THE CRUCIBLE

HIGHER

“The Crucible" by Arthur Miller

"The Crucible" is a 1953 play by Arthur Miller. It is set in the Puritan community of Salem, Massachusetts in the late seventeenth century. The play centres on paranoia and hysteria, and the ability of fear to cause basic human emotions to take over. The protagonist of the play is John Proctor, an independent thinker who is put into a number of difficult situations by the chaos within Salem.

Although the play is set in the 1690s, it has echoes with a more modern era, and Miller intended the play to be a criticism of the paranoia over Communism in the US in the 1950s. Although the fear of Communism has died down, the key themes of "The Crucible" remain evident today.

* **[Historical Context](http://higherenglishhelp.com/thecrucible/" \l "historicalcontext)**
* [**Plot Summary**](http://higherenglishhelp.com/thecrucible/#plot)
* [**Key Themes**](http://higherenglishhelp.com/thecrucible/#themes)
* [**Key Quotes**](http://higherenglishhelp.com/thecrucible/#quotes)
* [**Key Characters**](http://higherenglishhelp.com/thecrucible/#characters)
* [**Key Scene**](http://higherenglishhelp.com/thecrucible/#keyscene)
* [**Additional Material**](http://higherenglishhelp.com/thecrucible/#additionalmaterial)

Historical Context

The Salem Witch Trials

The ending of the seventeenth century (1600s) was a period of strong religious belief throughout the Christian world. One of the strictest of these groups were the Puritans. The Puritans believed that true religion was shown through acts and deeds, and particularly through hard work. They shunned the beliefs of Catholics and other Protestants who celebrated religion through ornate churches and images. Instead, Puritans felt that self-sacrifice was the route to religious salvation. Puritans therefore wore only simply-coloured clothes, and worked hard with little rest their entire life. They rejected things such as dancing and music as being evidence of leisure time, and therefore of time wasted. Their strict conservatism led to conflict with non-Puritans, particularly in England. After the establishment of colonies in what later became the United States, many Puritans fled England for the New World (what America was known as at the time) where they set up communities. From 1630, many Puritans began to head to Massachusetts (an area, now a state, on the East coast of America). Because of the distance between Massachusetts and England, the Puritan community was semi-independent, and was able to govern itself in many areas. Massachusetts at that point was a theocracy, where religious law and political law were the same.

Salem was an isolated community within Massachusetts. The belief in witches was common throughout the Protestant world at the time, and witchcraft was seen as a means of interacting with the devil. Many aspects of everyday life were attributed to witchcraft and black magic, and not believing in witches was said to mean that one didn't believe in God. The lack of medical understanding at the time meant that disease and illness were often linked with witches. Salem was divided by a social rivalry between families. When this is combined with its physical isolation - it was ripe for a descent into witchcraft. When girls within Salem began to experience epileptic fits and other medical problems, accusations flew across the social divide. Most of those accused were either local rivals or those who were in some way alienated from the community. Sarah Good, a local beggar, and Tituba, a Barbadian slave were some of the first to be accused. For a period of two years the trials raged, and a number of Salem figures were convicted of witchcraft. Although the panic eventually died down in 1693, the Salem trials are commonly held to be an example of mass hysteria, in which fear and irrationality are contagious and spreads throughout a community.

The Communist Trials

The period after the Second World War (1939-45) saw the emergence of the Cold War. This was so-called because it was a war that never broke out into actual fighting, despite there being tension and aggression from both parties. The two sides in the Cold War were the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR), a Communist country based around modern-day Russia. The conflict was one of ideology, between Communism (USSR) and Capitalism (USA). Capitalism refers to the economic system of free trade and free markets, and is generally linked with the democratic West (Western Europe and the USA). During the Cold War, Communism began to spread throughout the world, and the USA feared that it would take over. After World War II , the United States became the key global player in preventing the spread of Communism, and became increasingly worried about Communists within the US itself. Such was the sense of paranoia, that many Americans began to fear that there were Communists working within the US government. Senator Joseph McCarthy, a politician from Wisconsin, said that he knew of Communists working in the US State Department (the part of the government responsible for foreign policy). Such was the fear at the time, many people believed McCarthy, and the period became known as McCarthyism. During the period, a number of playwrights and Hollywood figures were called in front of the House Un-American Activities Commission, where they were asked to give the names of Communists in Hollywood. They would often do this in order to avoid being seen as anti-American. Miller wrote "The Crucible" because he thought that McCarthyism was a 'witch hunt'. Ironically, because Miller wrote "The Crucible" he came to the attention of the House Un-American Activities Commission and was denied a passport to go and watch the opening of the play in London in 1954.

