

**WOLFNOTE SUMMARY OF...**

**ARTHUR MILLER'S  
THE CRUCIBLE**



**CONTEXT**

This play takes place in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692.

We are in the home of Reverend Parris, whose daughter, Betty lies apparently unconscious in bed after being discovered at midnight dancing in the woods outside Salem. Her father had witnessed this scene, which involved the house black slave Tituba, and Parris' niece Abigail, and one other unidentified naked girl.

It later transpired that this naked girl was Ruth, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Putnam and she was in a similar comatose state.

There is talk of witchcraft.

Abigail is the leader of the girls and she had an affair with John Proctor and was dismissed by his wife from the household. She still desires John and she is obsessed with becoming his wife.

During the episode in the woods, Abigail drank blood and cast a spell in order to kill Mrs. Proctor.

The physician is unable to determine Betty's illness.

A well-respected member of the community, Rebecca Nurse tries to calm the situation and warns the Reverend Parris against blaming witchcraft for Betty's illness, as it would set a dangerous precedent.

There is animosity between Mrs. Putnam and Rebecca because all Rebecca's children are healthy whilst Mrs. Putnam has lost seven children in infancy, and she believes witchcraft is responsible for this.

There is a mutual dislike between the Reverend Parris and Proctor. Parris believes Proctor heads a group opposed to Parris and he is fearful for his position in the town.

There are disputes between the Putnams and the Corey family over land. Putnam is ambitious and desires more possessions.

The Reverend Hale arrives in the town to investigate the strange events. He is an expert in witchcraft.

Tituba, the black slave, is suspected of conjuring up spirits, and Abigail blames her for enticing her to sin.

Hale questions Tituba who accuses Goody Good and Goody Osburn of witchcraft.

Abigail also confesses to witchcraft, but fully repents and so starts a wave of accusations of witchcraft in the town. She sees a way to obtain John Proctor by accusing his wife of witchcraft.

The Proctors' servant, Mary Warren is appointed an official of the Court and she manages to protect Elizabeth Proctor from the first accusation of witchcraft.

Hale arrives at the Proctors' house to question them. He is concerned at Proctor's poor Church attendance and the fact that their last child has not yet been baptised. Hale is not convinced of Elizabeth's innocence and soon after she is arrested. They find a doll that was made by Mary Warren in the Proctors' house, and concealed inside is a needle. This is taken as evidence of witchcraft. Abigail stabs herself with a needle and accused Elizabeth of this act.

The Court convicts Martha Corey and Rebecca Nurse of witchcraft.

Giles Corey believes that Putnam is using his daughter to accuse his neighbours of witchcraft so that he can gain their land. Corey is arrested for Contempt of Court.

Deputy Governor Danforth who imposes a stay of execution for Elizabeth, as she is pregnant, heads the Court.

Proctor persuades Mary Warren, his servant, to make a testimony against Abigail and the other girls. However, through fear she withdraws this statement and matters look bleak for the Proctors. Proctor is forced to make public his affair with Abigail and he calls her a whore, and tells the Court that her aim is to have Elizabeth executed in the hope of becoming his wife. He has faith in his wife's honesty, telling the Court that she would never lie. However, on this one occasion she does lie to protect her husband from being charged with Lechery. John Proctor is arrested and he is scheduled to hang with Rebecca Nurse.

The Reverend Hale realises that matters have got out of hand, and hopes to save the lives of the prisoners by persuading them to confess to witchcraft. Proctor does confess to witchcraft, but when he realises that a written Affidavit is required to be posted on the Church door, he refuses and is taken to the gallows.

**THE AUTHOR**

Arthur Miller was born on 17<sup>th</sup> October 1915 in Harlem.

He was the son of Polish immigrants and his parents enjoyed good prosperity up until the Wall Street Crash of 1929. Financial hardship forced the Miller family to move to Brooklyn in 1929. He was not a good student and in fact he failed to graduate from High School, and his initial working career involved a mixture of labouring jobs either in the country or on the New York Waterfront. Miller learned much about life at the sharp end, and this was to stand him in good stead when he commenced his literary career. In fact, his work 'A View from the Bridge' dealt with life on the waterfront.

His work in the countryside gave him the inspiration for the movie, 'The Misfits' which starred his late wife Marilyn Monroe. It was whilst he was earning a meagre wage from menial work that he started to read extensively, and he decided that a literary career should be the goal to aim for. He was able to convince the University of Michigan to take him on as a student although he had never graduated from High School. He supported himself at University by working on a Newspaper and entering literary competitions. He graduated in 1938 and returned to New York. He soon became involved in writing scripts for radio and the theatre. Much of his work has the common thread of dealing with the problems faced by the man in the street.

His first major success was the play, 'All My Sons' published in 1947. This was followed by 'Death of a Salesman' published in 1949 and which won the Pulitzer Prize.

Many misinterpreted Miller's views regarding the common man as being sympathetic with communism, and he was subsequently investigated in 1947 by the House Un-American Activities Committee, but was completed cleared by the Committee.

'The Crucible' was published in 1953 and there is no doubt that Miller is making a direct comparison in this book of the Salem Witch Trials with the McCarthy Hunt for Communists. However, it is to do the work injustice by viewing it as merely a swipe against the McCarthy era, and there is a far deeper message in this work concerning human nature and mass hysteria.

Miller was married to Marilyn Monroe in 1955 and he wrote the screenplay of 'The Misfits' for her in 1961.

'After the fall' was published in 1964, and is a fictionalised account of his relationship with Marilyn.

Also in 1964, he wrote 'Incident at Vichy'. Other works include 'Fame' 1970, 'The American Clock' 1980, 'Elegy for a Lady' 1982, and in the same year 'Some Kind of Love Story'.

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

In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, Miller has received numerous awards over the years, including The Gold Medal for Drama, by the National Institutes of Arts and Letters. In 1965 he was elected President of Poets, Essayists and Novelists.

