

The Crucible by Arthur Miller

STUDY QUESTIONS

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

(from the [Penguin Study Guide](http://www.penguin.com/static/pdf/teachersguides/crucible.pdf) for *The Crucible* (<<http://www.penguin.com/static/pdf/teachersguides/crucible.pdf>> accessed on 20/10/14)

The witchcraft trials in Salem, Massachusetts, during the 1690s have been a blot on the history of America, a country which has come to pride itself on the concepts of free speech and justice as well as on its religious principles. Guilt by association, unexamined testimony, judges blinded by their biases, and individuals determined to use the system of justice when no evidence of a crime existed – these kinds of social or political problems did not go away with the completion of those trials.

U.S. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's relentless determination to find "unAmerican" citizens and communists in all areas of American life in the early 1950s prompted Arthur Miller to write *The Crucible*, a play about the Salem witch trials which has similarities to "McCarthyism." The play no doubt prompted the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1956 to call Miller for questioning, but Miller refused to cooperate when asked to identify writers who had once been communists. Richard H. Rovere calls Miller "the leading symbol of the militant, risk-taking conscience" of that time. Although the play does not parallel the McCarthy investigations exactly, Miller, as a socially conscious writer, is clearly making a statement about conscience and political morality relevant to the McCarthy period—or any period.

TECHNIQUE: ALLEGORY

(Adapted from Langston, D and Walker, M., [York Notes for the GSCE – The Crucible](#). Pearson Education Ltd. (2011), p. 51.)

The Crucible has long been seen as an allegory for the anti-Communist investigations ("witch-hunts") in the United States in the 1950s.

An allegory is a story that can be seen to have two different and parallel meanings, rather like a parable or fable.

In *The Crucible*, the audience is presented with a story that on the surface is about the Salem Witch Trials; however, as Miller was writing during the 1950s in America the play also acts a critical commentary on Joseph McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

See the interpolation on pg 37-40 for more information about the above.

ACT ONE

UNDERSTANDING

1. Who are the Puritans? What information does Miller give the reader about their society and religion?
2. What did Reverend Parris discover the girls doing in the woods? Why might these actions be seen as shocking in Puritan society?
3. Why has Reverend Parris sent for Reverend Hale of Beverly? What is Reverend Hale's area of expertise?
4. What has happened between John Proctor and Abigail Williams? How does Miller convey the tension between these two characters to the audience?
5. Who is Tituba? Why is she the first one seen as conduit of the Devil?
6. Describe how the following minor characters react to Betty.
 - a. Thomas and Anne Putnam

- b. Rebecca Nurse
- c. Giles Corey

ANALYSIS – KEY IDEAS AND TECHNIQUES

7. KEY IDEA: SELF-INTEREST AND EMPOWERMENT:

What does Arthur Miller see as the reasons for so many accusations of witchcraft in Salem? What do people like the Putnams hope to gain from such accusations? (pg. 22-23 and pg. 31-2)

8. KEY IDEA: AUTHORITY AND DISSENT:

Reverend Parris discovers the young girls dancing in the woods with Tituba, his black slave. How might the casting of spells and dancing be seen as a dangerous form of rebellion in a Puritan society? Why would the girls of Salem want to do this, despite the risks?

9. KEY IDEA: SELF-INTEREST AND EMPOWERMENT:

Why does Abigail suddenly ‘confess’ to seeing the devil and now “*want(ing) the light of God*”? Why do she and Betty suddenly start listing names of those she saw with the Devil? How does this ‘confession’ empower Abigail in this scene?

10. TECHNIQUE: STAGE DIRECTIONS

Look closely at the stage directions at the start of Act One. How does Miller use props and other details to communicate the austere nature of Puritanism to the audience?

11. TECHNIQUE: PUNCTUATION AND SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Look closely at the following passage from the play:

EXCERPT

(Starts at pg.45)

(Finishes at pg.47)

HALE: ...Abigail, what sort of dancing were you doing with her in the forest?

TITUBA: Oh, bless the Lord.

How does Miller create a rising sense of tension and panic in these lines? (Hint: Consider the use of punctuation and sentence length.)

12. CHARACTERISATION & INTERPOLATION

Miller uses several interpolations (“to insert into a text”) to inform his reader about the personality of some of his characters. These interpolations help inform an actor (and reader) of how a particular character should be portrayed. This is part of their overall characterisation, which also includes acting style, stage directions, costuming, make-up, blocking, props as well as interactions with other characters. Read through the interpolations in ACT ONE again, and make notes regarding the characterisation of the following characters:

- a. Reverend Parris
- b. Abigail Williams
- c. Mary Warren
- d. Thomas and Ann Putnam
- e. John Proctor
- f. Rebecca Nurse
- g. Reverend Hale
- h. Giles Corey

ACT TWO

UNDERSTANDING

1. What is the source of tension between Elizabeth and John Proctor?
2. Why does Abigail Williams accuse Elizabeth Proctor of witchcraft? What does she hope to gain?
3. Why is the discovery by Cheever of a “*poppet*” (rag doll) significant at this stage of the play?
4. Why is Proctor reluctant to go to Salem and tell the court about what Abigail Williams said to him in Betty’s bedroom?
5. Why does Proctor believe that some people have confessed to witchcraft, even if they are not guilty?

