

# Comparative Study

## Texts

- *Small Things Like These*
- *The Crucible*
- *The Shawshank Redemption*

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## Summary of the Three Texts

### ***Small Things Like These* by Claire Keegan**

The novel tells the story of Bill Furlong, a coal and timber merchant in 1980s New Ross, Co. Wexford, who confronts troubling questions about how girls and women are treated in the town's controversial convent.

The story opens with a short chapter that establishes the time and place of the story. A brief overview of Furlong's childhood follows. Son to an unmarried mother, he grew up living in her employer's (Mrs Wilson, a wealthy Protestant widow) house. He was bullied at school because he has never known his father. Mrs Wilson offered him some protection – growing up in her house was pleasant, and he has warm memories of that part of his childhood. The story then changes to the present as it explores Furlong's life with his wife Eileen, and their five daughters. The family are preparing for Christmas. They attend the annual lighting of the Christmas tree lights, make Christmas cake and write letters to Santa Claus.

The tone of the novel darkens as Furlong makes his first visit to the town's convent. Rumours abound in the town that the institution is a Magdalene Laundry or a mother and baby home. Furlong enters the convent without permission and finds a number of young girls and women being kept in appalling conditions. He discusses what he has seen later that evening with Eileen, but she is keen for him to not talk about the subject. Shortly afterwards, Furlong makes a return visit to the convent and discovers a young woman, Sarah, locked in the coal shed. He is thrown into a crisis as he listens to the Mother Superior's unconvincing explanation about how the young woman was locked in the shed. Sitting together, Mother Superior coaxes Sarah into lying that she had been playing a game of hide and seek with the other women and had been accidentally locked in the shed. Furlong does not challenge Mother Superior's unlikely account – but the experience has a profound effect on him, and will motivate him as the story progresses.

Furlong and his family attend Mass together. Afterwards they return home and put up their Christmas tree. Furlong decides to visit Ned, who worked with his mother for Mrs Wilson, and who Furlong grew up with. Ned is not home and instead the door is opened by a family friend. She remarks on the striking resemblance between Furlong and Ned. This moment leads to an epiphany for Furlong – his father is Ned.

The final part of the story sees Furlong act decisively to help Sarah escape the convent. He takes Sarah to his family home, even though he knows that Eileen is against any involvement with the girls and women in the convent. He notes that there may be 'a world of trouble' in his house for his decision but at the same time he considers that it would have been worse to do nothing 'which he would have had to live with for the rest of his life'. The novel ends uncertainly, as we never see Eileen's reaction, find out what happens to Sarah or see if Furlong has to face any other serious consequences.

### ***The Crucible* by Arthur Miller**

*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.

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 Shawshank Redemption* by Frank Darabont (Dir)**

Andy Dufresne, a banker, is wrongly convicted of the double murder of his wife and her lover. He is given two life sentences at Shawshank Prison in Maine, USA. He becomes friendly with Ellis ‘Red’ Redding, a popular prisoner who is known for smuggling objects into prison. Andy asks Red to get him a rock hammer, so he can take up his old hobby of rock collecting and shaping. The prison itself is a cruel and dangerous place. Andy is the target of sexual assaults by a gang known as ‘The Sisters’. Andy, Red and some other prisoners help to tar the roof of the prison. While carrying out the work, Andy overhears the leader of the guards, Byron Hadley, complaining about having to pay tax on his inheritance. Andy approaches Hadley and offers to help him. Hadley accepts Andy’s help and this means that Andy is favoured by the guards. The next time Andy is assaulted by ‘The Sisters’, Hadley and the guards take revenge on them, sending their leader (‘Bogs’) to a hospital.

The warden, Norton, offers Andy a position working in the prison library, because he thinks that Andy can help him, and the other guards, with financial issues. Andy accepts the position in the library and turns it from a sad, underused library into a blossoming, buzzing place.

Norton begins a program where prisoners work on infrastructure outside the prison walls. He accepts bribes from local businesses who fear that prison labour will undercut their business. Andy hides the money away in a bank account under a fake name, helping the warden launder money for many years. In 1964, an excitable young man named Tommy Williams is sent to

Shawshank. It comes to light that Tommy knows the person who actually killed Andy's wife and her lover. Andy informs the warden of the evidence and asks for support with an appeal. Norton refuses to help Andy as he does not want to lose his services. He has Tommy killed and Andy put in solitary confinement for two months.

Andy tells Red about his dreams of life outside the prison. He hopes to open a small hotel and run a fishing boat in Zihuantanejo, a Mexican coastal town. Andy tells Red that if he ever gets out of Shawshank, he should go to a place in Buxton to retrieve a package buried under an oak tree.

The next day, Andy doesn't come out of his cell for roll call, having escaped through a hole he has been digging with the rock hammer for many years. He poses as the fake person in whose name all of Norton's money has been deposited, takes the money and flees to Mexico. In the process, he also tips the police off to Norton's shady business dealings. When the authorities go to arrest the warden, he shoots himself.

After 40 years, Red finally makes parole and visits the place in Buxton that Andy told him about. He digs up a box full of money and a letter from Andy telling him to come to Zihuatanejo. He does and the two friends reunite.

MENTOR BOOKS

## A. Cultural Context

The cultural context of a text is the background or the ‘world’ of the text. Analysing the cultural context helps us to understand how individuals, groups and societies are shaped, and how they interact with each other. Studying the cultural context of a text allows us to examine issues such

as gender, religion, and social class in order to consider the ways in which they have an impact on people’s lives. Cultural context, then, is a study of society and how it affects the lives of its characters.

### *Small Things Like These*

The novel is set over the autumn and winter of 1984 in Co. Wexford. The story is divided into seven chapters, and follows Bill Furlong, a coal and timber merchant, as he prepares to spend Christmas with his wife Eileen and their five daughters. The cultural context of the novel is strikingly bleak. **1980s Ireland was synonymous with unemployment, emigration and a limited sense of personal or political freedom. The single most powerful cultural influence at the time was the Catholic Church. The vast majority of Irish people were Catholics who attended weekly Mass.**

**Gender plays an important role in shaping who has and who hasn’t got power in the cultural context of the novel.** Most of the people in paid employment in the novel are men. Bill Furlong is the family breadwinner, and plays a pivotal role in their lives. In contrast, women are largely consigned to familial roles.

Ireland of the 1980s was a society of limited material wealth, and the cultural context of the novel presents a country where there was little difference in terms of social status between the majority of its citizens. However, a character’s social class could certainly be an advantage or a disadvantage, depending on where they landed on the social hierarchy.

This relatively short novel, with only a handful of characters, demonstrates the rich and complex cultural context of 1980s Ireland.

has and who has not got power in the cultural context of the novel. Most of the people in paid employment in the novel are men. Bill Furlong is the family breadwinner and plays a pivotal role in the lives of his wife Eileen and his five daughters. Furlong is a man whose life revolves around his job and his family. He takes great pride in his daughters, noting that he often ‘felt a deep, private joy that these children were his own’. However, he appears ground down by his routines and responsibilities. Memorably, he describes his daily life as one of grind and monotony: ‘getting up in the dark and going to the yard, making the deliveries, one after another, the whole day long, then coming home in the dark and trying to wash the black off himself and sitting into a dinner table and falling asleep before waking in the dark to meet a version of the same thing, again’.

Furlong’s quiet dissatisfaction with his life is mirrored in his discomfort with the way men behave around women. He occasionally lies awake at night, listening to the sounds of the street. He notices the bawdy, vulgar humour of drunk men, the sound of ‘a sharp, hot whistle and laughter’ as they return home from the pub. These sounds unnerve Furlong and reinforce his distrust of men. He worries about his ‘girls getting big and growing up, going out into that world of men’. Most ominously, he has already noticed ‘men’s eyes following his girls’. In Furlong’s mind, men are not to be trusted around women.

Interestingly, Furlong examines his own role as a loyal and loving husband in the novel. He calls to a neighbour’s house for a kettle of

### GENDER

Gender plays a significant role in shaping who

hot water to defrost the lock on his gate. The neighbour, a young woman with three children, is friendly and welcoming to Furlong. He finds himself attracted to her, and lets 'a part of his mind turn loose to stray off and imagine what it might be like to live there, in that house, with her as his wife'. He traces his feeling of wanderlust to 'something in his blood'. Furlong was brought up to believe that his absent father had run off to England when his mother became pregnant. On some level, Furlong muses that he may do something similar – it is a fantasy, of course, as his real life is one of steadfast commitment to his wife and children.

The principal female character is Eileen, Bill's wife, and she provides an insight into the role of women in the cultural context of the novel. Eileen works in the family home, carrying out domestic tasks and organising the lives of her daughters, her husband and the family in general. The family returns home from watching the annual lighting of the town's Christmas lights. Eileen immediately starts to work. She said 'it was well past time they made the Christmas cake'. She enlists Bill and her daughters in the task, and as soon as they have finished, she took stock of the room and told the girls to clear down so she could get on, and start the ironing'. The family home is a busy place, with Eileen firmly at its helm. The girls go to bed, and Eileen immediately starts to work out what Christmas presents to get them. 'There's another job near done,' Eileen comments, after she decides to go to town the following day to pick up the presents. Her work extends beyond the physical and emotional labour of caring for five daughters. There is also the deep psychological work of planning the family's future. Even though Bill earns the money, Eileen looks after it, and thinks about how it can be best used to improve the lives of the family: 'I'm still putting something away into the Credit Union every week. We should get the loan and have the new windows in the front before this time next year'. Eileen's

role as a carer and organiser is unrivalled in the novel. **Like Bill, she has no real life outside of the family home – she has no real friends or hobbies. Readers are left with the impression of two dedicated, committed parents, whose roles within the family follow predictable gender norms.**

## RELIGION

The Catholic Church holds enormous influence over the cultural context of the novel. The protagonist of the novel, Bill Furlong, was raised by his Catholic mother, Sarah, in a Protestant home. Sarah worked as a domestic for Mrs Wilson, a wealthy Protestant widow, when she had 'fallen pregnant', as the degrading language of the time described it. There was immense social stigma for becoming pregnant outside of marriage. Sarah's family 'made it clear they'd have no more to do with her', as her pregnancy was considered a source of shame not just for Sarah, but for them too. Furlong inherited this shame. He was targeted by bullies at school, who picked on him for being a child born outside of marriage: 'he'd been jeered and called some ugly names; once he'd come home with the back of his coat covered in spit'. Such was the power of religion in the cultural context of 1980s Ireland. Interestingly, as a young adult Furlong's religion became an advantage for him as he 'had developed good, Protestant habits; was given to rising early and had no taste for drink'.

