



SPHERE

Fostering Civil Discourse and Diverse Viewpoints for Every Classroom

Exploring Equality and Individual Rights Through *The Crucible*

BY KOBI NELSON

Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students will begin reading act 1 of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. After warming up with an anticipation guide, they will consider why the play is titled *The Crucible* and make predictions about the plot. Then students will learn about the key components of a Greek tragedy and explain how these relate to the meaning of Miller's play. As they read act 1, students will identify the backstories of key characters and infer their personality traits and motivations. This knowledge will lead students toward activities and discussions that will help them understand how *The Crucible* grapples with the principle that "all men are created equal" outlined in the Declaration of Independence.



Essential Questions

- How does Arthur Miller use the structure of Greek tragedy to illuminate the consequences of governmental systems that prioritize rigid social hierarchies over individual rights and equality?
- How does Miller's play serve as an allegory that reveals the conflict between the principle of unalienable rights and a community's demands for conformity?
- How do the characters' relationships illustrate the difference between "the consent of the governed" in the Declaration of Independence and pressure to conform?

Learning Objectives

- Identify key characteristics of Greek tragedies and explain how they relate to *The Crucible*.
- Explain how *The Crucible* illuminates the dangers of social systems that deny the principles of equality and individual rights stated in the Declaration of Independence.
- Explore the ways that fear and rigid social hierarchies affect the characters and their relationships with others.
- Analyze how the characters' backstories, motivations, and positions within Salem's social hierarchy affect how events unfold in *The Crucible*.

Targeted Skills (AP Literature)

- **CHA 1.A** Identify and describe what specific textual details reveal about a character, that character's perspective, and that character's motives.
- **CHA 1.D** Describe how textual details reveal nuances and complexities in characters' relationships with one another.
- **FIG 5.A** Distinguish between the literal and figurative meanings of words and phrases.
- **FIG 5.C** Identify and explain the function of a symbol.
- **LAN 7.A** Develop a paragraph that includes 1) a claim that requires defense with evidence from the text and 2) the evidence itself.
- **LAN 7.B** Develop a thesis statement that conveys a defensible claim about an interpretation of literature and that may establish a line of reasoning.

Materials

- "An Introduction to Greek Tragedy" video
- "*The Crucible* Anticipation Guide" – 1 per student
- Graphic organizer on "Getting to Know Key Characters in *The Crucible*" – 1 per student

- Student copies of *The Crucible*
- Optional addition: "Tragedy and the Common Man" by Arthur Miller

Warm-Up

ANTICIPATION GUIDE

STEP 1

Hand out "*The Crucible* Anticipation Guide" and ask students to check "Agree" or "Disagree" for each statement. (The guide is reproduced for students at the end of this lesson.)

Statement	Agree	Disagree
Human dignity should take precedence over societal norms and expectations.		
People should protect their reputation, no matter what.		
Fear is an indication that something is wrong and must be fixed.		
It doesn't matter what others say about a person if the person's dignity remains intact.		
Questioning authority indicates a person's disloyalty and guilt.		
Fear is necessary to establish and maintain authority.		
Fear distorts a person's ability to see the truth clearly.		
When people are fearful, they become less compassionate and empathetic.		
Some truths are so obvious that they don't need to be proven or explained.		
An individual's conscience should override the community's demands for conformity.		
A person's worth is determined by their character, not their social standing.		
Personal integrity is more valuable than social acceptance.		

Truth is determined by those in authority.		
Sometimes it's OK to sacrifice your principles to save your reputation.		
Guilt must be proven with evidence, not assumed on the basis of accusations.		

STEP 2

After students have completed the guide, separate them into small groups. Have each person in every group share whether they agreed or disagreed with each statement. Remind students to actively listen to each other and ask questions when a person in their group has a different opinion from others.

STEP 3

Bring the whole class together and facilitate a discussion about what happens when a society or community is overcome with fear. Ask students to share historical examples and discuss the outcomes of these examples.

