The Crucible Booknotes Essay, Research Paper

BARRON’S BOOK NOTES

ARTHUR MILLER’S

THE CRUCIBLE

^^^^^^^^^^ARTHUR MILLER: THE AUTHOR AND HIS TIMES

In Salem, Massachusetts, a dozen teen-age girls and a black slave woman are caught dancing in the woods around a bubbling cauldron. Today, you wouldn’t even use the word “caught.” You might think these girls were strange, but you’d hardly call the cops on them. But it’s 1692, and Salem isn’t just an ordinary small town; it’s a religious community of the strictest kind. The people and their laws are as harsh as the Massachusetts winter. When two of the girls pass out from fright and can’t be revived, the others find themselves in serious trouble. Women who dance with the Devil are witches; and witches, when they are caught, are hanged. To get themselves out of their predicament, the girls try to spread the blame around. But the blame-spreading gets out of hand, and before long the whole town is in a panic, everyone accusing everyone else of witchcraft. Nineteen people will be hanged before the madness is stopped.

Well, you say, people were superstitious then. Nothing like that could happen today. Maybe so, but in the early 1950s, at the time The Crucible was written, a similar kind of hunt was taking place, not for witches, but for Communists. Today it bears the harmless-sounding name of the McCarthy Hearings on Un-American Activities, but for the people who got caught up in it–some of them our parents and grandparents–this “witch-hunt” was anything but harmless. in fact, to the playwright Arthur Miller, the McCarthy Hearings bore an alarming resemblance to the trials in Salem in 1692. The Crucible was his way of trying to keep history from repeating itself.

One of the most popular TV shows in 1953 was “I Led Three Lives.” It always began the same way: A man’s face appears on the screen. His expression is taut with anxiety. The narrator says something like, “This is the fantastically true story of Herbert A. Philbrick, who for nine frightening years did lead three lives–average citizen, member of the Communist Party, and counterspy for the FBI. For obvious reasons, the names, dates and places have been changed, but the story is based on fact.” The show was scary and exciting, but it always left you worried, because Philbrick’s job never seemed to be done. Communist spies were everywhere, and one man could do only so much against so many.

There was a lot of talk in those days about the “Red Menace.” Red is the color of the Russian flag, and all Russians are Communists. So to say “Better dead than red” meant that you’d kill yourself before you let the Communists take over. The slogan was repeated over and over throughout America. My father said it; my teachers said it; I’m sure I said it myself, even though I was just five years old at the time.

And in fact there were good reasons to be worried about the Russians. They had the atomic bomb, as we did. But a lot of people said they got the bomb by using spies, and that really made us worry. It was charged that secret agents, working under cover, had stolen our secrets and given them to the Enemy. Even worse, these spies supposedly were hardly ever Russians themselves, but often American citizens, as normal as you or me, the kind of people you see every day on the street and hardly even notice. Blacks are identifiable by their skin color, foreigners speak with an unusual accent. But a Communist could be anybody. It sort of makes a Communist sound like the bogey-man, doesn’t it? Well, to many people in 1953, a Communist was just as scary as the bogey-man, and a lot more real.

Soon after it was discovered that the Russians had the bomb, the U.S. Congress started investigations into so-called Un-American Activities, and one of the men they put in charge was Joseph R. McCarthy, a senator from Wisconsin. McCarthy claimed America was in great danger from a Communist conspiracy to take over the world. And, as if he were a surgeon hacking away tumors in a body riddled with cancer, he tried to root out every trace of Communism he could find. It soon became clear that very few people were completely free of any connection with Communism. To find out why, we have to go back in time a little bit.

Arthur Miller had just turned 14 when His family’s savings were wiped out by the stock market crash of October, 1929. Almost literally overnight, the lives of many of his friends changed from reasonable comfort to poverty. Over the next 12 years–the time of the Great Depression, as it is called–Arthur Miller came to know and work with people who had joined the Communist Party. These people weren’t spies, they simply were desperate, and they saw Communism as a way out of a desperate situation. And although Communism worried a few people in the 1930s, most were too busy with their own problems to give it much thought. Besides, Soviet Russia was not yet an enemy of the United States. In fact, Russian and American soldiers later fought side by side against the Germans at the end of World War II. It wasn’t until after the war, when–as so often happens–the victor’s turned against each other, that Communism began to be considered a very serious threat.

By the late 1940s when the Congressional hearings first began, there were quite a few people who had flirted with Communism at some time or other, although most had renounced it long before. But even if you had no Communism in your own past, you could easily be in the same position as Arthur Miller–you knew someone who did. That was more than enough to get you in trouble with Senator McCarthy and similar investigators.

