authorities or called a town meeting before he asked Reverend Hale to uncover demons in Salem. Rebecca fears that a witch-hunt will spark even more disputes. Putnam demands that Parris have Hale search for signs of witchcraft. Proctor reminds Putnam that he cannot command Parris and states that Salem does not grant votes on the basis of wealth. Putnam retorts that Proctor should not worry about Salem's government because he does not attend church regularly like a good citizen.**

**Proctor announces that he does not agree with Parris's emphasis on "hellfire and damnation" in his sermons.**

**Parris and Giles bicker over the question of whether Parris should be granted six pounds for firewood expenses. Parris claims that the six pounds are part of his salary and that his contract stipulates that the community provide him with firewood. Giles claims that Parris overstepped his boundaries in asking for the deed to his (Parris's) house. Parris replies that he does not want the community to be able to toss him out on a whim; his possession of the deed will make it more difficult for citizens to disobey the church.**

**Parris contends that Proctor does not have the right to defy his religious authority. He reminds Proctor that Salem is not a community of Quakers, and he advises Proctor to inform his "followers" of this fact. Parris declares that Proctor belongs to a faction in the church conspiring against him. Proctor shocks everyone when he says that he does not like Parris's kind of authority and would love to find and join this enemy faction.**

**Putnam and Proctor argue over the proper ownership of a piece of timberland where Proctor harvests his lumber. Putnam claims that his grandfather left the tract of land to him in his will. Proctor says that he purchased the land from Francis Nurse, adding that Putnam's grandfather had a habit of willing land that did not belong to him. Putnam, growing irate, threatens to sue Proctor.**

## Analysis

**In Puritan Salem, young women such as Abigail, Mary, and Mercy are largely powerless until they get married. As a young, unmarried servant girl, Mary is expected to obey the will of her employer, Proctor, who can confine her to his home and even whip her for disobeying his orders.**

**Proctor, in his first appearance, is presented as a quick-witted, sharp-tongued man with a strong independent streak. These traits would seem to make him a good person to question the motives of those who cry witchcraft. However, his guilt over his affair with Abigail makes his position problematic because he is guilty of the very hypocrisy that he despises in others. Abigail, meanwhile, is clearly not over their affair. She accuses Proctor of "putting knowledge" in her heart. In one sense, Abigail accuses him of destroying her innocence by taking**

**her virginity. In another sense, she also accuses him of showing her the extent to which hypocrisy governs social relations in Salem. Abigail's cynicism about her society reveals that she is well positioned to take advantage of the witch trials for personal gain as well as revenge. Her secret desire to remove Elizabeth Proctor from her path to John Proctor drives the hysteria that soon develops.**

**Proctor's inquiry as to whether Parris consulted anyone before seeking out Reverend Hale illustrates another constricting aspect of Salem society: the emphasis on public morality and the public good renders individual action suspect. Proctor's question subtly insinuates that Parris has personal, private, motives for calling Reverend Hale. He compounds the tension between the two by hinting that Parris's fire and brimstone sermons further the minister's individual interests by encouraging people to obey him, lest they risk going to hell.**

**Parris is one of the least appealing characters in the play. Suspicious and grasping, he has a strong attachment to the material side of life. It is obvious that his emphasis on hellfire and damnation is, at least in part, an attempt to coerce the congregation into giving him more material benefits out of guilt. Parris, Miller mentions in an aside to the audience, was once a merchant in Barbados. His commercialist zeal shows in the way he uses sin as a sort of currency to procure free firewood and free houses. He would have his congregation pay God for their sins, but he wants to collect on their debts himself.**

**Parris's desire to own the deed to his house is likewise telling. He explains his reasons in terms of the community's fickle attitude toward its ministers—in this, at least, he has a point. Before his arrival, the Putnams and the Nurses engaged in a bitter dispute over the choice of minister, a quarrel that offers ample evidence of a minister's vulnerability to political battles and personal grudges between families. However, Parris's claim that he wants only to ensure "obedience to the Church" is suspect, given that he reacts to disagreement with the church's edicts as though it were a personal insult. His allegation that Proctor leads a church faction intent on bringing about his downfall reveals that Parris is fairly paranoid. This paranoia, coupled with his actual political vulnerability, primes him to take advantage of the witch trials to protect his personal interests.**

**Rebecca's insistence to Proctor that he not "break charity" with the minister suggests that there are few ways to express individual disagreements in Salem because doing so is considered immoral. Feelings of jealousy and resentment have no outlet other than the court, which, in theocratic Salem, is also an institution of religious authority. The entire community of Salem is thus ripe for the witch trials to become an outlet for the expression of economic, political, and personal grudges through the manipulation of religious and moral authority. The land dispute between Proctor and Putnam adds the final touch to the implication that the real issues in the witch trials have much more to do with intra-societal and interpersonal concerns than with supernatural manifestations of the devil's influence.**

## Act I: The entrance of Reverend Hale to the closing scene

## Summary

***I saw Sarah Good with the Devil! I saw Goody Osburn with the Devil! I saw Bridget Bishop with the Devil!***

***(See Important Quotations Explained)***

**Reverend Hale is an intellectual man, and he has studied witchcraft extensively. He arrives at Parris's home with a heavy load of books. Hale asks Proctor and Giles if they have afflicted children. Giles says that Proctor does not believe in witches. Proctor denies having stated an opinion on witches at all and leaves Hale to his work.**

**Parris relates the tale of finding the girls dancing in the forest at night, and Mrs. Putnam reports having sent her daughter to conjure the spirits of her dead children. She asks if losing seven children before they live a day is a natural occurrence. Hale consults his books while Rebecca announces that she is too old to sit in on the proceedings. Parris insists that they may find the source of all the community's troubles, but she leaves anyway.**

**Giles asks Hale what reading strange books means because he often finds his wife, Martha, reading books. The night before, he tried to pray but found that he could not succeed until Martha closed her book and left the house. (Giles has a bad reputation in Salem, and people generally blame him for thefts and random fires. He cares little for public opinion, and he only began attending**

**church regularly after he married Martha. Giles does not mention that he only recently learned any prayers and that even small distractions cause him problems in reciting them.) Hale thoughtfully considers the information and concludes that they will have to discuss the matter later. Slightly taken aback, Giles states that he does not mean to say that his wife is a witch. He just wants to know what she reads and why she hides the books from him.**

**Hale questions Abigail about the dancing in the forest, but Abigail maintains that the dancing was not connected to witchcraft. Parris hesitantly adds that he saw a kettle in the grass when he caught the girls at their dancing. Abigail claims that it contained soup, but Parris insists that he saw something moving in it. Abigail says that a frog jumped in. Under severe questioning, she insists that she did not call the devil but that Tituba did. She denies drinking any of the brew in the kettle, but when the men bring Tituba to the room, Abigail points at her and announces that Tituba made her drink blood. Tituba tells Parris and Hale that Abigail begged her to conjure and concoct a charm.**

**Tituba insists that someone else is bewitching the children because the devil has many witches in his service. Hale counsels her to open herself to God's glory, and he asks if she has ever seen someone that she knows from Salem with the devil. Putnam suggests Sarah Good or Goody Osburn, two local outcasts. In a rising tide of religious exultation, Tituba says that she saw four people with the devil. She informs Parris that the devil told her many times to kill him in his sleep, but she refused even though the devil promised to grant her freedom and send her back to her native Barbados in return for her obedience. She recounts that the devil told her that he even had white people in his power and that he showed her Sarah Good and Goody Osburn. Mrs. Putnam declares that Tituba's story makes sense because Goody Osburn midwifed three of her ill-fated births. Abigail adds Bridget Bishop's name to the list of the accused. Betty rises from the bed and chants more names. The scene closes as Abigail and Betty, in feverish ecstasy, alternate in piling up names on the growing list. Hale calls for the marshal to bring irons to arrest the accused witches.**

## Analysis

**In a theocracy, part of the state's role is policing belief. Therefore, there is a good deal of pressure on the average citizen to inform on the blasphemous**

**speech of his or her neighbors in the name of Christian duty. Giles's claim to Hale that Proctor does not believe in witches does not necessarily arise out of a desire to do his Christian duty—he may only be making a joke. However, the very offhand nature of his statement indicates that reporting a neighbor's heretical words or thoughts is a deeply ingrained behavior in Salem.**

**Rebecca, a figure of respectability and good sense, fears that an investigation into witchcraft will only increase division within the Salem community. Parris's declaration that a thorough investigation could get at the root of all the community's problems proves accurate, though not in the way that he foresees. The witch trials do bring out all of the community's problems, but in the worst possible way. The specter of witchcraft allows citizens to blame political failures, the deaths of children, and land squabbles on supernatural influences. No one has to accept individual responsibility for any of the conflicts that divide the community or confront any of his or her personal issues with other individuals because everyone can simply say, "The devil made me do it."**

**Reverend Hale's reaction to Giles's story about Martha reveals the dangerous implications of a zealous witch-hunt. Ordinarily, reading books not related to the Bible would be considered an immoral use of one's time, but it certainly would not be interpreted as evidence of witchcraft. But with Hale present and the scent of witchcraft in the air, the slightest unorthodox behavior automatically makes someone suspect.**

**Abigail's reaction to the mounting pressure determines the way in which the rest of the witch trials will play out. Because she can no longer truly deny her involvement in witchcraft, she accepts her guilt but displaces it onto Tituba. She admits being involved in witchcraft but declares that Tituba forced her into it. Tituba's reaction to being accused follows Abigail's lead: she admits her guilt in a public setting and receives absolution and then completes her self-cleansing by passing her guilt on to others. In this manner, the admission of involvement with witchcraft functions like the ritual of confession.**

**The ritual of confession in the witch trials also allows the expression of sentiments that could not otherwise be verbalized in repressive Salem. By placing her own thoughts in the devil's mouth, Tituba can express her long-held aggression against the man who enslaves her. Moreover, she states that the devil**

**tempted her by showing her some white people that he owned. By naming the devil as a slave owner, she subtly accuses Parris and other white citizens of doing the devil's work in condoning slavery. Tituba is normally a powerless figure; in the context of the witch trials, however, she gains a power and authority previously unknown to her. No one would have listened seriously to a word she had to say before, but she now has a position of authority from which to name the secret sins of other Salem residents. She uses that power and authority to make accusations that would have earned her a beating before. The girls—Abigail and Betty—follow the same pattern, empowering themselves through their allegedly religious hysteria.**

## Act II

## Summary

**John Proctor sits down to dinner with his wife, Elizabeth. Mary Warren, their servant, has gone to the witch trials, defying Elizabeth's order that she remain in the house. Fourteen people are now in jail. If these accused witches do not confess, they will be hanged. Whoever Abigail and her troop name as they go into hysterics is arrested for bewitching the girls.**

**Proctor can barely believe the craze, and he tells Elizabeth that Abigail had sworn her dancing had nothing to do with witchcraft. Elizabeth wants him to testify that the accusations are a sham. He says that he cannot prove his allegation because Abigail told him this information while they were alone in a room. Elizabeth loses all faith in her husband upon hearing that he and Abigail were alone together. Proctor demands that she stop judging him. He says that he feels as though his home is a courtroom, but Elizabeth responds that the real court is in his own heart.**

**When Mary Warren returns home, she gives Elizabeth a doll that she sewed in court, saying that it is a gift. She reports that thirty-nine people now stand accused. John and Mary argue over whether Mary can continue attending the trials. He threatens to whip her, and Mary declares that she saved Elizabeth's life that day. Elizabeth's name was apparently mentioned in the accusations (Mary will not name the accuser), but Mary spoke out in Elizabeth's defense. Proctor instructs Mary to go to bed, but she demands that he stop ordering her**

**around. Elizabeth, meanwhile, is convinced that it was Abigail who accused her of witchcraft, in order to take her place in John's bed.**

**Hale visits the Proctors because he wants to speak with everyone whose name has been mentioned in connection with witchcraft. He has just visited Rebecca Nurse. Hale proceeds to ask questions about the Christian character of the Proctor home. He notes that the Proctors have not often attended church and that their youngest son is not yet baptized. Proctor explains that he does not like Parris's particular theology. Hale asks them to recite the Ten Commandments. Proctor obliges but forgets the commandment prohibiting adultery.**

**At Elizabeth's urging, Proctor informs Hale that Abigail told him that the children's sickness had nothing to do with witchcraft. Taken aback, Hale replies that many have already confessed. Proctor points out that they would have been hanged without a confession. Giles and Francis rush into Proctor's home, crying that their wives have been arrested. Rebecca is charged with the supernatural murders of Mrs. Putnam's babies. A man bought a pig from Martha Corey and it died not long afterward; he wanted his money back, but she refused, saying that he did not know how to care for a pig. Every pig he purchased thereafter died, and he accused her of bewitching him so that he would be incapable of keeping one alive.**

**Ezekiel Cheever and Herrick, the town marshal, arrive with a warrant for Elizabeth's arrest. Hale is surprised because, last he heard, Elizabeth was not charged with anything. Cheever asks if Elizabeth owns any dolls, and Elizabeth replies that she has not owned dolls since she was a girl. Cheever spies the doll Mary Warren gave her. He finds a needle inside it. Cheever relates that Abigail had a fit at dinner in Parris's house that evening. Parris found a needle in her abdomen, and Abigail accused Elizabeth of witchcraft. Elizabeth brings Mary downstairs. Mary informs the inquisitors that she made the doll while in court and stuck the needle in it herself.**

**As Elizabeth is led away, Proctor loses his temper and rips the warrant. He asks Hale why the accuser is always considered innocent. Hale appears less and less certain of the accusations of witchcraft. Proctor tells Mary that she has to testify in court that she made the doll and put the needle in it. Mary declares that Abigail will kill her if she does and that Abigail would only charge him with**

**lechery. Proctor is shocked that Abigail told Mary about the affair, but he demands that she testify anyway. Mary cries hysterically that she cannot.**

## Analysis

**Abigail and her troop have achieved an extremely unusual level of power and authority for young, unmarried girls in a Puritan community. They can destroy the lives of others with a mere accusation, and even the wealthy and influential are not safe. Mary Warren is so full of her newfound power that she feels able to defy Proctor's assumption of authority over her. She invokes her own power as an official of the court, a power that Proctor cannot easily deny.**

**Proctor's sense of guilt begins to eat away at him. He knows that he can bring down Abigail and end her reign of terror, but he fears for his good name if his hidden sin of adultery is revealed. The pressing knowledge of his own guilt makes him feel judged, but Elizabeth is correct when she points out that the judge who pursues him so mercilessly is himself. Proctor has a great loathing for hypocrisy, and, here, he judges his own hypocrisy no less harshly than that of others.**

**Proctor's intense dilemma over whether to expose his own sin to bring down Abigail is complicated by Hale's decision to visit everyone whose name is even remotely associated with the accusations of witchcraft. Hale wants to determine the character of each accused individual by measuring it against Christian standards. His invasion of the home space in the name of God reveals the essential nature of the trials—namely, to root out hidden sins and expose them. Any small deviation from doctrine is reason for suspicion. Proctor tries to prove the upright character of his home by reciting the Ten Commandments. In forgetting to name adultery, however, just as he "forgot" it during his affair with Abigail, he not only exposes the deficiency of his Christian morality but also suggests the possibility that his entire household has succumbed to the evil influence of the devil and witchcraft.**

**When Proctor asks indignantly why the accusers are always automatically innocent, he comments upon the essential attractiveness of taking the side of the accusers. Many of the accusations have come through the ritual confession of guilt—one confesses guilt and then proves one's "innocence" by accusing others. The accusing side enjoys a privileged position of moral virtue from this**

**standpoint. Proctor laments the lack of hard evidence, but, of course (as Danforth will later point out), in supernatural crimes, the standards of evidence are not as hard and fast. The only "proof" is the word of the alleged victims of witchcraft. Thus, to deny these victims' charges is almost a denial of the existence of witchcraft itself—quite a heretical claim. Therefore, those who take the side of the accusers can enjoy the self-justifying mission of doing God's will in rooting out the devil's work, while those who challenge them are threatening the very foundations of Salem society.**

**Hale, meanwhile, is undergoing an internal crisis. He clearly enjoyed being called to Salem because it made him feel like an expert. His pleasure in the trials comes from his privileged position of authority with respect to defining the guilty and the innocent. However, his surprise at hearing of Rebecca's arrest and the warrant for Elizabeth's arrest reveals that Hale is no longer in control of the proceedings. Power has passed into the hands of others, and as the craze spreads, Hale begins to doubt its essential justice.**

## Act III

## Summary

***[A] person is either with this court or he must be counted against it, there be no road between.***

***(See Important Quotations Explained)***

**Back in Salem, the court is in session. Giles interrupts the proceedings by shouting that Putnam is only making a grab for more land. He claims to have evidence to back up this assertion. Judge Hathorne, Deputy Governor Danforth, and the Reverends Hale and Parris join Giles and Francis in the vestry room to get to the bottom of the matter. Proctor and Mary Warren enter the room. Mary testifies that she and the other girls were only pretending to be afflicted by witchcraft. Judge Danforth, shocked, asks Proctor if he has told the village about Mary's claims. Parris declares that they all want to overthrow the court.**

**Danforth asks Proctor if he is attempting to undermine the court. Proctor assures him that he just wants to free his wife, but Cheever informs the judge that Proctor ripped up the warrant for Elizabeth's arrest. Danforth proceeds to question Proctor about his religious beliefs. He is particularly intrigued by the**

**information, offered by Parris, that Proctor only attends church about once a month. Cheever adds that Proctor plows on Sunday, a serious offense in Salem.**

**Danforth and Hathorne inform Proctor that he need not worry about Elizabeth's imminent execution because she claims to be pregnant. She will not be hanged until after she delivers. Danforth asks if he will drop his condemnation of the court, but Proctor refuses. He submits a deposition signed by ninety-one land-owning farmers attesting to the good characters of Elizabeth, Martha, and Rebecca. Parris insists that they all be summoned for questioning because the deposition is an attack on the court. Hale asks why every defense is considered an attack on the court.**

**Putnam is led into the room to answer to an allegation by Giles that he prompted his daughter to accuse George Jacobs of witchcraft. Should Jacobs hang, he would forfeit his property, and Putnam is the only person in Salem with the money to purchase such a tract. Giles refuses to name the man who gave him the information because he does not want to open him to Putnam's vengeance. Danforth arrests Giles for contempt of court.**

**Danforth sends for Abigail and her troop of girls. Abigail denies Mary's testimony, as well as her explanation for the doll in the Proctor home. Mary maintains her assertion that the girls are only pretending. Hathorne asks her to pretend to faint for them. Mary says she cannot because she does not have "the sense of it" now. Under continued pressure, she falters and explains that she only thought she saw spirits. Danforth pressures Abigail to be truthful. Abigail shivers and the other girls follow suit. They accuse Mary of bewitching them with a cold wind.**

**Proctor leaps at Abigail and calls her a whore. He confesses his affair with her and explains that Elizabeth fired her when she discovered it. He claims that Abigail wants Elizabeth to hang so that she can take her place in his home. Danforth orders Abigail and Proctor to turn their backs, and he sends for Elizabeth, who is reputed by Proctor to be unfailingly honest. Danforth asks why she fired Abigail. Elizabeth glances at Proctor for a clue, but Danforth demands that she look only at him while she speaks. Elizabeth claims to have gotten the mistaken notion that Proctor fancied Abigail, so she lost her temper and fired the girl without just cause. As marshal, Herrick removes Elizabeth**

**from the room. Proctor cries out that he confessed his sin, but it is too late for Elizabeth to change her story. Hale begs Danforth to reconsider, stating that Abigail has always struck him as false.**

**Abigail and the girls begin screaming that Mary is sending her spirit at them. Mary pleads with them to stop, but the girls repeat her words verbatim. The room erupts into a hectic frenzy of fear, excitement, and confusion. Mary seems to become infected with the hysteria of the other girls and starts screaming too. Proctor tries to touch her, but she dashes away from him, calling him the devil's man. She accuses him of consorting with the devil and pressuring her to join him in his evil ways. Danforth orders Proctor's arrest against Hale's vocal opposition. Hale denounces the proceedings and declares that he is quitting the court.**

***It is a whore's vengeance. . . .***

***(See Important Quotations Explained)***

## Analysis

**The desperate attempt by Giles, Proctor, and Francis to save their respective wives exposes the extent to which the trials have become about specific individuals and institutions struggling to maintain power and authority. Deputy Governor Danforth and Judge Hathorne do not want to admit publicly that they were deceived by a bunch of young women and girls, while Parris does not want the trials to end as a fraud because the scandal of having a lying daughter and niece would end his career in Salem. Predictably, the judge and the deputy governor react to Proctor's claims by accusing him of trying to undermine "the court," which, in theocratic Salem, is tantamount to undermining God himself.**

**In order to dispose of Proctor's threat, Danforth and Hathorne exercise their power to invade his privacy. Although Proctor has not yet been formally accused of witchcraft, Danforth and Hathorne, like Hale earlier, question him about his Christian morals as though he were already on trial. They hope to find in his character even the slightest deviation from Christian doctrine because they would then be able to cast him as an enemy of religion. Once thus labeled, Proctor would have virtually no chance of anyone in God-fearing Salem intervening on his behalf.**

**The reaction of Danforth and Hathorne to the deposition signed by ninety-one land-owning citizens further demonstrates the power of the court to invade the private lives of citizens, and indicates the extent to which the court believes in guilt by association. In the witch trials, guilt need not be proven by hard evidence, and signing a deposition attesting to the good character of the accused is enough to put oneself under the same suspicion of guilt. Over the protests of Francis, Danforth states that the signers should have nothing to worry about if they are innocent. The desire for privacy becomes an automatic sign of guilt. Revealingly, Parris states that the goal of the trials is to find precisely what is not seen—in both the supernatural realm and the realm of people's private lives.**

**During a bout of hysteria such as the witch trials, authority and power fall to those who can avoid questioning while forcing others to speak. By virtue of their rank, Danforth and Hathorne have the authority to cast any questions put to them as an attack on the court. Similarly, Abigail responds to Proctor's charges of harlotry with a refusal to answer questions. Although Danforth's patience with her presumptuous manner is limited, the fact that a young girl can so indignantly refuse to answer a direct question from a court official indicates that she possesses an unusual level of authority for her age and gender.**

**Much of Act III has to do with determining who will define innocence and guilt. Proctor makes one desperate bid for this authority by finally overcoming his desire to protect his good name, exposing his own secret sin. He hopes to replace his wife's alleged guilt with his own guilt and bring down Abigail in the process. Unfortunately, he mistakes the proceedings for an actual search for the guilty, when, in fact, the proceedings are better described as a power struggle. He exposes his private life to scrutiny, hoping to gain some authority, but he does not realize that too many influential people have invested energy into the proceedings for him to be able to stop them now. Too many reputations are at stake, and Proctor's revelation comes too late to stop the avalanche.**

## Act IV–Epilogue

## Summary: Act IV

***How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!***

***(See Important Quotations Explained)***

**That fall, Danforth and Hathorne visit a Salem jail to see Parris. Parris, worn and gaunt, greets them. They demand to know why Reverend Hale has returned to Salem. Parris assures them that Hale only wants to persuade the holdout prisoners to confess and save themselves from the gallows. He reports that Abigail and Mercy vanished from Salem after robbing him. Hale now appears, haggard and sorrowful. He begs the men to pardon the prisoners because the prisoners will not confess. Danforth replies that postponement or pardons will cast doubt not only on the guilt of the seven remaining prisoners but also on that of the twelve who have hanged already. Hale warns that the officials are courting rebellion. As a result of the trials, cows are wandering loose, crops are rotting in the fields, and orphans are wandering without supervision. Many homes have fallen into neglect because their owners were in jail or had to attend the proceedings. Everyone lives in fear of being accused of witchcraft, and there are rumors of revolt in nearby Andover.**

