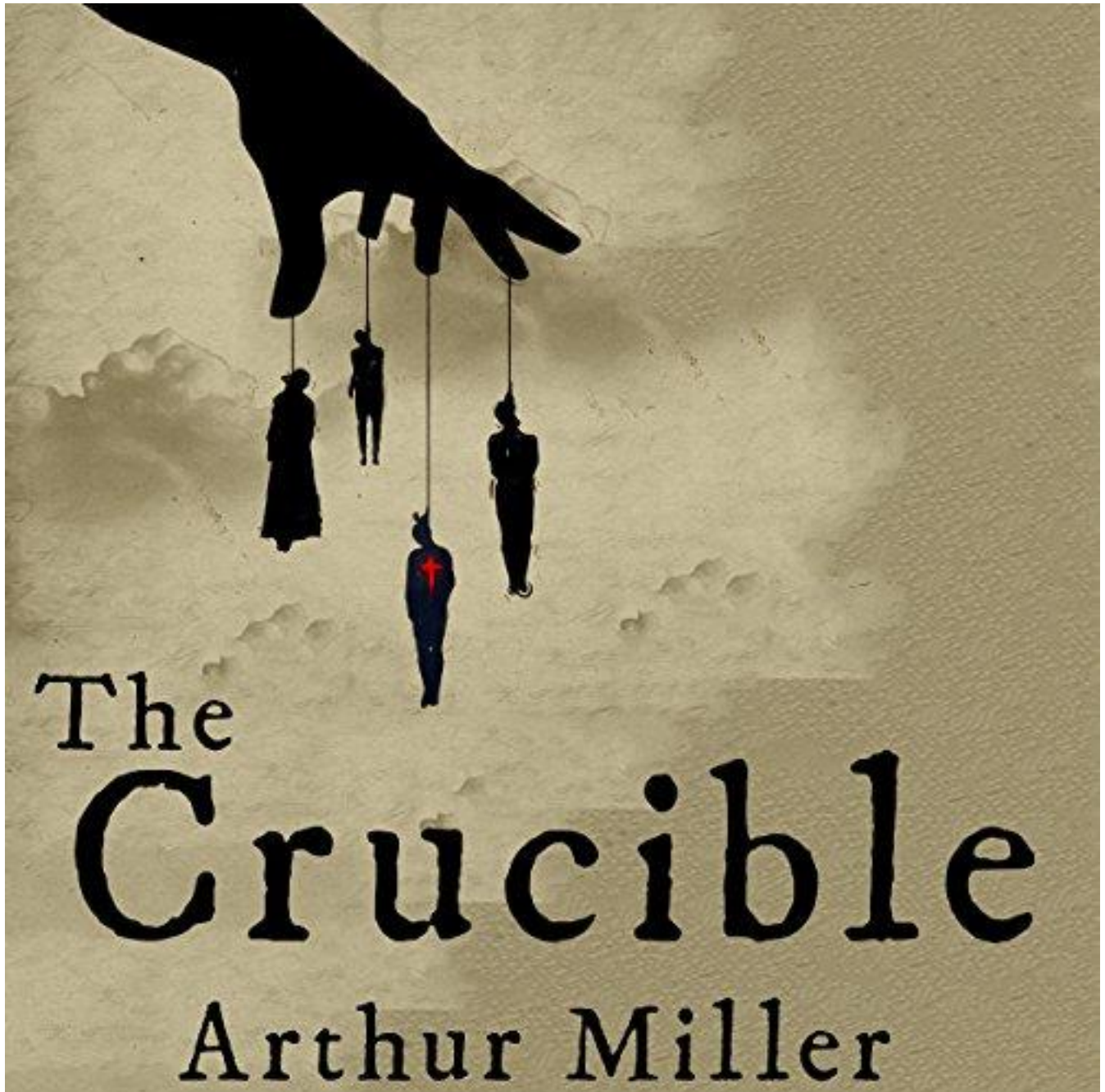


THE CRUCIBLE

- Arthur Miller



Pre-reading activities:

- How does mass hysteria develop?
- Why are innocent people accused of crimes?
- Where will jealousy and revenge lead us if we allowed them?
- How is religion used for perverted ends?
- Which is more important: the unity of a community or individual conscience?
- Why is peer pressure such an irresistible force?
- What lies would we be prepared to tell in order to save our lives?
- How can guilt destroy a personality?
- **Why did Arthur Miller write about something that happened so many years ago, and why is it relevant today?** (Cf. p. 10.)