Imagine what it was like being called in to testify. McCarthy or his aides might say, “Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?” No. “Do you know anyone who is or was a Communist?” No. McCarthy holds up some cards. “We have the names of people who have already confessed. Your name came up in connection with their testimony. Why do you suppose that is?” You say you don’t know, but you can tell that no one believes you. Maybe you’re not so innocent after all, you think. Maybe you’ve been sucked into the conspiracy without realizing it. Have you signed anything, donated any money, said anything to anybody that might sound suspicious?

Once you start thinking like this, it’s almost impossible to stop. You begin to feel guilty either way: even if you don’t have any Communist connections, you’ve done nothing to stop the spread of this evil; You may have even helped the enemy by being stupid or naive. You did it, it’s your fault, their questions seem to say. And they won’t let you go until you make up for it in some way. So you tell them about your friend who’s never home on Tuesday nights, or your mother’s uncle who used to quote Communist slogans all the time, or anyone you know who’s been acting a little odd the last few weeks. You name names, and they let you go.

And afterward no one wants anything to do with you. You were called in to testify, there had to be a reason. You must be a Communist, or at least have been working for them. You lose your friends, your job, sometimes even your family. You become an outcast. Your life is ruined.

This was the fate of many innocent people. Those who were spared either joined in the witch-hunt or kept silent for fear the same thing would happen to them. A lot of the victim never recovered, even long after the rest of the country lost interest and Joe McCarthy had been discredited. By 1957 it was pretty much over, and America could look back with a sad smile, wondering how anyone could have been so foolish.

But in 1953 it was no joke. Arthur Miller already knew about the Salem witch trials from his college days at the University of Michigan (1934-38). In The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller he describes how The Crucible took shape in his mind:”… when the McCarthy era came along,” he says, “I remembered these stories and I used to tell them to people when it [the investigation] started. I used to say, you know, McCarthy is actually saying certain lines that I recall the witch-hunters saying in Salem. So I started to go back, not with the idea of writing a play, but to refresh my own mind because it was getting eerie”.

One day, while he was reading some documents in the Salem museum, some tourists came in and wanted to see the pins. There was no need to ask, “What pins?” During the trials in 1692, the so-called witches often “sent out their spirits” to stick pins into the flesh of the girls who were accusing them. Now, as Arthur Miller watched, “the tourists pass the books, the exhibits, and no hint of danger reaches them from the quaint relics. I have a desire to tell them the significance of those relics. It is the desire to write”.

The significance of those relics was, in part, that the same thing that happened in 1692 was happening all over again. “It was not only the rise of ‘McCarthyism’ that moved me,” he writes, “but something which seemed much more weird and mysterious. It was the fact that a political, objective, knowledgeable campaign from the far Right [Communists were said to be on the far left] was capable of creating not only a terror, but a new subjective reality… and that such manifestly ridiculous men [as Senator Joe McCarthy] should be capable of paralyzing thought itself…. it was as though the whole country had been born anew, without a memory…. Astounded, I watched men pass me by without a nod whom I had known rather well for years….” And so Arthur Miller began to write The Crucible.

A few years before, Arthur Miller had become famous. His second play, Death of a Salesman, had won the 1949 Pulitzer Prize and a host of other awards. By the time he was 37, in 1952, he was a respected writer of established reputation, and people were looking forward to his next play. What he had to say was bound to be important.

There’s a saying that a prophet is honored everywhere except in his own country. This could certainly be said of the author of The Crucible when it first opened on Broadway on January 22, 1953. No one missed the parallels between 1692 Salem and 1953 America. “But,” many said, “witches never did exist, then or now. Communists are real.” Some critics complained that the play was too cold and intellectual. Others said it wasn’t a play at all, but some kind of outburst, a political speech. Most people found a way of saying that it wasn’t worth bothering with. The play ran for a few months, playing to almost empty houses. Then it closed. But the witch-hunt went on.

Arthur Miller had drawn a lot of attention to himself, and he soon got into trouble. In 1954 he was denied a passport to see a production of The Crucible in Belgium. In 1955 the New York City Youth Board began an investigation into his political beliefs. In 1956 he was called on to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. He refused to name names. He was cited for contempt of Congress. He was finally exonerated by the courts, but not until 1958. By then, more and more people were refusing to testify against others, and the witch-hunt was running out of steam. The hearings had gone on for ten years, and the country’s attention span was near its end. In all that time, no real Communist conspiracy was ever uncovered. Just as no real witches were ever found in Salem.

