

Arthur Miller Biography

Born in Manhattan, New York, on October 17, 1915, to a schoolteacher and coat manufacturer, Miller was one of three children. His father's business failed before the Depression years, causing the family to move to the less fashionable area of Brooklyn. He was an average student whose grades, plus limited finances, prevented his entering college. Miller prided himself more on his athletic than academic prowess during that time.

Working for little more than two years after graduation from high school, Miller saved enough money to attend the University of Michigan. While a student, he continued to work, one of his jobs being night editor of the *Michigan Daily*. He began to write plays and won two \$500 awards at the university as well as \$1,250 for the Theatre Guild Award of 1938. In 1940, shortly after graduation, he married a fellow student, Mary Grace Slattery. His literary career from that time to the present reflects a profusion of awards. (See chronology chart.)

The Crucible won for him the Antoinette Perry Award in 1953 and is a drama which is still popular because of the timelessness of its subject. In it, Miller creates an analogy of the witch-hunts in Salem to the investigation of Communists by Senator Joseph McCarthy.

In 1956, Miller, himself, was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee, where, like his heroic counterpart in *The Crucible*, he refused to identify others who had been involved with Communism.

The Crucible is a play concerning the moral choices people must make under irrational community pressure. In 1953, the theme of the play made many people uncomfortable, causing it to close after only a few months.

In 1954, Miller, who wanted to travel to Brussels, was denied a passport by the State Department because of his alleged leftist sympathies. Off Broadway revived *The Crucible* in 1958, where it was performed more than 600 times.

As to his personal life—in 1955, Miller was divorced and was denied use of material for a New York film project because of his past Communist association.

When, in 1956, he was called before the McCarthy hearings, he was cited with contempt of Congress for refusing to implicate his colleagues. In 1958, however, Miller's conviction was overturned by the court.

He married actress Marilyn Monroe in 1956 and created the screenplay *The Misfits* for her. Unfortunately, the set was plagued with trouble—Monroe's chronic lateness and the death of her costar, Clark Gable. The couple was divorced in 1961 and Monroe died in 1962.

Today, Miller is still writing and is regarded as a significant playwright of his generation. He married Ingeborg Morath in 1962, moving to a Connecticut country home and a life he enjoys. He and his wife have traveled to Russia and China collaborating on several books relating to this experience, he writing the text for her photographs. Today, his writings are still concerned with moral choices—in the areas which most bother him, the Depression and the Nazi terror.²

²Based on material from John MacNicholas, ed., *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Twentieth Century Dramatists* (Michigan: Gale Research Company, 1981).

THE McCARTHY YEARS ENGLISH III



Senator McCarthy (center) Schine, (left) Cohen (right)

"Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?"... This question was asked of numerous government officials, writers, filmmakers and public figures during a time of national hysteria known as the McCarthy era. Americans today remember that time with anger and shame. What happened?

After WWII, America was responding to the threat of soviet expansion. It was clear to most Americans, after the Soviets blockaded Berlin, that the Soviet brand of Communism meant totalitarianism, aggression, and repression. Many Americans feared that Communism would undermine their own values and institutions. This fear had a basis in reality but some people, to advance their own careers, also exploited it. One of these people was Senator Joseph McCarthy from Wisconsin. McCarthy was not the only person to exploit people's fears of Communist expansion, but his name has become synonymous with the witch-hunt atmosphere of that time.

The day that marks the beginning of this witch-hunt is February 9, 1950 when McCarthy announced his list of 205 "known Communists" in the government. Years before, however, the government had established the House Committee on Un-American Affairs (HCUA) to investigate such charges.

Soon, both the Senate and House subcommittees sponsored investigations into Communist influence in Hollywood. It may seem strange that Hollywood was a target, but everyone knew the strong effect that movies had

(and still have) on the thinking and values of the public. It seemed to be a perfect tool for Communist infiltration of ideas and the country was waging an ideological war against Communist influence of any kind.

Many movie stars, (such as Ronald Reagan president of the Screen Actors Guild), directors and other personalities in Hollywood were questioned by HUAC. Some members of the industry resisted the investigations and allegations; these courageous people felt that American principles were being sacrificed and that the First Amendment (protecting speech and assembly) was under attack. The Hollywood Ten refused to testify and were eventually jailed for contempt of Congress. The Motion Picture Association then pledged not to hire the Hollywood Ten or anyone else with Communist sympathies. Thus, blacklisting had begun.