Plot Summary

Act I

The play is set in Salem, a Puritan town in Massachusetts in the 1690s. A group of young girls go into the woods to dance, along with a Barbadian (from Barbados) slave called Tituba. The girls are discovered dancing by the Reverend Parris. The girls know that this will be frowned upon by the strict Puritans and are extremely frightened. Reverend Parris's daughter, Betty, falls into a coma upon being discovered. Back at the Parris's house, a number of the village have all come to see Betty, and the Putnams, a local couple suggest that witchcraft may have been involved. This causes a great deal of fear, and Parris decides to send for Reverend Hale, a 'witchfinder' from a nearby area.

While they are waiting for Hale to arrive, Parris asks Abigail Williams, who is his niece and the leader of the girls, what happened in the woods, although Abigail says only that they were dancing. Abigail perhaps realises what they are being accused of, and tells the other girls not to admit to anything other than dancing. John Proctor, a farmer in Salem comes to talk to Abigail alone. Abigail used to be a domestic servant for John and his wife, although left after her and John had an affair. Abigail clearly still has feelings for John, although John does not reciprocate (feel the same way back) and tells her to be careful what she starts in the village, and to stop her childish behaviour.

Betty Parris wakes out of her coma and starts screaming. As the townspeople begin to crowd around her, arguments break out between the figures in the town. The arguments are about various deep-rooted social tensions between leading villagers (particularly between the Putnams and Parris), thus suggesting that Salem is a town that is very much divided. Reverend Hale arrives and questions Betty and then Abigail before demanding to speak to Tituba. Under the pressure of his interrogation, Tituba confessing to having 'cavorted' with the devil, and begins to name other people in the village who have done the same. Abigail and Betty both join in these accusations, and the sense of hysteria grows and grows in front of the townspeople as more names are given. The Act ends on this dramatic climax, as the situation in the village turns from one hearsay (rumour) to one in which the devil appears to be communicating with a number of people, and in which accusations have begun to fly.

Act II

Act II begins in the relative calm of John Proctor's house, where he is eating dinner with his wife, Elizabeth. It emerges that there are now fourteen people that have been arrested by the court. Proctor is upset by the hypocrisy of forcing people to confess in order to avoid hanging. He tells Elizabeth that Abigail told him that the dancing had nothing to do with witchcraft. Elizabeth, initially encouraged by this information, soon realises it meant that John and Abigail were alone together, and suspects that the affair between the two may not have ended. John accuses Elizabeth of placing him constantly on trial, whereas Elizabeth says that John is judging himself. This foreshadows the later trial of John Proctor.

Mary Warren (the Proctor's servant - the replacement for Abigail) returns home, she gives Elizabeth a 'poppet' (a small doll) that she sewed while she was in court. John forbids Mary from attending court any more, although Mary seems to be more aware of her own power within Salem, and tells John and Elizabeth that Abigail accused Elizabeth in the court, but Mary defended her. Elizabeth is convinced that Abigail wants Elizabeth dead in order to have John.

Reverend Hale visits the Proctors as part of his investigation into those the court has accused. He questions the Proctors about why they have not attended church recently, and John Proctor states it is because he disagrees with Reverend Parris's teachings. Hale asks Proctor to recite the Ten Commandments. Proctor goes through them all, but can only remember nine. Elizabeth has to remind him of the tenth - 'Thou Shalt not Commit Adultery'.

Proctor tells Hale that Abigail is a fraud, and that the only reason those in jail confessed was to save their lives. At this point, Francis Nurse and Giles Corey burst in, saying that their wives have been arrested. Shortly after, Cheever and Herrick (the town marshalls) come to arrest Elizabeth. This is a shock, even to Hale. Cheever tells the Proctors that Abigail Williams had a fit at dinner, and found a sewing needle stuck in her belly. The poppet that Mary gave to Elizabeth has a needle in the same place, and it appears that Elizabeth has used witchcraft to attack Abigail. She is taken away, despite Mary saying that she made the poppet herself. Proctor resolves to confess his affair with Abigail in order to secure Elizabeth's release.

