

The Crucible

Background:

The Crucible is a 1952 play by the American playwright Arthur Miller. It is a dramatization of the Salem witch trials that took place in the Province of Massachusetts Bay during 1692 and 1693. In the small village of Salem, a collection of girls fell ill, falling victim to hallucinations and seizures. In extremely religious Puritan New England, frightening or surprising occurrences were often attributed to the devil or his cohorts. The unfathomable sickness spurred fears of witchcraft, and it was not long before the girls, and then many other residents of Salem, began to accuse other villagers of consorting with devils and casting spells. Old grudges and jealousies spilled out into the open, fueling the atmosphere of hysteria. The Massachusetts government and judicial system, heavily influenced by religion, rolled into action. Within a few weeks, dozens of people were in jail on charges of witchcraft. By the time the fever had run its course, in late August 1692, nineteen people (and two dogs) had been convicted and hanged for witchcraft.

More than two centuries later drawing on research conducted as an undergraduate in college, Miller composed one of his most famous works, *The Crucible*. The play is intended to serve as an allegory of McCarthyism, a time when the US government blacklisted accused communists. Led by Senator McCarthy, special congressional committees conducted highly controversial investigations intended to root out Communist sympathizers in the United States. As with the alleged witches of Salem, suspected Communists were encouraged to confess and to identify other “Red sympathizers” as means of escaping punishment. The policy resulted in a whirlwind of accusations and what Miller perceived to be a modern day “witch hunt,” so to speak.

Task:

Before you begin to read Miller’s work, you will need to complete a pre-reading assignment that will help to provide more context for the play. To fully understand the meaning of the text and the author’s purpose for writing it, it is necessary to have background knowledge about the time period in which the play is set, as well as the time period in which the work was written. Additionally, there will be a post reading assignment for you to complete after reading play to reflect on the text as a whole and how it fits into the scope of our nation’s history and society today.

You will also be reading Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* during the school year and be asked to make connections to your summer reading, so it is important that you actually read the play (not skim Sparknotes) in order to be successful. It may be helpful to consult Sparknotes and/or Shmoop at the end of each act to ensure that you fully comprehended all that is presented in each section of the text. The analysis section of Sparknotes will also provide you with further explanation of your reading to help you be successful on any assignments for the play and eventually your final summer reading test.

If you have questions as you are reading, email me (KischukS@epcusd401.org); I am more than happy to field questions throughout the summer. Also, consult the class website (www.wix.com/Kischuk/English). Here you will find the other online resources mentioned, which will be invaluable to you as you begin your reading. Be ready to discuss the work upon your return to school.

Assessment:

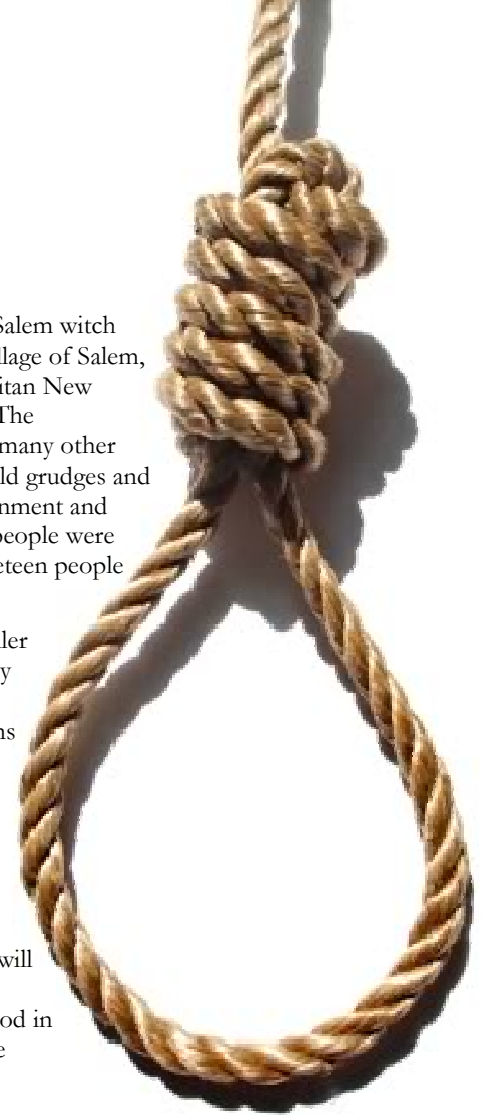
All of your summer reading work combined will account for 15% of your semester grade. During the first week of school, all students will take a test over *Brave New World* and *The Crucible*. At this time, students will also turn in their *Brave New World* and *The Crucible* summer reading assignments. Then, during the first week of class (either first or second semester depending on scheduling), students will work in groups to complete a project that will act as a summative assessment for *Brave New World* and lead into our first unit of study for the year *Fahrenheit 451*.