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

The Puritans were a branch of English Protestants who were particularly influential during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

They came into being during the reign of Elizabeth I, being a group of activists within the Church of England. Their chief aim was to ensure that a truly Protestant Church was created, and not an Anglo-Catholic one. Their main influence was John Calvin who was a French Theologian of the Reformation, and in 1533 he became a Protestant and wrote the work, Institutes of the 'Christian Religion'.

The Puritans were soon at odds with mainstream Church of England, and they faced much persecution. Many of the leading Puritans openly opposed James I and Charles I during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Many of these activists immigrated to America and set up communities in the New World. They were at the height of their power in England after the English Civil War when Oliver Cromwell was Lord Protector of England.

The societies that they set up in America were generally founded upon religious intolerance. They viewed themselves as being a Christian oasis in the midst of the wilderness governed by the devil and inhabited by pagan Indians. The initial success of the colonies can be attributed to their ability to work as a complete unit for the same aims, but once the societies were established and they had succeeded in surviving these inhospitable conditions, many members started to rebel against the austere regime. For as time passed and the land was more cultivated, less time was needed in physical labour and many had more spare time on their hands.

The Puritan ideal is for all members of the society to share the same beliefs and goals, but God made man to be of infinite variety, and it is unnatural to restrict the individual who needs to express their own type of freedom. Puritans consider any desire to be unnatural and the devil's work, in particular the desire to obtain material wealth or sexual freedom. What we have here, therefore, is similar to a pressure cooker and inside are the Puritans who are being forced to deny their natural desires and individuality. However, Miller has not called his book The Pressure Cooker, he has called it 'The Crucible', which likens it to a container for melting ores. It is also similar to a cauldron, which witches use, and so it serves two purposes indicating the heat of the situation and the fact that this is a witch-hunt. Of course, Puritans believe that a fate of fire and brimstone awaits those who transgress, so we have a further reference to fire and pressure.

Before 1692, the community of Salem had faced many problems and difficulties and some of the disputes went as far as an internal Trial, but by and large, the community still carried out its day-to-day business as one unit. On the election of Reverend Parris, which was a controversial appointment, a split occurred in the community. It didn't help the situation that Parris made certain demands regarding his income and also he demanded the title for the minister's manse. On one side of the divide were the Nurse family and on the other side were the Putnams, and the division between these two influential families widened. The fact that Reverend Parris had a Negro servant, Tituba, served as a catalyst for these strange events; which were attributed to witchcraft. It may be she was aware of voodoo or other such practices of the occult.

In February 1692 the first Warrants were issued and these were in respect to an eccentric woman and another woman who rarely attended Church. During the Trials, nineteen people were hanged as witches, and fifty-five others openly confessed to being witches. Two dogs were also hanged for witchcraft. Giles Corey was pressed to death with stones for refusing to answer to an Indictment. At the request of some of the heirs of the accused, the Government paid out various sums of money to those descendants of people hanged as witches.

## CHARACTERS

### REVEREND PARRIS

He is the weak minister of Salem whose daughter instigates the witch-hunt in the town of Salem. He is a narrow-minded, self-centred person who wishes to strengthen his authority in the town, and hopes to achieve this through the Trials proceedings.

### BETTY PARRIS

She is the daughter of Reverend Parris who is discovered dancing in the woods with Abigail, Tituba and Ruth Putnam.

### ABIGAIL WILLIAMS

She is the Reverend Parris' niece who was once the servant of the Proctors, but is dismissed by Goody Proctor for having an affair with her husband. She lusts after John Proctor still, and sees herself by his side as Mrs. Proctor. This can only be done through the death of Elizabeth Proctor and Abigail uses the witch Trials as a means of attaining this goal.

### TITUBA

Reverend Parris' black slave, Tituba, casts spells by the fire as the girls dance round about in the woods.

### MRS. ANN PUTNAM

She is a bitter woman because she has lost seven infant children, who fail to see that she may be responsible for these deaths, and blames her misfortune on witchcraft. She is jealous of Rebecca Nurse, which stems from the fact that she represents everything that Ann is not. This leads to her accusing Rebecca of witchcraft.

### THOMAS PUTNAM

He is a greedy man who covets his neighbours' land and again uses false accusations of witchcraft so that he might increase his property.

### RUTH PUTNAM

Ruth is the Putnams' daughter who is used as a tool by her parents in accusing members of Salem of witchcraft.

### JOHN PROCTOR

He is a hard-working Salem farmer who is seduced by Abigail his servant whilst his wife is ill and he is vulnerable. He dislikes Reverend Parris and, therefore, does not attend Church on a regular basis. He becomes the central character of the play whose execution forms its climax.

### ELIZABETH PROCTOR

Goody Proctor is an upstanding and honest woman who stays loyal to her husband despite his affair with Abigail. She forgives him this transgression and inadvertently causes his imprisonment.

### REVEREND HALE

He is brought into Salem to investigate the allegations of witchcraft in the town. He initially supports the witch Trials, but later denounces them and tries to save those that have been accused of witchcraft.

### FRANCIS and REBECCA NURSE

They are both respected individuals in Salem. Mrs. Putnam accuses Rebecca of witchcraft and Francis is a farmer and landowner and was often called upon to settle disagreements.

### GILES COREY

He was an elderly inhabitant of Salem who challenged the Court in an attempt to defend his wife charged of witchcraft. He received a different type of execution and was pressed to death, rocks being placed on his chest.

### DEPUTY GOVERNOR DANFORTH

He is head of the Salem Court, who signs the death sentences of those who refuse to confess. He adopts a blinkered attitude and refuses to use common sense and logic in dealing with these cases. Any deviation from the course he has set would be a sign of weakness, and he refuses to pardon any of those found guilty of witchcraft, and in the end nineteen innocent people were executed.

## ACT 1 – Scene 1

### Summary

This play takes place in Salem, Massachusetts and concerns a strict Puritan society.

There is a previous scene that the audience does not see, but provides the driving force for the whole play. It concerns Betty Parris the Reverend Parris' daughter, Abigail Williams Parris' niece, and Tituba a black slave from Barbados, who was dancing in the forest outside of Salem at midnight. There was also one other unidentified female running naked through the forest.

