

**PinkMonkey Literature Notes on . . .**

<http://monkeynote.stores.yahoo.net/>

## Sample MonkeyNotes

**Note: this sample contains only excerpts and does not represent the full contents of the booknote. This will give you an idea of the format and content.**

# *The Crucible*

by

**Arthur Miller**

1953



MonkeyNotes Study Guide Edited by Diane Sauder

<http://monkeynote.stores.yahoo.net/>

PinkMonkey.com Copyright © 1997, All Rights Reserved.

Distribution without the written consent of PinkMonkey.com is strictly prohibited.

## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

*The Crucible* is set in the last decade of the 17th century in Salem, Massachusetts, which was then a modest village peopled by Puritan settlers. The Puritans were very religious but also highly superstitious, and events which could not be explained away by reason or by the will of God were often .....

### LIST OF CHARACTERS

#### Major Characters

**Reverend Parris** - the recently appointed minister in Salem and father of Betty Parris. Parris is dogmatic in his opinions, intolerant of opposition, and suspicious of those whom he does not like. His belief in witches and his desire to punish his enemies set in motion the chain of events that leads to the hysteria in Salem. During the witch trials, he pressures Danforth, the chief judge, to punish those who, in his opinion, are possessed or in league with the Devil.

**John Proctor** - a young, upright, outspoken, successful farmer in Salem. He loves and respects his wife and is repentant of the one act of adultery he has committed with Abigail Williams, his.....

**Elizabeth Proctor** - John's young wife and the mother of his three sons. She is pregnant with a fourth child. Though she has become somewhat cold towards her husband on account of his.....

**Abigail Williams** - Reverend Parris' niece. An intelligent, resourceful, and highly mischievous girl of seventeen, Abigail is the natural leader of the other girls in Salem and leads them in.....

**Reverend John Hale** - a minister from the nearby town of Beverly who is called by Reverend Parris to investigate his suspicions of witchcraft in Salem. As he becomes aware of Abigail's, Parris', and Hathorne's hidden agendas, he begins to question the validity of the trials, in which he acts.....

**Judge Hathorne** - one of the judges who brings his prejudices to the proceedings and tries to interpret all evidence so as to support his pre-determined conclusions. He takes every .....

**Deputy Governor Danforth** - the judge appointed especially for the Salem witch trials. Though basically fair and open-minded, he is over-confident in his ability to judge the truth. Danforth feels that.....

**Mary Warren** - the young maidservant of the Proctors. Although Mary is honest and well-intentioned toward the Proctors, when faced with the prospect of suffering, her sense of self-preservation overrides.....

**Francis Nurse** - a well-to-do, respected farmer. He is helpful toward his friends and .....

**Rebecca Nurse** - the wife of Francis Nurse. Rebecca volunteers as a midwife and is highly respected in Salem for her helpful nature. She is very firm in her opinions and .....

**Giles Corey** - a sincere, well-intentioned, though cantankerous, old farmer. He is frank and forthright in his thinking and utterances. He is on good terms with .....

**Thomas Putnam** - a rich, unscrupulous farmer who is out to expand his.....

#### Minor Characters

**Tituba** - the Negro slave of Reverend Parris, believed to be practicing witchcraft.

**Ann Putnam** - Thomas Putnam's wife. A firm believer in witchcraft, she is.....

## CONFLICT

**Protagonist** - The novel's protagonist is John Proctor, the young and energetic farmer who tries to enlighten the whole town on the ridiculousness of the trials. This upright man is one of the very few who, throughout the play, sticks to his beliefs convincingly and denies whatever charges have.....

**Antagonist** - The antagonist is a combination of superstition and human weakness in the face of evil, authority, and social pressure. Proctor faces his own weakness in delaying doing the right .....

**Climax** - Abigail Williams accuses Elizabeth, Proctor's wife, of being a witch. Proctor tears up the arrest warrant and orders the officers out of his house, but to no avail. As Elizabeth is led away, he realizes that he is to blame by not having denounced Abigail earlier. The climax occurs when he

**Outcome** - The play is a tragic comedy. John Proctor stands up for what is right, but is still executed. He and many other citizens of Salem, including Rebecca, are killed during the play. Rebecca, with her.....

## SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The plot revolves around the witchcraft hysteria that plagues Salem and splits the town into those who use the trials for their own ends and those who desire the good of the society.

Act I introduces most of the main characters in the play. The action takes place in Reverend Parris' home. Having discovered his daughter dancing naked in the woods with several other girls and his Negro slave, he has called in the Reverend Hale to investigate his suspicions of witchcraft. Various characters are introduced, and the reader learns of the pettiness of the Putnams, the superstition of Parris, the open-mindedness of Hale, the viciousness of Abigail, and, most importantly, the secret guilt of Proctor, who has committed adultery with Abigail.

Act II develops the need for Proctor to take action in defending the truth. The action takes place at the Proctors' home. John and his wife argue over whether he should denounce Abigail, and the reader learns of.....

## THEMES

**Major Theme** - The major theme in the play is that of **good versus evil**. Based on the Salem witch trials of the late 17th century, The Crucible explores the fragility of a changing society and the difficulty of doing good in the face of evil and tremendous social pressures, both at the social and personal level. John Proctor, the protagonist of the play, is faced with the choice of accepting responsibility for.....

**Minor Theme** - A minor theme of the play is that the **hysteria of the witch trials** can be easily duplicated, as seen in the hysteria surrounding the "McCarthyism" of.....

## MOOD

Throughout the play, the mood is one of impending doom in the face of rampant superstition and increasing hysteria in the Salem society. Almost every character in the play is looked upon with suspicion by his or her neighbor. The good people are punished while the evil triumph. The audience or.....

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Arthur Miller was born in New York on October 17, 1915. Although his family had once been prosperous, they lost their fortune in the stock market crash of 1929, and the young Miller had to work a number of odd

jobs to support himself. These were formative years for Miller, during which the formerly indifferent student began reading on his own and developing a strong social conscience and sense of justice. He eventually entered the University of Michigan, where he began writing plays and worked on the college newspaper. After graduating in 1938, he moved back to New York, where he continued .....

## LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

**The Puritans** - The first permanent settlement of the New England area by Europeans began with the famous landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth in 1620. Salem was founded in 1626 and was first settled by Puritans in 1628, under the leadership of John Winthrop and John Endecott. In 1629, the Massachusetts Bay Company was chartered, and Puritan settlers began arriving in the New World in large groups. Puritan society was theocratic, and government was subsumed under the authority of the church, which played a huge role in daily life.

The Puritans were Protestant dissenters of the state-run Church of England. They left the Old World to escape religious persecution. They saw themselves as God's people, chosen to establish.....

**McCarthyism** - While Miller wrote *The Crucible* to explore the motivations and circumstances behind the Salem witch trials, he also wanted to highlight the story of the "Red Scare" of the forties and fifties, which reached its peak under the frenzied leadership of Senator Joseph McCarthy. In 1950, McCarthy, then a relatively unknown Senator from Wisconsin, gained instant fame when he.....

## ACT SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

### ACT I

#### Summary

The first act takes place in a bedroom in Reverend Parris' home in the spring of 1692. On the previous night, Reverend Parris caught Tituba (his slave), Betty (his daughter), Abigail Williams (his niece), and a few other girls dancing around a fire in the forest. When he scolded Betty, she fainted.

As the play opens on the next midday, Betty has not yet regained consciousness. Worried and suspecting witchcraft, Parris prays for his daughter's recovery. When Tituba comes to inquire about Betty, he drives her away. Just then, Abigail enters and tells him that Susanna Walcott has brought a message from Dr. Griggs. Susanna is called in, and she tells Parris that Dr. Griggs can find no medicine for Betty's illness in his books and suspects some unnatural cause for her illness.

