

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Crucible

by

Arthur Miller

Book Information

Arthur Miller, The Crucible
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This work dramatizes the events of the seventeenth-century witchcraft trials in Salem and the furor caused by witchcraft accusations.

Topics: Arts, Theater/Plays; Family Life, Death; History, Colonial Period; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Abigail Williams the lynchpin of the group of "afflicted" girls, who seems to be a petulant and vindictive young woman, using the mad atmosphere of the witch trials to punish people for offenses large and small; also called Abby

Deputy Governor Danforth the head of the General Court, which convenes in Salem

Elizabeth Proctor John Proctor's long-suffering but loving wife, who begrudgingly forgives her husband's indiscretions and comes to recognize his essential goodness

Giles Corey a strong-minded farmer and John Proctor's friend, who loses his wife and is tortured to death during the trials

John Proctor a strong, independent farmer who, in choosing between his life and acquiescence to the madness of the witch trials, is faced with a torturous test of his own morality

Judge Hathorne a bitter, remorseless Salem judge

Mary Warren Abigail's friend and the Proctors' housemaid, who is forced by John Proctor to tell the truth about the pretenses perpetrated by the girls

Parris a petty and suspicious cleric of Salem, who joins in the "proceedings" wholeheartedly but experiences a failure of nerve as respected people are killed

Rebecca Nurse a gracious and wise elder of the town; a person of true Christian character who becomes among the first suspected "witches" to be arrested

Reverend Hale a learned cleric from Beverly, Massachusetts, who is called to Salem to investigate the possibility of witchcraft but later comes to see the hypocrisy in the court

Vocabulary

afflicted suffering from a disease, injury, or condition; in mental or physical pain; stricken by an illness; hurting; wounded; tormented; tortured; troubled

contention tension or strife from disagreement; a lack of agreement; a point made as part of an argument; a struggle for possession of a desired object; a dispute; rivalry; discord

faction a party or group that breaks away from a larger group; a party within a larger group that works to advance its own particular goals and agenda; disagreement or strife among people, often within a single organization or group

hysterical out of control or not rational, often due to fear, worry, or anger; very upset; overwrought; afraid to the point of panic; frantic

lechery excessive indulgence in sexual activity; sexual activity that is forbidden or considered sinful

mischief naughty but generally harmless behavior; naughty fun; trouble; misbehavior

pretense the act of giving a false appearance; a fake or make-believe action or behavior; pretending with the intention to deceive; that which is false or pretended; something that falsifies the truth

prodigious extremely great; far beyond or bigger than what is normal; enormous; awesome; having extraordinary talents and abilities that arouse feelings of awe

publicly in a manner that is open, accessible, or available to all people; in front of an audience; openly; not privately

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theology the study of the nature of God and religious truth; the rational study of religion and its influences; a course of religious studies or a profession acquired by taking such classes

Synopsis

As the play opens, some of the young girls in Salem, Massachusetts, have been overcome by a mysterious condition that keeps them in bed, apparently unable to eat or speak. Parris's own daughter is among the afflicted, and his niece, Abigail, is also heavily involved. There is talk in town of witchcraft, but Parris wants to quell such rumors even though he himself witnessed the girls sporting in the woods with his Barbadian slave, Tituba.

Parris sends for Reverend Hale, a cleric known for his expertise in matters of the occult. Before Hale arrives, we learn that John Proctor has been inappropriately involved with Abigail during her time as his housekeeper. Even now, she assumes the relationship will continue, but Proctor warns her off. At Betty Parris's bedside, various Salemites appear, and we see the long-held grudges and grievances between various factions. For example, Thomas and Ann Putnam, who opposed Parris's appointment by the church from the beginning, take a certain glee in the whispers of witchcraft involving Parris's daughter.

When Hale arrives, he begins to interrogate Abigail, and she confesses that Tituba made her drink blood. When Tituba is brought before the group assembled at Betty's bedside, she is overcome by relentless questioning and declares she saw the Devil--and with him, Sarah Good and Goody Osburn. Hale tells Tituba she has been chosen by God to cleanse Salem. As the emotional atmosphere in the room rises to a fever pitch, Betty sits up in her bed and names others of the Devil's consorts. Soon Abigail joins in, and Act I ends with their ecstatic cries of accusation.

Later, at the home of John and Elizabeth Proctor, husband and wife discuss the strange happenings in Salem. A court has been appointed, and new accusations are made daily. Elizabeth declares to

her husband that he must tell the court what Abigail told him--that the strange happenings had nothing to do with witchcraft. Their housemaid, Mary Warren, arrives home from the "proceedings" bearing a strange gift for Elizabeth--a poppet--and quickly lets it be known that Elizabeth's own name was discussed in court that day. Disturbed and desperate, Elizabeth pleads with John to go to Abigail and break any "promises" about life for the two of them to which she may cling. She is sure Abigail means to put her away by this mischief and take her place with John.

After a disquieting visit from Reverend Hale, the household is rocked by the news that both Rebecca Nurse and Martha Corey have been arrested. It is not long before a marshal of the court comes for Elizabeth, finding her "poppet" sufficient evidence to arrest her. An anguished John Proctor decides to confess his relationship with Abby to the court and call an end to the entire mad enterprise.

At court the next day, Proctor relates events truthfully. Deputy Governor Danforth decides to test the veracity of Proctor's story by bringing his wife into court and asking her to confirm that John is an adulterer. Thinking to protect his name, she denies the accusation and seals his fate.

Months later, at the Salem jail, accused witches are hanged on a regular basis. Reverend Hale has changed and is now busying himself with comforting the accused. Parris is losing his nerve and has sent for Deputy Governor Danforth. He asks timidly whether it might be best to postpone the hangings for a while, especially given that Abigail has gone missing with the contents of Parris's strongbox. Undeterred, Danforth declares, "Postponement now speaks a floundering on my part." He learns that the group to be executed that morning, including Rebecca Nurse and Martha Corey, will not confess. He hopes he can extract a confession from Proctor and asks Elizabeth to speak to him. In an agonizing scene between husband and wife, Elizabeth leaves the decision to John. In almost unbearable anguish, he decides to confess. "I will have my life," he tells Danforth. As if to twist the knife further, Danforth

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declares he will affix Proctor's confession to the door of the church. The loss of his name in such a manner is more than Proctor can take, and he tears up the confession and joins Rebecca Nurse to walk to the place of the hanging.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Literary Analysis

What were some of the factors that, according to the playwright, might have paved the way for the witch-hunts?

In his introductory remarks, the playwright examines the historical underpinnings of the Massachusetts Colony at the time in which the play was set. A strong combination of state and religious power, a theocracy, was in place, and it controlled the society and protected it against real physical threats and insidious threats of disunity. By 1692, however, society was changing. Physical threats were of less concern, and the societal restraints began to feel too severe. In addition, the witch-hunts gave people the chance to act on long-held grudges against their neighbors. There was also a satisfaction in speaking in public about acts or sins that could never have been uttered before.

Inferential Comprehension

What was ironic about Elizabeth Proctor's declaration in court that her husband was NOT a lecher?

Prior to Elizabeth's appearance in court, her husband told Danforth that she was a woman incapable of lying. Here, lying perhaps for the first time, Elizabeth seeks to protect her husband's reputation. Instead, Elizabeth's failure to corroborate John's testimony is the final act that seals his fate.

Teachable Skills

Responding to Literature Responding to
Literature

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors

Understanding Historical & Cultural Factors

Understanding the Author's Craft

Understanding Author's Craft

Extending Meaning Extending Meaning