**Hale has not yet spoken to Proctor. Danforth hopes that Elizabeth can persuade him to confess. Elizabeth agrees to speak with Proctor, but she makes no promises. Everyone leaves the room to allow Elizabeth and Proctor privacy. Elizabeth tells Proctor that almost one hundred people have confessed to witchcraft. She relates that Giles was killed by being pressed to death by large stones, though he never pleaded guilty or not guilty to the charges against him. Had he denied the charges, the court would have hanged him, and he would have forfeited his property. He decided not to enter a plea, so that his farm would fall to his sons. In order to force him to enter a plea, the court tortured him on the press, but he continually refused, and the weight on his chest eventually became so great that it crushed him. His last words were "more weight."**

**Proctor asks Elizabeth if she thinks that he should confess. He says that he does not hold out, like Rebecca and Martha, because of religious conviction. Rather, he does so out of spite because he wants his persecutors to feel the weight of guilt for seeing him hanged when they know he is innocent.**

**After wrestling with his conscience for a long time, Proctor agrees to confess. Hathorne and Danforth are overjoyed and Cheever grabs paper, pen, and ink to write the confession. Proctor asks why it has to be written. Danforth informs him that it will be hung on the church door.**

**The men bring Rebecca to witness Proctor's confession, hoping that she will follow his example. The sight of Rebecca shames Proctor. He offers his confession, and Danforth asks him if he ever saw Rebecca Nurse in the devil's company. Proctor states that he did not. Danforth reads the names of the condemned out loud and asks if he ever saw any of them with the devil. Proctor again replies in the negative. Danforth pressures him to name other guilty parties, but Proctor declares that he will speak only about his own sins.**

**Proctor hesitates to sign the confession, saying that it is enough that the men have witnessed him admitting his alleged crimes. Under pressure, he signs his name but snatches the sheet from Danforth. Danforth demands the confession as proof to the village of Proctor's witchcraft. Proctor refuses to allow him to nail the paper with his name on the church door and, after arguing with the magistrates, tears the confession in two and renounces it. Danforth calls for the marshal. Herrick leads the seven condemned prisoners, including Proctor, to the gallows. Hale and Parris plead with Elizabeth to remonstrate with Proctor, but she refuses to sway him from doing what he believes is just.**

## Summary: Epilogue

**Not long afterward, Parris is voted out of office. He leaves Salem, never to be heard from again. Rumors have it that Abigail became a prostitute in Boston. Elizabeth remarries a few years after her husband's execution. In 1712, the excommunications of the condemned are retracted. The farms of the executed go fallow and remain vacant for years.**

## Analysis

**Months have passed, and things are falling apart in Massachusetts, making Danforth and Hathorne increasingly insecure. They do not want to, and ultimately cannot, admit that they made a mistake in signing the death warrants of the nineteen convicted, so they hope for confessions from the remaining prisoners to insulate them from accusations of mistaken verdicts. Danforth cannot pardon the prisoners, despite Hale's pleas and his obvious doubts about their guilt, because he does not want to "cast doubt" on the justification of the hangings of the twelve previously condemned and on the sentence of hanging for the seven remaining prisoners. In the twisted logic of the court, it would not be**

**"fair" to the twelve already hanged if the seven remaining prisoners were pardoned. Danforth prioritizes a bizarre, abstract notion of equality over the tangible reality of potential innocence.**

**Clearly, the most important issue for the officials of the court is the preservation of their reputations and the integrity of the court. As a theocratic institution, the court represents divine, as well as secular, justice. To admit to twelve mistaken hangings would be to question divine justice and the very foundations of the state and of human life. The integrity of the court would be shattered, and the reputations of court officials would fall with it. Danforth and Hathorne would rather preserve the appearance of justice than threaten the religious and political order of Salem.**

**Danforth and Hathorne's treatment of Proctor reveals an obsessive need to preserve the appearance of order and justify their actions as well as a hypocritical attitude about honesty. They want Proctor to sign a confession that admits his own status as a witch, testifies to the effect that he saw the other six prisoners in the company of the devil, and completely corroborates the court's findings. While they seek to take advantage of Proctor's reputation for honesty in order to support their claims of having conducted themselves justly, Danforth and Hathorne are wholly unwilling to believe Proctor when he says that he has conducted himself justly.**

**Proctor's refusal to take part in the ritual transfer of guilt that has dominated the play—the naming of other "witches"—separates him from the rest of the accused. His unwillingness to sign his name to the confession results in part from his desire not to dishonor his fellow prisoners' decisions to stand firm. More important, however, Proctor fixates on his name and on how it will be destroyed if he signs the confession. Proctor's desire to preserve his good name earlier keeps him from testifying against Abigail, leading to disastrous consequences. Now, however, he has finally come to a true understanding of what a good reputation means, and his defense of his name, in the form of not signing the confession, enables him to muster the courage to die heroically. His goodness and honesty, lost during his affair with Abigail, are recovered.**

## Important Quotations Explained

**1. I look for John Proctor that took me from my sleep and put knowledge in my heart! I never knew what pretense Salem was, I never knew the lying lessons I was taught by all these Christian women and their covenanted men! And now you bid me tear the light out of my eyes? I will not, I cannot! You loved me, John Proctor, and whatever sin it is, you love me yet!**

**Explanation for Quotation 1 >>**

**Abigail Williams utters these words in an Act I conversation with John Proctor, clueing the audience in to her past affair with him. For Proctor, we quickly realize, their relationship belongs to the past—while he may still be attracted to her, he is desperately trying to put the incident behind him. Abigail, on the other hand, has no such sense of closure, as this quote makes clear. As she begs him to come back to her, her anger overflows, and we see the roots of what becomes her targeted, destructive romp through Salem. First, there is her jealousy of Elizabeth Proctor and her fantasy that if she could only dispose of Elizabeth, John would be hers. But second, and perhaps more important, we see in this quotation a fierce loathing of the entire town—"I never knew what pretense Salem was, I never knew the lying lessons. . . ." Abigail hates Salem, and in the course of *The Crucible,* she makes Salem pay.**

**2. I want to open myself! . . . I want the light of God, I want the sweet love of Jesus! I danced for the Devil; I saw him, I wrote in his book; I go back to Jesus; I kiss His hand. I saw Sarah Good with the Devil! I saw Goody Osburn with the Devil! I saw Bridget Bishop with the Devil!**

**Explanation for Quotation 2 >>**

**This outburst from Abigail comes at the end of Act I, after the slave-girl Tituba has confessed to witchcraft. Abigail spent the first act worrying desperately about the possibility of being disgraced for having cast charms with her friends in the forest. Tituba's confession, however, offers an example of a way out, and Abigail takes it. She "confesses" to consorting with the Devil, which, according to the theology of Salem, means that she is redeemed and free from guilt. Then, as the next step in absolving herself of sin, she accuses others of being witches, thus shifting the burden of shame from her shoulders to those she names. Seeing**

**Abigail's success, the other girls follow suit, and with this pattern of hysterical, self-serving accusations, the witch trials get underway.**

**3. You must understand, sir, that a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it, there be no road between. This is a sharp time, now, a precise time—we live no longer in the dusky afternoon when evil mixed itself with good and befuddled the world. Now, by God's grace, the shining sun is up, and them that fear not light will surely praise it.**

**Explanation for Quotation 3 >>**

**This statement, given by Danforth in Act III, aptly sums up the attitude of the authorities toward the witch trials. In his own right, Danforth is an honorable man, but, like everyone else in Salem, he sees the world in black and white. Everything and everyone belongs to either God or the Devil. The court and government of Massachusetts, being divinely sanctioned, necessarily belong to God. Thus, anyone who opposes the court's activities cannot be an honest opponent. In a theocracy, one cannot have honest disagreements because God is infallible. Since the court is conducting the witch trials, anyone who questions the trials, such as Proctor or Giles Corey, is the court's enemy. From there, the logic is simple: the court does God's work, and so an enemy of the court *must,* necessarily, be a servant of the Devil.**

**4. A man may think God sleeps, but God sees everything, I know it now. I beg you, sir, I beg you—see her what she is. . . . She thinks to dance with me on my wife's grave! And well she might, for I thought of her softly. God help me, I lusted, and there is a promise in such sweat. But it is a whore's vengeance. . . .**

**Explanation for Quotation 4 >>**

**This quotation is taken from Act III, when Proctor finally breaks down and confesses his affair with Abigail, after trying, in vain, to expose her as a fraud without revealing their liaison. Proctor knows from the beginning that the witch trials constitute nothing more than a "whore's vengeance"—Abigail's revenge on him for ending their affair—but he shies away from making that knowledge public because it would lead to his disgrace. This scene, in the Salem courtroom, marks the climax of the play, in which Proctor's concern for justice outstrips his concern for his reputation. This re-prioritization of values enables him to do what is necessary. But he finds, to his horror, that his actions come too late:**

**instead of Abigail and the witch trials being exposed as a sham, Proctor is called a liar and then accused of witchcraft by the court. His attempt at honesty backfires and destroys him.**

**5. Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!**

**Explanation for Quotation 5 >>**

**Proctor utters these lines at the end of the play, in Act IV, when he is wrestling with his conscience over whether to confess to witchcraft and thereby save himself from the gallows. The judges and Hale have almost convinced him to do so, but the last stumbling block is his signature on the confession, which he cannot bring himself to give. In part, this unwillingness reflects his desire not to dishonor his fellow prisoners: he would not be able to live with himself knowing that other innocents died while he quaked at death's door and fled. More important, it illustrates his obsession with his good name. Reputation is tremendously important in Salem, where public and private morality are one and the same. Early in the play, Proctor's desire to preserve his good name keeps him from testifying against Abigail. Now, however, he has come to a true understanding of what a good reputation means and what course of action it necessitates—namely, that he tell the truth, not lie to save himself. "I have given you my soul; leave me my name!" he rages; this defense of his name enables him to muster the courage to die, heroically, with his goodness intact.**

## Key Facts

**FULL TITLE** · ***The Crucible***

**AUTHOR** · **Arthur Miller**

**TYPE OF WORK** · **Play**

**GENRE** · **Tragedy, allegory**

**LANGUAGE** · **English**

**TIME AND PLACE WRITTEN** · **America, early 1950s**

**DATE OF FIRST PUBLICATION** · **1953**

**PUBLISHER · Viking Press**

**NARRATOR · The play is occasionally interrupted by an omniscient, third-person narrator who fills in the background for the characters.**

**CLIMAX · John Proctor tells the Salem court that he committed adultery with Abigail Williams.**

**PROTAGONIST · John Proctor**

**ANTAGONIST · Abigail Williams**

**SETTING (TIME) · 1692**

**SETTING (PLACE) · Salem, a small town in colonial Massachusetts**

**POINT OF VIEW · *The Crucible* is a play, so the audience and reader are entirely outside the action.**

**FALLING ACTION · The events from John Proctor's attempt to expose Abigail in Act IV to his decision to die rather than confess at the end of Act IV.**

**TENSE · Present**

**FORESHADOWING · The time frame of the play is extremely compressed, and the action proceeds so quickly that there is little time for foreshadowing.**

**TONE · Serious and tragic—the language is almost biblical.**

**THEMES · Intolerance; hysteria; reputation**

**MOTIFS · Empowerment; accusation, confession, legal proceedings in general**

**SYMBOLS · Though the play itself has very few examples of symbolism beyond typical witchcraft symbols (rats, toads, and bats), the entire play is meant to be symbolic, with its witch trials standing in for the anti-Communist "witch-hunts" of the 1950s.**

## Study Questions & Essay Topics

## Study Questions

**1. Discuss the role that grudges and personal rivalries play in the witch trial hysteria.**

**Answer for Study Question 1 >>**

**The trials in *The Crucible* take place against the backdrop of a deeply religious and superstitious society, and most of the characters in the play seem to believe that rooting out witches from their community is God's work. However, there are plenty of simmering feuds and rivalries in the small town that have nothing to do with religion, and many Salem residents take advantage of the trials to express long-held grudges and exact revenge on their enemies. Abigail, the original source of the hysteria, has a grudge against Elizabeth Proctor because Elizabeth fired her after she discovered that Abigail was having an affair with her husband, John Proctor. As the ringleader of the girls whose "visions" prompt the witch craze, Abigail happily uses the situation to accuse Elizabeth and have her sent to jail. Meanwhile, Reverend Parris, a paranoid and insecure figure, begins the play with a precarious hold on his office, and the trials enable him to strengthen his position within the village by making scapegoats of people like Proctor who question his authority.**

**Among the minor characters, the wealthy, ambitious Thomas Putnam has a bitter grudge against Francis Nurse for a number of reasons: Nurse prevented Putnam's brother-in-law from being elected to the Salem ministry, and Nurse is also engaged in a bitter land dispute with one of Putnam's relatives. In the end, Rebecca, Francis's virtuous wife, is convicted of the supernatural murders of Ann Putnam's dead babies. Thus, the Putnams not only strike a blow against the Nurse family but also gain some measure of twisted satisfaction for the tragedy of seven stillbirths. This bizarre pursuit of "justice" typifies the way that many of the inhabitants approach the witch trials as an opportunity to gain ultimate satisfaction for simmering resentments by convincing themselves that their rivals are beyond wrong, that they are in league with the devil.**

**2. How do the witch trials empower individuals who were previously powerless?**

**Answer for Study Question 2 >>**

**Salem is a strict, hierarchical, and patriarchal society. The men of the town have all of the political power and their rule is buttressed not only by law but also by the supposed sanction of God. In this society, the lower rungs of the social ladder are occupied by young, unmarried girls like Abigail, Mary Warren, and Mercy. Powerless in daily life, these girls find a sudden source of power in their alleged possession by the devil and hysterical denunciations of their fellow townsfolk.**

**Previously, the minister and the girls' parents were God's earthly representatives, but in the fervor of the witch trials, the girls are suddenly treated as though they have a direct connection to the divine. A mere accusation from one of Abigail's troop is enough to incarcerate and convict even important, influential citizens, and the girls soon become conscious of their newfound power. In Act II, for instance, Mary Warren defies Proctor's authority, which derives from his role as her employer, after she becomes an official of the court, and she even questions his right to give her orders at all.**

**Even the most despised and downtrodden inhabitant of Salem, the black slave Tituba suddenly finds herself similarly empowered. She can voice all of her hostility toward her master, Parris, and it is simply excused as "suggestions from the devil." At the same time, she can declare that she has seen "white people" with the devil, thus (for the first time in her life, probably) giving her power over the white community. As the fear of falling on the wrong side of God causes chaos during the brief period of the hysteria and trials, the social order of Salem is turned on its head.**

**3. How does John Proctor's great dilemma change during the course of the play?**

**Answer for Study Question 3 >>**

**Proctor, the play's tragic hero, has the conscience of an honest man, but he also has a secret flaw—his past affair with Abigail. Her sexual jealousy, accentuated by Proctor's termination of their affair, provides the spark for the witch trials; Proctor thus bears some responsibility for what occurs. He feels that the only way to stop Abigail and the girls from their lies is to confess his adultery. He refrains for a long time from confessing his sin, however, for the sake of his own good name and his wife's honor. Eventually, though, Proctor's attempts to reveal Abigail as a fraud without revealing the crucial information about their affair fail, and he makes a public confession of his sin. But by the time he comes clean, it is too late to stop the craze from running its course, and Proctor himself is arrested and accused of being a witch.**

**At this point, Proctor faces a new dilemma and wrestles with his conscience over whether to save himself from the gallows with a confession to a sin that he did not commit. The judges and Hale almost convince him to do so, but in the end,**

**he cannot bring himself to sign his confession. Such an action would dishonor his fellow prisoners, who are steadfastly refusing to make false confessions; more important, he realizes that his own soul, his honor, and his honesty are worth more than a cowardly escape from the gallows. He dies and, in doing so, feels that he has finally purged his guilt for his failure to stop the trials when he had the chance. As his wife says, "he have his goodness now."**

## Suggested Essay Topics

**1. Compare the roles that Elizabeth Proctor and Abigail Williams play in *The Crucible*.**

**2. What role does sex, and sexual repression, play in *The Crucible*?**

**3. Why are Danforth, Hathorne, and the other authorities so resistant to believing the claim that Abigail and the other girls are lying?**

**4. What kind of government does Salem have? What role does it play in the action?**

**5. Analyze Reverend Parris. What are his motivations in supporting the witch trials?**

**6. Discuss the changes that Reverend Hale undergoes in the course of the play.**

# 2

## About The Crucible

**Inspired by the McCarthy hearings of the 1950s, Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible,* focuses on the inconsistencies of the Salem witch trials and the extreme behavior that can result from dark desires and hidden agendas.**

**Miller bases the play on the historical account of the Salem witch trials. In particular he focuses on the discovery of several young girls and a slave playing in the woods, conjuring — or attempting to conjure — spirits from the dead. Rather than suffer severe and inevitable punishment for their actions, the girls accused other inhabitants of Salem of practicing witchcraft. Ironically, the girls avoided punishment by accusing others of the very things of which they were guilty. This desperate and perhaps childish finger-pointing resulted in mass paranoia and an atmosphere of fear in which everyone was a potential witch. As the number of arrests increased, so did the distrust within the Salem community. A self-perpetuating cycle of distrust, accusation, arrest, and conviction emerged. By the end of 1692, the Salem court had convicted and executed nineteen men and women.**

**Miller creates an atmosphere and mood within the play reminiscent of the historical period and of Puritan culture. The inhabitants of Salem lived in a restrictive society. Although the Puritans left England to avoid religious persecution, they based their newly established society upon religious intolerance. The Puritans demonstrated their faithfulness, honesty, and integrity through physical labor and strict adherence to religious doctrine. They considered material and physical wants — especially sexual desires — as the Devil's work and a threat to society. The Bible and the minister's interpretation of the Bible determined what was considered socially acceptable behavior. The Puritans had no tolerance for inappropriate or unacceptable behavior and punished individuals publicly and severely if they transgressed. Miller captures the intolerance and religious fanaticism of the period and effectively incorporates them into the play.**

**Reading about the Salem witch trials and the paranoid frenzy going on at the time is one thing, but witnessing the trials first hand is quite another experience. Miller permits the audience to do just that by transforming the faceless names from history into living, breathing characters with desires, emotions, and freewill. Miller did make adjustments to the ages, backgrounds, and occupations of several of the individuals mentioned in the historical records, however. For example, he lowers the age gap between John Proctor and Abigail Williams from sixty and eleven, respectively, to thirty-five and seventeen, enabling the plot line of an affair between the two. Proctor and his wife Elizabeth ran an inn as well as a farm, but Miller eliminates this detail. Proctor's friend Giles Corey was actually pressed to death a month after Proctor's execution; however, Miller juxtaposes his death and Proctor's. Finally, Miller chose to omit the fact that Proctor had a son who was also tortured during the witch trials because he refused to confess to witchcraft.**

**Although no one can know for certain what the actual individuals thought, felt, or believed, Miller's incorporation of motive into the play's characters provides his audience with a realistic scenario that is both believable and applicable to society. For example, when the play was first produced during the 1950's, as McCarthyism submerged America in paranoia and fear, audiences could relate to the plot because Americans were turning in their friends so they would not be labeled as Communists. Although today's society may not be engaged in so-called "witch hunts," stories of an individual attempting to reestablish a relationship with a former lover by eliminating what he or she perceives to be the only obstacle — the person currently involved in a relationship with the former lover — are not uncommon. This classic love triangle appears repeatedly in literature, not to mention the supermarket tabloids.**

**Miller's exploration of the human psyche and behavior makes the play an enduring masterpiece, even though McCarthyism has faded into history. On one hand Miller addresses a particularly dark period in American history — a time in which society believed the Devil walked the streets of Salem and could become manifest in anyone, even a close neighbor or, worse yet, a family member. On the other hand, Miller moves beyond a discussion of witchcraft and what really happened in Salem to explore human motivation and subsequent behavior. The**

**play continues to affect audiences by allowing them to see how dark desires and hidden agendas can be played out.**

**Abigail is a young woman who seizes an opportunity to reverse fate. She has had an affair with Proctor, who now refuses to continue the affair out of a mixture of guilt and loyalty to his wife. Abigail takes advantage of the chance to eliminate Proctor's wife by accusing her of witchcraft, giving Abigail the opportunity to marry Proctor, while elevating herself within the Salem community. Although Abigail enjoys being the chief witness of the court, her chief desire is to obtain Proctor, and she will do anything to bring this about, including self-mutilation and murder.**

**The Putnams also seize opportunity. The Royal Charter was revoked in 1692 and original land titles became invalid, creating a crisis of property rights. Individuals no longer felt secure with their landholdings because they could be reassigned at any time. As a result, neighbors distrusted one another and feuds broke out regarding property rights and clear deeds of ownership. Miller incorporates this aspect of the period into the play through the character of Mr. Putnam. Like Abigail, a hidden agenda guides Putnam, namely his greed for land. He too, will stop at nothing to satisfy his desire, even if attaining his goal means murdering his neighbors by falsely accusing them of witchcraft so he can purchase their lands after their executions.**

**Miller's title, *The Crucible,* is appropriate for the play. A crucible is a container made of a substance that can resist great heat ; a crucible is also defined as a severe test. Within the context of the play the term takes on a new meaning: not only is the crucible a test, but a test designed to bring about change or reveal an individual's true character. The witch trials serve as a metaphorical crucible, which burns away the characters' outer shells to reveal their true intentions and character beneath. Throughout the play, Miller carefully peels away the layers of each character so that the audience not only can identify the character's motivation, but also can reevaluate the character through his or her actions. In other words, the audience observes the character as he or she is tested, and the audience ultimately determines if he or she passes the test.**

**Proctor provides an excellent example. His affair with Abigail results in a fall from grace, not only with his wife Elizabeth, but also within himself. Proctor**

**believes he is damned and cannot possibly regain Elizabeth's love and respect, not to mention his own self-respect and moral uprightness. Proctor is tested severely when he goes to the court to defend Elizabeth. In order to save his wife, he must publicly announce his sin and, therefore, lose his good name. Although he gives up his good name in court, he regains it at the end of the play by destroying his signed confession. The audience watches Proctor as the play progresses and judges his actions according to his motivations and reactions to the various "tests" through which he passes. As the audience observes the characters, the audience itself is tested and forced to acknowledge that desire — whether positive, such as the desire for pleasure, or negative, such as lust, greed, or envy — is a realistic part of life. The realization that desire affects individuals and their behavior keeps the audience engrossed in the play. *The Crucible* is divided into four acts; however, Miller does not include scene breaks within the play. It is possible to break each act into several scenes based upon shifts in location, and the entry and/or exit of characters.**

**The original version of the play included an encounter between John Proctor and Abigail in the woods; however, Miller chose to remove Act II, Scene 2, as it changed the dynamics of the play. This scene is generally included in the appendix of publications, but is rarely included in production of the play.**

## Character List

**Reverend Parris Minister in Salem. He believes a faction plans to force him to leave Salem, so he attempts to strengthen his authority through the witch trial proceedings.**