On Susanna's departure, Abigail tells Parris about the rumors in Salem alleging the practice of witchcraft. He asks Abigail whether they were practicing witchcraft the previous night. She denies it vehemently and says that they were merely dancing to the tunes of some Barbados songs sung by Tituba. He asserts that he saw a dress on the ground and one of the girls running naked, which Abigail also denies. Parris also questions Abigail about her own reputation in town and the cause of her discharge from service at the Proctors' house. She says that Goody (a Puritan form of address for women) Proctor hated her and drove her like a slave. On further questioning by Parris, she flares up.

Ann Putnam and her husband, Thomas, arrive. Mrs. Putnam alleges that it is rumored that Betty, Reverend Parris' daughter, has been seen flying. She also informs Parris that, like Betty, their daughter Ruth has taken ill after last night's episode. She is sure that witchcraft is the cause. Parris confirms that he, too, suspects witchcraft and has invited Reverend Hale from nearby Beverly, an expert in such matters, to deal with the problem.

Ann admits that she sent Ruth to engage Tituba, who knows how to speak to the dead, to raise the spirits of her

seven dead children, all of whom had died in infancy. She had hoped to discover who had killed them and what was now causing Ruth to fall sick so frequently and act so strangely. Upon hearing this, Parris turns to Abigail and once again accuses her of practicing witchcraft. She maintains that only Tituba and Ruth were engaged in doing so. Mercy Lewis, the Putnams' servant, enters to say that Ruth is slightly better.

Putnam prevails upon Parris to come down and pray with the assembled villagers to allay their fears. When Parris leaves with the Putnams, Abigail and Mercy discuss the events of the previous night and what they should admit about them. Mary Warren, another young girl who was also there, enters and says that the whole village is discussing what occurred and suspecting them to be witches.

Just then, Betty whimpers and calls for her dead mother. On waking up, she accuses Abigail of drinking blood the previous night in a ritual to kill Elizabeth Proctor. Abigail intimates that she has terrible powers and threatens all three with punishment if they speak of the night's events. If questioned, they are to say that they had merely danced and that it was only Tituba who had practiced witchcraft as she tried to conjure Goody Putnam's dead children. Betty collapses once again on hearing Abigail's dreadful threats.

John Proctor enters. He scolds Mary, his servant, for disobeying his order not to leave home and orders her to return there immediately. Mary and Mercy leave. Proctor questions Abigail about the previous night. She attempts to seduce him, reminding him of their adulterous liaison while she worked at his house and suggesting that he still longs for and loves her. He claims that he has no desire for her and wishes to pretend that it never happened, though he admits that he has, on occasion, stood outside her window. She accuses him of weakness in giving in to his wife and allowing her to spread false rumors about her.

As Abigail speaks, a psalm is heard; it is being sung in the background. Betty begins screaming. Parris rushes in, followed by the Putnams and Mercy Lewis. Abigail tells Parris that Betty began screaming when she heard him sing his psalm. Mrs. Putnam claims that Betty is unable to stand hearing the Lord's name and that she is undeniably possessed. Parris sends Mercy to report to Dr. Griggs.

Rebecca Nurse, a good and sincere woman, enters and is followed by Giles Corey, a local farmer. Putnam has some grudge against Rebecca and her husband, Francis, as a result of some land dispute. Putnam is also against Parris, for he was selected as minister over another candidate whom he had sponsored.

Rebecca assures both Parris and Putnam that their daughters will soon be well and that there is no cause for worry. She says that in childhood some unusual sicknesses are common and that there is no need to go looking for spirits as a cause. John Proctor supports her. Parris declares that in order to stop the rumors that the Devil is present in the community, he has invited Reverend Hale, who is an expert in such matters, to come and take suitable action. Proctor objects and says that he should not have done so without having had a village meeting first. Putnam, however, supports the action and accuses Rebecca of being in league with the Devil, for all but one of his children have died in infancy while none of her children or grandchildren have died.

Putnam instructs Parris to start looking for witches when Reverend Hale arrives. Proctor says that the citizens of Salem "vote by name...not by acreage" and that Putnam cannot order Parris to do something not sanctioned by a town meeting. When Putnam accuses Proctor of not attending church, Proctor answers that Parris' sermons are more about Hell than God and that Parris is more concerned about his own well being than the welfare of his parish. Parris, in turn, complains that the town is not meeting its contractual obligations to him and accuses Proctor of creating a clique against him. Rebecca Nurse tries to diffuse the tension.