STEP 4

Introduce *The Crucible* and tell students that fear is a large part of this play; as such, it will be important for them to consider the effects of fear on individuals and communities. Explain that this component of the play is why we completed the anticipation guide. Then transition to the next activity.

Lesson Activities

BEFORE READING

Transition to the learning activities by explaining that *The Crucible* was written by an author who was greatly influenced by Greek tragedies. Tell your students that it is important for them to understand the basic elements of Greek tragedies so that they can more fully grasp the meaning of the play.

EXPLORING GREEK TRAGEDY

STEP 1

Divide students into pairs or small groups. Ask each pair or group to list the characteristics of tragedies. If needed, explain to your students that the earliest known tragedies were written in ancient Greece and that the genre continues to be explored today in literature, dramatic plays, and films.

After students have finished brainstorming characteristics, facilitate a whole-group

discussion about the elements of a tragedy. What makes a particular piece of writing or performance a tragedy?

STEP 2

Have students watch the National Theatre's "An Introduction to Greek Tragedy" video. Ask them to respond to the following questions while they are watching:

- What does Greek tragedy show us about humans and the relationship with the world they inhabit?
- Why is it important for the hero/heroine in a tragedy to be imperfect and flawed?
- What is the purpose of the prologue in a Greek tragedy?
- What is the purpose of a chorus?
- What does the word "catharsis" mean?
- In your opinion, what is the purpose of "catharsis"?

Facilitate a whole-group conversation about the questions. Make sure that students understand the role of the prologue—to set the stage and provide background knowledge—and the role of the chorus—to provide commentary on the previous scene and allow for the passing of time. These additions to the play bring the audience into the story by accounting for their perspective and considering what they need to know to fully understand the plot.

STEP 3

Hand out the following table (a student copy called "Elements of Greek Tragedy in *The Crucible*" is included at the end of this lesson). Students will use this table to note the elements of Greek tragedy they observe in act 1.

Note: The following table is completed with examples of potential student responses, but these are not exhaustive.

Element of a Greek tragedy	Quotation or detail that illustrates this element	How this element enhances the audience's understanding
Prologue	• Before delving into the dialogue of the play, Arthur Miller describes the setting and compares the beliefs and worldview of the Salemites with those of his audience.	• This prologue helps his readers/ audience understand not only the context of the play but also how its story and history affect us. For me, it engages me more because I see more of a connection between my life and life in America more than 300 years ago.

Chorus	• Miller includes interludes in act 1 that tell the backstories of the characters. • At the end of act 1, the girls begin chanting hysterically about whom they "saw" with the devil.	• The backstories help the audience better understand the characters and why they might act the way they do. • The collective chant shows the viral nature of calling out "witches" in Salem's society, and it also shows how Salem was overcome by the accusations.
Imperfect hero/heroine	• John Proctor is characterized as confident, self-assured, and even-tempered. The irony is that he doesn't tolerate hypocrisy even though he himself is hiding a secret.	• The character of John helps the audience better understand the story because he is seen as a human character, which means his journey is relatable to a human audience.
Humans and their relationship to the world	• Land seems to be very important to the key characters, which might indicate their greed and desire to possess it above all else.	• Knowing that key characters are so possessive of land helps the audience understand that there might be more at play in these witch accusations than supernatural affairs.
Catharsis	• When Abigail threatens the other girls with death if they say anything besides what she wants them to say, it creates a fearful feeling.	• The fear evoked by Abigail's threat helps the audience better understand what the Salemites feel. Feeling this fear is cathartic and helps the audience feel connected to the characters.

DURING READING

Tell students that plot, character traits, and a character's reasoning are also important parts of a Greek tragedy (for more information on these elements, see Aristotle's *Poetics*). Therefore, students should not only read and identify elements of a Greek tragedy in their graphic organizers, but should also note passages that help them better understand the plot and characters.

Have students read act 1 of *The Crucible*.

AFTER READING

After all students have read act 1 and identified key elements of Greek tragedy, divide them into small groups. Each group should discuss what they found in act 1 that exemplifies the elements of Greek tragedy. While students are discussing the elements, they may update their tables, as needed.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

STEP 1

Have students work together in small groups to complete the “Getting to Know Key Characters in *The Crucible*” table (a blank student copy is included at the end of this lesson).