**Betty Parris Parris' daughter. Her father discovers her dancing in the woods, and she later accuses individuals of practicing witchcraft.**

**Abigail Williams Parris' niece. She instigates the witch trials by falsely accusing others of witchcraft. She pretends to see spirits and instructs the other girls to pretend as well.**

**Tituba Parris' black slave. Parris discovers her casting spells and making potions with the girls in the woods.**

**Mrs. Ann Putnam Wife of Thomas Putnam. She believes that a witch is responsible for the deaths of her seven infant children. Her jealousy of Rebecca Nurse leads her to accuse Goody Nurse of being a witch.**

**Thomas Putnam A greedy landowner in Salem. He systematically accuses his neighbors of witchcraft so that he might purchase their lands after they hang.**

**Ruth Putnam The Putnams' daughter. She accuses individuals of practicing witchcraft. A witness claims to have heard Putnam say Ruth's accusations helped him obtain land.**

**Mary Warren Servant to the Proctors. She goes along with Abigail and the girls by falsely accusing others of witchcraft; however, she later admits that she was lying.**

**Mercy Lewis Servant to the Putnams and friend to Abigail. She participates in the witch trials by pretending to see spirits and falsely accusing individuals of witchcraft.**

**John Proctor Salem farmer and former lover of Abigail's. He openly denounces Parris and does not attend church.**

**Elizabeth Proctor Wife of John Proctor. She is a decent and honest woman, who dismissed Abigail because of her affair with John Proctor.**

**Reverend Hale Minister in Beverly. The people of Salem summon him to investigate Betty's condition and determine if witchcraft is responsible. He supports the witch trials, but later denounces them when he learns that Abigail is lying.**

**Rebecca Nurse Wife of Francis Nurse. She is one of the most respected individuals in Salem because of her kindness and charity. She argues against the witch trial investigations. Mrs. Putnam accuses her of witchcraft.**

**Francis Nurse Farmer and landowner in Salem. He is a respected member of the community often called upon to settle disagreements between individuals.**

**Susanna Walcott Friend to Abigail. She also takes part in the trials by falsely accusing others of witchcraft.**

**Giles Corey Elderly inhabitant of Salem. He challenges the court in an attempt to defend his wife who has been convicted of witchcraft. He is pressed to death as a result.**

**Sarah Good Beggar in Salem. She is the first individual accused of witchcraft.**

**Judge Hathorne A judge in the Salem court.**

**Deputy Governor Danforth A special judge serving in the Salem court during the witch trials. He signs the death sentences for those individuals who refuse to confess their crimes. He refuses to delay any execution for fear that he will appear weak and irresolute.**

**Ezekial Cheever Appointed by the court to assist in arresting accused individuals.**

**Marshal Herrick Appointed by the court to arrest the accused individuals.**

**Hopkins Jailer.**

## Act I: Scene 1

## Analysis

**The inhabitants of Salem live in an extremely restrictive society. Although the Puritans left England to avoid religious persecution, they established a society in America founded upon religious intolerance. Government and religious authority are virtually inseparable, and individuals who question local authority are accused of questioning divine authority. The Puritan community considered physical labor and strict adherence to religious doctrine the best indicators of faithfulness, honesty, and integrity. The Puritans considered material and sexual desires unnatural and evil, and a threat to society. Salem was a rigid society that emphasized work and the suppression of individual desires.**

**In Act I, Scene 1, Miller sets the stage for *The Crucible* by introducing the four most important themes: deception, possession, greed, and the quest for power.**

**The "unseen" scene in the woods, which takes place before the action of the play, figuratively sets the stage. This scene serves as a catalyst for the remaining action of the play. Parris informs Abigail that he saw girls dancing, Tituba conjuring spells over the fire, and a naked girl running through the woods. This "unseen" scene symbolizes the suppression of desire, which is paramount in**

**Salem. Desire, of course, has many different interpretations for both the characters within the play, and for the audience. For Abigail, desire refers to her sexual longing for Proctor. According to the other characters, and the audience, desire may mean many other things besides sexual longing. For example, Putnam desires land and Parris desires control and authority. The audience, inevitably, will have other interpretations of this concept.**

**Because the girls cannot dance within Salem, they must retreat into the woods outside of Salem in order to indulge in physical pleasure. In addition, the naked girl running through the woods symbolizes the sexual desire present in all of the inhabitants of Salem, a desire that society forces them to suppress and negate. In order to express their innate desires (whether innocent or not), the girls must go outside of the community into the wilderness. Religion has not tamed the forests or the heathen Indians that inhabit them, so the Puritans view the woods as the Devil's stronghold. The wilderness outside of Salem is comparable to the wilderness in which Satan tempted Jesus. Although Jesus did not succumb to temptation, Satan led him into the wilderness to entice him to sin. The girls actively seek the wilderness because it provides them with a place where they can exercise desires that society considers unacceptable.**

## Glossary

**crucible a container made of a substance that can resist great heat, for melting, fusing, or calcining ores, metals, and the like; a severe test or trial; here, meaning a test designed to bring about change or reveal an individual's true character.**

**parochial of or in a parish or parishes; restricted to a small area or scope; narrow; limited; provincial; here, referring to the narrow-mindedness of the inhabitants of Salem.**

**autocracy a government in which one person has absolute power; dictatorship; despotism.**

**theocracy a government by a person or persons claiming to rule with divine authority.**

**paradox a statement that seems contradictory, unbelievable, or absurd but that may be true in fact. For example, the Puritans created a theocracy in order to**

**provide a unified and stable community in Salem. Instead, the witch trials severed social relations, separated families, and turned the people of Salem against one another.**

**dissemble to conceal under a false appearance; disguise.**

**Goody [Archaic] a woman, esp. an old woman or housewife, of lowly social status: used as a title with the surname.**

**providence the care or benevolent guidance of God or nature; here, the meaning is more closely aligned with "godsend," an unexpected but fortunate event. For example, Putnam believes God has revealed the presence of witchcraft in Salem. Although the idea of witchcraft frightens Putnam, he is grateful that the witchcraft has been revealed while it is still possible to control it.**

**conjure up to raise spirits from the dead.**

## Act I: Scene 2

## Analysis

**As the action of the play begins, the girls' behavior in the woods introduces deception as a major theme. Abigail is the instigator. Whereas the other girls may have participated in the rituals out of curiosity, Abigail has a definite agenda. She has experienced sexual pleasure with John Proctor and now wants to kill Proctor's wife, Elizabeth. Abigail realizes that the Puritanical society will never permit Proctor to leave his wife for her, and that he does not want to leave his wife anyway. The only way that Abigail can legitimately obtain Proctor within the bounds of society is for Elizabeth to die, giving Proctor the opportunity to marry again. Thus, from the very beginning, Abigail's desire to possess Proctor motivates her, driving her to drink blood and cast a spell on Elizabeth. Once Parris discovers her in the woods, Abigail resorts to deception in order to prevent others from discovering that she practiced witchcraft and to hide her affair with Proctor. Either one of these offenses would result in severe punishment at the hands of society.**

**Abigail uses intimidation to create an atmosphere of fear that pervades the entire play. Abigail first demonstrates her penchant for terrorizing others in her threat to the girls: "Let either of you breathe a word, or the edge of a word,**

**about the other things, and I will come to you in the black of some terrible night and I will bring a pointy reckoning that will shudder you . . . I can make you wish you had never seen the sun go down!" This threat foreshadows Abigail's accusations of witchcraft against others. Just as she threatens to harm the other girls through conjurings and witchcraft if they do not do as she says, so Abigail later carefully eliminates her enemies by accusing them of witchcraft. What begins as a simple act of self-preservation quickly turns into an opportunity to achieve power — and, ultimately, John Proctor.**

## Glossary

**grand peeping courage behavior or attribute of someone who is too frightened to participate in a ritual, but will watch others participate..**

**pointy reckoning the act or process of getting even or getting revenge.**

## Act I: Scene 3

## Analysis

**Abigail is the exact opposite of Proctor's morally upright wife, Elizabeth. Abigail represents the repressed desires — sexual, material, or other — possessed by all of the Puritans. The difference between Abigail and the other residents of Salem is that she does not suppress her desires. Abigail goes after what she wants and uses any means to achieve her goal, even manipulation, deception, and seduction.**

**While Abigail lived with the Proctors, Elizabeth was very ill. Abigail's responsibilities expanded and she began to see herself taking Elizabeth's place as Mrs. John Proctor. Not surprisingly, Proctor, lonely and vulnerable, noticed Abigail and became attracted to her. She was more visible in the house and interacted with him more than Elizabeth. However, the key to Proctor's desire for Abigail is her willingness to discard Puritan social restrictions. Whereas another Puritan woman would have concealed her desire for a married man, Abigail instead tempted Proctor and eventually enticed him to sin.**

**Scene 3 performs a pivotal role in the play because it reveals Abigail's only vulnerability: her feelings for John Proctor. Because Betty lies unconscious, Abigail seizes the opportunity to speak with Proctor alone and reaffirm their**

**relationship. Although Proctor remains resolute in his decision not to become involved with Abigail again, she and her blatant impropriety still captivate him. The thought of Abigail and the others dancing in the woods amuses and excites Proctor because society forbids the acts. Abigail interprets Proctor's reaction to her "wicked" behavior as a sign that he still cares for her. When Proctor refuses to admit any feelings for Abigail or to even speak of their affair, Abigail grows angry and blames Elizabeth for his indifference.**

**Proctor's determination to remain faithful to Elizabeth establishes his character's morals, and provides Abigail with her sole motivation throughout the remainder of the play. Prior to Scene 3, Abigail views Elizabeth as an inconvenience because she is preventing Abigail from being with Proctor. Now, however, Abigail sees Elizabeth as a threat because Proctor no longer acknowledges his feelings for Abigail. Up until this point in the play, Abigail's only concern has been concealing her behavior in the woods and her affair with Proctor. Now Abigail knows that she must deal with Elizabeth or lose Proctor completely. This realization foreshadows Abigail's actions in Scene 5.**

## Glossary

**partisan a person who takes the part of or strongly supports one side, party, or person; often, specifically, an unreasoning, emotional adherent.**

**faction a group of people inside a political party, club, government, and so on, working in a common cause against other such groups or against the main body; here, it refers to those resisting Reverend Parris.**

**calumny a false and malicious statement meant to hurt someone's reputation.**

**soft gentle; low; not loud or harsh: said of sound.**

**sportin' jesting; joking.**

**wintry of or like winter; cold, bleak; Here, it means without feeling.**

**covenant a binding and solemn agreement to do or keep from doing a specified thing; compact; the promise made by God to humanity, as describedin the Bible. Here, "covenanted" specifically refers to a person bound by God's law and scriptures. For example, John Proctor is a married man and is bound to Elizabeth through their marriage promise or contract. According to God's law,**

**Proctor and Elizabeth must remain faithful to one another. Of course, the entire premise of *The Crucible* is the result of Proctor's and Abigail's infidelity.**

## Act I: Scene 4

## Analysis

**Scene 4 reveals old animosities that later drive the action of the play. In this time period, it was not uncommon for children to die at birth or early in childhood for a number of reasons, including poor medical treatment, improper nutrition, and harsh living conditions. Even so, seven is an unusually high number of children's deaths within one family, and losing seven children, coupled with the threat to her surviving child, has left Mrs. Putnam a bitter woman. Inherently self-righteous, she believes she has been victimized and devotes all of her energy to discovering the cause of her children's deaths. Mrs. Putnam's obsession not only leads her to solicit Tituba's services in conjuring her children's spirits, but also results in jealousy toward other mothers who have not lost children. In this case, Mrs. Putnam focuses her jealousy and animosity upon Rebecca Nurse because Rebecca never lost one of her eleven children. Mrs. Putnam's anger toward Rebecca foreshadows Rebecca's arrest just before Act II, Scene 3. Mrs. Putnam may not have learned from Tituba why her children were born dead, but through the witch trials Mrs. Putnam manages to carry out her vengeance and anger by accusing Rebecca, an individual who has what she has always wanted.**

**Scene 4 also introduces greed and the quest for power or authority as the two other major themes of the play. Parris' argument with Proctor and Corey reveals that money causes many disputes within Salem. Tension arises when Proctor accuses Parris of concerning himself more with material gain than ministering to the inhabitants of Salem.**

**Proctor's anger is consistent with his character because he lives according to the morals and work ethic described in the Bible. This does not mean Proctor is perfect. His adulterous affair with Abigail presents a major flaw, but Proctor recognizes his sin and suffers greatly under the weight of his guilt. Parris' haggling over his contract, salary, and provisions disgusts Proctor. Proctor believes a minister obsessed with obtaining material goods — such as golden**

**candlesticks, rather than pewter ones — cannot truly serve God or minister to others.**

**On the other hand, one can understand Parris' concern over job security. Proctor criticizes Parris' request for the deed to his home, but Parris is acting reasonably because he knows Salem's history of getting rid of ministers. Once a very successful businessman in Barbados, lifestyle and economic expectations changed dramatically when he became a minister; however, Parris continues to think like a secular individual. He is used to material goods, such as the gold candlesticks mentioned in Act II, Scene 3, and he is accustomed to examining all of his options. Just as a resourceful businessman investigates all possible outcomes of a business deal, so Parris attempts to cover himself just in case things do not work out in Salem. Asking for the deed to his home not only decreases the possibility of a faction removing him from the pulpit, but it provides a place for him and his family if such an event actually occurs.**

**Parris' argument with Proctor also symbolizes Parris' continual battle to obtain authority within Salem. Parris views Proctor as his primary opponent, demonstrated when he accuses Proctor of leading a faction against him. Parris' anger stems from the fact that he feels that the inhabitants of Salem fail to recognize his authority when they refuse to acknowledge their "obligations toward the ministry." Just as Mrs. Putnam targets Rebecca because she is in the room and she is one of the mothers who has not lost a child, so Parris targets Proctor because he is there in front of him and, therefore, representative of the other undutiful inhabitants of Salem.**

**The end of Scene 4 reveals other animosities when Proctor and Putnam begin arguing over land rights. Proctor goes to leave and states that he must haul lumber back to his home. Putnam accuses Proctor of stealing wood from his land, even though Proctor states that he had purchased the land from Francis Nurse five months prior. Just as Scene 3 results in a new reason for Abigail to accuse others of witchcraft, so Scene 4 provides the Putnams with a lucrative motivation to accuse their neighbors of witchcraft. After Scene 3, Abigail's purpose is to accuse Elizabeth and obtain Proctor for herself. After Scene 4, the Putnams' purpose is to accuse anyone who "took" land that they believe should be theirs. Again, this shift foreshadows the arrest of Rebecca, as well as Martha Corey and numerous others in Act II.**

## Glossary

**prodigious notable; here, meaning ominous.**

**arbitrate to act as an impartial judge in order to settle disputes.**

**silly season phrase used to describe unexplainable, but natural behavior for a child.**

**bewildered confused or disoriented; here, meaning bewitched or acting unnaturally.**

**wheels within wheels . . . fires within fires phrase used to imply conspiracies.**

**defamation damaging another individual's character or reputation, generally through false accusations.**

## Act I: Scene 5

## Analysis

**Scene 5 is pivotal in the play for two reasons. First, this scene establishes the expectation of witchcraft in Salem. Hale warns everyone in the room that he will not examine Betty unless they acknowledge the fact that witchcraft may *not* be involved. Although everyone agrees, they overwhelmingly expect and hope that he will discover witchcraft. The idea of discovering witchcraft in one's own backyard is not only exciting, but it allows individuals to find an explanation for things that they otherwise cannot explain. For example, Mrs. Putnam's blaming her children's deaths upon witchcraft is easier than admitting that she did not give birth to healthy children, or that she cannot carry children successfully. Explaining that Betty and Ruth's ailments result from witchcraft is also much easier than admitting that good Puritan girls were out dancing in the woods and attempting to cast spells and are now feigning illness to avoid punishment.**

**Even though Hale states a disclaimer at the beginning of Scene 5, nearly everyone expects him to find evidence of witchcraft; they will not be satisfied unless he does. As a result, Hale is overcome by the many descriptions of all of the unnatural events occurring in Salem: Betty's illness, Ruth's condition, Tituba's ability to conjure spirits, dancing in the woods, the death of the seven Putnam children, Martha Corey's strange books, and so forth. He might explain**

**any one of these events in isolation, but together, they serve as overwhelming evidence of witchcraft in Salem.**

**Mrs. Putnam's anger toward Rebecca only intensifies when Rebecca criticizes her for sending Ruth to conjure up the dead with Tituba. Under normal circumstances, the Puritans would severely punish Mrs. Putnam for her actions, because they considered attempting to contact the dead and endangering the life of a child the Devil's work. However, Mrs. Putnam not only avoids punishment, but she manipulates Rebecca's reaction and her refusal to stay during Hale's examination of Betty as proof of Rebecca's involvement in the witchcraft.**

**The second reason that Scene 5 is pivotal is because Abigail exerts her power and begins her quest to obtain Proctor. Unsurprisingly, Tituba confesses to witchcraft when the townspeople threaten her with physical violence. She is a black female slave, an individual without any power. She cannot hope to defend herself against Abigail's accusations, even though she and Abigail both know that Abigail is lying. The fact that Tituba confesses to witchcraft and then implicates Sarah Good and Goody Osburn reveals that Tituba listens very well and values her life. In order to preserve her own life, Tituba takes cues from her interrogators and tells them what they want to hear. Hale's response to Tituba's confession prompts Abigail's own sudden admission of guilt.**

**Declaring witchcraft becomes the popular thing to do. It grants an individual instant status and recognition within Salem, which translates into power. Abigail realizes that she can achieve immediate respect and authority by declaring that she has consorted with the Devil but now seeks redemption. Abigail's manipulation of the circumstances demonstrates her keen sense of self-preservation, as well as a unique understanding of the blind ignorance of others. Abigail knows that the townspeople will view her as an expert witness. The fact that Hale believes her sets her far apart from the other people in Salem. The people forget Abigail's questionable reputation and now consider her an instrument of God. This calculated move finally puts her in a position to get rid of Elizabeth Proctor. The fact that Betty suddenly awakens after Abigail renounces the Devil only underscores Abigail's authority and further establishes her credibility.**

## Glossary

**diabolism dealings with the Devil or devils, as by sorcery or witchcraft.**

**inculcate to impress upon the mind by frequent repetition or persistent urging.**

**licentious morally unrestrained, esp. in sexual activity; lascivious.**

**truck the practice of bartering; [Informal] dealings (have no further *truck* with them). Here, also a verb, meaning to be in league with someone. For example Tituba denies trucking, or being in league with, the Devil.**

## Act II: Scene 1

## Analysis

**Act II, Scene 1 provides the audience with the first glimpse of Elizabeth and John Proctor together. Up until this point, the audience has only heard about Elizabeth through Abigail and Proctor. Abigail has described Elizabeth as a cold "sniveling" woman who cannot possibly satisfy Proctor or make him happy. Proctor has vehemently defended Elizabeth.**

**From outward appearances, the Proctor household seems to be the typical Puritan home. As Proctor and Elizabeth eat dinner they discuss the farm, crops, and domestic issues; however, tension exists in the house. Elizabeth knows about Proctor's affair. She tells Proctor that she forgives him, but a lingering distrust plagues her. Even though Proctor has remained faithful for the past seven months and is truly sorry for his affair, Elizabeth faces difficulty moving beyond the past. As a result, Proctor feels that Elizabeth continually scrutinizes his actions, which frustrates and angers him.**

**Tension and mutual frustration define their relationship. Elizabeth is frustrated with Proctor because of his initial infidelity and because she believes he still has feelings for Abigail. She is also frustrated with herself. She wants to forgive Proctor and begin reestablishing their relationship, but she cannot forget what he has done. Elizabeth tries to demonstrate her faith in Proctor when she asks him to go to Salem even though she does not want him anywhere near Abigail. However, the fact that he spent time alone with Abigail shatters Elizabeth's confidence in him. Elizabeth automatically suspects Proctor of wrongdoing.**

**Proctor, however, regrets his affair with Abigail. His own guilt, coupled with Elizabeth's subtle recrimination, wearies him. He too would like to move beyond the past and strengthen their marriage, but he does not know how to deal with Elizabeth's feelings or the distance between them. During the past seven months, Proctor has tried to please Elizabeth to gain her forgiveness and affection, but nothing seems to work. The current argument over Abigail is yet another example of their strained relationship. He is irritated with himself because he did not tell Elizabeth he was alone with Abigail in the first place. Now, Elizabeth is angry, not just because he was alone with Abigail, but because he did not tell her from the beginning.**

## Glossary

**clapped put, moved, set swiftly ( *clapped* into jail).**

**your justice would freeze beer said here to a person who forgives another for an injustice, but still harbors resentment for the deed and makes the other person feel guilty.**

## Act II: Scene 2

## Analysis

**Scene 2 reveals the impact of the witch trials and the frenzy they have created in Salem, reinforcing the theme of how easily a mob can be influenced. Suddenly the townspeople revere the youth of the town, namely Abigail and the other girls, as instruments of God. Anyone who has crossed the girls lives in fear of being accused of witchcraft.**

**As the leader of the group, Abigail has finally achieved the power she desires, and now she can use it to obtain Proctor. The other girls have achieved new status as well. Prior to the witch trials, Mary Warren lived as a servant in the Proctor home. She was paid for her services, but she was also under the authority of Proctor and was required to follow the rules of the house. If Mary Warren did not fulfill her work obligations, Proctor could discipline her just like one of the Proctor children. This type of arrangement was acceptable and normal within Puritan society.**

**After the witch trials begin, the social hierarchy of Salem becomes unstable. Individuals who previously did not have power obtain it and refuse to submit to others who traditionally have authority over them. Mary Warren provides a clear demonstration of this when she refuses to take orders from Elizabeth and stands up to Proctor when he threatens to whip her for insubordination.**

**In Scene 2 Mary Warren begins to cry. Serving on the court all day has exhausted and upset her. At this point, Mary Warren attempts to convince herself and the Proctors that solid evidence exists against all of the accused. She secretly questions this, but feels she can only go along with Abigail and the others. She now belongs to a group, and does not want to be an outcast.**

**Abigail's scheme becomes apparent to Elizabeth and Proctor within Scene 2. This is central to the play because, up until this point, only the audience knows what is really happening. Now two of the characters accurately interpret Abigail's actions and her overall objective. Before Scene 2, Proctor and Elizabeth knew that Abigail had lied about the witchcraft incident, and both suspected that Abigail wanted to get rid of Elizabeth. Scene 2 confirms their fears. The poppet that Mary Warren innocently gives to Elizabeth foreshadows Elizabeth's arrest in Scene 4.**

**When Mary Warren tells them the court accused Elizabeth, Abigail's plan becomes clear. Time is now the most important element in the play. With each arrest for witchcraft, Abigail gains credibility. In addition, the courtroom fits, trances, fainting spells, and other demonstrations of "hard evidence" increase Abigail's authority. She is quickly becoming irrefutable in the eyes of the court.**

**Proctor only has two chances to save Elizabeth. Either he must speak to Abigail and convince her that her plan will not work, or he must speak to Hale before Abigail accuses Elizabeth. If Proctor calls Abigail a fraud after Elizabeth's arrest, he will appear to be lashing out. Proctor must act as quickly as possible because both Proctor and Elizabeth know that Abigail will continue to accuse Elizabeth until the court arrests her.**