The influence of religion in the novel is encapsulated in the town's convent. Run by Mother Superior of the Good Shepherd order of nuns, the convent is a 'powerful-looking place on the hill at the far side of the river with black, wide-open gates and a host of tall, shining windows, facing the town'. This ominous description provides a foretaste of both the enforced misery that lies within the convent, and the pervasive power that Mother Superior and the nuns have on those people outside it. The convent is portrayed in ambiguous terms.

On the one hand it 'ran a training school ... for girls, providing them with basic education. They also ran a laundry business'. However, such descriptions seem innocuous to the town's inhabitants. Rumours abound that the convent is in fact a Magdalene Laundry, where 'girls of low character' are 'reformed' by cleaning bedlinen and handkerchiefs from 'dawn til night'. Another version has it that the convent is 'no better than a mother-and-baby home where common, unmarried girls went in to be hidden away after they had given birth'. The local chatter and gossip about the convent is given credence when Furlong visits to make a fuel delivery. He finds 'more than a dozen young women and girls, down on their hands and knees with tins of old-fashioned lavender polish and rags, polishing their hearts out in circles on the floor'. Shockingly, one of the girls asks him if he can help her escape as far as the river. 'All I want to do is drown meself,' she says. Both inside and out, the convent highlights the importance of religion in the cultural context of the novel.

Mother Superior is symbolic of the fearsome power of religion in the cultural context of the novel. Furlong returns to the convent to make a Christmas delivery of fuel. He is disturbed to find a girl locked in the coal shed. She is 'just about fit to stand' and is unable to tell if it is night or day. She pleads with Furlong to ask the nuns about her baby, who's 'fourteen weeks old. They've taken him from me now but they might let me feed him again, if he's here. I don't know where he is'. Rattled by her revelation, Furlong is bewildered when Mother Superior opens the door of the convent. She greets him with an incongruent smile and thanks him for coming. In doing so, Mother Superior wrongfoots Furlong, who had been anticipating a confrontation with the nun. Instead, Mother Superior empathises with the 'poor girl' and instructs Furlong to come in for a cup of tea. He resists, but she tells him authoritatively: 'You'll come in ... I'll have it no other way'. She is unconcerned as

Furlong apologises for bringing his dirty work boots across the pristine floors. 'Where there's muck, there's luck,' she tells him, nonchalantly. Mother Superior subtly emphasises the power of the Church as she enquires about Furlong's daughters, remarking that she hopes to see them all studying in the Catholic school next door to the convent. Fiendishly, she remarks: 'it's no easy task to find a place for everyone'. Beneath the façade of friendship lies the steel of authority; Mother Superior is obliquely signalling to Furlong that he should not publicly talk about the girl in the coal shed, or face the punishment of exclusion from the town's 'good' school.

### **SOCIAL CLASS**

A person's social class is clearly a marker of a person's power and influence in the cultural context of the novel. Though she does not appear in person in the novel, Mrs Wilson is the archetypal wealthy character. She lived in a large comfortable house and had two domestic workers: Sarah and Ned. She had a small library, as well as some livestock. She never had problems with neighbours as her land was 'well fenced and managed' and 'no money was owing'. She is driven by Ned to church on Sundays wearing her 'good hat'. Mrs Wilson is undoubtedly a generous character, giving 'Furlong a few thousand pounds to start up' when he became engaged to Eileen. Her money comes from her husband's military pension and affords her the confidence of social security as she 'didn't seem to care much for what judgements others passed but carried temperately along with her own life'.

The town of New Ross is busy, but certainly not prosperous. The economic outlook for the town is bleak: 'The shipyard company had closed and ... the big fertiliser factory ... had made several redundancies'. Small businesses too are suffering, and 'times were raw', but this inspires Furlong to 'keep his head down and stay on the right side of people, and to keep providing for his girls'. Concerns about money are ever-present in



1980s Ireland. Furlong himself, though running a relatively successful small business, has little more than enough to make it from week to week. His notices his lorry's engine is deteriorating. In order to replace it he will have to forgo something significant: 'the new windows that Eileen has her heart set upon for the front of the house would not be installed next year, or the year after'. More starkly, Furlong meets people who cannot afford to pay for fuel for their homes and they quietly ask him 'if what was owing could be put on the slate'. Furlong tries to help people who he knows are struggling, as he leaves 'a bag of logs at the doors of those who had given him the

business, when they could afford it'.

In this difficult social situation, there is anxiety about having enough to survive. Furlong worries that he will not be able to keep his girls studying at St Margarets, 'the only good school in the town'. Later in the novel a publican, Mrs Kehoe, warns Furlong not to jeopardise his daughter's education by speaking ill of the nuns and their convent: 'Can't I count on one hand the number of girls from around here that ever got on well who didn't walk those halls'. The subtext to her remarks is clear: education is the way to maintain or improve social status in the cultural context of the novel.

### KEY POINTS



- The novel is set over the autumn and winter of 1984 in Co. Wexford. The cultural context of the novel is strikingly bleak. 1980s Ireland was synonymous with unemployment, emigration and a limited sense of personal or political freedom.
- Most of the people in paid employment in the novel are men. Bill Furlong is the family breadwinner and plays a pivotal role in the lives of his wife Eileen and his five daughters. Furlong is a man whose life revolves around his job and his family. He takes great pride in his daughters, noting that he often 'felt a deep, private joy that these children were his own'.
- However, he also examines his own role as a loyal and loving husband. He calls to a neighbour's house for a kettle of hot water to defrost the lock on his gate. He finds himself attracted to her, and lets 'a part of his mind turn loose to stray off and imagine what it might be like to live there, in that house, with her as his wife'.
- The principal female character is Eileen, Bill's wife, and she provides insight into the role of women in the cultural context of the novel. Eileen works in the family home, carrying out domestic tasks and organising the lives of her daughters, her husband and the family in general.
- The Catholic Church holds enormous influence over the cultural context of the novel. The protagonist of the novel, Bill Furlong, was raised by his Catholic mother, Sarah, in a Protestant home. Sarah worked as a domestic for Mrs Wilson, a wealthy Protestant widow, when she had 'fallen pregnant' – this degrading language signals the immense social stigma of becoming pregnant outside of marriage. Mrs Wilson had no objection to Sarah raising Bill in her home, and continuing to work for her.
- Interestingly, as a young adult Furlong's religion became an advantage for him as he 'had developed good, Protestant habits; was given to rising early and had no taste for drink'.
- The influence of religion in the novel is encapsulated in the town's convent. The



convent is portrayed in ambiguous terms. On the one hand it 'ran a training school ... for girls, providing them with basic education. They also ran a laundry business'. However, rumours abound that the convent is in fact a Magdalene Laundry, or a mother and baby home.

## *The Crucible and Small Things Like These*

### **OVERVIEW**

*The Crucible* is a fictionalised version of a real witch hunt in a small Puritan community in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692. Miller based his play on what 'little is known' of the people involved in the witch hunt, drawing from contemporaneous letters, 'the trial record' and 'certain broadsides written at the time'.

**As with the novel, the cultural context of the play is almost relentlessly bleak.** According to Miller, Salem would have appeared to a European person as 'a barbaric frontier inhabited by a sect of fanatics'. Under Puritan law, the crime of witchcraft was punishable by death. When a number of girls in Salem fall ill with no identifiable cause, witchcraft is suspected – and some of the town's most vulnerable citizens are accused of causing harm to the girls by way of demonic spiritual conjuring.

The play explores this fevered cultural context, where rumours, hearsay and myths mutate into hard facts and evidence, until more than 100 people are accused of the dubious crime of witchcraft. In total, 19 people are hanged and one is crushed to death in the frenzy.

The role of religion is paramount in the cultural context of the play. Salem is a theocracy, and Puritanism forms the basis for the severe oppressive laws and values in the town.

Gender roles are delineated along patriarchal lines. Men hold all of the major religious, judicial and economic positions in the town, with women restricted to domestic roles.

A person's social class has a direct bearing on their power in the cultural context of the play. Major landowners command the respect of Reverend Parris, the minister of Salem, as well

as Judge Danforth, who oversees the witchcraft trials.

### **GENDER**

**As in Clare Keegan's novel, Arthur Miller's play presents a cultural context that is largely patriarchal.** The powerful people in the cultural context of the play are all male. Reverend Parris, minister of Salem, has massive influence over his congregation. Reverend Hale, a witchcraft expert who is summoned to investigate claims of supernatural events in the town, is treated with near-unanimous deference upon his arrival. Deputy-Governor Danforth, the judge in charge of the witchcraft trials, ultimately retains the power to try, convict and execute those who are found guilty of witchcraft. **Certainly, there is a wider cast of powerful characters in the play than in the novel. In common between the two cultural contexts, however, is the power and influence of men over women and over their societies.**

**The protagonist of the play, John Proctor, like Bill Furlong in the novel, is a widely respected character within his community. In parallel with Furlong, Proctor has a tangible sense of social justice, though he is arguably a more strong-minded and independent man.** Miller's stage notes introduce Proctor as 'powerful of body, even-tempered and not easily led'. Proctor demonstrates his astute temperament from the early stages of the play. He is non-committal on the topic of witchcraft: 'I never spoke on witches one way or the other,' he tells Reverend Parris. Later, he becomes incredulous when his wife Elizabeth tells him that a court will be set up with four judges in

Salem. 'Court! What court?' he exclaims. His scepticism hardens as he recalls one of the chief accusers, Abigail Williams – with whom he has had an affair – has already told him that there is no truth to the allegations of witchcraft. He attends the court to clear Elizabeth's name after she is accused of witchcraft too. However Proctor, like Furlong in the novel, is a man of definite moral rectitude. He is not satisfied with the exoneration of his wife and offers Danforth a deposition, signed by 91 Salem citizens, imploring the court to free the other wrongly accused women as the evidence of their good character is tangible and long-established, unlike the dubious claims made against them. 'If you'll notice, sir – they've known the women for many years and never saw no sign they had dealings with the Devil,' he says. Towards the end of the play, John Proctor is himself accused of witchcraft. He contemplates offering a false confession so that he can free himself and return to his wife and family. However, he refuses to sign the confession, 'because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life!'. **Ultimately, John Proctor dies for his beliefs – which obviously sets him apart from Bill Furlong in the novel. Both men are complex characters, whose status is typical of that afforded to men in their cultural contexts, but whose atypical actions, and pursuit of moral justice at personal cost, present them in a distinct light to other men.**

