

**A LEVEL**  
*Teacher Guide*

# **DRAMA AND THEATRE**

H459  
For first teaching in 2016

## **The Crucible – Arthur Miller**

Version 1



# The Crucible

by Arthur Miller

## Summary

*The Crucible* is set in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, beginning in the home of the town's spiritual leader Reverend Parris where his daughter Betty lies unconscious, seeming to be very ill. It transpires that the night before his niece Abigail and his black slave, Tituba, found Betty dancing in the woods, an act that was shocking to Puritan New England. When the physician is unable to find a cause of Betty's condition and neighbours Mr and Mrs Putnam arrive to say that their daughter Ruth is also unwell, village gossip soon credits witchery with causing the young girls to behave strangely and a crowd gathers at Parris' house.

Reverend Hale, an expert in witchcraft is sent for and Abigail alerts her friend Mercy Lewis and a servant of the Proctor family, Mary Warren, not to admit that they were casting spells and that Abigail had drunk blood and made a spell to kill Elizabeth Proctor, wife of farmer John, a man who rarely attends church. All girls insist they only danced.

Proctor talks to Abigail and we discover that last year he and 17-year old Abigail had an adulterous affair, which ended when Elizabeth found out and that the girl still desires him.

Betty, waking and screaming, sets off an argument among citizens about whether she is bewitched which parallels a separate dispute between Proctor, Parris, Giles Corey (famously argumentative) and the rich Thomas Putnam about land ownership and old feuds.

Hale's arrival starts an interrogation of Abigail about what happened in the woods leading to his being suspicious of the girl. He next questions Tituba who soon confesses to talking with the devil and starts accusing a number of townspeople of doing the same. Abigail joins in, confessing to communion with the devil and naming others. Betty too, adds names of people she claims are witches, which throws the community into uproar.

What this does is focus attention away from the girls' behaviour in the woods to a very serious, fabricated and hysterical witch-hunt which spreads mistrust, fear, suspicion and loathing through the community.





Later, as witch trials have begun, John and Elizabeth Proctor discuss the ever-increasing numbers of people accused of witchcraft just by being named by the hysterical girls. It has become a self-perpetuating and vicious circle of distrust, accusation, trial and punishment.

When she urges her husband to denounce Abigail as a liar, he declines leading her to believe he is still fond of her. Mary Warren returns from the trials to tell the Proctors that Elizabeth too has been denounced. Hale calls on them, followed by Francis Nurse and Giles Corey to say that their wives now also stand accused.

Suddenly Elizabeth is arrested after which John forcefully persuades Mary to expose the lies of Abigail and the others. He takes Mary to the court where Judge Danforth is told she will testify against the girls. The judge is sceptical, particularly as Elizabeth is pregnant and so would not be hanged for a year after the baby was born. Mary tells the court that Abigail and friends are lying, but when they are brought in to face this accusation, they claim they are being bewitched by Mary.

In his anger, Proctor confesses his affair and claims that Abigail is jealous of Elizabeth. Then Elizabeth is brought in and asked about the affair but to protect John's previous

good name, lies and so undermines her defence against the charges. Abigail and the girls raise the stakes by again pretending that Mary is bewitching them which causes her to accuse John himself of being a witch.

At Proctor's arrest, Hale has had enough and withdraws from the court proceedings. After the passage of summer and into autumn, we learn as more executions are being prepared that Abigail has run off taking all Parris' money and the witch trials have caused civil disorder to spread into other towns around, making Judge Danforth rather wary of continuing. Hale returns to ask the condemned witches to confess in order to save their lives, but they will not.

Danforth gets Elizabeth to persuade Proctor to agree to confess too, unhappy as he is about it as he is no more guilty than any of the others. He refuses to name other people or to sign the 'confession' and so when the court demands a public confession he retracts it all and goes to his death on the gallows.

And so the dark days of the witch trial persecutions in Massachusetts came to a natural end after the executions of nineteen men and women.



## The playwright and his influences

Playwright Arthur Miller (1915-2005), three times married including to Marilyn Monroe, was praised by one critic for his 'biting criticisms of societal problems.' Drawn to the paranoid frenzy of this true story with its many strands of meaning and themes, he saw parallels with the McCarthyism that deeply affected American 1950s society. When the USA got agitated about perceived threats from Communism partly among artists and the House Un-American Activities Committee got to work, Miller refused to co-operate and compared them to the Salem witch trials.

Nowadays it's acknowledged to raise wider questions about contemporary society, authority and peoples, religion and secularism, extremism and intolerance.

First published in 1953, *The Crucible* employs some novel techniques allowing directors and actors over the years to offer audiences a wide range of interpretations and shades of meaning.

