

“The Crucible”

Historical Background

CONTEXT: Who were these people and what did they believe?

Puritanism began in sixteenth-century England as a religious and political movement that aspired to “purify” English Protestantism of all forms of worship not found in the New Testament. The Puritans of Salem depicted in “The Crucible” were descended from settlers who had left England to practice their religious and social beliefs in the New World. They adhered to a literal interpretation of the Bible, and they revered the Old Testament as much as the New. Their conception of God was of a stern Old Testament patriarch.

The hallmarks of Puritanism were an acute sense of sin and a fear of divine vengeance. Its trademark was the grim-visaged preacher who, in tones of high seriousness and language abounding with bestial imagery, terrified his flock with scathing denunciations of mankind’s intrinsically loathsome and depraved nature.

Since the Puritans viewed all pleasures as the wiles of Satan, they banned music, dancing, and the theater. This ethic may have been hostile to the idle nobility, but it was compatible with the interests of the rising middle class. It sanctioned private property and mercantile enterprise and exhorted its adherents to develop the virtues of prudence, thrift, hard work, courage and self-reliance. Poverty, not wealth, was considered a sin, on the grounds that it revealed a lack of enterprise.

The first Puritan settlement in America as the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1650. A royal charter granted the Puritans by King Charles I established them as a political body. They were now free to create God’s “Visible Kingdom” on earth. The New Jerusalem they instituted was absolute. Authority was vested in a governor, a deputy governor, and 18 assistants. The church had the power to enforce the outward observances of godly living, to excommunicate recalcitrant, and to condemn heretics to death. A sinner imperiled not only his immortal soul but his holdings as well, since the church arrogated to itself the right to part a sinner from his property.

These American Puritans, who called themselves Covenanters, had modified their adherence to the strict Calvinist doctrine of predestination. As formulated by John Calvin, this doctrine held that only a few human beings had been “elected” to salvation’ the rest were “children of wrath,” damned by God even before their birth to everlasting hell. This credo struck the Covenanters as a doubtful inducement to industriousness – a required virtue if they were ever to tame their harsh environment in the New World – since it justified the conclusion that one’s earthly behavior had no bearing on one’s ultimate destiny.

Instead, the Covenanters, in accordance with other denominations, stressed the value of “good works.” They rejected, however, the notion that an individual could earn salvation by performing good deeds. A “good work” was efficacious for salvation only if it proceeded from a state of grace. And it remained God’s prerogative to dispense or withhold grace at will.

How could one tell whether one’s acts proceeded from a state of grace? Not by reading the Westminster Confession, which was the Articles of Faith of the American Covenanters.

Nowhere in any of their theological writings was this question addressed. Its absence points to a significant reality: Puritan theology denied its believers any criteria that they could use to make judgments regarding their spiritual state.

Puritanism also disposed of the concept of degrees of good and evil. A person was either one or the other. There was a world without nuance or rational causality, in which morality came to be perceived as something residing outside the individual.

This atmosphere fostered moral passivity and diminished the need to assume human responsibility. It is within this context that the [Salem] witch hunt must be viewed and that the readiness of so many participants to abjure their own judgment must be evaluated.

The historical basis for “The Crucible” derives from the Salem witch trials of 1692, an event regarded by some as the most disconcerting single episode in American history. . . Arthur Miller’s primary source of information was the Salem courthouse records, to which he occasionally refers in the expository “asides” that are interspersed in Act I of the published text.

What is this play about?

Early in the year 1692, in the small Massachusetts village of Salem, a collection of girls fell ill, falling victim to hallucinations and seizures. In extremely religious Puritan New England, frightening or surprising occurrences were often attributed to the devil or his cohorts. The unfathomable sickness spurred fears of witchcraft, and it was not long before the girls, and then many other residents of Salem, began to accuse other villagers of consorting with devils and casting spells. Old grudges and jealousies spilled out into the open, fueling the atmosphere of hysteria. The Massachusetts government and judicial system, heavily influenced by religion, rolled into action. Within a few weeks, dozens of people were in jail on charges of witchcraft. By the time the fever had run its course, in late August 1692, nineteen people (and two dogs) had been convicted and hanged for witchcraft.

Why did Arthur Miller write “The Crucible”?

More than two centuries later, Arthur Miller was born in New York City on October 17, 1915. His career as a playwright began while he was a student at the University of Michigan. Several of his early works won prizes, and during his senior year, the Federal Theatre Project in Detroit performed one of his works. He produced his first great success, “All My Sons,” in 1947. Two years later, in 1949, Miller wrote “Death of a Salesman,” which won the Pulitzer Prize and transformed Miller into a national sensation. Many critics described “Death of a Salesman” as the first great American tragedy, and Miller gained an associated eminence as a man who understood the deep essence of the United States.

Drawing on research on the witch trials he had conducted while an undergraduate, Miller composed “The Crucible” in the early 1950s. Miller wrote the play during the brief ascendancy of Senator Joseph McCarthy, a demagogue whose vitriolic anti-Communism proved the spark needed to propel the United States into a dramatic and fractious anti-Communist fervor during these first tense years of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Led by McCarthy,

special congressional committees conducted highly controversial investigations intended to root out Communist sympathizers in the United States. As with the alleged witches of Salem, suspected Communists were encouraged to confess and to identify other Red sympathizers as means of escaping punishment. The policy resulted in a whirlwind of accusations. As people began to realize that they might be condemned as Communists regardless of their innocence, many “cooperated,” attempting to save themselves through false confessions, creating the image that the United States was overrun with Communists and perpetuating the hysteria. The liberal entertainment industry, in which Miller worked, was one of the chief targets of these “witch hunts,” as their opponents termed them. Some cooperated; others, like Miller, refused to give in to questioning. 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.

At the time of its first performance, in January of 1953, critics and cast alike perceived “The Crucible” as a direct attack on McCarthyism (the policy of sniffing out Communists). Its comparatively short run, compared with those of Miller’s other works, was blamed on anti-Communist fervor. When Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were accused of spying for the Soviets and executed, the cast and audience of Miller’s play observed a moment of silence. Still, there are difficulties with interpreting “The Crucible” as a strict allegorical treatment of 1950s McCarthyism. For one thing, there were, as far as one can tell, no actual witches or devil-worshippers in Salem. However, there were certainly Communists in 1950s America, and many of those who were lionized as victims of McCarthyism at the time, such as the Rosenbergs and Alger Hiss (a former State Department official), were later found to have been in the pay of the Soviet Union. Miller’s Communist friends, then, were often less innocent than the victims of the Salem witch trials, like the stalwart Rebecca Nurse or the tragic John Proctor.

If Miller took unknowing liberties with the facts of his own era, he also played fast and loose with the historical record. The general outline of events in “The Crucible” corresponds to what happened in Salem of 1692, but Miller’s characters are often composites. Furthermore, his central plot device—the affair between Abigail Williams and John Proctor—has no grounding in fact (Proctor was over sixty at the time of the trials, while Abigail was only eleven). Thus, Miller’s decision to set sexual jealousy at the root of the hysteria constitutes a dramatic contrivance.

In an odd way, then, “The Crucible” is best read outside its historical context—not as a perfect allegory for anti-Communism, or as a faithful account of the Salem trials, but as a powerful and timeless depiction of how intolerance and hysteria can intersect and tear a community apart. In John Proctor, Miller gives the reader a marvelous tragic hero for any time—a flawed figure who finds his moral center just as everything is falling to pieces around him.

SparkNotes Editors. “SparkNote on The Crucible.” *SparkNotes.com*. SparkNotes LLC. 2003. Web.

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