Another important thing happened in 1958: The Crucible was put on again, this time in a small Off-Broadway theater. “The same critics reviewed it again,” Arthur Miller remembers, and “this time they were fairly swept away, the drama was as real to them [now, in 1958] as it had been cold and undramatic before [in 1953]. Reasons were given for the new impression; the main one was that the script had been improved.” Miller hadn’t changed a word in the script. He began to think that the real reason had more to do with the audience than the play: “…when McCarthyism was around, the… audience [was] quite simply in fear of the theme of the play, which was witch-hunting. In [1958] they were not afraid of it, and they began to look at the play” (Theater Essays, p. 245).

Most of the time when an author writes a play about current events, the play is forgotten as soon as the events are over. But The Crucible has come to be produced more often than even Death of a Salesman, which was long considered to be Arthur Miller’s most important play. Let’s see if we can figure out why.

If you’re watching a really scary film, say, The Exorcist, you can always reassure yourself by saying, “It’s only a movie.” But you can’t do that with The Crucible. The witch-hunt really happened. You can go to Salem today and still find the house where Rebecca Nurse lived, and see the door through which she was carried to her trial because she was too old and sick to walk. You can stand on the rock where the gallows was built, and look out over Salem Bay, the same bay 19 “witches” must have looked at just before they were hanged. You can go to the courthouse and they’ll show you the pins.

Nowadays we don’t believe in witches or the Devil, at least we say we don’t. But we’re still fascinated by the idea of supernatural forces and beings. And, for most of us, the scarier the better. The popularity of horror movies comes from this fascination. The Crucible also tells a strange and scary story. But in this play it’s not witches or demons that scare us–it’s people. Arthur Miller’s characters are ordinary folk. The terror that sweeps over them like a wave is real; the people who were hanged really died. In The Crucible there are no real witches; so what, then, “possessed” these people?

If you’ve ever built a wood fire, you know it doesn’t start itself. And the biggest logs won’t burn right away; you have to begin with smaller sticks, the kindling. But there can be no fire at all without a spark to set the kindling burning.

We can think of the Salem witchcraft as a kind of fire which, once started, could not be quenched until it had burned itself out.

By this analogy, the big logs would be the belief in witchcraft itself. This belief was an old one. In the ancient world, sorcery was everywhere–in Egypt and Babylon, even among the clear-thinking Greeks and the otherwise sensible Romans. Only the Jews, among all these ancient peoples, had laws forbidding the practice of witchcraft. It is first mentioned in the Old Testament (Exodus 22:18), where it says, “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” It was on the authority of this one sentence in the Bible that the 19 witches were hanged in Salem in 1692.

But until the end of the Middle Ages, no one had made a “scientific” study of the spirit world, and ideas about witches varied wildly from place to place and century to century. Then in 1486 two Christian monks brought out a book called the Malleus Maleficarum (The Hammer of Witches), the first book of demonology. Others soon followed (King James I of England even wrote one himself), and by the time Reverend Hale walked into Salem in 1692 with an armload of such books, the study of witchcraft was considered an exact science. When he says of his books, “Here is all the invisible world, caught, defined, and calculated,” he is being sincere. He has studied these books for years and he honestly believes himself to be an expert. So does everyone else. There is no reason to doubt him or his ability to deal with an enemy he knows so much about. Without this solid and specific belief in the reality of witchcraft, there might have been only a little brushfire in Salem.

The kindling of the fire was to be found in the visible world. In 1623 King James I (the same one who wrote the demonology book) had granted a charter to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, under which the Puritans could own their own land. This charter enabled the colony to thrive and grow over the next 60 years. But in 1684 the King revoked this charter, saying the land belonged to the Crown, thereby making the Puritans’ land titles null and void. A lot of squabbling resulted, finally coming to a head in 1689 when the Puritans overthrew the royal governor and reinstated the old charter. But they knew they had no legal right to do this, and by 1692 the insecurity of their position had taken its toll on their nerves.

Ownership of land wasn’t the only issue. The Puritans had come to Massachusetts in the first place not only to avoid religious persecution in England, as the history books say, but to establish a New Jerusalem, God’s “visible Kingdome” on Earth. For this reason it was natural for the Puritans to assume that God’s archenemy Satan would single them out for his most ferocious attacks. In fact, when witchcraft first broke out, many believed it to be the beginning of Armageddon, the great battle between Darkness and Light that would signal the end of the world. But even before this, the Puritans had already spent several years in constant and growing anxiety about the future of God’s “visible Kingdome.”

