

The Crucible

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Arthur Miller (1915–2005)

Biographical Notes

Considered one of America's greatest twentieth-century playwrights, Arthur Asher Miller was born in New York in 1915 to a Jewish immigrant family. His father, Isidore Miller, owned a women's clothing manufacturing business and employed 400 people. However, disaster struck the household – and America – with the economic crash of the late 1920s. Miller's father lost everything and the young Arthur was forced to resort to a series of lowly jobs to pay his way through the University of Michigan.

While a student at the University of Michigan, Miller began to win minor awards for his dramatic writing. These awards, coupled with encouragement from a professor named Kenneth Rowe, encouraged Miller to pursue his writing in earnest. Following some early unsuccessful work, Miller's breakthrough success came in 1947 with *All My Sons*, a tragic play about a manufacturer who sells faulty parts to the U.S. army in order to stop his business going under. Miller's most famous play, *Death of a Salesman*, premiered just two years later,

followed by *The Crucible* in 1953. Miller's work explores many of the great themes of modern life, perhaps most centrally the question of the relationship between the individual and their society. In a career spanning almost seven decades, Miller wrote over thirty-five plays as well as radio plays, screenplays and other works of fiction. He won countless awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1949.

Arthur Miller married three times. His first marriage in 1940 to Mary Slattery, a fellow-student at the University of Michigan, ended after sixteen years. In 1956 Miller married Hollywood film star Marilyn Monroe. They divorced in 1961, less than two years before Monroe's untimely death the age of thirty-six. In February 1962 Miller married gifted Austrian photographer Inge Morath; their marriage of almost forty years ended with Morath's death in January 2002. Miller died in February 2005 at the age of eighty-nine. Arthur Miller once said: 'The mission of the theatre, after all, is to change, to raise the consciousness of people to their human possibilities'.

Introduction

***The Crucible* was written by Arthur Miller in 1952, just eight years after the end of World War Two.** First performed in January 1953 in New York, at first *The Crucible* was not very popular with either audiences or critics. However, it won a Tony Award (a prestigious theatre award) that year and soon came to be recognised as one of the great works of modern theatre. ***The Crucible* has been performed worldwide and adapted as a film several times.** Most notable of the film versions is the 1996 production starring Daniel Day-Lewis and Winona Ryder, for which Miller himself wrote the screenplay.

Brief plot summary

The entire action of the play is set during a witch hunt in a small Puritan community in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692. Salem, in 1692, was the site of a major witch hunt ending in the deaths of twenty people. Miller took many of the facts of this episode in history (found in court records) and created with them a fictional drama. **The plot of *The Crucible* is straightforward. In the Puritan town of Salem a group of girls 'cry out' accusing other townspeople of witchcraft in order to deflect attention from their own dabbling in spells and conjuring.** The leader of these girls is Abigail Williams. A

court is set up to investigate these serious claims of witchcraft. Many villagers are accused and come to court, including John and Elizabeth Proctor, a couple whose marriage is in difficulty. John Proctor had an affair with Abigail, the chief accuser, seven months before the play's action takes place. Abigail now accuses Elizabeth Proctor of witchcraft in order to try to take her place at John's side. **As the action of the play comes to a climax, John Proctor seeks to clear his wife's name. However, in the play's riveting final scenes, Proctor is left with an excruciating choice when he himself is accused of witchcraft.**

The Crucible as tragedy

The Crucible is a **tragedy**, a play that features a **central hero who has a fatal flaw**. In a tragic hero the fatal flaw is typically the key to his or her downfall. John Proctor's flaw, which leads to his downfall, is bound up with his extramarital affair with Abigail and how he deals with the consequences of it.

There are two meanings of the word crucible relevant to the play. Firstly, a crucible is a vessel made to be able to endure great heat which is used for fusing metals. Secondly, a crucible is the name given to any severe test or trial. Both of these senses are relevant and can be borne in mind as you read Miller's play.

Language, structure and setting of *The Crucible*

The language of the play may, to our ear, sound a little strange. In carrying out his research into the Salem witch trials of 1692, Miller was struck by the distinctive language used in the court records. **Miller decided to work some of the style and vocabulary of the English of 1692 into his play.** The playwright himself noted that he was attracted by the 'plain, craggy English' and found it 'liberating ... with its swings from an almost legalistic precision to a wonder of

metaphoric richness'. While Miller's adaptation of seventeenth century English may initially sound strange, ultimately it adds a richness to our experience of the play.

The Crucible is **structured in four Acts**. Miller does not subdivide the acts into numbered scenes. Instead, each Act is made up of parts, clearly identifiable as characters arrive or depart, or as a significant action begins or ends. The **setting** for each Act is a different location within the town of Salem.

