

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 deceptions 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!'

It is important to see the immense pressure being brought to bear on Tituba here. An uneducated female slave is being harangued by a number of prominent men in the town. Tituba, in sheer terror, falls to her knees, begging not to be hanged. In her fear of death, Tituba makes what amounts to a confession. ‘I tell him I don’t desire to work for him, sir’. Hale, taking this as proof that Tituba has seen or spoken with the Devil, commits to breaking his hold on her. He consoles her: ‘We are going to help you tear yourself free’. This thought seems to frighten her even more. **In a desperate attempt to avoid persecution, Tituba says ‘I do believe somebody else be witchin’ these children’.** Hale’s obvious question is ‘Who?’

In the dramatic sequence which follows, both Putnam and Parris continue to place extreme pressure on Tituba. Reverend Hale is supportive of Tituba, clearly aware that her experience is deeply terrifying. Hale asks ‘When the Devil comes to you does he ever come with ... another person in the village? Someone you know’. Putnam is even more direct, suggesting that this person might be Sarah Good (a mentally ill homeless woman) or Sarah Osburn (a social outcast). Before she offers any names Tituba claims ‘how many times he bid me kill you, Mr. Parris!’ She continues ‘then he come one stormy night to me, and he say, “Look! I have *white* people belong to me.” And I look – and there was Goody Good ... Aye, sir,

and Goody Osburn’. Mrs Putnam pounces on this statement by Tituba, linking the accusation against Sarah Osburn to her being ‘midwife to me three times’. In terrifying imagery she says ‘My babies always shrivelled in her hands!’ **Hale probes Tituba for more information: ‘Take courage, you must give us all their names’.** **In his desire to be thorough Hale is opening the door to the hysterical mayhem which will soon break loose.**

Abigail, who has been watching closely, now rises ‘staring as though inspired, and cries out’. Taking the attention from Tituba, she announces: ‘I want to open myself!’ **Abigail proclaims ‘I want the sweet love of Jesus! I danced for the Devil; I saw him; I wrote in his book’.** **Abigail’s admissions do not end with her – she accuses others in the village of being in the Devil’s company.** Abigail repeats Tituba’s accusation against Good and Osburn, and adds the name of another, Bridget Bishop. As Abigail is speaking, Betty rises from the bed and begins to chant: ‘I saw George Jacobs with the Devil! I saw Goody Howe with the Devil!’ Both Parris and Hale are greatly relieved, with Hale commenting ‘Glory to God! It is broken, they are free!’ As Parris and Hale rejoice, Putnam sets out for the marshal, an official of the law: everyone accused of being with the Devil must now be arrested. **The curtain falls on Act One with the ‘ecstatic cries’ of the young girls shouting out the names of Salem residents they now accuse of witchcraft.**

KEY POINTS



- This scene shows the sheer power of hysteria – once it begins in earnest it is very difficult to defuse. It is clear that Abigail learns this lesson well here, too: she will use the same tactic later in the play for her own ends.
- Act One ends, as do each of the other three Acts in *The Crucible*, on a moment of high tension.
- Miller’s skilful use of dialogue and insight into behaviour and emotions allows him to transition Salem from a town in which two girls are strangely sick to a town in the grip of a witch hunt gathering pace.

ACT TWO

The Proctors at home: A divided house

Act Two is set in the common room of the Proctor household, eight days after the end of Act One. It is evening, almost dark, as John Proctor enters. Elizabeth is off-stage and can be heard singing to their children. As John and Elizabeth Proctor begin to speak, it is clear that there is strain and tension between them. Though the scene begins with some warm small talk, Miller notes that ‘a sense of their separation rises’ and Elizabeth ‘would speak but cannot’. The conversation turns to the subject of Mary Warren, the Proctors’ servant girl, and the goings-on in Salem.

Mary Warren, described in Act One as a ‘naive, lonely girl’ is becoming more assertive, defying direct instructions from Elizabeth not to go to Salem. Shockingly, this naive girl now has a role as ‘an official of the court’ which has taken shape in Salem over the past eight days. Elizabeth informs John that the newly created court is led by ‘four judges out of Boston’ with the Deputy Governor of the Province at its head. Proctor is shocked by this, but even more by the news that there are ‘fourteen people in jail now ... and the court have the power to hang them too’. While Proctor stands in disbelief at this, Elizabeth tells him that the Deputy Governor has promised hanging ‘if they’ll not confess’.

Talk turns to the difficult topic of Abigail, who is now firmly the leader of the accusers in the court. Abigail, known by Elizabeth Proctor as her husband’s mistress, is now being described in high terms in the town. Mary Warren has told of Abigail’s behaviour at court and Elizabeth comments that ‘I thought she were a saint, to hear her’. **As a leader now, Abigail ‘brings the other girls into court’ and those accused of witchcraft are brought before them. If the girls, controlled by Abigail, ‘scream and howl and fall on the floor – the person’s clapped in the jail for bewitchin’ them’.** It is clear that

Abigail has discovered a great power in being able to level an accusation of witchcraft at somebody. In wide-eyed shock, Proctor describes this behaviour as ‘a black mischief’.

Proctor, by this point, has told Elizabeth that Abigail admitted there is no substance to the talk of witchcraft. **Elizabeth urges John to go to Salem and relate this to the court, to discredit Abigail as a witness. Proctor is reluctant to do this for two reasons. Firstly, he was alone with Abigail when they spoke – a fact which angers his wife as she discovers it. This means nobody witnessed Abigail’s admission to Proctor. Secondly, if Proctor tried to discredit Abigail before the court, it is certain she would expose him as an adulterer.** This is a huge risk for John and Elizabeth and their reputation in Salem. Learning that he was alone with Abigail, Elizabeth ‘has suddenly lost all faith in him’ and says coldly ‘Do as you wish’. Proctor, addressing Elizabeth’s attitude to him, states bluntly ‘I’ll not have your suspicion any more’. Elizabeth’s sharp response gets to the heart of the matter from her point of view: ‘John, if it were not Abigail that you must go to hurt, would you falter now? I think not’. It is clear that there is still a deep wound between John and Elizabeth after his affair with Abigail.

