

The Crucible and Year of Wonders

1. Introductions

The events of The Crucible begin with a group of young girls from Salem being discovered dancing and playing at witchcraft with Tituba, the slave of the town's religious leader Reverend Parris. When his daughter Betty falls ill as a result, they and others seek to deflect blame away from themselves and simultaneously exact revenge against those they feel have wronged them. To do this, they are led by Parris' niece Abigail Williams to begin a spree of accusations of witchcraft which result in the hangings of many of the other townspeople, including John Proctor, with whom Abigail once had an affair.

Plague strikes a small, isolated Derbyshire village called Eyam in 1666 when it is brought there by a tailor carrying a bolt of infected cloth from London. The village's population is decimated as a result, and in the resulting turmoil the social contracts which bind the villagers begin to disintegrate as fear and suspicion erode them. Told from the perspective of a young widowed serving woman called Anna Frith, Year of Wonders shows her burgeoning strength as a healer and ultimately her escape at the conclusion of the novel to a new life.

2. Themes

The Crucible	Year of Wonders	The Crucible	Year of Wonders
Conflict between faith/God and nature		Existence of God remains unquestioned	Anna doubts God's role and power
Dangers of isolation, both physical and social		Puritan faith and practices	Some puritanical beliefs, but being post-Restoration (see Tips below) the Church of England is the reigning religious body
Fear, madness and desperation		External/outsider inquisition into Salem's troubles	Examination of Eyam's faults comes from its own leaders and members
Individual will VS Social customs and norms		Ideology is John Proctor's saving grace	Anna finds solace in more practical means like escape
The role of authority and leadership			
Use of 'witchcraft' and 'devilry' to put a label on bewildering events			
Conflict between 'commoners' and those with loftier titles or aspirations			
Backlash against overt female sexuality			

3. Character analysis

The Crucible

Character	Description	Comparisons
John Proctor	Local farmer married to Elizabeth Proctor who highly	*Anna Frith's pursuit of hope and the truth is similar to his

	values his good name and detests hypocrisy	desire to hold fast to his good name *Consider other Eyam outsiders who fall under public suspicion (e.g. Puritans)
Abigail Williams	The niece of Reverend Parris who was fired from the Proctor household after her affair with John was discovered. She is self-serving, cunning, hot-headed and a liar.	*Aphra's desperation drives her to do similarly extreme things *Compare with Anys Gowdie, another sexually forward woman
Reverend John Hale	A young minister who is purported to be an expert on witchcraft. He is critical and takes his job of cleansing Salem from witchcraft seriously, without displaying mindless fervour.	*Mompellion's dedication to his job as leader and moral guide
Elizabeth Proctor	John's highly proper, virtuous and committed wife who dislikes Abigail (who returns the sentiment!)	*She does not tend so much towards charity or sweetness as Elinor Mompellion and plays a different role in her community
Reverend Parris	The power-hungry minister of Salem's church, who is simultaneously puffed-up and paranoid, and is disliked by many among his 'flock'.	*Compare with Mompellion who is driven not by personal gain but by a deep moral zeal
Betty Parris	Reverend Parris' ten-year-old daughter who like Ruth falls ill after dancing at midnight which sparks the first witchcraft rumours	*The first plague victims in Eyam did not immediately alarm everyone, but built slowly to a crisis
Rebecca Nurse	A wise and well-regarded member of the Salem community who is nevertheless blamed by the Putnams for some of the ills that have befallen them and is killed as a result.	*Mem Gowdie is the most obvious parallel as a village wise woman who is both needed and feared
Francis Nurse	Rebecca's husband who is also well-regarded and disliked by the Putnams	
Judge Danforth	The deputy governor of Massachusetts who is the judge at the trials and deeply believes in his own rightness in his position	*Has a coldness about him which is similar to what is uncovered about Mompellion
Judge Hathorne	Another presiding judge at the trials who is less morally rigid than Danforth.	