There remains but the spark to set these dry sticks ablaze. The Puritans could hardly have picked a more difficult place to found their New Jerusalem. The ground was full of rocks, the winters were long and bitterly cold, and the forests surrounding their towns were infested with Indians, who continually raided the outlying farms. But the Puritans prospered by banding together. This process not only helped them overcome danger and difficulty but it gave them ample opportunity for minding each other’s business.

To the Puritans, man was a creature steeped in sin, and there was nothing he could do to save himself from the eternal fires of hell. A few believers–the elect, as the Puritans called themselves–God had chosen to save, or “justify.” Because God had justified them already, the elect naturally obeyed his laws. But you could outwardly obey these laws yet still not be saved. Puritan preachers never tired of railing against the “meritmongers,” those who thought they could buy their way into heaven with good works. On the other hand, it was easy to prove that you were damned–all you had to do was break the law. So there was tremendous pressure on everyone at least to appear to be one of the elect.

All of this is complicated, even to an adult. But put yourself in the place of a nine-year-old girl named Betty Parris. All you know is that the winter has been long and boring, that the grownups are more cranky than usual so they punish you more often, and that you must have sinned with your teeth because one of them aches. If all this isn’t enough, you have to be better than the other children in Salem Village, because your father is the minister. For weeks now your older cousin Abigail Williams has been making you sit with her and listen to your father’s slave Tituba tell shocking stories of her former life as a heathen in the Barbados. It was bad enough with just the two of you, but Abby never could keep a secret, and now there are ten or twelve of her friends who turn up at the back door as soon as your father walks out the front, begging Tituba for more. At first it was exciting, in a scary sort of way, but lately Tituba’s taken to acting out her heathen rituals, showing how they used to conjure spirits to foretell the future. You know you’re damned if you keep this up, but Abby’s slammed the door on your only way out: she’ll kill you if you tell. Your soul is suffocating in sin, and you can’t sleep any more for fear of the nightmares that always come.

The pressure was enough to give anyone a nervous breakdown. Betty Parris “freaked out.” Abigail Williams, for all her daring, wasn’t immune, and soon she began trying to fly and bursting into howls whenever her uncle prayed aloud or read the Scriptures, just like her cousin Betty. Then Betty, in one of her fits, let slip the name Tituba, and… but this is where the play starts.

^^^^^^^^^^THE CRUCIBLE: THE PLOT

It’s the spring of 1692. The whole village of Salem is in an uproar. The Reverend Samuel Parris’ daughter Betty won’t wake up, and the Putnams’ little Ruth is walking around like a zombie. The night before, Reverend Parris had heard a funny noise in the woods outside his house, and stumbled onto a frightening scene: his black slave Tituba was waving her arms over a boiling kettle, muttering wild-sounding gibberish, and around the fire a dozen girls were dancing–dancing, strictly forbidden by Puritan law. Among the girls were Betty and Ruth and his niece Abigail Williams. When he jumped out on them, everyone screamed and ran, all except Betty, who fainted dead away. And now she won’t wake up.

The house is buzzing with people, and every other word is “witchcraft.” Reverend Parris doesn’t want to believe it, but he’s sent for an expert just in case–the Reverend John Hale of the neighboring village of Beverly. When Hale arrives he tries to wake Betty, but she remains lifeless. Then he questions Abigail and Tituba. Some of the other village folk who look on are skeptical about witchcraft, especially John Proctor, whose serving girl, Mary Warren, had been with the girls the night before. Whip the nonsense out of them, Proctor suggests. Another doubter is old Rebecca Nurse, “twenty-six times a grandma,” who believes the girls are just going through one of their “silly seasons.”

But Reverend Hale’s questions are so sharp, and Tituba is so scared for her beloved Betty, that she blurts out that she was conjuring the dead. And when Hale presses her, she realizes her only way out is to “confess.” She gets carried away and begins to name others that she “saw with the Devil.” Soon Abigail is swept up in Tituba’s ecstatic “confession,” and she too names names. Betty wakes up and joins them.

In the next few days other girls–including Mary Warren–are added to their number, and within a week they have “cried out” (as they called it) 14 “witches.” An official court has been set up. John Proctor is particularly worried about Abigail Williams, who has become the girls’ ringleader. Abigail had been his maidservant before Mary Warren. When John’s wife, Elizabeth, fell ill, he had turned to Abigail in his loneliness, and at least once made love with her in the barn. He repented it immediately, and confessed to Elizabeth, who put Abigail out of the house. Now Proctor is afraid that Abigail means to “dance with him on his wife’s grave.” He doesn’t believe in witches, and he knows what mischief Abigail is capable of, so he decides to go to the court and denounce her. But before he can leave, the marshalls come to arrest Elizabeth: Abigail has “cried her out.”

