



DELTA
SPECIALIST ENGLISH TUITION

Sample Resources

**COMMON MODULE: THE
CRUCIBLE**

The following is a sample of Delta's full course materials. It includes comprehensive, state-ranking level research and analysis tailored to the new syllabus.

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HSC: Common Module (Texts and Human Experiences)

Lesson 3: The Crucible (I)

Introduction

A scathing investigation into the nature of fear and paranoia, Miller's allegorical appraisal of McCarthy era Cold War politics asserts his 1953 play as one of the most renowned dramas of the twentieth century. Miller's creative reimagining of the 17th century Salem witch trials provides an engaging and fruitful study and expanding our understanding of the performing arts as a vessel for social change. The complexity with which Miller exposes the manner in which human selfishness and impulse can see political doctrine manipulated with disastrous personal consequence sees *The Crucible* emerge as a profoundly insightful study into the complexity of human behaviours and experiences.

In this lesson, you will be introduced to the historical background of the play and the contextual influences that shaped its representation. We will look at an overview of the play, its characters and themes, before identifying representations of human experience in the play. We will explore how Miller utilises literary and dramaturgic techniques to represent these human experiences in Act I in a close textual analysis.

What is the Common Module: Texts and Human Experience?

The Common Module is the first module that students doing the HSC will study. Both HSC Advanced and Standard English students study it and it is the subject of HSC Paper 1.

Let's quickly revise the module requirements:

In this common module students deepen their understanding of how texts represent individual and collective human experiences. They examine how

texts represent human qualities and emotions associated with, or arising from, these experiences. Students appreciate, explore, interpret, analyse and evaluate the ways language is used to shape these representations in a range of texts in a variety of forms, modes and media.

Students explore how texts may give insight into the anomalies, paradoxes and inconsistencies in human behaviour and motivations, inviting the responder to see the world differently, to challenge assumptions, ignite new ideas or reflect personally. They may also consider the role of storytelling throughout time to express and reflect particular lives and cultures. By responding to a range of texts they further develop skills and confidence using various literary devices, language concepts, modes and media to formulate a considered response to texts.

Students study one prescribed text and a range of short texts that provide rich opportunities to further explore representations of human experiences illuminated in texts. They make increasingly informed judgements about how aspects of these texts, for example context, purpose, structure, stylistic and grammatical features, and form shape meaning. In addition, students select one related text and draw from personal experience to make connections between themselves, the world of the text and their wider world.

By responding and composing throughout the module students further develop a repertoire of skills in comprehending, interpreting and analysing complex texts. They examine how different modes and media use visual, verbal and/or digital language elements. They communicate ideas using figurative language to express universal themes and evaluative language to make informed judgements about texts. Students further develop skills in

using metalanguage, correct grammar and syntax to analyse language and express a personal perspective about a text.

Textual form

As part of our Common Module study, we also need to pay attention to the manner in which our composers represent the individual and shared human experiences that form the focus of their works. This necessarily entails a thorough understanding of form and technique – and a consideration into the way composers either conform, challenge or manipulate elements of their respective textual form.

Most broadly, *The Crucible* takes the form of a play, consisting of four acts. However, as with every play we study in English Advanced, we are not analysing it from the perspective of a theatrical production, but rather through the content provided by dialogue and stage directions as they are written by the composer. As such, almost all of what we understand of the personal and political landscapes presented in *The Crucible* is delivered through dialogue. By extension, our understanding Salem, Massachusetts is entirely informed by the subjective perspectives of others. There is very little authorial intervention through omnipotent narration, and little explicit insight into the subconscious thoughts of our characters. Instead, our entire worldview is shaped through the actions and words of Miller’s human subjects. This textual feature opens us up for a study of subjectivity and the malleability of human perspective – and while we conduct our analysis of the text we must always consider that the information delivered by Miller’s characters is inherently tainted by bias each and every one of us carries within. In our study, it is important to consider this feature of the text –our understanding of human experiences is inevitably filtered through the subjective lens of Miller’s deeply flawed characters.

What is interesting about *The Crucible* – and what makes it quite distinct from other plays – is the large use of expositional directional notes included amidst the dialogue by Miller, especially in the early stages of the play. These notes provide us with insight into the background and behaviour of certain characters.

More specifically, *The Crucible* is an **allegory**.