Other aspects of John Proctor's character present compelling insights into the role of gender in the cultural context of the play. Moreover, they provide a tangible contrast with the attitude and actions of Bill Furlong in the novel. Proctor's treatment of women is frequently gruff and intimidating. He threatens his servant, Mary Warren, with violence when he finds her talking to Abigail, rather than carrying out her duties in his family home. 'I'll show you a great doin' on your arse one of these days. Now get you home; my wife is waitin' with your work!' he says. His former lover, Abigail, alleges that

Elizabeth is 'blackening my name in the village' and is a 'cold, snivelling woman'. Proctor shakes Abigail in a rage and threatens her: 'Do you look for a whippin'?' Outbursts such as these strongly suggest that, in the cultural context of the play, men use violence and the threat of violence, to control women. **This provides an interesting counterpoint to the novel, where Bill Furlong fears the way men treat women, though he conducts himself with courtesy and respect towards them.**

As with Bill Furlong in the novel, John Proctor explores his own sense of what it means to be a loyal and committed husband. Unlike Keegan's protagonist, however, Miller's main character is a tragic hero, one whose life is in many ways defined by his biggest flaw: his affair with Abigail is a defining act for Proctor, leading him to feelings of immense regret and self-loathing. Miller notes that Proctor has 'no ritual for the washing away of sins' and that he was a sinner 'against his own vision of decent conduct'. The pain of the affair is never far from the surface. Elizabeth urges Proctor to tell the court that Abigail has explained to him that there was no witchcraft at play when Reverend Parris's daughter Betty became sick. However, their discussion quickly descends into a bitter rerun of their old arguments about his affair. Elizabeth accurately remarks that he has not been fully truthful with her about the circumstances of his last meeting with Abigail. Convulsed with guilt and frustration, Proctor flies into another rage and snaps: 'No more! I should have roared you down when first you told me your suspicion'. **The contrast with Bill Furlong is stark and thought-provoking; Furlong is a man who considers what it means to be loyal, and then commits to it. Proctor has betrayed his wife, and his guilt makes him in act in ways that do not correspond with his own values. Both men provide a fascinating contrast into how men in their cultural contexts view the institution of marriage.**

**Meanwhile, Elizabeth Proctor, is every bit as shrewd and diligent as Eileen in the novel.** She queries why John Proctor has not been quicker to tell the court of Abigail's confession that the witchcraft craze is a fraud: 'if it were not Abigail that you must go to hurt, would you falter now?'. Mary Warren reveals that Elizabeth has been 'somewhat mentioned' in relation to the practice of witchcraft in the court. Elizabeth quickly understands that Abigail has a plan to have her hung for witchcraft. 'Oh, the noose, the noose is up! ... she wants me dead'. Elizabeth is aware that her status as the wife of a respected farmer should buy her some credence. However, she notes that Abigail is gambling that she can convince the court of Elizabeth's guilt and marry John Proctor. 'She'd dare not call out such a farmer's wife but there be a monstrous profit in it. She thinks to take my place'. The play, like the novel, offers a portrayal of women in their cultural context that is nuanced and fascinating.

## RELIGION

**As in Keegan's novel, Miller's play deals with a society that is essentially controlled by religious forces.** Salem was founded by Puritans, a group of devout English Christian settlers who had broken away from the Church of England, less than a century before the trials began. Miller explains that Salem was a theocracy, 'a combine of state and religious power whose function was to keep the community together'. Salemites led strict and dutiful lives, fearful of hell and disturbed by the idea that the devil was always trying to corrupt them.

The intense and all-consuming presence of religion can be seen in the opening of the play, where Reverend Parris kneels beside a bed and prays over his daughter Betty, who is motionless, having apparently been the victim of witchcraft. Parris appeals to his niece, Abigail Williams, to explain what happened to Betty. Abigail explains that she and Betty had been dancing in the woods but is adamant that the cause of

her inertia is not witchcraft, but that she simply fainted when Parris caught them in the act. 'We did dance, uncle, and when you leaped out of the bush so suddenly, Betty was frightened and then she fainted. And there's the whole of it'. Revealingly, Abigail concedes to her uncle that he can tell his congregation that she 'confessed it' – referring to the forbidden act of dancing in public. She accepts that she will be 'whipped' for it, suggesting that extreme punishment for trivial matters is a norm in the cultural context of the play. The Puritanical culture develops further with the arrival of the Putnams. Ann (or Goody) Putnam enters Parris's house and declares that Betty's ailment 'is surely a stroke of hell upon you'. She repeats the rumour that Betty has flown over a barn in the town. Meanwhile, her husband Thomas declares: 'it is a providence the thing is out now!'. The couple reveal that their daughter, Ruth, is also suffering from a mysterious ailment. 'I'd not call it sick,' says Goody Putnam, 'the Devil's touch is heavier than sick'. The illnesses that have struck the girls have caused a panic within the town, one which most of its inhabitants are willing to believe is an act of the devil. **While the cultural context of the novel lacks the spiralling hysteria of the play, people in its cultural context are undoubtedly subject to the invasive forces of religion. Furlong's mother Sarah is rejected by her family on the religious grounds that she is pregnant outside of marriage. In both cultural contexts, then, religion plays a significant role in influencing characters' behaviour and beliefs.**

**In the novel the convent stands as a symbol and a site of religious power and influence. Perhaps the clearest expression of the role of religion in the cultural context of the play can be seen during the witchcraft trials.** Deputy Governor Danforth is the head judge at the trials. He outlines the central role of religion in shaping laws and punishments just before he questions the group of girls, led by Abigail, who have made allegations against Elizabeth Proctor and

others. He says: 'the law, based upon the Bible, and the Bible, writ by Almighty God, forbid the practice of witchcraft, and describe death as the penalty thereof'. Salem is a place of morbid superstition, where tenuous links between objects and ideas can be drawn, and used as a basis for a prosecution and a death sentence. Danforth questions Abigail about the discovery of a poppet (a doll made to represent a person, for casting spells on them) in Proctor's house. Abigail claims that Proctor's wife, Elizabeth, uses the poppet to physically harm her. John Proctor is horrified by this absurdist notion and declares that no-one has ever seen a poppet in his house, because his wife does not keep such things. However, the presence of religion, and the malleability of its meaning, leads to bizarre speculation and baffling deductions. Reverend Parris challenges Proctor's certainty about poppets: 'We are here ... precisely to discover what no one has ever seen'. Seeking to exonerate his wife, Proctor admits his affair with Abigail Williams, in the hope of proving that Abigail has an ulterior motive for accusing Elizabeth of witchcraft. Proctor declares that Abigail wants to have Elizabeth killed, so that she can replace her as John Proctor's wife. 'She thinks to dance with me on my wife's grave!' he says. Proctor is deeply ashamed at his affair – admitting it publicly is a drastic step, and one which skewers his own reputation in Puritan Salem. Proctor's shame is couched in stark, religious terms: 'A man may think God sleeps, but God sees everything,' he declares to the court. **The trials underline the central position of religion in the cultural context of the play, driven as they are by Reverend Parris, and featuring frequent references to God and the Devil. Meanwhile, Furlong's discovery of the girl in the coal shed at the convent reiterates the central role of religion in the cultural context of the novel – for the values and morals of 1980s Ireland are reflected in its callous treatment of society's most vulnerable people.**

Religious characters in the play serve to underscore the power and influence of religion in the cultural context of the play. Reverend Hale arrives in Salem to help investigate the alleged witchcraft taking place. After Goody Proctor, wife of John, 'is mentioned' in court during a witchcraft trial, Hale visits the Proctor family home to 'put some questions as to the Christian character of this house'. Hale queries why John Proctor is 'rarely in the church on Sabbath day', noting that the farmer has been to church services on Sunday 'twenty-six times in seventeen months'. Hale's information suggests the close monitoring of Salem's inhabitants by its religious figures. Next, Hale questions why only two of Proctor's three children have been baptised. Proctor explains that he does not like Reverend Parris who he finds to be a materialistic man with 'no light of God' in him. Hale is shocked at Proctor's outspoken and irreverent approach. He rebukes Proctor, telling him 'that is not for you to decide'. Hale then questions the Proctors about their knowledge of the Ten Commandments. Proctor struggles to recall all of the commandments and states unapologetically: 'I think it be a small fault'. Unsurprisingly, Hale does not see the funny side, and his response is severe and cutting: 'Theology, sir, is a fortress; no crack in a fortress may be accounted small'. However, as the trials develop, Hale becomes concerned that there is no place for debate or discussion around the veracity of the girls' claims, arguing: 'is every defence an attack upon the court?'. Eventually his scepticism hardens into outright incredulity at Abigail's version of events, and he concurs with the Proctors in their belief that 'private vengeance' is motivating her. Ignored by the arrogant Danforth, Hale declares: 'I denounce these proceedings, I quit this court!'. **Hale's evolution from acolyte to opponent of the religious-based control and interference in his community contrasts sharply with Mother Superior in the novel, who, rather than waver when Bill Furlong exposes the**

horrible conditions in the convent, instead brazenly pretends she knows nothing about how Sarah came to be in the coal shed and affects concern for her health.