Proctor, who is weary of feeling judged by Elizabeth, launches into a long defence of himself. He defends his caution, saying he has ‘good reason to think before I charge fraud’ on Abigail. Elizabeth should work on being charitable, Proctor claims: ‘I have gone tiptoe in this house all seven month since she is gone. I have not moved from there to there without I think to please you’. **Remarking on Elizabeth’s reluctance to forgive him for his affair, Proctor offers the remarkable image that ‘an everlasting funeral marches round your heart. I cannot speak but I am doubted, every moment judged for lies, as though I come into a court when I come into this house!’** Reaching the peak of his anger, Proctor says he

‘must have mistaken you for God’ but ‘you’re not, you’re not, and let you remember it!’ In a concluding moment of tenderness he asks ‘Let you look sometimes for goodness in me, and judge me not’. Elizabeth’s response shows great insight into her husband’s tortured character. **She says that Proctor’s real problem is that ‘The magistrate sits in your heart that judges you. I never thought you but a good man, John’.**

Deception and truth play a role in this scene as John and Elizabeth Proctor struggle to repair their marriage after his infidelity. Normal power relations of the time seem to be coming loose too, with the servant Mary Warren now ‘an official

of the court’. In this scene we clearly see how Abigail is using the other girls’ hysteria as a weapon of her own new-found power in the town. What she can do with the girls makes her a powerful presence in Salem and this makes the Proctors uneasy. Proctor’s reluctance to speak publicly against Abigail shows the power of guilt and shame the group have over him: he cannot afford for her to expose their adultery together. There is little ease, too, in the Proctors’ own marriage, as John feels Elizabeth has never fully forgiven him for his relationship with Abigail. Interestingly, Elizabeth denies this and claims that the only problem is the terrible power of guilt Proctor feels about his own actions.

KEY POINTS



- The location of the play’s action has moved to the Proctor household.
- News is relayed that fourteen women have now been arrested in Salem, with the court having power to hang them.
- It is made clear that Abigail is the ringleader of the accusers in the witchcraft trials. She is controlling a group of girls and using accusations as a way to exercise power.
- Elizabeth wants Proctor to go to Salem to testify against Abigail, but he will not. They argue about the aftermath of John’s affair with Abigail.

Mary Warren brings news from Salem

Mary Warren, the Proctors’ servant girl, enters. John Proctor is angry that she has been in Salem, so long away from her work at a time when Elizabeth is ‘not wholly well’. Mary defends herself, saying ‘I am in proceedings all day, sir’. Mary’s behaviour is strange and she speaks ‘with a trembling, decayed voice’. **Mary has had to sit all day in court and has made a small rag doll – a ‘poppet’ – which she gifts to Elizabeth Proctor. Elizabeth is taken aback by the gift and by Mary’s odd behaviour.** ‘We must all love each other now, Goody Proctor’ Mary says, before making for bed. Elizabeth stops her, eager to have news of events in Salem.

As she speaks, it becomes clear that Mary is

distressed by what she is witnessing in the town. She relays the astonishing news that there are now thirty-nine women arrested, up from the fourteen mentioned earlier by Elizabeth. News that ‘Goody Osburn – will hang!’ is met with disbelief. Sarah Good, the homeless woman, has only escaped hanging by confessing. Proctor wonders: ‘Confessed! To what?’ He scoffs that the court would believe her confession that she ‘sometimes made a compact with Lucifer, and wrote her name in his black book’. To Proctor, Goody Good is ‘a jabberer’ whose word cannot be trusted. Mary proceeds to give an account of Sarah Good’s trial which shows how quick the court is to condemn people on little or no evidence. **Mary says that while at Good’s trial she herself became overwhelmed by thoughts**

of **'what she done to me'**. Shortly after she tells a clearly silly story, Elizabeth protests **'I never heard you mention that before'**. It is clear that Mary has been overwhelmed by the experience of being in court – but it is too late now for Sarah Good. Good has been condemned for being unable to name the ten commandments: 'she could not say a single one'. Proctor, who sees how flimsy these accusations are, is outraged by the court's actions and Mary's part in them, memorably exclaiming 'But the proof, the proof!'

Worse is to come for the Proctors. Mary Warren, recently a 'naive, lonely' girl, now boldly declares herself 'an official of the court', a claim which angers Proctor into reaching for his whip. **Proctor is about to whip Mary when she points at Elizabeth and declares 'I saved her life today!' Elizabeth has been 'mentioned' as possibly involved in witchcraft, but Mary has**

denied it to the court. The Proctors are in a state of disgusted horror, but Mary will not reveal who Elizabeth's accuser is. She, like Abigail, is now aware of how much power she has as an accuser and uses it against Proctor: 'I would have you speak civilly to me, from this out'. Mary goes to bed, leaving Elizabeth and John Proctor 'wide-eyed' and 'staring'.

The hysteria of the trials is clearly gripping much of the village, including Mary Warren, leading her to give her testimony against Sarah Good. The increase in arrests, from fourteen to thirty-nine also indicates how out-of-hand things are getting. The Proctors realise how serious it is to have so much power concentrated in the hands of these girls. The girls are clearly using it wickedly. Although Mary won't name Elizabeth's accuser, the Proctors surely have their suspicions now about who would like to use the power of the court against her.

KEY POINTS



- Mary Warren returns from court and presents Elizabeth with a 'poppet' (a rag doll) she made during her long hours of court that day.
- Sarah Good is sentenced to hang and Mary Warren has given clearly unreliable testimony against her. The Proctors are horrified.
- We learn that Elizabeth is also now 'mentioned' at the court, though not yet accused. Mary Warren will not reveal who has mentioned Elizabeth.