Due Date:

Brave New World & Crucible Assignments: **August 20, 2012**

Summer Reading Test: **August 20, 2012**

Brave New World Project: **TBD** (in class)



Anyone who fails to turn in work and/or take the test by this date, will earn a zero for those portions of the summer reading grade. This means that your semester grade will automatically drop one full letter grade. Make sure you stay on top of your work throughout the summer—don’t put this off until a week before school starts!

Pre-Reading Assignment

Part I: Witchcraft in Puritan New England

Directions: Read the article below and highlight important key concepts as you read. This information will be included on your summer reading test.

In 1650, when the Puritans left England and set off to seek religious freedom in America, the fear of witchcraft was very real. For thousands of years, Satan was blamed for any and all oddities or mysteries in life; anyone who was in opposition to the concepts or ideas of Christianity was said to be connected to Satan and his evil work, and therefore considered a heretic.

Under the duress of extreme torture, many accused heretics “confessed” to flying on poles, practicing magic, engaging in sexual misconduct, and seeing Satan in various forms. In 1487, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of Witches) was published, and quickly became the official text for the detection and persecution of witches. The *Malleus Maleficarum* told tales of women (the weaker and less intellectual beings, according to the text) who, under the influence of the Devil, had sexual intercourse with demons, killed babies, destroyed crops, and caused general mayhem. Witches were blamed for unexpected deaths, natural disasters, sterility, sick livestock, and even strange weather. Also within the text were methods for prosecuting a witch, including stripping the accused and inspecting the body for signs such as unusual birthmarks (believed to be the Devil’s mark). When the *Malleus Maleficarum* was written, the idea of witchcraft was not popularly accepted, but the text quickly convinced many of the threat and danger of witches.

Between 1500 and 1650, approximately 70,000 accused witches were executed throughout Europe—approximately eighty percent of whom were women. Those who were accused were usually social outcasts, elderly women, single mothers, widows, the disabled, the poor, husbands of the accused, and those who publicly denied the existence of witches. The most prevalent times these “witch-hunts” occurred throughout history were times of political and social strife. People wanted someone to blame for their misfortune, and would literally hunt down their scapegoats.

The accused were guilty until proven innocent. The courts of New England recognized two forms of evidence of witchcraft: either an eyewitness account or a confession. Since very few confessed of their own will, torture was used to coerce a confession. The accused was jailed, then subjected to several forms of torture to elicit a confession. Some of the torture devices included:

- **Strappado**—The accused was bound and hung by her arms, which were tied behind her back. Weights were often hung from her feet to increase the pain, and usually caused her arms to break at her shoulders.
- **Swimming**—It was believed that a witch would not sink in water. The accused was tied up and thrown into a lake or pond; a witch would float, and the innocent would sink. Many drowned as a result.
- **Ordeal by Fire**—The defendant was forced to carry or walk on hot coals. The burns were wrapped and treated. After three days, upon examination of the wounds, if there was an open sore, the defendant was found guilty.
- **Ordeal by Water**—The defendant was forced to repeatedly place her arm in a pot of boiling water. Again, if there was still evidence of the burn after three days, she was found guilty of being a witch.
- **Thumbscrews**—The accused’s thumbs were placed in a vice and crushed incrementally to extract a confession.
- **Pricking**—Since it was a widely held belief that witches did not bleed, those who were accused were subjected to hundreds of pin pricks or cuts, as the court diligently looked for the absence of blood.
- **The Rack**—The accused was laid on a large board of wood with her hands and feet tied. As the accusers tried to extract a confession, her arms and ankles were pulled in opposite directions, often resulting in dislocation of the limbs.

Under these various forms of torture, many falsely confessed to practicing witchcraft. After the courts had a confession, trials resumed, and the witches who were found guilty (as were all who confessed) were publicly hanged or burned at the stake.

Pre-Reading Assignment

Part II: The Red Scare & McCarthy Trials

Directions: Read the article below and highlight important key concepts as you read. This information will be included on your summer reading test.

In 1950, Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible* as a parallel between the Salem witch trials and the current events that were spreading throughout the United States at the time. A similar “witch-hunt” was happening in the United States—and this time, the accused were those who were a part of the Communist Party or were Communist sympathizers.

Shortly after the end of World War I, a “Red Scare” took hold of the nation. Named after the red flag of the U.S.S.R. (now Russia), the “Reds” were seen as a threat to the democracy of the United States. Fear, paranoia, and hysteria gripped the nation, and many innocent people were questioned and then jailed for expressing any view which was seen as anti-Democratic or anti-American.

In June of 1940, Congress passed the Alien Registration Act, which required anyone who was not a legal resident of the United States to file a statement of their occupational and personal status, which included a record of their political beliefs. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which was established in 1938, had the job of investigating those who were suspected of overthrowing or threatening the democracy of the U.S. As the Alien Registration Act gathered the information, the HUAC began hunting down those who were believed to be a threat to American beliefs.

