The Crucible
by Arthur Miller
About the Author: Arthur Miller

• Born in NYC in 1915
• Career as a playwright began while he was a student at the University of Michigan
• Married to Marilyn Monroe (1956-61)
• Several early works won awards
  – *All My Sons*, 1947
  – *Death of a Salesman*, 1949 (Pulitzer Prize)
  • *Death of a Salesman* was described by critics as the first great American tragedy
  • Miller gained a reputation as a man who understood the deep essence of the United States
The Crucible Facts

- **Genre:** tragedy, allegory
- **Written in 1950s** (during McCarthyism)
- **Published:** 1953
- **Setting:** 1692, Salem, Massachusetts, Puritan New England (during the Salem Witch Trials)
- **Protagonist:** John Proctor
- **Antagonist:** Abigail Williams
- **Plot:** Strictly religious Puritan government prosecuted people for practicing witchcraft; nineteen people were convicted and hanged for witchcraft; fueled by a group of young girls and an affair (the events known famously as the “Salem Witch Trials”)
The Crucible

- Arthur Miller was inspired to write *The Crucible* not only because of his knowledge of the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, but he was also inspired by the “McCarthyism” era of the 1950s.

- *The Crucible* is an **allegory**, meaning it is **a story told on two levels**
  - On one level, it’s a story about the **Salem Witch Trials of 1692**
  - On another level, it’s a story about **McCarthyism of the 1950s**

- During the Salem Witch Trials, many people were accused of being witches

- During McCarthyism, many people were accused of being Communists
What is McCarthyism?

- A time period from about 1947-1957 when fear of Communist spies spread throughout the U.S. because Senator Joseph McCarthy announced he had lists of suspected Communists.

- Fear of world domination by communists hung over America in the post WWII years
  - Fears of nuclear holocaust because the Soviet Union had exploded an A-bomb in 1949
  - That same year China became communist
  - Continual threats of atomic bombs littered the news
  - Because of suspected communist spies in the U.S. government

- McCarthy took advantage of his power and began listing names of communists in the government, and then in other industries
What is McCarthyism?

• As with the alleged witches of Salem in 1692, suspected Communists in the 1950s were encouraged to confess and identify other Communists as means of escaping punishment.

• As people began to realize they might be condemned as Communists regardless of innocence, many “cooperated,” attempting to save themselves through false confessions.

• This created the image that the U.S. was overrun with Communists, and it perpetuated the hysteria.
What were the outcomes of McCarthyism?

• The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigated communists.

• HUAC wanted to prove actors and writers were communists.

• The Senate held hearings for some of the people on the lists. Hearings were televised nationwide.

• Arthur Miller was accused of being a Communist during the two years after *The Crucible* was published.

• Many people lost their jobs and their reputations, left the country, or committed suicide.
What Ended McCarthyism?

• McCarthy never proved any of the charges, and soon his ideas were discredited.
• Nobody believed McCarthy’s claims anymore.
• This was largely due to people like Ed Murrow, a radio/TV journalist, who sought to expose McCarthy.
• Television was highly influential.
What’s the Truth?

• Can’t treat the play strictly as an allegory
  – There were no witches, but there were Communists
  – Miller’s characters are composites (real people combined with fake characters)
  – The affair between Abigail Williams and John Proctor has no truth, so Miller’s decision to set sexual jealousy at the root of hysteria is a dramatic contrivance
Among others, here are a few themes of *The Crucible*:

- **Intolerance**: In the Puritan society, church and state are one, and there is no room for deviation from social norms.

- **Hysteria**: People in Salem believed their own neighbors were committing crimes and many panicked that witchcraft was spreading wildly.

- **Reputation**: Reputation was tremendously important in theocratic Salem, where public and private morals were one in the same; guilt by association was a common fear.
A Long History of Witchcraft

- Victims (the convicted witches) were not allowed to be buried in consecrated ground.

- Witchcraft has been confused in pop culture with pointy black hats, green faces, and broom sticks.

- Witchcraft actually goes back to ancient times, long before Christianity.

- People have been persecuted for witchcraft since before the creation of the Bible, around 560 B.C.

- The very last execution for witchcraft took place in Poland in 1793.
A Long History of Witchcraft

Torture Methods to get confessions:
- Accused were sometimes tied at hands and feet and immersed in deep water; if the accused witch floated, she was guilty; if she sank and drowned, she was innocent.
- leg vices
- whipping stocks with iron spikes
- scalding lime baths
- prayer stools furnished with sharp pegs
- the strappado (hoisting on a pulley to pull the arms from the sockets).
- Pressing with stones

Execution Methods:
- Burning at the stake
- Pressing and drowning
- Hanging was most common
The Salem Witch Trials of 1692

- From June through September of 1692, 19 men and women, all accused of witchcraft were carted to a slope near Salem village for hanging.
- Because the Puritans were had a theocratic government, going against religion was also going against the law, so worshipping the devil was illegal.
- Another man who was over 80 years old was also pressed to death under stones for refusing to submit to a trial on witchcraft charges.
- Hundreds of others faced accusations.
- Dozens sat in jail for months without trial until the hysteria that swept through Puritan Massachusetts subsided.
The Salem Witch Trials of 1692

- Eventually, **the colony admitted the trials were a mistake** and compensated the families of those conviction.

- Since then, the story of **the trials has become synonymous with paranoia and injustice**, and it continues to beguile the popular imagination more than 300 years later.

- **Why did this occur?**
  - Economic conditions
  - Congregational strife
  - Teenage boredom
  - Personal jealousies