'She thinks to take my place, John'

Having got the news that she is accused, Elizabeth says **'the noose, the noose is up'**. When John consoles her that **'there'll be no noose'**, Elizabeth's immediate reply is **'She wants me dead'**. There is no doubt between the couple that Abigail is Elizabeth's accuser. John states his intention to go straight to Ezekiel Cheever, a clerk of the town court, for help. Elizabeth disagrees with this approach and asks John to go straight to Abigail. She feels that Abigail is hoping to have Elizabeth executed for

'monstrous profit': 'She thinks to take my place, John'. Proctor cannot deny this.

Elizabeth now pleads with John to totally destroy Abigail's 'dearest hope' of being Elizabeth's replacement. She accuses John of being naive about Abigail and her desires. There is, Elizabeth says 'a promise made in any bed', one which Proctor must now kill by showing Abigail 'contempt' (strong dislike). **Proctor protests that he has done enough. He said the 'promise that a stallion gives a mare I gave that girl' and pleads that 'Were I stoned I would**

have cracked for shame this seven month!’ Proctor feels he has done enough to put distance between himself and Abigail, but he resents how Elizabeth’s ‘spirit twists around the single error of my life, and I will never tear it free’. The only way to tear it free, says Elizabeth, is for him to ‘come to know that I will be your only wife or no wife at all’. **Again, restating her charge that he hasn’t fully let go of Abigail, Elizabeth claims ‘She has an arrow in you yet’.** Proctor, who has reluctantly agreed to go to Abigail, is stopped in his tracks by the arrival of a visitor, Reverend

Hale.

In this short interaction many major themes of the play are evident within the Proctors’ marriage. John’s adultery with Abigail continues to wreak havoc. If Elizabeth is accused of witchcraft, both of the Proctors are about to feel the full power of the accusation. Because of John’s actions with Abigail, and the connection this created between them, the Proctors cannot simply ignore what is happening in Salem. Forces greater than their family are drawing them deeper into the crisis.

KEY POINTS



- The Proctors realise that Abigail plans to have Elizabeth hung as a witch. Elizabeth begs John to go directly to Abigail. He refuses.
- Elizabeth and John have a heated argument about whether or not John still has feelings for Abigail.

Reverend Hale examines Elizabeth and John Proctor

Reverend Hale arrives, late at night, to the Proctor house. Once the initial surprise passes, he informs them that he isn’t sent by the court, but comes ‘of my own authority’. Hale notes that, a little over a week in Salem, he cannot be expected to know everyone who is mentioned or accused in the court. Therefore ‘this afternoon, and now tonight, I go from house to house – I come now from Rebecca Nurse’s house’. **The purpose of his visit is to ‘draw clear opinion of them’.** The Proctors are stunned to find Rebecca Nurse accused, but Hale insists that ‘No man may longer doubt the powers of the dark are gathered in monstrous attack’ upon Salem. When Hale insists that ‘There is too much evidence now to deny it’, Proctor’s evasive response shows us he is suspicious of the court’s entire project: ‘I – have no knowledge in that line’. However, he finds it ‘hard to think so pious a woman be secretly a Devil’s bitch’.

Hale states plainly that the purpose of his visit is ‘to put some questions as to the Christian character of this house, if you’ll permit me’. In the interview which follows, several interesting details emerge. Firstly, according to Reverend Parris’s records, John Proctor has been in church just twenty-six times in seventeen months. This, Proctor excuses by the fact that Elizabeth has been ill. Secondly, Proctor makes clear his dislike of Parris’s expensive taste in church decoration: ‘for twenty week he preach nothin’ but golden candlesticks until he had them’. Thirdly, it is noted that the third of the Proctors’ boys has not yet been baptized. This, says John, is because ‘I like it not that Mr Parris should lay his hand upon my baby. I see no light of God in that man’. **Aware that he has spoken boldly against Salem’s minister, Proctor informs Hale that ‘I nailed the roof upon the church, I hung the door’ and concedes that he may ‘have been too quick’ to judge Parris. However, Elizabeth joins in, ‘we never loved the Devil here’.** Both seem eager to state their commitment to the

church.

Hale proceeds 'with the voice of one administering a secret test' to ask John Proctor to repeat the Ten Commandments. Proctor's responses are halting and nervous: he names nine commandments before repeating one in his attempt to name the tenth. He is 'stuck', 'lost' and 'flailing' when his wife interrupts gently: 'Adultery, John'. Somewhat humorously, grinning, Proctor says 'You see, sir, between the two of us we do know them all. I think it be a small fault'. Mr Hale, however, does not see the humour. His worried-sounding response indicates a suspicion for the Proctors: 'Theology, sir, is a fortress; no crack in a fortress may be accounted small'. Hale makes to leave the Proctor house and Elizabeth, feeling that Hale is not sure of her innocence, speaks to John with 'a note of desperation', referring to what Abigail has admitted to him. **She wants him to inform Reverend Hale that the ringleader of his accusers has herself admitted that there is no seriousness in the idea of witchcraft in Salem. Proctor admits it: 'Mr Parris discovered them sportin' in the woods. They were startled and took sick'. Hale is astonished that Abigail has admitted this.** He asks John why he has not come forward earlier. Proctor simply states that 'I never knew until tonight that the world is gone daft with this nonsense'.

Hale is taken aback, and maybe a little insulted, to hear rumours of witchcraft referred to as 'nonsense' and the town's behaviour as 'daft'. **When Hale reminds John Proctor that 'Tituba, Sarah Good and numerous others ... have confessed to dealing with the Devil', Proctor makes the blunt point to him 'And**

why not, if they must hang for denyin' it?'

When Proctor continues with: 'There are them that will swear to anything before they'll hang, have you ever thought of that?' Miller notes that he is simply echoing Hale's inner thoughts. Hale, too, suspects that the court is putting people in an impossible situation. Perhaps in an attempt to correct what is happening, Hale presses Proctor to come to court to testify. Proctor resists again, wondering aloud what is the point in testifying to a court which suspects 'a woman that never lied, and cannot, and the world knows she cannot!' (This might be either Rebecca Nurse or, indeed, Proctor's own wife Elizabeth.)

