

Political Issues

Several works written by Arthur Miller dealt with political issues. For example, *Death of a Salesman* dealt with the American ideal of capitalism and power. In the case of *The Crucible*, to quote Arthur Miller, it was written with the intent “to use the Salem witch trials as a metaphor for McCarthyism.” The definition of McCarthyism is “the practice of publicizing accusations of political disloyalty or subversion with insufficient regard to evidence.” During the 1950s, the United States cracked down on communists, potential communists, or supporters of Communism. Similar in many ways to the witch trials of 1692, many Americans were accused of being supportive to the communist party. The “Red Hunt,” as it were, was led by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and by Senator Joseph R. McCarthy.

“The ultimate terror of our lives should be faced,” Miller once said, “namely our own sadism, our own ability to obey orders from above, our own fear of standing firm on humane principle against the obscene power of the mass organization.”

The Crucible: Fact & Fiction

Miller has stated: “As for the characters of the persons, little is known about most of them except 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 behaviour, except as indicated in the commentary I have written for this text.”

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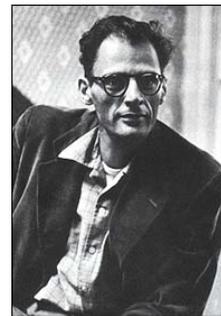
A Playgoer’s Guide to

THE CRUCIBLE

by Arthur Miller

The Author

Arthur Miller was born on October 17, 1915 in New York City. He has enriched the Broadway stage for several decades and has made a reputation for dealing with contemporary, political, and moral issues. Miller began writing plays while attending the University of Michigan, where several of his dramatic efforts were rewarded with prizes. Miller was married three times in his life, first to Mary Grace Slattery, his high school sweetheart, secondly to Marilyn Monroe, and then to Ingeborg Morath.



Miller wrote 25 plays in the course of his life. In 1936, he won the Theatre Guild Award for his play *The Grass still Grows*. In 1947 he won the Drama Critics prize for his play *All My Sons*. Miller won the Pulitzer Prize in 1949 for *Death of a Salesman*, and in 1953, he wrote *The Crucible* which won a Tony award. His final play, *Finishing the Picture*, was written in 2004, and was based on the movie *The Misfits*, which was Miller’s first Hollywood screenplay (written for Marilyn Monroe).

Arthur Miller passed away in his Roxbury, Connecticut home on February 11th 2005, at the age of 89. He will be long remembered and will be immortalized through his work. Two of his plays have recently been optioned for film: *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (2006) and *The Ride Down to Mt. Morgan* (2005).

Why Miller Wrote *The Crucible*

In Miller’s own words: “*The Crucible* was an act of desperation. Much of my desperation branched out, I suppose, from a typical Depression-era trauma. I had read about the witchcraft trials in college, but it was not until I read a book published in 1867 – a two-volume, thousand-page study by Charles W. Upham, who was then the mayor of Salem – that I knew I had to write about the period. Upham had not only written a broad and thorough

investigation of what was even then an almost lost chapter of Salem's past but opened up to me the details of personal relationships among many participants in the tragedy.

I visited Salem for the first time on a dismal spring day in 1952; it was a sidetracked town then, with abandoned factories and vacant stores. In the gloomy courthouse there I read the transcripts of the witchcraft trials of 1692; the accounts were hard to understand as they were taken down in shorthand. But there was one entry in Upham in which the thousands of pieces I had come across were jogged into place.

"During the examination of Elizabeth Procter, Abigail Williams and Ann Putnam" – the two were "afflicted" teen-age accusers, and Abigail was Parris's niece – "both made offer to strike at said Procter; but when Abigail's hand came near, it opened, whereas it was made up into a fist before, and came down exceeding lightly as it drew near to said Procter, and at length, with open and extended fingers, touched Procter's hood very lightly. Immediately Abigail cried out her fingers, her fingers, her fingers burned..."

In this remarkably observed gesture of a troubled young girl, I believed, a play became possible. Elizabeth Procter had been the orphaned Abigail's mistress, and they had lived together in the same small house until Elizabeth fired the girl. By this time, I was sure, John Procter had bedded Abigail, who had to be dismissed most likely to appease Elizabeth. There was bad blood between the two women now. That Abigail started, in effect, to condemn Elizabeth to death with her touch, then stopped her hand, then went through with it, was quite suddenly the human center of all this turmoil.

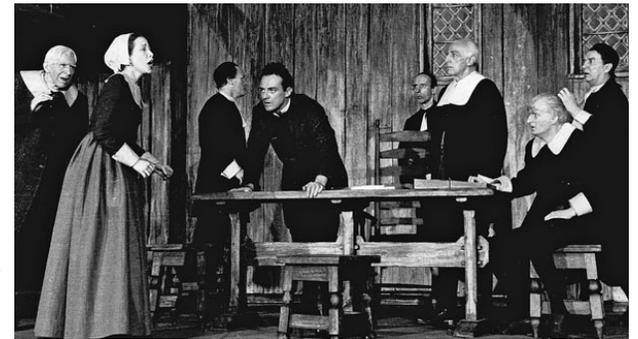
I had not approached the witchcraft out of nowhere, or from purely social and political considerations. My own marriage of twelve years was teetering and I knew more than I wished to know about where the blame lay.

The possibility that John Procter the sinner might overturn his paralyzing personal guilt and become the most forthright voice against the madness around him was a reassurance to me, and, I suppose, an inspiration: it demonstrated that a clear moral outcry could still spring even from an ambiguously unblemished soul. Moving slowly across the profusion of evidence, I sensed that I had at last found something of myself in it, and a play began to accumulate around this man.

I am not sure what *The Crucible* is telling people now, but I know that its paranoid center is still pumping out the same darkly attractive warning that it did in the fifties. For some, the play seems to be about the dilemma of relying on the testimony of small children accusing adults of sexual abuse, something I'd not have dreamed of forty years ago. For others, it may simply be a fascination with the outbreak of paranoia that suffuses the play – the blind panic that, in our age, often seems to sit at the dim edges of consciousness."

The Salem Witch Trials

The Crucible is based on true events that occurred in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692. Having been accused of witchcraft, nearly twenty men and



women were taken to Gallows Hill to be hanged. Hundreds of people were accused of witchcraft. Twenty four human lives were taken during the witch hunt. They also killed two dogs because they thought they were working for witches.

Four years prior to the trials, Samuel Parris became the preacher of a Salem church. Shortly after moving to town, Parris' daughter and a few of her friends became ill. The village believed that there were witches responsible for their illness. The town's people believed that witches had a healing touch that would cease convulsions. They also claimed that witches would float if they were thrown in a river. These two aspects were used as means of testing alleged witches during the trials.

Many have tried to explain why the Salem witch hunt occurred. Some believe it was merely teenage boredom. Others blame economic conditions. Some even consider congregational strife or personal jealousy to be to blame. Evidently, the puritan beliefs reinforced a strong fear of the devil and of witchcraft, which led to the trials.