By now the jail is bursting with “witches,” and no one seems safe. Rebecca Nurse, the most respectable person in the Village, has been convicted and sentenced to hang. John Proctor brings Mary Warren to the court with a statement saying it’s all pretense. This is a serious accusation, and the judges–Hathorne and Deputy Governor Danforth–want proof. So Proctor confesses his lechery with Abigail; but when Elizabeth is brought in to corroborate the charge, she denies it, thinking to spare her husband’s name. Then Abigail and the other girls turn on Mary Warren and cry her out. Her resolve collapses and she renounces her statement. Proctor “witched her” into writing it, she says. Proctor is hauled off to jail.

By October, 11 witches have gone to the gallows. On the morning John Proctor and seven others–including Rebecca Nurse–are to hang, strange rumors are going around. Other towns have risen up against their witch courts and overthrown them. Reverend Hale, who had believed John Proctor’s story and had denounced the proceedings when Proctor was arrested, has now returned, and he’s trying to get the prisoners to “confess” and save their lives, even if it means lying. Perhaps worst of all, Abigail Williams has disappeared, but not before breaking into her uncle’s strongbox and stealing all his money. Despite rising doubt in the town, Danforth and Hathorne refuse to call off the executions, because such an action will imply that they murdered the 11 that have already hanged. Their only hope is to get John Proctor to confess. So they bring in his wife, Elizabeth, now four months pregnant, to persuade him. At first Proctor gives in, but when he realizes they want to use his name to save their own skins, he rips up his confession and goes to his death with a clear conscience.

^^^^^^^^^^THE CRUCIBLE: JOHN PROCTOR

If you were to ask one of John Proctor’s sons what he wants to be when he grows up, he’d probably say, “My daddy.” It’s hard to imagine a better role model for a little boy than John Proctor. He’s big and strong and does the backbreaking work of the farm all by himself. True, he has a temper, and isn’t afraid to use the whip when you’ve been bad. But that’s not very often, because John Proctor is the kind of man who makes you want to do what he asks. And when he praises you, it’s like God Himself reached down from heaven and ruffled your hair. Maybe best of all, he knows how to make you laugh–he may be strict, but he’s no sourpuss.

In the community of Salem, John Proctor is important, not for what he is–he’s just a farmer–but for who he is. No one is more generous in helping his neighbors, and no one is more honest in his dealings. If he has a fault, it’s that he’s too honest: when he thinks you’re wrong, he’ll tell you to your face, even in front of other people. Anyone on the receiving end of such blunt criticism is bound to resent it. And John Proctor has made some enemies in Salem by his plain speaking. Reverend Parris is one.

But maybe if Proctor hadn’t been so admirable, he wouldn’t be in the mess he’s in. Abigail Williams fell in love with John Proctor’s strength and honesty. What young woman wouldn’t see him as the man of her dreams? His wife was sick, he was lonely, and he made the perfectly human mistake of succumbing to Abigail’s adoration. But he made an even bigger mistake, as far as Abigail is concerned, when he rejected her and went back to his wife. As the saying goes, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,” and Abigail pays him back with a vengeance.

Elizabeth Proctor must have fallen for John just as hard as Abigail did. But Elizabeth seems almost afraid of her feelings, and doesn’t express them easily. Her husband’s passion and sexuality no doubt frightened her, and he probably felt rebuffed and disappointed when she didn’t–or couldn’t–return his ardent expressions of love. Then after his affair with Abigail, he not only felt guilty but shamed by Elizabeth’s self-control. She says, “I never thought you but a good man, John–only somewhat bewildered.” How can he believe such meekness? If their positions were reversed, he’d have torn her limb from limb.

John Proctor is not the same man to himself as he is to others. In a way, their admiration revolts him, because he is disgusted with himself. Elizabeth hints at his problem when she says, “The magistrate sits in your heart that judges you.” And the judgment is harsh: John Proctor is a fraud. Before Abigail came along and ruined his peace, he was always sure of himself. He still is, but what he is sure of now is that nothing he can ever do will be pure and honest again.

In Christian doctrine, there is one sin for which there can be no forgiveness. It is called despair, and it means giving up hope because you’re so bad not even God can forgive you. John Proctor is heading toward despair when the play begins, and he is pushed closer to the edge as the witch madness unfolds. In the end he finds his goodness and is saved, but it’s a close call.

