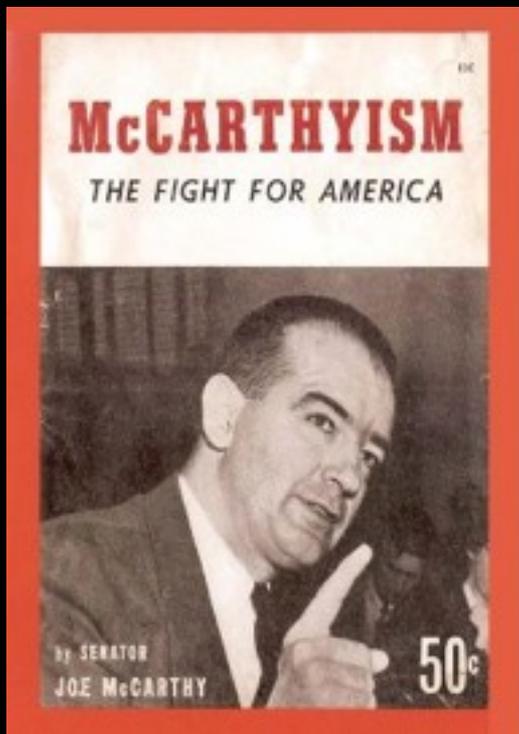


# The Crucible

Historical Context and Literary

Merit





## Historical CYCLES

Arthur Miller warns in the preface to *The Crucible* that “this play is not history,” but it is certainly dependent on historical events for its story.

The text concerns two periods of American history. The primary period of this play is the 17<sup>th</sup> century, specifically the time of the Salem Witch Trials. Running parallel to these early events in American history are those that took place in Miller’s own time, on which the playwright symbolically comments . Miller uses the play, set during the Salem Witch Trials, to criticize McCarthyism and the RED SCARE of the 1950s. He is stating that history is cyclical and we need to recognize that history, in this case, is repeating itself. He claims that McCarthyism was nothing more than a modern-day WITCH HUNT.

# Comments on Miller's Primary Period

## SALEM WITCH TRIALS



### NOTE:

- Please review your notes on the class-viewing of the History Channel Documentary In Search of History: The Salem Witch Trials. The film provides the historical context for the setting of The Crucible. This powerpoint focuses on Miller's parallel period, the McCarthy era.

# Factors Leading to McCarthyism:

## Harry s. Truman



**33<sup>rd</sup> President of the United States**  
in office from  
**April 12, 1945 – January 20, 1953**

- Although the Soviet Union and the United States had been allies during World War II, their alliance quickly unraveled once they had defeated their common enemy.
- In the U.S., after WWII, many Americans felt that China and Eastern Europe had been “lost” to the Soviets.
- Russia acquired the atomic bomb. By reason of the Soviets’ atomic testing, together with the thought that spies had stolen American ideas and given Russia the bomb, many feared that Russian communism posed a great threat to America. Some feared the Truman administration was not vigilant enough in eliminating this threat of communism.
- The political unrest of a post-war society, a rising uneasiness with a change in “American values” and a fear of moral DECADENCE, and widespread intolerance were all factors leading to THE GREAT SCARE of communism.

# Joseph McCarthy's Reputation

- Joseph McCarthy, a republican senator from Wisconsin, spent his first three years in office “undistinguished.”
- Some described him as a “lazy and ineffectual senator, and an easy captive for any lobbyist willing to put a few extra bucks into his personal or political bank account.”
- He sought fame and power.
- His political career was fading, until he used the charged political climate to boost that career.

(Oakley)