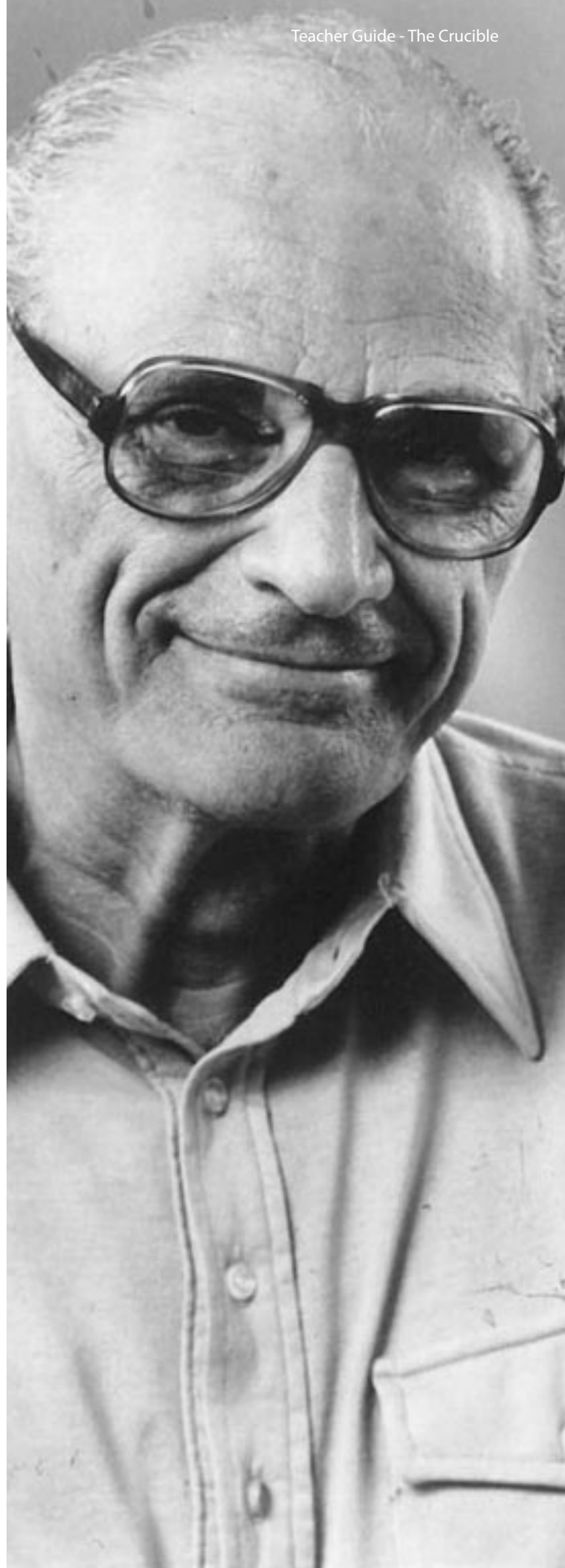
One such is Miller's lengthy expositions within the text which are neither stage directions nor character descriptions, but are psychological profiles of the central characters, adding social, historical and cultural contexts which enable better understanding. Some directors have used them as narrated asides or spoken by actors, while others have used them to inform in-depth character study by performers.

Either way, they are a unique asset in the study of this play.

*The Crucible* is a play in four acts, with the first described as 'an overture', a setting up of the characters and the plot which will be unfolded.

As preparation, BBC Bitesize [http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english\\_literature/dramacrucible/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/dramacrucible/) is aimed at GCSE learners it nonetheless includes useful, accessible teaching on content, plot, character with some video clips and a sample question: 'Show how Arthur Miller creates a powerful dramatic effect in *The Crucible*.'

The 1996 film, *The Crucible* <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0115988/> is worth watching with a preview on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ohw3lUvwa74>





# Deconstructing texts for performance, Component 4 of the specification

Learners will explore a number of directorial visions of the creative possibilities of the text. They will work practically and the component is assessed in writing. They will analyse and interpret with an in-depth focus on the director's role, how the full text or any number of scenes can be staged and performed for an audience and what theatrical devices and production methods may be used. An extract should show the relationship between characters, the proxemics between actors and audience and how the director shapes the performance.

The study of characters is integral, while text study around themes should help learners to place characters, plot and devices into their appropriate social, historical and cultural contexts.

## Key themes

Many themes are universal and inform both plot and characters. Religion, truth and 'sex, sin and the Devil' are at the heart of this play.

### Intolerance

Late 17th century Massachusetts society was theocratic – church and state were one, enforcing strict Protestantism called 'Puritanism' through moral and penal laws. The state of a person's soul was of public concern. No deviation or dissent was tolerated, but in Salem anything that was not of God was assumed to be of the Devil. The trials and hangings were a means of purifying society.