Act III

Act III begins with the court in session. Giles Corey interrupts proceedings to accuse Putnam of using accusations of witchcraft for his own personal profit. Proctor also arrives with Mary Warren to accuse Abigail of lying. Judge Danforth orders that discussions take place in the vestry room (a room next to the court, but outside of its authority). In the vestry, Proctor finds out that Elizabeth is pregnant, and therefore will not be executed until after the child is born (since Puritan society regaded it as a sin to kill a pregnant woman). He decides to carry on with his arguments anyway, showing that he didn't just care about Elizabeth, but the trials as a whole. Proctor and Corey give Danforth a petition signed by ninety-one farmers, testifying to the good character of Elizabeth Proctor, Martha Corey and Rebecca Nurse. Parris demands that they all be arrested for challenging the work of the court. Hale, in a first indication that he is losing faith in the proceedings, angrily asks Parris why every defence is an attack on the court.

Danforth summons Putnam into the room, where Corey repeats his allegation that Putnam told his daughter to accuse George Jacobs so that Putnam could buy the land when Jacobs was hanged. Corey says that he has a witness, although refuses to give the name of the witness because he fears the consequences for the man (either from Putnam, Danforth, or both). Danforth arrests Corey for contempt of court.

The girls are now brought into the room, where Mary Warren accuses Abigail of telling lies. However, the girls soon say that Mary Warren is bewitching them, and when Mary Warren is told to pretend to faint, to prove how easy it is, she can't. Proctor angrily steps in and accuses Abigail of being a 'whore'. He confesses his affair to the court. Abigail denies this. In order to settle the debate, Danforth sends for Elizabeth. When she enters, Danforth orders John and Abigail to turn their backs, and asks Elizabeth about why she sacked Abigail from their service. Elizabeth denies that John and Abigail had an affair, determined to protect her husband's reputation. As Elizabeth is led away, John calls out and tells her that he has already confessed.

The girls begin crying that Mary Warren is a witch. The hysteria in the room grows to a crescendo (climax) before Mary Warren turns on John and accuses him of being a witch. John is arrested, and taken away. He violenty denounces the court, as does Reverend Hale, who storms out, losing all respect for what is going on.

Act IV

Act IV begins months later than the end of Act III. Reverend Hale has returned to Salem to plead with those waiting to be executed that they should confess. Abigail has fled the village, after stealing money from Reverend Parris. Hale pleads with Danforth to stop the executions, although Danforth claims that this would be an injustice to those that have already been hanged. The court decides to ask Elizabeth to plead with John Proctor to confess.

Elizabeth is left alone with John, where she tells him about the fate of people within the town. Corey refused to say whether he was guilty or not guilty to avoid a trial. He feared that if he did, he would be hanged, and Putnam would get his land. The court tortured Corey by placing large rocks on him. Despite the torture, he still refused to put in a plea, and was crushed to death (although his land passed to his sons). Proctor says that he has not confessed so far because he wants the accusers to feel guilty when they see him die. Eventually, he decides to confess.

Danforth hands Proctor a pen and some ink, and tells him that his confession will be hung publicly. Danforth asks him to denounce others in his confession, and Proctor refuses to do this. Proctor eventually signs the confession, but snatches it out of Danforth's hands. After arguing with Danforth, he rips his confession in two. At this point, he is taken away to be hanged with the other prisoners. Hale pleads with Elizabeth to get John to change his mind, but she only says that John is doing what he believes to be right.

Key Themes

Hysteria

The real force that stalks through Salem is not witchcraft, but hysteria. Hysteria works as a catalyst to heighten existing tensions in the town, and brings to the surface greed and vengeance that was bubbling under. The fear that people held towards the devil (as well as the harsh and foreboding conditions of their surroundings) leads them to believe implausible statements. The townspeople can therefore be divided into two – the cynical and the naïve. The cynical people like Thomas Putnam and Abigail Williams use the hysteria for their own good, while the naïve people trust them and going along with their accusations. The hysteria forces people to become irrational, and to put their trust in the court at the expense of all else. Even John Proctor succumbs to anger during his appearance in court, as the hysterical emotions run high. The audience is also taken in by this irrationality. How can we see John Proctor as a hero for giving up his name (by confessing his affair) and also see him as a hero for refusing to give up his name (by retracting his confession)? The hysteria in Salem changes the moral boundaries not only of the town, but also of the audience.