By 1951, anyone who testified at the HUAC hearings found it difficult to find work. Non-cooperation with the HUAC was also professional suicide. Many who refused to implicate others destroyed their careers; those who were called to testify tried to salvage their professional lives by cooperating with the House committee and yet not naming names...not an easy task.

It was true that many of those who were called before the committee had some affiliation with the Communist party in America. Most of these people had become involved because they were looking for relief from the Depression years of the 1930's and the Communist Theory offered hope for a better

world. Some of the programs like Social Security and others developed during President Roosevelt's administration reflected a kind of socialistic thinking that was similar to communistic thinking in some ways. It was only in the 1940's when Communism became the Red Menace after the discrepancy between Communist in theory and Communist in practice became clear. Most of the people who had once attended Communist party meetings knew little or nothing about Communist practices but their repudiations were not acknowledged by the Committee who believed that "Once a communist, always a communist." To save their careers from being blacklisted, some people willingly testified against others. It seemed that the only way a person could be purged was to name another Commie...to create another victim. Then it would appear that the accuser was really sincere.

Fear of Communist aggression, fear of the Committee, and fear of being named caused a witch hunt hysteria. Arthur Miller who was called before the Committee wrote *The Crucible* to reflect the mood of the 1950's as well as the 1600's. In both time periods the all-powerful accusers took advantage of fear and participated in the creation of and persecution of scapegoats. The communist witch-hunt ruined many lives. Some people today still believe the results of that era were justified. However, most agree that fear can cause well-meaning people to destroy our democratic values in an attempt to protect them.

~~INTRODUCTION: THE CRUCIBLE~~

Both the social problems in post World War II America during McCarthyism and those in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692 resulted in the persecution and banishment of many innocent victims.

In the 1950s, during a climate of postwar economic, political, and social instability, there existed an atmosphere similar to that of the witch hysteria of Salem, whose population hoped to end bad luck and to cling to their Puritan ideals. Both groups threatened human rights, and both problems are addressed by Arthur Miller in his play. To understand the analogy drawn by the playwright, however, it is necessary to understand the atmosphere which existed in each society.

First of all, witch-hunts were prevalent in the world of the seventeenth century and even scientists of the day, such as John Locke, believed in the world of spirits and the occult. At that time, 900 witches were burned in Bamberg, Germany, along with 5,000 in the province of Alsace, France. Therefore, the twenty-three deaths in Salem were an extension of the fear of witchcraft throughout the world.

This climate of fear existed in Salem for a number of reasons. Primarily, the Puritans were becoming anxious about their religion, since in 1686 Charles II revoked their charter, sending to the Massachusetts colony an Anglican governor, hostile to Congregationalism. The people, therefore, were unable to govern themselves or to hold clear title to their farms. This was further complicated by a smallpox epidemic in 1691-1692, plus Indian raids on small farms. In addition, the town of Salem itself had its own particular problems and split into two parts—Salem Town and Salem Village—by the 1660s. Each had established a separate church by 1672.

Many of the conflicts of the Salemites were caused by economic unrest. The townspeople were more modern, stylish, and wealthy than the villagers. Fortunes of prominent villagers were diminished due to questions over wills. It was customary for a widow to marry and, upon her death, leave the bulk of her fortune to a stepchild. The result was antagonism, contesting of wills in court, and division over land boundaries. It was in such an atmosphere of unrest that an innocent prank by bored young girls escalated to a hysteria of persecution that left twenty-three people hanged, one pressed to death, and three to die in prison.

Likewise, in the United States after World War II, President Truman felt that America had given Eastern Europe and China to the Soviets. By reason of the Soviets' atomic testing, together with the prevailing idea that spies had stolen United States' ideas, fear that Russian Communism posed a great danger to America developed. Truman, himself, stated in policies that no one who held beliefs contrary to our form of government should be permitted to teach children and that vigilance over Communists would be such that almost any action against them would be allowed.¹ He indicated that the threat of Communism was almost a national crisis and that the extermination of democracy by the Russians was imminent.

Against this background, the House Un-American Activities Committee began an investigation into the lives of citizens who had espoused the doctrine of Communism. Through intensive interrogation by Senator Joseph McCarthy, using tactics of distortion, a witch-hunt began, leaving in its wake citizens who were blacklisted, unemployed, and in some cases, isolated from this country for over thirty years.