The HUAC established that Communist beliefs were being spread via mass media. At this time, movies were becoming more liberal, and therefore, were believed to be a threat; many felt that Hollywood was attempting to propagandize Communist beliefs. In September of 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee subpoenaed nineteen witnesses (most of whom were actors, directors, and writers) who had previously refused comment, claiming their Fifth Amendment rights. Eleven of the 17 were called to testify; only one actually spoke on the stand—the remaining ten refused to speak and were labeled the “Hollywood Ten.”

After these infamous ten refused to speak, executives from the movie industry met to decide how to best handle the bad press. They decided to suspend all ten without pay. Although the initial intention was to save their box office reputation, what eventually resulted was a decade-long blacklist. Hundreds of people who worked in the industry were told to point the finger naming those who had any affiliation with the Communist party. As a result, over 200 people lost their jobs and were unable to find anyone who would hire them. The Communist witch-hunt ruined the careers of hundreds, and ruined the reputation of hundreds more.

In February of 1950, a Republican senator from Wisconsin named Joseph McCarthy claimed to have a list of over 200 card-carrying members of the Communist party. By 1951, a new flourish of accusations began and a new wave were subpoenaed to “name names”—to snitch on those who were Communists or believed to be Communist sympathizers. Later, the terms McCarthy Trials and McCarthyism were coined, which described the anti-Communist movement and trials of the 1950s. Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible* in 1953, after witnessing first-hand the modern witch-hunt that had taken place in the United States. Miller wrote the controversial play as an allegory, a play which represents something much deeper. In this case, the story is about the Salem witch trials of the 1690s, but warns of history repeating these tragic events in the 1950s.

Pre-Reading Assignment

Part III: Historical Accuracy

Directions: Read the passage below and then answer the questions that follow; be sure to be specific and detailed with your responses and use complete sentences. Use another sheet of paper if you need more space to respond.

Before the text of the play begins, Arthur Miller included the following note on the historical accuracy of his 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 of 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, drawn to the best of my ability in conformity with their known behavior, except as indicated in the commentary I have written for this text.

1. What do you think Miller meant when he wrote, “This play is not history in the sense in which the word is used by the academic historian”? In what sense of “history” do you think the play was written? Why?

2. In what medium have you seen the concept “based on a true story”? What does this phrase mean? Why do you think authors and screenwriters might alter “history” or true events?

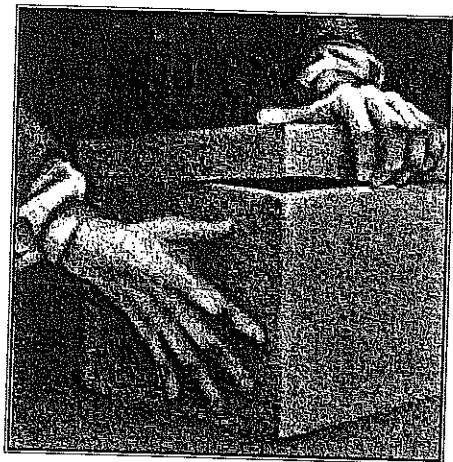
Post Reading Assignment

Directions: Read the attached Marc Aronson excerpt and then answer the questions below.

1. Aronson discusses several theories of scholars regarding why the Salem witch trials took place. Explain the theory do you find most plausible and discuss why.

2. Which of the theories seems least plausible? Explain.

3. Do Arthur Miller's historical inaccuracies detract from the message the play is intended to convey? Explain.



Fraud, witches, HYSTERICs,

hallucinators

Ever since the witch trials ended in the Massachusetts colony, people have tried to make sense of what happened. I have tried to outline the events, point to the best sources, and indicate some key questions that historians have raised. If you continue reading about Salem, you will soon discover that authors have strong opinions about what took place there. In order to help you make sense of those views, here is an outline of the different camps and how current scholars tend to view them. I discuss many of the most significant sources in greater detail in the "Notes and Comments" section as I cite them.

The oldest point of view is that there was some kind of deception and fraud occurring in Salem. The accusers made up their displays. Robert Calef and Thomas Brattle, who witnessed some of the events and gathered information from participants, saw the trials this way. Calef, in particular, also blamed Cotton Mather for supporting the accusers and defending the executions. In the nineteenth century Charles Upham collected many documents and local stories and followed that interpretation when he published his two-volume work *Salem Witchcraft*. He wrote well and had many wonderful details at his command, which made his work the foundation that both popular authors and serious historians used for over a century.

Two still-popular books can be seen as continuing this tradition of highly readable writing that tells a clear story of deception by the accusers and criticism of leading ministers, especially Cotton Mather: Marion Starkey's *The Devil in Massachusetts* and Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*. Written in the late 1940s and early 1950s, respectively, these works depicted a clear clash between rigid, even murderous, religious thinkers and the dawning of a new and more rational modern temperament. Though authors at the time could read the original transcripts of the pretrial hearings, these were available only in their original form or as gathered, edited, and published by a team of scribes in the 1930s.