*Note: The following table is completed with examples of potential student responses, but these are not exhaustive.

Character	Backstory	Character traits	Reasoning/ motivations
Reverend Parris	- Widower - Did not have children - Was a merchant in Barbados before becoming a minister - Brought Tituba from Barbados	- Domineering - Rigid - Easily angered - Religious/pious	- Always believes he is being persecuted - Believes children should be seen and not heard
Thomas Putnam	- Eldest son of the richest man - The brother-in-law of his wife (Ann) was turned down as minister - His father left a lot of money to his step-brother (not to him). 7 of his 8 children died	- Vengeful - Proud - Arrogant - Resentful	- Felt his name was being dishonored by the village - Desires to “set things right” - Wants to acquire land/property
John Proctor	- Farmer - Does not go to church often - Had an affair with Abigail - Knows his wife knows about the affair	- Even-tempered - Confident - Self-assured (on the outside)	- Feels that he is an imposter - Has no tolerance for hypocrisy in others
Francis Nurse	- Owns 300 acres - Engaged in a “land war” with Putnam - Led an annex from Salem that became “Topsfield”	- Hard-working - Fair - Independent	- Believes in fairness and shows fairness toward others - Motivated to be independent - Unafraid to protest against unjust actions

Rebecca Nurse	• Wife of Francis Nurse • Holds good standing in the village due to her husband's character and her own • All of her children lived and survived	• Reasonable • Thoughtful • Religious	• Trusts others and God to do the right thing • Believes in religious authority • Believes that peace is the best course of action
Reverend Hale	• Comes to Salem amid whisperings and rumors • Had recently come across a witch in his parish • Spends much time thinking about the invisible world in his intellectual pursuits	• Intelligent • Proud/arrogant • Thoughtful	• Believes that his intellect is above others—particularly commoners • Loves being asked to weigh in on matters of a spiritual and intellectual nature • Desires for his intelligence to be noticed and appreciated
Giles Corey	• An elderly man • Often blamed for others' misfortunes • Didn't go to church until he married his wife Martha	• Independent • Cranky • Courageous	• Doesn't care what other people think of him • Wants to be free and independent of others' thoughts

STEP 2

When all groups have completed the table, facilitate a whole-group discussion about each of the key characters in the graphic organizer. The following questions will help you:

