

A Story of Suspense

The drama has been used to inspire feelings in its audiences since its invention. A skilled playwright can play on the tendency of people to feel a certain way to change the way one looks at a play, and at the ideas it attempts to convey. The best cases of this use a feeling in the audience to strengthen the piece in both plot and impact. Suspense plays a central role in The Crucible in its role in the plot, its effects on the characters, and the way Miller uses it to set the mood of the play.

The plot of The Crucible is driven in significant part by the force of suspense. Toward the beginning of the play, the atmosphere of suspense has the townspeople anxious. Putnam says, with vicious certainty “I’d not call it sick, the Devil’s touch is heavier than sick. ” (13). Without this sense of anxiety—this worried suspense—the people would never have worried about witchcraft in the first place. Later, suspense drives many characters to bring accusations of witchcraft against others. Marry Warren is driven into a state of near hysteria, saying about Sarah Good, “Mr. Proctor, in open court she near to choked us all to death . . . She tried to kill me many times, Goody Proctor!” (57). The suspense in the novel builds further, leading to Proctor saying to Mary, “You’re coming to court with me, Mary. You will tell it in the court,” to which Mary responds “She’ll kill me for sayin’ that! . . . Abby’ll charge lechery on you, Mr. Proctor” (80). Throughout the novel the suspense drives the plot of The Crucible.

Suspense shapes the actions and motivation of the characters throughout the play. Suspense over what will happen with the Proctors moves Abigail to make sure “A needle were found stuck in her belly—”(76). This event was used by Abigail to cast possible guilt on Goody Proctor. The suspense over the possibility of witchcraft against Abigail and the warrant for Goody Proctor’s arrest leads Cheever to say (on the matter of a poppet) “Tis

hard proof! I find here a poppet Goody Proctor keeps. I have found it, sir... I never wanted to see such proof of hell, and I bid you obstruct me not, for I—" (75). Later in the scene, Proctor can no longer handle the suspense and snaps, saying as he rips the warrant, "Out with you ... Is the accuser always holy now? Were [Parris and Abigail] born this morning as clean as God's fingers? ... vengeance is walking Salem" (77). Through these events and the rest of the play, suspense plays a critical role in the actions of the characters.

Miller uses suspense not just as a device to develop the play in its plot and its characters, but also as a manner to set the mood of the play. In the beginning of the play, the stage direction reads "Parris is praying now, and, though we cannot hear his words, a sense of confusion hangs about him... [Tituba] enters as one who can no longer bear to be barred from the sight of her beloved, but is also very frightened because... as always, trouble in this house eventually lands on her back" (8). Later in the play, the mood in the scene at the proctor's house is summed up by the direction: "Enter Ezekiel Cheever. A stunned silence" (72). The whole scene is tense, stunned, and hostile as soon as Cheever enters the room. Later in the trial the sense of suspense is driven even by the placement of characters, as "As the curtain rises, the room is empty... Through the partitioning wall at the right we hear a prosecutor's voice, Judge Hathorne's... then a woman's voice" (83). Through the play, suspense is key to the feeling the audience has and the tone the story sets.

Suspense is used as an important device in The Crucible, and suits the subject matter very well. In a society where the opinion of the majority has a strong sway on who is killed, the feeling of nervous suspense about an event such as a witch trial would be natural. By using the natural feelings in a story, a writer can effectively convey a message and entertain an audience.