The Reverend Samuel Parris witnessed this scene and the play commences in his house where his daughter Betty lies unconscious in bed upstairs.

The town physician Dr. Griggs is unable to determine what ails Betty, but suggests witchcraft. Parris has questioned Abigail concerning the activities in the woods, but he feels she is not being entirely honest. He is also angry with his Negro slave who seemed to be casting spells over the fire in the woods. Abigail denies that she was participating in witchcraft and Parris also asks Abigail why she was dismissed from her job with John Proctor and his wife Goody (Elizabeth) Proctor. (*Goody is used as a title with a surname and refers to a woman, especially an old woman or housewife.*) Elizabeth is regarded as a pillar of the Puritan community being a person of high morals.

Mr. and Mrs. Putnam call, another prominent family in Salem, and they agree that Betty's illness results from witchcraft. Their own daughter, Ruth, has fallen into a similar trance. Mrs. Putnam is very superstitious, as she has had seven of her infants die under what she considers mysterious circumstances. Putnam tries to persuade Parris to openly declare that there is witchcraft at work in the community. The Reverend resists this, for it may give his enemies more ammunition to have him ousted from the town.

### Interpretation

The opening scene immediately provides the audience with a view of the restrictive Puritan society in Salem.

Puritans were English Protestants who immigrated to America to avoid religious persecution. The societies they set up initially in the New World were founded on religious intolerance. This is an unnatural state and the consequences of smothering natural human instincts are documented in this play.

The people in Salem live a bleak and depressing existence. Their world is spartan and basic, and they are not able to indulge in any forms of free behaviour.

The pre-scene involves a dance in the woods outside Salem, which could not be tolerated within the town. Puritans regarded the wild world or wilderness as Satan's realm, being untamed and dangerous. Therefore, the dancers are able to feel freedom and the excitement of doing something forbidden in their cavorting in the woods. In modern terms, this would be regarded as letting off steam, quite harmless in itself. However, one of the revellers, Abigail, has an agenda and she is driven by a particular desire.

Desire is something forbidden by the Puritans and there are many of the characters possessed by this strong feeling. Abigail desires Proctor in a sexual way. She lost her job with the Proctor family because Goody Proctor discovered that her husband was having an affair with Abigail. Goody Proctor had been ill and Abigail took over the running of the home and seduced Proctor when he was vulnerable.

Other characters also have desires. For some it is the desire for power, for others it is the desire for possessions e.g. Putnam wishes to possess more land, Parris wishes to have more control.

Reverend Parris is represented as a self-centred man. He is more concerned about his position in the community than his ailing daughter. He doesn't wish to declare that there is witchcraft in Salem, for this would undermine his position. Others wish for the witchcraft to be revealed for it can be used to explain away mysterious happenings, such as the death of Ann Putnam's infants, and the ailing girls who were dancing in the woods, Ruth and Betty.

## ACT 1 – Scene 2

### Summary

This takes place in Betty's bedroom where Abigail and Mercy, the Putnam's servant, are trying to wake Betty.

Abigail instructs Mercy as to what she is to say about the goings-on in the woods.

The Reverend Parris has already established that in addition to the dancing, Tituba was trying to raise Ruth's dead sisters.

Mercy is the unidentified naked female.

Rumours concerning the witchcraft are spreading in Salem and this news worries the girls because they may be labelled as witches.

Mary Warren enters the room. She is the Proctor's servant and she confirms the rumours about witchcraft. The girls begin to argue and Betty awakes. It now transpires that Abigail also drank blood in the woods and tried to cast a spell in order to kill Goody Proctor. She threatens the others to keep quiet or she will practice witchcraft on them. The story is that they only danced and that Tituba raised Ruth's sisters from the dead. Betty collapses again.

#### Interpretation

Abigail emerges as the leader of the girls. She clearly instigated the behaviour in the woods for her own agenda. She had a sexual relationship with Proctor and desires to possess him for herself. There is no way in the Puritan society that he could leave his wife and go with her, so her only alternative of being with the man she lusts after, is through the death of Elizabeth Proctor. She, therefore, casts a spell to destroy her rival.

The other girls are clearly terrorised by Abigail who bullies them into staying silent about her spell casting and drinking blood.

Abigail is the source of evil in the community. She intimidates those close to her and uses deceit in order to obtain her goals. Her maliciousness will escalate as the play unfolds.

"Let either of you breathe 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."

This is a prelude for the accusations of witchcraft against other members of the community that Abigail will make.

At present Abigail is seeking self-preservation, but she will learn that she has power and she will use this fully towards the end of the story.

The audience, therefore, becomes aware that Abigail is dangerous. The extent of this danger will grow as we realise how weak the Puritan society is.

The major conflict of characters will be between Goody Proctor and Abigail Williams.

#### ACT 1 – Scene 3

##### Summary

Still in Betty's room, John Proctor arrives and he is alone with Abigail.

Proctor suspects that Abigail is responsible for Betty's illness, or as he calls it "this mischief". Abigail tries to put on an air of innocence saying that the girls were merely dancing. Abigail accuses Proctor of coming here just to see her, but he denies this.

Abigail wishes to rekindle the affair. She feels that he would love her if Elizabeth, his wife, weren't in the way.

Proctor is attracted to Abigail because she does not adhere to the Puritan protocols.

##### Interpretation

Abigail takes the opportunity to establish Proctor's feelings for her whilst they are alone and Betty sleeps.

It has been seven months since their affair, and Abigail's feelings for Proctor have not diminished.

The audience realises the contrasts between Abigail and Elizabeth Proctor, although they have not seen the latter character yet. They only know about her through her reputation. She is viewed as a woman of high morals. In contrast, Abigail is in Puritanical terms, a loose woman. She seduced Proctor and in addition to this she indulges in extreme activities, and would wish to commune with the devil if this were possible. In any event, her actions will have evil consequences.

Abigail makes no attempt to suppress her desires. She wishes to possess Proctor and she will achieve this through any means. She initially possessed him through seduction, but this was only temporary, and she now hopes to possess him by manipulating others and terrorising her unwitting accomplices.