### Politics

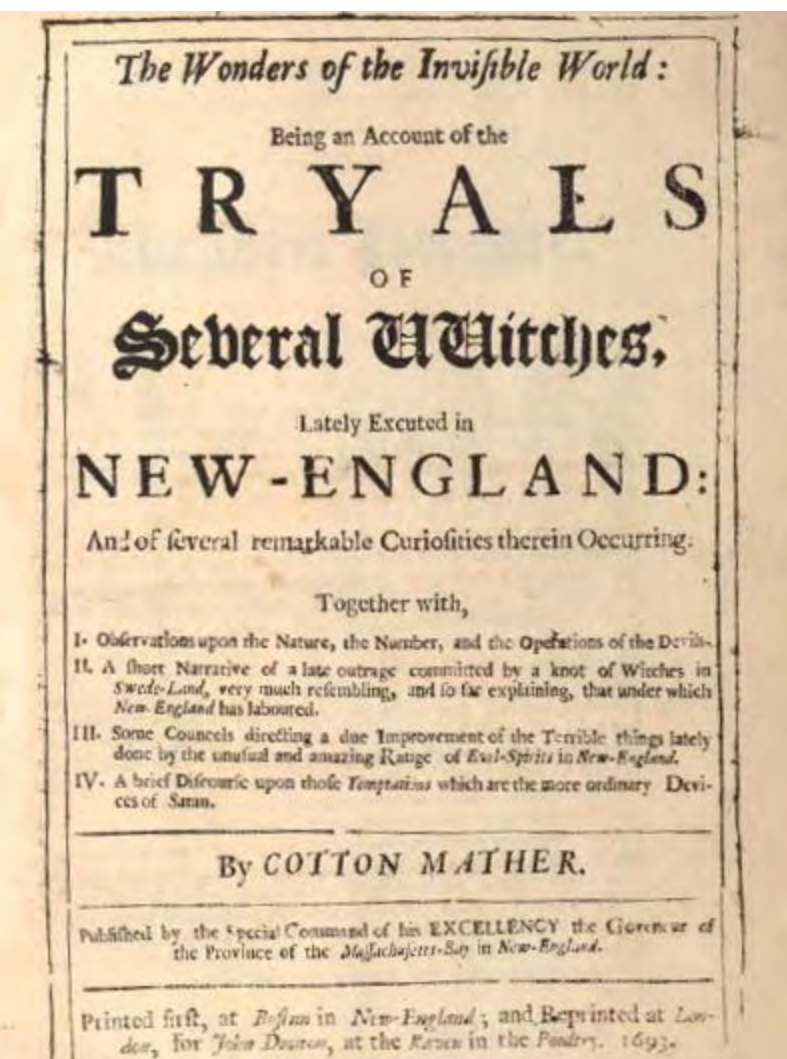
The play has been described as a symbol of the 'paranoia about Communism that pervaded America in the 1950s.' The House Un-American Activities Committee is like Salem's religious court. Obsession with communism's dangers was named McCarthyism after the Senator who first stirred up the practice of making accusations of subversion/treason without proper evidence. It's also come to mean making allegations or using unfair investigative techniques to restrict dissent or political criticism. The encouraging of naming people, forcing them to 'confess their crimes' is a common feature of repressive regimes.

### History

The Puritans' journey from England to the new world to escape persecution led directly to the theocracy of the east coast of the US - the desire to be 'pure', led by church and Christian ministers, to shun dancing and frivolous lifestyles, to obey the Ten Commandments. The town's name, Salem, is thought to be a version of Jerusalem. Legal proceedings are examples of what was really an English judicial system transported across the Atlantic.

### Authority

The religious hegemony of the state is challenged by dissent and rebellion in neighbouring towns and by the Devil in Salem, striking at the heart of their society's foundations. They did all they could to defeat attacks on their beliefs.



## Individuals

Our contemporary individualism, autonomy and anonymity had no place in 17th Century society. A man's church attendances and the presence in the house of a 'poppet' or doll were admissible evidence in court. The community acted as a whole, buttressed by what we might regard as harsh laws.

## Witchcraft

The play shows no 'witches' practising their craft, but fears of Satanic evil are reflected in the girls' hysterical responses, law enforcement's reactions and the physical, dramatic demonstration of being in a trance or under a spell, in the second half of Act 3.

## Hysteria

Hysterical people cease to listen to logic, reason or common sense. The accusing girls lashed out with preposterous accusations and the state religious regime acted hysterically with its trials and executions. Hysteria becomes a self-fulfilling cycle, fed in this play by under-currents of revenge over long-held disagreements.

## Reputation

A person's good name can be destroyed in a moment; reputations for honesty, integrity, piety, hard work were highly valued by 17th century citizens. Fear of a tarnished reputation drives Rev Parris, John Proctor (though his adultery previously has already ruined his good name), Judge Danforth and Rev Hale. A director would consider how reputation motivates characters. Confession is good for the soul in Christian teaching and a person who confesses has to some extent restored his/her reputation.

