Cloze Reading Key

The play is set in Salem, Massachusetts, 1692; the government is a theocracy—rule by God through religious officials. Hard work and church consume the majority of a Salem resident’s time. Within the community, there are simmering disputes over land. Matters of boundaries and deeds are a source of constant, bitter disagreements.

As the play opens, Reverend Parris kneels in prayer in front of his daughter’s bed. Ten-year-old Betty Parris lies in an unmoving, unresponsive state. Parris is a grim, stern man suffering from paranoia. He believes that the members of his congregation should not lift a finger during religious services without his permission. The rumor that Betty is the victim of witchcraft is running rampant in Salem, and a crowd has gathered in Parris’s parlor. Parris has sent for Reverend John Hale of Beverly, an expert on witchcraft, to determine whether Betty is indeed bewitched. Parris berates his niece, Abigail Williams, because he discovered her, Betty, and several other girls dancing in the forest in the middle of the night with his slave, Tituba. Tituba was intoning unintelligible words and waving her arms over a fire, and Parris thought he spotted someone running naked through the trees.

Thomas Putnam and his wife enter the room. Putnam holds one of the play’s many simmering grudges. His brother-in-law was a candidate for the Salem ministry, but a small faction thwarted his relative’s aspirations. Mrs. Putnam reports that their own daughter, Ruth, is as listless as Betty, and she claims that someone saw Betty flying over a neighbor’s barn

Abigail denies that she and the girls engaged in witchcraft. She states that Betty merely fainted from shock when her father caught them dancing. Parris fears that his enemies will use the scandal to drive him out of his ministerial office. He asks Abigail if her name and reputation are truly unimpeachable. Elizabeth Proctor, a local woman who once employed Abigail at her home but subsequently fired her, has stopped attending church regularly. There are rumors that Elizabeth does not want to sit so close to a soiled woman. Abigail denies any wrongdoing and asserts that Elizabeth hates her because she would not work like a slave. Parris asks why no other family has hired Abigail if Elizabeth is a liar. Abigail insinuates that Parris is only worried about her employment status because he begrudges her upkeep.

Mrs. Putnam had seven babies that each died within a day of its birth. Convinced that someone used witchcraft to murder them, she sent Ruth to Tituba to contact the spirits of her dead children in order to discover the identity of the murderer. Parris berates Abigail anew and asserts that she and the girls were indeed practicing witchcraft. Putnam urges Parris to head off his enemies and promptly announce that he has discovered witchcraft. Mercy Lewis, the Putnams’ servant, drops in and reports that Ruth seems better. Parris agrees to meet the crowd and lead them in a prayer, but he refuses to mention witchcraft until he gets Reverend Hale’s opinion.

Once they are alone, Abigail updates Mercy on the current situation. Mary Warren, the servant for the Proctor household, enters the room in a breathless, nervous state. She frets that they will all be labeled witches before long. Betty sits up suddenly and cries for her mother, but her mother is dead and buried. Abigail tells the girls that she has told Parris everything about their activities in the woods, but Betty cries that Abigail did not tell Parris about drinking blood as a charm to kill Elizabeth Proctor, John Proctor’s wife. Abigail strikes Betty across the face and warns the other girls to confess *only* that they danced and that Tituba conjured Ruth’s dead sisters. She threatens to kill them if they breathe a word about the other things that they did. Abigail shakes Betty, but Betty has returned to her unmoving, unresponsive state.