

# **DRAMA** *Works*

**Plays Through Practice**

**THE CRUCIBLE**  
by  
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**EXTRACT**

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# Extract

## **WORKING THROUGH THE TEXT IN A PRACTICAL WAY**

***Ideally, before starting this work, you should have read the play to have some idea of the plot and the characters. At the very least, you should read my brief plot synopsis and the brief character studies.***

***Students are advised to keep a record of the practical work they do from the beginning and the results of the experiments they try along the way. This should end up in a complete notebook of characters, set, lighting and other ideas as they go along.***

***The best way of doing the following work is to work through the exercises suggested and the comments on character and action and then, before going on with the next section, repeat the whole extract by acting/ reading it. The knowledge you have gained on the way will inform the way you do this and it will also throw up any inconsistencies in your decision-making.***

### ACT ONE

Look first of all at the stage directions at the beginning of the play. Instantly we notice the sense of historical correctness that is conveyed by Miller's description, without too much unnecessary detail: the wooden beams, the sense of 'clean spareness', the leaded window-panes. At the end of the working through the text, we will have gathered all the set requirements for each scene together and will be able to make decisions as to how best to set it in a way that will help a chosen theme, or the characterisation, or the sense of history - whichever you think in the end is the most important aspect to convey through setting.

For the moment, all we want to do is to glean enough detail to make sure that all your practical work is happening within a space that is useful and bears relevance to a possible final production. This space must be practicable and serve the needs of the actors.

Not much in the way of furnishings is required, so start by building in your studio or playing space some idea of where the things needed in the play will be placed. Miller is helpful and quite specific. Later, you may or may not find this helpful. Remember, a director is his own person and is not bound by the writer's specifications. For the moment, copy his suggestions, but it might be that you change your mind later about the placing of individual items. For this purpose, use whatever you have lying around in your studio; chairs, rostra blocks, whatever, and map out the main requirements of the scene. Two chairs with a gap between, facing outwards to show that they are not to be sat on, for instance, can indicate the door opening and the window.

A door at the back, a window to the left and a bed to the right, Miller asks for. Other furnishings are spare and help to show the simplicity by which these people live: a chest, a chair and a small table are the only other requirements. There is a candle burning. Decide where you would put these other objects quite arbitrarily but sensibly at first - you may find they need to be in different positions when the action is fitted in. Could the chest be beside the bed with the candle set upon it? Make sure there is plenty of floor space and that the doorway is left unobscured from any audience angle. Where could you place the table then? Downstage left perhaps, below the window? With the chair beside it? Try that for starters. As the work progresses through the Act, make notes as to any other requirements or changes that you make to this layout, altering them as necessity demands in your working space.

Make a note of the lighting requirements at the beginning. Look at it naturalistically first, i.e. trying to emulate the reality of the situation: sunlight streaming through the window, candle light - not giving off too much light in the day, but perhaps casting some glow on Betty's face on the bed. The window is narrow, small, so that suggests that the light will not be bright over the whole playing area. Perhaps you may find later that shadows round some of the edges might help the atmosphere being created in this Act. For the moment, make notes - adding to these as the work progresses through the Act, whenever relevant. Can you already see some problems with a naturalistic imitation? What might these problems be? Where do you think other lighting might be required to boost the suggestions made by Miller here?

## THE BEGINNING - PAGES 13 - 18

Before starting on any more of the play than to say that the Reverend Parris is kneeling by his ten-year-old daughter's bedside and praying, Miller breaks off for a few pages in order to give us some background to the period and to Puritanism. This is necessary for our understanding of the play. He also spends a little time on a description of Reverend Parris' character.

Read all of Miller's 'asides' with close attention. It really is important to understand the background to this play. Look first at the explanation, which starts in the second paragraph, after his description of the historical character of Parris.

In a nutshell, the town of Salem [little more than a village to us] is second and third generation from the original founders, but many of the older ones may even remember the start of it all forty years previously. Like all these little settlements, every acre has been fought out of the wilderness by sheer hard work; clearing trees, battling roots and stones to found fields and establish crops. Houses have been built out of felled trees and every one raised, every field created, every crop harvested is a cause, at the beginning, for community celebration. How close these first settlers must have had to work, battling not just against the natural difficulties of the elements and the land, but also against the Native Americans who often contested the white men's strange proprietorial use of that land.

By the time of our play, Salem has been fairly well established but the wilderness and the fear of what lies out there is never far away all the same. Miller stresses that the success of these communal projects was often due to the rules that bound them together and kept their noses to the grindstone of hard work. The Puritan model shows this well. Stern rules covered every aspect of their lives - rules that were enforced by Holy Scriptures, or at least by the parts of the Bible that were interpreted to suit them by the founders of this sect. No colour, no play, no frivolity was allowed; but in the early days these rules were practical and kept people focused on the task in hand whilst days of rest, spent in worship, re-inforced the sense of community which was just as necessary to their survival.

