

McCarthy Hearings and The Crucible Background Information

Symbolism in The Crucible & Similarities to McCarthyism

Bright Hub Education

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One of the most important themes in *The Crucible* involves similarities between McCarthyism. Other symbols include the play's title and the doll in Goody Proctor's house.

- **Similarities between McCarthyism and The Crucible**



McCarthyism: In the 1940s and 1950s Americans feared the encroachment of Communism. The Soviet Union was growing in power and the threat of a nuclear holocaust was on the forefront of American minds. Eastern Europe had become a conglomerate of Communist satellite nations. Throw in China and Americans began to feel they were surrounded by a Communist threat. Paranoia ensued.

The Crucible: Salem established itself as a religious community in the midst of evil. Salemites considered the forest the domain of the devil. Salem was surrounded by forest. Paranoia ensued.

McCarthyism: Joseph McCarthy, U.S. Senator, made unsubstantiated claims that more than 200 "card carrying" members of the Communist party had infiltrated the United States government. He had no proof.

The Crucible

: Delusional girls make unsubstantiated claims about the existence of witches in Salem. They have no proof.

- **McCarthyism:** McCarthy's unsubstantiated claims ruined lives and led to increased hostility.
The Crucible: The girls unsubstantiated claims ruin lives and lead to increased hostility in Salem.

McCarthyism: Those who were accused were assumed guilty, put on trial, and expected to divulge the names of other Communist sympathizers. Failure to do so led to sanctions.

The Crucible: Those who are accused are assumed guilty, put on trial, expected to confess, and expected to accuse others of being witches. Failure to do so leads to death.

McCarthyism: The media were not willing to stand up to Senator McCarthy for fear of being accused of being a Communist.

The Crucible: Townspeople are not willing to stand up to the court for fear of being accused of being a witch.

McCarthyism: Arthur Miller was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee and subsequently blacklisted.

The Crucible: Arthur Miller wrote it.

- **Other Significant Symbols**

To help better understand some of the deeper meanings in *The Crucible*, below are a list of significant symbols found within the play.

The Doll: The doll found on Elizabeth Proctor's shelf is a traditional symbol of voodoo and witchcraft. In *The Crucible*, the doll (as well as Rebecca Nurse) symbolizes the transformation of good to evil: dolls, in a normal society, represent childhood innocence and bring happiness. In Salem, dolls represent evil. This extends to the Puritan government and church, both being entrusted to protect its citizens, yet both doing the opposite.

Background Information

» The McCarthy hearings were trials in which Senator Joe McCarthy accused government employees of being Communists. He exaggerated and exploited the evidence and ruined many reputations. Blacklists were created and many employers refused to hire the suspected or accused. (If they did then they would be accused.) Due to the exaggerated evidence and the seriousness of the charges, the hearings struck fear in many Americans. Although at first popular, the public began to wonder how far it would go. After McCarthy accused the U.S. Army of housing Communists, his committee began to go down hill. The army strongly defended themselves as they sought to end McCarthy's "witch-hunts." In November of 1954 the Watkins committee censured McCarthy under two counts. The Senate voted to "condemn" him on December 22, 1954. This censure ended McCarthyism but could never undo all of the damage that it had caused.

Parallels between the Salem witch trials

» The McCarthy Hearings were referred to as "witch-hunts" because of their similarity to the Salem witch trials. They both struck fear in the people due to the "guilty until you confess" attitude which ruled the courts. In Salem the only way to escape death was to confess and repent; in the McCarthy hearings if you were accused, whether guilty or not, you would always be viewed as a Communist. McCarthy also relates to Abigail in *The Crucible*, because they both made false accusations against innocent people. McCarthy accused people of being communists, whereas Abigail accused people of being witches. Philosopher George Santayana best states McCarthy's fatal error - "*Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.*"

| Salem Witch Trials | The McCarthy Hearings |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » 1692 » accused of being witches » resulted in the execution of 20 people » forever damaged reputations » began by young girls » speculated cause: land disputes » some farmers raised chickens » "witches" were scapegoats for all the problems » accuser was highly respected » untrue accusations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » 1950's » accused of being communists » resulted in no direct deaths but great losses » also damaged reputations » began by McCarthy » speculated cause: to promote campaign » McCarthy had 12,000 chickens by age 16 » "communists" were scapegoats for society's problems » McCarthy was also highly respected » untrue accusations |