

1. **Mark your confusion.**
2. **Show evidence of a close reading.**
3. **Write a 1+ page reflection.**

### **Excerpts from “Are You Now Or Were You Ever?” by Arthur Miller**

Source: *The Guardian/The Observer*, June 17, 2000

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 40s and early 50s. My basic need was to respond to a phenomenon which, with only small exaggeration, one could say paralyzed a whole generation and in a short time dried up the habits of trust and toleration in public discourse...The object was to destroy the least credibility of any and all ideas associated with socialism and communism, whose proponents were assumed to be either knowing or unwitting agents of Soviet subversion.

An ideological war is like guerrilla war, since the enemy is an idea whose proponents are not in uniform but are disguised as ordinary citizens, a situation that can scare a lot of people to death. To call the atmosphere paranoid is not to say that there was nothing real in the American-Soviet stand-off. But if there was one element that lent the conflict a tone of the inauthentic and the invented, it was the swiftness with which all values were forced in months to reverse themselves...But it is impossible to convey properly the fears that marked that period. Nobody was shot, to be sure, although some were going to jail, where at least one, William Remington, was murdered by an inmate hoping to shorten his sentence by having killed a communist. Rather than physical fear, it was the sense of impotence, which seemed to deepen with each week, of being unable to speak accurately of the very recent past when being left wing in America, and for that matter in Europe, was to be alive to the dilemmas of the day.

...Writing now, almost half a century later, with the Soviet Union in ruins, China rhetorically fending off capitalism even as in reality it adopts a market economy, Cuba wallowing helplessly in the Caribbean, it is not easy to convey the American fear of a masterful communism. The quickness with which Soviet-style regimes had taken over eastern Europe and China was breathtaking, and I believe it stirred up a fear in Americans of our own ineptitudes, our mystifying inability, despite our military victories, to control the world whose liberties we had so recently won back from the Axis powers.

In 1956, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) subpoenaed me - I was cited for contempt of Congress for refusing to identify writers I had met at one of the two communist writers' meetings I had attended many years before. By then, the tide was going out for HUAC and it was finding it more difficult to make front pages. However, the news of my forthcoming marriage to Marilyn Monroe was too tempting to be passed. That our marriage had some connection with my being subpoenaed was confirmed when Chairman Walters of the HUAC sent word to Joseph Rauh, my lawyer, that he would be inclined to cancel my hearing if Miss Monroe would consent to have a picture taken with him.

The offer having been declined, the good chairman, as my hearing came to an end, entreated me to write less tragically about our country. This lecture cost me \$40,000 in lawyer's fees, a year's suspended sentence for contempt of Congress, and a \$500 fine. Not to mention about a year of inanition in my creative life.

My fictional view of the period, my sense of its unreality had been, like any impotence, a psychologically painful experience. A similar paralysis descended on Salem. In both places, to keep social unity intact, the authority of leaders had to be hardened and words of skepticism toward them constricted. A new cautionary diction, an uncustomary prudence inflected our way of talking to one another. The word socialism was all but taboo. Words had gotten fearsome...

Anyone standing up in the Salem of 1692 and denying that witches existed would have faced immediate arrest, the hardest interrogation and possibly the rope. Every authority not only confirmed the existence of witches but never questioned the necessity of executing them...There were witches, if not to most of us then certainly to everyone in

Salem; and there were communists, but what was the content of their menace? That to me became the issue. Having been deeply influenced as a student by a Marxist approach to society, and having known Marxists and sympathizers, I could simply not accept that these people were spies or even prepared to do the will of the Soviets in some future crisis...But the hunt had captured some significant part of the American imagination and its power demanded respect.

Turning to Salem was like looking into a petri dish, an embalmed stasis with its principal moving forces caught in stillness. One had to wonder what the human imagination fed on that could inspire neighbors and old friends to emerge overnight as furies secretly bent on the torture and destruction of Christians. More than a political metaphor, more than a moral tale, *The Crucible*, as it developed over more than a year, became the awesome evidence of the power of human imagination inflamed, the poetry of suggestion, and the tragedy of heroic resistance to a society possessed to the point of ruin.