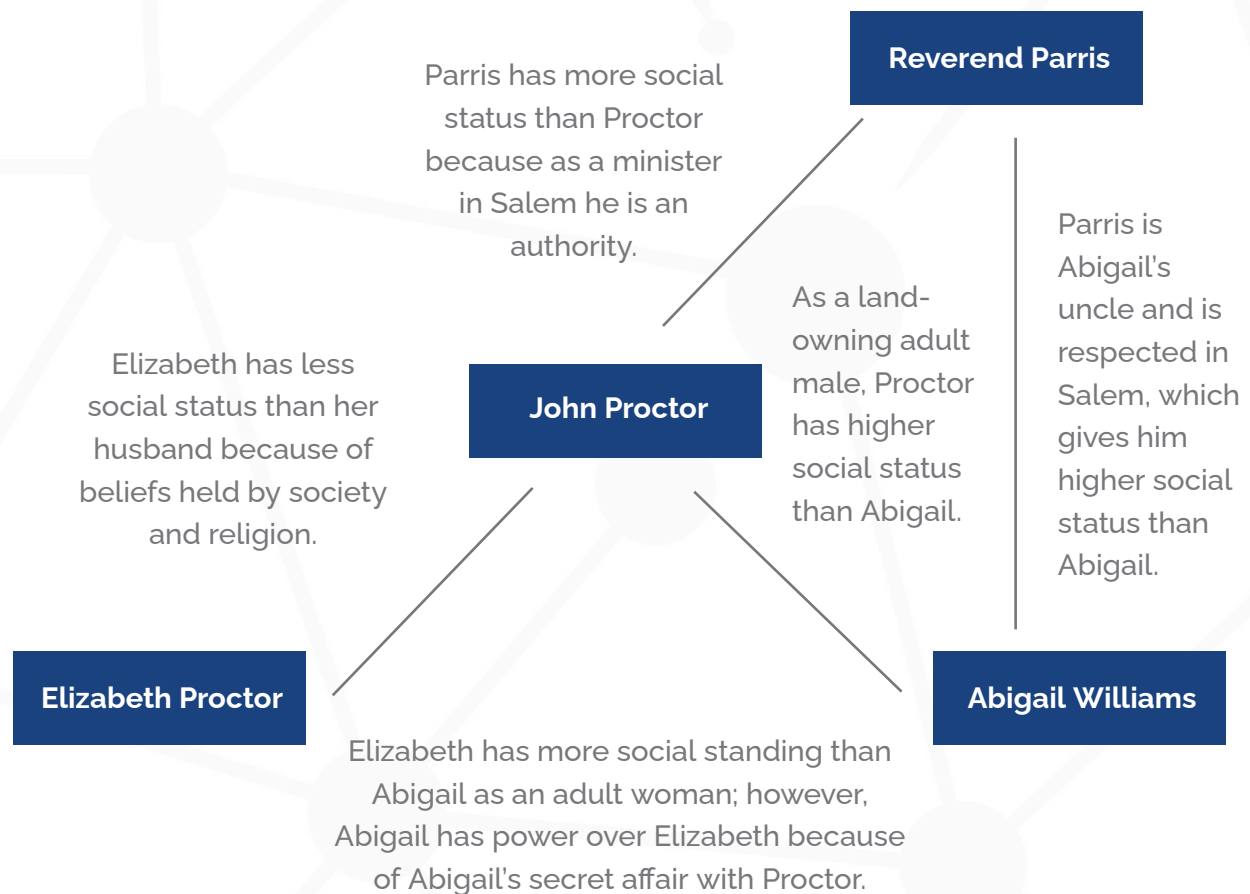
- Now that you've read and discussed the 1st act, who are the characters you admire? Who are the least admirable? Why?
- Why do you think Miller mentions only these characters (listed in the graphic organizer) in his backstory interludes? Why doesn't he tell the backstories of Tituba, Abigail, or Mary Warren?
- What serves as evidence or proof of witchcraft in this act? Which characters go along with this? Why do they go along with this and not others?
- What is Miller saying or implying by comparing the Salem witch trials to the events that were happening in 1950s America while he was writing *The Crucible*?

VISUALIZING SOCIAL HIERARCHIES

Ask students to work with a partner to create a hierarchy web that shows the hierarchy of relationships within the play. Students should use all the key characters in the "Getting to Know Key Characters" graphic organizer; however, they can also add characters like Tituba, Abigail Williams, and Mary Warren.

Before letting students work with their partners, brainstorm some ideas as a whole class. On the board, model creating a web with several hierarchical relationships from the play.

An example might look like this:



*Note: Let students be creative with these webs. Beyond providing written explanations, students can add colors or symbols to indicate social status among characters. The goal is for students to visualize the unequal nature of the society and governance in Miller's depiction of Salem.

CONNECT TO EQUALITY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS

STEP 1

After students have finished creating their hierarchy webs, debrief with students. You may ask the following questions to facilitate conversation:

- How do the relationships among the characters in *The Crucible* show the tensions between individual rights and societal expectations?
- How do societal expectations affect the perceived hierarchy among the characters?
- Do characters see themselves as equal in their rights with each other? Or do some see themselves as having more or fewer rights than others?

STEP 2

Facilitate a conversation about the phrase “all men are created equal” in the Declaration of Independence. Remind students that Miller’s play is set in a time before the writing of the Declaration. During the 17th century (the setting of *The Crucible*), equal rights was not a common belief. It was more common to believe that a person’s status affected the rights he was afforded. For example, if a person had a higher status, he was afforded more rights. If he had a lower status, he was afforded fewer rights. The Founders pushed against this belief when they wrote, “all men are created equal.”