SETTING

The Crucible is set in the last decade of the 17th century in Salem, Massachusetts (USA), which was then a modest village peopled by **Puritan*** settlers. The play was written by Arthur Miller in 1953, and deals with the Salem witch trials of 1692.

***Puritanism** = the beliefs or principles of a group of English Protestants of the late 16th and 17th centuries who regarded the Reformation of the Church under Queen Elizabeth I as incomplete.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Salem witch trials were a series of hearings and prosecutions of people accused of witchcraft in colonial Massachusetts between February 1692 and May 1693. More than two hundred people were accused. The trials resulted in the thirty people being found guilty, nineteen of whom were executed by hanging (fourteen women and five men). Preliminary hearings were conducted in several towns in the Province of Massachusetts Bay in 1692, but the most infamous trials were conducted in Salem Town.

The Puritans fled religious persecution in England and wanted a chance to establish a strict, religious government. They were mostly Calvinists who strived to purify the Church of England of its Roman Catholic aspects, and then return to Europe with a new and improved religion. Puritans established the colony of Massachusetts Bay (USA) in 1630. **Salem** was one of the earliest seaports.

Puritans had very strict moral beliefs and were especially hostile towards social pleasures, sex and self-indulgences – this is believed to be a reason why the witch trials might have started. The inhabitants of Salem lived in an extremely restrictive society. Although the Puritans left England to avoid religious persecution, they established a society in America founded upon religious intolerance.



Government and religious authority were virtually inseparable (cf. *THEOCRACY* below), and individuals who questioned **local authority** (government) were accused of questioning **divine authority** (God). The Puritan community considered physical labour and strict adherence to religious doctrine the best indicators of faithfulness, honesty, and integrity. They considered material and sexual desires unnatural and evil, and a threat to their “pure” society. Salem was a morally rigid society that emphasized work and the suppression of individual desires.

Not only were the Puritans very religious, they were also highly **superstitious**, and events which could not be explained away by reason or by the will of God were often attributed to the work of Satan. This **fear of the Devil**, combined with a highly regulated and at times, hypocritical social order, culminated in the infamous Salem witch trials of 1692, on which this play is based.



LIFE IN SALEM 1692

To understand the play, you need to imagine what life was like in that distant time and place. Imagine the following:

- being scalped (certain tribes of Native Americans used to take the hair and skin off their enemy's head);
- watching your parents being hacked to death with a tomahawk (a small axe);
- living in a society that forbids you to party or dance;
- being forced to do child labour, enduring your employer's insults and beatings;
- being whipped for "crimes" such as dancing or laughing in church;
- hearing only about hellfire and damnation (how you will be punished by God) every Sunday in church;
- fearing death by disease for which there is no cure;
- wearing restrictive clothing that hides your beauty and individuality.

These are the circumstances of the girls who were accused of witchcraft and who, in turn, began pointing fingers at innocent members of their community in order to escape punishment (whipping).



Because you may need to explain the girls' motivation in the **EXAM**, it is important to look more closely at the historical context that produced the frightful pressures listed above on the community of Salem.

1) FRONTIER FEARS

The people of Salem lived in constant fear of attack by Native Americans. Shortly before the witch trials began, the two frontier wars had destroyed a large portion of the white population, leaving many orphans. Defeated and paranoid, the inhabitants of Salem found a scapegoat – they blamed the **Devil** for all their misfortunes.