Martha Corey	The third wife of Giles Corey whose reading habits are the grounds for accusations of witchcraft against her.	
Giles Corey	An elderly, crotchety and outspoken farmer whose wife is accused of witchcraft. He is pressed to death, all the while asking them to add more weight.	*Mompellion requests the citizens of Eyam to make their deaths (if they must occur) honourable and to not spread their contagion
Thomas Putnam	A wealthy, high-up Salem-dweller who is bitter and has many personal grievances and grudges, and uses the witch trials to further his own pursuits.	*Compare with grave-robbers and those who seek to profit from the plague in <u>Year of Wonders</u>
Ann Putnam	A woman unlucky enough to lose seven out of eight babies born and wounded and angry enough to believe they were murdered and fling blame at her neighbours, namely Rebecca Nurse	*Compare with Aphra's desperate grief and descent into madness, also Lib Hancock's decision to blame Anys for her misfortunes
Ruth Putnam	The Putnam's only child who falls into a stupor when discovered dancing in the woods	
Tituba	A slave from Barbados in Reverend Parris' household who engages in 'acts of witchcraft' at Abigail's request	
Mary Warren	One of Abigail's cronies who is a servant in the Proctor household and too timid to successfully expose her plot	*Anna's lower position in society gives her a similar level of influence, but she is braver and more outspoken

Year of Wonders

Character	Description	Comparisons
Anna Frith	The narrator and protagonist of the novel. Although her childhood was unhappy, she is the young widowed mother of two boys whom she loves dearly, and is instrumental in the village's management of the plague, being curious, hardworking and open-minded.	*John Proctor's moral questioning *Rebecca Nurse's role in the community
Michael Mompellion	The relatively new preacher in Eyam who initially appears	*The leaders in Salem (the judges and reverends) can be

	highly moral and spiritual. As the novel progresses the harsher, more controlling aspects of his character begin to emerge.	compared to Mompellion both favourably and unfavourable
Thomas Stanley	The old, Puritan rector of the village who moved away after finding himself unable to follow the new monarchic rules concerning the Book of Common Prayer.	*All citizens of Salem share a belief system and the state of being outcast from the Church of England (see 'Tips') with Stanley
Elinor Mompellion	As Michael's wife who becomes Anna's closest friend and confidant, Elinor is a key figure in Eyam's life. She initially seems happy with Michael but it becomes known that he has used her past transgressions to punish her.	*Elizabeth Proctor shares her devotion to her husband and also her misgivings against him
George Viccars	A tailor who lodges with Anna and is the most likely plague vector. He wanted to marry Anna but died of the plague before they could become better acquainted, and his warning to burn the clothes he has made goes unheeded.	*Few, if any of the men of Salem can be said to possess the goodness and humour of Viccars
Anys Gowdie	The young, beautiful niece of Mem who acts somewhat as the village's doctor. Her unorthodox attitudes towards the Church and sexuality garner suspicion against her which comes to a fever pitch when she resuscitates her aunt with mouth-to-mouth, causing the mob to hang her.	*Compare to any woman who goes outside the bounds of propriety or attracts suspicion or anger over her actions (women, particularly odd or knowledgeable ones were the common victims of witch trials)
Mem Gowdie	Anys' aunt who was previously accused of witchcraft but acquitted. Out of misguided anger and desperation the villagers form a mob and attack her, and she later dies of her injury	*See 'Anys Gowdie'
Aphra Bont	Anna's stepmother whose initial fondness for witchcraft and occult charms escalates into full-blown madness when her husband and children die. She murders Elinor.	*Her desperation and vengefulness mirror Abigail's, but she is less subtle and cunning

Josiah/Joss Bont	With a difficult childhood and alcoholic tendencies, Anna's father does not make her life a happy one. His death arrives when he is charged of taking his already exorbitantly priced grave-digging service to new heights by trying to bury Christopher Unwin alive to steal from him.	*His rampant avarice and negative views of his fellow villagers mirror those of Thomas Putnam
The Bradfords	The wealthiest family in Eyam who escape it against Mompellion's wishes. The Colonel, the male head, is nasty and self-righteous and the daughter, Elizabeth is haughty and proud. Mrs. Bradford's difficult childbirth yields an illegitimate child taken on by Anna, despite Elizabeth's attempts to murder it.	*The Putnams are the closest familial analogue in <u>The Crucible</u> *Elizabeth's snootiness is echoed in Reverend Parris' self-importance
Jane Martin	Anna's former nanny who once held strict religious beliefs but disintegrates into drunkenness and blatantly sexual behaviour.	*Mompellion's lambasting of her mirrors the treatment in Salem of 'loose' women
John Gordon	A controlling and abusive husband who becomes one of the first to take up self-flagellation and eventually falls off a cliff and dies.	*The men of Salem do not appear to openly mistreat their wives as John does
Urith Gordon	Grown meek and timid in response to her husband's treatment of her, she dies after being sent infected hay to use as bedding.	
Merry Wickford	A Quaker child who is heir to the Wickford mine and is helped to keep it by Anna and Elinor	
Christopher Unwin	A villager who is saved by Anna and Elinor's medicine but Josiah Bont then tries to inter him alive	*Few accused in Salem managed to escape their fates as successfully as Unwin
Maggie Cantwell and Brand Rigney	Two of the Bradfords' former servants who try to make a new life for themselves in another village, but are literally beaten back home.	*Abigail also escapes Salem, but much more successfully than these two

