

Section B

Revision Notes

The Play: The Crucible by Arthur Miller

The background to the play and what it is based on: The play is about the Salem witch trials that took place in the Province of Massachusetts Bay during 1692 and 1693. Early in the year 1692, in the small Massachusetts village of Salem, a collection of girls fell ill, falling victim to hallucinations and seizures. In extremely religious Puritan New England, frightening or surprising occurrences were often attributed to the devil or his cohorts. The unfathomable sickness spurred fears of witchcraft, and it was not long before the girls, and then many other residents of Salem, began to accuse other villagers of consorting with devils and casting spells. Old grudges and jealousies spilled out into the open, fuelling the atmosphere of hysteria. The Massachusetts government and judicial system, heavily influenced by religion, rolled into action. Within a few weeks, dozens of people were in jail on charges of witchcraft. By the time the fever had run its course, in late August 1692, nineteen people (and two dogs) had been convicted and hanged for witchcraft.

Set in: 1692. Puritan times

What happens in each scene: The scene that we focus on in class and the scenes that you will need to learn are written in **bold**.

Act one

Rev. Parris is praying over his daughter, Betty Parris, who lies as if unconscious in her bed. Conversations between Rev. Parris, his niece Abigail Williams and several other girls reveal that the girls, including Abigail and Betty, were found dancing around a fire and a cooking pot in a nearby forest, apparently led by Tituba, Parris's slave from Barbados. When Parris found them Betty fainted and she has not yet come around. The townspeople do not know exactly what the girls were up to, but there are rumours of witchcraft.

John Proctor enters the room in which Betty lies in bed, Abigail is there and they are left alone. She then tries to seduce him. It does not work, but we find out that Abigail and Proctor engaged in a previous affair and that Abigail still has feelings for him.

Reverend John Hale is summoned from Beverly to look upon Betty and research the incident. He is known for detecting witchcraft and the devil and is eager to use his acquired learning. He questions Abigail, who accuses Tituba of being a witch. Tituba, afraid of being hanged and threatened with beating, she says that she is not a witch but she saw the devil and accuses Goodwives Sarah Good and Osburn of witchcraft. Betty who springs to life claims to have been bewitched and also shouts about her faith in God. Betty and Abigail sing out a list of people whom they claim to have seen with the Devil. This is all lies.

Act two

Elizabeth questions Proctor to find out if he is late for dinner because of a visit to Salem. She tells him that their housemaid, Mary Warren, has been there all day. Having forbidden Mary from going to Salem, Proctor becomes angry, but Elizabeth explains that Mary has been named an official of the court. Meaning that she has to go to court (like a jury member)

Elizabeth tells Proctor that he must reveal that Abigail is a fake and that she is lying. He declares that he cannot prove what she told him because they were alone when they talked. Elizabeth becomes upset because he has not previously mentioned this time alone with Abigail. Elizabeth is worried by this because of their previous love affair. Proctor believes that she is accusing him of resuming his affair with Abigail. They then have an argument.

Mary returns, and Proctor is furious that she has been in Salem all day. However, she advises that she will be gone every day because of her duties as an official of the court. Mary gives Elizabeth a poppet (a doll) that she made while in court, tells the couple that thirty-nine people are now in jail, and that Goody Osborne will hang because she says that she is not a witch. Proctor is angry because he believes the court is condemning people without solid evidence. Mary states that Elizabeth has also been accused, but, says that because Mary defended her, the court dismissed the accusation.

Elizabeth tells Proctor that she believes Abigail will accuse her of witchcraft and have her executed because she wants to become Proctor's wife. Elizabeth asks Proctor to speak to Abigail and tell her that no chance exists of him marrying her if anything happens to his wife.

Reverend Hale visits the Proctor house and tells Elizabeth and Proctor that the former has been named in court. Hale questions Proctor about his poor church attendance and asks him to recite the Ten Commandments. When Proctor gets stuck on the tenth, Elizabeth reminds him of the commandment forbidding adultery.

Proctor tells Hale that Abigail has admitted to him that witchcraft was not responsible for the fainting. Hale asks Proctor to testify in court and then questions Elizabeth to find out if she believes in witches. Giles Corey and Francis Nurse arrive and tell Proctor, Hale and Elizabeth that the court has arrested both of their wives for witchcraft.

Ezekiel Cheever and Willard/Herrick arrive with a warrant for Elizabeth's arrest. Cheever discovers the poppet that Mary made for Elizabeth, with a needle inside it. Cheever tells Proctor and Hale that, after apparently being stabbed with a needle while eating at Parris' house, Abigail accused Elizabeth's spirit of stabbing her. Mary tells Hale that she made the doll in court that day and stored the needle inside it. She also states that Abigail saw this because she sat next to her. The men still take Elizabeth into custody, and Hale, Corey and Nurse leave.