In 1969 Chadwick Hansen published *Witchcraft at Salem*. He thought all previous views, going back to

Explaining Salem

Upham's, were wrong. Hansen carefully reread the testimonies and decided that there truly were witches in Salem, which is one reason why the experiences of the accusers were real to them. He also began to sort through the mixture of evidence and legend that Upham and those who had followed him had blended together. For example, he showed how Tituba had changed in these accounts from an Indian to a black or half-black person over time.

A few years later Keith Thomas published a lengthy study, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. Though his focus was England, Thomas opened new approaches to Salem for historians, for he examined in great detail the court records of accusations of witchcraft and other types of magical practice. He saw that various folk beliefs were quite common. Witchcraft accusations, he discovered, tended to cluster around certain people in a community, especially women who were perceived as angry outsiders; he also showed that definitions of magic changed over time. For example, astrology shifted back and forth from being acceptable to being seen as devilish to being viewed as simply ineffectual or wrong. Thomas argued that as communities much like Salem shifted from a view in which everyone was expected to look out for everyone else to a focus on each individual and family being out for itself, people felt guilty for not taking care of outsiders. In order not to have to feel badly, they then called those people witches.

Though historians have objected to parts of

Witch- HUNT

Thomas's work, he offered a new way of seeing Salem. Folk magic and accusations of witchcraft were a part of English life. Instead of Salem as a horrible example of American Puritanism, it can be seen as the final expression of an interesting and complex strand in English history.

In the 1970s more and more historians began to study documents in America to see how witchcraft cases in the United States fit with those Thomas had described. At the same time two historians teaching an undergraduate course at the University of Massachusetts decided to take a new approach. Upham had indicated that there were deep tensions in Salem before the very first accusations of witchcraft. In *Salem Possessed*, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum meticulously reconstructed those struggles. They defined in wonderful detail the feud between the Putnams and the Porters. Concise, well written, and full of fascinating insights, this book remains one of the glories of Salem studies. The witchcraft cases, it now seemed, had roots in traditional English practices and in local tensions. The two historians also published modern editions of the transcripts and of other relevant documents in their three-volume *Salem Witchcraft Papers*. They made it much easier for others to follow their trail and make sense of the events for themselves.

John Putnam Demos in *Entertaining Satan*, published in 1982, did not primarily focus on Salem, which is itself interesting. His concern was not to assign praise

Explaining Salem

or assess blame to those involved in the trials, but to understand the larger picture in which those accusations fit. His richly researched and highly thoughtful book attempted to understand the psychology of witchcraft accusers. He made a serious effort to read through court testimony to understand the fears and anxieties inside people's minds.

In the 1980s historians, most notably Carol Karlsen in *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, took up the statistical information Thomas and others had found about women and witchcraft. If women were accused four times as often as men, this was significant. It told a great deal about how women in general were viewed in society. Karlsen in particular argued that the accused witches were not outsiders or bitter malcontents, but rather older women with some property. The conspiracy, in a sense, shifted away from the accusers in Salem. The real villain was a world that could not accept women who were not solely daughters, wives, or mothers.

The focus on the place of women in the whole issue of witchcraft continues to draw the attention of historians, though not mainly in regard to Salem. For in Salem, unlike any other similar outbreak of accusations in America, a significant percentage of men were accused and executed.

The three hundredth anniversary of the Salem trials in 1992 saw the publication of a book that challenged the shift in thinking that began with Hansen. The professor

Witch- HUNT

of English Bernard Rosenthal reread the original sources and went back to the older views. It was obvious, he argued in *Salem Story*, that there was conscious fraud in Salem. He also continued Hansen's effort to clear away the sludge of misinformation to which historians were still prey. His book is a refreshing, clean view that makes you read carefully and gives examples of collusion that seem unquestionable. Rosenthal is preparing his own new edition of the transcripts that corrects errors in the Boyer and Nissenbaum collection; rearranges the cases in a much more useful chronological sequence, and includes a smattering of documents that have recently been uncovered.

In the 1990s popular authors were inspired by Hansen in a different way. Combining his argument that there were real witches in Salem with other sources that claimed witchcraft was a part of an alternative female-oriented faith, they claimed the accused of Salem as long-lost ancestors. The issue of the witch trials was not fraud or true belief, they argued, but a society that could not accept a real pagan faith. An example of this kind of writing is Selma Williams's *Riding the Nightmare*, which was first published in 1978 and reprinted in 1991.

Academic historians have also followed up ideas from Hansen and Thomas and investigated how folk magic actually functioned in New England. Examining, for example, the diary of the judge Samuel Sewall, David Hall in his *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment* found that a

Explaining Salem

Witch- HUNT

truly devout Puritan also harbored folk beliefs. So society was not split between harsh Puritan ministers trying to enforce their brand of Christianity and local people who may have outwardly conformed but secretly used magical practices. Instead, according to Hall, these beliefs mingled, even inside the minds of individuals. Folk practices influenced ministers, even as the religious leaders tried to stamp them out.