## Glossary

**poppet [Obsolete] a doll.**

**hard proof undeniable, reliable, or actual proof; here, the phrase refers to solid evidence.**

**base having or showing little or no honor, courage, or decency; mean; ignoble; contemptible.**

## Act II: Scene 3

## Analysis

**Hale is a fair individual who honestly attempts to administer justice. He remains uninvolved in the petty rivalries and power plays of the inhabitants of Salem. Several issues disturb Hale and make him suspicious of the Proctors. These include Proctor's poor church attendance, the fact that one of the Proctor children remains unbaptized, and Proctor's inability to recite all of the Ten Commandments. He comes to the Proctor home on his own in order to test the Proctors and give them fair warning of Elizabeth's possible arrest.**

**The fact that Hale gives Proctor the opportunity to explain each of the incriminating items is an important testament to Hale's fairness and directly contrasts with what happened in Act I, Scene 5. In Act I, Scene 5, the inhabitants of Salem provide a list of evidence that Hale takes at face value and fails to analyze individually. As a result, Hale declares witchcraft without attempting to examine any of the evidence. Here, however, Hale allows Proctor to explain his actions. Although Hale disapproves of Proctor's actions — particularly his refusal to baptize his son because of feelings toward Parris — Hale realizes that Proctor is not an evil man.**

**Tension also arises in Scene 3 between the Proctors and Hale over issues of faith. Both Elizabeth and Proctor refuse to believe that Rebecca could be involved with witchcraft, and the accusation horrifies them both. Although Hale is hesitant to believe that Rebecca could be guilty, he will not dismiss the possibility.**

**At this point the play introduces the issue of an individual's works. The Puritans looked to the Scriptures as a guide for daily life. They did not believe that faith was a sufficient indication of religious dedication, unless a person demonstrated that faith through good deeds. Not surprisingly, the Proctors argue with Hale over Rebecca, considering her history of good works. Hale seems willing to**

**discount Rebecca's past works, even though Puritan ministers preach that God judges people according to their works.**

**Hale extends this argument when he questions Elizabeth regarding whether or not she believes in witches. Elizabeth denies the fact that witches exist because of Hale's attitude toward Rebecca. Elizabeth does not believe that Rebecca can possibly be a witch because the idea contradicts the morality of the Scriptures. Elizabeth knows that suspicion hangs over her also. Elizabeth has devoted her life to moral goodness and charity; therefore, she refuses to acknowledge the existence of witches when the court could label her as one.**

**Proctor's statement that Abigail admitted she was faking the entire witchcraft incident forces Hale to reexamine his own faith and actions in the preceding events. Hale realizes that good intentions and a firm commitment to God governed his own actions. However, he also realizes that he may have imprisoned innocent people and condemned to death those individuals who refused to confess to something they did not do.**

## Glossary

**trafficked had traffic, trade, or dealings with.**

**softness the quality of being easily impressed, influenced, or imposed upon; here, lax or negligent.**

**bound under compulsion; obliged; here it means in service to.**

**tainted morally corrupt.**

## Act II: Scene 4

## Analysis

**Abigail begins to execute her plan against Elizabeth in Scene 4. At this point Abigail exercises all of the power she has gained from the beginning of the play. Abigail realizes that in order to have Elizabeth arrested, she will have to create tangible evidence for the court, because it dismissed her verbal accusation. She is prepared to do anything to charge Elizabeth with witchcraft.**

**Abigail realizes that she can use Mary Warren as a tool to incriminate Elizabeth, and so she constructs a plot based upon deception and manipulation of Mary Warren. Abigail has seen Mary Warren sewing the poppet in court and**

**she knows that Mary Warren will give the doll to Elizabeth later. The fact that Abigail willingly inflicts a stabbing wound upon herself demonstrates how far she will go to destroy Elizabeth and possess Proctor.**

**Scene 4 also provides Proctor with an opportunity to discredit Abigail and prove the falsity of her accusation against Elizabeth. The problem is whether or not Mary Warren will testify against Abigail in open court. She admits that the poppet is her own and that Abigail saw her sewing it, and had even seen her store the needle inside. However, Mary Warren would not reveal this if Hale questioned her in order to disprove Abigail's claim. To save Elizabeth, Mary Warren must give up her sense of belonging, and face Abigail's initial threat of violence from Act I, Scene 2.**

**Mary Warren's fear of reprisal foreshadows Abigail's behavior toward Mary Warren in Act III. In addition, Mary Warren warns Proctor that Abigail will accuse him of adultery. This foreshadows the end of the play when Proctor reveals the affair in court.**

## Glossary

**tonnage weight in tons.**

**calamity deep trouble or misery; any extreme misfortune bringing great loss and sorrow; disaster.**

**broken sick, weakened, or beaten; here, meaning weak and imperfect.**

**as clean as God's fingers pure or perfect, in the way that all parts of God are flawless.**

**lechery unrestrained, excessive indulgence of sexual desires; gross sensuality; lewdness; here, lechery refers to Proctor's affair with Abigail.**

# Act III: Scene 1

## Analysis

**Time plays a critical role in Act III. The fascination with witchcraft that appeared in Act I, Scene 5 has quickly changed to mass paranoia. The townspeople now regard anyone who does not conform exactly to the laws of Salem society as a potential witch. Fear and automatic suspicion replace reason.**

**As the power of the court grows, the people of Salem live in fear. Old grudges, dislikes, and minor misdeeds can result in arrest and death — especially if the person offended is one of the children in the town, or someone who seeks more land. As the number of arrests increases, the court shows no mercy and refuses to acknowledge the idea that the accusers may have hidden agendas.**

**Not surprisingly, Proctor, Giles Corey, and Francis Nurse are anxious to present their evidence against Abigail and the girls. The court has just condemned Martha Corey and Rebecca Nurse, and, now that Elizabeth is in jail, Abigail has only to wait until Elizabeth's execution for her plan to be complete. Proctor will finally be free to remarry, and Abigail can possess him. Proctor senses this and is desperate to prove that Abigail is a fraud.**

**Danforth and Hathorne's participation in the court empowers them. The workings of the court concern them more than the actual individuals participating in the proceedings — whether voluntarily or against their will. As a result, when Nurse tells them that the girls have faked the entire witchcraft incident, the judges regard him as a dangerous individual. He casts doubt on the court, its proceedings, and, by extension, Danforth and Hathorne.**

## Glossary

**daft insane; crazy is closer to mad or crazy.**

**contentious always ready to argue; quarrelsome.**

**contemptuous full of contempt; scornful; disdainful. Here, the word describes Giles Corey's attempt to disrupt the court.**

**break charity to treat wrongfully or betray.**

## Act III: Scene 2

## Analysis

**Tension arises when Danforth questions Mary Warren and she admits that she and the others have been lying. Danforth believes that he is a fair judge, open to the truth. However, Mary Warren's recant forces him to doubt his own actions. He agrees to listen to Proctor because his claim affects the entire court and its proceedings. His willingness to hear Proctor and render judgment after Proctor has provided his evidence demonstrates that Danforth strives for some amount**

**of fairness. However, the situation troubles Danforth because, if Proctor proves that the accusations have been false, then Danforth must admit that the girls have deceived him. Such an admission would prove him to be a poor judge of character, if children can fool him. Also, the fact that he sent innocent people to the gallows would certainly demonstrate his failure as a judge.**

**A sharp contrast exists between Parris and Hale. Although not perfect, Hale centers his actions on others. Parris, on the other hand, is self-centered and narrow-minded. He is unbalanced during this scene, and, as the play progresses, he becomes fanatical as he attempts to preserve his position and authority within Salem. During this scene, Parris demonstrates that he still holds a grudge against Proctor. Rather than considering the implications of Proctor's claim that the girls are lying, Parris tries to discredit Proctor. Parris perceives Proctor as the chief member of the faction that opposes him within Salem. Parris will do anything to protect himself and his position as minister.**

**Greed and the quest for power also appear again with the exchange between Corey, Putnam, and Danforth. Danforth faces a difficult situation because yet another accuser has been claimed to be acting upon a hidden agenda. Corey has a witness who overheard Putnam talking about obtaining land as a result of his daughter Ruth accusing George Jacobs of witchcraft. This vital information reveals that Ruth is pretending that spirits attack her, and also casts doubt upon the Putnams' claim against Rebecca Nurse. Not only does this suggest that the Putnams fabricated their charge against Rebecca, but it supports the idea that they did it to obtain land. Putnam is opportunistic and willing to profit from the misfortune of others.**

**Irony emerges when Corey refuses to name his source. Corey's charge against Putnam provides enough information to end the witch trials, if Danforth would analyze the evidence. However, Danforth dismisses the charge against Putnam because of a lack of proof. Ironically, up until this point the court has been condemning people without proof, relying solely on the testimony of children.**

## Glossary

**deposition the testimony of a witness.**

**discontent dissatisfaction or restlessness. Here, the verb form is used, meaning to fail to satisfy.**

**sharp clearly defined; distinct; clear. Here, the word means decisive.**

**probity uprightness in one's dealings; integrity.**

**perjury the willful telling of a lie while under lawful oath or affirmation to tell the truth in a matter material to the point of inquiry.**

## Act III: Scene 3

## Analysis

**Scene 3 is the most intense scene in the play because everything is revealed, and timing proves to be one of the most important factors. Proctor realizes that it is critical for Mary Warren to testify against Abigail before she loses her courage to do so. In addition, time is critical at this point in the play because individuals are being convicted continuously. Every conviction increases Abigail's authority and decreases the likelihood that the Court will acquit someone accused. Proctor knows that Mary Warren is unsure about testifying directly against Abigail. Just as Danforth appears to favor Abigail's claim that Mary Warren is lying, Proctor informs him that Parris caught Abigail and the others dancing in the woods. This information, coupled with the fact that Parris discovered them, profoundly affects Danforth. Now Danforth views Abigail differently, and is more inclined to believe Proctor.**

**Danforth's sympathy shifts again to Abigail during Hathorne's cross-examination of Mary Warren. Hathorne makes a legitimate request when he asks Mary Warren to repeat her fainting performance. If she pretended to faint the first time, then she should be able to do it again. She is not able to do it.**

**Mary Warren's inability to faint or stage a fit serves as a cue to Abigail. In the court's eyes, Mary's failure to feign an attack proves that the girls cannot fake such behavior, which lends merit to Abigail's subsequent claim that Mary Warren's spirit is attacking her. At this point, the court is likely to discard Mary Warren's testimony in view of the evidence Abigail provides.**

**Only when Proctor accuses Abigail of being a whore does she end her fit and lose credibility with Danforth. When Proctor tells the court of his affair and**

**Abigail's plot to kill Elizabeth, he gives the court another opportunity to end the trials. However, just as Danforth willingly dismissed Corey's claim against Putnam because Corey would not reveal his witness, so Danforth dismisses Proctor's claim that Abigail is a harlot, simply because Elizabeth lies to conceal the affair.**

**Irony is evident in this scene because Danforth is committed to preserving truth, yet he will not acknowledge truth when he hears it. Proctor, who has spent seven months concealing his affair with Abigail, now tells the truth but is disbelieved. And Elizabeth, who has lived by the truth, lies to keep her husband's secret and condemns them both by doing so. And Mary Warren, who had lied and now is finally telling the truth, lies again to save her life. The only winner here is the chief liar, Abigail Williams, who continues to lie. And the court, which should be an instrument of truth, is in the position of condemning those who tell the truth and believing liars.**

**Truth does triumph in the end, through the individuals who refuse to compromise their beliefs in order to preserve their lives. However, the advocates of truth often pay with their lives — a heavy price.**

**Proctor's admission of adultery and Elizabeth's lie to hide the affair from the court mark a turning point in their marriage. Shame overwhelms Proctor, but he demonstrates his loyalty and love for Elizabeth by revealing the affair in order to save her life. The situation also changes Elizabeth. She knows that Proctor's name is important to him, and that he would not ruin his reputation by admitting an affair unless he truly loved her. She can finally trust him again.**

## Glossary

**guile slyness and cunning in dealing with others; craftiness; here, deception.**

**cool emotionally uninvolved; uncommitted; dispassionate. Here, meaning calculated.**

**harlot a woman who engages in promiscuous sexual activity for pay; here, meaning a sexually immoral woman.**

**slovenly careless in appearance, habits, work, and so on; untidy; slipshod.**

**gull to cheat or trick; dupe.**

# Act IV: Scene 1

## Analysis

**Several months have passed since the action in the play began. Act I opened in the spring of 1692, and the season is now fall. The court has already executed twelve people from Salem, and has scheduled seven more to die today.**

**Although Tituba was told in Act I that she would be spared if she revealed her alliance with the Devil, along with her knowledge of other individuals "in truck" with the Devil, she has in fact been imprisoned. Sarah and Tituba have been in prison so long that they have come to believe that they are in league with the Devil. Cold weather, deplorable living conditions, and the lack of food have made them delusional. They tell Herrick that the Devil will transform them into birds so that they can fly to Barbados. Having internalized the accusations of witchcraft, they now use them to create an escape from their situation.**

**Herrick's willingness to join Sarah and Tituba is noteworthy because he is no longer afraid of the idea of the Devil, nor is he afraid of Sarah or Tituba. At this point in the play the paranoia only remains within the court. The people of Salem have grown weary of the witch trials and the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty they have created.**

## Glossary

**rile to anger; irritate.**

# Act IV: Scene 2

## Analysis

**Some individuals, such as Putnam, profited from the witch trials, but overall the proceedings have devastated Salem. The court has torn apart families, leaving children as orphans. Fields now stand empty, and cattle roam the streets unclaimed. These consequences are noteworthy because originally the people believed that the trials would only affect the accused; however, one cannot ignore the relationship between the trials and the community. Instead of eliminating evil within the Salem community and uniting the people, the trials created an atmosphere of terror and destroyed the bond between neighbors.**

**Although no one has attempted to oust the court, as in Andover, grumblings of dissatisfaction echo throughout Salem, and apprehension looms over the court. The people of Salem are tired of living in fear. The court has accused many people, and executed twelve. Proctor has been in jail for three months, giving the people in the town time to think about his charge against Abigail and what happened in Act III, Scene 3. The townspeople no longer believe that Abigail serves as a mouthpiece for God, but instead acts upon her own vengeance; the people have had enough. The dagger that Parris finds represents the potential for violence that is just below the surface in Salem.**

**Danforth and Parris realize that public sentiment for the court is shifting. Their actions at this point are notable. Danforth displays a rigid determination to continue with the court proceedings. Act III, Scene 1, established the fact that Danforth's own role in the court concerns him more than the implications of the court's actions. Act IV, Scene 2 underscores his earlier behavior. He believes a delay in the executions will suggest he is weak and that he doubts his own judgments. This point should be irrelevant when contrasted with the possibility of executing an innocent person, but public perception of himself concerns Danforth more than justice.**

**Scene 2 continues to contrast Parris and Hale. Self-preservation motivates Parris, while a desire to make things right drives Hale. Parris prevails upon Danforth for a delay, not because he worries about condemning innocent people to die, but because Parris fears for his life. At the beginning of the play Parris worries about a faction trying to force him out of Salem. Now he fears that a mob will attack and kill him. The size of his congregation has diminished. This decrease is due in part to a dissatisfaction with Parris as minister; however, it also underscores the people's dissatisfaction with the court because the people perceive Parris as a proponent of the court.**

**Abigail's disappearance further testifies to the unrest in Salem. After Proctor revealed their affair, Abigail lost credibility in the eyes of the people, if not the eyes of the court. Abigail now realizes that Proctor thwarted her plan. Not only has she lost all of the power she gained through the witch trials, but she has also lost the prize she sought in the first place, Proctor. Rather than eliminate Elizabeth, her actions have condemned Proctor to hang. The deception that she created to possess Proctor and gain power in Salem has backfired. No reason**

**exists for Abigail to remain in Salem any longer. Hints of violence toward Parris also alert Abigail that the people of Salem may turn against her, because they see her as the one who started the calamity.**

**Parris does not tell Danforth of Abigail's disappearance immediately because he knows Danforth could interpret it as proof that the girls are a fraud. Once again Parris protects his own interests. He withholds the truth in order to prevent upheaval in Salem — an upheaval he fears would result in violence toward himself. Nevertheless, he has gone from a man who asked for more pay at the start of the play to a man who has lost everything. He is paying for his lack of integrity.**

**Danforth's reaction to Abigail's disappearance recalls his actions in Act III, Scenes 2 and 3. He does not consider the implications of Abigail leaving Salem because such consideration would force him to review the court and its actions. Carrying on as if he knew nothing of Abigail's disappearance is easier because it allows him to feel secure in his own actions. He will not delay the executions for fear that the people may regard the previous twelve executions as wrong. If this happened, Danforth would loose credibility. He is willing to execute seven more people, even though he doubts their guilt since the flight of their chief accuser.**

## Glossary

**strongbox a heavily made box or safe for storing valuables.**

**gibbet a gallows; a structure like a gallows, from which bodies of criminals already executed were hung and exposed to public scorn.**

# Act IV: Scene 3

## Analysis

**Scene 3 reveals a dramatic change in the relationship between Proctor and Elizabeth. They have learned to forgive one another and to communicate their feelings. Elizabeth realizes that she cannot blame Proctor entirely for the affair. Her insecurity prevented her from trusting Proctor and her lack of emotion created distance between them. When Elizabeth tells Proctor of her feelings, he sees that Elizabeth no longer condemns him. He can believe her when she tells**

**him she has forgiven him; as a result, they manage to put the affair in the past and move on to consider the future.**

**Proctor's decision to confess seems surprising at first. Considering his options, however, the choice seems less surprising. The Salem court states that it will find an individual innocent, provided that he or she is of "good conscience," but this is not the case. Danforth tells Hale in Act III, Scene 2 that witchcraft is "an invisible crime," one without witnesses. As a result, once an individual stands accused of witchcraft, he or she is guilty. The Salem court does not operate on the modern idea that an individual is innocent until proven guilty, but that an individual is guilty once accused. As a result, confession is the only way to plea-bargain for one's life.**

**Proctor is guilty of witchcraft because of his charge against Abigail and Mary Warren's accusation. He can refuse to plead guilty and be hung for witchcraft, or he can confess the crime and live. Either way the court declares him guilty, but the confession shows repentance for the crime and saves him from execution. Both Proctor and Elizabeth realize that lying about the confession is a small price to pay for his life. They have finally reached a point where they can begin to rebuild their marriage, and they do not want to lose that opportunity now.**

## Glossary

**floundering speaking or acting in an awkward, confused manner, with hesitation and frequent mistakes; here, meaning wavering, especially from indecision or doubt.**

**quail to draw back in fear; lose heart or courage; cower.**

**disputation a discussion marked by formal debate, often as an exercise; here, meaning an argument.**

# Act IV: Scene 4

## Analysis

**When Proctor tells Elizabeth that he will confess, she understands that he is doing so because he wants them to go home and reestablish their family. Note that neither Proctor nor Elizabeth considers Elizabeth's situation. The court has**

**delayed her execution until she gives birth to the child, but she is still scheduled to hang. If Proctor confesses and gains release, Elizabeth will still remain in jail. Proctor realizes that Elizabeth will not confess, but agrees to confess anyway. The play suggests, but does not confirm, two possible solutions for Elizabeth. First, she may decide that, although lying is a sin, lying to save her life and protect her family justifies the sin — especially since she already lied in the courtroom. On the other hand, perhaps the witch trials will end (as they have in Andover) and the courts will release her. Unfortunately neither one of these happens.**

**Scene 4 exemplifies a struggle. Proctor knows that signing the confession is lying, and this sacrifice of honor is the hardest for him to bear. His desire to remain honest and his desire to preserve his family tear him in two. Proctor believes that God will forgive him if he confesses, because, as Hale states, "life is God's most precious gift; no principle, however glorious, may justify the taking of it."**

**Proctor does not consider himself righteous, in fact he recoils from the idea that he is compared to individuals like Rebecca Nurse who are innocent of any wrongdoing. Of course Proctor has not practiced witchcraft; however, according to himself he is a fallen man, one who has sinned against his wife and himself.**

**He is willing to sacrifice his honor — which he has already done by admitting to adultery — and he can live with the knowledge that others will view him differently if he confesses. However, Proctor cannot bear the shame of having his confession nailed to the church door. Because confessing will save his life, he can live with that idea, but he believes nailing his confession to the church door constitutes a betrayal of everyone who refuses to confess. A public display of his false confession — especially at a church that is supposed to uphold truth — would insult those who choose to die to preserve their honor. A public display of his signature will strip him of his pride and identity. He will lose his good name and be nothing but a broken man. Proctor's decision to destroy the confession demonstrates his commitment to truth and his inability to tolerate falsehood, especially in himself.**

## Glossary

**scaffold a raised platform on which criminals are executed, as by hanging.**

**damn to cause the ruin of; make fail.**

**purge to cleanse or rid of impurities, foreign matter, or undesireable elements.**

**weighty of great significance or moment; serious.**

**beguile to mislead by cheating or tricking; deceive.**

## Character Analysis

## Abigail Williams

**Abigail Williams is the vehicle that drives the play. She bears most of the responsibility for the girls meeting with Tituba in the woods, and once Parris discovers them, she attempts to conceal her behavior because it will reveal her affair with Proctor if she confesses to casting a spell on Elizabeth Proctor. Abigail lies to conceal her affair, and to prevent charges of witchcraft. In order to avoid severe punishment for casting spells and adultery — not to mention attempted murder when she plots Elizabeth's death — Abigail shifts the focus away from herself by accusing others of witchcraft. This desperate act of self-preservation soon becomes Abigail's avenue of power.**

**Abigail is the exact opposite of Elizabeth. Abigail represents the repressed desires — sexual and material — that all of the Puritans possess. The difference is that Abigail does not suppress her desires. She finds herself attracted to Proctor while working in the Proctor home. According to the Puritanical mindset, Abigail's attraction to Proctor constitutes a sin, but one that she could repent of and refuse to acknowledge. Abigail does the opposite. She pursues Proctor and eventually seduces him.**

**Abigail's willingness to discard Puritan social restrictions sets her apart from the other characters, and also leads to her downfall. Abigail is independent, believing that nothing is impossible or beyond her grasp. These admirable qualities often lead to creativity and a thirst for life; however, Abigail lacks a conscience to keep herself in check. As a result, she sees no folly in her affair with Proctor. In fact, Abigail resents Elizabeth because she prevents Abigail from being with Proctor.**

**Abigail gives new meaning to the phrase "all is fair in love and war." She has brooded over her sexual encounter with Proctor for seven months. The more she thinks about the affair, the more Abigail convinces herself that Proctor loves her but cannot express his love because of Elizabeth. Abigail continues to review and edit her memories until they accurately portray her as the center of Proctor's existence. Rather than seeing herself as an awkward seventeen year-old who took advantage of a man's loneliness and insecurity during his wife's illness, Abigail sees herself as Proctor's true love and his ideal choice for a wife. She believes she has only to eliminate Elizabeth so that she and Proctor can marry and fulfill her fantasy.**

**Abigail's fantasy reflects her age. She is a young girl daydreaming about the ideal male. However, she possesses shrewd insight and a capacity for strategy that reveal maturity beyond that of most other characters. Declaring witchcraft provides her with instant status and recognition within Salem, which translates into power. Abigail uses her authority to create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. She threatens the other girls with violence if they refuse to go along with her plans, and she does not hesitate to accuse them of witchcraft if their loyalty proves untrue. Such is the case with Mary Warren.**