Her one weakness is her feelings for John Proctor.

It is clear that Proctor does not fully agree with the Puritan way, but he recognises that his wife is a genuinely good person and he is determined to remain loyal to her despite his lapse into sin.

One of the other storylines in the play is Proctor's attempt to understand himself and the aims of the Puritan society.

It is not clear whether Proctor appreciates Abigail's total wickedness, and he may consider himself partly to blame for his own seduction. He is probably not experienced regarding a woman who lusts after him.

#### ACT 1 – Scene 4



### Summary

Betty awakes and hears some parishioner's downstairs singing a hymn. She screams and covers her ears, and Mrs. Putnam interprets this as a sure sign of witchcraft because poor Betty cannot 'bear to hear the Lord's name'.

Rebecca Nurse attempts to calm Betty down.

Putnam asks if Rebecca will come and visit his daughter Ruth, and try and wake her. Rebecca is a calming influence and advises that both the girls' condition will pass. She tells the Reverend that it is a dangerous course to take to declare that these instances are related to witchcraft.

Mrs. Putnam, who is jealous of Rebecca because all her children are well, declares that it is witchcraft that is to blame for the loss of her children.

Some of the men present, including Giles Corey who is an elderly inhabitant of Salem, criticise Reverend Parris because he seems more concerned about money than God's will. They advise him what they expect of their minister.

Putnam then accuses Proctor of stealing wood from his land. The land in question is disputed. Putnam says it is his, but Proctor bought the land from Goody Nurse's husband.

### Interpretation

We have another indication that this society is not happy and that the members have petty disagreements with one another.

The men squabble about land and the effectiveness of their minister, and the women argue about witchcraft and the behaviour of the young girls. Ann Putnam cannot accept that it is probably her fault that her children die in infancy and not the devil's doing, although seven deaths seem extreme. Many children died in infancy at that time due to harsh weather and living conditions.

Parris is all too aware that there is a move to remove him from Salem. He tries to suppress the stories concerning witchcraft because it is a sign that God is not smiling on the community if witchcraft can enter into it.

Mrs. Putnam is obsessed now with blaming the death of her children on supernatural forces. This leads to her obtaining Tituba's services in calling on her children's spirits. She also blatantly shows her dislike of Rebecca Nurse. Both actions would normally invite serious censure from the Puritan society, but we are already seeing signs of Salem's breakdown.

### ACT 1 – Scene 5

#### Summary

The Reverend Hale arrives at Parris' house in order to visit Betty.

The Putnams advise Hale that their daughter Ruth suffers likewise and hope he will examine her as well.

Hale stresses that he will not examine Betty unless all accept that witchcraft is not the cause.

Mrs. Putnam declares that Tituba can conjure up spirits and confesses that she had sent Ruth to Tituba in order for this to take place so she could find out who murdered her infants.

Hale examines Betty.

Giles Corey confesses to Hale that his wife Martha has been reading strange books and he is unable to pray.

Hale is then confronted by the story of the girls dancing in the woods, so he decides to question Abigail who lays the blame on Tituba. Tituba is accused of drinking blood. Hale then questions Tituba who only wishes to redeem herself and so she admits that she has been working with the devil, and that she saw the devil with Goody Good and Goody Osburn.

Abigail admits that she has given herself to the devil, but she wishes to renounce the devil and she only wants "the sweet love of Jesus". Abigail confirms Tituba's story and that in addition to Good and Osburn, Bridget Bishop was also with the devil.

Betty takes the opportunity of contributing by waking up and accusing George Jacobs and Goody Howe.

More accusations follow.

### Interpretation

This is the first major turning point of the play.

There is now growing hysteria concerning the spectre of witchcraft in Salem.

Hale has clearly arrived with the view of quashing any views of witchcraft, but he is bombarded with so much apparent evidence that he relents and examines the various participants.

It is only Rebecca Nurse that identifies the danger in this course of action. It is noted that she leaves the house early on, suspecting the growing hysteria.

Hale relents to the theory that witchcraft is present because of the following:

- the death of Putnam's infants
- Betty and Ruth's condition
- the dancing in the woods and Tituba's ability to conjure spirits
- Martha Corey's strange books,
- and so forth.

All of these events can be individually explained but brought together to the God-fearing society, all smell of witchcraft.

What these Puritans fail to see is that Betty and Ruth are feigning illness to avoid punishment for their evil liaison with Abigail.

Abigail is the one that will profit from this mass hysteria, and her manipulation is already having drastic consequences.

Rebecca makes the mistake of leaving the scene when Hale examines Betty for signs of witchcraft. She tries to criticise Mrs. Putnam for delving in the devil's work by sending her daughter to Tituba.

The audience has little sympathy for any of these characters except Tituba. She has no power in this situation being a black female slave, and she quickly confesses to witchcraft when threatened with violence. It is only through self-preservation that she implicates others, the town misfits and eccentrics, but she is really only confessing what her interrogators wish to hear.

Abigail takes on the role of repentant sinner, confessing that she has consorted with the devil, but now seeks salvation. She is taking full advantage of the blind ignorance of those around her and she is now relishing in the role of being the expert witness to the witchcraft. All of a sudden, Abigail's previously poor reputation has been forgotten about.

## ACT 2 – Scene 1

### Summary

The scene changes from the house of Reverend Parris to the Proctor's home and eight days have elapsed since Abigail and Betty started accusing people of witchcraft.

The relationship between John and Elizabeth is expanded and we learn that Elizabeth has tried to forgive her husband over his affair with Abigail, but tension still exists between the couple. John is now aware that Elizabeth does not fully trust him. When John returns late for dinner, Elizabeth questions him, suspecting that he may have gone to Salem. He has been working late in the fields.

Elizabeth advises John that their servant Mary Warren has been absent all day in Salem. A Court has been set up to deal with the outbreak of witchcraft in the town. Four Magistrates have been assembled and the Deputy Governor of the Province heads the Court. So far, fourteen people have been jailed for witchcraft.

