THE CRUCIBLE

Plot Summary

ACT I

Giggles. Whispers. A rooster crows. These innocent sounds merge with the tense words of Reverend Parris praying at the bedside of ten-year-old Betty Parris, who has been in a trance-like state for several hours. Earlier, he discovered a group of girls, including Betty, dancing in the woods. Through his conversations with Tituba, his black servant, and Abigail Williams, his niece, Parris reveals his growing paranoia about the incident and its aftermath. He is aware that the community is gossiping about Betty and Abigail. He questions Abigail about their activities, but she denies that the behavior was anything more than "sport." Parris shares the alarming rumors that he has heard. Abigail has been dismissed recently from employment at the Proctor household, soiling her reputation. Abigail hotly defends herself, arguing that Mrs. Proctor wanted a slave instead of a servant.

When Mr. and Mrs. Putnam arrive, he learns that they, too, have an afflicted daughter, Ruth. The Putnams have buried all but one of their children, so Mrs. Putnam has sent Ruth to Tituba to learn the cause of the children's deaths. The Putnams become convinced that witches have invaded Salem. Reverend Parris chooses not to agree with that judgment until he has consulted with Reverend John Hale of Beverly, a noted authority on witchcraft. A crowd gathers, and Parris goes downstairs to pray with them.

When the adults leave, Abigail speaks to Betty and some of the other girls involved in the dancing. She explains that she has told Parris everything about their actions and that they must choose their words carefully because witchcraft is a hanging offense.

John Proctor, a respected farmer, arrives to find Mary Warren present, a servant who now works for his wife. For a few minutes he is unavoidably alone with Abigail, and they discuss the impact of their brief affair. John denies any continued attraction. Abigail criticizes John's wife and berates him for asking her to forget what has happened between them. She then confesses that what the girls have done in the woods is not witchcraft, but simply dancing.

Betty Parris becomes hysterical and various adults swarm the room to try to comfort her. Among them is Rebecca Nurse, an elderly woman who succeeds in quieting the child. Although Betty is calmed, tension continues as Parris bickers with parishioner Giles Corey about the salary paid to the minister.

Reverend John Hale arrives to offer his insights. After greeting people, he proceeds to question Abigail, Tituba, and others. Under threat of punishment, Tituba "confesses" to trafficking with the devil. Betty awakens and wildly calls out accusations. Others take up the cry. The scene which began with giggles and whispers closes with shrieks from the afflicted young women.

ACT II

Several days later in the Proctor home, John and his wife Elizabeth discuss the recent events in Salem. Fourteen people have been arrested and Mary Warren has gone to the trials daily. John berates Elizabeth for allowing
Mary to leave, but she says that she feels powerless to stop Mary. Elizabeth urges John to reveal Abigail's confession to the judges, but John hesitates since he has no witnesses to the admission.

When Mary returns, she says that the accused now number 39. She tries to ease the outrage that John expresses by presenting Elizabeth with a rag doll made during the court sessions. She states that she has defended Elizabeth during the proceedings. When Mary retires to bed, Elizabeth says she fears that Abigail will denounce her in order to win back John.

Reverend John Hale arrives. He questions why the Proctors have not been in church for some time. John says that he dislikes Reverend Parris' attitude. To prove his religious convictions, he attempts to recite the Ten Commandments. However, he stumbles at the one concerning adultery and has to be helped by Elizabeth. She encourages John to tell Reverend Hale that Abigail originally denied any involvement with witchcraft. When Hale says that several have confessed, John counters that only those who confess are spared a hanging.

Francis Nurse and Giles Corey arrive upset; their wives have been arrested. Hale is shocked; he has deep regard for Francis' wife, Rebecca Nurse. The town marshal arrives with a warrant for Elizabeth's arrest. The evidence, which convinces the law officer of her guilt, is a needle found in the body of the rag doll. As Elizabeth is lead away, an irate John Proctor rips up the warrant and insists that Mary testify that she made the doll. Reverend Hale is left with growing doubts.

**REVEREND PARRIS**

Photo Courtesy of the Arthur Miller Historical Society

**ACT III**

During Martha Corey's trial, Giles disrupts the proceedings. He accuses Mr. Putnam of using 'the hysteria' to make a grab for more land. Giles is removed from court, but he soon returns with Francis Nurse and John Proctor. The men try to convince Judge Hawthorne, Governor Danforth, and others that the witchcraft accusations are false. John Proctor produces Mary Warren, who testifies that the girls were dancing in the woods when Reverend Parris discovered them.

Danforth is skeptical of the claims, because Elizabeth Proctor is one of the accused. John learns that Elizabeth is pregnant, so she will be spared for a year until the baby is born. He persists in his criticism to help others
wrongly accused. Giles, too, tries to provide evidence of ulterior motives. He says that Putnam instructed his daughter, Ruth, to name others so he can claim their forfeited land. Giles refuses to provide the name of the witness who overheard Mr. Putnam’s instructions and is jailed for contempt of court.

When the girls are summoned to answer to Mary’s testimony, Abigail leads the girls in crying out that Mary afflicts them. John resorts to describing his adulterous relationship with Abigail in an attempt to undermine her power. He states that his wife knows the truth of the matter. Elizabeth Proctor is brought into the room to testify. John must turn his back to her, so she will have no hint of his wishes. Although she has a reputation for unfailing honesty, Elizabeth lies to protect John. Tragically, her words condemn him. Elizabeth is taken from the room, Abigail triumphs, and Mary joins in the outcry against John. She declares that he is the devil’s man. With Reverend Hale protesting, John Proctor is arrested.

**ACT IV**

Several months later, Hawthorne and Danforth speak with Reverend Parris. They are all affected by the growing doubts of the community. Reverend Parris says that Reverend Hale has returned to Salem hoping to convince the remaining prisoners to confess and save their lives.

Abigail and Mercy Lewis have stolen Parris’ money and fled the community. Reverend Parris is distraught as he senses the dissatisfaction of the parishioners. Reverend Hale enters and asks to speak with Elizabeth. He persuades her to convince John that he should confess. Elizabeth and John are left alone briefly. She tells him that Giles Corey was pressed to death when he refused to submit to a trial. As each stone was placed upon him, he called for "more weight." By avoiding trial, Giles saved his farm from confiscation.

John agrees to confess knowing that he is not a saintly figure like Rebecca Nurse. Court authorities are elated. Rebecca is brought into the room in hopes that she will confess as well. John signs the confession, then grabs the paper when judges declare that it will be posted on the church doors. John cannot put his name to any document that will be used to continue the blatant abuse of power. His honor restored, John prepares to meet his death. With pride, Elizabeth refuses to intervene.

*Plot summary courtesy of the Arthur Miller Historical Society.*