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# COMPARISONS

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ARTHUR MILLER'S  
**THE  
CRUCIBLE**

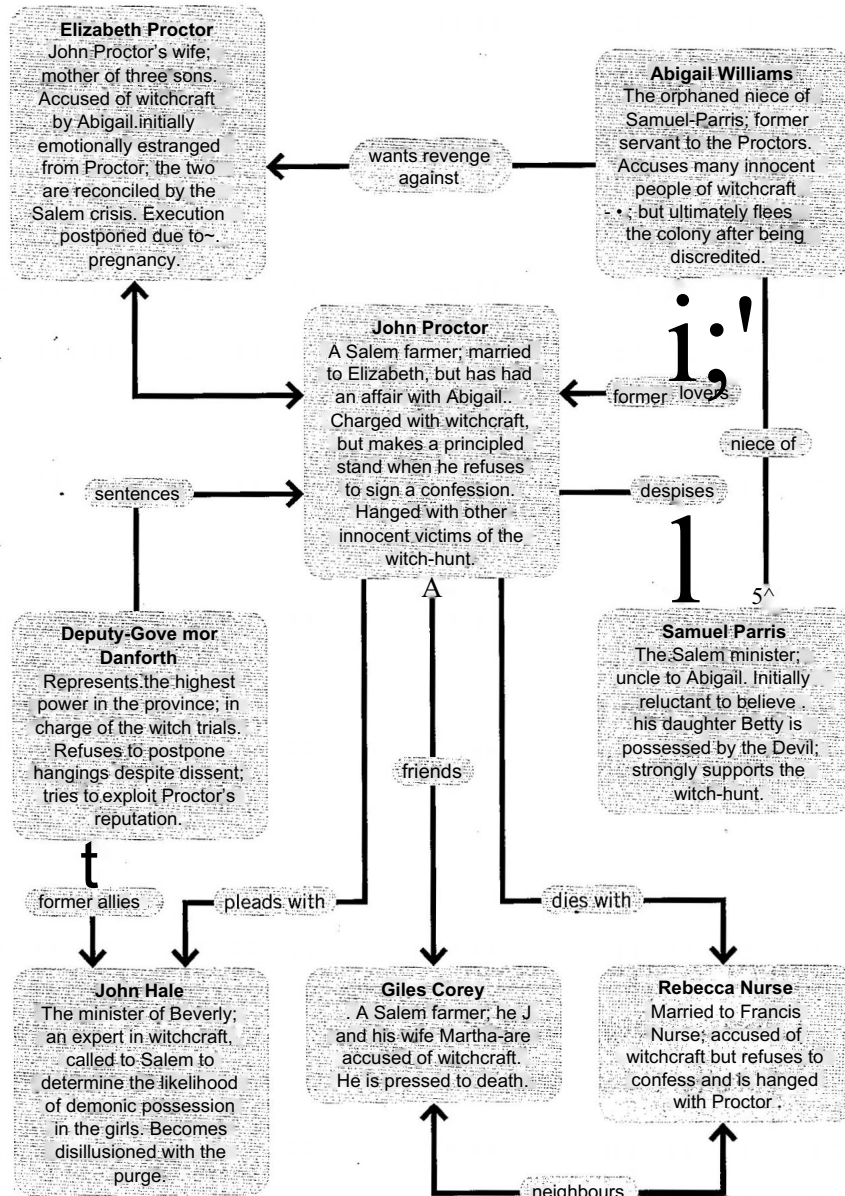
ROSALIE HAM'S  
**THE  
DRESSMAKER**

by Virginia Lee

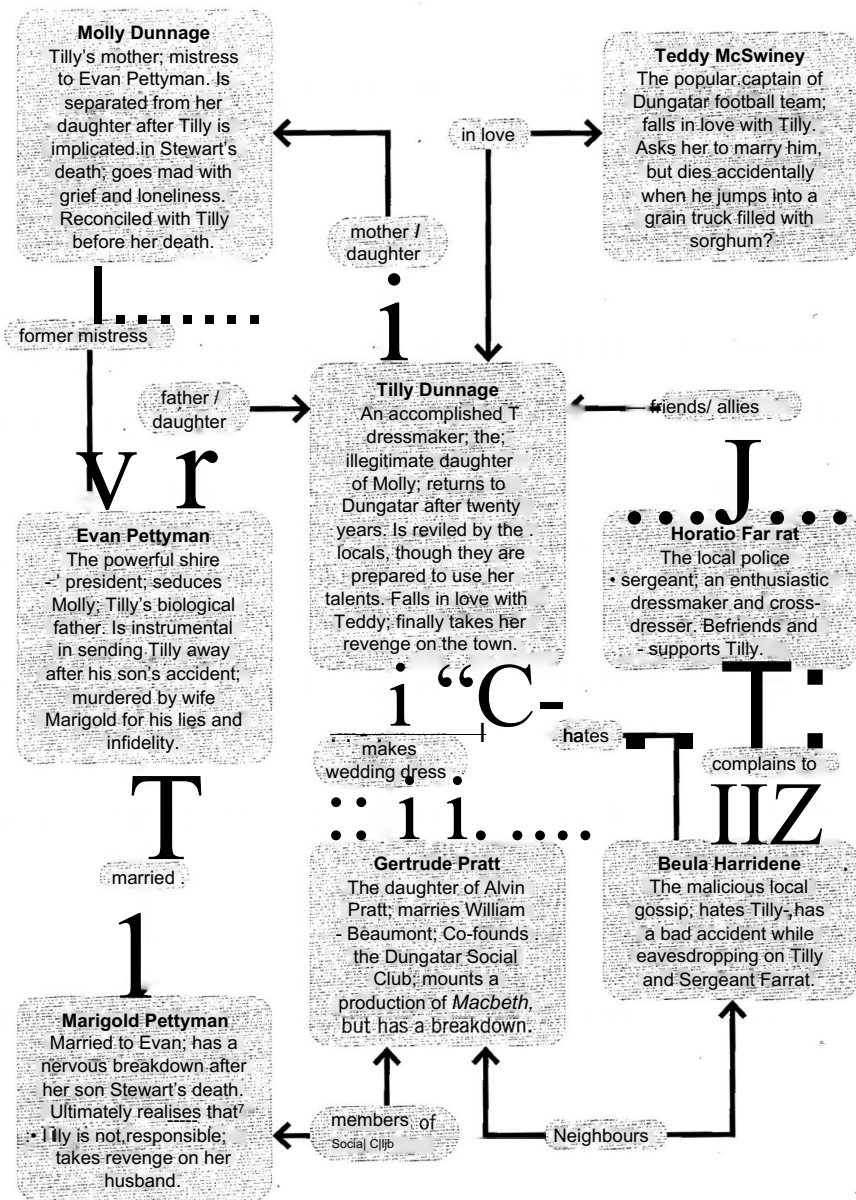
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# CHARACTER MAP: THE CRUCIBLE



# CHARACTER MAP: THE DRESSMAKER





# Section 1: *The Crucible*

## OVERVIEW

### About the author

Arthur Miller (1915-2005) is regarded as one of the greatest American dramatists of the twentieth century. His best-known plays include *All My Sons* (1947), *The Crucible* (1953), *A View from the Bridge* (1955) and the play for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Miller also wrote a number of screenplays, including *The Misfits* (1961) - the last completed film starring his second wife, Marilyn Monroe - and film adaptations of *Death of a Salesman* (1985) and *The Crucible* (1995).

Both *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* are considered classics of American drama. While they are very much products of their time, their universal concerns have resonated with audiences for generations, and they are still performed regularly today.

### Synopsis

*The Crucible* begins in spring 1692, in the Salem house of Reverend Samuel Parris. His daughter Betty sickens with a strange, undiagnosed condition after Parris discovers her dancing in the woods with a group of girls. Included in this group were Tituba, Parris' Barbadian slave, and Abigail Williams, Parris' niece. Now Betty refuses to wake, and there is gossip in the town that witchcraft might be involved. Parris has sent for a specialist, Reverend Hale, to ascertain the truth. A number of villagers arrive at the house, including Thomas Putnam, John Proctor, Rebecca Nurse and Giles Corey. Putnam's daughter, Ruth, also refuses to wake.

In a private moment, it is revealed that Proctor had a brief affair with Abigail seven months earlier, when she worked for him. Abigail still believes herself to be in love with Proctor, although he insists that the relationship is

over. When Reverend Hale arrives, he examines Betty and questions Abigail, who deflects blame onto Tituba. Threatened with hanging, Tituba confesses that she has bound herself to the Devil and has seen white people in his company. Abigail picks up the thread and accuses several of Salem's citizens. Betty, now awake, joins her in crying out the names of those whom they have apparently seen trafficking with the Devil.

Act Two is set eight days later, at the home of John and Elizabeth Proctor. The tension between the couple, as a result of John's affair with Abigail, is palpable. A court has been set up in Salem to try those accused of witchcraft; the Proctors' servant, Mary Warren, is one of those testifying. Elizabeth urges her husband to go to the courthouse and tell the judges what Abigail confided to him in private - that the witch-hunt is a fraud. They argue bitterly. When Mary returns from court, she informs them that the purge has intensified and Goody Osburn has been sentenced to hang. Mary's disclosure that Elizabeth has been 'somewhat mentioned' (p.59) reveals Abigail's malice towards her former mistress. When Reverend Hale visits, the Proctors tell him of Abigail's deception. Giles Corey and Francis Nurse arrive with the news that their wives have been charged. Elizabeth is arrested; Abigail has accused Elizabeth of sending her spirit to stab her, citing the poppet (small rag doll) Mary made in court as evidence. In despair, Proctor resolves to expose Abigail, even if she charges him with lechery.

Two weeks later, hundreds are in jail and seventy-two death warrants have been signed. In Act Three, Proctor, Giles Corey and Francis Nurse present themselves at the Salem courthouse to plead their wives' innocence. Mary accompanies them; she has written a deposition, swearing that she has never seen any spirits and the other girls are lying. Deputy-Governor Danforth and Judge Hathorne are suspicious of her claims, but Hale becomes increasingly disturbed by them. When Abigail is questioned, she denies Mary's allegations. In an effort to destroy Abigail's credibility, Proctor confesses that he has committed the crime of lechery and accuses Abigail of a 'whore's vengeance' (p.98). However, when Elizabeth is brought into the court and interrogated **M)y** Danforth, she lies to protect her husband. Hale pleads for justice, but Abigail turns the situation around by staging another 'crying-out', or denunciation. Mary becomes hysterical and turns instead on Proctor, accusing him of plotting to overthrow the court. The act concludes with Proctor's arrest and Hale's condemnation of the proceedings.

Act Four is set three months later, in the fall (autumn), at the Salem jail. The town is in a state of anarchy, and there has been rebellion against the trials in the neighbouring town of Andover. Twelve people have been hanged and more will die the next day. Parris reveals to Danforth that Abigail and the Putnams' servant Mercy Lewis have fled the colony, but Danforth will not consider postponing the impending executions. Hale has returned to Salem in the hope that he can persuade the condemned to save themselves. He pleads with Elizabeth to intervene with her husband. Proctor decides to sign a confession; however, when he realises that it will be made public and used to incriminate his friends and neighbours, he tears up the document. He refuses to allow his name to be exploited in this way. Together with Rebecca Nurse and Martha Corey, Proctor goes to the gallows.

## BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

### Historical setting

*The Crucible* is set in 1692 in the Puritan town of Salem, Massachusetts. Puritans were English Protestants who believed that the Church of England continued to borrow too heavily from the practices and traditions of the Roman Catholic Church and, therefore, had lost its 'purity of vision'. They argued for greater simplicity of worship, rejecting many of the more traditional aspects of the Anglican service, such as the Book of Common Prayer (a prayer book). Puritans valued temperance (not drinking alcohol) and austerity (living simply, with only the possessions they needed), and saw themselves as chosen people, part of a privileged group who had a special covenant (agreement) with God. This mindset made them deeply suspicious of other Christian sects. In *The Crucible*, a furious Parris tells Proctor, 'We are not Quakers here yet, Mr Proctor' (p.35) when the latter expresses a dissenting opinion.

Puritans were unpopular in England and faced persecution under Charles I. About a thousand Puritans fled to America to establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. The rest of the decade saw a large number of Puritans migrate from England to join the new colony. Here they set up 'covenanted' communities, linked by common values and a resolution to abide by God's commandments, as given in the Bible. Throughout the play there are references to these 'covenanted Christians' (p.85). Effectively, Massachusetts functioned as a theocracy where the state's role was to protect the Church and enforce its laws. Those not belonging to the Church were excluded from government.

The Puritan culture was 'strict and sombre' (p. 14), with an emphasis on prayer and hard work. Arthur Miller observes that in an alien, often dangerous environment, Puritans were well served by their commitment and discipline. The strict directives that members of the covenanted communities were required to follow ensured order and unity. This was particularly critical in a setting that presented so many challenges, from clearing and farming the land to subduing local Native American populations. Buttressed by faith, the theocracy's emphasis was on a collective, rather than a singular, mindset. However, Miller argues in the play's preamble



that the witch-hunt unfolded at a point in the colony's development when 'the balance began to turn towards greater individual freedom' (p. 16). As Massachusetts became more established, many of the original social and religious constraints no longer seemed reasonable. In the text, the more free-spirited have started to chafe under the rigorous demands Salem makes of its citizens - for example, John Proctor resents the compulsory weekly attendance at church. Abigail Williams certainly illustrates a more subversive element edging into the culture.

## Author's historical context

Arthur Miller's allegorical play draws on real historical events - the Salem witch trials of the seventeenth century - and was written in response to the disturbing phenomenon known as McCarthyism. In the early 1950s, when Miller was writing the play, the United States was at the height of the Cold War, an undeclared war of suspicion and espionage with the Soviet Union. Communism was despised and feared by many Americans. A number of anti-communist government agencies were established, including the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). After World War II, this committee intensified its efforts to flush out and vilify those viewed as a threat to the American way of life. From 1950, Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy rose to notoriety as an aggressive campaigner against communism, hunting down individuals with ruthless, almost religious, fervour. Civil liberties were suspended and thousands of Americans were blacklisted as communists or communist sympathisers. Many lost their careers, and some even went to prison.

As a liberal democrat, Miller recoiled from the political ideology being championed by the HUAC. In 1956, he was called to testify before the HUAC regarding his own political activities, but he refused to implicate anyone else. In a response that echoes John Proctor's, Miller stated, 'I am trying to, and I will, protect my sense of myself. I could not use the name of another person and bring trouble upon them'. Miller was fined and convicted of contempt, but escaped imprisonment. In the introduction to his *Collected Plays*, Miller identified a fundamental conflict between the new conservatism and the 'free-wheeling iconoclasm' of the country's past, observing with alarm that 'conscience was no longer a private matter but one of state administration' (Miller 1958, p.40).

## Salem witch trials

This conflict between the individual and the state was paralleled in 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts, where the events of the play take place. The Puritan theocracy took the threat of witchcraft seriously, and quite literally. A pervasive fear of the Devil instigated a fanatical purge of those perceived to be under his control. Just as alleged communists were targeted by the HUAC, so too, 300 years earlier, 'witches' had been hunted down and coerced into confessing their association with the Devil. They were also expected to denounce others who had been similarly corrupted. Those who resisted were assumed to be guilty. The accusations were led by a group of children and young women, and resulted in twenty hangings and the jailing of hundreds of innocent people. Eventually the witch-hunt burnt itself out. In 1697 Samuel Sewall, one of the nine judges appointed to hear the trials, made a formal apology in church to members of his congregation - the only judge to do so. Within twenty years, the government had officially acknowledged the injustice of the trials and awarded compensation to the victims and their families. Ultimately, as Miller reveals in his endnote, the power of the Massachusetts theocracy was broken.

It is hard to know exactly why such widespread panic took hold in Salem. The motivation behind the crying-out probably ranged from genuine mass hysteria to malicious self-interest. A repressive, paranoid culture that afforded young people no outlet, coupled with intense religiosity and rivalries within the village, created a toxic mix. Certainly, Miller viewed the witch trials as a salient lesson for his own time. He argues in his note at the beginning of the play that modern America inherited the Puritans' absolute conviction that morality was on their side, and 'it has helped and hurt us' (p. 15). Thus he makes an explicit connection between the past and the present, and implies that the mistakes of the past will continue to resonate unless there is a change in cultural perspective.

# GENRE, STRUCTURE & LANGUAGE

## Genre

*The Crucible* is a historical drama, based on the true story of the infamous Salem witch trials. Miller's voice is evident throughout - in the stage directions and in the extensive commentary that accompanies the text. The playwright offers vivid, insightful descriptions of the period and its politics, and the characters themselves. In his note at the beginning of the text, Miller explains that the play is not a history in the academic sense. Working from the scant primary sources available, he has changed some details and fused several personalities into one, though the characters are based on real individuals. The hero, John Proctor, was one of the victims of the state's crusade against the forces of darkness, as were Rebecca Nurse and Giles Corey. Miller states that the fate of each character 'is exactly that of his historical model' and that there is no-one in the drama who did not play a similar or identical role in real life. He suggests that the play reveals 'the essential nature of one of the strangest and most awful chapters in human history' (p.11).

*The Crucible* is also an allegory. Miller saw the Salem trials as the perfect vehicle through which to express his horror and outrage at analogous events happening in 1950s America. He felt that the modern witch-hunt against communists represented just as shameful and frightening a chapter in history. Rationality and freedom of thought were again being sacrificed as intolerance swamped the political conversation. Thus, Miller's play is a thinly veiled condemnation of an administration that used fear to wield control and repress its citizens. Further, it is a warning that if individuals are unwilling to oppose such 'public terror' (Miller 1958, p.41), genuine, lasting damage will be done to a society.

## Structure

The four-act linear structure of *The Crucible* charts Salem's downward trajectory with grim precision, building the conflict and intensity incrementally. The play has a tight timespan of three months. It commences in late spring 1692. The second act is set eight days later, and the third act takes place

two weeks after that. The drama concludes in the fall. The deterioration in the weather reflects the chill that descends on Salem. As the witch-hunt gathers momentum, more and more individuals are denounced before the Salem court, and the consequences for these hapless individuals escalate. Each of the four acts climaxes with a highly charged confrontation that contributes to the general sense of events spiralling further out of control.

The play has just four settings. All are interiors - Betty Parris' bedroom, the Proctors' common room, the Salem meeting house and the Salem jail - which reinforces the sense of a narrow, insular community, imploding from within. Throughout these scenes, individuals are trapped and denied agency. An inversion of the Puritan charter of self-governance is taking place: ordinary individuals become increasingly disempowered as state powers grow and impose a more punitive centralised authority.