In the 1980s and '90s, Americans became more sensitive to the effects of child abuse, but several scandals in which children were led to give false testimony also exposed the danger of too easily accepting accusations of abuse. Recent books such as Peter Charles Hoffer's *The Salem Witchcraft Trials* have raised the possibility of using both of these insights to make sense of Salem: Perhaps there was a history of abuse in Salem; or can our more recent experience allow us to better understand the false claims of the past?

Today historians see both sides of Salem. The outbreak of accusations made use of long-established beliefs about folk magic, but it probably also included instances of conscious deceit or fraud. Our knowledge of the worldview of the accusers, the accused, and the rest of the people of Massachusetts at the time is much deeper than it was. But we still do not know for sure why people behaved as they did in Salem.

A number of medical researchers have tried to explain Salem in other ways. For instance, one theory posits that people in the town were eating bread made

of spoiled wheat. The particular kind of rot, called *ergot*, in some wheat can have the effect of a drug that drives people temporarily mad, giving them visions and tormenting their bodies in ways similar to what the accusers described. Scientists and historians have looked closely at whether this could have taken place in Salem and have agreed that the theory is incorrect. Some of their reasons for coming to this conclusion are technical, having to do with climate, temperature, wheat crops, and the rise and fall of accusations in Salem. But there are also broader reasons for being hesitant about any such explanation of the trials.

The problem with this kind of approach can be easily seen in Laurie Winn Carlson's *A Fever in Salem*. She believes that those afflicted in Salem, and in general those who seemed to have been bewitched over the centuries, suffered from encephalitis lethargica, a disease whose symptoms match some of what was reported in Salem and that she believes could have been spread by birds and other animals. Her book is sloppy in places, but its biggest failing—which is also the flaw in the wheat rot theory—is that it assumes that you can look at symptoms and entirely disregard the cultural context in which they arose and were reported. While the references to such symptoms as biting, choking, and having visions come up over and over again in the trial records, it is hard to be sure what they really mean. The transcripts were not taken down by a stenographer or recorded on tape. The individuals writing them down

Explaining Salem

could have developed a shorthand to summarize what they heard. The accusers might have done the same, or, as I have discussed, they might have been inventing their actions wholly or partially. We simply do not know what words like *pinching* actually described, which makes it impossible to treat them as medical clues.

It seems not only unlikely, but rather fruitless, to look for some single and simple biological explanation of witchcraft, which is as interesting for what it tells us about its time as for any "cause." But there is another possibility. It may be that over the centuries some people in England and New England did eat rotten wheat or suffer from exotic diseases and, as a result, had convulsions and visions. Doctors and ministers trying to heal them may have interpreted those symptoms as defining affliction, bewitchment, or possession. Then, when people in Salem began to think they were afflicted—or decided to fake being in that state—they might have followed the known pattern of symptoms. A simple way this could have happened is if the Goodwin children in 1688 took some of their cues, consciously or unconsciously, from these established patterns and if the Salem accusers were then influenced by Cotton Mather's report on that case.

In other words, it was not germs that created symptoms that people falsely thought of as witchcraft; rather, when people believed they were afflicted, they behaved as they believed such people behaved, with a set of symptoms that might somewhere along the way

Witch- HUNT

have been observed in those suffering from one disease or another.

Most recently, there have been books, like this one, that seek to draw on and meld existing research. The best of these is Larry Gragg's *The Salem Witch Crisis*. A biographer of Samuel Parris, Gragg is quite familiar with both the original sources and the later studies, and he gives a readable, informed picture of what took place. Elaine G. Breslaw's *Tituba, Reluctant Witch of Salem* is an effort at a kind of biography of this crucial actor in the drama. It combines social history, detailed research, and speculation in trying to bring into focus the woman who was so important to the trials but who disappeared from history after they ended.

While researching this book, I learned of an important new study of Salem by the historian Mary Beth Norton. She generously informed me of an article she had published, "Finding the Devil in the Details of the Salem Witch Trials," which allowed me to get a sense of her ideas. Then, just as my book went into its final stages, I had the chance to read her *In the Devil's Snare*. Remarkably, Norton has managed to cast an entirely new light on the trials. By researching connections between a key group of accusers and severe clashes with Wabanaki people in Maine, she has supplied a context other historians only grasped in outline. This allowed her to make sense of accusations that had previously seemed random, to reinterpret pressures on the judges, and to take the accusers' visions seriously. Born out of

Explaining Salem

her interest in women and girls as actors in their own right, this blend of a feminist orientation with a broad historical scope is certain to become a necessary book for the next generation of scholars. And in the future, as our own concerns make us look at the world in new ways, I am sure new schools of interpretation will arise. I know that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, gave me a fresh sense of how differently one views the world in a time of crisis. As we examine our own ways of experiencing the world, we may well learn more about the accusers, judges, and victims of 1692.