**Abigail develops a detailed plan to acquire Proctor and will stop at nothing to see her plan succeed. Her strategy includes establishing her credibility with the court and then eliminating Elizabeth. The achievement of her plot requires cold calculation, and so Abigail carefully selects the individuals that she accuses in order to increase her credibility. Thus, she first accuses the town drunk and vagrant, knowing that society is already predisposed to convict them. Each arrest strengthens her position, and demonstrating fits and trances increases her authority even more. Her decision to wait until the court sees her as irrefutable before she accuses Elizabeth reveals her determination and obsession with Proctor. Abigail thinks nothing of the fact that she condemns innocent people to die; those people merely serve as necessary instruments for her use in the fulfillment of her plan. At the end of the play, when Abigail realizes that her plan has failed and that she has condemned Proctor to hang, she displays the same cold indifference that governs her actions throughout the play. She flees Salem, leaving Proctor without so much as a second glance.**

## John Proctor

**John Proctor is a tormented individual. He believes his affair with Abigail irreparably damaged him in the eyes of God, his wife Elizabeth, and himself. True, Proctor did succumb to sin and commit adultery; however, he lacks the capacity to forgive himself. Unsurprisingly, his relationship with Elizabeth remains strained throughout the majority of the play. He resents Elizabeth because she cannot forgive him and trust him again, but he is guilty of the same thing. In fact, his own inability to forgive himself merely intensifies his reaction to Elizabeth's lack of forgiveness.**

**In addition to struggling with the weight of his sin, the fact that he must reveal his transgression torments Proctor. His best possession is his good name and the respect and integrity associated with it. Once he acknowledges his affair with Abigail, Proctor effectively brands himself an adulterer and loses his good name. He dreads revealing his sin because guilt and regret already overwhelm him. Proctor believes a public display of his wrongdoing only intensifies the extent of his sin, thereby multiplying his guilt.**

**Proctor's decision to tell the court about his affair ironically demonstrates his goodness. He willingly sacrifices his good name in order to protect his wife. Only through his public acknowledgment of the affair does Proctor regain his wife's trust. At the end of the play, Proctor refuses to slander himself by allowing the court to nail his false confession to the church door. This action further exemplifies Proctor's integrity. Proctor knows that he will damn himself, yet again, if he agrees to confess. Although he wants to live, escaping death is not worth basing the remainder of his life on a lie. This realization, along with Elizabeth's forgiveness, enables Proctor to forgive himself and finally regain his good name and self-respect. As the court officials lead him to the gallows, he finds peace for the first time in the play.**

## Reverend Hale

**Reverend Hale's faith and his belief in the individual divide him. Hales comes to Salem in response to a need. He is the "spiritual doctor" summoned to evaluate Salem. His job is to diagnose witchcraft if it is present, and then provide a necessary cure through conversion or by removing the "infected" inhabitants**

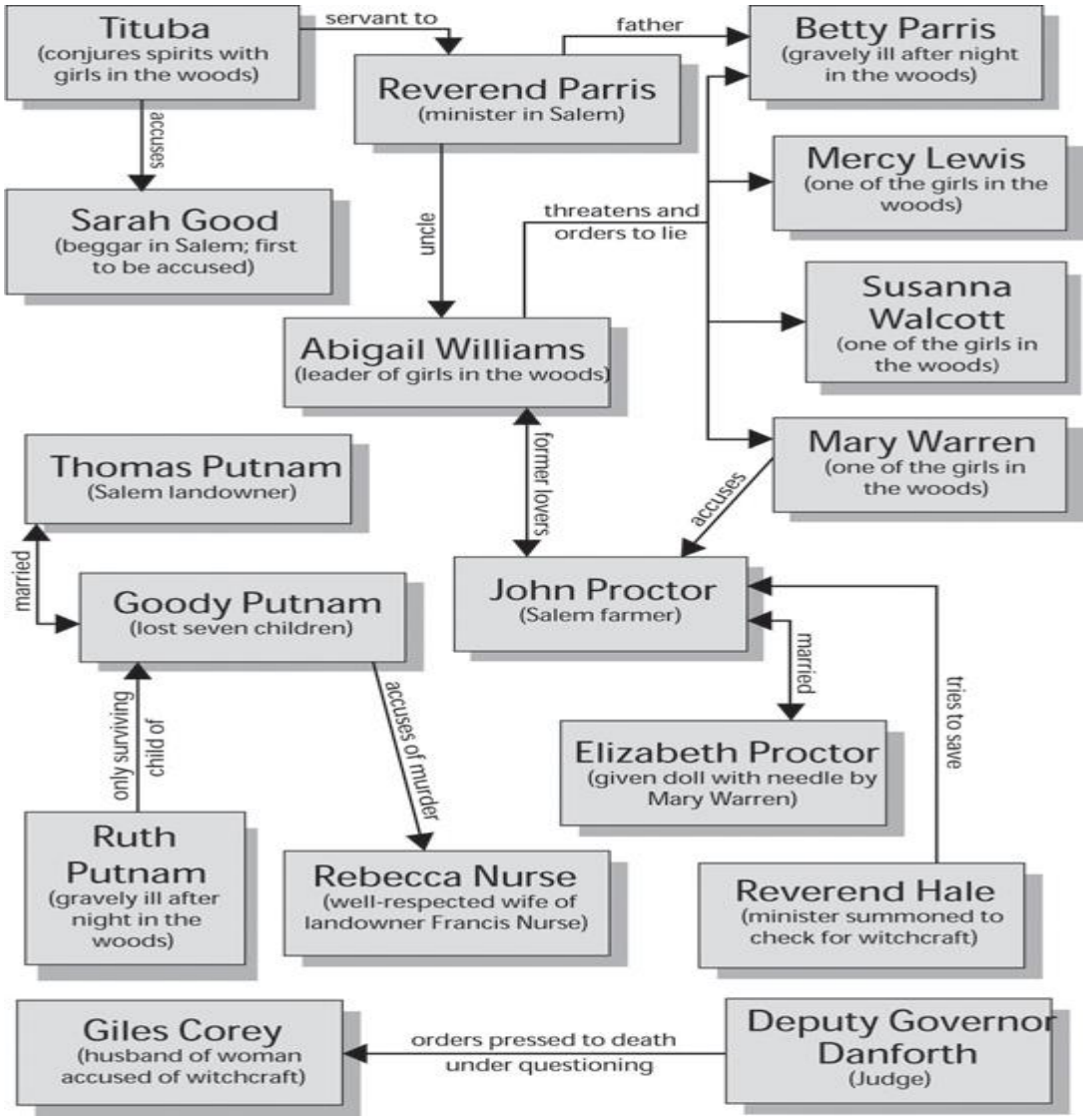
**from Salem. Hale devotes himself to his faith and his work. His good intentions and sincere desire to help the afflicted motivate him.**

**Unfortunately, Hale is also vulnerable. His zeal for discovering witchcraft allows others, particularly Abigail, to manipulate him. The amount of evidence for witchcraft when he arrives in Salem overwhelms him. Although Hale remains determined not to declare witchcraft unless he can prove it, the expectations of the people of Salem sweep him up, and, as a result, he takes their evidence at face value, rather than investigating it himself.**

**The audience should not condemn Hale. Like Proctor, he falls — through his inaccurate judgments and convictions — but later attempts to correct his shortcomings. Hale is the only member of the court who questions the court's decisions. He is not a rebel, nor does he want to overthrow the court's authority, but he is striving for justice. Once he realizes that Abigail is a fraud, Hale devotes himself to attempting to persuade the other prisoners to confess so that they may avoid execution — using lies to foil lies. What he does not realize is that the lies he is urging would only reinforce the slanders the court has already committed. There would be no truth left.**

**The action of the play severely tests Hale's faith and understanding. He must acknowledge that children have manipulated his own irrefutable beliefs, while also realizing that he has sent innocent people to their death. This knowledge is a heavy burden, but it changes Hale for the better. Although he questions his own faith and doctrine, he does not abandon religion altogether. He catches a glimpse of true faith through those he has condemned, particularly Rebecca Nurse and Elizabeth Proctor.**

## Character Map


Tituba
(conjures spirits with girls in the woods)
servant to
Reverend Parris
(minister in Salem)
father
Betty Parris
(gravely ill after night in the woods)
accuses
Sarah Good
(beggar in Salem; first to be accused)
uncle
threatens and orders to lie
Mercy Lewis
(one of the girls in the woods)
Susanna Walcott
(one of the girls in the woods)
Abigail Williams
(leader of girls in the woods)
Thomas Putnam
(Salem landowner)
former lovers
Mary Warren
(one of the girls in the woods)
accuses
married
Goody Putnam
(lost seven children)
John Proctor
(Salem farmer)
married
tries to save
only surviving child of
accuses of murder
Elizabeth Proctor
(given doll with needle by Mary Warren)
Ruth Putnam
(gravely ill after night in the woods)
Rebecca Nurse
(well-respected wife of landowner Francis Nurse)
Reverend Hale
(minister summoned to check for witchcraft)
Giles Corey
(husband of woman accused of witchcraft)
orders pressed to death under questioning
Deputy Governor Danforth
(Judge)

# Arthur Miller Biography

## Personal Background

**Arthur Miller was born in Harlem on October 17, 1915, the son of Polish immigrants, Isidore and Augusta Miller. Miller's father had established a successful clothing store upon coming to America, so the family enjoyed wealth; however, this prosperity ended with the Wall Street Crash of 1929. Financial hardship compelled the Miller family to move to Brooklyn in 1929.**

**Miller graduated from high school in New York in 1933. He applied to Cornell University and the University of Michigan, but both schools refused him admission. Miller worked a variety of odd jobs — including hosting a radio program — before the University of Michigan accepted him. At school, he studied journalism, became the night editor of the *Michigan Daily*, and began experimenting with theater.**

**In addition to hosting a radio program, Miller held a variety of jobs during his early career. After he left the University of Michigan, Miller wrote plays for the Federal Theatre in 1939. The Federal Theatre provided work for unemployed writers, actors, directors, and designers. Congress closed the Federal Theatre late in 1939.**

**Miller died on February 10, 2005, of heart failure. He was 89 years old.**

## Career Highlights

**Miller's prolific writing career spans a period of over sixty years. During this time, Miller has written twenty-six plays, a novel entitled *Focus* (1945), several travel journals, a collection of short stories entitled *I Don't Need You Anymore* (1967), and an autobiography entitled *Timebends: A Life* (1987). Miller's plays generally address social issues and center around an individual in a social dilemma, or an individual at the mercy of society.**

**Miller's first play, *No Villain*, produced in 1936, explores Marxist theory and inner conflict through an individual facing ruin as a result of a strike. *Honors at Dawn*, 1937, also centers around a strike and contrasting views of the economy, but focuses on an individual's inability to express himself. *The Great Disobedience*, 1938, makes a connection between the prison system and**

**capitalism. *The Golden Years,* 1940, tells the story of Cortes despoiling Mexico, as well as the effects of capitalism and fate on the individual.**

**Miller produced two radio plays in 1941: *The Pussycat and the Expert Plumber Who Was a Man,* and *William Ireland's Confession.* Miller's third radio play, *The Four Freedoms,* was produced in 1942.**

***The Man Who Had All the Luck,* 1944, revolves around a person who believes he has no control over his life, but is instead the victim of chance. *All My Sons,* 1947, explores the effect of past decisions on the present and future of the individual. *Death of a Salesman,* 1949, addresses the loss of identity, as well as a man's inability to accept change within himself and society. *The Crucible,* 1953, recreates the Salem witch trials, focusing on paranoid hysteria as well as the individual's struggle to remain true to ideals and convictions.**

***A View from the Bridge,* 1955, details three people and their experiences in crime. *After the Fall,* 1964, focuses on betrayal as a trait of humanity. *Incident at Vichy,* 1964, confronts a person's struggle with guilt and responsibility. *The Price,* 1968, tells the story of an individual confronted with free will and the burden of responsibility.**

***Fame,* 1970, tells the story of a famous playwright who is confronted but not recognized. *The American Clock,* 1980, focuses on the Depression and its effects on the individual, while, *Elegy for a Lady,* 1982, addresses death and its effects on relationships. *Some Kind of Love Story,* 1982, centers on society and the corruption of justice.**

***The Ride Down Mountain Morgan,* 1991, centers around a man who believes he can obtain everything he wants. *The Last Yankee,* 1993, explores the changing needs of individuals and the resulting tension that arises within a marriage. *Broken Glass,* 1994, tells the story of individuals using denial as a tool to escape pain.**

**Miller wrote the screenplay for the movie version of *The Crucible,* which was produced in 1996.**

**Miller has received numerous honors and awards throughout his career. Miller's accolades include: the Michigan's Avery Hopwood Award, 1936 and 1937; the Theatre Guild's Bureau of New Plays Award, 1937; the New York**

**Drama Critic's Circle Award, 1947; the Pulitzer Prize, 1949; the New York Drama Critic's Circle Award, 1949; the Antoinette Perry and Donaldson Awards, 1953; and the Gold Medal for Drama by the National Institutes of Arts and Letters, 1959. Miller was also elected President of PEN (Poets, Essayists, and Novelists) in 1965.**

## Critical Essays Arthur Miller's Narrative Technique in *The Crucible*

**Each stage production of *The Crucible* differs from every other in two areas. First, directors stage the play according to their own styles, using various props and costumes while suggesting numerous interpretations of characters. Secondly, individual actors read the lines differently, using diverse voice inflections, gestures, and body language to give each interpretation its own style.**

**Miller also provides yet another opportunity for variety, not just for the director and actors, but also for the audience and reader. Lengthy exposition pieces that are not glossed as stage directions periodically appear in the written play. For example, at the beginning of Act I, Miller provides stage directions for the set, props, and position of Parris and Betty on stage. However, Miller also includes an extensive psychological profile of Parris prior to beginning the action of the play. Before Parris speaks, a narrator says that "in history he cut a villainous path, and there is very little good to be said for him." Later, the narrator interrupts the action in Scene 1 to include background information on Putnam, and the narrator does the same for Proctor in Scene 3, Rebecca in Scene 4, and Hale and Giles in Scene 5. In addition to historical background on significant characters, the interruptions also include social commentary within the exposition.**

**The question arises whether or not a director should include these narrative sections, some of which are four pages long, within the play itself. At first glance, it appears that they are to be included within the actual production. If so, then a narrator character must read the narrative sections to the audience. If this is done, however, the continual interruptions in the play's action make engaging the audience in the play difficult. Therefore, the narrative sections should clearly serve only as a tool to provide directors and actors with background information.**

**The explicative passages allow directors and actors to focus on character motivation, providing them a better understanding of the characters and the historical period. Characters are more engaging because a genuine basis for tension between them exists. For example, obvious tension exists between Thomas Putnam and several other characters in the play, especially Francis Nurse. An actor playing Thomas Putnam must create a persona driven by greed. If the actor knows the passage that states that Putnam was "a deeply embittered man" who attempted to challenged his father's will because his father left the largest portion of money to his stepbrother, then the actor can internalize this quality of Putnam. These background passages result in a more effective portrayal of greed and a more believable character.**

**Individuals reading the play will have a different experience than the traditional audience because they will read the background information, which will inevitably affect their interpretation of the characters and the play's events. Within the exposition sections Miller addresses the reader directly, in the comfortable, reliable voice of a trusted narrator. As a result, the reader internalizes the information and responds to the characters and their actions based upon it. For example, a reader will discover the same information as a potential actor in regard to Putnam — that Putnam's father left the largest amount of money to Putnam's stepbrother. The reader will also benefit from the narrator's commentary. The narrator tells the reader that the real Putnam accused a large number of people during the trials, often as a method of retaliation or personal gain. After revealing Putnam's historical background, the narrator begins to suggest that Putnam's character will falsely accuse someone within the play. Although the narrator does not finish the suggestion — he only says, "especially when" — the reader automatically expects Putnam to falsely accuse someone in the play. As a result, the reader projects the narrator's commentary onto Putnam's character and anticipates Putnam's false accusations against rival landowners.**

## Historical Period: Puritans in Salem

**The action of the play takes place in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692. Salem is a Puritan community, and its inhabitants live in an extremely restrictive society. Although the Puritans left England to avoid religious persecution, they**

**established a society in America founded upon religious intolerance. Government and religious authority are virtually inseparable, and individuals who question local authority are accused of questioning divine authority. The Puritan community considers physical labor and strict adherence to religious doctrine the best indicators of faithfulness, honesty, and integrity.**

**Puritan society stresses the sense of community that results from shared experiences and beliefs. As an unsurprising result, the church dominates the Puritan culture. The church provides individuals with common shared experiences via the Scriptures, and a communal source of morality based on shared values. Thus, a sermon serves as a tool to teach a biblical lesson, and the theocratic government reinforces the precepts from the sermon.**

**For example, a sermon focusing on the fall of Adam and Eve might discuss the danger of physical gratification and the imminent disobedience resulting from desire. By extension, Puritan society discourages individuality, as well as individual desires. In fact, Puritans consider material and sexual desires unnatural and evil — the Devil's work — and a threat to society. Thus, the society punishes anyone who pursues material and/or sexual gratification. Of course, ways around these rules do exist. As demonstrated in *The Crucible*, people can pursue and obtain what they want without fear of reprisal, so long as they do it under the guise of the church or God's will. However, in general, one can describe Salem as a rigid society, emphasizing work and the suppression of individual desires.**

## Essay Questions

**1. A crucible is defined as a severe test. Write an essay discussing the significance of the title. What is "the crucible" within the play and how does it bring about change or reveal an individual's true character?**

**2. As a minister, Reverend Parris is supposed to devote himself to the spiritual welfare of the inhabitants of Salem. Write an essay discussing Parris' concerns and motivations. Is he an effective minister?**

**3. Write an essay discussing Proctor's relationship with Abigail. Why did Proctor have an affair, and what prompted him to end his affair with Abigail?**

**4. Compare and contrast Elizabeth Proctor and Abigail Williams. What are their individual positive character traits? Negative character traits? How do they feel about Proctor?**

**5. Elizabeth despises deception. She is a moral woman, devoted to upholding the truth. Discuss Elizabeth's behavior in the court. What prompts her to lie?**

**6. Write an essay discussing Abigail's plan to get rid of Elizabeth. Is the play a fulfillment of the spell she cast in the woods with Tituba?**

**7. Write an essay discussing the effects of the witch trials on Salem. How do the trials affect the community? Government and authority? The church? Individuals?**

**8. In Act IV, Scene 4, Proctor agrees to falsely confess in order to avoid death. He later changes his mind. Explain why he refuses to confess. What is the "shred of goodness" he discovers?**

# 3

## SETTING

***The Crucible*** **is set in the last decade of the 17th century in Salem, Massachusetts, which was then a modest village peopled by Puritan settlers. The Puritans were very religious but also highly superstitious, and events which could not be explained away by reason or by the will of God were often attributed to the work of Satan. This fear of the Devil, combined with a highly regulated and at times hypocritical social order, culminated in the infamous Salem witch trials of 1692, on which this play is based.**

## CONFLICT

### Protagonist

**The novel's protagonist is John Proctor, the young and energetic farmer who tries to enlighten the whole town on the ridiculousness of the trials. This upright man is one of the very few who, throughout the play, sticks to his beliefs convincingly and denies whatever charges have been leveled against him. He overcomes his guilt over his act of adultery and fears that it will be revealed to denounce Abigail Williams and the trials. When faced later with the opportunity to save himself by denouncing his friends, he chooses death, thus recovering his sense of goodness and denying his enemies of a victory over him. He represents, if not goodness, at least the perseverance which one requires to do good.**

### Antagonist

**The antagonist is a combination of superstition and human weakness in the face of evil, authority, and social pressure. Proctor faces his own weakness in delaying doing the right thing, and Proctor and all the good citizens of the town must contend with the forces of jealousy, fear, and pettiness that cause their neighbors to succumb to the witchcraft hysteria.**

### Climax

**Abigail Williams accuses Elizabeth, Proctor's wife, of being a witch. Proctor tears up the arrest warrant and orders the officers out of his house, but to no**

**avail. As Elizabeth is led away, he realizes that he is to blame by not having denounced Abigail earlier. The climax occurs when he testifies against Abigail, even though it means the loss of his reputation. His testimony proves that Proctor's conscience leads him to do what is right. This is reinforced at the end of the play when he tears up his confession, sacrificing his life for the good of the community and his own soul.**

## Outcome

**The play is a tragic comedy. John Proctor stands up for what is right, but is still executed. He and many other citizens of Salem, including Rebecca, are killed during the play. Rebecca, with her spirituality and immense faith in religion, never once succumbs to the pressures of her enemies to "confess." Proctor, on the other hand, faces one more moral crisis after bravely facing the court. At Hale's prompting, he signs a confession to save his life, but, when he discovers it will be used to denounce his friends, he tears it up. His final refusal to give in to evil solidifies his public reputation as a good man and allows him to die with a clean conscience, having done his duty.**

# THEMES

## Major Theme

**The major theme in the play is that of good versus evil. Based on the Salem witch trials of the late 17th century, *The Crucible* explores the fragility of a changing society and the difficulty of doing good in the face of evil and tremendous social pressures, both at the social and personal level. John Proctor, the protagonist of the play, is faced with the choice of accepting responsibility for his actions and doing the right thing. In a similar vein, society as a whole must deal with the challenge of doing good when threatened by evil, even when it comes with the stamp of law, authority, and social opinion.**

## Minor Theme

**A minor theme of the play is that the hysteria of the witch trials can be easily duplicated, as seen in the hysteria surrounding the "McCarthyism" of the early 1950s. This link should be understood as a background to the play, not as a simple interpretation of the play.**

# MOOD

**Throughout the play, the mood is one of impending doom in the face of rampant superstition and increasing hysteria in the Salem society. Almost every character in the play is looked upon with suspicion by his or her neighbor. The good people are punished while the evil triumph. The audience or reader presumably knows the outcome of the witch trials before they begin in the play and can only watch helplessly as events unfold. Even the final victory of good at the end involves the unnecessary sacrifice of a life. When Proctor tears up his confession and goes to his death, Hale realizes the evil he has done. Some balance is restored to Salem, but only after much needless suffering and destruction.**

# LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## The Puritans

**The first permanent settlement of the New England area by Europeans began with the famous landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth in 1620. Salem was founded in 1626 and was first settled by Puritans in 1628, under the leadership of John Winthrop and John Endecott. In 1629, the Massachusetts Bay Company was chartered, and Puritan settlers began arriving in the New World in large groups. Puritan society was theocratic, and government was subsumed under the authority of the church, which played a huge role in daily life.**

**The Puritans were Protestant dissenters of the state-run Church of England. They left the Old World to escape religious persecution. They saw themselves as God's people, chosen to establish a "New Jerusalem" in what they perceived as the wilds of America. The Puritans believed that God was the supreme authority and that humans were innately depraved because of the original sin of Adam and Even in Eden. In their view, most humans were predestined by God to be damned; only a chosen, elect few would go to heaven. No one could know whether he was chosen to be saved, however, and no amount of good works could save someone if he or she had been predestined for hell.**

**The Puritans brought with them from Europe a strong belief and fear of witchcraft and the power of the Devil. To them, America, with its large expanses of virgin land and unfamiliar and seemingly savage native peoples, was a**

**natural home for Satan. Indeed, in the early years of settlement, when the dangers of starvation, cold, and Indian attack were very real, the land seemed very dark and frightening. By the end of the century, however, the New England area had been heavily settled, but many old fears remained.**