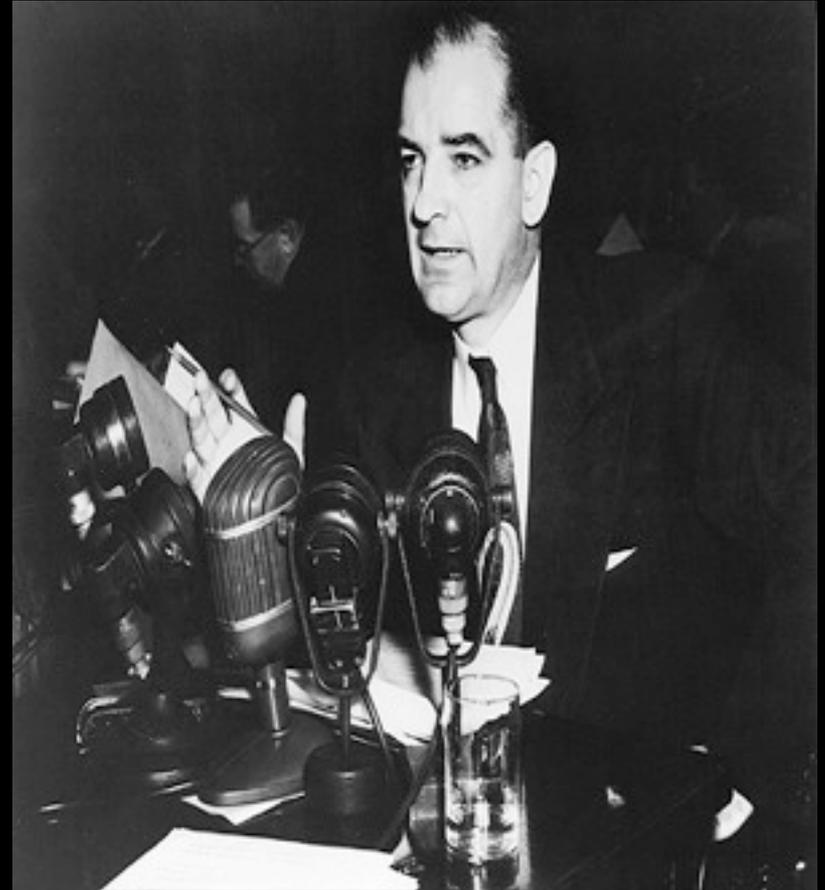
# A Political Bombshell

On February 9, 1950, Republican senator Joseph McCarthy dropped a political bombshell. McCarthy gave a speech at the Republican Women's Club of Wheeling, West Virginia, in which he attacked the Truman administration and claimed to have a long list of Communists in the State Department. No one in the press actually saw the names on the list, but McCarthy's announcement made the national news.

(Schulz)

McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) worked to root out all Communist sympathizers in the country. He began an investigation into the lives of citizens who appeared to have communist ideals. He held public trials and encouraged FEAR and PARANOIA.

(New Rep On



# McCarthy's Rise to Power

- It is widely accepted that McCarthy made up these accusations solely to AGGRANDIZE his political power. In fact, he often changed the number of people accused because he could not remember what he stated in previous speeches. The number of government officials in Truman's administration accused of being "card-carrying members of the communist party" went from 205 to 136 to 57 to 81.
- Many people were willing to believe his charges without evidence because people wanted to feel secure. His focus on weeding out corruption made people feel that someone was doing something to keep them safe.
- McCarthy became the most sought-after public speaker in America. He was named one of Washington's most eligible bachelors. His office was flooded with donations to help his cause of eliminating the communist threat. At one point, he received an average of \$1000.00 a day in the mail.
- Eventually, he had to escalate his accusations and not just speak generally of government officials, but actually NAME NAMES. He branched out to intimidate and attack private citizens- journalists, professors, artists, and those in professions that were considered "LIBERAL."

( Oakley)

# The Rise of a WITCH HUNT



- Through intensive interrogation by Senator Joseph McCarthy, using tactics of distortion, a witch-hunt began.
- Those who were sympathetic to the communist cause, or those who had connections with Russia, could be summoned before the committee to explain their involvement.
- People were told to recant communist beliefs and name their former friends and associates in the communist cause. When people denied allegations or refused to name names, they were punished.
- Citizens were blacklisted, unemployed, and in some cases, isolated from this country for over thirty years.

# EVIDENCE ???

McCarthy's evidence lacked any substance. One of his favorite techniques of proof was to pull a stack of papers from his old briefcase and, claiming that he held the evidence in his hand, taken from his files, to read from imaginary documents about imaginary people and imaginary events, making up names and numbers and events as he went along. Sometimes the "documents" were worthless sheets of paper, old government reports, or copies of legislation being deliberated by the Senate. He denied requests to see the documents by claiming that they were secret documents given to him by his network of informants. He denied requests for clarification by claiming that it was not his fault people were too stupid to understand what he was saying. He avoided criticisms of his inconsistencies in the number of communists against whom he had evidence by stating he was "sick of the numbers game" and "wanted to get to the heart of the matter." When called out on a lie, he would simply accuse his adversary of communist sympathy. He used BOMBASTIC and inflammatory speeches to obscure facts. He called those against the trials, "left-wing bleeding hearts," "egg-sucking phony liberals," "punks," and "traitors." He questioned the patriotism, loyalty, and morality of those who questioned the trials.

- The evidence in McCarthy trials was “questionable” and often relied on the testimony of those attempting to avoid persecution themselves. McCarthy and his cohorts made, what are now recognized as, reckless, and unsubstantiated accusations, as well as public attacks on the character or patriotism of political opponents.
- McCarthy was never able to truly substantiate his charges. They are now widely accepted as false. Many believe his intentions were corrupt and that he was looking for political gain.



# A Modern-Day Witch Hunt

**“Are you now, or have you ever been,  
a Communist?”**

Joseph McCarthy asked that question to MANY American citizens. This question spurred a modern-day witch hunt. McCarthy – a member of the American government encouraged the cleansing of the community of one group by another – the vilification of one group to allay the irrational fears of another.

# WHAT IS A WITCH HUNT?

**witch hunt:** noun

- 1 : a searching out for persecution of persons accused of witchcraft.
- 2 : the searching out and deliberate harassment of those (as political opponents) with unpopular views
- 3: a political campaign launched on the pretext of investigating activities subversive to the state.

