**Themes, Motifs and Symbols**

*Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.*

**At a Glance**

* Mass hysteria costs innocent lives in Salem, Massachusetts, much as mass hysteria was destroying livelihoods during the Red Scare in author Arthur Miller’s day.
* Persecution becomes a tool to distract society from its real problems: repression and an institutionalized belief system that cannot be questioned.
* Social pressure can lead individuals to go along with actions they know are wrong.
* Personal integrity, as exemplified by John Proctor’s decision to hang rather than confess to crimes he did not commit, is the only thing that can stand against mass corruption.
* Fanatic sexual and social repression, particularly of the young, results in disaster.

**Themes and Meanings**

The Crucible is a play about a man’s refusal to lie in order to satisfy phony claims enforced by the establishment; it portrays mass paranoia and the struggle to maintain human dignity in the face of a universe bereft of reason and order. The play’s attitude to the specific topic of witchcraft, however, is thoroughly naturalistic. Characters are motivated by rational economic concerns, jealousy, or a juvenile passion for the forbidden; even the religious zeal of Parris has its deeper roots in the minister’s wish that he could continue to “preach nothin’ but golden candlesticks until he had them.”

In this climate, The Crucible focuses on how man can deal with a fierce authority which demands that he perform immoral acts in order to maintain a hypocritical status quo. The “theocracy” of the Puritan settlement will not allow any cracks to appear in the facade of traditional religion behind which the powerful guard their position of advantage. In the key scene of Proctor’s confrontation with Deputy Governor Danforth, the playwright shows that, like the Roman Catholic inquisitors of Giordano Bruno and Galileo, Danforth has an inkling that to reverse the court’s judgment would be to open the door to broader implications, since “the entire contention of the state in these trials is that the voice of Heaven is speaking through the children.” Repeatedly, Danforth asks Proctor, “There lurks nowhere in your heart . . . any desire to undermine this court?” By an ironic twist, however, the undermining is done by Danforth himself, when he violates due process by ordering the summary arrest of certain petitioners or by depriving Proctor and Mary of all legal counsel.

I

n the final scene in jail, Proctor achieves heroic stature when he decides that his life is worth less than his duty to the truth. His claim to personal happiness is less important than the truth that the whole community—and history—needs, and he overcomes his previous, somewhat contrived flaw (adulterous lust). Because of Proctor’s act, Arthur Miller implies in an epilogue to the printed play entitled “Echoes down the Corridor,” “the power of theocracy in Massachusetts was broken.”

**The Issue of Cruelty**

*The Crucible* is seen as representing so many things by so many people. However, I tend to think that one of the most profound aspects of Miller's work is how it handles the issue of cruelty.  There is political cruelty in the accusations, the mass hysteria, the turning of neighbor upon neighbor, and the twisted way in which spirituality is used to repress and silence voice. What makes the drama profound is how this dynamic weaves its way into the private explorations of cruelty.  The personal realm is where some of the most brutal displays of cruelty can be seen between husband and wife, minister and penitent, and between friends.  The moments in which Miller is able to capture the privatized sense of cruelty which manifests from a cruel political condition makes for some of the best dramatic literature.  Miller was ahead of his time in illuminating how the true terror of the modern setting is how political and private cruelty converge to make individuals feel nothing but agonizing pain.  It is here that *The Crucible* operates as literary text, historical document, and philosophical treatise.

**Hell Hath No Fury Like a Woman Scorned**

Abigail Williams is a central figure in the play and perhaps one of the most significant dramatic presences within it. The events of the play often turn on her actions, and her behavior could be said to be a major reason for the escalation of the events in Salem Village that eventually led to the execution of eighteen people. The play is a fictionalization of the actual historical events, and it has been reported in historical documents that Abigail was only 11 years old at the time the trials took place (though she was in fact a servant in the Proctor household), so it is not clear if Abigail was in fact responsible for as much of what happened as The Crucible conveys. However, in pinpointing the capricious nature of a young servant girl who seeks attention and revenge after being spurned by her employer (who she seduced), the author wisely emphasizes the motivating factors that helped cause this debacle. Of course, Miller creates the context of a sexual and romantic liaison between John Proctor and Abigail to heighten the dramatic tension and also to add complex motivations to the characters' situations: Abigail is motivated by love and lust, as well as a desire to remove Elizabeth as an obstacle; while Proctor is motivated by guilt and shame, as well as anger at Abigail for her lies and manipulation, and a desire to protect Elizabeth.

While it is true that girls in the 17th century married and had children at much younger ages than they tend to in contemporary society, it is still a bit of a stretch for Miller to frame the witch trials as having been caused in part by an illicit affair. But as a dramatic device, it is a powerful and appropriate element that illuminates the play's larger themes. The girls who acted as "officials of the court" were mainly servants with poor prospects for marriage. As servants, many of them would have been mistreated. They certainly were not used to be the center of attention or even to being listened to. When it became apparent that the villagers and the magistrates were looking at their behavior and listening to their words, they became intoxicated by the attention and ego-gratification. Who wouldn't want to be treated like comparative royalty instead of doing chores all day?