## Language

The historical and geographical setting of *The Crucible* informs Miller's language choices. The speech patterns of the characters emulate the vocabulary and grammar of a different period. For example, they use older verb conjunctions: 'be you foolish, Mary Warren?' (p.27), 'It were a cold house I kept!' (p. 119), 'I am thirty-three time in court' (p.86). They also use 'Mister' and 'Goody' as forms of address.

In seventeenth-century Massachusetts, most of the characters have little formal education. Yet they have an extensive knowledge of the Bible, and this familiarity resonates in their language, which is sprinkled liberally with Biblical references. In court, Proctor urges Mary Warren to 'remember what the angel Raphael said to the boy Tobias' (p.86). Similarly, there is considerable emphasis on the Devil and the threat of hell-fire. The Devil is called by various names, including Lucifer and Satan, and even 'the Old Boy' (p.40), and these frequent references reinforce the fact that this community believes absolutely in the power and personification of evil. Figurative language is also built into the characters' discourse - even a simple farmer such as John Proctor uses imagery. When criticising Thomas Putnam's autocratic approach, Proctor argues, 'This society will not be a bag to swing around your head' (p.33). Samuel Parris defends Reverend Hale's presence in Salem by claiming that 'we may open up the boil of all our troubles today!' (p.43).



Throughout, Miller uses repetition to emphasise the allegorical struggle between good and evil at the heart of the play. Key words such as 'corruption', 'fraud' and 'vengeance' signal the true darkness threatening to engulf Salem. Conversely, heroic characters such as the Proctors are associated with the terms 'honesty' and 'goodness'. Interestingly, each spouse uses these words to describe the other - a testimony to the strength of their bond and their enduring commitment to a moral pathway.

### **Significance of the title**

The idea of a community in conflict is encapsulated in the play's title. A crucible is a metal container in which diverse, sometimes incompatible, elements are melted at high temperatures. Thus, in relation to Salem, the 'crucible' becomes a metaphor for heated tensions leading to conflict, a diabolical meltdown that destroys the town from within. In an oblique reference to the title, Danforth tells Proctor that 'we burn a hot fire here; it melts down all concealment' (p.81). However, rather than exposing the truth, the witch-hunt unleashes fear, self-interest and dissension.

Subliminally, a crucible also evokes witchcraft with its similarity to a cauldron, a vessel also used for heating or burning, as well as mixing herbs and potions. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, a cauldron is the means through which the witches conjure spells that create mischief and pain.

## ACT-BY-ACT ANALYSIS

### Act One (pp. 13-50)

**Summary:** *Betty Parris lies ill and rumours of witchcraft are rife in Salem; Reverend Hale is called; Abigail attempts to renew her relationship with John Proctor; Hale questions Abigail and Tituba, - Abigail leads the crying-out.*

The opening act establishes the background to the conflict that will tear Salem apart. For readers of the play (as opposed to an audience watching a live performance) Miller's commentary provides valuable insight into the Puritan context. Similarly, his descriptions of key personalities when they first appear add to our understanding.

In Act One, the various loyalties and allegiances that make up the character of the town are brought into focus with the looming crisis. Land is the real currency in the colony, and many are quick to take issue with, or advantage of, others. Property disputes are common - Giles Corey has regularly litigated against his neighbours - and boundaries are continually under challenge. John Proctor and Giles Corey form a natural alliance against Thomas Putnam and Samuel Parris, both of whom are quickly established as unsympathetic characters. Putnam's greed and strong sense of entitlement are evident in the acrimonious exchange with Proctor about land borders. A bitter, vindictive man, Putnam is used to getting his own way and tries to use his wealth and status to bully others. Parris is also motivated by self-interest, and his standing in the town is poor; he is convinced there is a party committed to deposing him. These tensions underscore the factional divisions and hostilities that simmer behind Salem's self-righteous facade. The witch-hunt will give those with axes to grind, such as Putnam and Parris, the opportunity to act on their grievances.

Ignorance of the girls' condition invites speculation about 'unnatural causes' (p.18) and it is Putnam who first insists that the supernatural is involved. By contrast, Rebecca Nurse tries to diffuse alarmism by advocating common sense and patience. Her phrase 'silly season' (p.32) is a gentle reminder - usually forgotten in the Puritan context - of the volatile nature

of adolescence. Mindful of the latent acrimony between neighbours, Nurse takes the long view and expresses unease over the prospect of further dissent. Her advice to Parris, 'Let us rather blame ourselves' (p.33), is interesting, for while it reflects the Puritan belief that any affliction is a punishment for guilt, it also steers her neighbours away from the metaphysical. Rebecca's parting exchange with Parris foreshadows the sinister trajectory that lies ahead: 'I go to God for you' / 'I hope you do not mean we go to Satan here!' (p.43). The archetypal conflict between good and evil will indeed be played out in Salem, though not necessarily along the theological lines anticipated by the authorities.

Abigail's forceful personality and wilfulness become apparent in this scene. She coerces the other girls into silence by threatening them with a 'pointy reckoning' (p.26) and refuses to accept that her relationship with Proctor is over. Undeterred by Elizabeth's public disapproval or her own failure to secure another position in the village, Abigail's 'concentrated desire' (p.28) places Proctor in a difficult position. He views the girl with some sympathy, as evidenced by his use of the diminutive 'Abby', but his angry reaction when she attacks Elizabeth reveals his true loyalties. Proctor's attempt to compartmentalise the two mutually exclusive aspects of his life is doomed to failure. The public and the private will converge when Abigail's hatred of Elizabeth provides her with the incentive to accuse her former mistress of witchcraft.

Abigail is shrewd enough to take ownership of the crying-out, seeing it as an opportunity to move from a position of guilt to one of victimhood. She is aided in this by the presence of Tituba, Parris' black slave, who knows from bitter experience that 'trouble in this house eventually lands on her back' (p.17). Abigail adroitly positions herself as the dupe of Tituba's malicious power. It is Tituba who is responsible for Abigail's past improprieties, such as laughing at prayer; worse, she has forced Abigail to drink blood and 'dream corruptions' (p.46). Faced with a choice between hanging and becoming 'God's instrument' (p.48), Tituba can do little but play to the collective bias of those who interrogate her.

### Key point

Salem is ripe for conflict, and a number of hostile elements in the town combine to ignite the witch-hunt. Fear of the supernatural is so strong that those who advocate a rational, calm approach are quickly silenced.

- Q** How does Miller create a sense of time and place in Act One?
- Q** Hale maintains that the hunt for witches is a 'most precise science' (p.40) based on evidence. In reality, how predisposed is he to discovering witchcraft?
- Q** Why might Proctor have been attracted to Abigail?

## Act Two (pp.51-75)

**Summary:** *The witch trials have commenced; Elizabeth urges Proctor to go to Salem and tell the court what he knows; Hale questions the Proctors; Rebecca, Martha and Elizabeth are arrested; Proctor vows to expose Abigail's lies.*

Act Two is set in the Proctors' common room. The opening interaction between John and Elizabeth Proctor is laced with tension - while each wants to please their spouse, it takes little for the simmering resentment over John's affair to rise to the surface. Proctor despairs of ever regaining his wife's trust: 'you forget nothin' and forgive nothin' (p.55). The events in Salem ignite another conflict between them. Abigail's role in the crying-out cannot be ignored, but Proctor balks at involving himself again with the girl and takes refuge in anger: 'I cannot speak but I am doubted, every moment judged for lies, as though I come into a court when I come into this house!' (p.55). Proctor's protest has an ironic resonance in light of what lies ahead for him.

Yet the acrimony between the couple recedes as the witch-hunt closes in. Both Proctors are shocked by the speed with which events are taking place. The arrival of the Deputy-Governor and other Boston judges to establish an official court in Salem brings home the gravity of the situation. Transgressions such as vagrancy and alcoholism have become hanging offences; the 'half-witted' (p.60) Goody Osburn is sentenced to death on the basis of mumbling and sleeping in ditches. The girls' 'weighty work' (p.58) in naming alleged offenders does not extend to providing proof; theirs are simply random accusations. Mary's description of the hysteria that takes hold of the group demonstrates the infectious power of suggestion. The 'misty coldness' (p.57) climbing up her back and the clamping sensation around her neck, culminating in a screaming voice that is her own, turns 'pretence' (p.94) into reality.



Mary gives a poppet to Elizabeth in good faith, but the image takes on sinister connotations in the context of the witch trials. Proctor asks in bewilderment, 'What signifies a poppet?' (p.69). At face value, it is a harmless token of childhood. But the poppet signifies the many complex layers that are working against the victims of the fraud. A poppet is a child's plaything, thus serving as a perverse reminder of all that the 'children' (p.92) making accusations are not; precocity and deception have replaced innocence. In the superstitious eyes of the court, the poppet represents black magic, specifically Barbadian voodoo. It also symbolises evil in the real sense, given that it is the malevolent ruse by which Abigail incriminates Elizabeth. Abigail's readiness to self-harm illustrates how committed she is to Elizabeth's destruction.

Hale's appearance underlines the importance of the Proctors presenting a united front. To the minister's credit, he is acting outside the court's ordinance and trying to form an objective view of those charged; however, the Proctors are right to see him as a potential threat. They present as a team when Proctor sheepishly declares that they are able to recite all of the commandments between them. Elizabeth's arrest galvanises Proctor into action. Ripping up the warrant is his first real gesture of defiance, and it foreshadows the ripping of his confession later in the play. Hale is distraught, but still desperately looks for a rational explanation - albeit from a Puritan perspective. Only a 'proportionate' (p.73) cause could have provoked such a baffling response from the Almighty as to have worthy women such as Elizabeth Proctor and Rebecca Nurse indicted.

Proctor's subsequent confrontation with Mary Warren makes clear the lengths to which he will go to protect his wife, promising to 'fall like an ocean on that court!' (p.72). He is prepared to ruin himself, rather than let Elizabeth be condemned: 'I will bring your guts into your mouth but that goodness will not die for me!' (p.74). Guilt and remorse overwhelm him as he confronts the implications of his adultery.

### Key point

One of the greatest ironies in the text is that the Puritans founded the colony of Massachusetts to escape persecution and to worship in freedom. Yet not only is Salem intent on denying their citizens freedom of thought or expression, it also victimises innocent people without evidence.

- Q** What concerns does Hale have regarding the Proctors' religious commitment? What does this tell us about Salem society?
- Q** How does Proctor's faith differ from Hale's?

## Act Three (pp.77-105)

**Summary:** *Proctor leads a deputation to court; Mary Warren confesses to fraud and is interrogated by Danforth; Proctor tries to expose Abigail but fails; Hale condemns the trials.*

The interrogation of Martha Corey that opens Act Three shows the bizarre position in which the accused find themselves. In response to Martha's claim that she does not know what a witch is, she is asked, 'How do you know, then, that you are not a witch?' (p.78). The onus here is placed on those charged to disprove the unprovable. Similarly, Parris' assertion later in the act - 'We are here, Your Honour, precisely to discover what no one has ever seen' (p.93) - illustrates the irrational perversity of the witch-hunt.

The Salem meeting house has been transformed into the 'highest court of the supreme government of this province' (p.79). The Deputy-Governor's description is calculated to provoke deference in the God-fearing and dread in those who dare to challenge it. Danforth's priority is to protect the legal process under his jurisdiction. The startling figures he gives Francis Nurse reveal the magnitude of the witch-hunt and the speed with which it has accelerated. It is just two weeks since Elizabeth's arrest, and there are 400 people in jail across the province and seventy-two condemned to hang. The court's investment in the girls' testimony is enormous, and the desperate deputation formed by John Proctor and his friends on behalf of their wives is doomed from the start. The farmers are met with suspicion and resistance by the court officials; Hale is the only one who tries to ensure a fair hearing.

Danforth is an ideologue - a man of rigid faith and uncompromising will. He and Judge Hathorne are only prepared to deal in stark polarities. Their view is that 'all innocent and Christian people are happy for the courts in Salem!' (p.85). Those who are 'gloomy' (p.85) must therefore be working with the Devil. In response to Hale's observation that there is a 'prodigious fear' of the court in the colony, Danforth is blunt: 'then there is a prodigious guilt in the country' (p.88). The Deputy-Governor's rationale identifies witchcraft

as a uniquely evil offence: it not only strikes at the heart of the theocracy but is also 'ipso facto, on its face and by its nature, an invisible crime' (p.90), witnessed only by the witch and the so-called victim. This means that the court must rely entirely on the victims' testimony, as there are no witnesses to be summoned in defence of the accused. Ordinary citizens are completely disempowered by the process as resistance is equated with guilt.

Although Giles' allegation against Thomas Putnam points to a far less noble agenda than the fight between good and evil, Mary's confession is regarded as another cunning ruse of the Devil. Her excuse - 'it were only sport in the beginning' (p.96) - seems completely inadequate, given that people's lives are at stake. Yet, with the exception of Abigail, it is probably what most of the girls thought at first. Mary's inability to pretend on cue reinforces the insidious context in which the crying-out has occurred. Instigated by Abigail, the emotion is picked up by the other girls with well-coordinated teamwork, leaving a weak personality such as Mary vulnerable. When she tries to explain 'I - have no sense of it now' (p.95), her halting account contains the truth for those who choose to hear it.

Abigail is brazen enough to call the court's bluff, deflecting Danforth's interrogation even after Proctor has incriminated himself. Proctor's frantic disclosure of the 'whore's vengeance' (p.98) is insufficient to challenge the Deputy-Governor's readiness to believe what is most expedient. His deliberate positioning of Elizabeth so that she is facing Proctor's and Abigail's backs is an uncompromising strategy that gives her no room to manoeuvre. For such an apparently 'weighty judge' (p.80), Danforth's refusal to accept the possibility that Elizabeth is lying to protect her husband is a damning indictment of his impartiality.

The act's climax sees Abigail manipulate the dynamic so effectively that Proctor is arrested for plotting to overthrow the court, and she again becomes the victim. Miller's stage directions describe Abigail as she appears to the authorities, alluding ironically to her 'infinite charity' as she forgives Mary's 'treachery' (p.104). Throughout this escalating drama, Reverend Hale's voice has become increasingly marginalised, but his passionate denunciation of the court's proceedings sets the scene for the conflict of values in the final act.

### Key point

John Proctor's failure to gain justice for Elizabeth and their friends demonstrates how corrupt and fundamentally flawed this legal process is. Individuals have little defence against a repressive administration that works from a position of self-serving inflexibility.

- Q** Compare the responses of Danforth, Hathorne and Parris in this act. Who do you see as the greater villain?
- Q** What does Proctor mean when he tells Danforth that 'God damns our kind especially ... we will burn together!' (p.105)?

### Act Four (pp.107-26)

**Summary:** *There is growing opposition to the trials; Elizabeth and Proctor meet in prison; Proctor agrees to sign a confession but recoils from its publication; he chooses to die with the others who will not confess.*

The fourth act opens three months later, and Miller presents a substantially weakened authority. The Salem judges are increasingly finding themselves in conflict with the community they purport to serve. While many of the accused have complied with the court, the few courageous individuals who refuse to confess are having a significant impact.

Both Danforth and Hathorne are guilty of massive self-delusion. They deny the discontent in Salem and are equally dismissive of rebellion in Andover. Danforth's refusal to address the implications of Abigail's disappearance is an even more blatant evasion. The Deputy-Governor is a sophisticated man, but his unwillingness to look objectively at evidence highlights again the fanatical sense of purpose that cuts across reason. Parris is more motivated by practicalities, arguing that the targeting of so many decent people - as opposed to vagrants and village riff-raff - could result in a loss of support in the town. In response, Danforth offers the perverse argument that pardoning innocent people represents a greater injustice than hanging them, given that twelve have already gone to the gallows. One of the many ironies in the text is the way Danforth exhorts Hale and Parris to behave 'like men' and stand by God's law 'as you are bound by Heaven to do' (p. 113), yet the public terror



of the witch-hunt itself attempts to rob the victims of their consciences. Citizens are forced to perjure themselves; even good men such as Hale are reduced to the status of impotent bystanders.

This is the critical choice that Proctor faces at the play's end - to stand as a man of conscience or submit to oppression. Elizabeth's admission that many have confessed demonstrates that most of the accused are too weak or too frightened to resist. However, Proctor recognises the hypocrisy underpinning Danforth's proposal to publicise his confession: 'is there no good penitence but it be public?' (pp. 123-4). This gives him the strength to reject the self-serving ethos of the court and rise above the personal guilt that has threatened to undermine everything he stands for. Through characters such as Proctor, Miller shows that it is possible for those with integrity to resist the tide. The final word goes to Elizabeth, who has mounted a silent revolt against the witch-hunts, and who best understands the struggle of conscience that her husband has fought: 'He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him!' (p. 126). Although Proctor's death is a tragedy, it is not meaningless, and the 'new sun' pouring in upon Elizabeth's face symbolises his victory over self-doubt and tyranny.

### Key point

In defying the theocracy, Proctor reclaims his conscience and his essential 'goodness'. This choice not only affirms what Proctor stands for but also crystallises the true nature of the threat that confronts Salem.

- Q Do you agree with Hale that 'life is God's most precious gift; no principle, however glorious, may justify the taking of it' (p.115)?
- Q How much influence does Elizabeth have over her husband's final decision?

# CHARACTERS & RELATIONSHIPS

## John Proctor

### Key quotes

'Nothing's spoiled by giving them this lie that were not rotten long before.' (p. 118)

'Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life!' (p.124)

John Proctor is a farmer in his mid-thirties. He is respected in Salem, but his reputation as an independent thinker and plain-speaking individual, intolerant of hypocrisy and cant, has led to ambivalence about him in some quarters. Miller notes that in Proctor's presence 'a fool felt his foolishness instantly' (p.27). He is not easily intimidated, and his reluctance to be drawn into factional infighting generates resentment among the more divisive elements in the town. Proctor tells Thomas Putnam irritably, 'we vote by name in this society, not by acreage' (p.33). His contempt for Reverend Parris is also obvious. He particularly dislikes the minister's hell-fire-and-brimstone version of religion and his barely disguised tendency to put his own interests before those of the congregation.

In fact, by Salem's standards, Proctor is an indifferent Christian. Intermittent church attendance and an inability to reel off the commandments suggest that his real priorities are running his farm and providing for his family. However, in the context of the witch-hunt, Proctor's irregularity sets him up for criticism, working against him when he is under scrutiny. As Hale notes, 'there is a softness in your record, sir, a softness' (p.64).

Proctor is a flawed hero, a generally upstanding man who has committed one grave sin. He cares deeply about his wife and bitterly regrets hurting her. He knows that his relationship with Abigail Williams has revealed weakness, and Elizabeth rightly asserts that 'the magistrate sits in your heart that judges you' (p.55). Proctor's conversation with Abigail in Act One reveals his determination to distance himself from her. While he reluctantly admits that he may think of her 'softly' from 'time to time' (p.29), Proctor underestimates

Abigail's duplicity and the extent of her vitriol. Even Elizabeth tentatively points out that he has 'a faulty understanding of young girls' (p.60).

