

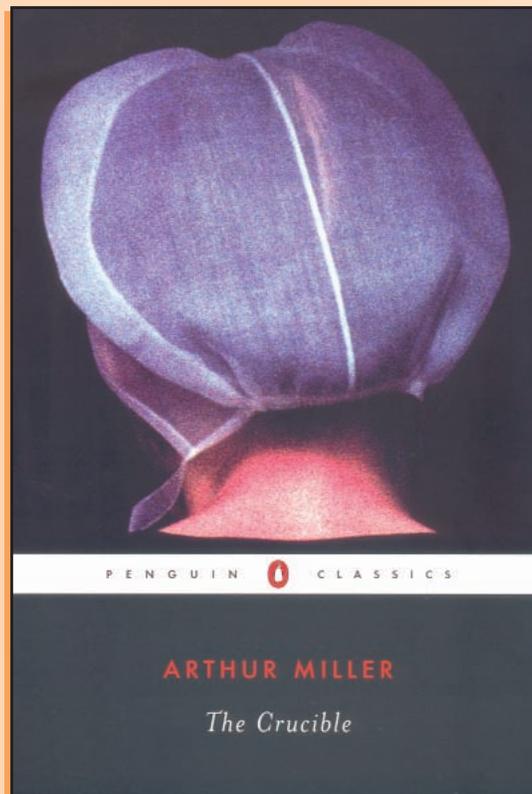


A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE PENGUIN EDITION OF

ARTHUR MILLER'S

# THE CRUCIBLE

By RANDEANE TETU



**NOTE TO THE TEACHER:**

The questions, exercises, and assignments on these pages are designed to guide students' reading of the literary work and to provide suggestions for exploring the implications of the story through discussions, research, and writing. Most of the items can be handled individually, but small group and whole class discussions will enhance comprehension. The Response Journal should provide students with a means, first, for recording their ideas, feelings, and concerns, and then for reflecting those responses in their writing assignments and class discussions. These sheets may be duplicated, but teachers should select and modify items according to the needs and abilities of their students.

**INTRODUCTION**

The witchcraft trials in Salem, Massachusetts, during the 1690s have been a blot on the history of America, a country which has come to pride itself on the concepts of free speech and justice as well as on its religious principles. Guilt by association, unexamined testimony, judges blinded by their biases, and individuals determined to use the system of justice when no evidence of a crime existed—these kinds of social or political problems did not go away with the completion of those trials.

U.S. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's relentless determination to find "unAmerican" citizens and communists in all areas of American life in the early 1950s prompted Arthur Miller to write *The Crucible*, a play about the Salem witch trials which has similarities to "McCarthyism." The play no doubt prompted the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1956 to call Miller for questioning, but Miller refused to cooperate when asked to identify writers who had once been communists. Richard H. Rovere calls Miller "the leading symbol of the militant, risk-taking conscience" of that time. Although the play does not parallel the McCarthy investigations exactly, Miller, as a socially conscious writer, is clearly making a statement about conscience and political morality relevant to the McCarthy period—or any period.

**PREPARING TO READ**

1. Review what you know about Massachusetts in the colonial period of early American history. What religious period and political values held Massachusetts together? What is a theocracy?
2. What were the beliefs and attitudes about witches and witchcraft held by many people in the New England colonies in the late seventeenth century? What characteristics did witches supposedly manifest? How were they identified? How were they punished?
3. Salem, Massachusetts did not have a speedy system of communication with other towns, and the wilderness was not far from its borders in 1692. How did this isolation affect activities and attitudes in the town?
4. Describe the political climate of the 1950s. Why did Senator McCarthy become a powerful figure? How did he influence politics in the 'fifties?
5. Why is it easier to relinquish responsibility for your actions when you are part of a group?
6. As you read through the play, stop occasionally to record your thoughts, reactions, and concerns in a Response Journal. Your journal may be a separate notebook or individual sheets which you clip together and keep in a folder. Include statements about the characters—what you learn about them, how they affect you—and about the key issues and events which the play explores. Also, jot down questions you have about events and statements in the play which you do not understand. Your Response Journal will come in handy when you discuss the play in class, write a paper, or explore a related topic that interests you. Because this play contains several unusual words (e.g., diabolism) and expressions (e.g. strike hard upon me), you may want to keep a list of some of those words and their meanings in your journal.

**UNDERSTANDING THE SURFACE STORY****ACT ONE**

1. Why did the Salem settlement need a theocracy? Why had the settlers begun to turn toward individualism?
2. How does Miller characterize Parris? How does Parris feel about his parishoners?
3. Why is Thomas Putnam willing to speak of witchcraft? How does Mrs. Putnam know what Ruth was doing in the woods?

4. Why does Abigail “admit” that Tituba and Ruth were conjuring spirits? Why is Abigail afraid the others will confess what they were doing in the woods? How does Abigail treat the other girls? How does she treat her uncle?
5. What are Abigail’s feelings towards John Proctor? Why is she antagonistic toward Elizabeth Proctor? Why has she been asked to leave her home? Why does she tell John what happened to Betty?
6. Why do Proctor and Rebecca speak out against Hale’s coming? Why has Proctor set himself against Parris? How does Rebecca’s departure affect those waiting at the bedside?
7. Why does Abigail accuse Tituba? Why does Hale believe Abigail rather than Tituba? How does he lead Tituba into naming names? Why do Abigail and Betty name names?