The word ‘allegory’ derives from the Greek *allēgoria*, meaning to ‘speak otherwise’. An allegory is a literary device in which a composer explores complex themes and subjects through extended metaphor. The characters and events presented throughout the composition serve as symbolic references to ideas prevalent in the composer’s immediate reality. As we know, *The Crucible* depicts the events of the Salem witch trials, conducted in 1692, as an allegory for the political disturbances of 1950s America. While Miller relies upon existing historical figures and events for his narrative, their actions and beliefs are representations of more contemporary attitudes and behaviours.

Miller conducts an investigation into the nature of McCarthy era hysteria without once mentioning the historical or political proponents of his 1950s context. Indeed, Communism and post-war society are foreign concepts in the reality of *The Crucible*, and yet the subject matter explored still serves as a reflection upon his contemporaneous political landscape. Therefore, when discussing the play in our essays, we must keep in mind at all times that the characters and their actions as presented in *The Crucible*, are in fact reflections of more contemporary 1950s attitudes.

What is the effect of the allegorical form? Miller’s decision to conduct his appraisal of post-war politics through allegory will have been in part informed by his historical context. Allegory is a common method of avoiding the threat of

censorship, especially in a period of American history so hostile toward any works considered remotely anti-American. Furthermore, allegory provides a useful vessel through which a composer is able to present an exploration and criticism of contemporary issues to an audience while largely minimising the biases that might obfuscate and distract a responder's interpretation of the text. If Miller had composed a text set in 1950s America, a large part of the audience would have rejected his content based upon historically based presuppositions – but by locating his play in a largely unfamiliar and contextually divorced 1690s landscape, the audience is to a bigger extent removed from their 1950s bias. As a result, the composer is able to deliver their message far more effectively and to a much larger audience than otherwise. That being said, historical allegory brings with it a large range of dangers that open a text to confusion and criticism. Miller addresses this concern of decontextualisation in the foreword to the play:

This play is not history in the sense in which the word is used by the academic historian. Dramatic purposes have sometimes required many characters to be fused into one; the number of girls involved in the “crying-out” has been reduced; Abigail’s age has been raised; while there were several judges of almost equal authority, I have symbolized them all in Hathorne and Danforth. However, I believe that the reader will discover here the essential nature of one of the strangest and most awful chapters in human history. The fate of each character is exactly that of his historical model, and there is no one in the drama who did not play a similar - and in some cases exactly the same - role in history.

As for the characters of the persons, little is known about most of them excepting what may be surmised from a few letters, the trial record, certain broadsides written at the time, and references to their conduct in sources of varying reliability. They may therefore be taken as creations of my own,

extremes, and Salem's religious fundamentalism and imposing theocracy ultimately saw the community tear itself apart.

Throughout the play, the 'heat' that is applied to the citizens through the growing hysteria and witch trials tests their integrity and their faith, and the lengths to which they will go in order to save themselves. By portraying a community in these trying times, Miller is able to bring to light many disturbingly familiar patterns of human behaviour and provokes us to confront what it really means to be human.

“We burn a hot fire here; it melts down all concealment.”

Danforth, Act III

Keep in mind that you are also encouraged to deeply consider other human experiences found within the text.

Restrictions, angst & rebellion

- The play portrays characters stifled by the strict moral code and lifestyle expected by the community which do not leave much room for personal freedom and by extension, self-actualisation. The negative effects of repression of individual freedom become apparent in the first Act where an act of defiance by the young girls has far-reaching consequences.
- Not only actions, but individual thoughts are also repressed as to air them risks the scrutiny of the town. Thus, the witch trials provided an outlet for the expression of angsts, grievances and vengeance, culminating in the tragic events of the play.

Fear of the unknown & hysteria

- Much of *The Crucible* deals with how individuals react to things they can't explain and exposes how truly primitive people are when confronted with their deepest fears.

- For Salem’s occupants, witchcraft represents the epitome of the unknown. The threat of witchcraft (real or imagined) quickly transmits through the town as a result of rumours and fear, causing the town to fall into a mass hysteria that overrides logic and individual thought and ends up perpetuating its own existence.
- Miller also uses this landscape of hysteria to highlight how most people tend to conform to what the majority around them think. The Crucible presents many reasons for this, including self-preservation, ease and ignorance. The testimony of many individuals is ignored in favour of the society-held view that the Devil is amongst them, effectively showing the powerlessness of the individual against the ‘collective conscious’.

