

The Crucible:

Fact versus Fiction

Written by Charleigh Carthy

Growing up, I loved watching television shows or films about witches, and other “magical” creatures because it gave me hope that there could be something magical out there in the universe. I always loved watching the film *Hocus Pocus* and envisioned myself being a witch as well one day. I never saw witches as something to be feared. It wasn't until I was in my freshman year of high school when reading the *Crucible*, that I began to realize why people in these films were terrified of witches. Arthur Miller did indeed want to write his play based on McCarthyism, but when Harry Cohn, head of Columbia Pictures, showed Miller's script to the F.B.I Cohn, he was asked to take the gangsters out of the scripts who were murdering their opponent and to “simply change them to Communist” (Why I wrote the *Crucible* 385). Although the *Crucible* is used to educate students about the SWT, “Miller has never claimed that his story is historically accurate, although many of the broader strokes correspond to events that occurred in Salem, Massachusetts during 1692.”(Lehigh University). The play was then altered to the SWT to show how history was indeed repeating itself. Throughout this paper, the reader will see the comparison of the *Crucible* vs the reality of the SWT to see how accurately Hytner and Miller portrayed the story.

The film starts by introducing us, the viewer, to Abigail Williams and her cousin, Elizabeth Parris (also referenced as Betty throughout the film), getting dressed to go out to the covenstead in the woods. In this scene, we meet Tituba, the first woman to be accused of being a witch. Tituba was an American Indian but in the film, she was an African American from Barbados. Although this may not be seen as a huge difference, I am just confused as to why Miller would not have had Tibutas ethnicity be correct in the film for authenticity purposes.

Tituba was also told to sing and dance by Abigail in the film in hopes to cast a curse on Elizabeth Proctor, while Reverend Parris spots them through the woods. Spoiler Alert, this scene helps foreshadow when Abigail then accuses Tituba of forcing these girls to sing and dance in hopes to clear Williams's name once the church gets word of someone drinking blood. Ann Putnam states that the girls were drinking her baby's blood and "You murdered my babies, Tituba!" (Miller and Hynter) As we learned throughout this course, the Puritans needed an explanation for everything because they did not believe that anything was a coincidence. Ann Putnam needed an explanation as to why she lost these babies. Tituba confesses to witchcraft when she talks about how Betty and Abigail begged them to configure. The girls, all lined up behind Tituba, seem guilty and fearful of what may happen to her. Reverend Hale, who was invited by Reverend Parris from Beverly, MA in hopes to help Betty, tries to talk to Tituba about what she saw when she met with the Devil. Parris, Putnam, and Hale all harass Tituba to release these names but she doesn't know. She then goes on to talk about only white people belonging to god and how she saw the two Midwives who failed to deliver Ann Putnam's babies. Following the stress and guilt Abigail Williams felt in the room, she also started to see the devil, writing in his book, and seeing Goody Osborne and Sarah Good. All the girls shouted at once saying the same thing. Mr. Hale is happy that the girls are free and goes off to find Goody Osborne. Although there is no evidence that this event happened in real life, we can believe something similar did happen to create this hysteria in Salem.

We first learn about Abigail's crush on John Proctor, the storyline of the *Crucible*, in the opening scene when the girls all run into the woods to meet as a coven, as I stated above. Abigail freaks out during the charm and slams the dead animal against the ground and begins to drink its blood. She drinks this blood as good luck in hopes that Elizabeth Proctor will die. Betty states

that “You (Abigail) drank a charm to kill John Proctor's wife! You drank a charm to kill Goody Proctor!” (Miller and Hynter), which funny enough also did not happen in real life. (The Crucible 16:25) Although the film follows the “love story” between John Proctor and Abigail Williams, there is no proof this love affair happened or that the two even knew each other before the trials began due to the age gap between 60 and 11 years old. Also, Abigail lived in Salem Town and the Proctors lived in Salem Village, roughly five to seven miles away from each other. Yet, in the New Yorker 1996, Miller talks about how he was convinced this love affair happened. Miller stated that he believed John Proctor had a relationship with Williams after reading the court records about the moment Williams tried to strike Elizabeth Proctor during her examination and decided to write his play following the love affair. “Elizabeth Proctor had been the orphaned Abigail’s mistress, and they had lived together in the same small house until Elizabeth fired the girl. By this time, I was sure John Proctor had bedded Abigail, who had to be dismissed most likely to appease Elizabeth. There was bad blood between the two women now. That Abigail started, in effect, to condemn Elizabeth to death with her touch, then stopped her hand, then went through with it, was quite suddenly the human center of all this turmoil.” (Miller). After watching this scene, I tried to understand from a director's point of view why he may have added this scene. I believe it was to let viewers know that Abigail was practicing magic. Practicing magic at this time was somewhat normal, but black magic was seen as the devil's work. I also believe this was to add to the plot that the witch was accusing others in the coven to protect herself and how Abigail was so desperate to be with John Proctor that she would do anything possible to make it happen. For obvious reasons, Miller knew that this plotline of an affair and accusing the wife of being a witch could make an amazing plot line to help move the story along, whether or not it may have happened in real life.