^^^^^^^^^^THE CRUCIBLE: ELIZABETH PROCTOR

The first we hear of Elizabeth Proctor is from Abigail Williams, who calls her a bitter, lying, cold, sniveling woman. Abigail has a tendency to blacken anyone who doesn’t like her. But when we finally meet Elizabeth herself, she does seem pretty cool toward her husband, John. And if she’s not exactly bitter about John’s fling with Abigail, she isn’t happy about it either. But who would be? She has a right to be jealous, and suspicious, too, especially when she finds out that the last time John was in town he saw Abigail alone–not in a crowd, as he had first told her. Elizabeth wants John to go back to the judges and expose Abigail’s lie about there being witchcraft in Salem, not just to help the town, but to prove he’s not still in love with Abigail. When John loses his temper because he can’t stand being judged any more, Elizabeth stands up to him:

…you [will] come to know that I will be your only wife, or no wife at all!

Cold, suspicious, possessive: not an attractive picture of Elizabeth Proctor. The question is, what was she like before John “strayed”? Later on, when she sees him for the last time before he’s hanged, she answers this question herself: “It needs a cold wife to prompt lechery.”

This painful honesty about herself brings out another quality in Elizabeth Proctor. Abigail calls her a gossiping liar, but John thinks of her as “that goodness,” and tells everyone that Elizabeth never told a lie in her Life. Indeed, according to her husband, Elizabeth can’t lie. This sounds like an exaggeration, and maybe John is making her out to be better than she is because he himself feels so guilty about having betrayed her. He could also be bragging because he’s proud of her goodness.

When she does tell a lie, it is to save John’s name: she denies to the court that her husband was an adulterer. Ironically, this lie does the opposite of what she intended, because John’s already confessed–now it looks like he’s lying. As Reverend Hale says, it’s a natural lie to tell, and even though it didn’t work, it took some courage for Elizabeth to lie to the most powerful authority in the province.

Courage has been defined as “being scared and doing it anyway.” This describes Elizabeth’s behavior when she is arrested. Although obviously scared to death, she promises to fear nothing. And then, as if to prove it, perhaps to herself as well as the others in the room, she says, “Tell the children I have gone to visit someone sick.” This may be whistling in the dark–talking about everyday things to keep her fear from overwhelming her–but the fact that she can think of her children at a time like this is impressive.

But Elizabeth’s courage is not blind–she’s intelligent as well as brave. When she hears that her name has been “somewhat mentioned” in court, she realizes Abigail is out to get her. It won’t be enough for John to talk to the court about Abigail; he will have to go to Abigail herself. From one tiny due, Elizabeth figures out Abigail’s whole monstrous plan to take her place with John. And she instantly knows what to do about it.

After her arrest, and all through her trial, Elizabeth refuses to confess to witchcraft, even though this lie would save her life. This is brave and noble. But as soon as she discovers she is pregnant, she doesn’t hesitate to tell her jailers immediately, knowing that this fact will probably spare her, at least for a while.

And in the last act Elizabeth shows not only wisdom but great love for her husband when he is agonizing over whether to confess. He asks her what he should do. She knows he is so confused that he will probably do whatever she says. She desperately wants him alive, especially now that a baby’s on the way. But she refuses to choose for him: “As you will, I would have it,” leaving him free to decide his own destiny. But she does give him her blessing:

Only be sure of this, for I know it now:

Whatever you will do, it is a good man does it.

^^^^^^^^^^THE CRUCIBLE: ABIGAIL WILLIAMS

If there is a “bad guy” in The Crucible, Abigail Williams is it. She is the one who first led the girls to Tituba for dancing in the woods and conjuring spirits. When Tituba is forced to “confess,” Abigail jumps right in and the other girls follow her. During the witch trials she is the girls’ leader, bringing them into the court and presiding over their “torments.” She intimidates everyone–the girls, the townsfolk, even the judges. And then, when it begins to look as if the tide is turning against her, she gets out while the getting is good, robbing her uncle, Reverend Parris, before she goes.

Abigail is a lot like the little girl in the movie The Bad Seed. In the movie, a nine-year-old terrorizes her family and the whole community. She murders several people, including her parents. She gets away with it because no one can believe that a child could be so evil. Anyone who does find her out, she kills.

Abigail lies without shame, threatens without fear, and thinks of nothing of sticking a needle two inches into her own belly in order to bring about the murder of Elizabeth Proctor. And she gets away with most of it.

But Abigail isn’t a child. She’s had a grown-up love affair with John Proctor, and has lost her childish faith in “the lying lessons I was taught by all these Christian women and their covenanted men.” A child, when hurt, may strike back in anger. But only an adult could so coolly plot and execute the ingenious revenge Abigail plans for Elizabeth.