Persecution & ‘witch-hunting’

- In a town such as Salem with a strict ‘norm’, anyone who deviates from the status quo is subject to the suspicion and scrutiny of the town. Miller elucidates that in times of turmoil and uncertainty, society is already predisposed to convict these people as ‘scapegoats’.
- Abigail’s exploitation of this intolerance is clear as she first accuses the elderly, drunk and homeless, and their arrests strengthen her authority. knowing that society is already predisposed to convict them.

Power, jealousy & revenge

- While the supernatural is undoubtedly real to the people of Salem, Miller makes it clear that the girls’ testimonies of witchcraft are a pretense. As Proctor aptly explains “Vengeance is walking Salem”, not the devil. There are only people – and greed, vengeance, envy and ignorance are the hidden forces driving the play. These thematic concerns highlight the play’s preoccupation with anomalies, paradoxes and inconsistencies.

- Abigail is motivated by jealousy of Elizabeth Proctor. Thomas Putnam is motivated by greed for other people's property. Ann Putnam is motivated by her envy of Rebecca's children.
- Throughout the play, we see how the Salem witch trials provide an opportunity for less prominent members of society to achieve a sense of importance and power, such as the character of Mary Warren.

Transgression, guilt & redemption

- Despite his late entry into the act, John Proctor acts as the vessel through which we experience the entire plot. Throughout the play, his guilt over his affair causes him to hesitate and battle with himself. His failings in marriage make him and his wife vulnerable to charges of witchcraft.
- But it is Proctor's ability to find self-forgiveness, protect his wife and confront Abigail that allows us to witness a story, albeit tragic, of profound personal triumph and redemption.

Reputation & good name

- The importance of a good reputation is a central thematic concern in the Crucible. Reputation is key in a world where social standing is governed by religious adherence. However, in the face of allegations such as witchcraft, even the best of reputations are quickly undermined and challenged.
- Regardless, this is exactly what sparks doubt at the accusations for Reverend Hale, and the same force behind Proctor's refusal to sign the false declaration even if it means death. In doing so Proctor's legacy becomes one that subverts the outwardly apparent: despite being put to death as a witch, Proctor gains the respect of those that matter.
- Abigail's eventual fall from grace further supports the karmic nature of reputation in The Crucible, despite the tragedies that may take place along the way.

Ultimately, all of these human experiences and concerns transcend temporal parameters. Whether it be transgression, hysteria or revenge, these concerns remain relevant to contemporary audiences. It is important that you address such timelessness within your own essays.

Act 1 - synopsis

The first act of *The Crucible* is the longest act: it introduces the action, the characters and sets up the disturbing sequence of events to follow. There are also critical insights into various personal conflicts that threaten to disrupt the social order in Salem.

10-year-old Betty Parris is mute and bedridden due to a mysterious sickness. Her father, town minister Reverend Parris, discovered Betty, his niece Abigail, his black slave Tituba and some other young girls from the town dancing in the woods the night before. Rumours are spreading of an ‘unnatural cause’ for Betty’s sickness. Parris asks Abigail about the rumours but she insists that Betty is not bewitched and the girls were just dancing.

Mr and Mrs Putnam arrive at the Parris household and reveal that their own daughter is similarly ill. Mrs Putnam says that she has previously lost 7 babies in infancy and believes the Devil is to blame. She reveals that she sent Ruth to Tituba in hopes of communicating with her dead siblings to determine who was responsible for their deaths. Parris is horrified and dismayed when Abigail admits that the girls and Tituba were indeed conjuring spirits that night in the forest.

Parris and the Putnams leave to calm the gathering crowd outside the house, leaving Abigail alone with Betty. Two other young girls enter, Mercy Lewis and Mary Warren, who were also in the woods. Betty awakes, frightened, and reveals that Abigail drank blood to cast a spell to kill John Proctor’s wife. Abigail violently warns

Betty to never repeat this and threatens the girls with violence if they tell anyone what actually happened in the forest.

