



Main Characters in The Crucible

Lesson Transcript

This lesson provides a general overview of some of the most important characters in Arthur Miller's famous play, 'The Crucible,' including how each of the characters contributes to the development of the plot.

Main Characters

Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* is a complex tale of the madness surrounding the Salem witch trials. While it's filled with many figures who contribute to the story, we'll focus on the main characters, whose importance is determined partially by their stage time, as well as their role in the development of the plot.

Abigail Williams

Abigail Williams is perhaps the most prominent main character in *The Crucible*. She leads a group of girls into the woods to dance with Tituba, her uncle's slave. When they're caught in the act of dancing, two of the young girls pretend to be ill to avoid punishment. Abigail decides to blame Tituba to avoid trouble for herself. From here, Abigail leads this same group of girls in a fury of witchcraft accusations that rock the town of Salem.

We also learn that Abigail has had an affair with her former employer, John Proctor. She is still in love with him and accuses his wife, Elizabeth, of witchcraft in hopes of being able to marry John after Elizabeth is executed. While this plot becomes clear to the audience throughout the play, Abigail succeeds in hoodwinking the town and its officials. They believe she and the girls are true messengers of God. In the end, Abigail steals her Uncle's savings and runs away in the night; not exactly the behavior of a pious vessel of the divine! Many lives are lost because of Abigail's accusations, and many others are ruined.

John Proctor

John Proctor is a well-respected farmer on the outskirts of Salem. As mentioned, Abigail was formerly employed as a servant in his home, during which time he had an adulterous affair with her. When we first meet John, it seems he still has feelings for Abigail, but he resists them. He tells

her, 'I will cut off my hand before I'll ever reach for you again.' We see John struggling with guilt over this affair throughout the play. He exerts himself to repair things with his wife and he believes himself a sinner, even saying to his wife, 'I am no good man.'

He gradually realizes, and is horrified by, Abigail's diabolical intentions by accusing Elizabeth and others of witchcraft. He goes to the court and admits to committing adultery with Abigail in an effort to discredit her and save those she's condemned. Sadly, because of the hysteria that has grown from these trials, instead of freeing others from prison, John winds up there himself. At the end of the play, the court officials try to get him to confess in order to save his life. He nearly does, but tears up the confession at the last minute, walking instead to the gallows, confidently asserting his innocence.

Reverend Parris

Reverend Parris is the one who discovers the girls dancing in the woods. He is the uncle to Abigail Williams and the father of Betty, one of the girls who feigns illness. He is not well-liked in the town. John Proctor has particular animosity for him. Reverend Parris seems to care more about his salary and having gold candlesticks on his pulpit than he does about ministering to his flock. We learn that 'there are many that quail to bring their children' to church, because the sermons Parris preaches are full of 'hellfire and bloody damnation.' Reverend Parris becomes an active and fervent supporter of the witch trials, particularly enjoying watching those who oppose him go to prison. He changes his tune at the end of the play, begging instead for pardon or postponement of executions, but only because he perceives popular opinion has turned against the court and the hangings.

Reverend Hale

Called to Salem from nearby Beverly, **Reverend Hale** serves as expert in finding those who practice witchcraft. Initially, he is quite pleased with himself and his reputation. When Abigail first accuses Tituba, Hale goads Tituba not only into confessing, but also into accusing others. Tituba falsely confesses in order to save herself, and Hale enthusiastically calls for those she accused to be arrested and shackled.

Hale participates actively in the court. As the play progresses, however, Reverend Hale begins to realize the gravity of what he's doing. He ends up trying to douse the flames he initially fanned with enthusiasm. After John Proctor confesses to committing adultery with Abigail, Hale breaks with the court, saying, 'I denounce these proceedings, I quit this court!' He shows up again in the final act of the play, busily trying to convince prisoners to confess in order to save their lives. He knows they're really innocent, and he cries out, 'There is blood on my head!' Here, he is expressing his guilt for playing a role in the execution of the innocent.

Elizabeth Proctor

Elizabeth Proctor is John's wife. She discovers her husband's affair with Abigail and dismisses the girl from her job as their servant. Elizabeth remains jealous and hurt throughout much of the play. She believes Abigail has orchestrated the witch trials largely in order to have John to herself. We see that John has struggled to apologize and regain Elizabeth's trust, and Elizabeth has had a difficult time with forgiveness. John even cries at one point, 'Oh, Elizabeth, your justice would freeze beer!' Elizabeth is devout and faithful, but in being so, it seems she has forged herself a cold character.

At the end of the play, after she has endured many months in prison and just before John is hanged, we see her soften and let out her warmth. In their last moments together, Elizabeth apologizes to John, 'I never knew how I should say my love. It were a cold house I kept!' A sad tragedy, indeed, that two people should be so near and so loving toward one another, and yet so unable to show it. At the end of the play, Elizabeth watches her husband, John, walk away to be hung. They have made their peace.

Lesson Summary

These five characters are responsible for the bulk of the action in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*.

Abigail Williams provides the initial spark for the Salem witch trials when she accuses Tituba of witchcraft. **Reverend Hale** fans this spark into a roaring flame as he encourages other accusations. **Reverend Parris** provides kindle for the flame by preaching damnation and oppression for so long. At the end, the fire of the witch trials cannot be contained. People like **John and Elizabeth Proctor** live with and participate in the consequences of these combined forces.