In a final push in his interrogation, Hale questions whether the Proctors even believe in the existence of witches. To deny this, at the time, would have been a major offense as they are clearly referred to in the Christian scriptures. Proctor admits he may have denied their existence casually before, but 'the Bible speaks of witches, and I will not deny them'. However, he does add, 'I cannot believe they come among us now'. **Elizabeth, for her part, says 'I cannot believe it', continuing 'I cannot think the Devil may own a woman's soul Mr Hale, when she keeps an upright way, as I have'. She continues: 'If you think I am one, then I say there are none'.** This outspokenness makes her husband scramble to her defence: 'She believe in the Gospel, every word!' Angrily, Elizabeth concludes: 'Question Abigail Williams about the Gospel, not myself!' This clearly leaves Hale shocked, which Miller indicates simply: 'Hale stares at her'. The visitor, after Elizabeth's outburst, instructs the Proctor family to baptise their third child 'quickly' and to go, without fail, to Sunday church from now on.

KEY POINTS



- Hale arrives to examine the Proctors, also bringing news of more examinations, including Rebeca Nurse's. Mr Hale is clearly wary about the way the court is using its power. He says he comes 'without the court's authority'.
- The Proctors, especially John, are questioned at length on their knowledge of Christianity and participation in Salem church life.
- John Proctor says Salem is 'gone daft' and reveals that Abigail has admitted there is no seriousness in the talk of witchcraft. Hale is astonished.
- Hale questions the Proctors about whether or not they believe in witches at all. Hale, who clearly believes deeply in witches and witchcraft, is torn about how to act in relation to the Proctors.

'What signifies a poppet?': Elizabeth Proctor is arrested

As Reverend Hale ends his questioning of the Proctors, Giles Corey and Francis Nurse arrive at the door. They come with shocking news: both Rebecca Nurse and Martha Corey have been arrested by Cheever, the court clerk. **Francis reports that Rebecca Nurse has been arrested for the 'supernatural murder of Goody Putnam's babies'. We learn that Martha Corey has been arrested for bewitching a man's ability to raise pigs.** (She has done this bewitching, the charge says, 'with her books', though the names of the books are never mentioned.) Both charges are clearly far-fetched. About Rebecca Nurse, Reverend Hale warns 'If Rebecca Nurse be tainted, then nothing's left to stop the whole green world from burning'. The shocked husbands protest the innocence of their wives, while Proctor is particularly offended by the charge against Rebecca: 'How may such a woman murder children?' Hale, urging them to trust the legal system that's at work, says to Francis: 'Let you rest upon the justice of the court; the court will send her home'.

There is shocked silence when Ezekiel Cheever, clerk of the court, enters. Shortly after him follows Herrick, a court martial. Cheever speaks directly to Proctor, notifying him that

he has 'sixteen warrant tonight' and 'I have a warrant for your wife'. Informing John Proctor that 'Abigail Williams charge her' he asks 'will you hand me any poppets that your wife may keep here?' The gathering is confused as to why Cheever wants to see the poppet, which is provided to him by Elizabeth, before she goes to fetch Mary Warren. Cheever is seen 'turning the poppet over in his hands' before raising the ragdoll's skirt and widening his eyes, astonished. **Cheever draws a long needle out of the poppet before excitedly telling the marshal 'Herrick, Herrick, it is a needle!'** He explains the meaning of the needle to those present. Abigail Williams, earlier that evening while at dinner in her uncle's house, fell to the floor 'like a struck beast ... and screamed a scream that a bull would weep to hear'. Parris rushed to her aid and discovered 'stuck two inches in the flesh of her belly ... a needle'. **When Parris asked his niece how the needle came to be there, she responded that Proctor's 'wife's familiar spirit pushed it in'.** Proctor protests that Abigail 'done it herself', while Cheever and Hale seem to believe the connection, with Cheever saying 'I never warranted to see such proof of Hell'.

As Elizabeth returns with Mary Warren, John Proctor grabs Mary by the arm and presents her to Hale. She is questioned about the poppet and

admits to both making it and sticking the needle in it herself. When asked for a witness, Mary says ‘Ask Abby, Abby sat beside me when I made it’. For Proctor, this is proof enough that the situation is a set-up of Abigail’s making and he pleads with Reverend Hale to see this. **The situation is then fully explained to Elizabeth, who is utterly shocked that Abigail would do this. Unfortunately for Elizabeth, she says: ‘The girl is murder! She must be ripped out of this world!’ Cheever begins to take Elizabeth’s turn of phrase as a sign of genuine desire for Elizabeth to be killed.** All of this angers Proctor greatly, who is now swiftly losing patience.

Proctor snatches Cheever’s arrest warrant for Elizabeth and rips it up, shouting ‘Out with you!’ Angrily, he throws Reverend Hale out, too, calling him ‘a broken minister’. **Hale once more asks Proctor to trust the court which will find in Elizabeth’s favour ‘if she is innocent’. At this, Proctor explodes in anger, wondering ‘Is the accuser always holy now?’ and asking ‘Were they born this morning, clean as God’s fingers?’** His explanation for the madness engulfing the town is that **‘vengeance is walking Salem’** – Proctor claims that there is no witchcraft, but people are using the idea simply to settle old scores. In Proctor’s mind **‘now the little crazy children are jangling the keys of the kingdom’**. Proctor calls Reverend Hale ‘Pontius Pilate’, a reference to the Roman Governor who condemned the innocent Jesus of Nazareth to death to please the crowd.

