

The Crucible - Key Information

Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible* in 1953. The play is a dramatization of **The Salem Witch trials** which is a real-life event that took place in the state of Massachusetts in North America between February 1692 and May 1693.

What did people believe about witches?

People in the 16th and 17th century genuinely believed in the existence of witches.

Witches were stereotypically women because especially under Puritan ideology, women were seen as inherently sinful because of the role of Eve in the fall of man. Puritans believed that women were more susceptible to the Devil because their souls were weaker and their bodies unprotected. The common belief about witches was that they made a diabolical pact with evil spirits and appealed to their intervention, thereby forsaking God and becoming a witch.

It was believed that witches could inflict diseases on people, spoil crops, bring about bad weather and perform other terrible acts of the devil's work.

Religious Beliefs

The church was the centre of people's lives, and they were expected to live by the teachings of the Bible. The Puritans led a very strict and rigid way of living. People were expected to conform and church attendance, dress code and behaviour were closely regulated. The Puritans believed in Satan and the Devil, and they believed that he was present in the world, just like God was. If you were disobedient against the teachings of the Church, it was believed that you were therefore a follower of Satan and your actions reflected Satan's will.

The Salem Witch Trials

The Salem Witch trials are a real-life event that happened in the town of Salem, Massachusetts in North America. In January of 1792, Reverend Parris's daughter, Elizabeth (9), and his niece Abigail Williams (11) fell ill, along with a girl called Ann Putnam who was also 11. They started having 'fits': screaming, shouting and making strange noises. A local doctor blamed the supernatural and said they were under the influence of the devil. The girls, under pressure from local magistrates, one of them called John Hathorne, blamed three women for afflicting them. These women were Tituba (the Parris's Caribbean slave) and two poor women called Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne. Both Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne claimed their innocence, but Tituba, probably out of fear, confessed to witchcraft. She said that "The Devil came to me and bid me serve him". All three women were jailed.

This sparked paranoia and mass hysteria which resulted in a witch hunt for the next few months. By the time the witch hunt was over, more than 200 people had been accused of witchcraft and 20 people had been executed.

After the period of mass hysteria was over and logic prevailed, many involved, including judges publicly confessed their error and guilt. In 1702, the General Court declared the trials unlawful and in 1711, the colony passed a bill to restore the rights and good names of those accused. Money was also offered to their heirs as restitution (compensation). In 1957, Massachusetts formally apologised for the events of 1692.

The town of Salem still exists today and has a museum called The Salem Witch Museum which is the town's most visited attraction.

Key Characters

Abigail Williams: *the 17-year-old niece of Reverend Parris. She is an orphan and a former servant to the Proctors.*

Reverend Parris: *the minister of Salem, Betty's father, and Abigail's uncle. Tituba is his slave.*

Betty Parris: *Reverend Parris's ten year old daughter. Cousin to Abigail Williams.*

John Proctor: *a farmer, and the husband of Elizabeth. He is well respected in the local community and values his reputation.*

Elizabeth Proctor: *loyal wife to John Proctor. She fires Abigail Williams as her servant before the play begins. Mary Warren is her servant during the events of the play.*

Rev John Hale: *minister in the nearby Massachusetts town of Beverly, and an expert in identifying witchcraft.*

Thomas Putnam: *an influential citizen but not well liked in the community.*

Ann Putman: *the wife of Thomas Putnam.*

Rebecca Nurse: *the wife of Francis Nurse and is well respected in the community.*

Francis Nurse: *an influential citizen. He is well liked in the community but is enemies with Thomas and Ann Putnam.*

Giles Corey: *An elderly member of the community. He is a farmer and is well known for filing lawsuits.*

Tituba: *Rev. Parris' slave from Barbados.*

Mary Warren: *naïve and lonely servant of the Proctors.*

Deputy Governor Danforth: *a Deputy governor of Massachusetts who comes to Salem to preside over the witch trials.*