Proctor tells Mary that she must testify in court against Abigail. Mary replies that she fears doing this because Abigail and the others will turn against her

Act Three

Judge Hathorne (offstage) is in the midst of questioning Martha Corey on accusations of witchcraft, during which her husband, Giles, interrupts the court proceedings and declares that Thomas Putnam is "reaching out for land!" Giles is removed from the courtroom and taken to the vestry room by Willard/Herrick. Judge Hathorne enters and angrily asks: "How dare you come roarin' into this court, are you gone daft, Corey?" Giles Corey replies that since Hathorne isn't a Boston Judge yet, he has no right to ask him that question. Deputy Governor Danforth, Cheever, Reverend Parris and Francis Nurse enter the vestry room. Corey explains that he owns 600 acres of land and a large quantity of timber, both of which Putnam had been eyeing. Corey also states that the court is holding his wife Martha by mistake saying he had only said Martha was reading books, but he never accused her of witchcraft.

Danforth soon thereafter takes utter control of the situation, and denies others in the court even a modicum of power. John Proctor enters with Mary Warren, promising to clear up any doubts regarding the girls if his wife is freed from custody. Danforth orders the girls into the vestry. Reverend Parris is sceptical, pointing out that the girls fainted, screamed, and turned cold before the accused, which they see as proof of the spirits. Mary tells them that she believed at first to have seen the spirits; however she knows now that there aren't any.

In an attempt to discredit Mary, Abigail and the other girls begin to scream and cry out that they are freezing. When Abigail calls to God, Proctor accuses her of being a whore and tells the court of their affair. Abigail denies it and the court has Elizabeth brought in to verify if Proctor is telling the truth. Not knowing that he had already confessed, Elizabeth lies and denies any knowledge of the affair. When Proctor continues to insist that the affair took place, the girls begin to pretend to see a yellow bird sent by Mary to attack them. To save her from being accused of witchcraft, Mary tells the court that Proctor was in league with the devil and forced her to testify. Proctor is arrested for witchcraft, and Reverend Hale storms out of the court, shouting "I denounce these proceedings!"

Act four

Proctor is chained to a jail wall, totally isolated from the outside. Reverend Parris begins to panic because John was liked by many in the village (as were Martha Corey and Rebecca Nurse, who are also to be hanged), and he explains his fears to Hathorne, Danforth and Cheever. He also reveals that Abigail and Mercy Lewis stole 31 pounds (about half his yearly salary) and boarded a ship in the night.

Hale enters, now a broken man who spends all his time with the prisoners, praying with them and advising prisoners to confess to witchcraft so that they can live. The authorities send Elizabeth to John, telling her to try to convince Proctor to confess to being a witch. **When Proctor and Elizabeth are alone, she forgives him and reaffirms their love. Elizabeth tells of Giles Corey being pressed to death.**

John chooses to confess in exchange for his life and calls out to Hathorne, who is almost overjoyed to hear such news. Proctor signs the confession, and then tears it up when realizing that Danforth is going to nail the signed confession to the church (which Proctor fears will ruin his name and the names of other people in the town). Proctor, Rebecca Nurse and Martha Corey are led to the gallows to hang.

The Three Main Characters

Abigail Williams: is Parris' 17-year-old niece and the play's antagonist. (A character who is against the main character i.e. the bad guy) Abigail was previously the maid for the Proctor house, fired by Elizabeth after her discovery of Abigail's affair with her husband, John. Abigail and her uncle's slave, Tituba, lead the local girls in love-spell rituals in the Salem forest over a fire. Rumours of witchcraft are heard in the village, and Abigail tries to use the town's fear to her advantage. She accuses many of witchcraft, starting first with the society's outcasts and gradually moving up to respected members of the community. Finally, she accuses Elizabeth Proctor, believing that John truly loves her and not Elizabeth. Abigail wants Elizabeth out of the way so that she and John can marry. John says that Abigail "hopes to dance with me upon my wife's grave." She is manipulative and charismatic, attacking anyone who stands in her way. She flees Salem during the trials.

John Proctor: is a down-to-earth farmer and the play's protagonist. (The main character that the audience tend to favour. I.e. the hero) He has a sexual relationship with Abigail Williams while she is a servant at his farm. Although he speaks his mind and stands up to Parris, he has no wish to be a martyr and he is careful about what he says when he senses real danger. He does show courage and boldness in his opposition to Parris and Putnam and he fiercely resists the arrest of his wife. Proctor is cautious when it comes to denouncing Abigail, particularly when his wife, claiming to be pregnant, is not in immediate danger. However, he feels he owes it to his accused friends to expose Abigail as a liar. He works hard to build a defence for those accused and manages to persuade Mary Warren to tell the truth, but this success is short-lived. As a last resort, he suffers the public shame of confessing to his adultery with Abigail however this does not work. In prison, he eventually confesses to witchcraft so that he can live with and care for his family, but finally he decides to die rather than lose his good name and admit to witchcraft and rips up the paper he signed. He will not deny himself. He has doubted his ability to be a good man so far, but with Elizabeth's example and support he realizes he can be true to himself and accept death. John Proctor is then hung at the neck to death.

Elizabeth Proctor: John Proctor's wife, and a resident of Salem. She is accused of witchcraft, and is only saved from death due to the fact that she is pregnant. Abigail hates her for being Proctor's wife, and for keeping Proctor's heart. By the end of the play she feels that Proctor's affair is due to her own faults, much to Proctor's dismay. By the end Elizabeth chooses not to save John's life and allows him to hang saying she would not take away his goodness.