In the **EXAM**, you should refer to the way in which the historical context of the play helps to explain the atmosphere of **paranoia** that dominates the play and the consequent search for a scapegoat.

2) PURITANISM

In addition to the information on Puritanism provided above, bear in mind the following. The success of the Puritan settlers in this new and often hostile environment can be accredited to their belief in family values, simple and sober living, discipline and hard work (idle people were considered law-breakers). But the Puritan belief system also contained the seeds of its own downfall. Among these were:

- **Fanaticism** = filled with excessive and single-minded zeal (enthusiasm); obsessively concerned with something. For example, in their excessive attention to the details of religious conduct.
- A potentially dangerous tendency to suppress natural human urges to laugh, dance, sing, dress up and stage performances. (These Puritans did not even celebrate Christmas.)
- Fundamental theocracy (cf. notes below)
- Isolation
- False accusations / Mass hysteria



- Lapses in *due process* (legal rights)
- The belief that women, through Eve, carry responsibility for original sin.
- A prohibition against women speaking in church.
- **Fundamentalism** = strict adherence to certain religious principles (**religious extremism**).

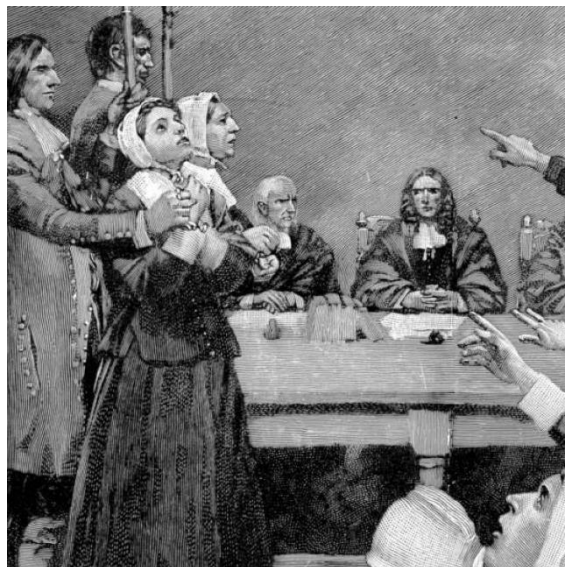
- Rigid literalism – statements in the Bible are regarded in a literal manner, e.g. "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out." (Matthew 5:29)
- Context and Scripture as a whole disregarded
- Emphasis on purity

3) THEOCRACY

In Salem, the power of the church and the state were combined in a theocracy.

The term comes from Greek: *theos* = god
and *krateo* = to rule

In other words, the laws are based purely on religion and the leaders of this government are religious leaders. A theocracy is an oppressive, authoritarian form of government where law is enforced by strict religious doctrine or belief. In practice, theocracy meant that a “sin” was punished as if it were a crime.



Arthur Miller claims that the witch-hunt was a “manifestation of the panic which set in among all classes when the balance began to turn toward greater individual freedom”. Members of the community were unhappy with the restrictions placed on them, and began to break some of the rules. **The church-state used the witch-hunt as a way of reasserting moral control.** Miller believed that state power should never be combined with church power, and his play demonstrates the **tyranny, or abuse of power**, that results when these two powers are indeed combined (cf. *McCarthyism* below).

4) HISTORICAL ACCURACY

Arthur Miller researched the Salem witch trials by visiting the town and reading the original court records. Many of the characters in his play have the same names and share the fate of their historical counterparts.

However, for the sake of **dramatic effect**, Miller made certain crucial alteration to historical truth. Two of the most important being that in Miller's play, the 11-year-old **Abigail Williams** becomes the 17-year-old former lover of **John Proctor**, and John's age is reduced from 60 to 30.

5) PURITAN SOCIETY

Here are some images to give you an idea what society was like in the 1700s. You'll see that the people dressed very modestly – much like the Mormons.





With regards the **LANDSCAPE**, it is almost impossible for me to describe the **hostile nature** in which these people had to survive. The following scenes from the movie, *The Revenant* (Leonardo Dicaprio), might prove to be the best way for you to imagine the cruel, cold winters and vast **isolation** that these people faced.