Notwithstanding Proctor's impartiality and instinctive capacity for leadership, there is little in his background to prepare him for the confrontation with the authorities that will eventually take his life. He is an unwilling martyr. His heroism emerges gradually as, like many, he is drawn into the witch-hunt despite himself. Naturally sceptical, he is astonished at the escalation of events. Elizabeth's arrest is the catalyst that sets him against the court, and his readiness to expose himself as a lecher reveals the lengths to which he will go to save her. However, in accusing Abigail, he damns himself.

Proctor's obligation to family and keen sense of his own unworthiness initially tempt him to profess his 'guilt'. Proctor wants to live, and is prepared to draw on his past offence in order to justify recanting. Paradoxically, it is precisely Proctor's 'weighty name' (p.123) in the village that underpins the value of his confession to the court. Yet the price of freedom is the loss of personal integrity. When Proctor discovers that his signed confession will be made public in order to vindicate the court and incriminate others, he realises that he is being used and his legacy will be one of shame. By 'selling' his friends, he will no longer be able to honourably teach his three sons 'to walk like men in the world' (p.124).

Proctor's fundamental honesty will not allow him to be complicit in the clear abuse of power being championed by the courts. His refusal to relinquish his name to Danforth is significant, for his name symbolises his sense of self, the essence of who he truly is. Without this, Proctor knows he has nothing: 'How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!' (p.124). This cry from the heart encapsulates the dilemma of all good people who are forced to make the invidious choice between their consciences and their lives.

### Key point

Arthur Miller presents Proctor's death as that of a heroic man who maintains his integrity, even to the point of death, in the face of a demonstrably corrupt authority.

## Elizabeth Proctor

### Key quotes

'Suspicion kissed you when I did; I never knew how I should say my love.' (p.119)

'I will be your only wife, or no wife at all!' (p.61)

Elizabeth is John Proctor's wife and a devout Christian of great integrity. Like many with a clear moral compass, she is inclined to be judgemental of those who are less constant - a quality that does not enable her to forgive easily. Despite the angst this has caused her husband, Proctor respects and admires Elizabeth's strength of character. He tells Danforth that his wife has never lied - literally cannot. When Proctor is racked with indecision about whether to confess to witchcraft, he is aware that nothing would induce Elizabeth to perjure herself under the same circumstances.

Elizabeth has been plagued by uncertainty in her marriage. An introvert with a tendency towards melancholy - Proctor says to her at the beginning of Act two, 'I think you're sad again' (p.52) - Elizabeth finds it difficult to demonstrate affection openly. Her husband's infidelity has reinforced her painful, secret fear that she is 'so plain, so poorly made' that 'no honest love' (p.119) could come to her. Having confronted Proctor with her suspicions, she has withdrawn emotionally, letting her mistrust fester and her hurt escalate.

It is not in Elizabeth's nature to take the easy way. Once the extent of the witch-hunt becomes clear, she urges the reluctant Proctor to go to Salem and reveal what he knows. Like her husband, she is amazed and disturbed by the number of arrests, and her natural honesty demands an immediate response to Abigail's private admission of fraud. Similarly, Elizabeth is courageous enough to stand her ground with Hale, insisting it is beyond belief that 'the Devil may own a woman's soul ... when she keeps an upright way' (p.66). Her challenge goes to the heart of the mania that grips Salem. The sheer absurdity of individuals leading good and purposeful lives while secretly bound to Satan is a conundrum that too few authorities feel the need to probe.

Once accused, Elizabeth's fear is very real - not only for herself, but also for her children. Significantly, her first instinct is to turn to her husband,

pleading, 'Oh, John, bring me [home] soon' (p.72). Her love for him comes to the fore in the courthouse when she lies to protect his reputation. This is a turning point for her. By lying, Elizabeth is abdicating the moral high ground that has guided her choices up until now. Implicit in the action is the realisation that life can throw up unexpected complexities, and that good people may behave in ways that are contrary to their beliefs.

In the couple's last painful exchange, Elizabeth concedes that she has sins of her own. She is determined to shoulder a share of blame for the difficulties in their marriage: 'it needs a cold wife to prompt lechery' (p.119). Knowing that her forgiveness remains vitally important to Proctor, Elizabeth does not deliberately withhold it when he asks for her approval. Her ambivalence at his decision to confess is based not on a lack of love or empathy, but on the accurate understanding that her forgiveness will not suffice if he cannot forgive himself: 'it is not my soul, John, it is yours' (p. 119). Elizabeth maintains her faith in Proctor's 'goodness' (p. 119) to the end, and she makes it clear that her love is unconditional. Her insistence that her husband is a good-man gives him the strength to finally act as one.

### Key point

Elizabeth's ability to genuinely forgive her husband involves a recognition of her own failings.

## Abigail Williams

### Key quotes

'A wild thing may say wild things.' (p.29)

'This girl has always struck me false!' (Hale, p.100)

Abigail Williams is a seventeen-year-old orphan living with her uncle, Samuel Parris. Previously, she worked as the Proctors' maidservant. Abigail's parents were killed by Native Americans, and the fact that she witnessed their horrific deaths gives her a strange authority over the other girls. Abigail is the undisputed leader of the group and easily bullies her peers into submission. She is a risk-taker, with a secret contempt for Salem's constraints - as her

willingness to dabble in conjuring demonstrates. In this, she is motivated by her own private vengeance against Elizabeth Proctor.

If Elizabeth exemplifies the virtuous wife, Abigail embodies the carnal. In the context of Puritan society-where such high value is placed on chastity and righteous living - Abigail is aberrant, set apart by her sexual precocity and wilfulness. The Deputy-Governor's view of her as an innocent 'child' underscores the expectation that young unmarried women in Salem behave in a submissive and compliant fashion. The contrast between Danforth's presumption and the reality that Proctor has experienced could not be more marked. Part of the attraction Abigail feels towards Proctor lies in the fact that, with him, she has been able to be 'a wild thing' (p.29). Their relationship entails breaking the rules, and perhaps this is the real source of its importance to her. She tells her former lover, 'I look for John Proctor that took me from my sleep and put knowledge in my heart' (p.30).

In one sense, Abigail is a victim of the Puritan ethos. She is too intelligent not to recognise the hypocrisy that underpins Salem's conventions, and too much of a rebel not to resent it. However, open defiance is impossible, and therefore she has learnt to manipulate and deceive. Miller describes her as having an 'endless capacity for dissembling' (p.18). Abigail has a ruthless ability to capitalise on a given situation and turn it to her advantage, redirecting blame onto others. She does this in Act One, with Tituba, and again in Act Three, when Mary Warren tries to expose her. The crying-out gives Abigail unprecedented power. She experiences the exhilarating sensation of being regarded by the town as 'a saint', and the crowd in the courtroom parts 'like the sea for Israel' (p.53) when she enters, greeting her with a mixture of awe and fear.

Abigail seems untouched by any scruples as to the diabolical fraud she is perpetuating, even though her lies facilitate the imprisonment and execution of innocent people. Her arrogance grows to such an extent that she even feels she can threaten the Deputy-Governor with impunity. Abigail's credibility with the court is, of course, predicated entirely on the assumption that she is virtuous and dutiful. When Proctor damages this credibility, she starts to lose ground. It is telling that Hale refers to her as a 'harlot' (p.114) in Act Four. Abigail is shrewd enough to recognise when the tide has turned against her, and her opportunism extends to robbing her uncle and absconding with his savings.

## Key point

Abigail covertly but decisively rejects the town's pious values and uses its God-fearing character as a weapon against it.

## John Hale

### Key quotes

'Theology, sir, is a fortress; no crack in a fortress may be accounted small.' (p. 65)

'You are a broken minister.' (Proctor, p.72)

The extent to which Reverend Hale changes through the play - shifting from one of the instigators of the witch-hunt to profound disillusionment with the trials - sets him apart from the other characters. Hale is a man of learning who approaches his task in Salem with the academic enthusiasm of 'a young doctor on his first call' (p.40). Although he believes passionately in the existence of the supernatural, he makes it clear that he will not be swayed by ignorant misconceptions: 'We cannot look to superstition in this. The Devil is precise' (p.41). Being called upon to diagnose witchcraft is a 'beloved errand' (p.37), and Hale sees his mission as perpetuating light, goodness and its preservation' (p.40). This makes his growing realisation that the crying-out represents something else entirely all the more painful.

Hale recognises that he is an outsider in Salem and takes it upon himself to visit the villagers to form 'a clear opinion' (p.62) of those accused. The charging of Rebecca Nurse and Elizabeth Proctor leaves the naturally fair-minded minister in a 'fever of guilt and uncertainty' (p.73). When Proctor and his friends present their deputation to the court, Hale does what he can to encourage an equitable hearing, questioning Parris furiously: 'Is every defence an attack upon the court?' (p.85). However, it becomes clear to Hale that there is no means by which the accused may challenge the process or prove their innocence. He watches with horror as justice and reason are overruled in favour of lies and self-interest.

Ultimately, Hale is as powerless as those whose death warrants he signs. He loses the confidence of Deputy-Governor Danforth and Judge Hathorne;

indeed, the latter suspects him of preaching rebellion in the neighbouring town of Andover. Hale returns to Salem in the desperate hope that lives can still be saved and pleads with the condemned to confess. He warns Elizabeth that 'it may well be God damns a liar less than he that throws away his life for pride' (p. 115). Hale's anguish is in sharp contrast to his former certainty; in this sense, he may be viewed as another casualty of the witch-hunt.

## Deputy-Governor Danforth

### Key quote

'I should hang ten thousand that dared to rise against the law, and an ocean of salt tears could not melt the resolution of the statutes.' (p. 113)

Deputy-Governor Danforth is an autocratic figure whose religious conviction and sense of purpose are absolute. Miller describes him as having 'some humour and sophistication', but this is in no way allowed to interfere with an 'exact loyalty' (p.78) to what he sees as his duty. Inflexibility and stubbornness blind him to the fraud being perpetrated by Abigail and the other girls. It becomes evident that Danforth's primary agenda is to protect the court and the theocracy whose interests it serves. He works from the erroneous premise that 'no uncorrupted man may fear this court' (p.88). His decision to issue warrants for all those who have testified to the good character of Elizabeth, Rebecca and Martha highlights his singlemindedness, as well as his ruthless determination to suppress dissent.

The final act demonstrates Danforth's hypocrisy. He refuses to concede that Abigail's disappearance has compromised the state's case and will not countenance postponing the hangings: 'postponement now speaks a floundering on my part' (p.113). If he has any private misgivings, hubris does not allow them to be aired. Furthermore, although Danforth maintains that he is not empowered to trade Proctor's life 'for a lie' (p.122), he is, in fact, willing to bargain. He knows that Proctor's confession has great strategic value, even if it does not incriminate others. Though Danforth continues to insist on the righteousness of his position, the corrupt legal process he heads has lost all credibility by the play's end.



## Samuel Parris

### Key quotes

'I see no light of God in that man.' (Proctor, p.63)

'Mr Parris, you are a brainless man.' (Danforth, p.III)

Reverend Samuel Parris is pompous and self-interested, an unpopular minister who has alienated many with his preaching about hell-fire and 'bloody damnation' (p.34). He is also the first minister to carp about his salary and demand ownership of the house provided for him. Proctor, who despises him, asserts that 'the last meeting I were at you spoke so long on deeds and mortgages I thought it were an auction' (p.35). For his part, Parris feels underappreciated, even persecuted, by his 'stiff-necked' (p.20) congregation. He tells his niece, 'there is a faction that is sworn to drive me from my pulpit' (p.19).

When Parris discovers the girls dancing in the forest and is subsequently confronted with his daughter's strange sickness, his primary concern is his own reputation. He is desperate to defuse the potentially explosive charge of witchcraft, fearing that he will lose his position if he is implicated in any way. Accordingly, he sends for Reverend Hale as a 'precaution only' (p.22), hoping to disprove the rumours. Once the crying-out commences, Parris sycophantically allies himself with the court, but - ever mindful of his own interests - argues in the final act against the hanging of those who continue to profess their innocence. He is less concerned with the miscarriage of justice than with the fact that ensuing dissent in the town might place his own life in jeopardy.

## Rebecca Nurse

### Key quote

'Believe me ... if Rebecca Nurse be tainted, then nothing's left to stop the whole green world from burning.' (Hale, p.67)

One of the undisputed martyrs of the purge, Rebecca Nurse exemplifies all of the Christian virtues that her society professes to value. She is esteemed

throughout the colony as a woman of compassion and wisdom, 'the very brick and mortar of the church' (p.67). Interestingly, Rebecca challenges the assumption that the explanation for Betty Parris' sickness lies in the supernatural, warning that there is 'a prodigious danger in the seeking of loose spirits' (p.33). Recognising the potential for division in the community, Rebecca fears that escalating panic may stir up factional interests. Rather than looking to the Devil, she suggests 'let us go to God for the cause of it' (p.33), making a clear - and prescient - distinction between temporal and spiritual authorities.

Hence, even from the outset Rebecca is presented as a dissenting voice, set apart from the status quo. Her subsequent refusal to comply with the court's directives makes her a victim of the state's tyranny. Like Proctor, she will not compromise her sense of self to make a false confession. Unlike Proctor, at no point does she vacillate or prevaricate: 'Why, it is a lie ... how may I damn myself? I cannot, I cannot' (p.121). Rebecca's death is one of the most flagrant examples of the injustice being perpetrated in Salem, and her martyrdom robs the witch-hunt of any public validity.

## Giles Corey

### Key quote

'They say he give them but two words. "More weight," he says. And died.' (Elizabeth, p.118)

Giles Corey is in his eighties, but age has not robbed him of his curiosity or determination. His outspoken and combative nature has placed him in many contentious situations in the past. Not intimidated by power or authority and ever mindful of his rights, Giles has taken neighbours to court thirty-three times. Danforth complements him on his 'very well phrased' (p.86) deposition. However, in the context of the hysteria that grips Salem, Giles' tendency to speak first and think later spells disaster for his wife. Drawing attention to Martha's taste for reading makes her vulnerable to the disgruntled Walcott's charge that she has bewitched his pigs with her books.

Miller calls Giles 'a crank and a nuisance, but withal a deeply innocent and brave man' (p.43). In the manner of his death, his understanding of

how the law works translates into extraordinary courage. Giles knows he cannot be condemned a wizard 'without he answer the indictment aye or nay' (p. 118) and, by remaining mute, he dies a Christian and protects his estate for his sons.

## **Judge Hathorne**

Described as 'a bitter, remorseless Salem judge' (p.78), Hathorne is a harsh figure, determined to protect his own authority under Danforth and sensitive regarding the status of the court. His role is crucial in Act Three when he intervenes after evidence of Abigail's sinful dancing emerges. Realising that Danforth is starting to have doubts, Hathorne seizes control of Mary's interrogation. By discrediting her testimony, he passes the advantage back to Abigail - who takes it. Hathorne is a cunning questioner. For example, when Martha Corey asserts her innocence, claiming not to know what a witch is, he retaliates: 'How do you know, then, that you are not a witch?' (p.77). Similarly, he bids Mary pretend to faint, after she claims she can, hoping to prove her a liar.

## **Tituba**

Parris' Barbadian slave has the ambiguous distinction of being thought psychic by some of the superstitious villagers. She is consulted by Abigail and Ruth Putnam, both of whom are prepared to dabble in black magic for their own purposes. Tituba is shocked by the accusation that she might hurt Betty or that she was 'gathering souls for the Devil' (p.46), when it was Abigail who asked her to conjure with blood. Threatened with hanging, Tituba confesses to her 'crimes' and her elaborate fantasy of being tempted to kill Parris reveals just how much she hates her master. She absorbs Putnam's suggestion of Good and Osburn as likely names, accusing them both and paving the way for Abigail to initiate the crying-out.

## Section 2: *The Dressmaker*

### OVERVIEW

#### About the author

Rosalie Ham is a contemporary Australian writer of novels, plays and short stories. Born in 1955, she grew up on a farm in Jerilderie, New South Wales, and has drawn extensively on this farming background in her writing. All of her four novels are set in small rural communities, and explore the social dynamics among people living in this potentially claustrophobic context.

Ham wrote *The Dressmaker*, her debut novel, as part of a writing course at RMIT University. It was first published in the year 2000 to commercial and critical acclaim - the novel was shortlisted for the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction at the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and was a finalist for State Library Victoria's Most Popular Novel. It has also been made into a successful film.

Ham has written three other novels: *Summer at Mount Hope* (2005), *There Should Be More Dancing* (2011) and *The Year of the Farmer* (2018).

#### Synopsis

Thirty-year-old Tilly Dunnage returns to her home town of Dungatar after an absence of twenty years. She has lived and worked in Europe as a dressmaker. Tilly finds her mother, Molly, living in squalor and ostracised by the town.

As a ten-year-old, Tilly (then known as Myrtle) was implicated in the accidental death of a fellow pupil, Stewart Pettyman. She was bullied by Stewart because of her illegitimacy; in the incident that resulted in his death, Tilly stepped aside when the boy charged at her, and he crashed into a brick wall and broke his neck. Blamed for the accident by Evan Pettyman - the powerful shire president and Tilly's biological father - Tilly was separated from her mother and sent away to school in Melbourne.

At first, Dungatar treats Tilly's homecoming with suspicion and hostility. Her only friends are Sergeant Farrat, the policeman, and Teddy McSwiney, the popular football hero. McSwiney falls in love with Tilly and, despite her caution, she starts to reciprocate his feelings. After making a wedding gown for Gertrude (Trudy) Pratt, a local girl, Tilly wins grudging acceptance in the town and builds up a thriving dressmaking business.

Trudy - now Mrs William Beaumont - establishes the Dungatar Social Club with her mother-in-law, Elsbeth. A number of events are planned, including a ball, for which Tilly makes the dresses. Tilly attends the ball with Teddy, but is shunned by the other guests. Afterwards, Tilly confides in Teddy and the pair decide to marry. In a foolhardy gesture designed to reassure Tilly that they have nothing to fear, Teddy jumps into a grain truck that he mistakenly thinks is full of wheat, and he suffocates. Tilly is blamed by the townspeople, who again turn their back on the Dunnages. A new dressmaker, Una Pleasance, is brought to town.

Approximately a year after Teddy's death, Molly has a strange dream about a baby. Tilly tells her mother that she had a son in Paris: Pablo, who died at seven months. Mother and daughter are reconciled. Shortly afterwards, Molly has a bad fall as the result of a stroke and dies. Distraught, Tilly vows revenge against the townspeople who have made their lives such a misery.