APPENDIX

THE CRUCIBLE, Witch-hunt, and Religion: Crossing Points of Many Histories

In classrooms throughout this land, Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* is treated as a kind of direct view across the centuries into the hearts and minds of the Puritans and farmers of colonial New England. That is a mistake. And yet the play is a brilliant creation, well worth the attention it gets. The real question that should be preoccupying teachers and students is why *The Crucible* is such a compelling portrait of a witch-hunt if it does not draw its power from insight into the events of 1692. What is the truth that the play captures if it is not the specifics of the Salem trials? The answers to these questions make Miller's creation all the more relevant to young people now, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, than it would be if it were merely a cleverly written history lesson.

Having at his command in 1952 only a well-written but unreliable nineteenth-century local history, and the popular but inaccurate *The Devil in Massachusetts* by Marion Starkey, as well as the original pretrial transcripts, which themselves contain subtle errors that close readers have since corrected, Miller was wrong about some of his facts. He consciously combined characters, and the main lines

These sketches (left) for the original Broadway production of *The Crucible* show how the designers used space to tell a story. The small windows and dominating wooden beams are similar to the portholes and planks of a ship. The support beams also suggest a giant cross. Puritans would not allow images of the crucifixion in their homes or churches, but the

of his interpretations do not match the views of modern historians. To pick the most obvious example, in Miller's 1997 autobiography, *Timebends*, he recalls having "no doubt that Tituba, Reverend Parris's black Barbados slave, had been practicing witchcraft." As readers will have seen me mention in a number of places, since the early seventies when an English professor carefully reread the original sources, scholars have known that Tituba was Indian, not African, and that if she used any ritual or folk magic at all, she learned the practices from her English neighbors and owners. Anyone who would like to see a listing of all of the historical errors in Miller's play can go to Web sites such as <http://ogram.org/17thc/miller.shtml>, which has links to many Crucible sites, including ones that spell out historical inaccuracies in great detail.

Despite these "flaws," the "gotcha" satisfaction of pointing out places where the play does not match the historical record is a cheap and easy victory. It is a triumph of easy erudition that makes the critic the superior mind for seeing mistakes, without granting Miller his true achievement: his ability to make us believe he has it right.

The Crucible should be used in classrooms as a wonderful example of historical fiction, not because it is fiction that teaches us history, but because its very historical limitations show us the power of fiction to create a scene that feels real, vivid, and true. Accuracy to events does not make historical fiction ring true. The more you know about the history behind the Salem trials, the more you appreciate Miller's ability to

create characters who *ought* to have existed, even if they didn't, stories that you *know* emotionally to be true, even if they weren't. His confident and insightful sense of psychology; his thoughtful, well-researched scene-setting; and his deft characterization are all testimony to his greatness as a writer, *not* his deep knowledge of the past.

A writer has the ability to render something that feels three-dimensional, that feels real. For some reason many people—from teachers, parents, and book reviewers to talk show hosts associate this artistic ability, this mastery of craft and technique, with a moral quality: a manner of truth-telling that is grounded in the world outside of art. In other words, if you are good, sincere, honest, and true, that will shine through in your book. And if your historical novel is absolutely faithful to fact, readers will experience it as a vivid portrait of the past. Like Hollywood costume designers who used to make sure stars in movie biographies wore historically accurate underwear, getting the hats, buttons, and turns of phrase right in your work is seen as a sign that you really care about the past, which will make your novel "good."

The Crucible puts the lie to this view. It reminds us that at least half of historical fiction, the "fiction" part, is pure invention. Miller's play is good because he makes the world he has invented come alive, not because it captures life as it actually was lived.

The Crucible is, though, not simply a triumph of artistry. As Miller so vividly explains in *Timebends*, he saw

an obvious link between the activities of a committee of the House of Representatives, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the trials as portrayed in Starkey's book. HUAC was relentlessly pursuing tales of a vast Communist conspiracy in America. At the time, politicians, some motivated by sincere concern, others taking advantage of the moment, made more and more of a mood of suspicion that was sweeping the country. HUAC began to hold hearings, questioning people about whether they were or had ever been Communists. Large businesses, schools, and media companies were put under pressure to root out employees with dangerous beliefs. People stood in danger of losing everything they had built in their adult lives: careers, friendships, standing in the community. In an atmosphere of fear, some protected themselves by speaking out against others. Precisely as in Salem, the more people who confessed to having been Communists and named others, the more reason there was to hold hearings, bring in more suspects, and pressure more companies to purify their ranks.