Elizabeth gives in to the inevitable and agrees to go with Cheever and Herrick. Before leaving, in a touching moment, she instructs Mary Warren about care for the house. John is told ‘When the children wake, speak nothing of witchcraft – it will frighten them’. **Proctor vows ‘I will bring you home’**. Cheever and Herrick leave with Elizabeth, who suffers the humiliation of being chained like a criminal. Corey begs Reverend Hale to speak up: ‘It is a fraud, you know it is a

fraud!’ There are harsh words between Proctor and Hale. Hale insists he will testify for Elizabeth in court, though he cannot tell if she is guilty or innocent. He also instructs those present to reflect on what dark secret or bad deed in Salem has brought terror to the town. He suggests it cannot be traced back, simply, to ‘little crazy children’, but that something much deeper must be at work. **Proctor has no patience for this talk, ordering Hale out powerfully: ‘You are a coward! Though you be ordained in God’s own tears, you are a coward now!’** Once Hale, Giles Corey and Francis Nurse go, Proctor is left alone with Mary Warren.

In the final action of Act Two, Proctor tells Mary Warren that he will go with her to the court the next morning where she will give ‘proper evidence’ to help Elizabeth. Proctor instructs her to tell the truth about the poppet, but Mary fears Abigail: ‘She’ll kill me for saying that!’ Interestingly, Mary Warren is aware that Abigail also has some secrets to tell about John. ‘Abby’ll charge lechery on you, Mr. Proctor!’ she says. (Lechery means excessive sexual desire and refers to Proctor’s affair with Abigail.) Proctor is initially surprised that Abigail has told others about their affair, as it clearly exposes a truth about Abigail too. Though he would prefer the town not to know his sexual history, Proctor can see a benefit in full honesty now: ‘Then her saintliness is done with ... We will slide together into our pit’. Mary Warren persists in saying she is too afraid to be totally truthful in front of Abigail and the other girls. **Proctor, in a striking final speech, tells her to ‘make her peace with the ugly truth now: ‘all our old pretence is ripped away ... we are only what we always were, but naked now’.** Proctor here is saying now the time has come for the people of Salem to bring into the light some truths everyone knows but would be happier to leave in darkness. The Act ends with Mary Warren sobbing ‘I cannot, I cannot, I cannot’.

KEY POINTS



- Salem is clearly in the grip of hysteria, with obviously innocent people such as Rebecca Nurse arrested.
- However, in order to get to Elizabeth Proctor, Abigail knows she must provide some physical proof for the court beyond her word that Elizabeth is a witch. She does this, deceptively, by making use of Mary Warren's naivety to get the poppet into the Proctor house.
- That Abigail stabs herself proves how determined she is to use the power of accusation to have Elizabeth eliminated.
- Mary Warren is now faced with testifying against the powerful Abigail who has threatened 'a pointy reckoning' on any girl who goes against her.
- Proctor realises that Abigail has hinted at his adultery ('lechery') to the other girls: he accepts that it will come to more general attention if he is going to face Abigail down in the court. He will likely have to bear the public shame of being known as an adulterer, a breaker of the seventh commandment.
- However Proctor is determined, at the end of Act Two, to do whatever he must to save Elizabeth.

ACT THREE

'They be tellin' lies about my wife, sir'

Act Three of *The Crucible* begins in the vestry room of Salem meeting house, which is now being used as a waiting room off the General Court. The curtain rises on an empty room described by Miller as 'solemn' and 'forbidding' (intimidating). There are plain benches to the left and right in the room with, at the centre, a long meeting table for the judges. The opening action of Act Three is overheard from the next room, the General Court. Before a crowd of people, Martha Corey is being questioned by Judge Hathorne on the charge of witchcraft.

From the outset of the questioning it is obvious that the court has become rigid and inflexible in its reasoning. For example, when Martha Corey protests 'I am innocent to a witch. I know not what a witch is' Hathorne responds 'How do you know, then, that you are not a witch?' It is plain that this kind of reasoning will be very difficult to combat.

Interrupting proceedings, Giles Corey is heard 'roaring' that he has evidence for the court in his wife's defence. Corey shouts 'Thomas Putnam is reaching out for land!' – he claims that Putnam is making claims of witchcraft against people in order to destroy them. With this done, Putnam will be free to buy up the land of these families destroyed by unprovable charges. Corey continues protesting loudly in the court and causing a disturbance. He is 'half carried' by Herrick from the main courtroom into the vestry, which is the room on stage. They are soon joined in the vestry by Reverend Hale, Judge Hathorne, Judge Danforth, Ezekiel Cheever and Reverend Parris.

Hathorne is described as 'a bitter, remorseless' judge. Danforth, who holds a higher office than Hathorne, is a man 'of some humor and sophistication' but he is serious too, with 'an exact loyalty to his position and his cause'. Giles Corey is interviewed briefly by Danforth. He pleads his wife's case, presuming that he has caused trouble for her by

mentioning that she reads books. He apologises for his earlier behaviour in court, pleading that ‘They be tellin’ lies about my wife, sir’. Corey is dismayed by his wife’s arrest and ‘distressed’ that he might have given the court reason for it: ‘I have broke charity with the woman, I have broke charity with her’. Corey weeps openly, drawing the pity of Reverend Hale who asks Danforth to allow Corey to give the ‘hard evidence for his wife’s defence’, whatever it might be. **Danforth refuses, saying that proper court processes must be followed: ‘let him submit his evidence in proper affidavit’ (i.e. in a legal document). At this point in the play the judges seem more concerned with the importance of the court than with truth and justice.** Corey is removed from the room by Herrick.

Francis Nurse steps forward, hoping to be heard. He pleads with Danforth, stating that ‘we come here three days now and cannot be heard’. His wife, Rebecca, has been condemned that morning. As he had done with Corey, Danforth instructs Francis Nurse ‘Let you write your plea, and in due time I will –’. Before Danforth can finish, Francis Nurse interrupts him excitedly,

saying ‘we have proof for your eyes; God forbid you shut them to it. The girls, sir, the girls are frauds’. Danforth is shocked. He reminds Francis Nurse of how respected and powerful a judge he is and that ‘near to four hundred are in the jails from Marblehead to Lynn, and upon my signature’. Astonishingly, Francis Nurse responds: ‘I never thought to say it to such a weighty judge, but you are deceived’. Throughout this exchange, Judge Hathorne interrupts regularly, claiming that what Nurse and Corey are doing is ‘contempt’ (i.e. disrespect) for the court and they should not be heard.

