**Act I Summary**

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.

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.

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.

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. She shakes Betty, but Betty has returned to her unmoving, unresponsive state.

John Proctor, a local farmer, enters Parris’s house to join the girls. Proctor disdains hypocrisy, and many people resent him for exposing their foolishness. However, Proctor is uneasy with himself because he had conducted an extramarital affair with Abigail. His wife, Elizabeth, discovered the affair and promptly dismissed Abigail from her work at the Proctor home.

Proctor caustically reminds Mary Warren, who now works for him, that he forbade her to leave his house, and he threatens to whip her if she does not obey his rules. Mercy Lewis and Mary depart. Abigail declares that she waits for Proctor at night. Proctor angers her by replying that he made no promises to her during their affair. She retorts that he cannot claim that he has no feelings for her because she has seen him looking up at her window. He admits that he still harbors kind feelings for her but asserts that their relationship is over. Abigail mocks Proctor for bending to the will of his “cold, sniveling” wife. Proctor threatens to give Abigail a whipping for insulting his wife. Abigail cries that Proctor put knowledge in her heart, and she declares that he cannot ask her to forget what she has learned—namely, that all of Salem operates on pretense and lies.

The crowd in the parlor sings a psalm. At the phrase “going up to Jesus,” Betty covers her ears and collapses into hysterics. Parris, Mercy, and the Putnams rush into the room. Mrs. Putnam concludes that Betty is bewitched and cannot hear the Lord’s name without pain. Rebecca Nurse, an elderly woman, joins them. Her husband, Francis Nurse, is highly respected in Salem, and many people ask him to arbitrate their disputes. Over the years, he gradually bought up the 300 acres that he once rented, and some people resent his success. He and Thomas Putnam bitterly disputed a matter of land boundaries. Moreover, Francis belonged to the faction that prevented Putnam’s brother-in-law from winning the Salem ministry. Giles Corey, a muscular, wiry eighty-three-year-old farmer, joins the crowd in the room as Rebecca stands over Betty. Betty gradually quiets in Rebecca’s gentle presence. Rebecca assures everyone that Ruth and Betty are probably only suffering from a childish fit, derived from overstimulation.

Proctor asks if Parris consulted the legal authorities or called a town meeting before he asked Reverend Hale to uncover demons in Salem. Rebecca fears that a witch-hunt will spark even more disputes. Putnam demands that Parris have Hale search for signs of witchcraft. Proctor reminds Putnam that he cannot command Parris and states that Salem does not grant votes on the basis of wealth. Putnam retorts that Proctor should not worry about Salem’s government because he does not attend church regularly like a good citizen. Proctor announces that he does not agree with Parris’s emphasis on “hellfire and damnation” in his sermons.

Parris and Giles bicker over the question of whether Parris should be granted six pounds for firewood expenses. Parris claims that the six pounds are part of his salary and that his contract stipulates that the community provide him with firewood. Giles claims that Parris overstepped his boundaries in asking for the deed to his (Parris’s) house. Parris replies that he does not want the community to be able to toss him out on a whim; his possession of the deed will make it more difficult for citizens to disobey the church.

Parris contends that Proctor does not have the right to defy his religious authority. He reminds Proctor that Salem is not a community of Quakers, and he advises Proctor to inform his “followers” of this fact. Parris declares that Proctor belongs to a faction in the church conspiring against him. Proctor shocks everyone when he says that he does not like Parris’s kind of authority and would love to find and join this enemy faction.

Reverend Hale is an intellectual man, and he has studied witchcraft extensively. He arrives at Parris’s home with a heavy load of books. Hale asks Proctor and Giles if they have afflicted children. Giles says that Proctor does not believe in witches. Proctor denies having stated an opinion on witches at all and leaves Hale to his work.

Parris relates the tale of finding the girls dancing in the forest at night, and Mrs. Putnam reports having sent her daughter to conjure the spirits of her dead children. She asks if losing seven children before they live a day is a natural occurrence. Hale consults his books while Rebecca announces that she is too old to sit in on the proceedings. Parris insists that they may find the source of all the community’s troubles, but she leaves anyway.

Giles asks Hale what reading strange books means because he often finds his wife, Martha, reading books. The night before, he tried to pray but found that he could not succeed until Martha closed her book and left the house. (Giles has a bad reputation in Salem, and people generally blame him for thefts and random fires. He cares little for public opinion, and he only began attending church regularly after he married Martha. Giles does not mention that he only recently learned any prayers and that even small distractions cause him problems in reciting them.) Hale thoughtfully considers the information and concludes that they will have to discuss the matter later. Slightly taken aback, Giles states that he does not mean to say that his wife is a witch. He just wants to know what she reads and why she hides the books from him.

Hale questions Abigail about the dancing in the forest, but Abigail maintains that the dancing was not connected to witchcraft. Parris hesitantly adds that he saw a kettle in the grass when he caught the girls at their dancing. Abigail claims that it contained soup, but Parris insists that he saw something moving in it. Abigail says that a frog jumped in. Under severe questioning, she insists that she did not call the devil but that Tituba did. She denies drinking any of the brew in the kettle, but when the men bring Tituba to the room, Abigail points at her and announces that Tituba made her drink blood. Tituba tells Parris and Hale that Abigail begged her to conjure and concoct a charm.

Tituba insists that someone else is bewitching the children because the devil has many witches in his service. Hale counsels her to open herself to God’s glory, and he asks if she has ever seen someone that she knows from Salem with the devil. Putnam suggests Sarah Good or Goody Osburn, two local outcasts. In a rising tide of religious exultation, Tituba says that she saw four people with the devil. She informs Parris that the devil told her many times to kill him in his sleep, but she refused even though the devil promised to grant her freedom and send her back to her native Barbados in return for her obedience. She recounts that the devil told her that he even had white people in his power and that he showed her Sarah Good and Goody Osburn. Mrs. Putnam declares that Tituba’s story makes sense because Goody Osburn midwifed three of her ill-fated births. Abigail adds Bridget Bishop’s name to the list of the accused. Betty rises from the bed and chants more names. The scene closes as Abigail and Betty, in feverish ecstasy, alternate in piling up names on the growing list. Hale calls for the marshal to bring irons to arrest the accused witches.