

THE CRUCIBLE: THE AUTHOR AND HIS TIMES

In Salem, Massachusetts, a dozen teen-age girls and a black slave woman are caught dancing in the woods around a bubbling cauldron. Today, you wouldn't even use the word "caught." You might think these girls were strange, but you'd hardly call the cops on them. But it's 1692, and Salem isn't just an ordinary small town; it's a religious community of the strictest kind. The people and their laws are as harsh as the Massachusetts winter. When two of the girls pass out from fright and can't be revived, the others find themselves in serious trouble. Women who dance with the Devil are witches; and witches, when they are caught, are hanged. To get themselves out of their predicament, the girls try to spread the blame around. But the blame-spreading gets out of hand, and before long the whole town is in a panic, everyone accusing everyone else of witchcraft. Nineteen people will be hanged before the madness is stopped.

Well, you say, people were superstitious then. Nothing like that could happen today. Maybe so, but in the early 1950s, at the time *The Crucible* was written, a similar kind of hunt was taking place, not for witches, but for Communists. Today it bears the harmless-sounding name of the McCarthy Hearings on Un-American Activities, but for the people who got caught up in it - some of them our parents and grandparents - this "witch-hunt" was anything but harmless. In fact, to the playwright Arthur Miller, the McCarthy Hearings bore an alarming resemblance to the trials in Salem in 1692. *The Crucible* was his way of trying to keep history from repeating itself.

One of the most popular TV shows in 1953 was "I Led Three Lives." It always began the same way: A man's face appears on the screen. His expression is taut with anxiety. The narrator says something like, "This is the fantastically true story of Herbert A. Philbrick, who for nine frightening years did lead three lives - average citizen, member of the Communist Party, and counterspy for the FBI. For obvious reasons, the names, dates and places have been changed, but the story is based on fact." The show was scary and exciting, but it always left you worried, because Philbrick's job never seemed to be done. Communist spies were everywhere, and one man could do only so much against so many.

There was a lot of talk in those days about the "Red Menace." Red is the color of the Russian flag, and all Russians are Communists. So to say "Better dead than red" meant that you'd kill yourself before you let the Communists take over. The slogan was repeated over and over throughout America. My father said it; my teachers said it; I'm sure I said it myself, even though I was just five years old at the time.

And in fact there were good reasons to be worried about the Russians. They had the atomic bomb, as we did. But a lot of people said they got the bomb by using spies, and that really made us worry. It was charged that secret agents, working under cover, had stolen our secrets and given them to the Enemy. Even worse, these spies supposedly were hardly ever Russians themselves,

but often American citizens, as normal as you or me, the kind of people you see every day on the street and hardly even notice. Blacks are identifiable by their skin colour, foreigners speak with an unusual accent. But a Communist could be anybody. It sort of makes a Communist sound like the bogey-man, doesn't it? Well, to many people in 1953, a Communist was just as scary as the bogey-man, and a lot more real.

Soon after it was discovered that the Russians had the bomb, the U.S. Congress started investigations into so-called Un-American Activities, and one of the men they put in charge was Joseph R. McCarthy, a senator from Wisconsin. McCarthy claimed America was in great danger from a Communist conspiracy to take over the world. And, as if he were a surgeon hacking away at tumours in a body riddled with cancer, he tried to root out every trace of Communism he could find. It soon became clear that very few people were completely free of any connection with Communism. To find out why, we have to go back in time a little bit.

Arthur Miller had just turned 14 when His family's savings were wiped out by the stock market crash of October, 1929. Almost literally overnight, the lives of many of his friends changed from reasonable comfort to poverty. Over the next 12 years - the time of the Great Depression, as it is called - Arthur Miller came to know and work with people who had joined the Communist Party. These people weren't spies, they simply were desperate, and they saw Communism as a way out of a desperate situation. And although Communism worried a few people in the 1930s, most were too busy with their own problems to give it much thought. Besides, Soviet Russia was not yet an enemy of the United States. In fact, Russian and American soldiers later fought side by side against the Germans at the end of World War II. It wasn't until after the war, when - as so often happens - the victor's turned against each other, that Communism began to be considered a very serious threat.