Corey enters again, beckoning in Mary Warren and John Proctor also. Mary keeps her eyes to the ground and Proctor is holding her by the elbow as if to support her in walking. Parris is clearly unhappy to see both Proctor and Warren. Sharply, he questions Mary Warren ‘What are you about here?’ and warns Danforth. **Proctor says: ‘Beware this man, Your Excellency, this man is mischief’. Parris is trying to ensure that neither Proctor or Warren are believed even before they begin to speak.**

KEY POINTS



- The setting of the play’s action has now changed to the waiting room of the General Court in Salem.
- Martha Corey, wife of Giles Corey, is now accused of witchcraft. The court has become much more rigid in its thinking and approach. Giles Corey accuses Thomas Putnam of stirring up trouble in a greedy attempt to ‘reach out’ for more land.
- Judge Hathorne, a bitter judge, and Judge Danforth are presiding over the court. Both Corey and Francis Nurse, whose wives are accused, appeal to the judges. However, the judges are not eager to hear them out immediately but insist they follow the proper channels.
- Proctor and Mary Warren arrive and are immediately attacked verbally by Reverend Parris who dislikes Proctor intensely.

Proctor brings Mary Warren before the court

As Mary Warren ‘cannot speak’, Proctor proceeds to speak on her behalf. He insists ‘She never saw no spirits, sir’ and is backed up by Giles Corey. Judge Danforth is astonished.

Proctor says ‘She has signed a deposition, sir’ (a deposition is a written testimony for the court), but Danforth will not accept it. Worried that this could destroy the believability of the court, Danforth questions Proctor and Mary. He asks Proctor whether he has ‘given out this story in the village’, worried it will undermine his work. Proctor confirms he has not. Parris intervenes, clearly very agitated by this negative development: ‘They’ve come to overthrow the court, sir!’ Danforth asks Proctor to think about the consequences of what Mary is suggesting. **Danforth reminds Proctor that the whole business of the court is based on the idea that ‘the voice of Heaven is speaking through the children’.** Danforth turns to Mary who admits that her actions and those of the other girls were all ‘pretence’. He is baffled by this evidence and is ‘wide-eyed’ as he considers the consequences. Parris speaks against Warren’s testimony, labelling it a ‘vile lie’.

Danforth probes Proctor’s confidence in Mary Warren. He asks whether Proctor would be willing to ‘declare this revelation in the open court’, that is with the townspeople there to witness. Proctor says he would be willing, that he simply wishes to free his wife. **When Proctor states strongly that he has no desire ‘to undermine the court’ Ezekiel Cheever interrupts. He reports to Danforth that Proctor ‘damned the court and ripped your warrant’ the night Elizabeth was arrested.** Parris is delighted by this evidence of Proctor’s attitude to the court. Danforth continues to examine other minor issues of Proctor’s character and religious behaviour. When Hale defends John Proctor, stating simply that ‘I

cannot think you may judge the man on such evidence’, Danforth returns to what he has seen in court. He has seen ‘people choked before my eyes ... struck by pins and slashed by daggers’. He has ‘until this moment not the slightest reason to suspect the children may be deceiving me’. **Proctor pushes back at Danforth, respectfully. He says that the Gospel will not tell the court that ‘Rebecca Nurse murdered seven babies’.** No, Proctor says, **‘It is the children only, and this one will swear she lied to you’.** Danforth calls Hathorne aside for a brief, private conversation.

Danforth returns with the news for John Proctor that Elizabeth Proctor is now claiming to be pregnant. Proctor is astonished. Officials of the court have examined her, but not found evidence of the pregnancy. However, Proctor says that if Elizabeth claims to be pregnant than it is so: ‘That woman will never lie, Mr Danforth. ... Never, sir, never’. Though Danforth, who cannot execute a pregnant woman, says he will let her live another month. If, within the month, Elizabeth shows signs of pregnancy, she will be spared hanging for a year. Elizabeth is ‘saved at least this year, and a year is long’. Danforth has heard from John Proctor’s mouth that his hope is simply to free his wife. He asks: ‘What say you sir? ... Will you drop this charge?’ At this stage Proctor can walk away from the business of the court and have reasonable hope that Elizabeth and their child might be spared if the craze has passed within a year.

Proctor cannot walk away. Referring to others accused, he says ‘These are my friends. Their wives are also accused’. Parris angrily insists, once more, that **John Proctor has ‘come to overthrow this court’.** Danforth orders the other judges in session in the neighbouring court to take a one-hour break. Referring to Proctor’s deposition he earlier refused to examine, Danforth says ‘I am ready to hear your evidence’.



KEY POINTS

- John Proctor speaks on Mary Warren's behalf, stating that she in fact has never seen spirits and that her previous behaviour before the court was an act.
- Danforth is suspicious that Proctor may be trying to undermine the court, but Proctor denies this. The judge says he has not the slightest reason to think the girls are lying. Proctor says his only motive in coming before the judge is to free his wife, Elizabeth.
- Danforth announces to Proctor that Elizabeth is pregnant and will be spared hanging for the duration of her pregnancy. Proctor confirms that Elizabeth must be pregnant, as 'That woman will never lie'.
- Even with Elizabeth spared, Proctor still refuses to walk away from the court. This shows his sense of justice and his loyalty to other innocent accused neighbours.

