

# [Whilst we are appalled by abigail williams](https://assignbuster.com/whilst-we-are-appalled-by-abigail-williams/)

[Literature](https://assignbuster.com/essay-subjects/literature/)

The antagonist Abigail Williams appals and shocks ‘ The Crucible’’s audience with her manner, from the very start already embroiled in opposition of Salem’s common society and its members, remorselessly bringing down anyone that dares to challenge her, with numerous deaths ensuing. Yet despite this, she remains the same character who turns the tables over in regards to their supressing patriarchal society, and against all odds rising from the belittled position of an orphaned woman to one that dares to challenge the theocratic ‘ weighty judges’, and attempt to break free from the extreme restrictiveness imposed upon females within the society.

Abigail initially is presented as a flawed character, and understandably so, as despite her initial outcry that she would ‘ never hurt Betty’, it is revealed that she is clearly deceptive when Abigail violently ‘ smashes her across the face’ in a fit of fury. It is seen that Abigail does indeed have a clear sense of her moral duties, she becomes obvious that she does understand that her very intentions to kill Elizabeth Proctor are simply outrightly wrong, and yet she decides to ahead with this.

She frequently exercises her expert ability to repel any accusations of this towards her, instead often pushing allegations towards the original accuser; the shift of power in speech is constantly turned towards her, and from the very start we already see Parris being struck by Abigail’s refusal to bow to his demands, and eventually reducing him to only murmurs of ‘ No…no’.

Miller quickly builds upon this character as one that is flawed; her limited moral upstanding shown in the initial parts of the play only seem to grow even worse as it is revealed that she has had an affair with Proctor, both considered a ‘ sin’ for the two, and yet Abigail knowingly commits this. Proctor’s presence also shows Abigail to have a questionable character in that she is often emotionally unstable, being extremely quick to have ‘[flashes] of anger’ at any given point, indicating that much of her future decisions are purely based on the anger residing within her.

Abigail’s later accusations of witchcraft carry the ultimate aim of convicting Elizabeth Proctor for her own benefit- Proctor, and from this we also see her inner selfishness; she is willing to murder another person for her own gain, and as the audience we find this disturbing and somewhat sickening. Despite this, Abigail’s character provides a fascinating image for the audience; the overture presents Salem’s theocracy as one of repression, and interestingly we do see her actively trying to break free from this.

From the lowly position of an orphaned and unmarried woman, we see that she effectively attempts to bring her own form of justice to the town. Proctor describing this as ‘ little crazy children jangling the keys of the kingdom’, and Abigail’s intentions simply using ‘ common vengeance [writing] the law’, and rightly so, yet as the audience we can only be fascinated that what initiates as a simply baseless lie is in reality believable in Salem; only a select few of the community realise that it is in fact completely false.

It is rightly so that the audience can only be amazed by her sheer willpower and determination in breaking free from the repressive nature of the town. Her own introduction to the play itself describes her as a girl ‘ with an endless capacity for dissembling’, and it is clear from the start that Abigail is no ordinary character; she soon sparks the hysteria that ensues, and as the audience we are amazed at the fact that common society could be persuaded and believe the accusations of a single character with little evidence.

In the instance of her affair with John Proctor, it is notable that she mentions that she too believes that Salem was based purely on ‘ pretence’, and full of ‘ lying lessons’; she is admirable to some extent in regards to this will to rise from her initial lowly position, especially as she herself recognises that Salem, under further analysis ‘[reads] the women’s bodies as the source of sin and shame’1, and Abigail’s affair, while officially condemned, can be seen as her ‘[discovering]…that these were normal and universal human feelings’.

While her use of violence towards Betty may be viewed by the audience as unnecessary and cruel, it is also a presentation of her ability to digress from the common view of women in Salem; women are presented as somewhat weak and obedient towards their male counterparts, existing for the sole purpose of marriage and reproduction, yet Abigail takes on the stereotypical ‘ masculine’ role, her use of violence coinciding with the authority she attempts to grasp.

In this way she is also seen as having full control over the group of girls which she herself leads towards the hysteria, exclaiming that they will ‘ shut it’ over the allegations of witchcraft, and notably was the same ringleader that led them with Tituba to the supposed ‘ sin’ of dancing in the forest, taking another stand towards Puritan repression.

Notably, Abigail is never presented as being the sole instigator of hysteria surrounding witchcraft; the Putnams are already ready and waiting for the accusations of witchcraft to begin, and we must admire Abigail for simply being able to see the advantages of the hysteria and using this for her own benefit. As the audience we are somewhat pleased to see that Abigail, similar to the audience, is also in recognition of the flawed society in Salem.

She herself explains her understanding that Salem was based solely on theocracy and its citizens ruled by fear, referring to her realisation as ‘ the light’ given to her by Proctor. It is also important to note that from this realisation, Abigail does indeed act for some form of diversion from the norm; despite her lies within her accusations she is notably the first female character to gather such a large reputation.

Elizabeth Proctor notes how upon her own visit to Salem, Abigail had garnered such a large reputation for instigating and perpetuating the hysteria that even Elizabeth herself almost ‘ thought she were a saint’, that ‘ where she walks the crowd will part like the sea for Israel’. However, despite her recognition of the wrongdoings in Salem, ultimately the audience is left shocked in her ways of dealing with this injustice, instead choosing to spread this injustice even further, for her own benefit.

In this way Miller introduces the theme of duality, the two sides of morality within Abigail which presents the audience with a sense of fascination. She is portrayed negatively frequently, notably when she accuses the very person that grants her own wishes, Tituba, as the easiest target, and clearly is ruthless in using other characters for her own benefit; initially she simply wishes for Elizabeth Proctor to be got rid of, and John for herself, while the other girls are simply presented by Miller as relatively weak in comparison to her.