### **SOCIAL CLASS**

**As with Gorey, Co. Wexford in the novel, there is a clearly discernible social class structure in Salem, and it evidently affects a character's power and influence.** Land is a key determinant of a person's social class. Thomas Putnam is a 'well-to-do landowner' who 'regarded himself as the intellectual superior of most of the people around him'. Together with his wife, Ann, they use their social heft to pressure Reverend Parris into believing his daughter Betty, struck down by an unidentified illness, is a victim of witchcraft. Thomas tells Parris: 'I have taken your part in all contention here, I would continue; but I cannot if you hold back in this'. Parris is hesitant to describe the rumours of supernatural events as witchcraft, for fear it will ruin his reputation: 'They will howl me out of Salem for such corruption in my house'. However, Thomas Putnam is not easily dissuaded and he insists that the moment is an opportunity for Parris to take control of the situation: 'Let you strike out against the Devil, and the village will bless you for it!'. Thomas Putnam's pressurising of Parris is explained by Miller in the stage notes: 'he is intent on getting upon Parris, for whom he has only contempt, to move toward the abyss'. His wife Ann, meanwhile, is searching for an explanation as to the tragic death of seven of her eight children at birth. She is convinced that they were murdered – later in the play it is revealed that Rebecca Nurse has been charged with 'the marvelous and supernatural murder of Goody Putnam's babies'. **The contrast with Mrs Wilson in the novel is drastic; whereas the wealthy widow of Keegan's tale uses her money and influence in a benevolent way, the Putnams are driven by nothing more than self-interest.**

**The play contrasts with the socially cohesive cultural context of the novel – Keegan's characters are, with one or two exceptions, the working poor, and Bill Furlong exemplifies a solidarity among people who have little but are willing to share it.** Miller's play highlights a community that is ferociously divided by a desire to retain or acquire land. In the materially austere Puritan cultural context, where land ownership signifies social status, many of the arguments about witches are underpinned by disagreements about land. Giles Corey, an 83-year-old resident of Salem, comes to court to defend his wife. He identifies himself to Judge Danforth as a man who has 'six hundred acres, and timber in addition'. He insists that the court gives him credence as he is a substantial landholder. Corey's self-description underlines how land ownership is regarded as a significant social class power in the cultural context of the play. Corey claims that Thomas Putnam is lying about his neighbours engaging in witchcraft so that they can be put in jail and he can buy their land. 'If Jacobs hangs for a witch he forfeits up his property ... and there is none but Putnam with the coin to buy so great a piece. This man is killing his neighbours for their land!'. **The febrile atmosphere and rancour of Salem could hardly be more different than the neighbourly empathy seen in Gorey, where Bill Furlong shows understanding towards his customers and allows them to delay payment on their fuel if needs be.**

**As in the novel, a concern for social status can be seen in the cultural context of the play. Bill Furlong worries about how his daughters will be able to access good quality schools if he is seen to criticise the nuns who run the convent.** Meanwhile, Reverend Parris worries about his social status in a much more selfish way. Reverend Parris complains that he is not afforded the lifestyle he expects as 'a graduate of Harvard College'. He moans that his 'contract' guarantees that he will be supplied with firewood by November but that he must prove he needs



it by showing ‘his frost-bitten hands like some London beggar!’ Parris adds that he is ‘not used to this poverty’ and wonders why he has not been given the deeds to the parish home. His incessant carping about his supposed hardship speaks to his obsession with status, while his obsequious backing of the court is motivated by his desire to retain the support of the powerful members of his parish. This is highlighted when he feels threatened following the discovery of a dagger lodged in his door, which he takes as a sign that

he is in danger if the trials continue. He appeals to Danforth to halt the impending executions of John Proctor and Rebecca Nurse, fearing that their hangings would cause a riot because they are popular and influential people. ‘It was another sort that hanged till now,’ he tells the judge. Parris’s wavering in support for the trial appears to be an act of self-preservation, rather than a moral stand, and his cold-hearted reasoning suggests he is a man who values the lives of some of his parishioners more than others.

### KEY POINTS



- As in Claire Keegan’s novel, Arthur Miller’s play presents a cultural context that is largely patriarchal. The powerful people in the cultural context of the play – Reverend Parris, Reverend Hale and Deputy-Governor Danforth are all male and exert massive power and influence over women and over their societies.
- The protagonist of the play, John Proctor, like Bill Furlong in the novel, is a widely respected character within his community with a clearly articulate sense of social justice. Ultimately, Proctor dies for his beliefs when he refuses to sign a false confession that he has engaged in witchcraft.
- John Proctor’s treatment of women provides a tangible contrast with Bill Furlong in the novel. Proctor’s treatment of women, such as Mary Warren and Abigail, is frequently gruff and intimidating. Meanwhile, Bill Furlong fears the way men treat women, though he conducts himself with courtesy and respect towards them.
- As with Bill Furlong in the novel, John Proctor explores his own sense of what it means to be a loyal and committed husband. Proctor suffers from immense guilt and self-loathing following his affair with Abigail. His desperation to be forgiven by both himself and his wife makes him act in angry, threatening ways. By contrast, Furlong is loyal and committed to his wife, despite sporadically wondering if he might have another life, with another woman, someplace else.
- The play, like the novel, offers a portrayal of women in their cultural context that is nuanced and fascinating. Elizabeth Proctor is every bit as shrewd and diligent as Eileen in the novel. She quickly understands that Abigail is gambling that she can convince the court of Elizabeth’s guilt and marry John Proctor. ‘She’d dare not call out such a farmer’s wife but there be a monstrous profit in it. She thinks to take my place.’
- The intense and all-consuming presence of religion can be seen in the opening of the play, where Reverend Parris kneels beside a bed and prays over his daughter Betty, who is motionless, having apparently been the victim of witchcraft. News of Betty’s mysterious plight spreads through the town – it is one of the sparks which lights the fire of hysteria around witches. Similarly, the novel’s characters lives are influenced by religious belief, notably when Furlong’s mother Sarah is rejected by her family on the religious grounds that she is pregnant outside of marriage.
- In the novel the convent stands as a symbol and a site of religious power and influence.

Meanwhile, the clearest expression of the role of religion in the cultural context of the play can be seen during the witchcraft trials. Religious characters in the play serve to underscore the power and influence of religion in the cultural context of the play. Reverend Hale arrives in Salem to help investigate the alleged witchcraft taking place. However, he ultimately finds that vengeance and bitterness are driving the witchcraft trials, rather than any concern about religious doctrine being corrupted. He contrasts sharply with Mother Superior in the novel, who never wavers from her image as a benevolent head nun, who simultaneously oversees an institution marked by cruelty and absence of mercy.

- Land is a key determinant of a person's social class in the play. Thomas Putnam, a 'well-to-do landowner', along with his wife Ann, use their social status to pressure Reverend Parris into admitting that his daughter Betty, struck down by an unidentified illness, is a victim of witchcraft. The divergence with Mrs Wilson in the novel is drastic; whereas the wealthy widow of Keegan's tale uses her money and influence in a benevolent way, the Putnams are driven by nothing more than self-interest.
- The play contrasts with the socially cohesive cultural context of the novel – Keegan's characters are, with one or two exceptions, the working poor, and Bill Furlong exemplifies a solidarity among people who have little but are willing to share it. By contrast, the play highlights a community that is ferociously divided by a desire to retain or acquire land.
- As in the novel, a concern for social status can be seen in the cultural context of the play. Bill Furlong worries about how his daughters will be able to access good quality schools if he is seen to criticise the nuns who run the convent. Meanwhile, Reverend Parris worries about his social status in a much more selfish way, complaining that he lives in relative poverty and only dropping his support for the witch trials when he thinks that his reputation is in jeopardy.

## *The Shawshank Redemption, Small Things Like These, and The Crucible*

### OVERVIEW OF SOCIETY

The film is set for the most part in the fictional Shawshank prison in Portland, Maine. The drama takes place between 1947, when Andy Dufresne is given two life sentences for the double murder of his wife and her lover, and the mid-late 1960s, when Andy escapes from the prison. This is a significant period in American history, as it includes the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the Korean War, the beginning of the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, and the infamous assassinations of both President John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin

Luther King. The importance of these events on the cultural context of the time is undeniable. However, the film ignores them all, apart from a single mention of the Kennedy killing. This underlines the idea that the prison is a place closed-off from the rest of the world. **As in the novel and the play, analysis of aspects such as gender, religion and social class reveal much about the cultural context of the film.**

### GENDER

**The film, like the novel and the play, depicts a world where men make the major decisions**



**and hold the powerful positions.** Indeed, viewers will note that there is not a single female character in the film – an aspect of the film which may be seen as a shortcoming, but which certainly highlights the influence of women in the film’s cultural context. As a result, nearly everybody in paid employment, such as the judge and lawyers at Andy’s trial, and the prison guards, is male: this reflects the patriarchal norms and values of postwar America, where women made up a small minority of the workforce. Warden Norton, head of Shawshank Prison, is an effete and joyless man; his severe appearance of polished shoes, sharp suit and meticulous haircut reflect a man with a strict and unambiguous outlook on life in prison. He demonstrates his power and influence over the prisoners when he organises the assassination of Tommy, a young prisoner who has discovered the real killer of Andy’s wife and her lover. Norton’s manner is icily disingenuous, calling Tommy ‘son’ in a friendly way, telling him he’s been ‘up nights’ worrying about the right thing to do, and offering Tommy a cigarette. He asks Tommy if he would be willing to testify in court about the story that links another man, Elmo Blatch, to the killings. ‘Just give me that chance,’ says Tommy, enthusiastically. At this, the warden stubs out his own cigarette, looks up at one of the watchtowers, and then slips into the background. This is the signal for Byron to shoot Tommy dead, an action that emphasises once again the power that Norton has in the prison system. **Norton is devoid of any of the empathy or compassion of Bil Furlong in the novel or John Proctor in the play. All three men occupy positions that are closed-off to women in their cultural contexts: Furlong the coal and timber merchant, Proctor the farmer and Norton the head of a male prison. However, Norton stands apart from the other men as he is brutal and callous, while Furlong is a decent and loving father to five girls, while Proctor is a widely respected member of his community.**

**The cultural context of the film is notable for its macho tendencies.** The prison guards, led by the fearsome Captain Byron Hadley, use violence to maintain control of the prison. In the first scene inside the prison one of the new convicts asks: ‘when do we eat?’ Byron, with the tacit consent of Warden Norton, approaches the man and screams in his face: ‘You eat when we say you eat!’ Later that evening another new convict has a mental breakdown and screams: ‘Oh God! I don’t belong here! I want to go home!’ Byron and his guards race to the man’s cell and warn the man to stop pleading or he will be assaulted. The man continues his cries and Byron viciously beats him with his baton. When the attack ends, there is silence until Byron barks out a warning: ‘If I hear so much as a mouse fart in here for the rest of the night, by God and Sonny Jesus, you’ll all visit the infirmary’. In another memorable scene the threat of violence is used to control the prisoners. Andy, Red and some of the other convicts are assigned to tar the roof of the prison license-plate factory. Andy overhears Byron complaining about the tax he has to pay on \$35,000 inheritance he has received following his brother’s death. Andy, with his background in banking, approaches Byron and startles him by asking: ‘Mr Hadley, do you trust your wife?’ Byron is infuriated by this provocative question, and threatens to throw Andy off the roof, only to stop when Andy explains that ‘if you do trust her, there’s no reason you can’t keep that \$35,000’. He tells Byron that he can avoid tax on his inheritance if he gifts it to his wife. **There are echoes of the film’s violence in the cultural context of the novel, where Furlong worries about how men mistreat women, and also in the play, where John Proctor himself uses violence and the threat of violence against Mary Warren and Abigail Williams.**

The film explores male friendship in a compelling way that adds nuance to its cultural context. Andy and Red develop a lasting and sincere bond that avoids patriarchal tropes.