Elizabeth implores Proctor to go into Salem and reveal Abigail's lies. Proctor had told his wife of the conversation he had with Abigail, but did not reveal that they were alone. This now comes to light because he cannot give evidence against her because there were no witnesses to their conversation. The two argue over John's continued dishonesty, and Elizabeth suspects that he still has feelings for Abigail.

### Interpretation

The initial impression of the Proctor household is that it is a place of calm in stark contrast to the scenes in the Parris household. This façade is what the Proctors project to the Salem community, but underneath, is still tension arising from Proctor's affair with Abigail. Elizabeth is now suspicious of Proctor and she is concerned that he is late for his meal, and wonders where he has been. Proctor is antagonised by Elizabeth's suspicion and also because their servant, Mary Warren, has been to Salem for the whole day despite his specific instructions. It is inevitable that the two will argue, and so the audience obtains a true picture in regard to the relationships in the household.

The audience is aware of the lunacy surrounding the witch-hunt, and soon the wave of hysteria will engulf the Proctors' home.

We also sense that there is general disobedience by the young girls, for Mary has disobeyed her master's orders and gone into Salem.

We observe Proctor's inability to do the right thing regarding Abigail because he has lost confidence and self-esteem as he has given in to temptation.

He responds to Elizabeth when she doubts his honesty by saying, "Let you look sometimes for the goodness in me, and judge me not." This is an important passage as he cannot stand his wife judging him, but as the Trial develops in Salem, there will come a point when he has to judge himself and face up to his responsibilities.



## ACT 2 – Scene 2

### Summary

Finally, Mary Warren returns from Salem.

Proctor is furious with her, but defiantly she tells them that she is now an official of the Court and will be required to attend every day. She gives Elizabeth a poppet (doll), which she made while waiting in the Court. There are now thirty-nine people in jail and Goody Osburn has not confessed to witchcraft and she is to be hanged. Proctor is exasperated by this news for he believes that the Court is condemning people without concrete evidence.

Mary states that it was fortunate that she was at Court for she was able to defend Elizabeth who was accused of witchcraft. In desperation, Elizabeth pleads with Proctor to do something, as it is clear that Abigail wants to get rid of her. She is certain that Abigail will accuse her of witchcraft again. She tells her husband that Abigail wants to take her place, and that he must make it clear to her that this will never happen, whatever happens to her.

### Interpretation

Although the audience does not view the Court scene, we are aware of the hysteria that is taking over the town of Salem.

These young girls have now become the instruments of God's justice and their past misdemeanours have been forgotten about. Anyone in the community who has crossed the girls is now in fear of being accused of witchcraft. Abigail is relishing her newfound power and is exercising it to the full so that she can possess Proctor. The other girls also enjoy their status, clearly shown in Mary's insubordination to her master. Previously, Proctor would have disciplined Mary in the same way as he would discipline a child, but he now has no control over her and this frustrates him.

However, she does have some loyalty still to the Proctors, and she gives Elizabeth the present of a doll that she has made whilst in Court. This appears on the face of it as an innocent gesture, but it will have serious repercussions later on in this act.

The audience is aware that the net is closing in on Elizabeth and that time is of the essence. Will the Proctors merely wait for the inevitable, or will John take some action to avert disaster? There seems to be only two courses of action available to Proctor – either to convince Abigail to stop her plan because he is not interested in her, or go to the Reverend Hale and tell him the whole story.

Reference is made to the lack of evidence regarding those accused of witchcraft. In Goody Osburn's case, Mary Warren had met Osburn when she had come begging and took sick immediately afterwards. This is the evidence held against Osburn, and on this she could be hanged.

## ACT 2 – Scene 3

### Summary

As a result of Elizabeth being named in the Court, the Reverend Hale visits the Proctors with a view to testing them and to warn them. Firstly, Hale is concerned at Proctors poor attendance at Church. This is because Proctor hates Parris, and not for any sinister reason. Hale asks him to recite the Ten Commandments. He recalls nine, but forgets the commandment concerning adultery, which is apt considering his liaison with Abigail. Proctor tells Hale that he had a conversation with Abigail who admitted that witchcraft was not responsible for Ruth and Betty's ailments. Hale says that he will have to testify in Court that Abigail is a fraud.

Hale then tests Elizabeth asking if she believes in witches. She doesn't.

Giles Corey and Francis Nurse arrive saying that both Martha Corey and Rebecca Nurse have been arrested for witchcraft.

### Interpretation

Hale comes over as a just man, but someone who has been caught up in the mass hysteria of Salem. However, he is experienced in such matters and knows that seemingly pious people can turn their hands to evil.

Another matter that concerns him is that the youngest Proctor child is unbaptised. Again this is because of Proctor's dislike for Reverend Parris.

It is ironic that Proctor should forget the one commandment that he has specifically broken recently.

Hale's visit also serves as a warning that Elizabeth may possibly face arrest. It is not evident whether the Proctors will act as a consequence.

It is a pity Hale had not tested the initial evidence concerning the girls at the outset, for this might have saved so much upheaval in Salem now. Instead, he has allowed himself to be swept along on the tide of lunacy.

The net tightens even further with the arrest of Rebecca and Martha for witchcraft. It appears at present that the evil and vindictive members of the society are holding sway over the rest.

At the end of Hale's examination, he appreciates that Proctor is not an evil man. However, the Proctors' defence over Rebecca's arrest might be a fateful move. Rebecca is viewed as a highly moral person who leads her day-to-day life according to the scriptures. With this in mind, Elizabeth cannot agree that witches exist. Elizabeth sees herself in the same mould as Rebecca, for she has tried to devote her life to moral goodness and charity.

Hale may now doubt his original good intentions and must consider that he may have imprisoned innocent people, but these facts will need to be resolved in the Court.

#### ACT 2 – Scene 4

##### Summary

Still at the Proctors' house, two officers of the Court arrive to arrest Elizabeth. They search the house and find the poppet, which contains a needle, and Elizabeth learns that Abigail has charged Elizabeth with attempted murder. Abigail has been stabbed with a needle whilst in the Parris' house.