## ACT TWO

1. Why doesn’t Proctor go to Salem to report what Abigail has told him? Why does Elizabeth want him to go? Why does Elizabeth mistrust him?
2. How does Proctor feel about the court and Mary Warren’s part in the proceedings? How has Mary Warren changed?
3. How has Hale changed since his arrival in Salem? Why is he testing Proctor and Elizabeth? Why hasn’t Proctor been in church?
4. Why is Cheever looking for a poppet? What is the significance of the one they find?
5. Hale says: “Mary—you charge a cold and cruel murder on Abigail.” What does he mean?
6. Why does Proctor insist that Mary Warren testify in Elizabeth’s defense? Why does Mary Warren refuse?

## ACT THREE

1. Why is Giles Cory expelled from court? Why won’t Danforth hear his evidence? Why is Cory arrested?
2. Why is Mary Warren in court? What does she tell Danforth? Why is Danforth suspicious of her and of Proctor? Why does Proctor remind her of the angel Raphael?
3. How does Parris nullify Proctor’s testament? How is Giles’s deposition turned against him?
4. What is the professed purpose of the court? Why doesn’t the court need witnesses? What does this suggest about the proceedings?
5. Why does Proctor confess lechery? Why does he think Danforth and Hathorne will believe his confession? Why don’t they believe him?
6. How is Elizabeth’s testimony used against Proctor? Why is this an unfair test of Elizabeth’s word against John’s?
7. How does Abigail turn the court against Mary Warren?
8. Why does Hale denounce the proceedings? What should have been the effect of his denunciation? Why is it not?

## ACT FOUR

1. What is the effect of Sarah Good’s and Tituba’s talk about flying south? Why does Miller include it?
  2. How has Parris changed? Why doesn’t the news that Abigail and Mercy have left town affect the decision of the court? How is Danforth a victim of his own logic?
  3. Why has Hale returned? How has he changed? Why has he changed?
  4. Why does Danforth allow Elizabeth to speak to John Proctor? How has she changed toward her husband? Why doesn’t she take Hale’s advice?
  5. How and why does Giles die? Why wasn’t he hanged?
  6. Why does Proctor confess? Why will he not name names? Why will he not let Danforth have his signed paper?
  7. Why does John Proctor choose to hang? What does he thereby accomplish?
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**DIGGING DEEPER**

1. What is a crucible? How is it used? Justify Miller's use of *The Crucible* as a title for his play.
2. What is an overture? Why does Miller use one in *The Crucible*? Why is "Echoes Down the Corridor" an appropriate afterword?
3. "...Salem folk believed that the virgin forest was the Devil's last preserve..." How is the forest used to personify the Devil? How else is the Devil personified?
4. How is Abigail responsible for starting the whole scare about witches in Salem? Is she lying? insane? possessed? If Abigail had not been caught dancing, would the witch trials still have been held? What makes you think so?
5. How do Hale's preconceptions influence his interpretation of events? How does his interpretation change? What are the implications of his conversion?
6. As a representative of the state government, is Danforth neutral and fair? How would his statement, "Do you know, Mr. Proctor, that the entire contention of the state in these trials is that the voice of Heaven is speaking through the children?" be received in a court today? Why was it received as valid in Salem in 1692?
7. "Them that will not confess will hang." Explain the major irony of that kind of confession.
8. How have Elizabeth and John Proctor come to terms? Explain the irony in their reconciliation. Why won't Elizabeth be hanged?
9. Why does Danforth rejoice when Proctor confesses? What does this imply about the purpose of the trials? What does it imply about Danforth? Why must Danforth hang Proctor?
10. What is the purpose of Miller's comments and explanations throughout the play? How would your understanding be affected if those had not been included?
11. How does Act Two, Scene 2 clarify or change the meaning of the play? Miller says that scene was eliminated from the stage version because it seemed to "deflect the tempo of the play." If you were directing the play, would you include that scene? Why or why not?
12. In staging the play, Laurence Olivier said a drumbeat starts during the play and continues to the end. How does Miller create this feeling of tension? How does he create the oppressive atmosphere?
13. Arthur Miller has been quoted as saying "The tragedy of *The Crucible* is the everlasting conflict between people so fanatically wedded to this orthodoxy that they could not cope with the evidence of their senses." What does he mean by "this orthodoxy"? What is "the evidence of their senses"? Do you agree that this is the basic conflict?
14. In a morality play, characters are intended to dramatize Good and Evil. In what ways is *The Crucible* a morality play?
15. As a socially conscious writer, Miller intended this play as a comment on McCarthyism. What are the parallels between the incidents Miller dramatizes and the acts of Senator McCarthy in the 1950s?
16. You might have utilized notes from your Response Journal as you reacted to some of the questions above. Now select one specific unanswered question from your journal, and see if your classmates can shed some light on that issue.