Proctor starts to leave, saying that he has some lumber to bring in. Putnam objects, saying that the lumber is from land belonging to him. Proctor maintains that he recently purchased the land from Rebecca Nurse's

husband. Putnam counters by saying that Nurse had no ownership right over the land. Giles Corey sides with Proctor and offers to help him bring in the timber.

Just then Reverend Hale arrives from Beverly, carrying several books. He recognizes Rebecca, though they have never met, and praises the good work she is doing, about which he has heard much in Beverly.

Putnam and his wife are introduced to Hale and report that their child is also suffering. Proctor leaves, expressing his hope that Hale will decide the issues sensibly. Giles remains to consult Hale about some matter.

Reverend Parris informs Hale that his daughter tried to leap from the window and was found roaming on the road, waiving her arms as if to fly. Putnam adds that she cannot stand hearing the Lord's name. Hale declines to listen to these rumors and superstitions and says that he will ask questions to ascertain facts without any prejudice. On being questioned by Hale, Parris says that he saw ten to twelve girls, including his daughter and niece, dancing in the forest the previous night. Mrs. Putnam says that she had sent her daughter to Tituba to raise the spirits of her seven daughters so as to find out who had caused their deaths.

Reverend Hale consults his books and promises that he will crush Satan if he is present. Rebecca leaves, fearing Hale's rituals may hurt Betty. Giles mentions that his wife reads some strange books at night and hides them from him. He also says that when she is reading the books, he is unable to remember or recite the words of his prayers. He wants to know why this happens. (In the written commentary in the script, Miller suggests that this is due more to Giles' own difficulty concentrating than anything his wife is doing.)

On being questioned by Hale, Abigail admits that Tituba had called the Devil the previous night, but claims that neither she nor Betty had participated in any rituals. Tituba is summoned, and Abigail accuses her of making her drink blood. Tituba denies this; she is still threatened with being whipped to death or hanged. Being cornered, she admits that the Devil comes to her. When asked by Hale whether the Devil is accompanied by anyone from the village, she names Sarah Good and Goody Osburn under Putnam's prompting. Suddenly, Abigail cries out dramatically that she too was with the Devil but now wants to return to Jesus. She and Betty alternately begin calling out the names of a large number of respectable people of Salem as having been seen by them with the Devil.

## **Notes**

The first act introduces all the major characters in the play except Elizabeth Proctor, Deputy Governor Danforth, and Judge Hathorne. It throws light on the nature of these main characters and provides a rationale, of sorts, to explain the seeds of the crisis that develops later.

Abigail seems to already suffer from a questionable reputation. Reverend Parris has heard rumors about her and even questions why she has been dismissed from employment at the Proctors. She, however, shows a quickness of mind in fabricating lies and extricating herself from difficult situations. It is obvious that she is vengeful, overbearing, and quite capable of mischief. She is also very emotional, as seen when she gets angry at Parris when he questions her about the events of the previous evening. It is apparent, however, that she is trying to hide something from her uncle. Parris is a hellfire and brimstone minister, who is quick to judge and easily influenced. When Goody Putnam tells him that it is rumored that his daughter Betty has been seen flying, he repeats it almost as fact to Reverend Hale. He is also somewhat self-important and is prejudiced against certain persons because of their independence of mind. In addition, he shows himself to be both willing and capable of acting against those he does not favor. Finally, he appears to lack a strong will. Instead of handling a minor incident of children playing in the forest on his own, he quickly and unwisely calls for outside help in the form of Reverend Hale, a supposed expert on matters of witchcraft. This action on Parris' part merely intensifies the tension in Salem.