It is a thoughtful and contemplative friendship based on mutual respect, trust and a shared curiosity about what gives life value. Tim Robbins, who plays the role of Andy, has said that part of the reason why the film is still so popular long after its release is because it is about a ‘friendship between two men that doesn’t involve car chases or being charming with the ladies’. He rightly notes that it is instead a film about ‘a true deep friendship which lasts’. Red comments that while others in the prison ‘took him [Andy] for snobby’ he felt differently: ‘yes, I think it would be fair to say I liked Andy from the start’. The two men support each other throughout the film, with Red helping Andy to ‘get things’ while Andy helps Red and the other men to look at the world differently. Their friendship is encapsulated by the closing scenes of the film when Red, commenting on Andy’s escape, says: ‘I guess I just miss my friend’ and also by their reunion on a beach in Mexico. **Similarly, the novel and the play explore the complexity of gender in their cultural contexts. Bill Furlong finds himself attracted to his neighbour, and ponders how his life might be different if he had married her – however, his momentary fantasy is simply that, and he remains committed to his wife and children. John Proctor lives to lament his affair with Abigail Williams. For all of the macho posturing of all three texts, the central characters are men of depth and substance, and allow students to see that gender is a crucial aspect in understanding a text’s cultural context.**

## RELIGION

Religion plays a small but significant role in the cultural context of the film. On arrival all prisoners are given prison clothes, a Bible and a short lecture from the warden. ‘I believe in two things. Discipline and the Bible. Here you’ll receive both. Put your faith in the lord, your ass belongs to me,’ he says. Norton likes to quote from the Bible – and he likes the inmates to

demonstrate their belief in God. He takes Andy’s Bible from his hands and says: ‘I’m pleased to see you’re reading this. Any favourite passage?’. Andy replies diligently, offering a quote from the Bible, and the warden is delighted. He tells Andy that his own favourite passages is: ‘I’m the light of the world, ye that follow me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life’. This exchange works to emphasise the importance of religion in the cultural context of the film, but it also works to comment on the film’s plot. Andy Dufresne, with his original and brave view of the world, is for many viewers a messianic figure, a person who can provide ‘the light of life’. **It is Norton, though, who creates a sense of religious devotion in Darabont’s film. He imposes his religious beliefs on his prisoners, with no room for critique or disagreement. This steadfast belief in the sanctity of his religion calls to mind both the cultural contexts of the novel and the play. Keegan’s novel and Miller’s play showcase societies that are in thrall to their dominant religions, where deviation from their teachings leads to social exclusion in the novel, and to execution in the play.**

The cultural context of the film shows people who have turned away from religious belief and towards something less specific but undoubtedly spiritual. In the case of Andy Dufresne, he is driven by a belief in hope. Andy is sent to solitary confinement as punishment for locking himself in the warden’s office and playing Mozart over the public announcement system. On his release, he chats with the other prisoners at the mess hall, telling them it was the ‘easiest time I ever did’ because he had ‘Mr Mozart to keep me company’. Red wonders how Andy could have been allowed to listen to music in solitary confinement. Andy taps his head and heart and tells the men he had the music inside of him, where it’s ‘the one thing they can’t confiscate’. Andy says that the men need music, or things that they care about, so that they do not forget

‘there are things in this world not carved out of grey stone. That there’s a small place inside of us they can never lock away, and that place is called hope’. Red tells Andy that ‘hope is a dangerous thing’ that has ‘no place’ in prison because it can ‘drive a man insane’. While Andy and Red disagree on the role that hope should play in prison, they are in tacit agreement about the irrelevance of religion to their lives: neither man, nor any of their fellow inmates, pray, talk to a priest or attend a church service. **Similarly, Reverend Hale moves away from conformity with the Church. His change from witchcraft expert to witch trial sceptic underlines the power of religion to influence people but also its shortcomings – Hale concludes that the trial is a rejection of all reasonable voices, and withdraws his support for it. In contrast, Mother Superior demonstrates her brazen power in the cultural context of Keegan’s novel – at no point does she waver from her inference that she is a pious and moral person, even when Furlong discovers evidence of neglect and mistreatment in the convent.**

### **SOCIAL CLASS**

**In the cultural context of the film, social class is a significant factor, as it is in the novel and the play.** Andy Dufresne gains privileges in the prison due to his social position, as the former vice president of a large Portland bank. His financial expertise means he is useful to Warden Norton, who wants Andy to help him embezzle money from the prison. Norton is part of a raid on Andy’s cell and tells him: ‘I hear you’re good with numbers. How nice. A man should have a skill’. The warden then says that ‘certain exceptions’ can be made for people like Andy, meaning that Andy is allowed to keep contraband items in his cell. Soon after, the warden summons Andy to his office. He tells Andy that he does not have to work in the dreaded prison laundry, where Andy has been the target of numerous sexual attacks. Instead, he wants to help Andy ‘find something

more befitting a man of your education’. Andy is allowed to work in the serene, though neglected, prison library alongside Brooks. Simultaneously, he is expected to work on the prison accounts, helping the warden to hide the bribes that he has received for putting the prisoners to work on the outside. Andy tells Red that Norton has got ‘scams you haven’t dreamed of ... there’s a river of dirty money flowing through this place’. As such, Andy’s power is contingent on satisfying the demands of Warden Norton. Andy threatens to withdraw his services as Norton’s shadowy accountant following the murder of Tommy, one of Andy’s prison friends. Norton warns Andy that he will have ‘no more protection from the guards’ and will lose his comfortable prison cell, as well as his library, if he stops working for him. Andy’s power is based primarily on his social class position, though this is tempered by the egalitarianism of prison: all prisoners are equally powerless, unless they gain favour with the genuinely powerful people, the guards, and the warden. **The social class hierarchy in the cultural context of the film echoes that of the novel and the play. Mrs Wilson is financially and socially secure enough to retain the services of Sarah Furlong, despite the social stigma faced by her for becoming pregnant outside of marriage. Similarly, the Putnams in the play clearly have more power than other characters, owing to their accumulation of land, and use this social cache to influence Reverend Parris into declaring witchcraft in the town.**

**Insecurity around social class features less in the cultural context of the film than that of the novel or play.** However, it is still possible to detect a keenness in the film for moving up the social ladder. Andy’s first day of work in the prison library is interrupted by a prison guard who asks him if he can help him to save money to send his children to college. This short scene highlights the power of education in this cultural context. The prison guard believes that

sending his children to college is the best way to help them secure their social status, and he is willing to put aside his own money to make sure it happens. **The guard's social class insecurity is similar to Reverend Parris's concerns in the play – he both worries that his lodgings do not fit with his lofty status, and that he will lose his position in the community owing**

**to his support for the witchcraft trials. In common with both texts, a sense of social class uncertainty can be detected in the cultural context of the novel, where Furlong worries that his daughters may be prevented from attending the town's 'good' school if he is seen to criticise the nuns running the convent.**

## KEY POINTS



- The film is set for the most part in the fictional Shawshank prison in Portland, Maine. The drama takes place between 1947, when Andy Dufresne is given two life sentences for the double murder of his wife and her lover, and the mid-late 1960s, when Andy escapes from the prison.
- The film, like the novel and the play, depicts a world where men make the major decisions and hold the powerful positions. Norton is devoid of any of the empathy or compassion of Bill Furlong in the novel or John Proctor in the play.
- The prison guards, led by the fearsome Captain Byron Hadley, use violence to maintain control of the prison. In the first scene inside the prison one of the new convicts asks: 'when do we eat?' Byron, with the tacit consent of Warden Norton, approaches the man and screams in his face: 'You eat when we say you eat!' There are echoes of the film's violence in the cultural context of the novel, where Furlong worries about how men mistreat women, and also in the play, where John Proctor himself uses violence and the threat of violence against Mary Warren and Abigail Williams.
- The friendship between Andy and Red is the film's one clear challenge to its otherwise patriarchal atmosphere. Similarly, Bill Furlong finds himself attracted to his neighbour, and ponders how his life might be different if he had married her – however, his momentary fantasy is simply that, and he remains committed to his wife and children. John Proctor lives to lament his affair with Abigail Williams.
- Religion plays a small but significant role in the cultural context of the film. On arrival all prisoners are given prison clothes, a bible and a short lecture from the warden. 'I believe in two things. Discipline and the Bible. Here you'll receive both. Put your faith in the lord, your ass belongs to me,' he says. Keegan's novel and Miller's play similarly showcase societies that are in thrall to their dominant religions, where deviation from their teachings leads to social exclusion in the novel, and to execution in the play.
- Andy Dufresne is more interested in 'hope' than religion. Red tells Andy that 'hope is a dangerous thing' that has 'no place' in prison because it can 'drive a man insane'. Neither man, nor any of their fellow inmates, pray, talk to a priest, or attend a church service. Similarly, Reverend Hale moves away from conformity with the Church, concluding that the witchcraft trial is a rejection of all reasonable voices, and withdraws his support for it. In contrast, Mother Superior does not waver from her inference that she is a pious and moral person, even when Furlong discovers evidence of neglect and mistreatment in the convent.