Mary Warren tells Hale that it was her that made the doll in Court and brought it home for Elizabeth. She had stored the needle inside the doll. She states that Abigail had observed her sewing the doll while she sat next to her. Despite this, Elizabeth is still taken away. Proctor pleads with Mary to testify against Abigail in Court. Mary is reluctant to do this because it would make her at odds with the other girls. She is aware of Proctor's affair with Abigail.

##### Interpretation

The possession of poppets (or dolls) was one of the signs of witchcraft. It was believed that you could inflict pain on someone by sticking pins into their effigy, similar to the voodoo doll. Again this is an example of how flimsy evidence was against those accused of witchcraft.

Proctor again does not wish to face up to his responsibilities and thinks he can make Mary appear in Court against Abigail, but she warns him that Abigail will accuse him of lechery.

The Reverend Hale is beginning to realise the seriousness of the situation when Rebecca is arrested for he says, "If Rebecca Nurse be tainted, then nothing's left to stop the whole green world from burning." As history shows, it is not the victims of the witch-hunt that are tainted, but the town of Salem itself.

The audience has a sense of helplessness as the drama unfolds. The players seem bound by the inept laws of the Court and this is one of the main points in Miller's play. Laws should not control people if the laws are corrupt. It is not sufficient to blindly follow laws or rules. "Laws are for the guidance of the wise, and for fools to follow."

We see how desperate Abigail has become in her goal to possess Proctor. She in fact stabs herself with a needle in her stomach in order to implicate Goody Proctor.

All too slowly, Proctor has come to the realisation of Abigail's obsession with him, and this may cost the life of his wife, who is completely innocent. He is angry at his wife's arrest, and accuses Hale of being like Pontius Pilate, but what he fails to realise is that he too has been like Pontius Pilate, trying to escape involvement in the affair by persuading others to act for him. It is only now that he comes to the conclusion that he will have to go to Court and support Mary Warren. Mary will require this support because she faces Abigail's full fury and violent reaction.

#### ACT 3 – Scene 1

##### Summary

The action now moves to the Salem Meeting House where Martha Corey is accused of witchcraft. Her husband interrupts the Court proceedings declaring that Thomas Putnam is "reaching out for land!" The Court is adjourned and a meeting is held in the vestry room between Corey, Judge Hathorne, Deputy Governor Danforth, Ezekiel Cheever (who arrested Elizabeth), and the Reverend Parris.

He raises the old argument that Putnam is trying to steal his land and timber, and he is using the arrest of his wife Martha to undermine the Corey family and possess their property. It is true that his wife reads books and Hale knows this, but he never accused her of witchcraft. He and Francis Nurse have been waiting to give evidence for three days, but to no avail. Danforth tells them they must file the appropriate paperwork. Nurse tells Danforth that the girls are fakes and it is all a pretence.

Danforth has an ominous power. He is renowned for having condemned over four hundred people to death.

#### Interpretation

It would not have gone unnoticed by the early audiences to this play that Miller is making a direct comparison between Danforth and McCarthy and his hearings in the early 1950's. Both exerted an ominous power over their 'victims', which seemed to have little to do with the due process of law. Danforth is manipulating the Court for his own purposes, and he is carrying out his duties with undue zeal.

Hathorne is described as "a bitter remorseless Salem judge" and this helps to create an atmosphere of heaviness and foreboding.

The basic concept of law that you are innocent until proved guilty has been turned on its head.

With Elizabeth in jail, Proctor, Giles Corey and Francis Nurse face a brick wall preventing them from entering the Court and giving evidence against Abigail and the girls. This is viewed by the Court as an attempt to undermine their authority.

The town of Salem itself has degenerated into a place where old grudges, dislikes and jealousies are the guiding force and are the lifeblood of the Court itself.

Accusations of witchcraft are being used by the girls, not only for Abigail's possession of Proctor, but also for other associated families to gain possessions, land etc.

#### ACT 3 – Scene 2

##### Summary

Mary Warren has signed a Deposition against Abigail and the other girls saying that they lied about seeing spirits. Proctor brings her into the Vestry room, but Danforth refuses to accept Mary's evidence. Danforth suspects that Proctor is trying to undermine the Court's authority for his own aims. Proctor says that confidence in the Court is waning because people are being accused of witchcraft solely on the basis of children's accusations.

Danforth advises Proctor that his wife is now claiming to be pregnant and the Court has allowed her to live another year for the sake of the unborn child. Proctor has also obtained a petition from 91 people stating that Rebecca Nurse and Martha Corey are incapable of witchcraft for they are good Christian women.

Putnam is brought into the Vestry and Giles Corey accuses him of encouraging his daughter to falsely accuse George Jacobs of witchcraft. Putnam hopes to gain Jacob's land once he is executed for he is one of the few people in Salem who can afford the purchase price. Corey's basis for this accusation is from a witness who overheard Putnam expressing this hope. Corey is arrested for Contempt of Court.

The Reverend Hale tries to bring some logic to the situation by telling Danforth that it is not possible that everyone who the girls accuse can be guilty. Danforth is persuaded to read Mary Warren's statement. Hale suggests that a lawyer should be brought in to present Proctor's claim regarding the girls, but Danforth rejects this.

Reverend Parris begs permission to question Mary Warren, but Danforth is losing patience with Parris and angrily refuses the request.

Mary Warren's statement is an admission that she has committed perjury and whatever happens now, she will go to jail, so Danforth stresses to her that she must tell the truth.

#### Interpretation

The Court has now become a symbol of fear in the Salem community, and Deputy Governor Danforth is losing control of the situation, but he is stubborn and will not alter his direction despite the questions being raised by Reverend Hale and Proctor.

The fact that Mary Warren has made a Deposition denying the existence of the spirits must put a seed of doubt in his mind. He puts pressure on young Mary telling her that whatever course she takes she will end up in jail, so she will jump away from where the greatest threat is.

Giles Corey accuses Putnam thus, "This man is killing his neighbours for their land!"