Act One takes place in a small upper bedroom in the home of the town's minister, Reverend Parris. Act Two is set in the home of John and Elizabeth Proctor, eight days later. Act Three takes place in the Salem meeting house a week or two later. The meeting house is a public building which also contains the General Court of Salem. Act Four is set in a Salem jail cell in the autumn of 1692, three months after the action of the earlier Acts.

Though the action of *The Crucible* exclusively concerns Salem in 1692, in a very pointed way Miller's drama explores political tensions in the United States in the early 1950s. Below, you will find a brief overview of both contexts, with some suggestions regarding how they relate to one another.

Historical backdrop to *The Crucible*: seventeenth century Salem

Salem, Massachusetts in 1692 was a small Puritan town – the village and surrounding area was home to only about two thousand people. **The Puritans were one of the many groups from Europe who had come to North America seeking to start a new life, the earliest Puritans arriving in 1620. Puritans were a group of Protestants driven by a desire to live their religious beliefs without interference from others.** They understood the world they lived in as a battle between the forces of the Christian God on one hand and the Devil on the other. **For the Puritans, both God and the Devil were real**

forces at work in the world. In Miller's own words, the Massachusetts Puritans 'believed, in short, that they held in their steady hands the candle that would light the world'. Arriving in North America, the early Puritan settlers faced harsh, uncertain conditions and in the face of these challenges they developed a way of living in which religion and government were united. This type of arrangement is called a theocracy. **In Massachusetts, the Puritan theocracy was developed as a combination of 'state and religious power whose function was to keep the community together, and to prevent any kind of disunity'.** In daily life this meant that church attendance was compulsory and the sermon (a speech given by the minister in church) became a forum for addressing town problems and concerns. Punishments for forbidden behaviours in Puritan settlements were frequently harsh and often carried out in public.

In 1692 Salem became the site of perhaps the most famous witch trials in history. Under Puritan law, the crime of witchcraft, or 'consulting with spirits' was punishable by death. During the winter of 1692 a number of girls in Salem fell ill and began exhibiting strange symptoms: contorting their bodies, falling dumb, babbling, complaining of fever. **In the absence of an identifiable cause for these strange symptoms, the townspeople began to suspect witchcraft.** At first a Black slave, Tituba, was accused, then a beggar named Sarah Good, then a disagreeable old woman named Sarah Osborne who didn't attend church. Once the frenzy of finger-pointing seized Salem, it seems people realised they could use an accusation of witchcraft against a neighbour, a debtor or any other person against whom they had a grudge. Many of the accusers were young girls. **For a number of months the town of Salem transformed into a boiling pot of accusation, probably based on little more than a combination of economic hardship, religious disagreement, teenage boredom and petty jealousies among neighbours.** Tragic

consequences followed. In just a few months in 1692, more than one hundred people were accused of witchcraft. Nineteen were hanged and one man was crushed to death for refusing to submit to trial.

Writing *The Crucible*: 1950s America

In 1952, the year Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible*, the United States was involved in a bitter war of political beliefs with its former ally, the communist Soviet Union. **Suspicion about communism was rife in many areas of American society, with many suspecting a secret communist plot to undermine the United States from within.** The most powerful expression of this concern was The House Committee on Un-American Activities, a committee of politicians set up in 1938 to investigate disloyalty to America by citizens, public employees and organisations which might have ties to either fascists or communists. **A person suspected of having communist sympathies could be called before the Committee and questioned about their political beliefs and activities. The accused might then be requested to provide the names of others who had taken part in 'subversive' activities.** Those who refused to cooperate with the Committee might be sent to prison: also, a refusal to cooperate brought with it its own suspicions. **Many who refused to cooperate lost their jobs or were blacklisted by employers.** Between 1938 and 1975 over three thousand Americans were called to testify before the Committee.

The work of the House Committee on Un-American Activities paid special attention to the motion picture (film) industry, suspected of employing a large number of communist sympathisers. In 1950, at the peak of this paranoia (known as the second Red Scare) ten Hollywood screenwriters and directors were jailed and fined one thousand dollars each. **Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s investigations by the House Committee ruined many careers and**

livelihoods as well as fuelling suspicion and paranoia in social and professional circles. In the face of this fever of suspicion and accusation, Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible*. Miller said he sought to explore the suspicion and strange thinking ‘so magical, so paranoid’ that was fuelling the second Red Scare. He was also deeply troubled by events in Europe since the rise of Hitler and Mussolini, by how people: ‘in Hitler’s Germany ... saw their neighbours being trucked off, or farmers in Soviet Ukraine saw the Kulaks vanishing before their eyes’. Arthur Miller was called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1956, three years after *The Crucible* premiered. He admitted being present at gatherings of a Communist Party writers group ten years earlier, but refused to name others present. **Miller said to the Committee: ‘I want you to understand that I am not protecting the communists or the Communist Party. I am trying to and I will protect my sense of myself. I could not use the name of another person and bring trouble on him’.**