- Andy Dufresne gains privileges in the prison due to his social position. His financial expertise means he is useful to Warden Norton, who wants Andy to help him embezzle money from this position in the prison. Similarly, Mrs Wilson uses her social status to protect Sarah Furlong. Likewise, the Putnams in the play have more power than other characters, owing to their accumulation of land, and use this social cache to influence Reverend Parris into declaring witchcraft in the town.
- Andy's first day of work in the prison library is interrupted by a prison guard who asks him if he can help him to save money to send his children to college. The prison guard believes that sending his children to college is the best way to help them secure their social status. The guard's social class insecurity is reminiscent of Reverend Parris's concerns in the play – his concerns about status are evident throughout. Social class uncertainty can also be detected in the cultural context of the novel, where Furlong worries that his daughters may be prevented from attending the town's 'good' school if he is seen to criticise the nuns running the convent.

MENTOR BOOKS

## Sample Answer A. Cultural Context

- (a) Discuss how those in power in society maintain their dominant position in one text on your comparative course. Develop your response with reference to the text. (30)
- (b) Compare how those in power in society maintain their dominant position in each of two other texts on your comparative course. Develop your response with reference to your chosen texts. (40)

(a) The Catholic Church is the most powerful institution in the novel *Small Things Like These* by Claire Keegan. The Catholic Church maintains its dominance by encouraging a loyal and uncritical devotion to its values. The protagonist of the novel, Bill Furlong, was raised by his Catholic mother, Sarah, in a Protestant home. Sarah worked as a domestic for Mrs Wilson, a wealthy Protestant widow, when she had ‘fallen pregnant’, as the degrading language of the time described it. There was immense social stigma at becoming pregnant outside of marriage, a sign of the power and dominance of the Catholic Church. Sarah’s family ‘made it clear they’d have no more to do with her’, as her pregnancy was considered a source of shame not just for Sarah, but for them too. Furlong inherited this shame. He was targeted by bullies at school, who picked on him for being a child born outside of marriage: ‘he’d been jeered and called some ugly names; once he’d come home with the back of his coat covered in spit’. Such was the power of religion in the cultural context of 1980’s Ireland that school bullies used it as a pretext for attacking people. The reproduction of Catholic teaching in every day life – whether it be at school or at home – is one of the cornerstones of the religion’s dominance in the cultural context of the novel.

It can be argued that the Catholic Church maintained its dominance through coercion and control. The town’s convent is a physical symbol of social, psychological and cultural power. Run by Mother Superior of the Good Shepherd order of nuns, the convent is a ‘powerful-looking place on the hill at the far side of the river with black, wide-open gates and a host of tall, shining windows, facing the town’. This ominous description provides a foretaste of both the enforced misery which lies within the convent, and the pervasive power that Mother Superior and the nuns have on those people outside it.

Mother Superior is symbolic of the fearsome power and dominant position of religion in the cultural context of the novel. Furlong returns to the convent to make a Christmas delivery of fuel. He is disturbed to find a girl locked in the coal shed. She is ‘just about fit to stand’ and is unable to tell if it is night or day. She pleads with Furlong to ask the nuns about her baby, who’s ‘fourteen weeks old. They’ve taken him from me now but they might let me feed him again, if he’s here. I don’t know where he is’. Rattled by her revelation, Furlong is bewildered when Mother Superior opens the door of the convent. She greets him with an incongruent smile and thanks him for coming. In doing so, Mother Superior wrongfoots Furlong, who had been anticipating a confrontation with the nun. Instead, Mother Superior empathises with the ‘poor girl’ and instructs Furlong to come in for a cup of tea. He resists, but she tells him authoritatively: ‘You’ll come in ... I’ll have it no other way’. She is blasé as Furlong apologises for bringing his dirty work boots across the pristine floors. ‘Where there’s muck, there’s luck,’ she tells him, nonchalantly. Mother Superior subtly emphasises



the power of the Church as she enquires about Furlong's daughters, remarking that she hopes to see them all studying in the Catholic school next door to the convent. Fiendishly, she remarks: 'it's no easy task to find a place for everyone'. Beneath the façade of friendship lies the steel of authority; Mother Superior is obliquely signalling to Furlong that he should not publicly talk about the girl in the coal shed, or face the punishment of exclusion from the town's 'good' school. The Church's involvement in multiple aspects of community life allows it to maintain its dominant position in the cultural context of the novel.

(b) The powerful people in *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller and *The Shawshank Redemption* by Frank Darabont maintain their dominant positions in a variety of ways; some do it through bullying, while others work to maintain their social class position and resist society's expectations, and still others do it through their self-aggrandising attitudes.

Some of the most powerful characters in the play maintain their dominant social position through the accumulation of land. In late 17th century Salem, land is an important marker of social class. Thomas Putnam is a 'well-to-do landowner' who 'regarded himself as the intellectual superior of most of the people around him'. Together with his wife, Ann, they use their social heft to pressure Reverend Parris into admitting that his daughter Betty, struck down by an unidentified illness, is a victim of witchcraft. Thomas tells Parris: 'I have taken your part in all contention here, I would continue; but I cannot if you hold back in this'. Parris is hesitant to describe the rumours of supernatural events as witchcraft, for fear it will ruin his reputation: 'They will howl me out of Salem for such corruption in my house'. However, Thomas Putnam is not easily dissuaded and he insists that the moment is an opportunity for Parris to take control of the situation. 'Let you strike out against the Devil, and the village will bless you for it!' Thomas Putnam's pressurising of Parris is explained by Miller in the stage notes: 'he is intent on getting upon Parris, for whom he has only contempt, to move toward the abyss'. Thomas Putnam uses his social class position to harangue Reverend Parris into a position where he will be thoroughly discredited. This is to Thomas Putnam's advantage, as he wants to have more influence in the town of Salem, and weakening the reverend is an effective way of achieving this.

By contrast to the nefarious Thomas Putnam, Andy Dufresne in the film is a middle-class character who maintains his powerful position within the prison by making himself useful to influential people, such as Warden Norton and the guards. Andy, unlike Thomas Putnam, is a gentle and caring person, who disarms people with his low-key manner. His dominance is subtle and largely unnoticed, until the film's dramatic twist. The contrast with Thomas Putnam could hardly be more glaring, as the men are motivated by different impulses: the wealthy Putnam wants to extend his dominance over his community by alienating one of its most powerful people, while Andy wants to use his dominant position to escape the prison. Andy's background as a vice president of a major Portland bank makes him an attractive helper for Norton, who gets Andy to help him embezzle money from the prison. In return, 'certain exceptions' are made, meaning that Andy is allowed to keep minor contraband items in his cell. Soon after, the warden summons Andy to his office. He tells Andy that he does not have to work in the dreaded prison laundry, where Andy has been the target of numerous sexual attacks. Instead, he wants to help Andy 'find something more befitting a man of your education'. Andy is also allowed to work in the serene though neglected



prison library alongside Brooks. In this way, Andy slowly gains the trust of the warden, and in the end, betrays that trust by escaping the prison and publicising details of Norton's criminality. Andy maintains his dominant position in a notably different way to Thomas Putnam in the play.

One of the play's most powerful characters is Deputy Governor Danforth, the head judge at the witch trials. He maintains his dominant position in the play through a mix of religious doctrine and legal expertise. The cultural context of the play, explains Miller, is a theocracy which is 'a combine of state and religious power whose function was to keep the community together'. Danforth outlines the central role of religion in shaping laws and punishments just before he questions the group of girls, led by Abigail, who have made allegations against Elizabeth Proctor and others. He says: 'the law, based upon the Bible, and the Bible, writ by Almighty God, forbid the practice of witchcraft, and describe death as the penalty thereof'. Danforth questions Abigail about the discovery of a poppet (a doll made to represent a person, for casting spells on them) in Proctor's house. Abigail claims that Proctor's wife, Elizabeth, uses the poppet to physically harm her. John Proctor is horrified by this absurdist notion and declares that no-one has ever seen a poppet in his house, because his wife does not keep such things. Danforth is unsympathetic to Proctor, however, and eventually finds both Elizabeth and Proctor guilty. Danforth's relentless application of religious-based laws allows him to maintain his dominant social position in the play.

Turning back to the film, Warden Norton maintains his dominant position in a way that carries echoes of Danforth's approach. Danforth proudly refers to religion as he seeks to carry out the business of the court, in much the same way as Norton enthusiastically uses religion to justify his appalling corruption in the prison. On arrival all prisoners are given prison clothes, a Bible and a short lecture from the warden. 'I believe in two things. Discipline and the Bible. Here you'll receive both. Put your faith in the lord, your ass belongs to me,' he says, in his characteristic fashion. During a raid on his cell, Norton hands Andy his Bible and asks: 'Any favourite passage?' Andy replies diligently, offering a quote from the Bible, and the warden is delighted. He tells Andy that his own favourite passages is: 'I'm the light of the world, ye that follow me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life'. Norton's choice of quotation reveals that he maintains his dominant position in society by presenting himself as a messianic figure, part pastor, part saviour and all redeemer. Norton's use of religion to maintain his dominant position is undermined by Andy, who plots against the warden, smirking knowingly as he convinces the warden that he is a prisoner he can trust. Andy knows that the warden's self-flattery is a sign of complacency, which in fact undermines his dominant position in society, and reveals a weakness that Andy will eventually exploit through his daring, thrilling escape. Danforth is more secure in his use of religion to justify his harsh and cruel approach to the witch trials. Salem is a theocracy and so it is harder for the people of the town to challenge a judge who takes refuge in religion than it is for a warden in a prison where he has made many enemies.

## B. General Vision and Viewpoint

Studying the general vision and viewpoint of a text is a chance to consider the way the author presents the world to an audience. It is widely agreed that there is no single interpretation of any text; it is one of the great strengths of English as a Leaving Certificate subject that students can explore, consider and formulate a personal response to the studied texts. An author's treatment of an issue or event might build or crush hopes, generate feelings of optimism or pessimism, and reinforce or challenge our assumptions about people, places, issues and periods in history. Indeed, a rounded

and reflective text might do all of these things at different stages, or possibly, all at once. Analysing distinctive aspects of texts allows us to come to some conclusions as to how an author views the world. Openings and endings are very helpful in this regard; the former sets while the latter refines the view of the author. In between, it is helpful to examine a variety of issues and techniques to understand better the author's view: key moments around issue like love and the family, or the use of a variety of narrative techniques, allows readers to establish the author's viewpoint.