Irrationality

The battle between the rational and the irrational can be seen as that between Danforth and Hale. Although John Proctor is seen as the archetypal rational character, his ultimate decision to save his name, and therefore die, shows that he values reputation over his life. Instead, Hale is the character we see that is willing to challenge his own beliefs. Although he is one of the architects of the court and the hysteria, he denounces the proceedings midway through. Hale also asks, “Is every defense an attack on the court?”, thus highlighting the problem with Danforth’s form of justice.

Irrationality also causes danger for those that are different from others. Sarah Good is the first to be accused, because she is homeless and unstable. Proctor’s accusation comes, in part, because he doesn’t attend the Church in Salem. Miller’s ultimate message is that irrational beliefs are ones that are not challenged, and that beliefs that cannot be challenged should be regarded as immoral. ‘The Crucible’ is an allegory of the Communist Trials of the 1950s in the US, when an irrational fear of Communism led to people clamping down on beliefs that were different from what was ‘normal’.

Conformity/Individuality

During times of mass hysteria and irrationality, it is dangerous to be an individual. Safety comes in being as similar to everyone else as possible. Those who are accused are often found guilty based on their individuality. Sarah Good, Giles Corey and John Proctor all come to the attention of the court because they are different in some way. In a time of mass hysteria, John Proctor’s greatest crime is not being hysterical. The power and pressure of conformity is something that drives the actions of the court. Danforth highlights this when he says, ‘a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it’. This shows that Salem has polarised. On one side are those fit in, and desire to conform, and on the other are those that do not. This also shows how mass hysteria needs only a critical mass (the number required to adopt a new behaviour that the movement takes on a life of its own) in order to become dangerous.

The Communist Trials of the 1950s famously attacked those who were regarded as being ‘different’ and accusing them of being Communists. Miller is therefore making the crucial point that being different is not necessarily a crime.

Reputation

Reputation is shown to be extremely important to the characters of Salem. John Proctor uses his reputation as a way to attempt to stop the witch trials. Proctor feels that by admitting to his affair with Abigail, he will show the court that she is a liar, even though this would cost John his own reputation in the town. However, at the end of the play, he recants (takes back) his confession because he does not want his reputation to be tarnished. Although reputation is shown to be a good thing, Miller ultimately questions whether it is worth dying for.

Reputation also crops up in other ways in the play. There is a sense of anticipation as the town waits for Reverend Hale to arrive, as his reputation is one of being fiercely successful at finding evidence of witchcraft. Similarly, when Hale begins to doubt the validity of the court, it is because of Proctor’s reputation that he believes him. Individuals within Salem regularly talk about their ‘character’. Reputation can also be a bad thing within Salem, as it can very easily turn into prejudice.

Morality

Morality runs throughout ‘The Crucible’. In many respects, morality is told through the technique of irony, in that those who often speak most of morality are those who are the least moral. The best example of this is Danforth. Danforth regularly talks of the importance of justice and fairness, and yet when he finds out that Abigail’s testimony was false, he refuses to continue hanging those who have been found guilty. Immorality, therefore is closely linked with injustice. The lack of justice that comes from the court is highly ironic, and Miller is making a clear comment on the Communist Trials, and their legitimacy.

Morality is also a key theme because of the link with Puritanism. Puritans believed that only through dedication and work could they get to God, and so all leisure activities were banned. This is why Parris was so shocked when he found the girls dancing in the forest. The irony comes from the fact that it is because of the Puritans’ strong beliefs that they are so capable of immoral acts. Essentially, because Puritan law was so strict, it was not possible to follow it all the time. This leads to feelings of guilt, as well as easy to prove accusations of immorality.

Revenge

The two key characters for revenge are Abigail Williams and Thomas Putnam. One of the open questions of the play is whether Abigail accuses Elizabeth Proctor to get revenge on John or Elizabeth. Although Elizabeth thinks that the accusation is an attempt to remove a love rival, it could be the case that Abigail is punishing John for rejecting her. Thomas Putnam is less ambiguous – he is trying to get revenge of Rebecca Nurse, as well as increase the land he holds within Salem. This is an ironic element of the play, as Salem is in the heart of a new, unexplored country. Putnam could have increased his land by simply finding new places to inhabit, although he chooses more Machiavellian tactics. Both Abigail and Thomas are ultimately concerned with power. Abigail enjoys the power she holds over the court, even deliberately clashing with Danforth to demonstrate it. Putnam is partially motivated by the fact that he couldn’t prevent Parris from being appointed minister in the village. Both characters utilise the hysteria to increase their power, and ultimately, to get revenge. In the context of revenge, it is ironic that Elizabeth ultimately condemns John to death by denying his affair. This shows that the Proctors exist on a different moral plane to the rest of Salem.