***The Crucible*: A timeless drama**

In *The Crucible* Miller created a compelling story about the seventeenth century Puritans to comment on the politics of 1950s America. This type of literary work is called an **allegory**. An allegory can be understood as a story within a story. The ‘surface’ story, for example, might be about farm animals who rebel against their farmer. The ‘deeper’ story might communicate the author’s unhappiness about politics and power in the world of his or her time. **Miller uses this technique to allow Puritan Salem to become a mirror for his own society.**

The types of human behaviour and the **themes** explored in Miller’s play are universal. They will be addressed in more detail in the Plot Summary and Key Themes sections. Included among them are: reputation; mob mentality; justice and injustice; lies and deception. *The Crucible’s* **themes are as relevant today as they were in Miller’s time or, indeed, in the time of the Puritan settlers.**

Plot Summary and Commentary

ACT ONE

Samuel Parris: Minister to a troubled town

In the opening pages of *The Crucible*, Miller introduces Reverend Samuel Parris, a Puritan minister. Parris is found in ‘a small upper bedroom’ of his home in Salem in the spring of 1692. The room ‘gives off an air of clean sparseness’ and has few decorations except for a candle burning beside a bed and a ‘chest, a chair, and a small table’. Before the play’s action commences, Miller provides a brief profile of Reverend Parris. (He does this for a number of characters in the course of the play.)

Samuel Parris is a widower in his middle forties. Parris ‘believes he is being persecuted wherever he goes’ and is a man with ‘no interest in children, or talent with them’. He

is minister to a group of people that allows no theatre nor anything they might describe as ‘vain enjoyment’. As a people whose families have recently come to America, life is often brutal, and villagers are ‘forced to fight the land like heroes for every grain of corn’. Land to the west of the settlements around Salem has not yet been explored by white settlers like the Puritans – it is ‘full of mystery’ and is ‘dark and threatening’. From this darkness ‘Indian tribes’ regularly have emerged and Reverend Parris and his parishioners have lost relatives to raids by Native Americans.

Miller explains that in order to create unity in the town of Salem the people there ‘developed a theocracy’, a combination of ‘state and religious power whose function was to keep the community together’. **In such a situation it is easy to imagine how a man such as Reverend Parris might be**

central and hold much power. Miller notes that this form of government created a situation in which everyday dislikes of neighbours or rivals could not be expressed and, instead, festered beneath the surface. When the talk of witchcraft began in 1692, he notes, ‘hatreds of neighbours could now be openly expressed, and vengeance taken’. In *The Crucible*, people’s everyday discontents and disagreements are soon reframed as part of a battle of Good against Evil, of God against the Devil. One can now ‘cry witch against one’s neighbour and feel perfectly justified’. Clearly, Reverend Samuel Parris is minister to a community threatened on a number of fronts: from the outside by Native American raids and from inside by numerous tensions among villagers.

As the curtain rises on Act One, Reverend Parris kneels beside a bed in prayer. Betty, his daughter, is motionless on the bed. Parris mumbles and weeps and ‘a sense of his confusion hangs about him.’ Tituba, Parris’s Black slave enters, asking after Betty, before being chased from the room by Parris. Tituba has been brought by Parris from his previous home, Barbados, where he was a merchant before being a minister. Tituba’s entry has clearly angered him. He addresses her in a ‘fury’ and is then ‘overcome by sobs’. Returning to Betty, he is distressed and pleads with her: ‘Dear child. Will you wake, will you open up your eyes!’ **The tone struck by the opening of the play is one of trouble and distress caused by the unexplained sickness of a child.** Parris is understandably troubled by the fact that his daughter is unresponsive.

KEY POINTS



- *The Crucible* begins with Reverend Samuel Parris in a distressed state, praying by his daughter Betty’s bedside. She is unresponsive.
- Some background is given on his character. Parris is a man who both ‘believes he is being persecuted wherever he goes’ and has ‘no interest in children, or talent with them’.
- Life in Salem in 1692 is briefly profiled. It was a life of hard work on the land. Locals frequently fought among themselves over land and other grievances. Danger was presented by tribes of raiding Native Americans – non-Christians the people of Salem would have seen as being on the side of the Devil.

Parris confronts Abigail

Parris’s seventeen-year-old niece, Abigail Williams, enters. She is described by Miller as ‘a strikingly beautiful girl, an orphan, with an endless capacity for dissembling’. (To dissemble means to hide your true emotions or motivations.) Abigail, worried about Betty, is accompanied by Susanna Walcott who brings news from the town’s doctor. The doctor earlier examined Betty and has been ‘searchin’ his books since he left you, sir’. **Susanna brings some**

advice which alarms Parris: ‘he bid me tell you, that you might look to unnatural things for the cause of it’. Parris immediately denies the possibility of ‘unnatural things’ and instructs Susanna to tell the doctor to ‘put out all thought of unnatural causes here’. Parris knows that if the suspicion of ‘unnatural things’ is associated with him it could lead to his ruin as a minister. In order to rule out such a possibility, Parris reports that he has sent for the services of Reverend Hale of nearby Beverly, a minister with expertise in

unnatural causes. As Susanna leaves, both Parris and Abigail instruct her to ‘Go directly home and speak nothing of unnatural causes’.