### Small Things Like These

#### **OPENING**

**The opening pages of Claire Keegan's novel present a general vision and viewpoint that is melancholic and pessimistic.** A dedication precedes the story proper which explains that the 'story is dedicated to the women and children who suffered time in Ireland's mother and baby homes and Magdalene laundries'. This is followed by an excerpt from the 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic, which famously commits to 'cherishing all of the children of the nation equally'. The juxtaposition of the dedication and the excerpt from the Proclamation serve to frame the novel for readers. The evident failure of the new Irish Republic to cherish its children equally is one of the most significant themes of this novel.

The opening pages are full of foreboding imagery and difficult lives, creating a general vision and viewpoint that is downbeat. The tone is set by the weather. The novel begins as autumn turns to winter, when 'the clocks went back the hour and the long November winds came in and blew, and stripped the trees bare'. Keegan documents how 'the people for the most part, unhappily endured the weather'. There is a faintly light-hearted air to the solemn discussions

about weather in the town: 'for who could believe that there, again was another raw-cold day?' It is a rare moment of levity in an otherwise bleak opening which sets the novel during the dreariest time of year when 'the nights came on and the frosts took hold again, and blades of cold slid under doors and cut the knees off those who still knelt to say the rosary'.

Keegan's spare yet evocative prose presents the reader with a vision of the world that is humble, hardy and pragmatic. A concise flashback into Bill Furlong's childhood strengthens this impression of the author's general vision and viewpoint. Keegan writes that 'Furlong had come from nothing' as the only child of an unmarried mother. Indeed, his mother's family 'made it clear they'd have no more to do with her', casting her out, alone, at the age of 16 into an Irish society that was unforgiving of those who became pregnant outside of marriage. Furlong's origins allow the author to explore a rich and complex general vision and viewpoint. At school he suffered bullying because he did not know his father. He had been 'jeered and called some ugly names ... once, he'd come home with the back of his coat covered in spit'. His childhood stigma followed him into young adulthood. He went

to the registry office to get a copy of his birth certificate and found the word 'unknown' written in the space where his father's name might have been. Worse, the clerk who handed him the certificate quietly taunted him: 'the clerk's mouth had bent into an ugly smile handing it out to him'. At the same time, it should be noted how at least one person did not turn her back on his mother – her employer, Mrs Wilson, who might have dismissed her from her job, but instead 'told her she should stay on and keep her work'. She had also helped his mother to and from hospital when Furlong was born and, having no children of her own, 'took him under her wing, gave him little jobs and helped along with his reading'. **The relationship between Furlong and Mrs Wilson offers a counterbalance to the otherwise sad and pessimistic general vision and viewpoint. Mrs Wilson is a character who suggests that even in the worst of times, the best of people can yet be seen.**

### **FAMILY LIFE**

**An optimistic and upbeat general vision and viewpoint emerges through the author's depiction of family life in the novel.** Bill Furlong and his wife Eileen are loving and committed parents to five daughters of school-going age. The family returns home from watching the annual lighting of the town's Christmas lights. Eileen comments that 'it was well past time they made the Christmas cake' and everyone in the family gets involved in the preparation. Eileen beats eggs and greases and lines the cake tin, Furlong creams a pound of butter and sugar, and the girls 'grated lemon rind, weighed and chopped candied peel and cherries, soaked whole almonds in butter and slipped them from their skins'. **It is patient, deliberate and loving work, time spent together as a family creating not just a cake, but a bond between siblings and parents that is quietly powerful and carefully fostered.**

However, the author alludes to a degree of

drudgery in family life. No sooner are the family finished with the cake than there are more chores to be done, as Eileen 'took stock of the room and told the girls to clear down so she could get on, and start the ironing'. Next, the girls go to bed, and Eileen immediately starts to work out what Christmas presents to get them. 'There's another job near done,' Eileen comments, after she decides to go to town the following day to pick up the presents. Furlong is frustrated with the frantic pace of family life and the way that the family seems to never stop working on things. 'What would life be like, he wondered, if they were given time to think and reflect over things?' **Furlong's private questioning of the tasks that bind his family life together reflect a general vision and viewpoint that is strongly realistic, resistant to idealism, and grounded in an understanding that families are complex units of individuals.**

### **LOVE**

**The author's general vision and viewpoint can be better understood by examining her treatment of love in the text. Keegan's general vision and viewpoint is unromantic, yet undeniably tender, warm and positive.** Furlong and Eileen's marriage is pragmatic. Most discussion takes place around jobs to be done, or commentary about their children. They are united in their love for their children, and their fears that time is passing too quickly. 'We'll blink a few times and they'll be married and gone,' says Eileen. The version of love displayed in the novel is gentle and understated. Eileen asks Furlong if he has chosen a Christmas present for her yet. Furlong playfully replies that he had noticed her interest in a local shoe shop: 'Oh, don't worry ... I took the hint there this evening with your little gander around Hanrahan's'. Eileen asks Furlong what he would like and his reply is characteristically unassuming: 'There's little I need,' he says. Eventually, he relents and suggests a book for himself, or a

‘big dictionary, for the house, for the girls’. This interaction displays the love between the couple and represents the author’s general vision and viewpoint, where love is a not idealised but something understated, sincere and constant.

Furlong and Eileen have their differences, too. These are most pronounced in Furlong’s criticism of the local convent. In bed he tells her of the mistreatment he has witnessed at the convent. Eileen is alarmed that Furlong is even talking to her about the convent in frank and sceptical terms: ‘She sat up rigid and said such things are nothing to do with them, and there was nothing they could do’. She reminds Furlong that the nuns are looking after girls and women who have been rejected by their families. She also notes, in a coldly pragmatic way, that the nuns always pay for the fuel Furlong brings them. Eileen’s defensive reaction leads Furlong to question what is really going on in the convent – earlier in the novel rumours that the convent is in fact a Magdalene Laundry or a mother and baby home are described. Eileen is fearful of offending the nuns in any way – even if it means ignoring abuse, telling Furlong: ‘If you want to get on in life, there’s things you have to ignore, so you can keep on’. Furlong, naturally reluctant to argue, tries to smooth things over and wonders what is wrong with Eileen. She replies: ‘Nothing. Only what you don’t realise. Wasn’t it far from any hardship that you were reared’. Furlong asks her what she means by this oblique comment. Alluding to his mother, who was unmarried when she gave birth to him, Eileen comments that the convent is a necessary place for girls and women who are pregnant. ‘There’s girls out there that get in trouble, that much you do know,’ she says. Eileen’s ‘cheap’ reference to Furlong’s mother causes him to feel something ‘small and hard in his throat’ which he could ‘neither swallow ... nor find any words to ease what had come between them’. Later, Eileen apologises and, in a more nuanced way, explains that she does not want their daughters to end up in such a place.

She explains: ‘if we just mind what we have here and stay on the right side of people and soldier on, none of ours will ever have to endure the likes of what them girls go through’. Furlong is unimpressed by Eileen’s clinical attitude, telling her that he is fortunate that Mrs Wilson did not think like Eileen. ‘Where would my mother have gone? Where would I be now?’ **This tense and difficult scene showcases a general vision and viewpoint that is delicately balanced between optimism and pessimism. It is possible to empathise with both Furlong’s and Eileen’s point of view, leading to the conclusion that Keegan’s view of the world is comprehensive, compassionate and considered.**

### **FRIENDSHIP**

**The author’s general vision and viewpoint can be further deduced by considering her treatment of friendship in the novel. The couple at the centre of the text, Furlong and Eileen, have no real friends.** Furlong is a man whose life revolves around his job and his family. He takes great pride in his daughters, noting that he often ‘felt a deep, private joy that these children were his own’. However, he appears ground down by his routines and responsibilities. Memorably, he describes his daily life as one of grind and monotony: ‘getting up in the dark and going to the yard, making the deliveries, one after another, the whole day long, then coming home in the dark and trying to wash the black off himself and sitting into a dinner table and falling asleep before waking in the dark to meet a version of the same thing, again’. There is no significant break from the routine completion of daily tasks. Life is not much more varied for his wife Eileen, either. Like Bill, she has no real life outside of the family home – she has no real friends or hobbies. The absence of friendships in the novel creates a downbeat, pessimistic general vision and viewpoint. This is further enhanced when the isolated, desperate lives of the girls and women in the convent are considered. Mostly nameless, the

spirit of these characters nevertheless casts a pall over the entire novel. **Their terrible loneliness is encapsulated when Furlong meets one of the girls during his first visit to the convent. He is making a fuel delivery and is unable to find anyone in charge. He wanders around the convent and stumbles across ‘more than a dozen young women and girls, down on their hands and knees with tins of old-fashioned lavender polish and rags, polishing their hearts out in circles on the floor’. One of the girls approaches him and asks him for help to escape as far as the river down in the town. She tells him: ‘I’ve nobody – and all I want to do is drown myself’. Elsewhere in the novel, the absence of friendship is regrettable. In this instance, it is truly heartbreaking, and articulates a pessimistic and sad general vision and viewpoint.**

### **SYMBOLS**

Recurring symbols feature throughout Claire Keegan’s novel, finessing the author’s general vision and viewpoint. **The story is replete with ominous references to birds and other animals, suggesting a downbeat, pessimistic general vision and viewpoint.** The novel is set late in the year during ‘a December of crows’. At the shipyard huge gulls ‘forage futilely’ and there are stray dogs ‘foraging’ for scraps in the bins. Before setting off to work one Sunday morning before Christmas, Furlong notices crows in the street outside his house: ‘one stood tearing at a pizza box, holding the cardboard down with his foot and pecking, suspiciously, at what was there before flapping wings and quickly flying off with a crust in his beak’. Later in the story Furlong comes across ‘a black cat eating from the carcass of a crow, licking her lips’. The repeated imagery of the natural world battling for survival is symbolic of the struggles faced by many of the characters in the novel. There is something everyday and unremarkable about these symbols; to the casual onlooker they might

not be noticed at all. But this only reinforces the power of such symbols; this is a story about terrible wrongs happening in front of a whole community, who become so accustomed to it that they are desensitised to their horror.