THE TITLE – What is a crucible?

The word “crucible” has two meanings.

- 1) A crucible is a **melting pot** for metal or other material (you could call a witch’s cauldron a crucible). When **heat** is applied to a crucible, the metals inside it separate into valuable and base components.
- 2) A crucible is also a **severe test or trial**. Metaphorically speaking, we could say that **heat** is applied to the characters in the play.

WHY DID ARTHUR MILLER WRITE ABOUT SOMETHING THAT HAPPENED SO MANY YEARS AGO, AND WHY IS IT RELEVANT TODAY?

To answer this question, we need to look at the parallels between the Salem witch trials (1692) and the political atmosphere in the United States at the time that Arthur Miller wrote the play (1950s).

The word “witch-hunt” is now used to refer to any campaign against people who hold unpopular or unorthodox views. Such investigations are supposedly conducted in order to maintain the safety of society, but in actual fact their aim is to harass and undermine those who hold differing views.

Arthur Miller lived through just such a witch-hunt in the United States of the 1950s. At this time, the US was dominated by fear of the Soviet Union and its nuclear weaponry (the “Red Scare”). The US was enjoying its post-war prosperity, and feared that its lifestyle and ideals would be overpowered by socialist ideas imported by foreigners. All alien residents were registered and questioned about their political views. Any hint of communist sympathy was reported to the House of UN-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which had been established in 1947.

The HUAC focused on Hollywood, calling 41 directors, producers and actors for questioning. Those who agreed to testify and to name other left-wing sympathisers were called “friendly witnesses”. Those who refused were imprisoned. People suspected of left-wing views were blacklisted.

The work of the HUAC was extended by Senator McCarthy, who convened hearings against suspected communists and liberals. The **paranoia** that marked this period is thus often referred to as **McCarthyism**.

In 1956, towards the end of its reign of terror, **the HUAC called Arthur Miller himself in for questioning**. Miller refused to name anyone he had met at two meetings of communist writers he had attended previously. As a result, he was fined \$500 and given a year’s suspended sentence.

PARALLELS: THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS AND MCCARTHYISM (The “Red Scare”)

They both happened because of **fear** and **paranoia**. **People were presumed guilty and it was impossible to prove innocence.** Often they were forced to name other people who were then accused. Both were eventually discredited, but the damage was done. The McCarthy trials were often called witch hunts, because there was no crime, just rounding up people and looking for something they may have done that people disapproved of. By the way there were other witch trials besides the ones in Salem. There have even been modern day witch hunts. A minister visiting Sarah Palin's church apparently accused an African woman of being a witch and causing car accidents. They claimed her pets were demons and killed them and had her run out of town.

The difference between the Salem Witch Trials and McCarthyism is that the Salem Witch Trials resulted in the **condemnation of innocent people who were not witches**, while McCarthyism was responsible for the condemnation of many people who were actually affiliated with Communism. Twenty people died as a result of the Salem Witch Trials, while no one died of a result of McCarthyism.

They are similar in the way that both included **public trials** that took place over a period of time, and that involved individuals in positions of authority who accused American citizens of crimes (witchcraft and communism, respectively) **with no proof**. It only took an accusation for someone to be deemed guilty. After all, it's **impossible to prove a negative**. In the former, the innocent were killed, in the latter, people's reputations and livelihoods were destroyed.

In Arthur Miller's own words:

“A close analogy today is the demonification of Muslims, branding them as "terrorists". I see McCarthyism rearing its ugly head again. You and I both know that not all Muslims are terrorists and not all terrorists are Muslims. But once again, the brain-dead, mob fanaticism is out to lynch every Muslim, as it happened in Salem with women, as it happened in America in the '50s with "imagined" Communists, and sadly, as it's happening again today. Those who do not understand history are condemned to repeat it.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

➤ MAJOR CHARACTERS

Reverend Parris

The recently appointed minister in Salem and father of Betty Parris. Parris is dogmatic in his opinions, intolerant of opposition, and suspicious of those whom he does not like. His belief in witches and his desire to punish his enemies set in motion the chain of events that leads to the hysteria in Salem. During the witch trials, he pressures Danforth, the chief judge, to punish those who, in his opinion, are possessed or in league with the Devil.