**With their tight-knit society, strong work ethic, religious intolerance, and stern rule, the Puritans were for a while the dominant social and political group in colonial New England. Their inflexible theocracy, while suited to the era of settlement, made it difficult for them to deal with the pressures of a changing and growing society. In 1684, the Massachusetts Bay Colony's charter was revoked, and in 1689, the requirement that one be a member of the church in order to vote was removed. By 1692, the time of the events of *The Crucible*, the power of the Puritans had significantly weakened.**

**Miller saw the witch trials as a manifestation of a society making one last gasp at asserting the dominance of a crumbling order. In his view, this attempt was an ironic failure, for the trials horrified the people of Massachusetts and New England and eventually led to the final break-up of the "power of theocracy" there. Although Miller says in his note preceding the play that *The Crucible* is "not history," he has done a careful job of adhering to the historical record and has not misrepresented either major events or actions of the characters. Of course, all dialogue and interpretations of the characters' motives for their actions are Miller's alone. In this regard, the play can be understood as his attempt to understand what might have happened and why.**

**In writing *The Crucible*, Miller made use of Chadwick Hansen's book, *Witchcraft at Salem*, for his historical source material. According to Hansen, witchcraft was actually practiced in Massachusetts in three forms: using a charm or spell to bring good luck to oneself (white magic); using a charm or spell to harm to others (black magic); and entering into a pact with the Devil to gain services in exchange for certain favors. In comparison to the witchcraft that was originally practiced in several parts of the world, however, the seriousness of it in Massachusetts was not nearly as deep nor devilish as it was made out to be.**

**In all veracity, the Puritans do deserve accolades. This venerable group gave us The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut which was the first constitution ever**

**written in the U.S. This sublime document became the paradigm that was to influence our federal constitution. The infrastructure of The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut was taken from a poignant message preached by Thomas Hooker.**

**The Puritans also gave us the separation of powers: executive, legislative and judicial. Additionally, they gave us the 'due process of law' (found in the Bill of Rights) and also 'unalienable rights' (found in the Declaration of Independence).**

## McCarthyism

**While Miller wrote *The Crucible* to explore the motivations and circumstances behind the Salem witch trials, he also wanted to highlight the story of the "Red Scare" of the forties and fifties, which reached its peak under the frenzied leadership of Senator Joseph McCarthy. In 1950, McCarthy, then a relatively unknown Senator from Wisconsin, gained instant fame when he claimed that there were many avowed Communists in the American government. America at that time was in the midst of the "cold war" with Russia, and McCarthy's charges galvanized the nation and led to a climate of fear and hysteria. McCarthy offered no proof of his charges, and often accused his critics of being Communists themselves by the mere fact of their criticism.**

**McCarthy was eventually discredited by the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings, during which a national television audience saw his viciousness and heard his lies. During the hearings, he failed to prove his claims of Communist infiltration of the Army. As a result, he was condemned by the Senate that same year, but the damage had been done.**

**The atmosphere in America during McCarthy's peak of power was such that Miller could not write directly about McCarthyism. If he had blatantly criticized the McCarthy era or the Senator behind the hysteria, he would certainly have been charged as a Communist. Instead, he wrote about the 17 th century Salem witch trials and trusted that his audience would see the parallelism between the two similar periods of hysteria. The play's first production in 1953 was not well-received for most critics judged it only as a thinly disguised, politically motivated allegory of McCarthyism. A second, off-Broadway production a year later was a success, however, and from then on, the play has continued to gain fame and acclaim.**

# ACT I

## Notes

**The first act introduces all the major characters in the play except Elizabeth Proctor, Deputy Governor Danforth, and Judge Hathorne. It throws light on the nature of these main characters and provides a rationale, of sorts, to explain the seeds of the crisis that develops later.**

**Abigail seems to already suffer from a questionable reputation. Reverend Parris has heard rumors about her and even questions why she has been dismissed from employment at the Proctors. She, however, shows a quickness of mind in fabricating lies and extricating herself from difficult situations. It is obvious that she is vengeful, overbearing, and quite capable of mischief. She is also very emotional, as seen when she gets angry at Parris when he questions her about the events of the previous evening. It is apparent, however, that she is trying to hide something from her uncle. Parris is a hellfire and brimstone minister, who is quick to judge and easily influenced. When Goody Putnam tells him that it is rumored that his daughter Betty has been seen flying, he repeats it almost as fact to Reverend Hale. He is also somewhat self-important and is prejudiced against certain persons because of their independence of mind. In addition, he shows himself to be both willing and capable of acting against those he does not favor. Finally, he appears to lack a strong will. Instead of handling a minor incident of children playing in the forest on his own, he quickly and unwisely calls for outside help in the form of Reverend Hale, a supposed expert on matters of witchcraft. This action on Parris' part merely intensifies the tension in Salem.**

**Proctor emerges as independent, outspoken, and stubborn. Though he appears sensible in his rejection of witchcraft, he is also conflicted by his lust for Abigail. Putnam emerges as a quarrelsome man with enmity toward many of the villagers. His wife is a superstitious woman, who appears to be the town gossip. She admits that she has called upon Tituba to try and summon the spirits of her dead children. On the other hand, Rebecca Nurse appears as a sensible, rational, and helpful woman; the people of the neighboring town of Beverly all know of her good works, as reported by Reverend Hale. It is Rebecca who tries to calm everyone down; she tells the gathered crowd that unusual childhood sicknesses**

**are normal and should not be blamed on the Devil or witchcraft. She also tries to play the peacemaker amongst those gathered at Reverend Parris' home. Putnam, however, seems to hold a grudge against her and her husband in spite of her goodness.**

**This act also sets the themes of the play in motion. In its exploration of the struggle between good and evil, *The Crucible* depicts a society in which shifting power roles and an increasing lack of faith in the social order make the handling of inexplicable events impossible. To a society caught in the grips of an insanity dictated by the absence of knowledge and the pressure of power, practical and balanced advice will appear outdated and hopelessly naive, if not dangerous. *The Crucible*, therefore, suggests that progress can never be made without error.**

**In this act, the first accusations occur: Abigail calls Goody Proctor a "gossiping liar," Mrs. Putnam implies that Rebecca Nurse's good fortune is suspicious, and Tituba, under pressure by Reverend Hale, names as witches two women suggested by Mr. Putnam. Reverend Hale initially tries to remain intellectually and emotionally independent, but he also falls prey to the social climate. Reverend Parris, meanwhile, seizes the opportunity to consolidate his own political power. What initially begins as a means for several children to escape punishment for having been caught dancing in the woods turns into a free-for-all that will lead to the near-destruction of the society.**

**Proctor's helplessness here is especially significant. He speaks out more than once that society, through a town meeting, should have a say in what goes on in Salem; but he is unwilling to fight for his belief. He is absorbed in his own fate and afraid that his adultery with Abigail will become public knowledge; he wants to prevent disclosure of his sin at all costs. As a result, he temporarily washes his hands of the proceedings, excusing himself from the gathering to go and bring in lumber. It is obvious, however, that he is guilt-ridden over his liaison with Abigail; his guilt allows Abigail to control him and will later keep him silent when she begins her accusations. Therefore, the disturbances in the social order are not merely due to the work of the forces of evil, but also to the abandonment of power by good people, such as Proctor. By the end of the play, Miller will make it clear that an individual cannot live isolated in his own private world; instead, he has a responsibility to society to try and prevent a social crisis, such as the witch hunt in the play.**

**Issues of power and race also play a role in this chapter. It is Tituba, an Afro-Caribbean slave, who undergoes the first examination for witchcraft. Although she does have knowledge of spirits, the incident in the woods occurred at the behest of Mrs. Putnam, who, in the eyes of the Puritan theology, should be equally culpable for seeking to speak to her dead children's spirits. The first two white citizens that are accused are Sarah Good and Goody Osburn, women of little power and social standing. If the witch trials had remained confined to those traditionally accused of witchcraft, it is likely that they would have had little impact. It was when prominent citizens began to be accused of witchcraft that the social order was threatened and public outrage began to grow.**

# ACT II

## Notes

**The setting of the second act, a quiet domestic scene in the Proctor household, is a sharp contrast to the commotion at Reverend Parris' house in the first act. Physically, the Proctor house seems far removed from the hysteria that is transpiring in the town of Salem, but even this quiet, domestic haven is struck with accusations of witchcraft by the end of the act. Additionally, the second act further develops the motives and personalities of the main characters of the play. It establishes Proctor's love for his wife and his genuine remorse for having committed adultery. His sin of having slept with Abigail, the chief accuser of the witch hunt, will greatly influence the shape and outcome of the play. Proctor hesitates to testify against Abigail, for he fears that his past sins will become a focus in the courtroom and cause him to be outcast by this Puritan society. This act also shows the strength of Proctor's character. He stands up to Hale, calling him a "Pontius Pilate" and tries to prevent Elizabeth's arrest. His prevailing upon Mary Warren that she must go to the court and tell the truth indicate his basic commitment to the process of law and his faith in the uprightness of others.**

**Proctor's wife, Elizabeth, is developed for the first time in the play, and it is obvious that she is a good woman. She loves her family, both her husband and her children, and is comfortable in the peaceful environs of her home. She also believes in Christian virtues. Although distressed over her husband's adultery, she has forgiven him and still loves him. She also believes that a person must do**

**what is right, no matter the cost. As a result, she tells John that he must go to Salem and try to stop the witch hunt, revealing what he knows about Abigail. Her words, however, do not convince him. Elizabeth must be charged as a witch and arrested before he is challenged into action.**

**Hale is shown in a dual light, both prejudiced and fair. He visits the citizens of Salem so that he might know them better before judging them and volunteers to testify in the court about whatever good he knows of Elizabeth; he also assures Francis Nurse that justice will be done in respect to his wife, Rebecca. At the same time, he refuses to believe John's story about Abigail and questions why the Proctors do not attend church more regularly and why their youngest son is not baptized. It is obvious that he is convinced that witches are present in Salem, and he uses the argument that the Devil is a wily and unrecognizable character when he does his evil work. When Elizabeth says she does not believe in witches, Reverend Hale is genuinely shocked. It is sad that a minister is so easily swayed by the fantastic stories and accusations of a few young girls, who obviously are no longer rational under the influence of their power over others.**

**Abigail, the chief instigator and accuser of the witch hunts, is a powerful figure. The other girls are obviously under her spell and quite afraid of her. Mary does not want to go to court and tell what she knows, for she is afraid of Abigail' retaliation. In addition, it is obvious that Abigail is jealous of and out for revenge against Elizabeth Proctor. She is so determined to have Elizabeth accused as a witch that she is willing to drive a needle into her own abdomen as proof that Proctor's wife has cast a spell on her and wants her dead. It is upon Abigail's accusations that Elizabeth is arrested.**

**Mary serves to develop the plot of the play. When Proctor tells her she must go to Salem and tell the truth about what she knows, she openly refuses to follow his order. It is a small instance of the questioning of authority and the exercise of power, but it foreshadows the general attitudes of the guilty girls who refuse to do what is right. Mary is also involved in another tense moment when she is asked about the poppet; fortunately, she shows her essential goodness and innocence by admitting that that the poppet belongs to her, and not Elizabeth. Mary is weak, however, and fears Abigail, so she does not wish to testify in court. This weakness in her character will be responsible for the sudden about-**

**face she does in Act III, when she finds that her own life may be endangered if she stands by John Proctor.**

**Act II establishes the tentativeness of the accusations made in Act I, showing them to be an exercise mainly directed at saving the accusers' own skins. The Salem witch-hunting process, thus, shifts from looking for witches to making people into ones. Goody Osborn is convicted as a witch because when she came begging for food and was turned away by Mary, the young girl fell sick. Goody Osborn is accused of having cast a spell on Mary to gain revenge for being denied food; for this, she will be hung. Many of the people who are accused, such as Rebecca and Elizabeth, have always been respected as honest and good; now, because their names are uttered by one of the girls, they are arrested.**

**The rising action of the play now focuses on the fact that honesty is not trusted in the midst of a deliberatelyconstructed hysteria. In this chapter, Miller is clearly beginning to show how easy it is for justice to fail in the face social pressure. Although he is a minister, Hale is shown to be incompetent in judging goodness or evil in anyone. Proctor asks him why the accusers are "holy" while the accused are presumed guilty, and he has no answer. It is obvious that religion has been corrupted, for mere surface presentations and hysterical accusations take precedence over actual goodness. It is ironic that Proctor, who is unable to recite the tenth commandment and who attends church only sporadically, is seen as corrupt, though it is corruption in the church that keeps him away from it. In fact Proctor, openly criticizes the materialism of the church and Reverend Parris during the play.**

**Although it does not do so overtly, *The Crucible* deals with issues of gender. The accusers in the play are a group of young, hysterical females, and the majority of people that they accuse are women, such as Elizabeth and Rebecca. In spite of the false accusations against them, it is the female characters who act courageously and with faith. At the same time, most of the male characters are unable to defend the truth, due to their moral weakness and skepticism. Although there are both evil and self-interested male and female characters in the play, there are no main male characters who display the steadfastness and courage of Rebecca Nurse and Elizabeth Proctor.**

# ACT III

## Notes

**Act III further develops the profiles of the play's main characters. The manipulative skills of Abigail, the self-righteousness of Danforth and his eagerness to carry out his duties, the pettiness and prejudice of Hathorne and Parris, and the growing disillusionment of Hale contribute to the terrible tragedy of the drama.**

**In this act, Miller fully unfurls his theme of the dangers of combining temporal and religious powers in the hands of a few. In that sense, this act can be deemed to be the central one of the play. The church, as represented by Parris and Hale, and the law, as represented by Danforth and Hathorne, are shown to be hollow and false. Parris uses the trial as an opportunity to increase his power and punish his enemies. Danforth and Hathorne show their arrogance and rigidity and refuse to let anyone question the court's proceedings or its authority; "a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it." Even the one fairly good institutional representative, Hale, is shown to be lacking in moral strength, for though he questions the authority and logic of the court and eventually quits the proceedings, he does not do enough to stop the witch hunt or the hangings.**

**The legal system is made a total mockery by the complete acceptance of the false accusations of Abigail and the girls and the inability of Corey, Nurse, and Proctor to obtain justice. The court shows itself to be absolutely incapable of seeing truth when presented with it. Abigail scares Mary into disavowing her testimony and accusing Proctor, and Proctor's damning self-admission of adultery is not believed, especially when the good Elizabeth refuses to reveal her husband's sin. When she is asked if her husband "is" a lecher, she says that he is not; her answer is not truly a lie, for Proctor is no longer involved with Abigail and Elizabeth does not view him as a lecher. Furthermore, the court considers any appeal for fairness and justice as a suspicious attack upon it, deserving of punishment or condemnation as a witch; when Giles Corey tries to bring evidence against the court, he is accused of being a witch and arrested. Danforth's suggestion that the innocent have nothing to hide and that everyone should, therefore, be happy about the proceedings is especially chilling.**

**Proctor's response to the irony of the court proceedings is that "God is dead;" these words are damaging to his testimony in court and to the saving of his soul for eternity.**

**The two institutions on which the Puritan society rests are both shown to be corrupt and inadequate. *The Crucible* suggests that a society in which the very foundations are crumbling cannot survive for long and will, by necessity, stumble upon itself and its own contradictions. Although belief in witches was very real, the witch hunt in Salem is in part a facade that has at its real aim revenge, power, and economic gain. What started as a silly pretension ends in disaster.**

# ACT IV

## Notes

**This act takes place in the Salem jail where Elizabeth, Proctor, Tituba, and others accused of being witches are held. Several months have past, with spring (the season of rebirth) giving way to autumn (the season of decay). The act opens with a small scene of comic relief in which Tituba and Goody Good, both who believe they are witches, talk about the Devil.**

**This act shows how the essential strength or weakness of an individual is demonstrated during a grave crisis. In the face of death, Rebecca Nurse remains steadfast, refusing to tell a lie; she does not want to damn her soul in order to save her life. Under similar circumstances, Giles Corey rises to superhuman heights of bravery and determination, saying only "more weight" as heavy stones are laid upon his chest in an effort to make him confess.**

**In contrast, Proctor comes to the conclusion that his life is not worth sacrificing for the sake of a principle, especially when he is corrupt anyway. He listens to Hale's argument that "God damns a liar less than he that throws his life away for pride." In the end, Proctor decides that giving a false confession is not too high a price to pay for saving his own life. When he realizes, however, that it will negate the reputation he has built over a lifetime and cause him to betray his friends and community, he chooses death over dishonor and tears up his signed confession. By this act, Proctor recovers his identity as a man of goodness and character.**

**Elizabeth also shows her strength of character. Though she loves her husband and wants him to live, she realizes he can only do so if he compromises himself. She refuses to ask him to confess and, once he recants his confession, refuses to ask him to reconsider, saying that she would not deny him his sense of goodness even to save his life.**

**Parris, in this act, is completely broken. His desire for power has helped unleash chaos on the society he was supposed to lead. Now he has lost his authority and fears for his life. When Proctor recants his confession, Parris feels as if his own death sentence has been announced. Hale, though he has tried to be virtuous throughout, has come to realize his own inadequacies and his role in the madness that has struck Salem. He is aware of the terrible irony of doing the "Devil's work" by asking people to lie in order to save their lives, but feels that it is the only way to undo some of the evil he has done.**

**It is worth noting that two of the strongest characters in the play, Rebecca and Elizabeth, are women. Their continual strength and steadfastness present a great contrast to the moral weakness of Parris, the moral impotence of Hale, and the moral vacillation of Proctor.**

# OVERALL ANALYSES

# CHARACTERS ANALYSIS

## John Proctor

**John Proctor is the central character in the play. His tragedy is the most significant, for it emerges from a flaw deep within himself and is resolved by his own actions. Unlike Rebecca Nurse, who is almost a stereotype in her complete goodness, Proctor is morally compromised and must openly struggle to do good.**

**Although he is outspoken and blunt in his skepticism of witchcraft and his denunciation of Reverend Parris' greed and the corruption of the church, he initially chooses to downplay the significance of Abigail's accusations. This tendency to remain apart can also be seen in his decision not to attend church, rather than take a more active role in the congregation. This independence of character, while it allows him to retain a sane outlook, also keeps him from taking effective action.**

**Proctor has two great conflicts to overcome. He overcomes the first by his decision to testify against Abigail, despite his guilt. This act constitutes the climax of the play, for it is at this moment that he realizes that he must participate in the community and that his individual needs might have to be sacrificed for the good of all. His second conflict is whether to sign a false confession and save his life or allow himself to be executed. His conscious decision to choose self-sacrifice allows him to both recover the sense of goodness that he lost when he committed adultery with Abigail and also serve his community. By his decision to accept death rather than betray his friends and neighbors, he rises above the tragedy of politics in the play to become its hero.**

**John Proctor's greatest strength is his manliness. It is also his greatest weakness, for it leads him into his liaison with Abigail. The guilt he feels over this act of betrayal prevents him from speaking out soon enough and contributes to his eventual imprisonment and death. Thus, in tune with Aristotle's definition of a tragic hero, he dies a death engendered by his own strength, which gains in significance due to the weakness of others. In a play ruled by passions and characters which are larger than life, Proctor, by his very flaws, remains human and, therefore, a character of immense power.**

## Rebecca Nurse

**Rebecca Nurse, like John Proctor, has a love for truth and goodness, but they are not similar characters. While Proctor with his flaws is rendered very human, Rebecca, in her near-perfect steadfastness, appears larger than life, and therefore, slightly more a character type than a fully fleshed-out person.**

**Rebecca's calmness, love of truth, and strength of character distinguish her from all the other characters in the play. Despite being intimately involved in the other characters lives, she rises above them through her actions. Though she is put under tremendous pressures, she does not succumb to them. Rebecca's attitude and actions elevate her from being a simple character to become a symbol of society's true ideals. Though she is physically destroyed by the battle between good and evil, her symbolic power lives on in the actions of John Proctor at the end of the play; her total goodness has influenced him to tear up his confession and redeem his soul. In the end, Rebecca is a character who is greatly admired, but she is almost to perfect to seem human.**

## Reverend Parris, Judge Hathorne, Reverend Hale, and Deputy Danforth

**Although each of these characters plays an independent role, together they serve as the representative spectrum of the political and religious order in Salem. Parris and Hale are caretakers of the soul, while Hathorne and Danforth embody the law. Together, however, all four only serve to achieve destruction of that which they are supposed to uphold. With the exception of Hale, they are more character types than characters, serving as symbolic representatives of the corrupted social order.**

**Hathorne is the least fleshed out of the four. While he does not seem motivated by political gain, he is the picture of the stern, self-satisfied official for whom the truth is less important than the appearance of justice and the proper showing of respect. It is he who is most keenly insulted by any suggestion that the accused may be innocent and the accusers may be perjurers.**

**In contrast, Danforth is somewhat open-minded; but his belief in his own rightness and righteousness renders him incapable of seeing the truth. By the end of the play, he is just as willing to pervert justice as Parris, suggesting that it would be somehow unjust to those who were executed if others were allowed to go free, even if they might be innocent.**

**Parris is easily the most villainous, concerned more with temporal power than serving God. He is guilty of helping to create the appearance of witchcraft where little or none exists. Instead of leading his people toward goodness, he leads them toward destruction.**

**Reverend Hale is the most complex of the four characters. He is initially skeptical of the talk of witchcraft, but is soon caught up in the hysteria. At then end of the play, as a member of the court, he signs numerous death warrants. His essential fair-mindedness, however, enables him to see that things have gotten out of hand. He recognizes that Proctor is speaking the truth when he accuses Abigail of making false accusations, and he understands the motivation that leads Elizabeth to lie to protect John. Guilty over his role in convicting so many innocent people, he tries to stop the proceedings, but it is too late. Like Proctor, he becomes a witness to destruction that he could have prevented.**

# THEMES ANALYSIS

## Major Theme

**A crucible is a vessel in which metal is heated to a high temperature and melted for the purposes of casting. It can also refer, metaphorically, to a time in history when great political, social, and cultural changes are in force, where society is seemingly being melted down and recast into a new mold. The word is also remarkably similar to crucifixion, which Miller certainly intended in choosing it as the title of his play. The picture of a man and a society bubbling in a crucible and the crucifixion of Christ interweave to form the main themes of the play: the problem of making the right moral choice and the necessity of sacrifice as a means of redemption. Both these themes, of course, take place in the context of the larger struggle of good versus evil.**

**The choice John Proctor must make is between saving either himself or society. His failure to do good initially allows events to get out of hand and eventually forces him into a position where he must make a choice. Reverend Hale, while not subject to the same moral quandary as Proctor, also suffers a crisis of consciousness for his failure to strive hard enough to stop the proceedings of the court. In contrast to them both are Rebecca Nurse and Elizabeth Proctor, whose moral and emotional steadfastness represents society at its best.**

**In a society at odds with itself and where reason and faith in the society has been replaced with irrationality and self-doubt, a clever manipulator can cause chaos. The Reverend Parris, Danforth, Hathorne, and Putnam represent the corruption of society by self-interested parties preying on society's fears. Through them, Miller highlights the destruction that manipulation and weak-mindedness can thrust upon society.**

**Miller suggests that in such times good can only triumph through a sacrifice upon the altar of society, that the crisis might only be able to be rectified by the death of those who struggle to uphold society's values. The death of John Proctor, though it might seem a tragic waste, is necessary, both for his own personal redemption and that of his society. The sacrifice of Proctor, Rebecca Nurse, Giles Corey and others, recalls the sacrifice of Christ for the sake of humankind. In the end, *The Crucible* focuses on a historical event to drive home**