Proctor emerges as independent, outspoken, and stubborn. Though he appears sensible in his rejection of witchcraft, he is also conflicted by his lust for Abigail. Putnam emerges as a quarrelsome man with enmity toward many of the villagers. His wife is a superstitious woman, who appears to be the town gossip. She admits that she has called upon Tituba to try and summon the spirits of her dead children. On the other hand, Rebecca Nurse appears as a sensible, rational, and helpful woman; the people of the neighboring town of Beverly all know of her good works, as reported by Reverend Hale. It is Rebecca who tries to calm everyone down; she tells the gathered crowd that unusual childhood sicknesses are normal and should not be blamed on the Devil or witchcraft. She also tries to play the peacemaker amongst those gathered at Reverend Parris' home. Putnam, however, seems to hold a grudge against her and her husband in spite of her goodness.

This act also sets the themes of the play in motion. In its exploration of the struggle between good and evil, *The Crucible* depicts a society in which shifting power roles and an increasing lack of faith in the social order make the handling of inexplicable events impossible. To a society caught in the grips of an insanity dictated by the absence of knowledge and the pressure of power, practical and balanced advice will appear outdated and hopelessly naive, if not dangerous. *The Crucible*, therefore, suggests that progress can never be made without error.

In this act, the first accusations occur: Abigail calls Goody Proctor a "gossiping liar," Mrs. Putnam implies that Rebecca Nurse's good fortune is suspicious, and Tituba, under pressure by Reverend Hale, names as witches two women suggested by Mr. Putnam. Reverend Hale initially tries to remain intellectually and emotionally independent, but he also falls prey to the social climate. Reverend Parris, meanwhile, seizes the opportunity to consolidate his own political power. What initially begins as a means for several children to escape punishment for having been caught dancing in the woods turns into a free-for-all that will lead to the near-destruction of the society.

Proctor's helplessness here is especially significant. He speaks out more than once that society, through a town meeting, should have a say in what goes on in Salem; but he is unwilling to fight for his belief. He is absorbed in his own fate and afraid that his adultery with Abigail will become public knowledge; he wants to prevent disclosure of his sin at all costs. As a result, he temporarily washes his hands of the proceedings, excusing himself from the gathering to go and bring in lumber. It is obvious, however, that he is guilt-ridden over his liaison with Abigail; his guilt allows Abigail to control him and will later keep him silent when she begins her accusations. Therefore, the disturbances in the social order are not merely due to the work of the forces of evil, but also to the abandonment of power by good people, such as Proctor. By the end of the play, Miller will make it clear that an individual cannot live isolated in his own private world; instead, he has a responsibility to society to try and prevent a social crisis, such as the witch hunt in the play.

Issues of power and race also play a role in this chapter. It is Tituba, an Afro-Caribbean slave, who undergoes the first examination for witchcraft. Although she does have knowledge of spirits, the incident in the woods occurred at the behest of Mrs. Putnam, who, in the eyes of the Puritan theology, should be equally culpable for seeking to speak to her dead children's spirits. The first two white citizens that are accused are Sarah Good and Goody Osburn, women of little power and social standing. If the witch trials had remained confined to those traditionally accused of witchcraft, it is likely that they would have had little impact. It was when prominent citizens began to be accused of witchcraft that the social order was threatened and public outrage began to grow.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTERS

**John Proctor** - John Proctor is the central character in the play. His tragedy is the most significant, for it emerges from a flaw deep within himself and is resolved by his own actions. Unlike Rebecca Nurse, who is

almost a stereotype in her complete goodness, Proctor is morally compromised and must openly struggle to do good.

Although he is outspoken and blunt in his skepticism of witchcraft and his denunciation of Reverend Parris' greed and the corruption of the church, he initially chooses to.....

**Rebecca Nurse** - Rebecca Nurse, like John Proctor, has a love for truth and goodness, but they are not similar characters. While Proctor with his flaws is rendered very human, Rebecca, in her near-perfect steadfastness, appears larger than life, and therefore, slightly more a character type than a fully fleshed-out person.

Rebecca's calmness, love of truth, and strength of character distinguish her from all the other characters in the play. Despite being intimately involved in the other characters lives, she.....