The important thing to decide about Abigail is whether you think she’s evil or not. Without doubt, almost all her actions have evil consequences, and if there is good in her, we don’t get to see much of it. She takes the lead in “crying out” witches; the other girls take their cues from her. In a very short time she has the whole town at her mercy, and she uses this power unscrupulously. In fact, a real witch could hardly have done a better job of destroying the community.

But is Abigail the only one to blame? if so, then what happened in Salem was a fluke, a case of one bad apple spoiling the barrel. Everyone else is therefore innocent; they just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

One thing that supports this idea is an old convention of writing plays that goes back to the Middle Ages. Certain plays called “moralities” always had a stock character called the Vice. The Vice was a troublemaker; his whole purpose was to stir things up, to set characters against each other, and to try to destroy the established order of things. Often the Vice was the Devil in disguise, but since these plays were put on by the church, he always lost in the end, most of the time by getting caught in one of his own traps. Abigail certainly fits this description, except for the last item–she doesn’t get caught.

But some believe that considering Abigail the “bad guy” misses Arthur Miller’s point. These people think that the real “bad guy” in The Crucible is superstition. With or without Abigail, there’d have been no witch madness if there’d been no belief in witches. If you look at it this way, Abigail, although you’d hardly call her innocent, is not entirely to blame either. Other girls cry out witches too; and it looks as if they were prompted, not by Abigail, but by their parents. If Abigail is evil, she’s not alone. The madness itself, caused by superstition, is to blame. One person alone could never wreak such havoc.

But however you think of her, Abigail Williams is a fascinating character. We see her only twice–in Act I and Act III–but her presence and her influence dominate the whole play.

^^^^^^^^^^THE CRUCIBLE: MARY WARREN

Poor Mary Warren! When we first meet her briefly in Act I, she’s afraid of everything. She was afraid to dance with the other girls in the woods. Now that the girls have been caught, she’s afraid she’ll be hanged as a witch, if Abigail doesn’t tell the whole truth. Most of all she’s afraid of Abigail–until John Proctor comes in and scares her back home.

But in Act II, when Proctor calls Mary a mouse, Elizabeth corrects him: “It is a mouse no more.” Now that Mary’s an official of the court, she can stand up even to John Proctor’s rage. Has Mary Warren suddenly become brave? Of course not. Her courage comes from the court, from being one of the group.

And in Act III, not even John Proctor’s great strength can keep her from breaking under the stress of being “cried out” by Abigail and the other girls. Mary’s more afraid of Abigail than anything, even the fact that “God damns all liars,” and this fear fully overwhelms her.

Is this a totally spineless creature? Probably not. Few people could stand up under the ordeal that Mary Warren is put through in Act III, and it’s a wonder she holds out as long as she does. Considering how easily frightened Mary is by nature, she shows tremendous courage in coming to the court at all. True, Proctor is making her do it; but once the ordeal has begun, Mary holds her own against Abigail longer than anybody. But when Proctor is discredited, she loses his support; and when even the judges turn against her, Mary finally breaks.

Mary can hardly be called evil. She tells the truth, unless she is intimidated into doing otherwise. She makes the poppet as a gift for Elizabeth. Maybe Mary does this to make up for being away from her chores for so long, but maybe this is the action of a kind heart as well as a guilty conscience.

Above all, Mary’s naive: she’s slow to believe evil of anyone. Perhaps this is why she cannot resist the evil that overwhelms her–she didn’t know how strong it was because she didn’t know it was there in the first place.

And could it also be loneliness that draws Mary Warren into this catastrophe? Out on Proctor’s farm, John and Elizabeth have each other and the children for companionship–they are a family. Mary is an orphan, an outsider, living on the Proctor’s charity. Three times she disobeys Proctor’s orders and sneaks into town: once to watch the other girls dance, again the next day “to see the great doings in the world,” and finally to go to court as an “official.” Is it excitement she’s after? In part, perhaps, but in town she is a member of a group; at home, she is just a lone servant. Maybe what crushes her in Act III is not just the harshness of the judges and the hysteria of her friends, but her isolation. She’s not afraid to tell the truth, she’s afraid to stand alone.

^^^^^^^^^^THE CRUCIBLE: REVEREND JOHN HALE

Arthur Miller describes Reverend Hale as “nearing forty, a tight-skinned, eager-eyed intellectual.” An intellectual is usually thought of as someone with his head in the clouds, who spends so much time thinking great thoughts that he’s inept in the real world of human emotions. There is some truth in this image of John Hale. He knows a lot about witchcraft; but he knows almost nothing about the people of Salem or the “contention” that is wracking the town. How pompous and arrogant he must sound when he says, “Have no fear now–we shall find [the Devil] out if he has come among us, and I mean to crush him utterly if he has shown his face!”