This falsification further develops as she realises that this would not be an easy task; she sets herself a precedent to accuse further citizens such as Sarah Good who are on the lower rungs of society, before finally setting her eyes on Elizabeth as the ultimate target, as Proctor confesses to the court that she simply ‘ thinks to dance with (Proctor) on (Elizabeth’s) grave’, rather than simply playing ‘ the role of (a) meek serving girl 3’.

The audience is able to sympathise with her from the fact that she, similar to audiences’ assumed train of thought that her motives are simply based on the fact that Puritanism meant that ‘ underneath they were all depraved (from) universal human feelings’1. We see that underneath her web of lies and accusations, we cannot help but also feel somewhat sorrowful for her in that she laments herself being orphaned after her parents were ‘[smashed]…on the pillow’, and she is now under the ‘ care’ of Parris who simply happens to be self-centred and not even pay attention to his own daughter.

Similarly, we can also feel sympathy for her in that despite the deceit presented by the theocracy, her somewhat pure intentions of love are simply cast aside by John Proctor who ultimately chooses to follow his Christian roots, while on the other hand Abigail decides to cast this away for the purpose of passion, ‘ the “ fire” of…passion becomes for her, then, the crucible that she claims affected her growth from ignorance from experience1’; her actions may be justified from her point of view.

We must admire the fact that this is her real perception of society, and her own methods of gaining ‘ justice’ or perhaps compensation for herself, and that despite the fact that she is not supposed to have the means to do so, she still manages.

Upon a feminist approach to analysis, we are also be fascinated by the fact that a female character, contextually considered almost inferior to their male counterparts in 1600s Salem, despite her status being an orphan, unmarried and a female within the society is still able to grasp the attention of many, and repeatedly manages to use this to her own advantage, and yet despite empowerment, ironically as a woman she is still presented as having a detestable character in terms of her ‘[killing] many people in order to keep her innocence2’ along with the other characters save from Rebecca Nurse who are similarly presented such as Mercy, introduced as ‘ a fat, sly, merciless girl’. Abigail is a character designed by Miller to provoke disgust in her ways of pursuing her goals, yet it is the very method of which she does so that fascinates the audience and separates her from the norms of 1600s society.

This reaches its climax within Act 3, whereupon Abigail even manages to gain some form of control over the judge Danforth himself; it is Danforth who ultimately resides over the fates of those accused by her, and yet her oratory strength and position within society is suddenly empowered to such an extent that even the presiding judge is described by the stage directions as ‘ weakening’; ultimately Abigail refuses to answer to Danforth, instead coldly stating that she ‘ will leave and not come back (to court) again’, we are left to wonder ‘ whether or not we can condone the actions of an individual who tries to break a community’s status quo3’, actions arguably very much as vicious and repressive as Puritan authority itself.

Another testimony to her adeptness also resides partially in distraction and persuasion; the moment she is accused of harlotry and almost falters, she instantly decides to pretend that Mary is attacking her, and even Danforth finds this act believable, exclaiming to Mary ‘ you have seen the Devil, have you not? ’. Eventually we see how her power is enough to force Mary to turn against Proctor once again, in amazement of us as the audience in her ability to turn the events into the opposite direction.

It is this very development of her character that places Abigail into the centre-stage of the audience’s attention- it is easy for us to condemn her as a liar and perpetuator of injustice, yet is rightly so that there might be ‘ difficult circumstances that might have led her to behave in the way she does3’?. Abigail’s initial intentions for gaining John Proctor and getting rid of Elizabeth may have initially had purer intentions, yet eventually, similar to the other hysterical characters such as the Putnams she seems to be heading towards a mindless power grab; despite finally having Elizabeth arrested and jailed for witchcraft she does not cease her accusations, instead also turning on John himself. We must sympathise with her cause in that she is in effect a victim of common society, a person shaped and forced into a position that is unacceptable.

Elements of McCarthyism also reside within Abigail, partially representing the character of McCarthy himself: she is the very person who sparks off the social tensions into fully blown hysteria, while within Miller’s 1950s America it is McCarthy who similarly makes use of accusations which can only hold at face-value; Abigail and McCarthy both use these allegations to increase their own social status from the lower rungs to ones that hold extreme power. In context we know that McCarthy himself was able to accuse hundreds of innocents of collaborating with communists, while Abigail is also able make use of baseless accusations to increase her own standing within the community, also leading her inherent downfall as Proctor and Giles finally break the cycle of hysteria that she sparked, only possible with their deaths.

It is clear that Miller presents Abigail as a character we grow to detest for her immoral actions that result in taking the lives of several, and as the audience we realise how ultimately, her goal simply becomes to grasp as much power as possible, remorseless in doing so; she initially ‘ drank a charm to kill John Proctor’s wife, transforms the growing tension into an outburst of hysteria followed by accusations, before eventually several are arrested or even hung for their ‘ crimes’, while she continues to grow in her social standing. On the other hand the audience is also made aware of her background on her becoming an orphan, as well as Parris being an uncaring uncle and parent towards her, and therefore we must feel some sympathy for her in that she lives in a society that is in reality extremely repressive.

Despite all of this repression she is able to challenge the status quo regarding the position of women, she realises her own ‘ pure elements’ as Proctor acts as her own ‘ crucible’ in showing her the falsifications of Puritanism; she is the first that finally takes action in raising the position of women, and indeed it is the group of girls as well as Mrs Putnam who make up the bulk of accusations. As the audience, we are also fascinated by her sheer willpower and determination- whilst being remorseless and murderous makes us detest her, it also serves as a testimony to her strength and empowerment, as well as wonder in that she is surprisingly able to succeed in doing so, proving her character to be one of fascination despite disgust.