As Una Pleasance's shortcomings have become painfully clear, the Social Club asks Tilly to make the costumes for the forthcoming drama eisteddfod. Seeing an opportunity, Tilly encourages Trudy to choose ludicrous Baroque costumes for Dungatar's production of *Macbeth*.

A series of bizarre - in some cases, fatal - accidents involving several of the town's prominent citizens, including Evan Pettyman, leads to the arrival of an investigating district inspector. However, he finds nothing untoward. In the meantime, rehearsals for the play go from bad to worse, with director Trudy becoming increasingly irrational. On the day of the eisteddfod, the cast travel to Winyerp without her; not surprisingly, their performance is a disaster. In their absence, Tilly deliberately sets fire to her own house, but makes sure that the blaze will spread. She then leaves for Melbourne. When the townspeople return, Dungatar has been burnt to the ground.

## BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

### Australia in the 1950s

*The Dressmaker* is set in the early 1950s when the Commonwealth of Australia was still a very young country, geographically remote and culturally unsophisticated. Commercial air travel was uncommon, and the long sea voyage to Europe or America added to Australia's isolation. The extensive travel that Tilly has done was rare.

Australia was entering into a period of prosperity and transition. The huge influx of postwar migrants brought economic growth and ethnic diversity, as well as fresh attitudes. America's emergence as the dominant postwar power meant that there was a cultural and political shift towards the United States. American popular culture was making its mark through cinema and music. In the text, Teddy takes Tilly and Molly to see the film *Sunset Boulevard*; there is also reference to JD Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* and to the musical *South Pacific*.

Even so, change was slower in country Australia, which essentially remained an Anglo-centric monoculture. Before television and the internet, rural society had limited exposure to new ideas-reinforcing conservatism and convention. Gender roles were clearly delineated, and few women had aspirations beyond marriage - Gertrude Pratt is typical. Once married, they became financially dependent on their husbands. The expectation was that they stay at home with the children.

Australia prided itself on its egalitarianism, but social divisions were prevalent, no less in the country than in the cities. These are evident in *The Dressmaker*. As Dungatar's night-cart man, Edward McSwiney is at the bottom of the social pecking order. Conversely, Elsbeth Beaumont considers herself superior to the rest of the town because she married a grazier's son and owns land. Even though Alvin Pratt is well-off, Elsbeth objects to William's marriage on the basis that Gertrude's father is a shop owner.

The novel also references aspects of Australian society peculiar to the times. For example, restrictive licensing laws meant that hotels were obliged to close at six o'clock. However, Sergeant Farrat turns a blind eye to the law and, after giving Fred Bundle a hint to wind up, he leaves the Station Hotel knowing full well that the Saturday-night drinking will continue.

## The wheatbelt

The fictitious town of Dungatar and its neighbours, Winyerp and Itheca, are located in the Victorian wheatbelt. This inland agricultural region, north-west of Melbourne, is named for the crop that, historically, has been one of Australia's main exports. The area - which also produces coarse grains such as sorghum, oilseeds and legumes - is arid and heavily reliant on rainfall for its yields. In *The Dressmaker*, the farms around Dungatar are 'golden seas of wheat', whereas Winyerp sits in the middle of 'an undulating brown blanket' (p.126) of sorghum. Ham describes the seasonal process whereby the trains pull into the towns and their empty trucks are filled with grain from the silos where they have been stored. The engines then tow the trucks away - sometimes up to fifty at a time - 'brimming with dusty gold and brown seed' (p.127). Some of this grain will go to the domestic market, some will be exported. To Tilly, who has grown up in the area, the cycle is reassuringly familiar, 'a map' (p.127).

## Haute couture

'Haute couture' is a French term, literally meaning 'high fashion'. Exclusive, custom-made clothes are designed and created for individual clients, sometimes taking up to 700 hours to complete. They are generally sewn by hand, using expensive, often unusual fabrics. In the 1950s, often considered the 'golden age' in fashion, approximately 15000 women in the world wore couture; currently it caters for an increasingly small clientele of about 2000.

Postwar Paris was the undisputed epicentre of fashion and the home of many celebrated couturiers. The text refers to actual designers and fashion houses, and the author tells us that Tilly has learnt from some of the masters. In particular, she was recommended to the House of Balenciaga by designer Madame Vionnet, with whom she had a close personal relationship.

Influential and inventive, Christóbal Balenciaga worked closely with fabric, manipulating it into various sculptural effects and shapes that altered the silhouette of a woman's body. Like Vionnet, who was a key influence on him, Balenciaga was a masterful tailor. His designs liberated women from the constraints of a defined, corseted waistline, thus allowing more freedom of movement. Balenciaga also designed the pillbox hat, probably the most popular hat of the 1950s, a decade in which many accessories were introduced to the market.

Many of Tilly's designs show the influence of her former mentor. The grey linen tunic that Tilly designs for Muriel Pratt - 'well tailored, chic and practical' (pp. 135-6)-evokes Balenciaga, as do many of the outfits observed by the bemused traveller who visits Dungatar. According to the admiring Sergeant Farrat, Tilly is 'a real couturier'. Her designs show the 'structure of Balenciaga, the simplicity of Chanel, the drapery of Vionnet and the art of Delaunay' (p.167).

## GENRE, STRUCTURE & LANGUAGE

### Genre

*The Dressmaker* is a modern Gothic novel, in that it incorporates some of the elements of classic Gothic fiction, albeit in a twentieth-century setting. There is a blend of horror and romance, a 'cursed' protagonist (in this case, a heroine), and a number of characters who evince a disturbed psyche. Ham builds an atmosphere of foreboding, and the text culminates in a series of violent, macabre 'accidents' that are predicated on karma.

In this sense, the novel is also an acerbic morality fable. The 'sour people' (p.236) of Dungatar are punished for their vindictiveness against the Dunnages. Tilly engineers a decisive revenge against the town, while those individuals who have behaved with particular cruelty - Evan Pettyman, Beula Harridene and Mr Almanac - are singled out for special punishment.

Further, *The Dressmaker* is an evocation of Australian country life in the 1950s. Although some of the characters border on caricature, there are many recognisable 'types', such as the jovial publican, his expansive wife and the paternal policeman. The Saturday-morning cake stall and the Saturday-afternoon football match are equally familiar. The pub is the social heart of the town, and football is the glue that binds the townspeople together.

Into this otherwise unremarkable context, Ham introduces an element of magic realism. The supernatural intrudes when Molly inexplicably dreams of her grandson, Pablo, on the same night that Tilly has her own dream. This mysterious coincidence becomes the narrative device through which the two women are genuinely reconciled.



## Structure

The novel is divided into four sections, entitled 'Gingham', 'Shantung', 'Felt' and 'Brocade'. While these have an obvious connection to the dressmaking motif, more importantly the headings correlate to the different stages in Tilly's emotional and creative journey, figuratively reflecting her relationship with the town.

Part One deals with Tilly's arrival in Dungatar. Gingham is an inexpensive, serviceable cotton that can be used for many purposes. It embodies the utilitarian, no-frills sartorial approach of the majority of townspeople. Gingham's very adaptability - it can be used for everything from grain bags to dresses - suggests that fashion does not have any particular currency in the town.

In Part Two, Tilly introduces couture to the women of Dungatar. Shantung is a vibrant, textured silk, used for more glamorous designs, signifying the way in which Tilly's creativity enriches their lives. Not only does she make beautiful clothes, she also tries to explain style and how it can differ from fashion, encouraging the women to choose designs that flatter their body shape and demonstrating the importance of accessories to complete the image.

Felt is a heavy, dense fabric, reserved for plain designs. Part Three is bookended by the deaths of Teddy and Molly, during which time the town's enmity towards the Dunnages hardens. Tilly no longer sews; instead, her creativity is swallowed by grief as she suffers through a distressing period of mourning and alienation.

Brocade is opulent and decorative. In Part Four, Tilly resumes her dressmaking and is restored to tentative favour in the town. When the drama club commissions Baroque costumes for their forthcoming production of *Macbeth*, the bizarre designs afford Tilly the opportunity to mock their pretensions.

## Language

Ham's prose is dry and incisive, oscillating swiftly between scathing observational humour and bleak calamity. She has a finely tuned sense of the absurd, and her use of figurative language to portray Dungatar and its characters is memorable. As Tilly surveys the town, she sees the 'green eye

of the oval' looking up at her, 'the cars around its edge like lashes' (p.12), confirming the central place football holds in the lives of these people. On a fine day, the low clouds sit 'like lemon butter on toast' (p.77). The residents are described with merciless precision. Crippled by Parkinson's disease, Mr Almanac is a 'mumbling question mark, forever face-down' (p.24); prior to his sobriety, Fred Bundle had been 'alcohol-pickled' (p.21). When Trudy is restrained by the doctor, she drops to the footpath 'to lie like a discarded cardigan' (p.285), an image that simultaneously conveys her vulnerability and her irrelevance.

The names of many of the residents are puns, reflecting their key characteristics. For example, Evan Pettyman is a small-minded, pompous hypocrite. Beula Harridene is a literal harridan, a spiteful gossip eaten up by hate for the world. Ruth and Prudence Dimm hold responsible positions in the town, but their stupidity and negligence have grim repercussions: by condoning the bullying that Tilly endures, Prudence contributes indirectly to Stewart Pettyman's death, while Ruth's failure to pay the residents' house insurance is blatantly remiss.

The language of these characters is informed by the 1950s country setting, drawing heavily on the vernacular. Teddy tells Tilly laconically that she's 'not a bad sort of a sheila' (p.175), while one of the young McSwineys accuses Beula of having 'shit on [her] liver' (p.50). These idioms contribute to the sense of time and place, as well as delineating character.

#### **Significance of the title**

The quotation by CF Forbes at the beginning of *The Dressmaker* highlights the power of clothing, suggesting that being well-dressed imparts such a sense of 'inward tranquillity' that it transcends even religion. By implication, power is conferred on Tilly for being able to create beautiful clothes. When she first arrives, Tilly announces to Sergeant Farrat that she is 'a seamstress and dressmaker' (p.8) - this is how she defines herself. Her profession becomes the conduit into the insular world of the Dungatar community, the only avenue through which the local women are prepared to connect with her.

At the same time, Tilly herself is not a 'tranquil' character. Devastated by her baby's death and wracked by an enduring sense of guilt over other tragedies for which she holds herself responsible, Tilly has her equanimity sorely tested. As for the townspeople themselves, Tilly has offered them a gift, which is

ultimately abused. In the end, their elaborate new costumes become a source of black mirth and a bitter reminder of their misplaced priorities.

The significance of Tilly's original name, Myrtle, is worth noting. The myrtle is a fragrant evergreen shrub with white flowers, native to Europe and North Africa. It was sacred to Demeter, goddess of fertility and the harvest, and Aphrodite, goddess of love. As such, it became a symbol of love and maternity. Though Tilly has been robbed of both, she is presented as a character who deserves love and should remain open to the possibility.

#### **Narrative point of view**

*The Dressmaker*'s written in the third person, with an omniscient narrator. Much of the novel is presented from an objective perspective, which allows Ham to cast an uncompromising eye over her characters, presenting their behaviour in a way that leaves no doubt as to their faults and foibles.

Events are also presented from the viewpoint of a particular individual, shifting this 'limited' perspective from one character to another. For example, Molly does not initially recognise her daughter, but realises that she will have to be 'crafty, employ stubborn resistance and subtle violence against this stronger woman who was determined to stay' (p.34). In general, though, it is the protagonist's point of view that is given. Presenting events from Tilly's perspective builds empathy and invites a degree of complicity from the reader. At the same time, Tilly's voice is a muted one. She is guarded, reluctant to expose herself, and she discloses little about her feelings or her history. Information regarding her time in Europe emerges incrementally - some of it teased out by Teddy - but there is still much we don't discover. Hence, Tilly remains an elusive character.

## CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER ANALYSIS

### Prologue (pp.1-2)

*Summary: Tilly returns home.*

The prologue establishes the context. Dungatar is a small, isolated town in the Victorian wheatbelt. The description of Molly Dunnage's cottage, sitting alone on the top of the hill that overlooks the town, hints at the reclusive nature of its occupant. Like Molly herself, it leans 'provocatively' (p.1) away from its foundations but is anchored to the chimney by a thick wisteria. Scandal has dogged Molly; hence The Hill casts a 'shadow' (p.1) over the town. Yet it is also a 'shaky beacon in a vast, black sea' (p.1), suggesting it is the one fragile point of comfort in a dark, unwelcoming setting.

### Part I: 'Gingham'

#### Chapter One (pp.5-12)

*Summary: Tilly is reunited with her mother.*

First impressions of Tilly are of a stylish, self-sufficient young woman. Watching her arrival, the curious Sergeant Farrat admires the cut and quality of her clothes, and homes in on her Singer sewing machine. This machine, symbolising possibility and creativity, is one of the enduring motifs in the text. Tilly's feelings upon returning to Dungatar are clearly conflicted; Farrat's offer to take her 'the long way home' (p.7) reignites memories of an unhappy childhood and hardens the knot in Tilly's stomach.

She faces a daunting, and thankless, task. The house is filthy and her mother, seemingly, does not know her. Molly is in a pitiful state; she has lived alone in poverty and neglect for years, her language is manic, and she suffers delusions. Tilly holds the town directly responsible: 'this is what they've done to you' (p.9).

### Key vocabulary

**Night-cart man:** before the advent of sewerage systems, the night-cart man collected and disposed of the town's excrement, which was deposited in portable, purpose-built cans.

## Chapter Two (pp. 13-27)

**Summary:** *Saturday morning in the town; Dungatar wins the football match.*

Chapter Two introduces many of the individuals who make up the town's collective character. Dungatar is a microcosm, a miniature reflection of the wider world beyond its boundaries, where all aspects of human behaviour are on display. For example, industry is represented by the Pratts, snobbery by the Beaumonts, spite by Beula Harridene, tolerance by Sergeant Farrat, infidelity by Faith O'Brien, cruelty by Mr Almanac and good fellowship by the Bundles.

On the surface - and in direct contrast to Salem - Dungatar appears to be an agnostic culture. There is no church and Sergeant Farrat is the closest the town has to a minister. Football is, in fact, the town's religion. The local team inspires a fierce, parochial loyalty; converging on the pub after their latest win, the victors are embraced affectionately by the publican's wife as 'My boys!' (p.26).

## Chapter Three (pp.28-33)

**Summary:** *Tilly meets Teddy McSwiney.*

The McSwineys are a close-knit family who lead a shambolic but honest existence. Having watched Tilly's arrival with great interest, Teddy McSwiney introduces himself at the earliest opportunity. Generous and practical, his offer of a wheelchair prompts Tilly to wonder, ironically, 'if the rest of the town would be as friendly' (p.32). However, Teddy's teasing comment, 'I'm the one should be frightened of you' (p.32), foreshadows the tragedy that lies ahead for them both.

The wheelchair symbolises Molly's dependence. Yet it will also enable her to leave the house and reconnect with the town.

**Q** What does Molly's comment that 'you can't keep anything secret here' (p.33) reveal about Dungatar?

## Chapter Four (pp.34-41)

**Summary:** *Tilly takes her mother into town.*

The Dunnage's presence in the town is regarded as an affront, prompting a judgemental frenzy. Those watching the pair's progress fall back on the old pejorative stereotypes: Tilly is the 'illegitimate girl' and Molly, the 'loose woman and hag' (p.39).

Nevertheless, there are exceptions. Irma Almanac, a gentle woman who has been covertly sending food to Molly for years, compliments Tilly on her bravery in returning home to look after her mother. Like Molly, Irma has suffered abuse. Her troubles have been solved by natural attrition: advanced Parkinson's disease has reduced her husband to a 'stiff and shuffling old man' (p.41), unable to inflict any further injury on his wife.

### Key point

Tilly's return reignites the town's animosity. Most of the residents resent her presence and are still prepared to judge her harshly for events in the past.

**Q** Does Tilly empower herself by returning to Dungatar, or does she become disempowered by the decision?

## Chapter Five (pp.42-51)

**Summary:** *Beula makes a complaint against the McSwineys.*

In this chapter, Beula Harridene's malice is set in opposition to Sergeant Farrat's goodwill. Beula represents the worst that Dungatar has to offer; she spies on her neighbours and sees evil everywhere. Sergeant Farrat indulges her up to a point - his theory is that Beula is starving due to an inefficient bite and is 'therefore vicious, malnourished and mad' (p.46). Beyond that, he refuses to accommodate her, although he treats others, including the McSwineys, with compassion and civility.

**Q** What similarities can you see between Beula Harridene and the Putnams in *The Crucible*?

## Chapter Six (pp.52-60)

*Summary: Gertrude sets her sights on William Beaumont; Tilly remembers her schooldays; Evan Pettyman ministers to Marigold.*

Gertrude may be plain and unsophisticated, but she dares to imagine what her parents cannot conceive of for her - marriage to William Beaumont. The Beaumonts see themselves as better than everyone else; however, they trade on their social standing and don't pay their bills.

Dungatar's ugly underbelly is exposed through Tilly's painful memories of being bullied at school - by both the teacher and the children - and Councillor Pettyman's unscrupulous treatment of his wife. Prudence Dimm's viciousness and Pettyman's exploitation of women are two factors that have made Tilly's life so unbearable in the past.

Q What do Gertrude and the Beaumonts have in common?

Q Compare the ways in which patriarchy is presented in *The Dressmaker* and *The Crucible*.

## Chapter Seven (pp.61-8)

*Summary: Dungatar wins the grand final.*

The Dungatar football team is the key element that unites this eclectic community. After the team wins a 'close and dirty battle' (p.65) against Winyerp, the watching crowd erupts with 'lust, revenge, joy, hate and elation' (p.66). The entire town celebrates with riotous enthusiasm at the pub: 'no team was ever happier, no town ever noisier' (p.66). Teddy is the hero of the hour, having dribbled the ball through for the winning point at the last minute, cementing his place as Dungatar's favourite son.

At the same time, Teddy's interest in the 'new sheila' (p.63) has been noted, and his protectiveness towards her is also unambiguously brought home to his friends. Teddy's love for Tilly will create a conflict of interest that cannot be easily reconciled with his relationship with the town, forcing him to make a choice between the two.

Q What is Septimus Crescant suggesting when he talks about 'the end' and says 'of course there's The Hill' (p.68)?

Q How does this chapter demonstrate some of the key differences between the towns of Dungatar and Salem?

## Chapter Eight (pp.69-83)

*Summary: Tilly's tea-chest arrives; Teddy asks her to the dance; Tilly makes Irma some special cakes.*

Trains represent Dungatar's connection to the outside world. Tilly's tea-chest hints at travels and experiences far beyond the imagination of any of the townspeople. Her worldliness is a constant challenge to their insularity. Tilly's remedial knowledge is more efficacious than Mr Almanac's conventional treatments, and her 'special cakes' (p.77) containing cannabis alleviate his wife's arthritic pain for the first time in years.