But more to the point, the alluring nature of the girls' budding sexuality, and their antics in the woods where they danced around a fire (where they also performed acts of folk magic under the direction of Tituba, to "conjure spirits" for innocent reasons, such as trying to find out the names of men they might marry), evoked imagery that obviously stoked the imaginations of the villagers. Adolescent sexuality is a powerful force in culture, and surrounded with taboos as well; and the portrayal of a young woman with sexual agency is often seen as threatening, and the seductive nature of female witches is in fact a major theme in the literature of the witchcraft hysteria in Europe and Colonial America. The Malleus Maleficarum, written in Germany in the 16th century as a guide for hunting witches, states "All witchcraft stems from carnal desire, which is in women insatiable." The portrayal of Abigail as a seductive, manipulative young woman contrasts with Proctor's righteous anger at her lies and her attempts to implicate his wife. Abigail's lust is therefore the motivation behind a major plot point of the play, which is a very bold, even controversial, dramatic choice, since it echoes the sexist and derogatory nature of the historic witch trials that resulted in many thousands of women being tortured and executed. By emphasizing the threatening nature of female sexuality, but positioning it alongside the childlike jealousy and vindictiveness Abigail displays, we can read this as a commentary upon the assumptions made about female sexuality, not only in terms of the Salem witch trials but as they apply to similar events throughout history. Miller astutely utilizes this trope as a way of humanizing the history of these events, to help make the fallible behavior of the characters resonate with modern audiences

**Politics**  
In the early 1950s, hearings at Senator Joseph McCarthy's powerful House Un-American Activities Committee had decided that the American Communist Party, a legal political party, was compromising the security of the nation by encouraging connections with Russia (America's ally during the Second World War but its enemy afterwards). Those who were sympathetic to the communist cause, or those who had connections with Russia, were summoned before the committee to explain their involvement, recant their beliefs, and name their former friends and associates in the communist cause. Miller himself had to attend a Senate hearing in 1957. He admitted that he had been to communist meetings—of writers—but refused to name anyone else. He denied having been a member of the Party and was eventually found guilty of contempt.

The McCarthy Committee's antagonism of innocent (and in most cases harmless) citizens—and politically-motivated persecution in general—is explored in *The Crucible* through the subject of witchcraft. Particularly, through the dramatization of events which took place in Salem, Massachusetts, in the seventeenth century. The town's hysteria at the beginning of the play has a direct parallel in the frenzy that communist "witch-hunting" caused in America in the 1950s. Further, John Proctor's trial, confession (obtained through antagonism and threats), and ultimate recantation conjures a scene similar to the ones that were played out in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee. By having his protagonist take a stand for his beliefs and his personal integrity, Miller displays a clear sympathy for those persecuted in McCarthy's inquisition. The playwright's message is one of personal and political freedom for every citizen.

*The Crucible* also examines political persecution as a tool for deflecting attention away from difficult problem areas. McCarthy's persecution of communist sympathizers did little to strengthen the fiber of American life (quite conversely, it added unwelcome suspicion and paranoia to many people's lives). To many, however, his actions made McCarthy look like an avenging hero for capitalism and diverted the American public's attention away from very real problems such as race and gender inequities. The investigators in Miller's play act in a very similar manner: They refuse to face the idea that their strict way of life may have led several young women to rebel (by, for example, dancing around a fire in the woods). Instead they blame the wayward girls' actions on the Devil and witchcraft. With this action they bond the community together in a battle against an outside evil that has corrupted their town. Unfortunately, in much the same way that McCarthy's persecution ultimately unraveled many American communities, the Salem Witch Trials end up destroying a way of life in the village.

**Morals and Morality**  
The issues which *The Crucible* raises have general moral relevance, as well as being related directly to the situation in America at the time the play was written. As Dennis Welland has noted in his [Arthur Miller](http://www.enotes.com/topics/arthur-miller), the play's moral is similar to those often found in the works of [George Bernard Shaw](http://www.enotes.com/topics/george-bernard-shaw) ([Pygmalion](http://www.enotes.com/topics/pygmalion), [Major Barbara](http://www.enotes.com/topics/major-barbara)). Shaw's morals often contend that wrong-headed actions—such as the witch trials—are often motivated by a lack of personal responsibility rather than based upon deliberate cruelty or malice. That is, rather than take a stand against proceedings they suspect are unjust, the townspeople of Salem go along with the trials. Welland stated: "That is why Elizabeth quietly rejects as 'the Devil's argument' Hale's impassioned plea to her to help Proctor save himself . . . Elizabeth, like [George Bernard] Shaw's St Joan[in his play of that name], has learnt through suffering that 'God's most precious gift is not rife at any price, but the life of spiritual freedom and moral integrity.' In Proctor's final recantation of his confession and his refusal to put his principles aside to save his life, we see the triumph of personal integrity in a world of moral uncertainty."

