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PART THREE: CHARACTERS

John Proctor

WHO IS JOHN PROCTOR?

John Proctor is an honest, independent and plain-speaking farmer. He is married to Elizabeth. Although some people criticise his religious commitment, he is generally respected in Salem. However, he has a guilty secret. He has committed adultery with Abigail when she was his servant.



WHAT DOES JOHN PROCTOR DO IN THE PLAY?

- Proctor speaks his mind and stands up to Reverend Parris.
- He is scornful about the witchcraft hysteria but is cautious in his opposition to the trials at first.
- He persuades Mary Warren to tell the truth in court.
- As a last resort, he confesses to his adultery in order to expose Abigail, but he is defeated by Elizabeth's well-intentioned lie and by Abigail's power over the girls.
- In prison he confesses to witchcraft so that he can live and look after his family, but he will not name others.
- Finally, he refuses to sign a confession and decides to die rather than lose his good name.

HOW IS JOHN PROCTOR DESCRIBED AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Quotation	Means?
'a sharp and biting way with hypocrites' (p. 16)	Miller's note here suggests why Proctor could easily make enemies in Salem.
'powerful of body, even-tempered and not easily led' (p. 16)	This describes Proctor's strength and independence.
'He is a sinner' (p. 16)	We are told that Proctor is burdened by a heavy sense of guilt.
'respected and even feared in Salem' (p. 16)	This again suggests his position in the community.

Quotation	Means?
'it is a man in his prime we see, with a quiet confidence and an unexpressed, hidden force.' (p. 16)	Proctor is an impressive presence in the room.
'I do not think I saw you at Sabbath meeting since snow flew.' (p. 23)	He is subject to criticism for his poor attendance at church.
'I do not judge you. The magistrate sits in your heart that judges you.' (p. 45)	Elizabeth knows that her husband is tortured by guilt for his adultery.
'... this man is mischief.' (p. 71)	Parris knows that Proctor is a formidable opponent when he comes to court and tries to discredit him.
'From the beginning this man has struck me true.' (p. 91)	Reverend Hale has always been impressed by Proctor and believes he is an honest man.
'Whatever you will do, it is a good man does it ... I never knew such goodness in the world.' (p. 109–10)	Elizabeth shows her belief in her husband and his decision.

KEY CONNECTION

Daniel Day-Lewis played the role of John Proctor in the 1996 film of the play.

EXAMINER'S TIP: WRITING ABOUT JOHN PROCTOR

John Proctor is the central **character** in Miller's play and suffers the trials and confusion of an ordinary reasonable man caught up in dangerous and unreasonable times. There is a strong connection here between his situation and that experienced by Arthur Miller in the anti-Communist hearings he was called before.

Proctor represents common sense and decency. He is not perfect, however, and is very aware of his own faults. Proctor is his own harshest judge. He believes strongly in telling the truth but he is tortured by the knowledge that he is living a lie.

He is a reluctant leader among those who oppose Parris and the Putnams. At first he only wants to save his wife, but later he comes to realise how important his good name is to him. Throughout the play Proctor is under great pressure when dealing with the struggle inside him between truth and reputation.

★ GRADE BOOSTER

Is John Proctor a thoroughly sympathetic character? Try drawing a graph to show how he goes up (or down) in your estimation during the play.

Understanding the question

Questions in exams or controlled conditions often need **'decoding'**. Decoding the question helps to ensure that your answer is relevant and refers to what you have been asked.



TOP TIP UNDERSTAND EXAM LANGUAGE

Get used to exam and essay-style language by looking at specimen questions and the words they use. For example:

Exam speak	Means?	Example
'convey ideas'	'get across a point to the reader': usually you have to say how this is done	Miller conveys the idea of a society at war with itself in the violent language used by the villagers towards one another, and in his own notes about the historical background.
'methods, techniques, ways'	The 'things' the writer does: for example, a powerful description, introducing a shocking event, how someone speaks	The imaginative use of stage directions, as when Miller describes Proctor and Elizabeth in a 'spinning world ... beyond sorrow, above it' (Act Four), is a further way of conveying their emotional closeness.
'present, represent'	'present': 'the way things are told to us' 'represent': 'what those things might mean underneath'	Miller presents Hale's arrival in Act One, 'loaded down with half a dozen heavy books'. The books represent not just religious authority, but also the educated, outside world from which Hale has come. However, their weight might also represent a burden that the community will have to carry.

TOP TIP 'BREAK DOWN' THE QUESTION

Pick out the **key words** or phrases. For example:

Question: How does Miller **explore** the theme of personal **envy and resentment** within the **community of Salem**?

- **Explore** – how does Miller develop this theme through characters and actions?
- **Envy and resentment** – these are the specific themes (being angered that others have more than you, and wanting what they have for yourself)
- **Community of Salem** – within the village/town

What does this tell you?

- **Focus on:** Putnam's quarrels over land; Ann Putnam's bitterness towards Rebecca and her family; Abigail's desire for John Proctor, who has rejected her, and her resentment of Elizabeth; perhaps also Elizabeth's initial resentment of what has happened in the past.

TOP TIP KNOW YOUR LITERARY LANGUAGE!

When studying texts you will come across words such as **theme, symbol, imagery, metaphor**. Some of these words could come up in the question you are asked. Make sure you know what they mean before you use them!

Planning your answer

It is vital that you **plan** your response to possible exam questions or controlled assessment tasks carefully, and then follow your plan, if you are to gain higher grades.

TOP TIP DO THE RESEARCH!

When revising for the exam or planning your response to the controlled assessment task, collect **evidence** (for example, quotations) that will support what you have to say. For example, if preparing to answer a question on the theme of conflict within the community you might list ideas as follows:

Key point	Evidence/quotation	Page/chapter, etc.
The conflict between decent working people and the authority of the law	<i>Judge Hathorne enters. He is in his sixties, a bitter, remorseless Salem judge. Hathorne: 'How do you dare come roarin' into this court! Are you gone daft, Corey!'</i>	Act Three/page 68

TOP TIP PLAN FOR PARAGRAPHS

Use paragraphs to plan your answer. For example:

- 1 The first paragraph should **introduce** the **argument** you wish to make.
- 2 Then, **develop** this argument with further paragraphs. Include **details, examples** and other possible **points of view**, making one point per paragraph.
- 3 **Sum up** your argument in the last paragraph.

For example, for the following task:

Question: Discuss the significance of the relationship between Abigail and Proctor.

- Paragraph 1: *Introduction*, e.g. explain who Abigail and Proctor are, and what we know of their previous affair.
- Paragraph 2: *First point*, e.g. physical desire between them, and how that has created conflict between Proctor and his wife.
- Paragraph 3: *Second point*, e.g. how Proctor's rejection of Abigail drives her to even greater lies and deception.
- Paragraph 4: *Third point*, e.g. how their paths separate as Proctor tries to redeem his relationship with Elizabeth and Abigail focuses her power on self-preservation.
- Paragraph 5: *Fourth point*, e.g. how their individual stories end – Proctor and Elizabeth reconciled, but Proctor hanged; Abigail reported to have run off with her uncle's money.
- Paragraph 6: *Conclusion*, e.g. sum up how their relationship reflects key themes of envy, conflict and power struggles within the village.