The Crucible, therefore, is a play about a witch-hunt in the seventeenth century written to expose a witch-hunt in the twentieth. And Miller hit upon an emotional truth in his research. "The main point," he realized, "of the hearings, precisely as in seventeenth-century Salem, was that the accused make public confession, damns his confederates as well as his Devil master, and guarantee his sterling new allegiance by breaking disgusting old vows—whereupon he was let loose to rejoin the society of

extremely decent people." Miller saw the witch trials as a kind of ritual cleansing, in which guilt could be released through confession and naming other sinners. That insight into the structure of the Salem hearings is true, or at least is true of a phase of them once accused witches began to confess. Probing into his own time, Miller understood the psychodynamics of the past, even if he did not entirely get the details right.

Miller had a subject that could speak to a current crisis while illuminating a fascinating historical moment, but how could he shape that into a play? He had an image in mind via the character he imagined for John Proctor: a good man who had once had an affair with a seventeen-year-old maid, and now had to face her leading a pack of accusers that was taking aim at his own wife. At that time Miller had entered psychoanalysis because he was haunted by the mutual attraction he and Marilyn Monroe had felt when they met briefly in Hollywood. Though he had not yet begun a relationship with Monroe, he felt that he was betraying his own marriage through his desire for Monroe. Proctor might well have been a fictional depiction of Miller's dilemma, the emotional force of the play also emerged out of his own life.

As he was about to leave to go to Salem to read the pretrial transcripts, Miller received a call from the brilliant film director Elia Kazan. Miller knew, even as he drove to Kazan's Connecticut home, what he was about to hear. To save his career in Hollywood, Kazan had joined the modern-day witch-hunt. He had spoken to HUAC, and given them the names of people he claimed had once

been Communists. Miller was not shocked, but he was angry. "It was not his [Kazan's] duty to be stronger than he was, the government had no right to require anyone to be stronger than it had been given him to be, the government was not in that line of work in America. I was experiencing a bitterness with the country that I had never even imagined before, a hatred of its stupidity and its throwing away of its freedom. Who or what was safer no because this man in his human weakness had been forced to humiliate himself? What truth had been enhanced by all this anguish?"

Miller himself was called to Washington and pressured to give HUAC more names, more people to ruin or to intimidate into confessions. He refused. His moral conviction made his meeting with Kazan all the more intense. The conversation of a man who bowed to the committee, and another who was determined to resist them was a drama as powerful as any either would place on the stage. It gave Miller the vision of what his play would be about: "the shifts of interests that turned loving husbands and wives into stony enemies, loving parents into indifferent supervisors or even exploiters of their children. As I already knew from my reading, that was the real story of ancient Salem Village, what they called the breaking of charity with one another."

Miller was again right. The break with charity is what drove the trials forward, as it did the HUAC hearings. It is what we must be on guard against today as we change laws to accommodate a state of war against terror. *The*

Crucible should be taught as fine writing, but also as an insight into how a witch-hunt works. When our comfort, safety, fear of being accused, and even justified anger at an enemy allows us to suppress doubt, and silence the voice of humanity that lets us identify with prisoners, suspects, and accused-evil-doers, then we are in real danger of doing evil ourselves. Miller's triumph was in creating a kind of psychological realism that did not depend at all on its historical setting. And that is how I think we should treat it today.

Miller has identified one more source for *The Crucible*, and that adds a final twist to this tangle of personal and national history, personal insight and literary accomplishment. At the Historical Society in Danvers he saw etchings of court scenes, perhaps from the trials. In the faces of the bearded judges recoiling from the agonized accusers he suddenly saw his own religious Jewish forebears. Salem was not just about America's Puritan, Protestant past; it was about "the moral intensity of the Jews and the clan's defensiveness against pollution from outside the ranks. I understood Salem in that flash, it was suddenly my own inheritance."

The Crucible is great because Miller penetrated the psychology of a political witch-hunt, and because it speaks about a moment in the life of a people aching to reach toward God and to protect themselves from evil. That, too, is in the headlines today. And a version of that same insight drew me to the Salem story. In the struggles of the Puritans to remain true to their faith in a time of

increasing doubt, I saw my own grandfather, a leading Rabbi in Kiev, none of whose ten children were devout. This association made me sympathetic to the strains the Puritans experienced, while, for Miller, it explained their ferocious intensity.

If fiction can give us insights that transcend time—offering us a picture of the witch-hunt mentality that was true of the 1950s America in which it was written, the seventeenth-century Salem it describes, and is a caution to us in the twenty-first century—history can do something else. History sensitizes us to the subtle differences between time periods. The more we know about witchcraft beliefs in the seventeenth century the less they resemble the sexually driven fears and passions of *The Crucible*. On the other hand, though, as we study the objects and records left behind from the past, we make sense of them by examining our own ideas, memories, and images. We see ourselves through the past, and the past through ourselves. In the process both are modified. Being the product of the great struggle over modernization in Judaism made the struggles over modernization in the seventeenth century much more interesting to me, as it did for Miller.