Teddy finds Tilly exotic and interesting, and his campaign to win her affections is 'indefatigable' (p.81). He brings her fresh fish and produce from his garden, as well as cooking for her. Molly is not so mad that she doesn't recognise Teddy's worth; when Tilly refuses to go to the footballers' dance with him, Molly sulks for two days. The old woman still does not seem to appreciate the loving care that Tilly gives her. When she can't get her own way, she behaves like a child, oblivious to consequences.

**Q** Why is Teddy convinced that 'Girls like her [Tilly] need a bloke like me about' (p.74)? Do you agree?

## Chapter Nine (pp.84-91)

*Summary: Tilly goes to the dance with Teddy; Gertrude wins William Beaumont.*

The evening is memorable for several attendees. After literally sweeping the inexperienced William off his feet, Gertrude uses her sexuality as a lure and successfully ensnares her quarry.

Teddy also gets his wish and has Tilly on his arm as his partner. However, despite his heroic status, the young couple are ostracised all night. For Tilly, the experience reinforces her sense that she is 'unworthy' (p.89): 'she knew it was a mistake; it was too soon, too bold' (p.88). She admits to herself that she is used to forgetting her so-called guilt, only to be reminded in cruel, gratuitous ways by the people of Dungatar.



## Key point

Teddy is dismissive of the town's attitude - 'They'll just have to get used to you' (p.91) - but Tilly concludes that the reverse is true. The town will not change, and she is the one who will need to adapt.

Q Why does Tilly go to the dance?

## Part II: 'Shantung'

### Chapter Ten (pp.95-100)

*Summary: The dance is discussed by the locals.*

Gossip, fuelled primarily by Beula Harridene, is one of Dungatar's primary pastimes. Tilly's appearance at the dance and, in particular, the eye-catching green dress has set tongues wagging. Beula is 'speechless with disgust' (p.98). Again, Tilly's sophistication is thrown into sharp relief: her sartorial style has been honed by years of working at the great couture houses of Europe, and is a world away from the outdated fashions of the local women.

### Chapter Eleven (pp.101-9)

*Summary: Tilly goes to the races.*

The races are a further opportunity for Tilly to promote her dressmaking skills. This time she wears a glamorous dress of amethyst shantung that shimmers as she walks, catching the light, as well as the attention of the other racegoers: 'she looked like some-one out of a movie and the air around her seemed different' (p. 107). The Dungatar women, dowdy in their 'sensible floral cotton button-throughs with box cluster pleat skirts' (p. 106) can only stare in envy.

Pragmatically, Gertrude Pratt homes in on the fact that Tilly is a dressmaker. Preoccupied with the wedding that she hopes is forthcoming, Gertrude's desire to look like a beautiful bride overrides any scruples she may have about Tilly herself.

Q What does the phrase 'marry down' (p. 109) mean? What does this reveal about societal values in country Australia in the 1950s?

## Chapter Twelve (pp.110-15)

*Summary: Tilly makes Gertrude's wedding dress.*

Tilly successfully appeals to Gertrude's vanity when she steers her away from her original choice of wedding gown, which would have done little to minimise her worst features: 'oh no ... we can do much better than that' (p.111). Both Tilly and Gertrude will eventually benefit from this transaction.

Although Tilly is coming to rely on Teddy more and more - not least in relation to managing Molly's moods and tantrums - there are still times when she is unwilling or unable to let down her emotional guard. Her enigmatic refusal to come for a Christmas drink with the McSwiney family - 'That would break my heart' (p. 115) - is one such occasion.

Q Why is Molly so hostile towards her own daughter?

## Chapter Thirteen (pp.116-25)

*Summary: Gertrude marries William; Tilly remembers Stewart Pettyman.*

Gertrude's dazzling entrance at her wedding surprises and delights her new husband, diffusing any qualms he may have about the suitability of the marriage. Thanks to Tilly, Gertrude is a beautiful bride, 'curvy and succulent' (p.118). The women in the congregation note that the dressmaker is 'an absolute wizard with fabric and scissors' (p. 119), though unfortunately they are not able to find out her name.

Snubbed by the wedding party, Tilly's thoughts turn to her unhappy schooldays. Taunted by her classmates and threatened and physically assaulted by Stewart Pettyman, her dominant memories are of fear and exclusion.

## Chapter Fourteen (pp. 126-33)

*Summary: Tilly gets some customers.*

The freight trains that rumble into Dungatar to empty the silos and transport the grain are part of the cycle of the farming calendar that defines towns such as this. The activity attracts the attention of the local children, who play around the looming silo and the grain trucks - just as the young Teddy McSwiney and his friends did in the past. Some of these trucks are filled

with wheat, some with sorghum. The scene, seemingly benign, foreshadows Teddy's accident.

Word of Tilly's dressmaking has spread through the town in the wake of the Beaumont wedding. One by one, the ladies of Dungatar climb The Hill with their various requests, which run the gamut from modest mending to the making of school uniforms, and to more daring commissions, such as Nancy Pickett's pantsuit.

#### Key vocabulary

**Sorghum:** a widely cultivated grain that can be used for human or animal consumption or to make ethanol. In Australia, it is used primarily as livestock feed.

**Madeline Vionnet:** an influential French fashion designer of the early twentieth century who was particularly known for the bias cut (cutting cloth diagonal to the fabric's grain, which helps it to cling to the body).

**Cristóbal Balenciaga:** a Spanish designer who opened his own fashion house in Paris in 1937 and became one of the most successful postwar couturiers.

Q Why is Molly so preoccupied with the possum?

## Chapter Fifteen (pp. 134-44)

**Summary:** *The Beaumonts return to Dungatar, accompanied by Lesley Muncan; the Social Club is launched; Tilly's business takes off.*

Like Tilly, Gertrude has reinvented herself. However, whereas Tilly's new identity is a legitimate attempt to escape her painful past and is accompanied by a new life of creativity and industry, Gertrude's changing her name to 'Trudy' is simply an affectation. When she returns from her shopping spree in Melbourne, intending to impress, she and Elsbeth are miffed to discover how well-dressed Dungatar has suddenly become. It is generally conceded that 'Tilly can work magic' (p.134).

Tilly's dressmaking skills play into the women's aspirations of social betterment. Genuine self-expression is less important than looking superior to one's neighbours, 'especially Elsbeth' (p.142). Tilly notes that, taking their cue from 'Trudy', the members of the newly established Social Club have acquired posh accents overnight, 'an enunciated Dungatar interpretation of queenly English' (p. 142). Elsbeth's initial resistance to her son's choice of

bride is weakened by the discovery that she and Trudy have much in common, and the welcome news of a pregnancy.

### Chapter Sixteen (pp. 145-58)

**Summary:** *The Social Club holds a fundraising day at Windswept Crest.*

Windswept Crest's nickname of 'Fart Hill' (p. 139) reflects the town's secret contempt for Elsbeth Beaumont. At the fundraising day, those invited are under no illusion that they are effectively raising money for the Beaumont family's coffers and to pay for proposed improvements to the property. While the guests eschew croquet, opting instead for football, Trudy counts the money. Privately, Muriel Pratt deplores the fact that, since her daughter's marriage, Trudy has absorbed Elsbeth's snobbery and turned into 'the sort of person I moved here to avoid' (p. 150).

With Gertrude's arrival, William's sister Mona finds herself ostracised. Desperate for affirmation and companionship, she gravitates towards Lesley, who is equally friendless, and the only one kind to her.

**Q** Comment on the way in which Teddy manages Molly. What does it show about him?

### Chapter Seventeen (pp.159-73)

**Summary:** *Mona and Lesley get married; a stranger visits Dungatar,- preparations are underway for the ball.*

Elsbeth Beaumont exploits Mona's indiscretion with Lesley to rush her daughter into marriage. Although the discovery of her new husband's impotence is a shock, Lesley convinces the disappointed Mona that a marriage can also be founded on friendship and compromise: 'we'll do the best we can together' (p. 173).

The stranger's arrival in Dungatar puts Tilly's accomplishments into perspective. Observing that the local women dress 'astonishingly well' (p.164), the traveller is so impressed that she seeks Tilly out to order some designs and offer her a job in Melbourne.

Tilly denies that she is wasting her talents in Dungatar and, certainly, the extensive preparations for the ball place even more demands on her time.

Tilly designs for each individual's body shape, maximising their attributes and minimising their faults. She takes a holistic approach, teaching her clients that true style goes beyond merely wearing the clothes. Rather, it is a synthesis of outfit, grooming, deportment and the right accessories. The women of Dungatar embrace the opportunity to assume more glamorous personas, acting out their fantasies - 'Faith's a red sequins kind of woman' (p.171)-and reinventing themselves as stylish and desirable. Nevertheless, recognising the town's limitations, Sergeant Farrat is the only one who truly appreciates Tilly's efforts.

### Key point

Throughout *The Dressmaker*, fashion is presented as a metaphor for change. Tilly's designs offer her clients a unique opportunity to express and transform themselves in previously unimagined ways.

## Chapter Eighteen (pp. 174-87)

**Summary:** *Tilly is shunned at the ball; she and Teddy declare their love; Teddy dies in an accident.*

Tilly knows that she is running a risk going to the ball, but she feels safe with Teddy: 'he was her good friend and he was her ally' (p.177). Her fabulous dress, a customised adaptation of one of Dior's most celebrated gowns, prompts her mother's wry comment that 'girls who wear dresses like that don't warrant honourable intentions' (p. 178). In retrospect, Molly's joke takes on an ominous edge. Although the occasion becomes a spectacular fashion parade, a tribute to Tilly's creativity and skill, Dungatar's animosity is again brought home to her when she is decisively rejected by those present. Nobody wants her on their table; Evan Pettyman and Beula Harridene are openly abusive.

The cruelty with which Tilly is treated demonstrates that nothing has really changed. Despite the glamorous image Tilly has crafted for them, the majority of Dungatar women remain mean-spirited and small-minded, resistant to self-improvement on any meaningful level. In fact, Teddy argues that the new wardrobes have encouraged arrogance and a sense of entitlement: 'They've grown airs, think they're classy. You're not doing them any good' (p. 175).

When, in a dark twist of fate, the future that Teddy plans is shattered by unexpected tragedy, Tilly's belief that she carries 'evil' (p.184) inside her becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

**Q** Tilly's brilliant magenta dress subliminally suggests a 'scarlet woman'. Is she challenging this stereotype or accommodating it?

**Q** Do you agree that Tilly's influence on the women has been harmful?

### Part III: 'Felt'

#### Chapter Nineteen (pp.191-200)

**Summary:** *The town mourns Teddy McSwiney.*

The tone of this chapter is elegiac as Dungatar comes to terms with the loss of their 'hero' (p.194). At the 'severe, cruel burial' (p. 196), the congregation is in no mood to absorb Sergeant Farrat's message of love and forgiveness.

Edward McSwiney decides to take his family away from Dungatar and, in an act that foreshadows Tilly's incineration of the town, burns the caravans and railway carriages that have been their home.

The McSwineys' loss mirrors that of other bereaved parents in the town. Farrat recognises how grief distorts perspective, even causing madness. Molly and Marigold Pettyman, for example, have drowned in 'the grief and disgust that hung like cobwebs' (p.194) everywhere they look. To an extent, the same thing happens to the town. In their 'stunned rage and wretchedness' (p. 198), the townspeople forget the fragile truce that has been established with the Dunnages and single out Tilly as their scapegoat. Full of despair and self-loathing, and haunted by memories of Stewart Pettyman, Tilly absorbs the town's blame.

**Q** Sergeant Farrat claims that 'tragedy includes everyone' and that everyone in the town is '*different*, yet included' (p.196). Do you agree?

**Q** Compare the ways in which these characters respond to the loss of their children: the McSwineys, Molly Dunnage, Marigold Pettyman and Ruth Putnam.

## Chapter Twenty (pp.201-2)

**Summary:** *The Dunnages are persecuted by the townspeople.*

The physical isolation of the Dunnages' house, on top of The Hill, reinforces their alienation from the town. Dungatar represents a cross-section, and not all of its residents are as malevolent as Beula Harridene or Evan Pettyman. Yet the town is united in its determination to believe the worst of Tilly, targeting her and her mother with unrelenting vitriol. As she nurses her grief, Tilly's bitterness grows.

## Chapter Twenty-One (pp.203-9)

**Summary:** *Una Pleasance arrives in Dungatar.*

Backed by the Social Club, Una Pleasance has arrived to open her own dressmaking establishment, Le Salon. True to form, Evan Pettyman targets the 'new girl in town' (p.204) with practised ease. Abandoned by the townspeople, Tilly's only work comes from her sole remaining friend, Sergeant Farrat; his green matador costume is a subliminal homage to the Spanish heritage of Tilly's old teacher, Cristobál Balenciaga.

### Key vocabulary

**Christian Dior:** one of the most influential French fashion designers of the postwar period.

**Pierre Balmain:** a French fashion designer.

## Chapter Twenty-Two (pp.210-14)

**Summary:** *Una opens Le Salon; Trudy has her baby.*

Una's dressmaking is of a very different calibre from Tilly's. Her designs are pedestrian and the standard of her work mediocre. The opening of the new business, temporarily located at the Pettymans, degenerates into farce when Trudy unexpectedly goes into labour. Avid for gossip, Beula is quick to seize on the fact that Trudy has only been married eight months. By the time Evan returns home, he finds his house in chaos and his neurotic wife prostrate in bed.

**Key vocabulary**

**Rockmans:** a women's clothing store in Melbourne catering to the cheaper end of the market.

Q What does this chapter reveal about the relationship between Trudy and Elsbeth?

**Chapter Twenty-Three (pp.215-20)**

**Summary:** *Tilly's skills are sought by the women of Winyerp.*

Tilly's garden is another manifestation of her creativity. Although the garden's perfume mingles with 'the stink of burning rubbish' (p.215), the residents' attempt to smoke the Dunnages out enables the plants to flourish. Tilly's namesake flower, the myrtle, features prominently, threading its way through the other plants and creeping across the verandah. The garden highlights Tilly's resilience and represents healing. After a period of mourning and inactivity, she resumes her dressmaking, this time for an appreciative clientele from Winyerp.

in suggesting the drama competition to Mrs Flynt, Tilly is able to use Elsbeth Beaumont's one-upmanship against her. As Tilly presciently observes, 'Plays ... bring out the best and worst in people' (p.219).

Q Why does Molly decorate her wheelchair?

**Chapter Twenty-Four (pp.221-7)**

**Summary:** *Evan and Una start an affair; an eisteddfod is planned.*

Tilly's mischievous suggestion of a play has taken root. Representatives from the Winyerp and Itheca Drama Club, looking like 'a group of European aristocrats' wives who had somehow lost their way' (p.225), invite Dungatar to participate in a drama eisteddfod. As Una's inadequacies as a dressmaker have become glaringly obvious, the women of Dungatar have a change of heart. In the interests of expediency, the past is conveniently forgotten and Tilly is reclaimed as one of their own.

Q Why is Marigold so obsessed with cleaning?

Q Contrast the behaviour of Evan Pettyman with that of John Proctor in *The Crucible*. Consider both the personalities involved and the social context.



## Chapter Twenty-Five (pp.228-9)

*Summary: Una returns to Melbourne.*

Una's departure from Dungatar does not dampen Evan's enthusiasm. The contrast between the drugged Marigold's view of her husband - 'You're so important, Evan' (p.229) - and the reality of his calculated indifference is stark.

## Chapter Twenty-Six (pp.230-6)

*Summary: Tilly is reconciled with her mother; Molly suffers a stroke and dies.*

Molly's inexplicable dream of her grandson introduces an element of magic realism into the novel. Previously ignorant of Pablo's existence, Molly is able to finally connect with her daughter, and she and Tilly share their stories. Brought together by their mutual loss, mother and daughter can only comfort each other and mourn the lost years, before Molly's own death.

Though she has options in Melbourne, Tilly decides that first she has accounts to settle in Dungatar: 'it seems only fair don't you think?' (p.236).

### Key point

Molly's death is a turning point for Tilly. For all their sins of omission and direct cruelty, she resolves to take revenge on the people of Dungatar. The pain that she and Molly have endured will be the driving force - her 'catalyst' and 'propeller' (p.236) - for change.

Q Are there any positives to come\* out of Molly's death?

## Part IV: 'Brocade'

## Chapter Twenty-Seven (pp.239-52)

*Summary: Tilly and Sergeant Farrat bury Molly; Beula has an accident; Mr Almanac drowns; Tilly agrees to make the costumes for Macbeth.*

This chapter commences with Molly's funeral - a sad and lonely affair attended only by Tilly and the sergeant - but afterwards, for the first time since her arrival in Dungatar, the wheels of justice start to turn in Tilly's favour.

Beula Harridene and Mr Almanac are both punished for their vindictiveness towards Molly. Beula's spying puts her in the wrong place at the wrong time and, after being struck by an airborne radiogram, she refuses to seek immediate help, making the injury worse. Mr Almanac meets his own fitting end when his dozing wife fails to arrest his blind advance into the creek behind their house. Standing by her mother's grave, Tilly gleefully remembers that 'sometimes things just don't *seem* fair' (p.248).

The Social Club's choice to stage *Macbeth* is fitting, given that Trudy and her acolytes are guilty of ambition and of the figurative murder of the Dunnages. Approached by the women to sew their costumes, Tilly is able to exploit Trudy's vanity and ignorance by encouraging her choice of the flamboyant Baroque designs. These costumes are not only contextually unsuitable for *Macbeth*, they will also prove very costly.

Q Does Tilly choose wisely when she agrees to make the costumes?

### Chapter Twenty-Eight (pp.253-9)

**Summary:** *Tilly visits Marigold to tell her the truth; Marigold kills Evan and attempts to take her own life.*

Dungatar's streak of accidents and deaths continues when Marigold, emboldened by Tilly, affects a ruthless revenge on her philandering husband. The story of Molly's seduction resonates with Marigold because it is effectively her story too. Freed from the toxic confusion caused by drugs, Marigold is able to see the actions of her husband - and son - clearly. While the truth hardens her resolve, it also leads to despair. The knowledge that Evan has manipulated and betrayed her, and that Stewart, whom she idolised, was a nasty little bully, leaves Marigold with nothing.

### Chapter Twenty-Nine (pp.260-6)

**Summary:** *The district inspector arrives to investigate the proliferation of deaths in Dungatar.*

Fate continues to play into Tilly's hands. Far from posing a threat, the district inspector is discovered to be a fool, whose inflated sense of self-importance precludes any real investigative talent. To Sergeant Farrat's mortification,

his uninvited guest is also extremely uncouth, with 'slovenly habits and very bad manners' (p.262). After the inspector's visit, Tilly decides that she can proceed with her scheme as 'there's nothing to be afraid of' (p.265).