# What causes a WITCH HUNT?

- Insufficient tolerance for human diversity
  - Prejudice/Bias
  - Scape-goating
  - Persecution of unpopular minority groups
- Overblown fear of the unfamiliar
  - Heightened Emotions
  - Irrational Fear and Paranoia
- Self-Righteousness and Moral Judgment
  - Blind Idealism
  - Moral Absolutism and a **STRINGENT** concept of Purity/Morality
- Mob Mentality
  - Hysteria
- Corruption of Power
  - Self-Absorbed Authority Figures
  - Greed for **AGGRANDIZEMENT**

# McCarthy's Witch Hunt: Who Was Targeted?

Of particular interest to Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee were those practicing communists in the artistic community. The reasoning was that the most dangerous methods for converting Americans to communist beliefs would be through the films, music, and art that they enjoyed. McCarthy prosecuted a great many playwrights, screenwriters, and other artists. In a number of cases, McCarthy was successful in "blacklisting" these artists – which meant no one would purchase their services for fear of being linked to communism. Major screenwriters, directors and actors were denied employment by major studios. A number of Miller's contemporaries lost their livelihood due to these hearings, and the playwright himself was brought before the proceedings. (Oakley)

NOTE: Arthur Miller, author of *The Crucible*, was directly connected to the world of Hollywood. He even married Marilyn Monroe.



# The Hollywood Ten

The first processed Hollywood blacklist was initiated the day after ten writers and directors [known as **THE HOLLYWOOD TEN**] were cited for contempt of Congress for refusing to give testimony to the House Un-American Activities Committee.



# *The Crucible's* Literary Merit: Important Concepts

**PROTEST LITERATURE:**  
(n) literature with a specific political or social aim, an intention to raise awareness or bring about change. (Merriam-Webster on-line)

Arthur Miller's intention was to emphasize the injustice of the McCarthy trials by relating them to a time in history that everyone accepts as morally and legally unjust.

**ALLEGORY:** (n) the expression, by means of symbolic fictional figures and actions, of truths or generalizations about human existence. (Merriam-Webster on-line)

Arthur Miller wrote the play as a political and social allegory for McCarthyism. His characters and events represent historical truths.

## Other Artists also developed allegories that represented the McCarthy Trials. Marvel Comics had a whole series that covered McCarthyism.

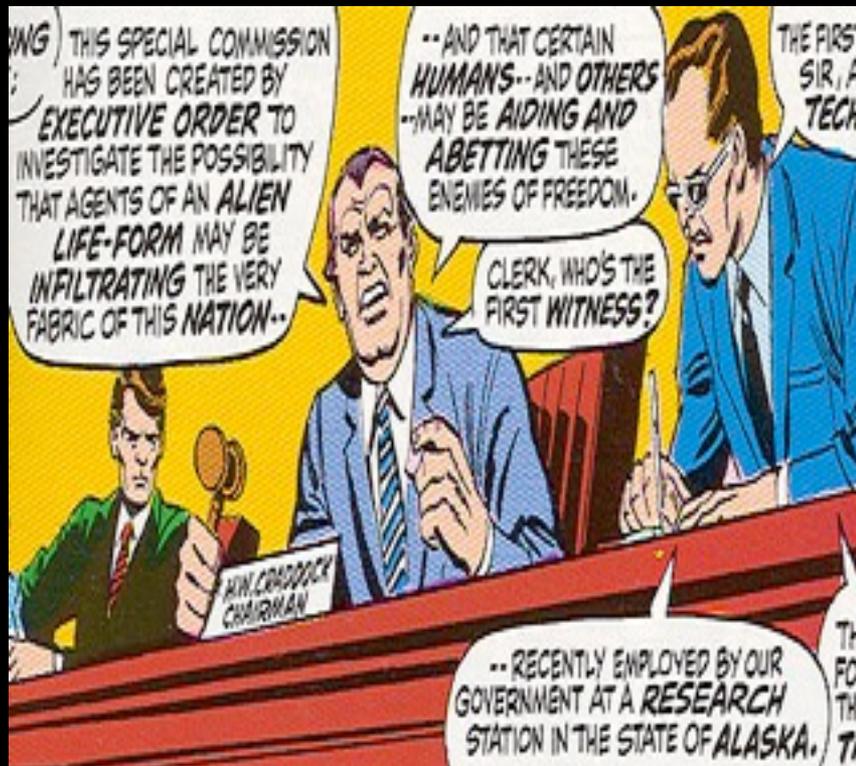
These panels include a direct paraphrase of the speech by Senator Joe McCarthy that launched his career as a Communist-hunting demagogue.

NOTE: Marvel replaces the fear of communism with the fear of alien life forms.



# McCarthyism and Pop Culture

## MARVEL COMICS



## MCCARTHY TRIALS



# YOUR ASSIGNMENT

- Make a list of parallels between the Salem Witch Trials and the McCarthy Trials. Consider events leading up to the trials, the emotions of the people involved, and the trials themselves. Categorize your list as follows: Political Climate, Social Climate, Accusers and Accusations, Trials and Evidence, Contributing Factors.

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