Prior to this witch-hunt Salem was a close-knit community, although under the surface there were rivalries and disputes, but the Trials have split the community and relationships will never be the same again in this town.

Reverend Hale recognises that there is a growing fear in the community, and people are wondering if they will be next to be accused.

Danforth regards any attack on the Court as a personal attack on him and a comment on his competence.

So far the Court cases have proceeded on the minimum of evidence solely based on the testimony of the children. Hale's suggestion that a lawyer be brought in is abhorrent to Danforth because lawyers would call

upon witnesses to support the accusations of witchcraft and this would severely slow down the process of rooting out the evil in the community. Unfortunately, the evil is concentrated in the accusers and it is the good that are suffering at the hands of these evil children.

### ACT 3 – Scene 3

#### Summary

The action continues in the Vestry and Danforth summons Abigail and three of the girls.

Danforth questions Abigail concerning Mary Warren's charge that they have all been lying and that she has falsely accused Elizabeth Proctor. Danforth learns the details of the dancing episode in the woods and Hathorne asks Mary Warren to pretend to faint, but she cannot. He concludes that she is now lying because she cannot faint. Abigail then accuses Mary Warren of sending out her spirit against the girls and Proctor loses his temper and tells the Court about his affair with Abigail and calls her a whore. He compares Abigail the whore to his wife who is incapable of lying.

The Court summons Elizabeth, but she denies that there was ever an affair between Proctor and Abigail, wishing to protect her husband against the charge of Lechery.

Abigail and the girls continue their assault against Mary Warren, who through fear withdraws her Deposition.

Proctor is arrested and Hale in exasperation denounces the Court and leaves.

#### Interpretation

The intensity of the play is increasing and the audience feels the desperate plight that the Proctors find themselves in.

Abigail is at the peak of her power bolstered by the support of the Court, which increases her authority over the people of Salem.

Danforth continues to blindly proceed with these farcical Court hearings for he has taken a road from which there is no return. To change course would be to admit that he has been fooled by a group of children, which would have drastic implications concerning his judicial, political and personal life. The fact that innocent members of the community are being executed seems to be secondary to his own reputation.

The Reverend Parris is also shown to be a very weak character and his behaviour has become unbalanced. His narrow-minded attitude and his attempts to hold on to his authority mean that there is no-one to support Reverend Hale's opposition to Danforth.

Hathorne continues to support Danforth, but he is probably hiding behind the attitude that he is just obeying orders.

The problem that Proctor faces is that Parris believes him to be the leader of the group that wish him replaced, so it is to his advantage to discredit Proctor in order to secure his position in Salem.

The accusations of witchcraft made by Abigail and the girls are used as a front for Parris to dispose of his main opposition in Proctor, and for Putnam to gain property from his executed neighbours.

We now see the true feelings between Elizabeth and Proctor, for she loves him so much that in order to protect him she lies to the Court. It is probably the only major lie she has ever committed.

To the audience, the Court appears to be a pathetic comedy, for its logic seems to be to imprison anybody who opposes it.

Although Danforth is now aware of the episode in the woods, he brushes that to one side. He cannot make the connection between that behaviour in the woods whether innocent or not, with the fact that Abigail and the girls are now sending important members of the Salem community to their deaths.

Finally, it is ironic that Proctor is indirectly imprisoned by his wife's lie.

### ACT 4 – Scenes 1 and 2

#### Summary

The scene changes from the Vestry in the Courthouse to Salem jail.

Marshall Herrick enters and wakes up Goody Good and Tituba so that they can be moved to a different cell.

Tituba tells Herrick that they await the Devil, who will fly them to Barbados.

The Reverend Hale arrives and tells the prisoners that they must confess to being witches in order to thwart the ridiculous Court and avoid being hanged.

Reverend Parris discovers that Abigail and Mercy Lewis have disappeared after robbing Parris and he suspects they may have boarded a ship. Parris delays telling Danforth this news because he fears that there will be a rebellion in Salem similar to the recent uprising in Andover. There they threw out the Court, as the people were unhappy with the proceedings.

When Danforth learns about the disappearance of Abigail he still considers that the evidence stands and will not postpone the executions for it would be a sign of weakness. Hale pleads with him to reconsider or at least give him time to persuade the prisoners to confess.

#### Interpretation

Parris is now fearful of the situation. He finds a dagger outside his door, which is a clear sign that his life is in danger, and so he pleads for a delay to the executions. This is done as an act of self-preservation rather than belief in the innocence of the victims.

The first Trial took place in the Spring of 1692 and it is now the Fall, and twelve people have been executed.

Once the disappearance of Abigail and the others becomes common knowledge, then the viability of the Court must be in serious doubt.

Danforth must try and hold things together and this can only be done through fear.

Parris is becoming more and more isolated in the community. His congregation has dramatically dropped in size and he must feel exceedingly vulnerable.

Abigail has disappeared because her goal cannot now be achieved. The prize of possessing Proctor has vanished with his imprisonment. There still remain seven people under sentence of death including the Proctors, but Danforth is determined to see this to the bitter end.

The Reverend Hale is trying to make the best of a bad situation. He does not wish to see any more deaths, and so he encourages the prisoners to plead guilty to the charge of witchcraft. Part of his argument is, "Life is God's most precious gift; no principle, however glorious, may justify the taking of it."

It seems that Proctor will decide to admit to the charges.

#### ACT 4 – Scene 3

##### Summary

Reverend Hale is having difficulties in persuading the seven condemned to death to confess, and he pleads again with Danforth for more time.

He senses that Proctor is considering confessing, so he asks Elizabeth to talk to her husband stressing the future in store for their children if he is hanged. Elizabeth feels responsible for Proctor's situation because she lied in Court. She also feels guilty for being suspicious about her husband after the affair with Abigail. She tells Proctor that she totally forgives him for the affair.

#### Interpretation

The only spark of light in this black affair is the fact that Proctor and Elizabeth have forgiven one another and are now able to communicate their true feelings for each other. In this hour of desperation they are perhaps closer than they have been for a long time.