## Martyrs

Those who died on the gallows were mainly unmourned. Miller addressed the role of martyr through John Proctor and his wrestling with 'confession', finally choosing to die, his name more or less intact. We are told Rebecca Nurse lived a blameless, God-fearing life and walked to face her death with no protest, a martyr.

## Women

In a male-dominated society, women have empowerment in this play, including young women like Abigail and a black slave like Tituba. Of course, after the trials, life continued as before, but it's a directorial note when developing the female roles in performance.

## Performance characteristics

*The Crucible* will need knowledge and understanding of basic skills in drama to achieve performance. Character building exercises will be helpful, as will blocking, maintaining appropriate amounts of props, lighting and sound effects to add to dramatic form rather than detract from or overwhelm it.

## Staging requirements

The play can be staged in historical costume or modern dress on a thrust, proscenium or open stage. Learners could experiment with in-the-round and traverse staging.

A director could place it in a different time and place from 17th Century Massachusetts. It could be presented as a Stanislavski-developed character based drama, or given a Brechtian-style treatment with no set, few entrances/exits, characters changing role.

## Common misconceptions or difficulties students may have

### If we have read it, do we need to perform it?

The text is not to be studied as a piece of literature but as the basis of a theatrical performance to an audience. The component is examined by written paper but is studied predominantly through practical experience of bringing it alive from page to stage.

### What about the archaic language?

Miller wrote how people spoke then. To modernise the language would need some justification. It's not difficult to access as it is.

### Do we need American accents?

In 1692 people were still from European stock; the American accent developed later.



**Must we use the explanations provided by Miller?**

The exposition passages may be used in performance by characters or narrator, or left out. They certainly help inform actors and director.

**Is this historical fact?**

It's based on facts. Miller made certain dramatic changes, acknowledged in his 'Historical Accuracy' notes.

## How to approach essay questions in the exam

- a) Characters – for example, describe how and why named characters behave at certain points; how they interact; how they change over time.
- b) Actors – for example, what particular performance skills would be needed to portray named characters?
- c) Plot – for example, how does Abigail's and her friends' hysteria show itself in several parts of the play?
- d) Themes – for example, how is reputation explored and presented through the play?
- e) Directing – for example, how would a director stage the whipped up frenzy of the accusers in Act 3? How would space and levels be used? What would a director want to say about relationships between characters?
- f) Draft thumbnail character sketches of Danforth, the Proctors, Hale, Parris, Abigail and Tituba, showing how they are affected by events as the play proceeds.
- g) What do the different ways of questioning of Hale and Danforth tell us about their characters?
- h) Keep a journal/diary of practical sessions to analyse and explain how characters are studied; how dialogue is rehearsed; how and why moves are blocked; which dramatic devices are employed and why; how an audience perspective is kept in mind and how meaning will be conveyed to that audience.
- i) Provide a rationale for decisions that a director may make in preparing the play for performance.



## What comes first?

The teacher should prepare the historical, social, cultural contexts and a synopsis of the plot with simple descriptions of the characters. Watching the film is one way of preparing for this, but many directors choose not to watch existing material.

## Text or film?

If the film is to be used as background research for the director and/of the cast, it could be shown before or after a round-the-class read through, with the teacher referring to Miller's expositions, stage directions, effects and explaining words, concepts and character traits as the reading progresses.

## Themes?

A discussion of one of the central themes can be undertaken with some small-group improvisation work to explore the theme in a modern setting. Put a second devised scene in place, set later to show some character development.

## Another one?

Repeat the exercise of devising two scenes in contemporary situations stimulated by another from the list of themes.

## More?

It could be done again with more themes, or it may be appropriate to limit it to three in total at this point.

## Director's viewpoint?

Learners repeat their preferred theme improvisation, this time with one of each group taking role of director, shaping the group's work for presentation and to convey the message of the piece.

## Choose a scene?

Starting with one scene, perhaps the opening scene or final one, this allows learners to work in small groups and experiment with language and how they might put the scene on the stage.

## Choose roles now?

Some learners prefer to have their role determined early on so they can polish it. However, others prosper by being challenged regularly – change roles periodically. Some teachers like to change some learners to different groups as well to broaden their experience. Tituba today becomes the director next session of another group, and

so on. Each learner should have experience of directing peers in order to fully understand the job.

## Aiming for performance?

At some point a presentation to an audience of either the full text or selected scenes is essential to prepare for the written task with full understanding. The audience should not be class peers but people who have not seen the work in progress.

## Analysis?

The performance itself is not the be-all and end-all. It is part of the process in understanding, creating and developing the directorial role required for the written paper which will have two questions. A review of the performance, a peer, self and teacher assessment is essential. If some part of it has been less effective on stage, then that is essential learning of the directorial process.





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