Key Quotes

***“I never knew what pretense Salem was, I never knew the lying lessons I was taught by all these Christian women and their covenanted men!”* (Abigail, Act I)**   
  
This highlights the irony within Salem that the people who claim morality are actually acting in the least moral way. Abigail is here saying that she learnt her immoral (‘lying’) actions from the people of Salem. Not only does this indicate the immorality in Salem, it also sets the scene that Salem is a town with secrets below the surface. Abigail is hinting that she has perhaps had immoral interactions with different people within the village. This quote also serves as foreshadowing, because the ‘lying’ that takes place in the court does so by ‘Christian men’.

***“I danced for the Devil; I saw him, I wrote in his book; I go back to Jesus; I kiss His hand. I saw Sarah Good with the Devil! I saw Goody Osburn with the Devil! I saw Bridget Bishop with the Devil!”* (Abigail, Act I)**   
  
The most important part of this quote is the punctuation, which highlights the sense of hysteria at the end of Act I. Abigail uses short sentences, and Miller clearly intended them to be shouted (hence his use of exclamation marks). The sentences keep getting shorter, and this increases the rhythm of the speech, which is a common way to create tension. As well as the growing speed of the sentences, Abigail also repeats ‘with the devil’ three times. This means that the phrases take on the form of a chant. When the other girls begin to join in, they follow the chant. This rhythm illustrates the mass hysteria and the conformity – it is easy to go along with and it causes panic.

***“You must understand sir, that a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it, there be no road between.”* (Danforth, Act III)**   
  
This quote is important in highlighting the pressure to conform that existed at the time. Despite the fact that Danforth is supposed to be an impartial (neutral) judge, he clearly regards anyone defending themselves as attacking him personally, and the court more generally. Hale asks him whether every defense is an attack on the court, thus highlighting the split between the two men. The division of Salem society into ‘with’ the court or ‘against it’ shows that Salem has become fully polarised, and that the choice is essentially between conformity or death.

***”I denounce these proceedings, I quit this court!”* (Hale, Act III)**   
  
This is perhaps the most important part of Act III. Although John Proctor goes to the court with Mary Warren to attempt to bring a halt to proceedings, he ends up being on trial himself. Hale can’t believe that Proctor is being found guilty of witchcraft, recognising him as a fellow rational ally. This indicates the battle between the rational and the irrational. Hale is a strong believer in logic and learning, where Danforth believes in tradition and conformity. The break between the two indicates the complete collapse of the legitimacy of the court.

***“Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang!”* (John Proctor, Act IV)**   
  
This quote falls at the end of Act IV, and is perhaps the most important quote in the play. Here, John Proctor recants his confession, and states that he would rather die than have his children and wife seem him as someone who betrayed his principles and his friends. Proctor says that those who hanged are noble, because they neither confessed nor did they accuse others. The fact that Proctor references ‘dust’ is biblical language. ‘Ashes to ashes, dust to dust’ is used in burial services, and references a quote from Genesis (3:19) *"Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return".* This quote highlights the insignificance of man, which juxtaposes with Proctor’s sense of empowerment at this point.

Key Characters

Proctor

John Proctor is the protagonist in ‘The Crucible’, and is seen by the audience as the hero. In many respects, he represents the audience on stage, refusing to take part in any of the hysteria, and instead maintaining his distance (both physical, because his home is on the outskirts of Salem, and emotional, in that he refuses to attend the court). Although Proctor has a tense relationship with his wife, we are shown that he is ultimately a good man. Unlike the rest of Salem, he is willing to admit his mistakes, and does not hold any moral vanity, even thought he does save his name at the end of the play

Proctor’s style of speech is simple and without any form of flourish. This represents his cool and logical brain. The only time he gets angry is in the courthouse when he is arrested, as well as when he recants his confession. Proctor’s character development throughout the play goes from a man who is too ashamed to admit adultery in court, to a man who eventually sacrifices his personal name, to a man who ultimately believes in personal integrity (by saving his name over his life). Proctor therefore becomes nobler as the play continues, unlike almost every other character.

Abigail

Abigail is often read as a character who gets out of her depth throughout the course of the play, although it is possible to see her as a darker character than this. She confesses that she saw Indians murder her parents, and this shapes her potentially murderous desires. In addition, Abigail is shown to be a beautiful woman, who can exert power over men in the village with her looks. This juxtaposes with her lack of social power (she is an unmarried woman), and teaches her to use her manipulating skills for bad. The fact that she has power over men in the village is testament to the immoral thoughts they feel towards her, undermining their Puritan beliefs.