**Reverend Parris, Judge Hathorne, Reverend Hale, and Deputy Danforth** - Although each of these characters plays an independent role, together they serve as the representative spectrum of the political and religious order in Salem. Parris and Hale are caretakers of the soul, while .....

## PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

Despite being a four-act play, *The Crucible* can be analyzed in terms of the traditional five stages of tragedies. The introduction (also called the exposition) introduces the elements necessary for understanding the action of a play. The exposition of *The Crucible* takes place in Act I. Here, Miller sets the scene and reveals key information about most of the important characters in the play and the conflicts which are soon to explode. Proctor's guilt over his liaison with Abigail, Abigail's mischief, Putnam's pettiness, and Parris' fear of witches are all central to the events which are soon to unfold.

In the rising action of a play, the conflicts, themes, and events introduced in the exposition begin to be set in motion. The rising action of *The Crucible* begins in Act I, with Parris and Mrs. Putnam encouraging the belief in witchcraft, and continues through Act II, in which personal prejudices and accusations replace seemingly harmless suspicions and questionings. As the action rises, reason is increasingly replaced by.....

## THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

**Major Theme** - A crucible is a vessel (container) in which metal is heated to a high temperature and melted for the purposes of casting. It can also refer, metaphorically, to a time in history when great political, social, and cultural changes are in force, where society is seemingly being melted down and recast into a new mold. The word is also remarkably similar to crucifixion, which Miller certainly intended.....

**Minor Theme** - *The Crucible's* minor theme is the evils and events of the McCarthy era, which provided the initial inspiration for the play. Miller saw many parallels between the witch trials of Salem and McCarthy's hunt for Communists, which some critics at the time even referred to as a "witch hunt." Both were periods of dramatic social tensions and social change, marked by terror, suspicion, hysteria, and.....

## POINT OF VIEW

*The Crucible* is written as a play in the present tense, so the audience (reader) is aware of all things as presented. Occasionally a third-person omniscient narrator interrupts the dialogue.

## QUOTES - QUOTATIONS AND ANALYSIS

"What profit him to bleed? Shall the dust praise him? Shall worms declare the truth?" Act 1. - Rev. Hale.

Hale is asking Elizabeth what good it would be for Proctor to die. He is indicating that nothing will be proven by an innocent man going to his death

**"It is for you to say what is good for you to hear."** Act 1. - Rev. Parris.

Parris is trying to show his authority and the authority of God by saying that it was not for Proctor to decide what he needs to know

**"He may have his goodness now, God forbid I take it from him."** Act IV. - Elizabeth Proctor to John.

Elizabeth believes that he now goes to death as an honest man by continuing to plead his innocence.....

## **SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS**

There is very little direct traditional symbolism in *The Crucible*.

Crucible - it is meant to purify, usually by fire. A great irony since the 'fire' that burns in Salem does not purify. Instead it muddles (confuses) and corrupts. Thus a fire burning for the wrong reason is not able to purify.

Fortress (page 65)- the church is seen in this manner. But while the metaphor used suggests one crack may break it, we also see that rigidity or the lack of an open mind can bring down an edifice just as quickly.....

## **IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY**

**Title:** *The Crucible*

**Author:** Arthur Miller

**Date Published:** 1953

**Meaning of Title:** A crucible is a vessel in which metal melted for the purposes of casting. It can also refer, metaphorically, to a time in history when great political, social, and cultural changes are in force, where society is seemingly being melted down and recast into a new mold.

**Genre:** Tragedy

**Point of View:** Presented as a play in the present tense. There is some interjection by.....

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Compare and contrast the characters of Rebecca Nurse and John Proctor.
2. Discuss Miller's treatment of women in *The Crucible*.
3. How is the play unified into a whole?
4. Explain why the play is a tragic comedy.....

***END OF SAMPLE MONKEYNOTES EXCERPTS***

<http://monkeynote.stores.yahoo.net/>

Copyright ©1997 PinkMonkey.com

[www.pinkmonkey.com](http://www.pinkmonkey.com)

All Rights Reserved. Distribution without the written consent of Pinkmonkey.com is prohibited.