### Chapter Thirty (pp.267-78)

*Summary: Rehearsals get underway; Tilly finishes the costumes.*

The curse of the play becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when, living up to its reputation as unlucky, things start to go wrong with *Macbeth* from the outset. Director and producer are at constant loggerheads, the actors are out of their depth and funding becomes an issue. Tilly watches the chaos with quiet satisfaction.

#### Key point

The Baroque costumes - heavy, uncomfortable and completely inappropriate - are a symbol of Dungatar's false values. The townspeople become complicit in their own downfall; the decision to prioritise the costumes over their insurance premiums will destroy their futures.

Q Is the play only bringing out the worst in the townspeople?

### Chapter Thirty-One (pp.279-82)

*Summary: Rehearsals become more stressful.*

As rehearsals start to implode, the browbeaten cast threaten to rebel against Trudy's maniacal authority. Like *Lady Macbeth*, Trudy is a casualty of her own ambition. She becomes increasingly unstable, finally having a breakdown just as the hoped-for prize is within reach.

### Chapter Thirty-Two (pp.283-93)

*Summary: After setting her house on fire, Tilly leaves town; the production is a disaster.*

Trudy's mind is 'full of scorpions' (p.285) and she is deemed unfit to continue. Her breakdown is an ominous portent; the bus' refusal to start is another.

Predictably, the production does not come together on the day. When the dreadful performance concludes prematurely after Act I, Dungatar's humiliation is complete.

As the townspeople struggle through the play, Tilly makes her own preparations. Like an avenging angel, she is ruthless and methodical, doing everything to ensure that her house will burn rapidly and the fire will spread. Sergeant Farrat, arriving late at the eisteddfod, can do nothing.

**Q** How does Malcolm's line, 'The night is long that never finds the day' (p.287), relate to Tilly?

### Chapter Thirty-Three (pp.294-6)

**Summary:** *The residents of Dungatar return to find their town destroyed.*

Although Tilly's costumes win the cup for 'Best Costume', this is no compensation for the devastation that greets the actors when they return home. With the exception of Windswept Crest, Dungatar has been razed to the ground. The people who made the Dunnages lives such a misery are left 'homeless and heartbroken' (p.295) and, in a perverse twist of fate, dependent on Elsbeth Beaumont's goodwill.

#### Key point

Traditionally, fire is seen as a cleansing agent that purges infection and disease, a symbol of rebirth. Tilly has provided the town with a chance to redeem itself by rising from the ashes with a clean slate and a fresh moral perspective - whether people choose to avail themselves of the opportunity or not.

**Q** How do you view Tilly's destruction of the town? Is it out of character?

**Q** 'As in *The Crucible*, the people of Dungatar are punished far more than they deserve.' Do you agree?

# CHARACTERS & RELATIONSHIPS

## Myrtle (Tilly) Dunnage

### Key quotes

'My name is Tilly ... Everyone will know soon enough.' (p.7)

'Tell me, why did a beautiful and clever girl, like you come back here?'  
(Irma, p.78)

Tilly Dunnage is a remarkable young woman. A disadvantaged background and a childhood scarred by tragedy have not prevented her from achieving success. She gains empowerment and agency through travelling to Europe and forging an independent career, eventually setting up her own shop in Paris. Defying convention, Tilly lives with her English lover, Ormond, and has a child out of wedlock, like her mother. However, this child is conceived in love and born into a welcoming home.

After her life in Paris implodes, Tilly returns to Dungatar to nurse her ailing mother, thinking that she can be of use to Molly. Unfortunately, the relationship is fraught. Far from appreciating her daughter's selflessness, the old woman is difficult, contrary and sometimes violent. In response to her mother's tantrums, Tilly is stoic and philosophical.

The general consensus in Dungatar is that Tilly's homecoming demonstrates a 'nerve' (p.35). Molly Dunnage's 'bastard girl' (p.64) is resented by the locals, whose perception of her is fuelled by vicious gossip and a distorted understanding of the past. Tilly stands out in the small town like an exotic bird of paradise and, at first, her arresting sartorial style provokes hostility among a population suspicious of difference. The bright rainbow colours she favours - green, purple, crimson - are in marked contrast to the drab attire of the local women. Tilly has been trained by the great couturiers in Paris - Balmain, Balenciaga and Dior - all of whom recognised her exceptional talent. She has the imagination to see the potential in a piece of discounted georgette relegated to a tablecloth and turn it into the stunning green gown that she wears to the dance. Tilly's designs are impossible to ignore, and the townspeople cannot resist utilising her talents to improve their wardrobes.

Tilly is happiest when she is creating. Despite the limitations and shortcomings of her 'inglorious' (p.128) clientele, she welcomes having a business to run again. Nevertheless, she is reminded on several occasions, and with brutal clarity, that she is being used by the townspeople. Sergeant Farrat is one of the few who truly values her presence in Dungatar, believing that without Tilly's 'tolerance and generosity, her patience and skills, our lives - mine especially - would not have been enriched' (p.239).

Tilly's vulnerability is evident to Farrat from the outset. Scarred by loss and burdened by guilt, she blames herself, erroneously, for the tragic deaths of Stewart Pettyman and her baby son. Rather than seeing herself as the victim she truly is, she judges herself as harshly as her home town and her lover have done. As such, Tilly initially perceives Teddy as someone she will damage. Gradually she responds to his love and unshakeable conviction that they belong together. However, every time Tilly rebuilds her life, tragedy strikes, reinforcing her sense of unworthiness and reducing her ability to see events objectively. After Teddy's accident, her exhausted mind races with 'venom and hate' (p. 199), for both herself and for the unforgiving townspeople of Dungatar.

As long as her mother is alive, Tilly feels that her only option is to remain in Dungatar as penance. However, Molly's unhappy death hardens Tilly's resolve and frees her to act. In setting the fire and ensuring its spread, she literally destroys her past. Tilly's actions are ruthless in the extreme; her lack of mercy, in fact, mirrors the way the town itself has behaved. Tilly's departure from Dungatar is an event, in marked contrast to her surreptitious night-time, arrival. In her new travelling outfit, she turns her back on her home town without compunction and leaves for a better life in Melbourne.

### Key point

Tilly's personal journey has encompassed loss and despair. However, the conclusion of the novel depicts a strong, resilient woman who has gained empowerment by reasserting control over her future.

## Teddy McSwiney

### Key quotes

'Teddy was Mae's firstborn, her dashing boy - cheeky, quick and canny.'  
(p.28)

'You'll be safe with Teddy.' (Farrat, p. 171)

Like Tilly, Teddy is an outcast. He is the eldest of the eleven McSwiney offspring-one of a family who live in a collection of disused railway carriages and old caravans beside the tip. His father has the lowly job of night-cart man, and Teddy would simply be another McSwiney, interchangeable with his many siblings and just as poorly regarded, were it not for the fact that he is 'Dungatar's highly valued full forward' (p.28). As captain and an integral member of the football team, Teddy enjoys the admiration and esteem of the whole town. His energy and generosity are also deployed in organising card games, Saturday-night dances and fundraising raffles - all of which further endear him to the locals. The general view is that 'Teddy McSwiney could sell a sailor sea-water' (p.28).

Cheerful and good-humoured, Teddy is the perfect foil for Tilly, the light to her darkness. His feelings for her are immediate. She is worldly and sophisticated, different from anyone else he has known. A supreme optimist and used to charming women, Teddy is undeterred by Tilly's aloofness. Nor does he care about her reputation with the town, or its obvious disapproval of their relationship. Teddy recognises the loneliness-beneath Tilly's independent shell, using guile and persistence to wear down her defences until she starts to rely on him. Believing that she has found 'something golden' (p.192), she agrees to marry him.

However, Teddy's fearlessness is his undoing. He dies trying to convince Tilly that no further harm will come to her; instead, he compounds her feelings of guilt and brings the town's hatred down on her head. Grimly, Sergeant Farrat tells the congregation at Teddy's funeral that 'you are not as large as he in heart, nor will you ever be, and that is the sad fact' (p. 197). In one perverse respect, Teddy's death is like that of Stewart Pettyman; though Tilly stands accused, each of these individuals is responsible for his own fate.

## Key point

The people of Dungatar have put Teddy on a pedestal and their emotional investment encourages a misplaced sense of ownership. This hero-worship is inherently dangerous, as shown by the town's irrational fury after they lose him.

## Molly Dunnage

### Key quotes

'Molly Dunnage, mad woman and crone ...' (p.8)

'She has good days and not-so-good, but she's always entertaining and things come back to her from time to time.' (Tilly, p.146)

Molly's presence in Dungatar has always been resented; metaphorically, she has lived in the dark, 'a shadow in a sad place' (p.236). Rejected by her family when she would not give up her baby, she comes to the town for a fresh start, only to be pursued by Evan Pettyman. With no money and an illegitimate child to support, Molly has few defences against Pettyman's relentless harassment and, unwillingly, becomes his mistress. Later, she insists that without his intervention, 'Myrtle and I could have had some sort of life' (p. 194). Pettyman continues to exercise a malign influence on Molly's existence, wielding his power in Dungatar to rob her of her child after his own son's death. Wretched and shunned, she literally goes 'mad with loneliness' (p.232).

When Tilly first returns to Dungatar, Molly is irrational, and resentful of her daughter's efforts to look after her. If she is crossed, she lashes out in bizarre ways. On one occasion, she dismantles Tilly's sewing machine and hides the parts; on another, she hits Tilly over the head with a poker. Equally, she shows no inclination - or ability - to curb her tongue and can say some vicious, hurtful things. More out of habit than malice, she calls Barney a 'spastic' (p. 103), though most of her insults are reserved for Tilly.

Molly's death is premature and the reconciliation with her daughter fleeting, but Tilly is, at least, offered a glimpse of the woman she has missed. Lucid and purposeful after dreaming of her grandson, Molly is finally able to



communicate the depths of her love, and the pair grieve together: 'sorry, so sorry, they said to each other' (p.233).

## Sergeant Farrat

### Key quote

'I'm beyond caring what these people think or say anymore. I'm sure everyone's seen what's on my clothes line over the years ...' (p.241)

Kind, tolerant and perceptive, Horatio Farrat is also an outsider. He is originally from Melbourne, but his attempts to design new uniforms as a young police graduate raised enough disquiet in the minds of his superiors for him to be posted to the isolated town of Dungatar. Sergeant Farrat's attitude towards law enforcement is fluid. According to Beula Harridene, his 'clock's set wrong' (p.45), but most residents appreciate his leniency. Although Farrat loves his adopted home, he is somewhat detached from its concerns - being invested in neither football nor drinking - and set apart by his own unconventional proclivities. In private, he enjoys designing and sewing (female) clothes, which he wears on holiday in Melbourne: 'the outfits didn't necessarily complement his physique, but they were unique' (p.20). The sergeant is particularly fond of the spring fashion shows at Myer and David Jones.

Farrat's sympathies are equally removed from the mainstream. He befriends Tilly when she returns to Dungatar, recognising her as a kindred creative spirit, and deploring the injustice with which she has been treated by the town. At the same time, the sergeant has a proprietorial concern for his 'flock' (p.201). He is a consistent force for good, whose role is to monitor, listen and encourage the people of Dungatar to show charity. At Teddy's funeral, Farrat condemns the prevailing hatred as dangerous and divisive, preaching love and inclusion instead. He remains Tilly's only ally - 'I knew a bit of needlework would lift your spirits' (p.209) - and provides unwavering support as her mother is dying. In an audacious gesture of solidarity, Farrat even wears one of his own outfits when he accompanies Tilly to Molly's funeral.

## Gertrude Pratt

### Key quote

'Reckon she might cost a few bob to run, that one.' (Scotty, p.87)

Gertrude, aka Trudy, is the daughter of Alvin and Muriel Pratt, the proprietors of Pratt's store. As the only supply outlet for miles - stocking groceries, meat, haberdashery and hardware - the store is 'a gold mine' (p.204), but Gertrude aims higher than being the daughter of a shop owner, however affluent.

To Elsbeth Beaumont's horror, Gertrude effectively snares her future husband by using her sexuality as bait: 'you've been had - and it doesn't take too much imagination to work out how' (p.109). She also uses emotional blackmail to override William's understandable misgivings, regarding the alacrity of the courtship: 'I thought you loved me. What about my reputation?' (p.117).

Gertrude is desperate to make the transition from grocer's daughter to the mistress of Windswept Crest. After the wedding, she assumes a new moniker and her vowels take on an unaccustomed roundness. She returns from a shopping trip to Melbourne with an expensive wardrobe, as well as bold plans for both the homestead and the town itself. Like Lady Macbeth, 'the ambitious soldier's wife' (p.270), Trudy manipulates her husband in order to further her own ambitions. Her chief objective is to depose Elsbeth and rule Windswept Crest through William. Significantly, her improvements to the property-the croquet lawn, the tennis court and the new stables-do not include a new tractor for her husband. Trudy's aspirations to improve Dungatar's social standing, as well as her own, are exposed as ridiculous when her career as a director crashes to an ignominious end. Further, her ambitions have significant ramifications for the town when its preoccupation with the eisteddfod allows Tilly to capitalise on their absence and set a fire. Trudy is a disgraced figure in the end, stripped of her authority and rejected by her disillusioned husband.

## Evan Pettyman

### Key quote

'He was a good councillor who got things done. He also knew how every man earned his keep.' (p.58)

Councillor Evan Pettyman is the shire president and 'Dungatar's richest man' (p.204). Opportunistic and self-interested, Pettyman marries the daughter of the town's previous shire president for her money. In her innocence, Marigold is easily swept off her feet by the 'ambitious, conniving and charming man' who 'wasn't very successful at anything, but told everyone he was' (p.256). To all appearances, Pettyman is a solicitous husband, treating Marigold with respect; in reality, he infantilises his wife and ensures her compliancy by dosing her with 'tonic' (p.59). Their marriage is based on deception, as Pettyman is a serial adulterer, primarily concerned with his own gratification.

Tilly's paternity is an open secret in Dungatar, but Pettyman shows a callous disregard for both his mistress and his illegitimate child. He demonstrates his vindictiveness when he is instrumental in sending Tilly away after Stewart's death. Though Pettyman pays for his daughter's schooling, this is in the expectation that she repay her 'benefactor' (p.158). He seems to regard Tilly's return to Dungatar as a personal affront, showing his contempt by spitting at her on the night of the ball.

In his arrogance, Pettyman vastly underestimates his fragile wife and 'clever' (p.257) daughter. Ultimately, though, he is his own worst enemy. After his untimely demise, the police's startling discovery of drugs, pornography and even evidence of embezzlement exposes Pettyman's criminal interests, thus destroying what remains of his reputation in the town.

## Section 3: Comparison

### IDEAS, ISSUES & THEMES

#### Vengeful communities

##### Key quotes

'We are what we always were in Salem, but now the little crazy children are jangling the keys of the kingdom, and common vengeance writes the law'. (*The Crucible*, p.72)

'In light of all they had done, and what they had not done, what they had decided not to do - they mustn't be abandoned.' (*The Dressmaker*, p.236)

On the face of it, the seventeenth-century village of Salem, Massachusetts, and the twentieth-century Australian town of Dungatar have little in common, except perhaps the fact that they are both small and rural. Yet in each case the townspeople contribute to their own destruction through a toxic combination of fear, intolerance and a desire to find scapegoats.

Widespread belief in the active malevolence of the Devil underpins the mayhem that is unleashed in Salem. Faced with a set of alarming and inexplicable circumstances, the majority are eager to attribute the girls' strange sickness to 'unnatural causes' (p. 18). Accordingly, Reverend Hale - who 'has much experience in all demonic arts' (p.22) - is summoned to ascertain the presence of witchcraft in the village. Nothing is more calculated to arouse terror in this God-fearing community. The desire to lay blame is strong, and the poor and the marginalised are obvious scapegoats. Not surprisingly, Tituba is the first accused. As a black slave, she represents the 'Other' in the Salem community, and is viewed with greater suspicion and mistrust than a white servant. The assumption that she is more likely to traffic with the Devil reflects the insularity of people such as Parris and the

Putnams. Therefore, her startling claim that she has seen '*white people*' (p.48) with the Devil is as incendiary as it is unexpected. Goody Good, 'that # sleeps in ditches', and Goody Osburn, 'drunk and half-witted' (p.60), are \$ initial targets because they are vulnerable and have no-one to defend their? innocence. \$

The witch-hunt exposes the self-interest and malice that has fermented beneath the town's pious surface for a long time. Salem celebrates such Christian values as charity and love for one's neighbour but, in reality, relations in the village have often been acrimonious. Factionalism is rife, and disputes over land are common. For example, Thomas Putnam pricks up his ears at Proctor's mention of moving lumber, insisting that the forest is part of his own entitlement. Proctor's retort - 'Your grandfather had a habit of willing land that never belonged to him' (p.36) - suggests that this friction is long-standing. Hence Rebecca's apprehension at Hale's pending arrival: 'this will set us all to arguin' again in the society, and we thought to have peace this year' (p.33). Her objections reveal the undercurrent of dissension in the town and highlight the weakness that will be its undoing.

In his commentary, Miller asserts that the witch trials provided those who harboured resentments with an unprecedented opportunity to act on them under a cloak of righteousness/long-held hatred of neighbours could now be openly expressed, and vengeance taken, despite the Bible's charitable injunctions' (p. 17). Giles Corey tells Danforth that the avaricious Putnam is exploiting the prevailing paranoia and profiting from his daughter's role in the crying-out: 'this man is killing his neighbours fortheir land' (p.87).

No-one takes greater advantage of this than Abigail. Driven by jealousy, she successfully manipulates the town's fear and superstition in her personal vendetta against Elizabeth. Abigail cannot accept that her relationship with Proctor is over and, with the single-minded narcissism of the young, has convinced herself of his enduring affection: 'you loved me, John Proctor, and whatever sin it is, you love me yet!' (p.30). Abigail's desire to be rid of the woman she calls 'a gossiping liar' (p.21) elevates the conjuring in the woods to a dangerous level, and the revelation that she 'drank a charm to - kill John Proctor's wife' (p.26) demonstrates the full extent of her hatred. Once Elizabeth's name joins the growing list of the accused, the Proctors realise that Abigail's agenda is sinister: she hopes to take Elizabeth's place as Proctor's wife.