Once alone, Parris interrogates Abigail. The minister has recently discovered a group of girls – including Betty, Abigail and Tituba – dancing at night in the woods. He accuses Abigail of ‘dancing like heathen in the forest’ and presses her to tell him the full truth of what she and the girls were doing. **This is crucial now, as Abigail reports that rumours are spreading through the town: ‘the rumour of witchcraft is all about’.** Villagers have come to Parris’s house and Abigail suggests that ‘you’d best go down and deny it yourself’. Parris demands the truth from Abigail before he goes down to address the crowd who have gathered. Abigail’s explanation of the events is simply that ‘we did dance, uncle, and when you leaped out of the bush so suddenly, Betty was frightened and then she fainted’. Abigail insists ‘we never conjured spirits’.

Parris warns Abigail that there is danger for him if her story is proven untrue. He is a man with ‘many enemies’ including a ‘faction that is sworn to drive me from my pulpit’. He emphasises how disastrous it could be if his household were shown to be ‘the centre of some obscene practice’. Elaborating on what he claims to have seen, Parris says ‘I saw Tituba waving her arms over the fire when I came on you ... And I heard screeching and gibberish’. And, claims Parris, ‘I saw – someone naked running through the trees’. Abigail immediately denies the accusation of nakedness. Explaining the sounds heard in the woods Abigail says Tituba ‘always sings her Barbados songs, and we dance’. **Finishing her defence of her story Abigail says: ‘There is nothin’ more. I swear it, uncle’.** This is one of the earliest of Abigail’s

many deceits and lies in the play.

A key part of the plot is built in the next brief interaction between Parris and Abigail. He reminds her of all he has done for her since her parents died: ‘I have given you a home, child, I have put clothes on your back’. Parris questions Abigail about whether or not she is respected in Salem, whether her ‘name in the town – is entirely white’. Why, if her name is ‘white’, was Abigail fired from her work as a servant to Goody Proctor? **What does Goody Proctor mean when she refuses to attend church because she won’t sit ‘so close to something soiled?’** In her defence, Abigail claims that Goody Proctor is ‘a bitter woman, a lying, cold, snivelling woman’. Ironically, Abigail calls Goody Proctor ‘a gossiping liar’ – this will be Abigail’s central role in the play. Just as Parris appears to be getting close to the truth of Abigail’s falling-out with Goody Proctor, their conversation is cut short by the entry of Mrs Ann Putnam.

Many of the key themes of the play are introduced in this short interaction. These include deception and secrecy, symbolised by the events Parris and Abigail talk about. They have taken place before the play opens, so Miller has decided to leave whatever happened in the woods unseen by the audience and disputed by the characters. Deception is highlighted in how Abigail is introduced as having ‘an endless capacity for dissembling’ and in Parris’s persistent, suspicious questioning. As a powerful man within Salem, Parris has much to lose if an accusation of witchcraft or other ‘unnatural causes’ is connected with him, his household or ministry. We note that both Parris and Abigail are aware of the power of hysteria, mob mentality, and gossip to do damage in such a small town.



KEY POINTS

- Parris is clearly alarmed and anxious at the doctor's suggestion that 'unnatural things' might be at the root of Betty's sickness.
- Parris confronts Abigail, eager to have the truth about what she and the girls were doing in the woods when he discovered them.
- Abigail claims Goody Proctor is a 'gossiping liar' and insists that her (Abigail's) name is 'entirely white' in Salem.
- A tone of dark mystery and deception is created by all the uncertainty in the opening part of Act One. Secrecy and deception are key themes throughout the play.

The Putnams' debate with Reverend Parris

Goody Putnam enters. She is memorably described by Miller as 'forty-five, a death-ridden woman, haunted by dreams'. She makes the strange claim, instantly denied by Parris, that Betty has been seen flying: 'Mr Collins saw her goin' over Ingersoll's barn'. **It is clear that gossip and fantastical stories have been spreading like wildfire around the village.** Thomas Putnam, Goody's husband, enters stating that 'It is a providence the thing is out now!' (A providence is an act of God.) As the Putnams observe Betty closely, they compare her symptoms to those of their daughter Ruth, who is also sick. Ruth 'never waked this morning, but her eyes open and she walks'. Hysterically, Goody Putnam claims that 'Her soul is taken, surely' and that 'it's death drivin' into them, forked and hoofed'.