**issues that essentially characterize all societies at all times, which makes the play both universal and enduring.**

## Minor Theme

***The Crucible's*** **minor theme is the evils and events of the McCarthy era, which provided the initial inspiration for the play. Miller saw many parallels between the witch trials of Salem and McCarthy's hunt for Communists, which some critics at the time even referred to as a "witch hunt." Both were periods of dramatic social tensions and social change, marked by terror, suspicion, hysteria, and paranoia. While there were undoubtedly Communists in America in the 1950s, and perhaps witches in Salem in the late 1600s, the hunts for both destroyed many innocent lives and corrupted the accusers.**

**Perhaps the most striking parallel between the McCarthy era and events in the play occurs in the scene where Parris accuses the signatories of Francis Nurse's petition of attacking the court and suggesting that no innocent person could possibly be unhappy with the court. This was the same logic that McCarthy and his followers used to discourage dissent.**

**Although** ***The Crucible*** **can be read as a commentary on the McCarthy era, its location in actual historical events of another era, its emphasis on personal struggle and responsibility, and its aesthetic achievement as a work of literature and drama render it timely and relevant in any era. Indeed, as historical circumstances change, new historical parallels emerge. Miller has noted that when he wrote the play, he never could have imagined that people would see in it a commentary on the dangers of accepting children's testimony in sexual abuse cases, yet the parallel seems quite apparent now. It is** ***The Crucible's*** **timeless concern with the problems of ascertaining truth and obtaining justice, rather than its commentary on any one historic event, that has made it a lasting work of art.**

# POINT OF VIEW

***The Crucible*** **is written as a play in the present tense, so the audience (reader) is aware of all things as presented. Occasionally a third-person omniscient narrator interrupts the dialogue.**

# QUOTATIONS

**"What profit him to bleed? Shall the dust praise him? Shall worms declare the truth?" Act 1. - Rev. Hale**

**Hale is asking Elizabeth what good it would be for Proctor to die. He is indicating that nothing will be proven by an innocent man going to his death**

**"It is for you to say what is good for you to hear." Act 1. - Rev. Parris**

**Parris is trying to show his authority and the authority of God by saying that it was not for Proctor to decide what he needs to know**

**"He may have his goodness now, God forbid I take it from him." Act IV. - Elizabeth Proctor to John**

**Elizabeth believes that he now goes to death as an honest man by continuing to plead his innocence.**

**"You think it God's work you should never lose a child, nor grandchild either and I bury all but one?" Act 1. - Mrs. Putnam**

**Mrs. Putnam is arguing with Rebecca Nurse because of Rebecca's proposition that God permitted Betty and Ruth's apparent sickness, rather then the Devil, and that maybe they should blame themselves. In the puritan religion, the spiritual world reflects the physical world, so if your children are dying, it is sign from god that you are not of his chosen ones. Mrs. Putnam refuses to believe she is at fault, as Rebecca suggested of all of them, so she is deeply resentful of Rebecca's appearing to be chosen (all her children are alive), and how she is moraly superior to them. Later on Mrs. Putnam charges Rebecca with the murder of her babies.**

**"It is a weighty name, it will stike the village that Proctor confess." Act IV. - Rev. Parris**

**He's describing that John Proctor is a well-known name in the town, and has a clean slate. He's implying that John Proctor is a good man and everybody believes so, so when he is "found guilty" and his name is dragged through the mud people will be stunned as some might not even believe it to be true.**

**"I'm not worth the dust on their feet." Act IV. - John Proctor**

**Referring to those that have already hung before him.**

## SYMBOLISM/MOTIFS

**There is very little direct traditional symbolism in *The Crucible.***

**Crucible - it is meant to purify, usually by fire. A great irony since the 'fire' that burns in Salem does not purify. Instead it muddles (confuses) and corrupts. Thus a fire burning for the wrong reason is not able to purify.**

**Fortress (page 65)- the church is seen in this manner. But while the metaphor used suggests one crack may break it, we also see that rigidity or the lack of an open mind can bring down an edifice just as quickly.**

**Dawn 'the new sun' (page 126) - the end of the play suggests the start of a new day where right is restored and the evil has been expelled.**

**The Crucible itself has very few examples beyond typical witchcraft symbols (rats, toads and bats for example)**

**The story as a whole can draw direct comparisons to the McCarthyism period of the 1950's. The paranoia and comparisons as a "witch hunt" are sharp.**

**Some major Motifs are: Resentment, Accusations, confessions, the trials.**

## STUDY QUESTIONS

**1. Compare and contrast the characters of Rebecca Nurse and John Proctor.**

**2. Discuss Miller's treatment of women in *The Crucible*.**

**3. How is the play unified into a whole?**

**4. Explain why the play is a tragic comedy.**

**5. In *The Crucible*, Miller develops his themes by using characters that are more types than individuals.**

**6. Explain the symbolic characters and how they develop the themes.**

**7. Discuss how the themes of *The Crucible* make it both universal and enduring.**

**8. What is the function of Reverend Hale in the play?**

**9. Miller originally wrote *The Crucible* as a critique of McCarthyism, but he distanced his narrative by using the Salem witch trials as the setting for the play. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this approach.**

**10. At the end of the play, John Proctor recovers his sense of goodness by tearing up the confession that would have saved his life. Given his character and the events which have led up to this moment, do you find this act believable? Fully explain your response.**

**11. In *The Crucible*, Miller suggests that sacrifices may be necessary to restore the social order. Discuss the sacrifices made by the play's characters and whether you think they are necessary.**

**12. How does the title relate to the story.**

**13. 'In The Crucible Arthur Miller is making pointed comments about individuals and how we should operate in society'. Discuss with reference to the text.**

**14. How are the characters tested and brought down to their essence?**

**15. What three characters are responsible for the trials and why?**

**16. How does the Crucible portray justice or injustice?**

# 4

## About The Crucible

**The Crucible is a fictional retelling of events in American history surrounding the Salem Witch Trials of the seventeenth century. Yet, is as much a product of the time in which Arthur Miller wrote it - the early 1950s - as it is description of Puritan society. The Salem witch trials took place from June through September of 1692, during which time nineteen men and women were hanged at Gallows Hill near Salem, while another man, Giles Corey, was stoned to death for refusing to submit to a trial on witchcraft charges. Hundreds of other persons faced accusations of witchcraft and dozens more languished in jail without trials. As the play describes, the witchcraft trials began because of the illness of Betty Parris, the daughter of the Salem minister, Reverend Samuel Parris, a former merchant in Barbados. Before Betty Parris fell ill, Cotton Mather had published "Memorable Providences," describing the suspected witchcraft of an Irish washerwoman in Boston, and Betty Parris' hysteria mirrored those of the suspected Irish witch. Other girls, including Ruth Putnam and Mercy Lewis also exhibited similar symptoms. However, actual events diverge from the narrative of the play. The Parris' slave, Tituba (who was likely a South American Arawak Indian and not African), immediately came under suspicion. As a form of counter-magic, Tituba was ordered to bake a rye cake with the urine of the afflicted victim and to feed the cake to a dog. This added to suspicions of witchcraft by Tituba, and led to the slave becoming one of the first women accused, along with Sarah Good and Sarah Osburn. Although most of the women first accused of witchcraft were considered disreputable, several reputable members of the community were soon executed, including Rebecca Nurse (featured in the play), and in the most controversial execution, George Burroughs, the former minister in Salem. One of the most flamboyant of the women executed was Bridget Bishop, a woman who had been married several times and was known as the mistress of two Salem taverns and had a reputation for dressing more 'artistically' than the women of the village.**

**Sir William Phips, the Governor of Massachusetts, created a new court to oversee the witchcraft cases. The Chief Justice of this court was William Stoughton, an avid witch-hunter who permitted many questionable deviations from normal courtroom procedure including the admission of spectral evidence (testimony by afflicted persons that they had been visited by a suspect's specter) and private conversations between accusers and judges.**

**By the early autumn of 1692, the cries of witchcraft began to ebb and doubts began to develop concerning the validity of the charges. Soon, the educated elite of the colony began efforts to end the witch-hunting hysteria that had enveloped Salem. Increase Mather, the father of Cotton, published "Cases of Conscience," which argued that it "were better that ten suspected witches should escape than one innocent person should be condemned." Mather urged the court to exclude spectral evidence. A period of atonement soon occurred in which Samuel Sewall, one of the judges, issued a public confession of guilt and apology, and Reverend Parris admitted errors in judgment. He did, however, attempt to shift the blame to others. (Governor Phips, for instance, shifted the blame to Stoughton, who nevertheless became the next Governor of Massachusetts.)**

**However, Miller wrote The Crucible not simply as a straight historical play detailing the Salem witch trials. Indeed, a good deal of the information in the play misrepresents the literal events of the trial: John Proctor was not a farmer, not a tavern owner, and during the time of the trials he was sixty years old and Abigail Williams only eleven. Rather, the play has as much significance as a product of the early Cold War era during which Miller wrote the play. Indeed, the play is a parable for the McCarthy era, in which similar 'witch hunts' occurred targeting citizens as communists rather than disciples of Satan.**

**Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy was an undistinguished member of the Senate until February 1950, when he made the public charge that 205 Communists had infiltrated the State department. Upon subsequent testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, McCarthy proved unable to produce the name of any "card-carrying" communists, but he gained increasing popular support for his campaign of accusations. Although he was later denounced, he promoted unfounded accusations and suspicions of communism in many quarters, and is best known for his investigation of communists in the United States Army.**

**The House Committee on Un-American Activities (generally known as HUAC) also investigated communism within Hollywood, calling a number of playwrights, directors and actors known for left-wing views to testify. Although some of these, including film director Elia Kazan, testified for the committee to avoid prison sentences, the Hollywood Ten, a group of entertainers, refused to testify and were convicted of contempt and sentenced to up to one year in prison. Over three hundred other entertainers were placed on a blacklist for possible communist views and were thus forbidden to work for major Hollywood studios (many of these were writers who worked under pseudonyms at the time, including Dalton Trumbo and Michael Wilson). Arthur Miller was one of these blacklisted. The blacklist prevented these men from receiving screen credit during this time, until actor Kirk Douglas pushed for Trumbo to receive screen credit for his adaptation of Spartacus for Stanley Kubrick in 1960.**

## Major Themes

## Authority and Dissent

**There are many levels of authority within the world of the Crucible. Early on, the Reverend Parris is the sole authoritative voice in Salem, as the minister and a graduate of Harvard College. He is supplanted by the arrival of Reverend Hale, who derives his authority from books and learning, which are then further supplanted in turn by the courts and its officials. Meanwhile, individualists like Proctor and Giles Corey rankle under these layers of authority – Proctor had long rejected Parris's preachings, and Corey made the authority of the law work for him as a constant plaintiff. But being an outlier is seen as dangerous in this society. Indeed, dissent against official authority is akin to being an anarchist at best and an agent of Satan at worst. Proctor and Corey are the two most modern figures in the play for their willingness to push back against the extreme authority of the courts. For this, however, they also suffer greatly.**

## Martyrdom

**Miller addresses the question of whether a martyr must be a saint by having Proctor grapple with this very issue throughout the play. The early victims of the witch hunt are not seen as martyrs because even after death, they are considered undesired members of society. In contrast, the execution of Rebecca**

**Nurse is widely recognized as one of martyrdom, because she has lived a conspicuously upright life and thus walks to the gallows without protest. Proctor sees himself as the borderline case – a respected member of society but far from sinless. It is only by recognizing that he need not be as perfect as Goody Nurse that Proctor finally finds "his goodness" as a moral man.**

## Community vs Individual

**Salem is a tight-knit community where there is no such thing as private business. Individual activities like church attendance or book reading or keeping poppets become admissible evidence in court. Miller speculates that the community of Salem sought to keep itself together by casting out undesirable individuals, and in so doing created the atmosphere necessary for the witch hunts. The court itself was an extension of this principle, desperately in search of external validity – Danforth cannot possibly exonerate some when others have already perished for the same crime. But for the accused, it is only the individual that matters. In the end, Proctor is left with nothing but his name and reputation.**

## Naming Names

**By requiring the accused to name others in their confessions, a witch hunt like that in Salem or HUAC can take on the form of a pyramid scheme or chain letter. In other words, to avoid the effects of this curse, you must pass it on to five other people, and so forth. This "naming names" allowed the accusations to spread and spread, while also permitting the public airing of grievances and sins. As a member of the blacklist himself, Miller felt particularly strongly about the evil of fingering others to save oneself, and he expresses this idea by having several characters grapple with the requirement that they name names. Giles Corey is held in contempt – the charge that ultimately leads to his execution – for refusing to name the person who told him of Putnam's scheming, and Proctor balks at the court's intention to question the 91 people who signed his declaration of the good character of the accused. But it is at the climax that this theme truly comes to the fore, as Proctor would rather die than accuse more innocent people.**

## Sin and Guilt

**Miller identifies the witch hunt as an opportunity for the repressed members of Salem society to publicly proclaim both their own sins and the sins of others. Guilt has been bottled up at home in this community, and the airing of sins and grievances is a relief to those previously without an outlet for confession. Guilt motivates not only the witch hunts themselves, but also the behavior of several principal characters. Proctor is haunted by remorse over his infidelity, while Reverend Hale works to undermine the court that he helped create as penance for his sins. The ultimate irony of the Salem witch hunts is not only that the sins of the trials quickly outpaced the original crime, but that there was no original crime to begin with. Indeed, the abstract concept of sin was made concrete through compounding avoidances of guilt.**

## Self interest

**In varying degrees, the instigators of the witch trials are working to serve their own self-interest. Abigail begins the hysteria when she finds it a convenient way to deflect attention from her own sins, and further points the accusations at Elizabeth to scheme her way into Proctor's arms. Tituba, the first charged, is also the first to confess when she realizes that a confession will save her life. Parris at first rankles against the witchcraft talk because it would undermine his reputation in the town, and later opposes the execution of prominent community members because their death would lead to popular uprising. Even Giles Corey died in the way he did because it was in his own interest – by not pleading and dying under the weighted rocks, he ensured that his property would pass to his sons rather than to the state.**

## Reputation

**The reputation of each individual within the Salem community largely dictated his or her fate. The witch trials featured significant subversions of the dominant social structure by elevating to a position of power individuals whose reputation and status were otherwise lowly. Abigail, an unmarried, female orphan, suddenly became the most important person in town, bringing with her a dozen other such girls who otherwise could only hope to work as housekeepers until they married. Similarly, the black slave Tituba, whose race gave her the lowest**

**social status in Salem, found herself with the ability to decide the fates of people far more powerful than herself as she accused others of witchcraft. Conversely, individuals with sparkling reputations like Rebecca Nurse and Elizabeth Proctor were dragged through the mud and lost all agency in their situations. John Proctor is the appropriate protagonist for this story especially because he falls in the center of Salem's spectrum of reputation. As a landowner and adulterer, he is placed by Miller at the eye of the storm, watching the entire social structure pivot around him.**

## Act One

## Analysis

**First performed in January of 1953 at the height of America's red scare, The Crucible is first and foremost a political argument, relating the Salem witchcraft trials to their contemporary equivalent in Miller's time, the McCarthy hearings. The figurative 'witch hunt' of McCarthyism becomes literal in Miller's play, which is constructed to illustrate how fear and hysteria mixed with an atmosphere of persecution may lead to tragically unjust consequences. Miller presents the play with traditional theatrical devices, relying on the dialogue and situations to illustrate his themes, but finds these somewhat insufficient. In the first act, the play therefore contains a number of historical digressions that reveal the motivations of each character and which cannot be accurately conveyed through a strict stage interpretation.**

**Through these prose passages that interrupt the dialogue and action of the play, Miller establishes the particular quality of Salem society that makes it particularly receptive to the repression and panic of the witch trials. The Puritan life in Salem is rigid and somber, allowing little room for people to break from the monotony and strict work ethic that dominated the close-knit society. Furthermore, the Puritan religious ethic informed all aspects of society, promoting safeguards against immorality at any cost to personal privacy or justice. The Puritans of Massachusetts were a religious faction who, after years of suffering persecution themselves, developed a willful sense of community to guard against infiltration from outside sources. It is this paradox that Miller finds to be a major theme of The Crucible: in order to keep the community together, members of that community believed that they must in some sense tear**

**it apart. Miller relates the intense paranoia over the integrity of the Puritan community to their belief that they are in some sense a chosen people, who will forge a new destiny for the world. This relates strongly to the political climate of the early 1950s in which Miller wrote The Crucible. After the end of World War II, the United States found itself engaged in a struggle for political supremacy with Communist forces, in particular the Soviet Union. Just as the Salem authorities believed that witchcraft threatened their community, many Americans during this time saw Communism as a threat to the American way of life.**

**However, the Salem witch trials as described by Miller have a sexual element that runs concurrent with the political aspects of the allegory. The community is one that promotes interference in all personal matters and intensely frowns upon any sinful conduct, without allowing for any legitimate expurgation of sin. The witch trials serve as a means to break from this stifling atmosphere and publicly confess one's sins through accusation. This simultaneous fear of and fascination with sexuality is a theme throughout The Crucible, as demonstrated by the adulterous relationship between Abigail Williams and John Proctor and the sexual undertones of the dancing that instigates the witchcraft trials. The 1950s were likewise an era of sexual conservatism, and known or suspected homosexuals were at particular risk for being singled out as Communist sympathizers.**

**The first act establishes the primary characters of the play who instigate the Salem witch trials. Each has his particular obsessions and motivations that drive him to push for the trials. The first and perhaps most reprehensible of these characters is the Reverend Samuel Parris, a man who symbolizes the particular quality of moral repression and paranoia that drive the trials. Miller immediately establishes Parris as a man whose main concern is his reputation and status in the community, rather than the well-being of his daughter. It is Tituba who shows more concern for Betty than her father, but she is kept away from the girl's sick bed. When he discusses finding Abigail and Betty dancing in the woods, his concern is not the sin that they committed but rather the possibility that his enemies will use this scandal against him. Parris is distinctly paranoid, defending himself from all enemies even when they may not exist. The particular quality of Parris that renders him dangerous is his strong belief in the**

**presence of evil. Even before the witchcraft paranoia, Proctor indicates that Parris showed an obsession with damnation and hell in order to strike fear into his parishioners. With the seeming presence of witchcraft in Salem, Parris now has a concrete, physical manifestation of the evil he so fears.**

**Abigail Williams is a less complex character whose motivations are simple; she is a clear villain with straightforward malicious motivation. Miller establishes that Abigail is suspected of adultery with John Proctor, a rumor that is confirmed later in the first act. Abigail demonstrates a great ability for self-preservation: she admits what she must at appropriate times, and places the blame for her actions at the most convenient source, Tituba. She then takes advantage of the situation to accuse Elizabeth Proctor, aiming to take her place in John Proctor's life. Abigail's lack of any morality renders her able to charge others with witchery no matter the consequences.**

**The third character who serves as a proponent of the witchcraft hysteria is Thomas Putnam. While Parris's motivation is suspicion and paranoia and Abigail's is mere villainy, Thomas Putnam demonstrates that his motivation involves his longstanding grudges against others; the witchcraft trials give Putnam an opportunity to exact revenge against others, and, as will later be shown, to profit economically from others' executions.**

**The final character who sets the witchcraft trials in motion is Reverend John Hale. Hale is perhaps the most complex character in The Crucible, a man who approaches religious matters with the conviction of a scientist and a scientific emphasis on proper procedure. Hale holds the contradictory belief that they cannot rely on superstition to solve the girls' problems but that they may find a supernatural explanation for the events. Since he lacks the malicious motivations and obsessions that plague the other instigators of the trials, Reverend Hale has the ability to change his position, yet at this point he finds himself caught up in the hysteria he has helped to create.**

**In contrast to these four characters stand the three main opponents of the witchcraft accusations. The Nurses are the most straightforward of these; Miller portrays Rebecca Nurse and her husband as near saints who rely on practical wisdom and experience. In contrast, Giles Corey has none of the noble character of the Nurses, yet he can oppose Parris and Putnam because of his contentious,**

**combative manner. Giles Corey doesn't care about public opinion and has never allowed his actions to be swayed by those around him. He may therefore choose whichever position he finds most suitable, even if it places him in danger.**

**However, Miller places John Proctor as the main protagonist of the story and its moral center. Proctor, as Miller writes, is a man who can easily discern foolishness and has the will to oppose it. He is a rational man with a brusque manner who, like Giles Corey, has no qualms about expressing his opinion. Miller portrays Proctor as a decidedly modern character, who eschews superstition for rationality and expresses skepticism for the trappings of organized religion, particularly Parris's obsession with hellfire and damnation. The particularly modern quality of John Proctor draws the audience sympathy to him, even if he is a self-professed sinner who had an affair with Abigail Williams. Yet this is the single sin that Proctor manifests and exists more as a plot point than as an organic character trait. The Proctor that Miller portrays throughout The Crucible has succumbed to and overcome temptation, like so many of us, making him both flawed and respectable.**

**Several significant themes emerge early in the play. One of these that Miller develops throughout the first act is the speed at which gossip can spread in a close-knit society like Salem. Miller establishes Salem as a world in which little information is considered private; all information is open to suspicion and question. This correlates to the McCarthy hearings, which probed into the lives of the suspected communists for evidence of their anti-American activity, no matter the actual relevance.**

**A second theme that Miller establishes is the ability of people to choose whichever position suits their self-interest. Abigail Williams shows the ability to affirm or deny any charge against her based entirely on whether it serves her needs, while Tituba, when charged with witchcraft, denies it only until she realizes that admitting to the crime will save her from further punishment and that accusing others will shift the blame elsewhere. The shift of blame from one character to another will be a recurring plot point, as few characters will accept the consequences of their actions or directly confront the charges leveled against them.**

**Perhaps the most important theme that Miller develops in this act is the propensity of accusations to snowball. The charges against the girls and Tituba become perpetually more significant: at first they are accused of merely dancing, then of dancing naked. The charges proceed until Tituba is deemed a witch and accuses others of conspiring with Satan. Legitimate charges of dancing and sinful activity increase in magnitude until charges of Satanism arise. The irony of this situation is that the fight against sinfulness in Salem will become more sinful and malicious than any of the actual events that occurred – much like, in Miller's opinion, the McCarthy era did more to tear apart America than Communist sympathizers ever did.**

## Act Two

## Analysis

**While the first act takes place in the "public" setting of Reverend Parris' home, the second act moves into what should be considered the private sphere of the Proctors' home. The conversation between John and Elizabeth Proctor is highly mundane, illustrating the significant tension remaining in the relationship since Proctor's affair with Abigail Williams. Elizabeth Proctor is intensely suspicious of her husband, worrying when he arrives at home late for dinner and adopting a condescending tone when her husband admits that he was momentarily alone with Abigail Williams. Miller establishes Elizabeth Proctor as a morally upright woman, respectable and dignified, yet with an air of superiority that renders her frigid and distant. Proctor feels that Elizabeth has made her home into a repressive atmosphere, continually punishing her husband for his wrongdoing. Still, if Elizabeth adopts a tone of moral superiority it is because she is the superior of her contemporaries, with an unwavering belief in the capability of persons to remain moral.**