By the late 1940s when the Congressional hearings first began, there were quite a few people who had flirted with Communism at some time or other, although most had renounced it long before. But even if you had no Communism in your own past, you could easily be in the same position as Arthur Miller - you knew someone who did. That was more than enough to get you in trouble with Senator McCarthy and similar investigators.

Imagine what it was like being called in to testify. McCarthy or his aides might say, "Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?" No. "Do you know anyone who is or was a Communist?" No. McCarthy holds up some cards. "We have the names of people who have already confessed. Your name came up in connection with their testimony. Why do you suppose that is?" You say you don't know, but you can tell that no one believes you. Maybe you're not so

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innocent after all, you think. Maybe you've been sucked into the conspiracy without realizing it. Have you signed anything, donated any money, said anything to anybody that might sound suspicious?

Once you start thinking like this, it's almost impossible to stop. You begin to feel guilty either way: even if you don't have any Communist connections, you've done nothing to stop the spread of this evil; You may have even helped the enemy by being stupid or naive. You did it, it's your fault, their questions seem to say. And they won't let you go until you make up for it in some way. So you tell them about your friend who's never home on Tuesday nights, or your mother's uncle who used to quote Communist slogans all the time, or anyone you know who's been acting a little odd the last few weeks. You name names, and they let you go.

And afterward no one wants anything to do with you. You were called in to testify, there had to be a reason. You must be a Communist, or at least have been working for them. You lose your friends, your job, sometimes even your family. You become an outcast. Your life is ruined.

This was the fate of many innocent people. Those who were spared either joined in the witch-hunt or kept silent for fear the same thing would happen to them. A lot of the victim never recovered, even long after the rest of the country lost interest and Joe McCarthy had been discredited. By 1957 it was pretty much over, and America could look back with a sad smile, wondering how anyone could have been so foolish.

But in 1953 it was no joke. Arthur Miller already knew about the Salem witch trials from his college days at the University of Michigan (1934-38). In *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller* he describes how *The Crucible* took shape in his mind: "... when the McCarthy era came along," he says, "I remembered these stories and I used to tell them to people when it [the investigation] started. I used to say, you know, McCarthy is actually saying certain lines that I recall the witch-hunters saying in Salem. So I started to go back, not with the idea of writing a play, but to refresh my own mind because it was getting eerie".

One day, while he was reading some documents in the Salem museum, some tourists came in and wanted to see the pins. There was no need to ask, "What pins?" During the trials in 1692, the so-called witches often "sent out their spirits" to stick pins into the flesh of the girls who were accusing them. Now, as Arthur Miller watched, "the tourists pass the books, the exhibits, and no hint of danger reaches them from the quaint relics. I have a desire to tell them the significance of those relics. It is the desire to write".

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The significance of those relics was, in part, that the same thing that happened in 1692 was happening all over again. "It was not only the rise of 'McCarthyism' that moved me," he writes, "but something which seemed much more weird and mysterious. It was the fact that a political, objective, knowledgeable campaign from the far Right [Communists were said to be on the far left] was capable of creating not only a terror, but a new subjective reality... and that such manifestly ridiculous men [as Senator Joe McCarthy] should be capable of paralyzing thought itself.... it was as though the whole country had been born anew, without a memory.... Astounded, I watched men pass me by without a nod whom I had known rather well for years...." And so Arthur Miller began to write *The Crucible*.

A few years before, Arthur Miller had become famous. His second play, *Death of a Salesman*, had won the 1949 Pulitzer Prize and a host of other awards. By the time he was 37, in 1952, he was a respected writer of established reputation, and people were looking forward to his next play. What he had to say was bound to be important.