Miller gives an extensive note about Thomas Putnam. He is described as 'a man with many grievances'. Of most importance here is that his wife's brother-in-law James Bayley was turned down as minister in Salem in favour of the Reverend Parris. Thomas Putnam had also jailed another former minister of Salem, George Burroughs, for 'debts the man did not owe'. Miller has also noted, from the historical record, that Thomas Putnam attempted to 'break his father's will' which left a large sum of money to Putnam's stepbrother. Again, he failed in this. **These failures, and the public humiliations**

that would have gone with them, have left Thomas Putnam a 'deeply embittered man'. He is described by Miller as determined to push Samuel Parris, whom he hates but pretends to like, 'towards the abyss'.

Thomas Putnam claims: 'There are hurtful, vengeful spirits layin' hands on these children' and is determined that Parris addresses the issue of witchcraft in the village. Mrs Putnam laments that she has 'laid seven babies unbaptized in the earth' and now sees Ruth, her only child, 'turning strange'. She confesses that Ruth has recently become 'a secret child' to her and, in an attempt to get to the bottom of it, Mrs Putnam sent Ruth to Tituba as she knows how to 'speak to the dead'. Parris is appalled at this, but Goody Putnam continues, saying she wanted to know 'what person murdered my babies'. **Thomas Putnam chimes in, pressing Parris to act as: 'There is a murdering witch among us'. Parris once again puts the accusations of meddling with spirits to Abigail who will only admit: 'Not I sir – Tituba and Ruth'. Parris, fearing the worst, says 'Now I am undone'.** Putnam consoles and encourages him, advising that all Parris needs to do is take charge of the situation: 'declare it yourself. You have discovered witchcraft'. Parris descends the stairs with the Putnams to pray with the crowd that has gathered below. **Parris's position is still a cautious one and he asks Putnam 'let you say nothing of witchcraft yet, I will not discuss it. The cause is yet unknown'.**

KEY POINTS



- Miller shows how easily panic, fuelled by gossip, can begin to spread in a small community.
- At the sign of this fresh trouble (i.e. the witchcraft), old sufferings resurface, such as the death of the Putnams' children and Thomas Putnam's longstanding dislike of Reverend Parris.
- Parris is terrified of losing his power and reputation and still wants to resist mentioning witchcraft as a cause of the girls' sickness.

Abigail: Ringleader of the girls

Abigail and Mercy, servant to the Putnam family, try to wake Betty. Fearing Parris will return to question Mercy, Abigail briefs her on what Parris knows already. Abigail says 'tell them we danced – I told them as much already' and that 'Tituba conjured Ruth's sisters to come out of the grave'. Mary Warren, servant to the Proctors and also present in the woods, enters. She is described by Miller as 'a naive, lonely girl'. Mary is panicked because 'the whole country's talkin' witchcraft' and 'Witchery's a hangin' error'. If they admit dancing, argues Mary, 'You'll only be whipped'. Betty stirs on the bed, then becomes more animated saying 'I'll fly to Mama. Let me fly!' before she puts one leg out the window. **After Abigail drags Betty back from the window, Betty accuses her: 'You drank a charm to kill John Proctor's wife! You drank a charm to kill Goody Proctor!'**

Abigail asserts herself among the girls, making it clear she is in command. She informs them of the extent of what they may

admit about their activities in the woods. 'We danced. And Tituba conjured Ruth Putnam's dead sisters. And that is all.' Chillingly, Abigail proceeds to warn and threaten the other girls that if they 'breathe a word' she will 'come to you in the black of some terrible night and I will bring a pointy reckoning that will shudder you'. To prove her mettle for such acts, we are reminded that 'I saw Indians smash my dear parents' heads' and 'I have seen some reddish work done at night'.

This brief scene gives us a key insight into the character of Abigail. She holds the power among the girls and has a clear agenda: the death of Goody Proctor. This is the only way, within her society, for Abigail and John Proctor to be together. For Abigail, deception is not a problem. She can say to Parris that her 'name is white', protesting her innocence, while soon after threatening a 'pointy reckoning' on the other girls. Abigail is at ease threatening great harm to the other girls. This hints at her determination and the prospect of the bad things she will do to achieve her aims.



KEY POINTS

- Mary Warren joins Abigail and Mercy and is clearly panicked by the talk of witchcraft she has heard spreading in the town. Abigail takes control, sternly instructing the other girls to tell very little of what was done in the woods.
- Abigail, away from her uncle, appears a controlling, menacing character, threatening a 'pointy reckoning' on the other girls if they reveal anything further in the village about their activities in the woods.

John Proctor has stern words with Abigail

As the girls are talking, John Proctor enters. **Proctor, who is the tragic hero of *The Crucible*, is a farmer in his mid-thirties. He is described as 'powerful of body, even-tempered, and not easily led' who has a 'sharp and biting way with hypocrites'**. Proctor draws the envy and resentment of many in Salem because he is slow to take sides in any dispute. In his presence 'a fool felt his foolishness instantly'. He is, as we shall shortly see, a character with his own troubles.

