

The Crucible

The Crucible written by Arthur Miller, is a historical fiction play about the famed Salem witch trials. One of the bases for writing the play was to parody the McCarthy era where witch hunting for communists was widespread; in fact Miller was actually one of the people questioned by the McCarthy committee. The historical content of The Crucible has its own relevance in today's society. I believe that Arthur Miller's life and his experience of McCarthyism strongly influenced the writing of The Crucible.

The spread of McCarthyism which was named after Joseph McCarthy was a period of intense anti-communism that happened in the United States from 1948 to about 1956. During this time, the United States government persecuted the Communist party along with suspected communist personages. The word McCarthyism even carried the idea of false, hysterical accusation and large scale attacks on minority groups. This anticommunist crusade faltered by the year 1954. This was when all the hearings made were televised allowing the press and public to view the bullying tactics of McCarthy. He suffered a backlash through public opinion and was then himself investigated for wrongdoings. Soon, he faded from the spotlight overnight (Burns, 2000).

The Crucible takes two of the worst moments in American history and uses them to demonstrate the pressure on people from society to conform. This is evident when Miller takes the Salem Witch trials and uses it as an attack to reflect on the McCarthyism period. Moreover, Miller was able to see the similarities between the McCarthy era and the actions of the Puritans in Salem by using religion as a sort of substitute for politics. Each event was just as cruel and merciless as the other. Furthermore, even though the Salem Witch trials had occurred over 200

years before *The Crucible* was written, it was so strong and vivid that it mirrored the McCarthy era where the spirit of persecution was reawakened. Just as McCarthy considered everything anti-American to be communist, the Puritans in *The Crucible* thought everything unexplainable to be the work of the devil, and in both cases, the authorities demanded conformity.

Likewise, in *The Crucible*, people were put on trial and killed when they did something that was beyond logic and unexplainable. I think part of how Miller put this across does not depend whether or not it is a human right to resist conformity but on how there was much distinction and bias prevalent among the supposed witch trials. This can be seen for example in act three when John Proctor produced evidence that the very core of the witch trials was a sham. In effect, he was accused of trying to overthrow the court and therefore associating with the devil. His evidence was consequently discredited and he was executed. The only reason he “attempted to overthrow the court” seems to be because he took it upon himself to stop the madness and save the innocent people who were being accused of witchcraft (Miller, Viking Critical Library, 1996).

The Crucible and McCarthyism have several similarities despite the fact that they took place at different points in time. Both *The Crucible* and McCarthyism involved people being wrongly accused of actions that they did not commit. Also, if someone in *The Crucible* confesses to being a witch in order to save their life, then their reputation is ruined and no one will ever view them the same way. In both McCarthyism and the Salem witch trials, if the person was not convicted, their image would be ruined and they would have a hard time building their image back to the way it was. Some cooperated but others, like Miller himself, refused to give in to

questioning. In the same manner, those who were revealed, falsely or legitimately, as Communists, and those who refused to incriminate their friends, saw their careers suffer, as they were blacklisted from potential jobs for many years afterward.

The society in Salem was a theocratic government that was based on religious beliefs. Therefore any sin would be acknowledged as an offence against the public as well as against God. Sins, especially in Salem would most likely have been hidden away from public view, and this would also explain the way Miller wrote *The Crucible*. Everyone seemed to know, or want to know everyone else's business.

In both McCarthyism and the Salem witch trials, there was a huge amount of pressure to reveal the secret sins of friends and neighbors. People, therefore began to take advantage of this condemnation, and began using the opportunity to take out personal grudges. For instance, in Act three it can be seen that Giles Corey had confronted Thomas Putnam pointing out to the court that Putnam stood to gain from everyone else's losses. It also meant that people were highly suspicious of one another and reported everything as "witchcraft."

There were similar instances that show how Putnam's suspicious convictions of his neighbors are in parallel with McCarthyism. Many of the people accused during the McCarthyism era were people with high positions of power, and plenty of people would have benefited from these losses. This shows that some people will go to any length to get what they want.

The language that Arthur Miller used when writing *The Crucible* is also very similar to the language used during the McCarthy era. Both refer to what they were objecting to as a disease that needed to be cured. “Witchery” threatened the purity of Salem and individuals within it. It is referred to as “a scourge that must be wiped out”. Souls could be cleansed by admitting your sins, and “being with God”, even though perhaps you had never left him in the first place, but did not want to risk being hanged. Similar events happened during McCarthyism. When someone said they were a communist to avoid having to endure a long trial, they would never be seen the same way again (Williams, Viking Critical Library, 2002).

Despite the fact that there are so many similarities between *The Crucible* and McCarthyism, there will obviously be some differences too. For example, in *The Crucible* many are hanged because they are believed to be witches but on the other hand, no one had been sentenced to the death penalty if they are accused of being a communist. Also, in *The Crucible* anyone in Salem is able to charge someone, whereas during McCarthyism it was Joseph McCarthy that charged people and the basic public had no say about who was charged (Burns, 2000).

I believe that there are many circumstances in the play which one cannot deny to have been influenced by Arthur Miller’s experience of McCarthyism. There have been parallelisms between religion and politics, witchcraft and communism, and the 17th century Salem and 1950’s communist driven McCarthy era. Similarly, some of the characters in *The Crucible* represent Arthur Miller’s views on the period. This is evident in the person of John Proctor who would symbolize freedom or perhaps even Miller himself assuming that ideal. I think that

although he lost the battle against the society that he lived in, Proctor was able to preserve and retain a sense of morality, the same way that Arthur Miller did not give in to questioning when he was questioned and interrogated.

At the time of its first performance in January of 1953, critics and cast alike saw *The Crucible* as a direct attack on McCarthyism. These were some of the reasons why it only had a short run due to the anti-Communist attachment it carried. It was also, however hailed to be a great success. Arthur Miller, on the other hand, was disappointed by critic's reactions. He claimed, "No critic seemed to sense what I was after, which was the conflict between a man's raw deeds and his conception of himself". Not only was he disappointed by critic's reviews, he was disappointed by the "hostility of New York audiences".

In conclusion, there is no doubt that Arthur Miller has made an effort to link McCarthyism and the Salem Witch trials in the writing of *The Crucible*. This is to show the cycle of human morality, and the characteristics of a period of mass hysteria. Literature is a very powerful way of highlighting the mistakes of the past, and making sure, or at least attempting to make sure that we do not repeat the same mistakes in the future. However, I do not think that *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller as an accurate historical story by the fact that he has taken his view of one event, and slipped it into another, obviously altering some of the details in order to make *The Crucible* believable but not of the actual Salem witch trials. This makes the play more of a historical fiction rather than a factual representation of the Salem witch trials.

Works Cited

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