ANALYSIS – KEY IDEAS AND TECHNIQUES

6. KEY IDEA: HYSTERIA

Look closely at Mary Warren’s description (pg. 57) of how she and the other girls react to Goody Osborn in the court. How is this a form of hysteria?

7. KEY IDEAS: AUTHORITY AND DISSENT/ SELF-INTEREST AND EMPOWERMENT

- a. Who has charged Rebecca Nurse with witchcraft? Why?
- b. What is different about the people now charged with witchcraft – Rebecca Nurse, Elizabeth Proctor and Martha Corey – compared to Goody Osborn and Sarah Good? How does this reflect the growing power of the Abigail and the other “victims”?

8. KEY IDEA: REPUTATION AND INTEGRITY/ SIN AND GUILT

During this act, Proctor struggles with his guilt over his adultery with Abigail. Why? How does such a sinful action, not fit with Proctor’s own image of himself as an upright and respected citizen of Salem?

9. TECHNIQUE: STAGE DIRECTIONS

Look closely at Miller’s stage directions for the opening of this scene. How does he communicate the tension between John and Elizabeth Proctor?

EXCERPT

(Starts at pg.51)

[*The common room of Proctor’s house, eight days later...*]

(Finishes at pg. 53)

ELIZABETH: I think you must go to Salem.

10. TECHNIQUE: HISTORICAL FICTION

Miller uses the genre historical fiction in The Crucible where he takes the events that occurred in Salem, Massachusetts in the 1600s and adapts them to the stage. In his “*A Note on the Historical Accuracy of the Play*” (pg.11), Miller explains the relationship between the The Crucible and the real events of the Salem Witch Trials.

DEFINITION OF HISTORICAL FICTION

<from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_fiction#History_play_and_grand_opera> accessed on 17/10/2014)

Historical fiction is a literary genre in which the action takes place in the past. It is an ambiguous term, because while it is frequently used as a synonym for the historical novel, the term is often used to describe other narrative formats, such as those in the performing and visual arts like theatre, opera, cinema, television, comics, and graphic novels.

The settings are drawn from history, and often contain historical persons. Works in this genre often portray the manners and social conditions of the persons or times presented in the story, with attention paid to period detail.

Miller utilises several techniques to make his characters and world seem more real in The Crucible.

These techniques include:

a. INVERT/INVERSION

This is a departure from normal word order. In The Crucible inversion is used to represent an older form of English as in “*I know not what I have said*” and “*I like not the sound of it.*” It gives the language of the play, a cadence similar to the Bible. For instance, where as a character in The Crucible might say “*Let you fear nothing*”, we would say today, “*Don’t be afraid of anything*”.

How would we write this sentence in modern English (pg. 53)?

ELIZABETH: She [Mary Warren] frightened all my strength away.

Now find another example of inversion in the Act Two. (Hint: Look closely at the passage where Proctor challenges Cheever who comes to arrest Elizabeth (Pg. 70)).

b. BIBLICAL REFERENCES

The Puritans lived in a theocracy where most citizens had knowledge of the Bible. Several characters in The Crucible use analogies (“*a comparison between one thing and another, typically for the purpose of explanation or clarification*”) from the Bible to make their points.

Explain this biblical analogy from Act Two (pg.53):

ELIZABETH: ...Abigail brings the other girls into the court and where she walks the crowd will part like
the sea for Israel...

c. COLLOQUIAL LANGUAGE

This is everyday speech that is often particular to certain place or religion. Miller uses such colloquial language as in “*it rebels my stomach*” to give richness to everyday ideas. Look at this example from Act Two (pg. 61).

PROCTOR: Woman am I so **base**? Do you truly think I’m **base**?

ELIZABETH: I never thought you **base**.

What does the word “**base**” mean? How is it an appropriate word for a description of Proctor’s sin?

(Adapted from Langston, D and Walker, M., York Notes for the GCSE – The Crucible. Pearson Education Ltd. 2011, p. 51.)

ACT THREE

UNDERSTANDING

1. What new evidence has Francis Nurse, Giles Corey and Proctor brought to the court in an attempt to save the lives of their wives?
 - a. Francis Nurses’s deposition
 - b. Giles Corey’s evidence against the Putnams
 - c. Proctor and Mary Warren
2. Who are Danforth and Hathorne? Why are they significant characters?
3. Why does Danforth describe witchcraft as “*ipso facto...an invisible crime*” (pg. 90). How does this strengthen the position of Abigail Williams and the other accuses as victims of witchcraft?
4. Why has Danforth postponed Elizabeth Proctor’s execution?
5. What does John Proctor sacrifice when he admits his adultery with Abigail Williams?
6. Why does Elizabeth lie about her husband’s relationship with Abigail?