Upon Proctor's entry, Mary Warren, his servant, rises in fright to leave. She should be at home at her chores. As Proctor reminds her: 'I am looking for you more often than my cows!' Mary protests that she 'only come to see the great doings in the world' to which Proctor responds threateningly 'I'll show you a great doing on your arse one of these days. Now get you home'. Mary Warren exits in a hurry, as does Mercy, leaving Proctor and Abigail alone.

The scene between Abigail and Proctor is full of flirtation and warmth, soon turning to anger and bitterness. It is clear that the two have romantic history and we can now guess with more accuracy the reason Abigail was fired from the Proctors' service seven months before. Abigail 'absorbs' Proctor's presence and he speaks to her with 'the faintest suggesting of a knowing smile on his face'. It is clear that there is some affection still between them beneath

the surface. Explaining Betty's illness, Abigail says 'We were dancin' in the woods last night, and my uncle leaped in on us. She took fright, is all'. Proctor treats it all lightly and moves to go before Abigail steps into his path 'feverishly looking into his eyes'. She pleads with him 'Give me a word, John. A soft word' only for Proctor to counter firmly 'No, no, Abby. That's done with'.

Abigail, who is clearly still in love with Proctor, suggests that he did not come 'five mile to see a silly girl fly', but instead it was to see her. Proctor denies this. Abigail is tormented by Proctor's claim that 'I'll not be comin' for you no more' and tries to rekindle in him the desire she felt when they were in the midst of their affair. In evocative imagery she reminds Proctor of how 'you clutched my back behind your house and sweated like a stallion'. Proctor has, Abigail claims, been standing by her window some nights 'looking up, burning in your loneliness'. **There is still desire on both their parts, Abigail claims, and the only obstacle is Goody Proctor: 'I saw your face when she put me out, and you loved me then and you do now!'** Proctor concedes that 'I may think of you softly from time to time. But I will cut off my hand before I ever reach for you again'. Against Abigail's slurs about Elizabeth – 'a cold, snivelling woman' – Proctor is strongly defensive. A psalm is heard being sung in the room below as Abigail makes a final dramatic appeal to Proctor: 'I look for John Proctor that took me from my sleep and put knowledge in my heart! ... You loved me, John

Proctor, and whatever sin it is, you love me yet!’ **Crucially, Abigail strikes out at what she sees as the hypocrisies of Salem’s religious belief system. She claims it is all a way of hiding from reality and people’s true feelings: ‘I never knew what pretence Salem was’.** A pretence is a false gesture; Abigail is saying that Salem society is built on everyone showing a false face of respectability to the world.

The power of sexual desire is felt clearly in this scene; it grips both characters. Abigail curses the approach to sexual morality at work in Salem. Instead of leaving Elizabeth to be with Abigail,

Proctor stayed in his respectable marriage. To Abigail, this denial of what happened between them is hypocrisy, making the whole town a ‘pretence’ based on deception. If Parris has questioned whether her name is ‘entirely white’ we might imagine there are rumours about Abigail’s sexual behaviour in the village. This is coupled with the fact that nobody has hired her since she was dismissed as Proctor’s servant. **This has made her feel powerless and excluded. Our growing sense of Abigail and her anger makes us question whether she will tolerate this powerlessness for long.**

KEY POINTS



- We meet the play’s tragic hero, John Proctor, for the first time. He is ‘powerful of body, even-tempered, and not easily led’.
- Abigail and Proctor had an affair seven months before, leading to Proctor’s wife banishing Abigail from their home. They still clearly have affection for each other, though Proctor is determined not to revive their relationship.
- Abigail admits, without hesitation, that there is no substance to the claims of witchcraft.
- On Proctor’s refusal to reignite their love affair, Abigail becomes angry, calling Goody Proctor a ‘cold snivelling woman’ and condemning the falseness of Salem society.

Tensions rise in the parish

When the words ‘going up to Jesus’ are heard being sung as part of a psalm by those gathered downstairs, Betty ‘claps her ears suddenly and whines loudly’. This abruptly ends Abigail and John’s conversation as a number of people from downstairs rush in. Soon Reverend Parris, the Putnams and their servant Mercy, Rebecca Nurse and Giles Corey are present. Corey is described as ‘eighty-three ... knotted with muscle, canny, inquisitive, and still powerful’. **Abigail suggests about Betty that ‘She heard you singin’ and suddenly she’s up and screaming’, leading Putnam to claim ‘This is a notorious sign of witchcraft afoot’.** In panic, Parris looks for the assistance of the recently-arrived Rebecca Nurse: ‘go to her, we’re lost’.