John Proctor arrives and orders Mary, who works in his household, to go home. Left alone, Proctor questions Abigail about Betty, and Abigail says she's just being silly. It is revealed that Proctor and Abigail had an affair when she worked at his house. Abigail wants the relationship to continue but Proctor turns down her advances. A psalm is heard being sung and Betty begins to shriek. Upon hearing her, the other adults rush in and Mrs Putnam claims Betty's distress is proof of witchcraft.

Giles Corey and Rebecca Nurse arrive. Rebecca is a highly-respected old woman with much experience with children. She claims that Betty's illness is nothing serious, but merely a childish phase. Reverend Hale, an intellectual and expert in witchcraft from a nearby town, arrives at the house to investigate the situation.

In front of Hale, Abigail suddenly changes her story and claims that Tituba called the Devil last night and has used witchcraft many times before. Threatened with whipping and hanging, a frightened Tituba confesses to working for the Devil and provides names of other witches in the town. Abigail and Betty also confess their involvement and begin accusing several others of being witches.

TWO WEEK TRIAL



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Questions to consider upon analysis

Contextual issues

- What language choices of Miller's evoke the diction of 1690s America?
- How does Miller create a sense of the Puritan restrictions that govern life in Salem?
- How does Miller use intermissions of factual information to keep the reader grounded?

Thematic concerns - Human experiences

- Restrictions & rebellion
- Power
- Fear of the unknown
- Transgression
- Deception
- Building hysteria

Textual issues

- Why does Miller use exposition to reveal information about his characters when they enter a scene? How would our perceptions change without his interruptions in the play?
- How does Miller use lexical choices, descriptions, gestures & stage directions to reveal differences between his characters?
- How does Miller use setting to create a certain atmosphere?

Textual analysis

Stage directions:

As is typical of the play text type, Miller provides us with stage directions. Intended for theatrical adaptation, they carry with them a symbolic relevance that ought to be considered as well.

A **small upper bedroom** in the home of Reverend Samuel Parris, Salem, Massachusetts, in the spring of the year 1692. There is a **narrow window** at the left. **Through its leaded panes the morning sunlight streams.** A **candle** still burns near the bed, which is at the right. A **chest, a chair, and a small table** are the other furnishings. At the back a door opens on the landing of the stairway to the ground floor. The room gives of an air of **clean sparseness.** The roof rafters are exposed, and the wood colors are raw and unmellowed. As the curtain rises, Reverend Parris is discovered kneeling beside the bed, evidently in prayer. His daughter, Betty Parris, aged ten, is lying on the bed, inert.

- Miller's description of the **setting** establishes the **tone** for the rest of the play. The first act takes place in one enclosed space - "*a small upper bedroom in the home*" - creating a feeling of claustrophobia, further emphasised by the "*narrow window*" and lack of light. The sparse, minimal furnishings including only "*a chest, a chair and a small table*" mean the room is devoid of any homely atmosphere, echoing the Puritanical beliefs of the society where indulgence is forbidden and only bare necessities are used. Miller's use of setting takes on symbolic significance; Parris' furnishings are a visual representation of the sparseness and conservatism of his broader Calvinistic ideals. His room reflects his tendency toward simplicity and asceticism, and sets the tone for our perception of Salem. Moreover, this small, enclosed space mirrors the set-up of the society in general - a small, stifling village of complete restrictions, in which

everyone is closely connected and under constant scrutiny and judgement. Additionally, in opening with the authority figure of Parris, Miller immediately establishes the notion of authority and the administration of justice as central ideas within the play.

- The **motif of light and dark** is also introduced here. While “*morning sunlight*” can be seen through the window, inside the room “*a candle*” is being used to illuminate the darkness. Outside the house, where there is sunlight, there is complete freedom, nothing is hidden. However, inside the house, where there is little light and a candle is being used to create what little light there is, there are many secrets and uncertainty.
- Unsurprisingly, Parris is in prayer – his Calvinistic devotion established immediately from the play’s outset. Religious observation and its intersection into political life are established as key themes in this opening tableau.
- Furthermore, Betty’s position as ‘inert’ upon the bed, is a physical representation of the subordination and passivity of the child population in Salem, as enforced by the disciplinary practices of their Calvinistic sect.

Commentary:

Now Miller asserts himself as quite unique among playwrights, as here he provides commentary intercut with the dialogue and actions of the play. This information, written in prose, is not intended to be delivered during a theatrical performance, but exists purely for the director and any readers of the material. In this commentary, Miller provides historical details and establishes the political and cultural backgrounds for each of his characters.