There's a saying that a prophet is honoured everywhere except in his own country. This could certainly be said of the author of *The Crucible* when it first opened on Broadway on January 22, 1953. No one missed the parallels between 1692 Salem and 1953 America. "But," many said, "witches never did exist, then or now. Communists are real." Some critics complained that the play was too cold and intellectual. Others said it wasn't a play at all, but some kind of outburst, a political speech. Most people found a way of saying that it wasn't worth bothering with. The play ran for a few months, playing to almost empty houses. Then it closed. But the witch-hunt went on.

Arthur Miller had drawn a lot of attention to himself, and he soon got into trouble. In 1954 he was denied a passport to see a production of *The Crucible* in Belgium. In 1955 the New York City Youth Board began an investigation into his political beliefs. In 1956 he was called on to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. He refused to name names. He was cited for contempt of Congress. He was finally exonerated by the courts, but not until 1958. By then, more and more people were refusing to testify against others, and the witch-hunt was running out of steam. The hearings had gone on for ten years, and the country's attention span was near its end.

In all that time, no real Communist conspiracy was ever uncovered. Just as no real witches were ever found in Salem.

Another important thing happened in 1958: *The Crucible* was put on again, this time in a small Off-Broadway theatre. "The same critics reviewed it again," Arthur Miller remembers, and "this time they were fairly swept away, the drama was as real to them [now, in 1958] as it had been cold and

undramatic before [in 1953]. Reasons were given for the new impression; the main one was that the script had been improved." Miller hadn't changed a word in the script. He began to think that the real reason had more to do with the audience than the play: "...when McCarthyism was around, the... audience [was] quite simply in fear of the theme of the play, which was witch-hunting. In [1958] they were not afraid of it, and they began to look at the play" (Theater Essays, p. 245).

Most of the time when an author writes a play about current events, the play is forgotten as soon as the events are over. But *The Crucible* has come to be produced more often than even *Death of a Salesman*, which was long considered to be Arthur Miller's most important play. Let's see if we can figure out why.

If you're watching a really scary film, say, *The Exorcist*, you can always reassure yourself by saying, "It's only a movie." But you can't do that with *The Crucible*. The witch-hunt really happened. You can go to Salem today and still find the house where Rebecca Nurse lived, and see the door through which she was carried to her trial because she was too old and sick to walk. You can stand on the rock where the gallows was built, and look out over Salem Bay, the same bay 19 "witches" must have looked at just before they were hanged. You can go to the courthouse and they'll show you the pins.

Nowadays we don't believe in witches or the Devil, at least we say we don't. But we're still fascinated by the idea of supernatural forces and beings. And, for most of us, the scarier, the better. The popularity of horror movies comes from this fascination. *The Crucible* also tells a strange and scary story. But in this play it's not witches or demons that scare us - it's people. Arthur Miller's characters are ordinary folk. The terror that sweeps over them like a wave is real; the people who were hanged really died. In *The Crucible* there are no real witches; so what, then, "possessed" these people?

If you've ever built a wood fire, you know it doesn't start itself. And the biggest logs won't burn right away; you have to begin with smaller sticks, the kindling. But there can be no fire at all without a spark to set the kindling burning.

We can think of the Salem witchcraft as a kind of fire which, once started, could not be quenched until it had burned itself out.

By this analogy, the big logs would be the belief in witchcraft itself. This belief was an old one. In the ancient world, sorcery was everywhere-in Egypt and Babylon, even among the clear-thinking

Greeks and the otherwise sensible Romans. Only the Jews, among all these ancient peoples, had laws forbidding the practice of witchcraft. It is first mentioned in the Old Testament (Exodus 22:18), where it says, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." It was on the authority of this one sentence in the Bible that the 19 witches were hanged in Salem in 1692.