In scene two, we see Betty who seems to be ill in bed. The camera then pans to Tituba and the others in the room, including Abigail Williams and Reverend Parris. The doctors say that he “fears there will be no medicines for this. [He] has seen nothing like it before” (Miller and Hynter). Reverend Parris seemed overly worried as Betty is his only child, or so we thought. During the real SWT, Betty is one of three. She had an older brother Thomas and a younger sister, Susanna, although they were probably left out of the film due to not playing quite enough of an important role during the SWT. At 15 minutes we see the girls, led by Abigail Willaims, leaving the church and running to Betty to try to clear their names of witchcraft. They tried to wake up Betty and she awakes and calls for her mama. She states “I’ll fly to her! Let me fly!” (Miller and Hynter) and rushed to the window. Unlike the *Crucible*, Betty's mother was alive during the SWT and died in 1696. From a film point of view, having Betty's mother dead allowed for more chances of drama and possibly led to a scene like this one. Another difference between this scene and reality is that Betty was not actually unconscious but instead “hid under furniture, complained of fever, barked like a dog, screamed and cried out in pain.”(Brooks), the film also did not show Abigail Williams showing these symptoms as she did in real life until after the accusations began. By doing so, the character Abigail Williams was protecting her name from being accused. No one would suspect these young girls of being witches if they were suffering from symptoms. Miller also probably had Betty sick at the beginning of the movie to show that she is feared for being punished for her actions by her father, but also foreshadows her trauma from causing what we know as the SWT.

When it comes down to the actual trials beginning, I notice right off the bat some differences. Throughout the film, we see Betty as a supporting character who helps Abigail accuse others of witchcraft. “Although Betty’s name appeared on the first complaint during the

trials, she never testified in any court.”(Brooks) Betty was sent away, by her parents, to live at Stephan Sewall's house in Salem town to attempt to cure her of the witchcraft that had caused her harm. Which could explain her lack of an apology for the Salem Witch Trials. Another difference between the film and reality was how many people Abigail Williams accused. In the *Crucible* Abigail accused 19 innocent people, but in reality, she accused 57 people. Abigail accused most people of witchcraft but only testified against 8 of them; Mary Easy, George Jacobs Sr, Susannah Martin, Rebecca Nurse, John Proctor, Elizabeth Proctor, Mary Witheridge, and John Willard and gave her last testimony on June 3, 1692 (Brooks) Just like the film, Abigail runs away with no known reasoning. In the film, she wanted to run away with John Proctor but he refused. In the *History of Massachusetts*, Brooks states that “it is possible her uncle, Reverend Samuel Parris, sent her away to prevent her from further participating in the witch trials, just like he sent his daughter away, but there is no evidence of this.” just as he did with her daughter Betty Parris. Another difference between the *Crucible* and reality is the number of death warrants signed by Reverend Hale. Miller had written that Hale signed off on 72 death warrants but according to historical documents, Hale had not signed off on any. In the film, Reverend Hale decided to leave his job because he fears the girls are not telling the truth. In reality, Hale did believe at first the girls were telling the truth but as more and more people began being accused Hale began to be less involved. Hale began to change his views on the SWT and was concerned about how the trials were being handled, especially with the court using children who were afflicted.

The *Crucible* has been used throughout schools to help educate students about the Salem witch trials. The story not only teaches students about what had happened in Salem, Ma during the late 17th century but also how friends and family betrayed each other during the trials while

also preparing them for another historical event, McCarthyism following the Red Scare.

Although I think it is important to teach students about this historical event in hopes to prevent history from repeating itself, I do think teachers and fellow book lovers should know the differences between the two. There is no evidence in historical documents stating the love affair between Proctor and Williams, and his name should be cleared of that. The book genre is a historical drama, which means the book is based on a historical event with fictional elements added to add to a storyline, just like Titanic. The purpose of these books is to teach students while also keeping them engaged with a story plot and storyline. I believe the book and or film should be used as an added piece of material based on stronger material to help students get a better understanding of what happened in Salem. While researching this paper to compare fact versus fiction, I found it was hard to find anything not regarding the crucible when researching characters such as Abigail Willams, Betty Parris, and of course John Proctor. The Crucible has been used so much for educating those on the SWT that it is hard to separate what happened from Miller's historical drama.

\

Citations

Brooks, Rebecca Beatrice, et al. "Betty Parris: First Afflicted Girl of the Salem Witch Trials." *History of Massachusetts Blog*, 20 Dec. 2020, historyofmassachusetts.org/betty-parris-first-afflicted-girl-of-the-salem-witch-trials/.

Miller, Arthur and director Hynter, Nicholas. *The Crucible: Screenplay*. Amazon, Penguin Books, 1996, www.amazon.com/Crucible-Daniel-Lewis-Winona-Ryder/dp/B000SVZIJE.

Miller, Arthur, et al. "Why I Wrote 'The Crucible.'" *The New Yorker*, 13 Oct. 1996, www.newyorker.com/magazine/1996/10/21/why-i-wrote-the-crucible.

"Reel American History - Films - List." *Lehigh University Digital Library*, digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/reels/films/list/0_7_5.