**McCarthyism and The Crucible: What to Know**

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In studying *The Crucible*, you will inevitably be faced with questions about the play's connections to the "Red Scare" of the 1950s and the phenomenon known as McCarthyism. These connections are important because they demonstrate that *The Crucible* is not merely a (highly adapted) retelling of historical events but also an allegorical reference to the timelessness of certain central human flaws. In this article, I'll provide historical background on McCarthyism, tell you about Arthur Miller's personal involvement with the investigations of alleged communists in the 1950s, and explain how and why interpretations of *The Crucible* are so closely tied to the political attitudes and events of that decade.

**Background on McCarthyism**

Let’s start off with some background on who Joseph McCarthy was and what role he played in American politics. **McCarthy was a Republican from Wisconsin who rose through the political ranks in the 1940s and was elected to the Senate in 1946.** When it looked like he might not be reelected in 1950 after a few unremarkable years of service, **he decided to try a new political strategy: targeting communist subversives.**

To see why this was even an option, you have to understand the political climate at the time. The 1950s marked the beginning of the Cold War, an era of great tension between the US and the communist USSR. **Conservatives in the US feared that anyone who had any affiliation with the Communist Party was a potential threat to national security** because they couldn’t be trusted to remain loyal to the US. **McCarthy was able to use this fear to his advantage.**

**On February 9, 1950, he claimed to possess a list of the names of 205 people in the US State Department who were members of the American Communist Party.** The public, in the throes of a communist hysteria, demanded an investigation of these supposed agitators within the government. Though many of the people on McCarthy’s list were not, in fact, communists, **he still managed to become the chairman of an organization called the Government Committee on Operations of the Senate, which proceeded to investigate “dissenters.”**These investigations went on for two years, during which the questioning spread to numerous government departments, and there was a continued proliferation of communist panic.**This persecution of alleged subversives became known colloquially as "McCarthyism."**

**McCarthy finally lost power in 1954 soon after proposing an investigation of the military to root out communists.**President Eisenhower, who never liked McCarthy and had great respect for the military as a former commander, decided things had finally gone too far. He worked behind the scenes to discredit McCarthy. **The Army sent inside information about McCarthy’s abuses of power to his critics, and a storm of bad PR finally led to the loss of his position as chairman of the investigatory committee.**He died soon after in 1957, four years after the opening of *The Crucible*.

Though the modern-day witch hunt philosophy carries his namesake, Joseph McCarthy was far from the only driving force behind the investigation of suspected communists during the Cold War.**Another congressional group called the House UnAmerican Activities Committee played a similar and, some would argue, even more dramatic role at the same time.**HUAC was a congressional committee originally established in 1938 with the primary goal of investigating communist and fascist organizations that had become active during the Great Depression.

**After World War II, as Cold War tensions mounted, HUAC became even more intent on investigating communist activities.**HUAC gained significant power in tandem with McCarthy; in fact, HUAC provided inspiration for many of McCarthy’s tactics. Members of the committee were convinced that disloyal communists had managed to infiltrate the US government, educational system, and entertainment industry. **Anyone deemed suspicious was issued a subpoena by the committee and subsequently questioned about their political activities and the activities of other potential subversives.** People who refused to answer these questions or name any names were arrested for contempt of Congress and even sent to jail. **Many were subsequently denied employment opportunities in their industries** because they were universally “blacklisted” or shut out by employers who feared that hiring them would be a public relations nightmare.

**Arthur Miller’s Connections to McCarthyism**

**Arthur Miller had great distaste for McCarthy’s investigations in the early 1950s, and he claims to have written *The Crucible* in 1953 largely as a reaction to this tense political climate.**He had become fascinated with the environment of paranoia and how it affected society as a whole. When he stumbled upon the story of the Salem witch trials, he finally came up with a way to express those themes on stage.***The Crucible* was also a reaction his personal disappointment at the decision of his friend, director Elia Kazan, to name some former colleagues as communists in 1952 in front of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee.**Many believe*The Crucible's* high profile as a criticism of McCarthyism partially led to Miller’s own investigation by HUAC.

**In 1956, Miller was subpoenaed by HUAC** after attempting to renew his passport before traveling to Belgium for the opening of *The Crucible.*He was suspected (not incorrectly) of possessing close ties to the American Communist Party. Miller did in fact write communist theater criticism and was a greater private supporter of communism than he portrayed himself to be at the time, but he never actually joined the party. When he appeared before HUAC,**Miller refused to name anyone else who was involved in “subversive” political activities.**To be fair, Miller had less at stake than many others who were called before HUAC to testify. Because he worked mainly in theater, he didn't have to worry as much about the effects Hollywood's unforgiving blacklist policy would have on his career.  **Miller was found in contempt of Congress for refusing to betray his peers, but the ruling was overturned two years later as HUAC lost power and relevance.**

*Many professionals in the entertainment industry found themselves jobless in Hollywood after falling out of HUAC's good graces. The government's influence on movies at this time was much greater than it is today.*

 ***The Crucible* as an Allegory for McCarthyism**

It’s not difficult to see the parallels between McCarthyism and *The Crucible*'s plot.The abandonment of reason in the face of hysteria is a clear common theme.**Arthur Miller wrote an essay in 1996 entitled “Why I Wrote The Crucible: An Author’s Answer to Politics” that provides insight into his view of the play’s connections to the communist panic.**

Early in the essay, **he relates the US State Department’s fear of China after the communist takeover to the fear of black magic in *The Crucible*.**Miller writes, “There was magic all around; the politics of alien conspiracy soon dominated political discourse and bid fair to wipe out any other issue.” Miller saw these sorts of irrational thought processes (weeding out officials associated with China in the US government with the goal of diminishing China’s power overall) as corollaries to the supernatural beliefs of his characters.