Rebecca Nurse is seventy-two, white-haired and uses a walking-stick. She has an air of gentleness about her: as soon as she stands over Betty the child grows quiet. This astonishes the Putnams, who ask her to ‘go to my Ruth and see if you can wake her’. Rebecca Nurse’s sharp response of ‘I think she’ll wake in time’ indicates a tension between Rebecca Nurse and the Putnam family. Mrs Putnam says that Ruth ‘cannot eat’, to which Rebecca says ‘Perhaps she is not hungered yet’. **It is soon clear that Rebecca Nurse is doubtful about the presence of witchcraft in Salem.** She calls on her age and wisdom as grandmother to twenty-six children: ‘I have seen them all through their silly seasons’. John Proctor agrees with Rebecca’s position.

The Putnams and Parris refuse to be

persuaded to back down from talk of witchcraft. Rebecca, unhappy that Reverend Hale has been called for, notes ‘there is prodigious danger in the seeking of loose spirits’. She supports Proctor in his complaints against Parris’s overreactions. The Putnams drive forwards, reminding everyone present that they have lost seven children in infancy and their eighth, Rebecca, is now sick. Mrs Putnam sarcastically puts a question to Rebecca: ‘You think it God’s work you should never lose a child, nor grandchild either, and I bury all but one?’ Suggesting that there are more than natural causes behind these sad circumstances, Mrs Putnam says ‘There are wheels within wheels in the village, and fires within fires’. This expression – wheels within wheels – implies that there are a number of different influences and causes behind events, beyond the obvious ones.

Further tensions in Salem now become clear. **Putnam pressures Parris to instruct Reverend Hale to ‘proceed to look for signs of witchcraft’ when he arrives. Proctor advises him to back down as Putnam ‘cannot command Mr Parris’. Putnam accuses Proctor of being an uncommitted member of the community who has not been ‘at Sabbath meeting since snow flew’.** Proctor’s defence is an attack on Parris, claiming he preaches ‘only hellfire and bloody damnation’ and will ‘rarely ever mention God any more’. An insulted Reverend Parris complains about his salary and the general disrespect for the minister who is ‘the Lord’s man in the parish’. Parris makes a general accusation that ‘there is a faction and a party’ in his church determined to drive him out. He implies that Proctor is part of it. Turning to Rebecca Nurse, Proctor restates his

dislike of Parris’s behaviour: ‘I mean it solemnly, Rebecca; I like not the smell of this “authority”’. Rebecca, who sees Proctor’s position, advises him to back down, not to ‘break charity with your minister’ but to ‘make your peace’.

John Proctor and Giles Corey make to leave, exchanging friendly banter as they do. **Proctor says he is going to drag some wood (lumber) home, only for Thomas Putnam to interrupt. Putnam claims to own the land on which the lumber is found as ‘it stands clear in my grandfather’s will’.** Proctor and Corey disagree with Putnam, with Corey saying ‘Let’s get your lumber home, John’ and Putnam shouting after him ‘I’ll have my men on you, Corey! I’ll clap a writ on you!’ Tensions over property and resources are clearly seen here and should be understood as never too far from the surface among these villagers and farmers. Before Proctor and Corey can leave, Reverend John Hale enters from the town of Beverly.

As we meet more parishioners in this scene, a number of further tensions and grievances are seen in the community. The Putnams and Parris clearly disagree with Rebecca Nurse regarding how to address the sickness of the girls. Mrs Putnam describes Salem town as a place where motivations and causes are often unclear and involve more than the obvious factors: ‘wheels within wheels’. There is division, too, in the church in Salem. Putnam confidently puts John Proctor down because he hasn’t been ‘at Sabbath meeting since snow flew’. Proctor excuses himself by hitting back at Parris who will ‘rarely ever mention God anymore’. Putnam argues with Proctor over land as another power struggle emerges.

KEY POINTS



- There is division in the gathering about the cause of Betty's distress. Parris and Putnam suspect unnatural causes, Rebecca Nurse disagrees. There is disagreement about how to proceed.
- Rebecca Nurse and Giles Corey are introduced. Rebecca, a kind, gentle and sensible older woman is a counterbalance to the hysteria gripping Parris and the Putnams. Giles Corey provides a bit of earthy humour to the play at several key moments.
- The crisis of the girls' sickness brings all the pain and tension of the villagers to the surface. A scene beginning at the bedside of a sick child ends with faction fighting over divisions in the church, the minister's pay, disputed land boundaries, and the cause of infant deaths.