A second significant symbol in the novel is that of a mirror. Throughout the story, Furlong passes many mirrors, or windows which offer his reflection. **These mirrors serve as symbols for Furlong’s deeper, moral reflections on the way the girls and women in the convent are treated.** The headlights from Furlong’s truck reflect on the windowpanes of the convent and ‘it felt as though he was meeting himself there’. Later, of course, he meets the best version of himself as he acts decisively to assist a young woman called Sarah who is in the convent. As he is led into the convent for tea with the Mother Superior, he ‘glimpsed a version of himself’ in the immaculately shiny hanging pots. Before attending Mass he looks in the mirror, inspecting himself after his tense conversation with Mother Superior. Notably, he attempts to shave himself and ‘nicked his throat’ despite looking in the mirror. In nearly every situation, Furlong finds himself in front of some form of mirror, literally, which serves as a powerful symbol for his development as a character and a man. As the end of the novel approaches, and he takes Sarah home with him, he wonders if there is ‘any point in being alive without helping one another?’ Tellingly, he questions if you can face yourself in the mirror if you ignore the plight of others. Overall, mirrors are powerful symbols in the novel which create a hopeful general vision and viewpoint – the more Furlong looks in the mirror, the more hopeful the story seems, as he reaches the only conclusion he can live with: the only way to face oneself in a mirror is to act according to your conscience.

### **ENDING**

**The ending of the novel offers conclusive evidence that the author’s general vision and**

**viewpoint is positive and optimistic, even if it is couched in the modest realism of everyday life that can be sensed throughout the text.** It is Christmas Eve and Bill Furlong has completed his work for the festive period. He feels ‘a bit freer now’ and goes for a walk into town to collect his wife’s Christmas present. He goes for a haircut and finds himself, once again, reflecting on his life – this time, on the revelation that his father had been Ned, who worked for Mrs Wilson alongside his mother. He wonders at how he had never realised it before: ‘why were the things that were closest so often the hardest to see?’ He buys a bag of chips and has a soft drink before he finds himself wandering around the town ‘back down to the river and on towards the bridge’. He considers ‘why he had not gone back to the comforts and safety of his own home’ before resolving that ‘his day was filling up now, with something else’. This is the confirmation that he is planning on returning to the convent. He reaches the coal-house and opens the door to discover Sarah locked inside once again: ‘Everything was just as he’d feared although the girl, this time, took his coat and seemed gladly to lean on him as

he led her out’. He helps her out of the convent grounds back through the town towards his home. Furlong considers if this moment represents ‘the best bit of him’ and feels a surge of positivity: ‘never once in his whole and unremarkable life had he known a happiness akin to this’. He takes Sarah to his family home, even though he knows that Eileen is against any involvement with the girls and women in the convent. He notes that there may be ‘a world of trouble’ in his house for his decision but at the same time he considers that it would have been worse to do nothing ‘which he would have had to live with for the rest of his life’. The novel finishes on a note of cautious optimism as Furlong reflects that ‘his fear more than outweighed every other feeling but in his foolish heart he not only hoped but legitimately believed that they would manage’. **Furlong’s decision to bring Sarah home may cause her a lot of trouble, too – but there is no doubting the sincerity of his actions, or Sarah’s consenting to them. Keegan’s general vision and viewpoint seems resolutely positive, in the most difficult of circumstances, at the conclusion of the novel.**

## KEY POINTS



- The opening pages of Clare Keegan’s novel present a general vision and viewpoint that is melancholic and pessimistic.
- The first sections are full of foreboding imagery and difficult lives, creating a general vision and viewpoint that is downbeat. Meanwhile, Bill Furlong’s childhood is marked by the prejudice of not knowing his father. Only Mrs Wilson, his mother’s employer as a domestic, stands against the narrow-minded and cold-hearted view that unmarried mothers should be shamed and rejected.
- There is an optimistic and upbeat general vision and viewpoint through the author’s depiction of family life in the novel. Bill Furlong and his wife Eileen are loving and committed parents to five daughters of school-going age. The family assist each other in household tasks and spend quality time together.
- However, there is a degree of drudgery in family life alluded to by Keegan. Bill Furlong is patently frustrated by the never-ending list of chores and obligations that come with family life. ‘What would life be like, he wondered, if they were given time to think and reflect over things?’
- Keegan’s general vision and viewpoint of Furlong and Eileen’s marriage is unromantic, yet undeniably tender, warm and positive. Furlong and Eileen have their differences,



too. These are most pronounced about Furlong's criticism of the local convent.

- The couple at the centre of the text, Furlong and Eileen, don't have any real friends. The absence of friendships in the novel creates a downbeat, pessimistic general vision and viewpoint. This is further enhanced when the isolated, desperate lives of the girls and women in the convent are considered.
- The story is replete with ominous references to birds and other animals, suggesting a downbeat, pessimistic general vision and viewpoint. There is something unremarkable about these symbols; to the casual onlooker they might not be noticed at all. But this only reinforces the power of such symbols; this is a story about terrible wrongs happening in front of a whole community who become so accustomed to it that they are desensitised to their horror.
- Mirrors are powerful symbols in the novel which create a hopeful general vision and viewpoint – the more Furlong looks in the mirror, the more hopeful the story seems, as he reaches the only conclusion he can live with: the only way to face oneself in a mirror is to act according to your conscience.
- The ending of the novel offers conclusive evidence that the author's general vision and viewpoint is positive and optimistic, even if it is couched in the modest realism of everyday life that can be sensed throughout the text. Furlong's decision to bring Sarah home may cause her a lot of trouble – but there is no doubting the sincerity of his actions, or Sarah's consenting to them.

## *The Crucible and Small Things Like These*

### **OPENING**

**The play, like the novel, begins with a general vision and viewpoint that is pessimistic and melancholic. Indeed, the hysteria that marks the opening to Miller's text sets it in an even starker context than that of Keegan's novel.**

The play is a fictionalised version of a real witch hunt in a small Puritan community in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692. Miller based his play on what 'little is known' of the people involved in the witch hunt, drawing from contemporaneous letters, 'the trial record' and 'certain broadsides written at the time'. As with the novel, real historical events are of direct relevance in the play. Miller wrote his play in response to the 'Red Scare' in 1950s America, which saw writers and academics who supported Communism subjected to censorship, questioning and opprobrium. In both cases, they are events that left people distraught and betrayed by the people who are supposed to care for them. The novel deftly

juxtaposes the 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic with a dedication to the mothers and children who suffered in Magdalene Laundries and mother and baby homes. Similarly, Miller in his 'note on the historical accuracy' explains that his play seeks to inform the reader of 'the essential nature of one of the strangest and most awful chapters in human history'. **Both texts are therefore set against the backdrop of grave and disturbing moments in history. The treatment of these major historical events provides evidence of the authorial general vision and viewpoint.**

The opening of the play demonstrates the author's pessimistic general vision and viewpoint. Act One begins with Miller's stage notes setting the context of the drama to follow. He notes how the setting of the play, Salem, would have appeared to a European person as 'a barbaric frontier inhabited by a sect of fanatics'. Miller explains that Salem was a theocracy, 'a



combine of state and religious power whose function was to keep the community together'. Salemites led strict and dutiful lives, fearful of hell and disturbed by the idea that the Devil was always trying to corrupt them. It is against this bleak and terrifying backdrop that the play begins.

Reverend Parris kneels beside a bed and prays over his daughter Betty, who is motionless, having apparently been the victim of witchcraft. Parris appeals to his niece, Abigail Williams, to explain what happened to Betty. Abigail explains that she and Betty had been dancing in the woods but is adamant that the cause of her inertia is not witchcraft, but that she simply fainted when Parris caught them in the act: 'We did dance, uncle, and when you leaped out of the bush so suddenly, Betty was frightened and then she fainted. And there's the whole of it'. Revealingly, Abigail concedes to her uncle that he can tell his congregation that she 'confessed it' – referring to the forbidden act of dancing in public. She accepts that she will be 'whipped' for it, suggesting that extreme punishment for trivial matters is a norm in the cultural context of the play. Parris does not trust his niece, however, and queries why she has not found work since she was dismissed by Elizabeth Proctor, stating that 'it has troubled me that you are now seven month out of their house, and in all this time no other family have ever called for your service'. Mistrust and deceit abound in the play's opening. The Putnams, Thomas and Ann, powerful landowners in the town, arrive at Parris's house and threaten to withdraw their support for him if he does not declare the presence of witchcraft in Salem. Miller notes how Thomas Putnam is 'intent upon getting Parris, for whom he has only contempt, to move toward the abyss'. Meanwhile, Abigail Williams, 'smashes' her friend Betty across the face after she reveals that Abigail 'drank a charm to kill Goody Proctor!' The hysteria and fear of the opening act of the play showcase an authorial general vision and

viewpoint that is dark and pessimistic. **This is reminiscent of some elements of the novel, where Irish society proves an unwelcoming place for vulnerable people like Furlong's mother. However, the novel simultaneously showcases a more optimistic general vision and viewpoint than the play, where Mrs Wilson steadfastly supports Furlong and his mother, even though it is an unpopular thing to do.**

### **FAMILY LIFE**

**Unlike the novel, where family life is presented in warm and appealing tones, the depiction of family life in the play is tragically bleak.** The momentum of the play is so frantic and witch hysteria so unstoppable that there are no tender familial moments, as seen in Keegan's play. Instead, family life – and indeed all daily life – is subsumed in the hunt for witches. The Putnams provide a concise example of how the witch hunt has taken over their family life. Ann Putnam, who has lost seven children at birth, is described by Miller as a 'twisted soul of forty five, a death-ridden woman, haunted by dreams'. Her husband, Thomas, is 'a man of many grievances' who considers himself to be 'the intellectual superior' of the majority of the town. Their interest in Betty Parris's apparently supernatural affliction borders on the ghoulish. Arriving at Reverend Parris's house, Ann gossips that his daughter Betty flew 'over Ingersoll's barn' while Thomas lustily declares: 'it is a providence the thing is out now!' Thomas Putnam insists that Parris must announce to his congregation that witchcraft has taken place in his own home. He says: 'Let you strike out against the Devil, and the village will bless you for it!' The couple reveal that their one surviving daughter, Ruth, is also suffering from a mysterious ailment. 'I'd not call it sick,' says Ann, 'the Devil's touch is heavier than sick'. The fear and panic felt by the Putnams as Ruth falls sick leads them to believe that she has been afflicted by the Devil. 'There