By the end of Act III, before she flees the town, Abigail is shown to be the most powerful person in Salem. Even Danforth trembles as he talks to her. Abigail clearly enjoys the power, and is willing to sacrifice everyone to maintain it. Her earlier claim that she loves John Proctor does not stop her from accusing him of witchcraft, and condemning him to death. Even though Danforth assures her that if she is found guilty of lying she will be hanged, Abigail shows neither fear, nor a desire to stop.

Danforth

Danforth is the Deputy Governor of Massachusetts and an extremely religious man. Danforth believes that his work is the work of God, and that the court cannot make a false decision, because God guides it. This leads him to fail to understand that some people may be afraid of the court and therefore lie (because innocent people should not fear God’s judgment), and also that defending oneself against accusations is not an attack on the court.

Danforth likes to think of himself as a man of justice and of God. However, he is not a man who is ever willing to challenge his own beliefs. The court serves as a macrocosm (larger representation) of his own moral battle. When someone challenges Danforth, he does not truly question his beliefs, but sees it as an attack on him. Even when he realises what Abigail has done, he refuses to stop the executions because it would not be ‘fair’ on those he had already killed. You get the sense that he has realised the trials were all false, but is unwilling to admit it to himself.

Hale

Hale is one of the most interesting characters in the play, in that he seems to be the only character to change his mind on the witch trials. Where John Proctor is always against them, and Danforth is always in favour, Hale begins believing in their honesty, but later denounces the court. Unlike Danforth, Hale gets his knowledge from reading and learning, and therefore is willing to engage with new ideas. Hale is described as an intellectual man, and one who initially enjoys trying to save witches. However, he recognises in John Proctor a sense of rationalism, and this leads him to realise that Danforth is an irrational man, and the trials are unjust.

In the final Act, Hale is trying desperately to get Proctor to confess, and therefore to save his life. This is borne of a guilt at what he had done in creating the hysteria in Salem. Although Hale is regarded as a sympathetic character, ultimately Proctor is seen as nobler, as he is willing to protect his dignity by refusing to confess, rather than desperately trying to save his life (as Hale advises). Hale is therefore a highly tragic character, even though he survives and Proctor dies.

Key Scene

The key scene in ‘The Crucible’ comes at the end of Act III (in some texts the play is only divided into two Acts, in which case it is the end of Act I), when Proctor attends the court in an attempt to discredit Abigail. He does this first by persuading Mary Warren to tell the truth, and ultimately by confessing his affair with Abigail. However, both fail, and Proctor is put on trial himself. When Elizabeth is called to the court and asked about the affair, she denies it, and in doing so undermines John’s case. He is then accused of witchcraft and placed under arrest. At this point, both Proctor and Hale angrily denounce the court.

When Proctor attempts to undermine Abigail, Danforth sees him as attempting to undermine the court, and therefore God. Danforth reacts extremely defensively to this, and begins to question Proctor personally, asking him about his Christian morality. This shows the extent to which the court has stopped being about witchcraft, and is now more concerned with preserving itself. Abigail wants to continue accusing people because she enjoys the power, Putnam accuses those whose land he wants, and Danforth defends the court because he has no other choice. There is no space for logical argument, and this is what appals Hale, and ultimately causes him to denounce the court, and leave. It becomes clear in the court that what matters is not who is guilty and who is innocent, but who holds power.

Ultimately, this scene is a tragic one. Proctor’s confession of adultery comes too late to stop the trials. Had he confessed earlier, he may have been listened to, although at this point, no one in power is willing to admit that the trials may be false. Another tragic aspect is the testament of Elizabeth Proctor. Although she is an honest and moral character, it is her one lapse into deception that condemns John. This symbolises the decline of Salem’s morality, where an honest woman in a court of law feels compelled to lie. Elizabeth is forced to choose between telling a lie and (she thinks) exposing John’s affair. She chooses to lie, which she believes is a sin – effectively sacrificing her morals for her husband. Ironically, telling the truth would have saved her husband. The inversion of morality means that even the good and pure characters do not know how to act. This scene represents the nadir (low point) of the court in terms of legitimacy. After this scene it is completely discredited. The denunciation of Hale exemplifies this.