The Crucible: Background

Introduction

Using the historical subject of the Salem Witch trials, Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* (1953) presents an allegory for events in contemporary America. The Salem Witch Trials took place in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, and were based on the accusations of a twelve-year-old girl named Anne Putnam. Putnam claimed that she had witnessed a number of Salem's residents holding black sabbaths and consorting with Satan. Based on these accusations, an English-American clergyman named Samuel Parris spearheaded the prosecution of dozens of alleged witches in the Massachusetts colony. Nineteen people were hanged and one pressed to death over the following two years.

Miller's play employs these historical events to criticize the moments in humankind's history when reason and fact became clouded by irrational fears and the desire to place the blame for society's problems on others. Dealing with elements such as false accusations, manifestations of mass hysteria, and rumour-mongering, *The Crucible* is seen by many as more of a commentary on "McCarthyism" than the actual Salem trials. "McCarthyism" was the name given to a movement led by Senator Joe McCarthy and his House Committee on Un-American Activities. This movement involved the hunting down and exposing of people suspected of having communist sympathies or connections. While those found guilty in McCarthy's witch hunt were not executed, many suffered irreparable damage to their reputations. Miller himself came under suspicion during this time.

While *The Crucible* achieved its greatest resonance in the 1950s—when McCarthy's reign of terror was still fresh in the public's mind—Miller's work has elements that have continued to provoke and enthrall audiences. That the play works on a wider allegorical level is suggested by the frequency with which it has been performed since the 1950s and by the way that it has been applied to a wide number of similar situations in different cultures and periods For example, Miller reported, in the *Detroit News*, a conversation he had with a Chinese woman writer who was imprisoned under the communist regime in her own country who said that "when she saw the play in 88 or 89 in Shanghai, she couldn't believe a non-Chinese had written it." The play speaks to anyone who has lived in a society where the questioning of authority and of the general opinion leads to rejection and punishment.

Salem and Puritanism

The government of Salem in 1692 was a Puritan theocracy. In other words, the town was under the unbending authority of the church. The leaders of the church, and especially the minister of the church, were very powerful figures, comparable to our elected officials. A person who was not a member in good standing of the church was not allowed to live in the community. All citizens were expected to conform to the teachings of the church at all times and to know its catechism, which contained the written statements of the church's beliefs.

Puritan theology was largely based on the teachings of John Calvin. Calvin was one of a group of theologians who protested against the Roman Catholic Church's departure from the Bible as the

ultimate authority. Based on their reading of Saint Paul in the New Testament, they particularly disagreed with the Roman Catholic emphasis on earning your salvation through good deeds on earth. These protesters, or Protestants, believed that salvation could not be earned. The only way to get to heaven was to be chosen by God and to have faith that He would save you from eternal damnation. Some people were predestined, or chosen to be saved, while others were not. While good works would not earn your salvation if you had not been chosen, believers desired to do good works on earth and thus follow the example set by Jesus Christ. Good works were visible signs of your commitment to God.

At the time of the Reformation, most of Europe was ruled by a theocracy of its own; that of the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestants were compelled by their beliefs to disregard many of the practices of the Catholic Church, including buying indulgences and approaching God only through a priest. The church was not pleased with this rebellion against its authority, and the Protestants were greatly persecuted. Many of them left Europe and settled in America to escape this persecution and practice their religion in peace. This was the case with the colony at Salem.

Miller himself has asserted that the community created by such a system was crucial to the survival of the colony against great odds. The settlers of Salem had to deal with attacks from Indians, harsh winters, unyielding soil, and many other hardships. Similar colonies that were not bound by common ideology eventually failed; the Virginia Colony is a good example. In contrast, the people of Salem were united in the strong bonds of a persecuted minority. Their religion required them to act honourably towards their fellow men and to help each other. They were expected to meet regularly at the Meeting House. A strong work ethic was also part of their theology. All of these things contributed to their survival.

Despite the advantages of such a system, however, *The Crucible* vividly shows it can lead to the loss of any sense of proportion. The Puritans had taken Calvinist theology several steps beyond what Calvin had in mind. While a man's good deeds could not earn him salvation, they were often used in Salem to determine the quality of his religious life and thus his standings in the community. While Calvin asserted that each man was responsible for his own salvation, the Puritans often took it upon themselves to determine the state of another man's soul. There was a great emphasis on avoiding damnation, and public confession and "coming back to God" after sin was actively encouraged. Given the importance of good deeds and hard work, as well as the harsh conditions of life in early America, there was little time for pleasure. Many of the pleasures we take for granted, such as dancing, were deemed frivolous and were not permitted. Every facet of life was touched by the rigid teachings of the church, which were strictly enforced. Failure to conform met with harsh penalties, the most severe of which was death by hanging.