The court is both doubted and defended

Proctor produces several written documents. The first, handed to Danforth, he describes as 'a sort of testament'. It has been signed by a number of people wishing to declare their good opinion of Rebecca Nurse, Martha Corey and Elizabeth Proctor. Those who have signed, says Proctor, all say 'they've known the women many years and never saw no sign they had dealings with the Devil'. This makes Parris, who is very invested in the work of the court, worry. He is seen 'sweating' when Francis Nurse reveals that there are ninety-one signatures on the document. **Parris goes on the attack directly, seeing this large number: 'This is a clear attack upon the court!' Crucially, Reverend Hale speaks in defence of the testament, wondering aloud 'Is every defence an attack upon the court?' He is trying to cast doubt on the blind determination that seems now to be driving Parris and Danforth.** Shockingly, at Hathorne's suggestion, Danforth orders that everyone who has signed the document defending the women be arrested 'for examination'. This horrifies Francis Nurse who fears he has 'brought trouble on these people'. In responding, Danforth makes a claim which clearly shows his frame of mind at this stage in the play. If those signing the testament are 'in good conscience' they have nothing to

fear. **It is now the case, Danforth claims, that 'a person is either with the court or he must be counted against it, there be no road between'.** The court, embodied in Judge Danforth, sees all opposition as the work of the Devil.

Giles Corey's legal submission is given to Judge Danforth. A mildly comic moment follows, when Judge Danforth compliments how well the submission is written. Corey explains that this is so because he has been so often in court and has become used to legal language. Corey mentions that Judge Danforth's father judged one of Corey's past legal cases, thirty-five years before. Reading Corey's submission, Danforth asks Parris to fetch Thomas Putnam. The conversation between Corey and Danforth is interrupted by the arrival in the vestry of Thomas Putnam. **Corey's submission contains an accusation against Putnam.** He has stated that Thomas Putnam is using the witchcraft crisis for his own ends, that he told his daughter to 'cry witchery upon George Jacobs that is now in jail'. Corey points out that if Jacobs is hung for witchcraft, by law he and his family will lose all their property. **There is nobody in Salem except Thomas Putnam with the money to buy this size of farm, which leads Corey to claim 'This man is killing his neighbours for their land!'** Further, Corey claims that his submission is based on the word

of ‘an honest man who heard Thomas Putnam say it.’ Danforth demands the man’s name, Corey will not give it. When Proctor steps in to defend Corey – ‘he has the story in confidence’ – Parris pushes back, claiming that ‘The Devil lives in such confidences’. Danforth reminds Corey that he has made a serious accusation, one that amounts to accusing Thomas Putnam of planning to have a man murdered by the court. Still, Corey will not give the name of the man who witnessed Putnam’s plan. Danforth places Corey under arrest for ‘contempt of this court’. In the heat of the moment Corey runs at Putnam, shouting ‘I’ll cut your throat, Putnam, I’ll kill you yet!’ while Proctor tries to hold him back.

Throughout Danforth’s questioning of Corey, Reverend Hale tries to bring a reasonable voice

to the harsh approaches taken by Danforth and Hathorne. He says that there is a terrible ‘fear of this court in the country’ and suggests that this may work against the court itself. If people do not feel the court is fair and balanced, they are likely to want nothing to do with it and certainly are going to be unwilling to cooperate openly. Danforth claims that if there is fear, there must also be guilt. Hale disputes this, explaining that it is easier for a man with an education, such as himself, to come and defend himself if needed. However, ‘there is a fear in the country nonetheless’. **Despite Hale’s pleas for Danforth to ease his position, the senior judge restates his determination: ‘there is a fear in the country because there is a moving plot to topple Christ in the country!’ and ‘No uncorrupted man may fear this court, Mr Hale!’**

KEY POINTS



- Proctor produces written testimonies, signed by many in the village, supporting the good character of Rebecca Nurse, Martha Corey and Elizabeth Proctor. Parris, insecure, once again declares this an attack on the court.
- Danforth orders all who have signed the document arrested for questioning. In his black-and-white thinking, people are either ‘with the court or he must be counted against it’.
- A submission from Giles Corey alleges that Thomas Putnam is deliberately using accusations of witchcraft to destroy farmers whose lands he wishes to buy. Corey will not give the name of the person who gave him this information: he is arrested for contempt of court as a result.
- Throughout the scene, Reverend Hale tries to be the voice of reason in the court, emphasising how afraid all Salem residents now are of the court. Danforth pushes back that ‘No uncorrupted man may fear this court’.

Mary Warren’s deposition: ‘She declares her friends are lying’

Having calmed Giles Corey with the promise that ‘we’ll prove it all now’, Proctor produces the paper on which Mary Warren’s deposition is written. Introducing Mary Warren’s testimony to Judge Danforth, Proctor reminds him that ‘until two week ago she were no different than the other children are today’. He does not deny that Mary Warren has taken part in the strange

and dangerous behaviour lead by Abigail. **Mary ‘swore familiar spirits choked her’ and even swore that Satan ‘in the form of women now in jail, tried to win her soul away’.** Proctor informs Danforth that **Mary Warren has now changed her position entirely. Warren swears, now, ‘that she never saw Satan ... And she declares her friends are lying’.** Reverend Hale hurriedly interrupts, suggesting that this claim should be presented to the court by a lawyer, not

a farmer like Proctor. Hale is urging caution here. He states that he has ‘signed seventy-two death warrants’ yet after signing Rebecca Nurse’s death warrant his ‘hand shakes yet as with a wound!’ Hale pleads, on these grounds, for Danforth to allow a lawyer to present Mary Warren’s evidence. The evidence is potentially explosive.

Danforth refuses to stall the work of the court. He claims no lawyer is needed and his explanation for this gives us a key insight into the thinking behind the court. In a trial for a more common crime, Danforth says, witnesses would be called. Because the only witnesses to witchcraft are the witch and the victim – and a witch will never convict herself – then the court *must* rely on the word of the victim. Hale reminds Danforth, once more, that Mary Warren claims the victims to be liars. Danforth, clearly growing impatient with Hale’s objections, insists that he is now going to address the question of the girls’ honesty. Hale, ‘defeated’, agrees.