History is a mirror, fiction a portrait. If Miller's painting has a few characters wrong, it still shows a great deal of truth, and his images are as resonant in the twenty-first century as they were fifty years ago. That is a great accomplishment, and should give classrooms much to talk about for generations to come.

Study Guide Questions

**** These questions will help give you focus as you read and also ensure that you comprehend each act; this will be helpful for the summer reading test. Completing these questions is optional and will not be collected for a grade****

Act I

1. What is wrong with Betty Parris?
2. How does Tituba react to Betty's condition?
3. What news does Susanna bring from the doctor?
4. What rumor is circulating about Betty?
5. How does Abigail initially defend the girls' behavior in the woods?
6. Why is Reverend Parris so worried about his reputation?
7. What did Parris see in the woods?
8. What does Abigail claim is the reason she was discharged from the Proctor household?
9. In what condition is Ruth Putnam?
10. Briefly describe Thomas Putnam.
11. Why did Mrs. Putnam enlist Tituba's help?
12. Why did Abigail drink blood?
13. How does Abigail threaten the other girls?
14. Briefly describe John Proctor.
15. What happens when John and Abigail are left alone?
16. What does Rebecca Nurse say about Betty and Ruth's sickness?
17. Why is Reverend Parris dissatisfied with his job in Salem?
18. About what are Proctor and Putnam fighting?
19. Describe Reverend Hale. For what reason has he been called to Salem?
20. What is Giles Corey's complaint about his wife?
21. Why does Tituba finally "confess"? What do you think of her actions? What do you think will happen as a result?
22. Why do you think the girls begin their accusations when they could have just let Tituba take the blame for everything?
23. What does the girls' behavior tell you about the youth of Salem?

Act II

1. What is the mood at the beginning of Act Two? Why?
2. What do we learn about John and Elizabeth's relationship at the beginning of the act?
3. What does Mary give Elizabeth?
4. What news does Mary Warren bring from court?
5. What does Elizabeth mean when she says: "Oh, the noose, the noose is up!"
6. What does Elizabeth want John to do in town? What will everyone find out if he does this?
7. Why has Reverend Hale come to the Proctor house?
8. To what is John referring when he says: "...it tells me that a minister may pray to God without he have golden candlesticks upon the altar."
9. What does Hale ask John to do? What happens?
10. What is ironic about this omission?
11. What news do Giles Corey and Frances Nurse tell John Proctor?
12. On what basis are they accused?
13. What is the significance of the poppet? How does this serve as "proof" for Elizabeth's accusation?
14. What does John mean when he says "I'll tell you what's walking in Salem—vengeance is walking in Salem"?

Act III

1. When the act begins, who is on the stand, and of what is she accused?
2. Who bursts into court, and why?
3. What does Mary Warren tell the court?
4. What does Cheever say that Proctor did when they came to arrest Elizabeth Proctor?
5. What do we learn about Elizabeth Proctor?
6. How many people signed the deposition? Who are the people who signed, and to what are they testifying?
7. Why is Giles Corey arrested?
8. How many death warrants has Hale signed?
9. What do the men of the court want Mary Warren to do on command?
10. What does Proctor confess?
11. What does Proctor say about his wife that eventually works against him?
12. What do the girls pretend to see in the courtroom?
13. What does Mary claim Proctor made her do?
14. What does Hale do at the end of the act? Why?
15. In our court system today, the accused is innocent until proven guilty. In what ways does the court of Salem ignore the "innocent until proven guilty" clause?
16. If you were a lawyer defending one of the accused today, what arguments would you make to defend your client? Compose a one-page speech which defends the innocence of John Proctor. Be sure to use examples from the text to make your case.

Act IV

1. What is Reverend Hale doing at the jailhouse?
2. What is happening to the farms and animals in the town of Salem? Why do you think this is happening?
3. What has happened to Abigail and Mercy Lewis?
4. What happened in the town of Andover? Why is Parris afraid of this news?
5. What does Parris suggest to Danforth? Why does he make this suggestion?
6. What other indications does Hale give that the town is falling apart?
7. What does Hale mean when he says, "There is blood on my head! Can you not see the blood on my head"?
8. Why does Danforth refuse to postpone the executions?
9. How long has passed since the trials first began?
10. What do Hale and Danforth beg Elizabeth to do? Why?
11. What does Elizabeth say happened to Giles Corey?
12. What has Proctor been contemplating doing? What is Elizabeth's response to this?
13. What do Danforth and Parris plan to do with Proctor's confession?
14. Why does Proctor refuse to sign the confession?
15. What does he do with the confession, and what happens to him as a result?
16. What does Elizabeth mean by: "He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him"?
17. What lessons do you think Arthur Miller wanted readers and audiences to learn from his play? What do you think are the most important themes of the play?
18. Do you think the story would have been as effective as a novel rather than a play? Why or why not? Why do you think Miller decided to tell the story of the Salem Witch Trials as a play rather than a novel?