**Society**  
Paralleling Miller's exploration of individual morality is his portrayal of society's response to events within its community. In the girls' initial accusations and the frenzy that ensues, Miller demonstrates how peer pressure can lead individuals into taking part in actions which they know are wrong. And in the community's reaction to these accusations, he shows how easily stories can be taken out of context—and how people are blamed for crimes they haven't committed. Miller links the mass hysteria of Salem to the community's excessive religious zeal and very strict attitudes towards sex. Sexual relationships and other instances of physical expression seem on the surface to be repressed and the fact that the girls fear being whipped for dancing and singing suggests the strict codes of behavior under which they live.

Yet the town is not without its sexual scandal: Abigail and John Proctor's adulterous relationship is very much in the foreground of the play and is a factor in the unfolding of the tragic events. It may be that Miller is suggesting that such strict religious codes lead to the repression of feelings which eventually escape and find expression in forbidden forms of behavior. The mass hysteria of the young girls could be seen as an outbreak of sexual feelings and fantasies which have long been repressed.

Nicholas Hytner (The Madness of King George), the director of the 1996 film adaptation of *The Crucible* (for which Miller wrote the screenplay) pointed out this element when he noted in his introduction to the Penguin edition of the screenplay that "a community that denies to its young any outlet for the expression of sexuality is asking for trouble." Through the events of the play, Miller seems to be warning against excessive religious (as well as political) fanaticism by showing the potential outbursts of feelings—and the disastrous results—which can occur if all forms of sexual expression are repressed.

**Intolerance**

*The Crucible* is set in a theocratic society, in which the church and the state are one, and the religion is a strict, austere form of Protestantism known as Puritanism. Because of the theocratic nature of the society, moral laws and state laws are one and the same: sin and the status of an individual’s soul are matters of public concern. There is no room for deviation from social norms, since any individual whose private life doesn’t conform to the established moral laws represents a threat not only to the public good but also to the rule of God and true religion. In Salem, everything and everyone belongs to either God or the devil; dissent is not merely unlawful, it is associated with satanic activity. This dichotomy functions as the underlying logic behind the witch trials. As Danforth says in Act III, “a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it.” The witch trials are the ultimate expression of intolerance (and hanging witches is the ultimate means of restoring the community’s purity); the trials brand all social deviants with the taint of devil-worship and thus necessitate their elimination from the community.

**Hysteria**

Another critical theme in *The Crucible* is the role that hysteria can play in tearing apart a community. Hysteria supplants logic and enables people to believe that their neighbors, whom they have always considered upstanding people, are committing absurd and unbelievable crimes—communing with the devil, killing babies, and so on. In *The Crucible,*the townsfolk accept and become active in the hysterical climate not only out of genuine religious piety but also because it gives them a chance to express repressed sentiments and to act on long-held grudges. The most obvious case is Abigail, who uses the situation to accuse Elizabeth Proctor of witchcraft and have her sent to jail. But others thrive on the hysteria as well: Reverend Parris strengthens his position within the village, albeit temporarily, by making scapegoats of people like Proctor who question his authority. The wealthy, ambitious Thomas Putnam gains revenge on Francis Nurse by getting Rebecca, Francis’s virtuous wife, convicted of the supernatural murders of Ann Putnam’s babies. In the end, hysteria can thrive only because people benefit from it. It suspends the rules of daily life and allows the acting out of every dark desire and hateful urge under the cover of righteousness.

**Reputation**

Reputation is tremendously important in theocratic Salem, where public and private moralities are one and the same. In an environment where reputation plays such an important role, the fear of guilt by association becomes particularly pernicious. Focused on maintaining public reputation, the townsfolk of Salem must fear that the sins of their friends and associates will taint their names. Various characters base their actions on the desire to protect their respective reputations. As the play begins, Parris fears that Abigail’s increasingly questionable actions, and the hints of witchcraft surrounding his daughter’s coma, will threaten his reputation and force him from the pulpit. Meanwhile, the protagonist, John Proctor, also seeks to keep his good name from being tarnished. Early in the play, he has a chance to put a stop to the girls’ accusations, but his desire to preserve his reputation keeps him from testifying against Abigail. At the end of the play, however, Proctor’s desire to keep his good name leads him to make the heroic choice not to make a false confession and to go to his death without signing his name to an untrue statement. “I have given you my soul; leave me my name!” he cries to Danforth in Act IV. By refusing to relinquish his name, he redeems himself for his earlier failure and dies with integrity.