As communist hysteria built, Miller was even more convinced that he wanted to write a play based on this form of collective insanity. **He was especially fascinated by people who disagreed with the communist “witch hunt” but chose to keep their heads down and go along with it to avoid their own persecution.** He writes, “But by 1950, when I began to think of writing about the hunt for Reds in America, I was motivated in some great part by the paralysis that had set in among many liberals who, despite their discomfort with the inquisitors' violations of civil rights, were fearful, and with good reason, of being identified as covert Communists if they should protest too strongly.” **This sort of behavior is one of the biggest contributors to the panic that grows throughout *The Crucible*.**For example, John Proctor hesitates to expose Abigail as a fraud because he fears repercussions from the court, and Parris is eager to turn on others to preserve his reputation.

In another relevant quote, **Miller writes, “The Soviet plot was the hub of a great wheel of causation**; the plot justified the crushing of all nuance, all the shadings that a realistic judgment of reality requires.” **In *The Crucible*, Miller translates this concept into the Satanic plot that the officials believe is at work in Salem.** Danforth claims that there is “a moving plot to topple Christ in the country!” (pg. 91). Danforth also insists that “a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it, there be no road between” (pg. 87). **Nuance cannot be tolerated because the people in charge feel that the stakes are too high.**Communist infiltration of the US government and the Devil’s infiltration of Salem are both disastrous scenarios that must be prevented at all costs, even if it means throwing innocent people under the bus.

Some people (including his former friend Elia Kazan) predictably complained that Miller’s analogy between the Salem witch trials and McCarthyism was bogus. After all, communists are real, and witches aren’t. Miller, however, says he viewed the analogy as perfectly sound. He argues that, in the 17th century, “the existence of witches was never questioned by the loftiest minds in Europe and America” because the Bible spoke of their existence. **Witches were just as real to people in the 1690s as communists were to people in the 1950s.**

He adds, **“The more I read into the Salem panic, the more it touched off corresponding ages of common experiences in the fifties**: the old friend of a blacklisted person crossing the street to avoid being seen talking to him; the overnight conversions of former leftists into born-again patriots; and so on. **Apparently, certain processes are universal.”**Miller was fascinated by what happened in Salem because of the parallels he could draw to the events of his life amidst the Red Scare. *The Crucible* has resonated across time because it expresses central truths about human nature. **People will go to great lengths to avoid being ostracized by society, including, in many cases, betraying their true beliefs and selling out their friends.**

*If patriotism is taken too far, it can transform itself into a hatred of "outsiders" rather than a love of political freedoms. This type of harmful attitude remains an issue in the US to this day.*

**Why Does the Relationship Between McCarthyism and *The Crucible* Matter?**

Miller closes his essay by saying, “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.” **Though we like to think of ourselves more enlightened than the people who conducted the Salem witch trials, virtually the same course of events has occurred many times in more recent history.**The fear of witches only seems archaic because most of society no longer holds serious beliefs in the supernatural. Today, scenarios like this can be even more insidious because “witch hunts” are conducted for types of people that really do exist. There were, of course, communists in the US in the 1950s, but the vast majority of them had no designs on overthrowing the US government or becoming Soviet spies. The danger lies in assuming that purely because someone holds a political or religious belief, he or she must pose a threat.

**People who are viewed as “other” continue to be persecuted out of fear and ignorance.** *The Crucible* and McCarthyism can be compared to other modern forms of rumor, persecution, suspicion, and hysteria such as:

* The AIDS scare in the 80’s and 90’s
* Fear of terrorism in the past 15 or 20 years and how that’s affected US views and policies
* The Obama “birther” movement
* The many rumors perpetuated by gullible people on social media
* Fear of immigrants and refugees as potential terrorist threats

**Afterword: Discussion Questions**

**Now that you've read the article, you can try your hand at answering some of these discussion questions.** I've included a few different types of questions on this topic that you might encounter in your English class:

* Discuss how Miller’s point of view influences the reading of the play. How did his own experiences shape his writing?
* Where does "fear" come from?  Why, as a nation, do we fear others?  Why, as individuals, do we fear others?
* Describe the political climate of the 1950s. Why did Senator McCarthy become a powerful figure? How did he influence politics in the fifties?
* As a socially conscious writer, Miller intended this play as a comment on McCarthyism. What are the parallels between the incidents Miller dramatizes and the acts of Senator McCarthy in the 1950s?
* Compare the events of the play to other historical or current events where innocent people are used as scapegoats. Is this a timeless cautionary tale?