

# Introduction and Literary Devices for *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller

## Theocracy

The rule of a state by God or a god.

## Democracy

Government by the people.

## Autocracy

A government with one person as the supreme power over the people.

## Puritanism

Practices of the Puritans; extreme or excessive strictness in matters of morals and religion.

## Tragedy

A serious play with an unhappy ending brought about by the characters or central characters impelled by fate (ancient drama) or moral weakness, psychological maladjustment, or social pressure.

## Crucible

The word crucible has many meanings. Its literal definition is a container that resists heat or the hollow at the bottom of an ore furnace. However, its connotations include melting pot, in the symbolic sense, and bearing of a cross (crux, crisis, + ferre).

## Irony

Language used is the opposite of what it actually means. There are many instances of ironic language in the play.

## Paradox

A statement or event contrary to what one might expect. The events of Salem represent a paradox to what one might have expected from God-fearing people such as the Puritans.

## Allegory

A story in which people, things, and happenings have another meaning, as in a fable or parable. Many critics have referred to *The Crucible* as a political allegory.

## Dramatic License

While Miller freely admitted that this play was not intended to be a history, he researched the information for the witch trials from primary documents in Salem. He was careful not to misrepresent characters or their actions. Miller did make some changes for the sake of the story. One of the largest was the Abigail Williams and John Proctor affair. Miller inferred from actions noted in court documents that Abigail and John had a relationship. Miller created all conversations to support this idea. Furthermore, Abigail was actually eleven years old when the story takes place. While girls were often wed around her age, Miller made her older in his story to make his audience more comfortable with this plot line.

## Authorial Intrusion

One of the most distinct techniques Miller uses in this play is authorial intrusion. In the Overture, he frequently interrupts the action in order to give the audience extra information, often information from Miller's life or the audience's current social experience. For example, when Proctor is introduced, Miller writes:

*"But as we shall see, the steady manner he displays does not spring from an untroubled soul...These people had no ritual for the washing away of sins. It is another trait we inherited from them, and it has helped to discipline us as well as to breed hypocrisy among us."*

In addition, Miller's sidebars offer his means of **direct characterization**.

*"He was the kind of man—powerful of body, even tempered, and not easily led—who cannot support to partisans without drawing their deepest resentment. In Proctor's presence, a fool felt his foolishness instantly—and a Proctor is always marked for calumny therefore."*

## Allusion and Parable

Miller emphasizes his theme of morality versus social pressure with historical and social allusions throughout the play. References to the Inquisition, Martin Luther, Biblical stories, and the post-World-War-II "Red Scare" show periods of history

when these types of events have occurred. Miller's goal is to show the circumstances causing this hysteria that echo throughout history including Miller's own period.

*"When one rises above the individual villainy displayed, one can only pity them all, just as we shall be pitied someday. It is still impossible for a man to organize his social life without repression, and the balance has yet to be struck between order and freedom."*

The "we" and "yet" insert a reference to Miller's lifetime to advance his theme.

*"Pontius Pilate! God will not let you wash your hands of this!"*

This allusion evokes a Biblical relationship to emphasize the moral injustice of Elizabeth's arrest.

### **Metonymy**

Metonymy is a figure of speech in which one word or phrase is substituted for another with which it is closely associated (such as "crown" for "royalty"). Or, "the church voted to fire the new minister." The "church" refers to the congregation and not the building itself. Metonymy is also the rhetorical strategy of describing something indirectly by referring to things around it, as in describing someone's clothing to characterize the individual.

Miller uses a character to describe a "character type." He strove to be accurate with each character's personality and then used his most distinct characters to represent a type of character found in nearly every society.

Notice how Miller directly characterizes John Proctor, but also expands this description to include all people with similar personalities.

*"In Proctor's presence a fool felt his foolishness instantly—and a Proctor is always marked for calumny therefore."*

Miller thus refers to all individuals who stand up to the inadequacies of society as Proctors.

In another example, Miller extends the genuinely good-hearted character, Rebecca Nurse, to all good-hearted, gentle, moral people.

*"I used to weep for my sins when the wind lifted up my skirts; and blushed for shame because some old Rebecca called me loose."*

Abigail, the opposite of a Rebecca, shows open disdain for that type of person.

### **Rhetoric**

Rhetoric is the art of speaking or writing effectively. This art utilizes a well-planned presentation of facts and ideas in clear, persuasive, and attractive language. The courtroom scenes in Acts III and IV are driven by rhetoric, as opposed to hard evidence.

**Danforth:** *In an ordinary crime, how does one defend the accused? One calls up witnesses to prove his innocence. But witchcraft is ipso facto, on its face and by nature, an invisible crime, is it not? Therefore, who may possibly be witness to it? The witch and the victim. None other. Now we cannot hope the witch will accuse herself; granted? Therefore, we must rely on her victims—and they do testify. The children certainly do testify."*

Notice how the legal term "ipso facto" and an orderly, logical presentation of ideas make this supernatural court case nearly reasonable. Miller used rhetoric to create for Danforth a situation in which hearsay and circumstance are the only possible evidence in these trials.

As you read the court scenes, consider the parallel Miller is drawing between the Puritans and the Salem trials and the Communist trials.