So, the harsh necessities of their lives did not allow for any letting-up in the early days. A community that let its guard down to get drunk or frolic round the bonfire would have been a dead community. Easy to see how frivolity, because of the danger of letting down one's guard, becomes associated with the Devil - with those powers of darkness which 'conspire' to make the fragile early settlements fail. By 1692, when such harsh rules could perhaps have been relaxed, the habit of them has become ingrained. Rules, work and worship was what had always held the people together; it gave them a structure; it made them feel safe. There had not in the past been room for the rebel, the individual who questioned. This play centres on a moment in Salem's history when some people are beginning to question the need for such strict rules, are beginning to assert their individuality. Those who are in positions of authority - the ministers of the church and those other in authority, upholders of the law and so on - feel threatened as they see the fabric of the society they have built up, and that has been tried and proven to work in a harsher time, begin to crumble. They will react in different ways: some will seek to tighten the rules even further, in a panic partly at their own loss of power and

partly at the threat to the safety of their world; some will begin to see that society can afford to change, to question and adapt to the new circumstances of a safer and expanding world. This melting-pot of change - called a crucible - is what the play exposes. What happens to a society which has lived by one set of rules when those rules begin to be questioned or changed in one way or the other?

By this long introductory aside, Miller focuses us on what he wants us to be looking at whilst at the same time warning us to be understanding of the society from which these nightmarish events spring. Understanding but not approving. The play exposes many different examples of that society, showing those who are genuine in their intentions, who abide by the rules out of sincere belief in them, and showing the beginnings of the crumbling of those same rules by alerting us to those who are insincere, who are using the rules for their own greed. Then again, there are those who, like John Proctor, are honest and genuine but for whom the rules have become a strait-jacket, showing clearly that there is now a need for change.

Now look at the first paragraph of the aside, which deals with the character of Parris. We are told about the historical figure of Parris: in his forties, a widower, who believed that children should be grateful for their existence and not reminding others of their presence - seen [as little as possible] but not heard. He has an inflated idea of his own importance and believes that 'he was being persecuted wherever he went.' Clearly, then, he is not an easy man, untrusting of people and always looking for insults, imaginary or otherwise. He has not been in Salem for long - just three years.

Moving forward to Page 17, where the action begins, Miller describes Parris as being in a state of confusion - weeping and praying alternately. Later it is clear that this confusion arises from terror - not terror as to his daughter's state of health, as one would expect, but that he should be in some way blamed. Much of Parris's motivation throughout the play is how to avert blame from himself. This makes him a thoroughly unlikeable character. Cowards are rarely admirable.

**What is Parris in a panic about here? Why does he pray and weep and mutter?**

- a] Come up with a thought-track of what is going on in his head first and then**
- b] Act it out, making the thought-track the words used in his muttering and 'prayers'.**

**How does someone in a panic act? Try to come up with the breathing rhythm of panic. Does this rhythm affect the way you move - your hands, your eyes, your head? Note that the word 'confusion' is the important one here. 'Confusion' tells us that he is in a panic, but he doesn't know quite what will happen or what has happened. It is quite different from the panic you might feel if you knew that a mad axeman was going to burst through the door in a matter of seconds. Your body and breathing will react differently to 'general' panic [ which is like what we call nowadays a panic attack] than to the panic that arises quite justifiably from a known source.**

**See if you can show the difference, by:**

**having half the class reacting in panic to that mad axeman, who has followed you home and is at this moment outside the door....  
and the other half reacting to a rumour they have heard that they might lose their job and their home - the next day might clarify matters - is there anything they can say to get out of the trouble looming? - but they are not sure what form that trouble has - it could be something they have done, or something an associate has done, or their secretary even - if only they knew!**

**Have a few of these latter people showing their pieces as solos. The modernisation of Parris's dilemma might help identify the state he is in.**

Tituba is next briefly described. What do you make of the description 'she enters as one does who can no longer bear to be barred from the sight of her beloved'? Is Miller just telling us that Tituba loves Betty? Having been told that Parris has no love for children, it is clear that Betty will need some love. Perhaps the slave Tituba has been a mother figure to the girl. She calls her 'My Betty', which would suggest that.

Miller describes the entrance as being motivated, then, mainly by genuine concern, but this is tempered by fear, since past experience warns her that it is the slave who usually gets blamed for everything.