But until the end of the Middle Ages, no one had made a "scientific" study of the spirit world, and ideas about witches varied wildly from place to place and century to century. Then in 1486 two Christian monks brought out a book called the *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches), the first book of demonology. Others soon followed (King James I of England even wrote one himself), and by the time Reverend Hale walked into Salem in 1692 with an armload of such books, the study of witchcraft was considered an exact science. When he says of his books, "Here is all the invisible world, caught, defined, and calculated," he is being sincere. He has studied these books for years and he honestly believes himself to be an expert. So does everyone else. There is no reason to doubt him or his ability to deal with an enemy he knows so much about. Without this solid and specific belief in the reality of witchcraft, there might have been only a little brushfire in Salem.

The kindling of the fire was to be found in the visible world. In 1623 King James I (the same one who wrote the demonology book) had granted a charter to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, under which the Puritans could own their own land. This charter enabled the colony to thrive and grow over the next 60 years. But in 1684 the King revoked this charter, saying the land belonged to the Crown, thereby making the Puritans' land titles null and void. A lot of squabbling resulted, finally coming to a head in 1689 when the Puritans overthrew the royal governor and reinstated the old charter. But they knew they had no legal right to do this, and by 1692 the insecurity of their position had taken its toll on their nerves.

Ownership of land wasn't the only issue. The Puritans had come to Massachusetts in the first place not only to avoid religious persecution in England, as the history books say, but to establish a New Jerusalem, God's "visible Kingdome" on Earth. For this reason it was natural for the Puritans to assume that God's archenemy Satan would single them out for his most ferocious attacks. In fact, when witchcraft first broke out, many believed it to be the beginning of Armageddon, the great battle between Darkness and Light that would signal the end of the world. But even before this, the Puritans had already spent several years in constant and growing anxiety about the future of God's "visible Kingdome."

There remains but the spark to set these dry sticks ablaze. The Puritans could hardly have picked a more difficult place to found their New Jerusalem. The ground was full of rocks, the winters were

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long and bitterly cold, and the forests surrounding their towns were infested with Indians, who continually raided the outlying farms. But the Puritans prospered by banding together. This process not only helped them overcome danger and difficulty but it gave them ample opportunity for minding each other's business.

To the Puritans, man was a creature steeped in sin, and there was nothing he could do to save himself from the eternal fires of hell. A few believers - the elect, as the Puritans called themselves - God had chosen to save, or "justify." Because God had justified them already, the elect naturally obeyed his laws. But you could outwardly obey these laws yet still not be saved. Puritan preachers never tired of railing against the "meritmongers," those who thought they could buy their way into heaven with good works. On the other hand, it was easy to prove that you were damned - all you had to do was break the law. So there was tremendous pressure on everyone at least to appear to be one of the elect.

All of this is complicated, even to an adult. But put yourself in the place of a nine-year-old girl named Betty Parris. All you know is that the winter has been long and boring, that the grownups are more cranky than usual so they punish you more often, and that you must have sinned with your teeth because one of them aches. If all this isn't enough, you have to be better than the other children in Salem Village, because your father is the minister. For weeks now your older cousin Abigail Williams has been making you sit with her and listen to your father's slave Tituba tell shocking stories of her former life as a heathen in the Barbados. It was bad enough with just the two of you, but Abby never could keep a secret, and now there are ten or twelve of her friends who turn up at the back door as soon as your father walks out the front, begging Tituba for more. At first it was exciting, in a scary sort of way, but lately Tituba's taken to acting out her heathen rituals, showing how they used to conjure spirits to foretell the future. You know you're damned if you keep this up, but Abby's slammed the door on your only way out: she'll kill you if you tell. Your soul is suffocating in sin, and you can't sleep any more for fear of the nightmares that always come.

The pressure was enough to give anyone a nervous breakdown. Betty Parris "freaked out." Abigail Williams, for all her daring, wasn't immune, and soon she began trying to fly and bursting into howls whenever her uncle prayed aloud or read the Scriptures, just like her cousin Betty. Then Betty, in one of her fits, let slip the name Tituba, and... but this is where the play starts.

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