In the stillness of the Salem courthouse, surrounded by the images of the 1950s but with my head in 1692, what the two eras had in common gradually gained definition. Both had the menace of concealed plots, but most startling were the similarities in the rituals of defense, the investigative routines; 300 years apart, both prosecutions alleged membership of a secret, disloyal group. Should the accused confess, his honesty could only be proved by naming former confederates. The informer became the axle of the plot's existence and the investigation's necessity...

That impossible coming to pass was not an observation made at a comfortable distance but a blade cutting directly into my life. This was especially the case with Elia Kazan's decision to cooperate with the HUAC. The surrounding fears felt even by those with the most fleeting of contacts with any communist-supported organization were enough to break through long associations and friendships.

Kazan had been a member of the Communist party only a matter of months, and even that link had ended years before. And the party had never been illegal, nor was membership in it. Yet this great director, left undefended by 20th Century Fox executives, his longtime employers, was told that if he refused to name people whom he had known in the party - actors, directors and writers - he would never be allowed to direct another picture in Hollywood, meaning the end of his career.

These names were already known to the committee through other testifiers and FBI informants, but exactly as in Salem - or Russia under the Czar and the Chairman, and Inquisition Spain, Revolutionary France or any other place of revolution or counter-revolution - conspiracy was the name for all opposition. And the reformation of the accused could only be believed when he gave up the names of his co-conspirators. Only this ritual of humiliation, the breaking of pride and independence, could win the accused readmission into the community. The process inevitably did produce in the accused a new set of political, social and even moral convictions more acceptable to the state whose fist had been shoved into his face, with his utter ruin promised should he resist.

I had stopped by Kazan's house in the country in 1952 after he had called me to come and talk, an unusual invitation - he had never been inclined to indulge in talk unless it concerned work. I had suspected from his dark tone that it must have to do with the HUAC, which was rampaging through the Hollywood ranks.

Since I was on my way up to Salem for research on a play that I was still unsure I would write, I called at his house, which was on my route. As he laid out his dilemma and his decision to comply with the HUAC (which he had already done) it was impossible not to feel his anguish, old friends that we were. But the crunch came when I felt fear, that great teacher, that cruel revealer. For it swept over me that, had I been one of his comrades, he would have spent my name as part of the guarantee of his reform. Even so, oddly enough, I was not filling up with hatred or contempt for him; his suffering was too palpable. The whole hateful procedure had brought him to this, and I believe made the writing of *The Crucible* all but inevitable...

...Kazan's testimony created a far greater shock than anyone else's...It may be that Kazan had been loved more than any other, that he had attracted far greater affection from writers and actors with whom he had worked, and so what was overtly a political act was sensed as a betrayal of love...

*The Crucible* straddles two different worlds to make them one, but it is not history in the usual sense of the word, but a moral, political and psychological construct that floats on the fluid emotions of both eras. As a commercial entertainment the play failed [it opened in 1953]. To start with there was the title: nobody knew what a crucible was. Most of the critics, as sometimes does happen, never caught on to the play's ironical substructure, and the ones who did were nervous about validating a work that was so unkind to the same sanctified procedural principles as underlay the hunt for reds. Some old acquaintances gave me distant nods in the theatre lobby on opening night, and even without air-conditioning the house was cool. There was also a problem with the temperature of the production.

..*The Crucible* is my most-produced play. It seems to be one of the few surviving shards of the so-called McCarthy period. And it is part of the play's history that, to people in so many parts of the world, its story seems to be their own. I used to think, half seriously, that you could tell when a dictator was about to take power, or had been overthrown, in a Latin American country, if *The Crucible* was suddenly being produced in that country.

...Salem village, that pious, devout settlement at the edge of white civilization, had displayed - three centuries before the Russo-American rivalry and the issues it raised - what can only be called a built-in pestilence in the human mind; a fatality forever awaiting the right conditions for its always unique, forever unprecedented outbreak of distrust, alarm, suspicion and murder. And for people wherever the play is performed on any of the five continents, there is always a certain amazement that the same terror that is happening to them or that is threatening them, has happened before to others. It is all very strange. But then, the Devil is known to lure people into forgetting what it is vital for them to remember - how else could his endless reappearances always come as such a marvelous surprise?

#### **Possible Response Questions:**

- How were witches and Communists characterized and treated?
- What are the differences between the two groups?
- Can literature further a social message and make a difference?