ANALYSIS – KEY IDEAS AND TECHNIQUES

7. KEY IDEA: HYSTERIA/ SELF-INTEREST AND EMPOWERMENT

Re-read this part of the act. How does Abigail create a feeling of hysteria amongst the girls and in doing so, empower herself and damage Proctor's argument? Make sure to note the change in Mary Warren in this scene and how Miller employs stage directions to show the hysteria to the viewer.

EXCERPT

(Starts at pg.100)

HALE: I believe him. [*Pointing at ABIGAIL*] This girl has always struck me as false! She has...

(Finishes at pg.105)

DANFORTH [*calling to him in fury*]: Mr Hale! Mr Hale!

8. KEY IDEA: AUTHORITY AND DISSENT

Danforth states that a person "*is either with the court or must be counted against it*" (pg. 85). Why does such a statement mean it is unlikely that people who challenge the authority of the court like Giles Corey, Francis Nurse and John Proctor will succeed?

9. KEY IDEA: REPUTATION AND INTEGRITY

In this act, the reputation and integrity of John and Elizabeth Proctor and Abigail Williams is challenged. Make notes for each character and the importance of their integrity and reputation to them.

- a. John Proctor
- b. Elizabeth Proctor
- c. Abigail Williams

10. TECHNIQUE: IMAGERY

Miller uses a wide range of metaphors and similes in The Crucible that are appropriate for the play's context. Look at the following passage in the play and find two examples of a metaphor:

In these two examples, identify the type of imagery and explain their purpose in the play. (ie. What they mean?)

- a) (pg.81) DANFORTH: ... We **burn a hot fire here**; it melts down all concealment.
- b) (pg.84) DANFORTH: ...Now, what do you have for us, Mr Proctor? And I beg you be as clear, **open as the sky**, and honest.

ACT FOUR

UNDERSTANDING

1. Why is Parris so worried that Abigail and Mercy Williams have fled with his money? How does this reflect badly on the court?
2. Hale states that he has "*come to do the Devil's work. I come to counsel Christians that they belie themselves*" (pg1 114). What is Hale attempting to get Rebecca Nurse and others to do? How is this a contradiction for an ordained minister like Hale? How has his attitude to witchcraft and the court changed since Act One?
3. Danforth arranges for Elizabeth Proctor to see John on the morning of his execution. Why?
4. What does Elizabeth mean when she says to her husband "*there is no higher judge under Heaven than Proctor!*" (pg. 119).
5. Despite 'confessing' to witchcraft, what does John Proctor refuse to do when he tells Danforth "*You will not use me!*" Why does this eventually lead to him tearing up his written 'confession' and being executed?

ANALYSIS – KEY IDEAS AND TECHNIQUES

6. KEY IDEA: AUTHORITY AND DISSENT

What evidence is there of increasing discontent with the Court and Witch Trials in this Act?

7. KEY IDEA: REPUTATION AND INTEGRITY

At the beginning of this act, Proctor sees himself as a “*fraud*” (pg.118) who is “*not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang!*” (pg. 124). How is Proctor’s integrity and reputation restored in this final act, both for himself and for us as the audience?

8. TECHNIQUE: NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Go through the play and outline the main events in each act. Make sure to highlight for each event the level of tension and where it heightens in each act.

9. TECHNIQUE: STAGE DIRECTIONS

Examine the stage directions that show Proctor’s interaction with Elizabeth, and comment on how they are used to depict the state of their relationship.

EXCERPT

(Starts at pg.116)

DANFORTH: Will you plead for his confession or will you not?

(Finishes at pg.120)

PROCTOR: I want my life.

10. TECHNIQUE: MINOR CHARACTERS AND CHARACTERISATION

Minor characters are often used in texts to represent certain points of view and attitudes in a text, when compared to the main characters. Consider the following two characters, and how they respond to the accusations of witchcraft. What do their actions and speech of these characters represent?

- a. Giles Corey
- b. Rebecca Nurse

11. TECHNIQUE: SYMBOLISM OF THE TITLE

The word, “*crucible*”, is never mentioned through-out the play, yet it is a title of great symbolic importance. A “*crucible*” by definition is a container in which metals and other materials are heated so as separate pure metals from waste and impurities.

(Adapted from Langston, D and Walker, M., York Notes for the GCSE – *The Crucible*. Pearson Education Ltd. 2011, p. 52.)

- a. Who and what is purified in the course of the play?
- b. Now, that you know the definition of a “*crucible*”, explain why this is an apt metaphor for events in the play?

12. TECHNIQUE: ALLEGORY

How has Miller use the historical events of the Salem Witch Trial as an allegory through which to criticise McCarthyism and the ‘witch-hunt’ for communist sympathisers?