John Proctor

A young, upright, outspoken, successful farmer in Salem. He loves and respects his wife and is repentant of the one act of adultery he has committed with Abigail Williams, his former servant. He resents the greediness and holier-than-thou attitude of Reverend Parris and, therefore, invites the latter's wrath and suspicion.

Elizabeth Proctor

John's young wife and the mother of his three sons. She becomes pregnant with a fourth child. Though she has become somewhat cold towards her husband on account of his liaison with Abigail, she greatly loves and respects him.

Abigail Williams

Reverend Parris' niece. An intelligent, resourceful, and highly manipulative girl of seventeen, Abigail is the natural leader of the other girls in Salem and leads them in accusing many of the town's citizens of witchcraft. She is also infatuated with John Proctor and keen to take Elizabeth's place. Quick-thinking and shrewd, Abigail extricates herself from awkward situations and promotes her ends by intimidation, deception and skilful acting.

Reverend John Hale

A minister from the nearby town of Beverly who is called by Reverend Parris to investigate the latter's suspicions of witchcraft in Salem. As he becomes aware of Abigail's, Parris', and Hathorne's hidden agendas, he begins to question the validity of the trials, in which he acts as a judge. He then tries to convince Danforth of the truth, but lacks the courage and conviction to openly oppose him.

Judge Hathorne

One of the judges who brings his prejudices to the proceedings and tries to interpret all evidence so as to support his pre-determined conclusions. He takes every opportunity to make Danforth see things his way.

Deputy Governor Danforth

The judge appointed especially for the Salem witch trials. Though basically fair and open-minded, he is over-confident in his ability to judge the truth. Danforth feels that

it is his duty and destiny to purge society of evil and establish the Kingdom of Christ on earth. He is, therefore, inclined to interpret all evidence as proof that Satan's forces are operating in Salem.

Mary Warren

The young maidservant of the Proctors. Although Mary is honest and well-intentioned toward the Proctors, when faced with the prospect of suffering, her sense of self-preservation overrides her natural goodness. She is terrified of Abigail and also does not want to be cut off from the other young girls.

Francis Nurse

A well-to-do, respected farmer. He is helpful toward his friends and active in the community. When he tries to stop the court's investigations, he is arrested.

Rebecca Nurse

The wife of Francis Nurse. Rebecca volunteers as a midwife and is highly respected in Salem for her helpful nature. She is very firm in her opinions and willing to make any sacrifice in the cause of truth. She is accused of being a witch on the prompting of the Putnams, who are jealous of her good fortune.

Giles Corey

A sincere, well-intentioned, though grumpy, old farmer. He is frank and forthright in his thinking and utterances. He is on good terms with John Proctor and Francis Nurse. When accused of practising witchcraft, he faces his death by torture with fearless courage.

Thomas Putnam

A rich, dishonest farmer who is out to expand his land holdings by any means. He is manipulative, close-minded, and domineering. He expects everybody to respect him and accept his opinions.

➤ **MINOR CHARACTERS**

Tituba

The Negro slave of Reverend Parris, believed to be practising witchcraft.

Ann Putnam

Thomas Putnam's wife. A firm believer in witchcraft, she is convinced that her seven daughters died of unnatural causes. She is behind the midnight dance in the woods.

Sarah Good

A simple beggar woman falsely accused of witchcraft by Abigail and her friends.

Betty Parris, Susanna Walcott, and Mercy Lewis

Young girls of Salem involved in the midnight dance in the woods. Loyal followers of Abigail Williams, they support her both out of fear and a sense of loyalty. Betty is the