STEP 3

Ask students the following questions to deepen their thinking about the connection between *The Crucible*, equality, and individual rights:

- As a playwright from the mid-20th century, Arthur Miller writes a tragedy set in the 17th century. Why does he choose that setting as an American citizen living almost 2 centuries after the writing of the Declaration of Independence? What is tragic about the play’s setting?
- Think about *The Crucible* from Miller’s perspective. What is the message he is trying to send about the relationship between equality, individual rights, and a civil society?

CHARACTER CONVERSATION

Transition to the next activity by telling students that they are going to be role-playing characters from *The Crucible*. The goal of this activity is to get students to consider the ways social hierarchy, character traits/motivations, and character backgrounds influence interactions between characters.

STEP 1

Organize students into groups of 7. Assign each student to role-play a character from the During Reading activity.

STEP 2

Tell students that they will be acting as their assigned characters in a conversation with others. Then tell them they will be discussing the same statements used in the anticipation guide for the Warm-Up.

*Note: If students are struggling to think about a statement from their character's perspective you can give them time to work with students who have been assigned to the same character. Then they can collaboratively determine how their character is likely to respond to each statement.

STEP 3

Facilitate the conversation by creating "tables" where all 7 characters can sit and see each other. Then draw a statement out of a hat and give each table 5 minutes to discuss. Repeat this for as many rounds as you have time for.

DEBRIEF

After the conversation, ask the following questions and allow students time to reflect.

- What was interesting or surprising to you about your conversation?
- How did the characters in your conversation respond to statements about individual conscience? Human dignity? Authority? Self-evident truths?

Closing

Post the following questions on the board. Have students respond individually in an exit ticket or facilitate a whole-group conversation.

- Why do you think Miller decided to write this play in the style of a tragedy? Why didn't he choose the structure of a comedy? Or a historical play?
- To what extent does Miller's writing bring out the Declaration's principle that "all men are created equal?"
- In this play, how does fear affect the perception by the characters of human dignity and worth?
- What happens when fear and suspicion override the self-evident truth that people are born free, equal, and have rights?

The Crucible Anticipation Guide

Instructions: Read each statement carefully. For each statement, decide whether you agree or disagree and put a check mark in the corresponding box.

Statement	Agree	Disagree
Human dignity should take precedence over societal norms and expectations.		
People should protect their reputation, no matter what.		
Fear is an indication that something is wrong and must be fixed.		
It doesn't matter what others say about a person if the person's dignity remains intact.		
Questioning authority indicates a person's disloyalty and guilt.		
Fear is necessary to establish and maintain authority.		
Fear distorts a person's ability to see the truth clearly.		
When people are fearful, they become less compassionate and empathetic.		
Some truths are so obvious that they don't need to be proven or explained.		
An individual's conscience should override the community's demands for conformity.		
A person's worth is determined by their character, not their social standing.		
Personal integrity is more valuable than social acceptance.		
Truth is determined by those in authority.		
Sometimes it's OK to sacrifice your principles to save your reputation.		
Guilt must be proven with evidence, not assumed on the basis of accusations.		

Elements of Greek Tragedy in *The Crucible*

Instructions: Complete this table while reading act 1 of *The Crucible*.

Element of Greek tragedy	Quotation or detail that illustrates this element	How this element enhances the audience's understanding
Prologue		
Chorus		
Imperfect hero/heroine		
Humans and their relationship to the world		
Catharsis		

Getting to Know Key Characters in *The Crucible*

Instructions: Complete this table while reading act 1 of *The Crucible*. In this act, Arthur Miller explicitly describes some of these characters' backstories; however, their character traits, reasonings, and motivations will need to be inferred.

Character	Backstory	Character traits	Reasoning/ motivations
Reverend Parris			
Thomas Putnam			
John Proctor			
Francis Nurse			
Rebecca Nurse			
Reverend Hale			
Giles Corey			