As panic and hysteria replace objectivity, the town starts to self-destruct. Turmoil and anarchy result. Hale paints a bleak picture when he informs Danforth of the breakdown of the town's infrastructure: 'Excellency, there are orphans wandering from house to house; abandoned cattle bellow on the highroads, the stink of rotting crops hangs everywhere' (p.114). His claim that 'no man knows when the harlot's cry will end his life' (p. 114) points to the terrifyingly random nature of the accusations. Good citizens, whose only crime has been to own coveted land or provoke offence, are denounced as agents of the Devil. Proctor himself recognises the true nature of the crying-out when he tells Hale that 'vengeance is walking Salem' (p.72).

### Key point

The erroneous assumption that the Devil is loose in Salem is exploited by unscrupulous individuals whose wickedness and greed are all-too-recognisably human.

In *The Dressmaker*, Dungatar's willingness to attribute blame and victimise the innocent is equally strong. When Tilly returns to the town, Molly reminds her that 'it's open slather on outcasts' (p.33). Convention and respectability form the basis of Dungatar's creed, and Molly Dunnage has committed the cardinal sin of having a child out of wedlock. In the town's eyes, this is her real crime, not her relationship with Evan Pettyman. Hypocritically, the town seems prepared to turn a blind eye to Faith O'Brien's adultery with Reginald Blood - although the chemist, Mr Almanac, concocts a painful punishment for the 'sinners' (p.23) - and Nancy Pickett's lesbian affair with Ruth Dimm. However, Molly is judged and condemned for her sexual history, and has been ostracised as 'mad' (p.232) and immoral ever since Tilly's birth.

Dungatar's judgement of Molly extends to her daughter, the evidence of her transgression. Tilly is bullied and reviled at school. The teacher, Prudence Dimm, sets the tone by victimising Tilly with blatant spite, thereby encouraging her pupils to do the same. In the playground, Tilly is called 'Dunnybum' and 'a bar-std' (p.56)\* and held down by the children while Stewart Pettyman charges at her like an angry bull. After his death, the town convinces itself that the little girl is responsible. Their hostility, coupled with Evan Pettyman's influence, results in Tilly being separated from her mother and sent to Melbourne.

Dungatar's refusal to forgive precipitates its destruction. Showing the same irrational bigotry as in the past, the townspeople also hold Tilly responsible for Teddy's death. Sergeant Farrat's eulogy encourages the town to reflect on its sins of spite and exclusion. Instead, the vitriol intensifies. In an echo of *The Crucible*, the Dunnage women are vilified as 'murderers' and 'witches' (p.201). Hoodlums vandalise the house, throwing rocks and rubbish. Tilly and her mother become prisoners in their home as the town's persecution makes it impossible for them to go out during daylight. Everyone in Dungatar, with the exception of Sergeant Farrat, is complicit. Even such an apparently good-natured woman as Faith O'Brien shoves Tilly on the only occasion that she ventures into town for provisions.

However, Dungatar encounters its match in Tilly. After her mother's death, her perspective shifts and, rather than accepting blame, she starts to apportion it. On her mother's behalf as much as her own, Tilly vows retribution against the town: 'Pain will no longer be our curse, Molly ... It will be our revenge and our reason' (p.236). Tilly's campaign commences with Even Pettyman. In a neat act of poetic justice, she effectively emasculates him so that Marigold is able to take her own vengeance on her lecherous husband/

Tilly's attempt to incinerate the whole town is calculated from the start. She sets the fire on a hot, windy day when the fire brigade is absent, making sure that her own house will burn quickly by stuffing it to the rafters with flammable material and dousing it with kerosene. As a final touch, she turns off the water. By the time the actors return, Dungatar is 'black and smoking' (p.294). All they can do is survey the damage while digesting the unpalatable fact that their insurance has not been paid. The battlelines are very clearly delineated in *The Dressmaker*. Tilly's reprisal is extreme, yet Ham elicits a little sympathy for the citizens of Dungatar. Malice and prejudice have been their undoing and, like the people of Salem, they have brought the crisis upon themselves.

### Key point

Both texts argue that the greatest threat to a community can come from within. The social compact - including respect, goodwill and shared history - is irreparably damaged when people reject rationality and become victims of their own blind prejudices.

## Guilt

### Key quotes

Hale: There is a prodigious fear of this court in the country -

Danforth: Then there is a prodigious guilt in the country. (*The Crucible*, p.88)

'Tilly knew she must stay in Dungatar for a kind of penance. If she went anywhere else the same thing would happen.' (*The Dressmaker*, pp.195-6)

Salem's obsession with sin and damnation provides the fertile context in which the crying-out occurs. The Puritan culture is inherently punitive, actively seeking out, and finding, wickedness in anything resembling gratuitous pleasure. For example, the reaction to the girls dancing in the woods is general condemnation. The preoccupation with sin assumes fault. When Reverend Hale counsels Proctor and his friends to 'think on your village and what may have drawn from heaven such thundering wrath upon you all' (p.73), his words suggest a collective guilt so blatant that the witch trials are the only means by which Salem can be purged.

Abigail and the other girls exploit this nexus between guilt and blame convincingly. By representing themselves as victims of malevolent forces, they shift the focus away from their own culpability and onto those supposedly acting for the Devil. The girls become the instrument through which the 'voice of Heaven' (p.81) is speaking. Danforth is so convinced of Salem's guilt that even the news of Abigail's defection fails to weaken his resolve: 'while I speak God's law, I will not crack its voice with whimpering' (p. 113).

Miller is interested in the way in which good men can be persuaded to doubt themselves, and *The Crucible* shows how damaging the effects of guilt can be. Reverend Hale blames himself for his role as the 'specialist' whose investigations lend credibility to the witch-hunt, and his crisis of conscience pitches him against the very mechanism of which he was once a crucial part. Hale admits that he came into the village 'like a bridegroom to his beloved, bearing gifts of high religion' (p.115), but the subsequent hysteria has destroyed his 'bright confidence' (p.115). By the end of the play, he has denounced the court and seeks only to undo the harm he has done, telling Elizabeth that 'I would save your husband's life, for if he is taken I count



myself his murderer' (p.115). Yet Hale's dilemma is not easily resolved. However much he rationalises his behaviour, in counselling the accused to lie he sets himself an unhappy penance that compromises his Christian values. As such, he remains conflicted.

John Proctor has come to regard himself as 'a kind of fraud' (p.27) rather than the man Salem assumes him to be. He views himself as a sinner - not merely by the judgemental standards of the society in which he lives, but also according to his own moral code. Proctor's guilt does not initially permit him to demonstrate principled conviction, as Rebecca Nurse or Martha Corey do. Confronted with a self-appointed moral authority, Proctor feels he has little justification for throwing away his life. In trying to convince himself, as well as his wife, that he is not the stuff of which martyrs are made, he insists that 'I cannot mount the gibbet like a saint ... I am no good man' (p. 118). This sense of unworthiness tempts him to betray himself and his friends.

On the other hand, Tilly's guilt is completely unwarranted. Unlike Proctor, she has committed no crime, - she has been the victim of tragic circumstances, not their agent. Tilly's guilt is compounded by the recrimination of others. Hence, like many victims of abuse, she blames herself. As a vulnerable child, she is treated shamefully by the people of Dungatar - irrationally accused of causing Stewart Pettyman's accident and cruelly punished by being separated from her mother. Sergeant Farrat is sympathetic, but he cannot prevail against the mood of the town or the determined malice of the Pettymans. Tilly is effectively abandoned, with no-one to champion her cause. When the life that she successfully establishes in Paris is destroyed with the death of her baby son, she is again blamed, this time by her grieving partner. Tilly is further punished by his desertion.

These deaths have left a permanent legacy of guilt and shame, shaping Tilly's adult sense of self. When she first returns to Dungatar, Sergeant Farrat observes perceptively that she seems 'strong, but damaged' (p.7). In Dungatar, Tilly's past remains an open wound that is impossible to cauterise; the town's resentment of her is palpable, and she is reminded of it whenever she drops her guard. As she explains to Teddy, her guilt is like 'a black thing - a weight ... it makes itself invisible then creeps back when I feel safest...' (p. 184).

Like Proctor, Tilly's guilt affects her judgement. She is reluctant to enter into a relationship with Teddy because she no longer trusts herself, fearing that she is cursed. While Teddy is the first to absolve her, ironically it is his foolhardy attempt to disprove her fears that kills him. Afterwards comes despair. Believing that she will never be free of her past, Tilly rejects the optimistic new identity she has given herself, reclaiming the name 'Myrtle' and telling Sergeant Farrat that 'everyone I've touched is hurt, or dead' (p. 192). She considers herself 'bankrupted' (p. 196) in every way, undeserving of forgiveness or love. All that is left for her is to stay in Dungatar and look after her infirm mother as reparation for her crimes.

Both *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker* promote the lesson that forgiveness must come from within. The play's climax sees Proctor's self-belief reassert itself when he refuses to surrender his name. He understands that he is not defined by a single mistake and is, in fact, worthy to die with 'saints' such as Rebecca. By rejecting the court's moral integrity, Proctor reclaims his own and achieves personal redemption: 'you have made your magic now, for now I do think I see some shred of goodness in John Proctor' (p. 125).

Arguably, Tilly's healing process is harder. Her ability to forgive herself has been set back by the painful circumstances of Teddy's death. She feels completely alone, having lost her sole ally and the promise of a brighter future. However, the unexpected lucidity that follows Molly's dream of her grandson leads to a cathartic moment of reconciliation and love. Tilly is able to tell her story and, in turn, hear her mother's. She realises the full extent of Molly's bereavement, and the fact that powerful forces were pitted against them both. From these shared confidences come a measure of peace and a reminder that she is not alone after all.

### Key point

These texts explore the corrosive effects of guilt and the way in which it exacerbates self-doubt. John Proctor and Tilly Dunnage both judge themselves harshly, and their shared sense of unworthiness makes them complicit in the retribution demanded of them.

## Abuse of power

### Key quotes

'The jails are packed - our greatest judges sit in Salem now - and hangin's promised.' (Hale, *The Crucible*, p.73)

'Everyone likes to have someone to hate.' (Tilly, *The Dressmaker*, p.1-75)

In the seventeenth century, the concept of female empowerment is alien, yet Abigail Williams is instrumental in actually shaping the crisis that plays out in Salem. The power she exercises is malevolent and self-interested. Until the purge, young women in Puritan society were essentially invisible, - Salem had never conceived that they would be 'anything but thankful for being permitted to walk straight, eyes slightly lowered ... and mouths shut until bidden to speak' (p. 13). As an orphan, working as a servant and living on her uncle's charity, Abigail is more disempowered than most. However, her intimidation of the girls, especially Mary Warren, demonstrates the force of her personality and the strange hold she develops over them. Abigail secures their silence, and then their active collaboration, with threats of 'reddish work done at night' (p.27). The witch-hunt gives her status and influence; she is treated with awe by the general population, and eminent judges believe her every accusation, no matter how far-fetched. Abigail's sense of entitlement grows to such a degree that she openly threatens the Deputy-Governor: 'let *you* beware, Mr Danforth' (p.96).

Abigail's lies feed directly into the religious paranoia of the authorities. Instead of challenging her allegations, Danforth and Hathorne become willing dupes. The Deputy-Governor represents the highest power in the province, yet under his authority justice is corrupted on a grand scale. Danforth shows none of the flexibility or compassion of a true leader. Rigid in his beliefs and self-serving in his priorities, he rules by fear and embodies the face of the public terror unleashed in Salem. Danforth views every defence as 'an attack upon the court' (p.85). Accordingly, when Francis Nurse presents his well-meaning testimonial, attesting to his wife's good name, those who have signed it are also arrested. Disturbing evidence against the state's key witnesses - in particular Abigail - does nothing to change Danforth's mind. In a perverse rationalisation, he refuses to pardon the condemned prisoners

on the basis that twelve have already been hanged for the same crime. His own reputation, and that of the government he represents, is more important than the lives of the innocent people he convicts.

Women's vulnerability is evident in both *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker*. For example, John Proctor is a good man and a fair-minded master, yet he still has a patriarchal mindset. Frustrated by a process he cannot understand, Proctor forbids his servant, Mary Warren, to go to Salem and has no hesitation threatening her with a whipping. When Mary refuses to obey him, insisting that she is 'an official of the court' (p.58), Proctor is prepared to use brute force to stop her. The girl's response - 'I'll not stand whipping any more! (p.58)' - suggests that his aggression is not out of the ordinary. This is reinforced at the end of Act Two, when Proctor again uses violence to force Mary into submission.

In many ways, Australia in the 1950s is no less patriarchal than seventeenth-century Massachusetts. As well as making the decisions and controlling the purse strings, some of the men in Dungatar abuse their wives with impunity. Mr Almanac is a sadistic, judgemental bully whose wife, Irma, 'used to have a lot of falls, which left her with a black eye or a cut lip' (p.41). Moreover, he denies her the drugs that may make her arthritic pain bearable. Though Almanac is the only chemist in town, he holds the perverse belief that sin is 'the cause of all disease' (p.40), and has no hesitation in inflicting pain on those he considers deserving of punishment. His 'remedy' for Faith O'Brien's vaginal itch is the abrasive cleaning agent White Lily.

Like Irma, Marigold Pettyman suffers abuse and indignity at the hands of her husband. Marigold is drugged and subjected to regular marital rape. Evan Pettyman is also a womaniser with wandering hands, a 'man-who touched women ... and at dances pressed his partners tightly, ramming his thigh between their legs to move them around the floor' (p.57). As shire president, Pettyman is too powerful to alienate. The local women avoid him where possible; the men tolerate his behaviour, making excuses because of his position. Pettyman's brutality towards Molly Dunnage effectively ruins her life. She is an inexperienced young woman when she is seduced by Pettyman, who pursues her ruthlessly when she tries to extricate herself from the relationship. After his son's death, he uses his influence to punish her in the cruellest way possible, by taking away her child: 'when he couldn't have his son anymore, I couldn't have you' (p.232). Nor does he divulge

Tilly's whereabouts, so that Molly lives in ignorance and loneliness until her daughter's return.

The text underscores the ugly power of the mob. In Dungatar, this power is abused decisively. While the town's hostility escalates to contemptible proportions after Teddy's accident, Tilly is targeted from the moment of her arrival in a collective campaign of harassment and covert bullying. She is snubbed, and excluded even from events where she has earned the right to be present. At the Pratt wedding reception, Tilly stands in the darkness outside the back door, waiting for an acknowledgement of her work. To the disappointment of the female guests, the name of Gertrude's dressmaker is not mentioned. Similarly, despite Tilly making the glorious gowns paraded by the women at the ball, there is no allocated place for her at the event. Her name has literally been scribbled or scrubbed out of the seating plan.

The victimisation of the adult Tilly is an extension of the treatment she received as a child, from adults as well as peers. Instead of protecting Tilly, Prudence Dimm abuses her authority by persecuting the girl. She puts her on ink-well duty day after day, hits her with a steel ruler and drags her out of the classroom by the plait (pp.55-6). This example encourages her suggestible students to behave with similar cruelty. As Molly Dunnage's daughter, Tilly has no voice and no advocate. Essentially, the town turns a blind eye to the way she is mistreated; only the outsider Edward McSwiney steps in on her behalf when tragedy strikes, telling Sergeant Farrat that 'the poor little thing ... was just trying to save herself' (p.193).

## Love and forgiveness

### Key quotes

'I never knew how I should say my love.' (Elizabeth, *The Crucible*, p.119)

'Sergeant Farrat said love was as strong as hate and that as much as they themselves could hate someone, they could also love an outcast.'

(Farrat, *The Dressmaker*, p.197)

The Proctors love each other deeply, but Proctor's adultery has damaged their marriage. Act Two reveals just how strained relations between the couple have become: Elizabeth tells herself that she has forgiven her husband,

but still an 'everlasting funeral' (p.55) marches around her heart. Despite Abigail's dismissal and her husband's repentance, Elizabeth punishes him with a seven-month silence and emotional withdrawal. Her insecurity and natural reserve prevent her from showing warmth or true forgiveness. In turn, Proctor resents her suspicions, given that he has done his best to win back her trust: 'oh, Elizabeth, your justice would freeze beer' (p.55). Yet the threat that Abigail poses has the unintended consequence of reuniting the couple. Initially reluctant to intervene in the court's proceedings, Proctor is spurred into action by Elizabeth's arrest. The stark contrast in the language he uses to describe each woman to the court illustrates clearly where his loyalties lie: Elizabeth is his 'dear good wife', while Abigail is a 'whore' and a 'lump of vanity' (p.98).

■ *The Crucible* demonstrates how closely love is allied with forgiveness. Elizabeth's forgiveness is crucial to Proctor, but it is not until she poignantly concedes her own shortcomings that she is able to offer it sincerely: 'it were a cold house I kept' (p. 119). Elizabeth knows that her husband's guilt will be compounded if he allows himself to be manipulated by the court, but she refuses to pass further judgement on him: 'whatever you will do, it is a good man does it' (p.119). This unwavering faith in Proctor's integrity helps him to make the choice he does, giving him the strength to resist the oppression of the state. The couple's passionate farewell kiss, devoid of recrimination or blame, and expressing everything that words cannot, is an affirmation of their love.

Until meeting Teddy, Tilly Dunnage receives no such absolution; her experience of love has been profoundly damaging. Abandoned by her English lover after the death of their son, she decides that the life she has built in Paris seems 'pointless and cruel' (p.232). Ormond's rejection convinces her that she has nothing to offer, and so when Teddy starts to woo her, carefully but persistently, she resists. Her feelings for him grow incrementally, despite her reluctance. Teddy's love is pure and uncomplicated. He categorically rejects Tilly's belief that she is 'cursed' (p.195) and dies attempting to prove that 'the might of his love' (p. 197) will shield her from further harm.

While love does not always prevail, *The Dressmaker* emphasises the idea that opening oneself to intimacy, however vulnerable or exposed one may be, remains an important and necessary part of the human condition. Though their relationship ends in tragedy, Tilly is nourished by Teddy's love. For a

short time, her fears are defused and she is invited to believe in herself again. The inherent risk of love is also evident in the Beaumont-Muncan alliance. When Mona marries Lesley, she does not get the husband she anticipates, but her ultimate acceptance allows these two lonely misfits to arrive at a compromise based on friendship.

Both of these texts deal in the polarities of love and hate, with the characters themselves reflecting this dichotomy. Sergeant Farrat speaks extensively of love and forgiveness at Teddy's funeral, trying in vain to dampen down the town's irrational hatred. He reminds the congregation that Teddy loved Tilly and intended to marry her. Moreover, he argues that the wedding would have been an inclusive, healing occasion to which all present, 'along with your secrets and mistakes and prejudices and flaws' (p.197) would have been invited. However, Dungatar gains nothing from his sermon, 'only their continuing hatred' (p.201). When the townswomen deign to re-engage Tilly's services a year after Teddy's death, she knows that their magnanimity is pragmatic rather than penitent. The townspeople have shown no remorse for their treatment of her or her mother. This lack of contrition gives the embittered Tilly permission to take revenge on Dungatar.