'Weighted with authority': Reverend Hale of Beverly arrives

Reverend Hale arrives from the nearby town of Beverly. He is 'nearing forty, a tight-skinned, eager-eyed intellectual'. For Hale it is a 'beloved' task to be called to Salem. It draws on his expertise in identifying witchcraft and gives him a sense of pride to have his 'unique knowledge ... publicly called for'. Like all others on the stage, Reverend Hale does not doubt the existence of the Devil nor his role in the world. His goal is to work towards 'light, goodness and its preservation' in Salem and he enters the scene weighed down by half a dozen heavy books of learning. Hale greets those in the room, complimenting and flattering the 'distinguished company' that has gathered there. Proctor leaves the gathering, clearly disapproving of the rising hysteria in the room. **Proctor's parting comment is telling: 'I've heard you to be a sensible man, Mr Hale. I hope you'll leave some of it in Salem'.**

Hale is led to Betty's bed to examine her as Reverend Parris and the Putnams excitedly relate to him a version of what has happened so far. Parris tells him Betty 'tries to fly', while Putnam comments on her reaction when she heard the psalm earlier: 'that's a sure sign of witchcraft afloat'. **Hale is unpersuaded by these details**

and instructs 'we cannot look to superstition in this. The Devil is precise; the marks of his presence are definite as stone'. Perhaps sensing the hysteria that is already gripping the village, Reverend Hale says that he won't examine Betty 'unless you are prepared to believe me if I should find no bruise of hell upon her'. This is agreed.

Reverend Hale asks 'what were the first warnings of this strangeness?' Parris, gesturing towards Abigail, tells him 'I discovered her and my niece and ten or twelve of the other girls, dancing in the forest last night'. Mrs Putnam adds that 'Mr Parris's slave has knowledge of conjurin', sir' and admits that she sent Ruth with Tituba so that 'she should learn from Tituba who murdered her sisters'. When Rebecca Nurse expresses shock and disapproval at this, Mrs Putnam's response is telling. She says 'I'll not have you judging me any more', indicating that there is serious underlying tension between the two women. For his part, Hale is horrified to hear of Mrs Putnam's terrible loss of seven children. **Reverend Hale gets to work consulting his books, relishing his role as he tells the villagers that: 'In these books the Devil stands stripped of all his brute disguises'.** As he moves back towards Betty, Rebecca rises, fearing Betty will be harmed. She departs, saying 'I go to God for you, sir', and clearly disapproving of what Hale and the others are about to engage in.

Before Hale can get to work, however, he has to deal with some queries from Giles Corey. It is one of the few comic moments in the play. Corey says 'I have always wanted to ask a learned man – what signifies the readin' of strange books?' When asked which books his wife reads that he considers strange, Corey answers 'I cannot tell; she hides them'. Corey complains that last night he 'tried and tried and could not say my prayers',

but when his wife finished reading and stepped out of the house, suddenly 'I could pray again'. **Corey concludes by admitting that he's 'not saying she's touched by the Devil' but when he has asked her about her reading materials she has refused to answer him.** Hale brushes Corey off with a promise that 'we'll discuss it' and finally turns to Abigail and Betty.

KEY POINTS



- When Reverend Hale arrives, bearing books on unnatural matters, both Parris and the Putnams are eager to provide him with information that will help him confirm the presence of witchcraft.
- Divisions persist between the Putnams and Rebecca Nurse, before the latter departs disapprovingly.
- Giles Corey provides information about his wife which will later be used against her.

'You must give us all their names'

As Reverend Hale finally questions Abigail and Betty, Act One moves towards a dramatic climax. Hale sits Betty up on her bed, though she remains lifeless. He warns others present to 'keep your wits about you', and Putnam especially to 'stand close in case she flies'. Hale introduces himself to Betty and questions her directly, even praying over her in Latin. Betty does not move. Hale turns to Abigail and begins to question her; he is eagerly assisted by Abigail's uncle, Reverend Parris. Abigail is clearly being evasive and unhelpful to Hale and he grasps her and emphasises how serious the situation is. 'Abigail, it may be your cousin is dying. Did you call the Devil last night?' Panicked, Abigail denies it before shifting the attention: 'Tituba, Tituba'. Abigail reports that Tituba called the Devil, though she doesn't know how, as Tituba 'spoke Barbados'. (It is unclear which language Tituba spoke but, from her defence that follows, it is clear that English is not her first language.) 'Did you feel any strangeness when she called him? A sudden cold wind, perhaps? A trembling below

the ground?' Abigail is asked. **Though Abigail denies seeing the Devil, she will remember the details suggested here by Hale and use them as weapons later. Tituba is called as Abigail's questioning continues.**

Abigail insists 'I am a good girl! I am a proper girl!' **The moment Tituba enters she 'instantly' points at her and accuses: 'She made me do it! She made Betty do it!'** In the face of Tituba's shock and anger Abigail increases her accusation, claiming 'She makes me drink blood!' Tituba does not deny it, but says it is not serious: 'I give she chicken blood!' Abigail continues her accusations against Tituba, including that 'She sends her spirit on me in church, she makes me laugh at prayer' and 'She comes to me while I sleep; she's always making me dream corruptions!' It is clear that Hale is convinced by Abigail's accusations and he presses on in his questioning of Tituba. 'When did you compact with the Devil?' he asks. When Tituba denies this, Parris instructs her 'You will confess yourself or I will take you out and whip you to your death, Tituba!' Putnam, watching closely, states: 'This woman must be hanged!'