**WRITING RESPONSES**

1. Explain why Proctor's knowledge that "the children's sickness had naught to do with witchcraft" did not stop the witch hunt and court proceedings.
2. Proctor's summation of the trials is that "Vengeance is walking Salem." Is he right? Support your position with evidence from the play.
3. Proctor calls Hale "Pontius Pilate." Explain the allusion and argue whether it is or not an appropriate allusion.
4. Give specific examples of how Abigail influences the proceedings, and then give your reason(s) for why she continually succeeds.
5. Miller said, "The form, the shape, the meaning of *The Crucible* were all compounded out of the faith of those who hanged." Explain what he means and how his meaning is evident in the play.

6. Herbert Blau ("Counterforce I: The Social Drama") says the adultery of John Proctor and Abigail Williams dissipates the force of the "public terror" which it was Miller's intent to convey. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?
7. Describe how Miller used the symbol of fire throughout the play and explain what it represents.
8. Choose one of the ironies in the play (for instance, Elizabeth Proctor lies to protect John Proctor and thereby convinces Danforth that John has lied to save Elizabeth) and explain how the irony enhances the drama of the play.
9. If audience sympathy were not with John Proctor in the matter of his adultery, we might be able to see Abigail's side of the story. Write an account of Abigail's feelings before she was caught dancing in the forest.
10. Write a one-act play in which a student is caught breaking the school code of ethics and must face a court of his or her peers. Make clear in your scene which rights the student has and which he or she does not.

### EXPLORING FURTHER

1. Research "habeas corpus." Explain how this right, guaranteed by the Constitution, might have influenced the proceedings at the Salem witch trials.
2. Research the Puritan idea of predestination and "the elect." How does an understanding of those concepts influence an interpretation of this play?
3. Read Joseph R. McCarthy's *McCarthyism: The Fight for America* or articles by Senator McCarthy. What were his tenets? What was their influence on the thinking of certain Americans in the 1950s? What appeal do they have today?
4. Read Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* (also available from Penguin), a play with themes similar to Miller's. Note the similarities and differences.
5. Read Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. The play has been performed successfully in China partly because of the common experience available to both cultures. What would be some of the difficulties in presenting *The Crucible* to an audience in China?
6. Read Miller's 1950 adaptation of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (also available from Penguin). How are the moral values of that play related to those in *The Crucible*?
7. Create an advertising campaign for a new presentation of the play. Include posters, news releases, radio and TV spots.
8. Stage an interview with Miller in which the class asks questions and Miller responds.
9. Set up a "Today Show" in which Abigail, Proctor, and other characters appear to recount the events which made them famous.
10. Using the list you made of unusual expressions used in the play, rewrite some of Miller's lines as they would be said by teenagers today.
11. "Three Sovereigns for Sarah," a television drama starring Vanessa Redgrave, examines the same Salem witch trials by focusing on one family's harrowing involvement. After viewing the three-part program, compare this more historical approach with Miller's more dramatic and symbolic approach.

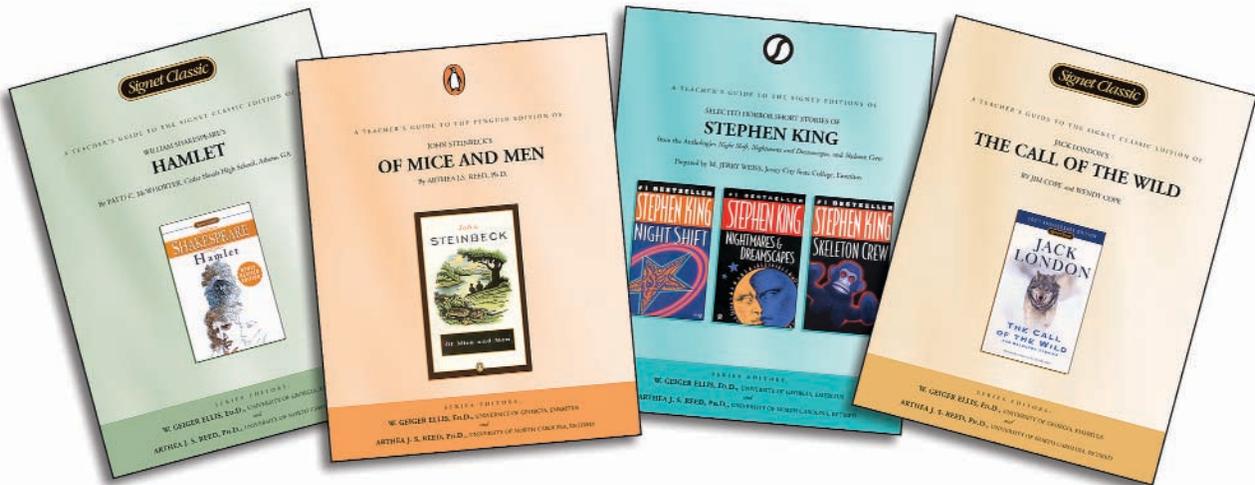
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