Proctor now hands the document containing Mary Warren’s statement to Judge Danforth. Judge Hathorne, Reverend Parris and Reverend Hale move close to Danforth, allowing all four men to read. Proctor glances at Giles, then reassures Mary Warren. Francis Nurse prays silently. All eyes are clearly on Judge Danforth but, before he can speak, Reverend Parris interrupts with ‘I

should like to question –’ Danforth snaps back at him: ‘Mr Parris, I bid you be silent!’ This is the first outburst from Danforth and we see his resentment of Parris clearly. Danforth asserts that it is he who is in charge here and asks Ezekiel Cheever to bring the other children from the court into the vestry. He then turns to question Mary Warren.

Danforth questions Mary Warren, at times speaking harshly to her. Firstly, he confirms with Mary that Proctor hasn’t pressured her to come to the court with evidence. Mary denies any pressure from Proctor. **Danforth asks her whether she was before ‘callously lying’ when she ‘knew that people would hang by your evidence?’** When Mary Warren admits that this was the case, **Danforth has an angry outburst asking Mary ‘Do you not know that God damns all liars? Or is it new that you lie?’** Once Mary claims that she is ‘with God now’, Danforth spells it out for her that her actions will have consequences. She either lied when she first appeared in court with Abigail, or is lying now – ‘in either case you have committed perjury and you will go to jail for it’. As she breaks down in tears under this intense questioning, Mary Warren insists ‘I cannot lie no more. I am with God, I am with God’. As she is sobbing the court door opens and a number of girls are brought in by Ezekiel Cheever.



KEY POINTS

- Proctor presents Mary’s testimony that she now declares her friends are lying. Hale begs Danforth to pause proceedings to allow a lawyer represent Warren. This is refused.
- Danforth snaps at Reverend Parris and we see, for the first time, real tension between the men.
- Mary Warren is questioned by Judge Danforth, who emphasises the seriousness of her lying to the court. She swears that, whatever her past, she is ‘with God now’ and telling the truth.
- Ezekiel Cheever brings Abigail and some other girls from the court to the vestry. Judge Danforth will now put Mary Warren’s accusations to them.

Mary and Abigail are questioned intensely

Four children are led into the vestry: Susanna Walcott, Mercy Lewis, Betty Parris and Abigail Williams. **Danforth emphasises how serious their situation is, that the law forbids witchcraft but also ‘the law and Bible damn all bearers of false witness’. (To bear false witness means to say something you know to be untrue.)** Danforth admits that Mary Warren’s testimony about the girls being liars may be the work of Satan. It may be a set-up to undermine the court and destroy its work. If this is the case, he threatens, ‘her neck will break for it’. However, it is also Danforth’s duty to investigate the truth of her claims. Turning to question the children, he advises that if they have been lying they should now ‘confess ... for a quick confession will go easier with you’. Abigail stands to be questioned. Danforth then looks from Abigail to Mary Warren, offering both a final chance to admit lying. Neither accepts. In the coming moments the attention will be turned to each girl in turn.

Danforth begins to question Abigail on the subject of the poppet. He puts to Abigail Mary Warren’s account of how the needle came to be in the poppet, but Abigail says flatly ‘It is a lie, sir’. Abigail claims that Elizabeth Proctor ‘always kept poppets’, while John Proctor speaks up to deny this. Hathorne claims that any poppets kept might have been hidden. In response Proctor says: ‘There might also be a dragon with five legs in my house, but no one has ever seen it’. Parris interjects saying that this is the whole aim of the court: ‘to discover what no one has ever seen’. Proctor changes his approach and asks Danforth to consider Mary Warren’s motives for coming to court. What benefit is it to her, he asks, ‘to turn herself about? What may Mary Warren gain but hard questioning and worse?’ **Proctor makes a claim against Abigail which astonishes Danforth: ‘I believe she means to murder’. In response to Danforth’s shocked question that ‘This child would murder your wife?’ Proctor**

states bluntly ‘It is not a child’. Proctor then proceeds to lead an attack on Abigail’s credibility, helped by Giles Corey.

A number of accusations are made against Abigail that shock Danforth. She is defended by Parris and Hathorne who sense, just as Danforth does, that it is crucial to the court for Abigail to be believed. Firstly, Proctor raises the issue of Abigail being ‘twice this year put out of the meeting house for laughter during prayer’. Secondly, Proctor encourages Mary to ‘tell the Governor how you danced in the woods’. Abigail stares at Mary who is too afraid to speak. Proctor, instead, tells the story of how ‘Abigail leads the girls to the woods ... and they have danced there naked’ and how ‘Mr Parris discovered them himself in the dead of night!’ Throughout this line of questioning, Parris interrupts in defence of Abigail. He informs Danforth that ‘since I come to Salem this man is blackening my name’, but he is forced to admit he discovered Abigail and other girls dancing in the woods. Parris is left with little choice here as Reverend Hale informs the court that Mr Parris admitted this to him when he first arrived from Beverly. **Danforth is astonished at this information about Abigail. Miller writes that for Danforth, at this stage, the situation is a ‘growing nightmare’ as Abigail has been seriously undermined.** Judge Hathorne, seeking to defend the court, now begins to question Mary Warren about her experiences.

Hathorne asks Mary how it can be true that she ‘never saw no spirits’ and yet when townspeople were on trial for witchery she ‘would faint, saying their spirits came out of their bodies and choked you’. More than once to Hathorne’s questioning Mary answers that all her actions before were ‘pretence’. This leads Proctor, perhaps in frustration, to back her up: ‘She only pretended to faint, Your Excellency. They’re all marvellous pretenders’. If Mary was pretending before, Hathorne asks, then ‘can she pretend to faint now?’ Parris joins Hathorne’s call for Mary to faint, but she cannot. Danforth wonders if it is