



## The Words of ARTHUR MILLER on *The Crucible*

### The Historical Background of *The Crucible*

In *Echoes Down the Corridor*, published in 2000, Arthur Miller writes: "It would probably never have occurred to me to write a play about the Salem witch trials of 1692 had I not seen some astonishing correspondences with that calamity in the America of the late forties and early fifties. . . . my basic need was to respond to a phenomenon which, with only small exaggeration, one could say was paralyzing a whole generation and in an amazingly short time was drying up the habits of trust and toleration in public discourse.

"I refer, of course, to the anticommunist rage that threatened to reach hysterical proportions and sometimes did. I can't remember anyone calling it an ideological war, but I think now that that is what it amounted to. Looking back at the period, I suppose we very rapidly passed over anything like a discussion or debate and into something quite different, a hunt not alone for subversive people but ideas and even a suspect language."

### The Writing of *The Crucible*

Miller explains where his ideas for *The Crucible* came from, saying, "On a lucky afternoon I happened upon a book, *The Devil in Massachusetts*, by Marion Starkey, a narrative of the Salem witch-hunt of 1692. I knew this story from my college reading more than a decade earlier, but now in this changed and darkened America it turned a wholly new aspect toward me, namely, the poetry of the hunt. Poetry may seem an odd word for a witch-hunt, but I saw now that there was something of the marvelous in the spectacle of the whole village, if not an entire province, whose imagination was literally captured by a vision of something that wasn't there. . . .

"As I stood in the stillness of the Salem courthouse, surrounded by the miasmatic swirl of the images of the 1950s but with my head in 1692, what the two eras had in common was gradually gaining definition. In both was the menace of concealed plots, but most startling were the similarities in the rituals of defense and the investigative routines. Three hundred years apart, both prosecutions were alleging membership in a secret, disloyal group; should the accused confess, his honesty could be proved only in precisely the



Arthur Miller

Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* failed at the box office in its initial production in 1953, but it has since become one of the most popular American plays of the twentieth century.

same way—by naming former confederates, nothing less. Thus the informer became the very proof of the plot and the investigator's necessity."

**How the Play Has Lasted** Musing on the eventual popularity of *The Crucible*, Miller says, "*The Crucible* is my most-produced play, here and abroad. . . . And it is part of the play's history, I think, that to people in so many parts of the world its story seems so like their own. . . . In fact, I used to think, half seriously—although it was not far from the truth—that you could tell when a dictator was about to take power in a Latin American country or when one had just been overthrown, by whether *The Crucible* was suddenly being produced there."



### ▲ Critical Viewing

This photograph shows a scene from a contemporary production of *The Crucible*. What can you infer about the relationship between these two characters, based on this photograph? [Infer]

## Thinking About the Commentary

1. (a) **Recall:** What experience gave Miller the original idea for *The Crucible*? (b) **Infer:** What aspects of this experience helped Miller connect the Salem of 1692 with the United States of the late 1940s and 1950s?
2. (a) **Recall:** What specific similarities does Miller see between the Salem witch trials of 1692 and the anticommunist hearings of the 1950s? (b) **Speculate:** In what ways do you think these similarities have contributed to the fact that *The Crucible* is Miller's most-produced play?

### As You Read *The Crucible* . . .

3. Notice how the conflict in the play can represent a universal conflict.
4. Consider ways in which reading this commentary enhances your experience of the play.

**From the Author's Desk**  
**The Words of Arthur Miller on *The Crucible***

**DIRECTIONS:** Use the space provided to answer the questions.

1. Briefly identify the "correspondence" Arthur Miller says he perceived in two widely separated periods of American history as he started to write *The Crucible*.

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2. How does Miller connect the Salem witch hunt with poetry?

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3. What specific similarities does Miller identify between the prosecutions and the confessions of the accused?

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4. According to Miller, why has *The Crucible* become his most-produced play?

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5. What questions for further research or investigation does this commentary leave you with? Identify at least two issues you would like to pursue as you read the play.

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