Elizabeth wants to be optimistic about the future and she cannot visualise it without her husband, and it is this argument that will persuade Proctor to confess guilt.

As we have said before, this Court in Salem operates on the dictum that when an individual is accused of witchcraft they are guilty, and there is only one sentence for this crime – death. This is unlike the modern Court where an individual is innocent until proved guilty.

Therefore, Proctor, if he wishes to plea bargain has to confess the witchcraft in order to save his life. In confessing, Proctor will show repentance and he will be saved from execution. His reluctance in making a confession is that he does not wish to give the Judges the satisfaction of winning the day. He considers them subhuman and to bow to their will is a bitter pill to swallow.

#### ACT 4 – Scene 4

##### Summary

Proctor hopes that if he makes an oral confession in Court, that will be sufficient for his Judges, but they require it in writing and it will be posted on the Church door. He cannot face this and, therefore, retracts his confession. He would rather die, and preserve his good name.

He asks himself, "God in heaven, what is John Proctor, what is John Proctor?"

He is lead out and hanged.

#### Interpretation

Proctor is also in a dilemma over his confession, but the Court want their pound of flesh and his confession must be in the form of a signed written testimony that will be hung on the Church door.

What undermines Proctor's position is the fact that Rebecca Nurse will not confess, and she is shocked when Proctor does. Also, Elizabeth has not confessed either although she has a year to live and time is not so important. There is no doubt that if need be she would probably confess at the last minute if her husband is still alive. She holds out with the hope that the Trials will end as they have in Andover, and she will be released without making a confession.

Proctor has already performed one great lie in his life, that being his affair with Abigail. He does not wish to make another lie. A small one he could have lived with, but the fact that a large written lie in plain view of everyone was required, is unthinkable.

The crux of the matter, therefore, is that if his written confession were to appear on the Church door, he would be betraying all those who have refused to confess. There would be no honour in this and he would end up a broken man with no name.



### QUESTIONS FOR STUDY with IDEAS FOR ANSWERS

Q: In ACT 4 – Scene 2, Deputy Governor Danforth faces a dilemma. What is it, and what are the factors he considers in making his final decision?

Ideas:

Firstly, Danforth is a man who is caught up in the hysteria of witch Trials. He has already participated in the deaths of hundreds of supposed witches.

In Salem, members of the community have been found guilty of witchcraft based on the most circumstantial evidence. The bulk of the accusations have come from a group of children and it is only after the executions have commenced that concrete evidence comes to light that the girls have been lying and making false accusations. So, the dilemma that Danforth faces is whether to admit that the Court has been wrong and misled by children, and therefore pardon the remainder of the prisoners under sentence of death, or proceed with the executions.

If he backtracks at this stage it will give a clear message to the world that innocents have been killed and that he is not fit to be Judge, Deputy Governor, or anything else. There is no doubt that this mass hysteria has occurred in other places where other innocents have been killed.

Therefore, Danforth takes the view that he must continue. He is long since past the point of no return and the lives of these innocent people are nothing compared to his own political survival.

Q: In ACT 4 – Scene 4, John Proctor ask himself, "God in heaven, what is John Proctor?" Well, who is he?

Ideas:

The whole play stems from Proctor's temptation to sin with Abigail. In a way it has similarities to the film 'Fatal Attraction' starring Michael Douglas and Glen Close.

Proctor 'chooses' the wrong person to have an affair with. Abigail must possess Proctor, and this is the driving force behind the Salem witch Trials, although other members of the community jump on the bandwagon, it is her desire to possess Proctor that is the overriding factor, it fuels the hunt.

Proctor fully realises the implication of this as the Trials develop, and he is riddled with guilt over this. However, he tries to avoid involvement with the Trials at the outset. He could quite easily have nipped this in the bud by confessing early on to his affair with Abigail. This would have undermined Abigail and nobody would have given credence to her allegations. However, Proctor fails to meet his responsibilities and leaves it too late in confessing the affair.

In the end it is Proctor's wife that forces him to become involved with the Trials just prior to her being arrested, but even then he uses his servant, Mary Warren to attempt to discredit Abigail. When this fails, he is left with no alternative but to discredit Abigail by calling her a whore, but this is seen by the Court as a desperate action to save his wife.

The inevitable happens and he is accused of being a witch.

The saying, 'He who hesitates is lost', is very apt here.

Under sentence of death, he faces the dilemma of whether to confess or not. He does not want to die for a ridiculous reason, but he does not want to betray those others condemned to death. After all, he is partly responsible for their predicament, and he should therefore suffer the same fate. The final decision is therefore to die as an honest man.

The answer to the question "What is John Proctor?" is – an honest man whose name is honoured, but he is not a martyr.

Q: Strong links and comparisons have been made between the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 and the Anti-Communist McCarthy Hearings in 1950. Explain what these are.

Ideas:

Both these events in history were examples of judicial hysteria where the law appears caught up in the frenzy to rid society of an apparent threat using limited evidence. For this to happen there first has to be a human environment, which feels it is being threatened by a force that will undermine its very existence. The members of the societies in both cases suffer a paranoiac reaction.

In the case of the Puritans, their environment was a strict adherence to the Bible and all its words, and in particular Exodus 22 v.18, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." The Court became preoccupied with implementing this law without regard to the evidence or lack of it. They viewed the girls as being God's mouthpieces, and when they accused innocent people of witchcraft, this was believed.

In the case of the McCarthy Trials, the western world was in the grip of the Cold War and this environment enabled the zealous McCarthy to instigate his hunt for Anti-Americans or Communists. In a way, he is similar to Abigail and he progressed from being an unimportant Senator to being a household name throughout the world at the end of his campaign. In 1954 his highly publicised Investigations Committee had explored all areas of American society for Communists, including the entertainment industry, and the army. These hearings were televised, and after many ruined careers, the accusations were shown to be baseless, just as Abigail's accusations were.

The lesson to be learned is that the law should be viewed as flexible in order to obtain justice. When the letter of the law rules Courts, then justice suffers. That is why our modern laws are forever being modified and refined.