Ahmed Bey	Anna's husband in name after she leaves Eyam with Mrs. Bradford's daughter. He lives in Barbary (Africa's Maghreb region currently) and allows Anna to study and look after her daughters	*The open-mindedness of Bey is totally absent from the Salem villagers
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4. Sample paragraphs

Prompt: How do The Crucible and Year of Wonders explore the role of Christianity in their respective communities?

Introduction

In both The Crucible and Year of Wonders, the Christian faith is a central tenet of the lives of all characters, as both texts tell the story of strongly religious communities. It also acts as a strong driver of the conflict which occurs in both cases, but in quite distinct ways, and propels the action and development of many characters.

Body paragraph

While it is not the root of the troubles that develop throughout the courses of the texts, religion and the need to adhere to a belief system are central to their propagation and ultimate resolution. In Year of Wonders, the cause of the plague is as simple as the arrival of a disease carrier in Eyam, but is framed as a 'trial' sent by God for the villagers to face. Likewise the scourge of accusations of witchcraft that befalls Salem is simply a result of people straying outside the bounds of good behaviour dictated by their community, but is instead seen as an outbreak of witchcraft and consorting with Satan. As such religion becomes the lens through which both crises are viewed, and is used to try to explain and resolve them. Before the advent of more modern scientific practices, one of the only ways that inexplicable events such as outbreaks of infectious disease or mass hysteria could be understood and tamed was to paint them as either benign or malignant spiritual acts. This allowed people to lay the blame not at their own doors, but at that of something beyond them; for the people of Eyam, something which in truth was a chance epidemiologic event could be seen as 'an opportunity that He offers to very few upon this Earth'. Because in both Eyam and Salem faith was already a familiar, stalwart part of everyday life, framing their respective disasters as acts of God or the Devil took away some of their fear, as they chose to see a terrible thing as part of something they had known since infancy.

Conclusion

Religion is far more than part of the everyday life and prayer of the common people of Year of Wonders and The Crucible; it is the foundation of their moral code and their way of explaining events which are frightening and make no sense. It also acts as a driving force within individuals as well as communities, deciding one way or another their actions and ultimately their characters.

5. Tips

Both texts are rich narratives on their own, but they are also strongly grounded in historical events that you may not have studied in great depth and which significantly influence the plot and characters' actions – this is especially relevant when discussing the religion portrayed in the texts.

You may miss many of the authors' intended messages if you're not aware of the full context of the books. Here are some ideas in this area that you might want to research:

The Crucible	Year of Wonders	Relevant to both
Martin Luther (<u>not</u> Martin Luther King!)	Restoration of the English Monarchy (1660)	Mass hysteria
Protestant reformation/European reformation	Church of England	Moral panic
Protestantism	Act of Uniformity 1662, Clarendon Code	
Puritanism/Puritans	English Civil War	
Salem witch trials	Oliver Cromwell	
<i>Summis desiderantes affectibus</i>		

The Crucible also has a very interesting place in modern history as Arthur Miller's comment on the rampant McCarthyism of 1950s America. Do some research on Miller's life and views (the introduction or foreword of your novel might have some useful hints).

Also note that The Crucible is a play whereas Year of Wonders is a novel; how does each format uphold or reveal the author's thoughts and ideas? How does the format of the text affect its other features (narrative, characters, voice etc.)?

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