**Miller creates an atmosphere of guilt within the Proctor household that mirrors the similar conditions within larger Puritan society. Proctor has expressed contrition for his infidelity and asked for forgiveness, yet there is no sense of catharsis within his marriage nor ability for full reconciliation. The Proctor marriage is stagnant and stifling, as the fact of John's adultery lingers in every conversation like a giant white elephant. Miller demonstrates this, in particular, when Proctor is unable to recall the commandment against adultery – it is a**

**moment of humor, but it also reflects the crisis of the Proctor marriage. Miller seems to indicate that, like the rest of their Puritan society, the Proctors need an outlet to expiate John's sins and without this means for redemption they are committed to a perpetual obsession with past infidelity.**

**Two major themes emerge in the second act of The Crucible. The first of these is the line between public and private. The act itself moves from the intimate conversation between husband and wife to more public matters, but the division between these two spheres becomes obscure. Even in this setting, the public discussions of the Proctors' guilt or innocence occurs within the home. More importantly, Reverend Hale and the other court officials use private information for their public matters, such as information about the frequency with which they attend church and their belief in the existence of witches. The court officials investigate all aspects of the suspects' private lives. Under such intense scrutiny, these officials are able to find any information that may be may interpreted as evidence of guilt – not unlike the House Unamerican Activities Commission using everything from religion and sexuality to, in the case of the Rosenbergs, a discarded box of Jell-o as evidence of un-American behavior.**

**The second major theme of the act is the ambiguity of evidence. This begins even before Hale arrives at the Proctors' home, when Elizabeth, as a betrayed wife, suspects her husband's excuses for coming home late. This continues with Reverend Hale's interpretation of John's forgetfulness of one of the Ten Commandments and the evidence against Martha Corey, which deemed her a witch for reading books. The most significant symbol of this theme in the second act is Mary Warren's poppet. Miller makes it clear to the audience that Elizabeth did not use the poppet as a charm against Abigail Williams, but its presence in her house is quite damning in the view of the court.**

**The poppet demonstrates that Abigail Williams is more villainous than earlier indicated. In the first act she behaved solely out of self-interest. She was ready to do harm to others, but only to save herself. However, in this instance she purposely frames Elizabeth Proctor out of revenge, planting the poppet as a means to engineer Elizabeth's murder. This event even breaks the icy exterior of Elizabeth Proctor, who deems that Abigail must be "ripped out of the world."**

**Miller creates a situation of bleak irony in this chapter with the arrest of Rebecca Nurse and Elizabeth Proctor. These characters are the most upright in the play, yet are accused of witchcraft by two of the most ignoble, Thomas Putnam and Abigail Williams. The dynamic of the witchcraft hysteria has created a situation in which the accuser of witchcraft is automatically presumed holy, as Proctor notes, while even the most spiritual character may be suspected of Satanic influence. In this situation the evil of Salem may raise their reputations at the expense of the good.**

**An additional irony that Miller constructs in the act is in the plot structure. The Proctors and their allies can rely on a single person to save themselves from Abigail Williams' treachery. Yet this person, Mary Warren, is the weakest and most pliable character in The Crucible. She alone has the power to stop the hysteria of the witchcraft trials, but neither the strength nor resolve to do so. Mary requires intense coercion from John Proctor to even consider admitting to the falsehood in court. However, despite her weakness Mary Warren is as dangerous as Abigail, for the guileless girl betrays none of Abigail's malicious bearing and thus appears more overtly innocent. She is a pawn who may be used by the Proctors to prove their innocence, but Miller foreshadows that Mary Warren may be used by Abigail to serve her own purposes as well.**

**Among the characters in the play, it is Reverend Hale who demonstrates the most prominent character development. While the other characters remain fixed in their particular allegiances and beliefs, Hale demonstrates the debilitating effects of the witchcraft trials by the change in his character. When he reappears in the third act he has none of his old enthusiasm. Although he clings to his belief that proof of witchery can be found in Salem, Hale appears more and more tentative about the results. He demonstrates a strong feeling of guilt for his actions, as shown by his reliance on what he grasps as indisputable evidence. Like Pontius Pilate, to whom Proctor compares Hale, he wants to play only a passive role in the proceedings without any feeling of personal responsibility. Hale's growing disillusionment foreshadows his later repudiation of the court's actions.**

# Act Three

## Analysis

**Amongst the characters in the play, it is Deputy Governor Danforth who seems to provide the most obvious symbol of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Danforth rules over the proceedings as if the accused are guilty until proven innocent, and adopts a harsh and vindictive air. However, Miller does not make Danforth a direct equivalent of the irrational demagogue McCarthy; rather, Danforth is a stern, cold man of unfailing faith in his judicial powers. He does not manifest any particular political ambition, but instead acts to preserve the strength of the court over which he rules. This does make Danforth suspicious of any attack on the plaintiffs and the proceedings, but also allows him some room for flexibility. He uses reason to persuade Proctor to drop his charges against Abigail, telling him that his wife is spared for at least a year and that he need not worry about her execution. It is Danforth's stern rationality that makes him a more disturbing figure; he is not a malicious villain equivalent to Abigail, but rather a man who has intense faith in the integrity of his court. He operates under the assumption that good and evil can be clearly and intensely defined, a flaw of tragic irony. In his desperate hope to sharply delineate good and evil, Danforth becomes the willing accomplice of those who obscure this line.**

**It is Reverend Parris who appears as the demagogue in this act of the play, denouncing all challenges to the court as challenges to Christianity and God himself. Parris is paranoid and foolish, demanding that all ninety-one people who attest to the good name of the three accused women be brought in for questioning. It is Parris' rabid defense of the trials that finally causes Hale to break from the court and offer a defense of the Proctors, Coreys and Nurses. Parris' demagoguery is placed into even sharper relief once the true reason for the girls' admission of witchcraft is revealed. Parris knows that the trials are a fraud and that the girls are lying, yet continues to push against witchcraft to suit his ends.**

**Miller develops the motivations of the proponents of the witchcraft trials in this chapter. Reverend Parris remains motivated by suspicion and paranoia, while Thomas Putnam moves from an original motivation of grudges against others to unabashed greed. Abigail Williams, in contrast, has moved from self-**

**preservation to a more general lust for power. However, upon the arrest of Rebecca Nurse and Elizabeth Proctor, Reverend Hale now eschews the supernatural explanations for more concrete, legal explanations. He redeems himself from his role as a Pontius Pilate by serving as an advocate for justice. This is significant, for it provides concrete evidence that opposition to the trials does not necessarily mean opposition to law and order.**

**Deputy Governor Danforth espouses the central irony of the witchcraft trials: because there can be no concrete evidence of witchcraft, one must trust the word of the accuser as to whether any witchcraft has occurred at all. This essentially negates the idea of evidence, taking opinion and allegation to be concrete fact. It is this flaw on which Abigail Williams and the other girls capitalize when making their accusations.**

**Miller establishes that it takes only a simple accusation for a person to be convicted of witchcraft. Thomas Putnam uses this for economic gain, coercing his daughter into accusing George Jacobs so that he may purchase his land once Jacobs has been executed. Yet it is Abigail Williams who brings this particular quality into sharp relief. Abigail is intense and dramatic; she targets the weak-willed Mary Warren, knowing that she will easily break from her alliance with Proctor once challenged. When Abigail pretends to see a yellow bird attacking her, it is an obvious falsehood that is nevertheless admissible as evidence in this court of law.**

**The act ends by encompassing two central ironies. The first of these is that, to prove his own innocence and prove himself faithful to his wife, John Proctor must publicly declare his infidelity. To save Elizabeth and protect himself from an inevitable accusation of witchcraft, Proctor must tear down his name and condemn himself for the crime of lechery. Despite Proctor's obvious sin, this places Proctor as a martyr, sacrificing any chance for a good reputation in Salem, where public reputation is essential, in order to save his wife and others wrongly accused of witchcraft.**

**The second irony involves the testimony of Elizabeth Proctor. To save her husband's life, she must condemn him for lechery. Miller establishes that she is an honest woman who never lies, yet at the moment in which her honesty is most critical she chooses the noble yet practical lie, and defends her husband. As Hale**

**notes, it is a natural lie for Elizabeth Proctor to tell, yet an incredibly ill-timed one; Elizabeth Proctor chooses dishonesty at the precise moment that her integrity matters the most.**

**Miller continues the theme of revolving accusations in this act when Mary finally breaks down and accuses Proctor of witchcraft. Fearful of her own life, Mary realizes that the only way to save herself is to accuse Proctor of coercing her into overthrowing the court. In this case the accusation contains some truth: Proctor did force Mary Warren into testifying - and yet, in this case the purpose is to promote true justice rather than to obscure it.**

**At the end of this act, Proctor condemns himself by claiming that God is dead. When he states this, he speaks metaphorically, lamenting a world in which the ostensibly just and moral society of Salem can be overthrown by one strong-willed girl. Once again Proctor gives in to melodramatics when faced with injustice. He may be correct, yet expresses his righteousness through means that make him an easy target for the likes of Abigail and Reverend Parris.**

## Act Four

## Analysis

**The fourth act of The Crucible largely concerns the perversion of justice that has occurred in Salem. Miller demonstrates this immediately in the comic interlude that opens the act. Tituba and Sarah Good are foolish comic foils whose claims of communing with Satan are intended to be absurd. Yet while these women are spared the gallows because they have confessed to witchcraft, those like Rebecca Nurse who refuse to admit to a crime they did not commit remain sentenced to execution. This large-scale inversion of justice is reflected in the larger workings of Salem society. As Parris claims, there is the possibility of rebellion because of the witchcraft trials, while the numerous people who remain in jail have caused the village to fall into shambles. This is yet another example of the irony of the witchcraft trials: while they meant to preserve the order of society, the trials throw Salem into a state of anarchy and rebellion.**

**However, since the previous act there has been a shift in the public opinion concerning the trials. Miller indicates that the citizens of Salem supported the trials when the victims were obviously disreputable members of the community,**

**but the executions of respected figures like Goody Nurse are much more controversial. This reinforces the idea that the Salem witch trials were in part vindictive; the purpose of the trials was not to remove witches from Salem, but rather to remove certain members of the community for other reasons. For the citizens of Salem, the executions only become unacceptable when they involve those honored members of the community, even if the charges against them have the same proof, or lack thereof, as those against the disreputable Bridget Bishop or Sarah Osburn. The implications of this are wholly cynical: the shift in public opinion is not a turn toward justice but rather an expression of personal preference.**

**If there is a sense of justice in The Crucible, it is meted out to Reverend Parris and Abigail Williams in this act. Reverend Parris reveals himself to be a fool capable of being easily manipulated by Abigail Williams, whose guilt seems obvious thanks to her sudden escape from town and theft of Parris' savings. However, even with these revelations casting further doubt on the validity of Abigail's charges, the Salem court continues with the trials and executions. The trials have taken on a life of their own, separate from the accusations of the principals, who set legal machinations in motion that even they cannot stop. This fulfills the theme of snowballing accusations that Miller established early in the play. The accusations began with Abigail Williams, but now, supported by the weight of the judiciary, the prosecution does not stop with her downfall.**

**Contrasting considerations of self-interest lead Danforth and Parris to beg John Proctor to confess to witchcraft. While Parris fears for his physical safety, Deputy Governor Danforth operates to defend the court from further attack. The change in Danforth's overt motivation is important. Previously, Danforth meant to uphold the integrity of the court, but here he suggests corruption to simply preserve the political stature of the government. Indeed, he even worries that postponing the executions would show the court's weakness. By prompting Proctor to give an obviously false confession, Danforth indicates that he likely believes that the witchcraft allegations are false. This fully demonstrates how the witch hunts have gained a life of their own; considerations of reputation and the political dynamic lead the court to continue with prosecutions and executions even when the original proponents of the trials are proven disreputable, and**

**even when the political officials who run these trials show serious doubt in the validity of the charges.**

**The final passages of The Crucible concern ideas of martyrdom and justice. Miller places three of the accused as possible martyrs, each representing different methods and approaches to self-sacrifice. Giles Corey, the first of the noble victims of the trials, remains the comic tragedian even in the throes of his death. He does not passively accept the decision of the court, but struggles against the court's charges. Even when Giles Corey dies at the hands of the court, he chooses the mode of execution that will allow his sons to still inherit his property. In contrast, Rebecca Nurse accepts her fate passively, a long-suffering martyr to the court's injustice. Unlike the truculent Giles Corey, Rebecca Nurse only displays those most Christian qualities of resignation and turning the other cheek.**

**The critical test for John Proctor in this act is whether he will accept the martyrdom of Giles Corey and Rebecca Nurse or choose self-interest. Proctor himself proposes the question of whether a sinful man may accept martyrdom by clinging to principles he has not always upheld. The saintly Rebecca Nurse may accept martyrdom because it suits her character, but the sinful Proctor questions whether or not it is hypocrisy to stand for his principles when he is an overt sinner. Miller implies that Proctor may choose self-sacrifice because it is not a question simply of his reputation, but that of his family and his community. Proctor may not be an exemplar in all matters, but he could not serve as a father to his children if he were to so readily give up his name to preserve himself.**

**The second question of this act is whether it is a worse sin to lie to save oneself or to allow oneself to die. This is the fulfillment of the theme of self-preservation that has recurred throughout the novel. While Hale says that God damns a liar less than a person who throws his life away, Elizabeth calls this the devil's argument. Miller seems to support Elizabeth's position, for it is by giving self-preserving lies that Tituba and Sarah Good perpetuated the witch hunts.**

**Elizabeth Proctor serves as the moral conscience in this act of The Crucible. It is she who puts forth the most prominent arguments for Proctor accepting his own death, despite her stated wish that she wants her husband to remain alive. This**

**could be interpreted as another manifestation of Elizabeth's cold nature, for she remains seemingly more concerned about abstract moral principles than her husband's life; Danforth even questions whether Elizabeth has any tenderness for her husband at all. Elizabeth is not to be played as a cold character, however. She refuses to influence her husband's decision despite her own wishes – he has earned her respect as a free moral agent, and she loves him all the more for his ability to make the right decision on his own.**

**The negotiations between Proctor and Danforth concerning his confession illustrate the theme of public versus private redemption. Proctor insists that his penitence remain private, while Danforth requires a public declaration of guilt and a further condemnation of other witches. It is this critical factor that allows Proctor to accept his martyrdom when he chooses to sacrifice himself to stop the perpetuation of the witchcraft accusations. Proctor thus answers his own concern about martyrdom, ending his life with an action that remains indisputably noble dispute the sins he has previously committed. He dies with his own name intact because, unlike so many others in front of the Salem court and the House Un-American Activities Committee, he refused to name names.**

## Historical Dystopia

**Many labels have been attached to The Crucible over the course of its life – tragedy, allegory, political screed, historical fiction, even horror. But the historical nature of the play often leads people to ignore its place in genre fiction, as a dystopia.**

**The dystopia is a sub-genre of speculative fiction, derived from its more philosophical cousin, the utopia. Sir Thomas More coined "utopia" in 1516 as a name for an ideal and impossible society. Pure utopias are rare in modern fiction, except as a Shangri-la or Brigadoon sought by characters from a non-utopian world. The significantly more popular genre of dystopia subverts the original concept by presenting worlds that either appear to be utopias but suffer from a fatal flaw (such as The Giver); worlds that are utopias to their inhabitants but unappealing to us (Brave New World); and worlds that are just plain awful (1984, and many others).**

**Generally, a dystopia shares significant tropes with science fiction, employing advanced technology and post-disaster scenarios to create the universe in**

**question. But The Crucible is no less a dystopia for taking place in the past rather than the future, in a time of farmers and butter churns rather than zeppelins and thought control.**

**Arthur Miller was no stranger to borrowing and adapting tropes from other genres of theater and fiction. His first hit, All My Sons, took its cue from the naturalist style of Henrik Ibsen, and Death of A Salesman borrowed elements from Yiddish theater and magic realism. The Crucible plays as a straight historical, like Shakespeare's history plays, but the particular unfamiliarity of the historical setting and the allegorical political argument being constructed lead The Crucible to share many elements of the dystopian narrative.**

**Salem itself features many characteristics that are common of dystopian settings: strict social stratification, as in Brave New World; restricted sexuality and the melding of church and state, as in The Handmaid's Tale; minimal privacy and required conformity, as in 1984; and invasive political apparatus, as in Fareneheit 451. But by virtue of having actually existed, Salem itself cannot be a proper dystopia, by definition. Rather, The Crucible is a dystopian narrative, making use of the tropes of the genre to dramatize the real history of the Salem witch trials.**

**George Orwell's 1984 is widely considered the most influential and well-known dystopia, and as it was recently published and popular when Miller was writing The Crucible, it serves as a good example for comparing the structure of the play to the classic dystopia.**

**In the first section, or Act One, of 1984 we are introduced to the world of Big Brother, establishing the particular rules of this universe. Act One of the Crucible is much the same, showing us the context of Salem and its inhabitants and how things work in their society. Act Two of 1984 has the protagonist, Winston Smith, beginning to realize that the world he lives in is unequivocally bad, and tries to fight back against the system. Act Two of the Crucible likewise shows Proctor understanding how far the trials have gone, and planning to stop the courts. Act Three of 1984 brings Winston to O'Brien, and there is significant debate about the nature of his society. The Crucible's third act is the courtroom arguments about the validity of the trials and their evidence. Finally, 1984 finishes with the defeat of the hero and the bleak continuation of the dystopia.**

**Although in some dystopias the hero succeeds in bringing down the system or escaping from his society, The Crucible is like 1984 in that its hero is also ultimately powerless in the face of the state, and is executed.**

**Aside from the structural similarity, The Crucible also shares characterization tropes with the dystopia genre. Like John Proctor, the hero of a dystopia is almost invariably a member of the society in question, usually fairly high in social standing, who instinctively understands that something is wrong with the world. He is generally a lone voice of reason, expressing the audience's opinion of the world in question. His rebellion often comes at great personal risk.**

**Moreover, a dystopia isn't merely entertainment. The point is to show the connection to the world the writer currently lives in, to exaggerate existing social and political flaws and demonstrate the damage they can do when taken to their logical extreme. Arthur Miller does just that – by framing 1692 Salem as a dystopia, he makes an even stronger case about the present day. Not only can political oppression and "naming names" lead to a dystopia-like environment – they have, in the true and not so distant past, in this very country. For that is the true point of the Crucible, to show just what depths society is capable of, now and in our past and in our future.**

## Suggested Essay Questions

**1. The Crucible is famous as a political allegory, but what exactly is Miller trying to say? Who do you think is being most criticized in the contemporary analogy?**

**Miller was particularly offended by those who "named names" before HUAC, and he himself refused to do so. While the Crucible indeed villainized the prosecutors and Court – those in the parallel positions of Joe McCarthy and HUAC – the play martyrs Corey and Proctor for refusing to do so. At the expense of their own lives, Corey and Proctor refused to condemn others, and in Miller's eyes this is the only truly moral decision.**

**2. The Crucible features a significant reversal of social roles in the Salem community. Choose a character whose position of power is upended and analyze the development of their role in the town and in the narrative. Can you make any observations about gender in this process?**

**The witch trials greatly increased the power and agency of otherwise lowly women like Tituba and Abigail, while bringing down more respected community members like Rebecca Nurse and Elizabeth. The position of men remained more stable – they were always in charge, and even if some of them were executed for witchcraft they would always control the positions of highest authority.**

**3. What is the role of gossip in the trials? How does Miller use gossip to implicate the whole town in the events of the witch trials?**

**Clearly the trials are begun by the wagging of tongues after the girls are found in the woods, but gossip certainly has a more enduring role. Reputations in Salem are made or broken based on slander and rumor, and reputation was a man's only defense against accusation – and even that often failed to correct aspersions. But gossip also proves to be a destructive force even in the hands of the good and unwitting, taking on a life of its own – Giles Corey, for instance, condemns his own wife simply by a slip of the tongue.**

**4. Miller makes some significant changes to the historical events for the play – most noticeably, he raises Abigail's age from 11 to 19, and invents an affair between her and Proctor. What purpose does this serve?**

**The affair is a dramatic device. It provides motive for Abigail's accusation of Elizabeth, and complicates the relationship between the Proctors. By raising Abigail's age and giving her motives of revenge, Miller can complicate the characterization of what would otherwise be a tale-telling little girl, without compromising her villainy.**

**5- Clearly, Proctor is the protagonist of the play, dominating three of the four acts. What begins as an ensemble rendering of the town's drama ends in an examination of a decision by one man, the focus gradually narrowed over the course of the play. How does Miller make this 17th century farmer into a character capable of holding our interest and sympathies for two hours?**

**Proctor is developed as a "modern" figure in the play. He is resistant to authority, rebelling against both the church and the state. He sees through humbug and shouts it down. Moreover, he has a complicated relationship with his wife, and is flawed but in an understandable way. He is independent minded, and struggles against the conformity of Salem that is so like 1950s America. In**

**short, he's like every other hero rebel – the same man in so many movies in stories, just realized this time in 17th century Salem.**

**5. What started the Salem witch trials? In their contemporary parallel of the red scare, we know that there really were Communists. But in 17th century Salem, there was no true witchcraft. So how did this thing start, and what does Miller have to say about its origins?**

**A major point of the play is that the witch trials were not truly started by any event or scandal – the discovery of the girls dancing in the woods was merely a tipping point, not the true origin. Miller is steadfast in his belief that the social structure of Salem is what caused the witch hunt and allowed it to accelerate. If it hadn't been Betty Paris falling sick after dancing in the woods, it would have been something else.**

**6. Act One is punctuated by prose passages in which Miller details the background of Salem and the characters. However, this background mixes facts from the historical record with the changes Miller made for dramatic reasons. What do you think of this?**

**Because the prose passages are contained within a fictionalized dramatic work, a reader should be aware that the passages are subject to the limitations of the form. However, Miller speaks with the voice of a historian in these passages, not with the voice of a playwright, and gives no indication that what he says is less than historical fact. Indeed, it is a slightly worrisome idea – a play about a man who died for the truth is so free with its own truths.**

**7. What is the function of Reverend Hale in the narrative?**

**Reverend Hale is an interesting and well-developed minor character. He serves the dramatic function of an outsider, aiding in exposition in the first act even as his presence catalyzes the witch trials. But in the third act, he begins to question the trials, and by the fourth act has renounced them completely and is actively working against them. Hale shows that the ministry and the courts need not all be evil, but that it is possible to realize the error of one's own ways and work to fix their effects.**

**8. Mary Warren is a bit of a cipher – we see her only as a pawn of Abigail, and then of Proctor, and then again of Abigail. Do we learn anything about the "real" Mary Warren?**

**Mary Warren is a particularly undeveloped character in the narrative, who functions largely as a plot device. We know that she is a weak-willed and terrified girl, who is easily manipulated by people stronger than herself. Abigail and Proctor are the ones who manipulate her, both threatening her with violence and vengeance, which draws a lucid connection between those two. Mary wants to be good, but she lacks the ability to see clearly where this good choice lies.**

**9. Are the judges evil? Be sure to define what you mean by "evil" in your answer.**

**This is a deceptively simple question. Miller believed that the judges in the witch trials were purely evil, and has stated that if he were to rewrite the play, he would make them less human and more obviously and thoroughly evil. But is evil a function of the will, or a failure of reason? These men did not set out to do evil – they legitimately saw themselves as doing God's work. Is it evil to be wrong? Arguably, the Putnams are the most evil characters in Miller's interpretation of the events, as they both support the trials and clearly are aware of the falsity of the charges.**