Judge Hathorne: *a bitter, remorseless Salem judge.*

Ezekiel Cheever: *a court appointed official*

The Crucible – Summary

Act 1

In the Puritan town of Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, the town minister, **Reverend Parris**, discovers his daughter **Betty**, niece **Abigail**, and other girls dancing in the forest with his slave **Tituba**. Betty faints in fright at being discovered, and will not wake. Rumours of witchcraft spread through the town and a crowd gathers at Parris's house while Parris, nervous about his reputation, questions Abigail about what the girls were doing in the forest. Abigail says they were just dancing, though it soon comes out that Tituba was trying to conjure dead spirits.

Parris runs off to calm the crowd, and a local farmer named **John Proctor** winds up alone with Abigail. While Abigail was a servant in the Proctor household, she and Proctor had an affair. Abigail tells Proctor there was no witchcraft, and insists Proctor still loves her. Proctor, guilt-ridden over the affair, tells her it's over. As the crowd downstairs begins to sing a hymn, Betty starts screaming and Parris, **Thomas Putnam**, Ann Putnam, **Rebecca Nurse**, and **Giles Corey** come running into the room. An argument about whether witchcraft led to Betty's condition soon transforms into an argument about other local political issues. Just then, **Reverend Hale**, a noted investigator of witchcraft, arrives, and Proctor, Rebecca Nurse, and Giles Corey leave.

Under threat of punishment if she refuses to confess, Tituba breaks down and admits she communed with the devil. She begins to name other witches in the town. Abigail, seeing that she'll be punished unless she joins Tituba in naming names, leaps up and begins to name more witches. Betty wakes and joins in.

Act 2

Eight days later, Proctor and his wife **Elizabeth** discuss the many people who have been charged with witchcraft by a court presided over by the deputy governor of the province. They learn from their servant **Mary Warren**, one of the girls accusing people in the town of witchcraft, that Elizabeth is herself accused. Elizabeth wants Proctor to expose Abigail as a fraud, but she suspects Proctor may still have feelings for the girl. As Proctor angrily denies it, Hale arrives to investigate the Proctors. He's soon followed by Giles Corey and **Francis Nurse**, whose wives have been accused of witchcraft and imprisoned. Moments later the authorities come and take away Elizabeth. Once they're alone, Proctor demands that Mary expose the other girls as frauds and promises to confront Abigail if he must.

Act 3

Proctor brings Mary to court to expose the accusations as lies. The girls, led by Abigail, deny the charge. Proctor reveals his affair with Abigail to show that she's dishonest. To test Proctor's claim, **Deputy**

Governor Danforth calls out Elizabeth, who Proctor says will never lie. But when asked if Proctor had an affair with Abigail, Elizabeth denies it to protect her husband's honor. Abigail and the other girls seize the moment to pretend Mary is attacking them with her spirit. Mary breaks under the strain and joins them, denouncing Proctor as an ally of the devil. Danforth orders Proctor's arrest. Hale, who now believes Proctor, denounces the actions of the court.

Act 4

The witch trials cause anger and riots in nearby towns. A few days before Proctor and many others are scheduled to hang, Abigail steals money from Parris and vanishes. Parris and Hale try to get the people convicted of witchcraft to confess in order to save their lives, because Danforth refuses to stop or postpone the executions, saying it would not be fair to those already hanged. But Danforth does allow Elizabeth, who's pregnant and therefore safe from hanging, to talk to Proctor. After speaking with his wife, Proctor agrees to confess, but refuses to incriminate anyone other than himself. Once he signs his confession, he refuses to hand it over. His name is all he has left, he says, and he won't ruin it by signing lies. Danforth says that if Proctor is not honestly confessing, then he won't accept the confession. Proctor tears up the statement. Parris and Hale are horror-struck as Proctor goes to the gallows, but Elizabeth says he has gotten his "goodness" back.