Just as the Catholic Church had persecuted the Protestants for failing to conform to their rules, so the Protestants persecuted those who did not conform to theirs. There was no room in Salem for free speech. The Bible was the only authority that was recognized, and any teaching not found there was considered not only false, but dangerous. Espousing views not taught by the Bible could lead others away from God, and thus imperil many souls, not just one. Witchcraft was especially dangerous, as its goal was to draw people away from God and into conspiracy with the devil. It was not, however, the only sin punishable by death in Salem.

Evidence shows that many who confessed to be Quakers were also hanged. The Puritans would not tolerate even the discussion of an idea contrary to their belief system. It was this atmosphere of repression and fear of punishment that ultimately led to the mass hysteria of the Salem Witch Trials. In short, the system became so important as to completely overrule reason.

Historical Context

Miller warns in the preface to *The Crucible* that "this play is not history," but it is certainly dependent on historical events for its story. It will be necessary in this section to deal with two periods of history first the time of the Salem witch trials and second the time of McCarthyism in the 1950s when Miller was writing.

Marion Starkey's 1949 book, *The Witch Trials in Massachusetts* first generated interest in the events that took place in Salem, Massachusetts, in the seventeenth century. Those accused of witchcraft were hounded by representatives of their community (and the larger pressure of majority opinion) until they admitted their involvement, naming others involved in suspicious practices—although the majority of those accused and named were guilty of nothing more than behaviour that did not conform to the societal norms of the time.

Despite what might be obvious to contemporary readers as free expression or eccentricity, these people were nevertheless prosecuted in Salem. Spearheaded by the crusade of the real-life Reverend Parris, twenty people were killed based on the suspicion that they had involvement with witchcraft. A good number of these people were killed for refusing to cooperate with the proceedings, having never confessed to any crimes. The Salem Witch Trials stand as an example of religious hysteria and mob mentality in American history.

Miller carefully uses this historical information as the basis for his play. The language of contemporary seventeenth century religious practice, which he frequently employs, demonstrates the thoroughness of his historical research into the customs of this period. For example, Parris points out at one point that "we are not Quakers." The Puritans disapproved of the Quakers because they believed that God could speak to individuals and inspire them to communicate on his behalf. Consequently, the Quakers avoided hierarchical forms of church government. The Puritans, in contrast, believed that God would only speak through his ordained ministers and accordingly placed great importance on their work. Further references include Abigail's comment about "these Christian women and their covenanted men" which reminds the audience that Puritans had to swear a solemn promise to accept the rules of the Church before they could become full members, and Proctor's criticism of Parris's fondness for highly decorated churches—"This man dreams cathedrals, not clapboard meetin' houses"; Puritans were not supposed to value this kind of decoration which was traditionally associated with other Christian denominations, particularly Roman Catholicism. *The Crucible* is steeped in the language and customs of seventeenth century east coast America.

Running parallel to these early events are those that took place in Miller's own time, on which the playwright symbolically comments through the story of the witch trials. Miller was interested in

political issues, including communism, which had developed after the Second World War when Russia's communist government became a significant world power. In the early 1950s, hearings at Senator Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee had decided that the American Communist Party, a legal political party, was compromising the security of the nation by encouraging connections with Russia. Those who were sympathetic to the communist cause, or those who had connections with Russia, could be summoned before the committee to explain their involvement, recant their beliefs, and name their former friends and associates in the communist cause.

Of particular interest to the committee were those practicing communists in the artistic community. Reasoning that the most nefarious methods for converting Americans to communist beliefs would be through the films, music, and art that they enjoyed, McCarthy and his cohorts prosecuted a great many playwrights, screenwriters, and other artists. In a number of cases they were successful in "blacklisting" these artists—which meant that no one would purchase their services for fear of being linked to communism. This event had its highest profile in the Hollywood of the 1950s, when such screenwriters as Dalton Trumbo (*Spartacus*) and Ben Hecht (*Notorious*) were denied employment by major studios (although a great number of blacklisted talents continued to write using "fronts"— legitimate writers who would put their name on the blacklisted author's work). A number of Miller's contemporaries lost their livelihood due to these hearings, and the playwright himself was brought before the proceedings.

These themes are explored in *The Crucible* through the subject of witchcraft and social hysteria. In the town's hysteria at the beginning of the play lies a parallel to the frenzy that communist "witch-hunting" caused in America in the 1950s. And in John Proctor's trial, confession, recantation, and refusal to name his associates, are incidents which regularly occurred in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee. However, because of its broad sweep of moral themes, the play has also had a life beyond the immediate and specific historical circumstances for which it was written. For example, its themes have been applied to such diverse subjects as religious fanaticism in the late-twentieth century, child abuse accusations in the U.S. and in Europe, and political freedom in Eastern Europe and China. While McCarthyism had been Miller's inspiration, the play's themes address many different circumstances in which mob mentality overrides personal integrity and placing blame on scapegoats proves easier than confronting (and correcting) deep-rooted societal inadequacies. As long as such practices ensue, the play's historical context will continue to be revised and reapplied.