At the time of these events Parris was in his middle forties. **In history he cut a villainous path**, and there is very little good to be said for him. He believed he was being **persecuted** wherever he went, despite his best efforts to **win people and God** to his side. In meeting, he felt insulted if someone rose to shut the door without first asking his permission.

...

He never conceived that the **children were anything but thankful** for being permitted to walk straight, eyes slightly lowered, arms at the sides, and mouths shut until bidden to speak.

- Miller speaks of Parris in historical terms, addressing him as a historical figure rather than a fictional device for his allegorical play. It is important that Miller does strive for verisimilitude to the best of his ability throughout the composition. He recognises the negative reputation Parris has developed in his own time and subsequently since – acknowledging the cultural biases that inevitably inform our perspective of historical figures.
- Miller immediately characterises Parris as a paranoid individual, and introduces the notion of persecution – a concept that will become increasingly relevant throughout our study. Indeed, persecution is the systematic mistreatment of an individual or group of people, usually by one majority group over another. It is an aspect of politics that is recurrently relevant throughout *The Crucible*.
- The idea of discipline is now introduced in relation to the monitored behaviour of Salem's children. It is important to consider that Miller recognises the fact that such strict behaviour was mandated out of genuine (if not misguided) concern for the well-being of the children. He does not suggest that these practices are born of malicious intent, but rather are the product of perceived altruism. These lines open us to this idea of subjectivity which so defines both the play and human experience in general. While we as a modern audience look upon such disciplinary measures as out-dated and

detrimental, the people of Salem saw it as beneficial. Miller draws attention to the fact that we as responders are just as much a product of our cultural biases as were the citizens of Salem, Massachusetts.

They would **not have permitted** anyone to read a novel... their creed forbade anything remotely resembling a theatre or 'vain enjoyment'.

- Miller introduces the idea of **anti-intellectualism**, as it exists in Salem, Massachusetts. Being a strictly conservative society, the community condemns any access to information seen to be potentially contradictory to established Puritan doctrine.
- This note marks the first obvious link between 1690s Salem and 1950s America – who, in their anti-Communist hysteria, largely shunned the distribution of educational or entertainment material that might contradict established capitalist values. This often took the form of the 'Hollywood blacklist' which was a practice of denying employment to suspected communist sympathisers amongst the entertainment community in Los Angeles. This was so as to stop the 'infiltration' of communist ideals into America's mass media circuit.

They carried about an **air** of innate resistance, even of **persecution**. Their fathers had, of course, been persecuted in England.

- We return to the notion of persecution. We recognise that Parris' own sense of persecution is founded in the broader mindset of his cultural landscape.
- An understanding of 'persecution' is important to developing an informed perspective of politics in Salem, 1950s America, and the world in general. From a sense of persecution arises a sense of solidarity, from which strongly bound and largely insular, conservative communities are formed. In the struggle against a perceived oppressor, certain values become only more

rigidly embraced and a resistance to change or adaptation reinforced. The persecution the Salem Puritans felt at the hands of the Catholic monarchy, as well as from the hostile Native American population is reminiscent of the sense of persecution developed amongst conservative Americans in the 1950s, who felt their way of life was under attack by communist and liberalist agendas. Feelings that were reinforced by the progressive movement of the early 20th century that saw advancements such as women's suffrage and child labour laws.

They set up a communal society [...] an autocracy was consent, for they were united from top to bottom by a common held ideology whose perpetuation was the reason and justification for all their sufferings.

- Miller introduces the explicitly political notion of autocracy by which authoritative power is concentrated into the hands of a single individual who exists above the laws they enforce. Autocracies are generally viewed in Western society to be exploitative and antithetical to utilitarian aims. However, Miller notes that the autocracy was welcomed within the Puritan society, who values rigid order and stability above personal liberty.
- Once again, Miller acknowledges the subjectivities that rule our perception. While our cultural biases in the 20th – 21st century might condemn autocracy, that does not make them inherently bad – and their worth can only be determined through the subjective lens of the individual, as informed by their historical, political and cultural context.

It is not hard to see how easily many could have been led to believe that the time of confusion had been brought upon them by deep and darkling forces.