And yet he has every reason to be confident. To Hale, demonology is an exact science, for he has spent his whole life in the study of it. But he is not just a bookworm, he is a minister of God. “His goal is light, goodness and its preservation,” and he is excited by being “called upon to face what may be a bloody fight with the Fiend himself.” All his years of preparation may now finally be put to the test.

He fails, and the evil that follows his first appearance totally overwhelms him. Why? Is the fault in his character? Is he not as smart as he thinks he is? Is he a fool, whose meddling lit the fuse to the bomb that blew up the town? Some say yes, and much of the play supports this answer. What looks like success at the end of Act I soon carries Hale out of his depth, and every time he appears after that he is less sure of himself. At the end of the play he has been completely crushed: he, a minister of the light, has “come to do the Devil’s work. I come to counsel Christians they should belie themselves. There is blood on my head! Can you not see the blood on my head!!”

It’s hard to imagine going through a more horrifying experience than the disillusionment of the Reverend Mr. Hale. All those years of dedicated, loving study made worthless by a band of hysterical and not-at-all innocent girls. Made worse than worthless–his learning ends up sending nineteen people to the gallows. And worst of all, he is helpless to stop it, having started it in the first place.

Is there evil in this man? Perhaps. According to Christian doctrine, one of the seven deadly (or damnable) sins is pride. In a way it’s the worst one, because it was pride that made the devil rebel against God. And Reverend Hale, when he first appears, feels “the pride of the specialist whose unique knowledge has at last been publicly called for.”

He certainly gets his comeuppance.

^^^^^^^^^^THE CRUCIBLE: REVEREND SAMUEL PARRIS

At the beginning of the play, when his little girl Betty lies sick on her bed, Reverend Parris is less worried about her condition than about what the neighbors will think if it turns out Betty is “witched.” Like a lot of selfish people, he feels persecuted: anyone who disagrees with Reverend Parris is his enemy, part of a conspiracy that’s out to “get him.” He is convinced that John Proctor is the leader of this conspiracy, because Proctor’s always criticizing him. Proctor doesn’t come to church anymore because, as he says, Reverend Parris can talk of nothing but hell and damnation–”Take it to heart, Mr. Parris. There are many others who stay away from church these days because you hardly ever mention God any more.”

Parris also seems to be greedy. Proctor tells Reverend Hale in Act II that Parris can’t “pray to God without he have golden candlesticks upon the altar.” Parris claims that in addition to his salary Salem him owes him money for firewood, and he wants the deed to his house–two things no minister had demanded before.

Parris is unhappy in Salem, and maybe he has his reasons. He says at one point, “I cannot offer one proposition without there be a howling riot of argument.” In the past few years, two ministers had left Salem in disgust with the town’s contentiousness and stinginess. Thomas Putnam had even had one of them, George Burroughs, put in jail for debts he did not owe. On top of that, Parris is a Harvard graduate, which his predecessors were not, so he feels he deserves more than, the town is willing to give.

Whatever the reasons for his discontent, Reverend Parris doesn’t seem to be a very nice person anyway. He bullies and mistreats his servant Tituba, and tries to do the same with Abigail. But he flatters and fawns on those in power, such as Thomas Putnam and Danforth. With everyone else he is arrogant and sometimes downright insulting.

Almost every time he opens his mouth it is to attack someone. When the court is first set up, he hides behind it like a child behind a parent, and he loses no chance to set the court against his “enemies,” especially John Proctor. When Francis Nurse presents the court with a petition in favor of his wife Rebecca, it is Parris’ idea that the 91 people who signed the petition should be arrested. As long as the court is in power, Parris is its staunchest support. But in Act IV, when the town is beginning to turn against the court, Parris is the first to look for a way out.

Imagine his horror when Abigail disappears at the end of the play. The court has lost its star witness, the leader of the girls on whose testimony all the witches have been hanged. Parris himself has lost a niece, but worst of all, Abigail robbed his strongbox before she left, and now he’s penniless. As Salem’s pastor, he should have protected his flock. Not only did he let the wolves into the fold, he joined in the attack. Now the wolves are in trouble, and Parris is left without a friend in the world.

It’s hard to feel sorry for the Reverend Samuel Parris. But there is something pathetic about a man who is so insecure that he has to persecute others to save his own skin.

^^^^^^^^^^THE CRUCIBLE: DEPUTY GOVERNOR DANFORTH

Overall, Deputy Governor Danforth does more damage in this play than anyone else, even Abigail Williams. As Deputy Governor of Mass