In *The Crucible*, the characters are similarly polarised. The merciless ethos of Danforth and Hathorne is pitted against the goodness of characters such as Proctor, Elizabeth and Rebecca, who retain their integrity despite their essential powerlessness. Proctor supporting the fragile Rebecca as they are marched to the gallows is a small but significant gesture of charity. His last words exhort Elizabeth to hold fast: 'Give them no tear! Tears pleasure them! Show honour now, show a stony heart and sink them with it!' (p.125).

The concept of forgiveness is perverted by the Salem witch-hunt. Those accused are urged to perjure themselves and confess to a crime they have not committed. If they comply, then God's - and the state's - mercy will be forthcoming. Yet when Tituba 'opens' herself to God's 'holy light' (p.47), she inadvertently plays into the hands of the spiteful Thomas Putnam, who puts words in her mouth - 'Sarah Good? Did you ever see Sarah Good with him [the Devil]? Or Osburn?' (p.47) - and gives evil the opportunity to flourish. Abigail's charade at the end of Act Three exemplifies this same unholy paradox. Knowing that Mary is telling the truth and she is the liar, Abigail nevertheless presents herself to the court as forgiving and solicitous, reaching out and drawing the distraught Mary to her. Hale comes to recognise the

fallacy on which the state's case is based, telling Danforth bitterly, 'I come to do the Devil's work. I come to counsel Christians they should belie themselves' (p.114).

### Key point

In both these texts, love is presented as a powerful force for good, challenging the bigotry and hatred that threatens to overwhelm events.

## Truth and deception

### Key quotes

'They're all marvellous pretenders.' (Proctor, *The Crucible*, p.95)

'In this town a man can covet his neighbour's wife and not get hurt, but to speak the truth can earn a bleeding nose.' (Septimus Crescant, *The Dressmaker*, p. 141)

Throughout *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker*, there is a disconnect between what people are ready to believe - about themselves and the world around them - and what is actually true. Truth is an expendable commodity in both communities.

A number of people in Dungatar have secret lives that flout the town's accepted conventions and are at odds with their public image. Faith O'Brien is married to Hamish but having an affair with the butcher, Reginald Blood. Behind closed doors, Nancy Pickett and Ruth Dimm conduct a lesbian affair. Sergeant Farrat's conservative superiors would be appalled to know that the respected policeman wears nylon stockings and lace panties under his uniform. The way in which Evan Pettyman deceives the town and lies to his wife is less benign. He holds the respected position of shire president but is chronically unfaithful, even starting an affair with Una Pleasance when she is staying in the Pettymans' home. While he treats Marigold with deference in public, he takes gross advantage of her in private.

Though Pettyman's behaviour is characterised by a marked lack of conscience, John Proctor's one offence causes him considerable mental anguish, as he considers himself a man of integrity. He is highly respected



in Salem as an upright man, a dutiful husband and a devoted father, but knows himself to be an adulterer who has committed the dangerous sin of lechery. Nevertheless, Abigail admires Proctor's honesty, crediting him with opening her eyes and putting knowledge in her heart. He has helped her identify the hypocrisy and self-interest that lies behind Salem's pious posturing: 'I never knew what pretence Salem was; I never knew the lying lessons I was taught by all these Christian women and their covenanted men!' (p.30).

Abigail's fundamental contempt for Salem's hypocrisy is one of the factors that enables her to rationalise her outrageous lies. In setting her terrifying fraud in motion, ignorance and the prevailing religious ethos play into her hands. Salem's citizens are predisposed to look for metaphysical, rather than rational, explanations. For example, when confronted with what he doesn't understand, a practical man such as Giles Corey still falls back on superstition: 'it [witchcraft] suggests to the mind what the trouble be among us all these years' (p.36). In the same way, Ann Putnam turns to conjuring for answers when she cannot rationalise the loss of seven babies in childbirth. Abigail manipulates this general susceptibility for her own ends, freely admitting to Proctor that the crying-out has 'naught to do with witchcraft' (p.54). However, her trustworthiness is accepted unquestioningly by Danforth and Hathorne, who, as representatives of the state, invest their 'entire contention' (p.81) in the children's testimony. The crying-out turns truth on its head. Abigail is perceived as an innocent 'child' (p.93) by the court and a 'saint' (p.53) by the cowed community. By contrast, true saints such as Rebecca Nurse are condemned as witches.

*The Dressmaker* explores the way in which people are willing to deceive themselves. Unexpectedly, Tilly's dressmaking abilities provide them with the means. She works a kind of alchemy on the women of Dungatar, who are 'renovated, European-touched, advanced to almost avante-garde' (p. 153) by her skill and imagination. The visitor from Melbourne is confounded, wondering how 'Paris had found its way to the dilapidated confines and neglected torsos of banal housewives in a rural province' (p.165). The novel acknowledges the transformative power of fashion while at the same time underscoring its limitations. Like the work of all great couturiers, Tilly's designs offer each individual a chance to present her best self. Unfortunately, the women of Dungatar are motivated by vanity and one-upmanship. They are happy to exploit Tilly's expertise, flaunting the shallow elegance conferred

on them by her clothes, but their understanding of style is one-dimensional. Tilly's beautiful creations can only affect a superficial transformation, beneath which Dungatar remains 'a town of round shoulders and splayed gaits' (p.171).

Gertrude Pratt is a prime example. Her radiant transformation on her wedding day owes everything to Tilly's wizardry; ingenious cutting disguises the bride's lumpy thighs and square bottom, even as it showcases her slender waist. However, Gertrude becomes a victim of her own narcissism. Morphing into 'Trudy', she decides that, under her direction, her home town can do better: 'we're going to take *Doongatah* for the ride of its life' (p. 136). Trudy's all-consuming self-belief is not dissimilar from Abigail's in *The Crucible*, and by sheer force of personality she carries others along with her. The idea that 'a successful production of *Macbeth* can be mounted with an inexperienced cast - some of whom have never heard of Shakespeare - is exposed as a pretentious delusion. In their outlandish Baroque costumes, the townspeople are revealed as vain and foolish, rather than clever or talented.

Throughout *The Dressmaker*, Ham demonstrates the townspeople's predilection to pervert the truth when it suits them. At Teddy's funeral, Sergeant Farrat points out that, like Tilly, Teddy was also an outcast, 'until he proved himself an asset' (p.197). In vain, Sergeant Farrat argues that Teddy wanted the townspeople to love Tilly and considered the way she had been treated 'unforgivable' (p.197). Dungatar remains fixed in its view that Tilly is a murderer. In Salem, Danforth and Hathorne show a comparable ability to distort the truth to justify their actions - in this case, the repressive approach taken by the state. Blinded by obsession and prejudice, they refuse to rethink their position even after Abigail's duplicity becomes clear and the integrity of the trials has been damaged. Both texts show the importance of moderate, rational voices in terms of promoting the truth, but in each case these voices are drowned out by a more powerful majority. Like Farrat, Reverend Hale's efforts to convey reason are isolated, and therefore ineffectual.

# QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

This section focuses on your own analytical writing on the text pair and gives you some strategies for producing high-quality responses in your coursework and exam essays.

## Essay topics

- 1 “I am John Proctor! You will not use me.” (*The Crucible*)  
“Nothing ever really changes, Myrtle.” (*The Dressmaker*)  
Compare the choices made by the characters in *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker*.
- 2 How do *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker* demonstrate the importance of leadership?
- 3 “Sometimes things just don’t seem fair.” (*The Dressmaker*)  
Compare how *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker* explore the subject of injustice.
- 4 Compare how *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker* portray the influence of the past on the present.
- 5 How do *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker* explore the effect of fear on a community?
- 6 “The magistrate sits in your heart that judges you.” (*The Crucible*)  
Compare the impact of guilt on the characters in *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker*.
- 7 Compare the ways in which *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker* portray divided societies.
- 8 “I will be your only wife, or no wife at all!” (*The Crucible*)  
“I’ll take you to the stars.” (*The Dressmaker*)  
How do *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker* depict the complexities of love?
- 9 ‘It is difficult to change people’s beliefs.’  
Compare how *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker* explore this idea.
- 10 Compare how *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker* explore the conflict between appearance and reality.

## Vocabulary for writing on *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker*

**Allegory:** a story with a meaning or message other than the literal one? the text invites interpretation on at least two levels.

**Haute couture:** 'high fashion'; designing and creating exclusive, custom-made clothes for an individual client; usually sewn by hand using expensive, often unusual, fabrics.

**Intertextuality:** the deliberate referencing of other texts within a text - either directly, by allusion or quotation, or indirectly, by paraphrasing or imitation.

**Linear structure:** a narrative that presents events in chronological order.

**Motif:** a recurring image used to link ideas and reinforce themes; adds cohesion and unity to the writing.

**Omniscient narration:** an all-seeing, all-knowing style of narration in which the author presents as much or as little as they choose about the characters' feelings, actions and circumstances.

**Patriarchy:** a society in which all the power structures - political, religious, legal and domestic - are invested in and run by men.

**Puritans:** Protestants who promoted a stricter, 'purer' form of Christianity.

**Romance:** a narrative that explores a romantic relationship between individuals.

**Theocracy:** a form of government in which there is no separation between church and state.

## Analysing a sample topic

**It is difficult to change people's beliefs.'**

**Compare how *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker* explore this idea.**

This topic asks you examine the beliefs that people have (they may be based on number of factors) and why they are so important. You must formulate a contention - make this clear in the introduction and indicate your line of argument.

- Look at the social and historical contexts presented in these texts.  
How do they shape the perspectives and inform the behaviours of the characters?

- The key word is 'beliefs' - that is, deep-seated, entrenched views. What are the big ideas or common messages that emerge from each text regarding people's beliefs? Focus on how and why the characters hold the beliefs they do.
- Do the writers of both texts come to similar conclusions? Where do they differ? Find evidence for your views on this in each text.
- The topic implies that an inability to change one's beliefs is negative - is this true? Consider what motivates key characters, as well as the consequences that flow from their views.

The topic is broad, and you will need to be selective. The following plan is only *one* way to tackle this question.

#### Sample introduction

Both Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* and Rosalie Ham's novel *The Dressmaker* demonstrate that it is very difficult for people to change their beliefs. Whether they are motivated by faith or simply blind prejudice, the characters in these texts are usually resistant to looking at situations from an alternative perspective. Often it is less confronting to reject reason and close their minds to the truth. However, change is not impossible, and in both texts there are some individuals who do alter their views. Furthermore, they are prepared to act on their new knowledge and understanding.

#### Body paragraph outline

*Paragraph 1:* In *The Crucible*, the driving imperative is religious belief.

- The Puritans of Massachusetts are devout Christians and their faith in God is accompanied by a passionate belief in the Devil.
- Salem is a theocracy, which tolerates no dissent. Those who break God's laws also commit a crime against the state.
- The pervasive fear that the Devil is active in Salem leads to the witch-hunt: 'we dare not quail to follow wherever the accusing finger points' (p.68).

*Paragraph 2:* Prejudice is the overriding factor in *The Dressmaker*.

- in the small conventional town of Dungatar, illegitimacy is a stigma - bigotry towards the Dunnages is deep-seated and ongoing.
- Two of the worst examples are 'venomous' Beula Harridene (p.200) and Evan Pettyman - it is easier for the latter to demonise Tilly than to take personal responsibility.
- After Teddy's death, the townspeople's rage and grief demands a scapegoat. Sergeant Farrat's attempts to persuade them that Tilly is innocent fail: 'they had salvaged nothing of his sermon, only their continuing hatred' (p.201).

*Paragraph 3:* Nevertheless, Miller makes a distinction between those who should change their beliefs and those prepared to uphold a strong moral principle.

- Readers are positioned to admire Elizabeth Proctor's faith, which is pure and unwavering. Her certainty cannot be shaken by Hale's spurious arguments that she or Rebecca could 'secretly be bound to Satan' (p.66). Similarly, she rejects Hale's appeal that Proctor should save his life by lying: 'I think that be the Devil's argument' (p.115).
- By contrast, Deputy-Governor Danforth is presented as a fanatic: 'a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it, there be no road between' (p.85). Danforth stubbornly refuses to listen to new evidence because it will compromise the state's investment in the witch trials.

*Paragraph 4:* There are characters in both texts who, for good reason, do change their views.

- In *The Crucible*, John Hale's religious conviction is initially so strong that he assumes a leading role in the witch-hunt. However, he is horrified by its arbitrary trajectory, and comes to believe there is 'blood on his hands' (p. 114).
- He retains his faith but does everything in his power to save the lives of those condemned, including counselling them to make false confessions.
- Marigold Pettyman, in *The Dressmaker*, has been poisoned - literally and metaphorically - by her husband, who makes her believe that Tilly murdered her son.

- Tilly liberates Marigold from Evan's lies, enabling her to fight back: 'I used to be sick, Evan, you used to make me sick, but Tilly Dunnage cured me' (p.257).

#### Sample conclusion

*The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker* show how powerful the beliefs of a majority can be, often overriding reason. These texts demonstrate that strongly held views can be based on little more than prejudice and fear. In such cases, the refusal to let go of these prejudices will have a detrimental impact on individuals and their communities. That there are characters in both texts who do change their beliefs and challenge the prevailing tide is testament to their singular courage and objectivity.

## SAMPLE ANSWER

"I am John Proctor! You will not use me." (*The Crucible*)

"Nothing ever really changes, Myrtle." (*The Dressmaker*)

Compare the choices made by the characters in *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker*.

The characters in Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* and Rosalie Ham's novel *The Dressmaker* are faced with significant - in some cases, life-threatening - choices that affect not only themselves but also those around them. These texts examine the roles that fear, conscience, self-interest and revenge play in the decisions people make. They also show that some behaviours have far-reaching consequences, and that how individuals choose to behave is often informed by the choices and actions of those who have gone before them.

In *The Crucible*, the overarching context of the witch-hunt governs the destinies of most of the characters, exerting a critical influence on the choices they make. Miller explores the way in which public terror divests people of conscience. A series of violent events leaves the residents of Salem vulnerable and disempowered. They are forced to make an invidious choice between compliance with a corrupt authority and adherence to their own principles. In most cases, this choice is dictated by fear: There are them that will swear to anything before they'll hang'. Nevertheless, some courageous individuals - such as Rebecca Nurse and Giles Corey - do emerge and are willing to stand against the court. The protagonist, John Proctor, is a reluctant hero who at first is prepared to lie and make a false confession. However, he recoils from allowing the court to publicise his signed statement in order to validate the trials' dwindling credibility. Proctor recognises that he is being exploited, and the very thing he is trying to protect - his good name - will be destroyed in the process: 'I am John Proctor! You will not use me.' His resistance illustrates that even in the direst circumstances, there is still a choice. When the distraught Hale insists that Proctor cannot die needlessly, the latter retaliates, 'I can. And there's your first marvel, that I can.'

Unlike those in Salem, the characters in *Dungatar* are not confronted with an existential threat. Their choices are much simpler - to accept or reject reason; to behave with compassion and empathy or with malice. At the same time, both texts highlight the fact that choices are not made in a



vacuum. In *The Crucible*, Proctor's adultery casts a long shadow. The ramifications of his 'single error' are felt by Salem as a whole because Abigail's jealousy and hatred of Elizabeth is the catalyst that leads to the witch-hunt. Proctor's affair is initially a private matter that only affects the three people involved. However, his attempts to extricate himself from the relationship provoke Abigail's anger. Unwilling to blame her lover, Abigail's invective is directed at Elizabeth: 'She is blackening my name in the village ... She is a cold, snivelling woman, and you bend to her!' Elizabeth recognises the girl's true intent before her husband does, telling him that Abigail 'dare not call out such a farmer's wife but there be monstrous profit in it'.

The same ripple effect is observable in *The Dressmaker*. Just as Salem pays the price for the 'whore's vengeance', Dungatar is held to account for its treatment of the Dunnages. Throughout the text, Tilly Dunnage is presented as a sympathetic character: compassionate, fair-minded and practical. Her decision to return to Dungatar is partially reactive - lost and bereft, she wants to escape Europe - but she is also altruistically motivated. When she finds her mother in an abject state, reviled and neglected by the townspeople, she knows that she is needed. Nonetheless, it is quickly brought home to Tilly that the town's hostility towards her and her mother has not abated. Mae McSwiney's warning - 'nothing ever really changes' - alludes to the bigotry that lies just beneath Dungatar's conservative veneer. While Tilly is of use to them, the townspeople are prepared to tolerate her presence, but after Teddy's death their bile resurfaces.

Tilly's destruction of Dungatar and Abigail's role in the crying-out make an interesting comparison. At face value, both are immoral choices. Yet we are positioned to empathise with Tilly and see her actions as just, and to condemn Abigail as an unscrupulous liar motivated by revenge. Molly's death effects a shift in Tilly. Believing that it is 'only fair' things *should change*, she decides that Dungatar will pay for its sins against her and her mother. She plants the seed of the play, knowing that the Social Club cannot resist showing up its neighbours, and she encourages Trudy's choice of the ridiculous - and expensive - costumes. When Tilly sets the fire, it is in the knowledge that the townspeople have chosen not to pay their insurance: 'we can't win without the soldiers' costumes'. The townspeople are reduced to 'terrified children lost in a crowd', undone by their own vindictiveness and cruelty. In the same way, Abigail exploits Salem's weaknesses, using the town's

prejudices and fear of the Devil against itself. As more and more are implicated by the crying-out, she becomes indispensable to the court, though her objective, to become Proctor's wife, eludes her.

By the end of the play, Abigail has been thoroughly discredited - exposed as a thief and, irrespective of what Danforth may prefer to believe, a liar. Described by Hale as a 'harlot', Abigail has fled from the chaos she has generated, with her reputation in tatters. By contrast, Tilly is presented as a righteous figure, surrounded by light. As she prepares to set the fire that will cleanse Dungeness of its vitriol, she is 'wreathed in a brilliant halo, like a back-lit actor, dust from tailor's chalk and flock floating in shafts of light about her'. Perhaps in the future Dungeness will make the choice to rebuild itself as a community where love and compassion, rather than hate, prevail.

These texts explore the complex interplay between cause and effect. Irrespective of their motives, the choices that people make will reverberate into the future. Moreover, both texts demonstrate that ethical choices are always open to those prepared to make them. Despite the victimisation of Salem's citizens in *The Crucible*, the choice to be guided by conscience remains. Conversely, the townspeople in *The Dressmaker* are not victims, but their collective decision to act as a mob to inflict pain on a pair of innocent women determines their fate.

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