**The love pulls Tituba forward, the fear pulls her backwards. See if you can show these two emotions at war in Tituba in your entrance. Try the entrance and her first line - already taking a step backward - as she sees Parris's face turning towards her with anger.**

Parris' reaction tells us, and her, that her fears are true - if there is any way that Parris can blame everything on expendable Tituba he will.

Our first sight of Abigail is 'all worry and apprehension and propriety.' How is she behaving? Why? Remember that she is an orphan, dependent on Parris for board and lodging as well as a place in the community. Not knowing which way everything is going to go, Abigail here is keeping a very low profile. How would that influence her voice and tone in these first lines? **Try:**

**almost whispering, as if afraid to speak aloud and draw attention to herself**  
**exaggeratedly polite, kind, like a nurse to a sick man**  
**with suppressed excitement, speaking fast and full of nervous energy**

Which seems right to you?

Look at the little scene with Susanna Walcott. Try playing her:

**all big-eyed, excited in a gossipy way**  
**terrified of the consequences - looking to Betty fearfully and casting little frightened looks at Abigail**  
**dutiful, not very bright, as if reciting words she has been told to learn by heart by the doctor, conscious she is the bearer of bad tidings**

Remember that there is no 'right' way to play a character or speak a line; there are always going to be a number of alternatives. All you must do is feel what seems right to you, what seems to work best, or casts a particular light on the scene. For this reason always discuss these exercises and the options they offer. Sometimes, when you know a character better, this may mean going back over old ground to check that you haven't changed your mind - created an inconsistency that doesn't work. Note that, though I have said there may be a number of ways to play a character, there are wrong interpretations - things that just don't work or can't be made to work. Experience will lead you to recognise these.

Noice how Abigail speaks her warning to Susanna before Parris does. If Parris weren't so distraught, he would pick up on this surely? Or does he notice and think she is being helpful, protective to his name? Or does he not hear her?

**Try Abigail's 'Speak nothing of it in the village, Susanna.' and Parris's ensuing line:**

**with Abigail's voice weighted with meaning - an implied threat 'or else...', through clenched teeth behind Parris's back; Parris speaking as if the only one warning her, off his own bat**  
**Abigail, with a glance to Parris to show she's protecting him, sounding calm and grown-up; Parris gratefully echoing her**

**Abigail's panic showing briefly, her voice exploding out, blurting before Parris can speak; Parris with a look at Abigail promising grimly we'll speak when we're alone, the line said firmly, a little threateningly**

**Discuss what differences these different slants show. You may want to make a decision as to which one you go with once you have read the next duologue.**

#### **ABIGAIL AND PARRIS PAGES 18 - 21**

Read this scene with close attention and decide what could be the truth of what really occurred. Parris came upon the girl children dancing in the forest around a fire. Tituba was there with them, singing songs in her native tongue. He thinks he saw a dress on the ground and someone naked.

**Which of the following of Abigail's speeches have the ring of truth in your opinion?**

**Uncle, we did dance.**

**Betty's not witched.**

**We did dance, uncle, and when you leaped out of the bush so suddenly, Betty was frightened and then she fainted.**

**But we never conjured spirits.**

**No one was naked!**

**Do you think any of these are lies? Which? How do you know?**

Now look at the second half of the dialogue, which is more concerned with Abigail's good name in the town and why she was dismissed from the Proctor's. Look at the following lines and ask yourself what is going on here:

**There be no blush about my name.**

**It's a bitter woman, a lying, cold, snivelling woman**

**They want slaves, not such as I.**

**I will not have it said my name is soiled!**

**What impression of Abigail's character do you get from just these four lines?**

Notice the difference approach Abigail gives to the first half of this dialogue - when she is frightened and feeling her way - to the second half, when she has already made her mind up and is set in her opinion. How would you show this in your body language and tone of voice?

This short scene shows some of the depths of Abigail's character and also hints at what she will do when cornered.

**'Do you begrudge my bed, uncle?'**

**Parris: No, no.'**

**The hesitation in Parris' answer shows what? Doubt? Fear?**

**Try Abigail's line with:**

**a] her squashing down her anger and turning on the charm, then**

**b]with her sounding threatening, quite frightening.**

**How does each approach affect the way he answers?**

Try improvising the scene in pairs, using your own words. Bearing in mind that we have not seen much of Abigail yet, seek to hint at the depths of resentment, pride and latent power in her character.

**Try a further couple of improvisations:**

**1. Abigail asks Tituba to create a love potion for her to give John Proctor. She doesn't say who it is for, but she also asks for an ill-luck charm to hurt someone. Tituba refuses the latter but sees no harm in the former.**