- Miller here notes that fear and confusion is often the source of political disruption. He also acknowledges that a fear of the unknown, which at the

time had was manifest as a belief in the supernatural, was an understandable justification for the panic and paranoia that dominated the period.

- Again, Miller implicates his 1950s context here, ‘the deep and darkling forces’ – which in Salem were manifest as witchcraft and Satanism, - are understood in the form of a fear of communism in post-war America. The use of the **plosive ‘d’** highlights how Miller recognises that amidst a state of political and social confusion, communism resembles an easy target for individual fears.
- Miller’s tone throughout this commentary comes across as remarkable impartial, he does not appear to condemn any sides or ideology – rather reflecting upon the cultural and political forces which shaped such insular and hostile behaviours.

For good purposes... the people of Salem developed a theocracy, a combine of state and religious power whose function was to keep the community together, and to prevent any kind of disunity that might open it to destruction by material or ideological enemies.

- A theocracy is a system of government in which the authoritative religious body hold sovereignty over appointed territory. The leader in this circumstance is one who exhibits a unique connection to divinity. In Salem, this leader was Reverend Samuel Parris.
- Miller recognises that the theocracy in Salem emerged out of a desire to maintain order and protect the community from external threat. This desire for order fundamentally underpins the construction of any political structure across time. Throughout the play, Miller introduces us to a number of conflicting political structures and appraises their suitability and responsibility in the perpetuation of certain social behaviours.

- The first description of Abigail when she enters the play establishes up as a duplicitous character. The **triad** of “worry and apprehension and propriety” used to describe her current appearance creates a sense of pretence casting doubt on her motives and intentions before she has even spoken. The **polysyndeton** creates a feeling of multiplicity; layer upon layer of facades that can be switched depending on the requirements of the situation.
- Abigail’s “endless capacity for dissembling” **foreshadows** her pivotal role as the instigator of the events that will unfold later in the play. The emphasis on her “strikingly beautiful” appearance captures a discordancy with outward appearances and inner realities, a prominent idea within the text.

ABIGAIL: Uncle? *He looks to her.* Susanna Walcott’s here from Doctor Griggs.

PARRIS: Oh? Let her come, let her come.

ABIGAIL, *leaning out the door to call to Susanna, who is down the hall a few steps:*
Come in, Susanna.

Susanna Walcott, a little younger than Abigail, a nervous, hurried girl, enters.

PARRIS, *eagerly:* What does the doctor say, child?

SUSANNA, *craning around Parris to get a look at Betty:* He bid me come and tell you, reverend sir, that he **cannot discover no medicine for it in his books.**

PARRIS: Then he must search on.

SUSANNA: Aye, sir, he have been searchin' his books since he left you, sir. But he bid me tell you, that you might look to **unnatural things** for the cause of it.

PARRIS, *his eyes going wide*: No-no. **There be no unnatural cause here.** Tell him I have sent for Reverend Hale of Beverly, and Mr. Hale will surely confirm that. Let him look to medicine and **put out all thought of unnatural causes** here. **There be none.**

- Here we see the first suggestions of “*unnatural things*” in the doctor’s message conveyed by Susanna, who functions as a **harbinger** of ill news and impending chaos. As the doctor can find no explanation “*in his books*”, **symbolic** of established understanding and knowledge, the villagers are forced to venture beyond into the realm of the unknown.
- Although witchcraft is not explicitly mentioned, it is the first thing on everyone’s mind and Parris’s reaction is one of shock followed by immediate denial. His constant, frequent **repetition** and his insistence on continuing to use the **euphemism** “*unnatural causes*” rather than voicing the word ‘witchcraft’ attempts to assure both himself and his listeners that there is no need for concern. What does this tell us about *fear of the unknown* as a human experience and how we deal with it?
- Miller uses specific language choices in *The Crucible* to help evoke the dialect of 17th century Salem. Note the changing tenses, archaic words and use of double negatives such as in “*he cannot discover no medicine...*”

ABIGAIL: Uncle, the rumor of witchcraft is all about; I think you’d best go down and deny it yourself. The **parlor’s packed with people**, sir. I’ll sit with her.

PARRIS, *pressed, turns on her*: And what shall I say to them? That my daughter and my niece I discovered **dancing like heathen in the forest?**

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